

The Foundation System

Hand Evaluation

All point ranges in this summary describe high-card points only, with no adjustments for distribution. The examples assume typical hands with minimal distributional assets. This means 5332 for an opening bid of 1 in a major suit, 4432 for responder, and 4432 for opener in a sequence such as 1C/1H/2H (opponents assumed silent). Rather than adding or subtracting points for distributional assets and flaws to a specific hand's point total (which would make the 40 HCP total for all four hands a variable instead of a constant), these assets and flaws are used to adjust the HCP requirements for making a specific bid upward or downward. In effect, this means that the HCP requirement for game (typically 25-26 for 3NT, 23-24 for 4H or 4S, 27-28 for 5C or 5D) becomes a variable which is shifted downward or upward by distributional assets or flaws. In general, each asset reduces the HCP requirement for a specific bid by one point, while each flaw increases the HCP requirement by one point. **These are general suggestions and are best applied to relatively balanced hands, especially those where the most likely contract will be game or partscore in notrump.** For potential suit contracts, the Losing Trick Count will be much more useful. See its description on the next page.

ASSETS

Each extra trump beyond the normal expected length.

Length in a usable side suit (or singleton or void in unbid side suit).

Count one or the other of above, but not both.

Tens and nines in trump suit or usable side suit.

Queen or Jack in trump suit.

Queen or Jack in side suit bid by partner.

Queen in your own 4+ card side suit (whether bid or not) if suit headed by A or K.

Aces in unbid side suits.

Favorably placed honors in an opponent's suit in competitive auctions.

FLAWS

One less trump than the normal expected length.

4333 shape.

Singleton K, Q, or J, except in a side suit bid by partner.

Doubleton Q or J, except in a side suit bid by partner.

Unfavorably placed honors in an opponent's suit in competitive auctions.

LOSING TRICK COUNT

In evaluating potential suit contracts, none of the leading experts of the past 50 years has placed much emphasis on point count, with or without adding points for distributional values, to evaluate potential suit contracts. This includes Charles Goren, who first popularized the 4321 point count in the years following WWII. Instead, the experts have uniformly based their evaluations on three factors: winners, losers, and the favorable or unfavorable placement of their partnership's high cards as revealed by the auction as it evolves. The evaluation method which comes closest to matching the experts' approach while remaining simple enough for lesser mortals to understand, is the Losing Trick Count, which we will abbreviate as LTC.

- Several variations of a Losing Trick Count have been proposed, having varying degrees of complexity. The method I use and recommend is the simplest one, which I first encountered in George Rosenkranz's first book on his ROMEX system:
- For each suit of three cards or longer, count one loser for each missing A, K, or Q.
- For each doubleton, count one loser for each missing A or K.
- For each singleton, count one loser unless it is the A.

Consider these hands: (1) AJxxxx x KJxxx □x (2) AJxxx Qx KJx □xxx

Hand (1) has two losers in spades, one in hearts, two in diamonds, and one in clubs for a total of six, while hand (2) has two losers in spades, two in hearts, two in diamonds, and three in clubs for a total of nine.

A normal opening bid will have LTC = 7 or less, although a hand with LTC = 8 can be opened with 12 HCP, particularly if the opening bid is in a minor suit so that there is a chance of stopping at 1NT. With one solitary exception, you should never open with LTC = 9. The exception is a 4333 hand with three bare aces, which should be opened with 1C or 1D because of the value of the aces. After partner's response to his opening bid, a hand with LTC = 7 or more will not invite game and will not accept a game invitation. A hand with LTC = 6 will accept a game invitation or make a mild game invitation.; e.g., after 1H/P/2H/P by bidding 2S, 2N, 3C, 3D, or 3H. The meaning of these various game invitations is beyond the scope of the current document, but will be explained in a later document. A hand with LTC = 5 will jump to game if a fit has been found, or will make a strong forcing bid such as a reverse or a jump shift or a jump in NT. These interpretations will usually be correct even if a reasonably competent opening bidder has never heard of the Losing Trick Count. Responder (you, the reader!) should expect Opener's LTC to correspond to the above criteria, regardless of which method Opener is using to evaluate his hand.

How does Responder use his knowledge of Opener's LTC to evaluate the partnership's partscore, game, or slam prospects? There are two basic approaches. The simplest is to add his own LTC to Opener's presumed LTC. Since there are three possible losing tricks in each suit, each hand has a maximum possible LTC = 12, so the maximum LTC for the combined partnership is 24. If you subtract the sum of the partnership's actual LTCs from the maximum possible combined LTC, the difference is the number of winners. This sounds confusing, so consider the case of an opening bid facing an opening bid, which is usually considered to offer a good play for game. If each partner's LTC = 7, the total is 14, which when subtracted from 24 suggests that the

partnership should have 10 winners, enough for game in a major suit or NT, but not quite enough for game in a minor. I show this method only because it is part of LTC history. It is **not recommended** by anyone because it fails to take into account how well the two partnership hands fit together.

The second method, which I urge everyone to adopt, allows Responder to judge how well his hand will be able to contribute toward avoiding the losers revealed by Opener's LTC. Any suit Opener has bid will have at least three cards, and thus three potential LTCs. Any ace, king, or queen in a suit bid (naturally, not a cue bid) by Opener will thus eliminate one of Opener's LTCs. These are called cover cards because they cover (i.e., eliminate) one of Opener's LTCs. It is in evaluating his holdings in side suits (not bid naturally by Opener) that Responder must use discretion. An ace in a side suit will always cover one of Opener's LTCs, except in the rare case where Opener has a void in that suit, so any side suit ace can be counted as a cover card. Side suit kings and queens require judgment, since they could be facing a short suit in Opener's hand and thus not covering an LTC in that suit. Kings are not cover cards opposite a singleton (or void), and may not cover a loser opposite a small doubleton. Queens are not cover cards opposite any suit shorter than three cards, and are a doubtful cover card opposite xxx or even Jxx(x). If Opener has bid only one suit, he has ample room for two or three cards in side suits, so side suit kings can be counted as about three-fourths of a cover card and queens can be counted as half a cover card. If Opener has bid two suits, his chances of being short in at least one side suit are excellent, so side suit kings can only be counted as about half a cover card, and queens about a third of a cover card. These guidelines are only approximate; a lot depends on Opener's high card strength as well, since the stronger his hand, the more likely his side suits will have high cards which fit with Responder's side suit kings or queens. And of course as the auction progresses, Responder will be continually updating his cover card estimate as more information becomes available from Opener's rebids and any intervening bids by the opponents. Once Responder completes his cover card estimate, he can subtract his cover card total from Opener's presumed LTC. The result is an estimate of the number of tricks the partnership is likely to lose, **assuming that they have found a suitable trump fit.**

That last phrase deserves emphasis. The Losing Trick Count is useful only for potential suit contracts. For notrump contracts with two reasonably balanced hands, traditional evaluation based on high card points with corrections for assets and flaws is still the preferred approach, although notrump games with fewer than 24-26 HCP occur frequently when nine winners are available (because of a long running suit) and there is a stopper in each side suit.