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## Negative Doubles

The negative double is a convention that I think is absolutely essential! This lesson is a little longer than most, but this situation comes up a lot. This is one that pays to study until you really understand it and can recognize it when it comes up at the table. Until you understand how the negative double works, and what it means when partner fails to make a negative double, you will continually find yourself being pushed around by the opponents in competitive auctions.

Both partners (responder and opener) must recognize the situation, because the negative double “system” may require action from the opener as well as the responder. An important point to remember is that negative doubles can only be made by the partner of the opening bidder. If the opponents have opened the bidding, it is not possible for your side to make a negative double! If the opponents have opened the bidding and partner doubles, it is a takeout double.

I would estimate that negative double situations come up about 5-10 times per session. Anytime partner opens and the next player overcalls, it is a negative double situation. Understanding and using negative doubles properly will greatly improve your results.

### When the Opponents Overcall – The Negative Double

Your partner has opened, and you are pleasantly contemplating how to respond when RHO spoils the party by making an overcall. Now some of your tools are no longer usable, and you may not be able to show your own suits or strength. What to do?

Your first priority is to show partner a fit with his suit if you have one. If you fail to do this, partner may well find themselves with an impossible decision at a high level. The second priority is to show your own decent suit if you have one, and enough strength to bid. With stopper(s) in the opponent’s suit (but not enough length to want to defend) you can bid NT at some level. But what if you have some values, but not support for partner or sufficient distribution to bid your own suit?

For example, after 1C – 1S -?, and you hold: S-xx H- Axxx D- Kxxx C-xxx, you are in an impossible situation. Pass and partner will think you have nothing. Partner may well have 4 hearts (assuming you play 5 card majors), but bidding 2H with this grossly

overstates the strength and shape of the hand. Respond 1NT, and you will never find a 4-4 heart fit, and 1NT is ridiculous with no spade stopper. The opponent's simple 1S overcall has left you helpless!

In the olden days of bridge after 1C – 1S, double would have been for penalty. Because one very rarely has a hand that wants to double a 1 level overcall for penalty, modern bidding has “repurposed” the double to handle this awkward situation. (The double is “negative” because it is not a penalty double.) Using negative doubles, a direct double after an overcall promises some strength (depending on level), and support for the other two suits, with the emphasis being on unbid major(s). So with the above hand a (negative) double is a perfect description.

After a 1 level overcall, a negative double promises at least 6 HCP, and four of the other major (or 4-4 in majors after 1C – 1D). After a 2 level overcall, a negative double should promise at least a good 8HCP.

**NOTE:** Negative doubles are not limited bids. You can make a negative double with quite a good hand. Of course, the higher the level the more playing strength required. In general, it is harder to show distribution than it is to show strength, so starting with a negative double and then showing strength is usually better. More on this later.

Some examples:

After 1C – 1H - ?

With: S-KQxx H-xx D- Kxxx C-xxx, double

But with: S-KQxxx H- xx D-Kxxx C-xx, bid 1S. Note that the direct bid of 1S now promises 5 spades, as the negative double is available to show 4 spades. Partner can now freely raise to 2S with 3 card support.

With: S-Jxxx H-xx D-Kxxx C-xxx, pass and await developments. You are not strong enough to bid.

After 1C – 1D -?

With: S-Kxxx H-Kxxx D-xx C-xxx, double. Let partner pick. Without the overcall, you couldn't describe this hand with one bid. Now you can! It's fun to make the opponents pay for their interference!

After 1C – 1S - ?

With: S-xx H- Axxx D-Kxxx C-xxx, double

With: S-xx H-Axxxx D-Kxxx C-xx, double. You have 5 hearts, but not enough strength for a free bid at the 2 level.

With: S-xx H-AKxxx D-Kxxx C-xx, bid 2H

But with: S-xx H-AKxx D- Kxxx C-xxx, double. You have the strength for the free bid, but a 2 level bid absolutely promises five card suits. Remember that negative doubles can be made with a stronger than minimum hand.

After 1H – 1S- ?

With: S-Kx H- xx D-Kxxx C-KQxxx, double to show both minors.

After 1D – 2H -?

With: S-KQxx H-xx D-Kxxx C-xxx, double. (If partner has to retreat to 3D you will be fine.)

With: S-KQxxx H-xx D-Kxxx C-xxx, double. You have a 5 card spade suit, but not enough strength to make a 2 level free bid. Depending on how the auction develops, you may get a chance to show the length.

But with: S-KQxxx H- xx D- KQxx C-xxx, bid 2S. Just enough for the 2 level free bid.

After 1C – 2S -?

With: S-xx H-AKxxx D-Kxxx C-xx, probably double, although 3H could work. You really don't have the HCP for a 3 level free bid.

With: S-KQ10 9x H-xx D-xxx C-xxx, PASS! Yes you can probably set 2 spades, and it is very tempting to show RHO what's what. However, partner will not pass your double. How do you think partner will enjoy playing a weak 4-2 heart fit at the three level? Fear not, there is a way to punish the opponents with this hand, which we will go over next week.

After 1H – 2S- ?

With: S-xx H-xx D-Kxxx C-KQxxx, pass, then bid 3 Clubs if partner reopens with a double. This will let partner know you have clubs but not a lot of strength.

But with S-xx H- x D-KQxxx C-KQxxx, you are strong enough to double, showing both minors and no fit for hearts.

With: S-KJx H-x D-Kxxx C-KQxxx, bid 2NT (If opponents are vul and we are not, consider passing and let partner reopen with a double, which you will pass.)

A question that you and your partner should discuss is how high do you play negative doubles? At the very minimum you should play them through 2 spades, and I strongly

suggest three spades. More expert players usually play them at least through 4 hearts, and world class players will usually say (with tongue a little in cheek) through seven hearts! Even for expert pairs at high levels the double tends to shade over into the “cooperative” double, which we will discuss in the future.

Also note that how high to play negative doubles is affected by the form of scoring. When playing a team game, the emphasis is strongly on finding your games, and not on small sets of high-level contracts. Using negative doubles at higher levels is about finding your games, so at team play consider playing negative doubles through 4 H. For example, after 1C – 4H - ?, Unless RHO is a lunatic, you are unlikely to set 4H enough to compensate for your game (if you have one).

So with after 1C-4H-?:

S-KQxx H-x D-Kxxx C-Axxx, a negative double will get you to the right game contract when that's right.

On the other hand, if partner has S-xx H-AK D-Axxx C-Kxxxx, he/she will be happy to pass for a good penalty when you have no game available.

The next lesson discusses opener's rebids, and how we punish the opponents when they step out of line.