

The Ingredients of TAKEOUT DOUBLES



When to use them

When NOT to use them

How to follow up

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Thursday, April 9, 2009

10:00 - 11:30 AM

Palo Alto Bridge Center

Part of the Unit 503 Spring Lecture series

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INGREDIENTS OF TAKEOUT DOUBLES

The **takeout double** is one of the most important tools for competitive bidding. Like any tool, it's important to know how to use it, when to use it and when *not* to use it.

The takeout double is the oldest *convention* in bridge. It's become totally standard and isn't alertable, but it's not "natural". When you double, you don't intend to beat the opponents' contract and increase the penalty. Rather, you double to convey information to your partner. You don't expect partner to pass the double; you expect him to *take it out* to a suit or NT.

Suppose the opponents open 1♣ and you have ♠Axx ♥xx ♦Ax ♣KJ10987. Chances are you can beat 1♣. But people realized early in the development of bridge that it wasn't very useful to double a 1-level bid for penalties. Why?

- The opponents are unlikely to sit for 1♣X. They probably have a better spot and are likely to find it (particularly if you double for penalties). Suppose they go to 1♥, or even 2♥. How confident are you about beating that?
- Even if you defeat 1♣X, you may have a better spot yourself (e.g. 3NT).
- This type of hand occurs rarely. One principle of bidding theory is: don't reserve a bid (or double) for a hand type that hardly ever comes up—particularly if there is a much better conventional use for the bid.

As it happens, there are many hands that are difficult to describe if you are restricted to suit bids or NT bids when the opponents open. These are hands where you have no one great suit but rather *support for all suits except the opponent's suit*.

Suppose you have this hand, which comes up frequently when they open the bidding:

♠Axxx ♥KQxx ♦QJxx ♣x

If they open 1♣ and you *didn't* have the takeout double available, you'd have to bid one of your suits, and it would be difficult to describe your hand properly. In general, it works better to reserve overcalls for 5-card suits.

Note: For more detailed information, I recommend Mike Lawrence's *Complete Book on Takeout Doubles*, Magnus Books, 1994.

Requirements for takeout doubles

We'll start by talking about the most common situation: RHO opens 1 of a suit. Then we'll discuss how they differ in different situations.

A takeout double of RHO's 1 bid promises *approximately* an opening bid. The exact requirement depends on distribution and level.

Distributionally, the basic requirement is to have **at least 3 cards** in each of the unbid suits. However, this is not necessarily sufficient to make a double correct.

The *ideal* distribution is 4-4-4-1 with a singleton in the opponents' suit. If you have this shape, the chances are good that partner has a good fit with you (i.e. at least 8 cards). With this shape, you can double with as few as 10 HCP, if the opening bid is 1♣.

The higher the level, the more points you need: about 2 points for each additional level of bidding. So if you double 4♣, you need at least 16 HCP with perfect shape. (More on doubling preempts later). Also, note that a double of 1♠ should have a bit more strength than a double of 1♣. If you double 1♣, partner is guaranteed to be able to show his suit at the one level. But if you double 1♠, partner has to go to the 2 level.

If your distribution is flatter, you need more strength. What other distributions are OK?

- 4432: fine, but you need a tad more HCP than with 4441.
- 4423 (i.e. doubleton in *unbid suit*). Generally: *do not double*. The only exception that some experts would make is with a doubleton in an unbid *minor*. If partner bids your doubleton, you hope he has a 5-card suit.
- 4333: Even more strength needed (around 14 HCP). Be careful about doubling with this shape. With a stopper in their suit and 15-18, you can overcall 1NT.
- 3334: the worst. Tend to pass regardless of strength unless you can overcall 1NT.
- 5431: good distribution, but you also have the option to overcall. See below.
- 5332: Usually right to overcall since 1 suit is much longer than the others.

Suppose you have this nice hand: ♠KJxx ♥x ♦KQxx ♣Axxx. If RHO opens 1♥, you have ideal shape: it's a perfect double. If RHO opens 2♥ or 3♥ it's still good enough to double! How about 4♥? I'd hate to pass but it's best to have a bit more strength.

