

Losing Trick Count

The Law (of Total Tricks – LOTT) is a tool to help you decide what level is right for a safe contract, there is a second tool you can use to the same purpose, Losing Trick Count (LTC). Once there is a known fit, using previous bids by your side, LTC can be used to estimate the safe level of a contract. We emphasize that the starting premise is that LTC **can only be used once there is a known fit**, but there is no problem in processing LTC to “pre-evaluate” your hand – just in case. The next premise is that a minimum opening hand (i.e 12-14 HCP) has a Losing Trick Count (LTC) of 7; and a minimum response hand (6-9 HCP) has an LTC of 9. If your Partner responds 2♠ to your 1♠ Open, you automatically know the partnership has, at minimum, a 16 (= 9+7) LTC hand.

The starting premise suggests that LTC **can not** be used when heading for NoTrump contracts or with misfit hands – **you must have a known 8+card fit**. In all other situations it can be used to assess the trick taking ability of hands after you have an agreed 8+Card fit in a suit. The usefulness of LTC lies in the power of unbalanced hands, the more unbalance a hand the more power this tool has (That's why you avoid LTC in No_Trump cases). We have mentioned in other places the saying “5-5, *Come alive.*” or “6-4 *Go for more*”; which is just another way of expressing the un-assumed strength of unbalanced hands that Works HCP misses. Using traditional valuation methods generally both short and long suits are undervalued. We make note here that the experts agree that the 4-3-2-1 system of evaluating hands tends to undervalue Aces and over-values Q's & J's (*Quacks*). Inherently, LTC provides the best method of evaluating the feature known as the “power of imbalance”. Consider the following two hands of a partnership:

♠A8652	♠K7	On the face of it (a total of 16 HCP) these hands don't seem
♥AQ8532	♥K764	much,
♦6	♦T52	adding 4 (or 5) PP (playing points) for the two singletons and an
♣7	♣9843	additional PP for the 6 th ♥ still makes a 4♥ contract a stretch using
		HCP's. So much for the traditional evaluation (22 combined PP)!
		This hand can easily make 5♥.

Let's consider an extreme example. How many points are required for a Grand Slam? If you were dealt 13 ♠'s, your 7♠ bid could be made with utmost confidence yet you only have 10 HCP and ~18 PP. using standard evaluation methods. Another example...

Likewise, if you held

♠KQJT98765432
♥2
♦-
♣-

you have 11 Tricks with ♠'s as Trump and if Partner has either ♠A or ♥A (just 4 HCP) a Small Slam is in the offing; and a Grand Slam if she held both (that's 8 HCP to go with your 6). However, if Partner held every other HCP in the deck (i.e. 26 HCP Missing the ♠A or ♥A) they do not help at all. You will only make your 11 Tricks in ♠'s. It is Tricks that make a winning hand in Bridge, not points (High Card or Playing). ***Let me say that again! Points do not yield a winning hand in Bridge, it is Tricks that count.*** So with many hands you need a different method of evaluating Trick Taking potential (which, btw, is what Milton Work's HCP method, that we use, was also designed to do). As our last two examples have illustrated HCP count doesn't help much with unbalanced hands, It gets us started, but that's all. That's why should combine both LTC and HCP to determine the full potential of our hands. HCP to start, LTC to finish.

How to Evaluate

Rather than count winning Tricks which, in Trump contracts, are not always sure tricks, LTC counts losing Tricks, which are, for all intent and purpose, practical certainties. Consider the first Partnership holding above. In the hand on the left there are only two losing Tricks, one each in the Minor suits. No matter what the opponents hold in those two suits, in a Trump contract, you stand to only lose only two Tricks, one each in ♦'s and ♣'s. Pretty straight-forward, as is the rest of the logic. You remember

in our introduction we introduced the premise: LTC for minimum opener and minimum response hands are 9 and 7 respectively, a total of 16. If we consider that, along side of the fact that standard HCP evaluation methods suggests that those two hands have the potential to make a 2-level contract; we can carry that logic forward and say a 3-level contract requires a combined LTC of 15 and a LTC of 14 is what is needed for a 4-level contract. We will examine the details of this view of LTC after we learn how to evaluate completely. Just as Milton Work considered A's as the ultimate Trick taker LTC does as well. But we also consider that, in a Trump contract, there can only be 3 tricks available in any suit so long as there is Trump available. Let's say that a different way: "In a Trump contract the maximum number of tricks you can lose in any given suit is 3". This leads us to consider that a holding of AKQ has no losing Tricks. Likewise a holding of AK79 or AQ79 has only 1 losing Trick and a holding like $\spadesuit 45$ has only 2 losing Tricks. Let us go back and consider the two hands (16 HCP/21PP total) we started with and apply the LTC:

