

THINGS MY MOTHER NEVER TAUGHT ME

My Mom taught me to play bridge sometime in the early 1970's. I should say she taught me how to play *a game resembling bridge*, but I didn't know any better then. When a friend asked if I played, I said sure and she got a foursome together. I soon found that my knowledge of bidding was sorely lacking. In my Mom's style of bridge, a 1NT opening bid asked partner to name his best suit and said nothing about opener's point count. The bidding after that was kind of fuzzy. Most of today's most bridge players are aware that a 1NT opening bid shows a balanced hand in a narrow point range – either 15 to 17 or 16 to 18 by partnership agreement. A 1NT opening bid *asks* nothing! It *describes* opener's hand so that responder is often able to place the contract immediately. In standard bidding without conventions, responses of 2D, 2H, 2S, 3NT, 4H, 4S and pass are all signoff bids that place the contract in the spot responder has chosen based on his hand and the description opener painted. A 2NT response asks opener to further describe his strength. With the top of a 1NT bid, opener goes on to 3NT. With the bottom, opener passes. Suit bids on the three-level are *forcing to game*. A 3H response shows five hearts and asks opener to bid 4H with a fit (three-card or better support) and to bid 3NT otherwise. Why doesn't responder simply bid 3NT? Because we prefer to play in a major suit when we have a fit of eight or more cards in the major. The power of the trump suit often lets us make game in a major when 3NT with the same hands would go down.

How would you respond to a 1NT opening holding: ♠K Q 5 ♥Q 10 9 5 ♦K J 5 2 ♣10 2?

My Mom might have bid 2H, but we included two-level responses in the signoff bids listed above. Are you ready to give up on game with your 11 points opposite partner's 1NT opening bid? Together, you surely have the 26 points suggested for game. Bidding 3H is game-forcing but partner will support with only three hearts and you could end up in 4H without an eight card fit when 3NT would be a better contract. On the other hand, bidding 3NT, while reasonable, risks missing the major suit fit we love.

Look at the complete deal below. What will West lead against 3NT and how will N-S fare in that contract?

Dlr: South ♠ K Q 5

Vul: N-S ♥ Q 10 9 5

♦ K J 5 2

♣ 10 2

♠ J 9 3

♥ 4 3

♦ 10 6 4

♣ K J 7 6 4



♠ 10 8 7 6

♥ A 7 2

♦ 9 8 7

♣ A 9 3

♠ A 4 2

♥ K J 8 6

♦ A Q 3

♣ Q 8 5

We like leading a long suit in notrump. Since East hasn't bid to help West know what to lead, West chooses the ♣6, fourth-best in the long club suit. East wins the ♣A, playing third hand high and, being an excellent partner, returns partner's lead to trap South's ♣Q. E-W cash the first five tricks in clubs and still have the ♥A coming. Despite their 27 total points, N-S go down two in 3NT.

N-S have a major suit fit. Would a 4H contract do better? Certainly, it gets off to a better start when E-W win only 2 clubs before North ruffs. What other tricks must be lost in 4H? Only the ♥A! As is often the case, a 4H contract is far superior to 3NT because of the control a trump suit provides. Was my Mom right? Should North have responded 2H instead of 3NT? No, but there is a bid North can make if your partnership uses Stayman, a bidding convention that was created to help us find a 4-4 major suit fit after a 1NT opening bid.

Using Stayman over a 1NT opening bid, responder bids 2C to ask if opener has a four-card major. Your partnership must have agreed in advance to use Stayman to make sure that opener doesn't think responder is bidding clubs naturally. In fact, 2C is an *artificial* bid. Responder could bid 2C with a singleton or even a void in clubs. Holding a four-card major, opener bids that major on the two level. With four cards in both majors, it's best to show hearts first. Here's how the bidding conversation (auction) would go on our hand:

South: 1NT

North: 2C – I know your strength and distribution, but could you have a four-card major partner? I have at least one major.

South: 2H – I have four hearts.

North: 4H – Now I can answer both questions of the auction and am able to place the contract thanks to your excellent description. We have the strength for game and we have a heart fit.

What if opener does not have a major suit? Opener uses an artificial 2D answer to say, Sorry, I don't have a major. Responder then chooses the best bid to continue the auction. Often responder's rebid will be either 2NT or 3NT, depending on whether responder's hand was an invitational 8 or 9 points or a game-going 10 or more points.

In order to use a Stayman 2C response to 1NT, responder should have a hand that is invitational or better – at least 8 points. Responder only uses Stayman with a reason. That means responder must have a major suit and be looking for a fit that cannot be found without Stayman.

North has: ♠KQ5 ♥Q1095 ♦KJ52 ♣102.

After South opened 1NT. North used Stayman and bid 2C to search for a 4-4 heart fit. Remember that **any new suit bid by responder after a notrump opening bid shows a five-card suit** so North needs Stayman to find a heart fit. On the above hand, South bid 2H in reply to Stayman and North was able to place the contract in 4H with an 11-point game-going hand. **A game-going hand usually jumps in response to a 1NT opening bid. When you use Stayman, delay that jump until your second bid.**

What if the 1NT opener had answered Stayman with 2S instead of 2H? Based on our suggestion to bid hearts with four cards in both majors, North knows that South does not have four hearts. With no major suit fit, North wants to play in 3NT and that is what North bids next, jumping with a game-going hand. **When opener shows the wrong major, responder usually bids notrump next.**

Opener might not have any major at all. Suppose South had answered Stayman with 2D, the artificial bid used to deny a major suit. Again, North bids 3NT.

