

# Should You Compete?

Using the “Law” of Total Tricks to  
improve your competitive bidding

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# The Law of Total Tricks

- The Law of Total Tricks (“the law”) is a way to estimate how high to go in competitive auctions
- It uses knowledge about how many cards you and your partner have in your suit, and how many the opponents have in theirs
- It is not used in deciding whether to bid game or slam, just whether to compete
- The law can be used with *any* bidding system

# The Law of Total Tricks – Theory

- In trump contracts, the length of the trump suit is very important, high cards less so
- More trumps = more tricks for you. More trumps for the opponents = more tricks for them. What's good for you (lots of cards in your suit) is also good for them (fewer cards in your suit means more in theirs).
- High cards are different: what's good for you (e.g., big cards, finesses onside) is bad for them and vice versa

# The Result:

## Total Trumps $\approx$ Total Tricks

- Add your cards and your partner's in your best trump suit; add to your opponents' cards in *their* best trump suit
- Add the tricks you're likely to win if your suit is trump, to the tricks they are likely to win if theirs is
- These two numbers tend to be about equal
- This tells us only the total tricks, *not which side will win how many*

# The Law: So What?

## (Easier Version)

- You know how many cards you have in your suit
- The bidding often tells you about how many partner has (or you can guess)
- In competition, it's usually good to bid as high as the total of your and your partner's trumps:
  - With an eight card fit, compete to the two level (eight tricks)
  - With nine cards, compete to the three level, etc.

# Things to be Careful About

- Your partner is there too; often (s)he knows better than you how high to go. The one who knows more, decides.
- The law works well only when the opponents are bidding (or probably will bid) a suit; against a likely no-trump contract, dial it back a bit.
- Other things take precedence:
  - If you're likely to make game, bid it!
  - If the penalty will obviously be worth it, double them instead!

# The Law: So What?

## (More Sophisticated Version)

- As before, estimate how many total cards you and your partner have in your suit
- Add that to how many the opponents sound like they have in their suit
  - You must consider what the opponents' bids mean
- Be willing to bid to that trick total (your last bid plus their last bid), or one more than the total (“overbidding the total by one”), but usually not farther

# Overbidding the Total – Example

- The auction: 1♥ (1♠) – 2♥ (2♠); your call.
- Suppose we hold five hearts. Partner promised three; that's eight.
- The overcaller showed a five card suit, and advancer's raise promised three. Eight more; total trumps (known) = 16.
- When advancer bid 2♠, the total bid was also 16: We had contracted for eight tricks in hearts, and they contracted for eight in spades.
- Our side should probably bid 3♥, to make the total 17 (one more than the trump total of 16). If we do, they should probably stop unless they have extra length.

# Why Overbid the Total by One?

- Consider the same eight hearts/eight spades example. What are the likely outcomes?
  - We make nine tricks; they make seven. Bid 3♥ = +140. Pass = +50 or +100. (Double = +100 or +200.)
  - We make eight tricks; they make eight. Bid 3♥ = -50 or -100 (-100 or -200 if doubled). Pass = -110.
  - We make seven tricks, they make nine. Bid 3♥ = -100 or -200 (-300 or -500 if doubled). Pass = -140.
- Bidding on is better than passing unless we are down two vulnerable, or are doubled (down one or vulnerable).

# Overbidding by One — Extreme Results

- Same eight hearts/eight spades example. What about less likely outcomes?
  - We make ten tricks; they make six. Bid 3♥ = +170. Pass = +100 or +200. Double = +300 or +500. Bid 4♥ = +420 or +620. Bid game or double!
  - We make six tricks; they make ten. Bid 3♥ = -150 or -300 (-500 or -800 if doubled). Pass = -170. Pass!
- Overbidding by one applies to decisions that are close. If you're making game, bid it. If the opponent do something silly, double them. And don't do anything silly yourself.

# Why Not Overbid the Total by Two?

- Same eight hearts/eight spades example, except we have bid 3♥. Should they now bid 3♠?
  - We make nine tricks; they make seven. Bid 3♠ = -100 or -200 (-300 or -500 if we double). Pass = -140.
  - We make eight tricks; they make eight. Bid 3♠ = -50 or -100 (-100 or -200 if we double). Pass = +50 or +100. (Double = +100 or +200.)
  - We make seven tricks, they make nine. Bid 3♠ = +140. Pass = +100 or +200. Double = +300 or +500.
- Passing is usually better than bidding. Bidding is awful when it turns a plus score into a minus; it *never* turns a minus into a plus. Doubling is often the best choice.

