

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Along with my good friend Bernie Chazen, I used to give entire multi-day seminars on doubles. We always started the same way. Bernie would waddle up to the microphone (picture 300+ pounds of man wearing suspenders) and in his booming voice would utter: “The Penalty Double has Died and Gone to Heaven.” Sadly, he is now in heaven with those penalty doubles.

Very few doubles actually mean: “I double the stakes—let’s play for penalties.” In this series, we’ll start with the two most basic non-penalty doubles: the Takeout Double and the Negative Double. Down the road, we’ll explore the many other doubles which have permeated modern competitive bidding.

THE TAKEOUT DOUBLE

This is the oldest “non-penalty” double in the game, and has been around since the origins of contract bridge. When RHO opens the bidding, it makes no sense to use double for penalty. Therefore, it has always been played as “takeout.”

The normal range is “about an opening bid” (count for shape, especially shortness in the opponent’s suit) up to approximately 17-18 HCP. If the takeout-doubler has *more* than 17-18, he doubles and then plans to bid again.

A common error committed by inexperienced players is making a takeout double of 1D with this type of hand:

A2 KJ82 KJ2 J987.

Their partner answers 1S (you know how partners are), and they think it is okay to now correct to 1NT. Not okay! **Doubling and then bidding again shows 18+** (in this case, more than a 1NT overcall, so about 18+ to 20 balanced).

For this reason, a takeout-doubler (in the normal 12/13 to 17/18 range) *must be able to tolerate all three unbid suits*. “Tolerate” means at least a tripleton. Bottom line: Do not make a takeout double without holding either 18+ HCP or at least three cards in every suit outside the suit being doubled. Don’t get too concerned with counting exactly 17 or 18. I would consider this 17-count too good for a 1S overcall of 1C: KQJ1098 AQJ 2 A32. On the other hand, I would overcall 1S with this 17-count: AQ765 KQ2 KQ J32.

Doubling and Bidding Again

While doubling and bidding again shows more than 17/18 (any distribution), it is *not* forcing. Here is a typical hand for doubling 1H and later bidding spades: AQJ98 32 AK2 AJ4. With a

really big hand (perhaps a game force), the doubler must find a stronger action than a non-forcing spade bid at his second turn.

Versus Preempts

Doubling an opening preempt is still takeout but requires a little more. Against a weak two-bid, a takeout double can be made with perfect 4-4-4-1 (one in their suit) shape and only 12 HCP. However, without that perfect shape, the doubler should have a little more strength. Against a three-level preempt, at least a solid opening bid is required, and even more is needed against a four-level preempt (covered at the end of this installment).

Doubles after two bids

Takeout doubles can be made after both opponents have bid. Consider this hand:

KQ98 A2 KJ53 632.

After the opponents bid 1C—Pass—1H, a player holding length in both unbid suits (as above) can make a takeout double. After 1H—Pass—1NT, a double would indicate a takeout double of hearts.

The takeout double can also be delayed as here:

AQ65 KJ65 K876 3.

After RHO opens 1D, this hand is unsuitable for a takeout double (just imagine if your partner took it out to clubs—as he is likely to). So, a player holding these cards should pass. However, if he's fortunate enough to see the bidding go, say:

1D—Pass—1NT—Pass
2C—??,

Now, he can double to show something like this (takeout of clubs).

Quiz: With which of these hands (nobody vulnerable) should you double RHO's 1H opening?

- A) AQ87 4 K1087 Q764
- B) AQ3 54 QJ87 KQ76
- C) KQ7 543 AQJ2 K103
- D) 52 876 AK43 AQJ3

Answer: A,B,C (with D, you should Pass)

Quiz: With which of these hands (nobody vulnerable) should you double RHO's 3H opening?

- E) KQ2 3 AQ876 KJ76
- F) A 432 KQ876 KJ42
- G) KQ10 AQ10 AQ42 J98
- H) AKQJ10 32 AKQ9 K2

Answer: E & H (With F, you should pass, with G, you should overcall 3NT)

RESPONSES

Responding to takeout doubles is an area that is misunderstood (or was never properly learned) by inexperienced players. It is very important to study and observe this standard set of responses to takeout doubles:

After the opponent's 1C opening (for example) is takeout-doubled by your partner, and your RHO passes:

1D/1H/1S (any non-jump bid of a suit) = natural and 0-8 HCP. Yes, "zero"—since there is no choice but to take out the double to 1H with, say: 432 5432 432 432.

1NT=6-10 balanced with stopper(s). This range is approximate, but most players agree it shows "something"—not a very weak hand. Do not take out to 1NT with: 432 432 432 J987 (guess to calmly and in tempo bid a 3-card suit, instead).

2D/2H/2S (a jump bid in a suit) = natural (4+cards) and 9-11 HCP. The range is approximate, but the key is that it is "medium" or "invitational." The takeout-doubler can go on if he has more than a minimum. Note that the jump does not promise five cards, nor is it forcing. Here is an example of a 4-card jump response to partner's takeout double of 1C: AQ32 43 KJ9 8765 (Respond 2S).

2NT=11-12 Invitational, balanced and stopper(s) in their suit.

3D/3H/3S (double-jump) = natural (5+ cards) invitational: based more on shape than a single jump. (Example of a 3H response to a takeout double: 5 KJ9876 J432 2).

3NT=13-15 To Play, balanced and stopper(s) in their suit.

4-of-a-major=To Play

2C=Not Natural. The cue-bid of their suit shows good hand. The bid is artificial and says nothing about their suit. A typical agreement would be to play this forcing to either notrump or suit-agreement. (So, 1C—Dbl—Pass-2C—Pass-2H is forcing one round, but if the 2C-bidder next bids either 2NT or raises to 3H, it can be passed).

