

Esther Discusses "2-Level Preempt Opens and Responses Thereto"

Bruce Thompson

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Bruce: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will talk us about an Interesting Board involving **2-level preempt opens, and responses thereto**. Esther, thanks for taking time to be with us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, in any case, thank you for talking to us. Here are the East/West hands in a recent (9/30/22) auction. Do you agree with EAST *sitting as Dealer* opening with a 2**S** bid?

WEST (14)	EAST (10)
S A K 7 6	S Q J T 5 4 2
H A 6 5	H K Q 8 4
D 9 3	D Q 6
C Q J 7 4	C 8

Esther: Well, actually, yes, I do. The hand is *too weak* to open 1**S**, and EAST does hold 6 Spades, including 3 "touching honors" (Q,J,T). "Touching honors" are important, because lacking a "gap" in the honors means Declarer's LHO cannot win a Trick when playing after Declarer and holding a

"fill-in-the-gap" card. More importantly, EAST's hand meets the preempt elements that I **always absolutely require** when making a 2-level preempt opening. Specifically, when sitting *first or second in the auction*, I absolutely, positively, never make a 2-level preempt open unless I hold **6 trump cards** and either (1) **2 of the 3 top cards**, or (2) **3 of the 5 top cards!!!!** Always! Always! Also, always!!!

Bruce: So, a "weak" bid must, **first**, involve holding a "weak" hand, in order to not make a "weak" bid with a "strong" hand, and thus confuse Partner, and thus often set an improvident contract! But why do you absolutely, positively, absolutely demand, **second**, the very specific requirements as regards top card holdings, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen? I encounter *many, many* Pairs who will open a 2-level preempt bid, without holding so many top cards, such as A,x,x,x,x,x. Do you think these players are *insane*?

Esther: Well, my dandruff-ridden dufus, actually, even though, as you know, I am a very *caring and warm* person, and do not like to insult people, yes, indeed, I do think such players are either insane, or maybe just making ill-advised decisions.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, why do you consider such bidding so *ill-advised*?

Esther: Well, a fundamentally essential objective when bidding is to "**limit**" your hand as much as possible. In other words, your objective when bidding is to tell your Partner as much *specific, precise* information about your hand as possible, as regards **both** (1) card counts/distribution, and (2) points. *Please try to think about it*. Do you really, really, really want to leave your Partner not knowing from your preempt bid whether you hold A,x,x,x,x,x, versus either A,K,x,x,x,x, or Q,J,T,x,x,x??? That is a very, very, very wide range of possibilities, even though Partner does at least know that you hold 6 cards.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, is there *any other* reason why you strictly demand these two specific requirements to open a "weak 2" bid when sitting first or second?

Esther: Well, yes, indeed, bozo breath! When you open "weak" sitting first or second in the auction, your Partner has not yet Passed! You must give Partner specific and mutually-understood information about your hand, in case Partner's hand "fits" with yours, and may be strong enough to bid Game! Give your Partner, who becomes "Captain" within the auction once you have "limited" your hand, detailed (1) HCP and (2) card distribution information, so that Partner as "Captain" can make informed decisions.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, you have totally, totally, totally persuaded me that your position is both thoughtful and correct. But, I wonder. Are there any special reasons why preempt bids have some particular appeal?

Esther: Well, such bids do eat up bidding space, which disadvantages your Opponents and compromises their abilities to communicate. This is especially true when you are opening 2**S**, because Spades is the "King Suit", and Partners bidding Spades can often take control of the auction!

Bruce: Well, is there any other reason why "weak 2" bids may be appealing?

Esther: Well, yes, indeed! When you hold 6 or more cards in a suit, the probability of your Partnership holding 8 or more cards in the suit goes way, WAY, up! As explained in the various "probabilities" lessons on the "Esther Bridge Lessons" website,¹ (1) when you hold **6** cards in a suit, there is a **74% probability** that you and Partner hold 8+ cards in that suit, and (2) when you hold **7** cards in a suit, there is a **93% probability** that you and Partner hold 8+ cards in that suit!!! Bidding *long* suits helps you and Partner find these *unusual splits*, because when you show Partner 6 or 7 cards in a suit, Partner is then more likely to pay attention to and announce holding even only 1 or 2 cards in that suit!

¹ See, on the "Esther Bridge Lessons" website, for example, "**#40. Eight Different Categories of Bridge Probabilities, and How These May Help Guide Your Bidding and Play**".

