

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

OCTOBER 2024 PROBLEM

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With the possible exception of wine tasting, no pastime employs a wider range of adjectives than bridge. On this month's auction, North's 2♦ might be described as free, natural, forward-going, constructive, encouraging, limited, and nonforcing. Yet for all that, it still encompasses a wide range of hands – some of which will produce a game opposite South's nice collection, others where 2♦ is our last plus score. Because of the uncertainties, you might have expected a big shift in votes between matchpoints at IMPs, but you might not have anticipated the direction it would go. I sure didn't.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
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NORTH-SOUTH VULNERABLE			
♠-Q103	♥-KQ8764	♦-A107	♣-Q
South	West	North	East
		Pass	Pass
1♥	1♠	2♦*	Pass
?			
* - NATURAL			

A. What is your call at Matchpoints?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
2♥	13	16	50
Pass	4	2	40
2NT	0	1	30
3♦	0	5	30

STEVE WHITE: 2♥. With no online system notes, should the asterisk include "forcing" or "non-forcing"? Since partner is a passed hand, I expect non-forcing in the absence of discussion.

After the last couple of months, I'm focusing on simpler, low-fat, low-asterisk problems for the rest of the year. I've learned through experience that every footnote reduces the D4MSC response rate by about 15%. Anyway, yes, 2♦ is definitely not forcing, but that's not the same thing as a signoff. North should have a good suit and a decent hand in the 9 to 11 HCP ballpark. Many Club detectives spent quite a lot of

prose trying to narrow it down further. Interestingly, though they largely agreed on the basics of partner's hand, they didn't entirely agree on what to do about it.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 2♥. Let's put the clues together about partner's pattern. No 2♦ opener, so unlikely to hold six diamonds. No negative double, so unlikely to hold four or more clubs. And with no urgency to get involved at all opposite a third hand opener, unlikely to hold long spades and a misfit. I make out partner's most likely pattern to be 3=2=5=3 with spades too weak to bid 1NT. So, I should correct to the higher scoring partial.

PETE FILANDRO: Pass. Partner's failure to open 2♦ suggests a five-card suit (e.g., 2=2=5=4 or 3=2=5=3). I will generously give partner ♦KQJxx of diamonds and one of the ♥A, ♣A, or ♣K. I estimate 3NT, 4♥, or 5♦ to be no more than 10-15% against best defense.

WILLIAM THOMAS: 3♦. Partner probably has exactly five diamonds and fewer than four clubs. East didn't raise spades, but that might be because West has six or more. Hearts are better for matchpoint purposes, but I don't want the opponents to find their club fit, so raising diamonds immediately is more practical.

Like most of the Club, I chose 2♥ in Problem A because of the form of scoring, but the point about clubs is worth noting. All of the consideration about +110 vs. +130 vs. +140 is well and good, but it's certainly possible that the double-dummy par on this deal is North-South +100 against 4♣ doubled, if we can double at all. Against that, our Panelists in effect voted 4-to-0 in favor of 2♦ vs. 3♦.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 3♦. Showing my nice support for partner's suit. Let's see what partner bids next.

RUI MARQUES: 3♦. Any other option, IMHO, leads to murkier auctions. I might lose the heart fit if partner has a doubleton heart, but I'll take that chance.

STEPHEN MARLOW: 3♦. Support with support, especially at matchpoints. Game might be somewhere, but I will just play the odds.

DON DALPE: Pass. Hope for a plus score or no worse than down one. No weak 2♦ opening bid makes me conservative at matchpoints.

Checking in from Switzerland, or maybe Denmark:

JAY APFELBAUM: Pass. There are red flags waving all over the place. I have a minimum opening bid and partner is a passed hand. East should have enough high card points to bid, but he did not raise West's spade overcall. North will have some spade length, and she should have some clubs as well. That leaves her with very few hearts. This could easily be our last chance for a plus score.

Still, emphasizing the six-card major easily won the day at matchpoints. I wonder if Harold Vanderbilt and his cruise ship buddies fathomed what they unleashed upon the world 100 years ago when they decided that hearts and spades would be worth 30 points a trick while clubs and diamonds were worth 20.

