

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

JULY 2023 PROBLEM

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Opening bids have gotten much more aggressive over the years. One consequence is that pass-outs have become virtually extinct in international and top-flight national events, and increasingly rare even in everyday club games. Put four modern bridge players at a table, and somebody will find an excuse to bid something on almost every deal. For our July problem, I chose a hand in which I believed paradoxically that the most aggressive action for South to take was to do precisely nothing...but I goofed. At the last moment, in a fit of breathtaking boneheadedness, I made a minor, needless adjustment to South's hand in the hopes of making one particular option slightly more attractive. Um, yeah – it worked. Have a look at the scoring table while I wipe the egg off my face. Fortunately, as with most D4MSC problems, the Club found a lot of interesting points to discuss on this non-problem. Did I mention that I hate eggs?

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

VIEW THE [D4MSC CONVENTION CARD](#)

BOTH VULNERABLE

♠-KJ8 ♥-AJ98532 ♦-J6 ♣-2

| South | West | North | East |
|-------|------|-------|------|
| | | Pass | |

?

A. What is your call at Matchpoints?

| ANSWER | PANEL | SOLVERS | AWARD |
|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| 1♥ | 13 | 19 | 50 |
| 3♥ | 1 | 7 | 40 |
| Pass | 0 | 2 | 30 |
| 2♥ | 0 | 1 | 30 |

Let's see...clown suit, check. Red ball nose, check. Impossibly tiny umbrella, check. Okay, folks, I'm ready. Fire away!

STEVE WHITE: 1♥. What's the problem? I have enough defense and enough playing strength to open at the one-level. Particularly in second seat, this hand is not a preempt.

ED SHAPIRO: 1♥. Looks normal by today's standards, though I don't recall ever passing a hand like this unless we had Roth-Stone standards for our opening bids. I haven't forgotten how to preempt – it's intentional.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 1♥. I would never pass with this nice, seven-loser hand, and I don't want to preempt my partner if there is a spade fit. This is especially true in second chair after East has passed. North might be the one with the good hand or the long spades.

CHRIS MARLOW: 1♥. I like these easy problems.

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 1♥. I suspect a misprint.

RICK ROWLAND: 1♥. Should be the overwhelming favorite.

*You think? In fact, when I picked up this South hand in a BBO daylong tournament, my spades were the king-eight-**three**. Normally, South is known to have the best hand at the table in a robot duplicate, which makes sense from both a bridge and a business standpoint. The stronger your hand, the more crucial decisions you usually must make. That helps differentiate the competitors when the other three players at the table are bots. Plus, it's more fun to hold strong hands than weak ones.*

This particular daily game, the Zenith Daylong Reward, is an exception to the Best Hand rule. The cards are distributed randomly, so on many boards you get to sit there twiddling your thumbs while your robot opponents briskly bid ice-cold games and slams. What fun. After four or five of those yawners, I picked up the South hand and decided that I was tired of passing, so I opened 1♥ on my nine-count. Do I think that's the best call in a regular, face-to-face game? No, but we'll get to that later. Anyway, when I decided to use this problem in the D4MSC, I was concerned that 1♥ would attract only tepid support, so I beefed up the spades by including the jack. That got the high-card point count to double digits, plus it made for a spade suit strong enough to give a potential preempter pause. Oopsies.

BARRY PASSER: 1♥. Losing trick count: 7. Check. Rule of 20: 10 points plus 10 cards in the longest two suits. Check. This is an opening bid. Of course, I intend to rebid hearts as often and as cheaply as possible until partner quits.

TOM WEIK: 1♥. Too good to pass or to preempt. 3♥ could get us to the wrong strain if partner has short hearts and a spade suit.

RICH ROTHWARF: 1♥. 3♥ is also reasonable, but the hearts aren't so strong and we don't mind playing in spades.

BARRY DEHLIN: 1♥. Eh, if it meets the minimum opening hand standard for our partnership, I bid 1♥. If not, I bid 3♥. Sadly, I don't "remember" our agreement, so I'll just go with what I think our agreement should be. I'll bid and rebid and re-rebid hearts; partner should know to cater to this type of hand.

BOB AND JOANN GLASSON: 1♥. Too good to preempt, even vulnerable.

Sigh. Yeah, it is. The ♣J should have stayed in the West hand, where it belonged. Were there any changes I could have made to the problem that would have avoided this landslide? Maybe. One was to have changed who was dealer.

CONNIE GOLDBERG: 1♥. Second seat and vulnerable, it's too hard to determine how high to preempt with so many jacks. I have enough defensive tricks to open a one-bid, I think.

BOB GRINWIS: 1♥. Too good to preempt in second seat. I would bid 3♥ opposite a passed partner, though.

PETE FILANDRO: 1♥. I follow the maxim, "Do not preempt your partner." Only a mastermind would know that 6♥ or 4♦ would not be superior contracts.

BILL SCHMIDT: 1♥. I can't imagine passing with this hand, so the choice is between 1♥ and 3♥. Since this is far from a classic three-level preempt, I'll respect my unpassed partner and give her the bidding room she deserves.

BARRY COHEN: 1♥. In second seat, I am not tempted to bid anything else.

Another would have been to move the strong fragment from spades to a minor.

RUI MARQUES: 1♥. My spade holding does not make me want to preempt. I don't even think that this hand is a sub-minimum for a 1♥ opening. If my diamond and spade holdings were interchanged, I would probably open 3♥.

CHRIS MARLOW (cont.): 1♥. I might have had to think about my bid had the club and spade holdings been switched. I probably would choose 3♥ then. As it is, I am less concerned with the opponents bidding spades and ruining my well-considered and reasoned later bids, so I will start low. This may be a stretch, but I prefer to start with a slight overbid than to try to catch up later.

RICK OLANOFF: 1♥. We might belong in spades, so I won't open 3♥. With one fewer spade, I would.

RICHARD J. HARTZ: 1♥. I want to leave room for partner to make a call. Spades might still be in the picture.

Or maybe, I should have done both.

JAY APPELBAUM: 1♥. This is the worst position for a preemptive heart bid, because RHO has passed. The most likely person at the table to have a problem over my preempt is partner. I have a nice fit for spades if North has that suit, and the hand has too much offensive and defensive values. I have a perfectly fine rebid of 2♥.

ANDY MUENZ: 1♥. It's a bit icky with three jacks, but I still open this at the one-level. The spade fragment makes it possible that spades could be a better trump suit than hearts. Preempting in hearts most likely takes spades out of the picture. And, second seat is the worst to preempt in.

On the subject of how many hearts to bid if 1♥ wasn't an option.

LEONARD HELFGOTT: 1♥. I don't like having this much defense for a three-level bid when 1♥ is "not unreasonable". With:

♦-Kx ♥-AJ8xxxx ♦-xx ♣-xxx

...I would try 2♥.

JOHN D. JONES: 1♥. This is more a matter of style than of tactics or evaluation. I don't hate 3♥. 2♥ and 4♥ are wrong though. 2♥ can't be this much playing strength. The suit is too weak for a vulnerable 4♥ without a four-card side suit.

I agree. If I were to open a seven-card suit with 2 ♥, it would be on a hand similar to what Leonard gave – vulnerable, so-so hearts, flat shape otherwise. A unilateral 4 ♥ at matchpoints makes precisely zero sense, and I was gratified that no one chose it. If you're going to open this hand (← foreshadowing), it's either one or three.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3 ♥. I hate bidding 3 ♥ with this hand, especially with the spade holding in second seat, but I think I need to take up bidding space.

KARL BARTH: 3 ♥. Remembering that matchpoints isn't "actual bridge", I'll go ahead and preempt. I won't be the only one in the field doing it. The odds of us missing a spade fit are pretty slim, and it gets the gist of the hand off my chest immediately. I'm glad I'm vulnerable so partner can expect a suit that's not *completely* ratty.

LYNN HARRIS: 3 ♥. Partner should expect seven hearts. If East is the opponent who holds, e.g., ♠AQxx, we appreciate our bid. If West has those cards, we are not so fortunate.

BILL BAUER: 3 ♥. Okay, I'll bite. While I am maximum for the bid, I tend to be near the top when I make a vulnerable three-level opener. And, I hold three jacks, which tend to be overvalued in Milton Work's 4-3-2-1 system.

Stray jacks are overvalued. Jacks who are in the company of a parent or guardian, however, typically pull their one-point weight and then some. On this problem, two of South's three jacks are in the longest suits, and both have a top honor looking out for them. Putting the ♠J with the ♠K in particular is what done me in.

Let's go back for a minute to the actual, live, unadulterated, accept-no-substitutes, real world South hand.

♠-K83 ♥-AJ98532 ♦-J6 ♣-2

I imagine that some 1 ♥ bidders would stick to their guns, but others, perhaps even a majority, would at least look for a Plan B. This is a pretty thin one-bid, even if your partner is a robot who couldn't care less if you opened it Six Pentacles. Opposite a human, I wouldn't do it, particularly at matchpoints where my partner might remember that I once opened a hand like this vulnerable in second seat. She'd never trust any of my one-bids again. Trouble is, this isn't a classic three-bid either. Thus:

JIM EAGLETON: Pass. Too strong for a preempt in first or second seat.

