

Esther Discusses Correctly Bidding Stayman

Bruce Thompson

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Bruce: Today, we are honored to have with us Esther Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints), who will talk us through correctly bidding Stayman. Esther, thanks for taking time to be with us today!

Esther: D**n it, Bruce! How many times do I have to tell you to **NEVER, ever** call me Esther! Always, **ALWAYS, ALWAYS** instead call me, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen!

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, in any case, thank you for talking to us today. Would you initially tell us a little about who invented the bridge Stayman Convention? I assume that the inventor was someone named "Stayman"?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you! Actually, Stayman was popularized by someone named "Stayman", but the Stayman Convention actually was not invented by Stayman! As noted in the "Esther Bridge Lessons" posting, "Happy 100th Birthday, Duplicate Bridge!":¹

c. 1940 **George N. Rapée** (1915 - 1999) develops the bridge convention that we know today as "Stayman" because Sam Stayman, a Partner of Rapée, popularized the convention in a 1945 article, "A New Notrump Convention," published in June, 1945 in The Bridge World. As NYT bridge columnist

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¹ See: https://esther-bridge.com/pdf/br_hist.pdf

Phillip Adler wrote in a December 15, 2005 article, "Call It Stayman, But Think Marx", "and to Rapée's chagrin, Stayman's name stuck. To be fair, Stayman always gave credit where it was due, he did a lot of work fine-tuning the {Rapée's} convention, and he wrote a book called 'Do You Play Stayman?' (Odyssey/Faber, 1965)." Jack Marx *independently* and perhaps *earlier* in 1939 invented this convention also, and in the United Kingdom this convention is called "Marx".

Bruce: Errr, well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, thanks very much for that information! Now here are the E/W holdings and the bidding that I would like to ask you about today:

Board #4

Dealer: WEST

WEST (15)	EAST (7)
S: J 5 2	S: Q 6 3
H: A Q T 7	H: K J 9 8
D: A 8 3	D: J 6 4
C: A 9 7	C: 8 6 4

Bidding

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1 NT	PASS	2 C	PASS
2 H	PASS	3 H	PASS
4 H	PASS	PASS	PASS

Bruce: Well, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, why don't we begin by talking about WEST's opening bid? Do you agree that that 1**NT** is WEST's best bid?

Esther: Well, my *malodorous misanthrope*, this is indeed a somewhat challenging bidding decision! This is a classic "Aces and spaces" hand. WEST can count **3** *definite* and **1** *likely* "quick tricks", and if EAST should show up short on points, and the contract is set at 1**NT**, then this contract is going down! Of course it could be worse. What if Dealer WEST instead held 4 Aces, 4 2's, 4 3's, and 1 4?

Bruce: Ok. So????

Esther: Well, my *simpering simpleton*, yes, I do agree with WEST's **1NT** bid. Sitting first, WEST has no information about whether EAST holds a bust hand, or something much better, and WEST must tell EAST what WEST can about WEST's holdings. But it is terrifying to make this bid! Of course, there is solace in knowing that in duplicate bridge every E/W pair on this Board faces the *same* dilemmas!

Bruce: Yikes, I agree. On this Board 26 of 26 contracts were set E/W! And at 19 of 26 Tables E/W got set! So, to a large extent, the E/W pairs did badly in an absolute sense, but better E/W Board scores were achieved by, in a relative sense, some E/W pairs doing *less badly* in going down than did other E/W pairs. So, on this Board, the E/W pairs primarily differentiated themselves by their **bidding**, rather than by the "play of the hand". Now let's then examine Responder EAST's **2C** Stayman bid. What do you think of Responder's bid?

Esther: Well, to be frank, I disagree with this Stayman response bid, and I actually find it disturbing, for 2 independent, but *equally important* reasons. **First**, EAST's hand is *too weak* on HCPs to make this bid. Normally, a Stayman response requires **8-10** HCPs. An *exception* is if you are 5-4 or 4-5 in the Majors, in which case (1) you should not perform a Jacoby transfer, and (2) you could bid Stayman with as few as ~7 HCPs, and later set the final contract at the 2-, 3-, or 4-level.

However, assuming you are not 5-4 or 4-5 in the Majors, indeed, fellow Quintuple Gold Emerald Life Master (20 Million+ ACBL MasterPoints) Savannah bridge player Yoda teaches that Responder should hold **9+ HCPs** to bid Stayman! Partly this is so that Opener knows that **3NT** can be bid if Opener is at the "top" of his **1NT** opening, and partly so that Opener knows that when I bid Stayman I as Responder have at least one 4-card Major, or maybe two 4-card Majors, or maybe 5 of one Major and 4 of the other Major, and I rationally believe that a game-level contract is a reasonable possibility, or otherwise I would just shut up.

