



Losing Trick Count – part 1

By Jennifer Jones

Are difficult bidding decisions causing you stress? Would you like a “magic formula” to give you the right answer most of the time? Then the method of hand evaluation known as Losing Trick Count (LTC) is for you!

LTC is more about the proper evaluation of fitting hands and distribution than about high-card points. It's the reason why some 19-point games make and some 26-point games fail, and it will help you make the winning bid. Plus, you can use it on your own, even if partner has never heard of it!

This article introduces counting losers, explains how it works and shows how to apply it in some common situations. Here is the formula:

1. **Count your losers**
2. **Add partner's losers**
3. **Deduct the total from 24**

The answer is the LTC. This is the number of tricks the partnership can expect to win most of the time — *i.e.*, if suits break normally and half of your finesses win. *It should only be used after a partnership fit is established during the bidding.*

Counting losers

1. Count losers only in the first three cards of each suit. *There are never more than three losers in a suit*

and never more losers than there are cards.

2. With three or more cards in a suit, count the ace, king and queen as winners; anything lower is a loser.
3. With a doubleton, count the ace and/or king winners. Other cards are losers. With a singleton, only the ace is a winner; anything else is a loser.

Examples: ♠A K Q 5 4 has no losers; ♠K 5 4 has two losers; ♠A K 5 4 3 has one loser; ♠K 5 has one loser; ♠7 6 5 4 3 has three losers; ♠J 5 4 has three losers; ♠K Q 5 has one loser; ♠Q 5 has two losers. Are you getting the picture?

Applying LTC

Losing trick count can be used in many situations, but this month we'll look at raises after partner opens the bidding with one of a major.

A normal minimum opening hand contains seven losers:

♠A K 9 7 6 ♥A 7 6 4 ♦Q 3 ♠8 7.

If partner also has seven losers, the total number of losers is 14. Subtracting 14 from 24 is 10: the number of tricks the partnership can expect to win. So if partner opens the bidding and you have a seven-loser hand with a fit, you should make a forcing bid and head toward game.

An invitational hand contains eight losers, a hand such as:

♠8 7 6 5 ♥K 8 ♦K 9 6 5 ♣A 5 4.

If partner opens and you have an eight-loser hand with a fit, invite! Don't worry too much about high-card points. Your eight losers plus partner's seven losers equals 15, which, subtracted from 24, equals 9 — not

enough for game. Partner will pass with a seven-loser hand and bid game with a better than minimum (six-loser) hand.

What would you bid with these hands after partner opens 1♥?

♠A J 7 6 4 ♥K Q J 6 ♦J 8 ♣9 7

♠A 8 7 6 4 ♥K Q 9 6 ♦8 5 ♣9 7

While the first hand has 12 HCP and the second only 9, they both have seven losers. That makes them both game-forcing hands, so make a game-forcing bid such as Jacoby 2NT.

Both hands can be expected to produce 10 tricks opposite this minimum seven-loser opener:

♠9 2 ♥A 10 7 4 3 ♦A K 10 4 ♣Q J.

To learn more, visit the author's blog site: <http://jennbridge.blogspot.com>. □

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Losing Trick Count – part 2

By Jennifer Jones

Should I invite game with this hand? What should my rebid be after partner raises my suit? These are common questions. When you find yourself faced with these decisions, pause and count your losers. This will give you the answer.

Losing Trick Count (LTC) does not replace point count. Rather, it is used as an adjunct to the point-count system *when a trump fit comes to light*. Last month's article explained how to count losers.

We have seen that a minimum opening bid generally has seven losers and that a seven-loser hand opposite a seven-loser hand should produce 10 tricks: $7 + 7 = 14$, which, subtracted from $24 = 10$, the number of tricks the partnership should be able to take.

As the responder, if you have support for opener's suit, base your response on how many losers you have. With nine or more, make a simple raise. With eight, invite game with a limit raise. With seven, make a game force. With six losers, consider bidding slam and with five or fewer, head toward slam.

What would you bid with these hands after partner opens $1\spadesuit$?

