



# PENALTY DOUBLES

*Presented by*

Chris Steele





# PENALTY DOUBLES

*Or How I Learned to Wield the Axe*

Presented by

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# AGENDA

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- ♠ Why a Lecture on Penalty Doubles?
- ♥ Whose Deck is it Anyway?
- ♦ Commonly Agreed Penalty Doubles
- ♣ Taking Advantage of Penalty Situations
- ♠ When to Avoid Doubling
- ♥ Test Your Knowledge!



As a Result of this Presentation, You Will  
Become Very Familiar With...

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+200

+300

+500

**-470**

**-670**



# A Word Of Caution...



- The content in this presentation should be discussed with your regular partner.
  - I may suggest a double is penalty, but your partnership may agree differently.
  - Modern bridge has developed more “utility doubles”. Most pairs play doubles are takeout unless explicitly defined.
- This presentation is intended for matchpoint strategy but can be applied to teams.  
Recommended adjustments for teams:
  - Avoid thin doubles for a 1 trick set.
  - “Take the money” if the opponents make a clear sacrifice.
  - Continue to capitalize on low level penalty doubles.
- Be a strong defender! Dropping tricks will ruin your superb bidding!



# Why a Lecture on Penalty Doubles?

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- Knowing when (and when not) to double is often the difference between winning and losing.
- Partnership misunderstandings on when a double is takeout vs penalty.
- Bridge is a bidders game; penalties let you fight back **against these pesky plumbers** against the opponents.
- A full understanding of penalty doubles provides greater flexibility in the auction and invites partner into the decision-making process.
- At matchpoints, thin doubles can lead to the “magic +200”, and/or beat out the par score in the standard game contract.



# Why a Lecture on Penalty Doubles?

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- Doubling more often will increase the volatility of your results.
- Who contributed more? Someone stealing second base 10/10 times or 28/40 times? Don't fear -670, just be right more than half the time!
- A steady pair who has a consistent 55% game almost never comes in first. An aggressive pair that fluctuates between 45% and 65% wins nearly half the time.
- Building a reputation as a doubler is essential to winning bridge.
  - **Don't be a pushover! Be a difficult opponent!**
- Some pairs need to be taught "nonvulnerable" does not mean "invulnerable".
  - **Yes, I have a vendetta.**



# Whose Deck Is It Anyway?



## Your side holds 23+HCP

- It is your deck!
- The enemy should never play undoubled!
- If the opponents find a “safe spot”, you must bid over them.
- You won’t necessarily bid game, but in many situations you will.
- Forcing passes (covered later) apply.



## Each side holds 18-22 HCP

- It is an even deck.
- Double when expecting a two-trick set.
- Identify defensive tricks in your hand and add partner’s expected tricks.

Partner’s Expected Tricks	
Point Range	Should Win
6-9 points	1 trick
10-12 points	2 tricks
13-15 points	3 tricks
16-18 points	4 tricks
19-22 points	5 tricks



## You side holds 17- HCP

- It is their deal.
- Avoid doubling just because you think you can set them.
- Opponents can be tipped off if you double and may run or play to advantage.
- Doubles are typically lead directing doubles of artificial suits.
- Use caution, you may be redoubled!



# Example Deal – Your Deck

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♥	1♠	2♥	2♠	
4♥	4♠	Pass	Pass	
X				

- West has 18 HCP. West assumes East has 6+HCP for their response.
- Partnership values: 23HCP+. It is our deck.
- E/W must double or push to 5♥.
- Passing out 4♠ undoubled will almost guarantee a poor result, even if you set it.

West

♠xx  
♥AKQTx  
♦AKx  
♣Qxx

East

♠Jx  
♥J9xx  
♦xx  
♣KJTxx



# Example Deal – Even Deck

West            North            East            South    Vul: None  
 1♦              1♠              1NT            2♠  
 3♣              3♠              X

- West's assumed 13 HCP + East's 7 = 20HCP
- It is an even deck (20 to 20).
- East sees 3 defensive tricks.
- Point count estimates West at 3 tricks.
- 3♠ should go down two.
- Safety in case a trick goes sour.

