



Fourth Suit Forcing

By Willie Jago

Fourth-suit-forcing is a double-edged tool which can convey information about your hand as well as gaining more knowledge about partner's hand.

Without this valuable device, we would be forced to gamble on game when we are uncertain of the correct strain. Fourth-suit-forcing allows both partners to consult and cooperate. How often have you seen a pair in a doomed 3NT contract because neither player has a stopper in a suit?

How does fourth-suit-forcing work? Let us look at a common fourth-suit-forcing bidding situation:

PARTNER YOU

1D 1S

2C 2H*?

What is going on! What does partner's 2H bid mean?

You can infer the following:

- a.. Partner has four spades.
- b.. Partner did not rebid 1H over 1D, so cannot have four hearts (and be looking for a heart fit).
- c.. Partner knows that you are at least 5-4 in diamonds and clubs and lack a good heart stopper from your failure to bid 1NT over 1S. Partner cannot have two heart stoppers, since he could have bid 2NT over your 2C.
- d.. Partner knows from your bidding that you have 6 to 10 points. By making a further bid he is showing 17+ points.

So? ...

Partner is clearly looking for a half stopper (or length) in hearts as a try for a no-trump game. If you have Qx, J10x, you should bid 2NT with 6-8 points and 3NT with 9-10 points.

This type of bidding sequence, where either partner had the opportunity to bid no-trump but chose to bid the fourth suit, is known as fourth-suit-forcing.

WHAT DOES FOURTH-SUIT-FORCING SHOW?

That depends on who you are, opener or responder, and whether you play FSF as forcing to game (many play it as forcing for one round). We will assume here that it is forcing to game and in a context of two-over-one.

When using fourth-suit-forcing:

a.. OPENER shows 17+ HCP (unless a game force situation is already established)

b.. RESPONDER shows 12+ HCP (unless a game force situation is already established)

(These are high-card points only, as we are usually heading towards no-trumps).

WHEN IS IT USED?

It can be used in a large variety of situations. The most common is when looking for a stopper for a no-trump contract. But it can also be used with a fit and looking for a slam. It "tells" partner that you have a good hand.

It is seldom used in a natural sense. With a good holding in that suit, the bidder can simply bid no-trumps.

Your hand: S A2 H 432 D 987 C AKJ43

PARTNER YOU

1D 2C

2S 3H*

You have 12 points and are asking opener if s/he has a heart stopper. Note that partner's 2S bid is not a reverse as your 2C bid (assuming two over one) has created a game forcing situation.

Your hand:S KQ632 H 876 D Q9 C KQ8

PARTNER YOU

1C 1S

2H 3D*

Again you have 12 points and partner has reversed showing 17+. A bid of 2S or 3C would show 6-10 HCP.

You have a half stopper in diamonds and are asking if partner (who is 5-4) has a stopper in that suit (Ax , Kx , Jxx , ...), or if s/he is 3-4-1-5 and can support spades.

Your hand:S 87 H K2 D 864 C AKQJ43

PARTNER YOU

1D 2C

2H 2S*

You are asking partner if he has spades stopped. If he bids 3S telling that he hasn't and asking if you have, you'll bid 4C and maybe he has enough to go to 5C.

Your hand: S 986 H 76 D KQ104 C AKJ9

PARTNER YOU

1C 1D

1H 2S*

Again you've got 13 points. But before attempting 5C or 5D (eleven is a lot of tricks!), why not try to explore the possibility of 3NT? (Note the jump which is used to show fourth-suit-asking, as 1S would be natural)

FOURTH-SUIT.....FORCING!

Note that the bid is forcing. That means that partner must bid again. That's why you must have a good hand. You are committing your side to game (or four of a minor) on a possible misfit - so you need points.

PARTNER YOU

1D 1S

2D 2H

3C*

In this situation opener is not indicating extra strength (his 2D rebid showed 13-15 points), but he is forced to bid (by responder's change of suit) and is unable to support either spades or hearts and has no decent stopper in the fourth suit. He has something like:

S J3 H KJ6 D AKQ93 C J83

and is making a waiting bid. Perhaps responder has five hearts or a club stopper. (If responder rebids 3S, we bid 4S and hope the J will be a useful card).

Fourth-suit-forcing can be used to show a strong hand.

PARTNER YOU

1D 1H

2C 2H

2S*

OPENER: S 864 H K D AQJ84 C AKQJ

Despite his 20 HCP, opener cannot jump to 3NT as the spades are wide open. Here opener is telling responder (who showed 6-9 points), that he has a very strong hand and now leaves it to responder to bid 2NT, 3C, 3D, 3H or game.

OPENER'S ACTIONS

After fourth-suit-forcing from responder, in order of preference, OPENER should :

- 1.. Give delayed 3-card support for responder's suit if it is a major (prefer to 3NT)
- 2.. Bid 3NT with at least one stopper in the fourth suit, particularly if responder's suit is a minor.
- 3.. Raise the fourth suit (but never beyond 3NT). This shows four cards in the suit and usually no stopper.
For example:

OPENER RESPONDER

1C 1S

2D 2H*

3H

This shows 1-4-4-4 or 0-4-4-5 distribution. Something like :

S 3 H 9873 D AK93 C AQ43

But

OPENER RESPONDER

1D 1H

2C 2S*

3S

cannot show four spades - opener would have rebid 1S over 1H, instead of 2C. This says " I have at least 17 HCP but no stopper in spades and two or fewer hearts - can you make a sensible decision?".

