

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JANUARY 2018 PROBLEM NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

Remember the 1975 cult film Rollerball, starring James Caan? It involved a popular and brutally violent sporting competition in which armored gladiators competed mercilessly for a coveted annual championship. Did you know that the movie was set in the distant future year of 2018? Well, here we are.

Near as I can tell, the closest present-day analogue to rollerball is the **2018 District 4 MSC Challenge**, which kicks off this month. Granted, it's not terribly violent, and you don't have to don body armor to enter your solutions. Unless you really want to, that is. I won't judge. But, the D4MSC is unquestionably the most prestigious annual sporting competition on the planet, sort of, and a record 60 District members have tossed their hats, er, helmets into the ring for the January kickoff. If you're not among them, it's not too late to join in February or even March -- remember, only your ten best monthly scores count towards your annual total. The Panelists' and Solvers' champions earn eternal fame, glory, two free session entries to a District 4 regional event, and an autographed photo of James Caan. (Psst, Allison...see what you can do about that last one, okay?) Good luck and Happy New Year!

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

IMPS, NONE VULNERABLE

♠-KJ2 ♥-K843 ♦-A642 ♣-Q2

<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>
	Pass	1♦	Pass
1♥	2♣	Dbl*	Pass
3♣	Pass	3♠	Pass

* - SUPPORT DOUBLE (3-CARD ♥ RAISE)

B. What call do you make?

CALL	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
4♦	8	19	100
3NT	3	15	90
4♠	1	5	70
4♥	0	4	70
5♦	0	3	70
Pass	1	1	60

Normally, I choose problems for our MSC that I personally find difficult, with at least three different plausible solutions, any of which can be deemed "right" under certain

circumstances. This time around, however, I think there's one demonstrably correct call. (Did I find it at the table? No. Go away.) And, I believe that most of us know deep down what it is. The question is, do you have the courage to make it? We set sail in 2018 with a problem designed to separate the men from the boys, the women from the girls, the brave from the meek, and the tigers from the sheep.

Leading off this month, roaring or bleating depending on your point of view, are the folks who feel that a belated 3NT on this tortured sequence promises no better of a stopper than the one we hold:

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 3NT. This is a good problem. My cue-bid said I wanted to play game but wasn't sure where. Partner's 3♠ bid denies five diamonds, and it avoided making a strain suggestion of hearts or notrump. Since I've denied as many as four spades (I would have bid 2♠ over partner's support double), North should logically be showing a partial spade stopper, although it helps to have discussed it. In any case, the ♣Qx begs to play notrump from our side.

ROSELYN AND SAUL TEUKOLSKY: 3NT. An immediate jump to 3NT over the double would have shown a good club stopper. This sequence shows doubt, and if partner has no help in the club suit, he should pull to 4♦. (Because South wants neither to play in hearts or spades, we must have diamond support.) This understanding takes a well-oiled partnership!

RUI MARQUES: 3NT. North's 3♠ probably does not guarantee four cards, since I pretty much denied a spade suit when I bid 3♣. Sounds like he's scavenging for a 3NT contract but doesn't have a full stopper. I'll be happy to catch this dummy:

♠Axx ♥Axx ♦KQxx ♣Jxx

...but if he has something less juicy, I'll need some well-placed cards.

JOHN HEMMER: 3NT. Partner bypassed 3♥. Since I asked for a club stopper, 3NT should advertise half a stopper.

CHRIS MARLOW: 3NT. My belief is that, if I didn't bid 3NT the last round, and I'm not interested in finding a spade fit, and I didn't sign off in a heart game, and I didn't show a diamond fit, then what other type of hand could I have but one with scattered values and a partial club stopper? At least, that's my story to partner when the opponents run off the first five or six club tricks and we had game elsewhere.

BILL SCHMIDT: 3NT. Right-siding the contract if partner has a club holding like ace-low or king-low-low. If I had a double-stop in clubs, I would have bid 3NT last round. If partner doesn't have club help and corrects to four of a minor, we'll have next month's MSC problem.

MARK BOLOTIN (with WILLIAM KILMER): 3NT. If North is looking for assistance for his half-stopper, I've got it. If he's something like 4=3=5=1 with extras, he'll pull it.

Other three notrump bidders are less sanguine about their chances, but they see no better option than to bid Bob Hamman's favorite contract and hope for the best.

PHIL FREIDENREICH: 3NT. We have the high-card points. We'll see whether we can develop the tricks.

JUDITH STILLINGER: 3NT. No good options. I don't want to be at the four-level on this distribution with only seven trumps. I'll bail out at 3NT and hope my partner has club help.

BARRY DEHLIN: 3NT. If good bidding problems have at least three viable solutions, this must be a great problem, because I considered five different calls: pass, 3NT, 4♥, 4♠, and 5♦....I'm not optimistic about 3NT, but on a good day partner will have the near-perfect cards to run off nine tricks with only one club stopper.

