The Losing Trick Count

Consider the following hands.

North	*South*
S - A 7 5 3 2	*S - K 7*
H - A Q 9 6 3 2	*H - K 8 7 4*
D - 2	*D - 8 5 3*
C - 4	*C - 9 8 7 2*

Only a combined 16 points, but a rather good 4 Heart contract. It happens, but would you bid it? How about -

1H - 2H - 4H!

But a jump to 4 Hearts on only 10 points? It looks silly, but it is the correct bid. Why? *Because the hand is unbalanced, and partner has shown a fit with your suit*. In such a case, hand evaluation using high card *points* will be a failure: it is best done using the **Losing Trick Count**.

The **LOSING TRICK COUNT (LTC)** is one of the most useful tools ever invented for Bridge players. It is a method of *EVALUATING* your hand, and, what's more, evaluating partner's also. But the most important point to note is that it should be employed only with **unbalanced** hands, and only when a **trump fit** has been disclosed (eight or more cards in the two hands).

So with balanced hands, use the *standard method for evaluation* ie. points based upon four for an Ace, three for a King etc. (invented by Dr. Milton Work), whilst with unbalanced hands it is far superior to use the *Losing Trick Count*.

Why? Why not use the traditional Work count for unbalanced hands as well as balanced? Because of the problem of deciding what is the exact worth of, first, long suits (especially in trumps or with a big two-suited fit) and second, short suits (singletons, voids). The LTC provides inherently the best evaluation of such features.

A simple example of the power of the unbalanced hand is shown above. Now to consider a most extreme example - how many points are required to make a Grand Slam? Most are taught that at least 37 points is the minimum. But if you were dealt all 13 Spades, your bid of *7 Spades* would be made with utmost confidence, and would have chances! But you only have 10 High Card points (HCPs), the Ace, King, Queen and Jack of Spades. It is the **unbalanced** nature of the hand (long suit and voids) that produces the tricks. Using the Milton Work point count alone, it is impossible to evaluate such a hand.

A further example - suppose you were dealt <u>all the Spades apart from the Ace</u>, and your *thirteenth card was the Two of Hearts* ie.

S - K Q J 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
H - 2
D - none
C - none

Now you have exactly a sure 11 tricks in Spades (12 Spades, less the Ace). If partner has either the Ace of Spades or the Ace of Hearts (4 points is all that is needed), you make a Small Slam; and if partner has BOTH of those Aces (8 points), you will make all 13 tricks. However, if partner has *all the other points in the pack* **apart** from the Ace of Spades or the Ace of Hearts (a total of 26 points!), they do not help at all. You only make the 11 tricks playing in Spades. It is **tricks** that are required to win at bridge, not points. And with certain types of hands, you need to employ methods that provide <u>evaluations of **trick potential**</u>

The **<u>Losing Trick Count (LTC)</u>** is the best means of assessing <u>unbalanced hands.</u> But it only applies AFTER A TRUMP FIT HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED. So, use it to assess the trick-taking potential of your hand when you have agreed a suit with partner. And you can also use it to assess the trick taking potential of partner's hand, whether partner is aware of the LTC or not. However, to establish more precisely what exact cards partner holds when considering a slam, you will need to employ other methods, such as Cue Bidding or Roman Key Card Blackwood.

So, in summary, the LTC is a *tool to help evaluate the trick-taking potential* of the combination of yours and partner's hands. It applies **only** after agreeing a trump suit (a MINIMUM combined 8 cards in the two hands is a necessity).

<u>Do NOT use it with No Trump hands or on misfit hands</u>. With No Trump hands, use the Work count method. With misfits, you probably do best to stop bidding as soon as possible.

<u>What is a Losing Trick?</u>

Pretty straightforward, really. A losing trick is a card that will not usually be expected to win a trick. A **winning** card is considered to be an **Ace**, or a **King**, or a **Queen**. All others are ***<u>losers</u>***. So the suit holdings of -

A K 5 or A Q 10 or K Q 4

each have two winners out of the three cards, and so are ONE LOSER suits. Note that we consider each suit of a hand on its own, and count the losers in each suit.

