

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JULY 2026 PROBLEM

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Pinocchio would be a lousy bridge partner. Considering how often we players have to fib a little when trying to describe 635 billion possible hands with just 38 legal calls, his nose would be poking us in the eye by the first hospitality break. To add insult to injury, every poke would be unauthorized information. This month's problem, sent in by one of our esteemed Panelists, would be particularly dangerous, as it requires South to deliver a 24-karat whopper at his very first turn. Should we lie about a heart stopper? Primary club support? Four spades or five diamonds? Jiminy Crickets! Whatever we choose, North might take us seriously and drive the partnership to a contract we want no part of. Take a seat, make a wish upon a star, and read about how the Club plans to get past this round while not being swallowed by a whale later in the auction.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

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IMPs, NORTH-SOUTH VULNERABLE

♠-K86 ♥-9643 ♦-A763 ♣-AQ

South	West	North	East
		1 ♣	1 ♥
?			

A. What is your call?

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

In a bygone era, this sort of problem had a widely accepted solution:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: Pass. Passing and then cue bidding when partner reopens with a double shows this hand-type.

That's what I was taught too, but you can see from the results table how far that strategy has fallen out of favor with modern tournament players. Given how responder is expected to bend over backwards and bid something with game-going

strength, I'm not even sure what pass-then-cue-bid would show these days. Maybe this hand but limited to invitational values?

To be fair, the downside to passing is that it often just transfers the headache to partner. Say he's looking at a normal weak notrump like:

♠-AQx ♥-Qxx ♦-xx ♣-KJ10xx

After 1♣-(1♦)-pass-(pass), now what? 1NT shows 18-19 HCP in standard methods. 2♣ suggests six with more playing strength. Double caters to a trap pass, which will happen about once every third pope when you hold these cards. Passing out 1♥ has some appeal at matchpoints when the opponents are red, but collecting 50's at IMPs is no way to get rich. Incidentally, opposite the actual South hand, North is frigid for 3NT on any lead and any lie of the cards. Isn't this fun?

Several of our colleagues have preferred methods for dealing with this situation.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: Double. In my regular partnership I could bid 1♠, which denies four or more spades. Without that available, and with too much to pass, I'll make a flawed negative double. Depending on how the auction develops, I may still be able to cue bid and find the best strain. If my diamonds were better, I'd bid 2♦.

ED SHAPIRO: Double. Probably an out-of-date approach, but I do think double is better to handle hands like this without four-plus spades than promising a specific number.

Point-counterpoint:

JOHN JONES: ...This problem is an advertisement for the Walsh negative double showing fewer than four spades, which I use with some partners. However, I feel strongly that's it's wrong in general, especially at matchpoints. Using the double this way does not allow for delineating the difference between exactly four spades and longer spades, the common usage.

I've never heard it described as a "Walsh" double, nor have I ever used a double that way, but I've played against plenty of opponents who swear by it. Someday maybe I'll give it a try. My hunch though is that it solves one class of problem (i.e., this one) while spawning a few new classes. Every bridge convention works that way.

A plurality of both Panelists and Solvers chose Ye Olde Original Negative Double despite its one teensy little flaw, earning it the top score for the month.

JAY APFELBAUM: Double. All choices have significant negative consequences. The least bad call is double. It may work splendidly when partner does not have a spade suit. If he does have four spades, we might get to a good contract when he bids something other than 1♠. If he bids 2♠, we should be able to get to a makeable game by bidding 3♣. Partner should then realize my hand does not include a four-card spade suit.

STEVE O'BRIEN: Double. While I'm a spade short, double is the best little lie for me. The hand belongs to us, and we have some time to figure out the best place to land. If partner happens to have a couple of heart honors, that place may be in notrump.

BILL BAUER: Double. There is no good call with this hand. I contemplated passing and passing again if partner reopens with a double. But my real hope is that partner can bid notrump at some point, which is as likely as a spam thwarter hand containing 38 points.

BOB GRINWIS: Double. I really want to have a fourth spade for this bid, but nothing is perfect and this is the most flexible. Bidding any number of notrump promises a heart stopper that I don't have. If partner can bid 1NT, I will raise to game.

PHIL FREIDENREICH: Double. Can't bid notrump; don't want to bid at the two level.

MICHAEL M. MAYER: Double. I have to act and this seems like the call closest to representing my hand. It keeps my options open.

True, but it also keeps partner's option open to 'correct' a later contract to spades, possibly on a six-card fit. Remember, he's likely to have a ruffing value in hearts. He might very well prefer what he believes to be a four-three spade game, because he'll expect to take heart taps in the "short" trump hand. Technically speaking, he won't be wrong.

