

Still More Double Trouble!

For those of you who have been paying attention (all three of you!), last time out I promised you a column about responding to negative doubles. But to know how to respond, you first need to know what the negative double means.

General Principles about Negative Doubles

The negative double is used by *responder* after partner opens one-of-a-suit and RHO overcalls. (But note: a double is **not** negative if anyone has bid notrump, or after a Michaels cue-bid or unusual 2NT overcall.) The negative double's primary purpose is to help you and partner find your major suit fit. If one minor and one major have been bid, the negative double shows the unbid major, but it does not promise (or deny) length in the unbid minor. It also does not promise shortness in the opponent's suit, but it denies support for opener if he bid a major. With support for opener's major, responder should raise or cue-bid instead of doubling.

The negative double shows a hand that would have responded had there been no overcall...but that lacks either the strength or the suit length to bid after the overcall. *With one exception*, bidding a major after the overcall promises at least a five-card suit, and doubling shows a four-card suit. However, responder can double with a five-card major if he doesn't have enough points to bid at the level required to compete after the overcall.

Strength Requirements for a Negative Double:

6 HCP at the 1-level

8 HCP at the 2-level

10 HCP at the 3-level

(These are *minimum* values. The negative double has no upper point limit.)

Double to Show the Unbid Major

The classic use of a negative double is when partner opens a minor and you have four hearts. If RHO overcalls 1S, you can't bid 1H anymore, but you still want to be able to find out if you and pard have a 4-4 heart fit. The negative double shows at least four hearts and 6 HCP (and says nothing about the unbid minor). 1C – 1S – **X** says, "I was going to bid 1H, but either I'm not strong enough to bid at the two level or I don't have a five-card suit." Bidding any new suit at the two level requires 10+ HCP.

Negative doublers also use 1C – 1H – **X** to show *exactly* four spades and at least 6 HCP. With five spades, you'd bid 1S instead of doubling. The overcall gave you an extra tool that you didn't have before: a way to tell partner right away that you have five spades and she can support you with three.

1M – 2m – **X** (where M is a major and m is a minor) shows at least 8 HCP and at least four cards in the unbid major, and denies three-card support for partner. Bidding two of the unbid major instead of doubling shows 10+ HCP and a five-card (or longer) suit.

When There are Two Unbid Majors

When there are *two* unbid majors, a double at the one level shows **both**.^{*} 1C – 1D – X promises four hearts and four spades and at least 6 HCP. If responder has only one four-card major, in this auction he must bid his suit instead of doubling. This is the one exception to the rule that when responder bids a major after the overcall, he's promising five. To understand why we let responder bid his suit when there are two unbid majors, consider the following auction:

1C – 1D – X – 1NT (or 2D)
2S – P - ?

If responder has a minimum hand and he doesn't have tolerance for spades, he's just gotten himself into a heap of double trouble!

However, at the two-level the double shows **one or both** majors:

1D – 2C – X promises 8+ HCP and a four-card major. And a plan! To make this double, responder also needs to have support for diamonds or extra values, or perhaps a club stopper, so he has a place to run if opener picks the wrong major.

When There are Two Unbid Minors

1H – 1S – X shows 6+ HCP and one or both minors.

1S – 2H – X shows 8+ HCP and one or both minors.

You'd really like to be 4-4 in the minors to double after both majors have been bid, but in his book, *Negative Doubles*, Marty Bergen says you can do it with a good 5+ card minor if you don't have enough points to bid your suit at the necessary level. He doesn't say what you're supposed to do if partner picks the wrong minor. As above, I would strongly suggest that you have tolerance for both minors or have a plan. Or find another bid! Sometimes you have to raise partner's major with just two...a seven-card fit is not the end of the world.

Finally! Opener's Responses to the Negative Double

After the negative double, opener's rebids are natural...whenever possible. When the double is promising a major, opener should bid as though his LHO had passed and partner had bid 1H or 1S. With four cards in pard's presumed major, opener should raise. A single raise is non-forcing and shows no extra values. A jump raise is invitational, and a cue-bid is forcing to game.

Without four cards in partner's major, make whatever bid best describes your hand. Opener's options are:

- Bid notrump with a stopper in the opponent's suit. This doesn't necessarily promise a balanced hand, but it does deny support for partner's major. With 18-19 HCP, *jump* to 2NT.
- Rebid a six-card suit, or a *good* five-card suit.
- Bid your second suit; pard may have support, especially if his double shows one or both minors instead of a major.
- Pass with enough strength in the opponent's suit to set them: four or five trumps with at least two honors at the two level.
- *If none of the above are right for your hand...* You still have to bid! **DON'T PASS** if you're not going to set them. With a chunky three in partner's major, such as QJx or better, you can raise partner's suit. With two or a bad three in pard's suit, you might have to bid notrump even without a stopper in the opponent's suit. If it

doesn't work out, tell partner that Marty Bergen made you do it: it's on page 24 of his book, *Negative Doubles*.

Parting Thoughts

The number one misconception about the negative double is that it promises the two unbid suits. When one major and one minor have been bid, a negative double promises the unbid major ONLY!

For a far more detailed discussion of negative doubles than I could ever present here, read Marty Bergen's book, *Negative Doubles*. You can order the book from Marty by calling 1-800-386-7432. Mention this column and Marty will give you a big discount!

* Retraction: in my March/April column, I said the double in this instance promises one major, not both. That was incorrect! I apologize for the error.