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This Week in Bridge

(58) Size of Trump Fit - *Law of Total Tricks*

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Level: 1

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General

There is much more to good hand evaluation than just the honors in our hand. Distribution, ruffing values, and fit are often the key to how well a hand plays. Thus, it is important for us to spend some time focusing on our trump tricks – not just our HCP.

Competitive auctions are the most difficult part of bidding. The HCP are often relatively evenly divided and make the decision about whether to play offense or defense challenging. To help us make these decisions about bidding (offense) or passing/doubling (defense), we need a guiding principle to help us make our decisions. This principle is called the *Law of Total Tricks* (LOTT.)

The *Law of Total Tricks* (LOTT)

Let's start out by saying that the *Law of Total Tricks* is poorly named. It is not a law at all! It is not always correct and will not work perfectly in any way. The *Law of Total Tricks* is much more of a principle – but unfortunately the *Principle of Total Tricks* was not chosen as its name!

Here is the *Simple Version of the Law of Total Tricks*: Compete to the size of your fit.

This means, in a competitive auction when we have a

- 8-card fit, we want to compete to the 8-trick level (2-level)
- 9-card fit, we want to compete to the 9-trick level (3-level)
- 10-card fit, we want to compete to the 10-trick level (4-level)

We bid in this fashion based on the idea that it is ok if we don't make our contract. The principle is that we will either make our bid or go down some small amount – and the opponents would have made a better score for themselves if we had allowed them to declare at a level lower.

The main idea is that when we have a large number of trump (large fit), this reduces our defense - the opponents will be ruffing in on our suit sooner. This large fit also increases our offensive ability: we will not lose as many trump tricks and we will be able to ruff in on the opponents' suit sooner.



Applying the *Law of Total Tricks*

The LOTT is used in many areas of the bidding. Some of these situations you are familiar with (or already doing) even if you are not aware of the LOTT. Here are a few of the most common applications that you are likely already familiar with:

- *Fundamentals of Preempts (Modern Style)* – Modern preempting uses the Law of Total Tricks all the time. Whenever partner preempts the bidding there is an expectation (guess) that partner will have two cards in our suit. Thus, we are bidding to the LOTT on our opening bid. If partner has more cards than expected, then they extend our preempt to an even higher level – applying the LOTT.
- *1M- 4M* -- This “Weak Freak” shows a 10-card fit and not a good hand. It is a simple application of the LOTT (10-card fit to the 10-trick level.) It bids to that level immediately!
- *Jumps in Competition* – The modern approach to these is to play them as weak. They immediately compete to the size of our fit and eat up the opponents’ valuable bidding space.

Problems with the LOTT

The LOTT is a guiding principle. It will get things right much of the time, but there will be many hands where following the principle will not work out for us. There are many books written on this subject and we will not go into all the details here. But we want to outline some of the issues with the LOTT and times that it will fail us. This way we will be able to keep an eye out for some of these issues:

- *Vulnerability* – When we are vulnerable, then down 2 can result in the death score (-200) and that is worse than if we let the opponents make 110, 120, 130, 140, or even 170. So we have to be a bit more careful when we are Vulnerable.
- *Doubles* – If the opponents double us and we go down then we can get even worse scores: -200, -300, -500, even more... This will certainly affect our expectation of getting a good board.
- *4333 Distribution* – When we have this horrible shape the LOTT is frequently wrong. We should adjust the LOTT down by a trick when we have such horrible distribution (no ruffing values!)
- *Jacks in Short Suits* – When we have honors like Jxx or Jx then the offensive values of our hand are frequently the same as if those suits were xxx or xx. (The Jacks are useless on offense.) But sometimes, they combine with partner’s holdings (like Qx or Qxx) to give us a trick on Defense. In this case, our points will be working for us on Defense and not on Offense. This situation often leads to the LOTT failing us as well. The LOTT works best when we have “convertible values.” These are tricks that work equally well on Offense and Defense.

Expert Hand Evaluation is an art form. Part of the art form is to know when to ignore the rules. One example of this Hand Evaluation is to know when to violate the LOTT. The situations above are some of the times to consider making adjustments to it.



Conclusion

Shape is about more than just our hand. It is about the way our hand fits with our partner's -- that results in fits, ruffing values, etc... The Law of Total Tricks is our guiding principle for how to apply this shape information in competitive auctions. We can see that the LOTT is not perfect, but it is winning bridge to push things to this level and put pressure on our opponents!