

Fundamental #1:

Short-handed play is fast (high average hands per hour). This might seem self-explanatory, but its impact is so large that it might not be considered fully at first glance. There are several factors that make online short-handed Texas Hold'Em a very fast game. Online poker is well known to allow players to average twice to three times more hands per hour than its live B&M counterpart.

Shuffling is instantaneous, players can act before their turn, dealers never have to split pots or call the floor, and poker software interfaces let players act more quickly than in a B&M cardroom. And these advantages of online poker are magnified at shorthanded games. Many hands end quickly through blind stealing or folds on the flop, so the instant shuffling has an increased impact. Of course, there are also fewer players who must make decisions. All these effects multiply, leading to averages of 150-200+ hands per hour in many cases.

But what does this mean to you, the aspiring winner? Lots and lots of money, most importantly. Poker is a game of many small edges. The more good decisions a winner makes (+EV decisions), the more money they earn. Simple, eh? Well, short-handed games allow a winner to make more decisions per hour than in a 10-handed game for two main reasons. The most straightforward (but common to all forms of online poker) is simply what we discussed above. There are more hands played per hour. However, a lesser considered reason is the looseness of the typical short-handed player. Due to the high price of the blinds, each player will take part in more hands. More hands played will result in more decisions to be made and each of these decisions is an opportunity for the good player.

So, there's the prospect of making a lot of money fast. But beware. The incredibly fast pace of shorthanded play is a double-edged sword. Many players complain of the very high variance of short-handed tables. On one hand, luck actually plays a smaller role in theory due to the higher number of decision opportunities per hour. To explain this phenomenon, I'll consider a case where a person is flipping a coin. If one person flips a coin only 10 times, there is a significant chance the percentages of 'heads' will vary greatly. It wouldn't be so shocking to see 60 or 70% of all flips end in 'heads' (or tails).

However, if that same person flipped a coin 100 times, the chances of 'heads' coming up 70% of the time are extremely small. The math needed to demonstrate the actual probabilities in our two scenarios is just an expansion of simple arithmetic, but too cumbersome for the purpose of this article. The point is that while luck swings to both good and bad players alike, the variance in general will be lower as more decisions are made.

If we've proven that luck is a smaller factor, why would a high variance be a normal complaint? Simply put, the game often proceeds faster than players can adjust. While conditions can change quickly in poker under any set of circumstances, the damage that can be done in shorthanded play is amplified. Let's say you are playing what is normally a winning strategy for your game. If an opponent crafts a solid strategy capitalizing on your weaknesses, you may not realize you are being outplayed for quite a few hands. The longer it takes to counter, the more money you will lose.

In other words, since your opponents have changed, the decisions you make will have negative expectations. The speed of play may mean that a lot of hands pass before you even realize what is happening. Furthermore, shorthanded play can often be very volatile and unpredictable, for reasons I will highlight in the next section and in future articles. Decisions will be closer to marginal in general than they would be in other games because even great short-handed players are forced to do a lot of educated guessing with very imperfect information.

Fundamental #2:

Short-handed play is usually loose and aggressive. At the time I am writing this article, there are six 10-handed \$3/\$6 games of Hold'Em at a popular online poker site. The average pot size is \$32 exactly. At the same time, there are three 5-handed \$3/\$6 games at the same site, with an average pot size of \$27. Why such a small difference? The answer lies in an oft-used phrase, "Poker begins as a fight for the blinds." In a 10-handed game, tight play is so critical that it often is the biggest difference between winners and losers in a low-limit game. One can afford to wait for premium hands before entering a pot. In a 5-handed game, keeping the same tight standards will be suicide to your bankroll. Each player will pay one of the blinds 40% of the time, constantly putting in money without any guarantee of even reasonable cards.

Sklansky and Malmuth point out the need for far looser standards pre-flop in what is pretty much the only available literature that focuses on short-handed play, *Hold 'Em Poker for Advanced Players*. As they show with basic math, a good short-handed player will need to play at least 40% of their hands pre-flop in many. Short-handed players will enter a lot more pots and see a lot more flops than their ring-game counterparts. In addition, the nature of Texas Hold 'Em rewards aggressive play, and this is never more true than in short-handed play. Why is being aggressive so critical?

Consider a common situation where a player raises pre-flop in a short-handed game and the big blind calls, making it heads-up on the flop. Four small bets are already in the pot. First, a little mathematical background. A player with a non-pocket pair will only improve to a pair about one-third of the time. This average is decreased if one's opponent has a similar holding, such as A9 vs A8. If a player has connectors, such as QJ, QT, Q9, there is an additional chance of between about 7-11% that the flop will result in a straight or open-ended straight draw. A player with two suited cards will

flop a four-flush or flush 12% of the time (by the way, a player with suited connectors such as JTs will flop either a four-flush, open-ended straight, or completed hand about 16% of the time). In other words, your opponent will flop a good draw or pair less than HALF the time, but the same applies to you.

After a bet, there would be five small bets at stake. Five small bets is not enough to justify a gut straight draw or draw at overcards without extraordinary implied odds. So, if a player holds QJ and the flop is 2d 5h 8c for example, they will have a very difficult time calling even a single bet. Drawing towards overcards in this case is not justified by the pot odds (there is a 6:41 chance of improving, or about 7 to 1 against making a pair on the turn). Also note that if that QJ is going against a set, two pair, or is dominated by a hand such as AQ, AJ, KQ, KJ, etc, then it does not even have 6 outs and may be drawing virtually dead. The QJ is in a position of vulnerability. A call is marginal at best.

