

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

MARCH 2026 PROBLEM
NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

Due to a combination of sloppy bookkeeping and a corrupted email client, my archive of problem suggestions from D4MSC readers is in sorry shape. I've been reluctant to use the ones I salvaged because, in many cases, I don't know who sent what in. I don't want to post a problem and not give its submitter proper credit. So, let's start fresh: if you have any problems, even ones you've sent before but haven't seen used, send them in and this time I'll take proper care of them. Meanwhile, there's this little beauty. I don't know who suggested it, if anyone. All I know is that it started life as Problem B in The Bridge World's Master Solvers Club of September 2017. And...yeah. It's diabolical, and I made a few alterations to make it even eviler, because I'm a total misanthrope. Unwittingly, my changes made the March 2026 problem eerily similar to...well, we'll get to that soon. If you think you've seen this problem before in the D4MSC, you haven't, but it's r-e-a-l-l-y close....

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
 VIEW THE [D4MSC CONVENTION CARD](#)

BOTH VULNERABLE			
♠-Q974 ♥-KJ98652 ♦-Q6 ♣--			
South	West	North	East
		1♦	Pass
1♥	Pass	1♠	Pass
?			

A. What is your call at Matchpoints?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♠	7	7	50
2♣	3	3	40
2♠	2	6	40
2♥	1	2	30
3♥	1	2	30
4♣	1	1	30
3♣	0	1	20
3NT	0	1	20
4♦	0	1	20
4♠	0	1	20

There are two schools of thought about how to score a bidding forum problem when the answers are all over the map. One is to go by the total number of votes for each call, the other is to award points based on the director's best guess as to the voters' general intentions. Good news, D4MSC fans: I decided to enroll in both schools this month! Problem A is scored by the Total Votes protocol, and Problem B, where there were even more different answers and less consensus (yes, really), is scored by Voter Intent. If there were a Problem C, I might have scored it by Flipping Coins.

Anyway, at matchpoints, a good chunk of the Club gravitated towards a simple game invitation in our probable eight-card fit. Let's start with them and branch out from there. For some, a big concern was the silence of the lambs sitting East-West.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 3♠. Although it's often best to play in my seven-card suit, I will invite in spades. My reasoning is this: The opponents haven't bid despite holding nine-plus clubs and potentially half the points. So there has to be a good chance that partner has short hearts and likely some extras. I'd be very surprised if 3♠ is passed out, but if I bid 4♠, I'm afraid I'll push us too high.

JAY APFELBAUM: 3♠. Partner is likely to have at most one heart. The absence of a club bid by the opposition is a clue that partner has length and an honor or two in that suit. This figures to be a crossruff hand. Trump leads could be deadly. If partner has a minimum with poor spades, even nine tricks could be out of reach. I would ask him to have just a little more before tackling a ten-trick contract.

MARK COHEN: 3♠. Thanks for the toughie! There will be votes for 2♠, 3♠ and 4♠, no doubt. Partner could hold a really good hand, something like:

♠AKxx ♥x ♦AKJxx ♣Jxx.

...or a not great one, like:

♠Jxxx ♥x ♦K10xxx ♣AK10.

...where even nine tricks in spades are in doubt. The opponents are quiet holding lots of clubs, but West could hold a decent hand with hearts, so this should keep them quiet as we explore our best spot.

Others were less worried about ovine reticence and more about what aspect of the hand to emphasize first.

TOM WEIK: 3♠. I confess to being lost in a sea of alternative bids. So much depends on partner's heart length and high card placement. I'm going with 3♠, although there are attractive alternatives in the majors.

STEVE WHITE: 3♠. Who can guess how many we can make, not knowing partner's overall strength, his spades, or if he has heart help? 3♠ seems like a good choice.

JOHN JONES: 3♠. Sometimes we will be better off in hearts, sometimes we will want to be higher or lower. Sometimes a really aggressive 4♣ splinter will be just what the doctor ordered. But good bidding aims for the middle of the road. Yes, I like my hand better with partner opening 1♦ as opposed to my void, but still, inviting seem right. This gives partner a chance to upgrade a heart honor.

When I said a "probable" eight-card spade fit, I meant that on a really good day it could be nine. But on a really bad day....

