

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

FEBRARY 2026 PROBLEM NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

If a convention card had room for all of the important agreements and rules that an experienced partnership uses, it would be the size of a bedsheet. One that might at least fit onto a pillowcase-sized card is "Splinters acceptable on singleton honors", with checkboxes for ace, king, and queen. In this month's problem, we have a known minor suit fit and considerable extra strength. If you checked the box next to "queen", this would be a dream splinter. Well, maybe. It does chew up an awful lot of room. If 3NT is the right contract, it will sometimes require a leap of faith for the partnership to bid it. Our diamonds are rather thin, and our clubs...aren't. Are these warning signs enough to steer the Club away from splintering with a stiff queen? Put on your PJs and let's find out.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
VIEW THE [D4MSC CONVENTION CARD](#)

MATCHPOINTS, BOTH VULNERABLE			
♠-K2 ♥-Q ♦-K875 ♣-AKQJ73			
South	West	North	East
1♣	Pass	1♦	Pass
?			

A. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♥	8	6	100
3♣	1	4	90
3♦	5	7	90
2♠	1	0	80
2NT	0	3	80
3NT	0	3	80
4♦	0	1	80

RICK ROWLAND: 3♥. According to our convention card, double jump shifts after a minor are splinters. Extrapolating that same treatment to this auction seems like a winner.

It's definitely a splinter raise of diamonds, and it's definitely a winner, at least here in the D4MSC where a majority of our esteemed Panelists chose it. In fact, some saw no close alternative.

BILL BAUER: 3♥. Why not splinter with this great supporting hand? In fact, I cannot come up with a bid that is nearly as descriptive.

BILL SCHMIDT: 3♥. A splinter describes the hand better than 2NT or 3♦. Because I'm showing four-card diamond support after having opened 1♣, it implies very strong clubs.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 3♥. This gets across the most information: fewer than four spades, short hearts, four-plus diamonds, five-plus clubs, and a game forcing hand. I would imagine that this would be close to unanimous.

Not quite. In terms of precisely describing the South hand, I agree that 3♥ puts all its competition to bed. The problem, as some old Danish guy put it, is what comes after. "To sleep, perchance to dream...ay, there's the rub. For in that sleep of bidding, what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, not to mention this round of the auction, must give us pause."

Here's the pause. We're playing 2/1 with Walsh, so partner could have a minimum-range response with no four-card major for her 1♦ bid, or she could have invitational or better values with diamonds and any number of 4CMs. If she has the strong type, she's going to move over anything we bid now, even just an insane 2♣, and we'll have time to tell our story. If she has the weak variant, however, things could get very hairy very quickly if we splinter. For starters, does 3♥ force us to game or just to 3NT?

BARRY COHEN: 3♥. I am going to force to game. The best description seems to be the splinter showing my diamond support and big hand. I won't bid notrump with the singleton heart, but partner may do so.

TOM WEIK: 3♥. Showing my short hearts, diamond fit, and big hand. This is the straightforward path to 6♦ if partner has the right cards. It offers the flexibility to end in 3NT, 4♦, 5♦, or slam.

KARL BARTH: 3♥. I don't really expect to stop in 3NT, but let's see what partner says next. If she wants to take a shot at 3NT, I won't argue. After all, I'll provide six tricks for that contract. Don't ask what I'll do if she bids 4♦ instead.

Barry (and Connie earlier) say 3♥ is a game force. Tom says we can stop in 4♦. Karl might not be sure. Eek. I think that most people play splinters as game-forcing, with certain pre-agreed exceptions (e.g., "mini-splinters"). Personally, I don't care for any "forcing to 3NT" bids anyway. Game-forcing means exactly what the term implies: 3NT, four of a major, or five of a minor. This isn't always ideal, but it simplifies life for both partners, plus getting to 5♦ cold for 4♦ is a lot less aggravating than getting to 4♦ cold for 6♦.

Next question: over 3♥, what would partner's 3♠ bid mean?

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 3♥. 3♣ and 3♦ seem like underbids. We can make game in either minor if pard has as little as, e.g.:

♠Axx ♥xxx ♦QJxxx ♣xx.

I think that the splinter is the most descriptive call. Partner will know I am something like 3=1=4=5 or 2=1=4=6 since I will have denied four spades. If she has wasted heart values and a stopper in spades, she can try 3NT. Lacking a spade stopper, she can ask with 3♠. I do wish my diamonds were better, but I love my club holding.

JAY APFELBAUM: 3♥. The value bid. I have a nice diamond fit and a singleton heart. Partner could look for 3NT by bidding 3♠. She could rebid 4♦ with a minimum. Other bids would look for slam. I will cooperate by bidding 4NT over a 4♥ rebid, which should imply second-round spade control. If partner offers a choice of slam contracts, we can choose clubs to protect the ♠K.

