

## Expressing Doubt V - Introducing The Penalty Pass

Here's a situation for you. You hold KJT32 Q6 A43 Q52 and the auction proceeds:  
1H-(1S)-?

So you have a 12 count and partner opened. You're borderline on whether or not you were going game forcing, but you were at least invitational. But the opponents interfered by bidding your suit. What should you do now? Basically your options are now bid some level of NT or else pass.

Why? Well the rule we try to instill in players is if the opponents bid a suit you want to make trump, either pass or bid NT. This is because at the 1 level you only need to take 7 tricks to go plus either by declaring or defending and at any level higher than 1 you need to take fewer tricks to go plus defending than you do declaring.

Here's how I used to think:

I was close to bidding game, and now that I know my spades are well placed I'm going to upgrade and bid 3N

Through some painful experience, I then learned this rule:

5 cards or more in a suit in which the opponent also has at least 5 cards is bad for whoever is declaring

Imagine your opponent has AQ985 of spades. That seems like a reasonable suit for an overcall. That leaves the 764 between your partner and RHO. If your partner has 2 of them, then you can finesse twice. That will win you 2 spade tricks, but no more. If your partner has only 1 then you'll only be able to finesse once and win just one trick. The best case scenario for you is if partner has 3 spades, and even then you're only getting 3 tricks. You simply will never enjoy your long spades.

Now imagine that you are defending spades. If your partner has 3 spades won't that be awesome? In fact even if partner has only 1 spade you will still get 3 spade tricks and have chances to ruff for a fourth. It's so much easier to take tricks when your long suit is trump than in NT.

I now routinely pass with hands like that. However, that has shifted a bunch of responsibility over to partner. Let's give partner a hand for this auction: 64 AJ852 KJ4 K98  
Now say the auction has gone 1H-(1S)-P-P-?

Here's my old way of thinking:

I have a minimum and partner couldn't take an action. I am going to pass before we get into trouble.

That works well with my old way of thinking as responder. If partner is going to bid NT with those hands, then there's no reason for me to get involved. But with the new way of thinking, if I pass then we are missing an opportunity to get a big plus score. And we might get a zero on the board if we can make game in NT.\* So what should declarer do in this new way of thinking?

**Declarer should always reopen if the opponents overcall a suit without jumping whenever they cannot eliminate the penalty pass.**

Therefore a reopening double by declarer does not promise any extra values, it merely suggests shortness in the overcalled suit.

\* And how would NT fare opposite a hand like that? It's got chances: 2 potential in spades, 1 sure and 4 potential in hearts, 2 sure and 1 potential in diamonds and 1 (rarely 2 if you lead it) potential in clubs. So the contract mostly hinges on the heart suit working for lots of tricks and the opponents not having a good club suit to setup.

Now, of course your partner will not always have a penalty pass merely because you are short in their suit. So how can partner let you know what kind of hand they have? It's pretty simple. Bidding says I have a weak hand and passing says I have the penalty pass. That's it.

How about opener? Now that the reopening double doesn't promise extra values, how can they show extra values? The answer here is also simple. They don't pass at their next opportunity.

Let's use the doubt paradigm in order to understand some of these extended auctions:

1H	1S	P	P
X	P	2C	P
?			

P - Let's play here

2D - Willing to defend 1S, but please choose between diamonds and hearts

(bidding 2D immediately would say the same thing but without the willingness to defend, so possibly a spade void and possibly lots of offence and little defence. Definitely expect more shape strength without the double)

2H - Willing to defend 1S, but 6 or more hearts

(Bidding 2H immediately would tend to be a weaker hand)

2S - Strong hand, very interested in game. Want to know about a spade stopper

(Bidding 2S immediately would tend to show a solid heart suit and interest in NT without defense.)

Basically, bidding first shows strength without the willingness to defend (i.e. I have no doubt about declare or defend) and doubling first allows for the possibility of defense, and hence shows doubt about that question.

To summarize, to have a penalty pass at the one level:

- Have at least 3 trump tricks
- Have at least 4 tricks or shortness in partner's opening bid

To have a reopening double rather than a bid:

- Have at least some desire to defend
  - Even with a void you might be willing to defend if you have enough defensive strength, but make sure these are fast tricks (Aces and kings), rather than slow ones (queens and jacks)

To have a reopening double rather than a pass:

- Have bad trump. The more tricks you can take in their suit, the less likely it is that partner has a penalty pass. A nice rule of thumb for reopening bids is to ask if you would've made a takeout double if they had opened. If so, then make a takeout double now.