



Bidding Basics

BY LARRY COHEN  larryco.com

Responding to 1NT – part 1

1NT is the most complex opening bid to respond to, so much so that we will need two issues to cover it.

Let's begin with the two main things to consider:

1. **Level.** Are we going to:
 - a. Insist on a partscore contract?
 - b. Invite game?
 - c. Insist on game?
 - d. Invite slam?
 - e. Insist on slam?
2. **Trump suit.** Are we going to:
 - a. Insist on notrump?
 - b. Show a five-card or longer suit?
 - c. Use Stayman to look for a 4–4 major-suit fit?

Knowing that partner has 15–17 balanced points will help us with these decisions.

Responder has a balanced hand

With two balanced hands, we'd want to have 26 HCP to reach 3NT. If, as responder, we have a balanced hand (4–3–3–3, 4–4–3–2 or 5–3–3–2), we can add our points to partner's. With, say, 11 balanced points, we know our partnership has a combined 26–28 points, which tells us we want to be in game (not partscore, not slam). It is our job to make sure our partnership lands in a game contract.

What if we have less? Suppose, for example, we have 9 HCP, balanced. Now we want to be in game opposite 17 (26 total), but a partscore opposite 15 (24 total). Our job is to invite game. If we have less than 9 balanced points, we want to be in a partscore and will usu-

ally pass 1NT.

If we have a balanced hand with slam interest, we have several choices. One is to ask for aces with 4♣ (a convention called Gerber). This rarely comes up and is barely worth even this mention. More common is an invitational bid of 4NT to ask partner if they are minimum or maximum. You might respond 4NT with something like:

♠A 8 2 ♥K Q 9 ♦Q J 7 6 ♣A 10 8.

This is not Blackwood. Knowing how many aces partner has is not as important as asking if he is minimum or maximum.

Unbalanced hands

With unbalanced hands, the decision-making process is more difficult. A lot depends on if an eight-card (or longer) major-suit trump fit can be located.

This month, we will discuss Stayman. In Part 2, we will visit Jacoby Transfers and other responses.

Stayman

A 2♣ response to 1NT says nothing about clubs. It can be bid with a club void! The bid is completely artificial (but does not require an Alert). It asks opener about major-suit holdings. If opener has no four-card major, the answer to Stayman is 2♦. (Never should opener respond 2NT.) With one four-card major, the opener bids it at the two level. With both majors, hearts are bid first. With a five-card major, the opener treats it as four and, again, just

bids it on the two level.

The follow-ups to these auctions will be covered in later articles in this series. For now, it suffices to say that the responder's next move is to either pass, invite game, bid game, invite slam or bid slam.

What are the requirements to respond 2♣? How many high-card points do you need?

The first requirement is that responder has at least one four-card major. Without a four-card major, there is no need to use the 2♣ Stayman inquiry. Regarding high-card points, the most common hand-type contains invitational or better values. So that means at least 8 decent HCP or 9 HCP. Here is why:


Suppose you were to use Stayman with this 6-point hand:

♠Q 2 ♥A 7 6 5 ♦6 5 4 ♣10 6 3 2.

Your 2♣ is met with 2♠ by opener. Now what? You can't pass (and play a 4–2 fit). So you would have to correct to 2NT. Not only is this likely to be too high, but partner might bid 3NT! Yes, this auction is invitational. Stayman followed by 2NT is inviting 3NT. It means: "No, we didn't find a 4–4 major fit, but I am still inviting game."

So the typical minimum for Stayman would have a king added to the example above:

♠Q 2 ♥A 7 6 5 ♦6 5 4 ♣K 10 3 2.

Now, you can comfortably respond 2♣ to 1NT. If partner doesn't choose hearts, you follow up with 2NT, invitational. 

BIDDING BASICS QUIZ

Partner opens 1NT (15–17 HCP) and RHO passes. What is your call with each of the following:

1. ♠6 4 ♥K 7 6 2 ♦Q 6 5 ♣J 9 3 2
2. ♠J 9 8 7 ♥10 8 7 6 ♦J 7 6 5 ♣2
3. ♠K 2 ♥K 2 ♦K J 10 8 7 6 ♣J 6 5
4. ♠K J 7 6 ♥K J 9 6 ♦10 3 2 ♣J 4
5. ♠K J 7 6 ♥K J 9 6 ♦10 3 2 ♣A 4
6. ♠K Q 10 ♥A Q J ♦Q 7 6 ♣10 8 7 6
7. ♠K Q 10 ♥A Q J ♦10 6 2 ♣A 10 8 6
8. ♠A 2 ♥K 2 ♦K Q J 9 8 7 6 ♣K J

1. Pass. You can't afford Stayman because you would be stuck opposite anything but 2♥.
2. 2♣. This time, you can comfortably pass partner's reply, even 2♦, which usually will provide at least a seven-card fit.
3. 3NT. Showing minors will be covered next article, but there is no need to show diamonds here.
4. 2♣. And then invite in partner's major or with 2NT over 2♦.
5. 2♣. And then insist on game in partner's major or with 3NT over 2♦.
6. 3NT. Even opposite 17 and a total of 31, that isn't enough to look for 6NT.
7. 4NT. Invitational. Partner will go with 17 and pass with 15. Judgment is required with 16.
8. 4♣. The very rare situation where you care only how many aces partner has. You will reach game, small slam or grand slam, depending on the answer.

There is no upper limit on Stayman. You can add lots of points to the example hand above and you would still start with 2♣ to look for the 4–4 heart fit. You would respond 2♣ with:

♠Q 2 ♥A K J 5 ♦A 5 4 ♣K J 10 3.

The difference is that if you have enough for game (or slam), you would later make sure to get there.

Can Stayman ever be used after 1NT with less than an invitational hand? Yes! But be careful to understand why. If the responder is willing to pass anything the opener responds (to Stayman), then it is okay to use it. What if responder were to use Stayman with:

♠5 4 3 2 ♥5 4 3 2 ♦6 5 4 3 2 ♣—?

An extreme example, but 2♣-Stay-

man is the right response to 1NT! Yes, you will get to the two level, but it will be in a playable trump suit – much better than putting down this dummy in 1NT where it is worth zero. If partner responds 2♥ or 2♠ to Stayman, it likely will go down, but the 4–4 fit won't be too bad. Your hand will be worth something in a trump suit. If partner responds 2♦, you will pass. Partner has some diamonds (usually at least three) and you will be in a much better contract than 1NT. Some of your low diamonds will take tricks!

So, if you have short clubs and the other three suits, you can use Stayman with 0 HCP!

There is a concept called “garbage” or “junk” Stayman, but that will also be covered in a later installment.

