

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

MAY 2025 PROBLEM

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Welcome to the Matchpoint Forest, where the trails have enough forks in them to stock an Olive Garden. Every time you come to a junction, you must choose which road to take. Get enough of those decisions right and the path will lead you to Victory City, where the inhabitants will shower you with riches – mostly something called ‘masterpoints’, which have precisely zero cash value, but they do come in a variety of pretty colors, so there’s that. Get too many wrong and you’ll arrive in the dreaded Swamp of Despair, where you will be doomed to rehash your 46% game with your partner over the hand records for all eternity, or at least until dinner arrives. Are you ready to set out on your quest, fair adventurer? Then let the journey begin....

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

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MATCHPOINTS, BOTH VULNERABLE

♠-K964 ♥-Q543 ♦-AJ10 ♣-QJ

South	West	North	East
	Pass	Pass	1♠
Pass	Pass	Double	Pass
?			

A. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
1NT	6	10	100
2♥	4	5	90
2♠	3	0	90
Pass	1	3	80
2NT	0	3	80
3♥	1	2	80

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I sat,
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth,

*Near a sign that read, with unbridled snark,
“Okay, hotshot – here’s your first decision.
Do you want to play or defend?”*

STEPHEN MARLOW: Pass. I don’t see how declarer is making this without a shapely hand, and the best we can do is a partscore. If declarer has that hand, too bad – on to the next board. I would do this at IMPs as well. At least I have an easy lead.

RICK OLANOFF: Pass. Making a game seems not at all likely. So, +200 will be fine, and dummy entries will be scarce.

DON DALPE: Pass. Is this an opening lead problem?

It could be. Honestly, I’m surprised so few people chose to convert the double for penalties. Down one rates to be an excellent board, and as Rick observes, declarer is likely to have a migraine trying to reach dummy. If she’s forced to play the entire deal out of her hand, our quacks might be fine defensive assets. Only a few bidders even mentioned the possibility of passing, perhaps because the spade spots aren’t anything to write home about. Still, even with king-nine-six-four, I think this is a very close call.

Anyway, almost everyone else in the Guild chose to bid. Here’s our bard again to serenade us as we travel the path of action:

*I took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
And because I wanted to stay with the field,
For when in the Matchpoint Forest
It’s often imprudent to stake the entire board
On an early decision in the auction.*

*Soon I came to another crossroad,
With one path rising toward the hills,
And the second descending into a valley.
A sardonic signpost stood nearby, asking:
“Next decision: You going high or low?”*

BILL BAUER: 3♥. I have to come to life with this hand, and I want to bid either 2NT or 3♥. By a narrow decision, 3♥ wins. However, I like 2NT so much that I will enter that answer under an assumed name. The "rule" I subscribe to is that when responding to partner's balancing takeout double, subtract three points from your hand. Taking 3 away from my 13 leaves 10. Enough to jump.

BARRY COHEN: 3♥. Trying for plus 200 on defense is tempting, but 1♠ might make or we might have a game. The most likely game is 4♥, so I’ll invite in hearts.

PHILIP FREIDENREICH: 2NT. Even counting the ♣QJ as only two points, I have 12 HCPs.

One brave soul was a bit miffed about the road we chose on the previous round:

BARRY PASSER: 2NT. Why didn't I double 1♠? Now I have to guess whether partner holds:

♠-x ♥-KJxx ♦-Qxxx ♣-Kxxx

...opposite which I should bid 3♥, or:

♠-10x ♥-Axx ♦-Kxxx ♣-Kxxx

...where 2NT is better. At least 2NT shows my full opener.

I know that "off-shape takeout double" is almost redundant these days, but forsooth, doubling 1♠ would have been a drawbridge too far, even at matchpoints. Among other things, we didn't know at the time that West held a bust and North a maximum pass. It could just as easily have been the other way around.

The best argument for going high is that we know where most of the missing points are. That should make the play a lot simpler. The key to the board might be landing in the right strain. A trio of the Guild's Elder Council believe they have a way to do just that.

