

"NEGATIVE DOUBLES": THE BASICS

During the first three decades or so of contract bridge, nearly all doubles were penalty doubles. The one generally common exception was a double of an opening bid *in a suit*, or of a response to such an opening, which was understood by all to be a *takeout* double that begged partner to bid an *unbid suit*. As used by experts, *takeout doubles* presumably showed *support* for all unbid suits (at least 4-card support for two, but possibly only 3-card support for a third unbid suit), with special emphasis on unbid *major* suits (a double of spades, in particular, virtually guaranteeing at least four hearts). Because takeout doubles are virtually forcing, their use could be extended to extremely powerful hands---in point-count terms, hands worth about 19 or more---without the usual support of all unbid suits. A useful guideline for would-be "off-shape" takeout doublers is, "Can I *handle* partner's reply in a suit for which I have poor support?" Thus, for example, if *intervenor* (the name for the first player to enter the auction after an opponent has opened) has a hand good enough to bid 2♠, 2NT or 3♣ *safely* over *advancer's* (the name for intervenor's partner) 2♦ reply to a takeout double of 1♥, then he may double 1♥ without adequate diamond support.

This exception---doubles for takeout rather than penalties---arose because experts of the era prior to *contract* bridge, when other forms of bridge were played, had learned from experience that hands for *unilateral penalty doubles*---doubles of opponents' low-level suit bids when partner had not promised any high cards---were *extremely* rare, and the unilateral penalty doubles worked poorly on the few occasions when the hands for them arose. Why did they work so poorly? Because when the bidder and the doubler both had length and strength in the doubled suit, the other players were invariably short. The partner of the bidder, relying on the bidder to have *generally useful high cards*, could usually pull the double to a suit of his own.

The exception was extended to higher and higher bids, and with reason. For example, if the opening bid was a three-bid (a weak preempt), opener would have a good seven-card suit, so hands for unilateral penalty doubles were still very rare. For a decade or two, a convention called *Fishbein* was popular, in which a double of an opening 3-bid was still for penalties, and the cheapest suit overcall was used as a (forcing) takeout. Thus *Fishbein* users would have to bid 3♥-3♠ to ask partner to bid a suit other than hearts. Eventually, experts realized that hands for a *natural* 3♠ overcall of a 3♥ preempt occurred far more often than hands for a penalty double of 3♥, and that *takeout* doubles of 3♥ were more efficient than *takeout* 3♠ overcalls (partner can bid 3♠ over a takeout double, or pass the takeout double for penalties). The popularity of *Fishbein* gradually declined, and I haven't seen anybody play the convention for about the last four decades.

During the last four decades, the *level* through which experts (and others) play takeout doubles of preempts has risen gradually. Currently, the *standard* treatment of doubles of opening preempts is *takeout* through 4♥, and many experts (wisely!) play doubles of 4♠ openings as takeout also. In practice, extending takeout doubles to the 4-level allows you to "have your cake and eat it too," for any intervenor who is strong enough to beg his partner to bid a suit at the 4- or 5-level needs great *high-card* strength, so with a *balanced* hand including three or four cards in the doubled suit, *advancer* will usually *pass for penalties*.

In the very early days of contract bridge, players were taught--or "knew" instinctively---to double *overcalls* (for penalties) with five cards to "a hundred honors" or a similar "trump stack" in the overcaller's suit. They considered it a cardinal sin (or perhaps a capital crime) to pull partner's low-level penalty double of an overcall, for such a double virtually guaranteed a huge set. I recall from childhood a "Bridge" cartoon by the cartoonist Webster in the *New York Herald Tribune* in which a large man stood up from his seat at the table, turned to his right-hand opponent and said, "I *rock* two hearts! I *sock* two hearts! In other words, your bid of two hearts is *doubled!*"

You can be sure the cartoon doubler had ♥KQJ10x (or better). You can be less sure that his double worked. His *left-hand* opponent may have run to 3♣ (for example), a contract against which the doubler, whom I'll call "Colonel Blimp," may have had no defense at all. After two decades of experience with Colonel Blimp Doubles, the British author S.J. Simon suggested in his wonderful 1946 book *Why You Lose at Bridge* that a double of a low-level overcall be a *proposal to partner*, a *tentative business double*, no more a command that opener pass than a new-suit response is a command that opener play in responder's suit. Simon suggested 1♠-2♦-*double* with (a) ♠x ♥Kxxx ♦J9x ♣AQxxx, the understanding being that this double showed *general* strength, a *poor fit* for opener's suit and *moderate length* in overcaller's suit, with opener free to pull when short in the doubled suit. Then in 1957, Marshall Miles wrote similarly in his classic book [How to Win at Duplicate Bridge](#) that (b) ♠AQxx ♥x ♦xxx ♣KJxxx was best handled by 1♥-2♦-*double*, there being *no reasonable alternative*. Remember Hands (a) and (b), for you shall encounter them again.

