

by Larry Cohen

## Larry and the Law



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.

### Comfort Zone

I'm a firm believer in making the game as enjoyable as possible but that doesn't mean I have to let the opponents have a comfortable time during the auction. In fact, that would be a violation of the ACBL's Code of Active Ethics:

*Actively ethical players do everything they can within the scope of the game to defeat their opponent at the bridge table while making that experience an otherwise enjoyable one for them.*

So, here's an auction that almost never occurs when I'm sitting in the North-South direction at the table:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	Pass
2♥	Pass	Pass	Pass

Let's see why.

### Counting Trumps

The basic guideline that 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.

To apply the LAW, we need to count not only the number of trumps held by our side but also the trumps held by the opponents. In the above auction, we know the opponents have at least an eight-card fit. East has a five-card or longer heart suit for the 1♥ opening and West has at least three-card support to raise to the two level.

The opponents are now "LAW" protected. They have competed to the level corresponding to the number of

## Balancing

combined trumps they hold. They are very happy to be in 2♥ because nothing bad can happen to them. If they make 2♥, great. If they don't make 2♥, that's fine also because some contract should make the other way.

So, our goal is: **don't let them do it!** Being minus 110 – the score the opponents receive for making 2♥ at duplicate or team bridge (60 trick score plus 50 partscore bonus) – is not the way to win. It's unacceptable. We have to go out of our way to accomplish the following objective:

#### A COMPETITIVE PHILOSOPHY

Don't let the opponents play in their eight-card fit at the two level.

### Balancing

One situation in which we can apply this philosophy is in the balancing position—if we pass, the auction will be over. For example, suppose we are South and the auction begins:

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

We are in the balancing seat. When I used to play with Marty Bergen, if he were sitting South, he would simply close his eyes and bid something in this type of auction. You don't have to be like Marty and close your eyes, but you do want to strive to do something other than pass. The guideline I would use is:

#### BALANCING GUIDELINE

If you have shortness in the opponents' suit – fewer than three cards – bid a suit or make a takeout double.

High-card points have nothing to do with it. If the opponents have stopped in 2♥, we should have approximately half the points in the deck. Otherwise, they would have been trying to get to game. Even if I have 6 or 7 high-card points, I still know our partnership has roughly 20 combined points – half the 40 high-card points in the deck. When I have 6 or 7 points, partner likely has 13 or 14 points with a hand unsuitable to enter the bidding earlier.

Furthermore, if I bid, partner should realize that I'm bidding just to avoid letting the opponents play at the two level in their eight-card fit. Partner is not going to jump to game, even with the values for an opening bid.

In the balancing position, I can bid with a bad five-card suit that would be unsuitable for a direct overcall. If I don't have a five-card or longer suit, I can make a takeout double with shortness in hearts. For example:

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

♠ Q 9 7 4 3    2♠. Is it risky? Yes.  
♥ 8 6            Could I be doubled  
♦ A 7 3 2        for a large penalty?  
♣ 5 2            Yes. However, when  
                         the opponents have  
found an eight-card fit and are  
about to play at the two level, top  
players know that they can't afford  
to let them stay in that contract ...  
despite the risks of bidding.

♠ Q 10 7 4    **Double.** It's a little  
♥ 5 2            dangerous to double  
♦ K Q 10 5     but the goal is the  
♣ K 10 3        same: to get them out  
                         of 2♥.

When we make a balancing call in this position, any one of three good things might happen:

1. We reach a contract we can make.
2. We go down in our contract but lose only 50 or 100 points instead

