

STAYMAN AND TRANSFERS IN RESPONSE TO A 1NT OPENING

When partner opens 1NT, you have a few conventional options at your disposal. The main ones are the 2♣ Stayman enquiry, and transfers to the next suit up. (Some partnerships just play transfers to the Majors (“red suit transfers”), where some partnerships can transfer to the minor suits as well (“4-way transfers”). This basically works like this:

1NT-2♣ = Stayman; asking partner to bid a 4+ card Major if they have one; otherwise reply 2♦*
1NT-2♦/♥/♠/NT = Transfer; asking partner to bid ♥/♠/♣/♦ respectively.

* You may play a version of Promissory Stayman where the 2♦ response is a natural bid, because without 4+ cards in diamonds, hearts or spades, Opener can reply 2NT. This is fine for beginners, but here I am recommending a different method.

The aim of this document is to show you that these two conventions can be used to great effect IF – and only if – your agreements are such that you are able to use both of them harmoniously. On their own, they are conventions worth having in your system, but together, utilised to their full potential, you can show a wide range of hands distinctly.

Let’s start with Stayman. Depending on who taught you, you may have been told that you should have a 4-Card Major before you bid Stayman. You may have been told that your hand should be Invitational or better. You may have been told you should never bid Stayman with a 5+ Card Major. I shall unfairly dub these the “beginner rules” of Stayman – unfair because experienced players can and do incorporate those rules into their system.

There are good reasons you have been told these things, however, if we are to unlock Stayman’s full potential, we need to understand that there are some hands where these things are not true. Understand the rules, so that you understand when you can break them.

The simplest way to understand this is to remember that the 2♣ bid is a *Question* – it simply asks Opener if they have a 4+ card Major. Therefore, it stands to reason that Responder would use this bid whenever the answer to that question is important in helping the partnership figure out what the best contract is. There are a variety of hands where Responder will want to use Stayman. Here is the full list of hands that Responder can have where they might use Stayman:

- A weak hand with at least 5-4 distribution in the Majors, looking to sign off in 2♥ or 2♠
- A hand that wishes to invite Opener to 3NT
- A Game-Invitational hand with a 4-card Major (but not a 5-card Major)
- A Game Forcing hand with at least one 4-card Major
- A hand using Stayman as a “steppingstone” to trigger another convention; e.g. Smolen

Don’t worry about that last one for now. If you get the agreements discussed here incorporated seamlessly into your system, you can pick up these “Not really Stayman” conventions another time. Opener has no idea which of these types of hand Responder has, but Opener doesn’t need to know that yet. In the first instance, Opener has only three possible responses to the 2♣ Stayman bid:

2♦: No; I do NOT have a 4-card Major. I have at most three cards in each of hearts and spades.
2♥: I have four or five hearts. I MAY or may not have four spades; I haven’t had a chance to say yet.
2♠: I have four or five spades, and I definitely do NOT have four or more hearts.

Whatever Opener answers, the point of using Stayman is that this information was helpful to Responder in deciding what to do next. At this point, Opener has defined their hand quite well, whereas Responder could have bid 2♣ with one of a variety of hands (see above). Let's discuss each of them in turn.

A weak hand with at least 5-4 distribution in the Majors, looking to sign off in 2♥ or 2♠

This is one of these hands that breaks the "beginner rules" of Stayman. The hand is not Invitational, AND it has a 5-Card Major, which suggests Responder should have transferred! So why use Stayman here? Well, because the goal is to ensure that the final contract is 2♥ or 2♠ (whichever suits the partnership best). If partner opens 1NT, and you have at least 4 cards in one Major and at least 5 cards in the other one, you almost certainly have an 8-card Major fit. The only time you couldn't is when Opener has 2 cards in your 5-card Major and 3 cards in your 4-card Major; 4-4 in the Minors.

That is extremely unlikely and very unlucky, but 7-card fits are not always bad. With a weak hand, your hand is going to be more useful in a suit contract where it has ruffing value. So, why use Stayman here? Well, first of all, if Opener responds a Major, job done! Just pass. If they say 2♦, simply bid 2 of whichever Major is your 5-carder (if you have at least 5 cards in both Majors, pick the longest one, or the strongest with equal length). Once you have bid this way (1NT-2♣-2♦-2♥ or 1NT-2♣-2♦-2♠), NOW Opener knows your hand is defined as a Weak hand with at least 5 cards in the suit you bid and at least 4 cards in the other one. It can't be anything else – look through the list of hands you would bid 2♣ with if you don't believe me. With what other hand type would you bid 2♥ or 2♠ in response to Opener's 2♦ bid? Spoiler alert: You wouldn't. Therefore Opener knows what you've got, and consequently knows they'd better Pass. On rare occasions, they MAY convert to the other Major, but that is unlikely, and entirely based on their judgement.

