

# Learning Points - The Law of Total Tricks

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Bidding Level: Basic

Tuesday Night Lecture Series

When competing we want to know how many tricks we can take and how many tricks they can take before we make our final decision. This is part 1 (of 2) to decide how high we should bid.

## Their Trumps + Our Trumps = Their Tricks + Our Tricks

**The LAW:** The total number of tricks available to both sides is

equal to the total number of trumps held by both sides in their best (often longest) fits. If total trumps are 16 (say, two 8-card fits) then if one side makes 9 tricks, the other makes 7 tricks (16-9=7). Useful for suit contracts not NT. Useless when opponents don't bid (our constructive auctions).

**How it Works:** Let's look at hands played at the CBA 1/4/2011:

<p><b>3</b>    ♠ 5    Dir: S ♥ 52    Vul: E-W ♦ T9752 ♣ A9864</p> <p>♠ 743    ♠ AKQJT2 ♥ KQT98    ♥ AJ6 ♦ K86    ♦ ♣ 32    ♣ KT75</p> <p>4    ♠ 986    ♣♦♥♠NT 8 18    ♥ 743    N - - - - 10    ♦ AQJ43    S - - - - ♣ QJ    E - 6 6 5 W - 6 6 5</p> <p>EW has 9 trumps NS has 10 Trumps Total Tricks = 19 EW makes 12 NS makes 6 Law Deviation: <b>-1</b></p>	<p><b>7</b>    ♠ T42    Dir: S ♥ J5    Vul: Both ♦ T2 ♣ AJ9865</p> <p>♠ 863    ♠ A95 ♥ QT7643    ♥ K92 ♦ K8    ♦ AQ965 ♣ 72    ♣ Q4</p> <p>6    ♠ KQJ7    ♣♦♥♠NT 5 15    ♥ A8    N 3 - - 2 1 14    ♦ J743    S 3 - - 2 1 ♣ KT3    E - 1 2 - - W - 1 2 - -</p> <p>EW has 9 trumps NS has 9 trumps Total Tricks = 18 NS makes 9 EW makes 8 Law Deviation: <b>-1</b></p>	<p><b>9</b>    ♠ K65    Dir: N ♥ AK982    Vul: E-W ♦ J2 ♣ QJ5</p> <p>♠ Q73    ♠ AJT ♥ T7    ♥ J6 ♦ AK9    ♦ T8543 ♣ AK987    ♣ T63</p> <p>14    ♠ 9842    ♣♦♥♠NT 16 6    ♥ Q543    N - - - - 4    ♦ Q76    S - - - - ♣ 42    E 3 3 - 1 W 3 3 - 1</p> <p>EW have 8 trumps NS have 9 trumps Total Tricks = 17 EW makes 9 NS makes 6 Law Deviation: <b>-2</b></p>
<p><b>26</b>    ♠ 7652    Dir: E ♥ K74    Vul: Both ♦ A4 ♣ AQ73</p> <p>♠ AK8    ♠ T ♥ AT852    ♥ 963 ♦ KJ2    ♦ JT95 ♣ 94    ♣ JT852</p> <p>13    ♠ QJ943    ♣♦♥♠NT 15 3    ♥ QJ    N - - - 3 1 9    ♦ 8763    S - - - 3 1 ♣ K6    E - 1 2 - - W - 1 2 - -</p> <p>EW has 8 trumps NS has 9 trumps Total Tricks = 17 EW makes 8 tricks NS makes 9 tricks Law Deviation = <b>0</b></p>	<p><b>4</b>    ♠ A7    Dir: W ♥ 53    Vul: Both ♦ J9852 ♣ KQJT</p> <p>♠ QT54    ♠ K62 ♥ J876    ♥ AT42 ♦ T3    ♦ AK4 ♣ 532    ♣ A94</p> <p>11    ♠ J983    ♣♦♥♠NT 3 18    ♥ KQ9    N 1 2 - - - 8    ♦ Q76    S 1 2 - - - ♣ 876    E - - 2 1 - - W - - 2 1 - -</p> <p>EW has 8 trumps NS has 8 trumps Total Tricks = 16 EW makes 8 tricks NS makes 8 tricks Law Deviation = <b>0</b></p>	<p><b>17</b>    ♠ AJ    Dir: N ♥ AT97    Vul: None ♦ K6 ♣ AQJ84</p> <p>♠ 653    ♠ T87 ♥ Q653    ♥ 84 ♦ JT84    ♦ Q9732 ♣ 65    ♣ T72</p> <p>19    ♠ KQ942    ♣♦♥♠NT 3 2    ♥ KJ2    N 7 - 7 7 7 16    ♦ A5    S 7 - 7 7 7 ♣ K93    E - - - - - W - - - - -</p> <p>NS has 8 trumps EW has 9 trumps Total Tricks = 17 EW makes 4 tricks NS makes 13 Tricks Law Deviation = <b>0</b></p>

The LoTT cannot predict when opponents high cards are placed well or when suits break badly - key reasons LoTT overestimates total tricks.

