

Negative Doubles

One of the most valuable competitive bidding conventions, negative doubles help when responder has no 5 card suit to bid or is too weak to bid after the opponent’s overcall.

What follows is a basic standard outline. Many variations exist. Negative Free Bids change the meaning of this basic approach and are not considered here. Like every other convention, when playing negative doubles pay attention to both partner’s responsibilities – the convention does not stop with the doubler. Both partner’s have responsibilities.

Does a negative double always promise both unbid suits? As originally conceived, yes. However the modern approach focuses on the unbid major suits and competing effectively.

How high should you play Negative Doubles? Many are comfortable with 3♣, or 4♦. Some play 4♠. Anything is possible. Marty Bergen recommends: 1) 5♦ and 2) Discuss what the double above game really means.

What other conventions should we play? *Weak jump shifts* complement this approach nicely. So do *cue bid = limit raises or better* in competition.

How should I decide whether to make a negative double with a borderline hand?

Positive Factors	Negative Factors
Shortness in opponent’s suit Fit or tolerance for partner Both unbid suits Prime cards (A or K)	Length in opponent’s suit Shortness in partner’s suit Flawed distribution in the unbid suits Quacks quacks quacks (QJ’s).

Requirements

Free bids (a non-jump new suit bid over the overcall) define the size and shape of the negative doubler’s hand. Standard free bids are forcing for 1 round. At the 2 level and higher they promise a good hand and at least 5 cards in the suit bid. A negative double complements the free bid and denies either that length, or that strength, or both.

Level	Negative Double HCP ¹ (Cards)	Free Bid HCP ¹ (Cards)
1	6-9; 4+ 10+ no 5 card suit	6+ , 4Maj over 1♦, 5+ for 1♠ over 1♥
2	8-10; 4+ 11+ no 5 card suit	11+ , 5+ Cards
3	10-11; 4+ 12+ no 5 card suit	12+ , 5+ Cards
4+	10-13; 4+ 14+ no 5 card suit	14+ , 5+ Cards
Comments	Does not deny a stopper Implies a fit/tolerance Implies no length in their suit	Implies no stopper Denies a fit Implies no wastage in their suit

1 = or the equivalent playing strength.

Responder’s Penalty Pass

Responder will often make a *penalty pass* over opponent’s overcall holding 4+ good trumps, no fit for partner and 10+ HCP hoping for partner to reopen with a double. Be careful at unfavorable vulnerability or opponents might score better than your possible vulnerable game.

Here are a few standard negative doubles to consider.

Negative Double	Meaning
1♣-1♦-Double	6+ HCP, Both 4 card Majors . With only one major bid it (just as if the overall wasn't there)! Double with a weak 54 major patterns, intending to pass partner's preference. With a stronger hand bid your 5 card major then bid again. Partner will interpret a reverse (♥ then ♠ by you) as game forcing. With a game force, double then cue bid, intending to bid your 5 card suit if partner does not mention a major.
1♣-1♥-Double	6+ HCP Exactly 4 ♠s, might not have 4♦. You can bid 1♠, with 6+ HCP & 5 ♠s
1♣-1♠-Double	6+ HCP, 4+ ♥s, might not have 4♦. Or any hand with 11+ HCP, 4 ♥s. Note, with stoppers in ♠ and 4♥ double 1 st .
1♥-1♠-Double	6-10 HCP, at least one minor unsuitable for a free bid at the 2 level. Also 11+ HCP 44+ minors.
1♠-2♥-Double	10+ HCP with at least one minor. Inference cannot make free bid.
1♠ -2♦-Double	8+ HCP 4+♥ or 11+ 4 hearts. 2♥ instead of Double shows 5+ cards, 11+ HCP forcing one round.
1♦-2♣-Double 1♣-2♦-Double	8+ HCP with 5-4 majors, 10+ HCP with 4-4 majors, 10+ HCP with a 4 card major. Partner does not promise both majors on this auction. Be careful.
1♦-2♠-Double	9+ HCP 4 ♥. 10-12 HCP with 5+ ♥ and shortness elsewhere. Not a penalty double. Pass for penalty and expect partner to convert.
Troublesome Sequences: 1♦-3♣-Double 1♣-3♦-Double 1♥/♠-3♣-Double 1♥/♠-3♦-Double <i>Be careful!!!</i>	10 + HCP enough points to invite game and an inability to make a free bid or bid NT (<12+ HCP, no 5+ Cards in suit, or missing stopper). Typically promises one 4 card major. Here, getting to a major fit is one possibility. With a game going hand, no stopper and no 4 card major you can double if and only if partner knows to expect you have no major and no stopper. [Marty Bergen has a treatment he calls the Thrump double – game going hand denying a stopper for 3NT. With a stopper in opponent's suit, opener bids 3NT. Often 9 tricks are easier to find than 10 even when we own an 8 card major suit fit]. Opener must not assume that the negative doubler fits their one 4 card major. Opener bids a single 4-card major at the 3 level, 3N with a stopper in their suit, or cue bid opponent's suit with no stopper and both 4 card majors to give partner a choice of major games. After opener's major suit preference, 3N by the negative doubler would imply 4 cards in the other major.
1♣/♦-3♥/♠-Double 1♥-3♠-Double 1♠-3♥-Double	You promise a great hand (10+HCP) with the other major. Showing minors, doubler has a game going hand with no NT stopper and 4-4+ in the minors. Bergen recommends playing negative doubles →5♦ - opponents have trumps (you'll never hold a trump stack & a standard penalty double). Others play high level doubles as cooperative = 3 cards in their suit. This helps partner decide the right next step.

