

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JULY 2025 PROBLEM

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Nobody throws a party like District 4. The 2025 Summer NABCs are in Philly this month, and if it's anything like the last few Nationals we've hosted, it'll be a street fair with playing cards. I believe the goal is someday to hold the games directly in the Reading Terminal Market to save time ("Ace from dummy, roast beef from Dinic's"), but for now it's still at the Marriott. In between meals, I hear there'll be some bridge being played, where you are likely to encounter several dozen difficult decisions like this one. None of the Club's four top options is particularly awful, but all can blow up in your face and bring your matchpoint score and your appetite down with it. Take your choice, pass the mustard, and see you all in a couple of weeks.

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

VIEW THE [D4MSC CONVENTION CARD](#)

MATCHPOINTS, BOTH VULNERABLE

♠-A87 ♥-Q1072 ♦-AJ9864 ♣---

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

A. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♦	11	7	100
Pass	3	10	90
2♠	2	3	80
2NT	0	4	80
4♦	0	1	70
4♥	0	1	70
4NT	0	1	70

I learned a lot during the pandemic. Mostly, I learned I never want to live through another major historical event, ever. But I also learned quite a bit about bridge from playing online for months at a time. The most important lessons were:

1. *Bob Hamman's famous rule about bidding 3NT doesn't go nearly far enough. At matchpoints, and especially against weaker opponents of either*

the carbon or silicon variety, you should bid some number of notrump at every legal opportunity. Your convention card should read, "1NT: 12-14". Not twelve to fourteen points. Twelve to fourteen cards.

2. *I am a lousy defender, but so is everyone else. There are no good defenders. The only two halfway decent ones are Eric Rodwell and Jeff Meckstroth. If you have a close declare-or-defend decision, and neither opponent has been on the cover of the ACBL Bulletin thirty times, bid.*
3. *The single greatest untapped source of top boards is converting negative doubles for penalties. You could power a small Alpine country with the matchpoints you generate.*

On this problem, if South's black suits were reversed, I would pass North's double in a flash. I don't care if my hearts are under West's, or over them, or halfway between them and Poughkeepsie. West is going down, maybe a lot. Alas, the fact that we have secondary support (or might it be primary?) for partner's known suit gives me pause. Let's start the discussion this month with the crew that's going for the jugular.

JAY APFELBAUM: Pass. This is a minimum opening bid and a misfit hand. However, I have two aces. There is every chance my partner has four spades and longer clubs. Declarer could make the contract, but this is probably our best chance for a plus.

JOHN D. JONES: Pass. Declarer will have a very tough time getting to dummy, the only possible quick entry being the ♥A or ♥K. A passed hand and a preemptor rate not to have a ton of tricks on the side. Partner made a negative double and at least has a little. The form of scoring is good for passing and +200 may be a pretty good score. If I were going to bid, I think it's close between 2 ♠ and 3 ♦.

STEVE WHITE: Pass. Really wicked problem. Pass has the advantage that it's sure to be a good score at this vulnerability if we set it, and there's some chance we will. If we had any sure plus score, I would take it, but we may not have one. East can overruff in hearts fairly soon. Let's hope West has chosen the wrong time to preempt.

BARRY COHEN: Pass. I suspect partner and I have a misfit. I will try for +200.

RUI MARQUES: Pass. There's a honeypot marked with +200 staring at me...

In the Winnie-the-Pooh stories, honeypots are good things, but in computer science, they're traps laid out on a network to snare greedy hackers. Which one is this? Well, I can see at least one possible trap lurking....

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: Pass. We have just a seven-card spade fit and the distribution of suits around the table looks bad. I'll take my chances that we can set the contract by at least one trick. I think that I can count four tricks in my hand alone.

See, that's the issue. We can't rely on our side having a misfit. We might even have a double-fit. Partner, having passed in first seat, is unlikely to have six spades, but he certainly might have five in a hand too weak to bid 2 ♠. That's why South's third spade and sixth diamond has me more than a little nervous.

If we can't put our nice heart suit to work on defense, maybe we can find a job for it on the other side of the ball.

DAVE LEGROW: 2NT. If notrump isn't right, it won't end up there, but if it *is* right, it should be played by South... I will temporize and let partner guide the auction.

The 2NT contingent was unusually silent; Dave was the only one who commented. This hand looks dyspeptically wrong for notrump, but see Lessons #1 and #2 above. It's insane how often an off-shape NT call scoops all the matchpoints.

Anyone for the boss suit?

BILL BAUER: 2♠. Several choices -- Pass, 2♠, 3♦ and 2NT (for those with suicidal tendencies). My trusty dartboard says go with 2♠ and hope to crossruff the hell out of the hand.

