

TRANSCRIPT OF RON KLINGER'S LECTURE ON LOSING TRICK COUNT

The aim of the Losing Trick Count (LTC) is to provide a more accurate tool for measuring the trick-taking potential of the partnership hands. We are all used to counting points and making point adjustments. For suitable situations, LTC claims to measure your trick potential better than point count.

WARNING: The LTC operates only with a trump fit (at least 8 trumps) **OR** when one partner has a self-sufficient suit (more later). The LTC usually comes into play only after a trump fit has come to light. You can use it to measure the potential of your own hand especially with a long, strong suit. The LTC is not suitable for no-trumps or for misfit hands. Use the point count for those.

Here is a basic example.

Suppose you pick up:

♠ K86532

♥ 4

♦ 72

♣ A943

Partner opens 1♦, you bid 1♠, partner 4♠. What do you do?

You have 7 HCP, about 11 or so counting distribution. Partner has about 19-20. Doesn't feel like a slam. I know that many would pass 4♠.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ AQ74 ♥ J8 ♦ AK943 ♣ K5

♠ K86532 ♥ 4 ♦ 72 ♣ A943

When the hand is over and you make 12 tricks, you ask partner:

'Could we have bid slam?'

'Nah, no way. No one will bid it.'

6♠ is a good bet, a piece of cake if trumps break 2-1. If trumps are 3-0, you will need to set up dummy's diamonds.

When you check the scores, you see one or two pairs have bid 6♠.

'Probably didn't know what they were doing,' you tell each other.

Chances are they did know what they were doing. With the LTC you will find slams such as these child's play.

We'll see more of these two hands later.

The LTC Formula

There are three steps in estimating your trick potential:

1. **Count Your Losers.**
2. **Estimate Partner's Losers.**
3. **Add these together and deduct the total from 24.**

The answer is the number of tricks your partnership will probably take, assuming normal breaks and half your finesses working.

WARNING:

Remember, you need at least an 8-card trump fit or a self-sufficient suit for the LTC to operate.

The answer for your trick potential is estimated to be at least 80 per cent effective. Don't expect the LTC to be accurate if trumps break 5-0 or if every finesse fails. Tough.

How To Count Your Own Losers

Each suit counts 3 losers at most.

For a 3-card or longer suit, count a loser for missing the ace, king or queen.

AKQ = 0 losers.

So is AKQ4 or AKQ42 or AKQ432

AQ3 is 1 loser.

The K is missing.

1 loser also for AQ32 or AQ532 or AQ7432.

A85 is 2 losers.

The K and Q are missing.

2 losers also for A8532 or K43 or K863 or K87432.

Jxx or worse = 3 losers.

So is Jxxx or longer.

DOUBLETONS:

A-K = no loser, A-x, K-x = 1 loser, A-Q = 1/2 a loser, others = 2.

KQ is 1 loser (A missing)

Q-x or worse = 2 losers (A and K missing)

SINGLETONS:

All singletons count as 1 loser except for ace singleton which is no loser.

VOID = 0 losers

Since you are playing in your trump fit, any losers in this suit in partner's hand can be ruffed.

How many losers do each of these combinations contain?

1. AK532 2. AJ73 3. 986432 4. K 5. KQ2 6. QJ53

Why not jot down your answers?

Remember there was mention at the beginning that paper and pen might come in handy.

1. AK532 = 1 loser, Q is missing

2. AJ73 = 2 losers, K + Q are missing

3. 986432 = 3 losers, A + K + Q are missing

4. K = 1 loser, A is missing 5. KQ2 = 1 loser, A is missing

6. QJ53 = 2 losers, A + K are missing

The last example (QJ53) highlights a problem. Just how valuable are combinations headed by the queen?

A32 = 2 losers and obviously Q32 is not as good as A32.

On the other hand, we would all prefer to hold Q32 than 432. At least Q32 has some potential to take a trick or to build up winners in partner's hand.

My suggestion is to count the queen as full value (1 trick) if the suit contains a second honor as well. Thus AQx or KQx count as 1 loser each. QJx or Q10x or longer count as 2 losers.

For weaker holdings, Q9x or worse, deduct half a trick. Count these normally as two and a half losers. If partner shows great strength in the suit, upgrade Qxx or longer to two losers.

How many losers does this bridge hand contain?

♠ K86532

♥ 4

♦ 72

♣ A943

Why not jot down your answers, suit by suit?

♠ K86532 2 losers

♥ 4 1 loser

♦ 72 2 losers

♣ A943 2 losers

.
Total losers = 7.

This is a 7-loser hand.

Now, how many losers in this bridge hand?

♠ AQ74

♥ J8

♦ AK943

♣ K5

♠ AQ74 1 loser

♥ J8 2 losers

♦ AK943 1 loser

♣ K5 1 loser

Total losers = 5. This is a 5-loser hand.

♠ AQ74 ♥ J8 ♦ AK943 ♣ K5

♠ K86532 ♥ 4 ♦ 72 ♣ A943

This was the first example hand.

North 5 losers, South 7 losers.

Total 12. 24 minus 12 = 12 tricks as the likely outcome. Head for 6♠.

North 1♦, South 1♠, N: 4♠, S: 4NT, N: 5♥ (or 5♠ RKCB), S: 6♠

We would all like to reach 6♠ on these cards but note that

North has nothing special for 4♠. No void, no singleton, only 17 HCP.

♠ AQ74
♥ J8
♦ AK943
♣ K5

It is easy to measure this hand as 5 losers when you see it.

How do you work that out during the bidding?

The average minimum opening hand has around 13-14 points. Likewise, the average minimum opener has 7 losers.

How many losers here:

♠ KQ74
♥ A8
♦ 872
♣ K943

Only 12 HCP but the hand has 7 losers.

1 in spades, 1 in hearts, 3 in diamonds and 2 in clubs.

Take a minimum opening as a 7-loser hand.

♠ J3
♥ AQ632
♦ K72
♣ K95

13 HCP and 7 losers (1 in ♥, 2 in each other suit).

This is normal expectancy for minimum openings with nothing special in shape.

