- **Stop**
- **Look**
- **Listen**
- **Analyze**
- **Plan**
- **Execute**

In Counting HCP (I, II & III) and Counting Shape (I & II) we saw how data guides decisions and how count changes dynamically throughout the play of the hand. We continually revise our estimates with each new bid, signal or play. Assume 2/1 Game Force – the more common duplicate system.

When do we count TRICKS?:

1) To decide how high to bid a SUIT contract when competing in the auction.
2) When preparing to play the hand as declarer (covered in detail in "the 1st 90 Seconds").
3) When preparing an opening lead and while defending.

How high should we bid?
With two balanced hands opposite each other and no compelling reason to contract in a Major Suit, you will prefer to bid some number of NT. We arrive at minor suit contracts by process of elimination.

For NT contracts HCP are a sound way to decide how high to bid. If one partner makes a bid showing length, we can **supplement HCP count with trick count**. If opener makes a strong jump rebid of their suit, we can count on 5-6 tricks in that suit plus 2 more outside that suit, so we can estimate how many NT we rate to make (absent a running suit for the opponents). A gambling 3N is opened with no side A or K and 7 SOLID running cards in a (minor) suit. We are "gambling" that partner has 2 tricks for us and that opponents will not find the lead to set us. (We count partner for 7 tricks in a suit where we do not hold A, K, or Q).

For suits, shape has a very important role as does the number of trumps you hold (**Law of Total Tricks**). Many conventions and competitive bidding strategies cater to knowing if our side has an 8, 9 or 10+ card trump fit. The Law's accuracy is fair to good, predicting the number of tricks won correctly about 83% of the time. Wirgren and Lawrence expound on Working Points and Side Suit Shortness as a better predictor of tricks. This approach is workable and requires dedication. There is a long-standing approach known to experts and in use for decades.

> **Law of Total Tricks**: The total number of tricks in any hand is approximately equal to the total number of trumps held in both sides best fit. *Bid to the level equal to the number of trumps you hold (e.g. bid to 3 with a 9 card fit, 4 with a 10 card fit). Always bid 4♠ over 4♥ (3♠ over 3♥) with enough trumps. Leave the 5-level for the opponents.*

The Losing Trick Count
This is simple guide to estimate how high to bid **once we find a good trump fit**. A good fit is 8 trumps between both hands. A great fit is 9 or more trumps. **No fit → no Loser Count. No Trumps → No Loser Count.**

Counting losers is straightforward. Absent bidding by the opponents, count up to 3 losers in each suit 3 or more cards long. Any A, K or Q is a winner. Holding a doubleton means a maximum of 2 losers in that suit and only A or K are winners. Holding a singleton there's only 1 possible loser and only the A is a winner. (Singleton K and Doubleton Q are NOT winners). Remember that honors in partner's suits carry their full weight. Only side suit Aces and supported Kings are winners for sure. Side-suit Queens and unsupported Kings are NOT certain

winners. If the bidding suggests your side-suit K or Q is finessable (power in that suit lies to your left) then DISCOUNT the value of that card as a full winner. (See detailed adjustments for improved accuracy in the Modern Losing Trick Count outline attached.

How LTC Works

There are a maximum of 12 losers in any one hand (no A's, K's , or Q' s with no suit shorter than 3). For any 2 hands therefore there are a maximum of 24 losers. (2x12=24). Count the losers in your hand and estimate the losers in partner's hand (estimated from the bidding, more on that soon) and subtract the total losers from 24. The remaining number is the number of tricks your side rates to win. NOTE: when considering slam, be sure to check for Aces/Controls – LTC cannot guarantee your side is not missing 2 Aces…

For **trump contracts** here's what we see:

24		2-level	3-level	4-level	5-level	6-level	7-level
Winners Needed		8	9	10	11	12	13
Losers remaining		16	15	14	13	12	11 or less

This shows we should bid game in a major when our loser count for BOTH hands (ours and partners is 14 or less. Game in a minor will happen when the loser count is 13. Slams require 12 and 11 losers maximum respectively.

