

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

APRIL 2018 PROBLEM
NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

Do you know how the date of Easter is determined every year? It's the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the traditional first day of spring, March 21st. The earliest it can occur is March 22nd (which hasn't happened since 1818 and won't again until 2285), and the latest is April 25th (last time: 1943; next time: 2038).)

*Due to a quirk of the calendar, it's been 62 years since Easter Sunday fell on April Fools' Day. This year, those two holidays also correspond with another major American festival: the monthly publication of the new **District 4Spot**. So, I thought it would be a good time to present a very unusual bidding problem that I'd been saving for the right moment. It involves elements of logic, faith, and trust, but mostly it's about working your way through an 'impossible' auction in which somebody at the table has either bid like a fool or is playing you for one. Ready, peeps? Off we go...*

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

MATCHPOINTS, BOTH VULNERABLE

♠-QJ9652 ♥-J5 ♦-8643 ♣-6

South	West	North	East
Pass	1♦	1♥	1♠
Pass	1NT	Double	3♦*
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
?			

* - INVITATIONAL

What is your call?

CALL	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♥	7	16	100
Pass	3	22	90
3♠	2	7	80
4♥	0	2	80
4♠	1	0	80

MICHAEL SHUSTER: Pass. Partner's doubles are not consistent with my diamond length and the East-West auction, but that is not my problem.

CHRIS KAUFMAN: 3♥. I don't understand partner's bidding. If he has such a strong hand, why didn't he start with a double? If he has a big two-suiter, why didn't he bid his clubs or rebid his hearts?

ROSELYN & SAUL TEUKOLSKY: 3♦. Something in this auction doesn't compute. Did East psych his 1♦ bid? This seems to be the moment to reveal our hand.

DON DALPE: Pass. My first reaction is to abstain. Did the 3♦ card fall out of the box by accident?

KEN COHEN: Pass. If partner has a strong five-five or better, then we are going to have a lengthy conversation after this board. Being a pro for a very long time, I have often saved partner from having done something stupid, but I'm not going to do it in a bidding forum. This hand simply does not compute.

No, it doesn't. Bridge bidding is a marvel of linguistics: with just 15 words and 38 allowable phrases, we're able to paint a more-or-less descriptive picture of over 53 octillion hands. But, the language of bridge is also incredibly fragile. Just one teeny little glitch, by any of the four players, can reduce the auction to a twitching, malfunctioning mush. It's like an android from Westworld, just not as photogenic.

It's ironic that Ken and the Teuks both used the phrase "does not compute", because South on this deal was a Bridge Base Online robot who had to make sense of a senseless auction. The result was, by far, the longest "tank" that I have ever seen a bridge bot make, as it tried futilely for more than 20 seconds to generate a 52-card layout that made even a little bit of sense. In a server farm somewhere in the cloud, smoke began pouring out of one of the racks.

Where was your humble director during all of this? I was North, sitting there innocently with:

♦AK ♥A108732 ♦10 ♣AJ108

You may or may not approve of my bidding, but personally I think each of my three calls were easy. First, I showed hearts. Then I suggested four clubs and a good hand. Finally, I said I didn't want to defend three diamonds undoubled at matchpoints, and would my dense silicon partner kindly do the right thing? Ideally, I would have a third spade here, but this is what they dealt me. In short, neither North nor South did anything (egregiously) wrong. If you're so inclined, figure out from here whether East or West was the culprit, and what one call was most likely to blame.

Here in the corporeal world, our Club experts were largely divided between trying for a penalty and getting out safely in a probable fit. The Panelists established a narrow majority for 3♥, so it earned this month's top award.

TOM WEIK: 3♥. Partner has hearts and clubs and a good hand. I can't do any more than indicate my preference. Defending seems unwise despite some potential for club ruffs.

STEVE WHITE: 3♥. The opponents' bidding makes it seem almost certain that North has eleven rounded cards. It's slightly tempting to pass 3♦ doubled, per the Law of Total Tricks and matchpoint scoring. But, as Edgar Kaplan said, takeout doubles should be taken out.

JAY APFELBAUM: 3♥. This hand might play well as dummy. Partner can ruff clubs in my hand. He should be six-four, or possibly even seven-four.

ED SHAPIRO: 3♥. Passing requires more stomach than I have, without at least a low diamond honor. 3♦ gets me too high if it's wrong.

CRAIG ROBINSON: 3♥. Partner has a big club-heart hand. If the opponents think to lead a trump, I have a near-yarborough, so I will keep this as low as possible.

PETE FILANDRO: 3♥. Let's do distribution first. East and West have at least four diamonds apiece, so North has at most one. West has at least one spade and East five, so again partner has at most one. North does not have seven hearts or he would have rebid them, and if he were six-six, he'd have bid 2♣ rather than double first. Thus, North is 1=6=1=5, West 1=4=4=4, and East 5=1=4=3.

