

For The Advancing Player

Bidding Improvements By Using Losing Trick Count



By Maritha Pottenger

marithapottenger@gmail.com

Although the 4-3-2-1 HCP system works reasonably well for balanced hands, it has some shortcomings. It tends to undervalue Aces and overvalue Queens and Jacks. It also is not as accurate on highly distributional hands. Adding the Losing Trick Count system to your bidding toolkit—once you have found a fit—will help you get to good games and slams.

Losing Trick Count (LTC) has no more than 12 possible losers in each hand of bridge. You count one loser for each Ace, King, and Queen you are missing in each suit. You can have only one loser (if missing Ace) for a singleton suit. You can have no more than two losers (if missing Ace and King) for a doubleton suit. In LTC, both xxx and xxxxxx have only three losers.

Just a few examples to make sure you have the concept:

♠Ax ♥Kxxx ♦KQxxx ♣xx: 6 Loser hand—missing ♠K, ♥AQ, ♦A, ♣AK.

♠xxx ♥Kxxx ♦Qxx ♣Qxx: 9 Loser hand (but see caveat below about Queens)—missing ♠AKQ, ♥AQ, ♦AK, and ♣AK.

♠AK ♥KQxxxx ♦Ax ♣KQx: 3 Loser hand—missing ♥A, ♦K, ♣A.

Caveat about Queens: Qxx should be counted as 2½ or 3 losers, not just 2 losers. If you have the Jack or 10 to back up the Queen, count the suit as 2 losers, e.g., QJx(x) or Q10x(x). With the caveat, the second example above would have about 10 or 11 losers rather than just 9.

I am going to give you the overall theory of LTC, but afterwards I will give you the “smaller numbers” option that I feel is simpler. Remember, the brain likes smaller numbers better than large numbers. In LTC, a hand of bridge has 24 losers. If Opener and Responder add together the number of losers in each of their hands, and subtract that from 24, the answer will show how many tricks they are likely to take. Remember, **do not use LTC unless and until you have found a fit!!!**

So, if Opener has 7 losers and Responder has 9 losers, the total is 16. Subtract that from 24 and the answer is 8—the number of tricks you are expected to take. So, the two level is definitely high enough. Don't get overly ambitious. If Opener has 4 losers and Responder has 8 losers, the sum of the two hands is 12 losers. Subtract that from 24 and you have 12. So, slam is a possibility.

An average opening hand will have 7 or 8 losers. An average simple raise (partner opens 1♠ and you raise to 2♠) will have 9 losers, so the 2 level is high enough. An average limit raise (partner opens 1♠

and you bid 3♠ showing 10+ to 12 HCP and trump support) will have 8 losers, so the 3 level is usually safe, and you will sometimes make game. An average strong NT opener has 6 losers.

THE SMALLER NUMBERS OPTION

The smaller number option is to think in terms of how many of your losers Responder is likely to cover.

Expect Responder to cover 2 (occasionally 2½ or even 3) with a simple raise.

Expect Responder to cover 3 (occasionally 4) with a limit raise.

Once you find a fit with partner, go to LTC. If you have a regular 7-loser hand and partner makes a simple raise, pass. Partner is likely to cover 2 of your losers which means stopping at the 2 level is highly advisable. (Sometimes partner will cover 3 of your losers). If you have a 6 loser opening hand, you can make a game try. Use Help Suit or Kokish or whatever your preferred system is. If you have a 5-loser hand, just bid game. It is not guaranteed, but the vast majority of the time it works!!

Small Numbers Actions by Opening Hand with Simple Raise by Partner:

7 Loser Opening Hand: ♠KQxxx ♥Axx ♦Kxx ♣xx: Pass simple raise

6 Loser Opening Hand: ♠KQxxx ♥Axx ♦KQx ♣xx: Make game try opposite simple raise.

5 Loser Opening Hand: ♠KQxxx ♥Axx ♦KQxx ♣x: Bid game after simple raise by partner

Examples of Simple Raises

♠xxx ♥Kxxx ♦Axxx ♣xx: 9 losers

♠xxxx ♥KQx ♦QJx ♣xxx: 9 losers

♠Jxxx ♥QJxx ♦xx ♣Kxx: 9 losers

If partner gives you a limit raise, pass with an 8 loser opening hand. With a limit raise, partner will usually cover 3, but sometimes 4 of your losers. That means that game is a possibility if you have 7 losers. So, you have to make an executive decision in this case. How lucky do you feel? Do you know anything about your opposition? Sometimes you'll make game; sometimes you'll be down one. With a 6 Loser hand, bid game opposite any limit raise. With a 5 loser opening hand, bid game opposite ANY raise—simple or limit!

Small Numbers Action by Opener with Limit Raise by Partner:

8 Loser Opening Hand: Pass limit raise

7 Loser Opening Hand: Bid game if you feel lucky.

6 Loser Opening Hand: Bid game

5 Loser Opening Hand: Bid game

Examples of Limit Raises:

♠xxxx ♥Kxxx ♦AQx ♣xx: 8 losers

♠xxx ♥Kxx ♦Axx ♣KQxx: 8 losers

♠Axx ♥KQxx ♦xx ♣xxxx: 8 losers

There is another advantage to LTC. It allows you to make an “executive decision” about those “in-between” hands. Limit Raises are usually defined as 10+ to 12 HCP. However, some 9 HCP hands have three “cover cards”—cards that are likely to take away losers from Opener's hand. If a hand has 8 losers, I treat it as a limit raise, even with only 9 HCP, especially when I am looking at three good cover cards. If it has 9 losers, I treat it as a simple raise, even if it has 10 HCP. For example: ♠Jxx ♥Qxx ♦Kxxx ♣Axx has 10 HCP but is only worth a simple raise with 9 (or even 9½ losers since Queen has no backup).

You can view a handout that looks at HCP and LTC in other hands by clicking this [link](#). ♣