

Lebensohl

Bidding after partner opens 1NT is often among the first topics discussed to beginners. The concepts are simple in principle, since opener's hand is very limited as compared to other openings. Beginners can simply count points and suits and all is well in the bidding.

It's also fertile grounds for more advanced discussions. Again, because the opening is very limited, there's a lot of science behind responder describing his hand.

Unfortunately, these delicate discussions go out the window once the opponents intervene. Take West's seat, holding:

♠AJx ♥KQT9 ♦xx ♣Q98x

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>
	1N	2♠	??

Ready to bid Stayman... wait, you can't! How rude!

Maybe instead your hand is

♠KQJxx ♥xx ♦KQJxx ♣x

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>
	1N	2♥	??

You could belong in 4♠, 5♦, or some slam.

Just to annoy you further,

♠xx ♥xxx ♦KJxx ♣AKJT

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>
	1N	2♥	??

Any ideas?

The opponent's bidding makes your decision-making process very difficult. This is because you haven't discussed how to bid various hand types in these auctions. Even with these discussions, you may not have the tools to get to the correct contract. It is difficult to employ good judgment with limited methods.

Many, but not all of these issues, can be resolved with the following agreements (called Lebensohl).



The premise behind Lebensohl is that it is important to distinguish competitive hands from game forcing hands. This provides a partnership with greater ability to not only get to game when it is right, but to get to the right game more often.

In order to accomplish this, 2N becomes a multi-purpose, artificial bid. This includes

- Competitive hands with a long suit
- Special types of FG hands

By corollary, bidding a suit directly is 100% FG. No ambiguity.

Lebensohl is a convention best learned by example. Say you hold as West

♠xx ♥Kx ♦xx ♣QT9xxxx

N	E	S	W
	1N	2♠	??

You have a competitive hand with a long suit (you do want to compete in ♣, right?). Bid 2N. Partner will bid 3♣ to find out what you've got. When he bids 3♣, you will pass. Now (opponent's permitting), you will get to play in 3♣.

Next hand, still West

♠Jxx ♥Qxx ♦x ♣AKJxxx

N	E	S	W
	1N	2♠	??

Now you have a hand that might even make slam opposite a fitting hand! To get this started, bid 3♣ directly. This is FG and natural, so partner won't be surprised when he looks at the hand record.

I mentioned earlier that 2N includes some FG hands. This should clarify that note...

In order to find a 4-4 major fit, responder should cuebid the opponent's suit. When a fit is found, all is well. If there is no fit, however, it becomes important to not get to a hopeless 3N. Consider holding (as West)

♠xx ♥JTxx ♦AKxxx ♣QT

N	E	S	W
	1N	2♠	3♠
P	3N	AP	

You bid 3♠, looking for a 4-4 ♥ fit. Partner doesn't have a fit. He also doesn't have a stopper... uh oh.

Partner's hand:

♠xxx ♥AKx ♦QJx ♣AKxx

5♦ offers better prospects than 3N. Unfortunately, getting to 3N was unavoidable.

This is where the special nuance comes in. If responder cuebids directly, he implies NO STOPPER in the opponent's suit. If responder cuebids after he bids 2N, he implies A STOPPER. This allows the partnership to avoid a situation like what is illustrated above. Opener can now pull to 4♣ instead of 3N, and E/W will end up in 5♦.

The same nuance is applicable to raising to 3N. Suppose you get this hand

♠xx ♥xxx ♦KQxx ♣KJxx

N	E	S	W
	1N	2♠	??

Values for 3N, but no ♠ stopper... the answer is to bid 3N directly! If partner doesn't have a ♠ stopper, he'll pull out of 3N to his best suit. Add the ♠K to the hand, and responder should bid 2N first, then 3N.

♣♦♥♠

It's worth discussing what happens when 4th hand decides to raise the overcall. Some example auctions include:

N	E	S	W	N	E	S	W	N	E	S	W
	1N	2♠	2N		1N	2♠	3♥		1N	2♦	3♦
3♠	?			3♠	?			4♦	?		

Now, despite responder's attempts to clarify the nature of his hand, advancer has cramped the auction even further! The problem of determining the best contract continues.

In the first auction (when responder bids 2N), opener's double is best played as penalty. This is because responder may have a variety of hands, from a weak hand with a long suit to a raise to 3N. If East uses a

double to show anything else, there's considerable risk in getting to a poor contract. When the bidding comes around to responder, he might do any of the following:

- P most hands with less than GF values
- X 4♥, ♠ stopper, FG
- 3N to play
- 4♣ to play (usually a weak 7+ card suit)
- 4♦ to play (usually a weak 7+ card suit)

In the 2nd auction, the opening side is in a forcing pass situation (as responder's 3♥ bid is game forcing). In this scenario, opener has the following options:

- P forcing, implies doubt about strain
- X penalty
- 3N – To play – normally implies a ♠ stopper and a source of offensive tricks
- 4♣ 3+♥, ♣ control, maximum values
- 4♦ 3+♥, ♦ control, no ♣ control, maximum values
- 4♥ 3+♥, minimum

When opener passes, responder has the following options:

- X Will tolerate playing 3♠X, includes most balanced minimums
- 3N To play, normally a 5-card trick source in ♥s with a fast ♠ stopper
- 4♣ 5+♥ 4+♣ FG
- 4♦ 5+♥ 4+♦ FG
- 4♥ 6+♥ signoff

The 3rd auction is particularly frustrating because the opening side has no assurance of a fit, and yet may often miss a 4-4 major fit in this auction. In this situation, a double by either side is penalty. Responder may bid 4♥ to show both majors and offer a choice of games.



