



Doubling 1NT – What Next?

OUR EXPLORATION of the competitive world of bidding continues with a look at the 1NT battleground, a scary world where casualties are many and the injuries severe. Most people are familiar with the basic idea that a double of 1NT is for penalty but after that, if the opponents run, it can be quite awkward to know when you should be penalising them and when you should be bidding a contract of your own.

The first question is: ‘How much do you need to double 1NT?’ The answer is that if you hold a balanced hand, then you should double on all hands of 17 points or more, most of 16, and a few of 15 if you have intermediate cards and sequences.

Can you ever double with less? Well, certainly holding a long suit it can be more effective to double than to overcall especially if your suit is a minor. Something like this is ideal:

♠ A 2
♥ 7 5 4
♦ K Q J 10 7 4
♣ A 3

Only 14 points but you have 1NT more or less beaten in your own hand, with five diamond tricks and two aces

to get in and cash them. Change the aces to queens and jacks and keep the point count the same, and now it would be wise to pass, as hands lacking cards of entry are often disappointing in defence.

Having doubled 1NT, what can you do if the opponents run to somewhere else? After all, the next hand will hold a five-card suit a lot of the time and does best to take it out whenever it can; should you press on doubling them or bid a suit?

The main issue arises over what double actually means in this sequence:

Oppo 1	Partner	Oppo 2	You
1NT	Dble	2♦	Dble

A third of the country play this double as take-out, and a third of the country play it as penalties. The other third of the country just double whenever they want to, and claim partner should have known

exactly what they had because ‘It was obvious I had hearts / no hearts / toast for breakfast’ etc.

The important thing is that you and your partner agree what double means. I don’t consider there to be one superior method played by all experts; if anything, I think they have more disagreements than the ordinary man in the street! I have chosen to concentrate on playing penalty doubles simply as I believe that to be slightly more common.

If you choose to play double for penalties in that sequence, then when you do double you should have length in trumps, typically four or three very good ones. Doubling the opponents at a low level is only right when they are in a misfit, and as you know they have at least a five-carder facing two with the 1NT bidder, then you must be careful when you pull the trigger.

So when you make a penalty double, assume partner has a relatively balanced hand in the 16/17 range and base it on that.

These hands are ideal for a double in the above sequence:

- a) ♠ K 3 ♥ 7 6 5 ♦ Q 10 8 4 ♣ J 7 6 5
- b) ♠ Q 4 ♥ J 8 7 ♦ K J 9 7 ♣ 6 5 4 3
- c) ♠ 4 ♥ Q J 10 5 ♦ A K 10 ♣ 9 7 6 5 4

What about if you can’t make a penalty double, and you hold very little? In that case pass with a balanced hand and let partner make his own arrangement, but bid in front of him if you have a bad hand with a long suit – in effect countering the opponents weak take out with one of your own!

Let’s say you hold this hand:

♠ J 9 7 4 3
♥ 8 7 5
♦ 2
♣ 8 7 4 3

On the auction shown earlier, immediately bid 2♠! Bidding ‘in front of partner’, as it is known, shows a poor hand and no wish to

do anything exciting.

What about if you hold more points and want to lay claim to the hand?

On the hand at the top of the next column you know you have a game on, but also that you have a lot of points between you and that a penalty might be

♠ K J 9 7 5
♥ Q 7 5
♦ Q
♣ K 8 7 6

good to collect if partner has some diamonds; what do you do? The solution is to pass for now, forcing partner to take some

action. If partner makes a penalty double you will pass, expecting him to have four good trumps (sitting under the diamond bidder), and if partner bids you will force to game. We call this a ‘forcing pass’.

If you have a much more shapely hand such as:

♠ K J 9 7 5
♥ Q 8 7 5 4 3
♦ Void
♣ 4 3

Then cue-bid the opponent’s suit, to show a good hand that wants to know more. Obviously if partner bids 3NT, you will

return to 4♥ to suggest a distributional hand. Partner will know you are very shapely (rather than just having a lot of points) as you haven’t given him the chance to double for penalties.

Let’s review some of the dos and don’ts of penalising a 1NT opening:

Do:

- Double 1NT when you hold 16+ points, or slightly fewer if you hold a good sequence to lead against it.
- Try and defend doubled part-scores when you have length and strength in the enemy trump suit; if you just have a lot of high cards then bid your normal game contract.
- Use the cue-bid of the opponents’ suit to show a shapely hand. With a more balanced hand that can’t double, pass it round to partner and let him have a go at it.

Don’t:

- Spring doubles on your partner out of the blue; make sure you have discussed them first. The argument ‘Didn’t you read this month’s Traps for the Unwary?’ will not take away the pain of conceding -870. □