Coincidentally, 1957 was the year in which *Sputnik* was launched. The innovative New York theorist Al Roth chose that time to popularize an idea originated by Lou Scharf, a lesser-known Bronx player, that doubles of low-level overcalls should be played as *takeout*, and as emphasizing unbid major suits (if there were any). Roth called this conventional double *Sputnik* to mark the start of a "Space Age" in bridge, but it became known more widely as a *Negative Double*, a most unfortunate name because it is not a negative action at all.

Some years ago, at the urging of a partner, I agreed to play "Negative Doubles," and soon, with both sides vulnerable, I opened (a strong) 2♥. My LHO overcalled 2♠, my partner doubled, and I licked my chops in anticipation of a

huge penalty. When the smoke cleared, we were -670, as 2♠ doubled made with ease, while +1430 was available to us for bidding and making 6♥. What had gone wrong? My partner had a weak hand with heart support and a singleton spade, and thought that playing "Negative Doubles" required him to double an opponent's overcall to show a weak hand. Ever since, I have preferred to use the name *Sputnik*, given to them by Al Roth in 1957, for Negative Doubles.

Tentative business doubles, as explained by Simon and Miles, were a significant improvement upon Colonel Blimp Doubles, but they suffered from two defects. One was the difficulty of teaching them to a resistant bridge public, especially as Simon and Miles were two lonely voices in a bridge wilderness, and Colonel Blimp Doubles were dear to the hearts of most players, who loved to be able to issue *commands*, rather than mere proposals, to their partners. The other was that, though more frequent and more effective than Colonel Blimp Doubles, they were still rare, Simon and Miles having overestimated their frequency implicitly.

Sputnik, for which another good name would be *takeout doubles of opposing overcalls*, won far more adherents among the experts who taught and wrote about bridge, and was far easier for the bridge public to accept because its difference from Colonel Blimp Doubles was sharp and clear. But it was Miles who had unwittingly put his finger on one of the two main merits of *Sputnik* Doubles: they can be used on hands for which (in his words) there is *no reasonable alternative*. Their other main merit is their *far greater frequency* (with certain reservations) than Colonel Blimp Doubles and the kind of doubles that Simon and Miles suggested.

To comprehend this other main merit, look again at Hands (a) and (b). They qualify for Sputnik Doubles as well as tentative business doubles. However, you can vary Hands (a) and (b) in such a way that they no longer qualify for tentative business doubles but still qualify for Sputnik. After 1♠-2♦, responder should still make a Sputnik Double with (a*) ♠Jx ♥Kxxx ♦9x ♣AQxxx; after 1♥-2♦, responder should double with (b*) ♠AQxx ♥xxx ♦x ♣KJxxx.

Though Sputnik Doubles are a form of takeout doubles, takeout doubles of overcalls differ significantly from takeout doubles of opening bids. This difference stems from an important difference in the *bids* of *responder* and *intervenor*. Responses in an unbid suit are *forcing*, but overcalls are not. So intervenor may sometimes start with a takeout double because he fears that his overcall may be passed, but responder need have no such fear. Thus double-then-new-suit shows a *stronger intervening* hand than bidding the new suit directly, but a *weaker responding* hand by a Sputnik Doubler.

For the most part, the *requirements* for Sputnik Doubles follow logically from their nature.

(1) Responder must have *no reasonable alternative*. If his hand qualifies for a *bid*, he should make that bid rather than double.

(2) Though emphasizing unbid majors (if any), responder must be able to *handle* opener's actions in reply, including a *penalty pass*. The higher the level of the double, the less opener needs to pass for penalties. Sputnik Doubles resemble other takeout doubles in this respect, of course, but opener, having already sent a suit message, will often prefer passing to repeating that message when he has a balanced hand and no other suit to bid. In his book, *Competitive Bidding in the 21st Century*, Miles, still active, recommends that opener pass Sputnik Doubles of 3-level overcalls routinely "with three good trumps and a balanced hand." This means that a 3-level Sputnik Doubler should never have a singleton (or void) in overcaller's suit.

(3) Responder must have 4-card support for at least one unbid 4-card major (if there is any).

Just as standard bidders must define the level at which intervenor's doubles become penalty instead of takeout, and do not play takeout doubles when the opening bid is in *notrump*, Sputnik users must also specify to *which auctions* Sputnik applies. There is enormous variation among Sputnik users, so every player must discuss Sputnik separately with every new partner. Here are some issues that need clarification.

(a) Doubles of *notrump overcalls* (whether natural or artificial) are never Sputnik.

(b) After a *notrump opening*, doubles are penalty doubles. Though many pairs use Sputnik Doubles of 3-level overcalls to replace Stayman, and a few pairs use Sputnik Doubles even of 2-level overcalls, these are non-standard treatments, not part of Sputnik itself, and require *separate agreements*.

(c) Through what *level* does Sputnik apply? I'm certain that Colonel Blimp Doubles and tentative business doubles alike are virtually useless at the *1-level*, and confident (though not certain) that they're poor at the *2-level*, but I believe that penalty doubles are desirable at the *3-level*, especially against the fashionably weak jump-overcallers of the present era. However, the most popular agreement is to play Sputnik through 3♠, though some pairs play Sputnik through 3♦ or 4♦.

