DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

NOVEMBER 2026 PROBLEM

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The D4MSC is in damage control mode this month. We have an excellent hand with more than mild slam interest, but the auction has gotten very high very fast due to the artificial, space-gobbling 3♣ bid. Now South must take a position one way or another. Is it just a guess? Are any of the guesses demonstrably better than the others? Was there a way to avoid this mess in the first place? This might be the Club's most instructive problem in years, particularly for what our expert panel had to say in Part A. Cleanup on Aisle 11 is in progress. Grab your mop and follow us.

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

MATCHPOINTS, NORTH-SOUTH VULNERABLE

♠-AK53 ♥-A107 ♦-J32 ♣-KQ6

South	West	North	East
	Pass	1♥	Pass
1♠	Pass	2♦	Pass
3♣*	Pass	3♥	Pass
?			

* - 4TH SUIT (GAME) FORCING

A. Do you agree with South's bidding so far?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
No	8	9	**20**
Yes	5	13	**10**

Lately, I haven't been scoring "Do You Agree…?" questions in the D4MSC. This time around, however, I think it's important to do so. South's problem in Part B was fully avoidable, though it does take some deft thinking ahead. Most of the "yes" responders who commented said, in essence, "Of course. What else could South do?" Most of the "no" responders said, "Well, since you asked…."

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: No. Back in the day, bidding 1♠ over 1♥ was automatic, but that seems to have changed. Many experts now recommend taking advantage of 2/1 by setting up a game force immediately. Ignore your four-card spade suit for the moment and bid 2♣. You know you are going to play in hearts (or possibly notrump, or even spades if partner bids them next), and you can still leave room to explore for slam. It prevents the awkward auction that South now faces.

DAN BOYE: No. While 1♠ and 3♣ are "standard" bids, starting with 2♣ makes the auction more efficient. After partner's 2♦ rebid, 2♥ conserves bidding room and conveys a better-than-minimum, game-forcing hand. If partner instead rebids 2♠, I'd be thrilled.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: No. Playing 2/1, the correct response is 2♣, after which opener can bid 2♠ when he has both four spades and five or more hearts. If the non-vulnerable opponents overcall 2♦ or 3♦, we can bid hearts cheaply as we have already created a game force. The only way we could have gotten away with the 1♠ response is if partner had rebid 1NT, allowing us to bid some game-forcing checkback followed by supporting hearts.

*Connie sent several versions of her comment and said she was trying to be diplomatic in the wording. Suffice it to say she really, **really** didn't like the 1♠ response.*

JOHN D. JONES: No. I prefer the modern style of starting with 2♣. It seems to lose space, but it actually buys us room. If we start with 2♣, then over partner's 2♦ rebid, we can bid the strain we would actually like to play in at matchpoints: 2NT. (No, I'm not passing partner's raise to 3NT). 1♠ isn't terrible; we all bid that way for years. But it has created this difficult problem.

MARK COHEN: No. No, no, no. On this excellent holding, we must try to establish a game-force as quickly as possible. The auction can then unfold slowly. Bid 2♣ instead of 1♠.

STEVE WHITE: No. It's understandable, and it might be what I would do at the table, but there are advantages to setting trumps and establishing a game force at a lower level.

One Panelist noted that, as awkwardly as the auction has developed for us, we're fortunate that it wasn't even worse:

PETE FILANDRO: No. My 1♠ bid caused this exact problem – a requirement to force with an artificial 3♣. That wasted the two-level, plus it appeared to seek a three-card spade preference from partner (which, if I had received it, would have wasted the entire three-level). After 2♣, game forcing, if I hear 2♦ and then bid 2♥, we have lots of room for either of us to show shape or extras.

If partner had bid 3♠, I'd probably just enter a zero for our side into the BridgeMate and ask the opponents to accept it.

If you consider it unthinkable to skip a four-card major to bid a three-card minor, I sympathize, but then you'll need some good partnership agreements to extricate yourself from auctions like this. In standard methods, a jump to 3♥ at South's second turn would be invitational. Two people suggest that you ought to re-think that.

BILL SCHMIDT: No. This hand type should establish a game force on the first round by bidding 2♣. If you start with 1♠, then you must agree hearts on the second round by jumping to 3♥ (assuming it's forcing). Fourth suit forcing implies that you have some idea about the direction that the auction might go, which is not the case here. If the fourth suit bid is at the three-level, it should deny a balanced hand.