True, but there's more. Many Club members noted the hand's suitability as a dummy for spades. That's well and good, but let's be honest: how often will you get to spades after opening 1 ♥? Say that West passes and North responds 1 ♠. You'd better hope that passed-hand East suddenly finds something to say, so that you can make a support double. If instead he passes, as is more likely, now what? 2 ♥, of course. Even if a little bird whispered in your ear that it was right to suppress your seven-bagger to make a three-card raise on a blind auction, all it would mean is that you, your partner, and the bird would be hauled in front of a committee. When you open light with a one-suited hand, it's often very difficult to land in a higher-ranking suit when you belong there. Bridge players have understood that for decades. I don't see why that wouldn't be the case on this deal.

If you really want to keep spades in the picture, one way to do so is to pass. It caters to partner having a normal 1 ♠ opener or a good 1 ♠ overcall, which she'll have room

to show if we don't get in her way. If need be, we can judge to insert a vulnerable, passed-hand 2♥ next round. That's a decent description of both shape and strength. Our expert D4MSC partner should draw the appropriate inferences as to why we didn't open 1♥ in the first place.

Opening 1♥, on the other hand, caters to our side belonging in hearts, not spades. We have seven good reasons to suspect that this is true. With that stupid ♣J gumming up the works, action seems warranted, so 1♥ is probably the best call. I wish I had left well enough alone.

B. What is your call at IMPs?

| ANSWER | PANEL | SOLVERS | AWARD |
|--------|-------|---------|-------|
| 1♥ | 13 | 23 | 50 |
| 3♥ | 1 | 5 | 40 |
| 2♥ | 0 | 1 | 30 |

If you thought Part A was a dud, welcome to "Landslide: The Sequel". Very few people changed their bid at IMPs. Worse for your hapless director, the vast majority of the comments for Part B were essentially this:

BARRY DEHLIN (with RICK ROWLAND, BARRY PASSER, ED SHAPIRO, RUI MARQUES, MICHAEL SHUSTER, CONNIE GOLDBERG, BOB GRINWIS, JAY APFELBAUM, BOB HAMMAN, CHARLES GOREN, THE RUEFUL RABBIT, OMAR SHARIF, your GRANDMOM'S WEDNESDAY BRIDGE CLUB, and VIRTUALLY EVERYONE ELSE WHO HAS EVER PLAYED BRIDGE AT ANY POINT IN THEIR LIVES, similarly): 1♥ (1♥ at MPs.) Ditto.

In other words, most commenters referred back to their matchpoints reasoning, which as you've seen was mostly of the "WTP?" nature. Double sigh. Well, there were a few changed answers plus some interesting tidbits about IMP bidding strategy, so let's hear them.

STEPHEN COOPER: 1♥ (1♥ at MPs.) Even at IMPs, this hand is an opening bid. My first instinct was to pass, but damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.

BILL SCHMIDT: 1♥ (1♥ at MPs.) Even more reason to keep the bidding "normal", to preserve any slam chances.

KARL BARTH: 1♥ (3♥ at MPs.) It's more likely that we get to a thin but making game if I open at the one level. We also might steal the opponents' plus score if LHO has to double or overcall. I'll rebid 2♥, then subside unless partner shows values.

CHRIS MARLOW: 1♥ (1♥ at MPs.) I am definitely starting low at IMPs to keep spades in the picture as a final strain.

I doubt it will be any easier at IMPs to get to spades after opening 1♥, but yes, it's best to start low at this form of scoring facing an unpassed hand. Opposite a passed partner, however, one might consider taking a few liberties:

ANDY MUENZ: 1♥ (1♥ at MPs). This would be a more interesting problem in third seat where you don't have to worry about preempting partner. There are North hands in which, if you open at the one-level, you won't reach game; e.g.:

♦-Axx ♥-Kx ♦-Qxx ♣-xxxxx

Game has decent play, enough to want to be in 4♥ at IMPs, but opening 1♥ will not get you there. Opening 4♥ would.

Oh well, one snoozer of a problem per year isn't so bad. Have a great summer, everyone, and best of luck at the Valley Forge Regional. We'll finish up with a pair of Last Words from two regular Panelists who stuck to their guns:

PETE FILANDRO: 1♥ (1♥ at MPs.) No difference on the scoring method. An opening bid is an opening bid.

BILL BAUER: 3♥ (3♥ at MPs.) One of my many weaknesses is that I often do the same thing at IMPs as I do at matchpoints. At least you can say I'm consistent – consistently wrong, that is.

♣ ♦ ♥ ♠

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/>