

Competing for the Partscore

By Ron Klinger

PARTSCORE COMPETITIVE BIDDING

Jean-René Vernes' article 'The Law of Total Tricks' was published in June, 1969, in *The Bridge World*. It caused scarcely a ripple among bridge players until Larry Cohen's exposition of the 'Law' in *To Bid or Not To Bid* in 1992.

Vernes expressed his law as follows: ***The number of Total Tricks in a hand is approximately equal to the total number of trumps held by both sides, each in its respective suit.***

Thus, if N-S hold nine spades and E-W have nine hearts, the total number of trumps is 18. If you add the tricks made by N-S in a spade contract to those by E-W in hearts, the total should also be 18. The assumption is best play by both sides.

This does not mean that each side will make nine tricks, although that is quite likely if the points held by each side are roughly equal. The law is still satisfied if one side makes ten tricks and the other makes eight, since the total remains at 18. Even eleven tricks one way and seven the other validate the law, though such variance is unusual unless there is great disparity in the high card strength. The 1969 article estimated that the law exactly reflected the outcome about 50% of the time and was accurate within one trick about 90% of the time.

Knowledge of the law, its applications and its ramifications will enable you to judge competitive auctions more accurately and can improve our bidding style. It will tell you when to bid on, how high to bid and when to defend. This flipper shows how the Law works and how you can apply it.

It is not difficult to know the number of trumps held by your side. That is often enough to indicate your best move. Surprisingly, it is also not too hard to estimate the number of trumps held by the opponents.

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
No	No	?	

In this auction each side has at least 8 trumps.

When total trumps = 16, it is almost never right to sell out at the two-level.

East should compete to 3H regardless of strength. With 16 trumps, total tricks = 16. If each side can make 8 tricks, then passing 2S = -110 for E-W, while bidding 3H = -50 (or -100 if vulnerable). By bidding 3H, the loss for East-West is reduced.

PART-SCORE BATTLES

When the opposition bidding dies out at a low level, should you pass it out and defend or should you re-open the bidding? Consider these two auctions:

(a)	West	North	East	South
	1♦	No	1♠	No
	2♠	No	No	?

(b)	West	North	East	South
	1♦	No	1♠	No
	2♦	No	No	?

You should be eager to compete when the opponents bid and raise a suit to the 2-level and stop there. If their side has a trump fit, your side will also have a trump fit most of the time. If their bidding stopped at the 2-level, they do not have 25-26 points, probably not even 23-24 as they did not invite a game.

They usually have around 19-21 points and if that is the case your side has just as much. If the points are about evenly divided, and each side has a trump fit, each side can usually make eight tricks. If you pass, they make their contract. If you compete and drive them to the 3-level, they may fail. That is your reward.

In (a) they have a sure trump fit and South should be keen to bid. Make a delayed double, a delayed overcall, something to try to push them to the 3-level. In (b), they may have a trump fit, but this is far from certain. Be prepared to compete if you are short in their suit (use a takeout double), but pass and defend with 3+ cards in their suit.

West	North	East	South
1♥	No	2♥	No
No	?		

They have a known trump fit and the bidding has stopped at the 2-level. North should bid. North's choices are:

1. **The delayed overcall:** Expectancy is a poor 5+ suit. If it were a strong suit, North would have overcalled on the first round.
2. **The delayed double:** Short in their suit with 3+ cards in the unbid suits and below 12 HCP (else you could have made a first-round double).
3. **The delayed 2NT:** At least 4-4 in the minors. With 5-5 North might have bid 2NT first time. If the opponents push on to the 3-level after one of these delayed actions, do not bid again. Be satisfied that you have pushed them one higher. You now have a better chance of defeating them.

THE 3-OVER-2-LEVEL RULE

If the opponents have bid and raised a suit to the two-level, be eager to compete even if it takes you to the 3-level. In addition, if they have stopped in a suit at the 2-level and you have a singleton or void in their suit, compete with a takeout double.

THE 3-OVER-3 RULE

If the opponents have competed to the 3-level, choose to defend if your side has only eight trumps, but you may bid your suit above them at the 3-level if your side has at least nine trumps.

West	North	East	South
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠
3♥	?		

Either North or South should bid 3S if they know their side has nine trumps.

THE 4-OVER-3 RULE

If your side has only partscore values, do not compete to the 4-level.

West	North	East	South
1♦	1♠	2♦	2♠
3♦	3♠	?	

Neither East nor West should push on to 4D. You need 25-26 points to have a good chance for 4H or 4S. You need just as many points for a good chance at 4C or 4D. If your points suggest no more than a part-score, you will fail at the 4-level about 80% of the time. It is better to pass their contract at the 3-level and hope that you can beat it. Five tricks in defence are often easier than ten tricks as declarer.

West	North	East	South
1♠	No	?	

What action should East take with these cards?

EAST

♠ J 7 5 3 2
 ♥ 8 5
 ♦ J 8 7 4 3
 ♣ 6

THE RULE OF TEN

If you know your side has ten trumps, bid to game at once with a weak hand.

When your side has 10 trumps, the total trick count is at least 19. With 3 cards in your suit, they have 23 cards left. If they have two 7- card fits, the rest is a 9-

card fit. With only one 7-card fit, their remaining 16 cards will include either a 9+ fit or two 8-card fits. A double fit (two 8+ suits) is worth an extra trick and so one way or another, they can be taken for 9 trumps. If total trumps = 19, then total tricks = 19. In the problem above, East should jump to 4S despite the meagre point count. With 19 total tricks, if your side can make 10 tricks, 4S will be fine. If 4S makes only 9 tricks, then they can make 10 tricks in their suit, perhaps 4H. If their suit is clubs, maybe they can make 5C, or perhaps 5C is a good sacrifice for them when 4S is making your way.

If allowed to play in 4S, you will almost always be in front whether 4S makes or fails. *In competitive auctions, always bid to the trick level equal to the number of trumps held by your side.*

Practical approach: With 9 trumps, do not sell out below 9 tricks. With 10 trumps, be prepared to bid for 10 tricks, and so on. You will not always win but you will be right so often that the gains will far outweigh the losses. If you follow this approach, you will be protected by the Law. If you fail at your correct trick level, then your loss will usually be less than what they would have scored in their best contract.

EXERCISES

A.

West	North	East	South
1♥	No	2♥	No
No	?		

What action should North take with these hands?

1. ♠ 8 6 3 2 ♥ K 7 ♦ A 6 3 ♣ Q 9 8 5	2. ♠ J 9 7 6 3 ♥ J 6 2 ♦ K Q 8 ♣ 9	3. ♠ 4 2 ♥ 7 3 ♦ K 8 6 4 3 ♣ A J 6 2
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4. ♠ Q J 5 2 ♥ 4 ♦ Q 8 5 4 3 2 ♣ K 7	5. ♠ Q J 5 2 ♥ 7 4 ♦ 6 ♣ K J 8 5 3 2	6. ♠ A 7 2 ♥ K J 6 4 ♦ Q 7 3 ♣ 9 8 5
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B.

West	North	East	South
1♠	No	2♠	No
No	Double	No	?

What action should South take with these hands?

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

West	North	East	South
1♦	1♠	2♦	No
No	?		

What action should North take with these hands?

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

West	North	East	South
1♦	No	1♠	2♣
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What action should West take with these hands?

1. ♠ 7 4 3 2 ♥ K Q 8 ♦ A K 9 3 2 ♣ 2	2. ♠ J 7 4 ♥ K Q ♦ A J 7 6 3 2 ♣ J 3	3. ♠ 3 ♥ A 6 ♦ K Q 7 6 2 ♣ A 10 7 4 2
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