

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JANUARY 2021 PROBLEM NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

*And so, once again, here we are. A shiny new year beckons to we denizens of Planet COVID. I hope your 2021 is an improvement over 2020. Which it will be. I mean, it's like saying to a Titanic survivor, "I hope your next cruise is smoother." We're also beckoning a new **District 4 MSC Challenge** with this month's problem. I'd beckon for some beer too, but I think I'm all out. Anyway, congratulations again to Bruce Schwaidelson and Bill Schmidt on their 2020 championships. Whether you choose to participate in the 2021 Challenge (by answering at least 10 of the 12 monthly problems on the website), or whether you only send in your votes and comments now and then, the D4MSC Steering Committee appreciates it. Onwards to the new year....*

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

MATCHPOINTS, EAST-WEST VULNERABLE

♠-AKJ103 ♥-853 ♦-- ♣-AQJ103

<u>South</u>	<u>West</u>	<u>North</u>	<u>East</u>
		2♥	Pass
?			

2NT = FEATURE ASK

3♥ = NONFORCING

4♦ = SPLINTER RAISE

4NT = RKCB FOR ♥

5♦ = EXCLUSION KCB FOR ♥

1. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
2NT	6	14	100
4♥	2	14	90
4♦	0	5	80
5♦	3	3	80
6♥	0	6	80
3♣	1	1	70
4NT	1	1	70
5♥	1	0	70
5NT	1	0	70

As you see, there is no shortage of ways to proceed. Much depends of course on what sort of suit partner might hold for his first-seat, favorable-vulnerability 2 ♥.

ANDY MUENZ: 4♥ The toughest part of this problem is not knowing partner's Weak Two tendencies at this vulnerability. Could North have something as weak as:

♠-xx ♥-xxxxx ♦-KQJx ♣-xx ?

If so, 4♥ has no play against best defense, and even 3♥ could be in jeopardy.

Yikes! I'd suggest to Andy that he lay off the eggnog for a bit, but alas, I know he's both stone sober and 100% correct -- there are a few Norths who'd cheerfully open 2♥ on that dumpster fire. In fact, it's the proper bid in the delightfully warped [EHAA](#) (Every Hand An Adventure) system. Here in the D4MSC, however, we know that North is a reliable, down-the-middle soul. Adventure is not his passion. True, at these colors, his heart suit might not meet the classic honor requirements of 2-of-the-top-3 & 3-of-the-top-5. But at least we know that 4♥ won't get set in trumps alone.

Nobody passed 2♥ or gave any indication that they'd stop short of game. Sixteen people, however, made it clear they had no intention of venturing any further. Two longtime Panelists explain why.

ED SHAPIRO: 4♥. Favorable vulnerability at matchpoints, and without a strong partnership, I'll take the chicken result while avoiding a silly one, like losing three trump tricks at the five-level. I might think differently if I knew full details on our suit quality standards and how opener would reply over a 4♦ splinter.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 4♥. Opposite one of my first-seat, favorable-vulnerability Weak Twos, we are more likely to have three trump losers than good play for 12 tricks. I'm happy to settle for game; I hope it makes. The only slam that might be decent is 6♣, but looking for that is very risky.

Michael also pointed out that the play in a high heart contract might not be smooth sailing, even if partner's trumps are relatively strong. He gave North:

♠-x ♥-KQJ10xx ♦-Q10xx ♣-xx

...and challenged readers to visualize how the play might unfold in 6♥ on a diamond lead. (Here's my New Year's tip to get you started: don't even think about leading trumps at trick two.)

Back to Andy:

ANDY MUENZ (cont.): 4♥. ...The question is whether or not to make a slam try. My thought is no, because it will take a perfect maximum to make six a favorite, e.g.:

♠-xx ♥-KQJxxx ♦-xxx ♣-Kx

...and I've learned not to play partner for the perfect maximum. Asking for a feature [via 2NT - Ed.] can only give the defense extra information, which at matchpoints could end up costing a valuable overtrick.

