

Esther Discusses "A Primer on the Basics of Bidding, and Making the Initial Lead: The *First Steps* of Bridge Play"

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Prefatory Comments

In any given bridge competition, you will participate in **100%** of the *auctions* during the competition. In any given bridge competition, you and Partner will play Defense on about **50%** of the Boards. In any competition, you will play as Declarer on about **25%** of the Boards.

When you are Declarer, you are in sole, total, absolute control of 26 out of 52 cards, all of which you can see. Communication with Partner is irrelevant when you are Declarer.

But whenever you are bidding, the essential, critical focus must be on truthfully, accurately **communicating** features of your Hand to your Partner. And whenever you are playing on Defense, the essential, critical focus must be on truthfully, accurately **communicating** features of your Hand to your Partner via "Signaling". **Critical**, cardinal principles of bridge include:

- 1. NEVER, EVER by *commission* lie to your Partner about your Hand's HCPs, or card counts, or both.**
- 2. NEVER, EVER by *omission* lie to your Partner about your Hand's HCPs, or card counts, or both, by failing to make a bid that your Hand entitles you to make.**

Communication with Partner is particularly essential when you are playing on Defense. This is because you, unlike Declarer, cannot unilaterally control 26 cards, and you, unlike Declarer, cannot see all the cards in Partner's hand. This is exactly what makes Defense in bridge so very difficult!

During the auction, you may be tempted to **always** try to *control* the Partnership's decision about where to set the final contract. However, bridge is a "team sport!" If you are a *Megalomaniac*, or a "Control Freak", and you try at every turn to

¹ Esther actually is a fictitious, not real person. This "Esther Bridge Lesson" actually was written by Bruce Thompson.

maintain unilateral control of the auction, you will invariably, seriously damage the results that your Partnership will achieve.

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If you are this "Control Freak", save yourself, and your hapless Partner, undeserved agony and pain, and turn away from bridge, and toward *Solitaire*!

Once you learn the basics of bidding, and making the initial lead, you are able to start playing bridge. You can then later, gradually learn more advanced skills, such as "Signaling"² to Partner your (1) Suit Attitude, (2) Suit Preference, and (3) Card Count, and Conventions, such as "2 Over 1"³, "Jacoby 2NT"⁴, "Roth Responses"⁵ to Partner's Strong 2C opening, and Roman Key Card ("RKC") 1430⁶ (or 3014) to ask Partner about Partner's "key cards."

Although reading instructional articles and books, watching instructional videos, and attending bridge lessons, all are important, **the only way you really learn to play bridge is by playing bridge**. Learning bridge is an arduous and life-long journey, and there will inevitably be bumps and even humiliations along the way. It will be important for you to have the compassion to forgive both yourself, and your Partner, for inevitable mistakes! But remember: *Your Opponents will also inevitably make mistakes*. You win at bridge as you facilitate your Opponents making mistakes, and you over time minimize you yourself making mistakes.

"Exactly When Should I *First* Contemplate My Bidding and Initial Lead Decisions?"

² Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #11: 'Signals' to Partner When Playing on Defense". Esther says, "When you are first learning to play bridge, focus early on 'signaling' to Partner your 'Suit Attitude' whenever Partner leads, and focus later on 'signaling' 'Suit Preference' and 'Card Count'."

³ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #1: '2 Over 1' (or '2/1')".

⁴ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #2: 'Jacoby 2NT'".

⁵ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #5: Responses to Partner's 2C Opening Bid".

⁶ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #3: Roman Key Card ('RKC') 1430".

With respect to bidding, **you should begin contemplating what your second bid will be before you make your first, initial bid.** One cardinal principle of bridge is:

Do not make an initial opening bid unless you can see a reasonable second bid!

With respect to selecting your opening lead, in case you end up "on lead," **you should begin contemplating what your opening lead will be during the auction.** Another cardinal principle of bridge is:

Think about what your opening lead will be during the auction, and not only once the auction has concluded!

Thinking about the opening lead during the auction will better inform your decisions about what to bid. For example, you may elect to make a "Lead Directing" bid to "signal" to Partner what you want Partner to lead to you upon Partner's first opportunity to lead.

Basics of Bidding

- 1. The "Captain" of the Bidding Partnership.** In general, once one Partner in a Partnership, the Opener, opens the bidding, the *other* Partner, the Responder, becomes the "**Captain**" of the Partnership, and the "**Captain**" (not the Opener) is responsible for asking any necessary questions, and then setting the Final Contract. Of course, a few Openers are "Control Freaks", and mutiny against the "Captain", and try to always maintain control of setting the contract.

