

Vacant (Worthless) Doubleton Convention

By Neil H. Timm

What do you do when your partner opens 1NT (15-17 HCP) and you have 10-14 HCP, but a worthless doubleton?

Let's consider a few examples:

Hand 1:

Openers Hand ♠A6 ♥AK52 ♦763 ♣KQ92

Responders Hand ♠42 ♥Q63 ♦AK42 ♣J654

Hand 2:

Openers Hand ♠AQJ4 ♥J7 ♦AQ6 ♣K963

Responders Hand ♠K52 ♥42 ♦K754 ♣A754

With both hands, partner opens 1NT and the next person passes; what do you now bid?

The obvious bids for both responder hands are 3NT, but are you not nervous about your worthless doubletons. With the first hand, you may play better in five of a minor or even four hearts with a spade lead. Similarly, with the second hand, making 3NT with a heart lead has zero play. Making ten tricks in spades if spades are no worse than 4-2, as long as clubs divide 3-2 or diamonds 3-3 is a better contract! How do you reach the most makeable contract?

To avoid playing notrump with worthless doubletons (Jx at best), Dave Cliff, who also invented splinter bids, suggested the Vacant Doubleton (VD) Convention. The convention is used when responder has no 4-card major and a worthless doubleton. While the notrump bidder may also have a worthless doubleton, the VD convention is used to find responders worthless doubleton, allowing the notrump bidder to conceal his.

For responder to use the convention we said he must have an invitational notrump hand, no four cards in the major and a worthless doubleton. In addition, there are two more requirements.

1. Responder must have three to an honor in at least one major.
2. Responder does not hold a 6-card minor.

How do we proceed?

(1) Recall that in SAYC that a bid of 2♠ is used as a relay to 3♣ to show a weak hand to sign off in 3♣ or 3♦. Opener is required to complete the transfer by bidding 3♣ and responder will pass or correct to 3♦. These are both used to show “bust” hands with 6-8 HCP and a six card minor.

(2) Playing 2/1 the bid of 2♠ is asking partner to show a four card minor, called **Minor Suit Stayman**. It is used to show the following types of hands: 1) a weak minor two suiter, 2) a weak hand with diamonds, 3) a strong minor two suiter. Playing Minor Suit Stayman, Opener shows a four card minor by bidding 3♣/3♦. Without a four card minor, opener bids 2NT. Responder passes holding a weak minor two-suiter if opener shows a four-card minor. If opener has denied holding a four-card minor by bidding 2NT, responder’s rebid of 3♣ to show a weak two-suiter and asks opener to pass with three-card support, or to correct to 3♦. Opener will always have three cards in one of the minors since with three cards; opener would be 5-4 in the majors and would have opened 1♥/1♠.

To show a diamond bust, responder will either pass a 3♦ rebid by opener or correct opener’s 2NT or 3♣ responses to 3♦. Minor suit Stayman followed by a 3♦ rebid is always a drop-dead bid. Any rebid by responder, other than 3♣/3♦, shows a strong minor 2-suiter. Responder’s normal rebids are:

- 3♥/3♠ shows a singleton or void in the suit bid
- 3NT shows 2-2-5-4 (5-5 in the minors) and mild slam interest
- 4NT shows 2-2-5-4 (5-4 in the minors) and strong slam interest

A raise of opener’s 3♣/3♦ rebid to 4♣/4♦ is usually Roman Keycard Minorwood, however, some play Kickback (the suit above the agreed upon trump suit). If open shows a four card minor, all sequences are natural and forcing to game.

(3) In Standard American one does not employ transfers. The bid of 2♠ is to play.

(4) In modified SAYC. A bid of 2♠ is used as a relay to 3♣ to show a weak hand (6-8 HCP) with a six card club suit. Opener is required to bid 3♣. A bid of 3♣ is a transfer to 3♦, 6-8 HCP and six diamonds. And, a bid of 2NT is 8-9 HCP and invitational.

Note that none of the above methods protect one against a worthless doubleton. How might we proceed?