CONNIE GOLDBERG (cont.): …The best agreement to have is that if you respond 1♠ to 1♥ with primary support for hearts, you must have a game-forcing hand with a good spade suit, usually five-plus. Therefore, if partner rebids two of a minor, your

jump to 3♥ is 100% forcing and shows at least mild slam interest. With minimum values, you'd just bid 4♥.

That would certainly solve our current mess, but it would create issues elsewhere. For instance, what should South do with, say, 5=3=2=3 and 11 points? Normally you'd respond 1♠ (we might have a nine-card spade fit), then jump invitationally to 3♥. If 3♥ were forcing, how do you show a three-card limit raise with a spade suit? [1]

Not every "no" vote came from a staunch 2♣ advocate. Some say that rather than pretending a spade is a club, why not pretend a spade is a heart?

STEPHEN COOPER: No. I prefer to show the game force on the first round. 2NT might not be too much of a distortion.

WILLIAM T. KILMER: No. Jacoby 2NT.

Others advocated skipping a prosaic auction over 1♥ and just cutting to the chase.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: No. South has 17 HCP and a nice balanced hand. There is no reason to go through Fourth Suit Forcing – just go for slam exploration.

Well, it would be nice to check on the spade situation first, but I get the point: the fourth-suit sequence has accomplished little. The partnership is little better off than if we had just bid 4NT over 1♥ immediately. The actual auction has been a tale told by a conformist, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. (Yes, I know Macbeth used a different noun than "conformist", but I'm trying to be diplomatic too.)

If you've been convinced that 2♣ is superior to 1♠, great. Now comes the hard part: getting this right at the table. When partner opens 1♥, it's reflexive to respond 1♠ on a game-forcing hand with four spades and three hearts. Avoiding the trap requires awareness and discipline. To be fair, let's give the Last Word for Part A to a pair of Yes men who recognized the allure of responding 2♣ (or Jacoby 2NT) but remained defiant in showing their spades first.

BARRY PASSER: Yes. A Jacoby raise requires four hearts, and I don't like psyching 2♣ just to create a force.

MARK BOLOTIN: Yes. Absolutely. I'm too strong for 3NT at my first turn, and I'm not giving up on slam possibilities on my second. In retrospect, an initial bid of 2♣ probably would have worked out better given how the auction went. I still stand by my sequence.

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[1] In fact, Bill Schmidt wondered about this too. He started a thread on BridgeWinners.com asking how to distinguish between a three-card limit raise vs. forcing raise of hearts after the auction begins 1♥-1♠. It turned into quite a long discussion, with some well-known pros checking in. Many proposed solutions are too complex for casual partnerships, but the entire thread is still worth a read. Two that stood out to Bill were:

(1) Require opener to bid 3♦ over a 4SF 3♣, which leaves room for responder to say which major he's aiming for. (I like this a lot)

(2) Play that responder's 4♣ over 3♥ is an artificial slam try, usually with hearts. If responder picks up a big black two-suiter, he jumps to 4♣ at his second turn. In this auction, we'd give up a very rare splinter raise of diamonds.

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

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
4NT	4	7	**80**
3NT	3	5	**70**
4♣	2	3	**70**
4♥	2	4	**70**
3♠	1	0	**60**
5♥	0	2	**60**
6♥	1	1	**60**

I admit that Part B of the problem is largely an exercise in guesswork, but let's be honest: we've all found ourselves in a pickle like this because our earlier decisions weren't ideal. Now we have to guess our way out. It's always illustrative to see what experts recommend in situations like this. As several people enumerated, while partner's point count is a mystery, we at least know a bit about his shape:

- *He has five or six hearts.*
- *He has four diamonds.*
- *He has fewer than three spades.*
- *He likely has no club stopper (though some pointed out that if North does hold six hearts, he might still have the ♣A.)*

Can we make any use of this? The top-scoring call, having earned it due to (just barely) a plurality of both Panelists and Solvers, is to send out everyone's favorite slam beacon.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 4NT. 4♥ would show extras in support of hearts but will partner be able to carry on to slam? I think the hand is too good, so perhaps South could bid 5♥ (not sure what it means), but I prefer to bid 4NT and find out where we stand for slam.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 4NT. Worth exploring for slam with an escape to 5♥ if I don't like the reply.

WILLIAM T. KILMER (with MANOJ DEB-ROY): 4NT. Roman Key-Card Blackwood for hearts.

