

Fourth Suit Forcing

Several of my more advanced students have been asking how to bid certain hands where they are stuck for a bid. What should they bid as responder when they have the values for game but don't know which game to try?

	Partner	You
♠ K Q 10 5 4	1♥	1♠
♥ Q 2	2♣	
♦ J 10 4	With 14 points you want to be in game – but which game should you bid?	
♣ A Q 10		

- A rebid 2♠ or 3♠ is not forcing – partner could pass. Jumping to 4♠ gets you to game but partner may only have one spade and 4♠ would go down.
- A raise to 2♥ or 3♥ is also not forcing. To jump to 4♥ suggests you have better heart support and 4♥ could go down if partner has five weaker hearts, say ♥K 6 5 4 3.
- A raise to 3♣ is not forcing. It shows four clubs and fewer points.
- 2NT would show about eleven points and can be passed. 3NT would show your 14 point hand better, but 3NT is not a good bid when you have nothing in diamonds. Diamonds are the suit the defenders are most likely to lead, since they are the unbid suit. If your clubs and diamond holdings were reversed, 3NT would be a very good bid.

What we need is a bid that says to partner 'I have a hand that wants to go to game, but I don't know which game we should bid. Please will you tell me a bit more about your hand, so we can decide together.' A bid of the only suit that has not been bid, in this case 2♦, is used to ask this question. It is a convention called 'Fourth Suit Forcing'. A 2♦ bid shows at least game invitational values; say 12+ points, and a hand that doesn't know where to go. It asks opener for further information.

So what is opener meant to respond when you make this Fourth Suit Forcing bid? I tried this quiz on my class to see if they could work out the best response.

♠ 2	This hand has shown its hearts and clubs. The extra information it can give is that it has a diamond stopper, so opener should bid 2NT and now you can bid 3NT. With a slightly better hand, say ♦K Q 2, opener should jump straight to 3NT
♥ A K 6 5 4	
♦ K 9 2	
♣ K 9 6 4	

♠ J 4 2	This hand has shown its five hearts and four clubs. But it has got three spades, your first bid suit, and opener should bid 2♠ to show them. Responder can now bid 4♠. With better spades, say ♠ A 4 2, opener can jump to 3♠ or 4♠.
♥ A K 6 5 4	
♦ 2	
♣ K J 6 4	

♠ 2	This hand can't bid no trumps without a diamond stop. It can't support spades, but it can show the extra shape by bidding 3♣. Knowing partner is 5-5 in hearts and clubs, you would bid 4♥ with the hand above.
♥ A K J 6 5	
♦ 7 2	
♣ K J 6 4 2	

♠ 4 2	This hand has shown its five hearts and four clubs. But it has got six good hearts so opener can bid 3♥ to show the extra length and you would be happy to bid 4♥.
♥ A K 10 8 4 3	
♦ 2	
♣ K J 6 4	

♠ A 6	With a good doubleton in spades, this hand should bid 2♠. Nearly always the 2♦ bidder will have five spades and game in spades is a possibility. This hand provides a diamond stopper in a suit contract, as it can ruff the third round of diamonds.
♥ A J 6 5 3	
♦ 5 2	
♣ K J 6 4	

♠ J 6
♥ A K 6 5 3
♦ 5 2
♣ K J 6 4

With nothing extra to show, opener makes the weakest response possible by bidding 2♥, which responder can pass. With the 14 point hand above you would bid 4♥ but with fewer points, say without ♥Q, you would pass 2♥.

When the fourth suit is bid at the two level responder may pass if opener makes a minimum rebid. This allows responder to try for game with a good 11 or 12 points and then pass when opener is minimum.
Over a Fourth Suit bid of 2♦, rebids of 2♥, 2♠ and 2NT show minimum opening bids. Any other response by opener, which shows extra values, is forcing to game. If responder bids again over opener's minimum response then the auction is also forcing to game.

♠ 10	♠ K J 9 8 3
♥ K Q 5	♥ J 2
♦ K Q 8 5 3	♦ A J 4 2
♣ A J 4 2	♣ Q 8

Peter Margaret
1♦ 1♠
2♣ 2♥
3NT

Despite having four diamonds, Margaret used a Fourth Suit Forcing 2♥ bid. Perhaps Peter would be able to show some spade support, since 4♠ means only having to make ten tricks and 4♠ scores better than 5♦, an important consideration when playing pairs. With 15 points and good cards in hearts, Peter was able to jump to 3NT. If he had only bid 2NT, Margaret would have passed and a good game would have been missed.

♠ 7	♠ A K Q 8 3
♥ A J 9 6 4	♥ 3
♦ A 9 2	♦ K Q J 10 5
♣ A Q 7 3	♣ 9 8

Everyone missed the best bid on this hand
1♥ 1♠
2♣ ?
Two people tried 3NT because they had diamonds well stopped. Someone bid 2♦ and passed opener's 3NT. Another jumped to 4♠. All the contracts made eleven tricks. But with a strong two-suiter, like the one shown, responder can jump to 3♦. Partner raises to 4♦ and the excellent 6♦ slam will be reached.

A Fourth Suit Forcing bid can be made at the two or three level, but not at the one level, where it is natural. So I was pleased that Lucy and Doreen both remembered this and produced a good auction so get to a 4♠ contract.

♠ Q 10 8 4	♠ K J 9 3
♥ A K 6 5	♥ 4 2
♦	♦ A J 10 6 4
♣ A J 6 4 2	♣ Q 8

Lucy Doreen
1♣ 1♦
1♥ 1♠
3♠ 4♠

Several students chose a 2NT rebid rather than 1♠. 3NT went down on ♥Q lead, since defenders don't always lead the unbid suit!

Remember

- When three suits have been bid, a bid in the fourth suit at the two or three level is not natural.
- Very often responder is looking for a stopper in the fourth suit for 3NT.
- A fourth suit bidder will have at least a good 11 points, usually more.
- Unless responder passes a minimum response by opener, the partnership is forced to game.
- With better than a minimum hand, opener must make a stronger response.