

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JANUARY 2026 PROBLEM NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

Happy New Year! The United States turns 250 in 2026. The D4MSC, while not as old or as venerated, launches its 12th annual **District 4 MSC Challenge** this month, which probably won't get as much media coverage as the semiquincentennial, but it's free to enter and a heck of a lot easier to spell. We take our small victories wherever we can find them. The year opens with a thorny matchpoint problem that requires our favorite All-American action hero, code name South, to make several early decisions regarding level, strain, and whether or not to pursue the archvillain East for sticking his nose into our auction. Here's how this movie played out.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
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MATCHPOINTS, NORTH-SOUTH VULNERABLE

♠-AKQ92 ♥-KJ87 ♦-AJ96 ♣--

South	West	North	East
1♠	Pass	1NT	2♦
?			

A. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♥	5	9	100
Double	4	7	90
2♥	3	6	90
3♦	2	2	90
2NT	1	0	80
3NT	0	1	80

Per official D4MSC rules, which were originally laid out by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence (unabridged version), 3♥ earns the top score this month by virtue of drawing a plurality of both Panelists' and Solvers' votes. Truth be told, even if it had ended in a dead three-way tie, I'd have awarded the 100 to 3♥ anyway because of the four 3♦ bidders. They just as plainly declined to double and forced to game. We'll get to them in due time.

The immediate question is whether to issue East a speeding ticket. At the table, that's exactly what I did, earning a clean top. Uh, I should perhaps mention that the vulnerability was reversed and that East's vulnerable two-level overcall was completely deranged, but why let the facts get in the way of a good story?

At any rate, I felt this would be a much better problem red-vs.-white. Matchpoint experts tend to be averse to early penalty doubles, especially at unfavorable vulnerability, but these diamonds (plus the very real fear that partner will bid clubs if we don't do something to deter him) were enough to get several of our top players to commit to the axe, beginning with our 2024 Solvers' champion who returns from a year's sabbatical on the Panel.

KARL BARTH: Double. The more I look at it, the better double looks. I think I can handle any auction that comes my way.

DOUGLAS DYE: Double. If partner started his auction with a three-card limit raise of spades, I'll hear from him again and will bid our vulnerable game. Otherwise, game our way is a crapshoot and we are booked for a juicy penalty of 2♦.

STEVE WHITE: Double. We will surely beat this enough if we don't have a game, and game might not be making. If we do have a game, we might get 800.

BILL BAUER: Double. A penalty double for sure. I expect partner is long in clubs and that we may not have game. I'll take the plus score in 2♦ doubled. If we can beat it two tricks for +300, our side should emerge with most of the matchpoints.

MARK COHEN: Double. Yes, we are vulnerable and they are not, but I have no other honest call. If partner pulls, say to 3♣, I'll feel much better bidding on.

I'm not so confident about that. If partner bids 3♣, he's basically saying, "My hand is more suitable for taking nine tricks in clubs than six in diamonds." That's a pretty big red flag considering our hand is suitable for absolutely nothing involving clubs. Sure, we might still be able to make something, possibly a game, but first we have to find it. The doublers split into two camps over 3♣. One is prepared to plant their flag on everyone's favorite matchpoint hill...

BARRY COHEN: Double. My hand feels massive sitting over the diamond bidder. If partner bids 3♣, I will bid 3NT

KARL BARTH (cont.): Double. ...If partner bids clubs, showing a weak hand with clubs, I'm happy to try 3NT. If he bids a major, I'm happy to play it in game. If he cues 3♦, I'm bidding 3NT.

STEPHEN COOPER: Double. I want partner's input. I will raise a major suit bid to game and convert a club bid (or 2NT) to 3NT.

...while the other will get their third suit into the auction before trying notrump.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: Double. If partner bids 3♣, I'll bid 3♥ and hope to scramble to 3NT or four of a major.

BARRY PASSER: Double. Penalty over the 1NT response. This is the most flexible call: it gives partner room to bid hearts, return to spades, or show long clubs at a manageable level. If partner doesn't pass (probably +800), I'll rebid 3♥ to complete my description.

I lean towards Connie and Barry P. here. Even at these colors, South's hand looks like a fine offer of a penalty double. If partner then erects a club barricade, I'll bulldoze it with my heart suit and hope for the best. Bridge bidding can be quite violent.

