Losing Trick Count

by Neil Morgenstern

The losing trick count is a method of hand-evaluation. It is not an alternative to point-count, but is something that should be used along-side point-count and applies only in certain situations.

Note: losing trick count is not a system, but a way of judging which bid is the correct one to make within a system. It can be applied equally to Standard American style systems, Acol and strong club.

When to apply Losing Trick Count

This should be applied:

1.When raising partner with a view to bidding game or slam

2.When opening or overcalling pre-emptively.

Evaluating Losing Trick Count

Raw count:

•Only the first 3 cards count

•Top honors are ace, king and queen

•Count a loser for each top honor missing in the top 3 cards in the suit.

•Singleton kings and doubleton queens are losers.

Example:

AKxxx

Kxx

Jx

QJx

1 loser (only first 3 cards count)

2 losers

2 losers

2 losers

Total = 7 losers

Adjustments: It seems crazy to consider Qxx and AJT both as 2 losers. For reasons like this various adjustments have devised.

The simplest guidelines are as follows:

AJT(xx) = 1.5 losers

Qxx(xx) = 2.5 losers (but QTx and QJx are only 2 losers)

This will probably do for now, but if you want to make further adjustments, I recommend the following:

•Treat jacks in support of honors as a plus value (eg KJx), not including jacks already counted supporting lone queens.

•Treat Qx and JTx as 2 and 3 losers respectively, but a plus value.

•Treat KQx as one loser but a minus value (KQJ is 1 loser as is KQT)

•If you have 2 doubletons, treat that too as a minus value.

If you consider a plus value as -1/3 of a loser, you will now be working in sixths of losers, so you may well get bogged down by mathematics.

Unless you have a quick head for figures, don't let this happen to you - just use the adjusted count as I set out at the start, but bear these plus and minus values in hand if things don't seem right.

Applying the losing trick count

Now you know how many losers you hold, it is easy to apply when raising partner. The general rule is to add the number of losers in your hand to the number of losers in partner's hand, and subtract the total from 24. That will give you an idea of how many tricks you are likely to make.

So if opener has 6 losers and responder has 8, the total is 14. Subtracting this from 24 gives you ten, enough for game in a major suit.

Example:

AQxxx

Kxx

QTx

Ax

total:

losers

1

2

2

1

--

6

+

losers

2

1

2

3

--

8 = 14

Kxxx

Ax

Kxx

Txxx

These hands will probably produce 10-11 tricks depending on finding J onside and a 3-1 or 2-2 spade break.

Axxxx

QJxxx

Ax

x

2

2

1

1

2

1

2

3

Kxxx

Kx

Kxx

Txxx

Changing West's hand to one which is still 6 losers but fewer points and more distribution, we see there will still be 10 tricks available most of the time. Note there is only a total of 20 points in E/W's hands, so point count would suggest bidding game is over-bidding.

Bidding slams

If the losing trick count shows 12 or fewer losers, it suggests there is enough strength for a slam. You still however have to check for controls because it's no use having 12 tricks if the opponents can cash two first.

Counting losers in partner's hand

Of course you cannot see partner's hand, but you can evaluate how many losers he holds by his bidding.

This part is system-dependent. I will usually assume fairly standard natural methods.

Opening bids: Usually 7 losers or less. Occasionally 8 when weak balanced min. "Acol 2" strength is 4 losers or less. Precision club openings are usually 5 or fewer, so an opening bid of 1 of a suit is 6-7 (approx).

Responder raises one level: (1-2): 8.5 - 9.5

Responder raises limit raise: (1-3, or 1 (X) 2NT) 7.5 - 8

Opener raises partner's bid: (1-1-2): 6.5 - 7.5

Opener double-raises: (1-1-3): 5.5 - 6

Weak 2 openers: 7 - 8 losers

Simple overcalls: 6 - 8 losers. (Some players allow them stronger)

Jump overcalls at 2 level (weak): 7 - 8 losers

Jump overcalls at 3 level (weak): 6-7 or 7-8 according to vulnerability.

Cover cards:

When partner has made a pre-emptive bid and you have a strong hand with little trump support, it is better to count cover cards than losers in your own hand.

A cover-card is what you think will contribute a trick to the contract. So AQxx is 1.5 cover cards, KQxx is probably 1, QJx is likely to be worth nothing (unless in trumps). Qx in partner's suit is 1 cover card. So is a singleton queen, which could be priceless opposite KJTxxx in partner's hand.

Now you simply subtract the number of cover cards from partner's likely loser-count and you can estimate total losers. Subtract that from 13 to work out how many tricks you will make.

Example: Partner pre-empts 3 non-vulnerable (likely 7 losers)

You hold: Q AKxx xxxx Axxx

It might not seem much (13 points opposite a weak pre-empt, and only a singleton trump) but you're worth 4 (certainly not 3NT) with 4 cover cards. Unless you're unlucky enough to lose 3 diamonds and A, you'll make it.

However with x KQTx QJTx AQJx

You have 15 points, but not enough to advance. In fact you have 2.5 cover cards so you might not even make 3S. You do hope of course that the next player will decide to compete because you have a lot of defense to 4, something you can't say about the first hand.

When not to use losing trick count

Do not use this method when you haven't yet found a fit. For example if you have 5-5 in spades and diamonds, and partner has 5-5 in hearts and clubs, you will both have very few losers, but the hand is a misfit and could prove a disaster.

Similarly, it is not a guide to opening the bidding with distributional hands. Axxxx xx x Kxxxx is only 7 losers but is not an opening bid.

Another time when losing trick count is likely to be inappropriate is a 6-2 fit when opener is not weak. Here you can attempt to count cover-cards, but it is more difficult to know what is useful and what is not.

Questions and answers

Q: What happens if we seem to have 25 or more points, but the losing trick count suggests we should not be in game?

A: Perhaps you should look at making some adjustments as noted above. You may have a lot of uncounted values like doubleton queens. Also consider the possibility of playing in 3NT rather than in your major suit game.

Q: How does the losing trick count fit in with the law of total tricks?

A: The losing trick count is a guide of how many tricks our side can take. The law of total tricks is a guide of how many tricks are available to both us and the opponents if we let them play in their best suit.

When you raise partner's bid pre-emptively, it is not because you think you can necessarily make the contract, but you know it will be a good sacrifice if you can't. However you will sometimes want to bid game with fewer than 10 trumps because you have enough in high cards to suggest you can make it.

Q: Where can I learn more about the losing trick count?

A: For further reading, one of the best books on the subject is *Modern Losing Trick Count* by Ron Klinger.