

Pointless Remarks: Bids That Don't Rely Upon Point Count

1. Use loser count to bid unbalanced hands.
2. Base raises upon your ability to cover opener's losers

My Pointless Remarks will show a better method than point count for gauging the strength of a hand and for determining when to bid and when to stop, especially in competitive auctions. The method counts losers in the opening hand and covers for those losers in the companion hand.

The Losing Trick Count was first identified in 1910 and "revived" about every 20 years since then. The major advance was in the treatment by George Rosenkrantz in 1975, who identified loser and cover relationships. Recently, the loser-cover concept has become the foundation for various bidding systems

The other practitioners of the method don't count covers. Instead they count losers in both hands and apply a formula based upon a theory that is approximately correct most of the time. Here you will not be exposed to that view. See recent books by Ron Klinger if you must.

History and Theory

- As early as 1910, Auction Bridge analysts noticed that the playing strength in a suit showed a systematic relationship with the number of Losers in a hand. Good opening bids had 7, better hands had 6, etc.
- In 1935, a theory was propagated by F Dudley Courtenay to account for the relationship.
- Eventually, some players transitioned from a recognition of the empirical fact to a positive recommendation that opening bids should have 7 or fewer losers. It works because normal raises will lead to contracts that are within a finesse of making.
- In 1975, loser count was supplemented by the idea that responder should evaluate his bids according to how many covers his hand could provide for opener's losers.
- By 1995, some players began to use the loser-cover concept to the virtual exclusion of high card point methods of gauging strength.

Vital Info for Hand Strength

Count Losers – one for each hole in your hand*

- Ax = 1L; Axx= 2L; Kx= 1L; Qxx= 2L; Qx= 2L; Jxx= 3L; xxxx=3L [max of 3 in each suit];AQ = 1/2
- Normal opener = 7 Losers & 2 Defensive Tricks
- Invite with 6 L if raised to 2; Bid game over limit raise by partner
- With 5 L, bid game over raise, cue bid for slam over stronger raise
- Open 2NT with 5-6 L and 19-22 HCP
- Open 2 Clubs with 3-4 L

* Add to loser count if you don't have enough trumps to ruff out the opposing high cards

The main advantages of loser count assessment are not apparent on the surface. What loser count gives you in actuality are:

1. How many high cards you have.
2. Supporting honors.
3. Suit length information.
4. Side suit quality.
5. Ruffing potential.
6. Improved assessment of queens and jacks.

With extreme distributions, it is possible to have few losers on a hand with very few high cards. An opening bid should still have a couple of quick tricks, however, you will often open distributional hands with fewer high card points than some players would think decent.

The method allows you to tell your partner what you have and which supporting cards will be valuable. His job is simplified also. He just needs to tell you what he has and where it is, by examining supporting cards and ruffing values that can be matched to your gaps in strength.

Losers and covers match up

East passes – 8 losers,
West opens – 6 losers
East invites – 3 covers,
probably using a Drury bid.

If East uses Drury, West
will bid the other major,
both to show where he
needs help and to take a
chance on finding a better
fit in the other major.
With fitting cards in both
majors, East may bid 4.

Bd: 10	♠ A5	Optimum EW 140
Vul: All	♥ Q1064	
Dlr: East	♦ K632	
	♣ J86	
♠ Q8642	N	♠ KJ9
♥ AJ753	W 10 E	♥ K92
♦ 8	S	♦ Q1074
♣ A10		♣ K92
10	♠ 1073	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
11 HCP 12	♥ 8	N 7 7 4 3 5
7	♦ AJ95	S 7 7 4 3 5
	♣ Q7543	E 5 5 9 9 8
		W 5 5 9 9 8

It is important to pass in 1st/2nd position with 8 losers, unless you have compensating high card strength. All responding bids assume that you have no more than 7 L, so each contract is likely to be a trick short, if you open light. The loser count does not correspond too closely to HCP; some 11 point hands meet opening bid requirements, while some 13 HCP hands do not.

When partner has passed, an opening bid might lack a rebid, might lack two quick tricks, or have 8 losers. A good reason to bid is a strong suit holding, such as a sturdy 4 card major, to get a lead, if the opponents outbid you.

