



DECIDE TO PLAY GREAT POKER

A Strategy Guide to
No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em

ANNIE DUKE
JOHN VORHAUS



More Praise from the Pros

“Trust me, this book will open your eyes again and again. It’s packed with so many good tactics that you’ll read it more than once!”

—Phil Hellmuth, Jr., 12-time World Champion of Poker and two-time WSOP Main Event Champion

“A revolutionary approach to playing no-limit Texas hold ’em. If this book doesn’t improve your game, you aren’t paying attention.”

—Doyle Brunson, 10-time World Champion of Poker and World Series of Poker Main Event Champion

“Annie is one of the smartest people I know, and not too bad at poker either. If you’re still learning (and I know I am), you’re sure to profit from reading this book.”

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“The brilliant mind of Annie Duke channeled through the magic voice of John Vorhaus—how could Decide not rock?”

—Vanessa Rousso, 2009 NBC National Heads-Up Poker Championship runner-up

“You have to understand the game before you can kill it. Decide takes care of the first part.”

—Bertrand “ElkY” Gropellier, co-author of *Kill ElkY* and author of *The Raiser’s Edge*, 2008 WPT Player of the Year

Decide to Play Great Poker

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A Strategy Guide to No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em

Annie Duke
and
John Vorhaus

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, Deedy Lederer, who was the smartest, quirkiest, and quickest intellect I have ever known. Her passion for games lives on in her children.

—Annie



To my grandchildren, Evie and Liam. I can't wait to teach you what beats what.

—John

Acknowledgments

From Annie:

It turns out that writing a book is really hard. Actually, it's not the writing of the book that's so difficult—it's the finishing of the book. Especially a book of this nature that exposes one's intellect so nakedly. This book took me two years to finish. I have so many people to thank for kicking me in the ass to get it done, because without them, I would have never found the courage to ship this thing.

First and foremost, I have to thank my brother, Howard Lederer. Without him, this book would never have been written, for it's my brother who instilled the love of poker in me and taught me to play the game. So much of what's contained in this book grew from the seeds sown in many long deconstructions of poker sessions, back when I started playing in Billings, Montana. My brother spent seemingly endless hours on the phone with me listening to hand after hand I had played, giving me his input as to the lines of play I had chosen. It was through those sessions on the phone that I learned this game and began my journey as a professional player and teacher. Without him, I would never have become the player I became.

I am incredibly grateful for having worked with the most amazing co-author I could ever ask for, John Vorhaus, who lent such a readable and light touch to the dense theory contained herein. He created a breezy read of material that could have been a slog. More important, in the end he delivered an ultimatum that finally got me to finish, and I truly believe that without him by my side, that would never have happened, which I surely would have regretted for the rest of my life. So thank you, John. You made me a better person in this process, and you certainly made my poker theory eminently readable. I am so lucky to call you friend.

Anthony Curtis had nearly endless patience during the process while I worked through my own demons in finishing this book. Thank you for taking it on and, more important, for taking me on. Blair Rodman and Kevin Blackwood were both kind enough to read early versions of the manuscript and lend their invaluable comments. They both made the book much better, and they lent their time just because they are passionate about writing and poker. Thanks to my good friend Jon Hair for his tireless dedication and patience in creating my too-cool cover; he never ceases to amaze me with his artistic flair. Glen Clarkson, my longtime manager, was a thorn in my side in the best possible way, nagging me constantly about finishing this book. Everyone needs that guy in their life and I wouldn't want to ever trade Glen in.

I have to thank every poker student I have ever taught, both private students and the hundreds of people I've lectured to in my poker seminars. My students have forced me to a high standard of clarity of thought and expression about the game. They have been partners in guiding the way I think about poker. If I couldn't coherently explain a concept to them, I knew I needed to rethink the concept. The process of communicating in a useful way to a room full of students forced my thoughts to be coherent in a way that made this book possible. And through that process, I became a much better poker player myself as I gained more and more clarity on the game.

I have my parents, Richard and Deedy Lederer, to thank for my love of games, particularly card games. They met over a game of bridge and continued that passion for cards into many a late-night family card game played on the floor of my father's study. They taught me that it's okay for a girl to be competitive, mathematical, and love exploring the theory of games. It's no surprise that two poker players came out of a household that valued intellectual pursuit so highly. I miss my mother's quick wit and quirky intellect terribly and hope just some small part of her is expressed in this book.

I thank my dear fiancé, Joe Reitman, for putting up with long stretches of time he never saw me as I was deep into writing and editing. He endured many nights of "in a minute," which turned into working sessions lasting into the wee hours of the morning. And when I came out the other side, he was there waiting for me, still loving me.

And, of course, I have to thank my children, Maud, Leo, Lucy, and Nelly. They inspire me every day to be a better person and a better thinker. They bring a joy to my life I could never have imagined that drives me to want to fulfill every last bit of my potential.



From John:

I wish to first thank Annie, for giving me the chance to learn from one of the greats. More than once you made my head explode, but always in a good way. Thanks to everyone at Huntington Press for their forbearance during the long gestation of this baby. Thanks to everyone who's sent kind words on my *Killer Poker* books—you always make my day. Reader, if you're wondering who's responsible for what's in this book, here's a simple rule of thumb: All of the brilliant concepts are Annie's; some of the pretty words are mine.

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Foreword

by Phil Gordon

In the 10-plus years I've been friends with Annie, I've never had the opportunity to question her decision-making skills at the poker table. A few things away from the table made me ask, "What the hell was Annie thinking?" ("Celebrity Apprentice" being the prime example), but that's a whole different story, I'm sure.

Here's the thing: There is no right or wrong way to play a hand of poker. What's right for me or Annie may be completely wrong for you. We absolutely hate it when people ask us the inevitable question: "So, how do you play pocket jacks?" or "I had AQ in late position, I raised, and the small blind re-raised. What should I have done?" Those questions are absolutely meaningless and unanswerable without context, without serious decision-making skills.

This book will give you excellent insight into what it takes to make good decisions at the poker table, in both tournaments and cash games. What you must understand is that an almost unlimited number of situations that will occur will be "close"—that is, it isn't clear-cut if you should raise, fold, or call. Any action could be right, and any action could be wrong. It's in situations where it's very close that the real money is made and lost.

If you can somehow manage to get more of the close decisions right, you'll be a big winner at poker. It isn't difficult to play AA or KK when someone raises all-in in front of you. It's really not even close—you just stick the money in the middle. End of story. It's the hands where you flop second or third pair on a coordinated board and you're either way ahead or way behind that are the true test.

If there's one lesson that I think you should take away from this book, it's this: Have a reason for every action. There are good reasons to raise before the flop or make a continuation bet. There are good reasons to make a speculative bluff or call down an opponent with second pair. There are reasons to get up from the table or decide to re-buy. If you always have a reason for your actions, you're sure to be making better decisions.

Nothing is "automatic" at the poker table. Even if you're dealt 72 off-suit under the gun, it might be profitable to raise. You must make a conscious decision to fold. Now, it may be that decision is 100% clear-cut, but some of the time, if you really do the work and dig deeper into the situation, you'll come up with a different conclusion than the "automatic" play.

You've already made one good decision—a conscientious decision to work on your poker game and become a better player. That's an excellent start. This book, along with some hard work and practice, will help you make good decisions at the table. And, after all, good decision-making is the mark of a champion, a champion like my dear friend Annie Duke.

PART ONE

Pre-game and Pre-flop

Decide to Decide

The First Rule is There are No Rules

Study the following chart of starting hands very carefully.

Did you notice that there's no chart? Good. You've taken your first step toward understanding a new way of playing no-limit Texas hold 'em, an approach that focuses your attention not on starting hand charts, but on the *decisions* you make, on how to make better decisions at the poker table than your opponents do. Being the best decision-maker at a table, not following a hand chart in some book you've read, will turn you into a big winner in poker.

Of course, a decision-science approach to poker is not the only way to think about the game. Some people take a strictly mathematical approach, where percentages are the only driving factor in their play. Others take an approach that talks about things like "feel." These people pretty much just go with their gut, without thinking much more deeply than that. But the most common approach I've seen in poker books is the method where the book lays down rules. It tells you things like which hands you should play in what position and gives you firm guidelines like, "Always raise three times the big blind." It has rules for everything from bluffing frequency to how much to tip.

The issue I have with rule-driven teaching is that it's much too rigid (except the tipping part—always a good idea to tip). Why? Because it turns poker players into rote thinkers, and rote thinking is much too simplistic for the dense, complex, complicated, and infinitely variable game of no-limit Texas hold 'em. I don't understand how someone can give you a rule about how to play the game of poker when every single game in which you ever participate will be different from the last one. The limitation of rule-driven thinking comes from the fact that every poker game is unique, even if you've played the same Wednesday-night game every week with the same eight friends for the past eight years. As with snowflakes, no two Wednesday nights will be the same. Maybe your usually solid opponents are drinking. Maybe last night's Super Viagra failed to live up to its promise. Maybe someone had a bad day at work and arrives on tilt.

In fact, if you think about it, the game shifts not just from session to session, but from hand to hand and even moment to moment. That's because your poker game has both a global context (the general attributes and abilities of the players) and a local context (what's happened recently in the game itself). Has the person you're playing this hand against been winning or losing for the past half-hour? Did he just take or give a bad beat? Have the Vicodins just kicked in? With highly focused information that requires highly situational decision-making skills, rules won't help you all that much.

I've seen books teach the rule, "If everyone folds around to your button, you should always raise." But if the small blind is on tilt and clearly looking to shove his whole stack and you're holding 72 off-suit, would now really be a good time to follow that rule? I'm pretty sure it wouldn't.

The problem I have is that in a game that's always changing and evolving, blind obeisance to rigid rules rarely works, especially if you don't understand the underlying conceptual basis for the rules. Not to put too fine a point on it, but if you're only following rules, you're following a road to ruin.

In this book, you won't learn a bunch of rules that can never be broken. I might give you some strategies or thought-forms that generally work, but I won't give you any rules like, "Always raise three times the big blind." Instead, what you'll learn is a conceptual framework, one that teaches you how to set goals, execute strategies based on those goals and, fundamentally, think about the purpose of every action you take at the table. This framework will give you an understanding of what your purpose is on every bet during every hand of every session of poker you ever play again. That's an ambitious goal, I know, but I assume you wouldn't involve yourself with this book if your goals weren't ambitious and if you weren't already ready to move beyond rules into a much more fluid and deeply felt grasp of the game.

To be fair, rules aren't a bad place to begin in poker. If you're a rank beginner and I only had one hour to get you up to speed on the game of no-limit Texas hold 'em, yes, I'd teach you a bunch of rules. But if you want to be a world-class player, or even a winning intermediate, that'd never be enough.

Tools, Not Rules

So instead of rules, I want you to think for a moment about tools. Think about what's in your poker toolbox. You have tools in that box like raising, calling, folding, check-raising, check-raise bluffing, and so on. When you consider something like a raise, you're really asking, "Is this the right tool for the job?" Just as you'd ask if your screwdriver, hammer, or keyhole saw is the right tool for your carpentry job, you should be asking if raising or folding or checking is the right tool in a poker hand. All of your tools represent choices you can make in poker, and here's a secret: No tool is any better or worse than any other tool. You just have to use your tools appropriately, for the right job.

This notion flies in the face of current conventional wisdom about poker. Some people, for example, insist that limping (flat-calling) when you're first into a pot is wrong. (They have a rule against it!) Well, guess what? It's not *de facto* a bad thing, it's just that conceptually it's not the most broadly useful tool at your disposal. Thus, it's often the second- or third-best choice to make. At times, though, it's the perfect tool for the job and the problem is that if you have a rule against limping, well, you'll never limp, will you? But "never" includes that small percentage of the time when limping is perfectly, outstandingly, correct.

So let's forget about rules. Instead, let's focus on understanding your goals as a poker player, because once you understand your goals, you can figure out your purpose and what you're trying to accomplish in each hand you play. Only then can you live a purposeful life in the game of poker.

Why?

To that end, let me ask you a question: Do you always know *why* you're doing what you're doing at the table? You should. It should be the case that if I, or anyone, tapped you on the shoulder and asked you the purpose of that action you just took, you could state it, clearly and succinctly. And I mean a very detailed explanation. If you just bet \$70 into a \$130 pot, you should be able to tell me not only why you chose to bet instead of check,

but also why you chose to bet \$70 instead of \$50 or \$100 or any of the other choices you had.

Most people can't do this; they can't really verbalize why they do what they do during a hand. Even some top pros can't do it. Take a moment to honestly assess if you really know the reason for your actions during a hand and I think you'll find that a lot of the time your explanation will be something like, "It seemed like the right thing to do." Or "I felt like he'd fold if I bet." Or "I raised three times the big blind because that's what I see pros doing on TV." Those answers are the equivalent of memorizing your multiplication tables so you can answer that three times three is nine, but not understanding *why* nine is the answer, not understanding how the underlying mathematical operator, multiplication, actually works. The problem with that is that if you only memorize your threes tables up to, say, three times nine, but now want the answer to three times eleven, you're kind of stuck.

Think about all the possible decisions you could make during a hand of poker: whether to raise now or raise on a later street; whether to check in an attempt to check-raise or check with the intention to fold; if you raise, how big? You can see that the situation is complex. Rules alone won't get this difficult job done.

Here's why:

POKER IS A GAME OF DECISION-MAKING UNDER CONDITIONS OF UNCERTAINTY

Underline that. Highlight it in yellow. Understanding this concept will change the way you think about the game and allow you to become a great player. Once you understand that poker is a game of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, you really understand the fundamental problem the game presents, and you can now set about to determine your ultimate goal for any hand of poker you play.

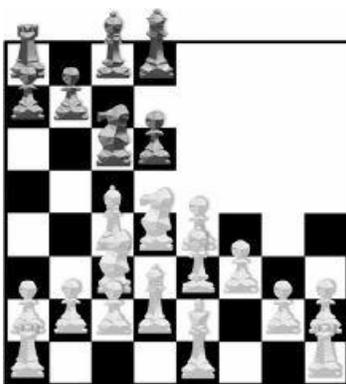
When you're playing hold 'em, you're required to make your decisions with incomplete information—far from complete, in fact—meaning you know what your two cards are, but you can't see your opponents' cards. Let's pause for a moment and compare poker to another dense, complex, complicated, and infinitely variable game: chess. If you ask the general public what they think is the most difficult game out there, they'll probably say chess. This is because in chess, you have to think many levels deep to be really good. You have to think through the implications of every move you consider in terms of what your opponent's possible responses might be and what your possible responses to his possible responses might be and so on. The more levels deep you try to go, the more complicated the decision trees become. The best players in the world can simply think more levels deep than everyone else.

Now, I don't disagree that chess is an intensely difficult game to become good at. That said, in chess you can see the whole board. It looks like this.



In chess, you have complete information. You can see all of your opponent's pieces right there in front of you and there's only one opponent, which kind of makes things easier, too. On top of that, there's no random element. No little chess gnomes come running up during the game and randomly steal pieces off the board. Because you can see the whole board and there are no random elements, you can theoretically make a perfect decision at each decision point. The only thing you don't know for sure is what your opponent has in mind, but since he has a theoretically optimal move, you should be able to come up with the mathematically best move all the time.

Is poker like chess? Sure, yeah, exactly ... except that the board looks something like this.



A little different, huh? Imagine playing chess where you could see only half of your opponent's position. That would be a really difficult game, wouldn't it? Then chess would be a game of decision-making under conditions of incomplete information as opposed to what it is, decision-making under conditions of complete information.

Now imagine a game just like chess that has all the complexity of the decision-making process in terms of how many levels deep you must go,

but has incomplete information and that's poker. So when I say poker is a game of incomplete information, I start from the premise that *almost all* the information you need has yet to be collected.

How much is *almost all*? Consider a 10-handed game of Texas hold 'em. You know your cards ... and that's all. There are 18 cards you don't know, along with nine independent thinkers who represent complex—and capricious—problems to be solved.

Once you understand that poker is a game of decision-making under conditions of incomplete information, you can easily see what your primary goal in the game should be.

REDUCE UNCERTAINTY TO MAKE YOUR DECISIONS EASIER FOR YOURSELF

Reduce uncertainty. Make your decisions easier for yourself. You get this, right? Once you understand the problem poker presents, you realize that the problem is really hard. You're playing chess against multiple opponents with part of the board blacked out. That's hard! So every action you take at the table must be to make your decisions easier and directed at gathering information about what your opponents are holding. The more information you have about your opponents' hands, the less uncertainty you'll have and the easier your decisions will be going forward. The more you can do this, the better off you'll always be.

Your Primary Goal is to Reduce Uncertainty

Reducing uncertainty makes all our decisions easier by completing the information picture. Of course, there are two other ways to make your decisions easier. One, you can opt out of the decision-making process entirely by folding. If you fold, you have no more decisions to make during the hand. Two, you can also opt out of the decision-making process by putting all your chips in the pot. Once you're all-in, you have no more decisions to make. We'll discuss the all-in play later and when and how to apply that tool. For now, just recognize that of all the tools at your disposal, the all-in tool is something of a blunt instrument. You'll want to use it sparingly.

So our main goal is to try to reduce our uncertainty and make our decisions easier. At the same time, we also have a secondary goal: to make our opponents' decisions in relation to us harder. If poker is a decision-making problem and if you can make better decisions than your opponents, you'll end up with all the money.

How do you make better decisions than your opponents? Not just by being smarter than they are (though presumably you are), but also by making *your* decisions easy and *their* decisions tough. How important is this? Is crucial important enough? Because if you think about one given hand of hold 'em, in Vegas let's say, where four raises per betting round are allowed, that makes five possible decision points on each betting round and four rounds of betting per hand. That sounds like 20 chances for you to make a slightly better decision than your opponents. Trust me, even if you're only a slightly better decision-maker than your opponents, you'll end up winning all the money in the world if you have 20 chances per hand to leverage that small decision-making edge. And if you become a *much* better decision maker than your opponents? The mind boggles.

Viewed through a certain filter, poker is a bidding war. I set a price and you set a price back to me, then I set a price back to you, and every time we have this little pricing war where we each put bids out there, we give ourselves an opportunity to make a good decision or a poor one. Every time we can force our opponents into a bad decision, we win. I want to repeat that, because it's fundamental to what this book is about.

EVERY TIME WE CAN FORCE OUR OPPONENTS INTO A BAD DECISION, WE WIN

Notice that nowhere in this discussion have I said that making money is the goal. Why isn't it? Simple. Making money is *not* the goal. Money, in this game, is just the fallout from good goal-setting and decision-making. You end up with all the money through your good decisions. Money is merely our score keeper. You could just as well be playing for matchsticks or marbles or dandelion fluff.

It might seem to be a trivial distinction, but it's not and here's why: If you set your goal as making money, you tend to play poorly when you're losing, because you're focusing mainly on outcomes. However, if you set your goal as being a good decision-maker, it won't matter whether you're winning or losing, because all that matters—*all that matters*—is the quality of your decisions, not the outcomes of those decisions.

Look, you'll sometimes lose when you get all your money in with pocket aces against your opponent's pocket fives. You'll get drawn out on about 18% of the time. But here's the thing: *You won't care*. Why not? Because you made a good decision to get your money in with the best hand and your opponent made a bad decision to call. You won the decision war. So what if the outcome didn't fall your way? In the long run, it will. And the long run is the only thing that any serious poker player cares about.

Bad beats? Who cares about bad beats? Let me tell you, if I never took a bad beat, I'd be playing in some really terrible games. I *want* bad beats. I *adore* bad beats. Every time someone puts a bad beat on me, it means they got their money into the pot with the worst of it. Folks, that's a *bad decision*—just the sort of decisions you want your opponents to be making. Bad beats make me happy. Bad beats mean I'm in a good game, that I've chosen well. Hooray for bad beats! ("Bad beat," like pretty much every poker term used in this book, is defined in the glossary, so if you get dazed or confused by terminology, go there.)

So before you go any further in this book, I want you to ask yourself a serious question: Are you prepared to make *great decisions* and ignore *bad outcomes*? If you are, you're ready to take your game to the next level. You're ready to focus on information and decisions and let the rest of the noise just float away. If you think you're ready for that, then here we go, because here comes the dealer to toss us some cards ...

The Religion of Position

The Power of Position

Pre-flop is the moment where you have control over one extremely important element in the hand: whether or not to play.

Whether or not to play is really about asking yourself the following question: Do I want to opt in to the decision-making problem that every hand of poker presents or do I want to opt out of this particular one?

The crux of answering that question is in determining whether you feel like your upcoming decisions will be easy or hard. If you think they'll be hard, then fold! If you think they'll be easy, then play!

But here's the thing. The main factor in determining the relative difficulty of playing any hand is the position at the table from which you must play.

You already know this. You already know to weigh whether you want to play certain hands in certain positions. I mean, people talk about position in hold 'em all the time. When you look at charts of starting hands—which, of course, you won't find here—you'll see that they vary as a function of your table position. Mostly, this variation is oriented around the percentage of times a better hand is behind you. The charts instruct you not to open with hand X in first position, due to the 16 or 18 unknown cards behind you that stand to be strong. Actually, that's correct. The earlier you open a pot, the greater the chance that someone behind you has a better hand than yours.

But that's not really the issue.

The problem with opening early isn't that others *sometimes* have better hands, but that they'll *always* have better position. When you're under the gun in a poker game, you'll be playing first for the rest of the hand, betting into the big unknown not just now, when you have no idea what anyone else is thinking or doing, but again on the flop, turn, and river. Considering that your main goal is to *reduce uncertainty*, does it sound like acting first helps you achieve that goal? Not likely. Rather, it's the most uncertain spot you can be in. Throughout the hand, you'll be acting with the least amount of information of anyone at that table. That's a huge decision-making disadvantage. How huge? Let's find out.

Imagine that you're buying a house and it's up to you to name the first price. The seller is willing to sell for \$500,000, but you don't know that. If you don't do your research well and you offer him a million, that's a pretty big disaster. You paid double what you had to pay. Or consider it from the other end. He's willing to sell for a half-million and you'd buy at that price, but you get tricky and offer only a hundred grand. You're so far apart that he won't even counter and you'll lose out on your dream home. If only you could have heard his offer before you had to act, but that's what happens when you have to name the first price. Unless you know exactly what you're doing, unless you've done extensive research on the market before offering your price, it's a disaster in the making.

Interestingly enough, children really get the idea that going first in any negotiation is bad. Have you ever seen two eight-year-old girls get into the following argument? Audrey asks Stephanie if she likes Selena Gomez. How does Stephanie respond? "Do you?" Then Audrey says, "I asked you first." Then Stephanie says, "Yeah, but you asked the question, so you have to answer first." I have little girls. I've seen these arguments devolve into little-girl meltdowns many times.

Why are both girls so reluctant to answer first? Because they understand the power of position. If Audrey answers first and says she likes Selena Gomez, while Stephanie is actually a Justin Bieber fan, Audrey's screwed. Then again, if Stephanie says she hates Selena Gomez, while Audrey just got a Selena Gomez fan-club membership and lunchbox set, Audrey's screwed again. And they're playing for much higher stakes than money: They're playing for self-image, social currency, and emotional well-being.

Don't you think if eight-year-olds understand the problem of position—the problem of having to set the first price—you should, too? Please, at least be as smart as an eight-year-old.

Poker, then, is just a price negotiation where you're bidding on your hand. When you have to go first, you surrender advantage. When you get to go last, you gain advantage. So while the start charts are right to represent a sliding scale related to position, they miss the essential fact that *hand strength* isn't the issue. *Information* is the issue.

Under the gun, I have no information beyond the quality of my own two cards. On the button, by contrast, I get to act with the most information. And there's *so much* information: the way people move their chips; the size of their bets; whether they raise or just call; even how they look at their cards. It all tells me largely where I stand before I even have to think about my own hand.

You know that information is power in poker, so let's do some transitive math:

**INFORMATION = POWER
POSITION = INFORMATION
POSITION = POWER**

In short, position is power!

Remember, first, your goal is to make your decisions easier. Second, that's hard to do when you have to go first. The good news—the great news—is that hold 'em offers us total control over whether to get involved or not. Except when we're in the blinds, we can always just fold. (And even in the blinds, we can choose to avoid disastrous speculations.) In the name of making our decision-making process easier, that's just what we do in early position. Fold. A lot.

And when we enter a pot from early position, it'll be with sufficient card strength to overcome information weakness. When we enter a pot at a major informational disadvantage, we better be going in strong. We better have a hand that has a lot of clarity, and clarity only comes with the top range of starting cards.

What's real strength? Simple: When you're acting early in the hand, enter only with a hand that's very likely to be the best hand. Enter only with a hand that doesn't really need to know much about the other players' cards to know that it's likely to be the best hand. Think about it. If you hold AA you don't need to see anyone else's cards to know you're holding the best hand. That's the clarity that comes from choosing hands that are at the top end of the starting-card spectrum from early position.

This isn't a rule. It's a common-sense approach to normal games (we'll talk later about how to adjust for super-loose or super-tight games). In a normally textured game against people who kind of know what they're doing and aren't crazy, the starting point for playing an unpaired hand early in a full ring game is ace-queen off-suit (or AQo as we'll notate it in this book). I know you're already surprised that I'm telling you, in general, to throw away hands like KQ and KJ here. I mean, both those cards have faces on them, right? How bad could playing two paints be?

But since we have to act early, we particularly want to avoid playing two cards likely to cause difficulty *if we hit our hand*.

Think about flopping a king when you're holding a hand like KQ or KJ and you have to act first. That's a scary proposition. You have no idea if one pair is the best hand with players to act behind you. That's a tough spot to play any one-pair hand out of position, as will become crystal clear in the post-flop section of this book. You want to try to avoid that hazard, so if you do get involved with a hand that's likely to make only one pair, then you better be sure, at minimum, that you have the *best* one pair. Thus AQ and AK are the unpaired hands to play. Don't worry yet about suited hands. We'll get to those shortly.

Your paired hands start somewhere in the 7s and 8s range and go up from there. You don't want to play hands like 2s, 3s, 4s, or 5s; it's difficult to flop good to those hands. Mostly, you'll hit nothing, which will give you an underpair to the board. And don't expect to hit your set; the odds against are about 7.5 to 1. The only way to play to hit a set at those odds is if you know you'll be able to cash it in big when you hit. *But you're first to act!* As will become crystal clear later in this book, it's really hard to get money out of even your really good hands, like sets, when you have to go first in the betting. If you've played even a little bit of poker, you already know this.

Sevens and eights have a better chance of being the best hand even unimproved on the flop and facing a smaller array of evil overcards. Those are easier hands to play.

Now let's shift to the other extreme: the button. The button is beautiful. God love the button. On the button, you get to act last. For the rest of the hand, you get to see what people do in front of you. Against blinds who don't over-defend, you could theoretically raise every single time it's folded around to you *no matter what cards you're holding*. Yes. The whole range of hands is playable under the right circumstances from the button. That's how valuable position is.

Now in practical terms, you don't want to raise every time and play every hand, because you'll simply trash the credibility of your button raise and you'd rather your opponents give you at least a little credit when you raise. But if you throw away the 15%-20% that are the bottom-feeders you're dealt (your 72o, T3o, and so on), you'll still push pretty damn hard from the button and, given your position, that's pretty damn good.

So here you are playing a restrictive set of hands in first position and an unrestrictive set of hands in last position. What about all the stops in between?

Again, considering only those times when it's folded to you and you have first action, you should plan on loosening up as a function of your position. While this might look like something you'd learn from a start chart, bear in mind that it's parabolic, rather than linear. Why? Because in the two or three spots after first position, you don't gain much in the way of position. Too many players are yet to act and when you get called, you'll be playing the hand out of position and it won't be very fun.

So stay snug, and stay out of everyone's way, in the early-position spots. When you get to the middle positions, you can start to add in your AJ and KQ and KJ and AT suited kinds of hands. And as you near the button, you can really open it up. When you raise from the cutoff (one before the button) or hijack (two before the button) seats, you're likely to end up with the button when you raise. Naturally, you don't want to play pure trash, but you can begin open-raising with your KTs, QTs, small pairs, suited aces, suited connectors, and similar hands that you'd muck everywhere else but here, where that curve gets steep.

Why such freedom? Again, it's not the reduced likelihood of someone behind you having a big hand, but the increased likelihood of getting to play the hand in position if anyone calls. What becomes clear when you start to *think ahead* to how to play the hand going forward is that whether you have the best hand or the worst hand or somewhere in the middle, all hands are harder to play when you have to act first after the flop. Position is literally the key to everything. And once you realize how hard it is to play hands out of position, you naturally start to avoid getting involved early.

The Illusion of Suit Value

Before we go any further, let's take a little detour into suitedness. I know you're thinking that the hands I suggest you play from the earlier positions seem reasonable—except I'm overlooking tasty hands like JTs (jack-ten suited) or A9s or 87s.

Actually, I'm not overlooking them. Rather, I'm looking them off, because as colorfully coordinated as they are, I've got to go to my late main man Warren Zevon here for a quick chorus of "It Ain't That Pretty At All!" And if this sounds like a rant, so be it, because people overvalue suitedness like crazy and if I can get you to stop doing that one thing, playing those low suited connectors from anywhere but late position, then your poker game will really improve and you'll get your money's worth from this book.

Start by recalling all the times you've limped into a pot with something like 87s, thinking the hand needs a lot of customers and you're trying to get a cheap flop and engineer the right price to draw to a flush (because you read that in a book). Please don't tell me you've never done this; I can read minds and right now I'm reading yours.

Not only that, I can prove your bias toward suitedness just by asking you a simple question: Would you even consider playing that 87 from early position if it weren't suited? Of course not. When you look down at that hand in first position, you aren't even a bit tempted to play the 87o. But 87s is a siren song, calling your name and tempting you to head for the fatal cliffs of a flush draw. The suited cards ensorcell you, obscuring the fact that you have *8 high*.

The first key to the puzzle is always to remember that, suited or unsuited, the most likely improvement of any hand of hold 'em is one pair. So if you start with 87, suited or otherwise, your most likely improvement is 8s with a 7 kicker or 7s with an 8 kicker. And this is in a *multi-way pot*.

Why multi-way? Because you either limped, encouraging others to limp behind you, or jumped into the midst of the "limped" with all those callers giving you such good value, because some book told you how great suited connectors play in multi-way pots. The reason why the books say that is that they are focused merely on the *price* the pot is offering you. The more players, the bigger the price, and drawing hands like a good price.

Well, that would be true if this were a game where you all just put money in before the flop, saw five cards with no further betting, and determined a winner after all the cards were dealt. But that isn't poker. That's more like craps. In poker, there's betting. You have to make decisions after the flop. And one crappy pair in a multi-way pot? Good luck with that now, with your mid-pair mid-kicker against all that traffic. How likely is it to be any damn good?

But in a heads-up hand (which is likely to be the case if you raised with your 87s from later position and got a caller), your one pair is actually likely to be the best hand. One pair against only one player is usually best. So if you make one pair, you'd definitely be better off against only one guy.

But one pair isn't the most likely thing to happen to your 87s on the flop. More likely than connecting to one pair is flopping absolutely nothing. Good luck trying to successfully bluff now in a multi-way pot from early position. You can't bluff; you've got too much company in the pot.

But what if you're heads-up and flop a complete nothing? Well, now you could actually win the pot anyway, because one player is much easier to bluff against. Your 8-high actually has a chance to win the pot despite missing the board. Need to bluff? You'll be much better off against one player.

Even if you flop a hand as good as two pair, you're still better off heads-up than multi-way. If you flop two pair with low suited connectors, your two pair will almost always be bottom two pair. In a multi-way pot, that is a very dangerous hand to hold. If the board is something like A67 and you hold 67s, you have to worry about someone making aces-up on the turn or the river and you have to worry about all the straight cards that could hit as well (by definition, if you make two pair while holding suited connectors, straight draws are always going to be a possibility).

If you're heads-up, then you don't have to worry as much about your opponent making a straight or a bigger two pair, because there are only two cards out against you. How are you going to get heads-up? Not by limping in the pot from early position encouraging lots of play behind you. You are going to get heads-up with these hands by reserving playing them for the later positions when everyone has already folded around to you. That's how you get up against one opponent.

Now, if you're happier with a hand as strong as two pair against just one opponent, that should be a big clue that maybe suited connectors don't actually play well in multi-way pots. From the standpoint of flopping nothing or one pair or even two pair, there really is no difference between 87o and 87s: They both stink in a multi-way pot (particularly out of position) and are both fine in a heads-up pot with position. But I know what you're thinking: "I'm not playing the 87s to make a pair or to try to bluff the pot. I'm playing it because of all the money I'll win when I make a flush." That's why they call it *implied odds*, right? I can take a bad bet now, because when I make that juicy flush I'm going for, I'll win so much money from my unsuspecting opponents.

But here's a hard truth: Suited cards are functionally no better than unsuited cards. And I intend to convince you of this, first through math, then by showing you how implied odds in these situations are largely a myth. Gasp! I know this flies in the face of conventional wisdom, but let's fly on just the same.

Let's say you take 87s to the flop and, miracle of miracles, flop a flush. Well, you've just bucked a 118-to-1 shot, so lucky you. Now you start counting your implied odds. How can you get 118 bets out of all the other players in order to grant you a full return on your miracle draw? Sorry, but that's not very likely. Probably, that many bets can't be found in the stacks of the remaining players. Worse, and here's the really bad news, you don't really want any further action on this hand. You'd like it to be over right this second.

Let me explain.

When you flop the flush, don't forget that you might not have the best hand in a multi-way pot. After all, if you're willing to play 87s, maybe the guy next to you will go with JTs or K2s. People do all kinds of crazy things, especially when spellbound by suitedness.

So let's say you're out of position and flop this flush. Of course, you have to bet. You can't risk a free card, one that could pair the board or produce another flush card, at which point your 8-high flush will be no good or, at best, your decision about whether to play on or fold will be much more difficult. This means that you just flopped your dream hand and now you have no choice: You have to bet.

Now, what happens if you bet and someone in this multi-way pot moves in on you? Are you happy? Not me. I'm scared spitless. Everyone can see that the board is suited and everyone includes the guy that just moved in on you against multiple opponents. That should make you super unhappy about your decision with your 8-high flush.

And even if no one raises behind you, even if you get multiple callers instead, or even one caller, you can't be too thrilled. Why? Because, as I just said, everyone in the pot can see that three of a suit are on the board. So what on Earth are they calling with? Hands that can improve to beat what you have now, if they don't already have you beat and are slow-playing, that's what. Basically, when you bet that hand, you're not particularly happy when you get any action at all. So you flopped your dream hand, you have to bet, and you're kind of rooting for everyone to fold. I don't know how we can talk reasonably about implied odds when we're not really looking for a lot of action on a hand we just hit as hard as we could.

But wait, it gets worse. Even if you have the only flush out there, two more cards are still coming, which means you have to fade another flush card on the turn or the river, which is only about a 2-to-1 underdog. So you flop your flush less than 1% of the time and over a third of *those* times, you risk getting outdrawn by someone holding a lone suited card higher than an 8.

And what if the board pairs, which also happens about 18% of the time on the turn? And when that doesn't happen, the board will pair 24% of the time on the river. Now you also have to fade the possibility of a full house, which makes your decisions on the hand murderous.

So it's only two-thirds of the .8% of the time you flop your flush that no other suited card hits on the turn and the river. That leaves you with about a .5% chance of flopping a flush and getting all the way to the river unmolested by another flush card hitting. Cut that down to about .3% when you include the board pairing (which will kill your action or just kill your hand). So about one time in 300 or so, you'll flop perfect and stay perfect. And that's only if your flush is good when you flop it to begin with. I think we can write off that circumstance from reasonable consideration, don't you?

So yeah, flopping a flush is just a dream, but flopping a flush *draw* is a reasonable possibility, right? Let's say you jump in with that 87s and the flop comes Q♠-6♣-2♦. You flopped your draw. That's awesome. That happens one time out of nine, so it's unlikely, but not water-into-wine unlikely. If we don't include implied odds, for you to break even on the flushy flop at your 10-handed table, you need nine people playing with you. Just to break even on flopping a flush draw! Break even, that is, if flopping the draw wins you the pot, which it doesn't, because all you currently have is 8-high. You haven't even made your hand yet, so don't get so darned excited. In a multi-way pot, you'll have to complete the draw in order to win, because multi-way you aren't winning with that 8-high. It's not like you are heads-up and could semi-bluff just one guy, right?

So in order to win, you still have to see the turn and river, and do you think your nice opponents are going to let you do that for free? Not at my table they won't.

The odds of making a flush on the turn or the river are well-known: You're about a 2-to-1 underdog to complete. But that's only *if you get to see both cards*. You're only about 20% to hit the flush on the turn alone, if that's the only card you get to see, and let's face it, if someone bets into your draw on the flop and the draw misses on the turn, you're likely to get bet at again and then you're almost always folding.

So if you almost always only get to see one card with your 8-high flush draw, you really need to be getting 4-to-1 or so on the call or you need some pretty compelling implied odds. And all the problems with implied odds that we discussed in contemplating flopping a flush apply here too—only worse. When you make that flush on the turn and bet it (you have to, since you can't allow any free cards with this vulnerable hand) and someone moves in on your sorry ass, how are you feeling now? After all, your opponents called with *something* on the flop and they could all see that the obvious texture just completed to a possible flush, so now you get moved in on and you feel completely sick. Your flush is 8-high.

See, you always have to think ahead to events later in the hand, and if you do that, you'll realize that you rarely get the right price to call your flush draw on the flop when the flush you're drawing at is so low. Implied odds don't make sense, since you're rooting against action. You don't want someone to deliver you their stack, because that probably means you're actually delivering them yours. And you rarely get the right price to call to either flop the flush or flop a draw at 8-to-1 and make it on the turn at another 4-to-1.

Overall, you're in a situation where you'll flop a flush draw one time in nine, then complete that one-in-nine draw about one time in four. Can you do the math? Your starting suited cards make a flush about as often as any single number comes up in roulette. And that's in the best of circumstances.

You want to know when suited cards are good? When you're heads-up in position—*just like every other hand you can hold*. Yet people persist in wanting to play middle and low suited connecting cards in multi-way pots.

Going back to the miracle of flopping a flush, are you more confident that your 8-high flush is good against four opponents or just one? One, of course. Not only does increased traffic mean your hand might not be good now, it *really* jacks up the possibility that the nasty card coming on the turn kills your hand: a fourth card in suit or something that pairs the board. What will you do in a multi-way pot when the action goes bet, then raise, in front of you? Cower out? Go broke? You have a tough decision and we *hate* those.

All told, your suited cards will make it to the river as a winning flush about 3% of the time. That means that having suited cards versus the same hand in an unsuited version only improves your hand by an average of about 3%. That isn't much. I'm not saying that the other 97% of the time they'll give you a tough decision; lots of times they'll just go in the muck unmourned. But why give yourself the headache? Detach from your infatuation with suited cards and your poker will improve 100%, I promise.

The easiest way to do that is to keep this simple question firmly and permanently in mind:

“IF THIS HAND WEREN'T SUITED, WOULD I STILL PLAY IT?”

If the answer is “no,” then muck it. That's your 87 or JT in first position.

If the answer is “yes, definitely,” then yippee, your good hand—say, AK early or KQ late, or any hand late; if you have perfect position, you're pretty much free to play the whole deck—just got even better. The fact that your hand is suited is just a bonus, the cherry on the sundae.

Where it gets interesting, and where suitedness can actually be factored in, is when you're not sure whether you'd play the hand or not.

Let's say you've got something like AJo in first position. I'll play this hand in early position if the players behind me are playing too tight and folding too often to my raises. In other games, the hand puts me on the fence. I let suitedness take me off the fence and put the hand into the playable category, folding AJo, but playing AJs—if the game is right. I never regret folding *any* hand *ever*, just because it's suited.

Neither should you.

But it's hard. I know it's hard. Suited cards are pretty. So pretty you could frame them. In fact, why not frame them instead of playing them? At least if you put them under glass, they won't get you into trouble.

If that doesn't work, pretend to be suit-blind and think of your hand only in terms of its high-card strength.

Remember, most of the time the best you can ask of your hand is to make a pair. If you have 87s, you have 8 high and you won't be happy with any pair you make. The same goes for 9-high or 10-high or J-high. So that's really what you want to look at.

When you see that 8♦7♦ in early position and you feel the urge to play it, just go, “Wait a minute, I have eight high.” This will put the hand where it belongs ... in the muck ... forever and ever, amen.

To Raise or Not to Raise (And That's Not a Question)

The Number-One Reason for Raising

Setting aside, for the moment, playing from the blinds and what to do if someone has already bet out in front of you, you now have a pretty clear roadmap for entering a pot when everyone has folded in front of you. You know that if you're playing up front, where your information disadvantage is extreme and you'll act first for the rest of the hand, you want to have a pretty high probability that you're starting with the best hand. You know you can play slightly looser hands in the middle. And you know (this is the fun part) that in back, you can play pretty much any hand you can think of, again if the game is right and everyone has folded to you. Good times. Most of hold 'em's good times come in position.

So having decided to play or not, you now face your next decision: enter the pot with a raise or a flat-call.

Well, around here, we're all about playing poker with a purpose, so if you raise, you'd better have a good clear reason to do so. In other words, every single one of those extra chips needs a *reason* to be in the pot. If you're in a \$10/\$20 game and you enter the pot for \$60, can you state clearly what those extra \$40 in chips are doing for you?

When you ask most people why they raise, their answers have to do with what their hand is. For example, they'll tell you it's to build the pot, because they want to get their money in with the best hand. Guess what! That reason isn't even on the list. In fact, now may not be the best time to build a pot at all, because most of the variance in hold 'em happens in that moment when the flop hits. You don't want to get your money in at this point of high variance when there is still lots of betting to come if the *only* reason to do so is you happen to think you have the best hand. Besides, if building a pot with the best hand were the real reason for raising, then you would raise more the better your hand is and no one would ever raise with anything but the best hands and we know neither of those things is true. So then: Why do you raise?

Remembering that poker is a game of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, the number one reason to put extra chips in the pot must be *to reduce uncertainty*, to extract information from your opponents in order to narrow the range of hands they could be holding. You want to start leveraging your chips to extract information from your opponents from the beginning of the hand. The sooner you find out what they have, the better your decisions will be for the rest of the hand, allowing you to play it more effectively.

Limpy Is Wimpy

Look what happens when you *don't* raise. Say you have AQo in late position and you limp into the pot. The small blind folds and the big blind checks. What have you learned about the big blind's hand that you didn't know before you put those chips in the pot? Basically, nothing. Most people won't check pocket aces there, so you might eliminate that hand, and maybe pocket kings. But big blinds will check queens. They'll check AKo, 72, and every hand in between. So if you limp into a pot, you learn close to nothing about the blind's hand when he checks, because you didn't actually force him to make a decision about his hand. That's not using your chips to a good purpose.

If you aren't using your chips as information-extraction tools, you aren't using them to any great effect, except, perhaps, to try to get lucky by getting in cheap and hitting the board. Misguided legal rulings notwithstanding, poker is *not* a game of luck; therefore, none of your logic for putting chips in the pot should have anything to do with getting lucky.

Limping in early position is even worse, because it multiplies, if you will, your field of ignorance. You learn nearly nothing about the first player to limp in behind you, because limps breed limps and the range of hands that limp behind a limper can be pretty broad. If you limp in, other hands that would otherwise fold will likewise limp, due to the perceived value of getting in cheap for a big pot.

Think about the range of hands that the limpers behind you could have. Could they have 65? Sure. J8s? Certainly. 77? Why not? The point is that they could have just about any hand except pure trash. Thus, rather than clarifying anything, your limp has actually significantly muddied the waters; worse, these players whose hands you know nothing about all get to act *after you* on all subsequent betting rounds. That's a disastrous use of your chips.

But wait. Like a bad infomercial, it gets worse. Since limping breeds limping, you create a stampede of limpers, the so-called limpede, and learn less and less about each successive hand that comes in. Hand requirements for players to limp behind limpers become successively weaker as more people enter the pot for the call. Each successive player into the pot can have a wider range of hands and they all get to act after you on every single betting round. By limping in early, you create a cascade of rapidly degrading information. In short, you have a mess.

And the bad news doesn't end there. What happens when you and another player limp and a third player raises? How much do you know about the raiser's hand? He just put a lot of chips in the pot, so you should know a lot about his hand. But when someone raises a couple of limpers, does he have a real hand? Or is he just attacking the obvious weakness in front of him? He doesn't even need to look at his cards to know his raise is likely to muscle out a couple of weak limpers.

How bad is it to allow a player to get that many chips in the pot and learn absolutely nothing about his hand? Suppose you hold 77 and limp in. When you get raised, since your opponent could be holding the whole range, if you were to fold 77 to the raise, you'll probably be folding the best hand too often, since a pair rates to be best against a player who could be raising blind. But if you don't fold, how do you play it out from there? If you just call, you'll frequently find yourself checking the flop and folding whenever a couple of overcards hit the board (most of the time). If only one overcard hits, how do you play the hand out of position? Lead out and get raised? Check and call the guy down? Check-raise to semi-bluff? None are particularly good plays, because they all involve post-flop action out of position.

Maybe you want to re-raise now, before the flop ... and all of a sudden you have your eyeballs on the table with a hand as weak as 77, not knowing very much at all about what your opponent has. What you do know is that when you get called, you almost never have the best hand. If your limp, re-raise play gets called, you're praying your opponent has only AK. That means you don't really want to get called, which means your limp, re-raise is actually a *bluff*. Your 77 becomes a bluff only because of your initial limp, which told you so little about your opponent's holding.

All in all, when you limp with that 77, you have no sensible play against this raise. If there is no good response, the initial limp is probably the culprit. You're in the worst position with the least information. I don't care what hand you hold. I don't like your chances now.

Raise and Appraise

When you raise, obviously, you make your opponents think twice about playing. If you raise enough to make them selective about the hands they play, you narrow down their possible holdings. You're buying information. So when you raise late and a blind calls you, does he have 72? Probably not. He probably has somewhere in the top 25%-50% of the hands he's dealt depending on how loose a player he is. Where limping would eliminate two or three hands from his calling range (aces, kings, and maybe queens), raising eliminates maybe two *out of three*. That's helpful enough in position and even more helpful out of position.

Opening for a raise forces your opponents to make decisions about their hands and that narrows down what they could be holding. When you limp in early position and an opponent calls you, you know very little about his hand. But when you raise from early position to make your opponents selective, then get flat-called behind, you know quite a bit about that hand, because when you raise in first position, your opponents all smell a pretty strong holding (you have to be strong, they reason, to raise early), so if they enter the pot, they're likely to be strong as well.

Even more interestingly, if you raise from the one hole and someone flat-calls from second or third position, you've learned even more about his hand: You know he doesn't hold the best possible hands. How? Think about it. Hands like AA and KK rarely don't re-raise there, with the whole field to act behind them. Even AK and QQ almost always re-raise. And yes, it's possible that someone might flat (flat-call) with a premium pair, perhaps hoping to encourage a squeeze play behind him. But most players aren't that tricky, especially when big pocket pairs put the deer-in-headlights fear into them. They re-raise you, because they just want to avoid a bunch of players jumping in behind them and they know you're probably strong enough to play along with their huge hand.

So when your opponent right behind you flat-calls your early-position raise, look at all the information you just scored: You know his hand is strong, but not super-strong. It's probably two unpaired big cards (but not AK), a middle-sized pair or, if the opponent is on the loose side, suited connectors. That's powerful, especially considering you have bad position. Knowing that much about what your in-position opponent holds helps you make much better decisions on the rest of the betting rounds. This is just one of myriad reasons why it's almost always better to raise than limp in any hand you choose to play.

And it gets better. Remember that on the heels of a limp, there's a cascade of degrading information. How does that cascade look if you raise? If someone calls your raise, then someone else calls behind, the overcaller's hand is usually stronger than the first caller's. Strong, but not super-strong. Not AA or KK or AK strong, because once there are two players in front of him, almost no one will just flat with AA and KK and AK. So while limpers behind limpers don't tell you much, multiple calls behind a raise paint a picture of progressively stronger hands, while conclusively eliminating the strongest of hands. Thus we see two information streams running opposite to each other. Limps behind limps cascade less and less information, whereas calls behind raises reveal successively narrower ranges.

You want more? We've seen how someone raising behind your limp might have nothing but pure air. But consider that same raise if you've opened the pot for a raise in first position. Everyone knows you're strong there, so if you get re-raised, you can be pretty sure it's by a strong hand. Good poker players rarely re-raise your early-position raise with complete air and almost always re-raise with what they consider to be the best hand.

Notice the difference. When a player raises your limp, you learn absolutely zero about his hand. When a player raises your open raise, you can reliably place it in the top 5%-10% of hands.

Now think about your 77. If you open for a raise in the first place, when you get re-raised, you have either an easy fold, since the hand that re-raises is almost always better than yours, or the choice to try to call to hit a set if the price is right. That is a much easier decision to make than if you limp and you have no idea what the other player is holding.

Finally, there's the following beautiful thing: If you limp and call a raise, it'll cost you more than open-raising in the first place. But if you open-raise and don't get re-raised, you learn much more about your opponents' hands for a cheaper price. That's more information for less money. Doesn't that sound good?

Which leads us to ...

THE NUMBER-ONE REASON FOR RAISING: TO GAIN INFORMATION

The Number-Two Reason for Raising

The number two reason for raising—and it, too, is a damn fine one—is to narrow the field, to reduce the number of players you face. And this is true no matter what two cards you hold. No two cards in hold 'em would rather play against multiple opponents than just one. That includes small pairs, AK, suited connectors, and yes, even AA.

