Don't Be a Loser

The dangers of overusing Losing Trick Count.

BY **MEL COLCHAMIRO**

The first time I learned about loser count was long ago when my then-teenage daughters would bring home an endless series of boyfriends. *That* was loser count!

The next time I learned about loser count was when I purchased and read the seminal work, "The Modern Losing Trick Count" by Australian bridge writer Ron Klinger. Published in 1986, it's the loser-count bible. But it's a modest bible.

When I read "the bible," I learned the Golden Rule of Loser Count from pg. 10: "Losing Trick Count (LTC) is used *after a trump fit has been established*." And on pg. 13, "(LTC) is not designed for notrump hands and is quite unsuitable for misfit hands ... It is the number of tricks you can expect to win if your trump suit breaks normally and half of your finesses work." Read those sentences again.

Then on pg. 143, author Klinger writes: "If you consider LTC as a useful adjunct to your normal bidding methods, it will be a valuable tool indeed. If you look on it as a panacea for your bidding problems, you will be bitterly disappointed."

That said, let's see what it's all about.

How loser count works

Losing trick count (or just loser count) is a way to value a hand, like the 4–3–2–1 point-count system. But its valuation method is much different. It is an *estimate* of how many losers you are likely to have in a trump contract. In some situations, LTC works better than counting points, usually when you have unbalanced hands.

To determine how many "losers" you have, count a loser in each suit that you do not have an ace, king or queen. In a doubleton suit, only worry about the ace and king; in a singleton suit, only worry about the ace; and in a void suit, there is nothing to worry about – you have no losers there. Here is an example hand:

♠A J 8 7 3 ♥K J 6 ♦K J 9 2 ♣10.

This is a seven-loser hand. Two losers in spades (the king and queen); two losers in hearts (the ace and queen); two losers in diamonds (the ace and queen); one loser in clubs (the ace).

Note what happens if we shift one of the diamonds into clubs so that the hand is this:

♠A J 8 7 3 ♥K J 6 ♦K J 9 ♣10 2.

Now we have an eight-loser hand because we have two losers in clubs.

Finally, let's shift one card out of spades into clubs so that the hand is this:

♠A J 8 7 ♥K J 6 ♦K J 9 ♣10 3 2

Now we have a nine-loser hand because we have three losers in clubs.

As you can see, the more balanced your hand is, the more estimated losers it has, and vice-versa. The more skewed your hand is – when you have long suits – the fewer estimated losers you have. Such hands have more playing strength for the same given high-card strength than balanced hands. Have you ever heard the expressions "With six-four, bid more" and "With six-five, come alive"? They're based on loser count.

Is it all really that simple?

That's the simple way to calculate loser count, but there's more to it. Simple LTC ain't perfect. It overvalues queens versus kings and aces, and overvalues kings versus aces, and it undervalues aces versus everything.

Compare these three-card holdings: A–x–x; K–x–x; Q–x–x. Though each of them count as two losers, all of us know that A–x–x is better than K–x–x, which is better than Q–x–x. A queen with no supporting ace, king, jack or 10 is probably best figured at 2 ½ losers (according to me, and, more importantly, according to Klinger). But then things get messy and complicated: Who wants to work with fractions? So most players just figure Q–x–x–(x)–(x) as two losers. This is one way in which simple loser count isn't quite a panacea for all bidding ills.

The same thing goes for jacks coupled with higher honor cards – they get shortchanged. Compare:

A–J–x vs. A–x–x
K–J–x vs. K–x–x
Q–J–x vs. Q–x–x

Each of these pairs is rated as two losers, but we all know which one we'd really rather have. We'd want the jack to help us out. For example, A–J–x opposite Q–x–x is at most one loser no matter what, but A–x–x opposite Q–x–x will be one loser only half the time. But LTC figures that losers are equally likely with or without the jack. Similarly, when A–J–x faces x–x–x, 75% of the time there will be two losers. But opposite 10–9–x, 75% of the time there will be only one.

Full-bore loser count?

For sure, loser count has its place. But don't overuse it. LTC devotees go all the way and totally replace point-count bidding with loser-count bidding. I strongly advise against that. Stick to normal bidding and hand evaluation and only use LTC selectively, otherwise you will tie yourself into bidding knots such as the following.