Some unbalanced hands are deceptive, especially 4-4-4-1 and 5-5-2-1 hands. They look good on the surface because they do not have many quick losers, but they also may lack sufficient trump length to cope with repeated forces – the hands can be shortened in trump, so that declarer cannot both draw trump and ruff cards in the short suit. The hand above should probably add a loser for poor trump control and accordingly, decline a game invitation, unless partner shows 4 trump.

Hands such as 5431 play much better than 4441, especially when one of the shorter suits becomes trump: On a 4-4 fit, low cards can be ruffed on one side, while trumps are drawn on the other. The five card suit can be more valuable as a source of length tricks than as a trump suit. The strongest normal pattern is 6-4. A fit in either suit is likely to make a game with very limited high card strength.

Raising

Auction: 1S – 2H – ??

Evaluation: East has 2 ½ to 3 covers for a spade contract. If West has seven losers, then East has an invitation with some safety at the three level.

Opener has only 6L, so he can accept the invitation, knowing that game should be no worse than a finesse.

The loser-cover approach gets the same result in almost the same way as anyone else, as it usually should.

Bd: 8	♠ 6	Optimum EW 430
Vul: None	♥ AKJ109	
Dlr: West	♦ A1073	
	♣ 1085	
♠ AQ1092	N	♠ K53
♥ 75	W 8 E	♥ Q83
♦ K942	S	♦ Q8
♣ KJ		♣ A9762
12	♠ J874	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
13HCP11	♥ 642	N 2 4 6 2 3
4	♦ J65	S 3 4 6 3 3
	♣ Q43	E 10 8 7 10 10
		W 10 8 7 10 10

Most hand evaluation and bidding methods lead to the same result on most hands. It couldn't be otherwise, since all methods try to achieve the optimum result on each hand.

The loser-cover approach has accuracy that is difficult to match by bulk methods of hand evaluation. Using bidding methods that indicate where one hand needs fillers and which also devalue high cards in the wrong places, you match other methods when they are right and exceed them when they fail to discount duplicated values.

On a few hands, you find exactly what you need and get to good contracts on dead-minimum values. It is memorable when your approach gets to a solid game or slam and your competition passes the hand out. However, those triumphs are rare. The real bread-and-butter hands are those where you bid gently on misfitting or dubious cards and watch your opponents sail into hopeless contracts.

Vital Info – Trump Fit

- They have 8 – We might not reciprocate
- They have nine – Things are fine.
- > How it works: we have 26 cards. Four cards are in the opponent's suit. The other 22 must be in the three remaining suits.
- > If those suits divide 8-7-7, we have a little fit. The cards might divide 8-8-6 or 9-7-6, etc., but we must have 8 or more cards in the same suit.
- If they have 10 – bid again. We must have a 9 card fit or two 8 card fits, if we can find them.

Normal auctions are contested auctions. Fit allows you to know when to compete and when to quit. When your opponents bid, they give you information about your partner's hand. When you bid, you may tell your opponents that they have fitting cards, as well.

If the opponents do not have a fit – common in forcing NT auctions - it is dangerous to interfere, since your partner probably has a better fit with an opponent than with you.

For defensive purposes, you should realize that the mathematical constraints hold for any two hands. If you have five card support for one of your opponents, then your partner must have a big fit with the other opponent. If he is sitting over the opponent, think about penalties. If not, avoid them.

What to bid?

West opens 1 S. East can choose an honest pass. A similar tactic is to bid 1NT* to conceal the fit and to suggest that East has a few cards and a misfit. He could also make a raise to 2 S, which does not guarantee N-S a fit. A preemptive raise to 3 S makes N-S start their search at a high level, but they now would know that they must have a fit. At this vulnerability, a jump to 4 S is suicidal.

Bd: 16	♠ Q96	
Vul: E/W	♥ A964	Optimum
Dlr: West	♦ A98	NS 430
	♣ Q63	
♠ AK1072	N	♠ J8543
♥ Q1087	W 16 E	♥ 52
♦ K65	S	♦ Q104
♣ 7		♣ J84
12	♠ --	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
12HCP 4	♥ KJ3	N 10 10 8 5 10
12	♦ J732	S 11 10 9 5 10
	♣ AK10952	E 2 2 3 8 3
		W 2 2 3 8 3

On either of the low-ball E-W approaches, N-S might try for a low-level penalty double instead of bidding their own game. Over 2 S, south might bid 3 clubs, which N would probably pull to 3NT. It's their optimum, if south is the trusting sort.