To capitalize on this vulnerability, good short-handed players will often bluff at a ragged flop (or any flop for that matter) since they are receiving 4-to-1 odds for their bluff and their opponent will not have connected with the flop approximately 50% of the time. In response, a good player will often raise back, as a bluff or semibluff, or with as little as 3rd pair. After all, folding too often makes the bluff profitable, so a good player must fight back to keep from being bullied. Now, this process can often result in a conflict that looks more like a game of "chicken" than poker (i.e. two players bullying each other trying to force the other to fold).

This power game creates some difficult decisions for the short-handed player, but the main premise is that most play is aggressive and loose. There is a wider variety of hands played and a wider set of strategies used than in a 10-handed game. Bluffs, semibluffs, semibluff reraises, check-raise bluffs, and bluff raising can all be found at online 5-handed tables because THEY ARE OFTEN EFFECTIVE. In turn, players with legitimate hands bet, raise, and reraise with far more abandon than in a full ring game, and their opponents will raise, reraise, or call with a far wider range of hands. This means a lot of money is going into each pot, often before the turn, even though the action is usually heads-up. It's easy to correlate how the increased range of hands and aggressiveness results in more 'educating guessing' and fewer clear-cut decisions for a good player.

Fundamental #3:

To win at short-handed poker, you must be observant. I might be a poker purist, but I believe good poker should include a high degree of bluffing, aggression, and guts. That's certainly how mass society views the game. But the truth in full ring games, especially at low limits, is that bluffs are usually bad plays, tightness is often a huge factor separating winners and losers, and guts have far less to do with how much is won than Hollywood would ever have us believe.

Utilizing a good conservative strategy, staying patient, understanding pot odds, and some basic card reading skills are the main tools of winners. Online players (including a lot of professionals) sometimes play two or three 10-handed games at the same time because they can win by simply using a straightforward, tight strategy. The same decisions come up repeatedly, and straightforward play takes the cash. These professionals win even though they don't know the tendencies of each player because the advantage of knowing each player's tendencies is reduced.

I am not attempting to say that being observant is unimportant in full-ring games. But the fact remains that especially in low limit games, many professionals win without being observant because it is less important than other skills such as card selection (tightness).

On the other hand...

In short-handed games, a winning player does one fundamental thing that sets him or her apart from the losing player. They adjust their own play to their opponents to capitalize on their opponents' mistakes. Being observant and adjusting one's playing style is the most important requirement for being a winning short-handed player. First, with a higher rate of hands played, an observant player can pick up the tendencies and playing style of opponents much more quickly.

Of course, there are many, many individual inclinations that can be exploited with a good counterstrategy (e.g. a player might fold too often to raises or check raises, they might not call enough in the blinds or they might call too much, or a player might fold too often on the end). There seem to be almost infinite possibilities. It might seem obvious, but almost every tendency can be countered. And in shorthanded play, strong card reading, psychology, and observation skills will result in opportunities for +EV players quickly and often.

All a winning player has to know is how to read those tendencies quickly and counter them effectively. But of course, therein lies the rub. Reading trends and understanding other players can be very difficult, and finding the best defense is harder yet. And in the real world, your opponents will not always be predictable. They will vary their play or will adjust to your counterstrategies. Your goal is to prepare ahead, and be ready to adjust quicker than your opponent. To be a winning player, you will always be one step ahead, outguessing, outthinking, and outplaying each opponent.

The subject of short-handed play is so complex and rich because it is in many ways completely different than the full-ring counterpart. There may not be a lot of shorthanded literature available to offer a straightforward strategy that wins, but the relative newness of the game is not the only reason. Instead, shorthanded poker is exceptional because each scenario is

distinct, and a winning player, more than anything else, must adjust to each situation uniquely. Until the next article, good luck.

In the last article, I pointed out that short-handed poker is a game of small edges, but that the number of decisions made in an hour are higher. One of the interesting aspects of such a game is that behaviors that would not normally have much impact in a full game will have a pronounced detriment short-handed. In this article, we will examine the prominent effect of ignoring an old common sense maxim in short-handed poker.

Most of us were taught the fairy tale "Jack and the Beanstalk" as a child. In this anecdote, Jack tries to reach a golden harp. To do so, he must apply all his energy to sneak past a sleeping giant. Jack does not want to wake up the giant, because if he does, he'd be in big trouble. The story teaches a subconscious, simple, and smart lesson. "Don't wake a sleeping giant."

Scenario 1: The "Low Limit Shark"

A couple months ago, I had the pleasure to make my semi-annual trip to Las Vegas. I play poker online at home, so most of the trip was spent engaging in the "forbidden" gambling fruits: the -EV table games. After three days of losing hundreds at the blackjack tables and sportsbooks around town, I made my first trip to the home of the pros: Bellagio's glorious poker room. I was impressed, and the style fit right in with my desire to take it easy and have some fun.

