

Lebensohl for everyone (Mark Oettinger)

Most tournament players are familiar with the “3 basic positions of Lebensohl.”

The lynchpin of Lebensohl is a response of 2N, forcing opener to bid (i.e., “relay to”) 3♣, so that responder can differentiate between a *direct* bid and an *indirect* bid after interposing the 2NT-3♣ relay.

The three basic positions of Lebensohl are:

(1) **Lebensohl Position #1.** When the opponents overcall partner’s 1N opener with a 2-level overcall higher than X or 2♣.

Note: most Vermont players that I know who use Lebensohl play “systems on” when RHO doubles or bids 2♣ over partner’s 1NT opener. Using this approach, RHO’s double is deemed to be “transparent,” and is ignored. Over RHO’s double, 2♣ is Stayman, 2♦ is a transfer to ♥, and 2♥ is a transfer to ♠. Over RHO’s 2♣, a double is Stayman, 2♦ is a transfer to ♥, and 2♥ is a transfer to ♠. Let’s assume that approach, and that Lebensohl Position #1 therefore only applies to RHO’s overcall of 2♦ or 2♥ or 2♠ over partner’s 1NT opener. [3-level overcalls are a subject for a different day. I *told* you that this was going to be a discussion of a *simple* form of Lebensohl.]

So...in the following auction:

W	N	E	S
	1N	2♥...	

X by South is for penalty.

2♠ by South is to play.

2N by South requires opener to “relay” to 3♣, after which,

South can pass (suggesting 6♣ and non-game-going values), or

South can correct to 3♦...also to play, and analogous to passing 3♣, or

South can make a delayed 3♥ cuebid...Stayman *with* a ♥ stopper.

A direct 3-level suit bid by South *below* the level of the overcall (i.e., 3♣ or 3♦) is constructive but *non-forcing*.

A direct cuebid of 3♥ by South is Stayman (i.e., 4♠) *without* a ♥ stopper.

A suit bid by South above the next level of the overcall (such as 3♠ in the above auction) shows 5+ length in the suit bid, and is forcing

(2) **Lebensohl Position #2.** When partner doubles the opponents' weak two opener.

So...in the following auction:

W	N	E	S
2♥	X	P...	

A direct 3-level suit bid by South *below* the level of the overcall (i.e., 3♣ or 3♦) is constructive but *non-forcing*.

2N by South requires opener to “relay” to 3♣, after which,
South can pass (suggesting 6♣ and non-game-going values), or
South can correct to 3♦...also to play, and analogous to passing 3♣, or
South can make a delayed 3♥ cuebid...Stayman *with* a ♥ stopper.

A direct cuebid of 3♥ by South is Stayman (i.e., 4♠) *without* a ♥ stopper.

A suit bid by South above the next level of the overcall (such as 3♠ in the above auction) shows 5+ length in the suit bid, and is forcing

(3) **Lebensohl Position #3.** After we open and reverse.

So...in the following auction:

W	N	E	S
P	1♦	P	1♠
P	2♥	P...	

2N by South requires opener to “relay” to 3♣, after which,
South can pass (suggesting 6♣ and non-game-going values), or
South corrects to a 3-level contract to play opposite a minimum reverse.

Any other bid by responder is natural and shows sufficient values for game.

Note #1: Reverses tend to have a wide range...a really good 16 to 21. If opener is on the high end of the reverse range (19-21), he refuses to accept the 3♣ relay, thereby committing the partnership to game.

Note #2. In the context of “Lebensohl after opener reverses,” there’s an exception. If the reverse is a “minor reverse,” i.e.:

W	N	E	S
P	1♣	P	1♥
P	2♦...		

Responder initiates Lebensohl via “the other major,” as opposed to 2NT. Don’t ask why. That’s for a later issue (maybe), and the relay is still 3♣. Try it!

OK, I can’t resist. Here’s..

(4) **Lebensohl Position #4**. OBAR Lebensohl.

<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>♠ 8</p> <p>♥ KQ1043</p> <p>♦ J432</p> <p>♣ K85</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%; text-align: right;"> <p>♠ AQJ97</p> <p>♥ 97</p> <p>♦ AK9</p> <p>♣ 962</p> </div> </div> <div style="text-align: center; margin: 10px 0;"> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>♠ 653</p> <p>♥ AJ8</p> <p>♦ Q106</p> <p>♣ J1043</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%; text-align: right;"> <p>♠ K1042</p> <p>♥ 652</p> <p>♦ 875</p> <p>♣ AQ7</p> </div> </div>	<p>Board 2 : Dealer East : NS vulnerable</p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;"><i>West</i></th> <th style="text-align: left;"><i>North</i></th> <th style="text-align: left;"><i>East</i></th> <th style="text-align: left;"><i>South</i></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td>1♠</td> <td>Pass</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2♠</td> <td>2NT</td> <td>Pass</td> <td>3♥</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3♠</td> <td>Pass</td> <td>Pass</td> <td>Dbl</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="4">All Pass</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>			1♠	Pass	2♠	2NT	Pass	3♥	3♠	Pass	Pass	Dbl	All Pass			
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Had I relayed as requested on the above hand, partner would have bid 3♥ setting the final contract. My bid of 3♥, on the other hand, declining to “accept the relay,” and showed “values,” typically 8 or more HCP. Partscores are hard-fought at matchpoints. Partner was happy to pass, and I was happy to double 3♠ with what seemed like 2 trump tricks.

I chose the ♥5 as my opening lead. We play “attitude leads.” This approach calls for the lead of “second high from worthless,” i.e., xxx, or xxxx, or xxxxx. In the case of xxx, when playing standard count, the second time the suit is played, I would play my highest ♥, showing an odd number, and on the third round of the suit, I would (perforce) play low, completing a “Middle-Up-Down” or “MUD” sequence...just as many of us were taught decades ago.

Declarer played a low ♥ from dummy, and partner won his ♥10. Partner returned the ♣, and declarer played the ♣6 from her hand, carefully concealing the ♣2. I won the ♣Q, and being unsure where the ♣K was, I led another ♥. Declarer won the ♥A on the board, and led a small ♠, finessing the ♠Q. I won the ♠K, and knowing (for her opening bid) that East has 5 ♠, I led the ♥6 (MUD). Declarer takes all of her ♦, and tries a ♣ from the board. I win the ♣Q, take ♣A and get out with another ♣ to partner's ♣K. I must win another ♠ for down 2 and +300. This result would not have been possible without the inferences made possible through our use of Lebensohl.

The definitive work on Lebensohl is by Ron Andersen, and is called *The Lebensohl Convention Complete in Contract Bridge*. One of my partners would call it “a memory hog,” but if you're willing to put in the work, it seems to come up once a session, and when it does, it's often good for a board. And who can't use an extra 4%?