It's Weird About Aces

Some people can't stand to win heads-up with them. They think they're cheating themselves of value by milking a single opponent with that monster. They're also afraid to raise, because they're worried that everyone will fold and they'll win nothing but the puny blinds. Well, that's greedy and greed is never a profitable strategy. Against one opponent, your aces will win well over 80% of the time. For each opponent you add into the mix, your chances of winning with aces go down 10%. That means that against five opponents, you're still a favorite against any one of them, *but an underdog against all of them taken together*. Why on Earth would you want your aces to win less than 30% of the time against a full field, when they'll win more than 80% of the time against one guy?

To be fair, if you limp with AA and invite callers, you'll be the pot favorite, but *without* information and *with* unnecessary additional variance in a game that's already a high-variance proposition to begin with.

But suppose you do. You limp with aces and the big blind checks. If the board comes 4♦-5♦-6♠ and the big blind moves all-in, you know nothing about his hand. He could be on anything from a naked steal or a draw to a set or a straight. But you have aces, after all, so you're probably waving bye-bye to your chips as they disappear into the big blind's stack. Congratulations on letting that blind in for nothing, greedy you.

But if you make a pre-flop raise that forces the big blind to be selective, when he pushes into that board of 4♦-5♦-6♠, you know exactly where you're at. Sure, he might have a set, which is just bad luck, but he's much more likely to have an overpair or the straight draw or flush draw. You're not so worried that he has any low two pair or any low straight; your raise should have driven him off those hands. Information is power and guess what? Power is power, too. So go ahead and raise, for all the right reasons.

Low and Middle Suited Connectors

Now, it's probably not that hard to convince you that aces would rather play against a narrower field. But it bears review that so do low suited connectors, like 87s. Nearly every poker book out there states that these are drawing hands and, of course, drawing hands want to play in a multi-way pot. But I'm here to tell you again, because you can't put too fine a point on it, that a hand like 87s would *rather* see the flop heads-up. If you flop a pair, it's probably the best hand (not true in a multi-way pot) and if you miss the flop completely, you can still win by betting with air (which you also can't do against multiple opponents). Truth is, the vast majority of flops you see with middle suited connectors will miss completely or hit a pair, one middle pair. Instead of dreaming about the huge pot you'll win when you make a flush, dream about all the small pots you'll win when you get to bluff your single opponent with a hand that didn't improve or improved just a smidge. That'll add up to a lot more, I promise.

Even if you make a flush, heads-up is still better. Your made flush is more likely to get paid off by an opponent who's less likely to give you credit for a flush in a heads-up pot than he would multi-way. You want implied odds? There they are! If you make your flush with a hand like 8♦7♦ on a board of K♦-9♦-2♠-3♥, you're much more likely to get paid off by a hand like KQ if you're heads-up. In a multi-way pot, however, that hand will rarely sail off to you, because the possible flush is obviously scary in a multi-way pot and will tend to kill action from hands like one pair.

Want more good news? Against one opponent, you're less likely to face a bigger flush, or a singleton flush when the fourth flush card hits, and you're less likely to get drawn out on when the board pairs; fewer hands are out there against you. I beat this dead horse enough: If you play these types of hands, forget what all the books say about playing them multi-way. Raise with them, get heads-up, and make it easier on yourself to win the pot no matter what the flop is.

Small Pairs

The other type of hand everyone claims to love in multi-way pots is the small pair. Pocket pairs can play well multi-way ... if you improve the hand. If you flop a set with a pocket pair, you're happy to be in a multi-way pot; you know you have the best hand. So a lot of the issues you have with suited connectors become moot. The more the merrier if you flop a set. That just makes a bigger pot for you.

The problem is that you improve your small pair only about one in every eight or so tries. So you'd rather play this hand heads-up, too, because you're more likely to win without improving those seven times you don't. When you hold pocket sevens against one opponent on a board of, say, J-9-2, you feel pretty comfortable that you can win that pot. Against multiple opponents, that hand looks like an easy muck. Since you won't improve your pair the vast majority of the time, wouldn't you rather be heads-up where you can win the pot anyway? I know I would.

Which brings us back to raising-reason number two:

EVERY HAND PERFORMS BETTER AGAINST FEWER OPPONENTS

No matter what hand you have, you'd rather thin the field. You're more likely to end up with the best hand. And you're more likely to have other ways to win, like betting on the flop with nothing.

The Number-Three Reason for Raising

The third reason for raising: It gives you power. It provides you with the lead on the pot, putting you in charge of what happens next.

Think about how many pots in no-limit hold 'em go, "Check to the raiser" on the flop, then the raiser bets and everyone folds. Do you want to be the one betting or folding? Seems like an obvious answer to me, but let's look at an example of why the lead is so powerful.

Say A♠J♠ limps into the pot, pocket 5s raises, and A♠J♠ calls. Now, the first thing to notice about that play, which happens a lot at the table, is that the A♠J♠ has put raising money in the pot without taking any raising power for himself. A♠J♠ could have raised the pot himself, but instead paid the same price with a limp and a call. *Same price, no extra purpose.* AJ doesn't find out anything about what his opponent is holding (his opponent could be raising just to take advantage of the limp), he didn't narrow the field, and he didn't take the lead.

Now let's look at the consequences of that action.

The board comes Q♠-9♦-2♦ and what happens? A♠J♠ checks to pocket 5s. Can you hear it? "Check to the raiser." Now the 5s bet and what does A♠J♠ do? He folds.

To be fair, he didn't have the better hand. In fact, the 5s rate to win the pot 75% of the time after the A♠J♠ misses on the flop. But the way the A♠J♠ played the pot, he couldn't win without it being the best hand. And that's the problem. You can't be a successful hold 'em player if you must have the best hand to win. But what if the A♠J♠ had raised like he was supposed to in the first place and the pocket 5s had called? Then the A♠J♠ leads out on the Q♠-9♦-2♦ board and the pocket pair folds. So the worst hand wins, the hand that only hits on the turn or river 25% of the time, just by raising pre-flop and taking control. That's called extra purpose, my friends. Even if one hand dominates the other, say AJo versus ATo, the first raiser and first bettor is likely to win, because neither hand much loves that flop of Q♠-9♦-2♦ and when one hand bets first, the other hand goes away. It doesn't so much matter who has the best hand, but who has the lead in determining who wins the pot. And that is how most hands of hold 'em play out.

Around here we have a saying, "The second liar doesn't stand a chance." What that means in hold 'em is simple:

BE FIRST IN TO WIN

I don't want to discount the possibility of someone getting creative with you if you raise pre-flop and make the expected continuation bet. Some players will float you—flat-call on the flop—with the intention of raising you off the pot on the turn. But if the next card off the deck is scary (and viewed through a certain filter, almost all of them can be scary), that player has to be super-creative to follow through on his bluff. And we don't even hate that, because every time you force your opponents to get super-creative on you, you're giving them opportunities to do really stupid things, which is always good.

Also, super-creative players are the exception, not the rule. Under normal circumstances, in the everyday run-of-the-mill poker game, you have control of the pot after raising pre-flop and getting heads-up. Now, you'll miss that flop 67% of the time, but so will your opponent, so ask yourself who you want to win when you miss that 67% of the time: you or him? You, obviously. And to achieve that result, you need to take the lead on the pot, and be the raiser, and cause people to check to you. Then you'll bet and they'll fold. Not only that, you'll force the decision onto your opponent,

giving him yet another opportunity to make a mistake.

I can put it even more simply: Do you want to be more or less likely to win? If you limp into a pot and let a lot of others limp in after you, you're less likely. But if you act first and raise, you're more likely, either by having everyone fold then and there or by taking control of the hand (with better information, by the way) and dictating the terms of engagement from that point forward.

Under normal circumstances in a normal game, the reasons for raising are so compelling that you probably shouldn't ever limp when you're first to act. Essentially, you look at your hand; it's either yes or no. Yes, I'm willing to play this hand or no, I'm not willing to play this hand. If it's yes, use your chips with purpose and raise the freaking pot.

Size Matters

Now comes the question, "How much should I raise?"

Has anyone *not* heard "three times the big blind"? Well, three times the big blind is only correct sometimes. It's not bad—as rules of thumb go. But we're going immediately beyond it to see how the size of the raise relates to how much mathematical pressure we put on ourselves and our opponents. The idea is to come up with the right answer for your game on your own without relying on any rules, even thumb ones.

Let's talk about a yes hand, like TT. If you see that hand when you're first to act, you're not folding, so your theoretical minimum action is to call. Playing a game with one-chip and two-chip blinds, your minimum action is to put in two chips. Now, when you look at your hand and decide to raise, you choose to put extra chips into the pot beyond the two-chip call the hand already warrants.

You know the theoretical reasons for doing so: to gain information about your opponents' hands, narrow the field, and take the lead. But the amount you choose to raise has mathematical consequences. When you put in chips above and beyond the two you call with, they need to be mathematically justified. So we need to look at the mathematical consequences of any chips we put in above and beyond the flat-call we're obliged to make because of the quality of our hand.

Let's say you look at that TT and think to make it triple the big blind. Three chips are already in the pot (the one-chip small blind and two-chip big blind) and the two more chips that constitute your call are definitely going in the pot, thanks to the TT you hold. In other words, you can already consider your two-chip call to be part of the pot, since it's going in no matter what. So you have the three chips from the blinds and the two chips from your call for a pot size totaling five chips.

If you want to raise to triple the big blind, for a total of six chips, you need to make sure that those four extra chips you're putting in the pot above and beyond the two-chip call are justified. Well, with five chips already in the pot and four more going in, you're basically betting four to win five. The pot is laying you 5-to-4 odds on your raise. In order to show a profit on *this* raise at *this* price, you'd need to win 45% more often by raising than you would if you'd just called. And that's easy. Having to win just 45% of the time more often is very low pressure for your hand, since you might win pre-flop when everyone folds and you'll generally win post-flop when your opponent whiffs the board, which he'll do two-thirds of the time.

Truth: Considering uncontested pre-flop wins, post-flop foldouts, hand strength, position, and all the other things we've talked about so far, the original raiser in the pot will win well over 60% of the pots he plays. In fact, if you size your pre-flop raises appropriately (making them large enough to force your opponents to be selective), you'll actually win at a rate approaching 70% of the time, merely by raising and taking the lead. That's a nice profit margin, considering that you're in profit if you win even just half the time.

So raising puts more mathematical pressure on you than calling, but it also vastly increases your chances of winning. Opening for three times the big blind is a relatively low-pressure proposition and it's very profitable; you're getting 5-to-4 from a pot that your raise makes you a favorite to win.

What falls out from this is that if you raise with a hand *with which you wouldn't otherwise call*, the mathematical pressure on that raise is much greater. Here, not only just the raising chips, but all the chips must be mathematically justified because you are raising with a hand you would not ever just call with. There's a big difference between a hand like TT, where your option is to call or raise, and a hand like 72o, where your option is to fold or raise with no option to just call.

When we look at a three-times-the-big-blind raise with a hand like TT where the minimum action, a call, is already a given, we only need to consider the mathematical pressure the extra four chips puts on our hand. But if we raise with a hand like 72, then we need to consider the mathematical pressure that all six chips in the bet put on us, because our choice is between zero and six chips going in, not between two and six going in. Now we're risking six chips to win three (rather than four to win five) and laying 2-to-1 odds. That means we must believe we will win that hand two-thirds of the time in order to justify the raise. Notice the difference there. To justify raising with TT, we need to feel we're likely to win 45% of the time more often than flat-calling, but to raise with 72, we must believe we will win the pot 67% of the time just to break even. That's a lot more pressure on the raise.

This doesn't mean we can never raise with crap. It does mean we have to be much choosier about when we do. If you raise with a hand you can't call with, you have to pick high-percentage situations. For example, when you have a good table image and everyone has folded around to you and you're close to the button, that's a situation where you can raise with anything or, indeed, with nothing at all.

Do you see why we don't go around skating on thin ice from early position? It doesn't make mathematical sense to do so. The likelihood of winning the hand is too low, given the mathematical pressure the raise puts on your hand. Simple solution: Just be much more selective in early position, rarely raising with junk.

But let's get back to the consequences of how much you raise. We've established that if you raise three times the big blind with a hand like TT, you must increase your chances of winning that hand by 45% at least. But what happens when you go to 4X the big blind? Now you're putting in six extra chips beyond the two-chip call, betting six to win the five chips in the pot. So now you have to win 55% more often to be in profit. That's still okay; the raiser rates to win about two-thirds of the time overall just by virtue of the raise itself. Once you get up to 5X BB, you're betting eight chips to win five and need to increase your chances of winning the pot by a smidge over 60%, which is right where you want to stop, because if you raise to 6X BB, you'll be laying exactly 2-to-1, risking 10 chips to win five, and then the best you can do is break even to the 67% of the time your opponent misses and you win just because you raised and took the lead.

You may not believe me that the mere fact of raising ensures that you'll win about two-thirds of the time. I'm not asking you to take it on faith. I'm just asking you to consider all the times your raise makes them fold; and the 67% of the time your opponent misses the flop; and all the times you win just because you have the lead. If, after all that, you're still in the mindset that calling along and trying to catch a flop is a good idea, then maybe you're in the wrong book.

If you think you're in the right book, think about sizing your raise anywhere from 2.5-5X the big blind. Anything *less* than that and you stop accomplishing what raising is supposed to accomplish—gathering information, gaining control, and thinning the field. Anything *more* than 5X and you put too much pressure on yourself to win. So 2.5-5X the big blind is exactly where you want to be.

One thing we haven't talked specifically about is the notion of raising the minimum, just doubling the size of the blind. I hope you can already see why that's a bad idea. Your raise is supposed to have a purpose and the minimum raise won't drive out the riffraff or define your opponents' hands.

The big blind in particular loves your min-raise, because he's getting at least 3.5-to-1 on his call, and even two undercards against two overcards are only about a 2-to-1 underdog. Since most matchups will be in the 3-to-2 range, even if the blind is an underdog, he still has a profitable call; it's automatic. So when the big blind calls the min-raise, you learn basically nothing about his hand that you didn't already know before you put the extra chips in the pot, because he should be calling with any two cards. It's just not good poker to add chips to the pot and learn nothing about your opponent's hand. That's like zero return on your investment.

Add another caller of your min-raise into the mix and now the big blind is getting 5.5-to-1. He gets to make a mathematically correct decision no matter what his two cards are, and you never want to make it easy for your opponent to make a good decision. In this case, it's a no-brainer.

And just when you think it can't get worse, it does. Your raise of 2X BB generally won't make the people behind you particularly selective either. Small pocket pairs come in; so do JTs; so do weak aces; so do any two face cards. Now where are you? Lost in the hand. You have multiple players acting behind you and you know very little about any of their hands. You have to act first on every street without knowing your opponents' range. In fact, your 2X raise generally does nothing more than a limp will in terms of forcing your opponents to be selective.

So yes, when you raise to twice the big blind, you're getting 5-to-2 on your money, which means you only have to win 28% of the time in order to be in profit and that's okay for the math. But it's not okay for the decision-making problems you'll face later in the hand.

Thus we have to strike a balance between math pressure and decision pressure. We need to pick the raise that puts the least amount of mathematical pressure on our hand, while still accomplishing the things raising is supposed to accomplish:

GAIN INFORMATION, NARROW THE FIELD, TAKE THE LEAD

You'll need to put in a bet of at least 2.5X BB to accomplish these three goals. You can bet more and be more certain of doing the job, but the bigger your raise, the greater the math pressure you're putting on yourself—the more often you have to win the hand to show profit. Three times the big blind is a good place to start, but you should plan on adjusting, either slightly down or somewhat less slightly up, within the range of 2.5-5X BB, in order to make sure your raise does its work.

If you want an exact rule on how much to raise, again, you're in the wrong book; I'm trying to help you think about poker on a deeper conceptual level. You know what you want to accomplish, so how do you know what size raise will achieve your goal? Simple: You observe; you experiment. You watch what other people do and apply what you learn to your own actions.

When you first sit down at the table, you don't know what's going on. You see someone raise three times the big blind and get four callers, and you make note of it. You think, "This table seems loose." Then someone else raises three times the big blind and also gets four callers. You realize, "Ah-ha. Three times the big blind isn't enough." So now, when it's your turn to open the pot, maybe you try 4X BB and see what happens. Just remember that you don't really want to go over 5X BB, lest you put too much mathematical pressure on yourself.

Another time, another table, you might notice that three times the big blind is routinely getting to the flop heads-up. That's when you can dial back to 2.5X BB, because the table has already told you how tight it is. If it works, you have less mathematical pressure and a great price from the pot. If it doesn't work, bump your raise up half a bet and see what happens. If 3X BB doesn't work, try 3.5X. If that doesn't work, try 4X. Just don't go above 5X the big blind and get upside down in the math.

So no, I can't give you rules. But I can give you a principle:

RAISE THE LEAST AMOUNT THAT DOES THE JOB

Really, why raise more? You'd just be wasting profit.

Cards? We Don't Need No Stinking Cards

The Myth of Mixing It Up

In all this talk about sizing your raise, we haven't talked about what cards you hold. That's because raise-sizing has nothing to do with your cards. Nowhere in the discussion of why you raise did I mention anything like *raise more when you have a better hand*. The cards only tell you whether your hand is a yes or no. The texture of the table tells you how big a raise to make as you set out to win the pot, whether you hit your hand or not, which you can do, because you've defined, narrowed, and taken control, *not* because you hold a huge hand.

Vary your raise to accomplish what raising is supposed to accomplish, *not* based on the strength of your hand. If raising were connected to the strength of your hand, the stronger your hand, the more you'd raise, and who couldn't crack that code?

When you're playing conceptually correct poker, when you're raising in a goal-oriented purposeful way, your goals, thus your raises, are naturally blind to your hand. This, by the way, makes your hand completely blind to your opponents as well, because your bet sizing isn't connected to your hand in any way beyond the hand being playable or not.

Now, while I know you'll never again make the mistake of pinning your raise to your card strength, your opponents routinely will, so it's worth seeing what happens when they err in the name of "mixing it up."

Your opponents fall into two groups, loosely defined as "amateurs" and "pros." Let's look at each one in turn.

There Are Amateurs

Amateurs raise big with hands they're afraid of, hands they *really* don't want to take to a flop. Two 8s is a great example of that. This hand hates overcards and rightly so, since the majority of the time, at least one overcard will flop and then pocket 8s can get hard to play, especially against several opponents. The problem for most players is that while they're scared of a hand like 88, they also know they're supposed to play the hand and they've probably read somewhere they should raise with it.

But their fear of the hand causes them to raise too much; they desperately want all their opponents to go away. They raise big, realizing somewhere in their reptilian brains that they might face hard decisions after the flop if one or more people play with them. Their way of making an easier decision is to try to chase people out of the pot by raising big with their weaker, more vulnerable, 88 or AJo or KQ.

Ah, but on the flip side, when they're *really* strong, when they have a hand like aces, then they raise small. They don't, you recall, want to scare off the customers. They're greedy and they know that if everyone folds to their raise with aces, they'll want to cry and cry and cry.

Let's see how wrong-headed that thinking is.

Say that in the name of "not revealing the strength of your hand" or "mixing it up," you limp with aces in early position. Obviously, you're hoping to limp and then re-raise, but all that does is turn your cards completely face up and let a hand like AQ make a good fold. If AQ raises your early-position limp and now gets re-raised by you, that hand surely knows to fold, because your hand screams strength. So all you got is the one raise out of your play, six chips in a one-chip/two-chip game. However, if you open for a raise like you do with any other hand, with a raise that's blind to the strength of your hand, AQ doesn't know where you're at. He'll certainly call, so the pot's guaranteed to be as big as it would be if you limped with aces. But maybe he'll re-raise, giving you a shot at his whole stack if he looks like he's pot-committed. Certainly, the open raise is more profitable against real hands than limping and re-raising.

But you'd still be sad if you raised and he folded, right? Don't be. Remember, only six combinations of cards produce pocket aces. The rest of the deck produces lesser hands. So only six hands in the deck will be sad when they get no action, but every other hand will be happy indeed. I mean, if you raise with AJ, are you unhappy when everyone folds? What about 66? KQs? Of course not. You're perfectly fine with raising and picking up the pot right there. I can construct a little pile of 6 hands that make you unhappy. But I can pile up to the ceiling all the hands with which you're happy to win the pot right now.

That's why you have to look at poker in its global context. It's not about what happens on this particular hand. It's not about getting your aces paid off. It's about playing with purpose, making good decisions, taking control of the game. So limp with those aces if you want to, but you'll just be making less money, playing your hand face-up, and giving your attentive opponents a pattern they can analyze and trust and use against you.

Still, people fall into this habit all the time, so be aware of it. When you notice that an opponent sometimes raises big and sometimes raises small, you only need to see him turn over exactly one hand to figure out his whole pattern. If he bets big and turns over a small pair or a hand like AJ, you know his small bets are with super-strong hands because his big bets are with his scared hands. Done. You've got him solved. After that, what do you get to do when he raises big? You come after him with a vengeance. You re-raise.

That's right: re-raise. Re-raise no matter what you have if no one has played in between you. Why not? He's not calling. His over-sized raise just announced to the world that he hates his hand, that he's terrified of it, so if you're paying attention, you can now re-raise him and not even look at your cards, because he doesn't really want to play with you. And when he raises small, you can go ahead and call with hands that play well against aces, hands like pocket 6s, not only because you've got such a tasty price when your opponent makes it so cheap to call, but because you know exactly where you're at: You're facing aces. When you flop a 6, you get all his money; when you don't flop a 6, you have an easy fold. Cheap call pre-flop and only upside post-flop.

But that same guy never gets a dime from you when you have a hand like AQ. You know your hand can't play well against your opponent's tiny raise. Against a normal guy, you'd probably lose money with AQ, but by betraying himself with a tiny raise, the greedy guy loses you and loses money in the process. So what has "mixing it up" really achieved for him? It's made him totally transparent to you. Hip-hip-hooray for the mix-it-uppers.

From just the patterning standpoint, raising big with small hands and small with big hands doesn't work, but when we think about it from a mathematical standpoint, it gets mind-bogglingly bad.

We've already established that the larger the raise, the more mathematical pressure you put on your hand. So by raising big with weaker hands and small with stronger hands, these mix-it-up people are playing mathematically ass-backward. They're putting more pressure to win on their weakest hands and less pressure to win on their strongest hands. Obviously, aces can withstand more pressure than AJo. So why would you set

the breakeven point for AJo higher than for aces? That sounds like a recipe for losing to me.

And There Are Professionals

Some more sophisticated players (either pros or “pros”) vary their play in exactly the opposite way. At least it’s more mathematically correct. By raising big with strong hands, they put the mathematical pressure where it belongs, on the hands that can withstand it.

Plus, there’s some game-theory sense to it: They understand how amateurs think. They know that amateurs expect them to raise big when they’re weak and small when they’re strong. So they turn it around. They open for five times the big blind with pocket aces, looking for play from shallow thinkers who read them as weak. And they raise small when they’re weak, trying to represent strength by reverse psychology. Sort of by accident, this does have the benefit of putting more money in the pot with a better hand and less money with a worse one.

But their problem is, if you’re attentive, again you’ve got them cornered. You know they’re raising small when they’re weak, so when that “savvy pro” raises small, you re-raise and he folds. But when he raises big, you fold your pocket 6s, because he’s raised too much, made it too expensive to make it worth your while to play, plus you know he has you dominated. Thank you very much for *all* that information.

As you can now see, when amateurs or pros vary their pre-flop raises in the name of “mixing it up,” whether they do so in a straightforward or tricky manner, all they’re really doing is giving you the keys to their kingdom. They actually accomplish the opposite of what they’re trying to and become easier, rather than harder, to read in the process.

And Then There’s You

This will never, now, happen to you. You understand the real goals of raising, goals that are completely blind to your cards. You figure out what’s working at the moment at your table and you go with it. And when the table texture changes, you change, too. Right now, three times the big blind might get you to heads-up. In a half-hour, everyone might be drunk or stuck and chasing and you’ll have to raise bigger. So you stay fluid, ready to adjust.

Since you’re playing conceptually correctly, your opponents never know more about your hand than whether it’s a yes or no, playable or not playable. Beyond that, they’re flying blind, exactly how you want them to fly.

Sometimes you’ll raise big because the table is loose. Sometimes you’ll raise small because the table is tight. And sometimes the best raise is no raise at all—when your raise simply can’t accomplish anything good.

Suppose you’re in a super-loose game, where raising to even 5X BB doesn’t achieve any of your raising goals. Even with a raise that big, you still get four or five callers, so you haven’t gained a narrow field, control, or information. You can’t go to 6X BB or higher, because you’re putting too much mathematical pressure on yourself, especially in a super-loose game where you won’t win anywhere near two-thirds of the pots you raise.

Well, if raising isn’t working, *don’t do it!* The extra chips aren’t accomplishing anything that calling wouldn’t accomplish. Note that it’s okay to limp if limping accomplishes the exact same thing as raising. If both limping and raising get multiple callers, then you haven’t learned anything about anyone’s hand, you haven’t narrowed the field, and you don’t have the lead since you can’t really buy the lead in a multiway pot. Thus, if even a big raise gets lots of takers, why waste chips for no reason? You know your hand is a yes, yes? So you know some chips are going in. Since you put chips in only with a purpose and you know that more chips will serve no purpose, you simply don’t put in more chips.

I know what you’re thinking: Didn’t I just tell you never to limp, but only to raise? No! I would never give a hard-and-fast *rule* like that. I said the reasons for raising are so compelling that, *in general*, when you’re first to act, you should raise. “In general.” Not always. There is no *always*. Only thoughtful, responsive poker.

But you hear it all the time: “I have a rule that I never limp.” But the thing is, you have to limp sometimes if you’re a flexible, responsive, good player, because sometimes you have a playable hand, but raising doesn’t achieve any of your raising goals. If you’re in a game where raising isn’t doing anything for you, limp away.

Everyone Bluffs

Now, if you find yourself in one of these loosey-goosey games where raising accomplishes very little, you have to adjust the hands you're willing to enter a pot with. In order to understand these adjustments, we need to take a detour into the relationship between bluffing and hand selection. Whether you realize it or not, the moment you decide to play a hand, you're actually choosing the frequency with which you'll be bluffing on late streets. So hand selection actually has everything to do with bluffing theory.

Bluffing theory has to do with understanding the appropriate circumstances in which to bluff, the circumstances where bluffing serves a profitable purpose. In order to properly set your starting hand values, you need to have a clear understanding of which games are good to bluff in. That understanding is what we call "bluffing theory," so here we go.

The Two Components of Your Hand

Every poker player bluffs. Any poker player who says he never bluffs is bluffing. That's because almost every hand you hold contains at least an element of bluff. It's true. Every poker hand you choose to play has two components, a value component and a bluff component. The value component is the likelihood that you'll win with the best hand. The bluff component is the likelihood that you'll have to bluff (or maybe just think you're bluffing) in order to take the pot.

At the extreme end of the value scale, we have pocket aces, flat-out the best hand. There's basically no bluff component to that hand at all. At the other end of the spectrum, you have the Hammer, the lowly 72, an underdog to every other hand in the deck and therefore almost all bluff going in. When you enter the pot with a hand like AA, you know you're not bluffing. When you play with 72, you know you are.

All other hands fall somewhere in between, which puts the relationship of value component to bluff component on a sliding scale. The stronger the hand, the higher the value-to-bluff ratio. Pocket kings are almost all value with a tiny bit of bluff, and 23 is almost all bluff with a tiny bit of value. Some mid-range hands, like AJ or pocket 7s, have a fair amount of both value and bluff. AJ is often the best hand before the flop, but will likely result in some sort of bluff post-flop if it misses. With a hand like pocket 7s, you might be betting into a board like J-T-3 without really knowing whether you're betting the value component, the bluff component, or a little of both. With this in mind, you can see that anytime you play a hand you know isn't the best possible theoretical hand, you add some extra bluff to your game. The worse the hand you choose to play, the more likely you're bluffing now or end up bluffing after the flop. That's why you need to understand bluffing to understand hand selection. The worse your starting hand, the better the bluffing conditions better be.

Now, if you ask most poker players how much bluff they should put into their game, they either won't understand the question or can't frame a sensible answer. They also probably don't realize that since there's a bluff component to almost every hand, in a sense we're all at least partly bluffing almost all the time.

In a minute we'll discuss how to control your bluffing frequency with mathematical rigor and elegance, but before we get to that, let me ask you a question: When you're in a game where everyone is playing lots and lots of hands, do you play lots and lots of hands as well? Most players, if they're honest with themselves, will admit that they play a lot more hands in a loose game. They see hands like A3 winning big pots and their reptilian brain says, "I can play a lot of hands here, because I'm so much better than my opponents and I clearly can drive this A9o against these donkeys." Either that, or they think they're getting such a good price from the pot that, as the punters say, "Any two'll do." And all of a sudden they have all their chips in the pot on an A-8-5 board with A9 and they don't know how they got into this mess.

I'm sure you've heard the poker aphorism, "Play tight in a loose game and loose in a tight one." I'm about to show you why that aphorism is, in fact, gospel solid from both a mathematical and a game-theory viewpoint. Let's look at the math side of things first.

The Mathematics of Tight and Loose

Imagine you're playing a game called Biodome stud, seven-card stud played inside an eternal Biodome, where the game never ends and the players never die. Pretend that this game has 500 and 1,000 betting limits, but no ante and no bring-in, so that you only put money into the pot when you want to; it costs you zero to fold every hand for eternity.

Given that you have all of eternity to show a profit in the game, what's the only hand you'd ever play? Three-of-a-kind to start, where your trips are at least as high as the highest ranked card on the board. If a jack is the highest card out, you'll play (JJ)J, (QQ)Q, (KK)K, and (AA)A. But if an ace is the highest card on the board, you'll throw (KK)K away.

With no ante and no bring-in, why would you do anything else? You can just wait and wait and wait until you're 100% sure you have the best hand and utterly crush the game. Of this game, then, we can say that it has zero risk of ruin. You can sit there forever, never playing anything but the nuts and never going broke.

Now let's imagine the same game of Biodome stud, only this time you have just 1,000 in chips to start and you have to ante 500. What hands do you play? Almost every hand! Your risk of ruin is so high that you'll have to play basically any three cards you're dealt.

Now check this out. Like the sliding scale of value to bluff, a sliding scale defines the relationship between the size of the ante and the size of the game. We've seen a game with zero ante and zero risk of ruin. In that case, the size of the game is very big in comparison to the size of the ante. We've also seen a game with a huge ante and huge risk of ruin. In this case, the size of the ante is very large in comparison to the size of the game.

The games you play will be at neither of these two extremes, but somewhere along that continuum, and once you know where you are on that scale, you'll know—forever and always—how active you need to be. As the size of the game shrinks in comparison to the size of the ante, risk of ruin rises and you need to loosen up. And as the size of the game increases in comparison to the size of the ante, you must play tighter, because your risk of ruin goes down, demanding less gamble.

This is transparently true when we look at these extreme situations. But it's no less true anywhere along the continuum and no less true for hold 'em, where the ante is usually collected in two specific spots, the small and big blinds, rather than spread through every hand.

Now let's examine this ante-to-game-size ratio again, this time using blinds, though instead of changing the size of the blind, we'll change the

size of the game.

If you're in a game with \$1 and \$2 blinds and the average pot size is \$200, you should play completely tight; the size of the game is huge in comparison to the size of the blinds. You're only risking \$3 a round to win a pot that will be a monster.

Conversely, if you're in a \$1 and \$2 game and the average pot size is only \$20, now the size of the game is quite small in comparison to the size of the blinds, which means you have to play loose (or quit the game if you're not at a tournament table). You have to play more hands and win more pots just to stay ahead of the blinds and you can only replenish your stack with small pots, because that's all there are. So you have to gamble a lot more.

In the first case, the risk of ruin is quite low and the ratio of the game size to the blinds is quite high. In the second case, the risk of ruin is quite high and the ratio of the size of the game size to the size of the blinds is quite low.

So there you have it. You play tight in a loose game, not because the poker aphorism tells you to, but because a loose game means bigger pots, bigger pots mean less risk of ruin, and less risk of ruin means you can afford to be more patient, mathematically. You play loose in a tight game, again not just because the axiom says so, but because tighter games have smaller pots, so you need to be more active to avoid getting gobbled up by the blinds. Mathematically, you can't afford just to sit around and wait if the game is small.

What makes a game big? That's right, a lot of people putting in a lot of money. And what kind of game is that? Exactly: loose, with multi-way pots and people playing hands till the river.

So in loose multi-way action games, the math says play tight. In tight games, where the pots are tiny, the math says play loose. Put a pin in that and let's move on to game theory.

Present Equity and Future Equity

Now we have our relative looseness pegged to the sliding scale of risk of ruin. Next we're going to examine two aspects of bluffing called present equity and future equity. Taken together with our risk of ruin, this gives you guidelines for adjusting both your tightness and bluffing frequency, elegantly and accurately, to any game you're in.

The present equity of a bluff is the probability that if you execute this bluff right now, it'll work and you'll win the pot. It's the equity in the bluff itself.

Future equity represents the probability that showing a bluff right now (failed or otherwise) will earn you extra calls downstream. Interestingly, the presence of future equity means that your present equity doesn't have to be greater than breakeven. In fact, your bluffs can actually be less than breakeven if you can make it up in future equity, by letting your opponents know you don't bet only when you have a hand. And really, you have to. After all, if you were a super-duper tight player who played only aces and was known to play only aces, you'd never get any action at all. You'd have to turn over something less than a premium hand at some point, or else, as we've already seen, not only will you not get action, you'll also give your opponents an incredibly reliable line on your play. By showing bluffs, you not only loosen up your opponents, you also make it more difficult for them to make good decisions against you; you expand the possible range of hands you could be playing.

Bluffing, then, is not just a luxury of poker, it's a necessity. And remember, with any hand but aces, you're automatically including at least a smidgeon of bluff to begin with, so don't freak out.

What freaks people out? Getting called when they bluff. They think they've been caught red-handed in some kind of sin. But you haven't been caught. You've just run a bluff that got called, *which is fine*, because the bluffs that get called are what builds future equity. Remember, your bluffs don't need to be money makers at this moment. Your bluffs can be completely breakeven (or even a bit less) and you're fine, because you'll make future money on them.

First, there's the value of getting called in the future when you have a real hand. Second, there's continuing and overall value in keeping your opponents guessing about your real strength. And don't forget that you might win the pot right now. So if you're one of those people who's too nervous to bluff, remember this:

IF YOU DON'T GET CAUGHT WITH YOUR HAND IN THE COOKIE JAR SOMETIMES, YOU'RE JUST NOT PLAYING RIGHT

When Bluffing Doesn't Work

People say all the time, "In the games I play in, bluffing doesn't work. Everyone calls anyhow." Well, if you're in that kind of game, then it's simple: Don't bluff. There's no value in it. And lest you think that's a rule or something, here's how you can come to that conclusion yourself.

First, I want you to think of your bluffs as sort of an advertising budget. Considering present equity, your advertising might or might not pay off right away. If not, that's called a negative spend and that's okay. You're spending money now, thinking you'll get something for it later.

But imagine for a moment that you sell a product called Poker-Cola, the only soft drink on Earth. You have a total monopoly on carbonated beverages, so anyone who wants to drink soda has to drink yours. Now, if you owned Poker-Cola, would you ever spend a dime on advertising? Of course not. The whole world has to buy your product regardless. No one has any choice. Why would you spend money to advertise when the supermarket aisles are lined with your product and people are clamoring for it and you have no competition? That would be the very definition of lighting a match to your money.

Now imagine that you sell that same product, Poker-Cola, but you face a market saturated with brands like Seven-Stud-Up, Mountain-of-Chips Dew, and Nehi-Lo Split. Since you have competition, you actually have to persuade buyers to drink Poker-Cola. You have to advertise. If you don't, the competition will kill you and you'll go broke.

Poker is the same way. If you're in a game where there's lots of action all the way to the river, you're the monopoly soda. You don't have to advertise; every buyer in the world is more than willing to spend. In a game where you are already getting called to the river, often by more than one player, you don't need to advertise to create action. You are already getting the action that you would generate by showing a bluff. So why bluff? You aren't increasing your future equity, since there is no value in getting caught.

In fact, since hold 'em is a game where it's hard to make a hand, you really don't want all those buyers. Yes, your best hands will get paid off, but you're handcuffed to your cards. You can never win without the best hand and that takes away one of your most useful tools. In such loose games, you don't want to encourage even more action by bluffing. You could actually stand a little *less* action. So tighten up. And if you're perceived as tight, that's okay. Maybe when you enter your infrequent pots, you'll actually get some folds. Plus, you'll play better hands, have a higher percentage of winners, and reduce your variance, which is damn helpful here. In an ultra-loose game, then, don't make the negative spend by bluffing. From the point of view of future equity, it hurts your cause in many ways.

It's not so good for present equity, either. These are *callers*, right? They'll call you with middle pair, bottom pair, a piece of lint hanging from their

cards. Thus, you have no future equity, *plus* no present equity, because the bluff won't work. You'll get called down and lose your money. Bottom line: Don't bluff when everyone is calling you already.

Now let's talk about a tight game, analogous to a competitive sales market. Here you have to bluff; otherwise, you'll never get paid. Your customers aren't buying. They're not giving you money when you make the best hand and that's a bad thing.

In tight games, then, your bluffs aren't just a sound investment, they're crucial. They attract people to your product. They ensure that you get calls when non-bluffers don't. And bluffs confuse your opponents about the kinds of hands you hold, making their decision-making harder, hallelujah. So bluffing in a tight game serves the needs of future equity.

It serves present equity, too. Tight players are more likely to give up without a fight, which means you don't need the best hand to win. In fact, you're in the perfect situation to bluff without any downside at all. You have a good shot at running the bluff successfully at the moment, but if you do get caught, you earn future equity! So it's all good.

All I've just done is tell you something you knew all along: Bluff in tight, not loose, games. But let's bring this all back to our discussion of the ratio between ante and pot size.

Since loose games have a larger pot-to-ante ratio, the risk of ruin is lower and we can afford to wait. Ergo, play tight; gamble less. Also in loose games, bluffing doesn't work. Ergo, don't bluff.

Since tight games have a lower pot-to-ante ratio, the risk of ruin is higher; we can't afford to wait. Ergo, play loose; gamble more. Also in tight games, bluffing pays massive dividends. Ergo, bluff away.

And now, *mirable visu*, the game theory and the math converge perfectly. When you're playing in a loose game (a bigger game by definition), simply subtract all your starting hands with a high bluff component—a high likelihood that you would have to bluff to win the pot with your holding—and you'll be playing appropriately tight for the game. When you're playing in a tight game (a smaller game by definition), you can add back a lot of those bluff hands and you'll be playing appropriately loose. By this simple device, you can find exactly the right bluffing frequency and the right degree of tightness for any game you're in.

In other words, you now have the tools to beat any game, *no matter how loose or tight it is*. Ain't game theory wonderful?

A Side Trip to Tournaments

You see another application of this risk-of-ruin metric in tournaments, where it's amazing how people get things almost completely back-assward. Their first mistake is playing way too loose at the beginning. They start a tournament with something like 100+ big blinds, and they think, *Yeah baby! I can play lots of hands!* They fear no real risk of ruin. They think each call is such a small part of their stack that they can take a chance and see a flop.

But pot odds have little to do with starting stack, since pot odds, by definition, are the relationship of the bet to the pot, not to anyone's stack. Play should thus be dictated by the math of one's investment in the pot, exactly as discussed above. But most players don't see it that way. They just think they have such a nice big stack that they can get involved a lot; going broke feels like it's very far away.

What's the result of that thinking? In the first few levels of a tournament, play tends to be very loose and pots tend to be multi-way. Now we know that in those circumstances, you should play tight. Your risk of ruin is low and the game is too loose around you.

But now here comes the middle of the tournament. The blinds rise and antes are added. The average stack size drops from 100+ BB to as low as 50 BB. Now the fear of going broke kicks in. So what do most players do? *They tighten up*—at exactly the moment when risk of ruin says you need to loosen up. See what I mean by back-assward?

The math completely backs this notion of playing tighter early and looser later. When the antes engage, there's suddenly a lot less mathematical pressure on your raises. Most tournament structures have a 100-200 level without antes, then a 100-200 level with antes. That's the perfect time to look at the effect antes have on the pressure you put on your hand by raising. When the blinds are 100-200 and there are no antes, when you open with air you must win 70% of the time to be in profit (you're playing a hand that was a no until you decided to bluff with it).

But when you add a 25-chip ante, suddenly there's an extra 250 in each 10-handed pot. Now when you open weak, you're risking 600 chips to win 550, which puts you at very close to even money, requiring you to be successful just over 50% of the time. Obviously, you can open weaker more often if you have to win only half, as opposed to over two-thirds, of the time.

So just at the time when everyone else is, illogically, tightening up, you're doing good math and punishing them.

Better yet, don't forget all the time you spent establishing a tight image in the beginning levels of that tournament, not because you were consciously trying to establish that image, but as a natural consequence of playing correctly when facing low risk of ruin. Then, when risk of ruin shifts and you need to add more bluff component, your raises will get the respect your tight image earned.

You see the average pot size shrinking (not absolutely, remember, but relative to the antes). So you start playing a bit looser and because it takes awhile for perception to catch up with reality, people continue to perceive you as tight, even though now you're playing quite loose.

So look at what you just did for yourself. By doing nothing but playing theoretically correct poker, you put your opponents into total confusion about how you play.

Now you can continue to loosen up all the way to the bubble, because the bubble tends to be the tightest point in a tournament (whether it's the money or final-table bubble). Conventional wisdom tells us to loosen up at the bubble and generally that's true. It's also theoretically sound, because pots tend to play small at the bubble and smaller pots relative to the blinds equal looser play, right? Also, there's present value in bluffing when your bluffs have a higher likelihood of working, which they do at the bubble, as timid players and short stacks hang on for dear life.

After the bubble bursts, people loosen up like crazy. And what do you do? Of course: You tighten up, a lot. No one's folding anymore. They're delirious to have made the money, but also aware that they need to accumulate chips to make a run at the final table. So they're playing anything—business cards, matchbooks, whatever.

You, meanwhile, have settled back to play the nuts for a while. And look at how beautiful that is! You've now established a loose image from your maniacal bubble play and what happens to all those players who were just waiting till the bubble popped before coming after you? Now they attack when you actually have a hand. Now you send them to the rail shaking their heads and wondering why a maniac like you had to have aces the one time they got in your way.

When the final-table bubble approaches, you'll generally be loosening up as players around you batten down the hatches desperate to get to the final table. Not only will players be tightening up around you, forcing looser play, but you'll also be playing short-handed, which increases risk of ruin, since the blinds come around on you faster. Remember that the higher the risk of ruin, the looser you should play, so you're really driven to gamble more at the final-table bubble.

But as soon as that final-table bubble bursts, things change again. When you get to the full-handed final table, you'll be playing tight again. First, all your relieved opponents will generally loosen back up. Second, at a full table, your risk of ruin also goes back down. Both of these factors

demand tighter play from you and, once again, you will be playing against your recently established loose image. Isn't that beautiful?

When the final table gets short-handed, the risk of ruin gets higher again, since the blinds are coming at you faster. So you loosen back up just when it matters, when you're going for the win. But perceptions are lagging and now everyone mistakes you for tight again. But all along, you've been neither loose nor tight. You've just reacted to the math of the situation and the way the players around you are playing. So sometimes you're tight and sometimes you're loose, but it's always according to good math and always deeply confusing to your opponents.

In Summary

When you understand tournament flow, you know it's generally correct to start out tight and gradually loosen up as the antes kick in and you get closer to the money bubble. Then you go super-loose at the bubble, only to tighten back up after it bursts. As the final table approaches, you go loose, then super-loose at the final-table bubble. When *that* bubble bursts, you tighten back up as your opponents get loose. Then you gradually loosen back up as the table gets short-handed. This way you're always playing against your most recent image, simply by playing correctly for the situation at hand.

In both cash games and tournaments, then, it starts to look like no matter what the rest of the table is doing, you should be doing pretty much the opposite, and yep, that's it exactly. Not just because of some vague idea of "going against the grain," but exactly and specifically because both math and game theory tell us it's correct to do so.

The next time you hear someone say, "Play tight in a loose game and loose in a tight game," you'll know the reason why, even though they won't.

And this isn't idle knowledge. Now, you'll enter any game situation, cash or tournament, with a much greater sense of confidence, because you'll know exactly when and how to change gears, based on the game as you find it. This is why rules don't work. They tell you *what* to do, but not *why*, and without the why, you're just a robot playing poker, and a robot who's not very informed, thus not very confident, at that.

The Art of Adjustment

Adjusting for Loose Games

We know by now that preferred strategy is to raise (when raising is working) in order to get the pot heads-up or close to it. We also know that in loose games, raising doesn't do the job it's designed to do. In those, you'll be limping a lot more, but you have to make a much more sophisticated adjustment than "limp with the hands you'd normally raise with." You have to think about what kinds of hands will do well in a loose limpy game. Let's break down that adjustment and see how it works.

First, recognize that in games where people tend to play to the river, you're playing, basically, showdown poker: Best hand wins. The first thing you lose in such a game is the power of position; there goes most of the bluffing equity (they call everything) and the informational advantage (they play everything) you normally get from position. There's still some value in position, because you do get to act last, so you can make better judgments about whether your hand is good and you'll be better at extracting value from your really good hands.

But because your ability to bluff is so drastically reduced, you won't overvalue position in this game by playing too broad a range of hands in position. In this circumstance, the value of position comes from cashing your good hands, so you don't want to play a lot of hands likely to end up as bluffs that won't work.

So your first adjustment is to snug up your starting requirements in position. We'll talk in a moment about what you should consider a playable hand, but in consideration of position, plan on playing only a little looser in back than up front, compared to the much looser you can play in position in a normal game. Here, you're playing a much flatter function between early position and later position. And remember, this is a situation where "they're loose, so you're tight," meaning that you'll flatten the function not by calling more frequently up front, but by folding more frequently in back.

In a normal game, you could play probably 80% of your hands on the button when you get to open. Here, not so much. First of all, that pot ain't getting folded around to you and second, your raise won't thin the field. So sit tight and play tight, even in position.

Next adjustment: For the sake of simplifying your decision-making problem in this loose crazy game, you play somewhat different cards. To give you a sense of which cards, let's walk through two different hands, AQ off-suit and pocket 7s (the minimum hands you'd play up front in a tight game) and see how these hands play differently in loose games versus tight ones. After that, we'll talk about some other hands with which you can profitably limp here, but wouldn't play up front in a normal game.

Again, without shoving a bunch of rules down your throat (notice how we just annihilated the "never-limp" rule), I intend to give you a template you can apply to hand selection in all games of this sort by getting you to think about both the upside and downside of the hands you hold.

All hands have both positive implied equity and negative implied equity. The positive side, or upside, is simply how much money you can make with the hand (winning by hitting or bluffing). The negative implied equity, or downside, is how much money you figure to lose with the hand, even if you hit it.

Heads-up, a hand like AQ has lots of upside and very little downside. It's probably the best hand to start with. When you hit the hand to one pair, it's likely to be good; if you miss, it's relatively easy to drive just one guy off his hand. So, good times with AQ in a normally tight game.

Pocket 7s heads-up also have good positive implied equity. You generally don't need to improve to still have the best hand or win the pot and if you do improve, for sure you have the best hand.

However, specifically heads-up, some negative implied equity shows up in how hard it is to release the hand in the face of two overcards, or even just one, on the flop. If you raise with a hand like 77 and your opponent randomly bets into a board of, say, J-6-2, you're now in a tricky situation. If you fold here, you're definitely folding the better hand too often. But you're very much flying blind, not sure if your 77 is good or not.

There are logical ways to play out this hand properly, as we'll see in the post-flop section of this book. But those lines of play have to do with minimizing your loss if you don't have the best hand, while preventing yourself from folding when you hold the winner. What's important to recognize here is that any time your line of play is focused on minimizing loss, you know you're in a potential downside situation and that's where you are with 77.

So heads-up, AQ or AK is relatively easy to play, while pocket 7s can be very hard. Now let's flip things around and look at these hands in a loose busy game with tons of callers. You'll see that the ease with which these hands play is exactly reversed.

Say you limp with pocket 7s (for reasons already discussed, in this game you're limping and not raising). You've got four callers scattered here and there and the flop comes T-8-2. Are you losing any money with pocket 7s? Of course not. With that much traffic, you now *know* that your hand's no good and into the muck it goes, unmourned. You're not worried about throwing away the best hand, as you'd be in a heads-up pot, so poof! The negative implied odds to the hand go away. Mid-range pocket pairs can't (or at least shouldn't) cause you to sail off when overcards flop against multiple opponents. On the other hand, if a 7 comes, you know that you're almost always holding the best hand. No confusion, no doubt.

With middle pocket pairs in a loose multi-way game, when you hit the hand once (meaning one card on the flop relates to your hand), you hit the hand huge: to a set. When you miss, you miss completely. No ambiguity. No tough decision-making problems. No negative implied odds. But tremendous positive implied odds, with plenty of callers to justify your set-mining venture. So once again, you have the math logic and the decision-making logic playing a harmonic duet. You know you're getting the right price to try to hit and you know you won't get into tricky trouble when you miss.

Now let's take that AQ and recognize that you probably have to hit the hand twice in order to feel confident that it's good in a multi-way pot. If you hit it once (which is how we usually hit our hands), flopping either the ace or the queen, you have just one pair against multiple opponents. Because of all the traffic, you have to be worried about someone in that pot having made two pair or better on the flop. And even if no one has outflopped you, you still have to stave off everyone on the turn and river.

Having one guy against you with three or five outs is no big deal. Having four against you with that many outs? Not so nice. Therefore, in a loose limpy game, you need a flop like A-A-x, Q-Q-x, A-Q-x, or if you're a real dreamer, K-J-T.

