

Esther Discusses "When to Double for Penalty, and When Not to Double for Penalty"

Bruce Thompson

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Bruce: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will talk us about **Doubles for Penalty**. Esther, thanks for taking time to be with us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, in any case, thank you for talking to us. Is there any overarching, *hugely critical concept* you wish to discuss with us prior to discussing the elements of penalty Doubles?

Esther: Well, actually, yes, my malodorous misanthrope. I want to strongly emphasize that your Partnership absolutely must have a *crystal clear* agreement about which Doubles are for **Doubles for Penalty**, and which Doubles are "**Not-for-Penalty**" Doubles,¹ artificial, and instead have other meanings, such as "Takeout"/Demand Doubles, "Lead-Directing" Doubles, 1NT Doubles, or "They Stole My Bid" Doubles, among several others. For example, your Partnership might explicitly agree that any bid at or above 3**S** is for penalty. Or, you might agree that any bid at or above 3**H** is for penalty, unless the opening bid is a pre-empt bid. If you and

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¹ In the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see: Lesson #14: "6 'Not-for-Penalty' Doubles".

Partner lack *crystal clear* understandings of which Doubles are for Penalty, and which Doubles are not, you misunderstandings will *inevitably* lead to *massive* mistakes that will cost you quite dearly!

Bruce: Well, can Partners use a *more sophisticated rubric* to know when Partners are definitely making a Double for Penalty, even when the Double is made at a **lower level** than, for example, **3S**?

Esther: Well, yes, Bruce! As you get more experience, a more complex rubric for delineating Doubles for Penalty *versus* "Not-for-Penalty" Doubles (e.g., "Takeout"/Demand, "Lead-Directing"). Of course, *it may take you awhile to get to a place where you and Partner are comfortable using a more complex rubric.* Here are *scenarios* that define other Doubles for Penalty used by some more experienced Partners:

1. We have established a definite "game-going" fit by bidding conventions such as "2 Over 1" or "Jacoby **2NT**".²

2. The *Opponents Overcall* by bidding **1NT**:

YOU	Opp	PARTNER	Opp
1S	1NT	DBL	<i>or</i>
1C	PASS	1H	1NT
DBL			

3. The *Opponents Overcall* after we have established a suit fit:

YOU	Opp	PARTNER	Opp
1S	PASS	2S	3D
DBL			

4. We have made a natural **1NT** bid, response, or rebid:

YOU	Opp	PARTNER	Opp
1NT	2H	DBL	<i>or</i>
1D	1S	1NT	2S
DBL			

² Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see the very **first 2 Conventions** in the "Conventions" section!

5. You or Partner have opened by making a preempt bid:

YOU	Opp	PARTNER	Opp
2S	3H	DBL	

6. You or Partner have previously Doubled a card-showing cue bid, such as Michaels Overcall Cuebid:³

YOU	Opp	PARTNER	Opp
		1C	2C
DBL	2S	DBL	

Bruce: Well, OK. Are there any generic principles that can help you and Partner sort out when a Double is more likely a Double for Penalty?

Esther: Well, yes:

1. A Double made at higher levels of bidding is more likely to be for Penalty.
2. If you or Partner have shown length and/or strength in the Opponents' bid suit, a Double is more likely to be for Penalty.
3. If you have shown unusual length in a suit (e.g., by bidding a preempt, bidding a suit twice), and Partner Doubles, Partner's Double is more likely to be for Penalty.

Bruce: Well, OK. Anything else?

Esther: Well, my dandruff-ridden dufus, actually, yes, there is something else. It is also critically important for you and your Partner to realize that **Doubles for Penalty** can be hugely important. Always remember: *You can score positive Bridge Scores, and even Top Matchpoint Boards, on defense, just as you can make good positive Bridge Scores on offense.* For example, when both Pairs are Vulnerable, you can score +620 by making a 4H or 4S contract with no Overtricks, but you can score +800 by setting Opponents 3 tricks. And it can be proven mathematically that +800 is *better/bigger* than +620!!! In general, *if you believe*

³ Within the "Esther Bridge Lessons", see "Lesson #12: Five (5) Two-Suited Distribution Cuebid Systems".

that you and Partner can set Opponents' contract by at least **2 Tricks** when they are Vulnerable, or **3 Tricks** when they are not Vulnerable, a Double for Penalty may be very attractive!

Bruce: Point well taken, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, But please help us learn more about **when** a penalty Double is reasonable.

