

Learning Points – Bidding NT with a 5 Card Major

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Declarer Play LEVEL: Intermediate

You are on a sound team at a strong field at the Ft. Wayne Regional Flight 2 of the Compact Knockouts. Your partner is Tony Habash – a strong reliable partner. Our partnership though brief is sound and effective.

North Deals None Vul IMPs	♠ AKxxx	← Tony
	♥ Kx	
	♦ Axx	
	♣ AQ6	

The Bidding

Partner and I frequently open 1NT or 2NT with sufficient strength and a 5 Major 332 pattern. Here Tony chose to open 2N with a balanced 20-point 5♠332. What should South do?

♠ Jxxx	N	♠ x
♥ Jx	W 17 E	♥ Qxxx
♦ KQJxx	S	♦ 10xxx
♣ xx		♣ K10xx

The Problem

Opening NT with 15-17 or 20-21 HCP hands and a 5 card major in a 5332 pattern has grown in popularity, especially in the 2/1 Game Force approach. On the plus side, you avoid difficult rebids, and the risk of not bidding game. Opponents might be surprised you hold a 5 card major when they don't expect it.

Steve →	♠ Q10x
	♥ A10xxx
	♦ x
	♣ Jxxx

On the negative side if opponents know you have a 5332 hand with a 5 card major (as revealed by using Puppet Stayman) the big hand is very easy to count on defense. Most play Puppet Stayman as game forcing. Responder uses Puppet Stayman without a 4-card major

North	East	South	West
2N	Pass	???	

when holding a game-going hand with a 3 card major and a short suit – a doubleton or shorter. The idea is that ruffing in the short trump hand adds a trick to the side's total, and you might avoid NT when opponents have a suit to run. South's hand seems to qualify for Puppet Stayman, but there's a catch.

We play 3♣ as [Puppet Stayman](http://www.cincybridge.com/Lessons/20090112%20Business%20Redoubles.pdf). (Check out the learning point for more details on this convention: <http://www.cincybridge.com/Lessons/20090112%20Business%20Redoubles.pdf>) We also play transfers. If North has a 5 card major it rates to be ♠ not ♥. If North doesn't have a 5 card major then ♥ or NT rate to be the best strain. The difficulty is that South must commit to a major before knowing enough about North's hand. Choosing Puppet Stayman all but abandons ♥ (unless North miraculously has 4 or 5 of them). Choosing the transfer to ♥ makes finding our ♠ fit extremely difficult. South reasoned that if partner fits ♥ then more South's hand contributes more tricks than if North has 5 ♠. While South's 3-card spade holding and singleton diamond point toward an extra trick in spades, South's hand will add many more tricks in ♥ if we have an 8 card fit. (Yes, South faces the known risk of a forcing defense – having to trump ♦ from the long trump hand).

Since many players use Puppet Stayman in this spot South can too, just to follow the field. South chose to transfer...and West directed a lead. Now North's 3♥ free-bid should indicate a place to play (typically promising 3 card support). South continued on with the hand description. Both North and South thought each other would stop ♦ adequately for 3NT to make.

North	East	South	West
2N	Pass	3♦	Double!
3♥	Pass	3N	Passed Out

The Play

East led a small ♦ as a good partner would. Declarer could not come to 9 tricks given the devilish location of key intermediates in the side suits. Playing in 4♠ along cross ruff lines, Declarer stands to make 10 or 11 tricks. Indeed our opponents bid and made 4♠ in a Precision Auction (They didn't face the Puppet Stayman or Transfer question).

3N down 1 for -50 and their making 4♠ for -420 led to a net score of -470 on the board, losing 10 IMPS.

Post Mortem

This hand shows a possible weakness for Puppet Stayman. One appealing way around the weakness is to agree that any 5332 hand with a 5 card major cannot have 3 cards in the other major! This way the 5-3 major fit for responder's major cannot exist. What do you open with 5=3/32 or 3=5/32? 1 of your Major – the old-fashioned way. What's the old way? Bid one of your major, and if partner responds 1NT Forcing, then you bid your lowest 3 card fragment:

- When partner returns you to 2 of your major, bid 2NT.
- If partner bids their own suit at the 2 level, rebid 2 of your major or 2N on your own.
- If partner bids 2N or a suit at the 3 level, bid 3NT.

The risk here of course is that partner passes you in your 3-card fragment when you have sufficient combined strength for NT or game.

Another idea is to allow responder to transfer if Opener responds 3N to Puppet Stayman showing no 4 or 5 card major. This allows pairs to play in responder's major when right.

There are exotic responses to handle this issue, and the memory load to Puppet Stayman is daunting. Go there if you must – I won't be following.

Learning Pointers

1. Make the best bid to avoid rebid problems later. Just be sure to adjust your approach so that you don't trade your rebid problem for a partnership bidding problem!!
2. Guaranteeing a doubleton in the other major when opening 1N or 2N makes sense as it clarifies responder's decisions immensely. (When you bid the old way, a good partner will know you have 3 cards in the other major).

Keywords: Puppet Stayman, Jacoby Transfer, ruffing in short trump hand adds tricks