

Against Stolen Bids

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Mirror, mirror on the wall ...

... Who is the fairest one of all? That famous line uttered by the wicked queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* goes through my head every time I hear players talking about "mirror doubles" that are used by (mainly club) players to fend off the opponents' intrusion into their auction after their partner's strong 1 NT (15-17 high-card points) opening bid. In New York and Florida, mirror doubles are also called "stolen bids." I have also heard that in other parts of the country they are also known as "shadow bids" or "shadow doubles."

But whatever they are known as, mirror doubles are mysterious creatures. No one seems to know where or how they originated, and it's odd that although mirror doubles are a staple of many (or possibly even most) club players, none, I mean virtually none, of the top players in the country or the world use them. In fact, nearly all top players speak of "mirror doubles" with as much disdain as a snake speaks of a mongoose. In the Summer NABC in Las Vegas, I was on an American Bridge Teacher's Association panel with (among others) ACBL Bridge Bulletin columnist Jerry Helms. You should have heard Jerry rail against them!

How can this be? Why is this so? Why do the best players hate mirror doubles so much? Should you?

This is Part 1 of a series. In the next few months, I'm going to answer these questions. I'm going to let you in on what the best players say about mirror doubles -- what they think is good and what is bad. Then I will write about the whole area of counter-defenses against intrusions into our strong 1NT auctions. But first, let's summarize what mirror doubles/stolen bids are.

Using stolen bids, responder's double of a two-level overcall of partner's 1NT opening bid means "they stole the bid I was going to make. Partner, had they passed, I was going to make that same bid they just made." For example, if they overcall 2♥ and I double, that means I was going to bid 2♥, a transfer to 2♠, and so on. Here is a summary:

[Beware. The Surgeon General has determined that mirror doubles/stolen bids (shown below) are detrimental to your bridge health.]

Why do the best players hate mirror doubles so much? Should you?

Opener starts with 1NT (15-17), and the next player bids. What should responder's double mean in each case?

<i>Opponent's bid</i>	<i>Meaning of double</i>
2♣	Stayman
2♦	Transfer to hearts
2♥	Transfer to spades

For bids from 2♠ through 3♠, double would mean whatever the bid means in your system. A corollary to stolen bids is that the next higher suit (for example 2♦ after a 2♣ overcall, 2♥ after a 2♦ overcall and 2♠ after a 2♥ overcall) is a transfer, just as it would have been in the absence of the overcall.

What the best players think

I know why I don't care for mirror doubles, and when I started writing this series, I knew that none of my frequent competitors in top-level events played them (I don't either). I decided to ask a sample of top players about their views of mirror doubles. I took a survey of these players (all NABC champions): Steve Bloom, Marty Bergen, David Berkowitz, Rich DeMartino, Allan Falk, Zeke Jabbour, Eric Kokish, Jill Meyers, Mike Passell, Barry Rigal, Steve Robinson and JoAnna Stansby. Next month I'll report on the results of the survey

Part 2 (January 2009)

The survey says ...

Q: Do you play mirror doubles?

A: Twelve out of 12 said no, except over 2♣. All indicated that they did in fact play that a double of 2♣ was Stayman, a form of mirror double. You should, too. Also, you should play "systems on" after a double or a 2♣ overcall.

Q: Do you know any of your peers who play mirror doubles?

A: Twelve out of 12 said no (other than to double 2♣ as Stayman). Steve Robinson: "I don't know anyone above the Flight C level who plays them." Mike Passell: "No one I know does."

Q: Do you know where, when or who invented mirror doubles?

A: Twelve out of 12 said they didn't know, but two made these comments: Allan Falk: "I don't know, but surely a player with no credentials as a bidding theorist." Barry Rigal: "Surely someone with too much time on their hands!"

Q: Would you recommend mirror doubles to lower-level players?

