

DISTRICT 4 MASTER SOLVERS CLUB

SEPTEMBER 2019 PROBLEM

NICK STRAGUZZI, DIRECTOR

Matchpoints is a strange game. At rubber bridge, 10 points is essentially a rounding error; at matchpoints, it sometimes means the difference between a shared top and a shared bottom. As an IMPs fan, I find matchpoints' overemphasis on minuscule 10- and 20-point swings to be...well, silly. I even wrote to the ACBL Bulletin about 10 years ago, after computer scoring had become universal, and suggested that the league experiment with "50-Point Matchpoint" events where it takes a 50-point difference between two pairs to be worth a full matchpoint. Zero to 40 would be treated as a virtual tie, half a matchpoint each. I guess my suggestion went over with a thud, because I never heard from them. Oh well. Were we playing 50-Point Matchpoints here, this month's decision would have been pretty easy, but with regular 10-Point Matchpoints scoring, it's a real challenge. Let's see how our District experts coped with it. To the video:

METHODS ARE 2/1 WITH "WALSH"

MATCHPOINTS, NS VULNERABLE

♠-AJ942 ♥-3 ♦-KJ86 ♣-Q103

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

(3♣ = FOURTH SUIT FORCING TO GAME)

1. What is your call?

ANSWER	PANEL	SOLVERS	AWARD
3♦	6	24	100
2NT	5	10	90
3♣	2	4	80
3NT	0	1	70

WILLIAM KILMER: 3♦. This is virtually a non-problem after last month's brutality.

Yeah, it's been a rough year, although that wasn't my intention. It just so happens that many of the 2019 problems have been of the Impending Doom variety. It's time for a brief hiatus from the stress and anxiety. This is a pretty straightforward two-part decision. One, is this hand worth forcing to game with 3♣ (or 3NT)? Two, if not, then should we invite in diamonds or notrump? Both look to me to be close calls.

The Club felt differently. By better than six-to-one, our members chose the more conservative route at matchpoints, the form of bridge scoring where plus scores are revered and cherished. Fair enough. Let's hear from the game-forcers first.

CRAIG ROBINSON: 3♣. These are pretty good cards. I'm heading towards 5♦, but 4♠ is still a possibility. If partner bids 3NT, I'll bid 4♦.

DON DALPE: 3♣. I have a hand I would open. How then can I not force to game opposite a second-seat opener? I realize this is matchpoints, but getting to the best game, even if it is anti-percentage, may still get lucky.

CHRIS KAUFMAN: 3♣. 2♠ and 3♦ just aren't encouraging enough, so I'll risk reaching a failing 3NT. If you're gonna overbid, be prepared to overplay!

LYNN HARRIS: 3♣. If my clubs were better (say, the ♣9 instead of a diamond spot card), I'd bid 3NT. As it is, I think the choice is between an encouraging 2NT and a 3♣ force. The ace-jack-nine combination in spades plus the ♣10 makes me believe 3♣ is the better bid.

A burning question is: how many spades might North hold? If he's at the top of his range, i.e. 16-18 HCP, he could be 3=5=4=1 or the like. If you took a weak preference to 2♥, he'd follow with 2♠ to show the hand-type. That's Introductory Bidding 101.

What if he's at the bottom of his range? With 11-15 HCP, some players today believe that raising responder's major on three with an unbalanced hand is mandatory (as opposed to introducing a new suit, that is.) Those partnerships usually use responder's subsequent 2NT as an artificial asking bid, with step-responses: 3♣ and 3♦ show a three-card raise with minimum vs. maximum strength, respectively. 3♥ and 3♠ show a four-card raise, ditto. The upshot is that, if you're enrolled in this school of thought, partner's 2♦ all but denies a minimum hand with three spades.

RICHARD HARTZ, SR.: 3♣. Leaves open the possibility of partner showing three-card spade support or playing 3NT.

WILLIAM BAUER: 3♣. Perhaps it is wishful thinking that my "no good" partner will turn up with three spades, but I'll give it a shot. I'm maybe a tad shy for my bid, but I expect North to have a sound opening bid in second seat. If partner's next bid is 3NT, I'll let him play there hoping his dummy play has improved from our last session together. If he rebids 3♥, I'll likely bid 4♦.

