Ask Jerry

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I have a question that I have wondered about for years. In the auction 1♣–Dbl–1♠–Dbl, I've read in several books that experts play the advancer's double (the second double in that auction) as penalty, showing spades along with constructive values. Why not bid 1NT with a spade stopper and use double as responsive, showing the other two suits? What is the big advantage to playing advancer's double as penalty in this situation?
Joe

Hi Joe,

An excellent question with an interesting history. At various points in the history of the game, psychic bids were the rage. The early Kaplan-Sheinwold system, for example, actually promoted what they called "controlled psychs." One of the oldest of these type bids occurred in the auction you described. After 1♣–Dbl, responder, holding something such as:

♠x ♥xxx ♦xxxx ♣Qxxxx,

would choose a "natural" 1♠ in an attempt to pick off the opponents' obvious spade fit. Although this action was not without risk, it occasionally hit a massive home run. Sometimes opener would choose a simple spade raise and responder would pass, go down four or five, yet get a great result since the opponents missed game. If doubled in any spade contract, however, responder would retreat to what they hoped was the safety of a club contract.

To combat this, double was used to show spades as the natural, constructive bid responder intended to make if RHO had passed. This had the effect of exposing a potential psych and basically just describing your hand. Without discussion, this is still the way many people define the double.

A more modern method is the one you suggest. Double by advancer (the partner of the takeout doubler) is responsive, showing exactly four hearts and implying at least four diamonds. Using this method, any advance of hearts shows at least a five-card suit. This agreement would apply equally to the sequence 1♦–Dbl–1♥–Dbl. The second double shows exactly four spades, and implies at least four clubs. Bidding spades directly guarantees at least five. This agreement can help locate a possible eight-card fit.

An even more modern method was suggested by Billy Miller in his June article about "curly cue" bids.

I think both methods are superior to the older method. Having just participated in a bidding disaster, however, with a regular partner on a similar auction, I stress the need for partnership agreement. Any agreement is superior to no agreement. ❐