Does Lebensohl apply after a balancing overcall? It doesn't, and for several good reasons:

- Responder bypassed an opportunity to transfer, bid Stayman, etc. on the first round
- There is no possible chance for game, so any bidding methods should be designed around competitive principles
- Differentiating between 4 and 7 point hands in this situation would be splitting hairs, since it doesn't matter to opener which hand responder has
- From opener's point of view, he has already given an adequate description of his hand. There are very few reasons to compete voluntarily to the three level, so differentiation between these hands is unnecessary

This doesn't mean that there isn't anything worth discussing. Consider this auction:

N	E	S	W
1N	P	P	

2♦

What hands should opener and responder compete on, and how? If East held something like

♠KQTx ♥AJ9x ♦xx ♣KQx

A takeout double would be OK, since responder can have a fit for one of opener's major suits. With a hand like this

♠A8xxx KQJ Ax Qxx

You might stick your neck out and bid 2♠, on the same principle that partner can have support for your suit. You should not be one of those players that holds

♠AJ9x ♥KQJ ♦KQx ♣xxx

And bids 2N. This is reckless on many levels, and unfortunately such bidding isn't punished often enough by an enemy double.

I mentioned that opener's double is for takeout. This is the case for responder as well. This way, the opening side can navigate to a undiscovered 4-4 major fit when the opponents balance in a minor or, when they balance in a major, compete effectively in a partscore that was unbidable with methods without interference (e.g. for several partnerships, a weak 4135 hand has to pass).

If opener has a penalty-oriented hand, he passes and waits for a reopening double to convert.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

In the day and age of artificial intervention, it's important to integrate Lebensohl-based methods when the opponents make artificial overcalls. For instance, what should responder's bid mean after:

N	E	S	W	N	E	S	W	N	E	S	W
1N	2♦!	?		1N	2♣!	?		1N	2♥!	?	
!= Majors				!= One Suit				!= ♥ and ♠			

The solution offered resembles methods that counter an Unusual NT overcall (Unusual v. Unusual). The strategy is based on the idea that when aggressor shows two specified suits, responder has a cuebid available in each suit. In addition, responder will only have two alternative trump suits (the unbid suits), so it is logical to define each cuebid as strong hands with one of the unbid suits.

When applied with Lebensohl, this strategy represents something like the following:

N	E	S	W
1N	2♦*	?	* = Majors

X Takeout (minors)

P Nonforcing, generally <7 HCP or penalty oriented hands

2♥ 5+♣ FG

2♠ 5+♦ FG

2N Lebensohl – forces 3♣ (to weak minor suit, NT values with full stoppers, or NT- oriented hands with only one stopper)

3♣ 6+♣ INV

3♦ 6+♦ INV

3♥ -- (perhaps forcing with both minors ♥ shortness)

3♠ -- (perhaps forcing with both minors ♠ shortness)

3N Values for 3N without either major suit stopped

In general, the two available cuebids correspond to suits by economy. Whichever unbid suit can be bid “cheapest” corresponds to the first cuebid, and so on.

When aggressor’s call is wholly artificial (there’s no specific suit named), Lebensohl is applied while trying to maintain as much business as usual. In the following example, it would be acceptable to play a “Shadow Double” approach where double acts as Stayman and other calls remain as without interference. However, there is a slight edge for getting to immediately name a trump suit with weak hands, thus:

N	E	S	W
1N	2♣*	?	* = One Suited Hand

X Sets force, usually good 7+ HCP, defensive values

P Nonforcing, implies weakness

2♦ 5+♦, competitive

2♥ 5+♥, competitive

2♠ 5+♠, competitive

2N Lebensohl, forces 3♣ (either weak with ♣ length, 6+ cd suit invitational, or balanced S/T)

3♣ 5+♣ FG

3♦ 5+♦ FG

3♥ 5+♥ FG

3♠ 5+♠ FG

3N Signoff

Two very common permutations of this start are worth mentioning:

N	E	S	W	N	E	S	W
1N	2♣*	X	XX	1N	2♣*	X	2♦

Better players agree that West's XX asks East to show his suit. Slightly worse players will bid 2♦ with these hands. In either case, opener has the option of passing or bidding (and in the second scenario, doubling).

In both cases, opener may bid a five-card suit at the two level with offensive values (if you open 1N with 2326 and the like, you may also show the minor at the three level as appropriate). Otherwise, passing is indicated. If advancer bids 2♦ and opener doubles, the recommended treatment is to show 44xx distribution (both majors). This looks superior to something like "lead directing" because it occasionally helps N/S compete with a 4-4 fit that otherwise gets lost.

Of course, when only one suit is showed explicitly and another unspecified suit is implied, the call is treated as a one suited hand. Methods resemble normal Lebensohl.

Overcalls like the last example are the hardest to deal with. In particular, aggressor has shown both suits while bidding one of them. This prevents responder from using a lot of tools available with lower level overcalls. Until better ideas are brought forth, it seems best to use similar ideas in the space available. So, in this auction:

N	E	S	W
1N	2♥*	?	* ♥ and ♠

P Nonforcing, implies penalty oriented values or weakness

X Takeout for minors, invitational or less

2♠ GF, 5+♣

2N Forces 3♣ (to weak minor, hands for 3N with one stopper, or 3N with both stoppers)

3♣ 6+♣, INV

3♦ 6+♦, INV

3♥ GF, 5+♦

3♠ 5+♦ 5+♣ 0-1♠ FG

3N Values for 3N w/o major suit stoppers

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠
