

Overview

Three different methods are normally available when you are trying to determine the total trick taking potential of the two hands.

1. High card points
2. “Adjusted” Modern Losing Trick Count
3. Cover Cards

The best method to use depends on the shape of your hand or partner’s hand. The method you chose will tell you the number of tricks you should be able to make and therefore how high you should bid.

Counting points works fairly well when you and your partner have balanced hands or semi-balanced hands without a fit. Since notrump is usually the contract of choice, using the point count method, the following guidelines apply:

- 3NT usually requires 26 points
- 6NT needs 34 points
- 7NT about 37 points

Holding the required number of high card points only gives you the highest probability of success in trying to make your contract. It helps to have a source of tricks (at least 4 or 5-card suit or suits). However, as we all know, there are no guarantees. One can construct a 30-point hand that cannot make 3NT (opponents have a source of tricks and quick entry) and a 21-point hand where 3NT rolls home (you have a long running suit and stoppers).

However, as soon as you discover a trump fit (or a double fit in two suits), stop counting points! Two other methods take precedence over the standard point count method.

1. “Adjusted” Modern Losing Trick Count method (Adjusted MLTC)
2. Cover Card method

Use the Adjusted MLTC method if you plan to play in partner’s long suit, you have trump support and useful ruffs. You also have a pretty good idea about the number of losers that are expected in partner’s hand (because the hand pattern is known).

Another advantage of the Adjusted MLTC method is that you can use it to evaluate your own hand even if your partner has never heard of it!

“Adjusted” MLTC takes into account and/or incorporates these trick producing features:

- Value of long trumps as well as a fit with partner in at least one suit (or a double fit in two suits)
- Advantages of shortness in a side suit (or two short suits in opposing hands). Both long trumps and shortness help reduce the number of losers. A singleton or a void in the hand with shorter or equal trump length creates extra tricks by ruffing losers.
- Automatically upgrades or downgrades high card points in your hand. Losing Trick Count may tell you that a 5-point hand is stronger than a 6-point hand, or a solid 10-point trump suit is about the same value as another 7-point trump suit.

Prefer the Cover Card method (fully explained in Part 2) either with trump support and no ruffing value, or when you have no trump support. It is also applicable to “Adjusted” Modern Losing Trick Count method but as a second verifier of how high to bid a particular hand.

When there is trump fit but the short trump hand does not have a singleton or void, the Cover Card method becomes superior. After finding a fit, count the number of cover cards in your hand that will take care of potential losers in partner’s hand and apply the cover card method.

Adjusted MLTC method

1. Each missing ace, king or queen is one losing trick unless it is a short suit
2. Count losing tricks (losers) in your hand
3. Make adjustment up or down
4. Estimate losing tricks (losers) in partner’s hand
5. Make adjustment up or down
6. Add the two losing trick counts together and subtract from 24 to get the # of tricks you can make. (Explain to the students why subtract from 24)

Pre-requisites

- You must have a known trump fit (4-4, 5-3, 6-3, 5-5; etc.) at least in one suit (or trump fit is strongly implied based on partner’s bidding)
- The total number of points can be somewhat lower than expected for a part score, game, small slam, or the grand slam but not lower by a lot.
- If the hand is too weak, you should make pre-emptive raise to the appropriate level. For example, partner opens 1♥, and you hold ♠AJ974, ♥Q87532, ♦7, ♣9. That is about as low as you can go and still make a game-forcing raise for hearts (Jacoby 2NT) especially because you would like to know if partner has spade shortness. Make the spade suit weaker, and a 4♣ Splinter makes more sense. Make it even weaker, a pre-emptive raise to 4♥ is best (more examples later).

