

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

AUGUST 2026 PROBLEM

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This month's problem comes to us courtesy of one of the best bridge books that you've probably never heard of. Frank Stewart's Better Bridge for the Advancing Player, published in 1984, presents 90 at-the-table stories/problems, starting out easy but getting progressively harder. Writing in his familiar folksy style, Stewart takes readers step by step through how an expert gathers evidence, weighs options, and makes winning decisions in the auction and the play. This month's D4MSC hand is problem #10 in the book, and it made quite an impression on me 40 years ago as an example of how good – how really, really, REALLY good – a seemingly nondescript hand can become as the auction proceeds.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

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MATCHPOINTS, NONE VULNERABLE

♠-AQ103 ♥-J8542 ♦-J1073 ♣--

South	West	North	East
		1♦	Double
1♥	1NT	2♦	Pass
?			

A. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♦	4	11	100
6♦	1	0	100
2♠	3	6	90
4♦	2	4	90
5♦	3	0	90
Pass	1	0	80
3♣	0	1	80
4♣	0	1	80

You know the drill: If no call draws a majority of Panelist or Solver support, but one call fetches a plurality of both groups, then it automatically earns the 100-point award. So, yeah, that's what went down here. Cut and dried. Mmm-hmm. I had no

qualms whatsoever. Let's let the 3 ♦ crew explain their choice while I lie on the floor in the fetal position, whimpering softly.

JOHN JONES: 3 ♦. As a practical matter, this will likely draw three quick passes. When an auction has all four players make constructive bids, normally nobody has significant extras. If partner does bid again, we will probably reach game. If we need a spade finesse, it will likely work.

Hmm? Now I'm whimpering so loudly that you can't read the article? Sorry. I'll try to keep it down.

BOB GRINWIS: 3 ♦. I have great support for partner, but my hearts are awful. I would pass, except 3 ♦ should keep them from finding their club fit.

DON DALPE: 3 ♦. Going for a plus score at matchpoints.

PHIL FREIDENREICH: 3 ♦. Showing support.

MARK KINZER: 3 ♦. Just right.

Many 3 ♦ bidders were quite cognizant that something big could be afoot, but they remained disciplined at matchpoints.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3 ♦. I'll take my plus if they let us play it there. I'll compete if they, surprisingly, bid on. If partner takes further action, I have the values to go. Yes, I know we'd want to be in 7 ♦ opposite something like

♠J9x ♥A ♦AKxxxx ♣xxx.

ANDY MUENZ: 3 ♦. This seems like a much tougher problem at IMPs where our seven-loser hand could mesh well enough to make game, especially if West has ♦Kxx, which can be picked off. However, at matchpoints, I'll just nudge things up a little to prevent them from finding their club fit and hope that we have two quick heart losers along with the ♦A.

STEVE WHITE: 3 ♦. At matchpoints, this is enough. It's enough at any scoring except vulnerable at IMPs.

BOB & JOANN GLASSON: 3 ♦. If partner has a perfect hand with no wasted club values, we might make 5 ♦.

JIM EAGLETON: 3 ♦. I don't want to go anywhere, especially to 3 ♣ by the opponents. I realize this hand could have crazy potential if the opponents' hearts are four-four.

Crazy potential is a perfect description. Unfortunately, that potential will be left on the shelf if you choose 3 ♦. As John observed, that call will be greeted by three green cards in rapid-fire order, followed by an opening lead, you putting down the dummy, and partner whimpering louder than I ever did.

Honestly, if you want to go low, I'd prefer this:

RICK ROWLAND: Pass. Playing for a positive score. I'm willing to compete later on.

Passing might allow East-West to find their club fit? Um, okay, good here. Our suit outranks theirs, and I'd wager big bucks that we can take at least as many tricks in diamonds as they can in clubs. Fun corollary: The more excited they get about clubs, the better our prospects in diamonds.

South is still an unlimited responder, so any new suit here is forcing. Two people took advantage to beat East-West to their own suit.

MARK COHEN: 3♣. We've learned so much in six calls. Partner likely has six diamonds and at most one heart. East's spades and West's diamonds are well placed for us. I'll not settle for less than game in diamonds but hope to get more information from partner and end higher.

RICK OLANOFF: 4♣. Limited by my failure to redouble, I hope.