After a short wait, I sat down at a lower limit table, ordered myself a drink, and went crazy. It was a raucous game. I dropped \$500 and had a great time. After just a few hours, I was down to my final \$200 of the day. At that moment, I become aware of a new player to my immediate right. He was a 35-year old man, and I noticed him because I bet out of turn when he delayed. He was taking the game very seriously. He paused when the action reached him preflop and checked his holecards the last possible moment. Even then, he scanned two or three spots behind him before making his play. Suddenly, I remembered a fundamental truth: Poker is not just played for fun.

When I saw this player next to me, the lightbulb in my head cleared the alcohol-induced fog in three seconds flat. A challenge had been issued, even if the man did not intend it. My desire to win erupted. The results are unimportant, but I did win back \$400 before I called it a night. More importantly, the new player had modified my motivation and behavior. I have no doubt I could have gone broke and left the table fully satisfied, leaving the new player to clean up and profit, if only I had kept playing for fun.

Sklansky and Malmuth point out that it is important not to take too long to act in a low-limit game, because it can ruin the "fun" atmosphere of the game and let others know you are playing to win. Scenario 1 is a classic example. In short-handed poker, there is an additional factor. Observation is critical. However, we often only consider our ability to watch others. This gentleman took extra time and effort, so he recognized the importance of observation. In the process, he inadvertently made sure other players noticed him. In short-handed poker, it is financial suicide to call such attention to yourself. If others are scrutinizing you closely, they will eventually figure out ways to counter your play.

Scenario 2: The "Angry Loser"

Like most of you, I work a full-time job. One night a few weeks ago, after a particularly tough day at work, I jumped online to play poker to blow off some steam. I was not playing my 'A' game, to say the least.

My game of choice was 5-handed Texas hold'em. As I enjoyed my leisure time, I read some football articles, flipping back and forth to the poker action. About an hour into the action, a critical hand occurred.

Preflop: I held 8♦6♦ in the big blind. Cutoff raised, button cold called, and I threw in an extra bet.

Flop: 5♣9♣Q♥

After I checked, the cutoff checked as well. Not surprisingly, the button tossed in a bet. On a normal day, if this were a hand I would play, I would bet out or maybe check-raise. With 4 outs, my draw is not sufficient for the pot odds, especially with one player left behind me (who could raise). However, I called.

Without fail, small mistakes compound into bigger ones, and I found myself the victim of a raising battle as the cutoff check-raised. I was left in a tough spot with a growing pot and a 4-outer in my hands. I should have dropped my hand at some point on the flop, but with waning attention, I did not. Instead, I called a total of 4 small bets on the flop and 1 big bet on the turn. As any bad-beat enthusiast could predict, I caught the nuts on the river.

Turn: 2♦

River: 7♦

So, I played badly yet won a large pot. This story could end there.

I could have continued to read about the weekend's NFL games, playing poker with half effort. Instead, the cutoff angrily typed into the chat box, using derogatory language. Most players have seen the behavior a thousand times, but it is often dismissed as "part of the game" and simple rudeness. It is also unprofitable.

I decided my opponent was correct. I needed to pay more attention to the poker game, so I did. The cutoff steamed away the rest of his money, and I played serious, mistake-free poker for the rest of my session.

Increased Magnitude in Short-Handed Poker

In short-handed poker, players will be making much more marginal decisions, and sometimes, due to a bad read or misunderstanding of short-handed concepts, a vicious bad beat will occur. Yet, it is imperative for a profitable short-handed player to never berate or correct their opponents. Nothing good can come of it. A bad player might improve, get upset and leave, or ignore it. A good player might feel offended and target the "angry loser." I mentioned above that it is better not to have people paying too much attention in the first place. Painting a target on your back is worse, and causing the "live ones" to leave is the greatest crime of all. Why push away the bad players while challenging the good players?

There are a million more examples that any number of players could give. This website includes several authors who have discussed similar stories. The convergent theme is this: If you do something that draws negative attention to yourself, you are likely reducing your ability to win. I am not saying that you should sit quietly and brood at your local game to avoid suspicion. In fact, you would probably draw attention by appearing so serious. Instead, just act normal, smile, and don't offend anybody. Appear to have fun even if you aren't, or at least don't take out your frustration on other players.

And that brings us back to our premise at the top of the article. "Never wake a sleeping giant." The problem in short-handed poker is that every other player is a potential "giant." With the proper motivation and the desire to concentrate, any player can observe, target, and beat you. Hence, one goal in short-handed poker is to not "wake" any of your opponents. In a full game, you might be able to avoid somebody bent on revenge. In a short-handed game, it is impossible.

Accordingly, if your goal is to win money, keep every possible edge for yourself. Don't antagonize the opposition and be content making the right plays. If you get angry, yell at your computer monitor. It won't hold a grudge. Until the next article, good luck

Short-handed Hold'Em: Preflop Play (Part I)

By Jason Pohl

Mainstream poker literature often includes popular charts or groupings for hand rankings, created to measure the relative value of hands in a full ring game. Unfortunately, these helpful tools cannot be used effectively in short-handed hold'em, because they were not written to assume a short-handed structure.

The two main differences between full and 5-person games are known to most advanced players, even if they are not fully understood. First, the relative value of big offsuited cards goes up, and the relative value of drawing hands go down. Second, the blind structure forces more action. Blinds come too often, and a good player cannot just wait for a premium holding. In Part I of this article, we will focus on the first distinction.