I'm not sure if Jay is implying that we can stop in 4♦. In any case, if we belong in 3NT and partner has the weak variety of a Walsh 1♦, her options are severely limited.

She knows the opponents have at least nine hearts.

She won't often have both majors stopped, and she can't count on us holding any hearts at all, let alone the potentially crucial ♥Q.

With no fitting club honor, she won't visualize six club tricks right out of the chute.

See what I'm getting at? If partner wants to keep 3NT in the picture at matchpoints but can't bid it herself for any of a billion reasons, she has exactly one option: 3♠. It can't ask for anything specific, like, "I have hearts covered, do you have a spade stopper?" It just means "Help!!" The one bright spot here is that, whatever 3♠ is looking for, we can try 3NT with some confidence that we have it, but not everyone agrees:

BARRY PASSER: 3♥. Splinter, right? My next bid over anything except 3NT will be 4♣.

Paging Pharrell Williams:

ANDY MUENZ: 3♥. Shows my strength and diamond support along with my biggest worry about 3NT, which seems like our most likely game. If partner has extras and wants to go looking for slam, I'm happy to cooperate with my source of tricks.

JOHN JONES: 3♥. Shows game-forcing values with diamond support. My clubs don't have to be quite this good, but this looks like it's in the ballpark because I'm short on aces. If partner bids 3NT, I'll happily pass.

MARK COHEN: 3♥. I'm just too good for 3♦ and this bid describes my hand pretty well. The opponents are silent with a lot of cards in the majors so I am hopeful we have a clear field to find our best spot. If partner tries 3♠ I will happily bid 3NT.

I have to admit, I considered this too:

KARL BARTH (cont.): 3♥. What I really want to bid is 4♣, showing a diamond raise with solid clubs, but I am not sure others would interpret it that way.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON (cont.): 3♥. I suppose I could bid 4♣ if it shows six clubs and four diamonds, as it would over a major, but I'm not sure if that's true over 1♦.

What other options do we have? Well, it is matchpoints, so....

JIM EAGLETON: 2NT. This may be the most concise bid I have ever made, so I'm sure it's wrong. Partner has promised 13 cards. Over any bid but 3NT, I can bid 4♦.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: 2NT. 18 HCP, good clubs, good diamonds. Partner can describe her hand.

STEVE WHITE: 2NT. Trying to right-side our hearts. Neither 3♦ nor 3♥ is clearly better, so let's try this.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 3NT. I'll take my chances that we have a heart stopper.

This hand stretches the definition of "balanced", to say the least. However, when playing matchpoints against silent opponents, no strong hand with a solid six-card suit is ever completely inappropriate for notrump. If forced to choose, I prefer 3NT to 2NT on the age-old principle that one might as well be hanged for stealing a sheep as for a lamb. And Steve is right: if partner has ♥Ax(x) or ♥Kxx, there's both positional and tactical value in keeping our stiff ♥Q in the closed hand.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 2♠. We will make a forcing bid hoping to find out the strength of North's hand. We'll follow with 4NT if responder can reasonably have two aces, and if she has them, we'll bid 6♣ to protect the ♠K on the opening lead.

Every time I jump shift in a non-suit, the roof caves in. If I tried 2♠, partner would be four=five in spades and diamonds with 13 points. I wouldn't be able to convince her I didn't have spades until I corrected 6♠ to 6NT, at which point the opponents would run the entire heart suit on us. Bridge hates me.

Maybe this hand isn't quite worth forcing to game. In fact, 17 of our Club brethren chose either 3♣ or 3♦, strongly encouraging partner to bid again but not compelling her. I decided to award 90 points to each, though 3♦ had more adherents. Let's hear from them first.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♦. Yes, the club suit is good, but my diamond support is too good to ignore. There's still time to get to 3NT or a slam, if there. Bidding 3NT now with a stiff ♥Q is too unilateral (as opposed to merely unilateral!)

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 3♦. If partner has a weak hand, this should be safe. If she shows a heart stopper, I'll bid 3NT.

STEPHEN COOPER: 3♦. My second choice was five diamonds, but partner will bid again with the required two aces. Partner could easily have:

♠Qxx ♥Kxx ♦Qxxxx ♣xx.

...where even 3♦ is far from guaranteed. I will show my fit and my values and trust partner to do the right thing.

MICHAEL MAYER: 3♦. Diamond support and extra values.

ED SHAPIRO: 3♦. I'd like to be able to bid 3♣, which is stronger than standard in my preferred (natural) style, but here I think getting my support into the auction has the best chance to work out. A phony jump-shift is too much.

MARK KINZER: 3♦. 3♥ is a close second choice.

DOUGLAS DYE: 3♦. This is a nice hand if partner can scrape up another call. I will bid 3NT if she bids 3♥ and cooperate in a control bidding sequence if she ventures 3♠. After 4♦, I'll try 5♣ to complete the picture of my hand.

