

Puppet Stayman

Regular Stayman was designed to uncover a 4-4 major fit after a 1NT opening bid, the logic being that those 4-4 fits usually play better than No Trump. Regular Stayman makes no provision for finding out if the No Trump bidder has a *five*-card suit, and for this reason a modified version of the convention was born, known as Puppet Stayman.

The majority of tournament players use Puppet Stayman opposite 2NT openings, and they use regular Stayman opposite 1NT openings. This is fine, but if you are someone who has no qualms about opening 1NT with a 5-card major, you may want to add Puppet to your 1NT repertoire, too ... but don't use 2♣ as Puppet (that would mess up some other useful features of regular Stayman), consider playing *both* versions, namely 2♣ as regular Stayman, 3♣ as Puppet. In what follows, the examples and commentary are based on a 2NT opening bid, but the logic is much the same for a Puppet auction that starts 1NT 3♣.

How Puppet Works

Opener Responder

2NT 3♣
3♥ If Opener has a 5-card major, he just bids it at the 3-level.

2NT 3♣
3♦ If Opener has a 4-card major (one or both), he bids 3♦.

2NT 3♣
3NT If Opener has no 4-card and no 5-card major, he bids 3NT.

Pretty simple so far ... if Opener bids 3NT then there is no major fit, if Opener bids 3♥ or 3♠ then that is our major fit (if, indeed, we have one). And, if Opener bids 3♦, then we *may* have a 4-4 fit. Here is the method for unearthing that 4-4 fit, and, if it seems a bit convoluted, just bear in mind that it is designed to allow Opener (the strong hand) to be Declarer.

Opener Responder

2NT 3♣
3♦ 3♥ If Responder has just one 4-card major he bids the one he does *not* have ... so this sequence shows 4 Spades and denies 4 Hearts ... now Opener either agrees Spades or bids 3NT.

2NT 3♣
3♦ 4♦ If Responder has two 4-card majors, then he bids 4♦, telling Opener to pick major.

2NT 3♣
3♦ 4♣ This sequence can also be used to tell Opener to pick a major, and most partnerships play that 4♣ shows slam interest, whereas 4♦ shows interest only in game.

Examples

Partner opens 2NT, what do you do with these hands?

- ♠ AQ65 Not much of a hand, but enough for game. Of course, we will bid 3♣, and if
♥ 7643 Opener bids 3♦, we'll bid 4♦, telling Partner to pick a major. Needless to say,
♦ 76 if Opener shows a 5-card major, we'll raise to game.
♣ 832
- ♠ AQ65 Again, we use Puppet, which will allow us to unearth a 4-4 (or 5-4) Spade fit or a
♥ 832 5-3 Heart fit.
♦ 76
♣ 7643
- ♠ AQ653 A problem hand! We might have a 5-3 Spade fit or a 5-3 Heart fit, and we have
♥ Q74 no way of looking for both of them. If we use Puppet, then the 5-3 Spade fit is
♦ 76 lost ... if we transfer to Spades then the 5-3 Heart fit is lost. As we cannot have
♣ 764 it both ways, it's best to go with the odds and transfer to Spades ... there's a much
higher probability that Opener has 3 Spades than there is that he has 5 Hearts.
- ♠ AQ653 A similar problem to before, only worse! Here, we must choose between losing
♥ Q743 the 4-4 Heart fit and losing the 5-3 Spade fit. We suggest that you use Puppet
♦ 76 on this one, though the transfer route could also work. However there is a
♣ 74 solution to this 5-4 problem ... see notes below on "The Switch."
- ♠ Q743 This 5-4 hand we *can* handle! No need for Puppet, just transfer to Hearts and then
♥ AQ653 bid 3♠. Nice and simple.
♦ 76
♣ 74
- ♠ QJ43 2NT by Partner, 3♣ by you, 3♦ by Partner. It might seem obvious to bid 4♣ here,
♥ AQJ7 but we would bid 4♦, planning to bid 6 of Opener's major at our next turn. We
♦ K3 would only use 4♣ when we are seeking Opener's opinion ... here we don't care,
♣ T96 we are going to 6 anyway.
- ♠ QJ43 Here, we are a little weaker, and we do need Opener's opinion about slam ...
♥ AJT7 we bid 4♣, and if Partner likes his hand he should feel free to jump to slam ...
♦ K3 if he is iffy he might try 4♦ ... if he really doesn't like his hand, he just bids
♣ T96 4♥ or 4♠.
- ♠ Q643 Nice hand! Playing 20-21 as our 2NT range, we could conceivably be missing
♥ KQ42 2 Aces, or we could be cold for 7! We want to use Roman Key Card on this
♦ KQT9 hand, so, after 2NT 3♣, 3♦, it would be a mistake to bid 4♣, lest Partner leap
♣ 7 to 6♥ or 6♠. No, bid 4♦, get Opener to establish which major is trumps, and then
bid 4NT. This take-charge approach allows us to get to the right spot with ease.

The Switch

We already encountered the problem that occurs when Responder has 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, and fortunately we have a solution for you. What you must do is simply switch the meanings of the 3♥ and 3NT responses. It's a dangerous convention, handle it with great care if you decide to play it. Here is "The Switch" in action:

2NT 3♣

3NT Using the Switch, 3NT shows 5 Hearts, and Responder can either pass, or, if he wants to play it in Hearts, 4♦ is available as a transfer, allowing the strong hand to declare 4♥.

2NT 3♣

3♥ This now shows no 4-card major, no 5-card major, and usually Responder will usually now bid some number of No Trump. But, here we see the benefit of the Switch ... if Responder has 5 Spades and 4 Hearts, he can now bid 3♠, looking for the 5-3 fit.

Yes, there is a definite benefit to be gained from the Switch, and no real downside. Well, on second thoughts, there is a rather serious downside ... it's a very easy treatment to forget! Only play it if you are sure that you and your Partner will not fumble the ball in the heat of battle. This one is definitely for regular partnerships only.