

Esther Discusses Her Personal "45 Pearls of Bridge Wisdom"¹

Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen²

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<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

1. Always *remember* that in duplicate bridge you are playing against people—the *specific people* in the competition. You are not playing against cards! "**Play the room!**" In making bidding and play decisions, when balancing likely risks against likely rewards, consciously, thoughtfully take into account what your particular friends "*in the specific room*" are likely to do on a given Board.³
2. In ACBL duplicate competitions the final rankings are determined by your Average Board Percentage across all Boards played, or your Total Match Points across all Boards played, both of which will rank order all the Pairs in the competition exactly in the same way.⁴ On a given Board, if you obtain a Bottom Board (a 0.0% Board), your Average Board Percentage will be lowered by *several percentage points* as against your having made a Middle or 50% Board. For example, if you are playing 18 Boards in

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¹ **Note.** **MANY** of the ideas herein are discussed *more expansively* in various lessons on the "Esther Bridge Lessons" website.

² "Esther Klinktoast-houstonhousen" is actually a *fictitious, not real* person, and this "Esther Bridge Lesson" was actually written by **Bruce Thompson**.

³ For example, in a Novice or Limited game, new players are *very unlikely* to ever Double for Penalty. So, if you Double for Penalty in such a game, if you are successful, you are likely to gain a competitive advantage that no other Pair will obtain, but also you will not be penalized very much in your final ranking if you do not Double for Penalty when no other Pair in the competition will do so. Similarly, in a Novice or Limited game, Pairs are unlikely to bid Slam, so if successful you will obtain a competitive advantage against the other Pairs, but if you do not bid slam, you will not sacrifice much in the final competitive rankings even if the Slam is makeable!

⁴ On the "Esther Bridge Lessons" website, see: "**How Duplicate Pairs Bridge is Scored**".

the competition, your Overall percentage will go down by $50\% / 18 = 2.8$ percentage points from poor performance on a single Board! And if you are bunched in the middle of the competition, your rank ordering may go down by several ranks from your performance on a single Board. **Try assiduously to avoid Bottom Boards!**⁵

3. During bidding and play you must constantly make thoughtful decisions about balancing risks against rewards. Should you take the contract to Game? Should you Double for Penalty? For example, if you meet the requirements of Mel Colchamiro's "Rule of 9", or Ron Klinger's "Rule of 10",⁶ then leaving a Double for Penalty off the table might be improvident, because while there may be relatively little gain in your Overall Percentage from making an obvious Double for Penalty if you are likely to get a Top Board anyway, there also may be very little risk, and you want to take any gifts provided by improvident Opponents. But, overall, do not try to make 100% Percentages on every Board involving downside risks. If you earn 70% on every Board in a competition, your Overall Percentage will also be 70%, and you will place first in that competition. So, *take the risks commensurate with trying to earn 70% (not 100%) on every Board!*

Bidding

4. When you are inclined to open the bidding, while contemplating what your initial bid will be, think at *the same time* about what your *second* bid under various scenarios will be, and do not make your first bid, unless you can visualize reasonable second bid choices!
5. When bidding **NT** contracts, pay extra attention to HCPs, but when bidding suit contracts, instead focus more on distributions and your trump card count, and the "**Law of Total Tricks.**"

⁵ Conversely, getting a Top or 100% Board can move you up several ranks as against obtaining merely an Average or 50% Board, if you are in the middle of the competitive rankings. See the **Appendix** for illustrations of how Total Average Percentages may "bunch up" in the middle of the distribution!

⁶ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", see: "**Lesson #28: When to Double for Penalty, and When Not to Double for Penalty**".

