

Lebensohl Revisited

Introduction

This article was originally written some 14 years ago for a regional Bridge newsletter in the North-West of England. Some of the ideas here are ones which you may already use or which you may have seen suggested elsewhere, but I hope that even the most ardent fans of Lebensohl may find something new to expand their use of it.

The original purpose behind Lebensohl was to allow responder to compete safely after his partner had opened 1NT and opponents had overcalled in a suit at the 2-level. The idea was that by giving up a natural 2NT bid, responder gains the ability to distinguish between competitive, invitational and forcing bids. For those who have not yet encountered Lebensohl, the original scheme is as follows:

1NT - 2x - 2y	is merely competitive, eg:
1NT - 2♥ - 2♠	is non-forcing and can be quite weak
1NT - 2x - 3y	is forcing, eg:
1NT - 2♥ - 3♠	shows at least a good 5-card suit and game values
1NT - 2x - 2NT	tells partner to bid 3♣, after which bids from responder are non-forcing, eg: -
1NT - 2x - 2NT - 3♣ - No	would show a weakish hand with long clubs
1NT - 2x - 2NT - 3♣ - 3y	is competitive or invitational depending on whether or not responder could have bid that suit at the 2-level. eg:
1NT - 2♥ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦	is merely competitive, whereas: -
1NT - 2♥ - 2NT - 3♠	is invitational, because of the availability of a 2♠ bid

For example: -

West	East	West	Bidding	East	South
♠ KQxx	♠ Jxx	1NT	2♥	2NT	No
♥ QJT	♥ x	3♣	No	3♦	All Pass
♦ AQx	♦ JT9xxx				
♣ Kxx	♣ QJx				

Without Lebensohl, East can't compete safely as a 3♦ bid is at least invitational.

Lebensohl users tend to use terms like **slow** and **fast** bids depending on whether or not responder uses the 2NT-3♣ relay. In addition to those above there are two other kind of sequences to consider: -

A fast 3NT	shows the values for 3NT but denies a stop in opponents' suit
A slow 3NT	shows at least one stop in the opponents suit
A fast cue-bid	is Staymanic, showing interest in any unbid Major, but denying a stop in opponents' suit.
A slow cue-bid	is also Staymanic, but promising a stop in opponents' suit.

West	East	West	Bidding	East	South
♠ QJxx	♠ ATxx	1NT	2♦	3♦ ¹	No
♥ Qx	♥ KJxx	3♠	No	4♠	All Pass
♦ Axx	♦ x				
♣ AQx	♣ JTxx				

(1) Stayman, denying a stop in their suit. 2NT-3♣--3♦ would have shown a stop and a 4-card spade suit (eg: ATxx JTxx Kxx Jx)

Extensions

Besides its original use when opponents overcall partner's 1NT opening, here are some other ways to use Lebensohl-type sequences: -

1. Transfer Lebensohl when partner's 1NT Opening is overcalled.
2. Transfer Lebensohl when partner had made a takeout double at the 1 or 2-level.
3. Lebensohl in **any** contested auction
4. Lebensohl after suit agreement at the 2-level.
5. Lebensohl in any 3-suited auction

1. Transfer Lebensohl

Most people use transfers when responding to partner's 1NT Opening for the very good reason that it gives responder a chance to show much more range and nuance in their bidding. Why give that up just because opponents have overcalled? Using Transfer Lebensohl, the original scheme is changed as follows: -

1NT - 2x - 2y	is still competitive
1NT - 2x - 2NT - 3♣ - 3y	is competitive, or mildly invitational if the bid was available at the 2-level
1NT - 2x - 3y	is a transfer, either forcing or strongly invitational. Opener completes the transfer if he would not accept the invitation and bids something else if he would. If Opener completes the transfer, Responder continues naturally if the bid was intended as forcing.

Slow & **fast** cue-bids (ie: **fast** by transferring into their suit), and **Slow** & **fast** bids of 3NT remain unchanged in their meaning. Transfer **then** cue-bid (if space permits) shows a good 6-card suit and exactly a **Single** stop in the opponents' suit. Opener is normally well-placed to judge the right spot.

