Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

First of all, a reminder that bids in the 4th suit can be played either as game-forcing or as forcing to the next level of no trumps.
There is a further consideration regarding the 4th suit at the 1-level.
It is also worth making the point that the use of the 4th suit bid should not be restricted to just the search for a 4th suit stop.
I have discussed these matters at some length in the 'Teacher's notes'. I would recommend that you consult these notes before setting out to teach this convention.
Where appropriate I have included both versions in the commentaries which follow,
But you must choose one or other to teach to your students.
Note that by no means all of the hands in this set require a bid in the fourth suit – sometimes the decision is when not to use it – but it will usually come into consideration.
In most cases the idea of such a bid will be presented in the context of responder's rebid, but on occasion it might appear later in the auction.
Note also the sequences suggested are in the context of four-card majors and a weak no trump.

Hand 1

1♦, 1♥, 1♠.
4th suit in all versions.
South bids 2♣ to search for a better club stop.
Game-forcing – North bids 2NT (forcing) just in case there is something bigger and better – South bids 3♠ and North signs off in 3NT.
Forcing to 2NT - North must jump to 3NT – anything else either misleads or risks being passed.
No trumps and spades each make 11 tricks. Hearts also rather amazingly makes 10 tricks after playing out 4 rounds of trumps and then playing the rest of the hand in no trumps, but do you really want to depend on a 4-4 split?

Hand 2

1♣, 1♦, 1♠.
4th suit in all versions.
West bids 2♥ to search for a better heart stop.
Game-forcing – many Easts will choose a rebid 2NT with their partial heart stop, and West will raise to 3NT. Better is for East to show his hand in case there is a higher contract available, by bidding 3♣, but with no higher aspirations West will repeat the 4th suit in search of the heart stop and East will sign off in 3NT.
Forcing to 2NT - North must jump to 3NT – anything else either misleads or risks being passed.
No trumps and spades each make 10 tricks.
No other game contracts are available.
Against 3NT South probably leads a small Heart. East can count 9 tricks in the black suits and will make either a 4th spade or a heart as NS take 2 hearts and a diamond.

Hand 3

1♥, 1♠, 2♦.
4th suit in all versions.

Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

North has a difficult rebid – too strong for a major at the 2- or 3-levels and not enough trumps to bid game in a major. The solution is the 4th suit (3♣)– perhaps partner will show a third spade or a sixth heart, and failing either of these at least a partial stop in no trumps. Jx is insufficient to count as a partial stop and so South can do no better than repeat his 5-card heart suit which North will raise to 4♥ (hoping to find a 6-card suit opposite).
No trumps will be held to 8 tricks as the defence takes the first 5. 10 tricks can be made in hearts, but you have to find 4 tricks in diamonds.

Hand 4

1♣, 1♦, 1♠.
Possibly 4th suit in some auctions.
Game-forcing – East is not strong enough to bid the 4th suit and so will probably rebid 2NT (showing invitational values but not promising a stop) on this balanced hand, but could bid 3♣ provided that partner's opening suit is likely to be 5-card.
Over 2NT West can do no better than 3♥ (4th suit) and East will probably now bid 4♣. On a good day EW will find their way to 6♣.
Forcing to 2NT – East bids 2♥ in search of a stop in the suit and West can only bid 4♦ (3♦ would not be forcing). Again, EW will reach 6♦ with a following wind.
6♣ and 6♦ each make 12 tricks with 5 in each minor and 2 spades – and no need for any risky finesses. Spades make 10 tricks and no trumps only 8.

Hand 5

1♣, 1♦, 1♠.
4th suit in all versions.
South bids 2♥ (the 4th suit) in either version of the convention as he searches for the no trump stop.
Game-forcing – North can bide his time with 2NT, South bids 3♣ and North must decide whether to go for game or try for a slam in either clubs or no trumps.
Forcing to 2NT - North must bid 3NT with 15 points facing at least invitational values, an excellent heart stop, and no other feature of note. It is unlikely that South will venture any further.
In fact, NS can make 12 tricks in either clubs or no trumps, but it is something of a long shot depending on both the heart finesse, and the clubs splitting. The no trump contract also depends on running the ♥J and dropping the 10 - not sure I'm finding that one.
I'll be happy to make a game in either strain.

Hand 6

1♠, 2♣, 2♦.
Not 4th suit (both hands hold stops, no higher aspirations, and a fit established).
Best is 3♠ on this 8-loser West hand with the known 5-3 fit, which East raises to 4 with 6 losers. West's alternative was to bid 2NT with 12 points and excellent heart stops, but it is far from certain that East will proceed any further.
In spades declarer might make 11 if he can establish a diamond ruff before clearing trumps, but he can be held to 10. In no trumps declarer will need to take his 9 tricks before the defence establishes both minors.

Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

Hand 7

4th suit to show a mild slam try.

South opens 1♠ planning to rebid 2♦.

If West is intrepid enough to overcall 2♥ on a flimsy suit and vulnerable then a pass from North and a protective double from South should prove lucrative.