There are three main reasons that hand rankings change so drastically when the number of players drops.

Implied Odds are reduced.

Drawing hands are often overvalued by many novices of short-handed games. For example, suitedness earns a considerable payoff by hitting a flush, but that only occurs about 3% of the time. A hand like Kx suited will flop a four flush or flush about 1/8th of the time. With a four flush on the flop, the player will only end with a flush 1/3rd of the time.

These improbable odds mean the suited hand needs to get in cheap and have multiway action to earn profit. Shorthanded poker fits neither requirement. Preflop play in 5-handed games very often involves a raise, meaning a player must pay two bets to even see the flop. On the flop, the contest is often heads-up, and the four flush loses money on every additional bet to the pot. Hence, suitedness is worth considerably less in a short-handed game. The same logic can be applied to all drawing hands. The probability of hitting a very strong hand (such as a set, straight, or flush) stays the same in both a shorthanded and a ring game, but the compensation in a short-handed pot is often inadequate.

Big cards win small pots.

It has been stated in many mainstream books that a hand like AKo has value because it can win unimproved in a heads-up match. But this concept is not just limited to hands like 'Big Slick'. There will be many hands that feature two drawing hands, and the big cards will take down the pot when both miss.

Example 1:

- Player 1: A♥ 5♣ {small blind}
- Player 2: J♥ T♥ {big blind}
- Flop: 4♥ 3♠ K♥. {4 small bets in the pot.}

Player 1 bets, Player 2 raises. Player 1 calls.

Turn: 6♦.

Player 1 checks. Player 2 bets. Player 1 calls.

River: Q♣.

Both check, and the A5o takes down the pot.

Neither player makes a mistake in the scenario above. With 7 bets in the pot already, Player 1 was correct to call on the flop with at least 6 known outs and a backdoor flush draw. Player 2 might have checked the turn, but it's not particularly pertinent to this scenario. Also, a bluff might work on the end here, but it depends on the skills of both competitors.

The bottom line is that the bigger card took down a pot unexpectedly, and Player 1 is several bets richer. It is hard to overvalue the extra small pots earned by the high card; it happens far too often in heads-up and shorthanded play to ignore.

The other advantage of big cards is that they upgrade guesswork into value bets and semibluffs. The following scenarios better illustrate the advantages allowed by high cards.

Example 2:

- Player 1 has K♥ 9♥. {small blind}
- Player 2 has 6♠ 5♠. {big blind}
- Flop: J♥ 3♦ 8♣. {4 small bets in the pot}

If you are Player 1, you cannot be sure what you are up against. A bet here is a percentage play, but it's still a guess, because you cannot be sure the King-high is currently winning. Player 2 is forced to fold.

Example 3:

- Player 1 has 6♠ 5♠. {small blind}
- Player 2 has K♥ 9♥. {big blind}
- Flop: J♥ 3d 8♣. {4 small bets in the pot}

Player 1 bets. It's a complete bluff. If Player 2 plays back, Player 1 is in trouble and will likely muck. If there is even a 25% chance of an immediate fold, Player 2 would be correct to raise. (Note: This is true regardless of what Player 2 holds, but the next scenario will illustrate why holding big cards makes this raise even more profitable.)

Example 4:

- Player 1 has 6♠ 5♠. {small blind}
- Player 2 has K♥ 9♥. {big blind}
- Flop: J♥ 5♦ 8♣. {4 small bets in the pot}

Player 1 bets. It's a value bet with 3rd pair. If Player 2 plays back, they're making a mistake. But it's not much of a blunder, because Player 2 still has 6 immediate outs if a King or Nine hits, and there are several cards (Ten or any heart) that give Player 2 a strong draw on the turn.

It's easy to dismiss the choice of Player 2 because it is a -EV play, but that's an error. In short-handed poker, you will misstep sometimes. Yet, there is tremendous value in big cards because they minimize the impact of inaccuracies.

Example 5/6:

- Player 1 has 6♠ 5♠. {small blind}
- Player 2 has K♥ 9♥. {big blind}

- Flop: J♥ 5♦ T♥. {4 small bets in the pot} OR
Flop: J♥ 5♦ 9♣. {4 small bets in the pot}

Player 1 bets, again believing it's a value bet with 3rd pair. However, Player 2 is the favorite on both flops. In both scenarios, Player 2 will win approximately 80% of the time. Obviously, Player 1 is in trouble.

K♥ 9♥ is plainly a superior hand to 6♠ 5♠ heads-up. But reality shows that many losing short-handed players leak money heavily by overplaying small cards. 6♠ 5♠ is a group 5 hand in Sklansky's Hold'Em hand rankings. K♥ 9♥ is a group 6 hand. But the examples above clearly demonstrate the original hypothesis: Hand rankings for full ring games do not work for short-handed strategy because they were not intended as short-handed strategy.

Hand domination is a much smaller factor.

Hand domination occurs when one starting hand causes apparent outs to be counterfeited in another starting hand, resulting in a very powerful advantage for the superior holding. Examples include (AA vs. AK), (AK vs. AQ), (A♥ 5♥ vs. K♥ 4♥), or even (KQ vs. Q9).

