

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	♣ K96	

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?

1NT ♣/♦ ?

Hand H Hand I

♠ 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

1NT 2♠ ?

Hand J Hand K

♠ 3 ♠ K3
♥ Q93 ♥ 983
♦ K985 ♦ K98
♣ AQJ86 ♣ AQ862

Things are not always straightforward however. What happens if we have a good (game going) hand, no 4 card major but no stop in the overcalled suit? Can we tell partner to bid 3NT only if he has adequate stop(s)?

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

1NT 2♠ ?

Hand L Hand M

♠ 4 ♠ K94
♥ KQJ3 ♥ KQJ3
♦ K94 ♦ 64
♣ K8752 ♣ K852

So that's covered Stayman and balanced hands, but what about balanced hands with a 4 card major where either 3NT or 4 of a major (or 5 of a minor) may be correct?

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♠ 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 Hand P

♠ J7 ♠ K94
♥ K93 ♥ KJ3
♦ Q1064 ♦ 1064
♣ Q852 ♣ 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 Hand R

♠ J7 ♠ K94
♥ K1093 ♥ KJ103
♦ Q64 ♦ 64
♣ Q852 ♣ 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.

Lebensohl over weak Two's.

West North East South

2♥ dbl pass ?

Partner has doubled a weak two for take-out.
How can you differentiate between weak,
invitational and strong hands? Use Lebensohl.

Hand A Hand B Hand C

♠ KQ64	♠ K986	♠ KJ42
♥ 63	♥ 63	♥ 63
♦ AJ3	♦ 7532	♦ A93
♣ K854	♣ 982	♣ Q1086

With Hand A we bid 3♠, game forcing.

With Hand B we bid 2♠, weak.

With Hand C we bid 2NT; followed by 3♠
over partner's expected 3♣ reply – invitational.

Things are a little different from the situation when partner has opened 1NT. If the opening bid was a weak major, then we do not use the cue bid as Stayman (partner is assumed to have the other major). Instead, it denies the other major and requests doubler to bid 3NT with stop(s). Remember, partner has not bid NT and you do not want to be declarer in NT with no stop.

Lebensohl after Partner has reversed.

North	East	South	West
1♦	pass	1♠	pass
2♥	pass	?	

Partner has shown a strong hand by reversing. Let's suppose that you play this reverse as a one round force, how can you differentiate between a hand that is very weak, one that is reasonable and one that forces to game? Let's consider a number of situations: -

1. We prefer partner's first bid suit

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C	With Hand A we bid 4♦; forcing, and since we have gone past 3NT it shows slam interest and/or shortage in the unbid suit.
♠ K7632	♠ Q632	♠ Q632	With Hand B we bid 3♦; forcing.
♥ KJ	♥ K42	♥ K2	With Hand C we bid 2NT, Lebensohl and then 3♦ over partner's 'forced' 3♣ reply – weak.
♦ KJ752	♦ Q532	♦ J632	
♣ 8	♣ 85	♣ 862	

2. We prefer partner's 2nd bid suit to his 1st bid suit

With a very weak responding hand we could pass (?) but most players play that a reverse is forcing for one bid or one round. So we again use Lebensohl when we have a very weak hand with support for partner's 2nd suit, same bidding sequence as above, 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - ? :-

Hand D	Hand E	With Hand D we bid 3♥; forcing,
♠ K7632	♠ Q632	With Hand E we bid 2NT, Lebensohl and then bid 3♥ over partner's 'forced' 3♣ reply – weak.
♥ KJ73	♥ K72	
♦ KJ	♦ 86	
♣ KJ	♣ J632	

Let's have an example of Lebensohl after a reverse. It's from news-sheet 16.

West, Terry	East, Chuck	West	East	(1) a reverse
♠ A	♠ 109762	1♦	1♠	(2) Lebensohl, West 'must' bid 3♣ and await developments.
♥ AQ74	♥ 8532	2♥ (1)	2NT (2)	(3) 'forced'
♦ AKQJ64	♦ 8	3♣ (3)	3♥ (4)	(4) a very weak hand with ♥'s
♣ 105	♣ A84	4♥ (5)	pass	(5) a very strong hand with ♥'s

I would not argue if you said that this West hand could open 2♣, but if you play a reverse as forcing (obviously Chuck and I do) then this is quite an efficient way to bid the hand. Now I personally do not like to open two suiters with 2♣ if I can avoid it, and with a ♠ singleton it is unlikely that 1♦ will be passed out. If you play 2♥ as negative over 2♣ (we do) then it presumably goes 2♣ - 2♥ - 3♦ - 3♠ - ? and the ♥ fit may get lost.

3. We would prefer to play in our suit

Hand F	Hand G	Hand H	With Hand F we bid 3♠, game forcing and showing a good suit.
♠ KQJ642	♠ KQ862	♠ QJ10862	With Hand G we bid 2♠, forcing. See note 1.
♥ 63	♥ Q3	♥ Q3	With Hand H we bid 2NT; followed by 3♠
♦ AJ	♦ J53	♦ 93	over partner 'forced' 3♣ reply – weak.
♣ K85	♣ 985	♣ 862	

Note 1. Some players play Lebensohl here slightly differently. They play a sequence such as 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - 2♠ as weak and with a stronger hand responder uses 2NT, Lebensohl, followed by 3♠. This is not standard when playing Lebensohl in this situation and would have to be agreed.

