

THEORY

The Law of Total Tricks is a bidding guideline for competitive auctions. In a competitive auction, “total tricks” equals “total trumps”. “Total tricks” means the number of tricks North-South would make playing in their trump suit plus the number of tricks East-West would make playing in their trump suit.

If North-South have nine Spades and East-West have eight Hearts, the Law says that the total number of tricks available is 17 (9 + 8). The division of these total tricks depends on the distribution of the high card points. When the HCP are divided evenly between the two sides, the number of trumps held by each side is an estimate of the tricks available to each side.

If you bid to the lawful level, you will either make your contract or likely go down less than what the opponents would have made in their contract. (Down one vulnerable and doubled is still -200, even if you used the Law to get there.)

The Law of Total Tricks is usually accurate. Extreme or flat shape will increase or decrease the number of tricks.

WHEN TO USE THE LAW

If you are trying to decide whether to bid *game*, count *points*. You need the usual 25 or 26 points to be confident of game. However, if you are trying to decide whether to *compete* (outbid your opponents), count *trumps*. The number of trumps and shape are more important than high-card points. The law is useful when you think you know how many trumps your side has and can estimate roughly how many trumps the opponents have.

When the HCP are favorable, bidding to the lawful level will often achieve a plus score. When the HCP are unfavorable, your penalty will likely be less than whatever the opponents could make.

HOW TO USE THE LAW

If there are 18 trumps, it is essential to bid “three over three”. It would be unsurprising for both sides to be able to take 9 tricks. If there are only 16 total trumps, it is ruinous to bid “three over three”. If the opponents were taking 9 tricks, you will take only 7.

If the opponents are content in a two-level fit, bid or double to push them up to the three-level. Be especially creative if you can bid on the two-level to disturb their “happy-two”.

It is safe and proper to bid for the number of tricks equal to the combined number of trumps your side holds.

Plunge with Purity: If your high cards are in your key suits (your trump suit, your key side suit), there is often an additional trick. Conversely, honors dispersed in their trump suit suggest maybe a trick less.

A singleton (especially in the Opponent’s suit) says bid.
Exciting shape (two-suiter or double fit with Partner) also says bid.
4-3-3-3 shape suggests difficulty taking tricks on offense.

In a competitive auction, bidding your agreed suit at the three-level is not inviting game nor showing extra points, but rather merely competing to the lawful level. If you have extra values and want to invite game, you must make a game-try bid in a new suit.

Deal 1

North Deals

None Vul

♠ 9 2
 ♥ K 10 8 4
 ♦ K 6 5 4
 ♣ Q 10 7

♠ Q J 7
 ♥ Q J 6 5 3
 ♦ 10 9 8 7
 ♣ 4



♠ A K 10 6 5 4
 ♥ 9 7 2
 ♦ J
 ♣ A 5 3

8
 6 12
 14

♠ 8 3
 ♥ A
 ♦ A Q 3 2
 ♣ K J 9 8 6 2

West

North

East

South

2 ♠

Pass

1 ♠

2 ♣

Pass

3 ♣

3 ♠

4 ♣

Pass

Pass

4 ♣ by South

Lead: ♠ Q

Deal 2

East Deals

N-S Vul

♠ Q J 10 8 7
 ♥ Q 9 6
 ♦ 8 3
 ♣ 10 9 8

♠ 6 5 3
 ♥ 4 3
 ♦ A Q J 7 2
 ♣ 4 3 2



♠ 2
 ♥ A K 10 2
 ♦ K 10 6 5 4
 ♣ A Q 7

♠ A K 9 4
 ♥ J 8 7 5
 ♦ 9
 ♣ K J 6 5

West

North

East

South

3 ♦

3 ♠

1 ♦

Dbl

Pass

Pass

5 ♦

Pass

5 ♦ by East

Lead: ♠ K

Deal 3

South Deals

E-W Vul

♠ 9 7 3

♥ K Q J

♦ 5 4

♣ A K J 10 6

♠ A K Q J 6

♥ 8 7 5 4 3 2

♦ A 7

♣ —



♠ 10 8 2

♥ A 10 6

♦ K 10 6 3

♣ 5 4 3

14 14
7 5

♠ 5 4

♥ 9

♦ Q J 9 8 2

♣ Q 9 8 7 2

West

North

East

South

1 ♠

2 ♣

2 ♠

5 ♣

5 ♠

Pass

Pass

Pass

5 ♠ by West

Lead: ♣ K

Deal 4

West Deals

Both Vul

♠ A J 6 5

♥ 8 5 3 2

♦ A 4

♣ 8 6 3

♠ 10 9 8

♥ A 10 9 7 4

♦ Q 10 2

♣ A Q



♠ Q 7 3

♥ Q J 6

♦ J 9 7 3

♣ K 10 7

♠ K 4 2

♥ K

♦ K 8 6 5

♣ J 9 5 4 2

9
12 9
10

West

1 ♥

Pass

Pass

North

Pass

2 ♠

East

2 ♥

Pass

South

Pass

Pass

2 ♠ by North

Lead: ♥ Q