In a ring game, a hand such as K9 has a fairly significant chance of being dominated, even if the flop includes a King. With nine opponents (and a King on the flop), there is a 10% chance an opponent holds a KT, KJ, KQ, or AK. Against any of these combinations, K9 is drawing very slim or virtually dead. More importantly, there are no Kx hands that a normal player would hold in a full ring game, so the K9 will not earn good pots with top pair. Overall, it is a clear loser.

In a short-handed game, K9 becomes profitable in many cases. Players will often not give you credit for top pair, so top pair with any kicker goes up in value. In addition, many players will play Kx suited or will play King with a small kicker fast from the blinds when a King hits. Moreover, the chances that an opponent holds KT, KJ, KQ, or AK is greatly reduced (less than 5%), further mitigated by examining if the opponent raised or reraised preflop.

The Role of Deception

Everything up to this point has indicated that hands like 65♣ are highly overrated in short-handed poker. However, there are two good reasons to demonstrate strength with small cards.

First, stealing pots is a necessity in many short-handed contests, and waiting around for big cards means missing a lot of excellent stealing opportunities. If you know an opponent folds too often, it is profitable to challenge them with a wider range of hands. If you raise with 65♣, your opponent will typically fail to comprehend that your real motivation for raising was to steal the pot. On the other hand, if you raised and eventually showed down a hand like J2, your opponent would likely begin calling or reraising more often, neutralizing your advantage by correcting their play.

Second, it is important to not be too predictable. If you only raise with big cards, your opponents will begin bluffing at you when rags hit the flop. Or, they will simply fold marginal hands since they know you would not raise without a strong holding. So, mixing up your play is critical. Raising with small suited connectors becomes a semibluff. You wouldn't mind if your opponent folded, but you would be just fine winning the pot with a surprising straight or two pair, which can rake in a larger pot because the flop appears harmless. In addition, mixing your play will slow down the opposition in the long run and force them to pay off your big cards more often, since they must give you credit for a wider range of potential starting hands.

In the next article, we can examine the effect of the blind structure more thoroughly, now that we can gauge the relative strengths of different starting hand combinations. If you have any questions, or comments, please feel free to email me at jason@pokerpages.com. Until next article, good luck!

Short-handed Hold'Em: Preflop Play (Part II)

By Jason Pohl

In the last article, we examined the relative value of starting hands in full and shorthanded games. To summarize, in shorthanded games implied odds are reduced, big cards take down pots unimproved, and hand domination is infrequent. Part II of this topic revolves around the blind structure. Blinds orbit quickly in a shorthanded game. At its most extreme is heads-up hold'em, where both players post a blind. In this article, we will examine heads-up preflop play so that we can review fundamental concepts before moving to larger shorthanded games.

Heads-Up Play

Heads-up play is analyzed by Sklansky and Malmuth in *Hold'Em Poker for Advanced Players*. If you do not own this book (and study it religiously), then you are placing yourself at a great disadvantage. The first concept offered by Sklansky and Malmuth concerns the preflop play required by the blind structure.

In a \$10/20 game, the small blind has anted \$5 and the big blind has anted \$10. If the small blind raises, he is betting \$15 to win \$15. So, he must steal the blinds only 50% of the time to earn immediate profit (assuming no raising and all things are equal postflop). If the big blind folds too often, the small blind would earn a significant profit by raising 100% of the time preflop. In fact, since the small blind would also win some hands after the flop, the fold percentage required for profit is far less. In other words, *blind stealing works incredibly well!*

It Gets Worse...

Furthermore, the small blind has a positional advantage after the flop. Position will allow the small blind to bluff more successfully, earn extra bets with big hands, or save bets in many situations. Not only do heads-up games feature a large volume of hands, but plays such as bluffs and semibluffs hold more consequence. Consider the following examples.

Example 1.

It is a normal \$2/4 heads-up game, with one exception. You must pay your opponent \$20,000 if you play a hand preflop. Clearly, to keep your losses at a minimum, you would never play a hand.

Example 2.

It is the same normal \$2/4 heads-up game, except you must only pay \$1 if you play a hand preflop. Many holdings such as AA are still clearly profitable, but you would think twice before playing most hands, since there is a hefty fee to overcome each time you compete.

Defending the big blind is similar to example 2 above. The exact amount lost by not having position differs with the competition, but the disadvantage always exists. For each hand that goes to the flop, the player with position will benefit because they will have an enhanced ability to profitably bluff, earn an extra bet on good hands, or save a bet with bad ones. How can a big blind out of position minimize its losses or even earn a profit against such obstacles?

Defending the Big Blind

Sklansky and Malmuth suggest defending with 40% of all hands, and reraising with the top quarter of those, based on the idea that this calling/raising strategy neutralizes the preflop advantage of raising 100% of the time from the small blind. I propose that this advice is too passive. Furthermore, the percentage of hands played should be fluid, based on the competition's play **after** the flop as well as preflop.

Before going any further, let's repeat the authors definition of playable hands, counting up to 40%. "Any pair, any ace, any other two cards that are both nine or higher, any other straight flush combination with no gaps or just one gap (except for 42s and 32s), and any king little suited. (You might add in a few more hands such as J8s, 98, or 97.)"