A key point is that there can be **NO MORE than THREE losers in any one suit**.
Why not? Because the longer a suit, the more chance there is that the 'long' cards become winners. For instance, if you hold a 4 card suit comprising the 5 4 3 2 and it divides 4-3-3-3 around the table, even though the opponents take their Ace, King and Queen, you will hold the thirteenth card of the suit, which is now a winning card.

So holding the following **suits**, how many losers in each? (The brackets shown after the third card in each example are there as a reminder that you only consider the first three cards you hold in the suit, as you cannot have more than three losers per suit.)

A/ (A 7 5) 3 B/ (Q J 10) C/ (A K 6) 4 2 D/ (8 5 4) 3 2

Answers - A) two, B) two, C) one D) three. Remember, an Ace, King or Queen is considered a winner, but no more than three losers per suit allowed..

So holding the following **HAND**, how many losers in it in total?

S - A 7 5 3 H - Q J 10 D - 4 C - 8 5 4 3 2

Answer - eight (two in Spades, two in Hearts, only one in Diamonds, three in Clubs). Note that a singleton suit has a maximum if ONE loser, a doubleton suit a maximum of TWO losers.

It is the *total number of losers per hand* that is used for **hand evaluation**. For instance, a hand with SEVEN losers is a candidate for an opening bid at the one level (so, in the above eight loser hand, replacing the Eight of Clubs with the Ace of Clubs produces a seven loser hand and an opening One Club hand - you do have a good rebid whatever partner says).

Refining the Losing Trick Count

Rule One: Use only on unbalanced hands when you have found a trump fit.

Rule Two: Maximum of THREE losers per suit (a maximum of twelve per hand).

Rule Three: ACE, KING, QUEEN are winners, all others are losers.

Can we break these rules? Rules One and Two, no; Rule Three, yes. Why can we re-evaluate Rule Three? Consider your holding of the following TWO loser suits -

A) Q 6 3 B) A J 10 C) K 10 9

Now assume partner holds only three little cards in that suit. Suit A) is most likely a THREE loser suit and B) a ONE loser suit, whilst C) may be a TWO or a THREE loser suit. It all depends upon the exact positioning of the other high cards in the suit. If partner does have them, fine, but if opponents hold them, beware. Even if opponents do hold them, they may be positioned in your favour eg. in item C) above, the A and Q may be 'in front of' your K 10 9, and your dummy may hold the J. This is why the LTC is not an exact science, but needs to be **applied with common sense**.

How do you apply common sense to (refine) the LTC? In the above example A) with a holding of Q x x, you might consider 'half-losers' (ugh!). So example A) above is 2 _ losers.

Some players 'balance' Q x x against another suit containing an Ace. If they also hold an Ace in their hand, they count Q x x as 2 losers, and if they do not hold an Ace, Q x x is counted as three losers. Why? Because an Ace always (invariably) wins a trick, whereas Kings and Queens do not.

Note that a King or Queen is always worth more if it is backed up by another lower honour. The best method is probably to count a holding of **Q J x** as TWO losers, and **Q x x or Q x x x x** as TWO AND A HALF (2_) losers (or even three if you don't care for 'half-losers').

Also note that a **singleton King or Queen** counts as ONE loser, and a **doubleton K x or K Q** also counts as ONE loser, but a **doubleton Q x or Q J** should be assessed as TWO losers.

Bidding Using The Losing Trick Count

An opening bid at the ONE level shows an LTC of 6 or 7 losers. A minimum response shows a LTC of 9 or 10, and a jump bid supporting our suit shows 8 losers. So what? Well, assuming we find at least an EIGHT card trump fit and we wish to play in that suit, we add together the losers in both hands. Say, we have 6 losers and can evaluate partner's hand as 8 losers, total 14. Now what?