Alternatively, North will bid 2♣ and South will rebid 2♦ as planned.

North could now bid 2NT or 3NT with his excellent heart stops – note that the 2NT rebid is forcing facing the 2-level change of suit response. Alternatively with the known 5-3 fit and a 6-loser hand he might bid 2♥ (the 4th suit) – South shows his 5-5 shape with 3♦ – and North bids 3♠ – a mild slam try as he could have made the bid directly. South could be tempted to look for a slam with just a 5-loser hand but the flimsy nature of the diamond suit suggests greater caution and a final contract of 4♠ or 5♠.

South can make 11 tricks in either spades or no trumps with the ♦K protected on the opening lead. North can make 11 tricks in spades but just 10 tricks in no trumps on the lead of the ♦J.

Hand 8

4th suit to create a second stop in both versions.

1♣, 1♥, 1♠

East bids 2♦ in either version, looking for any one of a third heart, a fifth spade, or to protect the ♦Q on lead in no trumps.

Game-forcing – West bids 2NT, and East raises to 3NT.

Forcing to 2NT – West bids 2NT (not forcing facing minimal invitational values) but East will raise to 3NT.

No trumps makes 9 tricks. 4♠ makes an extra trick, when the trumps split, but I don't think I want to be in it.

Hand 9

1♣, 1♦, 1♠ – assuming that EW remain silent.

4th suit if playing forcing to 2NT.

Game-forcing – playing the 4th suit as game-forcing South can do no better than 2NT, invitational but not guaranteeing a heart stop. North could reasonably pass. If he decides to bid on then 3♣ (not forcing) showing the nature of the hand is probably better than 3NT. South may well bid on seeing the long suit, although he could rebid the 4th suit on the way.

Forcing to 2NT – South should bid 3♥ in search of help in the suit for no trumps. With his partial stop North can bid in no trumps and may well be tempted to bid 3NT with his long club suit. 3♣ is also an option, which South may or may not convert to 3NT.

3NT make 9 tricks from either N or S, and Clubs make 10 tricks from either seat.

The no trump contract is sound, but it is far from certain that it should be bid.

Hand 10

1♣, 1♦.

4th suit in both versions.

East rebids 1♠. Note that it is wrong to jump with 17 or 18 points – it is not enough to create a game force facing partner's possible 6 (or less). With game-going values West now bids 2♥ (4th suit) in either version, hoping for either a 5th spade or a heart stop.

Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

Game-forcing – playing the 4th suit as game-forcing East now bids 3♣ (forcing) showing the nature of the hand - West repeats the 4th suit in search of the stop and East bids 3NT.

Forcing to 2NT – East dare not bid 2NT or 3♣ either of which might be passed and 4♣ risks bypassing the best contract, so opts for 3NT. He may well be tempted to bid more, but with no known fit and a scrappy long suit it does not feel like the right choice.

Both E and W can make 12 tricks in each of clubs, spades and no trumps, but I am far from certain that any of them are sound contracts depending as they do on finding or dropping the ♣Q.

Hand 11

Assuming no intervention from West the bidding will start 1♥, 2♦.

4th suit in either version in some auctions.

It is a matter of personal choice and partnership style whether you should reverse into 3♣ on this South hand.

If you choose not to then you will rebid 2♥.

North more or less has to bid 3♥ to show his invitational values which South will probably raise to game.

If you choose to make the high reverse into 3♣, then North might try 3♠ (the 4th suit) to which South should respond 4♣ which North may or may not raise to 5♣.

EW will probably take the first 2 spades in defence, but they can take no more as declarer clears trumps and sets up the hearts to go alongside a spade ruff, but it would be a different story if the ♥Q were not so easily caught or dropped.

Hand 12

1♠, 2♣, 2♦

Not 4th suit – you have a stop and no higher ambitions.

East could bid 2NT to show his invitational values and excellent heart stops.

I prefer 3♦, also showing the invitational values but better describing the nature of the hand, and there the auction ends.

Declarer has little trouble clearing trumps and setting up the clubs, but 9 tricks will prove the limit of his achievements. 3♦ is the best contract – clubs make 8 tricks and no trumps and spades each make 7 tricks.

Hand 13

1♥, 1♠, 2♦

Not 4th suit – not strong enough in either version.

South is not strong enough to bid the 4th suit at the 3-level. 2NT looks like his best way of showing invitational values. North must choose between pass and 3♦ – my choice is 3♦.

The optimum score is 120 for 2NT making 8 tricks played by either N or S. 2♥ also make 8 tricks, whilst 3♦ makes 9 tricks, each scoring 110. I shall be well satisfied with my 110 in diamonds.

Hand 14

1♥, 1♠, 2♦

Not 4th suit – no point.

Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

Note that there is no point in bidding anything other than 3NT with game-going values and little prospect of a superior contract.
No trumps make 10 tricks for the only making game.

Hand 15

1♣, 1♦, 1♥, assuming no interference.

4th suit in both versions.

