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This Week in Bridge

(333) Size of Trump Fit - *Law of Total Tricks*

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Level: 1

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General

There is much more to good hand evaluation than just the number of honor cards in our hand. Distribution, ruffing values, and fit are often the key to how many tricks we can take. Thus, it is important for us to spend some time focusing on our trump tricks, not just our HCP. This is particularly true in a competitive auction (the most difficult part of bidding) where we may not have a plethora of HCP. In a competitive auction where the HCP are relatively evenly divided, we often must decide whether we should play offense or defense. This can be a difficult decision. To help us make these competitive bidding decisions about bidding higher (playing offense) or passing/doubling (playing defense), we need a guiding principle to help us make our decisions. This principle is called the *Law of Total Tricks* (LOTT). Let's see how this principle helps us make better competitive bidding decisions and evaluate the nature of our hand.

The *Law of Total Tricks* (LOTT)

Let's start out by saying that the *Law of Total Tricks* is poorly named. It is not a law at all! It is not always correct and will not work perfectly. The *Law of Total Tricks* is much more of a principle – but unfortunately the Principle of Total Tricks was not chosen as its name!

Here is the simple version of the *Law of Total Tricks*: *Compete to the size of your fit!*

This means, in a competitive auction when we have an:

- 8-card fit, we compete to the 8-trick level (2-level)
- 9-card fit, we compete to the 9-trick level (3-level)
- 10-card fit, we compete to the 10-trick level (4-level)

We bid in this fashion based on the idea that it is ok if we don't make our contract. The principle is that we will either make our bid or go down some small amount – and the opponents would have made a better score for themselves if we had allowed them to declare a level lower.



The main idea is that when we have a large number of trump (large fit), this reduces our defense - the opponents will be ruffing the winners in our long suit sooner. This large fit also increases our offensive capability. We will not lose as many trump tricks (missing cards like the Queen and Jack are less likely to be a problem when we have a large fit) and we will be able to do more ruffing (even after we draw trump, we will have some trump remaining to us to ruff our losers.)

Applying the Law of Total Tricks

The LOTT is used in many areas of the bidding. We may already be using these ideas, even if we are not aware of the LOTT. Here are a few of the most common applications that we are likely already familiar with:

- *Fundamentals of Preempts (Modern Style)* – Modern preempting uses the Law of Total Tricks all the time. Whenever partner preempts the bidding, there is an expectation (guess) that partner will have two cards in our suit. Thus, we are bidding to the LOTT on our opening bid. If partner has more cards than expected, then they extend our preempt to an even higher level – applying the LOTT.
- *1M- 4M* -- This “weak freak” shows a 10-card fit and not a good hand. It is a simple application of the LOTT (10-card fit to the 10-trick level.) We bid to that level immediately!
- *Jumps in Competition* – The modern approach to these bids is to play them as weak. They immediately compete to the size of our fit and eat up the opponents’ valuable bidding space.

Problems with the LOTT

The LOTT is a guiding principle. It will help us get the bidding right much of the time, but there will be many hands where following the principle will not work out for us. There are many books written on this subject and we will not go into all the details here, but we want to outline some of the issues with the LOTT and times that it will fail us. This way we will be able to keep an eye out for some of these issues and know to make an adjustment to our bidding and not blindly follow the law:

- *Vulnerability* – When we are vulnerable, going down 2 can result in the “death score” (-200) and that is worse than if we let the opponents make 110, 120, 130, 140, or even 170. So we have to be a bit more careful when we are vulnerable.
- *Doubles* – If the opponents double us, especially on a partscore deal, and we go down, then we can get even worse scores than if we had chosen to defend: -200, -300, -500, even more...
- *4333 Distribution* – When we have this horrible shape, the LOTT is frequently wrong. We should adjust the LOTT down by a trick when we have horrible distribution (no ruffing values, 5332, etc.)
- *Jacks in Short Suits* – When we have honors like Jxx or Jx, the offensive values of our hand are frequently the same as if those suits were xxx or xx (Jacks are often useless on offense.) But sometimes, they combine with partner’s holdings (like Qx or Qxx) to give us a defensive trick. In these cases, our points will be working for us on defense and not on offense. This situation



often leads to the LOTT failing us as well. The LOTT works best when we have “convertible values”, points that work equally well on offense and defense.

Expert hand evaluation is an art form not a science - this is why computers are particularly bad at this part of bridge. Part of the art form is to determine when to ignore the rules. One example of this is knowing when to violate the LOTT. The situations above are some of the times to consider making adjustments to it and to following our instincts, not a blind formula.

Conclusion

Using shape to judge what to do in the bidding is about more than just making use of the distribution of our hand. The “Power of Shape” is about the way our hand fits with our partner’s. This results in fits, ruffing values, and many more ways to take tricks. The Law of Total Tricks is our guiding principle for how to apply shape information in competitive auctions. We can see that the LOTT is not perfect, but it is often “winning bridge” to push the auction to this level and put pressure on our opponents. Forcing your opponents to make difficult high level decisions is one of the best ways to get good results at the bridge table.