



Ask Jerry

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Dear Jerry,

A new duplicate partner has insisted that we need to learn the lebensohl convention when the opponents open a weak two-bid. He has tried to explain it to me, but it seems hopelessly complicated and I question the need. Opinion, please.

Jonathan

Hi, Jonathan,

Years ago, I taught a two-day, 10-hour seminar on the lebensohl convention. It was one of the major mistakes of my teaching life! The problem was not the convention as much as my stupid decision to try and teach every possible application and every possible response to a group who was completely unfamiliar with the concept. That being said, there is at least one instance where I consider this convention to be an absolute necessity, and that is when the opponents open a weak two-bid.

Let's look at three cases.

- | | West | North | East | South |
|----|---------|-------------|---------|-------|
| | 2♠ | Dbl | Pass | ? |
| 1. | ♠ J 8 7 | ♥ J 9 5 4 3 | ♦ J 4 2 | ♣ J 6 |
| 2. | ♠ J 3 4 | ♥ A Q 7 5 6 | ♦ Q 5 2 | ♣ 8 7 |
| 3. | ♠ J 8 6 | ♥ A Q 7 5 2 | ♦ A Q 3 | ♣ 6 4 |

Edgar Kaplan famously advised,

"Takeout doubles are meant to be taken out." I have often said that when advancing a takeout double, it is important to let partner know whether you are doing so because you had to, you were happy to, or you were thrilled to.

Looking at case one, your longest unbid suit is hearts. Lacking any options, you would bid 3♥. On case two, lacking any options, you would also bid 3♥.

The third case should be relatively easy. Holding full opening values opposite a partner who has shown at least an opening bid and three cards in all of the unbid suits, bidding a heart game seems rather straightforward.

Players who have questionable ethics or who just don't know any better have a simple solution on the first two hands. With the first hand, a head shake followed by a sigh followed by reluctantly tabling the 3♥ bid card strongly suggests weakness. Holding the second hand, a big smile and a prompt and emphatic thump of the 3♥ bid card should clearly express your constructive values. Obviously, these methods are entirely unacceptable. The solution?

Any time you consider changing a natural bid to a conventional call, the two most important factors are frequency of occurrence and analysis of gain versus loss.

When the opponents open a weak two-bid, lebensohl works as follows: When your partner makes a takeout double and you hold a poor hand

where a response at the three level is required, start with what is now an artificial bid of 2NT. By agreement, this "weakness signal" is a relay, essentially forcing your partner to bid 3♣, which you can then pass with a club suit or convert to your own suit.

With constructive values, something on the order of 8–11 points, bid your suit immediately.

The gain of this treatment is that the doubler knows to pass after your "weakness signal" unless he holds substantial extra values. After a constructive three-level bid, he can move forward with just a little extra.

The loss? What happens when you hold 8 or 9 points and a stopper in the opponent's suit and you want to bid a natural 2NT? You simply rue the day that you decided to adopt this convention!

There are circumstances that you and your partner will want to discuss in more detail, such as the use of lebensohl when partner doubles in the balancing seat, or when partner is a passed hand.

This explanation is as brief as my two-day presentation was wordy. To fully assimilate this useful tool, do some reading or consult one of your local experienced teachers for "the rest of the story."

Send your questions to
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