6. "Flat" or "square" hands generally play better in **NT** contracts, while 2-suited hands in suit contracts play *especially* well.
7. In *any* seat within the auction, open a 1-level suit bid if the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of cards in your two longest seats equals 20 or more ("**Rule of 20**"), or the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of cards in your two longest seats and (3) the number of your trump honors equals 22 or more ("**Rule of 22**").
8. If your RHO opens the auction with a suit bid, or your LHO opens the auction with a suit bid, and you are in the "balancing" position (i.e., 2 Passes to you), you can overcall to a level equal to your Ron Klinger "Suit Quality Test" (**SQT**) score minus 6. For example, if your RHO bids **1S**, and you hold A,Q,J,x,x,x of Diamonds (6 cards + 3 trump honors), you could bid **2D**, and conceivably later **3D**.
9. Once you "**limit**" your hand (i.e., give Partner *specific* information about both your point count and your card distribution), such as opening **1NT**, or **2H**, your Partner becomes the "Captain," and you must not bid again, unless your Partner demands that you answer a question (e.g., you open **1NT**, your LHO Passes, and your Partner responds **2C** [thus showing **9-10** HCPs,⁷ and at least 1 4-card Major]), thus demanding, "Partner, do you hold a 4-card or a 5-card Major?"
10. As soon as you are able, learn and begin playing bidding conventions that communicate **precise** information about your point count, and especially your trump card count (e.g., "2 Over 1", "Jacoby **2NT**").
11. If your RHO bids **1NT**, you Pass, your LHO bids **2C**, **2D**, or **2H**, and your Partner Doubles, your Partner is making a "**Lead-Directing Double**" requiring you to lead the Doubled suit upon your earliest opportunity to do so.

⁷ The Stayman response requires 8-10 HCPs, but I advise **9-10** HCPs, because you may end up playing **3NT**, in which case that extra point may come in very handy.

12. If you open 1**NT**, your LHO then bids 2**C**, 2**D**, or 2**H**, and your Partner Doubles, your Partner is making a "**They Stole My Bid**" Double, and you should treat Partner's Double as if Partner had bid the Doubled suit.
13. If your LHO opens 1**NT**, and Partner Doubles, Partner is saying, "I hold 15-17 HCPs, no void, no singleton, and no more than 1 Doubleton." **All** systems are "**on**" as if Partner had opened 1**NT**. However, this is not a "Demand" Double, and you can leave then Double on if you think your Partnership will make a better Bridge Score by setting your Opponents rather than playing for a Part Score.
14. **Never** do a "**Take Out**" Double demanding that Partner bid Partner's "longest and strongest" suit (unless the next Opponent bids), unless you hold (1) roughly opening HCPs, and (2) 4 cards in every unbid Major, and (3) no more than 2 (preferably 1) of the Opponents' bid suit.
15. **Never** ask for Aces (or "key" cards) unless you hold first or second Round control in every suit.
16. Even in a "competitive" auction, follow the "**Law of Total Tricks**", and bid a suit contract to a level of the number of trump cards your Partnership holds minus 6.
17. If you think your Partnership can make either a 3**NT** contract, or a Game contract in a Major, *prefer* to set the contract in the Major. You often will make either exactly 3**NT**, or 4**H** or 4**S**, and the Game exactly made in the Major will yield a higher Bridge Score.
18. You and Partner ought to agree that opening 1**D** always shows at least 4 Diamonds with an "SQT" score of at least 6 or 7.
19. You and Partner must negotiate a clearly-understood "**bright-line boundary**" regarding when bids of Double are for Penalty (e.g., any Double against Opponents' bid of a contract 3**S** or higher, or "If both of us Pass during the auction, and I later Double any bid 2**NT** or higher," "Whenever I Double twice within an auction, my second Double is always for Penalty.")

20. When Opponents jump to a Game contract even in the face of your bidding a different suit, think twice (or five times) before Doubling Opponents' bid for penalty.

