

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

MAY 2018 PROBLEM

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It's been 93 years since Harold Vanderbilt invented contract bridge while on a cruise through the Panama Canal, with rules that put a premium on accuracy in the auction. Since then, bridge bidding systems have evolved to the point where pretty much every common sequence has a narrow, well-defined, reasonably descriptive meaning. Even if our hopeless partners believe that it means something else.

One family of sequences, however, has spent the last century thumbing its nose at system theorists. Set sail with the D4MSC this month as it explores those treacherous waters, as a common but nebulous auction meets up with a very uncommon South hand, and wild hijinks ensue.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

IMPs, BOTH VULNERABLE

♠-AKQ985 ♥-A8743 ♦--- ♣-Q9

<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>
			Pass
1♠	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♥	Pass	3♣	Pass
?			

What is your call?

CALL	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
4♦	5	7	100
4♠	1	12	90
3♦	0	1	80
4♥	0	6	80
5♣	1	5	80
4♣	2	4	70
3♥	1	4	70
3♠	1	3	70
Pass	0	1	60
5NT	1	0	60
6♣	0	1	60

Okie-dokie, let's see here. That's one, two three...um, seven, eight...darn, I ran out of fingers. Is that eleven proposed answers I count? On a bread-and-butter bidding

sequence we've all encountered a hundred times? In the immortal words of Charlie Brown: "My stomach hurts."

Unfortunately, this sort of heartburn occurs often after responder bids a forcing 1NT, then makes a minimum rebid in a new minor. Everyone agrees that this is non-forcing and that it denies a primary fit for opener's suit(s). But beyond that, good luck. Responder could have near-invitational values with a chunky six-card suit, or she might have complete rubbish with a lousy seven-bagger, or anything in between. Opener is expected to pass most of the time, unless he has an unusual hand. Well, we've got one. Now what?

Before we explore the myriad possibilities -- hey, in a bidding forum, eleven qualifies as a "myriad" -- let's hear from a small but vocal contingent who assert that we shouldn't be in this quandary in the first place:

TOM WEIK (joined with varying degrees of strenuousness by **MICHAEL SHUSTER, ED SHAPIRO, TED LEVY, RUI MARQUES, and CHRIS KAUFMAN**): I have a strong objection to the bidding as shown. A non-forcing 2♥ is just plain wrong. If partner held:

♠xx ♥Kxxx ♦Jxxx ♣Axx

...he might pass when game is essentially assured and even a grand slam is conceivable. (Shuster went on to advise: next time, bid an honest 3♥. - NS)

Ed Shapiro and Steve Gibbon would have emphasized spades rather than introduce the comparatively weak hearts. I'm fine with treating highly distributional hands as being worthy of a 3♥ rebid here, provided responder is disciplined to show restraint when he has modest extras. Otherwise, the partnership can wind up in some bad slams, or in an unsafe contract at the five-level. Swap the minor-suit honors in Tom's hand to see what I mean if North gets frisky.

On the actual auction, the 2♥ rebid ostensibly worked out well. We learned about our club fit at the three-level, presumably in time for us to use that information to our advantage. Yet, the Club was sharply divided on how to proceed. Two people drove to slam. Twelve (including a plurality of Panelists) forced to game and at least suggested slam. Twenty-six bid game, sixteen invited game, and one lone wolf decided he was happy right where he's at and made a good case for complacency:

DANIEL DROZ: Pass. I see the potential of this hand - to go terribly wrong. Partner is showing a major-suit misfit. Opposite many "maximums" we will be unable to make any game. In 3NT, they may take a lot of minor suit tricks before we even gain the lead, and even then, we may not be able to run nine tricks. In 4♠, partner having at most a singleton, what are we doing with all our heart losers? 4♥ may be our best chance at a game should partner have three-card support, but he's much more likely to hold two or fewer. 5♣ requires eleven tricks, and partner will have to dispose of several diamond losers...I know we go for the game bonuses when vulnerable at IMPs, but I don't see us having the requisite 40% probability.

I can't agree with Daniel's pass. We have a powerful hand for the majors, vulnerable at IMPs. Even bad contracts occasionally make, particularly distributional ones, so we're worth at least a game try. If we go down, oh well. However, like the Oracle of Delphi, his warnings about what might go wrong in high-level contracts ought not to go unheeded.

Let's check in with the inviters next. One issue is choosing which suit to invite in. Recognizing that "Three-and-a-half Spadartubs" is unlikely to pass muster with the directors, and trying to cover as much of that ground as possible, is:

STEVE WHITE: 3♥. If partner doesn't pass, this call is most likely to reach the best contract. If he does pass, we probably have a better spot, but not necessarily the one that I would choose myself...Excellent problem, in my opinion, with lots of appeal to 3♥, 4♥, and 4♠, while also facing the possibility that clubs could be best.

BILL PORT: 3♥. What strong spades this hand has, and what weak hearts. Nevertheless, I know partner has *something* for his 1NT bid. If I bid 4♥, he will play me for a better suit. This is my best and most descriptive bid, and my ♣Qx could fit very nicely if he bids on.

KEN SHATOFF: 3♥. Bidding out my shape.