Many beginning players might wonder how to figure out that these holdings represent 40% of all possible hands. It is possible to double-check the authors' work by reviewing the number of combinations of each holding. Since there are 1326 possible 2-card combinations, a hand like AA, which can be made six different ways, represents (6/1326) of all possible starting hands. In percentages, this equates to ~0.45% of all hands, or about 220:1. Two cards of unknown suits can be combined sixteen different ways, while a suited hand is only formed with four possibilities (e.g. A♠K♠, A♥K♥, A♣K♣, A♦K♦). One resource for an aspiring player who is truly interested in learning the fundamental probabilities is *Hold'em's Odds Book* by Mike Petriv.

Reraising Preflop

There are three main reasons for adopting a more aggressive reraising strategy to effectively combat the stealer. Reraising punishes the stealer, sets up profitable postflop play, and establishes variation.

1. Punish the opposition.

I'm not the first person to suggest reraising to slow down your opponent on future action. In fact, Sklansky and Malmuth make it apparent that it is critical for your opponent to worry that a raise will cost more than it appears. As they say, "He needs to know that he's in jeopardy of a reraise. Thus you frequently reraise for the sake of future hands, not the hand that you are holding."

But is reraising 10% of your hands enough? 10% represents the cream of the crop: AA-99 (6 possible combinations each), AK-AT(16 combinations each), KQ(16), KJs(4), KTs(4), QJs(4), JTs(4). These hands are so dominating that many of them would be 3-bet in a full ring game. Versus a steal raise, the selection is too thin.

More importantly, reraising 10% of the time will likely not even affect a blind stealing opponent who is raising 100% of the time preflop. Out of 10 hands, the stealer will immediately win the blinds 6 times, play on the flop against an out of position caller 3 times, and face a reraise only once. In this situation, even against a reraise, it

becomes pretty easy for the small blind to fold if the flop doesn't hit him hard, since he knows he is competing against a premium hand.

2. Set up Flop play.

'If you're going to be in the hand to the end, you might as well get the money in early.' I'm not sure where I read or heard the above advice, but it makes a lot of sense. With a powerful hand, you want to put pressure your opponent and make him pay for the right to outdraw you. You want to earn the most money possible, and fundamentally, you want to get your money in while you are ahead. (This is an oversimplification, but it works for shorthanded play due to a concept called 'clustering'.)

Mason Malmuth wrote about shorthanded play in *Poker Essays*, a good book for advanced players to hone specific theories. "Concept No. 3: Be prepared to go to the river." Basically, if your hand is strong and **unless** the board develops in a very scary manner, you will often want to showdown. Since you will be going to the river with many hands, you should get the money in early, which makes a showdown strategy more likely to be correct and profitable in the long run.

A second factor is initiative. I mentioned above that most preflop stealers will not be affected by reraises, especially those raising 100% of the time preflop. In my experience, most opponents simply fold if the flop didn't hit their hand since they *expect* to be against a monster hand. Even those who do not habitually steal raise will still respect an opponent who reraised preflop. In other words, if you are the big blind and raise with a hand like JTs, you should virtually always bet on the flop, even if the flop misses entirely. Putting the pressure back on your opponent is critical. Opponents may simply concede on the flop, expecting to be against a very powerful hand and not wishing to pay a turn and river bet to see a showdown.

3. Establish variation.

The third reason to increase aggression preflop and reraise with a wider selection of hands addresses the predictability of the play. 10% narrows the possible hands considerably, and it creates an undeniable problem if the flop arrives with 3 rags. Under Sklansky and Malmuth's advice, you would be reraising with big cards 3 out of 4 times; this is simply too predictable against even average competition.

So, what is appropriate for a reraise preflop from the big blind? What if we added 88-66(6 combinations each), KJo(12), KTo(12), QJo(12), QT(16), A9s-A2s(4 combinations each), T9s(4), and 98s(4)? The total is an additional 110 hands, which progresses the amount of reraising hands to 18.25% of total hands. Notice that most of these hands can be taken to a showdown, yet they create enough variation to make any flop potentially dangerous for your adversary.

Watching the opposition

An aggressive counterstrategy is only part of the equation. You will still be calling with other hands. You will still need to vary your play to keep your opponent off your scent. I recommend slowplaying AA or KK sometimes, reraising with lesser holdings on occasion, and following up with occasionally unpredictable flop play. Keep them guessing. Meanwhile, watch your opposition. Preflop, you will adjust your standards in the same direction as your opponent. If the small blind stops raising half the time, you should not call as often, since you will too often be playing bad cards with bad position, a costly combination. Reraising is still valuable but should be reduced as well. You want to slow down against an opponent who raises only with legitimate hands.

In addition, you must consider the postflop play of your opponent. If the opponent plays very well with position: earning extra bets, staying aggressive, and following a solid bluffing strategy, then he will earn a significant advantage each hand played on the flop. With your higher postflop burden, you must adjust by folding more preflop. Against an expert, you will fold quite often (and therefore call less than Sklansky and Malmuth's recommended strategy). The important thing to note is that you *will* be losing money by folding the big blind more often. Repeat: YOU WILL BE VOLUNTARILY LOSING!!!! But you will lose less money folding than playing marginal hands that cost extra bets after the flop. Sometimes (often) you cannot win in the big blind of a heads-up matchup; your best choice is simply to minimize losses. Don't worry; you'll make your profits when you are in position and have the advantage.

