

Lebensohl over a Two-Bid (Backstory)

This article contains background material and preliminary plans for the upcoming third edition of *EZ-Expert Bidding Tools*. Gavin Wolpert's "expert standard" methods have superseded them in the book.

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When partner doubles a weak two-bid, we can have quite a problem. Our hand could have any strength – or none – passing the double is rare. We give up our natural 2 NT bid, in exchange for gaining an additional way to make every bid above 2 NT. One bid for many!

(2 ♥) – Dble – (Pass) – ?

We'll use this auction for examples, because it covers many situations. Spades are higher than opener's suit, so we can bid the suit at the two level. Clubs and diamonds are below opener's suit, so our cheapest bid of those suits will be at the three level.

Standard Lebensohl Methods

With a bad hand, we bid a suit at the two level (2 ♠ over 2 ♥ doubled), if possible. Otherwise, we bid 2 NT (lebensohl), which requests doubler to bid 3 ♣. To play in 3 ♣, we pass; otherwise we bid a suit below opener's (3 ♦ over 2 ♥ doubled), to play there.

Only with a huge hand will doubler bid higher than 3 ♣. We expect doubler to have either 3+ card support for all three unbid suits – or something much better!

Constructive hand. A direct bid of a suit below opener's is natural and non-forcing, with *constructive* strength. Writers disagree about what constructive exactly means here, sometimes using the word *invitational* (or both, with a subtle difference). We are going to define constructive as meaning "about 8 to 10 points." That might include a good 7 or a bad 11 (or any 11 with a minor suit).

A direct jump to three of a suit above opener's (3 ♠ over 2 ♥ doubled) is also constructive; it *promises at least five cards in the suit*.

Game in our long suit. We jump to game in our major suit of at least five cards. This tends to deny interest in slam.

The sequences we have discussed so far are the extent of modern standard. They address our most important considerations, our

strength and our long suit (especially a major). There is no consensus beyond the following charts, which are insufficient:

A1	D2	A2	Lebensohl/ <i>Diamonds</i> : (2 ♢) - X - (P) - ?
2 ♥	Natural and weak.		
2 ♠	Natural and weak.		
2 NT	Asks for 3 ♣.		
	3 ♣	Requested bid.	
		Pass	Play here.
3 ♣	Natural and constructive.		
3 ♥	Natural, 5+ cards, and constructive.		
3 ♠	Natural, 5+ cards, and constructive.		
4 ♥	Natural, 5+ cards, and game values.		
4 ♠	Natural, 5+ cards, and game values.		

A1	D2	A2	Lebensohl/ <i>Hearts</i> : (2 ♥) - X - (P) - ?
2 ♠	Natural and weak (0 to 7- points).		
2 NT	Asks for 3 ♣.		
	3 ♣	Requested bid.	
		Pass	Play here.
		3 ♢	Play here.
3 ♣	Natural and constructive.		
3 ♢	Natural and constructive.		
3 ♠	Natural, 5+ cards, and constructive.		
4 ♠	Natural, 5+ cards, and game values.		

A1	D2	A2	Lebensohl/ <i>Spades</i> : (2 ♠) - X - (P) - ?
2 NT	Asks for 3 ♣.		
	3 ♣	Requested bid.	
		Pass	Play here.
		3 ♢	Play here.
		3 ♥	Play here.
3 ♣	Natural and constructive.		
3 ♢	Natural and constructive.		
3 ♥	Natural, 4+ cards, and constructive.		
4 ♥	Natural, 5+ cards, and game values.		

When we can only show our major suit at the three level (3 ♥ over 2 ♠ doubled), that bid is made with four or more cards. As we have seen, we have the great luxury of being able to show a 5-card major in a constructive hand, when it is higher than opener's suit.

This ends the standard methods to be used by all lebensohl players.

Additional, Non-Standard Methods

We have seen all the bids for bad hands; all the rest of the bids can be devoted to hands with the potential for game or slam.

Slam Bidding

Yes, a slam is quite possible, and we need methods to sort that out. The weak two-bid opener may have no defensive strength, perhaps as little as this, non-vulnerable:

♠ Q J 9 7 6 4 ♥ 9 2 ♦ 5 4 3 ♣ 7 6

We start with slam bidding because it impacts a key decision – even though we subscribe to the “game over slam” principle.