I don't think it takes a "perfect" maximum for 6♥ to be an odds-on contract, but it certainly requires a friendly one. Even Andy's example is no sure thing; BridgeCalc puts 6♥ at about 80% on a diamond lead and best defense. Change the ♥K to the ♥A and it jumps to 95% (though with that hand, I personally would open 1♥.) Change North's hearts to ♥AJ10xxx and we're back around 70%. With ♥AKQxxx and out, they're 98%; ♥AKxxxx, and out is 83%. If you are reading this article while hung over

on New Year's Day, my apologies for all the math. The pursuit of bridge knowledge is not always compatible with eggnog.

To cut to the chase: the salient cards for North are the top three hearts (especially that all-important ♥A for control), the ♣K, and the ♠Q. Is it worth the effort and risk of trying to determine if he holds enough of them, particularly if your Weak-Two style makes it rather unlikely? These Solvers join Michael and Ed in saying no:

KARL BARTH: 4♥. If partner has a typical, first-seat, nonvulnerable Weak Two, there are going to be a couple losers. So I'll bid the game and take my plus.

JOHN JONES: 4♥. Opposite my style of white-vs.-red preempts, this isn't worth a slam try.

MATT SHERMAN: 4♥. If I'm trusting partner to have two of the top three honors, then 4♥ is where I want to be, and I'm not going to mess around getting there. It's true that North might have wasted high-card points in diamonds, but I'm also going to count on half my finesses and/or drops working out, too.

BARRY DEHLIN: 4♥. Sure, slam is possible, but with possible losers in hearts, diamonds, and clubs, it just seems like a stretch to even try. I hope the opponents think that they're being robbed and try 4♠.

JIM EAGLETON: 4♥. Is there a faster way to 60 pity points? [*It's the holiday season, Jim; take 90 - NS.*] If I say that 4♦ shows a void in "our system", will partner not get excited with ♦Axxx?

BOB GRINWIS: 4♥. Seems like the safest bid. Partner may not have solid hearts and could have wasted values in diamonds. I won't get the information I need with 2NT or 4NT.

CHRIS MARLOW: 4♥. Nice hand, but it still seems like we need a perfecta for slam to be a favorite. Given the usual standard of my partners' Weak Two bids at favorable vulnerability, even game might be an adventure.

Fair enough. Going past 4♥ on our own carries risk, even if partner's Weak-Twos are sound enough to be used as tornado shelters. Before we explore the below-game approaches to exploring for slam, let's hear from the folks who cast fear to the wind.

CRAIG ROBINSON: 4NT. Do I want to be in slam opposite only one key card? No. That rules out Exclusion Blackwood. A splinter will tell me nothing if partner rebids 4♥. 2NT is useful, but if partner shows the ♣K, then what is 4NT? By bidding 4NT directly, then after a 5♣ (one key-card) reply, I can follow up with 5♦ to ask about the ♥Q. If he has it, I'll try 6♥. They just called the tournament director on me because I am taking too long.

If I tried Craig's approach, partner's reply would be 5♥, showing two keys, both of which were the ♦A because he miscounted.

DAVE WACHSMAN: 5♦. Exclusion Blackwood is useful here as it facilitates choosing between 5♥ and 6♥. Of course, it helps if our Weak Two opening bids, even at favorable vulnerability, is reasonably disciplined.

JAY APFELBAUM: 5♦. The easiest and simplest way to get to a reasonable contract. Pass over a 5♥ response (no key cards). Sign off at 6♥ over 5♠ (one) or 5NT (two without the ♥Q). Bid 7♥ over 6♣ (two with the ♥Q). [*Observe from Jay's comment*

that most experts play 0314 replies over Exclusion Blackwood, even if they play 1430 over 4NT. - NS.]

BILL FOSTER: 5♦. Exclusion. In first seat, partner is expected to have six hearts to three of the top five hearts, and at least 9 HCP. Slam in hearts is a reasonable proposition. My second choice is simply to bid 6♥.

CHRIS KAUFMAN: 5♦. Seems obvious. Are we playing that partner is not to reply [beyond] 5♥ missing the ace and king of trump? As long as he holds one of those, I'm good with slam, and even if he has the ♥AKQ, I'm not speculating for a grand.

PETE FILANDRO: 5♦. To make six, partner needs (a) ace-king-queen of hearts; (b) one of the two missing black honors and a one-loser heart suit; or, (c) one trump loser and a winning black-suit finesse. That's perhaps 15 total cases. Each of the investigatory bids fails to cover all possibilities, but 5♦ informs him to discount any diamond honors, and go on with 7-9 working HCP.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 5♦. All I care about is partner's heart holding.