A: Ten out of 12 said they wouldn't. Eric Kokish: "No. Doubles above 2♣ are much more important as negative or value showing." Rich DeMartino: "Absolutely not!" Jill Meyers: "No. You are given more options to describe your hand if you play a double as negative or penalty." Robinson: "No. You need double as either negative or penalty."

Later, I will discuss the negative or penalty double options that you and your partner should agree upon.

Passell: "I wouldn't recommend mirror doubles to anyone." Falk: "No. mirror doubles take away either negative or penalty doubles, both of which are far more important."

Two respondents see some benefits for lower-level players. Zeke Jabbour: "I recommend anything that is comfortable to them, as long as there is no egregious technical flaw." Steve Bloom: "Yes. Weaker players need simple and consistent rules to cover a lot of competitive auctions. It is much more important to have a solid agreement in effect, rather than to have the best possible agreements."

Q: What are the strengths of mirror doubles?

A: Some of those polled admitted that there may be two -- one based on merit and one based on simplicity: Jabbour: "They right-side the contract by maintaining the ability to transfer into all four suits." Bloom: "There are simplicity and transfer gains." Kokish: "Easy to remember." Falk: "Preserving the ability to transfer, which may be overrated." Robinson: "Simplicity." Meyers: "Not complicated to learn." Rigal: "Transfer principle." David Berkowitz: "Weaker players would have an easier time remembering these bids."

Q: If you do not play mirror doubles, what should double mean?

Bloom: "Either negative or penalty. You choose." Jabbour: "My personal preference is for negative." Falk: "Negative at the three level or penalty at the two level. I play both ways with different partners and don't have a real preference." DeMartino: "With most partners, I play all doubles are negative." Robinson: "I like double of one-suiters as negative, doubles of two-suiters as penalty and three-level double as negative." Berkowitz: "I like negative." Meyers: "Doubles are negative as long as their bid is natural." Rigal: "Double of any call other than 2♣, is negative."

That's why the players polled don't like mirror doubles. They believe that double is needed for take out (negative) or penalty. Each partnership must choose. Ten of the panelists choose negative.

All the respondents still use transfers after a double or a 2♣ overcall. What do calls mean over other bids?

Q: After an overcall by an opponent (2♦ or higher), what would a bid in the next higher suit mean by the responder?

A: Rigal: "New suit at the two level is natural and not forcing, but forcing to game if new suit is bid the three level." Meyers: "Bids at the two level are natural and to play." Robinson: "2♥ and 2♣ are to play [not forcing], while bids at the three level are forcing or transfers if we've agreed on that." Falk: "Natural and not forcing at the two level, natural and forcing at the three level." Jabbour: "Natural."

Part 3 (February 2009)

What does it all mean?

Last month we saw that the expert panel overwhelmingly believes that mirror doubles come at too high a cost – the loss of the ability to use double as takeout or penalty. Ten respondents thought that a double of a natural two-level overcall after a strong 1NT opening should be negative. Two respondents said they would play doubles as penalty if partner wanted to. None of the respondents suggested you play mirror doubles except over 2♣.

Mel's proposed solution

Whenever an opponent overcalls your 1NT opening in a natural suit, double by your side is negative – that means takeout. A negative double doesn't always guarantee four cards in the unbid major.

Here's an example: Suppose your partner opens 1NT and right-hand opponent bids 2♥. You would make a negative double, if you held: ♠K86 ♥74 ♦AJ43 ♣9743. You might ask, "Why can't I bid 2NT with the hand above showing 8-9 points, invitational." That's a good question. The answer is that you need 2NT for something else. That something else has a weird name: Lebensohl.

In order to handle all the situations that come up when they interfere over your 1NT opening bid, you need a full arsenal of counter-defenses. In modern bidding, there are many cases in which 2NT has been assigned an artificial meaning. For example: 1♥ - Pass - 2NT is usually Jacoby, showing a forcing heart raise, while 1♥ - 2NT is meant as the unusual notrump showing the minors. The auction 2♥ - Pass - 2NT is usually played as either asking for a feature or as Ogust, and 1NT - Pass - 2NT is often played as a transfer to diamonds.

