

Was that Bid Forcing? - Part 1

One of the things many advancing players struggle with is identifying forcing bids. The toughest part is that which bids are forcing and which aren't depends both on your system (e.g., 2/1 and Standard American have slightly different forcing bids) and the bidding context. So, in today's lesson, we'll try and demystify some of the confusion.

The first thing to note is that there is really a scale of "forcing" auctions.

1. Forcing to game
2. Forcing for one round
3. Expected to bid
4. Invitational
5. Expected to pass

When we're talking about deciding whether a bid is forcing or not, we're usually trying to decide between #2 and #4. However, it can be useful to understand the other types of auctions to remove them from consideration.

Forcing to Game

We talked about this in our recent series on **Bidding in Competition**. In each of these auctions, the partnership is committed to game when playing 2/1:

North South

1♠ 2♣

1♥ 2NT

2♣ 2♠

As we discussed last month, there are only two options when you in one of these sequences: 1. You bid until you reach game or, 2. You double the opponent's bid. As such, ALL bids by the partnership after any of these starts are designed to find the best game contract and/or investigate for slam.

Expected to Bid

This type of bid usually occurs when partner bids a suit they DON'T have. Each of these auctions is an example:

East South

1♠ Double

1♠ 2♠

With the takeout double (first auction), partner is saying she has an opening hand and shortness in ♠s. In the second, she's bidding Michael's to show 5+ ♥ and 5+ cards in an unknown minor. In both cases, she wants us to bid one of her suits. So, why aren't these bids in category #2? Don't we have to bid here? In almost every case, you will oblige partner by bidding your best matching suit.

However, there will be that rare exception. Consider the hand below:

♠ A K Q J 10 7 6 5

♥ 10 9

♦ 7 2

♣ 3

In any contract other than ♠s, your hand is worth ZERO tricks! (Note: Your 8 spades plus East's presumed 5 spades means BOTH your partner and West should be void in ♠s. So, there's no way for South to get to your hand!) On the other hand, in a ♠ contract, your trump holding is strong enough to draw East's trump. So, your hand is worth EIGHT tricks! Given that difference, your best bid with this wacky freak of a hand is Pass on both of these auctions.

Expected to Pass

This type of bid comes up when partner is showing a minimum hand. Consider each of these auctions

North South

1♠ 4♠

North South

1♥ 2NT

4♥

In the first auction, South is showing a very weak hand: 5+ ♠ and 0-6 points. In the second auction, North's response to his partner's Jacoby 2NT bid shows a minimum opener. In both cases, there's no expectation that the bidding will continue. That doesn't mean the auction is over (e.g., South might have enough on the second auction to investigate slam), just that there is no force involved.

Now that we have those out of the way, we can turn to the interesting cases: forcing for one round versus invitational. Rather than memorizing a whole bunch of "rules" like "New suit by an unpassed hand is forcing," I find it's better to go back to the basics of what bidding is about. Whatever system you play, its goals are simple: 1. Decide if we belong in a partial, game or slam contract and, 2. Decide if we have 8+ cards in a major between the two hands. In most cases where there is some ambiguity about forcing or not, we are deciding between a game and a partial. (Note: If we're looking for slam, someone has probably already introduced a game-forcing bid.) This leads to our first two rules:

1. Based on the auction, if partner's best hand and our worst hand is enough for game, then we need to bid.
2. If we've agreed on a major, then any other trump suit (i.e., not NT) is forcing.

Let's see how to apply these rules to a couple of auctions:

North South

2♣ ?

North has 22+ points. But, he could have as many as 37, which would be more than enough for game. So, this bid is 100% forcing.

North South

1♥ ?

By opening 1♥, North has limited his hand to 21 points or less. With more than that, he would have opened 2♣ (see above). That's not enough for game, so no force here. So, if South bids here, it shows points, NOT a dislike of ♥s. Remember that the next time you're holding this "magical" hand:

♠7 6 5 3 2

♥Void

♦10 9 8 7

♣Q J 7 4

OK, super easy so far. So, let's kick things up a little here:

North South

1♦ 1♥

2♠ ?

Again, North didn't open 2♣, so he's limited to 21 points. His 2♠ bid, which is a reverse, did nothing to change that upper end. But, what about South? As we discussed above, since North's 1♦ bid wasn't forcing, South needs something to bid. In particular, her 1♥ shows 5+ points. Given that, South is forced to bid here since 21 + 5 is enough for game. (Note: The same logic would apply if South had bid 3♣ instead.)

Given that logic, now consider this auction:

North South

1♦ 1♥

1♠ ?

I recommend that you treat this auction as NOT forcing! Wait, what? That's a new suit by an unpassed hand?! Yes, but what is North's upper range? If he had 17+, he would have jump shifted. So, he has no more than 16 points. That, plus South's 5+, is nowhere near enough to force the bidding. To be fair, South will almost always bid in this situation. But, as we saw earlier, that doesn't mean this bid is forcing. Consider this hand:

♠ 7 6 5

♥ A J 7 6 2

♦ 10 9

♣ J 7 4

Your side may not even have the majority of the points here! Clearly, you don't have enough for game. So, why are you going to flail around to try and find something "better?" Who knows? West might even take you guys off the hook by bidding a balancing 2♣.

Now, let's see how finding a major suit fit impacts the bidding. Consider these three auctions:

North South

1♥ 2♥

2♠ ?

North South

1♥ 2♥

2NT ?

North South

1♥ 1♠

2♠ 3♣

?

In the first two hands, South's 2♥ confirms 8+♥: 5+ for North and 3+ for South. On the third hand, North's 2♠ does the same, although this time it's 4+ for South and 4+ for North. As a result, North's 2♠ bid on the first hand and South's 3♣ on the last are game invites. You and your partner can decide how to play these (e.g., help suit or short suit), but they are game tries and so are 100% forcing.

North's 2NT in the second auction, on the other hand, is not a new trump suit. Instead, it's an offer of a second possible contract. Since South's 2♥ could be as few as 5 points, this bid shows a flat 18 - 19 points. That's the same thing it would have shown if North had bid 1♠ instead. As a result, this bid is NOT forcing just like it wouldn't have been in this auction:

North South

1♥ 1♠

2NT ?

Quick Quiz

In each of these auctions, identify which bids, if any, are forcing.

1.

North South

1♥ 2♥

3♥ 4♥

2.

North South

1♥ 2NT

3♥ 4♥

3.

North South

1♣ 1♥

1NT

4.

North South

Pass 1♣

1♥ 1NT

5.

North South

Pass 1♣

1♥ 2♦

In this next section, you'll be given the start of an auction. Decide which continuations by North are forcing. (Note: We're assuming Standard American bidding.)

1.

North South

1♥ 1♠

a. 2♥

b. 3♥

c. 3♠

2.

North South

1♥ 2♥

a. 3♥

b. 2NT

c. 2♠

3.

North South

1♥ 1NT

a. 3♦

b. 2NT

c. 2♠

4.

North South

1♥ 2NT

a. 3♥

b. 3♦

c. 4♣