

Doubles

The original meaning of a double is to “up the ante” - doubling the rewards if declarer makes it, but also the penalty if he goes off. However, this use just doesn't make sense over most openings - when was the last time someone opened 1 of a suit and you held a hand that wanted to take a penalty?

A double remains for penalties if the opposition have opened 1NT, and should show 15+ points. Over suited openings, though, we need something subtler.

Takeout Doubles

There are lots of ways we could imagine using the double if not for penalties. The most common hand type you'll pick up when wanting to interfere with the opponents' auction is an opening hand of some sort, and since they're already accounted for at least four cards in the suit they've opened, you'll often be short in their suit as well.

If you have this hand type, the approach taken by most people is to double for *takeout* - that is to say, to ask your partner to take out the double into his longest suit. As easy as that! The ideal takeout double shapes offer partner equal length to choose from, something like:

♠ KJ98		♠ KQ32	
♥ KQ54	over a 1♦ opening, or maybe	♥ 7	over 1♥
♦ 8		♦ A874	
♣ KQJ4		♣ AQJ6	

Now, those are idealised hand shapes, but what about something like

♠ AQ98
♥ 2
♦ AJ4
♣ KJT64

You'd quite like to be involved in the auction (and would open 1♣ if given the chance, right?) but if RHO starts with a heart, you'd need a fifth spade to overcall 1♠ and choosing 2♣ might bypass your spade fit - which we really don't want to do.

So the answer is you can double here too, provided you adhere to two key things:

- 1) If you double a major, you **guarantee** four cards in the other major
- 2) Even if partner chooses your worst suit, you'll **live with it**

The first of these should be quite obvious; partner will strain to bid a major whenever possible and as a consequence you must have support for the suit she'll choose ahead of all the others.

The second requires us to think about what we'll do when responding to a takeout double.

Responding to a takeout double

So partner's doubled for takeout. If your RHO hasn't bid, you're going to be forced to do something here, so let's assume for now that he's kept schtum.

Things to note:

- 1) You should bid your longest suit; if you have two suits of equal length, you'll choose the major (obviously!)
- 2) If you have a decent hand, you should jump to let partner know you have the extra strength to have game interest.
- 3) If your longest suit has been bid by the opponents, you can bid 1NT (with 6-9) or 2NT (10-12) and a *stop* in their suit.
- 4) Passing for penalties is extremely unusual. Unless the opening has been at the two level or higher, you'll probably have to bid NT even with a holding of AKT76 in their suit or something

Let's see a few examples:

♠ Q8
♥ 842
♦ AJ3
♣ Q9862

Partner has doubled 1♥, passed to you. Your hand isn't all that great so a simple bid of your longest suit will be fine - 2♣. You don't need 10 points to go to the 2-level - there may be no alternative! Blame partner if it's wrong...

♠ AQT8
♥ 8642
♦ 3
♣ Q862

Partner has doubled 1♥ again, and it's your go. Still not that wonderful a hand, but partner's guaranteed four card spade suit makes 1♠ the bid to find here.

♠ Q8
♥ A842
♦ AQ3
♣ 9876

Partner has doubled 1♦ this time. Your hand is nice, so you might try a jump to 2♥ to prod partner to act. But he could be weak enough to pass that, so perhaps 3NT from you will get the job done. What do you think?

The bigger problem with the last hand is actually that although the double of 1♦ strongly implies four cards in both majors, many people will compromise with a hand like:

♠ AJ97 ♥ KQT ♦ 3 ♣ KJ543

There isn't such a hard and fast rule about guaranteeing majors when doubling a minor opening, so the above is a perfectly legitimate takeout double.

On that basis, with the third hand above I'd bid 3NT. I accept the responsibility if I go off opposite a weak takeout double, but you have a double stop in diamonds (if they lead them you'll get two tricks) and almost certainly want to be in a game. With a fifth heart a jump to 2♥ seems more appealing; partner should pass this only with a real bag of crap, and in that case it's not like you want to be in game anyway.

More doubling!

There are loads of situations where doubles can transcend their “official” use and be a really handy tool.

Negative (“sputnik”) doubling

Say partner opens a diamond and the opponents overcall a spade. You hold

♠ 97 ♥ KQT8 ♦ J76 ♣ Q543

You’d like to communicate to partner that you have four hearts, really. At the same time, you wouldn’t be ashamed of your diamond support if partner has five decent ones. You also have clubs as a third possible place to play.

Despite all of these excellent features of your hand, the overcall has shafted your auction - you’re not strong enough to bid 2♣ or 2♥ and 2♦ seems a little pushy.

As you’ve probably guessed by now, the answer is to double. In this situation the double shows:

- 1) Tolerance for the suit partner has opened
- 2) At least four cards in each of the two unbid suits
- 3) Six or more points

To show a strong single suited hand

If you have a cracker of a hand, something like

♠ 9 ♥ AKQT986 ♦ A76 ♣ A3

Then it’s pretty clear you want to be in game. The problem is that if the opponents open ahead of us, we tend to play jump overcalls as being weak (so if they’d opened a club, jumping to 2♥ shows a hand like a weak two). Luckily, our old friend Mr Double can help out again:

If you double, then correct partner’s choice of suits to a new suit, you show a strong single suited hand that basically wants to go to game whatever.