

Little Lies with Stayman  
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I am going to be discussing a narrowly defined problem. Is it OK to lie a little about HCP to bid Stayman when you have both major suits? Or to put it another way, could you use short-suit dummy points to help determine whether you bid Stayman when you have both majors?

What do you do with the hands below after partner opens with 1NT?

I	S: K965	II	S: QJ43
	H: Q843		H: J987
	D: 76		D: 9
	C: Q84		C: K732

If you elect to bid Stayman, then what?

Partner	You
1NT	2C
2S	[pass, invite or (with II) bid game?]
1NT	2C
2D	[2NT or 2H (garbage Stayman)?]

For a long time I have used Stayman with 4-4 in the majors whenever I am strong enough (with dummy points) so that with a major suit fit, I can invite game. With hand I, I would invite with 3S, with II, I would bid 4S. (Of course, I started this practice with 16-18 pt. 1NT.) With no fit, I would bid 2NT and take my chances that being one point light would not hurt. In the example above, I added Garbage Stayman as an alternative to bidding 2NT. I have never used it, and I didn't know what it was until recently. There is an explanation on the web from:

<http://www.miamibridge.net/183137/garbagestayman.pdf>

In brief, you bid 2C over Partner's 1NT with 0-7 HCP and 4-4 or better in the majors. If you find a fit you normally pass at the two level. If your partner bids 2D, you bid 2H, conventionally forcing him to choose a major suit. With hands like I and II, this would result in your playing at the two level with a 4-3 fit. When they claim that computer analysis shows that **“if you always were to remove 1NT, you would be correct 57% of the time,”** they are **NOT** claiming that playing in a 4-3 fit in a major will prove statistically better than playing in NT. The 57% includes all the cases where you do find an 8-card fit and do better than 1NT. If you do very well when you find a good fit, you can afford to lose a lot of hands with 4-3 fits. One problem is that when you bid 2H and it is alerted as garbage Stayman, your opponents will know that you are weak and that it is more likely than not that you are playing a 4-3 fit. This invites discriminating doubles.

My practice was recently criticized (with respect to hand I) by a player who is better than I am. Since the problem has a narrow focus, I thought a test with as few as 300 hands might indicate the basic tendencies. After completing this test, I looked at hands of type II.

I used the computer program that I own—Bridge Baron (BB). I generated slightly more than 300 deals in each of the categories: 4432 and 4414. BB is not the best choice of program. Its numbered sequence is labeled “numbered random deals,” so they may be fairly random. In addition, the starting point of a generated set jumps around in an apparently random way. I used sets only ten hands long, so achieved an even more random set of examples.

If opponents competed, I generally discarded the hand. With what I considered a substandard hand, (hands with unprotected honors, and hands made up solely of queens and jacks) I would not

invite to game. I did not interfere with BB's rebids, except that I would not allow BB to go to game with 15 HCP. I also rejected a very few of BB's 1NT openers with what I considered less than 15 points (e.g. 12 HCP plus a QJ doubleton.)

I wanted to avoid a double dummy defense, but I certainly failed. I did play both hands on defense. I tried to find the best REASONABLE defense, but there is no doubt some double-dummy aspects crept in. I am obviously much better at finding the best "reasonable" defense when I know what is in my partner's hand. What this means is that under more normal conditions, declarer would make more contracts than I did in this data set.

### **The Argument**

The basic reason to use Stayman is the knowledge that in a large majority of cases, hands with a 4-4 major suit fit will play at least one trick better than the same hands played in NT.

So, what is the probability of finding a major suit fit?

[bridge.rfrick.info/weakstayman.htm](http://bridge.rfrick.info/weakstayman.htm)

**When you are 4-4 in the majors and your partner opens 1NT, you have (about) a 52% chance of finding your partner with a 4-card major.**

**How do I know this? I had the computer deal random hands given that you had a 4-4-3-2 distribution and 0 HCP. I found 20,000 hands where your partner had 15-17 HCP and a balanced (4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, 5m-3-3-2) distribution. Partner had a 4-card major 52% of the time. (That's enough hands to be accurate to about .7 of a percentage point.)**

What is the probability that a four-four major suit will outperform 1NT by at least one trick?

In my data, with a 4-4-3-2 hand, a four-four major fit outperformed 1NT in 84% of the hands. If responder has 4-4-1-4

distribution, the 4-4 major fit outperformed 1NT in 94.5 % of the hands. If a Stayman bidder can take full advantage of this fact, then he/she will have a tremendous edge on 1NT bidders. In a pairs game, the obvious way to take advantage of this is to pass 2H or 2S. If your competition has passed out 1NT, then you have already outscored them at the two level, so why go higher and risk being set?

Much to my surprise, the risk of going higher was substantial. In the set of 4-4-3-2 hands, an invitational raise to the three level, followed by BB's automatic raise to 4 with 16-17 HCP, arrives at a makeable game contract in about 13% of the hands in the set. However, you are set more than twice as often (35%), either because 3 is already too high or you go off when you bid 4,

If the hand is passed out at 2H or 2S, scoring the hands as if you were in a pairs game head-to-head against a pair (or pairs) that pass out 1NT, you would have respectively, a 84% and a 94.5% game over the expected 52% of the hands where you have a fit. If your opponents compete after you pass two of the major, you know that you have 22-24 HCP, and you know that partner has at least two of their trumps, so you can decide whether to double or compete at the three level.

