THE LOSING TRICK COUNT (A common sense approach)

A critical point arises in any auction when you support your partner's suit. At this stage you can stop feeling your way to the best denomination and start to judge how many tricks you can make. There is another, more subtle, difference as well as is illustrated by hand (a) below.

(a) WEST	EAST	WEST	EAST
♠ A Q 7 4 3 2	♠ K 9 8 5	1♠	2♠
♥ 9	♥ Q J 8 7	Pass	
♦ A K 8 6 5	♦ 10 7		
♣ 4	♣ 9 8 6		

Is there anything particularly unreasonable about this auction, after all West has only 13 high card points (HCP) and East only 6? Even if West counts 3 'length' points and tentatively makes a game try with 3♦ East is hardly likely to accept it. So we seem to have a reasonable auction, with a most unsatisfactory result because East/West can easily make 11 tricks in spades. Rather than just accept this as bad luck, we should look again at whether the point count is an accurate way of evaluating distributional hands, once a fit has been found with partner. The losing trick count (LTC), as described below gives you a much better way.

Counting your losers

Consider only the first three cards in a suit; longer cards are always counted as winners. There are never more than 3 losers in a suit as the fourth card always has the potential to take a trick.

With three or more cards in a suit, count the ace, king and queen as winners- any other card is a loser.
With only two cards in a suit, count only the ace and king as winners.
With a singleton count only the ace as a winner. Any other card is a loser.
With a void you have no losers.

A little refinement is clearly necessary, after all, the above table would count Q 3 2 and A J 10 each as two losers. With Q 3 2 you have little chance of a winner if partner has three small cards in the suit, whereas with A J 10 you have an excellent chance of two winners if partner has three small cards. The traditional solution is to count A J 10 as only one loser but a queen unsupported by another honour card as 3 losers, but in my opinion this ignores lots of other combinations where the LTC overestimates or underestimates the strength. I think a broader approach using common sense and judgement is needed.

Some combinations where the 'official' number of losers underestimates the strength:

A Q doubleton A J 10 or A K J tripleton I call these 'plus values'
A singleton king is a plus value

Some combinations where the 'official' number of losers overestimates the strength: K 2 doubleton Q 3 2 tripleton I call these 'minus' values

If the hand has significantly more plus values than minus values, subtract a loser. If the hand has significantly more minus values than plus values, add a loser

Suppose you open 1♦ and your partner responds 1♠. Since you have found an 8-card spade fit you can use the LTC. Using the raw losing trick count, hands (b) and (c). each seem to have 6 losers. However (a) is full of plus values: it would be a distortion to bid less than 4♠. The only debate is whether it would qualify as a 4-loser or 5-loser hand. On the other hand (c) was a sub-minimum opening bid when you made it and is only just about raised to the status of minimum opening bid by finding a spade fit. Treat it as a 7-loser hand: worth only 2♠. Of course most hands have some plus values and some minus values, so no adjustment is needed.

(b) ♠ A J 10 8
♥ 3 2
♦ A K J 10 4
♣ A J

(c) ♠ Q 10 3 2
♥ J 2
♦ K Q 6 5 4
♣ K 3

The LTC should not be used as a security blanket. It is not an excuse to throw sensitivity and judgement out of the window. In the following auction you can assume that West is showing 5 diamonds and 4 spades

West	East
1♦	1♠
3♠	?

How do you regard these two hands?

(d) ♠ K 9 4 3 2
♥ 8 4 2
♦ Q J 2
♣ 5 3

(e) ♠ K 9 4 3 2
♥ Q J 2
♦ 8 4 2
♣ 5 3

Both have 9 losers but it is clearcut to bid 4♠ with (d) but pass with (e). If your partner has just four cards outside diamonds and spades, it is likely that the ♥Q J 2 will be at least partially wasted in (e). Equally a holding of three-small in your partner's suit is the worst possible. However in (d) all your cards are working well: you have no wasted values

Of course it is also worth listening to your opponents' bidding. If there is an overcall on your right in a suit where you have K 2 your holding is probably one loser, but if the overcall is on your left it is likely to be two losers

If hands (b), (c), (d), and (e) confuse you, perhaps the solution is not to use the LTC on balanced hands. It is on unbalanced hands (like (a)) where the LTC gives a more accurate guide than the point count. On balanced hands a properly used LTC will give a similar result to a point count (properly adjusted in the light of the bidding). Perhaps the point count is easier to use.

