

## Understanding Stayman and Transfers

Stayman and transfers are the most universally used conventions of all, but their subtleties are still not fully appreciated by many players. This article attempts to correct that.

### Stayman

Over partner's 1NT opening the responder bids 2♣, asking partner to bid his *lowest* four-card major suit. Note that the responder's 2♣ bid says nothing about his club holding – he may or may not hold length in clubs. This is why such a bid is known as a convention (i.e. it is an entirely artificial, *forcing* bid). If the opener does not have four cards or more in either major suit, he simply rebids 2♦. Once again this 2♦ bid is artificial (but not forcing, in the event that the responder has a diamond suit – see **Example 2** below). If the opener has four cards in one of the majors he rebids that suit. If he holds 4-4 shape in both majors, he rebids 2♥. *It follows therefore that a 2♥ rebid does not deny a four-card spade holding, whereas a 2♠ rebid does deny four hearts.*

Stayman can also be used when partner opens (or rebids) a strong 2NT. This time it is a 3♣ response that asks partner to show either four-card major. The 3♦ rebid denies either, 3♥ promises hearts but denies spades and 3♠ promises spades but denies hearts. It is the 3NT rebid that promises both four-card majors and partner now bids one-suit below the suit he wants partner to rebid if he wants to play in a major rather than 3NT (i.e. responder bids 4♦ over 3NT if he wants to play in hearts and 4♥ over 3NT if he wants to play in spades). This ensures that the stronger hand always plays the final contract, rather than having the strength exposed in the dummy.

Here are some hands that are suitable for a Stayman 2♣ response to an opening 1NT:

#### Example 1

♠ A Q 6 4	This is the classic Stayman hand. After partner opens with 1NT, the responder knows that the partnership should be contracting to make game, but he cannot be sure whether the best game is 3NT, 4♥ or 4♠. Therefore he bids 2♣, planning to rebid 3NT if partner responds 2♦, 4♥ if partner responds 2♥ and 4♠ if partner responds 2♠.
♥ K J 6 5	
♦ K 3	
♣ J 10 4	

#### Example 2

♠ 8 7 6 3      This hand is the complete reverse of **Example 1**, liable to be a  
 ♥ 9 6 4 3      nightmare for partner if he is left to play in 1NT. Responder can  
 ♦ 10 5 3 2      make a rescue attempt by bidding 2♣, planning to pass whatever  
 ♣ 7               partner responds. Although partner is likely to have a torrid time in  
                      whatever contract he plays, he is likely to make extra tricks by ruffing  
                      clubs. He will certainly do no worse by playing in a suit contract, even  
                      though he has to make one more trick.

### Example 3

♠ K 7 5 4      Similar to **Example 2**, in that a 1NT contract has a strong chance of  
 ♥ K 9 8 6 3      being uncomfortable, due to the weakness of the minor suits. You  
 ♦ 7 5             would normally make a ‘weak take-out’ of 2♥ with your five-card  
 ♣ J 9             heart suit, but it is possible that partner holds a four-card spade suit, in  
                      which case a 2♠ contract could well be superior to 2♥, especially if  
                      partner has only a doubleton heart. Therefore you respond with 2♣,  
                      planning to pass a 2♥ or 2♠ response or rebid 2♥ over a 2♦  
                      response. Partner will now know that you have a weak hand with  
                      precisely five hearts and four spades (otherwise there would be no  
                      point in going through a Stayman sequence, rather than bidding a  
                      simple 2♥ over 1NT). Holding a good three-card spade suit and a  
                      small doubleton in hearts, he will correct to 2♠ (see **Example 6**.)

### Example 4

♠ A Q J 4      A hand strong enough to bid game over a 1NT opening, but the  
 ♥ 9               responder would have serious reservations about the heart suit.  
 ♦ K 8 6 3      Thus a Stayman 2♣ is appropriate, with the intention of rebidding  
 ♣ A 7 6 5      3NT over 2♦, 3NT over 2♥ (with a lot more confidence) and 4♠  
                      over 2♠. Note that if partner bids 2♥ over 2C, he can confidently  
                      convert the 3NT rebid to 4♠, knowing that the responder has a four-  
                      card spade suit, whereas a 2♠ response to 2♣ automatically denies a  
                      four-card heart suit.

