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(6) NT Fundamentals: Lebensohl Basics - *Simple-sohl*

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Level: Intermediate

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General Introduction

Lebensohl is a very useful convention that is used when the opponents interfere over our 1NT opening. *Lebensohl* is also a very large convention and many players find it complicated and overwhelming (it has many places where it can be used and many details for players to remember.) The purpose of this lesson is to help you understand the development of *Lebensohl* and the ideas behind it - we'll avoid discussions of the technical details or any other sophisticated approaches and stick to the basic ideas that led to the invention of *Lebensohl*. These fundamental ideas and their most basic implementation I call *Simple-sohl*. *Simplesohl* is a basic agreement that will help you deal with the opponents competing in your 1NT auctions!

Opening 1NT

When we open the bidding with 1NT our partnership has a good idea of how to bid and effectively describe our hands. In standard Notrump bidding when partner opens 1NT, our tools are generally Stayman and Transfers. We also use 2NT to invite partner to game - "invitational with 8-9 HCP" (or something similar if we play 4-suited transfers.)

When the opponents interfere in the bidding, however, it makes our life much more difficult. In some of these cases we must change our general approach to bidding...

Interference with Systems On

Vs. Double

When the opponents double our 1NT opening, we ignore the double and play systems on (as if the opponents had not interfered.)

Note: We generally play the same methods whether the opponents' double is conventional or penalty. One exception is that when the opponents' double is penalty we change the meaning of redouble to "rescue;" if the opponents' double is conventional we play that redouble is "value showing."



Vs. 2♣ Interference

When the opponents interfere with 2♣, we play double as Stayman (stolen bid) and otherwise we play systems on (as if the opponents had not interfered.)

Interference with Systems Off: *Simplesohl* Introduced

Vs. 2♦-2♠ Interference

When the opponents interfere at the 2-level (other than 2♣), they take away our standard bidding structure and we should give up Stayman and Transfers and develop a new bidding system (methodology.)

The main advantage of transfers is that they allow us to show multiple hand types using the same bid. When we transfer, we could have a minimum hand interested only in a partscore, an invitational hand, a game-forcing hand, or a hand interested in slam. Consider these hands:

♠ xx ♥ QJxxx ♦ xxx ♣ xxx
♠ Ax ♥ QJxxx ♦ Jxx ♣ xxx
♠ Ax ♥ QJxxx ♦ Jxx ♣ Axx

With all three hands you start with the same bid - 2♦ as a transfer to ♥; you will then clear up which kind of hand you have with your next bid (pass, 2NT, 3NT in these cases.)

Hand Types

When the opponents interfere in the bidding we generally have three hand types that we want to describe to partner:

- Competitive Hands – usually 6-8 pts with a long suit,
- Invitational Hands,
- Game Forcing Hands.

In an effort to find a new bidding approach that will allow us to describe all of these hand types over interference, we begin by adopting a few general principles:

- 2-level Bids are natural and competitive (non-forcing,)
- 3-level Bids are natural and game forcing (jumps or non-jumps,)
- Cuebid is Game Forcing and “Stayman-like” (often looking for 4-4 Major suit fit.)



These agreements take care of many of the hands we might hold, but there are still some hands that we need to figure out how to handle:

- Invitational, balanced hands,
- Competitive hands with a suit we cannot bid at the 2-level,
- Invitational hands with a 5-card Major that we can show at the 2-level.

Defining Double

The first thing that we recognize when we start to consider our options is that we have a new call available to us – double. We use double to be “card showing.” That means we have a relatively balanced hand with invitational (or better) values and we have no other good bid available to us.

Note: Double is our fallback plan. It shows a hand that “wants to take action” but doesn’t know what other action to take. This meaning for double will be a running theme and is the modern approach to the meaning of double.

Redefining 2NT: *Simplesohl* Relay

Having agreed to this meaning of double (8+ HCP and relatively balanced), then we no longer need a natural and invitational 2NT bid. This frees 2NT up to be used as a conventional bid (called *Lebensohl*.) We use 2NT as a way to distinguish between forcing and non-forcing bids at the 3-level.

Here is how Simple-sohl works...

We define 2NT to be a *relay* to 3♣. That means that when Responder bids 2NT (in competition), the 1NT opener must bid 3♣. This 2NT bid means nothing; it just says to partner “I’m going to bid something at the 3-level partner – you bid 3♣, then I’ll tell you what is going on...” This gives us two ways to make all of our bids at the 3-level: we can bid them directly (game-forcing), or we can go through the 2NT relay first (competitive.)

Basic Example

In the example below we see how to use this 2NT relay to distinguish between a competitive and a game forcing hand.

1NT - (2♥) - 3♦ 5+c♦ suit and GF values (10+ HCP)
1NT - (2♥) - 2NT* - 3♣* - 3♦ 5+c♦ suit and competitive values (6-8 HCP)



This may all seem a bit strange and overwhelming, but with a little practice it will seem much more natural to you... Just remember “I use 2NT to compete in the bidding and I double with the invitational balanced hand” (the hand with which you used to bid 2NT.)

Note: Once you master this idea and feel comfortable with this new use of 2NT you will see that there are many other uses for this kind of “relay.” We will talk more about this when we discuss the complete Lebensohl convention.

More Examples

1NT - (2♥) - 2♠	Competitive, 5+c♠, 6-7 HCP (non-forcing)
1NT - (2♥) - 2NT* - 3♣* - 3♠	Invitational, 5+c♠, 8-9 HCP (non-forcing)
1NT - (2♥) - 3♠	Game Forcing, 5+c♠, 10+ HCP

Conclusion

My advice is to talk to your partner about *Simplesohl*. You don't have to learn all of the complexities of Lebensohl in order to gain many of the advantages of the convention. “2NT is a relay to 3♣ that we use to compete in the bidding and double is card showing – balanced invitational+.” That is a pretty easy conversation to have with your partner and can help solve a lot of difficult bidding problems – give it a try!