



Elements of Poker

Tommy Angelo

About the Author

I started going steady with Poker when I was 14 years old. I'd been crazy about her since we first met, back when I was seven. But she wouldn't have anything to do with me back then. She told me to look her up when I had some money and then we would have some real fun. Well, when I turned 14, I was rolling in cash. I had it coming in from five directions. I was a paperboy, window washer, lawn-mower, snow-shoveler, and a soda jerk for two hours a night at a buck an hour. I knew Poker only wanted me for my money, but I didn't care. I said okay Poker, I'm all grown up now. Take me I'm yours. And that's when Poker and I got serious. That's when we hooked up for real, for good.

Poker and I spent a lot of time together during my high-school years. And then, when I turned 18, everything changed. I don't know what happened, I don't know what went wrong, but somehow I fell in love with another game. I had a long and ecstatic affair with Bridge. For the next five years I was either playing bridge, about to play bridge, or wishing I was about to play bridge. I still saw Poker once a week, but Poker wanted way more from me than that.

My romance with Bridge ended abruptly when I accidentally became a full-time professional musician for eight years. My relationship with Poker stayed strong, even though I continued to split my affections. In my life, I have obsessed for years each at scrabble, and chess, and backgammon, and gin, and through it all, there was Poker, always Poker, ready to take me back.

One by one, as they had come, the other games fell away. It's just me and Poker now, as it was in the beginning.

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ISBN: 1-4196-8089-7
ISBN-13: 978-1-4196-8089-2

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Elements of Poker

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*I would like to dedicate this book to
all the people who have told me
that I should write a book.*

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Poker: a card game in which players bet on the value of their hands.

Element: a component or constituent of a whole.

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Contents

About This Book	1
The Band and Crew	16
My Terms	19
I. Universal Elements	25
1. A-Game	25
2. B-Game	25
3. C-Game	25
4. Lopping Off the C-Game	26
5. Quitting	29
6. Sets, Sessions, and Breaks	34
7. Reciprocity	34
8. Quitting Reciprocity	35
9. Bankroll	36
10. The Professional	38
11. Keeping Score	39
12. Accounting for the Rake	40
13. The Price of Poker Does Go Up	42
14. The Rules	43
15. The Profit Premise	44
16. How to Get Respect	45
17. How to Give Respect	46
18. Protection	48
19. Decisions	49
20. Defining Mistake	50
21. The Gray Area	52
22. Tilt	54
23. Tilt Reciprocity	56
24. Hard Tilt	57
25. Soft Tilt	57
26. Winning, Losing, and Breaking Even	57
27. Betting Reciprocity	58
28. On the Importance of Position	62
29. Position	62
30. Position Reciprocity	62
31. Firstlessness	63
32. Suitedness and Connectedness	64
33. Gobsnacked	65
34. Anticipation	65
35. The Rating Game	67
36. Seat Selection	68

37. Tight and Loose	71
38. Passive and Aggressive	72
39. Adaptiveness	73
40. Poker Addictions	73
41. Inevitability	74
42. Emotions	74
43. Entitlement	75
44. Fears	75
45. Running Good and Running Bad	76
46. Moving Up	76
47. Going Pro	77
48. Streaks	80
49. Low-Hanging Fruit	81
50. Discretion	81
51. Object of the Game	82
52. Kuzzycan	83

II. Table Poker 85

Introduction to Table Poker 85

Information

53. Information Reciprocity	86
54. Mum Poker	88
55. Constructing Your Poker Face	90
56. Hands on Face	90
57. The Difference Between Ignoring and Not Reacting	91
58. The Hierarchy of Fear	91
59. Reading the Players	92

Mechanics

60. Get Set	93
61. Look Left	94
62. How to Look at Your Cards	97
63. How Not to Stack Your Chips	97
64. Changing Seats	97
65. Tempo	99
66. Folding	99
67. How to Check	101
68. When to Announce Your Action	101
69. How to Play No-Limit with Ruthless Efficiency	102
70. How to Call, Bet, and Raise at Limit Poker	104

After the Betting

71. Flowchart of a Hold'em Hand	105
72. The Showdown	105
73. Sixth Street	106

74. Slowrolling and Slowcalling	107
75. Slowfolding and Fastfolding	110
76. Fastgrabbing	112
77. Fastrolling	112
78. Showing bluffs	116
79. Fantasy Poker	117
80. Shameless Showdowns	119
<i>The Poker Room</i>	
81. Home Field Vantage	124
82. On the Road.	124
83. Make Your Intentions Known	125
84. How and How Not to Call a Floorman	126
85. Don't Push the Button	127
86. The Dealer Made a Mistake. Should I Speak Up?	129
87. Moving Up to Mid-Limit at Table Poker.	131
88. A Reminder about Dealers.	131
89. Culture	132
90. Be the House	132
III. Internet Poker	135
91. Finger Tilt	135
92. Number of Tables to Play	135
93. The Chat Box	136
94. Notes to Self.	136
95. Comparing Internet Poker and Table Poker	136
IV. Cash Games	139
96. Fluctuation	139
97. Take the Blind or Post Behind?	140
98. Chopping the Blinds.	144
99. Buy the Button	146
100. Game Selection.	146
V. Tournaments	149
101. Event Odds.	149
102. The Bubble	150
103. Tournament Time	152
104. Stack Size Matters (Tournaments)	153
105. The Dollar Value of a Stack.	154
106. Things to Know	172
107. Comparing Cash Games and Tournaments.	173
VI. Hold'em.	177
108. Acting Last	177
109. The Preflop Positions	177
110. The Hijack Seat.	179

111. Universal Starting-Hand Chart	180
112. The Postflop Positions	190
113. Blinds and Buttons	192
114. Shorthanded	192
115. Pocket Aces	194
VII. Limit Hold'em	197
116. The Bread and Butter Situations	197
117. Open-Raising and Open-Limping	199
118. Suitedness at Limit Hold'em	200
119. Starting-Hand Groups for Limit Hold'em	200
120. Game Selection (Limit)	206
121. Stack Size Matters (Limit)	206
VIII. No-Limit Hold'em	209
A Little History	209
122. Stack Size Matters (No-Limit)	210
123. Buying In, Rebuying, and Adding On	213
124. How to Lose a Big Pot	214
125. Seat Selection and Game Rejection Based on Stacks	215
126. Controlling the Pot	217
127. Suitedness at No-Limit Hold'em	219
128. Betting or Raising 1/3 of Your Stack	220
IX. Elements of Performance	225
Introduction to Elements of Performance	225
129. The Path of Least Resistance	228
130. The Path of Leak Resistance	230
131. Awareness	230
132. Results Oriented	232
133. Poker Funk	233
134. Table Funk	235
135. Bliscipline	236
136. Self-Perpetuating Tiltlessness	236
137. A Reminder about Odds	237
138. Cravings	238
139. Meditation	239
140. Focus	239
141. Breathing	242
142. Sitting	247
143. Wellness	248
144. A Process of Illumination	249

Illustrations and Tables

1. Varieties and Venues (About This Book)	10
2. Lopping Off the C-Game (E4).	26
3. Talk Lines (E17)	47
4. The Gray Area (E21).	52
5. The Slide (E36)	70
6. Doing Minimum Time in the Worst Seat (E36)	71
7. Passive Aggressive (E38)	72
8. Flowchart of a Hold'em Hand (E71).	105
9. Take the Blind or Post Behind? (E97)	140
10. Event Odds (E101).	150
11. Payout Structure of the Sample Tournament (E105)	156
12. The Dollar Value of a Par Stack Before the Bubble Bursts (E105)	160
13. The Preflop Positions (E109)	177
14. Universal Starting-Hand Chart (E111)	182
15. Flops-Seen Percentages by Position (E114)	193
16. Starting-Hand Groups for Limit Hold'em (E119)	201
17. Stack Size Matters (No-Limit) (E123)	210

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About This Book

When I was growing up, there was only one person in the known universe who wrote about card games and his name was Edmond Hoyle. We had some of his books in our house. I still have one of them on a shelf. I haven't opened it since way back when, and suddenly I'm curious what's inside.

I just opened it up. It's a small paperback. The pages are yellow and half-way to crumbling. I am going to leaf through it and look for something meaty or profound that transcends time and rings true today.

::: leafing :::

::: still leafing :::

Pretty dry stuff mostly. I am no longer hoping to find anything in here about the glorious greatness of poker as the ultimate human endeavor or anything like that.

::: leafing :::

Okay, here's something. At the beginning of a section called "Strategy of Poker," there is a list of five big-picture ideas which are then expanded on in the text. Here is the list:

Strategy of Poker

To become a good player, one must:

- Learn the poker hands thoroughly.
- Learn the relative values of the hands – what sort of hand may be expected to win the pot.
- Learn how many cards it is best to draw to the various poker combinations.
- Learn the odds against winning with any particular hand, and how to figure the odds offered “by the pot.”
- Observe the other players in the game, to learn their habits and to read their probable strength or weakness from their actions and mannerisms; and at the same time avoid giveaway mannerisms of one’s own.

It was number five that made me smile when I read it and realize that yes, I know how to play poker according to Hoyle.



I became a professional poker player in 1990 when I was 32 years old. Before that, I played music five nights per week in a country-rock band. I performed on drums for four years, and then piano for four years. During that time, playing music was my career and playing poker was a hobby. In 1990, I left the full-time music business and I dropped back to gigging a couple of weekends per month on drums in a classic rock band with guys I’d known forever. There was little pay and lots of passion. To support my food and rent habit, I played poker five nights per week, from 7 p.m. until everybody quit, in a well-populated circuit of home games in my

About This Book

home town of Columbus, Ohio. That was my professional life for seven years. Playing poker every night Monday through Friday and playing music every other weekend. Also, I went on many poker playing trips, to Las Vegas, Atlantic City, Washington DC, St Louis, Davenport, Kansas City, and California.

From 1990 to 1997, I spent about 1/10 of my poker time in the dealer's chair. Sometimes I dealt because I wanted to, and then there were times I dealt because I had to. Also during that time I came up with a foolproof method of avoiding huge losses. What I did was I made sure I never had a huge amount of money to lose. I did that by culling my bankroll now and then, using sports betting, blackjack, and other bad ideas. And if that didn't work, I'd just jump in a poker game that I couldn't beat or afford. I have suffered nearly every indignity and insanity known to poker and gambling.

In 1997, I was charged with running an illegal gaming house. I pled guilty, paid my debt, and moved to Northern California to play in the peaceful legal poker rooms there. I live and play there still.

In 1999, I started writing about my poker experiences. Soon after that, people started writing to me with theirs. They'd ask me what I thought about how they played a hand. Or they'd ask me about a ruling, or they'd describe an ethical dilemma and ask what I'd do. With each letter I was learning, teaching, and flattered. So I kept writing, and the letters kept coming.

There were only a few guys in the world then who were known throughout the poker community as poker teachers for hire. I thought about becoming one of them. I often visited my ideas as to who, what, why, where, and how I would teach. But I hadn't done anything with my teaching ideas because I was stubbornly unkeen on the soliciting idea.

The World Poker Tour first aired on TV in March of 2003, at the same time as tournament attendance and internet poker exploded. Poker entered millions of homes via televisions and computers, thereby creating a massive market for poker instruction.

Elements of Poker

The internet provided accelerated interaction and experience. The tournaments created clumps of money that became bankrolls. All of a sudden, there were lots of smart players with lots of money who were hell bent on getting better. Maybe I could be persuaded to help.

Then, in July of 2003, I got this email:

Tommy,

I enjoy your poker articles and your posts at twoplustwo.com very much. I was wondering if you have ever given poker lessons or if you would want to? I'd be interested.

Your fan,

Michael

Michael's letter opened my eyes to a brilliant business model. Because I had done two of my favorite things – play poker and write about poker – I was being offered money to do my other favorite thing, which is to talk about poker. So my plan was to continue to play poker and write about poker, and prepare some helpful things to talk about, and then figure out how much to charge the next guy.

The first thing I did was go online to see if the domain “tiltless.com” was available. It was. I bought it. I was very pleased.

T I L T L E S S

I've had a thing for those letters in that order for a long time. I see them as one word, and also as two words. I'll use both versions in a sentence.

If no one is tiltless then everyone can tilt less.

About This Book

So, I had a name for my new poker-coaching business. And I had some bedrock ideas that I'd been cementing myself to. As a poker coach, I would:

- Hold all in confidence.
- Remain available for life for ongoing coaching.
- Teach only one-on-one and primarily face-to-face. This was mainly because of fear. I was terrified that I would fail to deliver an expected value. The way I felt was that if I could just talk to a guy and ask him questions and get to know him some, and he me, *then* I'd be able to say things and write things and do things that were worth the price. I wouldn't be afraid.
- Play in the same game with the client for mutual observation. Everyone I've ever met falls into one of two groups: those I've shared a poker table with, and everyone else. I wanted my clients to be in that first group if at all possible because it would give me more to give.
- Presume that the client wants to score higher.

To help me elaborate on that last point, I'd like to introduce Joe and Moe. Joe and Moe appear throughout this book. They are not consistent characters. They are just names I use for examples. For example:

- Joe is the best player at his casino. Everybody knows it, and everybody says so. When Joe plays his A-game, his expectation is +2 big bets per hour (BB/H). But when he tilts, he tilts hard, and he becomes one of the worst players in the room. Everybody knows this too, and everybody says so. When Joe plays his C-game, his expectation is -2BB/H.

Elements of Poker

Let's say Joe hired me to help him improve his score. What should we work on? Should we work on his A-game? Or his C-game?

- Moe is a loser who rarely and barely tilts. When Moe plays his best game, he loses 1BB/H. When he plays his worst game, he loses 1.3BB/H. Because of his mental steadiness, Moe's C-game will always net only slightly less than his A-game. What should Moe work on? His A-game? Or his C-game?

My premise would not be that the client wants to merely learn how to play better. I would assume that the client's objective is to score higher. Learning how to make your best game better is one way to score higher. Learning how to play your best game more often is another way. My curriculum would put equal emphasis on both ways.

In March 2004, I launched my tiltless.com website, where I described my services. Right away the word was out at twoplustwo.com that I was coaching, and I was instantly in action. Today it is three plus years later and I have 50 clients. Five of my clients were...

Okay, I have to cut in here for a second to talk about the word "client" because my buddy Deva gives me all kinds of shit over it. "How can a poker bum like you have something called a client?" And I'm like, okay, fair enough. So just what would you suggest I call these people? Students? I tried that word for a while and it didn't sit right. So eventually I settled on calling my clients "clients," which technically makes me a "consultant," which is another word Deva gives me grief over.

I must say though, there is one thing I really like about using the word "client." I like being able to invoke the sanctuarial right of client confidentiality. Okay, where were we...

About This Book

Five of the fifty have been face-to-face clients that were one-session-and-out. Five have been face-to-face one-session-at-a-time clients. Fifteen were/are phone-only clients of various commitments. And the rest have been through my full tiltless program, which is a comprehensive, personalized, face-to-face, three-day coaching blitz, followed by follow-up coaching. My favorite endorsement came during a goodbye when a client said, “This was not at all what I expected, but it was exactly what I needed.”

I have taught seasoned pros, scared newbies, college students, and family men. I’ve coached quiet players and chatterboxes, struggling players and millionaires.

For two years, my material was in a state of constant and drastic revision and expansion. It collected itself into one Word document that I call the master outline, but really it’s more like a clothesline. It’s a very long list of topics and talking points, some of them in code that only I know, others expanded. Plus analogies, stories, charts, and short writings by me and clients.

To write this book, I looked through the master outline and I selected the topics that I thought would be most helpful to the most players most often. Then I stopped playing poker and started typing.

Much of this book is about imagined extremes. The Professional is an imagined extreme. Mum poker is an imagined extreme. Tiltlessness is an imagined extreme. This book is about imagining idealistic extremes and then implementing practical methods of moving toward them.



Elements of Poker

Next I will go into some detail about the sections of this book, and also cover a few matters of form.

There are 144 numbered elements, separated into nine sections.

Universal Elements

Table Poker

Internet Poker

Cash Games

Tournaments

Hold'em

Limit Hold'em

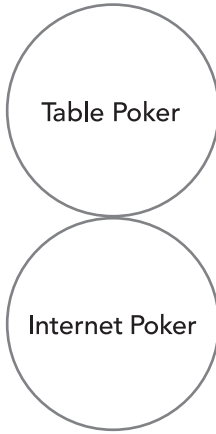
No-Limit Hold'em

Elements of Performance

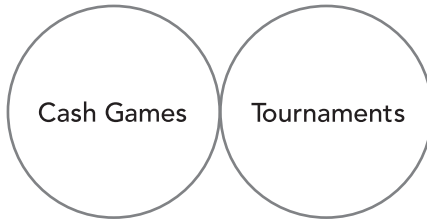
The first section, Universal Elements, contains topics such as anticipation, respect, the rake, quitting, and tilt.

The next four sections contain topics specific to the four settings of modern poker: Table Poker, Internet Poker, Cash Games (also called Ring Games), and Tournaments.

About This Book



Every hand is either table poker or internet poker.

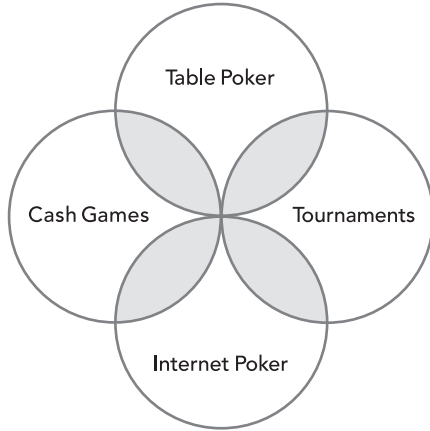


Every hand is either in a cash game or in a tournament.

Let's say you play poker in only one of those four settings, and you want to know which parts of this book might apply to you. The answer is all of it, except for the circle opposite your circle. For example, if you play poker exclusively on the internet, then the only section that would definitely not apply to you would be the table poker section.

Elements of Poker

VARIETIES AND VENUES



The circles are the varieties of poker in 2007.
The intersections are the four venues: internet cash games, internet tournaments, table poker tournaments, and table poker cash games.

The next three sections are:

Hold'em

Limit Hold'em

No-Limit Hold'em

The Hold'em section is mostly about position. Therefore, much of it applies to any game that uses two blinds and a button.

The Limit Hold'em and No-Limit Hold'em sections contain topics specific to those games. Here are some other places where specifics of limit and no-limit appear:

About This Book

E9. Bankroll

E68. When to Announce Your Action

E69. How to Play No-Limit with Ruthless Efficiency

E70. How to Call, Bet, and Raise at Limit Poker

E77. Fastrolling

E97. Take the Blind or Post Behind?

E111. Universal Starting-Hand Chart

The last section, Elements of Performance, is about how to be awake.



In this book, there are occasional passages outside the table poker section that apply only to table poker, and there are passages outside the cash game section that apply only to cash games. It's not that I think table poker is somehow better than internet poker, or that cash games are somehow better than tournaments. I don't. To me, there is one tree of poker, and no part of the tree is any better than any other.

We live in the poker tree and we move around as we please. The tree began with one main trunk: table-poker cash-games. That was the only poker there was for the first 100 years or so of the tree's life. During that time, the tree grew branches, twigs, and leaves. Those were the various kinds of poker, such as draw, stud, and hold'em, and their endlessly invented varieties. Branches and twigs and leaves have been growing and falling off since the beginning, while the basic shape of the tree remained the same.

Then, in the 1970's, from the main trunk there grew a whole new limb. The tournament limb. It started small, and it didn't

grow very fast, but it was well-nourished, and eventually the tournament limb grew thick and strong. With the new limb came the need for a new label to distinguish the limb from the trunk. The terms “ring game” and “cash game” came into usage to mean “non-tournament poker.” The term “side game” appeared as a subset of “cash game” that means “cash games near a tournament area that are only spread when a tournament is in town.”

During my first eight years as a pro, from 1990 to 1998, I played nothing but cash games. During those years, I went to the World Series of Poker and the Hall of Fame tournaments in Las Vegas almost every year. The turnouts were tiny by today’s numbers. But to me, and I’m sure many others, these were the biggest greatest poker conventions on earth and attendance was required. Man I loved that scene, and playing in the side games. I never entered a WSOP or Hall of Fame event back then because I figured to get clobbered my first however many times, and a grand or two for a tournament buy-in was a big chunk of my bankroll to bet on a long shot.

In the late 90’s, another new limb sprung from the trunk of the poker tree: the internet poker limb. We needed another new label for the trunk, something to mean “non-internet poker.” The clunky term “brick-and-mortar poker” was our first choice and we’ve been using it for nine years. I propose a sleeker label: “table poker.”

From 1998 to 2002, I went on many small, short, local ventures on the tournament limb. And I spent vast tracts of time on the internet limb. But I never strayed far from the trunk, and eventually I stopped going out on limbs altogether. Apparently I prefer my poker to be untimed and germey. And you know what they say. Write about what you know! So I did, and the result is a table-poker cash-game bias that runs throughout this book.



About This Book

The notation I use for cards is:

AcKh = ace of clubs and king of hearts.

T5o = ten-five offsuit.

A2s = ace-deuce suited.

A-K-T, 5, 4 = ace-king-ten on the flop, a five on the turn, and a four on the river.



The only previously published material of mine in this book is from a concurrently written work called “Reciprocity: The Cause of Profit at Poker,” which I wrote in the summer of 2006. Then I imported most of it into Elements of Poker in chunks. The Reciprocity article is at my website:

www.tommyangelo.com

Also at my site:

- The Universal Starting-Hand Chart from Element 111 in the “Hold’em” section. You can download the chart in Word and Excel.
- All of my articles, with the seven articles that are mentioned in this book under one link.
- Details about my coaching services.
- A CD for sale of original poker songs called “I’m Running Bad” that I made in 2001.

Elements of Poker

I think of this book as my curriculum catching its breath, and breadth. I hope it will serve my future clients as an accelerator, and that familiarity with the terms, tools, and concepts will allow us to hit the ground running.

To those I coached before I wrote this, this book is for you, and because of you. Thank you. And may you tilt less.

I'd like to close with something one of my teachers taught me about teaching. Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote:

“In a way, that’s all any of us do when we teach. As best we can, we show others what we have seen up to now. It’s at best a progress report, a map of our experiences, and by no means the absolute truth. And so the adventure unfolds.”

Tommy Angelo, July 2007

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The Band and Crew

There's no such thing as a solo album, and this book is no exception. To say I'm lucky to even know these people and that it's been a joy to work with them doesn't quite say it. To say they contributed hundreds of hours and thousands of ideas doesn't quite say it either. To say that this project was utterly reliant upon their efforts comes closer to saying it. But it still doesn't quite say it. Okay. I'll just say it. Thank you. Bigtime.

With great pleasure, I introduce...

On lights, sound, illustrations, album jacket, and digital wizardry:

from San Francisco, California – Dave Sciacero

from Scotts Valley, California – Rob Mackay

On hand charts, formatting, and tuning:

from Brooklyn, New York – Rick Putnam

On editing and harmony:

from Raleigh, North Carolina – Matt Flynn

from Las Vegas, Nevada – Dave “Clarkmeister” Clark

from Palo Alto, California – Kathleen Gilligan

from San Francisco, California – Lloyd Silberzweig

from Las Cruces, New Mexico – Doug Weathers

On bass – from San Francisco – my best buddy –
Alex Roberts

She has worked closely with me on this project from day one.
On lead editing and propulsion – from Las Cruces, New
Mexico – the indescribably essential – Anna Paradox.

And me on keyboard.

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My Terms

Poker changes so fast that our jargon can barely keep up. It's no surprise to find a few missing terms here and there, where something worthy of a label doesn't have one yet. I have a tendency to seek out the yet-unnamed and name them, using words I would use, and then I use them.

I am especially motivated when I spot an incomplete set. It all began over the word "rainbow."

I remember when we started calling a three-suited flop a rainbow flop. I thought it was one of the finest poker terms yet. I was soon obsessed with the two missing words in the newly implied set. We badly needed a word that meant "a flop with two cards of one suit and one of another," so that instead of saying, "the flop was 3-4-5 with a possible flush draw" or "the flop was 3-4-5 with two diamonds and one spade," we could simply say, "The flop was 3-4-5, something." And to complete the set, we needed a word for when the flop is all the same suit. The best I could come up with was twotone and monotone.

When the word "cutoff" caught on – to mean "the position one to the right of the button" – another incomplete set appeared, to my mind anyway. I liked the word cutoff just as much as rainbow, maybe even more. Rainbow arose because there are different suits. The Cutoff was born from position. It made a name for itself on positional merit alone. Even the almighty button, the ultimate and optimal position, was not initially named because of the value of its position, but rather, because of the actual dealer button that sits on the table.

When the button folds, the cutoff is first in line to assume power. Yes, cutoff, your positional strength is indeed great and you are indeed name worthy. So, how many more seats do we go counterclockwise around the table with all this naming? To me the answer is as clear as an azure sky of deepest summer. One. When I look at a preflop poker table, I see three seats of heightened positional consequence, and we only had names for two of them.

Elements of Poker

There's the button, the cutoff, and the ???. I completed the set by calling it the hijack seat. More on that in E110.

Our great word "slowroll" seeded a contrived set of words. A slowroll is a sinister ending to a poker hand. But it's not the only one. And there are virtuous endings too. I took it upon myself to name and define some of each. There's fastfolding, slowfolding, fastrolling, slowcalling, and fastgrabbing.

Here is a list of my terms, with definitions, and element numbers where they can be found.

Betting – I refer to folding, checking, calling, betting, and raising collectively as betting.

BHEF – Acronym for Best Hand Ever Fold (E111)

Bliscipline – Bliss via discipline. (E136)

Bubble Out – To bust out of a tournament on the bubble.

Event Odds – Event odds is a betting decision variable that only exists in tournaments. (E101)

Fastfold – A fastfold is when the betting is finished, and you muck your hand from any position as soon as you know you are beat. Fastfolds range from courteous to powerful. (E75)

Fastgrab – At the showdown, when the winner of a pot takes his last bet back before all of his opponents have relinquished their cards, that's a fastgrab. (E76)

Fastroll – A fastroll is when a player shows down his hand out of turn on purpose. (E77)

Finger Tilt – Finger tilt is an internet poker phenomenon. It's when a message from the brain gets ambushed by emotion, distraction, or fatigue on its way to the fingers. (E91)

Fluct – When fluctuation gets you down, you're fluct. (E96)

Game Rejection – The flipside of game selection.

Hard Tilt – Hard tilt is traditional, emotionally-charged tilt. (E24)

My Terms

Hijack Seat – In poker games that use a dealer button, the hijack seat is the position that is two to the right of the button. (E110)

Hufta – Acronym for “heads up first to act.” (E111)

Hulta – Acronym for “heads up last to act.” (E111)

Monotone – A flop is monotone when it is all one suit.

Mum Poker – Just what it sounds like. (E54)

Nubble Up – In a tournament, if your stack is down to a nub, and you double up, then you nubbled up.

POOP – Acronym for “passively out of position.” *Sometimes I play POOP.*

Reciprocity – The cause of profit at poker. (E7)

Reciprocal Analysis – To trade places and then compare what would have happened to what did happen. (E27)

Sixth Street – When the betting stops, sixth street starts. (E73)

Slowcall – A slowcall is when it is your turn, and you know for sure you are going to call, and your call is going to be the final betting action of the entire hand, and you haven’t called yet. (E74)

Slowfold – A slowfold is when the betting is over, and you’re beat, but you still have your cards. (E75)

Soft Tilt – Soft tilt is any non-A-game performance that was not caused by an emotional reaction to the players and cards. Major causes of soft tilt are fatigue, running low on money, and distraction. (E25)

Splain – To explain yourself during sixth street. (E80)

Table Poker – Table poker is any poker that is played on a table. (E53-E90)

Twotone – A flop is twotone when it is two-suited. For example: two hearts and one diamond.

WHEP – Acronym for Worst Hand Ever Play (E111)

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Elements of Poker

- I. Universal Elements
- II. Table Poker
- III. Internet Poker
- IV. Cash Games
- V. Tournaments
- VI. Hold'em
- VII. Limit Hold'em
- VIII. No-Limit Hold'em
- IX. Elements of Performance

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Universal Elements

1. A-Game

Your A-game is when you play your best and feel your best at the same time. You can move in and out of your A-game many times in a session. The idea is not to.

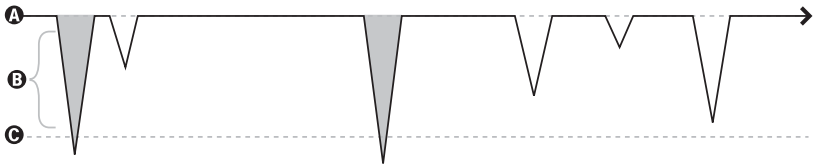
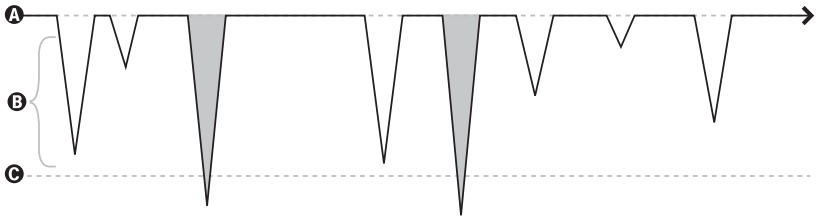
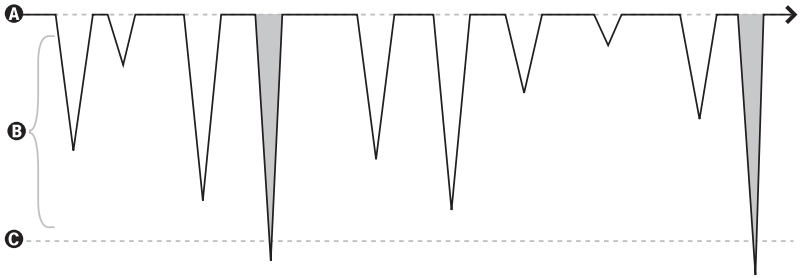
2. B-Game

Your B-game is everything between your A-game and your C-game. It's not your best and it's not your worst. B-game is bad for two reasons. It scores lower than your A-game. And it lives right next to your C-game.

3. C-Game

Your C-game is when you play poorly according to you. You might play bad and know you are playing bad. You might play bad and wait until tomorrow to tell yourself that you did actually play bad. Or you might play bad, and even tell yourself that you played bad, either during a session or after, but you lie to yourself about just how bad you played. In any case, if you know you played bad, that's your C-game.

4. Lopping Off the C-Game



Universal Elements

In these graphs, the X axis is time and the Y axis is performance. The horizontal line is your A-game, and the dips represent various durations and depths of B-game and C-game. These illustrations are fractal, meaning the represented time frame could be an hour, a week, or a year. From each graph to the next, the same change was made. The lowest dips were leveled out. The C-game was lopped off. I call the result a rise in C-level.



All the people who have won lots of money over many years at poker have three things in common. They have an A-game that will beat someone else's A-game. They play against those people. And they play their A-game dang near always. To bring about that third point – consistency of A-game – we turn to the C-game. To play your A-game more often, and then more often, and then even more often than that, the essential act is to apply effort, during sessions and in between, forever, to lopping off your C-game.

When you lop off some C-game, you end up with a new and improved C-game. You have a new worst that isn't quite as bad as your old worst was. Wouldn't it be great to have a great C-game? Lop. Lop. Lop.



Have you ever wondered what your win rate is when you are at your best? Is it 1 big bet per hour? 2? More? How about your loss rate when you are at your worst? Is it minus 1 big bet per hour? 2? More?

You could do a "C-game cost analysis" like this. Let's say your A-game wins 1BB/hour and your C-game loses 3BB/hour. So your C-game costs you 4BB/hour. And let's say you play your C-game two hours per week. The cost of your C-game would be 8BB/week. For a \$20/40 limit hold'em player, that comes to about \$16,000 per year.

Elements of Poker



Whenever you lop off some C-game, you increase the percentage of time you spend playing your A-game. This means that the work you put into your A-game will pay a higher return by being put into play more often.



From the instant each of us learned that three-of-a-kind beats two pair, we have been working on our A-game. When we think about how we play, we are working on our A-game. When we read a poker book, we are working on our A-game. When we write about hands or talk about hands, we are working on our A-game. Have you ever thought about a betting situation and made plans for how you would handle it the next time it comes up? I have. Zillions of times. That is A-game practice. Have you ever thought about how to play against a particular opponent? That is A-game practice. A-game practice is what we default to. That's because when we project a future reality, we are the hero. Of course we are at our best! Of course we do not practice the times we aren't. We do not think to add conditions to our fantasies such as "I am stuck and steaming," or "I can barely keep my eyes open." If we did, then that would be C-game practice. Sound crazy? Try it a few times and see what happens. Lop. Lop. Lop.



When is C-game most likely to occur? At the beginning of a session? Or at the end? It's no surprise then that the most important skill for lopping off the C-game is quitting.

5. Quitting

This is the one of the longest elements in the book. What happened was, I started writing about quitting, and well, you guessed it, I couldn't quit.



In order to quit well, you must be in control of yourself at the end of the session. It can be no other way. To achieve your highest possible score, you must be at your A-performance and your A-mindset all the way to the end, especially to the very end, of every session, not only so that you will make your best betting decisions, but also so that you will make your best quitting decisions.



Are you the kind of player who likes to think of yourself as earning a wage at poker? For example, let's say that when you play \$20/40 limit hold'em, your average earn is one big bet per hour. Do you think of 1BB/H as the amount you are earning while you play, regardless of how much you happen to actually be winning or losing during a session? Then tell me something. How can you be stuck, say, \$800, in a full \$20/40 game, and decide to extend your curfew for just one more round because "the game is too good to leave right now." Think about what you are saying. Even at your best, your expected earn is, say, 1.5BB/H, or \$60 per hour, which comes to about \$20 per round. Is that why you took the big blind just now at 2 a.m? When you've been playing all night? And you have to be somewhere in the morning? And you are stuck \$800? In order to make twenty bucks?



Elements of Poker

When you are winning, and you are very happy to be winning, and then you start to blow back some of your profit, and then you blow back some more of your profit, and the urge to flee grabs hold of you, and all of a sudden you'd really like to book a winner for the day – do it. Hit the door. Lock up the win.

What has happened is that your emotional risks are no longer in step with your financial risks. You and your money have become emotionally imbalanced.

Let's take it from the moment you get the idea to cash out and lock up a win, and project the future. There are three main things that could happen:

- You quit right now, a winner. We have established as a given that you will be happy. We will call the amount of happiness you will feel X.
- You continue to play and you win some more money before quitting. You will be happier than X, but not all that much happier. You'll probably be around one-fifth X to one-tenth X happier.
- You continue to play and you end up losing for the day. No more X for you. Nothing but Y, Y, Y.

P a i n.

I had 'em. I had the money.
I knew I was supposed to quit.
I knew it I knew it I knew it.
What the fuck is wrong with me.
Next time I'm just going to walk out.

P a i n.

Universal Elements

When you are winning, and you reach a point in the session when the happiness you will gain by winning more money will be much less than the pain you will endure if you lose, quit. Away from the table you can examine how and why this imbalance occurs. Meanwhile, learn to trust the quitting voice, and to react without question.



If you are stuck and you are not having fun, and the reason you are not having fun is because you are stuck, then it's okay to quit while citing this to yourself as the reason: I want to have fun. I am not having fun. So I will stop this unfun activity, now.



Here's an example of a kind of quit I've done many times. I'm playing limit hold'em, I've been playing quite a while, and I'm running flat. The game is crazy loose, and slow. We're playing maybe 20 hands an hour. I'm playing real tight. I'm not tilted, yet. But I'm wobbling, kind of on the edge. If I was to finally get involved in one of these swollen pots and lose it, well I might as well just pack it up for the night right then, rather than try to fight off tilt and fatigue and yeah, I'll play one more big pot, if I lose it, I'll go. But if I win it...

If I win it, that'll be all I need to get revived and resettled for another hour or two, maybe more. If I win it, I'll take a little walk and wash my face and hunker down for some more folding.

So here comes pocket kings. I've ended many a long session on pocket kings. And pocket aces. And flopped sets that lose on the river. And other similar crashing escapes. And that's what it is really, a crash, followed by an escape. It's a comforting feeling, when I get those aces in that state of mind, knowing that I'll quit if I lose this hand and stay if I win it. If I lose the hand, I'm prepared

Elements of Poker

to exit graciously. When I get to my car, I feel bad because losing feels bad, but I feel great about the escape.



