

Learning Points - The Law of Total Tricks

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See link below to Bridge World web page on Jean Rene Vernes, also Larry Cohen's book *To Bid or Not to Bid* for a detailed review. Also see Wirgren and Lawrence *I Fought the Law of Total Tricks* for insight into limitations and adjustments necessary for accurate high level decisions).

This outline is meant to provide a working overview of the possibilities in this approach to hand evaluation. Study the references before committing yourself and your partner to this approach.

Jean Rene Vernes (see also L. Cohen [To Bid or Not to Bid](#))

http://www.bridgeworld.com/default.asp?d=article_sampler&f=samltt.html

The total number of tricks available to both sides on any hand is equal to the total number of trumps held by both sides in their best (often longest) fits. (Jean-Rene Vernes Bridge World 1968). Said differently, if total trumps are 16 (say two 8-card fits) then if one side makes 9 tricks, the other side must make 7 tricks (16-9=7). Useful for suit contracts, not so much for NT bidding. Simple Concepts:

- 1) If a hand has 16 or fewer trumps let the opponent play (or double them) at the 3 level. If either side holds 9 trumps, then the minimum trick count is 17.
- 2) Bid to the level of the number of trumps your side holds (8 = 2 level; 9=3 level; 10=4 level, etc.)
- 3) Induce the opponents to bid one level higher than the number of their trumps.
- 4) Total tricks when one side plays NT and the other a suit is 7 + the number of trumps.
- 5) The 5 level belongs to the opponents. <19 Trumps never right to bid 5. With 19, only if we hold 11 trumps. With 20, 10-10 trumps often wrong. >20 the LoTT diverges.
- 6) When in doubt, bid 4S over their 4H.
- 7) When in doubt, bid one more on freak deals.
- 8) When holding 4 trumps (their suit) double for penalty.

The LoTT is about 83% accurate, but ± 1 trick happens often and ± 2 tricks can happen on freakish hands.

From Jean-Rene Verne's article: "You are protected by "security of distribution" in bidding for as many tricks as your side holds trumps. Thus, with eight trumps, you can bid practically without danger to the two level, with nine trumps to the three level, with ten to the four level, etc., because you will have either a good chance to make your contract or a good save against the enemy contract.

This rule holds good at almost any level, up to a small slam (with only one exception: **it will often pay to compete to the three level in a lower ranking suit when holding eight trumps**). Of course, the use of this rule presupposes two conditions: (1) the point-count difference must not be too great between the two sides, preferably no greater than 17-23, certainly no greater than 15-25; (2) the vulnerability must be equal or favorable. For this rule to operate on unfavorable vulnerability, your side must have as many high cards as the opponents (or more)."

Indicators to bid one more:

The more **short suits** held by your side, the more you should be willing to bid beyond the Law.

The more your points are working (sitting behind opponent's stoppers instead of in front of them).

Favorable vulnerability

Total Trumps ≥ 18 .

No wasted values – No strength opposite partner's shortness; No strength in their suit – they will have fewer points in outside suits when you hold no points in their suits.

Prime values (A's and K's), not slow values (Q's and J's)

Indicators to defend/double:

Few/no short suits (4333 distribution, or no short suit outside partner's suit))

Slow values (Q's and J's) not Prime values (A's and K's)

Points not working (Sitting in front of opponent's stoppers instead of behind them).

Unfavorable vulnerability

Total Trumps ≤ 17

Wasted values - strength opposite partner's shortness; strength in their suit – they will have points in outside suits when you hold points in their suits.

To illustrate let's look at the scoring for 4 of a Major from both pair's perspective. Here *Total Trumps* is the sum of the number of trumps held in our best fit plus the number of trumps held in opponent's best fit. *Our Tricks* are those we make declaring our contract. Therefore opponents declaring their contract = Total

Trumps minus Our tricks. (Assume one side plays 4H and the other 4S for this example).

Yellow compares not vulnerable scoring. Green compares vulnerable scores.

At equal vulnerability we need to make 8 tricks for a sacrifice to be worthwhile.

Unfavorable vulnerability? Compare our green to their yellow. Generally we need to make 9 tricks for a sacrifice to have value.

Favorable vulnerability? Compare our yellow to their green. See the cross hatch green -500 result – you can win many match points there.