A) $\spadesuit K Q 8 6$ $\heartsuit A 10$ $\diamondsuit J 3 2$ $\clubsuit J 8 6 5$

B) $\spadesuit K Q 8 6$ $\heartsuit 10$ $\diamondsuit J 7 4 3$ $\clubsuit J 8 6 5$

The first hand has 11 HCP and the second only 7 HCP, but they both have eight losers. That makes them game-invitational hands, so make a limit raise — $3\spadesuit$ if that's how you do it.

Now let's look at it from the point of view of opener, who is often in a position to place the contract once partner responds. Opposite a limit raise, showing eight losers, opener should pass with a seven-loser hand, bid game with a six-loser hand and

explore slam with a stronger hand.

How should opener proceed with these hands after a limit raise?

C) $\spadesuit A J 7 5 3$ $\heartsuit J 6$ $\diamondsuit K Q 8$ $\clubsuit A 7 3$

D) $\spadesuit A J 7 5 3$ $\heartsuit 8 6$ $\diamondsuit K Q 8 6$ $\clubsuit A 7$

Opener should pass with hand C (seven losers), but should bid game with hand D (six losers).

Interestingly, hands B and D combine for a 21-point game that makes, while hands A and C combine for a 26-point game likely to fail.

Let's look now at single raises that show nine or 10 losers. Here is a typical $2\heartsuit$ response to a $1\heartsuit$ opener:

$\spadesuit 9 4$ $\heartsuit Q J 6 2$ $\diamondsuit 8 7 5 2$ $\clubsuit A 9 5$

Looking at it again from opener's point of view, how should opener proceed with these hands after a single raise?

$\spadesuit 10 5$ $\heartsuit A K 10 9 7 3$ $\diamondsuit 4$ $\clubsuit K Q 8 2$

$\spadesuit Q 5$ $\heartsuit A K 10 9 7$ $\diamondsuit A K 7$ $\clubsuit J 8 4$

Although the first hand has only 12 points, it has five losers. As game is a strong possibility, opener should make a game try.

The second hand has more points (17) but seven losers, so opener should pass $2\heartsuit$.

Here's a hand my partner held recently in a local team game. I opened $1\spadesuit$ and she responded $1NT$. When I rebid $2\heartsuit$, she had a decision:

$\spadesuit 6$ $\heartsuit A J 10 9$ $\diamondsuit J 9 8 7 6 3$ $\clubsuit 5 2$

Although she had only 6 points, she counted her losers (8) and realized her hand was worth an invitation, so she raised to $3\heartsuit$. I held:

$\spadesuit A K 9 5 3$ $\heartsuit K 8 6 5 2$ $\diamondsuit A 4$ $\clubsuit 4$,

a powerful five-loser hand, so I had an easy $4\heartsuit$ bid and we reached a great 20-point game.



While some of these examples may seem dramatic, using LTC will help you refine your hand evaluation so as to more confidently bid the games that make and stay out of the ones that don't.

To learn more, visit the author's blog site: jennbridge.blogspot.com. □

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Losing Trick Count – part 3

By Jennifer Jones

This month we'll look at using LTC in slam bidding. To review, when partner opens the bidding and we have a fit, we can assume that partner has no more than seven losers. We *add* our losers to partner's and *subtract* from 24 to find the number of tricks the combined hands should be expected to make. Invite game with eight losers and bid game with seven. With six losers we are in slam territory, and with five or fewer losers, head directly toward slam. Ace-asking bids and cuebidding sequences are still important to ensure there aren't two quick losers.

1. What would you bid with this hand after partner opens 1♠?

♠108762 ♥A109853 ♦A4 ♣—

There are only 8 high-card points, but a closer look reveals that the hand has only six losers, so it is quite a good hand. You definitely want to be in game and realize that even a slam is possible. Make a descriptive bid (a splinter in clubs or Jacoby 2NT) and, being alert to the slam potential of the hand, you should be able to conduct an intelligent auction.

You can reach an excellent 23-point slam when partner holds either of the following hands:

♠AKQ95 ♥KJ ♦9 ♣Q8753
♠AKQ95 ♥76 ♦KQ7 ♣J83

2. What would you rebid with these hands after you open 1♥ and partner makes a limit raise (showing eight losers)?

♠J42 ♥KQ964 ♦AK9 ♣A8

♠J ♥KQ964 ♦AK932 ♣KJ

Both hands have 17 HCP, but the first hand has six losers, so sign off at 4♥. The second hand is much stronger with only four losers. It is suitable for Blackwood. If partner shows two aces, you will bid a slam.