Almost three-quarters of the field elected to press on in search of our own contract. Most chose to bid the other major, though the level was a point of contention.

PETE FILANDRO: 2♥. I could "take the money" by doubling, but vulnerable game bonuses are worth exploring. With partner likely short in spades and diamonds, four or more hearts are strongly possible. Jump shifting is not advisable because game (in 3NT if partner is minimum and, say, 2=3=2=6) is far off with our lack of a source of tricks. Partner knows I could be just short of a jump shift so with four-plus hearts, he will strain to raise.

JOHN JONES: 3♥. I'm forcing to game. This hand is too rich for a 2♥ rebid, which would be mandatory with any opening bid with four-plus hearts. A few decades ago, double would have been a possibility, but experts play that after a forcing NT, a double is takeout. If partner responds 4♣, I'll rebid 4♠.

I hadn't heard of playing a double here as takeout, so I did some research. Turns out there's surprisingly little either in the literature or on the web about this not-uncommon auction. One thread on BridgeWinners ended with the participants calling each other blithering idiots who couldn't be trusted to follow suit at trick 13, much less bid a hand properly. Oh well, lots of BW threads end that way, so no biggie.

The other discussion I found was on, of all places, Reddit, and it was a lot more genteel. The consensus was that a double here is what modern theorists might call "cooperative-takeout": extra values, willing to play for penalties if partner has a few trumps, else prepared to hear partner bid any suit, including the one that begins with a "C". That indeed doesn't seem to fit South's hand, so John's objection to doubling has merit. With that said, I'd expect over 90% of tournament bridge players to treat an undiscussed double here as penalty, so beware.

John's other point is also worth considering. Does a pass categorically deny six spades or four hearts? I play the former but not the latter, largely because I'd never really thought about it until now. If you believe that showing a four-card heart suit in this position is indeed mandatory, then 3♥ has much appeal. Otherwise, you might prefer to be in the better-go-low camp along with Pete and his cohorts:

DONALD DALPE: 2♥. Seems like the best chance to explore more options.

BARRY DEHLIN: 2♥. This seems straightforward...? I'm just bidding out my shape while showing extra strength. Nothing else seems in the ballpark. I have diamonds stopped, but the void makes notrump at any level unappealing. We don't want to stretch for matchpoint games, and partner will often be very weak on this auction so a game-forcing 3♥ seems far too ambitious.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: 2♥. Simple info to partner – I have at least five spades and four hearts in a game-going hand. Partner to choose the game.

Okay, hang on. Perhaps 2♥ shows at least modest extras, or perhaps it's obligatory with four hearts even if you opened on an 8-count. Either way, it's not forcing to game. If that's your intent, then you had better strut your stuff immediately.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 3♥. I would have bid 3♥ if there had been no interference so why not do so anyway? Partner likely has long clubs but may also have hearts. I expect that if he can't support hearts, he will bid spades with a doubleton and then we can guess what to do next. Of course, if he chooses 4♣ instead, it will get a bit more complicated.

You think?

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 3♥. Partner has not denied four hearts and can't have many diamonds, so hopefully he will have enough to raise one of my suits. I am also hoping that this will dissuade partner from bidding clubs.

If there is one saving grace regarding clubs, it's that South's spades might play opposite a singleton in a pinch, not that I'd like to put that to the test. Most 3♥ bidders worried little about partner's clubs; they were in search of bigger and better things.

RICK ROWLAND: 3♥. Great problem to start the new year. Three hearts keeps both majors in play.

BOB GRINWIS: 3♥. With 18 points and a void, I am too good for 2♥ or an invitational 3♠. Second choice is 3♦ showing a stopper, but partner would need both heart and club stoppers to bid 3NT. He should choose one of my majors.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 3♥. Showing my second suit.

TOM WEIK: 3♥. There is a good chance that partner has clubs and hearts on this deal. I have great playing strength if we have a decent fit. I hold not only attractive high cards but a void and great spots. I am looking for a vulnerable game, not a low-level penalty of a non-vulnerable contract. I might take a lot of tricks if partner has as little as:

♠Jx ♥QTxx ♦xx ♣KJxxx.

Slam is conceivable if partner has just a few key cards.

