



Prefer 4♠ / 4♥ to 3NT – Usually

AT teams (rubber/Chicago), there is much to be said in punting 3NT (preferably giving away as little information as possible en route) and not worrying overly about missing a major-suit fit. For it to be materially better to play 4♥/4♠ at teams, you need to score two more tricks than 3NT. This is because 3NT making nine tricks and 4♥/4♠ scoring ten tricks is essentially the same score at teams. Not so at pairs, where there is a huge difference between +420 (620) in 4♥/4♠ and +400 (600) in 3NT.

Pairs scoring rewards playing 4♥/4♠. If you think there is an extra trick to be had in the major, play there rather than in 3NT. With a 4-4 fit, there is almost always an extra ruffing trick (in either hand); with a 5-3 fit (less clearcut to play 4♥/4♠ over 3NT – you have five potential winners in no-trumps), there'll be an extra ruffing trick if it's in the short trump hand.

In this exercise, partner opens 1♥; you respond 2♣ (cheaper of four-card suits and much better than a bucolic leap in no-trumps!). Partner now rebids 2NT, to show 15-16 balanced* and the question is: what should you do now?

Hand A ♠ 6 2 ♥ Q 4 2 ♦ K J 5 2 ♣ A 9 7 2	Hand B ♠ Q 3 ♥ J 10 5 ♦ A 8 6 2 ♣ Q J 4 2
Hand C ♠ Q J ♥ K 8 4 ♦ Q J 9 2 ♣ Q J 10 2	

Hand A: bid 3♥. This shows delayed (i.e. three-card) heart support and offers a

*After a two-over-one response, it is sensible to play that a 2NT rebid is forcing to game and shows 15-19. This gives more room for investigation.

choice of games – it is 100% forcing. (Typically partner will bid 4♥ with five hearts and 3NT with four). The small doubleton spade makes this a clear choice (at teams too). Once in a while, spades are completely unstopped, making 3NT a disaster; more likely partner has a spade holding such as A-K-x, well enough stopped, but providing an extra ruffing trick in 4♥.

Hand B: bid 3♥. Much closer decision, because your doubleton spade is stronger. The suit is unlikely to be wide-open as a result and, more importantly, give partner a spade holding such as A-K-x (or K-J-x) and there is no third-round loser to ruff. I'd just bid 3NT at teams, but there are too many occasions where 3NT makes nine tricks and 4♥ makes ten that I'd feel duty-bound to offer the choice at pairs.

Hand C: bid 3NT. The spade doubleton is now so strong, you'd back against it providing a ruffing trick. All those queens and jacks in the minors suggest no-trumps. And furthermore, you have so many high cards that you'd expect both no-trumps and hearts (should there be a 5-3 fit) to make eleven tricks. Yes, once in a while partner will have two small spades, but that's not so likely – especially in the days where opponents bid decent five-card spade suits on precious little. Note, however, that not investigating for an eight-card major fit at pairs is the exception, not the rule.

Now have a look at this illustrative deal:

Game All. Dealer North.

♠ K 6 2	♥ A 8 7 3	♦ A K 3 2	♣ A 3
♠ Q J 9 7	♥ Q 10	♦ Q J 10 5	♣ K J 8
♠ 10	♥ J 9 5 4	♦ 8 6 4	♣ Q 10 7 5 4
♠ A 8 5 4 3	♥ K 6 2	♦ 9 7	♣ 9 6 2

West	North	East	South
	1♥	Pass	1♠
Pass	2NT ¹	Pass	3♥ ²
Pass	3♠ ³	Pass	4♠ ⁴
All Pass			

- 17-18 balanced.
- Showing three hearts and offering a choice of games.
- Showing three spades (but presumably only four hearts – no 4♥ bid) and similarly offering a choice of games.
- As usual at pairs, preferring the eight-card major fit to 3NT. Note that North-South's total absence of tens, jacks and queens (all no-trumpy cards) further accentuates the desire to play in a suit contract.

North cannot make 2NT, let alone 3NT. Yet, despite the 4-1 trump split, 4♠ is makeable. Without any fancy footwork either.

Declarer won West's queen of diamonds opening lead with dummy's king and cashed the king of spades, both following. He refrained from leading a second spade, however, for now he needed to set up the club ruff, by playing ace and a second club. West won the jack and led the queen of spades (East discarding a club), but declarer could win the ace and ruff a club.

At trick seven declarer cashed dummy's ace of diamonds, then ruffed a low diamond. He cashed the king of hearts, crossed to the (queen and) ace of hearts, then led a fourth diamond. With East discarding, he could safely ruff the diamond, whilst West helplessly had to follow with his last diamond. That was ten tricks in the bag, leaving West to score the last two tricks with his trumps (crashing partner's winning heart). Game made.

When my brother James and I started out as shy early teenagers at Abingdon Bridge Club, we had a simple rule. If we knew we had an eight-card major fit (or might have one) we'd always play there (or explore the possibility). Yes, there were a few occasions where no-trumps would have scored better (often on a misdefence, mind). But the rule stood us in pretty good stead. □