

7 Not-for-Penalty DOUBLES

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Back in the days when we used to play "human" (in-person) bridge, before the pandemic, in the Savannah Bridge Center, before the Savannah Bridge Center burned down, there used to be an annual or semi-annual game in which Clubs across the country played the same Boards, and for which a printed booklet was prepared ahead of time in which a famous bridge player, Larry Cohen, commented on each hand in the 24 Boards, and indicated what each player should bid on each hand. Larry Cohen, according to Wikipedia, "is an American bridge player, writer and teacher. He is best known as an advocate for the 'Law of Total Tricks' as a guide in the bidding. He has won 25 North American Bridge Championships (NABC) events..." In the booklet for a recent competition in this venue, Cohen included the suggested bid of DOUBLE on roughly **1** in every **5** of the randomly-generated Boards. The implication of this pattern on 24 randomly-generated Boards is that your Partnership bidding in every game should probably include **2 to 4** bids of DOUBLE! If you are a less experienced player, ***you probably are not making enough not-for-penalty DOUBLES!!!***

Every Partnership should have a Partnership agreement that makes explicit which DOUBLES are "for penalty," and which DOUBLES are not for penalty and instead are for other purposes. For examples, a Partnership may agree: "Any DOUBLE of between 3S and 4NT is for penalty, but any DOUBLE of a lower contract is never for penalty." Here are 6 not-for-penalty DOUBLES.

#1: "Takeout"/Demand DOUBLE

A "Takeout"/Demand DOUBLE is possible only if your Opponent (usually your RHO, but it could be your LHO, followed by 2 Passes) makes the first bid of a suit. When you make a "Takeout"

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DOUBLE, you require your Partner (called the "Advancer"), unless there is an intervening bid by Opponents, to bid Advancer's longest and strongest suit. A "Takeout"/**Demand** DOUBLE of an Opponent's bid **REQUIRES** that Advancer ****must**** bid Advancer's longest and strongest suit other than Opponent's bid suit, even with only a few points, except that Advancer *may pass if and only if* before Advancer's bid there is an intervening bid by Advancer's RHO.¹ On the other hand, if the Opponent my LHO bids following my DOUBLE, and then Advancer still bids, Advancer is now showing a hand with some strength (10+ HCPs) and a reasonably strong holding in the bid suit, because Advancer now voluntarily bid when Advancer was no longer required to bid!

New Zealanders Lee Asher-Simpson and Dennis Asher's "Bridge Doctor" website "Standard American Lesson **17**: Responses to **Takeout DOUBLE**"

<https://bridgedoctor.com/lessons/17-online-bridge-lessons.htm> discusses "Takeout/**Demand** DOUBLE". In the Lesson it is noted that if the bidding proceeds:

NORTH: 1D, EAST: DOUBLE, SOUTH: PASS,
and you hold ♠ 9 8 5 2 ♥ 7 3 ♦ 8 6 4 2 ♣ 7 6 4,

"You are **obliged** to respond [1♦] even with **no points**. If you had **8+** HCP you would jump the bidding 1 level so you would have bid 2♠. You **must** bid unless the opposition bids before your turn and thus *cancels* the [Takeout D]ouble" [or you hold a

¹ The "**Rule of 9**", proposed by Mel Colchamiro (see his book, How You can Play Like an Expert), was originally created to help you determine as Responder whether instead you should leave Partner's "Takeout"/**Demand** DOUBLE "on" for Penalty, notwithstanding the "demand" to bid, and try to set Opponents for a better Bridge Score, especially if Opponents are Vulnerable. Add together:

1. the level of Opponents' contract (e.g., 4 for a 4S contract), plus
2. the number of trump cards you hold in your Hand, plus
3. the number of trump Honors (including the Ten) you hold.

If the resulting number is **9 or more**, then you can probably safely leave "on" the DOUBLE for Penalty. If you do indeed set your Vulnerable Opponents, Partner *may not* divorce you for failing to bid in response to his "demand".

massive long Trump stack in the Opponents' bid Suit.] [emphasis added]

A further word may be in order about why a "takeout DOUBLE" is a "Demand" DOUBLE. When Partner executes a "takeout DOUBLE" Partner is saying, "I am 'short' in the Opponents' bid Suit. I do not have a 5-card Suit with good Suit Quality. Because I am 'short' in their bid Suit, Opponents likely are 'long' in their bid Suit, therefore the '**Law of Total Tricks**' says that Opponents will *kill* us if we let them play their Suit at a low level." For example, if Partner DOUBLES Opponents' 1S bid, the Opponents likely will (1) make their very low 1-level bid along with (2) DOUBLED scoring per Trick for every Trick over 6.

