

Dealing With Partner's Penalty Doubles

The first critical step in dealing with your partner's penalty doubles is learning to recognize which doubles are really penalty doubles. Misunderstandings regarding doubles often start there.

The greater the number of conventional doubles that you play (doubles that are part of some convention), the less opportunities you have to double the opponents for penalty; but the greater the chances that you will have a miscommunication about the meaning of your partner's double.

How many of the following conventions involving doubles do you play?

- Negative double
- Responsive double
- Support double
- Maximal double
- DONT
- Rosenkranz
- DOPI
- Lightner

Each of these, and untold others, involve doubles with special meaning. Clearly, we can eliminate these as penalty doubles. Add to this list all of the standard takeout doubles (when you are an unpassed hand and your left-hand opponent has opened the bidding, or when you are an unpassed hand and both of the opponents have bid while your partner has passed).

We can discount obvious lead-directing doubles of your opponents' artificial bids, although there are circumstances where those doubles turn into penalty doubles by virtue of the opponents' actions.

What remains is a collection of doubles all the way from balancing doubles at the one- or two-level to doubles of slam contracts. Clearly, low level doubles tend more to be takeout in nature and high level doubles tend to be more penalty in nature. But many of these non--conventional doubles should be viewed as "co-operative" doubles, requiring the doubler's partner to assess the situation and make a value judgement regarding the correct action. Of particular note are low-level doubles in the pass-out seat. These re-opening, or balancing, doubles are seldom intended primarily as penalty, but can be "converted" to penalty if you are holding an undisclosed quantity of the opponents' trump suit. Remember that by re-opening the bidding, your partner is protecting your interests, so be very certain that passing is the correct action.

And if you determine that partner's double is intended as penalty, what actions can you take? Passing seems to be the safest action to preserve your partner's confidence; but it is not always the correct action. You must think about the bidding up to that point and try to visualize the kind of hand partner must have to make a double in the particular

auction. Is it possible for partner to have a trump stack in this auction? Is partner's double based on general honor trick holding and quick tricks? Does partner have some unusual distribution? And whichever you determine to be the reason for the double, what does the strength and distribution of your hand suggest is the best action? We start our course of action by deciding if partner's hand is best suited for offense or defense. And that analysis begins with the bidding... your partner's, the opponents', and yours.

Questions to ask yourself include:

- Have the opponents agreed upon a trump suit? (If this is the case, and you are not void in that suit, you can assume partner does not have a trump stack...)
- Has your partner already indicated general strength outside of their suit?
- Has your partner already shown a distributional hand (Michaels bid, unusual NT, etc)
- Has your partner bid a suit? Has partner rebid that suit?
- Has your partner bid two suits?
- Have you bid a suit of your own?
- Have you supported partner's suit?
- Has your partner bid NT after the opponents have bid their trump suit?

The answer to each of these questions should help draw a picture of partner's hand. Once you have an idea of partner's hand, you should be able to assess your own hand to determine if you should pass partner's alleged penalty double.

Remember that all "penalty" doubles below the level of game should be treated as cooperative doubles; in other words, they're all "do something intelligent, partner" doubles. And they all require analysis on your part.

You should pass partner's penalty double unless you have information **that partner does not have** that would decrease the chances of taking defensive tricks. For example, partner has bid two suits, and you have six cards in partner's second suit. Because you are weak, or because the bidding was jumped quickly, you have not supported partner's second suit. When partner doubles, expecting to take a trick or two in that second suit, you have extra knowledge that will not happen; this is a case where you should probably pull partner's penalty double. If, however, you have supported partner's suit(s), especially pre-emptively or aggressively, then this is information partner already has, and you should not pull the double on this basis. This, not coincidentally, is why it is very important to show support for a partner that has overcalled, especially if it can be done safely at a low level. (Of course, that's not always possible, so there are limits to when you should support.)

Also, if partner's low-level (below game) double isn't based on length in the opponent's trump suit, then it's usually based on a preponderance of honor cards. If you have a six-card suit **that you haven't shown**, this would be an excellent time to run it out. If partner can take a handful of tricks playing in their eight-card fit, think how many tricks partner can take playing in **your** eight-or nine-card fit...

And what about the following auction?

Partner		You	
1♠	(Pass)	2♣	(2♥)
2♠	(4♥)	4♠	(5♥)
Double	(Pass)	?	

Okay, you have an opening hand with spade support. The opponents are clearly sacrificing in hearts; partner has doubled. What does this double mean, and what should you do?

First, the opponents cannot be allowed to play 5♥ undoubled. If partner were to pass (forcing pass) in this sequence, you would be asked to decide to double or to bid 5♠. But partner did not yield that decision to you, so it must be interpreted that partner is suggesting that either 5♠ cannot be made or that the double of 5♥ is the more attractive score. As above, you should now evaluate your hand with this information to determine if your hand is such that this decision might not be correct. (Examples of things that might make a difference would be a void in the opponent's suit, a singleton in an unbid suit, a very strong club suit that is a certain source of tricks on offense, etc). But if your hand contains no information not already known to partner, you should be pleased to defend the opponents' sacrifice. Of course, vulnerability is always a factor in making scoring-based decisions at the table.

Once you are defending a doubled contract, defend as if there is no tomorrow. If it takes an unusual or unlikely distribution to set the hand, assume that is the case and defend in that manner. Keep in mind that your partner doubled for some reason. Find that reason and defend that way. And if your partner didn't have any good reason for doubling, then it doesn't matter anyway.

And a final note... not all of your doubles will be successful. A nice target is 80%; if 20% of your doubles don't go bad, you're not doubling enough. When you set all of the contracts that you double, try doubling more.