Delayed leaping Michaels (DLM). For this method, we must already be playing leaping Michaels for intervenor, directly over the weak two-bid itself. Delayed leaping Michaels by advancer is only worthwhile because we already know how to play it!

These slam tries apply *after bidding 2 NT* (lebensohl, the delay):

- 4 m The bid minor and an unbid major (DLM).
- 4 cue Two unbid suits of the same rank (majors or minors, DLM).
- 4 NT Natural, quantitative, at least 16 HCP.

In addition to DLM, we have these *direct bids*:

- 4 m Natural, forcing, one-suited slam try.
- 4 cue Two unbid suits of the same rank (game-only).
- 4 NT Blackwood for aces, intending to bid slam in a long suit.

❑ [a] DLM and the rest of the six bids above are available to advancer, after the double of weak two-bid.

○ [b] The six bids above are undefined.

Cue-Bids and 3 NT Bids

In the Backstory is a chart for four prominent methods, none of which agree on cue-bids and 3 NT bids. Here are goals to assure that we don't declare notrump when doubler has our only stopper:

- Our delayed cue-bid must promise a stopper.
- Our 3 NT bid, direct or delayed, must promise a stopper.

Cue-bids. A cue-bid could result in a slam try.

- ❑ [c] The direct cue-bid is forcing to game, promises at least four cards in an unbid major, and *denies a stopper* in opener's suit.

The delayed cue-bid is forcing to game, promises at least four cards in an unbid major, and *shows a stopper* in opener's suit.

- [d] The direct cue-bid is forcing to game and asks for 3 NT with a stopper – likely based on a long, good suit.

The delayed cue-bid is a slam try and asks partner to show suits. (This sequence could wrong-side a notrump contract.)

3 NT Bids.

When we are confident of the contract, we should be glad to get there promptly. We don't need the bidding space, so we have this goal:

- A direct 3 NT should be more assertive than a delayed 3 NT, the modern style.

- ❑ [e] Direct 3 NT strongly suggests notrump.
Delayed 3 NT is tentative about notrump.

- [f] Direct 3 NT shows 14 to 16 HCP with a stopper.
Delayed 3 NT shows 11 to 13 HCP with a stopper.

When we are confident of the contract, we should be glad to get there promptly. We don't need the bidding space, so we have this goal:

- A direct 3 NT should be more assertive than a delayed 3 NT.

Delayed Three of a Major, Above Opener's Suit

(2 ♡) – Dble – (Pass) – 2 NT; (Pass) – 3 ♣ – (Pass) – 3 ♠

4-card invitation. Complementing the direct 5-card invitation, many use this sequence to show a 4-card invitation to game in spades. Usually, it says nothing about a stopper in opener's suit.

If this delayed 3 ♠ hits 4-card support, life is grand. If doubler has only three spades, playing a refusal in 3 ♠ is barely tolerable. A larger problem comes when doubler wants to play in 3 NT. Our lebensohl 2 NT means we declare, and the lead will come whistling through partner's stopper. Promising a stopper for a delayed 3 ♠ invitation solves this particular problem. However, when we do not have the stopper, we would have to choose between forcing to game, 2 ♠, and perhaps three of a minor.

The 5-card direct 3 ♠ bid is standard. The fifth spade is important information, even though we could solve the entire invitational 4-card problem by promising only four spades for both 3 ♠ bids.

We play heavy invites and light accepts, to reduce messing around at the three level. Bidding into a possible 4-3 fit does not seem like a heavy invite. The crux of the matter is, a 3 ♠ invitation on four cards works well only when it is lucky.

5-card force. This is a sweet addition to delayed leaping Michaels – replacing the problematic 4-card invitation. This bid is BWS.

Here are our three main choices for a *delayed 3 M above opener*:

- ☐ [g] is forcing with at least a 5-card suit (BWS).
- ☐ [h] invites game with a 4-card suit and promises a stopper.
- ☐ [i] invites game with a 4-card suit.

Chart for Lebensohl over Weak 2 ♥ doubled.