TODD HOLES: 3♥. Shows extra values and at least five-five shape, but short of values for a jump-shift. This narrows my range considerably to around 15-17 HCP which is what I have.

Todd makes a very important point: even an invitational bid here shows significant extras in any sensible system. Whether it's extra points or extra shape or both isn't clear to partner, of course, but the fact that South is bidding at all means that he has aspirations for bigger and better things.

My erstwhile Swiss team captain Everett Young always said that there is a technical bridge term for a suit of ace-king-queen-sixth. That term is "trumps".

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 3♠. 2♥ was a massive underbid, but it seems to have worked out well. However, we're still stuck. Partner will not imagine us with this much hand, so I don't expect to get useful cooperation. Maybe 3♦ should show a good hand for clubs, but I suspect that it's actually a probe for 3NT. In any case, I have an aversion to playing four-zero fits, so I'm not going to risk it. 3♠ shows positive values, because it forces a heart preference at the four-level. I hope it doesn't end the auction.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 3♠. I'm not happy with any call here. That said, I will show a strong six-four hand rather than bid 3♥. My spades are just too good to force partner to pass holding a stiff spade and a doubleton heart. And, he might just raise to four spades holding a heart honor and good clubs headed by the ♣A.

Of course, we could invite in the suit where we're sure we have at least an eight-card fit, even if it is a minor. It's crazy, but it just might work.

ANDY MUENZ: 4♣. Tough call, because there could be a play for game in any of three suits or notrump. I'll support clubs because it's the known eight-card fit and could easily be nine. Ace-king-seventh of clubs, or king-jack-seventh with the ♦A, and 5♣ is cold.

RICH ROTHWART: 4♣. Partner probably has at most three major-suit cards. Sometimes he will bid 4♥ or 4♠ with a secondary fit when he's accepting my invitation.

CATHY STRAUSS: 4♣. The diamond void and the solid spade honors warrant a raise rather than a pass.

JOANN AND BOB GLASSON: 4♣. With a weak hand, partner would correct to spades with a doubleton or pass with three hearts, so he's likely either 1=2=4=6 or 1=2=3=7. We'll invite a game.

BARRY PASSER: 4♣. Partner probably has a seven-card signoff, but I'm too strong to honor it. King-jack-ten-seventh and out give us a play for 5♣. Worth an invitation.

BILL SCHMIDT: 4♣. A jump to 5♣ is reasonable, but partner knows we're vulnerable at IMPs. He won't pass if he has good trumps. Also, 4♣ allows him to back into 4♠ with a doubleton.

As you see, it's a matter of open debate whether North has denied as many as two spades. This is ultimately a partnership decision. My belief is that North should bid 2♠ with a doubleton except in rare cases where North's hand looks unambiguously better for clubs than spades; e.g. 2=1=2=8, or two low spades and seven good clubs.

There's still one more invitational option, and it would seem to be the most flexible of all:

CHRIS KAUFMAN: 3♦. Not sure where I'm going with this exactly. I'm too busy trying to figure out why I didn't rebid 3♥.

3♦ is surely forcing; no one bids this way with 5=4=4=0 expecting to be able to stop on a dime. Right, partner? Partner! Drop the green card and step away from the table!

Next up: the game bidders. They're taking dead aim at that juicy 500-point game bonus. On the down side, the cramped auction means they have even less room to maneuver than the inviters. At least one potential strain is getting left behind, maybe two.

BARRY COHEN: 4♥. Love the club bid, but I don't have the same warm feeling for my heart suit. I'll just let partner pick a major-suit game.

HOWARD WACHTEL: 4♥. Vulnerable at IMPs, I don't want to miss a game. If I bid three of a major, partner might pass. Bidding hearts twice shows at least five, giving partner a choice.

LYNN HARRIS: 4♥. I think we should be in a major-suit game. Partner may have a hard time differentiating between a six-five hand and a five-five hand. I'm afraid to bid only 3♠, because partner might think I am six-four and pass.

I chose 4♥ too, on the theory that we can get to 4♠ from 4♥, but it's a little tough getting to 4♥ from 4♠. It's a testament to the intractability of this accursed problem that, having read everyone's answers this month, I now believe at least three other choices are better, including the Club's narrow plurality:

BARRY DEHLIN: 4♠. I haven't really shown either my full strength or my tenth and eleventh major-suit cards. I must bid game, and I think I have to choose between showing the extra spade or the extra heart. Given the relative suit quality, it's an easy choice.

RICK OLANOFF: 4♠. This will require some luck, but so might 5♣ on a trump lead.

TED LEVY: 4♠. Why didn't I rebid 3♥? I have four losers and spades that will play opposite a singleton. This is hardly the time to turtle up.

BILL BURNETT: 4♠. Tough call. I think six-one spades will play better than five-two hearts.

STEVE GIBBON: 4♠. The void and perhaps-running spades look better with the club continuation by partner.

BOB GRINWIS: 4♠. I think we belong in game, and there are too many holes for 3NT. Partner could pass 3♠.

As an aside, when was the last time you saw a bidding forum problem in which the opponents were silent throughout, and yet the only call from 3♦ to 4♠ that nobody chose was 3NT?

