Intermediate- Lesson 17

Losing Trick Count

We are all used to using point count to evaluate a hand: 4 for an Ace, 3 for a King, etc. And it works pretty well when the hand is balanced or semi balanced. But what can we do when our hand is unbalanced, ie very shapely? The high card point count isn't so accurate. It's possible to have a hand with few points but enormous playing strength.
There are some rather complicated ways of assessing this, such as adding points for voids or singletons, but they are not easy to use.

Fortunately, we have a brilliant tool to use, called **LOSING TRICK COUNT**. It is so useful it should be part of every bridge player's system.

But first, let's look at what we mean by a **balanced** or **unbalanced** hand.

A balanced hand has no void, no singleton, and no more than 1 doubleton. The shapes are 4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, or 5-3-3-2. Another quick way of looking at it is to add the number of cards in your two longest suits – if it comes to 9 or more, the hand is not balanced.

We rely on high card point count as the primary way to assess the strength of our hand when it's balanced. For example, if partner opens 1♥, and we have a balanced hand with four hearts, and we want to support partner's suit, we use high card point count to assess the level to bid. With 6-9 HCP, we raise to 2♥. With 10-12 HCP, we raise to 3♥. With 13+ HCP, we raise to 4♥. (Note: when responding with opening strength hands there are other useful ways of bidding, such as Splinters and Jacoby, but we're not covering them in this course. They're in the Advanced series)

But if it's unbalanced, we need a better way. The strength of an unbalanced hand can be tremendous, or not a lot, depending very much on whether we have a **FIT** with partner (a fit is 8 or more cards in a suit between you and your partner). If your hand is misfitting with partner, the unbalanced hand isn't going to be worth anything more than its face value in HCP- and maybe not even that!   But if you have a **fit**, you can start to get excited. And that's where Losing Trick Count comes into its own.

What is Losing Trick Count?
It's a very useful way of evaluating how high you and your partner can bid in a suit, once you've found a fit. It applies only when your hand is UNBALANCED. If you have found a fit in a suit, and your hand is unbalanced – **do not focus on your point count, but on Losing Trick Count.**

It allows you to bid game, for example, when, by other methods of hand evaluation, you might fail to recognise that game is on. It also let's you spot when you might have a slam available, so you can explore for that, when, if you are too obsessed with a modest high card point count, you probably wouldn't even notice the opportunity.

So, when can we use Losing Trick Count?
Here's a useful mnemonic to help you remember when you can use it. It's **UFO**.

- **U** is for **U**nbalanced hand. If your hand is balanced, just bid as you normally would, based on your point count.
- **F** is for when you have found a **F**it
- **O** is for when you are the **O**pening side, ie don't use it when the opposition have opened and your partner has overcalled.

How to calculate your Losing Tricks (LT's)
OK, let's say you've established you have a fit with partner, your side is the opening side, and your hand is unbalanced. Now you are going to count up your **LOSING TRICKS.** It's a bit of arithmetic, but you will get quicker at it with practice.

Look at each suit in turn. Consider the first 3 cards you hold only: by definition, the maximum number of losing tricks you can have in a suit is 3, and therefore, in your complete hand, is 12. If you have less than 3 cards in a suit, consider only the number of cards you hold in that suit. So, for example, a singleton can only come to a maximum of 1 LT for that suit.

Count 1 losing trick for each missing Ace, King, and Queen. If you have only two cards, count each missing Ace and King. If you have only one card, count 1LT unless it's the Ace. A void, of course, counts as 0 LT's.
Add up the LT's for all 4 suits, and that is the Losing Trick Count for your hand.

Examples
A 6 5 = 2 LT's	K Q 9 = 1LT	A J 9 6 2 = 2LT's
K 7 4 2 = 2 LT's	Q 6 = 2LT's	9 7 6 3 = 3 LT's
9 = 1LT	A 2 = 1 LT	K = 1LT

And for a complete hand:

Hand 1		Hand 2		Hand 3	
♠A Q 8 3 2	= 1	♠ K Q J 6 5 2 = 1		♠ 9 8 7 6	= 3
♥ J 8 7 5 3	= 3	♥ A 7 3 2	= 2	♥ J 6 4 2	= 3
♦ 7 2	= 2	♦ A	= 0	♦ K	= 1
♣ 3	= 1	♣ Q 3	=2	♣ K 8 7 5	= 2
Total	= 7LT's	Total	= 5LT's	Total	= 9LT's

We call the first hand a "7 loser hand", the second a "5 loser hand", and the third a "9 loser hand".

Well, so what? What's the point? How do we use that calculation?
The stronger a hand, the fewer LT's it will have.

The following bit you just have to learn – sorry about that – but I assure you it's worth it!

We assume that to open, a hand will have no more than 7 losing tricks. This applies even if opener is opening "light", as he/she should only be opening light in High Card Points if they have shape values to add to their HCP total. If you are responding to your partner's opening bid of 1 of a suit, you must work on the basis that they have 7 LT's, until more information emerges from the bidding. They might have fewer than 7 LT's: a good opening hand might have only 6 or 5, and a very powerful opening hand even fewer.

Likewise, to respond to opener's 1 level suit opener at the 1 level, a hand is assumed to be no worse than 9LT's, and to respond to opener's 1 level suit opener at the 2 level, a hand is assumed to be no worse than 8LT's. I'm afraid you just have to remember these numbers – but don't worry, with practice it becomes second nature.

