

The Advancing Player



Match Point Penalty Doubles as Promised

By Maritha Pottenger

As I stated last month, a vital part of match point strategy is being willing to double— sometimes very close doubles – in order to protect your match point score. You may be doubling at the 2 and 3 level, or higher. When the opponents have bid to game, and you believe they will not make it, there is no risk of doubling them into game.

However, you must double when you believe you were going to go plus on the board if the opponents had not bid higher than you. Here is an example from a unit game:

	♠AK10932	
	♥J6	
	♦J8	
	♣Q82	
♠7		♠QJ65
♥K109		♥832
♦Q964		♦1072
♣AK974		♣J65
	♠84	
	♥AQ754	
	♦AK53	
	♣103	

Dir: West Vul: None

	Maritha	Kent
South	West	North East
	1♦	1♠* Pass
2♥	Pass**	2♠ Pass
4♠***	Pass	Pass Dbl****
Pass	Pass	Pass

* I would have bid 2♠

** I'm not about to re-enter this auction at the 3-level

*** He should have bid only 3♠

**** Kent Hartman made a good match point double.

I opened 1♦ in the West (to avoid the rebid problem). North/South aggressively bid on to 4♠. You don't want to hang partner for making a lead-directing overcall at the 1-level. Kent Hartman's match point double of 4♠ in passout seat is quite reasonable. My opening bid promises two quick tricks and he has two spade tricks almost guaranteed. He figured that we

might even come to one more trick. There is a good chance I have something good behind the heart bidder, for example.

The diamond lead went to the ♦K. Declarer led a spade to her ♠K and ran the ♥J to my ♥K. I quickly cashed two club tricks. Kent sat back and waited for his two spade tricks. Double Dummy, North can trump- coup Kent. *[A trump coup involves Declarer ruffing enough times so that she has equal length to one opponent while eliminating all the side suits. She then end plays that opponent in the trump suit. In this case, Declarer can cash a second round of hearts, and ruff a heart. Then she cashes a second round of diamonds, and ruffs a diamond. Then she cashes the ♣Q which holds. At that point, she has ♠K109 Kent has ♠QJ6. She leads the ♠10 and Kent is end played and gets only one spade trick instead of two. That would have been -100 instead of -300.]*

Five other N/S pairs played in 4♠, and none of those E/W pairs doubled – again an argument for people becoming more aggressive with their match point doubles – especially when the opponents are already in game.

This is a common occurrence when you and the opponents are competing in spades and hearts. Hence, my advice: “Do not bid 3♠ unless you are willing to double the opponents in 4♥,” (or willing to bid on to 4♠ if necessary). Also, “Do not bid 4♥ unless you are willing to double the opponents in 4♠,” (or willing to bid on to 5♥ if necessary). If you “push” the opponents into a game which they probably would not have bid on their own, you are not getting very many match points if they make it. So double! If they make it, you won’t lose much. (In a recent game, we doubled the opponents in 4♥ and they went down 1 – a typical close match point double. If they had made their contract, doubling them would have made only 1 match point difference – because we were getting almost no match points once they got to game, if they had made it.) If you are going to become a “Demon Doubler,” you must obviously be a good defender.

Remember, defense is 50% of the game, so that is the area of your game that will pay the most dividends if you work hard on improving it with your partners. For low-level penalty doubles, there are some guidelines. If you are thinking of making a penalty double at the 2 level – or converting partner’s negative or responsive double into a penalty double by passing – you want to meet a couple of criteria. (1) Your side should hold approximately half the deck in HCP. In practice this is about 18-22 HCP. (2) The person making the double should meet the Rule of 2 and 4: 4 trumps and 2 trump tricks. Four trumps are, at least, a nuisance for Declarer – and often a killing blow. Two trump tricks are also necessary.

You are allowed to assume that Declarer will play trumps top down, so QJ10x is two trump tricks. When Declarer has the positional advantage of sitting behind you, be a bit wary with holdings such as KJ10x. When you are sitting behind Declarer, you can reasonably assume 2 – and very likely 3 – trump tricks with your holding.

The best time for low-level penalty doubles is on misfit hands – better to defend than declare with misfits – when you do not believe that you and your partner have enough strength to make game. Remember the magic 200: when the opponents are vulnerable, beating them one trick, doubled, will be superior to any part score you might make!

