

Learning Points Competitive Bidding Counting Our Tricks

By Steve Moese

January 19, 2010

Bidding Level: BASIC

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

How high should we bid?

HCP (and solid suit length) guide how high to bid NT contracts. If one partner shows a long suit, we can supplement HCP with tricks. Trump contracts require we blend strength and distribution to arrive at the right level. Here is an approach known to experts and in use for more than 75 years.

The Basic Losing Trick Count (LTC)

This is a practical way to estimate potential tricks **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. We count up to 3 losers in each suit.

3 or more cards -	A, K or Q* is a winner.	Maximum 3 losers
2 cards-	A, K are winners, all others are losers	Maximum 2 losers
1 card-	A is winner, all others are losers.	Maximum 1 loser

Voids have zero losers. (*Singleton K and Doubleton Q are NEVER winners*)

*Qxx+ = 2 ½ losers unless you hold a 2nd honor in the suit or partner bid that suit. Honors in partner's suits carry their full weight. Only side suit Aces and supported Kings are sure winners. Side-suit Queens and unsupported Kings are NOT sure winners. If the bidding suggests your side-suit K or Q is finessable (winners in that suit lies to your left) then DISCOUNT a full winner.

How LTC Works

When you have an 8-card trump fit, there are a maximum of 12 losers (=4x3) in any one hand (no A's, K's, or Q's with no suit shorter than 3). For your 2 hands 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 your 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 – LTC cannot guarantee your side is not missing 2 Aces.

Why 24 and not 26 losers you ask? After all, each hand holds 13 cards. Well the answer comes from the 8-card trump fit. The 4th (& 5th if 5-3) card in trumps wins better than 68% of the time (3-2 breaks).

For **trump contracts**: we should bid game in a major when our loser

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

count for BOTH hands is 14 or less. Game in a minor is on when the loser count is 13. Small slams require 12 losers and grand slams 11 losers respectively. **The Basic LTC assumes that suits are breaking evenly and at least ½ of your finesses are working.**

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

Learning plan:

- Hand Evaluation: HCP & shape → tricks
- Estimate tricks available for both sides.
- **Estimate our tricks.**
- Competitive bidding challenge: What's 10 HCP worth?
- The 2 Competitive Auctions.
- Best Competitive bidding practices.
- Key Bidding tools.

♠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	A sound Weak 2 bid.
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦1094 ♣QJ	12	1+2+3+2=8	Marginal. 2QT + 5CM → many open. QJ wasted.
♠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	Great trick taking hand. Slam opposite 9 losers.
♠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 22 hand (2 Quick Tricks).
♠K9832 ♥J7862 ♦A4 ♣Q	10	2+3+1+1=7	Pass this hand – not fit for rule of 22. 1½ QT.

Estimating Opener's Loser Count

Loser count depends on AKQs held and hand pattern. 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 fit and partner with a constructive 9 losers!! More distribution reduces LTC. Flat hands have higher LTC.

Strength	HCP	Est. LTC
Weak	4-6	10
Weak 2	5-7/8-10	9 / 7
Constructive	7-9	9
Invitational	10-12	8
Min Opening	12-14	7-8
Sound	15-17	6-7
Strong	18-21	5-7
Very Strong	22+	≤ 4

Opener's rebids offer insight into LTC:

Simple rebid	Minimum opener	12-14 HCP	5422/31 might mean only 6 losers
Jump Rebid	Sound opener	15-17 HCP	6322/31 might mean only 4 losers
Reverse	Strong opener	18-21 HCP	5431/6331 might mean only 4 losers
Str. J/S	Strong opener	18-21 HCP	Generally 5 losers or better
Demand Bid	Very Strong Opener	22+ HCP	4 losers or fewer.

Estimating Responder's Loser Count

We can estimate responder's loser count by the strength and shape of their responses during the bidding. Strength comes directly from weak, constructive, invitational, or forcing bidding. Responder's and opener's LTC based on strength is very similar. LTC depends on the length of the shortest suits held by responder. **Doubletons reduce the LTC by 1,**

Responder's Strength	HCP	Est. LTC
V. Weak	0-4	10-12
Weak	5-7	10
Constructive	7-9	9
Invitational	9-12	8
Forcing	12-14 Game	7
	15-17 Slam Interest	6
	18-19+ Invite Slam	5
	20+ Slam	≤ 5
	23+ Grand Slam	≤ 4

Singletons by 2 and voids by 3.

...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. Any hand with extreme distribution has tricks 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 in a way 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).

LTC is an approximate guide to level. When considering slam be sure locate 1st round controls (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.

Shape	LTC	Shape	LTC	Shape	LTC
4333	12	6331	10	7321	9
5332	11	5440	9	7411	8
4432	11	5521	9	7420	8
5422	10	5530	9	6511	8
5431	10	6421	9	6520	8
4441	10	6430	9	6610	7
6322	10	7222	9	7600	6

Sometimes the unfavorable lie of the cards is predicted by opponent's bidding. Often we simply have to guess. Useful Shortness and Working Points help as you approach a distributional game or slam.

