The
COURSE

Serious Hold 'Em Strategy
for Smart Players

ED MILLER

Best-selling author and noted poker authority

The Course

Serious Hold 'Em Strategy
For Smart Players

ED MILLER

Contents

Introduction

When I was a kid, my dad watched a lot of golf. Every Thursday through Sunday, our television was tuned to that week's PGA tournament. This was before the Internet, and we had only one TV, so many days I was a captive audience.

Through those thousands of hours of watching televised golf, I heard hundreds of players interviewed before tense Sunday matchups and after crushing losses. For the most part the words washed over me. If you've heard one cliché-filled athlete interview, you've heard almost all of them.

But one day, in one of these interviews, I heard something that stuck with me. I couldn't tell you who said it, but the idea was powerful. You don't play against the other players, the golfer said. You play against the course.

When you enter a golf tournament against a hundred other players, you can think about it one of two ways. You can think about it as "you against the field." To win, you have to beat every one of your opponents. You've got to beat the one who drives a million miles, and you've got to beat the one who never misses a putt. You've got to beat the one who can get out of every jam, and

you've got to beat the one who thrives under pressure no matter how intense.

That's one way to think about it. The other way is to ignore all that. Those other players don't matter. They're going to do what they're going to do. It's not your concern. In some sense, a golf tournament involves only two players—you and the course. The course sets the rules. It creates the challenges. It puts up the obstacles. Your job is to analyze the problem, formulate a strategy, then execute.

That's it. If you pick the right strategy, and your execution is crisp, the winning takes care of itself. The other players will beat themselves one way or the other. If you conquer the contours of the course, then you can ignore all the competition and claim your victory.

It's a powerful idea. It separates the things you can't control—the other players—from the things you can—your own strategy and execution. It's also an idea that perhaps applies even better to poker.

In poker, it's easy to get distracted by all the other players. This guy called twice and spiked a gutshot straight against you. That guy won't stop calling every time you play a pot. The woman across the table made the nuts against you three times in a row.

It's all noise. Ignore it. A hold 'em game is not you against nine opponents. It's you against the course. Master the course, and you'll see results.

If you don't ignore it, you risk getting caught in a dangerous trap—trying to change your opponents. If someone keeps calling and drawing out on you, then the natural response is to try to get

that guy to stop calling so much. Maybe you bet bigger. You figure that if you use a big enough gun, you'll be able to blast the guy out of your pots.

This approach, however, is exactly the wrong one. The more you simply react to what your opponents are doing—and especially the more you try to change the way they play—the more you ensure that you'll never win at this game.

Just play the course. In poker, the course isn't your opponents, but it is created by your opponents. Your opponents, by the strategies they use to play the game, decide where the sand traps and water hazards go. They also decide where you'll find the fairways and greens. The more flawed your opponents' strategies, the wider the fairways, and the bigger and more forgiving the greens.

Your first job is to survey the course. Every time you sit down to play, you examine the action to determine where the hazards lie and where the plum landings spots are. Next, you devise a strategy to hit the good spots as often as possible. Finally, you execute.

If you do that consistently—survey, strategize, execute—your opponents won't be able to keep up with you.

♠

This is my ninth poker book. When I tell my non-poker-playing friends that I've written nine poker books, they ask, "Is there really that much to say about poker?"

The short answer is yes. No-limit hold 'em is a game with a depth and subtlety that equals chess. People have been playing chess for hundreds of years. They've written thousands of books on the game, and still haven't mastered it. In contrast, while no-limit hold 'em has been around since early in the last century, its popularity exploded more recently, beginning with the 2003 World Series of Poker. Only since then has the poker community devoted significant resources to teasing out the game's finer strategic points.

I co-wrote my first book about poker strategy in 2004. The collective strategic knowledge about hold 'em has been in a constant state of flux since then. With each new book I've written, I've learned more about the game.

This book is the product of how I've learned to teach poker for the past ten years. I won't waste your time telling you that a flush beats a straight. I also won't rehash basic strategy points you can find in a hundred different places. That's what Google is for.

Instead, I've focused on presenting only high-value concepts. If I've done it right, this book will give you a series of "aha" moments, one after the other. These concepts are the most important, practical, and instantly applicable ideas that win money in real no-limit hold 'em games.

The book is broken down into a series of skills. Read the first skill, practice it, master it, and move onto the next. Once you have mastered the first three skills, you can expect to have sustained success in the lowest-level games offered in public card rooms.

After you get through the next four skills, you should have what it takes to win at the next level. And finally, if you master all the skills presented here, you should be able to play a professional-level game at some of the higher stakes.

Hold 'em isn't a simple game. You shouldn't expect success to come quickly and easily. But this complexity is precisely what makes it worth playing. If it's not easy for you, rest assured it's not easy for your opponents either. Most people who play the game regularly in public card rooms are, quite frankly, terrible players who make mistakes on nearly every hand. (They will also be happy to volunteer "advice" about how you should play more like them. Ignore them. Always, always ignore them!)

On top of this, the game's short-term luck factor serves to obscure relative skill levels among players. If you play ten games of chess against someone who is much better than you, there's a good chance you're going to lose nine or all ten of those games. After an experience like that, no one could believe they were in fact the better player.

Yet, in poker, the better player won't beat the worse player every time—not even close. The noise of hand-to-hand results often hides the edge the better player enjoys. Throw in a little old-fashioned self-delusion, and many people play for years and years thinking they are among the best players in the room, while actually being among the worst.

This book's main goal is to cut through all that noise. I want you to understand clearly what it means to be good at poker. I want you to focus on the stuff that's truly important. And I want you to tune out everything else.

I want you to expect a challenge. As I said above, poker excellence doesn't come easily. As I'm sure you already know, it will take consistent hard work on your end. But I also want to help you succeed. And I want you to understand that your poker goals are attainable if you study the right concepts and put forth enough effort.

This may be a new idea for you to consider. But I encourage you to see poker as an exercise in self-improvement. Every day that you read, every day that you study, and every day that you play, you get a little better than you were the day before. This is how you should measure success—not by money won or lost, but by whether you continue to improve day after day.

Don't worry about your opponents. They'll win and they'll lose. Along the way, they'll naturally have a lot of things to say about the game, very little of it valid. What happens with, and to, your opponents is both irrelevant and beyond your control.

In the end, it's just you and the course. Learn to read the course. Learn to beat the course. And every day strive to score better that day than you did the last. Do that, and the winning will take care of itself.

PART I: THE 30,000 FOOT VIEW

The Many Forms of No-Limit Hold 'em

I'm starting with some talk about the poker economy. In no-limit hold 'em, the goal of the game is to win money. While you shouldn't get hung up on daily wins and losses, there's no question that the idea is to win money over time.

In order to be a long-term winner, you must understand how money moves throughout the entire no-limit hold 'em system. How does money come into the system, how does it swirl around, and where does it end up?

Consistent winners are those players who insert themselves into the no-limit hold 'em system in such a way that money swirls toward them and accumulates with them over time. Money will come toward them and money will flow away from them. But winners are the ones who consistently have more moving toward them than away.

The trick to this is twofold. First, you have to figure out the right niche within the no-limit hold 'em system in which to position yourself. Second, you have to develop the game skills to become an accumulator rather than a donator.

This section covers the first of these two tricks—finding the right niche. I'll talk about all the possible places to position yourself, and then I'll tell you what I think of each of these places. The rest of the book will cover developing the game skills to accumulate (rather than donate) in the niche I recommend most players start.

Broadly, there are two different ways to play no-limit hold 'em: cash games and tournaments. And broadly, there are two different arenas in which to play: live and online. I'll cover each briefly.

LIVE CASH GAMES

Live cash games are played in casinos and card rooms throughout the world. For the moment, I'll ignore home games, as they are a unique beast (and one I personally have little experience with).

The stakes of a live cash game are determined by the size of the blinds. The smallest games commonly spread are 1-2, meaning the small blind is always $1, and the big blind is always $2 all through the game. Other commonly spread blinds are 1-3, 2-3, 2-5, 3-5, 5-5, 5-10, 10-20, and 10-25.

Roughly, you can group the games by the size of the big blind. So $2 and $3 big-blind games are the most common stakes played in the United States. Then $5 blind games. Most cities can support only a few $10 blind-and-higher games at any one time.

As of this writing, pretty much anyone who regularly plays live cash games is lousy at the game.

This may sound like a bold, almost reckless claim. But it's true.

I don't mean they're lousy compared to one another. In any given player pool, someone's got to be the "good" player and someone's got to be the donkey. I mean they are absolutely lousy compared to an objective standard of how to be good at no-limit hold 'em. Like, for instance, the Phil Ivey standard. Or like the most proficient computer bot playing the game.

The vast majority of live no-limit hold 'em players in card rooms around the world right now—playing 1-3, or 2-5, or even 10-25—would be absolutely brutalized by someone truly good at the game.

You might say, "Well, duh, Phil Ivey is one of the very best players in the world. Of course he'd beat the folks down at the casino playing 2-5."

That's fair. But I want to emphasize the enormous skill gap. Think of the best players you know. People you see in your regular games. These people wouldn't just lose to Phil Ivey. They'd be embarrassed. Tortured. If they were forced to sit at a table full of Phil Iveys, they'd lose so fast and so surely you wouldn't believe it.

I point this out for a few reasons.

First, it's to motivate you. The players at your local card room are all terrible at no-limit hold 'em. So you can learn to beat them. Even if you're starting out at the bottom of the totem pole, a little bit of study—the right kind of study—can leapfrog you to the top in relatively little time.

Second, I offer these dire statements to warn you about listening to your opponents at your local card rooms. Advice you

get from a live cash-game regular will nearly always be wrong, oversimplified, and unhelpful. These guys don't know what they're doing. They really don't. Learning from them will merely keep you at their level. Furthermore, as you become a regular player in a certain pool, subtle social factors come into play. There's a level of groupthink that manifests among regular live cash-game players that creeps into your brain without you realizing it. You must actively fight it. Because the more you think and play like these guys, the more certain it is you'll never become a good player.

Third, I think it's important to understand the dynamics that create these situations in the first place because it will give you insight into the game on a deeper level.

I played my first hand of Texas hold 'em in 2001 and became a regular at a card room for the first time toward the end of 2002. Back then, no-limit hold 'em was not played—not outside of tournaments at least. With a few exceptions, live cash games did not exist. All the cash games were limit hold 'em, so that's what I played.

Quickly I realized how terrible everyone's limit hold 'em play was. (I, too, was terrible at that time, but they were even more terrible than me.)

In the intervening years, poker has changed dramatically. No-limit hold 'em took over. The game has exploded in popularity. Online play has become a huge thing. A young, math-oriented generation has gone about trying to analyze the game systematically.

And yet, through all of these changes, live cash-game players are still lousy. I will admit, they are not quite as lousy today as they were in 2003. But the best players have gotten better far, far faster than the average live cash-game player.

It's almost like live cash game players are stuck in a time warp, unable to benefit from the quantum leaps in understanding that the most plugged-in players have generated.

Why?

By and large it's because many who play live cash games (at least at the higher stakes) are moneyed professionals and business owners who treat the game as a hobby. A hobby they are passionate about, no doubt, but just a hobby. They play because they have money and want to play, not because they have "paid their dues" and grinded their way up.

The format of live cash games lets these players enjoy the game. Compared to online play, live games are very slow. The slower speed caps how many hands you can play. Even if you're a card room rat who plays 100 hours a month, at 25 hands an hour, you can play at most 2,500 hands per month.

Compared to the online folks, that's a tiny number, even for a high-volume live player. Most regular live players play even fewer hands than that.

Most of our well-to-do higher stakes recreational players make more money in their regular lives than they can reasonably lose in only 2,500 poker hands a month. The format of live cash games is also very protective of hobbyist-type players, and it allows them to enjoy the game over the long term, while permitting them to play as much as they want to and still absorb the financial losses.

These hobbyists simply haven't learned how to play the game well. They'll tell you they know all about it. Experts they are, according to them. But if they kept track (many don't), they'd see they were losing money over time.

So, you might be thinking, if live cash-game players are so terrible, why don't the best players converge on these games for the easy money? Because the same natural hand cap (a few thousand hands per month maximum) that protects the bad players puts a cap on what good players can win. The best players don't want to cap their upside like that.

So generally speaking, what you have in live cash games is the ready opportunity to become the big dog in a relatively small park. If you're willing to start out at the smallest games in the room—usually 1-2 or 1-3—it doesn't take a whole lot of study and commitment to get to the point where your average result over time is positive rather than negative.

But you also can't win much in these small games. A typical winning player at this level might average maybe $10 an hour. This is not a path to riches. But winning is winning. And of course it's a whole lot better than losing.

With focus and work, you can acquire the skill to beat 2-5 games, where the typical winner might win $25 per hour.

With more work and commitment, you might learn to beat a 5-10 game, where the typical winner might win perhaps $40 per hour.

Excellent players might double these win rates.

These are numbers for typical winners at the various levels—players who are better than the average, but who still make lots of errors compared to world-class players.

Someone like Phil Ivey might be able to quadruple these numbers. It's impossible to say, because world-class players simply don't play these levels. So I can only speculate about how someone of his caliber might perform.

In reality, there's a fairly hard cap on how much you can win playing live no-limit cash games at the stakes available on a daily basis in most places around the United States and the world. In a regular game, you can't really expect to win more than a couple hundred dollars an hour—and few players who put in fulltime-like hours can even hit that $200-hourly mark.

So, it's relatively easy to win at live cash games. But it's considerably harder to learn to win at more than $50 an hour. And it's extremely difficult to win at more than $200 an hour.

Nevertheless, live cash games are my favorite type of no-limit hold 'em.

ONLINE CASH GAMES

No-limit hold 'em games online range from micro-stakes like $0.01-$0.02, to $25-$50 blinds and higher. Even though the rules of the two games are similar, in many ways the online ecosystem works exactly opposite to the ecosystem of the live game.

In live games, most of the seats are taken by recreational players who lose modestly and cover their losses on a monthly basis with their incomes. The online world is far more dog-eat-dog.

If you play a 5-10 game at a major international online site such as PokerStars, the vast majority of players in your games will be serious, professional-level players who have reached 5-10 by having started small and grinded out profit in smaller games. While these pros are hoping for the occasional recreational player to stumble into their game, many are also counting on generating a tiny per-hand profit off the mistakes their fellow professionals make.

There's a simple reason online games work this way. Speed. Online games run much faster, often three-to-four times faster than live games. So, where you might play 25 hands an hour live, you might play 75-100 hands an hour online.

Second, you can play multiple tables online, increasing the number of hands you play per hour to 500, 1,000, or even more.

This speed creates a hyper-competitive environment. Where a recreational player usually won't get hurt playing 2,500 hands a month, if he plays 25,000 hands or more a month online, he will get slaughtered.

In practice, recreational players rarely play that many hands online, because they get beaten so badly and so quickly they go broke before they get to that number.

The guys who put in that kind of volume are professionals. And as I said above, even the pros have to be careful, since they're always in games with other pros. Sometimes a given player will be

one of the best pros at that level, and the huge volume of hands will work in his favor. Other times, usually unwittingly, the player will be making mistakes that other pros can take advantage of. This can cause the player who is multi-tabling and racking up tens of thousands of hands to lose a lot of money very fast.

If you play online cash games, you're often sitting on the edge of a knife.

Despite the bad news, there are still benefits to playing online. First, you can start with almost no money. The standard buy-in for a $0.01-$0.02 blind game is $2. Even my five-year-old son can afford that. (No, he doesn't play poker. Yet.)

Second, the upside is essentially unlimited. If you become one of the world's best online players, your hourly rate can rise well into the four figures. And you can get those win rates on a near-daily basis with no travel.

Third, high-volume online players often get substantially more perks and cashback from the card room than live players.

Fourth, online poker affords the obvious benefits of playing in your pajamas, flexibility in setting your schedule, and so forth.

Finally, if your poker goal is to become the very best player in the world, it's absolutely mandatory that you focus primarily on online play. Because of the high win rate upside, the best players play online. The only way to join their ranks (and ultimately beat them) is to play against them on a daily basis.

Despite the appealing factors, the negatives of playing online are many. First, the games are much tougher, even when played for smaller stakes than typical live games. This reality has left

many hapless, broke souls to mutter incoherently about rigged deals, collusion, and so on.

What's going on? In the vast majority of cases, these players have run into a buzz saw of tables filled with superior players. When you lack the skills to compete, it's no help that the hands come at you one after another at a breakneck pace.

Second, even if you're a strong player for your online level, the per-hand win rate is much lower than live play. While you can make up for this—and more—with increased hand volume, the lower your per-hand win rate, the bigger your bankroll has to be to cover the swings. Online play, therefore, is characterized by prolonged and often utterly brutal downswings. Again, this is true even if you're one of the best players for your level.

Third, many online sites are not reliable, safe places to keep your money. I doubt I need to elaborate on this problem.

Fourth, the legal and regulatory environment for online poker is always in flux and in the United States, at the moment of this writing, the picture is bleak.

The bottom line? If you're a hardcore personality, and your ultimate goal is to be one of the world's top players, you need to play online. Otherwise, for you the negatives of online play may very well overwhelm the positives.

LIVE TOURNAMENTS

And now we get to tournaments. Many players seem to feel that tournament poker is completely different from cash-game poker.

I disagree with this assessment—the two games have a lot more in common than most people seem to acknowledge. Even without much specialized tournament knowledge, good cash-game players should perform fairly well in large field, high buy-in tournaments such as the World Series of Poker Main Event.

At the same time, tournaments and cash games aren't just two sides of the same coin. For me, there are two prominent differences. In tournaments, you'll often play short stacks such as 5, 10, and 20 big blinds. You'll rarely encounter stack sizes this short in cash games. If you were to see them in cash games, the way to play against them wouldn't be that different from how you play them in a tournament. But in practice, stacks this short aren't an important factor in cash game play.

Second, tournaments award prizes to players who go broke—every prize awarded below first place is an example of this. If you go broke in a cash game, on the other hand, you obviously win nothing. But the importance of this difference is often exaggerated among typical players. Early in a tournament, when the prizes are far off, the effects are negligible. And even when you get near the money bubble, it's easy to become overly focused on survival. In a typical multi-table tournament, the bulk of the money is in the top few prizes. The title "min-cash specialist" is a pejorative thrown around in tournament culture to make fun of someone who plays too conservatively in order to sneak into the money. Being a true min-cash specialist is not profitable.

For many players, tournaments are a lot more fun than cash games. That competitive aspect doesn't really exist in cash. There's also an adrenaline rush. And there's a finality to the game that

appeals to certain players. And, of course, the glory. If your goal is to be poker famous, live multi-table tournaments are where it's at.

Unfortunately, the financial characteristics of live tournaments are poor. I'll break it down quickly. Let's say you have an average return on investment (ROI) of 10 percent in a typical no-limit tournament. Tournament players generally talk about their ROIs like cash-game players talk about their win rates per hour.

An ROI of 10 percent would mean that after you play a tournament of a given buy-in, you expect to win on average your buy-in back plus ten percent. So if you played a zillion tournaments and bought in for $1,000 in each, you would expect on average to win about $1,100 in cashes per tournament played.

This 10-percent number is arbitrary, but it's pretty representative of what a fairly good, but not elite, tournament player can expect.

Say you decide to play tournaments with $1,000 buy-ins. On average you win $100 each time you play. But each tournament takes you a certain number of hours to complete. Sometimes you will bust out in the first level. Other times, you will play for three days and eventually win. Let's say that, on average, you play five hours in these $1,000 buy-in tournaments. Since you expect to win $100 per tournament played, that works out to about $20 an hour, or a bit less than what our competent 2-5 live cash player makes.

Yet, there are two big financial downsides to going the tournament route. First, variance is much greater. It would be relatively unlikely for a solidly profitable 2-5 player to lose more

than $20,000 over a period of many sessions. Playing a series of $1,000 tournaments, however, you can go through $20,000 with no trouble at all. For the same win rate, you'll need a much bigger bankroll to play tournaments.

The second downside comes into play for large-field tournaments with huge prizes at the top—namely, income tax. When we talk about ROI, we're talking about pre-tax ROI. If you play lots of small tournaments, this represents your average win. But if you play the occasional huge tournament, then due to income tax, the top prizes aren't quite as big as they appear.

Say, for example, you win a huge tournament for $500,000. If this amount is far and away above what you would normally make in a year, you're going to get hit with the maximum tax penalty. It varies depending on where you live, but it's not unreasonable to expect this score to get taxed at 40 percent. So it's not really a $500,000 score. It's a $300,000 score.

I know what you're thinking. Oh, only $300 grand? How will I ever survive on those slave wages?

Sure, you'd love to be in a position to be paying $200,000 in taxes. But it puts a very real dent in your expected ROI for that tournament. So that 10 percent expected profit margin might drop to 9 or 8 percent, depending on the tournament size and the amount of the total prize pool higher up in the big numbers.

Experienced live tournament players partially solve both of these problems by selling shares of each other amongst themselves. Instead of paying the full $1,000 buy-in, a player might sell 70 percent of his tournament winnings for $700. He might then use that $700 to buy 10-percent shares of seven of his

friends. So when the tournament starts, this player has a 30 percent share of his own action and 10 percent shares of seven other players.

This ubiquitous practice spreads the risk, lowering the magnitude of both the downswings and upswings. It's much harder to go through $20,000 playing $1,000 tournaments if the risk is broken down into small amounts and spread among many players. The tax implications are also ameliorated, since you will be sharing any big scores among your backers.

But this practice of trading pieces also limits your upside. Not just the upside of winning a huge tournament prize, but also the upside of becoming an excellent player. Say you work very hard and become the strongest tournament player you know. Whenever you trade shares with friends, you're diluting your edge by trading your valuable action for other players' less valuable shares. If your friends don't play as well, it's not an even trade.

Once you make a name for yourself, you can again solve this problem through a share value handicapping system called "markup," whereby certain players' shares are generally acknowledged in the marketplace to be more valuable than others. But this science is inexact. And your evaluation of your own skills may not square with what others think you're worth.

And none of this solves the basic problem that you're not going to get rich playing $1,000 live tournaments, almost no matter how good you are. If you want to make real money, you have to play a lot of $5,000-plus buy-in live events—and for that, you have to travel (and eat the associated expenses).

The good news about live tournaments? In many cases, they attract the weakest poker players of all. Almost all no-limit tournaments—from $20 local dailies to the $100,000 super-high-roller events—will attract a certain percentage of weak "dead money" players who have a fairly low chance of winning. The overwhelming popularity of tournament poker, and the glamor associated with winning these tournaments, means the fields will likely remain soft for a very long time.

In order to be a successful live tournament player, you're essentially forced to build social networks of hundreds of other players that you will depend upon to trade shares. And you will have to deal with the inevitable cheating and scamming scandals associated with being firmly enmeshed in the "poker world."

If this networking appeals to you, and you enjoy the adrenaline rush, live tournaments might be for you. But it's certainly not a path to quick riches unless you get very lucky.

ONLINE TOURNAMENTS

Online tournaments are an interesting option. While all online play is today more cutthroat than live play, online tournaments tend to be a more forgiving, and potentially more profitable, venue than cash games as more recreational players dip into online tournament pools.

Online tournament play has one big upside because you can play a huge volume at low buy-ins. I know players who play over a hundred $11 and $22 buy-in tournaments a day.

In my mind, tournaments are by far the easier way (compared to cash games) to start playing profitably online. Tournament-specific skills—playing short stacks accurately and accounting correctly for prize-money effects—come to the fore in online tournaments. If you master these two areas, you can quickly be ROI profitable in the three-to-seven percent range. While this ROI is lower than equivalent live-tournament ROIs, you can play for much smaller buy-ins with more volume.

These earnings can mean consistent money and a place to hone your skills through tens of thousands of hands to get even better. These skills will also translate to live tournaments, so you can jump to bigger buy-in live events when they come to town.

Overall, online tournaments are a solid option for many players. The earnings upside on tournament play is more capped than on cash game play, however. So again, you won't be the best player in the world if you focus on online tournaments. But you can become the best tournament player in the world. And that's a title no poker player would turn down.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I personally prefer live cash games for several reasons. I like that I can play these games with a bigger edge than online games. I like that I can play for more money with a relatively small bankroll. I like the slow pace. I like being in a card room with the option to socialize. I'm okay with the fact that I'll never be the best player in the world if I spend all my time in relatively soft live games.

Being the very best has never been on my list of poker priorities. I'm also okay with the scale of live win rates.

I also like that I can play whenever I want to, day or night. I can quit when I want to. I can choose the table I like. I can go to the bathroom when I like and eat dinner whenever I choose. (These seemingly mundane concerns pop up as issues at major tournaments all the time. In the 2014 World Series of Poker, for instance, there was a minor scandal when on a bathroom break at one of the large events, a group of men tried to storm the women's bathroom to do their business and get back without missing hands. Some women took offence and put up a fight. These are dramas I can do without.)

I also actively avoid the adrenaline rush. Poker is a game of huge ups and downs no matter how you play it. Over the years I've realized that I'm best served to even out the emotional highs and lows as much as possible. With cash games, every hand is basically the same as the last. The stakes are the same, the stacks are the same. I like that. It's a long series of relative sameness. As long as I'm playing stakes for which I'm well bankrolled—and these days I make sure I do this 100 percent of the time—the daily and weekly ups and downs are irrelevant. This is the way I prefer it.

If you're like me, you too might prefer live cash games.

But if you're very social, and you find the infinitude of cash games monotonous, you might prefer live tournaments. If you go this route, however, realize that making connections with other players and trading shares is all but mandatory. Travel may not

be mandatory. But most serious tournament players travel regularly.

Online tournaments fill a unique niche. You can learn a somewhat limited set of skills and grind those in the comfort of your own home to quite handsome profit.

Finally, online cash games are the most hardcore option. It's sink-or-swim in these games. But if you're utterly poker obsessed, and your goal is to be the best of the best, this is where it's at.

Much of this book will focus on the skills necessary to beat live cash games. I have written the book this way for a few reasons. First, it's what I play the most. Second, these are skills that will also help you if you play multi-table tournaments or online cash games. Third, my experience with poker students is that most will get what they want and need out of poker most easily and painlessly if they focus on live cash.

Live cash games seem to offer the best satisfaction-to-pain ratio for the widest number of players. Online play is mostly pain and frustration for so many people. And live tournaments too can provide you thousands of hours of pain before you hit the big one.

Even if you play something other than live cash, I encourage you to read on. I believe you'll gain much insight that will help your game, regardless of context. At the end, I'll offer resources you should tackle next for your game of choice.

Where Does The Money Come From?

This is a question I ask all my new students. First, I ask, "How do you do in the games you play? Do you win, lose, or roughly break-even?" Most say they win in the games they currently play. (In many cases this is an optimistic assessment.) Then comes the next question. "Where does the money come from? What actions do you take that cause you to win money over time?"

This is, perhaps surprisingly, a question most people can't answer—at least not to my satisfaction. The most common answer new students give is that they fold. This answer comes in a number of varieties. Some students say they're patient. Some say that they're disciplined. Some say they play tight. These are all euphemisms for folding a lot.

Folding is, without a doubt, an important skill. But it doesn't make you money. After all, when you fold, you win nothing. So, "I fold," is not, to me, a satisfactory answer. If you're often folding, how does money end up in your stack?

Where the money comes from is a critical question. What actions actually put money in your stack? You want to be able to

answer as specifically as possible. You want to identify the behavior that puts money in your stack. Once you know what those actions are, you can take more of them, so more money will appear in your stack.

If you can answer my question only in generalities—i.e., you're patient, or you choose your tables carefully—it will be hard for you to learn how to put money in your stack faster and better. If you don't quite know what you're doing right, then you can't intentionally do more of it.

And folding ain't it. Because I promise you: if you fold more and more, you won't win more money.

Not to beat a dead horse, but where *does* the money come from? From this sentence to the end of the book, every word here is devoted to answering that question. What conditions must be present for money to accumulate? What specific actions can you take to grow your stack? And how can you take different actions to increase your stack as quickly as possible?

THE BIG PICTURE

Live cash games are a negative sum game. The house takes either a rake or a time charge.

In a game with a $4 rake that deals 25 hands an hour, roughly $100 leaves the table every hour. In a 10-handed game, this $100 is shared roughly equally among each player over time. So it costs about $10 a person each hour to play. Time charges (usually

encountered at 5-10 and above) are typically a little more—perhaps $12 or $14 an hour.

Your job is to earn a profit through intentional, specific actions that totals more than the $10-to-$15 an hour it costs to play the game. These are actions you take that, generally, your opponents don't take—or that they don't take often enough.

This is the last time I will mention the rake. It's true that in raked games (where the house takes the money directly from the pot), the amount can theoretically affect your decision in some hands. I recommend you ignore these considerations for two reasons:

1. They arise so infrequently, we're talking about the difference between $10 an hour and $10.50 an hour. You should be able to fade 50 cents an hour.
2. The goal is to get good enough to play in 5-10 and higher games that use a time charge instead of a per-hand rake.

Unless you're playing a game with an outrageous rake (say $10 a hand or higher), just pretend you're paying a $10-an-hour time charge and don't worry about it.

Okay. So poker in cash games is negative sum. You need to win at least $10 an hour from taking actions your opponents don't take to at least break even. How do you do that? And who does that $10-plus come from?

This money comes from players who call or raise too much. It's theoretically possible to make money from players who fold too much pre-flop (by stealing their blinds more than you should be able to). But in reality, no one you actually encounter at a

poker table will make this error often enough for it to be profitable.

All the money you make playing poker at any level will come from players who call or raise too much. On average, they're putting too much money into pots, and you're taking from these pots more than your share.

As well, there are two ways to get money out of a pot. You can win it at showdown. Or you can bet and get everyone to fold. Your strategy to get more money will use both of these techniques repeatedly.

Think of it this way. It's a 10-handed 1-2 no-limit hold 'em game. There is some perfect way to play this game. I don't know what it is—no one does. No one's even close to figuring out how to play this game perfectly. But let's assume for a moment that there's a player who knows how to play it perfectly.

Actually, let's assume everyone knows how to play perfectly. So you have 10 perfect players pitted against one another. How does everyone do?

Everyone loses about $10 an hour.

Okay, that was easy. Now let's consider just one of these players again. What does this perfect strategy look like? Pretend you don't know the first thing about poker. You're just watching the game and trying to figure out what you can.

Pre-flop, the perfect player would put some money in the pot some percentage of the time—let's say with A% of all possible hands. On the flop, the perfect player would put money in the pot with B% of hands, where B is less than A, because the perfect player sometimes folds.

On the turn, the perfect player would put money in the pot with C% of hands, where C is less than B.

On the river, the perfect player would put money in the pot with D% of all possible hands, where D is less than C.

Graphically, it looks like a pyramid.
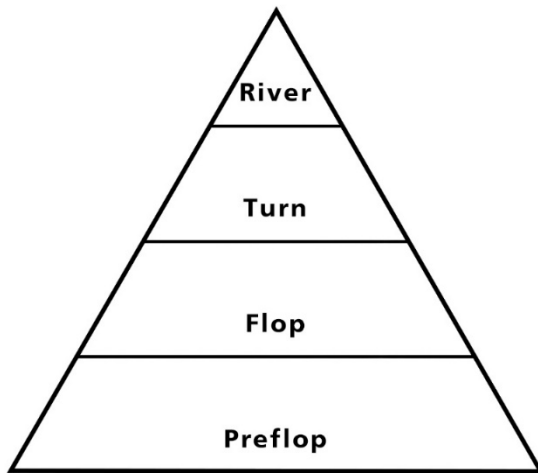
The perfect player starts out with a bunch of hands. After each betting round, this set of hands gets trimmed down a bit. Finally on the river, the perfect player is left with just a relative few hands that withstood the action.

So these are the perfect percentages—A%, B%, C%, and D% for pre-flop, flop, turn, and river betting.

But wait. When we play with real people, we're not in perfect land anymore.

Everyone you meet will play the game with one or more of their corresponding percentages higher than A%, B%, C%, or

D%. In other words, at least one of their betting percentages (and usually more than one) will be too high.

The difference between a player's actual percentage, and a perfect percentage, represents extra hands this player is willing to play. These extra hands are bad hands. They have to be bad, by definition. If they weren't bad, then they would be hands the perfect player was willing to play.

This is where the money comes from. When a player puts money into the pot with extra bad hands beyond the perfect percentage, they're making that money available for you to win. Your goal is to gobble up as much of this money as you can. This is easier said than done. But the first step is to understand clearly what you're trying to accomplish.

> *The money available to a player winning long term comes from other players' willingness to put money into the pot with bad hands that a perfect player would not play.*

You might believe the way to get this money is to outfold the competition. They're putting money in with bad hands. So if you just fold those same bad hands when you get them, you'll win.

This is a good insight. But it's not that simple.

Your opponents won't always be playing too many hands on every betting round in every pot. They may start a pot by playing

too many hands pre-flop, but fold extra hands after they miss the flop and turn. On certain boards, they may fold so many hands across all streets that they're actually playing fewer hands than the perfect percentage by the river.

If your strategy is simply to outfold your opponents (commonly called a "nit" strategy), in many pots you'll be folding way too often, and if you start pre-flop near the perfect percentage, you'll be so far short of the perfect percentage by the river that, despite their poor play, your opponents may accidentally be making money off you.

I won't talk about perfect percentages anymore. In my opinion, this is a useful concept to help you improve once you're already a fairly strong player. It's a bit too theoretical for what this book covers.

For now, just know this:

In poker, you make money by catching your opponents playing too many hands on every street. The way you get at that money is by betting or raising into those opponents who simply play too many hands. You can bet or raise with good hands to get paid. Or you can bet or raise with bad hands as a bluff. Either tactic works against an opponent who's in too many hands. Your opponents might call with bad hands, paying off your better hands. Or they might fold these hands, giving you the pot. Either way, over time, you make money.

But be aware that some players—particularly those playing the nit strategy—may start out pots by playing too many hands, but actually be playing too few hands by the river. If you bet the flop and turn, they fold so many hands on those two streets that

they're left only with strong ones by the river. So while it's safe to assume that your opponents are beginning each pot with too many hands, you must reevaluate that assumption after every betting round.

When you suspect that opponents may have folded so many hands that they are left only with their strongest hands, you get out of the way. If you consistently bet at players when they have too many hands, but get out of the way once they've folded down to too few hands, you will get the money.

Much of this book will teach you a series of skills you'll need to beat progressively bigger and tougher live no-limit hold 'em games. I'll start with the basic skills, and progress in the order I think it's best to help you build your game. Each skill is designed to ensure three things:

- You're attacking opponents when they play too many hands
- You're getting out of the way when opponents' strategies leave them with only strong hands
- You're rarely caught playing too many hands yourself

PART II: BEATING LIVE 1-2 GAMES

Skill #1. Play A Simple And Effective Pre-Flop Strategy

The main goal of a simple and effective pre-flop strategy is to avoid getting caught playing too many hands. Overall, we want to play hands that help us win money opponents are willing to give us. We'll avoid playing all other hands.

When making hand selections pre-flop, the first mistake most players make is to think about all the ways the flop can give them a monster. So they'll play **K♥7♥** because they can make a heart flush, or they can flop a king and a seven, or two sevens. They'll play **T♥9♠** because they can make a straight, or because they can make two pair or trips.

Then, when the flop disappoints them (which it usually does), they basically give up.

There are two big problems with the "let's try to hit a flop," mindset. First, it typically leads people to play too many hands pre-flop, since lots of two-card combos can foreseeably make a big

hand. Second, and most importantly, hitting flops is not where the money comes from.

This point is so important I will say it again.

Hitting flops is not where the money comes from.

"Ed, how you can you say that?" you ask. Well obviously, if you flop a full house, the money is probably coming your way.

There is, however, no such thing as "flop-hitting skill." Of course, some hands naturally hit more flops than others. But no player is any better at hitting flops than another. When you're playing a 1-2 game, guess what your opponents are trying to do?

They're playing specific hands pre-flop trying to hit the flop hard.

You can't play the same way your opponents play and expect to win. Instead, you'll lose your $10 an hour rake. Every time you think, "Gee, I hope I hit this flop," you're playing negative $10-an-hour poker.

Let's go back to the last chapter.

Where does the money come from? It comes from betting and raising when your opponents play too many hands. And it comes from getting out of their way when—after a round or two of betting—they are left with only strong hands.

You want to play hands pre-flop that are likely to be the best to bet and raise with on a wide range of boards. Flopping trips a

lot is not required to be profitable, or win more long-term, or grow your stack. In fact, it's completely beside the point.

You'll want to bet and raise when the situation calls for it. That's where the money comes from. Identifying situations that call for a bet or raise, and then executing.

You can, of course, bet or raise with any two cards. But you'll tend to have better *equity-when-called*, when you bet with T♠9♠, than with 7♣2♥. Thus, T♠9♠ is a strictly better hand pre-flop than 7♣2♥. And you'll tend to play T♠9♠, and fold 7♣2♥.

Equity, by the way, is a ubiquitous poker concept that's poorly understood. *Showdown equity* refers to the chance your hand will win at showdown if all the players turn their hands over and the rest of the board runs out. It's those tiny percentages you see on ESPN next to a player's hand. It's useful to be able to estimate your showdown equity during a hand. But more important is your *total equity*.

Equity, in general, refers to your hand's total value. As a board runs out, your hand gains value in two ways. One, it can have showdown equity—the chance it will win at showdown. Two, your hand carries *folding equity*—the chance you get an opponent to fold when you run a successful bluff and win the pot.

In a general sense, any time you're in a hand and there are still cards to come, your hand has equity. Meaning it has value. Even if you're holding 7-2 off, and the board has no sevens or deuces, your hand still has equity. This inherent value comes from the chance you can bet and opponents will fold.

Say you hold 6-5 and you've got one opponent on the turn. There are no sixes or fives on board, and you don't have a chance to make a straight. You've got six-high.

Your hand still has equity. You're extremely unlikely to win at showdown if you check it down. But you can bet. The chance your opponent folds to a bet is your folding equity. The equity that remains after your bluff fails is referred to as your equity-when-called.

If this example took place on the river, then your equity-when-called would be zero, since the chance someone would call you with worse than six-high is effectively zero. But since we're still on the turn, your equity-when-called is small, but still greater than zero. It's possible you could catch a six on the river and win with a pair of sixes. Or it's possible you could win with a river bluff. The sum of these possibilities gives you some equity-when-called on the turn. Not a lot, but some. (If you bluffed with a king-high hand instead of a six-high hand, your equity-when-called would certainly be higher.)

The concept of equity-when-called is key when determining hand selection pre-flop. A tiny handful of pre-flop hands are so strong you'll rarely want to bluff with them after the flop. That list is short—pocket aces, kings, maybe queens—and that's about it. With every other hand, you'll sometimes want to bluff after the flop. Whenever you think about bluffing, you must consider your potential equity-when-called. When you're bluffing, you want as much equity-when-called as possible.

The last chapter got us thinking about where the money comes from. We started this chapter looking at simple, effective pre-flop

strategy. Money in part comes from superior pre-flop hand selection, which in turn should always be guided by the working principle of equity. And there's more.