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, how does your position within the auction affect your willingness to open a preempt bid?

Esther: Your **Seat Position** relative to the Dealer does affect how willing you should be to open with a preempt bid!² Presuming that your preempt is not a Overcall Preempt, and thus all previous bidders have Passed:

1. Sitting First Seat your preempt opening is **effective** because you are preempting two Opponents but only your one Partner, none of whom have bid.
2. Sitting Second Seat your preempt opening is **less effective** because you are preempting only one Opponent and your one Partner.
3. Sitting Third Seat your preempt opening is **very effective** because you know Partner, like you, does not hold an opening hand, and that your Opponents have a majority of the HCPs, and may even be able to make a Game contract in a different suit.³
4. You should **not** make an opening preempt bid sitting Fourth Seat unless you are quite sure that you can make your contract, if your bid sets the contract. However, if your long suit is Spades, and the sum of (1) your Spade card count and (2) your HCPs is 15+ (the "Rule of 15"⁴), then you could either 1**S** or 2**S**, thinking about (1) the vulnerability of both Pairs, and (2) how "the room" would probably bid your hand.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, how does vulnerability affect your willingness to open with a preempt bid, and how high you are willing to bid?

² See David L. March (2014). "Preemptive Opening Bids and Responses":
<http://web4dmarch.com/bridge/bid/week4/lecture4.pdf>

³ When you and Partner hold a long suit fit, it is then also very likely that your Opponents also hold a long suit fit in a different suit!!! See the "Reciprocal Fit Probabilities" section on the "Esther Bridge Lessons" website, Lesson "**#40. Eight Different Categories of Bridge Probabilities, and How These May Help Guide Your Bidding and Play**".

⁴ With the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see "**#25. 40 or So Bridge Bidding/Play 'Rules'**".

Esther: Well, of course **Vulnerabilities of the Two Pairs** also affects how willing you should be to make a preempt opening, and how high you should be willing to preempt! Think about the "Worst Case Scenario", which involves each of the following:

1. Your Partner's hand provides you with Zero additional Tricks, and
2. Your Opponents Double your preempt bid, and
3. Your Opponents set your contract.

Here are the resulting **Bridge Scores** as against what your Opponents would earn bidding and exactly making Game contracts:

Vulnerability			Your Score Down				Opponents		
You	Opps	FAV	Doubled				Making		
			1	2	3	4	3NT	4Maj	5Min
YES	NO	NO	-200	-500	-800	-1100	-400	-420	-500
YES	YES	--	-200	-500	-800	-1100	-600	-620	-600
NO	NO	--	-100	-300	-500	-800	-400	-420	-500
NO	YES	YES	-100	-300	-500	-800	-600	-620	-600

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, but what does this all mean?

Esther: Well, Bruce, even in a very, very worst case scenario, where (1) your Partner's hand takes Zero Tricks, and (2) your Opponents Double (which less experienced players will rarely do), and (3) your Opponents set your contract, your Bridge Score will still be **roughly equal** to what your Opponents would otherwise make if they bid and made a Game contract. So, you want to open a preempt bid usually sitting in **first** or **second** seat, either in the hope that you will keep Opponents from finding a suit fit when they hold a Majority of the HCPs, so that you can play a successful Part Score contract, or that when you are sitting **first** Partner sitting third realizes that you can make a Game score contract that you might not otherwise find, because with your "weak" hand (but a long suit) you might otherwise not have shown Partner your hand.

Bruce: Very well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. But what's the bottom line?

Esther: Well, my blubbering bumblehead, when you are considering a preempt opening you need to count (1) what you think are

your "Sure Tricks" in non-Trump suits, and (2) how many Tricks you think your Trump cards will take. With respect to "Sure Tricks", here is how to count them:

"Sure Tricks"	
Cards	Tricks
A	1
AK	2
AQ	1.5
AQJ	2.5
Kx	.5
K	0
KQ	1

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what does this mean about **how high you should be willing to "overbid"** when making a preempt bid?

Esther: Well, my simpering simpleton,

1. When Vulnerability is "**Unfavorable**" (you are Vulnerable, Opponents are not Vulnerable), you should "overbid" by **no more than 2 Tricks** (a Bridge Score of -500 versus Opponents' 3NT=+400, 4Maj=+420, or 5Min=+500).
2. When Vulnerability is "**Neutral**", you should "overbid" by **no more than 3 Tricks**.
3. When Vulnerability is "**Favorable**", you should "overbid" by **no more than 4 Tricks**.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, when you are sitting as Dealer as EAST, how many Tricks would you count in your hand?