Try as I might, I can't warm up to 5♦. I suppose it has the advantage of allowing you to stop in 5♥ if partner opened a queen-high suit. But, at least in my dusty old book, queen-jack-ten-sixth is unacceptable for a "sound" Weak Two opening in first or second seat. You need one of the top two honors and preferably two of the top three. Otherwise, partner, looking at ace-low or king-low, will have no idea whether or not there's a loser in the suit.

More to the point: several of my partners do insist that suits like ♥QJ10xxx, and even considerably weaker, are adequate, and I usually go along. There are definite plusses to playing an aggressive Weak Two style. One of the minuses, however, is that when responder picks up a hand like South's, he simply cannot go slam-hunting, period, full stop, drop the mic and walk offstage. Responder needs a trump honor or three to entertain such thoughts, because weaker suits are dealt more often than stronger ones, and because an opener using such methods will bid 1♥ or 3♥ on many hands that qualify as a good 2♥ in conventional methods. If you're playing sound Weak Twos in first and second seat, then by bidding 5♦ here, aren't you essentially saying, "Look, partner, if you have the suit you're supposed to deliver, we'll have a play for 6♥, though it might be on a finesse or two. But I don't trust you, so I'm bidding 5♦ first."

If North is truly a reliable and upstanding soul, you might as well shoot out:

BARRY PASSER: 6♥. I play that 2♥ before partner has had an opportunity to bid must be a good suit -- ♥AKxxxx or ♥KQJxxx. So, there's nothing to think about.

MANOJ DEB-ROY: 6♥. I favor disciplined preemptive bids in first seat, because you are preempting your partner too. Opener must have three of the top four honors and be in the 8-11 HCP range.

STEPHEN COOPER: 6♥. Partner's hearts should not be as good as ♥AKQxxx nor any worse than ♥KQxxxx. There is only one place that we want to be, so bid it.

A direct 6♥ also shuts out the opponents. Is that really what we want?

MARK BOLOTIN: 6♥. We could have no heart loser. Partner could have the ♣K. Partner could have the ♠Q (in which case I'd rather not have a club lead). Otherwise, we'll need to hold the heart losers to one, and slam will be on a finesse. I'll make them find the right lead.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 6♥. I expect partner to have two of the top three hearts in first seat, so I bid what I expect partner to make. I will not give the opponents any additional information or allow them to suggest a lead.

Richard and Mark point out that if we take a roundabout way to 6♥, we might give the opponents a chance to make a lead-directing or suit-showing noise. Normally we'd prefer to avoid this, but here...hmm. Given that any heart slam we reach is unlikely to be cold owing to our anemic trumps, might it not be better if we offer the bad guys every opportunity to squeal on whatever important cards we're missing? Say West doubles an artificial club bid, presumably tipping off that the club finesse ain't working. That would have me slamming on the brakes like Fred Flintstone.

There was one other slam-bound adventurer:

TOM WEIK: 5NT. I'll assume the risk that we end up too high if partner's suit is headed by the queen, or worse. Even if his suit has only one top, we'll have a decent chance if it also contains the queen and jack. This is not much different than bidding 6♥, but with an unlikely bonus if he has the ♥AKQ.

Our largest contingent, comprising a little under half the field, chose one of three below-game investigatory calls. I expected to receive a few votes for 2♠, which I briefly considered, but nada. The group who chose a natural suit response went with:

BILL SCHMIDT: 3♣. Slam is definitely possible, which rules out a jump to 4♥. 5♥ at this vulnerability would be preemptive. That leaves us with a forcing 2♠ or 3♣. Clubs are better for three reasons. (1) the ♣K from partner is more useful than the ♠Q; (2) there will be less pressure on partner to raise a minor with three low; and (3) after partner retreats to 3♥, there will be room to force again with 3♠.

LYNN HARRIS: 3♣. The reason to start with this instead of 2♠ is that we have no spade loser opposite a doubleton in partner's hand, but we might have a club loser opposite a doubleton. Also, partner is less likely to have three spades when he opens 2♥. Over 3♦ or 3♥, I'll rebid 5♥ asking partner to bid six with strong hearts. I think that 7♥ requires too much to consider.