Now, strength. I'll give West 12 HCP for his opener, East 9 for his invitation, and thus North has about 15. Perhaps partner has ace-king-ten-sixth of hearts and ace-king-jack-fifth of clubs. It's too dangerous to pass, which might make on a high cross-ruff. 3♥ might make or go down one.

Several Solvers, including Mark Kinzer, Daniel Droz, Steve Gibbon, and Mark Bolotin, applied similar deductive reasoning to arrive at roughly the same shapes as Pete did.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♥. It sounds like we'll need four club tricks, including my ruff(s), to beat 3♦ doubled. I don't think so.

KARL BARTH: 3♥. Partner, who might be staring at a diamond void, wants me to make a noise. It seems unlikely that RHO psyched that spade bid. I have tolerance for hearts, so I'll own up to that.

MARK KINZER: 3♥. Might as well retreat to our known fit.

CHRIS KAUFMAN (CONT.): 3♥. ...I'm too puzzled just to accept -670, or to take a stab at 4♥, so I'll just settle for a meek part-score.

CHRISTINE SGRO: 3♥. I feel like I have few if any defensive tricks, and we'd need five to set 3♦.

WALTER BELL: 3♥. It sounds like partner is six-six.

BARRY COHEN: 3♥. I expect the opponents to lead a heart. I might not have a trick at all for partner.

JIM EAGLETON: 3♥. I have no interest in defense. A dummy reversal with spade ruffs is a big threat. I might not take a trick, and in the unlikely event I do, I might return an unhelpful trump through declarer, rather than the necessary heart or club.

TODD HOLES: 3♥. But, defending 3♦ doubled crossed my mind.

NORMAN SILVERS: 3♥. Best of a lot of bad choices.

Most of the 3♥ bidders (which include me) are simply hoping to find a playable landing spot. That's understandable, though honestly: if the bidding is to be believed, this is hardly an embarrassing dummy for hearts. Partner is twisting our arms vulnerable at the three level, and we do have jack-low of trumps (opposite a likely six-bagger) plus a club singleton. This next choice feels a little too optimistic, though:

JOHN VOLPEL: 4♥. Partner must be at least six-five in hearts and clubs. He should get at least one club ruff from my hand, plus the nice jack of hearts.

STEVE GIBBON: 4♥. North might be 1=6=0=6. A club ruff or two in dummy might be enough for ten tricks.

A smaller contingent went running for the other major. Along with the Teukolskys, who suspected presciently that something about East's 1♣ bid smelled, we had:

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 3♠. We tried to construct a hand for North consistent with the bidding. If partner had six hearts, he might have rebid them at some point. If he had five clubs, he'd have bid them at his second turn. If partner is only 5=4 in the rounded suits with no more than one diamond, he must have three or four spades. So, it's April Fools' Day and East has psyched 1♠.

BOB GRINWIS: 3♠. Takeout doubles should be taken out. Second choice is 3♥.

BARRY PASSER: 3♠. Natural and to play. East could have a miserable four-card suit. I'm not worried about it.

AL SHRIVE: 3♠. I expect partner to be 3=5=1=4 or 3=6=0=4 with up to 18 HCP.

But...but...we have six spades and East is promising five! RHO could've made a negative double if he had only four. Mind you, the alternative is believing that our presumed expert partner has a ginormous two-suiter that he chose to describe via the sequence "hearts-double-double." Which is absurd, as Filandro and the Glassons meticulously point out. So, what's going on?

Given that today is Easter Sunday, perhaps we should turn for guidance to William of Ockham, the Franciscan friar-philosopher who devised Occam's Razor nearly 800 years ago: "Entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily," he posited. Or, more plainly, "When faced with two or more theories, prefer the solution requiring the fewest assumptions." Or, plainer still: "Keep it simple, stupid!"

Look, somebody obviously goofed. If you choose to believe it's partner, well, you may have very good reasons for doing so in real life. "Partner is an ignoramus" certainly meets Occam's criteria. But, this is an expert bidding forum. As K. Cohen put it, we're not supposed to be presented with the problem of whether to save North from his own stupidity. Even on April Fools' Day, I wouldn't stoop to that.

An alternative explanation for the nutty auction, of which I think Occam would approve, is that East has only four spades and either didn't notice North's 1♥ overcall, or simply forgot to make a negative double. And, so it was. (East was human, and I never did find out which it was: as soon as the 13th trick of the deal was turned, he and his robot partner were whisked away to their next table.)

Winning this month's award for Most Admirable Partnership Trust is:

RICH ROTHWARF: 4♠. Partner has shortness in diamonds, and he should not be five-five or better in hearts and clubs. For his bidding, he should have at least three spades with extra values.

Er, sorry Rich. I only had a doubleton, but at least they were the ace-king. Good defense, which had better include a trump shift at some point, defeats 4♠. If the opponents greedily continue diamonds at trick two, however, trying to tap out dummy's trump honors: kablooey! South will elope easily with ten tricks.

What about defending? Partner did double twice, and whether or not you consider his second double to be for takeout, he certainly can't be too annoyed if we choose to convert it for penalties.

