

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JUNE 2025 PROBLEM
NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

Fortune favors the bold. On this month's deal, 6 \heartsuit was the par contract. Yet, in a recent online game, few pairs got to the slam even after North announced a very strong hand with both majors. Why? Because fortune might have her eye on heroes and swashbucklers, but matchpoints favors the prudent. Going minus with 30+ combined points is an excellent formula for a stone-cold bottom. Still, we might have five-level safety, so perhaps one tiny, wafer-thin slam try is warranted. Time to turn it over to the Club to debate the merits of boldness vs. caution in this auction.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
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MATCHPOINTS, EAST-WEST VULNERABLE

\spadesuit -J \heartsuit -J10973 \diamond -K872 \clubsuit -K65

South	West	North	East
Pass	Pass	1 \spadesuit	Pass
1NT	Pass	3 \heartsuit	Pass
?			

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

RANDOM PEOPLE

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AT WAWA	AWARD
Yes	16	25	2,187,416	10
No	0	0	0	0

PETE FILANDRO: Yes. Our first unanimous result?

Yes. Of course. Honestly, I have no memory of why I posed the question in the first place. I think I did a copy-and-paste from a previous month and forgot to remove the two-part format. South has nothing resembling a one-level opener, and opening 2 \heartsuit on these cards in first seat would be depraved. Over 1 \spadesuit , I suppose if one were swinging for a top board near the end of an event, you might try responding 2 \heartsuit for some action. Otherwise, pass-then-1NT is perfectly normal in almost every bidding system on Earth.

Gotta run, my hoagie is ready, and my gas tank must be full by now.

B. With the auction as given, what is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
4♥	11	17	90
5♥	2	6	80
4♣	1	2	70
4NT	2	0	70

Let's not bury the lede. North's hand was:

♠-AQ986 ♥-KQ62 ♦-A ♣-A94

Should she have opened 2NT? Should she have rebid something other than 3♥? Should she move over a 4♥ signoff? I say no, maybe (more on this later), and hell no! Partner has described her hand with the jump-shift and has very little extra in context. We might have a 1=4=4=4 six-count, and on a really bad day we might have only three hearts. If we're to reach 6♥, South has to take the lead (lede?) and get the lead (led?) out. Is any slam move worth the risk? Overwhelmingly, the Club echoed that "hell no!"

STEPHEN COOPER: 4♥. I see no obvious second choices. Partner has something just under 20 HCP, and I have no first-round controls.

BOB GRINWIS: 4♥. Looks like a no brainer. My 1NT bid limited my hand to 10 points or fewer. Partner can bid 4NT with slam aspirations and find me with zero key cards.

STEVE WHITE: 4♥. Seems automatic. Don't even see any reasonable alternative. Even if four of a minor is a cue bid (probably is), it's not a good choice. Even if 4♠ is a splinter (probably isn't), it's not a good choice.

DAVE LEGROW: 4♥. If I had any first-round control, I would start by cue-bidding to explore slam. But that is too optimistic with this scattering of values.

BARRY PASSER: 4♥. Not 4NT. Even if partner has four key cards, slam is risky; e.g.:

♠AQxxx ♥AKxx ♦Ax ♣xx.

...and 5♥ could be too high if she has only three keys.

RICHARD HARTZ: 4♥. With a magical fit, we might make more. Without it, we might be down before we take a trick.

PHIL FREIDENREICH: 4♥. Long hearts and two kings in the unbid suits.

JIM EAGLETON: 4♥. I predict a dummy reversal.

I think it's more likely that declarer will use dummy as, well, dummy, ruffing her spades good while drawing trump. Either way, she rates to take a lot of tricks. Will that be as many as twelve?

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 4♥. Today is Go Low Day. South has a beautiful hand for supporting hearts, but the value of the side kings is unknown. Side-suit aces are great cards in this auction, but kings are nice only if partner needs them. North will know I have some points, heart support, and fewer than three spades, but she won't know that I have five trumps. That said, I will leave it up to her to continue.

I am ruling out 5♥ because its message isn't very clear and it would prevent partner from using Blackwood.

