

Double Trouble

Part 2: Negative and Responsive Doubles

Introduction

Another area of great mystery in bridge are negative and responsive doubles. There are several reasons that these doubles can lead to much confusion. One is that they are, by definition, a competitive tool. There are many more possible combinations of bidding sequences when all the players start bidding so it is hard for a partnership to have discussed them all. Also, these doubles can occur at very high levels where there is little bidding space for you to make a decision. This also leads to hard, unfamiliar decisions. And of course, there is the basic theory behind what hands are contained in a negative and responsive double. Let's start with the basics.

A **Negative Double**, infrequently called a responder's double, is a double made by the partner of the opening bidder which describes length in the unbid suits and enough HCP to compete at that level. For instance, you would make a negative double after 1♣-(1♥) with hands such as:

- a) Kxxx, x, QJxx, xxxx
- b) Txxx, Qxxx, xx, AJx
- c) AKJx, Axx, AKx, Qxx

So, as you will note, 1 level negative doubles, like takeout doubles, are very specific about having 4 of the other major(s) but are somewhat flexible about the length held in the other minor. A negative double of 1♦ shows exactly 4-4 in the majors and a negative double of 1♥ shows exactly 4 spades.

Negative doubles at the 2 level are a bit less specific. Suppose you hold a hand such as x, KJTxx, Kxxx, xxx and your partner opens 1♣-(1♠)-? You have enough values to compete at the 2 level provided you find a decent fit, but you can't bid 2♥ as that would show 10+ HCP. The negative double is there to rescue you! Note here, though, that you may have more than 4 in some suit and just not have enough values to bid the suit directly. Given this information, what does this auction mean?

1♦-(1♠)-DBL-(P); 2♦-(P)-2♥

You got it! This shows a hand that wasn't really comfortable playing in 2♦ but has at least 5♥ but fewer than 10 HCP. Why fewer than 10 HCP? Because with 10+ HCP and 5+ hearts surely they would have started with 2♥ over the 1♠ overcall. Therefore, **a new suit after a negative double is not forcing.**

A **Responsive Double** is a double made by the partner of the overcaller (or takeout doubler) which describes length in the unbid suits and enough values to compete at that level. Doesn't that definition sound familiar? It's just like a negative double but in a slightly different situation. Negative doubles are by the partner of the opener and responsive doubles are by the partner of the overcaller. Some typical uses of responsive doubles would be:

(1♣)-1♠-(2♣)-DBL shows about 7+ HCP with length in both red suits.

(2♥)-DBL-(3♥)-DBL shows close to game forcing values (10+ HCP or so) and fewer than 4 spades. Why fewer than 4 spades. Because after a takeout double of hearts, you should bid spades if you have 4 of them since the takeout doubler will almost always have 4 himself.

So those are the basics, but the real meat of this talk is about the theory behind negative and responsive doubles. The best question to approach this theory is: **How high should you play negative doubles?** We have all filled out hundreds of convention cards and marked "neg doubles through ????" depending on which partner you are playing with, but what is the right level to play them through? You'll hear lots of answers: "3♦ so you can bring both majors in after a 3♦ preempt". "3♥ so we can find spades after a 3♥ preempt." Others are more adventurous, "4♦ (or 4♥) so we can play 4 of our major!" they cry out. Unfortunately, the answer isn't quite that simple.

In order to examine this question, first let's ask ourselves, what does it mean when we say, "we play negative doubles through 2♠"? Does this mean that at 2♠ and below is purely a takeout double and partner must pick one of our suits? Does this also imply that if the opponents preempt at 3♣ or higher that our doubles are strictly penalty doubles? Let me give a couple of examples. Suppose the bidding goes 1♣-(2♠)-DBL-(P). Opener holds AKTx, x, Kxx, KTxxx. Most players would pass the takeout double here, but if the double was purely for takeout, responder might have -, Jxxxxx, xxxxxx, x. After the opponents easily score up two overtricks, responder would ask, why did you pass my takeout double? Who would be at fault? Another example is this, suppose you hold something like Kx, xxxx, AQxx, Kxx and your partner opens 1♣-(3♥)-? Now what? I guess you double since you have no other attractive bids and nearly a game force. However, your partner holds Axx, x, Kxxx, AQxxx and while they will likely go down 2 doubled, you are cold for a slam. The opener couldn't go on, though, because he thinks you might have a lot of high cards in hearts, in which case you might not even make a game while beating 3♥ by 3 or 4 tricks!