Now suppose RHO opens anything other than hearts. **You must pass!** If RHO opens 1 club, you still have a "good hand", but you cannot double because *you don't have heart support*.

If you double, bad things can happen. Partner is likely to bid hearts, and then you will be in trouble. You might think "If partner bids hearts, I'll just bid spades". But this doesn't work either. If you double and then bid a new suit, it doesn't show this hand: *It shows a very strong hand with good spades*. More on this later.

People often are concerned that they will miss a good contract if they pass a hand like this. Usually this isn't a problem. Here's why:

- Sometimes it is the opponent's hand anyway. In this case, you'll be glad you kept quiet. If you double and the opponents get to game, *you've told them where all the high cards are.*
- If it is your hand, *the auction is not over.* Partner may be able to bid something (or double), particularly if it goes 1♣-P-P.
- Suppose the auction goes 1♣-P-1♠-P-2♠ (or 1NT). *Now you can double!* This shows support for the unbid suits, in this case spades and diamonds. (It also implies length in clubs because of the fact you didn't double or overcall originally.)
Note: if you double in a situation whether there are only 2 unbid suits, you must have at least 4-card support, not just 3.
- In some cases, you may be able to bid with a hand like this after all. With a doubleton heart and at least 15-18 points, you can overcall 1NT. And if your spades are a bit better (say KQJx), you can try overcalling 1♠. Overcalling on a *good* 4-card suit is not so bad, and it's definitely better than doubling.

Overcall or double?

Suppose RHO opens 1♣ and you have this hand: ♠Axx ♥AKxxx ♦QJx ♣xx

You have an opening bid and 3-card support for the unbid suits. Should you double?

No. It's better to bid 1♥ first. Why?

- If you double and partner bids spades or diamonds, how confident are you that you are in the best fit? You might be in a 4-3 fit while you might still have a 5-3 heart fit.
- If partner bid 1♠, would you try 2♥? No! That shows a *stronger* hand.

On the other hand, suppose you bid 1♥. Look at all the good things that can happen.

- Partner can support immediately with 3+ hearts. If he doesn't have 3, maybe he will bid something else. If he bids a suit, he probably has 5, so you get more information than if he bid over your double.
- Even if partner passes, sometimes you can have your cake and eat it too. Suppose it goes 1♣-1♥-2♣-P-P. *Now you can double*, which shows exactly the kind of hand you have: 5 hearts and at least 3 in the other 2 suits. So partner should know what to do. Bidding this way doesn't promise any extra strength (as doubling first and bidding would). It shows that you want to compete since the opponents have found a fit.

With a very weak 5-card major, it may be better to double. And with a 5-card minor, double is more likely to be correct, such as with ♠Axxx ♥KJx ♦Axxxx ♣x. But with an excellent minor and weak majors (♠xxx ♥Kxx ♦AQJ10x ♣Ax), overcall works better.

Responding to takeout doubles

It's important to remember that bidding after takeout doubles is *not* like bidding after an opening one-bid by partner. There are big differences between these 2 auctions:

1♣ - P - 1♥ and 1♣ - Dbl - P - 1♥.

In the first auction (we open 1♣):

- 1♥ promises at least 6 points. With less, responder simply passes.
- 1♥ is unlimited in strength. Even when playing strong jump shifts, 1H can show a very big hand.
- 1♥ is *forcing* (as are any new suits by responder). Responder has no idea yet whether partner has heart support, or how many clubs he has, or whether he has a side suit.

In the second auction (we double 1♣ for takeout),

- 1♥ promises *zero* points. Responder is not allowed to pass (except in rare cases where he has tremendous defense against 1♣).
- Doubler promises very specific distribution: at least 3 cards in the unbid suits.
- Therefore, responses to the double are *not forcing*. Partner usually has a very good idea what the best fit is, and it is up to responder to convey his strength.

