

Lebensohl

The Lebensohl convention uses 2NT as an artificial bid. Responder normally replies with a puppet bid of 3♣ and the Lebensohl bidder then describes his hand further. Originally the convention was just used in the situation where partner's 1NT opening has been overcalled; there are now two or more other situations where its use is also popular: - such as when partner has doubled a weak two bid for take-out and when partner has reversed. I shall cover the original convention first and then show that the other situations are very similar.

We assume that partner has opened a strong (15-17) NT throughout. It is exactly the same if you play a weak NT (just 3 points different).

North	East	South	With no interference, you would transfer with both of these hands. After opener completes the transfer, we bid 3NT with Hand A but pass the transfer response with hand B. No problem. But what if there was a 2♠ overcall? With Hand A we wish to bid 3♥, forcing, to offer partner the choice of 3NT or 4♥. With Hand B we simply want to play in 3♥. How can we manage both? By means of the Lebensohl convention.
1NT	2♠	?	
Hand A		Hand B	With hand A we bid 3♥, game forcing and showing a 5 card ♥ suit. With Hand B we first bid 2NT (Lebensohl). Partner is forced to bid 3♣ in reply and then we bid 3♥ to play.
♠ J3		♠ 73	
♥ KQ964		♥ KJ9643	
♦ AJ3		♦ 73	
♣ 985		♣ 985	

North	East	South	When the overcall is in a lower ranking suit than responder's, there is another bid available.
1NT	2♥	?	
Hand C	Hand D	Hand E	With Hand C we bid 3♠, game forcing. With Hand D we bid 2♠, simply competitive. With Hand E we bid 2NT; followed by 3♠ over partner forced 3♣ reply – invitational.
♠ KQ964	♠ KQ964	♠ KQ964	
♥ J3	♥ 63	♥ J3	
♦ AJ3	♦ 753	♦ 753	
♣ 985	♣ 985	♣ K98	

North	East	South	So, a major suit is easy, and when responder has a minor?
1NT	2♥/♠	?	
Hand F	Hand G		Partner's 1NT opening has been overcalled and we have a hand that simply wants to compete. We bid 2NT, Lebensohl. With Hand F we then bid 3♦ over opener's 3♣. With Hand G we simply pass the 3♣ reply.
♠ 64	♠ 64		
♥ J3	♥ J3		
♦ KJ9842	♦ 653		
♣ 653	♣ KJ9842		

North	East	South	So, so much for single suited hands. But what about balanced hands, and how does Stayman fit into the equation?
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1NT	♣/♦	?
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Hand H	Hand I
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♠ AJ75	♠ KQ983
♥ KQ93	♥ KQ42
♦ J9	♦ 92
♣ J82	♣ J8

First of all, let's consider the 2♣ overcall. It is perfectly acceptable to play a double of this 2♣ overcall as Stayman, and many people do indeed play this. To me, it goes against the grain. I play double as penalties. Of course, things may be different if opponent's overcall is artificial (often the case). I then like to play double as penalty orientated – being able to punish at least one of the suits shown. If people interfere with strong NT auctions, they should be stomped upon if at all

possible. Anyway, we still have the problem of a 2♦ or higher overcall, when Stayman is no longer possible. The solution is that 3 of the opponent's suit is (game forcing) Stayman. If ♣'s was the overcalled suit, then 3♣ is Stayman and 3♦ by opener denies a 4 card major. If ♦'s was the overcalled suit, then 3♦ is Stayman and 3NT denies a 4 card major etc. With Hand H we bid 3♣/♦; we raise a major suit response to game, otherwise we settle for 3NT. With hand I we again bid 3♣/♦ but this time it will probably be better to play in 4♠ if partner denies a 4 card major.

North	East	South	Things are not always straightforward however.
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1NT	2♠	?
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Hand J	Hand K
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♠ 3	♠ K3
♥ Q93	♥ 983
♦ K985	♦ K98
♣ AQJ86	♣ AQ862

Of course we could just blast 3NT with both of these hands. Probably OK with Hand K but dangerous with Hand J if partner has no stop. Can we differentiate between a hand with a stop and one without? Yes. When we have a stop (Hand K), we start off by bidding 2NT, Lebensohl. After partner's 3♣ we then bid 3NT. This sequence guarantees a stop. And with Hand J?

Bid 3NT directly. The direct 3NT bid denies a stop. Some people (notably in the UK) play this the other way round, with a direct 3NT showing a stop. Let's keep it 'simple' and stick to standard – direct denies a stop.

