



# Negative Doubles

How often do you make a penalty double at the one-level? Bearing this in mind, using a ‘take-out’ type of double in an auction such as  $1\clubsuit - (1\spadesuit) - ?$  is highly recommended.

## The Negative Double

Too often we are sat with a reasonable hand and four hearts not knowing what to do. Consider *Hand A*:

<i>Hand A</i>	
♠	8 7
♥	K Q 4 2
♦	K 5 4 3
♣	10 8 4

After partner opens  $1\clubsuit$  and right-hand opponent overcalls with  $1\spadesuit$ , you cannot bid  $2\heartsuit$  for that would show five hearts; 1NT is not ideal because you are weak in spades, and  $2\diamonds$  does not look right either. With just 8 points perhaps you feel you can pass. However, if, as so often happens, the bidding continues with  $2\spadesuit$ , it will be difficult for your side to get back into the auction, even though you know your minimum strength is at least 20 points. The difficulty is that since you passed, your partner could put you with 0-5 points rather than 6-9.

Overcalls occur quite often – on about 40 or 50% of the hands we play – so it is important to have a system that can deal with them effectively. Experience has shown that it is a wise choice to play as take-out the double of a suit overcall when partner has opened one-of-a-suit. The easiest way to play this double is to have it promise four cards in at least one unbid major. Thus in the sequence  $1\clubsuit - (1\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl}$ , the double would show four hearts. Ideally, the take-out doubler will have at least four cards in both of the unbid suits but, since we don’t live in an ideal world, we focus on the major suits.

This kind of double is called a Negative (or Sputnik) Double.

## What point count do we need for the negative double?

Just the amount for a normal response. In fact, what the double in the auction  $1\clubsuit - (1\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl}$  is really saying is: “Partner, I could have responded  $1\heartsuit$  without the overcall.”

If the auction has progressed to the two level, then you should have a few more points, e.g. after  $1\heartsuit - (2\diamonds) - ?$  Here we would want a slightly better hand to double (8+). This is because with 15 points your partner might want to rebid in no-trumps and since this will now be at the two level you need a few more points as responder.

As for the maximum point count, there really isn’t one: partner will respond (unless he has length in the opponents’ suit) so, even if you are very strong, you can make a negative double and then jump on a subsequent round. This is very much like responding one-of-a-suit with 15 points because you know that your partner will call again.

## How high do we use the Negative Double?

This is up to the partnership involved. A common agreement is to play this ‘take-out’ double up to and including  $2\spadesuit$ .

Thus in  $1\clubsuit - (2\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl}$ , the double is for take-out, promising four hearts; while in  $1\clubsuit - (3\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl}$ , the double is for penalties.

(Some competitive partnerships will play the negative double up to and including  $4\heartsuit$ , but this does require an aggressive approach to your bidding.)

Let us look at some examples. After this start to the auction –  $1\diamonds - (1\spadesuit) - ?$  – what would you call on *Hands B-E*?

<i>Hand B</i>		<i>Hand C</i>	
♠	5 4	♠	5 4
♥	K 8 4 2	♥	A K 4 3
♦	J 7 6	♦	Q J 3 2
♣	K 6 5 2	♣	K 6 2

<i>Hand D</i>		<i>Hand E</i>	
♠	5 4	♠	5 4
♥	K 5 4 3 2	♥	A K 4 3 2
♦	8 3 2	♦	A 8 3
♣	K 6 5	♣	6 5 2

*Hand B*: You would have responded  $1\heartsuit$  and with the auction at the one level you have enough points to bid – thus a *negative double* is ideal.

*Hand C*: This time you have a very strong hand, as well as diamond support. However, you would have responded  $1\heartsuit$  and thus a *negative double* still fits the bill. Your partner has to respond and then you will be able to show your true colours on the next round.

*Hand D*: This time you have five hearts and thus might be tempted to bid  $2\heartsuit$ , but being a two-level response this would promise greater strength and thus is not allowed. However, you can still use the *negative double* – after all, you would have responded  $1\heartsuit$ .

*Hand E*: You have enough length and strength to bid a natural  $2\heartsuit$  and this is what you should do.

## When do we use it?

I wrote above that when you hold a four-card major, then you should use the negative double. However, you can also use it on weak hands containing a longer major – when you are too weak to call at the two level, but still want to show your major suit.

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Similarly you can use the double when both majors have been called (e.g.  $1\heartsuit - (1\spadesuit) - ?$ ) to show a longer minor:

<i>Hand F</i>	
♠	5 4
♥	J 7
♦	Q 10 9 8 7 6
♣	A 3 2

*Hand F* would be suitable for a double – it is too weak for an immediate  $2\diamondsuit$  response. You might be able to show your diamonds later, implying a six-card suit and fewer than 10 points.

