



# Play & Learn

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Suppose North–South reach 4♠ with the hands below. East cashes three clubs and switches to a diamond. How do you like declarer’s chances?

Dlr: South ♠ K 7 6 2  
 Vul: Both ♥ A 6 4  
 ♦ A 5 3  
 ♣ 7 6 3

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

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

Because a 3–3 split of the missing hearts is unlikely, South’s fourth heart is a potential loser, but as long as the missing spades split 3–1 or 2–2, declarer can draw trumps and still have a spade left in dummy to ruff the potential heart loser later. Even with no shortness at all, North’s fourth trump is valuable – it can be used to ruff declarer’s heart loser. These two hands are very likely to make 4♠. Would you have gotten there?

What if we make one slight change in the previous deal by trading North’s ♠ 2 for East’s ♦ 2? Now dummy has only three-card spade support. How do you feel about a 4♠ contract now?

Now declarer won’t have a trump left in dummy after drawing trumps.

Nor can declarer afford to cash three top hearts while there is a trump left outstanding. Unless hearts split 3–3, a defender will ruff to set 4♠. Declarers who have practice dealing with fourth-round losers, which is what South’s fourth heart is called, have a way to try to make the hand when the player with the doubleton heart also has a doubleton trump, but it won’t work here, and the odds are against making 4♠ with these two hands. We saw last month that a major-suit opener’s distribution becomes more valuable when responder has more than three cards in support of that major suit and that is true here. With the same partnership point count but one less trump card in dummy, we are better off stopping in 3♠.

With a 5–3 fit, dummy’s 11 points opposite 13 points in declarer’s hand (adding one for long suit distribution) just weren’t quite enough for game in our second example. But those same points with an extra trump in dummy are enough to make game. My advice for a major-suit opener? Opposite a three-card limit raise, stay out of game when the strength isn’t there. But when partner makes a limit raise showing four or more trumps, carry on to game with a distributional hand. Players who recognize the power of a ninth trump and wish to differentiate between three and four trumps in responder’s hand must discuss how to do that. You might require responder’s

immediate jump raise to the three level to show four-card support. Responder could make an immediate 3♠ raise on our first deal. With only three-card support for opener’s major, responder makes some forcing bid before raising to 3♠. A standard 2♦ response would work in our second example. It takes some effort, but differentiating between three-card support and more lets you bid and make more games as well as stay out of games you cannot make.

Test yourself with a short exercise. Holding each hand below, you open 1♠. What is your decision after partner shows:

- a) a limit raise (a good 10–12 points) with more than three spades?
- b) a limit raise with exactly three spades?

- ① ♠ A Q 8 5 3 ♥ K Q 7 ♦ 9 2 ♣ J 8 2
- ② ♠ A Q 8 5 3 ♥ K Q 7 2 ♦ 9 ♣ K 8 2
- ③ ♠ A Q 7 5 3 ♥ Q 7 6 ♦ K J 7 4 ♣ 9

Hand 1, a balanced hand with 13 total points and no extra distribution, stops in 3♠ opposite either raise.

Hand 2, with 15 points, reaches 4♠ based on strength, not the size of the fit.

Hand 3 bids 4♠ opposite a four-card limit raise but stops in 3♠ with only 13 points opposite a three-card limit raise. ■