

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Last month we started a discussion about doubles by covering the Takeout Double and Responses. This month we move towards what I consider to be the most important convention in bridge: The Negative Double.

A Negative double is made by Responder. It shows enough to bid, but a hand not suitable for anything else. Since responding on the two-level shows at least a five-card suit and at least 10 points, there is no good way to describe many hand-types, thus the invention of the Negative double.

There is only one auction to study. The auction has to go this way for it to be a Negative Double:

<u>OPENER</u>	<u>OPPONENT</u>	<u>RESPONDER</u>
One <i>anything</i>	Any <i>suit</i> Bid	Double

There you have it. Notice that negative doubles are not used when the opening bid is on the two-level or higher. Not everyone uses them after a 1NT opening (but I recommend doing so).

The opponents can overcall in any suit (on *any* level—more on that later). If the opponents overcall in Notrump, there are no Negative doubles (Double is for penalties).

Up until the late 1950's, the double in the above auction *was* for penalties. This didn't make much sense, since it was rare to be dealt length and strength in a suit the opponents have bid. Al Roth popularized his famous convention in 1957 and called it Sputnik (after the Russian satellite). He proposed that a double by responder should not be for penalty—it should be takeout. About 10 years later, the term was change to "Negative Doubles." I see nothing "Negative" about them. To me, they should be called "Takeout Doubles by Responder." Maybe someone can come up with a better name than "Negative Doubles," but whether or not you like the name, the convention is here to stay. I don't even think it should be considered a convention. It is part of standard bidding.

Let's start out by answering the most-asked questions, starting with:

How Many HCP?

There is no exact requirement. It all depends on how high the overcall is. If the

opponents overcall on the one-level, a negative double can be made with as few as 6 or 7 HCP. On the two level, the requirements go up a bit (at least 8-9 HCP) and even higher on the three-plus level (close to an opening bid). There is no need to get too exact with these ranges, because “level” is a confusing term here. If your partner opens 1H and they overcall 2C, you are on the two-level, but very comfortably so. After your negative double, your partner has the entire two-level to make his second bid. Conversely, if their overcall is 2S, while you are still technically on the two-level, your partner will often have to make his next bid on the three level. So, a negative double after their 2S starts with a slightly higher minimum requirement than a negative double of a 2C overcall. We don’t want to memorize a different range for each specific overcall, so let’s just go with:

1-level: 6/7+
2-level: 8/9+
3+level: 11/12+

What’s really important in the ranges is the open-ended plus sign. “Plus” means unlimited. A negative double can be made with 15, 20 or even more points. Sometimes it is the best call and the only descriptive bid possible.

QUIZ

After : 1C (1S) ??, what would you do with each of these hands?

A) 54 KJ43 8764 432

B) 42 KQ76 A542 1087

C) 2 KJ876 Q32 J876

D) 2 KQJ8 AQ76 AJ43

A. Pass (not enough strength to act).

B. Double (and be happy it isn’t 1956 where you would have no good bid)

C. Double (on the light side, but surely you don’t want it to go 1C (1S) P P P). You don’t have enough strength for a direct 2H response.

D. Double (there is no upper limit; let’s look for a 4-4 heart fit to start).

After: 1D (3H) ?? what would you do with each of these hands?

E) AQJ76 A2 J876 32

F) A32 AJ98 654 732

G) AQ103 43 KQ98 J32

H) AQ95 32 AKQ A432

E) 3S. Normal with 5+ spades and a good hand (at this level, about an opening bid)

F) Pass. Partner is not a mind reader. If you double, he will take it out.

G) Double. Again delighted that it isn't 1956 where you would be stuck.

H) Double. There is no upper limit. Let's look for a 4-4 spade fit and go from there.

On What Level?

From the above quiz you can see that I advocate negative doubles on the three-level. But why stop there? Negative doubles should be played on all levels. In fact, the higher they bid, the *less* likely you are to hold a penalty double. If an opponent makes a 4H overcall, do you expect to hold good long hearts? Once in a decade, maybe. So, double should mean "I don't have hearts" as opposed to "I do have hearts." It is shortsighted to write "Negative Doubles through 3S" (or any other arbitrary level) on your convention card. The only proper choice is either through 7H or 7S or "through infinity"—indicated by: " $\rightarrow\infty$." I can't say I've ever seen an overcall higher than 5D, but you get the idea.

Refer back to last month's (??) article on takeout doubles of four-level openings. While the high-level double is not meant as penalty, that doesn't mean it won't be left in. Opener will "always" take out a low-level negative double, but he doesn't have to do so on the four or five level. If you open the bidding with a flat minimum and see partner make a negative double of their 4S overcall, you aren't forced to take it out to the five-level. You'd just pass and hope that with your opening bid opposite partner's announced strength that you can set them. Let's examine this in quiz form by first deciding on a negative double and then looking at opener's decision.

QUIZ

As responder, what is your call after partner opens 1D and RHO overcalls 4H (nobody vulnerable)?

- I) AQ32 3 AJ3 Q7654
- J) A43 AQ109 543 642
- K) J876 32 AK53 AK2
- L) KQ10 A2 AQ32 J876

Answers:

- I) Double and be happy it isn't "penalty."
- J) Pass (the rare occasion where you are sorry double isn't available as penalty).
- K) Double (it doesn't show heart strength).
- L) Double (whatever partner does, you've shown your cards/values).