BOB GRINWIS: 4NT. RKCB for the last suit bid. I will bid 6♥ if partner shows three keys (he can't have zero) or 5♠ (two with the queen). Over 5♣, I can get out at 5♥. There is too much risk that 4♥ will be passed when slam is in play.

Rarely does one see this mix of optimism and fatalism:

KARL BARTH: 4NT. Even though I am usually reluctant to wheel out Old Black, in this case I think slam is odds-on if partner has two key cards. I'm sure North holds ♦Qxxx and we're down two in six after two top diamonds and a ruff. But I'll take the risk. Besides, it's matchpoints, so there are no teammates to freak out when it's a hopeless overbid.

Old Black? Not everyone is certain of that.

BILL SCHMIDT: 4NT. Anything now is a pure guess. I prefer to guess high, because I can construct a 15-point hand for partner where 7NT would make. I only hope that we have an agreement about whether this agrees hearts, both for knowing whether the ♥K is a key card, and for knowing how to stop if we're off two keys.

RICK OLANOFF: 4NT. Maybe partner has extras and can bid on. My hand has no ruffing values, so notrump makes sense.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 4NT. There is no good solution. I think that at MP's South can choose between 3NT, 4NT or 6NT. That way, he won't have to suffer the embarrassment of putting this hand down as dummy. As partner could still have up to 16 HCP's I choose 4NT, which should be quantitative.

I agree, but we're in the minority. I think 4NT shows about this strength, albeit with one fewer heart and probably one more spade. Still, I would expect roughly eight out of ten partners to take it unhesitatingly as RKCB, and the other two to throw their bidding boxes at me as soon as the auction is over for making such an ambiguous bid.

What about 4♥? Some have suggested that it should show extras, but most Club members who chose it do so for an old-fashioned reason: they're signing off, and they provide plenty of example North hands where that's the winning call.

PETE FILANDRO: 4♥. I'm very heavy for this bid, but so much of my strength is potentially less useful in the black suits. Partner has not yet even promised six hearts. A respectable opener for partner, like :

♠xx ♥KQJxx ♦AKxx ♣xx

…will not have much play for slam, even if partner also holds both black jacks.

BARRY PASSER: 4♥. With only five points in partner's two suits and a seven-loser hand, I've heard enough.

RADU VASILESCU: 4♥. I'm well aware this is wimpy, but I've convinced myself that slam requires more than a perfect minimum from partner. Maybe it's because I'd open:

♠xx ♥KQxxx ♦AQxx ♣xx

…without feeling bad about it. Partner may also have some points in the blacks that wouldn't be helpful. Every once in a while, partner will have:

♠Qx ♥KQJxxx ♦Qxxx ♣A

…and 5♥ may go down on a diamond ruff.

Mind you, some 4♥ bidders signed off less contentedly than others.

MARK BOLOTIN: 4♥. I don't like this. It sounds like I have an opening hand, two-card heart support, and no full club stopper. But 4NT won't tell me what I want, 5♥ should be asking partner to bid six with a club control, and most other bids would only confuse him. At this point, I'll assume I have wasted values in the black suits and we're off the ♣A and a diamond loser. I can dream that partner finds another bid. The only other option at matchpoints would be 3NT.

As we've seen, some believe that South shows extra values for having gone through Fourth Suit Forcing. Only one game bidder said so explicitly.

R. DAVID WALKER: 4♥. The only reasonable choice. Although slam may be likely, 4NT or 5♥ might take us past the last makable contract. Partner will know from my 3♣ bid that I am more than a game hand and can still go forward.

Personally, I don't think South has shown, or even suggested, extra values for having taken us on a three-week luxury cruise to get to 4♥. I'm aware that many readers would differ, and if you're one, I'd (sincerely) like to understand your rationale. You know how to reach me.

My take: it's matchpoints, so getting to the right strain is crucial. Game Before Slam applies. I can think of quite a few reasons for South to have bid this way without extra values. We might have five spades and reason to believe that spades offers a safer or higher-scoring trump suit. We might be angling for 3NT, even with an eight-card fit. We might want to hear about a fifth diamond in the North hand. Maybe we just wanted to leave room for partner to show us extras. (2♦ denied the values for a strong jump shift, but that's still a lot of headroom.)

Sure, South could have jumped to 4♥ over 2♦ with three-card support and zero slam interest, but I'd do that only if I were certain we belong in hearts or if I felt that investigating alternate strains would often do more harm than good.