Here are some examples counting losers:

Hands	HCP	Losers	
♠432 ♥986 ♦1094 ♣7632	0	12	Weak weak weak weak weak and 4333 too.
♠K1098432 ♥8 ♦109 ♣763	3	2+1+2+3=8	Game if partner has 6 losers or less.
♠K32 ♥986 ♦1094 ♣QJ32	6	2+3+3+2=10	Weak. Partner needs a 4 loser hand for game.
♠K32 ♥K86 ♦1094 ♣QJ32	9	2+2+3+2=9	4333 means more losers
♠K32 ♥K864 ♦109 ♣QJ32	9	2+2+2+2=8	Power of short side suits
♠K32 ♥ KQJ864 ♦109 ♣32	9	2+1+2+2=7	Power of Working Points.
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦1094 ♣QJ	12	1+2+3+2=8	Marginal. 2QT swings the decision to bid.
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦ QJ1094 ♣-	12	1+2+2+0=5	Power of shortness - game opposite 9 losers!
♠KQ9632 ♥8 ♦ AQJ1094 ♣-	12	1+1+1+0=3	Very powerful trick taking hand. Slam opposite some 9 loser hands.
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦K94 ♣QJ	15	1+2+2+2=7	Often opened 1NT.
♠KQJ2 ♥QJ8 ♦QJ4 ♣QJ3	15	1+2+2+2=7	Never opened 1NT. Too few As & Ks.
♠KQ982 ♥AJ862 ♦74 ♣3	10	1+2+2+1=6	Open this Rule of 20 hand (2 Quick Tricks).
♠K9832 ♥J7862 ♦A4 ♣Q	10	2+3+1+1=7	Pass this hand – not fit for rule of 20. 1 QT.

Estimating Opener's Loser Count

		Estimated Losers			
Strength	HCP	*3334*	*4432/5332*	*4441/5431/ 5422/6322*	*5440/5521/ 6421/6331*
Weak 2	5-7/8-10	NA	NA	7-8	7-8
Minimum	12-14	7-8	7	6	5
Sound	15-17	6-7	5-7	4-5	3-4
Strong	18-21	5-6	4-5	3-4	2-3
Very Strong	22+	≤ 5	≤4	≤ 3	≤ 2

Loser count depends heavily on both AKQs held, and shape of the hand. A 7 or 8 card suit reduces loser count by eliminating side cards: 7=3=2=1 and 0 HCP starts with only 9 (not 12) losers. Add the AKQ of the long suit and a side A (13 HCP), and the loser count is reduced to 5 – enough to make game with a fitting partner with 9 losers!!

Estimating Responder's Loser Count

Strength	HCP	Estimated Losers
V. Weak	0-4	10-12
Weak	5-7	8-10
Constructive	7-9	7-9
Invitational	9-12	7-8
Forcing	12-14 Game	5-8
	15-17 Slam Interest	3-7
	18-19+ Invite Slam	3-6
	20+ Slam	≤ 5

We can estimate responder's loser count by the strength and shape of their responses during the bidding. Notice the range depends on the length of the shortest shits held by responder. Doubletons reduce the LTC by 1, Singletons by 2 and voids by 3. Who says shortness isn't important…One way to see the power of distribution is to count the LTC for hands with no HCP based on shape alone. Here's how losing trick count depends on responder's distribution only. The key point is that any hand with extreme distribution has play power if you can play in (one of) your long suit(s). So, do not give up easily when you hold 6 or more cards or 55+ shapes, even with no strength. (Just be sure to bid so that partner knows you have no strength. This is NOT license to bid with nothing, rather permission to get active late in the auction when warranted.

