

The Penalty Double

Dealer: South
 Vulnerability: E/W
 Lead: $\heartsuit 6$

	North		
	\spadesuit J 3		
	\heartsuit A Q 9 5		
	\diamondsuit Q 9 6 5		
	\clubsuit 10 9 6		
West		East	
\spadesuit Q 10 9 8 4		\spadesuit 6 2	
\heartsuit K 10 4		\heartsuit J 7 6 3 2	
\diamondsuit K		\diamondsuit 8 3 2	
\clubsuit A Q 7 5		\clubsuit 4 3 2	
	South		
	\spadesuit A K 7 5		
	\heartsuit 8		
	\diamondsuit A J 10 7 4		
	\clubsuit K J 8		

The Bidding:

West	North	East	South
$1\spadesuit$ ⁽¹⁾	Dbl ⁽²⁾	Pass	$1\diamondsuit$
			??

- (1) West's overcall is understandable. The spade suit isn't exactly "good". It holds only 2 of the top 5 honors, but the intermediates (the 9's and 8's) are right there. West could have doubled, but that too, would be deceptive because the double of a minor suit usually promises a 4-card in BOTH majors. $1\spadesuit$ is not perfect but most West's would do the same.
- (2) North's double is the *negative double*. It shows at least 8 HCP's and promises 4 hearts – the unbid major. It is a treatment that should be in your bidding system. What other bid is available to North? Any suit bid promises at least 5 cards over West's bid. In addition, since it must be at the 2-level, it promises at least 10 points. North has neither. 1NT is out of the question because that bid promises at least 1 stopper in spades - the opponent's bid suit.

What would you do as South? Your options are to bid your partner's promised heart suit; bid 1NT; rebid your diamonds; or pass. Let's look at each option.

Because your partner used the negative double you know she probably has no more than 4 hearts, and since you have only 1, playing in hearts is out of the question. 1NT is a possibility since you have stoppers in spades but your partner's heart suit could be a big problem. He may have only 1 or 2 honors and the opponents probably hold 8 hearts. Even if he has good hearts, your partner's suit might be hard to access once it is set up.

Rebidding your diamonds is better than the two options we've already discussed. It would be the best option if it weren't for the last option – **pass**.

If you pass, you're converting partner's negative or take out double to a penalty double. The double used to be used exclusively for penalty but today a whole host of non-penalty uses are assigned to the double: simple takeout, support, responsive, cooperative, card-showing, and many more. But what of the lowly penalty double?

Your partner's negative double promised 8 HCP's so you have a minimum of 24 points between you. That leaves 16 for the opponents. You can usually assume the overcaller has about 10 so that leaves East with a weak hand. You will play West for the honor cards and since you will take the lead several times in trumps, you can lead through the strong hand up to your partner. Your singleton heart will give you the possibility of a couple of ruffs. That brings the tricks you can take up to 5. You only need 2 from partner to set 1♠.

What if West runs to another suit? Partner has hearts covered; you have diamonds and your clubs, although short, are strong. You're still planning to double whatever suit West runs to. The good news is that they will be at the 2-level, and you'll need one less trick to set them.

Once you have a successful penalty double your confidence improves and your opponents' drops. After several doubling successes, you become known as a "demon doubler". Your scores will be higher and your love life will improve. (I'm not sure about the last part).

In the play, North led a low diamond. You win the ♦A, pinning West's ♦K. You lead your singleton heart, won by partner's ♥Q. North knows that West is out of diamonds and that you and he have all the rest of

the diamonds. The plan he initiates is to reduce the number of trump in the West hand so that he loses control of the deal. You see the same thing. So the strategy is to lead diamonds whenever you or he gets in the lead. This is called a forcing defense – forcing the declarer with the long trump to ruff. West trumps the 3rd trick and leads a low spade. North wins the ♠J and leads another diamond. West trumps and leads another spade. You win the ♠K and lead a 4th diamond. West ruffs with her last spade and now has to either lead a club into your tenace or lead a heart into your partner's ♥A. North leads a heart to the ♥A and partner leads another heart, which you ruff. You then cash your last diamond and your ♠A. You've taken 8 tricks: 3 spades, 2 hearts, a heart ruff, and 2 diamonds.

Since they were vulnerable you chalk up +500. This is better than any game you could have reached. And by the way, if West runs to 2 clubs, you double and she goes down 2 tricks as well. On this deal you can take 9 tricks in notrump, but even if you reach that contract, it only scores +400.

Augie Boehm has just published a book on this same topic. It's called Wielding The Axe and is available at www.baronbarklay.com. The weapon he writes about is obviously, the double. Augie says, "The best way to keep opponents 'out of your face' is to play a style where you can confidently wield the axe. Winners know when to double."