SUITEDNESS

The value of suitedness can't be overstated. It's enormous. Some no-limit players fool themselves with a bit of fallacious suitedness logic. It goes like this.

"Starting with two suited cards, you make a flush only 6 percent of the time by the river. The other 94 percent of the time, being suited is irrelevant. In fact, it can cost you money because you're drawing to a flush that doesn't come. And some of these flushes you'll never see because you'll get bet out of the pot before you see all the cards. Therefore, suited cards are overrated."

This logic, I assure you, is completely bogus. Let me quickly run through the counter-arguments.

1. Sure, suited hands make flushes by the river only six percent of the time. But a flush is a big hand and almost always wins the pot. Getting an extra six-percent chance to win a pot is pretty valuable.

2. Big hands are capable of winning big pots. So it's not just any six percent of pots we're talking about here. The pots you win with flushes will often be among the biggest pots you win. In no-limit, we're not just interested in how often something happens. But how much you might win

if it does. So even if flushes are rare, they can be a huge windfall.

3. Big hands can also win multi-way pots. If you routinely see a flop with four-to-six opponents, the ability to make a big winning hand takes on greater importance.

4. How big do you think the edges are in poker? Casinos have been built on winnings from blackjack, craps, and baccarat, and the house edges in those games are often less than three percent. You can't laugh off a six-percent chance and expect to win.

Furthermore, suitedness is the most important factor a hand can have when it comes to equity-when-called. True, suited cards may not actually turn into flushes all that often. But suited cards flop flush draws considerably more often.

What's the value of a flush draw you ask? Having a flush draw to fall back on if your bluff gets called is among the best equity you can have. It's so good, in fact, that your equity-when-called should you flop just a backdoor flush draw (e.g., J♥T♥ on a 9♦5♥3♠ flop) is quite significant.

Suitedness is so important that, for the most part, unsuited hands are unplayable in this game.

BIG CARDS

Most players know that ace-king is a good hand—even when it's not suited. It's the tremendous big-card strength that gives this unique hand its value.

Other big-card combinations also give you an edge. A hand like K♥J♥ on a 9♥7♣2♦ board is frequently strong enough to bet or raise against an opponent playing too many hands. Your overcards, plus the backdoor flush draw, give your hand enough equity-when-called to push some aggression. Holding 5♥4♥ on this board, however, is much weaker.

Big cards also give you a way to win medium pots with top pair. But, again, without suitedness, most hands are not worth playing. A-K and A-Q are usually exceptions. But once you get down even to A-J and K-Q offsuit, the big cards alone are often not strong enough to justify a play.

In particular, hands such as A-6 offsuit or K-8 offsuit with one big and one medium card and no suitedness are essentially junk in the vast majority of common scenarios in live no-limit games. Make these hands suited, however, and they're sometimes (but not always) playable. The suitedness along with the marginal big-card value can give them enough equity-when-called on many boards to get them into playable ranges.

CONNECTEDNESS

Connectedness can substitute for big cards to make hands like 9♥8♥ and 6♠5♠ playable. Offsuit connected hands like 9♥8♠ are rarely playable in a typical 9- or 10-handed live no-limit game.

Yet, many players get in trouble with suited connectors because they play them only for their ability to make big hands. With a hand like 7♦6♦ they think: "I'll get in cheap to see a flop and if I don't clobber my hand I'll fold and get out."

Once again, this mindset doesn't get the money. You're looking for situations where your opponents are playing too many hands, and your goal is to bet and raise them in these situations. You'll bet and raise strong hands and hope to get called, but you'll also bet and raise weak hands (preferably those that have equity-when-called) to get folds.

Suited connectors are the champions of equity-when-called. They rarely flop big hands. But very often they flop strong equity. This type of hand "hits" the widest range of possible flops, so long as you consider the value of features like flush draws, straight draws (including gutshots), backdoor draws, and bottom and middle pair.

These features are, indeed, "hits" as long as you're not depending on winning at showdown to get value. Hands like these tend to be the best choices to bet as bluffs on the flop and turn. Suited connectors, therefore, tend to be great bluffing hands. It's best to think of them that way starting right now.

SMALL PAIRS

Although many players tend to lump small pairs and suited connectors together as "speculative" hands, I tend to think of them as opposites. Suited connectors rarely flop big hands, but have strong equity-when-called on a wide range of boards. More often, small pairs flop big hands. But they generally have terrible equity-when-called should you miss the flop entirely.

This makes small pairs okay hands with which to bluff pre-flop (i.e., bluff 3-betting or 4-betting). But overall, small pairs are last-resort choices with which to bluff post-flop.

The silver lining? Sets are so valuable you naturally want to play your small pairs if you can see a flop for reasonably cheap. Sets are also useful because they help you win huge pots. Finally, on many boards, the threat you could be holding a set is what gives your aggressive betting much of its power. If you decided to stop playing small pairs and told your opponents so, you'd be unable to play aggressively with any real effect on those boards with two or three small cards. (Of course you would never directly tell your opponents your strategy, but it's dangerous to assume in this game that your opponents can't figure out on their own key parts of how you play.)

Okay. So aside from pocket pairs (big and small) which play by their own rules, pre-flop you're looking for hands that might give you equity-when-called if you choose to bluff. These hands are nearly exclusively suited hands (except the strongest offsuit

hands like **A♥K♦** or **A♠Q♠**) that have either big-card value, connected value, or both.

Now let's talk some more about pre-flop strategy.

What's the goal of pre-flop play? Most think the goal is to see the flop with hands with which they can win a big pot. Again, I believe if you think like most people, you'll be playing negative-$10-an-hour poker for years to come.

From my perspective, the goal of pre-flop play is to get yourself into situations where you can take advantage of the errors your opponents make. For the vast majority of live no-limit hold 'em players, they make the mistake time and again of giving too much action with too many hands. Pre-flop, this means most players play too-high a percentage of hands they're dealt. After the flop, things get a little more complicated. But pre-flop it's pretty straightforward. Your opponents simply play too many hands.

How should you respond? You should play fewer hands than they do. And raise with the hands you do play.

Raise every hand you play pre-flop.

"But Ed," you say, "what if I have very good reasons for a given hand to keep the pot small? What if, say, I'm on the button with **J♥8♥**? Why raise? Why not just call a limp and see if I improve?"

I recommend raising every hand you play for several reasons:

1. The biggest error your opponents consistently make pre-flop is they play too many hands. After the flop, your

opponents will differentiate themselves. Some will fold too many hands. Some will call down too much. Some will be too aggressive. But much of your profit long term will come from exploiting those who play too many hands pre-flop. And the best way to make money from opponents when they play too many hands is to bet and raise, especially pre-flop.

2. When you bet and raise pre-flop, you build pots early. And you're naturally increasing the size of bets on all future streets. This magnifies every error your opponent can make. In a $10 limped pot, your opponents are making mistakes proportional to $10. In a $50 raised pot, your opponents are making mistakes proportional to $50. The bigger the pot, the bigger the error (in real dollar terms). And the more you can win. So, all things being equal, you should want to play bigger pots.

3. Raising every hand hides information from your opponents. When you limp some hands and raise others, you're splitting your range in two. Maybe you always raise A-A and always limp 3-3. If you limp, your opponents know you can't have A-A. And if you raise, your opponents know you can't have a set or straight if the board comes 5-3-2. You may assume your opponents are not observant enough to pick up on this. But I think in many cases that underestimates your competition.

I concede the rare situation arises where you could argue limping is the best possible pre-flop play. But these situations are

absolutely not the norm in live no-limit hold 'em. Most people limp too frequently. And it's your job to exploit them.

There's another benefit to teaching yourself the discipline of raising every hand. It makes you less likely to play junk hands just because you're bored or tilted or otherwise not thinking clearly. It's one thing to burn $2 on a lark. It's another if you have to commit $10 and you have to draw attention to yourself by being the raiser.

If no one else has raised, and if you're not in a blind, and if you feel like your hand is playable, you should raise. This is true regardless of the number of limpers in front of you. (While theoretical exceptions to this rule exist, I see no reason to try to think up exceptions while you're still working through the ideas in this book.)

If someone has raised in front of you, it's a different story. You're not compelled to reraise, though you should reraise more often than the typical live player.

Whenever you're facing a pre-flop raise, you have a key piece of information you didn't have without the raise. In theory, your opponent has a raising hand. It's important to think briefly about what a "raising hand" might mean for each opponent.

As I mentioned above, the first clue comes when your opponent is willing to limp. If he sometimes limps and sometimes raises, you can often divide his total pre-flop range into limping hands and raising hands.

Many players with this approach don't raise that frequently pre-flop, and do so primarily with strong hands.

Again, how do you make money at this game? You bet and raise when you catch your opponents playing too many hands. And you get out of the way when your opponents are marked with strong hands.

If your opponent raises infrequently and mostly with strong hands, this is a "get out of the way" situation. When the same player limps in, you attack with bets and raises, because the limping hands are weak, and the ones they play too often. In other words, by separating raising hands from limping hands, your opponent is giving you reliable cues about when to attack and when to back off. Observing and heeding these cues is the bedrock principle to winning no-limit hold 'em.

Raises in other situations are less telling. Some players raise every time they enter a pot. While raising every time you enter a pot is good strategy, these players also usually play too many hands, so you should again feel free to attack with bets and raises (either by reraising pre-flop or by calling with the intention of being aggressive post-flop).

Other players vary their raising standards significantly by position. If they are one of the first few players to act, they will limp most hands and raise only the best ones. But when they're on the button, they will tend to raise a wide range of hands. Again, it is fine to attack these raises either with pre-flop reraises or post-flop aggression.

In a 1-2 game, when tight opponents reraise (a.k.a., 3-bet) pre-flop, they tend to have a narrow range of very strong hands. This is a critical time to get out of the way.

A QUICK SUMMARY

We've covered some important ideas. So let's review before we continue.

The money in live no-limit hold 'em games comes from catching your opponents putting money into the pot more frequently than recommended by a perfect strategy. Even better, the vast majority of players put more money into the pot than they should pre-flop.

After the flop, strategies diverge. Some players deal with all the extra hands they're playing by folding them out early. These players are easy to bully on the flop and turn. But by the time the big money starts flying on the river, it may be time to cut your losses.

Some players deal with their extra hands by calling down too often on too many streets. You hope to make hands against these players and bet them at every opportunity.

Some players deal with their extra hands by trying to steal pots with aggressive bets and raises. These players are trickiest to beat. But you can win just as much money off them as the other two player types. Once your opponent has the habit of putting too much money into the pot with too many hands, you can win that money as long as you choose the correct post-flop strategy.

This is what it means to "play the course" in poker. Your opponents build a nice big green for you by playing too many hands pre-flop. But getting your ball from tee to green isn't trivial. You will have to navigate the hazards, and the nature and

placement of the hazards is determined purely by your opponents' strategies. You have to take the paths that your opponents leave open to you.

Each table you play—each hole, continuing the golf analogy—will be different. One table might demand that you make a lot of medium-sized flop and turn bets to get people to fold out bad hands. Another table might require you to plan your actions around inducing and calling large bluff bets from your opponents. The trick is to play the course as it comes to you, rather than try to impose your will upon it. This process begins pre-flop.

As I said, your pre-flop strategy has two parts. One, you don't want to get caught playing too many hands. Two, you want to position yourself to best-leverage and exploit the money your opponents make available to you by playing too many hands.

You do this by choosing the right types of hands. Besides pocket pairs, you want hands that will have equity-when-called on a wide range of boards should you bluff. Suitedness is the most important feature to protect your equity-when-called. Suitedness is so important that the vast majority of valuable, playable non-pair hands are suited. Also important are big cards and connectedness. A suited hand with one of these two features (e.g., K♥T♥ or 8♦7♦) will often be playable. But one with neither of them (e.g., T♠4♠) will rarely be worth any money.

You also execute a sound pre-flop strategy by consistently raising if no one has raised ahead of you. Raising punishes your opponents for playing too many hands. And it bloats the pot, which increases the size of your opponents' errors later.

If someone else has raised in front of you, you're under no obligation to reraise. Facing a raise should, in many cases, give you some warning that you're facing an opponent who has a narrow range of fairly strong hands. This is a situation to avoid, not to attempt to attack.

PRE-FLOP FREQUENCIES

The final piece of the pre-flop puzzle is about frequencies. The first goal of pre-flop play is to ensure you don't get caught playing too many hands. In this book, we're going to make sure of that by enforcing frequencies on your pre-flop play. Meaning we're going to establish a percentage of hands we're going to play from each position.

For the record, these percentages are a bit arbitrary. I'm not trying to approximate the perfect percentages to which I've been referring so far.

First, pre-flop play for 9- or 10-handed games hasn't been even close to solved. So no one knows what those perfect percentages are. Second, even if you somehow knew those perfect percentages, you'd likely actually use a different strategy in a real 1-2 live game for reasons beyond the scope of this book.

Instead, I want to talk about frequencies that I know will help you become a winning 1-2 player. And if you want to learn even more about pre-flop play, you'll find resources at the end of the book that can help.

So let's divide the table into five positions. The first four positions are the big blind, the small blind, the button, and the cutoff (the seat one to the right of the button). The fifth position is every other seat at the table—I'll call this early position. I'll discuss these positions briefly in reverse order of how I listed them.

EARLY POSITION

By early position I mean every seat that's between the under the gun seat and the seat two off the button. In a 6-handed game, this is two seats. In a 9-handed game, this is five seats, and so on.

Theoretically there is some difference in how you should play from each of these seats. But the difference is small enough that I like to simplify things and treat them the same way. From this position, if no one has raised in front of you, I recommend you play roughly 14 percent of hands.

The hands I recommend playing are all pocket pairs, all suited aces, any two suited cards ten and higher (i.e., K♥T♥ or J♠T♠), suited connectors with no gap down to 7-6 (i.e., 8♦7♦), and ace-king and ace-queen offsuit. Written another way, these hands are

22+
A2s+, KTs+, QTs+, JTs-76s
AKo, AQo

I've chosen these particular hands with a typical 1-2 game in mind. I've placed emphasis on small pairs and suited aces because

these hands are able to build big hands that can win large, multi-way pots that often develop in these games. In different game environments, you would tweak this list by taking out some of the weakest hands and including other hands with different features. (For example, you would prefer AJo to A6s or 76s in many situations. But don't worry about these hand-selection issues too much for now.)

The specific weakest hands I chose for this list (i.e., 22, A2s, and 76s) aren't written in stone. By definition, some hand has to be the weakest on the list. If you wanted to swap these hands for a few you prefer, I wouldn't argue against it. The main point is the overall frequency—just 14 percent. This means you'll be rejecting 86 percent of all hands you're dealt in this position. More than five out of six times, you'll look at your cards and fold. This tightness ensures you won't get caught playing too many hands.

My recommendations are designed to be simple and effective. That's it. I don't claim perfection. But I believe you can win a lot of money playing live games with these recommendations. And this is the first standard for anything I write—will these ideas help you win?

If you follow this protocol, you'll be playing roughly 14 percent of the hands you're dealt if no one has raised ahead of you. And, yes, you'll raise all of them—including 76s and 22. Out of the 14 percent of hands you will play, you'll hold a pocket pair 41 percent of the time. You'll hold suited cards 46 percent of the time. You'll have offsuit A-K or A-Q another 13 percent of the time.

If someone raises in front of you, I recommend 3-betting with AA, KK, and even A5s. Obviously, A5s is a bluff. Whenever you bet or raise, you often want there to be a chance that you don't have a premium hand. The addition of A5s fits the bill in this circumstance.

I'd call a raise ahead of me with the other pocket pairs, any two suited cards ten or higher, the suited connectors, and ace-king offsuit. Thus, from the above range, I'm trimming the suited aces A9s and worse (except A5s) and ace-queen offsuit.

This is what I'd do if I felt my opponent's raise signified a reasonably strong hand. If I felt my opponent would raise any hand he'd play, I'd add all the hands back in, and I'd 3-bet with QQ, AK (suited and offsuit), all the suited aces A5s-A2s, and T9s and 87s.

Note how these recommendations dovetail with the overarching principle. When our opponents are playing too many hands, we attack them with bets and raises with both good and bad hands. When our opponents have strong, narrow ranges, we back off. Against a raise we think is strong, we reraise only the strongest hands (and a single bluff hand, A5s). Against a raise that represents too loose a range of hands, we reraise more.

You still must be careful, though, since when you're in early position, you have at least four players to act behind you who may turn up with a monster hand.

Here are my final recommendations for early position.

If no one has raised yet, raise:

22+
A2s+, KTs+, QTs+, JTs-76s
AKo, AQo

If someone has raised in front of you with a strong hand, as opposed to a weak, limped hand, reraise with:

AA-KK
A5s

Against this player you would flat call:

QQ-22
ATs+, KTs+, QTs+, JTs-76s
AKo

If a loose player has raised before you with a weak hand, or he's someone who never limps, reraise with:

AA-QQ
AKs, A5s-A2s, T9s, 87s
AKo

Against this player you would flat call with:

JJ-22
AQs-A6s, KTs+, QTs+, JTs, 98s, 76s
AQo

THE CUTOFF

In the cutoff, the same concepts apply. But you'll be playing a few more hands. Where you were playing roughly 14 percent of hands from early position, you'll play closer to 22 percent from the cutoff. These hands are all pocket pairs, all suited aces, suited kings down to K7s, any two suited cards nine or higher (e.g., Q♥9♥), suited connectors down to 43s, suited connectors with one gap down to 53s, ace-ten offsuit and better, and king-jack offsuit and better.

This range looks like

> 22+
> A2s+, K7s+, Q9s+, JTs-43s, J9s-53s
> ATo+, KJo+

This range is 27 percent pocket pairs, 51 percent suited hands, and 24 percent offsuit hands. Note that we're still concentrating on suited hands that have high card value or connected value or both. The vast majority of unsuited hands (roughly 92 percent of them) we still consider unplayable.

Against a raise you consider strong (again, a raise is strong if a player usually limps with weak hands, thereby concentrating stronger hands in their raising range), you want to respond as you would to a raise from early position. Here, your opponent is likely playing a narrow range of strong hands. This is a signal to stay away from the pot.

Against a raise from a loose player, or someone who raises every hand, from the cutoff you should 3-bet the hands I suggested in the early-position section. You could also 3-bet pocket jacks and

a couple other bluffing hands, like maybe 54s or A7s to balance your range and hide your hand strength.

You should call with the remaining hands on the list, though you might fold the weakest suited and offsuit hands (e.g., ATo, KJo, K8s-K7s, 43s, and 75s-53s).

Thus, against a tight raise, you'll play roughly as you did in early position.

Against a loose raise, you'll reraise with:

> JJ+
> AKs, A7s, A5s-A2s, T9s, 87s, 54s
> AKo

And you'll call with:

> TT-22
> AQs-A8s, A6s, K9s+, Q9s+, JTs, 98s, 76s-65s, J9s-86s
> AQo-AJo, KQo

Again, the emphasis here is on playing relatively few hands (22 percent), attacking players who enter too many pots, avoiding players with strong ranges, and choosing specific hands strategically, using the guidelines above. The exact hand choices—i.e., 53s versus K6s—are not the point.

THE BUTTON

The button is the best possible position. You should play most frequently from this seat. From the button, if no one's raised

ahead of you, you'll be playing 33 percent of hands. These hands include any pocket pair, any suited ace, any suited king, suited queens Q5s or better, suited jacks J7s or better, suited connectors down to 43s, suited one-gap connectors down to 53s, suited two-gap connectors down to 96s, offsuit aces A7o and better, offsuit kings K9o and better, and any two cards ten or higher (e.g., Q♥T♣).

This range looks like:

> 22+
> A2s+, K2s+, Q5s+, J7s+, T9s-43s, T8s-53s, T7s-96s
> A7o+, K9o+, QTo+, JTo

If you follow these guidelines, you'll have pocket pairs 11 percent of the time, suited hands 51 percent of the time, and offsuit hands 38 percent of the time. Again, note the strong emphasis on the value of suited hands, even from the best possible table position.

Yet, even on the button, you'll be folding two out of three hands. And if you adhere to these guidelines, you'll nearly always be one of the tightest players at the table. Being tight doesn't win you money (folding wins you nothing, after all). But it sets you up well to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves after the flop.

Against a tight raise, you'll still play roughly as you did from early position. While theoretically you can play a bit more adventurously against a tight raise when you have the button, unlocking the value of added weak hands requires a fairly complete set of no-limit skills. Once you have read this book and

mastered most of the skills through at least the end of the 2-5 section, feel free to revisit the hand ranges I recommend here and tweak them. At that point, you'll have a much better understanding of the hands you play. This understanding will give you the tools to write your own ranges.

Before that point, however, observe a much simpler principle—"attack weakness, avoid strength." A pre-flop raise from a tight raiser constitutes strength. So avoid it.

Against a loose raise, from the button you'll reraise with:

> 99+
> AKs-ATs, A5s-A2s, KQs-KJs, QJs, JTs, 97s, 75s
> AKo-AQo

And you'll call with:

> 88-22
> A9s-A6s, KTs-K9s, QTs-Q9s, T9s-43s, J9s-T8s, 86s, 64s-
> 53s, J8s-T7s
> AJo-ATo, KQo-KJo

These ranges are tighter than button ranges when you're not up against a raise, since even a loose raiser is typically stronger than a limper or two. Raising ranges—even loose ones—typically include the monster hands like A-A and K-K, while limping ranges often exclude these hands.

Also, the emphasis in the 3-betting ranges from this position has shifted from premium hands and bluffs (i.e., A-A, K-K, and A-5 suited) to premium hands and other strong hands. This change is due to the smaller chance that someone behind you

could wake up with A-A or K-K, and also because you're assured position in the pot.

But, as usual, the details of which particular hands are in which ranges aren't so important. What matters is that you're playing fewer hands on average than your opponents, that you're choosing hands that will have equity should you get called after the flop, and that you're focusing your play on pots where your opponents are likely to have many weak hands rather than few strong hands.

THE BLINDS

I'm lumping the blinds together. Both the small and big blind have quite a bit in common. In both positions, you'll play the hand out of position. In both positions, you're already part-way to the flop.

Yet, the blinds also differ a lot. But the differences between the two positions come to more prominence in tougher, higher-stakes games. Sorting out the details of higher-stakes play is beyond the scope of this book. I want to keep things clear and workable. So let's start to think about the two blinds in similar ways.

First, I'll address the one obvious difference between the two. In limped pots, you have the option to fold the small blind, but not the big blind. Naturally, you'll fold the offsuit junk—unconnected hands with no card higher than a jack. So you're folding J-4 and 9-6 and 5-2 and T-3. You're completing the small blind (or raising) with most other hands—meaning any pair, any

suited hand, any offsuit hand with high cards, or a hand with connected value. Don't think too hard about this. This complete-or-fold decision doesn't come up that often in the higher-stakes games you'll eventually be playing. The difference in expected outcome between completing and folding some of these marginal hands at lower stakes is counted in pennies. And it would take a whole lot of complicated math to estimate how many pennies and with which hands. It's not worth it. Don't sweat it.

In limped pots, where one or more players will tend to call a raise, just raise the good hands. This looks roughly like the following range:

    99+
    ATs+, KJs+
    AQo+

I tend to raise a few more hands situationally. But this range is fine.

If there's a decent chance that everyone will fold to the raise, then add hands like A5s-A2s, and K8s, and 76s to the raising mix. Choose suited hands that have either high card or connected strength.

Blind play becomes a little trickier when someone has raised ahead of you. In this case, you'll often be forced to defend blinds when the raise is small, and when the player doing the raising is likely to have a loose, weak range. You're under no significant obligation to defend blinds against bigger raises, and/or when the player doing the raising is likely to have a tight, strong range.

The threshold separating "small" and "big" raises is roughly (and arbitrarily) three times the blind. In a 1-2 game, a pre-flop raise smaller than $6 is "small", and one larger than $6 is "big." This assumes, as in most cash games, that there are no antes. Blind play in tournaments is very different because there are often antes, and raise sizes tend to be small most of the time.

You may have read that paragraph and thought, "Shoot, Ed, six bucks? I've never seen someone raise smaller than six bucks in my game!"

Yup, that's right. The vast majority of raises in live no-limit games are "big," so you should follow the accompanying guidelines. This means, in general, that blinds don't need to be "defended" that often in live no-limit games. You don't need to play weak hands that you don't really want to play just because you're already part-way in. Against a raise, play your blinds with the same principles you use in the rest of your positions. Attack weakness. Avoid strength.

Against tight raises, you can play from the blinds roughly the same hands you play from early position. For reference, here are the recommendations from above on early-position hands.

You'll reraise with:

> AA-KK
> A5s

And you'll call with:

> QQ-22
> ATs+, KTs+, QTs+, JTs-76s

AKo

Against loose raises, you should distinguish between those that come from early position, and those that come from a player in the cutoff or on the button. A loose raise from early position is still likely to indicate a reasonably strong hand unless the player is truly wild. Against this sort of raise, you can use the recommendations from early position against a loose raise. They're repeated below for reference.

Reraise with:

> AA-QQ
> AKs, A5s-A2s, T9s, 87s
> AKo

And call with:

> JJ-22
> AQs-A6s, KTs+, QTs+, JTs, 98s, 76s
> AQo

When you're in the blinds, there's an even looser type of raise you'll confront—the steal raise. Typically, this is a raise made by the button, and sometimes by the cutoff. This sort of raise is made nearly without regard to the merits of the hand. Instead, the player who raises is trying to steal the pot either immediately, or with a flop bet.

The prototypical steal raise is when everyone folds to a button raise. Not every button in a 1-2 game will raise very loosely in this situation, but most will. Also, if one or two players limp, and an

aggressive player on the button raises, this raise as well may often be treated as a steal raise.

Steal raises are made with weak, wide ranges. Therefore, they should be attacked. You should be much more inclined to reraise a potential steal raise than any other type of pre-flop raise from any other position.

Blind steal raises have their own terms. Here's a possible suggested range.

Reraise if you're holding:

> 99+, 44-22
> A2s+, KJs+, K7s-K5s, Q9s, 98s-54s, J9s-86s
> AJo+, KQo

This range represents nearly 16 percent of all hands. This is far more frequently than I've suggested reraising in any other situation. Again, I want to emphasize this is the hand set I recommend 3-betting against the player you think is raising as a steal. This means you think hands such as T-9 offsuit and 6-4 suited and T-6 suited might be in your opponent's very loose raising range.

You'll find considerable uncertainty in some of these reraised pots early in your career. If you haven't mastered some of the skills discussed later in this book, you may feel lost in pots where you reraise K-5 suited from the big blind and get called.

It's okay if you want to skip the loosest of these raises for now. But think about the situation from your opponent's perspective. How comfortable do you think your 1-2 opponent is trying to play a hand like T-6 suited against an opponent who reraised pre-

flop? Typical 1-2 players have no ability to navigate these situations accurately. To master hold 'em, you must learn to embrace ambiguity. You won't always know how things will turn out when you put your money in the middle. If you are comfortable in these situations, but your opponents aren't, you'll have a consistent advantage.

In my opinion, there's no better time to get used to playing 3-bet pots than now. Because eventually you'll have to challenge blind-steal attempts with 3-bets, and you're better off learning to do that at 1-2 than at 5-10.

Also, this situation shouldn't arise too often in smaller-stakes games because steal raises aren't as common. Since smaller-stakes players generally play looser pre-flop, usually many players will have limped, or someone in an earlier position will have raised before the action gets to the player on the button.

So when the situation does come up to challenge a steal raise, just do it and gain the experience competing in these kinds of dynamics.

Enough pep talk. Reraise those hands. In addition to all the reraising, against a steal raise you can call with lots of hands. Here's a sample range:

> 88-55
> KTs-K8s, K4s-K2s, QJs-QTs, Q8s-Q5s, JTs-T9s, 43s,
>   75s-53s, J8s-96s, J7s
> ATo-A8o, KJo-K9o, Q9o+, JTo-98o, J9o

If you follow these guidelines, you'll defend your blinds 36 percent of the time against a steal-raise. And when you defend, you're slightly less likely to reraise than you are to call.

These frequencies will protect your blinds from steal raises satisfactorily from 1-2 through 5-10 games and beyond.

Dealing with "small" steal raises like a $4 raise at 1-2 is beyond the scope of this book because you won't see small raises that often in live cash games. And the math gets complicated.

Most of the time, when you're playing your blinds in small-stakes live cash games, you'll either see a flop in a limped pot, or you'll see a "big" raise that isn't a steal raise. Against these raises, you don't have to defend your blinds very often, and you can treat the situation as if you were responding from early position.

The High Points

That was a lot of information, and I know it can get confusing in there. I included specific hand ranges in the discussion so you have some concrete, practical guidelines to help you get going. Yes, you can raise K-8 suited there and it won't be a disaster. No, you shouldn't call that raise with A-3 off.

But the specific hands I chose for each situation—particularly the marginal ones—are not important. Another author would no doubt choose a different mix of hands than I did for each decision point. I wouldn't even necessarily argue it either. The truth is, no one can say with certainty that K-6 suited is profitable, but K-5 suited is unprofitable in a given situation. This game is way too

complicated, and every situation comes with way too many variables to get precision like that.

Here's the part that matters.

1. **Play tight.** You can alter the mixes of hands, but don't stray too far from the frequencies I listed. If I recommended playing 14 percent of hands, don't play 30 percent instead. That's what can get you into trouble.

2. **Avoid strength.** Your 1-2 opponents will give you far too much information about their hand strength, and that information begins with pre-flop play. If someone rarely raises, but they raise this hand, assume they are strong and react accordingly.

3. **Attack weakness.** Your opponents play too many hands pre-flop. This tendency forms the base of why you can win money at this game. When you suspect your opponents are in with the weak hands, you should attack them with raises.

4. **Don't try to make hands.** Making trips and straights and flushes is not how you win. If you think, "Gee, maybe I can slip in with this suited hand and catch a flush," you are thinking like everyone else. If you think like everyone else, you will play like everyone else, and you will lose $10 an hour. If your opponents are limping, they're probably weak, and you should probably attack them with a raise—even if your hand isn't so great either.

5. **Choose hands that have equity-when-called.** A hand like 8-7 suited is better in this game than a hand like A-4

off. (This is true with typical cash game stack sizes. In tournaments with short stacks it's potentially a different story.) The real value of 8-7 suited is that it hits a wide range of flops, ensuring that you often have equity. A hand like this will be one of your best bluffing options. Whereas on flops that don't contain an ace, A-4 off will be mostly useless.

6. **Defend blinds against steals, not strong raises.** When your opponent makes a big raise that's likely to be a strong hand, don't worry about defending your blind. On the other hand, when your opponent makes a raise that's likely to be a steal, defend with lots of reraises and calls. Avoid strength. Attack weakness.

MULTI-WAY POTS AND LOOSE GAMES

That's it for the basics on pre-flop play. This section, "Multi-Way Pots and Loose Games," will be a recurring fixture at the end of the next few chapters. A common feature of small-stakes games is players who are in way too many hands pre-flop. This tendency creates pots where four-to-six players see most of the flops.

When so many see the flop, it makes it more likely one of them has hit the board. It often feels like opponents in these games will never fold.

When so many see a flop and refuse to fold post-flop, it can present a unique challenge to a lot of players early in their careers. So for the first few skills, I will specifically discuss how the ideas apply to these sorts of games.

In general, too many players tilt in these games and let the dynamic get into their heads. They get frustrated. And they flail around trying to find the winning formula.

The good news if you have this problem is that you're not alone. In reality, games with loose players and multi-way pots aren't that different from games with other types of opponents. If you learn the skills I cover in this book, and you incorporate the notes at the end of each chapter, you should do just fine.

There are in fact two types of loose games pre-flop. First, there are games where lots of people limp, but they're less willing to call raises (especially fairly big raises). For instance, in this sort of game, typically four players limp, and the blinds call and check

for a six-way flop. But if someone makes it $15 or $20 after three limpers, only one or two players are likely to call the raise.

In this type of game, raise bigger. When people limp in front of you, don't worry about them. Since players are limping with so many hands, these limps represent extremely wide and weak ranges. Just pretend the limps aren't there for the purpose of selecting hands (i.e., use the ranges I suggested above without adjustment). Then make your raise to $15 or $20. When you get one or two callers, you'll be playing a more "normal" game.

This may not be the perfect way to approach these games, but it's a simple and winning way. Don't waste your time trying to optimize your play in games like this. Because soon you'll be graduating out of this level of play.

The other type of loose games requires some adjustment. Here, players are loose and limp too much. Likewise, they're loose and call raises and reraises too much. In this type of game, if three players limp, and you raise to $20, you'd expect one or both blinds to call, and all three limpers to call as well.

On one level, this can feel scary. Yet, in fact this is an ideal situation in which to make money with stronger hands, because so many players are willing to risk so much money with weak hands.

Yet, here's the problem. This game style creates artificially shallow stacks. Say you're playing 1-2 with $200 stacks. In a "normal" game, two players limp, and you make it $10 to go. The blinds fold, and the limpers call. There's $33 in the pot and $190 behind, so the stack-to-pot ratio (SPR—the ratio of money left in

stacks to the money in the pot on the flop) at this point is almost 6.

With an SPR of 6, there's room to bet the flop, get called, and have meaningful action on the turn and river as well.

In a super-loose game however, you raise to $20 and get called in four spots. Now the pot's $100, with on average less than $200 behind. So, the SPR is below 2. When the SPR is so small, you essentially must decide whether to commit your stack on the flop.

When faced with playing for stacks on the flop, the relative value of pre-flop hand features gets reconfigured a bit. When I introduced these features, I said that suitedness was the most important, with big-card value and connectedness close behind.

Yet, when the pot is already so large compared to the remaining stacks—as it is in super-loose games—it's much more valuable to make top pair on the flop than it is to flop a straight draw. So a hand like K-T suited will perform much better than 8-7 suited. You might even prefer offsuit big card hands like A-J or K-Q to smaller suited connectors.

In fact, small suited connectors are so devalued in games like these, you might consider folding some of them to other players' raises. You might even consider limping with them. (I did say earlier in the book you could argue limping exceptions to me, and this might be one of them.)

As I said earlier about suited connectors, it's probably best to consider these bluffing hands. When five players see a flop, and most people will either commit on the flop or fold, the bluffing value of suited connectors drops (but doesn't disappear entirely).

Likewise, if you're *certain* you'll get called and have to see a flop, you can drop all the bluffing hands from your 3-betting ranges. Instead of 3-betting A-A, K-K, and A-5 suited from early position, you just 3-bet the premium pairs. And in that circumstance, you can likely add Q-Q, J-J, and A-K to the 3-betting range as well.

I want to emphasize you have to be quite certain you'll get called to abandon all your bluffs. Many amateurs make the mistake of taking their experiences from one game or a few games to an extreme. "These guys never call when I have it." "These guys never fold to bluffs." "They won't ever fold a pair. Ever." Player observations get generalized unreasonably, and reshape someone's play for good.

Amusingly, some amateurs will hold all three of these viewpoints simultaneously. Their opponents never pay them off when they have a hand, but always call their bluffs. This is obviously nonsense. Either your opponents call a lot or fold a lot. Your 1-2 opponents aren't clairvoyant. They don't have the gift to fold every time you have it and call every time you don't.

In games where players tend to fold a lot post-flop, there are still plenty of situations where you can get paid off with good hands. And in games where players tend to call down a lot, there are plenty of situations where you can get a bluff through. This is true almost regardless of the extremes you feel your games are playing.

You should catch yourself whenever you have the thought, "Gee, they *never* fold when I reraise." Is it really never? If it is, then fine, don't reraise bluffs. But being certain about future

events that aren't actually certain is one of the preferred foibles of mediocre poker players. Always keep an open mind and seek out information that challenges your reads.

The bottom line here? When you're in a game that's particularly loose, and pots get very big pre-flop, focus on hands that get you there faster and can hit a board hard—pocket pairs and high-card hands. And be less willing to play hands like suited connectors that take time to develop as the board runs out.

Skill #2. Don't Pay People Off

By now, you should feel like you have a reasonable pre-flop strategy. It's not perfect by any stretch, and I haven't discussed in detail how to alter it based on table dynamics, or what changes to make against tougher players. But that stuff isn't all that important right now. At 1-2 (and even at 2-5 and 5-10), the main idea of pre-flop play is playing tight. You should play tighter against raises, and raise a lot yourself. The other main thing is avoiding offsuit hands. Once you have these ideas down, you're ready to start earning money post-flop.

With our first post-flop skill, however, we're not yet going to earn money. Instead, we're going to avoid bleeding money. Your first post-flop skill is actually a folding skill. But it's a relatively easy one to acquire. And if you don't have it, you really don't have much of a shot.

Here's the short version: if someone makes a big bet or raise, fold.

Here's the slightly longer version: if your opponent has played in a way that suggests a strong hand range, fold all your hands that can't compete with that range.

Consider this example. It's a 1-2 game. You have $200 stacks.

You open to $7 with A♦K♠. Two players call behind, as do the blinds. There's $35 in the pot.

The flop comes A♥7♥6♠. The blinds check, and you bet $30. A player behind you calls, and the small blind calls. Now there's $125 in the pot, and $163 left in the stacks.

The turn is the 8♥, putting three hearts and a three-straight on board. The small blind moves all-in.

Here's the important post-flop skill to learn in action: you fold. Don't think twice. Most 1-2 players would hem and haw on this decision. They might fold. They might call. But they'd be unsure of what to do.

I'd fold in a millisecond. There's absolutely no question about it. Fold. Fold. Fold.

Here's how to break it down. If your opponent held A-Q, would she make this bet? (For the vast majority of players, the answer is clearly no.) She wouldn't bet A-J or A-T this way, either. With any of these hands, your opponent would be just as concerned about the turn card as you are. It's possible she'd get confused about what to do, and bet a hand like A-Q. But typically in such a case, you'd see a bet like $40, not all-in for $163.

When your opponent bets all-in for $163, she's representing a strong hand. She could have a flush. She could have a straight. It's even possible she could have a set or two pair. What she doesn't have is an ace you can beat.

The other option, of course, is that your opponent is bluffing. Maybe she's recognized that this card would be scary to someone holding A-K, and she's decided to try to move you off your hand.

Here's a rule of thumb that works 90 percent of the time for small-stakes players. They aren't bluffing.

More specifically, they don't bluff frequently enough to make you want to call and find out. Here's what I mean.

Let's take a simplified example. It's the river. There's $100 in the pot, and your opponent bets $100. You have top pair. You determine that if your opponent isn't bluffing, he can beat top pair. (This is the conclusion we came to in our previous example.) If you call, you win only if your opponent is bluffing. How often does your opponent have to be bluffing to justify the call?

You're calling $100 to win $200. So if you call and lose, you lose $100. If you call and win, you win $200. Therefore, if you catch your opponent bluffing one-third of the time, you break even. You can lose twice for every time you win.

If you suspect your opponent is bluffing more than one-third of the time, you should call every time. If you suspect your opponent is bluffing less than one-third of the time, you should fold every time. That one-third frequency is the magic number. It's where you flip from folding every time, to calling every time.