We will assume that a bid of 2♠ is an ambiguous transfer to the minors. For the Vacant Doubleton Convention, opener is required to bid 2NT (it does not deny a four card minor) and becomes an ASKING bid. What kind of hand do you have?

- 3♣ minor two-suiter and forcing
- 3♦ vacant doubleton in clubs or diamonds
- 3♥ vacant doubleton in hearts

3♠ vacant doubleton in spades

After the 3♦ response showing a VD in either minor, Opener now bids 3♥'s to ask which minor. Responders' bid of 3♠ shows clubs and 3NT shows diamonds.

When using this convention, the bid of 2NT by responder suggests 8-9 HCP, invitational, but may still have a worthless doubleton; however, opener may invoke a checkback bid as described more fully below.

For Hand 1, responder would bid 2♠. When partner bids 2NT (the asking bid) responder bids 3♠ to show his vacant/worthless doubleton in spades. The rest is up to partner. Over 3♠ he would likely bid 4♥ and play in a 4-3 fit. Note that this contract has a good chance of making if hearts are 3-3. With a spade lead, the 3NT contract has almost a zero probability of making.

For Hand 2, one would again bid 2♠, and after a 2NT bid by opener, one would bid 3♥ to show the vacant/worthless doubleton. Now partner would bid 4♠. This will make if spades split 4-2, provided clubs split 3-2, or diamonds split 3-3. Again, much better than 3NT.

But opener has four clubs, instead of bidding 2NT, suppose he bids 3♣ showing 4+ clubs. Now responder bids 3♦ and Opener must bid 3♠ because of the heart doubleton. With three spades, responder bids 4♠. All is well!

Let's look at one more example.

Hand 3:

Opener's Hand ♠A1075 ♥K52 ♦AK54 ♣Q9

Responder's Hand ♠KJ2 ♥AJ6 ♦Q8762 ♣63

Playing the convention, the bidding would go:

1NT	2♠
2NT	3♦ (doubleton is a minor)
3♥ (which minor)	3♠ (clubs)
4♠	Pass

Now four spades again has a reasonable chance of making. With a club lead, 3NT has little chance of making.

Whenever responder bids 2NT non-forcing, or Stayman, or transfers to hearts, Opener may CHECKBACK for a vacant doubleton. Here is how it works:

Opener	Responder
1NT	2NT

3♣ (Checkback)

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣ (Stayman)
2x	2NT
3♣ (Checkback)	

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦ (Transfer)
2♥	2NT
3♣ (Checkback)	

In all cases, if opener with enough points to bid game has the option of bidding 3♣ to ask responder if he has a vacant/worthless doubleton. Over the bid of 3♣, responder responses are:

- 3♦ vacant doubleton in clubs or diamonds
- 3♥ vacant doubleton in hearts
- 3♠ vacant doubleton in spades
- 3NT no vacant doubleton

After 3♦, one may again ask which minor by bidding 3♥ as above. Again, a bid of 3♠ shows clubs and 3NT shows diamonds.

NOTE: It is not useful to show a vacant/worthless doubleton in a suit bid by the opener (e.g., after Stayman, if opener bid spades, responder should not bother to show a worthless doubleton in spades).

We now look at some more example of the checkback variation of vacant doubletons.

Hand 4:

Openers Hand ♠Q42 ♥KJ1054 ♦K32 ♣AK

Responders Hand ♠63 ♥A76 ♦QJ106 ♣J654

The bids follow.

Opener	Responder
1NT	2NT
3♣ (Checkback)	3♠ (spade doubleton)
4♥	Pass

Opener has 5 hearts and 3 spades, to avoid a rebid problem he opens 1NT. He checks back over 2NT by bidding 3♣ and finds out that partner has a worthless doubleton spade. and now bids 4♥. (Yes, he could have bid 3♥ over 2NT as a natural bid, but this informs

the opponents about his 5-card suit, something he would prefer to hide if the final contract is 3NT).

Hand 5:

Openers Hand ♠AK64 ♥AK ♦QJ102 ♣963

Responders Hand ♠J82 ♥QJ754 ♦A43 ♣83

The bids follow.