Partner's Expected Tricks	
Point Range	Should Win
6-9 points	1 trick
10-12 points	2 tricks
13-15 points	3 tricks
16-18 points	4 tricks

West

♠x  
 ♥Jx  
 ♦AKJxx  
 ♣KJxxx

East

♠QJ9x  
 ♥ATx  
 ♦xxx  
 ♣xxx



# Example Deal – Their Deck

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
Pass	1♦	1♥	2♦	
Pass	3NT	Pass		

- The opponents have willfully bid a game. It is their deck.
- East is on lead and guaranteed to beat 3NT.
- Double would only tip off N/S that their speculative 3N game will fail.
- N/S would run to 4♦ or even 5♦ and make.

West

♠JTxxx

♥xx

♦xx

♣Txxx

East

♠xx

♥KQJT9x

♦Ax

♣QJx



# Commonly Agreed Penalty Doubles

---

- 1 When partner opens or overcalls with a preempt, your doubles are penalty
- 2 When the auction goes 1x – (X) – XX, all subsequent doubles are penalty
- 3 When the opponents interfere with your GF 2/1 auction, doubles are penalty
- 4 When the opponents make a natural 1N overcall, double is penalty, and all subsequent doubles are penalty
- 5 When your side has settled in a final contract, and then the opponents enter the auction, double is penalty
- 6\* When partner makes a takeout double, and as advancer you double the RHO's major.  
(This isn't explicitly penalty, but it shows 4 cards in the opponent's major)



# Example Deal 1

When partner opens or overcalls with a preempt, your doubles are penalty

West          North          East          South      Vul: N/S  
2♥            2♠            X

- East has a misfit for partner's preempt.
- East has strong intermediate trumps behind the overcaller.
- South has a weak hand.

West

♠xx  
♥AQJxxx  
♦xxx  
♣xx

East

♠QJ98  
♥x  
♦AQJx  
♣KQJx



# Example Deal 2

When the auction goes 1x – (X) – XX, all subsequent doubles are penalty

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♠	X	XX	2♥	
X				

- East does not have a fit with partner
- East has 10+HCP and a semi-balanced hand
- North may have made a “light” T/O X.
- West holds 4 trumps and doesn't let the opponents off the hook.

West

♠AKQxx  
♥QJxx  
♦xx  
♣Axx

East

♠Jx  
♥xx  
♦KQJxxx  
♣QJx



# Example Deal 3

When the opponents interfere with your GF 2/1 auction, doubles are penalty

West          North          East          South      Vul: None  
1♠            Pass            2♣            2♥

X

- In 2/1 auctions, 2♣ bids might not be a 5-card suit. A fit might not exist.
- The penalty in 2♥ easily outscores a 3N game, especially when slam is doubtful.
- You'd be surprised how many ill-advised "lead directing" bids go unpunished... **Take advantage!**
- NOTE: Only applies in a Game Forcing auction.

West

♠AQxxx  
♥QJxx  
♦xx  
♣Axx

East

♠Jx  
♥xxx  
♦AQJx  
♣KQJx



# Example Deal 4

When the opponents make a natural 1N overcall, double is penalty, and all subsequent doubles are penalty

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♦	1NT	X	2♣	
Pass	Pass	X		

- East has 11 HCP.
- Partner opened (12+HCP); it is “our deck”.
- East is happy to play 1NX. The opponents will not make 1N when it’s your deck.
- E/W continue to double the runout.

West  
♠KQJx  
♥Axx  
♦QTxx  
♣xx

East  
♠Axx  
♥KTx  
♦Jxx  
♣QJ9x



# Example Deal 5

When your side has settled in a final contract, and then the opponents enter the auction, double is penalty

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♠	Pass	2♠	Pass	
Pass	3♥	X		

- The partnership agreed to play 2♠. Game has no realistic chance.
- North believes “we can’t let the opponents play a 2-level contract.” **Prove them wrong!**
- You must protect your very possible +110 by doubling to salvage the board.
- Far too often I see down 2 undoubled here. +300 was on the table!

