

Fifth Chair



Doubles after a 1NT opening bid

by Marc Smith

Let's start with auctions where you double the opening 1NT. (There are conventional methods where a double of 1NT is used to show something other than a strong hand, but we'll ignore those. In my view you should always play a double of 1NT, even a strong notrump, as a penalty double.)

Let's first establish why a double of 1NT should be for penalties.

Logically, how can you make a takeout double when the opponents have not bid a suit? A takeout double, by definition, shows shortage in opener's suit and support for the other three. Of which suit would a double of 1NT be a takeout? So, a double of 1NT is a penalty double.

Many players in places like the USA and parts of Europe do not understand this simple theory. Playing a weak notrump in these places can prove very effective. In these places where the norm is a strong notrump, it is common practice to double a weak 1NT opening with "the middle of opener's range" - i.e., 13 HCP upwards. The doubler's partner then bids his best suit and they stumble their way to a fit, perhaps a game, with neither player knowing how strong partner's hand is.

That doesn't sound very efficient, does it? And it's not. What's more, the weak notrump is almost never punished for a large penalty, even when opener's partner has nothing.

So, what do you need to make a penalty double of a 1NT opening?

Essentially a double of 1NT says to your partner, "I have a better hand than opener." If RHO's 1NT shows 15-17 HCP, you need 18+ to double. If the 1NT opening is 12-14, then you need 15+.

(You may therefore think that against opponents who are playing a mini 1NT opening, showing 10-12 points, a double should show 13+, but that would be poor tactics. You should still wait until you hold 15+ points to double a mini notrump.)

Those are the HCP requirements for a double when you have a balanced hand. Against a strong notrump you will rarely hold 18+ HCP. However, remember that you will be on lead if 1NT doubled becomes the final contract. If you have a good opening lead, you can double on fewer HCP. For example:

S 853

H A

D A4

C KQJ10964

You can double any 1NT opening with this 14-HCP hand. There are two reasons why doubling is best. First, if your double ends the auction, as it often will, you can lead the king of clubs. Declarer will be able to cash some spade tricks, but when he leads a red suit, you will be able to win and cash the rest of your clubs. Second, doubling shows a strong hand. It is entirely possible that your opponents can make game in a major here. They are less likely to bid it, though, when they have been doubled for penalties at the one-level.

This example is even more extreme:

S 6

H 92

D 6

C AKQ1087543

When RHO opens 1NT (irrespective of the strength), there is a good chance your opponents are cold for at least game, perhaps even a slam. One thing is for certain, though -- it won't be in notrump.

You could preempt with 5C. A better option is a cheeky penalty double, despite holding only 9 HCP. Most of the time, the opponents will remove themselves to a major-suit contract. If they bid game, you can still sacrifice.

However, doubling may lead to a much better result. Sometimes the opponents will be scared out of bidding their game, thinking you have a much stronger hand. Even better, your LHO, who may be looking at a relatively balanced hand with quite a few HCP, may decide to teach you a sharp lesson by redoubling. You will still be cashing club tricks tomorrow.

Compare those hands with this one:

S Q865

H AJ3

D KQ7

C A74

RHO opens 1NT showing 12-14 points. With a 16-count you should double, but don't be surprised if the contract makes easily. Suppose opener has 13 points, the middle of his range. That leaves 11 HCP to be shared between LHO and your partner. If your partner has 8+ of those, you will collect a nice penalty from 1NT doubled (or some doubled two-level contract). If LHO is the one with the 8+ points, you may run into a redouble. Now it will be your side that has a choice of ways in which to concede a large minus score.

If the points are split fairly evenly between LHO and partner, 1NT probably will go down because your honors are well placed over declarer. However, much will depend on your opening lead.

The following hand is a much better double of 1NT, even though it has fewer HCP, because you have a good opening lead.

S A5

H K104

D 85

C KQJ964

Although you have only 13 HCP, this is a reasonable double, even of a strong notrump. Sure, things might go awry, but the chances are that 1NT doubled will fail if your partner shows up with his share of the missing points and declarer does not have a double stopper in clubs.

Nothing is certain except death and taxes, so you still may give away a trick on opening lead. However, you are far more likely to blow a trick leading from hands such as the balanced one above.