3. You open 1♠ holding:

♠AK1075 ♥K3 ♦A9865 ♣10

and partner bids 4♦, a splinter bid showing spade support and diamond shortness. How should you proceed?

As partner should have no worse than a seven-loser hand for this action, head for slam with your five-loser hand, bidding 4NT to ask about aces.

Minor-suit bidding

LTC is also effective for bidding minor suit games and slams. Eleven tricks are needed for a minor suit game, so if partner opens a minor and you have a fit, force to game with a six-loser hand and explore for slam with a five-loser hand.

How would you respond with these hands after partner opens 1♣ or 1♦?

A. ♠A82 ♥63 ♦A1065 ♣KQ109

B. ♠A8 ♥63 ♦A1065 ♣KQ1096

C. ♠A8 ♥3 ♦A10653 ♣KQ1096

All three hands have 13 HCP, but the loser count varies. Hand A has seven losers, which means that an 11-trick minor-suit game may not make, but with an opening bid facing an opening bid, perhaps a notrump game can be reached. Hand B, with six losers, should be able to make game in either a minor or in notrump. Hand C, with five losers, has great slam potential. A concerted effort should be made to get to a minor-suit slam.

Be alert to situations where counting losers can aid in hand evaluation. Here's a hand from a nationally rated pairs game at the Fall NABC in Seattle:

♠AKQJ952 ♥K4 ♦K5 ♣96

I opened 1♠, partner responded 1NT and RHO bid 2♣. I looked at my four-loser hand and made a jump rebid of 4♠! Partner, holding:

♠843 ♥AQJ52 ♦964 ♣A7

and intending to make a three-card limit raise, bid a slam without further ado. Although virtually all of the pairs took 13 tricks, 1460 was a great score because only one-third of the field got to slam. □

To learn more, visit the author's blog site: jennbridge.blogspot.com.



Losing Trick Count – part 4

By Jennifer Jones

Can Losing Trick Count be used in competitive auctions? Yes. Once you find a fit, LTC principles apply. This month we'll look at overcalls and takeout doubles, by our side and by the opponents.

We open, they compete

When our side opens and the opponents overcall, count losers in the normal manner.

What do you bid with:

♠A 8 7 4 3 ♥10 9 6 2 ♦5 ♣K 9 7

after partner opens 1♥ and RHO overcalls 2♦? With eight losers, this is an invitational hand. Bid 3♦ (or 3♥ if that is invitational in your system) to invite game. Partner will sign off at 3♥ with seven losers, bid game with six losers and will consider slam with fewer losers.

What about the situation where the opponent makes a takeout double?

What do you bid with:

♠K 8 7 ♥10 9 6 2 ♦5 ♣A Q 9 7 3

after partner opens 1♥ and RHO doubles?

Make a game-forcing raise with this seven-loser hand (2NT generally shows a limit raise or better). After the double, you can be reasonably confident that your values are “working,” *i.e.* that your finesses will win and the other honors will pull their weight.

They open, we overcall

Overcalls at the one level generally have six to eight losers, while a two-level overcall, particularly when

vulnerable, should be treated as an opening bid, showing six or seven losers. As advancer, invite game after a one-level overcall with seven or eight losers. Partner can then assess the strength of the two hands.

What do you bid with:

♠K 10 9 7 ♥8 7 5 ♦6 ♣K Q 9 5 3

after LHO opens 1♦ and partner overcalls 1♠?

This is a seven-loser hand, so it is too good for a single raise. Bid 2♦, a forward-going cuebid showing a limit raise or better.

What do you bid with the following hands after LHO opens 1♠ and partner overcalls 2♥?

1. ♠9 7 ♥K 9 6 3 ♦A Q 8 7 5 2 ♣6

2. ♠9 7 3 ♥K 9 6 3 ♦A Q 8 7 ♣6 2

No. 1, with six losers, should force to game. With six or seven losers, start with a cuebid and don't stop short of 4♥. No. 2, with the same number of HCP but eight losers, is worth only an invitation. Cuebid 2♠ and pass if partner signs off at 3♥.

