

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

FEBRUARY 2022 PROBLEM

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The 4-3-2-1 high card point system was invented by Bryant McCampbell in 1915 and popularized in later decades by Milton Work and Charles Goren. Similarly, the "Points, schmoints!" epithet was invented in 1916 by Filbert P. Throckmorton and popularized in later decades by pretty much everyone from Ely Culbertson to Marty Bergen. Okay, I just made Mr. Throckmorton up. But, yeah, it's been fashionable to diss the Work Point Count system for decades, even though every tournament bridge player uses it, and no one has come up with a better way to summarize the strength of a hand that doesn't involve tensor calculus. Its accuracy-to-simplicity ratio is off the charts, at least for balanced hands. The Work Count certainly has its problems -- it breaks down pretty badly when dealing with things like extra trump length, shortness, double-fits, enormous strength disparity between the two hands, and of course, slam decisions. This month's problem basically covers all those cases and maybe a few others Mr. Work never even thought of. Points, schmoints? We'll soon find out.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

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MATCHPOINTS, EAST-WEST VULNERABLE

♠-J9654 ♥-1085 ♦-K8753 ♣--

South	West	North	East
	Pass	2♣	Pass
2♦	Pass	2♠	Pass
?			

3♣ = NEGATIVE, NO ACE, USU. 0-4 HCP

3♦ = NATURAL

3♠ = FORCING, IMPLIES 8+ HCP

4♣, 4♦ = SPLINTER RAISE, USU. 8+ HCP

4♠ = WEAK RAISE, USU. 5-7 HCP

1. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
4♣	13	21	100
3♠	2	7	90
4♠	0	12	90
3♣	0	2	80
3♦	0	3	80
5♠	0	1	80
6♠	0	1	80

Schmointers of the world, unite!

ED SHAPIRO: 4♣. Are we really defining calls over a strong two-bid in terms of high card points?

STEPHEN COOPER: 4♣. Points, schmoints - the fifth spade is worth its weight in gold.

ANDY MUENZ: 3♠. Not sure whose idea it is that raises in this auction should have any relation to points, but it's a dumb idea.

PETE FILANDRO: 3♠. Points, schmoints! This hand counts to 10 support points, including five for the void with extra trump length and two for the spade QUEEN! I.e., if partner uses Key Card Blackwood asks if I hold the trump queen, with five to the jack I'll say yes.

JOHN D'ERRICO: 4♣. Five cards in trumps with the jack-nine as potential late-round entries. A side suit void. My king in a long suit. This hand is way better than Walter the Walrus would count it.

RUI MARQUES: 3♠. Five goodish trumps? Five-card side suit? Void on the side? Worth a strong raise even if we are "a bit" short on high-card points. If partner complains, I'll get out my Bridge 101 book and say, "I counted five for the void and two for the extra trumps. This hand is worth 11 HCP. Points, schmoints!"

DON DALPE: 4♣. I guess I have an unusual hand in this crazy system. Why are so many bids defined in terms of high-card points, especially after a strong-two?

Yes, the South hand is worth oodles more than its nominal four HCP. That's why it's an MSC problem. As for the ballpark ranges cited (and hedged with "usually"), that particular silliness arose from long experience moderating this feature. We have a wide range of readers spanning the gamut of tournament skill levels. I could have instead used "game forcing" or "slam positive", but then a great many folks wouldn't have a firm bearing on what sort of hands qualify in the context of a strong-two opening bid. I'd have received at least three comments bemoaning the lack of point ranges. Points, for better and for worse, are the lingua franca of bridge.

On a related note:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 4♣. The given ranges are nowhere close to standard and are, quite frankly, terrible. 5-7 HCP with support is not "weak" after a strong two, and 8+ is nearly a slam drive. Don't cite the [BBO] bots' agreements; it's not helping.

JOHN D. JONES: 4♣. I started to answer 4♣ quickly, thinking it was the easiest problem I had ever seen in a bidding contest. When I read the bidding footnotes, and that 4♣ showed 8 HCP in this system I understood the problem. The methods described both for splinters and the jump raise are far stronger than in my partnerships.

DOUGLAS DYE: 3♠. The notion that 3♠ "implies 8+ high-card points" is news to me.

