Hand Evaluation and Loser Trick Count

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Point Count Hand Evaluation

Most of us learned the Point Count method for evaluating Bridge hands when we started playing the game. Formulated by Milton Work, popularized by Charles Goren and given a good summary with adjustments by Alfred Sheinwold we have

The Sheinwold Point Count System

Initial Hand Valuation	
high cards	A=4, K=3, Q=2, J=1
shortness	doubleton=1, singleton=2, void=3
no aces	-1
3 or 4 aces	worth more
Q or J	only worth full value when accompanied by an ace or king
singleton K or doubleton Q or J	not worth full value
Declarer's Hand Valuation	
5th card in trump suit	+1
6th card in trump suit	+3
7th card in trump suit	+5
Dummy's Hand Valuation	
4+ trumps and a doubleton	+1
4+ trumps and a singleton	+3
4+ trumps and a void	+5

Points Required for Important Contracts

Contract	Points Required
3NT	25
4 of Major	26
5 of Minor	29
Small slam	33
Grand slam	37

Often Bridge players only pay attention to the first 2 rows in the Initial Hand Evaluation Table and make few adjustments to the high-card plus distribution point count.

What is wrong or misleading about the Work/Goren/Sheinwold point count method of Hand Evaluation? It under-values Aces and 10's and over-values Q's and J's. It also does not fully value combinations like AJ10 or KJ10. And, Point Count often falls short on highly distributional hands.

Example 1 (A **variant of a hand constructed by Mike Lawrence)**

```
                        109876
                         98765432
                         -
                         -
        K                               Q
        AKQJ                            10
        AKQJ                            109
         AKQJ                            1098765432
                    AJ5432
                    -
                    8765432
                    -
```

North/South, with 5 high card points can easily make 7 spades while East/West, with 35 high card points, can only make 6 clubs. Even with all the point count adjustment methods that have been proposed, you cannot raise the North/South evaluation to much more than 20, far from the 37 needed for a Grand!

There is another method of hand evaluation that, when used in conjunction with Point Count methods, can be very useful for distributional hands with a trump fit.

LOSER COUNT METHODOLOGY

What Is It ? (*Overview*)

A method of evaluating the trick taking potential of a hand by estimating the combined losers in the opener and responder hands. *It is very helpful for reaching games and slams on distributional hands with good trump fits. It does not replace point count* **but does work better on hands where shape and fit are of more importance than HCP's when considering how high to bid. It is simple and worth adding to your bridge repertoire, even if you only use it as a "second opinion" of your hand's worth.**

When Should You Use It?

USE PRIMARILY WHEN THERE IS A TRUMP FIT OF AT LEAST 8 CARDS (PREFERABLY 9 OR MORE) BETWEEN THE TWO HANDS. THE SHORTER HAND GENERALLY HAS 3 OR MORE CARDS IN SUPPORT. YOU CAN ALSO USE IT TO DECIDE WHETHER TO OPEN MARGINAL HANDS.

How Do You Use It? (*Details*)

1. **There are *at most three losers in a suit* and *never more losers than you have cards in that suit*.**
2. **Count a loser for each of the highest 3 cards in a suit that are less than a Queen – *but for a doubleton count a loser for every card less than a King and for a singleton you always***

have just 1 loser unless the singleton is an Ace. A void suit has 0 losers.

3. **Add up all your losers to get your *Loser Trick Count (LTC).***

That's all there is to it to get your LTC!

Examples: **AKxx, Axx, Kxx, QJx** has 7 losers (1 in spades, 2 in hearts, 2 in diamonds and 2 in clubs. **K8765, 32, 43, KQ54** also has 7 losers (2 in spades, 2 in hearts, 2 in diamonds and 1 in clubs). **Axxxx, 109xx, x ,Kxx** has 8 losers (2 in spades, 3 in hearts, 1 in diamonds and 2 in clubs). **NOTE**: **All these examples assume a trump fit has been established of at least 8 cards** – *Otherwise Don't Use Loser Trick Count Methods!*

4. **Add your loser count to what partner has shown by her bid (details to follow) and *subtract from 18* to see what level you can bid to and have a reasonable chance of making. (Why 18? Because there are 24 maximum possible losers the way we are counting and therefore 24 – LTC = tricks you can expect to win. Subtract 6 for "Book" and you get the level you can bid up too based on LTC.)**
5. **If the *LTC* suggests slam possibilities,** *you still have to make sure you have adequate controls!*

How Can You Estimate The Combined *LTC* to Subtract From 18?

General rules of thumb apply to opening bids and responder bids - the Table below shows average or typical loser counts – **Use when there is a suit fit –for these hands it is often best to focus more on the loser count than the point count!** This Table has the key information needed to start using loser count– begin by learning the "arrows" as they will work for most hands.

