

Negative (Sputnik) Doubles

♠ 75 Your partner opens 1♦. No problem, you simply bid 1♥ (you would not,
♥ AJ96 of course, not even dream of bidding 1NT and suppressing the 4 card ♥
♦ Q4 suit). Unfortunately, RHO intervenes with 1♠. So what do you bid now?
♣ 98732 Under traditional methods there is no sensible bid. You have to employ a
negative double. There are various different ways of playing them, but I
think the easiest (and best) is that they simply promise unbid majors(s) and sufficient points to compete (but
they are unlimited – just the same as a new suit if RHO had not intervened). So with this hand, a double of the
1♠ overcall promises a ♥ suit and enough points to compete to 2♥. And how should opener respond? - Just
the same as he would have if his LHO had passed and partner had bid 1♥. So 2♥ by opener is non-forcing.
Easy eh?
But some people may say ‘I like to have my nice juicy penalty double – especially if playing against some of
the wilder elements in the club’. The answer is that you *can* have your cake and eat it too. And very often
you get a much bigger cake!

So you do not lose your penalty double when you play negative doubles – you simply need a disciplined
partner. And sometimes the opposition don’t know what’s happening until it’s too late! In principle, opener
should always re-open with a double (there are a few exceptions, but generally speaking, opener will double
95% of the time, just in case partner has a penalty pass). Occasionally this tactic can lead to a bonanza. This
is a hand from 3 weeks ago. It is a typical penalty double of 2♣, so I passed awaiting partner’s re-opening
double. West did not like ♣’s so (unwisely) bid 2♠. Unaware of the misfit and impending disaster, East
re-bid his ♣ suit. Who says you cannot give a penalty double when you have to pass initially? – I managed
four having passed initially!! 1100 thank you.

South (me)	North	East	South	West
♠ AJ3	1♦	2♣	pass (1)	2♠ (2)
♥ 93	pass (3)	3♣ (4)	dbl (5)	3♠
♦ K75	pass	pass	dbl	4♥
♣ K8753	pass	pass	dbl	pass
	pass	4♠	dbl	pass
	pass	pass		

- (1) either a penalty double hand or a hand too weak for a forcing bid.
- (2) unwise with a misfit.
- (3) no need to re-open now.
- (4) unaware that south had a ♣ stack.
- (5) I wanted to play 2♣ doubled, so this is fine.

This bidding was a bit freakish, but you really do get the opponents one level higher quite often, and the
penalty doubles are not often (never!) missed if opener re-opens with a double when he should (nearly
always).

When you do not re-open with a double.

I was asked under what circumstances opener should not re-open with the 'automatic' re-opening double when playing negative doubles.

Now as I have frequently said, every pair plays negative double differently. I won't go into my preferred treatment again, but I will answer the question.

When you play negative doubles; you open, LHO overcalls and this is passed round to you, it is usually correct to 'automatically' re-open with a double. But there are hands when you should not. The hand types where you should not re-open with a double are as below where you have opened 1♣ and LHO has overcalled 1♥.

(a) **Hand A**
♠ AKQ97
♥ 7
♦ 7
♣ AKQ953

When you have a very powerful hand with game virtually in your own hand and where you may well make slam opposite very little. With Hand A I would jump to 2♠. I guess that some would have opened 2♣, but I prefer the natural slow approach with two-suiters.

(b) **Hand B**
♠ J32
♥ KQ103
♦ Q4
♣ AJ76

When you have a decent opener but have so much in the opponent's suit that you know that partner cannot possibly be sitting with a penalty hand. I would pass with Hand B.

(c) **Hand C**
♠ KQ54
♥ 72
♦ Q
♣ K96532

When you have a weak distributional hand with little defensive values. I think that 1♠ is reasonable with Hand C although I would not argue with double. Some might say that they would not have opened, but it does conform to the rule of 20 and a 1♣ opening would be a popular choice these days.