Opponents Have Only Bid One Suit One Time. The "Takeout" DOUBLE when Opponents have *only bid a suit, only once, requires* (1) *short length* in the Opponents' initially bid suit (such as a void, or only 1 or 2 cards), and (2) at least 3 cards in **all** 3 other unbid suits, and (3) at least an opening or near-opening point count. The "Takeout" DOUBLE also usually shows exactly 4 cards in at least 1 unbid Major (else Partner holding 5 cards in a Major would bid that Major), and usually in both unbid Majors, if the Opponents open a Minor suit.

An *ideal* situation for this "demand" DOUBLE would be when your RHO is Dealer, for example, and bids 1C. You hold:

S: A Q 9 7 **H:** K J T 7 **D:** Q J 8 7 **C:** 4 (13 HCPs), or

S: A K J 6 **H:** K Q J 9 **D:** A Q 7 5 **C:** 9 (20 HCPs).

You really **cannot** bid a suit, because you would be lying to Partner by showing 5 cards. A DOUBLE promises Partner, among other things, "Partner, either (1) **I have an opening hand, and no 5-card suit, or** (2) **17-19 HCPs along with a 5+ card suit,** which you will know if, after my Doubling, I then *later* bid an *unbid* suit."

Here is a checklist that you **must** use to determine if you can DOUBLE:

1. **Do you have 13+ points (including distributional points, because Partner/Advancer becomes Declarer in Partner's best suit, and you become Dummy)?** If "no," stop. You **cannot** DOUBLE.
2. **If you hold 13+ HCPs, but not a giant 17+ HCP hand, do you have only suits with 4 or fewer cards in suits other than**

the suit that Opponents opened? If "no," stop. You **cannot** DOUBLE.

1. If you hold 13+ HCPs, but not a giant hand, do you have only 0, 1, or 2 cards (preferably 0 or 1) in the suit that Opponents opened? If "no," stop. You **cannot** DOUBLE.

Opponents Have Each Bid Two Different Suits Each One Time.

When Opponents have both bid, but bid 2 different suits, a "Takeout" DOUBLE claims (1) at least 4 cards in both unbid suits, and **maybe even 5-5** in the two unbid suits, and (2) an opening or near opening point count.

Example

NORTH: 1C
EAST: PASS
SOUTH: 1S
WEST: DOUBLE

Partner DOUBLES, and Then Later Bids a New Suit. Note that if Partner DOUBLES, and then subsequently bids a new unbid suit, Partner is showing a BIG hand with at least 17 or so points, and probably has 5+ cards in the newly bid suit!

7 Advancer Options Showing Partner Advancer's (1) HCPs and (2) Distribution. The Partner responding to the "Takeout"/**Demand** DOUBLE is called the "Advancer". Here are the 7 options for the "Advancer" responding to the "Takeout"/**Demand** DOUBLE:

1. **0-8** HCPs: Non-Jump Suit bid is "natural", and shows the DOUBLER Advancer's "longest and strongest" Suit.
2. **6-10** HCPs: A 1NT bid shows a "flat" Hand, and "stopper(s)" in Opponent's bid Suit.
3. **9-11** HCPs: A "Jump" bid shows a Suit with 4+ cards, and is "invitational" to Game if Partner holds >~16 HCPs.
4. **11-12** HCPs: A 2NT bid shows a "flat" Hand, "stopper(s)" in Opponent's bid Suit, and may "invite" a 3NT bid, but can PASSEd.
5. **9+** HCPs: A "DOUBLE Jump" bid shows a **2-Suited** hand, and is "invitational" based largely on **distribution**, assuming that Partners find a "fit".
6. **13-15** HCPs: A 3NT "drop dead" bid shows a "flat" hand, and "stopper(s)" in Opponent's bid Suit.
7. **15+** HCPs: A "**Cue Bid**" of the Opponent's bid Suit shows a "giant" Hand. Opener then bids his "longest and strongest" Suit.

#2: "Negative" DOUBLE

Unlike a "Takeout"/Demand DOUBLE, which occurs only when Partner has either not yet bid, or Passed, a "Negative" DOUBLE becomes possible only if both (1) Partner opened a suit bid, and (2) your RHO overcalled by bidding a new suit. This system was invented by Al Roth and his Partner, Tobias Stone, in the 1950s, and originally was called "Sputnik!"

The person making a "Negative" DOUBLE shows both (1) holding exactly 4 cards in both *unbid* suits, and (2) enough points (**6-10**) for the Partnership to successfully play a 2-level contract, such as a combined 19-23 (~13 + 6 to 10) HCPs. Here are 2 examples with Partner sitting NORTH, and you sitting SOUTH.

Example #1

Partner		You (8)
NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1 D	1 S	S 8 4 2
		H K Q 5 4
		D 6 3
		C K T 5 2

Example #2

Partner		You (7)
NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1 C	1 H	S T 9 5 2
		H 8 3
		D A K 7 4
		C 9 5 3

"Negative DOUBLE" *Special Case*

When Partner and Your RHO Both Bid Minors

When your Partner and your RHO both bid Minors a **DOUBLE** by you only "shows" a Hand that is 2-Suited in both Major **only** if Partner bids 1**C** and RHO bids 1**D** and Partner is thus able to bid either 1**H** or 1**S**. If *instead* Partner opens 1**D** and RHO Overcalls 2**C** a **DOUBLE** by you "shows" "shortness" in the Opponent's bid Suit, Clubs, and at least 1 4-card Major but possibly only 3 cards in the other unbid Major.²

² See Marty Bergen's excellent article, "Better Bridge with Bergen: Improve Your Bidding Judgment" (p. 63) in the September, 2026 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin. Note that all ACBL

For a "Real Deal" example of Partners bidding the "Negative" DOUBLE see "**Esther Bridge 'Pop' Quiz #436**":

https://esther-bridge.com/quiz/q0436_q.pdf

The "Real Deal" Board was played by Bill Passell and Jack Schwencke in a 1980's Mexican Nationals bridge tournament. Passell and Schwencke were the champions in several competitions there.

#3: "Support" DOUBLE

A "Support" DOUBLE can **only** be made by the Opener, and only at his **second** turn to bid. A "Support" DOUBLE is used by Opener when (1) Opener's opening bid was a "convenient" Minor, and (2) Opener has 3 cards to support Responder's first bid in a Major.

Example #1

NORTH: 1**C**
EAST: PASS
SOUTH: 1**H**
WEST: 1**S**

NORTH: **DOUBLE**

NORTH here is showing **exactly 3** Hearts, and saying **nothing** about strength beyond what NORTH initially said by opening the bidding. NORTH may have 13 HCPS, or may have a lot more! Note: If NORTH had **4** Hearts, NORTH would not DOUBLE, and instead would bid 2**H**, 3**H**, or 4**H**, depending upon strength!

Example #2

NORTH: 1**D**
EAST: PASS
SOUTH: 1**S**
WEST: 2**H**

NORTH: **DOUBLE**

NORTH here is showing **exactly 3** Spades, but because the bid is now at the 2 level, should be showing a somewhat stronger than opening hand.

"Support" DOUBLES should be Alerted by the Responder, if nothing else, as a courtesy to the Opponents. And as Larry Cohen (www.larryco.com) says in his article, "Support DOUBLES,"

members can access ACBL Bridge Bulletin articles for the last several decades online on the ACBL website for free.

"In all my years of teaching experience, I've never seen a convention that causes more brain-freeze and confusion than Support DOUBLES. Players constantly forget to use them, forget to alert them, forget to realize Partner has used them... I recommend this convention only for players with strong concentration abilities who play frequently."

#4: "They Stole my Bid!" DOUBLE

When the Opponents interfere with your bidding sequence, and "steal" your bid, you can DOUBLE to tell Partner that the Opponent "stole my bid."

Example #1

NORTH: 1NT

EAST: 2C

SOUTH: DOUBLE

This bid by SOUTH asks Opener to respond as if Responder had instead bid 2C or Stayman.

