

## PENALTY DOUBLES by Maritha Pottenger

If your agreement is to play Negative Doubles and Responsive Doubles through 2 Spades, then a penalty oriented double would be:

1. Double of a bid in competition at 3 level or above. (If you play negative doubles through the 3 level, this does not apply.)
2. Direct Double of a NT bid (unless playing D.O.N.T. or other artificial system)
3. Direct Double of opponent's overcall of 1NT
4. Double after partner has accurately described both her strength and distribution, e.g., bid NT, opened a Weak Two, etc.
5. Double after either partner has made an earlier redouble
6. Double after either partner has made a penalty double earlier or passed a takeout double, converting to penalty.
7. Double of any artificial bid (eg. Stayman, Cuebid, Blackwood) or responses. This is primarily lead directing.
8. Double of an opening game bid in the minors.
9. Double of a 4S opening bid. (Double of 4H opening bid is considered takeout, but you are allowed to pass if you have a flat hand, no spade fit, and one or more tricks in your hand).

**To make a penalty double below game, you need length and strength in their suit.** The following is advisable:

- 1) At least 18-22 HCP between you and your partner (points evenly split with opponents)
- 2) A misfit with partner's suit
- 3) Use the "Rule of 10": Add your expected trump tricks to the number of tricks the opponents are contracting to win. For a good penalty double, the answer should be 10 or higher. [This applies to below-game doubles.]
- 4) Also use the "Rule of 12": Add the number of trumps you hold to the number of tricks the opponents are contracting to win. For a good penalty double, the answer should be 12 or higher. [This applies to below-game doubles.]

This means that **you need 3 trump winners for penalty doubles at the 1 level; 2 trump winners for penalty doubles at the 2 level; and 1 trump winner for penalty doubles at the 3 level.** To estimate trump winners, assume Declarer plays trumps from the top. Check the spot cards! Q10853 should be 3 winners. (After Declarer cashes Ace & King, your Q108 is sitting over Declarer's J97.) KQ76 is only 2 tricks. After Declarer cashes Ace, you can kill Jack with King & kill 10 with Queen, but Declarer's 9 still picks up your 7. **In terms of length, you need at least 5 trumps to penalty double at 1-level; at least 4 trumps to penalty-double at 2 level and at least 3 trumps to penalty-double at 3-level.** Also consider whether you are behind or in front of Declarer. Should meet BOTH Rule of 10 AND Rule of 12 for double to be advisable. **(Can also be called Rule of 2 and 4 as that's what you need at the 2 level.)**

Be wary of making penalty doubles at low-level contracts when you know your partner is void in their trump suit. Even five reasonably good trumps in your hand may not be enough. (It is often important for partner to be able to lead trumps through Declarer at least once. Otherwise, you might well become end played with your long trump holding. If your spots are great, you don't care whether partner is void.)

As always, consider vulnerability and how profitable your double is likely to be. Penalty doubles are vital when you want to STOP partner from (perhaps) bidding on. They are essential to ensure that your side gets a plus score. If, however, you think that you & your partner probably have game, you have to

figure out whether doubling the opponents or bidding your game will give you a higher score. However, unless you are red and the opponents are white, doubling is usually the best course. Remember **Budak's Rule: If your side has game, the opponents are probably down 800 or more.**

At matchpoints, you have lots of opportunities to convert take-out doubles, negative doubles, and responsive doubles into penalty doubles—simply by passing. **Remember: on misfit hands, it is usually better to DEFEND than to declare** (and game takes more HCPs on misfit hands, anyway). When you have four or more trumps and two trump tricks, and your side has half the deck in HCP, consider converting a negative or responsive double into a penalty double. An example would be: QJ109 Kx AKxx 9xx. You open 1D and LHO bids 2S (Weak Jump Overcall). Your partner makes a negative double—promising 10 HCP (forcing you to the 3 level) and 4 hearts. Your best contract, from your point of view, is 2S doubled, so PASS.

At matchpoints, the “other half” of negative doubles is essential. That means when you open the bidding; LHO overcalls at the one or two level; partner and RHO pass; **if you are short in the suit overcalled, you MUST reopen the bidding with a double.** Partner could easily be sitting their with a “stack” in that trump suit and s/he cannot double because a double by her would be a NEGATIVE double—promising the other suits. So, you make a reopening “take-out” double and partner happily converts it to penalty by passing. Many times you can get 300, 500, and even more, when your side does not make game because it is a misfit hand.

Generally speaking, most bridge players do not make near enough penalty doubles. Another rule of thumb is: **If they are not making 1 in 10 of your doubled contracts, you are not doubling enough.** Some matchpoint penalty doubles are close. You are trying to protect your part score. If, for example you and your partner bid 3H and the opponents compete to 3S, you may double because you feel reasonably sure that your side was making +140 and you want 100 or 300 (if they or nonvul) or 200 or 500 (if the opponents are vulnerable) to protect your score. Obviously, if you know hands are extremely distributional, you would not be doubling very often.

**Sometimes a matchpoint penalty double is made to STOP your partner from bidding.** If you suspect from the auction that partner is likely to take one more call and you do NOT believe it will work out well, you should double the opponents—even if you aren't SURE of the set—to stop your partner from bidding on. [I will note that when I've made these kinds of doubles, they usually work out well.] This is one form of being a good partner—protecting partner from making a mistake!]

At IMPS (Swiss Teams), it is rare to double below game. You must be SURE of your set with some definite trump tricks. Matchpoints are totally different and call for aggressive doubling. With matchpoints, be willing to double 3 and 4 level contracts even without trump tricks if you have a balanced hand when you know your side has the vast majority of the strength. [Balanced hands prefer to defend than declare.] Beware of doubling when the opponents have shown a 2-suited hand and could be cross-ruffing everything. Similarly, if your partner makes a takeout, negative, or responsive double at the 3 level and above, consider passing, converting to penalties the more HCP strength you have, and the more balanced your hand is.

**So learn to love that red card.** You find a surprising number of opportunities for +300; +500; +800 when your side has only a part score. Go for it!!