With the 7s, you hit the hand once, flopping a 7, and you're good to go. With the AQ, you can't feel completely comfortable unless you hit it twice. When you hit it in the usual way, flopping a pair, it'll be hard to drive out the shoe clerks. You could be ahead on the flop, but then again maybe you're not, and when the traffic catches up to you, you'll have a hard time *knowing* you're beat, *admitting* you're beat, and folding your hand.

A high pair with a good kicker is never an easy fold. And when it turns into a loser, either by being outflopped or outdrawn, you stand to spend a

lot of money on a sticky hand. Thus we see that there's a tremendous downside to making one pair with a multi-way pot, like AQ in a multi-way pot, that doesn't exist heads-up. That's your decision-making problem: When the board comes A-7-2 and the action goes bet, raise in front of you, how are you going to know where you're at?

In loose games with multi-way pots, then, good aces go way down in value, while middle pairs lose much of their downside risk. Now, this doesn't mean you throw away your AK or AQ hands in multi-way loose games. But it *does* mean that you dump that AJ and below. Meanwhile, go ahead and call with most of your pairs (not raising, because in a game like this, raising doesn't work), but do beware of set-under-set situations. In a limpy game, everyone plays every pair and if you hit your set with 22, be wary that it might not be the only set in town, especially if a raising war breaks out.

Now let's look at another category of hands: suited aces and your biggest suited connectors, hands like A7s and KQs. Start by recalling our discussion of the false value of low suited cards. Those hands have major downside; when you make the flush, it's never *the nut flush*.

But what about hands that make the nut or second-nut flush? Up front in a normal game, you don't want to be playing hands like A7s, because you won't get enough callers to give you good odds. And when you make a pair of aces, the most common "good" outcome with that hand, you either make very little money when your opponents fold to the scary ace on board or you sail off big time to an ace with a better kicker.

In a normal game, hands like A7s have value only when you get to play them in back of the field, where your hand strength is abetted by positional advantage. In a loose limpy game, though, those suited aces gain all sorts of upside and very little downside, because they so clearly tell you where you're at.

Flopping one pair doesn't get you into trouble. As with that AQ, you know how fragile your holding is. Top-pair no-kicker against the multitudes? Easy muck. Middle-pair ace-kicker? Easy muck. And there goes all your negative decision-making equity.

On the upside, your flush draws have huge positive equity, because you're drawing to the nuts. Unlike with a small flush, when you connect on the turn, you don't have to worry about a fourth suited card hitting on the river; obviously, you'll still have the nuts. Plus, in a loose crazy game, you're getting the right price on your draw. In this game, they *won't* care as much about the texture of the board and they *will* pay you off. Once again, the math and decision-making are elegantly aligned.

Now when it comes to K♥Q♥, say, you don't have the nuts, but you do have the near nuts, which means you can be a lot less worried about getting drawn out on when a fourth heart hits. Yes, you're fading the ace of hearts, but that's only one card, not all of the eight hearts in the deck, as you'd be with that ugly 7♥6♥. Plus, because K♥Q♥ is connected, you have a lot of straight hands you can make, all nut straights.

Obviously, if you hit the pair side of things, you'll be on good-pair good-kicker, which presents some of the same decision-making challenges as AQ off-suit in a multi-way pot, so you'll need to proceed with caution. But in this case the pairs aren't the only thing you have going for you, which is why you're playing KQs, but not K3s: so you're never looking at good-pair bad-kicker or bad-pair good-kicker with no straight possibilities. With top-pair second-kicker, you can now play some of your one-hit flops. You should play carefully, but you can play.

A number of hands fall into this category of "good to great in multi-way pots," including KJs or even KTs or QJs in late position. Except when you're very close to the button, don't go down as low as K9s, with which you have to flop too perfect. On the button, you could go as low as T9s, because you get to see the disaster of a bigger flush in front of you before you commit to the hand. In early position, your KQs and KJs are okay; again, the math makes your draws work and the clarity of the situation makes your decision-making easy.

To recap: In early and middle position in wide open games, play only the best unsuited aces, most pairs, pretty much all suited aces, and a smattering of suited connected paint. Around back, you can loosen up, adding in KT suited, closely connected suited queens, even that JT suited that everyone loves so much. But that's only in back and only in a loose timid game where you can see cheap flops with lots of traffic, remaining alert to the possibility that the tenor of the game might change, when you'll shift back to your normal, position-dependent, selective stance.

And by the way, if it seems like you've loosened up a lot, you haven't. You're still folding most of your hands, but the ones you play have the potential to make the nuts and pay off big. So we come to this:

IN LOOSE GAMES, PLAY HANDS THAT EASILY MAKE THE NUTS

If the hand you're looking at can't easily make the nuts or near nuts, stop looking at it and throw it in the muck.

Behind a Raise in a Normal Game

In a perfect world, no one raises at the table but you and you always control the action. Well, the last time I looked, this wasn't a perfect world. For the sake of having a complete pre-flop toolkit, then, we have to give some thought to how to respond when others raise. Fortunately, like everything else we've looked at, we can break this down. We can examine it logically and consider it in light of the fundamental goal of making our decisions easy and the other guys' hard.

The most common raise situation you'll face is when someone opens the pot for a raise and it's folded around to you. Forget about the blinds for now and think only about what to do when you have position on the raiser.

Your first consideration is the range of hands with which your opponent is likely to open for a raise. You'll take into account such things as his position relative to the blinds, actions he's taken in the past, his current state of mind (is he solid or tilty?), even whether he's likely to have read this book and is thus raising appropriately.

Some of your opponents will raise with literally any two cards. That's neither good nor bad, it just is; so you have to take that into account. On the other hand, you might be up against a Gibraltar who only opens with aces, kings, or queens. How will you know where your opponent is at? Presumably, you've been paying attention.

So let's say you're up against a loose-aggressive (LAG) raiser, whom you can reasonably expect to be raising, at this time and in this position, with something as weak as AT. Okay, you've completed step one: You've identified the bottom of the raiser's range.

Here's step two. Look at your hand and figure out if it's at least as good as the bottom of the raiser's range. Do you have AT or better? You can play. Do you have A9 or worse? You can't play. Your hand is below the bottom of his range. You don't figure to have any shot at the better hand, which means you're playing against the raise purely on the strength of position. Obviously, if you're planning to bluff, you can play any hand. But let's put a pin in that for now. Right now, we're talking about playing for value against the raise.

Position's not for nothing. Being in position, in fact, allows you to play with hands as far down as the bottom of the original raiser's range (though not below). Acting last means you're more likely to win the hand when you don't make anything. Also, bluffs in position tend not to cost much, so you get a lot of cheap shots at pots when you act last.

As we'll see later, when you're out of position, your calling requirements get much more stringent for exactly these reasons. In position, though,

you just need to be as good as the raiser's worst. If he raises with aces and kings, you'd better have at least kings. If he raises with any two cards, you can play with any two cards—if you choose to. You might choose otherwise, since his wide range may make your decision-making tricky from the flop forward. Remember, even though you *can* play, no law says you *must* play.

So your hand is good enough to play. Next question: Should you call or re-raise? Obviously, if your hand rates to be better than his (AA comes to mind), you can always re-raise for value. But think about some other hands that are better than your opponent's worst, like TT or AQ, with which you could legitimately either flat-call or re-raise. To figure out which way to go, start by determining whether your hand is at least strong enough to call the raise, then examine whether you think a re-raise will work.

When you re-raise the raiser, as you know, many good things can happen. First, you thin the field behind you, ensuring that you get to play this hand heads-up and in position. Second, you gain information, because if your opponent calls your raise and he's reasonably tight, he's further defined his hand as one that's close to the top, not the bottom, of his own raising range. Third, he might just fold right there, which is never a bad thing. The possibility of winning the pot now, or at least gaining extra information and taking the lead on the pot for yourself, should motivate you to fire that re-raise when the circumstances are right.

But what are the right circumstances? (Hint: It has nothing to do with mixing it up.) Let's do the math.

Let's say the blinds are 100/200, so 300 is in the pot. The raiser, not a super-tighty, makes it 600 to go, so now 900 is in the pot. You have pocket 10s, so at minimum you're calling, no matter what position the raiser is raising from. You know you're calling at least, so you can count your 600 call as already part of the pot, bringing the total to 1,500. As before, with a calling hand, we assume the call's been made and the chips are already in the pot. This leaves us free to examine whether the math is right to invest more chips and if so, how many.

So we have a total pot of 1,500: his 600 raise, your 600 call, plus the blinds. Generally when you raise, you should raise just about the whole pot. Why this size? For the same reasons you open raise when you are first to act. This is the amount that will generally get more information out of your opponent and is likely enough to trigger a fold from him. Obviously, sometimes you might raise less than the whole pot, sometimes more. It all depends on how loose or tight the opponent you are re-raising is. You, as always, want to pick the smallest amount that will either get your opponent to fold or, at least, tell you a lot more about his hand when he calls.

So in this case, you're looking at chipping in an additional 1,500, which matches the 1,500 already in the pot, creating a total bet of 2,100 on your part, your 600 call plus the 1,500 raise.

Now look what's going on. You're risking 1,500 extra chips beyond the call to win 1,500 chips, which is an even-money proposition. Now the answer about when you're supposed to re-raise becomes crystal clear: You re-raise when you believe that your raise increases the likelihood of winning the pot by at least 50% over just calling.

I can't help you be certain about hitting that 50% mark. You're playing the game, not me, and this is all about how your opponents react to you. So you'll have to use your judgment. But for sure you won't get a fold from a solid player who raises early, because his hand is probably better than yours. If that same player is raising out of late position, though, and he's reasonably active at the table, that's probably a fine time to re-raise, since his range is wide enough that he'll fold more than half of them. And even if he doesn't, you still have position and you probably also have the lead, because most players who do call in that situation will "check to the raiser" (our old friend) and fold on the flop when the board comes bad for their hand (our other old friend).

On the flip side, if you're playing against an opponent who never folds once he has chips in the pot, that's a good opponent to just call. Your raise won't make him go away, so you have no chance of winning the pot right there. Nor will you get much useful information. Obviously, you also want to avoid re-raising a player who's likely to come over the top of you, since a lot of your raising hands, TT or AQ, can't really stand the re-raise. A lot of loose and overly aggressive players nowadays love to re-raise the re-raiser. It's better to flat-call them, especially considering that when you hit your hand on the flop, they'll probably overplay whatever they have. By flatting here, you get to trap the overly aggressive player and punish him after the flop.

Knowing when to call and when to re-raise is nuanced. If you're on the fence, lean toward the re-raise, which will make your decisions easier in the long run. Think, for example, about how much easier it is to play TT on a flop when your re-raise has won you the lead. More than half the time, an overcard will flop, and if you flat-called pre-flop, the hand can be very tricky to play. Your opponent will bet into you the majority of the time and you won't know where you stand. This is even truer of AQ, since you'll miss the flop with that hand about two-thirds of the time and will have to fold to a bet.

On the other hand, if you re-raise before the flop, your opponent will check to you on these bad boards. Then you put the decision on him, as opposed to him putting the decision on you. That right there should compel you to re-raise whenever you think the conditions are favorable.

I understand that re-raising a raiser is scary to many players. But when you think it all the way through, you realize that calling is in many ways the scarier proposition, due to what you face after the flop when the board comes bad. Re-raising actually makes your life easier. So re-raise with a hand you would at minimum call with when you believe you'll win at least 50% of the time. It's not so scary when you actually understand why you're playing that way.

But you can't always just re-raise with good hands. That makes you too transparent. Sometimes you have to re-raise with garbage, too. So let's look at how holding garbage changes the math of the re-raise, thus impacting the circumstances under which you'll do it.

Let's say you have pure air and no way you'd ever call. This means that you can't count 600 calling chips as part of the pot. The choice is now between putting zero chips in the pot or putting in a full-pot re-raise. Remember our 100/200 blind example? We're talking about making it roughly 2,100 chips in an appropriately sized bet. If you re-raise, you're laying the entire 2,100 now for the chance to win 900 (the 300 in blinds plus the raiser's 600), a bit more than 2.3-to-1.

In order for that play to show profit, your opponent needs to lay down his hand more than 70% of the time. Wow. That means you'd better be making that play only in high-percentage situations, like when you're against an opponent who calls a re-raise only with the nuts, or opens big with weak hands. *Cuidado*, as our Spanish-speaking friends say.

It's a mathematical fact that the bluff-re-raise play has to work a whole lot of the time to be profitable. So be selective, but don't neglect trying it when those high-percentage situations emerge. And if you happen to get caught, it might not be bad for you anyway. You might be squirreling away some image equity for later.

Deciding whether to call or re-raise with real hands is a balancing act. Interestingly, this choice is easier to make in tournaments than in cash games, because tournament situations dictate a lot of players' styles. In the early stages of tournaments, you generally want to just call; this is when people playing loose are more likely to call your re-raise or even come over the top. Later, you can re-raise with that same hand; players are more likely to fold. And don't forget, once antes are involved, your math pressure goes down, which means your re-raise has to work less frequently in order to show profit.

In cash games, you get off this fence simply by measuring the relative looseness of the game. The looser the game, the looser the opponent, the more likely you are to call and not re-raise. Also think about the player you're up against. Believe me, *plenty* of players out there are frisky enough to

raise, but can't stand the heat of a re-raise. They fold like a map of France.

Of course, if the raiser is super-tight, especially if he is raising from early position, you're unlikely to re-raise him, because his raising range is so narrow to begin with that you're unlikely to have a hand at the top of his range and unlikely to successfully bluff him. Then again, if you happen to have aces and you think he has kings or queens, go ahead and bang away. Not only do you have the best of it, you'll be gaining cover for when you re-raise a loose aggressive player with absolute cheese.

Responding to Raises

Squeezy Peazy

Now let's look at what happens when there's a raise and a call before it gets to you. Would you believe that you should be more willing to re-raise now? You should. Now, your play has a much higher probability of success, while still needing to hit only 50% with a hand you'd call with, and 70% with your re-raise bluffs.

You pull this off by pitting your two opponents against each other. People call this a "squeeze play." But just because it's well-enough known to have a name doesn't mean it's not an effective tool. In fact, people can know full well that you're squeezing and still not be able to call.

Say there's a raise and a call and you re-raise. The original raiser can't call you willy-nilly; he has to worry about the player behind him actually having a good hand. Therefore, he has to be pretty tight on his range. If he *does* call you, you can pretty accurately gauge his strength (he's strong).

Meanwhile, you know that the original caller is highly unlikely to have a hand that can stand a re-raise; otherwise he'd have re-raised the pot himself.

So you can play these two against each other. The opener is worried about the guy behind him. The guy behind him likely has a hand he has to fold.

Here's more good news with the squeeze play: For an interesting psychological reason, you can often get away with not re-raising the whole pot and under-betting the pot by a bit. See, when you chunk in a re-raise, your opponents are more likely to think about the raise in relation to how much they have to call, rather than the size of the raise relative to the size of the pot. In other words, they're not asking themselves if they're getting the right price from the pot. They're just looking at how much extra they have to call. And remember, they're freaking out at the prospect of being jacked around and not just by you, but also by each other.

Fold. Fold. Next hand.

We've looked at a raiser and no caller, and a raiser and one caller. What happens when the callers start to cascade?

First thing, you have to forsake the squeeze play. With multiple callers, the chances of the squeeze working go down and the chances of getting called go up. In other words, while two players are more likely than one to fold to your re-raise (thanks to the power of the squeeze), three or more players are less likely to fold, not just because there are so many of them, but because cascading callers behind a raise tend to have *something* and the pot is so big that players will be reluctant to fold. Therefore, once it goes raise, call, call, in order to fire in that re-raise, you need to be at the top of everyone's range and willing to play a large pot all the way through.

To review: In a massively multi-way raised pot, you need to be very strong to re-raise. In a three-way pot, you can be weak on the re-raise. Heads-up, you need to judge how likely the re-raise is to induce a fold, then decide whether to re-raise or flat-call.

And remember, just because you *can* squeeze doesn't mean you *must* squeeze. If you have a hand like pocket 9s, of course you have the option of re-raising, but you can also play it like you'd play those pocket 7s in a loose limpy game. Call behind and try to flop a set. Almost no flop to that hand will be at all ambiguous. You'll either hit big or miss big, with an easy decision either way. In fact, I'd be much more likely to flat-call with pocket 9s than I would with AQ, for all the reasons we discussed in terms of loose-game decision-making.

And by the way, if you squeeze with 99, you'd also better raise with AA, KK, and AKs. If you never re-raise with your strongest hands, your opponents will figure out pretty damn quick that you slow-play your big hands and raise or re-raise your medium-strength hands. That sounds like a great strategy for players to take the pot away from you, since you've tabbed your hand as one that can't stand a re-raise.

Don't get cute with your strongest hands and just call behind every time. You need to re-raise with some of them, not just for their immediate value, but also to protect your squeezes and bluffs. If your opponents think you're squeezing, they'll come over the top and put you to the test.

And if this sounds like a lot of raise, re-raise, re-re-raise brinksmanship, that's exactly what it is. But that's poker. Go big or go home.

Blind-on-Blind Action

Now let's look at our available range of actions in the blind and our underlying reasons for them.

As you know by now, the relation of action to reason is key. You don't want to do anything without a good reason—perhaps two or three of them—supporting your choice. For instance, when it's folded around to you in the small blind, this is one time you can logically limp as first action into the pot, for the good reason that you're guaranteed to be playing the pot out of position, so you want to keep the pot small. If you don't have a clear fold and you don't think a raise will win you the pot, then playing small ball out of position is your next best option. Only when you're against a big blind who doesn't defend often enough should you raise the small blind a lot. But in that case, you're not looking to play the hand out of position. You're looking to end the hand right there. Of course, you only do this if you judge the big blind to be playing incorrectly tight. In that case, the general principle of playing loose in tight games applies.

On the flip side, if the small blind limps against you in the big blind, you should be more than willing to raise. If he calls (he might not; he might have been trying for a cheap flop), you'll have both the lead *and* position. Plus, his call kind of narrows his range. But you can check and play your position if you want to. You can even check hands with aces in them, because no one thinks you'd check an ace here; then, when you actually hit the hand, you'll get the guy to misread you.

So, in the big blind, you can either check or raise, depending on how the small blind plays. For instance, is he on auto-call when you raise? In that case, you should only raise with real hands unless he's likely to check-fold the flop anyway. Then you can raise pre-flop in order to bluff on the flop. If the small blind is likely to fold to a raise, you should raise quite often.

Blind-on-blind action is its own little war, but it's simply fought. From the big blind, it makes sense to err on the side of raising when it's just you and the small blind, because position is on your side. From the small blind, it is better to err on the side of limping, for the sake of keeping out-of-position pots small.

That's when everybody folds to your blind. What do you do with action before it gets to your blind? In the small blind when someone raises from the field, even if it's just the button (who could be raising with air), you take his range into consideration, as you would with any raiser. But you'll have to play the rest of the hand out of position, so you can't call with hands equal to the bottom of his range like you could when you had position on the

original raiser, only with hands higher in the range.

Always always always, if you're going to call a hand out of position, you need a stronger hand to counterbalance your disadvantage. It's true that when you call from the small blind, you get to call for less, but that discount is deceptive; bluffs are hard to execute and good hands are hard to cash in on out of position.

Example: With blinds of 100/200 and a raise to 600 in front of you, you're calling 500 to win 900. Yeah, that's almost a 2-to-1 pot price, but the raiser in position figures to win more than two-thirds of the time, so what you're looking at, basically, is a losing proposition. Lots of players get tricky or macho here, considering it a point of pride to defend their small blind. You know what? Let the dick-measurers measure dicks. You do the correct thing and fold hands that don't compete against the raiser's range.

Now, if you're sure that your hand is equivalent to the high end of the raiser's range, go ahead and re-raise. You're happy to pick up the pot right there and not have to play the hand out of position and you can actually narrow the field with the re-raise by knocking out the big blind. For these two reasons:

WHEN YOU HOLD A REAL HAND IN THE SMALL BLIND, RAISING IS IMPERATIVE

Honestly, even if you're giving away the strength of your hand, you really don't mind. Your best outcome is when everyone folds, *not* when you extract value from a big hand in bad position. That's an ugly situation, and even pocket aces don't make it significantly less ugly. So let them know you're strong. Encourage them to fold, or at least to know that they'd better hit their hand, because you're definitely betting something real.

The only exception is in playing middle pairs against an early-position raiser. With those hands, it's almost always correct to flat-call from the small blind. You know the early-position raiser has a very good hand, so a re-raise there would be imprudent. You can call, look to hit the set, and fold if you miss. Play the hand cheap for a big payoff instead of risking a re-raise against someone likely to be strong. Against a late-position raiser, with his much wider range, you can try to win the pot right there. With your pair, you're probably raising with the best hand anyway.

Another good example of how the raiser's position affects your small-blind action is with a hand like AJ. Against a solid early-position raiser, folding that hand in the small blind makes a ton of sense. You don't want to call and play out of position when your hand is likely behind or even dominated. And re-raising would be unwise against a player showing strength. So you fold.

The situation changes if the raise comes from late position where the raiser could have anything, and a hand like AJ would likely be at the top of his range. I'll fold that AJ to an early-position raiser with a tight range, but likely re-raise against a button raiser to try to win the pot right there. He could have anything or nothing at all and when I re-raise there, I expect to do so with the better hand. Notice that calling isn't an option.

Now, the big blind plays differently from the small blind. When it's raised by someone in the field and folded around to you, you're already heads-up against the raiser, so re-raising can't narrow the field short of ending the hand, which is unlikely, since re-raises from the big blind carry less clout than re-raises from the small blind. Why? Because whenever players act with even one player left to act behind them, that player's raises are perceived as stronger; the assumption is that the player must have something to raise when someone is still left to act. In a sense, the small blind's re-raise leverages the presence of the big blind to gain more respect. The big blind's re-raise doesn't get that respect.

Making matters worse, people expect the big blind to get jiggy in order to retard aggression. Raises from the big blind not only get less respect but in fact invite the nasty possibility of a re-bluff push from the original raiser, especially one canny enough to see that the big blind will re-raise as a defense against getting bullied.

What falls out of this is that if you're going to bluff-re-raise, presumably against a late-position opener, it's much wiser to do it from the small blind than the big blind. Remember, if you raise with a hand that can't call, you have to believe you will win the pot about 70% of the time. Because of the lack of respect that re-raises out of the big blind garner, that 70% is a tough mark to hit. To be sure, sometimes in bubble situations or against super-tight and timid opponents, you can hit that mark even out of the big blind. But it's a much easier mark to hit from the small blind, where your opponent is much less likely to put you on a bluff.

So lean toward flat-calling with your playable hands from the big blind. Your raises usually won't do much except create a big pot that you'll have to attack out of position for the rest of the hand. Similarly, you should be more likely to re-raise on a complete bluff from the small blind than from the big blind, leveraging the respect that small-blind raises naturally accrue.

As a last thought, let's talk about the concept of defending your big blind. Players love to talk about how they call with a wide range of hands from the big blind in order to defend it. Thing is, that blind doesn't belong to you, so there's nothing to defend. Once your chips go into a pot, they ain't yours. They're part of the pot and only relevant inasmuch as they help determine the pot size. Calling with weak hands because you somehow want to protect chips that no longer belong to you is the very definition of throwing good money after bad. It's okay to be pushed around on your big blind. Don't get your knickers in a twist. *Not* playing certain hands is part of correct play, too.

Now, I imagine you're thinking, "But can't I call with weak hands since I'm getting such a good price on my money?" Let's consider it.

Are you getting a better price to call? Absolutely. That's why you can be a little looser on your calls in the big blind, but only a little. In a 100/200 game with a raise to 600, you're calling 400 to win 900, so that's a little better than 2-to-1. To show profit, you have to win from this point forward over about a third of the time, hard to do out of position and without the lead or a legitimate hand.

And yes, you always hear players quote the odds that if you take two undercards (like 96) versus two overcards (like AK), the undercards are only a 2-to-1 underdog there. They quote these odds to justify calling with just about anything in the big blind, since they're getting better than 2-to-1 on their money. But that 2-to-1 is only relevant if there's no further action on the hand. Yes, when you get to see all five cards, your 96 will win better than 30% of the time (barely). But will you get to see five free cards? Not unless you're all-in pre-flop. Otherwise, you can't and shouldn't use odds for five cards to come to justify a call where you'll see only three cards before you have to act again. That's not only bad poker, it's a recipe for disaster.

Just for the record, JT suited is *not* strength. Against early-position raisers, especially tight ones who play real hands, to call with JT is ridiculous. (Which doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Big blinds make that call all day every day, which is what makes poker such a great game for the rest of us.)

Think about the average hand you're likely holding in the big blind. It consists of ... that's right ... average cards. If any raiser anywhere is raising with a distribution even somewhat better than average, you're a card-strength underdog in the long run. And always out of position. And never with the lead. And facing difficult decisions on every single street. Not a party. Not with JT, not with small aces, not with suited connectors. Just not.

So call selectively in the big blind and re-raise even more selectively, even against button raisers you know to be lying sacks of cheese. In order for your big blind re-raises to work, those button raisers need to be lying sacks of cheese *who will also fold*. Otherwise, you're just building a big pot out of position and basically looking to hit to win. If you have to hit to win anyway, why not keep the pot small till you hit? Flat-call with AK (which is nicely deceptive as a bonus). Call with pocket pairs. Call with KTs, KQ, AT. Hell, you can even flat-call with pocket aces here, because this is one time you don't have to worry about narrowing the field—you're already heads-up—and a called re-raise wouldn't yield much useful information

about your opponent's hand.

Always remember that your pre-flop raise is intended to do several jobs at once. If it's only doing one of them, or none of them, keep that raise in your pocket and disguise the strength of your hand. It'll make your opponent's post-flop decision-making that much tougher. And we know how much we like it when *that* happens.

PART TWO

Play on the Flop

A Short Chapter on Two Subjects

Sizing Your Bets on the Flop

Before we get into the specifics of play on the flop, let's talk again briefly about betting theory, and examine the logic of sizing our bets in a range between half-pot and three-quarters pot. As you'll see, it rarely makes mathematical sense to stray far outside that range. On occasion, such as the river when there's no more drawing, you might want to bet less than half the pot or more than the whole pot. But right now we're talking about play on the flop and we're considering how our bet sizes will affect the rest of the hand.

In general, the reason you bet around half the pot is that it's the right amount to price out most of the draws that your opponent might hold. Remember that on the flop, the best draw a player can have that's not already a favorite against a made pair is a flush draw. And that draw is about a 2-to-1 dog with two cards to come.

As we've already noted, many players will be ensorcelled by the 1-in-3 chance of completing their flush. They'll forget that they have to call bets on both the flop and the turn. If that's the case (and hey, even if it's not), it's important that you give your opponent the wrong price to call. In other words, and you're going to hear this phrase over and over again in our discussion of flop play, you want to give him the opportunity to *make a mathematical mistake*. While lots of players behave like a flush draw is a 2-to-1 dog to hit when deciding whether to call a bet on the flop, the reality is that a hand like a flush draw is actually about 4-to-1 against hitting. Don't forget that another bet is (or should be) on the way on the turn. This means the price needs to be calculated for one card to come, not two, and that price is 4-to-1, not 2-to-1. When you bet half the pot at someone, you're offering 3-to-1 odds on a 4-to-1 shot. If he calls, he's making a math mistake. That means he's losing money.

Let's assume the pot contains 1,000 in chips. It's an assumption we'll make for all of our post-flop pots, by the way, just to make it easier to think about the math. Okay, there's 1,000 in the pot. What happens if you under-bet the pot, putting in, say, 250? Now you're sending it to the person on the draw with the attractive price of 1,250 for 250, or 5-to-1. Now, a flush draw makes money; the price the pot is offering the player is greater than the price of making the draw. Even a straight draw is doing fine. You're offering an overlay on the odds of completing their draws. You're making life easy on everyone else. That might be fine at your summer cottage, but it sucks in poker.

In case you're unclear on what it means to make money on the math alone, let me lay it out. If there's 1,000 in the pot and you bet 250, your opponent has to call 250 to win the 1,000 pot plus your 250 bet, for a total of 1,250. If he's risking 250 to win 1,250 when he's a 4-to-1 underdog, this means that the four times he doesn't complete the flush, he'll lose his 250 bet, for a total loss of 1,000 chips. But the one time he does make his flush he'll win the 1,250 pot. His net profit, over five theoretical tries, is 250. It looks like you just gave him free money.

It's bad enough to give the right price to someone who would fold if you offered the wrong price. It's even worse when you offer the right price to someone who would have called even for the wrong price. If you have an opponent who'll call any bet with a flush draw, even a money-losing bet, why offer him a call that's good math? That's a disaster. And that's why you bet at least half-pot instead. You put at least 500 into a pot that has 1,000 in it and send it back to your drawing opponent at a price of at best 1,500-to-500 or 3-to-1. In calling 500 to win 1,500, your opponent is now making a bad mathematical decision with a flush draw. The four times he doesn't complete his flush, he'll lose 500 x 4, or 2,000. And the one time he complete his flush, he'll win only 1,500. Now *he's giving you* free money and life is good again.

Therefore, by sizing your bet correctly, you hand your opponent a lousy choice. He can do the correct thing and fold (and you win) or he can do the incorrect thing and call (and you win).

You might think it's better to bet more, just to make sure your opponent either does the right thing or pays a bigger penalty for doing the wrong thing. While that's true, up to a point, remember that any time you put more chips in the pot, you're also putting more mathematical pressure on yourself; you have to be right more often. The more you put in the pot, the more you risk. If you bet 500 into a 1,000 pot, you can lose your bet twice for every one time you win the pot and still break even. But if you bet 1,000 into a 1,000 pot, now you have to win as often as you lose in order to break even. So if you can bet less to get the same result (winning the pot or causing bad math), your profit will be greater in the long run. And it turns out that people who'd fold for a three-quarters-pot or pot-size bet are likely to fold for a half-pot bet as well. Either they know they're not getting the right price or they're just done with the hand.

There are only two times when it's appropriate to bet more than the pot. One is when the amount you're thinking about betting is such a high percentage of your stack that you're pot-committed anyhow, so you might as well move all-in. The other has to do with decreasing the difficulty of your decision-making, which we'll discuss in the fullness of time. For now, just set your sights on betting about half the pot (I usually land on 60%) and start adjusting upward if that half-pot bet doesn't do the job you want it to do. Think in terms of betting the least you can to accomplish your goal. Always bet within the half- to three-quarters-pot range and you won't go too far wrong.

The Question of Questions

In some poker books you may have read, the authors try to give you specific lines of play for every hand you hold and situation you face. All due respect to those authors, but that's an insane way to go about it. Too many combinations of hands can come up pre-flop; too many possible occurrences are in the cards post-flop. If I gave you guidance for specific holdings, I'd be leaving you lost at sea for anything outside that narrow range.

What I've done instead is cherry-pick some common no-limit hold 'em situations and show you the underlying thought process for each. You'll be amazed at how well they integrate with, and support and reinforce, one another. And when you're done, you'll have not only a good strategic grounding for these common situations, but also a theoretical understanding you can apply to myriad situations that come up. The goal here, again, is to give you a thoughtful, conceptual, purposeful understanding of both the *what* and the *why* of all your actions, so you can enter every game with the confidence borne of certain knowledge.

In this part of the book, then, we talk about four different types of hands you might hold: huge hands, drawing hands, one-pair hands, and bluffing hands. I've ranked them in order of ascending degree of difficulty, with huge hands being the easiest to play and one-pair hands being the toughest.

Wait, you say, what about bluffs? Didn't I put them last? Actually, as we'll see, it's a little harder to play one-pair hands than pure bluffs, but you still want to have a full understanding of how to play real hands before you start frisking around with bluffs. Successful bluffing is really the art of

storytelling. When you bluff, you're telling the story of one type of made hand or another. So let me ask you: How can you tell that story persuasively if you don't yet know what the story would be if you actually *had* the hand? Answer: You can't. Without that knowledge, the bluff becomes a dangerous weapon with which you can badly hurt yourself.

Properly used, the bluff is a jigsaw, cutting intricate pieces of a puzzle to a high degree of detail. Improperly used—and believe me, you see this all the time—it's a chainsaw with which players hack off their own limbs.

I understand the seduction of the bluff and I'll teach you how to do it well. But remember, just because you *can* bluff doesn't mean you *must* bluff. Too many players think that every time they miss a flop, they have to fall back on the default strategy of bluffing. There's a technical name for such players: broke. Don't let it happen to you.

Okay, every time you see a flop, you need to ask yourself some questions.

Do I have the best hand?

If I don't have the best hand, am I drawing?

If I don't have the best hand or a draw, am I bluffing?

Am I in position or out of position?

Is the pot heads-up or multi-way?

Who took the lead pre-flop?

How weak, tight, loose, or aggressive are my opponents?

What's my image?

What's the board texture?

Texture, as I'm sure you know, has to do with how highly coordinated the cards on the board are with one another. A board that has straight and/or flush cards on it, like J♣-T♣-3♠, is considered highly textured, while a board where the cards don't relate much to each other, like A♠-9♥-3♦, is considered untextured or dry. We'll talk a lot about texture. You'll see that your comparative hand strength is only half the picture. The other half is the board's texture and once you understand the relationship between your hand and the board's texture, you'll have simple reliable lines of action for every hand you play.

Of course, we also have to set a goal for the hand. For example, when you flop the best hand on a board that has no danger to it, your goal is to extract the most you can from your opponents. On a draw, your goal is to make the most money when you hit, *but also* lose the least when you miss. Sometimes your goal is to protect the hand. Sometimes it's to minimize your decision-making problem. But you always have a goal. No more flailing around betting "just because." From here on in, you'll always bet with purpose.

And once you've set your goal for the hand, you have to figure out how to achieve it. What bets, raises, and calls can you make that will move you most efficiently toward your goal and cause your opponents to make the most errors in your favor?

If that seems like an awful lot to think about, it is. So we'll break it all down into pieces and examine the pieces independently. Then we'll put them back together and you'll see something wonderful: that when you play all these situations conceptually correctly, they create a very confusing picture of you to your opponents. You'll literally never have to stray from the most mathematically perfect and financially profitable line of play, because you'll naturally appear to your opponents to be astoundingly confounding just by playing conceptually correct poker.

All these lines of play give cover to one another. The correct play of your big hands camouflages the correct play of your draws, which in turn disguises the correct play of your bluffs.

I hope you'll take the time and do the hard work to understand the game-theory basis for all this. But even if you don't, you'll still emerge with a playbook that lets you devastate most of your opponents most of the time.

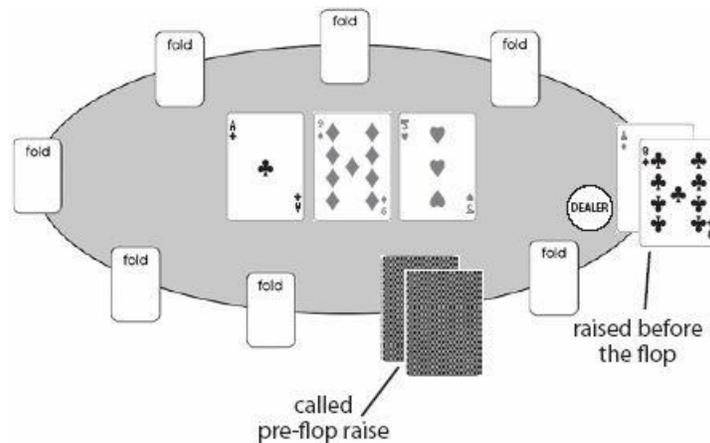
Let's get to it, shall we?

Flopping Huge

Big Hand, Heads-Up, In Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

We start our close examination of on-the-flop play by looking at what happens when you flop top two pair or better. For the purposes of this discussion, we don't care whether you have top two pair, trips, a full house, or even quads. The point is, you've flopped huge and now you have to figure out how to maximize value and avoid pitfalls, if any.

To start things off, we'll say that you took the lead before the flop, you're heads-up in position, and the board is fully dry: no straight or flush draws, *nada*. To help you visualize the situation, your hand is A♠9♣ and the flop comes A♣-9♦-3♥.



Note that if you had pocket 9s, you'd be roughly equally strong. I ask you to note this because, again, I'm giving you guidelines for certain situations that you can apply to analogous situations, even though the hands might not be precisely the same.

The first question is: How did you get involved in this hand? The likeliest answer is that it was folded to you in late position, you raised, and the big blind called. That's typically how you get involved with the lead in position: You raise late and get one caller. Also, typically on the flop, our old friend "check to the raiser" shows up.

So now you have two pair and the lead. Are you ready to act? Not quite yet. First, you have to set your goal for the hand. In this case, with a monster hand and a dry board, you have the luxury of focusing only on how to make the most money, with no need to protect against ... well, anything.

Understand that most people's instinct here when they flop huge and their opponent checks to them is to be "tricky" and check, for the obvious reason that they think they've got a big fish on the hook and they're reluctant to let it wriggle away. The problem is, that thinking is completely wrong (and this isn't the last time you'll hear me say it). Let's talk about why.

First, consider a situation where you're up against someone who has absolutely nothing. If he checks and you check, all you've done is alert him that something weird is going on; why would the pre-flop raiser fail to bet on the flop in position? That is a very unusual action and unusual actions tend to sound alarm bells. The continuation bet called for here will happen nearly 100% of the time, so your failure to make it is bizarre. Consider that if you had a semi-strong hand like Ax, you'd certainly be betting here. And even if you completely missed, you'd also be betting. After all, why did you buy the lead pre-flop if you don't use it to try to pick up the pot after you miss the board? Therefore, when it's "checked to the raiser" in a heads-up pot, you're expected to bet and it's highly unusual when you don't. And an unusual action with an unusual holding gives your hand away.

Look at the story you're telling. Your pre-flop raise said, "Strong!" But your post-flop check is trying hard to say, "Weak!" And what does that bizarre sequence add up to? Aha! A strong hand played weakly! Your opponent with nothing is now easily done with the hand and you get exactly what you would have gotten if you'd bet on the flop and he folded: zero. So against an opponent who has nothing and will see through your ruse, there's simply no upside to checking behind. If he's done with the hand, he's done with it.

I know what you're thinking. Wouldn't checking behind on the flop encourage a bluff on the turn? Sure, but how big a bluff? Probably something like half our standard 1,000-chip pot, so 500. He bluffs, you raise, he folds, Merry Christmas. You won an extra 500 from an opponent who wanted to bluff. But suppose instead you'd bet 500 on the flop and your opponent decided to check-raise bluff. That happens, you know. You're a late-position raiser; you could be in there with Swiss cheese. So maybe he's the guy who wants to punish you for your thieving ways.

Ah, but look at the price of his bluff now. With 1,500 in the pot after you bet, he has to bet something like 2,000 total to bluff meaningfully. Now he's committing four times as many chips as he would have with a lead-out bluff on the turn.

So no net loss to the player who's done with the hand, but a huge net gain for you against the player who wants to check-raise bluff. And even if he check-raise bluffs less frequently than he'd lead-out bluff on the turn (which he might not do, with such a weird check behind on the flop), you'll still end up making money when he loses so many more chips on the check-raise bluff.

Remember, this is a case where you want to get more money in the pot. It's not going in there by magic, you know. It takes money to make money. In other words,

TO GET MONEY IN THE POT, PUT MONEY IN THE POT

Or look at it this way: We're always happy when our opponents make mistakes, right? Why not give them the chance to make big ones?

Setting aside the times when they have nothing, let's think about the times when they have something. If you're up against a hand like JJ, the check behind is disastrous, because you're giving your opponent a free chance to hit his two-outer. Granted, he's only a 4% shot to do so, but you just laid him infinity-to-1 to try. Never give anyone infinity-to-1 odds. Maybe that's as close to a rule as we'll come, but I hope you see now bad it is. And if you bet 500 on the flop, do you think those pocket jacks are going away? Not on an A-9-3 board against someone who raises frequently in late position. An opponent willing to randomly fold JJ on a dry board against a late-position raiser is not only bad, he is also rare. (So don't *be* that guy.) You'll get at least that 500 from the pocket jacks and you're denying him a free shot at a kill card.

Why not just check and embolden those pocket jacks to bet on the turn? Apart from the infinity-to-1 issue, if he bets the turn, how much will it be? Again, probably around half-pot. So he's committing on the turn the exact same chips he'd have committed on the flop when he calls. *But you didn't make him pay.* If he's putting the chips in anyway, you maximize your value by making him pay on the flop. Remember, he's basically calling for two outs, so you're giving him 3-to-1 on a 20-to-1 shot. That's a terrible mathematical proposition for your opponent and a fantastic prop for your top two pair. And if you think your bet is going to let pocket jacks wriggle off the hook, let me tell you again that it's a rare player who's good enough—or, to be fair, bad enough—to lay down jacks there. Remember, you're the pre-flop raiser. You could have *anything*.

And if you bet the flop, that player with JJ might just lose his mind and check-raise. As with the bluffer, your bet opens the door to the possibility of your opponent making a big mistake. If he's not inclined to do so, then you'll make either a little extra money or no extra money, just as you would have with the check-check scenario, but with *none of the risk*. In other words, against a hand that'll give you action anyhow, making your continuation bet is all upside and no downside.

And when you're up against a hand like AQ, it's *vital* that you bet. He just made top-pair good-kicker, which ain't so easy to do in hold 'em. And if he's checking (we'll talk in a minute about what to do when he leads), you can be damn sure it's with intent to check-raise. At minimum, you get a call. No way is he check-folding. If you check behind, you've not only denied him the chance to make that big mistake, you've also alerted him, by your clear strong-hand-played-weakly line, that his AQ might in fact not be good.

Thus, when he leads the turn, it's for 500 and your raise will send him right out of the hand. You played the hand with warning bells clanging, exactly the way he'd expect a monster hand to play. You got his suspicions up with the check on the flop and now, after he bets, the minute you give him any resistance, he knows you were playing possum. And trust me, if he's not good enough to see the danger of your check on the flop, he's not good enough to see the danger of your 500 bet either.

Now look what happens when that AQ checks and you bet. You happen to have a strong hand now, but you'd be betting your whole range anyhow. You're heads-up in position with the lead, and you'd need a damn good reason not to make a continuation bet—like he exposed his cards and you know he flopped quads. So your standard c-bet does nothing to define your hand for him and your standard half-pot bet further says, "I always bet in this situation, no matter what I have, so you figure it out." Now the AQ will generally do what an AQ (or AK, for that matter) does: check-raise. And there goes his 2,000 into the pot.

Should you flat-call here and let him fire again on the turn? Probably not. Your flat-call on a dry board is completely strong. There are no draws you might be calling on, nothing that someone could use to make up reasons why his hand is good. You're not drawing to anything, so if you're calling, you must have something. If your opponent is blind and ignorant, he might put you on top-pair worse-kicker, but if he's blind and ignorant, you don't need my help beating him anyway.

Since the flat-call of the check-raise on a dry board announces extreme strength, you might as well re-raise here. This, by the way, is how you actually get AQ or AK on the hook for his whole stack. People fall in love with their good or great kickers and they won't believe that you'd play your big hand that fast on the flop; most of them don't play their big hands that fast.

This takes us back to the wrong-headed idea of being too tricky for our own good. Really, the logic is simple:

IF YOU WANT THEM ON THE HOOK, PUT THEM ON THE HOOK

To review: Your bet on the flop does better against a bluffer than checking behind does. It does better against someone who plans to call. It does better against someone who thinks he has the best hand. And by the way, it does fine against a hand like A7, because A7 isn't folding. It's either calling or check-raising, so you'll do at least as well by betting as you would by checking, and sometimes much better. The only hand your lead bet doesn't do better against is the complete blank with no urge to bluff. Against that hand it also does no worse, so it's a wash.

But here's the thing. From an overall storytelling and from a game-theory standpoint, it's really important to bet these big hands. You should continuation bet pretty much all the time heads-up and these big hands cover your weaker holdings. Remember, when you set your average continuation bet at half the pot, you let the pot lay you 2-to-1 on that bet. Thus, your success rate on the c-bet has to be only 33% in order to break even. Clearly, by the mere fact that you're heads-up with the lead and position, you'll hit your 33%; your opponent will completely miss the board almost 70% of the time. So your continuation bet is a low-pressure high-profit action—except when your opponents start taking the pot away, which they will with shocking regularity, once they figure out you don't bet your monsters.

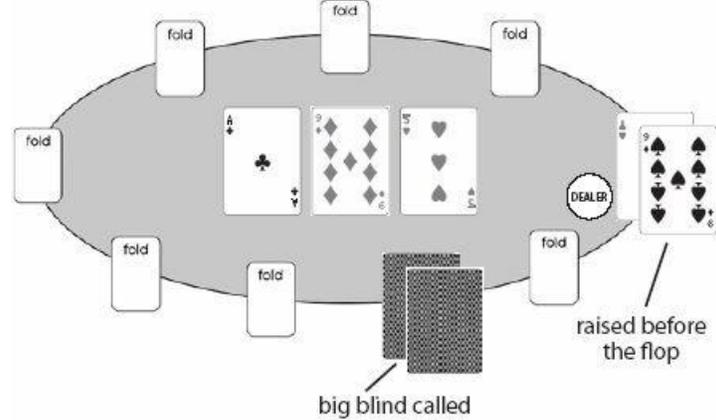
So bet your monsters! It gives cover to your lesser creatures. And don't ever forget how massively the little creatures outnumber the monsters. Just ask the plankton and the whale.

If I still haven't convinced you that it's profitable to bet your big hands, it's probably because somewhere in your memory, you recall flopping huge, betting, and "losing your customer." And that made you sad. But flopping huge is rare. You're much more likely to be continuation betting with QJ. Pocket 2s. Pocket 4s. Pure air. Are you sad when they fold to those hands? Of course not. So forget about the few hands where their folds make you sad. For the sake of your overall profit, you're much better off giving up a little equity with your monsters—which, by the way, you're *not*—for the sake of doing better with all your other hands that are happy to win without a fight.

The Weak Lead

We all know that people don't always check to the raiser. Sometimes they bet.

Let's say you raise before the flop with that same A9, get a call from one of the blinds, and here comes that same flop of A♣-9♦-3♥.



Now the blind bets into you. That is a really unusual action and should get you thinking about why he would just go and bet out. This kind of bet into the raiser in a heads-up pot is called a “weak lead,” because it’s entirely weak. It most often comes from bettors who have a hand they’re nervous about and want either to run a cheap bluff or find out if their hand is good. In fact, some people call these kinds of bets “probe bets” or “information bets.” But a hand that wants to find out if it’s good, that needs to bet and see how you respond in order to define itself, is by definition, not that strong, because a strong hand already knows it’s good without help. That bears repeating. A player holding a strong hand, like a set, doesn’t need you to tell him that his hand is good. He already knows it because *he has a set*. It is only the weaker range of hands that need that kind of help from you.

This situation is the flip side of what we just talked about, where people with super-strong hands (or hands they think are strong) try to get in a check-raise on the flop. Given that it’s hard to bluff out of position and people don’t like to risk too much on their bluffs, the weak lead generally defines the bettor’s hand as one that’s either really scared (total bluff) or somewhat scared (some part of the board from weak ace on down), one that wants to find out if it’s good then and there or just win the pot right away, cheap.

Occasionally, someone is clever enough to lead with a big hand here, though if he’s that clever, you already know it; you’ve been tracking his play, right? Most people, however, almost automatically check their huge hands heads-up out of position when their opponent has the lead. After all, they know they can expect a continuation bet behind them and visions of check-raises, like sugar plums, dance in their heads.

So the blind, by leading out, pretty much defines his hand as something like A8 all the way down to pure air. And that’s why it’s called a weak lead, not because the size of the bet is puny (it may be appropriately sized), but because it telegraphs weakness. Now you know what his hand is. And how wonderful is it someone that weak is betting into you? Your job now is just to maximize profit.

Weirdly, that’s exactly why you don’t raise here. You just call behind. Seems counterintuitive? It’s not. You know he’s weak, so you know he’s going away if you raise. His weak lead is asking you if either his hand is good or he can win the pot right there. If you raise, you answer that question for him a little too loudly and he folds. Obviously, you don’t have to worry about him getting infinite odds (if he has outs), since the odds aren’t infinite once he’s put money in the pot—he’s already paid for his mistake! He’s already given himself a bad price to try to hit at most three outs against your top-two if he’s on something like AT, AJ, AQ, or AK and no outs if he’s on air or you hold a set.

Think about that pot with 1,000 in it. Let’s say your opponent weak-leads 500 into the pot and you call 500. He’s risked 500 to win the 1,000 pot plus your 500 call, for a total of 1,500. That’s 3-to-1. But with only three outs, he’s 16- to-1 against hitting on the turn. That’s a big loser for him. So you can just flat-call him and let him dream he’s in good shape.

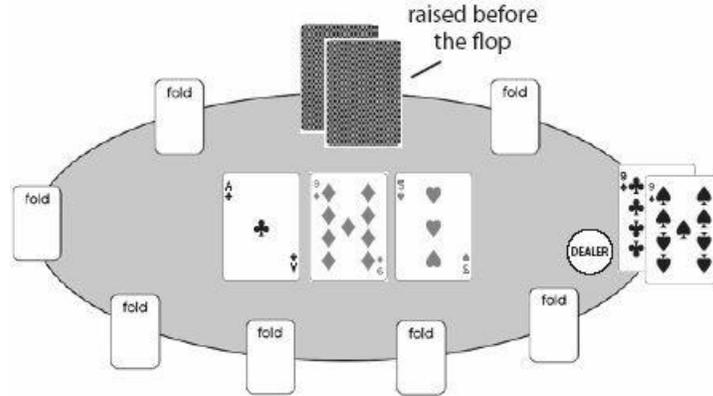
As before when you checked behind, your flat-call might alert an attentive opponent that you probably have a good hand. And you may get no further money out of him, but that’s okay; you wouldn’t get any more out of him anyway with a raise on the flop. By calling, you at least give your opponent a chance to make a mistake on the turn. Maybe he’s aggressive (and inattentive) enough to lead into you again. God love him, maybe he thinks you’re on a weaker ace than he is. Maybe he thinks you were calling to bluff. By flat-calling on the flop, then, you’re basically freerolling. Maybe he’ll lead again on the turn. Maybe he’ll check-call a turn bet from you. You don’t care. You’ve already gotten him to pay for a mistake. If he pays again, that’s just gravy.