Here is another example:

Example #2

NORTH: 1NT

EAST: 2D

SOUTH: DOUBLE

This bid by SOUTH demands that opener bid 2H, thus executing a Jacoby transfer.

Here is a 3rd example:

Example #3

NORTH: 1S

EAST: 2S (Michael's "cue" bid showing Hearts and a Minor)

SOUTH: DOUBLE

This bid by SOUTH tells Opener, NORTH, "I have 3 of your Spades and 8 to 10 points."

#5: "Lead Directing" DOUBLE

When Opponents are bidding a sequence in which you are confident they will **ignore your DOUBLE**, and you believe your Partner may be in the lead on the final contract, you can ask your Partner to lead a particular suit.

Example #1
NORTH: 1**NT**
EAST: PASS
SOUTH: 2**C**
WEST: DOUBLE

Here WEST is asking EAST to lead Clubs if EAST ends up in the lead. Because WEST knows that N/S hold ~16 + ~9 HCPs = ~25 HCPs, and likely do not hold long Clubs, WEST believes it will be very unlikely that N/S will leave the DOUBLE "in", so the Lead-Directing DOUBLE is safe.

Example #2
NORTH: 1**S**
EAST: PASS
SOUTH: 4**NT**
WEST: PASS
NORTH: 5**D**
EAST: DOUBLE

Here EAST is requesting a Diamond lead.

#6: "Snapdragon DOUBLE"

Statistically the most likely deal involves each player at the bridge table holding **10** of the 40 HCPs in the bridge card deck. Approximations to this HCP distribution can lead to Boards that are PASSEd out. But good players bid by metrics other than only HCPs. For example, following the admonitions of Marty Bergen's 1996 Points Schmoints! and Larry Cohen's 1996 To Bid or Not to Bid: The LAW of Total Tricks,³ even players with fewer than **~13** HCPs may bid during the auction.

Indeed, even when *all* 4 players at the bridge table hold roughly **10** HCPs conceivably all 4 players might bid during the auction! For example, many players (quite wisely) bid during the auction if they meet the requirements for Suit bids of Marty Bergen's "**Rule of 20**".⁴ Also, players may Overcall Suit bids with

³ Both of these books won the American Bridge Teachers' Association (ABTA) Bridge Book of the Year Awards!

⁴ Marty Bergen's "**Rule of 20**" says you can, and indeed **should**, bid a Suit whenever the sum of your (1) HCPs and (2) the number of cards you hold in your longest 2 Suits is **20** or more. Within

other Suit bids if their Suit has a strong Ron Klinger **"Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score"**.⁵

The **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"** occurs when a player sits 4th within the auction, (1) all 3 previous players bid a different Suit, and (2) you sitting 4th hold (a) **5+** cards in the single unbid Suit plus (b) either **3** cards in Partner's bid Suit or 2 cards in Partner's bid Suit including an Honor. For example, if the bidding proceeds (1) your LHO **1H**, (2) Partner **2C**, (3) your RHO **2D**, and you hold (4) *both* 5 Spades in the unbid Spade Suit with a good Ron Klinger **"SQT Score"** and either (a) **3** Clubs or (b) **2** Clubs including at least **1** Honor, your **"DOUBLE"** at your first turn to bid would be a **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"**.⁶

In the bidding sequence (1) your LHO bids **1C**, (2) Partner bids **1D**, (3) your RHO bids **1H**, and you hold (4) *both* 5 Spades in the unbid Spade Suit with a good Ron Klinger **"SQT Score"** and either (a) **3** Diamonds or (b) **2** Diamonds including at least **1** Honor, and you bid **"DOUBLE"**, is also a **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"**.