Following is an example of a missed opportunity by our opponents a few months ago. South opened 1♥ and my partner overcalled 2♣. North passed and I passed. South reopened with a double – mandatory when playing negative doubles as long as South is short in clubs. Partner

might be sitting with a penalty double of 2♣, but cannot make it because a double by Responder would be a Negative Double.

North's hand was:

♠K104 ♥94 ♦10732 ♣KJ42.

So, how does this stack up against the guidelines listed above for when you are thinking of making a penalty double at the 2 level? Your side must have about half the deck in HCP. North has 7; partner has at least 12 (and probably has more on this auction), so your side has approximately half the deck in high cards [check!]. At the 2 level, you need four trumps [check!] and two trump tricks [check!].

(You are behind the club over-caller, so you fully expect to score both your ♣K and ♣J.)

So, North's hand qualified on all three guidelines. Furthermore, North was reasonably sure that they were NOT missing game, and could see that it was a misfit hand (only two cards in partner's suit). Prefer to defend on misfit hands. If North had simply passed – converting the reopening double to penalty – our side would have taken only 5 tricks. Down 3, doubled, would have been +800 for N/S. Instead, North put her partner in the 5-2 heart fit which made only 2 at the table. (Deep Finesse made 3 on the hand, Double Dummy.) So which would you rather have +800 or +110? I know my vote!

Another vital time for match point doubles is when you know partner is short in the opponents' suit (because you have length) and you have wasted values there. Your hand will be a disappointment to partner if s/he bids on, so you must double before partner can “take the push” to one level higher. *Warn Your Partner Not to Bid on by Doubling.*

Suppose you hold:

♠xx ♥QJ109 ♦J10x ♣Qxxx.

Your LHO opens 1♥ and your partner doubles. RHO bids 2♥ and you pass, as does LHO. Partner now bids 2♠ – showing a very good hand. RHO takes the push to 3♥.

Bring out the Red Card.

Since you have a doubleton spade, RHO is probably taking the push to the 3 level on the basis of an extra trump – not on spade shortness.

That means your partner is almost certainly void in hearts. Do not risk your partner going to 3♠ with that void. Head partner off by doubling right away. Your quacky holdings in the minors rate to be helpful on defense and useless on offense, and you are guaranteed two trump tricks. Partner has doubled and then bid. S/he will be bringing at least three quick tricks to the table. If the opponents are vulnerable, you expect at least +200 and perhaps even +500 or +800.

These sort of decisions also come into play when you and your partner are in a Forcing Pass situation. If your side has voluntarily bid a vulnerable game and the opponents sacrifice, then a pass by either of you is forcing – partner must either double or take the push to the 5 level. The forcing pass guarantees that the passer does not have two quick losers in the opponents' suit and is willing to play at the 5 level.

However, sometimes you have only one loser in the opponents' suit, but your hand is more defensive than offensive. Perhaps you even have a trick in their trump suit. Those values will not

be as valuable to your partner if s/ he has shortness in their suit. Two examples where your side bids to a vulnerable 4♠ and the opponents sacrifice at 5♣.

♠AKxxx ♥Qxxx ♦Qxx ♣K: double quickly! The ♣K is wasted on offense, and you have way too many holes in the red suits to expect to make 5♠ even when partner has shown enough values to put you in game (after you opened).

♠AQxxx ♥Axx ♦xx ♣K10x: you have a likely trump trick, and your club values will not serve you well in trying to make 5♠. Double for sure profit. If partner has great controls with a club singleton or void, s/he can overrule your double. [If partner's hand were, for example ♠Kxxxx ♥KQxx ♦KQxx ♣--, s/he would certainly overrule you and bid 5♠.]

The last "guideline" of match point penalty doubles is: "Unless one in 10 of your penalty doubles is made by the opponents, you are not doubling enough." I have played with two partners who were "demon doubles." We would often play 3 to 5 doubled contracts every session of 26 or 27 boards. Opponents who knew these partners [One of them was Budak Barkan who some of you remember.] were much more timid about bidding on against us because they were afraid of being doubled – the other huge advantage of becoming an aggressive doubler.

So, go ye forth and double!