### Example 5

♠ K J 9 4      This hand is an extreme illustration of the value of Stayman.  
 ♥ 8               Over a 1NT opening you would respond 2♣ in the usual way,  
 ♦ 7 4             planning to raise a 2♠ rebid to 4♠ since your shape is good

♣ A Q 10 7 6 4

compensation for your slight lack of high-card strength. Over a 2♦ rebid you will bid 3♣, showing at least six clubs and a four-card major. Partner will now know that you do not have quite enough strength to bid game and a hand pattern that is not suitable to play in no-trumps. However he may convert to 3NT with a maximum and *a good stopper in all four suits* (e.g. something on the lines of A X X; K J X; Q J X X; K X X). Assuming the clubs are no worse than 3-1, 3NT is guaranteed on any lead. Over a 2♥ rebid to 2♣, you will again rebid 3♣, showing the same hand but with the added advantage that partner now knows that you have a four-card spade suit. He may elect to correct to either 3♠ (if he is minimum) or 4♠ (if he is maximum) if he also holds four spades.

### Example 6

♠ K 10 8 7 4

♥ K 9 6 4 2

♦ 8

♣ 7 4

Many players would elect to transfer into either hearts or spades on this hand, but to which suit? The problem can be avoided by bidding a Stayman 2♣ rather than a transfer. If partner responds with the likely 2♦ then 2♥ is the correct rebid, expecting partner to correct to 2♠ if he has three spades and two hearts. *In this way you cannot miss the guaranteed 5-3 major suit fit.* Only with a much stronger hand should you consider transferring into spades and then rebidding 3♥, which should be treated as a game-forcing sequence promising 5-5 or better in the majors.

There are two further points to be made about Stayman. Firstly, you cannot now bid 2♣ as a natural weak take-out of your partner's 1NT opening. Secondly, before you bid a Stayman 2♣, be sure that you can cope with whatever partner responds. It could be an even worse disaster to bid Stayman on a hand with the same shape as **Example 4** if it contained similar high-card strength as **Example 2**. If you think that partner is likely to rebid anything other than 2♥ over a Stayman 2♣, I recommend that you check the bottom of your garden for fairies!

## Transfers

When used in conjunction with Stayman, Transfers over an opening 1NT (or 2NT) is perhaps the single most valuable convention your partnership can employ, particularly if you are playing a weak no-trump. A transfer shows a five-card suit, but allows the partner with the stronger holding to play the hand when the transfer is the equivalent of a weak take-out, or alerts partner to the specific shape of your hand as an alternative to the 3NT contract.

### Example 7

- ♠ A 4      To initiate the transfer sequence in response to partner's weak  
♥ A Q 9 7 6 no-trump opening, bid one suit below your five-card suit (i.e. 2♦).  
♦ K J 5      Once partner completes the transfer by bidding 2♥, you will jump to  
♣ A Q 4      4NT, inviting partner to bid 6NT or the possible alternative of 6♥ if  
partner's shape has weaknesses. Even if your partner has a minimum  
for his opening, he must have good chances in either contract, because  
the shape of your hand adds to your high-card strength.

### Example 8

- ♠ K 7      You know that you have the values to play in 3NT after partner opens  
♥ Q J 9 8 4 with 1NT, but 4♥ is likely to prove a better contract if partner has a  
♦ K J 5      three-card heart suit. Thus you initiate the transfer by responding 2♦  
♣ K 8 6      over 1NT. After partner's forced response of 2♥ you now rebid 3NT  
and leave the decision to partner as to whether you should be playing  
in 3NT or 4♥.

