

5 card Major Stayman



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Introduction

Should you open 1NT with the right strength if the hand contains a 5-card major? Many players find this a vexed question, with different players at their club giving them different answers.

Some years back the answer would have been an emphatic "No". Today the approach has changed and with good reason. Take a look at the records of the world championships for any of the past ten years and you will find that the vast majority of top players prefer to open 1NT rather than 1♥ or 1♠ when they hold a balanced hand which includes a 5-card major. This has long been the style for the 2NT opening, but is also becoming dominant for a 1NT opening.

You will find the reasons for this new style in Part 1. Clearly players at world level are not going to saddle themselves with methods that are inferior. The most compelling reason to adopt their approach is because they believe it is better than the old standard of preferring a major suit opening to 1NT. If they think that opening 1NT with a 5-card major gives them an edge then we want to have that edge, too.

Once you and partner have adopted this approach, you will want to have the facility after a 1NT opening to be able to play in the best part-score, to invite game but stay low if opener is minimum, to locate the right game and to investigate slam prospects. All of these are included in Parts 2-6. If you are used to playing transfers to the major suits after a 1NT opening, these still apply and are also available even after the reply to the 1NT : 2♣ inquiry when opener has denied a 5-card major. Bidding after a 2NT opening will appear in Part 7.

Part 6 is devoted to slam bidding. To benefit from Part 6 you will need to be familiar with the material in Parts 2 to 5. You will know when the partnership is ready to move on to this area and to broaden your slam-bidding methods.

The early material includes exercises to cement the new methods into your subconscious. If you find your answers are not correct you will want to return to the relevant material and read that section again.

Later we will provide sets of hands for partnership bidding practice. Recommended is to bid them with your regular partner(s), but it is also possible to bid them on your own. If you decide to do that, do six hands at a time, first writing your action as the dealer on all six and then turning to the responding hands and writing down your responses to each of those six. Then return to the dealer's hand and so on. This way you are less likely to be influenced by seeing the two hands together.

After you have bid a set of hands either with a partner or by yourself, see how you would have bid the same hands using your old methods. You will be very pleased at the difference in outcome with your new approach.

For Standard American players

The question you need to answer is whether you wish to stick with your old methods or whether you want to upgrade to the modern approach. If you and your partner(s) are looking to improve your bidding in the no-trump area, then this section is definitely for you.

Why do most of the top players in world championships choose to open 1NT even when holding a 5-card major? In Part 1 you will see the many reasons and if it is good enough for them, it will soon become the norm for regular tournament players. Once you adopt this style, you will want to be able to find out whether the 1NT opener does have five cards in either major. This department provides an easy and effective way to structure your bidding. Responder can ask for a 5-card major and the partnership will have no trouble locating a 5-3 or a 4-4 major suit fit. Even after the reply, if opener's reply is negative, responder can still transfer to a 5-card major.

There is also a section on 5-card major Stayman after 2NT and slam bidding is not neglected, including how to find a minor suit fit for slam after a 1NT or 2NT opening. You will find your no-trump bidding greatly enhanced by adopting the methods here.

Part 1

Why top players open 1NT even when holding a five-card major

Bidding styles change . . . invariably for the better, as players judge the outcome of the decisions they make. Chances are that when you were learning bridge, the dominant approach was to open 1NT only with a balanced hand, one with a hand pattern of 4-3-3-3 or 4-4-3-2, or 5-3-3-2 as long as the 5-card suit was a minor. With a 5-3-3-2 pattern, a 5-card major and the right strength for 1NT, opening the major was advocated because major suit games usually have a greater chance of success than 3NT when there is at least an 8-card trump fit. This did not apply to minor suits since making nine tricks in no-trumps is easier than eleven with a minor suit as trumps when the hands are relatively balanced.

This is especially important for duplicate pairs. If you can make ten tricks in a major suit and score 420/620, you outscore those in 3NT who make 400/600. If an overtrick is available in no-trumps it is usually also available in the suit contract (but exceptions exist). On the other hand, if you can make eleven tricks in a minor suit game you are likely to make ten tricks in no-trumps, with 430/630 outscoring 400/600.

That was the argument in favour of choosing the major suit opening. What has happened since is that players realise they can have their cake and eat it, too. To open 1NT with a 5-card major need not impede your investigation for a major suit game. In addition many benefits flow from choosing 1NT rather than the 1-major opening.

The assumption is that your partnership is using a 1NT opening in the 15-17 point range. If your no-trump range is different, you can simply adjust the examples by switching a king or a queen or a jack from one hand to the other.

The benefits of opening 1NT if 5-3-3-2 with a 5-card major

If no major suit fit exists, what value is there in opening the major? In that case, opening 1NT has significant advantages and virtually no drawback.


1. Opening 1NT can keep the bidding lower.

W West	E East
♠ KQ4	♠ A73
♥ A9732	♥ 64
♦ AK	♦ Q642
♣ J63	♣ 8752

Do you prefer:

West

East

Pass	3 	Pass	3 
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

As indicated by the bidding, East led a low club and in the fullness of time declarer was two down for -200. At the other table it went:



West	North	East	South
---	Pass	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

With no helpful bidding from North-South, West tried a spade lead. Here declarer made ten tricks, +630. Some difference.

