

When to Bid Stayman, When to Bid 3NT Opposite a 1NT Opener

MATCH-POINT scoring is wrongly associated with a need to play in 3NT at almost every opportunity. In fact it is at teams and rubber that 3NT is more often preferable to 4♥ or 4♠; you need to make *two* more tricks in 4♥ or 4♠ for that contract to be materially superior. At pairs 4♥ or 4♠ will be better if it makes just *one* more trick (those extra 20 points really matter): you would want to be in 4♥ or 4♠ if you think there's one extra trick to be had – and there usually is with a 4-4 fit. However, you must beware the information that Stayman gives.

Exercise: Would you bid 2♣ Stayman over partner's 1NT opener (12-14) with these responding hands?

Hand A ♠ A J 9 7 ♥ 7 4 ♦ Q J 10 3 ♣ A J 2	Hand B ♠ K 9 7 5 ♥ Q 10 4 ♦ A J 3 ♣ K 9 3
Hand C ♠ J 10 9 4 ♥ A 10 8 4 ♦ K 3 ♣ A J 3	Hand D ♠ A 8 6 2 ♥ Q 8 ♦ K J 9 4 ♣ K 8 3

Hand A: a clear Stayman bid. If partner has four spades, it will almost certainly be better to play in 4♠ than in 3NT. There is heart weakness for 3NT and even if partner is well-stopped in the suit, there will surely be an extra ruffing trick somewhere.

Hand B: a clear 3NT, with the 4-3-3-3 shape. There will be the odd hand opposite where 4♣ plays better, but many more where 3NT will make the same number of tricks as 4♣. Even if, facing four spades, there were slightly more hands where 4♣ would play a trick better than 3NT (and this I doubt), I would still not bid Stayman – because every time partner does not have four spades and you play in 3NT, you have given the defence information about part-

ner's hand (i.e. whether he has four hearts).

Hand C: 2♣ Stayman. Having both four-card majors does make a difference. In general, when you end up in 3NT, you'd rather not do so via Stayman (giving away information). With both majors, as here, you are twice as likely *not* to play in 3NT than if you had just one four-card major.

Hand D: close! I would bid 3NT, although if partner held four spades I would probably on balance rather be in 4♣. The reason is I don't want to give away information. What if my Stayman bid was doubled to show decent clubs – tipping off the club lead? Or, more subtly, what if the Stayman bid *wasn't* doubled so West found (say) the winning heart lead vs 3NT rather than the losing club (from equivalent suits)? Having said that, if my heart doubleton was small-small, even jack-small, I'd really have to bid Stayman. An anti-room 3NT with a spade fit and the defence cashing all the hearts will score a big, round zero.

When to lean towards Stayman:

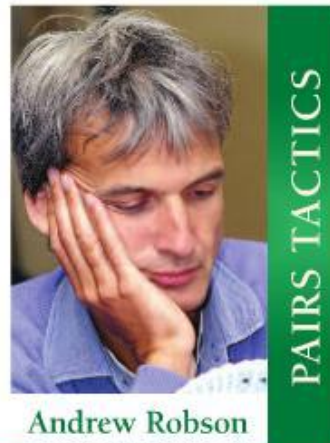
- Small doubletons
- Both four-card majors

When to lean towards 3NT:

- 4-3-3-3 hands
- Honour doubletons

Consider our featured deal:

E/W Game. Dealer South.			
	♠ K 10		
	♥ A 5 3 2		
	♦ K J 10 5		
	♣ K 9 8		
♠ A 9 7 6 3		♠ 8 2	
♥ K 10 8 4		♥ Q 6	
♦ 8		♦ 9 7 6 2	
♣ 4 3 2		♣ A J 10 7 5	
	♠ Q J 5 4		
	♥ J 9 7		
	♦ A Q 4 3		
	♣ Q 6		



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PAIRS TACTICS

The bidding as it went:

West	North	East	South
			1NT
Pass	2♣	Dble	2♣
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

The bidding as it should have gone:

West	North	East	South
			1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

North's decision to look for a 4-4 heart fit was hardly criminal, but once East had found the good lead-directing double of the Stayman 2♣, North-South could kiss a decent result goodbye. *Versus* 3NT West led a club to the ten and queen, and declarer led a spade, hoping East held the ♠A. Not so: West rose with the ♠A whereupon a second club through ♠K-9 ensured four club tricks for East. Down one.

Recommended is a simple raise to 3NT by North, hoping that there isn't a 4-4 heart fit or that, even if there is, 3NT will play for as many tricks (North's good outside intermediates making that quite likely). Declarer wins West's spade lead, knocks out the ace of spades and, later, the ace of clubs. Nine tricks and game made.

Andrew's Tip: 4-4 major fits do usually play a trick better than no-trumps. But think hard before using Stayman because of the information it gives away. With 4-3-3-3 shapes and 4-4-3-2s with good doubletons, it may be best to blast 3NT and give the opponents no information. □