What is your call as opener after you open 1D, they overcall 4H and partner doubles (nobody vulnerable)?

- M) KJ87 A2 KQ876 32
- N) 52 3 AKJ108 AJ1063.
- O) K32 AJ8 J762 QJ9
- P) J87 J8 KJ95 AK54.

M) Bid 4S. Your partner was prepared for you to takeout his "negative" double. If he can't stand spades, he needs to have an alternate plan (like maybe taking you back to 5D). If he has hand "I" above, he will pass and you will be in the right contract.

N) Bid 5C. When your partner doubles he is prepared to hear from you on such a hand.

O) Pass. With a balanced hand, you are not expected to take out the negative double. Who wants to play at such a high level with a flat hand when the doubler also might be flattish? We don't want to be on the five level in a 4-4 or even 4-3 fit. Just as with takeout doubles of high-level openings, the partner of the doubler leaves the double in with no good reason to take it out. Picture partner with hand

“K” above and 4HX is the proper final contract.

P) Pass. Again, don't take out high-level negative doubles without shape. (Partner has hand “L” above).

What does the double promise in the unbid suits?

In general, the double is takeout. The focus is on the other major. With 5-cards in the other major and enough strength (10+ if it has to be bid on the two level, 6+ if on the one level), the responder will just bid the major. But, if he has only 4 cards (or not enough strength to go to the two level), he will usually double (see the 1D overcall exception below). The doubler doesn't promise both of the unbid suits, but he needs a plan. For example, after:

1D (2S)

It would be dangerous to make a negative double with:

8432 AQJ42 J2 J7, because if the opener rebids in a minor, it will likely be a poor contract. However, if the responder doubles with:

832 AQJ4 QJ62 43, he has safety; he can always go back to diamonds if he doesn't like his partner's choice.

There are, unfortunately, two special auctions which require memorization. When the overcall is one diamond or one heart (in other words, one of a red suit), the negative double has a very specific meaning as follows:

After a 1♦ overcall: **Double promises at least 4 cards in *both* Majors.** Bidding a major guarantees only 4+ cards in that major.

After a 1♥ overcall, **Double promises exactly a 4-card spade suit.** A free 1♠ bid shows at least a 5-card ♠ suit.

Note the underlining, boldface and italics. There is really no substitute for studying and memorizing this standard treatment. Perhaps some examples will help to reinforce it.

QUIZ

What do you do after 1C (1D) ?? (nobody vulnerable)?

Q) AQ87 J43 QJ76 K2

R) KJ87 AKQ4 A2 J32

S) QJ10 AQ32 2 J8432

Answers

Q) 1S (don't double, which would guarantee four hearts as well)

R) Double (4-4 in majors, unlimited)

S) 1H (don't double without both majors)

What do you do after 1C (1H) ?? (nobody vulnerable)?

T) A8765 A2 6543 32.

U) KJ76 54 543 K542

V) AKJ7 652 AQ4 AK2

T) 1S (promising at least 5).

U) Double (I love when they overcall 1H; I can tell partner if I have exactly 4 spades, or 5+ spades).

V) Double (remember, there is no upper limit on a negative double).

One other hand-type a negative doubler can hold is a weak one-suiter. After partner's 1D and a 1S overcall, responder might hold, say:

43 KQJ987 Q32 32. He doesn't quite have enough to bid 2H directly, but he can double and bid hearts next to show a one-suiter (and by logic, less than 10 points by the failure to bid 2H the first time).

Reopening Doubles

Playing negative double (as "everyone" does) doesn't mean you can't sometimes collect a large penalty after an overcall. You can have your cake and eat it too, because when responder holds a penalty double, he can pass. The opening bidder will typically balance with a double (for takeout) when it comes back to him and responder can leave it in. For example:

1D (1S) ??

With the opponents vulnerable, the responder holds:

AQ1085 A32 2 9876.

He could bid notrump, but it is much more appealing to try to collect a penalty. He can't double, of course (that would be negative—which means partner won't leave it in). His best bet is to pass (without asking silly questions such as: "Do you ever overcall on a four-card suit?"). If LHO also passes (as is likely), the opening bidder will now double for takeout whenever he is short in spades. The hoped-for auction is:

1D (1S) P P
X P P P

Must the opening bidder reopen with a double? With a singleton in their suit, opener always should double (even with a minimum) on the one or two level. With a doubleton, he can reopen with a decent-looking hand (especially on the one level). With length (at least three) in their suit, opener is not likely to reopen unless he has a special or powerful hand. When responder has five-plus cards in the opponent's overcalled suit, it is quite likely that opener is short, so this pass and then convert for penalties is not an infrequent occurrence.

Opener's Actions after a Negative Double

While this series is on the actual doubles, here are a few simple notes for the opener to consider for his rebid after a negative double:

On low levels, the negative double won't be left in. Opener takes it out to a four-card major if possible (jumping with extras). With no four-card major, he rebids in notrump or a minor (jumping with extras—though opener's jumpshifts after a negative double are invitational only—not forcing). Opener can cue-bid the opponent's suit to create a force. On high levels (especially the four level), opener takes out a negative double only with a good reason (which means "distribution.") Of course, much of this requires judgment—but that's what makes this such a great game.

After giving a lesson on one of my cruises (to supposedly intermediate players) on negative doubles, one gentleman came to me after the lecture to thank me. He said: "What a great lesson—now I know what that "x" is for in the bidding box."

Next Month (??): Responsive & DSI Doubles