

## Losing Trick Count

The Losing Trick Count (LTC) is a useful tool to help decide to which level the bidding can progress to. It is only used for suit contracts.

To count losers, you are only concerned with aces, kings, queens, doubletons, singletons, and voids. The maximum number of losers in a suit is three. Therefore, xxx or xxxx or xxxxx all contain three losers.

Generally, you open the bidding with a one level bid if your hand contains a 7-loser hand or better. However, if you play a Weak No Trump (1NT = 12-14 HCP) you will often have a 8-loser hand. **However, the method of using the Losing Trick Count is when you have a fit.**

Both the opener and the responder can use the LTC to decide to what level the final contract should be.

### *Counting losers*

This is a method of hand-evaluation that assesses the trick taking potential of two hands combined, especially in a suit contract. It is best used when you and partner have found a fit in a suit that you want to play as trumps. Note: You should have 8 trumps between the two hands. Usually, this fit will be a major, because on many occasions when we have a fit in a minor suit we prefer to play in a no-trump contract because it scores better. Often you will combine both the Milton 4-3-2-1 method with the Losing Trick Count (LTC). If used correctly the LTC is an invaluable tool for aspiring bridge players. In its basic form, the LTC works like this:

Once a fit has been found, you must:

1. Count your losers
2. Add your partner's losers
3. Subtract the total from 18

The result will be the level at which you can play with the fit suit as trumps.

Rules for learning to count losers:

1. Only the first three cards in any suit are counted
2. Only the ace, king and queen are considered as winners (non-losers)
3. Droppable honours are counted as losers (singleton king, or doubleton queen)
4. Allowance for unsupported queens (see below)

Examples:

♠ 543  
♥ 54  
♦ 5432  
♣ 5432

Are there 13 losers? No you can only have a maximum of 3 losers per suit. So the maximum losers in any hand are: 12 (in a 4333 hand). On this hand there are 11 losers (3+2+3+3).

♠ AK4  
♥ J54  
♦ KQ54  
♣ 654

Now the losers are: one in ♠s, three in ♥s, one in ♦s and three in ♣s (ie 8 losers).

♠ AK43  
♥ Q  
♦ KQ432  
♣ 543

Now the losers are: one in ♠s, one in ♥s, one in ♦s and three in ♣s (ie 6 losers).

♠ AK5432  
♥ -  
♦ KQ543  
♣ 54

Now the losers are: one in ♠s, none in ♥s, one in ♦s and two in ♣s (ie 4 losers).

♠ AK5  
♥ AK5  
♦ AK54  
♣ AK5

Now the losers are: one in ♠s, one in ♥s, one in ♦s and one in ♣s (ie 4 losers).

These last two hands demonstrate two important factors affecting the losers in a hand:

1. Points
2. Shape

The more unbalanced a hand, the fewer the number of losers; and the more points (high cards), the fewer number of losers.

Although the 28 HCPs in the last hand appears stronger (suitable for a no-trump contract) the penultimate hand with only 12 HCPs has similar number of losers in a ♠ contract. Assuming a ♠ fit, partner's ♠s can be used to ruff ♦ losers if necessary (setting up the suit). So, we can see the power of the LTC it is able to evaluate the long suits, the shortages and the high card points to give you one simple answer.

Example:

♠ Q97		♠ 5	
♥ K73	8 losers	♥ AQ7542	4 losers
♦ A52		♦ KQ963	
♣ AJ85		♣ 7	

If a partnership has an 8 card fit, as above in ♥s, then if one partner can manage to tell his partner how many losers he has then his partner can decide the level to bid.

*The calculation:*

The combined number of losers, in both hands should be deducted from the magic number of 18. The answer will give you the level that the contract should be placed.

Therefore, in the above example,  $18 - (8 + 4) = 6$

You should be pleased to be in a 6♥ contract. But beware you still need to check if you have 2 top losers.

Three more examples should show that you don't need big hands to make use of this tool.

♠ KQ8652	♠ A74
♥ Q7	♥ J73
♦ KJ93	♦ A5
♣ 7	♣ AJ85

The bidding would have been:

1♠ - 2♣  
3♠ - 4♠  
Pass

The level to bid in ♠s is  $18 - (8 + 6) = 4$  level

♠ A	♠ J86
♥ J73	♥ Q7
♦ A1052	♦ KQ93
♣ AJ85	♣ 7652

The bidding would have been:

1♦ - 2♦  
Pass

The level to bid in ♦s is  $18 - (7 + 9) = 2$  level

One last example:

♠ AQ865	♠ K743
♥ J74	♥ 103
♦ KQ4	♦ J765
♣ 87	♣ Q3

The level to bid in ♠s is:

$18 - (7 + 9) = 2$  level

The bidding would have been:

1♠ - 2♠  
Pass

**Unsupported queens**

One further consideration of counting losers is described below. Compare these hands:

Hand 1:

♠ Q532

♥ Q532

♦ Q532

♣ 5

Hand 2:

♠ A532

♥ A532

♦ A532

♣ 5

Both of these hands count as 7 losers, but are they? Clearly the queen is overvalued. Aces certainly are classed as winners, but the queens can't be classed as winners without support. You would need the suits to be QJ10x to only have two losers. Therefore, we tend to class Q♠ as half a loser. So hand 1 contains  $8\frac{1}{2}$  losers, and Hand 2 contains 7 losers. So when queens are combined with other honours it is classed as a full winner – for example: KQxx is a 1 loser, and so QJ43 would be classed as two losers, and Q543 would be classed as  $2\frac{1}{2}$  losers.

