

# FOLLOWING THE LAW



LARRY COHEN

MASTER POINT PRESS

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# THE LAW (1968 - 2018)



## CHAPTER 1

# 1. PARIS, FRANCE – 1968

Jean-René Vernes, the discoverer of the Law of Total Tricks, is perplexed. *'Quel dommage!* Why didn't you raise me to the three-level? You knew we had nine trumps. *Sacré bleu!* Some day the world will learn about my LAW!'

# 2. REISINGER TEAMS, SEATTLE – 1993

*'LARRY COHEN!'*

The voice shattered the deep concentration of the room.

It was unmistakably the voice of Zia, the mercurial Pakistani star. The implication was clear. Zia had gotten a poor result, and the Law of Total Tricks was to blame. There was nobody to complain to but the arch defender of the LAW, poor old me.

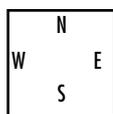
The knowledgeable group of players in the room was chuckling. This was no private joke. It was 1993, and everybody knew about the LAW.

Here was the deal that upset Zia:

Neither Vul.  
South Dealer

♠ Q 9 4 3  
♥ Q 8 4 2  
♦ 9 7 4  
♣ 9 7

♠ K 7 5 2  
♥ J 3  
♦ A K 5 3  
♣ K 10 2



♠ J 10 6  
♥ 6 5  
♦ J 10 8 2  
♣ A Q J 6

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

**West**  
*Shugart*

**North**  
*Zia*

**East**  
*Silverman*

**South**  
*Rosenberg*

dbl

3♥<sup>1</sup>

dbl<sup>2</sup>

1♥  
all pass

1. Weak.
2. Responsive.

Zia was playing against my teammates, Rita Shugart and Neil Silverman. Zia's partner, Michael Rosenberg, opened the South hand with a bid of one heart. After Shugart's double, Zia followed the LAW, and bid to the nine-trump level, three hearts. Silverman made a responsive double to show that he had a reasonable hand, but no long suit to bid.

Shugart now had a chance to make a LAWful decision. She reasoned that her side had at best an eight-card fit and that there were at most 17 trumps on the deal. This indicated that it was wrong to go on to the four-level. She made a gutsy pass and ended up +100 after collecting a spade trick and two tricks in each minor suit.

Zia was blaming me. In the old days he'd have pushed his unknowing opponents into four diamonds, down one. These days, obedient players abide by the LAW and don't bid to the four-level unless there are enough trumps.

## 2018 Pan Polar Simultaneous Teams, South Pole - DuGraph room

'He's kicked the LAW and he will pay!' The voice is that of Chuck Goren III, chief commentator. 'What in the world was he thinking about?'

Looking around the room, I expected a lot of icy blank stares. There were none. After all, this was 2018, and references to the LAW were as common as references to quick tricks and high-card points.

'Take a look at these half-time statistics.'

	<b>Glaciers</b>	<b>Arcadians</b>
Unforced errors	-22	-18
Winners	+16	+21
Good slams bid	+23	+13
ASTRO usage	-11	-13
LAW violations	-17	-44

Goren continued, 'The Arcadians are losing heavily on LAW violations. When will these people ever learn?'

# ADJUSTING THE LAW



## CHAPTER 4

In *To Bid or Not to Bid*, the toughest problem for me, the writer, was what to do about adjustments. Just the word ‘adjustments’ seemed like it would be enough to scare away any casual reader. Who wants to be bothered? Unfortunately, what I refer to as ‘adjustments’ are really vital ingredients of the LAW. I stuck adjustments at the back of the first book so that I wouldn’t lose too many readers.

Adjustments are really the key to a lifetime of good bidding decisions. If you learn to use adjustments correctly, you’ll be able to evaluate hands like the world’s best players do. Simply put:

**To derive the full benefits from the LAW, you must be familiar with adjustments!**

‘Adjusting’, in reality, is just a different way of describing what most experts call ‘hand evaluation’.

Let’s consider the following: A one-diamond opening bid is doubled by your partner and raised to two diamonds by your right-hand opponent. You’re looking at:

♠ 9 6 5 3   ♡ K J 4   ♦ Q J 3   ♣ 7 6 5

with nobody vulnerable. Would you bid two spades? Maybe, maybe not. Now suppose instead that you had a similar-looking seven-count:

♠ Q J 9 5   ♡ K J 4   ♦ 5 3 2   ♣ 7 6 5

After hearing the same auction, you’d now be pleased to bid two spades. What’s the difference? You realized that the second hand, with the queen-jack in your own suit as opposed to theirs, was a much better hand for competing with two spades. In LAW terms, we would say that you ‘adjusted’.

