

The Trouble with Doubles

by June Byrne

Responses to take-out doubles form an area of bidding that is full of pitfalls and booby traps. Life is easy when you have one of the suits that partner has asked for. The only question is how high you should bid. Various authorities disagree on ranges. My personal preference is to make a minimum bid with 0-9, jump with 10-11, and cue-bid with more. These ranges are partly based on what the doubler can be expected to do.

In Standard American, the take-out doubler should have 16-18 points to double and later bid or raise, 19-21 to double and later jump raise, and 22 or more to double and later cue-bid. When the take-out doubler has less than 16 points, he must not bid again without an invitation from partner. If your partner can be depended on to follow these guidelines (and if he can't, consider finding a new partner), you never have to worry about missing games.

The 16 point division here explains the ranges I am suggesting for responder. There is no need to jump with less than 10 points because game will not be possible unless the takeout doubler can take further action.

The exception to the above is after a free bid. If your LHO passes your double, your partner is forced to bid and his bid only guarantees 13 cards. If your LHO bids, your partner is not forced to bid. If he bids freely, you can raise with four of the suit and slightly more than a minimum.

So what do you bid with no suit? There are some textbooks out there which recommend bidding 1 NT with 0-10 points. Personally, I believe a response of 1 NT to a take-out double be based on at least one solid stopper and 7-10 points. There are two reasons for this preference. The first reason is purely practical. My partner's hand is very unlikely to be suitable for NT. The second reason is purely psychological. Opponents seldom allow one to play unmolested in a one level suit contract. If I bid a suit at a low level, the opponents are more likely to bid again. A 1 NT bid discourages competition. With 2 points and 4 cards to the 10 in the opponent's suit, even a true hand hog can not find any enthusiasm for being declarer. It is far better to make it simple for the opponents to bid further. Therefore with 0-6 points and no suit to bid, I suggest bidding your cheapest 3 card suit.

There is one hand which is permanently engraved on my brain. I was sitting in fourth seat with: ♠ 863 ♥ 732 ♦ 1094 ♣ J964. To be really honest, I sorted my hand and my mind went off to consider previous hands. I awoke with a jolt to discover left hand opponent had opened 1 ♣ and partner had doubled. RHO was now learnedly considering his hand. Meanwhile, as is extremely important at this point, I was trying to maintain a poker face and look like I had no problem at all. It never pays to let the opponents know how much trouble you are in. He decided to pass for the moment, I bid a cool 1 ♦ with no hint of pain and LHO passed. My partner now learnedly considered while I worried. What on earth was he doing? My partner finally bid 3 ♦. My poker face was becoming more and more difficult to maintain. I was thinking that he better have his whole 19-21 points because this had turned serious! Meanwhile RHO was again studying his hand learnedly. I cheered up when he produced a 3 NT bid. I was saved! I passed, LHO passed, but partner was still there thinking! He doubled and I had to find an opening lead. There are those who would talk themselves into an odd lead because of the double, but this was a pure penalty double (remember he has guaranteed 19 + points) so I led the 10 of diamonds. The declarer played as poorly as he had bid to go down 800 which was a tasty result. Several pairs had played 3 NT from my hand down 500 to

800, doubled. Others had played 3 ♦, down one or just making. If I had responded 1 NT, partner would have bid 3 NT with his 20 points. How could he have resisted the temptation?

The moral of this story is that when partner doubles, don't volunteer for a NT contract unless you have a really good hand. And do not respond 1NT unless you have a full stopper and 7-10 points.

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