DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

SEPTEMBER 2026 PROBLEM

NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

One of the first bridge maxims that a tournament hopeful learns is: The five level belongs to the opponents. On this month's problem deal, most of the D4MSC retort that they can have it. South is headed to higher altitudes, though exactly how high is up for discussion. Some settle for six, others probe for seven. A few of our Club brethren argue soberly from Base Camp that partner acted under pressure and we shouldn't hang him for it. Hmph – they never let us have any fun. All told, our 43 respondents backed eight different calls, which is quite remarkable considering only 14 were even available. Break out your climbing gear and bottled oxygen and join us as District 4 prepares to ascend Mount Everslam. If you're nice to us, we'll let you plant the flag on the summit.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
VIEW THE D4MSC CONVENTION CARD

IMPs, BOTH VULNERABLE

♠-A103 ♥-875 ♦-A ♣-AKJ852

South	West	North	East
			1♥
2♣	4♥	4♠	5♥
?			

A. Do you agree with South's 2♣ overcall?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
Yes	14	26	**0**
No, prefer Dbl.	0	3	**0**

This was mostly a polling question, so I elected in advance not to score it. I've noticed that most pairs' convention cards show the upper limit of a simple overcall as either 15 or 16 HCP. But I've also noticed that few players routinely double when they're above that range. Too many awkward things can happen by the time the auction comes back around. Perhaps it's time we update our convention cards.

Here, South holds a very strong playing hand, surely worth more than its 16 nominal HCP despite the three low hearts behind the opening bidder. Is it big enough to justify starting with a double? Just three people thought so, but only two commented on it.

STEVE WHITE: No. 2♣ isn't awful, but a double first is better with such good clubs plus two aces.

BOB GRINWIS: No. I would double first with 16.

Among the "yes" votes, Bolotin, Dye, Filandro, Olanoff, and Schwaidelson say that the hand is at least within sniffing distance of double-then-bid. Apfelbaum and Hartz worry about how to continue if anyone bids diamonds, particularly 3♦. B. Cohen, Dalpe, and Walker call out the three potential heart losers and conclude that 2♣ is plenty for now. Bauer and Muenz want a fourth spade before risking a borderline too-strong-to-overcall double.

Me, I'd overcall 2♣ without thinking twice (though to be fair, I do a lot of things at the table without thinking twice, or sometimes even once.) If my red suits were stiff heart and ace-third of diamonds, that would be a different story.

One subtle benefit of overcalling in this situation is that if partner introduces a new suit, you know he's sincerely interested in making it trumps. Here, for example, if South had doubled and the auction continued as it did, North's 4♠ bid could be based on a far weaker spade holding. At least for the time being, our modest 2♣ bid has worked out. Summarizing for the "Yes" crowd:

CONNIE GOLDBERG: Yes. I think it's the best initial action.

JOHN JONES: Yes. Old-fashioned standards (Goren etc.) indicated that an overcall should be in the 10-15 HCP range. In the modern style we learn to get our bids in early with strong hands so the opponents don't preempt us like crazy! This isn't quite a maximum.

BILL SCHMIDT: Yes. A power double normally requires a four-loser hand. This one has six.

STEPHEN COOPER: No real alternative.

And our Last Word for Problem A goes to:

KARL BARTH: Yes. There's not really a good reason to double. We're hefty for 2♣, but isn't that a nice change of pace for once?

B. With the auction as given, what call do you make?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
6♠	6	12	**100**
5NT	2	3	**90**
6♦	1	3	**90**
6♥	2	0	**90**
Pass	1	0	**80**
Double	0	4	**80**
5♠	1	7	**80**
7♠	1	0	**80**

Wanting to avoid a repeat of August's scoring quirk and recognizing that there were only a handful of grand slam-investigatory calls available at this altitude, I decided that this month I would sort the Club's responses into five buckets: Force to Grand, Invite a Grand, Just Bid Six, Just Bid Game, or Defend. Top bucket gets 100, next one gets 90. You can see the results in the table. 6♠ still posted a plurality of Panelists and Solvers no matter how you slice and dice them.