4. We want to play in NT

Partner's reverse is usually around 16-17 points (but could well be a lot more), and if we have a good holding in the unbid suit then we bid NT. Now playing Lebensohl there are options here, as we can bid 3NT directly or else a forcing 2NT. Note that this is different from 'standard' where 2NT would not be forcing but offering 2NT as a final contract. Playing Lebensohl we can never end up in 2NT – it's either a suit contract or 3NT (or more). Same bidding as before, 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - ? :-

Hand J	Hand K	Hand L	With Hand J we bid 3NT, to play.
♠ KJ64	♠ KJ64	♠ AQ64	With Hand K we have slam ambitions (6NT?)
♥ 94	♥ A4	♥ A4	if partner has more than a minimal reverse.
♦ K93	♦ K93	♦ K93	One way to show a hand like this is to bid 2NT
♣ KJ85	♣ AQ85	♣ AQ84	and then 3NT over partner's 3♣ reply – slam interest.
			Hand L definitely wants to go slamming.
			There are various possibilities; you could agree that 2NT
			followed by 4♣ over partner's forced 3♣ response is Gerber (a direct 4♣ after 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ – would be a splinter agreeing ♥'s).

5. We want to play in NT only if partner has a stop in the 4th suit.

Same bidding: 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - ?

Hand M	Hand N	With Hand M we would like to play in 3NT if partner has a ♣ stop. So we bid 3♣, 4 th suit forcing and then pass if partner shows a stop with 3NT.
♠ KJ64	♠ KJ64	With Hand N it's similar but this hand is worth a slam effort and you could try 3♣, 4 th suit forcing and then a quantitative 4NT if partner shows a ♣ stop with 3NT.
♥ K64	♥ AK4	
♦ K63	♦ KJ3	
♣ Q65	♣ K85	

6. 2NT when opener has reversed over a two level response.

North	East	South	West	2NT by South here would not be Lebensohl – even if you do not play 2/1, a reverse after a two level response is best played as game forcing and so 2NT here is natural and game forcing. It's up to you if you would play 3NT as fast arrival.
1♥	pass	2♣	pass	
2♠	pass	?		

7. When opener does not complete the 3♣ puppet.

Now Lebensohl 'forces' the reverser to bid 3♣. But there are situations where the partner of the 2NT Lebensohl bidder knows that game is on and so does not bid 3♣. This is covered fully in 'breaking the Lebensohl puppet' and here is an example where it may occur having reversed. It is the example from news-sheet 16 with the minor suits reversed: -

West	East	West	East	(1) a reverse
				(2) Lebensohl, West 'must' bid 3♣ and await developments.
♠ A	♠ 109762	1♣	1♠	(3) I am not going to risk 3♣ being passed
♥ AQ74	♥ 8532	2♥ (1)	2NT (2)	(4) a very weak hand with ♥'s
♦ 105	♦ A84	3♦ (3)	3♥ (4)	(5) a very strong hand with ♥'s
♣ AKQJ64	♣ 8	4♥ (5)	pass	

West has a game-forcing hand after partner has responded and at (2) East has advertised a weak hand. It would be a mistake for West to 'automatically' bid 3♣ at (3) as it is quite possible that East could pass that. So West has to bid something else and a 'meaningless but forcing' 3♦ is surely best at (3) as 3♥ would imply 5♥'s (and 6♣'s).

The Good-Bad 2NT

West	North	East	South
1♠	2♦	2♠	2NT!

Hand A	Hand B	Hand C
♠ A2	♠ 62	♠ 62
♥ J63	♥ J63	♥ QJ109863
♦ K862	♦ K962	♦ 93
♣ Q853	♣ 9853	♣ 102

Yet another use for Lebensohl. 2NT can hardly be used as natural here, so we utilise the bid as Lebensohl. If we wish to merely compete in partner's suit or an unbid suit, we go via Lebensohl. A direct bid shows values but should not be forcing.

With Hand A we bid 3♦, showing values.

With Hand B we bid 2NT; followed by 3♦ over partner 3♣ reply – a weak raise.

With Hand C we bid 2NT; followed by 3♥ over partner 3♣ reply – weak. The good-bad 2NT has many applications and may occur whichever side has opened the bidding.

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).

What is a Puppet?

A puppet is different from transfers, Stayman, Blackwood etc. Stayman and Blackwood ask, Lebensohl does not. A transfer tells, Lebensohl does not. The Lebensohl 2NT bid says nothing, but 'demands' a 3♣ response (the puppet) so that the Lebensohl bidder can start telling! May seem a bit complex, but you soon get the hang of it.

Breaking the Puppet.

Now we all know about breaking transfers, the situation here is somewhat different. Responder will normally always reply 3♣, but there are a few possible exceptions worthy of consideration. Basically, you must bid 3♣ in case partner has a very weak hand with long ♣'s. Usually, the responder has already limited his hand (a 1NT opener or a reverse) and the Lebensohl bidder is in charge. But there certainly are exception. For example, when we have doubled a weak two bid. If we have a huge hand and will on no account play in 3♣, then don't bid it! Also after reversing, if your hand is game going or cannot stand to play in 3♣, then bid something else.

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.