The Art of Doubling



by Jeremy Dhondy

The Take-out Double at the One Level

THE TAKE-OUT double is about the most standard bit of armoury most players have and probably the first convention they learn but it leads to all sorts of problems because of poor judgement, inappropriate use and lack of discussion. This article is an attempt to assist to remedy some of this. Imagine you are playing at your local club in the Monday night pairs game and you pick up the following hands. In each case you are South. What action do you take and, perhaps just as important, what action would partner take?

Hand 1 East opens 1♥ ♠ K J 9 8 ♥ 5 ♦ A Q 6 5 ♣ K 10 8 6	**Hand 2** East opens 1♥ ♠ 5 ♥ K J 9 8 ♦ A Q 6 5 ♣ K 10 8 6
Hand 3 East opens 1♥ ♠ A K 3 ♥ K Q 5 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ J 10 8 6	**Hand 4** East opens 1♥ ♠ A K 3 ♥ K Q 5 2 ♦ A 7 6 ♣ A 10 8
Hand 5 East opens 1♥ ♠ K J 5 ♥ 7 ♦ A J 6 5 2 ♣ A 10 8 6	**Hand 6** East opens 1♥ ♠ J 2 ♥ K 8 3 ♦ A K J 9 8 7 ♣ A K

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Hand 7 East opens 1♥ ♠ A 2 ♥ K 8 3 ♦ A K J 9 8 7 ♣ A K	**Hand 8** East opens 1♥ ♠ A K 9 8 ♥ 5 4 ♦ A 10 6 5 3 ♣ K 10
Hand 9 East opens 1♥ ♠ A K 9 8 3 ♥ 5 4 ♦ A 10 6 5 ♣ Q 10	**Hand 10** East opens 1♣ ♠ K Q 5 4 ♥ K J 9 8 ♦ Q 10 5 ♣ 8 3

Hand 11
East opens 1♣, may be short
♠ K J 7
♥ K J 9 5
♦ K 6 5
♣ Q 10 8

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I'm expecting 100% votes on the first two hands. Hand 1 is a classical shape for a take-out double with support for all the other three suits. It couldn't be more suitable and Hand 2 is about the worst hand you can imagine with no support for the other major and length in the opponent's suit. Virtually all tournament players would not double if they had an unsuitable shape and a minimum hand. Some club players play that to double is not truly for take out but just showing an opening hand. This method is very hard to play because when the opponents raise the opening suit responder has little idea what sort of hand partner has.

For example, on Hand 1 if the auction started:

West	North	East	South
		1♥	Dble
3♥	?		

Then the hand responding to the take-out double wants to be sure that partner has either a suitable hand shape-wise, or enough power that wading into the auction at this level won't lead to disaster.

Principle 1: When you double one of a major, you should have support for the other major and usually not length in the major opened.

If you do have length in opener's suit, then with a minimum hand you will be content to pass but if you are stronger you will be able to consider overcalling with 1NT. Hand 3 is a classic example of a 1NT overcall. You can choose your range but generally it is best to play it as quite strong so you lessen the risk of being doubled and going for a large penalty. 15-18 is a typical range. Some prefer 15-17; the downside of that is having to double and then bid no-trumps perhaps at the two level on an 18 count. That leads to the question as to what you do with Hand 4. Here you have length in the opponents suit, you are far too strong to overcall with 1NT, and if you pass there is a risk that your side will miss game. A 2NT overcall is usually reserved to show the minors. What you might do here is double and then rebid no-trumps at the cheapest level. When you do overcall 1NT the expert may be less worried by perfect shape than if he opened 1NT. Having a singleton might not put him off thinking that was the best expression of the hand.

Hand 12
East opens 1♥
♠ A K J
♥ K J 8 5
♦ K 9 8 7 6
♣ K

On Hand 12, double is a non starter and overcalling 2♦ on such a poor suit does

not begin to describe the hand. You are too good to pass so 1NT is the least of all evils.

Principle 2: If they open a suit and you have length in that suit you should only bid if you have a strong hand, either overcalling 1NT or doubling first if you are too strong to do that.

You can't wait for the perfect hand. At pairs particularly you need to get into the action if you possibly can. In Hand 5 you have a good shape but only three cards in the other major. Some club players would overcall 2♦. This is a mistake because the suit is bad and also because you are playable in two other places. You could easily play in 2♦ going down but being able to make a plus score in either black suit and on a bad day you will be doubled and go for a sizeable penalty.

Principle 3: Prefer to double with reasonable support for the other three suits rather than overcalling, especially with a poor suit.

What is the range for an overcall? A non-vulnerable overcall at the one level could be as little as 8 points and some might do it on even less but at the two level it will be stronger. Even so there is a limit. If you overcalled 2♦ on Hand 6 and partner passed slowly you would be a bit worried you might have missed game. What can you do about that? The answer is to double and then if partner bids spades expecting you to have them, you will now bid diamonds. If you had a very good hand such as Hand 7, then even doubling and bidding 2♦ would not do justice to it so double and then jump in diamonds.

To double and then bid a new suit shows a good suit. If you held Hand 8, you might double but if partner removed it to 2♣ you will have to live with that because to bid 2♦ now shows the type of hand in Hand 6, not Hand 8. You *can* bid 2♦ on this hand if you play something called *equal level conversion* (which simply means that to bid a new suit does not promise extra values or a good suit) and if playing in France that would be what would be expected, but it is not the standard English method and most partners would not expect that. It is a more playable method if you can make a strong jump overcall with a good suit but weak or intermediate jumps are much more popular over here than on the continent. You could, of course, overcall with 2♦ on the hand but it risks the penalty mentioned previously and also missing the spade fit.

Principle 4: If you double and then bid a new suit, this shows a good hand.

What should you do if you have a decent hand with a five-card major? It depends on how decent the hand is. If it is like Hand 9, then you should overcall 1♠, but if you had another ace you would be worried that you might miss game even if partner had quite slender values. If you double on hands that have opening values with a five-card major you will often miss a 5-3 fit.

Principle 5: If you hold a five card major then prefer to bid it at the one level to doubling unless your hand is very strong.

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So far the opponents have been opening a major. Does it make a difference if they open a minor? In my view it does. You have to be prepared to get into the auction even if you have slender values so I recommend doubling on Hand 10 but, as above, if partner responded 1♦ I would not now bid a major as that would show a good hand.

If the opponents open a minor, I recommend doubling also on Hand 11. The danger is that you might get too high but the plus for the action is that you may be able to get to a contract quickly before the opponents have got their act together.

Principle 6: If the opponents open 1♣ or 1♦ be prepared to make a take-out double with quite slender values if you have a reasonable shape. The chances are that partner can respond at the one level. If you may force him to the two level you should be more shape suitable or have more strength.

More people are choosing to play a strong no-trump and five-card majors these days and that means that when they open 1♣ or 1♦ they don't always have the suit, so you will have more hands with length in the minor they have opened. On Hand 11 I would double a club that might be short. I am not nearly good enough to overcall 1NT and if I don't bid now my side may well be frozen out of the auction. I would also double a Precision 1♦ opener where 1♦ might only have two cards in the suit. Remember that while you don't know if they have the minor or not, neither does the responder and you can take advantage of that.

Principle 7: Be aggressive and less worried about perfect shape in making a take-out double over a minor opening that might be short.

Once you have decided what sort of hands you are going to double on and perhaps just as importantly what hands you are not going to double on the next stage will to plan how you respond and develop the auction because you will need agreements here also if you are to maximise the potential given to your side by getting into the action. ❐

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