ED SHAPIRO: 3♠. I'll trust partner to have four spades, even though it's not guaranteed. This hand should head towards some number of spades without going

through fourth-suit forcing or splinter bids. They may set partner off, and we do only have one ace-king point. So, choose between 3♠ and 4♠.

It's not guaranteed, but it's pretty close. I think I've rebid 1♠ on a three-bagger twice in my life. Both times, I'd opened 1♣ on a 3=1=4=5 minimum with lousy diamonds, and I had to find something to say over partner's predictable 1♥ response. After a 1♦ opener, I think we're safe. Summing up for the 3♠ team:

RICK ROWLAND: 3♠. Game depends on how much wasted value partner has in clubs.

MARK KINZER: 3♠. Tough!

Indeed. Several spade voters lamented about how they were treating king-jack-nine-seventh as if it were four to the five. I was surprised how few 3♥ bidders there actually were.

BARRY COHEN: 3♥. I can't overlook this seven-card suit. With all of my other cards in partner's suits, surely I am interested in inviting game. Of course, the hand really grows up if partner can deliver the ♥A, ♥Q, or even the ♥10.

BARRY PASSER: 3♥. Since both my queens are working, this hand is better than its eight HCP. If partner has two hearts or even a singleton ace or queen, we belong in hearts.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♥. In spades, my hand can be punched too often to be able to set up and run the hearts. While there are lots of minimum (and sub-minimum) hands for partner that make game in a major, there seem to be too many more where we can't manage ten tricks. 4♥ is my second choice, 3♠ is third, 2♣ a distant fourth.

No word on what Mark's fifth through tenth choices were. He could have helped me score this problem. If partner puts down a singleton heart honor in dummy, rebidding our long suit will be a triumph. If he has the stiff three, or a void, maybe not so much.

The trouble with inviting game now is, even if it's about right on playing strength (and it is), you need to commit to a strain for the invitation, and you might guess very wrongly. Such is life in a Standard American or 2/1 bidding system. If you don't mind getting overboard now and then (and on this hand, "now" is a lively possibility), one way to manufacture the room you need to describe everything is:

BILL SCHMIDT: 2♣. We desperately need more information, so I'm willing to force to game to get it. Any immediate major-suit rebid risks playing in a part score when we belong in slam in the other major. If I had to pick one, I'd choose 3♥.

RICK OLANOFF: 2♣. While clearly lacking in HCPs, this hand will play well in spades and possibly in hearts as well. The ♦Q is a great card too, so this way, we will reach the best game. I admit that partner is likely to be short in hearts, but let's see.

PETE FILANDRO: 2♣. I need more info, so fourth-suit forcing is best. If partner can show a heart preference, or longer diamonds, or even a fifth spade, our future will be clearer. If not, I can always put us in 4♠ later.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 2♣. I will give partner an opportunity to show three-card heart support. Assuming that doesn't happen, I hope to be better placed to decide how many spades to bid next.

If partner shows three hearts, I might not recover from the shock.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♣. It is a "fact" that hands like South's will generally play better in hearts than spades, but there are certainly exceptions. The problem is how to get more info from partner. 2♣ is one option, but it's a game force and we may not have one despite my six-loser hand. 2♥ and 2♠ are underbids. 3♥ is possible, but partner might pass if he is void or holds a small stiff, and spades might play better. 4♥ is an overbid. 3♠ will abandon hearts. I'm gonna bid 2♣ and try to get to the game that makes sense. And yes, we could easily get too high, especially if partner has wasted club values, but give him

♠KJxx ♥Q ♦Kxxxx ♣KJx.

...and 4♥ has a shot.

True, but these days, the same hand with the ♥4 in place of the queen is opened by a lot of partnerships. Rule of 20, seven losers, 13 Goren points, Rule of e^{Ti} (I happen to know that Euler was a bridge hound), you name it. Let's be frank: if partner has a minimum, I don't like our chances after fourth-suit forcing. The good news is that there's a fairly decent chance he has some extras. Just as with last month's problem, where the auction started 1♣-(pass)-1♦-(pass), the opponents' failure to squeak is not to be ignored.

If you're willing to commit to game and to a strain, you could take a direct shot:

URMILA GUJRATHI: 3NT. You have eight tricks and hope that partner has the ♥A.

TODD THORSEN: 4♠. What I think can be made...?