I agree with Bill that, if we bid 3♣ and partner can only croak 3♥ over that, then 3NT is probably not going to be a happy contract for us. That's the main reason I chose to invite rather than force to game. Oftentimes it's right in situations like this to overbid slightly to ensure reaching the right strain, which is always worth a matchpoint or three. Here though, there's no guarantee that 3♣ is going to lead us to the promised land. If partner holds, for example:

♠K10 ♥A9432 ♦AQ105 ♣42

...it looks to me that the best matchpoint game might be four spades. Good luck getting there at all, much less over 3♣. At any rate, once we decide to invite, the question becomes whether to raise partner's minor or to offer notrump. This being matchpoints, I thought that the MSC plurality would be 2NT. I was mistaken.

RICK ROWLAND: 2NT. An invitational hand with a club stopper.

Yeah, that. Plus, eight tricks in notrump outscore nine in diamonds.

RICHARD HARTZ: 2NT. I play this as 10-11 HCP with a club stopper so it seems like an easy call. I hope I'm not missing something. Things would be different if the opponents had bid clubs.

BARRY COHEN: 2NT. This accurately describes my values. Partner can show three spades, a fifth diamond, or choose between 2NT and 3NT.

ANDY MUENZ (with **BILL SCHMIDT** echoing the right-sided holdings): 2NT. The hand is not strong enough to force to game with a stiff heart, especially given what people open with nowadays. Despite not having a great stopper, 2NT as some advantages, one of which is that it right-sides notrump opposite partner's ♣Ax or ♣Kx.

STEVE GIBBON: 2NT. This tells partner that I have at most five spades and two hearts, thus I have at least six minor-suit cards with invitational values. Trust him to do the right thing.

TOM WEIK: 2NT. Diamonds could be right, but this is matchpoints. My hand is not strong enough to force to game, especially given my poor heart fit. However, I have some attractive intermediates to help in notrump, and I would view it positively if partner raised to 3NT.

Our next panelist brings up an age-old conundrum of bridge: does "fourth suit forcing to game" allow for stopping in four of a minor? Ask your partner about this, before you find out his or her belief the hard way at the table.

ED SHAPIRO: 2NT. This is matchpoints, so looking for a plus score in notrump is a normal strategy. 3♦ is likely to achieve a plus, but it makes playing in 2NT a bit more difficult. I don't think it's worth 3♣, even with the agreement that on some auctions you can end in 4♦.

For you sociologists out there, let it be known that five of the six women who responded this month chose 2NT over 3♦. (The sixth chose 3NT!)

CATHY STRAUSS: 2NT. Natural and non-forcing. By showing a club stopper, this is more informative than a raise to 3♦. We're not strong enough to force with 3♣.

BOB & JOANN GLASSON: 2NT. Not good enough for a game-force. If partner has three spades and an acceptance, he'll bid 3♠ along the way.

CONNIE GOLDBERG (with **TODD HOLES**, right down to the part about 3♦ possibly being a full queen weaker): 2NT. The choice for me is between 2NT and 3♦. Both are game-invitational, but in practice, 3♦ can be at least a queen lighter to protect when partner has a strong hand a shade below a jump-shift. 2NT, on the other hand, is a pure 'value bid'. [Connie went on to endorse heartily the Gazzilli 2♦ convention, but we'll cover that topic another day - Ed.]

Nonetheless, the Panelists' plurality and Solvers' majority was an unassuming raise to 3♦, informing partner that we have a gosh-darn, honest-to-goodness fit. Several 3♦ bidders express concern that it doesn't entirely get across the hand's playing value in diamonds, but they cite sensible reasons for going a bit low, mostly centered around that lonely three of hearts.

RICH ROTHWARF: 3♦. An underbid, but partner should not have three spades unless he has extra values. 4♦ goes past 3NT, and 2NT may go down when 3♦ is

making overtricks. I'll take a plus score. Partner is still allowed to bid 3NT or to try for game in diamonds.

WILLIAM PORT: 3♦. These eleven points do not bode well for a game in notrump. I'll aim for a more assured plus score in 3♦. My second choice would be 3♣, but with five cards lower than a seven and only one ten-spot, my cards argue against that option.

LEN HELFGOTT: 3♦. The stiff heart lends itself to conservatism.

MARK BOLOTIN: 3♦. I don't quite have a full opener. My singleton is in the wrong place. I'll go to some game after any try by partner. This may not be our highest-scoring partial, but it's our surest plus score.

BILL FOSTER: 3♦. It's tempting to bid 3♣, but I don't think this hand is strong enough to do that. I suspect North is something like 1=6=4=2, which fits only in diamonds. Unless she is very strong (and if so, why didn't she jump to 3♦?), I expect her to pass.

BRUCE SCHWAIDELSON: 3♦. Partner has shown his two suits, and I have excellent support for one. But, why force to game if his hand looks like:

♦X ♦KQxxx ♦AQxx ♣xx ?

