

How To Express Doubt In The Auction - IV The Forcing Pass

What's this? How can a pass be forcing? Didn't the ACBL outlaw that? These and other questions crop up whenever this subject is raised. Let's start with a relatively simple scenario in order to set the stage:

1.

West	North	East	South
1S	P	4C!(1)	X
P(2)			

- (1) A splinter raise showing 4 card spade support and enough values to be in game.
(2) A "forcing" pass

Does anyone really expect East to pass 4Cx? Hopefully not. Not even if West had a ten minute break in tempo, would East be required to pass in this auction. After all, the bid of 4C committed East-West to playing in 4S **and** was not a natural bid with the effort to make clubs trump. So when West passed, they knew that East was going to have the chance to bid again and that they would bid again. That is the definition of a forcing pass. *You pass, and you are forcing your partner to bid again anyways.*

Well why would you do that? Why not bid something instead of forcing partner to do so. The answer is **doubt!** A forcing pass suggests that you do not know enough about the auction in order to place the contract. In other words, you need partner's help to answer one of these 3 questions:

1. Should we declare or defend?
2. Which strain should we declare?
3. What level should we declare at?

In example 1, the decision to declare or defend seems obvious. The strain is also obvious. So the only question West might have is what level should we declare? In other words, West is expressing at least mild slam interest.

Whenever we are expressing doubt, it's good to look at our possible alternative statements and the actions that could express them:

- No interest - 4S
- At least mild interest - P, XX, 4D, 4H
- Slam Values - 4N, 5N, 6S
- Strong slam interest - 5C, 5D, 5H, 5S

So bidding 4S shows no interest, and everything else shows interest of some variety. When the opponents double a splinter I tend to play that XX shows first round control and any other control bid denies first round control.

Let's let the auction in #1 continue

1a.

West	North	East	South
1S	P	4C!(1)	X
P(2)	5C	P(3)	

Is East's pass forcing or not? Well let's go through the logic:

East West have committed to playing at least 4S. West has shown interest in 6S. Therefore they have game values and West has some extra. This seems like letting the opponents play 5C undoubled doesn't make any sense. Therefore the pass is forcing. This time, there's a new option on the table. Namely we could defend 5C instead of declaring. Most commonly this kind of forcing pass is expressing doubt about the question of declaring or defending.

Again let's look at the possible statements:

- Defend - X
- Not Sure - pass
- Declare - And other bid

When we choose to declare, we have several gradations to our desire to declare, because the next question is again doubt about level. So we can break that down into answering the level question:

- No interest in slam - 5S
- Some interest in slam - 5D, 5H
- Slam Forcing - 5N or higher

By chaining these concepts and considering the auction through the doubt framework the bids can start to make sense even though there is a potentially confusing set of possible actions.

Now let's look at one more example auction

2.

West	North	East	South
1S	X	XX(1)	P(2)

- (1) 10+ HCP, tends to deny a fit
 (2) A forcing pass

Why is this a forcing pass? The opponents have opened and shown at least invitational values. They have more points than us and partner is short in spades. The odds of South having both the spade and the values to believe that they can set 1S is infinitesimally small. A more useful thing to want to express is "I don't have a preference as to which suit to play in", or in the framework of this lesson "Doubt about strain".

South can:

- Show doubt about strain - Pass
- Pick a strain - Bid

So that's what a forcing pass is, and some possible situations. To categorize them briefly

- If we have a fit and the opps double
 - Pass shows doubt about level
- If we have a fit and the opps bid
 - Pass shows doubt about declare or defend
- If the opps make a penalty double and we have options
 - Pass shows doubt about strain

There are of course several other alternative situations. And it's important to have agreements about when forcing passes are on or not. A common one is that forcing passes are on if we have forced to game.

3.

West	North	East	South
1S	P	2N(1)	3H
P(2)			

(1) Jacoby 2N, GF with 4+ spade support

(2) Forcing Pass

4.

West	North	East	South
1S	P	2H(1)	3C
P(2)			

(1) 2/1 forcing to game

(2) Forcing Pass

5a.

West	North	East	South
1S	3D	4S	5D
P			

5b.

West	North	East	South
1S	3D	4D	5D
P			

In 5a, the pass should be non-forcing. Since East showed a “weak freak” by jumping to 4S. If East wanted to show a hand that thought that 4S was going to make they should cuebid 4D like in 5b which turns forcing passes on, since East forced to game rather than preemptively bid it.

I invite you all to further explore the world of forcing passes and have discussions with your favorite partner(s) about when they are or are not on. It's far more important to have an agreement, then to have the best agreement.