Shapes	LTC @ 0 HCP
4333	12
4432/5332	11
4441/5422/5431/ 6322/6331	10
5521/5530/5440/6421/ 7321/7222/7330	9
6511/6520/7411/7420/ 8311/8221/8320	8
6610/7510/8410/ 9211/9310/9220	7
7600/8500/9400/10300	6

Cover Cards
Simply, AKQs held by partner in all suits are cover cards. They fill in the missing honors you need for LTC estimates. Cover cards help estimate LTC when partner has bid NT. 12-14 will have 4-5 cover cards. 15-17 will have 4-6 cover cards. 18-19 will have 4*-7 cover cards. 20-21 will have 4-8 cover cards. So, when partner opens 2NT, you can estimate that your 0 HCP holding of ♠9876543, ♥109764, ♦9, ♣5 (8 losers) is worth pushing to game!!! (Transfer to ♠s and bid 4♥s, or bid Stayman and if partner shows no 4 card major, bid game in ♠s).

Not all cover cards are equal. A K or Q in partner's suit is more likely to be a trick than a K ro Q in a side suit (unbid ot bid by the opponents).

Examples
LTC is an approximate guide to level – when considering slam be sure to control bid or ask for key cards to ensure that opponents cannot cash the setting trick immediately. If opponents hold missing honors (AKQs) in the wrong hand your finesses will not work and you will be down. Sometimes the unfavorable lie of the cards is predicted by opponent's bidding. Often we simply have to guess.

Let's look at the combine Losing Trick count for several hands. We'll assume opener has minimum to sound values and responder has a 4-card 11 HCP raise.

Responder's Hand→			♠J963 ♥K5 ♦K8 ♣A7654	♠J963 ♥K65 ♦K87 ♣A76
LTC →			**7**	**9**
Opener's Hand:	**HCP**	**LTC**	**Comments**	
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦1094 ♣QJ	12	**8**	15L &9W: Game on 1 of 2 finesses	17L & 7 W: We will struggle to make 2 spades!
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦ QJ1094 ♣-	12	**5**	12L &12 W: RKC keeps us out of an unmakeable slam. Slam is on if the ♣A is the ♦A.	14L & 10 W: We should bid game on this.
♠KQ9632 ♥8 ♦ AQJ1094 ♣-	12	**3**	10L&14W: RKC keeps us out of an unmakeable slam. Slam is on if the ♣A is the ♥A.	12L & 12 W: 10L&14W: RKC keeps us out of an unmakeable slam. Slam on if the ♣A is ♥A.
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦ QJ4 ♣ K9	15	**6**	13L & 11 W. Bid up to 5 to make.	15 L & 9 W: Here the ♦J makes trick 10. Bid 4.
♠KQJ2 ♥QJ8 ♦QJ4 ♣QJ3	15	**7**	17 L & 10 W: The lack of primes in the 15 HCP hand makes 4 require a finesse.	16 L & 8 W: 4-5 losers. (forgive the ♠J overlap here).
♠KQ982 ♥AJ862 ♦74 ♣3	10	**6**	13L & 11 W: You will make only 4 if the ♦A is wrongly placed.	15L & 9 W: 2 red-suit finesses offer possibilities for 10 tricks.
♠K9832 ♥J7862 ♦A4 ♣Q	10	**7**	14L & 10 W: Making 4 or 5 depending on the H honors.	16L & 8 W: Missing too many HCP in the long suits. Ugly.

More Examples:
Say you hold these hands and partner opens the bidding to this auction: 1♥-P-1♠-P-2♣-P-???

Hand	HCP	LTC	Comments
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦ Q109 ♣84	11	7	Even game might be a stretch if your ♦Q is not working. Bid 2N and await developments. Your 11 HCP might be 9 or 10.
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦84 ♣Q109	11	7	All your points are working. Push your way to 4♥.
♠KQ963 ♥A98 ♦2 ♣Q1084	11	7	Bid 2♦ 4th Suit GF then support ♥. You have 14 Support Points and they are all working. Slam is possible if partner has extras.
♠KQ632 ♥AQ984 ♦109 ♣8	11	5	LTC 12 →consider slam. Bid 2♦ 4th Suit GF then support ♥, then control bids follow. With partner's pointed suit controls, use RKC and bid your slam.
♠KQ632 ♥AQ984 ♦- ♣1098	11	5	Bid as the previous hand. You should think grand slam if partner has no ♦ controls, a ♠ control and top ♣s.