Mutiny may be appropriate when Opener knows critical information *unknown* to the Responder/**"Captain"**. For example, the Opener may hold unbeknownst to Responder a ginormous hand, and thus may reasonably mutiny, by asking for Aces or "Key Cards", by bidding Gerner 4**C**, or 4**NT** either Blackwood or Roman Key Card ("RKC") 1430 or 3014.

However, in most situations conducting a mutiny is *very, very, very risky*. For example, if after finding a suit fit in a Major, Responder then bids 4**NT**, and Opener Passes, this mutiny will almost certainly result in *either* a Top or a Bottom

Board. Because other Pairs sitting in the same direction on the same Board likely will Open and Respond similarly, and rational Openers will then not mutiny, the mutiny will be rare at other Tables, and *might* about **5%** of the time obtain an unmatched good Board resulting from randomly-successful and rare good luck. But about **95%** of the time a mutiny will result in a **Bottom Board**, or a Zero Board, because the wrong Partner, with insufficient information, is setting the Final Contract.

How much can an inappropriate mutiny, or an egregious bidding error involving a lie to your Partner, on a single Board, make in your overall competition results? Your overall result or ranking is determined by (1) your Total Matchpoint Score, computed by adding up the Matchpoints your Partnership earned across all the Boards in the competition, or (2) your Total Percentage, which is equal to the sum of your Matchpoints, your Total Matchpoints, divided by that mathematically maximum possible number of Matchpoints in the competition, both of which will rank order the Pairs in exactly the same rank order.⁷

If you are playing, for example, 18 Boards in the competition, and you earn a “Bottom Board”, or 0 Matchpoints, when you might at least have made a “Middle Board”, or a 50% Board, your Total Percentage will be reduced by $50 - 0 = 50 / 18 = 2.8\%$. *That is quite a bit, and can change your final rank order quite a bit, especially if you are in the middle of the ranking, where numerous Pairs will be grouped together!* If you are playing 18 Boards in the competition, and you earn a near “Bottom Board”, such as 10%, by for example not bidding a makeable slam that few other Pairs sitting in your Direction find, when you might have earned a 90% Board from bidding correctly, your Total Percentage will be reduced by $90 - 10 = 80 / 18 = 4.4\%$ by this single bad Board!!!

The Opener often will have made a bid that “limits” the Opener’s hand, such as by bidding

⁷ Within the “**Esther Bridge Lessons**”, see: “**How Duplicate Pairs Bridge is Scored**”.

1NT⁸ or 2S⁹, by providing the “Captain” with very specific HCP and Distribution information. Further bidding by the Opener in such situations is *highly inappropriate*, unless and until the Responder requests additional information from the Opener.

2. **Opening 1NT versus 1H or 1S.** If you hold the necessary HCPs, and the necessary distribution (See **Footnote 7**, above), and a 5-card Major, open 1NT. *Show your HCPs!* An exception may be if you hold 4 of the 5 Top Honors in the Major, especially if the suit is Spades, and one doubleton, but no voids or singletons.

Marty Bergen, a 10-time national bridge champion, is also famous for his bridge books. In his extremely popular book, Points Schmoints!, Bergen says (*emphasis in the original*), “Whenever you have a balanced hand and the appropriate point count, open 1NT. **There are absolutely no exceptions. Do not be distracted by a five-card major**” (p. 9).

3. **Opening with Fewer than 13 HCPs.** *First*, in any Seat, if the sum of (1) your HCPs and (2) the number of cards in your *longest 2 Suits* is **20+**, use the “**Rule of 20**”¹⁰, and *open the bidding!* The “**Rule of 20**” honors the fact that 2-suited hands play very well in Suit Contracts! *Second*, sitting 3rd, you can (but don’t have to) open the bidding with **11** HCPs! *Third*, sitting 4th, you can (but don’t have to) open the bidding with **10** HCPs. And

⁸ A 1NT opening bid does not deny holding a 5-card Major! Within the “**Esther Bridge Lessons**”, see “**Lesson #15: Esther Discusses (1) Opening 1NT versus a Major....**” A 1NT opening bid strictly “limits” Opener’s hand by showing (1) 15-17, or 15-18 HCPs, depending upon Partnership Agreement, (2) no void, no singleton, and (3) no more than 1 doubleton.

⁹ A “weak” 2 Opening Preempt bid strictly “limits” Opener’s hand to *certainly* containing (1) 6+ cards in the bid suit, and (2) either 2 of the top 3 Honors, or 3 of the top 5 Honors, and (3) less than opening HCPs. Within the “**Esther Bridge Lessons**”, see “**Lesson #24: Esther Discusses Preempt Openings and Responses Thereto**”.

