

LOW LEVEL PENALTY DOUBLES

The power of a big trump fit cannot be underestimated. If you have a ten card fit you can often make eight tricks through ruffing, and so you can make a two level contract with just 10 or 11 points between you and your partner.

It is impossible confidently to double the opponents at such a low level unless you know that you know they do not have a big fit. How might you know they do not have such a fit? By holding good trumps yourself, or knowing that both you and your partner hold some length in their suit. Since most low-level doubles are for take-out, you should only pass a take-out double, thus converting it to penalties, if you can be fully confident you have both strength and trump length. Similarly you should only double a two-level suit contract for penalties if you have a majority of points as well as either six trumps between you and your partner, or four good trumps in your hand.

There are some circumstances when a penalty double can be used: after a 1NT opening or after a weak pre-emptive opening by your side. In such cases your partner will have given you a well defined description of their hand, so you can accurately select the best contract.

Dealer: North. Love All.

	♠ K 10 7 6		
	♥ K 7		
	♦ A 10 9 4		
	♣ Q 7 6		
♠ J 8 5 4 3	N	♠ Q 9	
♥ 6	W	♥ J 10 8 5 4 3	
♦ K Q J 2	E	♦ 3	
♣ 8 5 3	S	♣ A K 9 2	
	♠ A 2		
	♥ A Q 9 2		
	♦ 8 7 6 5		
	♣ J 10 4		

In this example North opens a weak no-trump (12- 14 points).

West North East South

1NT 2♥ Dbl End

East makes an aggressive overcall over 1NT, but is punished by South who make a penalty double..

South knows their side has a clear majority of the points and not only do they have four good trumps but partner has promised at least two as well with the 1NT opening. East is only likely to make 5 tricks giving your side 500 matchpoints.

Dealer: North. Love All.

	♠ K 10 7 6		
	♥ K 7		
	♦ A 10 9 4		
	♣ Q 7 6		
♠ J 4 3	N	♠ Q 9	
♥ Q 6 2	W	♥ J 10 8 5 4 3	
♦ J 8 7 6 2	E	♦ 3	
♣ 8 5	S	♣ A K 9 2	
	♠ A 8 5 2		
	♥ A 9		
	♦ K Q 5		
	♣ J 10 4 3		

Now see how different things are if we change West and South hands just a little.

West North East South

1NT 2♥ ?

South has an even stronger hand now, but they must not contemplate making a penalty double: you need length in the opponents' suit to achieve good results.

2♥ will go one off, but that is worth very little, as you can see, North-South can make a game worth at least 400 points.

You need both strength and trump length to double at low levels.