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦
2♥	2NT
3♣ (Checkback)	3♦ (worthless doubleton in clubs or diamonds)
3♥	3♠ (worthless club doubleton)
4♥	Pass

Hand 6:

Openers Hand ♠AQ6 ♥AQ2 ♦32 ♣KQ973

Responders Hand ♠KJ43 ♥10874 ♦65 ♣A52

The bids follow.

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣ (Stayman)
2♦	2NT
3♣ (Checkback)	3♦ (worthless doubleton in clubs or diamonds)
3♥	3NT (worthless doubleton in diamonds)
4♦ (choose better major*)	4♠

* Called choice of game cue bid!

Final note: suppose responder has a VD (worthless doubleton) with a 4-card or 5-card major. You may want to add the VD option to your agreement as follows.

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♦
2♥	3♣ (Checkback*)

Opener	Responder
1NT	2♣ (Stayman)
2x	3♣ (Checkback*)

Here the bid of 3♣ is used to show a “game force + VD).

WHAT DO YOU LOSE BY PLAYING THE VACANT (WORTHLESS) DOUBLETON CONVENTION?

The major risk is that it provides information to the opponents. If you had bid 1NT-3NT, the opponents may not have found the lead in your VD (worthless) suit.

In addition, it cannot be played if you play Minor Suit Stayman or 4-way transfers with super accept.

To add the VD convention to your partnership agreement and opening 1NT (15-17HCP), the bid of 2NT is invitational to 3NT having 8-9 HCP, and bid of 3♣ is then used as a transfer to a 6-card diamond suit. The bid of 2♠ is either VD or a transfer to clubs.

The convention is based upon Chapter 13 Vacant Doubleton in the book 2003 book “Bridge Conventions in Depth” by Matthew & Pamela Granovetter published by Master Point Press.

What do you do as opener with 17 HCP and a worthless doubleton?

Opening 1NT 15-17 most 2/1 partners use major suit transfers. What is your agreement with 3 or 4 card support and 17 HCP? With a balanced hand and 4333 distribution with 4-card support and 17 HCP many employ a simple 2-level accept bid; however, if you have 4432 say with a doubleton somewhere many use the super accepting bid to convey a doubleton. This is fine but is rarely helpful and conveys too much information to the opponents about shape!

For hearts, consider bidding one step above the simple accept for example 1NT-2♦- 2♠ which announces a worthless doubleton somewhere with a 4-card ♥ fit and 17 HCP, do not bid 3♥; with less than 17 HCP opener with 3 or 4-card support bids 2♥.

If responder wants to know the doubleton suit, he relays with the next step bid 2NT over 2♠. Opener bids 3♣/3♦/3♠, the doubleton suit. Responder is now the captain and can 4♣ as 1430, or 4♥ to play, or 4NT as pick a slam.

If responders does not relay with 2NT because he has no need to know the doubleton location, he may bid 4♠ as 1430 for hearts (kickback), 4♥ to play or perhaps 4NT as pick a slam.

For spades, consider bidding one step above the simple accept for example 1NT-2♥- 3♣ which announces a worthless doubleton somewhere with a 4-card ♠ fit. And 17HCP. Note that we **do not use 2NT**, the next step, because it is reserved for another bid.

Now if responder wants to know the doubleton suit, he relays with the next step bid 3♦. Opener next bids 3♥4♣/4♦ to show the doubleton. Responder is now the captain and can bid 5NT as pick a slam or perhaps 4NT as 1430 or 4♠ to play.

Observe that opener has by-passed 2NT over both the 2♦/2♥ bids. Why? Because the bid of 2NT by the opener says he has 3-card support for the major and 17HCP, known as the Bell Convention.

What is one to do over the opening bid of 2NT where opener has 20-21 HCP? Now over 3♣/3♦ opener bids 3♥/3♠; with 20 HCP and 3 or 4 card support and 3NT is the super accepting bid with 4-card support, 21 HCP **and 3 aces**.

**For more on super accepting bidding see the web site:
<https://taigabridge.net/articles/bidding/after-2nt-1-superaccepts.htm>**