They open, we make a takeout double

What do you bid with:

♠K J 10 7 6 ♥— ♦4 3 2 ♣A 10 9 6 4

after LHO opens 1♥, partner doubles and RHO jumps to 3♥?

Respond as if partner opened the bidding (and therefore has seven losers). Jump to 4♠. This good seven-loser hand should make game opposite a takeout double. Note that partner's values rate to be “working” because they are located behind the opening bid.

Game should make easily opposite

either of these minimum hands:

♠A 4 2 ♥5 2 ♦K Q J 9 ♣K 8 7 2

♠A 8 4 2 ♥J 5 2 ♦A Q J ♣K 8 7

To learn more, visit the my blog site: jennbridge.blogspot.com. □

East hands for the March Bidding Box

Bid these hands with a partner. The West hands are on page 57. The N-S players are silent unless otherwise noted. Scores on page 31–33.

Problem 1. North deals. None vul. South bids 1♠ if possible.

♠— ♥K 10 6 4 ♦AK 8 5 ♣AK Q 10 8

Problem 2. East deals. N-S vul.

♠9 7 6 4 ♥AK 5 2 ♦J 8 6 ♣A 7

Problem 3. South deals. E-W vul.

♠K J 7 6 5 ♥AK 2 ♦8 5 4 ♣K J

Problem 4. West deals. Both vul.

♠A 8 3 ♥K 7 2 ♦K 10 7 6 ♣A 9 3

Problem 5. North deals. None vul.

♠K 8 2 ♥A 8 ♦K 7 6 4 ♣A 7 6 5

Problem 6. East deals. E-W vul.

North bids 4♦ if possible. South bids 5♦ if possible.

♠A 10 9 6 5 4 ♥K J 9 7 4 ♦— ♣10 4

Problem 7. South deals. N-S vul.

♠A 10 8 7 2 ♥J ♦K Q 6 ♣K Q 6 5

Problem 8. West deals. Both vul.

♠A 3 ♥AK 6 5 4 ♦AK Q ♣K 7 2



Losing Trick Count – part 5

By Jennifer Jones

Should I open at the one level or make a weak two-bid? Should I invite game after partner opens a weak two-bid? LTC can help with these common questions on hand evaluation. When in doubt as to the value of a hand, a count of the losers will usually provide the answer.

Opening

While LTC is generally used after a fit is located, it also has limited appli-

cation in other areas, such as whether to open the bidding at the one level or two level. Most weak two-bids, with an average range of 5–10 high-card points, contain seven or eight losers. Their value lies in distribution, which accords them the approximate loser count of an opening bid. Here are some examples:

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

Hands with fewer than seven losers may be too strong to open a weak two-bid. This six-loser hand fits that description:

♠K Q 8 7 4 3 ♥9 6 ♦5 2 ♣K Q 9

Finally, this 6–4, five-loser hand is simply too powerful to open 2♠, so bid 1♠.

♠K Q 8 7 4 3 ♥9 6 ♦5 ♣K Q 9 6

Responding

If partner opens a weak two-bid and you have three-card support, the fit is sufficient to use LTC (note that LTC loses accuracy with 6–2 fits). With eight or more losers, pass or increase the level of the preempt. With seven losers, it is usually right to invite game, and with six losers bid game. With fewer losers, consider slam. Let's look at some hands after partner opens 2♠.

(a) ♠K 10 2 ♥K J 7 4 ♦K Q 7 ♣9 3 2

(b) ♠K 10 8 2 ♥A 9 8 ♦10 9 7 5 3 ♣8

Hands (a) and (b) each have eight losers so can't be expected to make

game opposite 2♠. Pass 2♠ or bid 3♠ (except at unfavorable vulnerability) to make life difficult for the opponents.

(c) ♠A 8 2 ♥A 10 7 4 ♦Q J ♣K Q 8 3

(d) ♠J 10 2 ♥A K J 7 ♦K Q J 7 ♣8 3

Hands (c) and (d) have seven losers, so game is a possibility. Bid 2NT, asking, and if partner shows a feature (ace or king), game is a good bet.

If you play the Ogust convention (bidding 2NT to learn more about partner's opener), it can be defined with LTC principles as follows:

3♣ = "Bad hand, bad suit" with eight losers (nine rarely).

3♦ = "Bad hand, good suit" with eight losers.

