

Wielding the Axe: Doubling the Opponents for Penalties

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29 April 2021

Introduction

There is a well-known maxim in bridge:

- If the opponents never make a doubled contract then you aren't doubling enough.

That doesn't mean you should double every time you have a sniff of taking it down.

Some players just seem to know when to double – in reality they're making a judgement based on the bidding around the table, especially their partner's hand.

Let's try to break down that judgement into some simple ideas.

What does partner's bid say about their defensive tricks?

It's natural to focus on our own hand when bidding – listening to our partner's bidding tells us crucial information which we can use to decide when to double.

How many defensive tricks can I expect my partner take?	
What did my partner bid?	How many tricks is that worth in defence?
Pass	0
Any pre-empt – including weak 2s	0
Any simple overcall at the 1 level	1
1-level opening bid or a 2-level overcall	2
A stronger (16-19) hand or 1NT overcall	3
Opening 2C or 2NT	4

When we have a fit then we can't expect many tricks in that suit due to the variety of splits:

If we have a fit, how many defensive tricks are we limited to in that suit?	
Size of fit	How many defensive tricks can we expect in that suit?
Eight or nine card fit	1
Ten (or more) card fit	0

Questions to ask yourself when considering whether to double for penalties

1. How many tricks do we need to beat the contract?
2. How many tricks does my partner have?
3. How many tricks do I have? Consider:
 - a. Do we have a fit that limits our defensive tricks?
 - b. Are my tricks sitting under or over the opposition's suits?

Examples – Questions

Rather neatly, you are holding the exact same cards in all these example hands, with just one small change in the last one.

	You Have	The Bidding	Questions – How Many?	Your Bid
1	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO Pass 1♠ Pass 2♥ Pass 2♠ Pass 4♠ Pass Pass ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	
2	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♣ Pass 1♥ 1♠ 2♥ 3♠ 4♥ Pass Pass 4♠ 5♥ Pass Pass ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	
3	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♥ 2♣ Dbl 3♣ 3♥ 4♣ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	
4	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♠ Pass Pass 2♥ 3♦ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	
5	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 2♠ Dbl 4♠ 5♦ Pass Pass ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	
6	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO Pass 2♥ Dbl 4♥ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	
7	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K J 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♥ 1♠ 1NT 2♠ 3♣ 3♠ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks?	

Examples – Answers

	You Have	The Bidding	Questions – How Many?	Your Bid
1	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO Pass 1♠ Pass 2♥ Pass 2♠ Pass 4♠ Pass Pass ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 3 tricks total	Pass
2	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♣ Pass 1♥ 1♠ 2♥ 3♠ 4♥ Pass Pass 4♠ 5♥ Pass Pass ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 2 tricks total	Pass
3	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♥ 2♣ Dbl 3♣ 3♥ 4♣ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 5 tricks total	Double
4	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♠ Pass Pass 2♥ 3♦ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 5-6 tricks total	Double
5	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 2♠ Dbl 4♠ 5♦ Pass Pass ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 1-2 tricks total	Pass
6	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K Q 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO Pass Pass 2♥ Dbl 4♥ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 4 tricks total	Double
7	♠ K Q 6 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ K J 5 3 ♣ 7 6 3	Partn RHO You LHO 1♥ 1♠ 1NT 2♠ 3♣ 3♠ ??	1. Tricks to beat the contract? 2. Partner's tricks? 3. Your tricks? ⇒ 6 tricks total	Double

Examples – Answers Commentary

1. **Pass** – you've got three tricks, partner has none.
2. **Pass** – you can only count one spade trick and one and a half diamond tricks. The opposition seem to have reasonable points and/or decent shape.
3. **Double** – partner has three tricks, reduced to two by your heart fit, and you have three tricks. 4H is a remote possibility, better to take the guaranteed penalty.
4. **Double** – partner has two tricks (should have an opening hand for their bid) and you probably have four because you are sitting over declarer's suits.
5. **Pass** – you've only got one trick – you can't count on any spade tricks due to your big fit and your diamonds are sitting underneath declarer's.
 - Remarkably different from hand 4 despite holding the same cards!
6. **Double** – partner has two tricks, you have three, reduced to two by the probable spade fit. It will probably be quite close, but looks worth it – after all we have the balance of points. 4S is a remote possibility but is more of a blind gamble.
7. **Double** – partner has three tricks, you have two or three – this should usually be off two. 3NT might be making but it's pretty risky – better to take a guaranteed penalty.

Sources

Adapted from this Canadian article – note they use strong NT:

<http://www.reginabridge.com/handouts/Doubling.pdf> – by Jason Larrivee