KEN COHEN (cont.): Pass. ...If the opponents have made normal bids, that leaves partner with at least 1=6=1=5 shape. He should have bid his second suit [at the appropriate level] rather than double the first time. But, I'm passing at matchpoints

with expectation that partner has strong to very strong clubs. If I'm right, I would expect to score very well, possibly a top.

DAVE WACHSMAN: Pass. North must have the top clubs along with the ace-queen of hearts. I expect to beat it one or two tricks, which is a better result than going down in 3♥ against a forcing defense.

RUI MARQUES: Pass. Going for +200 at matchpoints. I ran a simulation on this to confirm, and unless East is psyching his 1♠ bid, we have a better chance of setting 3♦ than of making 3♥ or 3♣.

ANDY MUENZ: Pass. Glad I didn't open 2♠. The only place to go is 3♥, but this is unlikely to be right unless North is 2=6=0=5 and 3♦ makes. Pass leaves open the possibility of the magic +200. At IMPs, I probably chicken out in 3♥.

LYNN HARRIS: Pass. Stuck. If I had another heart, I'd bid 3♥. As it is, I'll hope that partner has the ♣A and we can get a ruff or two.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: Pass. North's double of 1NT indicates that he's not one-suited or two-suited. If East's 1♠ bid is for real, then partner somehow appears to have a couple of diamonds plus a pretty good hand.

DANIEL DROZ: Pass. With the East-West diamonds seemingly four-four, leading trumps if and when I get in should stop their cross-ruff. Then, partner's high cards might take the setting tricks. Frustrating problem, but a bottom is only a bottom.

CATHY STRAUSS (with JOHN JONES): Pass. I don't know if partner can make 3♥, and 3♦ making seems unlikely as well. This is our best chance at a plus score.

Note to self: People named Bill in our district like to play for penalties. To wit:

BILL SCHMIDT: Pass. At matchpoints, I can't pull to 3♥ when there's an obvious path to five tricks on defense. If I did pull, I'd try 4♥, but that's too speculative.

BILL PORT: Pass. Partner must have some good cards to double twice opposite a silent partner. Even though this hand fails the Rule of Nine to convert a takeout double for penalties, the chance it will lead to a plus score is excellent. *[The Rule of Nine: Add the bidding level, the number of trumps you hold, and the number of trump honors you hold; if the total is 9 or more, a penalty pass is warranted. Here, it's only 7: three for the level, plus four for our four low trumps. - NS]*

BILL BAUER: Pass. My forte is doubling opponents into game at matchpoints. On a serious note, I hope partner finds the ♣A lead and can read my ♣6.

BILL FOSTER (and BILL BURNETT): Pass. I hope partner has a diamond to lead. Maybe West will run back to 3♠ with doubleton support!

Two passing panelists sound a note of caution. Both Michael Shuster and Don Dalpe believe that North's double of 1NT showed diamonds -- that is, it was penalty-oriented rather than for takeout. On BBO, this sort of misunderstanding is not a worry. You can hover your pointer over any bid in the on-screen bidding box to see its meaning, and they listed the double as takeout. In the real world, it's something to discuss with your partner.

As you might expect from an auction this tortured, there was no demonstrably correct call at the table. 3♦, 3♥ and 3♣ all might make or go down, depending on the opening lead and subsequent defense. The scoring is generous to account for this fact, as well as for the deliberately tricky nature of the problem.

Let's give the final word this month to a hitherto unknown D4MSC participant who, curiously, shares an email address with Chris Marlow.

A FOOL TO BE NAMED LATER: 3♠. My logic is this. Partner cannot be very long in both hearts and clubs; he'd have bid an Unusual 2NT immediately or bid 2♣ [or a 3♣ picture-bid -- NS] over 1NT. He can't be extremely strong, or he'd have started with a double. His final double is asking me to bid. That leaves North with a maximum overcall and shape outside of diamonds, including something in spades. East either psyched 1♠ or chose to forego a negative double with only four spades. Given the vulnerability and the scoring, I would imagine partner to hold something like:

♠xxx ♥AKQxx ♦x ♣AKxx

If East does hold five good spades and we give up a big number, then I am going to use the points I mentioned above to blame partner for the result. Moral of the story: don't make partner guess.

That's always good advice, even on a date where one traditionally tries to make one's friends guess wrongly. Happy Spring, everyone; see you next month.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

Unlike the previous three months, the D4MSC Office didn't receive any notification of a Club regular performing spectacularly well in any national bidding forums. However, just before we went to press, we learned through the grapevine that our own Al Shrive and Don Dalpe won the NABC 10K Knockout Teams at the recently-concluded Philadelphia Nationals. Congratulations!

As always, the District did a phenomenal job of organizing and running the NABC this year. Well done to all the committee chairs for their months of hard work and planning. Attending a Philly NABC is such an awesome experience that I would suggest we offer to the ACBL to host it every spring, save for the fact that I don't want the Glassons and the rest of the District 4 leadership to hunt me down and murder me in my sleep. But other than that, yeah.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

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/>