Let's switch North's major suits: ♠Q1095 ♥KQ5 ♦KJ52 ♣102.

South still opens 1NT and North still has a game-going hand. This time, North uses Stayman hoping to find a 4-4 spade fit. Suppose opener answers North's 2C bid with 2H. What will North bid next?

Since North has a game-going hand, North should jump the bidding. North bids 3NT. Are you worried that you will miss that 4-4 spade fit you were hoping to find? It's true that South could have four spades and four hearts, but it's not responder's job to introduce spades. Remember, after a notrump opening bid, responder's new suit bids show five cards. North has only four spades. You should not miss a spade fit by rebidding 3NT. Opener heard North use Stayman. **We don't use Stayman without a reason.** Since North didn't raise opener's hearts, North's reason must be possession of the other major – spades. North really did show spades without ever saying the word “spades”. Suppose South has four hearts and four spades? South shouldn't leave the contract in 3NT. South should go to 4S, sure of a fit because North's Stayman bid showed at least one major suit.

Let's look at a new responding hand for North: ♠K 8 7 ♥A 9 7 4 ♦9 3 ♣J 5 4 2.

South still opens 1NT. North has only 8 points, a hand that wants to *invite* game. **Stayman can be used with invitational or stronger responding hands.** North responds 2C, Stayman.

Suppose South rebids 2H, showing a 4-card heart suit? **After using Stayman, an invitational hand rebids without jumping.** North bids 3H to invite South to bid 4H. South will accept the invitation with a hand at the top of the 1NT opening range (with 17 points or with 17 or 18 if you use the 16-18 range for opening 1NT.) South will pass to decline the game invitation with less than 17 points.

Change South's answer to Stayman to 2D, showing no major suit. North invites by bidding 2NT.

Change South's answer to Stayman to 2S, the wrong major. Again, North rebids 2NT with this hand. **When opener denies a major or shows the wrong major, responder usually bids in notrump next.**

Let's look at a hand that can be a problem to bid accurately if your partnership uses no conventions over a 1NT opening bid. North has ♠QJ 10 8 6 ♥9 4 ♦J 3 ♣KJ 7 2.

South opens 1NT. With 8 HCP and a 5-card suit, North's hand totals to 9 points. North wants to invite game and show the five-card spade suit. Finally, North has enough cards in the major to be able to bid spades but the problem is showing the proper strength. In standard bidding, 2S is a signoff bid and South will pass even with 17 points. Jumping to 3S isn't the solution either. Jump responses to a 1NT opening bid force to game. Stayman to the rescue! Even though North doesn't need to find four spades in South's hand to have a spade fit, North bids 2C. If South answers 2D or 2H, North now bids 2S. We agreed that responder needed an invitational hand or better to use Stayman, so 2S can't be signoff now. We also agreed that responder to a notrump opening bid needs five-card length to bid a new suit. Spades is a new suit in this auction so North is showing five spades. South treats the 2S bid as invitational. Opener can decline the invitation by passing and can accept the invitation by bidding game – either 3NT or 4S depending on South's spade support.

Over 1NT, responder uses Stayman with 8 or more points. There is one exception to this strength requirement on Stayman. With exactly the right distribution responder may use Stayman holding a very weak hand. Suppose North holds: ♠J 6 3 ♥9 8 5 4 ♦10 9 8 4 3 ♣4.

While we don't usually use Stayman with a weak hand, we make an exception when responder can pass any answer opener might give and still end up playing in a trump suit of at least seven card length. Is that the case with the North hand shown? If North bids 2C and opener denies a major with a 2D answer, North is sure the partnership has at least seven diamonds – five from North and at least two from opener's balanced hand. If instead, South answers 2H, a fit is found and North has improved the contract by using Stayman. If South answers 2S, the pair again is in a

seven-card trump suit. A 4-3 trump fit plays well when the hand with only three trumps also has a short suit so it's not a disaster to end up in a 4-3 fit.

The Stayman convention can also be used over a 2NT opening bid. We suggest opening 2NT with a balanced 20-21 point hand. In response to a 2NT opening bid, use 3C as Stayman. **Because the bidding is already at the three level, responder must have enough strength for game to use Stayman over 2NT.**

South opens 2NT and North has ♠6 3 ♥K 10 8 5 ♦Q 7 6 3 2 ♣7 4. Does North have enough for game opposite 20-21 points? Yes, with 5 HCP and a 5-card suit. North would like to explore for a 4-4 heart fit and bids 3C as Stayman. If opener bids 3H, North will raise to 4H. Over a 3S or 3D reply from opener, North will bid 3NT (when opener doesn't show your major in reply to Stayman, it's usually best to bid notrump.)

We'll conclude with one more usage of Stayman.

South	North
2C	2D
2NT	3C

Since N-S use the modern weak two preempts, they open all strong hands of 22 or more points with an artificial 2C bid. A 2D response passes little information but leaves as much room as possible for the strong opener to describe. South's 2NT rebid shows a balanced 22-24, a hand that is too strong to open with the modern 20-21 point 2NT. North's 3C bid is Stayman, looking for a 4-4 major suit fit. North is committing to game and could have as little as a king to do so.

Stayman is a very important convention because major suit fits are so important to find. If I could choose only a handful of conventions to use, Stayman would be on my list. Talk about using Stayman with your favorite partners. No convention can be used without prior partnership agreement.

By the way, if you're wondering about my Mom, I shared what I'd learned about bidding with her and she updated her bidding and even added Stayman. Mom enjoyed many happy years of bridge and made a lot of new bridge-playing friends before she passed away. Maybe she's still playing....