Being able to quit well when you are stuck is an essential skill for long-term winning. You can improve by practicing it, just like any other skill or talent. The talent I'm talking about here is standing up and walking away at the moment when you know you really should, but you really don't want to. There is a way to practice this skill. Take a lot of breaks. If you take a lot of breaks, and you do it the same whether you're ahead or behind, whether you feel steady and stable or tilted and toppling, then you will build up quitting strength much more quickly than if you think of quitting as something that happens only once per session.



Of the many homespun sayings I've heard around a poker table, this is one of my all time faves. I heard it from Cowboy Bill back when he ran a no-limit hold'em game every night at 7 p.m. at Pacific News in San Mateo.

To describe a player who will quit early if he gets ahead a little, but who will play late and lose big if he starts out unlucky, Bill would say, "He eats like a bird and shits like an elephant."



My third client was a friendly old fellow who lived in Las Vegas. He wrote to me and asked if I would allow him to pay me a fee so that he could buy me lunch and talk about poker. Already I knew that consulting was going to agree with me.

We talked on the phone and we decided to meet for lunch the next time I was in town. When we met, I asked him to describe his poker sessions to me, what times he starts, what he does when

he gets to the poker room, how much money he takes, what he plays, how much he buys in for and why, how he bets in certain common situations, and what his results have been.

He was very enthusiastic about poker. Although he had been playing for many years, it was only in the last year that he had “gotten serious” about getting better at poker and making money at it. He was consuming books and ideas and he was putting effective effort into his betting strategies, his understanding of his opponents, and everything else that has to do with playing the game. But his results – his actual score – had been consistently bad.

Then I asked him to describe his quitting, when he does it, and why, and do you play too long sometimes? Maybe because you’re stuck? Do you play when you think you are too tired to play? Or when you just feel like crap?

Here is my recollection of what he said: “I’ve been playing five nights per week lately, in the \$100 maximum buy-in no-limit hold’em game at The Mirage. I start at 7 p.m. and I quit at around two or three in the morning. By 11 o’clock, I am ahead almost every night and playing great. And then something will go wrong or I’ll lose a pot or, I don’t know, I get testy and things get to me, and a few hours after that I’ve got my head in my hands.”

“What we have here is a classic case of Cinderella syndrome,” I said. “You need to get your butt out of the casino by the stroke of midnight, before you turn ugly. That’s the only thing you should focus on. Nothing else. If you do not acquire the ability to walk away when you are playing like shit, then you will lose, and lose, and lose, night after night after night, just like you have been. There can’t be anything more important for you to work on.”

He agreed, enthusiastically. Over dessert and coffee we planned some short and long range changes.

6. Sets, Sessions, and Breaks

A set is the amount of time between sitting down and standing up. Think of your poker life as a series of sets. A set is typically an hour long. Shorter than an hour is fine. Longer than an hour might be fine. But longer than two hours is never fine.

A session is one or more sets grouped in time. Long sessions are fine, but only for as long as you are fine, and only if done in sets.

A break is the time between sets. To take a break, remove yourself physically from the game, and also mentally. Focus your mind on something you can see or hear, or on some part of your body. What's critical is that you stop the poker thinking, even if it's only for a few seconds. (More on that later.) The main thing here is to think of breaks as something to practice at and get better at and do, do, do.

7. Reciprocity

Before anything flows, there must be a difference. Between different elevations, water flows. Between different pressures, air flows. Between different poker players, money flows.

In the world of reciprocity, it's not what you do that matters most, and it's not what they do. It's both. Reciprocity is any difference between you and your opponents that affects your bottom line. Reciprocity says that when you and your opponents would do the same thing in a given situation, no money moves, and when you do something different, it does.

You can mine for reciprocal gold anywhere in the poker universe. Pick a topic, any topic. It can be as general as "food selection" or as specific as "Ace-king in the big blind at limit hold'em." You dig for gold by looking for things that you could do differently in the future, things that will create or increase

advantageous differences between you and your opponents, and thereby cause theoretical money to flow from them to you.

8. Quitting Reciprocity

“Walking away is easy. The hard part is standing up.” – me

I have always had very strict policies when it comes to quitting, even when I first started playing poker. Back then I had two main quitting rules that I never broke. I would always quit if I was out of money and nobody would lend me any, and I would always quit if everybody else did.

Eventually I quit all that stuff. I quit running out of money, and I quit being the last guy to quit. Nowadays, I think of quitting as a skill set unto itself, with branching subsets of skills for each type of quitting situation. There’s knowing how to quit at limit games, and there’s knowing how to quit at no-limit. There’s knowing how to quit when you have a curfew, and when you don’t. There’s being able to quit when you’re ahead, and when you’re stuck. There’s quitting when you feel good, and for when that doesn’t happen, you need to know how to quit when you feel bad. There are many ways to outquit your opponents.

One thing about tournaments is nobody ever quits. That decision is done for you, or rather, to you. The good news is, it is impossible to make a bad quitting decision in a tournament. The bad news is, your opponents can’t screw it up either, which means there is no reciprocal gold to be found in tournaments by the superior quitter.

By one way of looking at it, I have made tens of thousands of terrible quitting decisions. Times when everything was wrong. When I was tired. And tilted. And the game was bad. But I’d play on. I’m talking situations where a panel of quitting experts would unanimously decree: “You are severely injured and you are bleeding all over the table. Quit. Quit now.”

But I wouldn't. I'd take the next hand. And that'd be one bad quitting decision. After that hand, I'd have the option to quit, but no, I'd take another hand – I'd make another quitting mistake. That's two quitting mistakes in four minutes. And I had just begun to not quit.

In time, my blood started to clot, and I got a little bit better at quitting, and then a little more better, and then one day I realized that every session of cash-game poker I ever play will end on a quit, so I really should continue forever to work on getting better at quitting, and a few years later I realized that if I wanted to quit well every session, then I'd have to be sharp at the very end of every session, since that's always when the quitting happens, and a few years after that I realized that no action is an island, that everyone else's sessions always end on a quit too, and that the real reason there is money to be made by quitting well is because sometimes my opponents don't. Reciprocity.

9. Bankroll

I heard someone say that a poker player's bankroll is like a carpenter's hammer. It's his main tool. He has to have it or he can't work. I've always liked that analogy, so I did a little adding on. During a session, a poker player's money is like a carpenter's nails. A good carpenter brings lots of extra nails to the job site so that he 1) doesn't run out, and 2) doesn't worry about running out.



You can say you have a poker bankroll, but really what you have is an imaginary wall between some of your money and the rest of it.

Behind your main poker bankroll wall, there are two other walls on wheels that you construct and maneuver. There's the money you partition off and put on the table to bet with. That's

one bankroll. And then there's whatever other funds that are immediately available to you while you are playing, such as the money in your pocket, or maybe even the money in your buddy's pocket. Wherever it is, that's another bankroll. So all together, you have three separate bankrolls when you play. That means you have three ways to run out of money. You can go table broke, pocket broke, and broke broke.

Do you play your best game when you are running out of money?

I sure don't. The less concerned I am about my funding, the better I play. And I believe the same is true for most everyone. So really, reciprocally speaking, all I have to do is partition my money better than my opponents do, and I make money.



If you play table poker, keep a lot of cash at home. At least 10 times your normal big loss. For a \$4/8 player whose typical large loss for a session is \$300, that would mean keeping at least \$3,000 at home at all times, in cash and/or casino chips. For a similarly fluctuated \$20/40 player, that would be \$15,000. For a \$100/200 player whose normal big loss is \$7,500, this would mean keeping at least \$75,000 at home all the time, or at the cage. The power of this suggestion cannot be experienced by reading about it. It can only be felt, by practicing it. If you keep a very fat cash bankroll in your dwelling for a few months, I believe you will be noticeably and consistently more calm and focused while playing.



Sometimes you need to choose the lesser evil. Let's say you are going to play no-limit hold'em at the casino and your normal buy-in for the game is \$500. You know from the past that if you lose a few buy-ins, you start to play really bad. In other words, if you get stuck \$1500, the best decision for you will be to quit. How much

should you take to the casino? Should you take \$1500? \$3,000? \$5,000? \$1,000?

The answer is that if you play well when you are stuck, you should take way more money than you think you will need. If you play really bad after you get stuck beyond a certain amount, then you should only take that amount. This means that when your last money is on the table, you will stumble on the emotional hurdles that arise from having your last money on the table. That's bad. But it's the lesser evil, compared to being stuck and steaming and well-funded, so you should choose it.



There is an article at tommyangelo.com about bankroll called "Enough Is Not Enough."

10. The Professional

The Professional is immortal, unless he goes broke, in which case, he dies. If he takes a job, he dies. If he takes a loan, he dies. If he takes a gift, he dies. If he in any way acquires money that did not pass through a poker pot, he dies. These conditions cause The Professional to see every decision as a poker decision. The Professional is all meta-game, all the time.

I created The Professional to help me decide what to do. When I need some advice about a poker decision, I just ask The Professional. You can do the same thing. Be advised that The Professional's advice will vary. That's because he has multiple personalities. In your mind, The Professional might be a frothy young jock, while in my mind he could be a slothy old rock. But those differences and any others we might conjure up don't matter. The Professional's advice is always right for each of us. That's because when we talk to The Professional, we're just talking to ourselves, our best selves.

11. Keeping Score

There's two kinds of scoring at poker. There's actual score, measured in actual dollars, and there's theoretical score, measured in theoretical dollars. The theoretical score is the "expected value" of a decision, or any combination of decisions.

If we are talking on the phone and I ask, "What was your score last night?" I would be asking for your actual score.

When I say things like, "If you were to start folding bad hands more often, your score would go up," and "Every time you go on tilt, your score goes down," then I am talking about your theoretical score.



Take notice of how your scorekeeping methods help and hurt your mindset when you play. If you think that the act of keeping score helps with your overall discipline, then that benefit alone is reason enough to keep score. If you think that the act of keeping score is causing costly mind-clutter while you play, then stop keeping score and see how that goes. You can always start again.

When we have a desire to keep score, what we desire is comparison. We want to compare our current results to our past results. We want to compare our current results to our future results. And we want to compare our past results to our future results. Then there's the rest of the world. We want to compare our results to someone else's results, or to theoretically expected results, or to desired results. Our needs for these comparisons can be emotional. We just need to know. We want to know. Or we might use the comparison to guide our game-selection decisions and our bankroll decisions. It's all fine by me. The emotional reasons, and the business-minded reasons. Devise your current system to satisfy your current needs, and your projected needs. It's okay to just collect the data and hardly look back at it if that suits your needs – which happens to be what I do. What's not okay is

when the data is so high up in your consciousness that your mind churns on it while you play.

12. Accounting for the Rake

Joe quit his job to play poker for a living with a \$200,000 bankroll. His first year as a full time pro, he played 2,000 hours and he made \$10,000. His second year as a pro, he played 2,000 hours and he made \$20,000. Looking back on his first two years as a pro, Joe is happy in some ways and not so happy in others. He's happy about joblessness. He's not so happy about low income – only \$30,000 in two years. But then, he's kind of happy about having beat the game at all, even if he didn't win as much as he had hoped. Joe has his chin up. In his mind, he has officially earned some stripes as a pro. Plus he figures hey, I doubled my earn from my first year to my second! Not so bad!

Well, if Joe had done his accounting like a business – where net equals gross minus expenses – he'd be a lot happier about netting \$30,000, and not quite so happy about doubling his income from one year to the next.

It's not like Joe isn't rake sensitive. He is. He appreciates a discount, and he notices when a game is relatively expensive. It's just that Joe has never collected data on his table expenses, the invisible drip, the house take, in the various forms that it takes, and takes, and takes, whether it's money raked from the pot, money collected each half hour, or the fee of a tournament. If he did, Joe might be surprised to learn that all three of his favorite poker venues cost the same: \$20 per hour.

- On the internet, Joe plays four tables at the same time. On average he pays \$5 per hour per table to the poker website.

Universal Elements

- When Joe plays a live tournament, the average amount that he pays to the house is \$100 per event, and Joe's average duration per event is five hours.
- When Joe plays table poker, sometimes he plays in discounted late-night short-handed games. The house take can be as low as \$5 per hour per player. In a game like that, Joe figures he wins a lot of pots and he tips at least \$10 per hour, probably more. So \$15 per hour is the least Joe pays to play cash game table poker. On the upper end, Joe pays as much as \$30 per hour in full games in California, but usually closer to \$20, so overall, Joe pays about \$20 per hour to play table poker.

Joe's table expenses are \$20 per hour and he plays 2,000 hours per year, so his annual table expenses are \$40,000. To calculate how much money Joe's actual betting decisions earned him over his first two years as a pro, we take his net income ($10K + 20K = 30K$) and we add his table expenses ($40K + 40K = 80K$) to learn that Joe made \$110,000. Not too shabby!

Joe, as long as you're looking back on your data anyway, you might as well choose the perspective that is analytically and emotionally optimal. Know and embrace your real score, the big number, the \$110,000. That's how your specific combination of skill and luck truly fared over the last two years. If you do your accounting like an accountant, you'll feel better about your score, and your skill, as you should!

And Joe, I'm sorry to be the one who has to tell you this, but remember when you said your income doubled from \$10,000 to \$20,000? Well, it didn't. In the first year, in your world, you made \$10,000, end of story. In my world, your net income was \$10,000, your table expenses were \$40,000, and your gross income was \$50,000. In the second year, your ledger says you made \$20,000. I say you netted \$20,000. To that I add the \$40,000 that was collected from your stack by the house to arrive at \$60,000 as your

gross income for year two. You say you went from 10K to 20K, a 100% increase. I say you went from 50K to 60K, a 20% increase.



There is an article at tommyangelo.com about the rake called
“Zero Sum Minus Some.”

13. The Price of Poker Does Go Up

In 2003, the biggest rake I had ever seen in a public poker room was \$3 per hand. Over the next few years, \$4 rakes became the norm. Today in 2007, there are many tables charging \$5 per hand, and some charging \$6.

The price of poker has been going up since the dawn of dropboxes. It will continue to go up as long as taxes, wages, utilities, insurance, and everything else that businesses pay go up. When I see someone react badly to the rake going up, the smart-aleck in me wants to say, “So, were you expecting the rake to stay the same forever, or were you expecting it to go down?”

Someday the rake will be \$7 per hand where you play, then \$8, then maybe after that it will hop straight to \$10, and it won't stop there, that's for sure, not unless the economy collapses. I hope the day comes when I am playing poker and the rake is \$20 per hand. Hell, why stop there. Maybe I'll live to see \$30!

Playing poker in a casino is like going to see a movie you've seen before. You know what you are getting. And you know what it costs. If you then go and sit in the theater, and you complain about the movie, and you complain about the price, well guess what. It's not the casino's fault.

14. The Rules

Every rule of poker started as a fresh idea, usually cooked up in a hurry to take care of a problem. I can imagine the birth of some of the great rules of poker:

“Hey! Quit that! No fair telling him what to do!” And the “one player to a hand” rule was born.

“You tight-asses have no gamble in you whatsoever. Either we figure out a way to loosen this game up, or I’m taking my easy money and going home.” And the ante was born.

“Hey guys. Guess what. Because no one has folded during this entire hand, we aren’t going to have enough cards for everybody to get seven. What do we do now?” And the “community card” was born, which later grew up to become hold’em.

Rules are meant to be made up. If it’s just me and you playing, then we have no choice but to adjust or interpret the rules at the time of each disagreement, or invent new ones. If there’s a group of us, the same thing happens, as self-appointed committees and chairmen come up with ways to improve the conditions of contest. Many times I have been accused in casual gaming situations of making up the rules as I go, and I’m like, you’re right. And you’re welcome.

There is no higher human authority than when someone who has been granted authority by us is acting on that authority. In this way, every floorman is the Supreme Court. When the floorman comes to your table and makes a ruling, whatever he says is the correct ruling. If you get the feeling that he’s making up the rules on the spot, well, somebody has to. That’s the rule of rules. And we agreed it would be the floorman. That’s the rule of authority.

15. The Profit Premise

I have a couple of rich clients who play low-stakes. When I asked them at the outset what they hoped to accomplish by being coached at poker, they both gave pretty much the same answers:

I want to get better at preflop play, and bluffing, and not paying off, and postflop play, and reading opponents, and check-raising the turn, etc.

I want to be respected as a very good player.

I want to have more control over my emotions.

When I put the same question to clients who play at stakes that sting, I hear the same replies: “I want to learn how to play better, and feel better.” So far, everyone is the same.

When I asked the low-stakes rich guys, “Why do you play poker?” I knew they would reply with some of the non-profit motives behind why poker players play poker. I didn’t expect or get any surprises:

I play poker for the competition.

I play poker for the comradery.

I play poker because I really like to play poker.

When I put the same question to my conventionally jeopardized clients, their answers mirror those of the hyper-funded, with one addition: “I want to make money.”

I believe that a small percentage of all poker players are lifetime winners, and that most lifetime winners are not ahead very much. This is the effect of the rake.

Putting it all together, I conclude that profit is one reason that people play poker, it is never the only reason, and it is not an essential reason. But while I am writing, I pretend that profit is the only reason we play. That's because I believe that anytime we really do what we really think is the most profitable thing, we will optimally serve all of our needs.

16. How to Get Respect

The answer to the question "How can I get the most respect?" is the same as the answer to this question: "How can I make the most money?" Follow the profit premise and respect will follow you. Some examples:

Which earns more money?
Playing good? Or playing bad?
Which earns more respect?
Playing good? Or playing bad?

Which earns more money?
Tilting? Or not tilting?
Which earns more respect?
Tilting? Or not tilting?

Which earns more money?
Being respected? Or not being respected?
Which earns more respect?
Being respected? Or not being respected?

Respect begets respect. To get a lot, give a lot.

17. How to Give Respect

When the cards are dealt, they are given life. That is why we call them live. When cards are folded, their life is gone. That is why we call them dead. Give your respect to every live hand until it is dead.

Some things we quiet down for. Think of entering a cathedral. Think of when a golfer sets up for a crucial putt. A live hand creates that kind of sacred space and sacred time, and it makes other things sacred by association.

- The money that is used to wager on a live hand is sacred. The actual chips and cash are sacred, as is their monetary value, however large or small.
- The time spent wagering on a live hand is sacred. Do not hurry someone who has a live hand.
- The cards themselves are sacred. Don't mess around with the cards of a live hand.

And that's where it stops. Your opponent is not made sacred by virtue of having a live hand. You do not have to respect him. You do not have to like him. If you have no respect for your opponent, or you dislike him, you should strive to maintain unbroken respect nonetheless for the sacred elements near him, which are his cards, his time, and his money.

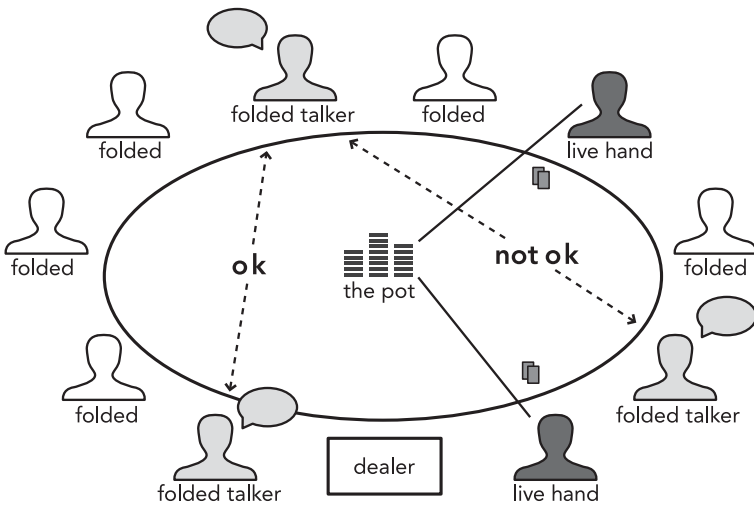
Here are two specific things to not do:

- Do not talk to an opponent when he has a live hand. Silence is respectful. And it's not just about respect for the cards, time, and money of the guy you are talking to. Many times, the person with a live hand will not mind carrying a conversation into a hand. He might even blatantly

Universal Elements

encourage it. Still, don't do it. The reason is because it is disrespectful to the cards, time, and money of his opponent.

- Imagine there are lines that extend from every live hand to the pot. Now imagine that a line extends from you to whomever you are talking to. If your talking line intersects any of the live hand lines, stop talking immediately. If the guy you were talking to looks at you weird, gesture politely to him that you are waiting for the hand to finish. If you are talking, and you are not talking across an intersection, it's still okay to stop talking just because people are playing a hand, especially at no-limit.



18. Protection

The word “protection” has three specific meanings at the poker table.

You “protect” your hand by betting and raising. When you have the best hand and you bet or raise, you are giving your hand protection by offering the wrong odds to draw and beat it.

You “protect” your cards, physically, with a chip, or your fingers, from being taken by the dealer or getting mucked into.

So far this has been all about you. The third kind of protection is about protecting your opponents. It’s about taking care to conceal your intentions for the good of all. It’s about being a good citizen.

Playing no-limit, you are under-the-gun and you have to pee. You are going to take a break right after this hand. You have pocket deuces and you limp in, hoping to see a cheap flop. The guy on your left makes a pot-sized raise. The next guy to act is the slowest player in the universe. He folds slow. He calls slower. When he raises, continents yawn. It looks like he’s about to start to raise. You are going to fold when the action gets to you. You make plans to sit still until it is your turn, no matter how long it takes. You just gave proper protection to everyone.

Another example:

You’re on the button when you play this huge pot at limit hold’em against Joe and Moe. You flop the nut flush draw with the nut straight draw. Joe bets the flop, Moe raises, you

make it three bets, Joe caps it, Moe calls, and you call. On the turn, you miss everything. Joe bets out, Moe raises, you call two cold, Joe reraises, Moe caps it, you call two cold again, and Joe calls. On the river, you miss everything, again. Joe bets. You are pissed that you missed, and you know you are going to fold no matter what Moe does. If you make no movements or sounds between the time the river card hits the board and Moe acts, then you did it right, you gave Joe protection.

Look what happens if you don't. Before Moe has acted, let's say that somehow or another, you indicate that you are going to fold. Moe now has some new and critical information, out of turn. Moe might have been about to fold, but now he calls, because he knows you are going to fold. If that happens, you just improperly altered the course of the hand. You either caused Joe to lose the entire pot, or you caused Moe to lose one additional bet. It doesn't matter which. If money moves between them because of you not giving protection, then you screwed up.

There's nothing in the rules of poker about giving protection. Just like there's nothing in the rules of life about holding the elevator door for a stranger.

19. Decisions

I put every decision you make that might have an impact on your poker score into two groups: betting and non-betting.

The five betting decisions are fold, check, call, bet, and raise. When betting or raising at no-limit or pot-limit, an additional betting decision is how much to bet and raise.

Non-betting decisions are things like what you say and eat. For example, let's say you are ordering dinner at a restaurant. After dinner you plan to go to the poker room for a long night of poker. You have a choice. You can order steak and potatoes and

wine and dessert, and maximize the likelihood that you will be drowsy at midnight, which in turn will maximize the likelihood that your late-session weaknesses will get the best of you and your bankroll, especially if you are stuck. Or, you can order fish and salad, no wine, and no dessert, and maximize the chances that you will be fresh and focused at midnight, even if you are stuck. Other examples of non-betting decisions are the decisions you make pertaining to bankroll, information, game selection, and quitting.



The way to win at poker is to make better decisions than your opponents do. The way to improve at poker is to make better decisions than you used to.

20. Defining Mistake

A mistake is when you make a decision that you think was not your best choice. There are two types of mistakes: betting mistakes and non-betting mistakes. Examples of betting mistakes are not folding before the flop when you think you should have, and calling on the river when you think you shouldn't have. Examples of non-betting mistakes are when you play too long according to you, or when you play underfunded according to you, or when you say the wrong thing according to you.



The game just broke up. You're sitting around the table, taking your time racking up, as are your buddies, Joe and Moe. The three of you start talking about the last hand of the session.

You say, "I made a mistake on the turn. I never should have bet out. I should have checked."

Universal Elements

Joe says, “I think you did the right thing by betting the turn. First of all...”

And Joe gives a fine explanation for why betting the turn was an excellent play.

Then Moe says, “I don’t think so, Joe. I think he definitely should have checked the turn because...”

And Moe gives a fine explanation of why checking the turn would have been an excellent play.

As it turns out, you like Joe’s argument better than Moe’s. You say, “You’re right, Joe. Betting the turn was the best play. So I played it right after all.”

Let’s review what just happened here. First you made a betting decision. Then you determined it was a mistake. At that point, if someone had asked you, “Did you make a mistake on the turn?” you would have said “yes.” Then, Joe disagreed with you, which meant at that moment, your decision to bet the turn was simultaneously a mistake and not a mistake, depending on who you asked. Later, after you heard and agreed with Joe’s explanation as to why he thought your mistake was not a mistake, your mind aligned with his, and you determined that you had made a mistake about your mistake being a mistake. All the while, the betting decision itself remained the same.

When does a mistake become a mistake? If your answer is “Whenever I say so,” then fair enough. Perfect answer and case closed. But if the answer is “Who the heck knows?” then isn’t it a mistake to define mistake?

21. The Gray Area



Black and white represent betting decisions that are definitely right or definitely wrong. The various shades of gray represent all the others.

Here are two examples of black and white betting decisions:

- Playing limit hold'em, in a full game, you are under-the-gun with 72o. Should you raise, call, or fold?
- Playing any poker game, it's on the river, you are headsup, and you have the nuts. Your opponent checks. Should you check or bet?

As we move into the gray, the theoretical expectations of our options become more balanced. A decision might make us a 60-40 favorite, for example. Moving into the central gray region, we arrive at those decisions for which the expected outcome is 50-50 or nearly so. These are the decisions of little or no theoretical consequence, the decisions where each option is as good as the other. These are the decisions that matter least.

Also in the central gray – the land of closest decisions – we can expect disagreement to go up over which decisions are best. We

can expect intelligent, elaborate debates with both sides insisting theirs is the right side. We can also expect to debate with ourselves and to second guess ourselves. In the central gray is where we are most likely to torture ourselves with the question: Did I get it right that time?

And that's why I say: The decisions that trouble us most are the ones that matter least.

Let's say you face a close betting decision, and afterwards, you want a definite answer. You want to know, one way or the other, if your play was right or wrong.

STOP!

That's a mistake. Just by thinking like that, about right and wrong, you are making a mistake. If you play a hand, and you face a close decision, and then you write about it or talk about it, I think that's great – seriously. Or if you talk about hands other people played, same thing. All good. But be careful. Don't fall into the gray area's trap. Don't burn up valuable energy and waste precious sanity. Don't assume that just because you have an answer, and just because someone else has a different answer, that one of you is right and the other is wrong.

Let's say I have the button and everyone folds around to me. Depending on my cards, and my opponents, and other variables, it might be obvious to me what the best choice is, or it might not be obvious at all. Should I assume that there is always a right answer? And even if there is a right answer, should I assume that I can always know what that answer is? I believe the answers to those questions are no and no.

Another example: it's on the turn, playing limit hold'em. There are three players in the pot. I am second to act. The first guy bets out. Should I raise? Should I call? Should I fold? Okay, I'll tell you more. I've got top pair. The guy who bet out might be on a draw, or he might have a monster. I can't really tell. The guy behind me might be really weak, maybe drawing thin against my hand. But he's acting so weak that maybe he's strong and he's about to raise it. Or maybe he is on a draw and I need to raise to

either get him out or make him pay the maximum price. But the guy who bet out might have me beat. He might even have me drawing dead. If I raise, I open it up for him to reraise. Hmm. Tough one. Should I raise? Should I call? Should I fold?

I believe it is correct to believe in unknowableness. Analyze, evaluate, ponder, and then let it be. Resist the gray area's mind-snaring entrapments. When you examine a betting decision, yours or someone else's, at the table or away, on your own or with others, remind yourself that debates point to close decisions, and that close decisions matter least, and that the answer is sometimes unknowable.



Think back to the very first hands of poker you ever played. Your gray area was almost everywhere, and your A-game stank. With every hand, with every round of betting, with every sixth street discussion, you gained significant experience and understanding. Your A-game improved at the same rapid pace that your gray area – your uncertainty – shrank.

As times passes, your rate of change slows. Your A-game improves more slowly, and your gray area shrinks more slowly. The main thing to realize is that no matter how good you get, you will always have a gray area. The gray is not part of you. It is part of the game.

22. Tilt

“To win at poker, you have to be very good at losing.” – me

During the first few years of my poker-playing career, I played almost entirely in home games that were almost entirely loose and reckless. All I had to do to win was play tight, which I had learned how to do. The trouble was, I had also learned how to tilt.

Universal Elements

I was a great tilter. I knew all the different kinds. I could do steaming tilt, simmering tilt, too loose tilt, too tight tilt, too aggressive tilt, too passive tilt, playing too high tilt, playing too long tilt, playing too tired tilt, entitlement tilt, annoyed tilt, injustice tilt, frustration tilt, sloppy tilt, revenge tilt, underfunded tilt, overfunded tilt, shame tilt, distracted tilt, scared tilt, envy tilt, this-is-the-worst-pizza-I've-ever-had tilt, I-just-got-showed-a-bluff tilt, and of course, the classics: I-gotta-get-even tilt, and I-only-have-so-much-time-to-lose-this-money tilt, also known as demolition tilt.

I'd tilt, and I'd look back on my tiltings, and I started seeing cycles, and then cycles within the cycles, and before long, I started to see my entire poker future as a ceaseless fluctuation between tight and tilt. I figured if I ever went broke at poker, it wouldn't be because my best wasn't good enough to keep me afloat. It'd be because my worst was bad enough to sink me.

A big day in my career was the day I realized that tomorrow I would still be a tilter. That there would be no quick fix. That any headway I made would be gradual. I realized that if I could somehow put progressively longer periods of time between my tiltings, and if I could somehow have them be progressively not quite as bad as the last time, then I'd have a chance to get some wind under my wings, and when I did, I'd soar indefinitely. Less often, less severe. Less often, less severe. That's what I kept telling myself.

It is now fifteen years and thirty thousand hours of poker later. In that time I have gathered myself, and my thoughts...

On Tilt

Tilt has many causes and kinds, but it has only one effect. It makes us play bad. It makes us do things we wouldn't do if we were at our very best. And that's how I want to define it, exactly like that. Tilt is any deviation from your A-game and your A-mindset, however slight or fleeting.

There are two reasons to define tilt in this way. One is standardization. All A-games are identical. Anyone who is playing his A-game is making the best decisions he knows how, and his mind is as right as it ever is. That's what A-game is. It's our best. And we all have it. So by defining tilt from the top down, we can draw a line for any player that cleanly divides his tilt from his non-tilt.

The other reason is that we aren't just playing with words here. We are using them as shovels to dig for gold. And by using the word tilt to focus on our best, instead of our worst, we hit a lode: Tilt is non A-game. Tilt is anything less than your utmost. Tilt is suboptimalness. Defining tilt in this way, everyone tilts. It's just a matter of how often, how long, and how bad.

And so we arrive at the three dimensions of tilt: frequency, duration, and depth. How often do you deviate from your A-game? How long does it last? And how far below your A-game do you go? Revisit those questions.

Tilt is all about you. If you think you should have taken the day off, or if you think you should have played at different stakes, or if you think you made a bad raise, then you tilted. Only you know when you knew better.

23. Tilt Reciprocity

Tilt reciprocity is your slippage matched up against everybody else's. Tilt reciprocity recognizes that any reduction, however small, in the frequencies, durations, and depths of your own tiltings will always have the effect of favorably widening the gap between your tilt and theirs, thereby earning immediate reciprocal advantage. To make money from tilt, you don't need to be tiltless. But you do have to tilt less.

24. Hard Tilt

Let's talk about traditional, emotionally-charged tilt. I call it hard tilt. When a naturally conservative player becomes obviously emotionally wracked and starts raising every hand, that's hard tilt. When a player is sitting quietly but there's a tension coming off of him because he's wrung taut between anger and frustration, that's hard tilt. Hard tilt can be severe or slight. The defining feature of hard tilt is that there is an emotional link in the chain of cause and effect.

25. Soft Tilt

Soft tilt is any moment of non-A-game performance that was not caused by an emotional reaction to the players and cards. Soft tilt has many causes. Three big ones are fatigue, running low on money, and distraction.

26. Winning, Losing, and Breaking Even

What does it mean to be winning, or losing, or breaking even? The answer is, it's only a matter of time.

Let's say Joe gets extremely stuck, and then for the next few hours he wins steadily. He's almost even for the night. Let's stop right here and take a poll. If we ask Joe's opponents if Joe is winning, they say yes, because during the time frame in their minds, he has won. If we ask Joe if he is winning, he says no, I'm still stuck. That's because the time span in his mind is the entire session. Or maybe Joe lost yesterday, and even though he's ahead today, he is still counting yesterday as part of today's session for whatever reason. I've done that kind of thing many times.

Let's say we ask Joe if he is winning for the week, and then we ask him if he is winning for the month, and the year, and

the lifetime. No matter what combinations of “yes” and “no” he answers to those four questions, his answers will be plausible. He could answer “yes, yes, yes, no,” or “no, no, no, yes,” or any other combo. What this means is that the answer to “Are you winning, losing, or breaking even?” is always “Since when?”



Here are the three main causes of tilt:

- Winning
- Losing
- Breaking even

27. Betting Reciprocity

Betting reciprocity is the difference between your betting decisions – raise, bet, call, check, and fold – and theirs.



Theoretical money doesn't spend, but it does inspire. I remember when I first heard about it in the form of “expected value.” I learned that each wager has two results. There's the expected result, based on analysis, and the actual result, based on events.

I was immediately and appropriately obsessed with theoretical money. All I wanted to know was my score. And I mean I wanted to know it now, as in, right after the hand. But I had no idea how to determine the actual expected value of a street, let alone a whole hand.

Without realizing it at the time, I borrowed from my prior life as a tournament bridge player – where my score was entirely

dependent on the scores of others – and I came up with a way to analyze a hand of poker that satisfied my needs.

After a hand was over, I'd trade places with my opponent. I'd give him my hole cards and my position, and I'd take his, and I would imagine how the play of the hand might have gone in the reversed scenario. Then I'd take the imaginary result and I'd compare it to what actually happened, and I'd get a sense of who really won the hand, in theory. I call this reciprocal analysis. It means to trade one or more parameters with your opponent, project the future in that reality, and compare.

Sometimes I could not accurately figure out who won a hand. But sometimes I could, especially if the hand had few variables, few branches, and was against familiar opponents.

For example, let's say one day I get pocket kings and Joe gets pocket aces. We play the hand, and Joe wins \$100 from me. Right away I'd pretend it had been the other way around, me with the aces, and Joe with the kings. I'd play the streets out and I'd think through the most likely lines and I'd take the resulting probability wave and put a number to it.

In this example, let's say I determined that had I had the pocket aces, I would have won \$80. The equation would go like this. Joe won \$100 in reality. I won \$80 in reversed make-believe. So my final score on the hand is -\$20. You can apply this method of review to any single street or group of streets.

Let's hold on to that way of thinking and take a look at starting hands at hold'em. In reality, as we all know, the least profitable starting hand is 72o, and the most profitable hand is pocket aces. In reciprocity, the least profitable hand is also 72o, but not because 72o is the worst hand. 72o is the least profitable hand because it is the most similarly played hand.

So what is the most profitable hand, reciprocally speaking? Is it pocket aces? Nope. The hand that has the highest reciprocal potential must be a hand that gets played lots of different ways. It's going to be somewhere between the hands that are rarely folded, and the hands that are rarely played. Aces are almost never folded

before the flop, so we know they cannot be the most profitable hand. It seems most improbable that the most profitable hand would be exactly the same hand for everyone through all time and space, which means the answer will vary from player to player. And that means that any answer we produce is just an educated guess anyway. So what the heck. I'll go first.

The hold'em hand I think I've made the most reciprocal profit on over the years is queen-ten. That's the hand I think I have played most differently from my opponents most often. After that comes king-ten, queen-jack, jack-ten, king-nine, queen-nine, jack-nine, queen-eight, jack-eight, ten-nine, etc, not necessarily in that order, but thereabouts. The reason these hands cause the most amount of reciprocal motion is because these hands bring out the most consequential difference in how a hand gets played, which is, before the flop.

