

Puppet Stayman after Partner bids 1NT

This is a variation of the Stayman convention. **It is useful if your partnership opens 1NT or 2NT with a 5-card Major.** With 2NT openings it has long been considered that such a hand may contain a 5-card Major whereas conventional wisdom for 1NT openings used to favour opening 1 of the Major with balanced hands 5-3-3-2 where the 5 is a Major. However, it is becoming increasingly popular to open ALL balanced hands with 1NT regardless of whether there is a 5-card Major. This was discussed recently in the EBU magazine. A high ranking expert's teachings also support this where it is argued that a benefit of such an approach is that when you bid and rebid a suit you are almost certain to have 6 cards of that suit – useful information for partner.

So, if we accept this changing trend towards all balanced hands being opened 1NT then it is logical that Puppet Stayman is now equally valid for hands where partner opens 1NT as it was for hands opening 2NT. I had already accepted the concept of ALL balanced hands being opened NT but occasionally as responder I notice that I had become fearful of being in the wrong contract. I had this one recently:

♠ K 10 5
♥ A 7 6
♦ 10 2
♣ K J 10 8 4

My partner opened 1NT. I want make a Game Invitational bid. But if I bid 2NT there is a real chance of ending up in 3NT but with an 8-card trump fit in a Major suit that would score better. Other pairs may be on the old wavelength and find their Major suit fit straight away then we get a poor score even if we bid the NT Game.

To get the benefit of the improved methods I need to have an improved approach to NT responses and Puppet Stayman provides just that.

In the original treatment, a 2♣ response to 1NT asks opener to bid any 4-card Major. With Puppet Stayman the objective is to find a 5-3 Major suit fit if there is one. Responder usually promises game-invitational strength or better but may only hold a 3-card Major.

When the 1NT opener rebids 2♦ it is a relay bid that denies a 5-card Major although it may have a 4-card Major.

The method evolves to include what you do if you have a 4-card Major or are 4-4 in both Majors.

Like most bidding strategies there is a drawback. Puppet Stayman is used for hands with at least Game Invitational strength so you cannot use Garbage Stayman to sign off in the lowest level when you are very weak with both Majors. You can still use transfer bids in the same way though.

Puppet Stayman Method after 1NT

Openers Rebids

After 1NT 2♣, opener's rebids are:

- 2♦ - Denies having a 5-card Major (may have a 4-card Major)
- 2♥ - has a 5-card Heart suit
- 2♠ - has a 5-card Spade suit

Responders Rebids

In response to opener's rebid of 2♦ responder may bid as follows – bear in mind the Major suit responder rebids are showing the other Major.

- Pass - has a weak 3-suiter short in Clubs
- 2♥ - shows a 4-card Spade suit. Denies having 4 Hearts – Game invitational
- 2♠ - shows a 4-card Heart suit. Denies having 4 Spades – Game invitational
- 2NT - 4-4 in the Majors - Game invitational, opener can Pass or correct to 3♥/♠ or 4♥/♠
- 3♣ - 4-4 in both Majors – Game forcing, opener chooses the correct denomination
- 3♥ - Game forcing and shows a 4-card Spade suit. Denies having 4 Hearts
- 3♠ - Game forcing and shows a 4-card Heart suit. Denies having 4 Spades
- 3NT - Natural, denies a 4-card Major. To Play (had only been looking for a 5-3 fit but didn't find it).

Example of hands for bidding Puppet Stayman (assuming NT open is 12-14)

Example 1

♠ 10 3
♥ A 9 8
♦ A J 8 3 2
♣ Q 7 4

Previously you might have bid 2NT inviting Game.

Playing Puppet Stayman you explore a potentially better option for if partner holds 5 Hearts – if that is the case you will then invite Game in Hearts instead.

- Over 2♥ bid 3♥ (Game invitational)
- Over 2♦ bid 2NT (Game invitational denies a 4-card Major)
- Over 2♠ bid 2NT (Game invitational shows less than three Spades and exactly three Hearts)

Original 1NT opener makes the Game call with a good 1NT or Passes with a poor 1NT

Example 2

♠ K Q J
♥ 9 5
♦ A J 8 3 2
♣ Q 7 4

Previously you might have bid 3NT as the hand is good enough for Game.

Playing Puppet Stayman you want to ask if partner holds 5 Spades – if so you plan to bid 4♠ because that will be a better contract.

- Over 2♠ bid 4♠
- Over 2♦ bid 3NT
- Over 2♥ bid 3NT

Example 3

♠ K Q J 10
♥ 9 3
♦ Q 7 6
♣ K 10 7 2

You have a 4-card Major and previously you may have bid Stayman before making an invitational raise.