If Bill ever puts that dartboard up on eBay, I'm bidding on it.

ED SHAPIRO: 2♠. It would be nicer if the double promised five spades, an agreement I had with a few partners many years ago. But it will do OK here showing only four. I don't want to pass, and I've had good luck with this bid.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 2♠. Willing to play in a four-three fit at the two level. On a good day, partner will have five spades. Not enough to do more opposite a passed hand. If partner bids 3♣, I will bid 3♦. If the opponents rebid hearts, I will double for penalty.

BOB GRINWIS: 2♠. I would rather have four of them, but a four-three fit is okay at this level. Since partner is a passed hand, he should not bid again. Partner does not have to have diamond support.

My preference is that a negative double at the two-level or higher promises at least two places to play – the unbid major and either the fourth suit or a tolerance for opener's suit. The ♠A is particularly valuable because it might stop the opponents from pulling trumps before partner can score a ruff or two.

Still, I doubt that 2♠ is right. We might scramble eight tricks, but that must be close to the limit opposite a passed-hand negative doubler. If partner has a club suit to set up, he's getting no help whatsoever from us. Conversely, if our diamonds can be set up with a ruff or two, how will we reach dummy to cash the winners? If partner has diamond help, we're probably better off in diamonds, while if he doesn't, we'll need a bit of luck to complete the cross ruff.

None of the four-level bidders explained their rationale (I think at least one misread the problem and thought that partner, rather than LHO, had bid 2♥), leaving us with just one group to hear from: those who hasten back to the safety of their six-card suit. First, the Cliff Notes summary:

RICK ROWLAND: 3♦. What else?

Next, an evaluation of the other options from Roget's Thesaurus:

STEPHEN COOPER: 3♦. Let me review the options: pass (too risky), 2♠ (a little better, but not much), anything else (stop dreaming). As I said last month, I see no alternative.

PETE FILANDRO: 3♦. The honest at-the-table bid. 2♠ ("creative?") might survive but has potential large minus results. Calls like pass ("shooting?") or 2NT ("eccentric?") sometimes are popular in bidding contests.

From the reference aisle:

DOUGLAS DYE: 3♦. Partner's textbook hand is a 4=1=3=5 eight- or nine-count. If he has anything close to that, 3♦ rates to be a plus score. If he has more (doubling only to show spades along the way), 3♦ is reasonably descriptive.

From Bartlett's Quotations: "I can resist anything except temptation." – Oscar Wilde

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 3♦. Although it's tempting to pass, our hearts are under the 2♥ bidder, so we will rebid diamonds.

KARL BARTH: 3♦. I'm tempted by 2♠ but I just can't do it. I'll go ahead and rebid my real suit. This feels like the normal action. I'm not tempted to pass, especially opposite a passed hand.

DOUGLAS DYE (cont.): 3♦. ...It's tempting to pass for penalties, but the opponents may well hold eight trumps and half the deck, not a recipe for success. The auction's not over; I may yet get to double a heart contract.

BILL SCHMIDT: 3♦. 2♠ would be tempting at matchpoints, except we've been warned that East has at least four spades, possibly five, sitting over partner. With a likely max of 21 HCP combined, a constructive 2NT is out of the question. Pass is risky, but worth considering. If we knew partner held a stiff diamond, passing would be best.

RICH ROTHWART: 3♦. Partner made a negative double at the two-level opposite a third-seat opener, so he should have at least 9 HCP (or great distribution) and only four spades. We should have at least eight diamonds, and there's a small chance we'll get to double 3♥. Pass and 2♠ are tempting.

Just curious: why can't partner hold five spades and one or two fewer points? If he has only four, couldn't spades be four-triple-three around the table? I wouldn't rely on either, mind you, but we're allowed to get lucky every once in a while.

Or perhaps not. From Dr. Seuss's A-B-C's of Bad Luck at Bridge:

BARRY PASSER: 3♦. (a) If I pass, partner will have one heart or none, –790. (b) If I bid 2♠ (reasonable), partner's hand will be:

♠Jxxx ♥xx ♦Qxx ♣KQxx

...for minus 200, where 3♦ makes. (c) If I bid 3♦, partner will hold:

♠Kxxxxx ♥xx ♦x ♣Axxx

...for minus 200, where 3♠ makes. I'll choose 3♦, because partner can still bid 3♠ with hand C.

I sympathize. There are probably a D through Z of other things that can go wrong, plus maybe a few Greek letters. I chose 3♦ too, here and at the table, on roughly this rationale:

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 3♦. Partner didn't open 2♠, nor did he bid 2♠ over 2♥. Still, if I had only five cards in diamonds, I'd bid 2♠. With this hand I'd bid 3♦. It seems like our best chances for game require a diamond fit.

