

Houdini

Houdini is a convention employed to escape from a horrible 1NT contract that has been doubled, thereby likely to result in a heavy penalty for your side. It is most useful whenever you are playing a weak no-trump (12-14 HCP) or a mini no-trump (9-11 HCP), but can also be employed for any strength of no-trump opening whenever a penalty double is likely to prove costly.

Over the penalty double of the opening 1NT, the responder *in third seat* has the following options:

- **Pass** - forcing partner to redouble. A pass of the redouble is to play and implies that the opponents should be doubled for penalties in whatever suit they bid. A bid over the redouble implies a weak hand and shows the lower ranked of two *non-touching* suits (i.e. holding clubs and hearts *or* clubs and spades *or* diamonds and spades with at least 4-4 shape.)
- **Redouble** - showing a single-suited hand, either with a five-card suit or any 4-3-3-3 shape where the four-card suit is of some reasonable quality. The opener must rebid 2♣, which can be passed if that is where the responder wants to play, or ‘corrected’ to the responder’s suit.
- **Bid 2♣/2♦/2♥** - showing the lower ranked of two *touching* suits with at least 4-4 shape or any 4-4-4-1 hand where two touching suits are of better quality than the third four-card suit or any 4-3-3-3 hand where the *higher-ranking* touching three-card suit is of reasonable quality (i.e. 2♣ shows clubs and diamonds; 2♦ shows diamonds and hearts; 2♥ shows hearts and spades.)

When the penalty double is made by the opponent sitting in the fourth seat (i.e. the pass-out seat), the responder has the following options:

- **Pass** - is to play, with the expectation that the opener will make the contract.
- **Redouble** - showing a single-suited hand, as outlined above. The opener must rebid 2♣, which can either be passed or corrected to the responder’s suit.
- **Bid 2♣/2♦/2♥** - showing the lower ranked of *any* two suits. The opener either passes or bids the next suit up if he holds two-card support in the responder’s first suit. This can then be

corrected to the responder's second suit in the knowledge that the opener has at least three-card support.

The big advantage of using Houdini is that the opponents can never be sure of the length of the responder's suit or suits and often rescue the opener from a horrible 1NT contract themselves. Here are some examples of the convention in action.

Example 1

♠	A 9 4 2	Over 1NT – X - ?, the responder bids 2♥, showing the
♥	8 7 6 4	two major suits. If the opener has longer hearts than
♦	5 3	spades he will pass and with longer spades than hearts
♣	8 6 2	he will correct to 2♠. If the opener has three cards in
		both majors he will elect to play in his better suit.

When the penalty double is made in fourth seat and this is passed round to you, remove to 2♥, showing hearts and spades and leaving your partner to decide which is the better option.

Example 2

♠	A 9 4 2	Exactly the same shape as Example 1 , but this time
♥	K J 6 4	the responder will pass the penalty double around to
♦	5 3	the opener, who will redouble. The redouble will be
♣	Q 6 2	passed when it comes back to the responder, in the
		expectation either that partner will easily make the
		contract or that the player in fourth seat will panic and the opponents will
		then concede a hefty penalty themselves.

A fourth-seat penalty double is very unlikely to be passed round to you unless your right-hand opponent has passed out after a panic attack. You will be very happy to settle for a healthy penalty of whichever suit they attempt to escape into.

Example 3

♠	A 9 6 4 2	Over 1NT – X - ?, the responder will redouble,
♥	8 7 4	showing a single-suited hand and forcing the opener
♦	5 3	to rebid 2♣. The responder will then 'correct' to 2♠,
♣	8 6 2	<i>unless the opponents have already 'rescued' to their</i>
		<i>own suit</i> , in which case the responder will be only too
		happy to pass. When this hand came up in a congress some years ago the
		player making the original penalty double actually 'rescued' his side to

2♠ after the opener rebid 2♣. Needless to say this contract did not fare too well when his partner showed up with a 4-4-4-1 hand with a singleton spade and the opener held J 8 doubleton.

You will have already taken action to transfer partner into your spade suit and so the fourth-seat penalty double of 1NT will not arise.