I am going to list the ways that two players can start a hand, starting with the least consequential, and moving toward the differences that make the most difference. If, in a given preflop situation:

- Two players would both fold, then no reciprocal money moves between them on that hand. No-brainers are no-gainers.
- Two players would both call before the flop, or if they would both raise, then still no money moves between them before the flop. There might be reciprocal motion on the hand after the flop, depending on how differently they would play it.
- One player calls before the flop when the other would raise. Here we have reciprocal motion before the flop, with potential for more after the flop.

Universal Elements

So far, either both players saw the flop, or both players didn't. There are two other ways it can go:

- One player folds before the flop when the other would call.
- One player folds when another would raise.

If it is true that maximum potential reciprocal motion occurs when one player sees the flop when another player wouldn't, then the most profitable hand is going to be the one that most often generates the play/don't-play difference, which, for me, by my estimation, is queen-ten.

After the flop, no matter how anyone got there, we can focus the reciprocal lens on any single bet, or street, or combination of streets, and do a reciprocal analysis. For example, it's on the river playing limit hold'em and you have the best hand. You bet and your opponent calls. If the situation was reversed, and your opponent bet the river, would you have called? If the answer is no, then you just won one bet. If the answer is yes, then you broke even.

At no-limit hold'em, the nature of all-in-ness narrows the reciprocal focus in a specific, recurring way. Let's say Joe and Moe both hit the flop. At some point in the hand, they get all-in. In reality, Joe busts Moe. In reciprocity, the main question is, would Moe have busted Joe? If the answer is yes, then the hand is a tie. If the answer is no, then Joe wins the hand by however much money he has in front of him at the end of the hand in the imagined reality.

28. On the Importance of Position

Position is not important at poker. Would you say that water is important at swimming? That speed is important at racing? No? Then don't say position is important at poker. It's more important than that.

29. Position

Here is everything you will ever need to know about position: The player who acts last has an advantage.

30. Position Reciprocity

The first shall be last and the last shall be first. – Jesus

Think of every hand of poker. Think of the enormous number of hands played on the internet, and then add to that every hand played in home games and casinos. Now think of that sum total of all hands broken down to street by street. All those streets. Millions, billions, whateverillions, it's a lot. Now consider this. Every one of those streets has this in common: someone goes first, and someone goes last.

I agree with everyone who thinks that acting last is better than acting first. But we have to slow down here because this is delicate. Position reciprocity is not the difference between first and last. It's the difference between firsts and lasts. When seen through the lens of reciprocity, positional advantage does not belong to the player who acts last. It belongs to the player who acts last most often.

The advantage of acting last exists during every round of betting. It's always there, at every moment, like home field advantage during a football game. At pro football, during the regular season,

to keep everything fair, each team plays half their games at home and half on the road. The rules do not allow a team to create a home-game/away-game reciprocal advantage simply by folding their away games. But at poker, we are allowed to do exactly that. We can fold our “away games,” our bad positions, and thereby act last more often than we act first, and thereby create an advantage.

31. Firstlessness

At high-low poker – whether it’s Omaha or stud or whatever – there is a definite best card to have, and a definite worst card. The best card is an ace, and the worst card is a nine. Preflop positions are the same way. There is a definite best position, the button, and a definite worst position, the small blind. The small blind is worst because it is an island of permafrost. It’s like a nine at high-low – predictably worthless.

What about the discounted price to see the flop from the small blind? Doesn’t that make it a bargain? Not the way I see it. From the small blind, I am charged a fee for something I wouldn’t want for free. I have to pay money to see the flop, and by doing so, I am guaranteeing that someone is going to have position on me every street this hand. The alternative, which is to fold before the flop and get ready for my button, is much more appealing.

Anything is better than being first to act. Even second. If there are three players and I am second to act, and the first guy bets out, and I raise, and the third guy folds, then I am now last to act. Or if the first guy checks, and I bet, and the guy behind me folds, now I’m last. Or let’s say I’m in a headsup pot. If I’m second, then I’m last!

The main thing here is that if I am not first to act, then there is a greater than zero chance that I could become last to act. But if I am first to act, there is always no chance that I will be last. First is worst, all the way to the river, every time.

32. Suitedness and Connectedness

Suited hands such as A2s and connected hands such as 76o hit the flop more than one third of the time, often by making a flush draw or a straight draw. Because of the way hands play out, the cost to draw to a hand is higher when first to act than last to act. And when the draw gets there, it earns less in early position than it does in last position.

Pocket aces earn more in last seat than they do in first seat too. But not as much more as suited hands and connected hands do.

Being last to act helps with stealing and manipulating the size of the pot. With aces, it's rare to be stealing. The bluffing benefit of being last is lost.

Pocket aces hit the flop every time, in the sense that one of the ways to hit the flop is to make top pair, and pocket aces are always better than that. Drawing hands will be willing to put money in on the flop about half the time, and many times the decision will be borderline, hinging on position and prior action. Pocket aces will be willing to put money in on the flop about all the time. Therefore, the aces don't care as much about where they are sitting.

It isn't that being suited or connected is worth extra on the button. It's that every hand is worth more on the button, and that some hands gain more than others.

Positional value only exists when there is more money to be wagered. When all players but one are all-in, or certain to go all-in, there is no longer an advantage to being last to act, and when that happens, we are able to quantify the value of suitedness. When the position variable and the implied odds variable are out of play, suited cards are worth about 5% more than non-suited cards before the flop because that's how much more often suited cards make a flush if you just run out all five board cards. If the

betting comes to an end on the flop, and you flopped a flush draw because you are suited, then your suitedness is worth about a third of the pot because you'll make a flush about a third of the time.

Reviewing, the approximate minimum amount that suited is better than non-suited before the flop is 5%, and the approximate minimum amount that suited is better than non-suited after flopping a flush draw is one third of the pot. In both cases, suitedness is worth more than the minimum when there are chips still in play, and suitedness is worth its most when you are last to act.

33. Gobsmacked

Have you ever been gobsmacked in the middle of a poker hand? I sure have. Lots of times. And I don't like it one bit. Even if you have no idea what the heck gobsmacked means, you can tell just from looking at it that being gobsmacked is not good. And no, I did not make this word up, though I do support whoever did. Gobsmacked is when something happens that you weren't ready for, and you needed to be. It's the opposite of anticipation.

34. Anticipation

Anticipation means to be ready for anything. It means not being caught by surprise. If you are caught by surprise, then you made an anticipation mistake. If you get checkraised, and you "didn't see it coming," then you made an anticipation mistake. If you bet out and you get raised, or if you raise and someone reraises, and you are caught off guard, then you made an anticipation mistake.

Suppose you are on the button in a three-handed pot. On the flop, Joe checks, Moe bets, you call, and now it is Joe's turn. Nothing he does should startle you. If Joe is a super tight player and he capped it before the flop, and now he weirdly folds on the

flop for one bet, that should not catch you by surprise. If Joe is a super loose and aggressive player who constantly checkraises on the flop, and this time, all of a sudden, he just calls, that should not astonish you.

A good anticipator foresees all pertinent paths without attaching to any of them. For example, let's say you have pocket kings, the preflop action just ended, and because of how it went, you think there is a good chance that your lone opponent has an ace. If you objectively anticipate the various ways the hand might play out if an ace comes on the flop, then that's good. If you will be disappointed if an ace comes on the flop, that's bad. If you will be relieved if an ace doesn't flop, that's just as bad. When you feel disappointment or relief, you have painted the ace with your desires and fears – you attached. When you are not attached, it's just an ace.

Anticipation prevents hitches. Let's say you raise before the flop, Joe reraises behind you, everyone else is out, and you call. Joe has been playing very aggressively and he routinely bets the flop when checked to. You flop a very good hand and you check, planning to checkraise, but aha, Joe checks behind. Because you had not anticipated that he might do that, you hitch, and now he knows that you were going to checkraise, and your cover is blown.

There is one particular anticipation mistake that takes the cake. It's the simplest one, and the most common. In a headsup pot, when you bet or raise, your opponent can only fold, call, or raise. If he folds, your next betting decision is not until the next hand. If he calls, your next betting decision is not until the next street. If he raises – and only if he raises – you must act now. That is why, when you bet or raise, there is strategically nothing to anticipate except a raise, and therefore, if you have not anticipated a raise, you not only made a mistake, you made the only mistake possible.

35. The Rating Game

We have been designed by natural selection to overrate ourselves at poker. It all started with sex. Gal attracts guy. Guy attracts gal. Genetically speaking, this arrangement works, so nature favors the genes that rate to get us a date.

DNA is not interested in truth. If straight talk culminates in conjugal consummation, your DNA is happy. If trumping up your own attributes gets you laid, your DNA is exactly as happy. Just as long as the deed gets done. It doesn't even matter if you believe your own story or not. If you have sex because you lied and you know you lied, for example, "You look marvelous," that scores the same as if you have sex because you lied unknowingly, such as, "I am funny."

If we carry in our mind a false image of ourselves, and that image gives us confidence, and the confidence itself increases the probability that we will procreate, then it doesn't matter that the image is false. Delusion will be naturally selected. And that's what happened. In the same way that evolutionary pressure has provided us with things like eyeglasses and ethics, it has also given us the tools, capacity, and propensity to overrate ourselves, at many things, and poker is just one of them.

With some games, like chess and tennis, you can't get away with thinking you are good if you suck, and you can't get away with thinking your opponents suck if they are good. There is not enough slack in the perception of reality for delusion to take root. Poker is not like that. We have The Gray Area. Once inside it, we can convince ourselves of anything. Add to that the high amount of self-worth currency at stake at poker, and we begin to see the poker table as an environment rich in the nutrients upon which delusions feed. Anyone with the naturally evolved human tendency to overrate themselves and underrate others can go a really long way with it at poker, even to the point of being a losing player who thinks of himself as a winning player. The result is a

refraction in the player pool. It turns out that 75% of all poker players think they play better than the other 75%.

36. Seat Selection

Make your seat selection decisions as if the object of the game is to be last to act on as many streets as possible.



Seat selection is a perpetual process. When a seat comes open in your game and you don't change seats, you are choosing to stay in the seat you are in. You just made another seat selection decision.



Where you sit in relation to the other players can make a huge difference in your expectation. In some situations, one seat change can make the difference between being a favorite or a dog.



I am playing in a ten-handed limit hold'em game. Eight of my opponents play like me in that they usually fold before the flop. The tenth player, Joe, never folds before the flop.

Joe is sitting on my immediate left which means that one out of every ten hands, on my button, I will be last to act after the flop, and on the other nine hands per round, I will never be last to act after the flop.

Joe changes seats. He moves one seat to the left. Now I will act behind Joe on twice as many hands as before. Even though Joe only moved 1/10 of the way around the table, the positional consequence of his move was 1:1. By moving one seat, Joe *doubled* the number of times that I will have a chance to be last to

Universal Elements

act, because now I might end up last to act from the cutoff if the button folds. And Joe's seat change *doubled* the number of hands per round that I will act behind the live player.

Now move Joe one more seat to the left. This means I have two tight players on my left. In this arrangement, I will always act behind Joe from my three most profitable positions: the button, cutoff, and hijack.

And that's enough.

When there are two tight players on my left, it means that when a loose player joins the game, he can't sit on my left. The tight players plug those critical seats and protect me from danger. Also, tight players tend to change seats less often than loose players do, and play longer. So the effort I apply toward working my way into an optimal seating situation rates to pay off.

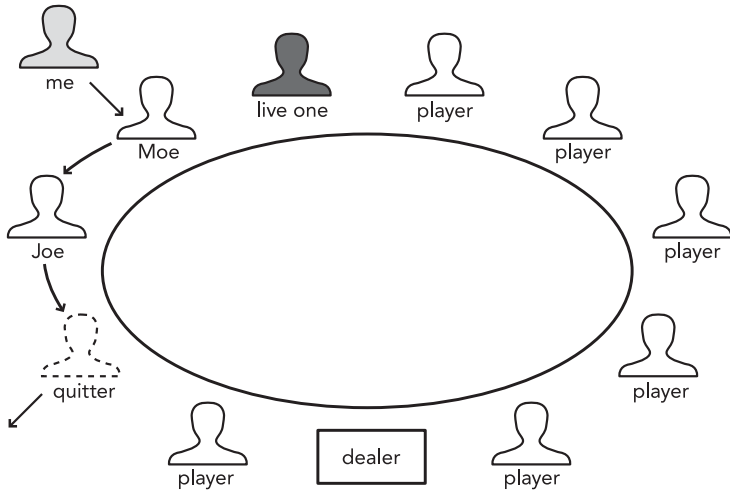
And that's it. I try to get two tight players on my left, and after that, I don't care where the live ones are.



I was on the road. I didn't know any of the players, the dealers, or the floormen. The game I wanted to play in was full and I was first on the list. I watched my game from a table away. The player in seat one stood up to go get some racks. He made eye contact with the floorman and signaled "I'm done" with a finger across his throat. The floorman got on the microphone and called my name. I signaled to the floorman, lock it up. The guy who was quitting racked up his chips and said his goodbyes to the dealer, and to the floorman, and to two of the players: Joe and Moe. I knew right then that Joe, Moe, and the quitter were all regulars in this room. They knew where the easy money was.

The quitter was vacating seat two. Meanwhile, Joe, in seat three, and Moe, in seat four, were arguing over which of them would get to move to seat two. Joe won the dispute, and he slid over one chair to the right. Moe, as I expected he would, immediately did the same, claiming seat three.

Elements of Poker



Already I knew all I needed to know. I knew that the player in seat five was very likely to be live. I also knew that the live one was the last player to enter the game before me, otherwise Moe and Joe would have already moved away from being directly in front of him. I sat down in seat four, temporarily.



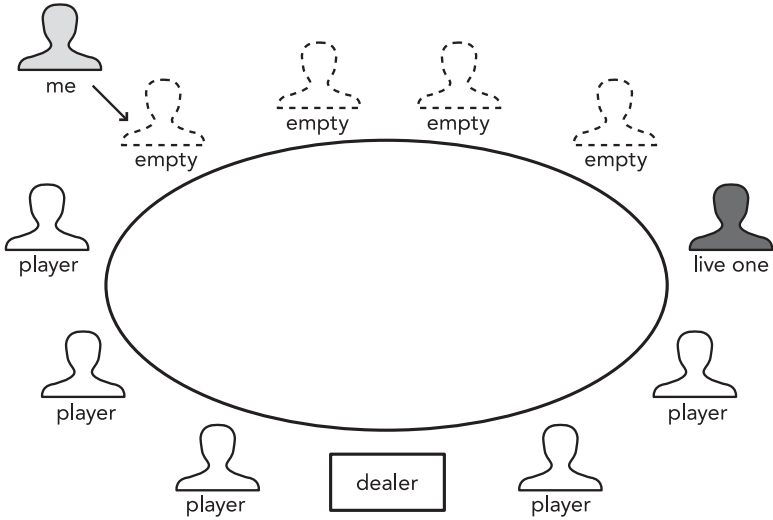
If I know that the next player coming into the game is a live one, and the seat to my left comes open, I will slide over one seat to the left and take the empty seat. Not so much to “get behind” the live one. But rather, to not be in front of him.

I have been in games where the one-seat-slide-to-the-left dominoed around the table as many as five or six seats while the live one stood there and watched, knowing full well what was going on, and not only not caring, but feeling kind of happy about being a sensation. I have never seen a nine-man slide.



Universal Elements

When more than one seat is open in a game that has one live player, the open seats will very often be in a row, in front of the live one. The regulars naturally arrange themselves this way.



If I was taking a seat in this game, I would take seat four. That way, when the next player joins the game, no matter where he sits, the number of hands per round that I will act behind the live one will double.

37. Tight and Loose

It is arbitrary, it is a fluke, it is not inherent to poker that playing tight is a winning approach. We have no constitution. We have no high council. Nobody ever sat around and decided, “Okay guys, let’s invent a new card game. Let’s make it so you can throw your cards away at the beginning if you want, and we’ll call that ‘folding.’ And let’s be devious. Let’s design the game so that folding is usually the best play!”

How arbitrary is the rightness of tightness? I went to a home game where all the players were notoriously tight. This game was way more about comradery than profit. Still, some action would be nice. But no one was giving any. After an hour, everybody was grumbling because nobody was gambling. Then Clarkmeister came out with an idea. “I know how to get you tight-asses to loosen up,” he said. “Instead of one small blind and one big blind, let’s have three big blinds.”

Each of our minds quickly had the same thoughts: “No, that’s new, that’s different, that’s stupid. Wait, that’s perfect, that’s brilliant, that’ll work!”

We started playing with three big blinds. The game loosened up immediately and considerably. No one in our rock garden was a “tight player” any more, and everyone was still giving it their best.

38. Passive and Aggressive

When we consider the richness of the complexities of the game of poker, it’s really amazing to think that we only do five things. We fold, check, call, bet, and raise. And our choices always come in the same two subsets. If no one has bet yet, we either check or bet. And when we are facing a bet, our options are fold, call, or raise.

Let’s look at the five betting actions and qualify them on a passive-aggressive scale. The most passive play is fold, followed by check, then call, then bet, then raise.



How can you not love the symmetry? Since we're making this up, we can say that "fold" is exactly as passive as "raise" is aggressive, and put those two actions at the ends of the passive-aggressive scale. Likewise we can say that "check" is exactly as passive as "bet" is aggressive, and place them as a balanced pair of middling options on the P-A scale. And calling? Calling lacks initiative, so in that sense, it's passive. But a call is also a refusal to leave the battle, so in that sense, it's aggressive. I'm fine with calling call a draw.

39. Adaptiveness

Games change, opponents change, we change, like three pendulums, swinging in a chaotic dance of tight and loose, passive and aggressive. The Professional calls upon extreme tightness and extreme looseness, extreme passiveness and extreme aggressiveness, and everything in between, at every moment. His full range of options is always in play.

40. Poker Addictions

There are many ways to be addicted to poker. You can be addicted to it as a game, in the way that playing games can be addictive. You can be addicted to poker as gambling, independent of it being poker. You can be addicted to thinking about poker. You can be addicted to the interactions with your opponents and the drama and conflict it gives you. In addition to all those, in the special case of internet poker, you can be addicted to it in the way that video games are addictive.

41. Inevitability

It is shockingly illogical for me to invite financial randomness into my life by sitting down to play poker and then get upset when the inevitable happens. But that doesn't keep me from doing it. And when I do get angry at inevitability, the anger costs me money. But that doesn't keep me from doing it either. It seems my struggle against inevitability is inevitable.

42. Emotions

Some emotions are inherently profitable, such as happiness and gratitude. Some are inherently unprofitable, such as anger and envy. And some can go either way depending on the situation, such as fear and pride.



A familiar feeling is when we are happy because someone else is sad, like when someone we don't like loses a big pot and whines about it. We enjoy their whining. The English language did not have a word for this emotion, and the German language did, so we borrowed it: *schadenfreude*. It means "to derive pleasure from another's misfortune."

Schadenfreude is always unprofitable. If you feel it, it means you could do better by being less emotionally involved with the person whose unhappiness makes you happy. If you wish you were feeling *schadenfreude*, but you aren't – meaning the individual whose unhappiness makes you happy happens to be happy right now – that's big trouble. Now you might use your betting to try to make him less happy, instead of using your betting to make him less wealthy.

43. Entitlement

You are not entitled to play bad just because they are playing bad. You are not entitled to tilt on the grounds that anyone would tilt after the terrible luck you've had. You are not entitled to play a marginal hand as a reward for folding correctly before the flop many times in a row. You are not entitled to call all the way when you know you are beat, just because you have a big pair in the hole. And no matter how good you play, or how bad they play, you are not entitled to win. If you have time and money, you are entitled to a seat at the table. That is all.

44. Fears

There really is something freeing about the act of mindfully facing fears, as in consciously watching them when they arise, and dwelling on them during quiet times. Another thing that helps is to write them out. Here are a few of the fears I have repeatedly felt intensely. I am afraid I'll play bad. I am afraid I'll think I played bad. I am afraid I'll look like I played bad. I am afraid I'll be mean. I am afraid I'll lose.

Was that good for you? It was for me! Here's some more. I fear running out of money. I fear paying off like a chump when I know I'm beat. I fear missing raises. I fear missing folds. I fear not bluffing enough. I fear bluffing too much. I fear getting checkraised on the turn. I fear folding a winner on the river. I fear calling with a loser on the river. And now, I am slightly less afraid of these things than I was ten minutes ago.

Franklin Roosevelt said that we have nothing to fear but fear itself. If he's right, then that's good news. We know that facing down fears continuously makes fear itself less fearful, which makes being afraid nothing to be afraid of. So we have nothing to fear.

45. Running Good and Running Bad

The Professional does not run good or run bad. He does not pleasure himself or torture himself with arbitrary time frames and accounting. He just plays.

46. Moving Up

Think of moving up as a skill set unto itself. Think about the challenges that will be common to all of your move-ups, and prepare. Here are two:

- You might not survive forever at the higher level. You might need to employ one of the vital skills for moving up, which is moving down.
- You can rely on fear appearing, and then evaporating. It's the good kind of fear, the smart kind, the rational kind. It's the same kind of fear that keeps us cautious in the world and therefore safe. It's the fear of the unknown. You'll start out afraid because you won't know the players, yet, and you won't know how they bet, yet, and you won't know how you are going to react to it all, yet. Gradually, as unknowns become known, the associated fears will melt away.



The two main reasons that high stakes games are tougher than low stakes games are that at high stakes, the players adapt faster, and when they tilt, they recover faster. To be better than the rest as a high stakes player, you need to adapt faster and recover faster than they do.



Financial sting causes tilt. When a player who earns \$3,000,000 per year loses 1/100th of his annual income in one night – which would be \$30,000 – he feels it, but the sting that he feels, meaning the effect of the loss on his lifestyle choices and financial security, is far less than that of a player who earns \$30,000 per year and loses \$300 in a night. There is less tilting at high stakes than at low stakes because high stakes players have more to lose.



For specifics about moving up
to mid-limit at table poker, see E87.

There is an article at tommyangelo.com about moving up called
“What Goes Up Might Come Down.”

47. Going Pro

What is a professional poker player? I define a professional poker player as someone who either quits a job to play poker, or never had a job and plays poker instead of getting one.

What’s it mean to be a successful professional poker player? Does it mean going to the grave without ever working for someone else? Let’s say Joe quits his job to play poker for a living with a \$50,000 bankroll. His living expenses are \$50,000 per year, his table expenses (rake and tips) are \$30,000 per year, and five years later, he’s broke. Is Joe a successful poker player? Was he ever?

Let’s review. Joe started with \$50,000 and he ended up with \$0. So his net result over five years was -\$50,000.

His living expenses over five years were $\$50,000 \times 5 = \$250,000$.

Elements of Poker

His playing expenses (rake and tips) over five years were $\$30,000 \times 5 = \$150,000$.

His total expenses that he paid out over five years were $\$250,000 + \$150,000 = \$400,000$.

Joe started with $\$50,000$. So his total earn for five years was $\$400,000 - \$50,000 = \$350,000$. Spread over five years, Joe made $\$70,000$ per year as a professional poker player.

That's not how we poker players typically do our figuring. We're more inclined to use the pocket method. We count what's in our pocket when we walk in, and we count what's in our pocket when we walk out, and the difference is how we did.

I've had long periods when I kept no records at all and my bankroll didn't change much. It was easy to figure out how much I made over any given time span. I'd just add up what I spent. Using that accounting method, Joe's life looks like this: In five years, he spent $\$250,000$ on non-poker expenses such as food, rent, and car. He started with $\$50,000$. So he made $\$200,000$. That's how much more he walked out with than he walked in with.

However we figure it – whether he made $\$350,000$ or $\$200,000$ – Joe is broke today, and the question is this: Was Joe a successful professional poker player? I say yes. Joe lived five years of freedom. That's an excellent score in my opinion.

When a professional poker player runs out of money, it's not a shame. It's just part of the game.

The shame is if you get the calling to spread your wings and fly, and you approach the cliff, but then you back away, and from then on you wonder what it would be like to soar on the wind, even for a little while, even if all you did was flail around aimlessly and crash. Think of all the people who have set their sights on being a professional football player, or sculptor, or any other challenging career that comes wrapped in pain. Think of how many of them have “failed” or “come up short” or “didn't make it.” Were those

Universal Elements

people wrong to be blinded by their passions? Were they wrong to chase a dream? *Is it better to have jumped and crashed than to never have jumped at all?*



It is not possible to find out if you “have what it takes” to go jobless and make your living playing poker, except by quitting your job. For example, let’s say it’s three years after you quit your job. You’ve been a poker pro for a while now, and you’re being tested like never before. You’re having the worst losing streak of your life by far. Your bankroll is at an all-time low. You’re stressed most of the time and depressed the rest. Your closest relationships are either not as close as you want them, or too close. Your health is, well, it’s all over the place, because you are.

But you love it anyway, goddamn it you really do! You’d do it all again, even though right now everything is totally fucked. You’ve had so many, many soaring times these last few years, just free, on the breeze. Waking up with not much, but plenty. Playing the game like the greatest player you have ever been. Stunning not just them but even yourself. New discoveries. New people. New places. New new new. What’s next? Who knows. Who cares. Who knew you could be so hungry and so happy at the same time?

Those thoughts fade, replaced by what’s real. You’re not soaring right now. You’re spiraling.

Looking into the future, do you think you can predict how you’ll feel when the shit hits the muck? What you’ll do? What your priorities will be? Who your circle will be? Do you think you can predict what the world will look like to you then, as you look at it from behind a paycheck now? Do you really think you know which cards are coming?



Here's a catch-22 that has caught many. You can't play enough hours to get good enough at poker to be a pro unless you quit your job. And you can't afford to quit your job until you are good enough at poker to be a pro.

If only that dang job wasn't in the way, you'd have the freedom to really work on your game by playing whenever you want to and quitting whenever you want to and just bearing down on it, week after week, month after month. But if you had that kind of freedom, you'd already be a pro.

To become good enough at playing poker to make a living playing poker requires a tremendous amount of poker playing, poker thinking, poker talking, listening, reading, and writing. There isn't quite enough time in a normal life to hold down a normal job, maintain normal relationships, and be a poker monster.

48. Streaks

There have been times when I wondered how I could ever lose. Days, weeks, even months sometimes, when all I did was win, win, win. Even when I lost I won, because I'd hardly lose anything, and I knew I had kept damage to the minimum possible. When I lost while I was winning, I didn't lose pride, momentum, or courage.

There have been times when I wondered how I had ever won. Days, weeks, even months sometimes, when all I did was lose, lose, lose. I've had runs of bad luck that were so long and so brutal that I was absolutely convinced that no one else on earth had ever been so unlucky. But realistically I knew that could not be so, or even if it was, I could not know it to be so. Noise, so much noise used to bounce around in my head, all the time.

All of my good streaks and all of my bad streaks of every length and depth have had one thing in common. They did not exist in your mind. They only existed in my mind. And this is true for everyone's winning and losing streaks. None of them

actually exist. They are all mental fabrication, like past and future. Everything that ever happens happens in the present tense. But how can you have a “streak” in the present tense? You can’t. And therefore, if you are in the present tense, which, in fact, at this time, you are, then at this moment there is no streak in your life. There is no inherent existence to streaks. The streak is there when you think about it, and when you stop thinking about it, it goes away. It blossoms and withers, all in your mind. And when your mind invents a streak, you believe it exists, because you believe what your mind tells you. But the truth is there is only the hand you are playing.

49. Low-Hanging Fruit

Poker is a fruit tree. Money is the fruit. There are two ways to get the fruit. One way is to climb a tree, get all scraped up, risk falling out, pick some fruit, and climb down. Another way is to stand on the ground and pick the low-hanging fruit. The Professional knows how to climb a tree. But he rarely has to.

50. Discretion

I’m playing \$20/40 limit hold’em at a local casino. Joe is in the game. Around midnight, Joe racks up and goes home. I leave a couple hours later. The next night, I show up at the casino in the early evening. A new \$20/40 is going to open up at table 38, at the next dealer break, in about 20 minutes. Me and a few of the regulars are sitting in our regular seats talking about the regular things, waiting for the game to start.

Moe walks up and sits down next to me and starts to unpack two racks.

“Hey Tommy. Did you play late last night?”

“Umm, I think so.”

“Were you here when Joe left?”

“Yes.”

“How’d he do?”

“He left with four racks. Said he won a thousand.”

An hour later, Joe walks in. He walks up to our table and does his hellos, and when there’s a gap in the chit-chat, Moe says to Joe, “Hey Joe, you got that thousand you owe me?”

Joe leans down in Moe’s ear and says, “Man, I’m sorry Moe. I wish I had your money for you, but I lost my ass playing late last night.”

Then Moe looks at me, while he says suspiciously to Joe, “Really?”

Then Joe looks suspiciously at me, while he says guiltily to Moe, “Well, uh, actually, I uh...”

And I’m like, whoops.

I only had to step into this kind of mess a few times before I decided to protect myself from similar discomforts by keeping my yapper shut as to other people’s financial affairs.

51. Object of the Game

Every game has an object of the game. It’s what determines who wins and who loses. At chess, the object of the game is to capture the opponent’s king. Whoever does that wins, and the other guy loses. At poker, the object of the game is to stand up with more money than you sat down with. Whoever does that wins. Whoever doesn’t loses.

What if you decided that for today’s session, the object of the game was to not tilt? What would you do differently? What if the object of the game was to act last on the turn and river? What if it was to quit while you felt fresh?

By making up your own object of the game...

“Today the object of the game is to not get sucked into calling raises in the big blind just because my cards are suited.”

“Today the object of the game is to not talk about hands at the table.”

...you sharpen the focus of your energy onto that objective.

52. Kuzzycan

Why does a man climb a mountain?

Kuzzycan is a word I just made up because I can. It means I can do whatever I want because it's my book. I can make up words, or change fonts **every word** *if I want to*, or **every letter**.

Your poker book is your betting and your behavior when you play poker. And you can do whatever you want. If someone does something that irritates you or angers you or wrongs you, you can spontaneously decide to not retaliate if you want to. It doesn't matter how justified you would be or what anyone else would do. You don't have to. And, you can spontaneously fold, just like that, whenever you want, even if you know for sure that a panel of experts would tell you that you should not have folded in the situation you were just in. The thing is, they are never you and they are never playing your cards. Only you ever are. And you can write your book however you please, and please, do.

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Table Poker

Introduction to Table Poker

Table poker is poker that happens on a table.

If table poker is a species, then each poker game is an organism that lives and dies, and when we sit around the table, we are cells of a body.

Table poker has two subspecies. One of them is home games. Much of the behavior detailed in this section is likely to be non-applicable or inappropriate in a pass-the-deal home game. The subspecies of table poker I'm writing about here lives in public poker rooms.

Table poker decisions are made and swayed by the eyes, the hands, hinging on the subtlest actions and reactions. I barely begin to raise while you simultaneously imply a hint of what you might do next, and nothing has actually happened yet. I cannot capture these infinite degrees, so I will resort to absolutes.

The suggested actions in this section are based on a blend of rules, protocol, etiquette, and my opinion on what makes a stylish, ethical poker player.

In this section, I divide table poker topics into these four subheadings: Information, Mechanics, After the Betting, and The Poker Room.

Information

53. Information Reciprocity

“My secret is I keep secrets.” – me.

I play poker on a need to know basis. I need to know the thoughts my opponents are thinking. I need to know the feelings they are feeling. And I need to know the cards they are playing. Meanwhile, I need them to know as little as possible about me. I call this relationship the information war.

The information war is fought on two fronts – sending and receiving. To win it, send less information than they send, while receiving more information than they receive. By controlling those differences, you control information flow.

Muscles

Think of the human body as a communication device that uses muscles to broadcast information. It is not always obvious who is in charge of operating the muscles. Sometimes we are, and sometimes they are. The more control we can retain over our muscles, the more control we have over information reciprocity.

Face

Humans have twice as many facial muscles as any other animals. The favored explanation is that at some point in the past, increases in facial musculature made our ancestors better than their neighbors at silent communication. The better communicators had an advantage at surviving, and at getting laid, and that's a genetic jackpot. So anytime a mutated gene gave mother nature a choice on this matter, more muscles in the face were naturally selected.

Table Poker

Now, many generations and mutations later, we've got these 40 muscles in our face, all wired up to send subtle silent signals. And we can't unplug them. All we can do is try to talk them into keeping quiet when we need them to, for the sake of the team. During a poker hand, the brain can be saying "Holy Crap!" and then, just as the face is about to say the same thing, the brain will whisper urgently to the face, "Wait! Shhh! Don't move a muscle!"

And when that happens, we see the poker face. The poker face is an instinctive reaction to situations in which the brain tells the body to stop sending information. Reciprocal gold goes to whoever is better at reacting instinctively on purpose.

Hands

For the game to be played, chips and cards must move, and human hands must move them. And where there is motion, there is information. Sometimes a little hitch in the hands will tell me something. Sometimes it'll be the way they handle their chips, sometimes it'll be the way they handle their cards, sometimes it'll be the way they check, sometimes it'll be almost nothing, but there's always something.

But the hand movement I get the most information from, by far, is the one where an opponent shows cards when he didn't have to.

Mouth

Here we have a collection of muscles and parts that send information using not only expressions, but also sounds. And not just any old sounds. Words. Sentences. Information of the highest grade. This comes as great news for the reciprocity miner as there are no rules that require the muscles of the mouth to move while playing poker. You have the right to remain silent.

54. Mum Poker

A military arms race results in bigger bombs and thicker bunkers. A zoological arms race results in exquisitely camouflaged prey, and predators who can see them anyway. The information war at poker has an arms race, and if one were to take it to its natural extreme – which I have – one would play a style of poker I call “mum poker” – which I do.

On the outside, mum poker is the classic poker face, extended to the entire body, and maintained through sixth street. On the inside, mum poker is no complaining, no blaming, no regretting. Mum poker is stillness. Mum poker is readiness. If you wanted to go all the way with it, you could think of mum poker as being like absolute zero, the cessation of motion. It is knowable in theory, and forever approachable, yet unattainable.

Or you could just think of it as sit up and shut up.

Today, when I am playing primarily for profit, I play mum poker. I wear a baseball cap, no sunglasses, and no lettering. I rarely make eye contact. I do not speak unless spoken to, and even then, I do not react to questions or comments about poker.

I have found that the less information I send, the more I focus on the game. And when I am focused on the game, I send less information. When I employ mum poker, I fight on both fronts of the information war simultaneously.



I used to shuffle chips until my hands got sore. My legs pulsed so much that my shoes had predictable wear patterns like the tires of a poorly aligned car. I have embedded myself at one casino for months or years at a time, and I talked so much at the table that I was a welcoming committee, table captain, and waitress translator all in one. And with all that movement, and all that talking, I was still able to support my food and rent habit from my poker winnings because I was still way, way ahead of my opponents in

Table Poker

the information war, because of what I didn't do, and didn't say, and when.

Mum poker is not about not talking. It's about not talking about certain things, namely, poker things. Mum poker means not talking about poker plays, poker thoughts, and poker feelings, especially the recent ones. And it means not talking about poker players, especially the present ones.

Mum poker means not saying certain words and phrases when you play. Words like ace, king, queen, spade, heart, pair, straight, gutshot, river, etc. Mum poker also means not being a dickhead. If someone asks you if you like your food, answer. If someone asks you if you like your cards, don't answer. That's mum poker.



If you chat with your opponents about this and that, and you refrain from using the forbidden words, that is mini mum. If you only speak when basic human protocol demands it, that's maximum.



When I play mum poker, I remain anomumous.



It was raining when I walked in. There was one seat open in my desired game and I took it. A guy I'd never met before struck up a conversation with me about the weather. It went so well that we ending up talking about all five Oscar nominees for best picture. Then we got involved in our first headsup pot. On the river, he bet and I folded. He said, "I knew you had the flush draw. How high was it?" I did not react. And that was the end of the movie talk.

Over the next hour, every time I played a pot, as soon as the hand was over, he asked me harsh questions, or made comments to others about how I played that were meant to injure me. He was needling me, saying increasingly desperate things to satisfy his need get a rise out of me.

We played another headsup pot. This time, I bet the river and he folded. He said, “What if I had raised the turn? Would you have called?” At this point, everyone at the table knew what my answer would be, especially him. He crescendoed to hysterical. “Would you? Huh? Would you? Huh? Would you?”

