



Master Solvers Panel



By John Swanson
Lancaster, California

Thanks to our panel members: Roger Lee and Paul Ivaska, Las Vegas, Mike Lawrence, Brentwood, Tennessee, and our Californians Wafik Abdou, Ed Davis, Andrew Gumperz, Jo Anna Stansby, and Jim Tritt. We have an eclectic group of problems this month.

Problem 1.

East-West vulnerable, IMP scoring
You are South holding:

♠86 ♥QJ532 ♦Q53 ♣752

South	West	North	East
		1♣	Pass
1♥	1♠	2♦	Pass
2♥*	2♠	4♥	Pass
Pass	4♠	Pass	Pass
?			

*Five+ hearts

J.S.: After deciding on your call but before reading the comments below, consider if partner's pass was forcing. That is, could you, in your partnership methods, pass 4♠ with an appropriate hand?

Gumperz: 5♣. This problem is an example of why a partnership needs a good understanding of when a pass is or is not forcing. If you think pass is forcing, the pass has shown a strong hand. If you think pass is non-forcing, the pass has shown a hand with excellent offense (to justify 4♥), but without the defense to double 4♠. If one partner thinks pass is forcing, and the other does not, the partnership will likely earn a disastrous result.

J.S.: The concept of a forcing pass in these high-level competitive situations is that the player in the immediate position (North on this deal) is uncertain if his side should double or bid on. He is soliciting partner's input. If North had a strong opinion either way he would double or take the push; he would not pass. Without the forcing pass agreement, North himself is forced to take a stand, frequently with quite limited information about South's hand (as in this case). An advantage of rejecting the forcing pass concept is that, if the immediate player has already bid the full extent (or more) of his cards, he can pass, content with any call partner makes, including a pass. Another advantage is that you don't have to define when passes are forcing and when they aren't.

Ivaska: 5♥. This is a strange sequence indeed. West has arranged the auction so that partner was able to get heart support out of her/his system. If West had bid 4♠ at his second turn, North would almost certainly have persevered to 5♥ rather than not supporting hearts, so I'll make the bid that partner would have under those circumstances. The Esteemed Moderator, 21st Century version, (EM21C) did not specify whether my 2♥ rebid limited my hand, but it seems to me that I have no (or even negative) defense (minimum in high cards, extra heart length) so North will have to supply all the defensive tricks.

This auction isn't technically forcing in my view, but I can't imagine passing since I'll lose many IMPs for us if either 4♠ or 5♥ makes. Pass (or – heaven help us – double) is only right if neither makes, which I regard as most unlikely, so I feel that passing is a dereliction of duty.

J.S.: I suppose that by "isn't technically forcing" Paul means that the pass is not defined as forcing in his partnership. That is inferior in my view. Partner has shown a hand worth forcing to game opposite a minimum response (which includes five hearts). You cannot afford to allow the opponents to pay a paltry undoubled penalty when you are due a game bonus. Paul notes that "I can't imagine passing." I suggest that if you don't pass with this collection of junk there is no holding with which you would pass. This also implies the auction should be forcing. But Paul is not alone in the belief that partner's pass is non-forcing:

Gumperz (continued): Partner's pass should not be forcing in this auction. He had a stronger raise to game available – a cuebid of 3♠ – which he declined to use. Any time a game bidder declines a stronger auction, the subsequent auction does not include forcing passes. So what type of hand might partner hold to bid 4♥ without wanting to set up a force? Perhaps a 0-3-4-6 with limited high cards, like: ♠-- ♥K10x ♦AJ10x ♣KQJ10xx.

J.S.: Andrew raises an excellent point: in a competitive auction, a strong hand should (must), when the possibility exists, bid to indicate that the deal belongs to his side to create a forcing pass situation. But this auction lacks both qualifiers. First, it was not (yet) a competitive auction. One doesn't, and shouldn't, design his auction with the anticipation of an outlandish, unexpected bid by an opponent. For example, you open 1♥ and partner raises to 2♥. You wouldn't fear that, having passed earlier, LHO will bid 4♠ out-of-the-blue. Thus you would not make a bid other than 4♥ to insure a forcing pass auction. In the problem auction, even though East has bid spades, there is no reason to believe he will take a flyer at the four level. Secondly, although there was room for a cue bid, it was not a feasible bid, for 3♠ would not show heart support. It would ask for a spade stopper, something like: ♠xx ♥x ♦AKxx ♣AKQJxx.

Gumperz (continued): Another question is, has West lost his mind? Why would he bid only 2♠, and now bid 4♠? Did his hand suddenly become two tricks better? West probably did not lose his mind. He is vul against not. If he is a competent player, he has not taken an excessive risk at these colors. I think he was trying to lure us into a double on insufficient defensive values. Our hand is atrocious defensively, so we can't dream of doubling in a non-forcing pass situation.

J.S.: We have a striking difference of opinion:

Stansby: Double. I view the auction as forcing and I don't like our prospects for eleven tricks.

Lawrence: Double. North's pass is obviously forcing, but there is a warning inference in the auction. North has only three hearts. He should not go through this reverse sequence with four trumps. He should make a splinter first. Yes, I have some useful offensive values, but they are as minimal as they can be. I suppose we might make 5♥ facing his forcing pass, but I'm betting against it.

Gumperz (continued – yes, once again): 5♣. Do we pass and defend or do we sacrifice? I am inclined to sacrifice. At these colors, down two produces a worthwhile number of IMPs, and I think that is a reasonable goal given the type of hand I expect partner to hold. I choose 5♣ to offer an alternative strain.

J.S.: Despite my disagreement with Andrew on a couple of points, I do agree with his call. The defense is pathetic, and 5♣ is more likely to make than 5♥.

