

Many players have abandoned the idea of low-level penalty Doubles of an overcall in favour of assigning a different meaning to the bid. After an opening bid by partner and an overcall by the next hand, a Double shows support for the unbid suits, with emphasis on the unbid major suit(s), and sufficient high-card points to want to enter the auction.

♠AJ82
♥965
♦K953
♣J7

After 1C-(1H) you could bid 1S here to show your 4-card spade suit. There's nothing wrong with that but a Negative Double adds more definition to the auction – it shows exactly 4 cards in spades. So :

1C-(1H)-1S = at least 5 spades
1C-(1H)-Dbl = exactly 4 spades

♠AJ82
♥K965
♦953
♣J7

After 1C-(1D) you could bid 1H or 1S here. 1H is a better choice because it allows partner to rebid 1S if he has four cards in the suit. If you bid 1S, your partner might not be strong enough to rebid 2H, so you risk losing out on a heart fit. A better idea is to start off with a Negative Double, showing four cards in both majors.

You would make exactly the same bid if the auction had started 1D-(2C). You want to bid something but both 2H and 2S would show at least five cards in the suit. A Negative Double describes your hand very nicely indeed.

Note : many players think that a Negative Double caters for auctions where the overcall has “taken away their bid”. This is not necessarily the case, as the examples above show. It is more likely to be true when the overcall is in spades, as in this example :

♠982
♥K965
♦AJ5
♣J87

After 1C-(1S) you are a bit stuck. You have enough points to bid, but what ? You can't bid 1NT without a spade stopper, you don't really want to support partner's clubs with only three of them and you don't want to bid 2D or 2H with just four of them. Without the 1S overcall you would have responded 1H. A Negative Double carries that message – it shows four cards in hearts and enough high-card points to want to bid something.

Negative Doubles can apply at higher levels too, as in this recent hand from Shoreham. North dealt with N/S vulnerable :

♠K876
♥7
♦A9
♣KQ8432

♠AQ104
♥1096
♦Q73
♣AJ5

North opened One Club, East overcalled Three Hearts and South had a problem. A bid of Three Spades at this point would show a longer suit, so South Doubled. North showed his spade suit by bidding Three Spades and South raised to Four Spades.

North ruffed the second rounds of hearts and won the next two tricks with the Ace and King of spades, East showing out on the second round. No problem – North drew a third round of trumps, leaving West with the master trump, and simply played winning clubs until West decided to ruff. The Ace of diamonds was an entry to the established clubs and declarer finished with 11 tricks.

If you decide to play Negative Doubles, it is important for the opening bidder to try to keep the auction alive whenever he is short in the overcaller's suit in case his partner has a hand suitable for a penalty double :

♠Q105
♥KJ95
♦AK973
♣7

♠K72
♥1062
♦54
♣KQJ62

North opened One Diamond and East overcalled Two Clubs. South really wanted to double this for penalties but had to Pass. West also Passed and the bidding arrived back at North. North knew his partner must have some high-card points else E/W would not be playing in a lowly Two Clubs contract. North Doubled for take-out and South was more than happy to Pass this for penalties. Two Clubs doubled, down three – a very good result on a part-score hand.

Enjoy your bridge !