Fair enough. 3♦ has the benefit of being a raise, which will encourage partner to bid on with borderline hands. That's probably what we want, given that we're close to max for this bid. What about three of the other minor?

PETE FILANDRO: 3♣. An underbid for sure, but we are in an awkward sequence. With our Walsh-style responses, if partner has no four-card major, she may have a bare minimum scraped-up response.

STEVE O'BRIEN: 3♣. This describes the hand best: long clubs and 17/18 points.

BOB GRINWIS: 3♣. 2NT would be right on power (18-19) but I don't feel comfortable with this shape and the bare heart queen is a negative. 3♣ shows solid clubs and is invitational to 3NT. I could bid 3♦, but I would rather try for the nine-trick game. If partner is very weak, 3♣ should be a playable spot.

I wouldn't say "solid" clubs, just strong ones. 3♣, which was my guess too, isn't bad. If partner passes and this isn't a plus score, we might not have one, including 3♦. Still, it buries the diamond fit at least temporarily and maybe for good. Partner will never imagine that we have king-fourth. If she has the weak Walsh variant, 3♣ could work out very well, but what if she has invitational values, or forcing ones? How often will she hold each hand-type on this auction?



To solve our dilemma, I turned to one of the world's foremost authorities on bidding theory: Taylor Swift. OK, I lied about the authority part. But she did famously sing in one of her better songs, "I don't know about you, but I'm feelin' 22", and that seems to me to be the key to unlocking this puzzle.

(Um, 22 missing high-card points, that is. That's what she meant, right?)

I fired up the D4MSC simulator, gave it South's hand, and set the conditions so that the only acceptable deals were ones where North would respond 1♦ and West and East would sit there like two adorable stuffed animals. I then asked it two questions:

- *What percentage of the time will North have the strong Walsh variant vs. the weak one?*
- *What strain takes more tricks at double-dummy: clubs or diamonds?*

About 1000 deals later, the results were in, and they were eye-opening, among other body parts.

- *North will have the stronger Walsh variant on **83%** (!!) of deals when East-West are non-vulnerable, and **79%** when they're vulnerable.*
- *Clubs (played by South) and diamonds (played by North) take the same number of tricks on **66%** of deals. Clubs are superior on **24%**, diamonds on **10%**. For what it's worth, notrump takes on average 1.1 tricks fewer than the better minor.*

*Turns out, the opponents' silence speaks volumes, particularly when our majors are so short. How you interpret this data is of course up to you. When North has the 6-10 HCP hand, 3NT by South is about **44%** on paper, but then, paper West knows to send out the ♥K on opening lead to squash our poor queen. Flesh-and-blood West will have a tougher time finding that lead, unless perhaps we have splintered.*

I expected closer to a 50-50 split between Strong Walsh and Weak Walsh, so the actual results floored me. Even when South has a hand as strong as this month's, North will not hold the weak variant often. Either she'll have a four-card major to show, or the opponents will have something to say. Something to remember at the bridge table.¹

Does this mean that the 3♥ splinter is the best call after all? I'd still disagree. One-fifth of the time, partner will hold the 6-10 hand, and the splinter will be at best a mixed blessing to her. When she has the 11+ hand, it'll be more beneficial, but it'll also make it trickier for us to end in clubs, which on balance is the superior strain. No matter – 3♥ still earns the 100 award this month.

Last Word for February goes to one of the Club's long-time stalwarts, who relates a story about a similar problem from many years ago.

PETE FILANDRO (cont.): 3♣. ...In the early 70's, possibly before Walsh-style responses were popularized by Max Hardy), I submitted a similar hand to *The Bridge World's* Master Solvers Club, but with ♠J2 and a stiff ♥A. It wasn't used, but Edgar Kaplan kindly provided his view of then-current expert thinking.

- If the club suit quality is sufficient, underbid with 3♣.
- Otherwise, underbid with 3♦.
- If you feel the hand is just too big for either option, open 2♣.
- If too big for 3♣/3♦ but not strong enough for 2♣, or if concerned that follow-up sequences would be unwieldy, jump-shift into the suit with a stopper.

Because partner has (for now) denied a major, she'll realize that any major I bid here could be on fewer than four cards. Nonetheless, I couldn't stomach jump-shifting into a singleton ace in my problem, or into king-low in this one.

Valuable bridge advice from Edgar Kaplan and Taylor Swift! You won't find this in any other feature. Ahem. Stay warm everyone until we meet again in March.



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/>

¹ If South has the same shape but only 14 HCP, the probability that North has the Strong Walsh hand jumps to **94%**. If South has the same 18 points but is 3-3 in the majors, the probability dips, but only to **72%**. No two ways about it: when a Walsh auction starts 1♣-(pass)-1♦-(pass), responder is a heavy favorite to hold the 11+ HCP variant.