

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

APRIL 2025 PROBLEM

NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

The great Al Roth served as a panelist in The Bridge World's Master Solvers Club for over four decades. Known equally for his acumen and his cantankerousness, Roth would often abstain from freak deals like this one, writing indignantly, "How DARE you give us this problem. Anything could be right!" No argument here. In fact, of the 29 possible calls, I consider no fewer than 16 (including a variety of possibly futile psychs) to be plausible. We all face crazy problems at the table now and then, even when the calendar doesn't read April 1st, and having expert advice on how to handle them is always worthwhile. This month, the Club DARES to go where Alvin feared to tread. Let's see what they bring back from the journey.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

VIEW THE [D4MSC CONVENTION CARD](#)

BOTH VULNERABLE			
♠-6 ♥-K10653 ♦-KQ109652 ♣--			
South	West	North	East
		2♥	Double
?			
2NT = FEATURE-ASK			

A. What is your call at Matchpoints?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♣	3	3	50
5♥	6	12	50
Pass	0	1	40
2NT	0	1	40
3♦	0	1	40
4♦	1	0	40
4♥	1	3	40
4NT	1	0	40
5♣	1	2	40
5♦	1	0	40
6♥	1	3	40

Given that it's April and the problem was chosen in part to drive everyone bonkers, the scoring is very generous this month. The top two choices in parts A and B earn the top score of 50; everything else gets a 40. At matchpoints, a straightforward preemptive raise to 5♥ drew about one-third of the votes, including mine, though I don't much like it. I just don't see anything that's clearly better. How DARE I give myself this problem! Wait, what?

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 5♥. In my dreams, partner will have two aces and one of them won't be the ♣A. In reality, there is a great chance that we will make 5♥ and the opponents will have a double fit and can make 5♠ or 6♠ (or clubs, perhaps). I suppose I could bid 2♠ over the double but I'm not that clever. I will just bust it right to 5♥ and let the chips fall where they may.

JIM EAGLETON: 5♥. 4♥ has little preemptive value, and 6♥ has little chance of a plus score at matchpoints. I also like 3♣ to muddy the waters and to make a lead-directing bid against a high-level spade contract by West.

CHRIS MARLOW: 5♥. It looks like the opponents can take at least ten tricks in spades while we are making at least 4♥. I will bid five and let them make the last guess.

STEVE WHITE: 5♥. Wow. Such a guess for both sides at either form of scoring. Surely, we have a good save over any makeable contract they bid, but neither we nor they know what they can make. A club bid would be tempting if it were clearly shortness, but not clear enough, and it might get them to clubs (especially at IMPs). I'll take the low road, hoping they underbid.

APRIL UHLENBURG: 5♥. Someone has points and spades. Let them figure out what to do.

That's my philosophy, too. I like 5♥ better than 4♥ because it takes the auction past the four-level quickly, and I like it better than a side-suit showing 5♦ (or lead-directing 5♣) because it takes away the opponents' ability to use 5♥ as a slam-going bid. At matchpoints, when it's their deal, I just want the opponents to wind up in the wrong contract. I'm less concerned about how wrong it is. Still, 5♥ is rather prosaic. I have a nagging feeling that this is one of those rare problems where a psychic bid is not only reasonable but warranted.

Hope springs eternal:

MARK BOLOTIN: 5♥. Hopefully, it makes. If not, I'll make them guess. Perhaps East and West believe that the five-level belongs to the opponents and will let us play here.

WILLIAM THOMAS: 5♥. I hope this is enough. Maybe I should bid six.

RICK ROWLAND: 5♥. Hope I can get myself doubled.

That's probably hoping for a bit much. West rates to have a fistful of black cards; at least nine and possibly eleven or twelve. We might buy his silence, but it's hard to visualize an honor distribution consistent with the auction where he'd think to himself, "I ought to defend 5♥ doubled with this hand." Here's another set of perhaps too-hopeful 5♥ backers:

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 5♥. Partner is unlikely to have two working aces. Let's make it difficult for them to find their spade (or club) fit.

BARRY PASSER: 5♥. I know they can make either 6♣ or 6♠, but why let *them* find out?

BOB GRINWIS: 5♥. Trying to keep the enemy from finding their spade fit.

Well, sure, but let's be real: West is already quite aware of his side's spade fit, and after our majestic leap to 5♥, East will have a good idea of what's going on, too. Nobody bids a vulnerable five of a major voluntarily for their health. If we can simply keep them from learning of their huge double-fit, then 5♥ will have served its purpose. My hope is that West won't have enough values to bid 6♠ (or, shudder, 5NT to show a two-suiter) and, with a hand too distributional to double, will "settle" for 5♠. I will have every green card at my disposal on the table if 5♠ comes around to me...but that's not a unanimous view from my fellow 5♥ bidders.