West  
♠KJxxx  
♥x  
♦KQTx  
♣Axx

East  
♠Txx  
♥AJ9x  
♦Jxx  
♣Qxx



# Example Deal 6

When partner makes a takeout double, and as advancer you double the RHO's major.

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
X	1♠	X	1♦	

- This isn't explicitly penalty, but it shows 4 cards in RHO's major.
- You can't allow an opponent with 8532 and a side A to accidentally steal your 4M game.
- Sometimes people psyche. Protect yourself!

West  
♠ Jxxx  
♥ AKx  
♦ xx  
♣ KQxx

East  
♠ AKQx  
♥ Qxx  
♦ xxxx  
♣ Jxx



# Taking Advantage of Penalty Situations

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- 1 Forcing Pass
- 2 Trap Pass
- 3 Converting Takeout Doubles – Mel's rule of 9
- 4 Converting Negative Doubles – Red vs White
- 5 The Deal is a Misfit
- 6 You Anticipate Ruffs or can Count Defensive Tricks



# Forcing Pass

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- Applies when both members of the partnership know it is “our deck”.
  - $1y - (X) - XX$
  - $1y - (1N) - X$
  - $1y - P - 2z$
  - $2\clubsuit$  openers (even if partner is bust)
- The **enemy** opponents are not allowed to play undoubled. We double or win the auction.
- Often helpful in 5 level decisions or when no fit has been established
  - Pass when unsure on direction by soliciting partner’s opinion
  - Double when you lack values or distribution
  - Bid on with unshown extras or unusual distribution.



# Forcing Pass – Example Deal

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♠	X	XX	Pass	
Pass	2♣	Pass	Pass	
X				

- Redouble makes it “our deck”, and both sides know it.
- No fit established; East asks partner’s opinion.
- West is delighted to share their opinion!
- Inexperienced Easts would let the opponents **slip through their claws** escape with a timid 2♦ bid.

West

♠AKTxx

♥Qxx

♦x

♣QJTx

East

♠xx

♥AJ9

♦AK9xx

♣xxx



# Trap Pass

---

- Negative doubles are so common that they have replaced traditional penalty doubles. So how do we **punish** take advantage of a poorly timed overcall?
- We trust our partner will reopen the bidding with shortness in the opponents suit.
- If you have a normal penalty double of a suit overcall, pass even with a strong hand.
- Rule: If a suit overcall is passed back to the opener, they must reopen with two or fewer cards in the opponent's suit (usually with a takeout double).
  - This does not promise extras. It is a required action with shortness!
  - Don't takeout double with freakish shape, such as a void. Just reopen with a bid. Your partner may be a bit disappointed, but fewer defensive tricks are available.
  - Don't reopen with length in the opponent's suit. Your partner's silence means they have nothing. Likely the opponents are in the wrong strain!



# Trap Pass – Example Deal

West	North	East	South	Vul: All
1♠	2♦	Pass	Pass	
X	Pass	Pass		

- East has a penalty double, so passes and trusts partner will act.
- West obliges by making a takeout double.
- East converts to penalty.
- **Gwahahaha! They fell right into my trap!**

West

♠AKJxx

♥KJ9x

♦x

♣Txx

East

♠x

♥Axx

♦KJTxx

♣Qxxx



# Mel's Rule of 9

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- Used when considering converting partner's takeout double to penalty.
- Commonly used to penalize opponent preemptive openers.
- Formula; Add the following values:
  - 1. The number of cards you hold in the opponent's suit
  - 2. The number of honors you hold in the opponent's suit (including the Ten)
  - 3. The level of the contract
- If the total is 9 or more, you should pass partner's double.
- This is just a guideline; nothing beats judgment of trick taking ability.



# Mel's Rule of 9 – Example Deal

West	North	East	South	Vul: All
X	Pass	Pass	2♦	

- East has 6 cards in the opponents suit.
- East has 1 honor in that suit.
- The level of the contract is 2.
- $6 + 1 + 2 = 9$ ; convert the double to penalty.