Table for Estimating Partner's Loser Count (to add to your own and subtract from 18)

Counting Assumed Losers in Partner's Hand		Expected Losers
Opener shows (11 – 12)	(If you open this light)	8
→ Opener shows (13 – 15)	Normal opening range hand	(7)
→ Opener shows (16 – 17)	Invite after raise or jump raise partner	6
→ Opener shows (18 – 20)	Raise to game	(5 – 6)
Opener shows (20 – 22)		4 – 5
Opener shows (22+)		3 – 4
Weak Two Bid (6 – 9)		7 – 8
Preemptive 3-Level (Vul / Not Vul)		6 or 7
Preemptive 4-level (Vul / Not Vul)		5 or 6
Takeout doubler shows (less than 18)		7 – 6
Takeout doubler shows (18 – 20)		5 – 6
Takeout doubler shows (22+)		4
Simple Overcall		6 – 8
3-level overcall over preempt		6
4-level overcall over 3-level preempt		5
→ Responder shows (6 - 9)		(9)
→ Responder shows (10 - 12)		(8)
→ Responder shows (13+)		(7 or less)

Adjustments That Improve Accuracy

You will often do OK without any adjustments – but you can make the Loser Count Method more accurate with a few simple adjustments. Common sense says Axx usually has fewer losers than Qxx and this is the most important adjustment.

1. **Hands with Qxx(xx..) (or unprotected Queens –QJx or Q10x is protected) add .5 or even 1 loser.**
2. **AJ10 combinations – subtract .5 or 1 loser**
3. **Hand with 12 or more HCP and no ace : Add a loser**
4. **Hand with four aces or three aces and a king : Deduct a loser**
5. **Hand with ten or more combined trumps + ruffing values (singleton or void), i.e., a superfit : Deduct a loser.**
6. **Hands with a double fit: Deduct a loser**

Also, you can use Loser Count to help decide whether to open marginal hands – If 8 or more losers, don't open marginal 11 or 12 point hands.

Loser Count at Work Examples

Example 2. Partner opens 1H and you hold: **Axxxx, 109xx, x, QJx**. Your loser count is 8 so you are worth an invitational (limit) raise. Partner, holding **Kx, AQJxx, 10xxx, Kx** has only 6 losers and goes on to a makeable game few other pairs bid (high card point count is only 20!). If the heart finesse is on and trumps split, it makes 5!

Example 3

Say you hold
♠ **K86532**
♡ **4**
♢ **72**
♣ **A943**

And you bid 1S over partner's 1D opening. Partner bids 4S. Do you try for slam? Opener shows 5-6 losers and you have 7 without even deducting for a 10 card fit. So, yes – go on and check for aces! Partner has

♠ **AQ74**
♡ **J8**
◊ **AK843**
♣ **K5**

This is a 5 loser hand after you bid 1S, justifying the raise to 4S on only 17 high card points. A slam is almost certain to make even though the combined hands have only 24 high card points.

Example 4 I held: **QJ10843, Q10, 10, A1062 .** Partner opened 1D and over my 1S rebid 1NT. I then bid 3S and was passed there. Partner held the expected 13 point 7 loser hand (**K2, A84, K632, QJ98**). The KC was on-sides and after a heart lead and continuation I was able to discard the 10D on the AH and make 5S! Loser count says I have a 7 loser hand and at least an 8 card fit after partner rebid 1NT. So I should have rebid 4S, not 3S (even though I thought 3S was a slight overbid!). Less than ½ the field reached game.

Example 5 I held **KQ9842, A, 62, 9874.** Loser count is 6, even though only 9 high card points. So I opened 1S instead of 2S. Partner held **A4, 109763, AQ8, KQJ** and bid 2H. I rebid 2S and over partners 3C bid, I unhappily bid 3S. Partner then used Roman Blackwood and we arrived at 6S with 25 high card points between us. Partner also had a 6 loser count so the slam was justified by loser count evaluation. I won't claim it was a good percentage slam, but the KD was onsides, the 10C dropped and trump split! Here partner should have assumed I was possibly a 7 loser count and not tried for slam after showing a strong hand.

Example 6 On 10/13/2016, I held **A, 98, Q98762, AKQ3** and partner opened the bidding with 1D (guaranteeing at least a 4-card

suit). My loser count is 4 so I immediately determined that at least a small slam should make with good chances for a grand if we had all the aces and the K of diamonds and one other king. I did end up (after several opponent pre-emptive bids) in 7D making for a top. However, 6 out of 16 pairs did not reach a small slam. Using LTC, after partner opens *you know you have a slam* (unless off an ace and the king of trump).

On this same theme, on 11/2/2016 an opponent held **A9xx, Kx, AQxxx, Kx** and heard partner open 1D (partner held **KQ42, A752, K987, 6**. Again, you can use LTC to conclude you have a small slam, especially after the next hand pre-empts in clubs (making your KC look even more valuable), but only 3 out of 13 bid a slam!

Example 7 Go back and look at Example 1 again (where 7 spades made on a total of 5 high-card points between the 2 hands. North has a six loser count and South has a 5 loser count. LTC is 11 and 18 – 11 = 7 so LTC predicts a Grand is makeable if the opponents have no immediate trick to cash. Only LTC works well on this highly distributional hand.

How Accurate Is It?
Loser count probably won't work if too many finesses are off or there is a very bad trump split – but that's true of any evaluation method. What is surprising is how often it does work or even underestimates. A quoted figure is that it "works" 80% of the time.

LTC Summary

For **opening hands**, remember **"7", "6" and "5".** For **responding hands** remember **"9", "8" and "7".** If there is a fit, **calculate estimated *LTC* and subtract from 18 to see how high you can bid and expect to make.**

References: Klinger, "Modern Losing Trick Count" and The Bridge World, May 2003 (J. Koelman) – or just Google "Losing Trick Count" and see all the hits you get!