

4th Suit Forcing

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When you and your partner have bid three suits, then it is not often that you will have a fit in the 4th suit. So the use of this 4th suit bid is often artificial. In all of the examples we assume no interfering bidding.

Consider the sequence: 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♥

Now it is possible that responder has a ♥ suit (perhaps he's got 5 ♠'s and 4 ♥'s) but it's unlikely that ♥'s is going to be the final strain. So this 4th suit is used artificially and asks partner to describe his hand further.

Now exactly what do we mean by 'describing one's hand further'? It is generally accepted that partner should show: -

- (a) A stop in the 4th suit (in case NoTrump ends up as the final contract).
- (b) More length in one of his own suits than he has already shown.
- (c) Some sort of support for one of partner's suits.

And what is the more important feature to show? It is generally accepted that showing a stopper (by bidding NoTrump) is the top priority. Occasionally you may have no sensible bid and have to 'lie', but you should never lie about a NoTrump stopper.

Hand A	Hand B	So you are opener and have the above auction, 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♥ ..? Partner's 2♥ bid is 4 th suit forcing, what do you bid?
♠ 9	♠ 9	Now both of these hands are rather weak (but totally acceptable)
♥ K4	♥ 642	openers, but one thing that you can never do is pass a 4 th suit
♦ AQJ54	♦ AQJ54	forcing bid! So you have to find a bid.
♣ Q9653	♣ KQ65	With Hand A it's easy, bid 2NT – you have a ♥ stop. With Hand B it's not so nice. You cannot bid 2NT with no ♥ stop, that is most

definitely a no-no. So you actually have no decent bid. You cannot really support partner's ♠'s with a singleton and to bid a minor would show greater length. Still, you have to bid and so with Hand B it's really a toss up between 3♣ and 3♦. But these 'impossible' hands really are the exception, it's usually obvious what to bid and it often does not matter as partner may simply have used 4th suit forcing to set up a game force.

Hand C	Hand D	We'll stick with the same auction here, 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♥ ..? With hand C it's 3♣, showing no ♥ stop and implying 5-5 (maybe 6-5 but possibly just 5-4 as above) in the minors. With hand D you again have no ♥ stop but ♠ Kx is sufficient support for partner in this situation, so bid 2♠.
♠ 9	♠ K9	
♥ 64	♥ 64	
♦ AQJ54	♦ AQJ54	
♣ KQ965	♣ KQ65	

Hand E	Hand F	And sometimes you are in the fortunate position of having a choice of reasonable bids. Same auction, 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♣ - 2♥ ..? With hand E you could have opened 1NT, but suppose you preferred 1♦ (maybe you play a weak NT). Then after partner's 2♥ 4 th suit bid you have support for partner and a ♥ stop. Bid 2NT – having a stop always takes priority. And it's much the same with hand F. Show the ♥ stop with 2NT rather than the 6 th ♦ with 3♦.
♠ K9	♠ 9	
♥ K4	♥ K4	
♦ AQJ54	♦ AQJ1054	
♣ K965	♣ QJ65	

Now 4th suit forcing may be used for many different reasons and in many different situations. So let's have a few examples of 4th suit forcing in action: -

1 Looking for No Trump.

West	East	West	East	
♠ AK1076	♠ 82	1♠	2♣	(1) 4 th suit forcing

♥ KJ72	♥ AQ	2♥	3♦ (1)	(2) I have a ♦ stop
♦ K5	♦ 9642	3NT (2)	pass	
♣ 53	♣ AK764			

It's not 100% but 3NT is where you want to be with these cards.

2 Setting up a game force.

Now opinion is divided as to whether 4th suit forcing is forcing for one bid, one round or to game. Many established pairs have sorted out this for all situations. My advice to any but the most experienced of established partnerships is to say that 4th suit is game forcing if bid by an unlimited hand. That really does make life so much easier in many situations.

West	East	West	East	
♠ A1076	♠ K32	1♦	1♥	(1) 4 th suit forcing
♥ K2	♥ AQ10864	1♠	2♣ (1)	(2) I have a ♣ stop
♦ Q654	♦ A2	2NT (2)	3♥ (3)	(3) Fine, but I really just want
♣ AQ3	♣ K7	etc...		to make a forcing 3♥ bid.

Here 3♥ at (1) would have been just (highly) invitational.

3 4th Suit by opener.

Now 4th suit is often used by responder, but there is no reason why it can't be by opener.

West	East	West	East	
♠ 5	♠ A109862	1♣	1♠	(1) 4 th suit forcing
♥ 763	♥ K4	2♦	2♠	(2) I have a ♥ stop
♦ AQ74	♦ K2		3♥ (1)	3NT (2)
♣ AKQ65	♣ 742	pass		

Let's have an example from the club where opener and responder both used 4th suit forcing (at different tables) on the same board: -

Board 16 from Wednesday 14th Dec, 2005

Dealer: ♠ AKQ104
 West ♥ 962
 E-W vul ♦ 1095
 ♣ 63

♠ J93 N ♠ 8652
 ♥ A1087 W E ♥ KQJ3
 ♦ 8743 S ♦ K6
 ♣ 85 ♣ 974

♠ 7
 ♥ 54
 ♦ AQJ2
 ♣ AKQJ102

Table A

West	North	East	South
pass	pass	pass	1♣
pass	1♠	pass	2♦
pass	2♥ (1)	pass	3♣
pass	3♠ (2)	pass	4♠ (3)
all pass			

Table B

West	North	East	South
pass	pass	pass	1♣
pass	1♠	pass	2♦
pass	2♠ (1)	pass	3♥ (4)
pass	3♠ (5)	pass	4♣
pass	4♠ (6)	all pass	

Table A: (1) 4th suit forcing. North was unsure if 2♠ was forcing here and so understandably chose the 4th suit.

