

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

AUGUST 2025 PROBLEM

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Despite the lopsided vote, I think this is one of the better D4MSC problems of the year. It arose in an online matchpoint game, so South's decision wasn't all that difficult: pass and protect the plus. Vulnerable at IMPs, it's perhaps a different story. It takes little imagination to construct hands for North where a diamond game is outstanding, passed hand or not. Needless to say, North indeed held one of those beauties, or this problem wouldn't be here. How much risk is acceptable when chasing a red game at IMPs? How weak can partner be for that competitive 3 ♦ bid? Does the fact that East and West are passed hands mean anything? When are the NABCs coming to Philly again? Okay, that one I know: in 2030. The first three questions, not so much. Maybe the Club has an idea.

NOTE: Due to the Philadelphia NABCs, I wrote this article well before the normal 4Spot deadline. If you submitted an entry any time before August 1st, be assured that your answer was tallied for the yearly contest. If you contributed a comment and don't see it quoted below, it was because it arrived after the article was complete. – NS

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

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IMPs, NORTH-SOUTH VULNERABLE

♠-AJ4 ♥-K ♦-J10862 ♣-A952

South	West	North	East
	Pass	Pass	Pass
1 ♦	Pass	1 ♥	2 ♣
Pass	3 ♣	3 ♦	Pass
?			

A. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
Pass	11	15	100
4 ♦	3	5	90
5 ♦	2	2	90
3 ♠	0	1	90
4 ♣	1	0	90
3NT	0	2	80

Usually, I post a problem on the D4MSC website around the 30th of the month, and then I go do something else for three weeks. In particular, I rarely look at answer submissions as they arrive. When I'm ready to start the article, I decide on my own answers, and only then do I go see what everyone else thought.

This month was different. I was quite aware that the August problem might turn into a dud, with a horde of Club denizens passing and much commentary along the lines of "WTFP??" So, I nervously scanned my email on July 1st, and...(*gulp*)...the first nine (9) submitters had all passed! Demonstrating my usual calm fortitude in times of crisis, I contemplated doing something I'd never done in a decade of D4MSC directorship: swapping out the problem and asking the first day's respondents to pretty-please take a mulligan.

To my relief, Connie Goldberg (5 ♦) was the tenth one in, and from then on, the Club was pretty evenly split between passers and bidders. Perhaps this is one of those problems that appears trivial at first glance but whose subtle complexity becomes apparent only after careful reflection. Alternatively, maybe the obvious solution is staring you in the face, and you can only go wrong if you overthink it. Let's face it, bridge is full of both kinds.

At least one of my predictions was right: a lot of the passers, and not only those from the first day, saw this as a spectacular non-problem.

ANDY MUENZ: Pass. Not sure what the problem is here. Partner just made a competitive call, we have a minimum opener, the opponents haven't competed to the four level (yet). What do we have that we haven't already shown? A fifth diamond? That doesn't indicate that we should voluntarily go one level higher to remain in a part score.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: Pass. I don't get the joke. We are miles from another move.

WILLIAM THOMAS: Pass. Second choice: pass. Number three: you guessed it.

DOUGLAS DYE: Pass. Even thinking about taking another call is an overbid.

RICK ROWLAND: Pass. What else?

Wait. Is there an echo in here?

RICK ROWLAND (July 2025): 3 ♦. What else?

To be fair, Rick scored 100 both months. Maybe this is the sort of problem that really is dangerous to overthink. I certainly didn't spend much time deliberating what to do as South on the actual deal. 3 ♦ was a near-sure plus, and 3NT had little appeal once the opponents had found their club fit. But I wondered what I'd do at IMPs instead of matchpoints, where that 500-point game bonus looms very large.

A few passers acknowledged that we might make game opposite a very well-fitting dummy, but they concluded that it was not worth the risk in pursuing.

RICH ROTHWART: Pass. It looks as if all of our cards are working and that partner is short in clubs, but if we have a game, it's 5 ♦. We have very poor trumps, and North might have only 7-8 HCP. 3 ♠ has merit, but will partner know she needs four good trumps to bid game?

