

When and When not to Double for Penalty by Jason Larrivee

“If you are not going to double then you better play good defence.” Wayne Natrass

“If the opponents aren't making a few doubled contracts then you aren't doubling enough.” unknown

Okay, I am sure you have all played the hand where you double the opponents for penalty, play poor defence, and still end up with a top board. I am sure you have also played the hand where you double for penalty, play perfect defence and still end up with a bottom because the opponents made the contract. My talk today will try to give you some simple rules that will allow you to make more good doubles and far fewer bad ones.

Now, I know that all of you have doubled for penalty when you know the opponents are going down. Like when they end up in 6S and you have the AK of spades in your hand. This double is easy to make. It is much harder to double when you have to rely on your partner for tricks. It is hard enough to be exactly sure how many tricks your own hand can take when you can see all your cards. How can you be expected to know how many your partner will take when you can't see any of his cards? Well, I find the rules below to be a fairly exact guide as to the minimum number of tricks you can expect your partner to take.

How many defensive tricks can I expect my partner take?	
What did my partner bid?	How many tricks is that worth in defence?
Pass, pass, pass	0
2D, 2H, 2S, 3C, 3D, 3H, 3S or any pre-emptive bid	0
Any simple overcall made at the 1 level	1
Any opening bid of 1 of a suit or an overcall of 2 of a suit	2
An opening or simple overcall of 1NT	3
2C or 2NT	4

Of course, in bridge nothing is ever this simple. I have learned that there are certain instances where you and your partner won't be able to take as many tricks as the table implies.

If we have an 8 card fit in one suit then I can count on us taking 1 trick in that suit.

If we have a 9 card fit in one suit then I can count on us taking one half of one trick in that suit.

If we have a 10 card fit in one suit then I can count on us taking 0 tricks in that suit.

So, with all that in mind here are the questions you should ask yourself before you double for penalty.

- 1) How many tricks do we need to set the contract?
- 2) How many tricks does my partner have?
- 3) How many tricks do I have?
- 4) How many tricks do I have to discount?

In the examples that follow below, I have attempted to apply this information to some real examples.

You have	The Bidding				Questions to ask	Answers to Questions	Double?
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	1a) Tricks to set it?		
	P	1S	P	2H	1b) Partner's tricks?		
	P	2S	P	4S	1c) Your tricks?		
	P	P	?		1d) Discounted by?		
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	2a) Tricks to set it?		
	1H	1S	1NT	2S	2b) Partner's tricks?		
	3C	3S	?		2c) Your tricks?		
					2d) Discounted by?		
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	3a) Tricks to set it?		
		1C	P	1H	3b) Partner's tricks?		
	1S	2H	2S	4H	3c) Your tricks?		
	P	P	4S	5H	3d) Discounted by?		
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	4a) Tricks to set it?		
	2S	*	4S	5D	4b) Partner's tricks?		
	P	P	?		4c) Your tricks?		
					4d) Discounted by?		
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	5a) Tricks to set it?		
		1S	P	P	5b) Partner's tricks?		
	1NT	2D	?		5c) Your tricks?		
					5d) Discounted by?		
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	6a) Tricks to set it?		
	1NT	3D	?		6b) Partner's tricks?		
					6c) Your tricks?		
					6d) Discounted by?		

Comments about why I would or would not double

- 1) No. I call this a Wishful thinking double. (You will end up wishing your partner had a trick)
- 2) Yes. When you and your partner have no fit the defence will do better than expected.
- 3) No. They have the points and you have pushed them to the 5 level be happy if you can set it.
- 4) No. This should set but doubling tends to cost you 1/2 of a trick.
- 5) Yes. You can probably make 3NT but Doubling bad low level contracts often leads to easy tops.
- 6) Yes or No. Sometimes you have to guess so play to your strengths.

Take a look at the cards the next time the opponents make a doubled contract and you will probably find that one of these rules was broken.

Answers to the Questions

You have	The Bidding				Questions to ask	Answers to Questions	Double?
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	1a) Tricks to set it?	4	NO
	P	1S	P	2H	1b) Partner's tricks?	0	
	P	2S	P	4S	1c) Your tricks?	3 (2S+1D)	
	P	P	?		1d) Discounted by?	0	
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	2a) Tricks to set it?	5	YES
	1H	1S	1NT	2S	2b) Partner's tricks?	2	
	3C	3S	?		2c) Your tricks?	4 (3SP+1D)	
					2d) Discounted by?	0	
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	3a) Tricks to set it?	3	NO
		1C	P	1H	3b) Partner's tricks?	1	
	1S	2H	2S	4H	3c) Your tricks?	3 (1.5S+1.5D)	
	P	P	4S	5H	3d) Discounted by?	1.5 (1S + 0.5D)	
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	4a) Tricks to set it?	3	NO
	2S	*	4S	5D	4b) Partner's tricks?	0	
	P	P	?		4c) Your tricks?	3 (1.5S+1.5D)	
					4d) Discounted by?	1.5	

You have	The Bidding				Questions to ask	Answers to Questions	Double?
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	5a) Tricks to set it?	6	YES
	1NT	1S	P	P	5b) Partner's tricks?	3	
		2D	?		5c) Your tricks?	4 (3d + 1S)	
					5d) Discounted by?	0	
♠ K Q 4 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 5	N	E	S (You)	W	6a) Tricks to set it?	5	YES or NO
	1NT	3D	?		6b) Partner's tricks?	3	
					6c) Your tricks?	3.5 (1.5S+2D)	
					6d) Discounted by?	unknown	