Simple Lebensohl

I suggest you use what is called simple Lebensohl. It allows the responder to compete in a long suit without getting the partnership overboard. Assume the bidding is as follows: 1NT 2♠ ? (you). Look at these two sample hands:

1. ♠4 ♥A5 ♦K876 ♣AJ9764
2. ♠4 ♥75 ♦8763 ♣AJ9764

With the first hand, your side has game or perhaps slam. So you bid 3♣ (forcing) to see what your partner rebids. But with the second hand, we want to play 3♣. Obviously, we can't bid 3♣ on both hands because partner won't understand our intentions. Simple Lebensohl comes to the rescue. With the second hand we bid 2NT, forcing the opener to bid 3♣. Opener then waits to see what the responder had in mind.

With the second hand, you will pass 3♣. By the way, if you had the same kind of hand as hand #2, but instead had long diamonds (or hearts), you would still bid 2NT. After partner bids the required 3♣, you would correct to 3♦ (or 3♥). That is a signal for opener to pass. If you had game aspirations, over 2♠ you would have bid your suit directly, instead of bidding 2NT.

When you have a hand that you might want to bid 2NT as natural and invitational, you can make a negative double showing 7 or more high-card points.

To summarize:

1. A double is negative (takeout) at the two or three level.
2. A new suit bid at the two level shows a length of five or more, is natural and not forcing.
3. A new suit bid at the three level shows a length of five or more, is natural and forcing.
4. 2NT is simple Lebensohl and is a relay to 3♣.

What's next?

You now have a playable system in place. Next month, you'll see how it works with various hands that you might face after an enemy overcall of partner's 1NT opening.

Part 4 (March 2009)

Suppose partner opens 1NT and your right-hand opponent overcalls 2♥. Here are some sample hands where you have a long suit:

1. ♠K8743 ♥53 ♦J85 ♣743
2. ♠KJ742 ♥54 ♦AQ3 ♣J54
3. ♠J8753 ♥76 ♦873 ♣642
4. ♠43 ♥86 ♦J65 ♣KJ7632
5. ♠A3 ♥84 ♦Q74 ♣KQ7532
6. ♠84 ♥A8 ♦Q98 ♣KQ7642

The suggested bids are:

1. 2♠. With 4 high-card points (partner has an average of 16), you want to compete. Partner is expected to pass.
2. 3♣. A new suit at the three level, whether it is a jump or not, is forcing. Partner should choose between 4♠ and 3NT. No need for simple Lebensohl.
3. Pass. If there had not been an overcall, you would bid 2♠ but the overcall takes you off the hook. Pass and stay out of trouble.
4. 2NT. This is simple Lebensohl, a relay to 3♣. Partner has no choice and you will pass.
5. 3♣. This is forcing. Maybe partner can bid 3NT with a heart stopper. If not, maybe this is a hand for 5♣.
6. 3NT. "Doin' what comes naturally."

At other times, you may have a balanced hand. Suppose partner opens 1NT. RHO overcalls 2♣ and you hold:

1. ♠87 ♥K873 ♦AJ4 ♣K876
2. ♠63 ♥KT63 ♦763 ♣KQ73
3. ♠K73 ♥765 ♦A43 ♣K963
4. ♠KJT3 ♥73 ♦763 ♣A763
5. ♠87 ♥K73 ♦AJ73 ♣8753

The suggested bids are:

1. Double. This is a negative and is for takeout. Partner is expected to bid with an eye towards hearts. Only if partner is loaded in spades should he pass.
2. Double. You will pass whatever partner bids and hope for a plus.
3. 3NT. A simple answer for a simple problem.
4. Pass. This is the price for playing negative doubles and simple Lebensohl. Don't double – partner is going to bid. Don't bid 2NT -- partner is going to bid 3♣. You should pass and hope partner can reopen with a double, which you'll pass for penalties.
5. Double. This is recommended even without a four-card heart suit -- in a pinch, three will do. You should pass whatever partner bids. If partner passes with strong spades, that's just fine, too.

