

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

SEPTEMBER 2017 PROBLEM

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This month's problem is the bridge version of a Rorschach Test. There is no one "right" answer, but whatever you respond will speak volumes about your perception of your partner, your left-hand opponent, your right-hand opponent, the quality of the field, and your general bidding philosophy. It might even unearth some repressed anger towards your mother, particularly if mom traumatized you as a toddler by passing you in a cue bid or something. Anyway, lie down on the couch and tell me about your dreams, because clinical psychoanalysis has come to the District Four Master Solvers' Club. No primal screams, please -- save that for when you see my bill.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

MATCHPOINTS, EAST-WEST VULNERABLE

♠-98543 ♥-Q9 ♦-K1063 ♣-107

South	West	North	East
Pass	Pass	1♥	3♣*
Pass	5♣	5♦	Pass
?			

* - INTERMEDIATE, USUALLY 11-14 HCP

What call do you make?

CALL	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
Pass	11	15	100
6♦	3	6	70
5♥	0	3	60
6♥	0	1	50

RAY RASKIN: Pass. Six might be there, but in an auction like this, it isn't clear who can make what. So, why punish partner for maybe being a little aggressive?

Because it's fun? Ray's sentiments were shared by a whopping two-thirds of the MSC, which at least made the scoring easy this month. Let's let them speak first. For the contingent who believe that, after this crazy start, any result not beginning with a minus sign will do nicely, we have:

JAY APFELBAUM: Pass. We could miss a slam, but it's probably best to hope merely for a plus score.

DON DALPE: Pass. I guess I'm supposed not to play five of a minor at matchpoints, but plus scores are usually okay. 5♦ looks like the most likely plus. It feels like hearts may be splitting badly.

PETE FILANDRO: Pass. Eliminating the truly wild shapes, I will assign partner five-five, six-five, or five-six in the reds. In two of those three cases, we have seven hearts but nine or ten diamonds. For safety, two-card differentials should be played in the longer combined suit. The matchpoint strategy to play in a higher scoring major versus a minor only applies when the contract is reasonably expected to be made. In this case, a different matchpoint strategy, "Protect the Plus," takes precedence.

TOM WEIK: Pass. A guessing game. A reasonable guess would be that partner is six-five in the reds, usually with longer hearts but possibly not. I'm also guessing to give up on slam, which seems possible but far from assured. 5♥ could be a winner, but it has additional risks: partner might have only five, or the suit might split badly.

STEVE WHITE: Pass. Let's play the denomination where we figure to take the most tricks, rather than count on taking eleven in hearts. We'll likely lose to pairs in 4♥, so I hope there aren't many playing there, or that they go down if there are.

Though I am a bidder, I admit that the "when the auction goes nuts, just go plus" argument is very enticing. I believe Freud would categorize this as wisely heeding one's rational superego rather than succumbing to the base desires of one's id. I think. It's been a really long time since I took Intro to Psychology.

Anyway, while passing seems attractive in the abstract, things get a little murky when the discussion gets concrete. What sort of hand might partner hold for his solo adventure at the five level? Several Club members offered up their thoughts.

MARK BOLOTIN: Pass. Can I expect partner to have more than:

♠Ax ♥AKxxx ♦AQJxx ♣x ?

While it's possible he has the ♥J as well, it doesn't seem worth the risk-reward trade-off to bid 5♥. He needs a good six-five hand, or six-six with a stiff ♠A, to justify being in 6♦.

RUI MARQUES: Pass. Reluctantly. Playing in diamonds looks better than in hearts. I have the ♥Q, ♦K, and heart doubleton to offer. Nice assets. But if partner shows up with:

♠x ♥AKxxxx ♦AJxxx ♣x,

he won't be happy if I bid six. And, based on the auction, suits are likely to break badly, so I chicken out...even at matchpoints!

