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This Week in Bridge

(336) Losers and Covers - Losing Trick Count

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Level: 1

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General

Working within the context of traditional HCP and adding or subtracting points from our hand is an effective re-evaluation process for evaluating balanced hands and for many unbalanced hands, but there are also other methods for evaluating our hands. In particular, much of the work on other methods of hand evaluation has gone into how to evaluate highly unbalanced hands. I would be remiss to talk about hand evaluation and not mention some other methods of evaluation.

Some players try to replace the more complex method of upgrading & downgrading for things like length points and fitting cards or misfitting cards with the idea of counting winners or losers. For notrump contracts, visualizing your winners can be an effective method of hand evaluation. For suit contracts, we may try to approximate our number of losers. For this loser-based hand evaluation there is a method that uses *Losers and Covers* – called *Losing Trick Count (LTC)*.

On a random hand, Losing Trick Count is generally not as effective as *good* hand evaluation. It is especially ineffective in evaluating balanced hands that fit together. But for some very distributional hands, counting HCP is so far off base that the amount of adjustment that we need to do can be overwhelming. In this case, losers and covers may be a more effective tool. Let's take a look at how Losing Trick Count works and see how we can make use of this as an alternative tool in our hand evaluation.



Counting Losers

Let's start out by examining a suit and how it will play. Assuming that partner does not have any ruffing values (they have normal length in the suit we are considering, say three small cards), then we consider what the average number of winners and losers we will have in this suit are.

Let's look at some examples of how many losers we will have for different holdings. This will not be a highly scientific process. We will be using averages and making lots of educated guesses and simplifications.

- xxx -- 3 Losers
- xx -- 2 Losers
- x -- 1 Loser (Notice this was easy when we have no honors.)
- xxxx – 3 Losers on average. This is the first interesting case – most of the time, we will only have 3 losers in this suit. We will likely be able to get rid of the 4th card in the suit – we may be able to ruff it, discard it, or set it up as a winner.
- Axxx – 2 Losers on average.
- AKxx -- 1 Loser on average.
- Axxxx – 2 Losers on average.
- Kxxx – 2+ Losers on average. Obviously, Axxx is likely to have fewer losers than Kxxx, but for simplicity we usually just round this to 2 losers.
- Qxxx – 2++ Losers on average. This is a worse holding than Axxx or Kxxx, but still the 4th card is likely to not be a loser. And we will likely only have 2 losers if partner has Ace, King, or Jack. Sometimes we will have 3 losers. Our average for this holding is between 2 and 3 losers.
- QJxx – 2 Losers on average.

We won't go through all the details or go into too much mathematics here (this gets too complicated and is better left to computer programs), but keep in mind these are generally averages and educated guesses as to how many losers we are likely to have when we have these holdings. *We focus on how many of the top 3 cards we have in each suit, giving us at most 3 losers in any suits.*

Note: One thing this method of hand evaluation does well is that it highly discounts Jacks (by only focusing on at most 3 losers in a suit). This is a good thing, since Jacks are overvalued and frequently not worth the full 1 HCP they are given.

Example 1

Let's use LTC to approximate our number of losers.

♠ AT763

♥ KQ62

♦ A87

♣ 5

Here we expect about 6 losers - 2♠, 1♥, 2♦, and 1♣.



Covers

When we count losers (in LTC), we are actually attempting to predict how the play will likely go during the auction, which is often a good idea (even when not using LTC). When we do so, we think of how the two hands will fit together – how partner’s hand will be useful to us and how our hand will be useful to partner. A *Cover Card* (or cover) is a card that takes away a loser from partner’s hand – “covers up a loser.”

Since partner is only counting at most three losers in each suit, then only Aces, Kings, and Queens are potential cover cards. But these cards are not guaranteed to be cover cards for partner’s hand. Just as in “regular” hand evaluation there can be wasted values, there is the equivalent concept of wasted covers:

- Ace, King, or Queen opposite a void,
- King or Queen opposite a singleton,
- Queen opposite a doubleton.

So, an Ace is mostly likely to be a cover card (a “working” cover), a King is likely to be a working cover card, and a Queen is only sometimes a working cover card.

Losers & Covers & Averages

One way that players try to make use of this *Losing Trick Count* information is by using the average number of losers and covers for each type of hand. Let’s look at some examples.

Opener’s Hands

Normal Opening Hand: Average of 7 losers.

Extra Values Opening (for example, 1NT Opener): 6 or fewer losers (1NT averages 6 losers)

Responder’s Hand (covers in hands that have a fit)

Simple Raise (minimum hand): Average of 2 working covers.

Limit Raise (invitational hand): Average of 3 covers.

Game Forcing Raise (like Jacoby 2NT): Average of 4 covers.

These are just averages, but this information can be useful for helping us make educated guesses.

Example 2

1♠ (7 or fewer losers) -- 3♠ (3 covers)

- Opener passes with 7 losers (7 losers – 3 covers = 4 losers; still not enough for game in 4♠)
- Opener bids 4♠ with 6 or fewer losers (6 losers – 3 covers = 3 losers; enough to make 4♠)



Problems with Losing Trick Count

Although LTC can be an effective tool, it has its flaws.

Fits Presumed

These statistical averages can be an effective way of evaluating losers on some hands, but we do not count losers on hands that we play in notrump – we count winners. Thus, this method breaks down for hands that don't end up in suit contracts. This means LTC is often ineffective for balanced or misfitting hands. Keep in mind that our entire premise of having at most 3 losers in a suit is based on getting rid of our 4th or 5th card (and this is frequently done by ruffing). When we use LTC, we assume that we have a fit and that we will be playing in a suit contract. Otherwise, this evaluation method of estimating losers does not have much meaning. Since we frequently do not have a fit, this method will break down if we apply it too early in the auction. We need to wait until we know we have a fit to use Losing Trick Count as a hand evaluation tool.

Working Covers?

Another problem with this method is “What is a cover?” Trying to determine what is a cover card (“*working*” cover) and what is not a cover card gets us back into many of the same issues of wasted values and fitting cards that are a major part of traditional hand evaluation. Making this determination is also a difficult part of properly applying losers and covers. Visualizing partner's hand and determining where their length and shortness are located helps us better understand the value of our potential cover cards.

Conclusion

There are certain types of hands where Losing Trick Count is effective and other places where it is less effective (like any method of hand evaluation). This method can be a helpful tool in evaluating shapely hands. It should be one of the tools in your toolkit, but not the only thing you depend on. The most important take away from learning about LTC is to project how the play is likely to go while you are still in the auction. This will help you determine how useful your cards will be for partner and help you make a better decision about the value of your hand.