

September 14, 2013
November 7, 2015

The Law of Total Tricks

Consider this deal:

| | | |
|-------|-------|------|
| | N | |
| | 543 | |
| | 872 | |
| | AQ7 | |
| | KT97 | |
| W | | E |
| QT92 | | AKJ |
| AQJT6 | | K953 |
| 54 | | T863 |
| 65 | | 32 |
| | S | |
| | 876 | |
| | 4 | |
| | KJ92 | |
| | AQJ84 | |

How many tricks can NS take in clubs? How many tricks can EW take in hearts?
How many total trumps does NS and EW have in their respective best trump suit?
Note the interesting "coincidence".

| | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| | N | | N | |
| | KJ5 | | KJ5 | |
| | AQT8 | | AQT8 | |
| | QJT | | QJT | |
| | K42 | | K42 | |
| W | | E | W | E |
| 876 | | AQ32 | AQ32 | 876 |
| 543 | | K6 | K6 | 543 |
| 983 | | K42 | K42 | 983 |
| AQT6 | | J987 | J987 | AQT6 |
| | S | | S | |
| | T94 | | T94 | |
| | J972 | | J972 | |
| | A765 | | A765 | |
| | 53 | | 53 | |

How many tricks can NS make in hearts? How many tricks can EW make in clubs?
How many combined trumps do NS and EW have?
What happens if you switch the EW hands?

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The Law of Total Tricks (known as the LAW): The total number of tricks available on a deal is equal to the total number of trump cards both sides hold in their respective best suits, where the total number of tricks is defined as the sum of the number of tricks available to each side if they could choose trumps.

Two questions: Why do you care? Or said differently, how does one use this “law” to advantage in competitive situations?

General rule of thumb: bid to the level of the total number of trumps that you and partner have. So if you have an 8 card fit, bid to the two level and if you have a 9 card fit bid to the three level. If you have a 10 card fit, do you bid to the four level? Depends ☺.

Two more questions: During the bidding how do you determine the number of trumps you and partner hold in your best suit? During the bidding how do you determine the number of trumps that the opponents have in their best suit?

If the auction is 1S – 2C – 2S – 3C, how many spades does responder have? We don’t know but it is likely to be 3 or 4 (not 5, why?). Suppose the bidding continues: P - P to responder. How many spades does opener have? Why? Suppose responder now bids 3S. How many spades does responder have? Suppose responder passes out 3C. How many spades does responder have? On the other hand, in the above auction, suppose opener bids 3S rather than passing 3C. How many spades does opener have? Why? In either auction, can we tell how many clubs the opponents have in their combined hands?

Suppose you hold the following hand: JT_{xxx}, x, KQ_{xx}, _{xxx}. If partner overcalls 1S, what do you bid? Why?

The following conventions use the LAW:

1. Bergen raises
2. Preemptive raises in competition
3. Support doubles
4. Bergen Accepts after transfers

Let’s see why.

Preemptive raises in competition: If partner overcalls 1S and you hold QJT_x, JT, Q_{xxxx}, _{xx} what would you bid? Why? How many spades do you have between the two hands? And what does the LAW suggest that you should bid with that many spades between the hands?

Support Doubles: Suppose you open 1C, partner bids 1H, and an opponent bids 1S. What does double mean (if you are playing support doubles)? What does 2S mean (if you are playing support doubles)? What good does this do you?

Bergen raises is a convention that that shows 4 spades (or hearts) and a particular hand strength. In its usual form, 3C shows a constructive raise and 4 spades and 3D shows a limit raise and 4 spades. Note that it forces you to the 3 level but, that is OK, because according to the LAW, the 3 level is a “safe” level to be.