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Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry:
At matchpoints, I held the following, nonvulnerable vs. vulnerable:

♠5 ♥A 8 5 2 ♦A 8 7 5 2 ♣10 4 2.

	Partner		Brian
			Pass
2♠	Dbl	4♠	?

I thought any of pass, double, 5♦, or 5♥ could be right, and went with double. Partner, holding 1=5=5=2 shape, passed and they made 4♠. Partner was most unhappy with me. After they made it, I was most unhappy with him. Opinion, please.

Brian

Hi Brian,
There are many auctions that occur where a partnership is not on firm ground as to its actual meaning. This is just another one.

The opponents likely have 10 spades or more, following The Law of Total Tricks, as the auction strongly suggests they are not bidding a game on power. I think it is entirely illogical to think you could hold a penalty double of 4♠. The common interpretation I prefer is to deem this a "responsive double," showing values to compete and at least two different strains to possibly play. Having this flexible option is much better than soloing to your five-card diamond suit by leaving multiple options available. Your partner is simply advised that you have values, but no clear sense of direction – exactly what you have. If he held some type of 2–3–4–4 takeout double, he is permitted to

pass and try to go plus. If, however, he has a shapely takeout double, knowing you have interest in at least two of his suits, he should follow one of Alvin Roth's most famous declarations, "Take out takeout doubles!"

You did not tell me exactly what your partner's hand was, but with two five-card red suits, he had a clear obligation to bid. A good auction from this point:

2♠	Dbl	4♠	Pass
Pass	4NT	Pass	Dbl 5♦

4NT should ask you to bid the cheapest four-card suit you hold. Because you've expressed tolerance for at least two places to play, your diamond bid would announce four or more diamonds along with at least three hearts. Holding 10 diamonds and nine hearts, defending a 4♠ contract does not seem our best decision. On another note, takeout doubles with two five-card suits are not exactly what advancer usually expects.

Another auction that should be takeout that seems to be misinterpreted.

	1♠	4♥	Pass
Pass	Dbl	Pass	?

This is a takeout double. It is rare to make penalty doubles underneath the long strong suit. Opener's hand might be:

♠A K x x x ♥x ♦A x x ♣A x x x.

Responder can choose to pass, but he should expect opener to have a strong hand with good spades, and tolerance for both unbid suits.

Another auction:

2NT 3♠ Dbl?

Your partner opens 2NT and RHO ventures in with a three-level bid. Using a double in this sequence as penalty has a very low likelihood of frequency. Your partner has at least two spades and RHO has announced six or more good spades. You are highly unlikely to have trump tricks but far more likely to have values but no clear sense of direction. Example:

♠6 3 ♥Q 7 6 2 ♦K 8 7 4 ♣Q J 3.

With 8 HCP opposite 20–21, are you supposed to pass? Bid 3NT with no spade stopper? Double for penalty and watch RHO take seven spade tricks and another one somewhere and defeat it one when you were cold for 4♥? Double announces values, not clear intentions of penalty.

Finally, an auction that it took years for me to come around:

1NT 2♥ Dbl!

For years I played this as pure penalty. In reality, I think it is far better to play a double in this auction as "value showing, negative-ish." Tolerance for the unbid suits and at least enough values to play something. If you don't use this as negative, then holding:

♠J 8 5 2 ♥9 3 ♦A 8 4 3 ♣K 5 2,

what are you supposed to do?

All of these suggestions are merely ways to get into an auction when the opponents have intervened to show enough values to compete.

A lengthy response to your actual question, but what else is new? ☺