In small-stakes games, you should nearly always assume that your opponents are bluffing *less frequently* than that key percentage. Therefore, you should always fold whenever your hand cannot beat any of the hands your opponent is representing with the bet.

> *When your opponents make big bets on late streets in small-stakes games, they nearly always have it, and are bluffing less frequently than they should. This means you should fold every time you cannot beat the hand they're representing.*

The above idea is gold. It applies the vast majority of the time in small-stakes no-limit hold 'em games. It's absolutely critical you understand this principle and use it religiously.

I'm going to qualify the idea now, so you understand when it best applies.

1. This idea comes into play most on the turn and river when your opponents make large, or stack-committing, bets.

2. In this context, a bet is large if it's a size you would only see once or twice an hour playing at the game. If you're playing 1-2 and someone at the table busts out an $80 bet only once or twice an hour, it's a large bet.

3. A bet is stack-committing if you cannot imagine your opponent folding after making the bet.

4. Big bets on the *flop* are sometimes bluffs. With two cards to come, many players are willing to gamble for stacks with hands like naked flush and straight draws. Once the

turn bricks, however, few players want to shove a stack with these hands. And once the river bricks, very few players are willing to make large bets on a cold bluff.

5. In particular, this analysis doesn't apply to small- and medium-sized flop bets. Do not assume all players have the goods just because they throw a few chips out on the flop—even if they raise your bet. The flop is the betting round players use to posture and try to "see where they're at." Bets on this round are not reliable indicators of strength.

Here's the bottom line. If a 1-2 opponent makes a large, or stack-committing, bet on the turn or river, assume it's not a bluff. Even if you suspect your opponent might bluff sometimes, very few small-stakes players bluff frequently enough (i.e., more than one-third of the time in our simple river example) that you'll want to call. If they're going to bluff 10 or 15 percent of the time, you just have to give them those bluffs. You cannot call and be wrong 85 to 90 percent of the time. You just have to let it go.

This can be hard. Many times, you'll have flopped something good—top pair or better. Then turn or river cards put straights or flushes on board. And someone represents one of these hands with a big bet. I see players all the time unwilling to accept that an opponent drew out. "I gotta see it," they say. And then, the vast majority of the time, they see it. And they lose.

You don't need to see it. I promise you. You've got two pair. So what. If you cannot beat the hand your opponent is representing with that large bet or raise on the turn or river, you

should fold. While it's possible your opponent is bluffing, it's almost certain your opponent won't be bluffing frequently enough to justify a call.

Consider a few wrinkles to this concept.

First, if the big bet or raise in question comes on the turn, there is a card yet to come and you may have outs. For example, say you have 4♦4♠. A player opens for $7 and another player calls. You call on the button. The big blind calls. There's $29 in the pot.

The flop comes K♠Q♠4♥. Everyone checks to you, and you bet $30. The big blind calls, the pre-flop raiser folds, and the other player calls. There's $119 in the pot.

The turn is the J♠. The big blind bets $70. The next player folds. If you call the $70, you'll have another $150 behind.

You should call. Yes, your opponent is representing a hand that beats you (a flush or straight). But you have ten outs to beat those hands (any king, queen, jack, or four). Additionally, you have the 4♠, and it's possible that a fourth spade will come, and you'll make a flush that beats your opponent's straight.

Finally, it's possible your opponent has just two pair with a hand like K-J or Q-J, and is betting out to test the waters.

When you combine all these possible ways to win—filling up, making a small flush to beat a straight, and already having the best hand—you have way too much chance to win to fold to just a $70 bet in a $119 pot.

But say you make the call, the river bricks, and your opponent shoves all-in. Now you should probably fold. It's unlikely your opponent would be so bold with two pair on this straight and

flush board, and it's almost unthinkable that he would bluff this way.

By the way, you may have heard along the way you shouldn't call the turn and fold the river. If you decide you're calling the turn, the advice goes, you should also call the river. This is hogwash—and it's particularly wrong at smaller stakes. The above example shows exactly why that advice is so bad.

On the turn, you had multiple ways to win, including that your opponent was overplaying his hand and your hand was still best. By the river, most of the ways to win had evaporated. Your chance to draw out on a better hand is gone. And, beyond that, your opponent committed a final time to playing his hand for stacks. If he held just two pair, there's a good chance he would have backed off on the river, just checking or betting a smaller amount. When he bet the turn, he could have held two pair. When he shoved the river, however, two pair became significantly less likely.

Never feel like you have to call the river because you called the turn. Maybe your turn call was justified. Maybe it was optimistic. Either way, the river is a brand-new decision point. You're better off folding if your opponent makes a big bet, and you can't beat the hand he's representing. You're never committed to calling a bet on the end if that bet is still a significant percentage of the pot (i.e., one-third pot or more).

Naturally, having outs is a good reason to call a large turn bet, even if you can't beat the hand your opponent is representing. Another reason to call on the turn is maybe you can beat some of the hands your opponent is representing, but not others. This

reason arose in the last example as well. The turn bet most easily represents a flush or straight. But some players would feel threatened holding a big two-pair hand, and decide they had to bet the hand. With a set, you lose to many of the hands your opponent represents, but you can beat some of them.

If you can beat only one or two represented hands, your best and safest action is still folding. But if you can list more than a few hands you can beat, it's often a call.

Again, this analysis can change between the turn and river. When your opponent bets the turn, you might decide he could be betting hands you beat, so you call. But when your opponent blasts away on the river seemingly undeterred by your turn call, you might decide he likely doesn't have those weakest hands. Now you fold.

This is a completely legitimate thought process. Far too many players feel "pot-committed" to hands where, by the time they're facing a big scary river bet, they know they can't be good anymore. But they call anyway because they think they're supposed to.

Simply put, don't pay people off.

This "don't pay people off" concept also extends to pre-flop play in small-stakes games. Here, players rarely 3-bet pre-flop and even more rarely 4-bet. When they do 3-bet, they typically have very strong hands like aces, kings, and ace-king. Most players in these games rarely (if ever) 3-bet "light" with hands like A5s and T9s. (This is one of the many ways you will be different from your opponents.)

When you raise pre-flop, and you get 3-bet by an opponent who rarely makes this play, you should usually fold. When stacks are deep (200 big blinds or more), sometimes you can justify calling with some hands, knowing you're behind. But with normal-sized stacks, you're usually better off folding the hands like 66 and QJs and the like that can't reasonably compete with a range of super-premium hands.

That's it for this skill. In a word, small-stakes players rarely bluff. In particular, they rarely bluff for big money on the turn or river. And they rarely bluff with 3-bets and 4-bets pre-flop. Whenever you can fairly assume your opponent is not bluffing, and you can only beat a bluff, you should fold.

MULTI-WAY POTS AND LOOSE GAMES

In multi-way pots, you can sometimes apply the fold reasoning to flop betting as well. Say someone raises pre-flop to $10 and gets five callers. The flop comes queen-high, and the pre-flop raiser bets $50 into a $60 pot and five opponents. Unless the player is atypical, the bettor will usually have at least a queen.

In general, flop bets in 1-2 games that are significantly bigger than half the pot, and that are made into three or more opponents, tend to be weighted heavily toward good made hands and strong draws. These bets are a signal you should likely let go of marginal hands as strong as top pair with a poor kicker.

For example, say it's a 1-2 game with $300 stacks. A loose player opens for $10 from early position, the cutoff calls, and you call in the big blind with A♦7♦. The flop comes A♣9♠4♥. You check, and the raiser bets $20 into the $31 pot. The cutoff folds. You should call. The bet is fairly small, and there are few enough players in the pot that the pre-flop raiser might just be making a standard continuation bet. Your pair of aces could easily be the best hand.

Now, say it's a 1-2 game with $300 stacks. A loose player opens for $10 from early position, and four players call. You call in the big blind with A♦7♦. There's $61 in the pot, and you have five opponents. The flop comes A♣9♠4♥. You check, and the raiser bets $50. One player calls, and it's back to you. Fold.

The bettor is far more likely to have a strong ace with this action than in the previous action. The extra players in the hand and the bigger betting and size of the pot encourage your opponent to play straighter, meaning betting good hands and checking the misses.

The caller in-between seals it. If you were to call, you'd be banking on the pre-flop raiser betting weak hands and the player in the middle calling with a nine or possibly a weak ace. This is a low-probability parlay. It's quite likely that one or both have you beaten, and the ideal play is to fold.

Many players in loose games will assume that bluffing is completely pointless. (If you pick your spots, you can still bluff in these games. But it's definitely harder.) These players will tend to have strong hands when they bet—and this is particularly true if there's been action throughout the hand (i.e., bets on all streets).

If one of these players commits to a large bet on the turn and river, you shouldn't even consider trying to call to catch bluffs.

In multi-way pots and super-loose games, "don't pay them off" is even better advice than usual.

Skill #3. Assess Your Hand Value

Now it's time to actually make some money. The first two skills we talked about are primarily folding skills. First, you tighten up, and fold most of your hands before the flop. Second, you fold whenever an opponent bets big, especially on the turn or river.

These folding skills are critical to becoming a winning player because they protect you from losing money in spots where most 1-2 players lose. But as I've said repeatedly, folding doesn't put money in your stack. In order to win, you need to take positive actions. This skill helps you do just that.

Say you flop top pair. How much is that hand worth?

It's a tough question to answer. There are so many unknowns. If you bet, how many opponents will call? Of the ones who call, how often will one of them draw out on you? Of the ones who call and don't draw out, how often will they call again? And is your top pair even the best hand to begin with?

And what about bet sizing? Do your choices change the value of your hand?

You should ask yourself these questions every time you see a flop. For the most part, they're difficult to answer with precision. But you can estimate the answer using all the available information to give you an idea of what your hand is worth. From that point on, your goal is to try to get as much value out of the hand as possible (without pushing it too far).

Before we answer these questions, I want to dispel a huge misconception most players have about playing value hands.

When you flop a good hand, you don't want your opponents to fold so you can win the pot. You want to get the hand to showdown. And, along the way, you want your opponents to pay you.

I'll say it again. When you flop a value hand, you don't want to push everyone out of the pot so you can win it. Regrettably, this thinking has fatal flaws. Let's break it down with a common example of bad play.

A player raises to $10. Two players and the blinds call behind. There's $50 in the pot.

The flop comes J♥T♥6♠. The blinds check, and the pre-flop raiser bets $70 into the $50 pot. Everyone folds, and the pre-flop raiser shows A♣J♠. "Couldn't let y'all draw out on me," he says.

This is exactly the wrong idea.

What value does a good hand have in poker? Just this: when you get to showdown, you turn the hand over. If no one can beat your hand, you win the pot.

That's it. That's the sole value of a good hand. It comes only at showdown. If there were no showdowns, all hands would be equally valuable.

So why would you want to take a hand that has special showdown value and play it in a way designed to avoid a showdown at all costs? If this makes no sense to you, good. It shouldn't make sense. Because it's not logical.

Which hands should avoid a showdown? You want to avoid showdowns with the hands that will lose if you get to showdown. Bad hands hate showdowns. Not good ones. Good ones like showdowns. Not complicated.

"But Ed," you might say, "it's not the showdown I'm worried about with top pair. It's the turn and river cards. I'd be happy to show the thing down if I could prevent the turn and river from coming."

Of course. But the way this game works, you can't get to showdown without seeing the turn and river. Yes, you have a hand that has special value only at showdown. And you can see showdown only if you first see turn and river cards. Therefore, in order to play good hands optimally, you must embrace the turn and river cards so you can get to a showdown that actually gives your hand value and pays you off.

Let's simplify. Say you can flop one of two hands. One hand is top pair. The other is ten-high. You get to pick one hand to bet, and one hand not to bet (and therefore check down to showdown). In this exercise, you aren't allowed to bet both hands or check both hands. You have to pick one for betting and one for checking.

If you bet, usually your opponent will fold. Which hand should you bet (to get a fold), and which should you check (to see a showdown)?

If you bet top pair, your opponent will fold and you'll win. But you'll lose nearly every time you have the ten-high.

If you check top pair, you'll still win fairly often with that hand. Sure, you get drawn out on some. But if you were ahead on the flop, you'll still be ahead most of the time on the river. That's part of the basic math of hold 'em. But now, you're also winning with ten-high. When you bet it, your opponent folds, and you win.

By choosing to check top pair and bet ten-high, you have gone from having one winning hand and one stone-cold loser, to having two winning hands. The top pair usually wins at showdown, and the ten-high usually wins as a bluff.

While I simplified the rules of the game for this illustration, the basic idea holds in real play. When you hold a hand with real showdown value, you don't want everyone to fold. You want to take the hand to showdown, and you want your opponents to pay you along the way. Your hands without showdown value are the ones you want to bet so much your opponents all fold.

What if you get drawn out on? Don't sweat it. It happens. That's part of the game.

What if a scare card comes and your opponent puts in a big raise against you? We learned the answer to this one in the last chapter. You fold. And you don't think twice about it.

Some will think I'm nuts for saying it, but one of the beauties of 1-2 is you don't have to worry so much about getting outdrawn. If someone draws out, they'll likely make a big bet, and you can just fold. The player with the winning hand will give you that information.

Yet, I assure you, that getting drawn out on in bigger games against tougher players is much worse. Because tougher players are willing to bluff. And because they're more aware of the composition of their hand ranges at any given time, they will make big bets you're forced to pay off. They will bluff the flop and turn with a gutshot, then shove the river when they get there, and you have to pay the whole way.

In small-stakes games, because players don't bluff enough, you get to save that final bet. When someone draws out against you, it's not such a big deal.

So when you flop a hand like top pair or two pair, your goal should be to bet your hand such that your opponents with weaker hands will pay the maximum to lose at showdown.

WHAT WEAKER HANDS WILL CALL?

In hold 'em generally, with any bet you make, you're trying to get a worse hand to call, or a better hand to fold.

So when you flop a value hand—e.g., top pair, a set, two pair, and so on—ask yourself: if I bet, what weaker hands will call? And how many weaker hands are out there? This will help you decide how much value your hand actually has. And what your bet sizing should be.

For example, say you raise A♥K♥ pre-flop and get two callers. The flop comes A♦9♠4♣. You have top pair, top kicker. If you bet, what worse hands will call you?

An opponent with an ace and a kicker worse than yours will almost certainly call at least one bet. You might also get calls from someone with a nine, someone with a four, or someone with an unimproved pair like T-T.

Say you have A-T instead. Mostly the same worse hands will call. But you have to worry about A-J, A-Q, and A-K that now beat you.

Say you have J-J instead. Now all the aces beat you, but you still may get calls from weaker hands such as nines, fours, and smaller unimproved pocket pairs.

STREETS OF VALUE

I've helped to clear up that common misconception about your value hands—you don't want to shut a pot down on the flop, and you don't want to push players out of the hand. Moving on, now we can assign those hands the "right" value. The first task is to consider how many streets of value a particular hand is worth.

If you bet your hand on a given street and most of the time worse hands call you, consider that a "street of value." In our A♥K♥ example on the A♦9♠4♣ flop, we clearly have at least one street of value. If we bet out with this hand, many worse hands will call.

Say we bet the flop and get called. Now the turn brings the 2♥, making the board A♦9♠4♠2♥. If you bet again (a bigger-sized turn bet), what hands will call again?

Clearly not all the hands that called the first time will call again. Someone holding Q♠4♠ will probably give up. Someone with T♦9♦ might give up too. As might someone with J♠J♣.

Depending on the game, someone with A♣6♠ may or may not give up. On the other hand, someone with A♣Q♠ or A♠J♠ will likely call.

And anyone who called the flop with A-2 now has you beat.

If you bet the hand a second time, will worse hands call? Absolutely. In most games, enough worse hands will call you that it's worthwhile to bet the hand again for value. You might get raised by A-2. But you'll get called often enough by A-Q, A-J, and A-T to make up for it. And if you do get raised, because your opponents don't bluff often enough, you can probably just fold. (Though before you fold, consider whether the raiser might mistakenly raise you with a hand like A-T.)

So it would appear your A♥K♥ hand easily has at least two streets of value. You bet the flop, and you'll most likely get called by worse hands. You bet the turn, and you'll most likely still get called by worse hands.

How about the river? If you bet the flop and turn, can you bet the river and expect to get called by worse hands? This answer depends on the playing style of your opponents, the specific river card, and how much you bet.

If your opponents are typical Las Vegas regulars in a noon game on a Tuesday, and if the river card is a queen, the answer is no. Las Vegas regulars are notoriously tight post-flop, and they would typically find a fold even with a hand as strong as A-T if you tried to bet it three times.

The one hand you might get them to call you down with, A-Q, makes two pair if the river delivers a queen.

Though if you decided to bet smaller, you might be able to change this equation and squeak out a little bit of value on the final street. A Las Vegas opponent might balk at calling a $150 holding A-T, but might not be able to resist calling $50.

On the other hand, because context is everything, if your opponents are wild Los Angeles small-stakes players, and the river is a deuce, you likely could shove the river and expect to get called by plenty of worse hands.

So in the Las Vegas game, you might say that A-K has two, or perhaps two and a half, streets of value. (A half of a street of value means that you may or may not get that street. It could go one way or the other depending on the cards that come or on your opponent's strategy.) In the Los Angeles game, you might say that A-K has a full three streets of value.

To summarize: a hand has a street of value if you can bet it and expect to be called, on average, by worse hands. If you can't think of many (or any) worse hands that would call if you bet, then your hand lacks that street of value.

The notion of "streets of value" means you should always have a plan for the hand. On the flop, you should look ahead and begin to estimate how many streets there are from which you can extract

value. Your thought process might be, "Okay, I have A-K on an ace-high, rainbow flop. I can bet once and get most pairs to call. I can bet again and still worse aces will call. On the river I might have some trouble getting called by worse hands, particularly if the turn and river cards come down scary."

If A-K has two, or two and a half, streets of value, then A-T in the majority of cases, has no more than two streets. You can bet the flop with it and get called by worse aces and weaker pairs. But if you bet the turn, it's a toss-up whether you'll be ahead or behind when your opponent calls again. Weak aces like A-6 might call, but you also might be getting called by A-J or A-Q.

A hand like A-6 has even fewer streets of value—probably just one. You can bet it once and get smaller pairs to call. But if you bet it again, the hands that call will tend to be aces that beat you.

Incidentally, this is why hands like A♠6♣ are junk in hold 'em. Lots of loose players run with any ace at all in low-stakes games, and sometimes they hit two pair and drag a pot. But resist the groupthink. If you take this hand to battle, and you flop an ace, it's likely worth only a single street of value. You have to flop two pair or better to wring more streets of value out of it.

And you don't need an ace in your hand to flop two pair. Any two cards can flop two pair or better and get multiple streets of value. Furthermore, since A♠6♣ can't make a flush or straight using both cards, if you miss the flop and bluff, you'll rarely have much equity-when-called. (Remember our "equity-when-called" discussion earlier in the book? This is a good illustration.)

Let's look at another example and determine streets of value.

You have T♣9♣. You open-raise and three players call. The flop comes K♠T♠9♠ giving you bottom two pair on a board with straight and flush possibilities.

Everyone checks to you. How many streets of value is this hand worth?

Say you bet the flop. What worse hands might call? You'll get calls from any king. You'll also get a call from whomever is holding the A♠. You also might get calls from hands like J♠J♦ or Q♠T♥.

Unfortunately, these hands all have significant equity against you. On this flop, even hitting two pair, almost every hand that might call you will have a good chance to draw out.

Some people look at that reality and think, "Wow, I'd better bet huge and drive everyone out. I have the winning hand right now. Why mess with a board that could give someone a straight or flush?" But, again, that's not the ideal attitude.

Instead, you should think, "This hand has a bit of showdown value, but it's not worth a whole lot. I will play it cautiously, trying to preserve the showdown value while not paying off a better hand."

Getting back to streets of value on our K♠T♠9♠ board, I could name several weaker hands that would call. So you can lock in at least one street of value. But how about two?

Well, first of all, any spade, jack, or ten on the turn makes it very easy for an opponent to hold a flush or straight respectively. In that circumstance, it's unrealistic to think you can bet bottom two pair and be ahead most of the time when you're called. And

one of those scare cards will show up roughly one-third of the time. So, if one of those cards comes, you can be fairly sure you're limited to only one street of value. (Turning your hand into a bluff is a possibility if one of the scare cards comes, but don't worry about that for now.)

On the flipside, if the turn comes a ten or nine, your full house now pretty much guarantees you three streets of value, since you can bet the turn and river and expect someone with a flush to call you down.

If the turn bricks, however, can you bet again and get called by worse on our K♠T♠9♠ board? It's close. Many of the hands I listed on the flop as potential callers will likely call again. The player with the A♠ and those with flush-and-straight combo draws will be tempted to see the river card. A player with just a king and no kicker might release. But most small-stakes players would call again with A-K, K-Q, or K-J.

On a dynamic board like K♠T♠9♠ (a dynamic board is one where the best hand is likely to change after the turn and river cards), your hand's particular streets of value may depend a lot on which cards come. If a flush or straight card comes, your two pair loses all remaining streets of value. If a card that gives you a full house comes, you can bet all three streets confidently. If a brick comes, you may have two streets of value.

WHICH STREETS?

So far we've been looking at a value hand on the flop and trying to determine its streets of value. But you should also be thinking about exactly *which* streets of value. What do I mean?

Let's say you have A♣T♣ on an A♦9♠4♠ flop. You think it's likely your opponent will call you twice, but not three times, with a weaker ace. This hand has two streets of value. But there are three post-flop streets. When you decide you have only two streets of value, you're implicitly deciding to check one street. So, which two streets should you bet?

There are three possibilities. You can bet the flop and turn, the flop and river, or the turn and river.

When the board allows for a number of draws, it's usually best to bet earlier in the hand for two reasons.

One, draws are most likely to call the flop, less likely to call the turn, and they won't call at all on the river. Draws have less information the closer you are to the flop. So you'll get more calls from worse hands on a draw-heavy board when you bet the flop. Get your money in and build the pot when your opponents' hands are still relatively uncertain.

Two, when you bet draw-heavy boards, your opponents have to determine whether you're betting a made hand or a draw. This confusion can naturally earn you calls from weaker made hands.

On a static board like A♦9♠4♣, where made hands on the flop will probably still be the best by the river, and future streets are unlikely to change things, you don't have as clear a reason to

bet one street over another. Giving someone a free card on the flop, for example, is unlikely to hurt you. When draws are available, it incentivizes betting the flop and turn since draws will call only with cards to come. But on this board there are no draws available, so that incentive is absent. Checking the flop may also convince your opponent that your hand is weaker than it is.

But even though the cost of checking is relatively small on this board type, giving a free card if you're ahead always costs something. Even if it's small, your opponents will have some chance to draw out. Furthermore, if you always check the flop with your two-streets-of-value hands, you will fork your range in an exploitable way. You don't want to check your good hands and bet mostly your missed ones. An astute opponent could pick up on the pattern and use the information against you.

On a static board, then, you often have a choice of which street to check. But reads and history with players play a role here. And you'll want to mix it up a bit so you aren't predictable. Some lines may work better against some opponents than others. For instance, some players might be more willing to call the flop and turn with weak made hands on the off-chance they hit trips. Other players might be more willing to call the turn and river with these same hands because after you check the flop, they're suspicious of your hand strength. And against some players, betting the flop and checking the turn with A♣T♣ on a A♦9♠4♣ board might nicely conceal your hand and make your opponent the most suspicious, earning you a call on the river.

The bottom line? If there are draws out there, make value bets earlier in the hand. You don't want to bet huge to shut the hand

down. But you want to charge your opponents to draw, and you want opponents with weaker made hands to hope you're the one with the draw and call. When the board is relatively static, you can choose which streets to bet and check based on reads, the table dynamic, history with the players, and other factors.

And here I'll add a final, but important, amendment. On draw-heavy boards, the concepts of which hands are "ahead" and which are "behind" can become blurred. A hand like Q-T on a Q♦9♣7♣ flop might be ahead of many hands. But if you bet this hand, you can expect any hand that calls you to have a significant chance of beating you.

For instance, you're technically "ahead" of A♣8♣. But Q-T wins on only 53 percent of possible turn-and-river-card combinations. The value of betting the flop and getting called when you're only a 53/47 favorite is relatively small.

On the other hand, if you bet Q-T, you may get called by K-Q or A-Q, against which you're a huge underdog. So if you bet Q-T on the flop, you may be ahead more often than not when called, but when you're ahead you're probably only a little ahead. And when you're behind, you're likely way behind.

If you're playing deep stacks, the situation is even worse. Many turn and river cards will be scary. If your opponents are strong players, they can call the flop and frequently pressure you on the turn and river.

When you consider all these factors, you may decide that you don't want to bet the flop with a hand like Q-T on a Q♦9♣7♣ board, even though you're likely to be ahead when called, and even though draw-heavy boards tend to make you want to bet

earlier in the hand. Yet when you're ahead, you're not ahead by much. In other words, you've hit the flop but there are mitigating circumstances and the hand just doesn't have that much value. Weaker players tend not to create a plan for the hand, and fall in love with top pair. You may be wiser to check the flop, and hope the turn is a brick like 2♥.

On the other hand, you would almost certainly want to bet A-Q or especially K-K on a Q♦9♣7♣ flop. While opponents are still likely to have outs against you when they call, with these hands you're less likely to be behind when called.

SLOWPLAYING

Don't. Especially at the 1-2 level.

But honestly, most of the time, at most levels, don't. By "slowplaying" I mean specifically checking back a hand on the flop that potentially has three streets of value.

Let's look more closely. Say you flop a set (usually a three-streets-of-value hand). But you decide to check back the flop to "let your opponents catch up" or to be clever and hide your hand strength. Generally speaking, don't do this. When you slowplay, you forfeit the chance to get three streets of value—and that third street is by far the most valuable street in hold 'em, since the pot has grown and the bets are the biggest.

When you flop a set, your goal shouldn't be to try to coax a single street of value over the course of the hand out of someone

who didn't flop a pair. Your goal should be to stack someone who flopped top pair, an overpair, a lower set, or a big draw. If you give your opponents a free card on the flop, you make it much harder to stack them.

Note that slowplaying is not checking a hand that potentially has fewer than three streets of value. You can easily check top pair on a static, or even a dynamic, flop, and that doesn't count as slowplaying, since you were never expecting to get three full streets of value anyway. Checking these sorts of hands is a good way to disguise your hand strength, exercise some measure of pot control, and protect yourself against unpredictable bluffing. Yet, don't check your three-street hands for this purpose.

Also, calling (as opposed to raising) a bet can be a little different than checking. If you're in position, for instance, and your opponent bets into you on the flop, with your three-street hand you can just call. You still preserve your chance to get three streets of value in by the river while concealing your hand strength somewhat. If your opponent checks the turn, you can make turn and river bets, and you still may get three streets. So it's fine to call a flop bet with a three-street hand (though you can usually raise these hands on the flop without a problem as well).

Don't check and give away streets of value in order to coax value out of your opponents' weak hands. When you flop a monster, your goal is to stack your opponent. That process starts with a bet.

DON'T "PROTECT" YOUR HAND

I began this chapter with this idea, but I'm going to repeat it because it's important.

When you make a hand that can win at showdown, the only difference between that hand and any other hand is its *showdown value*. If your hand never gets to showdown, you might as well have had two blank cards.

Therefore, you almost never want to bet a showdown hand with the goal of ending the hand. Save those bets for the times you have flopped a draw or nothing.

In general, "protecting your hand" is not the goal. You want to bet hands for value when you believe you can get called by worse hands. Many times when you bet, you just may end up getting value and protecting the hand at the same time. Great. That's fine.

But you don't want to take a hand with relatively little value (like Q-T on a Q-9-7 two-tone flop), and bet it hard to "protect" it. If you bet this hand hard, you're essentially turning it into a bluff. You're usually better off choosing hands without showdown value (e.g., 8-6 or a small flush draw on this flop) to bluff with, rather than top pair.

BET SIZING

Bet sizing is a vital no-limit hold 'em topic, and one we'll return to repeatedly. It has many subtleties. At this point, however, I want to introduce the idea briefly in a direct, actionable way. We'll refine these ideas as we go.

In general, big bets get people to fold, and small bets get people to call. But most players overestimate this effect. The typical live no-limit hold 'em player has two thresholds for their hands that apply at all times. They have a threshold of hand strength above which they will not fold no matter what. And they have a threshold of hand strength below which they will not call, no matter what. For example, your opponents might never be willing to fold trips of any kind as long as the board doesn't show a four-straight or four-flush. And your opponents might never be willing to call with king-high no pair on the river. Once you can pin down your opponents' thresholds, your results can improve.

This concept is critical. New hold 'em players don't understand it, and make errors regarding the first threshold all the time. Students regularly send me hands where they launch a big bluff, only to have their opponents snap them off. In many cases, my students were trying to get opponents to fold hands that these players realistically were never going to fold no matter what.

The second threshold is even less understood, but is very useful. Basically it means you can fire low-cost bluffs at some pots (even a bet as small as $15 or $20 into a $100 pot, for instance)

and show a profit because enough of your opponents' hands fall below their calling threshold.

But this section isn't about bluffing. It's about using bet sizing to extract maximum value from your good hands. Consider these concepts:

1. **Bet big enough with big hands so you can comfortably bet all-in by the river.** This is an extension of the "don't slowplay three-street hands" concept from above. If you flop a set, for example, your goal is to try to win stacks. You don't want to start that plan off with a free card. You don't want to start it off with a small "suck them in" bet either—not if it means you'll be betting pot or more by the river if you want to get stacks in.

It's generally easier to get a pot-sized bet or larger called on the flop than the river. So you want to build the pot early and give your opponent something more callable on the river.

For example, say two players limp, and you raise to $10 with 9-9 and $200 stacks. The blinds fold, and the limpers call. There's $33 in the pot with $190 behind. The flop comes Q-9-2. Your opponents check. You can get all the money in by betting $40, then $60, then $90. Or you can get it in by betting $10, then $50, then $130. You're more likely to get your flop bet called if you bet $10. But you're more likely to win stacks if you start with that $40 bet, because a $90 river bet will be called much more often after a $60 turn bet than a $130 river bet after a $50 turn bet.

2. **Sometimes you can squeeze in an extra street of value if you shade your bet sizes small.** In particular, you can turn some top pair/marginal kicker hands into three-street hands against

some opponents. Say two players limp, and you raise to $10 with A-T suited. The blinds fold, and the limpers call. The flop comes A-8-3. Against many players, if you try to use the $40-$60-$90 line from the above hand, you'll find hands that call you on the river will tend to have you beaten more often than not. The $10-$50-$130 line would be even worse, as that huge river bet would get these players to fold almost all the hands you beat.

Using the above logic, we'd conclude this is a two-street hand. But you might be able to turn it into a three-street hand if you tread lightly with your bet sizing. Say you bet $20-$30-$40. Or you might even try $25-$35-$45. A player on the flop holding A-2 on our A-8-3 flop won't be inclined to fold to a $20 or $25 bet. Then each bet is only a little bigger than the last. This player might feel "committed" to calling these smallish bets on later streets because the pot odds become more attractive every time.

This tactic is player-specific. Opponents it works best on tend not to be very sophisticated about how they think and play. These opponents, often loose or just poor players, will generally call most modest-sized bets if they hit the board with top pair. But it's worth considering when you believe you have just a one- or two-street hand.

3. Don't bet big with vulnerable hands. If anything, bet smaller. I'm repeating an earlier concept, but it's important. Many players love to do this. Pre-flop, if they have A-A, they'll make it $10. But if they have J-J, they'll make it $15. Secretly, they're hoping the extra money encourages their opponents to fold so they won't have to play the hand. On the flop, they'll bet

$25 with a set, but $40 with a vulnerable top pair. Again, the goal secretly is to encourage people to fold so they can't draw out.

The only point of having a "good" hand is to win at showdown. If the hand ends before showdown, you might as well have two blank cards. Also, you should want to invest more money in your stronger hands, and less money in your weaker hands. Once you accept these two principles, the idea of betting bigger with more vulnerable hands makes no sense at all.

Most importantly, don't size your bets this way. In general, you can't prevent players from drawing out on you, not without shutting down a pot too early and potentially wrecking the real value of your hand. Whatever hands your opponent may have that are weak enough to consider folding (to a big bet), you'd probably prefer he call (a smaller bet) with them instead.

Furthermore, you know from Skill #2 earlier in the book that when your opponents do draw out, it's no big deal, because you can just fold. Since they don't protect their value bets with enough bluffs in their range, you just get out of the way when they start betting big.

4. Bet bigger than your opponents do. Commonly, bets from live no-limit hold 'em players are too small. When they flop a set, their bet sizing is too small, and often gives them little-to-no chance to win stacks. There's no clear rule for how big bets should be. But don't mimic your opponents' bet sizing and consider those "standard." Make sure your average bet is bigger than theirs. A good rule of thumb might be at least a half-pot bet when you flop a monster. This builds the pot so on each subsequent street your bets can help you get stacks in by the river.

Once you gain experience and become more sophisticated with bet-sizing concepts, you can use your opponents' "standard" bet sizing against them. We'll cover these ideas later in the book.

5. Don't worry about tipping your hand strength with your bet sizing—for now. In a 1-2 game, you gain more by choosing appropriate bet sizing relative to your hand strength than you lose by giving out information with your bet sizing. This equation changes when you move up. At 5-10, for instance, you need to be more careful about information revealed through bet sizing. (One of my bread-and-butter profit sources is to use information gained by examining my opponents' bet-sizing choices.) But at 1-2, I wouldn't worry too much. Just bet big with your good hands, and smaller with weaker hands. And try not to be too obvious about it.

GETTING VALUE IN MULTI-WAY POTS AND LOOSE GAMES

In multi-way pots and loose games, getting value for good hands is the primary way you'll generate advantage over the long term. And since players are so willing to put money into a pot, you can still do quite well even though you'll find yourself playing a fairly one-dimensional strategy.

The primary complaint from loose games is that people never fold. You can't get them off hands. Opponents chase constantly—and draw out all the time.

Okay. If they never fold, then that means you should be able to get tremendous value for all your good hands. You should even be able to get value from mediocre hands.

When you have trouble winning in loose games with lots of calling stations, it's often due to one problem: you don't bet your hands enough. You're so worried about getting drawn out on, you try to force folds on earlier streets. Then, if that doesn't work, you check it down all the way because you're terrified that seven of diamonds on the river hit your opponent's kicker. "Oh, you mean my jacks are good? Phew," you think, as you drag a pot that could have been twice as big if you'd had the nerve to bet the river.

Put in the language of this chapter, many hands are worth three streets of value in these games. Here's another example.

Four players limp for $2, and the small blind calls. You're in the big blind with K♥T♦ and a $200 stack, and you check.

The flop comes K♠J♣3♠. The small blind checks, and you bet $12 into the $12 pot. Three limpers call.

What sort of hands do you think they have? They could have kings (with better or, with this crowd more likely, worse kickers). They could have jacks. They could have threes. They could have unimproved pocket pairs. They could have flush draws. They could have open-ended straight draws. They could have gutshots. They could have ace-high.

They could have two blank cards and be calling for pot odds. (That's a joke.)

Keep in mind there's nothing to be afraid of. At this point, you're one of four players. If you win this pot more than one in four times, you're ahead of the game. And you'll win at least that

often. It's not a high bar to clear. If a bad card comes and an opponent puts in a big bet, use your skill from the last chapter and fold. No worries. It was just not meant to be one of your 25-plus percent of winners.

Say the turn is the 4♦, for a K♠J♣3♠4♦ board. You dodged everything. There's $60 in the pot, and you have three opponents. You bet $50. Two players call.

These players are likely not to have the worst of the possible hands I listed above. If they did, they'd have folded like the third player. But they can still have any king, any flush draw, open-ended straight draws, or gutshots if they're stubborn. They can also have any jack. If they're real stubborn, they can also have threes and unimproved pocket pairs.

Most importantly, it's looking good for you because no one has raised. This is a board that often scares most 1-2 players. If they held two pair or a set—or even just a king with a better kicker—there's a good chance they would try to end the action on the turn by shoving over your bet. After all, you're not the only one worried about getting drawn out on. Everyone worries about it. Players with two pair or a set would typically see the flush and straight draws out there, the big pot, the three opponents, and just shove.

But no one did that. So you probably have the best hand.

The river is the Q♦, making the final board K♠J♣3♠4♦Q♦. It's not the perfect river card, but few are. It's fine. If someone braved it to the river with A-T or T-9 gutshots, God bless them. They get your money. Otherwise, it's not a bad card at all. K-Q had you beat anyway, so if someone improved that hand to two

pair it doesn't hurt you much. Besides the gutshots, only Q-J is a likely hand that might have improved to beat you. Not too bad.

There's $136 left in your stack, and there's $210 in the pot. Shove.

Don't be shy. You probably have the best hand, and someone might call. Shove. If this really is a game where no one folds to bluffs, they won't fold here either. They'll call with their K-2. They'll call with Q-T that missed a straight but backed into a pair. They'll call with A-J because they think you're bluffing. They'll call with 5-5 because pairs are good, right? (That's another joke.)

This is how these multi-way, loose games work. Maybe it's true bluffing doesn't work very often. Everyone is married to every pot. You can't win by pushing people off hands. I get it.

But instead, you can take your flopped top pair in a limped pot that would be worth almost nothing in a tighter, tougher game, and possibly win a huge pot with it.

Is someone going to call your shove sometimes and show A-T for the rivered nuts? Sure. That will happen. Is someone going to show you Q-J? Yup. Is someone going to show you 3-3 for a flopped set sandbagged to the river? Once in a while. This is a gambling game. Remember: sometimes you lose.

But you won't lose over the long-term—not if you follow my rules about playing tight pre-flop and refusing to pay off other players' big turn-and-river bets.

They can feel chaotic, but games with multi-way pots and loose players can be very lucrative. As we saw, you can take common, not-so-special hands like top pair with an okay kicker, bet them across three streets, get called all the way by top pair

with no kicker, or by second pair, or by a busted draw that rivered a pair.

But you must bet these not-great hands with confidence. In the above example, many 1-2 players would find the flop bet. Some might also find the turn bet, though they might feel a creeping fear and shade it smaller to something like $30 instead. But very few would shove the river as I suggest. They just wouldn't. That queen is just scary enough (even though it's really not that scary), the pot is just big enough, and their hand is just marginal enough that they'll check and hope their opponents check behind. Or they'll bet $30 as a ploy to prevent someone else from bluffing at the pot.

But usually, many 1-2 players will simply check. And it will get checked around. And K-T will be good for a fairly small pot. If you can't win bluffing, and you also refuse to bet your top pair and better hands because someone made a flush on you once three months ago, you won't win. It's that simple.

So the strategy in these games is straightforward. Play your tight, effective pre-flop strategy. Raise and reraise your good hands to build pots.

When you flop top pair or better, you bet. You keep betting until someone raises you. When that happens, you fold.

