



THE BIDDING TOOLKIT

Puppet Stayman

Puppet Stayman is a specialized version of regular Stayman that is popularly used in response to a 2NT opening bid.

Beginning an auction with 2NT has pluses and minuses. In the plus column, opener gets to convey her strength (for the purposes of this column, we'll define 2NT as showing 20 to 21 high-card points) and relative shape, which is, of course, balanced. On the minus side, 2NT is unwieldy because it takes up a lot of bidding space. Also, many of the hands that are candidates for 2NT openings will contain a five-card major. If you open 2NT on a hand that has five hearts or five spades, wouldn't it be easy to miss a 5-3 major-suit fit? This is why many pairs use puppet Stayman, a bidding tool designed to diagnose such a fit.

Here's how it works: after a 2NT opening (the opponents are silent), a 3♣ response promises at least game-going values and asks opener if she has a four- or five-card major. With five hearts, opener

rebids 3♥. With five spades, she rebids 3♠. If opener has four hearts or four spades (or both), she rebids 3♦. With no four- or five-card major-suit holding, opener rebids 3NT.

The 3♣ response is Alertable (on the convention card, the "Puppet Stayman" box is in **RED**). If the opponents ask about its meaning, explain that 3♣ asks opener if she holds a four- or five-card major. The responses are also Alertable.

After a 3♦ response

When opener rebids 3♦, saying that she has at least one four-card major, responder still isn't sure which major opener holds — or if opener has both majors. If responder has only one four-card major, he tells opener about it by bidding the *other* major at the three level. So with four hearts, responder rebids 3♠; with four spades, responder rebids 3♥. This seems backward. Why do this? If opener has a fit for responder's major, it allows her to bid it at the four level, ensuring that the strong hand declares. For example:

Opener	Responder
2NT	3♣ ⁽¹⁾
3♦ ⁽²⁾	3♠ ⁽³⁾
4♥ ⁽⁴⁾	Pass

- (1) Puppet Stayman: do you have a four- or five-card major?
- (2) I have at least one four-card major.
- (3) I have four hearts.
- (4) Me too. Let's play 4♥ instead of 3NT.

Notice that the strong hand bid hearts first and will declare the

contract.

What if opener's major doesn't fit responder's? Opener rebids 3NT.

Finally, what if responder has both four-card majors? Responder rebids 4♦ over 3♦ to command opener to choose.

Opener	Responder
2NT	3♣ ⁽¹⁾
3♦ ⁽²⁾	4♦ ⁽³⁾
4♠ ⁽⁴⁾	Pass

- (1) Puppet Stayman: do you have a four- or five-card major?
- (2) I have at least one four-card major.
- (3) I have four hearts and four spades. Choose a major-suit game.
- (4) I have four spades.

After a 3♥ or 3♠ response

When opener shows a five-card major, responder can usually place the contract (unless he has slam ambitions). With a three-card or longer fit for opener's major, responder will usually bid four of that major to end the auction. If responder doesn't have a fit for that major, he rebids 3NT.

There is a catch, however. As responder, you have to get into the habit of asking about opener's major-suit holdings even when you have only three cards in hearts or spades — remember that opener might have five. For example:

♠Q 6 4 ♥8 7 ♦A 9 4 2 ♣Q 5 3 2.

If partner opens 2NT it seems automatic to bid 3NT, but playing puppet Stayman you should bid 3♣ first. If opener shows a five-card spade suit (3♠), you'll happily bid 4♠. If not, you'll sign off in 3NT.

After a 3NT response

3NT will frequently end the auction. Responder will only continue if he has unusual length in the majors. With hands that contain a 6-4 pattern in the majors, for example, responder may start with 3♣ to find out if opener has a major-suit fit. When opener says no, responder may then transfer into the six-card major at the four level. This one is easy to forget, so be sure to discuss it! □

Did you know?

Playing puppet Stayman, you can still play Jacoby and Texas transfers over a 2NT opening. The treatments are compatible.