Granted that the point ranges I cited were somewhat, ahem, fanciful, but there was a method to that particular madness. The purpose of this month's problem is to illustrate when and how to reevaluate a hand's worth, however one measures it, in the context of the auction. Here, the potential adjustment is dramatic. I set up four bands for the Club to choose from: face value (3♣) intending presumably to catch up later; a small promotion (4♠), a large promotion (3♠, 4♣, both forcing), and a temporary punt on all things pointacular (3♦). No bots were harmed, or even involved, in the making of this film.

At any rate. This would be quite a good hand opposite a 1♠ opener; I'd probably respond 4♠ but worry we might be missing six. Opposite a strong 2♠, this could be the greatest four-point dummy in the history of bridge. Or maybe not:

ED SHAPIRO (cont.): 4♣. ...This is a difficult hand that might not be safe above the four-level, with the worst cases coming when partner holds strong club values but is off some top red-suit tricks. I choose the splinter to help partner reevaluate his hand immediately.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 4♣. This is a huge hand for spades despite having only 4 HCP. Give partner just:

♠AKxxx ♥Ax ♦AQx ♣xxx

...and a grand slam is practically laydown, yet that hand hardly qualifies for a 2♣ opener. The best way to help partner evaluate his hand for slam is to help him understand you have great trump support with club shortness.

BARRY PASSER: 4♣. This hand has more playing strength than any generic 9-HCP hand, *if and only if* the club void is useful. Best way to convey that message is with the splinter.

BOB & JOANN GLASSON: 4♣. Seems like the only bid to describe this good-bad hand. If partner has wasted values in clubs, we will play 4♠.

I agree with the Glassons: if I splintered, and partner could only retreat to 4♠, I'm done. What should we do if he cue-bids a red suit?

TOM WEIK (with BARRY PASSER agreeing on the follow-up plan): 4♣. Seems very clear. If partner has a heart control, a lot of tricks appear forthcoming. If partner bids 4♦, I'll bid 5♣ to confirm first-round control.

MICHAEL SHUSTER (cont.): 4♣. What we have is a near slam-drive. I could start with 3♠, which would make it easier to show the ♦K below slam. However, 4♣ then 5♣ shows the void, which rates to be more important.

ANDREW KAUFMAN: 4♣. This is a great playing hand, and the splinter gives the best picture of it even if it lacks the expected point count. Bidding just 3♠ would only show a three-card fit, and jumping to 4♠ would be done with a very weak hand

with four trumps and no controls. If partner continues with 4 ♦, I'll bid 5 ♦. If North bids 4 ♥ instead, I'll retreat to 4 ♠.

JAY APFELBAUM: 4 ♣. Too much playing strength and too descriptive a call to do anything else. Over 4 ♦ I will retreat to 4 ♠, but over 4 ♥ I'll bid 5 ♣ to confirm a void and a diamond control.

STEVE WHITE: 4 ♣. Usually eight-plus points, but still best here. Over 4 ♦, with no heart control, I'll call 4 ♠ -- even if 4 ♥ would be Last Train, if partner thinks I have eight points, 4 ♠ is enough. If partner instead bids 4 ♥, it's a little tougher with only second-round diamond control, but I would still trot out 5 ♦.

I think I'd bid 5 ♣ over four of either red suit. By choosing to splinter, we've in effect decided that the void (plus the extra trumps) is the salient feature of the hand. Partner could have run back to 4 ♠ holding his nose if he hated the news of our club shortness. Might as well finish the description -- in for a penny, in for a pound.

BILL PORT: 4 ♣. The question of 'How can I tell partner what I hold without it being misinterpreted' is best done by the splinter. That bid cannot be anything else.

Well-I-I....

BILL SCHMIDT: 3 ♠. The footnotes are wrong...if 3 ♣ is a double-negative, 4 ♣ must be natural.

My poor footnotes are developing a complex. Bill's objection is valid; however, for the purpose of this problem, if only for the sake of clarity, 3 ♣ is a double-negative and 4 ♣ is a splinter. In the wild, things are more complicated. As many experts play it, 3 ♣ might be a double-negative, or it might be forward-going with clubs. The later auction is supposed to clear up any ambiguity, not that it always does. We've had this topic come up in earlier D4MSC problems.