As strength increases, there are more tricks.

More points, fewer losers.

16-18 points with ordinary shape will usually have 6 losers.

As strength decreases, there figure to be fewer tricks.

Fewer points, more losers.

10-12 points, no special shape: expect 8 losers.

40 HCP in the pack . . . 13 tricks . . . so roughly 3 HCPs = 1 trick. So if 13-15 points = 7 losers, 3 extra points, 16-18, should be 6 losers. 19-21 points, expect 5.

3 fewer points, 10-12: expect 8 losers.

Similarly, 7-9 points is usually 9 losers.

7-9 = 9, 10-12 = 8, 13-15 = 7, 16-18 = 6, 19-21 = 5, and so on. If you know partner's points, you can estimate partner's losers.

Partner opens 1♦ . . . Losers expected: 7 or fewer. Could be a minimum opening, could be stronger.

You respond 1♠ and partner rebids 2♠. This confirms a trump fit and only a minimum opening. Place partner with 7 losers.

Count your losers, add on 7, deduct the total from 24.

The answer = the number of tricks you are likely to win.

1♦ : 1♠, 2♠ from opener = minimum = 7 losers.

How many losers would opener show if the bidding went 1♦ : 1♠, 3♠?

What if it went 1♦ : 1♠, 4♠?

How many losers for opener?

1♦ : 1♠, 2♠ = minimum opening and so 7 losers as the normal expectancy

1♦ : 1♠, 3♠ = one trick more and so 6 losers. 16-18 points = 6 losers

1♦ : 1♠, 4♠ = two tricks more than 2♠ and so 5 losers expectancy.

OK, back to the first hand.

Opener: ♠ AQ74 ♥ J8 ♦ AK943 ♣ K5

You open 1♦ and partner bids 1♠. What next?

Trump fit exists, so count losers. You have 5. 1-level response is 9 losers or better. Assume the worst, 9. So, 5 plus 9 = 14. 24 minus 14 = 10, so ten tricks expected, so insist on game.

With a singleton or void, you could splinter. As it is, bid 4♠.

Now, responder's decision with ♠ K86532 ♥ 4 ♦ 72 ♣ A943

Partner opens 1♦, you bid 1♠, opener rebids 4♠. What now?

Trump fit exists, so count losers. You have 7. Opener's jump to game opposite 6+ points should be 19+ points, so expect 5 losers.

7 plus 5 = 12. 24 minus 12 = 12, so twelve tricks expected. Explore slam.

With spades headed by the king, a singleton heart and clubs headed by the ace, Blackwood (or RKCB) is suitable. You can risk your rag doubleton diamond as partner opened 1♦ and has shown a strong hand.

What would you do after 1♦ : 1♠, 4♠ . . . if you held:

♠ K86532 ♥ 42 ♦ 7 ♣ A943 ?

♠ AQ74 ♥ J8 ♦ AK943 ♣ K5

♠ K86532 ♥ 42 ♦ 7 ♣ A943

Slam is now risky.

Some players might take their chances, ask with 4NT and bid 6♠, but against you and me, they always lead hearts, right?

With the danger in hearts, South should cue-bid 5♣ after 1♦ : 1♠, 4♠.

N cue-bids 5♦ to show the ♦A.

S now bids 5♠ (Bypassing 5♥ says, 'I'm worried about ♥'). N passes ('Me, too!')

OK, let's look at a few other actions and the losers expected.

How many losers for a takeout double?

How many losers for a 1-level response?

What about for a 2-level response?

Takeout double = about opening strength. Expect 7 losers or fewer

1-level response = 6 or more points. Expect 9 losers or fewer.

2-level response = 10 or more points. Expect 8 losers or fewer.

How about opener's reverse?

What would you expect for that?

What about opener's jump shift, say, 1♥ : 1♠, 3♣?

How many losers?

Since opener's reverse is around 16 points, you can expect 6 losers or fewer.

As opener normally has at least a 5-4 pattern, you will find that opener's reverse more often

turns up with only 5 losers.

♠ 62 ♥ AK42 ♦ K2 ♣ AQJ43

Open 1♣. Over 1♠, rebid 2♥. The hand has only 5 losers.

So, basic expectancy for opener's reverse is 5 losers.

You are entitled to reverse with fewer than 16 HCP as long as the hand has no more than 5 losers.

Since a minimum opening is 7 losers, a 5-loser hand has a playing strength two tricks better than a minimum.

It is reasonable to reverse with such strength. It would be OK to open 1♦ and rebid 2♥ over 1♠ with ♠ 62 ♥ AQJ2 ♦ AK10942 ♣ 3

What about opener's jump shift, say, 1♥ : 1♠, 3♣? How many losers?

Given that opener's jump shift is forcing to game and responder might have only 6 points, opener's expectancy is 19+ points.

That would translate to 5 losers or better, but as opener is normally at least 5-4, expect the jump shift to be a 4-loser hand.

♠ A2 ♥ AQ742 ♦ 87 ♣ AKQ4 Open 1♥, rebid 3♣ over 1♠. 4 losers.

What about a 1-level overcall by partner? You know your partner's habits better than I do, but if partner can be expected to have a decent 5-card or longer suit and around 8 HCP or better, the 1-level overcall figures to be 8 losers (minimum) up to 6 losers (maximum).

These are respectable overcalls of 1♠:

♠ AKQ62 ♥ 95 ♦ 643 ♣ 862 or ♠ KQ762 ♥ 95 ♦ A43 ♣ 862 Each has eight losers.

An overcall type hand with 5 losers is usually too strong for a simple overcall. With 5 losers, double first, bid your 5+ suit next.

Double then jump in a new suit shows an overcall hand with 4 losers.

Suppose Right hand Opponent (RHO) opens 1♦ and you hold:

♠ AQJ762 ♥ KQ5 ♦ A4 ♣ 62. What is your bidding plan?

You have a 5-loser hand. Double and bid again shows this.

Double and rebid 1♠ over 1♥ or 2♠ over 2♣.

What if partner replies 1NT to your double?