Now let's look at the hands with no fit. As I said above, I would bid 2NT after 1NT-2C-2D\_\_. The problem is not that 2NT is dangerous. It isn't, although it does go off more often than 1NT. The problem is that partner, who doesn't know that you have lied about your HCP, may raise to game. (Of course, some of these games make.)

Starting with the 4-4-3-2 hands, I will again score the hands like a pairs game against opponents who pass 1NT. In this schema the only way you can beat the opponents on a hand is to bid and make 3NT. This happens in about 16% of the hands. 2NT bid and made is a tie, and if you go off when 1NT makes, you obviously lose. In my data, scoring 1 pt for wins, 1/2 for ties, the Stayman bidder would have a 43.75% game. Forgetting about the 52-48% proportion, and treating the two sets as 50-50, then you add 43.75

to 84 and average the two, you find that the Stayman bidder has a 63.9% game.

### **4-4-1-4 Hands**

For these hands, where the singleton might make NT more dangerous, I decided to compare both Garbage Stayman and regular Stayman against 1NT passed out..

To repeat: over the half of the hands that have a fit, if your opponent passes 1NT, you have a 94.5 % game.

If you bid 2NT after 2D you do not do well, but you still have a 32.5% game. Combining the two and averaging you have a 63.5% game for the whole set.

Garbage Stayman would have identical scores for the hands with major suit fits. It does slightly worse after 2D, with a 30% game. The difference between regular Stayman and garbage Stayman here is probably within the margin of error, but there is certainly no indication that you need to resort to garbage Stayman.

Another complication arises from the fact that not everyone would be comfortable passing 1NT with hand II (4-4-1-4). With ten dummy points in support of a major suit, they might also use Stayman, then (with a fit) either bid game or invite game. Even a garbage Stayman bidder does not forfeit his right to revalue his hand after he finds a fit. Of course in the real world not everyone plays 15-17 NT. Pairs who play precision would certainly get to game with 16-17 HCP. I am not sure what precision players would bid when opener has 15 HCP. In the Kaplan-Sheinwold system that I used to play (with weak NT) the bidding would go one of a minor -- one of a major – 2 of the major – 4 of the major.

It turns out that in this data set jumping to game is a bad idea. 4 of a major makes only 43% of the time. This is due to the fact that when opener has 15 HCP, game makes only about 30% of the time. When he has 16 or 17, game makes 53.1% of the time. If you are going to compete with the aggressive bidders, then, you

should invite game with 3 of the major, rather than jumping to four.

If you do invite with 4-4-1-4 hands, you still beat the people who pass 1NT, but by a smaller margin. You would beat 1NT 73.6% of the time in the hands with a major suit fit. Combined with the 32.5 form the NT hands, you have 53% game against those who pass 1NT.

I have so far not discussed team games. In IMP scoring, you generally do not try to improve on a part score. You would go beyond 1NT only if you thought there was a good chance for game. With the 4432 hands in this data set, there is such a small probability of game that you should just pass 1NT.

With 4-4-1-4 hands there is a reasonable probability of making game. I refuse to actually count the IMPs for the whole set, but I did try to estimate them. I assume that a vulnerable game is worth an additional 10 IMP, while a nonvulnerable game is worth 6. If you bid game and go off, while your opponents make a contract of 1 or 2NT, you will lose 5-6 points vulnerable and 4-5 nonvulnerable.

Using -5.5 and -4.5 as average loss, it becomes worthwhile to try for a vulnerable game with a probability of success of 36%, and for a nonvulnerable game with a probability of 43%. Those two choices do not account for all the hands, but I would estimate that you should to try for a vulnerable game with a 4-4-1-4 hand. My best guess is that it is a toss-up whether to try for a nonvulnerable game. For these hands it might be appropriate to ask whether 2 me's on defense, knowing each other's hand, have an unfair advantage over one me as declarer. Unless you are playing against experts I would suggest you bid Stayman and invite to game with a fit. I am reminded of a set of "Bridge Secrets" that was handed out in lectures at one of the nationals . They included:

"Overbid and play for misdefense."

"Look for reasons to bid rather than excuses to pass."

"Bid with a fit. Pass with no fit. KO's are lost, not won."

Before closing, I should presumably say something about the significance of the data. That is difficult. The evidence that it pays to bid Stayman with these hands seems overwhelming, but I cannot give an actual figure on the statistical significance. When one turns to decisions about whether to bid game, the play gets more complex and the number of relevant hands gets smaller. The margin of error is therefore greater. I was very surprised at the number of hands with 25 or 26 points (including dummy points) that did not make ten tricks in a suit contract. This certainly shakes my confidence in the textbooks that say the one can statistically expect a reasonable play for game with 25 points.

I was interested enough that after I prepared this talk, I ran another 100 hands with:

NT opener with 16 HCP, a doubleton, and a 4 card Major  
Responder with 7 HCP, 4-4-3-2 with both majors  
Counting short-suit points in both hands, these hands come to 25 points. Of the 100 hands, 24 made 10 tricks, 6 would make ten about half the time (finding the queen or not having the opponents make a killing lead), and two would make 10 tricks if I knew what was in the opponents hands. Bidding game with these hands would clearly not be advisable.