Two words were employed frequently by the 4♥ brigade. One was "perfect" and all of its colloquial noun variants ending with a vowel:

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 4♥. We might have the perfect hand for slam, but our spade shortness is a negative so we will settle for 4♥.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 4♥. Although I might have the perfect hand for partner, I can't encourage her to go to the five level when she could have 18 points in the majors and three quick losers.

RUI MARQUES: 4♥. What a beautiful hand, suddenly...although it would require a perfecto for slam. I'm taking the quick route to the safe result. Next board.

JOHN D. JONES: 4♥. Yes, North could have a perfecto that makes seven, like:

♠Axxxx ♥AKQxx ♦AQx ♣--

...and other possibilities. But being practical and making percentage guesses is part of bridge. 4♣ or 4♦ would be a cue bid (especially being a passed hand), but it should show an ace. I'll raise to 4♥ and hope partner doesn't go down on the ♣Q lead holding:

♠AKQxx ♥AKQx ♦Q ♣xxx

STEPHEN MARLOW: 4♥. Game should be fine. If I were playing IMPs, maybe I would consider 5♥, but I would need North to have a perfecta for a slam. At matchpoints, I will just play in game and apologize if we missed a laydown slam. Sometimes safety comes first.

Speaking of safety...

DAN BOYE: 4♥. Any other bid such as 4♣ might get partner to the five level, which isn't safe.

RICH ROTHWARP: 4♥. If four of a minor showed a slam try in hearts with a control, that would be a consideration, but we don't have any first-round controls. Partner is missing at least one key card and probably two. We aren't safe even at the five-level. 4NT or 5♥ would be okay if opener promises five hearts for her 3♥ bid.

PETE FILANDRO: 4♥. 4♥ is our safety level missing six(!!) key cards. Partner could be as good as 20 HCP in this or a similar construction:

♠AKQxx ♥Qxxx ♦Q ♣AQJ.

Some may try 4NT and, opposite the sample hand, hear a 5♠ answer (gulp!!), propelling us to down two. Alternatively, if playing that cue-bids may show first or second round control, our 4♣ will overly excite partner who will try Blackwood, hear my 5♦ (zero) response, and subside in 5♥, down one.

BILL SCHMIDT: 4♥. Slam is possible, but there is no way to advance safely. 4♣ (my second choice) is unlikely to accomplish anything and may cause confusion. 4NT or 5♥ might work but might also result in disaster.

JAY APFELBAUM: 4♥. My hand is strong enough to be interested in slam, but there is no safe way to try for it. Partner needs three first-round controls for slam, and the five-level is not safe if she has only two.

I can sympathize with that. Matchpoints is a funny game. It rewards aggressiveness for things like competing for a part score or playing in a higher-scoring strain. But it slams the car door on your fingers when you get too high holding the balance of points. Besides, if you're an expert declarer, you can often pick up matchpoints just by playing your cards better than the field. Even if 6 \heartsuit is makeable on this deal, it might take some deft play to bring home twelve tricks. If so, you'll likely do well whether you score +480 or +980.

Still, I wonder if "Safety Last!" ought to be our mantra here. Partner is showing a terrific hand. We have five trumps for her, with potential second-round control of all three side suits. Plus, let's not completely discount that modest \spades J, which could be a crucial card. Partner is as aware as we are about the perils of getting too high at matchpoints. Why not show her that our raise is FOUR HEARTS rather than four hearts?

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 4 \clubsuit . This shows a good raise to 4 \heartsuit with a club card. In the context of the auction, our hand is pretty good. Slam probably depends on partner holding a fifth heart, so I don't plan on a further aggressive move. In my preferred methods, partner has guaranteed five-five.

MARK BOLOTIN: 4 \clubsuit . Even though I'm aceless, my hand is worth at least one cue bid in support of hearts. 4NT is too optimistic.