And if the weak lead is actually a strong lead, your raise on the flop would just eventuate an all-in situation right there and you might be up against one of the few hands that can actually beat you. Truly, though, that’s a secondary consideration, since that’s just a cold deck. Most—almost all—of the time this lead bet is a weak lead and can be treated as such.

Big Hand, Heads-Up, In Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Now let’s change the situation a little. Let’s say someone raises in middle position and you call behind with pocket 9s; I hope you’re not calling with A9 here.

Everyone else folds and again the flop comes A♠-9♦-3♥ and now you’re in the catbird seat.



Generally, in this situation, the pre-flop raiser will bet out. When that happens, most players holding your strength would flat-call, not wanting to scare off the customer. You might flat-call, too, and that's probably right most of the time, since you could be calling with a wide range of hands, including bluffs.

But before you automatically call, first ask yourself how aggressive the lead bettor is. If he's very aggressive, he might lead into you with nothing. If he's passive, he's declared his strength twice, first by raising pre-flop, again by leading on the flop; that means a super-passive player that has a strong holding. This can be a great time to raise. First, you know he has a pretty good piece of the flop. Second, a really good hand usually won't raise in your situation, so your raise can actually look like a weak line of play.

When you raise, be sure to make a bet that matches the story you're telling. If you make a minimum raise, you're telling him you're huge; a min-raise screams that you don't want your opponent to fold. Make your raise about three times his bet, or about the size of the pot. But remember, only make this play if you have some reason to believe that your opponent is strong or creative enough to try to three-bet bluff your raise back if he reads your raise as weak.

Interestingly, the one story you're *not* telling here when you raise is the story of a set. Who'd be crazy enough to give away the strength of his set with a raise right on the flop? Well, you, that's who—if you feel that your opponent has a strong hand and is coming along anyhow. Under most other circumstances, where you suspect your opponent to be weak or merely continuation betting, go ahead and flat-call. You're not that worried about telegraphing strength here; if you're wrong that he's strong, you weren't getting any more earn from him anyhow.

But say you know your opponent has something like AQ or AK. He bets. You call. *Why would you call?* Suddenly, he's scared. He has to play the turn and the river out of position against someone who liked this dry board well enough to stay in the hand. He'll definitely slow down. Maybe he'll check-call on the turn. Probably he'll check-fold on the river.

Let's see how much you make with that line of play. Figuring half-pot bets on both streets, you picked up 500 by calling on the flop and another 1,000 by betting on the turn. So that's 1,500. But what if you raise to 2,000 on the flop? Now you're getting at least that same 1,500 out of him, but maybe more; AQ or AK doesn't suspect a set here and will probably re-raise, thinking that his hand is good. If he shuts down and just calls on the turn or the river, okay; you haven't done worse. Maybe you've done better.

Again, it all comes down to whether you think your opponent is strong or weak. Against strong players, encourage action early in the hand. Against weak players or continuation bettors, call. The reason for just calling when you don't sense strength is the cover it gives you when you have other hands, like top pair or pure air. We'll get to those later. For now, just remember that the call behind is *very scary* to someone who bets up front without real strength, so when you call he tends to be done contributing to your stack anyway.

In sum:

TELL THE STRONG HAND A WEAK STORY

If you're starting to get the sense that much of what we're about here is storytelling, you're right. The thing is, you need to find the right story to tell. Some people get *Reservoir Dogs*. Others just get *Reservoir Puppies*. It's up to you to choose.

When the Lead Checks

Now let's put you in position with pocket 9s against a pre-flop raiser who checks to you on that same flop of A♣-9♦-3♥. What story is your opponent telling you? He bought the pre-flop lead by raising. He's in a heads-up pot. And now he checks away that lead he paid for?

That story only makes sense if he's playing possum himself. For the same reason that you don't want to check your huge hand when you have the lead in position, your opponent's check here should scream strength to you, because it is such an unusual action. The check basically says, "Hey, I hit the board hard here and I'm afraid that if I bet, you'll fold and I'll be sad. So I'm checking to trick you and keep you on the hook."

Here's the good news: Your set of 9s can only be beaten by AA (which is just a cold deck), so you're happy to be tricked. If your opponent is trying to trick you into betting, thinking he has the better hand, make his day. Bet when you have the better hand. He'll probably check-raise you and you can go for his stack. When I flop the nuts or near nuts, I always like to try to accommodate players trying to trap me.

Certainly, some opponents are so passive that if they check the lead away, they really do have absolutely nothing. Against that particular guy, you might as well check your monster and just cross your fingers he'll take some kind of stab at the pot on the turn. The most passive player checking away the lead in a heads-up pot intends to fold if you bet big or bet small or even just sneeze on the pot. However, the majority of players checking away the lead, particularly as you move up in limits, are looking for the trap, so your default position should be to accommodate those tricky bastards. Bet and trap them back.

Remember your goal-setting. How can you get the biggest earn? If you check behind someone here, he'll lead out 500 on the turn, you'll raise, and you give him the chance to go away. By checking away the opportunity to bet the flop and then raising the turn, you just played a line that screams big hand. Yahoo, you just won 500.

But if he checks the flop and you bet like the donkey (he thinks) you are, one of two things happens. Maybe he calls and leads out on the turn, which means you pick up 500 on the flop and at least another 1,000 on the turn. Or maybe he fires in that post-flop check-raise he had in mind. That

gets at least the same 1,500 in the pot. Maybe 2,000. Now you can come over the top and maybe get all his chips. If he folds, okay, you still come out ahead with this line of play versus checking behind his check on the flop.

Big Flop, Bad Position

Big Hand, Heads-Up, Out of Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

We've looked at what happens when you flop huge in position. Now let's make things harder for you by taking away the advantage of acting last. We're still only looking at heads-up situations and in this one, you're out of position with a big flop and you have the lead.

This could happen in a couple of ways: You could raise in the cutoff with A9 and get called by the button; or you could raise somewhere in the middle with 99 and get called from behind. When the board comes our now-familiar A♠-9♦-3♥, you now know that you can't check your big hand, lest you alert your opponent to your strength. I'm assuming that you haven't been playing so passively that he could read you for a possible check-fold here. Remember:

IF YOU'RE GOING TO BET ALL YOUR MISSES, YOU'D DAMN WELL BETTER BET YOUR HITS

Were you thinking about check-raising? We'll talk about the utility of that play later, but for now, realize that by doing so, you're basically turning your cards face up. At times, you definitely want to say to your opponent, "Ha, look what I have!" But this isn't one of them. It'd be bad enough to check, tipping off your strength. If you're lucky enough to get your opponent to bet, say, 500 into that 1,000 pot, that's all you're getting because your check-raise basically has you playing Indian Poker, holding your cards to your forehead. The check already raised your opponent's suspicions and the check-raise just confirmed them. The AQ who bet 500 to find out if his cards were good now knows they're not, and he's done with the hand.

But suppose you lead your standard 500. What's an AQ doing now? He's at least calling and probably raising, particularly if he's not an advanced player (more on that later). So instead of getting a measly little 500 out of AQ by check-raising and letting him know his hand's no good, now you're betting 500 and letting AQ give you 2,000. Moreover, his raise tells you he's not super-strong; if he were, he'd flat-call, hoping to squeeze more money out of you on the turn. Therefore, you can re-raise, representing, I don't know, righteous indignation. Now AQ is actually thinking of calling, maybe for all his chips.

Why wouldn't you just flat-call his raise? Because if you do, again, you warn him that you have a hand and give him a good reason to slow down or back off. After all, if you're willing to flat-call a raise out of position on such a dry board as A♠-9♦-3♥ what could you have? There are no draws out there so you must have a damn good made hand. But if you get frisky on the flop, AQ has at least a reason to believe you're way out of line and might make a huge mistake. No, the way to trap strong hands here is to bet, hope to get raised, then re-raise big. With this line of play you might do much better, and you certainly won't do worse.

But what about opponents who want to bluff? As before, if you can get the bluffer to commit more chips on his bluff, you're better off. And you do this by betting out. He might bluff less frequently (though floating is mighty popular these days and betting into players who love to float with a big hand is a great way to punish them), but if his bluffing frequency is more than 25% of what it would be if you'd checked, you'll come out ahead on the deal, because he has to bluff with 2,000 chips instead of 500.

Plus, don't forget that your oddball check might alert him that his bluff won't work. Or he might just decide to check behind and take a free card. Probably that card won't help him, in which case you get no extra earn anyway. But it might if he has a hand like jacks and you just gave him infinity-to-1. Your check, then, basically hopes that someone will throw 500 free chips at you. And that's where you're at, either winning 500 or nothing. If you bet out, you give yourself that same chance to win either 500 or nothing, but also maybe more, because maybe that blessed bluffer will decide to float you (call behind) on the flop and bluff the turn.

So against a strong hand it's no worse, and possibly much better, to lead out. And against a wannabe bluffer it's no worse, and possibly much better, to lead out.

What if you're up against a medium-strength hand like A8? While it's true that if you check, he might bet 500 to see where he's at, he'll certainly call 500 for the same reason. Then if you check the turn, he'll probably bet again, which means that even if he folds to your check-raise, you'll have gotten about 1,500 out of him instead of just 500.

So against strong hands, no hands, *and* medium hands, it's better to bet. Besides, you're giving cover to all those continuation bets you make where you have nothing at all. Once again we see game theory and equity maximization both pointing to the same line of play. Lead out when you flop big with the pre-flop lead. You'll make more money that way and improve your overall position in the game, adding deception to your play.

Some people won't take the strong line of play. They're afraid of running up against something like pocket aces here. Well, you know what?

THERE ARE NO MONSTERS UNDER YOUR BED!

Get over it.

Big Hand, Heads-Up, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Now we have our last heads-up situation with big flops, where you're out of position without the lead.

How did you get here? Either by calling a raise with 99 in the big blind or calling a late-position raise with A9s in the blind. If you called with A9s anywhere else, you probably made a mistake, so don't do that.

Again, we see that very untextured board of A♠-9♦-3♥ and the question is whether to check your two pair or better, or to bet. And the answer has everything to do with your opponent.

In general, people check to the leader in a hand, which you should also do against most opponents, because you want them to feel comfortable making that good ol' continuation bet. But here's the key: You're *not* checking to check-raise. Remember that check-raising here is turning your hand face up. Unless your opponent is super-creative, a check-raise causes most hands that continuation bet to fold. Players continuation bet with

almost anything and that means most of the time you check-raise, your opponent doesn't have a hand he can call with. So checking and calling is a better play. It lets you win more money on later streets.

When you check-call, take a read. See how comfortable your opponent seems with your call. The stronger you think his hand is, the more likely you should be to bet out on the turn. If he loves his hand, he'll raise you here, which is exactly what you want. This is an especially effective play against opponents who have been overly aggressive against you. Your bet will induce a raise from these types, punishing their overly aggressive ways.

Against your more passive types, especially a player who might not seem comfortable with his hand when you call his bet on the flop, check the turn. Give your opponent the chance to bet again, then decide whether to check-raise now or check-call and lead out on the river. Obviously, if your opponent checks back on the turn, you're betting the river.

Depending on your opponent, arguments can be made for checking the turn or leading out. Often, it's a judgment call—you're on the fence. One way to get off the fence when you're unsure whether checking or betting is correct is to take a look at the card that falls on the turn and ask yourself how related it is to the flop. On that A♣-9♦-3♥ board, for example, the T♦ would create a lot of draws, so you might lead out on the turn rather than risk giving a free shot at a backdoor draw. On the other hand, if the 6♠ hits, there's not much danger in giving a free card; plus, your opponent will rate that as a safe card for himself as well, so if you check on the turn, he's more likely to fire a second barrel.

Now let's look at a highly aggressive and creative opponent, the kind of guy who has been giving you fits at the table. Interestingly, this is one player you *can* lead into on the flop. To understand why, recall our discussion of how it looks when someone leads into us. What's that called? A weak lead. A bet from a hand that's afraid to take heat. At least that's how it looks to a savvy creative player. Being the confident Joe he is, he's likely to sense fear and come after it in one of two ways. Either he raises right there, certainly good for you, or he floats, calling in position to take the pot away on the turn. So against the super-duper aggressive guy, you can lead out on the flop. If you get raised, re-raise. If you get flat-called, check on the turn and hope that this player completes his floaty bluff and hands you a big part of his stack.

Now, you might be looking at your lead here, and since you know it's not a weak lead, you might be worried that your opponent will know it, too. Don't worry; be happy. First of all, most people don't get out of their heads enough even to think about what you're up to. Second, who bets out with a hand like top two pair or a set? *Everyone* goes for a check-raise there. Third, you're using this move *only* against your hyper-aggressive opponent, who's most likely to read you as weak, to whom your bet is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. You don't lead into passive or normal players, because you're risking a fold and you don't want that, not with this hand. The super-aggressive opponent isn't going away, so again, why not give him a chance to make a super-big mistake?

It can get confusing trying to track who's passive, who's aggressive, who's tricky, who's straightforward, and so on, so here's the traffic, in summary form: If your opponent has been raising your flop bets a lot, bet. If your opponent has been floating you a lot, bet. In all other cases when you don't have the lead, check.

Monsters of the Multi-Way

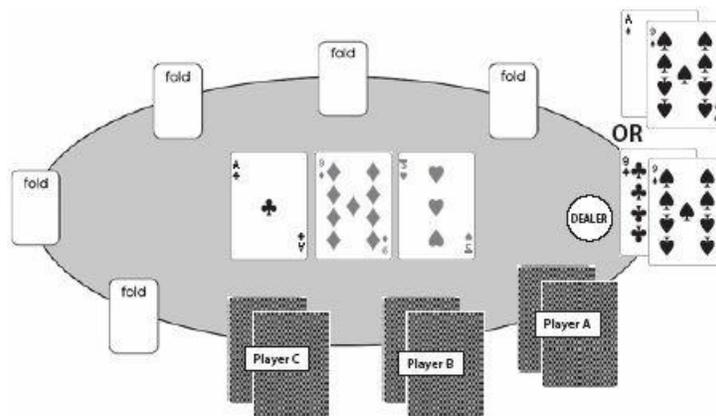
Big Hand, Multi-Way, In Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

In this chapter we talk about the play of huge hands on untextured boards in multi-way pots. We have the same board as before, A♣-9♦-3♥, and your hand is still either A9 or 99, on the logic that they're roughly equally huge flops with this board. Because the pot is multi-way, four-way in this example, the pot contains 2,000 chips. Let's set the stage.

You're in position on the field with the lead. Maybe you raised a loose caller with your A9s and got called by him and the two blinds. Or maybe the action went limp, limp, limp, you raised with pocket 9s, and got called by the planet. If that happened, obviously you're in a loose game. In any case, you're in the lead with position.

If everyone checks to you, you bet, for reasons previously discussed. First, when you have the lead in position, people won't give your hand much credit when you bet; they assume you're continuation betting. Second, if someone has an AQ or JJ hand, you're giving him a free shot to hit his bingo card, the old infinity-to-1 odds. Third, though granted, a c-bet in a multi-way pot isn't automatic, to check behind three checkers is to tell a weird story and thereby tip your opponents that your hand might be big. But even if you're in a game where checking behind three checkers isn't unusual, you still want to bet your big hands to give cover to your small holdings that will nevertheless be profitable to play in position—if you've given appropriate cover by betting your monsters, too.

Want to know why it's super-bad to check behind here? Because one of your opponents might be sitting on AK or AQ and looking to check-raise. If you give him the chance to do that, you've got him! If you don't give him the chance, he'll bet 1,000 into that 2,000-chip pot on the turn, you'll raise, and that's all you're likely to get. By checking behind on the flop, you give good aces a good chance to slither off the hook on the turn and who wants that? He does, maybe. Not you.



Arraying your opponents in positions A, B, or C, we note that AK isn't likely to be in position C, because by the time it gets to him, he's so afraid he won't get in his check-raise that he's likely to bet. Therefore, if AK is out against you, it's in position A or B—the perfect spots for firing a check-raise into a multi-way pot.

Not only that, but the check-raise is bound to be a big one, because the check-raiser has to worry about clearing out the three or two slackjaws behind him. So ask yourself, which would you rather have? An AK in early position check-raising you to 3,500 or 4,000 on the flop or an AK in early position leading 1,000 on the turn and folding to your raise?

The question is rhetorical.

And if it happens that players A, B, and C have nothing they're excited about and they fold to your bet, then you've won no less than you would have won otherwise. Sure, you could check behind to let everyone catch up a *little*. But what if they catch up too much? Then you lose the pot and all your chips, and it's a disaster that you could have avoided by playing the hand the way it was meant to be played.

If player C has something like JJ or QQ, he might read your button bet for noise and check-raise you here, especially if players A and B fold to your bet. Anyone inclined to bluff here would be in the same boat; they'd misinterpret your bet with a real hand as a bet with not much of one. This is why you *must* bet your super-strong and semi-strong hands the same way—to keep your opponents from getting a tight line on your play and to induce huge mistakes.

If you don't bet, you reduce the chances of *anyone* bluffing on the turn. Four players remain in the pot and no one likes to bluff into heavy traffic. And even if someone does lead bluff on the turn, it'll only be for, again, 1,000, when you would have gotten 3,500 or 4,000 by inducing the check-raise bluff on the flop.

When They Take the Lead Away

Now let's look at what happens when we have position in a multi-way pot, we raise pre-flop, and someone bets into us on the flop.

To start off with, that's a little unusual. In a multi-way pot, the natural flow is still to check to the raiser, albeit slightly less so than in a heads-up pot, where it is just about automatic. So take a breath before you proceed. Anytime anything is out of the natural flow of the game, that's a good time to take a moment and figure out what's going on.

To figure out what's going on here, start by considering where the bet is coming from. If it's coming from player C, the player immediately to your right, you can read it as a weak attempt to pick the pot up, since a huge hand will tend to try to trap you. Pocket jacks would bet here; so would a

bad ace, just to find out where they're at—textbook leads. In this case and in a lot of cases that follow, I suggest you play this situation as if you're heads-up. When the action goes check, check, and the player to your right bets, it's as if you are heads-up in that moment. We know that heads-up in position against a weak lead, we're just calling behind when we have a huge hand, so that the weak lead has a chance to make another mistake on the turn.

The good news for flat-calling behind a weak lead multi-way is that you don't discourage players A or B from trying something tricky if they're so inclined. In their eyes, player C's bet looks like an assumption that players A and B have nothing, thus an attempt to bluff into the pre-flop raiser. Your call behind looks somewhat weak as well and if player A or B was planning all along to check-raise, or gets that bright idea to squeeze right now, your flat-call builds a nice fat pot.

It's worth noting that a flat-call behind one player feels very strong, but the same flat-call in a multi-way pot feels weaker; you have so much traffic behind you to deal with, you're probably waiting to see what they do, right? So here's a case—and you'll see this over and over again in this book—where your correct action remains the same from one situation to the next, but the impact it has on your opponents is completely different and deeply confusing. Players who don't remember whether you were in a pot heads-up or multi-way will simply never know whether your call behind is very strong or very weak.

In a multi-way pot on an untextured board, then, play a bet from your immediate right as if you're heads-up. In some other cases that we'll explore later, you'll do this to keep from dumping off your chips to early-position players with hidden strength. Here, you're looking to let early-position players dump off their chips to you. And yet again we see how our lines of play continually harmonize with and reinforce one another. (And you ain't seen nothin' yet!)

Moving on ...

Now let player B seize the post-flop lead. Behind a check and in front of two players, he fires off a bet of 1,000. If player C folds, you'll now ... guess what ... play the hand like you're heads-up, which means you just call here, for all the reasons already given.

When player B leads and player C calls, things get interesting, because with a board this dry, you know that player C has to have some kind of hand. This means you want to raise with your big hand, since a call behind a call on a dry board reveals your strength anyway, especially because you're *overcalling* another player on a dry board. You can't be calling with a drawing hand (dry board), yet you like your hand enough to feel it can beat two players and not just one. That's a sure sign of strength.

Your raise, on the other hand, could be misperceived as a squeeze play and get action from a hand like AK, who puts you on something like AT. Flat-call, though, and you can be certain your opponents will be suspicious of your hand. Truly, that overcall behind on a dry board will freeze the other players in their tracks. Yes, maybe they'll fold if you re-raise here, but so what? You weren't getting more out of them anyway.

If player A bets and it's folded through to you, now you're heads-up and you can call. If B or C calls in between, or they both do, raise. Again, your call behind will look so catastrophically scary that everyone will flee then and there. Interestingly, the lead from first position is actually weaker than from second position; if he really had a hand and with so much traffic behind, he could comfortably go for a check-raise.

It's key, then, to think about where the bet is coming from in a multi-way pot. If it comes from either the first position or from the player to your immediate right, it's likely to be weaker than if it comes from in between. Again, if player A is strong, he's going for a check-raise, and player C is thinking he only has to get past you to win the pot without a hand. Player B, though, can neither count on someone doing his betting for him nor two players behind him rolling over. By a process of elimination, then, he must have some kind of hand.

Big Hand, Multi-Way, In Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Same hand, same board, same multi-way pot, only this time you don't have the lead.

Maybe first position raises, gets a couple of callers, and you flat-call with two nines. You figure that the opener has a real hand and there are too many callers for a squeeze play to work, so you just take a look at the flop, which makes you look like a genius, because you just hit.

Now, weirdly, even though you didn't have the lead pre-flop, in this case everyone checks to you. It looks like someone is inviting you to make a button bet, so accept the invitation. After all, with so much traffic in a raised pot, someone's bound to have an ace, right? If it's a good one, he's looking to check-raise here, basically crying shenanigans on your button bet. Ah, but your button bet is crying shenanigans on his utterly undeceptive check. Let's call it a shenanigans party.

Recognize that you'll do much better by betting than by checking here. As we've seen before, if you check, someone holding AK or AQ will lead on the turn, you'll raise, and ... end of story. As we've seen before, your bet on the flop gives someone a chance to make a big mistake.

Here's an example of such a mistake: Your button bet sets up a bluff by, say, player A. He'd be pretty bold to bet into the field on the turn with nothing and even if he did, it would be for only 1,000. But here on the flop, he can easily read your button bet for a steal and fire off a raise. And if everyone folds to your button bet, that's not the end of the world. You'd like them to fold when you're stealing, wouldn't you? Your bet with this hand gives cover to your steals, so bet, even if the "worst" that happens is you win without a fight.

Next let's look at what happens when the pre-flop bettor keeps the lead on the flop. In this scenario, player A bets, B and C fold, and now you get to play the hand heads-up, which means you should generally flat-call unless you think the player either hit the board himself or will read your raise as weak and try to re-bluff you.

Most of the time, however, your opponent will read your call as an attempt to slow him down and he'll obligingly bet again on the turn, particularly if he likes to double-barrel his continuation bets. Then you can pop him for a raise. He might go away then, but at least he gives you some chips on the turn. Had you raised on the flop into a player who likely was thin, you probably would have lost him.

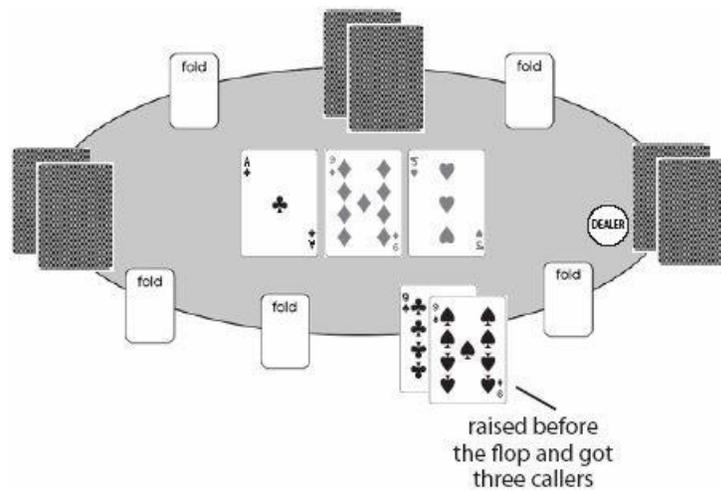
When player A leads into the field and anyone calls before it gets to you, you'll want to raise. Once again, your call looks unnaturally strong and your raise looks unnaturally weak, like a squeeze. Remember that your profit in this situation comes from lesser made hands or pure air. Lesser made hands *might* bet again on the turn if you flat-call on the flop, but pure air certainly won't. Your best chance to get his chips is to raise and let him read you for weak. The same would be true if player B bet and player C called.

If the pre-flop leader gives up the lead and someone else takes it, your action will be determined by whether anyone calls between you and the new leader. With calls, you raise. Without calls, you call, playing the hand as you would heads-up. And if everyone checks to the player on your right, you again just call his bet, giving early-position players the chance to raise and denying them the chance to fold.

In all of these circumstances, the two controlling ideas are, first, default back to your heads-up strategies when it's appropriate to do so and second, take actions most likely to be read as a bluff.

Big Hand, Multi-Way, Out of Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

Same cards, same board, same multi-way pot. You have pocket 9s, raised in early position, and got three callers behind you.



You're now out of position with the lead on the hand and a monster holding. With a hand like nines and a board like A♣-9♦-3♥, this becomes the easiest of hands to play: Just bet.

Look, you were the pre-flop raiser, so a bet is natural for you. After all, you'll continuation bet here quite a bit (though not as often as when heads-up). Betting out makes sense in the context of the rest of your play. A check, I guess with the intention of check-raising, will just look super-suspicious.

But here's the real reason to bet: What on Earth do you think all those people are calling with anyway? Don't you think at least one of them has an ace in his hand (it's not like *you* have one)? They have to be calling with something and the single most likely card out against you is an ace. If you bet out, an ace is never folding and may be nice enough to raise you. If you get called, you can go for the check-raise on the turn. If you get raised on the flop, well, you're just golden.

Maybe you're thinking that if you check, an ace will bet and you can get in a check-raise. Maybe, but it still won't be as profitable as leading out. When you check, your opponent will bet about 1,000 into that 2,000 pot, while being somewhat suspicious because you checked away the lead. Then you raise, he freaks, and you lose him. But as we've seen in similar heads-up situations, if you lead out, he's at minimum calling that same 1,000 bet and likely raising it to 3,500 or 4,000. If he doesn't raise, you'll get more out of him on the turn anyway. In fact, it's even better than that heads-up situation, because with three players holding position on you, don't you think at least one of them will stick around?

Big Hand, Multi-Way, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Same cards, same board, same multi-way pot. You have pocket 9s in the big blind. The action goes bet, call, call, and you call along. Or maybe it goes limp, limp, limp, check. In any case, you're first to act without the lead.

The interesting thing about this situation is that it doesn't really matter which of the three players behind you has the lead. You're going to do the same thing, no matter what. And that thing is ...

Bet.

Lead 1,000 into a pot of 2,000.

Why?

Probe bet. Weak lead.

Which practically screams, "Weak ace!"

And invites a strong ace in any of the later positions to jump all over the weak lead. And leap right into the trap.

Why not go for a check-raise? Because you might not get it in and if you do, you're just turning your cards face up and saying, "Look at this monster here. I was willing to check-raise the field. I'm strong!" Sure, you got 1,000 out of the good ace, but that's all you got. By leading, you get at least 1,000, plus whatever else he decides to put into the pot to punish you for your putative weak lead.

Could the good ace read your check-raise for a bluff? Maybe ... if you took the flop heads-up. But in a multi-way pot, it's unlikely that going for a check-raise against a field of players can be a bluff. It *has* to be a hand.

Are you afraid someone will read your lead for the monster it is? Don't be. The tendency to check a set in early position is so overwhelmingly knee-jerk that most players can't imagine leading with it and they certainly won't imagine that you're doing it here. Lead out with your monster? What are you, trying to kill your action?

It's almost taboo.

So basically, don't care who opens the pot pre-flop. If you're out of position with a big hand and a dry board, bet your standard half-pot bet. Bet it even if you think your check will induce both a bet and a raise behind you. If your opponents are that eager to mix it up, they won't be slowed down at all by your weak lead.

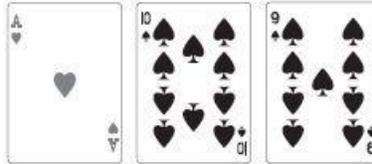
Flopping Big on a Textured Board

It's a Bird, It's a Plane, it's Super-Texture!

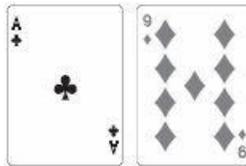
Up till now, we've considered how to play monster flops on untextured boards and our only goal has been to maximize profit. With textured boards—when possibilities of straights or flushes abound—we have to temper that goal with the consideration of how to protect ourselves from both bad outcomes and tough decisions. That's what we'll examine now.

As we did in the last section, we'll set up a typical flop and use it to inspect a range of related situations. In this case, we'll make the board not just textured, but super-textured; that is, it holds the twin dangers of both straights and flushes.

Here's the flop:



And here's your hand:



As you can see, you've flopped good, but the situation can get bad fast. Just think about all the cards you'd hate to see on the turn. Nine spades complete a possible flush. Two non-spade tens can give an opponent three-of-a-kind or counterfeit your A9 and put AK ahead. Nine non-spade face cards can give an opponent a higher two pair or complete a straight, which one of three non-spade 8s, 7s, or 6s might do as well.

More than half the deck is out against you.

Yikes!

You understand, of course, that no one player can hold all these outs, but the problem is you don't know which outs any given opponent might hold, since the cards are face down, so any one of these cards makes your decision difficult if it hits on the turn, because it explodes the possibilities of hands that might beat you. On the flop, your hand can only be beaten by a set or AT. If one of these danger cards hits the turn, the range of possible hands that beat you is much larger, making your decision tree more complicated. And any card that increases your decision-making difficulty can be judged a bad card for you.

To take just one example, suppose someone is holding AK here and the J♠ hits the board on the turn. He might think he has the best hand and bet or raise for value, especially if he has the K♠, both giving him outs on the river if he is wrong and locking out the nut flush. Then you'd have to fold to the raise; the board is just too scary and too likely to have made your hand second-best. Do you really want to call with A9 on a board like A♥-T♠-9♠-J♠? So now you lose the pot when you had the best hand to someone who didn't even know he was bluffing you. That's a disaster.

Or you might be up against someone waiting to pounce on all that texture and claim any scare card as the one that hit his hand and so bluff-raises on purpose, and once again you're pressed to fold the winner.

Or you could have someone with AQo, fully prepared to donk off all his chips with top-pair good-kicker, but then that spade hits on the turn and he turns tail, taking your action with you.

All those outs, then, are a big fat double-edge sword for you. They embolden action from bold players and kill action from timid ones.

And that's like half the deck! Half the deck that makes your next choice hard, or slows or kills your action.

So here's what you do. Recognize that you likely have the best hand now, accept that you're likely to face a knotty problem on the turn, and manipulate the situation so you don't have to make tough decisions.

With this last point, we return to the core idea of this book: make your decisions easier. We also arrive at a clear understanding of our goal on this hand. It's twofold: Either get your money in with the best hand or get your opponent to fold. Both goals make your decision easier on the turn. If your opponent folds, you win the pot right there (never a terrible thing) and you definitely don't have to make any more decisions on the hand that might result in folding a winner. If you bet big, that makes it unlikely you'll face a big decision on the turn; usually, either all the money will be in on the flop or your opponent will have folded and you face no decision at all.

Some people use this logic to conclude that the best play is to just go all in. This can be correct, as an all-in play ensures no further decisions on this problematic board. But at times an all-in move is mathematically too poor to make, mainly when stacks are so deep that you'd be laying a big price on the pot. If you're pot-committed or if a bet already represents at least 30% of your stack, you can certainly justify the all-in play. But be careful when you're super-deep-stacked. You don't want to get upside down in the math.

One hopes that you're a smart and confident enough poker player that you wouldn't just barf all your chips into the pot when you're deep-stacked, thus letting the universe decide who wins. That puts a ton of mathematical pressure on you, pressure you don't need to invite. Any time you make a bet larger than the size of the pot, you're overbetting the pot, laying big odds.

Say there's 1,000 in the pot and you bet 9,000. You're laying 9-to-1 on the pot, which means that for every 10 times this scenario comes up, you

have to win nine just to break even. Now granted, it's such a huge overbet that it's likely to work—induce a fold, that is—most of the time. But *most* of the time isn't *all* the time. Especially when you aren't looking to get called.

But when you are looking to get called or you don't care either way, that's a great time to shove into a super-scary board. This bears repeating:

ALL-IN PLAYS MAKE SENSE WHEN YOU'RE EQUALLY HAPPY IF YOUR OPPONENT CALLS OR FOLDS

Whether he calls or folds, you now have no more decisions to make, which is good when the next card is a favorite to be either an action killer or a bluff opportunity for your opponent. But remember, you have to be happy either way, which you should be here. A call gets a lot of money in the pot when you almost definitely have the best hand (especially if you have a set). A fold means you lock up the pot and don't have to face the danger of the turn. But again, don't just barf. Make sure the situation is right.

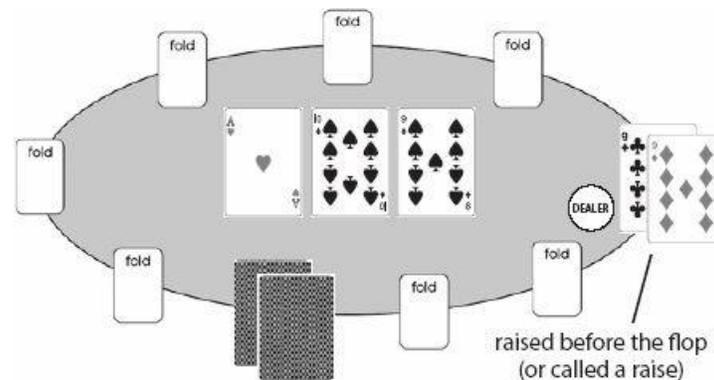
The problem for most players is they get a lot of positive reinforcement for that grandstand overbet. So think about it. Let's say you move in and lay 9-to-1 on the pot. And let's say that play works 85% of the time. Almost all trials indicate that the play works. That's a lot of positive reinforcement for the play. But we're still losing money. We need to win 90% of the time to break even and we're just not perceptive enough over the long haul to know whether our success rate is 85% or 90% or whatever. Still, it's hard to size bets precisely. You get into things like game theory, image, perception, math, and then people's heads start to hurt, and then they just say, "Screw it," and shove.

This is a problem two ways. The first, most catastrophically, is when you get called, you almost always lose, because players don't call such huge bets with mediocre holdings. The second problem is just that: Players don't call such bets with mediocre holdings, so your drastic overbet never gets your huge hand paid off. Let's remove the grandstand overbet from our contemplation here. It does a certain job, but not particularly effectively, and it leaves other important jobs undone. Let's allow all-ins only when the stack sizes make all-ins the right choice.

Now let's get back to figuring out how to play a huge hand on a highly textured board.

Big Hand, Heads-Up, In Position, With or Without the Lead, Textured Board

We're heads-up. You raise before the flop and get one caller. Or you call a raise in position. In this case, when you flop a big hand on a textured board, it doesn't matter if you have the lead or your opponent does. You'll behave the same either way. Recall that in this situation on an untextured board, you'd bet when your opponent checks to you with 500 or 600 into a 1,000 pot, either because you're continuation betting with something to protect or you're continuation betting with nothing whether your opponent has the lead or not. If the pre-flop leader checks, he's probably up to no good, which you're happy about with a big hand. Here you'll bet as well when your opponent checks, because you don't want to just maximize earn, but also minimize decision difficulties. To make your decision-making easier, just ask yourself one simple question: How bad is it to give a free card here?



The answer is, of course, *real bad*. Black Plague bad. Yankees win bad. Half-the-deck-either-kills-your-action-or-leaves-you-vulnerable-to-a-bluff bad. So you know you have to bet. Already your decision-making has gotten easier: Not betting, at least, isn't an option. Can you feel the pressure lifting from you? Your choice is easy, because *you have no choice*. You must bet. So relax. Relax and bet.

Of course, you still have to decide how much to bet, but that decision just got easier, too. You know you have to bet at least enough to give draws the wrong price to call. You also know you want to make worse hands pay. And you further know you don't want to discourage someone from check-raise bluffing you on this flop (or semi-bluffing with, say, a flush draw). For all these reasons—and notice again how our reasons elegantly complement one another—figure to bet about half to three-quarters of the pot. That's enough to price out someone drawing one card to a flush or straight, but still small enough to get a worse hand to pay you and also to invite an ill-advised check-raise.

Now, some players are so afraid of others' draws that they'll actually check, in order to minimize their loss when—inevitably, as they see it—the other guy hits. But if you check, you're handing out infinity-to-1 odds like Halloween treats. You're making the math a no-brainer. So bet at least half the pot and make the other guy decide whether he wants to accept the wrong price on his draw. If he makes the good-math choice and folds, you won without a fight. If he makes the bad-math choice and calls, that's fine, too; he called at negative equity. Even if he draws out, you're still in long-term profit on the play.

If you have trouble seeing the logic of this, think about a slot machine with a payout of, say, 98%. When you drop a dollar into that pull toy, you have two possible outcomes. One is you lose your dollar. The other is you win something, maybe even \$5,000. Isn't that great? Sure is, except for one thing. Though you won five grand, you still lost 2¢, because that's the way the house sets the machine—to pay back 98¢ on the dollar. And the machine doesn't care whether you hit a jackpot or not, since it wins 2¢ on every spin no matter what. Here's how it relates to this situation. By making potential draws pay, *you are the house*. So offer the wrong price. Even if they win this time, they're still doing bad math, and that's ... yep ... a mistake. In the long run, every mistake you force is a checkmark in the win column for you.

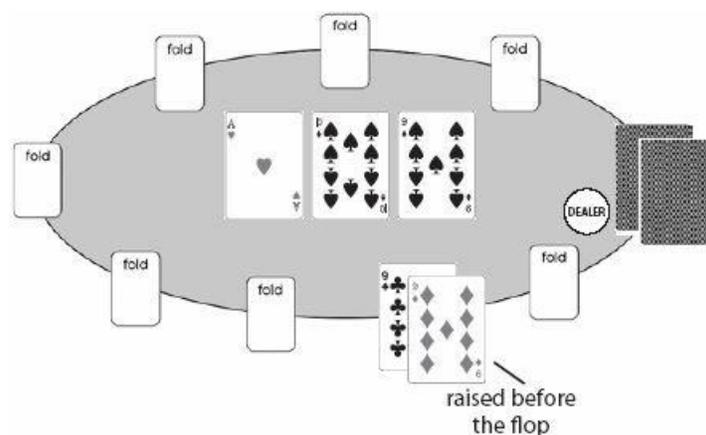
And when you bet and your opponent is kind enough to check-raise? Then it's party time! You get to put all your chips into the pot as a favorite and don't have to make any further decisions on the hand. So when you get check-raised, don't just flat-call. That would let another card come off while chips have yet to be bet and half the deck might make things hard for you. Instead, re-raise—all-in if your stack and the pot warrant it. If he

folds, yay! No more decisions for you. If he calls, you're again, since you figure to have the best hand. No bad result there. Happy if he does, happy if he doesn't, and that's the best kind of happy.

Now suppose your opponent bets into you, either continuation betting if he's the pre-flop raiser or betting into you if you raised pre-flop. On an untextured board, the latter would be a weak lead and you wouldn't want to dissuade the weak lead from betting again, so you'd just call. With a textured board, though, you'll raise any time your opponent bets into you. You probably have the best hand, or your opponent might be betting some kind of made hand to deny a free card, or he might be trying to win the pot cheap with a drawing hand or a bluff, and/or you don't care what he has, because raising makes your decisions easier. Shut his ass out. Raise him. If he re-raises, that's just paradise, because you have the best hand and no more decisions to make.

Big Hand, Heads-Up, Out of Position, With the Lead, Textured Board

If you're out of position with the lead, you might think you should just bet, because checking away the lead will raise suspicions. But there are such big advantages to check-raising on an ugly board like this that you should pause for a moment before c-betting and consider how likely it is that the pre-flop leader will bet this flop if you check. Remember, you don't want to be giving free cards, so if you think your opponent is likely to check behind, you need to bet. If, however, you're confident that your conventionally aggressive opponent can't resist pouncing on any check, you should check here and let him do his thing. Then you get to check-raise with your huge hand and if he folds, it's no more decisions on an ugly board. If he calls and either of you is all-in, also no more decisions. The check-raise is a nice result: It stops the turn decision and lets you put a lot of money in the pot when you know you're a favorite.



Think about how great this check-raise will work against someone who has a hand like a good ace. If you check-raise on such a highly textured board against, say, AK, that player can come up with lots of reasons for your check-raise. He might put you on a semi-bluff check-raise with one of the many available draws on the board. This can cause a player with a hand like AK to massively overplay his hand, re-raising on this kind of flop. That's obviously a good result for you.

Then again, if he folds to your check-raise, suspicious that you checked away the pre-flop lead and raised his bet, that's a good result too; you're done with a difficult flop that you have to play out of position. You get your money in with the best of it and *without* having to make any tough decisions. Interestingly, this isn't only how you maximize your win against a hand like AK, but also against a hand like a flush draw. Let's see why.

For starters, as usual, there's 1,000 in the pot. Now, against either AK or a flush draw, if you lead out for 600, they're both likely to call, which could make your situation tricky on the turn. If either raises you, that'd be fine, but they would have almost always bet if you checked away the lead anyhow, so it's six of one, half-dozen of the other.

But when they flat-call, one of two things happens. Either you get a safe card, bet the turn, and end the hand against the flush draw, or you get one of a million scare cards and feel queasy for a bit. So while your check-raise risks giving a free card (so you must be cautious about who you check to), it's more likely to get a lot of chips, or all of them, into the pot on the flop, obviating any need for queasiness. AK will likely read your check-raise for a flush draw, and the guy holding the actual flush draw will think he's getting odds to call, so he will.

If they fold, of course, that's fine, too. You got the 600 or so they bet on the flop, which is all you would have gotten if you'd bet and they had called. Trust me, if putting all your chips in causes your opponent to fold, you're jumping for joy. That's you, jumping for joy. You look good.

Big Hand, Heads-Up, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Textured Board

So let's say you're sitting in the big blind with a hand like 99 and you call a raise from early position. The flop comes A♥-T♠-9♠, and you're out of position with a big hand, but without the lead on an ugly board.

The good news is that you can check now without raising the sort of red flags you wave when you check away the lead. Remember that checking away the lead makes many enemies smell a rat, so you can surrender the lead only to the type of opponent you're sure will ignore his suspicions and bet. When you don't have the lead, a check to the raiser is natural and the vast majority of opponents will automatically c-bet here, setting up your opportunity to get in that juicy check-raise on a difficult board.

So unless your opponent is the most passive of passive players, checking to the raiser is the natural act and the best strategy. You're telling the perfectly natural and logical "check-to-the-raiser" story, so go ahead and tell it. Check, check, check away on the flop and raise your eyeballs on the table when your opponent continues with a bet.

Textured Board, Multi-Way Pot

When you start to consider multi-way pots, you'd think that your problem would become more complex as a function of the many different draws possibly out against you. In fact, the opposite is true. Remember, you have the best hand now. And you're looking to raise to limit decisions on the next card. In a multi-way pot, the opportunities to raise are more abundant, because the chances increase that someone will bet for you. And that

makes the situation completely cut and dried: When you have the best hand, you need to bet big enough to guarantee that any draw gets the wrong price, and to minimize your tricky decisions on the turn.

Are you wondering, "Why should I be so afraid of tricky decisions?" After all, shouldn't top poker players be great at making tricky decisions? Why should we shy away?

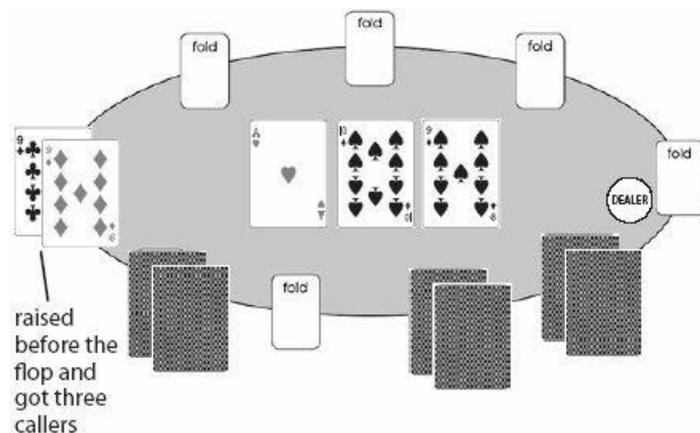
Here's the tautological truth: Hard decisions are *hard*. I don't care how good a player you are, when you're faced with difficult decision-making problems, you *will* make mistakes. You'll fold winners. You'll pay off made hands. Why open yourself up to those mistakes if you don't have to?

This is a case where KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) really holds true. By striking preemptively on the flop, you can go a long way toward guaranteeing that you don't have to face the tough choices when a flush card, straight card, or straight and flush card hits on the turn. Being a great player doesn't mean mastering tricky situations. It means manipulating things so that tricky situations don't occur.

Big Hand, Multi-Way, In Position, With the Lead, Textured Board

Same 99 hand, same ugly flop of A♥-T♠-9♠. You raise a limper pre-flop and both blinds plus the original limper call. Now you're in a multi-way pot, in position, with the lead.

Obviously, the best result here is that someone is kind enough to lead into you. Then you get to raise and protect your hand. You're just looking to play fast here.



However, if there are multiple bets and raises in front of you on the flop, someone might be rocking a legitimately huge hand. Obviously, if players are willing to call big raises in front of you, you should stop to consider whether your hand is good at all, as big as it might seem. The strength of your hand is only relative to the strength that you read in your opponents. So if you're in the lower end of the big-hand range, anywhere from bottom set to top two pair, consider that when fireworks are going off in front of you, you might actually find a fold. That said, most of the time you're looking to raise bets in front of you and it makes your life much easier if your opponents are that accommodating. Generally, then, raise big here whenever someone bets into you.

Unfortunately for you, people have a tendency to check to the raiser, so you won't always have your opponents accommodate you so nicely with a bet. Let's say they do check to you. Bet that same half- to three-quarters-pot-size bet as usual, then cross your fingers and hope someone is nice enough to check-raise you. If someone does, you just hit the lottery and can re-raise him. That should end the hand right there, either by getting him to fold or getting all the money in the pot. If they aren't that accommodating and you just get callers, that should warn you that the draw is out there somewhere.

So in multi-way pots, don't dump all your chips on the turn when that textured board turns deadly by completing. But if a blank hits on the turn, bet if it's checked to you or raise if someone leads out.

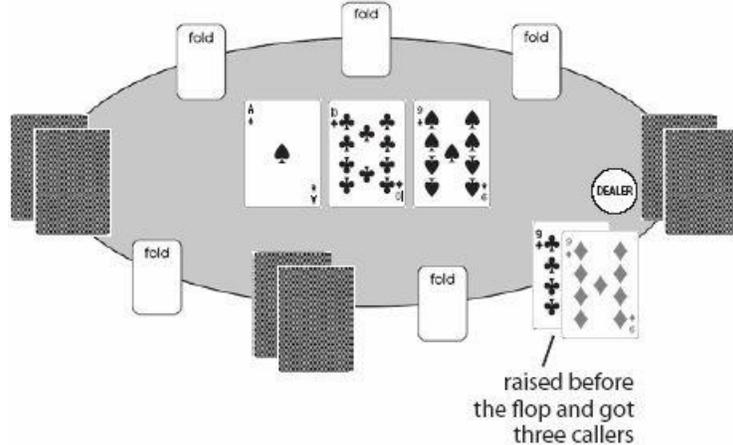
Especially in multi-way pots, play the flop as fast as your opponents will allow. Don't slow-play. Trying to be tricky will only trick you out of your chips.

Big Hand, Multi-Way, In Position, Without the Lead, Textured Board

When you don't have the lead in position on a field of players, things are often easier. You're more likely to have someone bet into you. Obviously, if that happens, you can play the hand fast and raise right there. If everyone checks to you, hope they're trying to trick you into betting to check-raise you, your dream scenario. If anyone bets into you, make sure to raise, all-in if your chip stack warrants, and get all decisions done right there. Remember, if you get multiple callers to your bet rather than a check-raise, be aware that draws are probably out against you, so play all turn cards that complete the draws with great caution.

Big Hand, Multi-Way, Out of Position, With or Without the Lead, Textured Board

When you're out of position on a hand like this, you're looking to get in a check-raise, which is usually an action-ending play, and you're certainly looking to end action when the board is as ugly as A♠-T♠-9♠.



If you have a really strong hand, you don't mind getting your money in on the flop. If you aren't the pre-flop raiser, you have a natural check; letting the action continue behind you is strategic and unsuspecting. When you're the pre-flop raiser and the pot is multi-way, the check is also pretty natural. With three players to act behind you, you're under no obligation to continuation bet. So you can naturally check in this spot as well. Frankly, there's no reason to bet out here; getting flat-called behind, especially by multiple players, is a pretty big disaster.

This brings up an interesting point. If you recall, when you have a strong hand like a set of 9s and the board is unthreatening, like $A\spadesuit-9\clubsuit-3\spadesuit$, betting out makes much more sense, whether you have the lead or not. It's no big deal if you get called; nothing bad will happen to the board when the turn card hits. If you're lucky, you get raised in the multi-way pot by someone who's likely to be holding an ace. So leading into the field on dry boards makes the most sense.

