DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

OCTOBER 2026 PROBLEM

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I'll keep the intro short this month. October's D4MSC problem is the sort of bread-and-butter competitive decision you face half a dozen times per session. Support partner, emphasize our own strong six-card suit, look for 3NT? The Club threw out five possible options, all perfectly logical but none close to ideal. And the winner is…

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"
VIEW THE D4MSC CONVENTION CARD

MATCHPOINTS, NONE VULNERABLE

♠-10 ♥-J43 ♦-AQJ982 ♣-AQ9

South	West	North	East
			Pass
1♦	1♠	2♣	2♠
?			

A. What call do you make?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♣	5	8	**100**
Double	1	1	**90**
3♦	2	6	**90**
3♠	3	5	**90**
4♣	2	2	**90**

I don't care for the Club's top choice of 3♣. South's hand is no powerhouse, but it's quite good in the context of the auction: three good trumps, a ruffing value in the opponents' suit, and a significant source of tricks in diamonds. Surely there must be some better way to describe what we hold. So, no, I don't like 3♣.

Except I chose it too.

Why? Despair, mostly. If you let me peek at North's hand, I'm sure I'd choose from the four main alternatives at least nine times out of ten. Trouble is, when any of them are wrong, they run the risk of being very wrong, by overstating the hand's value or orientation or both. 3♣ is the safe, herd mentality, stay-with-the-field bid. On this hand, not knowing what else to do, I'm going to go low and hope it's right. Let's see if any of the Club's bulls can change my mind.

If the hand is worth an immediate club raise, and you fear that 3♣ is too little, then there's always this:

PETE FILANDRO: 4♣. If I bid 3♠ and heard 3NT from partner, I wouldn't sit for it anyway. I'm not willing to gamble that the diamonds run or that we have nine tricks off the top. So, I'm letting partner know that I'm suit-oriented.

RICK ROWLAND: 4♣. Too good for a passable 3♣.

A jump raise would be fantastic when partner has full values, good clubs, and little major-suit wastage. Game is quite possible, and even a slam can't be ruled out if her hand is something like king-sixth of clubs, plus the ♥A and ♦K – a textbook, albeit perfecto, competitive 2♣ response.

Unfortunately, that textbook was written about ninety years ago. At modern matchpoints, if North passes with a decent hand because she's a point or two shy of Charles Goren's idea of a 2♣ bid, she'll deserve to hear 3♠ on her left followed by two passes. Won't that be exciting?!

I agree this hand is closer on values to 4♣ than 3♣, but game in a minor is no sure thing, and getting to 3NT over 4♣ is quite the challenge. Speaking of which, what about aiming for everyone's favorite matchpoint contract?

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 3♠. Hoping partner can bid 3NT with a spade stopper. South's hand is too good to simply raise clubs.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 3♠. In my regular partnership, we play Good/Bad 2NT, so I could simply bid 3♣ now to show a game-invitational hand with club support. With no such gadget available, I can make a very heavy 3♣ bid, or a rather light cue bid. Here, if I held a strong, balanced hand with club support, i.e.:

♠10x ♥Qx ♦AKJ982 ♣AQ9,

…I could double, so I'm hoping 3♠ carries the implication of spade shortness.

KARL BARTH: 3♠. Double sounds like hearts, so that's out. My first thought was 3♣, but this 5-1/2 loser hand evaluates somewhat stronger than a milquetoast raise. 3♠ gets the message across pretty well. If partner has a spade stopper, we'll play 3NT. Give her any 11 points and I like our chances. If she bids four of either minor, I'll raise to five.

Could work, but I have much the same concern with 3♠ as with 4♣. All four players are bidding constructively. In auctions like this, it's rare that more than one holds more than a minimum. In this case, that person is us, and just a little.

Meanwhile, at least one player rates to be a bit light for their bidding. Who might it be? Probably not West – his partner is a passed hand, so he has little reason to enter the fray armed with only cheese. Probably not East – he likely has only three spades (with four or more, he'd have a trillion ways to show it) so raising on a sub-minimum won't be enticing. Who's left?

Too many soft results over too many years tells me that if anyone at the table is light, it's partner. She has the most to lose by not showing her cards while she can. Your mileage may vary.

