LOSING TRICK COUNT

(Developed by F. Dudley Courtenay, popularised by Maurice Harrison-Gray during 1930's)

The Losing Trick Count **used in conjunction** with the standard point count, is a method of evaluating the trick taking potential of two combined hands playing in a suit contract. It primarily quantifies the 'shape' of the hand, and is merely a different but more formal way of adding points for length, singletons, or voids.
It should only be used when a fit has been established. Moreover I personally restrict its use to immediate responses to partner's opening bid, and to opener's re-bid if partner has supported the suit. At higher levels, trump solidity, cue-bids, controls bids, etc. are more valuable in determining the slam potential of hands.

(The examples that follow relate to a five-card major system, but the method is identical for four-card majors)

Mechanics

1. Count losers.
2. Add to partner's losers.
3. Subtract total from 18 – the answer gives the level at which you can expect to play **with the fit as trumps**.

Benchmarks

Based on the normal Milton Point Count – minimum of 12 to open; minimum of 6 to respond (in any suit):

An **opening hand** will usually have a maximum of **7 losers.**
A **responding hand** (in support, or in a change of suit situation) will have a maximum of **9 losers.**

Counting Losers

- **Only the first three cards in any suit can be losers**
- **Only the Ace, King, and Queen are winners**
- **'Droppable Honours' count as losers (i.e. singleton King, or doubleton Queen)**

However there are modifications to be made with three card or more suits containing the Queen.

- if the Q is in the trump suit (in support response) – no modification.
- if the Q is supported by the A, K, or J – no modification.
- Q109 – no modification.
- if the Q is not supported by any of the above – add ½ loser.

(Examples: Axxx – 2 losers; Kxx – 2 losers; Qxx – 2½ losers (unless trump suit); QJx – 2 losers; AQx – 1 loser; KQx – 1 loser; Kx – 1 loser; Qx – 2 losers; A – 0 losers; K – 1 losers).

Also opinions vary with AJ10. I would consider this to be a 1 loser suit.

Any '½ s' are then rounded upwards – i.e. 6½ becomes 7.

Also beware of ace-less or king-less hands (I would add ½ loser for a hand with no ace and 1 loser for the rare hands with neither ace nor king).

It should be noted that the above is a basic guide to loser counting. In the fuller system, distinctions are made between balanced and non-balanced hands – but these are for the experts.

Examples (assume responding to five-card major 1♠ opener):

a)	b)	c)	d)	e)	f)
♠ K75	♠ A754	♠ K752	♠ K752	♠ K752	♠ 872
♥ A7	♥ 6	♥ A	♥ K	♥ A	♥ K8
♦ 9873	♦ Q97653	♦ K973	♦ Q973	♦ Q973	♦ Q764
♣7532	♣ Q4	♣ 8742	♣ 8742	♣ J742	♣ J742

a) Spades – 2 loser; Hearts – 1; Diamonds – 3 ; Clubs – 3: TOTAL – 9 losers.

b) Spades – 2 loser; Hearts – 1; Diamonds – 2½ ; Clubs – 2: TOTAL – 7 ½ (i.e. 8) losers.

c) Spades – 2 loser; Hearts – 0; Diamonds – 2; Clubs - 3: TOTAL – 7 losers.

d) Spades – 2 loser; Hearts – 1; Diamonds – 2½ ; Clubs – 3; No Aces – ½ TOTAL – 9 losers.

e) Spades – 2 loser; Hearts – 0; Diamonds – 2½ ; Clubs – 3: TOTAL – 7½(i.e. 8) losers.

f) Spades – 3 loser; Hearts – 1; Diamonds – 2½ ; Clubs – 3: No Aces – ½ TOTAL - 10 losers.

Subtract From 18

Responder will add his known losers to opener's assumed minimum (7), and subtract from 18. This gives the support level. For example, responder with 9 losers, adds to 7 (=16), subtracts total from 18 (18 – 16) = 2, so support at the '2' level.

Take care with 7 loser support hands. Only bid direct to 4 if the hcp are minimal (i.e. a pre-emptive raise). With the same 7 losers and say a 13+ hand use your normal delayed game raise methods (change of suit; Jacoby; Baron etc.).

Responder will have based his support on an assumed 7 loser opening hand from partner. If opener has a better hand (i.e. less than 7 losers), he can raise partner's support level:

1♠ - 2♠ (9 losers) – 4♠ (with a five loser hand).