If you and your favorite partner prefer to play penalty doubles instead of negative doubles, responder's choices with long suits are unaffected. With balanced hands, however, things change. Look back at the five balanced hands. Playing penalty doubles, with hand #1 bid 3♠ a cuebid. It would act as Stayman. You're strong enough to force to game. With hand #2s, you're stuck. Pass lets them steal. Forcing to game is an overbid. You can't quite have everything. With hand #3, 3NT is still just fine. With hand #4 you should double. This hand is the poster child for playing penalty doubles. Hand #5 is another where you're stuck-- nothing fits.

Penalty doubles are fine, sort of, but negative doubles seem to cover more situations. That is why the experts prefer negative doubles. I guess you know where I stand. Next month will be the last installment of this series, and I'll address one final important point.

Part 5 (April 2009)

A final important note

Too often, I see players make a big error when the opponents make an interference bid after their partner's strong 1NT opening: They are too cautious and pass. When your side has the clear majority of the high-card points, the responder knows it, but the opener does not. It is responder's responsibility, therefore, to take some action. I encapsulate this notion in what I call Mel's Rule of 23.

When you know that your side has at least 23 HCP and the opponents intervene, you must double or bid -- pass is not an option.

If you pass, you are giving the opponents a license to steal. Because the opener has 16 HCP on average, the responder must do something (bid or double) if she has at least 7 HCP. Try this short quiz. Suppose the bidding is 1N 2♠ ? (you). What would you do with each of the following hands:

1. ♠86 ♥K763 ♦876 ♣A7637

Answer: Double. This is takeout. You will pass partner's bid. If partner passes for penalty, that's fine too.

2. ♠976 ♥AJ43 ♦K42 ♣T76

Answer: This is takeout, again. You'd prefer to have four-card support for more than one unbid suit, but that's life. Passing is unacceptable, at least at matchpoints. You just can't accept a score of plus 50 or 100 if you can make plus 110 or 120. At IMPs, you can be a bit more cautious since the IMP difference would be negligible. But at matchpoints, it can mean a zero.

3. ♠83 ♥Q3 ♦KJ7643 ♣875

Answer: 2NT. This bid is Lebensohl -- a relay to 3♣. Over 3♣, you will bid 3♦ and partner will know you do not have game intentions and will pass.

4. ♠Q83 ♥Q6 ♦J873 ♣Q763

Answer: Pass. Yes, so there are some 7-point hands that you should pass. That's because this one is really worth only 5.5 or 6 points. Remember, when a hand is made up of mostly queens and jacks, downgrade its value.

Babies and the best

By the way, these guidelines are not just for you and me; they're not "baby" guidelines. *All* the best players follow them, even if they've never heard of Mel's Rule of 23. Phillip Alder reported a deal in the *New York Times* on Dec. 4, 2008, that illustrates this. It involved one of the world's greatest players, Eric Rodwell, at the Boston NABC last November. Eric's partner, Jeff Meckstroth, opened 1NT, promising 14-16 HCP and Eric held:

♠96 ♥KT43 ♦T654 ♣KQ4.

The next person overcalled 2♦, showing diamonds and a major. Unhesitatingly, Eric doubled -- not a mirror double, but one showing values. It was a takeout double, which I have been urging you to play in this situation. Eric knew that his 8 HCP plus Jeff's (on average) 15 HCP gave his side 23 HCP -- the trigger-point for taking action. When his partner Jeff then bid 2♠, Eric converted to 2NT which led to a "Meckwellian" 24-point 3NT contract that made. (When you play the cards like Eric and Jeff do, then you can bid to 3NT with 24 HCP. Until then, just follow the usual 25-26 HCP guideline.)