

Reopening Doubles of 1 NT Responses and Rebids

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What sort of hand should the doubler have in this auction?

South	West	North	East
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	Pass	Dbl

Many players would take this as a reopening takeout double, showing both minor suits and a hand of this sort: ♠-432 ♥-76 ♦-AQ76 ♣-KJ75.

Played this way, such doubles are dangerous. The opponents have not found a fit, you have no reason to believe that partner has four cards in a minor suit (more likely he has four in each major), and you are contracting to take 8/13 of the tricks with perhaps 6/13 of the total points.

Since the opponents figure to have a majority of the high card points (HCP), few players would consider a double of this sort as primarily for business. How could it be? Even with the opening lead advantage, how can one hope to profit by doubling the stronger side in a notrump contract?

The fallacy in this logic lies in the implied assumption that points are the same as strength, which is not true. Point count is an estimate of strength, an estimate that may sometimes be way off.

Points are values assigned to cards on the basis of their average worth. That worth does not apply to every deal, however; it is just an average. KJx counts as four points, but is almost worthless if AQ10 is on the left. If AQ10 is on the right, the value of KJx is greater than the point count would indicate.

This means that it is possible to double 1NT responses and rebids in the reopening seat, and to double primarily for business. When do you double? When the opponents seem to be overvaluing their hands, when their high cards may not be worth as much as they think. How can you know for sure? You can't. You go by the odds, as in the rest of bridge.

With length and strength (positional strength, that is: AQ10, not AKQ) in a suit or suits bid on your right, with shortness and weakness in any suit bid on your left, the odds become good that the opponents have misjudged their strength and are contracting for more tricks than they can take. Yes, they have 21-22 HCP, but with finesses not working and suits not breaking they may end up with only five or six tricks. They have enough points for their bid, but not enough strength for their contract.

There are four possible situations for a reopening double of a 1NT response or rebid, depending on how many suits have been bid:

1)	South	West	North	East
	1♦	Pass	1NT	Pass
	Pass	Dbl		
2)	South	West	North	East
	1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
	1NT	Pass	Pass	Dbl
3)	South	West	North	East
	1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
	1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
	Pass	Dbl		
4)	South	West	North	East
	1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass
	1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
	1NT	Pass	Pass	Dbl

What is required for each of these doubles? Let's look at each. No. 1) is the reopening double of a 1NT response:

South	West	North	East
1♦	Pass	1NT	Pass
Pass	Dbl		

The minimum for a non-vulnerable double in this sequence might be something like:
 ♠-A105 ♥-KJ3 ♦-K1097 ♣-1097.

To double with a hand this light, conditions have to be just right, as they are here: a) The diamond suit, bid on the right, is bottled up; b) If partner takes out to a suit, she will find support; c) You can stand any lead; d) You have tenaces (KJ, A10) that may kill honor strength in opener's hand; e) You have many honor cards, a very important factor; f) You are not vulnerable, so down one doubled (or two undoubled) may be okay if partner runs to a suit. If any of these conditions are weakened, you need extra strength to compensate.

One drawback of a No. 1) double is that you have information about only one enemy suit and cannot be confident that the opponents have overvalued their hands. Another is that the 1NT responder has a minimum of six HCP, and opener may not be minimum.

On the other hand, the reopening double of a 1NT response is a crunching answer to the light opening bids one sees these days, especially in third seat. Rather than jump into the bidding with an immediate notrump overcall or takeout double, just pass with strength in opener's suit. If a 1NT response gets

passed around to you, the ensuing double may earn a big penalty. Sometimes the opponents bid higher, making your pass even more profitable.

No. 2) is the reopening double of a 1NT rebid by opener:

South	West	North	East
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	Pass	Dbl

This is the best opportunity for a lucrative double. Responder may have only four or five HCP, stretching to show a major suit. Opener has a maximum of 15 HCP (probably not that, if his notrump range is 15-17 HCP). With information about two suits, you can assess the relative strength of the two sides more accurately than in No. 1). You might have only 10 HCP with a hand that is otherwise ideal: ♠-AQ108 ♥-J106 ♦-52 ♣-QJ108. The conditions are perfect: strength over the spade suit, weakness in diamonds (any finesse there will fail), a good suit to attack after partner's probable spade lead, and no isolated kings or queens lying under opener's high cards. They could go down three! If partner must pull the double, you have support for both unbid suits.