Opening Bids

| Adjusted Losing Trick Count | Type of hand |
|------------------------------|---|
| 4-loser or stronger hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong 2♣ opening • Strong Jump Shift (SJS) by opening bidder (especially at the 3-level) |
| 5-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2NT opening is treated as a 5-loser hand • Jump re-bid of 2NT is treated as a 5-loser hand • Jump to game in responder's suit |
| 6-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong 1NT opening bid is treated as a 6-loser hand • Jump raise to 3-level by the opener |
| 7-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normal opening bid • Weak-2 bid (does not meet Rule of 22)* • Take-out double |
| 8-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak-2 bid (Meets Rule of 2 or 3)** |
| 9-loser hand (favorable VUL) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak-2 bid (Meets the Rule of 3, sometimes 4?)*** |

*Rule of 22: Add points, number of quick tricks and length in the two longest suits. If the total is greater than 22, open the bidding.

**Rule of 2, 3 and sometimes 4: When vulnerable, a preemptive bid that meets the "Rule of 2" is expected to be two tricks short of the contract with that suit as trumps. At equal or favorable vulnerability, the hand may be three or even four tricks short but then you must use Ogust Responses, which allow the responder to find out how bad partner's preempt is before deciding whether to bid game.

In other words, if your Weak-2 bid (or Weak-3) has a wide range, it will create problems for partner. Holding a strong hand, he will be unsure whether to try for game and in the process, force a 3-level contract. Be careful about opening with a Weak-2 bid that meets the Rule of 4 when you are not-vulnerable and opponents are. For example:

1. ♠QJ9753, ♥942, ♦87, ♣93 or
2. ♠K109864, ♥942, ♦87, ♣93 or
3. ♠AJ8764, ♥942, ♦87, ♣93.

After learning about Adjusted MLTC, I am going to ask you to forget about Rule of 17 (hope you have never heard about it!) and apply loser count method instead. It is a better measure of the trick taking potential of the combined hands when there is a fit.

Hand Evaluation Methods – Part 1

Responder's bids (This hand can subtract 1-½ losers if there is a 10-card fit and subtract ¾ losers if there is a 9-card fit. Refer to next page for other adjustments)

| Adjusted MLTC | Type of hand |
|---------------------------|---|
| 7-loser or stronger hands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Splinter • Splinter then 5-level bid (6 losers) or 4NT (5 losers) • Jacoby 2NT • 2-over-1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Then, invite slam with a 6-loser hand ○ Then, ask for key cards if a 5-loser hand ○ Then, make a Splinter bid (This will be a 3-card support Splinter since you did not make an immediate Splinter before 2-over-1 response) • Direct RKCB (5 or 4-loser hand) |
| 8-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit Raise – invite with 3 or 4 trumps • 1NT Forcing followed by a jump to 3M (3-card LR) • 1NT Forcing then Splinter (3-card support Splinter, presumably your hand went up in value) |
| 9 or 10-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple raise (Most 10-loser hands should be passed) • With 5-card support in a major, especially with a side suit singleton, jump to 4M |

Opener's re-bids

| Losing Trick Count* | Type of hand |
|---------------------|---|
| 7-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple raises • Repeat the same suit • Re-bid 1NT |
| 6-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jump Raise to 3-level • Jump in the suit that was opened |
| 5-loser hand | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jump to 4M • Jump re-bid of 2NT • Strong Jump Shift by Opener at the 3-level • Reverse • 4-level Splinter |
| 4-loser hands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the suit (or suits) have texture, the hand may be good enough for a Strong 2♣ opening. |

Commonly used adjustments

Very rarely do you see a hand with a “pure” losing trick count. All Modern Losing Trick Counts have to be adjusted up or down.