You don't let scare cards scare you unless they're really scary. In this game, it's a lot easier to make middle pair than a flush, even when three flush cards are out there. Maybe middle pair folds when the flush is out there. But if that's true, then you've found a spot where they do indeed fold, and you can sneak in some bluffs.

In these types of games, it's important to remember that you aren't playing against your opponents, you're playing against the course. Too many people get hung up on who is winning and who is losing in games like these. "That guy plays every single hand and he's won $2,000 already in this 1-2 game!" These observations create frustration and envy, and they also create self-doubt.

The reality is that games with multi-way pots and loose players are very swingy. The pots can be huge, and if you're lucky enough to run into three or four hands in a row, you can win four or more buy-ins in short order.

And if you're playing every hand, you can win those buy-ins before you even have to play the blinds for the first time.

On the other hand, if you're playing a tight, effective pre-flop strategy like I recommend, you usually won't be playing hands frequently enough to put together those huge stacks you sometimes see.

But don't worry about that. These players who build huge stacks quickly also lose them just as quickly. Over the long term, they lose—and they lose a lot. Don't worry about who's winning or losing for the day. It's noise. Just focus on your own strategy for making the most out of the table conditions.

Your opponents are going to pay off top pair hands, so focus on playing hands pre-flop that make those hands. Then bet top pair for the maximum when you make it. When you lose one, shake it off and try again.

FINAL THOUGHTS

If you flop a hand with showdown value, the goal is to squeeze as much value from the hand as you can, then get it to showdown so you can realize its value. You can estimate a hand's value by using our streets-of-value method. In your mind, create a plan for the hand. Determine how many times you can bet the hand and expect to be called by worse hands. Think about which turn cards will help you by adding streets of value, and which cards will hurt you and take value away. Think about which types of cards are more likely to fall.

Once you have your estimate for streets of value, think about the type of hands you're expecting to call you. Is it mainly weaker made hands? Is it mainly draws? Is it a mixture of both types of hands? The more you think draws will call, the more you should want to bet the flop and turn. The more you think weaker made hands will call, the more flexible you can be about which streets to bet and check.

And remember: draw-heavy boards can be tricky for players with made hands. Top pair might look like a more valuable hand than it actually is on many of these boards. Be careful not to overestimate your streets of value with a marginal made hand on a dynamic board that offers your opponents many opportunities. Sometimes holding marginal hands on draw-heavy boards, it's best to give a free card and hope for a brick on the turn. If you catch your brick, you can bet for value with confidence—and the

fact that you checked top pair on a draw-heavy board might confuse some opponents. I'm not saying you always want to check in this situation. But it's sometimes the best available option.

There's a lot more to this game than "make a hand and bet it." If you practice evaluating the true worth of your value hands, you'll take much sharper and more precise betting lines, allowing you to maximize your hand's potential every time you're lucky enough to actually hit a flop.

1-2 Hand Quizzes

So that's it for 1-2. There are so many poor players at this level, if you learn and master these three skills, you'll have an edge in nearly every 1-2 or 1-3 live game on the planet.

The formula is simple. First, you play a tight pre-flop game. You play fewer hands, and you consistently raise the hands you play. This strategy will immediately punish your opponents for playing too many hands, and it sets them up to make compounding post-flop errors that you can take maximum advantage of.

But strong pre-flop play alone doesn't put money in your stack.

You need two critical post-flop skills to actually accumulate more chips on a regular basis. First, you need to fold to big bets. Your 1-2 and 1-3 opponents don't make big bluffs often enough. If they aren't bluffing enough, then you shouldn't be trying to catch them bluffing because it's not profitable.

Ever. Poker has a weird property that once an opponent strays a little bit from a perfect strategy, you should play the counter-strategy 100 percent of the time. The counter-strategy to someone who doesn't bluff enough is to fold to their bets. You will fold

every time you have a hand that can't beat the worst hand they would bet in that way. The only time you consider calling is if you can think of a few hands you still beat that they might bet hard.

That calling exception certainly comes up. But most of the calls I see at 1-2 involve hands that had no chance to win (unless the bettor was bluffing). You absolutely must learn to fold these hands without fail and without remorse.

The second ideal 1-2 post-flop skill is the ability to correctly assess the value of your strong hands. How much is your top pair actually worth? How do certain turn and river cards affect the value of your hand as the board runs out?

For starters, as we discussed, think in terms of streets of value. How many times can you bet the hand, and get worse hands to call? If you think in terms of board textures and streets of value, you can play most of your value hands in a reasonable way.

So how does this cluster of skills win you money over the long term?

Simple. You win money from opponents with your strong hands because you bet them for value in an intelligent, considered way. But your opponents don't win nearly as much money from you when they make strong hands because you fold to their big bets. The fact that you play a tighter and stronger range of hands pre-flop intensifies this advantage by putting you in the position of having the stronger hand more often.

That's it. That one edge is enough to win money consistently in most 1-2 and 1-3 games. To put it in the terms I used in the introduction, your opponents have three ways to dispose of bad hands—fold them, call with them, or bluff with them. These 1-2

skills will help you punish the players who try to call with the bad hands.

Yet keep in mind, these 1-2 skills alone will not be enough if you move up, since many of the players at 2-5 and 5-10 have also mastered these skills to one extent or another. Opponents at higher levels will try to get rid of bad hands more often by folding them or bluffing with them, and so far we haven't covered how to catch your opponents doing these things. But these basic, essential 1-2 skills alone should get you off to a winning start if you stick to the smallest game in the room.

Here are a series of hand quizzes to help you practice these concepts and apply them in real situations. In each of these hands, you're playing in a 1-2 game in a card room with $300 stacks.

H A N D   1

You're two off the button. Two players limp to you. You have 9♣8♣. What do you do?

♠

Raise to about $10 or $12. Many typical 1-2 players would limp along with this hand. They want to see a cheap flop to see if their straight or flush draws materialize. If they don't hit the flop hard, they plan to fold.

This strategy will not be profitable. Since most people are looking to hit flops well and make strong hands, if you also look

just to hit flops well and make strong hands, you will not have an edge.

Nine-eight suited is a particularly good bluffing hand. Even if you're playing in a game where bluffing isn't a central feature of your strategy, this hand is such a good bluffing hand that you should start out with a raise. Raising allows you to build a pot that you might be able to steal on a later street. It also protects you from forking your range into strong raising hands and weak limping hands. On later streets, if you flop a pair or one of the draws you're looking for, you can play this hand like A-A, or like any other hand that would be threatening to your opponents. Since they often limp in with weak hands, there's an excellent chance this strategy will put extra money in your stack.

HAND 2

A player limps. The next player raises to $10. A third player calls. You're in the small blind with K♠J♠. What do you do?

♠

Fold. Offsuit hands are not good in this game. Furthermore, you're looking for situations where your opponents are likely playing too many hands because those are the times you can win their money. When someone has raised from early position, it's a fairly good (but not foolproof) sign of strength. Also, you're out of position and the raise size is "big."

The raiser likely has hands on average at least as strong as yours. You're out of position. The $1 you have in the small blind is barely worth mentioning compared to the $9 you're required to call. Fold most of your offsuit hands in these situations.

HAND 3

Two players limp. An aggressive regular player makes it $12 to go on the button. The small blind folds. You're in the big blind, and you have A♣4♣. What do you do?

♠

If you folded, I wouldn't think you were completely crazy. And calling is okay too, but I strongly recommend reraising. I'd make it $35 to go.

This reraise balances your range, and the usual reraises you make with hands like A-A and K-K. If you think it's hard to get action with your big hands, adding reraises with A-4 suited in situations like this will increase your profitability and disguise your strategy. Your opponents may or may not start giving you more action. But it doesn't matter to you what they do. If they give you more action, great. A-A and K-K then become big winners for you. If they don't give you action, then you get to bluff them out of pots with A-4 suited and similar hands.

The key factor here is the aggressive player raising limpers on the button. This is likely to be a "steal raise," made with hands as

weak as 8-5 suited. When you attack raises like these with reraises, you paint your opponent into a corner. If they fold pre-flop, great.

If they usually call you pre-flop, then they're seeing flops with 8-5 suited for $35. When that's the case, you can just bet most flops and show an automatic profit should they fold.

Remember, however, this is a high-variance strategy, so be prepared to have it blow up in your face a few times. That's part of the game. And part of the fun!

HAND 4

Three players limp. You make it $12 to go on the button with A♣J♠. The small blind reraises to $40. The limpers fold. What should you do?

♠

Fold. If you were the small blind, and following my pre-flop recommendations, then you could be reraising with all sorts of hands. You could have A-4 suited or K-8 suited or 3-3. Against this assortment of hands, A-J offsuit plays just fine, and you would be right to call. In fact, you might even choose to 4-bet A-J offsuit.

But that was a lot of ifs. And, quite frankly, most 1-2 players play nothing like my suggested reraising strategy from the blinds. Instead, they tend to reraise A-A, K-K, Q-Q, and maybe A-K or J-J. That's it.

You should never assume your 1-2 opponents are playing the way I suggest. They aren't. Not even close. That's why you can after all beat them so badly. If they played like I suggested, you'd have less edge, and the rake would eat you alive.

Unless you know for sure that a particular 1-2 player will 3-bet with a wide range of hands from the blinds, you should assume this raise is a hand like K-K. Against hands this strong, A-J offsuit is an absolutely no-brainer fold.

HAND 5

Two players limp. You have K♦5♦ from two off the button. What do you do?

♠

Fold. The seat two off the button is in my "early position" playing range. And this hand is nowhere near the ones I suggest playing from this seat. You might feel like you're in late-ish position, and that this is a pretty suited hand. Don't be seduced. You generate your edge over time because you have a specific strategy that takes advantage of your opponents' willingness to play too many hands, and their tendency to call with them post-flop.

Playing hands like this from the wrong table position is not part of the plan. It doesn't serve your interest. Step 1 is to make sure you're playing tighter than your opponents. Yes, all your

opponents would play this hand. They'd limp with it. Maybe one or two out of nine would even raise it.

But you're different. You don't do that. You will fold. This insistence on protecting tight, strong hand ranges will serve you well post-flop where, in pot after pot, your opponents are caught with weaker hands (middle pairs, weaker kickers, and more). You can always bet your good hands for value, and you can often bluff them out of pots when you miss the flop. A tighter starting range is the gift that keeps on giving.

A thought like "maybe I'll make a king-high flush," just ain't how you win at this game. Hope is not a strategy. Not at 1-2, and especially not at higher stakes.

HAND 6

Four players limp. You make it $15 to go from one off the button with K♦Q♦. The big blind calls, and three of the four limpers call also. This loose play is typical in your particular game, and players are also very willing to call post-flop bets. There's $78 in the pot and you have $285 behind.

The flop comes Q♣T♣7♦. Everyone checks to you. You bet $70, and two players call. There's $288 in the pot and $215 behind.

The turn is the 2♣. Your opponents check. What do you do?

♠

Shove all-in. This one is very straightforward. Your opponents call too many hands pre-flop, and they react to players betting into their weak ranges by calling with too many bad hands. You take advantage of this error by betting when you hit the flop.

Yes, the flush came in on the turn. Yes, sometimes you will bet and someone will call and show you J♣5♣. That's part of the game.

What's also part of the game is that flushes are hard to make. Even if your opponents play every single suited hand in the deck, there are only ever 45 hands out of 1,035 possible hands (that don't include any of the board cards or your two cards) that make a flush.

When loose players call on a flop like this, they can have flush draws. But they can also have queens, tens, sevens, and any of a bunch of different straight-draw hands from A-K to 8-6. Even getting called in two spots, it's still more likely than not that no one holds a flush draw.

You get money in your stack by betting good hands into people who play too many hands pre-flop, and who call too much post-flop. In loose games, bet, bet, bet your top pairs.

Hand 7

Four players limp. You make it $15 to go from one off the button with K♦Q♦. The big blind calls and three of the four limpers call. Loose play is typical for this game, and as in the example above,

players are willing to call bets after the flop. There's $78 in the pot. You have $285 behind.

The flop comes Q♣T♣7♦. Everyone checks to you. You bet $70, and two players call. There's $288 in the pot and $215 behind.

The turn is the 2♣. The first player shoves all-in for $215. What do you do?

♠

Fold. This is a bread-and-butter example of employing Skill #2. When your opponents make a big turn or river bet, and you can't beat the hands they're representing, you must fold. To justify calling, you would have to expect them to be bluffing a significant percentage of the time. Typical 1-2 players won't bluff for big money even close-to-often enough to justify a call.

The distinction between the play of Hand #6 and this one is a critical one. Both hands played identically until the turn. Yet, in the second hand, your opponent gave you a massively important piece of information by shoving. This is an action the player would take with only a small percentage of his total hand range.

When the player instead does a more-normal thing like checking to you (as in Hand #6), he preserves most of the hands in his range (i.e., all the ones he would not shove all-in with). Since the ones he would shove with will tend to be strong, the check actually depletes some strength from his range, and he's left with a weak set of hands worth attacking with a bet.

This is it. Right here is the core logic that defines superior no-limit hold 'em strategy. Your opponents start with a given hand range. They proceed to give you information through their checks and bets across several streets that help you refine your estimate of what hands they could have. You act on that information by attacking a weaker sets of hands, and avoiding stronger ones.

In a 1-2 game, a large turn bet, especially a shove, indicates incredible strength. So you should avoid this range of hands.

The absence of a large turn bet partially denies that strength (only partially, since it's possible for players to check very strong hands). But all your opponents' weak hands from playing too many hands pre-flop are still in the mix. So the total picture after an opponent checks this spot suggests weakness, and you should therefore attack with a bet.

Make sure you thoroughly understand these last two examples before you continue. There is perhaps no more important reasoning in the game to keep you profitable long term.

HAND 8

Two players limp. You make it $12 to go on the button with Q♥J♥. The blinds fold, and both limpers call. There's $39 in the pot and $288 behind.

The flop comes J♦4♣4♥. Your opponents check, you bet $20, and the first limper calls.

The turn is the T♣. Your opponent checks. What should you do?

♠

This is a common problem, and there's not a clear answer. It pays to approach this decision using streets-of-value logic.

What kinds of hands might have called you on the flop? Any jack would have called, and obviously any four. Typically you can get calls on a flop like this from pocket pairs lower than jacks, and you can sometimes get calls from a hand like A-Q.

When called on the flop, the hand you most hope your opponent has is J-T, since that's the hand you beat that's most likely to call you down. Obviously, the turn card dashes those hopes. The turn card also renders all kickers below a ten irrelevant (because any hand with a jack and a lower kicker plays jacks and fours with the ten). So if someone were to call down with, say, J-9, if you also hold a jack, they'd be hoping for a chop at best.

In other words, if you bet the turn and river, and if your opponent has a worse hand, from their perspective it's a dismal situation.

Rational 1-2 players fold all worse hands than yours given this pressure. But irrational 1-2 players will happily call down two more streets with any jack, and sometimes even with hand like 8-8. (Calling down with a jack is not fundamentally wrong, it's just irrational in most 1-2 games because players aren't bluffing often enough.)

It's your job, then, to decide if your opponent is rational or not. If your opponent loves to call down with weaker hands, you should bet the turn and river—though you might keep bet sizing small. For instance, you might bet $40 on the turn, and $60 on the river.

Against a rational opponent, however, you can't expect two more streets of value against weaker hands. You'll have to check at least once. Turn checks and river checks each have pros and cons. I'll briefly go over them.

A pro for a turn bet (i.e., a river check) is that it denies a free card to hands like 7-7 or A-Q that might improve to beat you on the river. A con of a turn bet is that if your opponent has a strong hand like trips, you'll likely get check-raised, thus forfeiting your bet. (You will, of course, fold to the check-raise. That's Skill #2.)

A pro of waiting for the river to bet is that you may not have to pay off trips. Say you check back the turn, and a deuce comes on the river. Instead of checking, your opponent bets $60 into the $79 pot. Skill #2 says you should fold—and you just saved $40 compared to having bet the turn. A con of waiting for the river to bet is that you give a free card that might beat you. Also, your opponent may be occasionally induced to bluff the river, and you will naturally fold to these bluffs.

The more rational you expect your opponent to play, the more you should check the turn and bet the river. The advantage of your getting to fold to a river bet is greater in this case, because your opponent will tell you with his bet that you're beaten, and he also will rarely bluff.

If your opponent is less rational or generally plays in a way you find baffling, you're probably better off betting the turn and checking down the river.

Your chosen bet size is also opponent-dependent. You want to bet small enough that you think your opponent is likely to call with a hand like J-9, or possibly even 8-8. It does little good to blow all those hands out of the pot, as you'll then be losing nearly every time you get called. With some opponents, you'll be able to bet $40 and get called. With others, you'll need to keep it small— like $20.

There's no magic bullet to sizing these bets. You have to experiment and see how opponents react.

HAND 9

You have A♣A♦ under the gun. You open to $10, which is a common opening raise size in the game you play. A player calls behind you and the big blind calls. There's $31 in the pot and $290 behind.

The flop comes J♣7♣5♦. The big blind bets $15. What do you do?

♠

Keeping in mind Skill #2, this is not a situation that demands extreme caution. It's a small bet. And it comes on the flop, not

the turn or river. Don't let a bet like this scare you off a big hand like aces. Given the way most people play at 1-2, you're likely to have the best hand.

There is one problem. This small, out-of-flow bet (your opponent did not "check to the raiser") is typically a probe bet. Your opponent wants you to reveal whether you're strong or weak. He likely defended the blind with a hand like J-8. And now he's flopped a weak top pair. He wants to find out cheaply if he's good.

Your job with aces is to obscure the meaning of your reaction, while still encouraging your opponent to put as much money in the pot as possible. These can be competing goals. Balancing them can be tricky.

One thing is fairly certain. If you raise big and fire money at the pot, your opponent will fold. That's the information he's looking for. Since you don't want this to happen, you shouldn't react this way.

You can either call the bet, which is ambiguous, or you can make a small raise—like a min-raise to $30. The raise shows a bit more strength, but most players won't be able to resist calling it.

From that point, you're again in streets-of-value mode. You have to estimate how many streets you can bet—and how big those bets can be—and still keep your opponent in the pot to showdown with a hand like J-8.

A minor concern is the player behind you. On a flop like J-7-5, it's unlikely this player has much. But since there's a flush draw on board, it increases the chance you'll get action. This consideration has me leaning toward making the small raise in

this instance. You could raise the $15 bet to $30, and the opponent behind you could call with a jack, or a flush draw, or a straight draw. This is a better outcome than just calling the flop bet and having the player behind you call as well.

So I'd probably raise to $30. Then I'd bet the turn an amount I thought a player with J-8 would likely call. Assuming the turn and river cards aren't too threatening, I'd bet the river as well, again for an amount I'd hope an opponent would call with just a jack.

These bet sizes vary and are situation-dependent. For some tables, they should be fairly big. For others, they will need to be pretty small.

HAND 10

A player limps. You have 4♣4♠ from four off the button. You raise to $10. Two players call behind you, the big blind calls, and the limper calls. There are five players and $51 in the pot.

The flop comes Q♣J♣4♥, giving you bottom set. Everyone checks to you, and you bet $50. One player behind you calls. There's $151 in the pot and $240 behind.

The turn is the A♦. You bet $90, and your opponent raises you all-in for $150 more. What do you do?

♠

Call, and don't think too hard about it either.

It's unlikely your opponent is bluffing, since this is a big turn raise over your big turn bet. There are a number of hands that beat you. You're behind K-T, and you're also behind sets of aces, queens, and jacks. Isn't this a place to apply Skill #2 and fold while you're behind?

Skill #2 doesn't apply here for two reasons. One, you can beat some of the hands your opponent is representing. While he can have the hands that beat you, he can also easily have A-Q, A-J, or Q-J. Furthermore, he could have called the flop with an ace-high flush draw like A♣T♣. That hand, for instance, would give him top pair, the nut flush draw, and a gutshot straight draw. With a hand like that (or really with any ace-high flush draw), your opponent could feel committed to the pot with top pair and be shoving to avoid a tough river decision if the flush misses and you shove.

Your opponents think like that. But you shouldn't. Raising with the goal of avoiding a future tough decision is mostly dumb.

In any event, you're behind a number of hands your opponent could have. But you're also ahead of many of those hands. When this is the case, play for stacks.

The second reason Skill #2 doesn't apply is that you can draw out on the straight, the main hand you're worried about. Having the ability to draw out on your opponent doesn't on its own mean you should call a big turn bet. But it lowers the bar considerably. When you can identify hands you beat, and you have a legitimate chance to draw out on the hands that beat you, it's usually a slam-dunk call.

HAND 11

Two players limp. Another player raises in the cutoff to $12. You're on the button with K♦K♠, and you reraise to $35. Everyone folds, except the original raiser who calls. There's $77 in the pot and $265 behind.

The flop comes T♣4♣3♠. Your opponent checks, and you bet $50. Your opponent check-raises to $150. What do you do?

♠

This is another situation where people try to apply Skill #2, but it doesn't quite apply. Yes, I emphasized that Skill #2 applies to big bets, not small ones. But it applies most clearly on the turn and river. Not the flop.

This is a big flop bet. So Skill #2 doesn't apply as easily.

You can definitely be behind here. Your opponent could easily have T-T, 4-4, 3-3, or A-A. But you could be ahead as well. Your opponent could have Q-Q, J-J, or possibly even A-T. Your opponent could also hold a big flush draw with overcards like A♣Q♣ or K♣J♣. Players typically play these hand this way.

Your opponent could also hold a combination straight and flush draw like A♣5♣ or 6♣5♣.

You're behind some hands, and you're unfortunately unlikely to draw out on those hands. But you're ahead of quite a few hands

as well. Additionally, the pot is laying you odds, since there's $177 in the pot (excluding your opponent's raise), and $215 still to be bet (this number is relevant if you expect to shove). You don't have to win more than 50 percent of the time to make calling a better choice than folding.

If you assume you'd be getting it all-in every time you didn't fold to the raise (a fair assumption), you're risking $215 to win a total of $392. This means you need to win only a little more than 35 percent of the time to justify a call.

Here, you should move all-in since there's relatively little money left after you call your opponent's raise. You will lose this pot fairly often. But when your opponent forces the issue on flops like this—especially when the pot was 3-bet pre-flop—and you have an overpair, often you just have to gamble.

HAND 12

Three players limp. You make it $15 to go on the button with J♣T♣. The big blind calls, and two of the three limpers call. There are four players, $63 in the pot, and $285 behind.

The flop comes T♦9♣9♠. Everyone checks to you and you bet $40. One player calls.

The turn is the A♥. Your opponent checks, and you decide that the turn card makes it difficult for you to get more streets of value. So you check it back. There's $143 in the pot, and $245 behind.

The river is the 3♣. Your opponent bets $30. What do you do?

♠

Not every poker decision will fit neatly under the umbrella of the skills I outline in this book. This isn't a Skill #2 situation, since the river bet is tiny. It's possible your opponent is bluffing a busted straight draw like K-Q or Q-J or 8-7.

It's possible your opponent has trip nines and is trying to squeeze value. It's also possible he's got a ten just like you. And if you call, you'll chop.

It's possible he's got an ace. The challenges are many.

The pot is laying you $173-to-$30 odds. So you need to win only 15 percent of the time to justify a call.

Seems like a no-brainer call then, right? Maybe. It's possible you won't be good even 15 percent of the time. If your opponent isn't likely to ever bluff, including with even small bluff bets like this, you might never win the pot outright and only chop it sometimes.

So is it a fold? Not so fast. It's player-dependent. If you fold the river every time someone breathes on a pot, you won't do very well at this game.

Also, you might consider a raise. If you raise, your opponent might fold if he's got a ten like you. If you raise big enough, he might even fold an ace. He'll likely never fold trip nines. But once in a blue moon, someone will even fold trips with a bad kicker.

I could see calling this bet against some opponents (because I'd expect them to bluff a busted straight draw this way, but bet

bigger with trips). I could see folding to this bet against some opponents (because I'd expect them never to bluff, and I'd expect them to check a ten). And I could even see raising this bet against some opponents.

This book won't give you the recipe for every situation. That's clearly impossible. My goal is to give you a winning philosophy that you can apply in common and important scenarios. Many times, you'll have to use your best judgment and just wing it.

Don't let that bother you. Your opponents have to wing it, too, in many of the same situations. So having to make some spur-of-the-moment decisions in unexpected spots won't put you at a relative disadvantage. Just make the best decisions you can and move on. Also, trust the decisions you make. You're smart, and now approaching the game systematically. Those two things will give you an advantage over many opponents, even when you're forced to improvise.

When hands like these arise, after you've made your decision and gotten a result, write the hand down. Take it home. Use the time you have away from the table to reanalyze the situation. Try to decide whether you made the best possible play, or if there was a better available option.

In the end your long-term success will not hinge on how well you perform when you're forced to play an unusual or unanticipated situation. Instead, your success will hinge on how hard you work to make these situations more familiar. Analyze them in the present, so in the future you expect them, you're ready for them, and you're better prepared.

PART III: BEATING LIVE 2-5 GAMES

Skill #4. Barreling

This skill marks a change from the first three we've discussed. Each of the first three skills required you only to evaluate the strength of your own cards.

To recap, Skill #1 suggested that with pre-flop play, you look at your own cards, and compare them to a set of playable hands in a given situation. In Skill #2, when you refuse to pay people off, you look first to the size and context of an opponent's bet, and judge against your own cards. You base your decision off mainly those two variables. Using Skill #3, when you assess the value of your hand, you look one more time only at your cards and how strong they are compared to the hands you expect opponents to call with.

Instead of calling these three skills the 1-2 skills, I could just as easily have called them the "playing your cards" skills. They're important. Fundamental even, one might argue, to good play. But every poker enthusiast knows there's a lot more to the game. If you just played your own cards, you'd severely limit yourself strategically and the possibilities for long-term profit.

With this next skill, we begin to look away from what we hold, and instead focus on what our opponents might have. It's a critical transition in our thinking.

In general, 2-5 skills focus on figuring out when opponents might be strong or weak and acting accordingly. We aren't so worried about our cards. Once you've mastered these 2-5 skills, you should be able to play a session or two completely blind—without ever looking at your cards—and not lose too badly. You'll have the tools to "turn nothing into something" on a regular basis.

This all starts with barreling. Barreling is a simple strategy. Let's say you raise pre-flop and your opponent calls. They check to you on the flop and you bet. Your opponent calls and then checks the turn. You bet again. If your opponent calls and checks the river, perhaps you bet one more time.

You'll start to make these bets without much regard to what you hold. Sometimes you'll choose to barrel because you hold a hand with certain features. But, especially at the 2-5 level, these decisions have much more to do with what your opponents might have and how they tend to play.

To get you started with the concept of barreling, I'll quote from an article I wrote in 2013:

> Say I'm on the button and everyone has folded to me. I raise pre-flop and get one call. Let's say for the sake of keeping the numbers easy that I've made it $10 to go and was called. (Let's also assume that any extra dead blind-and-ante money gets raked away.)

The pot is $20. My opponent checks the flop, and I bet $10 (half-pot). Half the time my opponent folds, and half the time he calls.

Say he calls. The pot is now $40. My opponent checks the turn, and I bet $20. Again, he folds half the time and calls half the time.

Say he calls again. The pot is now $80. My opponent checks the river, and I bet $40. One more time, he folds half the time and calls half the time.

If my opponent and I play ten thousand hands using these strategies, who do you think comes out ahead?

Notice I haven't mentioned specific cards at all. That's because I'm discussing two strategies, not individual hands. To get really good at poker, you must learn to zoom out from thinking about specific hands and think instead of one strategy versus another.

So who wins?

My opponent folds 7/8 of his hands and calls to showdown with 1/8 of them. Let's assume that the 1/8 of hands with which he gets to showdown are always the best possible 1/8 of hands (not a fair assumption, of course, as it assumes that my opponent is able to predict perfectly on the flop where his hand will fall by the river). In hands that get to showdown, therefore, I'll win 1/16 of the time and lose 15/16 of the time. (That is, I'll luck into a hand that beats his average showdown hand 1/16 of the time.)

Let's break it down. Half the time, I win 10 when he folds on the flop. One-fourth of the time, I win 20 when he folds on the turn. One-eighth of the time, I win 40 when he folds on the river. At showdown, I lose an average of 70 (accounting for the chance I luck into a winner).

On average, how do I fare playing this game?

EV = (0.5)(10) + (0.25)(20) + (0.125)(40) + (0.125)(-70)
= 5 + 5 + 5 - 8.75
= 6.25

I win an average of $6.25 per hand. That's more than half the pre-flop raise size.

All I'm doing is betting half-pot whenever my opponent checks. I've given my opponent the benefit of psychic powers, and yet my couldn't-be-simpler strategy crushes his more considered strategy.

What's my opponent doing wrong? He's folding too much, of course. He's also not raising enough.

"No one actually plays like that," I can hear you say.

I disagree. Lots of people play like this, at least in 2-5, and to a lesser extent, 5-10 games in Las Vegas. Sure, no one plays precisely like this with exactly these ratios. But plenty play closely enough that a strategy to simply bet half-pot whenever checked to beats them.

[Revised and excerpted from "You Check, I Bet," published originally in Card Player magazine, vol. 25 no. 3.]

Say you were a no-limit hold 'em player who learned to play not from books, but from watching others play, and through trial and error. Because everyone else plays way too loose pre-flop, you would also learn to play way too lose pre-flop. In the beginning, because you played too many bad hands, you flopped a lot of marginal hands like bottom and middle pairs, and top pairs with

kicker problems. Those times you actually flopped a decent top pair or better, turn or river cards often came that threatened you with possible straights and flushes.

Frequently, when you held these hands, you found opponents betting into you. You weren't sure what to do. So the first thing you tried was calling. You called a lot of bets and got shown a lot of hands. You lost a few buy-ins and decided to change the way you played.

You decided to stop calling. You started folding instead. If someone really decided to crank up their bets against you, you'd fold all your marginal one-pair hands. If someone represented a made flush on the river, you'd believe him.

This change saved you a lot of money. And you stopped losing so much. So you stuck with the strategy. Since you weren't losing as much anymore, you didn't try to change anything else about your approach.

If you play 2-5, you'll find many regular players at this level of their development. They play too many hands pre-flop. But they've learned they can also fold to post-flop pressure and not get hurt too badly.

The only reason these players don't get hurt too badly is because their opponents don't take advantage of their mistakes. By and large, their opponents are at the same level. Everyone's playing too many hands. And everyone's folding to each other's big bets. In the end, they all hope to pick off enough marks who will call some of their bets so everyone can share in the profit.

Yet, as I talked about above, these players are often beaten by the simplest of all strategies—i.e., when they check, you bet.

This works for two reasons. One, as I've said many times before, these players play too many hands pre-flop, which causes them to get stuck with too many bad hands after the flop. Two, these kinds of players are trained by their opponents' styles to assume that people aren't bluffing when they bet a certain way. It's specifically this assumption, indeed, that saves these players from being hopeless losers. (It's also the exact assumption I suggested in Skill #2 that you make and obey in order to accumulate chips. It's a good assumption because it can save you many buy-ins over the long-term at 1-2 and 2-5.)

I told you to assume that your opponents aren't bluffing with big turn and river bets and to fold. And by the time you get to 2-5, many of your opponents will assume the same about you—that you aren't bluffing. Your job is to violate that assumption with your play relentlessly and mercilessly. You'll be the one who bluffs constantly and in all the situations where no one else bluffs.

When you combine these two factors—loose pre-flop play with a general trust of large bets—you get many situations where you can close your eyes and bet whenever your opponents check to you and show a profit.

CONTINUATION BETTING

This process begins with the continuation bet (the "C-bet"). This idea is well known and has been around for a long time. In simple terms, you raise pre-flop, then represent the strength of your pre-

flop range by betting the flop whether you connected with the board or not.

Here's an example. It's a 2-5 no-limit game with $500 stacks. Three players limp, and you make it $35 to go with A♥Q♥. The big blind calls, and two of the limpers call. There's $147 in the pot and $465 behind.

The flop comes K♥4♦2♠. Your opponents check. You bet $80, and your opponents all fold.

If you ask typical players why they bet with A-Q on that board, you'll sometimes hear, "I raised pre-flop so I can represent the king on the flop."

In my opinion, that answer represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what's going on, a misunderstanding that will ultimately cause players to make unprofitable C-bets and miss profitable ones. Given what I've said so far about barreling, can you spot the problem with that thought process?

Take a second to think about it.

Okay, time's up. Here's the problem. The focus remains on the bettor's own hand. He's "representing the king" with a C-bet, a representation backed up in his mind by his pre-flop raise.

In reality, it's mostly irrelevant that he raised pre-flop. And if people fold, it's not out of fear that the pre-flop raiser hit a king. They fold because they likely missed the flop, or they flopped something so weak they didn't feel it was worth $80.

In other words, the bet's success or failure has everything to do with what other players hold, and little or nothing to do with what the bettor holds (or what he represents holding). This analysis will not hold true for all bluff bets, but it is nearly

universally true of C-bets. If someone has a king, they're calling. If someone doesn't have a king, on a board like K-4-2 rainbow, if you bet big enough there's a good chance they're folding.

This idea of "representing the king" is pernicious because it has you attacking the wrong types of flops and turns. Take the action described in this example but compare two different flops. The first is K-4-2 rainbow. The second is 8-4-2 rainbow. On the first flop, you can "represent the king." On the second flop, it's "obvious the pre-flop raiser missed" just about everything.

However, in a typical 2-5 game, it's far more important to C-bet on the 8-4-2 flop than on the K-4-2 flop. In fact, on the king-high flop, I might even check it back with the intention of betting the turn if everyone again checks to me.

I would nearly always C-bet, however, the 8-4-2 flop.

I'll expand on this important concept in Skill #5. For now, however, this is the essential takeaway idea.

Barreling is not about what you hold or what you could hold. Barreling is about punishing your opponent for having too many junk hands and his choosing to get rid of those extra hands by folding them.

In romance, the cliché break-up line goes, "It's not you, it's me." In poker it's the opposite. "It's not me. It's you." Keep the focus on your opponents' holdings and you'll get ever closer to poker bliss.

BARRELING BEYOND THE FLOP

Most of the time, your opponents will make decisions based on the strength of their own hands without worrying too much about what you might have. If you think about it, this shouldn't be surprising. Since that's basically how I asked you to play through the first three skills.

When your opponents miss the flop and you bet $50, they fold. When your opponents flop bottom pair and you bet $50, they might fold or call. But if they call, when they don't improve on the turn and you bet $150, they fold. The same logic holds for middle pairs and unimproved pocket pairs—most hands weaker than top pair that also don't have flush or straight draws to keep your opponents in the hand. They may call a flop bet. But if you keep firing and they don't improve, they'll fold.

The same logic also holds for weak draws. When your opponents flop a gutshot and you bet $50, they might fold or they might call. But if they call, when they don't improve on the turn and you bet $150, they fold.

Most opponents, most of the time, will attempt to put a value on their own hands and then compare that value to the betting action. As long as the betting action stays smaller than the value they assign to their hand, they'll stick around. When the cost of playing the hand moves significantly beyond their valuation, they'll likely fold. (I don't mean that people think, "This is a seventy-three dollar hand. No more, and no less." The thinking is fuzzier and more intuitive than that.)

The trick to effective barreling is determining when your opponents are most likely to feel their hands didn't make the cut. The more likely your opponents have hands they don't view as worth a lot, the more you should want to bet.

It's a little tricky to figure out when these situations occur, especially if you aren't very experienced. The rest of this skill, along with the next two, are devoted to trying to answering this question.

In a word, what are the signs an opponent is likely to fold to a bet?

BET THE TURN

Above all, remember this about barreling: when they check to you on the turn, and you won't be able to win a showdown without improvement, bet.

Your turn bet is rarely a bad bet. It's frequently enormously profitable. If you aren't good at figuring out when to bet, you're much better off betting all your weak hands than betting none of them.

Here's a simple example. Say you have J♦T♦. Your opponent opens for $20, someone calls, and you call on the button. The blinds fold, and there's $67 in the pot.

The flop comes K♦Q♠3♠. The pre-flop raiser bets $30. The player in the middle folds, and you call with your open-ended straight draw.

The turn is the 6♣. The raiser checks. Bet, and don't be shy about it. There's $120 in the pot. Bet $100. You can win the hand several ways. You can win if they fold. If they call and you go to the river, you have equity-when-called in your nut straight draw. You have additional equity-when-called because even if you miss the straight, you can bet the river and perhaps get a fold.

Here's another 2-5 example. One player limps, and you make it $20 to go on the button with 5♠4♠. The big blind calls, and the limper calls. There's $62 in the pot.

The flop comes 9♠6♦2♣, giving you a gutshot and a backdoor flush draw. Your opponents check, and you bet $50. The big blind folds, and the limper calls.

The turn is the K♠. Your opponent checks. Bet! Again, don't go light on the bet. There's $162 in the pot. Bet $120.

Why bet in these situations? It comes down to the math that I quoted at the start of this section. As long as your opponent maintains a folding rate above a certain amount (it's about 30 percent to your half-pot bets—a little more if you're betting three-quarters pot as I've recommended above), your bet will show an automatic profit.

Your opponents are playing into this automatic-profit scenario by playing too many hands pre-flop and making speculative calls on the flop. This leaves them with far too many weak hands by the turn. The turn is the street where no-limit hands begin to "get real." If you're betting $120 with $500 stacks to start the hand, you're implicitly saying, "It's $120 now and it might be all-in on the next card."

Experienced players know that they can't just call that $120 with weak hands and expect things to go their way. It gets expensive. Fast. If they're planning to dump their weak hands, the turn is where it happens. This phenomenon pushes their turn-folding percentages well north of the break-even point and into the automatic profit zone.

In fact, it's just a bonus in these examples that you happen to have straight draws. Often, because you're starting with good hands, you'll be in a situation where you can bet, get called, and still draw out on the river. That's great. But that equity is often not even necessary to justify a bet. But the equity makes the bet even more profitable.

Recall from our pre-flop strategy in Skill #1, you're specifically choosing hands pre-flop for the likelihood they'll have equity-when-called when you bet them on the turn. In this way, your strategy will be cohesive from pre-flop to the river. You're playing hands pre-flop with the idea that there's a good chance you'll be barreling the hand on the turn to show an automatic profit.

It's a big reason why I recommend not limping pre-flop. When you raise hands like 5♠4♠ on the button, you can follow through with a C-bet. You can then barrel the turn, and collect all the money your opponents feed the pot with their weak pre-flop calls. Taken together, your bets work in tandem toward the strategic goal of punishing opponents for playing too many hands pre-flop and folding the bad ones post.

If you choose instead to limp 5♠4♠ pre-flop, the pot will be much smaller on the turn. Which means your play on average wins less. Further, a smaller pot may encourage another player to

take a stab at the pot on the flop. This is not necessarily a disaster. But these kinds of smaller pots are less predictable. And if you decide to bluff after an opponent bets, it's easier to make an error and accidentally run into a strong hand.

Overall, as long as you buy into the "bet the turn" strategy for your game (and it's a good strategy in most, but not all, 2-5 game types), then you should also buy into the "no limping" pre-flop strategy as something that will support this exact turn strategy and make it more profitable.