Then he had an aha moment, followed by a silence, and suddenly he settled down. “Hey, I like your shirt,” he said. “Where’d you get it?”

“Thanks,” I said. “My wife bought it for me.”

55. Constructing Your Poker Face

The purpose of the poker face is to minimize the sending of information. In the chain of cause and effect that results in the sending of information, there is always muscle movement. One way to practice and improve your poker face is to treat it entirely as a function of your muscles. The object is stillness. To that end, close your lips, but do not close your teeth. This keeps your jaw muscles unclenched and still. Put your tongue behind your upper teeth. This keeps saliva from collecting at the top of your throat and causing you to swallow. Aim your eyes forward and down, at flop depth or shallower. This minimizes blinking. Now consciously breathe. Perfect.

56. Hands on Face

When you notice that your hands are touching your face, either raise your face, or lower your hands, or both.

57. The Difference Between Ignoring and Not Reacting

There's a big difference between ignoring the people and events in a poker game and not reacting to them. Ignoring is when you react on the inside, but not on the outside. Not reacting is when nothing happens, inside or out. Not reacting looks the same as ignoring, but it feels better.

58. The Hierarchy of Fear

The Professional is fearless, which is why he sits at the top of the hierarchy of fear at his table. It doesn't matter if one or more of his opponents do not fear him. What determines his top rank is that he fears nothing and no one. The Professional shares the top level of the hierarchy of fear with other fearless players.

So much for idealistic extremes. In the real world, each player at the table lives inside his own ever-shifting hierarchy of fear. And it doesn't have to be linear. It could be that you are afraid of Joe who is afraid of Moe who is afraid of Larry who is afraid of everybody.

The way to make sure you reap the benefits of all the fear you have coming to you is to not indicate it when you fear someone. I learned this lesson like this: There'd be a player I was afraid of. But apparently I did a decent job of hiding it because one day he'd say something exasperated to me like "Man, I never know what you have." And I'd realize, dang! What was I so afraid of? This dude's been afraid of me all along!



We fear the unknown, as do they. That's why the surest way to earn rungs on the hierarchy of fear is to fight valiantly in the information war.

59. Reading the Players

Everything everyone does is a tell. What they wear is a tell. How they sit is a tell. What they say is a tell. What they don't say is a tell. How they put their chips in the pot is a tell. Each of their betting decisions – raise, bet, call, check, or fold – is a tell. It's all a seamless trail of tells. And what do all these tells tell you? It depends. Tells might tell you about your opponent's thoughts. Tells might tell you about your opponent's feelings. Tells might tell you about your opponent's intentions. Tells might tell you what your opponent's hole cards are. It all depends on what you are doing. Are you listening? Or are you telling?

Mechanics

60. Get Set

Poker is like golf and baseball and gymnastics and any other sport that has breaks in the action. The players do something, then they rest, then they do something, then they rest, etcetera. The best athletes, the ones we see on TV, they all have one thing in common. Before they do anything, they get set. Every golfer has a pre-shot routine. Every baseball pitcher has a pre-pitch routine. Every gymnast becomes still and concentrated. Then, and only then, they do what they came to do.

Take action to take control of yourself before each hand. If you're already in control, then take action to stay that way. Here are some things to do before a hand. Any one of them does the job. Combos are even better.

- Stop talking, reading, eating, or looking around.
- Sit up.
- Notice that you are breathing.
- Glance around the table at your opponents' stacks. This brings your attention to the table, literally. Plus you gain essential information. E121 and E123 are about what to do with it.
- Watch the cards being dealt.
- Are you one of the few, the proud, the slightly goofy? Are you willing to take on the abacus challenge? See if you can remember to move one chip from one place on your stack to another while the dealer is shuffling. It doesn't matter

from where to where. Any move'll do. If you can do this for a few hands in a row when you are feeling good, that's good. If you can do it for a few hands in a row when you are feeling bad, that's really good. If you can do it for an hour, that's super. If you can do it for a day, that's superhuman.

- In games where the house collects by the half hour and the players agree to use a “time pot,” I keep one or two well-placed \$1 chips on top of my stack until time is paid to remind me that the next hand is a time pot.

61. Look Left

If there are three or more players in the pot and the action is about to be on you, right is the wrong way to look. The players on your right are going to fold, check, call, bet, or raise, whether you watch them do it or not, and you will always know what they did before you act. When you look to the right, you look into the past. To see your future, look left.



Look left over and over and over to build up profiles on the preflop and postflop behavior of the opponents on your left. That way, when they send some useful information, you'll see it, and you'll know what it means.



Let's look at looking left before the flop and after the flop.

There is no bad time to look at your left-hand opponents before the flop. The second-best time to look at them is as they look at their cards and just after. The best time is at the moment

Table Poker

the action gets to you. That's when your left-hand opponents are most likely to be revealing their intentions.

Looking left before the flop gains more from some seats than others. The best seats to look left from, in this order, are the cutoff, the hijack, the button, and the small blind. From the early positions, looking left is significantly less profitable because:

- There are so many people to look at.
- I am positionally disadvantaged from the early positions, so I base my decision to fold, call, or raise primarily on the cards themselves. The result is that the information I gain from looking left is much less likely to sway my decision from the early seats than from the late seats.

Let's take a look at the four main positions to look left from, starting with the small blind and moving counterclockwise.

- From the small blind, if you look left and you see that the big blind is going to raise, this is information that could turn a correct call into a correct fold. Likewise, if you know that the big blind is going to check, a borderline fold could become a correct call.
- From the button, looking left means looking at the players in the blinds. If you can detect any reliable foreshadowing in this common and volatile confrontation, it could weigh heavily into your preflop decision.
- From the cutoff seat, you only need to focus on one player, the button. If you see that the button is going to fold, it means you are the button. How huge would it be to have an extra button hand now and then? That's what you earn when you know and notice the mannerisms of the player on your left. If the player on my left routinely telegraphs

his preflop intentions, I come to extra attention when I'm in the cutoff. I want to know how much he likes his hand before I decide how much I like mine.

- Next is the hijack seat. From the cutoff, I start with one player behind me. From the hijack, there are two. This means that the chance that I'll become last to act from the hijack is only about half as good as from the cutoff, unless I look left from the hijack and I see that the cutoff and/or the button are going to fold. Then the hijack becomes the cutoff or the button.

Lots of times, looking left doesn't matter. I either don't get any information, or else the information has no influence on my betting decision. But when it matters, it really matters – like the time I was playing limit hold'em in a full game and everyone folded to me in the cutoff. I had ace-ten. Without looking left, I would always raise here. But this time I looked left at my opponent on the button. He is one of the tightest players I know and he absolutely never gets out of line. He also telegraphs his preflop intentions frequently and honestly. I looked left and I saw that he was going to raise no matter what anyone else did. So I folded. He raised. The big blind called and the hand went to showdown. The button had ace-king.

After the flop, I keep looking left. Even if I have the button, there is still stuff left to see. Let's say it's a threeway pot and I have the button. Joe is first to act and he checks. Moe is next to act. Who should I be looking at? Answer: Joe. And all I should be looking for is an answer to this question: "Does Joe look like someone who is about to checkraise?"

Here is another postflop look left. Playing limit hold'em, there's three players, and I'm in the middle. We're at the turn. My hand is AJ, and the board is A-K-9, 8. The first player bets out. What should I do? I should look left. If my left hand opponent indicates that he is going to raise, I might fold. If he indicates that

he is going to call, I might raise. If he indicates that he is going to fold, I might call. If he doesn't indicate anything, well, at least I looked.

62. How to Look at Your Cards

Look at your cards without hunching down. If you can't do it, then practice altering your technique until you can.

Ask a friend to sit next to you while you practice looking at your cards in various ways, and ask him, "Can you see my cards now? How about now?"

Keep your thumbs contained and don't point them at the ceiling. If you happen to spot an upright thumb of yours, and you have the wherewithal to lower it, this is excellent news. It means you are aware.

63. How Not to Stack Your Chips

- Do not impede the dealer.
- Do not leave your chips in racks.
- Do not block lines of sight to your cards.

64. Changing Seats

When you find yourself in a conflict over a chair, tell your opponent to sit on it, graciously. Maybe you want the seat that he is vacating. Maybe you'll want the next seat that comes open. Maybe everything is just fine, just as it is. Competition does not require confrontation. Do not compete for a seat. Compete for the money. The way to get the money is to remain calm in

between hands so that you will be calm during hands. Pettiness and complaining lose to comportment and grace. If someone else wants the seat you want, defer.



If, as recommended, you keep a healthy sized stack on the table even when you are losing (especially playing limit poker), and if, as recommended, you are always on the lookout for an open seat to the right of one or two tight players, and if, as recommended, you play good, then you will many times in your life have a big stack of chips that you want to move. Put planning and practice into how and when your chips move from your old seat to your new one. Anticipate the situation and base your actions on not slowing down the game. For example, if you know you can't get to your new seat in time to play the next hand in tempo, just tell the dealer to deal you out.

If you use racks to move your chips, that's fine. But the most efficient and stylish way is to slide your stack, even when it is huge.

Stack sliding is an excellent skill to have for seat changing, and also for betting at no-limit. Next time you are near a roulette game, watch how they do it. Think of the bottom layer of your chips as a tray that your other chips are sitting on. What you do is slide the tray across the table. If you are changing seats and it's a long move, slide your stack as far as you can toward your new seat, then walk around the table, reach your splayed fingers to the back and bottom of your stack, and steer your chips to harbor.

65. Tempo

From the dictionary:

General definition: A characteristic rate or rhythm of activity.

Musical definition: The speed at which music is or ought to be played.

Tempo at poker is both of those things and one more. When a betting action is made in tempo, it is not only well-timed, it is also unflinching.

66. Folding

The most important thing about folding is that other people don't see your cards or thoughts.



Playing backgammon, if Joe offers Moe the doubling cube, it's a challenge – it's like a raise. Moe has two and only two options. Moe can accept the cube, in which case the wager on the current game doubles, from, say, \$10 to \$20. Or Moe can fold. He can just up and quit, right in the middle of the game, pay Joe ten bucks, and start another game.

The doubling cube concept is one of gambling's great inventions. The idea of being able to say to your opponent, Look, I think I'm ahead. So I want to bet more. You can either bet more too, or you can quit now and forfeit the current wager, you pussy.

It's the whole folding thing. That's what makes our game what it is. Is there any other game that separates the winners from the losers based on how well they give up?



Elements of Poker

The basic position for folding at mum poker is to keep your forearm on the rail, lest the whole appendage start talking. How do I fold thee? Let me count the ways.

Forehand spin
Backhand spin
Thumb flick
Forefinger flick
Chip flick
Lift and toss



When you fold face up, the message that is sent to the table, whether you intend it or not, and whether you realize it or not, is this: “Dear table of people. It is very important to me what you think of me. It is so important that I am willing to give you the most generous gift of information I can – I will show you my cards – just so you know that 1) my decisions were justified, and also that 2) I am unlucky. I know it will cost me money to reveal my cards and feelings to you. But that’s okay. That’s how much I value your opinion of me.”

If you always fold face down without ever showing even one card to anyone, the message that is sent, and received, whether you intend it or not, and whether you realize it or not, is this: “I don’t care what you think about how I play. I don’t even care what I think about how I play. Oh, and by the way, I am impervious to everything.” Fussless folding fortifies.



There is an article at tommyangelo.com
about folding called “Folding.”

67. How to Check

When we call, bet, and raise, we do it with chips and cash. When we fold, we do it with cards. When we check, we use only our hands. Checking is the only betting action that does not leave a visible history on the table, and that's why checking is the only betting action that we sometimes have to say.

Try to time your checking so that the dealer sees it. If you are about to check, but you can see that the dealer is not going to see you do it, then look and see if the next player to act will see it, and if he will, then go ahead and check. If neither the dealer nor the next player will see you check, then either wait until one of them will, or say "check."

Here are two things to not do when you check with your hand:

- Do not change speeds or balk. For example, do not lower your finger tips nearly to the table's surface, stop, and then complete the check by touching the table.
- Do not extend a hand with visible chips in it held in a betting posture, and then turn your hand over and check with your knuckles.

68. When to Announce Your Action.

At limit poker, do not announce your folds, calls, bets, and raises. Just do it. When checking, it's okay to say "check" when the dealer and the next player to act either won't or didn't see you check.

At no-limit, it's the same as limit. Shhh, just do it. There are some exceptions besides checking, covered in E69.

69. How to Play No-Limit with Ruthless Efficiency

- Bet with your hands, not with your mouth.
- Never call for the clock on another player.
- Learn to smoothly slide your entire stack into the betting area. (And to retrieve it!)
- When you are going to raise, and you are going to state the amount of your raise, do not begin to speak until you know what you are going to say.
- Do not bet or raise an amount that requires the dealer to make change. This requires diligent stack management. (And does not apply to tournaments.)
- Maintain your stack in a state of all-in readiness. You do not need to be ready to go all-in at all times, but you do need to be one planned step away from going all-in at all times. For example, if you know that you can push 10 columns of chips into the pot smoothly, and you have 13 columns, then before you go all-in, you would first stack 3 of your columns on top of the other 10, and then slide your chips out.
- Do not say the word “call” unless your call is the final betting action of the entire hand. And even then, only sometimes, such as when you have the nuts or a probable winner, and you are doing a courtesy fastroll. In that case you would simultaneously turn your hand over and say “call.”

Table Poker

- To intimidate with speed and sleekness, use few chips. This requires foresight and legwork. You want to always have some large denomination chips in your stack and in your pocket. Here are some times to use them and not use them:

Let's say you are playing \$2/5 blinds no-limit hold'em in Nevada. The main chips in play are \$5 chips (red) and most players buy in for \$200 to \$500 in red chips. Have at least a couple hundred dollars worth of \$25 chips (green) in your stack, even if everyone else's stacks are all red.

Use your green chips only when you are betting or raising around \$75-ish or more. Here's what happens. After the flop, the first player bets out \$40, using eight red chips. The next guy calls the \$40, also using red chips. Out from you sweetly slide seven green chips. That's \$175. And you're sitting there. And everybody's like, whoa.

When I say "use few chips," I do not mean to use the fewest possible. Use your large denomination chips only when you would need to use about 15 or more chips of the standard denomination to make your wager. In a \$2/5 blinds game where almost all betting is done with \$5 chips, to bet \$25 you should always use five red chips, and never use one green chip. If you are betting \$40, use eight red chips. If you don't have enough red chips in your stack to do what I just said, then you made a stack-management mistake before the hand started.

Let's look at other stakes. In a \$1/2 blinds no-limit game in which \$1 chips are the main denomination in play, you would also have some red chips in your stack. In a game with \$5-10 blinds and \$10 chips as the main chip, or a game with \$10/20 blinds and \$20

chips as the main chip, you would have plenty of \$100 chips in your stack and use them.

Here is how to put someone all-in without talking. Playing \$2/5 blinds, it's on the river, headsup, you are last to act, and you have the nuts. The pot is \$300. Your stack is \$1,000. Your opponent has \$200. He checks. All indicators tell you that he will call his whole stack. It's your turn. Do not say "all-in" in a situation like this. Just make your bet, using your big chips. That's why you have them, so that you can bet instantly without having to move multiple stacks of chips. If you know your opponent has \$200, then bet \$200, in big chips. If you are not sure how much he has, then bet the smallest amount that will assure that he must go all-in to call.

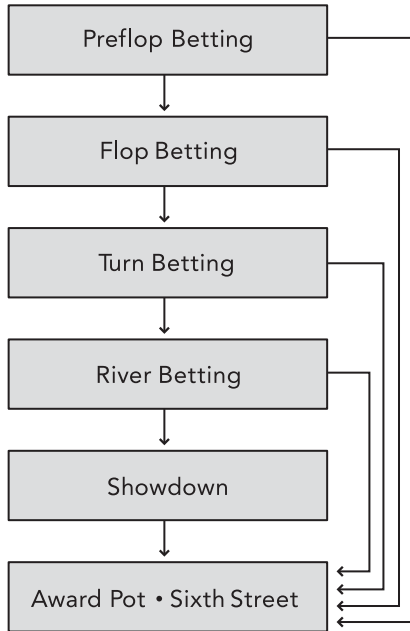
70. How to Call, Bet, and Raise at Limit Poker

Be like the point guard on a basketball team who dribbles the ball down the court without even coming close to looking at it. When you reach back to your stack and you need exactly eight chips, you come out with exactly eight chips. Your eyes don't flick down. And whether you are calling one chip, or putting out 16 chips to raise the turn, your chips leave your hand with an easy elegance that says I've done this before. You don't flub a dribble. You can't. You've lost that ability. That's how good you want to get with your chips at limit poker.

"Amateurs practice until they get it right. Professionals practice until they can't get it wrong." – author unknown

After the Betting

71. Flowchart of a Hold'em Hand



Every hand of hold'em starts with the top box and ends with the bottom box. After any round of betting, a hand can skip directly to the bottom box.

72. The Showdown

The showdown is a span of time. The showdown begins when the betting is over and at least two people still have cards. It ends when the last of the losing hands hits the muck.

When any of these three things happen, we are headed for a showdown:

- The river gets checked around.
- Someone calls a final bet or raise on the river.
- Someone calls all-in, or someone bets or raises all-in and gets called.

A showdown goes one of two ways. Either someone turns over cards, or all players but one fold their cards face down (as when a caught bluffer mucks instead of showing). The showdown ends when we know who won.

There is an underlying order to events during the showdown. Things that go in order are not necessarily right. And things that go out of order are not necessarily wrong. But there is an order.

73. Sixth Street

Sixth street starts when the betting stops. Sixth street is when players relax, which is why it pays not to.

Sixth street is when statues become fountains. While playing the turn and river, the players are stoic, doing their best to give up as little information as possible. And then, as soon as the betting stops, their parts start moving, broadcasting information about their thoughts, their feelings, and their cards. Sixth street is when players let their guard down, as if all of a sudden it's safe to reveal classified secrets to the enemy. It's like they don't even know the war is still going on.

Sixth street can start at the end of any street. For example, Joe raises before the flop and only Moe calls. On the flop, Joe bets, Moe raises, and Joe folds. The pot is awarded to Moe, and sixth street begins. Any reaction to the hand constitutes sixth street

Table Poker

action. If a hand ends with no comments, no gestures, and no strained silence, then that hand did not have a sixth street, in the same way that some hands don't have a river. For any given hand, sixth street is over when no one is talking about it. Sixth street is usually finished by the time the next hand starts, although for some hands it can last for years.



In the stream of information, sixth street is a reliable place to pan for gold.



If you fold before the flop and your mind strays from the action, that's okay. Just tune back in for the showdown and sixth street. Look around and see who did what and from which positions, listen to what people say, note who is happy and sad, look at the stacks, and it'll be like you never missed a thing.



It is better to look strong than weak. Sixth street is a time to cloak your sorrow and your joy. By acting impenetrable, you allow it to become true in their minds, and maybe even yours.

74. Slowrolling and Slowcalling

If it's done accidentally, then slowrolling is okay. If it's not, it's not. The same goes for slowcalling.

The Slowroll

Joe and Moe are at the showdown. Joe turns over his cards. Moe has Joe beat. If Moe intentionally delays stating his hand or showing his hand, even for a millisecond, for the purpose of making Joe think that Joe has a winning hand, then Moe just slowrolled Joe. This is always wrong behavior by Moe, even if Joe is hated by all for being a slowroller.

Getting slowrolled sucks. Playing limit hold'em, it's three-handed, and you're at the turn. The board is Qh-8h-5c, 2d. You have AQ for top pair. Joe has 76o, giving him a straight draw. Moe has Kh4h, giving him a flush draw. On the turn, they both check, you bet, and they both call. Your read on the situation is that you are sure your hand is good at this point.

The river is a king, giving Moe the best hand with a pair of kings. Joe checks the river, and Moe checks. You have your feelers fully extended and it doesn't feel like the king hit anyone. So you bet. Joe folds, and Moe delays. Then he reluctantly calls. Because of how the betting went, and because of Moe's slowcall, you are extremely sure that your pair of queens with an ace kicker is the winner. When you turn your hand over, Moe looks at your cards, shakes his head, and slumps a little. Now there is no doubt that your hand is good.

And then, Moe turns his hand over. His kings beat your queens. In a microsecond, you suffer the most intense spike of disappointment that can happen at poker: when you are sure you have the winning hand at the showdown, and you find out you're wrong. Next comes rage, and maybe even a plot for revenge. *Why did Moe do that to me? What a dick. I hate Moe. I am going to slowroll him next chance I get.*

W r o n g.

Slowrolling happens. Sometimes it's accidental. Sometimes it's on purpose. Either way, the spike of pain you feel from losing a pot that had your name on it is theoretically the same. The anger

you feel toward the scumwad who did this to you, that's a separate concern.

When you get intentionally slowrolled, the most important thing is to not look at the person who slowrolled you or say anything to him or reply to anything he says. If you talk to the slowroller, or about the slowroller, or about the slowroll, then you have lost the battle. If you don't react, you win, and you win big. There is no gray area. You have been attacked in a way that does not allow for ties.

When you accidentally slowroll someone else (which I have done hundreds of times), if it will make you feel better to apologize, do it. But you don't have to. You know your heart was pure, and most likely they will too.

The Slowcall

A slowcall is when you know for sure you are going to call a bet, and your call is going to be the final betting action of the entire hand, and you haven't called yet.

Playing no-limit hold'em, everyone folds around to Joe in the small blind. Joe goes all-in. Moe is in the big blind. Moe has pocket aces. Moe knows for sure that he is going to call, but he fakes deliberation, just to make Joe think that his chances are better than they are. That's an extreme slowcall.

Here is an example of a lesser slowcall. Playing limit hold'em, Joe has 99. Moe has Jh8h. The flop comes 7h-3h-2c. Joe bets the flop and Moe calls with his flush draw. The turn is the 2d. Joe bets the turn and Moe calls. The river is a jack, making Moe the new leader with a pair of jacks. Joe bets the river.

Moe knows without even thinking about it that there's no way he is going to fold. Not after making top pair on the river after never making a move on the hand. And Moe also knows without thinking that he is not going to raise. That's because Moe is a very passive player who would never raise on the river with just one pair.

So, at the instant Joe bets, Moe knows he is going to call. But instead of calling in tempo, Moe hem-haws around a little. At that instant, Joe becomes certain that he has the best hand with pocket nines because the only thing he was really worried about was if Moe had made a pair of jacks on the river, but surely Moe wouldn't be hesitating before calling if he had a jack.

The final effect of slowcalling is the same as slowrolling. Someone intentionally made someone else think they had a winner when they didn't, and the gods frown.

75. Slowfolding and Fastfolding

A slowfold is when the betting is over, and you're beat, but you still have your cards.

We're at the showdown, it's three-handed, and I have nine-high. Joe is first to show, then Moe, then me. Joe turns over his hand. There is no doubt that my cards are going to end up face down in the muck. The question is, when should I fold my hand? Right now? Or should I wait for Moe to act? Hmm. If we assume that Moe will only show his hand if it beats Joe's hand, then I will occasionally have a chance to save face by waiting for Moe to show first, then I can muck my hand and act like I had Joe beat, but not Moe. But is that really the type of reasoning that should be steering my course?

Let's say Joe turns over his hand and he only has ace-high. Moe flashes his cards without letting go of them. Moe has a busted flush draw. He can't beat Joe's ace-high. Moe shakes his head. I sit without indicating anything. Moe finally mucks. Joe is now expecting me to turn over a hand that beats his, not only because his hand is weak, but because I still have cards and I've been sitting there looking like someone who is about to turn over a hand that wins a pot. But I can't beat his ace-high either. So now I muck, and Joe gets some slowfold joy from winning a pot he expected to lose.

Table Poker

I don't slowfold anymore. What I do now is I fastfold. A fastfold is when the betting is finished, and you muck your hand as soon as you know you are beat, regardless of position and everything else. Fastfolds are never wrong. They range from courteous – when folding out of turn on the river helps move the game along – to powerful, as in these two examples.

- Playing limit hold'em, it's a three-handed pot. I'm on the button with 98o. The flop is 7-6-2 rainbow. On the flop, Joe bets, Moe raises, I reraise, Joe caps it, Moe calls, and I call. The turn is a jack. Joe bets, Moe raises, I call, Joe reraises, Moe caps it, I call, and Joe calls. The river is a three. Joe checks, Moe checks, and I muck.
- Playing limit hold'em, I raise on the button with 88 and Joe calls from the big blind. We're headsup. The flop is Ah-Kd-Jc. Joe checks, I bet, and Joe calls. The turn is the 5h. Joe checks, I bet, and Joe calls. The river is the 4c, making the final board Ah-Kd-Jc, 5h, 4c. On the river, Joe checks, and I check behind. Joe's grin as he turns over 3h2h. He called on the flop with a backdoor straight draw, a backdoor flush draw, and with the option to bluff later. On the turn, he picked up a straight draw and a flush draw. On the river, he made a straight, and he checked, planning to checkraise if I bet. At the showdown, anyone watching could see that I had to have gotten sucked out on on the river, since Joe's hand on the turn was three-high. Less than two seconds after Joe's cards hit the table face up, mine hit the muck face down. That's a galaxy-class fastfold.

By fastfolding, I give some free information now and then, but I think it adds some mystery to my madness as well. I don't have any blanket recommendations on this. Slowfolding and fastfolding deal in information exchange and microseconds and style, and are therefore highly situation-dependent and you-dependent.

76. Fastgrabbing

A fastgrab is when a player grabs his last bet back early. Joe bets the river. Moe calls. Joe turns over the nuts and immediately grabs his last bet back into his stack. That's a fastgrab. What Joe did was he reached out and took money out of the pot while a hand was still going on. Don't do that.

Most fastgrabs are done without the nuts. Joe bets the river. Moe calls. Joe turns over his hand. It's not the nuts, but it beats Moe's hand. We know so right away because of Moe's reaction to seeing it – the way he delays, the way he looks at his cards and the board, or maybe he just comes right out and says "That's good." At limit poker, Joe should never reach out and take his last bet back. At no-limit, if Joe's last bet is multiple columns of chips, and it would help the dealer if Joe retrieved them himself, then Joe should wait until Moe has relinquished his cards and the dealer is awarding the pot before Joe helps the dealer finish the hand.

77. Fastrolling

Of all these rollyfoldsy words I made up, this is the one that penetrates deepest into the part of poker that lies between what's correct and what's right. A fastroll is a courtesy. It is never incorrect to fastroll, and, according to a strict interpretation of the proper order of things during the showdown, it is never incorrect not to fastroll. However, it can be deemed to be very wrong in certain situations to not fastroll.

We're at the showdown, it's me and Joe. I have the button. The action is on Joe to either show his hand or muck it. But Joe doesn't do either one. When a player hesitates during his turn at the showdown, it creates a space that exists outside the natural order of things, and therefore outside the rules. This is where the fastroll lives, in the land of ethics and etiquette, where the floorman has no jurisdiction. It's just us now.

Table Poker

Back to the hand at hand. We're at the showdown, and instead of showing, Joe says what he has. Here's what I do when that happens. If Joe verbally states a hand that I can beat or tie, I show my hand immediately. I never make him show his hand. Let's say my hand is a pair of threes, and Joe says, "I have a pair of twos," but he doesn't turn his cards over. It is within the rules for me to do nothing, in which case what will happen is Joe will eventually turn over his pair of twos, and then I will turn over my pair of threes. I believe the better play in a headsup showdown is to turn your hand over anytime you hear your opponent declare a hand that you can beat or tie. It's stylishly trusting, and fast.

Next let's look at what happens when Joe, instead of showing or mucking, says "I missed," or he taps the table in that way that indicates he's got squat.

- If I have ace-high or better, I show my hand right away.
- If I have king-high or worse, and Joe says "I missed," then I say, "Me too," and I wait for him to show.
- If I have king-high or worse and Joe taps the table, I wait him out.
- If Joe says, "King-high," when I have king-high, or he says "Queen-high" when I have queen-high, or he says "jack-high" when I have jack-high, etc, and I have the best possible kicker (meaning I have KQ or QJ or JT etc), then I show my hand immediately. If I have a lesser kicker, then I say "Me too" and wait.

Another time to fastroll is at limit poker, when someone is all-in, the betting for the whole hand is completed, and there are still one or more cards to come. Just turn your hand over. You have to show it to win anyway. And if you end up showing a loser now and then that you didn't have to, oh well.

You might be thinking, “Now hold on a second. First you tell me to lock down my information output, and now you’re telling me to reveal my sacred cards to the universe at times when according to the rules and protocol I don’t have to?”

That’s right. That’s exactly what I’m saying. It’s better to give up some information than to not fastroll appropriately. In some poker cultures, not fastrolling in certain situations – such as when Joe says “I missed” and you have a very good hand – is exactly as evil as slowrolling.

That said, let me say this. It is never against the rules to not fastroll. In other words, it’s always within the rules to just wait. Like so:

Your opponent bets the river and you call. At that moment, the action is on him. The rules require him to either show his hand or muck it. The rules do not require him to talk, and the rules do not forbid him to talk. If, instead of turning his hand over or throwing it away, your opponent gestures or talks, he has created a space outside the rules. You have no choice but to exist within this space he has created. The only “rules” we have to go on in spaces like this are not called “rules.” That’s because the house is not in charge of enforcing them. They are called ethics and etiquette, and they are always changing and always different from place to place and person to person, and always made up by you and me and groups of us. What I have done so far in this section is detail some of the ways I behave in the space created by a called opponent who does not turn his hand over in tempo. Here is another way to behave that is opposite what I do, but is nevertheless highly ethical. It goes like this:

It’s headsup. Joe bets the river, you call, and he...

It doesn’t matter what Joe does, or says, or how long it takes. You decide you ain’t moving until he shows or mucks. If and when he shows, you show, period. Even if you have the nuts. That’s a perfectly fine way to play poker. If you wait him out,

Table Poker

and you catch flack over it, and you are baffled as to how you can behave by-the-book yet at the same time sense censure, the mystery is solved when you realize that what you are feeling is an ethical pressure that only exists in the space created by your opponent's stall. You can – and may – force the hand into realignment with proper poker sequence, anytime you want to, by not talking, not gesturing, and waiting.

Here are some more times to fastroll:

- If you are last to act on the river, and it's checked to you, and you are going to check, and you have a hand that has a decent chance of winning, it's okay to just turn your hand over instead of checking and waiting.
- If you bet or raise all-in at no-limit, and you get called, and the call ends the betting action of the hand, turn your hand over immediately, even if there are still cards to come.
- Playing no-limit, if your opponent bets all-in and you call, or if calling his bet puts you all-in, and you have the nuts, turn your hand over immediately, even if there are still cards to come. Also, if you have a very good hand, like a set, and you are nearly certain it's good at the time you call, turn it over right away. The next best thing is to say what you have, such as, "I have the nut flush," or "I have bottom set." I prefer to turn the cards over because it is quieter, yet louder.

Let's look at when you are first to show and you have a very weak hand. My recommendation is that you do not state your hand or tap the table. You either show or muck. There are times when this can be very difficult to do. And when you do it, it won't feel equitable. Doesn't it seem unfair that just because other players say or indicate "I missed" and you don't, that they occasionally

come out ahead on the information exchange at the showdown? Well, it is unfair – from close up. In the grander scheme, you could say that the reason your opponents say “I missed” is because they are weak, and the reason you don’t say “I missed” is because you are strong, which means you are competing for money when you are strong and your opponents are weak. How fair is that?

78. Showing bluffs

There are two opportunities to show a bluff. One is when you get called, the other is when you don’t.

Showing a Called Bluff

You just bet the river and your lone opponent called. Your hand is ten-high. You have a choice. You can show your hand or muck it. In either case, your opponent will know that you bluffed. If you show, then he will know what you bluffed with, and you will know what he called with. If you muck, he will not know what you bluffed with, and unless he gives you a courtesy show, you will not know what he called with. This arrangement is an ancient and fair exchange called “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” If you show your cards, then he has to show his. If you don’t, then he doesn’t. And it’s up to you, the bluffer, as to how it goes.

There are a variety of benefits to showing a called bluff. It is a flagrant display of shamelessness and fearlessness. And it might confuse your opponent into throwing away a winner. And you get to see what he called with. And I’ve seen people call with nothing – your king-high might be the best hand.

Here’s what I do. If I want to see his hand more than I don’t want him to see my hand, then I show. Otherwise I muck.

Showing an Uncalled Bluff

Let's say you bet or raise – it could be on any street – and everyone folds. You won the pot. Your hand is ten-high. You have a choice. You can show your hand or muck it.

One reason to show an uncalled bluff is to attempt to agitate or embarrass an opponent into tilting. Another reason is to set your opponents up for later, so that they will try to catch you bluffing when you aren't.

The third reason that uncalled bluffs get shown is the most common one, and the least lucrative. Of the thousands of uncalled bluffs I have seen turned over by their proud owners, I believe almost all of them were shown by players who were high on their own brain chemistry at the moment their opponents folded, as I was whenever I showed a bluff, and I've shown hundreds. I never did it deliberately to promote tilt, or to set up a take down, even though that's what I would have said. When I showed, it was because I had a secret I couldn't keep. I had to tell somebody. I just couldn't help myself. Even after I starting wanting to keep my bluffs a secret, the urge to show what I had gotten away with was too often too strong.

If you are susceptible to showing bluffs, and you very much wish you weren't, then try planning ahead, by the session, and by the hand. After a session, take account of any bluffs you showed, and recommit to not doing it next time. During a hand, at the moment you bluff, you should get ready to muck, because really, as soon as you bluff, it doesn't matter to you if he calls or not, right? Aren't you going to muck face down either way?

79. Fantasy Poker

Fantasy poker is a game people play. It's what happens when poker players talk about unseen hole cards as if everyone had seen them. Fantasy poker is a cooperative of feigned belief. It's when everyone

knows that anyone could be lying, yet everyone acts like no one is.

I used to think I was an exceptionally gifted liar. During a sixth street inquisition, I could make up the perfect lie and deliver it perfectly, every time, about what my cards were, and why I did what I did. I told lies that were not only delectably believable, but they also helped to maintain my image as whatever I thought I was trying to maintain my image as. After lying a million times, it occurred to me, Hey, I play against guys all the time who play as well as I do. Maybe they lie as well as well. Come to think of it, I thought, they almost certainly do. I am surrounded by liars! How dare they!

It is quite understandable that we would want to rewrite history at the poker table. And it's not all that hard to play a bad hand poorly, and then make it look like you played a good hand excellently. For example:

Playing limit hold'em, I was on the button with Jc9c. Joe limped and I raised. The small blind folded and Moe called in the big blind. Three players, me last. The flop came 8h-6h-2c. Moe checked and Joe bet. I had a pair draw, a backdoor straight draw, a backdoor flush draw, and two overcards. With all of that, how could I not raise?

So I raised, and Moe called two cold, and Joe called. The turn was an offsuit ace. The board was now 8h-6h-2c, Ad. Moe checked, Joe bet, I folded, and Moe folded. So now we had six unseen hole cards and three experienced fantasy poker players. It was everybody's hand to win.

Moe said to me, "What'd you have?"

I shook my head, like somebody who had pocket queens.

Joe said, "He had pocket queens. I had him beat on the flop. The ace just saved you money." Which could have been total bullshit of course.

I said, "If I had pocket queens, I'd still be raising. You had dick."

Table Poker

This is what a Mobius strip of bullshit looks like. I would say things like that thinking cleverly that it would make them think that I really did have pocket queens.

Would it have that effect? I believed that people believed me when I played fantasy poker, yet I rarely trusted what came from the mouths of others.

Then why do it? Even if they believed you, what is the benefit to you?

There's a lot of pride on the line when you play fantasy poker.

When I realized that I send wrong information of some kind virtually every time I open my mouth at the showdown, it suddenly seemed silly to say anything. And it really seemed silly for anyone to ask me anything. Don't these people know I can't be trusted? (There was one brief period when I replied a few times to "What'd you have?" with "Do you really want to know what I had or are you just wondering which lie I'll tell?")

One day it hit me. If it was so fruitlessly pointless for them to talk to me about what I had, then maybe, just maybe, it was equally useless for me to talk to them about what they had. That didn't leave us anything to talk about. And so ended my fantasy poker career. Nowadays, if you ask me what I had, I can solemnly assure you, I won't lie.