Suppose you have this hand: ♠xxxx ♥xxx ♦xxx ♣xxx. If partner opens 1♣, you have an easy pass, of course. If instead partner doubles 1♣, what do you bid? Again easy, 1♠. You only have one 4-card suit so you bid it at the one level.

Suppose you have this hand: ♠Axxxx ♥KJx ♦Ax ♣xxx. If your partner opens 1♣ or 1♦ or 1♥, you bid 1♠. No problem, it's forcing, partner must bid again, and you can make sure you get to game.

I've seen people respond 1♠ to a takeout double with this hand, but this is *wrong!* Why?

- You know your partnership has at least 8 spades, so you are positive you want to play in spades. There's no need to explore for a trump fit.
- You know your partner has opening bid values, so your side has enough to bid game.

Therefore, bid 4♠ immediately! There's no reason to mess around when you *know what the final contract should be*.

Suppose you have a bit less: ♠Qxxxx ♥KJx ♦Ax ♣xxx. Now, are you sure you want to be in game? No, not if partner has a minimum. So you make an invitational bid: 2♠. This shows 9-11 points and at least 4 spades. If your suit was hearts and the auction went 1♠-X-P, you would have to bid 3H to invite.

Note that a jump bid is not at all like a jump shift in response to an opening bid (either strong or weak). It shows a limited hand and invites game.

Therefore, when you make a simple *non-jump* suit response to a double, you show 0-8 points (maybe a bad 9). Given that, let's look at how the doubler should rebid.

Suppose you have ♠QJxx ♥xx ♦Axxx ♣KQx. A fine takeout double over 1♥.

If the bidding goes 1♥-X-P-1♠-P, you must *pass*. Some people raise instinctively, just as they would over 1♦-1♠. But this situation is different, because:

- You have already promised spade support
- You know there's no game because partner has a maximum of 8-9 points. If he had more, he would have jumped.

You might say: partner doesn't know I have 4 trumps. That's true, but he knows you have at least 3. So in this situation, your first priority is to send the message "no game". Later, if you have a chance to compete to 2♠, you probably will.

If you raise directly, you are saying "Partner, even though you have a weak hand, I still think we may have game if you have a maximum". So you need about 16-18 points to bid 2♠ directly. If the opening bidder interferes, you can shade that a little because it may be your last chance to compete... but you still need 4 spades and more than a minimum.

In fact, suppose my partner had jumped to 2♠ over my double. I would probably still pass! Even though I have 4 spades, this hand is minimum, and partner is only inviting. With a point more I'd probably raise to 3♠.

When responder has a choice of suits

When responding to a takeout double, sometimes you have a choice of suits. *Prefer majors to minors; otherwise respond in your longest suit.*

If you have a 5+ card major, *that is the trump suit*. Suppose you have this hand: ♠QJxxx ♥x ♦Kxxxx ♣xx. Bid 1♠, and if the opponents compete, plan to *rebid spades*. Don't bother bidding diamonds when you know you have an 8-card major suit fit. Again, this is different than how you'd bid after your partner opened.

If you rebid a minor, your major is only 4 cards, e.g. Axxx ♥x ♦Kxxxx ♣xxx. It is usually correct to bid 1♠ first even with 5 diamonds.

With 5-4 in the majors, bid the 5-card suit. With 4-4 in the majors, *bid spades first* if you are strong enough to rebid. Then you can rebid hearts, which gives partner an option. This is another difference from "normal" bidding.

With no 4-card major, consider bidding NT rather than a minor if you have a stopper in their suit. 1NT shows 7-10 HCP, 2NT 11-12, 3NT 13+ (or a very good minor).

With ♠Qxx ♥xx ♦Axxxx ♣KJx, 1NT is best over 1♣ -Dbl-P. 1♦ is an underbid. 2♦ is OK on points but game in a minor is unlikely & partner won't be able to bid NT.

Suppose your longest suit is their suit: then what?

