



BY **JERRY HELMS**
askjerry@jerryhelms.com
jerryhelms.com

Newer Players

Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry,
My partner opened 1♣ and my RHO overcalled 1NT. Holding:
♠J 10 9 5 4 ♥Q 10 6 4 ♦A 8 3 ♣7,
I made a negative double and to my surprise, it went all pass. They made several overtricks! Partner insisted my double was for penalty, but I insisted we play negative doubles. Consensus seems to be, she was right. Your opinion?

Jean

Hi Jean,
Sorry to say that your partner and the others whose advice you sought are correct. A little background:

The negative, or Sputnik double, as it was originally known to the expert community, was first introduced by Alvin Roth in the mid-1950s as the world transitioned to playing five-card majors. The theory was to uncover secondary fits, especially in a major, after a minor-suit opening was overcalled. The classic example:

Partner	RHO	You
1♣	1♠	?

with responder holding:

♠x x x ♥K J x x ♦K J x x ♣x x.

The shift to five-card majors meant that in this auction, opener could hold four strong hearts and perhaps three low clubs, something that would be unlikely if partner could have opened a four-card heart suit. Roth's suggestion to use double as takeout in sequences like the one above was a necessary addition to augment five-card major bidding. The basic premise was that in auctions where

partner opened one of a suit and an opponent overcalled in a suit, double was better used to search for alternative contracts rather than penalty.

In your auction, between your partner's opening bid and RHO's announced 15–18 points, there is little reason to speculate on finding a secondary fit at the two level that may not even exist.

It is standard practice to play that a double of a 1NT overcall is 100% penalty. Responder's values for this double are typically 10 or more high-card points, with zero indication of shape. Each of the following would qualify:

♠Q J 7 6 2 ♥Q 4 ♦A J 4 ♣9 6 3

♠7 2 ♥A Q 4 ♦Q J 10 4 ♣J 10 6 3

♠A 7 6 2 ♥K 8 5 4 ♦7 4 ♣Q J 3

Consider: If opener holds 12 or more points, RHO around 16, and you hold 10, what do you think dummy might look like? Worthless would be a good start. A double in this sequence announces ownership of the hand, and strongly suggests that either we play or the opponents play a doubled contract. While each of these examples have exactly 10 HCP, it would be perfectly acceptable to hold more!

The flip side is that if responder does not double 1NT, he does not hold a good hand, which does not mean he shouldn't bid. With any long suit or any shapely two-suited hand, responder should tend to bid. Since the failure to double denies a good hand, any bid he makes is nonforcing.

Partner	RHO	You
1m	1NT	?

① ♠Q J 10 4 3 2 ♥7 ♦J 6 5 2 ♣7 4

② ♠7 4 ♥K J 8 5 3 2 ♦6 5 ♣9 6 3

I would bid two of my major with either of these.

Partner	RHO	You
1♦	1NT	?

♠Q J 10 9 4 3 2 ♥7 ♦J 10 5 2 ♣4

A preemptive jump to 3♠ would be my choice. In the same auction, holding:

♠3 ♥7 4 ♦Q 9 6 5 2 ♣Q 8 7 5 3

A preemptive jump to 3♦ greatly appeals to me.

With all of these hands, responder should get his long suit involved. Remember, the failure to double denies a strong hand.

Partner	RHO	You
1m	1NT	?

① ♠K 9 6 3 2 ♥A 7 6 5 4 ♦8 ♣6 5

② ♠A J 10 5 ♥Q J 9 5 4 ♦8 4 3 ♣6

It is often a good idea to bid on these type hands. There are a number of conventional options which could be useful in this situation. Any artificial bid that allows responder to show length in both major suits would be preferable to a pass, in my opinion. I have an understandable bias for the HELLO convention, of which I am co-creator, for use after the opponents either open or overcall 1NT.

As usual, far more information than you requested or perhaps needed. I don't know about you, but I feel better! 😊