

# **Lebensohl De-Mystified**

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## **Dilemma: How to Distinguish between Length and Strength When Partner Shows a Strong Hand**

**Situation 1:** Partner has doubled the opponents' weak-two opening and the bidding is passed back to you...

**Situation 2:** Partner has opened the bidding and has reversed after your simple response...

**Situation 3:** Partner has opened 1NT (15-17) and the opponents interfere, or partner has doubled the opponents' weak-two opening, and your holding is such that you feel strongly that the hand belongs to your side...

**Common problem:** Sometimes you possess a strong honor-card holding, sometimes you have a weak hand with favorable distribution, and sometimes (not frequently enough) you possess a combination of both honor strength and distribution. And all too often you have neither, but you cannot pass. How do you accurately describe to partner the strength and distribution of your hand? How do you avoid making distributional hands sound like they contain aces and kings?

Each of these situations (partner doubles weak two, partner reverses, opponents interfere over partner's 1NT) presents a slight variation on a common theme; and these are not infrequent occurrences. Many partnerships struggle without tools to handle these situations.

## ***Opponents Open a Weak-Two, and Partner Doubles***

After partner doubles the opponents' weak-two opening (either directly or in the balance seat) and the bidding is passed back to you, you have some difficult choices to make. If you simply bid your best suit, your partner will likely pass. Sometimes this is what you would like because you are holding a weak hand and no particularly impressive suit. But on other occasions, you would like to show either a stronger hand, a more distributional holding, or both. If you're holding a stronger hand, do you jump in a suit that might not be very impressive? If you're holding a weak hand with a long suit, can you show your partner this? And what if you're holding an invitational hand, or a hand with extra values **and** a good suit? And what about a hand that might play best in 3NT? There isn't much room to explore that as well. Problems...

## ***Partner Opens, You Respond, Partner Reverses***

So your partner opened a standard 1-level opening bid and you offered a 1-level response. But partner reverses, promising extra values (generally accepted as being about 17HPC+), and something like 5-4 distribution (or better). What do you do if your hand consists of minimum strength and no useful suit? What if your hand is weak, but your suit is long (maybe 6 cards or more)? How about if you have a stronger hand than you've shown, but don't want to bid aggressively because you might bypass 3NT? Problems, problems...

## ***Partner Opens 1NT and Opponents Interfere***

Many partnerships like to play "stolen bid" or "shadow" doubles in this situation. In this agreement, a double after direct interference is used to convey that the overcaller has made the same bid that the responder would have made without the interference. Usually this would either be a double of 2 clubs (to mean Stayman) or a double of 2 diamonds or 2 hearts (to mean a transfer). On the surface, this would seem to be a quite reasonable course of action. But there are a number of drawbacks. One of the biggest (and the reason that I will not play this convention in serious competition) is that there is no longer an ability to punish the opponents for unwarranted intrusion in our auction. And without this capability to double for penalties, savvy opponents will take every opportunity to interfere.

Additionally, consider the following: after partner's 1NT opening, the opponent in the direct position bids 2 spades; you hold a seven-card heart suit. Holding 4 points, will you bid 3 hearts? If not, are you willing to pass and passively surrender the bid to the opponents? But then, holding 11 points, would you bid 3 hearts? And if the answer is yes to both holdings, how will your partner know which hand you hold? And what about the hand with only four hearts and 13 points? What will you bid on this hand? Are you willing to bypass the possibility of playing 3NT? How will you proceed? If you play "systems on", how high do you play them? Problems, problems, problems...

## ***A Common Solution***

Notice that the above situations have something in common. All of them occur when partner has a good hand, the bidding has gotten to the two-level, and you have not had sufficient opportunity to show either your strength or your distribution (or lack of one of both).

The general cure for these problems lies in the Lebensohl convention. I know, you've heard bad things about Lebensohl... I hear them, too. In fact, there are some things that I don't like about Lebensohl, so there are ways that I like to "tweak" it a bit in order to make Lebensohl behave the way I need it to behave.

Lebensohl, despite the outward appearance of complexity, is simpler in principle than many of the conventions that today's players adore.

The treatment revolves around four principles when responding to your partner's strong action forces you to bid at the two-level:

- **responses at the two-level are weak and "to-play"**
  - **responses at the three-level are 100% forcing (for one round)**
  - **doubles show values without a suit - DSI - "do something intelligent, partner"; they tend to be "penalty-oriented"**
  - **the response of 2NT forces partner's rebid of 3♣**
- (ALERTABLE)**

Let's look at each of these applications in turn...

## **Lebensohl Over Doubles of Weak Two-Bids**

When partner doubles the opponents' "weak-two" openings, there is an immediate need to describe both strength and distribution. But when you bid a new suit, exactly what are you promising? What is the distinction between:

(2♥) - Double - 2♠ and

(2♥) - Double - 3♠ ...