(2) This is now (game) forcing, having invoked the 4th suit.

(3) South knows that North has five decent ♠'s and no ♥ stop and so he wisely goes for the ♠ game.

Table B: (1) This N-S pair do actually have an agreement here. They play Lebensohl with a weak hand after partner's reverse and so 2♠ is forcing. However, that may not be the best treatment – maybe it's better to play 2♠ as the weak bid and go via Lebensohl with a stronger hand. Anyway, that's not the issue here.

(4) 4th suit forcing (asking for a ♥ stop).

(5) Don't have one (a ♥ stop) but I have good ♠'s.

(6) Well... I was North and I won't bid 5 of a minor if 4 of a major looks viable!

And what happened? The rest of the field were in 3NT or 5♣ and 4♠+1 was a top.

Time for a fiasco

Board 23 from Friday 16th Dec, 2005

I'll go into 1♣ - 1♦ - 1♥ - 1♠ soon, but just look at this farcical sequence from news-sheet 163:

West	East	West	East
♠ Q109	♠ AK4	1♣	1♦
♥ J854	♥ K1063	1♥	1♠
♦ AK2	♦ 10985	1NT	4NT
♣ Q85	♣ AK	pass	

Clearly comical, and we will address 4th suit after 1♣ - 1♦ - 1♥ next.

4 4th Suit after 1♣ - 1♦ - 1♥

Expert opinion is divided here. (a) Some say that 1♠ is 4th suit forcing, (b) Some say that 2♠ is 4th suit forcing, (c) Some say that 1♠ is forcing and may be either natural or 4th suit (it's obviously forcing whatever) and what it is will be clarified later.

So which treatment is best? Actually I am quite happy playing any of them – as long as you/partner agree!

Hand F So let's look at the previous East hand and assume that West's opening was sound and that you are happy responding 1♦ to the 1♣ opening.

♠ AK4 How should the hand proceed after 1♣ - 1♦ - 1♥ ?

- ♥ K1063 (a) If 1♠ is 4th suit forcing, bid that followed by a ♥ bid at the lowest level next go, assuming you agree with my recommendation that 4th suit is game forcing.
- ♦ 10985 (b) If 1♠ is natural and 2♠ is 4th suit, then bid 2♠ followed by 3♥ next go.
- ♣ AK (c) If 1♠ is either natural or 4th suit forcing, then bid 1♠ followed by a jump in ♥ 's next go – this clarifies that 1♠ was 4th suit and that you have a super hand in support of ♥ 's.

5 4th suit forcing followed by a No trump bid.

One of the main uses of 4th suit forcing is to establish if partner has a stop for NoTrump. So what does it mean when somebody bids 4th suit and then bids No Trump when partner denies a stop?

It generally means that the 4th suit bidder has just one stop and suggests that partner may remove to another spot if he thinks that there may not be 9 quick tricks available in NoTrump: -

Example 5.1

West	East	West	East	
♠ 7	♠ AQJ6	1♦	1♠	(1) 4 th suit forcing
♥ 75	♥ A64	2♣	2♥ (1)	(2) No ♥ stop
♦ AK654	♦ 872	3♣ (2)	3NT (3)	(3) I have just one ♥ stop
♣ AK654	♣ Q72	pass (4)		(4) Then let's go for it, one of the minors hopefully runs?

Example 5.2

West	East	West	East	
♠ K	♠ AQJ6	1♦	1♠	(1) 4 th suit forcing
♥ 5	♥ A64	2♣	2♥ (1)	(2) No ♥ stop
♦ AJ9654	♦ 872	3♣ (2)	3NT (3)	(3) I have just one ♥ stop
♣ AJ543	♣ Q72	4♣ (4)	5♦ (5)	(4) I don't think 1 stop is enough
		pass		(5) Fast arrival. 4♦ would show slam interest if you play 4 th suit forcing as game forcing

6 When 4th suit is not game forcing.

If a player has limited his hand and then bids the 4th suit he is showing a maximum for his bidding so far but it is not game forcing: -

West	East	West	East
♠ 94	♠ AQ1085	1♦	1♠
♥ 92	♥ 843	2♣ (1)	2♦
♦ AKJ82	♦ 964	2♥ (2)	2♠
♣ AKJ8	♣ 64	pass	

This West hand is not good enough for 3♣ at (1) and 2♣ is correct (the West hand is actually from news-sheet 195 when the holder did bid 3♣ and they got uncomfortably high - with a different East hand). Thus 2♥ at (2) defines this West hand pretty well, looking for game if East has a suitable maximum. East has no ♥ stop and no game interest and they end up in a good spot. If East had only 4♠'s then he would have signed off in 3♦.