Also if opener is able to support a new suit from responder, he should assume responder has a 9 loser hand (see example (e) below)

Looking at examples (a) – (f) above, responder should bid as follows.

a) – 2♠ (9 losers + assumed 7 losers = 16; 18 – 16 = 2).

b) – 3♠ (combined 15 losers). Standard limit bids would dictate only 2♠, but this doesn't take account of the shape.

c) – 4♠ (only 9 high card points. but again shape would give a good play for 10 tricks).

d) – 2♠ (similar to (c), but the Q♦ has less trick taking potential than K♦, and aceless).

e) – 3♠ (combined 15 losers), whereas standard limit bids would dictate only 2♠.

f) – 2♠. Ltc would indicate a limit of only 1♠ with 10 losers (10 + 7 = 17; 18 – 17 = 1), but you can't really pass with a 6 count, and you have added a full loser for the '½' loser (but don't be surprised if 2♠ goes one off if opener has a minimum).

Other Examples

a)
♠ AK962
♥ 7
♦ A854
♣ Q52

♠ QJ84
♥ Q852
♦ K
♣ J863

b)
♠ AK962
♥ 7
♦ A8542
♣ A5

♠ QJ84
♥ Q852
♦ K
♣ J863

c)
♠ AKQ32
♥ A643
♦ 752
♣ 9

♠ 8654
♥ K95
♦ 8
♣ A10862

d)
♠ AQ754
♥ 843
♦ A53
♣ K5

♠ K942
♥ 5
♦ K97642
♣ 86

e)
♠ 7
♥ KQ74
♦ AK9642
♣ 73

♠ 843
♥ A9632
♦ 107
♣ K54

f)
♠ 72
♥ KQ74
♦ AK964
♣ 73

♠ 843
♥ A9632
♦ 107
♣ K54

g)
♠ 6
♥ AK843
♦ A9542
♣ Q8

♠ J742
♥ QJ72
♦ J
♣ J752

h)
♠ 6
♥ AK843
♦ A9542
♣ A8

♠ J742
♥ QJ72
♦ J
♣ J752

a) 1♠ - 2♠ (9 losers) - pass (½ loser added for ace-less hand); 9 + 7 = 16; 18 – 16 = 2♠. You should eventually lose one heart, one diamond, three clubs (unless the opposition are kind to you with the club suit).

b) 1♠ - 2♠ (9 losers) - 4♠ (5 losers): 9 + 5 = 14; 18 – 14 = 4♠. Similar to (a) but the slightly better club situation in opener's hand gives rise to only 5 losers.

c) 1♠ - 3♠ (8 losers) - 4♠ (6 losers); 8 + 6 = 14; 18 – 14 = 4♠. Only a combined 20 count, but ltc. enables the excellent shape to be taken into account. Two diamond ruffs lead to ten tricks.

d) 1♠ - 4♠ (7 losers). Not a certainty. Also the bid makes it more difficult for the opposition to find their heart fit.

e) 1♦ - 1♥ - 4♥. North can support responder's heart suit. He has a 5-loser hand (in support). Add to partner's assumed 9 loser hand (the minimum to be able to respond) = 14. 18 – 14 = 4.

f) 1♦ - 1♥ - 3♥ - pass. North has a similar hand to (e) – same points, but with one loser more, is content to bid 3♥. South with nothing extra to his assumed 9 losers, passes.

g) 1♥ - 2♥ - pass. South has a nine loser hand, opener has a six loser hand, so nine tricks should be the limit (you will probably lose one spade, one diamond, two clubs.

h) 1♥ - 2♥ - 4♥. Similar to (g), but opener has a five loser hand, so 4♥. Using just limit bids you would not reach game.

With examples (c) (d) and (e) above, using pure limit-bids, you would probably not have reached game.

Other Uses

The ltc. can be used in response to partner's overcall. **Overcalls** are assumed to be **8 loser hands**, so partner judges the appropriate raise based on this. A disadvantage of this approach is that in the modern game, overcalls are becoming ultra-light. So only use after overcalls if your partner is disciplined in his overcalling methods.

Summary

The ltc. should be used as a **guideline**, particularly at lower levels in determining whether to raise to the two- or three-level, or as opener, whether to try for game (possibly via a trial bid). Don't go to excesses with the ltc.