$\spadesuit A8652$	LTC = 2	$\spadesuit K7$	LTC = 1	In each hand, each suit can only have, at most, 3 LTC
$\heartsuit AQ8532$	LTC = 1	$\heartsuit K764$	LTC = 2	Then In each suit subtract 1 for each A, protected K and Q
$\diamond 6$	LTC = 1	$\diamond T52$	LTC = 3	If a suit has 1 Card it can only lose 1 Trick
$\clubsuit 7$	LTC = 1	$\clubsuit 9843$	LTC = 3	If a suit has 2 Cards it can only lose 2 Tricks

The left hand has an LTC of 5 and the right has an LTC = 9 a total of 14. The total LTC of 14 suggests a 4-level contract in \heartsuit 's. We will see later how we get there with an LTC of 14. The **key point** is that **there are NO MORE than 3 losing Tricks in any suit in a hand. And that there is, minimally, an 8-Card Trump fit.**

Why? Because the longer the suit, the more chance the 'long' cards have of taking a Trick rather than being a loser. For example, if your hold $\clubsuit 9843$, as above and the suit divides 4-3-3-3, even though the opponents take their A, K and Q your fourth \clubsuit is a winner (once Trump is gone). And your singletons? They mean their long suits (whether they are filled with honors or not) are losers to your Trump.

You must have the idea by now, it is the total number of losers per hand that is used for this extended means of hand evaluation. Recall we said that the premise is that an opening hand is counted as a 7 LTC hand. Lets look further.

Ruling the Losing Trick Count

Rule 1: Use only on unbalanced hands when you have found a fit

Rule 2: Maximum of Three losers per suit; 12 per hand, and 24 per partnership

Rule 3: Only Ace, King, Queen are non losers

Can we break any of these rules? Answer is NO, but we might want to refine Rule 3 by making it a little stricter. Consider the three following suits:

- a) Q63 b) AJT9 c) KT9

Now consider the situation when Partner is holding 3 small opposite each of these hands. In (a) it is quite likely that the Q will be captured making (a) a 3-loser-suit. (b) has a very good chance of having 2 winners making it a 1-loser-suit versus the 2 it evaluates to and (c) could be a 2- or 3-loser suit. In each case it all depends on where the other high cards in the suit are located. We point this out because LTC, like most things in Bridge, is not exact but must be applied with common sense. So you might consider: treating (a) as a $2\frac{1}{2}$ -LTC (instead of 2) while, due to promotion, QJx might be considered a 2 LTC. Kx or KQ is a 1-Trick-loser as is a singleton K; but Qx or QJ must be assessed as a 2-Trick-loser.

Whether one chooses to refine LTC as suggested or use it in an un-refined fashion, the process eventually yields the number of tricks the partnership can expect to take when playing in their established suit. That is, assuming normal breaks and assuming required finesses work about half the time. One can then use partnership bids to ascertain the partnership LTC. Each partner conveys LTC

by their bid.

Bidding and Applying LTC

We generally use the standard 12+HCP method to Open at the 1-level; but remember this equates to a 7 maybe 8 or 6 LTC hand. You will find that your 12-14 HCP 5-Card Major suit hands usually evaluate to 6 or 7 LTC.

With a fit Partner can be assured that you have at least a 7 LTC hand, assess his hand to determine how high to bid. Under LTC guidelines the total number of Tricks per hand is 4 (suits) x 3 = 12; for both hands in the Partnership the total is then 24. When we subtract the total number of LTC for the Partnership from 24 the result is the number of Tricks the Partnership should be capable of winning. Example: Partner bids 1♠ and you hold ♠652 ♥Q852 ♦K76 ♣AT7. Using traditional evaluation you have 9 HCP and should show your minimum response hand by bidding 2♠ (minimum response with 3-Card support). Using LTC you have 9 (perhaps 9½) losers and still would bid a seemingly shakier 2♠. If Partner has either the ♥A or a protected ♥K your ♥Q is safe and the 9 LTC and the 2-level Contract is less shaky. Once you bid 2♠ partner is now assured that you have a 9 loser hand and, knowing there is a fit in ♠'s, can then determine the partnership LTC by actually evaluating the true LTC of his hand. If instead of a 7 loser hand partner actually holds a 6 loser hand he can safely (because (your)9 + (his)6=15 and 24-15 = 9) compete to the 3-level, i.e. 9 tricks. Note we said compete; that is where LTC, like LOTT, shines, in competitive bidding situations. With a 5 LTC (5 loser) hand one can easily bid game, 4♠.