The first hand had two *negative adjustment factors* — ‘minor honors’ in the opponents’ trump suit (QJx of diamonds), as well as a lack of same in your own suit (9xxx of spades). The second hand was much more ‘pure’. The ‘minor honors’ are in your suit (QJ9x of spades), and nothing is wasted in theirs (xxx of diamonds).

Let’s look at the two types of adjustments:

## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ADJUSTMENTS

Negative Adjustment  
Factors (suggest  
Total Tricks will be  
**less** than the  
number of trumps)

1) **Negative Purity**  
minor honors in  
opponents' suits  
and/or *poor* interiors in  
your own suits

2) **Negative Fit**  
misfits

3) **Negative Shape**  
flat hands

Positive Adjustment  
Factors (suggest  
Total Tricks will be  
**greater** than the  
number of trumps)

1) **Positive Purity**  
*no* minor honors in  
opponents' suits  
*good* interiors in  
your own suits

2) **Positive fit**  
double/double fit

3) **Positive Shape**  
extra length or voids

We use the information in this chart to help us make our bidding decisions. We look at our hand and try to determine if there are negative or positive adjustment factors present. After making that determination, we will adjust our estimate of the total number of trumps and tricks upwards or downwards. The upshot of all this is that:

When there are **Negative** factors: we will tend to pass or double.

When there are **Positive** factors: we will tend to bid on.

Let's say we are confronted with a bidding problem and have gone through all the LAW fundamentals as reviewed in Chapter Two. We've estimated from the bidding that there are 16 trumps. But, before we make our bidding decision, we should do a quick check for adjustment factors. If there are only negative factors, we will expect fewer tricks than trumps. If

there are only positive factors, we will expect more tricks than trumps. However, if both are present, we expect trumps to equal tricks; the negative and positive factors cancel each other out.

Although adjusting is not an exact science, the presence of these factors will help you 'lean' in one direction or the other. On many hands you won't know whether to choose 16 or 17 as the number of trumps. If there are more negative factors than positive ones, then use 16 as your estimate. If more positive factors exist than negative ones, then use 17 as the number of tricks.

Since these factors will alter our total trick count, let's look through the chart and see how we can recognize its components.

## NEGATIVE FACTORS

The first and most important negative factor is 'minor honors.' This term can be a bit confusing since, in bridge terminology, 'minors' often refer to clubs and diamonds. Of course, in this context, 'minor' has nothing to do with suit denomination!

What we mean by 'minor honors' are holdings that will often provide a trick on defense, but not on offense. The ace of the opponents' suit would not be a minor honor. You'd expect it to be a trick no matter which side plays the hand. It won't influence the *total* trick count.

However, holdings such as Qxx or QJx are considered to be 'minor honors.' We could easily take a trick on defense with either holding if the suit is trump. Instead, if we were playing the hand in our own trump suit, our holding of Qxx or QJx of their suit could easily be useless. Opposite two small, we'd have to lose to the ace and king. Maybe our queen would set up for a useful discard, but probably not. These holdings have a definite effect on the *total* trick count and that effect is a negative one.

Here is a list of typical minor-honor combinations. If you have any of these holdings in the opponents' trump suit, you should be wary about competing. They should cause you to adjust your total-trick appraisal downwards.

## MINOR HONOR HOLDINGS

A J x x	A J x
K Q x	K Q
K 10 x x	K 10 x
K J x x	K J x
K x	K
Q 10 x x	Q 10 x
Q J x x	Q J x
Q x x x	Q x x
Q x	Q
J 10 x x	J x x x
J x x	J x

‘Poor interiors in our suit’ is also a negative sign. A trump holding of J 6 4 3 2 is much more ‘negative’ than J 10 9 6 3. Lack of the 10’s and/or 9’s of your side’s trump suit is often a reason to lean towards defending in a close situation.

The second negative adjustment factor listed is ‘misfits’. If, from the bidding, you can tell that neither side rates to have a fit (eight or more cards), the Total Trick count should be adjusted downwards. This factor occurs infrequently and is not very important.

The third and last negative adjustment factor listed is ‘flat hands.’ This refers to balanced hands — hands without singletons or voids, typically 4-3-3-3 or 5-3-3-2. If you have a flat hand and you are in doubt as to how many trumps/tricks there are, then assume the lower number. This also is not a very important adjustment factor.

## POSITIVE FACTORS

Positive factors, as you might have guessed, are basically just the opposite of negative factors. (Refer back to the chart on page 33.) Positive purity, the first positive adjustment factor, is the possession of good interiors in our suits and lack of ‘minor honors’ in the opponents’. With pure hands, the number of tricks is often higher than expected. Pure hands generally argue for bidding as opposed to passing.

Our second positive factor, double fits, is the opposite of misfits. For **LAW** purposes, **when both sides have an 8+ card**