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Bidding Basics

Negative doubles

After a year of takeout doubles, we move to a different kind of takeout double. This double will be made by the *responder to the opening bid*. The so-called “negative double” occurs only in this auction:

Opener	Overcaller	Responder
1x	Bid	Dbl ⁽¹⁾
(1) Negative double		

Carefully study that line. Notice that it is the *partner of the opening bidder* who makes a negative double. This is the only situation in which a negative double is used. Notice that there must be an overcall (in a suit, not in notrump). The overcall can be on any level. Notice that the opening bid was on the one level (yes, even a 1NT opening, which will be discussed down the line).

What and why and how do negative doubles work? Suppose your partner opens 1♦ and you hold:

♠8 2 ♥K 10 7 6 ♦Q 4 2 ♣A 8 7 6.

You are about to respond 1♥, but RHO overcalls 1♠. You can no longer legally bid 1♥. What about 2♥? That would require not only 10 HCP, but also five or more hearts. If it were 1955, you’d be stuck. Thankfully, legendary player/writer/inventor Al Roth came up with “negative doubles” (originally called “Sputnik”).

Responder’s double after an overcall used to be for penalties, not very practical. Using negative doubles, the double is “not” for penalties, thus the term “negative.” I’d prefer a different name because this is really a “takeout double by responder.”

This month, we will define how many points are needed for a negative double. In future months, we will

discuss what suit(s) it shows.

How many points?

First of all, I am not a stickler for “points.” Is it high-card points or “total points”? How do you count total points anyway? What about 10s and 9s and distribution? In this article, I’ll use high-card points, but feel free to cheat a little on these requirements if you have nice shape, good spot cards, etc.

The number of points needed for a negative double depends on what the overcall was. If the overcall was, say, 1♦, you are at a low, comfortable level – only about 6–7 HCP would be needed. But what if the overcall were 2♠? Now, you’d be getting opener to at least 2NT or the three level – you wouldn’t want to do that with only 6–7 HCP. About 9–10 HCP would be the minimum. The higher the overcall, the more responder needs for a negative double. Because most of my readers and students insist on a range, I’ll put something in writing, but it is very approximate:

One level negative double – approximately 7+ HCP

Two level negative double – approximately 9+ HCP

Three level negative double – approximately 11+ HCP

Four level or higher negative double – approximately 13+ HCP

Notice that if you double their 2♣ overcall (partner has an entire level on which to name a suit), you are more comfortable (and don’t need as much) as if their overcall is in spades.

Notice that I mentioned only the minimum required. There is no

range as in “X to Y.” All the ranges are simply “X+.” That’s because there is *no upper range for a negative double*. Consider what you would do here:

Opener	Overcaller	Responder
1♦	1♠	?

♠9 4 3 ♥A 10 8 7 ♦A Q ♣A Q J 10

A two-level bid would show Woolworths (5 & 10 – a 5+ card suit and 10+ HCP, and you can Google it if you are under 50 and don’t get the reference). A cuebid (2♠) would show a limit raise or better in diamonds. The correct call is a negative double. Opener will bid a four-card heart suit if he has one. You will make a strong move later in the auction, making sure to reach at least game. In future months, we will discuss what distribution a negative double shows and discuss follow-up actions for both responder and opener. ▶▶

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Lessons Learned

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down one in all likelihood. If we take a finesse and it loses, we go down an extra trick: four clubs, a diamond and a heart (or spade). Because we had a very normal auction to a 25 HCP game, we don’t want to risk that extra 50 points. It’s OK to give up on the hopes of making your contract if those odds are slim. Safely going down just one trick can be a good result. ☺

Newer Players

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Quiz

After 1♦ – (1♠) what would you bid with:

- 1) ♠42 ♥AQ108 ♦32 ♣Q10876
- 2) ♠42 ♥AQ1087 ♦KQ76 ♣32
- 3) ♠Q1082 ♥KQ2 ♦32 ♣Q987
- 4) ♠876 ♥Q876 ♦542 ♣KJ2

After 1♣ – (2♥) what would you bid with:

- 5) ♠A765 ♥A2 ♦A76 ♣A654
- 6) ♠Q765 ♥Q2 ♦QJ2 ♣9765
- 7) ♠KJ876 ♥AK ♦Q7652 ♣2
- 8) ♠A42 ♥KJ2 ♦Q1087 ♣KJ2

Answers

- 1) Double. Enough points and nothing else fits.
- 2) 2♥. Show 5+ hearts and 10+ HCP.
- 3) 1NT. 6–10 balanced with their suit stopped (denies four cards in the

other major).

4) Pass. Had RHO passed, you'd have dredged up a 1♥ response, but here, no need to come in.

5) Double. A 2♠ bid would promise at least five.

6) Pass. Lots of junk and not enough to come in on this level.

7) 2♠. Show 5+ spades and 10+ HCP.

8) 3NT. Their suit stopped and enough for 3NT (and no interest in reaching the other major).