For example:

S 94 H Q3 D AKJ82 C AK83

(4) Rebid your second suit if you are 5-5.

(5) Rebid your first suit with five cards in that suit.

With a minimum, opener takes any of the above actions at the cheapest level. With a strong hand (15+), he makes a jump or goes straight to game

YOU PARTNER WEST EAST

S AQ72 S K5 1C 1D (1)

H KJ6 H 92 1S (2) 2H* (3)

D 84 D AK972 2NT (4) 3NT (5)

C K732 C AJ106

(1) We prefer not to jump to 3C (bid slowly), and 2NT is awful with no heart stopper.

(2) Show your shape (Partner could have four diamonds and four spades)

(3) Fourth-suit-forcing (A good hand and "have you got a stopper?")

(4) Stopper and a minimal opening.

(5) 3NT is a better spot than 5C (particularly at PAIRS).

LEAD: 5 of hearts.

THE PLAY: The lead was from AQxxx and you take the first trick with the H J. Play a club to the C A and lead the C J, so that if the finesse loses, it keeps the danger hand off lead.

RESPONDER'S ACTION

If opener has used fourth-suit-forcing:

(1) Bid NT with a stopper

(2) Without a stopper, much depends on the bidding but prefer to give delayed support for one of opener's suits.

OPENER YOU

1S 2C*

3C 3D

3H*

With: S 107 H 863 D AK93 C KQ32

Bid 3S (Delayed preference and minimal)

With : S K96 H 72 D AKQ9 C KQ32

Bid 4S. This delayed support shows slam interest and strong MINORS. With no interest in slam, you should have bid 4S over 3C. (3D was forcing, as your 2C bid created a game force)

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Note the difference between these auctions:

1. OPENER YOU

1D 1S

2C 3S

This shows six spades and 10-12 HCP. An invitational bid and not forcing.

But:

2. OPENER YOU

1D 1S

2C 2H*

2NT 3S

Shows six spades and 12+ HCP. Forcing to game as FSF was used

3. OPENER YOU

1C 1D

1H 1S

The only exception when the fourth suit is not FSF. It is natural, showing four diamonds and four spades. The range is undefined, 6+ HCP.

And

3. OPENER YOU

1C 1D

1H 2S*

We use this jump as FSF. ie 12+ HCP, asking for a spade stopper and not a 4-card spade suit. This jump only occurs with the spade suit.

QUIZ

Section A. Partner opens 1D, 1H from you. He rebids 2C. What is your bid?

a) S 8432 H AK98 D K6 C Q43

b) S KQ8 H K9863 D Q9 C Q43

- c) S 843 H AK98 D K6 C J863
- d) S 843 H AKJ3 D K6 C K863
- e) S K86 H KQ762 D AQ C 842
- f) S 73 H AJ72 D KQ43 C J85
- g) S 73 H AK72 D KQ43 C K76
- h) S 86 H AQJ652 D 97 C 843
- i) S J6 H AQJ652 D K7 C 843
- j) S 86 H AQ8642 D A6 C A72

B. You opened 1D, 1H from partner, 2C from you and 2S* by partner. What is your next bid?

- a) S 2 H 854 D KQJ32 C AQJ3
- b) S KQ8 H 3 D KJ864 C AK32
- c) S 3 H K98 D AK652 C AQ63
- d) S 84 H K D KQ652 C AJ743
- e) S 6 H 2 D AQ9732 C AKJ52
- f) S QJ6 H 2 D KQ532 C AJ54
- g) S 73 H 84 D KQ932 C A KJ2
- h) S J6 H 52 D AK852 C AKQ9
- i) S J6 H 2 D AK7532 C A843
- j) S 862 H Q D AKJ96 C AQJ7

ANSWERS

- a. 2S*. 11 points. Maybe 3NT is best spot if partner has a spade stopper and he plays it.
- b. 2NT. 11 points and your own good stoppers.
- c. 3C. 11 points, invitational, slight underbid, only 3 spades.
- d. 2S*. 14 points. Too strong for 3C and looking for 3NT.
- e. 2S*. 14 points. Hoping for heart support. Else 3NT by you.

f. 3D. 11 points. Show your diamond fit and let partner decide. Invitational.

g. 2S*. 15 points. Too good for an invitational 3D.

h. 2H. six hearts and showing 6-9 points.

i. 3H. six hearts and 10+ points. Invitational.

j. 2S*. 14 points. Too strong for 3H. May show length in hearts later.

B.

a. 3H. Shows three hearts, no stopper and nothing much above your opening of 13 points.

b. 3NT. You've got the goods asked for.

c. 4H. You've got a great hand (16+ points).

d. 3C. Show your 5-5.

e. 4C . Treat as a 5-5. Extra distribution (one less loser). You'd like to be in a minor game.

f. 2NT. Show your stopper.

g. 3D. "Sorry partner, no stopper!"

h. 3S. No stopper, but extra strength. "Can you make a sensible decision?"

i. 3D. "I'm minimal, but have six diamonds."

j. 3S. 17 points. Too strong for 3H. Must go to game. "You decide..."