Right. We have six diamonds, six losers, and some help in partner's suit. I could do without being vulnerable, but otherwise 3♦ looks okay. Game is a long way off; for now, I'm just trying to find a decent place to land. But if there does happen to be a magic game in the cards, it's on layouts where partner fits diamonds a lot.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 3 ♦. This could get really ugly if partner is four=six in the blacks (or worse) but I don't think passing the double is a good idea with my hearts in front of declarer's. I suppose I might try 2 ♠ since it could promise just a three-carder and we do remain on the two level – besides, partner could have five of them. But I think I will still rebid my six-card suit. Maybe East will compete to 3 ♥; you never know.

ANDY MUENZ: 3 ♦. Not a great suit, but this seems like the least of evils. This doesn't seem to be the hand to play in a Moysian fit since hearts will be ruffed in the hand with the long trumps (which just might be East). My hand has gotten worse with the bidding and despite the heart stopper, I don't want to bid notrump with the club void. So, 3 ♦ it is. At least I have decent spots.

JIM EAGLETON: 3 ♦. Normally at matchpoints, I support partner's major over my minor without thinking. Then I think: how am I going to play a four-three trump fit that splits five-one? Does anyone remember when we called these distributional hands "computer dealt"? I think we have a reasonable chance at a positive score and I am going to bid like I have 10 HCP opposite partner's club values.

MARK COHEN: 3 ♦. I'm never passing on this hand with my heart cards in front of the heart bidder and a minimal opening bid. Partner should have at least a couple of diamonds. This should be our best, conservative spot.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3 ♦. I'm short of the guidelines for [Mel's Rule of 9](#)...and without significant reason to go against it. We can probably make 2 ♠, but if I bid it, we'll likely get too high. I'll just tell partner what I have.

There wasn't much enthusiasm for the 3 ♦ call, as you see. Perhaps two sages from the Philosophy Department can cheer us up.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 3 ♦. Pass isn't very attractive with a potential spade fit and top-less hearts in a finessable position. If the opponents happen to have a secondary club fit, we might not be able to beat *four* hearts, let alone two. As far as where to remove it to: you'll never go too far wrong by emphasizing your best and longest suit.

RICH ROTHWART (cont.): 3 ♦. ...Maybe not the way to get a top, but probably not the way to get a bottom, either.

You underestimate me. In 3 ♦, I used dummy's lone entry to take a deep finesse in diamonds...smack into West's stiff ♦10. Oy. So, yes, I manufactured a cold bottom on a really dumb line of play, but that's not the point. Plus 110 would have been a poor score, too. The winning call was to pass. North held:

♠K10543 ♥J6 ♦75 ♣A652

Right or wrong, more Norths chose to double with that hand than to bid 2 ♠. About a quarter of the field defended 2 ♥ doubled for +200. The defense is elementary, and on the fortunate lie of the cards, there was nothing declarer could do. She loses two spades, two trumps, and two red aces. Go back and re-read all of the reasons the Club gave for declining to pass out the double. They're all good, sound, and wise, yet playing for penalties in the face of all that still won the board. What gives?

The reason, I think, has to do with modern bidding practice. Players open and over-call very aggressively today. Length, not strength, is the defining virtue. Note that

several Panelists all but ruled out a six-card suit for North because of his failure to open 2♠. Would they have opened the king-sixth-and-out suit from Barry Passer's "C" example? What about queen-sixth, or jack-sixth?

More importantly, every red-blooded East would raise with any sort of fit, sometimes with as little as ace-low or king-low. I see this tactic more and more when playing online, particularly in the heart suit, and it's due to the Law of Total Tricks. "Wait a sec," you protest, "the LAW suggests not raising to the three level preemptively on a presumed eight-card fit!" True, but the opponents won't know that you raised on a doubleton. Either might assume you have nine combined trumps and therefore that there is an extra trick available on the deal. If one has three-low in hearts, he might infer that his partner has a singleton. So, they bid rather than pass or double. Surprise!

Put all this together and you'll soon see why, when East fails to act over partner's double, queen-ten-fourth of trumps under the opening bidder is a lot less scary for defense. Playing for penalties on this hand was (and still is) too rich for my blood, but I'm beginning to come around.

Last Word this month goes to a Panelist who pleads for assistance but who found the winning call without any.

TOM WEIK: Pass. I admit I don't know what to do. 2♠ and 3♦ are options, but I'm fearful of all alternatives. Let's hope partner leads the ♣K from a solid sequence and the ace is in dummy. And let's hope partner has an entry somewhere. Help!

Don't twist yourself into a soft pretzel, Tom. Come on out to the NABC's this month and grab one after a session. See you there.



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/>.