

Dilemma: How to Describe Length and Strength When Partner Shows a Strong Hand

Situation: Partner has opened 1NT (15-18) and the opponents interfere, or partner has doubled the opponents' weak-two opening, or partner has opened the bidding and reversed. Your holding is such that you feel strongly that the hand belongs to your side. Sometimes that belief comes from a strong honor-card holding, sometimes from a favorable distribution, and sometimes (not frequently enough) from a combination of honor strength and distribution.

Problem: 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 the initial situations (opponents interfere over partner's 1NT, partner doubles weak two, partner reverses) presents a slight variation on a common theme; and these are not infrequent occurrences. Many partnerships struggle without tools to handle these situations. Let's look at each of these in turn...

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 five hearts and 11 points? What will you bid on this hand? Are you willing to bypass the possibility of playing 3NT? How will you proceed? Problems...

Opponents Open a Weak-Two, and Partner Doubles

After partner doubles the opponents' weak-two opening and the responder passes, 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, 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, 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. And

there are a few things that I like to "tweak" a bit in order to make Lebensohl behave the way I need it to behave.

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

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]

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]

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. 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 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 no five-card major, no six-card minor. 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 denies a stopper in the opponents' suit; to use Stayman when you possess a stopper in their suit, you start with the Lebensohl 2NT relay to 3♣, and then cue-bid the opponent's suit.) 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 hand that holds an unbid 4-card major suit, I prefer to double (see paragraph above) and let partner make the next decision.

Lebensohl Over Doubles of Weak Two-Bids

In much the same way as Lebensohl handles interference over partner's NT opener, it works when partner doubles the opponents' "weak-two" openings.

When your partner doubles a pre-emptive opening, there is an immediate need to show 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♠

How many points are needed for each? How many spades?
Which do you bid with a good hand and four spades?
Which do you bid with a weak hand and six spades?
Which do you bid with a good hand and six spades?

Lebensohl in this instance is 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; 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 - (Pass) - 3♣ - (Pass) - 3♠ is a game-
invitation with 4+ spades

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2NT - (Pass) - 3♣ - (Pass) - 3♦ is a weak
hand with 5+ diamonds

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 2NT - (Pass) - 3♣ - (Pass) - Pass is a weak
hand with 5+ clubs

(2♥) - Double - (Pass) - 3NT is a hand with nine tricks in NT **but no heart stopper** (remember the "direct denials" from above); 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, but the best is as a full opening hand, and asking if partner has slam interest...

At any rate, the capability to distinguish between weak hands, invitational hands, and game-forcing hands makes Lebensohl a very powerful tool in these sequences.

Lebensohl Over Reverses

Increasingly, partnerships are coming to realize that Lebensohl has additional use over partner's reverse. 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 of opener to their first suit.

But when you add Lebensohl into the mix, a much better distinction can be made:

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 (yes, it can happen) shows distribution that was previously undisclosed (a second suit of four cards), but a very weak hand and no tolerance for opener's two suits).

Any 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 by responder forces a (relay) bid of 3♣ by opener, after which responder may pass or suggest the final contract. This is a weak, non-forcing bid. In fact, it is the existence of this option that permits the game-forcing nature of all rebids by responder at the three-level to be treated as game-forcing.

Summary

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

I believe it 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.

