

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

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Welcome to the new monthly District 4 MSC feature: slimmer, trimmer, no non-meat fillers, and 50% fewer calories. It doesn't get any better than this! Well, okay, it does: you could hit the Powerball or something. But hey, we're bridge players, so we're chronically unlucky. This'll probably have to do.

January also marks the start of the **2017 D4MSC Challenge**, in which our Panelists and Solvers vie for the coveted title of Best Bidder in the District, accompanied by a couple of no-less-coveted free D4 Regional entries. We'll discuss how the Challenge will work with the new monthly format at the end of the article. For now, let's kick off 2017 and get to our problem:

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

MATCHPOINTS, NONE VUL.

♠-KQJ98 ♥-J ♦-AKQ4 ♣-J52

South	West	North	East
		2♥	Pass
2♠	Pass	3♥	Pass
??			

What call do you make?

CALL	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
Pass	10	8	100
4♥	1	3	60
3NT	0	1	50

The ideal bidding forum problem is one that will divide the pool of respondents into three or more sizeable camps, each making excellent arguments for their respective position. This one succeeded with flying colors...just not the way I drew it up. For the "you-gotta-be-kidding-me" passers:

TOM WEIK: Pass. Is there an alternative?

MICHAEL SHUSTER: Pass. With luck, partner can hold the damage to down one.

CRAIG ROBINSON: Pass. North's hand has little or no value to me; my hand has a little value to him. Good luck, partner!

PETE FILANDRO: Pass. "Points, schmoints" applies here. Game in spades requires partner to hold good spades; game in hearts requires a solid suit; game in notrump needs a club honor and a major-suit ace. I estimate those chances at about 15%. Pass, pass, pass.

DOUGLAS DYE: Pass. Hard to construct a lot of hands for North that make game a favorite.

BARRY COHEN: Pass. And hope he makes it.

BILL SCHMIDT: Pass. Too many losers to go on.

CHRIS MARLOW: Pass. No fit, time to quit.

For the "not-at-this-form-of-scoring" passers:

DON DALPE: Pass. Looking for magic at matchpoints does not seem right. The problem might be tougher at IMPs, where partner might hold ace-king-queen-sixth in hearts and a doubleton club (impossible if I were North as I would open 1♥).

ED SHAPIRO: Pass. Without a known good fit, I'll just hope to go plus at matchpoints. Any game would be a shot.

STEVE WHITE: Pass. This is matchpoints and game figures to be under 50%. No reason to think any strain will play better than hearts.

DAVE WACHSMAN: Pass. There are many more North holdings that would result in game going down than making. At IMPs, I would consider the state of the match and assess who our competition is before deciding whether to pass or bid 4♥.

AL SHRIVE: Pass. Hoping to eke out +140, maybe a fortuitous +170 on a non-club lead or club shortness in the North hand. I will wait until we are playing IMPs to take a stab at a vulnerable 4♥.

And finally, for the "insufficient-information-to-bid" passers:

CONNIE GOLDBERG: Pass. Unless partner is six-four in the red suits, we probably stand to lose a spade, a couple of clubs and a heart. I assume that partner has fewer than three spades, and that he either lacks a feature in clubs or his hand is so bad that he didn't want to show it.

RUI MARQUES: Pass. Partner being vulnerable, his 2♥ bid shows a suit of good quality. The ♠J is useful. We can come to ten tricks if we don't have four immediate losers, but there's no way to find out below the game level.

BOB BROWNE: Pass. 3♥ shows a minimum with nothing (convenient) to say. If I play partner for:

♠xx ♥AQTxXX ♦xx ♣Qxx

...(and he need not have the ♣Q), it looks like we've got four losers. Even if there are pitches available on diamonds, I might not be able to take them in time.

COURTENAY FOOTMAN: Pass. In hearts, I expect to lose one spade, one heart, and two clubs. If my partner has the right cards, we could make more, but he is showing a minimum. (With a max, my partner would have bid 3♦, not 3♥.)

There you have it: a plethora of intelligent reasons to throw in the towel, laid out in detail by bridge experts across four states. (Five if you count our Florida snowbirds.) OK, so maybe this wasn't the best problem in the world. Providing an emphatic analytical exclamation point for the passers is:

BOB & JOANN GLASSON: Pass. Let's give partner a hand for his vulnerable-vs.-not, first-seat 2♥ at matchpoints:

♠6 ♥AK10976 ♦763 ♣Q76

...That's about the maximum he could hold. Over our 2♠ bid, partner could have bid 3♣ or 3♦ to show a feature with a hand that he loved. 3NT would show a solid heart suit, like ♠AKQ765. Partner would have opened 1♥ with the ♣A instead of the ♣Q. It looks like four losers, so we'll go low at matchpoints. 3NT is out of the question with a singleton heart. We'll never be able to use the hearts in dummy.