MULTI-WAY POTS AND LOOSE PLAYERS

To recap from our earlier discussions, the skills we learned at the 1-2 level dovetail well with multi-way pots and loose players. With loose opponents who play every other hand, sticking to a tight, effective pre-flop strategy that includes lots of raising is your best approach. And when your opponents come out betting and raising big in these games, it's usually a sign to fold. In multi-way pots with loose players, these two skills rise in importance.

So does getting proper value for your hands. It can be frustrating in these games when loose opponents (or ones you consider bad or reckless) draw out on you. But always remember you don't need to win nearly as often in a game like this to make a profit. When you play a heads-up pot, you need to win roughly

50 percent of the time (give or take) to show a profit. When you play a three-handed pot, it's roughly 33 percent of the time.

When you're playing five- and six-handed pots, you only need to win 20 and 17 percent of the time (again, give or take, since the hand moves beyond just pre-flop action) to show a profit. Indeed, it's unreasonable to expect to win 50 percent of the time in five- and six-handed pots. It's unreasonable even when you have a good hand pre-flop like Q-Q, or a good hand on the flop like top pair.

The beauty of Skill #2 from our earlier discussion is you don't have to pay people off when they have you beat. On the flip side, other players are likely to pay you off at least some of the time when you have *them* beat. So not only do you win more than your share of pots by playing better hands, the pots you win are bigger on average than the pots you lose.

When you play multi-way pots against loose players according to this framework, it should diffuse some of your frustration. No, you won't win all the time. Most of the time, someone is going to make a hand, bet you out of the pot, and take it down. That's how it works. Your main job is to get out of the pot when in fact they bet you out. Then bet your hand like crazy when you're the one likely to be in front.

And you're even allowed to lose a fair percentage of the time when you're aggressive and betting like crazy because you think you're ahead. This is the way multi-way pots work. As long as you adhere to the first three skills, you'll do just fine.

So now we can integrate the first of our 2-5 skills, barreling. There's no question that barreling loses importance when you play

multi-way pots against loose players. It's much harder to push five opponents out of a pot than just one or two. But frequently I hear the advice, "Man, you should *never* bluff in a game like that."

This is poor advice indeed. I bluff in loose games with multi-way hands with regularity—albeit less than in a "normal" game.

I'll start by highlighting the many spots you likely shouldn't barrel in looser games. First, as a general rule, don't C-bet flops you miss into four or more opponents unless there's money behind and you have significant equity-when-called. With that many players in the hand (even with only three opponents), it's likely someone hit the flop.

For example, say you're playing 2-5 with $400 stacks. You raise pre-flop to $25 with A♥K♦ and get called in four places. There's $125 in the pot—and there's a relatively shallow stack-to-pot ratio of about 3. The flop comes J♦9♣5♣. You probably shouldn't C-bet the flop. You're almost certain to get called on a flop like this one (possibly in multiple spots), since many hands might connect with the jack, the nine, and the clubs. And if you do get called, you won't have much money left to barrel effectively on the turn.

Furthermore, it's not entirely clear which turn cards would be good to barrel. Would the 2♥ be a good card? It's probably about as good as you could hope for. But I wouldn't expect anyone with a jack to fold. And you might even get calls from hands like A-9 or K-9.

The situation is different, though, with deeper stacks and when your hand has equity-when-called. Let's say you're playing $1,000 stacks instead. You raised pre-flop to $25 with A♣K♣ and got

called in four places. There's $125 in the pot, but this time the stack-to-pot ratio is about 8. With the higher stack-to-pot ratio, you'll be able to fire multiple barrels if you'd like. Your chance to win the pot doesn't evaporate just because someone called on the flop.

Say the flop comes J♣T♠3♠, giving you a gutshot, two overcards, and a backdoor nut flush draw. If everyone checks to you, you might want to C-bet this flop.

You'll get called, sure. The jack, ten, and spades connect with too many hands to expect four folds. But this bet is not designed to immediately win the pot. It's designed for other things:

1. Your bet thins the field to prevent someone from spiking an unlikely set or two pair on the turn that they will never fold.

2. Your action sets up betting on future rounds and keeps the nuts in your range. With this bet, you're telling the story you could easily have a set of jacks or tens, but if you check the flop you essentially deny the possibility you're holding these hands.

3. It builds a pot worth stealing, and takes advantage of even loose players' tendencies to get skittish when playing enormous pots. Most loose players know that J-7 is probably not good on a J-T-3 flop if someone else wants to put $1,000 in the pot by the river.

4. It gives your opponents a chance to raise if they flopped big, thus giving you information and allowing you to fold out of the hand if that's your best action to take.

This fourth point is important. In multi-way pots, people don't like to slowplay big hands when draws are out there. They're much more inclined to raise early to protect their hands and to charge other players who they believe are drawing.

An opponent's raise can be considered an early warning system for your barreling attempts. Instead of picking you off while you vainly fire three barrels totaling nearly $1,000 at this $125 pot, the player with J-T or A-J or a set on a J♣T♠3♠ board is usually inclined to let you off the hook for just the price of your C-bet. You bet the flop, they raise, and you say, "Thanks for not sandbagging and hiding your hand to the turn and river."

Actually, don't say that. Just think it. Don't talk about strategy at the table. It can be annoying to other players, you reveal too much about your strategies, players often respond with information that's not true, and in general nothing good can come of it.

But to get back to the point at hand. These are the justifications that support your C-bet barrels at looser tables. The goal isn't to get everyone to fold immediately, because that probably won't happen. Can the bet still make sense even if you're fairly sure someone will call? Yes. As long as it likely sets up future barrels that can help you steal a pot. If not, it's nearly always best to forgo a C-bet.

For example, say you bet a J♣T♠3♠ flop for $100 and get called in two spots. There's $425 in the pot, and you have two opponents.

In a loose game, there's no reason to assume your two opponents have any particular type of hand. On a J♣T♠3♠ flop,

callers could have jacks, tens, threes, spades, and straight draws (including gutshots) around the jack and ten. That's a lot of hands, many of which aren't particularly strong.

Also, flush draws specifically are a relatively small subset of all possible hands. You can't safely assume that someone has the flush if the flush card comes on the turn—in fact, a card like the 5♠ may be a great card to barrel, since if your opponents don't have the flush, they may be loath to call.

But say the turn is the 7♣. This card conveniently gives you a flush draw with your A♣K♣. This possibility is an important reason you would barrel a pot like this to start with. The backdoor flush gives you the chance to catch a big draw on the turn. It's also a disguised draw. If the backdoor flush hits the river, your opponents may not give you credit. It's the type of pot that can win you their entire $1,000 stack, while there's relatively little threat to your whole $1,000 stack.

Say your opponents check the turn, and you bet $300 into the $425 pot. This leaves you about $575 for a river bet, which would be a very credible final barrel if it comes to it. In the meantime, it's a stiff proposition for your opponents to call $300 from out of position in a 2-5 game with nearly $600 behind. Even if they are that loose, they're unlikely to call this bet with a weak jack, ten, or a gutshot. They might even fold some hands stronger than these.

Even if you know these players and they usually call to the bitter end, they might surprise you. Often players make the mistake of assuming something never happens when it actually happens rarely, like ten percent of the time. There's a big

difference between never and ten percent. These small percentages can add up to great significance when you analyze situations properly.

So barreling isn't a complete no-go in multi-way pots and loose games. But, you want to slow down blind barreling, where you bet any two cards because opponents happened to check. A blind-barreling strategy works well in games where people generally like to fold their extra weak hands. But when they're always calling, it's often a poor strategy and earns you neither chips nor folds.

But you still want to attack pots when stacks are deep, when you have equity-when-called, and when the players who call are unlikely to have a strong made hand.

Getting it right will take some experimentation. You'll need to push a few hands to the limit to see how far your opponents will go to call you down. You may find your opponents are absolute slaves to the call, unwilling to let anyone win a hand without a showdown. But you're more likely to find opponents who will indeed fold to barrels. As long as you pick your spots with some care, you should be able to use this skill to improve your win rate, even when half the table sees every flop.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In Skill #4, I haven't given you a lot of guidance about when to barrel and when not to barrel. That guidance begins with Skill #5. But barreling in general is a profitable strategy in any game type

where your opponents are playing too loose pre-flop and not seeing a ton of showdowns.

Here's a quick test to decide if barreling will be profitable. Watch twenty hands. Count how many go to the flop multi-way (i.e., three-or-more handed). Also, count how many go to showdown—and not just get checked down to showdown, but where someone had to call a significant bet along the way. If more than half the hands play multi-way, but four or fewer go to showdown, there's a great chance that barreling will be a profitable strategy.

When a lot of players see flops, but most hands don't get to showdown, players are too loose pre-flop, and they're folding many of their weak hands post-flop—exactly the dynamic you can exploit for greater profit.

In fact, unless the game is really wild, with players getting all-in constantly with pots, and side pots, and side-side pots (if you've played casino poker for more than a few dozen hours, you know what I'm talking about) there's a good chance that barreling will bring you more chips.

Beginning with our 2-5 skills, improving at no-limit hold 'em gets tougher. I promised in this book to make the game clearer and more accessible. And my goal is to do just that. I want to give you an understandable framework so you can improve step by step.

But in reality, no-limit hold 'em isn't tic-tac-toe. There's a lot to it. And quite frankly, it's complicated. You aren't going to read one book and understand it all. So from now on, I'll recommend

books (mine and others) should you want to learn more about the skill we just covered.

To learn about barreling in greater depth, I recommend another of my books, *Playing The Player*. If you're working on understanding when to barrel, when to back off, and when to challenge opponents who may be barreling at you, *Playing The Player* covers the topic in great depth, but also in plain language without a bunch of equations. If you can read and understand this book, you'll get a lot out of *Playing The Player*. In fact, I recommend you read that book next.

But I'm not going to leave you with just a recommendation. In the next skill, you'll learn how board texture can affect the success rate of the barrels you're learning to fire with confidence.

Skill #5. Evaluating Board Texture

Before the flop, the game is always the same. Everyone gets two cards. The best hand is always A-A. Next is K-K. And so on.

Once the flop comes, everything changes. Or, rather, two things change. First, the order of hand rankings change. Unless the flop comes ace high, A-A will no longer be the best hand. Usually top set will be the best hand. Then middle set. Then bottom set. Then top two pair. And so on.

Second, the relative equities of the hands will also change. This is perhaps a tricky concept.

Before the flop, for example, A-A is the best hand, and K-K is the second best. But A-A is actually much better than K-K. Q-Q is the third-best hand, but the difference between it and K-K is smaller than the difference between K-K and A-A.

T-8 suited is a better hand than 7-5 suited. They aren't separated in the rankings by just a single hand. There are several hands between T-8 and 7-5 suited. Yet, they actually run close together in equity—there is much less difference in real strength between T-8 and 7-5 suited than between K-K and Q-Q.

So, pre-flop, you could rank hands from best to worst, but numeral rankings wouldn't tell the entire story. The relative equities of each hand are also important.

The flop not only changes hand rankings, but also changes the strength differences between them. The study of how each flop (or board) type alters hand rankings and equities is referred to as the study of board texture.

Board texture is the primary wrinkle in this game. It's the reason no-limit hold 'em is a complex, difficult game like chess, and not a simple one like blackjack.

The better you understand how board texture affects hand rankings and equities, the better you'll become at making barreling and value-betting decisions. And the better you'll be at no-limit hold 'em. And the better you'll get at making money.

STATIC VERSUS DYNAMIC BOARDS

In no-limit hold 'em there are 22,100 possible flops. Each of these flops creates a unique ordering of hand values for the cards held by each player at the table, and a unique distribution of hand equities. If you had a central processing unit implanted in your brain, you could study each of these 22,100 flops independently to understand perfectly how each affects hand ranking and equity distribution.

If you're not yet enhanced with unfathomable computing power, twenty-two thousand unique outcomes is just way too much information to calculate and retain. It makes sense, therefore, to put different flop types into groups, where a given group of flops tends to behave in a certain way.

The most important grouping is the distinction between static and dynamic flops. A *static flop* is one like K♠7♦3♥—where the hand values (particularly hands near the top of the pile like 7-7, K-7, A-K, and K-Q) are relatively unlikely to change on the turn or river. If you're ahead on the flop, you'll probably still be ahead on the river. In this example, either you hold a king or you don't. There's no flush draw available. And the only straight draw is a gutshot between the 7 and the 3. Only one overcard (an ace) can come on a subsequent street to beat you if you hold the king.

A *dynamic flop* is one like 9♣7♠4♣—where hand values (again, particularly the ones at the top of the heap like 4-4, J-J, A-9, and T-9) are likely to change significantly on the turn and river. Several factors can make a flop dynamic. But the most important one is a "low highest" card—meaning, where the highest card on the flop is a relatively low card. When the highest card on the flop is a 9 or lower, as in this case, your flop is dynamic, since it's likely one, or possibly two, overcards will come by the river. These overcards can completely upset the ordering of hands.

Flush and straight draws can also make a flop dynamic. But players tend to overestimate the importance of draws, compared to simply the rank of the highest card on the flop. As you know, a pair of jacks beats a pair of nines just as surely as a flush. But it's

a lot easier to make a pair of jacks, so the reordering of hands is more drastic when an overcard hits the board than a flush card.

Here's the math behind a jack hitting versus a flush completing. Say the flop comes 9♣7♠4♣. There are 55 total possible flush-draw hands, and if I started counting them all for this flop—A♣K♣, A♣Q♣, A♣J♣, A♣T♣, A♣8♣, etc.—and I counted every possible combination, I'd get 55 hands.

In hold 'em, this is always the number of possible flush-draw hands when two of any suit hit the flop. 55.

There are a total of 180 possible hands that have a jack in them (excluding J-J). That's more than three times as many flush-drawing hands.

So, say I hold A-9 on this 9♣7♠4♣ flop. More hands leapfrog me in the rankings if a jack hits than if a club hits. When a club hits, only 45 hands improve to beat A-9 (plus a few stray two pair hands). It's 45 hands, not 55, because the appearance of a third club eliminates the possibility of hands using that card. That is, if the turn is the 2♣, no one can hold A♣2♣.

But when a jack hits the board, any two cards that include a jack improve to beat A-9. That's 135 possible combinations—far more than the 45 possible flushes. Of course, sometimes the flop action will eliminate many of the hands with a jack and another random card. But sometimes the flop action won't eliminate many hands—if it goes check-check, for instance. Or if someone makes a C-bet, he could be betting any two cards.

In any event, an overcard hitting the turn will usually overturn the ordering of hands as much if not more than a flush card.

There's more to say on this topic. For now, keep in mind that static flops are ones where hand rankings—yours and your opponents'—are unlikely to change much on the turn and river. Dynamic flops are ones where hand rankings are likely to change significantly on the turn and river.

Static flops—K-7-3, K-Q-4, A-9-5, Q-J-2, K-6-6—will typically feature one or two high cards. These flops become semi-static when there's also a flush draw present. And when the flop also contains a straight draw, or is all one suit—flops like A♣Q♠9♣ or K♦7♦6♦—then they've slid toward a gray area between static and dynamic. Even on flops such as these, there's a good chance the player who flops top pair will continue to hold the best hand by the river. But clearly, added straight and flush possibilities muddy the situation.

On the other end, a rainbow 8-4-2 flop is dynamic, even without flush draws. It's just too likely an overcard will hit on either the turn or river. When you add a flush draw, it gets even more dynamic. If you straighten the cards like 8-7-5, it also gets more dynamic.

Remember that with static flops, there are large equity differences between the various hand levels. If you flop a set on a static board, you're nearly a lock against anyone else. If you flop two pair including top pair, you're a big favorite over any one-pair hand. If you flop top pair with a good kicker, you're a big favorite over someone with a lesser kicker, and you're a pretty big favorite over middle or bottom pair.

As you move down from the best to the worst hand, the equity differences between each set of hands is large.

On dynamic flops, equities tend to run closer together. For instance, take a dynamic flop like 8♣7♠5♣. And consider three hands playing this flop—A♣Q♣, J♠J♣, and 8♦6♦. Each of these hands comes from very different hand tiers. But all three of them have equity against one another. There's no clear ordering of best to worst, and it would be difficult to convince the player holding any of these three hands they're so far behind they might as well give up.

The strategic implications of static versus dynamic boards are many. But for now I'll drill down on one last idea. On static boards, if you bet, you're presenting a clear threat. "Whatever hand you have," your bet says, "I have a better one. And against a better hand you have little chance to win."

On dynamic boards, however, a bet doesn't carry the same threat. At best, a bet says, "I have a hand that has a good chance to win," to which an opponent easily could say, "So do I." And there's a call.

So what does any of this have to do with Skill #4, barreling?

In general, on a static board, you need fewer barrels to "get the job done" than on a dynamic board. Seen the other way, if your bluffs haven't worked after betting the flop and turn on a static board, there's a good chance you should give up. But if your bluff bets haven't worked on a dynamic board, you may still want to give a river bluff a shot. It's likely your opponents are still drawing and by the river, have missed everything. That, or they'll worry that your river bet means you outdrew them.

Consider these examples:

In both cases, it's a 2-5 game with $1,000 stacks. Two players limp. You make it $25 to go on the button and the limpers call. There's $82 in the pot.

First, the flop comes K♦Q♠3♥. Your opponents check, and you bet $60. The first limper folds, and the second limper calls.

The turn is the 6♥. Your opponent checks, and you bet $160. He calls.

The river is the 6♦. Your opponent checks.

In a typical 2-5 game, you should probably give up if you're bluffing. (Notice that I never told you what hand you held. For the purposes of this example, it's not important.)

Why should you give up? On a K♦Q♠3♥ flop, when your opponent calls your $60, he could have a king or a queen or a straight draw—hands like A-T and J-T. He could have even better hands like two pair, or a set. And it's possible (with some player types) that he's got a hand weaker than a queen.

But it's unlikely he called with too many weaker hands than a queen. It would not be normal for most players to call this flop with a hand like 9-8, or 6-4, or even 2-2. Therefore, the fact that he called has meaning. And since you'd expect your opponent to have folded a good portion of weak hands or hands that totally missed, the fact that he didn't fold makes his average remaining hand considerably stronger.

In this example, the turn brings a brick. He checks again. You bet again—a largish bet for a typical 2-5 game. Your bet says something clear on this static board. "Ok, I know you flopped some kind of hand, but I really think I have you beat."

When your opponent calls, in effect he's saying, "I'm not sure about that."

On a static board like K-Q-3-6, both the bettor and the caller are clearly saying they have made hands, and each person feels there's a good chance their hand is best.

On the river, the board is now K-Q-3-6-6. The confidence in each player doesn't change much. The caller still feels his hand is best. If you bluff, it's a pure power play. A river bet says, "Ha! I've got a monster, and I've got you on the hook for the full ride." For the bluff to succeed, your opponent must understand this implied dialogue (not a good assumption about many low-stakes players), and your opponent must also believe you. He must also have the discipline to lay down a hand you know he likes.

In general, this is a losing bluff strategy. You don't barrel to muscle people off hands you know they like. The goal of barreling is to catch your opponent with too many bad hands, and watch them fold to get rid of them. In this hand, on your K-Q-3-6-6 board, the flop barrel accomplishes this (because many hands look pretty weak on a K-Q-3 flop). The turn barrel also does this by getting an opponent to relinquish all his marginal hands after he called a flop, hands like A-T and Q-9. By the time the turn is bet and called, the caller will have a small remaining set of fairly strong hands. Barreling time, for this pot at least, is over.

Consider a different board. It's the same 2-5 game with $1,000 stacks and the same pre-flop action (two limp-callers).

This time, however, the flop comes 9♣7♠4♣. Your opponents check, you bet $60, the first limper folds, and the second limper calls.

The turn is the 5♦. Your opponent checks, you bet $160, and he calls.

The river is the K♦. Your opponent checks again on this 9♣7♠4♣5♦K♦ board

You might consider firing a final barrel of perhaps $300 into the $522 pot. Why is this situation different?

Because this board is dynamic. Your opponent could have been calling with a variety of different hand types. He could hold a one-pair hand like A-9 or T-T. He could hold a flush draw like A♣J♣. He could hold a pair, plus a straight draw, such as 7-6 or 6-5.

The implied dialog on this board is very different from the one on the static board above. When you bet the turn, you're not representing any particular sort of hand. But because you raised pre-flop, many players will tend to give you credit for a hand like A-A or Q-Q.

More importantly (remember, barreling is mostly about what your opponents might hold), your opponent could hold anything from a pair to a flush draw to a straight draw, to a combination of two or three of those things. A player might call the turn on a board like 9♣7♠4♣5♦ for lots of reasons. And by no means do all of them imply the player feels they have a strong hand worth showing down.

The river card—the K♦—is likely a bad card for the caller almost no matter what hand he holds. If he has a flush draw, he missed. Likewise, all the straight draws missed. Even if he held a

hand like T-T, he now has to worry you had something like A-K and have outdrawn him.

The bottom line? Because the flop started out dynamic, your opponent will likely have found more hands to call with on the flop and turn. But by the river, a significant percentage of these hands will have bricked out. Your opponent can still have plenty of weak hands he'll consider folding out.

DRY VERSUS WET BOARDS

A *dry board* is one that has few available draws. K♦7♠2♣, for example, is the quintessential dry board, with no flush or straight draws. And this is also a static board.

But dry and static are not identical. For example, 8♣4♠2♦ is a dry board. But it's also a dynamic board.

A *wet board* is one that's not dry. (I didn't make these terms up, I promise.) So T♦8♦7♠ is a quintessential wet board because of the flush and straight draws present. It's also a dynamic board.

Wet boards tend to be dynamic. But some might consider a board like K♦Q♠3♠ wet, but it would only qualify as somewhat dynamic.

I mention these terms because you'll hear them frequently from other players, writers, and coaches. Personally, I think this dry-versus-wet thing is overdone. I think the static-versus-dynamic distinction is more useful to making good decisions.

Players will tend to find more hands they think are worth calling on the flop and perhaps also the turn, when the board is wet than when it's dry.

For example, when the flop is K♦7♠2♣, if you bet, and one or more opponents call, they'll tend to have a king, or sometimes a seven, or a lesser pair. Since relatively few hands fit these criteria, if you bet, you'll see a fairly high fold rate against a typical 2-5 player.

On the other hand, when the flop is Q♦9♠6♦, if you bet and one or more opponents call, they'll tend to have a queen, or a nine, or maybe a six, or unimproved pocket pair. The caller can also have a straight draw (open-ended or gutshot), or a flush draw. Any connected hand from K-Q down to 6-5 will have hit something on this flop. Any one-gap hand from A-Q down to 6-4 will have something on this flop. Any two-gap hand from K-T down to 8-5 will have something on this flop. Any two diamonds will have something on this flop.

Obviously, that's a large number of hands, all of which can claim to have hit this flop. The thing is, however, that while a large number of hands has hit this flop, very few hands have hit it hard. Nearly all of these hands will feel like they need to improve on the turn to really have something.

The great thing about a Q♦9♠6♦ flop is that the cards that improve most hands are obvious. A ten, for instance, hits nearly everything that called the flop. Say the T♣ comes on the turn, making the board Q♦9♠6♦T♣. Here's what happens to a few hands that called the flop. Q-J becomes top pair with an open-

ended straight draw. T-9 becomes two pair. K-J makes a straight. 9-8 becomes a pair and a double-gutshot straight draw. 8-7 becomes a straight. T-8 becomes a pair and a double-gutshot straight draw. And so forth.

Almost all the hands that called the flop will feel like they improved on a ten turn card.

A deuce or four on the turn is the opposite—it misses nearly every hand.

So here's how this type of board works. Say you bet a Q♦9♠6♦ flop and get two calls. The turn brings the 4♣. If you bet, most of the time both opponents will fold. Why? Because the likelihood was that both players hit the flop, but neither hit it hard (with Q-J or better). Since the four completes few likely hands, neither player will feel like they improved, and both are likely to fold to a nice-sized turn bet.

This tends to be true on wet boards that have loosely connected straight possibilities. Boards like K-T-7, Q-T-6, K-9-7, J-8-6, and the like, feature gaps between both the top-and-middle cards, and the middle-and-bottom cards. This makes it easier to flop a gutshot and harder (relatively) to flop open-ended. It also broadens the range of hands that feel they hit the board, but it reduces the overall equity each of these hands has against a strong top-pair or overpair hand.

Truly wet boards like T♦9♦7♠ are trickier if you're barreling. Many hands will feel like they've hit this board. But the hands people make on a flop like this tend to be stronger and with more equity against an overpair. It's much easier to flop combination hands like a pair plus an open-ended draw, or a straight draw plus

a flush draw on a board like this. Players like to stick with these combo hands to the end. These boards also offer more possibilities for made hands (i.e., J-8 and 8-6 make straights on the flop). All these factors combined make this board tricky to barrel against.

Consider one primary takeaway about dry versus wet boards. On dry boards (and these also include many paired boards like 8-8-2), if you bet the flop, you can expect a fairly high fold rate (because many hands miss dry flops). But more of the hands that call the flop will want to see it through to the end. So it often makes sense to bet once and give up on these boards. Or, if you bet twice, to give up on the river if called.

On somewhat wet boards like Q-9-6, you shouldn't even consider betting just once and giving up. You're so likely to have your first bet called, if you fire that one bluff and give up when called, you'll burn through money. But these are terrific boards on which to bet twice. You bet the flop, fully expecting to get called. Then you avoid a danger card like a jack, ten, or eight on the turn. If the turn card bricks for this flop, you bluff a nice amount and win more than your share of these kinds of pots.

On very wet boards like T♣9♠7♣, concede the pot if you hold a hand like A♦4♦ that doesn't connect in any way. So many hands with real equity connect with this board, you should restrict your bluff barrels to those times you hold a hand that also has a piece of the board.

TWO NON-ACE WHEEL CARDS

This is a small point, but it should help in immediate ways, and also provide insight into board texture in general.

Consider two boards. The first is Q♥7♦3♥. The second is Q♥4♦3♥. Very similar. If you bet the first flop and someone calls, usually your opponent will have either a queen, a seven, or a flush draw, with gutshot draws 6-5, 6-4, and 5-4 also possible.

If you bet the second flop and someone calls, usually your opponent will have a queen, a flush draw, or a straight draw. Considerably more straight draws are available with this board, including 7-6, 7-5, 6-5, and also A-2 and A-5. (6-2 and 5-2 are also possible, though unlikely).

In general, boards whose flops have two non-ace wheel cards will generally see more calls—and more folds on the turn—than similar boards without these two wheel cards. With these cards present, someone on the Q-4-3 flop can hold a gutshot draw with A-2 or A-5.

Since many players play any ace, these gutshot draws are fairly common on two wheel-card flops. As long as a third wheel card doesn't hit the turn, you should probably barrel.

For example, say three players limp in a 2-5 game. You raise to $35 on the button with K♦Q♦. Two out of three limpers call. There's $117 in the pot.

The flop comes J♦5♣3♠. Your opponents check, and you bet $80. One player calls. There's $277 in the pot.

The turn is the 9♥. Your opponent checks. You should probably bet the turn. The presence of the two wheel cards on the flop should make you more inclined to bet, since this provides the added chance your opponent called the flop with an A-4 or A-2 gutshot.

MONOCHROME BOARDS

A monochrome board is one that comes all of one suit. These boards make flushes available. For the most part, they're scary. When players don't hold a flush card they immediately think, "Gee, I could be drawing dead already. And people love playing suited hands."

This fear is real, obviously. But it's often overblown. It's hard to make a flush. Let's look at the basic math.

You're playing a loose opponent who plays any two suited cards. Loose players who like a hand like 7-2 suited also tend to play hands like Q-9 offsuit, A-4 offsuit, 9-8 offsuit, and so on. For the sake of argument, let's say this player will play about half of all possible hands.

There are 1,326 total possible hold 'em hands. A flop removes three possible cards, which removes from consideration all the hands that would have included one of the flopped cards (you can't, say, hold A♠K♥ pre-flop if the K♥ is on the flop).

This leaves 1,176 total possible hold 'em hands post-flop. Our opponent plays half of these, so about 588 hands. Let's ballpark it at 600.

When the flop comes three of a suit, there are 45 possible flushes. This number never changes. With three same-suited cards on the flop, there are exactly ten left in the deck.

So of these 600 hands your opponent is playing, only 45 of them are flopped flushes. Therefore, this player playing any two suited cards will flop a flush on a three-flush board just 7.5 percent of the time.

That's not that scary, is it? It shouldn't be. The math doesn't change a ton for tighter players either. When players are tight, they play fewer hands overall, but they also will have folded some of the flush combinations pre-flop. In the end, they'll flop a flush only a small percentage of the time as well.

Although flushes are hard to flop, many players have an outsized fear of them because a flush is an obvious threat.

This misunderstanding about the frequency of flopped flushes often means you can aggressively play monochrome boards to steal more than your share of pots.

BOARDS WITH (OR WITHOUT) KEY CARDS

Opponents will often "fork" their ranges pre-flop. By fork I mean they'll divide their hand sets pre-flop into two or more sets by

choosing different actions for each. The most common way is limping with some hands and raising with others. Also, against a raise, they'll call with some hands and 3-bet with others. (It's usually correct to fork your ranges in the second scenario, though weak players do a poor job of choosing which hands go in which range.) A subtler player forks ranges pre-flop through bet sizing. He'll raise to $20 with some hands, but raise to $30 with others. (This is a very bad idea. Don't do this.)

Forking is also a bad habit because it's difficult to create two different sets of hands where both sets will play well on a wide variety of flops. If you raise some hands but just call with others, you want the raising hands to be stronger on average than the calling hands. But you'll also want a mix of hands in each range so it's never too obvious which hands you're playing in which range should you miss a flop.

This, incidentally, is one of many reasons I advise against limping pre-flop. Players who limp generally fork their ranges so they're easy to exploit on certain kinds of flops. (Yet, you can't help forking when deciding between calling a raise and 3-betting.)

When your opponent has a forked range, typically due to poor range construction, each forked range will perform poorly on a prescribed set of flops that either do or don't have "key cards."

Let's explore with a simple example. Two players limp, and an aggressive player limps the button. You check the big blind. The flop comes A♣9♣6♠. You check, and both limpers check. The button bets $20.

This flop contains an ace, which in this case is a key card. Aggressive players will usually raise the button after limpers, who

typically limp low-card hands like 8♠5♠ or 2♦2♣. It would be odd for an aggressive player to limp the button with a hand that contains an ace. Therefore, the button's limping range performs poorly on most flops that contain an ace—and therefore he should rarely bet these flops. There's a good chance the bet is weak, and you should check-raise (or check-call, and plan to bet a later street) with impunity.

This example relies on the aggressive button player forking his range poorly—raising most hands, but still wanting to limp a few of his weak hands. Here, he did indeed fork his range, and didn't tell a coherent story on the flop when he bet.

But these "key-card flops" can go the other way too and thwart a player's strong hand range.

Say a player limps, and you raise to $20 with 9♥8♥ from the button. A player reraises you from the big blind to $50. You know this player well enough to know that he will reraise only with hands J-J, A-Q, and stronger. Despite this strong range, you call the $30 because both of you have over $1,000 behind, and you know you can exploit the information you have about your opponent's range on an array of boards.

The flop comes 7♣5♠4♠, giving you a gutshot. This board lacks a key card (an ace, king, or queen to pair your opponent's A-K and A-Q hands). Furthermore, it features a possible straight, and a straight-and-flush draw your opponent likely doesn't have. You, on the other hand, as a button raiser and 3-bet caller, can hold an assortment of hands that hit this flop well.

You'll typically want to see this hand through at least to the turn, and you can use the threat of having completed a hand to put pressure on your opponent.

MULTI-WAY POTS AND LOOSE GAMES

This will be the final multi-way pots and loose-games section, as proficiency in looser games wanes in importance as you move up in stakes. Also, in these game types, the most basic skills are also the most valuable ones.

The main idea here involves how the difference between four opponents and one or two opponents plays up on certain flop textures, and down on others.

Let's start with two other players. Take J♥T♥4♠. On this kind of flop, it's likely you'll make a C-bet, and one or both opponents will fold. Unimproved pocket pairs lower than tens will usually fold with two flopped overcards and draws abounding. Ace-high, when the kicker is a nine or lower, will also usually fold. Suited connectors like 6-5 or 8-6 that failed to flop even a gutshot also typically fold.

Add up all these hands, and you have a decent percentage of a typical pre-flop range that doesn't want any part of a flop like this.

So it's reasonable to expect you might pick up the pot some percentage of the time when you C-bet against one or two players.

Against four opponents, however, it's likely someone will call on a J♥T♥4♠ flop. The abundance of straight draws, flush draws, and the fact that jacks and tens are commonly held, ensures this.

As I mentioned in the barreling chapter, you may still want to bet this flop into four opponents even if you're almost certain you won't immediately win. But you want to have equity-when-called, and you want there to be significant money behind so you can play the turn and river.

Other flop textures, however, don't work the same way. Take 6♥3♣3♠, for example. If you were to bet small (i.e., half pot or less) into four opponents, I'd usually expect someone to call. But the call wouldn't mean they have a six, a three, or an overpair necessarily. They could have ace-high or even Q-J.

But if you bet bigger into the same flop, you can often convince the light callers to fold. And once you do that, there's a decent chance you can bet into four players and pick up the pot. Any single opponent is a big underdog to be holding at least a six.

If you bet big on the flop with a hand like Q-J and a backdoor flush draw, even if you get called, you often have equity. The call is more likely to be a six, or a small overpair, than it is to be a three. This is true because threes are rarely played pre-flop, and because the two threes on board leave only two threes outstanding. So your overcards have a good chance to be best if you catch one and make a pair, and you also have outs to catch the flush draw as well.

Ace-high flops can be fine to C-bet into one or two opponents, but are often a pass against four or five loose players. Say the flop comes A-9-4 and you have 8-7 suited with a backdoor flush draw.

With just one opponent, you probably should bet, hoping your opponent doesn't have an ace and folds.

But against four or five opponents, there's a strong chance someone has an ace. That's because aces make up a significant percentage of many people's pre-flop ranges. So it's unlikely four or five players will all fail to have one. Because you're likely to get called by an ace, and you have relatively little equity-when-called in this situation, give up.

On the other hand, a flop like 8♣4♣2♣ can be a great one to barrel in multi-way pots. It's harder to make flushes than most players realize, as discussed above. So even with four opponents, there's a decent chance no one's flopped a flush. On the other hand, most players will easily assume that one of their four opponents likely has a flush. If you come out betting, they'll just figure you're the one who has it.

In general, boards where hand values are closer together—generally dynamic boards with draws and medium-high cards—these boards play what we call "true" in multi-way pots with loose players. That is, these are boards where you should play your good hands fast, and give up on weaker hands. Your opponents will more easily call your bets on these boards, because everyone feels like they have a shot to win until the river card comes.

Ace-high boards also play fairly true, because when five or six people see a flop (particularly in a raised pot), usually someone has an ace.

Yet, certain static boards give you more barreling room. Cards are less connected, and fewer winning hands overall are possible. You can get through four players with decent success on a J-2-2

flop or a Q-6-3 flop, particularly with no flush draws available. If your hand has positive features like overcards or backdoor draws, it can be worth firing at these boards, and even firing again on the turn, if you're called on the flop.

The better you understand how hand ranges interact with different board textures, the better you'll seize on barreling opportunities even in multi-way pots with loose players. With static boards in particular, barreling can be very profitable as we've seen.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Understanding flop texture is a skill that takes much time and hours at the table to master. But it's the first skill we've covered so far that will help you generate huge edges over a wide variety of opponents. Typical 2-5 players understand flop texture in only the most superficial ways (i.e., three cards of a suit on the board make a flush possible). As a result, they're unaware of many situations where they're playing a strategy vulnerable to barreling or getting bluffed.

A lot of my edge when I play 2-5 comes from bluff-raising opponents who bet flops where they're unlikely to hold a hand they will think is worth defending. My edge also comes from barreling on boards where it's hard to make certain represented hands. At the same time, I back off when the board texture is likely to improve my opponents' hand strength at my expense.

People consider bluffing in poker a psychological test of wills. "Does she have it? Or is she bluffing?" In reality, my goal when I bluff is to figure out when my opponent is unlikely to have anything at all. In that moment, I want to bet and take it. You want to bluff when you believe your opponent has a relatively weak set of hands, and you want to avoid bluffing when your opponent has a relatively strong set of hands. When you understand board texture thoroughly, you'll be a long way toward being able to identify each of these scenarios.

This is another example where you're not playing your opponents, but instead you're playing the course. If you try to turn bluffing into a psychological war where you and your opponents are constantly trying to one-up one another, you're playing with fire. When you are always trying to take things to the next level, your opponents—who may be predictable and exploitable most of the time—become moving targets who are tricky to deal with. A small percentage of poker players thrive in this sort of gamesmanship, but most don't.

Generally, you're better off turning your attention away from your opponents and keeping it on the course. Many board textures will leave your opponents with weak hands. If they have folding tendencies post-flop, just take all the pots they give you. And take your pots quietly so you can take the next one too.

For an in-depth look at board textures, I recommend my book *How To Read Hands At No-Limit Hold 'em,* which discusses in detail how to break down board texture to determine how friendly or unfriendly a given board will be to your barrels and bluffs.

Skill #6. Making Live Reads

The way you get an edge when you're still at the 1-2 level is simple. You play tight pre-flop, you refuse to pay off opponents who don't bluff enough, and you value bet, relying on the fact that 1-2 players are willing to call too frequently with bad hands.

When you begin to tackle 2-5, you encounter opponents who have learned not to call down too frequently with bad hands. But their bad hands haven't gone away, because these players still play too many hands pre-flop. Instead of calling down with their bad hands, these more sophisticated opponents take occasional stabs at the pot with them, and fold them out the rest of the time.

Our first two skills at the 2-5 level have focused on trying to get these players to fold bad hands. Barreling is how you force them to fold. And understanding board texture allows you to pick your spots to barrel with more precision.

This next skill, making live reads, will help you get opponents to fold. But it's also the first time we'll look at opponents who make bets to try to get you to fold improperly.

Live reads is a wide category. It encompasses all the little bits of information available to you at a poker table. Physical tells are the category most people think of when they consider live reads, but for me at least, physical tells aren't the most important. For me, the most important live read is the bet-sizing tell.

After bet-sizing tells, which I attempt to read on a large percentage of hands I play, I consider a player's physical appearance. How a player looks can give you useful (though obviously not infallible) clues about the sorts of plays they're likely to make.

I also use my opponents' bet-sizing habits to decode certain plays they make. Regular players spend a lot of time together, and their strategies and thought processes rub off. This phenomenon creates little trends where a specific play comes into vogue among regular card room players. If you play enough to be aware of what comes into vogue, you'll start to decode an opponent's play.

After bet-sizing, I do consider some physical tells. But I'm not very good at the, "Watch how the arteries pulse in her neck," kind of thing. The ones I watch for are less dramatic. I use timing tells a fair amount, where you get clues about an opponent's hand based on how quickly and/or smoothly they act. Beyond that, players give off lots of little clues about their attitude toward their hands. And they often give off these clues after they have mentally given up on a pot.