♠ AQJ762 ♥ KQ5 ♦ A4 ♣ 62

You doubled 1♦ and partner replied 1NT. What now?

The 1NT response to a takeout double usually has 6-9 points. That will generally produce two tricks. If so, partner's two winners will reduce your 5 losers to 3.

Partner 1NT response should contain 2-3 spades. Bid 4♠.

More on estimating partner's losers:

How many losers would you expect from a single raise?

How many from a limit raise?

What loser range would expect from partner's weak two opening?

What about partner's weak jump overcall?

The range for a single raise is 6-9 points. Expect 9 losers.

The single raise may occasionally be 8 losers. That is why it is reasonable for opener to invite game with 6 losers after a single raise. 6 losers plus 8 = 14. 24 minus 14 = 10 tricks.

With support and 10 losers, it is usually better to respond 1NT if you have a 4-3-3-3 pattern (to dampen partner's enthusiasm).

Received this email yesterday:

"Dear Ron,

Last night I held ♠ Kxx ♥ Kxx ♦ xxxx ♣ xxx. Partner opened 1♥ [5 card majors] and I answered 1NT forcing intending to rebid 2♥. I like to use 1NT forcing as showing a minimal hand for partner's major with at most 3 hearts . . . I wanted to put the brakes on early. Partner WANTS the immediate raise to 2 hearts and no other call."

This was the guts of my reply:

"Dear xxx,

The hand you held (♠ Kxx ♥ Kxx ♦ xxxx ♣ xxx) has 10 losers and so 1NT is recommended (even if 1NT is not forcing!).

The danger of 1♥ : 2♥ taking you too high with such a poor hand is much greater than the danger of missing the right spot by responding 1NT. Agree totally with your action."

After 1♥:1NT, if opener has a 5-3-3-2, opener may pass 1NT or raise no-trumps.

In each case, no-trumps is likely to be as good as a heart contract and may be better.

A 4-3-3-3 opposite a 5-3-3-2 often produces the same number of tricks in no-trumps as in the 5-3 fit.

Suppose the hands are like this:

♠ Q76 ♥ A10852 ♦ 98 ♣ AK5

♠ K52 ♥ K43 ♦ 7542 ♣ 632

1NT might fail, but you have a pretty good chance to score 7 tricks via 1 spade, 4 hearts and 2 clubs.

2♥ is likely to go 1 down, losing 2 ♠s, 1 ♥, 2 ♦s, 1 ♣.

If partner is not 5-3-3-2, partner will not pass 1NT.

♠ Q7 ♥ A10852 ♦ 83 ♣ AK84

♠ K52 ♥ K43 ♦ 7542 ♣ 632

Now the bidding might go 1♥ : 1NT, 2♣ : 2♥ . . .

1NT might still make but 2♥ is better.

Actually, 2♥ is an interesting play problem.

♠ K52 ♥ K43 ♦ 7542 ♣ 632

♠ Q7 ♥ A10852 ♦ 83 ♣ AK84

Suppose you are South in 2♥ and West leads the ♠J : 2 - 8 - Q
How would you plan the play?

If you draw trumps, you could easily lose 1 spade, 1 heart, 2 clubs and 2 diamonds. If you play to ruff a club in dummy early you might easily be over-ruffed or lose an extra trump trick. You would like to ruff a club with dummy's third trump. How can you organise that as safely as possible?

♠ K52 ♥ K43 ♦ 7542 ♣ 632

♠ Q7 ♥ A10852 ♦ 83 ♣ AK84

The neat solution is to duck a club at trick 2. When you regain the lead, cash ♥K, ♥A, and then ♣A, ♣K and ruff your last club if they are not 3-3. As long as hearts are 3-2, you should be OK. Since a club has to be lost anyway, you may as well lose it early.

All right, let's get back to estimating partner's losers. . .

The limit raise (1♥ : 3♥ or 1♦ : 3♦) is usually played as around 10-12 points. It should therefore contain eight losers.

♠ A962 ♥ K8 ♦ K863 ♣ 432 : You have 8 losers. Playing limit raises this is a sound 1♠ : 3♠ raise.

7 losers would be too strong for a limit raise. With 7 losers and support, you should reach game. 7 plus 7 = 14. 24 - 14 = 10 tricks.

A normal weak two ranges from 8 losers (minimum) to 7 losers (max).

Minimum weak two: ♠ AQ10962 ♥ 3 ♦ 986 ♣ 432 (8 losers)

Maximum weak two: ♠ 52 ♥ KQJ643 ♦ K76 ♣ 97 (7 losers)

With a 6-4 pattern, the weak two might have only 6 losers.

Weak jump overcalls have a similar expectancy.

♠ KQ763

♥ QJ83

♦ AKQ

♣ 5

You open 1♠, LHO bids 2♥H and partner jumps to 4♥ (splinter: spade support and shortage in hearts).

What do you do?

NORTH: ♠ KQ763 ♥ QJ83 ♦ AKQ ♣ 5

N: 1♠ E: 2♥ S: 4♥ W: Pass

N: ?

This deal arose in the 1999 International Olympic Committee Grand Prix Open Teams in September.

The Brazilian North bid 4♠ at this point.

Do you think he was right?

♠ KQ763 ♥ QJ83 ♦ AKQ ♣ 5

♠ A9852 ♥ H - - - ♦ J954 ♣ K974

4♠ was passed out and an easy slam missed.

Slam bidding is traditionally the worst area for experts.

With only 4 losers opposite the 7 shown by 4♥, North's 4♠ was a feeble effort. The meek may inherit the earth but they lose at bridge.

Note South's 4♥ splinter: not many HCP but only 7 losers.

China did no better.

N 1♣ Precision; E: 1♥: S 1♠ (No other E-W bidding):,

N 4♣ splinter (good): S 4♥ cue (good) :,

N 4♠ (bad), all pass.

With 4 losers facing 7, grand slam potential, 6♠ should be reached.

WHY DEDUCT FROM 24?

Where does that figure of 24 come from?

Maximum losers in a suit? Three. So, maximum losers in 4 suits? 12.