To determine how high to bid, the LTC says we should subtract out total losers in the two hands from 24. Now 24 - 14 = 10. Hence the Losing Trick Count states that we have good chances of making TEN tricks in our trump suit. Why subtract from 24? This is because there are TWELVE losers in each of our and partner's hands, 24 in total. (Some people subtract from 18, as they take off the 'book' of 6 tricks first. Now their result says how high to bid:- 18 minus 14 = 4, so bid at the 4 level.)

Return to our initial example on page one -

North	*South*
S - A 7 5 3 2	*S - K 7*
H - A Q 9 6 3 2	*H - K 8 7 4*
D - 2	*D - 8 5 3*
C - 4	*C - 9 8 7 2*

How many losers for North? Five. How many for South? 9. Total = 14. Subtract 14 from 24 = 10 tricks. Bid what you think you can make; so its 4 Hearts, easily made.

Note that North has 5 losers, which the LTC normally indicates is close to an opening at the TWO level (best kept for 4 loser hands). However, the hand is clearly not powerful enough in High Cards to warrant this, its power being in its unbalanced nature which the LTC is designed to evaluate. (An opening strong Two bid shows a hand of both POWER and QUALITY ie. lots of high cards)

Note also that the North hand is useless if South holds Diamonds and Clubs. The key to this hand is the distribution and combination of the Spades and Heart suits, and it is this type of hand for which the LTC is best used - it assesses the distributional power very readily, which a points-based mechanism is unable to do as quickly and as efficiently.

Bidding Summary/Evaluation Using the Losing Trick Count

Opening Bid At ONE Level:

SUIT:	6/7 Losers
NO TRUMPS:	7/8 Losers (if Weak)
	6/7 Losers (if Strong)

Opening Bid At TWO Level:

SUIT:	3/4 Losers (not 2 Clubs)
NO TRUMPS:	4/5 Losers
2 CLUBS:	2 (or 2 1/2) Losers

Response At ONE Level:

SUIT: 9/10 Losers

NO TRUMPS: 9/10 Losers

Change of Suit Response At TWO Level:

SUIT: 8 or less Losers

NO TRUMPS: 8 or less Losers

Double Jump Response:

NEW SUIT: 7 or less Losers

SAME SUIT: 8 Losers

Jump to Four Response:

NEW SUIT: 6 or less Losers (Slam seeking)

SAME SUIT: 7 Losers (shutout)

Overcall:

MINIMUM: 8 Losers

Take-Out Double:

MINIMUM: 7 Losers

Jump Rebid By Opener:

SAME SUIT: 5/6 Losers

Addenda

1/ The LTC will invariably indicate *whether a slam is a possibility*, having found a suit fit (twelve losers minimum between the two hands). However, it is usually sensible to use a *check on Key Cards* 'along the way' (via Cue bidding and/or Roman Key Card Blackwood), as you may be missing the required number of Aces/Kings

2/ Be careful if *most of the cards in the agreed trump suit are in one hand*. Having an eight-nil fit is usually not quite as effective as a five-three fit.

3/ A *ten card trump fit tends to bring in an extra trick* - so be ready to knock off a loser in this event.

4/ Should you find *a fit in a second suit* as well as your trump suit, you can also reduce yours losers by one.

5/ Remember, you can *use the LTC even if partner knows nothing about it*. (In this case, you might encourage partner to use it, as it is so very useful.)

6/ When you first look at your hand, ask yourself *'What is the potential should partner have a fit?'*. Say you hold -

Q J 9 8 7 4 J 10 6 4 4 3 2 void

This hand is pretty useless if partner bids and bids Clubs, but worth at least bidding to the 3 level if you can find a fit in Spades or Hearts (or even Diamonds). Just two Spades with partner will do, but four Hearts or five Diamonds are needed for the 'magic' eight card fit. After all, with a fit, it is an 8 loser hand, minimum.

7/ What about a SEVEN card trump fit? There is a vast difference between a seven and an eight card fit in a suit if it is intended for that suit to be trumps. Why? Well, consider the 'break' of the cards in that suit. If you and partner have eight, then opponents have but five. Now five cards tend to split 3-2 very often - hence you will be able to draw these five and still have cards over in at least one hand for ruffing. Even a 4-1 break may not be too bad if your eight are divided 5-3.

