

TIPS FOR TOPS

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The board referred to in this article was played in the 499er game at Bridge Centre of Niagara on July 20th, 2021, (Game #8981). Full results and game schedule at www.bridgecentreofniagara.com.

• Negative Doubles

Bd: 17 Vul: None Dir: North	<p>♠ KQ82 ♥ A2 ♦ J43 ♣ AT86</p>	Optimum NS 4S: +420
<p>♠ 653 ♥ J8643 ♦ AQ5 ♣ 73</p>	<p>N W 17 E S</p>	<p>♠ T7 ♥ KQT975 ♦ T86 ♣ K9</p>
<p>14 7 HCP 8 11</p>	<p>♠ AJ94 ♥ -- ♦ K972 ♣ QJ542</p>	<p>♣ ♦ ♥ ♠ N N 4 2 - 4 - S 4 2 - 4 - E - - 2 - - W - - 2 - -</p>

Board 17 provides another perfect example of a point that I make frequently. NS have 9 Clubs and 8 Spades between them, and they can make game in Spades - the major suit - but not in Clubs. Can they get to their Spade game? That depends on their systems and on the interference.

All Norths opened the bidding with 1C, and Easts overcalled in Hearts, but some bid 1H while others bid 2H. In either case, South's call should be a DOUBLE. This is a "negative" double showing the other major - the Spades, and this is the precise situation that the negative double was invented for.

Consider first the Souths who had to deal with the 2H overcall. They would have liked to respond 1S, but they can't bid 2S over 2H, because that would promise a 5-card suit. Without the negative double in their repertoire, they have limited options. 3C shows support, but could be made with a much weaker hand; it only promises a simple raise - less than 10HCP.

Without a negative double available, the best call would be a cue-bid - 3H - it shows a better hand than 3C (11+) and still suggests Club support. North probably should still bid 3S - always looking for a Major suit - but they may be concerned about whether their bid will be understood. In other words, the Spade game is still reachable, but so much easier if South can show the Spade suit right away with the negative double. And with this South hand, there are no drawbacks; if North doesn't have Spades and rebids their Clubs, you have great support for that, too.

For those Souths who saw a 1H overcall on their right, the situation was a lot easier to handle, although the negative double still has value in this situation. If you haven't adopted this gadget, you would bid 1S over the 1H; those who did reached their Spade game. But for those who have adopted negative doubles, a double here shows exactly 4 Spades, while a Spade bid would show 5; this can be a very important distinction in many cases, if not today.

So one tip from this hand is on the overcall. It's not wrong to overcall 1H with the East hand, but 2H is much more effective. It gets in the way more, and is a more precise description of your hand, which helps your partner know what to do. With only 8HCP in your hand, there's not much chance that you are looking for a game contract. Your aim in overcalling is primarily to disrupt the NS bidding, and 2H is much more effective at that than 1H. If you can paint the complete picture of your hand in one single bid, do it.

But the bigger tip for all: while I don't recommend you complicate your game by adding a lot of gadgets to your systems, the negative double is a simple convention which should be adopted by anyone who plays as much bridge as most of my readers do. It passes the true test of a good convention: it solves a problem that comes up often, there's very little memory strain, and it gives up nothing - because who is going to double for penalty at this low a level? You should read a more comprehensive description of the convention than I can provide here; you will find this - and many others - at www.bridge-bum.com, or at www.larryco.com - the website of Larry Cohen, one of the game's best writers and teachers.

Of course, I haven't yet mentioned the West hand; with 5 Hearts opposite a Heart overcall, West is not going to sit quietly and let NS find their best spot. How many Hearts should West bid? That will depend on the auction that has already transpired. Opposite 1H, a raise to 3 is good; opposite 2H, I would go straight to 4. Why the difference? A 2H bid announces a hand with less than opening points and 6 Hearts; in this case, you know that the hand belongs to the opponents. You also know that you will take no more than 1 Heart trick, if any, on defence. In this situation, obstruction is your main goal. A 1H overcall, on the other hand, might include full opening points or even more. You don't expect to make 4Hs with your 7HCP, but you also don't know that the opponents can make a game, so you should push them only a little and make them guess.