Assuming that you play 1♠ as a natural one-round force then 2♠ becomes the artificial fourth suit bid and holding game-going values is right in this case in either version. South bids 3♥ showing his fifth heart and by implication 6 clubs. North should now choose between 4♥ and 4♣. 4♣, forcing below game-level is more likely to locate a slam. What follows depends on locating South's honours.
Clubs, hearts and no trumps each make 13 tricks without any difficulty.

Hand 16

1♦, 1♠

4th suit in some sequences

For those who play non-strong reverses 2♥ will be an automatic rebid on this West hand. East might then bid the 4th suit (4♣) just in case West holds a 5th heart, but when West rebids 3NT East should probably revert to 4♠.
Playing strong reverses I prefer 2♦ to 2♥ for opener's rebid, following which East jumps to 4♠.
Spades make 10 tricks helped by the positions of the red kings, and no trumps makes 9 tricks.
Diamonds make 11 tricks, but 4♠ yields the best score.

Hand 17

Either 1♠, 2♣, 2♦.

No need for 4th suit

North can see a 5-3 spade fit, and so with an 8-loser hand jumps to 3♠.
North might be tempted, but the contract is unlikely to be higher than 4♠ or 5♠.
Spades make 12 tricks thanks to a club finesse providing an early heart discard and an extremely favourable lie of the diamond intermediates, but it would be a brave if not foolhardy bid. No trumps make 10 tricks.

Hand 18

1♦, 1♥, 1♠.

4th suit if playing forcing to 2NT.

Game-forcing – if the fourth suit is played as forcing to game then West must choose between 2NT (showing invitational values but not necessarily a club stop) and 3♦ on the 5-3 fit in an unbalanced hand. Over 2NT East can introduce the 4th suit with 3♣ in search of the club stop and West will sign off in 3NT. Over 3♦ East might take a punt at 3NT but perhaps 3♥ is more likely after which West will raise to 4♥.

Forcing to 2NT – West bids 2♣ promising invitational values and suggesting at least a partial stop in clubs, and with a club honour and 14 points East has little trouble raising to 3NT.

Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

3NT makes 9 tricks from either hand, but it feels far more comfortable from the East hand with broken honours holdings protected in 3 suits.
4♥ makes 10 tricks on the 5-2 split when the trumps conveniently split 4-2 and the ♥J can be caught, for the best score. 5♦ also makes 11 tricks, but I would much prefer to be in 3NT though it's not exactly easy.

Hand 19

1♦, 1♠, 2♥

4th suit in both versions

Facing a strong reverse from South North has enough for game, but which game?
Bid 3♣ (4th suit).
South can do no better than 3♠ (having already denied 4 cards in the suit), and it will be a brave North who raises to game.
Spades makes 10 tricks when the ♠Q and the ♦J finesse, but it's a long shot.
Hearts also make 10 tricks, and no trumps make 9.

Hand 20

1♥, 2♣, 2♦.

4th suit in both versions

East bids 2♠ (4th suit) – perhaps no trumps will play better from the West hand - perhaps West holds a 6th heart – or might there be something on in diamonds?
West bids 2NT. East could now bid 3♦ suggesting at least some slam interest by taking the slow route, which West will probably raise discouragingly to 5♦. Alternatively, a simple raise to 3NT by East will end the auction.
The best contract is NT played by West making 11 tricks. West can also make 11 tricks in Hearts or Diamonds.
Meanwhile, East can make 11 tricks in Diamonds or 10 tricks in Hearts or No trumps.

Hand 21

1♦, 2♣, 2♠.

4th suit in both versions.

2S is a forcing reverse following the 2-level response.
South is therefore strong enough to bid 3♥ (4th suit) and North will sign off in 3NT.
As they lie NS can make 10 tricks in spades, even on a 4-3 fit with a 5-1 split against, but I would rather be in 3NT making 9.

Hand 22

1♦, 2♣.

No need for 4th suit

East is not strong enough to reverse into 2♥ and so repeats his diamonds.
West forces with a responder's reverse of 2♠, East bids 2NT with his heart stop and West raises to 3NT.
11 tricks can be made in any one of Clubs, Hearts(!), or no trumps.

Fourth suit forcing - Commentary

Hand 23

1♥, 1♠, 2♦.

No need for 4th suit

With his excellent club stop and invitational values North bids 2NT.

South could pass. Alternatively he bids 3S which North raises to game.

NS make 10 tricks in spades – the only making game..

Meanwhile E can make 7 tricks in clubs, meaning that any intervention higher than 1♣ is potentially expensive.

Hand 24

1♣, 1♦, 1♥.

4th suit if playing forcing to 2NT.

Game-forcing – if the fourth suit is played as forcing to game then East will bid 2NT (showing invitational values but not necessarily a spade stop) over which West will probably pass.

Forcing to 2NT – East bids 2S (forcing to 2NT), and West bids 2NT, again probably ending the auction.

As it happens EW can make 9 tricks in No trumps with ♠K well-positioned, Diamonds running for just 1 loser and the Clubs establishing for just 1 loser – but surely against the odds.