JAY APFELBAUM (cont.): Double. ...If partner does bid 1♠, the wisest choice might be to pass and try for a plus score.

BILL SCHMIDT: Double. I expect to get more useful information from double than I would from passing, which is the only other reasonable choice. Game prospects are poor unless partner can volunteer notrump or jump to 2♠ over my double.

That's probably a fair assessment. Still, we hold quite a good hand. If partner rebids 1♠ or two of a minor, we might yet find a good suit game when he has nothing wasted in hearts. It could even be 4♠ on a four-three fit, as North might be able to reverse the dummy. If West holds four spades, she might be out of hearts and unable to reach her partner when she collects her long trump trick. (Plus, I've heard rumors that in faraway lands, trumps sometimes break three-three.)

What about our notrump prospects? While four to the nine isn't a textbook stopper, it makes a pretty nice appendix to many pedestrian North holdings. If he has just queen-spot in hearts, for example, the opponents will often be unable to run five tricks on us double-dummy, and it will be harder still at single dummy. Say this is the heart layout:

	NORTH	
	♥-Q5	
WEST		EAST
♥-K8		♥-AJ1072
	SOUTH	
	♥-9643	

If West is on opening lead, we got problems. If North declares, however, East had better put her finger on a low heart, because the normal lead of the ♥J costs a trick.

Summing up for the doubler:

DOUGLAS G. DYE: Double. Far from perfect, but it keeps all strains in play and saves bidding space (unlike 2♦ or 2♥). There's plenty of time to force to game once I know more about partner's hand.

Fair. I don't hate a negative double, at least no more than I hate my other choices. Allowing partner to rebid a natural and unforced 2♣ could be the key to unlocking the board. Let's see if the two-level bidders can make a more compelling case.

RICK ROWLAND: 2♦. The lie that gives partner the greatest chance to do something intelligent.

BARRY COHEN: 2♦. Best of many poor choices. I can't bid notrump unilaterally without a stopper. I can't double and play in 4♠ with partner taking the heart ruffs. I can't pass. 2♦ shows my values even if I'm one card short.

TOM WEIK: 2♦. Thirteen beautiful HCP. Why am I experiencing fear? Guess it's because I'm having trouble envisioning a good final resting place in game unless partner's hand holds good hearts, facilitating notrump. Other minimal hands may be a big challenge.

BARRY DEHLIN: 2♦. I prefer a lie about my length in a not-what-we're-gunning-for minor suit than about my holdings in what-we-*are*-gunning-for strains (e.g., lying about spade length with a double, lying about a heart stopper with a notrump bid). This keeps the auction going and if partner pushes us towards 5♦ despite my future protestations, it feels like he'll usually have four.

STEVE WHITE: 2♦. Awful, but it's forcing. The only other reasonable choice is pass, but I'm not risking that, vulnerable at IMPs

MARK BOLOTIN: 2♦. Forcing. Let's see what happens.

KARL BARTH: 2♦. If 2♥ is the only forcing call, then that's my bid. Otherwise, I think 2♦ is the smallest lie. This is a tough problem. I'm hoping to hear a notrump bid from partner.

Get in line.

JOHN JONES (cont.): 2♦. I am a diamond short but have enough extras that I will be able to handle most auctions. At least 2♦ sets up a forcing auction and I can make penalty doubles if the opponents get in our way further.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♦. For the moment, this seems the best lie. Whatever partner does (other than 2NT) will solicit a 3♥ call from me, asking/hoping that he can find a stopper for 3NT. I don't like 2♥ because it promises a limit raise or better in clubs, and a negative double doesn't make me feel good either. I don't like pass, 2NT, or 3NT, so 2♦ it is!

MARK COHEN: 2♦. Ouch! Making us think!!

A dangerous pastime, but it's a dangerous game.

MARK COHEN (cont.): ...Looks like we might have game, but where? If we double, what's our next bid over 1♠ (or 2♠ if LHO raises hearts)? Any number of notrump? Yikes! Wrong-siding the contract and no true stopper. If partner bids notrump over 2♦, I will feel better but not thrilled. 2♦ is a least of evils and if partner raises to 3♦, I will try 3♥.

Most of the 2♦ bidders were squirming, but one was defiant, so let's have him make the closing case:

PETE FILANDRO: 2♦. Not uncomfortable at all. If partner raises diamonds, he will be shapely and appreciate my minor honors. If he needs a diamond stopper to bid 3NT, I have it. A distant second choice is 2♥, treating my big doubleton in clubs as a three-carder.