Additionally, as Pete Filandro noted earlier and two cue-bidders point out now, even if 3♠ fetches 3NT, our problems might not be over:

BARRY DEHLIN: 3♠. It feels like this maybe isn't going to be our hardest bid this auction. After partner's 3NT, we'll have a difficult choice. But for now, I'm just going to show a game-going hand across from partner's invitational-plus and see where things go.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 3♠. We could be going to game in notrump or either minor, although slam is possible. South's 14 HCP (plus the stiff spade) are very well placed. Even the ♥J could be valuable if we wind up in notrump. The best way to solicit more info from partner is via 3♠. She might bid 3NT with spades stopped, or she could rebid clubs or support diamonds. What South will do after that could be next month's problem.

We do have a rather nice suit of our own. If it were in a major, the vote to rebid it would be a landslide. Should it be less so because it's merely in diamonds? No, say:

DOUGLAS G. DYE: 3♦. Partner has some spades and has bid clubs. If she is short in diamonds with a minimum, 3♦ is high enough and rates to play better than 3♣. If she has a full opening hand, I'll hear from her again and will then raise clubs. With 3♦, I've described my hand type and announced a solid opener; that's enough for now.

BARRY COHEN: 3♦. This seems about right. I don't have enough to bid 3♠. I don't have four hearts for a double. In clubs, they can force us early by leading spades and partner might then not be able to bring in the diamond suit.

JIM EAGLETON: 3♦. Free bid showing more than a minimum in diamonds.

KIM HOLM: 3♦. My hand has strengthened.

BOB GRINWIS: 3♦. It best describes my hand. Second choice: 3♣.

DONALD DALPE: 3♦. I assume I will get a chance to bid clubs later.

Maybe, maybe not. I agree that 3♦ shows more than a minimum, but it keeps the club support under wraps. That might be the only thing that can get North to take another bid. Put another way: failing to support partner could be right, but if it's wrong, it will be a painful post-mortem.

Several people mentioned the possibility of doubling. Does it show four hearts? A strong balanced hand? Extras with no better call? Only two people chose it this month, and only one commented:

ANDY MUENZ: Double. We're probably heading toward five of a minor with an outside possibility of 3NT, but who knows which minor will be better? I'm not a big fan of raising on three when there is an alternative available, and here it is to double and then support clubs. That should clue partner in that we only have three-card support and that we have another place potentially to play (diamonds in this case).

I guess my concern with doubling is this: Andy and Connie Goldberg are panelists and accomplished players. They are almost on the same page as to what a double shows, which I think is pretty impressive in itself. And yet…they're still not quite there. Andy says this hand qualifies, Connie says it doesn't because of the stiff spade. And the presence or absence of that second spade is r-e-a-l-l-y important, particularly for a high-level minor suit contract, because it's in the opponents' suit.

If you left it to me (and why should you?), I'd guess that a double shows something like 2=4=5=2 with around 15 points – closer to Connie than Andy, in other words, but still not on either one's page. "Partner, this is our deal," it announces. "I have a good, flexible hand with no clear direction. Whatever you want to do, now or later, offense or defense, I'm down with it." But here, where we're 1=3=6=3 and both sides might have a double fit? Not so much.

That leaves 3♣. Bleah. It's going to sound like a mere courtesy raise to partner. I just hope that showing a little courtesy is the best we can do. To put it another way:

STEPHEN COOPER: 3♣. Sometimes the low road is best. Let partner know that you have support, and you might get to show values later.

I agree, even though the only thing we're likely to show later is the dummy in 3♣. No one will have the pure strength to bid again, but someone – partner, I hope – might have enough shape to do so.

ED SHAPIRO: 3♣. Support has priority. A cue-bid is too much, and I want another club to jump-raise. If you want to do something tactical, be my guest.

BILL SCHMIDT: 3♣. Tempting to bid more, but partner can infer much of what I think are extras, and I don't want to jam the auction.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 3♣. It's easy to envision a spade loser, a heart loser or two (I did not see a negative double from partner), and even a potential diamond loser with the overcaller on my left. I will compete to 4♣.

MARK COHEN: 3♣. Partner has put us in a near-game force. I'll give us as much room to explore game and slam possibilities. If they jam us with 4♠, I can try 4NT to show long and strong diamonds. Realize that three non-spade kings are likely enough to score 5♣.

STEVE WHITE: 3♣. Wish we were playing Good/Bad 2NT here. Yes, I have extras, but just 3♣ is the best available call.

A side question: how many clubs does North promise?