4 \clubsuit was my choice as well, and like Michael and Mark, I think it unambiguously shows hearts. I'm a big believer in one of Larry Cohen's rules: In any uncontested auction that begins with a one-bid, we cannot introduce a new suit above 3NT. Or, as Larry himself once said here in the D4MSC in a similar situation:

LARRY COHEN: 4 \clubsuit . No new suits on the four-level. This is a control-bid raise of hearts.

To be fair, on the 2019 problem where Larry made that bid, South held the \clubsuit A. Might it cause trouble here because we have only the king? Possibly. There are no guarantees in life or bridge. Partner is an expert, so she'll recognize that we had only two ways to make a good below-game heart raise. If we didn't get dealt an ace, we might have had to make do with a king, and she should take this into account. (The fact that we are a passed hand provides some extra safety, too.)

Others jumped in feet-first by bidding past 4 \heartsuit . Though several respondents mentioned 4 \spades , none actually took the plunge, possibly because nobody was entirely sure exactly what it meant.

STEVE WHITE (cont.): 4 \heartsuitWhat could 4 \spades be other than a splinter when we didn't use Drury last round? Maybe:

\spades KQ \heartsuit KQ \diamond xxxxx \clubsuit xxxxx ?

What about it simply showing three spades and a bare minimum? Even if you aren't playing that a simple raise of 1♥ or 1♦ is constructive, as many pairs today do, you would often respond 1NT with a rogues' gallery like:

♦-985 ♦-Q72 ♦-K93 ♣-J532

...if only to slow partner down. That's just bridge, going back a century or more. You wouldn't jump to 4♦ without three-card support, you denied a constructive raise by not responding 2♦, and you denied a three-card limit raise by not using Drury. There's not a whole lot left. Perhaps if our agreement was that 1NT categorically denied three-card support, then treating 4♦ as a splinter here is logical and something that our expert partner can be expected to work out. But it's going to be very scary waiting for her next call. Agreeing, while raising questions about a different option:

ED SHAPIRO: 4♥. I want no part of 4♦. Would 5♥ show a good fit and equal controls in the side suits? But where's the guarantee of five-level safety in an unlucky case?

I'd say 5♥ shows a good raise with first-round control either of every side suit or of none. And "every" isn't an option on this auction. I considered 5♥ too, but I rejected it because...uh, well...as you know, the phase of the moon is waxing gibbous and...oh, all right. I never thought of it. It's very clever, even if it does make it quite a challenge to stop in 4♥. Accepting that potential downside:

RICK OLANOFF: 5♥. There might be a slam, but without a 4♥ rebid it seems unlikely. North might have only four hearts, too.

BARRY ROGOFF: 5♥. A nine- or ten-card heart fit and three side second-round controls are enough for one slam try. I don't know what our cue bidding agreements are, and I don't want to be in slam if partner has two trump losers. I'm not strong enough to ask for keycards.

DOUGLAS DYE: 5♥. With a limit raise (of hearts) opposite a jump shift I must make a try for slam. No other bid implies a big heart fit, spade shortness and controls in both side suits. Four of a minor here could badly muddy the waters, and I'm not sure that 4NT would be taken as Roman Key-Card Blackwood for hearts, assuming I wanted to take control of the auction, which I don't.

I think it has to be RKCB, and this is coming from the District's reigning champion of finding any reason under the sun for 4NT to be something other than Blackwood. We're a passed hand, and we had a natural 2NT response available. So, the usual reason for treating a jump from the three-level to 4NT as natural – namely, we have no known fit and considerable extra unshown strength for a 3NT bid – doesn't apply. Taking advantage of this opportunity were:

BILL BAUER: 4NT. I am the eternal optimist. Partner will have four keycards. And the missing minor suit ace will be onside. Looks like the right hand to be aggressive (unless the final contract goes down, in which case I change my call to 4♥).

KARL BARTH: 4NT. Given that my passed hand 1NT wasn't forcing, I expect that partner really wanted to bid hearts. So now it's about the level. My conservative nature had me choosing 4♥ at first, but that sounds too much like a quacky six-count. The more I thought about North being five-five, the easier twelve tricks

looked. It's still forbidden to bid $4\frac{1}{2}\heartsuit$, and I toyed with a raise to $5\heartsuit$. If partner doesn't have two quick losers, slam could be easy. The way to find out is to ask. So, I'm asking.