			Bidding		
West	East	South	West	North	East
♠ AQxx	♠ KJxxxx	No	1NT	2♥	3♥ ¹
♥ xxx	♥ x	4♥	5♣ ²	No	5♦
♦ Kx	♦ AJx	No	5♠	No	6♠ ⁴
♣ AQTx	♣ Kxx				

- (1) Transfer to Spades
- (2) Would accept an invitation, so cue-bids his cheapest control, the Ace of Clubs
- (3) Knows the hands are fitting well if partner has no heart control

2. Transfer Lebensohl over Takeout Doubles

I would suggest this at the 1 or 2 level (if used at the 1-level then you have to give up 1NT as a natural response, but the sense of the sequences remains unchanged otherwise). The scheme is essentially exactly as when 1NT is overcalled in (1) above.

The factor that suggests Transfer Lebensohl both when partner has opened 1NT and over partner's takeout doubles is that partner is generally the stronger hand, and is known to have at least a small doubleton in any suit we might be thinking of bidding.

Admittedly, this works best where simple overcalls are constructive and potentially as strong as 18 HCP, jump overcalls are weak and obstructive, and take-out doubles are generally 3-suited, so your mileage may differ here. Eg: - (South opens 1♥)

			Bidding	
West	East	West	East	
♠ AQJxx	♠ Kxxx(1♥) X		2♣ ¹	
♥ x	♥ xx	2♠ ²	4♣ ³	
♦ Kxx	♦ AQJxxx	4♦ ⁴	5♦ ⁵	
♣ Axxx	♣ x	6♠		

- (1) Transfer to 2♦, at least strongly invitational, intending to rebid 2♠ over 2♦
- (2) A suit at this stage, but also agreeing an invitation in diamonds
- (3) Splinter, for Spades (We always play splinters to show at least Qxxx in trumps)
- (4) Cheapest 1st or 2nd round control shown. In view of the 2♠ bid this is an Honour
- (5) Denying 1st or second round control of hearts and showing A♦
- (6) Now knows a small slam is the limit.

3. Lebensohl in any contested auction

If you can use Lebensohl when Opponents overcall partner's 1NT Opening, why not give yourself the same range of response when opponents overcall your partner's suit opening, or when partner overcalls their Opening bid (either in a suit or in NT's)? In this way: -

Direct Raises	are always preemptive (any good or forcing raise going via an unassuming cue-bid).
Slow Raises	are genuinely invitational
Negative Doubles	remain unchanged, usually denying good support for partner and showing interest in the unbid suits
2-level bids	in new suits are merely competitive
Fast new suit bids	at the 3-level are forcing
Slow new suit bids	at the 3-level are competitive or invitational as in the original scheme.
Slow & Fast 3NT	has the same meaning as in the original scheme
Slow & Fast Cue-bids:	If partner has bid a Minor suit, this shows good support for partner and shows/denies a good stop in opponents suit for the purposes of playing in 3NT. When partner has bid a major suit, this shows or denies 1st or Second round control of opponents suit. An extreme example: -

			Bidding		
West	East	South	West	North	East
♠ AKJxxx	♠ Qxxx	1♥	1♠ ¹	2♥	3♥ ²
♥ -	♥ xxx	4♥	4NT ³	No	5♠ ⁴
♦ QJTxx	♦ AKx	No	5NT	No	6♦
♣ Kx	♣ Axx	No	7♠ ⁵	All Pass	

- (1) No double because no good support for Clubs.
- (2) Good raise, No 1st or 2nd round control of hearts.
- (3) RKCB 0314
- (4) 2 Key Cards and Queen of Trumps
- (5) Knows partner must have AK or Diamonds and Ace of Clubs.

