



Adventures in Bridge

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This Week in Bridge

(168) Puppet Stayman

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Level: 3, 5

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General

Puppet Stayman is a modification of Stayman to search for 4-4 Major suit fits as well as 5-3 Major suit fits when Opener has a 5cM. This is done by changing the question that Responder asks with Stayman from “Do you have a 4c Major?” to “Do you have a 4c OR a 5c Major?” and redefining Opener’s answers to show these Major suit holdings.

Puppet Stayman over 2NT

Level: 3

One of the common places to use Puppet Stayman is over a 2NT opening bid, and in fact, this is where it is found on a convention card. Let’s see how this works.

- 2NT 3♣
—?
- 3♦ at least one 4cM
 - 3♥ 5c♥
 - 3♠ 5c♠
 - 3NT no 5cM or 4cM

After a 3♦ answer by Opener, showing a 4cM, then Responder can continue to look for a 4-4 Major suit fit if needed. Responder does this by bidding the other Major than they have at the 3-level. This allows the strong hand, Opener, to be the declarer if the partnership has a 4-4 fit (similar to Smolen.)

- 2NT 3♣
3♦ —?
- 3♥ 4c♠
 - 3♠ 4c♥
 - 3NT no 4cM
 - 4♣ 4-4M, slam try
 - 4♦ 4-4M, pick a major

Problems with Puppet Stayman

Level: 3

Although Puppet Stayman can allow the partnership to find a 5-3 Major suit fit, it has some problems.

- Puppet Stayman gives away a lot of information to the opponents if Responder uses it with any hand with a 3cM.
- Sometimes playing in a 5-3 Major fit instead of NT is not best when Opener has a balanced hand.
- Responder loses the ability to bid Smolen over 2NT, making it harder to look for a Major suit fit when Responder is 5/4M.
- Puppet Stayman is often overused by Responder.

Combining Stayman and Puppet Stayman

Level: 3

Some partnerships like to use 3♣ as Puppet Stayman over 1NT opening bids as well as 2♣ as regular Stayman. This allows the partnership to have both Stayman and Puppet Stayman asking bids.

1NT	2♣	Stayman
1NT	3♣	Puppet Stayman

With this agreement, Responder does not use Puppet Stayman with 4-4M because regular Stayman can be used. Responder only uses Puppet Stayman with at least one 3cM (4/3, 3/3, 3/2, 3/1, or 3/0 in the Majors) and game forcing values.

Note: Responder should usually not use Puppet with a flat hand and 4/3 or 3/3 in the Majors because even if they find a 5-3 fit with Opener, with a flat hand 4M is not likely to be a better contract than 3NT.

Modern Puppet Stayman over 1NT

Level: 5

There has been a slight improvement on Puppet Stayman for the auction 1NT-3♣ when both Stayman and Puppet Stayman are available. Since Responder will not be 4-4 in the Majors over 1NT to bid 3♣, there is no hand where Responder would need to go past 3NT if Opener answers 3♦ (Responder can't bid 4♣ or 4♦ to show 4-4M). Thus, Opener's 3♦ answer no longer needs to promise a 4cM.

1NT	3♣
—?	

- 3♦ no 5cM (but may or may not have a 4cM)
- 3♥ 5c♥
- 3♠ 5c♠

- 3NT Does Not Exist

After the 3♦ answer by Opener, Responder can still show a 4cM just as before by bidding the other Major at the 3-level. This approach is an improvement when Responder has a 3cM and no 4cM. The auction is similar in both Puppet and Modern Puppet Stayman:

1NT 3♣
3♦ 3NT

But in Modern Puppet Stayman, Opener gives away less information by not promising a 4cM.

Conclusion

Puppet Stayman allows Responder to look for a 5-3 Major suit fit (when Responder has 3cM), but it introduces complexity and gives up Responder's ability to show some Major suit hands - 5/4, 5/5. This is a tradeoff that you and partner need to decide whether it is worthwhile to you or not. Puppet Stayman tends to give up more than it gains and it can encourage bad habits, while most of the situations it solves, especially after a 1NT opening, can be handled with other bidding sequences.