

ChRONicles of Cardplay

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The Law of Total Tricks

The Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) was first described in a 1967 book by French bridge author Jean-Rene Vernes. The theory was lost for many years, but rediscovered in the late 80's by Larry Cohen and Marty Bergen. They applied the concepts to their bidding and started winning everything in sight. In 1992, Larry Cohen wrote a book that took the bridge world by storm - "To Bid or Not to Bid – The LAW of Total Tricks" (ISBN 1-879582-03-1). In this book, Cohen explains the LOTT at some length and why it works.

So, what is the LAW of Total Tricks anyway?

There are several ways to explain LOTT. The "official" explanation is "When the high card points (HCP) are about evenly divided, the total number of tricks available on any particular deal is equal to the sum of the longest trump suits of the opposing sides." Huh? OK, let's assume your side has an 8-card spade fit and the opponents have a 9-card heart fit. There are 17 total tricks available on this hand (8+9=17). Evenly divided means approximately 17-23 HCP for each side. The spade holders rate to take 8 tricks in a spade contract and the heart holders rate to take 9 tricks in a heart contract. BUT THIS IS NOT GUARANTEED! Based on the lie of the cards, the spade holders may take 9 tricks and the heart holders take only 8 tricks. In fact, the spade holders may take 10 tricks and the heart holders only 7. Normally these different results occur because one or more key finesses either work or they don't resulting in a transfer of a trick from one side to the other. For example, if you have AQ opposite two small, if RHO holds the K, you get one trick in the suit and they get one. If LHO holds the K, you get two tricks. The number of tricks doesn't change, just who gets them changes.

The simplified version

A simplified way of stating LOTT is as follows: "It's safe to compete to the number of trumps your side has." So, if your side has a 9-card heart fit, you should bid 3 hearts and not let the opponent's play at the 2-level. Interestingly, whether you make it or not is irrelevant. Assume they have an 8-card spade fit and your side has a 9-card heart fit. Here's the scoring chart as to why LOTT works (the same kind of chart applies for higher level contracts):

Bid	Your Tricks	Their Tricks	Your result
2 spades by them	5	8	-110
	4	9	-140
3 hearts by you	8	5	-50 (NV) or -100 (VUL)
	9	4	+140
3 spades by them	4	9	-140
	5	8	+50 or +100

Notice that if you play at the 3-level, you always get a better result than letting them play at the 2-level! The exception is if you're vulnerable, AND they double AND they beat you one for minus 200, you'll get a poor result. Even then it's difficult for them to double you without a trump stack (remember, you have 9 trump and they only have 4 between them). They often take the push to the 3-level and go set one or cannot find a double. Even if they bid and make 3, you're no worse off and at least you gave yourself the chance for a positive score.

Does The Law of Total Tricks always work?

No. But all in all, the exceptions are rare and this is an excellent method to use when deciding to bid on or to pass or even to double. Here are the exceptions:

- 1) Sometimes there's one extra trick, sometimes one less than LOTT predicts. It works *most* of the time but not *all* of the time. It works often enough that it's clearly the percentage bid at the table.

- 2) The LOTT assumes double-dummy perfect declarer play and perfect defense. In practice, some hands cannot be defended perfectly and declarer makes a contract where he technically could be set based on very unusual defense unlikely to be found at the table. The same holds true for declarer play. For example, if you have to play for a singleton king offside to make the contract, LOTT assumes you do even though it's not the percentage play.
- 3) When both sides have a double fit, there's often 1, 2 or even 3 more tricks available than the LOTT predicts.
- 4) The LOTT tends to break down when there's a huge fit. Just because you have a 12-card fit doesn't mean you're making slam!
- 5) The LOTT does not work with notrump contracts.

Pre-empt

Interestingly, preempts are LOTT based. If you have a 6-card heart suit, there are 7 cards outstanding. Assuming they're evenly divided and partner has two, you're in an 8-card fit at the 2-level! If you open a 3-level preempt with 7 cards, there are 6 cards outstanding and partner rates to have two. You're in a 9-card fit at the 3-level! Traditionally, if partner opens a 5-card major and you have a poor hand with 5 cards in his major, you preemptively bid 4. Again, you have a 10-card fit. You're at the 4-level and whether it makes or not, you normally get a better duplicate result than letting them play in their trump suit.

How do I apply this theory at the table?

- 1) One way is to learn and use Bergen Raises. There are many variants and styles of Bergen Raises and it's beyond the scope of this article to go into them. Essentially, Bergen Raises get the partnership to the 3-level as fast as possible when you have a 9-card fit. You rate to make the contract (or go set less than the value of their contract) and bidding quickly to the 3-level puts pressure on the opponents. Note that not everyone likes and/or plays Bergen Raises.
- 2) Another application is to decide when to "take the push" to the 3-level.
 - a. If your side has a known 9-card fit, it's almost always right to bid on to the 3-level.
 - b. If your side has an 8-card fit, it's almost always wrong to bid 3 over 3 (unless you have a strong suspicion that the opponent's have a 9-card fit). You've gotten them to a level where you might beat them. Just let them play.
 - c. If the bidding has gone 1 heart – 1 spade – 2 hearts – 2 spades even with only an 8-card heart suit, you should bid 3 hearts as a sacrifice. You don't expect to make it, but going set 1 trick (or even 2 tricks non-vulnerable) gives away less than letting them make 2 or 3 playing in their suit. You do have to be careful when your side is vulnerable. Good opponents will double you to try for the magic 200 and a top.
- 3) Bid one more when you have a double fit. There are often more tricks available than LOTT predicts.
- 4) Don't be afraid to bid 3 over 2 as a sacrifice expecting to go set one trick. The LOTT is the basis for the old saw "Down one is good bridge."
- 5) Bid quickly to the 4-level with a 10-card fit and half the deck as a save/make.
- 6) When they've bid on to the 3-level vulnerable and you think they're in an 8-card fit with poorly lying cards, double to try for the magic +200.

Final word

Most top players over the years learned and used the LOTT empirically. Their experience at the table gave them the instinct to know when to compete and when not to compete. Larry Cohen's book codified the theory and made it understandable to players with lots less table time. The book is still in print and is a classic must-read for any serious duplicate bridge player. It's an easy read and you should get a copy, read it, and encourage all your serious partners to do the same.