4. Lebensohl After Suit Agreement at the 2-Level

One thing which has astonished me since starting to play on OkBridge is the almost complete absence of trial bids, either the long-suit or short-suit variety. For those of you who like to be a little more scientific, why not have the ability to make either a long-suit **or** a short suit trial bid depending on what is the most salient feature of your hand, if you've agreed a suit at the 2-level, especially a Major: -

1X - 2X - 3X	is purely pre-emptive
1X - 2X - 2Y	is a short-suit trial bid in Y (Y is Higher-ranking)
1X - 2X - 2NT - 3♣ - 3Y	is a long-suit trial bid in Y
1♥ - 2♥ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♥	is a long-suit trial bid in Spades (See below)
1X - 2X - 3Y	is a short-suit trial bid in Y (Y is Lower ranking)

Consider the following: -

		Bidding	
West	East	West	East
♠ AKJxx	♠ Txx	1♠	2♠
♥ x	♥ AKJx	3♥ ¹	3♠ ²
♦ Kxx	♦ xxx	No	
♣ AT9x	♣ xxx		

- (1) Short-suit trial bid in Hearts
- (2) Can judge that the hands do not fit well so declines the invitation

This next hand shows the other side of the coin: -

		Bidding	
West	East	West	East
♠ Jxx	♠ x	1♥	2♥
♥ AJTxx	♥ Kxxx	2NT ¹	3♣ ²
♦ Ax	♦ Kxx	3♥ ³	4♥ ⁴
♣ Axx	♣ JT9xx		

- (1) *Lebensohl*
- (2) *Forced*
- (3) *Long-suit trial bid in Spades*
- (4) *Has the required help in Spades*

5. Lebensohl in 3-suited Auctions

The application of Lebensohl in this situation, as well as providing a means to show preference, invitation or forcing bids, is to differentiate between different kinds of 4th-suit forces, in particular between: -

- **Fast** 4th-suit forces more interested in clarification of partner's shape & range.
- **Slow** 4th-suit forces more interested in a stop for the purposes of playing in 3NT.

The permutations and nuances in these sequences are greatly varied depending on whether a slow bid could have been made at the 2-level or not, but they build on the normal Lebensohl scheme. A few examples: -

1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♦	is asking opener to clarify his shape & range
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦	is interested in a stop in Diamonds for 3NT
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 3NT	shows values for 3NT but no Diamond stop
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3NT	is to play
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♥	is simple preference
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 3♥	is 100% forcing
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♥	is invitational
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♠	non-forcing, probably a 6-card suit
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2NT - 3♣ - 3♠	is invitational with a 5+ -card suit, no fit for Hearts or Clubs.
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 3♠	is 100% forcing, implies a partial fit for Hearts or Clubs
1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 3♣	is invitational (forcing hand would go via 2♦)

Conclusion

Hopefully, this article will have given those of you who have never included Lebensohl in your repertoire a taste of how useful a convention it is, and those of you who do use it some ideas on other situations where it can help you to reach the right contract safely.

In finishing here is another hand from tournament play. My regular partner at the time was Jason Hackett, who was sitting North in this hand from a Pairs competition in Manchester in the late 1989:

NS Vulnerable

	North					
	♠ QJxx					
	♥ Ax					
	♦ KJT					
	C Kxxx	East 2♥ ¹	West	North	Bidding	East
West			X	No	No	3NT ²
♠ Kxx		♠ Txxx	No	4♣ ³	No	
♥ QJTxxx		♥ Kx	No	5♣ ⁵	All Pass	4♠ ⁴
♦ Axxx	♦ xxxx					
♣ x		♣ xx				
	South					
	♠ Ax					
	♥ xxx					
	♦ Qx					
	♣ AQJxxx					

(1) Weak (!)
 (2) Values for 3NT but no heart stop
 (3) Diagnosing that with no heart stop and no interest in Spades, I likely had a long Minor
 (4) Cue-bid in support of Clubs (Cannot be a suit or would have bid 3♥ initially)
 (5) My inability to cue-bid a diamond or heart control stops Jason from going too far

Most of the room were either in 3NT or 6♣ (both going off after the inevitable Heart lead) or taking 4♥X off for 300 and only one other pair managed to find the right level in Clubs.

Enjoy your Bridge!

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