Note what this does for your Transfers! If you as Responder transfer Opener into a Major, and then bid the other one yourself, this MUST be at least Invitational. It is showing at least 5-4 distribution, but can't be weak, because you would've used Stayman. Bids have clearer definition.

A hand that wishes to Invite Opener to 3NT

Nice and easy from Responder's point of view – whatever Opener responds to the 2♣ bid with, just bid 2NT. This defines the responding hand as an Invite to 3NT. If Opener replied 2♥ (the bidding has gone 1NT-2♣-2♥-2NT), and is maximum with 4-4 in the Majors, they might say 3♠ instead of 3NT, just in case Responder had bid 2NT holding 4 spades (which as you're about to see, they may have done).

A Game-Invitational hand with a 4-card Major (but not a 5-card Major)

Here, the next bid can change depending on what Opener says. If Opener says 2♦, then Responder will say 2NT, because the only sensible move now is to look for 3NT. If Opener replies with a Major, then Responder will do one of two things. If they have 4 cards in the same Major, they will raise it to the 3-level to invite to 4. (For example: 1NT-2♣-2♥-3♥). If they do not have the same Major, they will bid 2NT. There is still an outside chance of a Major fit when Opener bid 2♥, because they would have shown hearts before spades. So if it has gone 1NT-2♣-2♥-2NT, and Opener has a strong hand for their 1NT bid with 4-4 in the Majors, they should bid 3♠, just in case Responder has four spades. Opener doesn't know in this situation whether Responder has this hand type or the previous, but they DO know what to bid next.

A Game Forcing hand with at least one 4-card Major

In this case, Responder knows that the partnership is going to Game, but doesn't yet know if there is a Major fit, so doesn't know if 3NT or 4♥/♠ is a better spot. If Opener replies 2♦, there cannot be a Major fit, so Responder simply signs off in 3NT now. If Opener replies with a Major, Responder will go to Game in that Major IF it is an 8-card fit; otherwise they will bid 3NT. It is important that with a Game Forcing hand, Responder only uses Stayman with a 4-card Major, because after it has gone 1NT-2♣-2♥-3NT, Opener will bid 4♠ if they have 4-4 in the Majors. The reason should be familiar by now – Responder's immediate jump to 3NT after the 2♥ bid indicated that they have a Game Forcing hand with a 4-card Major, and it clearly isn't hearts, so it must be spades.

A note on hands with Slam interest

If, as Responder, you have a Balanced hand with no 5-Card suit, that is nonetheless interested in Slam based on partner's opening 1NT bid, Stayman is NOT the way to go, because it cannot help you! Instead, make sure your Slam bidding agreements and conventions are optimised so that, on the rare occasion you have a balanced hand with a 4-card Major, interested in Slam, you will have a way to investigate. It almost certainly won't involve Stayman, however – and if it does, it will probably be in the sense of using Stayman as nothing other than a rigmarole to go through to trigger some other convention, as some conventions do that.

Recap of what we've covered so far:

- Responder may use the Stayman convention with a variety of hands
- Responder clarifies their hand type with their second bid, AFTER Opener responds 2♦/♥/♠
- If Opener is 4-4 in the Majors, they show hearts first. They can bid spades later if needed
- Although the 2♣ bid does not promise a Major, Responder's subsequent bid might
- If Responder is inviting Game without a Major, their 2nd bid will be 2NT
- If Responder forces Game after bidding 2♣ Stayman, they are promising a 4-card Major
- Stayman is not usually a suitable means of initiating Slam Bidding

MOVING ON TO TRANSFERS

Having considered Stayman in depth, this is an opportune time to consider what we can do with Transfers. When you are first taught transfers, the first reason teachers often give is "it ensures that the stronger hand Declares the contract, thus hiding the points and making it harder to defend". I'm not saying this reason *doesn't* apply – it is indeed *a* reason for using transfers, but it is obviously not true in all cases (particularly if you play a 12-14NT), and certainly not the main one.

The best thing about Transfers is that they preserve so much bidding space. Consider all the hands that, as Responder, you may wish to transfer with. You could have a weak hand. You could have a hand worth inviting to Game. You could have a Game Forcing hand. There are subcategories of all the above. Now imagine that you don't play Transfers! You need a bid for every different type. The 2-level would have to be reserved for Weak hands; Invitational bids would need to be stronger than that; Game Forcing bids even stronger than those! Instead, Responder can start off in the same manner no matter how strong the hand is, and then differentiate from there.