WEST (14)	EAST (10)
S A K 7 6	S Q J T 5 4 2
H A 6 5	H K Q 8 4
D 9 3	D Q 6
C Q J 7 4	C 8

Esther: Well, my simpering simpleton, I would count 1 Heart Trick. My Partner, WEST, is likely to hold at least 2 Spades, and if we hold 8 Spades in total, the most likely split is 3-2. Even if Partner does not hold A,K, a single Opponent is unlikely to hold A,K. So, I would anticipate taking 5 Spades. So, sitting first, and counting 6 Tricks, I would be willing to open 2**S**, thinking that even in a

worst case scenario things won't be too bad, and in a best case scenarios, my Partner, WEST, who has not bid, may hold a dynamite hand, and we may bid and make Game in a Major!

Bruce: Very well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Point well taken! Now in this actual auction, once EAST opened 2S, WEST then bid 2NT! (Alert!). What does this artificial, and therefore Alerted!, 2NT! bid mean?

Esther: Well, my blubbering bumblehead, this 2NT!⁵ response by Partner demands that Opener answer the query, "Opener, do you have a side suit entry, such as an Ace or a protected King?"

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, **why** would Responder make such a query?

Esther: Well, my simpering simpleton, the purpose of this query "demand" bid is so that Responder, who likely holds few of the initially bid suit, since Opener had so many, whether, if Responder played a 3NT contract, WEST would have other transportation to get back to Dummy's long bid suit when playing NT. However, a **CARDINAL BRIDGE PRINCIPLE** that must be emphasized is:

NEVER make a 2NT! response to Partner's opening weak-2 "preempt" bid unless you both (1) have all the other Suits "stopped" at a reasonable level, and (2) you hold sufficient HCPs together with Opener's "weak" HCPs to likely "make" a 3NT contract!

Bruce: Errr, ok, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, in this auction EAST then responded to WEST's inquiry by bidding 3H, thus showing a "protected" side-Suit entry in Hearts. Do you

⁵ An *alternative* 2NT! system for Responder's reply to a "weak-2" preemptive opening bid was developed by Harold Ogust. "Ogust" is a system that **demands** that Opener further describe both (1) trump "suit quality" and (2) hand HCPs. For example, a 3C! response to the Ogust 2NT! bid says "minimal point count", poor "suit quality", a 3D! response says "maximal point count", poor "suit quality". See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ogust_convention

think WEST should then use the "**Rule of 17**" to decide whether to take the auction to 4**S**?

Esther: Well, the "**Rule of 17**" says, "When your Partner opens by making a 2-level preempt bid in a Major, add together (1) the number of cards you hold in the bid suit, and (2) the number of HCPs you hold, if the sum is 17, or higher, then bid 4**H** or 4**S**, assuming the opening preempt bid was a Major." This "**Rule of 17**" can be used either (1) immediately after Partner opened a "weak 2" preempt in a Major, or (2) after an 2**NT**! inquiry about Opener's side features.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what is your opinion of this "**Rule of 17**"?

Esther: Well, I actually do like a lot of the bridge "Rules", or guidelines, such the "Rule of 11," the "Rule of 20," and the "Rule of 7." But as to the "**Rule of 17**", not so much. I do compute this sum. And here the sum was $4+14 = 18$, and I would indeed have bid 4**S**. That is *clearly* the correct bid. But I consider the "**Rule of 17**" a bit crude. Because I am both cognitively and emotionally withholding, I will withhold full discussion of my reservations here. But I will advise you to go to the excellent "Bridge with Larry Cohen" website, and read his entry titled "**Rule of 17**⁶".

Bruce: OK. So how then would you decide as WEST to bid 4**S** in this auction?

Esther: Well, my simpering simpleton, because here E/W were playing preempt bids in an intelligent manner, WEST knew that E/W held **all 5** of the top trump cards!!! Furthermore, WEST knew that EAST held a top Heart honor, which would fit with WEST's Heart holdings. And, finally, WEST knew that E/W held 10 of the 13 trump cards. Hello. Hello. Hello. Have we heard of the all-important "**Law of Total Tricks**"? Hello. Hello. Hello. Earth to Bruce! Is anybody home???? Anybody at all???

⁶ See: <https://www.larryco.com/bridge-articles/rule-of-17>.