Over 3 S, South will know there is a fit. He will probably double. N may leave it in for +200, pull to 3NT for 430 or try for the heart game – down one or two, unless S pulls to 5 C.

Since partner will play you for solid values when you are vulnerable, I think you should avoid any of the support bids, lest you mislead CHO. The 1NT* looks like the better option, given that your immediate goal is to keep your opponents from bidding a game. Your secondary intent is to make a part score. Over 1NT, South will bid 2 or 3 clubs. Partner would double 2 clubs and you can bid spades. With luck, the opponents may settle for a club part score.

Food for thought: Playing in a team game, suicide can be painless. If you bid 4 spades on the east hand, almost any south would “take out insurance” by bidding 5 clubs, rather than let you play a vulnerable game. If their contract fails, east gets a big reward. If the opponents double instead, they pick up only 3 IMPs, provided that your teammates bid one of their successful games. Playing in a pairs game, east should avoid this tactic.

losers

North has two quick tricks and an easy rebid after a 1 Club opening.

East also has 2 QT but will have a rebid problem unless he opens 1 heart.

Several pairs passed this out. One pair bid well, for a cold 4 H, with a total of 19 HCP.

Bd: 16	♠ K1076	Optimum EW 650
Vul: E/W	♥ 104	
Dlr: West	♦ Q104	
	♣ AQ63	
♠ A5432	N	♠ --
♥ KJ653	W 16 E	♥ A987
♦ 53	S	♦ KJ982
♣ 5		♣ K1097
11	♠ QJ98	♣♦♥♠ N
8 HCP11	♥ Q2	N 6 3 2 5 4
10	♦ A76	S 6 2 2 5 3
	♣ J842	E 7 10 11 8 8
		W 7 10 11 8 8

From Mark's Friday game on 17 April 2015. The west hand lacks 2QT, so should pass in 1st seat. Hands that fail to make the grade can be opened in third seat if they fail only one of three criteria: loser count, defensive tricks, rebid.

North's hand has the potential to find a good spade contract, if west passes. Against vul EW, the hand is a good 1C opening, because of the spade rebid. The 5-0 spades and bad location of high cards would lead to -150.

The east hand is a mandatory opening bid. Two QT and 6 L. I recommend 4 card major opening bids and Drury for third hand. If you are outbid, you will get a reasonable lead. It's generally more helpful to your side and more obstructive than bidding a weak three card minor. The major suit prepares for an expected spade bid by your partner on this hand. If there is a heart fit, this is one way to find it.

If you start 1D, partner says 1S, you say 2C – partner is in a quandary. If you reverse to 2H over 1S, you get lucky this time but could easily do worse. One solution is to make 4th suit natural and non-forcing by a passed hand. That might be the best you can do if you refuse to anticipate the problem by bidding 1H to start with.

The south hand meets the rule of 14 for a fourth seat opening [points plus spades] but the hand has nine losers – a clear-cut pass.

Vital Info for Responder

- How many losers has partner shown?
- Do we know how many cover cards we have?
- Can we find out, if we don't know?
- Method for assessing covers: Count one for each face card where partner has known length. Count one for ace or king, unless partner has known shortage. Count $\frac{1}{2}$ for outside queen. Count one for singleton, count $\frac{1}{2}$ for doubleton.
- Bid according to how many covers you have, not how many points.

Partner of opener checks the quality of his hand when he has a trump fit.

He counts covers and potential covers.

Unless the bidding reveals that partner is short in the suit where your good cards are located, you count 1 Cover for each ace and king in your hand and $\frac{1}{2}$ cover for each queen. A queen is promoted to a full cover, if partner is known to have length in the suit.

Simple raise = 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 covers

Limit raise = 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 covers

Game – 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ or more covers

If the opener has 7 losers, then each contract is normally no worse than a finesse.

If either hand is substantially stronger, then control bidding will reveal whether the hands have cards in the right places for a higher level contract.

Misfit?