No. 3) and No. 4) are similar:

South	West	North	East
1♣	Pass	1♥	Pass
1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
Pass	Dbl		

South	West	North	East
1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	Pass	Dbl

In both sequences, each opponent has bid at least twice. Watch out here. Responder is unlikely to be sub-minimum. A great deal is known about the distribution of the opposing suits, but partner has little choice about passing the double. Where can he go? Still, with ideal holdings you can double. All it takes is a hand with good tenace/length combinations in suits bid on the right, weakness/shortness in those bid on the left, plus a reasonable supply of honor cards. The doubler in No. 3) might have: ♠-AJ98 ♥-42 ♦-QJ10 ♣-A1087. The No. 4) doubler could hold: ♠-KJ97 ♥-83 ♦-AQ1086 ♣-54.

So you have doubled. Now what does partner do? Deciding whether to pass or bid, he thinks: "Am I positionally strong in any suit bid on my right?" "Am I weak and short in any suit bid on my left?" "Could I score more (or lose less) by bidding instead of passing?"

If you are weak in a suit bid on your right you can rightly fear that the opponents have a running suit there. Remember, partner is usually weak in that suit.

Why is it good to be weak in a suit bid on the left? Partner has implied strength there, so wouldn't it be better to have a high card fit in that suit? No! Strength opposite strength is a wasteful duplication. If you are not swallowing up the opponents' high cards, you are biting the air and they may make their contract.

Always go for a likely plus in your own contract rather than attempt a doubtful defense of 1NT doubled, especially against non-vulnerable opponents. Buying the hand will probably be a satisfactory result, and partner's defensive hand should reduce the likelihood that the opponents can find a good suit contract after your takeout bid.

Don't pull the double to a four-card suit, even with a bad hand. If you can't beat 1NT you're probably dead anyway. Besides, the doubler's hand is unlimited (except for a passed hand, of course). He could have 1NT defeated in his own hand and have no support for your suit. It is murder to double 1NT with a monster hand and then have partner pull the double by bidding a Jxxx suit (opposite your Qx).

After a double of 1NT, the opponents cannot play the hand un-doubled. If either opponent runs from the double, the next hand can pass the bid around to partner, who must bid or double. The die was cast with the double of 1NT. If you get killed once in a while, that's to be expected. More often you'll come out on top. Any other policy lets the opponents off the hook too often, when a player cannot double a runout bid and therefore chooses to bid out of fear that partner will not act.

If you do pass partner's double, what do you lead? (You are on lead.) If you lack a good suit of your own, try leading dummy's suit, which the doubler is supposed to have covered. She may not be that well fixed, however, so if you have some constructive lead of your own, give it a try.

Now let's look at a hand that is not a good double, but one with which many players would double:

West	North	East	South
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
1NT	Pass	Pass	?

South holds, vulnerable: ♠-952 ♥-A87 ♦-KJ9 ♣-KQ64. What should he do? The answer is pass, fast. This hand is not nearly so good as its point count indicates. Diamonds have been bid on the left, so KJ9 may be only as good as 432. The spade suit is breaking well, and any finesse there will work. The ace of hearts is no surprise to the opposition, who are quite prepared to knock out aces. If the ace of clubs is on the left, the KQ of clubs needs the jack in partner's hand to be worth much. If a double here is supposed to be for takeout, good luck. North is unlikely to take more than six tricks in a doubled contract of 2♣ or 2♥. Here is the deal:

North

♠ K43
 ♥ 9653
 ♦ Q86
 ♣ 1093

West

♠ J107
 ♥ QJ6
 ♦ A10732
 ♣ AJ

East

♠ AQ86
 ♥ K102
 ♦ 54
 ♣ 8752

South

♠ 952
 ♥ A87
 ♦ KJ9
 ♣ KQ64

Not so bad, at that. The diamond bidder does not have AQ over the KJ, and the club situation is okay, although blocked. Still, they make one or two overtricks if South doubles. Or should North pull the double? Two hearts goes down four, even with a 3-3 trump split.

Let's change the South hand, reducing the point count but increasing the real strength:
 ♠-KJ108 ♥-A1052 ♦-94 ♣-QJ10. Now South can double 1NT with some confidence,
 in view of the spade strength and diamond weakness. This time the deal is:

North

♠ 54
 ♥ 763
 ♦ KJ83
 ♣ K842

West

♠ 632
 ♥ QJ4
 ♦ AQ762
 ♣ A5

East

♠ AQ97
 ♥ K98
 ♦ 105
 ♣ 9762

South

♠ KJ108
 ♥ A1052
 ♦ 94
 ♣ QJ10

East-West have the same sort of hands as before, with 22 HCP. Lacking a good suit, North leads a spade against 1NT doubled. When the smoke clears, East-West are down two, minus 300 or 500.

Get the point?