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): Pass. ... I suppose if partner has a perfect hand, like

♠Kxx ♥xxxx ♦AKxxx ♣xx

...5 ♦ would have good play. More often than not, partner won't have that fifth diamond or will have weaker diamonds, and game is well below 30%. Remember, partner would still bid the same way with:

♠ Qxxx ♥ Qxxx ♦ Qxxxx ♣ --

KARL BARTH: Pass. I really wanted to bid again because it feels like my cards are working well. But I have eight losers, and partner probably does too for her initial pass. Vulnerability notwithstanding, this really is looking like a part score battle and I'm not going to push for a notrump game that is almost certainly down after a club lead. As for 5 ♦ ...I'm not that optimistic.

RICHARD J HARTZ: Pass. We may have a perfect fit for 5 ♦, but partner is a passed hand.

JIM EAGLETON: Pass. I can easily imagine taking seven tricks in the red suits, but not before the opponents get four clubs and a stopper or two. So, 3NT seems too risky for even a vulnerable IMPs game.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: Pass. I suppose I could construct the perfect hand for 3NT or 5 ♦, but partner's 3 ♦ bid does not suggest she has the perfect hand. It suggests she has a hand good enough to compete to 3 ♦ with her four-plus card support and short clubs. Playing for a likely plus score in 3 ♦ is a nice place to be. Things will get much more exciting if the opponents push on to 4 ♣ (doubled).

STEPHEN GIBBON: Pass. Sounds right. If West or East competes to 4 ♣, double.

Strange as it may seem, I might not double 4 ♣. Not at IMPs, anyway. If the opponents are reasonably sound bidders, we won't beat it two tricks often, and we might not beat it at all. In particular, if East bids it, I'd wager beaucoup bucks that he's something like 2=5=0=6 and the setting trick (if we have one) will be the ♥K. I wouldn't do anything to make him think twice about taking the heart finesse.

Some passers say that if North had the cards to make 5 ♦ viable, she would have done something different last turn.

MARK COHEN: Pass. South has a good hand and partner is short in clubs. She may have a perfect hand for game, like:

♠ Qxx ♥ Axxx ♦ Axxxx ♣ x

...but she would not have bid 3 ♦ with that, and she might have as little as:

♠ xx ♥ QJ109x ♦ Qxxxx ♣ x

Yes, we are vulnerable, but it would be wrong to go minus on this board.

PETE FILANDRO: Pass. If partner had, say, 4=5=3=1, she might have doubled - or - with 3=5=4=1 or 4=4=4=1 and 9 or 10 HCPs, she would revalue to a near opener and would have bid 4 ♣ or 4 ♦. Ergo, our passed hand partner has only 6-8 HCPs and game is unlikely to be available.

OK, hang on. We opened 1 ♦ in fourth seat. After the 1 ♥ response, the opponents blasted the auction to the stratospheric heights of 2 ♣, and all we could muster over that was a pass. Partner knows we have two or fewer hearts, and thus at least four diamonds, but that's all. We certainly don't have the World's Fair. We might not even have the Gloucester County Farmers' Market. From her vantage point, we could have a 4=2=4=3 11-count (that's the requisite 15 Pearson Points for a fourth-seat opener, if you're counting), and this board is just a part-score battle to be won as

cheaply as possible. If she has four spades along with her diamond support, I agree she might double, but otherwise she's going to bid 3 ♦ on roughly 10 hands out of 10.

Ultimately, most people who passed cited one of two main reasons, sometimes both. The first is what action partner chose on her first turn.

ED SHAPIRO: Pass. Playing a light initial action style, I'd probably pass this out. Even with a more traditional opening (does anyone actually still play this way?), I don't see game.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: Pass. Partner passed originally

MANOJ DEB-ROY: Pass. Partner's first call was pass.

BOB GRINWIS: Pass. Partner is a passed hand and I have 13 HCP including a bare king. I see no chance for game.