Slow 'em Down

Finally, a good preflop game will complement the overall strategy. Getting the money in early with the best hand will help to mitigate your positional disadvantage to some degree. But the best reason to stay aggressive may be intimidation. If you can scare your opponent into slowing down, you will begin to win the blinds for free, and you will not be forced to play at a disadvantage so often. In other words, you *want* your opponent to stop raising your blinds. So snarl (metaphorically) and attack back! Until next time, good luck!

If you have any questions, or comments, please feel free to email me at jason@pokerpages.com. I received a lot of great emails in the last month, and I hope to hear from more of you in the future.

Short Handed Poker: Defending the Blinds

By Jason Pohl

I received an email early in January regarding heads-up strategy. Tom asked, "How much is being in position worth? Or to put it another way, how often should you be defending your blinds?" In the last article, I examined reraises from the big blind. In this article, I will focus on how often you should be calling from the big blind.

Before I begin, let's repeat Sklansky and Malmuth's recommendations in *Hold'Em Poker for Advanced Players*. They suggest calling at least 40% of the time, reraising with the top quarter of these holdings. They include "Any pair, any ace, any other two cards that are both nine or higher, any other straight flush combination with no gaps or just one gap, and any king little suited. (You might add in a few more hands such as J8s, 98, or 97.)"

As I noted in the last article, I firmly trust the guidances in *Hold'Em Poker for Advanced Players* along with *Theory of Poker*. I believe Sklansky and Malmuth are brilliant teachers and excellent poker authors who take their material very seriously. However, I believe they use unsound logic to determine the number of playable hands in a short-handed game, and I don't feel our differences in opinion are insignificant. Sklansky and Malmuth have an irrefutable reputation that is well deserved. Therefore, I am not questioning their character, skill, brilliance, or credibility. It is only my intention to prove that in this one exceptional case, Sklansky and Malmuth's advice is flawed.

Could Sklansky and Malmuth be wrong?

The analysis used by Sklansky and Malmuth to find 40% does not quite make sense, and it can help indicate why current theory on short-handed play sometimes fails to designate the best strategy. Sklansky and Malmuth point out that in a \$10/20 game, with the preflop raiser risking \$15 to win \$15, the raiser must steal the blinds only 50% of the time to make an immediate profit (assuming no reraises).

On one hand, they point out correctly that "{the small blind} is entitled to a profit because he has position on you and because you have a larger blind than he does." On the other hand, they follow up by suggesting, "The idea is to keep his profit to a minimum. This means that when the player on the button raises a lot you must call (or reraise) a lot." Herein lies the fallacy. Sklansky and Malmuth are saying that you should call because your opponent will make money if you don't call. Makes sense, right? If your opponent makes money (maximizes his profit), you must be losing too much, right? Let's recall an example from last week.

Example 1:

\$10/20 heads-up game. Blinds \$5/10.

You have AhAc.

Your opponent flips over 7c2s and raises preflop.

There are 3 small bets (\$15 total) in the pot. But there's a catch. It will cost you \$20,000 to play your hand due to some vicious house rules. Should you call? Of course not. It **does not matter** that your opponent makes \$5 stealing your blind. Even though the opponent would lose money if you played your pair of Aces (and thus maximizes profit when you fold), it is still correct for you to fold because the only relevant point is that you lose much, much less (minimizing your losses) by folding.

Conclusion: Don't worry about the odds of the preflop raiser. Your only concern is whether a call or raise has positive expectation. We'll use some more examples to crystallize this argument.

Example 2:

\$3/6 heads-up game. Blinds \$1/\$3.

To steal, the small blind raises \$5 to win \$4.

Using simple arithmetic, we calculate that the preflop raiser needs to steal the blinds 55% of the time to make an immediate profit, a considerable increase over the 50% needed in the \$10/20 game. If your goal was only to counter your opponent's strategy, you could call less since you would only need to defend 45% of the time. Should you therefore play differently? No. As a big blind, you're facing the exact same situation in both games.

In the \$10/20 game, there is \$30 in the pot, and you must call \$10.

3:1 ratio.

In the \$3/6 game, there is \$9 in the pot, and you must call \$3.

3:1 ratio.

Also note that the small blind is still raising 100% of the time, so his potential holdings have not changed in frequency.

Example 3:

\$10/20 3-handed game.

Blinds \$5/10.

Again, we assume no reraising. Our assumptions are helpful to keep the playing field even in our comparisons of heads-up and 3-handed games. The button is raising 100% of the time, attempting to steal the blinds (\$20 to win \$15). Small blind folds. There is \$35 in the pot, and you must call \$10. **3.5:1 ratio.**

Sklansky and Malmuth suggest that since the small blind is also defending, the big blind needs to call 70% as often as it would in a heads-up game. This advice is where I differ the most. As big blind in a 3-handed game, you have better odds to call than you would in a heads-up game, and with the small blind's cards in the muck, the proper play should clearly include more calling, not less. Remember, the button is still raising 100% of the time, and even if you assume the small blind is more likely to fold small cards, the distribution of cards that the button is raising does not change much.

Calling from the Big Blind

So, how often should you be defending your blinds? To figure that out, we only need to consider which hands are profitable to call. A reraise will affect how much profit will be won, not whether the hand should be played. In other words, both raising and calling will have +EV, but one play makes more profit than the alternative. After a certain point, raising becomes less profitable than calling. At another point, calling will incur a loss, and the hand should be folded. Last article, I argued for reraising with approximately the top 17% of all hands, although that number depends on certain factors. Now, we will examine how many hands should be called, again assuming that your big blind is raised 100% of the time. We will examine three circumstances: heads-up, 3-handed, and heads-up when the big blind has position.