- a) Add $\frac{1}{2}$ a loser for every queen, in any suit, unless it is accompanied by an adjacent honor (J or K or A). In fact, queens and jacks in an ace less hand lose some of their face value.
- b) Subtract $\frac{3}{4}$ losers if you have 4-card support; subtract $1\frac{1}{2}$ losers if you have 5-card support not including the trump queen. Otherwise, it is a wash. The 10th trump acts like the trump queen; therefore if either hand has the queen, it is useless. Count zero points for it.
- c) Similarly, make sure to de-value a hand that has wasted values in partner’s trump suit. A hand with long trumps including two or three honors is not as useful as some of those points in other suits. For example, partner opens $1\spadesuit$ and you have $\spadesuit KQJ10x$. That $\spadesuit QJ$ is worth nothing!
- d) Add $\frac{1}{2}$ a loser in a side suit that lacks texture (no J's, 10's, 9's to go along with the honors). In other words, KQ is 1-loser but Kx is doubtful. AJ109x is 2 losers but Axxxx is not necessarily so. Kxxxx is definitely not the same as Axxxx in terms of loser count. Qxxxx is even worse.
- e) We can also delve into an up or down adjustment of a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a loser but that may be cutting it too fine for most people. Besides, there will be bridge judgment involved in any case when the total number of losers comes out to $14\frac{1}{2}$ when contemplating game or $12\frac{1}{2}$ losers when looking for a small slam or $11\frac{1}{2}$ for a grand slam.
- f) If you have a double-fit (in two suits), that is one less loser.
- g) During the class on “In and Out Evaluation”, we talked about the principle of concentration and texture. With excellent fillers in a suit, count $\frac{1}{2}$ fewer losers. Sometimes you can count one whole loser less in the combined hands when you also have a secondary fit with partner.
- h) When considering the grand slam, missing jacks in key suits are a definite concern. Having the jack to go along with aces and kings and queens gives you additional safety that is usually required to bid a grand slam in any denomination.

Additional Considerations

1. If responder shows a limit raise (LR) (an 8-loser hand) in support of Opener's suit, a normal opening bid (a 7-loser hand) does NOT produce game. The same is true of Drury responses. Limit Raise is an invitation to game but non-forcing. Opener needs extras (15 points or six losers) in order to accept the invitation. General rule is "Stretch to invite but have full values to accept the invitation"
2. If Responder has a 7-loser hand opposite an opening bid of one of a major, Responder can think about forcing to game. That could be a Splinter bid or Jacoby 2NT or a 2-over-1 response before showing support or a cue-bid if opponents have interfered and then bid again if warranted.
3. When you have 6 losers, partner needs to show "extras" (6 losers), before you can explore slam possibilities. For example, a strong NT opening is treated as a 6-loser hand. Opposite another 6-loser hand, slam is possible provided there is a trump fit (24 minus 6+6 losers = 12 tricks).
4. Lacking a trump fit, you need the required number of high card points or a source of tricks (long suit) and controls.
5. These complementary 6-loser hands are some of the most difficult hands to bid to a high percentage slam. We will cover some of the bidding nuances that are necessary for you to explore and bid these borderline slams.
6. Point count requirements can be lower when there is a fit and Adjusted MLTC is being used. For example, a limit raise normally requires 10-12 points but if you have a good fit (4 or 5 card support for partner) and 8-loser hand, 8 points may be enough to give partner a limit raise. Please note that there is a vast difference between a 5-4 fit and a 5-3 fit, even more so between a 4-3 fit and a 5-1 or 6-1 fit.
7. Game forcing Splinters can be made with fewer points when the hand has a source of tricks in a side suit (4-6, 4-5-3-1 or 4-5-4-0 distributions). For example, ♠10xxxx ♥void ♦KQJ10x ♣xxx is good enough to make a Splinter bid of 4♥ when partner opens 1♠. A bare minimum hand with three aces may produce 12 tricks!
8. If game or slam "at worst" needs a finesse to work, invite. In other words, if a "perfect minimum" will likely produce the game or slam, invite. If partner does not have a perfect minimum, she needs to be at the top of her range (consistent with all her previous bidding) to accept. Your invitation asked that same question, "Partner, do you have extra values?"
9. A 10-card fit has extra values. The 10th trump is the same as the trump queen (or two more points if you like to work with "points").
10. A huge trump fit and shortness is sheer power; it adds significant value to your hand. For example, if partner opens 1♠ and you hold: ♠Q987 ♥KQ1064 ♦643 ♣Void. Only 7 points but the loser-count is from optimistic 6 to pessimistic 7. No need to jump to 4♠ since ♥KQ1064 make it less likely that the opponents will out-bid you. With those 7 points, a 4♣ Splinter is more reasonable than Jacoby 2NT.
11. And remember, you can use MLTC even if partner knows nothing about it!