West

♠AQTxx

♥AKxx

♦Q

♣KTx

East

♠x

♥Q9x

♦A9xxxx

♣Axx



# Converting Negative Doubles

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
1♣	3♦	X	Pass	
Pass			Pass	

- Opponents are unfavorable and decided to **intrude into my castle** enter our auction.
- We have a likely trump trick.
- Game is questionable.
- Deal looks like a misfit.
- Opportunity for the magic “+200” (or more).

West

♠--

♥AKx

♦KJx

♣QJTxxxx



# The Deal is a Misfit

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass	
2♦	Pass	Pass	2♥	
X				

- South balanced in an unsafe suit, as West can hold hearts but lack the values to reverse.
- Double on the anticipation of a misfit!
- Misfit suits will produce high card winners and ruffing values on defense.
- If partner lacks defensive values or has extra diamonds, they will pull your double.
- Relatively low risk for high payoff.

West

♠x  
♥Q9xx  
♦AKJxxx  
♣Ax



# You Anticipate Ruffs or can Count Defensive Tricks

West	North	East	South	Vul: All
			1♠	
Pass	2♦	Pass	3♦	
Pass	3♠	Pass	4♠	

X

- The opponents have shown a double fit.
- Our holding strongly suggests partner is getting ruffs.
- We are on lead and know how to direct the defense. (Lead A♦ and continue)
- The opponents can't run anywhere safe.

West

♠A

♥xxxx

♦Axxx

♣xxxx



# You Anticipate Ruffs or can Count Defensive Tricks

West	North	East	South	Vul: All
	1N	Pass	2♣	
Pass	2♦	Pass	2♠	
Pass	3♠	Pass	4♠	

X

- 2s = Invitational 5+ spades, 4 hearts.
- Opponents “crept up” to game. It feels thin.
- Your trump holding can’t “give the show away” by doubling.
- You have 2 sure tricks with few HCP.
- Your partner is behind the 1N bidder and should have values equating to tricks.

West

♠KQJ

♥XX

♦XXXX

♣XXXX



# When to Avoid Doubling

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- Experts often double partscores. Large penalties are available.
- However, experts only double willfully bid games and slams in specific situations. Why?
  - The opponents could run to a safe spot.
  - The opponents use knowledge of your double to play the hand to advantage.



# When to Avoid Doubling

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- Avoid takeout doubles when partner's is unlikely to have a trap pass.
- Avoid 5 level doubles when you have extreme shape.
- Avoid speculative doubles when you can't count defensive tricks.
- Avoid doubles when your honors are poorly placed, given the bidding.
  - Things are "working" for the opponents.
- Avoid a lead directing double when you're going to be on lead anyway...
  - **Don't be a minion that makes rookie mistakes!**



# When to Avoid Doubling – Deal 1

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
			1N	
Pass	2♦	Pass	2♥	
Pass	3♦	Pass	3♥	
Pass	4N	Pass	5♦	
Pass	6♥	Pass	Pass	
X	6N			

- 2♦ = hearts
- 3♦ = game forcing
- 5♦ = 3/0
  
- Doubling will tip off the opponents.
- Don't turn an AVG+ into a bottom!

West

♠x

♥QJT9

♦XXXX

♣XXXX



# When to Avoid Doubling – Deal 2

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♣	1♠	Pass	Pass	
Pass				

- West holds length in the overcall suit.
- East's silence means they have little values.
- No obligation to reopen the bidding.
- The opponents are in the wrong strain (Hearts is better). Don't let them recover!

West

♠Axxx  
♥Kxx  
♦xx  
♣AK9x

East

♠JTx  
♥xx  
♦K9xxx  
♣xxx



# When to Avoid Doubling – Deal 3

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
1♠	Pass	2♥	4♦	
4♥	5♦	Pass	Pass	
5♥				

- Partner has made a forcing pass and wants our opinion.
- We have the shape (singleton in opponent's suit) to bid on.
- We lack quick defensive tricks; a penalty is unlikely to be enough.