- You can bid NT if your hand is reasonably balanced and you have enough strength.
- Rarely, you may actually have a hand where it is correct to pass! But you need a good hand and VERY good trumps to do this: ♠xx ♥J10x ♦AJx ♣QJ1097. *Hint*: if you pass a double for penalties, your partner *must lead a trump* (if he has one).
- Otherwise, bid another suit. If you have ♠xx ♥Qx ♦xxx ♣xxxxxx, *don't pass*. They will probably make 1♣x with overtricks despite your 6 trumps. Bid 1♦ instead.

- What you should never do (though I've seen people do this) is to bid their suit! If you really want to play in their suit, it's better to pass the double.

If you do bid their suit, it is a *cue bid*. This is the *only forcing bid* in response to a double. It says "I have a good hand but I'm not sure where we should be playing", & asks partner to describe further. The most common hand is 4-4 in the majors and invitational+ strength. Partner should bid his better major. If he bids a major & you raise, he can be passed with a minimum. If you bid a new suit, that's game forcing.

When RHO doesn't pass

If RHO bids after partner's double, this takes you off the hook if you have a very weak hand. So you only bid if you actually *want* to bid. How many points do you need? Depends on the level, and how long your suit is. With 4, you tend to have the upper end of the range (i.e. 6-8). With 5, you don't need much. Of course if you have enough to jump (or go to game), you still do that. And you might have to jump 1 level higher to show the invitational hand, e.g. 1♣ - Dbl - 1♠ - 3♥.

What does it mean if you double responder's bid? That depends on the bid:

- If responder bid a new suit, a double is for penalties! The reason: your partner promised something in all the other suits. If you, as well, have something, then opener must be short. It's even possible that responder is short and he was psyching!
- If responder raised, then it doesn't make sense to double them for penalties when they probably have at least an 8-card fit. In this case, you can make a **responsive double**. 1♣-Dbl-2♣-Dbl.

A responsive double is something like a takeout double. People play it different ways, but a useful agreement is this:

- If they bid and raised a major, the double shows length in both minors and asks partner to choose. (If you have 4 cards in the other major, you should bid it instead of making a responsive double.)
- If they bid and raised a minor, the double shows equal length in both majors. (With 5-4 in the majors, just bid the 5-card suit.)

Suppose RHO redoubles your partner's double. Technically you're off the hook here too... but don't pass just because you're weak. The problem is that if opener passes too, partner (the doubler) will have to decide what to bid. So you should *always* show a preference if you have one, regardless of strength. Pass means you don't have a preference among the unbid suits. Partner will know you are weak either way!

Doubling with hands too good to overcall

Usually it's better to overcall than double with a 5-card or longer suit, particularly a major. But if you have a very strong hand with a good suit, like ♠AKxxxx ♥Ax ♦Ax ♣Kxx, you need to take stronger action to make sure the hand doesn't get passed out. In the old days, you could bid 2S over an opening 1 bid to show this hand. As bidding evolved, people realized that these strong jump overcalls were rare and it was more valuable to play preemptive jump overcalls.

The way to handle these hands is to *double* first, then bid your suit at your next opportunity.

How strong do you have to be to double and then bid a new suit? *Very strong*. At least 18 points or equivalent distribution. Some people overdo this. Suppose you have an excellent 16-point hand like this: ♠AKxxx ♥Kx ♦AQx ♣xxx. If RHO opens 1♣, are you too strong to bid 1♠? NO! After 1 spade, if everyone passes, you are very unlikely to miss a game. Why?

- With 3-card support, your partner should raise with at least 6 points. Then you can invite game. (This is a separate topic... but ALWAYS raise your partner with 3 trumps and any reasonable hand. Don't think, maybe we buy the contract in 1 spade; it'll never happen. It's better to show your support immediately and interfere with the opponents)
- Without spade support, partner will need to have a decent hand, plus clubs stopped, to make 3NT. Surely he'll bid 1NT with ♠xx ♥Axxx ♦xxxx ♣KQx ... and it's not even clear you can make 3NT.