3♥ = "Good hand, bad suit" with seven losers.

3♠ = "Good hand, good suit" with seven losers.

3NT shows a suit headed by the A–K–Q, a seven-loser hand.

(e) ♠J 10 2 ♥A Q J 4 ♦K Q 9 7 3 ♣8

(f) ♠K Q 8 ♥K J 4 ♦8 4 ♣A Q 10 6 2

Hands (e) and (f) contain six losers so should make game opposite most weak two-bids. Bid 4♠.

(g) ♠A 10 2 ♥A K J 7 4 ♦K Q J 7 ♣8

(h) ♠K J 10 2 ♥7 ♦A 7 ♣A K J 9 8 2

Hands (g) and (h) contain five losers so should move toward slam. Both hands are suitable for ace- or key card-asking bids. If partner shows two — bid 6♠.

To learn more, visit the author's blog site: jennbridge.blogspot.com. □

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Losing Trick Count – part 6

By Jennifer Jones

This final LTC article will address questions asked by readers. First, the most common question:

Can LTC be used in notrump auctions?

Yes — after you find a fit! We will look at trump fits identified using Stayman and Jacoby transfers. Note that the LTC formula has its greatest accuracy with **unbalanced** hands, and if both the opening notrump hand and the responding hand are balanced, then high-card points should be the determining factor.

Start with the premise that an opening bid of 1NT (15–17) has six or seven losers. Therefore, you should pass a game-invitational bid with seven losers and accept with six.

Stayman

You open 1NT, find your heart fit with Stayman, and partner raises to 3♥. How should you proceed with these hands?

1. ♠A Q 10 ♥K J 6 3 ♦Q J 2 ♣K 9 7
2. ♠A 5 ♥K 10 6 3 ♦A Q 10 2 ♣K 5 3

Although both hands have 16 HCP, the first hand has seven losers, the second only six. Pass 3♥ with hand 1 and bid 4♥ with hand 2.

Jacoby transfers

The same formula applies to Jacoby transfers — pass an invitational bid with seven losers and raise to game

with six. Additionally, in a transfer sequence, there is the option to jump to three of the major — a “super-acceptance” showing four trumps and a good hand. Note: *A good hand is one with no more than six losers.*

Here’s an exciting hand from a recent regional knockout match, which enabled us to eke out a win.

♠A 8 6 5 ♥K Q J 4 ♦Q 10 8 ♣K 3

I opened 1NT and partner bid 2♦, a transfer to hearts. I had only 15 HCP, but four trumps and six losers, so I jumped to 3♥, a super-acceptance. Partner held:

♠7 3 ♥A 9 8 6 2 ♦J 9 7 5 4 ♣6

Although there were only 5 HCP, the hand had eight losers, so he added his eight losers to my six, applied the formula and bid game! The cards were well positioned and this 20-point game rolled home — a victory for LTC.

Does LTC work with 4–4 fits?

Yes — once you find at least an eight-card fit, LTC can be used effectively.

How about game tries?

Various game tries can be useful with LTC. I prefer help-suit game tries. If you open 1♠ with:

♠A K 9 7 6 ♥K 5 3 ♣K Q 9 8 ♠10

and partner raises to 2♠, your 5-loser hand is worth a 3♥ game try. If part-

ner has help in hearts, she’ll bid 4♠.

I’m late to the party. How, exactly, do you count losers?

Welcome! See the December 2011 issue of the Bridge Bulletin or visit my bridge blog (web address below).

I keep hearing about adjustments to LTC. Please explain.

Over the years, bridge writers have proposed various adjustments to the basic LTC formula. A good approach is to *add* half a loser for each “unsupported” queen and *deduct* half a loser for each ace. A queen is “supported” when it is accompanied by a jack or 10. My advice is to gain experience with the basic formula before applying adjustments.

Are there any other situations in which LTC can be used?

Absolutely! It works like a charm with Bergen raises, and I have written about that elsewhere. Really, any time during the auction when you need to engage in hand evaluation, a count of your losers can guide you toward the winning call.

Cultivate the habit of counting your losers. Success will dispel any doubts. I predict you will soon agree with me that LTC is an invaluable bidding tool! □

To learn more, visit the author’s blog site: jennbridge.blogspot.com.