80. Shameless Showdowns

I have made many wrong turns in my life. And I don't mean metaphorically. I mean in my car. I'll be driving along, and my mind will be elsewhere, or I'll be talking, and I'll just drive right by the place I intended to turn. And I might not notice it for a while. I have made so many wrong turns that I am no longer miffed when it happens. Passengers are surprised by how unsurprised I am after I make a wrong turn. They'll be like, "Dude, we just lost half an

hour because you're an idiot. Do the right thing here and show us a little shame!"

What am I supposed to do? Act like I'm mad at myself? For the sake of others?

The same thing happens at the poker table. Like the time I was playing in a game with \$10/20 blinds, two players limped, the small blind completed, and I checked in the big blind with 72o. The flop was A-Q-J rainbow, and everyone checked. The turn was a fourth-suit king, and everyone checked again. The river was a ten, putting an ace-high straight on board that I didn't see because I was busy ordering food from the waitress. We all checked again. They checked because we all had the nuts. I checked because I thought I had seven-high. When the last guy checked on the river, that made me first to show, and with no hope to win, I just mucked. The dealer started to split the pot three ways and that's when I noticed my mistake. The total pot was \$80 which means I cost myself \$20 by ordering a \$10 meal. A couple guys were snickering. Oh well. Wrong turn.



When people explain themselves during sixth street, I call it splaining. Splaining is an information leak. To plug it, focus on your turn at the showdown. At that moment, you will always have the same three options: you can turn your cards over, you can throw them away, or... you can hem-haw around a little. Hem-hawing is a leak in the dike that holds back the splaining. You want to delete that option, leaving you only these:

- show in tempo
- muck in tempo

If you can swallow that flappy tongue of yours and just turn your cards over, right when you have so much splaining to do, and

Table Poker

if you can chuck your cards like it was nothing, right at the climax of the hand, then you can snip the splaining. And then you can be shameless.



Shamelessly showing down a hand that others might be ashamed of is an act of discipline and contentment. It's like a combination of not looking at a car wreck and not fretting over hair loss.



The board on the river is Ac-Td-9c, 3d, 3h. Your hand is KcJc. You flopped the nut straight draw and the nut flush draw. On the river, your hand is king-jack high. Your lone opponent, Joe, bets the river. Your read on Joe is that he either has a very good hand, or he has nothing and he is bluffing. You have nothing, and your king-high is the second nut nothing, which will beat many nothings that Joe might have, so, you decide to call. After you call, Joe turns over KdQd, the nut nothing. You were right. He was bluffing. But his queen beats your jack, and you lose anyway. Oops. This is an especially difficult time to pull off a shameless muck, but if you can do it, here is the type of reaction you might get:

There have been times when my opponents were convinced that I had misread the cards and mucked a winning hand, because of how I mucked. They were forced into that conclusion because the alternative, that I would intentionally call on the river with a hand that loses to, say, KQ, and then, after such an astonishing and dramatic finish, that I would ditch my cards as if nothing even remotely out of the ordinary had happened, well, that scenario seemed just too fantastically improbable, so, they rationally went with the less improbable explanation and assumed that I had misread the cards and

that I had boneheadedly given away a won pot without even knowing it.

Sometimes there is an urgent need to let me know. That's when I hear, "What the heck did you have? You just folded a winner bub. Did you see he only had king-high? Hellooooo. Are you on mute?"

At this point the issue is resolved as they either figure out that I had not folded a winner, or they stop caring.



A potent showdown weapon is to not judge at the moment of expected judgment. Here is an example:

Joe and Moe are two poker players who met three days ago at a poker table. They have played in the same game twice since then, a couple hours each time. They are both tighter than most, and they developed a mutual respect for how the other plays, in that way that tight players do. They had yet to play a headsup pot, and then this hand came up.

Playing in a full limit hold'em game, Joe was under-the-gun with AA and Moe was on the button with 22. Before the flop, Joe raised and everyone folded around to Moe. Moe called and both blinds folded. Just the two of them now. The flop was Q-8-3 rainbow. Joe bet and Moe called. The turn was a four. Joe checked with pocket aces, Moe bet with pocket twos, and Joe checkraised. Moe called. The river was a deuce, making the final board Q-8-3, 4, 2, and giving Moe the lead at the finish line with three deuces. Joe bet the river, Moe raised, and Joe called. Moe turned over his set of deuces. Joe mucked silently face down. And Moe started talking.

The mutual respect that had developed between Joe and Moe stemmed from the assumption that neither of them would play pocket deuces the way Moe just did. To do so would be a crime of sorts, between players who rate each other

Table Poker

highly. Moe was now a criminal, and he assumed that court was in session, as it so often is. Moe threw himself before the court, entered a plea of guilty, and begged forgiveness. Moe did all of that, when he said:

“Sorry man. When I bet the turn, I was hoping you had ace-king. I knew you had me when you checkraised. You played it just right. I knew I should have folded. Man that was a bad beat. I’m really sorry dude.”

At this point, if Joe says, “S’okay,” or “No problem,” or if Joe taps the table softly with his hand, or if Joe nods calmly in acknowledgment of what Moe said, then Joe is being lenient, and Moe becomes a free man. If, however, Joe wants to impose the harshest penalty (and I know this is true because I have suffered it before) then Joe will not look at Moe, or speak to Moe, or react in any way to Moe’s pathetic groveling. He will leave him to languish.



If it looks like you intentionally did something unethical or illegal, and it was an accident, and you know that others saw it, and you know that they know that you know that it looked like you did something wrong, do nothing. Don’t splain yourself. If you splain, which can be accomplished with as little as an eye roll and a shrug, you acknowledge that there is a council of judgment in session and that you have been accused of a crime and that you have taken the stand to defend yourself. By not acknowledging your own suspicious-looking moves, you dissolve the court.

The Poker Room

81. Home Field Vantage

My pattern has been to switch locations and then stay put. I'll play at one poker room nearly exclusively for a while. It might be for a few months or a few years. Then the winds change and I'm somewhere else.

It's a great feeling to be like part of the furniture of a poker room, when I know the names of the dealers without reading their badges, and I know the food selection without reading the menu, and I know how the players play without reading the action. Yes, the regulars know how I play too. So that balances out. The players I get the big head start on are the ones who don't come here often, like that fellow over there who just sat down. He's never played in my game at my casino before. He's got a whole table of unfamiliar opponents to figure out and confuse. I just have one.

82. On the Road

Give me a fat wad of hundreds and a few days and a hotel room near a poker room and I'm a very happy man. Right up until the poker playing starts. Then the anticipation buzz ends and the bloodletting is inevitable. At some point in the trip, it's guaranteed, I'll be fried and frazzled, and I'll keep saying deal me in.

That was me in the old days.

It's kind of backwards, how my results on the road gradually changed from bad to good. I was in deep denial about the effect that playing a billion hours in a row had on my performance. The problem I *did* admit to having was that I would play for 15 hours or whatever, sleep for 3, and then I'd play another long session, while justifying the insufficient sleep with lies such as "Nobody expects to sleep well in Vegas," and "I feel pretty good right now."

Table Poker

Because I was less in denial about how poorly I prepared for my sessions than about how poorly I ended them, I was able to make some improvements on the front end of my sessions. All I had to do for crying out loud was sleep! How hard is that? Well it's pretty hard when I wake up and I know they are playing poker right downstairs. Stay in bed, I'd tell myself. Go back to sleep. You can do it. Nope. Not yet. No getting up. Shhh. Roll over. Close your eyes. You can do this.

And eventually I did. And then I did it a little more often. Then a little more more often. Now and then I'd go for a walk outside. That habit grew until it got to where now and then I didn't. Then it got to where I wouldn't play without a walk between sleeping and playing. Somewhere along the way, the losing stopped.

If you know you will falter on the road, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, then the main thing to work on, forever, is your recovery system. You know you will need to be resilient to survive. That's what walking around, eating right,* and forcing yourself to get enough sleep is all about. It's about physically and mentally recovering from the brutalities of poker before the next fight.

83. Make Your Intentions Known

Let the house know your plans when it will help them run the game. For example, when you are entering a game and you know you are going to let the button pass and post behind, let the dealer know too. And when you are leaving for a while, let the floorman know when you think you'll be back. This kind of information it's okay to volunteer.

* Which reminds me of a story. There's this guy. He has a stalk of celery stuck in his ear, and a carrot hanging out of his nose. He's not feeling well, so he goes to the doctor. The doctor says, "I can tell what's wrong with you just from looking at you. You're not eating right."

84. How and How Not to Call a Floorman

Here is how not to call a floorman:

FLOOR!!!!

Here is how to call a floorman, in spirit:

“Excuse me, kind players and dealer. I would like to suggest at this time that we consider bringing in an outside mediator to help us settle this matter. I believe that fellow over there in the suit should do just fine.”

Here is how to call the floorman, in reality:

When you want the floorman to be called on your own behalf, look into the dealer’s face and say, “Would you call the floorman please?” If the dealer or the players object to your request, and you still want a floorman, say something appeasing, and then ask again. For example, “I understand where you’re coming from on this. I’d still like to call a floorman please. Thank you.” And then stop talking, and stop moving. This will cause the game to stop, which will cause a floorman to appear.

Sometimes when I call for a floorman, I am not involved in the irregularity or the contention. If I can see that the mistake or dispute is not going to be resolved without a floorman, and no one is calling one, I might help out and nudge things along. Sometimes the act of suggesting that a floorman be called is enough to bring the matter to a speedy close. That’s because a cooperative spirit can suddenly arise among adversaries when neither of them desires a higher authority on the scene. An example is when two motorists have an accident and they decide to settle the matter themselves without bringing in the police or their insurance companies.

In some poker rooms, calling for a floorman is no more disruptive than calling for a waitress. The management *wants* the floor to be called to the table, as many times as needed, even to mend minor procedural mishaps. In other rooms, calling a

floorman is like calling a fireman. It's always loud and dramatic. In those rooms, you should have a very good reason for summoning the fire truck.



When the floor has been called, it can be a stressful time for the table poker organism. Players bicker. Dealers rustle. Whatever sparks were already flying around have a chance to get some oxygen and burst into flames.

Shhh. Relax. If you intend to speak when the floorman arrives, consider that sometimes the calmest voice is the only one that gets heard. Settle yourself now, while you have time. If you will not be needed when the floorman arrives, then enjoy this little break and let the matter resolve itself without you. If you are feeling extremely and suddenly impatient because of this dumb delay in the game, it sounds like you could use a break anyway.

85. Don't Push the Button

To dealers: Don't move the dealer button until the hand is totally over and the pot has been awarded. Here's why:

- Moving the button early doesn't get us any more hands, even when it goes well. And when moving the button early causes a minor irregularity, which it often does, it always slows the game down. Moving the button early is an action whose sole purpose is to gain time, yet its only effect is that it loses time.
- All of the players at the table, and any players returning to the table, are entitled to see the correct positional information at the showdown. Everyone should be able to glance around the table and see which players did what

from which positions. When the button gets moved while there are still live hands or exposed cards, the table is simply wrong.

- The floorman needs the button to be in the right spot during the showdown so that he can quickly and accurately see what's going on so that he can perform his seating duties optimally.

To players: Don't push the button.

But what if all the cards are mucked and the dealer is pushing the pot to the winner? What about moving the button now and saying "button moved" to the dealer?

If no cards are face up, and if the dealer must stretch uncomfortably to reach the button where it is, then it is okay to move the button for the dealer and say "button moved." Otherwise, do not push the button, even when the hand is over. Let the dealer do it. Here's why:

Some dealers don't care if you push their button. With them, nothing you do can cause a problem. Some dealers do care. They know that the game runs best if they move the button themselves in their usual procedure. With that kind of dealer – and you won't always know when you have one – if you push their button, nothing good can happen. If something gets flubbed up, you risk agitating not only the dealer, but also the players, and in exchange for those risks, the most you can gain is that the next hand begins a fraction of a second sooner. Your expectation is to break even or lose. That's an inverse freeroll. Stay away.

86. The Dealer Made a Mistake. Should I Speak Up?

If you had asked me twenty years ago if I thought I should speak up when I see that there is something wrong with the pot – and by “speak up” I mean “let the dealer know,” which can be done with as little as a raised eyebrow – I would have said absolutely yes I should, and so should everyone else. The logic behind my firm moral stance would have been the usual logic behind my firm moral stances: “Because I think so, and so do all the other people who think so too.” But now I’m not so sure. Let’s play judge:

Joe and Moe are playing in a deep-stack fast-action no-limit hold’em game. The blinds are \$10/20. They have about \$10,000 each. Before the flop, Joe makes it \$200 with pocket twos, and Moe just calls with pocket aces. They’re headsup and Moe is last to act. The flop comes A-9-9. Joe has two pair: nines and twos. Moe flopped aces full of nines.

Joe bets out \$500 on the flop and Moe just calls. The turn is a deuce, giving Joe a full house, twos over nines. Joe bets out \$2,000 on the turn, and Moe just calls.

The river is, that’s right, you guessed it, the last deuce in the deck. Joe caught runner runner case case on the turn and river – a thousand-to-one shot – to beat Moe’s flopped full house.

Board: A-9-9, 2, 2

Moe’s hand: AA

Joe’s hand: 22

On the river Joe bets all-in: \$7300. Moe calls in ecstasy. Joe shows his quads. Moe screams in agony.

It turns out that Moe had Joe covered, but barely. When the dealer finishes counting the stacks and settling the pot, Moe’s stack is a stub. Moe had started the hand with \$10,000, and now he has \$130. Along the way, the dealer made a mistake. Moe has one \$10 chip too many. He’s only supposed to have \$120, which means Joe got shorted \$10. Meanwhile,

Elements of Poker

Moe is still suffering all over the place while he signals the floorman for a reload from the cage.

Whaddya think? Is every player who saw the error individually honor-bound to tell a guy who just lost ten thousand dollars after flopping aces full that he owes ten bucks more? Here's another one:

You are playing \$4/8 limit high-low Omaha. The pot is heads-up and small. They're at the showdown. Joe turns over his hand. Moe turns over his hand. The hands and the board are complicated. Joe says, "It's a split." Moe is a little confused and he nods his head. The dealer splits the pot in half and awards it. Just one problem. Moe was supposed to get $\frac{3}{4}$ of the pot and Joe was supposed to get $\frac{1}{4}$. And you saw the whole thing. If you speak up right now, the error will definitely be rectified. Joe will owe Moe two dollars, maybe three. But to get there, the dealer will have to gather the pot pieces back from Joe and Moe, and re-split it from scratch. If you wait another instant, it will be too late. Should you speak up? What if you saw that Joe saw the mistake, meaning that Joe knowingly robbed Moe when he accepted half the pot? What if you knew that Joe had not seen the mistake? Should it matter? What if the pot had been huge? Should that matter? What if you hate one of these guys?

Zooming back out...

Here are two very solid reasons why one might choose to speak up when one sees that the money is wrong: 1) To protect one's interests. 2) To maintain the righteousness of the poker universe.

Here are two equally solid reasons why one might choose to stay quiet: 1) To protect one's interests. 2) Because one might not consider oneself to be a custodian of the righteousness of the poker universe.

My opinion on this issue is that case by case, whatever you choose to do is automatically correct, just because you chose it.

87. Moving Up to Mid-Limit at Table Poker

Let's say the highest you have played at table poker is \$8/16 limit hold'em. You have been crushing the game for six months. At the place you play, the next level up is \$20/40. And now you're going to play in it. You've got your mind right. You've got your bankroll right. You show up at the casino, rested and ready. You sign up for the \$20/40 game. The floorman looks at you approvingly, "It's about time."

A little while later, your name is called. You approach the \$20/40 table gripping two racks of chips. You manage to sit down and get the chips out of the racks without any of them touching the floor. After a few minutes, you settle into a steady state of scared shitless. You can hardly move. The fear is so thick you don't even know what it is.

Well here's what it is. Moving up at table poker, especially the move from low-limit (\$6/12-ish) to mid-limit (\$20/40-ish), is not merely a change in "skill level" or "betting styles" of the opponents. It can be a whole change in culture, like moving to a foreign country, where when you say something, they either look at you weird or ignore you. So be ready for that. Be ready to be uncomfortable at first, and less so as time goes on, as you learn the ways of the people in your new land.

88. A Reminder about Dealers

Dealers are people too.

89. Culture

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. The same goes for Las Vegas. And Los Angeles. And Atlantic City, and along the Mississippi River, and on the internet, and anywhere else where cards, money, and poker players come together. Customs, rules, protocols, foods, software, and attitudes are not acceptable or unacceptable. They are not normal or strange. They are merely aspects of your situation.

90. Be the House

When you play poker at a casino, pretend you are the poker room manager and that your pay is a flat percentage of the total revenue, and that when you play, you play with your own money, and no one knows you are the manager. To your opponents, you are just another poker player. To you, you are a greedy heartless bastard trying to suck every cent you can out of the game – twice. As a player, and as the house.

Playing undercover in your own game, with maximum profit as your only goal, what would you do? As the manager, you would:

- Think of your dealers as the backbone of your business. They share a table with every customer. They touch every dollar you earn. They are your eyes, your ears, and your image. Your success is dependent upon theirs. And no matter how bad a dealer screws up or misbehaves, you would never put one of your dealers on the spot in front of the customers, because it's always best for the casino's bottom line if you keep your cool.
- Help keep the game moving because the more hands that get dealt, the more money you make. To that end, you would watch the hands as they are played, even after you

Table Poker

fold, and you would anticipate pauses and snags in the betting and in the house procedures, and be ready to gently assist if needed.

- Want your customers to stay put, and when they leave, you would want them to come back. So of course you would never do anything or say anything while you are playing that might run them off or keep them away. If you didn't talk to your customers, that would be fine. You wouldn't need to sell them anything. They are already buying.

What about as a player? If you were trying to make the most money you could, now and in the future, what would you want?

- You'd want the poker room to profit, starting with the dealers.
- You'd want lots of hands to get dealt.
- You'd want to pay attention to the betting action after you fold.
- You'd want there to be lots of poker players in the building.

It turns out that the behaviors that would make you the most money as a manager also make you the most as a player. Treat the staff like teammates and everybody wins.

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Internet Poker

91. Finger Tilt

Finger tilt is when a message on its way to the fingers from the brain gets ambushed by emotion, distraction, or fatigue. Finger tilt is like electricity in that if something goes wrong, it's already too late, which means the only protection is prevention.

Here are four independent things you can do anytime that will maximize the likelihood that you will minimize your finger tilt.

- Put your hands in your lap.
- Close your eyes.
- Sit up straight. (E142)
- Consciously breathe. (E141)

92. Number of Tables to Play

The Professional does not confuse maximum action with maximum extraction. When The Professional decides how many tables to play at the same time – for example, let's say that right now he is playing three tables – it is because he has reason to believe that

at this time, looking at the biggest picture, he is earning more in dollars-per-hour by playing three tables than he would by playing two tables, or four.

93. The Chat Box

Let's say you wanted to make it more likely that you will make misclick mistakes. And that you wanted to increase the probability that you will be distracted from the game and miss something important. And let's say you wanted to disclose information to your opponents about yourself that will help them play better against you. How might you achieve all these goals with one action? Chat.

94. Notes to Self

Be good to yourself by helping yourself do what you think you should do. If you think of things you'd like to be reminded of while you are playing, write them down or print them out on a piece of paper and put the paper where you are sure to see it while you are playing.

95. Comparing Internet Poker and Table Poker

Some people like internet poker because it's faster.
Others prefer table poker because it's slower.

Some people like internet poker because you don't have to leave the house. Others prefer table poker because you do have to leave the house.

Some people like internet poker because you can order a pizza.
Others like table poker because you can order a cocktail.

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Cash Games

96. Fluctuation

The ticker tapes of life go by, and we just love to watch. It almost doesn't matter if we get richer or poorer, heavier or lighter. When our stats change, we feel something, and that's what we're hooked on, that fluctuated feeling. We want to get fluc up.

And then along comes poker. The mother fluctuater. I sit down. I post a blind. I've been fluctuated already. And I know what comes next. I'll get some good cards that will make me want to fluctuate before the flop. And you will too. At the same time. Then the flop comes. We might do lots of betting and raising, which causes fluctuation, or we might do lots of checking and folding, which causes stasis, or anywhere in between. And that's true for every street. Even our fluctuation fluctuates like crazy.

Sometimes fluctuation is in the cards. One guy has AK, another guy has QQ, another guy has 98, and the flop comes Q-J-T. This is a guaranteed cluster fluc. Other times, nobody has much of anything, but that doesn't mean you won't get fluc. No matter how bad your cards are, you can always fluc yourself by bluffing.

At the poker table, we can't help but keep track of "how we're doing." We assign special meaning to tiny segments of our fluctuation. If you fluctuate down and it gets you down, you're fluc. That's why it's best to not give a fluc.

97. Take the Blind or Post Behind?

You are about to enter a game in which the rule is that you must post a big blind to get a hand. If you want to get as many hands as you can for your money, you have two choices. You can play your first hand from the natural big blind position. Or you can play your first hand from behind the button, after posting a big blind from there. Which way is better?

At limit poker, my policy is to never post behind the button. At no-limit, I occasionally post behind. Here are my thoughts and history on this topic:

Let's say the blinds are \$10/20. If you start on the big blind, you pay \$30 to play one full round, no matter how many handed it is. If you post from the cutoff (which means the same as post behind the button), you pay one big blind of \$20. For your \$20, you get a partial round, from your cutoff hand to your under-the-gun hand.

Let's compare the cost-per-hand of the two options.

Cost-Per-Hand Comparison of Starting on the Big Blind versus Posting Behind				
Blinds: \$10/20				
	T a k e t h e B l i n d		P o s t B e h i n d	
	\$30 buys:	At a Cost Per Hand of:	\$20 buys:	At a Cost Per Hand of:
10 players	10 hands	\$3.00	7 hands	\$2.85
9 players	9 hands	3.33	6 hands	3.33
8 players	8 hands	3.75	5 hands	4.00
7 players	7 hands	4.28	4 hands	5.00
6 players	6 hands	5.00	3 hands	6.66
5 players	5 hands	6.00	2 hands	10.00
4 players	4 hands	7.50	1 hand	20.00

Cash Games

Like a million others, I approximated those calculations while sitting at a poker table and concluded that:

- In full games, the difference in cost-per-hand between posting behind and starting on the big blind is small.
- In shorthanded games, barring metagame considerations, it's a no-brainer to enter on the big blind.

In that case, let's zoom in on full games only. Heck, let's look precisely at nine-handed games with \$10/20 blinds. In that specific case, it's an exact tie: \$3.33 per hand. What does that mean? That it doesn't matter what I do? It was unfathomable to me that the story could end there. Taking the blind and posting behind seemed too different to be the same. The seeker in me needed to know that a good reason exists for favoring one over the other. The scientist in me needed to know what it was.

How about the position parameter? Is that a scale tipper? Well, let's see. I can post \$20 in the big blind, which is the second worst position, or I can post \$20 in the cutoff, which is the second best position. Having my \$20 working for me in the second best position has to be better than posting my \$20 from the second worst position, right? Plus, when I take my first hand in the big blind, my second hand is my small blind, which is the worst position of all. I had found the reason I was seeking. Because of the difference in positional value between the blinds and the cutoff, I decided my policy would be to post in the cutoff.

This was in the early 90's when I was exploring this issue. Almost every poker game in every casino in the USA was some form of limit poker, mostly hold'em. After I came to the conclusion that I should always post behind because of position, I started paying closer attention to the professionals I played against on the road, to see what they did. I noticed that some of the sharpies always posted behind when they entered a game, some always started on the big blind, and others did whichever came first. Curious. I

was forced to conclude, despite the position thing, that there was no discernable difference in expectation between taking the big blind and posting behind. It was officially too close to call. So I changed my ways again. For the next eight years, when I entered a game, I employed the “I came to play” policy. I chose the option that had me saying “Deal me in” fastest.

In 1997, I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where a beachhead of no-limit hold'em had formed ten years earlier when California legalized hold'em. From 1997 to now (2007), my table time has been about 2/3 limit and 1/3 no-limit. (Which do I prefer? Whichever one I'm playing! I love them equally.) Around 1999, I stopped posting behind at limit hold'em, which I am about to explain. But I still post behind sometimes at no-limit, depending on who has how much and where, in other words, depending on my opponents' stack sizes, betting tendencies, and positions. At limit, none of those variables weigh into my take-the-blind-or-post-behind decision. For the rest of the way, I am going to talk only about why I do not post behind at limit. The reasoning also applies to no-limit, in a limited way.

Raising and betting are the aggressive betting options. Checking and folding are the passive ones. Raising and betting cause fluctuation. Checking and folding don't. Therefore, aggressive play causes fluctuation, and passive play doesn't. From the cutoff and hijack, I am aggressive. From the blinds, I am passive. The result is that the difference in fluctuation I experience between taking my first two hands in the cutoff and hijack, and taking my first two hands in the blinds, is huge.

When I post in the cutoff, I often give some fast action on the first hand. For example, if everyone folds to me, I might raise no matter what my cards are. Or let's say someone raises in front of me. Because it only costs me one bet to call, and because I have good position, it could be correct to stay in with a hand that I would no-doubt fold if I was facing two bets cold. And if I

Cash Games

am committed to not folding, then in my world I should raise, in order to:

- Put the maximum pressure on the button to fold.
- Attempt to create a bread and butter situation. (E116)
- Say hello.

So here I am reraising before the flop right out of the gate with some hand that I would have mucked without a memory had I not posted behind the button. It's hand number one, and already I'm inviting instability. When instead, I could have been sitting there in the blinds, comfortably cultivating a snug image that I would exploit later.

And that was the wake-up call. When those thoughts entered my mind, I realized that the difference between starting on the big blind and posting behind was so big that I couldn't even see it. It's the difference between passive and aggressive. It's the difference between tight and loose. It's the difference between jumping in and settling in. It's the difference between being afraid and being feared.

I stopped posting behind at limit poker. Now I enter each game on the big blind as a willful act of aggression reduction, and therefore fluctuation reduction, and therefore tilt reduction. Plus, I get the button on my third hand. I can say hello then.

98. Chopping the Blinds

Chopping is like so many things in that whatever choice you make is the best choice for you.

If your policy is that you will chop the blinds if your neighbor does, do not ask your neighbor if he chops. Make him ask. The exception is when everyone folds to you in the small blind. Now you have to ask.

When you ask, do it without fanfare, preferring gestures over words, and never question the answer.

If you do not chop, and you want to warn the players next to you as a courtesy, that's fine. Know also that it is not wrong to not warn them.

If one of your neighbors is having the "Do you chop?" conversation with his other neighbor, be ready to give him your answer to the same question.

If you do not chop, and someone asks you if you chop, do not reply by saying, "I don't chop" or "no." Instead, say, "I play."

When discussions or conflicts come up around chopping, stay out.

If one of your neighbors does not chop, do not tell your other neighbor that you are not going to chop with him because your other neighbor is not chopping with you. If you chop, chop. If you don't chop, don't chop. It's okay to vary your policy between sessions, and between venues, but not between hands.

If because of your neighbors' policies you find yourself chopping with the guy on your right, but not with the guy on your left, and you feel positionally wronged, that's okay. Just roll with it. Tomorrow it will be the other way around. The main thing is don't splain. Just state your policy when it is appropriate to do so and then shhh.

The house's collection policy can influence chopping. If the house is charging by the half hour, then there is no effect on the to-chop-or-not-to-chop decision. If the house is raking the pot, then it becomes a factor. Let's say the house policy is "no flop no

Cash Games

drop.” That means if everyone folds and the blinds chop, then the house takes nothing that hand. If there is a flop, then let’s say the house will take \$4 from the pot. Under these conditions, a player who does not chop would need to have a \$2 playing advantage per hand on average in blind-versus-blind situations in order to break even with the choppers. The theoretical amount that a non-chopper makes by not chopping would be the amount above \$2/hand that he is better than the universe.

I played many years as a non-chopper and I loved it:

- You don’t need to concern yourself with who chops and who doesn’t.
- Nobody can pull any chopping angles on you.
- Not-chopping can be an integral part of a strong table presence.

In 2001, I started chopping, initially because of a change in the collection policy where I was playing, and then other reasons for chopping came into view that made me a dedicated chopper in all games and locations. The big change I had not anticipated is that chopping helped with self-perpetuating tiltlessness by reducing my financial fluctuation and my emotional fluctuation. Suddenly, hundreds of headsup hands per year were removed from my life, many of them played against embittered choppers.



There is an article at tommyangelo.com about chopping called “A Reason for Every Reason.”

99. Buy the Button

When I have the option to “buy the button,” I do it. Buy-the-button is an excellent rule, for the players and for the house. I saw it in action soon after it was invented and I was so excited about it I wrote an article called “Buy the Button: A Perfect Rule” that details how the rule works and why it is so awesome. The article is at tommyangelo.com.

100. Game Selection

Game selection is a perpetual process. Every time you post a blind, that’s a game selection decision. You just said no to all other games and activities. You re-selected the game you are in.

To make profitable game selection decisions, evaluate yourself and your opponents without assigning judgment labels. When you look back on a decision that you made, or that one of your opponents made, do not think in terms of good, bad, smart, stupid, etc. Instead, evaluate decisions the simplest way imaginable, like this: I think that my/his decision was more profitable than the alternative(s), or, I think that my/his decision was less profitable than the alternative(s). And by how much.

Here is an example of what to *not* think. “Wow. Can you believe it? That moron/idiot/donk called three bets cold before the flop with a total piece of crap that I wouldn’t even have played for one bet.”

Instead of thinking, just observe, like so: “He called three cold with K5o.”

And then stop right there, before the thinking muddles you up. You have the information you need. You are not obligated to form an opinion about the play or the player.

If, while you are playing, you are attached to the notion that you are a “better player” than any or all of your opponents, or that you are a “worse player” than any or all of your opponents, that’s

Cash Games

bad news for your game selection and game rejection decisions, and for your betting decisions. What if there's a guy in your game who played "way worse" than you yesterday when you first played with him, because he was tired and tilted and you weren't, but today he is back to playing his usual strong game and you aren't, and you still think you have a big edge over him? What if those kinds of changes were going on all around you, and in you, all the time? Guess what. They are.

You need to evaluate him now, always now. Players go on tilt. They come off tilt. They can tilt for long periods, or for one bet. They win pots and feel good. They lose pots and feel bad. They improve. They tire. They change. You change. If you have an inflexible image in your mind of an opponent, then whenever he changes, your evaluation of him will be wrong. If you have an inflexible image in your mind of yourself, then whenever you change, your evaluation of yourself will be wrong. For up-to-date evaluation, there is no time but the present.



If Joe chooses to take the worst of it on purpose and play in a very tough game because he wants the challenge of playing against tough opponents and because he wants to go to school on them and learn and grow and because he has a gnawing need to know how he stacks up, then that's a consciously made non-profit decision, and a good one. If Joe finds himself in that same game under any other circumstances, then that's an unconsciously made non-profit decision, and an unconscionably bad one.



If you've been losing and your image is bad and you feel bad, consider changing tables for the sole purpose of giving your image and your mindset a fresh start. The same goes for changing casinos.

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Tournaments

101. Event Odds

Event odds is a betting decision variable that only exists in tournaments. The defining feature of event odds is that it always takes the payout into account.

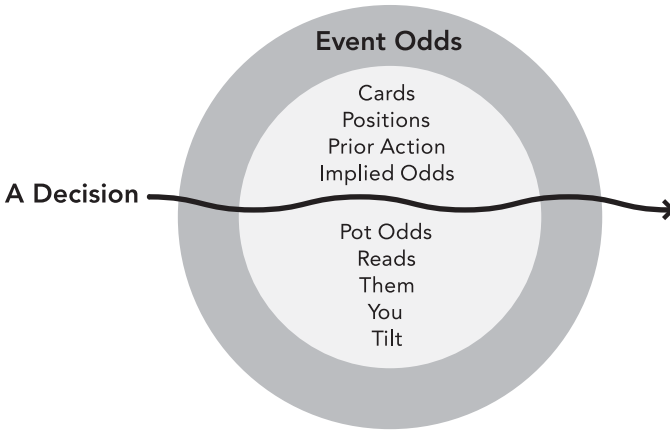
(If a deal might be struck, then there is an implied payout, and that too is weighed into every decision under the heading event odds.)

Event odds is similar in spirit to implied odds, but longer in scope. Implied odds start over once per hand. Event odds start over once per event.

Before calling with a flush draw, one might think, “I am going to call because I am getting the right implied odds to call.” Similarly, at the final table of a big tournament, when every elimination makes you money, and you have a very big stack, and you are in the big blind, and the player under-the-gun goes all-in with a short stack, and everyone folds around to you, and your hand is not very good, you might think to yourself, “I would fold this hand in a cash game because the pot odds do not warrant a call, and there are no implied odds because my opponent is all-in. But here, in this current situation in this tournament, I am getting the right event odds to call, so I call.”

Elements of Poker

In the same way that all good no-limit decisions pass through the stack size variable (E123), all good tournament decisions pass through the event odds variable.



Event odds is a metasphere tournament variable. Consciously or unconsciously, it's where I look first and last for answers.

102. The Bubble

The bubble is a span of time. The bubble bursts when the last loser busts out. It begins to inflate sometime before that.

When does the bubble begin to inflate? That is something we have to – I mean get to – make up. If someone says, “I busted out of a big tournament on the bubble,” I do not take that to mean that they were the very last loser to leave. I take it to mean thereabouts. In a tournament that starts with 1,000 players and pays 100 places, we could think of the bubble as beginning to inflate when there are about 120 players still sitting. In an event that starts with 100 players and pays 10, I'd say the bubble starts at about the final 15. In a single-table tournament that begins

Tournaments

with 10 players and pays 3 places, we could say that “the bubble” refers to the segment of the tournament when there are exactly 4 players.

In any event, when the last loser departs, the bubble bursts, and a new competition begins. I think of a tournament as having three parts. The first part is before the bubble begins to inflate. The second part is the bubble itself. And the third part is after the bubble bursts, meaning everyone still playing wins money, and now it’s just a matter of how much.



You should assume at the start of every tournament that you will make it to the bubble, and you should put maximum effort into being ready and rooted when the bubble begins. If you know going into the event that you will only make it to the bubble on average say one out of five times, then that is all the more reason to dedicate yourself to being stable and awake when you get there. You don’t get many opportunities. You don’t want to waste them.



If The Professional played nothing but big-field multi-table tournaments, he would set his sights first on making a profit, and second on increasing his profit. On the bubble, the object of the game for him would be to get in the money. The Professional would see his decisions on the bubble as the most consequential decisions of his life, even more so than his decisions at final tables. That’s because he knows he will spend five to ten times more time on the bubble than at final tables, and that the road to every final table passes through a bubble.



The bubble is one of the bloodiest places in poker. Sometimes a wound incurred on the bubble can bleed for days. Whoever came up with the phrase “cruel and unusual punishment” probably just bubbled out of a tournament.

103. Tournament Time

A poker tournament is a timed event. If you are playing in a tournament that ends sometime after midnight, and right now it is 10 p.m., then you can't win yet.

There are three units of tournament time: hands, levels (or rounds), and actual time in hours and minutes.

The main reason to think of a tournament as a timed event is to help you relax so that you will play well and conserve energy before the bubble, so that when the bubble starts to inflate, you won't be all wiggled out like the guy next to you. Instead, you'll be calm. And attentive. Just playing poker. Because you knew all along how long it was going to take to get here.

Traveling to the bubble is like traveling to anywhere else. When I fly to Vegas, nothing I do has any effect on the airplane's departure time from SFO, or on the airplane's touchdown time in Vegas, or on how long the taxi line is, or on how much traffic there is, or on how many people are checking in when I do, or on the fish in that amazing tank in the lobby of The Mirage. When I leave home (start a tournament), I have a fair idea of how long it will be before I get to my hotel room (get to the bubble). And when I get there, I'll be there, no matter what happened during transit, or how I felt about it.

If I stress out during my travel time, worrying about what is going to happen after I leave my room, then by the time I get to my room, I am exhausted, and I collapse. If instead I relax during transit, without worrying about the future, then I am fresh when the future arrives.

How are you going to spend your travel time to the bubble?
Stressing or relaxing?

104. Stack Size Matters (Tournaments)

At every moment of every hand, there is either someone still in the pot who has a bigger stack than you do, or there isn't. This is data of life and death. To stay alive, you need to be vigilant – you need to know which foes could kill you. During the preflop betting, pay extra attention to the players who have you covered. Not for any reason in particular. Just as a habit. The same way a pilot looks at the altimeter.