Another sign of a good bidding forum problem is the length of the experts' replies. Barry was one of eleven respondents to produce 150 or more words of analysis. I had to do quite a bit of editing for the article, usually snipping away points that others had made. One regular Panelist, however, tackled the salient issues so well that it's worth quoting him (almost) in full.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 3NT. There are a bunch of issues to cover here.

The first question is whether to bid at all, and the answer is that we must. 3♣ established a game force. Partner can bid [a waiting] 3♠ here with extra values. There just isn't a positive expectation for stopping on a dime.

The second question is whether North's 3♠ promises four spades, which could make a raise attractive. To answer that, we have to reexamine our last action. 3♣ was forcing, but 2♠ would have been natural and forcing. Since we've denied spades, partner can introduce the suit on fewer than four cards without an expectation of being raised. Thus, while 3♠ will often deliver four spades, it need not.

Next question: with what sort of hands would North bid this way? The key here is that 3♠ preempted our ability to set hearts trump with 3♥. With any hand containing five diamonds, and on many with four decent diamonds, partner would have bid 3♦ to give us room. We could still get to a four-three spade fit after 3♦ when our hand next bids 3♠. *[A very good point. -- NS]*

All this leaves me with the conclusion that partner is showing a balanced hand, probably with terrible hearts, that didn't want to grab 3NT. Possibly 4=3=4=2, but I think more likely 3=3=4=3 with chunky spades and an anti-positional club holding like king-low-low. With a positional¹ club holding of our own and a balanced hand, we should suggest 3NT. We didn't bid it last round, so partner knows we had other strains in mind, and he need not pass if his hand is radically different from what I've suggested. (P.S.: Sorry I wrote you a book, but this problem covers an area of bidding theory that isn't well understood.)

Michael's treatise is thorough, well-thought out, and compelling. I almost feel that I should apologize to him that 3NT, which is what I tried at the table, went down two tricks. Granted that I was playing with one of BBO's army of robots as usual, and that the bots are notoriously impervious to compelling bidding logic. But, when you see North's actual hand, you'll also observe that it was hard to fault its bidding this time.

¹ A quick word about "positional" vs. "anti-positional" holdings, for newer players. A *positional* holding is one that might enable the declaring side to take an extra trick if it's protected from the opening lead. King-low is the most famous example, but queen-low is often positional too. Note that if North has ace-low, ace-third, or king-third in clubs, these are *anti-positional* holdings -- North can expect to win one club trick on this auction whether he's dummy or declarer. But, if South has queen-low opposite, the combined club holding is worth two tricks if South declares and West, who presumably has the missing high honor, leads his suit.

Alternately, West can save a trick by not leading clubs, but that concedes a *tempo* -- South's club stopper is still intact, so she can now afford to lose the lead once while setting up her tricks. -- NS

Anyway, with respect to our notrump bidders, there's nothing particularly courageous about bidding 3NT on a balanced hand with game values and half a stopper. That's just bridge. If you go down, you go down. We're talking super gutsy, out-of-the-box, tigers vs. sheep stuff here. How about:

RICK OLANOFF: 4♠. Let Moyses play it. [Sonny Moyses, former editor of *The Bridge World* and a proponent of four-three trump fits, after whom such "Moyesian" fits are named. You'll be seeing that word a lot below. -- NS]

TED LEVY: 4♠. North is 4=3=4=2 with no high club honor. Suck it up and bid the spade game; partner needs practice playing four-three fits. Who knows, it might even make.

ANDY MEUNZ: 4♠. Partner should have four spades since this is his first opportunity to show them. Between hearts and spades, I'd rather play the four-three fit in which the three-card holding is with the shorter clubs. The other advantage is that this puts the club bidder on lead. He might have king-jack-sixth, which could give us a trick or a tempo.

DAVE WACHSMAN: 4♠. At IMPs, it's too risky to fail to bid a game that is likely to be bid at the other table. North declined notrump in favor of disclosing a four-card spade suit.

Panelist Rick Rowland also chose 4♠, without comment. If partner is guaranteeing four spades, as this contingent believes, then this would be an attractive option. And, I must admit it takes a certain level of intrepidity to risk a three-three fit. But, as others noted, we pretty much denied four spades of our own, so the chance that partner is merely marking time by bidding his strongest suit (♠AQx, say) makes 4♠ feel more risky than gutsy.

What about game in the other major, where we can at least count on having more trumps than the opponents? Where does that stand on the man-mouse scale?

BOB GRINWIS: 4♥. I hate the four-three fit at this level, but presumably my 3♣ bid asked partner to bid 3NT with a club stopper, and he did not. We have the points for game.

JAMES L. MASON: 4♥. Partner is showing first or second round control in spades. Go for it!

