Fourth Suit Forcing – teacher's notes.

Context

This convention might first have crossed your path quite late in your bridge career – let's face it, it hadn't been thought of when you started.
But that is no reason why it should not now appear at a much earlier stage.
It is one of the most useful conventions and basically simple in concept.

However, there are a number of variations both in style and detail.

Purpose

The bid is most commonly employed by responder on his rebid, but it can appear later in the auction. The following notes are written mostly in the context of responder's rebid.

Many play the convention only as a way of searching for a no trump stop.
That is indeed one of its main purposes, and it is considerably better than not playing it at all, but it is a grotesquely missed opportunity. Whenever the final optimum strain is in doubt, or you would like to express at least a passing slam interest in a suit contract, then 4th suit is likely to be the way to go.
In the examples in this topic I have attempted to illustrate some of its versatility.

How forcing?

There are two schools of thought here, both of them perfectly valid. Just make sure that you and your partner are agreed on which version you are playing.

1. A bid of the 4th suit at the three-level is always game-forcing.
2. A bid of the 4th suit at the two-level can be played either as game-forcing or forcing to 2NT.

Andrew Robson and Larry Cohen amongst others prefer the game-forcing version.
EBED – the teaching wing of the ebu – teaches the 'forcing to 2NT' version.

Continuations

<u>Playing the game-going version</u> opener will usually take things slowly below game-level, exploring the two hands slowly and quite possibly investigating the possibility of a slam at a low level. If the 4th suit bidder reverts to a suit bid which he could have made directly earlier then he is setting the suit and suggesting at least a mild slam interest.

<u>Playing the 'forcing to 2NT version'</u> the following responses by opener are not forcing:-

a minimum rebid in no trumps;
a minimum rebid in opener's first suit;
a minimum rebid in responder's suit.

Any other response by opener will be game-forcing, as will any continuation by responder following one of the responses above.

Pros and cons

<u>Playing the game-going version</u> responder might on occasion have to bid 2NT with a balanced shape and invitational values but with no stop in the fourth suit.

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Playing the 'forcing to 2NT' version opener with the values to accept the invitation and bid game must not make one of the bids above as they might be passed. This will not infrequently lead to a constricted auction as both partners try to explore the hand further below game-level.

4th suit at the one-level

Simplest – but not best – is to play the sequence 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 1♠ exactly the same as you would play any other 4th suit sequence, so:-

If you play 4th suit at the 2-level as game-forcing then play the sequence above as game-forcing (may or may not contain 4 spades), 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 1NT as 6-9 points, (no better bid available, may or may not contain a spade stop), and 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 2NT as balanced 10-12 points (may or may not contain a spade stop);

If you play 4th suit at the 2-level as forcing to 2NT then play the sequence above as forcing to 1NT on 6+ points.

Better is the modern style in which the sequence 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 1♠ is played as a natural 1-round force promising 4 spades. 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 1NT then becomes 6-9 points, (no better bid available, may or may not contain a spade stop), and the sequence 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, 2♠ then becomes the artificial 4th suit sequence, denying four spades, and as forcing as any other 4th suit at the two-level.

Just decide whether or not you wish to include this extension from the start.

Jump in the fourth suit

Use this with game-going values and five cards in the fourth suit. It is likely to be the only way to locate the 5-3 fit when partner has 5-4-3-1 shape.

Which version?

My preference (but see below) is to go along with Andrew Robson and to play it **as game-forcing,** when it adds considerable versatility for any game-forcing hand on which the final strain or level is far from clear.

The consideration that you might have to bid 2NT as responder on your rebid on invitational values but without a stop is not in general a great problem - so the opponents take the first 5 tricks off the top - partner will usually still has the opportunity to rebid the 4th suit at the three-level in search of a stop if he wishes to bid on to a no trump game.

However,

Because others have been taught the 'standard English' version, there is much to be said for playing the 'forcing to 2NT' version when skipping around from partner to partner in a bridge environment where that is the more common method.

So, I personally teach 'game-forcing' to any steady established partnership who are looking to move forwards, but to teach whichever is the local norm to a general improvers' group.

Both methods are discussed in the commentary on this section.

How good a stop for no trumps?

Some require a genuine stop, such as A or KQ.

Note that as little as Kx in partner's hand provides a stop should the opponents decide to attack that suit on their opening lead, provided that partner is declaring the hand.

I find that asking for a partial stop – typically Qx or Jxx or better – is more versatile than demanding a solid stop, and the examples and commentary are written from that standpoint.

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Responding to the fourth suit

Clearly bidding some number of no trumps if holding a stop (or partial stop) in the fourth suit is a desirable option.

However, the opportunity for opener to give further information relating to shape should not be missed. Likely holdings would be 3 cards in partner's suit, 5 cards in your second suit or 6 cards in your first suit.

Priorities in responding

There is some room for discussion on this matter, but a good starting point would be:-

1. 3 cards in partner's major;
2. 5 cards in your second suit;
3. 6 cards in your first suit;
4. A partial stop or better for no trumps