**Counting partner's losers**

This might seem difficult, as you can't see his hand! However, it is only like counting his HCPs. When partner opens the bidding at the 1-level we expect him to have 12+ HCPs, and a minimum hand to respond has 6+ HCPs. With a minimum opening hand, he will have 7-losers (unless he opens 1NT), and any minimum response is expected to have 9-losers maximum.

In the Milton points system we assume partner has the minimum; if he opens 1NT (in a 12-14 HCP system) and we have 11 HCPs, we respond upto 2NT and if partner is maximum he will go onto 3NT. The LTC works in a similar way. We assume he has a minimum hand until he tells us differently.

Subtracting from 18

Once you have added your own losers and partner's losers together, you take the total away from 18 and the answer is the level what you should bid.

Examples:

Now it is time for the example hands; it is from these that you will really learn about the Losing Trick Count.

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

1♥    1♠  
?

The auction starts simply; you only count losers when you have a fit, so there is no need to count losers to begin with, but when East bids 1♠, you, as West, know that you have a fit and should thus count your losers:

2 in ♠s, 1 in ♥s, 2 in ♦s and 1 in ♣s = 6 losers.

How many losers does East have? (Work it out without looking at his hand!)

- Assume that he has the minimum for a responder, that is: 9.
- Adding your losers (6) to partner's losers (9) gives a total of 15.

Then  $18 - 15 = 3$ : so bid 3♠.

Now it is East's turn to go through this process. He counts up his losers: 2 in ♠s, 2 in ♥s, 1 in ♦s and 3 in ♣s = 8 losers.

How many losers does West have? For a minimum opening hand he has 7 – but hold on a moment! West does *not* have a minimum opening hand, because he bid 3♠ rather than 2♠ so he must have a better hand, i.e. 6 losers.

Adding your losers (8) to partner's losers (6) gives a total of 14. Then  $18 - 14 = 4$ : so bid 4♠.

Rather than doing all this work, you can simply compare your hand to its LTC minimum.

So, on the East-West diagram above, the auction would still start 1♥ – 1♠. After East's 1♠ response, West knows that they have a ♠ fit and can count his losers: 6. Now all West has to do is compare his hand to its minimum:

“As opener my minimum hand is 7 losers; with that I would respond 2♠, but I am one better, so I bid one more: 3♠.”

Then the responder (East) does the same, but of course he compares his hand to his own minimum (9 losers for a responding hand). With 9 losers he would of course pass 3♠, but with 8 losers (one better) he bids one more: 4♠.

As responder, it is very important to differentiate between ‘strong’ (point-wise) and ‘distributional strong’ hands with 7 losers. To see why, have a look at these two hands replying to a 1♠ opening bid:

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

Both have seven losers, but should they really be bid in the same way?

Hand A: responds with 4♠, the direct raise showing a distributional hand – whenever you have a weak hand with support, raise the suit straight away to the level suggested by the LTC (fast arrival).

Hand B:

If you have the Jacoby 2NT toy in your box you would use that, otherwise use a 2♦ bid, planning what is called a ‘Delayed Game Raise’: taking advantage of the fact that partner has to make another bid. You plan to jump to game *after* he has made his second bid, therefore delaying your raise to game by one round. (He now knows you have more honour cards – slower route)

**The LTC in Action**

If you are still confused, do not be worried. Here come more examples that will allow you to follow exactly how it all works and also see how brilliantly it can turn out!

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

West

East

1♠

3♠

4♠

PASS

A succinct auction to an excellent contract. West opens 1♠ and East counts his losers: 8, one better than minimum, so rather than 2♠, he bids one more: 3♠. Now West counts his losers: 6. He, of course, as opener, compares to seven losers. He is also one better than his minimum, so he bids one more: 4♠. A great auction: the LTC has evaluated the worth of the singleton ♦ – all that is needed to make the contract is to take two ♦ ruffs in dummy's hand. Would you have got to game if you had not used LTC?

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

West

East

1♣

1♠

4♠

PASS

This time we have two natural bids (1♣ and 1♠) before West counts his losers – just 5! With 7 losers he would rebid 2♠, and with 6 he would rebid 3♠, but with 5 losers he should bid 4♠! It looks a bid odd, but whenever you start to doubt the LTC, have a look at the strength of your long suits and if they are good, then trust the system. Here there is no doubt that your suits are first-rate and thus you should jump to game. That is not necessarily the end of the auction: East might well have further ambitions. He counts his losers: here, 9; this is, of course, a minimum hand, so East happily passes. What a great game on just 19 points! The beauty of it is that the LTC predicted exactly

what would happen. If the ♣s break 3-2, you can establish the suit by ruffing one ♣ and thus the seven, six and five of ♣s will be winners.