Or you might take a shot at the whole ball of wax via a splinter. Maybe partner has extra values, very strong diamonds, and bupkis in clubs. The solitary vote for 3♣ was intended that way, but in a 2/1 system, responder's jump in the fourth suit usually shows a two-suited invitational hand. The way to show a game-forcing spade raise with club shortness is:

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 4♣. Splinter. Looking for partner to bid 4♦.

BILL BAUER: 4♣. OK, I'll admit that a splinter is a tad aggressive. However, the ♦Q may be worth a lot, as well as the first-round (and second-round through 13-round) control in clubs. I know I want to be in the spade game, and if partner has ace-king in both pointed suits, maybe slam. Remember, the Devil hates a coward!

Cool! It's nice to know that my cravenness has some spiritual side benefits. I am with the poultry on Problem A along with:

DOUGLAS DYE: 2♠. I can't believe I'm not rebidding my seven-bagger, but if my call ends the auction, I'd rather be in spades than hearts. The fitting diamond honor and ruff/crossruff potential stand out. If partner continues with 2NT or 3♣, my heart rebid (4♥ over 2NT, 3♥ over 3♣) will alert him to the unbalanced nature of my hand.

KARL BARTH: 2♠. Where are the clubs? Partner certainly has a few of them, to go along with his pointed suits. The odds are simply overwhelming that partner is so short in hearts that my ♥K may as well be another deuce. So, I have a functional four-count. Even with a lovely club void, my hand is not worth more than a simple raise at matchpoints. If partner's hand is very distributional, he'll take another call and I'll judge accordingly.

BOB GRINWIS: 2♠. It's a known fit of at least eight cards, and there is no guarantee that partner has any hearts.

STEPHEN COOPER: 2♠. I can visualize too many hands where game has no play. If partner cannot act over 2♠, it is probably right.

Exactly. 1♠ wasn't forcing, so 2♠, while hardly a Chuck Norris meme, promises a little bit of strength. If partner needs a fit to continue, he's found it. If he needs to know where our side suit is, he's heard it. I hope to get a chance to rebid my hearts, but if this ends the matchpoint auction, it will be right often enough not to fret about the times it will be wrong. Or so I hope.

Going low too, but in the other major:

ANDY MUENZ: 2♥. I haven't done one of Nick's simulations, but it seems to me that partner's most likely shape is 4=0=5=4. That means that half of our points are completely wasted in a spade contract. Partner also probably has some wasted club values, especially since neither opponent has come in despite at least nine clubs between them.

In hearts, we should be able to take three taps and still keep control opposite a four-two split. Hopefully we can scramble through with four heart tricks, two or three spades, and a couple of tricks in the minors. Playing in spades, repeated trump leads can take away the whole value of our hand.

JIM EAGLETON: 2♥. I don't think I can pass 3♦ after I bid 2♠.

Partner willing, you can pass any time you please. I didn't run a simulation this month, but it seems rather likely that partner has one heart at most. Still, hearts could be a considerably better strain than spades if that lone heart is a good one, and we might survive opposite a deuce. If North is void in hearts, life goes on.

Once upon a time, particularly on the West Coast, bidding the fourth suit was only a one-round force. That might be a useful treatment on this deal, but of course it would just cause different problems on many others. Anyway, I think Problem B is the more interesting one because of the vulnerable-at-IMP's angle. Last Word at matchpoints goes to one of our esteemed guest panelists auditioning for the great new bridge reality TV show: Say Yes to the Mess:

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): 2♥. ...Can we have a misfit with an eight-card fit? Are we better off playing in our seven-card fit than in our eight-card fit? Am I having a fit trying to answer this problem? The answer to all is YES!

I hear Andy's going to try out for the other big bridge TV show next, where you and your partner zip around the globe to play at as many clubs as possible. What, you've never heard of The Amazing Ace?

B. What is your call at IMPs?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
2♣	3	4	50
4♣	1	1	50
4♠	3	3	50
2♠	2	5	40
3♠	4	3	40
4♥	1	3	40
2♥	1	1	30
3♥	0	2	30
3♣	0	1	20
3♦	0	1	20
5♦	0	1	20

OK, hear me out...

The only sensible way to score this problem, where no action drew even a measly 20% of the vote, was to group the answers by where they were aiming rather than where they wound up. The two main decision points were:

- 21 voters weren't stopping short of game. (Remember, the 3♣ vote was intended as a splinter.) 10 invited, 9 showed a minimum.
- 31 voters either aimed towards spades this turn or kept their options open via 2♣. 9 went for a red suit.

