

TO BID OR
NOT TO BID



The LAW of Total Tricks

LARRY COHEN

*Over 50,000
copies sold!*

Master Point Press on the Internet

www.masterpointpress.com

Our main site, with information about our books and software, reviews and more.

www.masteringbridge.com

Our site for bridge teachers and students – free downloadable support material for our books, helpful articles, forums and more.

www.ebooksbridge.com

Purchase downloadable electronic versions of MPP books.

www.bridgeblogging.com

Read and comment on regular articles from MPP authors and other bridge notables.

In memory of Nathan Cohen

Thanks to

Randy Baron, Marty Bergen, David Berkowitz, Kitty Bethe, Herb Cohen, Jon Cohen, Neil Cohen, Paul Cohen, Susie Cohen, Allan Falk, Harold Feldheim, Thomas Goodwin, Matthew Granovetter, Mike Lawrence, Eric Leong, Pat Lilly, Edwin Kantar, Robin Kay, Alex McCallum, Eric Rodwell, Om Sundar Sayenju, Paul Shapiro, Stan Sterenberg, Frank Stewart, Alan Truscott, and Steve Weinstein

Edited by Karen McCallum

© 1992, 2002 Larry Cohen

All rights reserved. It is illegal to reproduce any portion of this material, except by special arrangement with the publisher. Reproduction of this material without authorization, by any duplication process whatsoever, is a violation of copyright.

Master Point Press

331 Douglas Ave.

Toronto, Ontario Canada

M5M 1H2 (416) 781-0351

Websites: www.masterpointpress.com

www.masteringbridge.com

www.bridgeblogging.com

www.ebooksbridge.com

Email: info@masterpointpress.com

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Cohen, Larry, 1959-

To bid or not to bid: the LAW of total tricks

ISBN 978-1-55494-022-6

1. Contract bridge — Bidding I. Title

GV1282.4.C64 2002 795.41'52 C2002-901833-1

MPP Editor

Cover and Interior design

Interior format and copyediting

Ray Lee

Olena S. Sullivan

Deanna Bourassa

Contents

	Foreword by Marty Bergen	4
	Introduction	5
Chapter 1	What is the LAW?	7
Chapter 2	Applying the LAW	23
Chapter 3	Minor Adjustments	53
Chapter 4	On the Proper-level	59
Chapter 5	Off the Proper-level	89
Chapter 6	Double Trouble	111
Chapter 7	Notrump and the LAW	143
Chapter 8	Maxims	153
Chapter 9	Major Adjustments	175
Chapter 10	Is There a Downside?	199
Chapter 11	The LAW in the World	205
	Glossary	229
	Duplicate Scoring Table	235
	IMP Table	236
	Players Index	237
	Bibliography	239

FOREWORD

June, 1969, was an important month in my life. I got married, moved into a new apartment, graduated college and read a bridge article.

What's the big deal about the bridge article? If anyone had told me that there was something in my mailbox which would have a dramatic effect on my life, I'd have called the bomb squad! But, there was no one to warn me, so all I knew was that my monthly *Bridge World* had arrived. My bridge life would never be the same...

The article, entitled *The Law of Total Tricks* by Jean René Vernes, suggested a revolutionary idea. According to Verne, in the area of competitive bidding, trumps are everything! I was fascinated by the idea. I read and reread the article countless times. It was a revelation. I couldn't wait to test it out at the table. And I loved to pore through hand records after the session to observe the Law of Total Tricks in action. Although it didn't take long for me to become a believer, I've never ceased to be impressed by its accuracy.

It annoyed me in those days to be repeatedly confronted with the puzzling behavior of other expert players. They reacted quite differently to what, by then, had become simply the 'LAW' to my now obedient bridge brain. For the most part, they were unwilling to go along with the idea. Instead, they stubbornly preferred to back their judgment. Fortunately, for me, more of them were opponents than partners.

In 1979, another important milestone... I met Larry Cohen, who was to become one of my best friends and most successful bridge partners. Larry was captivated by the Law of Total Tricks, just as I had been ten years before. Our partnership methods were designed specifically to utilize the principles dictated by the LAW. He became an eager disciple, and a skilled practitioner.

Larry and I both have preached the LAW ever since, whenever a chance happens to present itself — writing, lecturing and teaching the concepts to anyone who will listen. We've been nothing less than delighted to have discovered a simple and effective tool which serves to make certain bridge decisions

trivial. The time to share the secrets with bridge players everywhere is long overdue.

Larry has set down the principles in a clear, orderly and concise manner, with realistic suggestions on how to incorporate LAW ideas into your own bidding methods. A serious reader will derive a great deal of usable knowledge if he takes it to heart.

Larry's book won't do anything to help your card play - there's not a backwash squeeze to be found. But then, you're not likely to encounter one of those at the table anytime soon. What you will see, every time you play, are innumerable competitive bidding decisions. The practical advice contained in these pages will help you get those right - time after time. Obey the LAW and make winning decisions - that's what To Bid or Not to Bid is all about.

Marty Bergen
May, 1992

INTRODUCTION

To bid or not to bid. That is the question faced in every competitive auction. Should I sell out to the opponents, or bid one more? Should I defend, or try to win the contract for our side? I first became aware of the concepts discussed in this book back in 1979, when I met the prolific Marty Bergen at the Cincinnati Fall Nationals. Always eager to share his original ideas, Marty monopolized the dinner conversation for several hours, expounding upon his personal favorite - the Law of Total Tricks. I was hooked.

