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This Week in Bridge

(222) Negative Doubles Overview

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Level: 1

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General

When partner opens the bidding with a 1-level bid of a suit (1♣, 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠) and RHO overcalls a suit, Responder is under pressure to try to describe their hand and search for a possible fit. Responder can bid a new suit, called a *Freebid*, with the appropriate length and strength to compete in the bidding. But if Responder does not meet the requirements for a freebid, they need another tool to show enough values to compete in the bidding but no good other action. This tool is *Double!* (As is the case in many competitive auctions.) Responder's double in this specific type of auction is called a *Negative Double*.

Low-Level Negative Double Specifics

Only two negative double auctions "promise" a specific distribution by Responder. These are the lowest-level negative doubles possible.

1♣	(1♦)	X	Exactly 4-4 Majors, 6+ points
1♣/1♦	(1♥)	X	4-card S, 6+ points

More Flexible Negative Doubles

Negative doubles after higher-level overcalls (after a 1♠ or higher overcall) can be made with a larger variety of shapes. These doubles do not "promise" a specific distribution; they are more flexible actions. In general, the higher Responder makes a negative double, the more flexibility Opener must allow for their possible distributions.

Example Auction

1♣ (1♠) X

This is the first negative double that is somewhat "blurry" about exactly what distribution it shows.

The "normal" hand we may have for making a negative double is one with 4-card ♥, 5-card ♦, and 6+HCP.

But as Responder we may make a negative double with a variety of different distributions in this auction:

1♣ (1♠) X

Example Hand 1

♠ 84
♥ A976
♦ A8432
♣ T6

A classic hand for making a negative double. We pass if Opener bids either of the unbid suits.

Example Hand 2

♠ 84
♥ A9762
♦ A843
♣ T6

Here we have extra length in the unbid Major, but not enough values to make a freebid. So we make a negative double, planning to pass if partner bids either of the unbid suits.

Example Hand 3

♠ 84
♥ A976
♦ 43
♣ AT643

Here we have support for the minor suit partner opened and for the unbid Major. If partner bids ♥, we pass; if partner bids ♦, we correct back to ♣.

Example Hand 4

♠ AJ8
♥ AJ97
♦ 43
♣ JT6

Here we have support for the unbid Major, which we hope partner bids, but we also have a stopper in the opponent's suit. If partner bids 2♦ after our negative double, we bid 2NT, showing our ♠ stopper and invitational values.

Example Hand 5

♠ 843
♥ AQJ976
♦ 43
♣ T6

Here we make a negative double because we have enough values to act, but not enough to make a freebid in our long ♥ suit. If partner bids anything other than ♥, we bid ♥ next to show a hand with 6-9 pts and a long ♥ suit. This hand type is sometimes referred to as a *Negative Freebid* hand.

Example Hand 6

♠ 843
♥ A97
♦ A843
♣ T64

We have no good bid. 1NT shows the right values and shape, but we have no ♠ stopper. 2♣ shows more ♣ than we have. 2♦ shows more values and more ♦ than we have, as does 2♥. This leaves double or pass. Pass does not let partner know that we have some values and may make the auction more difficult later. Double is a possible call, showing “enough values to compete in the bidding, but no other good action.” None of these bids are good and it is a bit of a partnership style issue as to how you handle these types of hands.

Higher-Level Negative Doubles

When RHO makes a higher-level overcall, Responder needs more values to compete in the bidding. This is true for freebids and for negative doubles. For us to make a negative double after a 1-level overcall, we need about 6 points. As the opponent's overcalls become higher we need more values in order to make a negative double. Versus a 3♠ or higher overcall, we need about 12+ points. These are total points, not just HCP, and the more shape we have, the fewer HCP we promise. But we should keep in mind that if Opener has length and strength in the suit overcalled, they may convert our negative double into a penalty double. We should have some defensive tricks when making a negative double, especially at higher levels. Also, the higher the level of interference we face, the less space we have to communicate with partner below 3NT. In this case, we are forced to make a negative double with a large variety of shapes. Opener should know this and not assume we have a perfectly shaped hand for a negative double in these auctions.

The values Responder needs to make a negative double after a variety of different overcalls are:

- 1♣ ()
- 1♦/1♥/1♠ Need about 6+ points to make a negative double.
 - 2♣ Good 6 to 7+ points
 - 2♦ 7+ points
 - 2♥ 8+ points
 - 2♠ 9+ points
 - 3♣ 10+ points
 - 3♦ Good 10+ points
 - 3♥ 11+ points
 - 3♠ 12+ points (A negative double of 3♠ is a Game Forcing action.)

We need more values to make a negative double of a 2♠ overcall than a 2♣ overcall (even though they are both bids at the 2-level) because our double of 2♠ is more likely to force Opener to the 3-level than a negative double of a 2♣ overcall. Since we are more likely to push partner to a higher level we should have more values.

Negative Double Summary

Eddie Wold, one of the top five Masterpoint holders of all time, has a good “rule of thumb” for deciding whether to make a negative double. He describes them as having “two places to play!” Those could be:

- The 2 unbid suits
- One unbid suit and NT (often the other Major suit)
- One unbid suit and partner’s suit
- Extreme length in one of the unbid suits (like having that suit “twice”)

This is a reasonable way of thinking about negative doubles and helps get players out of the habit of thinking they must promise both of the unbid suits.

Conclusion

The negative double is a very important and useful bid in bridge. It can be a bit more complicated than just “having the other 2 suits,” but it is worth some complexity because in a competitive auction Responder needs to have good tools to search for a fit. This bid is so useful that when a group of the best bridge players in the world were asked in a poll in *The Bridge World* magazine if they had to play bridge and could only use one convention, what it would be, the *Negative Double* was the overwhelming winner! So make sure that you are proficient in using this tool to look for a fit, and to land in a reasonable contract if partner does not do what



you hoped they would after your negative double. The key to successfully using a negative double is to make a plan for what to do after you make your double.