Ergo, the three bids that forced to game with a spade orientation (if any) earned 50 points. The three bids that did one or the other scored 40. Non-forcing heart bids got 30, and the three one-vote outliers, 20. Heavy is the head that wears the director's cap.

The biggest movement from matchpoints to IMPs came from the folks who simply were not settling for a part-score at this vulnerability. There was nothing fancy about their motivation:

ED SHAPIRO: 4♠ (3♠ at MPs). Here, the vulnerability says to bid game. 4♠ is the least of the game bids, as it's the least descriptive. If partner has made a temporizing 1♠ rebid with a hand too good to support hearts immediately, he won't pass.

MARK BOLOTIN: 4♥ (3♥ at IMPs). When I bid it, I'll keep telling myself that this is a six-loser hand, while I try to ignore its flaws.

JAY APFELBAUM: 4♠ (3♠ at MPs). Game at matchpoints is a 50-50 proposition. It only requires about 38% at this form of scoring. A power bid makes a penalty double less likely. Also, a killing defense might be possible but could be difficult to find.

MARK KINZER: 4♠ (3♠ at MPs). Best shot at game.

STEVE WHITE: 2♣ (3♠ at MPs). Vulnerable at IMPs, it can't be right to stop short of game. Definitely best to start with 2♣, in case we have a slam, and to preserve chances of reaching 4♥ instead of 4♠ if we stop in game.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 4♠ (3♠ at MPs). Can't risk missing a vulnerable game.

I suppose. I might point out, however, that the 38% break-even point assumes that A, you don't get doubled, and B, you go down exactly one trick. Those may not apply on this deal. In fact, if our values for game are marginal, the opponents' silence might be for the reason that Mark Cohen noted earlier: our suits are splitting terribly. That could lead to outcome C: East or West doubles whatever contract we land in, and they have to call in a team of accountants from KPMG to calculate the penalty.

All levity aside, it's close, and no one can say you're wrong if you drive to game on a complex hand like this. Even when you can't make it, you sometimes will. Still, there are other ways to pick up a nice swing.

ANDY MUENZ: 2♥ (2♥ at MPs). We have a 6.5-loser hand and a four-four fit opposite an opening bid. Vulnerable at IMPs, we want to be in game, right? Not so much. Let's hope the people at the other table think that, and maybe we can win 7 IMPs for our +110 to go with our teammates' +200. Or more, if they are able to double or if the opponents play in the wrong major and go down extra tricks.

If 4♥ or 4♠ are booked for a two-trick set, it's important to stop at the two-level to take full advantage. Otherwise, and somewhat paradoxically, the break-even point for stretching to game is considerably lower than 38%. If you knew that they'll reach the three-level at the other table, and that game will either make or go down two, you may as well bid it. +620 vs. -170 = win 10; -200 vs. +100 = lose 3. I have a lot of respect for our most disciplined pessimists:

KARL BARTH: 2♠ (2♠ at MPs). I thought about rebidding my hearts because, if partner's singleton is an honor, then hearts is a tolerable trump suit. But I can't help decades of training. I'll bid up more spades and hope it all works out. The vulnerability doesn't tempt me to invite. If partner is six-five or something, I imagine we'll wind up in 4♠. If partner can find an invitation, I might accept, though after the expected short suit try in hearts, is this really the hand to barrel into 4♠?

STEPHEN COOPER: 2♠ (2♠ at MPs). There is not enough fit to force to game. This looks like the safest action.

Me? At IMPs, I'm still a chicken but my coop goes up one level higher:

TOM WEIK: 3♠ (3♠ at MPs). When I held this hand last night, partner had:

♠Jxxx ♥-- ♦Jxxxx ♣AKQx.

JOHN JONES: 3♠ (3♠ at MPs). Partner knows that we are vulnerable at IMPs, and he is last man out and can bid game with any excuse.

Exactly, redux. If we can make game, the odds that partner will bid it over 3♠ are enormous. I've noticed that when I'm vulnerable at IMPs, he usually is too.

Sticking to their fourth-suit forcing guns:

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). Same as before, but I'm more likely to push to 4♠ unless partner's rebid is 2NT, showing wasted values in clubs.