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

West

East

1♦

1♠

4♠

?

One of the things with which most club players struggle with is when to bid on to slam and this is an area where the LTC can help enormously. Take a look at the layout above, for example: after 1♦–1♠ West counts his losers and finds 5. As in the previous layout, he should jump straight to game and rebid 4♠. However, as suggested, this is not the end of the auction. East counts his losers: 6; now remember that he is the responding hand, so he compares to a minimum of 9 losers. So: with 9 he would pass, with 8 he would contemplate 5♠, with 7 he would think of 6♠ – and with 6 he should be dreaming of 7♠! Yes, what the LTC is saying is that there is a great chance of slam, but do not forget that you can only make the required number of tricks if you are in control (that is, if you have the necessary aces and kings). After all, you could have:

♠ A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7 in one hand, and

♥ A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7 in the other

(which are worth sixteen tricks), but if both hands have a doubleton ♣, then your opponents could take the first two tricks!

That is an extreme example, but it highlights how important it is to check for controls if you are going for a slam, rather than blindly following the LTC. This hand is not ideal for Blackwood with its two small doubletons, but the important thing to note is that the LTC says there is a chance that a Grand Slam might be on, so you really should bid on over 4♠. How you do it? If you do use Blackwood, you will find all the aces and all the kings in place so 7♠ is the place to be! Note that 7NT would not make, as just eleven tricks are available.

**Other Fits**

You might wonder: "What about other fits: 5-3, 6-2, and so on?" The Losing Trick Count still works along the same lines:

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

West

East

1♥

1♠

2♣

3♥

4♥

PASS

West's rebid of 2♣ is standard Acol and shows five cards in the first bid suit. Hence East knows that there is an 8-card fit and he uses LTC. He holds an 8-loser hand and so rebids one level above the lowest level: not 2♥ but 3♥. Opener has 6 losers and can therefore go for game.

Similarly:

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

West

East

1♥

1♠

2♦

3♠

4♠

PASS

When East rebids ♠s, we have found our fit and we can count our losers: West counts 6, so he can raise one level (with 7, he would pass) and since East has just 8 losers, he can raise to game. This is a relatively extreme example, but you can see how well the LTC can work. Having said that, you can also see that the play, in some of the contracts you might reach, may not be quite so straightforward!

**Useful Tips**

The LTC takes some getting used to, but it really is a very useful tool. However, please make sure it is just a tool and not a be-all and end-all! For an example of where it might go wrong, try this:

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

West

East

1♠

3♠

4♠

PASS

Following the LTC blindly, East counts 8 losers and so responds 3♠ and West counts 6 losers and bids on to game. We might go down in 2♠, let alone 4♠! Notice the difference between holding four aces and holding four kings! There are many little tips that can be used with the LTC and one is: “Beware an aceless hand!” You should always take half a loser off if your hand does not have an ace. In fact, in the extreme case that you hold neither a king nor an ace (as in the East hand in the last diagram) you should take a whole loser off.

Another tip is that a queen in your partner’s suit counts full value; this is because it is much more likely to be well supported. Last but not least, a note of warning about balanced hands: balanced hands always have more losers than you expect and thus it is important to be careful when using the LTC with them.

Hands that are opened with a weak no-trump will often be very weak in terms of losers (8 or 9 losers), but they are still fine opening bids. If you find a fit using Stayman, you must take into account, that your partner may have just such a weak hand:

♠ A 8 6 4

♥ K Q 3

♦ Q J 6

♣ 9 8 7

♠ K Q 9 2

♥ A 9 7 6

♦ 8 2

♣ Q J 3

West

East

1NT

2♣\*

2♠

3♠

PASS

East might be tempted to jump to game when he finds a ♠ fit because he has 7 losers, but he should be wary that his partner might have 8 losers for his weak no-trump and thus should just invite game, by bidding 3♠. West will pass 3♠ because he has eight losers.

## Conclusions

I am sure that there are endless other tips that could be added to refine your use of the Losing Trick Count, but the important thing is just to try it. Persevere with the system for a month or two; if you still cannot grasp it, or you still find your results not improving, then give up – but I would be surprised if you don't find that you will be one of those pairs that are able to write '4♠ made' on the traveller, whilst most are putting in '2♠ + 2', or getting to slam when the traveller is filled with scores of '4♠ + 2'. You do need to persevere for a while though, because whenever you try something new it takes time to get used to it, and not make mistakes.

### What I use

I combine both HCPs and LTC – a balance of both systems works well and defines the hands where you need to make a fast arrival bid (distributional), and a slower (more HCPs) route.

One point that I've noticed with LTC is when responding and you have an 11 TPs hand, with 4-card support of a major, but it shows up as a 9 loser hand. I still bid at the 3-level.

Note: Remember forcing and non-forcing bidding!