

Bridge Today University and Bridgetoday.com present:
Competitive Bidding and the Law with Larry Cohen

Lesson 1: Introducing the LAW!

SAMPLE
First 6 pages of 14 pages

Many years ago Frenchman Jean Rene Vernes came up with a brilliant idea. It's taken a quarter of a century, but his idea is finally getting the worldwide attention it deserves.

Mr. Vernes discovered the Law of Total Tricks. What he realized is that most bridge deals are very predictable. You can determine how many tricks can be won by simply knowing how many trumps each side has. Sounds too simplistic, but it is an amazingly accurate guideline. Being aware of this guideline will improve everyone's bridge game!

In this series of lessons I will be writing about bidding decisions in competitive auctions. We will look at the problems from a Law of Total Tricks point of view, and examine some of the theories and materials set out by Mr. Vernes, and further developed by Marty Bergen.

In today's bridge world, you'll find your opponents are getting more and more pesky. They always seem to be in your auctions! If you are not already intimately familiar with the LAW, I urge you to learn it – you have to have some way to fight back against the opponent's incessant interference.

There is one huge benefit of taking these lessons via the Internet, as opposed to reading them in a magazine or a book. You can ask questions! Yes – if you are stuck and don't understand something, simply e-mail l@larryco.com and I'll help you out. All I ask is your patience in waiting for a response. Sometimes it will come within 24 hours, maybe even one hour. But other times I'll be at a bridge tournament and it may take up to 10 days to two weeks.

Let's start our first lesson by defining the "LAW" so that you can apply your Total Tricks knowledge to all competitive auctions. Many of you, no doubt, have already heard of the LAW of Total Tricks. Also, some of you have seen the "definition" that follows. Sometimes people are scared off by this definition, and never get

any further. It's not as bad as it looks. And...If you can fully master and understand this definition, you are on your way.

You know how students always ask, "Is it going to be on the test?" Well, this definition will be on every test for all 11 weeks. You simply must understand it to continue for the next 10 lessons. So, I beg and plead that you read it 100 times if necessary, follow the example(s), and then go from there.

Enough with the warnings...here it goes:

DEFINITION: On most bridge deals, the Total Number of Tricks available to both sides will approximately equal the Total Number of Trumps.

Let me illustrate. If North-South's longest fit is 8 cards, and East-West's longest fit is 9 cards, then there are 17 trumps (8+9), so we'd expect approximately 17 Total Tricks. Sounds like a mouthful, but look at this deal:

Q J 8 2																				
K Q 10 9																				
A 3 2																				
8 6																				
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Now, remember what the LAW says: If North-South's longest fit (hearts, in the diagram) is 8 cards, and East-West's longest fit is 9 cards (clubs in the diagram), then there will be approximately 17 Total Tricks. What do we mean by 17 Total Tricks? How would North-South do in hearts? They'd make 10 tricks (losing only two club tricks and the spade ace). How would East-West do in clubs? They'd make 7 tricks (losing two tricks each in spades, hearts, and diamonds). Add the 10 for North-South to the 7 for East-West to get 17 Total Tricks.

By being aware of this little formula, we can make accurate bidding decisions. It will take a few lessons before you have the full

hang of it, but if you try all the examples and quizzes you should pick it up with ease. For now, you might want to try quiz questions 5 and 6 at the end of this lesson to make sure you can look at a full deal and determine the number of trumps and tricks.

How does any of this help us in the bidding? The Law tells us (take my word for it for now) that we should strive to bid to the level of the number of trumps that our side has. We should be striving to bid to the three level with 9 trumps; with 8 trumps the two level is our goal. Following this little rule blindly will produce very good results. We'll eventually see how to fine-tune it a bit, but try to keep this rule of bidding to the proper LAW level in mind.

Understanding this simple LAW, and learning how to apply it, will bring your decision making to a much higher level. Sure, there are some modifications to learn, but those will be discussed as we look at problems over the next few lessons.

Let's look at an easy, everyday type of situation:

Your partner opens the bidding with one spade, which you raise to two spades holding

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Q 5 2
K 4 2
K 8 7 4
J 3 2

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Both sides are vulnerable, you're playing IMPs, and your LHO overcalls 3H, which is passed back to you. The auction has gone :

Partner	LHO	You	RHO
1S	Pass	2S	3H
Pass	Pass	?	

Are you at all tempted to bid 3S with your 9 HCP? If the answer is no, then your bridge instincts on this hand were quite good. If you are a three-spade bidder, then the LAW of Total Tricks is something that will definitely help.

