

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

MARCH 2025 PROBLEM

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Eli Culbertson coined the term “swan” to describe a 7-4-1-1 bridge hand, a distribution he found particularly graceful. His advice, as you have read before in this feature and elsewhere, was that swans should be played in the seven-card suit, even if you have a four-four fit in the side suit. Culbertson didn’t give an avian name to 7-4-2-0 hands to my knowledge, nor did he offer any guidelines on what to do with them. Well, fine. I’m going to call it an emu – a similar long neck, but stockier and nowhere near as graceful. Emus are flightless, but let’s see if the Club can get this bird off the ground, at least better than I did when I picked it up at the table. Go Birds.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
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NONE VULNERABLE			
♠-J964 ♥-AK76543 ♦-102 ♣--			
South	West	North	East
		1♦	Pass
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
?			

A. What is your call at Matchpoints?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
2♣	5	9	50
3♥	2	2	40
3♠	2	4	40
4♣	2	4	40
4♥	2	4	40
4♠	3	2	40
4NT	0	1	30
2♠	0	1	30

By a resounding 32-11 margin, the Club felt that our little 8-point quasi-swan was worth driving to game. Fair enough – this hand has quite a lot of playing strength. Which game, and what route to take, were more divisive matters. Let’s begin with the flock who were determined to fly the contract South for the winter.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 4♥. Game prospects look good, and unless partner is five=six, hearts should be trumps.

RUI MARQUES: 4♥. Am I giving up a four-four fit to play in a potential seven-zero? Well, if partner is short in hearts, then my hand is more valuable with hearts as trump. Playing in spades, partner might get tapped in clubs and get cut off from my precious heart suit. In hearts, I have enough firepower to sustain some taps. As for the level, I'd bid 3♥ with a six-card suit, so....

BARRY PASSER: 4♥. If partner has a singleton heart, I'm okay in 4♥, but an opening club lead will probably kill the heart suit in a 4♠ contract.

DOUGLAS DYE: 4♥. The seventh heart tips the scales in favor of bidding game, and 4♥ seems the most likely make. Partner may have only ordinary spades, face a club tap, and never enjoy slow heart tricks in a spade contract. Ordinarily, I would prefer to advance slowly, as partner may have significant extra values or shape. Here, however, all invitational bids risk missing a cold game even opposite a minimum, while 2♣ followed by 4♥ should show much better heart texture.

Note the common concern among this group: playing in spades, one or two taps in dummy might orphan the heart suit. That was precisely Culbertson's rationale for advising his students to shoot for the seven-bagger when holding a seven-four hand. Against that, Culbertson and every other bridge teacher since the Pleistocene has also advised: "support with support". Well, we do have support.

STEPHEN COOPER: 4♠. I think that the field will bid this game, and I do not want to be left behind.

JAY APFELBAUM: 4♠. Any game might make. Partner probably has at most one heart. We might need a favorable lead to make it, but time to be optimistic.

DON DALPE: 4♠. Let them find the best lead.

Should we worry more that 4♠ is too much or that it's not enough?

CAROL REITZ: 4♠. Six-loser hand with a spade fit. I hope it's not an underbid.

Could be. South's hand is an odd bird indeed. It's easy to construct 15-point hands for North in which game is down off the top and others where 6♠ needs only normal breaks in the majors. Is it worth making one sporting slam try? That feels a tad pushy to me with such mediocre trumps, but not to:

R. DAVID WALKER: 4♣. Splinter. Very clear at any form of scoring.

TOM WEIK: 4♣. This hand is worthy of reaching game. Partner doesn't need much for game or even slam if his high cards are working. Disclosing the club control seems automatic, especially since partner's strength is unlimited at this time.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 4♣. A little light for a splinter, but too much slam potential for anything else.

JOHN D. JONES: 4♣. This may be optimistic, but seven-four is powerful distribution. The connected heart honors provide a trick source. Yes, if partner has a significant amount wasted in clubs with poor spades, like:

♠10xxx ♥x ♦KQJxx ♣KQJ

...we will be too high. But if he has a perfect hand such as:

♠AKQx ♥Q ♦Axxxx ♣xx

...thirteen tricks are likely. 4♠ would show a balanced hand the way I play.