I think Rick means his bid as a splinter raise¹, while Mark is simply making a cheap, forcing bid. Both are aiming high, which is good. Many more people, however, chose to force in the other black suit, which rumor has it is both four cards long and a major that partner has not yet denied.

JAY APFELBAUM: 2♠. This is one of those deals where many tricks can be made due to distribution. 2♠ is forcing. I intend to raise diamonds to the four-level. Unless partner has very strong clubs and weak diamonds, eleven tricks should be easy.

MANOJ K. DEB-ROY: 2♠. Partner may have a spade fit, or she might continue 3♥ with king-third, or she can go back to 3♦.

BILL SCHMIDT: 2♠. Partner is likely to be 2=2=6=3 or 2=1=6=4. 5♦ is possible, but not if she has too many wasted club values. If 2♠ fetches 2NT or 3♣, I'll subside with 3♦. Partner should know not to go on because I didn't redouble. Over anything else, I'll try 4♦. I'm not worried about the opponents competing, because their fit is in clubs.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2♠. I clearly need more information about partner's hand, and the best way to solicit it is 2♠. Assuming that support doubles were still on over the 1NT advance, partner has denied three hearts, but she could still have four spades. The shorter her hearts, the better my hand. Give her:

♠Jxx ♥x ♦AKxxxx ♣Axx

...and we have a diamond slam with 20 HCPs!

Spoiler alert: you can give her even less and she still might make it.

KARL BARTH: 2♠. My initial thought was to raise diamonds immediately, but what's the hurry? Bidding a forcing 2♠ may be what partner needs to hear to get us to 3NT when that is the top spot. The other logical call is a 4♣ splinter, but I'd prefer to have a bit more in HCP.

R. DAVID WALKER: 2♠. Since it's not yet clear whose deal it is, the natural 2♠ is best. Partner has at most two hearts. We can still play in diamonds or notrump.

Even at matchpoints (which Karl cheerfully observed is "not bridge"), I don't think this is the hand to cater to 3NT. Getting there after this start would require guesswork, and diamonds look like a swell trump suit. Besides, 3NT only outscores five of a minor when overtricks are involved. I'm not sure what this hand is telling us, but "Betcha we can make 4NT!" is probably not it.

Now for the big diamond raisers.

¹ I'd treat 4♣ as a splinter too, being a simple soul. 3♣ is natural, forcing and value-showing, thus 4♣ is a splinter. But I've seen some experts use it as a "picture bid" showing very good diamond support in context, with side strength in clubs.

BARRY PASSER: 4♦. At some point I have to show my support. This hand is not quite strong enough to blast into 5♦, but it's close. West's 1NT shows heart honor(s), so I can hope partner is short in hearts.

BILL BAUER: 4♦. With the values to raise partner's suit, I subscribe to the bidding style which says to bid to the level corresponding to the combined number of trumps. If I am wrong, I will immediately cancel my subscription.

STEVE OBRIEN: 4♦. Invite game as ten tricks look assured. If partner has the right distribution, a singleton heart, then she could proceed to game.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 4♦. I have spades behind East and no losers in clubs. Based on the double and 1NT bid, I expect partner to be short in hearts. This hand has a lot of trick-taking potential, but not quite enough to insist on game.

All of the above believe that 4♦ is highly invitational but not forcing. One Panelist, however, begs to differ while channeling his inner Victor Frankenstein:

DOUGLAS DYE: 4♦. Partner is advertising a good six-card suit and the auction suggests she is short in hearts. My hand has become a monster. My first obligation is to let partner know we have a big diamond fit. If she control-bids in clubs I will settle for 5♦, but if she bids hearts, I will cheerfully cooperate in slam investigation. This hand is too good for a 5♦ rebid, and bidding either black suit here only muddies the waters.

Now that I've had a month to think about it, I suppose 4♦ ought to be forcing. If it were invitational, then how could you make a forcing raise? We're unlimited, after all, and the usual two-step approach – first cue-bid their suit, then raise – won't fly because the opponents have rudely failed to bid a suit, the fiends. Karl Barth suggests bidding 2♠, then pulling 2NT to 3♦, which "sounds like a strong raise". Maybe, but I suspect that will be the last sound anyone hears on this auction.

