



BY JERRY HELMS

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Ask Jerry

Dear Jerry,
My partner and I are trying to get a handle on how best to employ a bid of the fourth suit by responder. Some suggest it should be a one-round force, while others insist it is game forcing. Which do you prefer and why?

Andrew

Hi Andrew,

Many years ago, at an American Bridge Teachers meeting, I was preceded by 2/1 guru, Max Hardy, who spent 30 minutes impressively touting the virtues of the bid of the fourth suit as a one-round force. My presentation which followed, was about using the fourth suit as game forcing. Hmmm. He was a bit better known at that time, and even now, but I stuck to my guns!

Let's start with a premise: The modern style is to treat all second-round jumps in suits previously mentioned as nonforcing, but invitational.

Often, responder faces issues in reaching the best game and sometimes being able to invite slam, yet do so without consuming valuable bidding space. A couple of examples:

Partner	You
1♦	1♥
1♠	?

♠K 3 2 ♥A K 7 5 4 ♦K 5 2 ♣7 3

With your full opening bid, there should be a game somewhere, but which game? Opener could hold any of the following:

A ♠A 6 5 4 ♥Q 9 2 ♦A Q 8 4 ♣Q 2

B ♠J 10 5 4 ♥9 2 ♦A Q J 4 ♣A Q 2

C ♠A Q 5 4 ♥2 ♦A Q J 9 8 4 3 ♣2

If opener holds hand A, you want to be in 4♥. If B, 3NT; if C, 6♦ – or at least not 3NT!

With the responder's hand above, I would bid 2♣ as an artificial game force, saying nothing about my club holding. It commits the partnership to ultimately reach at least a game, and asks opener to continue the description of his hand. With hand A, opener has an easy bid of 2♥, having previously denied four. On B, 2NT. Typically two or fewer hearts with a clear stopper in the fourth suit (clubs). With C, 3♦. Denies three hearts, denies a club stopper, and should show an intermediate hand with six or more good diamonds.

In each case, responder used the fourth suit to elicit information that was useful. Essentially, opener's priorities are to show three-card support for responder's first suit, to bid notrump with a stopper in the fourth suit, and to rebid his own suit with nothing better to say. Sometimes opener must use judgment as to whether three-card support or a double stopper in the fourth suit should be his priority.

My biggest reason to play the fourth suit as a game force is to facilitate slam investigation. Four auctions:

1	1♣	1♥
	1♠	2♠
2	1♣	1♥
	1♠	3♠
3	1♣	1♥
	1♠	4♠
4	1♣	1♥
	1♠	2♦
	2NT	3♠

1 Responder has 6–10 support points, four-card support.

2 Responder has 11–12 support points, four-card support.

3 Responder has 13–14 support points, four-card support.

4 By bidding the fourth suit, and then raising spades, responder is making a slam try, showing more than 14 support points.

On the fourth example, if responder were to bid either 3♣ or 3♥, after using fourth-suit forcing, he is showing a very strong hand. This way, responder does not have to simply leap to game, but rather can conserve space to investigate a possible slam.

There are many inferences to be taken when responder utilizes fourth-suit forcing, depending on his follow-ups. For my purposes, I like the certainty that once I bid the fourth suit, both of us know we are required to bid to at least the level of game.

Pitfalls to avoid ... Holding:

D ♠3 ♥J 8 6 3 2 ♦K Q 7 4 2 ♣J 8

E ♠Q ♥K 10 8 3 2 ♦A J 10 7 4 ♣J 8

Partner	You
1♣	1♥
1♠	?

The temptation on D would be to bid 2♦, but of course you can't do that because that would be an artificial game force. Despite your unbalanced shape, 1NT is the only reasonable option. On E, the reflex thought to bid 2♦ would once again rear its ugly head. However, a bid of 2♦ would not even show diamonds and would commit the partnership to game. My solution would be to make an invitational bid of 2NT. I certainly have the unbid suit stopped! 🕒