Distant? A sizable minority got up close and personal with the limit-plus raise.

ANDY MUENZ: 2♥. We have a choice of lies. We can pretend we have a heart stopper, but to show our strength properly we would have to bid 3NT. We can double and lie about our spade length. The problem with that is that if we end up in a Moysian fit, the long hand will be ruffing hearts. We could show our strength and bid our longest suit, but 2♦ is short a card and doesn't seem right. So, lying about our support for partner's minor seems best. If partner has a stopper we can still play 3NT from his side and we haven't completely shut spades out if partner wants to play there. Plus, if we're going to lie about length, having ace-queen is not a horrible choice.

STEPHEN COOPER: 2♥. "Do something intelligent." Partner now knows that I do not have four spades or five diamonds, but I think that it is our deal. That is a lot of information.

RICHARD J HARTZ: 2♥. No other call is appealing.

R. DAVID WALKER: 2♥. Only choice. Informs partner that it is our deal. Possible contracts are 3NT, 4♣, 5♣ or 3♥ doubled.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 2♥. A cue bid usually shows at least a good three-card fit, but it's the best alternative to get to 3NT if partner has a heart card or even 5♣ if partner has a long club suit.

There's a place, a Gemini dream...

JIM EAGLETON: 2♥. I'm not convinced this hand is worth a game force, but the other options (double, pass, or notrump) don't seem to describe my hand. According to Google Gemini:

"When Partner Opens a Minor (e.g., 1D - [1S] - 2S):

A cue bid does not necessarily promise support but shows a game-forcing hand (12+ HCP) looking for a 3NT contract with help in the enemy suit."

...Jack-ten doubleton might be enough. Also, I can un-game force after 3♣, but only if that is right.

I believe Jim is the first person to quote an artificially intelligent chatbot in the D4MSC. Me, I make my choices based on natural stupidity. It's simpler and less aggravating. On this problem, we arrived at the same call. I don't love 2♥, and I'm aware there are still several ways for the auction to go off the rails, but I mildly prefer it to the alternatives. Here's why.

IMPs is a game of swings. Unlike matchpoints, it's better to focus on what could go right rather than to fear what might go wrong. Here, if we belong in a part-score with an opening hand facing an opening hand, too bad. Our counterparts at the other table will have the same problem, and misery loves company.

If supporting clubs gets partner excited, that's okay by me. It will often be because he thinks his long, broken club suit is now a fast source of tricks. Well, he could be right. 2♥ could have been based on a good 10-count with ♣xxxx. How disappointed can he be to find that I have the ace-queen doubleton plus a full opener? Keep in mind that opposite a strong but hardly rock-crushing North hand like:

♠-AQx ♥-x ♦-KQx ♣-KJxxxx

...we belong in six clubs! Weaken the hand a bit – say, move a low club to spades and change one of the queens to a jack – and we're still modest favorites to make 5♣.

If partner's next bid is a retreat to 3♣, okay, I admit I'll be guessing what to do. But that hasn't happened yet. No call is perfect, and all of them could end in disaster, but at least 2♥ has an upside that the other alternatives lack. I think it's worth a shot.

One further call drew support from a Club regular:

BARRY PASSER: 2NT. Hoping 1) to scare West out of leading a heart, or 2) that partner can cover an honor lead and my ♥9 holds up as a stopper, or 3) if partner passes 2NT, they take only five hearts and we get the rest. Doubling with only three spades is *not* an option!

We've had a string of tough problems in 2026, but this might be the thorniest of the lot. Who sent it in, and what actually happened at the table? For this month's Last Word, let's go to the source himself.

BILL SCHMIDT (cont.): Double. ...I chose a negative double, West passed (the opponents were silent for the rest of the auction), and partner rebid 2♣. Now what?

I decided to raise to 3♣, which fetched a 3♥ cue bid from partner. This was a new partnership, so 3♥ was undiscussed. What do I need to bid 3NT? I decided to try it, only to find that partner's hand was:

♠-AQ3 ♥-J ♦-K84 ♣-K109876.

The heart suit wasn't blocked, so 3NT went down one while 4♣ (but not 5♣ – the heart bidder had a stiff club) would have made.

I would argue that singleton jack is an inappropriate holding for a cue bid in this auction, unless partner was strong enough to bid on over my 3NT. But it might be worth an MSC inquiry.

I have a feeling that the D4MSC would revolt if we made them revisit this nightmare. Thanks to Bill for the great problem, and thanks as always to all our participants. The August problem is up on the website. Have a blast on the Fourth of July!



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/>