Example 4

<p>♠ 5 3 ♥ Q 6 ♦ J 8 4 2 ♣ 10 9 7 3 2</p>	<p>When this hand was played in a Teams match, both opening bidders were doubled when they opened 1NT. One pair was playing ‘exit transfers’ and got into terrible trouble when the opposition doubled 2♣ and the suit broke badly. The pair at the other table was playing Houdini, however, and when the responder bid 2♣ over the penalty double the pair managed to escape into their 4-4 diamond fit and actually made the contract when the opener held ♦ A Q X X and also held good hearts. The point of this tale is that it is always better to give your partner options if you can and thereby you are far more likely to end up in a superior contract.</p>
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Over the fourth-seat penalty double you will remove this to 2♣, showing clubs and another suit. With three-card club support partner will pass, regardless of the shape of the rest of his hand. With a doubleton club and at least three diamonds, partner will correct to 2♦, leaving you to decide the best alternative.

Example 5

<p>♠ 7 6 4 ♥ Q 6 2 ♦ J 8 4 2 ♣ 9 7 3</p>	<p>This hand is difficult, even for Houdini exponents. The best option is to bid 2♦ over the penalty double of your partner’s 1NT opening. Ostensibly this shows a 4-4 shape with diamonds and hearts, of course, but the best you can hope for on this hand is to escape to a healthier contract than playing in a doubled 1NT when the opponents are quite likely to be able to make 3NT themselves. With luck partner will be able to pass 2♦, even if the opponents double it. Alternatively he may have something like ♥ A K X X – you never know your luck!</p>
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If the penalty double is passed round to you, you will remove to 2♦, showing either diamonds and hearts or diamonds and spades. Partner will correct to 2♥ *only if he holds a doubleton diamond*.

Example 6

♠	7 6 4	The same strength and shape as the Example 5 , but the four-card suit is not followed by a three-card suit of quality. This time you must pass the double of the opening 1NT around to your partner, who is required to re-double. If this is passed back to you then you will remove to 2♣, ostensibly showing clubs and hearts or clubs and spades. Partner will either pass if he has longer (or better) clubs than hearts or ‘correct’ to 2♥ if he would prefer to play in either major. The other alternative is for partner to remove 2♣ to 2♦. This <i>guarantees</i> a five-card diamond suit while <i>denying</i> more than a doubleton club. Therefore partner is showing a 5-3-3-2 hand, with a willingness to play in either major, but offering you the option to pass 2♦ if you hold a 5-4-3-1 hand with a singleton in either major and three-card diamond support.
♥	Q 6 2	
♦	9 7 3	
♣	J 8 4 2	

If the penalty double is passed round to you, you will remove to 2♣, showing clubs and another suit. If partner removes this to 2♦, *you must correct to 2♥ rather than pass 2♦*. Your three-card heart suit is more likely to be a better fit than your miserable three-card diamond suit, unless you are unlucky enough to find partner with a five-card diamond suit. The best way to avoid this possibility is to have a partnership understanding that the opener will always remove a fourth seat penalty double immediately, whenever he has opened 1NT with a five-card suit. This agreement will cost whenever the responder has a good hand, however.

Example 7

♠	A 8 5 2	It would be a mistake to remove a penalty double of 1NT to 2♣ on this hand, even though you do have 4-4 shape in the minors. If you do bid 2♣ you will miss the option of rescuing into a good 4-4 spade fit when partner holds a 4-4-3-2 hand with both majors or a 4-3-3-3 hand with a four-card spade suit or a 4-3-3-3 hand with four hearts and a good quality three-card spade suit. In all of these alternatives a 2♠ contract is virtually guaranteed to be better than playing in a minor, unless partner holds four-card support for a minor. The only time this decision to pass the double will cost will be if partner holds a 4-3-3-3 hand with a four-card diamond suit.
♥	7	
♦	J 7 6 4	
♣	J 7 6 4	

You should remove the fourth-seat penalty double of the 1NT opening to 2♣, showing clubs and another suit. If partner removes this to

2♦, *you must correct to 2♠*, since you know that partner has at least three-card spade support.

Example 8

♠	8 6 5 2	The same shape and high-card strength as Example 7 , but this time it would certainly be an error to seek a fit in spades. You are far more likely to find a good fit in either minor than you are to find a 4-4 spade fit. So you must remove the penalty double of 1NT to 2♣, thus showing at least 4-4 in clubs and diamonds and leaving partner to choose the better option.
♥	7	
♦	K 7 6 4	
♣	K 7 6 4	

Again you should remove the fourth-seat penalty double to 2♣, showing clubs and another suit. This time, however, you will pass if partner corrects to 2♦, since your diamond suit is likely to be of more value than your spade suit, even though you know you have at least a 4-3 fit in spades.

The key to Houdini is its flexibility. It allows you the best chance to find a suitable fit rather than concede a hefty penalty in a dodgy 1NT contract. At the same time the opponents are kept guessing about what their best options are and quite often they will not make the best choice.