Several years later, Marty and I started our partnership and based our entire system upon the Law of Total Tricks. More than anything else, I attribute our successes of the 1980's to the LAW. Sure, we're both good card players and good constructive bidders, but so are thousands of other experts. What most helped us win seven National Championships as partners was our competitive decisions.

In this modern era of bridge, opponents very rarely give your side a free run in the bidding. Most decisions have to be made in competition — often after preempts. To rely solely on judgment is unpleasant at best. The world’s best frequently go wrong when faced with competitive bidding decisions. Because the opponents have taken away the bidding room, it often boils down to nothing more than guesswork.

Fortunately, for Marty and me, we didn’t have to rely on judgment or guesswork. We let the Law of Total Tricks make our competitive decisions, and found it to be far superior to any bridge player’s judgment.

Experts are renowned for their big egos. They believe that no law can substitute for experience and a keen sense of evaluation and deduction. What they don’t realize is that the Law of Total Tricks is at the foundation of every bridge deal, and is far more accurate than their judgement.

I want to share the LAW with not only the disdainful experts, but with bridge players at every-level, including beginners. If I were to teach bridge to a novice, I would consider the Law of Total Tricks to be a fundamental concept — imperative learning material.

The definition of the LAW, and how it works, is the subject of the first chapter. In Chapter Two, you will begin to see why the LAW is of utmost importance in a competitive auction.

If any player were to read only those two chapters, I can promise that his or her bridge game would improve dramatically. However, there are many fine points as well as corollaries to the LAW. The rest of the book is devoted to fine-tuning. At the end, I’ve included a chapter on World Championship decisions where the Law of Total Tricks came into play (or should have).

I believe that the Law of Total Tricks will revolutionize the way bridge players bid in competition. Such is my belief that I fear that too many people will read this book, and make the right decision the next time they sit down to play at my table.

Larry Cohen

WHAT IS THE LAW?



CHAPTER 1

1978...NEW ORLEANS – WORLD PAIR OLYMPIAD

Brazilian star, Marcello Branco, was well on his way to winning the World Pairs Championship when he picked up:

♠ A K Q 8 6 ♥ 10 7 6 3 ♦ J 8 ♣ A 10

With nobody vulnerable he dealt and opened the bidding with one spade. After a two heart overcall, he was raised to two spades. His right hand opponent jumped to four hearts and it was up to him:

Branco
1♠
??

Oppt.
2♥

Cintra
2♠

Oppt.
4♥

Can you make a better decision than Branco made? By the time you reach the end of Chapter Two you'll know what to do.*

The Law of Total Tricks can best be understood by first looking at a very ordinary bridge deal:

♠ 8 5	♠ K Q J 2	♠ 6 4 3			
♥ 8 6 5	♥ K Q 3	♥ 9 7 4 2			
♦ K Q 2	♦ 8 5 4	♦ J 10 6			
♣ A J 10 4 3	♣ 8 6 2	♣ K Q 7			
	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ A 10 9 7				
	♥ A J 10				
	♦ A 9 7 3				
	♣ 9 5				

On this deal, North-South will probably play in spades, and take nine tricks (losing two tricks in each minor suit). If East-West were to play the hand in clubs, they would take seven tricks (losing two spades, three hearts, and the ace of diamonds).

* It's too early to explain how the LAW would guide you to the winning decision. If you simply must know the answer now, see page 33.

Even though both sides can't play the hand at the same time, we will, for argument's sake, say that on this deal there are **16 total tricks** – North-South have nine tricks in spades, and East-West have seven tricks in clubs.

Now, let's look at how many trumps there are in this deal. North-South, if they play in spades, have eight trumps. East-West, if they play in clubs, also have eight trumps. Even though both suits can't be trump at the same time, we will again, for argument's sake, say that on this deal there are **16 total trumps** – eight for North-South in spades, and eight for East-West in clubs.

Is it a coincidence that there are 16 *total tricks* and 16 *total trumps*? Not at all. In fact, this phenomenon is the basis for the Law of Total Tricks, and the entire contents of this book.

The Total Number of Tricks available on any deal
is approximately equal to the
Total Number of Trumps.

Using its simplest definition, The Law of Total Tricks states: **Total Number of Tricks** means the combined Total Tricks available to both sides (assuming best play and defense) if they play in their best (longest) fit. For example, if North-South can take ten tricks in their 5-4 (longest) spade fit, and East-West can take seven tricks in their 4-4 (longest) diamond fit, then the Total Number of Tricks would be 10+7, or 17.

Total Number of Trumps means the combined total of cards in both sides' best trump fit. For example, if North-South's best (longest) fit is a 5-4 spade fit, and East-West's best (longest) fit is a 4-4 diamond fit, then the Total Number of Trumps would be 9+8, or 17.

If North-South's longest fit is ten cards, and East-West's longest fit is nine cards, then the LAW says that there are 19 Total Tricks available. Those 19 tricks can be divided in many different ways – maybe North-South can take 11, and East-West can take eight – or vice versa – but the *Total Number of Tricks* is fixed at 19.