

THE LAW OF TOTAL TRICKS

In recent years, bridge enthusiasts have been able to work with computer programs that generate lots of hands and test out a number of different approaches. Computer simulation offers good support for “The Law of Total Tricks” as formulated by Larry Cohen in his book: *To Bid or Not to Bid; The Law of Total Tricks*.

The Law of Total Tricks is applicable to situations involving competitive bidding. When the strength is relatively evenly divided between two sides (e.g., 20 HCP to 20 HCP or even 18 to 22 or 17 to 23), The Law tends to work quite well.

The Law of Total Tricks says that the number of tricks available on any deal is (approximately) equal to the number of total trumps in that deal. The number of total trumps is found by adding together the longest trump fit for both sides. If, for example, one side has an 8-card trump fit and the other side has a 9-card trump fit, the total trumps is 17, and the number of tricks available will usually equal 17 as well. Generally speaking, your side is likely to make the same number of tricks as you have trumps, so the partnership with a 9-card trump fit is likely to make 9 tricks (and can thus bid to the 3 level) while the partnership with an 8-card trump fit is likely to make only 8 tricks (and thus should stop bidding at the 2 level).

There are several corollaries that follow from The Law:

- 1) **Do not outbid the opponents at the 3-level with 16 Total Trumps.** (In other words, if your side has only 8 trumps and their side has only 8 trumps, each of you is likely to make only 8 tricks, so whoever bids up to the three level is likely to go down.)
- 2) **Do outbid the opponents at the 3-level with 18 Total Trumps.** Naturally vulnerability is also a factor, but if you have a 9-card or 10-card trump fit, you should happily compete to the 3 level and will make your contract most of the time.
- 3) **With 17 Total Trumps, it is often right to outbid your opponents at the 3 level.**
- 4) **The 5-level belongs to the opponents.** (It is rarely right to compete to the 5 level, e.g., 5 hearts over 4 spades—unless you know there are 20 or more Total Trumps & Tricks.)
- 5) **When in doubt, bid 4 spades over 4 hearts**
- 6) **When holding 4 trumps, consider making a penalty double** (at 3 level & above).
- 7) **On freak hands, consider bidding one more.**

There are several factors that should cause you to **adjust** the number of Total Trumps & Tricks you believe are available (Total Tricks may be *less than* and can be *more than* Total Trumps):

- 1) Wildly distributional hands (with **voids** or **extra long suits**); hands in which **all your honor cards are working together** and in your long suits; **good interior spots** in your long suits; **double/double fits** (both sides have a fit in 2 suits) can be **adjusted upward** for trick-taking capacity.
- 2) **Secondary honors in the opponents’ suit**; **poor interior spots** in your suit; **misfits**; **flat hands** should cause you to **adjust downward** your trick-taking capacity.

The Law forms the logic behind Bergen Raises. When people playing Bergen Raises have a 9-card fit, they immediately get to the 3-level. According to the Law, if they go down, their opponents have a makable contract that is worth more than the penalty those opponents could collect by defeating them. This is also the logic behind preemptive raises in suits and preempts in general. The DONT (Disturbing Opponents’ No Trump) system allows people using the convention to show all one and two-suited hands at the two level. Playing possible 8-card fits at the 2 level (not being forced to the 3 level) can pay big dividends in competition. Doubling opponents at the 3 level is often superior to bidding on.

Do not neglect vulnerability. If you are non-vulnerable, you can afford to bid on to the three level (expecting to go down one) and, even doubled, will score better than letting the opponents make a partial at the 2 level. Be very wary when vulnerable. Down one, doubled, is 200—almost always a bottom board!