But when the board is textured, as we've just determined, the check to check-raise is conceptually correct; you're looking to announce a big hand and end action right there. You don't want to risk betting out and getting flat-called in several spots, because that means trouble for you on the turn. You'd rather end the action right there.

THERE'S NO SHAME IN WINNING POTS RIGHT NOW

Before we move on, I want to make two points about big holdings on multi-way flops with textured and untextured boards, respectively.

First, look how much more complex your decision-making is when you don't fear the flop. This seems counterintuitive, but the many different paths toward extracting maximum value must all be considered. On textured flops, your goal is so powerfully clear—*avoid disastrous decision-making*—that it actually makes your post-flop choices much simpler. Mostly, you're trying to get your money in on the flop by any means possible.

Second, notice how awesomely random your behavior will appear to your opponents. On untextured boards, you bet out, whether you had the pre-flop lead or not. On textured boards, you check to check-raise, whether you had the pre-flop lead or not. But in both cases you have a big hand. How confusing is it to your opponents that sometimes you check and sometimes you bet when you're sitting huge? Lucky for you, most of your opponents won't factor in the texture when trying to analyze your action.

Time and again, then, we see how mixing it up, trying to look confusing by inserting variation in your play, makes no sense. You can *appear* random just by playing the right way. Since the correct lines of play vary so much, from leading light to check-raising all-in, you're likely to sow confusion among your inattentive opponents, which is to say most of them.

This is why you don't ever have to think in terms of arbitrarily mixing up your play. Just do the right thing, the right math, game-theoretical, goal-setting, and decision-making thing, and your opponents' heads will naturally explode.

Okay, ready to play some draws?

Quick on the Draws

Big Draws

For the purpose of this discussion, we're awarding you a tasty hand like $A\heartsuit K\clubsuit$ and a board of $8\heartsuit-4\clubsuit-3\clubsuit$. This is, by definition, a big draw, because you're drawing to the nut flush, plus the three aces and three kings in the deck are also likely to be good if you hit one of them. So you have 15 outs to wind up with either certainly or probably the best hand—if you don't have it already.

To see how big this draw is, consider the best hands you might be up against. If you're facing pocket queens, all your outs are good and you're a 54% favorite to win this pot. Against pocket kings, you lose your three king outs, but you're still almost even money. Obviously, against aces, a set, or two pair, you have only the flush draw, which makes you a 2-to-1 underdog with two to come, somewhat less against the hands with redraws to a full house, but in any case that's a worst-case scenario. To be either a favorite or, at worst, a 2-to-1 underdog is a pretty sweet position to be in.

As before, your first job is to set your goals for the hand. If you like, you can include winning with ace high as part of your goal set, but that's just a bonus. The main question is, *where does this hand's strength lie?* The answer: It lies in the fact that you can win more than one way, either by making the flush or making top-pair top-kicker.

However, and this is a really important concept, it's not just that you have the six extra outs to top pair; those extra outs aren't enough to make you a favorite *unless you have two cards to come*. With one card to come, a hand with 15 outs is not a favorite. It's actually only 30% to hit. If your best-case scenario is 30%, that's not such a big hand anymore, is it? No, the power of this hand lies not just in having all those outs, but in *having two chances to hit*. Once you get that concept embedded in your bones, it becomes much easier to set a coherent goal with your big draws, which is, simply:

GET TO SEE TWO CARDS

We've spent a fair amount of time in this book looking at why and how to deny proper odds to drawing hands. Now let's turn it around and see how we can ensure getting the odds we want. It's almost unfair, if we can pull it off: No one ever gets the right price to draw—except us! That's what's known as winning poker.

As you'll see, pursuit of this goal often makes your opponent fold, a nice bonus. You have exactly ace high and who doesn't mind winning a pot with no pair? So how do we do this, ensure that we either get to see two cards or win the pot then and there? The same way we attacked big draws with big hands on highly textured flops: by playing fast.

Remember that when you flop a huge hand on a highly coordinated board, you really don't want to make any more decisions on the hand. That turn card can be disastrous for your decision-making process. So you play that hand super-fast on the flop to end the action right there, either by getting the money in with the best hand or by your opponent folding.

Well, when you have a big draw, you also want to end the action here, though for completely different conceptual reasons. Same board, completely different hands, same behavior. With the set-type hand, you strive to get the money in as a favorite, because the texture works against you. With the draw, the texture works for you, so you want the maximum opportunity to hit one of your outs or to win without a fight.

Think about how confusing this will be to your opponents. When you play fast on a textured board, they don't know whether you have the big made hand or the big draw. How are they supposed to play effectively against you? They can't.

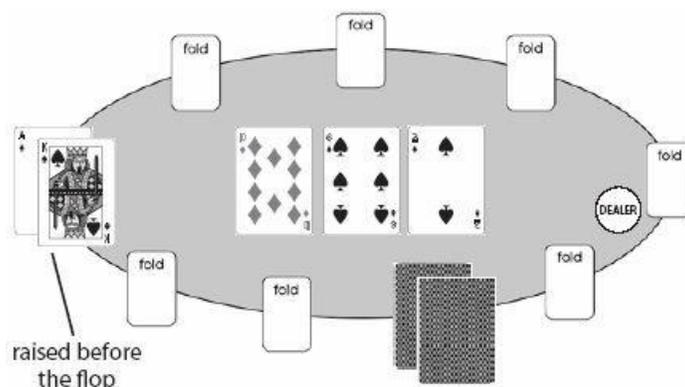
Okay, so if we're seeing two cards with a big draw, we're either a favorite or, at worst, about a 2-to-1 underdog. We're probably getting close to 2-to-1 on our money, plus we have extra equity from the times the other guys fold.

Interestingly, a lot of people play this kind of hand in such a way to actually give themselves a huge opportunity to *fail* to make a hand. They bet a "safe" amount on the flop, maybe even giving themselves the right price at that point. But then they face a bet on the turn that's not the right price, so if they don't make their hand on the turn, they lose the pot, and that's the whole pot, including the safe amount that went in on the flop.

And by the way, when you hit your hand on the turn, you don't get paid off. You bet it exactly like the type of hand it was. I don't call that seeing two cards or ending the action, do you? Let's see how to do better.

Big Draw, Heads-Up, In Position, With the Lead

You raise before the flop with $A\heartsuit K\clubsuit$ and the blind calls, so you're in position heads-up with the lead. The flop comes $T\heartsuit-6\clubsuit-2\clubsuit$.



The player out of position now checks to you. What do you do? Bet that same half- to three-quarters-pot bet you would if you had a set. If he calls, you got a great price on just the draw aspect of your hand (3-to-1 on a 2-to-1 shot with 15 outs and one to come). If, instead, you get check-raised, that's even better; you can re-raise or shove. This will trigger a fold from most players and if you get called, it's no big deal, because your worst-case scenario is about a 2-to-1 underdog, though you're often a favorite. Combine that with your fold equity and the re-raise is a huge moneymaker.

Now let's say you're the pre-flop raiser, you get called by the blind, but he leads into you. What do you do? That's easy. Again, it's the same thing you'd do with a set. Raise big. Go all-in if you're close to the right amount. You're the favorite, remember. And you want to end the betting action—or the hand—right there.

Big Draw, Heads-Up, In Position, Without the Lead

Now let's give the other guy the lead. You call in position against an early-position raiser with a hand like A♠K♠ and that same flop of T♦-6♠-2♠ comes down, giving you two overcards and a flush draw. If our friendly raiser continuation bets, as you'd expect him to do, you do the exact same thing you'd do if he took the lead away by betting out. You raise big, for all the reasons previously discussed. But here's where things can get a little tricky. What if the pre-flop raiser checks to you? That's weird, isn't it? And weird play makes us suspicious. So here our strategy departs from that of playing a set on a coordinated board.

Remember that when you have a set and the pre-flop leader checks to you, you're happy to step into his tricky check-raise trap. He thinks he has a big hand, but actually you hold the monster. But when you have a big draw, things are different, because all you have at that moment is ace high, and if your opponent is holding big or huge (anything from AA to a set), your hand is no longer big. His AA costs you your high-card outs, and his set turns some of your flush draw outs into kill cards by pairing the board. Against such hands you could be something like a 3-to-1 dog with two cards to come. Your hand doesn't seem so big anymore, does it?

When a pre-flop raiser checks to you on the flop in a heads-up pot, your radar should be beeping big time—that usually signals a big hand and you should take the infinity-to-1 odds on offer. Basically, he's telling you that he doesn't mind giving a free card. Well, you don't mind taking the free card he's offering you here, because the texture is working so hard in your favor. So thank him kindly and check back. (This is why, again, you should never check unless you're comfortable giving off a free card.) If he's that eager to toss away the lead, he's probably looking to get in a check-raise, but he thereby reveals that maybe your hand isn't so big after all, so take that free one.

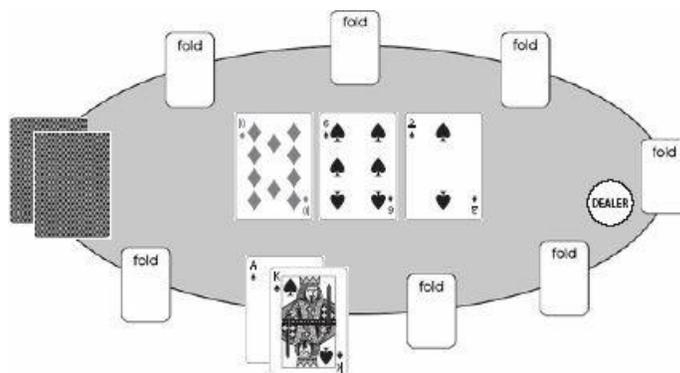
This is different from a player without the lead or position checking it to you. A check-raise from that guy indicates a much wider hand range, all the way from bluff to set, but mostly sitting in the top-pair range. It's easy to imagine a hand like KT checking the ten-high flop to the raiser in order to check-raise. The hand range is much weaker and you can expect that play from one pair when there's been a natural check to the raiser.

But can you really imagine a pre-flop raiser who has earned that c-bet checking a hand like KT on a coordinated board? That's a stretch. So don't fall for the trap when all you have is ace high. Check back and take the free one.

Whenever you're in position, then, play your big draw as if it were a set—super fast—unless you're specifically in position against a pre-flop raiser who checks away the lead to you. Then check for your life. That guy is waiting for you with a big bear trap.

Big Draw, Heads-Up, Out of Position, With or Without the Lead

If you have that same A♠K♠ on that same T♦-6♠-2♠ board and you're first to act in a heads-up pot, it makes no difference if you're the pre-flop raiser or not; your behavior will be the same either way.



Remember the two concepts that apply here. First, if you have a hand like two overcards and a flush draw, you really want to get the hand over with right on the flop. Second, you can give a free card on a coordinated board only if that free card won't hurt you. The best way to end the hand when you're out of position, as discussed, is to check-raise. If you had a set, you'd have to keep the fear of giving a free card clearly in mind, but when you have the big draw, the situation is much different: *You don't care about the free card.* You have the texture. The coordination of the flop works in your favor. If you check and your opponent checks behind you, you see the turn for free, which is the best price you could hope for. If your opponent is kind enough to bet for you, you get that juicy check-raise in, which also isn't a bad outcome. When either outcome favors you, you don't even need to worry about whether your opponent bets. If he doesn't bet, that's awesome. If he does, also awesome. Therefore, whenever you're out of position heads-up with a big draw, with or without the lead, you can go ahead and check away.

Obviously, a lot of the time you're check-raising this kind of flop, you'll have a huge made hand, like a set. Now how confused are your opponents? No sooner have they figured out that you're check-raising huge hands than *pow!* You're check-raising huge draws, too. And again, these two plays come from completely conceptually different places. With the big hand, you're avoiding tough choices on the turn. Here, you're inducing a fold or shoving all-in. If your opponent folds, you win with ace high. If he calls, you get your two cards to the river as the favorite. At the same time, you *never* have to fade a miss on the turn. You've got it covered. All your decision-making ends on the flop, when you're in control of all aspects of the hand.

Remember: Your hand isn't big if you miss on the turn and have to face a bet. On the other hand, if you check-raise on the flop, they'll either call or they won't and you're happy either way. As a bonus, from a game-theory standpoint, you're conceptually correct (your money is in as a favorite), but

the pre-flop raiser checked to you, you bet, and then all hell breaks loose, with multiple players making multiple bets and now you have to decide about joining the party. For example, say you bet, get two callers, and the third player moves in. Or you bet, get check-raised, and one or two of your opponents calls. Or you bet, get check-raised, and one of your opponents moves in. What are you supposed to do in these spots?

Usually, run away! You definitely no longer have a big hand. Against those kinds of fireworks, it'd be a weird universe indeed if your ace or king outs were any good. Even if all your flush cards turn out to be gin (probably not the case, because it feels like a set is out there), against multiple players giving action, it's likely that one of them also has a flush draw. That loses two of your outs, devastating in this scenario. If you call here, you're on a pure gamble. And poker is a game of skill. Don't take the skill away by closing your eyes and trying to get lucky when everyone is telling you your hand just shrunk to the size of a peanut. Recognize when your hand is no longer big.

Sometimes it's checked to you, you bet, and then all hell breaks loose, with multiple players making multiple bets and now you have to decide about joining the party. For example, say you bet, get two callers, and the third player moves in. Or you bet, get check-raised, and one or two of your opponents calls. Or you bet, get check-raised, and one of your opponents moves in. What are you supposed to do in these spots?

Big Draw, In Position, Multi-Way, With or Without the Lead, Bet to You

Whenever we're sitting with a big draw, like two overs and a flush draw, and there's a bet to us in a multi-way pot, we have to ask ourselves this question: "If I raise, can I reasonably expect to win the pot right here?" If the answer is yes, we raise. If the answer is no, we ask a follow-up: "If I raise here, can I reasonably expect the hand to get heads-up?" If the answer is yes, we raise. If the answer is no, we flat-call.

Why do we take these lines of play? For reasons previously discussed: winning without a fight, ginning our outs, and getting to see two cards. If there's a bet in front of you and you're next to act, either because you're directly after the bettor or because players in between have folded, go ahead and raise. Raise the whole pot or move in if your stack warrants it. This nearly always isolates the bettor and often wins the pot right there.

If exactly one caller winds up between you and the bettor, you can also raise. Raise big. Raise the whole pot. Move in if your stack warrants it. This looks like a classic squeeze play and will work like one. On a highly textured board, it's unlikely the caller has a made hand. If he did, he'd generally raise to protect his holding on such a dangerous board. This means his hand is probably a draw along with yours and that means you actually have that guy beat. It's unlikely he holds a hand like a set, because that hand is supposed to raise on this kind of board to protect itself.

So when you raise, you're probably ahead of the caller and you definitely put the original bettor in a tough spot. He has to worry about both you and the guy who called him, which makes his marginal lead hands, like one pair, go away. And the guy who's probably way behind your hand? If he folds, you just won a big pot with no pair. And if he calls, he's probably calling with a draw and you want that, since you have *the* draw. No bad result there.

The only times you wouldn't raise when there's a bet in front of you is if either multiple callers are between you and the bettor or someone beats you to the raise. In both these cases, you have to take a read. In the first case, you'll raise only if you believe you have a good chance of winning the pot right there. Otherwise, you'd never pass up such a good price to draw to the flush. After all, if there's more than one caller, you're getting a minimum of 4-to-1 to draw at your hand (assuming a half-pot-size bet) and that's a bargain you generally don't want to miss.

In the second case, you need to look at the players making the action and make two decisions. If you think a re-raise will win the pot right there, you can try that. It's kamikaze for sure, but it could win you a big pot on a semi-bluff and that's not too shabby.

But if you don't think a re-raise will get you the pot, you'll generally fold. If you call, a ton of bad things can happen. The original bettor might shove, in which case you won't have odds to call, so you'll fold. If the original bettor folds, you're also not getting the right price.

Now here comes the turn and, yikes! 1) If you miss completely, you'll get bet off your hand. 2) The ace or the king are less likely to be gin outs. 3) If you hit the ace or king, you have no idea if your hand is good. 4) If you hit the flush, you probably lose your customer. All I can say there is ugh.

This means that the only time you'd consider calling is if you know you won't be facing significant action on the turn, for instance if the raiser is all-in and the original bettor either won't play or doesn't have enough in his stack to put you to tough choices. Otherwise, there is no harm in just folding what's surely only a flush draw there.

Allow me to remind you to *stop and think* in these types of multi-way situations. You'd be amazed at how many players insist on calculating their pot odds based on a theoretical clean nine outs, or even 15, without bothering to consider the obvious reality of the situation at hand. Don't fall into that trap. No matter how big your draw started out, the flop isn't that tasty anymore. If three people love it, there has to be a reason, or two, or three.

In sum, in active multi-way pots, your big draw generally gets devalued to an ordinary flush draw. Sometimes your ace outs will still be good, against raising or re-raising pocket kings, say, so you'll still need to take a read on the situation. But count your outs objectively, taking into account your opponents' likely holdings, and *not* taking into account any feeling of entitlement that your big draw creates. Remember, a big draw is only *potential*: the potential to get opponents to fold, or the potential to see two cards as a favorite. Sometimes, that potential is thwarted by the actions of others in the hand. In such cases, just be realistic and fold when folding is the right thing to do.

To review, when you're facing a bet and the action was:

Check, check, bet, you raise.

Check, bet, fold, you raise.

Bet, call, fold, you raise.

Bet, fold, call, you raise.

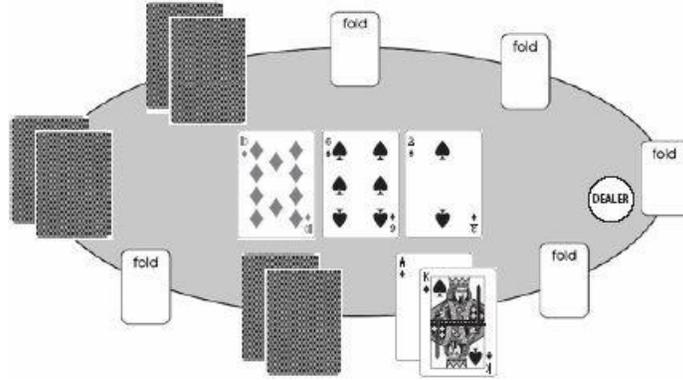
Bet, call, call, you just call unless you have a strong reason to think you can fold everyone with a raise.

Basically, when you're in position, you're looking to slam them with that big raise at most opportunities. Easy enough.

Big Draw, Multi-Way, Out of Position, With or Without the Lead

Let's make things even less complicated, shall we?

You're in a four-way pot in early position and first to bet, meaning you're in first position, or in second position and the first-position player has checked to you. You have that same A♠K♠ and the flop is the same T♦-6♠-2♠.



This is where things get really easy. No matter where the pre-flop raise came from—even if it came from you—you’re checking here. You don’t really care if you give off a free card. In fact, you like it. The coordination of the flop is in your favor here. If you have a set, you have to be sure someone will bet behind you to feel safe checking, as a free card could spell disaster for you. But when you’re the one holding the flush draw, that free card now spells delicious.

Still, license to check notwithstanding, why not just bet anyway and try to win the pot right there? Aren’t we all about taking control around here? Sure, but if you bet and get called, you’ll have to figure out what to do on the turn when you miss, a tough decision made tougher by your position. And what happens if you get fireworks behind you, like a raise and a re-raise, or multiple calls and shove, or any of the other things that might inspire you to fold? Now you’ve thrown off a bet when you didn’t have to.

Check. Check and see the fireworks for free. If the action goes all-insane behind you, consider that you’ve lost something like half your outs, measure the pot odds against your *true* card odds, and get the hell out of the way. Yes, you lost the potential of your big draw, but don’t worry, another one will come along and you’ll have the opportunity to play that one correctly, too.

More important, if you check here, you often get to check-raise and that’s super-yummy for you. I’ll say it again. If you check-raise and win the pot right there, you just won with ace high. If you don’t, you just bought yourself the turn and river cards (when you get to check-raise all-in) and isolated on one player, which gins your outs and removes all decision-making pressure from your perilous early position.

Whether you check-raise or just call when there’s a bet behind you depends on the same factors as when you’re in position in these situations, mainly your chances of a re-raise winning the pot right now. Obviously, if you check in first position and the guy to your right bets, triggering folds from the two other players in the pot, you’d check-raise. You already know you’re isolated and you can clearly go for the fold.

If you check and there’s a bet and one caller, think about the players’ profiles before check-raising. Make sure you know they’re capable of folding before applying the squeeze. If you’re against a bet and two callers, usually you’ll take that juicy price, trying to hit the nut flush.

To review, if you check and:

It goes check, check, bet, you check-raise.

It goes check, bet, fold, you check-raise.

It goes check, bet, call, fold, you check-raise.

It goes check, bet, fold, call, you check-raise.

It goes bet, call, call, you just call unless you have a strong reason to believe a check-raise will win the pot right there.

Basically, when you’re out of position, you’re looking to slam them with that big check-raise.

Check-raising out of position can be dicey, though, if you and your opponent both have major money behind to play with. You’ll face a decision on the turn, one made tougher by your bad position and those two big stacks. In position in a multi-way pot, you can raise big against field if you feel it’ll either fold them out or get you heads-up. Out of position, getting heads-up is no longer good enough. You either have to be reasonably certain to fold the field or you need to be in the right chip position to get all-in (where you’d be calling for 40% of your stack). If you get called and there’s still money behind, you’ll either have to take a second stab at the pot if you miss on the turn, making an expensive bluff at a player who has demonstrated strength, or check and cross your fingers that your opponent doesn’t bet. But don’t hold your breath for that; a player calling the check-raise on the flop will pounce on your check and make you fold. Then again, if you do hit the flush, you’ll almost always lose your action. The best you can do is check and hope he’ll bet for you. Once again, you’re relying on the kindness of strangers.

Most poker players aren’t that kind.

And if you hit an ace or king, now you’re just guessing whether your hand is good. If you bet, you’re bluffing; a call means your hand probably isn’t good and if you get raised, I guarantee you’re folding. So the bet is just a bluff, since the only good outcome for you is a fold. Again, you could check and hope the fellow checks behind. If he bets, you have a tough decision. And you know what tough decisions make us. Losing players.

The moral of the story is that when you’re out of position, believing you can get a pot heads-up isn’t enough to warrant the check-raise. You’re never buying a free card, unless the check-raise gets you all-in.

Still, notice what you’re earning in terms of deception with your play of big draws. These playing patterns are almost identical to how you’ll play your big made hands. The only difference is that when you have a set, say, and it goes bet, call, call, you’d be moving all-in. Or when there are fireworks behind you, you’d still play unless you have bottom set, which you might fold. Other than that, you’re looking to end action with sets and big draws alike. In position, you’re looking for raises that either win the pot or eradicate ugly decisions on the turn. Out of position with both types of hands, you’re looking to check-raise and end the hand.

That’s such a rare alignment of actions with wildly differing hands that virtually no opponent will be able to decipher what the hell you have. All they’ll see is that you check-raise big with sets and draws alike, and they won’t ever know where they’re at against you.

Small Draws, Heads-Up

Now let’s turn our attention to small draws. For this example, I’m giving you 8♠7♠, that middle suited connector that people love so much.

The first thing I have to ask you is *why are you playing this hand?* If you’re in early position and your answer is anything other than, “Because it’s suited,” you’re kind of lying, because you know that if you held 8♠7♥, you’d fold it like an origami swan, so that’s that. Okay, maybe everyone folded to you in the cutoff and you raised. I’m down with that, totally. You could have also been forced into the hand in the blinds. I get that, too. But anything other than those, especially from early position, and you’re playing the hand because it’s suited! Stop that! Now!

Anyway, somehow you got involved with that 8♠7♠ and the flop came good for this bad hand: A♠-4♠-3♥.

Well, you *think* it's good, so far. Note that up till this point, we've been talking about big hands and big draws played for value. Now we're talking about cards where you know at the outset that you don't have the best hand. All you have is nine outs. You hope. That's not a big hand. You'll definitely have to improve to win. Your odds of improving are about 2-to-1 against with two cards to come and 4-to-1 against with one card to come, depending on what's out there; your live outs are the spades and the spades alone. You can't assume that hitting an 8 or a 7 would be good. Looking for hope from the runner-runner straight? That's a little daft.

Okay, this is a mess, so let's try to clean it up. We'll start as always, by defining our goal. We don't have the best hand, so our goal is to win without the best hand. Notice that you can't think about winning with the flush you were so happy to flop a draw to, because as soon as that third spade hits, everyone will know it and there go your implied odds. Worse, as we've already discussed, you have to fade a higher flush or a higher flush draw or both. If you're in the hand at all, you've already rejected the best goal: to lose no money with this hand. In any case, if you try to win this hand, you need to know what you're doing.

You're bluffing, that's what.

This is, of course, not all that uncommon in hold 'em. Suppose you raise with 8♠7♠ in the cutoff position, out to steal the blinds and empirically braced to believe the button will fold, only this time he doesn't. Well, you're out of position with what can't possibly be the best hand. If you're bluffing, this is good time to point out that you should treat a hand like this as taboo in early position, where bluffs are so hard to execute, especially in multi-way pots. With a hand that will almost always turn into a bluff or a muck, why put yourself in the pickle in the first place? If you think about it—and I mean really examine it with clear-eyed honesty—you'll understand that you can't play 87 for value. Suited or unsuited, there ain't none.

Small Draw, Heads-Up, In Position, With the Lead

Let's say you raise late on a steal, but that doesn't work when the big blind calls. He checks to you on the flop of A♠-4♠-3♥ and you know you're bluffing since you don't have anything yet, so you'll do what you always do when it's checked to you: fire in that continuation bet. How big is your bet? Half-pot is the minimum to get the job done; you can go to three-quarters-pot if the situation warrants. What you want is an amount big enough to get a reasonable opponent to fold, but small enough to give yourself a fair price for either a draw or a bluff. If you bet half-pot, for example, when your opponent folds, you're getting 2-to-1 on the bet and when he calls, you're getting 3-to-1 on the money. That's enough to make the continuation-bet semi-bluff a huge money maker for you. By betting half the pot, you're letting the pot lay you 2-to-1, which means that to break even, your opponent has to fold only 33% of the time right on the flop. Given how often your opponent will miss the board, you'll win about twice as often as you need to with the c-bet. As a complete bonus, when you do get called, you can still make the best hand and you're getting 3-to-1 on that draw. You're giving yourself a good price on hitting your flush draw, but that's really secondary.

What's primary is that the story of your half-pot continuation bet is consistent with many of the other situations we've been looking at, where you have some kind of hand or even a big one. It's also consistent with some bluffy lines of play we have yet to examine. So your storytelling remains consistent and if your opponent misses the flop, which he mostly will, maybe you'll get him to fold. If he calls, you're still giving your draw the best price you can. And if he check-raises, forcing you to fold, you're still okay with the math, because he has to force your fold more than 66% of the time for your stab at the pot to be unprofitable, and we know that ain't happening.

As you know, bluffs don't always work. We've already discussed how that's okay, how bluffs can—are meant to—fail a certain percentage of the time. But you have to know what to do if your bluff gets check-raised all-in. Now there's no re-bluff. Your opponent has his chips in the pot. And unless the check-raise all-in is so small that it's giving you a big price to call, like 3-to-1 on your flush draw (since you might be drawing dead), you should fold.

If you bet half-pot and get check-raised all-in, you got caught. Maybe you got trapped. Maybe you got re-bluffed. It doesn't really matter, because what you have is 8-high and the wrong price to call. Your hand is in the muck. The good news is, you lost the minimum.

Let's say your opponent flat-calls your bet on the flop, another spade comes on the turn, and—oh dear!—you've made your hand. He checks to you. You have to bet. I want to stress this. You *have* to bet. He might have a lone big spade in his hand and you can't let a free card come off. This is important. Let's highlight it.

YOU CAN NEVER CHECK WHEN YOU CAN'T AFFORD A FREE CARD

And you definitely can't afford a free card here; you have nowhere near the nuts. Unfortunately, you're kind of damned if you do, damned if you don't, because if you get called on the flop, you can easily get check-raised on the turn. If you bet and get check-raised, you're facing a tough decision, and therein lies the problem with 8-high hands. There are no tough decisions when you get check-raised holding the nut flush. There are only happy dances. Holding 8-high, on the other hand, there's a lot of blood, sweat, and tears after you walk away from a tournament wondering how you got so unlucky as to run a flush into a bigger flush. Sucks to be you. When you bet your 8-high flush on the turn, you're just hoping either for a fold or flat-call, or that another flush card doesn't hit on the river.

Now, in a weird way, you're luckier if the turn is a blank, because then you know exactly what you have. With the 8-high flush, you might have the best hand and you might not. With the 8-high flush draw, you know you don't have a hand. So now when it's checked to you, you can check and take a free card or you can bluff. If you bluff, you know you're bluffing, and if you get check-raised, you know you're folding. There's complete clarity here.

When you bet after making the flush, you don't know what you're doing. Unless your opponent folds, you have no idea if you have the best hand. If he raises, you're confused and sick. If he calls, you're worried. Weird that you have more clarity when you don't hit than when you do. That's a clue that there's something terribly wrong with this hand.

Now let's look at what happens when you raise with 8♠7♠ in position before the flop and get one caller and the flop comes that same A♠-4♠-3♥, only now instead of the usual check to you, your early-position caller leads out. Don't be fooled into thinking this is a weak lead. There's too much texture on the board, so let's consider what it could be. Yes, he might have a weak hand or a bluff, but he might also have a draw. He might have a good ace he's trying to protect. He might even have a set and be afraid of letting a free card come off. On an untextured board, the lead into the raiser usually narrowly defines a hand as weak. On a coordinated board, the lead into the raiser leaves the whole range open.

Against most of the hands that lead into you, if you raise you're likely to get played with, because the board's texture raises the possibility that you're on a draw, making a made hand less likely to fold. Again, in contrast to the untextured board, people will look for, and find, reasons to call here. Think about it. If the board has no texture and you raise, they can give you credit only for a made hand or a bluff. On a textured board, they can give you credit for a made hand, a bluff, or a draw trying to semi-bluff, and that gives them 33% more reason to call. It's harder to get a real hand to lay down when your opponent can come up with so many reasons for your raise other than that you have the best hand. So you're in kind of a tight

spot. You can't really raise as a bluff in a situation where there are too few scenarios in which your opponent is bluffing and too many scenarios where he'll call. So only against the tightest and weakest opponents would you raise when led into.

Alternatively, you could, and really should, flat-call as a semi-bluff float—of a type we'll discuss later at length—where you're kind of hoping that they're just betting to take a stab at the pot and will give up on the hand on the turn no matter what. That certainly can happen. Just remember that you're not calling for the draw. You don't have odds for that. You also need the option to bluff or take a free card on the turn. When the flush misses, you hope your call on the flop bought you a check on the turn, so you can either take the free one or bluff. Notice I keep saying bluff over and over again. That's not for nothing.

If the flush card does hit, it'll most likely kill your action, because when you called on the flop, the flush draw surely crossed your opponent's mind, so now he'll play whatever he holds with extreme caution. And you're back to the same spot as before. If you bet, you hope not to get raised; that's just sickening. A fold makes you happy. A call is fine, but you're crossing your fingers that no flush card hits the river.

And that's in the best-case scenario, when you're in position with the lead.

Small Draw, Heads-Up, In Position, Without the Lead

Now let's put you in position, but take away the lead. This means that someone raised and you called behind with 8♠7♣. Frankly, I don't know how that happened. Maybe you misread your hand, thinking you had pocket 8s. Maybe you're dreaming of a 6-5-4 flop. Maybe you're stoned. Whatever. He bet, you called, now the flop comes A♠-4♠-3♥ and he leads into you. What should you do?

Well, you could semi-bluff, but notice the word *bluff* there. You could represent an ace that's trying to protect itself, raise, and hope he doesn't have an ace, but notice the word *hope* there. Because when he calls, you're not happy. And you're in that same situation as when your opponent led into you when you had the lead, with a lot of excuses for someone to call your raise on a flop that looks like this. So the bluff raise probably won't work often enough to be profitable.

If your opponent re-raises you, you're folding, unless the price to call is insanely good, due to the raise, for some reason, being drastically undersized. If your opponent calls your raise, you now know for a fact that you need to hit your flush, but if it's good, you probably won't get paid off and if it's not good, you'll get crushed. The bluff-raise here, then, is a play without much upside and a whole slippery slope of downside.

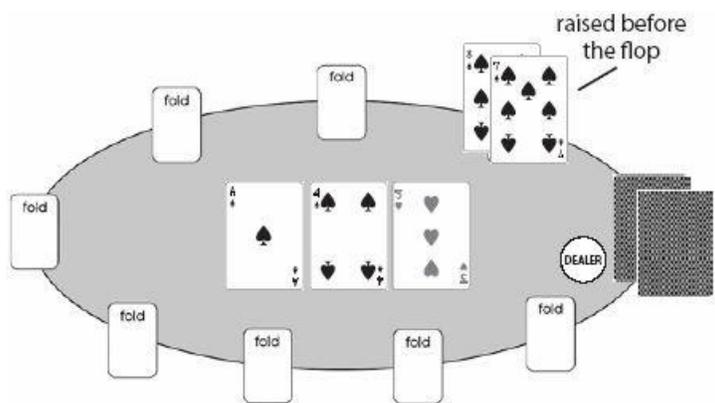
Alternatively, you could flat-call as a semi-bluff float where you kind of hope he's continuation betting because he has the lead and will give up if you offer resistance. Again, that can happen. Just remember you're bluffing. Bluff, bluff, bluffing. And be sure to be heads-up and in position; that's when these bluffs are easiest to run.

What if your dear pre-flop raiser checks the flop? I hope at this point that your hackles go up. By now you should be very suspicious of this kind of check. And given the warranted suspicion, I wouldn't highly recommend betting 8-high into such a trap. Take the free card to hit the flush. Don't pass up the fabulous price of free. Let's be honest: That would make you an idiot and I know you're not an idiot. (Except for the fact that you somehow called a raise in position holding the 8-high in the first place, which I guess was an accident, right?)

What I'm obviously trying to show you is there's not a lot of value to this hand. You're either bluffing straight out or semi-bluffing. The sooner you recognize this, the sooner you'll decide, hey, given my low risk of ruin, I don't really need to be playing this hand at all.

Small Draw, Heads-Up, Out of Position, With the Lead

Bad situation worse: Maybe you raise on a steal from the cutoff, hoping that the button will fold, but that doesn't work, so now you're heads-up and out of position, but at least you have the lead. With the same flop we've been looking at, you make your standard continuation bet and hope you don't get called or raised. If you get raised, you have to fold your bluff or put him on a bluff and make the kamikaze re-bluff. I'm not saying don't ever do that, but it's an expensive play and you better be sure of your reading skills before you attempt it. Otherwise, you're a kamikaze: You crash, you burn.



If you continuation bet and get called, you have to decide whether to fire again on the turn when you miss, executing a double-barrel bluff. Again, I'm not saying you should never take a second barrel. Most good players do that routinely. Just understand that you're bluffing when you take that second shot.

If you hit the flush on the turn, you can't check. Period. No free cards allowed. If you had an ace-high flush, you'd have that option. But you don't have an ace-high flush. You have an 8-high flush. So you bet. If you get called, you're worried about what your opponent is calling with. You're worried you might already be beat and you're praying for no more flush cards to hit. If you get raised, ack, now you're sick. If you get a fold, that's the good result. But wait. You made a flush. Why are you happy with a fold? Because the hand is 8-high, dude.

Small Draw, Heads-Up, Out of Position, Without the Lead

Let's say you don't have position or the lead. I guess this happened when someone raised on the button and you called in the big blind after aliens temporarily possessed you. (If you thought the button was so weak, why didn't you re-raise pre-flop to avoid this truly ugly situation entirely?)

You can't lead out, because if you get raised, you're folding, and you won't take the pot away from a real hand anyway. If you check, at least your opponent could check behind you. Then you get a free card. If the texture misses on the turn, you could lead out on a bluff to try to pick up the pot against someone who demonstrated weakness on the flop. Or you could check again, intending to fold to a bet, call if the price is right (for some bizarre reason), or make a risky check-raise semi-bluff. Maybe you get another check and a free look at the river. Mostly, you just hope—for free cards or a fold if you bluff.

If you make your flush on the turn, you can't check; you can't give a free card. So you're back to the same place. If you bet and get called, you hope your hand is good and no flush card hits the river. If you get raised, you're nauseous. The happiest, most comfortable, result is still a fold. Bleh.

Of course, if they don't accommodate you with a check on the flop, betting instead, you're surely thinking call, being a 2-to-1 dog getting at least 2-to-1 from the pot when you do. But how are you a 2-to-1 dog? Do you think in a million years you'll see two cards for the price you paid on the flop? If the flush misses, you're checking to check-fold or check-raise semi-bluff, or you're lead-bluffing and hoping that works. None of that's free. When you call out of position, you aren't getting a free turn card like you might when you call in position. That means you should treat the hand as a 4-to-1 dog, but you aren't getting 4-to-1 on your flop call. So there better be some implied odds, extra money you'll get from your opponent when the flush hits. But your opponent knows you called with *something* on the flop. And once again, when you hit the flush, you can't check to induce a bet you can't afford to give a free card. So you just have to bet out, and where are the implied odds when you're sick to get raised?

So check-calling seems like a bad option, which leaves us with the check-raise semi-bluff. If that floats your boat, go for it. But that's a big line of play with a tiny hand that injects all sorts of variance into your game. I'm not saying never check-raise bluff. I'm just saying that a hand you probably played pre-flop in search of a nice cheap flush draw just turned into a massive bluff and that probably wasn't your intention when you called in the first place.

At least if the texture doesn't hit, you know your hand's no good. That gives clarity. A bizarre Dali-esque clarity, but clarity just the same.

Maybe you should just check-fold. Better still, don't call in the first place.

Small Draws, Multi-Way

If you ask most people why they play a hand like 8♠7♠ in a multi-way pot, they'll tell you something like, "With all those players, I'm getting the right price to call."

Now, as we've seen, this hand's best chance of success is heads-up in position, not because it's drawing to anything, but because it can run some fairly cheap and fairly effective bluffs. Even so, people don't think they should play the hand heads-up, because they're not getting a big price. They're so focused on the flush that they think the more the merrier. But the more players, the harder to bluff, and with 8-high, you have to suspect that multi-way pots will be harder to play. *Every* hand plays better, and easier, heads-up. Multi-way pots should be treated as an aberration, not an opportunity.

Remember, the likelihood of running successful bluffs is inversely proportional to the number of opponents. So what does a hand lose when almost all of its value comes from bluffing? Right: almost all of its value.

Small Draw, Multi-Way, In Position, With or Without the Lead

Still, let's run it down. You're in late position in a multi-way pot. Maybe everyone limped to you and you limped. Or you lost your mind, called a late-position raiser, and picked up the blinds. (Why wouldn't you re-raise pre-flop and try to win it right there?) Or you raised late and got called in three places. Maybe it went limp, limp, limp and you tried for a steal that went spectacularly south—weird to do when three limpers is the textbook definition of *loose game* and raising with nothing into a large field is hardly the textbook definition of *playing tight in a loose game*.

But there you are with your cruddy 8♠7♠ against a *mess* of players.

Flop comes A♠-4♠-3♠ and everyone checks to you. I guess you'll make a continuation bet if you're the pre-flop raiser or take a stab at the pot if you aren't. You bet, and cross your fingers that no one raises or even calls, for that matter, because if you get called, particularly more than once, you may be fading another flush draw. And that means another heart on the turn will kill either your action or, uh, you.

When multiple players call on the flop, it's not like they're blind. They can see the texture. And do you think for a second none of them has in mind that one of these many players might have a spade draw? So when the spade hits on the turn, hands like one pair tend to go off into the sunset; *they can see the obvious texture right in front of them*. Add to that the grim reality that all the players are calling with *something*, possibly a flush draw like yours (only better) and you'd better keep in mind that when you hit, you might be in deep yoghurt.

Either no action or too much. Not a birthday party with presents for you.

You probably have to bet when it's checked to you. Your opponents have shown enough weakness that you're a favorite for them to fold. If you bet half the pot, you have to win 33% of the time to break even. And that will most likely happen either by them folding out or you making the flush, which holds up on the turn (don't expect to be paid off, though). If you just check behind, not only are you giving up equity, you're also making your strategy completely transparent to your opponents. Simply put, they'll know that you bet when you have a hand and don't bet when you don't, and you really can't have them knowing that.

Your bet, then, is kind of a sacrifice on the altar of your poor hand selection. You bet about half the pot, the minimum price for a bluff. But if you get called, no card in the deck will improve your situation much on the turn. If you miss, your decision whether to take a second barrel at the pot will depend on the number of callers on the flop and what you put them on. I wouldn't recommend the second barrel unless the pot goes heads-up on the flop and, it would be nice if you can reliably read your opponent for a draw or weak pair. Then, when the turn misses you and you get checked to, a second barrel is probably profitable.

As before, when your spade hits, you actually get *less* clarity. The texture, plus action in front of you, adds up to a deep ugly hole of difficult decision-making. What's the solution? Stay out of such holes in the first place. Play strategies that lead to easy, not hard, decisions. In other words

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AVOID CLOSE SITUATIONS

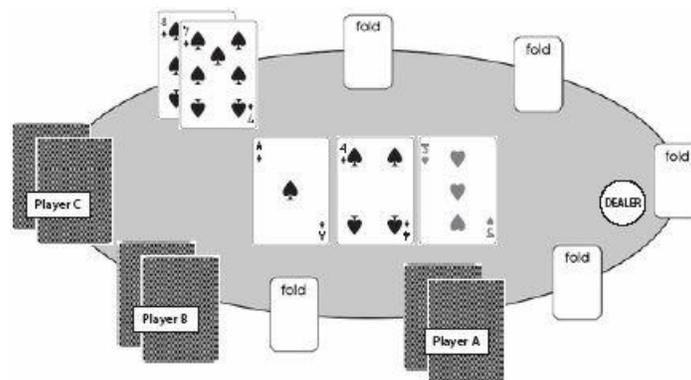
Close situations invite mistakes, which we don't like to make.

Some decisions will be clear, yet unpleasant. If you make your standard continuation bet and someone moves in, you have to fold. Even if it's check-raised for a more modest amount, if anyone calls in traffic, you're folding. You can't play an 8-high flush draw here.

Who wants to draw dead? I hope you don't raise your hand.

If you bet and get flat-called by the field, good luck. You haven't been moved off your hand, but you're still not feeling too frisky, because they didn't all call with nothing. If the turn is a blank and it's checked to you, you could try betting again on a bluff, but if the board does hit, you need to be very leery of action in front of you, and who likes to have to be leery in position? Again, your best strategy is simply not to get into this mess in the first place. If it does happen, maybe because your pre-flop raise didn't get the desired result—just set damage control as your goal.

Let's say it's not checked to you, but you face a bet from one of the three players in the pot. How you'll proceed depends on which position makes the bet and whether callers are in between you and the bettor.



Again, we'll designate your opponents as A, B, and C, with C immediately to your right. If it's checked to C and he bets, consider a raise here as a semi-bluff; out of all the possible leaders into this pot, the player to your right is most likely to be taking a shot at the pot. You're certainly allowed to call shenanigans on him. But be sure you understand that you're not raising for value here, thinking your hand is in any way great. You're raising because you think the bettor is telling tales. If you get called by anyone after you raise, your callers will hold either better hands or better draws than you. You're raising to fold the field.

If you don't think you can achieve that goal, you could always flat-call and try to hit your flush. But before you get excited about that possibility, let's look at the math of it. Your opponent will probably bet between half- and full-pot. If he bets half-pot, you're getting 3-to-1 on your call—*almost* the right price to hit a flush with one card to come. If he bets any bigger than that, you're not getting the right price and you have a mathematical fold. Remember, you're calling to see *one* card, not *two*. You can't count on getting to the river for free, so you can't get the right price to call. Most players massively overvalue the implied odds here, the chance to get paid off big. But the texture is too obvious to overvalue that. So your call is iffy at best.

Another thing you can't count on is not getting check-raised by players A or B when you call player C. Nor can you count on your 8-high flush being the best flush draw out there. And don't forget that if you hit on the turn, 20% of the time a fourth suited card will come on the river, exposing you to redraws. You can't bluff if you miss and you might not get paid off if you hit. So there go your fold equity and your implied odds. Best course: Call with caution and hope things break your way.

Now let's say that player A leads out and B and C both call. You might think you have an easy call here, but what's everyone calling with? They don't have made hands—two pair or better; if they did, they'd raise to protect against the flush draw. Maybe they're flat-calling with something like AK, but even someone with that hand would probably raise to protect, at least if he's any good. So what does that leave? Yup, flush draws. Are you hoping that one is 6♠5♠ and the other is 3♠2♠? Good luck with that.

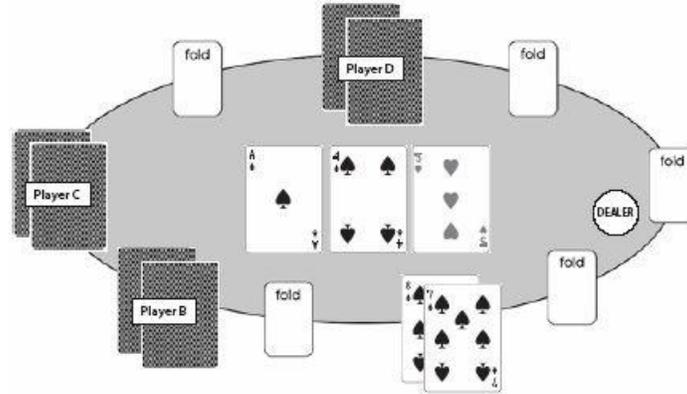
So when it goes bet, call, call, you should fold—in *exactly* the multi-way situation where you thought your hand would perform better. This exposes the fallacy of multi-way thinking. Yes, more traffic equals better pot odds, but it also means a higher probability of facing a better hand. It also lowers the likelihood of getting paid off by a worse hand, because the more players in a pot, the more everyone is worried about the flush draws. And again, you lose the bluffing equity you get when you're heads-up. People think they're more likely to get their draws paid off multi-way, but that's faulty thinking. The texture is out there for everyone to see. Everyone knows that *someone* is on a draw. They're both *more* likely to beat you and *less* likely to pay you off. Oops.

Next. If there's any combination of bet and raise from players A, B and C, you're gone. Basically, any time any two players show strong interest in the pot, your interest should become purely rhetorical. If player A bets and it's folded to you, you can call because—*ta-da!*—you're now playing heads-up and you can either hit and get paid off or blank-and-bluff on the turn. You don't raise here, though, because you could get three-bet off the hand. That player A was willing to lead into the field suggests strength, a different story than when player C bets.

So raising player A when you can just call in position seems not so good. You might think about folding here. Depending on the bet size, you're probably not getting the right price to see one card. And you lose the fold equity you might otherwise have on your misses, since player A has announced strength. Fold equity is important if you're willing to take a bad price on the flop call. However, since you're now heads-up, you gain back your implied odds, so have at it.

Small Draw, Multi-Way, Out of Position, With or Without the Lead

Now let's flip you around and put you out of position. I'm not sure how you got involved in a raised pot with 8♠7♠ out of position. Maybe a middle-position player raised, the button and small blind called, and you got seduced by your great price in the big blind. Or maybe you limped early and ran into a raise and some calls behind. Did you raise to steal and your plan went terribly wrong when three people called? Whatever, you're in a bad position with a bad hand. Let's make the best of it.



Your mantra here is *play cheap*; find the best way to ensure that you get to see the turn card. Forget about fold equity. A bunch of people are in the pot for a raise and someone hit this board for sure. Whether or not you had the lead pre-flop, checking is your best option, the best way to play the hand cheap. If it's checked around, awesome. Everyone else is asleep at the switch and you get a free card. That's as cheap as it gets.

But if anyone bets, a call feels pretty fishy; you'd have to play the hand out of position getting a bad price. If it's just you and the bettor, you're getting at best 3-to-1 and you're a 4-to-1 dog to hit the turn. If you miss, you have no bluff, unless you want to execute a very expensive check-raise bluff on the turn. If a heart hits the turn, you have to bet out (since you can't give a free river card there), but if you bet out, you don't get paid, since any real hand would have check-raised the flop to protect itself. So you played the hand just like a flush draw and there go your implied odds.

Which brings up check-raising the one player on the flop. At least you aren't leaving yourself handcuffed to your cards. You're playing your hand like a real hand would play. And if you get caught, you might still make the flush. Just don't call a re-raise unless the price is ridiculously good. Honestly, if you just quietly fold on the flop, it wouldn't be the worst play ever.

Obviously, if it goes, say, bet, call, call, you know you're up against better hands and/or better draws and you're never getting paid off, so goodbye hand. Folding is safe. Check-raising is maniacal. Calling leaves you open to flush over flush and you have no bluff or implied odds.

Now look what happened: You flopped your dream flop and you check-folded, as the most sensible play, absolutely making the best of a bad situation.

And that's what happens when you play 8-high hands.

If players B and C check behind you and player D bets, you can consider raising on a bluff, but a check-raise bluff that commits a lot of your chips to the hand is dangerous. You might be thinking that player D is just betting his position and you might be right, but don't forget that B or C might be trapping, too.

Personally, I think you can find lots of better situations to run your bluffs, but if you're looking for a bluffing opportunity, there it is: exactly when the last-position bettor is likely to be full of crap and the players in between are likely to fold.

Just remember that you're *bluffing*, not *drawing*. Also, this is much riskier when player B opens the pot. He's likely to have a hand, since he's betting into two players. When you go for these check-raise bluffs, factor in position, as well as fortitude: Only bluff someone you think is weak or foldy enough to lay down.

