

## Identifying the Losers

With certain hands, you can easily count the tricks you expect to lose based on *your own hand*.

1. ♠ Q J 10 9 8 7 6 ♥ 6 4 3 ♦ 8 ♣ Q J 10  
7 losers (2 spades, 3 hearts and 2 clubs). With my quality suit, void and club trick, I'd open 3♠ at any vul.

2. ♠ A K Q J 10 9 4 ♥ A ♦ A 2 ♣ 6 5 2  
With 4 losers (1 diamond and 3 clubs) and 4 quick tricks (♠A K, ♥A, ♦A) open 2♣ and then bid spades. If partner says he has nothing, bid 3NT and expect to win nine tricks. There's no reason to think that the enemy can take five club tricks in 3NT, but even if they could, you expect a heart opening lead.

As you can see, **when you have a long strong suit, you may be able to count your losers in advance** (best time is if the hand is very strong or very weak). However, on most hands, accurately counting losers in advance is not possible. For the great majority of suits, you need to know exactly what partner has. For example, you pick up the following hand:

3. ♠ A Q 9 8 ♥ K J 7 5 2 ♦ 7 ♣ Q 8 3

Partner opens 1♦ and you respond 1♥. Partner then jumps to 3♥. Excellent! Any time you have all of the following ingredients, slam prospects are rosy:

**Partner opens and then jumps, your side finds a fit, and you have an opening bid of your own.**

How many losers do you have? ðHold your horses! I don't know...wait 'til I see dummy, then I'll tell you.ö

## Downgradable Distribution

**In a suit contract, if your distribution in your three shortest suits is the flattest it could be, that is NOT good.**

If your longest suit is 4 cards:  
no one gets excited to pick up 4-4-3-2 distribution, but 4-3-3-3 is truly awful. You have nothing to ruff and no suit to set up.

If you have a 5-card suit:  
although you are grateful to have a long suit, 5-3-3-2 shape is a turnoff.\* Even 5-4-2-2 is a significantly better distribution.

If you have a 6-card suit:  
6-3-2-2 is a bummer. You would much prefer to have a singleton or void.

If you have a 7-card suit:  
by now, you know the story. 7-2-2-2 is just too flat.

**In conclusion:** When you are dealt any of the four flat as a pancake distributions:

4-3-3-3    5-3-3-2    6-3-2-2    7-2-2-2  
downgrade your hand and proceed with caution.

\*The only time you don't mind 5-3-3-2 distribution in a suit contract is when you bid notrump earlier and are already known to have a balanced hand.

After discussing flat as a pancake hands, I find it useful to remind players how crucial it is to look beyond their long suit. Remember: **Hands with long suits are more effective in a suit contract when they also have very short suit(s).**

Worst	Better	Very Good	Awesome
5-3-3-2	5-4-2-2	5-4-3-1	5-4-4-0
6-3-2-2	6-3-3-1	6-4-2-1	6-4-3-0
7-2-2-2	7-3-2-1	7-4-1-1	7-4-2-0

On the following auction, what would you do with the hands below?

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>You</i>	<i>South</i>
1♦	3♣	3♠	Pass
4♠	Pass	???	

- ♠ K Q J 9 8 5 ♥ A 10 8 ♦ 7 2 ♣ A 4  
Pass. I'm unwilling to bid on with this boring shape.
- ♠ K Q J 9 8 5 ♥ A 10 8 7 ♦ A 2 ♣ 4  
4NT. If partner has at least one ace, I'll take my chances in slam based on the very good distribution.
- ♠ K Q J 9 8 5 ♥ A 10 8 7 ♦ A 7 2 ♣ 6  
6♠. With this awesome distribution, slam should be worthwhile opposite almost any hand that opened and raised. Once opener limited his hand by just raising to game, trying for seven is very impractical.

**By the way:** If you ever wondered how often you will have a hand with a void, the answer is: 5% of the hands you pick up.