If you double instead, partner will bid his best suit, which is unlikely to be your suit, and may only be a 4-card suit. And if the opponents preempt, you may be forced to bid 3♠ or 4♠ to show your suit, which could be quite risky when you don't know if there's a fit. Of course, if you have a hand like ♠AKQxxx ♥x ♦Axxx ♣Ax, this is more than good enough to double first and then bid spades.

Suppose your hand is ♠Qxx ♥AQxx ♦xx ♣xxxx. LHO opens 1♣ and the auction goes 1♣-Dbl-P-1♥-P-1♠-P. Often people miss the significance of this auction... somehow it doesn't "sound" strong. But don't forget: *doubler never bids a new suit without a huge hand, because he already promised support for your suit.*

What should you bid? 4♠! With good trumps and a maximum double, if your partner has his bid you should be in game. You could bid 2♠ with as little as xxx ♥xxx ♦Kxxx xxx (game would be on opposite the hand above).

You can also double with a balanced hand of 19+ points (a hand *too strong* to overcall 1NT), planning to bid NT next time. For example, ♠KQx ♥AJxx ♦Axx ♣KQx.

Doubles of preempts

Doubles of preempts are similar to doubles of 1-bids, but there are some differences. They are still takeout doubles, not penalty doubles. Many people play takeout through the level of 4♥. If they open 4♠ or more, double is for penalties. (Mike Lawrence recommends that a double of 4♠ should be for takeout as well.)

The higher the level, the more strength doubler needs: about 2 points for each additional level. The "Rule of 7" says: assume your partner has a random 7 points when deciding whether to take action.

Off-shape doubles are a bit more common at higher levels. Since you are cramped for bidding space, you can't have everything & you have to take some risks. So occasionally you may double without the perfect distribution. Both players have to play the odds as far as what partner has, and you're not always going to be right.

The higher the level, the more likely it is that responder can pass for penalties. At the 1-level, it is very rare. At the 4-level it's fairly common. Suppose it goes 4♥ – X – P and you have ♠xx ♥QJ10x ♦Kxxx ♣xxx. Not a very good hand, but you may have 2 trump tricks and partner needs to have a good hand. Your side has no obvious game. If partner is really strong you may make 3NT or 5♦ but then you are likely to crush 4♥.

How about if they opened 3♥? It's a little riskier to double them into game, but you are unlikely to have game, and there is a pretty good chance of taking 5 tricks in hearts.

If they opened 2♥? Then it's too risky to pass. They only need to take 8 tricks and your partner isn't promising as much strength. So it's best to be safe and just bid 3♦ (or 2NT if you play Lebensohl).

Lebensohl is a convention used after a double of a weak 2 bid. It allows you to distinguish between a very weak forced 3-level response and a decent hand that isn't strong enough to bid 4. If partner doubles 2S and you have ♠xxx ♥xxx ♦Kxxx ♣xxx, bid 2NT first. Partner relays to 3♣; then you bid 3♦ which shows a very weak hand. Bidding 3♦ directly shows a better hand like ♠xxx ♥Ax ♦KQxxx ♣xxx.

Other auctions

Besides a direct double of RHO's opening bid, there are many other situations in which takeout doubles apply. We'll discuss some of them. Suppose you have this hand:

♠Kxxx ♥x ♦AQxx ♣xxxx

If RHO opens 1♥, this is a bit light to double. Only 9 points plus a singleton. But suppose you pass and it goes 2♥-P-P to you. This is a *balancing* situation. Now it's 100% clear to double! This might seem strange: why are you strong enough to double at the 2-level but not at the 1-level? There are several reasons for this:

- The opponents have found a fit, almost guaranteed to be 8+. When they have a known fit, the chances are excellent that we have a fit too. Why? Because with 5 or fewer cards in their suit, there's more room in our hands for 8+-card fits of our own. The Law of Total Tricks (and other competitive bidding guidelines) indicate that we should usually compete and possibly push them to the 3 level.
- They have stopped in a part score, which means their total point count is limited, and your partner should have something. When you first passed over 1♥, neither opponent had limited their hand, so it was actually more dangerous to act then.
- If you pass, the auction is over. When you pass in a non-balancing situation, your partner still has a chance to act.

