

A Modern Approach To Takeout Doubles

Classically a textbook takeout double has 4441 shape with a singleton in the suit the opponents have opened. We have long allowed for some flexibility here by moving any 1 card around from that shape and still thinking that's a double. So 5431, 4432, were also considered acceptable shapes (but only when the 5 card suit was a minor.) As people have started to open weaker and weaker hands, the arms race has scaled up and it has become common to double with 4333 hands! Let's dive into that strategy and talk about the upsides and downsides.

Consider the difference between making a takeout double of 1S and 1C. When you double 1C your partner gets to bid ANY suit at the 1 level, and can in fact bid 1N if they have a stopper and some points. Whereas if you make a takeout double of 1S you are requiring your partner to bid at the 2 level unless they want to try and make 1N.

Furthermore, when the opponents opened 1C, often they weren't seriously suggesting that clubs be trump. So the benefit of being short in their suit is more dubious. Whereas when they opened 1S they have 5 spades. If you have 3 spades one of 2 things will be true - either they have a fit, or else your partner will be short in spades. If they have a fit you'll get to balance later and if not, then the odds of you having a fit are about 10%.

With all of that in mind, here's my current approach to takeout doubles at the 1 level:

Over 1C or 1D, double = an opening hand, I do not promise shortness in the opponents suit but I rarely have a lot of HCP there and almost never 4 cards or more in their suit. I still double with shape and shortness e.g. ♠Qxxx ♥Kxxx ♦x ♣AJxx is a fine double of 1D.

Over 1H or 1S, double is more classical. At most 2 cards in the major and support for the unbid suits. If I have only 3 cards in the unbid major that's a flaw, but not fatal. I simply require 12 HCP to double at the 1 level if I only have 3 cards in the unbid major. So ♠Qxx ♥x ♦AJTx ♣Kxxx is a pass of 1H but ♠Qxx ♥x ♦AJTx ♣KQxx is a double in my book.

Responding to modern takeout doubles

In a nutshell - prioritize majors, prefer NT to minors, be cautious about getting to the 3 level. This is especially true in the minors. Jumping to the 2 level doesn't change, but be leery of auctions like 1C-X-1S-3D/H The opponents haven't shown a fit yet and you cannot be certain that your partner has 4 card support for your suit. Always have at least 5 in your minor and preferably 6. After all we'd usually rather play in a major or NT than a minor anyways.

♠Kx ♥xx ♦AJTxxx ♣Qxx is a fine 3D bid, but with ♠Kx ♥xx ♦AJTx ♣Qxxx I would prefer 1N despite having a good suit to bid and only a dubious club stopper.

Note: Keep in mind your personal declarer play skill. For many players NT is harder than a trump contract. Make life easy on yourself and bid the contract that you want to play rather than the textbook bid. After all it's better to have a plus score in 2D rather than the moral victory of knowing you could have made 1N but went down 2 instead.

The special scenario of overcalling 1D

Given the desire to show any opening hand after opponents open 1m, what should you do with a hand like ♠Qxxx ♥Ax ♦KJxx ♣Qxx when the opponents open 1C?

My approach is to overcall 1D to show opening count and a hand unsuitable for overcalling a major or making a takeout double. I respond to 1D overcalls at the 1 level as if partner opened the bidding 1D. That means 1H and 1S only show 4 cards in length AND are forcing for 1 round. I once again prioritize responding 1N over raising the diamond suit with most balanced hands without a 4 card major to bid. Similarly negative doubles apply. So: 1C-1D-1S-X = 4+ hearts and 6+ HCP. just like if the auction had gone 1D-1S-X.

This does mean not overcalling with good diamond suits and weak hands. So ♠Axx ♥xx ♦QJTxx ♣Kxx is now a pass rather than a 1D overcall. And I aggressively bid 2D (preemptive) with a good 5 card diamond suit like ♠xx ♥xxx ♦AKJTxx ♣xxx. That's an annoying auction for the opponents to bid over. And you really do want a diamond lead from your partner.