STEPHEN COOPER: 2♥. At matchpoints, I am not going to suppress the sixth heart. It may not be as safe, but the major is worth the risk.

ED SHAPIRO: 2♥. It's nice that we play weak red two-bids. Here, partner will play me for a sound opening, usually with six hearts. At matchpoints, I think rebidding a good six-card major is essential.

ANDY MUENZ: 2♥. Let's show our sixth card in the higher scoring strain. While it's possible that diamonds could make four with hearts only making two, there is also the possibility that we can take nine tricks in hearts.

BILL SCHMIDT: 2♥. I'll try for +140, hoping that partner will bid again if he has heart shortness.

BARRY DEHLIN: 2♥. Nothing complicated here: majors pay more than minors, so I have to be *very* convinced diamonds are better before accepting the minor in a part-score deal. There's a good chance that partner has either two hearts, or just one but with a 3-3 split.

KARL BARTH: 2♥. I realize this is kind of weak-sounding, but my hand is pretty weak. If we are going plus on this hand, I don't need much from partner to be +110 at the two-level and I'd rather be +140 than +130 (in 3♦) if there's an overtrick to be had. Even a stiff ♥J might be enough for us to get a good result.

STEVE WHITE (cont.): 2♥. ...Partner definitely has at most two hearts. On the other hand, partner opened neither 1♦ nor 2♦, so she's unlikely to have a good suit. With six decent hearts, I'll rebid 2♥, hoping we can score at least as well in hearts as in diamonds.

BARRY COHEN: 2♥. At matchpoints, I'll try the better scoring major-suit contract.

BOB GRINWIS: 2♥. Minimum opener with six hearts. I have no other message to send.

You might not have another message, but plenty of your fellow 2♥ bidders do. They plan to send one now and the other next round.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 2♥. I think both 2♥ and 3♦ are acceptable bids. My reason for choosing 2♥ is to better compete for the part-score later when West rebids 2♠. If I get another chance, I can rebid 3♦ without overstating my hand.

BARRY PASSER: 2♥. King-queen-sixth is worth rebidding. If this is not passed out, I can support diamonds next round.

TOM WEIK: 2♥. It is quite a guess as to what partner holds and in which direction to head. I do know I don't want to pass. My choice is to rebid the respectable six-card major. If extremely short in hearts, there is a possibility that partner will find a 3♣ call, and I can then bid diamonds. 3NT may be the right spot but it seems against the odds.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♥. I think I'll take my chances on 2♥ ending the auction. If it doesn't, then I may get a chance to bid 3♦. I would hate to miss our six-two fit in matchpoints. I don't like bidding 3♦ immediately, since I don't want to encourage partner into thinking we can get somewhere.

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): 2♥. Partner probably doesn't have six good diamonds, but if she has something like a 3=0=5=5 10 count, she could bid 3♣ over 2♥ which will still allow us to find diamonds.

DOUGLAS DYE: 2♥. I'm hoping partner has heart tolerance and opts for the higher scoring strain. If LHO bids 2♠ I can offer partner a choice with 3♦.

I expected that 2NT would draw a few votes at matchpoints, but it barely even drew a couple of mentions.

JOHN D. JONES: 2♥. A significant guessing game. 2NT or 3♦ could easily be best. Even Pass could be right. I'm sure the 2NT bidders will tell me I need to learn how to play matchpoints.

PHIL FREIDENREICH: 2NT. When in doubt, bid notrump. I hope to make it or go down no more than one trick.

An old bridge maxim goes: "There are no game bonuses at matchpoints." Except, um...yeah, there are. I've had countless 48% games from failure to earn enough of those non-existent bonuses. Some maxims are kind of dumb, frankly. The point, however, is that matchpoints rewards accurate bidding, so stretching to thin games has no long-term benefit. Even so, a few respondents wondered about how high North-South should bid, and needless to say, a whole lot more will wonder along with them when we get to the IMPs problem.