BARRY COHEN: 4♥. I'll try a major suit game. If partner has four spades, he'll have a maximum of two clubs, so 4♥ will be fine. If he doesn't have four spades, then I obviously don't want to play in spades! Second choice is 4♦.

Barry's math is non-obvious but impeccable. When playing a four-three fit, the aim is to take ruffs in the three-trump hand to keep control. If we have a four-three fit in spades, then partner can have at most two clubs (because with 4=3=3=3 shape, he would have opened 1♣, not 1♦.) Therefore, suit strength aside, if spades are a playable trump suit, then so must hearts be. Would either 4♥ or 4♠ have made on the actual layout? No, but hey: we deal with hypotheticals here in the D4MSC.

Three notrump...four hearts...four spades. C'mon people. These are obvious choices. Show some backbone!

AL SHRIVE: 5♦. We could opt for the correct Moysian contract of 4♥, but our own hearts are very poor. Having to ruff clubs with North's heart honors might be fatal. I'll try for the 11-trick game.

DANIEL DROZ: 5♦. Partner could have bid 3♦ or 3♥, so I would treat 3♠ as showing extras. I really hope that a 4=3=4=2 14-count does not qualify as "extras". I think North should be 4=3=5=1 or similar; or, if instead he's balanced, he'll have a lot of extra strength. The makes our diamond support and fitting spade honors a great catch for partner, who'll almost always have a play for eleven tricks.

Now we're talking! Jumping gallantly to 5♦ shows that we are indeed men (or women) of action, and that we are not to be trifled with. Unfortunately, I also think it shows a way stronger hand than this. Keep in mind that, other than denying the values for an initial jump shift, our hand is unlimited. Gallantry aside, there's a better way. Remember, we're playing IMPs, so whatever call we choose, we'll have to justify it bravely to both our partner and our teammates.

DOUGLAS DYE: Pass. Systemically, this is a tough one. I had enough to cue-bid in search of 3NT, but now my hand has gotten worse. At IMPs, we'd like to bid game, but 3NT is out, 5♦ requires a perfect minimum with a stiff club, and 4♠ is unlikely without significant extra high-card strength. Did 3♣ promise another call? I don't think so, but my partner might!

BARRY PASSER: Pass. Give partner a good holding for his bidding, like:

♠AQxx ♥Axx ♦Kxxx ♣Jx

...and even with this *perfectly* fitting hand, all we can make is 3♠.

Yikes! Okay, um, maybe I got a little carried away with the tigers-and-sheep rhetoric. Let's dial it back a bit. We can't pass. Yes, its unquestionably brave, and yes, 3♠ could be our last plus score. Passing might net us a five or six-IMP swing on a good day. But, it's too deep of a position to take at teams. Partner might be patterning out with a strong 4=3=5=1 hand in the belief that 3♣ established a force to at least 3NT. He won't be pleased to see a green card come out of your bidding box. Worse, the next time partner holds that hand, he'll invent some nebulous cue-bid or to jump into the proverbial stratosphere, for fear you'll pass again.

There's only one call left. This problem may be all about separating the brave from the meek. But once in a while, being meek is brave:

DON DALPE: 4♦. If partner had ♣Kx, he'd have bid 3NT. He might have the stiff ♣K but in that case 5♦ might still be the better contract. With no fast source of tricks, bidding 3NT is right only if partner has ♣Ax and chose to stall, in the hopes of making me declarer.

CHRIS KAUFMAN: 4♦. Ugh. I'm not bidding 3NT; that's almost certainly not making. Pass might even be the right call, but it's not good for partnership relations. Rather than pick four of a major to end the auction, I'll just show partner what I have. Whatever he then bids, the result is his fault.

BILL PORT (with MARK KINZER): 4♦. Showing opening values, four diamonds, and no club stopper. If partner has extras, he can bid again. [Kinzer notes that partner has yet to make a non-forcing bid, so 18-19 HCP cannot be ruled out. -- NS.]

Yeah, this looks right to me, despite how enticing Shuster's and the Teuks' logic is for 3NT. Both partners have all but yelled across the table, "Bid 3NT with a club stopper, you imbecile!" Neither obliged.

Besides, even if we do manage to take a club trick, either because we lucked into a textbook "split stopper" like ♣Jxx/♣Qx, or because West leads a low club from ace-king-long, where are our eight fast winners coming from? We have slow values, non-existent intermediates, and nothing resembling a source of tricks. The moment we lose the lead, the club barrage begins. This feels like the sort of parlay only a tiger could love. Given a second chance, I'm going ovine here, as are:

BILL SEDLIS: 4♦. I'd like to bid 4♠, which should be a better Moysian fit than 4♥, but there is no guarantee North has four spades. My values are too soft for 3NT.

JIM EAGLETON: 4♦. I'm not expecting three-three splits in either major.

