

NEW MINOR FARCE VS CHECKBACK STAYMAN

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Responder often has a rebid problem in this auction:

Opener	Responder
1 any	1 any
1NT	?

- 1) How to sign-off, invite game, or force to game with support for opener's suit. A minimum raise is weak, a jump invitational, so how to force?
- 2) How to sign off, invite game, or force to game with a long suit of his own. A minimum suit rebid is weak, a jump invitational, so how to force?
- 3) How to sign off, invite game, or force to game with a two-suited hand. A non-reverse bid in a new suit is weak, a jump is forcing, so how to invite?
- 4) How to find out if opener has three-card support for responder's major or four cards in an unbid major.

Two popular conventions address these problems: New Minor Forcing and Checkback Stayman. Let's look at each:

New Minor Forcing

New Minor Forcing is responder's bid of an unbid minor when opener rebids 1NT. It requires at least game-invitational strength, and (unless the hand is stronger) a five-card or longer major. In answer, opener shows three-card support for responder, jumping with a good hand. Lacking support after a 2♣ New Minor Forcing bid, opener bids 2♦ with a minimum and something higher with a good hand. A 2♦ New Minor Forcing bid complicates things:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1NT	2♦
2♠ - no support, minimum hand	
2NT - no support, good hand	

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♠
1NT	2♦
2♥ - heart suit, may have spade support	
2NT - no support, minimum hand	
3♣/3♦/3NT - no support, good hand	

Some play that 2♥ is artificial, showing no spade support and a minimum, while 2NT shows a good hand. This is crazy, possibly missing a 4-4 heart fit when responder can't afford to bid 3♥ (forcing).

Over 1NT, a jump rebid in the same suit is invitational, as is a jump raise of opener's suit (which denies a five-card major). To force, responder must either jump in a new suit or use New Minor Forcing and then rebid his suit or raise. But what if there is no "new minor"?

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
1NT	?

A jump rebid of 3♦ or 3♣ is only invitational, so responder must bid 3NT with many strong unbalanced hands that belong in five or six of a minor.

There is no way for an New Minor Forcing bidder to describe an invitational hand with good support for opener's minor. After responding 1♥ to 1♣ with ♠-4 ♥-K7432 ♦-Q65 ♣-AQ32 and getting a disappointing answer to New Minor Forcing, how can responder stop in 3♣? He can't, because 3♣ is forcing, so he must stay in notrump. Play 3♣ as invitational? But what if the clubs were AKJ3? There's a problem either way.

Another New Minor Forcing drawback is the strength requirement, because many weak hands need conventional help. New Minor Forcing bidders cannot describe a weak 5-5 hand, except for two majors. They must just rebid the higher ranking suit and hope for the best. A weak hand with good support for opener's minor is also a problem, whether or not responder's suit is five long. When responder supports the minor, should opener show three-card support for responder? It's a complete guess.

The main drawback of New Minor Forcing, however, is the bidding space wasted by a New Minor Forcing 2♦ bid. Imagine the difficulties if 2♦ had to be used as Stayman opposite a 1NT opening, with 2♣ a natural sign-off.

Checkback Stayman

With one version of Checkback Stayman (there are several), a 2♣ rebid by responder asks opener to show three-card support for responder's major, or an unbid four-card major, or extra-good hearts (if he opened with 1♥), giving priority to the first. Lacking any of these, opener bids 2♦. Other two-level rebids by responder (except reverses) are sign-offs. All jumps are forcing. To invite game in a suit, responder bids 2♣, then makes his invitation. To sign off in clubs, responder bids 2♣, then 3♣. To invite game with a club bid, responder bids 2♣, then 2NT (artificially). To invite game in notrump, he bids 2NT over 1NT, even with a five-card major if his distribution is 5-3-3-2. A third round 2NT bid is also natural.

Checkback Stayman has no strength or length requirements. If he is prepared for what might ensue, responder can bid 2♣ with any strength whatsoever. This is possible because opener (like a notrump opener) does not show strength; he must bid 2♦, 2♥, or 2♠. After responding 1♠ to 1♦ with ♠-K6543 ♥-A52 ♦-10876 ♣-6 and hearing a 1NT rebid, responder can use Checkback Stayman and pass any response.

After Checkback Stayman, responder's new suit bid at the two level is forcing for one round only. He can show a second suit and follow with an invitational raise of opener's suit. A two-level suit rebid shows a five-card suit and a weak hand, with trump support for opener's minor or a minor suit on the side. Opener can pass with a very strong doubleton. Otherwise he bids minimally to let responder continue his hand description.

Checkback Stayman has the drawback that responder can't stop in two of a major with an invitational hand, possibly resulting in a risky three-level contract.

New Minor Forcing and Checkback Stayman both have the drawback that you can't stop at the two level in the minor that is bid artificially. With New Minor Forcing, responder can't show a weak major-diamond 5-5 opposite a 1♣ opener's 1NT rebid, but can sign off in 2♣. With Checkback Stayman, responder can show that weak 5-5, but can't sign off in 2♣. If you think the two drawbacks cancel, tell me the last time you had a weak responding hand and the opponents let you play in 2♣ after a 1♣ opening and 1NT rebid. It never happens.

So which is superior, New Minor Forcing or Checkback Stayman? My own opinion is reflected in the title, which is not a typo.

Here's Marty Bergen's opinion: "Every time I hear the opponents bid 1♣ - 1♥/1♠ - 1NT - 2♦ (New Minor Forcing) - 2NT, I have to laugh at the 'nature' of bridge players. How can it be correct to use 2♦ as 'Stayman' (forcing opener to bid 2NT when he has no major (suit bid) when 2♣ is available? This potential loss of bidding space makes no sense at all. Whereas after 2♣ checkback, opener's 'negative' is an economical 2♦, as in Stayman, preserving the opportunity for responder to rebid two-of-a-major."

See the chapter CHECKBACK STAYMAN BY RESPONDER in the book "Marvin's Conventions and Treatments."