# When the Law Doesn't Work Well

- When the opponents are likely to end up in notrump, assume a “trump” total of seven for them. This usually means bidding more conservatively.
- Certain aspects of the deal may suggest that the trick total will be higher than the trump total, others that it will be lower.
- Adjustments to account for these things are the subject of the next lesson.

# Standard Bidding Often Gets Us There

- Preemptive raises to the three level usually promise nine card fits
- Preemptive raises to the four level (e.g., 1♠ – 4♠) are almost always ten card fits
- Weak preemptive openings tend to work, assuming partner has the expected number of cards:
  - A weak two is usually six cards; added to partner's expected  $2\frac{1}{3}$ , we are usually at the right level
  - Opening at the three level shows seven; add partner's expected two, and again the opening is at the right level

# Certain Bids Make it Harder

- When a bid “promises” certain length, partner will play you for it; this can turn out badly if you don’t have it:
  - Opening weak twos with five cards is OK (expected total =  $7\frac{2}{3}$ ) until partner raises (to the right level assuming you have six); doing it with seven is definitely underbidding (expected total = nine)
  - Bidding Michaels or unusual notrump with 5-4 makes it hard for partner to judge; so does opening four card majors in third seat
- Overcalling after 1 notrump is dangerous if you don’t find an eight card fit at the two level, or nine at the three level (but non-advanced opponents rarely double and often don’t compete well)

# Warning: Don't Turn the Page!

*The next pages show the deals we're about to play, so please don't look until you've played them*

Conditions for hands:

1. Dealer North, none vulnerable
2. Dealer North, both vulnerable
3. Dealer South, none vulnerable
4. Dealer West, none vulnerable

# Hands for Play — Hand 1

	<b>N</b> North	
	♠ K7	
	♥ AKQ73	
	♦ J5	
	♣ 9743	
<b>W</b> West		<b>E</b> East
♠ A8		♠ Q1032
♥ J62		♥ 109
♦ K843		♦ Q10976
♣ AQ106		♣ KJ
	<b>S</b> South	
	♠ J9654	
	♥ 854	
	♦ A2	
	♣ 852	

# Hands for Play — Hand 2

	<b>N</b> North	
	♠ 7432	
	♥ 7	
	♦ KJ103	
	♣ Q1064	
<b>W</b> West		<b>E</b> East
♠ 105		♠ Q
♥ KJ10965		♥ Q8432
♦ 7652		♦ A94
♣ 2		♣ J983
	<b>S</b> South	
	♠ AKJ986	
	♥ A	
	♦ Q8	
	♣ AK75	

# Hands for Play — Hand 3

	<b>N</b> North	
	♠ A102	
	♥ 84	
	♦ 102	
	♣ K109742	
<b>W</b> West		<b>E</b> East
♠ KQ976		♠ J543
♥ A105		♥ Q32
♦ K5		♦ J8643
♣ AJ6		♣ Q
	<b>S</b> South	
	♠ 8	
	♥ KJ976	
	♦ AQ97	
	♣ 853	

# Hands for Play — Hand 4

	<b>N</b> North	
	♠ Q865	
	♥ 732	
	♦ 54	
	♣ J732	
<b>W</b> West		<b>E</b> East
♠ A		♠ 9742
♥ A1065		♥ KJ84
♦ K10983		♦ A72
♣ A95		♣ 64
	<b>S</b> South	
	♠ KJ103	
	♥ Q9	
	♦ QJ6	
	♣ KQ108	

# Suggested Reading

- *To Bid or Not to Bid: The Law of Total Tricks* by Larry Cohen (the subject of lessons 3 and 4; there are many others but this remains the best)
- *Complete Book on Hand Evaluation in Contract Bridge* by Mike Lawrence (includes “in and out” valuation, which is relevant to both losing trick count and the law)
- This slide deck, and those from previous lessons is available on my website at [www.dougcoachman.com/bridgelessons](http://www.dougcoachman.com/bridgelessons)

# Coming in Future Lessons

- The “Law” of Total Tricks Part 2 — Adjustments to the law
- After that... tell me what you'd like to learn about!

# About this Presentation

- Prepared and presented by Doug Couchman
  - Doug operates his own tutoring business, specializing in graduate admission exams (LSAT, MCAT, GMAT, and GRE)
  - He has been involved in bridge since the late 90s:
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