



Law of Total Tricks (LOTT) Hand Evaluation Method

Many of you have heard of THE LAW OF TOTAL TRICKS (aka LOTT or simply the Law). Here is an introduction to this way of evaluating your hand.

Note that what is being addressed here is SUIT CONTRACTS and most typically in competition.

To introduce The Law of Total Tricks (LOTT), we start with Larry Cohen's definition from his book "To Bid or Not to Bid".

"The LAW of TOTAL TRICKS states:

The Total Number of Tricks available on any deal is equal to the Total Number of Trumps.

Total Number of Tricks means the combined Total Tricks available to both sides (assuming best play and defense) if they play in their best (longest) fit. For example, if North-South can take ten tricks in their 5-4 (longest) spade fit, and East-West can take seven tricks in their 4-4 (longest) diamond fit, then the Total Number of Tricks would be 10+7, or 17.

Total Number of Trumps means the combined total of cards in both sides' best trump fit. For example, if North-South's best (longest) fit is a 5-4 spade fit, and East-West's best (longest) fit is a 4-4 diamond fit, then the Total Number of Trumps would be 9+9, or 18."

The LAW states that it is safe to contract for the same number of tricks as the number of trumps in the best (longest) fit. This is in the context of a competitive (or potentially competitive auction) in which the values are approximately split between the two sides. Thus with an 8-card trump fit you should normally bid to the 2-level. Bid to the 3-level with a 9-card fit.

Like any other bidding method, there is a basic principle and therefore judgment factors. These are called ADJUSTMENTS, including suit texture, honors held in opponent's bid suit which downgrade your hand), distribution and double fits (i.e. 5-4 spade fit and 4/4 diamond fit which enhance the hand).

The LAW does not state that you can expect to make the contract.

However, if you are going down in your contract, then the opponents usually can make more their way than they can by doubling and setting you.

So what does all this mean to you as you sit at the table and hear partner open one heart and you are sitting there with five hearts? It means that regardless of your values it usually is safe to bid to the 4-level.

Generally speaking (as adjustments previously mentioned are made which can increase or decrease the value of your hand) your side will make the same number of tricks as your trump fit. Therefore in a competitive part-score auction, bid to the same number of tricks as your side has trumps. Thus with an 8-card trump fit you should bid to the 2-level;

with a 9-card fit you should bid to the 3-level.

Consider this hand:

NORTH

S Q6

H KQ54

D T972

C KJ2

WEST EAST

S K9832 S AT94

H A9 H T832

D J5 D Q3

C Q854 C AT73

SOUTH

S J75

H J76

D AK864

C 96

North-South have 9 diamonds and East-West 8 spades. N-S will lose two spades, one heart and one club to make 9 tricks. E-W will lose one spade, one heart, two diamonds and one club for 8 tricks. The total number of trumps between the two sides is 17 and that is also the total number of tricks.

A key to using the Law is to reliably estimate how many trumps each side holds. By listening to the bidding and applying the Law, you will be more successful in deciding when to compete, when to double, when to pass.

For example, as North you open one heart and East overcalls one spade.

Partner raises to two hearts and West competes to two spades. From the bidding thus far, we can assume a minimum of an 8-card fit for both sides for a total of 16 trumps. According to the Law, this translates to an expectation of 16 total tricks. If the HCP are evenly divided, and there is no extreme distribution, then the opponents seem likely to make their two spade contract. Should your side compete to the three level? According to the Law, the answer depends on whether you or your partner has at least one extra trump. Whichever partner has an extra trump is expected to bid three hearts. This is not a game invite. It is just competing to the maximum level of safety. What if neither partner has an extra heart? Then the Law suggests that you should let them play two spades, because the three level is not safe for your side. The chances of being doubled and going down 2 or more (or doubled down 1 if your side is vulnerable) are too high to justify the risk of competing.

For a vivid look at the Law, Cohen provides a hand from the 1986 Rosenblum Teams in Miami. As South you hold:

S K974

H 82

D 8652

C 432

and the auction goes Pass by you, 1D by West, 1S by partner and double (a negative double) by East. What is your bid? With a mere 3 HCP, Zia bid 3S and partner went on to an easy four spade game while another world champion bid two spades, missing game. Here is the full deal:

NORTH

S AJT63

H K93

D void

C AQJT9

WEST EAST

S Q S 852

H QJT5 H A764

D KQT974 D AJ3

C K6 C 873

SOUTH

S K974

H 82

D 8652

C 432

Here Zia bid to the level of the combined trump total with his three spade bid and partner, with a void in West's suit and two good five-card suits, went on to game opposite a 3 HCP hand! Note that N-S have 9 spades and and E-W have have 9 diamonds so that there are 18 total trumps. N-S lose 2 hearts for eleven tricks. E-W lose one spade and two clubs for 10 tricks. There are 21 total tricks. This is because of adjustments due to the void and double fit of spades and clubs for N/S and diamonds and hearts for E-W.

Partner opens one spade. Next hands bids two clubs.

What is your response?

a) S: A943 H: J8 D: K752 C: 872

b) S: 964 H: K7 D: 7652 C: K843

c) S: K652 H: 5 D: Q9653 C: 872

d) S: A832 H: Q74 D: K52 C: J72

e) S: JT93 H: 4 D: JT8752 C: 72

a) Bid 2S, planning to compete to 3S if necessary. You have 8 points and 4-card support.

b) Bid 2S, planning not to compete further. You have 6 points and 3-card support.

c) Bid 3S if your partnership agreement is preemptive jump raises in competition. If playing SAYC, then bid 2S, planning to compete to 3S because of your 4-card support.

d) Bid 2S, planning to compete to 3S. Despite the 10 HCP, you have "square" shape, so this hand is not worth a game invite.

e) Pass in standard methods, planning to compete to 3S later, or bid 3S if playing preemptive jump raises in competition. Raise with only a 2 count? Yes, you have an effective 6 points and 4-card support. And you've only left them the 4-level in which to find their possible heart fit.

Principle: "In a competitive auction bid to the same level as your side's number of trumps." I recommend Cohen's "Introduction To the Law".

Note please that these are indeed not your typical SAYC bids. Thus if you choose to pursue the use of the Law of Total Tricks, you will need to discuss this with your partner. The non-SAYC bids are alertable and must be marked on your convention card under the sections for major and minor suit opening bids "Jump Raise in Comp".