Watchouts:

- Always have a tolerance for partner's suit before you double (2 or 3 cards) especially when weak. You might have to play there!
- Choose to show the major(s) in preference to a stopper in their suit. You can bid NT later if there is room. If you don't show your 4 card major, partner will never believe you have one.
- Avoid negative doubles with "Quacks" in a weak hand, or a hand with length in their suits and a poor fit for partner.
- Remember partner might have to bid a 3-card major under duress, even at the 2 level.
- At the 3-level be practical. This might be your last shot at 3N.
- At the 4 and 5 level (if you play negative doubles that high) be prepared to leave the double in if defending looks right.

The following are not negative doubles (unless specifically agreed with your partner):

1x – 1N – Double 1x – 2N – Double 1x – 3N – Double

1x – 2x – Double - partner shows 2 suits, Penalty

1x – 3/4x – Double - Penalty if natural, safe lead if Western (Asks stopper).

1x – 3/4y – Double - Penalty if 3/4y is beyond the upper limit of your agreement.

Opener's Bids:

Strength	Action
Cue bid	Game forcing
Jump (3-level) cue	asks stopper for 3NT. Forces 3N or 4 of a minor.
High level reverse	Game forcing
Jumps to Major Game	Weaker than cue bid. Game
Reverse – Only 1♣-1M-X-P-2♦	Forcing 1 Round
All Jumps below game	Invitational
1N Rebid	Suggest stopper and a minimum, no fit for Doubler's suit.
2N Rebid	Stopper certain. Might be unbalanced if jump. Never minimum.
3N Rebid	18-19 HCP. Double jump show unbalanced (minor oriented) hand. Balanced hand jumps to 2N.

Opener's Reopening Double:

Opener's most important responsibility is to manage the 2nd bid accurately. If partner and advancer both pass, opener is poised to make a balancing double.

With a **void** in their suit bid a suit – DO NOT DOUBLE.

With **1 or 2 cards** in their suit, Double by all means. (You can pass with 5332 minimums).

Try to avoid making a negative double with **3 cards** in their suit.

Never double with **4+ cards** in their suit. Partner (and likely advancer) will be short. Rebidding a 5 card suit or bidding a 2nd suit in the balancing seat is better than doubling with a void or 3+ cards in their suit.

Do not double if your hand is extremely distributional. With a 55+ or 64+ pattern, bid on.

Opener's Penalty Pass

Level	Likelihood Opener's Penalty Pass	Penalty Pass Trump Holding	Do Not make Penalty Pass Holding
1	Almost never	AQJ10	4 trumps
2	Rare	KQJ8	3
3	Sometimes	108xx	2
4	Almost always if balanced	Qxx	1
4	Always if balanced	Jxx	Void
5+	Almost always	8x	0, 1 w/great distribution

Reference:

Marty Bergen, Points Schmounts Series Negative Doubles, a must read for every partnership.

Magnus Books, Stamford Connecticut (2000). 118 pp. ISBN 0-9637533-6-3