

# The Losing Trick Count in Action



In the last issue of BRIDGE we saw how to apply the Losing Trick Count (LTC) in its basic form. When you have found a fit:

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

We learnt to count losers and we also learnt the LTC values for minimum hands:

Minimum Opener = 7 losers  
Minimum Responder = 9 losers

Now it's time to move on, and learn to apply Point C.

## Subtracting from 18

Once you have added your own losers and partner's losers together, you take the total away from 18 and the answer is what you should bid. (If you have come across subtracting from 24, please note: that would give you the answer to the question of how many tricks you can make: six more than what you bid.)

Don't worry about why this is so – you do not need to know. In fact, by the end of this article, you will not be 'subtracting' at all, but instead you will be 'comparing'!

Now it is time for the example hands; it is from these that you will really learn about the Losing Trick Count.

♠ K 4 3 2 ♥ A K 4 3 2 ♦ K 3 2 ♣ 2	<table border="1" style="margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td>N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td>W</td><td></td><td>E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td>S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A 8 7 6 ♥ 6 5 ♦ A Q 7 6 ♣ 8 7 6
	N										
W		E									
	S										

West	East
1♥	1♠
?	

The auction starts simply; you only count losers when you have a fit, so there is no need to count losers to begin with, but when East bids 1♠, you as West know that you have a fit and should thus count your losers: 2 in spades, 1 in hearts, 2 in diamonds and 1 in clubs = 6 losers.

How many losers does East have? (Work it out without looking at his hand!)

- Assume that he has the minimum for a responder, that is: 9.
- Adding your losers (6) to partner's losers (9) gives a total of 15. Then  $18 - 15 = 3$ : bid 3♠.

Now it is East's turn to go through this process. He counts up his losers: 2 in spades, 2 in hearts, 1 in diamonds and 3 in clubs = 8 losers.

How many losers does West have? For a minimum opening hand he has 7 – but hold on a moment! West does *not* have a minimum opening hand, because he bid 3♠ rather than 2♠ – so he must have a better hand, i.e. 6 losers.

- Adding your losers (8) to partner's losers (6) gives a total of 14. Then  $18 - 14 = 4$ : bid 4♠.

## The Easy Way

Now that was a whole lot of work – but bear in mind that we did do the calculations for two people, thus doubling the workload.

However, there is an easier way: rather than doing all this work, you can simply compare your hand to its LTC minimum.

So on the East-West diagram in the previous column, the auction would still start 1♥ – 1♠.

After East's 1♠ response, West knows that they have a spade fit and can count his losers: 6. Now all West has to do is compare his hand to its minimum: "As opener my minimum

hand is 7 losers; with that I would respond 2♠, but I am one better, so I bid one more: 3♠."

Then the responder (East) does the same, but of course he compares his hand to his own minimum (9 losers for a responding hand). With 9 losers he would of course pass 3♠, but with 8 losers (one better) he bids one more: 4♠.

Isn't that a lot easier? No long calculations, just compare your hand to its minimum; all you have to remember is whether you are the opener (minimum: 7 losers) or the responder (minimum: 9 losers) – and that is not so difficult, is it?

You can actually put it in table form:

OPENER'S TABLE		
(with support for responder's suit eg. 1♦ – 1♥ – ?):		
7 losers	<b>minimum</b>	rebid 2♥
6 losers	<b>intermediate</b>	rebid 3♥
5 losers	<b>strong</b>	rebid 4♥

RESPONDER'S TABLE		
(with support for a 1♠ opening):		
9 losers	<b>minimum</b>	bid 2♠
8 losers	<b>intermediate</b>	bid 3♠
7 losers	<b>distributionally strong</b> (see below)	bid 4♠

As responder, it is very important to differentiate between 'strong' (point-wise) and 'distributionally strong' hands with 7 losers. To see why, have a look at these two hands replying to a 1♠ opening bid:

<b>Hand A</b> ♠ J 10 4 3 2 ♥ Void ♦ A 10 9 8 3 2 ♣ 3 2	<b>Hand B</b> ♠ A 8 7 6 ♥ K 5 ♦ A Q 7 6 ♣ 8 7 6
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Both have seven losers, but should they really be bid in the same way?

**Hand A** responds with 4♠, the direct raise showing a distributional hand – whenever you have a weak hand with support, raise the suit straight away to the level suggested by the LTC.

**Hand B** bids 2♦, planning what is called a ‘Delayed Game Raise’: taking advantage of the fact that partner has to make another bid, you plan to jump to game *after* he has made his second bid, therefore delaying your raise to game by one round.

### The LTC in Action

If you are still confused, do not be worried. Here come more examples that will allow you to follow exactly how it all works and also see how brilliantly it can turn out!

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1♠	3♠
4♠	End

A nice, succinct auction. West opens 1♠ and East counts his losers: 8, one better than minimum, so rather than 2♠, he bids one more: 3♠. Now West counts his losers: 6. He, of course, as opener, compares to seven losers. He is also one better than his minimum, so he bids one more: 4♠.

A great auction: the LTC has evaluated the worth of the singleton diamond – all that is needed to make the contract is to take two diamond ruffs in dummy’s hand.

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1♣	1♠
4♠	End

This time we have two natural bids (1♣ and 1♠) before West counts his losers – just 5! With 7 losers he would rebid 2♠, and with 6 he would rebid 3♠, but with 5 he should bid 4♠! It looks a bid odd, but whenever you start to doubt the LTC, have a look at the strength of your long suits and if they are good, then trust the system. Here there is no doubt that your suits are first-rate and thus you should jump to game.