West

♠KQJxx

♥QJxx

♦x

♣Kxx

East

♠ATx

♥KTxxx

♦xx

♣Axx



# SMASH!



, OR

1N:	1♠	1♥	1♦	1♣
2N:	2♠	2♥	2♦	2♣
3N:	3♠	3♥	3♦	3♣
4N:	4♠	4♥	4♦	4♣
5N:	5♠	5♥	5♦	5♣
6N:	6♠	6♥	6♦	6♣
7N:	7♠	7♥	7♦	7♣

7NT  
7NT

## Scenario:

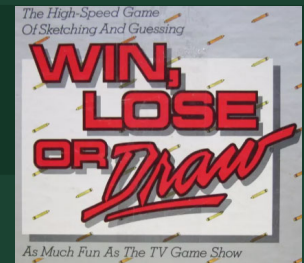
You are provided with an example deal (from a major event so pressure's on!).  
You must decide if you would:

**A.** SMASH! (Double for penalty)

**B.** Pass... (A safe chicken isn't a dead chicken)

**C.** Bid. (Always declare!)

**D.** Go watch old episodes  
of Win, Lose, or Draw



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 1

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
			Pass	
1♠	X	2♠	Pass	
Pass	X	Pass	4♥	
Pass	Pass	?		

East

♠ Q54

♥ QJ83

♦ T54

♣ J93



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 1 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
			Pass	
1♠	X	2♠	Pass	
Pass	X	Pass	4♥	
Pass	Pass	X		

	North	
	♠K	
	♥AK54	
	♦K73	
	♣AQT74	East
West		♠Q54
♠JT872		♥QJ83
♥T		♦T54
♦AQ92	South	♣J93
♣K52	♠A963	
	♥9762	
4♥X=	♦J86	
+590	♣86	

**Winning  
Answer:  
Pass!**



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 2

---

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
Pass	Pass	1♥	1N	
?				

West

♠K9653

♥4

♦Q73

♣A942



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 2 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
Pass	Pass	1♥	1N	
X	Pass	Pass	2♣	
X	Pass	Pass	Pass	

West

♠K9653

♥4

♦Q73

♣A942

2♣X-5

-1400

North

♠874

♥9753

♦KT94

♣T3

East

♠T2

♥AQJ82

♦A852

♣Q5

South

♠AQJ

♥KT6

♦J6

♣KJ876

**SMASH!**



**Winning  
Answer:  
Smash!**



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 3

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
		1♥	Pass	
1♠	Pass	1N	Pass	
Pass	2♦	Pass	Pass	
?				

West

♠ J9864

♥ 3

♦ A962

♣ QJ7



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 3 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
		1♥	Pass	
1♠	Pass	1N	Pass	
Pass	2♦	Pass	Pass	
X				

	North	
	♠KQ2	
	♥K98	
	♦KJT75	
	♣98	East
		♠A7
		♥AJT64
		♦Q43
		♣KT5
	South	
	♠T53	
	♥Q752	
	♦8	
	♣A6432	
West		
♠J9864		
♥3		
♦A962		
♣QJ7		
2♦X-3		
-800		

**SMASH!**



**Winning  
Answer:  
Smash!**



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 4

West	North	East	South	Vul: E/W
1♥	2♦	3♦	5♦	
?				

West

♠742

♥AJT75

♦--

♣AQJ64



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 4(A)

West      North      East      South      Vul: E/W  
 1♥      2♦      3♦      5♦

	North	
	♠63	
	♥32	
	♦AQJT75	
	♣K52	East
		♠AQJ8
		♥KQ98
		♦92
		♣T93
	South	
	♠KT95	
	♥64	
	♦K8643	
	♣87	

West

♠742  
 ♥AJT75  
 ♦--  
 ♣AQJ64

5♥=  
 +650

1Nr	1♣	1♥	1♦	1♠
2Nr	2♣	2♥	2♦	2♠
3Nr	3♣	3♥	3♦	3♠
4Nr	4♣	4♥	4♦	4♠
5Nr	5♣	5♥	5♦	5♠
6Nr	6♣	6♥	6♦	6♠
7Nr	7♣	7♥	7♦	7♠




**Winning  
 Answer:  
 Bid (5♥)!**



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 5

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
			1♠	
Pass	2♠	Pass	4♠	
?				