The toughest of the eight calls to categorize was the solitary pass:

> **PETE FILANDRO**: Pass. For me, a direct 5♠ or pass-then-pull *[showing significant extra strength when pass is forcing – Ed.]* are the options. I'm too good for double and not confident enough for six. Among far too many possibilities, I offer as a sample hand for partner:
>
> ♠QJ9xxx ♥x ♦Kxx ♣Qxx.
>
> Two losers occur when there is a natural trump loser or when the opponents can get a fast club ruff. If I were positive that partner held the ♣Q and ♠KQ (I'm not), I would bid 6♣ and trade 2 IMPs in case 6♠ goes down on a club ruff.

Pete believes that a pass by South is clearly forcing. But is it? That's impossible to answer definitively. In some of my partnerships, it would be; in others, it isn't. Pretty much everyone agrees that if our side has shown game-going values or has voluntarily bid game, then forcing passes apply. That's fine, but the devil is in the detail of what "voluntary" means. Let me channel my inner Kronk and argue both sides.



ANGEL: Tread carefully, my child. Partner's 4♠ call was made under heavy pressure. If he felt we had a fair shot at game, he had just one chance to tell us. His bid could be based on long, strong spades and little else. He has no idea we hold both spade support and substantial extra values. Pass would not be forcing.

DEVIL: Rubbish. Partner bid game on his own, vulnerable no less. How is that not "voluntary"? No one put a pitchfork to his head! Pass is 100% forcing.

ANGEL: But partner had no chance to introduce his spades below the four-level. He might have just bid 2♠ if West had passed or perhaps jumped to 3♠ invitational if that were available. We mustn't punish him for his intrepidness. Pass is non-forcing.

DEVIL: Too bad for us if he got frisky. He could have passed and hoped we'd reopen with a double. When he bids 4♠ directly, he's telling us it's our deal and that defending 5♥ undoubled is not an option. Pass. Forcing. Rinse. Repeat.

ANGEL: If pass were forcing, you would be consigning the partnership to bridge hell on many deals where South overcalled on a bare 10-count and five or six good clubs! Pass is obviously non-forcing.

DEVIL: So what? Hell's a nice place. Are you too virtuous to come visit me once in a while? It's forcing!

ANGEL: Non-forcing!

DEVIL: Forcing!

ANGEL: Non-forcing!

DEVIL: Duck season!

ANGEL: Rabbit season!

(Elmer Fudd appears and blows both away with his shotgun.)

Ahem. OK, so maybe that didn't get us anywhere. Again, I have partners who believe that if we bid to game without preempting at any point, it doesn't pay to retain the option of defending undoubled. And I have some who follow Larry Cohen's famous "janitor rule" – a pass is only forcing if everyone in the room, including the custodial staff, would agree it is. In fact, there's an outstanding web page on nvba.org worth checking out. Steve Robinson moderates a broad panel of leading experts in a long discussion of when a pass is and is not forcing. They didn't come to any definitive conclusion either.

For what it's worth, two of the Club's senior members mentioned what they felt a pass would be, and they agreed with each other…but not with Pete:

ED SHAPIRO: 5♠. To make. Lots of crowded bidding, but to me, pass is not forcing on this auction and cannot be considered. 6♠ can be considered, but partner does have another chance.

JOHN JONES: 6♠. My guess is that this is making and might be making seven. But pass isn't forcing, and who knows? At least by bidding 6♠, I won't be the last guesser – the opponents must guess whether to bid 7♥. (If it is bid on my right, I will be making a forcing pass.)

I ought to mention before we continue that the question of what partner might hold for his 4♠ bid extends far beyond whether or not pass is forcing. If you believe that North should get into the auction with, say, seven good spades and nothing else, or six plus a useful side value, then taking the low road here is wise. If you feel he needs real values to come in, then you should aim appropriately high (and that might mean starting with a forcing pass.)

Willing (or almost willing) to defend right where we're at are:

DENNIS RITALDATO: Double. We should have at least 3 sure tricks. Even with so many points, game in 5♠ is high risk.