Obviously, if you ever check and see fireworks behind you, get out of the way. That's one of the advantages of checking here. You get to see the fireworks before you put a dime in the pot. There's a lot of value in figuring out for free that your draw is worthless. Then again, it was probably this worthless when you first got it.

Here's the thing, folks: In most situations, and especially in multi-way pots, small draws aren't really draws at all. There are just too many ways they can go wrong, either by not getting paid off or by getting crushed by bigger draws. Most of the time, you're playing them as a bluff and as I said (and will show you), there are many better situations for scratching your itch to bluff.

So stop thinking of middle suited connectors as anything other than middle cards that happen to look a little pretty, and stop imagining that high traffic implies high profit when, in fact, the opposite is true.

If this book gets you to stop thinking of small draws as something special (or stop thinking of them at all), it will earn you back its cover price a hundred times over.

Top Pair, Untextured Board

Big Hands Don't Happen in a Vacuum

Before we get into how to play the perilous top pair, let's pause to take another look at what it means to put a hand in context and to remind ourselves why texture matters so much. It's never enough just to think about your hand strength. You also need to think about the number of real outs you're up against *and* the number of cards that will make decision-making hard.

We've already seen situations where as much as half the deck is a criminal assault on your holding. Much of the time, you can reasonably conclude that you're in much better shape. Say you hold 99 on a board of A-9-3, no suits. Obviously, if you're up against pocket aces, it's, "Oh well, bye-bye stack." Against pocket tens, you're fading two outs; against pocket 3s, you're fading one. For all intents and purposes, your opponents are drawing dead. In that case, you can ease into the pot and try to extract all the value you can.

But if the board is T-9-3 with two cards in suit, now only half the cards in the deck are safe for you. This isn't to say that your opponent is holding all the draws. It's just to say that the board is bad: bad decision-wise; bad in terms of profit; bad because it kills action; bad because of land mines. Note that you have a set in both cases, but the *relative value* of your set is wildly different. This is what we mean when we say that big hands don't happen in a vacuum.

With this in mind, never regret moving all-in on a textured board and having everyone fold. No, you *didn't* "lose value." Yes, you *did* avoid a tricky situation on the turn. If you got someone with a straight draw and flush draw to lay down his hand, you got someone to fold on a board that could turn sour for you, which is good because it reduces your variance. And while your opponent probably doesn't have both a straight draw and a flush draw here, you're not playing against *him*, you're playing against the *deck* and all those awful cards.

Look at it this way: If your bet always punishes any draw by offering a bad price, then it doesn't matter which draw your opponent has. And if he has no draw and no hand, you're not making any more money off him anyway. Moral of the story:

PUNISH THE DECK

Give any draw the wrong price to call. Don't worry about losing value with monster hands. Just win the pot. Save your milky moves for when the board bears no texture.

Believe it or not, all the discussion about big hands and draws was the easy stuff; at least you know what the hell you have. In the case of a set, you know you have the best hand. In the case of a draw, you know with certainty you don't have the best hand right now, but you also know your odds of ending up with the best hand. These hands offer you clarity. Clarity makes things easier for you.

Let's look at a hand that's something less than a monster and a lot less clear: flopped top pair. First things first, we set our goal. As we've seen, with huge hands, our goal is either to make the most money (on non-textured boards) or simplify our decision-making process (on textured ones). With drawing hands, our goal is to increase the probability of making the hand in such a way as to maximize fold equity and earn.

Now we're at top pair and the situation is more complex, because top pair is a murky holding. Do you have the best hand? Most people jump to the immediate conclusion that they do. Show most players holding a hand like AQ off-suit and a board like A-9-3 no suits and they'll probably say, "Wow, I've got a really strong hand." But they don't. They have a *medium*-strength hand, for the simple reason that plenty of hands are both better and worse than AQ, but none in the middle. Hands like AK, two pair, or trips are much better than AQ here, being at worst about 80% to beat you with two cards to come (if you're against bottom two pair). Hands like AJ, T9, and pure rags are just the opposite, at best 20% to beat you with two cards to come (if your opponent has a hand like T9). Lots of better hands. Lots of worse ones. But none in between. You either have way way the worst of it or way way the best of it. And because you can't see your opponents' hole cards, you have no idea which. How's that for murky? So let's stop getting so excited about flopping top pair. It's a good start, but we're a long way yet from home and dry.

In this situation, then, it's more important than ever to set a clear goal with the hand; it's not like such a hand plays itself. So what's the goal here? You can't say it's only to extract the most money from your opponent; in the case where your opponent has you murdered, that's going to cost you a ton. You also can't say it's only to lose the least against your opponent; when you've murdered your opponent, that goal will cost you, too.

The problem is that you really want to do both. If you *knew* you had the best hand, you'd want to play the hand like a set, extracting every last penny from your opponent. If you *knew* you had the worst hand, you'd fold. This is why playing top pair is so hard: We have two goals fighting against each other. We want to win the most money from worse hands and lose the least money to better hands.

Well, here's good news: Not only is it possible to satisfy these two goals at once, it actually conforms neatly to all of the game-theory and math stuff we've been talking about, and provides nice cover for other kinds of hands to boot.

This isn't to say it's an easy thing to think through. It's not. Playing top pair is about the most difficult flop situation you'll face. But it's least difficult when the board isn't textured, so that's where we'll start.

Top Pair Is a Medium-Strength Hand

To recap: When you flop top pair, you either have way the best or way the worst hand and you don't know which. Looking at the hands worse than yours, you can see that they all have very few outs to beat you. If you hold AQ on an A-9-3 rainbow flop, a hand like AJ has three outs. T9 has five outs (minus your redraws). You could also face a hand like TT with two outs. Pure air, of course (a hand like J7, say), can only beat you on a bluff or some crazy runner-runner. Note, then, that on an untextured board, hands worse than yours have scant chance of catching up (at best 20% with two cards to come).

On the other hand, if you're up against AK or better, say (or AQ if you're holding AJ), you have a maximum of three outs to win. And that's what makes this situation so interesting and tricky. You're either *way* ahead or *way* behind and in the absence of draws, *there is no in between*. This is the fundamental fact of top-pair holdings and it's worth searing into your brain:

WITH TOP PAIR, YOU'RE EITHER WAY AHEAD OR WAY BEHIND

The problem, of course, is you don't know which. And you really *can't* know which. Absent super-human reads, you have to admit that a wide range of opponents will get identically involved with AK and AJ. Players treat those two hands about the same when they flop an ace. And players with big hands will bet exactly the same as players with no hands.

So ... murky *murky* situation. Now, you might think at this point that your goal is to find out where you're at, using, I assume, some sort of proverbial probe bet. Actually, no. Since most players treat AK about the same as AJ (at least on the flop), no such bet will make your opponent tell you what he has; he'll act the same whether he has you crushed or you have him crushed. So your real goal is this: Play in such a way that it *doesn't matter* where you're at. This is how you should always think about your one-pair hands: You're blind to their holdings, but you just don't care.

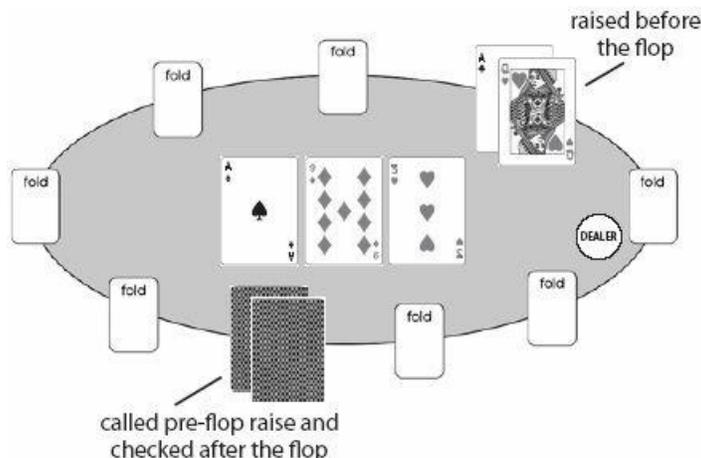
Now all you need to do is design a bet to handle both situations at the same time. You want to find a line of play that minimizes losses against AK or better (given that you aren't folding), while at the exact same time maximizing earn against hands like T9, AJ, or worse. I know that sounds impossible, but such lines of play do exist and we'll check them out in a second.

First, though, I want to emphasize that it doesn't matter whether you're holding AQ, AJ, or whatever here. Any time you feel like you're either way ahead or way behind, you can stop caring about which. You don't even have to bother trying to figure it out. Players generally spend far too much time worrying about whether they have the best hand or not. You'll play the same way against the whole range of holdings, maximizing profit and minimizing loss at the same time, which takes a lot of decision-making pressure off you. To put it another way, you don't have to guess and it's always great for your poker game when you can take a pass on guessing.

So then, how do you win the most against AJ? How do you lose the least to AK? How do you maximize your information as you go along? Let's find out.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, In Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

We'll start with the easiest situation. You're in position. You raise before the flop with AQ and get one caller, who checks to you on a board of A-9-3 rainbow.



What do you do? Bet, of course. This standard continuation-bet situation calls for the standard continuation bet, because you want to win this pot all those times when you have nothing, right? Okay, in position and with the lead, you bet when checked to. Case closed.

Among the responses your opponent could make here is, of course, a check-raise. What should you do? First, think about what his check-raise means. Put yourself in his shoes. On a board this dry, would you ever check-raise with AA in your hand? No. 99? No. 33? Of course not! Players with huge hands want to trap. They love to slow-play and trick their opponents into giving them a ton of chips.

A player with top set on a dry board wouldn't check-raise you here. He'd be deathly afraid of letting you off the hook. So once you get check-raised here, you know your opponent can't have the strongest range of hands. Sure, he might be overplaying AK a bit, but even that's unusual. So what should you do? Re-raise. Most of the time, you're re-raising with the best hand here. And even if you aren't, maybe AK will lay down. But more important, maybe AJ will get caught up in the frenzy and call.

You definitely don't want to flat-call here and give AJ a moment to think about it. If you flat-call on this board, where there are no draws, AJ will shut down. The player holding that hand will figure out he's buried, since an untextured board gives him few excuses to decide his AJ is good. But re-raise on the flop and you give him a chance to rationalize that you're just trying to move him off the hand. Call and you win nothing more. Re-raise on the flop and you might get his whole stack.

Learn this! It's gospel: The fast play on the flop from your opponent when the board presents no danger firmly places him on the weak end of the spectrum. So play accordingly. That was easy, right?

But what if your opponent just calls your bet on the flop? That keeps his whole range of hands open. He might be checking to the raiser and calling with a huge hand like a set. He might be calling with top pair himself, either AK or AJ or worse. He might be calling with complete air, floating to bluff later in the hand. You don't know, because his whole range plays the same. So he calls and now there are two possibilities for the turn: He could either check again or bet into you.

If your opponent checks again, resist the urge to bet here. Most players do bet; they think they need to "protect their hand." In fact, I guarantee that if you do happen to check the turn here and your opponent hits a 3-outer on the river, there will be a know-it-all who will tsk tsk you and tell you that you should have bet to protect your hand on the turn. But that know-it-all (really know-it-some) is completely wrong for oh so many reasons.

First, the kinds of hands that you're beating right now are at best 20% with two cards to come (if your opponent has a hand like T9). Let's say the pot has 1,000 chips when the flop comes A-9-3. You bet 500 and your opponent calls. That means your opponent called 500 to win 1,500. That's 3-to-1, folks. But if he's behind, at best he's 20% with two to come, a 4-to-1 underdog. That means he's losing money when he calls on the flop, *even*

if he gets to see two cards. So if you bet and paid for your privilege of checking the turn. By offering your opponent such a bad price for two to come when he's behind on the flop, you can let him see two cards for his flop call and still come out ahead on the money side. You got him to pay a bad price, again, even if you check the turn. So check away. You paid for the opportunity to do so. And when the busybody admonishes you for checking, just smile and nod. That guy is misguided and it's not your job to set him straight.

So by betting the flop, you earned the right to check the turn. But that doesn't mean you have to. It just means that mathematically you can and still be in profit on the play. So let's look at whether you *should* check the turn.

First, let's say you're against a hand that does have you beat, like AK. Obviously, if you bet here, say 1,000 in chips, you're losing at least 1,000, since you have the worst hand and your opponent will surely call, if not raise. But if you check, that same AK will now bet the river, most likely the same 1,000 chips. You call (since you must call the river if you check the turn) and lose 1,000 chips. So against a much better hand, checking the turn versus betting the turn is at least breakeven. Either you can bet the turn and lose the 1K chips there or you can check the turn and lose the 1K chips when you call the river bet.

What the check buys you against the best hand, though, is the maximum chance to suck out on the river. If the AK check-raises you off your hand on the turn, you never get the chance to suck out and hit a queen. By checking the turn, you always get that chance. So on the losing end, it tends to come out the same chip-wise whether you bet the turn or check the turn and call a bet on the river. But if you check the turn instead of betting, you give yourself more chances to hit that marvelous suck-out.

Now, what if a worse hand like AJ checks the turn to you? How does a check stack up against a bet now?

Let's think about what could happen if you bet. Either your opponent calls your 1,000 or raises it. If he calls and checks the river, you'll be hard pressed to bet there. I would strongly recommend a check, since it'll be difficult to get paid off when you bet a third time, unless you're beat; then you might get check-raised off your hand. The bet on the river would be low value, so you'll probably only pick up the 1,000 he would have called on the turn.

But here's the ugly scenario. What if you bet on the turn and get check-raised? I know what you're doing. Folding. That's right. You're folding. Your opponent called a raise pre-flop. Checked and called the dry A-9-3 board on the flop, then went for a check-raise on the turn. Your AQ is flying into the muck.

But here's an important concept: When the pot belongs to you because you have the best hand, folding loses you more than your bet. It loses you the whole pot. If you fold AQ here and your opponent has AK, you only lose 1,000 on the turn by betting with the worst hand because the pot doesn't belong to you, it belongs to your opponent holding the better hand. But if your opponent holds AJ or T9 or J7 here and check-raises you off your hand, you not only lose the 1,000 you bet, but also the 2,000 already in the pot, since that pot is supposed to be yours. So by betting the turn and opening yourself up to the check-raise, you lost yourself 3,000 to try to win 1,000.

If you check the turn instead, now your opponent holding AJ will likely bet the river, that same 1,000, and you'll call and win the pot. And never, ever, get bluffed. Checking the turn with the intent to call the river ensures that a worse hand never gets to beat you, because you never open yourself up to the check-raise bluff. Not only that, it encourages players to try to bluff you or value bet super-light. A hand like TT that might have folded had you bet the turn will often value bet the river after you check the turn. Same for a hand like T9 or even AJ. That means a check has huge upside against a worse hand. You're more likely to pick up extra chips from the other player and you never get bluffed off the whole pot.

This concept of avoiding getting bluffed has to do with *opening the action*. Whenever the action is to you and you're last to act, you have a choice of whether to close or open the action. Closing the action means that the betting round is over and the other player(s) can't bet again. If it's checked to you and you check, action closes. If it's bet to you and you call, action closes. But if it's checked to you and you bet, you open the action back up. If it's bet to you and you raise, you also open the action back up. Anytime you open action back up, you risk getting raised. So remember these words:

DON'T OPEN THE ACTION WITH A HAND THAT CAN'T STAND TO BE RAISED

The best hand can stand to be raised. If you have top set, open the action all you want. Since you don't risk folding the best hand, opening the action is pure upside. If you're bluffing, you can also open up the action; if you get raised, so what? The bluff didn't work and you fold a pot that didn't belong to you anyway. If you're bluffing, you know you're never folding the best hand; therefore you can open the action in order to try to win the pot.

But when you have a hand that *might* be the best hand, while being vulnerable to getting raised, reopening the action is a disaster. Then a raise can make you fold your winning hand, which might very well be a *whole-pot* mistake on your part. So in the case of a hand like top pair, when your opponent checks to you on the turn and offers you the opportunity to close the action down with a check, take it.

So that's what you do if your opponent checks to you, but what if he bets into you on the turn? Should you raise or call? (I'm assuming you don't have enough information to fold, but by all means, feel free to if you're certain you're beat.) The majority of players have a strong tendency to call here. But then what do you do if you face a bet on the river? Call again? That's actually a reasonable answer against any kind of aggressive or creative player. Particularly against a lot of the good Internet pros, it would probably be a mistake to fold on the river after calling the turn. But here's a better idea. If you'd call the river anyway after calling the turn, then why not raise the turn in the first place?

Let's say the pot has 2,000 going into the turn card. You have the same AQ- or AJ-type of hand on an A-9-3 no-suits board. You were the pre-flop raiser and your opponent check-called on the flop, then led out 1,000 on the turn. If you call there, you've committed 1,000 to the pot, then another 2,000+ when your opponent bets on the river and you call again. That's a total commitment of 3,000+ to the pot—never committed in a way that could get your opponent to lay down a better hand, because all you're doing is calling off. The call never puts your opponent to a decision that could trigger a fold.

But if you raise on the turn to 3,000 or 3,500, what does this buy you? A few things. First, when your opponent folds, you don't have to show your hand. We always like that. Second, it gives your opponent a chance to fold the better hand. Think about if you were on the opposite side of this hand with, say, AQ. You check and call on the flop, then bet the turn, and now you get raised? Ugh. You're probably folding, right? I bet you've even folded AK in that spot.

So if you're the one raising with your own AQ or AJ (or even T9) in position, this play just bought you a pot against a range of hands that beat you. That's pretty strong. And it was all for the same number chips you were willing to commit to the hand anyway if you were willing to call both the turn and the river. It's just that you committed them in an aggressive manner by raising the turn instead of calling, and got your opponent to make his own whole-pot mistake.

Lastly, raising on the turn prevents you from ever getting bluffed off your AQ on the river. We've all chickened out when facing some huge bet on the river, right? If you're against an aggressive opponent who's willing to fire the big third barrel at the pot, he might just get you to fold your top pair

with that play. He might force you to make a whole-pot mistake and that's a disaster.

By raising on the turn, you get him to lay the hand down and never have to face that bet. Very few opponents will re-raise bluff you on the turn against this line of action. So when you do get re-raised on the turn, you can be sure your hand is no good and now you can safely fold. If you flat-call the turn, the same hand that would fold to a raise might make a bold river bluff and win the pot from you.

But no rules, right? It's not always correct to raise the turn with top pair. Obviously, if your opponent's hand was turned face up and you could see that you had him crushed, you'd never raise on the turn. So if, for some reason, you have a strong read on your opponent and you know you have him beat, then flat-call with complete conviction to call the river and pick off his bluff/overly aggressive value bet.

Also, the more passive your opponent, the more you should flat-call on the turn; passive players, by definition, never fire third barrel bluffs. If you're against this type of opponent who would never ever bet the river after you call the turn unless he had you 100% beat, you can just call the turn instead of raising with the complete conviction of folding to a river bet.

To recap: The more aggressive your opponent, the more likely you should be to invest your river-calling money with a raise on the turn. If you get three-bet, he has the best hand and you have an easy fold. If he does call your raise, he'll almost always check to you on the river. Then you can check behind and either collect the pot or lose no more than you would have by calling on the turn and calling again on the river. Raising the turn is all upside, due to the equity in having your opponent fold the best hand, avoiding getting bluffed on the river, and never having to show your hole cards.

That's what you do if your opponent checks to you on the flop. But what if he calls your pre-flop raise, then leads into you? Well, we already named this play, remember? It's called a *weak lead*. Players who lead into the raiser on a dry board usually have weak hands looking for information. That means you can now surmise that your opponent is on the weak end of the spectrum and your hand dominates his.

Many people would raise here, because they think they have the best hand. But if you know you have the best hand, why would you ever raise in this spot? Why risk raising an opponent who's betting for the sole purpose of trying to figure out if his hand is any good? Aren't you just giving him the chance to make a great fold?

If you have AQ and your opponent has AJ on an ace-high board, you might as well have a set. I mean, you have your opponent down to three outs, 12% with two to come. There aren't a lot of better situations than that in hold 'em. Don't raise the weak lead. Flat-call and hook that fish for more!

When the turn card hits, if it's checked to you, check. Yes. Check. Don't risk getting check-raised, losing your nerve, folding the best hand. If you're really up against complete junk, you'll make more by checking the turn than betting.

Think about complete air, a hand like J7. This hand makes some weak stab at the pot on the flop. You call the bluff. Now what could he be planning with the check on the turn? Well, he's either intending to check-fold, which earns you zero on your turn bet, or he's planning to check-raise, which loses you the whole freaking pot when you fold to that genius play.

If you check the turn instead, the J7 might take another stab at the river, mistaking your check on the turn for an invitation to buy the pot. Now you call and shut that bluff down, getting an extra bet out of J7, who would've folded to a turn bet, and avoiding surrendering the pot to a dastardly J7 intending to raise the turn if you bet. Obviously, the same logic applies to AJ or whatever he might hold. And, of course, just in case you're against a tricky AK, it comes out breakeven anyway.

If you call the flop against the weak lead and your opponent continues the story with another bet on the turn, you should lean toward a raise, for all the reasons discussed above, except now you might be more inclined to put your opponent on a hand that you want to call down, since you are more likely to believe you have him buried, based on his weak lead on the flop.

One last note on these plays. If you do call the turn and your opponent checks the river, check back. This returns to the concept of opening action. You likely won't get called by a worse hand than yours after you called two streets on such a dry board (so you couldn't be drawing), but if you get raised, you'll have to fold. That means there's basically no value in your bet.

Likewise, if you raise the turn and your opponent calls, shut down the hand. You most likely have the worst hand and your opponent is telling you he's sticking with his holding. If he checks the river to you, check back. If he bets, folding is almost always correct.

Got it? Hopefully. But don't worry. You'll keep hearing these concepts over and over and over again; these are the most important concepts to master in becoming a winning player.

Top pair is the hardest hand to play, yet the most common situation that comes up outside of flopping nothing. If you're wondering why the vast majority of players lose money in this game, this is why. We're in the thick of it now. If the most common made hand is the most mistake-ridden and least understood, no wonder everyone is losing at this game. And lucky for you. Now you won't make those mistakes yourself.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, In Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Same AQ- or AJ-type hand. A player raises before the flop and you call in position. You go to the flop heads-up and the board comes A-9-3, rainbow.

Let's start with your opponent making a standard continuation bet. Here's a spot where most players raise, possibly because they've been instructed many times in many books to raise for information, to find out if their hand is any good.

But think about it: Would you ever raise with AA here? 99? 33? On this super-dry board against just one guy? Ha! Not in a million years. You don't want to let the fish off the hook, right? So what does your raise tell your opponent? That you certainly don't have those hands! You might think you're raising to get information, but all you're really doing is giving it.

Sadly, this is often the case with those who seek to find out something with a raise on the flop. By trying to extract information, you just reveal that your hand needs some help in knowing what it is. Oops.

So your opponent bets into you, let's say a c-bet of 500 into a pot of 1,000. By definition, the continuation bet tells you nothing about your opponent's hand. He's the pre-flop raiser, so obviously he can and will bet his whole range here, all the way from sets to complete misses. When he bets the 500, your choices are to call 500 or make it something like 1,500+.

Now, when a hand that has you beat like AK bets that 500, when you flat-call you'll lose 500. But when you raise to 1,800, what does AK do? He comes right over the top, putting you to a tough decision. And if you fold (which you might have to do), that's 1,800 you lost, when you could have lost just 500 at that point. Obviously, if you somehow find a call of the re-raise, though I can't imagine you would, you just lost a whole lot more.

Say your opponent doesn't have AK or better. Let's give him any of the hands worse than yours. When you raise his 500 lead to 1,800, one of two things will happen. If he has pure air, he's either re-raising or folding. And he might easily find a bluff-raise, since your raise announced that your hand is weak. If he folds, you win the same 500 you'd have won by calling. But if he re-raises you off your hand, then you've lost a whole pot that should have been yours by right of having the better hand.

Same with T9. His hand isn't that strong. He either has to give up the pot or play it as a bluff. If he bluffs and makes you fold the better hand, that's

a disaster by reopening the betting. It's also a disaster for your opponent holds AJ: You let him wigggle off the hook. If you raise, he might sense danger and go away.

So you gave him a chance to make a good fold and that's bad. Worse, if he's savvy, he might believe that his AJ is the better hand, since your raise reads weak, and three-bet you on a kind of a bluff-by-mistake. Without a supernatural read, you can't know whether you're way ahead or way behind and you hate having to choose.

Therefore, raising the c-bet from your opponent is kind of ugly. But by flat-calling behind, you do exactly what you set out to do. You minimize losses to better hands. You maximize gains against worse hands. And you evade the monstrously difficult task of trying to figure out if a re-raise is coming from a better hand, a worse hand that *thinks* it's a better hand, or someone smart enough to figure out you're vulnerable to a naked bluff. Good luck figuring out which.

Okay, your opponent continuation bets and now you know that you're flat-calling. So off we go to the turn, where your opponent either bets again or not. Among other things, this means your call on the flop got you two streets' worth of information for just 500. You got to see what your opponent looked like in two betting situations. For the cheap price of 500, you got to see him bet the flop and either bet or not bet the turn.

And now we're back at the same decision matrix as before.

Let's say he bets 1,000 on the turn, half-pot. Ask yourself the following two questions: *Is my opponent capable of folding a better hand if I raise? If I call and he bets the river, is he the type of opponent I'd have to call down?*

If the answer to the first question is yes, then that's a good sign a raise might be in order; you pick up the fold equity, the chance of winning a pot that really doesn't belong to you.

If the answer to the second question is yes as well, then a raise is definitely in order. If you're willing to put the money in to call the river anyway, why not just use those same chips to raise the turn? That way you might successfully bluff out the better hand, which you can never do if you just call down. You also never face a big river bluff, which makes your decision-making life easier.

Now obviously, if you're up against an opponent who could never fold a better hand, a raise doesn't make a lot of sense here. Also, if it's an opponent who'd never bet the river unless he had a huge hand, you can flat-call and fold if he bets a third time, or check if he checks the river to you. Unlike in the case where your opponent weak leads the flop into you, in the case where your opponent is continuation betting the flop, then taking another bet at the turn, you don't have enough information to assume you hold the best hand. So planning to call down to trap the bluff is less likely to be your play in this spot.

If your opponent checks the turn to you, you can check. As we've established, betting here has no upside and all downside. Against a hand like AK, you lose the same bet whether you bet the turn or call a bet on the river. (And you really should bet the river if he checks it to you again there.) Six of one, half a dozen of the other, against the better hand.

Against a worse hand, a bet on the turn is a complete debacle. Let's say your opponent has pure air, not that unlikely, since the c-bet from the pre-flop raiser doesn't mean he's connected with the board. Remember that when air checks the turn and you bet, he'll either fold, netting you zero, or check-raise, costing you the whole pot since you'll surely fold to that play, in this case 2,000, plus the 1,000 you just bet. But if you check the turn, you avoid that disastrous check-raise by closing down the action.

But wait! It gets better. You just gave your friend holding air a chance to bet the river. He may or may not. It doesn't really matter; you're freerolling now. If he does bet, you have an easy call and you pick up 1,000 extra from a hand that was never paying you on the turn. And you've induced a bluff line that can never work for your opponent, while shutting down the bluff line (the check-raise on the turn) that will actually give him a high success rate. Sweet!

If your opponent has a real hand like AJ, something good, but not quite as good as yours, you should be superleery of opening the action back up on the turn; AJ can accidentally bluff you. And how sick is this? If AJ does check-raise, he might actually think he has the better hand, so you won't get a single whiff of bluff off him, *because he doesn't think he's bluffing*. If you read him accurately you'll fold, because you read him as strong. But he only *thinks* he's strong. Actually, you have the better hand, but you jeopardize it by reopening the action. In this situation, it's always better to keep the action closed.

With a check behind on the turn, you can have your cake and eat it, too. AK will bet the river and you'll pay him a little, oh well. It was the same amount you would have lost by betting the turn anyway and at least you gave yourself a free shot to suck out. But AJ will bet the river, too, and then you'll pick up that 1,000 without ever risking being accidentally bluffed. And J7 might take a stab at picking up the pot on the river, too, and that's just absolutely free money— risk-free, too.

So there you have it. Against a better hand, you do better by checking behind on the turn. Against a worse hand, you do better. Against pure air, you do better; you avert the risk of a bluff on the turn that you can't call and you invite a bluff on the river that you can snap off.

To review: Whether you have the pre-flop lead or your opponent does, when you get bet into on the flop and you're holding a hand like top pair, your best line is to call behind, no matter whether your opponent's bet is a weak lead or a continuation bet.

Are you ready for the best news of all? Remember how you play your huge hands, your two pair or sets, heads-up in position? That's right, you flat-call in position, just as you're doing here.

Let's imagine you're facing the world's most attentive opponent. Even if he watches everything you do and processes it perfectly, *he can't know where you're at right here*. You might be on a monster. You might be on a middle-strength hand. You're playing exactly the same way with each holding, for reasons that make perfect math and game-theory sense and with perfect disguise. Tell me what's not to like. Tell me why you'd ever "mix it up" when playing correctly mixes it up so much already.

(And just to give you a sneak preview, when we get to bluffing, you'll see lots of times when you flat-call behind with nothing, too. How sick will that be? Your call behind on the flop could represent a huge hand, a fair hand, or no hand at all. How could your confused opponents then put you on a hand?)

There are some other situations where you can use the flat-call line of play effectively. For example, you're heads-up with an overpair to a low board, like KK looking at a board of 9-8-3. That's another circumstance where you're either way ahead and fading few outs, or way behind and holding few outs. Proceed as above. You can also play this way when you're not sure where you're at, on a board of T-T-4, for example, when you have two 9s. Again, counting the outs, you'll see that you're either crushed or cruising, but you might not know which and reopening the action is an invitation to disaster.

One last situation to cover where you're in position with a hand like top pair. Your opponent raises before the flop. You call with AQ or AJ. The board comes: It looks like a decent A-9-3 rainbow. Your pre-flop raising friend now checks.

What the hell is that? I hope your suspicions are raised as much as mine would be. Why did this player, who paid for the privilege of continuation betting on the flop, all of a sudden relinquish the lead with a check?

That's very unusual and means he's up to no good. Maybe he missed and is actually intending to check-fold, in which case a bet earns you nothing, but a check might induce a lead-out bluff on the turn. Or he missed and is planning to check-raise bluff if you bet, which will just lose you the

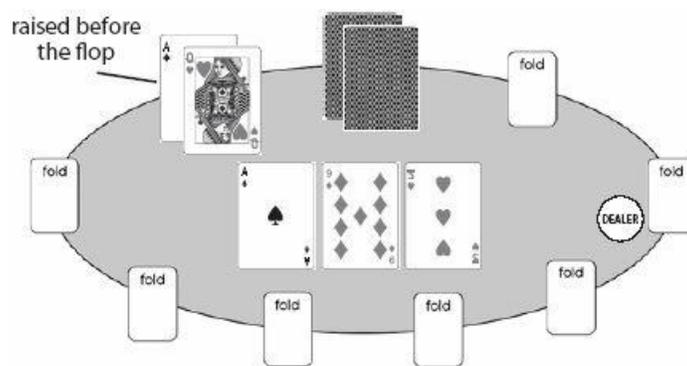
pot to the worse hand. Or he hit the board hard (the most likely case), so a bet is ill-advised, since you'd step into a hell of a trap for no apparent reason except that you clearly weren't listening to what your opponent was telling you when he checked away the lead on this dry board. Don't fall for it! If he checks the turn again, fall for it then. Who can resist a second check? If he bets the turn, flat-call and feel out the river. But try to keep this pot as small as possible all around.

It's so beautiful, it's scary. By checking the flop, you prevent J7 from check-raising you, but you *do* let him donk off 500 on the turn. After that, he's done and you win, even if you don't extract any further value. Meanwhile, AJ doesn't get to check-raise you off your hand with a holding he either does or doesn't think is ahead. And AK doesn't get to extract big value from you. You completely control the action, maximizing your gain, while minimizing your loss, keeping decision-making difficulty down, giving cover to your other holdings and, by the way, thinking about your poker at a whole new and much deeper level. Trust me, if you get this one thing right—controlling the action with your medium-strength hands—you'll make so much more money in this situation you'll want to give me a medal.

It might occur to you that checking on the flop gives your opponent a free chance to beat you if he has a hand like AJ or TT. While that's true, you have to remember that on these untextured boards, it's really not that big a risk. If he's not already ahead of you, he has only a few outs to catch up. If you're something like a 9-to-1 favorite with one to come (and you often will be here), you can afford to fade those odds. That's not where the risk comes from in this situation. The real must-avoid risk is opening the action up to a bluff. When you do that, your opponent doesn't have to hit his hand. All he has to do is raise you. And don't forget, you might be betting into a better hand. After all, your opponent suspiciously checked away the lead. Thus, in the ... hierarchy of bad things that could happen ... paying off a better hand or getting blown off the pot are both orders of magnitude worse than fading two or three outs to someone's trips or kicker.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, Out of Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

Now let's investigate this metric when you're out of position. You still don't know if you're way ahead or behind, and that's bad, but now it's worse: You also don't get to act last. You got into this situation by, say, raising pre-flop with your AQ and getting one caller behind. You go to the A-9-3 flop with the lead, but without position.



Obviously, you're betting into this untextured board on the flop. Given that you'll continuation bet most of your misses, you'll sure bet when you hit. If you get raised, stop and think about what your opponent could have. Would he raise with AA? 99? 33? Almost definitely not. Poker players are greedy bastards and there's no way he'll raise you out of the pot. A player holding such a monster will flat-call, and rightly so, to try to keep you on the hook. So the raise actually tells you that you probably have the better hand. Re-raise. Calling is a problem, because you're out of position. On the turn, if you check after calling the raise on the flop, you probably won't get a bet behind you and if you bet out on the turn, you won't get played with unless you're beat.

So just re-raise on the flop. At least that gives your opponent a chance to lay down a better hand than yours. It's not like AQ or AK has an easy call there. So play in a way that gives you some fold equity. Once you call the flop, you lose easy options for the turn, since you just gave your hand away.

If you continuation bet the flop and get flat-called, which you often will, check on the turn. Why? See it from the other guy's point of view. You know that if you were in position with a weaker hand like this and your opponent bet the turn, you'd mostly raise, right? So if you're out of position, a bet on the turn opens you up to exactly the kind of play that you yourself would make. Don't fall into the very trap you spring when you can.

Remember, you don't know if you're way ahead or way behind. If you're way ahead against a hand like AJ or worse, you don't want to surrender a pot that's rightfully yours. But if you're way behind, against a hand like AK or better, you don't want to lose more than you have to. When you bet on the turn in this type of situation, you open yourself up to a big raise that could be a bluff or a better hand and you *just don't know*. All you do know is that you bet the flop on a dry board and got called and now you're facing a scary raise on the turn that's almost always going to trigger a fold from you. So don't invite that disaster. Keep the pot small when you're out of position and in doubt.

You don't have to worry too much about projecting weakness. After all, you're not folding if he bets. So you might as well just check the turn. If it's checked back, bet the river.

But if he bets for you, now it gets interesting. You can go for a check-raise. Remember, in position holding one pair against a player who checks to you on the turn, it's really important that you check back and close the action down; you want to avoid getting check-raised when your hand is so vulnerable.

Well, lucky for you, not everyone is that savvy. Most players, as you recall, think they need to bet their mid-strength hands to protect them on the turn. And that bet opens them up to a yummy check-raise from you. In other words, you just sprang the trap they're not smart enough to stay out of. This keeps you from having to make decisions out of position on the river (always desirable); it also gets better hands to fold. Think about how strong your line of play reads to a hand like AK. You c-bet the flop, then go for a check-raise on the turn? That hand reads ridiculously strong and that's how you get AK to fold.

In a lot of ways, the same logic we applied to raising the turn in position applies here. If you just check-call the turn, you'd probably check and call a river bet, too. But that line of play means you can never win a pot that doesn't belong to you. If you're willing to put calling money in the pot on the river anyway, why not use those chips aggressively on the turn? Check-raise your opponent and give yourself a chance to win it right there.

By checking the turn, you force a hand like J7 to bluff you in a way that can't ever win, because when he bets, you check-raise. You also let AJ bet

for value by mistake. A bet by the turn, on the other hand, gives both those hands a chance to win the pot, opening you up to a raise that your hand can't stand to face. If AK gets sticky, it's winning the money from you anyway. At least by check-raising, you give that hand an opportunity to fold, which you never do by betting out on the turn. Across the board, you're keeping yourself from having to make tricky decisions by checking the turn, while the check-raise puts the tricky decisions on your opponents. That sounds like just the kind of poker you want to play.

Again, keep in mind that if you're against the right kind of passive opponent who would never ever bet the river without a huge hand, you can take a small line of play and check and call on the turn with the intention of checking the river to see what happens. A player like this will have a tighter range of hands he'll bet on the turn, so it's less likely he'll be bluffing in that spot. His river bet will likewise come from real strength, so you never risk incorrectly folding the pot to him there. If he's bold enough to take another bet at the pot, he has you beat.

So you see that the same principles apply out of position as in position. When you hold vulnerable hands like top pair, be very careful about opening up the action to your opponent. The biggest disaster in poker is to make a pot mistake. If you bet the turn when you're out of position, you open yourself to just that disaster. By checking, you not only keep the pot small when your opponent checks back, you also let him open himself up to just the sort of disastrous raise-fold that you yourself avoid.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Now let's put you out of position without the lead and see what happens.

For example, let's say you call a pre-flop raiser with AQ or AJ in the big blind. Obviously, you'll consider the position of the pre-flop bettor. If he's tight and early, you might not call at all, but let's put him in middle or late position with no one but you, in the big blind, playing along. You're facing the same untextured A-9-3 flop.

By now, you know that you can't lead out; that's a weak lead and it defines your hand as likely an ace you're not that happy with, precisely what you have. You might think that your bet is probing for information, but you're actually giving, not getting, information. So you're checking for sure. If your opponent checks behind, you check again on the turn, for the same reason we've been seeing all along: His check is super-suspicious. Why would the pre-flop raiser check there? Isn't he supposed to continuation bet? So if he doesn't, that should look unusual to you and can only mean one of two things: Either he's a super weak player who whiffed and is so bad he won't even take a shot at the pot or he's trying to trick you, because he hit the flop pretty hard.

If you bet the turn after it goes check-check on the flop and now your opponent raises, where are you at? You're either up against a much better hand that trapped you or a much worse hand that's trying to raise you off a bluff. What a mess. That's exactly why you don't bet in these spots. But if you check the turn, there's no way to get raised.

Remember, when you're up against a hand that has completely missed the board, if you bet the turn, he'll either fold, which wins you zero, or he'll raise you, which loses you the whole pot. But if you check, what's that bluffer to do? Do you know any players who'll let two checks pass? There's like three of them, scattered around the planet. Everyone else will say, "Well, isn't he weak?" and come after you. And now you'll call, once again inducing a bluff that can't work.

Notice I said, "Call." I didn't say check-raise the turn as I did when you have the lead going into the flop, because now you have a lot of information about what your opponent might be holding. By checking away the lead behind you on the flop, your opponent has already narrowly defined his hand as either seriously huge or seriously a miss and nothing in between. So if you check-raise, you're either check-raising a bluffing player who'll just fold, earning you no extra chips for your efforts, or you're check-raising a player holding the world, which isn't really a good strategy. So check-call, then feel the river out.

When you get to the river out of position in this spot, you really have to take a read. The good news is, you've gotten some good looks at your opponent. You've seen him check the flop behind your check. You've seen him bet the turn and gotten his reaction when you called. Now you need to do a little thinking and figure out where he's at. If you figure him for top pair or better, you can lead with a defensive bet, which we discuss later at length, or check with the intention of folding if he bets. If you think his hand is worse than yours, you can check to induce the bluff. By this time, you should have at least a little extra information to go on. Notice how your only tricky decision on the hand comes on the river, when you have the benefit of all available information.

And maybe you get lucky and he just checks it down anyway.

To review, from out of position, you check to the player with the lead. If he checks behind, you check the turn to call, not check-raise, if he bets. You'll do better with this line against big misses that checked the flop, but could bluff re-raise on the turn, and you'll do about the same against the big hits, since you'll lose the bet on the turn whether you lead out or he does. So against your opponent's range, the check is a net-plus play.

Okay, back to the flop. You called a raise out of position and checked to the leader, who now bets. At this point, if you're like most people, you'll have an almost unquenchable urge to check-raise. After all, you have AQ, right? Damn straight! But let's do the numbers, because from a money point of view, it turns out that a check-raise here is a pretty bad idea.

If you check and he bets 500, your check-raise will be something like 1,500 to 2,000. Problem is, AK isn't folding. Two pair isn't folding. A set isn't folding. They're either re-raising, putting you to a tough decision now, or flat-calling, putting you to a tough decision later. If they re-raise and you fold, that's 1,500 to 2,000 you lost. If you call, that's a huge chunk of your stack, if not all of it.

On the other hand, if you check-call, you're in for 500 on the flop instead of 1,500 to 2,000. And the check-call defends against the bluff re-raise. If you check-raise this flop and you're up against the garden-variety continuation bet with nothing, your opponent will either fold, earning you nothing extra with the check-raise or—gasp!—re-raise, losing you the pot. When you check-raise this flop, aren't you pretty much announcing that you don't have a set? If you had a set, you'd be playing possum, not check-raising your opponent, because let's face it, you're a greedy bastard, too.

So a savvy opponent will read your check-raise as weak and that opens you up to the bluff re-raise, which loses you the whole freaking pot. If you check and call, you shut that play down. It's also an easier way to play the hand. You never put yourself to a difficult decision. Put simply, the harder your choices are, the smaller you want to keep the pot on the flop.

You've wisely shut down the action on the flop with your genius check-call. Now what do you do on the turn? By now, I hope you're screaming, "Check!" Yes. You can't bet out; that opens you up to a player who, like yourself, is willing to raise the turn with not too much to get you to lay down your hand. Top pair is too weak to have to face that kind of play, so avoid it by, again, checking on the turn. It also happens to encourage our dear pre-flop raiser to take a second barrel at the pot, a second barrel that won't bluff you off your hand.

If you lead out and your opponent bluffs by raising, it will work close to 100% of the time. But if you check and your opponent takes a second stab at the pot, it will work 0% of the time. You're never folding to that bet, sometimes calling, and often check-raising for all the reasons we've discussed. The check-raise avoids having to figure out a proper line of play, out of position, on the river, which is always difficult to navigate. It punishes players who like to take second-barrel bluffs, discouraging them from doing so, which will work in your favor in the future. It also gives better hands the opportunity to fold and that's pure gold in this game. Obviously, some exceptions apply, mostly against passive players you don't

need to control, because they mostly control themselves.

The moral of the story? When you're heads-up with top pair on a dry board, save the fast play for later in the hand. Players often feel (justifiably!) uncertain with a hand like top pair and want to get the hand over with quickly. They raise or weak-lead on the flop to "find out where they're at," explicitly revealing their lack of strength *and* opening themselves up to folding the best hand. If they have to find out where they're at, it obviously means they don't already know, which they would if their hand was strong. Ergo, weak hands probe. By waiting to make these big actions on the turn, raising when your opponent gives you the opportunity, you get to be the one forcing bad folds on the other guy. Playing fast on a dry flop makes your hand read weak. Delaying till the turn makes your hand read stronger than it actually is.

While pouncing on opportunities to raise on the turn, you also want to make sure to shut action down with well-placed checks, so as to not give your opponent the same courtesy. While you're leveraging your opponents' ill-advised action-opening bets on the turn, you check in those same situations to avoid being put in tough spots where you have to surrender pots. To sum up the turn play:

- If you're in position and your opponent checks to you, check and shut down the action.
- If you're in position and your opponent is kind enough to bet into you, generally raise.
- If you're out of position, don't bet into your opponent and open yourself up to a raise.
- If you're out of position and check, punish your opponent's ill-advised bet by check-raising, unless the pre-flop leader checked behind you on the flop.

In other words, check if he checks, raise if he bets. Remember these words and you'll go far, Grasshopper.

Top Pair, Multi-Way, In Position, With or Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Resetting the situation, you have AQ and you raise on the button. Only now, instead of taking the flop heads-up, you manage to attract three callers. Or you call a raise with AQ, probably suited, and pick up the blinds along the way.

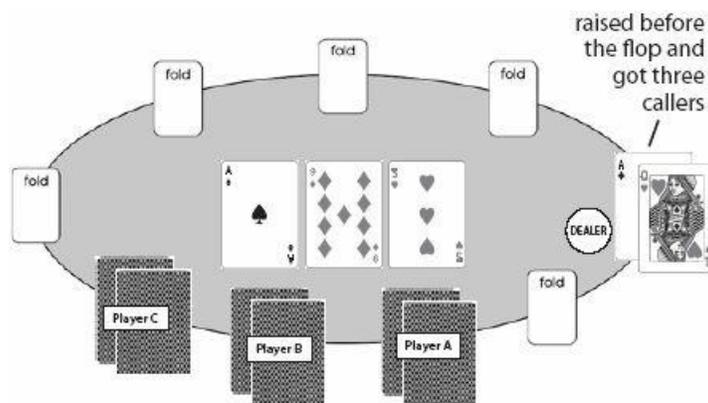
Once again, when talking about multi-way pots, it's much less important to worry about the pre-flop lead, because when multiple players are in a hand, the lead matters less, while hitting the board matters much more. The lead is an important concept when figuring out who'll win a pot in which both players miss or improve in a weak way. When four players see a flop, someone improves, so the lead recedes in importance.

Back to the situation at hand: You have AQ in a four-way raised pot and the flop comes untextured, like A-9-3 no suits. Now you're in a familiar situation in terms of evaluating the strength of your hand. The classes of hands you're concerned with are AK or better, 9x or AJ or worse, all the way down to Air Jordan. When the board becomes a quandary for your AQ, like this could-be-good or could-be-perilous A-9-3 no suits, all you know is your hand is either way ahead or way behind. Multi-way, the big difference is that if you're way ahead, there are likely to be more outs against you among the other players' hands.

Let's say you have the best hand right now, but you're against one player holding AJ and another holding 98. If you were heads-up against the AJ, only three outs would be out there against you. Against the 98 alone, there would be five. But if both players are in a pot with you, they have a total of eight outs between them, so the chances of your losing the pot are almost as good as losing to one player on a flush draw. In multi-way pots, even a dry board is essentially textured. And it gets worse as the number of opponents increases. More players equals fewer safe cards for your hand. A textured board, then, has either multiple cards working together or multiple opponents working against you.

With this in mind, we'll start hunting for ways to reduce texture by reducing these multi-way pots to heads-up situations. Top pair, in particular, really likes being against one player; it's already hard enough to evaluate. Adding more players to the pot reduces your clarity and you want to do everything you can to increase it.

So here's you, sitting in position D, as usual.



Let's say that everyone checks to you. First, can you afford to give off a free card here? The answer has to be no. When the pot is multi-way, we're looking at a functionally textured board. So no free cards. Therefore, bet. Bet around your normal 50%-75% of the pot. Give yourself a nice little price (in case you're wrong and your hand is no good), while offering anyone trying to draw out on you a bad price (in case you're right and your hand is good). Sure, you might be up against AK and if you knew that, you'd check. But given that the cards are face down, you'll lose money to AK no matter how you play this hand.

The real win here is that you might get action from air, because your bet in position looks pretty much like, well, a position bet. Remember, you're only betting about half-pot, a cheap price for a stab at it. Obviously, if everyone folds, that's great. If someone check-raises and everyone else clears out, well, you have a situation on your hands. You have to read the player check-raising to figure out if your hand is good. Make some assumptions based on where the check-raise is coming from and, particularly, whether the check-raiser has a legitimate reason to be taking that action with a big hand.

Let's say everyone checks to you in last position and you bet. Players A and B fold. If player C now check-raises you, that's strange. Think about it. Why is he check-raising? He's already heads-up. The board isn't scary. And he checked as the second-to-last player to act with no guarantee of a bet from you. The check-raise feels a little like an afterthought here, as if once the other players dropped out, he thought, "Well, that really looks like a position bet, so here's my chance!"

This check-raise, then, is one you can give less credit to. Therefore, think hard about re-raising, playing it exactly as you would against a check-

raise on a dry board in a heads-up pot (since you are now heads-up). Flat-calling doesn't really work here. The flat-call gives away your hand on a board with no obvious draws.

What if it's player A, not C, who check-raises you? This situation is different. Player A is showing much more strength. First, with three players to act behind him, he can check with the plan to check-raise, figuring that he's more likely to get someone to open the action for him. And when he check-raises you, it's logical he might do this with a bigger hand, like AK or two pair, to knock out the other two players and protect his holding. Granted, he probably doesn't make this play with AA, but he also probably doesn't make it with nothing, as that would be dangerous with three players left to act behind him. So you can definitely give player A credit for something. How big a something will be up to you. But in general, credit the early-position check-raiser with more strength than his late-position counterpart.

Now, if there's a check-raise from up front and so much as a single call in between, you fold your AQ and don't lose any more money. You might have one liar out there, but you don't have two (or more). I mean, there are no draws on board, so what's someone calling that big check-raise with? Not nothing. Something. You're dead. Either dead to the check-raiser or dead to the caller. Easy fold.

Similarly, if you bet and get multiple callers, you can be sure that, with no obvious draws on the board, someone has something. If multiple players call on the flop, play with extreme caution on the turn. If it's checked around to you on the turn, that's a good time to check and see the river with the intention to call a bet, for all the reasons discussed in the heads-up section. To bet here is to get killed by a bigger hand and/or open yourself up to nasty bluffs. You clearly don't want to open up the action. You can still call the river, using chips you didn't barf off on the turn.