The **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"** is *"Forcing for 1 Round"*, meaning that if your Partner's RHO **PASS**es, then Partner **must** bid in response to your **DOUBLE**. For example, in the bidding sequence (1) your LHO bids **1C**, (2) Partner bids **1D**, (3) your RHO bids **1H**, and you hold (4) *both* 5 Spades in the unbid Spade Suit with a good Ron Klinger **"Suit Quality Test Score"** and either (a) **3** Diamonds or (b) **2** Diamonds including at least **1** Honor, and you bid **"DOUBLE"**, and Partner's RHO **PASS**es after you execute the **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"**, Partner then **must** bid either **2D** or **2S**. For more details on the **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"**, see **"Esther Bridge 'Pop' Quiz #126, 'Beware the 'Snapdragon' and the 'L-D' DOUBLES"**:

https://esther-bridge.com/quiz/q0126_q.pdf

#7: DOUBLE of Opponent's 1NT Opening

the **"Esther Bridge Lessons"**, see: **"Lesson #43: 'Are the 'Rule of 20' and the 'Law of Total Tricks' Both Broken?":** [https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/count\(s\).pdf](https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/count(s).pdf)

⁵ The Ron Klinger **"Suit Quality Test ('SQT') Score"** equals the sum of (1) the number of HCPs held in the Suit and (2) the number of cards held in the Suit. Generally, Suit contract bids less than or equal to the **"SQT Score"** - 6 are safe.

⁶ By mutual agreement Partners may alter the "support" required to make the **"Snapdragon DOUBLE"**.

If the Opponents open 1NT, some pairs play a subsequent DOUBLE by Partner as showing (1) a 1NT point count and (2) NT "flat" or "square" distribution shape. This means that the both the 1NT bidder and the DOUBLER hold 15-17 points, meaning in turn that both their Partners have *almost no points*. All systems (Stayman and Jacoby transfers) are "on" after this DOUBLE, and indeed the *most likely* response to the DOUBLE will be a transfer to a long Major, which usually will be the final contract.

It is important to note that the DOUBLE of Opponent's 1NT open bid is not a "demand" DOUBLE! For example, let's say that the bidding progresses as follows:

NORTH: Pass
EAST: Pass
SOUTH: 1NT
WEST: DOUBLE
NORTH: Pass
EAST: ??

And let's say that the N/S pair is Vulnerable. EAST might think (*always a dangerous thing to do in bridge*), "Hmmm. Two hands have 30 to 34 points out of 40. We probably at best can make a part score contract." And then EAST might *think further* (also dangerous), "Hmmm. They are Vulnerable. I have a long suit and not many points. But I have a side entry to that long suit. If we can set this 1NT contract even only 2 tricks (likely given our points and distributions), we will get a Bridge Score of **+500**, and that will be *higher* than any score we might achieve on a part score contract. I am going to Pass."

A Common (and VERY Dangerous) Misconception

The following bidding and hands can be used to emphasize a common (and **very dangerous**) misconception:

EAST: 1S
SOUTH: ???

Consider SOUTH on this Board holding *either* of the following two hands:

SOUTH (13)	SOUTH (14)
S: Q T 4	S: 8 5 4 2
H: K 8 7	H: K Q J
D: Q J T 3	D: A J 7
C: K Q 8	C: K 8 5

Guess what? In this bidding sequence, with these holdings, SOUTH has **no bid** for *either* of these hands! SOUTH has (1) not enough cards in any suit to bid a suit, (2) not enough points to overcall 1NT, and (3) in both hands too many cards in Spades for a DOUBLE along with in the two hands holding only either 1 or 0 suits with at least 4 cards. Furthermore, if I DOUBLE a bid of a Major, I almost always want to hold 4 of the unbid Major, so hopefully Partner and I can play in a Major for a higher Bridge Score.

In short, just because you hold 13 or 14 HCPs does not mean you are guaranteed a reasonable Overcall bid in the auction! **Sometimes you can hold points, but still have no reasonable bid!**

A Special “Penalty DOUBLE” that Is Also “Lead-Directing”

You may also be interested in the “Lightner ‘Penalty’, ‘Lead-Directing’ DOUBLE”⁷ of Opponents’ Slam or 3NT Bids. The “Lightner DOUBLE” was

⁷ See the “Esther Bridge Convention Lesson #29”: “Lightner ‘Lead-Directing’, ‘Penalty’ DOUBLES of Slam/3NT Contrasts”:

<https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/Lightner.pdf>

invented in 1929 by prominent bridge player and theorist Theodore “Teddy” Lightner. The “**Lightner DOUBLE**” promises to set the Opponents for Penalty but also *directs* Partner to make an “*unusual*” lead that Partner *otherwise* would *not* make which then “sets” the Opponents’ contract.