Examples

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

Hand	HCP	LTC	Comments
♠KQ632 ♥A98 ♦Q109 ♣84	11	7-8	Even game might be a stretch if your ♦Q is not working. Bid 2N and await developments. Your 11 HCP might really 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♦ 4 th 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♦ 4 th Suit GF then support ♥. Control bids follow. With partner's pointed suit controls, use RKC & 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.

Hands	Discussion
♠AQTxxx ♥x ♦KQJx ♣xx	12 HCP, 2½ Quick Tricks <i>LTC 1+1+1+2=5; Winners = 7.</i> Open 1♠. Bid aggressively w/♠ or ♦ fit.
♠xx ♥A10x ♦KQxx ♣QJxx	12 HCP, 2 Quick Tricks <i>LTC 2+1½+1½+2½=7½ Winners 4½</i> Consider passing initially. Upgrade QJ's where partner fits.
♠x ♥A10xxxx ♦x ♣KQJxx	10 HCP, 2 Quick Tricks <i>LTC 1+1½+1+1=4½ Winners = 7½</i> Open 1♥. Determine partner's cover cards for game or slam.
♠AQJ10xxx ♥x ♦KQJx ♣x	13 HCP, 2 ½ Quick Tricks <i>LTC 1+1+1+1=4 Winners = 8</i> 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 <i>LTC 1½+1+1½+3=7 Winners = 5.</i> With both Aces working & length in partner's 2 nd 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. <i>LTC 2+1½+2+1=6½ losers. Winners 5½.</i> Partner splinters 4♦ (0/1 ♦, 2 nd round control in unbid suits, 12-15 HCP). LTC - 5 losers and 7 winners. Do you have the ♠AQ and 1 st or 2 nd round control of ♦s? 4N RKB elicits 6♦ - a useful void. Bid 7. Partner will have the ♠AQ and the round Ks. The ♥ loser goes away on the ♣K. This grand makes on the right 26 HCP.

Modern LTC evaluation

Consider only at the top three cards in each suit as follows. 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 Modern approach recognizes that Qxx < Kxx < Axx when it comes to tricks. It also recognizes that split honors are worth less than honors in the same suit and hand. KQx opposite xxx is

worth 1 or 2 tricks. However Kxx opposite Qxx is worth 2 tricks only if the A is doubleton or defenders make a mistake. Qxx is likely worth 2.5 losers not 2 losers. A&K must be well placed for the Q to win.

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

← 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.

Adjust MLTC by Control Points. There are 12 Control Points (A=2, K=1) and 40 HCP in the deck. (40 HCP / 12 TC = 3.33 HCP/TC). A top-control rich hand adjusts as follows:

- 1) Count losers
- 2) Count top controls
- 3) Multiply Top Controls by 3.33 → Top Control HCP
- 4) Subtract actual HCP from the Top Control HCP
- 5) Divide the Difference (Top Control HCP – Actual HCP) by 6 and subtract this from your loser total.

For example: Axx, Axxx, Axx, Axxx

8 Losers

16 HCP

8 top controls x 3.33 = 26.67 Top Control HCP

26.67 – 16 = 10.67 Difference

10.67 / 6 = 1.8

Adjusted Losers = 8 – 1.8 = about 6 to 6½ losers, a strong 1NT opening.

Cover Cards

When partner has a balanced hand and you have a 7+ card suit, knowing partner's cover cards can help estimate your winners. Add partner's cover card count to your loser count to estimate the number of tricks your side can take. Cover cards follow Ruben's In-Out valuation principles: A>K>Q in outside suits, while Q>K>A in your trump suit. With freakish distributions (partner has 10+ cards in 2 suits), bid on with Aces in the side suits but check for partner's aces or pass if you hold Kings. Don't even think about bidding on if you hold Queens!

HCP	Losers	Cover Cards
0-6	10-12	0-1
7-9	8-9	1-2
10-12	7-8	2-3
13-15	6-7	3-4
16-18	5-6	4-5
19-21	4-5	5-6
22-24	3-4	6-7
25-27	2-3	7-8

Trump Length Adjustments

With 8 trumps holding xxx, add a loser. In a 6-2 or 7-1 fit the short hand must decide if extra winners are available. If not, add a loser. With 9 trumps - no change. With 10 trumps add a winner.

Competitive bidding:

Law of Total Tricks → Total Tricks in the hand

Losing Trick Count → Our side's winners

LoTT-LTC = Opponent's winners

You now know whether to bid more or not, and why!

No valuation approach is perfect for all hands. LTC improves how we estimate tricks from both HCP and distribution over standard approaches.

Reference: Ron Klinger, The Modern Losing Trick Count Bidding to Win at Bridge, Cassell, Great Britain (1986) 143 pp. ISBN 0-304-35770-7