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LET us all be clear about one thing: bridge is a game of probabilities. Yes, it is about many other things as well – judgement, partnership harmony, bidding systems, table presence, luck – but first and foremost bridge is about odds. If you strive at all times to make the bid or play that has the highest chance of success, then you will consistently win, and if you do not you won't. That observation is my central argument.

Let me first of all deal with a hand such as Hand A:

Hand A

♠ A Q 7 2
♥ K J 6 3
♦ 6
♣ K 9 4 3

No one is going to suggest you should not bid Stayman on this hand. If partner has a four-card major, the hand is almost guaranteed to play better in that fit than no-trumps. But what if we take instead a hand such as Hand B?

Hand B

♠ A Q 7 2
♥ K 6 3
♦ J 8 6
♣ K 9 3

Doubtless Frances will argue that just because you are completely balanced, it does not mean partner is and if partner has four spades, then this could easily be a

better contract. And she is right – of course she is right. Partner could easily have:

♠ K J 8 4 ♥ A Q 7 ♦ 5 2 ♣ Q J 10 8

where 4♠ is cold barring a ruff and 3NT has no play at all. But the odds are against that. Partner has to have four spades in the first place and then 4♠ has to be a better contract. Change partner's hand to:

♠ K J 8 4 ♥ A Q 7 ♦ 7 5 2 ♣ A 8 2

and now 3NT is simply on diamonds breaking 4-3 (even assuming the opponents lead them) and 4♠ has no play at all.

And let's be clear that it is not just 4-3-3-3 patterns that often play better in no-trumps. Partner might hold:

♠ K J 8 4 ♥ 8 7 2 ♦ Q 7 ♣ A Q J 8

for example, when the likely attack on diamonds gives me my ninth trick and the contract is never worse than the ♥A being well placed, while 4♠ always needs the ♥A well placed plus a favourable spade break.

So I advocate simply bidding 3NT on balanced hands opposite partner's 1NT opening. There is, however, one important proviso. *The more points you have between you, the more you should simply bid 3NT.* The late Raymond Brock, a far better player than I will ever be, once told me that he never looked for a 4-4 fit on balanced hands if the total point count was at least 27. The reasons are twofold. Firstly the extra high-card points mean that you have more high cards to generate tricks, and secondly all the extra HCP in the world will not protect you against bad breaks. Take for example this pair of hands:

♠ K 7 6 2

♥ A 8 3

♦ K 9

♣ K Q 7 5



♠ Q 8 5 4

♥ K Q J 2

♦ A 6

♣ J 10 2

In 4♠, if someone has a singleton club you could lose two aces and two ruffs, or the trumps may break 5-0 – all the while with 3NT on ice. So extra HCP can save you from bad breaks by playing in no-trumps. Conversely, if you have bid game on

minimum values, you will often need good breaks and the hands fitting well, and then you may be more inclined to use Stayman.

There is one other very important reason to just bid 3NT on balanced hands – it gives away less information to the opposition. Say you were on lead with:

♠ K Q 8 2 ♥ 7 4 3 ♦ K Q 3 2 ♣ 8 4

after 1NT – 3NT. You probably fish out a spade. But would you still lead a spade if the auction had gone 1NT – 2♣ – 2♥, 3NT? No: there are four spades on your left, so you might try a diamond. If you always bid Stayman with four-card majors you make yourself easy to play against.

And it gets worse. Consider this hand first reported by Nick Sandqvist. You are on lead with:

♠ 9 8 7 5 ♥ J 8 5 2 ♦ J 2 ♣ 10 9 7

after the auction 2NT – 3♣ – 3♥ – 3NT. Clearly there are four hearts on your right and four spades on your left, so those are unattractive and anyway with this rubbish you probably want to try and hit partner's suit. But partner has not doubled 3♣. So the player at the table tried the ♦J. His partner, who held ♦K-Q-10-x-x and the ♠A, was charmed. Speculative, I hear you say – certainly. Lucky – maybe, but I think the opposition made their own bad luck. If the auction had gone 2NT – 3NT the ♦J would really have been a wild lead, a spade or the ♣10 being normal.

So in summary, to bid Stayman on balanced hands *all* of the following must be present:

- partner must have your four-card major, *and*
- it must be right to play in the major, *and*
- the bidding must not tip off the lead (whether or not the fit is found).

To not bid Stayman on balanced hands you simply have to be able to make 3NT.