KARL BARTH (cont.): 2♥. ...If partner has a boost to 3♥, I have a tough decision but I'm leaning toward pass, my diamond fit notwithstanding.

RICH ROTHWART: 2♥. We do have six hearts, and game is not out of the question if partner has ♥Ax or ♥Jx along with good diamonds. He didn't open 2♦, and he didn't double 1♠, so there's a reasonable chance he has two hearts.

MARK BOLOTIN: 2♥. East's failure to bid 2♠ makes me worry that our side has three spade losers. My guess is we do a trick better in diamonds, but that may be a wash or +140 vs. +130. If partner is short in spades, I might get a raise to 3♥ and I'll go to game. Since I'm showing a full opener, I might even hear 2NT from partner. Do I pass, bid 3NT or 3♦???

According to the Club simulator, if North raises to 3♥, South should bid game. 4♥ will outscore 3♥ in the long run by about 55%-45%. This assumes of course that North is the expert we believe she is – she won't risk the plus at matchpoints by inviting with shaded values.

If North surprises us with an invitational 2NT, we should pass, though converting to 3♦ is close. 3NT is a distant third, around 40%. The problem isn't spades – it's clubs. Even if East leads his partner's suit at trick one, the opponents will often have plenty of time later to attack clubs and defeat us before partner can arrange nine tricks. This surprised me.¹ I thought 3NT would have a much better outcome given all our seemingly useful queens and tens, but the club weakness is too much to overcome.

WWED : What Would Elvis Do?:

JIM EAGLETON: 2♥. I can't let 2♠ stand with a possible double fit, but I don't want to bid 3♥ over 2♠ (after partner's pass), so it's now or never.

¹ "Surprised" is an understatement. Until I ran the simulation, I would have advised passing an invitational 3♥ but raising 2NT to three. Blasted computers these days are smarter than I am at bridge.

Friendly advice from Ol' Bullseye Bill:

BILL BAUER: 2♥. When confronted with a problem like this one, I used to advise my beginner students to itemize the possible calls (Pass, 2♥, 2NT, or 3♦) and evaluate each. A half-hour later, many students would have an answer and maybe one or two might come up with the best answer. Then, I realized that my advice was violating Audrey Grant's (whose methods I used) admonition: "A hand of bridge is to be played the same day it is dealt!" I then reverted to telling my students to use a dartboard to select their call. I made a small fortune selling pocket-sized dartboards to my students. After all that, I chose 2♥ hoping for partner to have two-card support.

I don't think a dartboard is needed at matchpoints. Rebidding a six-card major is the normal action. True, it might allow the opponents to find their nine-card club fit, but maybe that's normal too. Last Word for Problem A goes to a trio whose one-line answers sum things up tidily.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: 2♥. Six-card suit. Minimum hand, 12 -13 HCP.

RICK ROWLAND: 2♥. Why not show the sixth heart?

ANDY PURBRICK: 2♥. Soft values, devalued spade honor, hope no more bidding!

B. What is your call at IMPs?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
Pass	8	7	50
2♥	7	8	40
2NT	1	0	30
3♦	1	9	30

Wow. A vulnerable game beckons, but a good chunk of the D4MSC is in no mood for beckoning.

STEPHEN COOPER: Pass (2♥ at MPs). This looks like the safest place to play. My black queens are no longer full value, making this a sub minimum opener.

DOUGLAS DYE: Pass (2♥ at MPs). At IMPs we only want to go plus, so I needn't guess partner's tolerance for hearts.

PETE FILANDRO: Pass (Pass at MPs). Even if I (again, generously) give partner a maximum passed hand with a six-card diamond suit that was unsuitable for a vulnerable preempt, plus all working cards on the side, all games are unlikely except when partner has a singleton spade. Looking for

♠x ♥Ax ♦KQxxxx ♣xxxx

...or the like in the North hand is a very tiny target.

BARRY DEHLIN: Pass (2♥ at MPs). Devaluing my ♠Q, I'm not optimistic for our game prospects. So, I'll just accept our known diamond fit as the best chance to go plus.