¹⁰ Within the “**Esther Bridge Lessons**”, see: “**Lesson #25: Some of the 40 or so Bridge Bidding/Play Rules**”.

as Responder to a Partner opening in 3rd or 4th Seat, you must *REMEMBER* that Partner may have opened with <13 HCP!

4. **Do Not Open or Overcall Just Because You Hold 13 HCPs.** If you hold 4 of 1 Minor, and 3-3-3 in the other Suits, and Partner has already Passed, you *might* elect not to bid at your first turn! You have a "flat" hand, but too few points to open 1NT, and "flat" hands do not play well in Suit Contracts! Remember that you and Partner can also obtain a Positive Score on a Board *even when you play on Defense!* You can also enter the bidding later!
5. **Do Not Ever Overcall Opponents' Suit Bid(s) by Overcalling with a NT Bid Unless You Hold at (the Very) Least 1 "Protected" Stopper in Each of the Opponents' Bid Suits.** Overcalling Opponents with a NT bid is extremely dangerous!
6. **Do Not Double Opponents Just Because You Hold 13+ HCPs.** You *absolutely* can hold 13+ HCPs when Opponents Open, and *still* not have either a reasonable Overcall, or a reasonable Double!!! To Double Opponents with a "Take Out" Double,¹¹ you must hold 0-2 cards (preferably either 0 or 1) in the Opponent's bid suit, and no "biddable" Suit in other Suits. If you Double Opponents' opening bid of a Minor, you should be 4-4 in the Majors, with good "Suit Quality" in both Majors.
7. **Do Not Open 1D Unless You Hold 4+ Diamonds.** Some Partners agree that Partners may open 1C with as few as 2 Clubs. But it may be wise to agree that Partners will not open 1D unless Partner holds (1) 4+ Diamonds that (2) include Honors.
8. **Do Not Respond "Stayman" 2C to Partner's 1NT Opening Unless You Meet Both Requirements for This**

¹¹ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "Convention #14: 6 Not-for-Penalty Doubles".

Doubles are **very** important in duplicate bridge, especially given that there are so many kinds of Doubles! It has been estimated that your Partnership should bid Double between **2 and 4 times** in every competitive bridge session!

Response. *First*, if Partner opens 1**NT**, do not bid "Stayman" 2**C** unless you hold 9 (versus 8) to 10 HCPs, in case you end up playing a **NT** contract, in which case that extra point may come in very handy.¹² *Second*, do not bid Stayman if your distribution is 4-3-3-3 or 3-4-3-3, because your hand does not offer opportunities to ruff, and being "flat" will play better in a **NT** rather than a Suit Contract.

9. **Only Overcall Opponents with a Suit Bid if Your Suit Meets the Ron Klinger "Suit Quality Test" ("SQT") Score Requirements of Your Bid.** The "**SQT**" **Score** equals the sum of (1) the number of cards in the Suit *plus* (2) the number of Honors (including the Ten) that you hold. You can generally bid for a Suit Contract up to a level equaling the "**SQT**" **Score minus 6**. Even if your Hand is relatively weak, an Overcall of a "good" suit can be helpful *even on defense* when Opponents hold the preponderance of the points, and are likely to set the Contract, because your Overcall Suit bid is "lead directing", and that can be very useful on defense if you hold Ace, A,K, or K,Q,x.
10. **A "Lead Directing" Double can be Very Helpful on Defense.** A "Lead Directing" Double (See **Footnote 10**, above) can be very helpful in "directing" Partner what to lead whenever Partner's first lead occurs. A "Lead Directing" Double is an "artificial", non-"Takeout" Double that says to Partner, "Please lead this Suit to me at your first opportunity. I have an Ace, A,K or several Honors in the Suit I Doubled." For example, when Dealer opens 1**NT**, Partner Passes, and your RHO bids 2**C**, 2**D**, 2**H**, or 2**S**, each of these bids is "artificial" (respectively "Stayman" seeking a 4-

¹² If you are 4-4 in the Majors, and both Majors have some "Suit Quality", it may be reasonable to bid Stayman 2**C** with 8 HCPs, because your odds of a fit in a Major are so much better when you are 2-suited in the Majors!

card Major, transfer to Hearts with 5+ Hearts and 0 or more HCPs, transfer to Spades with 5+ Spades and 0 or more HCPs, and transfer to a Minor with 6+ cards in a Minor). Doubling any of these "artificial" bids is theoretically "risk free", as Opponents are *very unlikely* to leave the Double "on", because Opponents (especially if the bid is Stayman 2C) hold the preponderance of the HCPs, and are likely to Overcall your Double. At least, that's the theory.

