

THE LAW WINS

A Brief Look at the Law of Total Tricks*

Most of you have heard about the Law of Total Tricks. The following is an attempt to explain it. Whether or not you have heard it discussed, it is applied by experts and the better bridge players frequently and with great success.

Simply, the Law of Total Tricks says that the total number of tricks available on a bridge deal in a competitive auction is equal to the total number of trumps. The total number of tricks means the combined total tricks available to both sides if each were to play a contract in their longest and best trump fit assuming best play and defense. The total number of trumps means the combined total of trumps and is reached by adding together the number of trumps from each side's best trump suit. Sound a little difficult? It really isn't....it's just a little difficult to put it into an easily understood paragraph! I suggest that read and reread the above until you think you understand it.

Now why, you might ask, do you care? The Law of Total Tricks is a tool to be used in competitive bidding situations. The law infers that the total trick count is constant and that neither the location of high cards nor the distribution of the suits changes it. With proper application of the Law, better decisions can be made on whether to bid more or to defend. Look at the following hand to see how the Law of Total Tricks works:

	<u>North</u>	
	♠ KJ6	
	♥ AQ102	
	♦ QJ10	
	♣ K98	
<u>West</u>		<u>East</u>
♠ 1043		♠ AQ52
♥ 953		♥ K4
♦ 932		♦ K84
♣ AQ107		♣ J654

South

♠ 987

♥ J876

♦ A765

♣ 32

In this example North-South's best fit is hearts (8) and East-West's best fit is clubs (8). According to the law there should be 16 tricks available (8 hearts plus 8 clubs.) On this deal, North-South should take nine tricks playing in hearts while East-West, playing in clubs, can take seven tricks (making one). That's a total of 16 tricks and is equal to the number of trumps held by the two sides. If some of the key cards are changed around, the tricks available to one side or the other may change but the total number of tricks never changes. Try it.

The key to applying the Law of Total Tricks is in knowing precisely how many trumps you and your partner have between you and accurately estimating the number of trumps the opponents hold. This must be determined during the auction and is the main reason that conventions like Bergen raises and limit raises were developed. In the above deal, both North-South and East-West would know they can bid safely only to the two level.

However, in real life, it's much simpler to apply the Law once you get used to it. In a competitive auction simply bid again if you have extra trumps. Or perhaps consciously overbid if the opponents seem to be at their maximum spot in order to replace their positive score with a small minus score for the set incurred by your side. There are a few rules that have evolved when applying The Law:

- (1) Never outbid the opponents on the three level with combined 16 trumps.
- (2) Always outbid the opponents on the three level with combined 18 trumps.
- (3) It is usually right to outbid the opponents on the three level with combined 17 trumps.
- (4) If necessary, bid to the level equal to the combined number of trumps held by your side.

(5) Try not to let the opponents play at a level equal to their number of trumps.

(6) The total number of tricks when one side plays in notrump and one side plays in a trump suit is 7 plus the number of cards held in the trump suit.

The Law does not work perfectly. It is to be used as a guideline. Such things as soft holdings in the opponents' suit, misfits, double fits, good and bad trump holdings should be used to adjust the number of tricks available up or down.

Just as there are many axioms relating to declarer play and defense, there are some bidding "maxims" related to the Law of Total Tricks. They are:

(1) The five level belongs to the opponents. With fewer than 19 trumps it's hardly ever right to bid five-over-five. With 19, it's only right when trumps are 11-8 and the vulnerability is right. With 20 trumps it's wrong if trump are 10-10. With more than 20 trumps the Law tends to break down.

(2) When in doubt, bid four spades over four hearts.

(3) When in doubt, bid one more on freak deals. One of the major reasons for this maxim is that the opening lead is less likely to be "best" because of the freakness of the hands.

(4) When holding four trumps, consider making a penalty double. The 4-1 or 4-0 trump break will frequently result in the opponent's taking fewer tricks than anticipated.

It is important to restate that the Law of Total Tricks will not always work. Sometimes the total trumps don't exactly equal the total tricks and it's not always possible to know to make the proper adjustments. Also, the law is based on the best play and best defense which means that the best lead will always be made. However, more errors are committed by defenders than by declarers so it may well be advantageous to bid more in weak fields. The conclusion is to follow the Law generally (with adjustments), but, when in doubt, to bid one more.

*(Mostly from the Book by Larry Cohen entitled "To Bid or Not To Bid")