After the preflop betting is over, when you are waiting for the flop, that's the time to stop. And eliminate surprises. If there is anything you might need to know about the stack sizes during this hand, the time to know it is now.

- Only if you know the stack sizes can you make good guesses time and again as to whether or not an opponent is approaching or has passed his commitment threshold.
- Only if you know the stack sizes can you decipher the betting actions of your opponents that are based on stack size. And because so many betting decisions are influenced by stack size, stack size information is a valuable hand-reading tool.
- Only if you know the stack sizes can you anticipate inevitable betting that is caused by the stack sizes. For example, it's halfway through a tournament and you have a par stack. Everyone folds to you on the button. You look at your cards. They tell you to fold. You listen to your gut. It tells you to raise. The timing is perfect to steal. You know it. You feel it. But wait. Look here. The guy in the

big blind hardly has any chips left. If you raise, he will call for sure. With no hope of winning the pot without a showdown, it becomes correct to fold, and that's what you do. Good thing you looked!

105. The Dollar Value of a Stack

Dollar value is an analytical tool. To determine the dollar value of your stack at any given instant during a tournament, ask yourself what's the most you would pay for your seat, and that's the dollar value (DV) of your stack.

For example, it's the first hand of the \$10,000 buy-in main event of the 2007 World Series of Poker. There are 6,358 entries and everyone started with T20,000 in chips. On the first hand, you get pocket aces. You raise, and you get reraised by a player who has pocket kings. You raise again and the two of you get all-in before the flop. Your aces hold up. Going into the second hand, almost everyone still has T20,000 or close. But because you doubled up on the first hand, you have T40,000. What is the most you would pay for your seat right now? Another way to look at it: What's the least you would sell it for?

For me, the answer to both questions would be about \$12,000. That's what my seat would be worth to me in the situation described, so that is the dollar value of my stack.

The dollar value of a stack is affected by its size and by the number of players remaining, and also by non-quantifiable factors such as tilt, desire, and playing ability. For now, in the examples, for the purpose of examining only the effects of stack size and tournament conditions on dollar value, I am going to pretend that all players including you have no tilt, no desire, and no playing advantage. We'll come back to those variables at the end.

Tournaments

Let's put dollar value in action. The stats for our sample tournament will be:

- Game: No-Limit Hold'em
- For simplicity, we'll have no rake and no antes.
- Buy-in: \$1,000
- Entries: 1,000
- Prize Pool: \$1,000,000
- Starting Stack: T2,000
- Total Chip Count: T2,000,000
- Maximum number of players per table: 10, until there are 99 players, and then the max is 9 players per table.

Elements of Poker

- Payout Structure:

Place		Payout
1st	-	\$250,000
2nd	-	150,000
3rd	-	100,000
4th	-	70,000
5th	-	39,000
6th	-	21,000
7th	-	16,000
8th	-	12,000
9th	-	9,000
10,11,12	-	8,000
13,14,15	-	7,000
16,17,18	-	6,000
19-27	-	5,500
28-36	-	5,000
37-45	-	4,500
55-63	-	4,000
64-72	-	3,500
73-81	-	3,000
82-90	-	2,500
91-100	-	2,000

Theoretical Value and Cash Value

The dollar value of a stack goes up every time a player busts out. Sometimes it goes up in theoretical value only. Other times in actual cash value. Before the bubble bursts, the increase-in-dollar-value-per-bustout is all theoretical, and with each bustout, the value of each bustout gets slightly bigger.

Tournaments

After the bubble bursts, everyone's stack suddenly has an actual minimum cash value (\$2,000 in our example), plus an additional theoretical value. Add those together and you get the dollar value.

Our example tournament pays out like a 2007 World Series of Poker event. The payouts from 100th place to 19th place increase once every nine places. During that span, eight out of nine bustouts result in a theoretical increase in DV. On the ninth bustout, the tournament shrinks by one table, and everyone's stack gains more cash value, which is part of a new and higher dollar value.

When there are 18 players remaining, the payout increases every three bustouts, adding cash value to the dollar values every third bustout, and theoretical value on the bustouts in between. At the final table, there are no more theoretical increases in dollar value resulting from bustouts, as every bustout adds cash value to all remaining stacks.

Tempering

When the size of a stack doubles, its dollar value less than doubles, and when a stack is cut in half, its dollar value falls by less than half. There is tempering.

Shortstacked early. The blinds are 25/50. Par stack is a little over T2,000. You lost a big pot already and your stack is only T150. On the next hand, you go all-in, one player calls, and the blinds fold. You win your respirator hand. Now you have T375. Your stack size more than doubled. What did your dollar value do?

Very shortstacked early. Taking this to the extreme, what if your stack is one chip, and you go all-in, and you win. You just tripled up. What did your DV do?

Losing half a par stack early. Five hundred players remain and you have a par stack, valued at \$2,000. If you lose half your stack on the next hand, how much will your dollar value drop?

Big stack early. Five hundred players remain. If you had a par stack, it would be worth \$2,000. But you've been red hot, and your stack is 6 x par. Is your stack worth 6 x \$2,000 = \$12,000? (Reminders: The tournament has many levels yet to go, and the prize for 8th place is \$12,000.)

When two players go all-in. Early in the tournament, when two of your opponents get all-in, your DV barely cares. At the final table, when the same thing happens, your DV rejoices.

The dollar value of busting others early. The blinds are 50/100. 950 players remain. You have T5,000. A player with T500 goes all-in and it's up to you to call or let him have it. If you call and win, you will have T5,650, and there will be one less player in the tournament. If you call and lose, you will have T4,500. The difference in dollar value of these two outcomes comes from the difference between 5,650 and 4,500, not from the difference between 950 and 949.

The dollar value of busting others late. At the final table, personally eliminating a player not only increases your stack size, it also directly increases your payout, so there is always that additional reason to go for it.

Dollar values just after the bubble bursts. The bubble just burst. You're in the money with 99 others who, you'll recall, are exactly tied with you in skill, experience, tilt, and

everything else. Let's take a look at the dollar values of three different stack sizes: medium, small, and big.

Par stack. With 100 players remaining, and a total chip count of T2,000,000, a par stack when the bubble bursts is T20,000. Let's say that all 100 players have exactly T20,000. In that special case, you can know your DV exactly. You will rate to come in first place 1/100th of the time, second place 1/100th of the time, etc., so that after 100 trials, you rate to get paid \$1,000,000 (the total prize pool), for an average payoff of \$10,000 per post-bubble trial. This means that the DV of your par stack at the moment the bubble bursts is exactly \$10,000. If we open up the stack size variable so that the stacks vary in the normal way, the DV of a par stack won't necessarily be \$10,000, but it won't stray far. We can say as a baseline that surviving the bubble with a par stack is worth \$10,000.

(In our scenario, that's five times the minimum payout of \$2,000. That could be a handy stat to have: How much will a par stack be worth when the bubble bursts, in multiples of the minimum payout?)

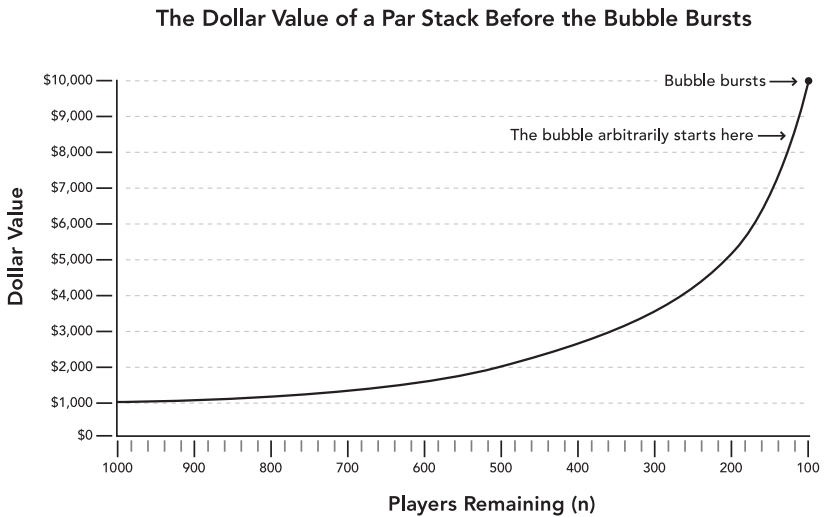
Small stack. Par stack is T20,000, and you have T5,000. What is your DV? We know it is greater than \$2,000, since that is the worst you can do. There are several ways to come at this. One way is to base an estimate on the fact that if you go all-in twice on 50-50 shots, you will double up to T10,000 half the time, and half of those times you will double up to T20,000, which is a par stack, which is worth \$10,000. What's that make your ¼ par stack worth right now? I'd say about \$3,000.

Big stack. Among the benefits of a big stack is that you can outlast some bad luck. What's it worth to be able to lose a couple major pots and still be sitting? A lot.

Elements of Poker

However, you still have a long way to go before the big money is in sight. Putting those factors together, if a par stack is worth \$10,000 right after the bubble bursts, I'd say a 3 x par stack would be worth about \$20,000.

Graphing the Dollar Value of a Par Stack



This graph takes us from the outset of our sample tournament up until the bubble bursts. It is assumed that all players are tied as to playing ability, tilt, desire, etc. We already established that under those conditions, a par stack at the moment the bubble bursts is worth \$10,000. The graph shows that a par stack takes a road to the bubble that has a familiar curve to it. The formula depicted here is:

$$DV_n = RP/n$$

- DV = dollar value of a par stack
- n = number of players remaining
- RP = remaining payout

Before the bubble bursts, the remaining payout remains steady at \$1,000,000. After the bubble bursts, the remaining payout shrinks as players who make it into the money bust out and take some payout with them.

A similarly conceptualized graph could be made that depicts the dollar value of a par stack for the rest of the tournament.

How to Analyze Using Dollar Value

Before a key decision – or when analyzing a decision after the fact – look at your possible paths, project what the dollar value of your stack will be at the end of each path, and compare.

When you do an actual analysis of an actual situation, key variables will be known to you – such as cards, opponents, prior action, and reads – that I am not addressing in this discussion. What comes next are three common situations and the analytical frameworks they generate.

All or nothing. Let's say that the situation is such that on the next hand, you are either going to fold before the flop or go all-in before the flop. At that point, you know that your next hand will take one of four possible paths:

- You will fold.
- You will raise, and:
 - They will all fold.
 - You will get called and lose.
 - You will get called and win.

To put the dollar value concept to use, estimate what the dollar value of your stack will be after each of those four possibilities. You can do this without cards. Then, to compare folding to raising in a specific situation with specific cards, you would first assign a probability of occurrence to each of the three paths under "You raise," multiply those weightings by the dollar value of your stack that each path will result in, and add those three products. That's the dollar value of raising. Then compare that to the dollar value of folding.

There are two examples coming up that walk through this process. But first, here are two more recurring frameworks upon which we hang our variables:

Calling all-in or folding. When you are facing a bet or a raise that will put you (or commit you to being) all-in if you call, you have three possible paths:

- You call and lose. $DV = x$
- You call and win. $DV = y$
- You fold. $DV = z$

Tournaments

To compare calling to folding, you would multiply x times the percent of the time that x rates to happen. Then do the same for y . Then add those two products together to get the DV of calling. Then compare that number to z .

You and Joe are way ahead. At your table, everyone has a par stack or smaller, except for you and Joe who both have stacks that are $5 \times$ par. Joe opens the next pot with a standard raise. Should you see the flop with Joe? To help you decide, predict what the dollar value of your stack will be at the end of various outcomes:

- You see the flop and...
 - The pot stays small and you win. DV = ?
 - The pot stays small and you lose. DV = ?
 - You put in $\frac{1}{4}$ your stack and win. DV = ?
 - You put in $\frac{1}{4}$ your stack and lose. DV = ?
 - You put in $\frac{1}{2}$ your stack and win. DV = ?
 - You put in $\frac{1}{2}$ your stack and lose. DV = ?
 - You put in your whole stack and win. DV = ?
 - You put in your whole stack and lose. DV = ?
- You fold. DV = ?

Now go ahead and look at your cards.

Shortstacked on the Bubble. In this example and the next one (Folding Aces Before the Flop), we will evaluate and compare the dollar values of various paths using specific stack sizes and specific weightings.

Here's the scene. 103 players remain. Outlast three players and you cash. You have the smallest stack in the tournament with T6,000. The next smallest stacks are: T7,000, T8,000, T9,000, etc. The blinds just went up to 1,000/2,000, and they will go up again in about 40 hands.

You are under-the-gun. If we toss out limping as an option, that leaves four possible endings to your next story.

You raise all-in, get called, and lose. You will be standing up with a DV of \$0.

You raise all-in and they all fold. You will have T9,000. If you then fold every hand before the flop, you will be forced to go all-in in about 20 hands. When you do manage to skate into the money without a showdown, you will have a very short stack, valued at let's say \$2,500. (\$2,000 + a slight chance at lots more.)

How often will 20 hands be long enough to survive into the money? Let's estimate that at 60%.

The other 40% of the time, you will play an all-in pot on one of your blinds. If you lose, you're out. If you win, you'll last another round at least. How often will that extra round of folding land you in the money? Let's estimate 70%. And let's say you win half your all-in pots in situations like these. What will your dollar value be with T9,000?

To crunch these numbers, we add 60% of \$2,500 (for the times you can fold into the money) to 40% (for the times you have a showdown) of 50% (for the times you win your showdown) of 70% (for the times you coast into the money

Tournaments

after winning your showdown) of \$2,500, for a total of \$1,850.

More briefly:

$$60\% * 2500 + 40\% * 50\% * 70\% * 2500 = \$1850.$$

Let's call it **\$1,900**. (I'm a rounder.)

You raise all-in, get called, and win. You will have T13,000. (The big blind called.) You just passed up five players. If you fold every hand before the flop, you will be forced to go all-in in about 37 hands. You estimate an 80% chance that the bubble will burst before then. And when your all-in hand comes, you estimate you will win it half the time. Of those times that you go all-in and win, you estimate the bubble will burst before you are forced all-in again 90% of the time. What will your dollar value be if you double up to T13,000?

To crunch these numbers, we add 80% of \$2,500 (for the times you can fold into the money) to 20% (for the times you have a showdown) of 50% (for the times you win your showdown) of 90% (for the times you coast into the money after winning your showdown) of \$2,500 for a total of \$2,225.

More briefly:

$$80\% * 2500 + 20\% * 50\% * 90\% * 2500 = \$2,225.$$

Call it **\$2,200**.

You fold. If you fold, you will post a big blind of T2,000 on the next hand. Your remaining stack will then be T4,000. You will have two ways to win your big blind hand without a showdown: 1) everyone folds, or 2) a player limps for T2,000, and then when you raise T4,000 all-in, he folds. Both of those endings are very rare, given how small your stack is. Rare enough to round to zero in my well-rounded world.

Elements of Poker

If someone raises and you fold, you will have T4,000, and the next hand will be your small blind, and again you will have almost no chance of winning a pot without a showdown.

So basically if you fold your under-the-gun hand with T6,000, you are headed for a showdown. Let's say you win 50% of your shortstack showdowns. Your stack will end up at zero half the time, for a DV of \$0. And half the time you'll have T12,000 to T15,000, for a DV of about \$2,200 (determined above). The dollar value of your T6,000 stack after folding your under-the-gun hand will therefore be $\$2,200 / 2 = \mathbf{\$1,100}$.

So, if you raise, get called, and lose, your dollar value will be \$0. If you raise and they all fold, your dollar value will be about \$1,900. If you raise, get called, and win, your dollar value will be about \$2,200. And if you fold, your dollar value will be about \$1,100. Your cards and your reads will affect your estimate of winning a showdown, which will then affect your DV estimates. This example and the next one are about how to arrive at answers, not about the answers I arrived at.

We are comparing two options: raising and folding. It's a five-step process:

- Estimate the DV for each of the three possible paths that arise from raising.
- Assign a probability (or weighting) to each path and multiply.
- Add those three products, and that's the DV of raising.
- Estimate the DV of folding.
- Compare the DV of folding to the DV of raising.

Tournaments

In our example, the weightings in step 2 will vary significantly based on the cards and other variables. For the sake of finishing what we started here with simplicity, let's say that each of the three raising paths is equally likely. In other words, when you raise, 1/3 of the time your opponents will fold, 1/3 of the time you will get called and win, and 1/3 of the time you will get called and lose.

- You raise, and they fold: 33% of \$1,900 is \$633
- You raise, get called, and win: 33% of \$2,200 is \$733
- You raise, get called, and lose: 33% of \$0 is \$0

The dollar value of raising is $\$633 + \$733 + 0 = \$1,366$.
And the dollar value of folding (derived above) is \$1,100.
I raise.

Folding Aces Before the Flop. It's down to three players, you, Joe, and Moe. The blinds are 10,000/20,000. You have T100,000. Joe and Moe each have exactly T950,000. You are in the big blind. Joe has the button. He is first to act before the flop and he goes all-in. Moe calls from the small blind, so now he's all-in too. You look at your cards. You have pocket aces. The pot odds say you should call. But pot odds can't see across the river. Only event odds can. Event odds can see to the top of the mountain, and into the valley, and event odds say that you should... ?

Let's look at the dollar value of your stack after each of the three possible outcomes. (Reminder: First place is \$250,000, second is \$150,000, and third is \$100,000.)

You call and lose. Your stack size will be zero. The dollar value of your zero stack will be exactly \$100,000.

You call and win. Your stack size will be T300,000 and you will be headsup against an opponent who has T1,700,000.

(We'll assume that Joe and Moe do not end up tied and split a side pot.) You will have \$150,000 locked up, with a greater than zero chance at an additional \$100,000. Against a matched opponent, I'd say the DV of your T300,000 stack would be about \$170,000, and your opponent's stack would be worth about \$230,000.

You fold. You will lock up the second place money, \$150,000. You will start the headsup match with T100,000 against an opponent who has T1,900,000. As before, your dollar value will be greater than the second place money, but less greater. I'd put your DV at about \$160,000.

Now we weight. Let's say that you estimate you will win with aces in this situation about 70% of the time.

- You call and lose: 30% of \$100,000 is \$30,000.
- You call and win: 70% of \$170,000 is \$111,000.

So, the DV of calling would be $\$30,000 + \$111,000 = \$143,000$. And we have already estimated the DV of folding at \$160,000. These numbers suggest that this decision would be a fairly close call, I mean, uh, fold.

Let's make it not so close. What if you started with T400,000, and they each had T800,000? A DV analysis would say to call. What if you started the hand with only T21,000, leaving you with T1,000 after you posted the big blind, so that it will only cost you T1,000 to call the preflop raise, and you'd be getting 62-1 if you called? A DV analysis would say to fold.

Stack size. What we see is that answers often depend totally or mostly on stack size. DV is a link in the chain between stack size and best answer.

The Human Factors

So far we have been exploring dollar value without feeling. Let's widen the net and see what we catch.

The Dollar Value of Ability. The dollar value of ability factors into dollar value, even before the first hand. At the outset of a \$1,000 buy-in tournament, a favored player's stack could be worth \$1,100, while a novice's stack might be worth \$100.

Let's say you're down to three players and the stacks are all tied up – each of you has T666,000. The prize money for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd combined is $250+150+100= \$500,000$. Divide that by three and we arrive at \$166,000 as the exact DV of your stack.

But not really. That's what the DV would be if no one had a playing advantage. As it so happens, someone does have an advantage, and it happens to be you. Turns out you are one helluva player. I mean really good. And both of your opponents are not really good. What do the DV's look like now? I'd say your stack is worth about \$200,000 and theirs are each worth about \$150,000. Or let's say you think both your opponents have a playing advantage over you. You might put your DV at \$140,000, and theirs at \$180,000.

The Dollar Value of Tilt. You can quantify your tilt during a tournament using the dollar value of your stack. An example:

Of the initial 1,000 players, 120 remain. The top 100 finishers will make money. Your stack is 2 x par which puts you in good shape to be one of them. On the next hand, you get pocket aces. You get all-in before the flop against a player who has a par stack and ace-king. The flop comes K-K-2. You lose the pot and half your stack, leaving you with a par stack. You are shaken up, but shaking it off. A couple hands later, just as you get settled down and ready to play sharp with your par stack, you get pocket queens, and you raise, and a player who has

a ½ par stack and ace-king suited calls, and you flop a set of queens, and he flops a flush draw, and you bet the flop, and he raises all-in, and you have the nuts, so you call, and he makes his flush, so you lose. Again. And your stack, that moments ago was sailing into the money, is now at ½ par and sinking. You feel the heat rise inside you. A second later you're all flared up and godDAMmit! How the hell did this happen?!

At that moment, who would you want playing your stack for you on the next hand? You? Feeling all anxious and desperate? Or that mellow fellow across the table who also has a ½ par stack and is grateful to still be playing? At that moment, how does the dollar value of your same-sized stack compare to his?

Grateful is a good way to be during a tournament. Grateful rates to beat whatever you're feeling after getting clipped twice at this critical time. To help keep the dollar value of your stack topped off, try to remember the lucky hands you won instead of the unlucky ones you lost.

The Dollar Value of Desire. In this final example, we return to the first hand of the main event of the 2007 World Series of Poker. You are a billionaire who spends all year every year looking forward to playing in The Big One. And the man with the microphone just said "Shuffle up and deal." And you're sitting there. Nothing could be more perfect. Then some guy who is worth a million times more than you walks up to you and says, "I want to buy your seat. Name your price."

What's the least you would sell your seat for at that moment? Would it be a hundred thousand? A million? Ten million? First place pays \$8,250,000. If your selling price (your DV) is more than \$8,250,000, then your desire to keep playing – in other words, your desire to not go busted – is currently greater than your desire to pocket the first place money, which means that if somebody goes all-in in front of you before the flop on the next

hand, it becomes correct in your richly warped world for you to fold no matter what, even with pocket aces.

For us more traditionally funded folks, the dollar value of our stack will never exceed the first place prize. But we can still skew our DV plenty, with our wants. I want to make it to the final table. I want to make it to the final table. I want to make it to the final table. I want to bust that asshole in seat three. I want to bust that asshole in seat three. I want to bust that asshole in seat three. I want to be on camera. I want to be on camera. I want to be on camera. I want to bust that asshole in seat three, at the final table, on camera!

Making Deals. If you know your DV, and if you can guess what your opponents think their DV's are, you can negotiate more effectively.

Shortstacked. There are only two ways to get shortstacked. You either got unlucky, or you played bad. That spells double trouble, if you think about it. And only if you think about it. Anytime you think about how you got shortstacked, you will always conjure up a bad memory about bad luck or bad play, and bad memories make you play bad. So not only are you running out of chips, you're running out of patience.

But what else is there to think about when I'm shortstacked except how I got shortstacked?

Put your attention on something you can control, such as: you. And your next move. And your attitude. Die with dignity, leaklessly.

When shortstacked, the dollar value of your stack is proportional to the altitude of your chin.

106. Things to Know

Fixed data:

- Total chip count
- Number of entries
- Total prize pool
- Payout structure

Changing data:

- Number of players remaining
- Par stack (total chip count divided by the number of players remaining)
- Dollar value of your stack (E105)
- Time/Hands remaining at the current level
- Blinds and antes

Bubble data:

- When it rates to start
- When it rates to end

Hand data:

- Stack sizes
- Pot size

107. Comparing Cash Games and Tournaments

The Professional has two highly profitable poker skills besides his playing skills. He is very good at choosing when to quit, and at choosing who to play against. That's why he is so often at his best and getting the best of it.

The Professional determined that tournaments could not be better for his life expectancy than cash games because in a tournament, he is disarmed. He doesn't get to decide when he quits, or who he plays against. If he were to play tournaments, The Professional would repeatedly find himself playing in tough games, or playing when he feels like crap, or both. And since those are the two main ways that The Professional can jeopardize his bankroll, and therefore his life, it's a no-brainer for him to stick to cash games.

I have a few reasons of my own for preferring cash games to tournaments. Keep in mind that my priorities are quite a bit different than The Professional's. His purpose is to avoid death. Mine is merely to avoid discomfort.

When I applied for the job of Professional Poker Player, one of the promises they made me was that I would spend less time in line. And they were right. I can arrange my days and nights so that I do things like shop and eat and drive around at times when other people by and large aren't. But I think I might have missed the fine print. It turns out there are some unavoidable exceptions. For example, sometimes I have to wait in line to pee. Like at a concert. Or if I play a poker tournament.

Another reason I prefer cash games is that I don't like it when my bankroll fluctuation is happening yet suspended at the same time. Are you familiar with Schrödinger's cat? The cat is inside a box that is rigged up to randomly kill the cat, without anyone outside the box knowing when. To find out if the cat is dead or alive at any given moment, we open the box and look inside. Meanwhile, before we open the box, is the cat dead or alive? The official scientific answer is yes-no-maybe-so.

The cat is the value of my bankroll. The box is the tournament. Opening the door of the box and looking at the cat equates to the moment that I bust out of the tournament or win it. At that time, the wave form of possible values for my bankroll collapses down to one reality. Before that, my pending bankroll fluctuation exists in a state of yes-no-maybe-so.

If I make a bad call in a tournament and I lose half my chips, nothing really happens. No money changes hands. The money doesn't move until I play my last hand of the event (the box is opened) and we find out where I placed (we observe the cat). If I make a bad payoff for half my stack in a cash game, there is no box that sequesters the effect on my bankroll. I pay for my mistake now, in dollars, and I know how many. Likewise, when I pick off a bluff in a cash game, I get paid now. I guess I prefer pay-as-you-go poker.

And the pain equation is *way* out of whack. If I lose \$1,000 playing \$20/40 limit hold'em, that's two racks, which is a common, large-ish loss for me at limit poker. And it hurts. Let's define X as: the average amount of pain I feel after a two-rack loss at limit hold'em. Now let's say I enter a \$100 buy-in tournament. One hundred dollars is not even enough to get to the river in most \$20/40 pots. But when I lose \$100 in a tournament, I feel like X. So we have $\$1,000 = X$ at \$20/40, and $\$100 = X$ at tournaments. What's up with that?

Then there's the problem with stack aesthetics. It's impossible to strike fear into hearts when I'm sitting behind a chip stack that is one column wide and barely higher than the padded rail.

Let's take a more serious look at some of the many fine reasons to play tournaments:

- The glory of the win.
- Playing at a final table is a fantastically wonderful rush.
- A decent payoff can be a bankroll.

Tournaments

- A big payoff can be a life change.
- For players who play poorly, and for players who don't quit well, tournaments can be a great bargain compared to cash games. They get more playing time per dollar lost, and more poker thrills per dollar lost.
- Beginners get to play against experts.
- Experts get to play against beginners.
- If you love to play tournaments, that's the only reason you ever need.



I have played many small tournaments in which I faced many of my cash-game opponents. I noticed that some of the players who played loose in the cash games played much tighter in the tournaments. I could not escape the thought that if only they played as tight in the cash games as they did in the tournaments, they would do much better at cash games. There was a mystery to be solved.

Now I see it as a risk-of-death thing. A race car driver stays focused on self-preservation because any mistake could cause his death. Tournaments are like that. Cash games aren't.

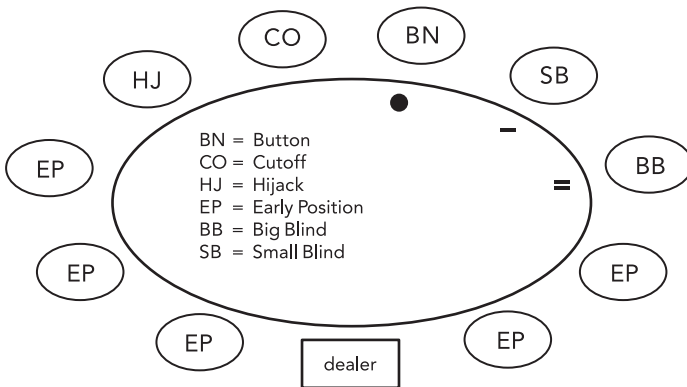
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Hold'em

108. Acting Last

Acting last is like taking a drink of water. We don't have to understand why it's good for us to know that it is. And the benefits are unaffected by our understanding of them.

109. The Preflop Positions



This is what a poker table looks like to me before the flop. The reason I lump the five EP seats together is that the difference in positional value between them is so slight that it rarely weighs into my preflop decision. The result is that within the specifics of the moment, I play all five EP seats pretty much the same. For example, if I'm playing in a ten-handed limit hold'em game, I play JTo the same way from all five of the EP seats. And the same goes for A6o, and 76s. Whereas from the hijack, cutoff, and button, there is much variation in how I play those hands.

The illustration shows the six permanent preflop positions. These are the positions that exist when the blinds are regular, as in, one small blind and one big blind. Many hands begin with irregular blinds, and this creates temporary preflop positions. Here are some examples of irregular blinds:

- When a new player or a returning player posts a big blind from behind the button.
- When a player posts a straddle or a kill.
- When the blinds are being “made up” or “rectified,” after a player quits the game right after playing his big blind hand or small blind hand.

I think of these situations as creating preflop positions unto themselves, especially the most common irregular blinds situation, which is posting behind the button. Players who post behind when they enter or re-enter a game have seven preflop positions. It's just that only six of them occur every round. (There is a row for “posting behind” on the Universal Starting-Hand Chart, E111.) And because posting behind is so common, I think of “pots in which someone else has posted behind” as a set of unique preflop positions to be aware of and plan for.

110. The Hijack Seat

I like the name we have for the seat to the right of the button: the cutoff. It's a pleasingly vague yet accurate title. And I like it that the name acknowledges the power of position, by virtue of existing.

What about the next seat over? I think the seat to the right of the cutoff has enough positional heft to deserve its own name too, so I gave it one: the hijack seat. To the right of the hijack, the positional values of the seats are not very good, and the positional values don't change much from one seat to the next, so those seats don't get fancy names. They all get called early position.

All of the early positions are defined by one commonality: they have at least three positions behind them, namely the button, cutoff, and hijack. For me, that's the magic number: 3. That's when it's too many.

Keep in mind that what I'm after, after all, is to be after all. To act last. To me, the early positions look like a desert wasteland. It's a place where people die from overexposure. Which cards do I play from positional hell? The ones that can take the heat.

Here is a post I wrote at twoplustwo.com:

The Hijack Seat – 12/07/04 – 11:31 a.m.

Full \$20/40 limit hold'em game. I was on the button with A9o. Two players limped and the guy in the cutoff-plus-one seat raised.

What kind of name is that for a seat? The "Cutoff plus one" seat? Also known as "CO+1?" Is that longhand for carbon dioxide?

Whatever it is, it's a very important seat to me in that it pretty much concludes each orbit in terms of my willingness to engage preflop without a pair or a big ace.

I'm calling it The Hijack Seat from now on because some guy just hijacked me from it. Two players limped, two players folded, and he raised. The cutoff folded. My usual play these days from the button is to call two cold about half the time in spots like this. With A9, more like 95%. But I don't know, something about this guy, I decided to let him have this one. Damn hijacker.

111. Universal Starting-Hand Chart

This is a long element. The outline looks like this:

- Reasons to Work with This Chart
- The Universal Starting-Hand Chart (USHC)
- The Game, the Columns, and the Rows
- WHEP (Worst Hand Ever Play)
- Filling in the Data Squares
- Using the USHC to Lop Off C-Game
- Comparing Limit and No-Limit
- BHEF (Best Hand Ever Fold) and the "It Depends" Range

Reasons to Work with This Chart

- To tweak your preflop A-game by examining dozens of common preflop situations and asking yourself what you do and why. When you fill out these squares, you draw lines. You set bars. You are forced to come up with a reason, however whimsical or sound, for choosing to place each bar where you place it.
- To become aware of which preflop decisions you make that are player independent. This serves to increase correctness and conserve energy.
- To raise your positional awareness.
- To take snapshots of your current ways, for later reference and amusement.

Saving the best for last...

- This chart can be used like a scalpel to lop off ugly growths of C-game.

You can download ready-to-use Universal Starting-Hand Charts, in Word and Excel, along with these instructions, at:

www.tommyangelo.com

Elements of Poker

Universal Starting-Hand Chart

Fill in the Worst Hands you would Ever Play in each situation.
(WHEP)

Universal Starting-Hand Chart						
Game: _____						
Prior Action						
	No One In	1 Caller	2 Callers	3 Callers	1 Raiser	2 Raisers
Button						
Cutoff						
Hijack						
Early Position						
Big Blind						
Small Blind						
Post Behind						

Hold'em

The Game

At the top of the chart, enter the game that the chart is for. Be as general or as specific as is useful to you. You could write down “No-limit hold'em” or “High-low Omaha at Johnny's home game” or “Deep-stack no-limit tournaments during the first two rounds.”

This particular chart is for poker games that have blinds and a button. It could be modified and used for stud.

The Columns

No One In	1 Caller	2 Callers	3 Callers	1 Raiser	2 Raisers
-----------	----------	-----------	-----------	----------	-----------

I chose these headings because I wanted to cover the most ground with the least paper. Conceptually, this chart extends off to the right, with one column for every possible combination of calls and raises ahead of you.

The Rows

Button
Cutoff
Hijack
Early Position
Big Blind
Small Blind
Post Behind

The rows of the USHC are the seven preflop positions from E109. The row labeled “early position” could be expanded into multiple rows and labeled (for example) EP1, EP2, EP3, EP4, and EP5, if you would like that distinction.

The bottom row is for when you post behind the button. (For me, in the column labeled “No One In,” my lone entry would be “72o – R.” That’s why I don’t post behind. See E97 for more on that.)

WHEP

WHEP stands for Worst Hand Ever Play. This is what you put in the data squares. The word "Play" in "Worst Hand Ever Play" means "not fold," as in, "raise or call."

Filling in the Data Squares

Think of all 169 starting hands as falling into these categories:

- Pocket pairs (AA to 22)
- Ace-x (AK to A2)
- King-x (KQ to K2)
- Queen-x (QJ to Q2)
- Jack-x, Ten-x, Nine-x, etc.
- Suited
- Unsuited

In each square, write down the worst hand that you would ever play from each category. (Notation note: s = suited, o = offsuit.) Here is a sample square from my own limit hold'em chart:

Elements of Poker

WHEP / Limit Hold'em	
	No One In
Early Position	22, AT, KQ

The first category is pocket pairs. In ideal conditions, I would play any pair in that spot. So I enter 22 as “the worst pair I would ever play.”

Next are the ace-high hands. The worst ace-high hand I think I should ever play from EP at limit hold'em is AT. So I put that in the square.

In the king category, the worst hand I think I should ever play is KQ.

I do not think I should play any queen-high hands, or jack-high hands, or any other hands, so my entries stop at the king-high category.

Suitedness does not effect my betting decisions in early position at limit hold'em (see E118 for more on that), so I did not indicate suitedness.

So far, the square lists the worst hands I intend to play, with nothing about how I intend to play them – raise or call. For the purpose of analyzing and tweaking your A-game, it is best to indicate raise or call in the squares. For the purpose of lopping off C-game, it is not required. Here is the same square from my chart, with R indicating raise, and C indicating call.

Hold'em

WHEP / Limit Hold'em	
	No One In
Early Position	22 – R or C AT – R KQ – R

When I open the pot from early position with a pair, I sometimes raise and sometimes call, so I write “R or C.” With all other hands, I raise. (See E117 for why.)

It is very important to understand that when you enter a hand in a square, it does not mean that you intend to always play that hand. It means you might play it or you might not. If you enter, say, KQ, in the early position box, it means that with favorable variables, such as how your opponents are playing, and any meta-game considerations, that you might go as low as KQ, but never lower. And yes that means never. That’s one of the reasons to do this exercise: to reveal to yourself which plays you make that you yourself think you should never make. You draw lines that you don’t think you should ever cross. If you don’t have any such lines, then you would fill in 72o in all the squares.

Here is another sample box, this time from one of my clients:

WHEP / Limit Hold'em	
	No One In
Button	22, A2, K9o, K5s QTo, Q8s, JTo, J7s, T9

These entries mean that he might play any pocket pair, and that he might play any hand with an ace, and that he intends to always fold K8o, K4s, Q9o, Q7s, J9o, J6s, T8o, T8s, and all lower hands, categorically.

