



Penalty Doubles of Game Contracts Part I

CLEARLY, BEFORE even considering a penalty double, there has to be a reasonable chance of defeating the opponents' contract. Extreme caution should be exercised when doubling part-scores, because of the danger of doubling the opponents into game. *You should adopt a more aggressive approach to doubling game contracts.*

Furthermore, if playing pairs, an unsuccessful double might turn an average into a bottom but, at teams, turning -620 into -790 will cost just 5 IMPs. So, in many such circumstances, the risks involved are smaller in teams than in pairs. To illustrate the point, consider this deal. Imagine that you are East with the following hand, taken from a recent tournament:

| |
|--------------|
| ♠ 8 2 |
| ♥ 9 3 |
| ♦ A 10 6 5 |
| ♣ A K J 10 4 |

You are vulnerable, the opponents are not, and the auction begins thus:

| | | | |
|------|------------------|------|------------------|
| West | North | East | South |
| | | | 1NT ¹ |
| Pass | 2♦ ² | Pass | 2♥ |
| Pass | 3NT ³ | ? | |

¹ 12-14

² Transfer to hearts.

³ Giving opener a choice of games.

What now? A lot depends on whether you are playing pairs or teams.

At most tables East passed again, as did South and when West led a spade, declarer made the contract. Some Easts doubled, however! It doesn't make sense for this 'out of the blue' double to show a lot of points – East had the opportunity to bid earlier, chose not to and, furthermore, the opponents have advertised the values for game already.

A more intelligent interpretation is that East is making a lead-directing double. The idea is that if West can be persuaded to lead the right suit, in this case clubs, then 3NT should fail. The message is: 'Please lead my suit, not yours!'

Accordingly, West has to work out which suit to lead. In this and similar situations, having discounted the suits where North-South are known to have strong holdings, the obvious selection will be West's weakest suit, although further inferences may exist. On this basis, with reference to the full deal below, West seems to have two equally reasonable leads, the ♦8 and ♠7:

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--|--|--------------|
| E/W Game. Dealer South. | | | |
| ♠ K Q | | | |
| ♥ K J 8 6 4 | | | |
| ♦ Q 9 4 | | | |
| ♣ Q 9 6 | | | |
| ♠ 10 9 7 5 4 | | | ♠ 8 2 |
| ♥ Q 10 7 2 | | | ♥ 9 3 |
| ♦ 8 3 | | | ♦ A 10 6 5 |
| ♣ 7 5 | | | ♣ A K J 10 4 |
| | | | ♠ A J 6 3 |
| | | | ♥ A 5 |
| | | | ♦ K J 7 2 |
| | | | ♣ 8 3 2 |

On a club lead 3NT is doomed but on any other lead declarer can prevail, making two diamond tricks, four spades and three hearts. So, the double does carry some risk – the main problem being that partner might not discern that clubs is the suit to lead. A further, albeit lesser, problem is that occasionally, despite West finding a club lead, declarer might still succeed (on a different layout), with the clubs being stopped and declarer being able to cash at least eight major-suit tricks before surrendering the lead.

What effect would the format (pairs or teams) have on East's decision to double?

The main issue here is that playing pairs, 3NT doubled going down will be a top but making will be a bottom. At teams, if it makes, then 4 IMPs will have been sacrificed, whereas if it goes down, the double will have gained 12 IMPs in comparison with not doubling and partner leading a spade. Playing teams, the risk-

reward ratio greatly favours a double by East, whereas, at pairs, this is not so clear.

Consequently, in many situations when considering whether to double a game contract, at teams you should be prepared to take slight risks whereas, playing pairs, a more cautious approach is sensible.

Returning to the featured hand, there are some other issues that should be noted. One is that some players would play a double of 2♦ as being lead-directing. In this case, East would be extremely hopeful of West finding a club lead by passing over 2♦, thereby denying a strong diamond holding and then doubling 3NT. In this scenario, a double of 3NT would be clear at both teams and pairs. For those who play a double of 2♦ as showing a strong hand, the above inference would not be available and doubling 3NT would be clear at teams but not so obvious at pairs.

A second point is that East could have pinpointed the club lead by overcalling 3♣ on the first round. The problem with this action is that it is not sound, and risks being doubled for a sizeable penalty. The prevailing vulnerability and the lack of a sixth club suggests that pass is correct.

Furthermore, it should be noted that sometimes, this sort of double is used to announce a strong holding in dummy's long suit (hearts). On this occasion, however, East can be confident that if 3NT is passed by South, then West will have enough hearts to know that this cannot be the reason for the double.

In addition, South might remove to 4♥. In this case, the double will help West to find the best lead against that contract as well.

With regard to the doubling of game contracts, there are situations (which I intend to explore in the next article) calling for more caution at teams than pairs. Excepting these, however, and without advocating a style of reckless penalty doubles, the following advice seems reasonable: **At teams, be that bit readier to double game contracts than you might be at pairs.** □