**Improving Bidding Judgement**

**The Losing Trick Count**

Most people who come to the game of Bridge learn how to bid based on some form of ‘Counting’ of points.

Perhaps the most popular form (and one still widely taught and used) of counting of points was proposed by Milton, who established the ‘Work Count’, whereby the value of your hand is based on the number of picture or face cards (Ace; King; Queen and Jack), with an Ace being worth 4 ‘points’ down to the Jack with a value of 1 ‘point’.

To use this method, a player simply adds up the total number of ‘points’ from their Aces, Kings, Queens and Jacks, and then uses the total to make a bid. This approach has the advantage of being easy to teach, understand and use. The issue with the ‘Work Count’ approach is that there are other features of a hand that contribute to how good (or strong) a playing hand it is.

Players looking to improve their bidding, need to develop judgment skills that build on the basic ‘point counting’ approach, adding in those subtle ‘features’ of a hand that mean two hands with identical ‘point counts’ can deliver a big difference in the number of tricks won.

The Losing Trick Count is a [relatively] easy route into developing those skills. It does have its limitations, it is only really suitable for Suit Contracts where you have a fit with partner; is best suited to Major Suit contracts; and is easiest to use when opponents remain silent through the bidding, but none the less, as an aid to taking the first steps towards improving your bidding judgement, the Losing Trick Count is a ‘tool’ worth trying out…

**The Losing Trick Count**

**How Many Losers have I?**

The essence of the Losing Trick Count approach is assessing…

How Many Losers have I?

A Single Suit...

**The Rule of 3:**

Under the Losing Trick Count, only the first three cards in any suit count as possible losers (the logic being that in a Trump Suit contract you will be unlikely to have ‘mirror image’ hands with more than three cards in both hands in a side suit – so you will be able to ruff any ‘long losers’…)

**Aces; Kings; and Queens:**

The second source of losers under the Losing Trick Count approach are any cards that are not an Ace; King; or Queen.

**Example 1:**

Take this suit:

**K Q x (x)**

The ‘Rule of 3’ says that the 4th card in the suit (in brackets) does not count as a loser, so we are left with K; Q; x… The King and Queen are not losers, so under the Losing Trick Count, this suit = **1 Loser**

**Example 2:**

Now take this suit:

**x x x (x)**

The ‘Rule of 3’ says that the 4th card in the suit (in brackets) does not count as a loser… But without an Ace; King or Queen, the first three cards are all losers, so under the Losing Trick Count, this suit = **3 Losers**

**The Losing Trick Count**

**Bidding as Opener and Responder**

The Losing Trick Count approach helps the partnership work together, to bid to the right level, by deciding how many combined losers they have…

**The Opener’s 1st bid (making an opening bid):**

Because Opener does not know if the partnership has a suit fit, they cannot reasonably use the Losing Trick Count approach immediately…

**The Responder’s 1st bid (once we know we have an 8+ card fit):**

As responder you can see from your 1st bid if the Losing Trick Count approach can be used, if it can, you follow some simple steps…

* Step 1: Add up your ‘losers’

Adding the remaining suits to Examples1 & 2, gives us hand Example 3…

**Example 3:**

**♠ K Q x (x)**

**♥ K x x**

**♦ x x**

**♣ x x x (x)**

Let’s assume partner (the Opener) bids 1Spade, we now know we have a fit and can use the Losing Trick Count. Using what we have learnt from the Losing Trick Count approach, we can come to the number of losers in a complete hand…

**♠ K Q x (x)** Discount the 4th (x) card: This suit = **1 Loser**

**♥ K x x** A King – but two x cards: This suit = **2 Losers**

**♦ x x** Two x cards & no honours: This suit = **2 Losers**

**♣ x x x (x)** Discount the 4th (x) card: This suit = **3 Losers**

This hand then has: 1 + 2 + 2 + 3 = **8 Losers**

**The Losing Trick Count**

**Bidding to the right level (1)**

Once we have come to our number of losers as responder, in Step 1, we now need to communicate this information to our partner.

