

by Larry Cohen

## Larry and the Law



Scientific statements about the Law of Gravity can be challenging, but that doesn't stop us from becoming familiar with the impact on our daily lives. When an apple falls from a tree, experience tells us it's going to land on the ground, not rise in the air. The Law of Total Tricks (the LAW) is similar. It can be difficult to grasp in its original form (see sidebar), but we can certainly take advantage of its consequences to help improve our game. This series by champion Larry Cohen, who popularized the Law of Total Tricks, is designed to do exactly that: put the LAW to practical use.

### Counting Trumps

We learn in the beginning that an ace counts as 4 points, a king 3, a queen 2, and a jack 1. We add up the pictures and come up with our high-card points. Our bidding structure then focuses on the combined points the partnership holds. With about 25 or 26 combined points, we want to get to a game contract; with about 33 or more points, we strive to get to a slam contract.

In a similar manner, in competitive auctions we should begin to count the number of combined trumps the partnership holds. This will be useful in competitive situations since one of the simplest guidelines that comes from the LAW is:

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

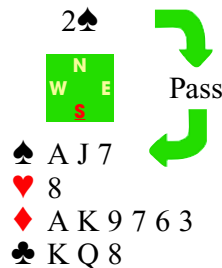
How do we know the number of combined trumps the partnership holds when we can only see the cards in our hand? Partner's bidding will often give us the clue we need. When partner opens with a weak 2♠ bid, for example, we can imagine that partner holds a good six-card suit. We add the number of spades we hold to those promised by partner to get the total trumps for the partnership.

## Responding to Weak Two-Bids

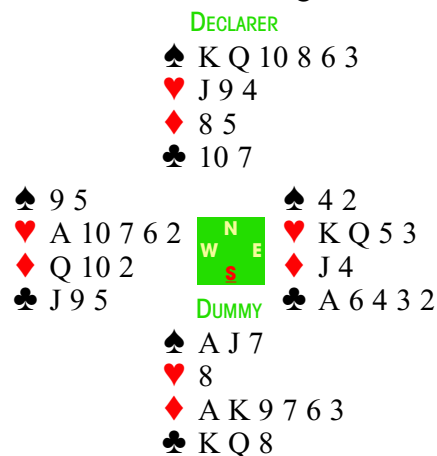
That makes responding to weak two-bids a good starting point to see when the LAW can be applied.

### When the LAW Doesn't Apply

The LAW is only needed when the auction is competitive. If our side has the majority of strength and it is unlikely the opponents will bid, we ignore the LAW and its consequences. For example:



This hand has nothing to do with the LAW. When I look at this hand, I can imagine taking ten tricks opposite partner's hand. The full deal could be something like this:



We'll lose a heart and a club trick. Partner can trump two heart losers in dummy, or establish some winners in dummy on which to discard them. I expect to make 4♠. It has nothing to do with the number of trumps. I want to be in 4♠, so I just bid it.

Here's another hand illustrating the same idea:



I want to be in 3NT because I think I'm going to make it. I have seven diamond tricks and a club trick. I expect that I'll get one more trick with the ♣Q, the ♥K, or one of partner's spades.

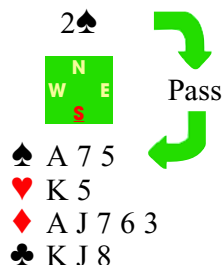
So, I don't think about the LAW if I'm simply bidding to a game contract, expecting to make it.

Another situation where I'm not concerned with the LAW after partner opens with a weak two-bid is when I have enough strength to investigate a game contract.