BARRY COHEN: Pass (2♥ at MPs). At IMPs, I will go low and pass. I have a questionable ♣Q and my spades are sitting under the spade bidder.

STEPHEN MARLOW: Pass (3♦ at MPs). This really is a minimum hand, and I can come back in with 3♦ later.

JAY APFELBAUM: Pass (Pass at MPs). Same reasoning as above, plus the form of scoring does not require us to always try for the maximum possible plus score.

Well, yes, but they definitely do pay game bonuses at IMPs, figuratively and literally. Our most likely game is in hearts. If we bid 2♥, and partner can scrape up a raise to 3♥, then bidding game is a 55-45 favorite, as we've already seen. That's more than enough of an edge, vulnerable at IMPs. And if she can't raise, aren't we likely enough still to get a plus score in 2♥ or 3♦?

D4MSC SIMULATOR: Pass (2♥ at MPs). No.

I didn't ask you.

D4MSC SIMULATOR (cont.): ...Well, I'm answering you anyway. Yes, if North can raise your heart rebid, game is a slight favorite. But she'll have a hand worth a raise about one deal in five, and remember, you'll still go down on 45% of those. On the other four deals, you'll lose more IMPs over time after bidding 2♥ or 3♦ than if you had passed. 2♥ is close, but 3♦ really isn't.

Hmph. Obviously, there are still a few bugs in that program. Or in me. I thought this was a close decision between 2♥ and 3♦, and I wasn't alone.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 2♥ (2♥ at MPs). Partner is a passed hand, so the chance of making game is low. Even opposite ♥Ax and ♦KQ, spades could be six-two and we'd run into a trump promotion on the third spade. That said, I think there's a case for 3♦ as well as a preemptive bid. The opponents could be making 4♠.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♥ (2♥ at MPs). This one is tougher, but I still like rebidding the six-card heart suit, holding my ♦A107 in reserve for a 3♦ bailout, if doubled.

RICH ROTHWART: 2♥ (2♥ at MPs). Even more reason not to give up on game, although 3♦ has more appeal at IMPs.

Unfortunately, with partner limited to at most a doubleton heart, 4♥ won't be there all that often. It's a testament to the power of the vulnerable game at IMPs that 2♥'s expected score is even close to that of Pass. But, if this is a part-score deal as it seems, diamonds are significantly safer than hearts.

What about 3♦, combining construction with preemption?

ANDY MUENZ: 3♦ (2♥ at MPs). Let's go with the known eight-card fit while also being mildly encouraging. While bidding 2NT is tempting (although I'd like to know if East's pass said anything about his spade holding, such as denying a high honor), I'm a bit worried about our spade stopper being knocked out on opening lead in 3NT. Obviously, if partner encourages with 3♠, I'll bid 3NT, and if she shows a doubleton heart with 3♥, I'll raise to four.

KARL BARTH: 3♦ (2♥ at MPs). Diamonds is clearly a safer contract than hearts, unless partner can show some sign of support. If she has a modicum of heart support, I would be delighted to hear 3♥. I am shying away from any attempt at 3NT since at most we have minimum HCP for game and my spade stopper is quite iffy.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♦ (2♥ at MPs). Aggressive, but it looks like the best way to find a game.

MARK COHEN: 3♦ (2♥ at MPs). We are sure to have at least an eight-card fit in diamonds, but only six in hearts. 3♦ looks safer, and it preempts West, too.

RUI MARQUES: 3 ♦ (3 ♦ at MPs). I was a bit on the fence at matchpoints between 2 ♥ and 3 ♦, but at IMPs I'm 100% for 3 ♦.

Having examined a lot of simulator deals, I think I see the issue with 3 ♦ (which, for the record, I too wound up choosing.) It preempts everyone. No one is likely to bid over it, particularly North, whose offensive potential is limited from her failure to open 1 ♦ or 2 ♦. Sometimes it wins IMPs by keeping the opponents from reaching a good black-suit contract, which is fine, but other times it keeps them from reaching a failing contract. Our side does have the balance of points, after all. 2 ♥ could win when it gets us to 4 ♥. Pass could win when neither side can make much of anything, which is the case more often than you might think. 3 ♦ kind of takes up space in the muddled middle.