So maximum losers in your hand = 12 and maximum in partner's = 12. Total 24. By deducting actual losers from the maximum possible what accounts for the difference? The tricks your side should win.

HOW ACCURATE IS THE LTC?

Suppose one of your suits is AQ5. What are the odds that this will be only one loser, or in other words, what are the chances that your AQ5 will translate into two tricks?

What do you think? 50 percent? 65? 75? 80? 85? 90?

If partner has rags only, the chance for the finesse is 50 per cent, but partner need not have rags. Partner could have the king.

The king can be in 3 spots. If the king is with partner, you have two tricks. If the king is on your right, you have two tricks.

That is already 2/3 of the time.

AQx as two tricks: what odds?

If your side has more points than theirs, the odds improve.

Suppose you have 14 HCP and partner about 13. That gives the opponents 13 HCP, too.

The odds are now 50 per cent that partner has the K and 50 per cent that an opponent does. If RHO has the K (25 per cent) you have 2 tricks. That brings it up to 75 per cent.

Of course partner need not have the king for you to make 2 tricks.

If partner has the jack, two tricks are sure.

If partner has 10-9-x your chances for two tricks are improved. If LHO leads the suit, you have two tricks. All these extra chances boost the odds for two tricks to over 80 per cent, close to 85.

♠ A832
♥ 6
♦ 94
♣ K85432

Partner opens 1♠, RHO passes.

What action should you take?

You have spade support, a weak hand but with 7 losers you are too good for 2♠. The jump to 4♠ expresses this hand type.

It is too weak for 2♣ (which also has no preemptive effect).

The two hands might be like this:

♠ A832 ♥ 6 ♦ 94 ♣ K85432

♠ KQ954 ♥ 1095 ♦ K8 ♣ A97

4♠ is respectable, succeeding if the diamond finesse works or if clubs are 2-2, all in all about a 70 per cent chance.

♠ KQ942

♥ Q10

♦ AQ873

♣ 2

You opens 1♠, LHO passes, 2♠ from partner, RHO passes.

What action should you take?

You have 5 losers. The 2♠ raise, 6-9 points, is usually 9 losers.

5 plus 9 = 14. 24 minus 14 = 10 tricks. Bid 4♠.

♠ A763 ♥ 32 ♦ K54 ♣ 8754

♠ KQ942 ♥ Q10 ♦ AQ873 ♣ 2

4♠ is great and should make easily. Of course, partner's ♦ K is a jewel. Partner's cards might not always be so useful.

The two hands could be like this:

♠ A763 ♥ K54 ♦ 62 ♣ 8754

♠ KQ942 ♥ Q10 ♦ AQ873 ♣ 2

4♠ is still all right. On a lucky day, you might make 11 tricks if the diamonds finesse is on.

The two hands might be:

♠ A763 ♥ 954 ♦ 62 ♣ K754

♠ KQ942 ♥ Q10 ♦ AQ873 ♣ 2

Now 4♠ may well fail. Too bad. If you need to be right all the time, bridge is not your game.

Like the lass who said, 'I thought I was lucky to find Mr. Right, until I found out his first name was Always.'

It pays to be optimistic. You win some, you lose some. Play well and the wins will exceed the losses. Do not expect eternal bliss. . . certainly not at bridge. . . 60 per cent bliss is pretty good.

♠ AK62
♥ A6
♦ AQ9753
♣ 2

Partner passes. You open 1♦, 3♦ from partner. What action should you take?

You have 4 losers. Partner's 3♦ as a passed hand (or as a limit raise) should be 8 losers.

4 plus 8 = 12. 24 - 12 = 12 trick potential. Head for slam.

♠ AK62 ♥ A6 ♦ AQ9753 ♣ 2

Usually you would ask for aces but with three aces yourself and a singleton in the other suit, you can simply jump to 6♦ over 3♦. It never hurts to have a reputation as a flamboyant player.

The sequence will have been Pass : 1♦, 3♦ : 6♦. It would be OK to ask with 4NT but you will finish in 6♦ later anyway.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ 754 ♥ K4 ♦ K862 ♣ A643

♠ AK62 ♥ A6 ♦ AQ9753 ♣ 2

6♦ is laydown and 7♦ virtually hopeless. 7♦ might make if partner had two spades. Be satisfied to reach 6♦ opposite a passed hand.

♠ A974

♥ Q9
♦ AK6
♣ J753

RHO opens 1♥, you double, LHO passes. Partner bids 2♠, RHO passes.

What action do you take?

You have 8 losers. Partner's jump reply, around 10 points or so, should be 8 losers.

8 plus 8 = 16. $24 - 16 = 8$ tricks. Pass 2♠.

Expectancy for a takeout double is 7 losers. You have 8. That makes you sub-minimum for the double. There is no case for bidding on after partner's 2♠ reply.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ A974 ♥ Q9 ♦ AK6 ♣ J753

♠ K853 ♥ J7 ♦ QJ73 ♣ A86

Most of the time you will make just 8 tricks, losing 1 spade, 2 hearts and 2 clubs. 3♠ is living beyond your means. 4♠ is madness.

We estimate 3 points = 1 trick. Here the partnership has 3 points in hearts for no tricks. Notice how the LTC counts nothing for the hearts and keeps the partnership at a sensible, low level.

♠ A974 ♥ Q9 ♦ AK6 ♣ J753

♠ K853 ♥ J7 ♦ QJ73 ♣ A86

Even 2♠ might fail if the spades are not 3-2. At least, you will lose less in 2♠ than those who have climbed higher in spades.

Even if they compete to 3♥, you should not bid 3♠.

Now take a look at these two hands:

♠ K85 ♥ AKQ ♦ 943 ♣ A862

♠ AQJ543 ♥ 965 ♦ 8 ♣ 753

South has 8 losers, North 7. $8 + 7 = 15$. $24 - 15 = 9$ tricks, yet $4♠$ is virtually foolproof. What has gone wrong?

The LTC formula (Count your losers, add partners, deduct from 24) works well when each player has some ruffing potential.

When you have no ruffing potential, a better approach exists:

Calculate partner's losers, deduct this from 13, then add on your winners. The final answer is the number of tricks expected.