West

♠KJ94

♥AK7

♦JT7

♣QJT



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 5 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
			1♠	
Pass	2♠	Pass	4♠	
X	Pass	Pass	XX	

West

♠KJ94

♥AK7

♦JT7

♣QJT

4♠XX+1

+1480

North

♠QT6

♥T9432

♦Q4

♣K84

East

♠5

♥Q865

♦532

♣97532

South

♠A8732

♥J

♦AK986

♣A6

**Winning  
Answer:  
Pass!**



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 6

West	North	East	South	Vul: All
			1♠	
2♣	Pass	Pass	2♦	
Pass	Pass	2♥	3♦	
?				

West

♠QT5

♥6

♦Q964

♣AKJ83



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 6 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: All
			1♠	
2♣	Pass	Pass	2♦	
Pass	Pass	2♥	3♦	
X				

West

♠QT5  
♥6  
♦Q964  
♣AKJ83

3♦X-1  
-200

North

♠K  
♥J9543  
♦53  
♣Q9742

East

♠J872  
♥AQT72  
♦T8  
♣T5

South

♠A9643  
♥K8  
♦AKJ72  
♣6

**SMASH!**



**Winning  
Answer:  
Smash!**



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 7

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
1♦	1♥	X*1	1N*2	
Pass	2♣	2♦	2♠	
Pass	3♣	3♦	5♣	
?				

- X\*1 = 4 or 5 ♠
- 1N\*2 = ♣

West

♠4

♥AJ64

♦KQJ7

♣A632



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 7 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: N/S
1♦	1♥	X*1	1N*2	
Pass	2♣	2♦	2♠	
Pass	3♣	3♦	5♣	
X				

- X\*1 = 4 or 5 ♠
- 1N\*2 = ♣

**Winning  
Answer:  
Pass!**



West

♠4  
♥AJ64  
♦KQJ7  
♣A632

5♣X=  
+750

North

♠AT  
♥Q9832  
♦A932  
♣75

East

♠Q9876  
♥75  
♦T8654  
♣8

South

♠KJ532  
♥KT  
♦--  
♣KQJT94



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 8

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
	1N	Pass	2♦	
X	2♥	Pass	Pass	
2♠	Pass	Pass	?	

- 1N = 14-16
- 2♦ = ♥
- 2♥ = fit

South

♠T93  
♥QT853  
♦QJ2  
♣A2



# Smash, Pass, or Bid – Deal 8 (A)

West	North	East	South	Vul: None
	1N	Pass	2♦	
X	2♥	Pass	Pass	
2♠	Pass	Pass	2N	

- 1N = 14-16
- 2♦ = ♥
- 2♥ = fit

1N	1♠	1♥	1♦	1♣
2N	2♠	2♥	2♦	2♣
3N	3♠	3♥	3♦	3♣
4N	4♠	4♥	4♦	4♣
5N	5♠	5♥	5♦	5♣
6N	6♠	6♥	6♦	6♣
7N	7♠	7♥	7♦	7♣

**Winning  
Answer:  
Bid (2N)!**



	North	
	♠AK5	
	♥J74	
	♦K85	
	♣QJ83	
West		East
♠QJ64		♠872
♥AK		♥962
♦AT763		♦94
♣K4		♣T9765
	South	
	♠T93	
	♥QT853	
	♦QJ2	
	♣A2	
2N=		
+120		

# References

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- Example deals and material in this presentation inspired from:
- Richard Pavlicek's Bridge Website (<https://rpbridge.net>)
- Buddy Hanby's Lecture on "Double Means Double" (Bridge Club of Houston)
- BCA-NightGames Google Discussion Board
- Rob Brady's Youtube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@bradybot0>)
- RealBridge's Monthly Bidding Contest (<https://realbridge.online/bidding-contest-home.html>)
- How the Experts Win at Bridge (Burt & Lynn Rose Hall, 1996)
- Various ACBL Bridge Bulletin Articles
- Images of Bowser from "The Super Mario Bros. Movie" (2023) and "The Super Mario Galaxy Movie" (2026)





**Thank You!**

***Now Get Out There and Go for Blood!***