If we have 4+ card support for partner's suit (ie a fit), AND an unbalanced hand, we count up our losing tricks. We add that total to partner's assumed 7LT's and *subtract that total from 18*. (Don't for the moment ask: "why 18?"- just take it that the calculation works in practice). The answer is how many you can bid in response to partner's opener.
So, if partner opens say 1♥, and you have an unbalanced hand with 7LT's (ignore the number of HCP's – it might be not a lot) and 4 or more hearts, then bid 4♥. (7+7=14. 18-14=4. Therefore bid 4♥)

Opener will know you are counting on him/her having 7LT's. So if opener actually has only 6LT's, they can raise by one more; ie if partner opens ♥, and you have an unbalanced hand with 8LT's and at least 4 hearts, then bid 3♥. (7+8=15. 18-15=3. Therefore bid 3♥). But let's say opener opened with a 6-loser hand, he/she can then raise to 4♥.

Example 1

Opener	Responder
♠ 6 2	♠ 7 3
♥ A 7 4 2	♥ K 3
♦ Q 9 7 5 4 2	♦ A K 8 6
♣ A	♣ J 7 6 5 3
Opens 1♦	Responds 4♦ [(1)]
Raises to 5♦ [(2)]	

    (1) 2 + 1 + 1 + 3 = 7LT's. Add to partner's assumed 7LT's = 14. Take 14 from 18, so bid 4 diamonds.
    (2) 2 +2 + 2 + 0 = 6LT's. One fewer than partner assumed. So bid one more.

Example 2

Opener	Responder
♠ K 6 5 2	♠ A Q 7 4 3
♥ A K 3	♥ 8 7 6 2
♦ 2	♦ 4 3
♣ A K 10 7 3	♣ J 4
Opens 1♣	Responds 1♠
Raises to 4♠ [(1)]	Pass [(2)]

    (1) 2 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 5LT's. Add to partner's assumed 9 LT's for his/her 1 level response, = 14. Take 14 from 18, so bid 4 spades.
    (2) 1+ 3 + 2 + 2 = 8LT's, one fewer than partner has assumed for their 4♠ bid, but as we're already in game, no need to bid on to 5♠ .

High level contracts -looking for slam

Say your partner opens 1♠, and you have lovely spade support, a shapely hand, and only 5 LT's. You count 7 LT's for partner + 5 for your hand= 12, and 18-12=6. Do you bid straight to 6♠? The answer is no, you don't. The LTC method will tell you that game should be near certain, and that slam *might* be possible, but it's not very accurate *on its own* for judging whether you can make a slam. So you will need other methods, such as ace-asking (and when you're more advanced, cue bidding), to explore for whether slam is really on or not. But Losing Trick Count is great- it has alerted you to the POSSIBILITY that you might have slam.

Health warning:

As for all systems in bridge, LTC isn't perfect, and will not always give the right answer. However, it usually does, and is a great tool. It gets even more accurate as you learn to apply the extra guidance, described below, to refine your judgement. Don't get discouraged if you sometimes come unstuck – that's bridge, and every system will go wrong some of the time. Bridge isn't an exact science, and if your methods work most of the time, you will get good results.

Refining your judgement:
With LTC, as you get more experienced, you'll begin to be able to use your judgement and shade hands up or down depending on other considerations. For example, these two suit holdings count the same in LT's: ♠A J 9 and ♠Q 3 2. They both count as 2 LT's, but they are not the same strength.

Three adjustments to consider:

1   Unsupported queens
A useful guide is to beware of unsupported queens when counting your losing tricks. An unsupported queen is a suit containing just the queen and small cards. A supported queen is a suit containing the queen and the A, K, or J. LTC takes no account of jacks, but QJx is a far better holding than Qxx. You should count an extra half a loser for a suit with an unsupported queen. Therefore it's OK to count Q J x as two losers, but you should count Q x x as two and a half losers.

What on earth is the point of half a loser? You can't bid three and a half spades, can you? The answer is, when you have half a loser, look to other methods of evaluation to decide whether to round your count up or down.

2   Doubletons: if you have a hand with these suits, ♦6 2 ♣ 7 4, you will be counting them as 4 losers, just as you would if they were ♦6 5 2 ♣ 4. Yet singletons are lovely, and doubletons not so good. You'd far rather have the 3-1 holding than the 2-2. If you're shading up or down, you should rate a hand containing two doubletons as weaker, and round a half loser up to a full loser.

3   Having no aces: if in doubt, a hand with no aces should be shaded down in value.

Other considerations will be length in partner's suit, ie the suit that will be trumps, and your HCP point count. You always have more than one method to evaluate your hand.

Consider these two hands facing partner's 1♥ opening bid. A somewhat extreme example, but it makes the point.

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

Hand A has 8 LT's, and hand B 7LT's. But would you really want to bid higher on hand B than hand A?
In hand A, the diamond suit counts as two losers, so LTC isn't adding value for the ♦Q – which is accurate.
But in hand B, the hearts and the clubs both contain unsupported queens, so we are going to count two and a half losers for each, ie 5 LT's in those two suits – and we are now counting hand B as 8 LT's, not 7. And now, when thinking which of these two **8 loser** hands is better, we would rate A, with two aces, as a better bet than hand B, with none.

It's not easy and takes practice and experience to evaluate hands well. But don't dismay – the LTC is a terrific tool, and essential in your toolkit. Frequently it helps you bid a game which makes, when others are too focussed just on HCP count, and end up time after time, frustratingly, making overtricks in part score.

<center>♣ ♦ ♥ ♠</center>