### APPLYING THE LAW WHEN RESPONDING TO A WEAK TWO-BID

When partner opens a weak two-bid:

- With enough strength that it is likely the partnership can make a game contract:
  - Bid Game.
  - Make a forcing bid (e.g. 2NT) to get more information.
- If it's unlikely there is enough strength for game, compete to the level of the number of trumps held by the partnership:
  - 0-2 trumps Pass
  - 3 trumps Raise to the three level
  - 4+ trumps Raise to the game level

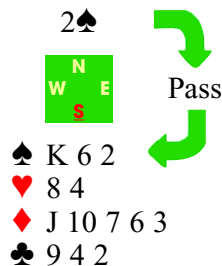


If partner has a nice 2♠ opening, I want to be in game; if not, I don't. A raise to 3♠ is not invitational, as we'll see shortly. So, I need a way to invite partner to further describe the hand. I can do this by using the conventional forcing 2NT response. If partner rebids 3♠ showing no extra values, I'll settle for partscore. If partner bids another suit, showing extra values, I'm taking us to 4♠.

I have only nine trumps in the above example, but I don't apply the LAW when I'm simply thinking about getting to the best contract and it's unlikely the opponents will compete.

### Applying the LAW's Competitive Guideline

If partner opens with a weak two-bid and I don't think we have a game, now we're likely in a competitive auction. It might not be competitive at the moment, but it will be. This is the time to start applying the LAW. Opposite a weak two-bid, it is very easy. To decide whether to bid and how much to bid, all I have to do is count the number of combined trumps in the two hands.



I'm not interested in bidding to a game with the intention of making it, nor inviting partner to consider a game. So, I apply the LAW's Competitive Guideline. Partner has six spades; I have three. Nine combined trumps. So, I bid 3♠, competing to the level of the number of trumps held by the partnership.



Larry Cohen and his wife Maria live in Boca Raton, Florida.

The raise to 3♠ is not an invitation. Partner is expected to pass. Do I expect to make this contract? No, but I don't care. I think the points we will lose for being defeated will be less than the score the opponents would get if they were in their best contract. My 3♠ bid is simply to make it more difficult for them to get to their best spot.

In the last example, East passed, so it might seem that we aren't in a competitive auction. Not yet! If our partnership doesn't have much combined strength and East doesn't have enough to bid, West is surely waiting to get into the auction. Our 3♠ bid is in anticipation that the auction will be competitive.

What if East had made a takeout double or overcalled at the three level? I'd still bid 3♠, competing to the level of the number of trumps our partnership holds. If East jumped to 4♥, however, I'd pass. I don't want to compete to a level beyond the number of combined trumps.

I could have a stronger hand to raise to 3♠. With this hand, I can't imagine our side taking enough



When Larry and I started playing seriously several years ago, he said that there were only two rules for this partnership. Rule 1 was no yelling (of course, my wife defines yelling as raising my eyebrows, but Larry is a bit more tolerant). Rule 2 was that I must be dedicated to the LAW of Total Tricks.

—David Berkowitz

tricks to make a game in spades, so I apply the LAW: nine trumps, compete to the three level. I bid 3♠, whether or not right hand opponent bids or passes ... and I still don't expect to make it.

Here is another hand where I can't visualize ten tricks opposite partner's hand with six



spades and less than the values for an opening bid. So, I add up the number of combined trumps and come to ten. Ten trumps, compete to the ten-trick level. I jump to 4♠.

How will partner know whether I have a good hand, expecting to make 4♠, or a weak hand like this? Partner will know when dummy comes down! Partner is not involved in the bidding when I jump to 4♠. Both partner and the opponents will have to guess what I'm up to.

What if I have two or fewer cards in partner's suit? With no interest in game, I pass. With at most eight combined trumps, I don't want to compete beyond the two level, eight tricks. ♠

### The Law of Total Tricks

The Law of Total Tricks (the LAW) was formulated by Jean-René Vernes in his 1968 book, *Bridge Moderne de la Defense*. After analyzing several hundred deals, Vernes concluded:

The total number of tricks available on any deal is approximately equal to the total number of trumps.

The interpretation of "total number of tricks" and "total number of trumps" is not straightforward. If you want to delve further into the LAW, get one of Larry's books on the subject: *Introduction to the LAW*, *To Bid or Not to Bid*, or *Following the LAW*, available from Baron Barclay.