This looks like a long, tedious list, but it shouldn't be overwhelming. What it needs to be, though, is Standard Operating Procedure. All players need to study and be comfortable with this list. Responding to partner's takeout double can be summarized in two sentences: Jumps are invitational, non-jumps in a suit are 0-8, notrump bids show values and a stopper. With enough for game, make sure to either bid game or start with a cue-bid of the opponent's suit.

In all situations above, the opponent has passed after the takeout double. If he acts, any action by you (which would be a "free-bid") shows some values—there is no need to take out the double

once their responder has bid (or redoubled) after the double. Example: (1D) X (1H) 1S—is no longer 0-8, since passing was an option. This 1S bid is more like 5-8.

Quiz : Partner doubles their 1D opening bid and RHO passes. What is your call with:

- I) K32 65 87642 876
- J) KQJ3 A2 865 J876
- K) K32 K32 K104 8762
- L) AQJ2 AKJ4 54 987

Answers: I) 1S (too weak for 1NT and not enough for a penalty pass); J) 2S; K) 1NT (a better description than 2C) L) 2D (cue-bid) and drive to at least game when partner chooses a major.

BALANCING

All of the above ranges refer to direct seat (the double came immediately after their bid). In balancing seat (for example, 1H—Pass—Pass—Double), the double is still takeout, but the range is about a king less. Put another way: All doubles in balancing seat are approximately 3 points lighter in range than in direct seat. The responses to such doubles slide up accordingly (to invite by jumping requires 3 points more). Especially when the opponents have bid and raised a major (as in 1H—Pass—2H—Pass—Pass--??) a balancing double can be quite light

EQUAL-LEVEL CONVERSION

Some partnerships play that a takeout-doubler can convert 2C to 2D without promising extras. This allows for a takeout double of 1S with a hand such as: K2 AJ43 KQ1097 42. Though it doesn't meet the requirements of having three cards in every side suit, a double is admissible since if partner takes out to the dreaded club suit (where you hold a doubleton), you can "convert" to 2D to show this type of hand (diamonds and the other major, no extra values promised). This treatment requires partnership agreement.

CONVERTING FOR PENALTY

As the late, great Edgar Kaplan used to say: "Takeout doubles are meant to be taken out." However, as will be the case for all doubles in this series, they can be "converted" for penalty. A very good (at least five cards) suit is needed to leave in a one-level takeout double. Holding: A2 KQ1098 543 432, a leave-in is okay after 1H—Double—Pass--??. The higher the level, the less stringent the requirements. On the three-level, a double is often left in with only a decent four-card suit. Especially if it was a balancing double, and you are behind the bidder, a leave-in is possible as the lesser of evils. After 3S—Pass—Pass—Double—Pass--?? I would leave it in with, say, Q10xx Axx xxx xxx. At the one-level, a player holding this hand should not play for penalties.

FOUR-LEVEL DOUBLES

Doubles of any four-level opening should be for takeout. If the opponents open 4H, it would be normal to double with: AQ43 5 KJ87 KQ74. The double is *not* for penalty. If the opening is 4S, the double is still takeout, something like: 5 KQ76 AK43 KJ76. The double definitely should not be (as some teachers still insist) penalty. When the opponents are dealt eight spades, the one thing you are not likely to have is spades! Thus, double should not show spades. If you are uncomfortable calling it “takeout,” how about calling it “takeout/cards/do something.” I would double 4S with: A2 A32 A765 A764. The meaning is: “Partner—I have a good hand and am willing to hear from you.” It is the *partner* of the takeout doubler (on the 4-level) who must be judicious. Such doubles should be removed only with a good reason. A good reason is “shape.” Take out a double of 4S to 5H with, say: 3 QJ10987 KQ32 32. Leave it in with no good reason to bid, e.g., a flat hand such as: J43 Q876 K32 J53. The language after 4-of-a-major—Double is very important. The doubler is saying: “I have a good hand with which I am happy to hear from you with a shapely hand.” The doubler’s partner leaves it in with balanced junk and takes it out with nice shape. Note: 4NT by either player (the overcaller, or the doubler’s partner) is played as a 2-suited takeout.

Quiz: Both vulnerable, RHO opens 4H. What is your call?

- M) AQ42 5 AKQ4 A432
- N) A32 A32 KQ43 A32
- O) 542 AQ108 A765 64
- P) 3 2 AQJ98 AKJ652

M) Double (Perfect) N) Double O) Pass (hope partner doubles for takeout and convert it for penalties) P 4NT (for the minors)

Quiz Both vulnerable, partner doubles their 4S opening. What do you do with:

- Q) KJ2 Q432 8764 32
- R) -- AQ8764 432 J653
- S) Q32 Q32 QJ54 K32
- T) 5 87 KQ765 QJ764

Q) Pass R) 5H S) Pass T) 4NT (takeout)

There are still teachers (not many, I hope) who preach that a double of a 4S opening is for penalty and that 4NT is for takeout. No! Do they get dealt lots of spades when their opponents open 4S? Bidding 4NT commits your side to the 5-level and should be done only with a very shapely 2-suited hand (at least 5-5). You don’t want to commit to the 5-level by bidding 4NT over their 4S on some 1=4=4=4 hand only to find partner with balanced junk. Doubling is a much more flexible action.

The first two months of this series (Takeout and Negative doubles) will be on the Intermediate Level. Later on the material will be more advanced.

NEXT MONTH: The series continues with an extensive look at Negative Doubles