

## How Do *You* Play Negative Doubles?

The only convention I played for some years was Blackwood, and I still remember what a revelation it was when I first learned Stayman and transfers. Next to these, the most useful bid I've picked up since beginning duplicate is the negative double. All of these bids are well known, but it can still be a surprise to find that others play them differently when *we* think they can be used in just a "standard" way.

In the recent Wilmington sectional, this bidding occurred: 1♥ (my partner) 1♠ (RHO) 2♥ (me) DBL (LHO). When partner asked for clarification, the overcaller said he didn't know for sure what it was (I assumed it was a support double of some sort). We went on to play in hearts and make our bid, and LHO said afterward, "Of course you know what it was, partner—a negative double showing both minors." I have to admit that though it made sense, I would not have recognized it had my partner bid that way. I do not use negative doubles when partner is an overcaller, and with people bidding hearts and spades, who cared about the minors?

The next day I used a negative double in a way I hadn't done before. After 1♠ by partner and a 2♦ overcall, it was my turn holding ♠Q73 ♥QJ853 ♦3 ♣KQ42. We don't play that a cue bid promises a limit raise with 3 trumps in this situation, and I didn't want to show this awful heart suit instead of my spade support by bidding hearts, but I wasn't strong enough to jump raise spades. I decided to double, showing hearts and clubs and then to raise spades later, hoping to convey 3-card support, 10 HCP, and shortness in diamonds. LHO raised diamonds, partner bid 4♣, and I corrected to 4♠. We doubled their 5♦ sacrifice for a near top. This wasn't the most elegant way to bid the hand, but the negative double helped me out.

Here are the basics that everyone would agree on about negative doubles.

1. They occur in competitive auctions and promise AT LEAST ONE of the unbid suits (the major, if one hasn't been shown).
2. The negative doubler has to have at least TWO places for partner to play. If the doubler doesn't have BOTH unbid suits, he must either have support for partner's suit or enough points and strength in the opponents' suit to bid no trump. For example, if partner's 1♦ opening is overcalled with 2♣, the negative doubler must have both majors OR one major with 4+ diamonds OR 9+ HCP, one major, and 2 club stoppers so that the partnership can play no trump.
3. Minimum point values for the bid are: 6+ if partner can bid at the one level, 8+ if partner must bid at the two level, and 10+ if at the three level or higher.
4. A negative double does not deny possessing a five-card suit or an opening hand (or better).
5. It is fair to draw certain inferences from the use or failure to use a negative double. If the auction is 1♦ 1♥ 1♠, partner should assume we have 5+ spades. We'd double if only holding four, so he can raise us confidently with 3-card support. If the bidding is 1♣ 1♦ 1♥ (or 1♠), partner knows we have 4+ in that major but not in the other. And if the bidding goes 1♦ 2♣ DBL, partner bids 2♥ and the doubler bids 2♠, the doubler is showing 5+ spades and a weak hand (less than the ten points it would take to bid 2♠ directly). Partner should pass unless holding a great diamond suit.
6. Opener's rebids are as follows. For the purposes of clarity, assume the bidding has gone 1♣ (opener), 1♥ overcall, DBL and that opener *does* hold 4 spades. With a minimum opener of 12-14 points, bid 1♠. With 15-17 points, jump to 2♠. With 18+ points, jump to game or cue bid the opponent's suit to get more information from the doubler.

7. You cannot simultaneously play penalty and negative doubles! If the overcall is in your best suit, pass in tempo and hope that either partner reopens with a double or the opponents bid again. A double at your second turn is always for penalties.

With these basics in mind, can you decide to use the negative double when partner is an overcaller? Sure, if your partnership wants it that way. If this is a non-standard treatment, though, you should alert the bid (I'm not sure about this—I'll try to contact the ACBL). Can you use it when the overcall is 1NT? Again, do so if that makes sense to your partnership (and that would *not* require an alert unless it carried a message other than a two-suited hand with 8+ points). To what level should you play negative doubles? That's up to you. The more competitive, tournament-style bidders play them through 4♦ or 4♥, but you may choose to limit them to the two or three level, depending on how often you want to double for penalties.

If you do not play negative doubles or use them very much, either you are not getting into the bidding enough or are doing so in a dangerously imprecise way, so that your responses to your partner's opening bids vary wildly in strength and distribution, making it tough for your partnership to know when to play or defend, sacrifice or double, or get to a partial, game, or even slam. Check out the concluding examples below for more reasons to play this versatile and extremely useful bid.

Example 1  
N/S Vul

North	East	South	West
1♠	2♥	?	

South's hand: ♠J7 ♥842 ♦KQ86 ♣AJ109

If South passes, North may find himself fixed. He won't know who has the best fit or the balance of power, and unless he has a long suit or a strong hand, coming back in at this vulnerability would be extremely dangerous. South can't bid no trump without any heart stoppers and cannot bid a minor at the two level without a five-card suit (that *could* properly be done as a temporizing bid if South had 3+ spades and was planning to raise spades next). If South uses the negative double, he is showing 4-4 in the minors, no more than 2 spades, and 10+ points (North must go to the 3 level to bid a minor). North can chance another bid or a double of the overcall based on this information.

North's hand: ♠AQ1082 ♥43 ♦AJ92 ♣Q7

With normal splits North-South can make as many as 4 spades or diamonds, maybe even 5 if the spade finesse works. The negative double keeps East from buying a cheap contract.

(Go to the next page for 2 more examples)

Example 2  
E/W Vul

West	North	East	South	
♠Q6	♠KJ7	♠A1032	♠9854	
♥A82	♥973	♥KJ104	♥Q65	
♦AQ7432	♦65	♦1098	♦KJ	
♣K9	♣A10752	♣63	♣QJ84	(just to show E/W <i>do</i> get hands!)
1♦	2♣	DBL	3♣	
3♦	Pass	4♦	Pass	
5♦	Pass	Pass	Pass	

OK, I wouldn't have overcalled North's ragged club suit, but at this vulnerability it worked out. E/W can make 3NT, but the opposition bidding makes it tough to get there. Four hearts by West makes (South can't lead through the clubs), and so does five diamonds as long as West keeps South off lead. Getting to any game is good, and without the negative double it would be even harder for E/W. Note that East's double showed his hand exactly—4-4 in the majors and 8+ points. West would bid hearts going for a Moysian fit without the rebidable 6-card diamond suit. East's raise to 4♦ is a bit pushy, but he has 9 dummy points, 3-card support, and good intermediates in the key suits.

Example 3  
N/S Vul

East	South	West	North
♠53	♠AK10986	♠QJ72	♠4
♥A765	♥94	♥J1032	♥KQ8
♦K	♦987	♦AQ103	♦J6542
♣KQ9732	♣106	♣A	♣J854
1♣	2♠	DBL	Pass
3♥	Pass	3NT	Pass
Pass	Pass		

West makes the negative double and then offers his partner a choice of games. His 3NT shows an opening hand and 2 spade stoppers. East leaves it in no trump because his doubleton spade makes a trump in by North very likely (and four hearts *does* go down after ♠AK and a third spade, giving North 2 trump winners no matter what declarer does. No trump makes 10 tricks after a spade lead and continuation.

See you at bridge!