### Example 9

- ♠ J 10 8 7 5      You respond to partner's opening 1NT with the transfer bid of 2♥.  
♥ 10 4      Naturally you pass over partner's forced 2♠ rebid, showing the  
♦ 9 7 6      equivalent of a weak take-out in spades.  
♣ 8 3 2

### Example 10

- ♠ K J 10 6 4      Over partner's opening 1NT you respond with the transfer bid of 2♥.  
♥ Q 6      When partner completes the transfer you invite partner to bid game  
♦ A J 7      either in no-trumps or in spades by bidding 2NT. This shows 11-12  
♣ 10 9 5      HCP with precisely five spades. With a maximum partner raises to  
3NT or 4♠ if he has adequate spade support. With a minimum he  
passes or rebids 3♠, which is to play. Note that you do not invite the  
game via 3♠ over 2♠. *This promises a six-card spade suit.*

### Example 11

- ♠ K J 10 6 5 4      This time you transfer to spades via 2♥ and when partner  
♥ Q 6      completes the transfer you make the invitational raise of 3♠,  
♦ A J 7      showing 10-11 HCP and at least six spades. With the same  
♣ 10 9      shape and 12 HCP you should raise straight to game.

### Example 12

♠ K J 9 8 7 5  
♥ 9  
♦ A K J  
♣ Q 7 4

On this hand you should bid 4♠ directly, rather than transfer to spades via 2♥. The reason for this is that by bidding 2♥ you are inviting a lead-directing penalty double, which could well give the opposition the impetus to make a good sacrifice in 5♥ over 4♠. It is much better to bid the spade game immediately on hands like this, since it is unlikely to matter which of you plays the final contract and may well make it difficult or impossible for the opponents to make a nuisance of themselves.

### Example 13

♠ K J 9 7 2  
♥ A Q J 6 4  
♦ Q 4  
♣ 6

It is much better to use a transfer sequence on hands that are 5-5 in the majors, as long as you want to be in game or better. Partner is more than likely not to have a four-card major but is certain to have at least one three-card major for his balanced 1NT opening. You will make the transfer bid of 2♥ over 1NT and will then bid 3♥ over partner's forced 2♠ rebid. Partner will now know that you have at least 5-5 in the majors with a good hand and he will raise to game in his preferred major.

You should use Stayman rather than transfers on a hand where you are not strong enough for game, since otherwise you could be forced to find your fit at the 3-level (see **Example 6**.) You should also use Stayman on hands where you are strong enough for game with 5-4 shape in the majors. If partner rebids 2♦ over your Stayman 2♣, you can now jump to 3 in your five-card major. This allows partner to choose his preferred contract of 3NT or 4 of your major. Since you have also shown four cards in the other major by this sequence, he should have a good idea of what the best contract should be.

If the opponents intervene over the opening no-trump, all bids by the responder are now natural, of course. Any attempt to complete the transfer by the opening bidder should be abandoned if the opposition intervene with a suit of their own over the responder's transfer bid. This is because the opening bidder has already limited his hand with the opening 1NT, whereas the responder is still unlimited. Any decision *must* be passed round to him - and he may well be heaving a huge sigh of relief at having been rescued from conceding a severe penalty!

There are two disadvantages to using transfers. The first is pointed out in the case for bidding 4♠ direct in **Example 10** (i.e. you may be doubled in your bid of a short suit and thereby give the opposition the chance to either sacrifice or pinpoint a better defence.) Secondly, you lose the weak-out of 2♦ over 1NT and you can therefore

only make a weak take-out in the minors at the 3-level. In my opinion the benefits of using transfers easily outweighs the demerits, however.

Transfers can also be used to show partner a five-card or longer minor. They are best used on hands where partner is likely to do better by playing in the minor suit rather than in 1NT (e.g. 3-3-6-1 or 3-3-1-6 shape with anything between 6-10 HCP) rather than for hands where partner is likely to settle for 3NT anyway. In this latter circumstance it is better to bid 3NT directly, since now your hand pattern is still hidden and the opening lead becomes less obvious. My own preference is to use a 2NT response as a transfer to clubs and 3♣ as a transfer to diamonds. This leaves the 2♠ response to a 1NT opening available as an enquiry regarding the strength of partner's hand for use on hands that are not suitable for a Stayman or a transfer sequence.