

Double **Trouble**

by Bob Gruber

Penalty Doubles, Takeout Doubles, Balancing Doubles, Negative Doubles, Lead-directing Doubles, Responsive Doubles, Support Doubles, Maximal Overcall Doubles, Stolen-bid Doubles, Business Doubles ! What do they all mean? When do we use them? And where will they end?

Yes, the simple Penalty Double, also known as a Business Double, has evolved into a plethora of possibilities. In fact, the list above is not complete. Whole books have been written on some of the specific doubles listed, but World Champion Mike Lawrence felt compelled to write a book about new meanings for this venerable bid. All those new ideas won't be covered here. Instead, let's briefly discuss the list above to help distinguish one from another.

Penalty Double The original meaning of the double was to penalize the opponents when they got too high in the auction. As we know, the penalties for going down doubled are increased. Conversely, the reward for making a doubled contract is greater. You double when you feel the reward for defeating the opponents' contract will be greater than that for making your own contract, or worse, when bidding on will get your side too high and you'll be the ones going down. Remember, whole books have been written about these doubles, so the information in a short paper will be simplistic and superficial at best.

Limited Use of the Double for Penalty Only Bridge theorists are an inventive lot, so it's no surprise they were soon dissatisfied with the limited opportunities to apply the penalty double. And there were other situations begging for a bid that was not answered by the existing bidding structures. Probably the first new meaning for the double was the Takeout Double.

Takeout Double Imagine the opponents have opened the bidding, you have an opening hand yourself, but for safety's sake, you'd like to have a good five-card suit to enter the bidding with an overcall, and you don't have one. You don't have a penalty double, either. Must you remain mute? Not necessarily.

If you have support for the unbid suits (ideally 4 cards, but 3 in a pinch), you can make a "takeout" double. This double is not for penalty, but asks partner to take it (the double) out into one of the other suits. The takeout double is usually made at a low level, often at your first opportunity to bid. If only 1 suit has been bid, you should have support for all 3 unbid suits. If 2 suits have been bid, you should have support for the other 2 suits. Even if partner has passed over the opening bid, you can make a takeout double when it's your turn to bid if you have support for the unbid suits and an opening hand. There's much more to the Takeout Double, a whole book's worth by Mike Lawrence in fact, but this is enough for a basic description.

Balancing Double Probably the next variation on the penalty double was the Balancing Double. This is a takeout double made in the pass out seat. Again, this is usually made at a fairly low level and arises when you don't want the opponents to play a low-level contract that will probably be easy to make. If the opponents are passing at a low level, partner probably has some values. Therefore, you can shade the values you need to "re-open" the bidding down to 10 points, maybe even less depending upon the vulnerability. (Since you are re-opening the bidding rather than closing it out with a pass, this double is also called a re-opening double.) When partner bids he/she needs to bear in mind that your balancing double already placed some values in his/her hand, and that you might be a little lighter than a normal takeout double, say about a K lighter.

Negative Double The Negative Double is akin to the Takeout Double; so much so that the two are sometimes confused. When your partner opens the bidding and your right-hand opponent overcalls, sometimes you lack either the length or the strength (or both) to bid a suit directly. Negative doubles help describe these hands (of limited value) more accurately. They are, in essence, a takeout double made when your side opens the bidding, not the opposing side. They are usually limited to being made at a low level, allowing you to compete when you might otherwise be shut out of the bidding.

Again, whole books have been written about this double. However, Mike Savage has written a very nice 2-page article on Negative Doubles. You can find it in hard copy at many Regional and National tournaments, but it is also available on-line at www.vcbridge.org. From the "Home" page, click on *Links*, then scroll down to *Systems/Conventions/Treatments*. Click on *Mike Savage on Conventions*. Scroll through the alphabetized list that comes up to find "Negative Doubles." Click on that to view the article. You may also print or even download the article to your own computer.

Observations on the Points so Far Have you noticed a pattern in these last three (3) doubles? Yes, they are all some variation on the Takeout Double (or the Takeout Double itself). Yes, they allow you to compete in the bidding when you might otherwise have to remain silent. And yes, they are all made at a low level in the bidding.

There are a couple of reasons for this last observation. (Or you may consider them the flip side of the same coin.) First, the penalty double is not often used effectively at very low levels, say the 1 and 2 level. In reality, the penalty double is mostly an idle bid at these levels. Better to modify its meaning and put it to use rather than allow it to lie fallow. Second, by limiting these special doubles to low levels (exactly what level must be agreed upon by the two partners), you allow the double to be used for penalty when it will be most lethal. All in all, a pretty good 1-2 punch.

