



Play & Learn

BY PAT HARRINGTON ✉ ppharr@gmail.com

To the moon and the stars?

We've discussed the suits shown by a negative double, but we haven't thoroughly discussed the strength required or the level through which they apply.

East holds:

♠ A Q 4 3 ♥ 9 8 3 ♦ 10 7 ♣ Q J 5 4.

Consider East's action in each of these auctions.

- | | | | | |
|----|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1. | <i>West</i> | <i>North</i> | <i>East</i> | <i>South</i> |
| | 1♦ | 1♥ | ? | |
| 2. | <i>West</i> | <i>North</i> | <i>East</i> | <i>South</i> |
| | 1♦ | 2♥ | ? | |
| 3. | <i>West</i> | <i>North</i> | <i>East</i> | <i>South</i> |
| | 1♦ | 3♥ | ? | |

Answers:

- East could make a negative double to show exactly four spades and 6 or more points.
- When a partnership decides to use negative doubles, they must also decide how high they are in effect. Some books suggest using them through a 2♠ overcall, but many players have a higher upper limit. While a minimum opener can bail out in 2♠, consider what opener might have to bid without four spades. A minimum opener might have to bid 2NT or three of a minor. Because a negative double here could push the partnership a bit higher, it makes sense to require responder to have a bit more strength in this auction. A reasonable agreement is for responder's negative double to show at least 8 points

when the overcall is two of a minor and at least 9 points after an overcall of two of a major. East has just enough to double with in the second auction provided your partnership has agreed to use negative doubles through at least 2♠.

- Now if opener cannot support spades, a negative double would force the bidding to 3NT or four of a minor, which could be risky. While your partnership could agree to use negative doubles this high, this hand isn't strong enough. The minimum for a negative double of a three-level preempt is about 11 points. Sadly, your only other option is to pass.

You could make a negative double in the third auction holding:

♠ A K 7 4 ♥ 8 3 ♦ 7 5 2 ♣ A Q 6 5
or

♠ Q 7 5 4 ♥ K Q 8 ♦ 7 5 ♣ A Q J 6.

With the latter hand, you also have the option of simply bidding 3NT. Partner might be in a difficult position if you make a negative double and they don't have a spade fit. When an opponent's preempt leaves you little room to explore for game and you have the opponents' suit stopped, don't risk forcing partner to make a rebid that takes you past 3NT. Avoiding trouble takes precedence over reaching the ideal game.

At unfavorable vulnerability, what's East's call holding:

♠ K Q 9 4 ♥ 8 3 ♦ Q 10 7 2 ♣ A K 5?

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
1♦	4♥	?	

If East-West don't use negative doubles this high, East could double 4♥ for penalty or bid 5♦. Pass is not an option when East is the only one who knows the pair has enough strength for game. The best game could be 4♠. It's common for experienced players to agree to use negative doubles through overcalls of 4♥ or even with no upper limit at all. Just as with high-level takeout doubles, partner can pass and convert the double to penalty, especially with a balanced hand and no fit for responder's suit. Don't think of your double here as forcing partner to bid at the five level without a fit. Think of it as letting partner help choose the best contract. You need an opening hand or close to it to make a negative double that forces to game.

It might be wise for those new to negative doubles to avoid complications by using this convention through a 2♠ overcall for starters, leaving higher doubles as penalty. Later, you can raise the bar to a higher level – perhaps through 4♥ or 4♠ – and eventually even to the moon and the stars with no upper limit. Beware: Higher-level negative doubles require opener and responder to use good bidding judgment. ■