This arose in the China vs Japan quarter-final of the 2004 World Open Teams Olympiad:

Dealer West : Both vulnerable

	N North ♠ Q3 ♥ 98 ♦ KJ1054 ♣ K973	
W West ♠ K972 ♥ Q754 ♦ A6 ♣ J102		E East ♠ A654 ♥ 32 ♦ 732 ♣ Q865
	S South ♠ J108 ♥ AKJ106 ♦ Q98 ♣ A4	

At one table South opened 1  after three passes, North bid a forcing 1NT and South rebid 2 . North made an artificial game try and South jumped to 3NT. As the bidding indicated South had 5 hearts, 3+ diamonds and a 3-5-3-2 pattern if the hand was balanced, East hit on the low club lead. The defence scored two clubs, two spades, one heart and one diamond for two down and +200 to East-West.

At the other table South opened 1NT in fourth seat. North raised to 3NT and West led a low spade. East won, returned the suit and West played a third spade. South simply knocked out the

♦ A and had nine tricks for +600. Note that declarer also has an easy time if West leads a heart. The lesson is that the less you tell the opposition the better your chances.

3. If you open with your major and no major fit exists, partner will often respond 1NT. Opening 1NT allows the strong hand to be declarer if you end up in no-trumps.

After 1-major : 1NT, the weaker hand will be the declarer if the contract is no-trumps. There might be no difference, but it can be preferable to have the stronger hand concealed. That makes it harder for the defenders to place the missing high cards. Having the opening lead come into the strong hand can also be beneficial, as the strong hand is likely to have more tenace-like holdings, such as A-Q, K-J-x or K-x, to protect from the lead.

W West	E East
♠ AQJ75	♠ 82
♥ K8	♥ J3
♦ K98	♦ A632
♣ K32	♣ A9754

Do you prefer:

West	East
1♠	1NT
2NT	3NT

Or this:

West	East
1NT	3NT
Pass	

W West	E East
♠ AQJ75	♠ 82
♥ K8	♥ J3
♦ K98	♦ A632
♣ K32	♣ A9754

Do you prefer:

West	East
1♠	1NT
2NT	3NT

Or this:

West	East

1NT

3NT

Pass

Played by East, 3NT may fail quickly on a heart lead. 3NT by West is a far better chance. On a heart lead East has an awkward guess, but West has a heart trick without guesswork.

4. Opening 1NT allows responder to make a transfer bid.

If you open 1♥ or 1♠, partner is expected to pass with a very weak hand. If you open 1NT, partner is permitted, indeed encouraged to bid with a weak hand and a long suit.

W West	E East
♠ AJ743	♠ 6
♥ A9	♥ 1086432
♦ AJ5	♦ Q84
♣ K95	♣ 743

Do you prefer :

West

East

1♠

Pass

Or this:

West

East

1NT

2♦

2♥

Pass

In 1♥, West cannot reach dummy and might make between four and seven tricks. Played by West, 3♣ has more chance of success than 1♥. Even if 3♣ fails the loss is likely to be less than the loss in 1♥.

Even when the partnership has the values for game, opening 1NT can improve your chance for success:

W West	E East
♠ AQ832	♠ K
♥ 96	♥ AK7542
♦ AK2	♦ J103
♣ K72	♣ 954

Played by East 4♥ could suffer three club losers at once and game would be defeated. A diamond lead is helpful, but it would be even more useful if West were declarer.

Played by West 4♥ has excellent chances for an overtrick. On a club lead, a club and a diamond can be discarded on the ♠ A-Q and the result will be eleven tricks on normal breaks. If West receives a diamond lead against 4♥ and dummy wins the trick, it would be possible to make twelve tricks with a bit of luck and normal breaks in the major suits.

This is not being fanciful. Players in the world championships would have benefited from this approach here:

Dealer East : North-South vulnerable

		N North		
		♠ Q		
		♥ AQ976		
		♦ J1086		
		♣ K84		
W West			E East	
♠ 52			♠ J10974	
♥ J104			♥ 82	
♦ AQ52			♦ 73	
♣ A1075			♣ J962	
		S South		
		♠ AK863		
		♥ K53		
		♦ K94		
		♣ Q3		

3NT by North or South is unbeatable, but it would be normal to reach 4♥. A standard natural auction might go:

West	North	East	South
---	---	Pass	1♠
Pass	2♥	Pass	4♥
All Pass			

In the semi-finals of the 2002 McConnell Cup (World Women's Teams), three pairs played 4♥ by North. Two perished on the ♦ 7 lead. A similar fate awaited North in 4♥ in the quarter-finals of the Power Rosenblum (World Open Teams). If South is declarer, 4♥ cannot be beaten.

West	North	East	South
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Pass

Pass

All Pass

2  *

3NT

Pass

Pass

Pass

1NT

2 

4 