DANIEL BOYE: 4♣. Partner needs a perfecto for slam; something like four strong spades and the ace-king of diamonds. However, one slam try cannot hurt. After partner's expected 4♦, I'll bid 4♥ and away partner's next call. If West doubles 4♣, partner can pass and I will redouble to show absolute club control.

Dan's Plan is a sensible one, but there's a potential hitch. Partner might not bid 4♦, especially if he lacks the ♦A or has a lot of wasted club values. He'll sign off in what he believes to be our agreed suit: 4♠. That's fine if we belong in spades or if either major is okay. If we belong in hearts, that bird will have flown.

Which brings us to the apex predator for Problem A: good old fourth-suit forcing.

PETE FILANDRO: 2♣. This hand is too strong for any invite. A low-level game force gives us lots of room to sort out our best contract. Also, if slam is possible, any invitational bid might not encourage partner enough.

BILL SCHMIDT: 2♣. I'm willing force to game, but we need more information to decide on a trump suit. Any major-suit bid at this point could go very wrong. The form of scoring is irrelevant, because even if I only wanted to invite to game (at matchpoints) I wouldn't know which suit to invite in.

BARRY COHEN: 2♣. This hand has too much potential not to go to game in a major.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 2♣. Asking if partner has secondary heart support.

MARK BOLOTIN: 2♣. Yes, I'm risking that the opponents may find a sacrifice. However, partner doesn't need much for slam. Even a grand is possible opposite ace-king-queen-fourth of spades, queen-doubleton of hearts, and the ♦A.

If you're committing to game, then it's impossible to argue that 2♣ is a poor call. As its backers point out, it's economical, it keeps both potential trump suits in play, and if partner has a lot of extras, maybe reaching a good slam is still possible. Of course, reaching a bad one is also possible. Partner will expect more than eight points out of us, seven of which are in what is likely his short suit. Some risks have to be taken with awkward hands.

In hindsight, perhaps this was a poor problem for a bidding forum. That's not something the director writes often when said problem attracts eight different answers, including six that drew support from at least two Panelists, along with lots of excellent commentary. The issue is that one can choose 2♣ without needing to volunteer any follow-up plans. The key decision on this hand isn't part-score or game (or slam). It's hearts or spades. And the secondary issue is that hearts could be right even if partner never supports them, or if he runs from the suit every time you bid them, or if he pulls out a gun and demands that you rip up all remaining heart cards in your bidding box. That last scenario doesn't happen often, but ever since the pandemic, one never knows.

Among the 2♣ bidders, only about half suggested which major they were targeting.

RICH ROTHWART: 2♣. I'm willing to force to game in order to find the right strain. I'll support spades next, unless partner bids 2♥.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 2♣. We need to get the strain decision right. The best way to do that is to establish a game force and see what partner does. It is usually best to make a mild overbid in order to facilitate this type of auction. If partner bids hearts here or raises after I rebid them, then we'll play in hearts. Otherwise, I'll bid 4♠.

ANDY MUENZ: 2♣. I'm forcing to game with a six-loser hand and my void not in partner's minor. I originally considered bidding 4♠ directly but came up with two advantages to going this route. One, if I bid 4♠, partner will likely bid on with:

♠AKxx ♥x ♦QJxx ♣AKxx

...and I *really* don't want to be higher than 4♠ opposite that. Two, 2♣ gives partner the chance to show secondary heart support.

STEVE WHITE: 2♣. Let's hear what partner says. I expect to end up in 4♥ almost regardless, but possibly 4♠ at matchpoints.

JIM EAGLETON: 2♣. This may be essentially a transfer to 2NT, because partner must have something (too much?) in clubs. My subsequent 3♥ will be forcing. Go slow, find the best fit.

We could go slower still and perhaps stay out of a bad game. So say our invitational bidders, who were split between hearts and spades. The spade bidders certainly had more to say.

KARL BARTH: 3♠. I realize this can make ten tricks easily if partner isn't super short in hearts, but my partner never has perfect cards for me. So, I'll invite and hope for the best. I could be convinced to bid 3♥ but that doesn't show the seventh heart and partner might be discouraged by my failure to raise spades. I will choose the suit that will make partner a bit more optimistic.

DAVE LEGROW: 3♠. Partner could have many different hands, but you need to show the eight-card fit and offer a strong invitation to game. Let partner take over from here.