STEPHEN COOPER: 5♥. If the opponents compete further, I will bid 6♦ or, if necessary, 7♦. We might have a trick on defense.

TOM WEIK: 5♥. I am more concerned about taking up the opponents' bidding space than in trying to bid scientifically. I expect to make 5♥. If LHO bids 5♠ and it comes around to me, I will bid 6♣, asking for a club lead against 6♠.

Not me. I'm with:

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON (cont.): 5♥. ...I probably won't bid again since I don't want to push them to a making slam.

There's another way 5♥ might win, but (to me, anyway) it's very disturbing. A less experienced West, with lots of black cards and an in-between hand, might have a brutal bidding decision to make over such an unusual bid. If he produces a slow pass or even slower double, it could set East with a serious ethical dilemma. The Laws, as they're currently enforced, make this type of ploy attractive to some, and there is a lively debate among bridge players as to whether it is or isn't cricket, so to speak. Perhaps it's best to have a protective partnership agreement that, if the opponents preempt to five of their major, we are automatically in a forcing auction. If they think we can make something, we agree to believe them. Just a thought.

For the first time in D4MSC history that I can recall, a psychic bid earned a (shared) top award. Or maybe it's not a psych at all.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 3♣. New suits are forcing, and we want partner to lead a club against their spade contract. If we get a chance later, we will support hearts.

KARL BARTH: 3♣. I think this is a standout. If we wind up defending, I want a club lead. Clearly, I intend to bid hearts next. If they bid only 4♠, they'll be missing a slam.¹

JAY APFELBAUM: 3♣. I believe this will be an outlier choice. I am prepared to bid to the six level. The opponents can probably make eleven tricks in a spade contract.

¹ Microsoft Word's new AI-based grammar checker went absolutely ballistic over Karl's response. It appears to want me to replace every word with a meatloaf recipe or something. I think what he wrote is perfectly good bridge English, so I printed it verbatim. Take that, Microsoft!

I know of no other way to ask for a club lead against a spade slam. My plan is to raise hearts on my next bid; this could be to the five-level. If the opponents bid 5♠ I will bid 6♥. I will pass 6♠ and hope the club ruff will prove to be the setting trick.

MARK COHEN: 3♣. No clue how this auction will end! If the opponents end in 6♠ by West, I surely will welcome a club lead. West may have a problem right away - should she double 3♣ or bid her spades? She surely has 10+ black cards, and there's no guarantee we can beat six of either suit. I'll compete to 6♥ gladly and hope I don't push them on.

No 3♣ bidder considers their bid a psych. It's lead-directing, pure and simple. I think that's fair, though I can also see the opponents getting the director involved after the board. Once again, the way the Laws are written and enforced in 2025, I wouldn't want to predict the outcome.

Note that Jay and Mark offered follow-up plans. Both intend to keep bidding at the six level if necessary. Maybe that's a good idea, maybe not, but if you intend to still be bidding when the auction reaches six, then it seems safer to start with 3♣ than with 5♥. Nothing about 3♣ squeals to the opponents that they can take sixteen tricks in at least two different strains. It sounds like we're merely bidding out our hand, and if North takes another bid, it will sound like she's bidding out hers.

Eight loyal Club members chose some number of hearts other than five. Let's hear from them next, starting with a Panelist who has something to say about 3♣, too.

RICH ROTHWART: 4♥. If West bids 4♠, I'll back in with 5♣. I hope partner will read this as lead-directing. A direct 3♣ allows both opponents to cue-bid hearts.

JAY HARE: 4♥. Make 4♠ difficult.

BILL SCHMIDT: 6♥. I expect the opponents to have a makeable slam, so at any form of scoring our objective is to make it as difficult as possible for them to bid it. It doesn't really matter what we can make, so any type of exploration is missing the point.

RUI MARQUES: 6♥. They have a huge double fit in the black suits, and likely almost all the useful goodies. Let them have the last guess.

BARRY COHEN: 6♥. I strongly suspect that we are making 5♥, but we won't be able to play there since they're probably on for five, six, or seven spades. I'm bidding what I expect is a sacrifice and will let them guess what to do. If West bids 6♠, I will bid 7♣ for a club lead.

