

Esther Comments Once Again About Bidding Using the "Rule of 5"

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 through the "**Rule of 5.**"¹ Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, 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 call me Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen! Instead, call me Esther! I am a very *warm, caring, friendly* person, and prefer to be casual and friendly, my malodorous muffinhead!

Bruce: Errr, well, sorry again about that, Esther. In any case, before you talk us through the "**Rule of 5,**" would you first talk more *generally* through the "**Rules**" of bridge?

Esther: Well, yes indeed, I would like to make a general comment about the "Rules," *before* talking about the "**Rule of 5.**" Initially, I want to emphasize that these "Rules of Bridge" are not "rules" in the usual sense. In common parlance, "rules" (1) dictate proper behavior and (2) specify penalties for improper behavior. For example, in football, if your team has one or more players on the wrong side of the line of

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¹ For discussion of the numerous bridge "Rules" within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" see: "Esther Bridge Dialogue Lesson #25: "40 or So Bridge Bidding/Play 'Rules'":

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play at the time the ball is hiked, your team has broken the "off sides" rule, and your opponent team will be offered a 5-yard penalty and replay of the down in punishment for your team's bad behavior.

Bruce: Well, doesn't bridge have the equivalent of what we usually call "rules"?

Esther: Yes, of course! But these "rules" are not called "rules." The equivalent of "rules" in bridge are called instead the "Laws of Bridge." (**Really!!!**) To become a licensed ACBL Director, you must take a 300+ item test about various things, and especially the "**Laws of Bridge.**" The "**Laws of Bridge**" specify that players must bid in turn, make "sufficient" bids, when playing follow suit whenever possible, and so forth, and what remedies the Director can impose whenever the numerous Laws are violated.

Bruce: OK, so what are the "Rules (not Laws) of Bridge."

Esther: The "Rules of Bridge" are **general guidelines about how to bid, or play, in certain situations.** The "Rules of Bridge" should not mechanically dictate what you do or do not do. But the "Rules of Bridge" are things to seriously think about as you bid, or play. For example, the "**Rule of 7**" says that, when you are Declarer in a **NT** contract, and opponents lead a suit, as a general rule, you should "duck" for [7 minus the number of cards your partnership holds in that suit] rounds of play. Thus, if your opponents lead a Spade, and Dummy and your hand together hold 5 Spades, you should "duck" for $7 - 5 = 2$ rounds of play of Spades before you take your winner, so that you will optimize your results.

"Rule of 5"

Bruce: OK, so what is the "Rules of 5"?

Esther: Yoda² taught me this Rule. The "Rule of 5" guides whether you, as Opener bidding a Major, should, or *should not*, bid game, once Partner gives you a "constructive" raise at the 2 level of your bid Major. This "Rule" assumes that Responder's bid at the 2 level shows (1) 3 card support, and (2) 8 to 10 HCPs. This Rule is especially useful in a "competitive auction" (i.e., both sides are bidding). The "Rule of 5" says, when you open a Major and Partner supports you at the 2 level with a "constructive raise," you can immediately bid game if you count the number of Aces, Kings, and Queens you are missing across ALL 4 SUITS, and iff (if, and only if) that number is 5 or less.

Complication #1

Bruce: Well, what if I as Opener have a side suit that is only a singleton low card, for example, because I can eventually trump that suit? Should I still add 3 (missing A,K,Q in that suit) to my total?

Esther: This is *exactly* where you have to use the "Rule of 5" with some flexibility, and JUDGMENT/DISCRETION. I would count missing Aces, Kings, and Queens across "side" non-Trump Suits only up to the number of cards I held in these Suits. For example, if Partner and I have found a "fit" in Spades, and I held:

S A K T 9 8 5
H 4
D A Q 6
C K Q 8

I would count this as 1 Spade + 1 Heart + 1 Diamond + 1 Club = 4, and I would bid 4**S**.

² "Yoda" is what some members of the Savannah Bridge Club call a *very, very accomplished* LifeMaster who plays *frequently* in the club and has taught Bruce a number of lessons.

Complication #2

Bruce: Well, surely there is yet another second "complication." After all, *it is bridge, isn't it?*

Esther: Yes, indeed, my malodorous misanthrope! Some Partners play a variation of the "Rule of 5" called "Help Suit Asking." If I as Opener, in reaction to Responder's "constructive raise" to the 2 level of my bid Major, then bid any other suit at the 3 level, I am asking Responder if Responder can "help" by taking winning tricks in the suit that I bid at the 3 level. For example, if I open 1**H**, Partner responds 2**H**, and I then bid 3**D!**, I as Opener am (1) telling Responder that I have several losing, low cards in Diamonds, and (2) asking the Responder if Responder has "protected" winning tricks (e.g., A,K,x; A,Q,x,x, K,Q,x) in the newly-bid suit. If, on the other hand, Responder cannot help in Diamonds, Responder will then re-bid the Major, and the contract will be set at the 3 level.

Bruce: Amazing. But doesn't your 3**D!** bid have to be **ALERTED**, and *explained* as "help suit asking," because your Diamond bid is artificial, and not natural?

Esther: TRUE, my simpering simpleton!

Bruce: My goodness!!! This means you are also actually EXPLICITLY telling your Opponents how best to set your contract!!!! Is THAT a good idea?????

Esther: Well, this is exactly what makes "help suit asking" a very controversial bid! You should use this bidding system *iff* (if, and only if) you as Opener know that you can then make the 3-level contract, even if Responder cannot "help" you in Diamonds, and even though you have explicitly told Opponents how to most hurt you!!! This is very dicey stuff, indeed!!!

Bruce: Well, is there any way to protect yourself against bidding too high when playing "help suit asking"?

Esther: Well, yes. Many Partners will play such that Opener only bids "help suit asking" with a 3-level bid iff (if, and only if) Opener's number is **exactly 6**. This means that you are on the margin for bidding a game contract, and probably will still be OK with a 3-level contract. Nevertheless, note that when you play "help suit asking," the cost is that Opener is giving up the opportunity to show Responder long side suits that also may be useful.