BOB GRINWIS: 3♠. It's invitational, and we know it's at least a four-four fit. Partner could have one heart or none at all.

True, but we have a suit that might play perfectly peachy opposite a void. The only one of our four 3♥ backers to offer a comment, though it's quite a compelling one, was:

MARK KINZER: 3♥. Emphasize the seven-card suit.

Finding a truly novel use for the two-part problem format is:

BILL BAUER: 3♠. I am torn between 2♣ and 3♠. Fortunately, I get to vote twice, so I can vote for each. My only problem is which bid goes with matchpoints vs. IMPs. I think the more conservative bid of 3♠ is more appropriate for MP scoring.

I chose 4♥, but remember, I have a wire on the board. If you're going to game, then 2♣ is surely better in theory and arguably better in practice. Summing up:

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♣. It's easy to say, "Oh, good, we have a four-four spade fit," but it may not be the best place to play. Hearts could be better, even if partner has only a singleton. For this reason, I am going to make sure we get to game with my six-loser, 8 HCP hand by going slow and hearing more from partner. I will likely rebid my hearts next. Ultimately, I will have to decide between the majors, and if

partner surprises me by showing heart support next (unlikely since we haven't heard a club peep from the opponents), there could even be a slam.

If partner shows heart support, it would mean the non-vulnerable opponents have kept silent with a trillion clubs. Unlikely but hardly impossible, as confirmed by the Solver who gets Last Word for Part A this month:

MARK COHEN: 2♣. Not sure which major suit game I want to play. Partner's next bid will be important. The club suit is missing, but last week a Common Game board had my stiff ♠A opposite a void, and my opponents never bid!

A gross violation of the Law (of Total Tricks). How is one supposed to bid against such scoundrels?

B. What is your call at IMPs?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
2♣	8	12	50
3♠	2	2	40
4♣	2	4	40
4♥	2	5	40
4♠	2	3	40
3♥	0	1	30

Our emu hasn't morphed into a beautiful swan or anything else in Part B, but the form of scoring has made it more attractive to run it to game. Among the inviters who changed their bids are:

BILL BAUER: 2♣ (3♠ at MPs). A bit aggressive. I would clearly bid 2♣ if vulnerable, but the odds are less favorable when non-vulnerable. The problem with answering on the first day the problem appears is that I have to wait a whole month for the answer. Glad February has only 28 days!

BOB GRINWIS: 4♠ (3♠ at MPs). I want to be in game at this form of scoring.

One D4MSC stalwart changed his aim but not his bid.

ANDY MUENZ: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). For reasons similar to my matchpoint explanation, I don't want to give partner too much encouragement by bidding 4♥ directly. At IMPs, I'm looking towards playing in hearts rather than spades. Hearts is the safer game since it can better handle bad breaks and repeated taps.

Another was less fearful of the opponents throwing in a monkey wrench.

MARK BOLOTIN: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). I feel more strongly in favor of this bid at IMPs, because a club sacrifice might cost us a full board at matchpoints but only a small swing at IMPs.

One panelist welcomed the whole toolbox.

DON DALPE: 2♣ (4♠ at MPs). Maybe partner's rebid will help me pick the safer game. Even if they double, it might add to my information to help me.

Riding against traffic:

STEPHEN COOPER: 3♠ (4♠ at MPs). Although I want to bid 4♠, I think it is wise to let partner have a voice in the decision.

If forced to bid some number of spades, and though it seems counterintuitive, I prefer 3♠ to 4♠ at IMPs too. Partner knows it's teams. He wants to reach a making game as strongly as I do. If he passes 3♠, it must be due to some unholy combination of weak trumps, soft values, and very short hearts, all of which I know from looking at my hand would put us squarely in Danger, Will Robinson! territory. If forced to bid hearts, however, I'd still choose four, since partner can't be expected to know that a stiff ♥2 qualifies as primary trump support.

Deftly, if unknowingly, aligning with this month's avian theme is:

PETE FILANDRO: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). Guessing at which suit to invite in puts all our eggs in one basket. I'm not ready to commit us to a specific suit when partner could be, for instance, 4=1=4=4 or 4=3=4=2.

