

“Double, Double, Toil and Trouble”

(Friday mini-lesson – 6 December 2019)

A couple of weeks ago I was approached by one of our regular Friday players who asked, “Why don’t we have a lesson on penalty doubles?”

It can be a bit of a tricky topic, deciding whether your partner’s double is meant as **penalty** or **takeout** (or even some other **conventional** meaning), but let’s look at a few basics. In general, **most** doubles are **not** for penalty.

Last week, Richard’s mini-lesson covered the most common “non-penalty” doubles – Takeout, Negative and Support doubles. These are very important to recognise, because if partner’s double is one of these types of double – **it’s not a penalty double**.

For a quick recap, and to ensure we can recognise them when they occur, let’s look at each in turn:

1. **Takeout Double:** LHO opens some number of a suit (e.g., 1♥, 2♠, 3♣, etc.), your partner doubles and RHO passes. Partner is not saying she wishes to penalize the opponents’ contract, but that she has approximately opening points, is short in the suit bid, and has support for all three other suits. Similarly, whenever the opponents bid two suits and partner doubles: e.g. (1♥)-P-(1♠)-X.
2. **Negative Double:** You open the bidding, an opponent overcalls, and then your partner doubles. Again, not a penalty but showing the two unbid suits and about 7+ points. This is really a special form of a takeout double, the intention being for partner to “take it out” to one of the unbid suits if possible, or if they don’t have 4+ cards in one of those suits, simply rebid their own suit or bid NT, as appropriate.
3. **Support Double:** This is *less* commonly used or known by newer players, but nevertheless a very useful convention. Your partner opens the bidding, next player passes and you respond in a major suit, then your LHO overcalls, and now your partner doubles. This, by agreement, shows 3-card support for your major, which can be very useful when you have 5 cards in your suit and your initial response only shows 4+. It doesn’t show extra points and now you just bid something sensible based on the information given.

For all of these conventional doubles there should be clear partnership agreement on what is considered the upper limit of the opponent’s bid, after which the **double becomes penalty**. For example:

1. Many partnerships agree that a double following any bid up to and including 4♥ is for takeout, but a double of an opening 4♠ bid is for penalty (use 4NT as the takeout bid).
2. Negative doubles are often played up to a maximum of a 3♠ overcall (e.g., 1♣-(3♠)-X is negative looking for a 4-4♥ fit, whereas X over any higher overcall is for penalty).
3. Support doubles are often played up to 2♠.
 - e.g. 1♦-(P)-1♥-(2♠)-X shows 3-card♥ support,
 - but 1♦-(P)-1♥-(3♣)-X is penalty.

Discuss with your partner and find what limits work for you. There is a spot on the bottom of the front page of your convention card in which to mark your agreements for these upper limits to the conventional doubles.

Apart from these examples of partnership agreement, what are other bidding situations where one can be quite confident that partner's double is meant as penalty?

1. When you and partner have both **agreed on a suit** and the opponents are competing/sacrificing:

e.g. 1♠-(3♥)-3♠-(4♥)-X.

However, as with all penalty doubles, this is not a command for partner to pass. It's more of a strong suggestion that says, "I don't *think* we can make game ourselves, but I'm pretty sure the opponents are just yanking our chain and are *overboard* in their contract. Let's punish them if we can!" If your previous support bid was made more on extreme distribution as opposed to high card points, then it is usually right to pull the double. On highly distributional hands, often game can be made in both directions.

2. When either you or partner has bid a strength-showing XX over an opponent's takeout X, and the opponents bid a new suit:

e.g. 1♥-(X)-XX-(2♣)-P-(P)-X.

3. Directly after an opponent's 1NT overcall:

e.g. 1♦-(1NT)-X

4. When the opponents compete over a very strong opening bid by you or your partner, like 2♣ or 2NT:

e.g. 2♣-(3♦)-X.

In each of the above, if the opponents bid again, all subsequent doubles are penalty too.

Apart from the above situations, a good guideline would be that doubles of high-level contracts are much more likely to be penalty, and those of low-level contracts for takeout.