I'm clear what the odds favour. Can Frances do better than that?

Two top players debate a hot bridge topic. Tell us whose argument has won you over by e-mailing the Editor at elena@ebu.co.uk

Use Stayman on flat hands



Frances Hinden

Or vote by post (Editor, English Bridge, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR). Comments for publication (not more than 200 words, please) are welcome.

IF you and your partner both have a 4-3-3-3 distribution with four spades, and you have the values for game between you, would you rather be in 4♠ or 3NT? There's no answer that will be right every time, but bridge is a game of probabilities, and as a general rule 3NT will be the better contract. You only need nine tricks to make game in 3NT, and there are no short suits to generate the extra trick in 4♠ by ruffing. Even if you have 4-3-2 opposite 7-6-5 in (say) diamonds, 4♠ will only be a better contract if the opening leader has five diamonds: with only four they can't take more than four tricks in the suit, and with three or fewer they are probably going to lead something else.

This seems to be a good argument for not using Stayman, so am I on the wrong side of this debate? Not at all. Well, perhaps, but only if partner restricts opening 1NT to hands with a 4-3-3-3 distribution, or perhaps a 4-4-3-2 with an honour in every suit. But partner doesn't. Nowadays many players regularly open 1NT with a five-card major, with a 4-4-4-1 shape, or with a five-card minor and a four-card major. Some pairs go so far as to open 1NT on 5-3-4-1s with a singleton honour. Even the most conservative of us would think that the West hand in the diagram below is a perfectly good weak no-trump opening. Try putting it opposite a boring balanced hand with four spades such as the East hand:

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

East has a 4-3-3-3 shape and has honours in every suit, and yet 4♠ is still a much better contract than 3NT.

At teams scoring, to make game in no-trump you need one fewer trick than playing in a major, so you might argue that you would need a major-suit fit to be worth two more tricks to make it worthwhile. However, at match-pointed pairs it is right to play in the major every time the 4-4 fit is worth just one extra trick, because ten (or eleven) tricks in the major outscore nine (or ten) tricks in 3NT. If you have a 4-3-3-3 distribution, and partner responds 2♠ to Stayman denying four hearts, partner is still at least three times as likely than not to have an outside doubleton. Some of the time you will have enough high cards in the suit so that the shortage will not be worth an extra trick from a ruff, but you only need to be right more than half the time to come out ahead at pairs.

What if you are interested in a slam, rather than just looking for game? Now it is even more important to look for a 4-4 fit. On the deal below 6♠ is virtually cold by taking a heart ruff in opener's hand but the main chance in 6NT is a 3-3 diamond break, making the chances of succeeding under 40%:

♠ A K 5 2		♠ Q J 9 4
♥ 9 2		♥ A K 7
♦ K Q 8 6		♦ A 7 2
♣ J 8 4		♣ K Q 5

Unfortunately, it is not always easy both to look for a 4-4 major suit fit, and also to offer 3NT as an alternative. In a regular partnership, you can play some clever methods after a 1NT opening to explore for the best contract. In any partnership, if responder shows an invitation then opener should remember to offer 3NT. Looking at:
♠ K Q 6 3 ♥ Q J 10 ♦ K J 9 ♣ Q 10 3
you can open 1NT, bid 2♠ in response to

partner's Stayman enquiry, but then suggest 3NT if partner raises to 3♠. You can also try to use some judgement rather than relying on any prescriptive rule – 'parrot cries are for parrots', as my parents used to tell me. Not all balanced hands are the same.

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

Hand A is an obvious raise of 1NT to 3NT because it's hard to construct a hand opposite where 4♠ is more likely to make. By contrast, Hand B has good trumps, extra high cards and no honour in one of the suits, which makes it a strong candidate for playing in spades.

This isn't an article on system after a 1NT opening, but if you want to take full advantage of using Stayman you do need some way of agreeing opener's major below game level. You might like to ask your partner what the auction 1NT – 2♣ – 2♠ – 3♥ should show. Opener should have denied four hearts, so it can't be looking for a 4-4 fit, while if responder had five hearts and no spade fit he would have started by transferring to, or jumping in, hearts. Similarly, 1NT – 2♣ – 2♥ – 3♠ has no obvious natural meaning, so a nice general agreement to have is that three of the other major by responder agrees opener's major. This both helps with slam bidding and (as a side benefit) lets you explore for the right game after you have, as I recommend, used Stayman on your balanced hand. □