North bids 1 H. If South is leery of bidding on an apparent misfit, he may mess this hand up badly.

Note that S has a six loser hand. That is a good opening bid. If he bids an honest 2 C, then reverses over partner's heart rebid, into 3 diamonds, N will begin to appreciate the fine fit in two suits. It should be easy to get to 5 C but not so easy to bid the 25 point slam.

Some players might bid the mighty spade suit and land in 3NT.

Bd: 17	♠ Q		
Vul: None	♥ AQ1096		Optimum
Dlr: North	♦ K105		NS 920
	♣ K632		
♠ AJ1086	N	♠ K93	
♥ K83	W 17 E	♥ J7542	
♦ Q83	S	♦ 976	
♣ 109		♣ J7	
14	♠ 7542	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N	
10HCP 5	♥ --	N 12 11 9 8 8	
11	♦ AJ42	S 12 11 9 8 8	
	♣ AQ854	E 0 2 4 5 3	
		W 0 1 4 5 3	

Playing a 2/1 GF system, it can be difficult to determine the value of your cards. Are they good enough for a GF?

If you use the 7 loser and 2 QT criteria for an opening bid, that's good enough, even on an apparent misfit, since your partner may have support for either of your suits, even though you don't like his. If you distort your hand by bidding spades, you have little hope of finding a minor suit fit later.

Bidding note: Some 2/1 GF players always bid out their pattern, so they would immediately raise a club response to three. Others prefer to rebid their major, without promising extra length [though they often have it], to avoid using space unnecessarily until they know partner's intent. This would work better on the given hand if partner intended to show a balanced GF with neutral heart support and a spade control. The immediate raise of a minor would be made on better hand, typically one that is more two-suited than the north hand.

Rule-breaker

West has the rare 8 loser hand that must be opened. At some point, the presence of high cards can overcome the deficiency caused by flat distribution.

Still, the very solid 6 L hand held by East is barely enough to make a game, opposite the bad West hand. A normal opening bid has 4 covers for partner. The West hand has only 3 ½ counting the doubleton.

Bd: 27	♠ 42		
Vul: None	♥ K9765		Optimum
Dir: South	♦ AK7		EW 420
	♣ Q72		
♠ 653	N	♠ AKQJ9	
♥ AJ4	W 27 E	♥ Q32	
♦ Q6	S	♦ 9842	
♣ AK1096		♣ 3	
12	♠ 1087	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N	
14HCP12	♥ 108	N 5 5 5 3 5	
2	♦ J1053	S 5 5 5 3 5	
	♣ J854	E 8 7 7 9 8	
		W 8 8 8 10 8	

A heart lead will almost certainly doom the contract, if it is played by east. Note that, if west stretches his hand to open 1NT [not recommended with 8 L unless a third or fourth hand opener], then a transfer sequence would make the spade game good against any lead.

Declared in the East, one must play carefully to avoid going down on repeated trump leads. On a trump lead, you should cross to dummy and lead a low diamond from the board. This should allow you to ruff one diamond loser and discard the other on clubs. The idea behind the diamond play is to let north win the second diamond, after his trumps are removed by his partner. The plan fails if south has both the ace and king of diamonds and three trumps. If you lead to the queen at trick two, north can win it, lead a second trump, then let south win the next diamond to play a third round of trumps.

Example of losers covered

Board 2 from 2-17-2015

South may drive to the best contract by opening 1 C and reversing over 1 S.

Partner may be tempted to steer toward 3NT, or persist with spades but with such good controls, should be thinking club slam. For the reverse, opener should have 5 losers. Subtract 3 ½ covers and you get a hand that should be no worse than a finesse for six clubs.

Bd: 2	♠ A109654	Optimum NS 1370
Vul: N/S	♥ Q9	
Dir: East	♦ 102	
	♣ AK10	
♠ KJ	N	♠ Q8732
♥ J10763	W 2 E	♥ K85
♦ Q876	S	♦ J94
♣ 85		♣ J2
13	♠ --	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
7 HCP 7	♥ A42	N 12 10 8 9 10
13	♦ AK53	S 12 10 8 9 10
	♣ Q97643	E 1 3 5 4 3
		W 0 3 5 4 3

This hand shows how to use the information partner supplies...provided that partner supplies the right information. South might be tempted to underbid over the expected spade response. If he does, the slam dies unborn.