Recapping the Basics

You ought to already be familiar with the idea of Transfers. Partner opens 1NT, 2♣ is reserved for Stayman, and 2 of any other suit is asking Opener to transfer into the next available suit up (diamonds to hearts, hearts to spades, and spades to clubs). 2NT meanwhile is a transfer to diamonds, *which is why, if Responder wants to invite to 3NT, they need to go through Stayman*. You see how everything fits together? Agreements you have in one convention affect the other.

Let's talk about your plan when, as Responder, you make a Transfer bid. First of all, let's get the weak hands out of the way, because that is nice and easy. Assuming Opener completes the transfer, you simply Pass. You were, after all, transferring into the contract you intended partner to play, yes? When you have an Invitational or Game Forcing hand, your hand will broadly fall into one of two types: Hands where you will want the contract to be NT unless there's a fit in your suit, and hands that you definitely want to be played in a suit. In the first case, you return to NT, allowing Opener to choose between the suit you transferred them to, and NT. The rest of the time, you either have a long suit that is destined to be the trump suit, or you have two good suits. The basic structure is this:

Responder's Rebids when Opener completes the transfer

Pass = Job done; Opener has bid the contract I want them to play

2NT = 5 cards in the Major Opener was transferred into; inviting to Game

Raise of 3 of the Major Opener just bid* = 6+ cards in the suit; inviting to Game

3NT = Game Forcing hand; Opener to choose between Passing or bidding Game in Responder's suit

New suit = Natural; 4+ cards in the 2nd suit. Invitational if 2♠; otherwise Game Forcing

What does Opener do then? Let's start with the * option – obviously this is only an option when Opener was transferred into Major. Responder is inviting to Game, and strongly suggesting their Major as the place to play. Opener *can* overrule and bid 3NT (on their head be it), but most of the time, if accepting the invite, they will be going to 4 of the Major. Minor suit transfers are slightly different because *there is no Invitational option with Minor suit transfers*. When you make a Minor suit transfer, you must make your decision about whether you're signing off or going to Game based on Opener's second bid and your hand alone.

The fourth option is the easiest for Opener (apart from the first, where Opener is already Declarer), because it is either a case of Passing, or bidding Game in the suit in question.

Ostensibly, this is also the case when Responder rebids 2NT – the choice is three-way this time: Pass, bid 3NT, or bid 4 of the Major that Opener was transferred into. However, there is a caveat to this: If Opener is inclined to accept the invite to Game, but they opened 1NT with 2-2 in the Majors and a 6-card Minor (not everyone does that, but some do), then they should bid their minor suit now. The reason is interesting – if you look at the fifth possibility, you'll see that a rebid of 2♠ from Responder is Inviting to Game. Why? Well, we're talking about the sequence 1NT-2♦-2♥-2♠, so Responder has transferred into hearts and then bid spades naturally. There is no reason to assume this is Game Forcing – Responder has simply bid out their shape, and never raised the level to do so. It *could* have been weak, were it not for the fact that a weak hand with 5-4 in the Majors would've used Stayman.

Therefore, this is an invitational sequence. You'll notice that if Responder instead has 5 spades and 4 hearts, the ability to show both suits AND invite Game at the 2-level is not available. 1NT-2♥-2♠-3♥ ought to be Game Forcing (a new suit at the 3-level). This means that when the sequence is 1NT-2♥-2♠-2NT, Responder could be concealing 4 hearts in this sequence. The partnership must run the risk

of playing in 2NT with an 8 or even 9-card heart fit if Opener passes. (It isn't likely; remember Responder will also bid this way with ANY Invitational hand that has exactly 5 spades and no other suit longer than 4 cards). However, when the sequence continues: 1NT-2♥-2♠-2NT-3NT, if Responder happens to be sitting there with 5 spades and 4 hearts, they are not going to pass 3NT. They will bid 4♥, on the basis that the worst-case scenario is a 4-3 fit in hearts and a 5-2 fit in spades. Opener will either pass 4♥, or correct to 4♠ if they believe that's a better contract. For Responder's assumption about the worst-case scenario to be correct, they can't afford Opener to be 2-2 in the Majors.

This brings us on to what Opener should do if Responder shows a 2-suited hand. The answer is fairly straightforward: pick which of the two suits they want to be trump, and bid it as cheaply as possible. Alternatively, if Opener doesn't fancy either of the two suits as a trump suit, they can bid 3NT.