Total Trumps	Our Tricks	Their Tricks	Not Vulnerable				Vulnerable			
			Their Game	Their Game Doubled	Our Game	Our Game Doubled	Their Game	Their Game Doubled	Our Game	Our Game Doubled
16	6	10	-420	-590	-200	-800	-620	-790	-400	-1100
	7	9	+50	+100	-150	-500	+100	+200	-300	-800
	8	8	+100	+300	-100	-300	+200	+500	-200	-500
	9	7	+150	+500	-50	-100	+300	+800	-100	-200
	10	6	+200	+800	+420	+590	+400	+1100	+620	+790
17	7	10	-420	-590	-150	-500	-620	-790	-300	-800
	8	9	+50	+100	-100	-300	+100	+200	-200	-500
	9	8	+100	+300	-50	-100	+200	+500	-100	-200
	10	7	+150	+500	+420	+590	+300	+800	+620	+790
	11	6	+200	+800	+450	+690	+400	+1100	+820	+990
18	7	11	-450	-690	-150	-500	-650	-990	-300	-800
	8	10	-420	-590	-100	-300	-620	-790	-200	-500
	9	9	+50	+100	-50	-100	+100	+200	-100	-200
	10	8	+100	+300	+420	+690	+200	+500	+620	+790
	11	7	+150	+500	+450	+790	+300	+800	+650	+990

We only need to make 7 tricks in our sacrifice when we are not vulnerable and they are.

Bidding one more is almost always right at favorable vulnerability, and when the hand has 18 or more tricks. Nevertheless leave the 5 level to the opponents except on very freakish hands – and don't blame me if you push them into an unbidable making small slam.

With 16 Trumps between both pairs, we want to bid game only when we have the strength to make it on our own and can only afford a 2 trick set. We must make 8 tricks or get a bad score. We should be prone to defend rather than bid more, because they will lose more (doubled) than we gain making our game.

With a 17 trump hand, the decision is much closer. If we can make 8 or 9 tricks then we should double our opponents, not bid on. With an 18 trick hand bidding to game appears to benefit whether we are vulnerable or not, and whether we make it or not. At favorable vulnerability we can bid when all our cards are working, regardless of strength.

Key to effectively using the Law in competitive auctions is first to accurately estimate the number of trumps your side owns. Many choose bidding methods in competition to clarify number of trumps early in the auction:

Support Double → 2H; a direct raise shows 4+

Jordan LR over opponent 2NT = 4+ Card support; Redouble then support = 3 card support

Drury 2C=3 card support; 2D=4+ Card support.

Opener bids 3 directly in competitive auctions after responder support means 6+ trumps.

Responder's free support to the 3 level in a competitive auction where opener has shown 5 trumps shows 4 card support (or a desire to induce opponents to bid higher).

Bergen Raises

Jacoby 2NT (majors) shows 4+ in a balanced hand

Splinter bids shows 4+ in an unbalanced hand

Jump Limit raise shows 4+ ; 1NT Forcing Major Limit Raise shows 3 in a balanced or unbalanced hand

Preemptive raises show 4+ and a desire to obstruct.

Jacoby transfers/Smolen to show 5 + Trumps

Law Raises of Jacoby Transfers (*We don't recommend this*).

Stayman to find a 44 or even 54 trump fit where necessary.

4 card suits up the line enable best fit in response to minor suit openings.

Forcing Pass: When we bid to show a fit and at least game invitational strength, a pass is forcing on partner and shows no wasted values in their suit, with a desire to act (Double or bid).

The list is far longer, but you get the idea.

Next pay close attention to opponent's bidding to understand the number of trumps each has in their suit.

Rebidding a suit typically show six. Pairs often strain to bid NT when holding a 5 card minor.

Bidding a new lower ranking suit to the 1st can be shorter or equal length. Rebidding the 2nd suit informs equal length (5 or more).

A reverse usually is into a 4 card suit and implies a 5 card 1st suit

Rebidding the 1st suit shows 6-4

Some play reverses into strength fragments and do not guarantee 4 cards – **ASK**.

An eager reraise in a competitive auction should show at least one more trump than the minimum for the original bid. This applies for opener as well as responder.

Play the takeout doubler for a 4441 type hand until you learn more. Their partner is.

Often there is a negative inference that neither opponent holds a 5 card suit when they pass instead of overcall.

Keep on counting – and then use what you've counted!