

Negative Doubles

Negative doubles have become popular because they solve this difficult -- and common -- bidding problem:

♠762 ♥KQ75 ♦94 ♣QJ93

Partner opens 1D and your right-hand opponent (RHO) overcalls 1S. The overcall has taken away your 1H response, so you have no way to accurately describe your strength and distribution. You can't bid 1NT (which promises a spade stopper) and you can't bid a new suit at the 2-level (which promises 10-11+ pts.).

This solution is the **negative double**. To use this convention, you and partner agree that if you open the bidding and the opponent makes a direct suit overcall, a double by responder is **NOT** for penalty. Instead, it shows:

- At least a fair response (7+ pts.) **AND**
- **4-card length** in at least one of the unbid suits -- usually the unbid **major** suit. (Some pairs agree that if the two unbid suits are majors -- for example, after 1C by partner, 1D by RHO -- a negative double promises 4 cards in **both** suits.)

In the problem above, you would double to show the values for a response and a 4-card heart suit. This tells partner that you would have responded 1H if the opponent had passed. If opener also has 4 hearts, he'll "raise" your response by bidding hearts himself. If not, he can choose another descriptive bid.

Here are some other examples of how you can use negative doubles:

♠A973 ♥AJ ♦92 ♣KJ1062

If partner opens 1D and RHO overcalls 1H, make a negative double. Even though you have enough strength for a 2-level freebid, a 2C bid here will make it difficult to find a possible 4-4 spade fit. Use the double to show your 4-card spade suit, then decide which game to bid over partner's response. If partner doesn't "raise" your spades, you'll bid 3NT.

♠K1063 ♥762 ♦K72 ♣AJ7

If partner opens 1D and RHO overcalls 2C, make a negative double to show at least one 4-card major. If partner bids 2H, you can bid 2NT -- this shows an invitational-to-game hand with a club stopper, but without four hearts. Since you started with the negative double instead of 2NT, partner will also know that you have a 4-card spade suit.

Responder's Freebids

Playing negative doubles also offers you the advantage of assigning a more specific meaning to a freebid of a new suit. After an opponent's overcall, if responder freely bids a new suit (instead of making a negative double), he promises a **5-card suit**. A new-suit freebid at the 1-level shows 7+ pts.; at the 2-level or higher, it shows 10+ pts. (However, a bid of 1H or 1S over a 1D overcall still only shows 4 because a negative double would show *both* majors.)

♠QJ1073 ♥874 ♦A92 ♣74

If partner opens 1D and your RHO overcalls 1H, bid 1S. The overcall hasn't taken away your 1-level response, so you have **two** ways to show spades. In these situations, use the negative double to show a **4-card** suit. Use the freebid (1S) to promise a **5-card** suit (partner will know he can raise with 3-card support). **However**, if partner opens 1D and your RHO overcalls 2C, this hand isn't strong enough for a 2S freebid. In this case, you'll have to use a negative double. If partner bids 2D, you'll pass. If he bids 2H, you can correct to 2S, which shows extra length and is not forcing.

Penalizing the opponent's overcall

What do you do when you have a "real" penalty double of RHO's overcall? As responder, you can't make an immediate double for penalty, so you must pass and hope partner will bid again:

♠3 ♥Q43 ♦KQ1087 ♣A754

If partner opens 1S and your RHO overcalls 2D, your only alternative is to pass (smoothly) and let partner bid for you. If partner is short in diamonds (very likely), he'll reopen with a takeout double. You can pass this double for penalties.

When is the negative double "off"?

You and your partner can decide at which levels of bidding you'll use negative doubles. One popular agreement is that negative doubles are "on" if the opponent makes a suit overcall through the level of 3S. If you use this agreement, negative doubles are "off" (responder's double is for penalty) if the overcall is 4C or higher.

No matter how you choose to play negative doubles, they apply only if the opponent overcalls a **suit**. Responder's double of a 1NT overcall is always for penalty.

The higher the level of the overcall, the more strength responder needs to make a negative double. If partner opens 1C and the opponent makes a jump overcall of 2S, you'll want to have a little extra playing strength (not necessarily extra points) to make a negative double, which will force partner to the 3-level.

Opener's rebids

After responder's negative double, opener must make a rebid that describes both his strength and his support for the suit partner has shown with the double. In most cases, you'll bid your hand just as if partner had made a 1-bid in that suit:

- With a **MINIMUM** opening (13-15 pts.), make your natural suit or notrump rebid at a low level. If you have 4-card support for the suit partner has shown with the double, you should always show it.
- With an **INVITATIONAL** hand (15-17 pts.), **jump one level** to show extra strength (1C by you - 1H overcall - DBL by partner - P - 2S by you).
- With a **FORCING-TO-GAME** hand (18+ pts.), **jump to game**. (Or, if you're not sure of which game to play, **cuebid** the opponent's suit to force responder to tell you more about his hand.)

Reopening the bidding

Remember that responder cannot make an immediate penalty double of an opponent's overcall. If you open the bidding, your LHO makes an overcall and your partner passes, he may have a hand with strength in the opponent's suit. If you're short in the overcaller's suit, you should try to "protect" partner by reopening the bidding for him.

♠AJ9 ♥KQ72 ♦A10542 ♣9

You open 1D, your LHO overcalls 2C, and it goes Pass-Pass back to you. You should keep the auction open with a balancing double, which is takeout. If partner wanted to make a penalty double of 2C, he can pass. If he didn't, he'll bid 2D, 2H or 2S.

Be careful about reopening, though, if you have length in the opponent's suit:

♠A3 ♥K5 ♦AQ1087 ♣10754

You open 1D, your LHO overcalls 2C, and it goes Pass-Pass back to you. With this hand, you should pass. Your club length tells you partner wasn't waiting to make a penalty double of 2C. It's more likely he passed because he's very weak. Your shortness in the majors should make you suspicious that the opponents have a better trump suit, so don't give them a chance to find it.