

Puppet Stayman

(Friday mini-lesson – 20 March 2020)

Puppet Stayman is a form of Stayman that asks the NT bidder whether they have a **4- or a 5-card major**, as opposed to simple Stayman which asks about 4-card majors only.

Puppet Stayman is most useful for strong 2NT bids or rebids. For example, many people open 2NT with balanced 20-21 hcp hands, and open 2♣, rebidding 2NT, with 22-24 hcp. [You may play slightly different ranges, e.g., 20-22 for 2NT and 23-24 for 2♣-2NT sequence, or similar.] **It is strongly recommended that you open these strong balanced hands in one of these ways even with a 5-card major.** Almost all expert pairs I know will do so.

However, opening 1NT with a 5-card major is a matter of partnership style and agreement. Many people (like myself) do not for various reasons. Hence, Puppet Stayman is not generally used over 1NT openings since it is not needed. But it can be if you and your partner *do* open 1NT with 5-card majors.

Here is how Puppet Stayman works. If you are responder and your partner shows a strong balanced hand, as above, and you have enough points to know that the partnership has a combined count of 25 or more, and you have **3 or 4 cards in one or both major suits**, bid 3♣ (Puppet Stayman). This bid and all subsequent bids up to and including 3NT by you and your partner are alertable.

Opening NT bidder's responses to 3♣ (Puppet Stayman):

1. With a 5-card major, bid that suit (3♥ or 3♠)
2. With one or both 4-card majors, bid 3♦
3. With no 4- or 5-card major, bid 3NT

As responder, with case #1 (partner shows 5-card major), go to game if that matches your 3- or 4-card suit, else bid 3NT. And with case #3 (partner has no major, 4 or 5 cards long), simply pass 3NT.

The tricky part of the convention comes in case #2, the situation where partner bids 3♦ (showing a 4-card major).

Obviously, if you used Puppet Stayman simply on the basis of having a 3-card major and were looking to see whether partner had 5 in the same suit, bid 3NT, since partner's 3♦ has denied that.

The non-intuitive case, and reason it is called Puppet Stayman, is when you have a 4-card major and in response to 3♦ rebid by the NT opener, **you must bid the major you do not have!**

Why would you do such a thing? The reason is so that the *strong hand gets to be declarer* – usually worth a trick or two in the play of the hand.

After you bid the major you do *not* have, partner (an intelligent person!) should be able to figure out which major you *do* have! Now, if that matched their major, they bid game in that suit or they simply say “Sorry, we don’t have a fit,” and bid 3NT.

So, what do you do as responder if you have *two* 4-card majors? Obviously, you can’t now bid the major you do not have after opener rebids 3♦. The answer is **bid 4♦ which tells partner you have both majors**. Since they’ve promised at least one 4-card major with their bid, they can now just bid 4 of that major.

Let’s see how all the above works with some sample hands.

Examples (* asterisks below indicate alertable bids)

Opener	Responder	Bidding
A. ♠ K 5 3 ♥ K Q J 6 3 ♦ A Q ♣ A J 5	♠ A 7 6 2 ♥ T 9 4 ♦ 9 7 4 3 ♣ Q 4	2NT - 3♣* 3♥* - 4♥
B. ♠ K 5 3 ♥ K Q J 6 ♦ A Q 3 ♣ A J 5	♠ A 7 ♥ T 9 4 3 ♦ 9 7 5 2 ♣ Q 4 2	2NT - 3♣* 3♦* - 3♠* [Note!!] 4♥
C. ♠ K 5 3 ♥ K Q J 6 ♦ A Q 3 ♣ A K J	♠ A J 7 2 ♥ T 9 ♦ 9 7 4 3 ♣ 8 7 4	2♣* - 2♦* 2NT - 3♣* 3♦* - 3♥* [Note!!] 3NT
D. ♠ K 8 5 3 ♥ K Q J ♦ A Q 3 ♣ A K J	♠ A J 7 2 ♥ T 9 8 4 ♦ 9 7 4 ♣ 8 4	2♣* - 2♦* 2NT - 3♣* 3♦* - 4♦* [Note!!] 4♠
E. ♠ K 5 3 ♥ K Q J ♦ A Q 6 3 ♣ A J 5	♠ A 7 6 2 ♥ T 9 4 ♦ 9 7 5 2 ♣ Q 4	2NT - 3♣* 3NT

If you and your partner open 1NT with a 5-card major and would like to use Puppet Stayman, then the bids are all the same as above except for being *one level lower*.