

NEGATIVE DOUBLES by Maritha Pottenger

Negative doubles get their name because they are **not** old-fashioned penalty doubles. **Negative doubles are an extension of the “Take-Out Double.”** With a Take-Out Double, partner promises minimal support for the 3 unbid suits. With a Negative Double, you promise support for one unbid suit (and possibly a second unbid suit). Basically a negative double promises **at least two places to play**.

A negative double can only occur after your partner has opened the bidding and an opponent has overcalled. A negative double, in its simplest form, is used at the one-level and two-level and promises four cards in the unbid major. It implies (but does not guarantee) three to four cards in the other unbid suit. Thus, in an auction of 1C (by partner), 1S (by right-hand opponent), a double by you would promise four (or more) hearts in your hand and imply that you have three or more diamonds. Diamonds not essential; hearts guaranteed.

Similarly, in an auction of 1C (by partner), 1H (RHO), a double by you is negative and promises 4 (and only 4) spades. (You may, or may not, have diamonds.) If you had five (or more) spades, you would bid 1 Spade over one Heart. Although emphasis is given to finding major fits, you can also use a negative double to show the minors. 1H (by partner), 1S (RHO), a double by you is negative and promises at least 4-4 in clubs & diamonds.

The general guidelines are that you should have about **six points to make a negative double at the one-level** (just as you would bid a one-over-one response to your partner with six points). You should have about **8-10 points to bid at the two-level, and 10 or more points if your two-level bid will force partner to bid at the three level.** (When you have long suits, you can shade your high cards down a point or two.)

A special case is the 1C (by partner), 1D (RHO), negative double by you. In this sequence, you promise 4 cards in **both majors**. The reason is that, in standard bidding, you are free to bid one heart or one spade over the opponent's 1D **without** promising 5 cards. Your 1H or 1S only promises four cards, thus the negative double guarantees 4-4 in the majors. (Some partners play that 1H or 1S promises 5 cards & neg double promises 4-3.)

It is not so simple at the **two level**. 1D (by partner), 2C (RHO), **negative double by you guarantees at least one four-card major**. Bidding constraints being what they are, you cannot promise both majors (otherwise this bid will seldom come up and you'll be left without a bid on too many hands). If you do have only one four-card major, you should have tolerance (3 decent cards) for the other major, or be able to return partner to diamonds (good diamond support along with your four-card major). You should have at least a good 8-9 HCP (10 better).

Please note that your partner is free to convert a negative double into a penalty double if s/he believes that is the right thing to do. For example, on the auction of 1C (partner), 2S (a weak, pre-emptive bid by RHO), a negative double by you (promising 10 points as you are forcing partner to respond at the three level), partner may choose to try to set 2 Spades doubled if s/he holds four reasonably good spades (e.g., Q J 10 x; Q 8; A Q xx; K 10 9 x, etc.) Partner's opening bid, plus your 10 points and partner's good spades should allow you to set the contract, whereas you may not have game between you. If partner feels game is a possibility, partner can bid 2NT with good spade stoppers, suggesting a 3NT game.

Many people play negative doubles at least through the 2 Spade level (that is, an overcall of 2 spades by your opponents). Some people play negative doubles through 3 Spades, and some people play them through 4 Hearts. If you are trying negative double for the first time, begin by playing them simply through the 2 Spade level.

Remember: if you could have made a negative double and overcall instead, you guarantee 5 cards in the suit you overcall. And, if you are too weak to bid at a higher level (e.g., 5 hearts, but only 6 HCP and auction goes 1C-1S to you), go ahead and make the negative double. Partner will know you have 4 hearts anyway.

The other **vital** piece of negative doubles is that **partner MUST reopen the bidding with a double when s/he is in the pass-out seat and has shortness in the suit of the overcaller.** You could be sitting there with a penalty double of overcaller's suit and could not bid because a double would have been negative. By reopening with a double, partner gives you the opportunity to pass (converting the double to penalties). An example would be 1C by your partner; 2H by opponent, pass, pass. If partner has only one or two hearts, s/he should double, asking you to bid. (You don't want to sell out to only 2H, anyway.) If you have a penalty double of 2H, you will simply pass and collect the good score you deserve.

Negative doubles can only be made by RESPONDER—the partner of the person who opened the bidding. If Responder makes a negative double and then bids a different suit, it show a WEAK hand and a long suit (usually 6, but could be 5 in a pinch), e.g., 1D-1S-*-P-2C-P-2H: weak hand, 5-6 hearts.