Here we need to get into partner's head rather than our own. Bidding five-over-five is a dicey proposition at matchpoints. If you believe that your call will effectively end the auction, then it's right to bid when the chance of your contract making, plus the chance of the opponents' contract making when yours doesn't, is above 50%. That rule is simplistic but generally sound. If you believe that both contracts will be down more than half the time, you should pass (or double).

Our presumed-expert partner believes he holds a hand that meets the criteria for bidding five-over-five opposite a silent partner. With Mark's example hand, I might double. With Rui's...ugh. I'd bid five diamonds at IMPs, but no call seems clear-cut at matchpoints. How much leeway should we give North in this situation? These MSC members say, "a lot":

ROS AND SAUL TEUKOLSKY: Pass. If their game is making, we're ahead. The danger of 5♥ is that if the trumps don't break, we'll go for 300. It sounds likely from their bidding that hearts won't break.

BARRY DEHLIN: Pass. Two decisions: level and strain. I think level is easy; slam is certainly possible, but to be confident of only one black suit loser is a huge gamble, especially when partner might already have won the board by pushing through their interference to find our diamond fit. Re: strain -- I love to be in a major at matchpoints, but partner might only have five hearts. Even if he has six, it seems like there could be lots of problems with bad trump breaks.

ED SHAPIRO (with KARL BARTH and HOWARD WACHTEL): Pass. Allowing partner room to have made a good decision to make or save. This is not by any means a forcing pass position, so partner's options were limited. The extra safety in 5♦ is enough to make me uninterested in trying for the higher scoring game.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: Pass. Since we can't tell if partner is bidding to make or merely saving red vs. white, I'm going to let him play in our best trump suit. Yes, I know it's matchpoints and that 5♥ might be making, but I can't be sure...and, I'd be even sorrier if I bid 5♥ and he turns up with five hearts and six diamonds.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: Pass. North may make six, but he may not. There's no way to tell his exact red-suit distribution.

DAVE WACHSMAN (with PHILIP FREIDENREICH similarly): Pass. Partner said, "pick your best red suit." I'll pass and let East-West try to figure out what their best move is.

I'd expect that the opponents are through bidding, but one never knows. East did advertise opening-bid values, after all. Was his pass of 5♦ forcing? I say no; I'm from the Larry Cohen school that believes a high-level pass is forcing only when it is so obvious that even the club janitor would play it as forcing. East limited his hand, so West is captain, and that's that. But, a lot of bridge players (and janitors) better than me believe that if our side voluntarily bids game at unfavorable vulnerability, it sets up a de facto forcing pass situation.

DOUGLAS DYE: Pass. Needless to say, I have the perfect hand for partner, who may well have the best hand at the table but is more likely thinking save. I will give West some respect; he is vulnerable against not, and has a good idea of what his side can make. If I pass, he may be peeved enough to double a contract which should have good play. Unless partner holds three aces (in which case he might have doubled) we are likely not missing a diamond slam.

BILL SCHMIDT: Pass. No need to get greedy. If we're making, +400 (or +550) will be enough. If we're sacrificing, playing in diamonds must be at least as good as playing in hearts.

Some respondents turn to one of the finest pairs of our generation for guidance. Meckstroth and Rodwell? Hamman and Wolff? Nah. Queen and Bowie:

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: Pass. Our ♦K and ♥Q are two wonderful cards, but partner is bidding under pressure, while the vulnerable opponents are likely bidding to make at matchpoints.

BILL BURNETT: Pass. Partner was under pressure, so I won't punish him. With bad splits likely, I'll stick with our best fit, even at matchpoints.

I'm all-in with playing in diamonds, for what that's worth. Worrying about higher-scoring strains when the auction has been jacked up this high, this fast, is questionable. Still..."under pressure?" I dunno if I'd call it that. Partner presumably had a green card or two available in his bidding box. If the auction is significantly higher

than he originally planned to go, I'd expect him to have used one. He'd be under a lot more pressure if this were Swiss Teams, where double-game swings are catastrophic.