MICHAEL M. MAYER: 3♥. Given my void and the opponent's bidding, the possibility of partner having a club bust is greater than I'd like. However, I'm going to make the same bid I would have otherwise with no opposition bidding. I don't want to miss either major suit game, even though 3NT might be best. My second choice would be double, because I'm not sure we can make more than the vulnerable game is worth. My third choice is an insane 3NT.

One person's insanity is another's inspiration.

RUI MARQUES: 3NT. If I bid 3♦, what will partner do with 2=3=2=6? I for sure don't want to hear 4♣, so 3NT it is.

Our two guest panelists for 2026 diverged on their views of this problem.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♥. What's the problem? Am I supposed to bid 3NT because partner can't? If partner bids 3♠, I can still bid 3NT. If partner has the overwhelming urge to bid a long club suit over 3♥, won't he have an even stronger urge over 3NT? Also, the right minimum gives us a heart slam...or even a grand.

ANDY MUENZ: 2NT. East's bid simultaneously made my hand stronger yet harder to bid. Whereas I was about to make a call in hearts, I now know that I'm the only one who will be able to show a diamond stopper. Do I do that and possibly lose the heart suit? Or do I bid hearts and possibly lose a chance at 3NT?

If I bid hearts, I think I need to jump to 3♥, because with four losers that look like three after East's bid, I'm much too strong for 2♥. If I choose notrump, I would bid 3NT if my hearts and clubs were switched (or we were playing IMPs), but here I'll prefer the slight underbid to give partner a chance to act at the three level which just might let me show my hearts.

I get the rationale for 3♥, but something about it just feels...wrong, as if I'm misdescribing my hand with only five-four in the majors and an entire suit that might be wasted. Maybe this is a hand where a much-maligned, nebulous cue-bid is in fact the best description available?

JAY APFELBAUM: 3♦. Shows a strong hand. Partner should expect me to hold a diamond stopper. He might bid a heart suit or, possibly, show spade support. The only other choice should be 3NT, but that figures to be a better contract if played by North.

RICK OLANOFF: 3♦. Going to game somewhere, possibly slam.

BILL SCHMIDT: 3♦. With presumed shortness in spades and diamonds, partner is a favorite to hold 4 or more hearts. If so, we might not collect enough in 2♦ doubled. 3♥ by me should promise five hearts. If partner is weak with long clubs, I hope he will be reluctant to bypass 3NT.

Bill says what I couldn't put into words above: 3♥ really ought to show five-five, or at least five-four in a much purer hand than this. We have too much in diamonds to emphasize hearts, and too little in clubs to propose notrump directly. 3♦ is hardly foolproof, but we should be able to cope with anything partner bids except 4♣, which isn't going to be terribly cope-able whatever we choose.

JIM EAGLETON: 3♦. Forcing. When trump has not been defined, it becomes a "partner do the right thing" bid, which I always have trouble with at the table. I'm not proud that this is my choice.

In fact, Jim arrived at 3♦ after critiquing and rejecting 11 (!!) possible alternatives in detail. Of the five others in this month's scoring table:

JIM EAGLETON (cont.): 3♦. ...Double will likely bring 3♣ by partner followed by 3NT by me, but if he has a long club suit or we get a little interference, I may be bidding over 5♣....2♥ is nonforcing and too low....2NT shows the points and the diamond stopper but it should be more balanced and show more interest in 3NT (especially with a club lead coming through partner) than I have....3♥ is a good way to get to game when slam is cold....3NT is forcing to 3NT.

I toyed with awarding 100 points to 3♦ as well as 3♥ this month, but the 14-to-4 vote and the fact that partner might take 3♦ as an invitation to show his six-card club suit dissuaded me. 3♥ may or may not be better in theory, but it's a practical call. Last Word this month goes to a pair of Panelists who, like George Washington, cannot tell a lie:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 2♥. It's not like I'd have known what to do if RHO hadn't bid.

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): 2NT. ...The good news is that if I'm wrong and we either miss game or don't have a club stopper and get clobbered, it's matchpoints so it's only one board with 11 more to go this year.

That's the spirit, of '76, plus one quindemihemiquattrocentennial or whatever it's called. Thanks to everyone who participated. Stay warm, go Birds (or Bills if you're from our upstate NY contingent), and see you in February.



*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/>*