Partner might have extras or three-card spade support. I'll give him the chance to show them, or to pass 3♦.

BOB GRINWIS: 3♦. Not enough to force with 3♣, so I'll show support instead. Four of my 11 points are quacks, and I have a singleton heart, so I can't be too aggressive.

HOWARD WACHTEL: 3♦. My singleton is in partner's first-bid suit, so I don't consider my hand to be a full opener. 3♦ shows primary diamond support and denies heart support. 2NT is an alternative, but I would worry that West would lead a club from ♣KJxxx to East's ♣A, and a club would come back through my ♣Q10.

That happens to me every time I bid notrump on queen-ten-low. No, really: every single time, like freaking clockwork. It's like the defenders' cards magically rearrange themselves to allow it to happen, like I'm on some bridge version of The Outer Limits. Anyway, a good number of 3♦ bidders believe they are making the right value bid.

JAY APPELBAUM: 3♦. Not strong enough for 3♣. Too few diamonds for 4♦. 2NT does not disclose the excellent diamond fit. Best choice considering the options.

JOHN JONES: 3♦. Forcing to game seems really rich. 2NT seems wrong with such good diamond support. 3♦ seems like the Baby Bear bid: "just right".

MANOJ K. DEB-ROY: 3♦. Showing four diamonds, about 11 points, and looking for game.

STEVE WHITE: 3♦. The only reasonable choices are 2NT and 3♦, since the hand is not worth a game force. The club holding argues for notrump, but this hand should play very well in diamonds if partner goes on that way.

DAVE WACHSMAN: 3♦. Very descriptive, as it shows the diamond support while denying a game-forcing hand. Opener should be well-placed to continue.

BARRY PASSER: 3♦. Right on the money! Four-card support, 11 points. Partner can return to spades if he has three of them.

I admit 3♦ has one big advantage over 2NT: it allows partner to reevaluate his hand in light of the known fit. If he's 1=5=4=3 or the like, this probably won't be a big deal. But, North is allowed to get dealt a good six-five in the reds every now and then, and if that's his hand, 3♦ could be an enormous winner.

JOHN HEMMER: 3♦. Bridge is a partnership game. I like to support my partner when we have a fit. Since I'm an unpassed hand, 3♦ should be forward-going.

RICK OLANOFF: 3♦. If partner has extra values or extra diamonds, he can bid on. Otherwise, a plus score at matchpoints is often good. At IMPs, I'd probably bid 3♣.

BARRY DEHLIN: 3♦. Especially if we open lighter, I can't see forcing to game at this point. 2NT and 3♦ both convey my invitational strength, and my first instinct was to bid 2NT at matchpoints. But, partner also knows that we're playing MPs. He can bid 3NT with a club holding he wants to have lead protection, like king-low. And, maybe he's even got three spades he wants to tell me about on the way to 3NT.

TED LEVY: 3♦. Not enough for 3♣; it's not clear where the two hands belong yet. 2NT is not for me. I didn't have to bid, so partner knows I have some cards.

JIM EAGLETON: 3♦. Every decade I want my partner to bid and play 3 NT. Emphasizing the spade misfit does not seem to help and gives me a problem over 3♥.

Notrump? We don't (always) need no stinking notrump! Even at matchpoints, minor suit contracts that make are hardly chopped liver, particularly when notrump is going down or when the minor might produce multiple extra tricks, as two longstanding Panelists point out:

MICHAEL SHUSTER: 3♦. I have primary support and less than a game force. Rearranging the honors produces a hand that's worse for diamonds and better for notrump:

♦J9xxx ♦x ♦Ajxx ♣KQ10.

Our actual hand rates to take at least 10 tricks in diamonds, so I'm not tempted by 2NT.

PETER FILANDRO: 3♦. A wide-ranging invitation showing 9-13 support points. I'm at the top, but within range. The tempting 3♣ seeks three-card spade support, but with 3=5=4=1 and a minimum opener, partner usually raises spades. With a minimum 2=5=4=2, she often bids notrump. So, with no guarantees, I'll posit 1=5=4=3. Thus, a misfit with no source of tricks for notrump. I need partner to have extra strength to achieve 3NT or 5♦.