Anything could work, of course. If we're going to raise hearts, I mildly prefer 5♥ due to the form of scoring. At matchpoints, as we've all heard many times, what matters most is how often you're right. How much (i.e., by how many points) is secondary. 5♥ takes up a ton of room, and even though it essentially advertises in neon lights that the opponents can make something big, they don't know exactly what that might be. It gives the bad guys the chance to go wrong most often, in other words. Maybe that's the best we can do.

What about bidding some number of clubs other than three?

ANDY MUENZ: 5♣. I'm hoping that partner takes this as lead directing with heart support. I would love a club lead against a spade contract. While I'm tempted to

bid 6♣ at matchpoints in case both five-level major contracts are making, I'd be more worried that partner will drop me in 6♣ than 5♣.

DOUGLAS DYE: 5♣. This is McCabe in the extreme. I want a club lead against their likely spade contract, and my action hopefully darkens the opponents' view of their club fit. A key side benefit is that I'm about to learn the level of my partner's trust in our agreements. *[In McCabe, after an opening weak-two and a direct takeout double, responder's new suit bid is fit-showing with values in the bid suit. Usually, one uses McCabe at the three-level, but the partnership can play that the higher the bid, the bigger the fit and the more strength one has in the bid suit. – Ed.]*

R. DAVID WALKER: 5♣. A splinter with a void. This should get us to our best heart contract. If the partnership plays Exclusion Blackwood, we will know how high to bid. Otherwise, partner could cue bid in diamonds or spades. Partner should find a club lead if the opponents outbid us in spades. 4♣ is my second choice if it is agreed to be some form of key-card ask.

There were several one-off and two-off choices this month, and their proponents make good cases for each. Let's take them from low to high.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 2NT. Looking for the ♦A

LEN HELFGOTT: 3♦. Only if it is forcing, planning to go to 5♥.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 4♦. I'd like to find out if anybody has a heart void so I know whether to save at the seven level, or to Lightner Double 6♠ for a club lead. I'd also be fine with the direct 6♥.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 4NT. I'd like to know how many aces partner has. If he has two, I'll try to make slam. I suspect I may be bidding six or seven anyway, since I'm not going to defend on this hand (unless partner has two aces, and they bid to the seven level.) Mostly this is just a variety of blowing smoke, but the information is not useless.

PETE FILANDRO: 5♦. Look at the plusses. (1) If it's passed out, it's playable. (2) If partner raises, it's playable. (3) It denies the opponents use of Blackwood. (4) If either opponent holds ♦xx or even ♦Ax, they might fear bidding on. (5) Since it is April Fools' Day, if LHO declares 6♠ or 7♠, I can Lightner double for a club lead!

Pete earns bonus points for being in the spirit of the holiday. I do think that he and Connie make a good point, though. Maybe if we bid clubs it will cause the opponents to misjudge their degree of double-fit. Maybe hiding our seven-card side suit will do the same. Those are perfectly fine tactics. But do we ever actually need to bid clubs solely for lead-direction purposes? We can always make a Lightner double. You might retort that North could be on lead against 6♠ with 1=6=3=3, and that's true, but if we've bid clubs ostensibly naturally and then used Lightner, shouldn't she lead...a diamond? I mean, I sure would. What else can South be void in, potatoes? If you agree, then if you bid clubs, you can't also use Lightner. You have to pass 6♠, then sit there and hope that partner leads a club and is as surprised as everyone else at the table when you ruff it.

Last Word for Part A goes to a man whose amp goes all the way to 11...barely.

BILL BAUER: 5♥. I am a disciple of Audrey Grant and believe that with an 11-card fit in a competitive auction, the contract belongs at the five-level. So, if I am not

mistaken that $6 + 5 = 11$ trump, then $5\heartsuit$ is the correct call, making another assumption that $5\heartsuit$ is an 11-trick contract. I apologize if my math skills are not what they used to be.

Sorry, Bill, can't help you. I ran out of fingers.

B. What is your call at IMPs?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♣	3	3	50
5♥	6	9	50
6♥	3	5	50
Pass	0	1	40
2NT	0	2	40
3♦	0	1	40
4♥	1	4	40
4NT	1	0	40
5♣	0	1	40
5♦	1	0	40

There was surprisingly little movement between matchpoints and IMPs, but $6\heartsuit$ picked up enough support that I felt awarding it 50 points was justified. What caused a few people to change their choice?