This is worth repeating. When you have no ruffing potential:

1. Calculate partner's losers (in the usual way)
2. Deduct the answer from 13. That gives you partner's winners.
3. Add your winners.

The answer is the number of tricks expected.

Calculate partner's losers.

Deduct from 13 to estimate partner's tricks.

Add on your tricks.

This is the usual approach after partner's pre-emptive opening. It is also sensible after partner's weak two opening if you have no ruffing value. Indeed, you should use it any time that you have support for partner but no ruffing value.

♠ AK6

♥ 876

♦ AK53

♣ 874

Partner opens $2♥$, a weak two, RHO passes.

What do you do?

The weak 2♥ has 7 or 8 losers. Deduct from 13 = 6 or 5 tricks. You have 4 tricks. Opposite 6 tricks that would produce game. You should invite game. The Ogust 2NT response is used to do that.

Opposite a minimum, stop in 3♥. Opposite a maximum, bid 4♥.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ AK63 ♥ 876 ♦ AK5 ♣ 874

♠ 92 ♥ AKQ532 ♦ 762 ♣ 105

How embarrassing not to reach game with these values.

The auction could go: 2♥ : 2NT, 3NT (A-K-Q suit) : 4♥. It would be very risky to pass 3NT, though it might work.

Likewise, how poor not to reach 4♥ with these hands:

♠ AK63 ♥ 876 ♦ AK5 ♣ 874

♠ 92 ♥ KQ10432 ♦ 762 ♣ A2

The auction could go: 2♥ : 2NT (Ogust), 3♠ : 4♥. 3♠ shows a maximum weak two with a good suit.

4♥ makes if hearts are 2-2 OR if East has the ♥A OR if the ♥J is singleton. All in all, pretty good odds.

Of course, the hands might be:

♠ AK63 ♥ 876 ♦ AK5 ♣ 874

♠ 92 ♥ KQJ432 ♦ 762 ♣ 92

Now the auction might go: 2♥ : 2NT (Ogust), 3♦ : 3♥, Pass. 3♦ shows a minimum weak two with a good suit.

It would be unlucky for 3♥ to fail, but it could happen.

♠ AKQ43

♥ K2

♦ A32

♣ 876

Partner opens 1♥, you bid 1♠ and opener rebids 3♥.

Where would you head now?

Partner's rebid shows a 6-card or longer suit and about 16-18 points. Because of the 6-card suit, expectancy for 3♥ is 5 losers.

$13 - 5 = 8$ tricks with partner. You have 5 winners. Aim for 7♥.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ AKQ43 ♥ K2 ♦ A32 ♣ 876

♠ 92 ♥ AQJ643 ♦ K85 ♣ AJ

The auction could go: 1♥ : 1♠, 3♥ : 4NT (RKCB), 5♠ : 7♥.

5♠ shows two key cards plus the trump queen. Opener is minimum for the 3♥ rebid (15 HCP, 6 losers) but 7♥ is still a great contract.

This brings up an important guideline for bidding a grand slam:

If the loser count indicates 13 tricks potential AND

You have an adequate trump fit AND

Your side has all the aces PLUS the K and Q of trumps

Then bid seven.

♠ K832

♥ KQ63

♦ AKQJ

♣ 3

Partner opens 1♥.

How many losers do you have?

What is your potential? What do you do?

You have 4 losers.

Partner opened the bidding. Expect 7 losers.

4 plus 7 = 11. 24 minus 11 = 13 tricks potential.

Bid 4NT. You gain nothing by bidding more slowly.

1♥ : 4NT, ?

Opposite one ace, sign off in 5♥. Opposite two aces, bid 6♥. Opposite three aces, bid 7♥. Potential is 13 tricks and you know the partnership has all the aces and the K-Q of trumps.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ K832 ♥ KQ63 ♦ AKQJ ♣ 3

♠ A5 ♥ AJ542 ♦ 853 ♣ A84

The play in 7♥ is routine. 6NT is there but not 7NT. You had an easy auction since you had the K-Q of trumps yourself.

♠ KQ32 ♥ J863 ♦ AKQJ ♣ A

♠ A5 ♥ AKQ42 ♦ 853 ♣ 842

Responder still has 4 losers and 7♥ is still a great contract.

4NT RKCB makes it easy to locate the K and Q of trumps. Without RKCB, it is much tougher to find the trump honours.

The bidding might go: 1♥ : 4NT, 5♣ : 5♦, 5♠ : 7♥.

4NT RKCB; 5♣ = 0 or 3 key cards, obviously 3 (the ♠A, ♥A, ♥K); 5♦ asks for the trump queen; 5♠ says, 'Yes, I have it.' (Some players use 5♦ to show 0 or 3 key cards instead of 5♣.)

When you have no ruffing value, you remember from earlier:

Calculate partner's losers. Deduct from 13.

Add on your tricks.

You can use an equivalent approach when you have the long suit and partner might have no ruffing values for you. Count your losers. Deduct from 13 to calculate your tricks. Add on the winners estimated in partner's hand.

♠ AKQJ54

♥ 92

♦ AK2

♣ 104

You open 1♠, partner replies 1NT, RHO passes.

What do you do?

You have 5 losers. That gives you 8 tricks. Partner's 1NT, 6-9 points, will normally include two tricks. That takes you to ten tricks and so you should rebid 4♠.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ 32 ♥ AK63 ♦ 8743 ♣ 986

♠ AKQJ54 ♥ 92 ♦ AK2 ♣ 104

A very easy game. Partner might bid on if you rebid 3♠ but some partners might pass 3♠.

4♠ would still be a good spot if partner had a singleton or void in spades or if the hearts were A-Q-6-2. A game around 50 per cent is OK.

At this point, you should be thinking, 'Hey, wait a moment. If partner has a singleton or a void in spades, we do not have a trump fit.'

That is true but the formula (count your losers, deduct from 13, add on partner's winners) works perfectly well if you have a suit that needs no support, a self-sufficient suit.

The AKQJ54 in spades in the preceding example is such a suit.