RUI MARQUES: 5♣. North probably has at most one spade, possibly none, and at most three hearts. Maybe a major suit game makes, but it seems that the best way to make use of partner's hand is to play in clubs. Hopefully he'll have king-jack-seventh and game will be almost laydown.

WALTER BELL: 5♣. Could easily make six if partner's clubs are six or seven long headed by the ♣AK, but there's no safe way to find out. Great problem!

JOHN VOLPEL: 5♣. If partner's clubs are halfway decent, even jack-ten-sixth, I have a shot. He must have a few high-card points to respond 1NT.

JACK MENDELSON: 5♣. 6♣ is an option. Would 4♣ be Minorwood? If so, that would be my choice.

Minorwood (sometimes called Raisewood) is a convention whereby raising partner's minor suit to the four level asks for key-cards, but only in auctions in which slam is clearly in the picture. I don't think this auction would qualify, because both North and South have made non-forcing bids.

Then there's 4♦. Its adherents aren't quite on the same page as to what it means, but all blame for that belongs with your sloppy director. I should have included a footnote specifying some treatment for it. Absent any specific control-ask agreement, I would assume it's a splinter in support of clubs, though it also serves as a de facto "pick a game, partner" request. Agreeing:

CONSTANCE GOLDBERG: 4♦. Showing diamond shortness and club support, with at least five-four in the majors. Kickback, or any similar control-ask interpretation, would be inconsistent with the non-forcing 2♥ rebid. I'm hoping to root out a doubleton spade in partner's hand. Otherwise, we can play 5♣.

TOM WEIK (cont.): 4♦. ...Best on the bidding as given. This must be a splinter with a big hand. Partner can sign off at 5♣, but if he has ace-king-jack-seventh of clubs and out, he can ask for key-cards and get us to 7♣.

CRAIG ROBINSON: 4♦. A splinter is my best shot at getting to a good slam.

ED SHAPIRO: 4♦. I hope partner takes the time to work this out, since I'm conceding a good score in a bidding competition. 😊

Not to worry, Ed: 4♦ gets the top award this month. You can have your splinter and eat it too, except that's a really dumb mixed metaphor. If readers are wondering about the scoring, this is what our beleaguered Actuarial Dept. came up with. 4♦ and 4♠ were the highest vote-getters. I gave 4♦ 100 points by virtue of its being the Panelists' plurality, and 4♦ 90 for being the Solvers' plurality. Because two-thirds of the electorate drove to game, game bids (plus 3♦) received 80 points, and invitational bids got 70.

More takes on the nuances of 4♦:

MARK BOLOTIN: 4♦. My first thought was to bid 5♣, but why not make the splinter bid to explore slam? I doubt we can get to seven even if it's there, but 6♣ is still possible. If an immediate 3♣ response by North would have been a weak jump-shift, I might consider 5♦ or 5NT on this auction.

I dislike weak jump-shifts, but I concede they'd be helpful here. The fact that partner went through 1NT before bidding 3♣ would suggest more values than a direct 3♣ response.

DAVE WACHSMAN: 4♦. This shows a void in diamonds and club support. Partner can decide whether to sign off in 5♣ or bid a slam. This problem will generate many viable answers. *(Tell me about it -- NS)*

I agree with Dave: 4♦ must show a void, not a singleton, on the tortured logic of the auction. We went from being willing to play in 2♥ to, presumably, inviting a club slam. I don't see how you get from Point A to Point B holding even one diamond.

AL SHRIVE (with **DON DALPE** concurring on the first part): 4♦. Exclusion Key-Card for clubs. If that's not available, then I'd bid 4♦. As a splinter in support of clubs.

Al's got it all covered. Going even higher is:

PETE FILANDRO: 5NT. Obviously, partner's clubs are key. If he has seven or eight to the jack, 5♣ is our limit. With seven or eight to the ♠AK(J), a grand is probable. Even ace-king-jack-sixth and decent black-suit breaks gives us a good play for 7♣. Because Exclusion Blackwood and similar key-card asks are "undiscussed", and Roman Key-Card Blackwood would count the worthless ♦A, I think 6♣, "bidding what you think you can make", is a reasonable call.

But, if you are going to bid 6♣, why not try 5NT? Surely this is a Grand Slam Force for clubs on the auction. Partner will almost always reply 6♣, putting us back with the "what we think we can make" field. But, if he does happen to hold ♠AK, we'll have found a 23-point grand!

As another aside: when was the last time you saw a bidding forum problem in which one respondent passed in a part score, another bid a Grand Slam Force, and both provided quite sensible justification for their calls? If I had a mulligan, I think I would choose 5♣ here. Clubs is our fit, there's no danger of a misunderstanding, and I'd trust partner to bid slam if her clubs are better than I have a right to expect. But, do go back and re-read Daniel Droz's original, foreboding comment. What exactly is partner to do with all her diamond losers, particularly if the opening lead knocks out the late ♥A entry to dummy?

Last word this month goes to the Club member who chose the highest bid, but with the simplest and most straightforward explanation:

JOHN JONES: 6♣. Just a guess.



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/>