That is not necessarily the end of the auction: East might well have further ambitions. He counts his losers: here, 9. This is, of course, a minimum hand, so East happily passes. What a great game on just 19 points! The beauty of it is that the LTC predicted exactly what would happen. If the clubs break 3-2, you can establish the suit by ruffing one club and thus the seven, six and five of clubs will be winners.

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1♦	1♠
4♠	?

One of the things with which most club players struggle is when to bid on to slam and this is an area where the LTC can help enormously. Take a look at the layout above, for example: after 1♦ – 1♠ West counts his losers and finds 5. As in the previous layout, he should jump straight to game and rebid 4♠. However, as suggested, this is not the end of the auction. East counts his losers: 6. Now remember that he is the responding hand, so he compares to a minimum of 9 losers. So: with 9 he would pass, with 8 he would contemplate 5♠, with 7 he would think of 6♠ – and with 6 he should be dreaming of 7♠!

Yes, what the LTC is saying is that there is a great chance of slam, but do not forget that you can only make the required number of tricks if you are in control (that is, if you have the necessary aces and kings). After all, you could have ♠ A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7 in one hand and ♥ A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7 in the other (which are worth sixteen tricks), but if

both hands have a doubleton club, then your opponents could take the first two tricks!

That is an extreme example, but it highlights how important it is to check for controls if you are going for a slam, rather than blindly following the LTC. This hand is not ideal for Blackwood with its two small doubletons, but the important thing to note is that the LTC says there is a chance that a Grand Slam might be on, so your really should bid on over 4♠ – however you do it. If you do use Blackwood, you will find all the aces and all the kings in place so 7♠ is the place to be! Note that 7NT would not make, as just eleven tricks are available.

### Other Fits

You might wonder: “What about other fits: 5-3, 6-2, and so on?”

The Losing Trick Count still works along the same lines:

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1♥	1♠
2♣	3♥
4♥	End

West’s rebid of 2♣ is standard Acol and shows five cards in the first bid suit. Hence East knows that there is an eight-card fit and he uses LTC. He holds an 8-loser hand and so rebids one level above the lowest level: not 2♥ but 3♥. Opener has 6 losers, and can therefore go for game.

Similarly:

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1♥	1♠
2♦	2♠
3♠	4♠
End	

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When East rebids spades, we have found our fit and we can count our losers: West counts 6, so he can raise one level (with 7, he would pass) and since East has just 8 losers, he can raise to game.

This is a relatively extreme example, but you can see how well the LTC can work. Having said that, you can also see that the play, in some of the contracts you might reach, may not be quite so straightforward!

## Useful Tips

The LTC takes some getting used to, but it really is a very useful tool. However, please make sure it is just a tool and not a be-all and end-all!

For an example of where it might go wrong, try this:

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1♠	3♠
4♠	End

Following the LTC blindly, East counts 8 losers and so responds 3♠ and West counts 6 losers and bids on to game. We might go down in 2♠, let alone 4♠! Notice the difference between holding four aces and holding four kings!

There are many little tips that can be used with the LTC and one is: "Beware an aceless hand!" You should always add half a loser if your hand does not have an ace. In fact, in the extreme case that you hold neither a king nor an ace (as in

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the East hand in the last diagram) you should add a whole loser.

Another tip is that a queen in your partner's suit counts full value; this is because it is much more likely to be well supported.

Last but not least, a note of warning about balanced hands: balanced hands always have more losers than you expect and thus it is important to be careful when using the LTC with them. Hands that are opened with a weak no-trump will often be very weak in terms of losers (8 or 9 losers), but they are still fine opening bids. If you find a fit using Stayman, you must take into account, that your partner may have just such a weak hand:

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

<b>West</b>	<b>East</b>
1NT	2♣
2♠	3♠
Pass	

East might be tempted to jump to game when he finds a spade fit because he has 7 losers, but he should be wary that his partner might have 8 losers for his weak no-trump and thus should just invite game, by bidding 3♠. West will pass 3♠ because he has eight losers.

## Conclusions

I am sure that there are endless other tips that could be added to refine your use of the Losing Trick Count, but the important thing is just to try it. Persevere with the system for a month or two; if you still cannot grasp it, or you still find your results not improving, then give up – but I would be surprised if you don't find that you will be one of those pairs that are able to write '4♠ made' on the traveller, whilst most are putting in '2♠ + 2', or getting to slam when the traveller is filled with scores of '4♠ + 2'.

You do need to persevere for a while, though, because whenever you try something new it will take time to stick.

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I make it a rule never to write to publications unless (a) I get paid or (b) I am likely to win a prize. Today I am to make an exception.

I really must write and congratulate Bernard Magee on his brilliant Acol Bidding software. I bought it about three months ago, and I am still addicted to it – in fact, I have to put a time limit on my using it! My family think I am so clever when they pass the door and Bernard's voice rings out with "Well done," or "Very good choice" I try not to let them hear him when he says: "No comment!"

I would also like to mention that when I first purchased the CD my intention was not to use the sound as I thought it would be distracting. In actual fact, now I always have the sound on, and I find Bernard's voice very easy to listen to.

It must have been a marathon task to make this software, and I wonder how long it took him. It would be interesting to have an article about it.

I am now saving up to buy QPlus 6.5.

Audrey Walsh, Rolvenden, Kent

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