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Lagniappe: Esther Discusses "(1) Does the 'Law of Total Tricks' ('LOTT') Really Work, and (2) Is the 'LOTT' Magic?"

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To return to the "Esther Bridge Lessons," CLICK:

<https://esther-bridge.com/index.html>

Q. What is the "Law of Total Tricks" ("LOTT")?

Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons" there is a post listing (1) Esther's **4 most important bridge books** of all time, and (2) the **2021-2023 Best and Runner-Up Bridge Books** identified by the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA)². As noted previously, within ****ALL**** these bridge books, perhaps the most important book of all time is Larry Cohen's 1992 ABTA award-winning book, To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks. And Cohen's compatriot Marty Bergen, in Bergen's ABTA 1996 award-winning book, Points Schmoints!, also teaches the all-important philosophy underlying the "Law of Total Tricks". The "Law of Total Tricks" says:

When you are bidding a Suit contract, assuming both you and Partner are bidding rationally, you will *almost always* (about 85% of the time in Esther's estimation) make a Suit contract if your contract is set at, or lower than, the number of Trump cards you hold minus 6!

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¹ As noted in an article in the Winter/Spring, 2024 article in The American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) Journal, https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/ABTA_1_24.pdf, Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen in fact is a hypothetical, and not a real person! So this article was really, really written by Bruce Thompson.

² Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", go to: <https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/BestBooks.pdf>

Q. What is the primary usefulness of the "Law of Total Tricks"?

The "**Law of Total Tricks**" was developed for use in "competitive" auctions in which both competing Pairs are bidding **Suit contracts**, and both Pairs have found a "fit", usually both involving an 8+ card Suit "fit". The crucial quandary that both Pairs *must* settle is how high each Pair can "safely" bid.

Because the "**Law of Total Tricks**" turns on bidders counting *exactly* the number of Trump cards held within the Partnership, the "LOTT" in turn naturally leads to some players preferring to use bidding conventions that communicate to Partner exact Trump Suit card counts, such as "**2 Over 1**"³, "**Jacoby 2NT!**"⁴, "**Bergen Limit Raises**"⁵, and "**Drury**"⁶.

The "**Law of Total Tricks**" says, for example, that if both Pairs are bidding *Suit contracts*, and Pair #1 is bidding Hearts, and Pair #2 is bidding Spades, and Pair #1 holds a **9**-card Heart "fit", and Pair #2 holds an **8**-card Spade "fit", Pair #1 can likely bid safely to a 9-6 = **3**-level "part score" contract, while Pair #2 can bid safely only to an 8-6 = **2**-level "part score" contract. Of course, the ultimate result also turns in part on the distribution features, such as voids and singletons, and the Trump distribution, such as 4-4 versus 5-3 versus 6-2, held by both Pairs.

Many Beginning and Advancing Players may not realize that quite often when your Partnership holds **1** "**single**" Suit "fit", or even **2**, or "**double**" Suit fits, your Opponents are also *very likely* to hold a Suit "fit", or even a different "**double**" Suit "fit". For example, if you and Partner hold **1** 8-card Suit "fit", such as in Hearts, there is a **66.7%** probability that your Opponents hold **1** 8-card Suit "fit", such as in Spades. And when your Partnership holds a 10-card Trump Suit card "fit", your Opponents will have at least an 8-card "**double**" fit in **2** Suits. And when your Partnership holds **2** 8-card Suit fits, your Opponents will have **2** 8-card fits in the *other 2* Suits!⁷

³ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", go to: "Convention #1: '2 Over 1' ('2/1')".

⁴ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", go to: "Convention #2: 'Jacoby 2NT!'".

⁵ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", go to: "Convention #4: 'Bergen Limit Raises'".

⁶ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", go to: "Convention #7: 'Drury'".

⁷ Within the "**Esther Bridge Lessons**", see "Lesson #40: 8 Different Categories of Bridge Probabilities, and How These May Help Guide Your Bidding and Play", "**Section #6: Reciprocal Fit Probabilities: Opponents' Trump Fit Probabilities When You Have a Trump Fit, and Vice Versa**".

Q. Does the "Law of Total Tricks" Really Work?

Although the "Law of Total Tricks" has been widely accepted within modern bridge circles, the "Law" has not been without critics. For example, Mike Lawrence and Anders Wirgren were critical of blindly using the "LOTT" in their 2004 book, I Fought the Law of Total Tricks.

Various bridge **computer simulations** have been conducted to examine *empirically* how well the "Law of Total Tricks" really works. In these computer simulations, computer programs are written to (1) generate tens or hundreds of thousands of Boards from among the 635,013,559,600 that a Player can receive across the 53,644,737,765,488,792,839,237,440,000 mathematically possible bridge deals⁸, and then (2) *optimally* play each Board to evaluate how often certain outcomes occur, such as on what percentage of Boards the number of Tricks taken exactly equals the number of Trump cards held by the Pair setting the contract.