Leading

21. Think about what you will lead, if you end up on lead, *during* the auction, and not only once the auction ends, and this will also likely better inform your bidding decisions.
22. If your Partner bid a suit during the auction, a good lead is usually Partner's bid suit, especially when the Opponents are playing a suit contract, and may be able to trump your long suit, unless you take winners *early*.
23. When leading Partner's bid suit, if you hold an Honor, lead you highest Honor to Partner.
24. If neither you nor Partner bid during the auction, and you do not hold "touching honors," lead "bottom of something, top of nothing".
25. If neither you nor Partner bid during the auction, leading from a singleton or doubleton may be ideal, since you should expect "Partner to always return your lead at the first opportunity", unless the Dummy comes up short in the led suit, or Partner on some other basis knows that "returning your lead" will be unwise.
26. If your LHO bid a suit during the auction, and your RHO did not support that suit, leading through your LHO in that player's bid suit may result in winning a Trick with Partner's King, or Partner overtaking your LHO's honor with Partner's Ace.
27. Against a suit contract, leading the top of 2 "touching" honors, strictly promises Partner the next lower honor, which even if you lose this Trick, your next "touching" honor can be won later, and may even take extra Tricks if your Partner also holds high honors in the suit.
28. Leading "touching" honors against a **NT** contract is more wise if you hold **3** "touching" honors, in which case you should first lead the **middle** of your 3 "touching" honors.

29. When on lead against Opponents' suit contract, and holding a doubleton, lead your top card from the doubleton, thus alerting your Partner to your short suit.
30. When leading against a **NT** contract, if one Opponent opened **NT**, and the other Opponent responded with a Stayman **2C** or Stayman **3C** bid, and the Opponent who opened **NT** shows a 4-card Major that Responder then does not support, leading that bid Major may be wise. Or, if one Opponent opened **NT**, and the other Opponent responded with a Stayman **2C** or Stayman **3C** bid, and the Opponent who opened **NT** then bids **2D** or **3D**, leading from your long Major may be wise.
31. When leading against a **NT** contract, and your Partner did not bid during the auction, and you do not hold 3 "touching honors," lead 4th from the top of your "longest and strongest" suit, so that Partner will know your "longest and strongest" suit, and can invoke the vitally-important "**Rule of 11**" so that Partner can determine once Dummy comes down exactly how many cards in the led suit Declarer holds that are higher than your led card.

Play as Declarer

32. When you are Declarer, **always** lead "low to high", unless there is a clear (and extremely rare) reason to do otherwise.
33. When you are Declarer playing a **NT** contract, once Dummy comes down, immediately **count your "winners"**, and determine whether you can safely make your contract even without playing for a "drop", or a finesse.
34. When you are Declarer playing a suit contract, once Dummy comes down, immediately **count your "losers"**, and try to determine how you can "get rid" of losers, either by sloughing "losers", or by trumping/ruffing what would otherwise be your "losers."
35. When you are Declarer in a **NT** contract, once Dummy comes down, immediately count the number of cards you hold in each suit. You usually will want to *repeatedly* "attack" the suit in which you hold the most cards, so that you can

"promote" even low cards in your longest suit into winners, and thus extra Tricks, except when doing so causes you to lose control, and you know you will then get set. When you are "promoting" lowly cards in one hand's long suit, make sure you maintain *transportation* back to that hand to later take these "lowly" long-suit winners.