Assessing Partner's losers

This is no more difficult than assessing partner's points and is done on the basis of the strength revealed in the bidding. The critical number to remember is SEVEN. That is the number of losers in a sound opening hand, and you work up and down from there- the stronger the hand, the fewer the losers.

Here are some examples of the losers you can expect from partner's bid.

A minimum response (usually 6-9 HCP) has 9 or 10 losers. With such a hand responder might raise opener's suit to the two level.
An intermediate (or jump) response (usually 10-12 HCP) has 8 losers. With such a hand responder might jump raise opener's suit to the three level.
A sound minimum opening bid (usually 12-15 HCP) or a strong response (13+ HCP) has 7 losers. With such a hand opener might give a single raise in responder's suit.
A strong opening bid (usually 16-18 HCP) has 5 or 6 losers.
With such a hand opener might give a jump raise to partner's suit.
A very strong opening bid (usually 19-21 HCP) has 4-5 losers
A minimum overcall has 8 losers
A minimum 2-level overcall has 7 losers
A minimum takeout double has 7 losers

Assessing the total number of losers.

If you have found a fit of at least 8 cards with partner and your hand is unbalanced it is time to abandon the point count and start to apply the losing trick count as follows:

1. Count your losers.
2. Add partner's estimated losers.
3. Deduct the total from 24 to give the number of tricks you expect to make. A good aide-memoire is to realise that 14 losers normally makes 10 tricks in a major suit: ie. game.

(f)	West	East	(g)	West	East	(h)	West	East	(i)	West	East
	1♥	2♥		1♥	3♥		1♦	1♥		1♦	1♥
	?			?			2♥	?		3♥	?

In (f) West assumes East has 9 losers. With 6 or 7 losers West passes.
In (g) West assumes East has 8 losers. With 7 losers West passes. With 6 losers West bids 4♥.
With (h) East assumes West has 7 losers. With 7 losers East will ensure game is reached. With 9 losers East will pass. With 8 losers East may make a game try. It might depend on how his hand fits a 1♦ opening bid.
With (i) East assumes West has 6 losers. With 8 losers East will proceed to game.

Note that in (f) and (h) the heart raiser may have only 3 hearts, so it would be inappropriate to use the LTC with just 4 hearts. A no-trump continuation may be more appropriate.

Note also that the LTC works best in the area of assessing whether to bid game. It is less accurate in the slam zone where control cards are so important. The LTC might give an indication as to whether there is the potential for 12 tricks but there is no point quoting the LTC if you are missing two aces, or they start by cashing the A K in a suit.

We will finish with some examples: We start by re-examine examining hand (a)

(a)	West	East
	♠ A Q 7 4 3 2	♠ K 9 8 5
	♥ 9	♥ Q J 8 7
	♦ A K 8 6 5	♦ 10 7
	♣ 4	♣ 9 8 6

East raises West's opening bid of 1♠ to 2♠. West now counts losers, a total of 4 (one in each suit). East's losers are estimated as 9 or 10. Suppose West is pessimistic and assumes that East has 10 losers. West adds 4 to 10 and deducts the total from 24, leaving a total of 10. Even on the pessimistic assumption that East has 10 losers West can envisage 10 tricks, so he jumps to 4♠.

(j)	West	East	
1 loser	♠ A K J 5	♠ Q 10 4 3 2	2 losers
1 loser	♥ K Q 10 6 4 3	♥ 9 5	2 losers
2 losers	♦ 9 7	♦ A 5 3	2 losers
1 loser	♣ 7	♣ 9 6 2	3 losers
5 losers			9 losers

South	West	North	East
	1♥	P	1♠
P	4♠	All Pass	

(k)	West	East	
1 loser	♠ A Q 3 2	♠ K 9 8 6 5 4	2 losers
3 losers	♥ J 7 4 3	♥ K Q 2	1 loser
1 loser	♦ 3	♦ 8 6	2 losers
2 losers	♣ A J 3 2	♣ 8 4	2 losers
7 losers (minimum take-out double)			7 losers

South	West	North	East
1♦	Dbl	P	4♠

(l)	West	East	
0 loser	♠ A K Q 4 2	♠ J 8 6 4	3 losers
3 losers	♥ J 7 5	♥ A K Q 6	0 loser
2 losers	♦ 9 3	♦ K 7 5 2	2 losers
3 losers	♣ 8 5 4	♣ 6	1 loser
8 losers (minimum 1-level overcall)			6 losers

South	West	North	East
1♦	1♠	P	4♠