The reverse is based on loser count, rather than high cards. It should show five L, so partner only needs two covers to make game probable in a major. A minor-oriented hand needs something extra. The suit length is key. Most people have adopted a technique in response that makes a raise of the opener's second suit or a return to his first a game force.

The GF only promises a couple of cover cards, since opener is showing a shortage of losers. After the GF, opener may bid controls or use a key card asking method to find that all suits are controlled against two quick losers.

A simple but effective method of rebidding after a reverse is given by Billy Miller in a recent Bulletin column. A suit rebid is forcing one round. A raise of partner's second suit OR a return to his first suit are both forcing to game. A 2NT bid is natural, with a stopper in the unbid suit. A bid of the fourth suit denies the ability to make any of the other possible calls.

How to bid pointlessly

- P – 1C – 1S – dbl
- 2S – 4H - P – P
- P [or 4S]

Bd: 1	♠ QJ82	
Vul: None	♥ 654	Optimum
Dlr: North	♦ QJ96	NS -100
	♣ 105	
♠ 93	N	♠ 104
♥ A1073	W 1 E	♥ KQJ8
♦ 8752	S	♦ 3
♣ KJ8		♣ AQ7642
6	♠ AK765	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
8 HCP12	♥ 92	N 3 9 2 9 3
14	♦ AK104	S 3 9 2 9 3
	♣ 93	E 10 4 10 4 4
		W 10 4 10 4 4

Opener has 5 losers, so a very good hand, despite having only 12 HCP. South has a nice overcall, but expects to make only 9 tricks after partner's minimum raise [6L – 2C= 4L].

East has an obvious game bid over partner's negative double of one spade. The negative double should show constructive values [7-9 "points"] and better yet, should provide two useful high cards to cover your losers. The danger in bidding game is that partner may have her high cards in diamonds, where they would be wasted. Then the game would depend upon whether you have a club loser to go with the three tricks you expect to lose in spades and diamonds.

At our table, I bid three, expecting opponents would bid three spades; then I would bid four and hope the opponents would be goaded into doubling, or at least, would be unwilling to bid on. Actually, they passed out three hearts.

The bidding may take a word of explanation. When you are competing against the master suit, just bidding your game is not usually enough. You also have to consider whether opponents have a cheap sacrifice – or even a make in their own suit. Here, a singleton club is not unlikely, so you don't know that you can set four spades.

- Communicate information about your needs
Partner counts covers for your losers
- The difference is the number of tricks you expect to lose playing a trump contract

BIDDING:

P - 1D - 2S - dbl
4S - P - P - P

Bd: 20	♠ J9	
Vul: All	♥ 64	Optimum
Dlr: West	♦ AKJ104	NS -500
	♣ Q1084	
♠ 10652	N	♠ AKQ843
♥ AJ5	W 20 E	♥ Q102
♦ 8732	S	♦ Q9
♣ A2		♣ 75
11	♠ 7	♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N
9 HCP13	♥ K9873	N 9 9 7 3 3
7	♦ 65	S 9 9 7 3 3
	♣ KJ963	E 4 4 6 10 8
		W 4 4 6 10 8

If you have six losers and your partner covers three of them, you can make 10 tricks. Easy. If your partner's bid promises a 4-loser hand [2 Club opening] and you have three covers, you can make six. Bidding just consists of finding whether your cards are in the right place and detecting whether your good features duplicate partner's. [Easy to say, hard to do.]

(Board 20 9MAR2015 Charity Game): The "weak" jump overcall must sensibly vary depending upon vulnerability. The jump bid may be used more freely after partner has passed. Your passed-hand partner trusts you to have no more than six losers, so she has a good raise.

A loser-cover evaluation shows two certain tricks and a possible ruff in clubs. If partner has the expected six losers, then $6 - 2\frac{1}{2} = 3\frac{1}{2}$ L => game should depend upon a finesse.

Vital info for NT Contracts

- An opening balanced bid should have 7 Losers or less, and 12+ to 14- high card points–
- A good NT hand [strong NT] has 7 or fewer L, 14 or more HCP, and a source of tricks:
- > Either a five card suit or 5+ Controls [A=2;K=1]
- Partner assesses covers and length tricks.
Opposite a balanced hand, any queen is a probable cover, since partner has no singletons.