LTC analysis tells us that most opening bids have about seven losers, such as this normal hand:

♠8 4 ♥K Q J 7 3 ♦A Q 5 ♣J 5 2.

So LTC fans say: "I open all seven-loser hands." Well, not so fast. That would lead to the ridiculous conclusion that you should open 1♠ on this hand because it has seven losers:

♠9 8 6 5 4 3 ♥8 7 6 5 4 2 ♦6 ♣—

but that you shouldn't open this one:

♠A J 4 ♥K J 7 ♦J 9 3 ♣K J 8 4

because it has nine losers! See what I mean?

On pg. 13 of his book, Klinger warns and reminds us: "It is vital that you do not envisage the LTC as replacing point count. It is used as an adjunct to the point count when a trump fit comes to light."

When to use LTC

One of the most common auctions is when a major-suit opening bid (or overcall) is raised to the two level, as in 1♥–2♥ or 1♠–2♠. After the simple raise from partner, the opening bidder (or overcaller) has three choices: pass, try for game in the major or bid game in the major.

Instead of using point count to guide opener's choice, the now-familiar idea is to use what's called **5–6–7 loser count**. What that means is if you have five losers by loser count, just bid game; with six losers, try for game; with seven or more losers, just pass.

Sometimes, loser count seems to contradict point count; the two push you in different directions. Loser count usually knows better, so follow loser count.

To practice, consider the following hands. You open 1♠, and partner raises to 2♠. What next?

♠A J 8 7 3 ♥K J 6 ♦A J 2 ♣Q 10

Pass. You have eight losers.

♠A Q 8 7 3 ♥6 ♦K J 6 5 2 ♣Q 9

Try for game with this six-loser hand. (Which method you use is not the point here, just make some game try.)

♠A Q 7 6 5 ♥10 ♦K J 8 7 4 ♣K 8

With this five-loser hand, bid game.

Suppose responder's hand happens to be a normal-looking 9-point raise to 2♠, such as:

♠K 9 3 ♥7 5 3 ♦Q 9 3 ♣A 4 3 2.

Opposite the first hand, there will be a loser in spades 2/3 of the time; we're going to lose two tricks in hearts three times out of four; we're going to lose a trick in diamonds nine times out of 10; and, barring a club lead away from the king, we're going to lose a trick there, too. So even if we get lucky in spades or hearts and lose only two tricks in those two suits combined, the chances are great that 4♠ will fail. But opposite the second hand, we'll make 10 tricks with normal breaks. And opposite the last hand, we'll make 11 tricks most of the time. It's a bit odd, but LTC correctly guides us to pass 2♠ with 16 HCP (Hand 1), but to move on with 12 or 13 HCP with Hands 2 and 3.

How to try for game

Suppose your hand is this:

♠A K 9 3 2 ♥A 4 ♦K 9 5 2 ♣10 5

and partner raises your 1♠ opening bid to 2♠. You have six losers, so you try for game. But if you bid 3♠, partner will certainly raise to 4♠ if she has:

♠Q J 8 4 ♥K 8 6 ♦8 7 6 ♣Q J 6

If you match those two hands together, you'll see that 4♠ has no chance: two actual club losers and at least two actual diamond losers. 4♠ is down one or two, though nobody did anything wrong ... except use the wrong method for looking for game. (By the way, if we interchange responder's clubs for diamonds, 4♠ will make easily.)

Side-suit game tries

As many of you may know, it is much more effective to use what are known as "side-suit game tries." That is, in the above situation, instead of bidding 3♠, bid your side suit where you need help, such as fitting honors or "ruffability." That's why they are sometimes called help-suit game tries. Here, opener should try for game by bidding 3♦. (Keep reading.)

1–2–3 loser count in reply

When responder hears a side-suit game try, she, in turn, should use LTC, though here you should use "1–2–3 loser count." If the responder has one loser in the side suit, then she should bid game in the major, no matter how weak her raise. If she has two losers in that suit, then she should use her judgment: With a maximum raise, she should bid game, but with a minimum

raise, she should go back to three of the major. And if she has three losers in the help suit, then she should definitely go back to three of the major even if she has maximum values for the initial raise.