36. When you are Declarer playing a **NT** contract, use the "**Rule of 7**" (the number of cards your Partnership holds in the suit minus 7) to determine *how many times* to "duck" taking winners in the led suit. However, notwithstanding the "Rule of 7", if you see that you can make your contract by immediately taking a winner in the led suit, and your contract is otherwise in jeopardy, make your contract immediately.
37. When you are playing a suit contract as Declarer, and Dummy and you hold remaining trump cards, and an Opponent holds *1 remaining but winning* trump card, do not draw the last trump card, unless you otherwise only by doing so can create safe winners in a different long suit.
38. Trying a finesse is usually not especially likely to be successful, unless one Opponent bid, and so you know to finesse *through that Opponent*, especially if your finesse is in that Opponent's bid suit, or neither Opponent bid, and play has progressed quite a bit, and one Opponent plays several honors, thus leading you to infer that the *second* Opponent holds the remaining honors, and thus any necessary finesses should be played instead *through that Opponent*.
39. A finesse is more attractive when you hold "touching honors" for the card with which you are running the finesse, because, even if you lose the finesse, you will have nevertheless "promoted" the "touching honor".
40. If between Dummy and your hand as Declarer you are missing an honor, but hold the Ace and "touching honors," lead the highest "touching honor" in Dummy, and if your RHO does not "cover" that honor, and you win the Trick, then you know then that RHO holds the missing honor. Lead again from Dummy, and cover with your winning Ace, if necessary. For example, if you hold A,Q,x,x, and Dummy holds J,x,x, lead the Dummy's Jack to run your first finesse.

41. Because, assuming Opponents did not bid during the auction, and assuming that it is early in play, the probability of a successful "finesse" is 50%, but only 50%, it usually is better to instead play for an honor "drop" when the odds of success of the "drop" are greater than 50%.
42. When as Declarer playing a suit contract you hold *unavoidably losing* cards in your hand, or Dummy, or both, "**play a loser upon a loser**",⁸ either (1) to protect against using your trump cards when you are short trump, or hold weak trump cards, or (2) to create new ruffing opportunities in either Dummy or your hand. For example, let's say that Opponents lead an Ace that you *could* win by ruffing/trumping in Declarer's hand, but that you have relatively few trump cards in both Declarer and Dummy's hands combined, relative to the contract level, and considering the "Law of Total Tricks," it might be more wise to slough a loser on Opponents' Ace, rather than trumping it from Declarer's hand. Or, in a **NT** contract, when you hold the 10 lowest Diamonds across both Dummy's and your hand, lead a very low Diamond from Dummy, and also a very low Diamond from your Declarer's hand.
43. The Dummy almost always holds an equal number of trump cards or fewer trump cards than held by Declarer, and usually the number of trump winners at least equals to the number of Declarer's trump cards. This means that trumping/ruffing in Declarer's hand does not generate any extra Tricks, but **ruffing in Dummy** can create new Tricks. Therefore, do not ruff in Declarer's hand, except when doing so is *necessary* for transportation purposes!
44. When you are Declarer in a suit contract, and Dummy holds fewer trump cards than you as Declarer hold, and if it is also relatively early in play, such that new voids have not yet likely been created in Opponents' hands, it is advisable to **delay pulling trump cards**, if you see any

⁸ See the "Loser on Loser Play" **video** by Bridget Rampton:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oB8AyfFu8cQ>

possibility of creating voids in Dummy, such that you can trump in Dummy, prior to "drawing trump."

45. When you are Declarer, and you are down to the last few Tricks, and you hold several "Quick Tricks", such as 2 more trump cards in your hand as Declarer, and a loser, do not play the loser!!! Play the "Quick Tricks" first, and the loser last, and hope that Opponents "throw off" the wrong card, and create an extra winner for you!⁹

⁹ A famous bridge Life Master in the Savannah Bridge Club, who some players call "Yoda," emphasizes that, "Bridge is a game of mistakes! Try to *minimize* your (inevitable) mistakes, but give your Opponents every, single possible opportunity to themselves make mistakes!"

Example Real "Total Average Percentages"
Distributions from Recent Pairs Competitions
in the Savannah Bridge Club

	Open Game 7/21/23		Open Game 7/19/23		249er 7/19/23
	N/S	E/W		Pairs	Pairs
>70%					
69%					
68%					
67%					
66%					
65%				*	
64%					*
63%	*				
62%	*				
61%					
60%					
59%					
58%				*	
57%		*			* *
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49%				* *	
48%		* *			
47%	* *				
46%	*	*			
45%	*				
44%				*	
43%					
42%					
41%				*	
40%	*			*	*
39%					
38%					
37%					
36%					
<36%					*