As long as you have a fit (8+card fit) if your hand, as responder, evaluates to 8 LTC you can safely show a limit raise by raising partners 1-of-a-suit opener to the 3-level (assuming you hold 4 of Partners suit). Partners' 7 LTC combined with your 8 LTC (= 15LTC) says that you can make a three level contract. Your (e.g. 1♥ – P – 3♥) sequence tells the opener that you have an 8 LTC hand. If his hand is actually a 6 LTC (rather than the 7 LTC that the opening implies) he can add your 8 LTC (3♥) bid add his 6 LTC to get 14 – it's game time. 24-14 = 10 Tricks!

Later we will indicate that some care must be taken with extremely unbalanced hands but lets consider these two hands, you are vulnerable an opponents are not

Opener	♠ 9	LTC = 1	Responder	♠T76	LTC = 3
	♥KQT98532	LTC = 1		♥A74	LTC = 2
	♦-	LTC = 0		♦K524	LTC = 2
	♣KJ75	LTC = 2		♣QT9	LTC = 2

With a 4 LTC hand, opener would be remiss if he opened with anything other than 1♥. Despite only 9 HCP this 4 LTC the hand is too strong to open with 4♥, with just a few key cards in partners hand (e.g. 2 of the 4 Aces which isn't a stretch) it smells like slam. You already have the 8-card fit so as little as a 1NT response (suggesting a 9 LTC hand) means you might be safe at (24 – (9+4) = 13 LTC) the 5 level. So you start with 1♥, LHO passes and partner surprises you with 2♥. An 11-card fit, now LOTT also says you can afford to be at the at the 5 level. Your hopes are looking toward the sky then RHO throws a 3♣ bid on the table. If you relied solely on HCP and PP there might/should be a hesitation on your part to bid even 4♥. It is very possible that you could lose 3♣, 1♥ and a ♠ down 2. With the added information provided by LTC there should be no hesitation, you can confidently bid 4♥. You don't know it exactly but the opponents have 22 HCP and a solid ♠ fit, they might be willing to sacrifice by bidding 4♣ and your sitting there vulnerable with a weak-freak. Armed with LTC info you can think – 'I do have a decent chance to make 5 (LTC of 13) and the likely hood that I will go down more than 1 is very low.' Down 1 doubled/vul = -300, versus them making 4♣ = -420. With a great deal of confidence you can bid 5♥ -- a very good sacrifice bid – even vulnerable.

In general a 4 LTC hand is often worthy of a 2♣ opening bid. Think about it. Even if partner has 0 HCP and no PP – he has a 12 loser hand. His 12 and your 4 LTC = 16 LTC. If you can identify a fit you're safe at the two level but there's not much room to find at fit at the two level – that's the risk you're taking. If you had a 4 loser hand similar to our first hand getting to game using HCP thinking

might still be difficult. Lets modify that first holding slightly.

♠A8652	LTC = 2	♠K3	LTC = 1
♥AQ8543	LTC = 1	♥K72	LTC = 2
♦A	LTC = 0	♦T543	LTC = 3
♣7	LTC = 1	♣9843	LTC = 3

1♥ – ? – 2♥ – P; ? It now has 14 HCP and great trick-taking power (20-21 PP). Using HCP we would open this 1♥. With a little bidding magic we *might* even reach 4♥ or even 4♠ using HCP only. Let's evaluate it that way. Do you invite with 3♥? Partner would surely Pass with 6 HCP. Do you venture to 4♥, based on your 20-21 PP? You have 3+ losers (2+♠'s and a quick ♣) and possibly the ♥K. Looking at both hands it is clear what the contract should be but at the table looking at your hand alone and listening to the auction the decision could be stressful. Now Let's Open that 14HCP hand with 2♣ based on its LTC value of 4 (anticipating that Partner will have 2♥'s or maybe 3♠'s). Now how does the bidding go:

2♣ – P – 2♦ – P; 2♥ – P – 4♥ – P – P – P. With your 2♣ Opener Partner's 6 HCP gives him no angst about immediately bidding Game once the fit is revealed. Recall that a minimum response hand (6-9 HCP) evaluates to 9 LTC. Combining that with a 4 LTC hand gives us a 13 LTC hand worthy of a 5-level contract once the 8-Card fit is revealed. Using either HCP or LTC logic Partner has no problem advancing the bid to Game – you told him you had a BIG hand with that 2♣ Open. Using HCP you'd never open the hand with 2♣, but LTC opens the door for such a bid. Just notate it on your Convention Card. In the 2♣, box put 22+HCP or 4LTC.