A1	D2	A2	Lebensohl/ <i>Hearts</i> : (2 ♥) - X - (P) - ?		
2 ♠	Natural and weak (0 to 7- points).				
2 NT	Asks for 3 ♣.				
	3 ♣	Requested bid.			
		Pass	Play here.		
		3 ♦	Play here.		
		3 ♥	[c] (cue) 4-card M, GF, stop.		[d] slam try, asks for suits.
		3 ♠	[g] 5+ ♠ GF.	[h] 4+ ♠, stopper, inv.	[i] 4+ ♠, inv.
		3 NT	[e] tentative about NT.		[f] 11 to 13 with stopper.
		4 ♣	[a] DLM: slam try, ♣ & M.		
		4 ♦	[a] DLM: slam try, ♦ & M.		
		4 ♥	[a] (cue) DLM: Two suits of the same rank.		
		4 ♠			
		4 NT	[a] Natural, quantitative, 16+ HCP.		
3 ♣	Natural and constructive.				
3 ♦	Natural and constructive.				
3 ♥	[c] 4-card M, GF, no stop.		[d] Asks 3 NT, run long suit.		
3 ♠	Natural, 5+ cards, and constructive.				
3 NT	[e] strongly suggests NT.		[f] 14 to 16 with stopper.		
4 ♣	[a] Natural, forcing, one-suited slam try.				
4 ♦	[a] Natural, forcing, one-suited slam try.				
4 ♥	[a] Two unbid suits of the same rank (game-only).				
4 ♠	Natural, 5+ cards, and game values.				
4 NT	[a] Blackwood for aces, intending to bid slam in a long suit.				

Passed hand. Mike Lawrence recommends that lebensohl be off, when advancer has denied opening bid strength, for example:

(P) – (2 ♥) – X – (P); ?

- On such an auction, lebensohl is on (default).
- On such an auction, lebensohl is off.

Back of the Backstory

Writing about this form of lebensohl is diverse and conflicting. Below is supporting information drawn from my sources. Anything underlined in the paragraphs that follow could be disruptive to our results and is not recommended.

These methods are prominent and appear playable:

Weak 2-Bid Doubled – Lebensohl: (2 ♡) – X – (P) – ?				
Bid	Bergen (1986)	Lawrence (2012)	BWS (2017)	Walker
2 ♠	Natural, 0 to 6.	Natural, 0 to 9-.	Natural, weak	Natural, 0 to 7.
2 NT	Leb: often 0 to 6.	Leb: often 0 to 9-.	Leb: often weak.	Leb: often 0 to 7.
3 ♣	Natural, 7 to 11.	Natural, 9 to 11.	Natural, moderate.	Natural, 7 to 11.
3 ♦	Natural, 7 to 11.	Natural, 9 to 11.	Natural, moderate.	Natural, 7 to 11.
3 ♡	Usually 4 spades, GF.*	Asks for 3 NT with stopper, GF, typically a long running minor.	4 spades, GF, no stopper.	Asks for 3 NT with stopper, GF, may be 1-suited slam try.
3 ♠	5+ spades, invitational.	5+ spades, invitational.	5+ spades, invitational.	5+ spades, 8 to 10.
3 NT	Doubt about 3 NT (one stopper).	Stopper, 14 to 16.	Strongly suggests notrump.	Usually not spades, good stoppers, GF.
4 ♣	Natural invitation.			
4 ♦	Natural invitation.			
4 ♡				Two suits of same rank (minors), game-only.
4 ♠	5+ spades, GF.	5+ spades, GF.	5+ spades, GF.	5+ spades, GF.

Weak 2-Bid Doubled - Lebensohl: (2 ♡) – X – (P) – 2 NT; (P) – 3 ♣ – (P) – ?				
Bid	Bergen (1986)	Lawrence (2012)	BWS (2017)	Walker
Pass	Natural, 0 to 6.	Natural, 0 to 9-.	Natural, weak.	Natural, 0 to 7 HCP.
3 ♦	Natural, 0 to 6.	Natural, 0 to 9-.	Natural, weak.	Natural, 0 to 7 HCP.
3 ♡	Usually 4 spades, slam try.	Asks partner to show suits, slam try.*	4 spades, GF, stopper.	4 spades, GF, no stopper.*
3 ♠	4 spades, invitational.*	4 spades, invitational.*	5+ spades, forcing.	4 spades, 8 to 10.*
3 NT	Confident of 3 NT (stoppers).	Stopper, 11 to 13.	Tentative about notrump.	4 spades, GF, with stopper.
4 ♣	Forcing?			<u>Clubs & spades.</u>
4 ♦	Forcing?			<u>Diamonds & spades.</u>
4 ♡	Slam try?			<u>Two suits of same rank (minors).</u>
4 ♠				Leaping Michaels slam tries!
4 NT		Stopper, 16+.		