All of that seems right to me, save perhaps for the final sentence. If you're feeling lucky, there is a way you might be able to use dummy's hearts. Nobody so much as mentioned it, let alone played for it. Oh well, at least nobody objected to the auction. Um, wait:

PETE FILANDRO (cont.): I would have passed 2♥!

MICHAEL SHUSTER (cont.): Moving over 2♥ was a huge error at matchpoints. LHO might have balanced their side into a number had I passed, and this hand affords no 3-level safety.

DOUG DYE (cont.): Why didn't I bid 2NT to see if North has a club card?

ED SHAPIRO (cont.): It would be nice to know our agreed methods. I assume that 2♠ was forcing and that opener had a way to show a spade fit. I also assume that opener had some way to show an absolute maximum, which at these colors wouldn't be unexpected. If the weak-two bidder can't distinguish hands without a fit, I submit that a forcing 2NT response would have been better, almost regardless of how opener describes his hand.

BILL FOSTER: I would have responded 2NT. I don't like the 2♠ bid because when my partner opens a weak two in hearts, I expect a maximum of two small cards in spades. I know, that is old fashioned, as many players these days will open a weak-two with even *four* small cards in the other major. But when my partners open 2♥, I expect them not to have primary spade support.

Sheesh! Anybody else have any complaints?

BOB BROWNE (cont.): By the way, you're ugly.

Meh. I'm used to that from him. All kidding aside, this clearly was a problem that should have stayed on the shelf. C'est la vie -- we have plenty of tough ones queued up for 2017. Before we finish, however, let's hear from the handful of panelists and solvers who chose to act:

RAY RASKIN: 4♥. Partner opened a vulnerable weak-two and had no type of feature to show, so his heart holding rates to be very good. The contract rates to be a favorite.

HOWARD WACHTEL: 4♥. My hand has five losers, and pre-emptor's hand probably has no worse than nine losers, so with 14 total losers, I believe that ten tricks in hearts is reasonable. On the other hand, 3NT may not fare well on a club lead.

LYNN HARRIS: 4♥. Partner is vulnerable and should have a good suit. Too many entry problems for 3NT.

RICK OLANOFF: 4♥. Partner should have a good suit at these colors. My club holding argues against 3NT. Pass might be best, but I'm an optimist.

Needless to say (or else this problem wouldn't have been posed), at the table, game was on. Partner, a Bridge Base Online robot, held something like:

♠ 3 ♥ KQ10932 ♦J8 ♣Q976

Nothing special, and yet 3NT is pretty much cold. Ever see a deal where a couple of short jacks pulled so much weight? Me neither. (The rounded-suit nines came in handy too.) No bidding system ever invented could unearth the presence of that magnificent ♦J, so pass is the percentage call.

I'm happy to report that I bid 3NT at the table and made it...but, ah, it was one of those "robot race" games at total point scoring, where you're usually better off bidding like a fast lunatic than a slow expert. I was curious what the Club would've done in a sane pairs game, and it seems we have our answer. Just one person would have grabbed the brass ring at matchpoints, and though the MSC tally gives him the lowest award, he deserves the final word:

BILL FOSTER (cont.): 3NT. With the auction as given, I am faced with a complete guess: pass, 3NT, or 4♥. Given my concentration in diamonds, I would expect a club lead against either game contract. If partner has as little as four clubs to the ten to go along with six hearts to the ace-king-queen, 3NT has a chance. I am not super confident that this is the right call.

Who needs confidence when you have the diamond jack? Thanks, everyone; on to February! - NS

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

Our new one-problem-monthly format necessitates some changes to the annual District 4 MSC Challenge. Henceforth, your best ten scores in a calendar year will count towards your Challenge score. This allows you to miss (or bomb) a couple of months and still have a chance at the yearly title. 1000 would be a perfect score.

Not only did 2016 Solvers' Challenge winner Rui Marques graduate to the panel for 2017, so did longtime Solver Douglas Dye, who recently cracked the District 4 Top 100 Masterpoints list. Congrats, Doug! (Remember, if you are in the Top 100, you're automatically a Panelist.)