WHEN IS A SUIT SELF-SUFFICIENT?

There is an easy test to apply for this.

Count the number of cards in your long suit. Add the number of honours in that long suit. The total is the Suit Quality (SQ).

If the quality is 10 or more, the suit is self-sufficient.

AKQJ54 : Length = 6. Honours 4. Total 10. Thus this is a self-sufficient suit.

Likewise, these suits are self-sufficient (SQ is 10 or more).

KQJ1032 or AQJ6432 or QJ1098632, and so on.

If such a suit is a major, try to insist on it as trumps.

So, if you have a self-sufficient suit:

Count your losers.

Deduct from 13 to calculate your tricks.

Add on the winners estimated in partner's hand.

The answer is the number of tricks you are likely to make.

This formula will also work for you if you have a trump fit.

♠ AKQ432

♥ 85

♦ AQJ

♣ 87

You open 1♠, partner raises to 2♠, RHO passes. Your move?

You have 5 losers. $13 - 5 = 8$ playing tricks.

Partner's 6-9 points figures to produce 2 tricks.

Your 8 tricks and partner's 2 = 10. Therefore, rebid 4♠.

When you have a self-sufficient suit (or a trump fit), how can you tell how many tricks partner has? How do you translate points into tricks?

Responder's 6-9 point hands will usually produce two tricks (but it could be 3 --- AKQ in one suit — or only one (ace and 2 jacks). 2 tricks is a good guideline but we are not dealing with certainties.

1 trick = 3 points, so 10-12 = 3 tricks, 13-15 = 4, 16-18 = 5, etc.

♠ KQ2
♥ 2
♦ 42
♣ AQJ7643

You open 1♣, partner responds 3NT (16-18 points, no 4-card major).

What do you do now?

You have a self-sufficient club suit. 5 losers = 8 playing tricks.

Partner's 16-18 points = 5 tricks likely. 8 plus 5 = 13. A grand slam is possible. Do not sell out too soon.

♠ KQ2
♥ 2
♦ 42
♣ AQJ7643

After 1♣ : 3NT, a 4♣ rebid is sensible. This sets the trump suit.

Partner continues with 4♦, showing ♦ A.

What is your plan now?

After 1♣ : 3NT, 4♣ : 4♦, ask for key cards.

If you find 3 key cards only, stop in 6♣.

If partner has 4 key cards, ask for kings. If partner has a king as well, you can rebid 7NT.

On your lucky days, the two hands might be like this:

♠ A95 ♥ AK3 ♦ A1086 ♣ K65

♠ KQ2 ♥ 2 ♦ 42 ♣ AQJ7643

If partner had denied a king after showing 4 key cards, you would bid 6NT. Imagine the ♥K above is the ♥J and you can see 6NT is fine.

♠ K832

♥ KQ63

♦ AKQJ

♣ 3

Suppose partner has opened 1♥.

What action do you take?

Partner 1♥ : You: ?

You have a good trump fit and 4 losers. Partner opened the bidding. Expect 7 losers. 4 plus 7 = 11. 24 minus 11 = 13 tricks potential.

Bid 4NT. You gain nothing by bidding more slowly.

1♥H : 4NT, ?

Opposite one ace, sign off in 5♥. Opposite two aces, bid 6♥. Opposite three aces, bid 7♥. Potential is 13 tricks and you know the partnership has all the aces and the K-Q of trumps.

The two hands might be like this:

♠ K832 ♥ KQ63 ♦ AKQJ ♣ 3

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The play in 7♥ is routine. 6NT is there but not 7NT. You had an easy auction since you had the K-Q of trumps yourself.

What if the two hands are like this:

♠ KQ32 ♥ J863 ♦ AKQJ ♣ A

♠ A5 ♥ AKQ42 ♦ 853 ♣ 842

Responder still has 4 losers and 7♥ is still a great contract.

4NT RKCB makes it easy to locate the K and Q of trumps. Without RKCB, it is much tougher to find the trump honours.

The bidding might go: 1♥ : 4NT, 5♣ : 5♦, 5♠ : 7♥.

4NT RKCB; 5♣ = 0 or 3 key cards, obviously 3 (the ♠A, ♥A, ♥K); 5♦ asks for the trump queen; 5♠ says, 'Yes, I have it.' (Some players use 5♦ to show 0 or 3 key cards instead of 5♣.)

♠ AJ63

♥ J98

♦ Q63

♣ K74

Partner opens 1♦, you respond 1♠, opener raises to 2♠.

What do you do now?

You have 11 HCP. Most players would invite game. You have a trump fit, so count losers. You have 9 1/2 losers but let's upgrade the ♦Q as partner opened 1♦. So, 9 losers. Partner opened, so 7 losers. 9 plus 7 = 16. 24 - 16 = 8 tricks. The LTC says 8 tricks is the likely outcome, so pass 2♠.

The two hands might be:

♠ AJ63	♠ K842
♥ J98	♥ Q10
♦ Q63	♦ AK742
♣ K74	♣ J2

E 1♦ : W 1♠, E 2♠ : W Pass.

Note that the ♦ Q is full value but 4♠ is still a poor contract. You should lose 2 hearts and 1 club at least. You might lose a second club and you might easily have a spade loser (♠ Q offside or spades 4-1). 4♠ is about 20 per cent.

♠ AJ63
♥ J98
♦ Q63
♣ K74

After 1♦ : 1♠, 2♠ . . . if you go on at all, it might be best to try 2NT. Trouble is partner might take you back to spades. Partners are like that . . . put on earth to test your tolerance. :)

I'd rather pass 2♠ and gain when things go badly (4-1 trumps, etc.)

♠ K9754
♥ AK832
♦ 82
♣ 7

LHO opens 1♣, 1♠ from partner, double on your right (negative).

What do you do?

You have 6 losers. Partner's overcall = 8. 6 plus 8 = 14. 24 minus 14 = 10 tricks. Bid 4♠.

The two hands might be:

♠ AQ832	♠ K9754
♥ 75	♥ AK832
♦ K94	♦ 82
♣ 862	♣ 7

4♠ is a great spot and may well make 11 tricks if the ♦ A is with the opener. N-S may have a decent save in clubs but they haven't found it yet.

