by Larry Cohen

Larry and the Law

Responding to 1♥ or 1♠

The full theory behind the Law of Total Tricks (the LAW) can be difficult to comprehend, but that doesn't mean we can't benefit from some of its results. In this series, champion Larry Cohen, who has popularized the LAW, shows how we can put it to practical use.

The Golden Rule

The Law of Total Tricks is a tool for competitive bidding. It's used when both sides *could* be competing for the contract. We use 'could' because sometimes we have to anticipate that the auction will become competitive, even if it isn't right now. That's the idea behind a preemptive opening bid, for example. We expect the auction will be competitive and want to make it difficult for the opponents to get into the bidding.

The basic guideline we use in competitive auctions is:

> **THE LAW'S COMPETITIVE GUIDELINE**
> Strive to compete to the level of the number of trumps held by the partnership.

Let's see when and how to apply this 'Golden Rule' if we are responder and partner opens 1♥ or 1♠.

Counting Trumps

As we saw in the previous article, a key to applying the LAW is to count the number of trumps in the combined partnership hands. When partner opens 1♥ or 1♠, we're off to a good start because *we can assume partner has five cards in the suit.* True, partner may have six or more, but we'll find that out later and can then re-adjust accordingly.

So, we simply add the number of cards we hold in the suit to the five promised by partner to give us the total number of trumps. If partner opens 1♥ and we have three-card support, we assume the partnership has eight trumps; if we have four-card support, we assume there are nine combined trumps, and so on.

When the LAW Doesn't Apply

The LAW only applies when we have a trump fit and the auction is competitive...or likely to become so. If we don't have a fit for partner, we aren't likely to be thinking about the LAW. Even if we have a fit, we don't usually have to worry about the LAW if our right-hand opponent passes partner's opening bid.

Instead, we use our standard methods to raise partner based on point count. It's important to give opener the correct information about our strength. So far, the auction is purely constructive. The deal is likely to belong to our side and we have to decide whether we belong in part-score, game, or slam. For example:

1♠

N W E S Pass

♠ Q 8 3
♥ K 10 7 3
♦ 10 8
♣ Q J 8 2
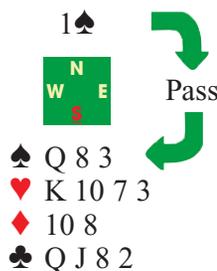
With this hand I simply raise to 2♠, showing three-card or longer support and about 6-10 points.

1♠

N W E S Pass

♠ Q 8 7 3
♥ K 10 3
♦ 10 8
♣ Q 8 3 2
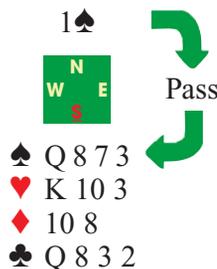
Even with four-card support for partner's major, I raise only to the two level when the hand falls into

the 6-10 point range. It's more important to let opener know about my point count than the number of trumps when we're trying to judge the correct level without any competition.

1♠

N W E S Pass

♠ Q 8 7 3
♥ K 10 3
♦ 10 8
♣ A Q 8 2
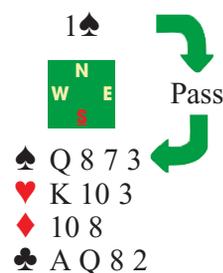
With four-card support and about 11-12 points, I make a limit raise to 3♠, inviting opener to bid game. I should have four trumps for a limit raise. With only three-card support, I can start with a new suit or a forcing 1NT.

1♠

N W E S Pass

♠ K 9 7 5 2
♥ 3
♦ 9 8 6
♣ 10 9 6 2
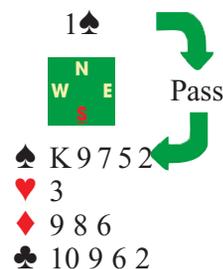
Only with a weak hand of about 0-6 high-card points and five or more trumps do I take preemptive action. I jump to 4♠ with this hand, anticipating that there will likely be competition if I bid less since the opponents likely have some strength and spade shortness.

This is the standard approach with such hands. With a hand worth 13 or more points in support of spades, we use our partnership methods to show a forcing raise, such as a Jacoby 2NT response.

When the Opponents Compete After We Raise

Although the number of trumps we hold isn't important when we make a simple raise to the two level, it does become significant if the opponents enter the auction. Suppose we are South and the auction begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
	1♥	Pass	2♥
Pass	Pass	3♣	?

I have nothing more to say with this hand, even though I'm a near maximum for my raise to 2♥.

♠ Q 8 4
♥ K 9 4
♦ K J 7 5
♣ 10 7 3

The LAW's Competitive Guideline says I can compete to the level corresponding to the number of combined trumps. With only three-card support, I can only count eight combined trumps, so I don't go beyond the two level, eight tricks.