Heads-up (Small blind has position.)

The irony of Sklansky and Malmuth's analysis is that even though the reasoning behind the recommendation is imperfect, playing 40% of hands in the big blind is close to correct against an opponent of equal skill. The exact number is impossible to discern, because it depends on the skill of both you and your opponent. If you are a complete novice, but your opponent is a novice also, the disadvantage of being out of position is lessened. If you are an expert, but your opponent is also an expert, the disadvantage of being out of position is magnified.

My recommendation is to tend towards a tighter strategy for several reasons. First, the 40%+ strategy includes many marginal hands such as J8s, 97, 64s, and K3s. While these hands appear to have sufficient pot odds, they also have two fundamental problems. They will not hit any of the flop approximately 40-50% of the time and will give up on the flop. Also, when they hit the flop with a pair, it will often be a very exposed position, susceptible to a well-timed bluff or semibluff. Since so much of today's opposition relies heavily on bluffs and semibluffs, hands that are exposed to these moves will pay a significant penalty after the flop.

Finally, these marginal hands are more likely to hit and still finish behind, either because the opponent has flopped a higher pair, or because the opponent draws out on the turn or river. The vulnerability of these hands can be reduced to some degree with strong play, especially in position where free card plays are available. Out of position, they will lead to some of the toughest decisions to be made in short-handed games, and these tough decisions will cause even experts to make mistakes.

The other reason to lean towards a tighter strategy involves the overall aggression you will want to incorporate into your post-flop style. You should be reraising preflop 17+% of the time. Coupled with postflop aggression, consistently revealing strong cards will likely lead to successful bluffs and semibluffs, as well as having the general effect of slowing down your competition (which is rarely a bad thing). While it seems that an opponent could thwart your strategy by simply giving up on the flop without a big hand, the reality is that you will either get action with your big hands or win with your bluffs/semibluffs more than your fair share, depending on how your opposition adjusts.

3-handed

We should assume the small blind has folded to be able to compare fairly. In *Hold'Em for Advanced Players*, Sklansky and Malmuth state, "you need to realize that the little blind should be aware that the big blind may also call. Consequently he should only play his better hands. Thus the little blind should play about half as often as the big blind, and their combined playing frequency should be only a little more than it was for the big blind when the game was heads-up. In other words the big blind should play approximately 70 percent as often as before, and the little blind should play approximately 40 percent as often as the big blind played in the previous case." We will discuss the small blind's quandary another time, but the key for now is that this advice is incorrect for the big blind.

As a big blind, you do not care what "should" happen. Nor should it concern you that the small blind did not have a playable hand. The only important items are (a) the skill of the button player, (b) the likely raising hands from the button, and (c) the pot odds you are receiving. In both (a) and (b), there is no difference from the heads-up example. However, the pot odds have increased. It is straightforward that you should play more hands out of your big blind since the pot size has increased for your call. I would recommend calling with 40-45% of hands in this situation.

Remember, your real concern is not how much your opponent is winning or losing. It is only how much you are winning or losing. The two matters are not necessarily equivalent.

Heads-up (Big blind has position.)

This position is unique and should only occur when everyone has folded to the small blind in a 3-handed or larger game. If the small blind raises 100% of the time, how much should you call? In this scenario, we continue to assume an average player raising 100% of the time, as well as the same 3:1 pot odds. However, now the big blind will have position post-flop.

Obviously, position makes a tremendous difference, with the advantage yielding dividends immediately on the flop since you will be able to gain information about your opponent. If your position will earn an edge, and you have 3:1 pot odds, it should seem obvious that you can defend very liberally against an opponent who raises 100% of the time.

Personally, I would play about two-thirds of all hands (sometimes more since I tend to make good use of position), as you should find a significant profit in several ways, such as earning extra bets when you hit your hand, picking up pots when your opponent misses, buying free cards, and many more. You wouldn't mind winning $\frac{1}{2}$ a small bet (and saving your big blind) when your opponent folds, but if he is raising 100% of the time, you will turn a tidy profit by taking advantage of position. Some hands I would call include: QXs, JXs, T7s, T6s, 96s, 85s, 74s, J8o, T8o, T7o, K8o-K4o, Q8o-Q5o, 87o, 76o, and 65o. Of course, this assumes my opponent is raising 100% of the time preflop. In reality, I don't see players make that mistake from the small blind above the \$3/6 limit (and even then it is fairly rare).

Learning to Think for Yourself

In conclusion, this has been a very difficult article for me to write. When I began, I re-examined correct big blind play and compared it to Sklansky and Malmuth's recommendations. I found some similarities, but ultimately concluded that the advice I read in *Hold'Em for Advanced Players* was based in part on faulty premises. The concept of playing to reduce the opponent's profit can go too far. But even the best strategists and theoreticians can be wrong sometimes, and so each idea should be examined on its merits, even when it is the advice of authors who are "correct" 99.9% of the time. After all, whether you win or lose does not depend on what you've read as much as it depends on what you learned and how much it helps you think.