North	East	South	So that's covered Stayman and balanced hands, but what about balanced hands with a 4 card major where either 3NT
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1NT	2♠	?	or 4 of a major (or 5 of a minor) may be correct?
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Hand L	Hand M
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♠ 3	♠ K94
♥ KQJ3	♥ KQJ3
♦ K94	♦ 64
♣ K8752	♣ K852

The first priority is to look for the 4-4 ♥ fit. But if there is no fit, can we distinguish between a hand that has a ♠ stop and one that does not? Yes. We use a similar approach to that used earlier. 3♠ is Stayman (looking for ♥'s). A direct bid of 3♠ denies a ♠ stop (as Hand L). With a ♠ stop (Hand M) we first bid 2NT and then 3♠ (Stayman) over the 3♣ reply. Going via 2NT promises a stop.

Example of balanced game-going hands

Partner's 1NT opening has been overcalled with 2♠: -

South's hand	♠ 64 ♥ KJ7 ♦ K94 ♣ AJ952	♠ K4 ♥ KJ7 ♦ 964 ♣ AJ952	♠ 64 ♥ KJ74 ♦ K94 ♣ AJ95	♠ K4 ♥ KJ74 ♦ 964 ♣ AJ95
♥ suit?	x	x	v	v
♠ stop?	x	v	x	v
Bidding	N E S W 1NT 2♠ 3NT	N E S W 1NT 2♠ 2NT - 3♣ - 3NT	N E S W 1NT 2♠ 3♠	N E S W 1NT 2♠ 2NT - 3♣ - 3♠

What We Give Up

Every conventional bid costs something. Here we lose a natural 2NT invitational raise.

Hand N

♠ J7
♥ K93
♦ Q1064
♣ Q852

Hand P

♠ K94
♥ KJ3
♦ 1064
♣ Q852

With both of these hands we would have made an invitational raise had there been no overcall. After the 2♠ overcall we have to reconsider. We no longer have the invitational raise but it hardly matters, Hand N should pass as there may well be a problem with the ♠ suit – thanks for the warning. With Hand P we are not afraid, but with 24+ combined points 2♠ will usually go down, so forget about invitations,double!

Hand Q

♠ J7
♥ K1093
♦ Q64
♣ Q852

Hand R

♠ K94
♥ KJ103
♦ 64
♣ Q852

Things are slightly different here; we have an invitational hand but also a possible ♥ fit. Without intervention, we would have bid 2♣ Stayman and then invited in either ♥'s or NT. Unfortunately, the overcall has left us with insufficient room (the same is true even if you don't play Lebensohl). We do not have the values for forcing Stayman, so pass with Hand Q and double with Hand R. Unfortunately, the laws do allow opponents to interfere, and sometimes it is inconvenient.

You may, of course, choose to play these invitational hands differently. A take-out double is played by some, but that may put pressure on opener and I am reluctant to give up the penalty double.

Variations and Extensions of Lebensohl.

I have given the basics of Lebensohl. However, serious partnerships may have to work on a number of aspects, particularly concerning conventional overcalls of partner's 1NT opener. For example, if East overcalls 2♣ promising both majors, then what does 2 of a major by you mean? (a good solution is that 2♥/♠ are both conventional – showing shortage in the majors, with 2♠ the stronger (game forcing)). If the opponents play DONT and double (single suited hand) then what does a re-double mean? (I would play this as values – penalty orientated).

Summary of Lebensohl after Partner's 1NT is Overcalled

After partner's 1NT opening has been overcalled (+ indicated the next bid after Lebensohl): -

Dbl	= penalties / looking for blood.
2 level bid	= competitive
3 level bid	= Game forcing
cue bid	= Stayman, no stop. Game forcing.
2NT	= Lebensohl, forces a 3♣ reply
2NT + cue bid	= Stayman, with a stop. Game forcing.
2NT + suit	= competitive (invitational if a two level bid was available)
3NT	= game going, no 4 card major, no stop.
2NT + 3NT	= game going, no 4 card major, with a stop.

Stolen Bid

If the overcall of partner's 1NT is 2♣ then many players play that double is Stayman (rather than having to bid 3♣). And if you play this you can then play 'systems on' – i.e. your normal transfers etc just as if there had been no intervention. This is probably a quite sound addition to the convention.

Some players continue this theme to higher overcalls but that really is not totally logical and it's best to play Lebensohl over overcalls of 2♦ or higher.