My notes here are based upon years of experience playing both weak and strong NT systems; my experience and the experience of others.

The approach devalues Jacks. They are not counted, except in combination with other high cards – AJ10, KJ10, QJ9, etc. This means that we promote some 14 point hands with quality trick-taking cards and demote some 15 point hands.

In responding, we would invite game with three good cards [KKQ=8 HCP] but would not with only two working cards [AA or AAJ]. Losers still lose in NT contracts, so you need to cover three of the expected seven to make nine tricks. If you find a major, then partner must cope with one extra loser, usually by ruffing in dummy.

Playing for matchpoints, it is now common to open any 12 point hand. Do not open such a hand if it has 8 losers, unless partner has already passed. Any contract is likely to be one trick short, since all responses and raises are calibrated to a normal 7 loser opener.

The same idea of promoting hands to the next higher category and demoting hands with suspect values holds for stronger hands also. In competition, knowing the basics about loser count and covers permits you to bid based upon probabilities – likely patterns and likely loser/cover combinations, even though the interference might prevent you from obtaining exact information.

Guide for Loser Estimation

- Opening in suit followed by 2NT rebid = six losers.
- Open 2NT = five or six losers.
- Open 2 clubs = 3 or 4 losers; 2NT rebid typically 4 losers; major suit rebid four losers; minor suit rebid = 3 losers
- Overall of weak two = six losers typically
- Jump overcall – Equal vulnerability 6 L [5L if VUL vs Not]
- Two level overcall – Equal vulnerability 6 L
- Open and reverse – 5 losers
- Open and jump rebid – 6 losers
- Open and jump-shift – 5 losers

EQUIVALENCIES for Strong Hands

You can interpret your partner's bids according to how much help he needs from you:

System Considerations: You can make more accurate judgments if you adopt bidding methods that reveal singletons. Over a simple major suit raise, you also need a method of identifying whether partner's cards cover three losers.

If you are alert, your opponent's bids can also reveal how much help they need. When you see dummy, you should be able to use a loser-cover analysis to see what defense might work. For matchpoints, this might help you decide whether to cash out or wait for tricks.

References: F Dudley Courtenay "The Losing Trick Count" , 1935– [reprint available through Barnes and Noble, on-line.]

George Rosenkrantz "Win With Romex" – 1975 book, out of print
BridgeHands website "Losing Trick Count Hand Valuation "

Part I – counting L's

Part II – counting covers

Related Conventional Methods

- The best fit to the approach is Odd-Even Drury. Two Clubs shows 2 ½ to 3 covers and an odd number of trump OR a 12-13 HCP hand with 8 L and short trump. Opener replies 2D with either a bad hand OR a GF to find out which. Two diamonds by a passed hand shows 2 ½ - 3 covers and an even number of trumps. A jump to three of major by passed hand shows 5 card support and less than a Drury bid.
- Natural Game Tries use bids in a side suit to show where cards would be useful and ask, using 2NT, if opener prefers not to tell. The 2NT asks partner to bid game with 3 covers, to sign off with a 4333 or 4432 hand or to bid a side suit with either length [5+] or shortness in the side suit. Any game try implies a 6 loser hand.
- Direct and delayed splinter bids help to identify wasted high cards.
- Fit-jumps are more consistent with the theme than Bergen Raises.

There are more conventions than there are bridge players. It's best for practical purposes to limit yourself to a few that are needed frequently, unless you have a stable partner with a very good memory.

There are several forms of Drury, including a variety of two-way Drury methods. Two-way is good for estimating total tricks available and very good, if you frequently open four card majors as God intended. Drury comes up often, since most deals have approximately equal values in all four hands.

If you follow the advice about passing defective hands in 1st/2nd chair, then it is important to play some form of Drury, to avoid going down at the three level when you have opened a marginal hand and your partner lacks an opener too.

Game tries and conventional raises are more a matter of taste than a great systemic advantage for any method. You could easily play all day without either opportunity arising. Either you don't get to open a major, or partner has no fit or, almost always, the opponents mess up your chance to raise.