The second reason, and the one I have much sympathy towards, is the invaluable partnership tenet of Never Punish Partner for Competing.

TOM WEIK: Pass. I have some good cards, but I am quite minimal. Partner could also have a good card or two, along with club shortness. But with that distribution, including diamond support, she needs very little in high cards to bid as shown.

JOHN D. JONES: Pass. After a fourth seat opening, we should strive to not let the opponents play undoubled. Bidding now (after I passed over 2 ♣) could be hanging partner for making a courageous balancing bid.

Very true. A lot depends on how weak partner might be for that vulnerable 3 ♦ bid. If you're from the school that advocates never conceding a part-score battle until you show primary support for partner's suit, then you might bid 3 ♦ freely on some very marginal values. Look again at Andy Muenz's and Mark Cohen's second example hands. If you agree that one or both are worth a 3 ♦ bid, then is it logically consistent also to believe that it's right to risk the plus in search of a game? To a lot of us, the answers are yes and yes, but we'll get to that shortly. First let's sum up the views of the passers with this:

STEVE WHITE: Pass. Take the plus score. Very unlikely we can make a game if they find a trump lead, and often we will not make one even when they don't. No good way to explore, since exploring would be toward 5 ♦ and would increase the chance of a trump lead

If you're among the bidders, as I am, you have your work cut out for you in justifying any bid. The passers made a very compelling case. Let's begin with our colleagues who pinned back their ears and went all-in.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 5 ♦. On this one, I'm just sort of bidding what I think I can make. Jumping to game seems a better idea than giving the opponents more information to defend with.

STEPHEN COOPER: 5 ♦. My reaction at the table would probably be pass. Partner's 10-count and 3=4=5=1 shape should be enough to make this vulnerable game, losing a spade and a red card. It took me twenty minutes to come to this conclusion, so it would not likely happen at the table.

MARK BOLOTIN: 5 ♦. It rolls against as little as ♥A and ace-fifth of diamonds, along with the expected singleton club. I'm going to be aggressive and not invite. If

there's a miracle slam, we're never going to find it. I'm not sure I can construct a hand for partner with which we belong in 3NT.

RUI MARQUES: 5 ♦. Partner rates to have four or five diamonds and zero or one club. A quick simulation gave me around 80% chances of making at least 11 tricks in diamonds. I'll bash it now and let the opponents worry about how to beat it (if they can).

A simulation, you say? Capital idea. I pinged the D4MSC Software Dept. and put them on the case. This is a complicated problem to simulate because we're 11 bids into the auction, so there are a lot of moving parts. I set up the parameters to exclude deals where any of our three opponents might have done something different earlier. I ensured that the minimum example hands given by Andy and Mark for North would be accepted. I ruled out the hand-types Pete Filandro cited in which partner might have doubled instead of bidding 3 ♦. Lastly, I threw out freak deals (like North being 5=6 in the reds) where trying to predict who would bid what is a fool's errand.

200 deals later, the simulator spat out some very interesting results.

North ♦	N-S tricks available double-dummy				Average HCP		
	8-	9	10	11+	West	North	East
4+	1%	6%	34%	59%	7.9	9.0	10.1
5+	0	5%	30%	65%	8.1	8.8	10.1

The first row of numbers are for cases where North is constrained to hold four or more diamonds – what most people would expect, in other words. Yes, Virginia, it's true: North-South can make game in diamonds almost six times in ten. Mind you, that's double-dummy, so it requires declarer to guess everything right, which sometimes means finding the ♠Q or dropping the ♦Q offside. Against that, it also assumes the opponents will defend perfectly, which they won't always do. With everyone playing single-dummy, and human bridge skills being what they are, I'd put the odds of making 5 ♦ at 50-50, maybe a hair higher.

The second column shows how the numbers change when North has at least five diamonds for her raise. Now, game is almost a two-to-one favorite if declarer reads the layout correctly.