Using the USHC to Lop Off C-Game

With this chart, you can work on your A-game and your C-game at the same time. By asking yourself where you should draw your starting-hand lines, you refine your A-game. And by deciding to fold certain hands in certain situations no matter what, you raise your C-level. This section is about that second thing. It's about seeing the Universal Starting-Hand Chart as a safety net that you construct to catch you when you are falling.

When you enter a hand in a data square that you think is the worst hand you should ever play in the given situation, you are at the same time barring yourself from playing all the lower hands. For example, if you write down 87s in the square marked "Cutoff – One Limper," you are telling yourself that you intend to always fold these hands too: 87o, 86s, 86o, 76s, 76o, etc. When you dip below the 87s bar by playing 86s, hopefully the work you did with the chart will cause you to talk to yourself and say, "I told myself at home that I should never play that hand in that spot. Why did I? How can I make it stop?"

For the purpose of tilt reduction, it doesn't matter where your starting-hand bars "should" be. Because of The Gray Area (E21), we expect to find ourselves in many break-even situations where one option is barely better or worse than the other. Every time you make an entry in a square, you are zeroing in on a break-even decision. Your USHC could be called "My Break-Even Chart" and it would not be mislabeled. Here's the thing. When you draw a line at say 87s, you are not in search of ultimate correctness for you or the universe. You are in search of your C-game, so that you can lop it off. What matters most is that when you write down 87s, you do so with an earnest intent to fold all of these hands

Hold'em

every time, suited and unsuited: 86, 85, 84, 83, 82, 76, 75, 74, 73, 72, 65, 64, 63, 62, 54, 53, 52, 43, 42, and 32.

Let's say you write down 87s in one of the data squares, but you know deep down that you have no intention or desire to fold 54s in the given situation for the rest of your life. No problem. Just adjust the bar. Change your entry to 54s, or however low you have to go until you find a bar that you want to stay above and can stay above.

What I think I should do does not always line up with what I do do. In the data squares, I enter how I think I should play. For example, according to the entries in my sample box, I don't think I should ever play QJs under-the-gun in a full game of limit hold'em. But sometimes I do it anyway. Do not expect the hands you write down to exactly reflect how you actually play. Do expect to ask yourself why this is so.

Imagine if no matter how many losing hands or losing sessions you had in a row, you stayed above your bars. What would that do to your score? Can you do it? I don't know. Can you do it without knowing where your bars are?

Comparing Limit and No-Limit

The Universal Starting-Hand Chart is a better tool for limit hold'em than for no-limit. That's because stack sizes and opponents weigh more at no-limit than at limit. For limit, I think it is best to have the "ever" in "worst hand ever play" actually mean "ever." For no-limit, to give the chart enough flexibility to be useful, I think it's good to give "ever" some wiggle room.

Another reason this chart works better for limit than no-limit is because at limit, the higher your hole cards are, the better: KQo is always a better starting hand than 54o. This makes for simple charting. At no-limit, higher cards are not necessarily preferred cards. There are situations where someone might fold KQo but

play 76o. The chart can handle this aspect of no-limit if you enter ranges of hands.

BHEF and the “It Depends” Range

There is a flipside to the Worst Hand Ever Play chart. If you change the word “worst” to “best,” and you change the word “play” to “fold,” you end up with a whole new chart. It’s the Best Hand Ever Fold chart, or BHEF.

The BHEF chart serves a grand theoretic purpose. If you compare your entries from a square on your BHEF chart to your entries from the same square on your WHEP chart, you will bookend a range of hands that I call your “it depends” range. This is the range of hands that you don’t always fold and you don’t always play in the given situation. This means that your correct choice during battle will always depend on something other than your cards and position.

112. The Postflop Positions

By one way of looking at it, you could say there are two postflop positions: last to act, and other. I’m going to break it down a little further, into six postflop positions.

In headsup pots, the positions are:

- Heads Up Last To Act (hulta)
- Heads Up First To Act (hufta)

If the pot is not headsup, the positions are:

- Last to act

Hold'em

- Next to last
- Next to next to last
- WOOPS (Way Out Of Position Sadly)

At the start of every postflop street you ever play, you will be in one of those six positions. When someone folds, and your position changes, you want to ease into your new position like a familiar garment. Two examples:

- The game is limit hold'em and you are in the big blind. One player limps and the button raises. The small blind calls, you call, and the limper calls. There are four players in the hand, and you have two players behind you. *That is your postflop positional situation. It is defined by the number of players in the hand, and by how many of them are behind you.*

On the flop, the small blind checks, you bet, the next player raises, and the other two players fold. Now suddenly you are hufta. You become practiced at seeing hufta situations approaching, and you become practiced at what you'll do when they arrive.

- Same hand, but this time, the small blind bets out on the flop, and you raise. The next two players fold and the small blind calls. You slip smoothly into hultra.

Postflop Button, Postflop Cutoff, and Postflop Hijack

When the flop hits the table, the player who is last to act is the postflop button, the player who is next to last to act is the postflop cutoff, and the player who is next to next to last to act is the postflop hijack.

The postflop hijack is not a good position. With two players behind you, your chances of becoming last to act this hand are rarely good. The postflop cutoff is twice as good as the postflop hijack in that there are half as many players behind you which makes it twice as easy to become the button. And then there's the button. No amount of next-to-last adds up to being last. The mightiest cutoff loses to the lowliest button.

113. Blinds and Buttons

The flop is on the way. What percentage of the time is at least one of the players a blind or the button? Three-handed, it would be 100%. Four-handed, also 100%. Five handed, if the under-the-gun player calls or raises, and the next player calls or raises, and everyone else folds, then that would result in a flop that includes no players from the blinds or button. I'd guess that happens about once every hundred hands. Six handed, there are three non-blind, non-button seats. Now my guess is that one out of 50 flops would be blindless and buttonless. Let's hop right to ten-handed. I asked around on this and others agreed with my guess here, that in a full game, you'll see both blinds and the button fold before the flop about once every 20 hands.

So if you're going to look at the game position by position, you could work on your play from the button and against the button, and on your play from the blinds and against the blinds, and you'd be looking at at least 95% of your poker life right there.

114. Shorthanded

I play more hands in shorthanded games than in full games, but not really. Let's say my overall flops-seen percentage in full games is 20%, and my overall flops-seen percentage in shorthanded games is 30%. It looks like I am playing more hands at shorthanded than

Hold'em

full. But that is an illusion. What's really happening is I'm playing the same percentage of hands from each position, independent of how many players there are. It's just that full games have a higher percentage of the tighter positions, so the total percentage of flops seen is lower.

These are approximations of my flops-seen percentages:

	Flops Seen 10-Handed	Flops Seen 5-Handed
Button	40%	40%
Cutoff	30	30
Hijack	25	25
EP1	10	N/A
EP2	10	N/A
EP3	10	N/A
EP4	10	N/A
EP5	10	N/A
Big Blind	40	40
Small Blind	20	20
Total	21%	31%



I find shorthanded games to be more engaging than full games because the decisions are more consequential, and there are more of them. I find shorthanded to be more profitable than full games for the same reasons.

115. Pocket Aces

If you have KQ and the flop comes J-T-9 rainbow, then you have the nuts, and because you have the nuts, you know in advance that if you lose this hand, you will be entitled to maximum sadness because after all, you had the nuts. But it isn't very often that KQ is the nuts with cards coming. And that's true for every starting hand, save one. Pocket aces is the stone cold nuts with cards coming every time, starting at the moment you get dealt that second ace. The reason getting aces cracked always drives us nuts is because we always had the nuts.



It is inevitable that you will win some big pots with big hands. It is also inevitable that you will lose some big pots with big hands. Big hands mean big pots mean big fluctuation mean big tilt. Pocket aces is a big hand. So when you get pocket aces, relax. You are about to ride a swing. Don't get thrown off!

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Limit Hold'em

116. The Bread and Butter Situations

The betting before the flop just ended. Then comes that little pause. Before the flop is flopped. It's the ready-set-go part of the hand. Sometimes, in that suspended space, I get a feeling of *This is why I came. This is why I showed up to play poker today, just so that I could get myself into exactly the spot I am in right now.*

Long ago, I started to think of these situations – the ones that made me feel like I was making money just by being in them – as my bread and butter. I looked for patterns inside the parameters. I wanted to know where my bread and butter came from so that I would never go hungry. Here's what I came up with:

- I am last to act.
- I was the last raiser before the flop.
- The pot is headsup or threeway.

When all three of those conditions are met, and the flop is coming, my bread is buttered. Let's look closer:

- All fold to me on the button. I raise. This will usually result in an immediate win or a bread and butter situation.

Elements of Poker

The only exception is when one of the blinds reraises and I just call.

- I am in the big blind. Everyone folds to the small blind. If he limps and I raise and he calls, that's a B&B for me. If he raises and I reraise and he calls, that too is a B&B for me.
- I have the button. One player limps. If I raise, this will result in a B&B for me whenever one or both blinds fold and no one reraises.
- I have the button. Two players limp. The big blind is known to never fold his big blind before the flop to a single raise. There is no chance for a B&B this hand. Too many players.
- I am in any seat but the blinds. One player raises. It's my turn. If I reraise, I could end up in a B&B. If I call, I definitely won't.
- I am in the big blind. Everyone folds to the button who raises. The small blind folds. If I fold, I deny the button his B&B.

If it's true that I make money by being in B&B situations more often than my opponents, then that would explain why I have always done so much better (in dollars per hour) in shorthanded games than in full games. Shorthanded games provide more opportunities per hour to create bread and butter situations, and more opportunities to avoid being in theirs.

There's an add-on to this. I call it a "late-blooming bread and butter situation." Let's say I raise before the flop, one player calls behind me, and both blinds call. The pot is four-handed and I am next to last to act. This is not a bread and butter situation, but it will bloom into one if I bet or raise on the flop and the player

behind me folds. Let's say that on the flop, the small blind bets out, and the big blind folds. It's my turn. I will almost never call here. I will either fold or raise. That's because if I am willing to call one bet, then it only costs me one bet to raise, and if I raise, I will maximize the chances that the player behind me will fold. And that is more important than anything because if he folds, I take the lead on this hand. I am now last to act, last aggressor, with the turn and river coming. Those are the three conditions of a late-blooming B&B.

Your next question might be "Okay, I got myself into one of these bread and butter situations. What do I do now?"

That is an excellent and proper question. And here is my excellent and proper answer.

How the hell should I know? I don't know who you are, I don't know who your opponents are, I don't know what your cards are, and I don't know what the flop is. I have brought you to a banquet. You have to feed yourself.

117. Open-Raising and Open-Limping

The only time I open-imp playing limit hold'em is if I have a small pocket pair and the game is very loose and very passive before the flop. Otherwise, if no one else is in the pot yet, I either raise or fold. Four of the reasons are:

- Whenever I openraise, I might win the pot before the flop, or I might end up in a bread and butter situation. Whenever I openlimp, I will never win the pot without a flop, and I will never be in a bread and butter situation.
- When I openlimp, I invite others to bread and butter me and I end up toasted.

- If I always come in raising, it is harder to put me on a hand than if I sometimes limp and sometimes raise.
- Players who always raise at limit hold'em earn one of two images: reckless or dangerous. When a player who always raises plays many hands, he is reckless. When a player who always raises plays few hands, he is dangerous. I want to be dangerous.

118. Suitedness at Limit Hold'em

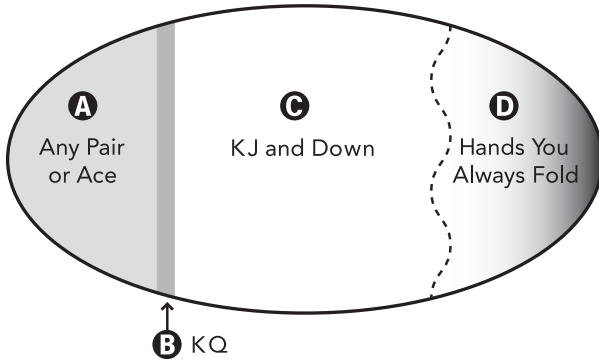
When should suitedness tip the scales between playing a hand and folding it at limit hold'em? In other words, when does the difference between K9s and K9o, or 87s and 87o, or A2s and A2o, make a difference?

When I play, I draw the line at the last three seats: the button, cutoff, and hijack. From those positions, the difference between suited and unsuited can be big enough to turn a fold into a raise. From the other positions, it never is. I am suit-blind before the flop from early position and from the blinds. I see only the number of spots on the cards, not their shape.

119. Starting-Hand Groups for Limit Hold'em

Hand groups for hold'em traditionally serve to classify preflop strategy into manageable nuggets of advice and theory that can be meaningfully analyzed, verified for potency, and passed along. These four hand groups are not quite like that. I say "not quite" because one of the groups – Group D (a subset of Group C) – is entirely about preflop play, while Groups A and C are mainly about playing the turn and river. And Group B is one hand.

Limit Hold'em



Group A

The hands in Group A are AK, AQ, AJ, AT, A9, A8, A7, A6, A5, A4, A3, A2, suited and unsuited, plus AA, KK, QQ, JJ, TT, 99, 88, 77, 66, 55, 44, 33, and 22.

Twenty percent of hold'em hands are Group A hands. I call these hands “showdown hands” because if I have one, then I know, for sure, from before the flop, that if the pot starts out headsup or comes down to headsup, and I don't improve, I will always have the option to de-escalate the war at any point – simply by not betting and not raising – and take my hole cards to the showdown.

By seeing the starting hands as either Group A or Group C, it helps me anticipate the play on the river, starting all the way back before the flop. Let's compare the worst Group A hand – A2 – to one of the better Group C hands – JT. We'll assume neither hand improves, and watch them in action:

- If my opponent bets the river and I have A2, I will have an opportunity to play some poker. By calling when my ace-high is good more often than my opponents would call if the situation were reversed, and by folding more often when my ace-high isn't good, I can earn some reciprocal money. Whereas if I have jack-high, and my opponent bets the river, then my destiny is known before the flop, and it

Elements of Poker

does not include any interesting and profitable decisions. I will have no choice but to fold.*

- If I have A2, and my opponent is first to act on the river and he checks, then all is right in the world, because now I can check behind for value and show down my showdown hand (which will win many pots that go check-check on the river), or I can bluff. If I have jack-high, and my opponent is first to act on the river and he checks, then my only choices are to either give up on the hand and check behind, or try to win the pot with a bluff.
- In pots with three or more players, when the river gets checked around, A2 wins now and then. JT almost never does.
- Another difference between Group A and Group C pertains to the classic, fruitful, dual strategies for playing the turn and river when hulta (Heads Up Last To Act) after the opponent checks the turn, which are:
 - 1) Bet the turn and check behind on the river.
 - 2) Check behind on the turn and call the river.

I might have a fairly good hand and use either of those strategies on any given hand, depending on the cards and opponents and prior action and such. *With precisely ace-high on the turn, I am very often earning the theoretical maximum just by having the opportunity to employ one of those strategies.* This adds a depth to the value of Group A hands before the flop when I will be last to act. With Group C hands, the dual

* Sometimes I will bluffraise on the river, but those situations are rare, and they will arise independently of whether I have A2 or JT, making them irrelevant here.

Limit Hold'em

turn-and-river strategy is not available. It's like golfing without a putter.

Am I saying that all Group A hands are better than all other hands before the flop? No. There are some preflop situations where I would prefer A2 over JT, and some where I would prefer JT over A2. On the river, headsup, unimproved, however, there is no ambiguity. I always want any Group A hand over any other hand. This fact affects my preflop outlook in proportion to the amount of headsup pots.

Group B

Group B is one hand: KQ. I think of KQ as a bad good hand and a good bad hand. It's right in there somewhere. In these hand groups for limit hold'em, KQ is a spacer between groups A and C, put there to make groups A and C more distinct and therefore more useful.

Group C

Group C is KJ and down.

Group D

Group D is the hands you think you should always fold before the flop.

The benefits of knowing your Group D are leak resistance, fluctuation reduction, lopping off C-game, and self-perpetuating tiltlessness. Group D is not about determining correct betting strategy for the universe. It's about damage control strategy for you.

You might not even have a group D. I didn't have one until about five years ago. I'll show you what I mean with a before-and-after of how I play the worst starting hand, 72o, from the two most inviting positions: the button and the small blind.

- I have the button, everyone folds to me, both players in the blinds are very tight and straightforward, and I'm running red hot. I know they don't want to mess with me right now. The timing is right to raise no matter what my cards are. I look at my cards and I see 72o. I used to raise. Now I fold.
- I'm in the small blind with 72o in a full \$15-30 game. The blinds are \$10 and \$15. Eight players limp. It's my turn. I look left and I can see that the big blind is not going to raise. There are 29 chips in the pot and it costs me 1 chip to call. I used to call. Now I fold. What would you do?

If you would call, then you do not have a Group D. If you would fold for one chip in the above example, then are there any other hands you think you should always fold before the flop from all positions against all opponents at all times? If there are, then think them through and write them out. This is your personal collection of other muckers.

I have played 72o at limit hold'em many times, and many other hands much like it. Now I just throw them away. Experienced, sophisticated players have told me that when I fold 72o in the small blind for one chip in a pot with many limpers, I am losing money by mucking the worst hand in the worst position. And I would never argue against that kind of claim. From the perspective of a hand-by-hand statistical analysis of indeterminable branching variables, a case can be made for calling with 72o for one chip. I have made that case myself, many times, back when I used to call. Now I would like to make a case to support folding.

Limit Hold'em

The pendulum swings. Sometimes I build up power over opponents because of how I play and behave and feel. It is a delicate, transient power, and no matter how much power I have, I could lose it at any time. To maintain this power, it must be constantly cradled and restored.

The power makes people say things with words and expressions and movements that tell me what cards they have and what they are thinking and feeling. The power makes people more likely to fold, check, and call when I'm in the pot, instead of bet and raise. Even players who are known for their aggression back off when I have the power.

The power converts to profit only if I wield it well. To wield the power, I use my chips. I push people around. Ideally without them finding out.

And then I push a little too far, a little too often, and when that happens, my power erodes, along with my discipline, along with my chips. The pendulum swings.

Well, my pendulum doesn't swing so much anymore, ever since I came up with the idea of having a list of hands that I would always fold no matter what. Armed with my Group D, I build up power as usual, and I wield it as usual, but I am less likely to abuse it, so I am less likely to lose it.

The first Group D I made up for myself was "all unpainted, unsuited, four (or more) gappers." That would be: 72o, 82o, 92o, T2o, 83o, 93o, T3o, 94o, T4o, T5o. Later, I added these hands: 32o, 42o, 52o, 62o, 63o, 73o, J2o, J3o, Q2o, Q3o. Your group D is whatever you write down. You can change it between sessions. The idea is to stick stubbornly to today's Group D today.

Group D is not "the hands you always fold." Group D is "the hands you intend to always fold." The presumption is that sometimes we play hands we don't think we should. This exercise makes that less likely to happen with dreck hands.

120. Game Selection (Limit)

If it's bad for you if you limp, then it's good for you if they do. Sit in games with limpers.

121. Stack Size Matters (Limit)

You should constantly survey the stacks for two reasons. First is to stay informed as to all the swings in the game. You'll know who has been winning, and losing, and how much, and for how long. The second reason is that you will never be surprised by a player going all-in. If you have ever had this thought – “Damn! If only I had noticed that Joe was nearly all-in, I would have played this hand differently” – then you know the frustration that comes from throwing away theoretical money in this way, and from missing out on an opportunity to do something neat. For example:

The pot is three-handed. Joe is first to act, then me, then Moe. We're at the flop, and Joe has exactly two big bets (which equals four small bets). On the flop, Joe checks, I bet, Moe calls, and Joe checkraises. It's my turn, and it's one small bet to me. Joe has exactly two small bets left. I know Joe well enough to know that if I reraise to three bets, Joe will make it four bets, all-in. It can be correct for me to just call Joe's checkraise on the flop (rather than reraise) for the specific purpose of leaving Joe with one full big bet, so that when Joe predictably bets the turn, I can raise and put two-big-bet pressure on Moe.

I hate to miss out on stuff like that. I feel like I've lost money when I do. So I scan the stacks.



Limit Hold'em

For optimization, it is imperative to maintain a sizable stack at limit hold'em at all times. Begin every session with at least two racks. A rack is 100 chips. *N e v e r* begin a hand with less than a rack. To insure that you do not begin a hand with less than a rack, you must start every hand with enough chips so that if you lose a big pot, you will still have more than a rack in front of you when two new hole cards come your way right away. This means you need to have a rack and a half on the table at the start of every hand, at the very least. A two rack minimum is best. When you add on to your stack, do it shamelessly by the rack.

The above paragraph applies to games that do not allow cash on the table. For games that *do* allow cash on the table, well, see the above paragraph. It still applies. It just takes more work. The logistics of a cash-and-chips game make it so you might have to go to the cage yourself, maybe every couple hours, to keep your chip stack thick and high. Do it. Have chips.

If you do these things, here is what you can expect:

- Every time you hit a hot streak, you'll have at least three or four racks of chips on the table, maybe more. You will grow accustomed to having a beautiful stack of chips in front of you. And so will your opponents.
- When you are stuck, you won't look like it. New players who join the game will not know that you are stuck, and existing players will forget.
- Every time you leave the game, no matter how much you lose, no matter how bad you feel, you will always need actual racks when you rack up, which means you will never look like a busted disgusted pathetic loser, which means maybe, just maybe, you won't feel like one either.

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No-Limit Hold'em

A Little History

In the year 2001, according to a census taken by me, only a few hundred people in the United States played no-limit hold'em and pot-limit hold'em in legal, public poker rooms. (We called no-limit and pot-limit "big bet poker" to distinguish them from limit poker.) As to pot-limit, there was one table in Hollywood Park, California. There was one table in Oceanside, California. And there was one table in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As to no-limit hold'em, there was one table at the El Dorado in Reno, and in the San Francisco Bay Area, several casinos spread no-limit, but they didn't all go every night. The average for the whole Bay Area was about two tables per night, bringing the total number of no-limit hold'em games in the country to three.

Six tables. Of all the tables of legal, public, cash-game hold'em going on in the United States in 2001 – in Vegas and L.A. and Atlantic City and along the Mississippi River and everywhere else – all of it was limit except for about six tables. Tens of thousands of poker players loved to read, write, and think about cash-game big-bet hold'em, but hardly anyone got to actually play it. (I was one of the lucky ones. Or at least that's what I kept telling myself during my growing pains: "I am one of the chosen few who has the opportunity to get run over by the Cadillac of poker!")

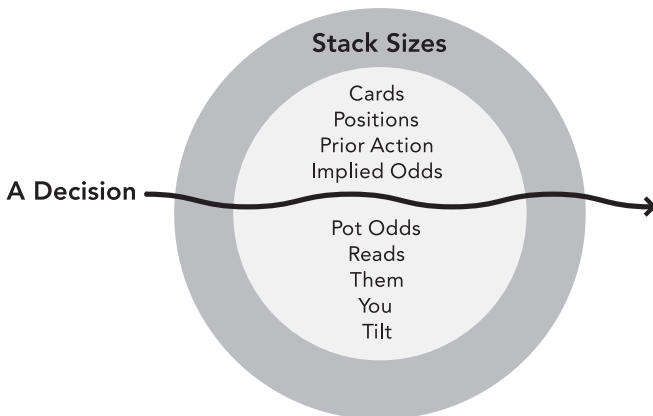
Elements of Poker

Then someone had an excellent idea so that no-limit could be played on the internet. Have a maximum buy-in. The idea was to set an upper limit on the amount of money a player can sit down with. This innovation gave cash-game no-limit hold'em to the world, via the internet, and the world liked it. Soon, there were thousands of no-limit games online. And then a tsunami of players showed up at the brick-and-mortar casinos and said to the management, in effect, "We see you have some empty tables. Do you mind if we pay you thousands of dollars to play poker on them? Our condition is that we want to play what we're used to. We want to play no-limit hold'em with a maximum buy-in."

Poker room managers say yes in situations like this, and all of a sudden we had no-limit games everywhere. Who could have predicted that almost every poker room in the country would go from never having run a no-limit cash game, to having multiple tables of no-limit every night? And that most tables would have a maximum buy-in?

This is how things go, with seeds and buds and flowers. Today's poker, whatever it is, is not the only way, or the best way, it's just today's way.

122. Stack Size Matters (No-Limit)



No-Limit Hold'em

Stack size at no-limit is a metasphere variable. Consciously or unconsciously, matters of stack size are where I look first and last for answers. When I am buying in, adding on, changing seats, quitting, or playing a hand, it's as if before each decision I ask myself, "How much do the stack sizes matter to me in making this decision?"

Here are three situations – one where stack sizes are all that matters, one where they don't matter, and one in between.

- I'm at the final table of a big tournament with a huge stack. A very short stack goes all-in under-the-gun before the flop. Everyone folds around to me in the big blind. It will cost a small fraction of my stack to call. So I call. I don't need to look at my cards, I don't need to know anything about my opponent, and position is made irrelevant by the all-in. I call based on stack sizes only.
- \$10/20 blinds. Joe and I both have \$2,000. It's folded to Joe in the small blind. Joe calls and I check in the big blind. The betting on the flop is check, check. The betting on the turn is check, check. On the river, Joe checks. The pot is \$40. It's my turn. This is a case where my betting decision would not be influenced by the stack sizes.
- \$10/20 blinds. Wild game. Joe and Moe are gambling it up big. They both have \$8,000. Joe opens the pot under-the-gun for \$200. Moe calls as usual right behind him. Everyone folds to me on the button. I look left and I can see that both blinds are folding. What should I do?
What's that? You need to know what my cards are before you can answer? Okay. I have pocket aces. So then, what should I do? Should I raise? Okay then. How much?
What's that? You still can't give an answer? Now you say you need to know my stack size?

I used to think like that, cards first, and then stack size. Now it's the other way around. Let's return to the third example, where Joe and Moe have \$8,000, and let's say I have \$2,000. No matter what I have – whether it's aces, a small pocket pair, suited connectors, or a hankering to bluff – I'm going to be playing a \$2,000 stack this hand. And if I had \$8,000 and they had \$2,000, I'd still be playing a \$2,000 stack this hand. That's the foundation. Stack size. That's what determines the all-in thresholds, which then influence the size of my bets and raises.



In games that use chips and cash, when I cannot determine the size of a player's stack by looking at it, I look inquisitively at him and his stack, and that will often be enough to get him to tell me how much money he has on the table. If that doesn't work, my policy is to not ask verbally. This is not the optimal approach on a hand-to-hand basis, since I would no doubt make better decisions if I always had accurate information. But I'd just as soon not say anything during a hand unless I really really have to, so what I do is track the cash. For example:

Playing \$2/5 blinds no-limit hold'em, Joe's stack is \$1,000. He has three \$100 bills that I can clearly see, plus seven stacks of \$5 chips. On the next hand, Joe and Moe play a big pot, and Joe wins \$800 from Moe – \$200 of it in red chips, plus six \$100 bills. I watch the money go to Joe. After Joe is awarded the pot, he rebuilds his sizable stack. First he squares up his \$100 bills and he sits them flat on the table. Then he puts columns of chips on top of the bills. His bills are in plain sight, but there is no way to know exactly how many there are. Joe did not do anything unethical or unetiquettable, but he did introduce a margin of error as to what his stack size is. Good thing I was watching.



Know generally which stacks are bigger than yours and which stacks are smaller than yours. Know specifically the sizes of the stacks smaller than yours.

123. Buying In, Rebuying, and Adding On

You are about to sit down in a no-limit hold'em game with the two best players in the world and the two worst players in the world. You're in the middle – you have the best of it against the worst players to the same extent that you have the worst of it against the best players. The two best players each have \$1,000. The two worst players each have \$100. You can buy in for any amount you like. How much should you buy in for?

The reason to buy in for \$100 is because on the next pot, any amount of money you put into the pot that is greater than \$100 can only go into a side pot against one of the best players in the world.

Same scenario, except this time the two great players have \$100, and the two bad players have \$1,000. How much do you buy in for now?

Buying in, rebuying, and adding on at no-limit are the same as betting and raising at no-limit. It's something you do with your money, and you decide the amount. How much you bet and how much you raise are recurring decisions that matter. That's why you try to get better at them. Buying in, rebuying, and adding on are recurring decisions that matter too.

Base your decisions on who has how much. Evaluate who you think is playing well or not playing well at the time, and adjust your stack accordingly. For example, after a live player doubles up, you might add on to your stack to cover him. I've seen many times when several players perform a synchronized add-on after a live player drags a big pot.

"But what if I'm on the road and I don't know any of the players?" you might ask. On the road, my default is to buy in

small. After I am familiar with the players, the stacks, and the pace of the game, I adjust my stack. A small buy-in retains big options.

Another consideration is the fear factor. When the game presents you with the option to have fewer chips than those you fear, take it, and when the game presents you with the option to have more chips than those who fear you, take it.

And then there's position. Imagine if you could adjust your stack up or down before every hand, anywhere from \$100 to \$1000. What I'd do is make my stack \$100 from the blinds, and \$1,000 when I had the button. In the real world, I do the next best thing. Here are two examples:

- Full game. I have \$2,000 and the other stacks range from \$500 to \$5,000. On the next hand, I lose \$1700, leaving me with \$300 and the smallest stack. My button is four hands away. If I am going to reload, I will wait until my button to do it. This way the fresh money from my pocket enters the game in optimum position. Plus, for those four hands, I don't need to survey the stacks. I can base my betting on the size of my little stack, which allows me to relax for a few hands while I shake off losing \$1700.
- When I lose my whole stack and I am going to rebuy big, sometimes I'll rebuy small on the very next hand, and wait until my next button to add on big. I do this to squeeze some reciprocal positional advantage from the go-broke-and-rebuy cycles.

124. How to Lose a Big Pot

Here is how to lose a big pot at no-limit hold'em. The blinds are \$10/20. You have \$5,000 as does everyone else. You get pocket aces under-the-gun. You limp. Joe raises. Moe calls. You reraise.

Joe reraises. Moe reraises. You move all-in and they both call. Joe turns over pocket queens. You turn over your pocket aces. Moe shows jack-ten suited. The flop comes K-9-2 rainbow. How do you play it from here?

What I do is I plan out exactly what I am going to do if a queen comes and I lose. When all of my chips are in the pot, and one or more cards are still to come, I ask myself right then: Am I going to rebuy if I lose this pot? How much? Am I going to take a break? Am I going to quit? Am I going to walk around and then decide? Those are the only questions on my mind while the dealer is burning and turning. The result is that when all my money's in the middle, and my cards are face up, and I've got the best hand, and the river card beats me, I'm always unrattled and unwavering. I make my next play like it was scripted, because it was.

125. Seat Selection and Game Rejection Based on Stacks

Let's imagine the two extremes of seat selection and game rejection. At one end, we have a home game where the same players who start the game always finish the game, and nobody ever changes seats. In that scenario, seat selection and game rejection are never relevant because they do not exist.

At the other end is an infinite selection universe, with billions of games of every kind going all the time, with games breaking and starting, and players moving around. And you can change tables or seats with no break in your action. In that scenario, seat selection and game rejection are always relevant, because somewhere there is a seat more profitable than the one you are in, and it costs nothing to move there.

We can use the infinite-selection universe as a setting for thought experiments. For example:

The game is \$1/2 blinds no-limit hold'em. The maximum buy-in is \$200. To isolate the position variable, we'll say that

everyone is tied as to playing ability. I double up to \$400. Everyone else at the table has \$200, except for one guy, Joe, who also has \$400. This means my extra \$200 can only be wagered in a side pot against Joe, which means I should either think I have an advantage against Joe, or I should change games.

There's two types of advantage, and together they determine who has the overall advantage. There's playing advantage, like the difference between someone who plays a lot of poker and someone who just started. And there's positional advantage, which is the same for everyone. Whether or not I think I have the advantage over a particular player at a particular time depends on both how he is playing and where he is sitting.

In this setup, I have no playing advantage over Joe. What about position? Let's put Joe on my immediate left. In that case, he would have a huge positional advantage over me. I would quit the game because my extra \$200 will only be behind Joe's extra \$200 on one hand each round – on my button. On the other nine hands per round, Joe and his extra \$200 will act after me. This is not good. Starting over with \$200 at any table in this universe is bound to be better.

Now let's put Joe on my right. And call me parked.

In the real world, it goes more like this:

Playing no-limit table poker, the blinds are \$10/20, and I need to be home by noon. At 10 a.m. my stack is \$8,000. The live player, Joe, is sitting on my immediate right. He just lost a big pot and he's down to \$900. Indicators are that he is going to quit if he loses the \$900, so I decide to go home now, when the big blind gets to me, probably. On what was to be my last hand, Joe takes the big blind. I fold, and three players limp for \$20. They have \$4,000 each. Joe shoves all-in for \$900. The first limper calls \$900, the second limper calls \$900, and the third limper goes all-in. The first two limpers fold, and now

Joe has only one guy to beat to take down a \$3600 pot, which he does. So I take my blind.

126. Controlling the Pot

On the flop and the turn, if one or more players check, and now it's up to the player who is last to act to either check or bet, that's control. He has the helm and his action will steer the pot.

Let's compare checking behind to betting, by comparing three checked streets to two checked streets to one checked street to no checked streets. In order to stabilize the bet-size variable, we'll make all bets pot-sized. To further simplify, we'll make the examples headsup. What we're looking for is the effect of betting vs. checking on the size of the pot.

The blinds are \$2/5. The small blind completes and the big blind checks. It's headsup and the pot is \$10. From that point, here are the four variations:

- If both players check all the way, the final pot is \$10.
- If one street has a \$10 bet and a call, and the other two streets are checked, the final pot is $10 + 10 + 10 = \$30$.
- If two streets have a bet and a call, and the other street is checked, the final pot is $10 + 10 + 10 + 30 + 30 = \90 .
- If all three postflop streets are bet and called, the final pot is $10 + 10 + 10 + 30 + 30 + 90 + 90 = \270 .

So our final-pot-size progression is 1, 3, 9, 27.

Math conclusion: Checking behind on one street reduces the potential pot size to one third what it would be without the check. In other words, on the flop and the turn, after the first player

checks, the other player has the option to triple the final pot size, or not.

General conclusion: Players who are first to act have some control over the size of the pot. They can make it grow, by betting. But they can't keep it from growing by checking. The only player who ever has the final say on whether or not the pot stays the same size on any given street is the player who is last to act, because only the player who is last to act can check behind.

Let's take the same approach and look at controlling the pot before the flop. For these examples, the conditions are that the game is headsup, the blinds are \$1/2, and on every street there is one pot-sized bet and call. What we're looking for is the effect of preflop raises on the final pot size.

- Preflop, the small blind completes and the big blind checks. The pot is \$4. On the flop, there is a \$4 bet and call. On the turn, there is a \$12 bet and call. On the river, there is a \$36 bet and call. The final pot is \$108.
- Preflop, the small blind raises to \$6. The big blind calls \$5 more. The pot is \$12. On the flop, turn, and river, there is a pot-sized bet and a call. The final pot is \$324.
- Preflop, the small blind raises to \$20. The big blind calls \$18 more. The pot is \$40. This time the final pot size ends up being \$1080.

With no raise, the final pot is \$108. With a raise to 3x the big blind, the final pot is three times bigger: \$324. With a raise to 10x the big blind, the final pot is \$1080, which equals \$108 x 10. Two conclusions we can draw are:

- A preflop raise increases the final pot size by the raise's multiple of the big blind.

No-Limit Hold'em

- If there is a pot-sized bet and call on the flop, turn, and river, then the pot ends up being 27 times bigger than it was before the flop. This means that each of us put in half that, or about 13 times the preflop pot.

This is handy data to have when I'm deciding whether to raise before the flop, and how much – especially when I am aiming at a target of a specific size, like Joe's stack. Sometimes I'll use a preflop raise to adjust the pot size such that if I make normal-sized bets on the flop, turn, and river, and I get called all the way and win, I'm either going to win half Joe's stack, or all of it.

127. Suitedness at No-Limit Hold'em

When should suitedness tip the scales before the flop at no-limit? When should the difference between A2o and A2s be the difference between staying in or getting out? The answer depends on stack sizes, player tendencies, and positions. In extreme cases, not all three matter:

The stacks are very deep and Joe, a very loose, very aggressive player, is in the game. Joe makes many big bluffs and many loose calls. If I get A2s, I will limp in from any seat, and I'll call a normal sized raise from any seat. If I get A2o, I'll most likely fold from any seat.

That was a case where position was irrelevant. Stack sizes and player tendencies were enough to draw the play/fold line between A2s and A2o.