Lead-directing Doubles Unlike the previously discussed doubles, lead-directing doubles may be made at any level in the bidding, even the 7 level. Usually, these doubles are made when the opponent in front of you makes an artificial bid in a suit in which you are strong, certainly with some high card values and usually with length as well. Some examples are:

1NT-P-2♣-Dbl the Stayman 2♣ bid is known to be artificial, saying nothing about responder's club holding. If you have strength & length in clubs, double to tell partner you'd like a club lead if he's the opening leader, but if not, probably—probably—to lead clubs the 1st time he gains the lead as a defender.

1NT-P-2♥-Dbl the 2♥ Jacoby Transfer bid is artificial, asking the 1NT opener to bid ♠s. Your double says you think a ♥ lead will work out best for your side.

1♠ P 4NT P
5♥ Dbl the 5♥ Blackwood response is artificial, typically indicating possession of 2 Aces (or 2 key cards). Your double of this artificial bid asks partner to lead a heart at his first opportunity.

There are situations where a delayed double is lead-directing.

1♦ P 1♥ P
1NT P 3NT Dbl Without any bidding by "our" side, a double of a 3NT contract where the opponents have bid suits along the way, calls for a lead of dummy's first bid suit. Do not make this lead-directing double unless you are certain you are going to beat the contract with this suit led. They are probably going to stay in 3NT, and if they make it, you've just handed them a top. Another potential negative is you were going to beat 3NT regardless of what partner led, but now they run to a makeable 4♥s (in a Moyesian 4-3 fit). Sometimes it's best to just take your plus.

Another lead-directing double late in the auction is the *Lightner Slam Double*. The player not on lead to the presumed final contract doubles, asking partner to make an unusual lead. If the doubler bid a suit, that suit is prohibited because it's the usual, not an unusual, lead. Most often the doubler has a side suit void and wants to score an immediate ruff. If dummy bid a side suit (or suits), the 1st one bid is a strong candidate. If dummy hasn't bid a side suit, but declarer has, that's another possibility. If no side suits have been bid by the opponents, opening leader usually chooses his longest unbid suit. Finally, if you find yourself on lead after partner's Lightner Slam Double, the card you lead should express suit preference for partner's return lead.

Responsive Doubles Another double that's covered by Mike Savage is the responsive double. Quoting him from *Responsive Doubles Basics*—available at www.vcbridge.org—we learn:

In general, **Responsive Doubles** occur when your partner has made a take-out double or has overcalled a suit and the next hand raises opener's suit. It's a take-out double by the defense after your partner has bid. It shows the unbid suits and values to compete, sometimes with strong game interest.

Refer to this 1-page article for further information.

Support Doubles Yet another double covered by Mike Savage in a 1-page article (on www.vcbridge.org, reachable via *Writings* then *Mike Savage on Conventions*) is support doubles. He starts out:

When you open the bidding and your partner makes a one-level response and the next hand overcalls at the one or two level, sometimes you will want to raise partner's suit with three-card support. Other times you will have four-card support. Support Doubles were created so opener can tell responder which he has—three or four-card support.

If you are playing Support Doubles and you make an immediate raise to two over the opponent's overcall, you show four-card support. If you double, you show three-card support. If your opponent doubles, instead of overcalling, a *redouble* by you is used in many partnerships to show three-card support.

Rather than repeat information that's readily available, please refer to this article.

Maximal Overcall Doubles When the opponents have overcalled, Maximal Overcall Doubles, also called Competitive Doubles, are used by the opening bidder to differentiate game invitational hands from hands that merely wish to compete for a partscore. Literally, it means the opponents have taken up the maximum amount of room with their overcalls (at the 3 level) so that a bid of your suit at the 3 level appears to be competitive only and no invitational bid is available. The Maximal Overcall Double solves this problem by making the double an invitational bid in your suit—not penalty—and keeps the 3-level bid as competitive. Obviously, you give up the penalty double in this situation. So, that's the tradeoff you have to consider in deciding whether to play these doubles or not.

Stolen-bid Doubles The Stolen-bid Double is usually used after 1NT and 2NT opening bids in which responder plans to bid Stayman, Jacoby Transfer, or even Minor Suit Stayman. But before he gets a chance, his right hand opponent (RHO) makes that very bid. Double now says: that's what I was going to bid, RHO stole my bid! By giving up the immediate, low-level penalty double, you can effectively make your artificial asking (Stayman) or telling (Jacoby) bid. And when you hold the bid suit, if partner is prone to double back in, i.e. reopen the bidding with a double, you can pass and convert the reopening double to penalty. If partner is prone to pass and you have a hand worth a NT invitation, you should employ whatever your method is to make that invitation.

Summary

This concludes the brief survey of the most commonly used doubles. In such a short paper, it's not possible to cover these doubles in any depth. The intent has been to pique your interest, to give you an inkling of whether a particular double might work for you and your partner(s). And if successful, to motivate you to seek further information, from this website—www.vcbridge.org—or others, from books, and even from software.

Happy researching.