Time to reveal the deal. This problem arose during one of BBO's robot individuals, and it was a speed event to boot. It was in my best interests to make North declarer because the bots play much faster than any human. So, giving precisely zero thought as to which major was better, I quickly raised to 4♠ and sat back to watch the play. It wasn't pretty.

	♠ KQ103	
	♥ 8	
	♦ AQ74	
	♣ J973	
♠ 7		♠ A852
♥ QJ9		♥ 102
♦ K9865		♦ J3
♣ KQ65		♣ A10842
	♠ J964	
	♥ AK76543	
	♦ 102	
	♣ --	

East led the ♠2. The contract can be made, but the sole winning line is hardly obvious. Declarer must win the opening lead specifically with dummy's ♠9, take the diamond finesse immediately, and then play on hearts, ruffing the third round with the king or queen. The gymnastics in trumps keeps the suit from blocking and allows declarer to withstand any later attempts by the opponents to tap dummy in clubs. This line won't always work on other layouts.

My bot partner chose instead to try ruffing diamonds in dummy. East discarded a heart on the third round and declarer couldn't recover. Not a good line in my opinion, but what matters is that 4♥ is foolproof on almost any East-West layout with the ♦K onside. Unless hearts are five-zero, or if they're four-one and the opponent with the singleton can get a fast ruff, declarer need only play three rounds of trump upon gaining the lead and then knock out the ♠A at his leisure.

"Swans should be played in the seven-card suit." Was our emu just a funny looking swan at heart? I fired up the D4MSC Simulator to see what it thought about the four main approaches.

1. Drive to game in hearts
2. Invite game in hearts.
3. Drive to game in spades
4. Invite game in spades

Two hundred deals later, here's what it said about matchpoints:

South = ♠-J964 ♥-AK76543 ♦-102 ♣-- MPs None vulnerable

Vs. ->	Line 1	Line 2	Line 3	Line 4
Line 1	---	53%	40%	45%
Line 2	47%	---	36%	40%
Line 3	60%	64%	---	54%
Line 4	55%	60%	46%	---

Expected Matchpoint percentage results

And here's its analysis for IMPs:

South = ♠-J964 ♥-AK76543 ♦-102 ♣-- IMPs None vulnerable

Vs. ->	Line 1	Line 2	Line 3	Line 4
Line 1	---	2.2	-17.3	-14.3
Line 2	-2.2	---	-20.2	-17.3
Line 3	17.2	20.3	---	3.0
Line 4	14.3	17.3	-3.0	---

Expected IMP results (per 10 boards)

Maybe Culbertson's advice is a...dodo? On this South hand at least, and despite the actual at-the-table result, spades (Lines 3 and 4) are clearly superior to hearts. In either strain, you're a little better off just blasting out game (Lines 1 and 3) rather than bringing partner into the decision.

I admit I was quite surprised, but looking through the 200 random deals it generated, I see why spades won, and it's nothing unexpected. The strong heart suit is close to being set up before the play even starts. As long as North's spades aren't anemic, then the four-four fit will often produce an extra trick. Furthermore, any club "wastage" that North has isn't necessarily wasted. The ♣A, and sometimes just the ♣K, carry weight by protecting dummy from being tapped until hearts are established.

What about the 4♣ splinter? It was very difficult to set up the rules for determining when North-South would finish in 4♠, 5♠, or 6♠. Among other things, if North were to get excited and ask for key cards, should South commit the partnership to slam by

jumping to show the club void? But based on some gorilla logic, it seems that the splinter is in fact worth the risk. You'll get to a good 6♠ more often than you'll get overboard. I think.

Lastly, what about 2♣? The simulator says: meh. Most of the time, it does no harm, and sometimes it lets you find the better strain for game. Other times, it doesn't – on quite a few deals when North admits to holding two (or rarely three) hearts, you'll wind up in 4♥ when 4♠ is equally good or better. Four-four fits are powerful beasts when trumps behave.

So, sorry Mr. Culbertson. This emu, and I suspect quite a lot of its swan cousins, usually belongs in spades. But as our Last Word for March points out: who needs birds anyway when you have the proverbial race-winning tortoise?

JIM EAGLETON: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). Go slow, go far.

Sound advice. You need only go as far as the D4MSC website to see our annual April Fools' Day freakazoid problem. Have fun with it and I'll see you back at the Club in early spring when the robins return.



*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/>.*