

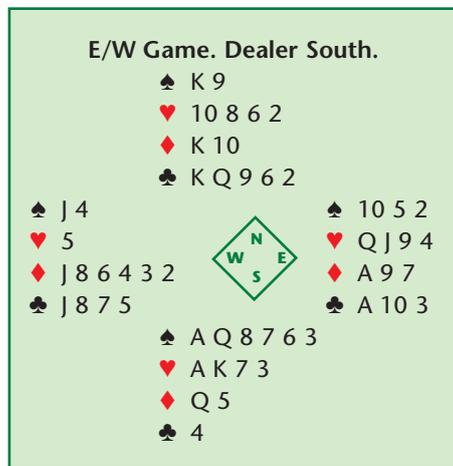


Penalty Doubles of Game Contracts Part II

HOW WOULD you negotiate the following trump suit for the loss of just one trick?



When the deal occurred in a recent teams match, at one table declarer laid down the ace first. If an honour had appeared (or the ♥ 9 with West), he would have continued with a low card towards the ♥10 in dummy, thereby catering for all 3-2 breaks and many of the 4-1 breaks. When both East and West followed with small cards, however, declarer played the king next, West showed out and the contract went down. The full deal was:



West	North	East	South
			1♠
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♥
Pass	3♥	Pass	4♥
All Pass			

West led a diamond to the ace and East returned the ♦9 to dummy's king. At that point declarer tackled the trump suit in the fashion described above, resulting in one down. Both the bidding and the play had been normal, so a flat board seemed likely. At the other table, however, there had been an unforeseen twist: East had doubled the final contract (also 4♥). To what effect?

Tricks one and two were the same but at trick three, declarer called for the ♥10, an audacious play! East covered with the jack, declarer won with the king and continued low to dummy's ♥8 and East's ♥9. Subsequently, declarer was able to finesse East's ♥Q, draw the final trump and cash the spades to record 4♥ doubled making.

In a sense, the key to the play was in the bidding, which had advertised the bad trump break and caused declarer to adopt an unusual but, under the circumstances, correct line of play. Her chosen play of leading the ♥10 might have lost unnecessarily to many holdings, including a singleton honour with West, but declarer had been able to discount these possibilities because of East's final contribution to the auction.

Quite literally, East's double gave the game away!

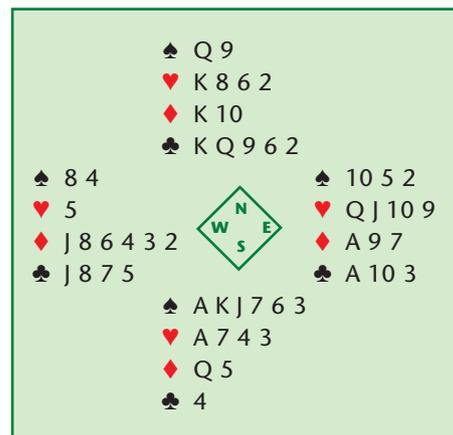
What should be made of East's double? After all, often declarer will be unable to make 4♥ despite being warned of the bad trump break – for example, North having ♥K-10-x-x. Playing pairs, as long as the contract goes down, such a double is likely to turn an average into a top, roughly speaking and, therefore, might be considered a fair gamble.

In contrast, playing teams, the extra 50 or 100 gained by taking the contract one off is a small reward by comparison with the scenario described above, in which the team's loss of 12 IMPs could be attributed directly to the ill-conceived double.

On the above deal, a contract that had been destined to crash on the rocks of bad distribution was resurrected by East's double, which gave a blueprint of the heart suit – a blueprint that declarer was able to use to her advantage. *The key to a successful doubling strategy at teams is to ensure that declarer, despite being warned of the bad breaks, will still be powerless to avoid the impending shipwreck.*

If one were to improve East's hearts to ♥Q-J-10-9, allied with the two aces, then a penalty double of 4♥ would be a highly attractive proposition. Even then, how would East feel if South removed to 4♠

and the deal turned out to be as below?



4♥ has no chance, yet 4♠ will make by throwing a heart loser on a club winner in due course.

At pairs, it would be madness not to double 4♥ on this East hand, because usually North-South will have no safe haven. At teams, however, because the reward for success might be small (an extra 2 or 3 IMPs), the decision is much closer and a good but cautious player might still choose to pass, the full hand vindicating his or her reticence. With a singleton spade, two aces and ♥Q-J-10-9, even the most timid of players should double at any form of the game. This is because it is likely that partner will have length in spades, giving the opponents no escape route.

It should be remembered that whenever you double the opponents, you are giving information about your hand. It is possible that this information might be used to their advantage, either by executing a brilliant line of play that caters solely for the existing layout of the cards (revealed by the double), or to run from the ill-fated contract to one that cannot be beaten.

Playing teams, one should be very wary of making penalty doubles that will occasionally backfire in the manner described above – there should be a strong emphasis on the opponents being dead in the water. At pairs, a much less circumspect approach is to be recommended in this area. □