Next is a case where if the stacks are deep enough, then player tendencies don't matter, and no cards are too low, which of course means...

I have the button. Six players limp in. It's my turn. With 72o, I would fold. With 72s, I would play.

So, when should suitedness tip the scales before the flop at no-limit? There's no rule I can tell you. But I know when it does.

128. Betting or Raising 1/3 of Your Stack

Here's a fun fact. If you bet or raise $1/3$ of your stack and you get called by one player, your stack is now about the same size as the pot. When you move all-in on the next street, your opponent's drawing odds will always be known in advance: 2-to-1. (If your opponent's stack is smaller than yours, then you would apply this concept using $1/3$ of his stack.)

I really like how that works out. I often use the $1/3$ concept to temper my bet-size and raise-size decisions, especially oversized bets and raises. There's nothing formulaically prescribable here because of all the usual variables. Here are some examples of how and when I work this ratio into my game:

- Full game. The blinds are \$5/10. All stacks are \$1,000. Joe is under-the-gun. He opens for \$40. Everyone folds to me in the big blind. I've got pocket aces. I would either just call, or raise it to the \$300 - \$400 range. I would raise if I think my opponent has his finger on the trigger. It could be that I think he is a very tight player who will commit his stack with a big pocket pair, or I could think he is a very loose player ready to gamble it up for a grand with whatever. In both of those cases, I would raise about $1/3$ of my stack. If I raise and he calls, then it doesn't matter any more who is first or last to act. I'm going all-in on the flop.

No-Limit Hold'em

- If several players limp in, and I have a big pocket pair, this is a situation where I will often adjust my raise toward 1/3 of something. If I have the smallest stack, I might bet 1/3 of my stack, even if that is a significant overbet. If I have the biggest stack, I sometimes take aim at the loosest limper by betting 1/3 of his stack.
- The blinds are \$5/10. I have 77 in the big blind. Joe limps under-the-gun, two others limp, the small blind completes, and I check. The pot is \$50. All stacks are \$1,000. The flop is 7h-6h-2c. I have top set. The small blind checks, I check, Joe bets \$50, and everyone folds back to me. We're headsup now. Whether I call or raise in a spot like this is always going to depend on the conditions of the universe at that moment. As to how much I raise, that's something I can pretty much decide on in advance.
- Let's say I knew that Joe had a flush draw or a straight draw. I'd want to raise enough so that he is not getting the right odds to draw, but not so much that he won't. And if he calls on the flop, I want to do the same thing again on the turn. I want him to get the wrong odds, and be tempted to take them. Raising 1/3 does all this. The least I would raise to in that spot is \$300. If he calls, I move in on the turn.
- Let's say I knew that Joe had limped under-the-gun with pocket aces. Raising 1/3 puts him to the test for all of his chips right now, on the flop, before a scare card comes on the turn, and before his excitement over getting action with aces wears off. He's sitting there, holding an overpair, *the* overpair, pocket aces, looking at a board of 7-6-2 twotone. In his mind, I could have an overpair, or I could have a straight draw, or I could have a flush draw. If I make it \$300, he will do one of three things. He'll

Elements of Poker

either make a great fold, or catch an ace, or go broke. My money is on that last one.

- Let's say I knew that Joe was trying to steal this pot and that he has nothing. Well then of course I'd just call his \$50 bet on the flop and check the turn!

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Elements of Performance

Introduction to Elements of Performance

My body in 2003 was literally bent, and I had much mental and physical pain because of it. I knew people who did yoga and swore by it. One day I decided to give yoga my utmost. I bought some books and DVD's and I started reading about it and doing it at home, every day, several times per day, sometimes a few minutes, sometimes a few dozen. It was easy for me to keep up a daily yoga practice because two years earlier I had already established a pattern of putting my needs above everything else at least once per day. That was in 2001, when I quit smoking cigarettes for about the 20th time. The difference that made the difference this time around was that I made two commitments instead of one. On the day I quit smoking, as planned, I started going on one or two half-hour walks per day every day. My commitment was absolute, and irrational, and it saved me, and still does. In my mind, the walks were a life-and-death nourishment-level priority, equal in urgency to daily eating, daily sleeping, and daily not smoking. Because of those two years of walking, yoga caught fire with me after about a week, and the flame has never gone out. What I'm saying here is that daily-ness is the nuts.

The yoga books and yoga videos basically said this: "Hold your body like so, and pay close attention to when, and how, you breathe." Then came instructions on how to hold the body just

so, and details as to when, and how, to breathe. Well, I was way more into the body stuff than the breathing stuff. I was still under the impression that yoga was a physical activity that would help my back. But I went along with the breathing as best I could. I tried to pay attention to it and adjust my breathing as instructed. But man, it was hard. I was no good at it at all. It was dang near impossible for me to do what seemed like the simplest thing in the world. Little did I know that those were essential growing moments. I was doing mind training, disguised as exercise. I was learning the skills I would need to perform a great magic trick. I was learning how to make pain disappear, and not just physical pain, but mental pain as well.

Eugen Herrigel was a German philosopher and teacher who studied archery under a Zen master in Japan for six years in the 1920's. Years later, he wrote "Zen in the Art of Archery."

In his book, Eugen says that after he had trained hard at archery under a Master for a solid year, his arrows still wobbled, and he could not "draw the bow spiritually." One day, the Master said, "You cannot do it, because you do not breathe right." Then the Master gave Eugen detailed instructions on breathing, and he had Eugen practice just the breathing. Sure enough, when Eugen went back to shooting arrows, some of them had lost their wobble. We pick it up at page 40, at the end of the Master's lesson on breathing:

"...concentrate entirely on your breathing, as if you had nothing else to do!" the Master said.

It took me a considerable time before I succeeded in doing what the Master wanted. But – I succeeded. I learned to lose myself so effortlessly in the breathing that I sometimes had the feeling that I myself was not breathing but – strange as this may sound – being breathed. And even when, in hours of thoughtful reflection, I struggled against this bold idea, I could no longer doubt that the breathing held out all that the Master had promised. Now and then, and in the course of time more

and more frequently, I managed to draw the bow and keep it drawn until the moment of release while remaining completely relaxed in body, without my being able to say how it happened. The qualitative difference between these few successful shots and the innumerable failures was so convincing that I was ready to admit that now at last I understood what was meant to draw the bow “spiritually.”

So that was it: not a technical trick I had tried in vain to pick up, but liberating breath-control with new and far-reaching possibilities. I saw this not without misgiving, for I well know how great is the temptation to succumb to a powerful influence and, ensnared in self-delusion, to overrate the importance of an experience merely because it is so unusual. But despite all equivocation and sober reserve, the results obtained by the new breathing – for in time I was able to draw even the strong bow of the Master with muscles relaxed – were far too definite to be denied.

In talking it over with Mr. Komachiya, I once asked him why the Master had looked on so long at my futile efforts to draw the bow “spiritually,” why he had not insisted on the correct breathing right from the start.

“A great Master,” he replied, “must also be a great teacher. With us the two things go hand in hand. Had he begun the lessons with breathing exercises, he would never have been able to convince you that you owe them anything decisive. You had to suffer shipwreck through your own efforts, before you were ready to seize the lifebelt he threw you.”

For many years, I had watched my own “futile efforts” to “draw the bow spiritually.” In my case, the phrase “draw the bow spiritually” translates to “play poker painlessly.” That’s what I had been after. That was my holy grail. Right before I started breathing, I was at the point that Eugen was at, right before he started breathing. I had gone as far as I could go with reducing poker pain in every way I could think of, and I had also become

talented at not showing pain, but I still felt it inside, and it sucked and hurt. Sometimes I'd feel it while playing, and sometimes not until I'd curl up and hide afterwards.

I practiced concentrating on my breathing at home, and while walking, and driving, and pretty soon I got to where I could remember to pay attention to my breathing while I was playing poker. The effect on my game was as dramatic as what happened to Eugen's archery. After twenty years of nearly constant chip-shuffling, I just ... stopped. And I stopped second-guessing my decisions altogether. And I was remembering to look left far more than ever before. And I was quitting impeccably every session. And I had become unannoyable. And no matter how much I lost, or how I lost it, I didn't lose it.

I've gone far beyond poker with the whole breathing thing. My daily practice has grown to include sitting meditation. This is when you sit as still as you can and concentrate on posture and breathing. When the mind wanders, you return it to the posture and breathing.

I've only been placing attention on my breathing for four years, and I sure as heck ain't no Master. In this section, I'm going to pass along some things I've learned about breathing and thinking and pain as if answering the question: How can this stuff be applied profitably, to poker, right away, by your basic American-cultured poker player?

129. The Path of Least Resistance

There's good resistance and bad resistance. When we resist harming ourselves and others, that's the good kind. When we resist reality, that's the bad kind. What we want to do then is apply the good kind of resistance to the bad kind, and resist resistance.

What does it mean to resist reality? It means to wish things are different than they are. The sequence of events goes like this. First, we experience reality with our senses. We see, hear, touch, smell,

Elements of Performance

and taste. Then, right away, our mind steps in with its thoughts about the sensory input. If there is something about reality that our thinking doesn't like, then those thoughts themselves are the resistance. They are the push-back, they oppose, they reject, they resist what is. We wish things did not look, sound, feel, smell, or taste the way they do. And unhappiness is born. Here are some examples:

I feel. I feel rain on my skin. I feel the air because it is much colder than my skin and moving. It is cold and windy and raining and I am outside. I wish it was warm and sunny. I wish I was inside.

I taste. I am tasting food. Molecules of food touch the sensing molecules in my mouth which send nerve impulses to my brain which I then perceive as flavor, texture, and temperature. But what if my food is too salty? What if it is too chewy? Or too cold? What if I take a dislike to my food? When that happens, I have two options. I can either stop eating unhappily, or I can continue eating unhappily. If only I did not resist the way things actually are, I would just chew my food, and taste it, and swallow it. I might feel mindlessly indifferent about the food, or intensely satisfied, or plainly grateful, or anatomically fascinated, but never unhappy.

I hear. I am hearing Joe. I am hearing Joe say something I strongly disagree with. Joe said what he said. This is the reality. But I wish he had not said it. That is the resisting of reality. I resist reality practically every time I hear anything I disagree with about anything. And when I resist, I am unhappy. If only I did not resist other people's ideas, I would just hear them and chew them up and swallow them.

I hear. It is 1985 and I am on the phone, hearing my sister. She is telling me that our mother has cancer and three months.

This is the reality. But I so deeply wish it were not so. I did not know it then but I know it now: Extreme resistance is extreme pain. Slight resistance is slight pain. Resistance and pain are proportionate.

I see. I am seeing my opponent's hole cards. I am seeing my opponent's hole cards because we are at the showdown and he just turned them over. I see that his hand beats my hand. I do not like what I see. I wish the cards were different than they are. I resist. And it hurts. Resisting always hurts. Resisting is hurt.

And there we have the meaning and the consequences of resisting reality. At regular life, resistance is futile, and painful. At poker, resistance is not only futile and painful, but also expensive.

If only we could be like water. When water moves, it follows the path of least resistance. Water would be good at poker.

130. The Path of Leak Resistance

When a poker player says, "I have some leaks," it means he is aware of recurring situations in which he does things he thinks he shouldn't, like when he plays too loose, or visits the craps table. Leaking costs money with every drop. Leaking is not as bad as bleeding, and it's not nearly as bad as spewing, and it's way better than hemorrhaging, but it is still far worse than not leaking at all. When a poker player plugs a leak, or tries to, he walks the path of leak resistance.

131. Awareness

While you are playing, and while you are on break, it's good to step back now and then and check your awareness. Ask yourself,

Elements of Performance

“How well or poorly am I playing right now?” But don’t stop there. You have to be very wary of your awareness because you can’t trust it to be aware of itself, and that’s where self-deception creeps in. So step back once more, and look at your awareness awareness. Have a little talk with your selves.

Me: Am I playing well?

Myself: You’re playing fine. You’ve just been unlucky, that’s all.

Me: Really? I feel like maybe I’m playing just a little bit not so great.

Myself: Dude. Nobody here can touch you. Now quit being so spineless and get in there and raise it up again. They can’t keep outplaying you forever.

Me: What’d you say?

Myself: You heard me. What’s the problem? Do you want me to tell you that you’re playing well? Or do you want the truth?

I: If you two had any idea how silly you sound.

Myself: Hey, nobody asked you!

Me: Hold on. Stop action. I’m asking. I have a question for the all-knowing, all-seeing **I**.

I: Okay. Let’s hear it.

Me: How’s my playing?

I: Your playing has been antsy and you are definitely not in your best groove. But the good news is, your awareness is currently kicking ass, which means now that you know and believe that you're off whack, you can do something about it.

When you send a probe from yourself to yourself, then that's it, game over, you win. It doesn't matter what the readings are. If you can slow down long enough to genuinely pop yourself the "How's my playing?" question, then your awareness at that moment is good.

132. Results Oriented

I am classically results oriented. When I make a play that works out, I tend to think it was better than it actually was. When I make a play that doesn't work out, I tend to think it was worse than it actually was. The same goes for evaluating a session. When I win, I think I played better than I did. When I lose, I think I played worse than I did. For example:

Playing \$20/40 limit hold'em, it's one hour into the session. I flop a flush draw. I hit my flush and I win a nice size pot with about \$600 in it. Hours later, I quit the game a \$300 winner, a typical smallish win at those stakes. Driving home, I feel pretty good about the session, like I was sharp and hardly tilted. I won, and I feel like a winner.

The next day, let's say everything happens exactly the same. All the same opponents get all the same cards and they play them the same way, except for one difference. In this reality, I miss my flush. I don't win that \$600 pot early in the session. This time I go home three hundred bucks lighter. Driving home, my mind keeps revisiting my close decisions, burning out on second guesses and what ifs. I lost, and I feel like a loser.

On day one, I thought I played well. On day two, I thought I played poorly. I wonder how often my evaluation of my performance hinges on one long-forgotten card.

That was a look through the lens of results-orientedness, to see how it warps the self-evaluation of a session. Let's see what a refracted hand looks like.

No-limit hold'em. Cash game. The blinds are \$10/20. Everyone has \$6,000. I'm on the button with pocket fives. Everyone folds to me. I open for \$80. The small blind folds. Joe is in the big blind. He calls the \$60 more.

The flop comes A-A-5. I have a full house. Joe checks. I bet \$100 in a way designed to convince the universe and even myself that I am bluffing. Joe folds.

Damn, I should have checked! I suck!

Okay. Do-over. Just like before.

I open for \$80 with 55 on the button, and only Joe calls. The flop comes A-A-5, Joe checks, and I bet \$100. But this time, Joe has AK, and he checkraises on the flop to \$300. I make it a thousand and he real quick moves all-in for six grand and I call just as fast and we both turn over and no ace or king comes and I bust him and...

What an awesome bet by me on the flop! I'm a genius!

133. Poker Funk

Poker funk is when you play poker, and you lose, and afterwards you feel like shit about it. Poker funk is a ball and chain of pain that is shackled to your psyche. It's when your mind keeps returning to your poker pain when it idles. To change your pain,

you must change your mind, by either redirecting it to the present, or shutting it down.

When I'm having some poker funk and I want to divert my mind the lazy way, I watch a movie. A movie is a powerful anesthetic. It soothes by bringing me to the present moment and keeping me there. When the movie is on, everything I am paying attention to is happening now, right in front of me, and this act alone makes my pain vanish. While the movie has my attention, I feel no rage or injustice or jealousy or self-pity or worry or regret. When the movie is on, I am not thinking about my inadequacy as a poker player and about all those sick suckouts and about losing chunks of money. And there's a bonus feature! The movie allows time to pass. When they say that time heals all wounds, they mean poker wounds too.

Another way to get some emergency pain relief is to shut down the pain source by going to sleep. That's the easiest and safest way to stop the thinking. What's happening is that you have painful memories in your mind that want to be dwelled on. That's the only way they can live. So you can hardly blame them for being so persistent. And they move in clusters. If you let one bad poker memory in, it will hold the door open, and the associated bad feelings will come in too. Your mind then becomes a dwelling for woeful dwelling. To clean house, sleep. Extra sleep is a naturally occurring and healthy component of poker funk because it empties your weary mind so that it can rest and get strong again.

Poker funk hurts your mind in the same way that a sprain hurts your ankle. After you sprain your ankle, you can hobble around if you want. It'll hurt. And you'll risk more injury. But you'll still heal up just fine, eventually. If, however, you lie down and rest instead of playing while injured, then the pain will stop right away, and you'll heal a lot faster.

134. Table Funk

If you are playing poker and you feel despondent, that's table funk. It's that woe-is-me feeling. The great thing about table funk is that while it is going on, you have an immediate opportunity to make money. That's because if you do anything that eases your funk, even by the tiniest bit, your theoretical score goes up.

The worst thing you can do during table funk is wallow in it. But that's what it wants you to do, which is why it's so hard to break out of it right in the middle of it. To fix the funk, any action is better than inaction. Here are four ways (besides breathing) to respond to despondency:

- Just up and quit. That's right. Throw in the towel. Call it a night. Stick a fork in you, you're done. All that sorry sad sack crap. You feel bad. You look bad. Go home. Don't even talk to me. Shhh!! I don't want to hear it. Just go.
- ~~Wake~~the**fuckUP!!** Get your mind out of your mind. It's revolting.
- Say something to a player or a staffer that you know will get a positive reaction. A little pick-me-up. A gap in your woe-is-me. If you force it to go away, even for a moment, then who knows, maybe it won't come back.
- Make up games for yourself. Things to do with your chips, your cards, your gaze, or you could count by primes, or try listening in on a conversation at another table like you're a CIA operative. Anything works here. Silently silly is saliently sane.

That's four ways to save money when feeling bad is costing you money. You can walk yourself out, you can wake yourself up, you can talk yourself down, or you can play with yourself.

135. Bliscipline

Bliscipline is when you are at the table and you are so totally in control of yourself and so totally at peace in the situation that no matter what happens next, you'll still have plenty of resolve in reserve.

136. Self-Perpetuating Tiltlessness

Early on, I knew tilt was the most important thing, and I tried like hell to undo it. Sometimes I would practice losing in my car. On the way to the casino, I'd pretend I was already there.

My hand is pocket kings. There is much raising before the flop and not much folding. On the flop comes a king. There is more betting and more raising. Going into the river, the pot is mounded and wide, and my top set is the nuts. On the river, an arch-villain catches a gutshot and snatches this rent-filled pot away from me.

Then I would rehearse getting over it.

At the poker table, I practice losing for real. When I lose a hand, I try to see it as practice for the next time I lose a hand. If I go an hour without winning a pot, I'm just working out, getting in shape, for the next time I have a winless hour. When I lose ten sessions in a row, I look at it as practice for the next time I lose ten sessions in a row.



When I sit down to play poker, if I am hopeful that I will win, it is inevitable that I will sometimes be disappointed. Likewise, when I start with a good hand and I hope to win the pot, I invite disappointment. When I am disappointed, I do not play my best. At my best, I am hopeless.



Elements of Performance

Tilted poker is like crooked teeth.
It's not your fault, and it can be fixed.



Reset, reset, reset.
Rise above it, rise above it, rise above it.
Let it go, let it go, let it go.



Fluctuation causes tilt.
Tilt causes fluctuation.



Take a beat, take a breath.



Dwell on this word: impermanence.

137. A Reminder about Odds

Let's say there is one card to go, your lone opponent shows you his cards, and then he bets all-in. It's up to you to call or fold. You can see that you have nine outs to win, so you need to be getting 5-to-1 to make the call. The pot is offering you 5-to-1. What would you do?

I would fold.

Isn't the language peculiar? I wonder why we don't say what we mean, which is: "You need to be getting *better* than 5-to-1 to make the call." That we are talking about odds at all assumes we are talking about methodically making money. Yet under their rational surface, the words connote a longing to give action.

The reminder is that if you are "getting the right odds," and you are getting *only* the right odds, then you are getting nothing but a thrill ride.

138. Cravings

When you crave a cigarette, there are two ways to make the craving go away. One way is to smoke a cigarette. The other way is to not smoke a cigarette. Either way, in minutes, the craving subsides.

Change the word "cigarette" in the paragraph above to anything else that people crave, and it remains true. Drug craving, music craving, drama craving, flop craving, add your own. Whatever the craving is "for," it's still just a craving, and there are two ways to make it stop. One way is to satisfy it. The other way is not to. Either way, the craving will go away. Craving is not a steady state. After the craving will come a duration of time without a craving. And then comes another craving. This is the pattern, on again off again, whether you satisfy any particular craving or not.

Cravings are not harmful. They just are. And they are not inherently paired with the way we happen to satisfy them. Practice the simple act of not scratching that itch, of just letting things be, just as they are. Hello craving. Goodbye craving.

139. Meditation

Thinking serves us well. Our amazing powers of recall and foresight save our lives and our bankrolls. I don't need to set myself on fire or play every hand to know what would happen if I did. I can imagine. The problem is that the thinking that allows us to imagine the past and future is the same thinking that robs us of the present. Meditation stops the thinking, one breath at a time, and returns us to what is going on. Meditation is immersion in reality. Meditation can be done sitting, walking, lying down, and standing, which means it is always available.

140. Focus

Playing limit hold'em, three players are in the pot and I'm in the middle. The board on the turn is Ad-9h-8h, Qh. I have AK of clubs, giving me top-pair top-kicker, with no flush draw and no straight draw. Joe is first to act. He bets. Joe has been playing aggressively and loudly. The range of hands I put him on is everything from the nuts down. He could have a flush, a straight, a set, two pair, one pair, a flush draw, or a straight draw. As he bets, Joe says something to me intended to agitate me, and it does. Meanwhile, Moe, on my left, inadvertently and prematurely reaches back to grab a stack of chips to raise with. I've seen him do this before and it is not an act. Another thing about Moe – he is ever-worried that someone has a monster. He would not raise the turn into a board like that in a situation like this without a made hand. Most likely he has a flush, or maybe a straight with JT, both of which beat the best hand I could make. So I'm drawing dead. I should fold.

Just one problem. I missed it. I didn't see Moe reach for the trigger. While Moe was revealing his intentions, my sensors were pointing at noisy Joe. Interesting that the correctness of folding versus not folding on this hand depends entirely on which way I

look when Joe bets the turn. If I look right, I should stay in. If I look left, I should get out.

Even at our best, it's hard to focus on the right thing at the right time all the time. Throw in some fatigue, stuckness, television, and mind noise, and it's impossible. But wouldn't it be amazing if we could? What would that feel like? What would it look like? What would need to change? Is it unrealistic to think that we could be maximally focused all the time? Of course it is. Is it unrealistic to think that we could do better than we do now? Of course it isn't.

Think weight-lifting. If you lift weights, you will increase the strength and stamina of your muscles. It's not a matter of *if*, it's only a matter of how much. And the results will be proportional to the effort. And you have options. You can do many repetitions with light weights, or you can do few reps with heavy weights, or you can do any combo in between. It all works. The key to doing it is just doing it.

It's the same way with strengthening your mind.

To lift weights mentally, what you do is focus on something.

Focus is when you direct your sense organs and your mind at the same thing at the same time. The best thing to use as an object of focus is your breathing. You could also use a marking on the wall, or the sounds around you. When you are walking somewhere, you could fix your vision on something up ahead and keep looking at it until you get there. Or you could walk nowhere, at home, and concentrate on walking super slowly. When you are driving, and you are stopped at a red light, you could gaze unbudgingly at the light until it changes, and while that is going on, notice that you are breathing. When you are eating, you could focus on the details of the goings on inside your mouth. When you are standing, you could focus on standing still.

The only requirement of the thing you focus on is that it be current. If it is made of matter, it needs to be something you can see or touch or taste or smell now. If it is made of sound, it has to be something you can hear now. If it is made of pain, it has to

hurt now. If you focus on a person, they must be with you now. If you focus on some part of you, then it is automatically now.

You focus, and then at some point, as expected, you start thinking about something that's not now. You go out of focus. But because you had so recently been outside your thinking, you can now see your thinking as just thinking, and you say hello thinking, I am going to softly set you aside now and return to my focusing task.

That was one rep.

Like doing a bench press or a curl.

Then the thinking starts up again, as it always will. And that's fine. Again you stop, and you drive another wedge of awareness into your mind, and you say "not now" to your thinking. You tell your thoughts, "I appreciate that you are accustomed to having my mind to yourself, but right now I am going to ask you to move out of the way for a moment because I am doing some focusing training." Then you return to your chosen object of focus. That was rep number two.

I didn't understand how concentration exercises worked until right after I started doing them. One thing that happens when you start doing mind reps is you come to realize that your thoughts are whizzing by out of your control virtually every waking moment of your life. What you do during focusing training is sublimely simple. You stop the thinking. That's it.

Cautionary note: Thinking about thinking still counts as thinking.

If you go for years without doing any weight training, and then you start working out every day, you will get noticeably stronger every day at first, then your rate of strengthening will slow. You might plateau, in which case your workouts would be more about maintaining strength than increasing it. You can get to a higher level with more exertion, more effort. If you stop working out, you will gradually lose strength. Up and down and back and forth it goes, depending on the quantity and quality of today's training. It's the same way with mind training. There's

muscle build-up, muscle maintenance, and muscle atrophy. And no amount of understanding and good intentions is a substitute for one committed moment of hard work.

By doing mental workouts, you gain discipline. Discipline is not something you accomplish or acquire. It is something you apply. Discipline is a tool that you forge when you are alone. Then you bring it with you to the poker game and use it.

The big difference between weight training and mind training is that in order to do weight training, you have to be where the equipment is. With mind training, you can do it anywhere, even while you are playing poker. All the equipment you need is right there with you at the table. You have your mind, your body, and your breathing.

141. Breathing

One thousand is the number of times you breathe in an hour. Try to be mindful of as many of your breaths as you possibly can. By mindful I mean that you know when you are breathing in, and you know when you are breathing out. You can do this by:

- Controlling your breathing
- Counting your breaths
- Following your breathing
- Just breathing

I'll go through all four.

When you control your breathing, look at all the directions you can go. You can decide to breathe slower than you would have, had you not thought about it. Or you can decide to breathe faster. You could say to yourself, “I will inhale deeper now,” and then do it. Or, you could just as easily choose to make your breathing shallower. Also you can make your breathing louder on purpose, or you can decide for no reason at all to see how quietly you can do it.

Reviewing, we have three pairs of options so far: faster and slower, deeper and shallower, louder and quieter. All of your breaths will vary one from the other in these ways, whether you are paying attention to them or not. Controlled breathing is when you have a say in these matters.

Another breath selection that can be made consciously instead of unconsciously is your skull opening. The air has to go from outside to inside and back, and the only holes for that are in your head. You can choose to breathe through your mouth or through your nose. Breathing through your nose on purpose is in itself an excellent exercise of breath control.

Lungs do not pump themselves like the heart. They aren't made of muscle. The expansion and contraction of your lungs is totally controlled by the surrounding muscles, which you have almost total control over. The big daddy of the whole apparatus is the diaphragm, which is a sheet of muscle that spans the bottom of your rib cage. When the diaphragm contracts, it stretches out flat and pulls down on your lungs which expands them and creates suction. You can also tug on your lungs from the sides by flexing your thoracic muscles which are the muscles attached to your ribs. And you can fill the top portion of your lungs by lifting up with your neck muscles.

That's a lot of ways that your mind can control your breathing. But no matter how strong your mind becomes, and no matter how slow you go, you can never just will yourself into not breathing. So you're safe. You can experiment, and you will be protected by safety protocols, like on a Star Trek holodeck.

Elements of Poker

None of these breathing options are better or worse than the others, unless you have a purpose. For the purpose of shaking off some drowsiness, you could turn up the volume with the sound down by completely inflating and completely deflating your lungs, several times, with some pace to it, with your mouth open, noiselessly. To elevate your calmness, the best way to breathe is slowly, quietly, through the nose, using only the diaphragm. For the purpose of mind training, any breathing works.

So far we have been on the topic of being mindful of your breathing by controlling your breathing. Next is counting.

Count your breaths as they go by. Make it a game with yourself. See if you can count ten breaths in a row. This is a simple yet complex yet easy yet difficult game, depending on how much control you have over yourself as you play it. It turns out that all you have to do to win is play.

If you make it to ten, that's very good. When my mind is scattered, I can't even make it to two. It might take me ten tries to get to ten. But that's okay because the most important number to count to is one.

Counting breaths is an excellent way to hop on the breathing train because you can know exactly when you fell off. And when you lose count, that's fine. It's like, the whole point. That we can't hold the count is a symptom of an affliction that counting cures.

Next is following the in-and-out of your breathing like so: When you are drawing air in, say to yourself, "Breathing in, I am aware that I am breathing in." And when air is leaving your body, "Breathing out, I am aware that I am breathing out."

Meditation master Thich Nhat Hahn teaches a tender technique. He suggests that we practice mindfulness using pairs of private statements about current events and breathing awareness.

Elements of Performance

Here is a sampling of what you might say to yourself as you observe the things and occurrences around you.

When you are outside:

Breathing in, I look at the blue sky.
Breathing out, I smile to the blue sky.

When something sudden and traumatic happens:

Breathing in, I am aware that I stubbed my toe.
Breathing out, I smile to my toe.

And for those times when you can't think of anything to smile to, you can do it like this:

Breathing in, I am aware that I just got sucked out on.
Breathing out, I am aware that I am breathing out.

And the final way to be mindful of your breathing is to do nothing more than observe it, without altering your breaths, or counting them, or narrating them. This kind of breathing is simply breath taking.



If you want to fully oxygenate each of the trillions of cells in your body, if you want to inject your mind with as much calm and focus as you possibly can, if you want to know that you have optimized, then you need to know that when it comes to breathing, the big money is in the out breath. Exhale completely, slowly, silently. Go further than you would have gone had you not decided to go further. Push that last bit out. Wait, there's more. Scrunch your insides up, and you can empty all the bad gas from your portable little airbags. It's old air. It's like used food. You want it out.

Now watch what comes in.



When we follow our breathing, we divert our minds away from the constant dialogue we carry on with ourselves. And it never fails. Our racing thoughts are always slowed or stopped when we attend to our breathing. Inevitably we lose track of our breathing – sometimes in less than a second – and the thinking returns. By repeatedly using our breathing to turn off our thinking, we learn to step outside of our own thoughts long enough to see them as merely the result of yet another human mind doing yet more thinking. And suddenly the pain is gone.



One thing that's great for immediate breathing awareness is if you put a hand on your belly and feel it go in and out.



When mammals are relaxed, when things are okay, they breathe slowly and through the nose. This relationship is well known to the mammal mind. When you are an unrelaxed mammal, if you can summon the will to breathe slowly through the nose anyway, you can actually use the body to persuade the mind that everything is fine. The mind – which only a moment before was in a uproar – can't help but notice that suddenly the indicators from the body are saying that all is well. The lungs are inflating and deflating evenly and slowly. The mouth is closed. Whatever the trouble was, well, it seems to have passed. "I suppose I can relax now too," the mind says to itself. And the mind settles.



In a moment of crisis, the most common advice given by a calm person to an uncalm person is, “Stop and take a deep breath.”

Why wait for a crisis?



If all this stuff about breathing seems out of place in a poker book, recall my premise. I am assuming that you are a poker player and that you want to make changes that rate to raise your score. Breathing rates to raise your score, thus:

If we define tilt as any deviation from your A-game and your A-mindset, however slight or fleeting, then any reduction in tilt improves one’s theoretical score. The primary cause of tilt is mental pain, such as anger, fear, regret, injustice, disappointment, and shame. The only place that your mental pain exists is inside your mind. The only thing that your mind does is think. When you place attention on your breathing, you take it away from your thinking.

Therefore, awareness of breathing reduces thinking which reduces pain which reduces tilt which raises your score. Or simply, breathing improves scoring.

142. Sitting

When you sit to play poker, sit with intentionality. Keep track of where your parts are and what they are doing. Your hands. Your feet. Your shoulders. And especially your spine. At first this is extremely difficult to do which is why you get power surges by doing it. The wonderment is that you are never denied the opportunity to power up in this way.

When you are playing poker and you have decided to attend to your sitting, here is what you do. Make yourself symmetrical. Place your left limbs in the same position as your right limbs, and point your face forward. Sit up straight. You think you are straight at this point, but probably you could do better. Roll your hips forward as far as they will go while holding your backbone perpendicular to the floor. Tune your spine like a guitar string by adjusting the tension. Not too taut and not too loose. You might want to sit on the edge of your chair, and it may require several dedicated exhales to achieve a good arrangement.

Now your body is aligned not only for optimal sitting but also for optimal breathing. You can do no better than this.

143. Wellness

If feeling good at the poker table is more profitable than feeling bad, and if healthy foods make us feel better than unhealthy foods do, it follows that when we eat healthy foods, we make money.

Likewise, if exercise makes us feel good, then when we exercise, we make money.

Here's the best part. It doesn't matter if you are young or old or feeble or fit. And it doesn't matter what you've done and haven't done. Unmade choices remain. And that will always be the case unless you die or can't move.

Meanwhile, drink some water, eat some plants, get some sleep, and at least once a day, accompany your body down to the floor and stretch it, relax it, breathe it. The benefits are immediate and cumulative, so it's like a compounding freeroll. Do it for yourself, and for those around you, and when that is insufficient motive, do it for your bankroll.

144. A Process of Illumination

During bad times, we get unhappy. Let's say we wanted to be less unhappy during bad times. We could train ourselves to do it, if we were to use our bad times as opportunities to practice getting better at getting over bad times. The ideal arrangement would be if we had lots of bad times to practice on, so that we could get better even faster.

So, to help us accelerate the process of learning how to handle bad times, we decide to invent a new game. We call it: Bad Times. The purpose of Bad Times is to cause bad times for everyone. The more the better, and the worse the better.

We'd want our game to unleash waves of agony and anger, again and again, on every player. We would call our game a success if it caused depression, oppression, beguilement, defilement. Bad Times would follow us around and cause us grief, by souring our relationships, our disposition, and our grapes. We would design and refine our game to be seductive, and addictive, in multiple ways, so that its snares snag many, many times.

Our game would not be like chess. At chess, whoever plays the best wins. Where's the agony in that? Our game must be viciously unjust: the better you play, the more exquisite will be your torture. To that end, we will employ a significant randomizing agent. Something like randomly selected pieces of paper with markings on them would work. We would attenuate the luck factor so that it causes the maximum amount of confusion, and delusion, and bad times, and very bad times.

Our game would not be like football or any other game that has teams. A team forms a supportive network that makes losing easier. We'll have none of that in our game. Not only will nobody and I mean nobody share your pain, they will probably enjoy it.

Mountain climbing is painful, but Bad Times would not be anything like mountain climbing. A mountain climber is so busy at not freezing to death and not falling to death that his pain doesn't really get a chance to cook properly. Our game would have gaps

Elements of Poker

in the action, plenty of time for steaming, and simmering, and stewing, and boiling, plenty of time to allow the thinking mind to wander off and injure itself, so that we can practice healing it.

Let's see. What else. Oh, I know. Proximity. We'll sit in a circle, as close as we can get without touching. That way the bad vibes of Bad Times can spread easily and quickly, spraying fertile spores of conflict. And let's have comfortable chairs that stick to people who are stuck. And we'll have dealers, ghastly beasts possessing wizardly powers, able to raise the frequency and pungency of the bad times.

What would be at stake? What could we put on the line that would pour on the pain? What could we lose that would amplify the anguish? Pride? Of course there would be that, but loss of pride is not nearly severe enough to do the damage we're after here. Plus, everyone doesn't have it, so everyone can't lose it. We need something that is universally valuable. Something everyone has, and wants more of.

We decide that in our new game, the loser will pay, not only in pride, but also in cash. Money buys time, and food, and choices. Money is time, and food, and choices. Money equals food. Food equals life. Money equals life. Broke equals death. In our society, wagering money is as close as we can get to betting our lives. With so much at stake, our game is sure to cause desperation, and treachery, and man, this is truly a nasty game we are inventing here. Do you think we'll be able to get anybody to play it?

We play our new game, and the bad times come, and we remember to follow our breathing. In, and out. In, and out. By doing so, we set aside our thoughts about what went wrong, and we step away from our thoughts about what might go wrong, and for that moment, when those thoughts are gone, so too is unhappiness. By eliminating the past, and eliminating the future, we give ourselves this present. We will practice this process of elimination, using our new game, and it will become for us a process of illumination. Let us play.