STEVE YOUNGER (joined by **WALTER MITCHELL** and **HOWARD WACHTEL**): 4♦. 3♠ denies a club stopper so 3NT is out. Diamonds look like our only fit.

Don't kid yourself: it takes courage at IMPs to bid a nonforcing four of a minor when you know you have the high-card points for game. If your teammates announce "minus 400" when you compare scores, you're going to have three pairs of eyeballs staring daggers at you.

Speaking of which: is 4♦ forcing? Most respondents believed that 3♣ established a game-force. Some bridge theorists advocate that it doesn't pay to be able to slam on the brakes in four of a minor on auctions like this, and thus "game force" means GAME-force. An opposing school says that we're forced only to 3NT, after which it's every man for himself. Here's a quartet of Panelists in the latter clique:

PETE FILANDRO (with **BILL BURNETT** concurring on the bidding plan): 4♦. Non-forcing, by the way. With my "death holding" club length and probable wasted ♣Q, I tread lightly. If partner has the extras to bid on, he'll offer 4♥. I will reject that Moysian fit in favor of 4♠, where our trumps are stronger. I've denied four spades, so if partner bid 3♠ on only three, he'll return to 5♦, which is where we'll play.

TOM WEIK: 4♦. Although I have cue-bid, 4♦ is not forcing. North is likely 4=3=4=2. If he has minimum values, he'll pass 4♦, which is the safest strain and should prove high enough. With extras or a singleton club, he'll bid again, possibly 4♥.

JAY APFELBAUM: 4♦. No club stoppers. Probably two club losers. A four-three major game is possible but against the odds. Take the plus score.

KEN COHEN: 4♦. Is 4♦ forcing? I had this discussion once with Rick Rowland, who wanted to play it as forcing. I said that it should be non-forcing. In a very short period, we played four of a minor with three top losers three times for +130. After the third occurrence, I asked him if he now thought non-forcing was a better way to play it, and he agreed. It's difficult to argue with three very positive results.

The problem certainly attracted its share of gallows humor:

ED SHAPIRO (with **BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON** and **JOHN VOLPEL**): 4♦. Finally getting around to showing our known eight-card fit. I would have bid an invitational 3♦ on my previous turn [as would have Volpel -- NS.] But since I didn't, I had better honor my own game-force.

LYNN HARRIS: 4♦. I think partner is 4=3=4=2. I hope he passes, because I'd be surprised to make five.

GLEN HOFFING: 4♦. But, 3♦ was probably the last contract we could make.

JOHN JONES: 4♦. I think this is forcing. I wish it weren't.

Shapiro, Schwaidelson, Wachtel, and Filandro all bemoaned the fact that the partnership is now at the four level without any real certainty of who has what, save for no club stopper. How'd we get here, anyway? My answer: blame the support double, a hugely popular tournament convention these days but one that comes with baggage. Most play that a support double is mandatory with three-card support, regardless of opener's strength (and, by extension, failure to make one denies as many as three cards in responder's suit.) Well, okay. That works well on competitive part-score auctions, which admittedly are the bread-and-butter of modern duplicate bridge. But, it also violates a fundamental tenet of bidding theory: the more we bid, the more we should be limiting our values. That's how you get halfway to 7NT knowing little more about each other's strength than you did two rounds ago

The North hand was pretty much as expected. I bid 3NT as South and caught:

♠AQ9 ♥Q102 ♦KQ85 ♣654

Perhaps my robot partner should have temporized with 3♦, but that would be asking a lot of it. Hearts were four-two and West accurately led a passive spade (BBO bots lead very passively) with ace-king-jack-fifth of clubs. Let's let our newly reigning Panelists' and Solvers' champs have the last words:

JOANN AND BOB GLASSON: 4♦. Partner has denied a full club stopper, so our ♣Q has lost value. Our hearts aren't good enough to play the four-three fit. It's time to suggest diamonds as a strain. Non-vulnerable at IMPs, we're content to stop short of game if partner has nothing extra.

STEVE WHITE: 4♦. I think this should be forcing, but if partner thinks otherwise and passes, I'd expect to be in the right spot. 3NT would be lunacy without a club stopper. 4♣ would keep all of 4♥, 4♠ and 5♦ open as possible landing spots, but it probably won't help us get to the best of those three, plus it creates some risk of being unable to stop as low as 5♦. My second choice is 4♠, which I'd guess is our best game if we have one. 4♠, however, also eliminates the possibility that partner thinks 4♦ is forcing but passes anyway, which here would likely be a win for partnership misunderstanding.

By the way, the D4MSC was not the only Master Solvers Club championship that Steve won in 2017. Join me in congratulating him for finishing first in The Bridge World's seminal and prestigious MSC. Ours is cooler, though. Where else can you win an autographed picture of James Caan? See you next month, Rollerballers.



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/>