DOUGLAS DYE: $6\heartsuit$ (5♣ at MPs). Initially, I thought $5\heartsuit$ best but quickly realized that, at IMPs, I would not allow opponents to play $5\spadesuit$ or $6\clubsuit$ in any event. Let them guess what to do at a level that makes defending a reasonable choice.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: $6\heartsuit$ (4♦ at MPs). At IMPs, I won't sell out below $7\spadesuit$, which I will Lightner double if partner is on lead.

R. DAVID WALKER: $6\heartsuit$ (5♣ at MPs). Let the opponents be the last to guess what is right to bid and right to lead.

Most comments on Part B, however, were along the lines of:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 4NT (4NT at MPs). I don't see how the form of scoring makes a difference.

I'll field that one. I too went from $5\heartsuit$ to $6\heartsuit$. At matchpoints, I'm content to take up bidding room and then let the opponents muddle through. They will end in $5\heartsuit$ doubled, $5\spadesuit$, $6\clubsuit$, $6\spadesuit$, $7\clubsuit$, or $7\spadesuit$, sometimes when other options are superior. I'll hope that they go wrong often enough to make it worth my while, and that they'll wind up really wrong now and then to give me a top score. If they deftly alight in the right spot despite the big preempt, c'est la vie. It's only one board.

At IMPs, very often the entire match will hinge on this deal. I don't want them to be just a little wrong; e.g., playing in $6\clubsuit$ for 1370 instead of $6\spadesuit$ for 1430 for two whopping IMPs. I want them to be very wrong; e.g., defending $6\heartsuit$ X for (say) 500 instead of making six of anything for 13 or 14 IMPs.

As I expect 6 ♥ doubled to cost no more than 500 (losing a spade, the ♦A, and a diamond ruff on a bad day), and that the opponents have more than that available in even their inferior contracts, I'll go right to six. If I'm being honest, I think I can make a fair case that the theoretically best bid at IMPs is...7 ♥.

The other Club members who switched votes (and commented) were:

JAY HARE: 2NT (4 ♥ at MPs). 6 ♥ is possible if partner has the ♠A.

JIM EAGLETON: 4 ♥ (5 ♥ at MPs). At IMPs, partner might take 5 ♥ to six with the ♣A (and promised two of the top three heart honors.)

APRIL UHLENBERG: 4 ♥ (5 ♥ at MPs). I don't want to go for a number at IMPs. I'd bid 4 ♦ if it showed diamonds and hearts.

Standing their ground but making important points:

KARL BARTH: 3 ♣ (3 ♣ at MPs). It might be even more important to direct a club lead at IMPs because we expect the opponents to bid a lot of spades. It seems almost inevitable that they will make six unless that club ruff materializes.

RICH ROTHWART: 4 ♥ (4 ♥ at MPs). 5 ♥ is more tempting at IMPs, but they may bid 5 ♠ or 6 ♠ before I bid clubs.

ANDY MUENZ: 5 ♣ (5 ♣ at MPs). Here the five level is clearly the right place since I don't want to tempt them into guessing to bid a making 6 ♥ over my six-level bid (especially if they manage to get me on lead).

PETE FILANDRO: 5 ♦ (5 ♦ at MPs). Back to a real-world problem – some of my regular partners would open 2 ♥ frequently on a five-card suit. (♥AQJxx would be more than enough.) I would have a tougher problem.

STEVE WHITE: 5 ♥ (5 ♥ at MPs). Another interesting strategy, at either scoring, is to bid just 4 ♥ now, expecting West to bid 4 ♠. If East makes a slam try, only then throw in a club bid. Far better than clubs before hearts, because the last thing we want to hear is a club raise from partner.

MARK BOLOTIN: 5 ♥ (5 ♥ at MPs). Let's be honest. I can only guess.

An entirely new twist on the term "five-or-seven deal":

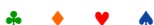
STEPHEN COOPER: 5 ♥. Bid what I think that I can make and bid it fast. I will sell out to 5 ♠ and bid seven if they bid slam.

The funniest part is that I can't come up with much to criticize about that plan. It might work. I'd bid 7 ♣ on the way to 7 ♥, to avoid a partnership-destroying catastrophe against 7 ♠. At the seven level, anything goes. It's not as though we're soliciting partner's input into whether to sacrifice in 8 ♥.

Earning a double-dip on Last Word for April:

BILL BAUER: 5 ♥. This month I am hedging my bets by being consistent. Surely, at least one of my answers will be correct.

If correct means "earned the top award", mission accomplished...though this month, there were several ways to accomplish that goal. Well done, thanks to everyone, and see you again when the April showers bring May flowers.



*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 frm can be found at <http://d4msc.straguzzi.org/>.*