

Eight Never – Nine Ever

By Larry Cohen

Larry Cohen, of Boca Raton, FL, is best known for his rediscovery of the Law of Total Tricks which was explored in his To Bid or Not to Bid, the bestselling bridge book of 1992–93. His theory has been taken up by experts the world over. Although he has not won any world titles, he has represented the USA on several occasions and won most domestic competitions.

When I was a young kid, just learning the game of bridge, my grandfather told me ‘Larry, just follow a few simple maxims and you will go far.’ Second hand low, third hand high, buy low sell high (oops, wrong game), and ‘eight ever, nine never’ were amongst his favorites. Little did he know that I would twist that last maxim around and use it as one of the keys to my success. What he taught me was always ‘ever’ finesse for the queen with eight trumps, and ‘never’ finesse with nine. I went on to learn the Law of Total Tricks, and that is when I discovered ‘eight never and nine ever’!

In this new ‘golden rule’ the numbers eight and nine refer to the number of trumps in the combined hands of a partnership. If there is a 6-2 fit there are eight trumps, a 5-4 fit means nine trumps. The words ‘never’ and ‘ever’ refer to the act of competing (or bidding) at the three level on partscore hands.

‘Eight never’ means that you should never outbid the opponents at the three level if your side has only eight trumps. Conversely, ‘nine ever’ suggests that in the same circumstances with nine trumps you should ‘ever’ and always compete to three of your trump suit.

Let’s try a couple of hands. At Love All, with:

♠ K Q 9 8 7
♥ A 8
♦ A 9 2
♣ 10 7 2

playing five-card majors, you deal and open one spade. After a two heart overcall, your partner raises to two spades. Your right-hand opponent bids three hearts, and it is your call.

You have a nice opening bid, but you should not be tempted to bid three spades. Your side rates to have only eight trumps – so never bid three over three. If partner has four trumps, giving your side nine, he will know to bid three spades. The full deal rates to be something like:

South Deals	♠ A 6 3		
None Vul	♥ 7 6 3		
	♦ K 8 6 4		
	♣ J 9 4		
♠ 10 4		♠ J 5 2	
♥ K Q 10 9 5	W N E	♥ J 4 2	
♦ 10 5 3	S	♦ Q J 7	
♣ A Q 3		♣ K 8 6 5	
	♠ K Q 9 8 7		
	♥ A 8		
	♦ A 9 2		
	♣ 10 7 2		

The opponents were due to fail in three hearts, losing five top tricks. You’ll also fail if you bid three spades, as you have five sure losers after the obvious heart lead.

Does this full deal contain anything surprising? No, it is a very typical layout for this everyday auction. Both partnerships have an eight-card fit, and both sides can take only eight tricks. Why should you go minus when they are going minus?

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If you were to give yourself a sixth spade you would have a clear reason to compete to three spades. Let's even take away some high card points to illustrate that possession of nine trumps is crucial – not possession of an extra jack or queen. Holding:

♠ K 9 8 7 5 2
♥ A 8
♦ A 9 2
♣ 10 7

you are faced with the same auction as above. Your partner has raised spades, and the opponents have competed to three hearts. This time your side has nine trumps: nine ever – so you bid three spades, expecting the full deal to resemble:

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

Three hearts is still one down, but now you can make three spades. Your ninth spade translates into a ninth trick. What if the spades were 3-1? You'd go down, but then three hearts would make.

Why does this 'eight never, nine ever' work out so well? The reason is simple if you know the Law of Total Tricks, a concept that has only recently received the attention it deserves. The Law states that the number of total trumps (add the number of cards in North-South's best fit to the number of cards in East-West's best fit) is approximately equal to the number of total tricks (add the number of tricks that North-South can take in their best fit to the number of tricks East-West can take in their best fit). If the high cards are evenly split eight trumps leads to eight tricks, and nine trumps usually leads to nine tricks.

This is an oversimplification, but the concept is a sound one.

Over and over again, throughout the bridge world, people bid three over three with only eight trumps, and find that both three-level contracts fail. Instead of going +50 or +100, players go minus the same number.

I have given my self-learned advice to my grandfather and now he's the king of the senior circuit. He simply follows the reversed golden rule: 'Eight never, nine ever'.

TIP: *When considering bidding at the three level over the opponents' three-level contract, always bid when your side has nine trumps but never when it has only eight.*