The missing 27 points are on average distributed: 10 HCP with East, 8 HCP for West, and 9 HCP for partner. Andy's and Mark's weak distributional North hand-types, on which partner made a courageous competitive raise, did turn up occasionally, but they were rare. Really rare. Like, what's-going-on rare.

*It took me a while (and several hundred more randomly-dealt deals) to realize why this was happening. To cut to the chase, it was because **everyone else at the table is a passed hand!** If North is at the very bottom of her range, it requires East to have just shy of an opening bid and West to have a maximum single raise where no call but 3 ♣ made sense on his third turn, when he had the entire two-level available. It'll happen, just not routinely.*

The dynamics are quite different if South were the dealer and opened 1 ♦ in first seat. Now, the opponents can have substantial extra values, partner will have a bare-bones 3 ♦ bid far more often, and a diamond game is under 45% even double-dummy. This is the scenario where it's arguably right for South to give partner some room.

In short, it's those three initial passes that make all the difference in the world. It truly seems right to bid here. You can make a reasonable case that it's best to blast out 5 ♦ at this vulnerability and form of scoring, but if you're like me and want to give partner an out if she does hold four diamonds and 6-8 HCP, then what about:

BILL SCHMIDT: 4 ♦. If partner has

♠10xx ♥Axxxx ♦AQ9x ♣x

...we want to be in 5 ♦. Vulnerable at IMPs, we can't afford to miss it. But partner could also have

♠xxx ♥QJxxx ♦KQxx ♣x

... where 5 ♦ has no play. There is no game try that specifically asks about the red aces, so we'll have to depend on partner's hand evaluation skills.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 4 ♦. Partner has at most one club, so game is possible with as little as:

♠Kxx ♥xxxxx ♦AQxxx ♣--

...Vulnerable at IMPs, we will take one try with 4 ♦.

JAY APFELBAUM: 4 ♦. This hand has the potential to win many tricks by ruffing. Much will depend on the quality and quantity of North's diamond support. Also, it would be great if she has the ♥A. That and two diamond honors are the stuff of dreams. Experience tells me that dreams rarely come true. Still, there are many other holdings that offer a play for game. The odds favor inviting. Bidding it is just a bit too optimistic.

BARRY COHEN: 4 ♦. There is potential for a vulnerable game in diamonds. I'll give partner the final decision.

If we've settled on an invitational bid, maybe there's a better option than 4 ♦.

BILL BAUER: 4 ♣. Vulnerable at IMP's requires us greedy players to try for game with either 4 ♣ or 4 ♦. 4 ♣ is a bit more invitational than 4 ♦. I briefly considered 3NT, but it is likely I will have to let the opponents in to run their suit.

Sing with me, sing for the years, sing for the laughter and sing for the tears:

RICK OLANOFF: 3 ♠. I will bid 4 ♣ over 3NT attempting for 6 ♦ – Dream on!

For those who care, 6 ♦ is about a 4% prospect, though it jumps to 11% if North is gracious enough to hold at least five diamonds. 3NT in all simulations was under 10%. North's hand was:

♠-Q6 ♥-QJ942 ♦-A9543 ♣-10

At matchpoints, 3 ♦ was the usual contract. Trumps were two-one and the ♠K was onside (not that the spade finesse was even remotely needed), so almost every declarer took 11 tricks. Note that South's stiff ♥K was a very hard-working card. If you believe strongly that North should have bid something other than 3 ♦ with her seven-loser hand, I'll respect that, but I really don't know what that something is.

That wraps up August. If you're reading this at the Marriott as the NABCs enter their second weekend, have a great time and good luck! Bring home a victory for the District. Last Word goes to a 4 ♦ bidder who believes that heaven is indeed a place on earth, and it's not necessarily the Reading Terminal Market at lunchtime.

BARRY PASSER: 4 ♦. Confirming I actually have a diamond suit, and interest in game. The fit will be superb if partner has prime cards, e.g.:

♠xxx ♥Axxxx ♦KQxx ♣x

Cross-ruff heaven!

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

*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/>.*