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 only when you and your partner have found a fit in a suit in which you would like to play as trumps – you should have at least eight trumps between the two hands. Usually this fit will be in a major, because on many occasions when we have a fit in a minor suit we prefer to play in a notrump contract, however if you are sure you want to play in a minor suit, you can use it then too.

You might think that you do not need another method of evaluation, and that is quite true, but surely the more methods you have the better the judgement of a hand you can make.

The Losing Trick Count (LTC) should not be used by itself, but in conjunction with the standard point-counting system (Milton Work Count). If used sensibly, LTC is an invaluable tool for the aspiring bridge player. In its basic form, LTC works like this:

Once a **fit** has been found, you must:

A. **Count your losers**
B. **Add your partner's losers**
C. **Subtract the total from 18**

The result will give you the level at which you can expect to play **with the fit suit as trumps.**

Let's start by learning to count our losers. There are four basic rules, the first three being:

1. **Only the first three cards in any suit can be losers.**
2. **Only the ace, king and queen are winners.**
3. **'Droppable honours' count as losers (i.e. a singleton king or a doubleton queen).**

Here are some examples. Note that counting losers is the very essence of LTC, so go over the examples and make sure you follow the reasoning.

> ♠ 5 4 3
> ♥ 5 4
> ♦ 5 4 3 2
> ♣ 5 4 3 2

This hand looks easy: surely there are 13 losers! No, not in our system – remember, only the first three cards of any suit count. So here you have three losers in spades, two in hearts, and only three in diamonds and three in clubs – the fourth card in each of the last two suits does not count as a loser. Thus the total number of losers is 11.

> ♠ A K 4
> ♥ J 5 4
> ♦ K Q 5 4
> ♣ 6 5 4

Adding a few high cards will obviously change things, but remember: we only count the first three cards in any suit. In spades we have one loser (ace and king count as winners). In hearts we have three losers (the jack is not a winner). In diamonds, remember that the four does not count (the fourth card in the suit), so there is just one loser in diamonds (king and queen count as winners), and three losers in clubs. **Total = 8 losers.**

> ♠ A K 4 3
> ♥ Q
> ♦ K Q 5 4 3
> ♣ 6 5 4

Slightly altering the shape will also change things. Remember: neither the ♠3 nor the ♦4-3 will count, because they are in long suits. Only counting the first three cards, we have one loser in spades, one in hearts (the queen will fall under a higher honour and so counts as a loser – see Rule 3), one in diamonds and three in clubs. **Total: 6 losers.**

> ♠ A K 5 4 3 2
> ♥ VOID
> ♦ K Q 4 3 2
> ♣ 4 3

Even more shape. This time the ♠4-3-2 do not count nor do the ♦3-2. This means that the only losers on this hand are ♠5, ♦4 and ♣4-3. **Total = 4 losers.**

> ♠ A K 4
> ♥ A K 4
> ♦ A K 5 4
> ♣ A K 4

This hand is a little bit stronger in high card points! However, it has the same number of losers, 4 – one in each suit.

These last two hands demonstrate the two important factors determining the number of losers in a hand: **points** and **shape**. The more unbalanced a hand, the smaller the number of losers; and the more points in a hand, the smaller the number of losers.

Although the 28-point hand appears a lot stronger for a no-trump contract than a suit contract (say spades) the last two hands above are of similar strength. Remember: we only count losers when we have a fit, so our partner, with spades too, might be able to ruff some diamonds and establish that suit making our 12-point hand look worth eight or nine tricks – perhaps even more than the obvious eight top tricks of the 28-point hand.

This is the power of the Losing Trick Count: it is able to evaluate the long suits, the shortages and the high-card points and give you one simple answer. We will see how to use it as we go on but unfortunately, before we go any further. we do have to add one more element to the counting of losers:

Compare these two hands:

Hand 1
♠ Q 4 3 2
♥ Q 4 3 2
♦ Q 4 3 2
♣ 2

Hand 2
♠ A 4 3 2
♥ A 4 3 2
♦ A 4 3 2
♣ 2

Both of these hands have just 7 losers, but there is a distinct difference between them. Clearly the queen is being over-valued; to counter-balance this, the **queen** is often counted as **half** a loser. So the Hand 1 above contains **8½ losers**, and Hand 2 has **7 losers**.

However, when the queen combines with an honour, it is a lot stronger and is worth a full winner. So ♠K-Q-4-3 would count as 1 loser and ♥Q-J-4-3 would count as 2 losers, whilst ♦ Q-4-3-2 would count as 2½. So the **fourth** and final rule with regard to counting losers is: the queen counts as half a loser *except* when in combination with ace, king or jack.

The full set of four rules is thus:

1. **Only the first three cards in any suit can be losers.**
2. **Only the ace, king and queen are winners.**
3. **'Droppable Honours' count as losers (i.e. a singleton king or a doubleton queen).**
4. **The queen counts as half a loser *except* when in combination with ace, king or jack.**

Now let us consider two slightly more complex examples:

♠ K Q 6
♥ A Q 5 4 3
♦ Q 4 3
♣ 6 3

Let us work out one suit at a time:

Spades: 1 loser (queen with king, so full winner).
Hearts: 1 loser (queen with ace, so full winner) and we only count the first three cards.
Diamonds: 2½ losers (queen by herself, so half a loser).
Clubs: 2 losers.
Total = 6½ losers.

On the next hand:

♠ Q 5 4 3
♥ Q J 3 2
♦ A 8 7
♣ Q 2

Spades: 2½ losers (queen by herself and we only count the first three cards).
Hearts: 2 losers (queen with jack so full winner, but the jack itself is never a winner).
Diamonds: 2 losers
Clubs: 2 losers (don't forget Rule 3: the queen will drop under the ace-king, hence it is a loser).
Total = 8½ losers.

The last hand above is probably the most difficult one you are likely to come across; if you got it right, well done – if you did not get it right, try to make sure you understand why. Once you have mastered counting your losers you are halfway to mastering the Losing Trick Count.

Let us refer back to the basic LTC:

A. **Count your losers**
B. **Add your partner's losers**
C. **Subtract from 18**

We have covered Point A, but how do we go about working out Point B?

This is rather like assessing the number of high-card points that partner holds. When our partner opens the bidding at the one level, he has a minimum of 12 HCP, and a minimum responding hand has 6 HCP – these are values you have to remember. It is similar with losers: you have to remember the values for a minimum opening hand as well as those for a minimum responding hand. They are:

Minimum Opening hand = 7 losers
Minimum Responding hand = 9 losers

In the point-count system, we assume that partner has the minimum, e.g. when you partner opens 1NT (12-14 HCP) and you have 11 HCP, you do not jump to 3NT, because he might have just 12 HCP. You assume he has the minimum and thus bid 2NT – if he does have 14 HCP he can then bid on as appropriate. The Losing Trick Count works in the same way: we always assume our partner has a minimum hand unless he tells us differently.

That is all there is to Point B. We shall look at some examples and tackle Point C in the next issue of BRIDGE.

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