PETE FILANDRO: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). Still the best call. 3♠ or 4♠ can be passed when 4♥ or six of a major is better. 4♣ misdescribes our "opening bid" strength, which has only ½ (or zero) quick tricks, and it kills our chance of finding a superior heart fit.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♣ (2♣ at MPs). For all of the wrong reasons I mentioned earlier.

Never one to pass up an opportunity for bonus points is:

BILL BAUER: 4♣ (4♣ at MPs). While I usually try to hedge my bets by picking a different answer, my rationale at matchpoints also seems to apply at IMPs on this deal. If not, I hope Nick will give me credit for getting the spam robot thwarter problem correct. I hear he's mellowing in his old age!

One of these days, I'm going to post a cribbage hand as the spam thwarter and ask entrants to count up the points. Pro tip: don't guess 19.

And that wraps it up for another month. Thanks as always to everyone who took the time to participate! The annual April freakazoid problem is up on the website, and I hope spring will be here when the Club convenes again to discuss it. Right now there's about 46 inches of snow on my driveway. I'd better go shovel it.

("Wait a minute...what happened to the story behind why we may have seen this problem before? And who gets the Last Word on Problem B??")



BILL SCHMIDT: Nick – My memory isn't perfect...I had to do some digging to find the bidding problem that I was looking for. But it appears that the March 2026 problem is essentially identical to the March 2025 problem. The thing that tipped me off is that I remembered writing the same response, phrased a little differently.

Wait. WHAT??!!

*Bill's email around the middle of February made my heart sink faster than a curling stone in a hot tub. Did I duplicate a D4MSC problem? Worse still, did I crib one from The Bridge World without giving them credit?? I would **never** do that...uh, would I?*

Fortunately, the answer is no. I saved the actual BBO deal record of the March 2025 problem, and since I was the only human who played it (in a BBO Robot Race game, boards are not duplicated), I can attest that it never appeared in TBW. I also went down to my basement and dug out the September 2017 issue of the magazine to confirm that my electronic record of the problem was accurate. It was. The two South hands are crazy similar, though.

The auctions were identical.

Both sides were vulnerable this year, not vulnerable last year.

South had a 4=7=2=0 eight-count both times.

On the March 2025 problem, South's hand was:

♠J964 ♥AK76543 ♦102 ♣--

The September 2017 TBW hand was originally:

♠J1096 ♥KJ97632 ♦-- ♣K3

I decided to move the two-card suit from clubs to diamonds and give South the ♠Q to make aggressive bidding more attractive, which is how we wound up with:

♠Q974 ♥KJ98652 ♦Q6 ♣--

But yeah, that club-diamond exchange unwittingly caused the Club nearly to get caught in a bridge time loop. Oh well, February is the month of Groundhog Day after all. And, serendipitously, the voting results from last year to this are quite different and thus quite educational.

Last year, 2♣ was the runaway winner at both forms of scoring. There were some differences of opinion as to whether to aim for hearts or spades, naturally, but even at matchpoints, the Club was committed to reaching game. Later, I ran a simulation which showed that forcing to game was correct and that spades were the superior trump strain. The hearts were so good that they were ready to deliver tricks to your door more efficiently than Amazon, whatever suit was trump.

This year, the hearts are quite broken. They might not deliver any tricks in a spade contract, let alone five or six. The spades are a little better, and that ♦Q has a lot of potential. Forcing to game at matchpoints is a considerable risk, though if game is in the cards, the return on investment could be pretty high.

Lesson: I need to keep better records, not only of where our problem submissions come from, but also on what themes we have and haven't covered recently. For his eagle eye, Bill deserves the Last Word this month, which are the same words he wrote for last March's problem (and which he says still ring true on this March's):

BILL SCHMIDT: 2♣. I'm willing force to game, but we need more information to decide on a trump suit. Any major-suit bid at this point could go very wrong. The form of scoring is irrelevant, because even if I only wanted to invite to game (at matchpoints) I wouldn't know which suit to invite in.



As someone just asked after all these years, I suppose I should explain my convention for North's gender in the D4MSC. In odd months, he's male. In even months, she's female. If you send in comments with your answer, no need to check the calendar to decide which pronouns to use. You can refer to North as he, she, they, one, it, CHO, dodo, whatever, and I'll adjust it accordingly.



*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/>*