

The Foundation System

The Classical Takeout Double

INTRODUCTION

Auctions beginning with a takeout double are responsible for more bidding errors than any other single facet of modern American bidding. In addition to doubling with hands which would better be handled by an overcall or a pass, the most common errors are overbidding by the Doubler and underbidding by the Doubler's partner. To a certain extent, the overbidding and underbidding tend to compensate each other and reasonable contracts are often reached. Frequently, though, Doubler's partner is not underbidding (he merely has an awful hand) and the partnership gets too high; or Doubler is not overbidding (he really has a monster) and the partnership misses a good game or even slam (though the frequency of slams when the opponent's have opened the bidding is so low that it is rarely worthwhile to even think of a slam after a takeout double).

This review attempts to summarize modern American practice in the following areas: (1) when to double; (2) responding to the double; (3) Doubler's rebid; and (4) defending against the takeout double; using mainly a question and answer format. It should be noted that many well-developed expert partnerships have explicit agreements which may deviate from the approaches described here. If you do not have any such explicit agreements with your present partners, or are playing with a new partner for the first time, your best chance for mutual understanding lies in following the approach described below. Many, perhaps most, of the example hands will involve close decisions, where there is some merit to two or more different actions. In those cases, the reasoning process used in deciding on a particular action is often more important than precisely which action is chosen.

Please note that although I will sometimes describe the requirements for a certain bid in terms of the 4321 point count because of its widespread use in hand evaluation, point count is of very little use in evaluating potential suit contracts, where the important factors are winners, losers, controls, positioning of high cards, and suit texture (tens, nines, and eights in long suits). Note also that when point count is mentioned here, it is always high-card points (HCP) *with no additions for distributional values such as doubletons, singletons, voids, or long suits*. There are always a fixed total of 40 HCP in my decks; distributional values are evaluated in terms of winners, losers, and controls.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Culbertson's day, competitive bidding after an opponent opened with a one-bid in a suit was relatively simple. If your hand was strong enough that you would have opened the bidding, you made a takeout double (or bid 1NT if you would have opened 1NT had the opponent passed). With a weaker hand, you either passed or made a simple overcall, while an intermediate jump overcall was available for those strong distributional hands with a suit which was playable opposite a singleton in partner's hand. The 4321 highcard- point (HCP) requirement for an overcall in that era was about 8-12, although of course HCPs were not used in those days, since high-cards were evaluated in terms of honor tricks.

By Goren's day, it had become obvious that finding an adequate trump fit at a sufficiently low level was often difficult or impossible when the takeout double could be based on a hand with virtually any distribution (including a singleton or void in an unbid suit). Accordingly, it became

common practice to treat the takeout double as a three-suited hand (4441, 5431, 5440, 5530, 4432, or occasionally 4333) with shortness in the opponent's suit, at least Qxx support for each of the other three suits, and at least a minimum opening bid in high-card strength. This approach made it necessary to allow an overcall on onesuited or two-suited hands of opening bid strength for which a takeout double would have been used under the Culbertson approach. Thus the HCP requirement for a simple overcall was broadened to about 8-17, with the exact limits depending upon such factors as vulnerability, suit quality, and positioning of honor cards. For hands stronger in HCP than the agreed maximum for an overcall, the limitation of the takeout double to three-suited hands was waived. If, after the response to the takeout double, the Doubler bid a new suit or notrump (instead of passing or raising partner's response to the double), he guaranteed a hand stronger in high-cards than the 17 HCP maximum for a simple overcall. The takeout doubler's partner could thus be assured that he would always find *either* Qxx or better support for any new suit he chooses to bid *or* sufficient high-card strength to compensate for the lack of fit.

During the heyday of the Italian Blue Team in the 1960's, they developed a hybrid style which combined the broad-ranged overcalls of the classical Goren approach with the old-fashioned Culbertson era's flexible distributional requirements for the takeout double. Despite the Blue Team's unparalleled success, their methods were never widely adopted, nor were some of the new hyper-modern methods such as transfer responses to takeout doubles and transfer overcalls. Therefore, this review will focus exclusively upon the classical Goren approach which still forms the basis for most modern American competitive bidding.

DEFENDING AGAINST THE TAKEOUT DOUBLE

Theory

The primary weapon in defending against a takeout double is the redouble, which shows a strong hand of at least 10 HCP, usually with good defensive values. Opener is requested to pass with any normal hand in case the Redoubler wishes to make a penalty double, but may make a minimum rebid with a weak distributional opening or a jump rebid with a strong distributional opening. With a distributional opening of intermediate strength, opener should pass and then remove partner's penalty double. It is rarely possible to punish the opponents severely at the one-level, so after a double of a 1C, 1D, or 1H opening, most experts play that a new suit at the one-level is forcing while other new suit bids are natural and non-forcing. Failure to redouble does not therefore deny holding as much as 10 HCP. Indeed, with a strong defensive hand and a singleton in Opener's suit, it is often advisable to pass the takeout double in hopes that the doubler will raise his partner's response and you can make a penalty double at a higher level than if you had warned the opponents with a redouble. The redouble thus tends to show one of two types of hand: (a) support for Opener's suit with good defensive values and at least 10 HCP; or (b) a hand of at least game-invitational strength without support for Opener's suit and without a major suit which could be shown at the one-level.