TOM WEIK: 2 ♥ (2 ♥ at MPs). Pass seems a safer call, but if partner has a nice hand such as:

♠Ax ♥Jx ♦KQxxx ♣xxxx

... and finds a 3 ♥ bid, I will try for 4 ♥, a vulnerable game at IMPs.

ED SHAPIRO: 2 ♥ (2 ♥ at MPs). We're vulnerable, and game in hearts isn't precluded. So, I make a simple, descriptive bid and get partner's input. I'm OK if it's pass.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: 2 ♥ (2 ♥ at MPs). Hearts score better than diamonds.

PHIL FREIDENREICH: 2 ♥ (2NT at MPs). If I support diamonds, the inevitable spade lead will go through my queen-ten-low.

JOHN D. JONES: 2 ♥ (2 ♥ at MPs). Somewhat easier than at IMPs, but it still looks like a guessing game to me.

Normalcy is in the eye of the beholder:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 2 ♥ (2 ♥ at MPs). IMPs is more complicated, since if I judge game to be out of the question and 2 ♦ to be playable, I could just pass. Overall, though, we have a real opening bid, and we should not be in a hurry to drop the auction unexpectedly. We have a normal 2 ♥ call.

STEVE WHITE: 3 ♦ (2 ♥ at MPs). Here we want to play the safest part-score unless we can make a game. Vulnerable at imps we can bid a game even if it's under 50%. My hand is so good opposite a diamond call that I shouldn't pass, even though there are some red flags (three spades, no spade raise from RHO, the ♥KQ instead of the ♥A.) Still, 3 ♦ looks like a completely normal call.

Michael went on to make a very good point about 2 ♥:

MICHAEL SHUSTER (cont.): 2 ♥. ...Is game out of the question? Not at all:

♠Axx ♥Jx ♦KQxxx ♣xxx

...is in play. The real issue is we won't know when to go on to game if partner raises. Move the ♠A to clubs and game is terrible. But opposite 2=2=6=3 with bad diamonds, game is probably fine.

Quite true, and this also underscores a big issue with simulations: it ignores the value of at-the-table judgment. I had South accept any and every invitation to 4 ♥, which I "knew" would make 55% of the time. Perhaps a human South could do a bit better from reading the opponents' tempo and mannerisms as the auction progressed. If you can guess correctly to stop in 3 ♥ even one time in ten, then 2 ♥ would probably

edge out Pass. Against that, if you pass and West can balance over 2 ♦, you might beat the simulator by using your judgment to decide when it's right to compete to 3 ♦ vs. selling out. (I had the simulator compete every time.)

DON DALPE: 2NT (Pass at MPs). Partner sees the vulnerability, and at IMP's, she still offered a bid. I hope that 2NT is as good or better than 2 ♦.

Notrump had the same flaw at IMPs as at matchpoints: if the opponents can't beat you in spades, they will often have a second chance to beat you in clubs. We basically need help in all four suits, and passed-hand partner won't oblige often.

Scoring Problem B was a dilemma. Although pass drew a slight plurality of Panelists, I thought about giving 2 ♥ the top score because more people overall chose to bid than pass. The trouble with that reasoning is that it can be twisted to justify awarding 50 points to any of the three main choices. For example, why not give the 50 to 3 ♦? After all, a majority of the Club chose to bid, and a (different) majority chose to play in diamonds. In the end, I decided to honor the Panelists' narrow vote.

This was a good problem. I thought at IMPs it was a toss-up between 2 ♥ and 3 ♦, but now I understand why it's in fact a toss-up between 2 ♥ and pass. If you're still not sure how best to approach a problem like this at the table, you can always fall back on the advice of Ol' Bullseye Bill, who gets October's Last Word:

BILL BAUER: Pass (2 ♥ at MPs). I really do not like my hand even though it is sort of a full opener. This time I am hoping partner has only one heart. If my partner disappoints me with his or her actual holding, then I can always find a new partner.



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/>.