

LOSING TRICK COUNT AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Losing Trick Count (LTC) is a useful method of hand evaluation, especially for pre-emptive raises when you have a fit with partner. You evaluate your losers (up to three in a suit, but 1 less for each Ace, King or Queen held, or corresponding shortage), then add to partner's assumed count and subtract from 18 to see how high you can go. Take a hand like ♠ AQ10xx ♥ xx ♦ x ♣ J9xxx if partner opens 1♠ and the next hand passes or doubles; the method regards this as a 7 loser hand to go with partner's 7 losers for a minimum opening bid, 7 + 7 = 14, subtract from 18 so bid 4♠. Some tweaks are needed (Queens need to be "balanced" by aces, or the hand must be downgraded, for example, but the technique has its limitations too. Consider the following hand at Love All held by North at Crawley Bridge Club on Wednesday 25th February:

♠A ♥ QJ8 ♦ AKJ8653 ♣A2

Potentially this is huge, as partner holding the singleton diamond Queen and 12 other small cards will see 3NT romp home, while a hand like ♠10xxx ♥x ♦10xxx ♣Kxxx will see 6♦ being cold on a combined 22 count. Unfortunately partner deals and passes, while the opponents are still there and open 3♥.

♠ 7 5 4 2	♠ A	♠ J 8 3
♥ A K 10 7 5 4 2	♥ Q J 8	♥ 9
♦ 9	♦ A K J 8 6 5 3	♦ Q 10 7 4
♣ 10	♣ A 2	♣ K Q J 7 3
	♠ K Q 10 9 6	
	♥ 6 3	
	♦ 2	
	♣ 9 8 6 5 4	

The hand is a horror for North-South, whether in diamonds, spades or no trumps. 5 diamonds was a popular choice after West opened 3♥ although one North, bid 3NT over an overly strong weak 2♥. He knew South hadn't opened a weak 2♠ so hopefully wouldn't bid 4♠ with only 5, and shouldn't be that short in diamonds.

South promptly bid 4♠ and North, perhaps slightly petulantly reverted to 4NT. South took the unsubtle hint and passed, not that this final contract went at all well.

North South played in diamonds or no trumps at every table, and went lurching off in every case – 2 off, 3 off and 4 off results littered the traveller, although any East who fancied doubling would have got a top without really trying. There are several lessons from the hand:

- The LTC only works well when there is a decent trump fit (or, occasionally, if partner has a key honour such as a singleton honour opposite a good suit). North could reasonably think he's got only 4 losers, treating the diamonds as solid, while South might try to claim 7 losers (at least if partner opened 1♠, when a pre-emptive raise to game is fine). Such estimates give a massively bloated view of the North/South prospects, even if diamonds are 3-2.
- Pre-empts should sound a warning bell about the possibility of bad breaks. A 4-1 diamond break is normally bad luck, but rather less so if you know hearts are 7-1 or 6-2 the other way.
- East can see that North-South are going to struggle for tricks unless they're running off a long spade suit. The bidding precludes this possibility, so doubling should be automatic.
- Some players might talk themselves out of opening a pre-empt as West due to the 4 card spade suit and for fear that one opponent has already passed; what if partner has a fairly good hand with spades. If partner does have spades, though, then the opponents have a good minor suit fit, which they will certainly have the chance to find. It is better to get the hand of your chest early, especially as others will probably pre-empt too. At favourable vulnerability, I might be tempted to open 4♥, although this perhaps just shows how dodgy some of my 3-bids are.