This hand is a near minimum for the raise to 2♥. However, when the auction becomes competitive, I can safely go to the nine-trick level according to the LAW. I bid 3♥. Applying the LAW doesn't have to do with the number of points; it has to do with number of trumps.

♠ Q 8 4
♥ K 9 4 3
♦ J 7 5 2
♣ 10 7

After a Takeout Double

If the opponent on our right doubles partner's 1♥ or 1♠ opening, we're in a competitive auction right away, so the LAW applies. It doesn't really affect our raise to the two level—it still shows support and about 6-10 points—or our raise to the four level—it's still preemptive with five-card or longer support. However, it does have a major impact on our raise to the three level.

1♠

N
W E
S

Double

♠ 9 7 5 2
♥ 3
♦ 9 8 6 4
♣ 8 7 6 2
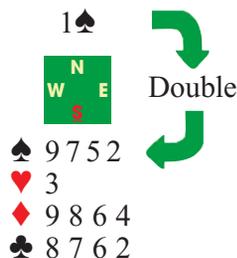
Not a single high card! With this hand, we would pass if East passed.

Yet the Competitive Guideline suggests that we strive to compete to the three level when the auction is competitive and we know there are nine combined trumps. I would make a preemptive jump to 3♠ with this hand! The complete deal might be something like this:

DECLARER
♠ K Q J 8 4
♥ A 10 9
♦ K Q 5 2
♣ K

♠ A 6 3   ♠ 10
♥ Q 8 6 5 2   ♥ K J 7 4
♦ 10 7   ♦ A J 3
♣ Q 10 4   ♣ A J 9 5 3

N
W E
S

DUMMY
♠ 9 7 5 2
♥ 3
♦ 9 8 6 4
♣ 8 7 6 2
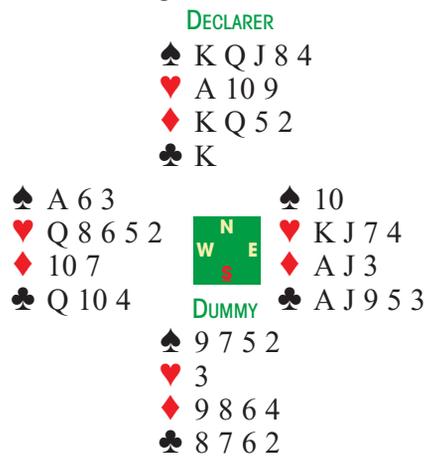
A jump to 3♠ could easily buy the contract, shutting East-West out of their easy 4♥ contract. We may or may not make 3♠—it's touch and go—but that's not critical. Without our jump to 3♠, West would bid hearts and East-West would easily reach game. The best we could then do would be to sacrifice in 4♠. Better to jump preemptively right away.

It's standard practice to treat a jump raise as preemptive after a takeout double, so what do we do if we have a limit raise? We could start with a redouble to show about 10 or more points, planning to show the support at our next opportunity. A popular modern approach is to use a jump to 2NT to show a limit raise or better in partner's suit after a takeout double. Our partnership can decide.

After an Overcall

The situation is similar if our right-hand opponent makes an overcall after partner's 1♥ or 1♠ opening bid. The responses at the two- and four-level don't change much, but a jump raise to the three level becomes preemptive instead of a limit raise.

This approach of following the LAW after an overcall has become so popular that it's no longer alertable in competitive events. It's considered standard practice.

1♥

N
W E
S

1♠

♠ 9 2
♥ Q J 7 5
♦ J 10 6 4
♣ 8 7 3

I would jump to 3♥ with this hand over East's overcall. Nine combined trumps; compete to the three level. It may keep West out of the auction; it may make it more difficult for East-West to decide if they belong in partscore or game; it may lead to a profitable sacrifice.

What if we have a limit raise? We show this with a cuebid of the opponents' suit, 2♠. That still allows us to stop in 3♥ if we don't have enough combined strength for game but lets partner know that we have values and are interested in getting to game. ◆

APPLYING THE LAW WHEN RESPONDING TO 1♥ OR 1♠

(The points in italics are those affected by the LAW.)

If right-hand opponent passes:
- Raise to the two level with 6–10 points and 3-card or longer support.
- Raise to the three level with 11–12 and 4-card or longer support.
- Raise to the four level with 0–6 points and 5-card or longer support.

If right-hand opponent doubles:
- Raise to the two level with 6–10 points and 3-card or longer support.
- *Raise to the three level with 0–6 points and 4-card support.*
- *Bid 2NT (or redouble) with 11 or more and 4-card or longer support.*
- Raise to the four level with 0–6 points and 5-card or longer support.

If right-hand opponent overcalls:
- Raise to the two level with 6–10 points and 3-card or longer support.
- *Raise to the three level with 0–6 points and 4-card support.*
- *Cuebid the opponents' suit with 11 or more and 4-card or longer support.*
- Raise to the four level with 0–5 points and 5-card or longer support.