

## Fourth-Suit Forcing (4SF or FSF) Convention

Fourth-suit-forcing (4SF) is a convention that has become popular with the rise of the Two-over-one (2/1) system, which emphasizes jumping the bidding with weak, distributional hands and keeping the bidding low with stronger hands.

Consider the following bidding sequence:

1♦ (you) - Pass - 1♥ (partner) - Pass  
1♠ - Pass - 2♣

The 2♣ bid is forcing in any system. But with a club suit, less than four hearts, and no strong preference for diamonds, partner would be just as well served bidding some appropriate level of notrump: 1NT would be a virtual shutdown, 2NT would be invitational to game (probably about 11-12 HCP), and 3NT would be a full opening hand.

But the 3NT bid, showing an opening hand, crowds the bidding way too much. Partner may have a minimum balanced hand with four spades, in which case the 3NT bid sets the contract nicely. But it is just as likely that partner has some other type of hand; possibly two-suited, possibly quite a bit stronger than a minimum opener. And so, consistent with the 2/1 principles, it is more useful to use the 2♣ (the fourth suit) in an artificial manner.

Invocation of the fourth suit in a non-competition auction (with one exception, discussed below) is artificial. It is used when responder has sufficient values for (at least) game and wishes to explore the proper contract and the possibilities for slam. *It does not imply anything about the holding in that suit.*

4SF is a request for partner to further clarify his hand. Since the 4SF bidder often holds five cards in their first-bid suit (in the above example, hearts), the first obligation of the opener is to show three-card support. This may be the only information responder needs to properly place the contract.

**Failing three-card support, the next obligation of the opener is to show a stopper in the fourth suit; this is done by bidding NT in response to the 4SF bid. Whether opener should show a full stopper or a partial stopper is a matter of partnership agreement, but most players would expect a full stopper in the absence of any specific discussion.**

**Without three-card support and without a stopper in the fourth suit, opener should make the bid that next-best describes the hand. If opener's second suit is five cards in length, it should be rebid now.**

**In the very rare instance that opener has a three-suited hand without a stopper in the fourth suit, and is extremely short in responder's first suit, a (four-card) raise of the fourth suit may be required. This should be seen by the responder as a red flag. Responder should place the contract in the safest possible place.**

**Without any of these holdings, opener generally will rebid his first suit. This does not indicate special length in that suit, but should be merely noted as a hand that has nothing new to describe.**

*4SF is not used in a competitive auction, when responder is a passed hand, or when a 2/1 sequence has been initiated.*

**Note that playing 4SF has an impact on other sequences. For example, note the following:**

**1♦ (you) - Pass - 1♥ (partner) - Pass  
1♠ - Pass - 3♥**

**now becomes merely invitational (10-12?), because the responder did not (negative inference) use 4SF. This differentiation is very useful and is an important adjunct to the use of 4SF.**

**The exception to the 4SF occurs when the bidding proceeds:**

**1♣ (you) - Pass - 1♦ (partner) - Pass  
1♥ - Pass - 1♠**

**This is *not* 4SF; it retains its original meaning, as opener has not denied the presence of a 4-card spade suit. To utilize 4SF in this instance, the bidding proceeds:**

**1♣ (you) - Pass - 1♦ (partner) - Pass  
1♥ - Pass - 2♠**

**(Note the jump to 2♠; in this auction it can have no other meaning; it is 4SF)**