If there's a bet in front of you on the turn, treat it much like the heads-up situation when you have the opportunity. If no one calls between you and the bettor, this is a great opportunity to raise on the turn. This will sound familiar: You'll probably call the river anyway, so why not use the river money to raise on the turn instead? You'll look super-strong and maybe get a cagey AK or weak two pair to muck. In short, if player A bets the turn and B and C fold, raise. If A checks, B bets, and C folds, it's even better to raise, because you can push A off the pot. Likewise, if A and B check and C bets, raise to drive out the checkers.

You don't just knee-jerk raise, though. You analyze, using the same principles to decide whether to raise the turn in a heads-up pot when the out-of-position player leads into you. As in that circumstance, you need to believe three things: that you can get a better hand to fold; that the bet on the river won't be meaningful enough that you could fold with the confidence that your hand is no good; and that the other player's hand might beat yours, such that calling on the turn to induce a bet on the river wouldn't make much sense.

Let's take the latter consideration first. If you believe the other player has the worse hand, you'd still probably raise the turn to knock out players yet to act behind you. So if B or C bets into you, you'd tend toward raising, even if you thought you had them beat, to knock A and/or B out of the pot, thus reducing the outs against you. But if A bets and B and C fold, now you'd flat-call if you think you have A beat and want to trap him, calling the river if he bets.

As for the other two considerations, you take a read. You have to figure out if you're calling with the intention to fold to a river bet. First, are you suspicious of the player/players who have checked? If you suspect they might be trapping, it's better to flat-call the bet on the turn and feel out the rest of the hand. If they fold behind you, phew! If they raise, you found out what you needed to know and got off the hand pretty cheap.

Second, is the player who bet the turn unimaginative and passive? If so, the most you want to do is call with the intention of folding the river if he persists (assuming he bets again and you don't improve). But in a multi-way pot, you can also consider folding when an unimaginative player calls the flop and bets the turn, particularly if he's sitting up front and leading into the field. That line from a passive player should read pretty strong to you. So consider folding in that spot to that guy.

What if you bet the flop and get exactly one caller? Now you're playing a heads-up pot and your life has just become much easier. So re-read the heads-up section for how to play the turn in position on a dry board. The play proceeds exactly the same. If your lone caller checks the turn, check with the intention to call a bet on the river or bet the river if he checks. If your lone caller bets into you on the turn, raise, unless you strongly believe that you have the better hand (so you intend to pick off a river bet) or a bet from him on the river would almost always mean you're beat (so you intend to fold the river to a bet).

To summarize, when it's checked to you on the flop and you're in position with a hand like AQ on an A-9-3 board, you *have* to bet. You bet in that spot with big hands, bluffs, and hands in the middle. A check means giving a free card on a functionally textured board. A bet here also gives you the best chance at getting the pot heads-up. If you check, you'll still be multi-way on the turn. If you bet, they might all fold or you might get a single caller or a single check-raiser, all of which clarifies your situation immensely.

Now let's say you still have the AQ in a multi-way pot. You're still in position. And you're looking at that same flop of A-9-3 rainbow. Only now instead of everyone checking to you, someone bets out. What you do depends on the action that is in front of you. Say the action goes check, check, and then the player to your right bets into you. This hand doesn't have to be strong, especially if the player happened to be the pre-flop raiser. With two people showing weakness by checking and only one player to act behind him, player C might be betting just to try to pick up the pot cheap. Since you can judge this hand to be on the weaker side much of the time, you're in a great position to flat-call and play the rest of the hand in position against a hand you're probably ahead of. Assuming players A and B fold after you call, you play subsequent streets exactly as if you'd gone into the flop heads-up and your opponent bet into you. If he checks the turn, check. If he bets, raise, unless you believe you have the better hand.

Why shouldn't you raise the cutoff player in order to ensure shutting out players A and B? They'll fold if they have nothing or check-raise if that was their plan all along. And they'll take these actions regardless of whether you call or raise. And if someone check-raises into two (or more) players, that indicates huge strength, so you get to fold for the price of a call, not a raise. By the way, if you're thinking that the early-position check-raise is a squeeze play, consider that it's coming from a player who's out of position *and* raising into two players who chose to continue on a board with no obvious draws. That's usually not a squeeze, that's strength.

Even if player A or B does have a piece of the flop, say middle-pair medium-kicker or top-pair bad-kicker, you don't mind him calling here. By overcalling your bet, they've already paid a price—the wrong price—for improving their hands. Remember, they're looking at, at most, five outs, so they only have about a 10% chance of hitting on the turn. They need 9-to-1 from a pot that's probably offering around 4-to-1, so you don't mind them calling along. Say they go into the flop with 2,000 in chips in the pot. Now player C bets 1,000 and you call 1,000. That puts 4,000 in the pot for a call of 1,000 by player A or B chasing just five outs. That's bad math, so you're okay with him tagging along.

Remember, then, that with such a dry board, you really don't have to worry about thinning the field or denying proper odds on the flop; the tradeoff of running into a check with intent to check-raise is too great. Your controlling idea should be to get maximum information for minimum investment of chips. And the call tells you most of what you need to know, allowing you to get to the turn cheap. Most of the time, the action will go check, check, bet, call (by you), fold, fold. So you'll end up playing a heads-up pot, which is ideal, for minimal investment.

Occasionally, you'll get a real call-fest, with the action going check, check, bet, call, call, call. When that happens, almost no card on the turn can be considered a blank. After all, three opponents liked that dry flop enough to call a bet on the flop. Some might have made hands. One or more might have you beat already. But all at least have outs. Heads-up, you wouldn't worry so much about people hitting their kickers, but here you have

to. Remember, the two ways for a board to be textured are multiple flop cards related to each other and multiple opponents working against you. If everyone checks to you on the turn, you can't afford to give a free card, so bet. You're less afraid of opening yourself up to a raise bluff, because people are much less likely to be bluffing in a multi-way pot. If you get check-raised on the turn, you can fold.

If someone does your betting for you on the turn, the same lines of play apply as when you bet the flop, with your call, raise, or fold decisions dependent on where the bet comes from and how you read your opponents. As before, the more players to act behind you, the more you should lean toward a raise to knock the remaining players out of the hand and get a better hand to possibly fold. Also, if a weak-tight player bets into the field, consider a fold instead of a call, particularly if that player is first to act.

If there's a bet, and two callers are between you and the bettor, lean toward folding. There aren't a lot of hands you can put the other players on that don't beat you. If only one caller stands between you and the bettor, you can raise as a semi-squeeze play, putting player A in a tight spot with player B still to act behind him. That guy will fold a stronger range of hands than normal in that spot; then you only have to worry about player B folding. Generally speaking, you want to be more willing to play against fewer callers and less willing to play against more.

To review, if the action on the flop comes from your immediate right, flat-call and see where you're at on the turn. If you've gotten heads-up, play it like any other heads-up hand. If it's still multi-way on the turn and everyone checks to you, bet. However, if there's a bet and more than one call (or raise) on the turn, you can pretty confidently get away from your AQ, because if someone didn't hit his kicker on the turn, he's been sitting on two pair or a set from the start.

Okay, we've covered what to do when you're in position with AQ and everyone checks to you on a flop like A-9-3 rainbow. We've also covered what to do when you get a bet from the player directly to your right. Next, let's look at what happens when the lead comes from someone in first or second position.

If player A bets and B and C fold, you can flat-call and play the rest of the hand according to your heads-up recipe. Easy enough. If he checks the turn, you check, and if he bets the turn you raise, unless the usual exceptions apply.

If player A bets and B or C (but not both) calls, you can flat-call too, but for a very different reason. In this case, you're not just calling, you're *overcalling* and that's a clear signifier of strength. No obvious draws on the board means your opponents won't think you're drawing when you call. Your opponents also won't think you're calling to float, a play generally reserved for heads-up situations. So they'll have to figure you for a real hand, one you're willing to pit against two players. No need to raise, as your call already signals enough strength for you to take control of the hand on the turn.

If the action on the turn goes check, check to you, you bet against the two opponents. This plays differently than heads-up, where if it's checked to you on the turn, you're supposed to check behind. Your call on the flop indicated such strength that you're not likely to get bluffed, and only the strongest hands will likely check-raise you here. In other words, by overcalling on the flop, you leverage the traffic. In their view, you can't be on a draw, you're probably not overcalling with a crappy ace, and you're likely not floating. That all adds up to a good ace or better, so a check-raise on the turn from any of them means they can beat that. Good news: You don't risk folding the best hand.

If one player folds and one calls, play the river with caution, checking behind if it's checked to you. After all, that caller has something, right? And he's unlikely to fold the river once he calls you on the turn. If he leads into you, take a read. If you think the bet is defensive, meant to minimize his loss with a hand he's unsure of, you can easily call, or raise if you believe he'll fold AK or better in this situation. If you think the bet is real, decide whether you think you have the better hand enough of the time to warrant a call. For example, if the bet offers you 3-to-1 from the pot, do you believe you'll win with your AQ here at least 25% of the time? If yes, call. If no, fold.

If you bet the turn, both players call, then player A bets out on the river and player B calls, lean strongly toward folding. I mean, seriously, what on Earth can you beat here? A crazy player betting AT into two people on the river and another wacko calling with worse than that? That seems like a stretch, no? If player A checks and player B bets, flat-call. If A check-raises, you have an easy fold. If A bets and B folds, take a read whether the bet is defensive, then follow the same thinking as above.

Let's say the action isn't checked to you on the turn after your overcall on the flop. Instead, player A bets and player B folds. Now, just play the hand as if you're heads-up. Lean toward a raise, but call if you think the river bet will be meaningful enough to trigger an easy fold or if you're sure you have your opponent beat. If A checks and B bets, lean toward flat-calling. Player A is either checking to fold or checking to trap and, again, he'll take that action whether you call or raise. By calling, you get away cheaper. Not only that, but player B is likely to be weaker here. He didn't raise on the flop and his bet on the turn doesn't have to mean that much after A checks. For these reasons, you can flat-call B on the turn. If A folds, you're heads-up to the river. On the river if B checks, check back and show it down. If he bets, take the same reads as usual.

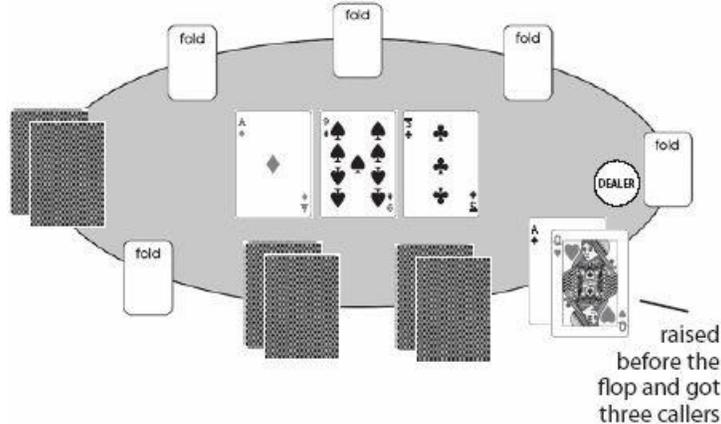
What if A bets out on the turn, then B raises? You have an easy fold. You already signaled strength with your call on the flop, yet both players are still willing to give that kind of action? Don't get it in your head that they're just making a play here. Even if all you see in front of you is a bet on the turn and a call, not a raise, still consider folding, depending on how loose your opponents are. Your call on the flop signaled sufficient strength that their involvement in front of you on the turn indicates indifference to your strength.

With a hand like AQ on an A-9-3-x board, you're basically hoping that player A has lost his mind and bet into two players on the turn with AJ or worse and that B has somehow managed to call with AJ or worse. That seems unlikely at best. Obviously, the looser (or drunker) the players, the greater likelihood that this mass insanity has taken place. If you choose to stay in the hand, be sure to raise, since your call on the turn mandates a call on the river, so you might as well use your river-calling money on the turn aggressively. This might make player A lay down with AK or a weak two-pair hand, since he has to worry about player B behind him. It's happened before and at least it gives you the opportunity to win without the best hand. So if it goes bet and call in front of you on the turn, either raise or fold, nothing in between.

As a final note, here's one more reason to overcall, rather than raise, on the flop with a bet and a call in front of you. If you raise, you really don't want anyone to call; that would mean you're beat. In other words, by raising the flop instead of overcalling, you turn AQ into a flat-out bluff. That seems like not the thing to do with a decently strong hand. It puts you in a position of either winning nothing more or losing a lot more. All-around not good.

Top Pair, Multi-Way, Out of Position, With the Lead, Untextured Board

When you've raised pre-flop, gotten three callers behind you, and flopped pretty good, hitting A♦-9♠-3♣, the board looks like this.



What you do here is lead out and hope that not a lot happens. In the best case, everyone folds and you win. Second-best scenario has you getting just one caller, so that you can play it according to your heads-up strategy and check on the turn. If you get multiple callers with this dry board, your AQ isn't looking so good, so you have to check on the turn in that case too. Should one person then bet and everyone else fold, you can either check-call and feel out the river or check-raise, depending on your opponent, just as you would heads-up. If you check-call, you'll either check or defensive bet the river, depending on your opponent's aggressiveness and the range of hands you put him on.

But that's at the end of the hand. Back here on the flop, if you had the lead pre-flop, you'll want to keep it here, but whether you get one caller or several, you have to check on the turn. Against one caller, you'd play out the hand like you're heads-up, going for the check-raise on the turn. If your lone opponent checks behind you on the turn, you'd bet the river. Same line as heads-up. If you get multiple callers, you can check the turn and look for opportunities to make the pot heads-up.

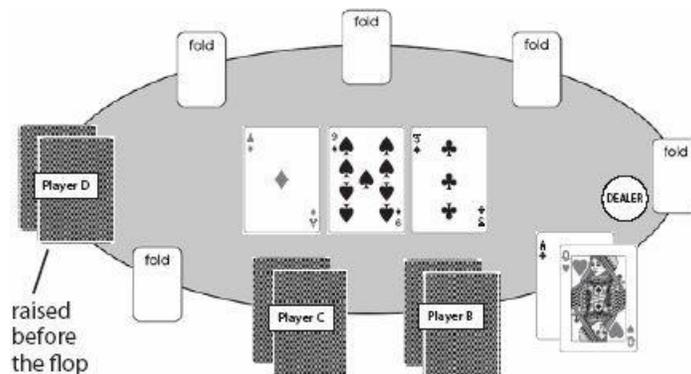
Any time a player bets behind your check and you're next to act, you can take a read.

If you believe a check-raise can win the pot right there, go for it. If you think you have the worst hand and can't bluff it, fold. If you feel calling is warranted, because of the type of opponent you're against (same decision as heads-up), flat-call. Just look for situations where you can follow the same strategies you would if you were heads-up. If your check on the turn generates a bet-fest or a bet- and raise-fest, now you have an easy fold and got off the hand cheap.

Obviously, if you lead on the flop and all hell breaks loose, you're done with the hand. Remember, you're not looking at a board with draws, so if the action goes bet, call, raise, or bet, raise, call, you can make a very confident fold.

Top Pair, Multi-Way, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Untextured Board

Now let's take the lead away from you. Let's say the pre-flop action went limp, limp, raise and you called in the big blind. The limpers both called, so you get to play this hand out of position, without the lead, against three opponents. Unlike if you had a big hand here, you certainly don't want to lead into the field, inviting either a raise or a multi-way pot, which means you're checking and seeing what happens.



If it's checked to the pre-flop raiser who now bets in position, you'll call, not raise. Since players B and C have indicated weakness by their checks, most likely they'll fold here and you get to play the rest of the hand heads-up. If they do raise after a bet and a call, you can assume strength. Again, you get to fold for a lower cost.

If you check-call and get one or more callers behind you, with no obvious draws on the board, again you have to ask yourself, "What the hell do these people have?" You'll check again on the turn and take a look at the action. If B or C suddenly takes the lead away and D calls, you can certainly consider getting off the hand for cheap by folding. Any time there's a bet and a raise, you're done.

If it's checked back to the leader again and he bets, you can take another call and see what any player or players behind you might do. You have the option of check-raising here if you think it can win the pot. That's a very strong play and against the right opponents, it might very well work, but understand that it's more of a bluff than a check-raise for value. You'll have a tendency to check-call and see what this guy does behind. If you check on the turn, player B bets, and C and D fold, you can either call or raise, depending on whether you think a raise will generate a fold. If you check on the turn and player B bets and gets called in either one or two places, you've got to consider folding; again, there's nothing to give anyone on that dry board in terms of draws.

When you check the flop and everyone checks behind, you can certainly take a shot on the turn. You might as well find out right there if your hand is good or if someone checked a set on the flop. If fireworks break out, oh well. If you get one caller, you can check it down or check-call on the river, just as you would in this situation heads-up. If you get more than one caller, you'll check the river and see what happens. If there's just one bettor and no callers, you'll have to take a read, but if there's a bet and a call, you have an easy fold. No point in overcalling; you know your AQ can't be the

best hand.

Decision-making in some multi-way pots can actually be easier than it first appears. Multiple bettors or callers define the relative strength that's out against you. And remember that any time the pot gets down to two players, you have your good solid heads-up strategies to default back to.

Still, multi-way pots can be a mess in the sense that multiple players tend to texturize the board and imperil your top-pair good-kicker holding.

And what happens when the board is textured to begin with? Well, that's what we'll look at next.

Top Pair, Textured Board

Doing Two Things at Once

The problem with textured boards is not just that they *are* so textured, but that they *look* so textured. If you're trying to get full value out of a hand like AQ against a hand like AJ and two suited cards are on board, you have to worry about the third suited card coming, not just because it might give your opponent a flush, but also because it will totally queer your action when it hits, or cause you to get bluffed off your hand.

Looking at an untextured board like A-9-3 rainbow, your opponent holding AJ can think of all kinds of reasons to call. For one, he probably thinks he has the best hand and isn't too worried about being drawn out on. That makes it easy for him to play on a dry board. He might also call on the flop if the board is textured, but if that texture completes on the turn, he's running for cover like a rabbit at the sound of hounds. Thus we can say that:

OBVIOUS TEXTURE WILL KILL YOUR ACTION *BECAUSE IT'S OBVIOUS TEXTURE*

Then again, texture also gives your opponents three ways to beat your medium-strength hands: with a better hand; with a draw that gets there; or with a bluff.

As we saw with our monster hands, when the board is textured, you have to bet to protect. And as with big hands, medium-strength hands find themselves in the peculiar position of trying to do two things at once. They want to dodge difficult decisions, but they also want worse hands to pay off. Complicating the picture, medium-strength hands, unlike monsters, aren't the clear favorite before the texture hits. They could be behind to begin with.

Talking of texture, you've noticed by now that when we contemplate textured boards, the examples we use involve mostly flush draws. This isn't by accident, nor is it because flush draws have one more out (nine) than open-ended straight draws (eight). The reason we look so hard at flush draws is that when the texture hits, it's there for all to see. You wouldn't think that intelligent poker players would overlook straight draws—though one could argue about how intelligent most poker players actually are—but they often do.

Straight texture is much *much* harder to spot than flush texture. It's less in your face. Sometimes it's practically invisible. If you're looking at a board like A-Q-8 and your opponent is sitting on a double-gutshot draw with JT, will you be scared when a king or 9 comes off? It just doesn't look like the texture hit.

Flush cards, on the other hand, are crystal clear. This is why, among other things, they make for such marvelous bluffing opportunities against certain opponents, a situation we'll discuss in the bluffing section.

In the meantime, we'll continue what we've been doing: looking for lines of play that minimize risk, maximize gain, dodge tricky decisions, and play blind to the strength of our opponents' holdings. And though I'll keep using flush draws to illustrate these lines of play, I trust you to be savvy and attentive enough to extrapolate them into straight-draw situations, even the sneaky double-gutter ones.

As we saw when considering medium-strength hands on untextured boards, if you play your hands fast, you end up with a big pot on your hands and you've only gotten to see your opponent act once. Often, however, for the price of a modest bet on the flop, you got to see your opponent's reactions on three streets, particularly when you're in position: the flop, when you bet; the turn, when you check behind his check; and the river, where all those looks at your opponent can be really useful. In a sense, you're buying information at a bargain price and what's not to like about that? Thus, we'll continue to look for a solid line of play that minimizes risk and maximizes information, even when the board is coordinated.

But if you think about it, this line of play on dry boards makes figuring out your opponent's holding kind of a bonus. Your bets are designed to be blind to your opponent's holding, so you really don't give a rat's ass what he has. Sure, if you face a third bet on the river, you'll have to figure things out. That's why against many players, again, you'll take your river-calling money and raise with it on the turn. It's also why against a passive player, you don't need to sweat it; he's not taking that third barrel unless he has you beat. How great is it ... how frickin' *great* is it ... to know that you're making the right bet for the situation without knowing or even caring what your opponent holds?

And not for nothing, but consider the psychological benefit. If you get used to playing that way—correct line of play, blind to the other guy's cards—all you're trying to do is to find and execute the proper line of play. Do that and you've won, no matter whether you win this pot or not. So not only are you blind to your opponent's holding, you're also blind to the outcome. You've set yourself free from the toxic notion that winning the pot equals proper play and losing the pot equals mistake.

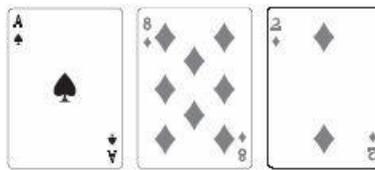
Of course, all that was on untextured dry boards. The question now is, can we execute the same line on a textured wet board, where our concerns include defending against draws by pricing them out? We also have to factor in how much texture we hold, because it matters on the turn whether you hold a high card in the suit that hits. I know this sounds complex and daunting, but I promise, with just a bit of work, you can think through this situation and come out the other side confident in the lines of play you choose.

Okay, here we go. You hold A♦Q♣ or A♥Q♣. I offer both hands, because it matters on the turn which ace you happen to be holding, so keep that in mind as we move forward. The board is A♠-8♦-2♦. Let's put this all in big pictures so it's easier to see.

Your hand:



The flop:



Now, there's good and bad news. The good news? You've flopped pretty good: top-pair good-kicker. The bad news? You have no idea what the other guy holds. You're in the same situation as on a dry board with top pair, only now your opponent could legitimately have AJ or worse, AK or better, or a draw.

You could be up against a much better hand like AK, A2 or a set.

You could be facing a much worse hand, from AJ or 98 on down to a bluff, where your opponent has maybe something like three to five outs in the deck or maybe something like none.

And you could be up against J♦T♦ or a similar draw to the texture.

But here's the thing. On the flop, at least, you don't care what the guy has. In almost all cases, you play just like on an untextured board, keeping the action as closed as possible.

One thing you have to think about here is leveraging the texture. Without texture, hands like AK and AJ will decide on their own whether to continue or not, based on how strong they think they are. Not a lot on the board scares them off. And while you might get a better hand to fold to pressure on the turn, you have to tell a very strong story to do so. Mostly, what you're doing is playing in a way that loses the least amount of money to a better hand that won't fold and wins the most money from a worse hand that you don't want to fold, while still giving the best hand the opportunity to muck.

On coordinated boards, though, you have other ways to beat, say, AK, because you can use completed texture to slow him down or even scare him off. To be fair, you'll have a harder time getting paid off by that AJ-type hand and for the same reason: scary scary texture. And, of course, scary texture works both ways. It creates credible bluffing opportunities for opponents' hands that couldn't otherwise beat you.

Another complicating factor is that, unlike on an untextured board, now a possible holding out there against you is neither way ahead nor way behind. With two cards to come, most draws to texture are in the range of 2-to-1 against completing their hand. So they might not be ahead now, but they could easily get ahead—much more easily than the poor AJ sitting on just three outs.

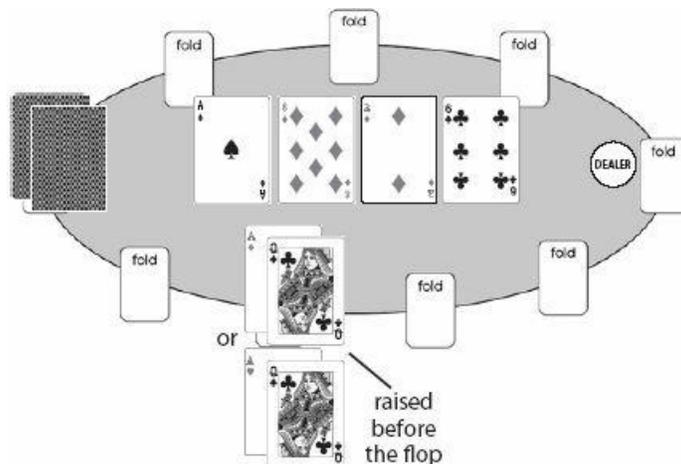
Scary texture ... two-way bluffing opportunities ... legitimate draws ... they all add complexity and make this one of the most difficult hold 'em problems you'll face. So let's get started solving it.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, In Position, With the Lead, Textured Board

We'll start as we always do: heads-up, in position, with the lead. You raised before the flop with A♦Q♣ or A♥Q♣ and got one caller, who now checks to you on an A♠-8♦-2♦ board. Of course, you're betting your standard half- to three-quarters pot, since you can't afford to give a free card to a textured board. What if your opponent calls? First let's look at what happens when the flush doesn't hit on the turn.

If the flush doesn't complete, it doesn't matter whether you hold the A♦Q♣ or the A♥Q♣, because both hands will play the same. First, let's say your opponent who checked and called on the flop now checks the turn when a blank hits, making the board something like A♠-8♦-2♦-6♣. Recall that on an untextured board, if your opponent check-calls on the flop and checks the turn, you check to keep the action closed. You really don't want to get check-raised in that spot; you'd have to lay down the better hand to a bluff. But when the board was untextured, you were fading at most five outs, so you could afford to let that free card come off, since the card wasn't in fact free. You paid for the right to check the turn by betting the flop.

When the board is textured, you can't let that free card come off. You have to follow through with your flop bet by continuing to give draws the wrong price to call. Fortunately, when you price out the flush a second time, most flush draws will fold, defining the caller as someone either without a flush draw or capable of doing bad math.



If your opponent calls on the turn, you'll take a look at the river. If the texture misses and he checks to you, just check it down. There isn't a lot of value to a river bet, where it's unlikely a worse hand will pay you off. If your opponent bets into a blank, you'll have to apply some reading skills, but you'll probably lean toward calling, since a really big hand should have played back at you on an earlier street to protect against the texture. Therefore, this river bet looks a bit defensive. His story says that he's betting the weaker end of his range, so you can call.

Now let's say that your opponent calls your turn bet and the board completes to, say, A♠-8♦-2♦-6♣-J♦. If your opponent checks to you, it's up to you to decide how unhappy he is about the last card. If he looks super-unhappy and you believe you might have a worse hand, you can bet, which

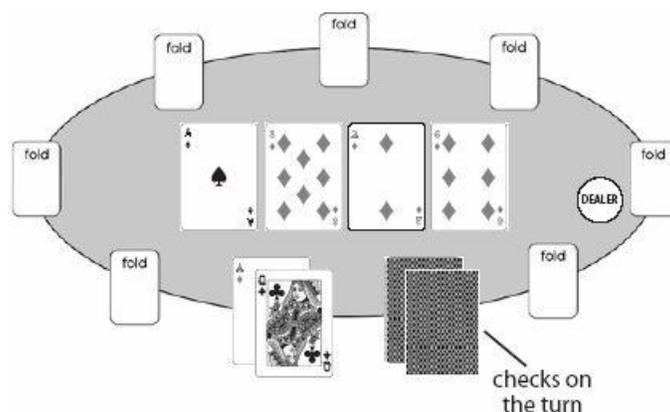
might get a better hand to fold. Otherwise, just check it down. To bet, you need to believe you have the worse hand; the river bet on this board has little value as anything other than a bluff.

Why? Because it's unlikely that a hand like AT or worse will ever pay you off. The board has completed everything. There really isn't a hand that a sane player holding AT could think to have beat (though, caveat, not all players are sane). If you aren't getting paid by worse hands than yours, the only reason to bet would be to bluff. So most of the time, you'd check in this spot.

If, on the other hand, the board completes to $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\clubsuit-J\diamondsuit$ and your opponent who check-called twice now bets into you, take a read. He played the hand like he was drawing for the flush. So unless you have some strong reason to believe otherwise, you should believe the story and fold. It's unlikely that a player would call on two streets just for the opportunity to bluff the river. So lean toward giving credit where credit is due.

We're clear on what to do when a blank hits on the turn after you get called on the flop. But now let's say the texture does hit. Suppose the $6\clubsuit$ comes off, putting three diamonds on the board of $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\clubsuit$. Now it really matters if you're holding $A\diamondsuit Q\clubsuit$ or $A\heartsuit Q\clubsuit$.

Let's start with you holding the $A\diamondsuit$. Why does that matter so much? Two reasons. First, your opponent can't be holding the nut flush and that's really good news for you: He, by definition, has to be vulnerable to folding the better hand, because he can't be holding the *best* hand. Second, now the board texture is working *for you*. You have a draw to the nuts, which means, in a sense, you can behave as if there's no texture on the board at all. If that's confusing, it won't be in just a moment.



You're holding the $A\diamondsuit Q\clubsuit$ on an $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\clubsuit$ board. Your opponent checked to you on the flop, you bet and got a call, and now your opponent checks to you on the turn. If the board had no texture on it, you'd check. There are a lot of compelling reasons for the check and, I hope it is clear that with a vulnerable hand such as top pair, you want to check if possible. You can also take this check when you're holding the $A\diamondsuit$ in your hand on this highly textured board, since giving a free card here isn't a problem; the free card could make you the nuts. But letting either made hands or naked bluffs check-raise you puts you to a nasty decision, and that's no good.

So when you hold the $A\diamondsuit Q\clubsuit$, you can play the hand exactly as you would if there were no texture on the board. Check behind a check on the turn with the intention of calling the river if he bets into a blank and raising if he bets into the flush completing on the river. If he checks the river, you can bet either way, because you shouldn't pass up two checks in a row.

I'm just guessing that you can come up with the right line of play now if the flush hits the turn and your opponent leads into you. You're holding $A\diamondsuit Q\clubsuit$ and the board completes to $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\clubsuit$. Your opponent checked to you on the flop, you bet, he called, the $6\clubsuit$ hits the turn, and your opponent leads out.

All you have to ask yourself is what you'd do if there were no texture on this board at all. The answer there is either call or raise. Certainly, you don't fold. You might have the best hand and, even if you don't, you're drawing at the nuts.

Whether you call or raise depends on two things. First, do you believe your opponent will lay down a better hand if you raise? One can safely assume AK would go into the muck and a set or even a low flush might lay down. This should make you lean toward raising. Second, do you believe that your opponent could be betting without a flush here? Obviously, the more likely your opponent has the flush, the more you should call and feel out the river. If you believe your opponent lacks imagination, then if another diamond doesn't hit the river, you have an easy fold to his river bet. Therefore, lean toward calling on the turn against unimaginative opponents.

Note that by calling instead of raising, you close the action and get to see the river 100% of the time, which means that you'll hit every flush you are meant to hit. If you raise the turn and get re-raised to a wrong price to chase the flush draw, you'll have to fold. You can't count on implied odds, because once the fourth spade hits, you don't get paid. So unless you're getting 4-to-1 on calling the re-raise, you'll have to fold.

You have a similar decision matrix when you are holding the $A\diamondsuit$ in your hand on an $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\clubsuit$ as you would if the board were completely uncoordinated and you held top-pair good-kicker on the turn. Either call or raise when your opponent bets into you, with a lean toward raising aggressive opponents and checking to pedestrian ones. Check if they check. Treat the texture as invisible; it's working for you.

But what if the texture is working against you? What if the board is $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\clubsuit$ and you hold the $A\heartsuit Q\clubsuit$? Well, now you're no longer blind to the texture. You can see it and you have to deal with it.

So your opponent checked to you on the flop, you bet, and he called. Now the board completes to the possible flush and he checks to you. Without the ace of suit in your hand, you bet, because you can no longer afford to give a free draw to an opponent holding a lone diamond in his hand. A bet of half the pot or slightly more gives a hand with a lone diamond in it the wrong price and probably drives it into the muck. And since the board now has super-scary texture, you probably won't get check-raised by AK or AJ, unless those hands specifically have the $A\diamondsuit$ in them, in which case your hand isn't in great shape anyway.

A naked bluff is also unlikely to check-raise you here. Bluffers are more likely to represent the flush by leading out on the turn, because check-raise bluffs are so damn expensive and risky on boards that are highly textured. Therefore, if you bet and get check-raised on the turn, you're probably folding. Most likely, you're not folding the better hand. But even if you sometimes do, you pay the price to protect against the free card, a priority here.

To repeat, because it's so crucial, you can only check the turn when it's checked to you on a three-flushing board when you have a high card in suit in your hand and can let a free card come off. When you have no suit and the texture hits, you bet to protect your AQ.

In this situation, you absolutely don't care if a worse hand folds, because you've avoided the main problem of facing a difficult decision on the river. Always be willing to give up a little potential earn from a worse hand if it prevents a sick card from coming on the river, which will happen, by

the way, about one time in five, if you don't include the worse ace's kicker. Including that kicker, you're up over 25%, and since you didn't bet the turn, you just open yourself up to all sorts of texture-driven bluffs on the river. Remember that when you check behind on a fully dry board, you're about a 9-to-1 favorite to face an okay river card. Here, you're only a 3-to-1 favorite, against either an opponent who's drawing to the texture or who's willing to bluff at the texture.

Once again, we see that the math lines up nicely behind the decision-making issue, because if you bet about half the pot on the turn and get called, you're, in essence, offering yourself a 3-to-1 price on the river card. If it blanks, you can check behind, lose the minimum to AK (who won't bet into you, because you bet the turn) or a made flush that forgot to bet, or win the pot against anyone else.

And if you get check-raised on the turn? Well, what can you do? The texture hit, your opponent check-raised, and you're probably folding. But that's okay. Remember, if you were the one with the flush, you wouldn't be checking here, you'd be betting, and possibly getting paid. In the long run, it's a wash. Sure, you hate to fold to the check-raise, but your bet on the textured turn actually slows down a lot of bluffers—how do they know you didn't hit?—and as mentioned, people tend not to bluff out of position with check-raises on the turn. This all skews toward the judgment that the check-raise here is coming from a hand that hit.

If your opponent calls your turn bet instead of raising or folding and the river hits another diamond for four diamonds on the board, you'll have to fold if he bets out. If he checks, you should almost always try to bluff at it to win, as any hand without a diamond will almost always fold and even sets or a low diamond will go away as well. That makes the bluff well worth it and it doesn't really need to cost you more than about half the pot to try.

If the board comes a blank on the river instead and he checks, you should strongly lean toward checking it down, unless you decide that the only way for you to win is to bluff. In that case, you can bet with the knowledge that you're not value betting, because you won't get paid by a worse hand. If your opponent bets into you when the blank hits, you'll have to take a read. The more you read it for a defensive bet, the more you should call or even raise to win the pot.

Now what if you have the A♥Q♣ on this A♠-8♦-2♦-6♠ board and you're led into on the turn? When you had the A♦ in your hand, you had a choice between calling and raising. But now the choice is between folding and raising. Why can't you call? Because what kind of decision does that give you on the river? If you call the turn, planning to call on the river, you might as well raise the turn, trying to get hands like AK or better to believe you have a flush and fold. Take the river money and get a better hand to fold on the turn, while always blocking against a fourth diamond hitting the river. If you aren't planning to call the river if your opponent bets, that must mean you have an unimaginative opponent on your hands, in which case you should be folding to his evident strength (flush) on the turn anyway.

The problem with a call on the turn is that you have nowhere to go from there. Your only hope after flat-calling is that a fourth diamond hits the river and you can bluff it and win. That seems like a pretty long con. If you think your opponent is vulnerable to a bluff, the raise on the turn will do the trick anyway, so you might as well play the hand like the bluff it has become and try to win it right there.

Now back at the flop, what do you do if your opponent check-raises your flop bet instead of just flat-calling? This can be a difficult spot; there are lots of reasons for the check-raise here. When the board is dry, a check-raise in this position generally reads weakness, due to the Greedy Bastard Rule. If we assume our opponent is greedy, then check-raising on a dry board with a big hand doesn't make sense, as it risks inducing a fold. Greedy Bastards with big hands play slow, so play fast on dry flops. But that same GB might check-raise on a textured board to protect against the board texture and having to play out of position if a third diamond hits. This means that a check-raise could be anything from a big hand or a bluff to a flush draw trying to semi-bluff at the pot, and that creates problems for you.

As we've discussed, when a player check-raises you on a dry board, the right play is to re-raise. But that's not the case here. If you did have a flush draw, you might flat-call a bet like this, so a flat-call doesn't narrowly define your hand to your opponent. This is where I'd suggest knowing your player well and reading all of Joe Navarro's work. Because how you read your player determines your play.

If you think you're beat, fold to the check-raise. That seems obvious. If you think you're against a flush draw, either re-raise, trying to win right there, or race the hand if you're called. You can also flat-call the re-raise and punish the draw if it misses on the turn. You'd be more likely to re-raise without the big diamond in your hand, since you lack any redraws. With the big diamond in your hand, a flat-call works better; you can pick up a redraw if the flush hits and/or bluff a player that you know can't have the nuts. Thus, with the big diamond in your hand, you'll have more options on the turn and that makes calling a better option on the flop.

If you think you might have the best hand, but aren't sure, you'd tend to flat-call, especially with the big diamond in your hand, which opens lots of bluffing possibilities. If the diamond hits on the turn, your opponent might check to you. Then you can check back if you want to play the hand smaller. Or you could represent that you called the check-raise with a flush draw and try to win it right there. After all, you know he doesn't have the nut flush, and maybe a disgusted AK folds in that spot. Either way, your story will make sense. But keep in mind that folding is always an option, too.

Moving on: You're still in position and you've still raised pre-flop, only now let's say that instead of your opponent checking to the raiser (you), the big blind leads into you on that textured flop. The majority of players holding AQ will make the big mistake of figuring they need to raise in order to protect their top pair. They fail to understand that just calling will protect their hand; after all, a price is a price, no matter where the bet came from.

With 1,000 in the pot, when your opponent checks and you bet 500, he's risking 500 to win 1,500. With 1,000 in the pot, when your opponent bets 500 and you call, he's still risking 500 to win 1,500. That 3-to-1 is the wrong price for a 4-to-1 shot no matter who put the first chips in. Therefore, why raise? The damage has been done. The only way you can help him do good math is by folding and that's not happening here, right? Not when the turn could blank, giving you the chance to punish the draw again. The way to punish a draw is not by raising on the flop, but by making sure the draw pays *twice*, taking at best 3-to-1 on a 4-to-1 shot two times.

What I really want you to do here is think beyond such simplicities as, "I need to protect my hand," and do a complete analysis of what that really means. While it's true that the flush draw might bet into you as a semi-bluff on the flop, your call of the bet gives that flush draw a bad price to see just the turn (since you'll bet the turn, they're only get to see one card for the price they pay on the flop). It's also true that a hand like AK would bet into you for the same reason that most players are inclined to bet: to protect against the draw that *you* might have, trying to avoid giving a free card. The texture on the board reduces the likelihood that the player leading into the pre-flop raiser is on a complete bluff, but apart from that, you can't be sure exactly where you're at. You might be facing AJ or AK kinds of hands, complete bluffs, or draws. As always, since you don't and can't know, you want the best line of play that's blind to your opponent's holding.

Suppose you raise. Is AK folding? No. So you're losing extra money to that hand. Is AJ folding? Maybe ... but maybe he's re-raising, thinking you're just making noise or raising with a flush draw. If he folds, you've let a worse hand slither off the hook. If he re-raises, you have to fold the best hand and that's never good.

What about that flush draw that everyone assumes the bettor has? Is that hand folding? Not if you make a reasonably sized raise. He's still thinking about his magical 2-to-1 odds and that's exactly what your raise will offer him. It also offers him the opportunity to re-raise bluff you. Not much good can come from a raise, then; it's superfluous, since your call already did the pricing job. So all that extra money you put into the pot thinking you had to protect your hand is just giving more money to AK, giving AJ a chance to get away or bluff you off the pot, and giving the flush draw either a chance to bluff you or to get there and crush you. So what good is that extra money doing? No good, and plenty of potential bad.

This is exactly where the "I have to protect my hand" thinking breaks down. It considers only one of the hands you might be up against (and poorly at that), but you really have to consider them *all*.

So now we know that raising is bad and calling already prices the flush draw out with one card to come. So when your opponent takes the lead from you and bets out, just call. And when some know-it-all at the table leans over to you and says, "You should have protected your hand," smile and agree with him, knowing that he apparently can't add two and two together and has no idea what he's talking about.

You get your opponent to do bad math if you call on the flop, then bet on the turn if the texture doesn't hit. The texture probably isn't hitting—it's like 4-to-1 against, right?—but even if it does and you have to fold, that's not so bad; you've reduced your variance in a dicey situation.

Anyway, let's say that you call behind and a blank comes off. What will a flush draw do? Will he bet again? Probably not. He'll check, angling for a free card. That's when you hit him with the bad math, betting big enough to deny him the right price to call. By betting half the pot or so, you force your opponent either to fold or make a bad call, both great outcomes for you. By calling behind on the flop, you actually give that draw the opportunity to mathematically punish himself.

Unlike your know-it-all friend, you understand that you don't punish the flush draw by raising on the flop (giving him a decent gamble), but by making him pay to draw twice, forcing him to take 3-to-1 on a 4-to-1 shot twice during the hand. You don't need to punish him further by raising. He's already punished himself quite well, thank you.

Let's run the bets, so we're crystal clear on this important point. With 1,000 in the pot post-flop, your opponent with the flush draw bets 750. If you call, is he getting 4-to-1 odds? Of course not. So he's already set a bad price for himself. But if you raise, you're actually allowing him to have a good thing happen, because now he can push in and get something close to 2-to-1 from the pot. *And* he gets to see two cards, *exactly* what the flush draw wants.

Counterintuitive as it sounds, then, by raising, you're not actually protecting yourself against the flush draw at all. Instead, you're increasing the likelihood that the flush draw will get the benefit of a full board, which is when—and only when—that draw has power. Plus, don't forget the draw is only one of the hands you could be up against and we've clearly established that raising into AK or AJ can't be right, because you're either losing more money, your customer, or the whole pot to a bluff.

I just want to say in passing that there might be some of you out there who think it's really heroic to snap off big bluffs here. I hope you'll clear your mind of that. Unless you're clairvoyant (you're not), you can never be sure that your read is right. So, yeah, you might snap off a monster bluff, but you can do that by calling on the flop and catching the bluff on the turn anyway, or you might donk off your chips to AK.

And here's the thing: Even when you're right, you're wrong, because making that raise on the flop increases the pot size and your variance in a situation where your decision-making must necessarily be problematic. Remember:

WHEN CHOICES ARE HARD KEEP THE POT SMALL

I hope I've convinced you to call behind on the flop when your opponent leads into you. Now we can start looking at what happens on the turn, where the hand will play out just as it did when the flop was checked to you.

First, pay attention to whether or not you have the ace in suit. If the texture completes on the turn to A♠-8♦-2♦-6♦ and you don't have the ace in suit, you either fold or raise when your opponent bets the turn, depending on your take on his strength and willingness to fold the best hand. The more vulnerable you believe he is, the more you should lean toward raising. The less creative the player, the more you should lean toward folding. If you do have the ace in suit and he bets into you on the turn, now you either call, if you think he might be betting a better hand and won't fold to your raise, or raise if you think he's semi-bluffing or otherwise willing to fold a better hand. Either way, you have a live draw to the nut flush.

If the texture hits and your opponent checks the turn to you, you can check if you have the ace in suit; you're now blind to the texture and can proceed as if the board were dry. Check with the intention of calling the river if the fourth diamond doesn't hit and raising if it does.

When you don't have the high diamond in your hand on the A♠-8♦-2♦-6♦ board and your opponent checks to you on the turn, you have to deny the free card, either to someone holding the draw or someone inclined to bluff at a completion of the texture on the river. If you get called and the river comes a fourth diamond, fold if your opponent bets and bet if he checks, leveraging that fourth diamond to get hands better than yours to muck. If a blank hits, check behind a check unless you have a strong reason to believe that the only way for you to win is to bluff. Then bet and represent the flush a second time. If he bets when the board blanks, you will have to take a read and decide if he really hit the flush on the turn or not.

Remember that a hand like AK will tend to check the river there, hoping to check it down. So his check-call on the turn and bet into a river blank is either a made flush or absolutely nothing and not a whole lot in between. Make sure you factor that in to your decision on the river.

What if the board hits a blank on the turn? Something like a 4♣ making the board A♠-8♦-2♦-4♣ on the turn and now your opponent bets into you? As before, this is a great time to raise with a hand like AQ. If you're likely to call the river no matter what, you might as well raise the turn. And by the way, how does AK feel now? You raised pre-flop, flat-called in position on a textured board, and now you're raising on the turn when the texture didn't hit.

"Holy smokes!" thinks AK. "What have I just stepped in?" Now he fears that he's up against two pair or better, and while he might not fold to your raise, he's sure as hell checking to you on the river. Then you get to check, losing exactly the same amount to AK that you would have lost if you'd called on the turn and crying-called on the river—*without any of the nasty decision-making!*

Can I get an amen?

Meanwhile, what about little AJ in this situation? How will your raise on the turn do against that hand? Well, let's say he leads 1,000 into you on the turn. If you raise and he folds, that's 1,000 in your stack. If you call and the texture hits on the river, one of two things happens. Either he's leading into you and you have to figure out whether he has the flush, opening yourself up to folding the best hand, or he's check-folding, meaning that you won, yep, 1,000—or lost the pot if he got you off your hand *while* fading the nasty decision-making.

Calling behind on the turn against a hand like AJ, then, means you're either winning the same 1,000 you'd have won by raising, or losing the whole pot to a worse hand if the texture completes. And even if it doesn't and he checks the river to you, you should check it down anyway, since it's unlikely a worse hand will call you here. Remember that if he bets when the texture misses and you call him down, you should probably have raised on the turn.

So the only time it would be right to flat-call his lead on the turn is if you know your opponent isn't creative enough to bluff. In that case, you'd know you wouldn't be putting in any extra river money. You'd know you were beat and have an easy fold.

Just remember that if the river blanks and your opponent checks to you, you don't want to bet. The missed draw isn't paying you and you don't know whether you're against AK or AJ, so you don't want to reopen the betting. If the texture does hit and it's checked to you, only bet if you believe your opponent is on AK or better *and* he believes you're on the draw *and* he's good enough to make a big laydown.

Now let's look at what happens when your opponent bets into you on the flop, you flat-call, and he checks to missed texture on the turn. You'll bet

folding or raising, depending on how much you read your opponent for beating you and how vulnerable you think he is to the pressure, how likely you think he'll fold to the raising play. Just understand this raise acts as a pure bluff, since you're not looking to get called. Remember that when your opponent bets out on the flop after raising pre-flop, it's likely just a c-bet. When he continues on the turn, you can give a lot of opponents credit for taking the second barrel and against those types, the raise will work enough of the time to make it profitable.

The lines of play are easy enough, now, to figure out when your pre-flop raiser continues the story by betting the flop. But what happens if that same pre-flop raiser now surrenders the lead by checking to you on the flop? If the board was untextured, you'd check behind; you're either way ahead or way behind and don't want to keep the betting open. Remember, he either has the world or he's checking to give up, so there's no reason to step into that mess.

With texture present, you might think that now you have to bet to protect against the flush. But before going down that road, let's think about what he could have. He raised pre-flop, right? If he connected with the board by hitting a flush draw, he'd most likely bet. Hitting a flush draw is a pretty good connection that will trigger the continuation bet almost 100% of the time. It's extremely unlikely that with a flush draw, your opponent would be checking to call.

Why would he suddenly play the flush so passively? He might be checking the flush draw to raise you as a semi-bluff, which will actually work against your bet. You'd fold to that bet against such a strong line of play. So the flush draw is either betting out or checking to check-raise and take you off your hand, but that's unlikely. Most of the time your opponent can't have a flush draw, so you don't need to protect against the flush by betting; he can't be holding that hand or he'd have c-bet. Some small percentage of the time, he does hold the flush draw and will take you off your hand by check-raising (remember, this is a play *you'd* make with a big flush draw, since you don't care about letting a free card come off). Either way, a bet doesn't make a lot of sense here.

Once again, we're in a spot where either our opponent hit the flop huge and is making that suspicious-lead surrendering check to get you to bet, so he can check-raise (as you'd try to do holding a set or perhaps a big flush draw), or he just gave up on the hand.

Either way, a bet by you doesn't seem judicious, since it feels like only bad things can come of it. Any bluffs or lighter connections with the board would have triggered a c-bet. The check has to be setting you up for a check-raise or check-fold, which makes your bet a negative free-roll. If he really has nothing, you risk nothing with a check. But if he's trapping, well, there goes your hand into the muck.

So check, even though it seems counterintuitive. Check when that tricky pre-flop raiser checks to you on the flop, giving up the lead on a textured board like $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit$. If he checks again to you on the turn when the board bricks, you can bet. If, instead of bricking, the board completes with a flush card on the turn, you can bet when he takes that second check, whether you have the high diamond or not. If you don't have it, holding something like $A\heartsuit Q\clubsuit$, obviously you'd bet to protect against that lone diamond in your opponent's hand when the board is now $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\diamondsuit$. With the $A\diamondsuit Q\clubsuit$ you can also take the bet after the second check. If he check-raises, be very suspicious of his play, because you know he can't have the nuts; he definitely doesn't hold the $A\diamondsuit$ in his hand.