Learning Points
1) Counting shape helps when declaring and defending. Shape can help when HCP can't.
2) Counting distribution and HCP together is a powerful in guide to the best choice of plays.
3) Never take practice finesses (finesses that are unnecessary but available). Avoid or delay pure guess finesses whenever possible! Count instead.

Good Books

Edwin Kantar,   Advanced Bridge Defense
Marty Bergen,   More Points Schmoints
Marshall Miles,   Inferences at Bridge

Keywords: HCP, Shape, Tricks, Planning the Play, Losing Trick Count,

Modern Losing Trick Count – Improved LTC Accuracy

If, and only if, you have a trump fit of 8+ cards, add your estimated total winners to partner's and bid accordingly. If you're in the slam zone (12+ winners), check controls and then bid accordingly. If you do not have a trump fit, do not use LTC. Bid logically.

LTC evaluation Consider only at the top three cards in each suit as follows.

Suit	LTC
Void	0
x	1
A	0
K	1***
Q	1**
J	1*
AK	0
AQ	1**
AJ	1*
Ax	1
KQ	1½ **
KJ	1½ *
Kx	1½
QJ	2***
Qx	2**
Jx	2*
xx	2
AKQ	0
AKJ	½*
AKx	½
AQJ	1**
AQx	1
AJ10	1½ **
AJx	1½ *
Axx	1½
KQJ	1
KQ10	1½ *
KQx	1½
KJ10	2**
KJx	2*
Kxx	2
QJ10	2
QJx	2½**
Q10x	2½*
Qxx	2½
J10x	3**
Jxx	3*
xxx	3

Missing A's count 1½ LTC, Missing K's count 1, Missing Q's count ½.

← Count Honor Combinations in a suit, adjusting for multiple honors and fit with partner. The asterisks show where to add value to subordinate honors when the partnership has a fit in that suit. Subtract ¼ LTC for each asterisk with a KNOWN fit with partner.

Hands	Discussion
♠AQTxxx ♥x ♦KQJx ♣xx	12 HCP, 2½ Quick Tricks *LTC 1+1+1+2= 5; Winners = 7.* Open 1♠. Bid aggressively w/♠ or ♦ fit.
♠ xx ♥A10x ♦ KQxx ♣ QJxx	12 HCP, 2 Quick Tricks *LTC 2+1½ +1½ +2½=7½ Winners 4½* Consider passing initially. Upgrade QJ's where partner fits.
♠x ♥A10xxxx ♦x ♣KQJxx	10 HCP, 2 Quick Tricks *LTC 1+1½ +1+1=4½ Winners = 7½* Open 1♥. Determine partner's cover cards for game or slam.
♠AQJ10xxx ♥x ♦KQJx ♣x	13 HCP, 2 ½ Quick Tricks *LTC 1+1+1+1=4 Winners = 8* Open 1♠ and Jump Shift into Diamonds. Force to game if partner can respond. Need 4 QTs to open Strong 2♣
♠Axx ♥x ♦Axxxxx ♣xxx	Partner opens 1♠ you bid 1N (Forcing). Partner rebids 2♦. 8 HCP 2 Quick Tricks *LTC 1 ½+1+1½+3=7 Winners = 5.* With both Aces working & length in partner's 2nd suit, the 8-card ♠ fit says use the LTC. Your 7 losers and partner's 7 losers (an average opening hand) total 14, or 24-14=10 combined winners. Go ahead, bid 4♠!
♠KJ10xxx ♥Axx ♦ xx ♣AQ	14 HCP 3 Quick Tricks. *LTC 2+1½ +2+1=6½ losers. Winners 5½.* Partner splinters to 4♦ (0/1 ♦, 2nd round control in unbid suits, 12-15 HCP). Adjust LTC – 5 losers and 7 winners. The only question is do you have the ♠AQ and 1st or 2nd round control of ♦s. 4N RKB elicits 6♦ – a void with 3 key cards (bless partner for showing the ♠Q). Go ahead, bid the grand slam. Your ♥ loser will go away on partner's ♣K. This grand makes on the right 26 HCP.