If partner raises to 4♣, maybe we can reach a superior club slam after all. Still, if all we're interested in whether or not partner has the ♣K, a simpler way to find out is:

RICH ROTHWART: 2NT. If partner shows a club feature, I'll bid RKCB for hearts. If she bids 3NT [showing ♥AKQxxx or better - Ed.], I'll try 6♥. Otherwise, 4♥ seems like enough.

That sounds like a swell plan to me. If you are appalled about Rich's intention to invoke Blackwood with a void, don't be. There will be no ambiguity in partner's reply. Explaining why:

DANIEL DROZ: 2NT. At first, my thought was that slam seems low percentage, as we are likely to have a trump loser. However, on reflection, if partner does have the ♣K, we might be able to take five trumps, five clubs, and two spades. If partner doesn't bid 3♣, I'm signing off in 4♥. But if he does, I'll try 4NT, as I'm not sure if

5♦ would be Exclusion in this sequence, and besides, partner can't have the ♣K, the ♦A, and good hearts if he opens 2♥.

One other rebid by North would be music to our ears:

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 2NT. If partner shows a club feature, I'll follow up with 5♥ to ask how good his hearts are. If instead he bids 3NT, showing ♥AKQxxx, I can bid 6♥ or maybe even 7♥.

STEVE WHITE: 2NT. At favorable vulnerability, 4♥ might be enough, but he's allowed to have a reasonably good Weak-Two. I'll sign off at 4♥ over 3♦ or 3♥, bid 5♥ over 3♣ or 3♠, and bid 6♥ over 3NT.

If anyone has written the authoritative book on how to bid after a 3NT 'solid-suit' reply to a 2NT feature-ask, I haven't read it. It would seem to me that Chapter One ought to give responder some means of inquiring about opener's shape. At any rate, I'd personally settle for 6♥ over 3NT, because bidding and making a 24-point slam should provide a terrific matchpoint score.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 2NT. This implies a fit and at least game-invitational strength. In my opinion, partner shows a feature, if he has one, only when he is non-minimum. He can bid game directly with no feature but a very strong suit. If he shows such a suit, I'll bid 6♥. If North bids 3♣, I can bid 4♦.

BARRY COHEN: 2NT. Let's find out more about partner's hand. With luck, he will have a club feature or a solid suit, at which point I'll investigate slam. I won't stop short of game no matter what North rebids.

CATHY STRAUSS: 2NT. In the unlikely event that partner has the ♣K or chooses to show a spade feature with the ♠Q, we should be good for 6♥. We'll probably lose one heart, since with ♥AKQ and an outside king, she would open 1♥.

BILL KILMER: 2NT. Potentially a great hand, but it feels wrong to rush this one.

STEPHANIE FINE: 2NT. I know I will be bidding again, so it would be helpful to have a better idea of any other features in partner's hand.

JEFF ROHRBECK: 2NT. Might as well find out more about partner's hand before deciding on game vs. slam.

MARK KINZER: 2NT. If partner responds 3♣, we're slamming.

BILL BAUER: 2NT. This is the best bid to rule out slam or to keep the possibility alive. If partner responds 3♣, then I'll (optimistically) rebid 5♥ to ask partner to go to six with strong trumps. Besides, if I'm wrong, I take comfort in knowing that my two lowest scores in 2021 will be dropped.

Indeed they will, but your 100 for January has a twelve-month shelf life. With a clean plurality of Panelists and a tied plurality of Solvers, 2NT earned the top award. Many of its backers voiced their opinions about the various alternatives.

DOUGLAS DYE: 2NT. I'm not trying for slam unless partner has a club "feature" and likes his hand well enough to show it (i.e., he has good hearts.) The problem with using Exclusion Blackwood directly is that you have no safety at the five-level.

RICK ROWLAND: 2NT. See what partner has to say while keeping the auction low. I'm not sure what partner is supposed to do over a 4♦ splinter, and people who bid 5♦ (Exclusion) haven't seen what my partners open 2♥ at these colors.