We do this in three further steps…

* Step 2: Assume opener has 7 Losers for a 1 of suit opening bid
* Step 3: Add your losers to opener’s assumed 7 losers = Total Losers
* Step 4: Use the responder ‘scale’ and Losing Trick Count - **MAGIC ‘18’**

**Responder Scale:**

* 16 Total Losers: Subtract from 18 = 2 = Bid 2 of suit
* 15 Total Losers: Subtract from 18 = 3 = Jump to 3 of suit
* 14 Total Losers: Subtract from 18 = 4 = Double Jump to 4 of suit

Thinking back to our hand at Example 3…

**♠ K Q x (x)** = **1 Loser**

**♥ K x x** = **2 Losers**

**♦ x x** = **2 Losers**

**♣ x x x (x)** = **3 Losers**

Total = **8 Losers**

Adding our 8 Losers to Opener’s assumed 7 Losers, gives us 15 Total Losers, and using the Responder Scale, suggests we should make a Jump bid response of 3Spades…

*Note: Using a ‘Point Counting’ approach, with 8 High Card Points as in the Example 3 hand, most responders would just raise to 2Spades…*

**The Losing Trick Count**

**Bidding to the right level (2)**

**Opener’s rebid:**

Following on from the previous steps and responder’s bid of 3Spades, Opener now knows of the trump fit so can use the Losing Trick Count to reassess their hand using the same ‘scale’ idea responder has used...

In the same way that Responder has assumed Opener has 7 losers, so too opener assumes from responder’s bids they have a set number of losers, depending on the level of bid, along the lines of this scale…

**Responder Scale (from Opener’s view):**

* Responder bids 2 of suit = 16 Total Losers: Responder has 9 Losers
* Responder bids 3 of suit = 15 Total Losers: Responder has 8 Losers
* Responder bids 4 of suit = 14 Total Losers: Responder has 7 Losers

With the information from this scale, Opener can now count their losers using the Losing Trick Count approach. Once done, they add responder’s assumed losers to theirs and judge what action to take:

In the sequence we have been using for this example, Opener started the auction with a bid of 1Spade, Responder Jump raised to 3Spades…

Opener assumes that Responder has 8 Losers for that Jump bid, so now adds up their actual Losers to bid to the Right Level:

* Pass with 7 Losers: Responder’s 8 Losers + 7 = 15 = 3 level contract
* Bid Game with 6 Losers: Responder’s 8 Losers + 6 = 14 = 4 Level bid

*Note: with 4 or fewer Losers, Opener would want to consider making a Slam Try, but most hands with this few Losers would normally have been opened with a stronger bid than a simple 1Spade…*

**The Losing Trick Count**

**Bidding to the right level (3)**

Following on from the previous guide to Opener and Responder in how to use the Losing Trick Count approach as a means to improve their bidding judgement, we can look at a complete hand…

**Responder’s Hand (Example 3):**

**♠ K Q x (x)**

**♥ K x x**

**♦ x x**

**♣ x x x (x)**

We used the Losing Trick Count to decide this hand had 8 Losers and that we would raise an opening 1Spade bid by partner to 3Spades.

An Opening bid of 1Spade would be made with the following hand:

**Example 4 (Opener Hand):**

**♠ A x x (x) (x)** = **2 Losers**

**♥ Q x** = **1 Loser**

**♦ x x x (x) = 3 Losers**

**♣ A Q = 0 Losers**

Total = **6 Losers**

Hearing Responder Jump Raise to 3Spades, Opener can now use the Losing Trick Count approach to evaluate their hand. Adding Responder’s assumed 8 Losers to the 6 in Opener’s hand, suggests a bid of 4Spades.

Looking at the complete hand made up of Example hands 3 & 4, we can see that this is a reasonable contract and success will likely hinge on the position of the **♥A** or the **♣K**.

*Note: using a Point counting approach, responder with Example 3 hand would bid 2Spades, and Opener with Example hand 4 would PASS…*

**The Losing Trick Count**

**Summary Points**

The Losing Trick Count is an approach that can help you begin to evaluate your hand, using some other means than just high card Points…

The Losing Trick Count approach is not without flaws, but it does start you thinking in a way that helps you develop bidding judgement…

Judgement, when applied to bidding, in its many forms: if / when to bid a game; if / when to Pass; if / when to pre-empt; is one of the skills you will see in more experienced players and in their scores on travellers…

Some Losing Trick Count approach points to remember:

* It is not a ‘system’ merely a guide, once you have a suit fit it can be used as you feel appropriate
* The Losing Trick Count approach uses 18 as its ‘Magic Number’, take your Total losers from 18 and the result is the suggested level to bid to (Opener 7 Losers; Responder 7 Losers; Total = 14; 18-14 = 4level bid)
* There are a maximum of 3 losers per suit: long suit losers are often not losers because partner has shortage and can ruff them
* Aces, Kings and Queens are the most valuable honours to hold and for the Losing Trick Count approach, they do not count as Losers \*

*\* You need to apply common sense and caution when using the Losing Trick Count approach to side suits with Q x x or similar.*

*Q x x in a side suit, when partner has three or more rag cards, is unlikely to ever play for just 2 losers, and some texts advise you should count it as 2½ Losers: this caters for hands when partner does / does not have some help in the side suit*

**So there we are, The Losing Trick Count:**

**Give it a try and see what you think…**