The exception: When 5–6–7 should be 4–5–6

Long ago, I came to a conclusion: 5–6–7 loser count doesn't work well when the opener's hand specifically has a five-card suit and a four-card suit. In those situations, I strongly advise lowering your sights a trick and use 4–5–6 loser count. That is, with four losers bid game, with five losers try for game, and with six or more losers just pass.

Exception to the exception

Not to make you crazy, but if your high cards are all aces and kings, then ignore the above exception. Go ahead and use 5–6–7 loser count.

Mel's "Compete Count" utilizes loser count

What in the world is Mel's Compete Count? Well, MCC is a handy-dandy way to guide you in a situation where you're bidding your tail off, the opponents are fighting you every step of the way, and dopey partner is sitting there like a bump on a log putting out green card after green card. Just how much can you go it alone? Here's an example. You hold:

♠7 ♥A Q 6 ♦A K Q 10 7 2 ♣K 9 3

and open 1♦. LHO overcalls 1♠ and partner passes. RHO raises to 2♠, so you try 3♦. LHO continues with 3♠ which is followed by two passes. Now what?

Should you keep fighting? You should if – by presuming partner can cover just one of your losers (is that too much to ask for?) – you have as many estimated winners as tricks you would be contracting for if you bid once more. Here, you have four estimated losers. If partner can cover one of them, you'd have only three losers, so contracting for 10 tricks (i.e., three losers) should be in the ballpark. So it's OK to bid 4♦ (actually, double is better), but pass is too conservative.

But if we change the hand ever so slightly – let's make the ♥A Q 6 into the ♥A J 6 – now you have one additional loser, and bidding more would probably be too much.

You can use Mel's Compete Count on one-suiters like this or on two-suiters (5–5, 6–5), but it is not really meant for balanced hands.

What I do do, and what I don't do

Some players use the hardline, full-bore loser count idea. They say – quoting LTC theory – that because there are three estimated losers in each suit, and each partner has four suits, each partner has at most 12 losers, and so the partnership has 24 losers in all. True enough.

Then they go on to explain that because loser-count theory says that a minimum opening bid usually reflects seven losers, if a fit is found and the responder has seven losers, that means there are only 14 losers between the two hands. And if you subtract from 24, there must, therefore, be 10 combined winners. So loser-count crazies bid a lot of games. But things are not so simple. Suppose you hold:

♠K J 9 5 ♥8 6 3 ♦9 ♣K Q 7 4 3

Partner opens 1♦, and you respond 1♠. Partner raises to 2♠. Now what?

Strict loser count tells us that because we have seven losers – and so does partner – there are 14 total losers, and therefore there must be 10 total winners. So if you're an LTC purist, you bid 4♠. You wait anxiously for the sight of the dummy, and, after the ♥Q opening lead, you are too often disappointed when partner tables:

♠A 8 6 2 ♥K 10 2 ♦K Q 8 3 ♣J 5.

Presuming the ♥A lies over the king, there are at least five top losers and maybe six, unless the spades lie very favorably for you. Even if partner has the ♥A instead of the king, full-bore LTC will have failed miserably.

Below is another example from the February 2017 issue of The Bridge World, the venerable bridge magazine. One of its features asks a panel of expert bridge players what they would do in certain situations. It's like the It's Your Call feature in the Bridge Bulletin that I participate in each month.

♠K Q 10 4 ♥8 7 3 2 ♦K Q 5 ♣J 8

Partner opens 1♦, you bid 1♥, and partner rebids 2♥. Your turn.

Full-bore LTC devotees would say, "Well, I have a seven-loser hand. Partner has seven losers for her minimum opening bid, so that's 14 losers. There must be 10 winners, so I will bid 4♥."

Well, the expert Bridge World panel didn't quite see it that way. Out of the 24 panelists, six passed 2♥ and 18 tried for game. Not one bid game, even though full-bore LTC would tell them to do so. So you can see that although full-bore LTC analysis is superficially appealing, the best players in the country don't seem to think you should follow it blindly. Neither do I. Why? Because it just doesn't work often enough to justify its use in situations like this. So use LTC selectively. Unless you like losing. ■

Mel Colchamiro of Merrick NY is a Grand Life Master and bridge instructor.