In other words, players will often subtly reveal they're planning to fold before you actually commit money to the pot. When one of your main goals is to barrel players off bad hands, this type of tell is very useful.

Unfortunately, while I can describe many different live reads, in this area there's absolutely no substitute for experience. You'll have to spend hours and hours at the table with your eyes open to learn how this stuff works.

But I can point you in the right direction, showing the specific things I look for, how I interpret them, and how I use them to make decisions. At the very least, this should put you on the right track to mastering live-read skills.

BET-SIZING TELLS

It's hard to overstate how important bet-sizing tells can be. For years, I never wrote on this topic, and felt like it wasn't worth the time. Naturally I thought bet-sizing tells were useful. But it was worked into my game on a subconscious level. When people talk about poker "feel," using bet-sizing tells were part of my "feel" for a long time. I mistakenly made the assumption that other experienced players had the same feel I had.

Then I started coaching. Students would bring me hands and I would ask them why they didn't raise a given bet here, or fold to that one there. These were decisions that seemed obvious to me because of how the bets "felt"—information coded into how they were sized. My students in many cases were unable to read the sizes and correctly pull out the information. It was then I realized how important and under-explained the topic was.

Here's the basic idea. No-limit hold 'em lets players make bets of any size they choose. Typically, 2-5 players don't have a solid

mathematical reason to choose one bet size over another. They size bets based on two factors. First, they use what is "standard" as a guide. If they see people bet around $50 on the flop, they tend to bet $50 on the flop. Second, they alter the standard size based on how they're feeling about their hand and the situation.

These feelings can run the gamut, but a few are common. First, a player who is concerned about getting drawn out on will often size a bet on the big side. If $50 is the "standard" flop bet, this player might make it $70 instead. The thinking is basically, "Hey, I don't care if anyone calls. If they all fold, at least I win. And if someone tries to draw out on me, they're going to have to pay for it."

For example, say someone holds pocket jacks and the flop comes ten-high with flush and straight draws. This is a situation people will (inaccurately) cheat their bets larger for reasons we've discussed earlier in the book.

The second common feeling is caution. As I've talked about before, once you get to 2-5, many players are preoccupied with not paying off bets with their second-best hands. The worst thing that could possibly happen, from their perspective, is that they call three times with a hand that was never best. These players invent an array of strategies designed to "see where they're at." They want information that tips them off if they're behind. So they can fold.

In this context, their strategy is rarely pure checking and calling. It usually involves making a bet at some point. This bet is a probe, like a person poking a rattlesnake to see if it's alive. They

want a low-risk way to poke their opponents and see if they like their hands.

A cautious bet will typically shade smaller than the "standard" size. A flop bet that's usually $50 might become $30 or $35.

We've already skimmed the edges of bet-sizing tells without calling them such. In Skill #2—not paying people off—we drew a distinction between a player who made a big turn bet, say $130, and one who made a small turn bet, say $60. The meaning of the small bet might be ambiguous for a typical 1-2 player. But a big bet was far too likely to be the goods to consider trying to catch someone bluffing.

In the terms I use above, players unnecessarily fork their ranges with different bet sizing depending on how they feel about their hand and the board. Typically, "good hands" get one bet size, while "not so good" hands get a smaller one.

This is a terrible way to play no-limit hold 'em, as you permit opponents to fold to your big bets and raise your small ones, ensuring you get the wrong outcome in each case. Before we talk about how to read and utilize bet-sizing tells further, I want to raise a small but important idea about how you size your own bets.

Never vary your bet sizes within a range based on the cards you hold. Almost as bad, is choosing your bet size among two similar options based on what you want your opponent to do (i.e., small for call, big for fold). When you do this, you give away potentially enormous amounts of information. Furthermore, you get very little compensation for it. Mathematically, the difference between betting $70 with a hand you like, and $40 with a hand you like

less, gives you relatively little upside. If it works exactly as you want it to, you do only slightly better than if you'd have just bet $50 or $55 with either hand.

The downside to forking your range with bet sizing is potentially disastrous. Players who read and use these tells will absolutely pick you apart—it's nearly as bad as just showing them your cards.

So don't do it. In general, pick one bet size and use it for all the hands you intend to bet. Now this bet size can vary depending on the circumstance. If the pot is $200, choose a bigger bet than if the pot were $100. If the board is dynamic (especially if there are lots of drawing hands available), choose a bigger bet than if the board is static. If the stack sizes are deep, choose a bigger bet than if they're shallow.

In fact, you can even vary the size of your bet based on the strength of your overall range of hands. If you're in a situation where you'll have lots of flush draws, and the flush comes in, feel free to bet bigger. And likewise if you're in a situation where your overall range of hands is somewhat weak, bet smaller. Just don't bet big when you actually have a flush and smaller when you have just two pair or you're bluffing.

If you're certain your opponent can't decode your bet sizing, you can break my rule here and choose sizes for specific hands. But you should be nearly certain your opponent has no decoding skills. The amount you stand to gain from this practice is small compared to the risk if you're wrong about your opponent.

Finally, poor bet sizing is a bad habit if your goal is to play 5-10 and higher. Regulars at the higher stakes have fundamental

problems with how they play. For example, just like players at 1-2, they play too many hands pre-flop. But they're playing 10-25 instead of 1-2 because they can decipher and ruthlessly punish players who have prominent bet-sizing tells. So work on it. Before you bet, pick a bet size that makes sense given the situation, and all the hands you might have and would be betting. Consistently bet that amount with those presumed hands in your range.

Back to your opponents' bet-sizing tells. Most regular players at 2-5 will have some sort of exploitable bet-sizing tendencies. These tells are most dramatic when there's more at stake. In other words, you'll see tells when emotions are running high, and stacks come into play.

Here's an example. Two players limp. You make it $25 to go on the button. Both limpers call. There's $82 in the pot.

The flop comes Q♥9♥3♣. Your opponents check, and you bet $60. The first limper folds, and the second one calls.

The turn is the T♦. Your opponent bets. This is a scenario in which many 2-5 players will fork their range by choosing different bet sizing with different hands.

There's $202 in the pot. Say your opponent bets $140. This is the "big" bet. Your opponent is betting out because he has a strong hand, and is concerned if he checks, you'll check it back for a free card. I'd expect to see at least two pair from this opponent.

Now, say your opponent bets $70. This is the "small" bet. Your opponent is betting here because he's got something—but it's not good enough that he wants to commit his stack. He doesn't want you to check it back for a free card (he'd prefer you

just fold instead). He also doesn't want to check and have you bet $160.

His bet is designed to jam you up. The goal is to get a cheap fold or to prevent you from putting him in a tough spot. At this bet size, I'd expect to see a number of pair-plus-draw hands like K-Q, J-9, K-T, A♥3♥, and the like.

Further, his fork isn't completely clean. There might be a few strong hands sprinkled into his small-bet range. The nuts—K-J in particular—might find its way into this range, since most players are less concerned about getting outdrawn when they hold the nuts. But this player might bet big with the nuts—or might even check it.

Overall, the two bet sizes in this situation fork into two camps: one, strong hands the player is willing to get all-in with (the larger bets); and two, marginal hands the player will likely be willing to fold on the river to a big bet (the smaller bets).

Note how the psychology works in this hand. By the turn, the board is Q♥9♥3♣T♦. There are three cards to a straight on board, as well as a flush draw. Anyone holding a good made hand like two pair or better is concerned about nearly half the deck coming on the river. At the 2-5 level, players try to avoid getting drawn out on in these spots by betting bigger on the turn. And they're less concerned about concealing the strength of their holdings.

On the flop, it's often harder to interpret bet sizing. Say a player opens for $20 and you call on the button. There's $47 in the pot. The flop comes J♥9♥5♦. It's a draw-heavy flop, but your opponent could bet $20 or $35, and it would be unclear what

these bet sizes mean. There's less at stake on the flop, since stacks are not yet threatened or in play.

If I were tempted to raise this flop bet (maybe I believed the player was betting a weak range into my stronger range), I might be more inclined to raise a $20 bet and less inclined to raise a $35 bet. But in my experience, it's wrong to use bet sizing on the flop as primary data. It's better used as a tie-breaker.

Occasionally, you'll find a player who wants to overbet $70 into $47 on a flop like J♥9♥5♦. This typically means the player has exactly one pair—usually an overpair or top pair, top kicker—and is trying to avoid getting drawn out on. Yet, as the general level of play has improved over the years, I see this particular bet-sizing blunder less frequently.

Even among players who recognize and exploit bet-sizing tells, many don't take full advantage of them because they're too eager to be the aggressor. When an opponent bets, they want to "retake the initiative" by raising or calling or betting out of turn on the next street. They look at many post-flop situations as "raise or fold."

Everything about this line of thinking is wrong. Having the "initiative" is essentially a bogus concept. Very few situations after the flop are truly raise or fold. Calling usually has a strong value and purpose in-between these two options, such that most decisions come down to either a raise or call or a call or fold decision.

Beyond this, there's another huge problem with wanting to be the aggressor post-flop. If you're the one betting or raising, then you're the one potentially giving off bet-sizing tells, and your

opponents have no opportunity to give them to you. This creates an information imbalance that always works against you.

Simply put, if you constantly insist on betting and raising, then your opponents can't bet, and you can't glean bet-sizing tells from their actions. Be patient. Learn to draw out hands through the turn and river, and throw the action back so you can catch your opponents in a big bet-sizing error.

Here's a typical example. Say a player opens for $20, and a player in middle position calls. You're on the button with A♥7♥. You call. The blinds fold. There's $67 in the pot.

The flop comes K♥T♥7♦. You have the nut flush draw and bottom pair. The pre-flop raiser bets $35. The next player folds.

Many players are tempted to turn this hand immediately into a bluff. They want to raise here and then, if called, shove the turn. In general, I think this is a suboptimal use of a hand this strong and flexible. Right now you don't have a lot of information about what the pre-flop raiser has. And, as I said above, bet-sizing tells on the flop are not always that strong. Your opponent has bet only half pot on the flop. But what meaning this has (if any) varies from player to player, and even from card room to card room. This could be a "standard" C-bet with any old hand intended to represent the king. It could also be a hand like A-K or A-A, or even K-K.

Said simply, you don't yet know. If you raise here, and your opponent does want to play, you could be up against a strong set of hands against which your hand doesn't have the equity it looks like it should have. Against A-K, for instance, you have just the flush draw and outs for trips. The ace outs are gone. Same thing

against A-A. Against a set, you lose the trip outs also, and you have to fade a pair on the board to win with a flush.

Potentially, your hand performs better when you allow your opponent to give you information when he bets his strong hands on the turn. You do this by flat-calling the flop, seeing a turn card, and then looking for a bet-sizing tell.

Say you call. The turn is the 8♣. Your opponent should give you a pretty good idea of his hand strength with how he reacts to this card. If he checks, there's a good chance he holds a hand like Q-Q, or another hand with which he chose to C-bet, but has given up on, like 6-6 or A-2.

If he bets, his sizing is likely to reveal a great deal. There's $137 in the pot. If he bets $90 or more, there's a good chance he's got what he considers a strong hand that he wants to defend against draws. This range is likely A-K and better. Against this bet size, I would not bluff, since there's an excellent chance your opponent will simply go with his hand.

Yet, say on this K♥T♥7♦8♣ board your opponent bets just $50 or $60. This bet could be a number of things. It could be a weak king like K♣5♣. It could be a pair-plus-draw hand, like J-T or 9-8. It could be a flush draw weaker than yours.

Against a bet of this size, I would bluff-raise. Many of the hands players put in this $50 or $60 turn-bet range are exactly the hands against which you should be trying to bluff. These are hands that have your pair of sevens beaten but aren't strong enough to play for stacks. (This is a perfect example of using a bluff strategically to get your opponents off of certain parts of their

range.) These are also hands against which you likely have a full complement of outs (flush, trip, and two-pair outs).

By flat-calling the flop and waiting for your opponent to act on the turn, you allow him to give you information that's potentially useful. If you blast away on the flop, you're just gambling against your opponent's entire range.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

I know this discussion will be controversial. But there's undoubtedly information you can get by observing how a player looks. When I've seen discourse on this topic, it usually comes with a raft of racial, gender, and age-based stereotypes. According to my personal experience, there's some truth to some of those stereotypes. But as poker has evolved over the past decade, these stereotypes are less and less true. So I'll spare you the stereotypes.

Nevertheless, I do factor a player's appearance into my decision-making sometimes, so I would be remiss to avoid the topic entirely.

Generally, I consider a player's appearance to answer a specific question. The most common situation is when an opponent 3-bets pre-flop. Many 2-5 players still use an antiquated reraising strategy pre-flop, where they tend to 3-bet only premium hands, or with the occasional and random bluff. Typically against this player type, I never want to 4-bet as a bluff, since they have a premium hand the vast majority of the time.

Other 2-5 players use a more modern approach to 3-betting. This approach was developed in online play and as a result, many of the players who use this strategy have a significant history playing online. The modern approach to 3-betting involves 3-betting premium hands, along with a set of "light" hands as bluffs (what some call "3-betting light"). How many hands to 3-bet light depends on the position of players in the hand. Against this player type, it's critical to have a 4-betting strategy (including a 4-bet bluffing strategy) to correctly counter their 3-betting strategy.

Not many players are in between. Either they're old school or not. Either I never want to 4-bet bluff them, or I want to use a fairly complete 4-bet strategy against them.

Let's say I get 3-bet in a 2-5 game by someone I don't know. I quickly need to answer the question, "Is this player old or new school?"

The first piece of information I use isn't how they look, but rather the context of the play. What are the positions the initial raiser and the 3-bettor hold? An old-school player who only 3-bets premium hands tends to ignore position. After all, you're equally likely to get J-J and A-K or better from any seat at the table.

Modern 3-bettors, however, will drastically widen their 3-betting frequency in certain scenarios. When the button opens with a blind steal, the modern 3-better will reraise frequently from either blind position. When the cutoff opens, the modern 3-bettor will often reraise from the button and also from the blinds.

Therefore, if you took a survey of every hand a modern 3-bettor reraised pre-flop, you'd see that most of these hands came from the blinds or the button.

For an old-school 3-bettor, this pattern would be less pronounced. They would still 3-bet from the button some of the time, but they'd be less likely to 3-bet from the blinds, and they'd also be less sensitive to position overall since more of their 3-bets would be with premium hands.

How does this help you arrive at a solid 4-betting strategy? Well, if the 3-bet is in a "bread-and-butter" situation for a modern 3-bettor (the player is raising from the cutoff, button, or blinds), I'm more inclined to treat the player as new school. If the 3-bet is in a situation less common relative to the habits of the modern 3-bettor (a raise from almost any position), I'm more likely to think it's an old-school player.

That's when appearance comes in. In general—and I am of course generalizing—players with a modern strategy tend to be younger. Sometimes middle-aged men will play this modern strategy, but these men tend to be nerdy looking (for lack of a better term). There are always exceptions. Stay alert. Beware of sharp older players, especially women, who are well aware of these stereotypes and expectations and turn them on their head.

It's also not fair to assume because someone is young they'll play modern. I'm looking for evidence the player has significant experience in online cash games. A telltale sign is when a young player dresses down and has lots of money.

In Las Vegas, there's a player around 25. He wears a hooded sweatshirt, ragged jeans, and flip-flops nearly every day. He carries

a Jansport backpack (the kind I used for books in elementary school). And his game is 5-10 and higher, pulling fistfuls of $1,000 and $5,000 denomination chips for his buy-ins out of the front pouch of his ratty backpack.

This is not something you'd ever see outside a poker room. Young men usually don't have thousands of dollars to their names, let alone casino chips in their backpacks. Wealthy (not from poker) young men tend to dress better, especially when they go to a casino. This peculiar appearance is a huge tell that the player played significant online poker.

Say I play the following hands. In each case, the opponent is a stranger at a 2-5 game. I know they're in Las Vegas. And I know what they look like. That's it.

Hand 1: I open for $15 from five off the button. The next player raises to $50. Everyone folds back to me.

This is not a bread-and-butter 3-betting situation. Both the reraiser and I are far out of position relative to the rest of the table. No matter what my opponent looks like, if this is my first encounter with the player, I would not 4-bet bluff.

Hand 2: I open for $15 from the cutoff. The button folds, and the small blind raises to $50. The big blind folds.

This is a situation (cutoff raise, small-blind reraise) where modern 3-bettors will make the play significantly more often than old-school players. This by itself doesn't mean my opponent is a modern 3-bettor. But it's a hint. I'll look at the player's physical appearance to figure it out.

If the player is an Asian woman in her 50s, I'll likely assume (for now) she's an old-school 3-bettor.

If the player is the 25-year-old with the big chips in his backpack, I'll likely assume (for now) he's a modern 3-bettor.

If the player is a 35-year-old male wearing a suit and a lanyard for a convention of peanut farmers currently in town, I'll likely assume he's old school.

If the player is a 35-year-old male in sweats with a beard and glasses, I'll probably start out assuming that he's a modern 3-bettor, but I'll be willing to revise that read. If I play the hand and get shown A-A, and I don't see him 3-bet for another six hours, it will swing me toward considering this player more an old-school 3-bettor next time around.

In the simplest terms, this is how I use physical appearance to inform my decisions. I'm not trading very often on racial or gender stereotypes. And remember, this is just me. You're welcome to develop your own visual strategies. More typically, I'm trying to gauge the type of experience the player may have had (i.e., online, live card room, home games, small stakes, higher stakes, etc.). I use this to inform my read as to how a given player will approach certain situations.

Most importantly, as I gain more information, I change my assumptions constantly since table and betting behaviors are more important that looks.

BETTING FASHIONS

Betting fashions have been a real thing ever since I started to play poker seriously 13 years ago. In general, there are two types of

plays people make in poker. (I'm oversimplifying, but bear with me.) First, there are the "fundamental plays." You raise with A-A pre-flop. Why do you do that? Because it's a good play. It makes money. You want to raise your strong hands. This is a fundamental play.

Second, there are the "fashion plays." You check and call the flop with middle pair, but you bet out on the turn for one-third pot no matter what comes. Why did you do this? Or, more to the point, why do so many 2-5 players do this? There's nothing obviously correct about this particular play. Sure, you can rationalize it, but it's sort of arbitrary. Why not bet full pot? Why not check-raise? Why not check and call again? What is special about check-calling the flop, then betting out small on the turn with a particular kind of hand?

If you haven't played enough to know what I'm talking about, that's fine. It's almost better that you don't, actually. If you haven't been exposed to these plays, you probably won't be imitating and making them, and you'll be able to see them more clearly for what they are.

I call these kinds of plays "groupthink." Player pools at card rooms are social structures. You play with the same players every day or every week, and the social rules of human behavior kick in. You begin to copy those around you. You shy away from doing things that will set you apart, particularly if that thing is conspicuous. This is natural. It's ingrained in our brains.

Over time, certain sets of rather specific plays, often strategically unsound, become commonplace. There's no real reason to play these hands in a particular way. It's often not the

best way to play them. But everyone does it and it becomes a fashion that takes hold of many regular players in a regular game.

The first instance of groupthink I spotted was in 2003, in the Bellagio's 15-30 and 30-60 limit hold 'em games. A lot of the regulars started to play top pair, weak kicker, in a very specific way. If you bet into them on the flop, they would call. If you bet again on the turn, they would raise. If you called and checked the river, they would check it back.

It was uncanny. For a while, many of the regular players would dutifully play their top pairs this way over and over. And while you could see the logic, it wasn't optimal. There were few other hands these players played this way. So you could fairly assume someone held a weak top pair when you saw this betting pattern. (Many of these players would also fold their pairs if you reraised the turn and bet the river.)

These betting fashions, by their very nature, are often local in nature. The peculiar tics of the 2-5 Las Vegas player pool will differ from those of the 5-10 Los Angeles pool, which will differ yet again from those in Florida games, and so forth.

But be on the lookout for particular betting lines that players in your games take with specific hands. The most relevant hand types are often marginal made hands—top pair/weak kicker, or middle pairs, or draws. These are often the tougher hands to play, so many players rely on a rote approach that becomes common. If you can identify this rote betting sequence, you'll have a huge edge in all the hands where an opponent takes a fashionable betting line.

PHYSICAL TELLS

I'm not an expert on physical tells so I don't have a lot to say on the topic. I do use them sometimes, so they're worth a mention. The ones I use most fall into the general category of "lack of interest" tells. Players have these behaviors when they've looked at their cards and decided they won't play for the pot. For example, some players will look at their cards pre-flop, and if they're folding, they'll hold their cards carelessly waiting for the action to get to them.

When you see this particular tell, you can play pre-flop as if you were one seat closer to the button. If you're two off the button, for instance, you would follow my early position recommendations. But if you catch someone to your left pre-folding, you can now play using my cutoff recommendations. Over time, these small adjustments will help you squeeze a few extra bucks out of your games.

You can see lack-of-interest tells post-flop too, especially in multi-way pots. If someone misses the flop from the blinds, they'll sometimes make it obvious they don't intend to go after the pot. If you catch lack-of-interest tells from one or two players, it can make it worthwhile to take a small stab at the pot in hopes that other players are also folding.

Other tells I watch for are discomfort tells. It's hard to put into words what I look for. But many times players will give off body language that betrays a lack of confidence about the upcoming action. They're worried about something. They're worried they're

beat. They're worried they'll get drawn out on. They're worried you'll raise if they bet.

If I catch a discomfort tell, I am more likely to consider a bluff, especially one that puts stacks into play.

If you want to learn more about physical tells, I recommend the excellent books by Zachary Elwood, *Reading Poker Tells* and *Verbal Poker Tells*.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I'll be honest. It's hard to learn and identify live reads from a book. It's an area where experience will be the best teacher. But take a few things from this section.

First, live reads are important. I haven't listed that many here, but I use them all the time. It behooves you to figure out how to incorporate them into your decisions and strategies.

The reads I rely on the most are bet-sizing tells. These tells are everywhere in live no-limit cash games. Many players don't think clearly about how they bet and as a result they tend to fork their ranges in a way that gives away too much information.

Every time your opponent bets, you have a chance to glean a bet-sizing tell. If they're responding to your bet, however, and if they don't raise, they can't give you a tell. Because these tells can be so valuable, it's worth it to play a hand a little more passively. The value of raising and taking control might actually be less than the value of allowing your opponent to take another action and give off a possible tell. Always consider alternate ways to play

hands, particularly if you're considering ending the betting action early by raising or shoving pre-flop or on the flop. In live 2-5 games, I often find myself drawing hands out to the turn and river in an attempt to elicit a bet-sizing tell.

Bet-sizing tells aren't the only information you can get if you draw out a hand. You can also get a physical tell.

For instance, say your opponent bets the flop. You have a hand you might raise with, but instead you choose to call in position. The turn card completes a flush draw. Your opponent shows discomfort with the card and then bets a small amount. These two pieces of information—the physical tell and the bet-sizing tell—together can give you clear guidance about how to continue. If you're always raising flops and getting stacks in early, you miss these opportunities.

Betting fashions are another way that players give away information about their hands—if you let them. Once you become a card-room regular at certain stakes, you should be able to identify a few clear betting patterns that many of the other regulars tend to use. These patterns often involve an attempt to navigate through muddy waters with a marginal hand. First, you have to give your opponent a chance to complete the pattern. Once you see it, it's often trivial to react with the perfect counter-strategy. (Usually the counter-strategy is to blow your opponent out of the hand.)

Here's the bottom line. Many no-limit hold 'em players live in fear of the turn and river. These are the streets where scary cards often arrive. They're also the streets where the bets are biggest. In an attempt to avoid difficult play on these streets, many players

attempt to short-circuit the game by shoveling money in pre-flop and on the flop.

If you wish to be a superior player, however, you must resist this temptation. The turn and river will eventually become your best friends, precisely because they feel so threatening to your opponents. Under the pressure that comes from these streets, your opponents will crack, and they'll give off information about their hands and their intentions in a number of different ways.

Harder to do than say. But try to relax and let your hands get to these later streets. Then throw the action to your opponents so they can tell you just how they feel. Armed with this extra information you can often play your hand to perfection.

Skill #7. Emotional Numbing

So far we've looked at developing strategies and playing hands. This next skill is about the game's mental aspect.

In a word, this game is brutal. No two ways about it. It's an incredibly complex and strategic game, where you'll need a depth of understanding to create a lasting edge. This study requires long hours of focused practice to refine.

Then after countless hours of study, some drunken yahoo spikes a gutshot. Then he laughs that vaguely maniacal laugh that ends in a coughing fit. Then he raises you blind next hand, you call, and he again sucks out. Then he trash-talks you for the next hour while you sit card dead, unable to do anything about it.

If you let it, no-limit hold 'em will torture you in nearly every way imaginable. Eventually you'll hit a stretch, weeks maybe, where you'll lose every single all-in pot, whether you get it in good or bad. You'll run the biggest bluff of your life and some guy will snap-call with king-high—and win—and you'll sit stupefied, wondering how he could make that call. Then he'll say he misread

his hand and thought he had a straight. "Sorry about that," he'll say, as he takes a full five minutes to stack all your money.

If you haven't had enough experience playing poker to understand these examples viscerally, congratulations. You have a vital shred of innocence still to lose. But don't read this book, with all its strategic cleverness, and assume that this no-limit hold 'em thing will be a cakewalk. It most certainly won't be. This game will give you incredible lows, no matter how good you are. Do not assume that all the study in the world and table time will make chips magically float your way.

I urge you not to make that mistake. But you will. Because taking this game too lightly is a mistake that heeds no warning, and a mistake you have to experience and correct for yourself. A big part of your potential blind spot is selection bias. If you're reading this book, there's a good chance you're interested in poker. If you're interested in poker, there's a good chance your experiences in the game have thus far been mostly positive. Maybe you came in third in the first tournament you ever played. You've won all the money in your home game. You've played 1-2 in a casino and didn't always go broke.

The people who learn the game and get their heads bashed in for the first ten times tend to lose interest.

Yet the difference between you with your positive experiences, and this theoretical snake-bitten newbie, is mostly raw luck.

But do we believe the luck argument? No. Not in our hearts. We all know poker is a skill game. So if good things happen, it's due at least in good part to our excellent skills, right?

Wrong. At least wrong in the short-term. And for poker, the short-term is longer than many people intuitively assume.

Now the swings are not necessarily forever. Good poker players can, and do, generate edges that allow them to win consistently over longer timeframes. But these longer timeframes are actually fairly long. And it's likely, if you showed me good results and said, "Ed, is this long-term success yet?" I would say no. I know this because, in fact, people show me results all the time and ask me this very question. And most of the time my answer is no. No, these results don't mean you're awesome at poker. They don't mean that at all. They mean you've been lucky—and it's also possible you're good at poker. But only possible.

Part of the reason I recommended live cash game no-limit hold 'em at the beginning of this book is because this is actually the most forgiving of the available options. But if you play live cash games long enough, even if you're a winning player, you'll encounter long stretches of bad, bad things. These stretches will go on for weeks and sometimes months. When I played full-time for a living, I once had a stretch where I lost every day for 16 days straight. That's pretty demoralizing.

But the bad runs you'll get playing live cash are actually many fewer than if you play online or you focus on tournaments. Nevertheless, they're still quite bad.

So why am I belaboring this point? Once you're playing consistently at the 2-5 level or higher, you absolutely have to find a way to deal with the game's emotional ups and downs. You need

to find a way to numb yourself emotionally to a lot of the day-to-day noise in your results.

If you don't numb yourself, it gets harder to think clearly and strategically about your game. If your last four bluffs have been snapped off, it's tempting to pass on a bluff when a fifth situation rolls around. If you keep getting drawn out on, it's tempting to try to bet bigger to blow your opponents out of the pot when you flop a strong hand. But if you do these things, you're playing to make the pain go away. You're not playing to create an edge.

Playing to ease the pain doesn't work. It just creates more pain in the long run. You have to figure out how to get rid of the pain, without making significant changes to how you play. Not easy.

I'm not a psychologist. But I do have quite a bit of experience playing poker and dealing with this problem. So I can share what's worked for me.

The first step is an affirmation. "Whether I have won or lost today says nothing about how well or poorly I have played." This is absolutely true. Say it to yourself after every session, however you do. The positive or negative number you have at the end of the day is, by itself, completely meaningless. It's noise. You cannot judge your performance on it. It's very difficult to improve just by second-guessing the hands you lost. If you have a lot of room to improve, chances are good you make mistakes on hands you win, hands you lose, even hands where little money changes hands. It's misguided to focus on only the losing hands, as in, "I lost last time I tried that, so I'll try something else this time." Poker doesn't work that way.

Remember to affirm to yourself after every session. "Whether I have won or lost today says nothing about how well or poorly I have played."

The next step involves bankroll. In my experience, it's nearly impossible to play your best when you're feeling bankroll pressure. The bankrolls needed to play these games are considerably bigger than most players think. For example, I wouldn't even think of playing 2-5 on a regular basis with less than a $20,000 bankroll. Pros can and do have downswings of $15,000 or more at this level.

And these are professional-level players with relatively high, well-established win rates. If there's a decent chance you don't play the game as well as these players, your win rate will be lower, and you'll be exposed to potentially bigger downswings. It would not shock me to hear of a winning (but not elite) 2-5 player suffering a $30,000 or bigger downswing.

And the thing about downswings is, for the most part, they're random. Sure, once downswings get big enough, they're self-feeding on some level. No one plays as well near the bottom of a large downswing as they do on a normal day. But professional-level players who aren't playing their best should still (for the most part) be playing a game that's expected to win over the long run. There are many errors that a pro will never make, even in the depths of anxiety and despair.

So when the downswing keeps going, it's often due to garden-variety bad luck.

But if you play on a short bankroll and you feel the pressure to win, you're almost guaranteed to make errors in an attempt to

reduce your exposure to risk. These tactics don't work long term. They just increase your chance of ultimately going broke.

So my second piece of advice is simple. Ensure you're properly bankrolled (or, preferably, over-bankrolled) for whatever stakes you choose to play. If you don't have $20,000 set aside for poker, don't play 2-5. At least not on a regular basis. Stay at 1-2. The goal is to get to the point where the day's outcome is almost completely irrelevant to you. To numb yourself emotionally to it. You don't want to feel down in the dumps if you lose two buy-ins, nor do you want to feel ecstatic if you win two. You want to be as even-keeled as possible after every session. A generous bankroll is, in my opinion, necessary to achieve this goal.

My third piece of advice is a bit of a gimmick, but I know it helps some people. Make sure you're over-bankrolled for your session. Let's say you play 2-5, and the most you really ever lose in a session is $2,000. Bring $3,000 with you to the casino. That way you never have to worry about going home broke. You never have to worry about putting your last dollar on the table. There is always money behind.

Obviously, there's nothing magic going on here. The math and the game don't care how much money is in your wallet. But the goal is to focus on the things that matter, and worrying about whether you're going to run out of money is not one of them.

Over the years I've written widely on this topic and have deepened those ideas here.

THE PITFALLS OF RUNNING GOOD

Running good out of the gate is one of the worst things that can happen to new players. If they rack up big wins early on, a couple of bad things can happen. First, they develop unrealistic expectations. They think winning comes easy, and they think solid strategy is much simpler than it really is. This may cause them to ignore sound advice, and it can also make the inevitable bad runs that much harder to take. Second, these early wins reinforce bad habits. As long as they're winning, people assume whatever they're doing must be right. Those early winners often pick up bad habits and get careless.

People write a lot about how to handle bad runs. But I think learning to avoid the pitfalls of running good is equally important. Our "winning" bad habits come back to haunt us over the long term. Here, I've identified five pitfalls of running good that you should look to avoid the next time the cards go your way.

Entering Unprofitable Pots

This one is simple and universal. Almost everyone who runs good for an extended period begins to loosen up. In more sober times, they'd know to fold K♥8♥ from five off the button. But in a

manic state, this hand starts to look like another opportunity to drag a huge pot. We loosen up by opening more pots from out of position. And we loosen up by calling more raises, both in and out of position. Over time, these subtle adjustments will prove to be costly.

If you've been running good, allow yourself an extra second to make pre-flop decisions. (I know of one player who, after she wins a huge pot, walks away from the table for the next few hands to avoid "losing it back.") If you see a hand that looks playable, don't just toss in your money. Think about whether this hand fits in well with your overall game plan. Don't play the hand just because you're anxious to see a flop and you have the chips to do so.

Attacking Strong Players

Being a good player means learning to pick on weak opponents. When you've been running good, everyone at the table looks like an appropriate target. If this happens, you can find yourself attacking the wrong players, and your long-term results can suffer. Consider the following.

A large pot gets built between a bad player, Barry, and Sal, one of the stronger players at the table. At showdown, Sal shows an unexpected hand for his typical range and loses. He played the hand unconventionally and lost a big pot as a result. Another strong player, Steve, who has recently been running good, observes this hand and concludes that Sal is perhaps not so strong

after all. Steve then decides to try to pick on Sal, entering many of his pots with weak hands to capitalize on Sal's bad play.

Here's the problem. Sal isn't really that bad of a player, and he's going to know how to handle Steve's aggression. Steve should be attacking Barry, the bad player, not Sal, the strong player who played one hand a little strangely. Yet I've seen this scenario play out time and again. Don't let your ego get the better of you. Stay focused on the truly weak players at the table.

Trying Bad Bluffs

Players who have been running good have probably run a few good bluffs. This success drugs the player, who gets even more daring. Eventually the player crosses the line into wild and unprofitable. When these bigger bluffs get picked off, the player doesn't see his errors. "Can't win 'em all," the player shrugs.

If you've been running good, think about your gutsy and aggressive plays an extra few seconds. Is this really a good bluffing opportunity? Or are you just amped up to get your chips in the middle? The big bluff is a potent weapon that should be used sparingly. If you find yourself thinking, "I can't win if I don't bet," you may want to dial the aggression back. Just a little.

Adopting Pet Plays

Say last week you played the following hand at a 1-2 game. A player opened for $7, and the button called. You called in the big blind with J♥9♥.

The flop came A♦J♣9♠, giving you bottom two.

You checked, the pre-flop raiser bet $20, the button folded, and you check-raised to $50. Your opponent called.

The turn was the 9♦. You checked, the button bet $60, and you check-raised all-in and got called by A-K.

Since you played this hand, you've been absolutely on fire, winning several thousand dollars. You've ran this double check-raise play out several more times, mostly with good results.

The flop-and-turn double check-raise could become your new best friend. After a few successes, you might begin to use the play whenever possible. Every flop becomes yet another opportunity to bust out the double check-raise. I urge you: don't let that happen.

Pet plays are bad for a couple of reasons. In most cases, less is more. A simple play—betting the flop and turn—is often stronger than a complicated pet play, i.e., check-raising the flop and turn. Therefore, if you overuse pet plays, you're consistently choosing inferior lines. Beyond that, if you use these plays too much, opponents can predict them and exploit you. You'll gain a reputation as the person who double check-raises all the time, and players will adjust.

If you find yourself using a new play a lot, when away from the table, think about when the play is best, and when a simpler play might be better.

Spending The Spoils

The last pitfall is both common and potentially damaging to a bankroll. People spend their winnings when they run good. Obviously money is ultimately for spending. But many people go overboard with frivolous spending after a good run. Definitely enjoy your good fortune. But also remember that leaner times are inevitable. Your run-good winnings help subsidize losses in the bad times. But only if you haven't already spent the money.

After a good run, rework your personal budget. You'll know exactly how much of your winnings you'll need for a rainy day, and how much you can spend.

THE PITFALLS OF RUNNING BAD

Running bad is the boogeyman for every poker player. There's nothing more frustrating than doing everything "right" and yet still losing session after session. If you aren't vigilant, running bad can set off a vicious cycle. You run bad for a while, which causes

you to start playing badly, which then prolongs poor results. Here are five pitfalls to avoid during your next bad run.

Losing Aggressiveness

Aggressive play is the key to winning poker. Finding the right bluffs, and the smart value bets, sets good players apart from mediocre ones. When you run bad, however, your aggressive edge can be the first thing to go. After all, not one of your bluffs has worked in two days, so why burn chips trying another? Or every time you make a decent hand, an opponent seems to show up with the nuts. So why bother betting for value at all?

When you're beaten down and nothing is working, it's easy to lose the nerve to bet and raise with anything but locked hands. If your fear is eroding your normal aggression, try one of two remedies. Take a few extra seconds on your decisions and talk yourself into putting your chips in the middle. Failing that, you can take a break and analyze hands away from the table. Reviewing the math for an aggressive play can motivate you to commit chips the next time even if things haven't been going well.

Making Hopeless Calls

How many times have you said this: "I know you got there, but I have to see it anyway." Then you pay off and, sure enough, your opponent has the hand you expect. If you've been running bad,

making these hopeless calls is tempting. Or, rather, you become suspicious about your luck and so accustomed to losing that you begin to throw money away in fits of self-destruction.

This is a dangerous state. If you no longer have the willpower to avoid paying off obvious hands, it's time to take a break. Unfortunately, your opponents can indeed outdraw you many times in a row (10 or more even). But if you can't make the smart folds when necessary, stop playing and do something to relax. The next time you play your mental state will likely be better.

Preferring All-In Plays Too Often

When you're running bad, you might start to end hands early. You've been beaten one too many times on the river, so you subconsciously adjust by shoving the flop more often. This can take two forms, neither of which is good.

First, you overplay your big hands on the flop, shutting out your action. Say you flop a straight. Instead of making a small raise or flat-calling to keep an opponent in the pot, you move all-in and your opponent instantly folds. Sure, you win the pot. But you don't win as much with the hand as you could have.

Or, more dangerously, you commit your stack on the flop with weak hands. Consider this extreme case. I once saw a tight player in a 2-5 game wait several hours for a hand. When he finally flopped a set, he got his money in against a draw, and the river completed his opponent's flush. The tight player's very next hand went this way. He opened for $20 with a $400 stack. Two players

called. The flop came A♦9♥6♠. The big blind bet $40, and the tight player moved all in for $380. The big blind called and showed A-Q. The tight player had K-K.

Obviously, shoving the flop with kings on this ace-high board is bankroll suicide and a case of extreme panic. Don't let a bad run put you in a state where you're shoving with marginal holdings just to end a hand and change your luck. If you catch yourself thinking this way, take a break. Read about variance. Remind yourself how brutal the game came be. Most importantly, don't take it personally.

Giving Too Many Free Showdowns

One big advantage to position is having the option to value bet the river with a good hand. But when you've been running bad, checking it down to showdown can seem tempting even with strong hands. If you haven't seen a showdown in several hours, you might say to yourself, "Thank goodness, I can finally get a hand to showdown." But then you check.

Needless to say, if you're so grateful to see a showdown that you're intentionally skipping good river bets, you're not playing your best poker. Put your frustrations aside, and take a few extra seconds with your river decisions. Think as clearly as possible whether a bet is smart or not. Don't let a bad run frustrate you into leaving good money on the table.