♠ KQ985
♥ AKQ862
♦ 4
♣ 7

Partner opens 1♦. How do you feel about this hand?

What do you do?

After partner's 1♦, an optimist is one who thinks, 'Great. I have an opening hand. We have a game here, maybe a slam.'

A pessimist is one who thinks, 'Oh, just great. I bet partner is 6-5 in the minors and the misfit leads to a terrible disaster.'

OK, so we know what an optimist is and what a pessimist is.

Do you know what a realist is?

The wise ones tell us, "A realist is one who KNOWS the pessimist is right."

OK, back to reality. Partner opens 1♦. What do you respond?

♠ KQ985
♥ AKQ862
♦ 4
♣ 7

You have an excellent hand, only 3 losers, but it is too soon to count losers. There is no evidence yet of a trump fit.

Bid just 1♥. There is no need to jump to 2♥ and no benefit either.

Partner 1♦ : You 1♥.

Partner rebids 1♠.

What do you do now?

What great news! You have a trump fit, so count losers. You have 3. Partner opened and has not promised extras, so count 7. $3 \text{ plus } 7 = 10$. $24 \text{ minus } 10 = 14$ tricks potential. !!!

OK, so a grand slam is possible and you are the one who knows it. The one who knows should take control. Check on aces / key cards. If partner shows three aces, bid 7♠. (Not 7NT: the hearts may not run.)

The two hands might be:

♠ A632	♠ KQ985
♥ 7	♥ AKQ862
♦ AJ643	♦ 4
♣ A42	♣ 7

7♠ is a great spot. Win the lead, draw trumps (remember to play the ♠A first to guard against ♠ J1074 with North). Then set up hearts.

♠ AKQ632
♥ K8652
♦ 5
♣ 3

You open 1♠, partner responds 2♥.

What action do you take?

You have a (great) trump fit, so count losers. You have 4 losers, partner should have 8 or better (10 points up) $4 \text{ plus } 8 = 12$ tricks potential, so check on aces.

♠ AKQ632
♥ K8652
♦ 5

♣ 3

You 1♠, pard 2♥, you 4NT : pard 5♥.

Playing RKCB, 5♥ shows 2 key cards (2 aces here) but no ♥Q.

What do you do now?

Since the 2♥ response shows five or more hearts, chances are (78 per cent) that hearts are 2-1 and no loser. Bid 6♥.

The two hands might be:

♠ AKQ632	♠ 4
♥ K8652	♥ AJ743
♦ 5	♦ A98
♣ 3	♣ J952

Partner has a minimum, 8 losers as expected. 6♥ is an excellent slam. Draw trumps and set up spades will be the plan. By playing the ♥K first, partner can even guard against ♥Q-10-9 with North.

Now take a look at these two hands:

♠ 96	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ K5
♣ A632	♣ 754

West has 6 losers. East has 9. 9 plus 6 = 15. 24 - 15 = 9. Tricks expected 9, and in hearts W figures to lose 2 spades and 2 clubs only. So, the result is just as you would expect.

But suppose the hands were like this:

♠ 96	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ 754
♣ A632	♣ K5

East has the same HCP, same shape, same number of Ks, same losers (9), but now 4♥ is a very good contract (ruff 1 club low, 1 club high).

What has happened?

Opener	Responder 1	Responder 2
♠ 96	♠ 8732	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ 754	♦ K5
♣ A632	♣ K5	♣ 754

Responder's K-x in clubs is far more valuable than the K-x in diamonds.

K-x opposite length is far more valuable than K-x opposite a short suit. The location of the high cards can boost the value of a hand.

After a major suit raise to the 2-level, if you have a 2-loser or 3-loser suit, you can check whether partner has useful cards opposite by making a 'long suit trial bid'.

A trial bid is a new suit after a major suit raise to the 2-level.

1♥ : 2♥, 3♣ is a trial bid, asking for help in clubs.

1♠ : 2♠, 3♦ is a trial bid, asking for useful stuff in diamonds.

The typical trial bid by opener in such auctions is a 6-loser hand and usually around 16-18 points.

The trial bid is an invitation to game and the trial suit is usually a 3-card or longer suit with 2 or 3 losers.

1♣ : 1♥, 2♥ : 3♦ is a trial bid in diamonds by responder.

1♦ : 1♠, 2♠ : 3♥ is a trial bid in hearts by responder.

Opener treats responder's trial bid as a game invitation. Again the trial suit is a 3-card or longer suit with 2 or 3 losers.

If it is a game invitation, responder will usually have 8 losers and about 10-12 points.

While responder's trial bid will usually be a game invitation, responder may also use a trial bid as the first move in a slam exploration. Responder may be interested in whether opener has help in the trial suit.

In reply to a trial bid, you sign off in 3-of-the-major if you have a poor holding in the trial suit. Bid game in the major if you have a strong holding in the trial suit. In judging your holding in the trial suit, losers can be a very good guide.

Your holding in the trial suit:

3 losers (J-x-x or worse): Sign off in 3-Major.

2 losers: Sign off in 3-Major if minimum, bid 4-Major if maximum.

0 or 1 loser in the trial suit: Bid 4-Major.

This easy guide will produce the right decisions most often.

Now let's look at those earlier hands again:

♠ 96	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ K5
♣ A632	♣ 754

West 1♥ : East 2♥,

West : 3♣ (trial) : East 3♥, West : Pass.

West has 6 losers and invites game. East has 3 losers in the trial suit and rejects the invitation. E-W stop at a sensible level.

♠ 96	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ 754
♣ A632	♣ K5

This time it goes: 1♥ : 2♥, 3♣ : 4♥

East has only 1 loser in the trial suit and accepts the invitation. E-W reach a good game. (If it went 1♥ : 2♥, 3♥, East would pass.)

♠ 96	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ 75
♣ A632	♣ K54

This time it goes: 1♥ : 2♥, 3♣ : 3♥

E has 2 losers in the trial suit but is minimum. Invitation rejected. West figures lose 2 spades, 1 diamond, 1 club and just make 3♥.