Quick Tricks (QT): The number of tricks you expect to win in a suit on the first two rounds of that suit.  
Only 2 QT per suit. Note: Jacks are never quick.

$$AK = 2, \quad AQ = 1\frac{1}{2}, \quad A = 1, \quad KQ = 1, \quad Kx = \frac{1}{2}$$

Count them up:

A.  $\spadesuit AKJ7 \quad \heartsuit KQ \quad \diamondsuit QJ1074 \quad \clubsuit J10$   
3 quick tricks. ( $\spadesuit AK = 2, \heartsuit KQ = 1$ )

B.  $\spadesuit K8752 \quad \heartsuit KJ4 \quad \diamondsuit Q96 \quad \clubsuit AQ$   
 $2\frac{1}{2}$  quick tricks ( $\spadesuit K = \frac{1}{2}, \heartsuit K = \frac{1}{2}, \clubsuit AQ = 1\frac{1}{2}$ )

C.  $\spadesuit 8752 \quad \heartsuit 64 \quad \diamondsuit AKQJ108 \quad \clubsuit 7$   
2 quick tricks ( $\diamondsuit AK$ )

Always count your quick tricks. Why is this essential?  
Counting your quick tricks helps you:

É Appreciate the true value of aces and kings.

É Distinguish between "good points" and "schmoints".

É Appreciate that the value of all honor cards is greater when in combination with other honors.

É Make good bidding decisions, such as:

1. Deciding whether to open a borderline hand.  
(Avoid opening a marginal hand in first or second seat with fewer than two quick tricks.)
2. Avoiding penalty doubles based only on having "a lot of points".
3. Knowing when it is correct to open  $2\clubsuit$ .

Want some guidelines for opening  $2\clubsuit$ ? Keep reading.

Should You Open 2♣, then bid 2NT or a major?

É If you intend to rebid 2NT, you need a hand worth at least 22 points in notrump.

É If you intend to rebid 2♥ or 2♠, you need a 5+ card major suit, but HCP are NOT the key. To open 2♣ and then bid a major, the key number is *“four”*.

- A. Count your losers; tricks you expect to lose if partner has no help. **The maximum is four.**
- B. Count your quick tricks. **The minimum is four.**
- C. Open 2♣ only if you satisfy *both* *“four”*.

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

Open 2♣. 4 losers (1 in each suit) and 4 quick tricks.

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

Open 1♠. Only 3 quick tricks. Case closed!

♠ A K Q 10 3   ♥ A K Q J 2   ♦ 4 2   ♣ 8

Open 2♣. 3 losers (in the minors), and 4 quick tricks.

♠ A   ♥ A Q 6 4 3   ♦ K 7 6 3   ♣ A K J

Open 1♥. The ♠A is a downgrade, and your two longest suits are not very strong. I'd guess 5+ losers, and wouldn't open 2♣ despite the 5 quick tricks.

♠ A K 10 5 4   ♥ A K 5   ♦ A K 10 3   ♣ 8

Open 2♣. No downgrades in this hand. Any hand with 6 quick tricks is too strong to open 1♥ or 1♠.

**By the way:** I've seen many slams missed by experts who didn't open 2♣ with *“four”* and *“four”* hands.

## Happy Together

**All honor cards increase in value when combined with other honors in the same suit.**

Therefore,  $\diamond K Q x \clubsuit x x x$  in the minors is worth more than:  $\diamond Q x x \clubsuit K x x$ .

All three hands below have 13 HCP. Rank them from weakest to strongest AFTER counting the quick tricks.

1.  $\spadesuit A K x x \heartsuit x x \diamond K Q J x \clubsuit x x x$
2.  $\spadesuit K J x x \heartsuit K x \diamond Q x x x \clubsuit A x x$
3.  $\spadesuit K J x x \heartsuit x x \diamond K Q x x \clubsuit A x x$

Hand #2 is the weakest.

2 quick tricks:  $\spadesuit K = \frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\heartsuit K = \frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\clubsuit A = 1$ .

Three of the suits contain only one honor card.

**All honors become less valuable when “isolated.”**

Hand #3 is better.

$2\frac{1}{2}$  quick tricks:  $\spadesuit K = \frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\diamond K Q = 1$ ,  $\clubsuit A = 1$ .

Both of the red-suit honors are now in the same suit.

Therefore, the value of each of those cards is greater than in hand #2. Whether the  $\diamond K$  and  $\diamond Q$  are married or just living together, they are happier, and so are you.

Hand #1 is the strongest.

3 quick tricks:  $\spadesuit A K = 2$ ,  $\diamond K Q = 1$ .

The same 13 HCP as the other two hands, but each of the five honors is supported by other honor cards.

A hand with two strong 4-card suits is upgradable.