11. **If Partner Opens 1NT, and Your RHO bids 2C, 2D, or 2H, Thus "Stealing" Your Bid, You Can Double to Tell Partner, "Partner, Opponents Stole My Bid. Please Pretend That *Instead* I Had Made This Bid!"**
12. **If Your RHO Opens 1NT, and Your Hand In Every Respect Meets the Requirements for You to Yourself Have Opened 1NT, You Can Double to Show This** (e.g., RHO: 1NT, You: Double; or LHO: 1NT, Partner: Pass, RHO: Pass, You: Double) (See **Footnote 10**, above). ALL systems (i.e., "Stayman," "Jacoby Transfers") are **ON!** Given that 2 Hands both hold roughly $16 + 16 = 32$ out of 40 HCPs, Partner's *most likely bid*, with $40 - 16 - 16 = 8$ HCPs at most, if Partner does not Pass, is a Jacoby Transfer, since Partner is *quite unlikely* to hold the 9-10 HCPs required for a "Stayman 2C" bid! However, a Double of Opponent's 1NT opening bid is *definitely not* a "Demand" Double. When your Partner Doubles Opponent's 1NT opening bid, it is YOUR DECISION whether to bid, or instead to leave the Double "on", and play for a positive Board Bridge Score by setting the 1NT bidder. Remember: "The hardest bid to make in bridge is 1NT!" Partner Doubling 1NT has shown ~16 HCPs, and if you hold HCPs, and your Opponents are Vulnerable, a HUGELY positive Bridge Score may be in the offing from just leaving this Double "on", and setting the Vulnerable Opponents!

13. **If You and Partner Are Playing "2 Over 1" ("2/1") and "Jacoby 2NT"¹³, be *METICULOUS* About Correctly Responding to Partner's Bid, and **NEVER Lie to Partner!** Esther strongly feels that newer players should begin playing these 2 Conventions *early* in their bridge lives!!! These Conventions address the grand challenge that newer players confront: Partners *both* knowing early-on in the auction that the Partners can make a contract *somewhere* between 3NT and 4S, or, equally important, Partners instead *both* knowing that they indeed cannot make a contract somewhere between 3NT and 4S! For example, if you and Partner are playing "2/1", and Partner opens a 1-level bid in a Major, and Opponents Pass at every turn, do not *under any circumstances* respond by bidding a 2-level bid in a lower-ranked suit, unless you hold 12+ HCPs! *Do not ever lie to Partner!!!***

Lagniappe¹⁴: Making the Initial Lead

14. **When You are Leading on Defense, Follow the Basic Precepts of Leading.**¹⁵ For example, *first*, if Partner bid a Suit, it is usually best to lead Partner's bid Suit, and usually if you hold a Top Honor in that suit, lead that Honor. *Second*, if you are playing against a **NT** contract, and Partner did not bid, and you do not hold "touching Honors", lead the 4th from the Top of your "longest and strongest" Suit, so that Partner can apply one of the most important of 40 or so "Rules of Bridge": the "**Rule of 11**" (See **Footnote 9**, above).

¹³ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "**Convention #1: '2 Over 1'**", and "**Convention #2: 'Jacoby 2NT'**".

¹⁴ "Lagniappe" means "a little something extra," which is a frequently used, and *delicious* phrase in New Orleans, which has numerous extraordinary restaurants, and where it is very difficult to get a bad meal, though it can be done, if you work hard, or listen to the dining recommendations of horse carriage drivers.

¹⁵ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: "**Lesson #42: Leads on Defense**".

Third, if you hold "touching Honors," and Partner Passed at every turn, lead your top "touching Honor"¹⁶ as long as you have some length in the Suit. *Fourth*, if you hold a singleton against a Suit Contract, and Partner did not bid, lead your singleton, to "demand" that Partner lead this Suit back to you at Partner's first opportunity, and hopefully before Declarer has had the opportunity to "draw Trump". *Fifth*, if Partner did not bid during the auction, lead a Suit not bid by the Opponents, and assuming you do not hold "touching Honors", lead "Top of Nothing, Bottom of Something," to let Partner know something about your holdings.

¹⁶ Leading an Honor promises either a doubleton, or a singleton, but usually the next lower "touching honor". Against a Suit Contract, holding K,Q,x of an unbid suit, lead the King. Against a NT contract, holding 3 "touching Honors", or a "tenace" (e.g., Q,J,9), especially if you hold a long Suit, lead the middle "touching Honor".