Losing Tricks Count

During our workshop at Henley Bridge Club on Tuesday, 24 July, we used "**Losing Tricks Count**" to help us decide the level of bid for a trump contract. It helped us to bid 4 Spades, which was the optimum contract that could be won if Declarer made no errors.

This note is intended to explain more about the "Losing Tricks Count" method of evaluating the strength of a hand. I have divided it into three sections:

1. The purpose of Losing Tricks Count and when to apply it;
2. Calculating the Losing Tricks Count in your hand; and
3. Applying the Losing Tricks Count to help decide the level of trump bid.

1. The purpose of Losing Tricks Count and when to apply it

We are familiar with counting the High Card Points (HCPs) in a hand and we use this initially to decide if we have a strong enough hand to open the bidding (usually 12+ points or using "Rule of 20").

If you have a balanced hand (no more than one doubleton and no singletons), using HCP is a very good measure of the strength of your hand. You need to be careful that, between you and your partner, you have stops in all the suits, but combined points of 25+ for a game and 33+ for a slam works quite well.

However, using just HCP for an unbalanced hand is less effective. Having two or three of the top cards in a suit (not just in trumps but in other suits as well) is very useful for trump games and so is only having one or two or, better still, no cards in a suit because this provides an opportunity for "ruffing" (which is the term often used for trumping).

An approximate, but better than nothing, way of evaluating the strength of an unbalanced hand is to start with the HCP and then add points for shortages in suits, e.g. add 5 for a void, 3 for a singleton and 1 for a doubleton. A better measure is the Losing Tricks Count (LTC).

Using LTC is not full-proof and it should not be used mechanically as a substitute for judgement. It is just an aid. It is less effective if your hand is balanced but you are considering a trump contract with you partner. It is also a lot less accurate at the slam level (6 of any of the suits) than it is for determining whether to bid a game contract (4 ♠/♥ or 5 ♦/♣).

2. Calculating the Losing Tricks Count in your hand

This is the boring bit. You can just learn how to calculate the LTC, but I think it is better to first have a broad understanding of why it does reflect the strength of a hand for playing in a trump contract.

In trump contracts, there are unlikely to be more than two rounds of a suit before one of the players has run out of that suit and someone ruffs (trumps). For a suit to circulate three times before someone ruffs, the cards in that suit need to be distributed 3,3,3,4 among the four players, which can occur but is rare. An Ace will usually be a winning card, as will a King if you have another card with it and sometimes a Queen will win, usually if the Ace and King are played in the first round. Any card in a non-trump suit with a value less than a Queen is unlikely to win.

Conversely, having a void in a suit, a singleton, or even a doubleton of a non-trump suit in your hand can provide you with opportunities to ruff while the other players still hold cards in the suit.

For **non-trump suits**, we need a measure that reflects how many Aces, Kings and Queens are most likely to be winners and shortages of cards that will provide the opportunity for ruffing.

For the **trump** suit, we measure the strength in the same way, except for a small difference relating to Queens described below. We do not need our measure of strength to take additional account of cards in the trump suit that are below the Queen level, because these will mainly be used to take advantage of the shortages in other suits by ruffing.

The LTC measure reflects both aspects – high cards in all suits and shortages in the non-trump suits. It is expressed as the likely losers rather than winners in your hand. The strength of the hand is shown by how few losers you have.

Start calculating the likely losers (LTC) by only considering the first three top cards you have in each of the four suits. Add up the number of these cards that are **not** either an Ace, King or Queen.

There are just a couple of refinements:

- The sequence Ace, Jack, Ten in the same suit counts as one loser rather than two

- If you have a Queen in a suit without either the Ace or King, count this as a loser if it is not in the trump suit

Examples

In all cases, ♥ s are trumps

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

The answers for the last four hands above are at the end of this note.

3. Applying the Losing Tricks Count to help decide the level of trump bid

Finally, we get to the more interesting part – how to use Losing Tricks Count (LTC) in practice.

The general advice is not to calculate the LTC until you are ready to agree a suit for trumps with your partner in the bidding. There is nothing to stop you calculating it earlier, but your

initial priority is deciding whether you have enough HCP to enter the bidding as the opening bidder, over-caller, or responder. There is also the practical consideration that a Queen in your hand without an Ace or King in the same suit may count as a loser or not, depending which suit is being considered for trumps.

The time to use LTC is when

1. You want to bid the same suit in support of your partner's bid; or

2. Your partner has supported your suit and it is your turn to bid again.

1. You want to bid the same suit in support of your partner's bid

You will not know your partner's LTC, so you assume as follows:

- If your partner has opened the bidding, assume she has an LTC of 7

- If your partner's first bid was an overcall, assume she has an LTC of 8

- If your partner's bid was a response to your opening bid, but in a different suit to the one you bid, assume an LTC of 9

You have calculated the LTC for your own hand. Add your LTC to the assumed LTC for your partner and subtract the total from 18. For example, if your partner opens **1 ♥** and you have four or more ♥s and an LTC of 8, you can bid **3 ♥** (7 + 8 = 15; 18 – 15 = 3).

2. Your partner has supported your suit and it is your turn to bid again

If you and your partner have agreed to use LTC, you will know that your partner assumed an LTC for your hand, based on whether your bid was an opening bid (7), an overcall (8), or a response (9) – as described in the last section.

However, you have calculated the LTC of your hand. If your actual LTC is one less than the level your partner assumed you have when they last bid, you can raise the bidding to the next level (still in the same suit). If your LTC is 2 higher than your partner will have assumed, you can raise two levels - but see cautionary note in the next paragraph. For example, if you opened the bidding with **1 ♥**, your partner responded **3 ♥**, and your calculated LTC is 6, you can bid **4 ♥**. (Your partner will have assumed you have an LTC of 7, but you have 6. Bidding can be raised a level.)

To repeat the restrictions stated earlier in this note, using LTC is still relevant but you should put less dependency on it if your hand is balanced and you are investigating a trump contract. It is also less reliable for Slams than it is for Games, so be wary about taking the bidding beyond game level just based on using LTC. (You could use controlled bidding and / or asking for information on Aces to find out more.)

I'm sorry this may seem a little complicated if you are not already familiar with using LTC. It does come more naturally the more you use it and it is a method that enables experienced players to make better bids. I am not at the stage yet where using LTC comes naturally, but I am trying to use it for bidding trump contracts and it does work.

Answers to the remaining four hands in Section 2:

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