♠ 96	♠ 8732
♥ AQJ54	♥ K762
♦ A2	♦ KQ5
♣ A632	♣ 54

This time it goes: 1♥ : 2♥, 3♣ : 4♥

E has 2 losers in the trial suit but is maximum. Invitation accepted. West figures lose 2 spades and 1 club, making 4♥ easily.

Now take a look at these two hands:

♠ AQ863	♠ K975
♥ A6	♥ K532
♦ K76	♦ 5
♣ 632	♣ AQ87

West has 7 losers. East has 6. 7 plus 6 = 13. 24 - 13 = 11. Tricks expected 11, and in spades W figures to lose 1 diamond and 1 club at least. If ♣K is onside, 11 tricks. If not, 10 tricks. Stopping in 4♠ is eminently sensible.

But suppose the hands were like this:

♠ AQ863	♠ K975
♥ A6	♥ K532

♦ 976

♦ 5

♣ K32

♣ AQ87

W's HCP, high cards, losers are the same but now 6♠ is excellent.

What has happened?

Opener 1

Opener 2

Responder

♠ AQ863

♠ AQ863

♠ K975

♥ A6

♥ A6

♥ K532

♦ K76

♦ 976

♦ 5

♣ 632

♣ K32

♣ AQ87

Opener's ♣K is far more valuable than opener's king in diamonds.

Just as trial bids help you to diagnose whether partner's high cards are well-located for game purposes, so splinter bids aim to find out whether partner's cards are in the right place for slam.

Often it not what you have that counts, but where it's located. If you have the means to find out, you will be able to bid slams more accurately.

Splinters can be used by responder or by opener. A splinter is usually an unnecessarily high jump in a new suit. For example, 1♠ : 4♣ or 1♠ : 4♦ or 1♠ : 4♥.

The splinter shows a singleton or void in the suit bid PLUS at least 4 trumps for partner PLUS enough points for game.

For an immediate splinter by responder, you can expect about an opening hand.

♠ K975

♥ K532

♦ 5

♣ AQ87

If partner opens 1♥ or 1♠, this is a pretty respectable splinter bid of 4♦. As a splinter bid will usually have 6-7 losers, the hand could actually be a bit weaker than this in HCP.

When partner makes a splinter bid, the ace is useful opposite a singleton, but the king, queen and jack are almost always wasted.

After an immediate splinter by responder, opener should disregard the K, Q and J in the splinter suit. If opener has 13 or more HCP in the other suits, slam is likely to be a good bet.

After discounting the wasted cards in the short suit, if opener's HCP fall below 12, slam is probably a poor bet. Sign off in game.

So, let's take a look at those two splinter hands again.

♠ AQ863	♠ K975
♥ A6	♥ K532
♦ K76	♦ 5
♣ 632	♣ AQ87

West : 1 ♠, East : 4 ♦, West : 4 ♠, East : Pass.

After deducting the 3 HCP for the wasted ♦K, West has only 10 HCP. Therefore, West signs off in 4 ♠. If very strong, East can bid on.

Next:

♠ AQ863	♠ K975
♥ A6	♥ K532
♦ 976	♦ 5
♣ K32	♣ AQ87

West 1 ♠ : East : 4 ♦, West: 4NT (RKCB), East 5 ♥ (2 key cards), W: 6 ♠

Now West has nothing wasted in diamonds and has 13 HCP. Therefore,

West heads for slam and bids 6♠ after East shows 2 key cards.

What if the hands were like this?

♠ AQ863 ♠ K975

♥ A6 ♥ K532

♦ K76 ♦ 5

♣ K32 ♣ AQ87

West 1♠ : East : 4♦, West: 4NT (RKCB), East 5♥ (2 key cards), W: 6♠

West has 3 HCP wasted in diamonds but still has 13 HCP after deducting the wasted strength. So, West again heads for slam.

The 1♠ : 4♥ splinter is dangerous. A few sequences that go 1♠ : 4♥, Pass . . . Oops, I forgot . . . destroy the value of playing splinters. Still, the first debacle like that is usually enough to ensure it isn't forgotten again.

The splinters after a 1♥ opening are:

1♥ : 3♠ (spade shortage), 1♥ : 4♣ and 1♥ : 4♦

The theory is that such jumps are not as useful for other purposes. Splinters are often used after the major suits. Some also use splinters after 1♣, e.g., 1♣ : 3♦ or 1♣ : 3♥ or 1♣ : 3♠, or after 1♦ (1♦ : 3♥ or 1♦ : 3♠ or 1♦ : 4♣).

Opener can also make a splinter bid after partner's response.

1♣ : 1♠, 4♦ = shortage in diamonds, 4 spades and enough for game. As responder has promised only about 6 points, opener's splinter here would be around 19 points or more.

♠ KQ3 ♠ A75

♥ 9732	♥ 8
♦ J2	♦ AK54
♣ AQJ4	♣ K8632

West 1♣ : East : 3♥ (splinter), W: 4♣, E: 4NT, W: 5♦ E: 6♣

It is best to treat the splinter as game-forcing and so West's 4♣ is not droppable. W is concerned about diamonds.

With good controls in all suits, East asks with 4NT.

♠ KQ63	♠ A75
♥ K52	♥ 8
♦ Q3	♦ AK54
♣ QJ54	♣ K8632

West 1♣ : East : 3♥ (splinter), W: 3♠, E: 4♠, W: Pass

One stopper opposite the singleton may be enough but it is risky. 3♠ suggests playing in a 4-3 fit. 5♣ is OK but 4♠ is fine at MP.

Splinters can be very helpful after a 2♣ opening:

♠ AKQ632	♠ 8754
♥ - - -	♥ 86432
♦ KQJ3	♦ A64

♣ A74

♣ 2

West 2♣ : East 2♦, W: 2♠, E: 4♣ (splinter), W: 4♥, E: 5♦, W:7♠

With only 3 losers, West is strong enough for a 2♣ opening. 4♥ = cue-bid, 5♦ = cue-bid.
That is enough for W to bid 7♠.