Playing Puppet Stayman you firstly ask if partner has 5 Spades and if not your next bid will describe to partner that you have 4 Spades and are 'invitational'

Over 2♦ bid 2♥ (shows 4 Spades and is invitational to Game) note that partner could still have a 4-card Spade suit with the 2♦ response

Over 2♥ bid 2NT (Game invitational)

Over 2♠ bid 3♠ (Game invitational)

Example 4

♠ K Q J 10
♥ 9 3
♦ A 7 6
♣ K 10 7 2

Like the previous hand but a little bit stronger. You have a 4-card Major and previously you may have bid Stayman before bidding the appropriate Game.

Playing Puppet Stayman you firstly ask if partner has 5 Spades and if not your next bid will describe to partner that you have 4 Spades and are Game Forcing. This enables partner to select Spades if there is an 8-card fit or 3NT if not.

Over 2♦ bid 3♥ (shows 4 Spades and is forcing to Game) note that partner could still have a 4-card Spade suit with the 2♦ response

Over 2♥ bid 3NT

Over 2♠ bid 4♠

Example 5

♠ A J 9 8
♥ A Q 5 2
♦ 7
♣ 7 6 5 2

You have two 4-card Majors and previously you may have bid Stayman and then after 2♦ you would have bid 2NT invitational. After 2♥/♠ you would have converted to Game in the Major suit. Without a Major suit fit this hand is not worth Game but with a fit the singleton Diamond is now a more worthwhile asset and the hand is a 7-loser worth a Game bid.

With Puppet Stayman you describe your hand shape as invitational and let opener choose the correct denomination. If you find an 8-card Major suit fit and you have a 7-loser you can make the Game bid yourself if partner hasn't made it first.

Over 2♦ bid 2NT (shows 4-4 in the Majors invitational to Game) note that partner could still have a 4-card Spade suit with the 2♦ response. In this event, if partner bids 3♥/♠ over your 2NT you can raise it to 4 as your hand is now worth more in trumps than it would have been in NT.

Over 2♥ bid 4♥ (upgrading your invitational bid as described above)

Over 2♠ bid 4♠ (upgrading your invitational bid as described above)

Example 6

♠ A J 9 8
♥ A Q 5 2
♦ K 7
♣ 7 6 2

Again you have two 4-card Majors but this time you want to be in Game.

Over 2♦ bid 3♣ (shows 4-4 in the Majors Game Forcing) note that partner could still have a 4-card Spade suit with the 2♦ response. Partner will bid the appropriate Game.

Over 2♥ bid 4♥

Over 2♠ bid 4♠

NOTES

1. Garbage Stayman

You can't play Garbage Stayman with a view to a weak take-out at the two level because 2♣ is at least invitational to Game when you are using Puppet Stayman.

But with extreme shape and favourable vulnerability your hand might be crying out for a weak take-out pre-empt. If the hand is suitable you might have partnership agreement that a 3-level bid over partner's 1NT is a natural weak take-out.

2. Transfer Bids

You can still make transfer bids and these will have the same meaning as they would have done if you were using straight Stayman.

Example 7

♠ A 6 5 2
♥ A 9 7 5 2
♦ 10
♣ 9 7 6

You are too weak to make a Puppet Stayman bid because that would be invitational to Game. You might have a Spade fit but you can't play Garbage Stayman for the same reason. You fear the opponents could run a long Diamond suit against you if your side is in NTs so you decide your best option is to play with Hearts as trumps. Partner will have at least two and possibly more.

After 1NT bid 2♦ which is a transfer to Hearts.

Partner will bid 2♥ and you can Pass after that.

Example 8

♠ A 10 6 4 2

♥ A Q 7 3

♦ 10

♣ K 7 6

After 1NT you can bid 2♥ (transfer to Spades)

Partner bids 2♠

You now bid 3♥ - this is Game Forcing - partner knows you have 5 Spades and 4 Hearts and can select the appropriate Game

3. Responders rebids

The transfer bid method used in Puppet Stayman is useful for two reasons:

- Double dummy analysis shows 87% of hands are capable of making the same number of tricks whichever side is declarer; 9% of hands will achieve better with the good hand as declarer but only 4% of Game going hands will get more tricks if declarer is the hand with the low number of HCPs
- On top of that there is a psychological advantage to keep defenders guessing where the HCPs are

Puppet Stayman ensures that where possible the original opener is the declarer.

Opener must therefore be alert that responder rebids in the sequence 1NT, 2♣, 2♦, 2♥ shows that responder **has Spades (not Hearts)** and similarly, in the sequence 1NT, 2♣, 2♦, 2♠ the responder **has Hearts (not Spades)**

Puppet Stayman after partner has opened 2NT

It is not unknown that a 2NT bid contains a singleton Ace. So it is even more important to discover a trump fit if there is one. After 2NT there is less bidding space for exploration bids but responder can still explore the possibility of the 5-3 trump fit when it is already known that a Game is biddable. This would be difficult using straightforward Stayman and Transfer methods but Puppet Stayman can achieve this. The 2NT bid situation is perhaps the reason Puppet Stayman was invented.