TOM WEIK: 2♠. Good problem. Should we invite or insist? A minimal response is not an option. I'm headed to game in hearts or notrump, most likely the former. Wish me luck, I may need it! I'm hoping for something like:

♠-xx ♥-AKxx ♦-xxx ♣-K10xx

BILL SCHMIDT: 2♠. The positional advantage in spades and diamonds means there will be game most of the time. Picture either:

♠-xx ♥-KJ10x ♦-Kxx ♣-K10xx

♠-xx ♥-AK10x ♦-9xxx ♣-Kxx

...and there's no intelligent way to invite. At this vulnerability and level, partner has already shown a maximum passed hand. But there is a way to steer to 3NT rather than 4♥ in case partner has only three hearts. Picture:

♠-10x ♥-AKx ♦-9xxx ♣-K10xx

JAY APFELBAUM: 2♠. I see two possible approaches. I have four hearts but no spot cards. This might mean too many losers for a heart game. The club honors could help build tricks, but any finesse is likely to lose. However, 3NT might make if partner has any help in spades. He could have a flattish 11-count with two spades. I am an optimist, so I choose the aggressive approach. A conservative would bid 2♥ for the best chance of a good plus score.

Because North is a passed hand, 2♠ isn't (or at least shouldn't be) a game force. Nevertheless, it will be a challenge to stop short of game intelligently, if only because of sheer momentum. If this indeed turns out to be a game deal, then 2♠ is worthy of the top award because it rates to get you to the better game. But if it's a part-score deal, then we'll all wish we took the valley road. And that's the one that almost two-thirds of our wanderers chose. As our bard might put it:

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!
And as in effish thought I stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffing through the tulgey wood...
Oh poop, I'm mixing up my poems again.*

*Ah then, fair reader, let us cut to the chase.
One further fork lies along the low road.
To the left is hearts; to the right, notrump,
And the final sign on our sojourn demands,
"You get one guess. Better make it count."*

ANDY MUENZ: 2♥. We have a junky 13-count opposite a passed hand, so we don't want to make a bid that can be construed as invitational in any way, shape, or form. So there is no reason to bid to the same level as we would if partner weren't a passed hand. That leaves 1NT and 2♥ as the options. It's close between the two, but given my poor spots, I'd rather play in the suit contract, especially with dummy in a position to potentially overruff LHO.

KARL BARTH: 2♥. I'm not bidding notrump because my ♠9 might not be a second stopper, and I'd hate to go down in 2NT when a heart contract is cold. Besides, if I lend partner the king he needed to make the balancing double, my remaining hand just isn't that great – eight losers and a very quacky 10-count.

MARK BOLOTIN: 2♥. I'll take my likely plus. Game is, at best, a remote possibility, and passing is a top-or-bottom shot.

RICH ROTHWARF: 2♥. Partner is likely to have four hearts. Cue-bidding or jumping to 3♥ may get us to a making game, but it may get us too high when partner has 8 or 9 HCP or a heart holding that doesn't mesh well with ours.

JIM EAGLETON: 2♥. Good partners would describe this monster with a jump in hearts or notrump. I'm just trying to score over 100 points, playing in hearts or defending against spades (which may require a double).

PETE FILANDRO: 2♥. With a perfect 1=4=4=4 shape and 11 HCPs, partner would have opened the bidding. I expect 8 to 10 HCPs. Opposite 8 or 9 points, game is an underdog. Even opposite 10, I still worry about two trump losers or dummy having an imperfect shape like 1=3=4=5.

On this auction, partner could have a lot of imperfections. Keep in mind that, while North is a passed hand, we are essentially unlimited. With short spades, partner might have doubled on a very marginal hand in case we held a penalty pass. Sometimes he'll have four hearts, other times he won't. As with the two prior decisions, it's maddeningly close, but methinks that, on this problem, all roads lead to:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 1NT. It is generally right at matchpoints to take slightly conservative actions in close cases, so trying for game is out. 2♥ could be awful if partner doesn't hold four hearts, and it might be no better than 1NT even when he

does (though maybe 2♥ would goad the bad guys into competing to 2♠, which I would double.) Overall, I just want to protect the plus score, since it is quite probable that many pairs will get too high on our cards.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 1NT. Partner is a passed hand so there is no game in sight. With a balanced hand of soft cards, 1NT looks just about right.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 1NT. Partner is a passed hand. I have a quackish hand that looks better than it is. I am going slowly. There's no guarantee partner has four hearts, and even so I may lose the same tricks in 2♥ that I will in 1NT. Give partner the ♠10 and we have two stoppers.