Is the first bid non-forcing or invitational?

Is the second bid invitational or forcing?

and what about:

(2♥) - Double - 3♦ ...

Lebensohl can be used to make such distinctions.

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2♠ shows a preference for spades

(hopefully, four...) and weak (it may be made with only three spades and a very weak hand, if necessary; be careful)

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 3♣ is a game-forcing bid with 5+ clubs

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 3♠ is a game-forcing bid with 4+ spades

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2NT **(ALERT)** - (Pass) - 3♣ **(ALERT)** -

(Pass) - 3♠ is a game-invitation with 4+ spades

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2NT **(ALERT)** - (Pass) - 3♣ **(ALERT)** -

(Pass) - 3♦ is a weak hand with 5+ diamonds

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2NT **(ALERT)** - (Pass) - 3♣ **(ALERT)** -

(Pass) - Pass is a weak hand with 5+ clubs

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 3NT **(ALERT)** is a hand with nine tricks in

NT **but with no heart stopper** (remember the "direct denies" from above); discuss this with partner, as not everyone will be comfortable with this and any subsequent auctions

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2NT **(ALERT)** - (Pass) - 3♣ **(ALERT)** -

(Pass) - 3NT is a hand with nine tricks in NT **containing a heart stopper**; discuss this with partner, as not everyone will be comfortable with this and any subsequent auctions

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 3♥ can be played in many ways, one treatment is as a full opening hand, and asking if partner has slam interest... an alternate treatment shows a "half" stopper in hearts, and asks partner to bid 3NT with a similar "half" stopper.

**Discuss these options with your partner.**

## ***Lebensohl Over Reverses***

Increasingly, partnerships are coming to realize that Lebensohl has additional use over partner's reverse bids. In much the same way as it works over the double of an opponent's weak-two opener, it can help distinguish between length and strength over partner's reverse.

(Incidentally, a reverse by opener is when that player opens at the one-level in a suit and, at next turn, bids a higher ranking suit at the two level [Example: 1♦ - (Pass) - 1♠ - (Pass) - 2♥; this indicates 17+ HCP by opener and (at least) 5-4 distribution; in any event the (lower-ranking) suit opened is longer than the second suit shown.]

Traditionally, the only rebids by responder that were not game-forcing would be a rebid of responder's first suit, a rebid of 2NT, and sometimes (by partnership agreement) a return by responder to opener's first suit. But when you add Lebensohl agreements into the mix, a much better distinction can be made:

**Any voluntary bid at the three level**, including a return to opener's first suit or a raise of opener's second suit, constitutes a game force and a suggestion of the final denomination.

A rebid of 2NT (**ALERTABLE**) by responder forces a (relay) bid of 3♣ by opener (**ALERTABLE**), after which responder may pass or suggest the final contract. Responder has become the captain, and responder's rebids will dictate the remainder of the auction. It is the existence of this option that permits the game-forcing nature of all rebids by responder at the three-level.

A rebid of responder's suit (at the two level) indicates a 6-card suit (or a 5-card suit with no tolerance for partner's two suits) and a weak hand (one that barely found a response to the opening bid and really doesn't want to bid again).

A new suit at the two level (rare, but it can happen) shows two suits of (at least) five cards each, but a weak hand with no tolerance for opener's suits. Responder possesses a singleton or void in opener's first suit and a void, singleton, or doubleton in opener's second suit. Opener should place the contract.

## ***Lebensohl After Interference over Notrump Openings***

This is the original problem for which Lebensohl was developed; and it is very effective over natural overcalls of your Notrump openers. If your opponents are playing a Conventional system over your Notrump openers, you need to decide whether to play Lebensohl. In any event, you need to discuss the meanings of your bids in such an auction. Suggestions are at the end of this section.

Lebensohl (as played over opponent's interference over partner's 1NT opening) works on the following principles:

1) Bids you make at the **two-level** are **non-forcing** and simply show a suit preference where to play (in this instance, a five-card suit); partner should pass...

[Example: 1NT - (2♥) - 2♠ shows 5+ spades and a weak hand]

2) Bids you make at the **three-level** are **forcing**, especially if the same suit was available at the two level...

[Example: 1NT - (2♥) - 3♦ shows 5+ diamonds and is forcing one round]

[Example: 1NT - (2♥) - 3♠ shows 5+ spades and is forcing to game]

3) **Doubles always show values with no biddable suit (the "DSI" double).**

4) If you have a suit of your own, but bidding that suit would take you to the three-level, and you don't have sufficient strength to force the bidding, you start with **2NT (ALERTABLE)**. This is a **relay bid**, and partner **must** bid **3♣**. If your suit is not clubs, you will correct. Partner **must** pass.

