

THE LOSING TRICK COUNT

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You open 1S. Partner raises to 2S. You like your hand. Do you make a try for game? And what if the bidding goes 1♠ P 3♠? Do you bid game or pass?

Or, partner opens 1S. You have spade support with a good 10 HCP, or perhaps a poor 11 HCP. Do you raise to 2S or 3S?

These problems (and others) are made much easier if you understand the principles of the Losing Trick Count (LTC). This is a system of hand valuation that is almost as old as contract bridge itself, but has been given new life by Australian teacher and writer Ron Klinger. He has written widely about it, and one of his publications should be in your club library.

I won't pretend to improve on Ron's presentation, but merely to summarise so that you will be tempted to read the original. The LTC is not a primary method of hand valuation. For most of us, this will still be the HCP count. But the LTC is a valuable addition to your armamentarium.

Principle: Take each suit in your hand. For every A, K or Q that you don't have in that suit, count one loser, with a maximum of 3 losers in each suit. There are no more losers than the number of cards in the suit. Thus xxxx or xxx = 3 losers, Axx, Kxx, or Qxx = 2 losers, AKx or AQx = 1 loser, AKQ = no losers. xx = 2 losers, x = 1 loser. On this basis, the most losers you can have is 12 (three in each suit). This similarly applies to partner's hand, so that the partnership could have at most 24 losers. On any one hand, you know the losers in your own hand, and partner's bid will give you a good estimate of his losers. Add your losers to partner's, subtract the total from 24, and this will tell you how many tricks the partnership can make. Thus the average opening hand has 7 losers. If partner also has 7 losers, our total is 14, subtract from 24, and we can make ten tricks. (I'm more used to thinking in terms of the contract makeable, so I subtract from 18, so 14 from 18 is four, so we can make 4S).

So:

1. Count your losers.
2. Add this number to partner's losers.
3. Subtract from 18. This gives you the level of the contract you can make.
4. The average opening hand (12-15 HCP) has 7 losers (occasionally 6).
The minimum responding hand (6-9 HCP) has 8 or 9 losers.
(Occasionally 10).

There is no guarantee about this. In bridge, 'never' or 'always' should not be part of our vocabulary. Most of the time, the above will be true.

How do you know about partner's losers? If partner is the opener, you may not know this until you hear his rebid. Let's classify opening hands as

- A. Sound opening (12-15 HCP) = 6-7 losers
- B. Strong (16-18) = 5-6 losers
- C. Super (19-21) = 4-5 losers.
- D. Game force(22+) = 3 or fewer losers

So:

1♣ 1♥	1♣ 1♥	1♣ 1♥
2♥ = sound(6-7)	3♥ = strong (5-6)	4♥ = super (4-5)

1♣ 1♥	1♣ 1♥
3♣ = strong (5-6)	2♦ = strong (5-6), reverse with 5/4 in ♣ and ♦

Note that the LTC does not apply to no-trump type hands. Here you still use the HCP. Let me repeat: the LTC applies only when you have found a suit fit.

Note also that 5 'losers' does not = 8 playing tricks. Thus:

♠J108753 ♥Q9764 ♦- ♣AK is a potentially powerful hand with only 5 losers but only 2 playing tricks until you find some sort of major fit with partner.

Note that you don't use the LTC as your main guide to opening strength. If you do, you'll reach the ludicrous situation of not opening this hand because it has 8 losers:

♠Axxx ♥Axx ♦Axx ♣Axx

or opening this hand because it has only 7 losers:

♠Qxxxxx ♥xxxxx ♦x ♣x

Modifications: There are some finer points in assessing your LTC which I don't have space to cover here, but do read them. For example, Qxx has two losers theoretically, but counts as 2 ½ losers unless you also hold the J, i.e. QJx. And sometimes the degree of trump fit may vary your LTC.

Notice also that you may sometimes have a respectable first round raise with more than 9 losers, for example a raise of 1♠ to 2♠ (6-9 HCP) on

♠K753 ♥9042 ♦J43 ♣A76 or ♠QJ86 ♥Q43 ♦762 ♣Q42

Both these hands have 10 losers. Partner will probably expect 9 losers. With hands of this type, pass any invitation by partner.

A typical sequence: You hold ♠AK743 ♥83 ♦J862 ♣AK. You open 1♠ and partner responds 2♠. Where to from here? You have 6 losers. Partner has shown a probable 8-9 loser hand. If partner is at the top of his range, then game may be on. So you make a game try. Your methods will vary according to your system. Simplest would be a free raise to 3♠. This says to partner 'I have 6 losers, not 7. If you have only 8 losers, bid game. Otherwise pass'. Or you may make a side suit trial bid, or bid 2NT to show extra values. Here the LTC is often a useful extra aid to judgment.

Another example: Partner opens 1♠. Here are two possible hands you may have, both awkward to bid, and both with 10 HCP.

Hand A. ♠KQxx ♥AJx ♦xxxx ♣xx Hand B ♠K9xx ♥AJx ♦Jxxx ♣Jx

10 HCP hands are a bit too good for a single raise (1♠ - 2♠) but not good enough to jump to 3♠. Traditionally we try to temporize with a two over one bid to show our 10 HCP, then support spades. But neither hand has a decent side suit to bid.. Count your losers. Hand A has 8 losers, and hand B has 9 losers. Bid 3♠ with A, but only 2♠ with B.

This is particularly helpful when you are a passed hand. When partner opens a major, your prime duty is to show support if any. With 4 card support, or 3 card support playing a 5 card major system, raise partner's suit immediately. The LTC fills the bill. If you don't raise, e.g. you bid 2C or 2D, partner is entitled to pass with a minimum hand.

You will find the LTC useful in competitive bidding, pre-emptive bidding and deciding whether to sacrifice (my answer – rarely).

Here is an example of the LTC in action in a recent teams event.

Bd 13 ♠AQJ4
 Dir N ♥J4
 Vul both ♦A753
 ♣972
 ♠72 ♠963
 ♥AQ102 ♥965
 ♦1086 ♦K92
 ♣QJ103 ♣A864
 ♠K1085
 ♥K873
 ♦QJ4
 ♣K5

The bidding:

N	E	S	W
1D	P	1H	P
1S	P	3S	All pass

In a teams event, it's hard to stay out of game after this auction. But this is the sort of spot where we rely on the LTC. North has a poor opening hand with 8 losers. South's raise to 3S was exact, and North could not justify a raise to game. In the field of 34 tables, only nine pairs stayed out of the unmakeable game.