Three Panelists went straight for the brass ring.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 5♦. Probably the right spot. Even if I knew how to be scientific there's no reason that will help.

ED SHAPIRO: 5♦. No strategy, just bidding what I think we can make. 4♦ might be closer, but I haven't bid where my strength lies, so I'll just bid the limit myself rather than setting partner up to make the wrong choice based on insufficient information.

STEPHEN COOPER: 5♦. I am liking my hand more as the auction progresses. My black cards look right for game and partner's red cards seem right. "DAMN THE TORPEDOS, FULL SPEED AHEAD!"

I had chosen 2♠ when I posted the problem, but now I'd like to take a mulligan. I think 5♦ must be better. I'd love to get partner's input, but honestly – after we bid hearts first and spades second, how is she to know that ♠Jx and ♥x are exactly what we're looking for? And even if there's a better spot, how will we find it? As we just learned, it's not even obvious how to make a forcing diamond raise. I think our expert partner is a favorite to take at least 11 tricks, and making a minor-suit game on 20-23 combined HCP can't be a poor matchpoint result.

Which brings us back to Frank Stewart's excellent book. The framing story for the problem put you in a first-time partnership with "Ralph", a very good player at the local club. You were having an excellent game, in part because you were both bending over backwards not to saddle the other with inscrutable bids or impossible decisions. When this deal arose, Stewart covered pretty much every salient point the club made: a big fit, the likely favorable location of any missing diamond or spade honors, North's almost certain shortness in hearts, and the immense difficulty of conveying all of this good news to partner.

So, the protagonist bid 5 ♦ too, right? Nope. For dramatic and didactic purposes, Stewart had you bid 6 ♦! The opponents doubled, of course, and Ralph's cards weren't exactly ideal...in fact, he held a minimum for his bidding. Declarer was faced with the task of taking 12 tricks with this (rotated for convenience):

♠-AQ103

♥-J8542

♦-J1073

♣-

♠-72

♥-9

♦-AQ9642

♣-KQ73

Let me turn it over to Frank for what happened next.

They led a trump at him, not a bad shot, and you watched the play unfold to your satisfaction. Dummy won the first trick as Ralph's RHO refused to cover. Ralph carefully led a heart; RHO won and returned the ♦K. Ralph won it, took the spade finesse successfully, ruffed a heart, and led to the ♠A. He ruffed another heart, both opponents following, ruffed a club, ruffed a fourth heart to establish the fifth one, and called for the ♣K. LHO covered and dummy ruffed with its last trump. Ralph then discarded his other low club on dummy's established heart, ruffed a spade, and claimed. Making six!

Stewart noted that a club return at trick three would have removed one of dummy's entries prematurely, but then declarer could have ruffed three clubs in dummy.

I don't think Frank Stewart would advocate a 6 ♦ bid on South's hand in real life. I sure wouldn't. But the lesson is nonetheless sound. Point count alone can't tell you how many tricks you can take, particularly when two shapely hands have a huge fit. Sometimes you have to look at your hand, visualize what partner has shown, make a few assumptions from the opponents' calls, and bid what you think you can make. That last part is especially true when you, rather than partner, are the one in a better position to decide. 6 ♦ is a stretch, but 5 ♦ gives you a bit of safety in case something

isn't as you expect. Look at the two hands again and tell me: if you bid and made 5 ♦ on those ratty cards, wouldn't you expect at worst a shared top?

I honored the Club's established scoring rules and gave 3 ♦ the top score, but I also took some director's discretion and awarded 100 points (and this month's Last Word) to the only person who duplicated the bidding from the story.

PETE FILANDRO: 6 ♦. I've been a lone bidder before, but I like the percentages. The four critical cards are the ♦AK, the ♠K, and the ♥A. My simulations show that the ♠K is not in the West, so whenever West's diamond stopper is the king, I'm nearly gin for six. If West instead has ♦A, I have the combined chances of the ♥A in North (probably singleton) or, more likely, a black suit lead (probably a club) letting me pitch partner's heart on the third spade. A red suit lead from East will probably not look appealing to him.

Perhaps Pete and Ralph will pair up at the Valley Forge sectional next week. I hope to see you there, and we'll definitely reconvene at the D4MSC in September.



*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 <https://d4msc.straguzzi.org/>*