[Example: 1NT - (2♥) - 2NT - (Pass) - 3♣ - (Pass) - 3♦ shows 6+ diamonds and a weak hand]

[Example: 1NT - (2♥) - 2NT - (Pass) - 3♣ - (Pass) - Pass shows 6+ clubs and a weak hand]

If your suit is higher-ranking than the overcalled suit, you have an additional option. You can start with 2NT (relay to 3♣) and then bid your suit. This shows an invitational hand. Since you didn't bid the suit at the two-level (drop dead) or jump to the three-level, your partner has the freedom to continue on if reasonable.

[Example: 1NT - (2♥) - 2NT - (Pass) - 3♣ - (Pass) - 3♠ shows 5+ spades and an invitational hand]

Looking for a NT game is somewhat normal, except that playing Lebensohl permits responder to confirm or deny the presence of a stopper in the opponents' suit. If the responder bids 3NT directly, this (usually) denies a stopper in their suit. If the responder starts with a 2NT relay to 3♣ and then bids 3NT, responder promises a stopper in that suit. (This is marked on the Convention Card as "Fast Denies" or "Direct Denies" after the box checked "Lebensohl". This distinction permits the opener to evacuate 3NT when there is no stopper in the opponent's suit; this is a useful "gadget".

But there are two aspects of traditional Lebensohl that I dislike and think are less effective:

Strictly speaking, in Lebensohl, a double of the opponent's overcall is strictly a penalty double. Most players now consider it "penalty-oriented". That is a good modification. To me it indicates 8+ HCP (the hand belongs to us), and containing no five-card suit. Since it's a value-showing double, partner should assess vulnerability, card location, trump holding, etc, and decide whether a penalty double of the opponents is a more likely good outcome than continuing the search for a game. Frequently, the decision to defend is the right one.

The second issue that I have with traditional Lebensohl is with the implementation of Stayman. In traditional Lebensohl, a direct cue-bid of the opponents' overcalled suit is Stayman. It commits the partnership to 3NT or four of a suit. This is somewhat effective when the opponents overcall a minor suit and there is a reasonable chance that a 4-4 fit can be found in a major suit. But when a major suit is overcalled, the chances that the partnership will find a good fit in the other major is greatly diminished, and the possibility of punishing the opponents is now gone. For this reason, with a balanced hand containing values, **even if it contains an unbid 4-card major**, I prefer to start with a double and let partner make the next decision.

## ***When the Opponents Employ Conventional Overcalls over 1NT***

Many players prefer to keep their regular two-level systems intact (Stayman, Jacoby Transfers) when the opponents double or bid 2♣ over their 1NT opening. On the surface this is simple, but it does not make as much sense when that double or 2♣ bid has an artificial meaning. Higher-level systems (e.g. Texas Transfers) can usually be retained.

Increasingly, opponents are abandoning natural overcalls over 1NT for Conventional calls such as DONT, Cappelletti, or Meckwell. It is important to know what these Conventions imply in order to counter their effects.

DONT (Disturbing Opponents' NoTrumps) is used to show the presence of either a one-suited hand or a two-suited hand. A double indicates a one-suited hand and relays partner to 2♣, after which the doubler identifies the suit (by bidding, passing, or raising). A bid at the two-level indicates a two-suited hand containing the bid suit and a higher suit.

Cappelletti is also used to show the presence of either a one-suited hand or a two-suited hand. A 2♣ bid shows a single-suited hand and relays partner to 2♦, after which the overcaller identifies the suit. A 2♦ bid promises both major suits and prompts partner to choose between them. A 2♥ or 2♠ bid indicates that suit and an unidentified minor suit (partner bids 2NT to ask about the minor suit). A double indicates an equal hand to the 1NT opener, and can be passed for penalties with the right type of hand.

Meckwell is used to show the presence of either a one-suited hand or a two-suited hand. A 2♣ or 2♦ bid shows that suit and an unspecified major suit; 2♥ or 2♠ bid is natural. 2NT shows both minor suits, and a double shows either a long minor suit or both major suits and relays partner to 2♣.

When competing against Conventional overcalls, a double is usually used to indicate that you can double the opponents' known suit (or one of their suits if the Convention promises more than one known suit). When the opponents' call promises a particular shape (e.g. a single-suited hand) a double (or redouble) can be used to indicate the same shape.

You can use suit bids as Lebensohl, unless that suit is one that is one of the opponents' known suits, in which case the bid would indicate a strong take-out. If the opponents have two known suits, bidding either of the known suits can be used as a strong bid showing a stopper in that suit seeking a NoTrump contract.

### ***Summary***

Lebensohl is a very powerful tool: one that all serious players need to have in their bidding arsenal. It is best modified to eliminate some of the more traditional weaknesses that do not serve it well, but it is a Convention that can be applied with few variations to a number of situations.