Puppet Stayman Method after 2NT

Similar to Puppet Stayman after 1NT but with two subtle **variations**

Openers Rebids

After 2NT, 3♣ Puppet Stayman is unconditionally forcing to GAME (**the first variation**)

Opener's rebids are:

- 3♦ - Denies having a 5-card Major (**but guarantees at least one 4-card Major**) (**this is the second variation**)

The responder (i.e. the original Stayman bidder) then bids:

3♥ - denies four Hearts but shows four Spades – Opener then bids 3NT or 4♠

3♠ - denies four Spades but shows four Hearts – Opener then bids 3NT or 4♥

4♣ - 4-4 in both Majors – Game forcing – Opener then bids his better Major

3NT – No 4-card Major (i.e. the original 3♣ bid was an attempt to find a 5-card Major)
Opener will Pass

- 3♥ - 5-card Heart suit - responder (i.e. the original Stayman bidder) then bids the appropriate Game

- 3♠ - 5-card Spade suit- responder (i.e. the original Stayman bidder) then bids the appropriate Game

3NT – No 4-card Major

Examples (as described at bridgewebs.com):

a)♠ AKJ93 ♥ A7 ♦ AJ4 ♣ K82	b)♠ AKJ ♥ AK7 ♦ J84 ♣ KJ83	c)♠ AKJ ♥ AK7 ♦ J84 ♣ KJ83	d)♠ AK63 ♥ AKJ ♦ J84 ♣ KJ8	e)♠ AK6 ♥ AKJ7 ♦ Q84 ♣ K83	← <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">Opener's hand</div>
♠ Q74 ♥ K83 ♦ Q7652 ♣ 94	♠ Q74 ♥ Q83 ♦ Q7652 ♣ 94	♠ Q74 ♥ Q832 ♦ Q7652 ♣ 9	♠ Q74 ♥ Q832 ♦ Q7652 ♣ 9	♠ Q4 ♥ Q832 ♦ J7652 ♣ 9	

f)♠ AK3 ♥ AKJ7 ♦ Q84 ♣ K83	g)♠ AKJ93 ♥ A7 ♦ AJ4 ♣ K82	h)♠ AK3 ♥ AKJ ♦ J84 ♣ KJ83	← <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">Opener's hand</div>
♠ Q742 ♥ Q832 ♦ J765 ♣ 9	♠ Q7 ♥ K832 ♦ Q7652 ♣ 94	♠ Q7642 ♥ Q83 ♦ Q765 ♣ 9	

- a) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♠ - 4♣. Responder would prefer a 5-3 major game on account of the fragile club suit, so bids 3♣. 3♠ from opener shows a five-card spade suit.
- b) 2NT - 3♣ - 3NT - pass. As (a), but 3NT from opener denies a four-card or a five-card major.
- c) 2NT - 3♣ - 3NT - pass. Responder would prefer to play in hearts if opener can support - 3NT from opener shows he can't.
- d) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ - 3♠ - 3NT - pass. Responder would prefer to play in hearts so bids 3♣. Opener shows at least one four-card major. South denies four spades (and hence shows four hearts), but North can't support.
- e) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ - 3♠ - 4♥ - pass. Responder would prefer to play in hearts so bids 3♣. Opener shows at least one four-card major. South denies four spades (and hence shows four hearts), but now North can support hearts.
- f) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♦ - 4♣ - 4♥ - pass. 4♣ from responder shows both majors; North supports hearts.
- g) 2NT - 3♣ - 3♠ - 4♠ - pass. Responder would like to find a 4-4 heart fit, but when opener shows the five card spade suit, he could bid either 4♠ or 3NT. Despite being only a doubleton spade, the poor club suit would probably persuade me to bid 4♠, hoping for a possible club ruff before defenders can draw trumps.
- h) 2NT - 3♥ - 3♠ - 3NT - 4♠ - pass. **Not 5-card Stayman** - an ordinary transfer sequence when **responder** has the 5-card major.

Conclusions

Puppet Stayman is a handy bidding convention when you have a tendency to open NT with a 5-card Major. It helps to avoid playing in NT Game contracts when you have at least an 8-card Major suit fit where usually you will get a better score with the Major suit as trumps.

Puppet Stayman method always results in the stronger hand being the declarer. This situation improves the trick making capacity of the declarer by a small margin.

The convention requires good partnership understanding.

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