STEVE WHITE (cont.): 2NT. ...Obviously, an invitational 3♥ is ridiculous. I'm not going to try RKCB with a void. Exclusion Blackwood (at 5♦) seems like a mistake since we will often be overboard. I'm not sure whether a direct raise to 5♥ would be preemptive.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON (cont.): 2NT. ...Why not 5♥ directly? White vs. red, that is usually played as preemptive. Exclusion Blackwood? I don't know what response structure we're playing, but it would be easy to get beyond 5♥ missing too many important trump honors.

CONNIE GOLDBERG (cont.): 2NT. ...Although it's irrelevant to this problem because of South's diamond void, I would also like to note that playing 4NT as Roman Key-Card Blackwood over a preempt is hopeless in my opinion. Sometimes, responder has a big, one-suited hand that needs to know about aces only, so 4NT should be plain old vanilla Blackwood. Bridge World Standard and most expert partnerships play that, in response to any preempt except 3♣, 4♣ asks for key cards. (Over partner's 3♣ opening, 4♦ asks for keys.)

Connie makes a good point about Blackwood in this auction. Here's another:

JOANN & BOB GLASSON: 2NT. Slam is possible, so we start with 2NT looking for the ♣K. Exclusion Blackwood is theoretically best, but starting at 5♦ is too risky. We now think that 4♦ should be Exclusion.

If we adopted that treatment, we'd lose the ability to show diamond shortness. Is that irreplaceable? Let's let our final group make a case for the splinter.

ROGER MONACO: 4♦. 2NT makes it too difficult later to show the diamond void. Partner should realize that I have a great hand, demanding game at least, and respond accordingly.

ROSEANNE G. HUGHES: 4♦. Shows a singleton or void. This reveals exactly what partner needs to hear. Partner can now show either spade or club values.

RUI MARQUES: 4♦. If partner rebids 4♥, I give up. If partner bids 4♠, implying a few clubs, that's a different story. The reason why I don't go the Exclusion route is simply lack of safety at the five-level. Blackwood won't give me the answers I need, and 2♠ risks muddying the waters. How I wish I was playing Ogust.

It took me a few minutes to grasp what Rui was talking about regarding 4♠ and clubs, but I get it now. 4♠ takes us beyond 4♥, and partner is a big favorite to have a club control to risk that. Interesting. Still, the drawback of 4♦ is that it's unclear what exactly partner is supposed to do over it. He'll retreat to 4♥ almost ten times out of ten. A practiced partnership might have the strong foundation and nimbleness to make a splinter work, but most of us will just be guessing at an uncomfortable level. So, yes, I think Connie and the Glassons are right about the practicality of using jump-shifts here as various flavors of Blackwood. (However, 2NT followed by 4NT ought to be RKCB for partner's suit.)

Rui also mentioned Ogust, in which opener's replies to 2NT show various combinations of good/bad suits and good/bad overall strength. For years, I preferred Ogust to feature-asks, but in the past decade or so I've changed my mind. One 2NT bidder perhaps missed the footnote about our agreement:

STEVE GIBBON: 2NT. Hoping for a Good-Hand-Good-Suit reply, else leave it at 4♥.

...but let's say we were playing Ogust, and partner showed that hand-type. The suit description is helpful, but we still need to sort out whether his side card is the ♣K or a high diamond honor, and beyond that, there is a ginormous difference on this deal between the ♠A and ♦K. The ace isn't entirely wasted opposite our void, because it allows declarer to ruff the opening lead and retain control over the diamond suit while drawing trumps. That's what makes Michael Shuster's hypothetical North hand so thorny. So, yeah, I think I was wrong all those years advocating for Ogust. (I think I'm down to just two agreements I insist on: simple overcalls can be as strong as 18 HCP, and 2♥ and 2♠ overcalls of 1NT are natural. The rest of the card, I leave to partner.)

At any rate, this problem generated a worthwhile discussion, even if the problem itself was somewhat flawed because of the unsurety of what partner's hearts might look like. I'll be happy if our other 11 problems this year are as substantial. And I'll be super happy if we can all wind up at a bridge game together by summertime. Last Word for the First Month goes to:

DON DALPE: 5♥. A direct, slightly crazy bid. (My first submission [4NT - Ed.] was completely crazy, but I was drinking at the time.)

Crazy? After 2020, I don't know if I'd describe anything ever again as crazy. See you all in February.



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/>