

HAND OF THE WEEK

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Here's an interesting situation that I've never seen discussed in print. But it's not uncommon. And if you understand the ideas that I present here, you will find that they apply in many other situations.

In third seat, with none vulnerable at matchpoints, you pick up the following hand. ♠A4 ♥10953 ♦A9854 ♣87. Ho hum. But partner opens 1NT (15-17) and you perk up. RHO passes, and it's your turn to bid. With two aces, you are on the borderline between inviting game and passing. But since aces are undervalued in the 4321 point count and you have two of them, I think you should bid. You bid 2♣, Stayman, and await partner's reply.

What is your plan if partner bids 2♦? I think you should pass. You have a good suit for notrump, but on the other hand, you know that the opponents have at least 8 spades, and having the lead come through your ace at trick 1 is not ideal, Partner will have to have the ♠Qxx or ♠KJx for a spade lead to help him. With any other holding, the defense will have found a good attacking lead without any loss in trick-taking potential in the suit.

What is your plan if partner bids 2♥? Many people would invite with 3♥, but I think you should jump to game. You have potential ruffs coming in two suits, and a long side suit headed by the Ace which could be a source of tricks. But if partner is one of those declarers who draws trumps first and thinks later, you should only invite.

What is your plan if partner bids 2♠? You have no choice but to bid 2NT, invitational.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, LHO overcalls 2♠, passed back to you.

Should you pass here? I don't think so. It's pretty clear to me that, if partner didn't want to double 2♠, there's a good chance you can make 3 of a red suit.

Should you bid 3♦ here? Nope, that would show a hand that was going to rebid 3♦ if partner answered 2♠, and that shows a game forcing hand with long diamonds and 4 cards in the unbid major. Perhaps ♠A4 ♥K953 ♦A9854 ♣87. You can't make the same bid with both hands.

Should you bid 3♥ here? Nope. I don't know what that shows, but (to parallel the 3 of a minor rebid here) it should show 5♥ and game-going values. And you have neither of those.

What would it have meant if partner had doubled 2♠? Since whenever you bid Stayman, you have either invitational or better values or both majors, his double should be for penalty and show 4 or more good spades.

Would partner have been allowed to do anything else after the 2♠ overcall? Perhaps he should be allowed to bid 3♥ with a 5-card suit and maximum values. But otherwise, no, he has to consider the fact that you might have a weak hand with 4-4 in the majors.

Should you bid 2NT here? I suppose that's possible, if it's natural and you have enough in spades to not be worried if partner has two small spades. (I would play that as lebensohl here, showing (usually) the desire to play 3 of a suit.) But since the lead would be coming through you, you'd have to have a pretty good holding. And that's not going to be common. So I think you should pass if you have invitational values and just hope you have enough defense to get a plus score.

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What about 3♠ or 3NT? These should be reserved for game forcing hands without a long minor. 3♠ would show 4 hearts with a spade stopper, and 3NT would show 4 spades including a stopper and deny 4 hearts.

OK, what's left? Only my favorite call – Double. What does double show here? Well, first let's list all the things you can't have.

- You can't have a GF hand with a spade stopper or a 5+ card minor.
- You can't have a balanced invite with a good spade holding.
- You can't have an invitational hand with 5 hearts (or 5 spades) – you would have started with a transfer, not Stayman.

So what other hands can you have for Stayman?

- You could have a weak hand with both majors. If you have that, you just pass. You wanted to play in a major, and that's exactly what will happen if you pass. And instead of 8 tricks, you only need 6 tricks to get a plus score. Don't return the favor by trying to bid something here.
- You could have (maybe) a weak hand with a 6-card minor. Most of us have a way to bid this hand, either directly or conventionally.
- You could have a hand that would like to compete to the 3-level and has to 4+ card suits. Yes! You have that! What should you do? You should double (for takeout).

Is partner allowed to pass your double? Yes, but he should be wary of doing so without a 4-card spade holding. And he could have that - ♠J10xx ♥AQx ♦Kx ♣AQ10x. He knows you have two places to play, but he only has one. And he knows that, if you have hearts, you have only 4 of them. So which is more likely 0 that you have 4+ clubs or that you have 4+ diamonds? Diamonds, by a lot. And since he knows your side has about 24 points, he should think highly of his defensive prospects. But most of the time, he will have 3 spades and some hope of an 8-card fit. He will bid his cheapest 4-card suit, and if you don't fit it you can bid the cheapest suit that you do have. When you both have two places to play and there are only 3 possible suits, you will have a playable fit.

What else might partner do? If he has something like ♠KJx ♥AQx ♦Qxx ♣AJxx, he can bid 2NT – a good 3-card spade holding and only one place to play. What should partner do with ♠Jxx ♥AQx ♦KQx ♣AJxx? He should bid 2NT and redouble (for rescue) if he gets doubled. Sometimes, he will make it. Sometimes he will be down 1, and they would have made 2♠, so you will get a good score. And sometimes, he will go down a bunch and you will have lost your bet that reopening was a good idea. If that happens, remember that this is a game of percentages, not absolutes.

What else might you double with? You might double with game-going values and no stopper or long minor (thus 4 hearts). In that case (a) partner will pass for penalties with a decent 4-card holding, or (b) he will bid something. If he bids something, and it's not the unbid major, you will cue-bid to tell him you have a game force with no help in their suit, or bid 3NT to tell him you have a game force with a little bit of help in their suit.

There's a lot of stuff here, but it's all logical, founded on three propositions.

1. You didn't bid Stayman randomly.
2. You will not pass them out at the 2-level when you had planned to bid a game.

3. You need to differentiate your degree of stopper as much as possible when you were planning to bid game.

Note that proposition 3 means that you must bid 3NT, cue-bid, or double with game-going hands lacking a long minor. It would be illogical to have the 3-level bids show no stopper or a partial stopper, because you would be losing out on your opportunity to find a suit fit just when that's most desirable.

So you must play the double of their overcall as takeout, and partner must take it out when he doesn't have 4 of their trumps. This allows you to maximize your chances to get to the right contract after they interfere. With game-going hands we will nearly always make the right choice among the 3 other suits and 3NT using this method. When we are limited to a partial, we may play a minor with a fit in the other major, but we will at least be in a playable fit with the majority of the high card points. So we will often go plus.