Speaking of 3NT…

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 3NT. The auction has left us no room to show partner heart support without bypassing the opportunity to play 3NT. With our concentration in the black suits, we bid 3NT hoping for the maximum score at matchpoints.

DOUGLAS G. DYE: 3NT. The highest-scoring contract is the goal here. With only five points in partner's suits, I'll be content with game unless North finds another call. Note that if you're thinking slam, you'd prefer the ♣KQ to be the ace.

STEVE WHITE: 3NT. You left out the right answer: politely excuse yourself, leave the table, never return. As to a legal call, partner probably does not have the ♣A so I can't see going above game with no good way to invite a slam anyway. If North doesn't have the ♣A, East may have it, or partner might have the ♣J or ♣109. Even ♣10x might turn into a second stopper. Worth the gamble at matchpoints.

ANDY MUENZ: 3NT. My thought is that this should show a hand that would have bid 3NT last round, except that we are a little stronger than what that bid would show (12-15 HCP or so).

To Andy's point, I feel the same way about 3NT as I do with 4♥. I don't think the slow sequence shows extras in 2026, just interest in other strains, particularly in locating three-card spade support. Bridge is hard. If I wanted an easier hobby, I'd take up alligator wrestling or recreational atom-splitting.

DONALD DALPE: 4♣. Looking for the hoped-for diamond cue bid.

BARRY COHEN: 4♣. I am interested in slam.

JOHN D. JONES: 4♣. This has to be treated as a strong heart raise. (If partner isn't good enough to draw this inference, I would bid 4♥). If I had rebiddable spades, I would bid 3♠. If I had diamond support I would raise to 4♦. I could raise to 4♥, but that's an underbid by at least an ace. If 4NT is some version of RKCB, then it's an overbid and takes partner having the ♥KQ of hearts, the ♦A, *and* some other card to make slam good. If 4NT is natural with our agreements (the D4MSC convention card doesn't clarify), that seems rich too. If partner rebids 4♥, I will pass; he may have had a difficult hand to bid and tried 3♥ on a five-card suit.

Back to the Future:

> **DAN BOYE**: 4♣. It's unclear whether partner is five-four or six-four in the red suits. I have too many open spaces in trumps and diamonds to use Blackwood. Partner's nine red cards make slam iffy. Over 4♦ or 4♥, I'll raise to 5♥. But I want to go back and respond 2♣.

I think I have a spare flux capacitor in my garage. I'll FedEx it to you. 4♣ nominally shows a strong five-five or better in the black suits, but it looks like many people have adapted it to show hands like this. That seems far more useful.

What about bidding 5♥ immediately? Several people considered it. Mark Bolotin says it should ask partner for a club control. Dan Boye chose to bid 4♣ and then 5♥, maybe to assure partner that clubs aren't wide open. Just two Solvers chose it here. One did so without comment. The other told me privately that he thinks it's just a simple, Mom-and-Pop slam invitation. Partner has a very wide range, like 11 to 17 points. Bid six if at the top, pass if at the bottom. Easy, peasy. I think he's crazy, but that's just me…literally. (Seriously, 5♥ was the best I could come up with, but upon reading everyone's comments, I might use the flux capacitor myself and change my choice to 3NT.)

Other views:

> **BILL BAUER**: 3♠. Showing a spade control and hoping that partner can cue-bid 4♦.
>
> **STEPHEN COOPER**: 6NT. With no ruffing values, the matchpoint action is to bid notrump.

Maybe the best comment and rationale of all this month:

> MARK COHEN: 6NT. I've made one questionable bid already, so here goes nothing. I can't find a smart or sensible call at all, so I'll just guess, knowing there are many combinations of cards which could score 12 tricks. It's matchpoints, and this will be just one very good or very bad result in our game.

I tried to run a simulation but didn't get far. This deep into the auction, it's difficult to filter out all the sundry hands in which an opponent might take a call. Near as I can tell, slam isn't terrible, but it's below 50%. Sometimes hearts score better than notrump, sometimes not. All I think I learned from it is this: Just like in the 80's movie WarGames*, the only winning move here is not to play. Respond 2♣ and stay out of trouble.*

So ends our penultimate D4MSC of the year. Next month, we'll learn who our 2026 Challenge champions are, and then (gulp) 2027 will be upon us. As you're likely reading this on November 1st, which is Día de los Muertos in Mexico, there's no more appropriate Last Word than this:

> **CONNIE GOLDBERG** (cont.): 4NT. South dug his own grave by bidding 1♠.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

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/***