The thing which will help us out, eventually, is adding a clause to our definitions for negative and responsive doubles. Though we were all very happy with the definitions above when we first saw them, the thing we left out is possibly the most important concept: **and a somewhat balanced hand!** If we add the general understanding that with 5-5 or greater in the unbid suits we will do something other than double, everyone will be on much firmer ground on our competitive auctions. Yes, your initial action with your 5-5 hand will be something of a guess, but all the subsequent decisions will be much tighter. Let's take a look at some examples which illustrate the practical implications of this concept.

Examples

1♣-(2♠)-? and you hold as responder x, KJxxx, AJxxx, Qx. 3♥ might have both a better heart suit and a better hand since we are effectively forcing to game, but what else can you do? We definitely don't want to make a negative double with these hands, since then opener will start guessing to bid 3 card suits at the 3 level. That will surely lead to many disasters on other more normal hands. Bid 3♥ and hope that you have a fit. Your great distributional values may carry you where your meager HCP won't.

1♣-(3♥)-DBL-(P) and you hold as the opener Ax, QJxx, Kxx, Kxxx. Pass sure looks like a winner. Now that we can rule out partner having a weak hand with spades and diamonds, we know he has some decent defensive values. Sure, 3NT is an option, however, we might not make game opposite responder's 11 or 12 HCP, but I'm willing to bet they aren't coming close to making 3♥!

Don't feel too cocky, though. There are plenty of gotchas out there.

1♦-(3♥)-? and you hold Kxxx, AJx, Kxx, xx. It sure looks like a classical negative double, but think further. You may have your side's only heart stopper. If that is true and partner doesn't have 4 spades, you will effectively endplay him in the auction by doubling. He can't bid 3NT and he can't bid 3♠, so he will either pass or bid 4♣. Either one is likely to be a worse result than 3NT. Yes, you have only 11 HCP and might not have a game, and yes, you have 4-4 in the unbid suits, but Hamman's Law helps us out in these situations; **"If 3NT is a possible contract, bid it."** If you don't do it, who can?

Try this one on for size: 1♥-(3♣)-? while you have xxx, xx, xxxx, AKQT. Better not double! Opener might think you have spades and get you past 3NT. Best is to pass and hope that partner can reopen, preferably with a double. I'll bet you know what to do after that!

A similar hand to the one above is Axx, xx, Kxxx, AQTx. After 1♥-(3♣) many players would pass expecting to collect a huge number after partner reopens with double, but there is no guarantee that opener will bid again. The higher the level, the more awkward hands opener can have which he will simply pass out. Therefore, a good rule of thumb is don't try and trap pass when you have a sure game.

Summary

What I'm trying to show here is that there is not some magical level where we suddenly start having penalty doubles instead of takeout doubles. There are two components to negative and responsive doubles, high card values and suit distribution. At low levels there is plenty of room to describe our distribution comfortably since we have so many options in the bidding, therefore we can assume that a negative double definitely has the unbid suits. However, there is a gradual transition **as the bidding level gets higher our doubles are meant more as an expression of hand ownership than about describing any particular distribution.** Because of this, as the level of the auction gets higher and higher, the opener is more and more likely to just (correctly) pass out your negative double when he doesn't have any other good action to take.

- . **When you have 5-5 or better in the unbid suits, make your best guess with a suit, but don't make a negative or responsive double.**
- . **A new suit after a negative double is not forcing.**
- . **If 3NT is a possible contract, bid it.**
- . **As the bidding level gets higher our doubles are meant more as an expression of hand ownership than about describing any particular distribution.**