Failing To Play Shorter Sessions

If you're running bad, no matter who you are, you're better served playing shorter sessions. Say you generally play four-hour sessions. Try two hours for the following reasons to get yourself back on track:

1. If the session gets off to a bad start, you'll play fewer hands in your frustrated mindset.
2. If the session gets off to a good start, you'll be able to book wins and regain confidence.

Either way, you'll play fewer hands and have more time away from the table. You'll be free to work on your game, and avoid the pitfalls of future bad runs.

MEASURING SUCCESS

Poker is a peculiar game. There's no score. If you're playing a cash game, there's no winner. If you're playing a tournament, there's one winner and a zillion losers. Your opponents can play terribly and win a bundle. You can play great and crash and burn. All of this peculiarity has left more than one player completely frustrated, groveling to the poker gods for a break. Clearly, if you've been reduced to begging for better luck, you probably haven't succeeded. But what is success at poker? And how it is measured?

First, I'll tell you what it isn't. It isn't a win rate. If you poke around on the internet, you're bound to find dozens of people who will gladly tell you that if you don't win $20 on average for every 100 hands you play at game X, then you must suck. Or they'll tell you that they win $20 for every 100 hands, but they don't expect a lowly mortal such as yourself to win that much, so maybe you should win $10 for every 100 hands. And if you don't, you suck.

Please ignore these people. Most of them are full of it. They don't win nearly as much as they say they do. In fact, you should take it for granted that any poker player telling you how much money they make is bending the truth at least a little bit. Most bend a lot. Don't compare your real results to someone else's fantasy. You can't possibly live up to it.

If you're good at poker, you can definitely win money. But unless you're uncommon and outstanding, you won't be retiring to a tropical paradise with your winnings any time soon. Your long-term wins will likely be modest. That's reflected in the sheer numbers. There are lots of good poker players around, and they can't all win fortunes. The money just isn't there.

For example, I've been lucky enough to sell over 250,000 copies of my poker books. I believe that most people who buy and study my books will become better players. But most of them won't be $100,000-plus winners at poker. They can't be. Multiply 250 thousand by 100 thousand and you get a figure that would impress even the Department of Defense.

So, what does it mean? As a player, you have to develop non-monetary metrics for poker success. Success isn't necessarily

winning as much money as some internet braggart says you should win. Success at poker for you might mean getting something meaningful back from the game in exchange for the time and effort you put into it.

For many players, it's as simple as enjoying your time at the table. If playing poker lifts your mood and exercises your brain, then that alone might constitute success. While it may seem a low bar, I have seen enough temper tantrums at the table to know that a lot of people clearly don't enjoy themselves when they play.

The only way I know how to enjoy the game is to work at becoming a better player. I find my joy when I win an extra bet or an extra pot using newly-acquired skills and knowledge. One of my favorite plays is stealing a big river pot all-in that I know, based on my reads, my opponent simply can't call. Another one I like is value-betting the river, knowing my opponent likely has ace-high and will be too suspicious of my aggressive style to find a fold. Each time I run these plays well, I feel a twinge of success. These are plays I never made early in my career because my hand reading wasn't as refined. Over time, I learned which opponents couldn't call a shove, while my style at the start wasn't aggressive enough to induce ace-high call-downs. These moments are concrete successes in my never-ending journey to poker mastery.

I like to focus on particular hands and sessions to measure my success. Other players focus on numbers. Instead of setting money goals, they try to play a certain number of hands a month. Reaching that goal is success. Or some online players will adjust their play so their statistics hit certain targets. The closer they get, the more they've succeeded. These particular criteria don't mean

much to me, but I think they can be reasonable ways to measure poker achievement.

Yet, if you're trying to measure your own success, you should avoid a money focus for two reasons. One, of all the things you *can* control when you play, how much you win is the one thing you control the least. If you focus on financial goals, you're bound to disappoint yourself. That's because of card variance, plain and simple. Second, if you repeatedly miss your monetary goals, you may become a little desperate. Every day desperate poker players make bad decisions. They play bigger than they should. They hit friends up for loans they likely won't be able to repay. Or they become prey for others looking to make a buck. If you keep your focus on the mechanics of the game, and on things you can control like your own education, you're more likely to keep your wits about you and also appreciate how you grow as a player and what you accomplish.

Above all, when you're trying to measure poker success, the yardstick has to be personal. You can't use someone else's benchmark. Win rates on anonymous forums don't apply to you, and the numbers are likely a figment of a player's overactive imagination. Every player respects the game for different reasons and gauges progress uniquely. No matter what you choose, if you evaluate yourself in a reasonable way, hopefully you'll conclude that all the hours you've invested, and all the ups and downs you've experienced, have been worth it.

[The articles above, here in edited form, originally appeared in *Card Player* magazine, Volume 22, Numbers 23 and 24; and Volume 23, Number 5.]

FINAL THOUGHTS

If your goal is long-term, sustained success at 2-5 or higher, you must learn to tackle the emotions that come with the game. From my perspective, this means learning to steel yourself to the game's day-to-day, week-to-week results. After a week's worth of play, you can be up $5,000, or down the same amount. This number by itself says little to nothing about whether you're playing with a long-term advantage that will create an expected positive win rate going forward.

Don't get hung-up on your results. After every session, remind yourself that results don't matter. What matters is how you're learning. And how you're mastering the skills in this and other books. How you're analyzing your hands away from the game. Studying your betting patterns. Talking to other players you trust.

After reading about bet-sizing tells for instance, how did you integrate that skill? Did you notice someone make a small bet, then peg it as a weak hand and raise to win a pot? Did you fire a river barrel for the first time? If it didn't work—and that's the reason you lost—that could be a good thing. Analyze the hand. Did you follow barreling principles in this book? Did you bet into a weak range, but your opponent happened to have one of his best possible hands? If so, that's bad luck. But perhaps overall you

played well for the day. But if you didn't—say you picked a bad spot to bluff—that's part of the learning process, too. Once you've analyzed a hand you've learned from it. And you've turned a negative into a positive going forward.

Furthermore, make sure you're well-bankrolled for the level you're playing. If you're thinking, "Gee, a few more days like this, and I won't be able to play at all," it's a sign you're in trouble. Even if the math says you should be fine, this line of thinking is almost guaranteed to taint your decisions. You're much better off feeling like you can play and lose, and it won't affect your ability to play the next day.

Also consider different buy-in options as a first step. Instead of buying in for $500, try $300. You might feel you're less at risk as you learn. Failing that, move down a level. You're better off feeling confident at 1-2 than jittery at 2-5.

Figuring out your level and how to create a comfortable playing schedule is hard for every player at the start. You're not alone. Some of your peace of mind comes from making sure you bring enough money when you play. I know I feel self-conscious if I only arrive with two buy-ins. If I get stacked in one hand, all of a sudden I realize I have my last dollar (for the day at least) on the table. I don't like the feeling—I find it distracting. So I try to avoid it.

One final, but important, point about this game. When you play 1-2, a big part of strong, defensive poker at this level is learning how not to get stacked. You don't want to pay other players off. And you want to value hands correctly so you're more likely to get action from worse hands, and less likely to overplay

and get stacked against the nuts. It's fine at 1-2 to avoid getting stacked when it's imposed on you.

Once you move up to 2-5 and higher, that's no longer your goal. Getting stacked at these levels is an essential part of a winning strategy. For the most part, you're playing with people who have already mastered not getting stacked at 1-2. If you play like them, you won't create any edge. So while you won't often get stacked, you also won't win much over the long term.

Winning at 2-5 requires a counter-strategy that often takes advantage of your opponents' unwillingness to get stacked. You take advantage of this unwillingness by putting stacks in play with large turn and river bets (and bluffs). The math is with you, since your opponents will back down to this pressure often enough for you to show a profit. But sometimes you'll run into a big hand and, well, you'll get stacked.

Many players find this embarrassing. You run a big bluff on the river, and your opponent snap calls and slams quads down. You just shoved into quads. Don't you feel dumb?

But you shouldn't feel dumb. In fact, quads is exactly the hand I want to be shown when my bluff fails. It's a rare hand that people play in funky ways, and obviously it's a hand players will never fold. In other words, on nearly any bluff, there's some threat your opponent will show up with quads (or some similar nutted hand). But obviously because these hands are so rare, if you tend to get snapped off by these big hands, it means your bluffs are working like they should against all the lesser hands. You're doing something very right.

It's when people snap off my all-in bluff with one pair, or even ace-high, that I feel a little sheepish. These hands cause me to reevaluate my strategy. But, I'm never embarrassed. Maybe I made a mistake. But every single player at every single table makes lots of mistakes. Most players usually don't go down in flames for everyone to see. But that's because they're timid, unimaginative players who will never do what's necessary to really get good at the game and take big chances that sometime fail. And that's the bottom line.

If your goal is to master 2-5 and move higher, you have to embrace the occasional massive train wreck. You'll think a hand through, commit your stack, and then have it blow up in your face. Learn to wear these moments like a badge of honor. It's a horrible cliché, but utterly true in poker: no pain, no gain. You take risks and build essential strategic muscle for the next time.

Vanessa Selbst, for instance, is notorious for "blowing up." She runs huge, daring plays for all the money. Sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes it looks really dumb. But look at her success. The occasional blow up is an integral part of her winning equation.

As much as humanly possible, your decisions should be based on logic. If you feel emotions creeping in, you're likely to make errors. Quit the table for at least an hour to recompose yourself. If you're frustrated from running bad, you'll make errors. If you're elated from running good, you'll make errors. If you're embarrassed or too anxious to try certain plays due to social pressures, you'll make errors. Above all, your goal is to play numb, and reduce your emotional reaction to an absolute minimum. If

you do that, and develop the other skills we've covered so far in this book, you'll have what it takes to win solidly at 2-5 and move up as you desire.

To learn more about tilt and hard feelings that rise as you play, I recommend the work of Tommy Angelo. He was a professional mid-stakes player for years, and his greatest strength was how he controlled the emotional aspects of the game. Over the last decade, he's tackled the topic in an original, whimsical way that's sure to make you think. I recommend his book *Elements Of Poker* as an introduction to his work.

2-5 Hand Quizzes

Before we get into specific hands, let's recap.

The skills for 1-2 games comprise what most people refer to as "ABC poker." Often, the goal is to play tight pre-flop, refuse to pay people off who don't bluff, and focus on trying to get maximum value for your good hands. This works great on players who don't realize that you aren't bluffing often enough for them to justify calling you down with weaker hands. It also gives you a small natural advantage over many players who play too many hands pre-flop.

But if you want to move on to 2-5, you need more, and better, skills. Many 2-5 players have already mastered ABC poker. By and large, like you, they'll be good at not paying off with second-best hands, and not getting stacked. They can flop a set just as easily as you can. They can flop a big flush draw and run a semi-bluff with it just like you. If you play 2-5 with 1-2 skills, you'll make money from the occasional player who plays just as badly as 1-2 regulars. But against other regulars you'll have little to no advantage. This will translate into an experience you'll no doubt find frustrating.

Our 2-5 skills are focused on exploiting ABC players. First, many of these players don't play tight enough pre-flop. Even though they shake their heads at the hands of recreational players, they're also playing too many hands. On top of that, their solution to nearly every situation that puts significant money at risk is to fold. They're waiting for a sure thing. Their strategy is highly exploitable.

As you've learned, barreling is the first skill you can use to exploit this style of play. Simply betting when these players check goes a long way toward beating them. Since they're so willing to fold, they often unwittingly create situations where you can freely bet any two cards and show an automatic profit.

As I wrote above, when in doubt, bet the turn.

But, you can also refine this strategy with some study of board textures. When the flop comes, it reorders both hand rankings and the relative equities that separate each hand. If you take the time to study these textures by placing flops into different groups with similar features, you can identify flops on which players are more or less likely to fold. This skill will help you decide whether to barrel once, twice, or three times. It's also a critical skill when you play more accomplished and aggressive players at 5-10 and above. Finally, the skill helps when you're trying to get value for good hands, because you'll be more aware of when to expect calls and when to expect folds.

You can further refine barreling (and other decisions) with an intentional study of live reads. Information is everywhere when you play live, but it takes experience and effort to notice it, analyze it, and put it to work.

The live read I use most is the bet-sizing tell. Your opponents when they bet must choose a bet size. Because many unsophisticated players make this decision poorly, bet sizing often leaks substantial information about an opponents' hands and intention.

Bet-sizing tells are so useful, it's often better to delay your aggression on a given street and throw the action back to your opponent rather than raising immediately. If you take control of the betting, then you're the one at risk for giving off bet-sizing tells. This doesn't mean you should always play your hands passively on early betting rounds. But this factor is worth considering when you're deciding between raising or calling the flop.

Other live reads are also useful, including your opponents' personal appearances, betting fashions, and physical tells. You won't learn all at once how to gather this data, but if you give this skill the attention it deserves, you'll compile a personal directory of live reads that you can use to inform future decisions.

Finally, when you become a 2-5 regular, it's time to address the game's emotional side. Most players who pursue no-limit hold 'em seriously have mostly seen the good side of the game in their early experiences. They won a tournament, hit a jackpot, or just had some modest success at 1-2. But even for the best players, the game is a rocky ride. Huge upswings and downswings are a threat to start on any hand. And even with strong play, downswings can last a long time and become extremely frustrating.

If you're going to survive and move up, you have to numb yourself to fluctuations. The more emotionally invested you are in

your results, the more you'll risk poor decisions if you're winning and feeling euphoric, or if you're trying to make the pain stop, or if you're afraid of being embarrassed. Naturally, this is hard, as we are emotional creatures. But it pays to work on it in the same way you work on your game's more strategic aspects.

For now, we've covered the main skills you'll need to achieve professional-level play at 2-5. Let's review some hands that illustrate these concepts. These hands assume you're playing 2-5 in Las Vegas with $1,000 stacks.

Hand 1

Two players limp. You make it $25 to go on the button with Q♦9♦. The big blind calls, one limper folds, and the other calls. There's $82 in the pot.

The flop comes J♦8♣5♣. Your opponents check. You bet $70, and the limper calls.

The turn is the K♥. Your opponent checks. What should you do?

♠

Bet. There's $222 in the pot with about $900 behind. This is plenty of money behind to bet the turn and still threaten a full river bet. You have a gutshot, which gives you some equity if called. Additionally, depending on the river card, you might have

a profitable barrel on the river as well, which adds to your equity-when-called on the turn.

With stacks this deep, I'd bet about $200. This should chase off the vast majority of hands that called you on the flop. If the stacks were smaller, I'd pare down the size of my turn bet to perhaps $140, making sure to reserve enough for a credible river bet. Barreling the turn works so well in part because you threaten to make an even bigger river bet. Many players would rather just fold than face that gauntlet.

HAND 2

A player makes it $20 to go in early position. A regular calls in the cutoff, and you call on the button with 9♣8♣. The blinds fold. There's $67 in the pot.

The flop comes K♦Q♥8♠.

The pre-flop raiser bets $30, and the next player folds. What do you do?

♠

Call. Some players would look at the king and queen, the fact that this player raised pre-flop, and assume they were likely behind. But the bet size belies that story a bit. Most players with a hand like A-K or K-Q would bet bigger into two opponents.

There's considerable chance that the raiser has a hand like T-T or A-5 suited or 6-6 and is simply C-betting.

You can call and see what he does on the turn. This will help you decide how to proceed.

♠

For argument's sake, say you call. There's $127 in the pot. The turn is the 3♣, making the board K♦Q♥8♠3♣. Your opponent checks. What should you do?

♠

Bet. There are two ways to look at your hand. First, because you have a pair, you could decide it's a weak made hand and start thinking in terms of streets of value. This hand has zero streets of value, since very often you can't reasonably expect a 2-5 player to call you with anything worse.

Often, it's more accurate to treat hands like this where you pair a smaller board card as bluffing hands. You can get people to fold stronger hands, and if you're called by top pair, you have five outs.

This is a blurry line. Sometimes when you bet these hands, you won't actually know if you want to get called by worse hands or get better hands to fold. Sometimes you won't want to bet—this would make sense if either of those possibilities were unlikely. But other times, you'll want to bet, because the chance of one of these two positive outcomes is high.

There's no clear answer in these situations. You should analyze them on their own merits, and attempt to predict how your opponents will react to bets. Try to get a sense of positive outcomes if you bet—and how likely these outcomes are.

In this case, I would treat the hand as a bluff, because there's a good chance your opponent has a hand like A-Q or T-T, and there's also a good chance he'll fold these hands to pressure.

I'd bet about $70 into the $127 pot. The bet's big enough to get your opponent to release most of your targeted hands, but it's also likely a bet size you'd choose if you were the one holding A-K.

If you bet on the small side, it encourages marginal hands like K-9 and A-Q to call. If you're strongly considering a river barrel, these extra calls can be a good thing, since they'll be your target hands for the final barrel. You'll make considerably more money if K-9 and A-Q call the turn and fold the river, than if they fold straight out on the turn. This logic applies, of course, only if you barrel the river. Whether to do that is player-dependent (i.e., will your opponent ever fold a hand like K-T to sufficient pressure?).

This hand falls under the "when in doubt, bet the turn," line of thinking.

HAND 3

A player limps. You raise to $20 from two off the button with K♦Q♦. The big blind calls, as does the limper. There's $62 in the pot.

The flop comes A♣8♣5♦.

Your opponents check. You bet $40, and the big blind calls.

The turn is the T♠. Your opponent now bets $60 into the $142 pot. What do you do?

♠

Raise. All day long.

This is a live-read situation that applies in most games. The player in the big blind has an ace with a kicker he's worried about. He check-calls the flop, and then he bets out on the non-club turn card in an attempt to see where he's at. He's worried if he checks the turn, you'll make a big bet, and he won't know whether to call down or fold.

He tries to derail that potential course of action by betting out of turn. But he doesn't want to invest a lot in the hand, because he's worried he's beaten. So he bets around half-pot. His plan is to fold if you raise. That's the entire point of keeping the bet on the small side—so he saves money if he has to fold. So make him fold.

You can just blow him out of the water by raising his $60 bet to $180 or more. Or, if you want to get greedy (entailing more risk on your part, of course), you can min-raise him to $120. That bet may get him to fold as well, but he might feel obligated to call for only $60 more. Then the plan is to blow him out on any river card. Both options are viable. The second is riskier, because it allows a card to come off that helps his hand. It does, however,

save a few bucks if your opponent was setting you up and reraises. But this set-up rarely happens.

If you're playing out of the big blind against a professional live no-limit hold 'em player, an ace hits the flop, and you want that player to raise you on the turn, you can take this betting line. Check-call the flop, then bet out small on the turn. You'll get that raise the vast majority of the time. Almost all live pros know about this spot.

HAND 4

A player limps. You make it $20 to go with A♣5♣ from the cutoff. The button calls, the big blind calls, and the limper calls. There's $82 in the pot.

The flop is Q♣9♦6♦. Everyone checks to you, and you bet $80. The button and big blind fold, and the limper calls.

The turn is the T♥. Your opponent checks. What do you do?

♠

Check. This is the exception to the "just bet" rule on the turn. The ten is the worst turn card for you if your goal is to get your opponent to fold. A lot of different hands will call this flop, from A-Q to 7-5, and everything in between. Almost all these hands improve with the ten.

Here are a few examples. J-T improves from a straight draw to a pair and a straight draw. T-9 obviously improves to two pair. J-9 improves from a pair, to a pair and a straight draw. 8-7 improves to a straight. T-8 improves to a pair and a double gutshot. And so forth.

Almost no matter what your opponent has, if he thought his hand was worth an $80 call on the flop, he will think this turn card improved his hand. The goal is to attack weakness and avoid strength. This turn card adds too much strength to your opponent's range.

It doesn't help that your hand has little value of its own on this board. You caught a bad turn card. Just give up.

If the turn had instead been the 3♥, this would be a clear situation in which to bet again.

HAND 5

A player opens for $20 on the button. You're in the big blind with K♥7♥ and make it $60. Your opponent calls. There's $122 in the pot.

The flop is Q♥J♦7♠. What do you do?

♠

You could bet. You flopped a pair, which is something. Betting makes sense against timid players who would be likely to fold a hand as strong as Q-T if you keep betting.

But consider checking as well. When you check and pass the action to your opponents, you give them a chance to throw you a live read. In this particular hand, if you bet the flop, given the board texture, there's an excellent chance your opponent will call. But the call could mean a straight draw, a queen, or a jack. It could even be another seven or a hand like T-T. The call doesn't tell you much except that your opponent likely hit the flop.

If you check, your opponent can give you information about the relative strength of his hand with bet sizing. Say he bets $100 into the $122 pot. I'd consider this likely to mean a strong hand, and I'd fold.

Say he bets $50. This smallish bet could be a probe to see what you do. It's an invitation to make a play at the pot. You can check-raise. Or you can check-call and bet the turn. Or you can check-call, check the turn, and if your opponent checks back, you can make a large (i.e., pot-sized) river bet that will likely get your opponent off all marginal pairs.

For the sake of argument, let's assume you check, and your opponent checks back.

The turn is the 3♥, making the board Q♥J♦7♠3♥ and giving you a flush draw. There's still $122 in the pot. What should you do now?

♠

This card is one of the reasons you should stick to suited hands when you make light 3-bets pre-flop. I would bet this card for sure, and would certainly barrel the river as well. I'd probably bet about $70 on the turn. This bet size should get folds if your opponent whiffed the flop entirely, but it will get calls from all the marginal paired hands like A-J.

And it's fine if you get called. You expect it. The hammer comes on the river. No matter what card arrives (unless you hit your hand), fire $220 or so into the $262 pot. This line credibly represents that you hold A-A or K-K or Q-Q or J-J, and you decided to get "tricky" by checking the flop. Most 2-5 regulars who are versed with Skill #2, and who don't like to try to bust the rare river bluff, will fold.

If you hit your hand, bet a smaller amount in an attempt to squeeze a call out of a queen.

Note that this advice to bet a large amount as a bluff and a smaller amount for value is highly exploitable if you're playing against observant enough opponents. In practice, it's much harder for most players to decode your river bet-sizing decisions than it is for them to decode more common situations that arise on the flop and turn. So you can probably get away with forking your range in this way.

But if you suspect your opponent is semi-clever, you should stick to the $220 bet size with all your hands. That way if your opponent tries to get smart and call your bluff sometimes, he will also end up sometimes paying off a large bet when you make two pair, trips, or a flush.

HAND 6

A player opens for $20 from three off the button. You call in the cutoff with K♦Q♦. The blinds fold. There's $47 in the pot.

The flop comes T♦9♠6♠. Your opponent bets $30. What should you do?

♠

Raise. This is a dynamic flop that your opponent, an out-of-position pre-flop raiser, should be checking a lot. But if this player is like most at 2-5, there's a good chance he's unaware of these subtleties, or he is aware, but he makes so much money firing barrels he's going to fire away until given a reason not to.

So, give him a reason not to. You have overcards, a gutshot, and a backdoor flush draw, which is plenty of equity-when-called. There's a good chance your opponent is out of line on a bet. Harness your positional advantage on this dynamic board texture by immediately challenging your opponent.

I'd raise to about $90. If called and checked to on the turn, I'd be inclined to barrel most turn cards. There's a good chance your opponent is calling with a drawing hand, and a nice big turn barrel should frequently take it down. If called again, you always have a gutshot to the nuts to fall back on.

HAND 7

You open to $20 from five off the button with 9♣8♣. Two players call behind, and the blinds fold. There's $67 in the pot.

The flop comes A♣7♦5♣, giving you a flush draw and a gutshot. You bet $60, the first player calls, and the second folds.

The turn is the 2♥. You bet $180. Your opponent calls.

The river is the K♦. What do you do?

♠

Check and give up. Your combo draw had so much equity-when-called on the flop and turn, yet your hand had so little immediate showdown value, it almost demanded to be bet twice.

But your opponent's turn call was strong. Calling a full pot-sized bet in these games means business. It's likely your opponent has A-Q or stronger. Now that you've bricked the river, you're caught with no showdown value against an opponent with a strong range. Just give up. Every once in a while, your opponent will have a hand like K♠J♣ that you could have gotten him to fold out with another bet, but more often he'll just have a hand. It's not a good bluffing spot.

HAND 8

A player opens for $20. You call from the cutoff with A♦K♠. The blinds fold. There's $47 in the pot.

The flop comes T♦5♠3♠. Your opponent bets $30. What should you do?

♠

You have position on a dynamic board. The pre-flop raiser should likely check this flop fairly often, but many 2-5 players will C-bet with most of their hands. In the previous hand quiz where this concept applied, I argued you should raise.

In this hand, I'd just call. The situation here is different. With the best possible no-pair hand, you have more showdown value in this example, so it's okay to bring yourself one step closer to showdown with a call. Also, you have less equity-when-called here, and the hand you're drawing to, top pair, will likely not be good enough to win if stacks go in. You should be more comfortable blowing up the pot early in the hand if you have a draw to the nuts (as the gutshot draw was in the previous example). When you have no real ability to make the nuts, as in this hand, it's often preferable to call.

You definitely shouldn't fold. There's a good chance the pre-flop raiser has air. And this hand is just generally too strong to fold for one bet on this flop texture.

♠

For argument, let's say you call. The turn is the 9♦. Your opponent bets $90 into the $107 pot. Now, what should you do?

♠

Fold. Apply Skill #2. Your opponent has made a large, nearly pot-sized bet on the turn. Don't try to bluff-catch. Just fold.

HAND 9

A player limps. You make it $20 to go from four off the button with J♠T♠. Two players call behind, the small and big blinds call, and the limper calls. There's $120 in the pot and six players.

The flop comes 7♠2♦2♣. Everyone checks. What should you do?

♠

This is a situation I might consider bluffing, even in a multi-way pot against loose players. It's hard for anyone to make a good hand on this flop. When you're considering pushing your way through four or five opponents with barrels, you want flops where an obvious, but relatively rare hand, is the boss (i.e., a flop like 9♦4♦2♦). Or where it's difficult to make anything at all with a

flop like this. As the pre-flop raiser, you can represent A-A and often get anyone not holding at least a deuce to fold.

If I bet the flop, I'd bet on the small side like $40 or $50. I choose this bet sizing for three reasons.

First, if I actually held A-A, I'd probably bet that much. Second, it lets you off cheap if someone check-raises. Third, it encourages people to call with marginal hands. Again, it's often a good thing to encourage marginal calls if you intend to bet the next street. So I'd bet small, and if called in one or two places, I'd bet the turn for a much bigger amount—perhaps $150 or $200. This line looks like an "obvious" A-A or K-K to seasoned players, and they'll often be prone to release hands like 8-8 or 8-7 to a turn bet.

I'm talking about representing A-A in this analysis, but realize that we're not barreling this board *because* we can represent A-A. We're barreling because our opponents are unlikely to have strong hands they'll want to play for stacks. The fact that we can have A-A—giving our opponents a concrete threat to fear—is just icing on the cake.

Notice, again, if your opponents were to fold these hands to a turn bet, they'd be making a fold per Skill #2. This is the core premise of 2-5 skills—your opponents at this level tend to be familiar with the concepts from our 1-2 chapter. You're going to use their mastery of these skills against them by forcing them to fold their weak ranges on board textures that are hard to hit. And even when they hit these boards, you're sometimes going to force them into making Skill #2 folds.

If they're going to refuse to pay you off when you flop a set, then you simply bluff them to death.

PART IV:
BEATING LIVE
5-10 GAMES

Skill #8. Exploiting Aggression

I'm going to keep the discussion brief in our final three skills. To some extent, beating 5-10 no-limit is beyond the scope of this book. It's a game big enough that many card rooms don't even spread it. And when it is spread, it's often at the top of the food chain.

But I decided to include 5-10 skills for two reasons. One, at this level you'll learn how to deal with players who want to get rid of extra hands by bluffing with them instead of folding them out, as we discussed earlier. Learning to respond to these bluffs is a vital skill at 5-10. (And this skill can also be necessary at 1-2 and 2-5.) Two, learning how to exploit aggression ties everything together. Once you can handle over-aggressive players, you will have all the skills necessary to take anyone's money—at least as long as they insist on playing too many hands pre-flop.

Also, this section is aspirational. Many card rooms don't get a regular 5-10 game going. Since 2-5 is often the biggest game in these casinos, lots of players develop winning 2-5 skills then get

stunted. Many mistakenly believe there isn't much more to the game beyond what they already know.

This idea is wrong. No-limit hold 'em is a strategy game with a complexity on par with chess. The game is incredibly deep, and no matter how good you are, you'll always have plenty of room to get even better. These last few skills will reveal even more to the game—and that you're never done learning it.

Let's go back to the basic framework presented at the beginning of the book. We have an opponent who's simply playing too many hands pre-flop. Yet in this case, to get rid of these hands, this player likes to bluff away the bad hands. This bluffing strategy works great against players who also play too many hands, but like to fold out the extra ones. In a perfect world with too many hands pre-flop, the bluffer bluffs, the folder folds, and one player systematically wins from the other.

There are two styles of bluffing. First, you'll experience the little shots that players take at the pot. "Gee, if I bet here, maybe everyone will fold." Second, you'll experience the bigger, stack-sized bluffs where players are trying to apply maximum pressure.

Fundamentally, you deal with both types of aggression in a similar way. I'll talk first about the small shots, since these are less scary.

Say your opponent bets. You know, based on how the hand went down, that your opponent likely has one of ten different hands. Nine of these hands are strong. The 10th hand is junk. Say your opponent decides to bet all ten hands. What should you do?

You should fold, even though you know he's sometimes bluffing. He just has too many strong hands out there to risk

trying to pick off a bluff. If you try to get granular, and pick off one or two of his bluff hands from in-between all his good hands, you're going to pay off good hands too often and lose more than you win the few times you catch him.

Why is trying to pick off bluffs unprofitable in the long run? For the simple reason that your opponent has the correct underlying hand-range strength to justify the bluffs he's making.

What if we dropped it to eight good hands and two bluffs? It depends on the bet size compared to the pot size. But in most circumstances, you should still fold. Again, there are just too many real hands out there to try to go after a bluff.

Now flip the situation. You have a loose and wild opponent who likes to bet all the time. He bets. You think he's got one of ten hands, but you think there are two good hands and eight junk hands. What now?

Now you're welcome to pick the player off—calling every time. The underlying hand range is far too weak to justify the bluffs the player is making.

This is the key idea behind how you exploit your opponents' aggression. When their underlying hand range is strong, get out of the way and leave the potential bluffs alone. When their underlying hand range is weak, however, you're welcome to start trying to call the bluffs.

This is the essential problem when you play too many hands. If you want to bluff them away, you're forced to bluff from some weak hand ranges. You're essentially hoping your opponents don't notice the problem and give you undue credit for strength just because you're willing to put money out there.

The key to exploiting aggression, therefore, is to figure out when your opponent is betting from a weak range. These are the bets you start to play back at.

BLOATED BETTING FREQUENCIES

When dealing with aggression, the first thing you're looking for is bloated betting frequencies. After you've played no-limit hold 'em for a while, you'll be attuned to the game's basic rhythms. He raises, she calls. She checks, he bets. Some of these actions become almost automatic. She calls and checks again. He bets again. Everyone knew he was going to do that.

Certain bets you can easily predict. He's betting the flop because he raised pre-flop. He's betting the button because everyone checked to him. He's betting the turn because she just called the flop.

Whenever your opponents make predictable bets, they're also exploitable. There are few situations in this game (from a theoretical standpoint) where you should bet almost 100 percent of the time. In the main, you should bet some hands and check others. Your betting frequency should reflect the relative strength of your hand range and your position. With a strong hand range and position, you bet a high percentage of your hands. With a weak hand range out of position, you bet a low percentage of your hands. When these factors are mixed, your betting frequency

should be moderate. You're not betting too much. You're not betting too little.

You don't want your opponents to be able to predict accurately when you will bet and when you won't.

Predictable bets are exploitable bets.

Let's say you play too many hands pre-flop, and you're playing against a tight player who doesn't play that many hands. In this case, your betting frequencies post-flop should go down. You're starting with a weak set of hands, and you're up against someone with a tighter, stronger range. You shouldn't be betting often from weakness and into strength.

But here's the thing. Many 5-10 players don't understand this idea—or at least they don't obey the rule. They will raise pre-flop with a wide range of hands like 6-3 suited, K-7 offsuit, and the like. You, as a tight player following my pre-flop recommendations, call. You have the stronger set of hands—there's no doubt about it. Yet this player will bet the flop 100 percent of the time anyway. He's the one who raised pre-flop, so he just thinks of it like it's a standard C-bet.

But it's an exploitable mistake, because he's betting a weak set of hands into a player with a strong set of hands. He should be checking most of the time and deferring to you, the player with the tighter range. At the 5-10 level, over-aggressive mistakes like these are commonplace.

You should not fold often, or at all, to certain of these bets. You should usually call, even if you feel like you don't have any sort of hand.

Yes, you can call with nothing. Think about the player who can bet all of his hands because he has eight good ones and two junk hands. The couple bluffs are well-hidden amongst the strong hands. The same principle holds for calls as well—at least when you're calling on an early street like the flop. You can hide some calls with weak hands among all your calls with hands like top pair. When you have the range strength advantage in a pot, it is your right to continue with some weak hands hidden among all the strong ones.

> *When you have the stronger hand range, it is your right to continue with some weak hands hidden amongst the strong ones.*

You can also consider raising with weak hands (weak hands among a generally strong range) when you think your opponent is betting from a position of weakness. Whether to call or raise depends on a several factors. Do you think there's a chance you'll pick up live reads if you call and see another card? Do you think your opponent is likely to keep bluffing if you call? Do you think your opponent will react predictably if you raise? What's the

texture of the board on the flop? How much stronger is your range than his? And so forth.

Sorting out these details is complex and beyond the scope of this chapter. But the key point is simple. If your opponent has bet, and you're thinking, "Of course he bet there," there's an excellent chance he's bluffing too many hands for what his hand range can support. On its own, this is not reason enough to attack the bet. But you should begin to think about the kinds of hands your opponent might have—good and bad.

If you're able to confirm your initial impression that he has too many weak hands, you should rarely fold to such a bet, and you should challenge the bet with a mixture of calls and raises.

You'll rely on this line of thinking repeatedly at 5-10. Players are still quite loose pre-flop, just as they are at 1-2 and 2-5. But they're more aggressive overall. You can peg a lot of loose players' extra bets and raises as over-aggression and "automatic" bets, based mostly on the situation and not on the strength of their hand range. Once you get a handle on identifying them, these are the bets from which you win money long term—as long as you don't fold to them.

THE GIVE-UP

Consider this scenario. Your opponent plays too many hands pre-flop. Nevertheless, he C-bets the flop nearly 100 percent of the time. Because you've identified this incongruity, you always call (or raise) this bet. It doesn't much matter what you hold. All that

matters is that your hand range is stronger on average than his, yet he's the one that's always doing the betting in this spot.

On the turn, your opponent has two options. He can acknowledge that his hand range is weak, and give up on a lot of bluffs. Or he can refuse to acknowledge this fact and storm ahead with another bluff.

Players routinely choose either of these options. Your goal is to try to guess which option your opponent is likely to take. Opponents that give up a lot are the easiest to deal with. You just wait them out. They bet the flop, you call. They bet the turn, maybe you call again. They check the river, and you bet and take the pot. (You don't win every time, but you win more than your share.)

If you play some 5-10 games, you'll see a lot of this giving-up tactic. Many players are willing to fire one or two shots, but usually give up if you refuse to go away. This is, indeed, the principle tactic employed by classic loose-aggressive players (LAGs). They play lots of hands pre-flop. Then, with many junk hands, they'll bet twice, trying to get a cheap fold. If you don't go away, they give up on most of their hands rather than launch a huge river bluff.

In fact, some players are so predictable in this style of play you can actually use Skill #2 against them, meaning don't pay them off if there's a third barrel. Say your opponent raises to $40 pre-flop and you call. He bets $80 on the flop, and you call. He bets $200 on the turn, and you call. Then on the river he bets $660.

You should fold to this bet, as a big river bet is often the marker that the LAG actually has a hand. There will frequently be a bet-

sizing tell, as the LAG is trying to make up all the small losses he suffers with his style by duping you into paying him off in one huge pot. So he shades that river bet large, hoping you won't give him credit (why would you, after all, since he plays so many hands, and bets the flop and turn so often?).

But if you watch this player for a while, you'll actually see that while the $80 flop bet and the $200 turn bet are reliable from this player, the $660 on the river is a rarity. When he misses completely, he generally does a lot of checking back the river and giving up. Or he catches a pair, slows his betting down, and tries to win a showdown.

THE LAST-DITCH EFFORT

Consider a type of over-aggressive players who create a weak betting range for themselves early in a hand by doing something they'd rarely do with a strong hand. Then they decide to run a bluff anyway. Here's a classic example.

You open for $30 in a 5-10 game with $1,000 stacks. Two players call behind you, and the blinds fold. There's $105 in the pot.

The flop comes J♥T♣5♥.

You check, the next player checks, and the button bets $70. You call, and the next player folds.

The turn is the K♦. You check, and your opponent checks. There's $245 in the pot and a little over $900 behind.

The river is the 2♦. You bet $120, and your opponent raises to $400.

On the flop, the player on the button bets when checked to. This bet doesn't necessarily signify strength, especially if the player plays lots of hands pre-flop.

It's the turn action, though, that tips you off to weakness. When the board is J♥T♣5♥K♦, most players with strong hands would bet to get calls from weaker hands, and to charge the draws. So the check-back indicates a weak range. It's not impossible that the player would check a strong hand or two. But the action in the hand thus far indicates a relatively weak hand range.

The river changes nothing. Yet, now the button player wakes up to a raise. This is a raise that's unsupported by the strength of the player's hand range. If this were a 1-2 game, I might well follow Skill #2 and fold, since despite the red flags about this play, bluff-raises at 1-2 can be quite rare.

But at 5-10, with on average a more aggressive player pool, I would consider calling even if my hand is guaranteed to lose should my opponent have a hand. There is a decent chance this player held a draw that bricked, and he views the river bet suspiciously after checks on the flop and turn. Instead of giving up on the pot, he's making a last-ditch bluff attempt.

I want to emphasize that two concepts here conflict. The first concept is not to pay people off who don't bluff often enough. The second concept is that you should challenge bets made by players who hold a weak underlying hand range. Whether to call a given bet or not depends on a judgment call about exactly how often a given player in general might be inclined to bluff.

THE BULLY

There are players who have little-to-no respect for money—at least not for the usual amounts found on a 5-10 table. These players play too many hands pre-flop (often way too many), and when they miss, they're perfectly willing to play their hands to the very end as if they hold the nuts. Indeed, putting the screws to more uptight opponents is one of their main delights.

The problem is these players will also play good hands like they have the nuts. So any time you enter a big pot with them, and they put in that huge river bet, it could go either way. You'll rarely know for sure whether you should call.

Live reads sometimes help. But these players also have good live-read skills. They hide information better than many players, and they also pick up live reads better than you might expect.

The good news? These players are potentially some of the most profitable at a table. They're willing to put lots of money into play, and their strategy is highly exploitable if you know what you're doing.