(d) The strength required for Sputnik Doubles varies with the level, a level that is determined not only by the level of the overcall but also by the level at which opener must bid in reply. Thus responder needs more (at least 2 or 3 HCP more) to double after 1♣-2♠ than after 1♠-2♣.

(e) When there are *two* unbid majors, responder needn't have support for both, so long as he has support for one major *and at least limit-raise values* in support of opener's minor. However, *1♣-1♦-double* specifically requires support for both majors, the rationale being that with one 4-card major and limit-raise or better values in support of clubs, responder can always *bid* 1♥ or 1♠ and then show his support for clubs.

(f) Responder must be aware of, and prepared for, the possibility that opener, who has already bid one suit, may not have another suit to show, and in a pinch may have to bid a 3-card suit, relying on responder to have the four cards promised by the Sputnik Double. In such situations, a Sputnik Doubler should avoid "raising" opener's second suit without a fifth card in it, for he is in effect *rebidding* that suit.

(g) A Sputnik Double of a 1♥ overcall is in a class by itself. It seems to violate Requirement (1), for given that it promises four spades, a 1♠ bid is a reasonable alternative. There are two conflicting ways of treating this clash of criteria, and I'll call the opposing schools *Bolsheviks* and *Mensheviks*, borrowing Russian words meaning respectively *minority* and *majority*. The minority Bolsheviks play a double of 1♥ as *denying* four spades, the majority Mensheviks require a *fifth* spade for a 1♠ response.

Who is right? I researched it by studying many hands from world championships, and discovered that the Mensheviks are right, for three reasons, none of them obvious.

First, the Bolsheviks render the sequence 1♣ (or 1♦)-1♥-double-pass-1♠ useless, except to the opponents, but how else is opener to bid with ♠A1042 ♥983 ♦A5 ♣KQ76 or similar?

Second, when a 4-4 spade fit does exist, *it's usually better that a spade contract be played from opener's side*, for a heart lead through declarer will sometimes hurt, while anything the overcaller leads may help.

Third, it's useful for opener to know when responder has a fifth spade, especially when advancer raises hearts. *Support Double* enthusiasts may say that this matters little, for after 1♣ (or 1♦)-1♥-1♠-2♥, opener can show his degree of support by raising with four spades or doubling with three. However, after 1♣ (or 1♦)-1♥-1♠-3♥ (which is often played as weak nowadays, and thus subject to profitable penalty doubles), Support Doubles do not apply.

(h) Sputnik Doubles trigger *limit bidding*. 1♣-pass-1♥-pass-3♥ is nonforcing, and so is 1♣-1♠-double-pass-3♥. Indeed, with two exceptions, 1♣-1♠-double should be treated like 1♣-pass-1♥. One exception is that an opener who planned to *rebid* 1♠ over a 1♥ response may have to bid 1♣-1♠-double-pass-*INT* instead on a hand that is not completely suitable. The other exception is that opener's 2♦ rebid, which would otherwise be a "reverse" showing substantial extra values (and forcing in the modern style), becomes an ordinary rebid showing minimum-to-moderate opening strength. Also, 1♣-1♥-double (Menshevik)-pass-1♠ has a special meaning: it shows a *very weak* opening hand indeed, a hand that would bid 1♣-pass-1♠-pass-2♠ only *reluctantly*. With a hand that would bid 1♣-pass-1♠-pass-2♠ *gladly* (a maximum), opener bids 1♣-1♥-double (Menshevik)-pass-2♠.

(i) Some "authority" may tell you, "If you play Negative Doubles, you have a *duty to reopen with a double* when you open and an overcall (within your Negative-Doubling range) is passed around to you, unless you have three or more cards in overcaller's suit."

If you play that way, you also have a duty to *alert your partner's pass* over an overcall, explain it as "semi-forcing," and describe the circumstances in which you may pass. Unfortunately, most who believe in a "duty to reopen" disregard their duty to alert. It's much better to disregard the alleged duty to reopen, which stems from a myth that arose in the early days of Sputnik and has never been repudiated. The early Sputnik enthusiasts, seeking to convert the many Colonel Blimps of their era, encountered the objection (pardon the slight exaggeration), "But what if I have nine trumps to a hundred fifty honors and am frothing at the lips because I can't make a *penalty* double?"

To pacify Colonel Blimp, they replied, "Never fear. Your partner will always *reopen* with a double and you can collect the 1700 to which you are entitled by passing for penalties."

That, of course, was the wrong answer. They should have said, "Once in a while that will happen. But even when it does, you are probably better off for it. For your penalty doubles, infrequently as they occur, stick even less frequently. Somebody, usually the overcaller's partner if not your own partner, almost always pulls. You'll do better beating the overcaller several tricks undoubled than you'd do in the contract that would have been played eventually if you'd been able to make a penalty double. Negative Doubles being far more frequent and useful than penalty doubles, responders who play penalty doubles will *very often* find themselves with hands they can't bid, and pray fervently that their partners will reopen, but responders who play Negative Doubles will *very seldom* find themselves frustrated by their inability to make penalty doubles. The price for playing Negative Doubles is a small one, and you should be far more willing to pay it than to pay the large price you must pay if you *don't* play Negative Doubles."