This being bridge, there's always a can of worms lurking in the simplest of auctions. Say you bid 3♦. If partner bids 3♥ over that, I think most of us would agree that's forcing and showing extras -- North showed his six-four via hearts-diamonds-hearts; if he was minimum, he could've bid hearts-hearts-diamonds. If he bids 3NT, that doesn't show the World's Fair; just enough extras to go for game. But...uh...what's it mean if he now bids 3♣? Does that show the 3=5=4=1 family of strong hands with 16-18 points? Is it just a courtesy bid showing three spades on the way to 3NT? Does it even show three spades at all, as our next Solver frets?:

RUI MARQUES: 3♦. 3♣ could easily be the winning action, but if partner is minimum, I'm happy to play 3♦. If partner rebids hearts, I'll continue with 3NT. If he

bids spades, I won't know if he has two or three, but playing MPs I'll venture 4♦ (partner rates to be short in clubs and I might be able to ruff one in dummy).

Rui deserves an Atta Boy for being the only one of us to reach 4♦ on the hand I gave back on page 2. At any rate, after twenty minutes of deep contemplation (read: I dozed off), I think if North bids 3♦ next, it shows game-going values, secondary spade support (three cards, or maybe two honors doubleton in a pinch), and doubt about notrump.

Summing up for the 3♦ contingent is:

DANIEL DROZ: 3♦. I like this hand, but I do not wish to drive to game. Sure, I have 11 HCP with a singleton, but four of those points are quacks and that singleton is in partner's major. I don't want to play this hand in notrump if partner is 2=5=4=2, as our clubs are worrying and the auction has pinpointed this weakness to the opponents. So, I prefer 3♦ to 2NT. If partner passes, this contract will be safe and in our best fit. Partner is welcome to try 3NT, or even bid spades.

What I like most here is that this bid lets partner help make the final call. It shows a hand with at least four, maybe five spades; at most two, probably one heart; four diamonds, maybe five; likely without a great club stopper; and a little shy of a game force. This should leave him placed well to choose where to park this boat. Even 3♣ takes partner out of the decision, as we would have to place the contract ourselves next round, most likely.

It's hard to argue with a word of that, but I'm going to halfheartedly try. I agree 3♦ is a better bridge call. It's better at matchpoints if the hand belongs in diamonds, or if partner has some 2=5=4=2 dog in which the opponents will start by rattling off a zillion clubs and then look where else they can find 100-point undertricks. I thought originally that I might bid 3♣ at IMPs, but after reading everyone's comments, I changed my mind: 3♦ is a much better call at that form of scoring. Daniel is correct: this is just not a hand in which overbidding is likely to lead you to a superior strain.

...But. This is matchpoints. Every textbook on the subject hammers home the point that, at MPs, the question is not "How Much?" but "How Often?" That is, what matters at matchpoints is how often one action wins over another, even if the wins are by 10 and 20 points and the losses are by area codes. And...sorry...I'm pretty sure 2NT is going to outscore 3♦ more often than not, usually by some stupid little margin like +120 vs. +110. When 2NT is wrong, it will sometimes be catastrophically wrong. But, it's only one board. As I said six pages ago: Matchpoints is a strange game.

At the table, all roads led to 3NT. It didn't matter which side it was played from: partner's clubs were ♣KJ and the opponents weren't going to figure out they should be attacking hearts until it was much too late. Whatever we learn from this month's problem is purely theoretical, though theory is sometimes fun. Final Word this month goes to:

STEPHEN COOPER: 3♦. This hand is so close (close to 2NT, 3♣, and 3NT), but I will settle for telling partner I have more than a pass and hope that he has another bid. I will bid 3NT over 3♥ and raise 3♠ to four. I will tell you what I will do over 4♦ if it appears in the October problem.

It won't, but that certainly would be an interesting one, wouldn't it?



*It's time for our Three-Quarters Pole Update on the **2019 District 4 MSC Challenge**, the most prestigious bridge bidding contest in the world (assuming the word only stretched from Wilmington to Syracuse, that is.)*

Pete Filandro is still in the lead among Panelists; in fact, Pete has a perfect 700 so far this year as he tries to duplicate Tom Weik's 2018 achievement of pitching a perfect game in the D4MSC. But, Pete's first dropped score is an 80, so an off-month or two could put him back among the pack. Tom and the Glassons are at 670 and there is a huge logjam just behind them among...well, pretty much every other Panelist, to be honest. It's still anyone's game.

*As far as the Solvers go, 2017 champ **Steve White** is tied for the lead at 690 with **Bruce Schwaidelson**. Bruce, however, has one edge: both of his dropped scores are 90s, while Steve's are an 80 and a 70. There's a four-way tie at 680 between Mark Bolotin, Stephen Cooper, Leonard Helfgott, and Andy Muenz; another four regular Solvers are at 670, and six more are at 660.*



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/>