* May wrong-side or fail to resolve 3 NT.

BWS. “In advancing a takeout double of a weak two-bid (or the equivalent), lebensohl applies (two notrump is a marionette to three clubs [intervenor bids above three clubs only with significant extra strength], after which advancer can pass or bid lower than three of opener's suit to show a weak hand; direct, non-jump, three-level new-suit advances show moderate values). A direct, natural three-notrump advance strongly suggests that strain (bidding two notrump first is more tentative about notrump). A direct, unbid-major-suit inquiry cue-bid suggests that doubler, if not replying in a major, not bid notrump without a full stopper in opener's suit (bidding two notrump first suggests that doubler can return to notrump with no help in opener's suit). A jump to three spades over a double of two hearts is invitational and shows at least five spades (bidding two notrump first makes a three-spade rebid forcing).”

BWS has no sequence to show a constructive hand with a 4-card major higher than opener's. This appears to put slam over game. However, a bid to show such a hand may risk more than it is likely to gain.

Marc Smith hints that advancer's jump to 4 ♣ or 4 ♦ should be natural and forcing: “to venture beyond 3NT to show your suit ... should really only be done on wildly distributional hands or hands intending to at least seriously investigate slam.”

Otherwise, the two cue-bids (direct and via 2 NT) and the two 3 NT bids should be used to handle most of advancer's game-going hands. A cue-bid promises a 4-card major, and 3 NT denies one. The slow auction (via 2 NT) promises a stopper, while the fast auction denies a stopper.

Ron Andersen's coverage of this topic does not consider that advancer may have interest in slam. His unique statement is, “The player who first bids notrump (in non-signoff sequences) promises a stopper.” [This is a grand idea that gives up too much.]

(2 ♥) – X – (P) – 2 NT; (P) – 3 ♣ – (P) – 3 ♠

Andersen says that, since 3 ♠ is not a sign-off, it promises a heart stopper – it is forcing with five spades and offers a choice of games!

(2 ♠) – X – (P) – ?

A cue-bid forces to game. A direct cue-bid (3 ♠) shows a 4-card major, without a stopper. A delayed cue-bid (via 2 NT) shows a 4-card major with a stopper.

Robert Todd's article (483) does not contain the word “slam.”

(2 ♠) – X – (P) – ?

A cue-bid (3 ♠) shows four hearts, game values and no stopper. Via 2 NT, the cue-bid also shows a stopper. “We can use 2 NT followed by 3 NT vs. a direct 3 NT to show a stopper (or half stopper).”

(2 ♥) – X – (P) – ?

A direct 3 ♠ shows 5+ cards; some play this forcing, others constructive. The two 3 ♥ cue-bids work the same as above, with four spades.

Simon Farrer says that a direct 3 NT shows control of opener’s suit and an opening hand, or close to it. A slow 3 NT shows only one stopper. A slow cue-bid shows a 4-card major with a stopper; the fast cue-bid is not mentioned.

Bidding three of a major suit higher than opener’s suit directly shows 10 to 11 HCP, and via 2 NT shows 7 to 9 – neither promises more than a 4-carder.

Max Hardy offers but a sketch with half a dozen examples.

Maritha Pottenger dumps down modern standard for intermediate players:

- 1) an immediate suit bid by you at the 2-level is to play.
- 2) an immediate suit bid by you at the 3 level shows 9-11 HCP (and only promises 4-card suit).*
- 3) a cue-bid is game-forcing
- 4) a jump bid shows 12+ HCP and is game-forcing.*
- 5) 2 NT is a relay, forcing partner to bid 3 ♣. Any suit bid after that is weak and asks partner to pass. (You can also pass partner’s forced 3 ♣ bid.)

* Pottenger’s description is deficient for a major suit higher than opener’s.

Turning to Bridge Winners, after writing most of the above, but before finding Wolpert’s class, I discovered these posts, the best at the tip of an iceberg:

Frank Lipniski summarized his Oct 2019 article from *The Bridge World* on Bridge Winners. His plan is pick a minor lebensohl (PAM). His method appears more complicated than the *better minor lebensohl* that it spawned.

Ken Bowlby’s post is right on topic, with more than a dozen fresh and differing opinions.

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