

Stay Out of Double Trouble!

Have you heard the one about the bridge player who wanted to have both X's and D's in her bidding box? When asked why, she replied, "How else will my partner know if I'm doubling for takeout or for penalty?"

There are many, many kinds of doubles, but the only ones you really need to know are the penalty double, the takeout double, and the takeout double's cousin, the negative double. Partner will never spring a Stripe Tail Ape double on you without discussing it first. (And no, I didn't make that up...but don't ask me what it is!) Unless you and partner have agreed to play some of the fancier doubles, the \$64,000 question when partner doubles is, "Is it takeout or penalty?"

The Takeout Double

A double of the opponent's opening bid at the one level, and usually also at the two level, is a takeout double. (Doubles of opening three- or four-level bids may be either for takeout or penalty, by partnership agreement.) The takeout double says, "I have a hand worth opening and support for all the unbid suits. Please name any suit other than the one our opponent opened."

The takeout double promises a hand with no more than two cards in the opener's suit, at least three cards in all the unbid suits, and usually no five-card or longer major suit to overcall. If opener's suit is a minor, the double promises at least 4-3 in the majors. If the opponents have bid a major, the double shows exactly four cards in the other major suit.

Therefore,

1C – X shows at least three diamonds, and 4-3 or 4-4 in the majors.

1H – X shows at least three in each minor, and exactly four spades.

The Negative Double

A negative double is similar to a takeout double in that it also promises four cards in at least one unbid major. The main difference is that a negative double is used by responder after the opponents have overcalled. Also, the negative double promises as little as 6 or 7 points at the one level, and it does not promise shortness in the opponent's suit.

1C – 1H – X shows exactly four spades. With five spades, pard would bid 1S instead of doubling.

1C – 1D – X shows at least one four-card major.

1H – 1S – X shows 4-4 in the minors.

The Penalty Double

The penalty double is just that: it doubles (and then some!) the penalty the declaring side will incur if they fail to make the contract. It also rewards them with big bonuses if they make their contract, so you should be reasonably sure you're going to set

them before you make a penalty double, or leave pard's penalty double in. To make a penalty double, or convert pard's takeout double into a penalty double by passing, you need more than points: you need a *trump stack*. Four or five of their suit with a couple of honors is a trump stack. Four small cards in their suit is not.

How can you tell if it's takeout or penalty? Here are a few guidelines to help you decide.

It's Probably a Penalty Double If:

1. We have a fit. Once we've bid and raised a suit, there's no need to look for another suit.
2. Partner could have done a takeout double of the same suit before.
 $1H - P - 2H - P$
 $4H - X$ is for penalty.
3. You've already described your hand. If you've bid two suits, or rebid your suit showing six or more, and partner doubles instead of supporting you, it's for penalty.
4. There are no unbid suits, or there's only one unbid suit (unless you have the advanced agreement that partner's bid of the fourth suit promises five cards).

It's Probably a Takeout Double If:

1. It's a double of a low-level contract. At the one- or two-level, it's just too easy for the opponents to make their contract and rack up those big bonuses.
2. Partner might not have been able to do a takeout double before.
 $1C - P - 1H - P$
 $2H - X$ is for takeout. Pard couldn't double before because he doesn't have hearts.
3. Partner has shown two suits already. She doesn't have enough cards left in her hand to have a trump stack.
4. Partner did a takeout double of the same suit earlier. Remember, the takeout double promises shortness in the opponent's suit. If he was short in their suit before, he doesn't have a trump stack now.

Partner Doubled; Now What?

Bid if it's a takeout double; pass if it's a penalty double...except when you need to do the opposite! I'll talk about responding to partner's double in my next column.

Dedicated to my twin sister, who suggested I write about doubles. When we were kids, we were always causing "double trouble"!