One thing that's unambiguous is that the splinter was the runaway winner this month, including a massive 13-to-2 margin among Panelists. That makes the following one of the better predictions the Club has ever had:

RICK ROWLAND: 4 ♣. Should be a unanimous panel, but it never is.

The overwhelming sentiment of the folks who favored 4 ♣ is that, though it lacks honor values on the surface, this hand has excellent slam potential in spades provided that our club void is useful. Or, "points, schmoints!", which is a lot pithier even if that word is driving my spell-checker crazy.

RICH ROTHWART: 4 ♣. Splinters show four or more trumps with slam interest. This hand meets that standard. I'd rather have a side ace than just a king, but the fifth trump and the void make up for that.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 4 ♣. Despite the paucity of points, I have a very good hand in support of spades, with five trumps, a club void, and a side suit headed by the king. While not perfect, the splinter at least gets the nature of my hand across.

DAVE WACHSMAN: 4 ♣. The splinter raise is the best choice because it makes clear that slam is in sight. My eight-loser hand is likely to fit well with opener's hand, which might have three or fewer losers.

MATT SHERMAN: 4♣. I want to help my partner explore a slam if it's there. 4♣ seems like the most descriptive bid even though I'm short on high-card points.

CHRIS MARLOW: 4♣. Perhaps my reading glasses are a bit too rose-colored. Five-card support, void, potentially useful five-card side suit...I think this is worth at least eight points. There are many sub-minimal hands for North's 2♣ opening whereby slam is cold. I am not too worried we will get too high (for now).

KARL BARTH: 4♣. This seems like the best lie. It will be hard to recover from a double-negative because this is an amazing four-point hand. So, getting the spade support and club shortness off my chest right away will be the most helpful thing I can do.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 4♣. A little light in points, but the void, the fifth spade, and the five-card diamond suit compensate for the light values. I have too much playing strength for anything else.

RICHARD HARTZ JR.: 4♣. With five spades and a void, I definitely want to explore for slam. High card points shouldn't matter, but key cards will. Hopefully the splinter will help partner evaluate the usefulness of his values.

MARK KINZER: 4♣. This hand is simply amazing in its support.

One particular precious metal made multiple appearances in this month's set:

MARK BOLOTIN: 4♣. Short on points, but extra trumps and a void. My hand could be a gold mine for partner.

Stephen Cooper remarked earlier that South's fifth trump might be worth its weight in gold. Based on some quick experimentation with my handy postage scale, a playing card weighs on average about 1.6 grams. 24 karat gold currently trades for \$58.44 a gram. Hence, the ♠4 is worth \$93.50, and the entire hand goes for a cool \$1,215. This is the sort of essential bridge analysis you simply do not find at any other site. I'm not sure why. Anyway, summing up for the 4♣ crew is:

JOHN SCHWARTZ: 4♣. We're going to at least 4♠, so I might as well show my club shortness. Partner can have a variety of hand types, and perhaps the splinter is what she needs to know to judge slam prospects. In any case, I'll be well-prepared for the post-mortem, and isn't that the main goal?

In my book, it sure is. But, let's not close the book too fast this month. As several people noted, 4♣ isn't perfect. The difference between a singleton and a void is often substantial, and if we want to make partner aware of that substance, we'll need to bid beyond game. That, I think, is a risk worth taking if partner cooperates over 4♣.

More of a worry, perhaps, is that a splinter raise suggests high-card values -- the dreaded schmoints! -- in both unbid suits. Diamonds, we got covered. Hearts, not so much. If partner's trumps are headed by the ace-king-queen, a lively possibility, and we advertise support and club shortness, he'll understandably expect more than one king and one ten in the reds. So, yes, this hand has the playing strength for a splinter, but that rather yawning lack of "usu. 8+ HCP" might yet come back to bite us. We should at least have a look at the alternatives, starting with:

DOUGLAS DYE (cont.): 3♠. ...My playing strength is just short of a limit raise. I want to set trumps and hope that partner initiates a control-bidding sequence so I can tell the rest of my story.

BILL SCHMIDT (cont.): 3♠. ...Setting the trump suit, and forward-going. Too much slam potential for 4♠. I'll be happy to bid 4♦ over 4♣.