Davis: 5♥. Partner has shown 1-3-4-5 or 0-3-4-6 distribution with his bidding through 4♥. Partner would double with many hands containing a singleton spade and good defense, so his pass shows a void in spades or extra playing strength, such as: ♠x ♥AKx ♦AKxx ♣KQJxx. By passing 4♠ back to me, partner is allowing me to make the final decision. With no extra offense and no defense, it is not absolutely clear what I should do.

But what is West doing? He knows we are going to whack him in 4♠. Or is he trying to buy the hand in 4♠ doubled with nine spade tricks and the ♣A? I am suspicious. Thus I am bidding 5♥, not just because we probably have enough to make, but also to not fall victim to the machinations of a devious West.

J.S.: West held: ♠AQ109742 ♥K8 ♦J1092 ♣--. His auction was unusual, perhaps devious, and maybe you or I would have bid his cards differently, but it doesn't qualify as mindless.

Tritt: 5♥. What little I have fits partner's hand and provides offensive fillers, but almost no defense, and his pass is forcing. Also, West knows they are vulnerable, yet chose to "walk the dog" to 4♠. He is not likely to fear a double; nor do I have any reason to expect to beat 4♠. 5♥ could make, or if not, it could be a good save.

Lee: 5♣. It's annoying, but it looks like there's a good chance they've done the right thing, so it's time to take the push. I was sort of dodging the question of whether the auction was forcing or not, but I don't think it's that big of a sweat with our hand. If partner thinks pass is non-forcing, then he thinks 4♠ might make, in which case I'm inclined to agree. If he made a forcing pass then I'm inclined to bid with no defensive trick. 1-3-4-5 would be a surprising shape given the lack of double, regardless of whether we play support doubles. For the record, I think we are in a force.

J.S.: North held: ♠3 ♥A107 ♦A76 ♣AKQJ106. He had already shown his offensive potential with the 4♥ call. He should have doubled 4♠ on this and most other hands which do not include a void in spades. Holding Ed's super strong example, North could pass, then pull South's double, inviting a slam. There is another entire story behind this deal which begs discussion but must wait for another day, for North broke tempo before passing and the director undoubled the 4♠ contract.

Problem 2.

Both sides vulnerable, IMP scoring
You are South holding:

♠842 ♥AQ ♦AQ865 ♣K75

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

Ivaska: 3♥. After all, ♥AQ-doubleton is better support than three small, which, in and of itself, doesn't make 3♥ right. However, there isn't an attractive alternative to 3♥; 4♦ is forcing but suggests more distribution. 3NT is a gamble that could get one committed to the local mental hospital for a good long stretch, especially since the reasonable possibility of 3♥ is available.

Gumperz: 3♥. This virtually commits us to play in hearts because after 3♥, 3NT by either player will be a slam try in hearts (serious 3NT). I don't mind giving up 3NT so much, but 3♥ may make it hard to reach a 6♦ contract. If partner bids keycard it is unlikely you will find your way back to diamonds. And if partner makes a mild slam try, will you cooperate? You have good cards but one fewer heart than he expects. On the plus side for 3♥, if partner has a singleton somewhere he will recognize that the hand is likely to produce an extra trick in diamonds, so we can trust him to offer diamonds as a resting spot. And if we stop in game, the doubleton ♥AQ is fine support for 4♥, which is a trick lower than the diamond game. And I can foresee the possibility of a misunderstanding if we show delayed support with 4♥. The alternative of 4♦ indicates the extra values you hold in prime cards, but rules out play in 4♥, the most likely winning contract. An immediate 3NT bid would be wildly unsound. If partner has this minimum: ♠x ♥Kxxxx ♦KJx ♣Axxx, 6♦ has play while 3NT has no play.

Abdou: 3♥, end-played into that bid. It suggests three hearts but ♥AQ will do. I plan to bid 3NT over 3♠, 4♦ over 4♣ and pass over 4♥.

Davis: 3♥. Partner will think I have three hearts but that is okay. This is by far the best description of my hand. If partner moves toward slam I certainly have enough to cooperate, and I will suggest playing in diamonds. If partner wants to stop in 4♥ with a minimum hand we should be fine. It is useful to have an agreement on how to show black suit stoppers for reaching 3NT on this auction, but on this hand the best contract will be found by showing heart support.

Stansby: 3♥. In my style 2♦ shows 5+ diamonds, and raising shows 4. I won't be playing 3NT unless partner bids it.

Lee: 3♥. It seems straightforward here to lie about the third heart absent some pretty involved methods. You can fix this problem by playing 2♠ or 3♥ as a two-way bid, but I prefer to keep things simple unless necessary.

Tritt: 3♥, where my cards are. We could play a heart game, a diamond game, or a red suit slam.

Lawrence: 3♥. There are artificial methods here which might be used, but I don't use them and don't think they are necessary on this hand.

J.S.: I agree that artificial methods are not necessary here and wasn't previously aware of them. The following was supplied by Ed Davis: It used to be that 3♥ after the auction: 1♥-2♦-3♦ showed hearts. 3NT was to play and, a long time ago (circa car hops serving food at drive-in restaurants), 3♠ showed a spade stopper and denied a club stopper. Later it became popular to play that the 3♠ bid asked for a spade stopper.

Most recently, Michael Rosenberg (and probably others) have suggested that 3♥ over 3♦ should be used to show either support for opener's major or a club stopper. If one accepts that premise, then regardless of which major is opened, responder's bids over 3♦ can have the following meanings:

a. 3♥ equals support for opener's major or a club stopper and no stopper in the other major; Then opener's bids are:

3♠ denies the ability (or willingness) to be declarer in 3NT

3NT shows a stopper in the other major and the willingness to be declarer

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