Subsequent Bidding

By the time Opener has had three bids, it should be fairly obvious where the contract is heading, if it has not already been decided. The only possible ambiguity there is left will be when there is interest in a Slam. For that, the partnership will need to make use of cue bids and/or Blackwood, but that is a separate topic entirely.

Transfer Breaks

You'll notice that Responder's rebids above are couched in terms of IF Opener completes the transfer, which might be a strange concept to some. Why wouldn't they? In some partnerships, completing the transfer is the only thing you are allowed to do. Again, this is fine – but if you want to get the most out of your system, you don't want to waste time by making bids that convey zero information to your partner. I wrote about this in more detail in the *Spring 2019* edition of the Aberdeen Bridge Club newsletter; let me know if you would like a copy.

Even if you play 4-way transfers, it is important to talk about Major suit transfers separately from minor suit transfers, simply because Major suit transfers are at a lower level, so there is more that you can do with them.

Major suit Transfer breaks

When Responder makes a red suit transfer, Opener should complete the transfer if they have only 2 or 3 cards in the suit they are being transferred into. Every other bid will be some form of "super-accept", showing 4 or even 5 cards in the suit they were asked to bid. Here are the options:

1NT-2♦/♥ - Opener's possible responses:

Completing the transfer = 2 or 3 cards in the suit they were asked to bid.

Jumping to 3 of the Major they were asked to bid = Minimum for the 1NT bid; 4-card support

Bidding another suit* = Maximum for the 1NT bid; 4-card support; probable feature in suit bid

2NT = 5 cards in the suit they were asked to bid.

Anything other than simply completing the transfer agrees the suit as the only possible trump suit (NT is still an option, but an unlikely one). Not the caveat with the * - as Opener, do NOT bid the suit directly below the Major you were asked to transfer into, because Responder will need that bid available as a "re-transfer"! For example: 1NT-2♦-3♣-3♦-3♥ - Here, Responder tried to transfer Opener into hearts. Opener showed 4 hearts and probably a feature in clubs by bidding 3♣ ("probably" because 2♠ was also an option; 3♦ however was NOT an option), Responder bid 3♦ as a re-transfer, and now, having shown their extra strength and support, Opener does complete the transfer.

Note: It is *probable* that Responder will make a re-transfer bid, but they might not. They might bid the transfer suit themselves! This would be a deliberate decision that they think the contract might be better off being played from *their own* hand. They need to be wary, however. In the example above, after Opener bids 3♣, if Responder bids 3♥ instead of 3♦, Opener could pass this! They would need to jump to 4♥ right away if they want to play that contract. The last alternative would be that they would make some kind of cue bid – and again, that would be a rare case where Responder is interested in Slam, but believes it might have better chances if they are Declarer (because they are trying to protect a holding like Kxx or something; it is *not* OK to use this technique just because you think you can declare better than partner! 😊)

Again, by the time you are at the stage of Responder's 2nd bid, it should be fairly clear where the auction is going. The only thing left to sort out will be whether you're playing in Game or Slam.

Minor suit transfers

Opener has only TWO options available when a Minor suit transfer is made. They can complete the transfer, or make the only available call cheaper than completing the transfer. ONE of these bids should show Axx(x) or Kxx(x) in the suit they were asked to bid; the other bid shows any hand where the support is not as good as that. Which way round you play it is a matter for you and your partner to decide. The reason for the "other" option being Axx or Kxx is because *most* of the time, Responder will be looking to sign off with a weak hand. However, if one suit has six running tricks, 3NT may make even *if* Responder has a weak hand. So that is important information for them to have.

STAYMAN AND TRANSFERS – DEALING WITH INTERFERENCE

All the discussions and examples above are given on the assumption that there is no opposition bidding. This is all very well, but those pesky opponents like to make things difficult! However, if your agreements are solid, then you can actually use the opposition's attempt to throw a spanner in the works to your advantage, and make them think twice about interfering in the future!

System ON or System OFF?

If your side makes a 1NT overcall over a 1-of-a-suit opening bid, the standard treatment is to play that as system ON (Stayman and Transfers still apply). You note the fact that the opponents have made that opening bid, but for all intents and purposes you ignore it. This applies across the board whatever you think the implications may be. For example, if your Left-Hand-Opponent (LHO) opens 1♠, and your partner overcalls 1NT (pass from RHO), then 2♥ from you is a transfer to spades! Don't assume that it is obvious you don't mean spades – if you have an agreement in place, you stick to it! If you actually have hearts, you should transfer by bidding 2♦.