When you are choosing between a 1NT response and a negative double; consider how you would usually respond to your partner's opening; that is, if you always like to show a four-card major, then you should double whenever you hold one. The exception to this is when you hold a weakish hand such as *Hand G*:

<i>Hand G</i>	
♠	K J 8 6
♥	J 10 3 2
♦	5 2
♣	K 6 4

After partner has opened  $1\diamondsuit$  and right-hand opponent has overcalled with  $1\spadesuit$ , you know you are not strong enough to double first and bid no-trumps later at a higher level.

Your unimpressive heart suit, the small doubleton in partner's suit, and the double stop in the opponent's suit should convince you that an immediate 1NT response is preferable to a negative double.

### Responding to the Negative Double

Responding to a negative double is relatively straightforward: bid your hand normally as if partner had responded one-of-the-major, i.e. after the sequence  $1\diamondsuit - (1\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl} - (\text{Pass}) - ?$  bid as if the auction had started  $1\diamondsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass}) - ?$

What would you bid with *Hands H-J* after the bidding has started  $1\diamondsuit - (1\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl} - (\text{Pass}) - ?$

<i>Hand H</i>		<i>Hand I</i>	
♠	5 4 3	♠	K 8 4 3
♥	A Q 4 2	♥	4 3
♦	A K J 7 6	♦	A Q 10 9 2
♣	10	♣	K 6

<i>Hand J</i>	
♠	K Q 5 4
♥	5 4
♦	A Q 8 3 2
♣	A J

*Hand H*: You have a fit for hearts, but do not just bid  $2\heartsuit$ ; you need to show your strength: with a singleton and 14 points you must jump to  $3\heartsuit$  (6 losers).

*Hand I*: This is a little awkward, for had the auction started simply  $1\diamondsuit - (\text{Pass}) - 1\heartsuit - (\text{Pass})$  you would have rebid  $1\spadesuit$ . The temptation is to bid no-trumps instead, but do not forget that a 1NT rebid promises a stronger hand (15-17 points). That leaves little choice but to rebid your first suit:  $2\diamondsuit$ .

*Hand J*: This time you have a stronger hand and can therefore rebid 1NT.

Knowing that you have a fit is very useful when the auction goes higher very quickly. Holding *Hand K* below, after  $1\diamondsuit - (1\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl} - (3\spadesuit) - ?$

<i>Hand K</i>	
♠	4
♥	Q 8 7 6
♦	A K 8 7 6 5
♣	A 2

Playing the negative double as I suggest means that you know partner has four hearts, and you can confidently bid  $4\heartsuit$ .

### Other situations

When both majors have been bid, then the negative double can still be used, but now it would suggest holding the minors, e.g. in the sequence  $1\heartsuit - (1\spadesuit) - \text{Dbl}$ , the double is still for take-out, suggesting the minors.

When you have a choice of making a negative double or bidding at the one level, the double always shows four

cards, thus:

$1\clubsuit - (1\heartsuit) - \text{Dbl}$  The negative double shows four spades

$1\clubsuit - (1\heartsuit) - 1\spadesuit$  You can use the  $1\spadesuit$  bid to show five

When both minors have been bid, the negative double at the one level promises both majors, but at the two level it promises just one:

$1\clubsuit - (1\diamondsuit) - \text{Dbl}$  Because you could bid  $1\heartsuit$  or  $1\spadesuit$  with four cards, the double is used to show both majors.

$1\diamondsuit - (2\clubsuit) - ?$  You cannot show a four-card major at the one level, so the double shows at least one major.

One last example:

♠	K J 10 6 5	♠	7 4
♥	A 6 2	♥	5 3
♦	J 9	♦	K Q 6 5 4 3
♣	K 6 4	♣	A 5 2

West	North	East	South
$1\spadesuit$	$2\heartsuit$	Dbl	Pass
$2\spadesuit$	Pass	$3\diamondsuit$	End

The negative double is useful simply to get your strength across. Here, East's negative double is an excellent bid: it keeps his side in the auction. He is too weak to bid  $3\diamondsuit$  which would force his side into a forlorn 3NT, but he wants to show some strength, otherwise West may well have to pass out  $2\heartsuit$  thinking that East has a weak hand (0-7 points). West simply rebids his suit as he usually would, and when East rebids  $3\diamondsuit$  he can pass because he knows that, had East been stronger, he would have bid  $3\diamondsuit$  direct.

### Conclusions

There are many different versions of the negative double. The version I have given here I regard as the easiest to use as it focuses on the unbid major which, more often than not, is the most important news you want to tell partner. The convention is relatively straightforward and it will make dealing with overcalls so much easier, that you may almost begin to look forward to them! ■