But with only seven cards between you and partner, the opponents have six, which will break 4-2 more often than not. If your cards split 4-3 , then one opponent has at least as many as does your best hand. Even a 5-2 division of your seven may have a problem. So having eight cards in a suit is much to be preferred to only seven.

Having nine instead of eight is even better, but the increase from 8 to 9 is much less important than the increase from 7 to 9.

Losing Trick Count When Partner Opens A Major Suit:

When partner opens with 1 of a major and you have FOUR or more card support for that major, a useful convention is *JACOBY 2 NO TRUMP* response. This is used when you have the required trump support and enough points to at least suggest game to partner (some insist that game in the major is the minimum contract). So you would have trump support and at least an opening hand to use this system. You also deny a singleton or void, as you would cue bid that suit with such a feature as responder. So with game-going (or better hands), this convention is very sensible. Losing Trick Count is used to assess the potential of the hand, but as you hold at least 11 or 12 point, you can afford to explore slowly. Note that you cannot now use the 2 No Trump response to show a balanced 10-13 points as in traditional ACOL.

This leaves the hands where you have excellent trump support, but very few points. Now use the Losing Trick Count and bid to the limit! With, say, 6 card trump support and seven losers, bid 4 of the major. Do not worry that you have only about 7 points. It is the shape that counts. Partner will have chances of making the contract, and you will have prevented opponents having a auction that leads them to a good contract.

So with weak hands with trump support for partner's major, use LTC and act pre-emptively. With good points, use Jacoby 2 No Trumps. Partner will now know whether to look for a slam, sacrifice, and so on.

Losing Trick Count When Partner Opens A Minor Suit:

When the suit opened is a minor and you have 4 plus card support, with points look for a No Trump contract. However, with support and a LTC of 9 or 10, traditionally the bid is 2 of the minor (assuming 1 No Trump is not an option), or 3 of the minor with a LTC of 8 . The *Law of Total Tricks* - which dictates so much sensible bidding - says that you should reverse these two bids ie. jump to 3 with the 9 or 10 losers, and only bid 2 with 8 losers. This is known as INVERTED MINOR SUIT RAISES. If you also play the Jacoby 2 No Trump convention mentioned above, your 2 No Trump response when partner opens a minor suit, should be the *BARON CONVENTION*, which shows a balanced 4-3-3-3 hand, with no 4 card major.

Examples of LTC

a/ Direct raise with a weak hand:

North	*South*
S - K 7 5 3	*S - A Q 7 6 3*
H - A Q 9 6 2	*H - J 8 7 4*
D - Q 2	*D - 8*
C - 4	*C - 9 8 7*

North opens 1 Heart, East passes, and South counts 8 losers, so bids 3 Hearts. North now counts 6 losers and bids 4. Should South not bid 1 Spade first? No - always show the trump support and the number of losers. Note also that East-West probably have a very good sacrifice in 5 Diamonds or 5 Clubs. If South does bid 1 Spade, West will have an easy chance to bid. And suppose that East-West did find the sacrifice after the correct bidding, North now knows that South has at least 4 Hearts, and is able better to decide whether to bid on or not.

b/ Direct raise with a very weak hand:

North	*South*
S - A 7	*S - K 7*
H - A Q 9 6 3	*H - J 10 8 7 5 4 2*
D - A 2	*D - 8 5*
C - 9 8 6 3	*C - 5 4*

North opens 1 Heart, East passes, and South counts 7 losers (count one less for the trump length), so bids 4 Hearts.

c/ Holding a strong hand and support:

North	*South*
S - A 7 5 3 2	*S - K 7*
H - A Q 9 6 3 2	*H - K 8 7 4*
D - 2	*D - A 5 3*
C - 4	*C - A 8 7 2*

North opens 1 Heart, East passes, and South counts 7 losers as b/ above. But this hand is so much stronger than b/. The Jacoby 2 NT shows this type of hand as opposed to the direct raise above, so North, counting 5 losers, can look for the slam. Compare this North hand when it is opposite that in b/, when North would NOT bid further.