The opponents bidding typically shows 8, 9, or 10 card fits...listen carefully and estimate their length. Adjust your competitive bidding style. **The partner who knows we have a 9-card fit is the one who bids 3.** 1♠-P-2♠-3♣: P → w/5 ♠s and a minimum; 3♣ with 6+ ♠s and a minimum, 4♣ with game. Double shows 5 ♠s a maximum and 3+ cards in their suit. If opener passes, responder bids 3♣ with 4-card support (check vulnerability please), doubles with 3-card maximums, and passes with 3 card minimums.

### Simple Concepts:

- 1) Bid to the level of the number of trumps your side holds (8 = 2 level; 9=3 level; 10=4 level, etc.)
- 2) Induce the opponents to bid one level higher than the number of their trumps.
- 3) **Avoid -200.** Check Vulnerability. Act when NV vs V.
- 4) Mind Useful Shortness and Working Points.
- 5) 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.
- 6) Total tricks when one side plays NT and the other a suit is 7 + the number of trumps.
- 7) 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.
- 8) When in doubt, bid 4♠ over their 4♥.
- 9) When in doubt, bid one more on freak deals.
- 10) When holding 4 trumps (their suit) double for penalty when they bid higher than their # of trumps.

**The LoTT is about 80% accurate, but ± 1 trick happens often and ± 2 tricks can happen on freakish hands.**

### 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.

### 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 more points in outside suits when you hold 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.

### **Declare or Defend**

We can construct a table of outcomes for the different vulnerabilities and see how the Total Trumps for the hand guide whether to defend or bid more. This table does not predict our exact result on any given hand. The table shows we should let opponents declare when Total Trumps are 16 unless we can make game with certainty. As the number of Total Trumps increases, the pendulum swings to us declaring. By 19 Total Trumps we should strive to declare.

Total Trumps	Our Tricks	Their Tricks	NV	V	NV	NV	V	V	V	NV
			Our Contract Dbld	Their Contract						
16	6	10	-800	-620	-800	-420	-1100	-620	-1100	-420
	7	9	-500	+100	-500	+50	-800	+100	-800	+50
	8	8	-300	+200	-300	+100	-500	+200	-500	+100
	9	7	-100	+350	-100	+150	-200	+350	-200	+150
	10	6	+590	+400	+590	+200	+790	+400	+790	+200
17	7	10	-500	-620	-500	-420	-800	-620	-800	-420
	8	9	-300	+100	-300	+50	-500	+100	-500	+50
	9	8	-100	+200	-100	+100	-300	+200	-300	+100
	10	7	+590	-300	+590	-150	+790	-300	+790	-150
	11	6	+690	-400	+690	-200	+990	-400	+990	-200
18	8	10	-300	-620	-300	-420	-500	-620	-500	-420
	9	9	-100	+100	-100	+50	-200	+100	-200	+50
	10	8	+590	+200	+590	+100	+790	+200	+790	+100
	11	7	+690	+300	+690	+150	+990	+300	+990	+150
19	9	10	-100	-620	-100	-420	-200	-620	-200	-420
	10	9	+590	+100	+590	+50	+790	+100	+790	+50
	11	8	+690	+200	+690	+100	+990	+200	+990	+100

**Bidding one more is almost always right at favorable vulnerability 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 unbiddable making small slam.

**With 16 Total Trumps for both pairs, we want to bid game only when we can make it.** We 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 we may benefit from bidding game at favorable vulnerability whether we make it or not.** At favorable vulnerability we can bid when all our cards are working, regardless of strength.

### Conclusion

If  $\pm 1$  trick is accurate enough for you, then the Law of Total Tricks can help you estimate how many total tricks both sides can take.

The Law DOES NOT predict how many tricks you will win for any one hand. Instead the LAW identifies when we might bid more to improve our expected score.

If we combine the LAW with the Losing Trick Count, then we can estimate Total Tricks (LAW), Our Tricks (LTC) and Their Tricks (LAW – LTC).

**Jean Rene Vernes (Bridge World 1968) - see also L. Cohen To Bid or Not to Bid**  
[http://www.bridgeworld.com/default.asp?d=article\\_sampler&f=samltt.html](http://www.bridgeworld.com/default.asp?d=article_sampler&f=samltt.html)