These factors are important to keep in mind in situations where you are considering doubling later in the auction.

Suppose the auction goes 1♥-P-2♥ and you are next to bid. The opponents have a fit, so it's in your interest to compete. However, opener may still have a good hand. Should you double, with the same hand as above? Generally, yes. This is sort of an "advance balance" situation. Suppose you pass and opener passes. It's very unlikely that your partner will have the shape to double, since he may have 3-4 cards in their suit. It's up to

you, with shortness, to double. If it turns out that opener does have extras, you probably won't make your contract, but they are likely to try for game rather than doubling you.

Here's another common balancing double:

1♦ - P - P - P - Dbl

In this situation, the opponents don't necessarily have a good fit. However, they have limited their strength, and it is the last time you can act. It is usually wrong to let them play at the 1 level. With a hand as weak as ♠Axxx ♥Kxxx ♦x ♣xxxx, doubling would be fine. But a few cautions:

- Make sure you have proper shape when doubling light. With ♠Axxx ♥KJx xxx ♣xxx, pass quickly.
- Particularly when they bid a minor, there is a danger that if you reopen they may find a better fit. When they open a major, it's less likely.
- The balancing doubler's partner must be more conservative in responding, since the doubler may have a weaker hand than usual.

1♦ - P - 1♠ - P - 2♠ - Dbl

This situation we discussed earlier. Over 1♦, you must pass without spade support. When the opponents bid spades, there are now 2 unbid suits instead of 3, so the subsequent double shows hearts & diamonds (at least 4-4).

1♥ - P - 1NT - Dbl

This double is treated the same as a direct takeout double of 1♥, with support for the other 3 suits. You may need just a bit more strength, since your partner won't be able to bid at the 1 level, and they may not have a fit.

1♣ - P - 1♥ - Dbl

There are 2 unbid suits, so double shows both of them: *at least* 4-4 and a solid opening bid. This is not a balancing situation. Both opponents are unlimited, and they haven't shown a fit yet. If you pass, the auction isn't over. If the opponents show strength, you'll be glad you didn't double and reveal where all the points are.

1♠ - P - 2♣ - ?

Very dangerous. RHO is showing a good hand (particularly if playing 2/1 game force). The hand belongs to the opponents, so you must have super shape to double: something like ♠x ♥KQ10xx ♦QJ10xxx ♣x, where you may be able to find a good sacrifice.

1♣-1♠-2♣-P-P-Dbl

Discussed before. You bid 1♠ first to show a 5-card suit, then double later to show at least 3 cards in the other suits.

1♣-Dbl-2♣-P-P-2♠

This shows a *big hand* (18+) with good spades. You doubled first because you were too strong to overcall. Partner should respond with any strength at all.

1♠-P-1NT-P-2♠-Dbl

What is going on here? Is this a balancing situation? No! The opponents are somewhat limited, but they have not found a fit (opener shows 6+ spades, but responder might have no spades). There is no difference in which suits are unbid, so the double can't be for takeout. It doesn't make sense to force partner to bid at the 3 level after passing the first time. This is the rare case where the double is for penalties! Partner has a hand like ♠ KJ10987 ♥xx Ax ♣Axx.

1♠-P-1NT-P-P-Dbl

Also for penalties. No reason to double for takeout after passing the first time.

The opening bidder can also make takeout doubles. For example:

1♦ - P - P - 1♠ - Dbl

This shows length in hearts and clubs, in addition to diamonds. Opener must have a very good hand to want to compete in this situation, since partner is very weak.

1♦ - 1♠- P - P - Dbl

This is also for takeout, but it doesn't require extra values because responder may have been forced to pass with some values. In particular, partner might have a spade stack and be hoping to pass your double. This needs to be discussed along with negative doubles: a big topic that requires another lecture.

One important thing to note: *a double is never for takeout if doubler's partner has bid or doubled previously*. It may be for penalties, but there are other types of low-level doubles too (negative, responsive, support, maximal overcall, card-showing).