PHIL FREIDENREICH: 3♣. Partner has at least five clubs but we're not vulnerable and it's matchpoints.

JOHN D. JONES: 3♣. Despite my being sort of minimum, we may have a game. The best bid at this point is to raise clubs. Partner promised at least five and will have no idea they might all be good if I don't raise.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♣. If partner has only four clubs, she should have the values to bid again. We found our fit; I see no reason to bid higher unless partner can take further action.

To be clear, partner is systemically showing five or more clubs. Once in a blue moon, however, she might bid 2♣ on four because she has far too much to pass and nothing better to do. Her hand for such an excursion might be:

♠5432 ♥KQ2 ♦K4 ♣KJ108

It's a mad, mad, mad, mad world:

BILL BAUER: 3♣. Seems right with this decent minimum hand. In fact, I am tempted to repeat Alfred E. Newman's famous pronouncement: "What's the Problem?"

What, Bill worry?

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

This problem arose on CueBids, the Swedish bidding practice app that seems to be taking the bridge community by storm. Unfortunately, on this deal, taking the low road led to a lousy result. Partner held (spot cards approximate):

♠5432 ♥A2 ♦K3 ♣K7653

3♣ is where we wound up, with game in either minor excellent and slam not bad. Yes, my partner should have bid again, which would have gotten us to game, but could we realistically have reached 6♣ after this prosaic start? I doubt it.

Of course, one deal proves nothing. One thousand deals might. So, after completing the article, I dusted off the D4MSC simulator to see if it could provide some insight. As it's impossible to say which of our five options is "best" because of the multitude of ways the auction could continue, I settled for having it report on how many tricks North-South can take in each of the three prospective strains. And the answer is:

Strain	Down	Part-score	Game only	Slam	Exactly 9
♣ Clubs	4%	49%	32%	15%	17%
♦ Diamonds	20%	52%	20%	8%	26%
NT Notrump	69%	n/a	30%	< 1%	20%

("Exactly 9" - % of time N/S can take exactly 9 tricks in the given strain)

The first row in the table tells us that, playing in clubs, we're already down 4% of the time (i.e., at most 8 tricks are available on best defense). On just under half of the deals, we can make a part-score (3♣ or 4♣) but not a game. One about one-third, 5♣ is the limit, and another 15% of the time we have a slam.

Lastly, the rightmost column quantifies the risk of bidding beyond the three-level. For example, if you want to explore for a club game (or slam), that's fine, but be aware that exactly nine tricks are the limit in clubs on 17% of deals.

My observations:

- *What makes this bloody problem so hard is that we have a very real chance of game or slam (47% total in clubs, 31% in notrump), but if we probe for it, we run a non-negligible chance of turning a plus into a minus. As bridge decisions go, it's high risk/high reward.*
- *Nearly as significant: I can't recall a simulation where so many of the deals allow **exactly one** of the three prospective games to succeed, while the other two fail. Only 5♣ = 11%, only 5♦ = 4%, only 3NT = 9%.*
- *If anyone is light, it's North as expected. She has fewer than 10 Goren points on more than one-third of the deals. Her practical limit is 13.*

- *Why does 3♦ go down 20% of the time, and take only nine tricks another 26%? North rates to have few diamonds, and if there's a bad trump split, West is more likely to hold the length. East's long suit is usually hearts, but he's too weak to bid them.*
- *3NT by North, to be fair, should make at the table more than 30% of the time. On some layouts, it takes a heart lead from East to set it, which he won't always find.*
- *With that said, 3NT will not often make overtricks – double dummy, on just 11% of deals.*

After processing all of this, I feel better about choosing 3♣. I'll miss some games but not all – partner still has a turn, and if she finds another bid, we'll be in great shape. Ultimately, though, the second bullet point is what sold me. It's often not enough to figure out that the partnership has the values for game or slam. You still have to find the right one. On deals like this, where level and strain are both dicey, no one can be criticized for protecting the plus.

One encouraging outcome of October's problem is that nobody here in the D4MSC passed. On CueBids, about 5% of Souths did just that, for reasons I can't fathom. Last Word this month goes to a Solver who understands that these bridge boots are made for walkin':

> JOHN D. JONES (cont.): 3♣. …At IMPs, 3♦ (followed by supporting clubs) would be more appealing. Here, the issue is making the best bid ***now***. Pass is for those that want to get walked on!

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

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/***