

Should You Compete? (part 2)

Using the “Law” of Total Tricks in complex situations

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The Law of Total Tricks — Recap

- The Law of Total Tricks (“the law”) is a way to estimate how high to go in competitive auctions
- It uses estimates of how many cards you and your partner have in your suit, and of how many the opponents have in theirs
- It applies most directly to part score battles but can also be used for high level decisions

The Law of Total Tricks — Recap 2

- In general, total tricks \approx total trumps
- This applies when each side is in its best (usually longest) trump fit — when one side is bidding notrump, assume seven total trumps for them
- The rule says nothing about *who* will take the tricks, just what the sum will be

When does the law underestimate?

- Some factors indicate that the trick total will tend to be higher than the law suggests:
 - Double fits
 - “Pure” deals (minor honors in “our” suits only)
 - Voids
- When these factors are known, tend to bid more

How to adjust: Early in the auction

- In the first round or so of bidding, you may have little to go on, but be aware of positive and negative factors:
 - Bid more with a void
 - Bid more with “chunky” suits (those with minor honors) and less with aces and/or spaces. This matters most with preempts.
- Remember, this is for competitive purposes; don't ignore constructive decisions. Always look for any game or slam that might be good.

How to adjust: Late in the auction

- Always adjust your thinking as you learn more
 - Watch out for minor honors in suits the opponents seem to hold.
 - Watch for double fits — express and implied
 - Strangely, aces in your suits can be bad news: They are points the bad guys don't have, yet they're still bidding...
- The player with more information should usually decide. Don't make a decision in front of partner unless you are certain.

Double or Save — sometimes the law tells us we should double (maybe)

- In principle the law doesn't tell us anything about who can make what
- But sometimes the law tells us that *someone* has made a mistake (just not who)
- Especially at matchpoints, we may work out that we should double... even when we're not sure we can set them
- When the opponents have clearly overbid the law by more than one, double if you think you were going plus

Double or Save — Example

- Let's return to our familiar eight hearts/eight spades example from the previous lesson
- Recall that with sixteen trumps total, we (holding hearts) should bid 3♥ if necessary, but they (holding spades) should *not* bid 3♠
- But suppose they do bid 3♠. How should we decide what to do?

Double or Save — What matters?

- Were we wrong about how many trumps? (If probably yes, pass or bid more.)
- Were we making our contract? (If probably yes, tend to bid more or double)
 - If we were making 3♥, that would have been +140. At matchpoints, it is critical to “protect our plus”, often by doubling, to get back to even or better versus the field
 - If we were going down, it is “heads we win, tails we don’t lose” — we have lost nothing, and gain if both sides are going down
- At IMPs, double a partscore only when you are confident

Double or Save — Example Numbers

- We bid 3♥, which we think was making. They bid 3♠. We think there are sixteen trumps.
- If we were making nine tricks, that would have been +140. If we are right, the field will have lots of +140s our way.
- The law suggests that they will make seven tricks, for down 2.
 - If they are not vulnerable, +100 will be a fairly bad score (and +50 even worse). We must either bid on, or double and hope for down 2 (for +300). If there is an extra trick and they are down only one, we can't win.
- If they are vulnerable, +200 will be good, so maybe we don't need to double. But if there is an extra trick we need to double to get that +200.

Double or Save — Notrump Auctions

- When our side has bid notrump and they compete, we should often double or save if notrump had a decent chance to make:
- If they have eight trumps, the total is fifteen. That means they are safe at the two level if they have a fit. But...
 - If we have six of their trumps, we should usually either double or bid game. If they are down one, +50 will lose to those making 1 notrump, and +100 will lose if we were making +120.
 - If we have five or fewer trumps (meaning they have eight), they have probably found a good contract. If you can't double on power, you should usually compete (in a suit). If they have that good a fit you probably do too.
- At the three level, often double.

When They Sacrifice

- When our side has bid game (and expected to make it), we may have to decide what to do at the five level. The law can help, but you have to consider several things.
- Were you making your contract? If no, they have taken a bad sacrifice; double and take your profit (unless they might make it, in which case pass).
- Are you making at the five level? If not clearly yes, they may have taken a good sacrifice but there's nothing you can do but double and take your plus.
- The hardest questions come when you think there's a good chance you can make one more (let's say five of your major).

When they sacrifice — example

- We bid 4♠, and expected to make it. They bid 5♥, which is going down. We think we can make 5♠.
- Suppose there are 20 trumps: If we can make 5♠, they are down 2. If nonvulnerable versus vulnerable, double for +500 (versus +450). Otherwise, be willing to bid on if you are sure it will make.
- Now suppose there are only nineteen trumps. Now, us making 5♠ suggests they will be down 3. Doubling is better unless we are vulnerable and they are not, and then only if we make exactly eleven tricks.

The importance of what the field does

- The foregoing assumed the field is *bidding* the game our way. if not, we may have “won” the board just by bidding this high:
- Suppose we are not vulnerable. We were making +420 or +450 (we’re not sure), but the field is making lots of +170s and +200s. We were getting a top.
- Now the opponents sacrifice. They are going down one or two. (If more, the decision is probably easy.)
- +300 for down two doubled, or +200 for down one doubled if they are vulnerable, is worse than we were going to get *but is still a top*, and is safer.

At high levels, be careful about adjustments

- High level competition often involves double fits and voids, which increase the trick total. If in doubt, add a trick to the total, especially at IMPs.
- If the opponents appear to have bid too high, they may know something you don't. How experienced are they? How much respect do they have for you?
- On the other hand, sometimes honors in their suits make it clear that someone has overbid. Decide who, and pass or double.

Warning: Don't Turn the Page!

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

Conditions for hands:

1. Dealer North, both vulnerable
2. Dealer West, both vulnerable

Hands for Play — Hand 1

	N North	
	♠ K762	
	♥ J95	
	♦ QJ4	
	♣ K94	
W West		E East
♠ Q103		♠ J5
♥ A10764		♥ Q832
♦ A108		♦ K632
♣ J2		♣ Q65
	S South	
	♠ A984	
	♥ K	
	♦ 975	
	♣ A10873	

Hands for Play – Hand 2

	N North	
	♠ J1032	
	♥	
	♦ A9653	
	♣ J763	
W West		E East
♠ K87		♠ 5
♥ AJ32		♥ KQ10875
♦ KQJ872		♦ 104
♣		♣ K842
	S South	
	♠ AQ964	
	♥ 964	
	♦	
	♣ AQ1095	

Suggested Reading

- *To Bid or Not to Bid: The Law of Total Tricks* by Larry Cohen (This book covers lessons 3 and 4; there are many others but it 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.)
- These slide decks are available on my website at www.dougcoachman.com/bridgelessons. (No password required, just view or download them.)

Coming in Future Lessons

- Nothing specific planned, so tell me what you would like me to do.
- No definite schedule, but Wednesday mornings are likely (perhaps two per month).

About this Presentation

- Prepared and presented by Doug Couchman; copyright Doug Couchman 2019
 - 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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