Also, in this situation, remember that the 1NT overcall is 15-17HCPs (and promising cover in the suit that was opened). This is the case even if your normal 1NT opening is a weaker range. (If your normal 1NT opening is a stronger range, e.g. 16-18, the overcall may also mean that. You should discuss with your partner).

In short, when the opponents open the bidding, and your side makes an immediate overcall of 1NT, treat that as if the 1NT bid was an opening bid – but remember, the point range *may* be different! You can also play System ON when your side bids 1NT in the protective position (the opponents open 1 of a suit, and there are two passes). In this position, a 1NT bid is 12-14HCPs, even if your opening 1NT range is normally different.

However, if you have opened (or overcalled) 1NT, and your LHO takes action (doubles or overcalls), System is OFF! You should have other methods in place (wriggle, Lebensohl, takeout double etc) to deal with interference of your 1NT opening. So in this section we shall be looking at what to do when the opponents take action *after* you have initiated Stayman or Transfers.

Double of the Stayman or Transfer bid

This is by far the most common type of interference you are likely to face at this stage of the bidding. This is because these bids are artificial, and often made because Responder actually has another suit, so there is a good chance the opponent actually has this suit! Even if they don't want or expect to declare it, they may think that it is worth doubling to give their partner an indication of a lead.

However, this gives Opener options! For a start, there is the option of passing, because Responder will have another chance to bid. Therefore, my suggestion is that if Opener bids here, their bid means the same thing as it would have meant without the double, *but with the added information that they have a stop (at least an Ace or King, or maybe QJx+) in the suit that was doubled*. Without this stop, they simply pass. If this is passed round to Responder, Responder can simply Redouble to ask Opener to make the bid they would have made had there been no interference (answer the Stayman question or complete the transfer). Note that Responder doesn't *have* to Redouble; they may bid to right-side the contract! For example, let's say the bidding has gone: 1NT-(P)-2♦-(X)-P-(P)-?

Let's also say that Responder happens to be sitting with a weak hand, 6 hearts, and K2 doubleton of diamonds. It makes sense if Responder now declares a heart contract, because then the opponents can't play a diamond through the King at Trick 1. If a diamond is the opening lead, the King will make a trick. Responder should only bid this way if they are trying to right-side the contract, because otherwise bidding space is lost with stronger hands.

Another option Opener has is Redouble. This can be used to catch out frivolous doubles from opponents who really ought to have kept quiet. The Redouble is showing a *good* 5 (or even 6) card suit in the suit they are redoubling, with interest in Declaring this contract if Responder has enough cards (typically three) in the suit to tolerate it as trumps. You do have to take into account the probable bad break in trumps, although this is somewhat offset by the fact Opener has values behind the opponent who doubled, and that they will not be taken by surprise at the split when Declaring. Even if there are a couple of losers in the trump suit, that might not be an issue if you have plenty values anyway. Remember, Responder *might* have been using Stayman or Transfers with a strong hand! 2♦XX making earns more points than 3NT, and that's before you start counting overtricks, which are worth a lot more in Redoubled contracts. Once you've Redoubled, the trap is sprung. There is nowhere the opponents can run to. What are they going to do – go to 3 of the suit that you were confident you'd make at least 8 tricks in? Even on the rare occasion that they have an escape route that works, you'll be no worse off than anyone else anyway, assuming that the Responding hand only bids on if they have an actual need or reason to.

The opponents overcall the Stayman or Transfer Bid

There are various ways to deal with this, and it is worth discussing them with your partner. One simple way to play (not necessarily the best) is that if Opener bids over the overcall, their bid means what it would have meant had the opponent not interfered. Double suggests they would have bid what the opponent bid (as the opponent's bid may not be natural), and Pass means Opener cannot bid or double. In general, passing makes a lot of sense, leaving it to Responder to describe how strong their hand is – they may wish to let the opponents steal the contract if they are weak. Generally, Double from Responder is asking Opener to do what they should have done had there been no interference – but with the caveat that some bids have been taken away. For example, in a situation such as: 1NT-(P)-2♥-(3♣)-P-(P)-X-(P)-? – Opener was originally supposed to bid 2♠, but that

is not possible now. Therefore, 3♣ is simply completing the transfer; NOT showing 4-card support with a minimum hand! It's a matter to discuss with partner, but 3♦ here would probably still be maximum with 4-card support – it would just not necessarily show any feature in diamonds, since it was the only bid available to show the maximum hand.