Esther: Well, basically, against Opponents' Suit contract, you usually want a "trump stack" to feel comfortable making a penalty Double. A penalty Double against a Suit contract based on strength in a side suit may be dangerous, because Opponents may hold a void, or a singleton, in your strong Suit! For example, if you or Partner bid a suit during the auction, and Opponents nevertheless jumped to a Game or a Slam contract, you had best be very wary about making a Double for Penalty! Against a **NT** contract you may want to hold points, and either know you will be "on lead," or you have told your Partner what to lead by using a "Lead-Directing" Double, or a long suit with likely side entries. And a Double for Penalty that *Doubles Opponents into a Game contract* is especially *dicey*! Of course, if you hold 2 Aces against a **6NT** contract, and you are on lead, a penalty Double is obviously correct, and the *failure* to make this penalty Double could result in your being sent to Bridge Prison!

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, are there any times when you would not Double, even though you believe you and Partner will set the contract?

Esther: Well, my blubbering bumblehead, yes, indeed! Do not Double for penalty if the Opponents have bid multiple suits, and the contract is being set at a relatively low level, or the Opponents may "run" to a *different and makeable contract*, especially if Opponents may "run" from a contract in a lower-scoring Minor, into a makeable bid in a higher-scoring Major, which will then result in a positive Bridge Score for them, and a negative Bridge Score for you.

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, so **when** should you make a Double for Penalty, assuming you believe that Opponents won't "run", or can't successfully "run" because the contract is at a high level?

Esther: Well, my simpering simpleton, there are a couple of bridge "Rules" that may be helpful. One such "Rule" is the "**Rule of 9**" proposed by Mel Colchamiro (see his 2007 book, How You Can Play Like an Expert (Without Having to Be One): Mel's 21st Century Rules and Other Guidelines for Winning at Your Level and Above) for use in deciding whether to Double suit contracts. Add together:

1. the level of Opponents' contract (e.g., 4 for a 4**S** contract), plus
2. the number of trump cards you hold in your Hand, plus
3. the number of trump Honors (including the Ten) you hold.

If the resulting number is **9 or more**, then you can probably safely Double for penalty. A simpler form of this Rule merely adds the contract level to the number of trump cards you hold.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, wasn't Colchamiro's "Rule of 9" originally intended by him to be used to decide when it may be safe to ignore Partner's "demand" that you bid when Partner makes a "Take-Out Demand" Double?⁴ For example, your LHO as Dealer opens 1**S**, Partner Doubles, your RHO passes, and (1) your Hand meets the requirements of the "Rule of 9", (2) you do not think your Partnership can make a Game contract, and (3) your Opponents are *Vulnerable*, thus making a successful defense that sets your Opponents' suit contract "Sweet."

Esther: Well, my blubbering bumblehead, yes, indeed! That was the original use of the "Rule of 9". But be very very, very careful about leaving Partner's Double "on"

⁴ A "Take-Out Demand" Double **demands** that you bid your "longest and strongest" suit, or NT, unless your RHO bids something other than Pass, or you hold a "massive" "Trump stack" against a Suit contract bid.

when Partner's Double is clearly a "Take-Out Demand" Double. If you ignore Partner's Demand, and you do indeed set the Opponents when they are Vulnerable, Partner may not kill you. But if your expectation of setting the Opponents does not work out, you will have a very, very (justifiably) angry Partner on your hands. And I certainly wouldn't take this risk unless the Opponents are Vulnerable!

Bruce: Errr, ok, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Is there another "Rule" that you can use to help guide your decision about whether to Double for penalty?

Esther: Well, yes. There also is the "**Rule of 10**" proposed by Ron Klinger (see his book, 100 Winning Duplicate Tips). Again, we compute a Sum by adding together:

1. the number of trump tricks you believe you will take, plus
2. the number of total Tricks the Opponents are contracting to take (e.g., for a 2-level contract, 8).

If the resulting number is **10 or more**, then you can probably safely Double for Penalty. For example, if the contract is 2S, and you hold K,J,x,x of trump, you might expect to take the K of trump, and 1 additional trump Trick either with the Jack, or by ruffing with a small trump card. Because $2 + 8 = 10$, you can probably safely Double! These Rules involving suit contracts emphasize you holding a trump stack, and avoid your counting on winners in other suits where Opponents may hold voids or singletons! But as with all the Rules, these Rules should be used as "advisory", and not in an overly rigid manner.

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, it sounds like the bottom line is: "**It is USUALLY very unwise to Double for Penalty against a suit contract simply because you have a lot of points!**"

Esther: Bingo, Bruce! You got it. And here are a couple of precepts about when you should **NOT Double for Penalty:**

1. It is usually unwise to Double for Penalty Opponents' Slam contract. If you set a Slam contract, Opponents probably made an improvident

bid, and you are likely to get a good Board Matchpoint Score/Percentage without taking the risk of making a Double!

2. It is usually unwise to Double for Penalty Opponents' low-level bid if you think Opponents may "run" to an alternative contract, which you think may be makeable.