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(61) Hand Evaluation: Losers and Covers (Losing Trick Count)

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General

Working within the context of traditional HCP and re-evaluation (adding or subtracting points from our hand in order to re-evaluate our hand) is very useful for balanced hands and for many unbalanced hands. But there are other methods for evaluating our hands. In particular, much of the thought (creation) of new ideas has gone into how to evaluate unbalanced hands. I would be remiss to talk about hand evaluation and not mention some other methods of evaluation.

Some players try to replace the more complex method of upgrading & downgrading for things like length points and fitting cards or misfitting cards with the ideas of counting *Losers & Covers* – called *Losing Trick Count (LTC)*.

This is generally not as effective as *good* Hand Evaluation. It is especially ineffective in evaluating balanced hands that fit together. But for some very distributional hands counting HCP is so far off base that the amount of adjustments that we have to do can be overwhelming. So let's take a look at how Losing Trick Count works and see how we can make use of this as an alternative tool in our hand evaluation.

Counting Losers

We want to start out by examining a suit and how it is going to play. Assuming that partner does not have any ruffing values (they have normal length in the suit we are considering, say three small cards) then we consider how many tricks (winners) and how many losers will we have in this suit on average.

Let's look at some examples of how many losers we will have for different holdings. This will not be a highly scientific process. We will be using averages and making lots of educated guesses and simplifications.

- Xxx -- 3 Losers
- Xx -- 2 Losers
- X -- 1 Loser (Notice this was easy when we have no honors.)



- Xxxx – 3 Losers on average. This is the first interesting case – most of the time, we will only have 3 losers in this suit. The 4th card in the suit we will likely be able to get rid of. We will either be able to ruff it, discard it, or set it up as a winner.
- Axxx – 2 Losers on average.
- AKxx - 1 Loser on average.
- Axxxx – 2 Losers on average.
- Kxxx – 2+ Losers on Average. Obviously, Axxx is likely to have fewer losers than Kxxx. But for simplicity we usually just round this to 2 losers.
- Qxxx – 2++ Losers on Average. This is a worse holding than Axxx or Kxxx. But still the 4th card is likely to not be a loser. And we will likely only have 2 losers if partner has Ace, King, or Jack. Sometimes we will have 3 losers. Our average for this holding is between 2 and 3 losers.
- QJxx – 2 Losers on Average.

We won't go through all the details or go into too much mathematics here (this gets too complicated and is better left to computer programs.) But keep in mind these are generally averages and educated guesses as to how many losers we are likely to have when we have these holdings.

Note: One thing this method of Hand Evaluation does well is that it highly discounts Jacks (by only focusing on at most 3 losers.) This is a good thing since Jacks are overvalued and not generally worth the full one HCP they are given.

Example

Axxxx

KQxx

Axx

x

6 losers (on average) 2♠, 1♥, 2♦, 1♣ loser.

Covers

When we count losers we are really thinking in terms of how the play will likely go during the auction (it is often a good idea to try to visualize this.) When we do that, we think of how the two hands are going to fit together – how partner's hand is going to be useful to us and how our hand is going to be useful to partner. A *Cover Card* (or Cover) is a card that takes away a loser from partner's hand – “covers up a loser.”

Since partner is only counting at most three losers in each suit then only Aces, Kings, and Queens are potential cover cards. But these cards are not guaranteed to be cover cards for partner's hand. Just as in “regular” hand evaluation there can be wasted values:

- Ace, King, or Queen opposite a void,
- King or Queen opposite a singleton,
- Queen opposite a doubleton.



So an Ace is mostly likely to be a cover card (very likely,) a King is likely to be a cover card, and a Queen is only sometimes a cover card.

Losers & Covers & Averages

One way that players try to make use of this *Losing Trick Count* information is by using the average number of losers and covers for each type of hand. Let's look at some examples of this.

Opener's Hands

Opening Hand – Average of 7 Losers.

Extra Values (like a 1N Opener) – Average of 6 Losers

Responder's Hand - Covers in Hands with Fits

Simple Raise (minimum hand) – Average of 2 Covers.

Limit Raise (invitational hand)– Average of 3 Covers.

Game Forcing Raise – Average of 4 Covers.

These are just averages and help us make educated guesses (decisions.)

Example

1♠ (7 or fewer Losers) -- 3♠ (3 Covers)

Opener Passes with 7 Losers (7 Losers – 3 Covers = 4 losers. Still not enough for game, 4♠.)

Opener Bids 4♠ with 6 or fewer losers (6 Losers – 3 Covers = 3 Losers. Enough to make 4♠.)

Problems with Losing Trick Count

Fits Presumed

These statistical averages can be an effective ways of evaluating losers on some hands. But we do not count losers on hands that we play in Notrump – we count winners. Thus, this method breaks down for hands that don't end up in suit contracts. (This is most common for balanced hands or misfitting hands.) So keep in mind, our entire premise of having at most 3-losers in a suit is based on getting rid of our 4th or 5th card (and this is frequently done by ruffing.) We are assuming that we have a fit and that we will be playing in a suit contract for this evaluation to have much meaning. Since we frequently do not, this method will frequently break down if we apply it too early in the auction.

Working Covers?

Another problem with this method is "What is a cover?" Trying to determine what is a cover card (*Working Cover*) and what is not a cover card gets us back into many of the same issues of wasted values and fitting cards that are a major part of traditional hand evaluation. Making this determination is also a difficult part of properly applying Losers and Covers.



Conclusion

Generally, Losing Trick Count has types of hands where it is effective and other places where it is less effective (like any method of hand evaluation.) It can be a helpful tool in evaluating shapely hands - one of the tools in our kit, but not the only thing we should use. The most important thing a player can take away from our LTC discussion is to try to think about how the play may go during the auction and try to determine how useful our cards will be for partner when making a decision about the value of your hand.