

Double Trouble

Irregular partnerships at most levels of the game throw huge swings simply by having differing opinions about whether a double in a particular situation is penalty and when it is takeout. It is not hard to imagine the disastrous consequences that arise when partners disagree at the table in mid auction without prior agreement. Apart from doubler perhaps having some values, the hand types are otherwise complete opposites.

There is probably nothing that an irregular partnership can do to prevent catastrophes of this nature on occasion. There are many situations in which either a penalty or a take-out double has merit, and indeed a few situations in which a double might show something in between the two, as well as isolated occasions when it is artificial and conventional. Depending on your background and personal preferences, on marginal hands the partnership will inevitably differ occasionally where the situation is undiscussed. That is one of the prices that you pay for the irregularity of the partnership.

A regular partnership should however treat this issue as a priority for discussion.

The possible situations for which you might need to cater are highly diverse. If you have a brain the size of a planet you might be able to conceive of all situations in which you might want to double, and categorise the bid accordingly. In practice, unless you can distill the situations into a condensed set of rules on which the partnership can agree, the potential for mistakes will continue.

So there has to be a trade-off between simplification of agreements on the one hand and a desire to cater optimally for as wide a variety of situations on the other. The positioning of the cut-off will depend upon the mental capacity of the lowest common denominator of the partnership.

Ultimately you might end up with a simple flow chart that leads to the "Take-out" or "penalty" conclusion depending on a series of questions, the ordering of which would be relevant.

Here is an example, that I have set out in a text format, although it is perhaps easier to assimilate as a diagram. No-one is compelled to use this example. Nor do I suggest that it is superior to any other flow chart with the same level of complexity. Indeed I am certain that it could be improved upon by adding layers of complexity, if you can cope with that. But it may serve as a starting point for players to consider, and it is fairly closely aligned to my personal preferences, but I stress the qualifier "personal".

Question 1:

Is this a situation in which we have a specific artificial agreement?

If so, then apply that agreement

If not, proceed to Question 2.

An example might be a Lightner double. Well, that is penalty really, but its lead-directing message is worthy of separate treatment. Another example that *I* tend to include in this situation is a 4th seat double of RHO's 1 suit response to LHO's 1C opener, which in a regular partnership I use to show a 3-suited takeout of Clubs. So it has penalty overtones (one of my suits being the one doubled), but also takeout overtones (promising also the unbid suits). Double of an opponent's transfer, or of Stayman, or of a Multi 2D opener, may also fit into this category, if you have a specific agreement.

Question 2:

Have we already found a trump fit?

If so, then the double is penalty.

If not, proceed to question 3.

The main point of a takeout double is to find a trump fit with a degree of safety. If we have already found one, the need for the takeout double diminishes, arguably to the point of redundancy.

In this example flowchart I have excluded the possibility of using double to show a game try in our known trump fit, allowing you to rebid your known fit in a purely competitive capacity. If you like the game try double then you can cater for it - it just adds a level of complexity to the flow chart. If you want to make it even more complicated, some players only use the double as "game try" if the suit being doubled is the one directly below their own trump fit (ie, the situation where there is no other game try bid available).

Question 3:

Are the opponents in an announced trump fit at the 2 level?

If so, then the double is takeout.

If not, then proceed to question 4.

You may have to derive rules for when a trump fit has been announced. A direct raise would show a fit. But what about giving preference? I play that giving preference by bidding does NOT suggest a fit, but giving preference by passing DOES. (If in doubt, you would normally give "false" preference to partner's first bid suit, so in passing you REALLY prefer the second - reinforcing the likelihood of a fit).

Question 4:

Do any one or more of the following conditions apply?

If yes, then double is penalty.

If no, then double is takeout.

Conditions for Question 4, which rank equally in priority are:

- 1) If pass (instead of double) would have been forcing on partner to keep the auction alive;
- 2) If either one of us has, previously in the auction, implied length in the suit doubled;
- 3) If our side has preempted in the auction;
- 4) If doubler had an opportunity to double the same suit at a lower level, and chose instead to pass on that occasion;
- 5) If the contract being doubled is any number of NoTrumps;
- 6) If the contract being doubled is above the 3 level (optionally excluding opening 4Suit);
- 7) If double is of an artificial forcing bid (then tends to be lead directing and hence nominally for penalties)

Note that in condition 1 I have not attempted to define the occasions when you would be in a "forcing pass" situation. That could be included in the flow chart, but I think it sensible to keep it out for clarity, and perhaps go through a similar exercise to identify forcing pass auctions.

Likewise, in condition 2 I have not identified the occasions when length in an unbid suit might be implied. An obvious example might be where your side has made a takeout double of a different suit earlier in the auction. The partnership ought also discuss whether opening 1NT (or 2NT) implies length in all 4 suits. I personally prefer not, which leads to the conclusion that a double of their overcall of 1NT would (in accordance with my personal preferences) be a takeout double under this algorithm. If you prefer penalty doubles in that

situation you would have to agree that length is implied by opening 1NT (or change the flow chart to cater for it).

Whether a penalty double promises trump length is another thorny issue, relevant to condition 6. Low level penalty doubles do promise trump length. At high levels, you might double simply because you can see the contract being defeated. Particularly if the opponents have shown a big trump fit to get there, partner should not assume a trump stack in a high level double. The double can be removed under those circumstances, but not for fear of the contract making; rather because you expect to make your own (higher scoring) contract.

Well, enough for now, this is just meant to be food for thought. Using the above algorithm it would not be hard to come up with some situations that throw out a conclusion that is at odds with common sense. If, for example, the opponents bid all 4 suits naturally, a double might be for takeout under the above rules, when it would likely be more useful for penalties. Cater for that if you wish (I think it unlikely that I will want to double at all, whether for penalties or takeout). Or you might agree that if the opponents have bid or more suits naturally then a double is penalties, but also promising length in the 4th suit where unbid. There are several tweaks that are possible.

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