BILL BAUER: 3♠. I'm tearing up our convention card and substituting what I prefer to play. In my style (Audrey Grant Better Bridge), 3♠ shows spade support plus an ace, a king, a singleton, or a void. (Perhaps more than one.) I'm feeling very slam-mish and will cue-bid clubs next unless partner beats me to it, in which case I will just retreat to 4♠.

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): 3♠. ...This should say I have a spade fit and at least some interest in going further than game, which is what I have. I'm not strong enough to take up more room with a splinter, but here I can show my diamond king over a club control bid and then put on the brakes after that. If partner bypasses 4♣ and shows diamonds, I'll bid 5♣ to show a control.

*On the surface, 4♣ doesn't take up much more room than 3♠, and it seems to me that the extra two steps is a small price to pay for showing club shortness along with our spade support and slam openness. However, if North-South were using some form of Serious/Unserious 3NT, which allows a practiced partnership to distinguish between (*yawn*) slam interest? and **SLAM INTEREST!!!**, those two steps could be vital.*

BILL FOSTER: 4♠. A shutout bid with my regular partner. If we were behind in this game, I would make a splinter raise of 4♣, which we play as showing a void in clubs with spade support. She might have opened 2♣ with a four-loser hand and five spades.

I have a suspicion that if you weren't behind in the game before you bid 4♠, you might be afterwards. But, you don't have to convince me of the benefits of void splinters. I think they're terrific. Someday I'll make them a footnote option on a D4MSC problem, though if I tried to attach a point range, I might have to enter the Witness Protection Program.

BOB GRINWIS: 4♠. I have five spades but only four HCP and a lot of losers. No other bid seems reasonable.

LYNN HARRIS: 4♠. Just bid game so that East-West will not compete.

THEODORE LEVY: 4♠. If this isn't a weak raise, I don't know what is.

JIM EAGLETON: 4♠. I like 3♦ and 4♣, but I don't know if partner would properly value any diamond holding headed by less than the jack after 3♦, or any club holding headed by the ♣A after a splinter. 3♠ is also possible. I can't make an argument for which overbid is the most descriptive, let alone which will be most popular. I like to have a little more than a minimum for my bid once every year, and I hope many on the panel will agree it is good to get this task out of the way early in 2022.

Duly noted. 4♠ drew the second-most votes but relatively few comments. The stated "usu. 5-to-7 HCP" treatment is abnormal; most expert pairs use a jump-raise to 4♠ as a very weak hand with support. Bad hands without support go the double-negative route.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 3♣. Start with the double negative and then see. I expect to end up in four or more spades.

The issue here is that if you bid 3♣ and then later enthusiastically support spades, partner may guess that your "double-negative" was in fact a constructive club bid with spade support. Which brings us to our final (commented-on) option, one that I think deserved a bit more love this month:

JOHN HEMMER: 3♦. This gives partner useful information when I support spades next. If he raises diamonds, we can probably make slam in spades.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: 3♦. Looking for a possible slam in spades. Verifying before (maybe) settling down at 4♠.

The trouble with 3♦ is that you'll never convince partner when you raise spades next that you have five-card support, not to mention a club void. The benefit is that it keeps the auction lower, allows partner to make whatever rebid he has prepared, and doesn't overstate our high card count. 4♣ is more direct and descriptive, and as long as partner can take a joke, I think it's the long-term winning call. I also think (but am much less certain) that partner can hold more hands in which knowledge of our club shortness is essential than ones in which the key is knowing about our side diamond suit.

JOHN D. JONES (cont.): 4♣. ...Even given that partner will expect more than my 4 HCP, the fifth trump is worth something, the void instead of a stiff is worth something, and I will bid 4♣ anyway. Given that the methods don't include double-ranged splinters, it's either I do or I don't. I would be very worried about missing slam if I didn't get my great trumps and club shortness off my chest.

To put it as succinctly as possible, our Final Word this month goes to:

ANDY PURBRICK: 4♣. Rhymes with the real estate motto: Distribution, distribution, distribution.

As long as I don't have to submit my hand for a building inspection before closing, I think the splinter will work just fine. Thanks as always everyone; see you next month.



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/>