Bruce: OK. What is your second objection to Responder's 2C Stayman bid?

Esther: *Second*, I will never bid Stayman if the distribution of my hand is **S:4, H:3, D:3, C:3, or S:3, H:4, D:3, C:3**. This is a (1) "flat" hand that will play better in **NT**, and (2) without enough HCPs to bid **3NT**, the best bid by Responder is quite simply **PASS!** If Responder's distribution is 4-3-3-3 or 3-4-3-3, Responder *has no shortness that can provide opportunities for trumping!*

An exception may be if your 4-card Major includes **3** or **4** Honors. As Marty Bergen's noted in his monthly article in the December, 2024 issue of the ACBL Bridge Bulletin (page 55), "I have always believed that any [S]uit headed by four honors should be treated as if it had an additional card."

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Obviously, you agree that WEST must bid 2**H** in response to the Stayman inquiry. Opener bidding 2**S** denies 4 Hearts, but Opener bidding 2**H** does not deny holding 4 Spades. What do think then about EAST's subsequent 3**H** bid?

Esther: Well, I also disagree with this bid. Responder bidding 3**H** confirms a holding of 4 Hearts and is *invitational* to a game bid. Because Responder did not have enough HCPs to bid Stayman in the first place, a subsequent invitational bid certainly is not appropriate.

Some Special Stayman Bidding Sequences

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen. Is there anything else you want to discuss with respect to "correctly" bidding Stayman?

Esther: Well, Bruce, I will certainly try to help you.

There are **3 somewhat unusual bidding sequences**² that I

² These examples are drawn for Barbara Seagram and Marc Smith's excellent 1999 book, 25 Bridge Conventions You Should Know (pp. 16-17). Esther may have altered some of the cards in the examples.

would like to discuss. First, let's talk about bidding Stayman in response to Partner's 1NT opening bid when **you as Responder hold both (1) "Invitational Values" and (2) a 5-card Major**. Let's say that the Opponents are silent throughout the auction and the bidding proceeds:

Partner	YOU
1NT	2C
2D	2H

Your 2nd bid of 2H says, "Partner, I (1) hold 5+ Hearts, not 4, and (2) enough HCPs and good enough Heart Suit Quality that a 4H Game contract is possible. At your discretion, either (1) PASS and play a 2H contract, (2) bid 4H, or (3) bid and play a 3NT contract. I will not be bidding again!"

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what is the 2nd of your **3 somewhat unusual bidding sequences?**

Esther: Well, Bruce, second, you can sometimes bid Stayman when you hold **fewer than 8+ HCPs "iff" (if, and only if) your Hand has certain distributions**. The first example involves you holding (1) ~5 HCPs, (2) 2 4-card Majors *both* with an Honor, and (3) a 5-card Diamond Suit with an Honor:

♠ J 9 6 4 ♥ Q T 8 5 ♦ Q T 9 7 2 ♣ -- (5)

This Hand does not hold "invitational" values but does have a built-in "safety net". If Opener bids 2H or 2S you are happy to PASS. If Opener instead bids 2D showing no 4-card Major you again can happily PASS since Opener had to hold at least 2 Diamonds to bid 1NT and so your Partnership holds at least 5 + 2 = 7 Diamonds.

You can also bid Stayman to set a final Club contract. One drawback of the 2C Stayman bid is that it is more difficult to set a final 3C part-score contract. Let's say you as Responder hold:

♠ 8 5 ♥ 9 ♦ J T 9 4 2 ♣ Q T 9 8 5 3 (3)

You bid 3C after Partner responds to your Stayman bid and the Opener is *required* to PASS!

Bruce: OK, Ms. Klinktoast-Houstonhousen, what is the 3rd of your **3 somewhat unusual bidding sequences?**

Esther: Well, Bruce, third, you as Responder to the 1**NT** opening bid hold **4 good Spades and 5 good Hearts**, such as:

♠ K Q 8 5 ♥ K J 9 7 3 ♦ K 7 ♣ T 9 (12)

You bid Stayman to find out if the Opener had **4+** Spades but Opener bid 2**D**. If you as Responder at your 2nd turn within the auction then "jump" to 3**H** you are saying, "Partner, I hold 4 Spades and **5** Hearts and 'Game-going' values. Please bid either 3**NT** or 4**H**!"