

All beginners are encouraged to play bridge with their friends, since there is no better way of learning the game than playing it. However dealing random hands has one major problem – there is nothing to stop really awkward hands coming up. Take this hand which Liz showed me last week:

♠ A K J 9 7	Derek	Liz
♥ 10 7	1♥	1♠
♦ J 3 2	2♣	?
♣ K Q 5		

Liz had 14 points. She knew that with a good hand facing an opening bid, she ought to bid game – but which game should she bid? She could hardly support hearts on just two. She couldn't jump to game in spades with only a 5-card suit. She didn't want to bid 3NT without a diamond stopper. She did not want to raise clubs to game with only 3-card support. She just did not seem to have a good action available. In the end she chose 3NT, but sadly opponents led a diamond and took the first five tricks.

♠ Q 5 2	Her partner's hand was very good. In fact, a slam could have been made in spades, hearts or even clubs. So going down in 3NT was particularly frustrating. But what could Liz have done to avoid the disaster?
♥ A K Q J 6	
♦ 4	
♣ A J 9 8	

The answer to Liz's problem has not yet been covered in class. She will have to wait till next year, when she will learn about Fourth Suit Forcing but when I explained the idea to her she followed it quite easily. What would a bid of 2♦ mean in the auction given? If Liz had diamonds she could bid no trumps, so 2♦ is not very useful in the natural sense. It is much more sensible to use it as a bid asking partner for more information. It is a FORCING bid, so partner must not pass. It is a CONVENTIONAL bid, asking a specific question, 'What else have you got?' With the actual hand he held Derek would have bid 3♠ to show that as well as having hearts and clubs, he had three spades and a good hand. Liz might not have bid a slam but at least they would have got to the best game.

♠ Q 5 2	Look at some of the other hands Derek might have held. With just 12 points, bidding 2♠ over 2♦ would be enough.
♥ A J 9 6 5	
♦ 4	
♣ A J 9 8	

♠ 2	With diamonds stopped, Derek would bid to bid no trumps. With only 12 points, 2NT shows that the hand is a minimum.. Make the ♣J the ♣A, so that the hand has 15 points and Derek would have to bid 3NT.	♠ 2
♥ A Q 9 6 5		♥ A Q 9 6 5
♦ K Q 4		♦ K Q 4
♣ J 9 8 4		♣ A 9 8 4

♠ Q 5	With a 6-card heart suit and 12 points, a 2♥ bid would best show the hand. Make the hearts better, say A K J 6 5 4 and it would be right to jump to 3♥, showing a good 6-card suit in a non-minimum hand.	♠ Q 5
♥ A J 6 5 4 3		♥ A K J 6 5 4
♦ 4		♦ 4
♣ A J 9 8		♣ A J 9 8

♠ Q 5	Sometimes the opener will not have a good bid available over 2♦ and will have to make the least bad bid. On this unexciting 12 points, no trumps is out because there is no diamond stopper, so the choice is between 2♥ and 2♠. I prefer 2♠ because I have already shown my five hearts by opening 1♥ and rebidding 2♣.
♥ A J 6 5 4	
♦ 8 4	
♣ A J 9 8	

1♣ 1♦	So, a bid of the fourth suit is forcing and does not promise any particular holding in the suit bid. It requires opener to give more detail about distribution and strength. There is one exception – when the fourth suit is bid at the one-level. Here 1♠ is natural, showing four spades, so opener will raise spades with 4-card support. As 1♠ is natural, 2♠ is the fourth suit.
1♥ 1♠	

Liz wanted to know where she could learn more about Fourth Suit Forcing and I was pleased to be able to tell her that the EBU has now published a book on Foundation Standard English. It is called 'Really Easy Bidding' and is for beginners who do not want to be confused by too much detail but who need to know the basics of the whole system. It is available from the EBU Bridge Shop at £9.99 plus 50 pence for postage and packing. It will be on sale at the Brighton Congress – good holiday reading for students and their teachers!