Summary

- a) 2-level Contract → 16 Losers or better
- b) 3-level Contract → 15 LTC or better
- c) 4-level Contract → 14 LTC or better
- d) 5-level Contract → 13 LTC or better
- e) Small Slam → 12 LTC or better

Addendum

LTC works best with 5-3 fits; better with 4-4 fits; Take care with 6-2 and 7-1 fits. Even though 8-0 indicates an possible unbalanced hand it turns out that LTC doesn't work as well with extremely unbalanced Trump suits.

- a) A 10-Card fit usually leads to an extra Trick beyond what LTC suggests.
- b) You can use LTC even if your Partner knows nothing about it. It isn't a communication tool its an evaluation tool.

More on LTC – The 5-6-7 Rule

LTC has become a very popular tool, such that many teachers include it early in their curriculum.

Students are taught to apply the 5-6-7 rule whenever they hear a minimum response to their opening of a Major: either 1♠ – P – 2♠ – P; ? or 1♥ – P – 2♥ – P; ?. The 5-6-7 rule says: "The fit has been found, partner says 'I have a 9-loser hand' thus if (a) I have a 5-LTC go to Game, (b) with a 6-LTC I should try for Game (e.g. using help-suit game-try), and (c) with a 7-LTC, I PASS.

As it turns out this approach works well even when a hand is opened with less than 12HCP in a case such as: ♠862

♥AQ843

♦KQ93

♣7

This is a 6-LTC hand and even with only 11HCP it probably should be opened 1♥ and if the response is 2♥ the 5-6-7 rule generally works OK. But make

that ♠2 a ♣2 and the hand can and usually does fall apart. What is the difference, both have 11HCPs and 6-LTC. Nothing, it turns out, as mentioned above. certain type hands just do not work well with LTC and experience has shown that 5-4 hands that don't have a singleton or void most often play 1-trick less than expected by LTC. Thus we are cautioned (see Mel Colchamiro's *How You Can Play Like an Expert*) that when we open 5-4 hands the 5-6-7 rule should be changed to a 4-5-6 rule. Actually its even a bit more complicated than that. It is only the 6 in the 5-6-7 rule that is problematic and Mel gives us his controls adjustment. As we see in other applications Controls are counted as follows A=2, K=1. Now our 5-6-7 formula changes, when having 5-4 holding, to $(\# \text{ of Controls} - \text{LTC}) = J$

- if $J = 1+$ go for game
- if $J = 0$ Try for Game
- if $J = -1$ or less Pass

What this approach effectively does is restores the true trick-taking effectiveness of A's and K's into the evaluation system.

Even More on LTC

You have a good hand by any standard (HCP, LTC) and you open the bidding; but those pesky rogue opponents wont let you get away with it – and your Partner has already Passed. The Opponents own the contract but you feel like you should bid on. Despite the fact that you're not sure of your real LTC (lack of fit and no response from Partner) you have a 5-LTC hand or maybe even a 4-LTC hand and don't want to give up. Can you proceed strictly on your own LTC, say of 5 and bid on. It always seems that when you do, you get clobbered; and when you don't – you should have. Is there a good rule of thumb to help decide when to and when not to? It's not fool-proof but if you have a balanced hand it surely doesn't work unless you hand 20+ HCP that's when we tell Partner he should definitely bid (and the opponents are scared off). But if you have a hand with a singleton you can use this rule of thumb: take your LTC -1 and subtract it from 13. That's the number of tricks you, all-by-yourself, can contract for. Example: You have a 5-LTC hand, subtract $1 = 4$. Subtract that from $13 = 9$. Bid your suit at the 3-level. A 4-LTC hand should excite you to unilaterally bid your suit at the 4-level. If you are in a Major it makes no sense to go it alone above the 4-level. In a Minor going it alone to the 5-level is dangerous regardless of LTC. Use your judgment, a positive score of 130, is always preferable to minus score.

Rule of 14

If you have a great hand, the opponents get into the bidding and Partner passes. You hate to sell out just because partner passes, you might be tempted to bid again. This rule tells you how many tricks you should be able to take, based only on your own Losing Trick Count. Subtract your LTC from 14, the result is the number of tricks you should be able to take especially if you have a 5-card suit. So if you have a 7 LTC, $14 - 7 = 7$, you can only make a 1-level contract – that's why we're safe opening 1 of something with a 7 LTC (12-14 HCP) hand. It's when you have a 5 LTC hand and partner passes you feel like you should compete and the rule says you can take 9 tricks; i.e. you can compete to the 3 level.