RUI MARQUES: 1NT. The hand screams notrump, especially at matchpoints. Partner might be a bit off-shape. (I can see 2=3=4=4, for example.)

ED SHAPIRO: 1NT. This is enough at matchpoints, unless I'm playing solidly sound initial actions.

BOB GRINWIS: 1NT. This is a bit of an underbid with 13 HCP. My hearts are weak, I don't like my queen-jack doubleton in clubs, and partner is a passed hand, so I will take the low road.

DOUGLAS DYE: 1NT. Good spades, soft values, no game likely, and the opponents should remain silent. I expect to take as many tricks in notrump as in hearts, even assuming that partner holds four hearts.

Several 1NT followers concede that the Hearts Trail looks almost as inviting.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 1NT. If I didn't have the ♠9, I'd bid 2♥. And I have no objection to 2♥ as it is. It's a close call.

JOHN D. JONES: 1NT. With partner a passed hand, I'll go low and not try for an iffy game with my collection of soft cards. That leaves 1NT and 2♥ as the choices. I have no real quarrel with 2♥, but the ♠9 encourages me to try 1NT.

Summarizing for the Knights of the Notrump Table:

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 1NT. Partner is a passed hand in the balancing seat. We are balanced, fairly flat, and looking like a notrump kind of hand. Plus, I'm not exactly enamored with my four-card heart suit. Game is out of the question and if partner wants to bid his five-card suit somewhere, he is welcome to do so. Oh, and by the way: if North has as little as the ♠10, the suit is likely double stopped. 1NT it is.

STEVE WHITE: 1NT. The easier part of the decision: whether or not to try for game. No, not at matchpoints opposite a passed hand, even though it might make opposite some maximums. The ♠10 instead of the ♠9 might be good enough for a game try. The harder part: hearts or notrump? With the combined chances that partner lacks four hearts, or that notrump scores better even when he does, I'll take 1NT.

At the table, partner had a 2=3=4=4 ten-count:

♠-A2 ♥-KJ8 ♦-Q643 ♣-10653

Even with both hands on view, it's not clear what the best contract is. The matchpoint results were all over the map, but one fact stood out: 1♠ doubled went down one on precise defense, or imprecise defense, or just-sit-there-and-follow-suit defense. I badly wanted to pass on my second turn but chickened out and tried 2♥, largely based on this forlorn hope:

KARL BARTH (cont.): 2♥. I originally considered bidding 3♥ because I expect the opponents (probably West) to push to 2♠ if I bid only 2♥. But I am very comfortable bidding 3♥ over 2♠. If East takes the push to 3♠, I'll whack it and lead a trump. Realistically, I expect to go plus in a heart part-score.

MARK COHEN: 2♥. Game is unlikely, and partner didn't balance with 1NT. He really should have at least four hearts. I have a chunky hand and can take a whack at anything the opponents might subsequently try. If partner should oddly make some game try, I will happily cooperate.

Alas, there were no whacks to be taken as the opponents, who had seven combined spades and 17 points, were quite through bidding. In hindsight, if I wasn't going to double, I should have bid 1NT, where there were at least some chances to earn extra matchpoints in the play.

And so ends our noble quest. Did you navigate the myriad twists and turns of this road less traveled to bring back a king's ransom, or at least a few red points? Last Word this month goes to a D4MSC Panelist who's celebrating a first-place finish in the ACBL's 2024 Ace of Online Clubs jousting tournament:

STEPHEN COOPER: 2♥. I like my hand, but I do not love my hand. I'm not going to hang partner for balancing.

Partner thanks you for that, as do I. Our work here is finished. It's time for me to set off in search of future bidding problems. Or as our bard might put it:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood,
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep.
Drat, I'm mixing up my poems again.
Oh well, at least this time
It's by the same author.
See you in June.*



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/>.