JEFF ROHRBECK: Double. I'll hope for a big set. If partner pulls it to 5♠, that's fine too. On defense, I'll start with the ♦A and hope to get a few diamond ruffs.

ANDY MUENZ: 6♠. My second choice is probably double since we might get five tricks on defense if we can get a diamond ruff.

Moving up the south face of the mountain carefully, we find our game bidders:

BOB GRINWIS: 5♠. Partner has to be short in hearts and to have a good spade suit for his bid.

STEVE WHITE: 5♠. I think this has to be a favorite, and it will be a good sacrifice if it goes down. Six or even seven might make, but that would be punishing partner. If I were to bid above 5♠ here, 6♦ would be best. It must be agreeing spades, and it might get partner to bid a good grand with ♠KQJ, the ♣Q, and a heart void.

KARL BARTH: 5♠. I'd have to assume no heart loser to bid 6♠, and I don't trust the opponents enough to do that. We could be off a heart loser and then we'd need either magic cards or friendly breaks for partner to take twelve tricks. I like our chances in 5♠.

The largest team on the slopes are the adventurers who are willing to bet on a small slam, but who (more or less) give up on reaching a grand.

BARRY COHEN: 6♠. I have too much extra to bid only 5♠, so I'll settle for six.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 6♠. At IMPs, the slam bonus is worth the risk.

BILL BAUER: 6♠. Partner should be void in hearts. If he has a singleton, then we'll need spades to come home with no loser. Of course, we have to play the club suit for five tricks.

CRAIG ROGNER: 6♠. Bidding on the hope that partner has at most one heart and either six spades to the king or five to the king-queen.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 6♠. Partner bid spades freely at the four level. I expect that he has no more than one heart loser.

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): 6♠. …First, if we're wrong, we can argue in the post-mortem that preempts sometimes work. There's a good chance that partner is void in hearts. If the opponents have their strength in the red suits, then we have a nice double fit in the blacks. Even if that's not the case, there's a decent chance that the ♣Q can be finessed.

Some 6♠ bidders looked up at Mont Grande with varying degrees of wistfulness.

R. DAVID WALKER: 6♠. I might like to be in 7♣ or 7♠, but both black suits could be four-zero. If they are, our opponents can make 6♥. 6♠ then becomes a good save. If West has the club void, then a club ruff at trick one may compress the spade losers and 6♠ may still make.

BILL SCHMIDT: 6♠. Seven seems likely but not guaranteed. Partner would never accept a slam invitation with a seven-count, even with the perfect hand.

BARRY PASSER: 6♠. The vulnerable opponents are bidding up to 5♥ on distribution. Although partner is probably void in hearts, 7♠ is too risky because neither black suit is likely to break kindly.

STEPHEN COOPER: 6♠. Too many chances of a loser to bid seven, but it's tempting.

I'd call it more than merely tempting. Yes, partner needs quite a few important cards for 7♠ to be good. But he just might have them. Here's why.

Our three worthy table opponents have done an awful lot of high-level vulnerable bidding with just 24 HCP and one measly ace among them. What could justify that?

West is acting with a known big heart fit. Okay, that's easy.

North, who's been preempted, could have a wide range of holdings, particularly to take the colloquial "transfer" to spades when the bad guys have shown hearts. We'll come back to him later.

East isn't bidding to the five-level for her health. Remember, our side has yet to confirm a fit. Unless she's a beginner, she thinks she can make 5♥ or that, if it goes down, North-South might make a game. We're looking at three hearts. West has at

least four. Ergo, East has six at most. What might her other seven cards be? She has to take tricks with five of them. She can't have many spades, and they certainly aren't headed by the ♠A. Whatever clubs she's looking at are known in the parlance as "losers". Let's see, hearts, spades, clubs…what's left?

