



Play & Learn

BY PAT HARRINGTON ✉ ppharr@gmail.com

Losing trick count

Whatever point-count method we use, we must realize that our point total is only an estimation of the trick-taking value of our hand. How we value our hand might change as the auction progresses. Losing trick count (LTC) is a hand evaluation tool that can help you better judge the value of your hand.

LTC has nothing to do with counting losers, as declarer does when planning the play. It's used to evaluate your own 13-card hand. Here's how it works. Go through your hand, suit by suit, and count one loser for each missing ace, king or queen in that suit starting with the ace. No suit can have more than three losers; short suits will have fewer than three losers. With a singleton, count only a missing ace; with a doubleton, count only a missing ace or king.

Let's see how LTC works by examining some responding hands that might qualify for a limit raise of partner's 1♥ opening bid. Our first two hands are from last month's column.

① ♠64 ♥Q743 ♦K83 ♣A752

For the doubleton spade, count two losers for the missing ace and king. We don't worry about the missing queen because we have only two cards in the suit. Missing the ♥A and ♥K, there are two heart losers. With four-card or longer suits, assume partner will either have enough length to make your fourth card good or shortness and trumps for ruffing. The missing ♦A and ♦Q make two diamond losers, and the missing ♣K and ♣Q make two club losers. This hand has eight losers.

To give this number meaning, you need to know that a typical minimum opening hand has seven losers. The fewer losers a hand has, the stronger it is. Below is a chart showing expected LTC for minimum, medium and maximum categories:

Strength	Opener's hand	Responder's Hand
Minimum	13-15 points - 7 LTC	6-10 points - 9 or more LTC
Medium	16-18 points - 6 LTC	10+ to 12 points - 8 LTC
Maximum	19-21 points - 5 LTC	13+ points - 7 or fewer LTC
Strong Two Opening	22+ points - 4 or fewer LTC	

Using LTC is helpful when your hand is on the borderline between two categories; it can improve responder's judgment with a 10-point hand, which may fall into either the minimum or medium category. Hand 1 totals 10 points and, with an LTC of 8, can be treated as a limit raise to 3♥.

② ♠J64 ♥Q743 ♦K83 ♣A75

This hand also values to 10 points in support of hearts. Let's use LTC to decide whether it should be treated as a limit raise or a single raise. With three spade losers and two losers in every other suit, our LTC total is nine. This hand is best treated as a single raise to 2♥. Hands having 4-3-3-3 distribution generally produce fewer tricks than other distributions having the same high cards.

For the next two hands, partner again opens 1♥.

③ ♠AQ76 ♥K962 ♦54 ♣765

With 10 points and one spade loser,

two heart losers, two diamond losers and three club losers, Hand 3 comes to a total of eight losers, worth a limit raise to 3♥.

④ ♠Q63 ♥AJ72 ♦J65 ♣Q92

Hand 4 also comes to 10 points but

has nine losers (two spades, two hearts, three diamonds and two clubs) and is best treated as a single raise to 2♥.

A flaw in LTC is that it values an ace the same as it values a queen. Even beginning bridge players realize that A-x-x is better than Q-x-x. When using LTC, most players will make a downward adjustment in hands with an excess of queens over aces. This hand has one ace and two queens, all of which were not counted as losers. A good adjustment is to add half a loser for every excess queen that was not counted as a loser. We said this hand had nine losers, but with two queens and one ace, many would consider this hand to have an extra loser, reinforcing our choice to raise to 2♥.

LTC could be just what you need to improve your judgment. For more details, refer to Jennifer Jones's series starting in the December 2011 Bulletin. Past issues of the Bulletin are available to ACBL members at acbl.org.