



By: Don Rogers

Penalty Doubles

Penalizing the opponents by doubling is an important tool in duplicate bridge. Not only can doubling the opponents when it is right get you a superior board, having a reputation for being willing to double will go far in preventing the opponents from making annoying nuisance bids. If you get a reputation for being unwilling to double, that gets around too, and the opponents will push you around with no fear of consequences.

Particularly in part-score situations, a penalty double will usually convert a roughly average board into either a top or bottom. When the opponents are vulnerable, setting them even one trick is worth 200 points, more than any part score you can make. If the opponents are non-vulnerable, setting them two tricks doubled (300 points) is worth more than any part score.

At matchpoint scoring, you can be more aggressive with penalty doubles because each board is an entirely separate score. I believe that at matchpoints, if the opponents are not occasionally making a doubled contract, you are not doubling enough! If your penalty doubles are right even two-thirds of the time, that's clearly good strategy (two tops for every bottom).

AT IMP scoring (team games & knockouts) you must be much more conservative with your penalty doubles. Remember that if the opponents make a contract of 2 hearts or higher doubled, they score a game on what should have been a part score hand. This will probably lose the match in Swiss team or similar event.

There aren't really hard and fast rules about making penalty doubles. The following are some guidelines that I use.

1. Don't double freely bid games and slams just because you think they won't make it. This is a situation where the odds are not in your favor. If the opponents have indeed misjudged their hands, you are already headed for an above average result. Doubling will result in at best a small improvement in your score, while if they make it you have converted an average into a bottom. In general, your opponents are not fools, and if they don't have high cards they will have shape that negates some of your aces and kings. Furthermore, a double based on long trumps in your hand may backfire if it alerts declarer to the situation, and allows declarer to make a contract that would have failed had you kept quiet.

2. In competitive game auctions, where it is clear that it is your hand, but the opponents make a sacrifice bid, it may be necessary to double to salvage some matchpoints. (See the lesson on Warning doubles.) For example, if you bid game in hearts, and the opponents sacrifice at four spades or five of a minor, if you think five hearts cannot be made, you should double. This will depend a lot on your shape – if you have only three hearts, your heart honors are more likely to cash, while if your side has a 10-card heart fit, you may get no heart tricks on defense.

3. Competitive part score auctions offer some of the best opportunities for lucrative penalty doubles. Players tend to lose their discipline in these auctions, and bid when they should pass. Consider the following common auction:

Partner You

1S - 2H - 2S - 3H

P - P - ?

With: S-xxx H-KJ10x D-Axx C-xxx, a double is almost automatic. If the opponents are vulnerable, 100% double. Your analysis of the situation:

Partner has promised 2-1/2 to 3 defensive tricks with the opening bid.

Unless RHO is a lunatic, they will have the AQ of hearts for a two-level overcall. You have 3 defensive tricks so, the opponents are almost certainly down one, and maybe two.

Your double cannot be for takeout – you and partner have already agreed on spades. Double here is 100% penalty.

Partner's pass over 2S says they have a minimum hand. You do not have a game.

Your heart holding says RHO has made a typical cheesy matchpoint two-level overcall. Time to swing the hammer and teach them a lesson. After the hand RHO will probably be saying to their partner "but I had 13 points!".

With: S-xxxx H-Kxxx D-Ax C-Jxx, best to pass or bid 3 spades (depending on vulnerability and scoring). You may beat 3 hearts, but no guarantees. Your fourth spade is a liability, as partner's spade honors may not cash. Note that you no longer have the J10 of hearts – you are getting at most one heart trick, and your fourth heart will be at most an inconvenience for declarer.

Another example:

	Partner		You
1NT -	X*	- P	- ?

* Equal Value

With: S- Qxx H- Axxx D- xx C-Qxxx

If the opponents are vulnerable and we are not, pass is about a 100% action. 1NT is probably down 2 or 3 tricks, while you may not have a game. Opener's partner has at most a jack or two. Don't make the mistake of bidding a suit here – partner has described their hand as 16-18 balanced.

4. Trump suit texture is very important. Jacks, tens, nines, and even eights are hugely valuable cards in the trump suit. Don't double just because you have Kxxxx in trumps.