Blackwood would work great opposite North's actual cards, but it runs the risk of a $5\spadesuit$ response on Pete Filandro's example hand, which is a rather normal jump-shift. I suppose it all depends upon your level of risk tolerance.

In fact, what you choose here depends on what you think of a lot of things. For example, many Norths would open 2NT today, especially online. The stiff ace, five-four majors, and "only" 19 high-card points would be no barriers. I still prefer 1 \spadesuit , but I'm old-fashioned.

North's proper second bid, however, is not so clear. 2NT saves room and gets across the basic nature of the hand. It also allows for a useful partnership agreement that 1 \spadesuit followed by 3 \heartsuit guarantees at least five-five. Responder can always check back for a four-card heart suit.

That still leaves us with one lingering question: do we or do we not have five-level safety?



To gather some evidence, I cranked up the D4MSC Simulator and gave it a laundry list of criteria for North's hand, plus I eliminated layouts on which the opponents might come in. 500 randomly-dealt qualifying deals later, we have some hard data to work with.

Tricks by North in \heartsuit	Deals	Pct.
9 or fewer	4	0.8 %
10	63	12.6%
11	261	52.2%
12	169	33.8%
13	3	0.6%

We can ignore the edge cases where partner gets set in $4\heartsuit$ or brings home $7\heartsuit$. The middle three rows are what matter. North can make $6\heartsuit$ one time in three, and she'll go down in $5\heartsuit$ only about one time in seven. So, this means we should steel our nerves and make a slam try, right?

Well...no. Not necessarily. Keep in mind that the simulator sees all 52 cards. We bridge players are only privy to 13 during the auction, 26 during the play. Achieving those percentages at the table requires perfect bidding and clairvoyant play, which none of us will ever achieve. The simulator, for example, knows whether to finesse or to play for the drop in hearts if we're off the queen..

There are a lot of imponderables in this mix – we might misdeclare, the opponents might misdefend, moon phase waxing gibbous, etc. Bottom line though is that ten tricks are the limit on 13.4% of the deals, so if we go past $4\heartsuit$ to try for slam, we have

to make a slam 13.4% of the time just to break even. And a making slam is available on only 33.8% of deals. If we reach a few failing slams, and we will, we'll have to make up for them by reaching that many more making ones.

Having done this analysis, I believe I now grasp what the 4♥ bidders are saying (and, as you might have noticed, several of them are among our District's most aggressive and successful bidders.) Are we safe on the five level? Usually, but so what? Our chances of reaching enough profitable slams can't be much higher than just sub-siding in game and hoping that partner can play it better than other Norths.

Last Word this month goes to a Solver who may or may not have seen Harold Lloyd's classic 1923 comedy, Safety Last!, but who definitely is a fan of a particular classic 1971 rock album.

ANDY MUENZ: 4♥. I have an eight-loser hand opposite partner's jump shift (most likely 5 losers). Unless partner has both minor suit aces, one of my kings is likely to be wasted...and if partner has jack-low or worse in a minor, the opponents have the opportunity to lead through that king. If partner has a Black Dog with fewer than five losers, she should have opened 2♣ and we'd be Going to California to Rock and Roll at the Misty Mountain Hop.

There's a partner who's sure, all that glitters is gold, and she's buying a Stairway to Bridge Heaven, where every slam we bid comes home. Have a great start of the summer and see you in July.



*Halfway through the **2025 District 4 MSC Challenge**, no fewer than 10 Panelists have 390 or 400 points after their two lowest months are dropped. However, only Bruce Schwaidelson has 400 an extra 100 in the "bank", as it were, so he's effectively in the lead as he seeks his fourth title. Among our Solvers, 11 people have 390 or 400, but once again only one has a 100 among his or her dropped scores: Steve White.*

There is a monthly D4MSC reminder email that goes out on or about the 15th of every month. If you're not on the list and would like to be added, please let me know when you submit your next answers.



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/>.