Again, so much of this problem depends heavily on one's opinion of North. If he's the sort who'd bid out a good five-five hand come hell or high water, you'd best pass and pray. But, if one truly believes that partner is disciplined to the point of anal-retentiveness, and that he wouldn't allow the opponents to stampede him into a rash five-level action, then:

TODD WACHSMAN: 6♦. Partner probably isn't saving, and given the fact that I have king-ten-fourth in diamonds, I don't want them to find a club slam. I put partner on the following hand, with East's points in clubs and spades and West's in clubs:

♦x ♥AKJ108x ♦AQJ9xx ♣x

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 6♦. I have two cover cards and a useful ruffing value, so I owe partner a raise. If the vulnerability were different, I might pass, just trying to buy the contract. If I catch badly, we might be off two aces, but I'm willing to risk it.

ANDY MUENZ: 6♦. Lots of questions here. The opponents put us under a lot of pressure, so it comes down to how strong and shapely partner is. I opted for the lower-scoring diamonds since if I'm wrong, we are probably going down fewer tricks (a heart contract is more likely to suffer a ruff than diamonds are). But, pass, 5♥, and 6♥ could all work out.

LYNN HARRIS: 6♦. Playing partner for six-six reds and one black card. We can handle a bad trump break in diamonds easier than we can in hearts.

Given the red-suit honors we're looking at, I think North is more likely to be six-six or seven-five than five-five. With holes in both his suits, and with nothing about the auction suggesting that we'd produce the cards to plug those holes (not to mention cards to cover whatever black-suit losers he's looking at), he must be bidding on extreme shape. Six-five can't be ruled out, but I think five-six can. If partner opened 1♥ with five hearts and six diamonds, it would mean he didn't think he had enough playing strength to open 1♦ and then reverse into 2♥. Well, okay, but it's not easy to construct a hand in which North wouldn't want to reverse at the two-level but would cheerily bid at the five-level opposite a possibly-broke partner at MPs.

Anyway, the Club voted 29-10 to stay put at the five level, and 35-4 to choose diamonds over hearts. For the folks looking to score that extra 10 points per trick:

BARRY COHEN: 5♥. It's matchpoints so I'm going for the higher-scoring game. I think I have a very good hand for partner, but I won't try slam. I don't want to hang him for competing.

AL SHRIVE: 5♥. At matchpoints, I'll correct the 1=6=5=1 to the major. At IMPs, I'd pass.

CHRIS MARLOW: 5♥. West, vulnerable vs. not at matchpoints, was willing to jump to 5♣, which should mean he holds a very distributional hand. I expect the opponents to have all of the club honors and most of the spades. Partner should be 6=5 or better in the red suits, but whether that includes zero, one, or two black suit losers is just a guess. I am a bit worried about bad splits and would pass in a team game, but at matchpoints, I expect the field to be in hearts, so I will bid the likely higher scoring contract.

DAVE BORT: 6♥. Expecting partner to be 6=5 in the red suits with a likely club void. I can certainly cooperate with all my points in his suits. I don't want to hang him, so I'm tempted just to bid the game. That said, if I have to guess, I want to guess high.

Bill Foster, who passed, said he was "tempted" to correct to 5♥. It's important to note that our auction will likely not be duplicated at any other table; other Easts will have overcalled 2♣ rather than 3♣. Playing in hearts is risky compared to diamonds, but if you judge that's where most other North-Souths will be -- and particularly if FOUR hearts is where you think they'll be -- then much as it pains me to say it, correcting to hearts is probably right. +400 isn't going to do you much good against a sea of +420s and +450s.

Final word this month goes to:

CHRIS KAUFMAN: Pass. Anything else is too speculative for my blood. Maybe I'm just losing courage in my old age.

Aren't we all?



The District 4 Master Solvers' Club appreciates problem submissions of any sort. Our crack analytic staff can be reached at d4msc@straguzzi.org. Monthly problems plus our online submission form can be found at <http://d4msc.straguzzi.org/>