

King-Size Headache -- Problem

♠ 3
♥ 6 4
♦ A K 7 6 2
♣ A 10 6 5 4

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1 ♥	Pass	2 ♦ ¹
Pass	3 ♣	Pass	4 ♠ ²
Pass	4 NT ³	Pass	5 ♥ ⁴
Pass	5 NT ⁵	Pass	?

1. Natural game force.
2. Splinter: 0-1 ♠, excellent ♣ support.
3. Roman Keycard Blackwood.
4. Two keycards, without the ♣ Q..
5. We have all 5, plus ♣ Q: please bid a side king.

This is "It's Your Call" problem (4) from the Bridge Bulletin, December 2021, IMPs scoring, playing Bridge Bulletin Standard. More than half the expert panel gave a distinctly incorrect answer. What say you?

Crosswood is a convention of my design, about which I first wrote in June 2011: when a minor suit is confirmed to be trump, or implied to be, then four of the other minor asks for keycards. This would apply if we raise to 4 ♣ and partner bids 4 ♦. We reply 4 NT to show two keycards without the ♣ Q. Partner then bids 5 ♦ to say we have them all and ask for a side king. 6 ♣ would deny a side king, so 5 NT shows the king we could not show: diamonds. Partner does not know about the singleton spade, but will bid a grand slam holding ♦ QJ. This plan is not so good, if partner raises 4 ♣ to 5 ♣.

After 1 ♥ - 2 ♦; 3 ♣ - ? 3 ♦ would be natural and forcing,* so 4 ♦ is Crosswood, implying clubs are trump. We want to bid a slam if they cannot cash two top winners, so go for it!

Unfortunately, although Steve Robinson commented that he would have used 4 ♦ to ask for keycards, Bridge Bulletin Standard does not include Crosswood -- we are stuck with this problem.

* Even if playing the version where responder's repeat of a 2/1 response is non-forcing, this 3 ♦ bid must be forcing, because opener's high reverse to 3 ♣ must show extras. In fact I prefer to play this way when 2 ♦ sets a game force. Consider this hand, which appears in Billy Miller's column of the same issue:

♠ K J 9 7 4 ♥ - ♦ K J 6 5 4 ♣ Q 9 8

This hand does not have enough defense for me, but I would not complain if my partner applied the rule of 20 to this hand and opened 1 ♠. All that crud *is* in long suits. Having opened 1 ♠ and hearing a 2 ♥ response, rebid 2 ♠. Limit the hand and leave partner maximum space. (Yes, some folks play that 2 ♠ shows six cards, but that makes for some silly 2 NT rebids as well as problems on hands such as this.)

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The bid of 6 ♣ rightfully earned seven panelists the top score of 100 points. Five panelists chose 7 ♣ and three chose 6 ♦. Let's see why those choices were so bad.

First, we could hardly hold less for the 4 ♠ splinter. Other than the two known aces and looking at the ♣ K Q, he can surely count on a red king (or maybe ♥ Q, ♦ Q J). Holding the magic hand, partner bids 7 ♣, not 5 NT:

♠ A x ♥ A K x x x ♦ x x ♣ K Q J x

My rule is: *Don't bid speculative grand slams!* I like to be able to count 13 tricks, or 12 plus multiple possibilities for 13. Think 75%. For partner's hand above, the grand slam would be probable, *from the bidding*. The chance of the 4 ♠ splinter providing only ♦ Q J has to be less than 50 %, so the grand is 75% or better.

So, those who bid 7 ♣ have bid their values twice and deserve to have that contract fail.

How about 6 ♦, to show the king? Well that commits us to 6 NT, 6 ♥, 6 ♦ or 7 ♣, and all those contracts are likely to fail, because partner needs something extra from us to make 7 ♣.

But partner asked us to show a king! Well, that's secondary. The main reason to bid 5 NT is to tell us that we have all the keycards. This is absolutely required, when there might be concealed values that produce 13 tricks, for example:

♠ 3 ♥ 6 4 ♦ A K Q J 9 5 ♣ A J 10 4 -- jump to 7 ♣ and discard four hearts on the diamonds
 ♠ 3 ♥ 6 4 ♦ A K Q J 9 ♣ A 10 6 5 4 -- jump to 7 ♣ and hope to discard four hearts on the diamonds
 ♠ K ♥ 6 4 ♦ A K 7 6 2 ♣ A 10 6 5 4 -- jump to 7 ♣ and discard the losing ♥ on the ♠ A