[Light bulb goes on over Kronk's head]

East has a big red two-suiter. Andy Muenz alluded to it, Mark Cohen and Bruce Schwaidelson say so directly (below). North's strength is likely concentrated in the black suits, which helps explain why he came in at the four level. While we can't be certain that he has the ♣Q, the chance of it has gone up. I'm perfectly okay with bidding 6♠ (which on a bad day might even be set via a ruff), but I think we're worth one ascent on the summit before settling for six. Now…which trail should it be?

DOUGLAS DYE: 5NT. With no trump suit agreed upon, I feel confident partner will view this as "Pick a slam". Holding ♠KQxxxxx and a heart void, I'll expect to hear a 6♥ control bid on the way to 6♠, making the grand odds on. I'm happy now that I chose 2♣, as the auction has been most informative. *[I know, right? – NS]*

RICK OLANOFF: 5NT. Pick a slam, partner, who might well have a heart void.

BRUCE H. WILLIAMS: 5NT. Worst case is that partner has six spades to the nine without either honor and the suit splits or an honor drops under the ace.

5NT is a reasonable approach. What else is available?

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 6♦. We are close to having a grand. All partner needs is something like:

♠KQJxxx ♥-- ♦xxxx ♣Qxx

(or perhaps less) and we have 13 tricks. Why stop in 5♠ or 6♠? If partner likes his hand, he can contemplate seven when I show the ♦A. If he in fact has a stiff heart, then 6♠ it is. And if some smart-aleck West jumped to 4♥, vulnerable, with only three trumps, I will pay off to two heart losers! Bidding 6♦ now will be especially important if the opponents try 7♥ next with their heart-diamond double fit.

JIM EAGLETON: 6♦. I would like third-round control to cue bid hearts at the six-level. I'll point to last month's comments from (insert highest praise here) when slam was the best answer.

MARK COHEN: 6♦. I'm hopefully on my way to 7♠ and giving partner a chance to show his heart void. East likely has a big red two-suiter, West probably has 5 hearts and a bunch of minor cards. I care most about partner who has a fistful of good spades, maybe ♠KQJxxxxx, and my hand looks like a perfect fit for 13 tricks.

Sounds good to me. North will know what to bid next with a heart void.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 6♥. It sounds like partner is void in hearts, with either long spades or spades plus clubs. I'll cue 6♥, then correct 6♠ to 7♣. Partner should pass 7♣ with something like:

♠KJxxxx ♥-- ♦Kxx(x) ♣Qxx(x)

…and correct to 7♠ with…

♠KQxxxxx ♥-- ♦xxxx ♣xx.

JAY APFELBAUM: 6♥. The cue bid must show spade support. The only possible contracts for our side are a small or grand slam in spades. The only way that makes

sense is if my hand has both minor suit aces and a high spade. Partner should sign off at six level unless he has a heart void and the high spades.

Jay makes a valuable point. If you bid 6♥, you must have first-round control of both minors. Otherwise, why are you inviting a grand slam off two aces plus whatever trump honors North is looking at? On paper, that's clear. At the table, I admit it might not have crossed my mind. Effective cue-bidding is still the #1 high art form of bridge.

I'm not sure where I got this problem or what the full deal was, but it's a good one. Last Word this month goes to a pair of Panelists who expressed quite different views about what to do when a potential grand slam is in the offing:

RICK ROWLAND: 7♠. Partner only needs king-queen-sixth of spades and a heart void to make this a laydown.

MARK BOLOTIN: 6♠. I've missed grand slams before and I survived.

Maybe bridge should borrow the TV show Survivor's motto: Outwit, Outlast, Outplay. Thanks as always everyone – October's problem is on the website.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

*With nine months in the books and three to go, the **2026 D4MSC Challenge** standings look as follows.*

In the Panelists' race, Mark Bolotin and Bill Schmidt are tied with 680 points. The Glassons and Bruce Schwaidelson are 10 points back and then comes a huge group lurking at 660.

For the Solvers, John Jones is 10 points up on Phil Freidenreich, 680 to 670, with Bob Grinwis and Jim Kenny at 660. Scores are down a bit this year because we've had no dud problems (yet). I hope to keep that up through the end of the year.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

*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 **https://d4msc.straguzzi.org/***