How do we use the LAW for this kind of decision? The simplest (sometimes too simple!) way is to say to ourselves, "Eight trumps - two level. Don't go to the three level when the opponents are already on the three level in a competitive auction without our partnership holding nine trumps." How do we know that we don't have

nine trumps? Because if partner had six spades, he should have bid three spades knowing that our side had nine.

A slightly more complicated way to use the LAW is to think along the following lines. We have eight spades. The opponents probably have no more than eight hearts (after all, partner might have bid three spades if he had a singleton heart). We have eight, and they have eight for a total of 16 trumps. This means that the deal probably will yield only 16 tricks. In other words, if they can make three hearts, we'd be down 2 in three spades. More likely, they are going down one in three hearts, and we'd be going down one in three spades.

Does this seem confusing? All we did was add 8+8, and then do some simple reasoning.

It's the kind of reasoning that is worth learning how to do. We'll do more of this kind of reasoning in later lessons. Just to get away from the math for a moment, let's look at what the full deal in the above example might look like:

Q 5 2																		
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K 8 7 4																		
J 3 2																		
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		9 7																
		A 5 3																
		A Q 4																

As you can see, N-S have eight spades and E-W have eight hearts, for a total of 16 trumps. You can also see, that each side will take eight tricks. (N-S take four spades, and two tricks in each minor. E-W take six heart tricks, and one in each black suit.)

Notice partner's (South) hand. Pretend that we took away one of his small diamonds and moved it into the spade suit, giving him a six-card suit so that he'd hold:

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K J 10 9 6 3
9 7
A 3
A Q 4

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and the full deal would look like:

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Q 5 2
K 4 2
K 8 7 4
J 3 2

7 4
10 3
Q 10 9 6 5
K 9 7 6

      N
     W E
      S

A 8
A Q J 8 6 5
J 2
10 8 5

K J 10 9 6 3
9 7
A 3
A Q 4

```

Now, count the trumps and tricks. North-South have 9 spades and East-West have 8 hearts for a total of 17 trumps. How do North-South fare in a spade contract? They'd take one more trick than in the original diagram (no more diamond loser). North-South would have 9 tricks and East-West would still have 8 against best defense. Notice how that extra trump translated into an extra trick. In fact, if South had that sixth spade he would have followed the LAW and bid three spades, knowing that his side had nine trumps.

Just a quick aside. Many students get confused when I say "with nine trumps go to the three level." This advice is good, but please, please, note that if you have enough strength for game, then don't worry about the LAW. In other words, if your side has the required 25 or 26 points (counting distribution) for game, then just bid it!

I once had a student who had a five-card spade suit and a 19-count. He opened one spade, his partner gave him a limit raise to three spades (showing four-card support) and my student passed because his side had only 9 trumps. Please don't get confused!

One other little point that I'd expect a student to raise his hand and ask: What if your side has two long fits of equal length? No problem - if there is a tie (for example, two eight-card fits) then simply use "eight" as the number of trumps. We'll see in a

later lesson that the possession of two good fits often has a slight influence on the LAW.

Think how many times you're faced with this auction:

You	LHO	Part	RHO
1H	2C	2H	3C
?			

Suppose you hold one of the following hands:

1) A 8 Q J 6 4 3 K 4 2 K 5 4

or

2) 7 2 K Q 9 8 5 4 A Q J 9 5

Now your only decision is whether to compete to three hearts or pass their three clubs. What should you do?

Partner has promised three hearts for his raise to 2H. In hand #1, you have five hearts, so your side has a total of eight trumps.

Now ask yourself if your side's trumps are equal to the number of tricks needed to make your bid. If you bid 3H, you would need to make nine tricks. You don't have enough trumps, so you pass and try for five tricks on defense.

With the second hand you are sure that your side has nine trumps. Therefore, it is correct for you to contract for nine tricks. Bid 3H.

Do you know that you will make 3H with hand #2? Of course not. You do not know whether partner has a lousy six-count or a good nine or ten. In addition, who could know how your finesses will fare? However, it is clear that your sixth heart will only be an asset if hearts are trump.

One major piece of advice that the LAW of Total tricks tells us is:

YOU ARE SAFE IN COMPETING TO THE TRICK LEVEL EQUAL TO YOUR PARTNERSHIP'S NUMBER OF TRUMPS.

AVOID COMPETING BEYOND YOUR SAFETY LEVEL.