The bad news? Many of the same skills that helped you succeed at 1-2 and 2-5 will work against you with these players. That's why you'll often hear your peers complaining. "You can't read him, he could have anything," they say.

This is another example of a situation where you should not play your opponents, but you should play the course. Many people find players like The Bully to be intimidating. But the

reality is that they are slaves to the math of the game just like everyone else. They don't have any magic formula to win. Because their strategy is an uncommon one at lower stakes, you may not have the recipe to beat them at the ready. But they're very beatable. Put their bluster out of your mind and focus on finding accurate counter-strategies to their plays.

Unfortunately, the details of how to build a complete counter-strategy to these wildly overaggressive players are far too complex for this chapter. If you want to win like you should against The Bully, it requires you do a bit of work to understand how hand ranges behave on different board textures. A great place to learn these concepts is in my book *Poker's 1%*. This text presents a method to analyze hands away from the table that will help you develop your intuition for the strength of hand ranges given certain board textures. The ideas in *Poker's 1%* are invaluable as you begin to tackle tougher, more aggressive games.

Skill #9. Playing Deep

Games at the 1-2 and 2-5 levels typically feature a buy-in cap. In Las Vegas, which has fairly high caps for these games, the typical maximum buy-ins are $300 and $1,000, respectively. This equals 150 big blinds in the 1-2 games, and 200 big blinds in the 2-5 game.

Once you hit the 5-10 level, buy-ins can get deeper. In Las Vegas, 5-10 games are typically capped at a $3,000 buy-in, or they're completely uncapped. In uncapped games, it's not uncommon for players to buy in for $5,000, or even $10,000 or more.

In this section, I want to address some common misconceptions about playing deep and offer a few tips.

First, and most importantly, I want to dispel a common myth. There's absolutely no disadvantage to buying in short to a game where everyone else is deep. I don't know how many times I've heard someone say, "Man, everyone has $10,000 or more at that table. If you buy in for $1,000 or $2,000, you don't stand a chance. All the big stacks will bully you."

This is complete nonsense. There is no truth to this idea, yet it won't die.

No-limit hold 'em is played "table stakes." Meaning, if you have $500 on the table, then you're playing no-limit hold 'em for $500. If your opponent has a one-million-dollar chip sitting next to his $500 stack, it's irrelevant. You're playing for $500. Yours, and his. That chip might as well be a card protector. That chip might as well be in his pocket.

In reality, that player can't bully you. The rules of the game restrict him to betting a maximum of $500 against you. If he wants to play loose and aggressively for that $500, you simply play tight pre-flop and use Skill #8 wisely to create an edge against his inappropriately aggressive play.

Sure, he will never run out of money. Why is that a problem?

If this explanation hasn't convinced you there's no inherent advantage to playing deep stacked, then I urge you to investigate further until you're convinced. You're likely to have problems playing in 5-10 games and higher without a clear understanding of how different stack sizes affect play.

Not only is playing a short stack not a disadvantage in a 5-10 game, but I recommend that you buy in short to games 5-10 and higher if you're relatively new to the level. Buying in short does a few good things for you. One, it limits your potential losses and prevents you from making one enormous error that sinks you.

Two, it actually gives you a small natural advantage over your opponents. If everyone at the table is playing a $5,000 stack, they'll be calibrating their strategies based on that stack size. They'll be playing even looser pre-flop. They'll be more willing to hang around in certain pots with marginal hands.

In that environment, if you're playing a $600 stack, you'll have plenty of opportunity to shove all-in and catch your opponents holding weak hands with bad options. If you're the shortest stack at the table, you always know what stack size you're playing for. Your deep-stacked opponents will have to constantly adjust their strategies depending on who may decide to enter the pot.

I haven't talked much about stack sizes in this book for two reasons. One, I've focused on one type of game—live no-limit cash. In these games, most players tend to buy in for somewhere between 50 big blinds and the table maximum. Unless the game is very wild, stack sizes will tend to stay in this range even several hours into play, as players leave and new players sit. Generally you won't have many 5, or 20, or even 40 big-blind stacks to account for.

Furthermore, the exploitable errors that 1-2 and 2-5 players make don't often involve stacking off. Or, at least with 1-2, when you're getting stacks in, it's because you have an excellent hand and it's fairly obvious you want to play for it all.

The skills I emphasized in the 2-5 section come to prominence in medium-sized pots. When you're picking on players who tend to fold too often, you aren't playing many pots for stacks. So, in practice, at the 2-5 level, there's often little strategic difference if your opponent is playing 80 big blinds or 160 big blinds. In either case, for example, you might plan to barrel the flop and turn and give up if called.

But once you start competing against aggressive players who try to hide their bad hands through elaborate bluffs, stack sizes begin to affect every hand. This skill is about playing deep, which

I'll define as playing 300 big blinds or more. This would mean $3,000 stacks or more at 5-10.

My goal here is just to demystify playing deep-stacked, not give you a complete rundown. Consider a few observations.

NOT A TOTALLY DIFFERENT GAME

Note that theoretically, strategic changes remain moderate when you increase stacks from 200 big blinds, to 400 or even 500 big blinds. That extra stack depth, even in games playing deep, usually allows only one additional pot-sized bet in a given hand. So at a point in a hand where you'd be looking to get all-in with a "normal" stack depth, there's typically only a single bet or raise left behind in a "deeper" game.

Yet, this one extra bet does a few things. One, it increases the value of position. This means a player in position can play more loosely pre-flop, while out-of-position players should play slightly tighter.

Two, it means you should bluff a bit more on early streets, since there's potentially one extra bet with which to fire a final barrel after you've completed other betting lines.

Three, it means you should be considerably tighter with the set of hands you're willing to get all-in. It only makes sense you should be choosier with hands you play for $6,000 than those you play for $2,000.

DEEP STACKS, IN PRACTICE

One of this book's main themes is that players at all levels tend to play too many hands pre-flop, and they tend to get rid of these extra junk hands one of three ways.

When your opponents get rid of hands by folding, stack depth won't often come into play. If they're folding on the turn, it doesn't matter if you have $800 behind or $8,000. You can play these players roughly as you would with a normal stack.

When your opponents deal with extra hands by calling down, it's fairly obvious how to exploit them. You refuse to pay them off (i.e., Skill #2) for that extra stack depth, but you make sure to get that extra depth into play against them when you have the nuts or near-nuts.

Finally, when players tend to bluff with their extra junk hands, you may have a problem. Deeper stacks promote a looser, bluffier style. With position you can play more hands pre-flop, you can bluff with more hands on the flop, and you can protect that looseness with the threat of a huge river bet.

But all is not lost. First of all, I reiterate that you're never required to play super deep. You're welcome to buy in for $600 at, say, a 5-10 game. Even if you were to double up twice (a good session by any measure), you'd still be only 240 big-blinds deep—not the 400 or more I'm talking about here. In fact, buying in short to a high-stakes game is a relatively easy way to get an edge for a good win rate. Your opponents in these games will play too many hands pre-flop and will plan to bluff their way out of bad

situations. When you're a short stack, there's too little money behind to bluff, and your opponents will just be stuck with their bad hands.

This fact is not lost on the regular inhabitants of such games, who will complain about you if you short stack their games too much.

But let's assume you want to play deep like everyone else. How do you get an edge against LAGs who are playing a style that's favored by the structure of no-limit at higher levels?

First, you have to make sure you're psychologically comfortable with deeper stacks. If you're afraid of getting stacked, you won't succeed. Do not play deep unless you're comfortable with the idea of getting stacked two or three times, even. Of course, no one wants to lose. But you can't play in fear of it. Even a whiff of fear will come through, and you'll make exactly the errors your opponents expect you to make, which is obviously a bad situation.

Okay, so you're playing deep and doing so comfortably. You need to be loose and hang in there, in position, early in your hands.

For example, say you're playing 5-10 with $5,000 stacks.

Two players limp, and you raise to $50 on the button with J♠8♠. The small blind reraises to $150. The limpers fold. You should probably call the reraise. You don't want to get pushed off your hands in position, or else you'll be playing too many of your hands from out of position. This is a situation where playing deep encourages you to loosen up with the added advantage of position.

Once you have made these basic adjustments, you'll need to focus on outplaying your opponents using the skills we've discussed. Most important is an understanding of board textures, an ability to use live reads, and emotional numbing.

Loose-aggressive players at 5-10 will tend to make mistakes for large chunks of their stacks if you wait long enough. These players tend to misunderstand board textures, which means they're prone to running bluffs in spots where they're representing fewer hands than they think they are.

Also, players in these games often have little emotional control and are prone to act out. When stacks are deep, going on tilt tends to take on a bigger role as it can determine who wins and who loses over the long term.

Also, live reads become extremely important. If your opponent is consistently better at picking up and using live reads, you're going to have a tough time winning even if you better understand the theoretical side of the game. If you don't feel like you often find useful live read information to aid your decision-making, and if you also feel frustrated because your results at deep-stacked 5-10 aren't what you'd hoped they'd be, a live read imbalance is the most likely culprit.

Your opponents are probably picking up information that you leak unwittingly, and you're not picking up enough information on them to balance. Try buying in short (making live read information less valuable), and work actively on improving your live read skills.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As you can see, this section is not a detailed guide to winning deep-stacked games. Honestly, the way to win deep-stacked is to be "better at poker" than other players. Better at poker means to understand the fundamentals of the game better—pre-flop ranges, board textures, and so forth. Better at poker also means to perform better at the live read side of the game. When you play deep, live reads become perhaps the most important skill of all.

But I included this section, among other reasons, to dispel deep-stack myths. To that extent, always remember:

1. You're under no obligation to play deep-stacked just because your opponents are. They hold no advantage even if they all have ten times your stack on the table. In fact, you're the one that holds a modest advantage.

2. Do not play deep-stacked unless you're comfortable with the stakes involved, and you're ready to get stacked two or three times. Players comfortable at this level will suspect you aren't ready to play for stacks, and they will test you.

3. Many of the plays that may look like mistakes if you're used to playing shallow stacks are either not mistakes with deep stacks, or they're only minor mistakes. Don't fool yourself into thinking a game is soft just because you see people calling 3-bets loosely pre-flop.

4. You still likely want to play tighter than the average player in these games. Even though playing looser is forgiven in

some circumstances with deeper stacks, most players still play too many hands.

5.   To win against aggressive recreational players at this level, you have to use the hard poker skills of understanding board texture, making live reads, and numbing yourself emotionally. If you do these things consistently better than recreational players, and you're patient, you'll catch them making stack-sized errors. And when stacks are $5,000 or more, winning a stack is very sweet indeed.

Skill #10. Taking On The Pros

If you learn to exploit aggression, and you can handle playing deep—either by avoiding playing deep with the toughest players, or by learning its intricacies—and if you've mastered the other skills in this book, you can win at 5-10. Indeed, you could win enough to support yourself as a professional player (provided you have the bankroll).

But if you play 5-10 at a pro level, you won't be the only one. Wherever a game this big or bigger is played regularly, a pool of professional players will be there to feed off it. Chances are there will be two or three other pros in the game each time you play.

Most people start out with the idea they'll try to avoid playing the pros, and they'll focus on beating the softer targets at the table. Many people assume other pros will also have this mindset. Indeed, some pros will in fact have this mindset. But the best pros usually don't. They're out to try to beat every single player at the table.

Ultimately, if you want to maximize your potential at 5-10, and give yourself the chance to move even higher, you must learn to take on the pros.

There are two main ways to get an edge on the pros in your 5-10 games. The first one is simple, gimmicky, and works only as long as you remain unknown to your opponents. The second one is much harder, but will work indefinitely.

REVERSING LIVE READS

The first path toward an edge is a gimmick. It works, as I said, when you're relatively unknown to pros in your game. So you can use this tactic any time you're playing while traveling, you can use it on new strong players who enter your player pool, and sometimes you can even use it against pros who know you, but who may have forgotten that you use this strategy from time to time.

Here's the idea. You intentionally give off live reads, but you reverse their meaning. When the pros react to your tells, and they make an assumption about your hand, you surprise them with a different sort of hand.

Here's a simple example. It's a 5-10 game with $2,000 stacks. A recreational player limps, and a pro makes it $50 to go from two off the button. You call in the big blind with 4♣4♠. The limper calls. There's $155 in the pot and three players to the flop.

The flop comes A♣6♣4♦. You check, the limper checks, and the pro bets $80. You call, and the limper folds.

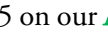The turn is the K♥. You bet out for $100 into the $315 pot.

To a pro, this is a betting pattern that should indicate weakness. Most players who take this line hold a weak ace. This read is especially believable because you began the hand in the big blind, and many players love to defend their ace-rag hands out of the blinds.

It's this donk bet (betting out of turn or out of flow), combined with your smallish bet size that completes this live read. A lot of pros are conditioned to react to action like this with brute force. They'll raise your turn bet and strongly consider barreling the river. They'll do it with a hand like A-Q, because they'll assume their hand is good, and they'll want to get value. And they'll do it as a bluff, since it's likely to work. (Their bet sizing with A-Q and the bluff will likely be different, with A-Q bets shaded small to encourage calls from A-x, with the bluffs shaded larger to blast A-x out of the pot.)

When you hold bottom set, obviously you crush almost anything the pro can hold. The problem is that anyone strong enough to be a pro at 5-10 will know they shouldn't give tons of action to an unknown player on static, ace-high flops. At the very least, they'll be wary you just called pre-flop with A-Q, and will be unlikely to shovel money at you with anything weaker.

By reversing the "weak lead on the turn" live read, you increase the chance your opponent decides to bluff. You also get a bit of extra money into the pot those times your opponent does have a strong hand.

This live-read reversal has one potential problem. If you were to reraise the turn raise that you induced with your weak lead, it would be a sign of great strength. In other words, say you bet $100 into $335 with a set. The pro makes it $400 to go. If you were to reraise, the pro's first thought would likely be that you reversed the tell on the original bet and you were looking for action. This might encourage him to get away from a hand even as strong as A-Q.

As well, you could take a live-read reversal one step further and do it with a drawing hand as an elaborate semi-bluff. Instead of 4-4, say you held 7-5 on our A♣6♣4♦ for an open-ended straight draw on the flop. You could check and call a flop bet. When the turn bricks, you could bet $100 into $335, inducing the pro to raise to $400. Then you could drop a massive reraise. As long as you're relatively unknown to the pro you're targeting, the pro would be essentially forced to give you credit for a hand after this action. You're likely to get a ton of folds to the reraise.

The better your facility with live reads at your game level (Skill #6), the better you'll be able to reverse these live reads to exploit your opponents. And you'll want to use these reversals against pros because your opponent has to recognize the live read in the first place for a reversal to succeed. Therefore, it's best to use the ploys which most pros at your level are familiar with. You can't run a gimmick on a player who has no idea what you're doing.

You can figure out which of the tells you know about are useful to reverse by watching pros, and seeing how predictably they react. When a tell comes out through the natural course of play, if the pro reacts with the appropriate counter-strategy, this may

be a tell you can reverse. If you're good at this, you'll be able to watch a hand, see some specific action, and think, "That pro is going to raise 100 percent of the time here." And, naturally, you should be right about it.

Reversing live reads is an effective strategy when it works, because often you can induce your opponent to do precisely what you want them to. When you can paint the best players into a corner, it's powerful. And profitable.

But as I said, it's also a bit of a gimmick. The same pros won't fall for it indefinitely. You trick them a few times, trying to induce their live reads, and they'll remember and adjust. Yet, because it can be worth so much when you do trick them, you might want to try to save these shots for the juiciest opportunities.

But don't save them too long, because the rest of your play can out you as an atypical opponent. If you routinely distinguish yourself by 3-betting aggressively pre-flop, or barreling well, or value betting accurately, or reacting well to board textures, some pros may suspect you quickly of being a pro-level player.

Once they have that read, they'll react less predictably to you if you try to throw a reverse tell. They'll know it could be a trap.

Caveats notwithstanding, if you're an unknown player in a new card room anywhere in the world, the reverse live read is a fantastic weapon against savvier players.

FINDING THEIR LEAKS

Once you've worn out your ability to use cheap tactics against pros, you have to beat them the old-fashioned way—by outplaying them.

You outplay the pros using the same skills we've used throughout this book. Pros in live games will tend to play too many hands pre-flop (though often not as many as recreational players). And pros have the same problem with these extra hands everyone else does—they have to stick them somewhere. But pros tend to be smart about where they go. They'll call down with their junk hands when they can get away with it. They'll fold them when they believe that makes the most sense. And they'll often try to bluff their extra hands, because that strategy works against a wide swath of live no-limit players.

In other words, at any moment, in any given hand, pros are just as vulnerable to being punished for their loose, exploitable play as anyone else. But they're a moving target. So they're trickier. Instead of relying on a static strategy, they're able to adjust their play to what they think will work in the moment.

But you still have two options to hit a moving target. One, you can try to stay a step ahead. Two, you can try to develop an optimal strategy that will exploit a pro player's strategy no matter which way they turn.

The first approach is easier. You're looking for specific leaks in their games. No pro I know plays anywhere close to a perfect game. They'll always give away information about hand strength

by the way they construct their hand ranges, and by the way they handle certain situations. Here's an example.

Let's say a pro opens for $30 from two off the button, and you call in the big blind. The flop comes Q♥8♦3♦. You check, the pro bets, you call.

The turn is the 6♣. You check and your opponent checks. What can he have?

The pro is clearly taking a typical pot-controlling line designed to get to showdown with a medium-strength hand. Hands like Q-J and A-8 are in his mix. The player could also have an ace-high hand like A-J, or a medium unimproved pocket pair like 7-7.

With extra-strong hands like 3-3 or 8-6, the pro would undoubtedly bet again in an attempt to get three streets of value against a good queen. The turn check, therefore, likely indicates that the pro has a hand worth between one and two streets of value. Or the pro checks because he's giving up on the hand.

So if that's what a check means, what does it mean if the pro makes a big turn bet instead?

Well, it could be one of those extra-strong hands such as 3-3 and 8-6. But it could also be a bluff. Any time a pro-level player is making strong bets, there's a chance it's a bluff.

The question is, what percentage of the time is he bluffing? An optimal bluffing frequency does exist. So if the pro bluffs precisely that much, you can't do anything about it. Call, and you lose too often to the good hands. Fold, and you get bluffed out a lot.

No pro will actually bluff at the optimal frequency. Sometimes they'll bluff less than optimally, sometimes more. These are often not conscious decisions. Most 5-10 pros aren't thinking in terms

of optimal frequencies. Instead, they're reacting to, and acting on, live reads. Or they're a little lazy about their play, and falling easily into betting patterns that work okay, but aren't necessarily perfect.

If you can get into a pro's head, you can sometimes guess whether they're over- or under-bluffing in this kind of spot and those like it. The first puzzle piece is board texture. How many strong hands, worth three streets of value, are out there? Some boards allow more of these hands than others. If a given board allows fewer strong hands, it's likely the pro could be over-bluffing. Unless he accounts for the lack of good hands and bluffs less, he will be bluffing too many hands compared to the number of strong hands he can hold relative to the board texture.

The second puzzle piece is related to the first—pre-flop hand selection. A pro might have more strong hands on a K-9-7-3 board than on a K-7-6-3 board, for example, because before the flop he plays significantly fewer hands with sixes in them than he does hands with nines. Or it can work in reverse. If the professional is an aggressive pre-flop reraiser, when he doesn't reraise, you can discount the possibility he has a high-card hand.

Third, you can try to intuit the pro's overall strategy. Is he looking to win pots with bluffs, or is he looking to win showdowns? No pro player will skew too far in one or the other direction. But there will always be some skew in their overall approach.

Consider all these factors then examine the turn bet. Is it more likely to be value bet or a bluff? If you get skilled at deciphering

the information available in betting lines, you'll be able to create an edge over professional-level opponents.

G AME -T HEORY O PTIMAL P LAY

Game Theory Optimal play, or GTO, is now a buzzword. The theory suggests you can create an optimal strategy that can't be beaten by any other strategy, and that beats any other strategy no matter what it is. This is the strategy the Computer Poker Research Group (CPRG) at the University of Alberta calculated for heads-up limit hold 'em in their Cepheus project. (Go to http://poker.srv.ualberta.ca/ for more information on this fascinating project.)

The GTO strategy for heads-up limit hold 'em has been calculated by the folks at CPRG, but no one knows exactly what that strategy might be for multi-handed, no-limit hold 'em. (Indeed, technically, an "optimal" strategy doesn't necessarily exist when more than two people play the game, despite countless articles today on how to play optimal poker.)

The optimal strategy is still a mystery. But you can work to understand what some features might look like. And incorporate them. As the theory goes, if you can play reasonably close to a GTO strategy, you'll be able to get the edge on every pro with an inferior understanding to yours.

GTO play is beyond the scope of this book. But if the idea intrigues you, I recommend the following texts:

- *Poker's 1%* by Ed Miller. This is not a book about GTO, but it lays a foundation that will help you grasp the more difficult GTO ideas in more advanced books.

- *Mathematics of Poker* by Bill Chen and Jerrod Ankenman. This book is a fantastic introduction to mathematical solutions for poker games. I'd recommend reading this after my *Poker's 1%.* If you like it, continuing on makes sense. If it's hard, the following books likely will be, too.

- *Applications of No-limit Hold 'em* by Matthew Janda, and *Expert Heads-Up No-limit Hold 'em* (two volumes) by Will Tipton. These books contain a gold mine of information for those seeking greater guidance in optimal strategies.

5-10 Hand Quizzes

In this 5-10 section, my hope was to give you a taste of what it means to study, and achieve results beyond the levels of most other players. It was brief, but I hope I gave you something to think about, as well as a roadmap for what to read and study once you're ready to take on the game at higher levels.

For the hand quizzes below, you're playing 5-10 with $3,000 stacks in a place you don't often play. The players are unknown to you, but you will use some of the clues I discussed in the live reads chapter to make assumptions about how they might play.

Hand 1

Two players limp, and an obvious professional player makes it $50 to go on the button. You're in the big blind with 7♦7♣, and you call. One of the limpers calls.

The flop comes A♣7♠3♥. You check. The check makes sense because there are relatively few hands you would want to bet out after calling from the big blind on this board. Since you'd likely have reraised pre-flop with A-K and A-Q, and possibly A-J as well

as some smaller suited aces, a set is among the few good hands you're likely to have.

Since the balance of your entire range will be fairly weak on this flop, you don't want to fork it by betting the strong hands and checking the weak ones. It's preferable to hide the few strong hands you flop among the many weak ones by checking them all.

The limper checks, and the pre-flop raiser bets $80 into the $155 pot. You call, and the limper folds.

The turn is the 4♣. What should you do?

♠

Considering all we've covered thus far, there's no one right answer. Your opponents will be intelligent, competent, and familiar with the ideas in the 1-2 and 2-5 sections of this book. Your goal is to create an informational advantage—often a series of temporary informational advantages—and stay one step ahead.

In this particular hand, you could mimic a play many players would make if they held a weak ace hand such as A-5. You could make a "probe" bet of perhaps $100 into the $315 pot.

Most pros would recognize an out-of-turn $100 bet into this pot as a likely information probe. Typically, in this situation it means the player in the blind defended with a weak ace and now wants to find out cheaply if the ace is good.

If the pro can't beat an ace, with stacks this deep, he'll likely raise and blow the blind player out of the water.

If the pro can beat the ace, he might make a small raise for value, or he might just call. Both moves are designed to string the big blind along with the ace for one more street.

So here's what the whole picture looks like. On the turn, you bet out for $100 with your set. The professional player mistakes this for a weak ace. If he can't beat the ace, he raises you to $300 or more. You can either call the raise and check the river to induce a second barrel, or you can reraise immediately which likely ends the hand. Reraising is better if you don't expect a second barrel, since it denies a free card to a long-shot hand that might outdraw you. Yet, if you think you can get the pro to fire again, then you should probably risk a river card and just call.

If the pro can beat a weak ace, expect either just a call or a smaller raise—perhaps to $200 or $250. In either case, your best play is probably to just call (if raised) and check the river. The pro will almost certainly bet for value.

Then you check-raise. And I'd make it a big bet. Force the pro to make a big fold. Sometimes they will, but sometimes they'll be confused by your line and call.

Either way, the goal is to misrepresent your hand on the turn, then use that misrepresentation to extract extra value by encouraging the pro to be overly aggressive with what might be a weak hand range—a range that's ultimately weak because he plays too many hands pre-flop to begin with.

Hand 2

Two players limp, and an obvious pro makes it $50 to go on the button. You're in the big blind with 9♣7♣, and you call. One of the limpers calls. (You could reasonably have chosen to reraise pre-flop as well.)

The flop comes A♣7♠3♥. You check.

The limper checks, and the pre-flop raiser bets $80 into the $155 pot. You call, and the limper folds.

The turn is the 4♣. What should you do?

♠

Again, there's no right answer here, but it's worth considering the same maneuver from the previous example. Except this time the goal is to induce over-aggression on the turn, and then attempt to win the pot with a bluff.

So you bet out $100 into a $315 pot. The pro raises to $350, say. Then you reraise to $900, leaving a little under $2,000 left for the river.

It's going to be a tough spot for the pro. He's likely starting with a weak range pre-flop. The flop C-bet on an A-7-3 rainbow board doesn't show significant strength. The pro could decide to make that bet with any number of weaker hands.

The turn raise is the over-aggression we induced by mimicking a weak play often made by recreational players. So that raise doesn't imply strength either. This is a classic case of catching a

player putting too much money into a pot with a weak hand set. If you want an edge on 5-10 pros, you have to find ways to induce bets and then raise when the underlying strength of their hand range doesn't justify their actions.

From time to time, this line will blow up in your face, as the pro will show up with 6-5 suited or a flopped set. That's part of the deal. But the occasional blow up is built into the math. As long as your opponent is getting out of line too much pre-flop, and then again on the turn raise, you're covered. You'll make enough when it works to pay for the blow ups when it doesn't.

If all else fails, make sure you spike a club on the river and suck out.

HAND 3

[This hand comes from an article I wrote for *Card Player* magazine (vol. 27 no. 11) entitled "Mistakes 5-10 Players Make."]

You open A♣Q♣ for $30 from two off the button. A pro (who doesn't know you) calls on the button.

The flop is 9♣4♠3♦. What do you do?

♠

Check. This is a dynamic flop, favoring the in-position player, and it doesn't connect well with your opening range from two off the button. A professional player in position will know well how

to handle this situation. It's best to acknowledge the unfortunate call on the button, and the bad flop, by checking most of your range.

You check, and the pro bets $50. What do you do?

♠

Call. Just because you checked the flop doesn't mean you should give up if the pro breathes on the pot. He could be betting his entire range here, and a good ace-high is still likely the best hand on this type of ragged flop.

The turn is the K♠. What do you do?

♠

Here you have options. You can bet out, representing the king. It's not a bad option, since now the board is less dynamic than on the flop, and since you very plausibly could have hit the king.

But betting out won't gain you much. If he's got a king, he won't fold. And if he's got nothing, you have him beaten with just one card to come. He probably won't fold a nine straight out either, nor a hand like T-T. Mostly, a bet gets better hands to call, and worse hands to fold. It's not a disaster by any means, since even if your opponent has 7-2 he's got outs to beat you. But you might be able to do better.

If your goal is to induce over-aggression, checking might be the better play. The goal is to induce action from worse hands. Sure, he could bet a king, and you'd call. But if you bet out, then

he's calling with the king and it's all the same. Also, checking could give you live-read information you wouldn't get from betting.

Either line is defensible. I would choose one or the other based on the errors I expect the player to make. In other words, I'd try to think one step ahead of my opponent and play to my assumptions. My success or failure would depend on my ability to predict his strategy and his actions.

In the actual hand, I checked. So let's say that's what you do.

He checks it back. The river is the A♦. What do you do now?

♠

Again, you could bet or check. If you bet, it's because you think your opponent is more likely to try to bluff-catch, than try to bluff or make a thin value bet. If you check, it's the opposite. In these games, I thought it was far more likely the pro would bet if checked to, than call if I bet.

So I checked. He bet $90 into the $175 pot. I called. He showed K-J and I won.

He was trying to bet second pair for value on the river. He likely assumed I held a hand like a nine or T-T. He probably checked back the turn because he was worried I would try to make a Skill #2 fold against him if he bet out on the turn. After I checked again on the river, he tried to squeeze a bet out of me.

This value bet was overly optimistic. If he was worried I'd try to make a Skill #2 fold on the turn, he should have been equally worried on the river after the boss overcard hit. Furthermore,

there's a good chance I'd have an ace. Given the assumptions about me he seemed to be making, he was more likely getting called by an ace than a nine, so he should have checked back the river.

Again, the theme in this hand is consistent. Aggressive 5-10 players, whether "pros" or recreational players, still play too many hands pre-flop, giving you access to their money. To capitalize on this access, you have to anticipate how they intend to dump their extra weak hands. When your opponents are aggressive, you have to give them opportunities and inducements to take shots at you. Then you snap them off.

It's a tricky, volatile game to get the hang of. A robust discussion of aggressive, higher-stakes games is beyond the scope of this book. I hope the included examples give you a taste of the type of thinking you'll have to master to climb successfully to 5-10 and beyond.

The Next Step

This book is a serious introduction to live no-limit hold 'em. If you follow this blueprint from beginning to end, you'll acquire both a conceptual understanding and the practical skills needed to beat these games in most locales at most stakes commonly offered.

But there is in fact more. If you found this book thought provoking, and you're ready to take it up a notch, there's plenty of available material to keep you studying for years to come. I'll first list the books you might read next, regardless of the games you normally play. Then I'll recommend a few books for specific goals.

The Main Course

As I wrote in the introduction, I've written nine poker books in all. I don't recommend you read them all. But some of them might help transform your game. Consider them in this order:

Playing The Player: Moving Beyond ABC Poker To Dominate Your Opponents

Without a doubt, consider this text next. It goes much deeper into the ideas I presented in this book's 2-5 section. Identifying situations to bully your opponents off weak hands is just plain fun.

How To Read Hands At No-Limit Hold 'em

Consider reading this next. It's a little more nuts-and-bolts than either this book, or *Playing The Player*. But I think you'll benefit greatly from an in-depth look at hand reading (including building hand ranges and understanding board texture). It is perhaps the most vital no-limit hold 'em skill you'll hone once you get beyond the basics. Essential stuff.

Poker's 1%: The One Big Secret That Keeps Elite Players On Top

As I've said many times in this book, lots of material was beyond our scope. *Poker's 1%* covers in detail more advanced ideas. Simply put, and in plain language, the book reveals how elite players approach the game. If you want to thrive in higher-stakes games against opponents who are versed in what I've covered here, *Poker's 1%* is a must-read.

Red Chip Poker

Beyond these three books, you might want to explore RedChipPoker.com, the video training site I co-founded with Doug Hull, James Sweeney, and Christian Soto. Each month, the site publishes instructional videos that dovetail nicely with the

material here. Red Chip is a great audio-visual companion to my books, and will show you myriad contexts where various strategies come into play. Good poker is not random. Good poker requires a plan. For your individual hands, for different games, for your careers.

TOURNAMENT PLAY

If you're interested in tournaments, you'll have to study and get good at a number of skills I didn't cover here. These include playing various stack depths, dealing with antes, understanding bubble play and the concept of leverage, and learning about chip-valuation models such as the Independent Chip Model (ICM).

For tournament play, I recommend the *Secrets of Professional Tournament Poker* series of books by Jonathan Little, and the *Kill Phil* series of books by Blair Rodman, Lee Nelson, Tysen Streib, and others.

For video instruction, Tournament Poker Edge (TournamentPokerEdge.com) is an excellent site that drills down on some great approaches to a winning tournament strategy.

Getting good at the skills in this book will certainly help you in tournaments. But tournaments are their own animal requiring additional skills you can't ignore. My recommendations here should get you going.

LIVE READS AND TELLS

This is an area of study consistently underserved—partly because it's hard to teach, and partly because those who've mastered it don't like to divulge their secrets. Go-to books in this area are by Zachary Elwood: *Reading Poker Tells* and *Verbal Poker Tells*.

HIGHER-LEVEL POKER THINKING

Poker is a tremendously complex game. But that complexity doesn't have to be an obstacle. My goal as a poker writer is to distill difficult ideas to their essence. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I avoid a lot of the down-and-dirty math of the game. Math underlies everything I write about, but I try not to fill my books with equations. If you want to get a little dirtier with the numbers, I offer the following recommendations.

The Theory of Poker by David Sklansky
This is perhaps the most accessible book that explores poker on a higher level. A well-respected classic.

The Mathematics of Poker by Bill Chen and Jerrod Ankenman
This is the definitive modern work on the mathematical and game-theory analysis of poker. It's not for everyone. Read a few

chapters and you'll know if it's for you. Regardless, it's the gold standard for its category. If you want to explore the math in depth, this is a must-read.

Applications of No-Limit Hold 'em by Matthew Janda

If you've read *Poker's 1%* and *The Mathematics of Poker,* and want more in-depth analysis of no-limit hold 'em, this is the book.

Expert Heads Up No Limit Hold 'em by Will Tipton (two volumes)

Will Tipton has done astonishing work in these books. They are not for the faint of heart, but are at the cutting edge of what's in print for no-limit hold 'em analysis. If your goal is to conquer the Mount Everest that is the online no-limit cash game world, these last few books will be an essential part of your training program.

FINAL THOUGHTS

These various books should keep you busy. In the end, the game is what you make of it. If you're mostly a recreational player, you'll do well reading this book and *Playing The Player*, and leaving it at that. *Playing The Player* is written in the same plain-spoken style as this book, and between the two, you'll have plenty of ammunition to take on folks at any card room, anywhere in the world.

If you're the kind of player who wants to dig deeper, continue to learn, and ultimately dominate your competition, then you've found the right game. While it's deceptively simple on the surface, no-limit hold 'em is an extremely difficult game that will reward you endlessly with incremental mastery for every hour of study you put into it. It need never get stale. In this game, there's no doubt. Hard work is rewarded.

Conclusion

No-limit hold 'em is an intricate and sometimes frustrating game. You're probably going to play thousands of hands where you aren't sure what to do. And you'll naturally play hands where you're pretty sure you did the right thing but get stacked anyway.

Never let it get you down. And be gracious with yourself. You aren't supposed to have the perfect answer to every situation. And you aren't supposed to win every time you play, whether you take the right actions or not.

You're never going to understand everything there is to know about this game. Whatever your level, the frontier of your knowledge will always be vast. Some of that frontier will be familiar. Much of it will be unknown. You will likely feel the borders of that frontier every time you play. Some hand or another will come up, and you won't be sure of the best play.

All of this is completely normal. Your job is to muddle through these situations as best as you can. If you're smart, and can approach a situation logically, you'll probably do just fine with many of them. And some of them you'll no doubt butcher.

In this way, you're not alone. Every person who had ever sat down at a poker table shares this reality. Everyone, from the best

players in the world on down, sometimes butchers hands. What separates the winners from everyone else is what they do after this happens.

Most people make a decision, play out the hand, and move on. Afterwards, they don't think much about it one way or the other. If they win the hand, they pat themselves on the back for being smart. If they lose the hand, they find something to blame. The dealer, their opponent's bad play, the universe, whatever. Maybe they take the hand home with them and do some results-oriented analysis. "Gee, if I'd just have shoved the flop, he wouldn't have been able to call with his gutshot, and I wouldn't have lost."

That's what most people do. They learn absolutely nothing from this process. The next time the same situation comes up, they are still in the dark.

Winners react differently. When a hand comes up they aren't sure about, they write it down and take it home. They study it. Winners understand that winning or losing a hand is mostly irrelevant. They analyze how their overall strategy applies to the situation so that if it comes up again, they'll have the answer. That's what matters.

Winners think about, and engage the game, systematically. They know that money comes from those who play too many hands pre-flop, and who try to get rid of those extra hands by calling, folding, or bluffing post-flop. In this context, what does the unexpected situation look like? Is it a situation to leverage because an opponent has a weak range? Is it a situation to avoid because an opponent's range is strong? If it's a situation to exploit, what's the best method? If it's a situation to avoid, can you fold?

Or are you stuck calling at least once because of your own hand's value?

When you encounter a hand that baffles you, take it home and analyze it using the best methods you know. Try to come to a conclusion about how best to have played the hand. Your poker life in the long term is not about better financial results. It's about better play. Better study. Better strategy. Better actions you take over and over across countless hands, regardless of whether a huge pot is added to your chip stack.

If you do this consistently, over time you will slowly develop a knowledge of the game that will put your less-studious opponents to shame.

You don't have to play every hand perfectly. You don't have to know what you're doing every minute of the game. No one comes close to those ideals.

Above all, when you play a hand that signals a gap in your knowledge, write it down, run home, and learn from it. Do that over and over and do it well, and the mysteries of no-limit hold 'em will reveal themselves to you in ways you could never predict.

Acknowledgements

This book has been a pleasure to put together largely for the multifaceted efforts of Eileen Sutton of Sutton Creative. She has put her stamp on this book with her editing work, her marketing insight, and her status as exactly the sort of poker player I wrote the book for. Thank you very much, Eileen, for helping me to take my work a level beyond what I have done before.

Thank you to Darcy Flanders and Matthew Belloise of Baseline Design for their terrific work producing a slightly idiosyncratic poker book cover.

Thank you to Loretta Mock. If this is my first book that you've read, there's a good chance she helped to steer you here.

Thank you to Andrew Brokos, Nate Meyvis, and Carlos Welch of the Thinking Poker Podcast for reviewing the book and offering insightful feedback that has helped make this a more accurate book than it otherwise would have been. If you aren't a listener, you should go download every episode of the Thinking Poker Podcast right now and binge listen to it. If there's finer free poker content out there, I'm not aware of it.

Likewise, I'd like to thank Doug Hull, James Sweeney, and Christian Soto, my partners at Red Chip Poker video training.

These guys took a look at a very rough draft and helped fix most of the errors before they made it to you.

I'd also like to thank Jonathan Little, Abe Limon, Zachary Ellwood, Dr. Tricia Cardner, Craig Tapscott, Julio Rodriguez, Bob Dancer, Richard Munchkin, Nick Christenson, Justin Marchand at *Card Player* magazine, and Matthew Parvis at PokerNews.com, Mike Minkoff at ProfessionalPoker.com, Anthony Curtis at Huntington Press, the folks at Gamblers General Store in Las Vegas, and others whom I may have forgotten for their efforts and time invested on my behalf.

I'd like to thank Amazon for their terrific self-publishing platform. And to Starbucks for renting me office space for the daily price of a $2 coffee.

A big thank you to my readers. Without you, there would be no books. A special thanks to those who take the time to write up book reviews on blogs and at Amazon. These help me out a ton, and I really appreciate it. Also a big thanks to those who talk to me regularly on Facebook, Twitter, and at the Red Chip Poker forums. This discussion benefits everyone.

Finally, a thank you to my wife, Elaine, who endures the highs and lows of book-writing along with me. And to my son, Elliott, who has lost too much daddy time this year to late-night editing sessions. And, finally, to my mom and dad.