Matthew Ginsberg conducted just such a computer simulation involving several hundreds of thousands of Boards to study the "Law of Total Tricks", and reported his results in the May, 1996 issue of The Bridge World in his article, "How Computers Will Play Bridge". He found that total tricks only equaled total trumps on **40%** of the deals. Of course, Tricks may also exceed those predicted to be taken by the "Law of Total Tricks".

However, it is not clear to me that this simulation was limited to only Hands in which all Hands were not "flat", such as 4-3-3-3, 3-4-3-3, 3-3-4-3, or 3-3-3-4. Obviously, the "shape" of the Hand is a critical consideration in deciding to make a Suit bid as against a **NT** bid. The importance of Hand "shape" in making Suit bids has been heavily emphasized by players such as Marty Bergen, who has emphasized, for example, that 2-Suited Hand "shapes" play particularly well in Suit contracts, which led to Bergen's popularizing his "**Rule of 20**" to decide whether to open a Suit bid with *fewer* than **13** CPs.

Ginsberg also published online a subsequent bridge computer simulation study, "An Analysis of the Law of Total Tricks"⁹. However, this was a smaller-scale simulation involving only 1,000

⁸ See "Relevant Percentages for Bridge Players":

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/taverham/Probabilities.pdf>

⁹ See: <https://bocosan.tripod.com/ginsberg/total.HTML>

deals, in which both Pairs between them held between 14 and 24 cards in their respective 2 Trump Suits. Ginsberg concluded:

...the probabilities are similar whenever the [S]uit lengths combine to **20** cards or fewer [across the 2 Pairs], which they will **99%** of the time. So here's the straight story on the Law: Provided that the [T]rump lengths combine to 20 cards or fewer, the Law of Total Tricks will lead you to correct decisions approximately **70%** of the time.

Does that mean you should follow it? That depends, I suppose, on **whether you can make competitive judgments correctly more than 70% of the time without it.** [emphasis added]

Jeff Tang, in an article titled "The Law of Total Tricks"¹⁰, on his excellent BridgeBum website offered his views on using the "**Law of Total Tricks**" as a bidding guide:

In my experience, [the use of the "**Law of Total Tricks**"] ...is most common and critical at the 2- and 3-levels. If you and your partner have an 8-card fit, then you are usually safe to compete to the 2-level in that suit. And if you own a 9-card fit, then you're usually safe to compete to the 3-level. The contract will either make, or be a good sacrifice against whatever the [O]pponents can make.

Q. Well, do you think "Law of Total Tricks" is Magical?

Well, the "**Law of Total Tricks**" is not a real "law" such as one the "ACBL Laws of Bridge". Instead, the "**Law of Total Tricks**" is like one of the 40 or so bridge "Rules"¹¹, which actually are not true "rules", and instead are *general guidelines* for bidding or play.

And many of the bridges "Rules" often work, and can be quite helpful, albeit perhaps not *magically*. For example, when Partner leads 4th from the "top" of a Suit holding, the "**Rule of 11**" will tell you exactly how many Suit cards are higher than 11 - the card

¹⁰ See: https://www.bridgebum.com/law_of_total_tricks.php

¹¹ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see "Lesson #25: 40 or so Bridge Bidding/Play 'Rules'".

"face value" in the remaining 3 Hands, and because you can see both the Dummy and your own Hand, once Dummy comes down you know exactly how many Suit cards Declarer holds that are higher than the led card! And the "Rule of 7" is extremely helpful as a general guide about how many Tricks as Declarer you should "duck" when playing a **NT** contract. And the "Rule of 5" is *immensely* helpful in indicating whether you as Opener should or should not bid a Game contract when Partner gives you a "constructive" raise to your 1**H** or 1**S** opening bid.

In a similar vein, the "Law of Total Tricks" is an extremely useful guide to determining how high you can bid in setting a Suit contract. And the "Law of Total Tricks" should be considered even when Opponents are not competitively bidding. After all, whether or not your Opponents hold HCPs, nevertheless they almost certainly have an 8+ card "fit" in 1 or 2 Suits! Of course, no "rule", and no "Law of Total Tricks", should be *rigidly, thoughtlessly, and mechanically* invoked. But the "Law of Total Tricks" should *always* be at least one consideration in every auction!

Q. Well, OK, what are the "bottom line" primary implications of the "Law of Total Tricks", or "LOTT"?

Perhaps Alan Truscott said it best. Truscott wrote the daily bridge column for the New York Times for 41 years (1964-2005), and served as Executive Editor for the first 6 editions of The Official Encyclopedia of Bridge. In his June 27, 2002 [Section E, p. 6] article in the New York Times, "Obey the Law of Total Tricks (And Always Add Carefully)" Alan Truscott argued:

The law does not always work. If there is a double fit [in which Partners hold 2 8+ card fits], the total tricks are usually one more than the number of trumps. But there is *very seldom* more than a *one-trick* variation. A practical guideline can be derived from this... [O]ne should normally bid for a number of tricks equal to the number of trumps you and your partner are known to have. With an eight-card fit, bid to the two level, with a nine-card fit, to the three-level; and so on. [emphases added]