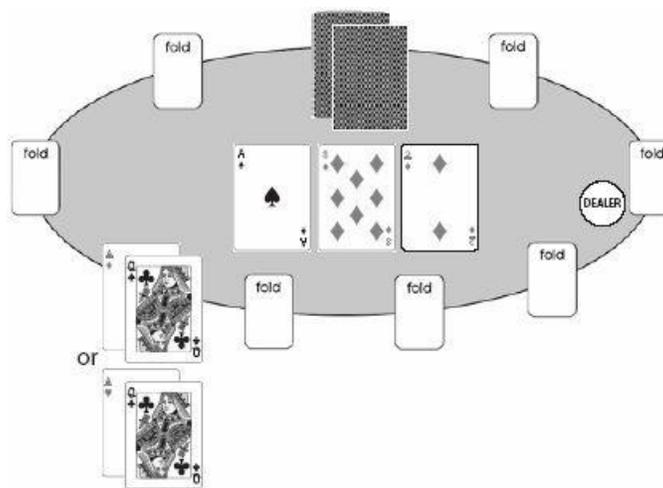
Think about his story. Does it make a lot of sense? If he's checking to check-raise with a big made hand on the flop, why would he check again on the turn when the board becomes terrifying? Wouldn't he bet out to protect against another free card after the failed check-raise attempt on the flop? And if he does play that strange a line, how could he call if you re-raised him on the turn? He couldn't. His hand is too vulnerable to the board. You know for certain he doesn't hold the nuts.

The same logic applies if he has a low flush. It's weird that he'd try to check to check-raise a holding like that on the flop, but once he hit the turn, he'd almost always bet out. If he check-raises, again, you know he doesn't have the nuts, so you can probably get him off his hand with a re-raise. And, the re-raise certainly gets any other holdings to fold.

All that said, you do have the option to check with $A\diamondsuit$ the in your hand on a turn of $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit-6\diamondsuit$ since all that board texture is working for you. You certainly could check if you had a compelling reason to play a very small pot (maybe you're sitting on the money bubble of a tourney). Just realize that if you check there, you're never folding the river. You'll always, at minimum, call. And, clearly, you'd raise if a fourth diamond hits and your opponent is kind enough to bet into you. Only with $A\diamondsuit$ the in your hand can you take that check, though; it is only with that card you're not vulnerable to allowing that fourth diamond to come off free of charge.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, Out of Position, With the Lead, Textured Board

To make things just a little more difficult, let's put you out of position. As we've seen, playing hands out of position is always harder; going first just sucks. So you raise before the flop. A player calls with position on you. You have $A\diamondsuit Q\clubsuit$ or $A\heartsuit Q\clubsuit$ and the flop is $A\spadesuit-8\diamondsuit-2\diamondsuit$.



Obviously, you lead. If you get raised here, you pretty much have to continue with the hand; you could be looking at anything: a complete bluff, semi-bluff flush draw, AJ, or worse, thinking they want to protect against the flush draw, or AK or better doing the same.

Once you can give your opponent the whole range of hands, you're obliged to continue playing, since you beat most of that range. On a dry flop, you'd re-raise, since the flat-call already gives your hand strength away, making it unlikely you'd get paid on the turn anyway. Plus, it's much more

unlikely, your opponent has a big hand when he raises the flop on the dry board (remember the Greedy Bastard Rule).

But when the board has texture, a flat-call of his raise on the flop doesn't give your hand away. Your opponent might think you're drawing to a flush or have a made hand and are waiting for the board to break on the turn before committing to the hand.

If you're thinking that your flat-call gives the flush draw the right price, mathematically speaking, that's not the case. If your opponent has raised about the pot (the most likely raise size), then after your call he's getting about 2-to-1. So if the pot going into the flop is 1,000 and you bet 500, he might raise to 2,000. If you call the 2,000, he's risking 2,000 to win 3,000 (your 2,000, plus the 1,000 already in the pot). That gives him a price of 3-to-2. But with a flush draw, he's a 4-to-1 dog with one card to come (since you'll bet the turn). That makes him do some pretty bad math.

Compare that situation to your three-betting on the flop of A♠-8♦-2♣ after he raises your c-bet. Three-betting most likely gets you both all-in (or close). And since your three-bet will be somewhere close to the size of the pot, if your opponent calls, he gets 2-to-1 or slightly better. *And hell get to see two cards now* since all the betting is done, so it's good math. Add to this the fact that two pair or better is probably not folding in that spot and you can see that your re-raise kind of just dumps off your money.

So flat-call, but with the intention of betting no matter what the turn card is. The advantage of flat-calling and leading out is that your lead out on the turn costs you less than the three-bet on the flop would. If you three-bet the flop, you'll generally raise about the size of the pot. But if you flat-call, now you're only betting about half the pot on the turn. That gives you a much cheaper way through the hand, always preferable when out of position.

So let's say the board bricks and your opponent held a flush draw, a bluff, or AJ when he raised you on the flop. If you bet about half to three-quarters of the pot on the turn, these hands all go away. You showed enough resistance to his aggression on the flop that he won't bluff-raise you again with no hand, so that eliminates the bluff. Meanwhile, the AJ has figured out that his hand is no good when you call a raise on the flop and then bet the turn and he goes away. And the player with the flush draw has to do bad math to call, so you win that proposition either way, whether he calls or folds.

But what if the board bricks on the turn and your opponent is holding a set or AK? Isn't it stupid to just lead out? Well, no. If he raised you on the flop with that hand and you re-raised, it would have cost you your whole stack. By flat-calling on the flop, then leading the turn, you lose less when you fold to his likely re-raise on the turn, which you'll do with confidence that he's betting a real hand, given the process of elimination outlined above. You lose to the big hand anyway, so you want to minimize your loss by any means possible. Flat-calling the flop and leading the turn accomplish this, since you only have to bet about half the pot on the turn, versus re-raising the whole pot if you make the play on the flop. At the same time, it forces bluffs and worse aces to fold, and corners flush draws into either folds or bad mathematical calls.

Interestingly, when the board hits the flush card, you also bet out. Given your opponent's range of hands when he raises the flop (the whole range), he's more likely not to have the flush than to have it. Since your flat-call on the flop can be read as a flush draw, by betting out on the turn when another flush card hits, you represent that hand quite nicely. And you will lose less if he happens to hit the flush, by the way.

So let's say you have that A♦Q♣ or A♥Q♣ (in this case it doesn't matter if you hold the ace in suit, since the pot is already so large after the raise on the flop that you won't have a check-raise option). The turn completes the flush and the opponent who raised your c-bet on the flop is holding a set, two pair, or AK. Now you lead half to three-quarters of the pot after calling his raise on the flop. What hand is he supposed to give you there? Can he call with AK in that spot, especially an AK with no diamond? It sure looks like you hit your flush. By leading here, you get all bluffs and weak aces to fold, plus big hands who give you credit for the flush. And you did it all for half the price of re-raising on the flop, which will never get a big hand to fold.

Are you still thinking, "But what if my opponent actually has the flush?" Well, first let's look at a case where you don't hold the suited ace. Here, as before, this line loses you less to a hand that beat you anyway. If you three-bet the flush draw on the flop, it costs you about 7,000 in our example and you give your opponent slightly better than 2-to-1 odds, since he has to call 5,000 more to win your 7,000, plus the 3,500 already in the pot. And he gets to see two cards. By flat-calling on the flop and leading the turn (folding to his raise or even giving up if he calls), it costs you the 2,000 you called on the flop and the 2,500 you lead out on the turn, for a total commitment of 4,500, a 2,500 savings over the three-bet line of play. You lose to that flush when it hits on the turn regardless. By playing the hand slower, you save money and only give your opponent one chance to hit his hand, since you'll surely bet the turn as well when a brick hits.

One final note on how to play when your c-bet gets raised on the flop: If you happen to have the A♦ in your hand when the flush completes on the turn and you get raised when you bet out, take a look at the size of the raise and determine if you're getting the right price to call there (you need about 4-to-1). If you are, take the call to try to hit that fourth diamond on the river. If you're not getting the right price, your strong lean would be to fold, since you can give your opponent credit for a hand that beats you. You've shown so much resistance on the hand that only the most creative and kamikaze opponents would ever bluff you there.

That's what you do if you c-bet the flop and get raised. Now let's see what you do if you get flatted instead on that A♠-8♦-2♣ board. Once again, it makes a difference if the board bricks the turn and if you're holding the high card in suit when the texture hits. As we now well know, when the board bricks on the turn, you bet to make that flush pay twice. If you're raised, take a read, but you'll probably have to fold (the suckiness of being out of position). If you're called, you'll almost always check the river and call a bet from your opponent if a blank hits. A big made hand would have raised you on the flop or turn to protect against the flush draw. Two flat-calls read more like a flush or the AJ that's unsure of itself. Your check on the river is meant to induce a bluff from busted flush draws and overly aggressive AJ types of hands. A lead on the river has no value, since the busted flush will never call you, but he might bet if you check.

If the board completes the flush on the river, take a read. Realize, though, that the flush is probably the most likely hand at that point. In this case, if you're unsure what your opponent holds, a defensive bet has merit. At least that line loses you less money against a non-flush hand that has you beat (since it's unlikely he'll raise the river now that the flush has hit without holding the flush himself and you'll bet less than he would if you checked to him). It also stops you from being bluffed by air and minimizes your loss against the flush that hit. Of course, if you're sure your opponent was drawing to a flush, the check-fold on the river is completely in order.

But what happens when the third card in suit hits the turn, completing to A♠-8♦-2♣-6♥? If you have the high suited card, holding A♦Q♣, play the hand like there's no texture, as you would in position. As you recall, if the board is dry, your AQ would go for a check-raise on the turn. Similarly, with the ace in suit in your hand, you can check to check-raise, because if your opponent checks back you are very happy to take a free shot at your flush draw. If he does check the turn, bet the river no matter what. If he bets the turn, execute your check-raise semi-bluff. Not only will sets lay down to the texture here, but small flushes will too. And you have the advantage of knowing your opponent can't possibly be holding the nuts. The c-bet on the flop and check-raise on the turn line of play just scream flush. And if you're wrong? It was a semi-bluff, after all, so you know you have outs to suck out if the fourth diamond hits. That goes under the category of how bad could it be?

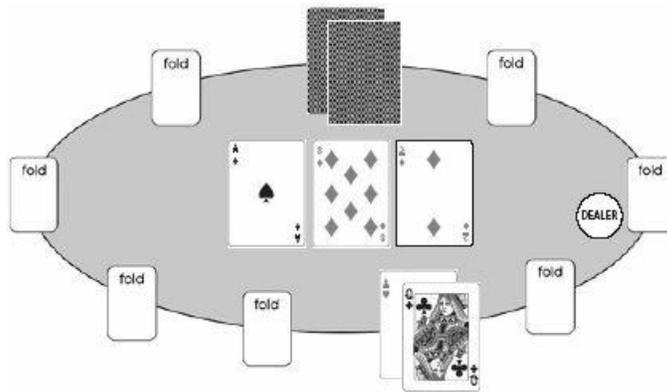
If you don't have that wonderful high diamond in your hand, you are just going to have to bet when the third diamond hits. The fact is that when your opponent calls on the flop, he either has the flush draw or he doesn't. When that flush card hits, you can't let a free card come off, because the coordination of the board is working so hard against you. And you can't check-fold; that's just wimpy. So you bet. Maybe AK will believe you have the flush and fold. Stranger things have happened.

Fortunately, even big made hands will have a hard time raising when the board has a possible flush on it, so that minimizes your investment and decision-making problems. If a fourth diamond hits on the river after you are called on the turn, you have the opportunity to bluff and get a set to fold, as long as it isn't a set of aces with the ace of diamonds in it (but you'd have already heard from that hand). If the board bricks again on the river, you can either check and hope to get it checked down or throw in a defensive bet if you're planning to call a river bet anyway.

If you get raised on the turn when the texture hits, you have to fold if you don't have the A♦ in your hand. Were you bluffed? Oh well, you were bluffed. If you ran into the flush, at least you didn't lose much. But such is life out of position. That's why you try to avoid positional disadvantage in the first place.

Top Pair, Heads-Up, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Textured Board

Now let's put you out of position without the lead. Probably you called from the blind, because otherwise what did you do, limp with AQ and call a raise out of position? Hope not. Anyway, the board comes A♠-8♦-2♦ and what do most people holding AQ do? They generally lead out; they're afraid of the flush draw and they don't want to risk giving a free card. But that's not a realistic concern here, because your opponent had the lead pre-flop and he's likely to c-bet, denying himself the free card, as it were. If he has the texture, especially a strong draw like K♦J♦, he's definitely betting, either to build a pot with a rich draw or to end the hand right there. He's not taking a free card. (If you had the lead pre-flop and checked, he might take a free card here, suspicious of your hand. But when he has the lead, the bet is somewhat mandatory on his part.) He knows he won't get paid if the texture hits unless you have exactly a worse flush draw—unlikely. Therefore, when your opponent takes a free card here, it's because he has nothing he's excited about and nothing to protect. In other words, when you check and he checks behind, you suddenly don't have to worry very much about the texture.



On the other hand, if you led out into this board, you'd be giving a tremendous amount of definition to your hand. You'd be telling your opponent that you've hit the board in some way that makes you want to protect your hand against the flush draw (or you are making a flailing bluff). With a flush draw, you would generally just check and call or try to check-raise semi-bluff, so that range of hand is functionally eliminated, which makes it easier for your opponent (who has position, remember) to play the rest of the hand effectively against you, since your hand is now pretty well defined.

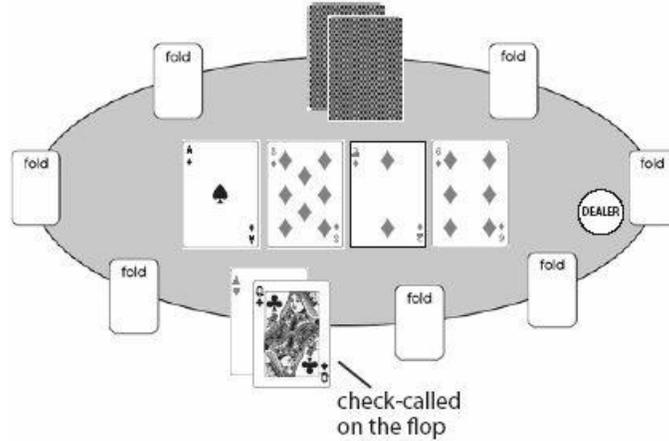
Therefore, what you want to do is check and let your opponent continuation bet. But you are not going to check-raise here, like most players do when they think they have to protect against the flush draw. We already know the math and logic of that, from our discussion above. Instead, take the slower line on this hand and check-call, minimizing your loss at that point against AK or better, since the call will usually cost you only about 500-700 if the pot is 1,000 going into the flop. Compare that to the 2,000 or so the raise would cost. And calling gives your opponent only about 3-to-1, a bad price to look at one card if he's holding a flush draw. If the board busts on the turn, lead out for all the reasons we've discussed: no free card to an opponent with a flush draw; AJ might or might not bet, but definitely calls; c-bet bluffs go away and fold, so no nasty decision-making on the river for you when you are out of position; and you lose less to all the hands that beat you than you do if you check-raise the flop.

I understand that when you bet out, you expose yourself to a creative bluff-raise (which is why you check this spot on a completely uncoordinated board). But you have to deny a free card here and such is the peril of out-of-position play and protecting yourself against creative bluffs is less important than protecting against texture.

If you bet out on the turn and get flat-called, you can again put your opponent on the weak end of the range or a flush draw making a bad call. Therefore, if the board busts on the river, you should check to induce a bluff from that range, which won't call your river bet, but will often take a stab at the river if you check. If the flush completes on the river, take a read, either check-folding or defensive betting.

Remember always that we're talking about heads-up play here. Most people don't take that into account when they bet out on the flop into the pre-flop raiser to protect against the texture. But in most heads-up situations whether you're in or out of position, you're looking at reduced texture. When texture is a factor, you don't want to bet too big too early; unfortunately, you often give the flush draw the opportunity to see two cards at the right price. By check-calling on the flop, then betting on the turn when the board busts, you let the flush draw do bad math instead. And as we've seen, against hands like AK and AJ, you do much better with this line, both from a money and decision-making perspective.

When you check-called the flop and the texture hits on the turn, completing to A♠-8♦-2♦-6♦, you'll bet if you don't have the high card in suit in your hand, because, again, it looks like you hit the draw.



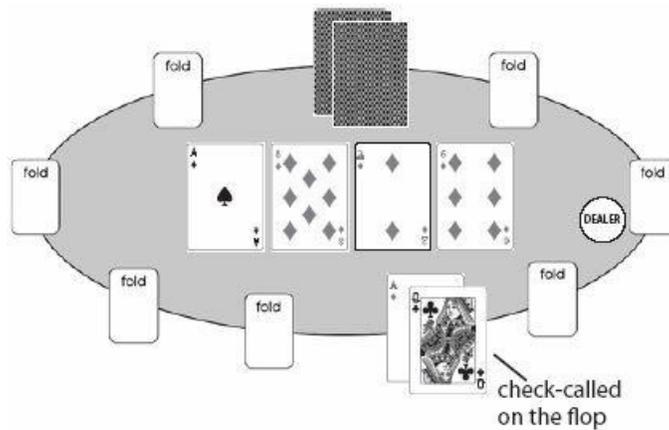
So now you bet the flush just like any other donkey who check-calls and bets when he hits his hand, at the same time protecting yourself from allowing a free card to come off, getting some slightly better hands to lay down and discouraging monsters from getting too frisky with all that flushy color on board.

If you're called when you bet a board like $A♠-8♦-2♦-6♦$, pay close attention to your opponent and see if he looks back at his hand when calling you. If he does, then calls, that's generally telling you he either has one high card in suit to the board, or none. If he already had the flush, he'd know it and wouldn't have to check his hand. Without a diamond, he'll fold unless his hand is so big, like a set, that he has to call. But you know he doesn't have a flush there.

At the start of the hand, inattentive players (and they're legion) don't commit the suits of their hole cards to memory when their hole cards are unsuited, since they figure that the suits probably won't matter. But now that three of a suit are on the board and your opponent doesn't remember whether he holds a diamond or not, if he looks, calls, and a fourth diamond comes on the river, you can easily check-fold. If the river bricks, you can bet and take a stab at the pot, knowing he didn't hit his redraw and is vulnerable to being bluffed. This is a tell you can take right to the bank.

If he doesn't look back and still calls, you should be suspicious he's playing a flush in a greedy cagey way. Otherwise, he'd look back, even with a hand like a set, to see if he has a redraw in case you have the flush you're representing. In this case, you can pretty easily check-fold the river. He has you beat. If you get raised when you bet, so be it, you fold. But keep in mind that by not check-raising the flop, you save a lot of chips against a flush that hits on the turn, at least 800, while making sure your opponent is getting a bad price with one to come.

What should you do on the turn when you do hold the high diamond in suit on a board like $A♠-8♦-2♦-6♦$?



Say you hold $A♣Q♣$ and you check and call on the flop. Can you give a free card on this turn? Of course! You hold the $A♦$, so the coordination is working for you. Check. If you get a bet behind your check, check-raise. If you get a check behind, be happy for the free card and bet the river no matter what hits. Many hands that can beat you will fold to your check-raise on the turn, since it looks so flushy. And if you're wrong and get called, it's not like you're drawing dead anyway. So yay you!

Top Pair, Multi-Way, In Position, With or Without the Lead, Textured Board

Now let's make things difficult by dropping ourselves into a gross, messy, four-way pot with a textured board. As before, you hold $A♦Q♣$ or $A♥Q♣$, the flop is $A♠-8♦-2♦$, and you're sitting around back in position.

By now, I'm sure you understand that this example is applicable to all sorts of other drawing situations and we use the same example for analysis each time. The issue isn't the hand specifics, but the thinking and analysis that go into your decision-making.

You're in position. You raise pre-flop and get three callers. Let's say it went limp, limp, you raised, and the blind and both limpers called. Let's not call those callers donkeys. Let's call them ... "enthusiasts." Or it was raised in front of you, let's say from early position, you flat-call, then both blinds—again, "enthusiasts"—jump on for the ride.

Either way, you're in position on the field. Everyone checks to you. You'll bet 100% of the time—more, if you can figure out how! Of course, you can't let a free card come off here. In the best case, everyone folds and you win. In the not-so-great case, you get raised. And in that case, it'll really matter where the raise comes from.

than player A, who'll more likely actually have the flush. So again, unless you had a strong read on him, you'd tend to raise no matter which AQ you had, high diamond or not, and represent the flush.

As an aside, sizing your bet on the flop has some unique aspects in multi-way pots with texture on board. The presence of draws and multiple callers has a ripple effect on pot odds. It turns out that the right amount to bet is around three-quarters pot, the top end of your normal betting range. Let's see why.

Say there's 1,000 in the pot and it's checked to you on the flop. You really want to punish the flush draws, so you bet the whole pot. If you bet 1,000, you're giving 2-to-1 odds to the first caller (2,000 in the pot for him to call 1,000) and obviously, that's not right for a draw with one card to come. If he calls, the second caller is now getting 3-to-1 on his money (3,000 in the pot for him to call 1,000), and likewise, that's not right for a flush, again assuming you'll deny him a free card on the turn (which you will, right?). It's not until you get all the way to the fourth caller that you deliver the right price, 1,000 to win 4,000, or 4-to-1. So betting the pot forces at least two opponents to make bad decisions by calling to draw with one to come, but the problem is it also puts a lot of pressure on you. Remember, as the size of your bet increases, you have to be right that much more often. But maybe you don't have to bet that much to price those first two opponents out.

So maybe you bet half-pot, just 500 into this multi-way field. Unfortunately, now you're really making it attractive to call. The first caller gets 3-to-1 (1,500 in the pot for a call of 500), the wrong price to draw, but within the range of DCs (donkey calls). Worse, the second caller gets the right price of 4-to-1 (calling 500 into a pot of 2,000), the right price to see just one card. Since you never want to let your opponents do good math, it can't be right to bet half-pot here. And that's not even considering the terrific price that caller number three gets. That guy just hit the lottery.

So let's split the difference. Bet 750 into that pot of 1,000. Now player A is getting 2.3-to-1 (calling 750 to win a pot of 1,750), definitely the wrong price. Player B is getting 3.3-to-1 (calling 750 to win 2,500), also the wrong price. Only the third caller can get the right price now, the same result as when you bet the whole pot. This bet, then, strikes a compromise between letting your opponents do bad math and not putting too much mathematical pressure on yourself. Like the Goldilocks Setting on your thermostat, it's just right.

Let's again say you're in position on a field of multiple players, holding AQ, but now someone bets into you on the flop of A♠-8♦-2♦. If that's player A and the action goes bet, fold, fold, you're back to heads-up in position and you can play the hand exactly as you would if you'd gotten heads-up before the flop, calling in position and seeing whether the texture hits on the turn. Again, you're not raising and reopening the betting, which might open you up to some hard decisions. You can exercise that option just to call, which prices out the flush draw with one card to come, in case that's what player A is betting with. Now when the turn bricks the texture, you bet if player A checks and lean toward raising if he bets into you. If the texture completes, bet if he checks to you, unless you have the high diamond in your hand, in which case you can check. If he bets the possible flush on the turn, fold or raise without the ace in suit and call or raise with it.

Interestingly, if A checks, B bets, and C folds, you'll still take the same action as you would heads-up: flat-call. If A is planning to fold, it makes no difference if you call or raise. And while a raise from you might drive him off his draw, the call prices him out of his draw anyway. Remember that if B bets something like 750 into a 1,000 pot and you call, A is still getting only 3.3-to-1, the wrong price. Plus, if he's planning to check-raise with a huge hand, you can get away that much cheaper. What's more, your call behind looks so much like a happy flush draw that it sets up your strong action on those turns when the texture hits. Largely, then, ignore the first-position checker and play the hand heads-up when B bets and C folds.

If you call B, and A also calls, now you can play the hand as you would on the turn in any multi-way situation. If the texture bricks the turn and it's checked to you, bet. You can't give a free card to a flush draw. If the texture completes and it's checked to you, bet if you don't have a high diamond and check if you do, unless you have a read that your two opponents are unhappy with that flush hitting, in which case you can bet to win the pot right there.

If there's a bet into you on a turn that bricks the texture, you'll tend to raise, unless there's a call in front of you, in which case, uh-oh, you're probably beat. If the texture does complete, you'd lean toward folding the A♥Q♣ if player A leads out, but raising if it's player B. If you have the ace in suit and the board completes, flat-call A's bet, unless you feel you can drive off his small flush with a raise. Against B, have a stronger tendency to raise, since his hand doesn't need to be as strong to bet as player A's.

Now, suppose A and B both check the flop of A♠-8♦-2♦ and player C bets. Is he strong? Not necessarily. He might be semi- or completely bluffing, figuring that A and B have shown weakness and he only has to get through you, the button, in order to pick up the pot. The draw would bet here. Air would bet here. AJ would bet here. AK would bet here. The whole range would bet here. And out of that whole range, you only have to worry about AK or better. Considering that he's in the second BS position (you're in the first BS position on the button) and a raise from you now will likely get the hand heads-up (or even end it here), your best course is to raise. It's the sum of several things: the likelihood that A and B will both fold; the pot odds you'll offer B if you flat-call and he's holding a flush draw; your correct desire to get the pot heads-up; and the fact that player C doesn't need to be as strong as someone betting from earlier position would be. So go ahead and use your raise to leverage A and B—and maybe even C—right off the pot.

The other thing about raising here is that you find out right away if there's nasty intent from player A. If he check-raises all-in, you can just quietly fold. Heads-up, that all-in push would be a little iffy; you wouldn't know if it's a real hand or not. But when the action goes check, bet, raise, shove, AQ becomes an extremely easy fold, so you're not opening yourself up to a difficult decision by raising here.

Another situation: Player A checks, B bets, and C calls. Or A bets, B folds, and C calls. Or A bets, B calls, and C folds. They're all the same, in that you get a bettor and a caller in front of you.

Recall from our discussion of untextured boards that your overcall here looks strong, but your raise here looks alarmingly squeezezy and it won't get anyone to fold. You're facing either a draw or a hand and they're happy to call—both because you look so squeezezy and because now the pot starts to offer attractive odds to callers. Your raise here, then, invites good math and welcomes accurate analysis, so just overcall. If the board bricks and they check to you, you can bet, taking a stab that they hold either weak enough hands to fold or flush draws that wouldn't be getting the right price to call. If the board hits the texture and they check to you, you can bet as well, representing the flush, since that's a reasonable hand for them to put you on in the first place. If the texture bricks and a player bets into you, you can play the hand out exactly as we've already discussed. Same thing if the texture hits. By now the tale is familiar.

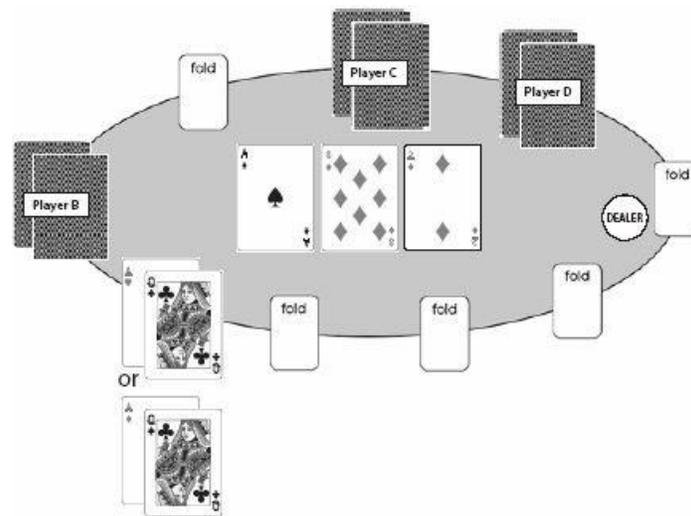
Top Pair, Multi-Way, Out of Position, With the Lead, Textured Board

Ready to play this bad boy multi-way *and* out of position? Well, here's the hard truth. AQ is tough enough to play out of position on a dry board. Add the texture and things can get really dicey. So go into this situation with the firm awareness that no matter how big a poker genius you think you might be, no one can play this situation that well. You can only strive to play it better than your peers.

Let's say you raise before the flop with AQ and get a call parade behind you. The flop comes the now-familiar A♠-8♦-2♦. Naturally, you'll think about continuation betting, since c-betting is damn near gospel for us. Not, however, in this spot. Here, out of position with multiple players to act behind you, you have no obligation to make that bet and a good mathematical reason not to. If you c-bet a complete miss with, say, a half-pot bet,

you're getting laid 2-to-1 on a bluff. With three players to act behind you, all of whom called a raise pre-flop, is it realistic to think you will win the pot 33% of the time? Nah. Therefore, the math says: No c-bet here for you. And apart from the pure math, if you bet here, you risk getting raised off your hand on the flop or called in multiple spots behind you and not knowing what to do on the turn. Tough decisions as far as the eye can see.

But can you check? Well, you know you can only check if you don't risk giving off a free card and I'd argue that a free card is extremely unlikely in this situation. You're against three players, all of whom called a pre-flop raise. Now the board hits with an ace, a likely card for (at least) one of the three to be holding. So the player holding an ace will likely bet behind you to try to protect his hand. Any player with a flush draw would also bet his hand as a semi-bluff. And if everyone checks to the button, don't you think he'll take a stab at the pot? Sure. As it's unlikely that the pot will be checked around, the issue of the free-card giveaway goes away.



And it turns out that checking gives you the most flexibility. By checking, you get to see any awaiting disasters behind you ... for free. When you check and fireworks ensue, goodbye you at no additional charge. No nasty bluff, semi-bluff, or squeeze raises to worry about. Plus, by checking, you can back into some heads-up situations, too.

For example, let's say you check, player B bets, and C and D fold. Now you're heads-up and can play accordingly, calling the bet on the flop, then leading out when the flush draw doesn't complete on the turn. When the flush draw does complete on the turn, you'd lead out if you don't hold the big card in suit to the board and check to check-raise if you do, as already discussed above.

Likewise, if you check, B checks, C bets, and D folds, you can flat-call. Player B was either checking to fold or check-raise and you get to find out for cheap. Most of the time, B will fold, leaving you heads-up with C. If B happens to call, you'll lead into the board when the texture hits on the turn, representing the flush when you don't hold the big card in suit, but go for the check-raise when you do. Think how strong it would be if you check the A♠-8♦-2♦-6♦ board, B bets, C calls, and you semi-bluff check-raise. Even small flushes will fold to you in that situation and the play can't be that bad anyway, since you have outs and you know no one can have the nuts.

The only time you'd check-raise the flop would be if B and C check behind you and D bets. Raise to knock out players B and C, so they're not around to give you fits on the turn. Plus, checking away the lead and raising a player making a button bet makes sense. The button doesn't have to be strong, while your check-raise reads strong to everyone in the hand, since you still have two players left to act behind you. Flush draws in particular will fold, since they won't feel like they're getting the right price (unless they have top pair and a flush draw, which you'll hear about right away anyway and can fold accordingly).

If your check-raise gets called, continue as you would heads-up. The pot will be quite large at this juncture, so you should generally bet out no matter what hits on the turn or what suited cards you hold, since you can represent having either the big made hand or the flush-draw semi-bluff check-raising on the flop.

Of course, if the third suited card hits and your opponent clearly shows excitement about the card, feel free to check and fold. Likewise, if the board bricks the flush draw on the turn and your opponent looks particularly relieved to see that, feel free to check and fold as well, unless you specifically have the ace in suit in your hand.

Top Pair, Multi-Way, Out of Position, Without the Lead, Textured Board

Now let's put you out of position without the lead. Should you bet? Not just no, but *hell* no. That's the pre-flop-raiser's job. Plus, your lead-out bet can't do you any good. If you get a bunch of callers, you've learned nothing about their hand strength and if you face a raise, that's just ugly.

In a multi-way pot with texture on board, is your AQ a hand worth protecting? Not really. Most people have a knee-jerk desire to protect their ace—any ace—but this hand is so fraught with problems, your bad position and your uncertainty about the next card being paramount, that you're better off just checking and seeing what everyone behind you does. Note that if player B bets (you now being player A, right?), you actually get the right of last action.

Remember that although you have AQ, your hand is medium-strength, nothing to get too excited about, especially with your bad position and all that texture. And if you *do* lead out, are you not defining your hand for exactly what it is? You wouldn't be leading out bluffing into all that traffic. Maybe you have the flush draw (though most players would be trying for a free card) or a big pair, but definitely you've got *something*. Don't give away that information.

Plus, you really can't stand a raise here. If you lead out with your proud little top-pair good-kicker and you get raised, you're in a tough situation. You can sidestep that—for all these right reasons—by checking and seeing what happens next.

Again, if there's a lot of sick action behind you, you can get away from your hand—for free! But check this out: Suppose you check, B and C check, and D bets. What position is he in? That's right, the bullshit seat. So now you can raise. Think about how strong that raise looks. It looks like you were lurking and waiting for just the outcome you got: meek checks from the middle-position players and a reckless adventure from the player in position. It's likely that you'll win this pot right here.

If you check and a bet comes from B, it's a slightly different story. Let's say B bets, and C and D fold. Now you can flat-call and play it heads-up. You know he's got something, but you don't know if you're ahead or behind. From our previous discussion, we know that the best line of play is check-calling, then leading on the turn no matter what hits, unless you hold the high card in suit to the board and the third suited card hits the turn.

Next case: Player D had the lead pre-flop, but now it goes check from you, check from B, and then C leads into the pre-flop raiser. If D folds, you'll want to flat-call here, because C is more likely to have something that can withstand a check-raise, given that he took the lead away from D. There will be times, of course, when you check-raise D, B comes over the top, and the original bettor jumps into the pool, too. Well, that happens. At least you found out now. Remember, whenever there's big action, your AQ becomes just another hand that didn't hit.

And that's the bottom line with a pretty good hand like top-pair good-kicker. It's not the nuts, though people treat it like it is. When you hold that hand, you need to find the line of play that maximizes your gain, minimizes your risk, and keeps tricky decisions at bay.

PART THREE

The Rest of It

Bluffing

Success-Rate Thinking

In prior chapters, we talked about what to do when you flop a monster, a draw, or a semi-good hand like top pair. In this chapter we discuss what to do when you flop absolutely nothing. You're not done with the hand! There's still a way to win, a way as old as poker itself: the venerable bluff.

Remember our discussion of bluffing in the context of pre-flop play. We noted that your pre-flop bluff was mostly a pricing issue ... making sure the cost of your bluffs didn't outstrip your predicted win rate. The other discovery we made, and one worth repeating, was how hard it is to bluff in early position; when that pre-flop bluff bet gets called, you have to play the rest of the hand out of position, that ol' uphill climb. Now we'll shift our discussion to post-flop bluffing, and we'll start like we always do: by setting our goals.

The first thing to do to set your goal is ask, "What kind of hand do I have?" You then measure the answer against your goal for the hand. When you flop huge on a dry board, your goal is to maximize earn. When you flop a big draw, your goal is to manipulate the pot toward easy decisions or an immediate win. When you flop top pair and you don't know if you're ahead or behind, your goal is to maximize earn and minimize loss.

And now, when you look down and see a hand that can't possibly win with a showdown, you can start to shape your goal. Interestingly, your goal is *not* "to win with the worst hand." Obviously, that's what you're trying to do, but that's kind of beside the point. Your *real* goal is this:

BLUFF IN A WAY THAT MAXIMIZES YOUR SUCCESS RATE

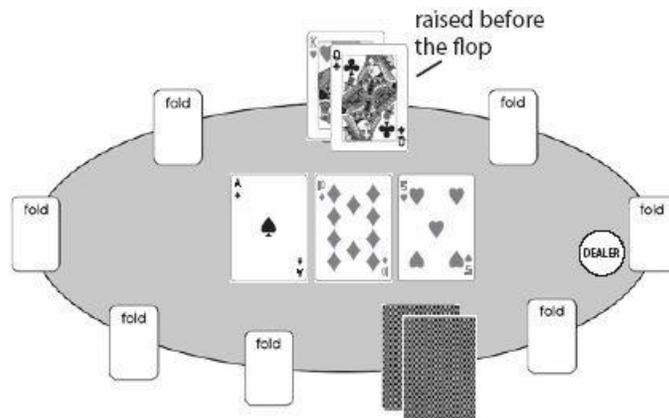
And the way to maximize your success rate is to invest the least amount of money for the greatest gain, particularly in terms of information about whether your opponent's hand is weak enough to be bluffed. In this, our intent is similar to our goals for the play of top pair, where we try to maximize the probability that a better hand will lay down, while minimizing loss against those hands that won't lay down. We also draw a distinction between a pure bluff and a semi-bluff; in the case of the semi-bluff, you might bluff, knowing that if your bluff gets called, you have other ways to win.

The two kinds of pure bluffs to think about are: those where you're absolutely sure you don't have the best hand, and those where you might have the best hand, not because you're particularly strong, but because your opponent is weak, too. Looking at a board of T-6-5, a hand like 97 would fall into the first category and a hand like AQ would fall into the second. In either case, it's important to recognize why your bluff often begins not with a bang but a whimper; not with a raise, that is, but a call.

We'll start by putting you in position, because bluffing, like just about everything in hold 'em, is easier in position.

The Continuation-Bet Bluff, In Position, Heads-Up

You raised before the flop and the big blind called. The flop comes A-T-5 and he checks. Now you'll execute the most common bluff, a simple continuation bet. This is why you bought the lead in the first place, so you can win the pot when your opponent misses the flop completely or hits so weak that he doesn't deem it profitable to continue.



So when you hold, for example, KQ on the A-T-5 flop and your opponent checks to the raiser, you bet (50%-75% of the pot). Notice that you're betting in that spot whether you have a monster, a draw, a top pair or, as here, not much. Your opponent will know this if he's been paying attention, but what does that tell him about *this* hand? Not a thing. And that's called giving cover to your bluffs. All those bets you've made with good hands now increase the likelihood that your bet with pure air will have the desired result. So when it's checked to you and you have position and the lead, you'll be betting just about 100% of the time.

The Second-Barrel Bluff, In Position, Heads-Up

Sometimes when your opponent checks to you and you continuation bet on the flop, you get called and your instinct is to say, "Oops." But remember, when you get called on the flop, your opponent doesn't necessarily have a super-strong hand; he might have a draw (if the board is coordinated), a small pair, an under pair, or a weak top pair. And he might be bluffing, as you'll see in the section on bluffing out of position.

So if your opponent checks to you again on the turn, don't just automatically shut down. It's okay to take a second barrel at the pot. Remember, by

betting into the pot on the turn, you only need your opponent to fold 33% of the time to break even and that's a super-low-pressure second barrel to take in a spot where your opponent has shown weakness *twice*. If you get check-raised there, so be it. It's not like you're ever folding the best hand there. So don't be afraid of taking a second barrel at the pot when your opponent has called your c-bet bluff on the flop.

The Float on Dry Boards, In Position, Heads-Up

Suppose, though, that the big blind takes the lead away and bets into you. Or suppose that your opponent was the pre-flop raiser and now continuation bets into you on the flop and you're holding that KQ on an A-T-5 board. Most people, when they think about bluffing there, think that it's time to go *boom! raise!* and take the pot right away. But neither the math nor the story you're telling supports this action.

Say that going to the flop, we have our same 1,000 pot as always. Now your opponent leads 500 into you. If you raise, you'll have to go to something like 1,800-2,000 if you want to have some clout. So now you've invested 1,800-2,000 on the flop to see what your opponent does. If he's truly weak and folds, you win his 500 bet and that's great—except you invested 1,800-2,000 to do it and you only got to see him act one time before putting those chips at risk.

Suppose the board is A-T-5 and your opponent has something like QT or some other medium-strength hand that he'll weak-lead or c-bet with. If he's astute, he's not going away, because your raise reads so weak. If you were really strong, he can reason, you'd call behind on the flop and let him bet into you again on the turn. Smart strong opponents will raise you right back here, to keep the pressure on. Now what are you going to do? Four-bet re-bluff? Yikes!

So your story's all wrong. You're telling a story of weakness when you want to talk strength. To tell *that* story, tell it in parts. Float: Call on the flop, intending to execute a bluff later in the hand. Not only will your story of strength ring truer, since really strong hands would flat-call this flop, you'll also get the benefit of more information for less money.

Say your opponent bets that 500 and you call. You've only invested 500 in the pot post-flop so far and for that price, you've made your opponent feel nervous. Now he has to play the rest of the hand out of position against someone who has shown a willingness to call on a dry board. Who's seeing monsters under the bed now? I mean, if you had middle pair or a bad ace, you'd raise on the flop to find out where your hand is, right? Well, no, *you* wouldn't, not after reading this book. But *he* would, and he wonders why you didn't. Basically, your flat-call has put your opponent completely back on his heels, because the call looks so trappy.

It doesn't look like a bluff.

Now here comes the turn card, and it's ... whatever, since you weren't calling to hit your hand, anyway. Your opponent checks. Now you can bet about half the pot, or 1,000, what a real hand would bet there. Total investment for the hand so far: 1,500. If he folds here, you won his 500 flop bet for 1,500 rather than 1,800. Greatest gain for the smallest price. As a bonus, you got to see your opponent act twice. More information for less outlay. Can you see how much better this is than just barfing all your chips into the pot on the flop?

Of course, you might get check-raised on the turn and have to fold. But that's okay; you won't forfeit a pot you could have won at showdown. Remember that the reason you don't like to bet just one pair on the turn is that if you get check-raised, you might be folding the best hand, a whole-pot mistake. When you're bluffing, you never fade that mistake. Remember also that your half-pot bet on the turn has to work only 33% of the time to break even. Considering the weakness your opponent has shown, that doesn't seem like such a high bar to jump over, does it?

At times, of course, your opponent won't obligingly check to you on the turn. Suppose he leads into you again. If you read him for strength on the second bet and have to bail on your bluff, it still ends up being cheaper than if you'd raised on the flop. You're out of the hand for a mere 500, your call on the flop, instead of the 1,800-2,000 it would've cost you to raise, get re-raised, and find out you can't win.

Even better, where you'd have to fold your bluff to a re-raise on the flop, you don't necessarily need to surrender when your opponent fires again into your float. Though you'd prefer the action to go bet, call on the flop, then check, bet, fold on the turn, you can still consider bluff-raising into that second barrel, if you think your opponent is vulnerable. The bluff-raise on the turn tells the story of a super-strong hand, one that trap-called on the flop to raise the turn, the kind of line you'd take with made hands like top pair, two pair, or a set. If you sense enough weakness when your opponent bets the turn, you can raise on a stone-cold bluff. This isn't a play you make every time, so feel free, if it makes you more comfortable, to save it for situations where you're semi-bluffing and might yet make your hand.

For instance, let's say you hold a hand like QJ on a K-T-2 board. Your opponent leads into you on the flop and you just call. Now the turn is a deuce or some card that doesn't help either you or the board. Your opponent leads into you again, but you read weakness. Your bluff-raise tells a hugely strong story. If your read is right, you win; if not, you still have outs. Thus, at times, even in the face of a second barrel on the turn, you can go ahead and raise.

I'd only do that against someone who's likely to bet the turn with a weaker hand, such as an aggressive creative opponent who almost always takes a second barrel on the turn. This is especially effective if he reads you as an ABC-type player and can now interpret your story as "strong all along, waiting to trap." However, against non-creative players, who'd only bet again on the turn with a monster, you should stay away from this kind of play.

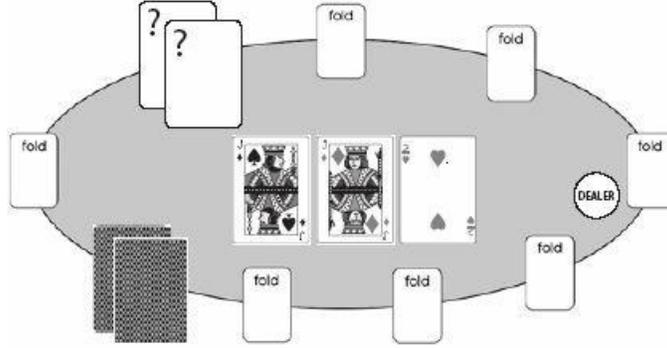
What I most want you to take away from this discussion is how valuable it is to break your bluffs down into parts. You get more information with less risk *and* you tell a much more compelling story, absolutely consistent with your line of play for big hands. Also, by calling behind on the flop, you don't reopen the betting to hyper-aggressive players looking to come over the top either with or without a hand. So take a breath and wait to bluff on the turn. Often, the leader will check to you and you can take that beautiful half-pot opportunity to pick up the pot right there.

But even if it's bet into you a second time, you can still bluff-raise if the situation is right. If you get called, you know you're facing a huge hand and you're done with trying. But note that you can actually get top pair or the bad end of two pair to lay down here, which you're highly unlikely to accomplish with a bluff-raise on the flop.

Flop-Dependent Bluffs, In Position, Heads-Up

Often, your bluffing opportunities are dictated by the texture of the flop itself, though the same principle of taking a breath still applies.

Say you're looking at a flop of J-J-2, the so-called "orphan flop" just looking to be adopted.



Here again, most bluffers' tendency is to raise the flop, trying to tell a story of three jacks right away. But is that really the story you're telling? No. You're telling your opponent that you *don't* have a jack. If you did, you'd happily call along and try to extract extra value. The Greedy Bastard Rule, right? (Which is why, by the way, if you do have a jack, it can be great to raise on the flop against someone sophisticated enough to read you for weakness. It so confuses your more astute opponents that they will often try to *re-bluff* you there. Oops for them.)

Look, the vast majority of players, when they get bet into on that J-J-2 flop, will flat-call with the jack in their hand. So the minute you flat-call, your opponent is on his guard. If he checks into you on the turn, you can now bet and convincingly represent the jack, which confirms his assumptions about your hand. But *do* bet. The reason you called on the flop, remember, was to set up the bluff on the turn. If you're not following through on the turn, never call on the flop with nothing. Better yet, get in the habit of following through. You'll be a better poker player if you do. Again, waiting for your opponent to check to you on the turn is a cheaper and more effective way to represent the jack in your hand. That's how a jack would actually play.

If your opponent check-raises you after you bet on the turn, who cares? By betting around half the pot, you had to win that pot only 33% of the time to break even. And do you really think you'll get check-raised more than 66% of the time? Add in that you'll never disastrously fold the best hand there and it's winner, winner, chicken dinner.

If your opponent leads into you on the turn, you can still raise and represent the jack. What's awesome about that play is your opponent can only call with a jack in his hand, which he's not likely to have. Why? The Greedy Bastard Rule: Someone holding the jack is more likely to go for a check-raise, rather than a second bet on the turn. So the mere fact he's led out should make you read him for no jack. The beautiful thing about this bluffing line is that it works particularly well when you're unsure whether or not your hand is the best.

Sometimes the flop doesn't define your hand well; it doesn't tell you at first whether you're bluffing or not. Say you hold pocket 8s and the board is J-J-2. When someone bets into you, if you call on the flop, are you setting up a bluff or calling for value because you might actually have the best hand? At this point you don't know, because your opponent might have 99, TT, or QQ, or even the jack, but also 66 or KQ. In other words, your hand is super-undefined.

Most players holding 88 on the J-J-2 flop raise right away; they want to find out then and there if their hand is good. I mean, who likes not knowing? But you run into the same old problem if you raise on the flop: too many chips, too weak a tale. Granted, if you raise on the flop, you probably won't get called by KQ (that would be a super-sophisticated float), but you might get *re-raised* by that hand if KQ figures out you're unlikely to have a jack and thus would fold to a re-raise. That's problem number one for the raise.

Problem number two is that you make it somewhat easy for those 99 or TT hands to call you (or re-raise you). And hands like QQ, KK, or AA now have a super-easy call (or re-raise). In other words, by raising on the flop, you ensure that the best hand will never fold and that the worst hand can take the pot away from you.

But if you flat-call on the flop, then raise the turn when your opponent bets again, now KQ will summarily fold. That hand isn't re-bluffing you; the bluff is too expensive by the time the third bet on the turn rolls around and you played the hand so strong it would be pretty kamikaze to try. The raise on the turn also gets hands like 99 and TT to fold and often gets QQ to go away, too. I mean, all those hands have to worry about you holding a jack. That's certainly the story you've told. Even KK and AA can fold here. Good luck getting those hands into the muck on the flop.

Again, thinking about our work with top pair where we made the right bet regardless of what our opponent held, here's another case where you don't know where you're at, but it doesn't matter. You might be raising with the best hand, and when they fold, that's okay. But you might be raising with the worst hand, and when they fold, that's *really* okay. When you aren't sure if yours is the best hand or not, play it like a bluff. That way, you never have to know if you're ahead or behind. You get better hands than yours to fold, while making it difficult to be folding the best hand to a re-bluff.

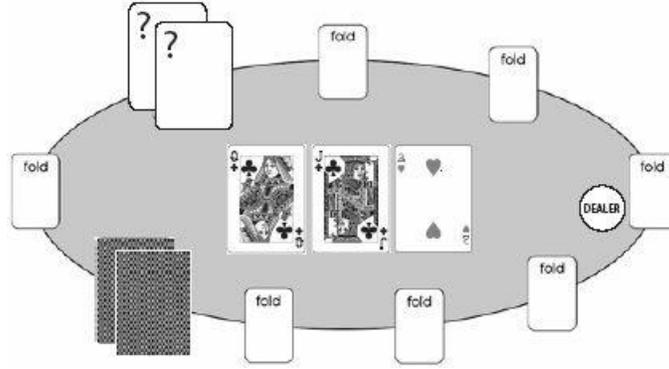
Correspondingly, the stronger your pocket pair, the less need there is to raise at all, to play the hand like a bluff. You're simply more sure of your hand, more likely to have the best hand, and there are fewer superior hands that will fold.

Suppose you have AA on a board of 9-9-2. You're almost certain to have the best hand, unless your opponent has a 9 or 22, so let your opponent bet into you as often as he likes. It's not like a 9 will ever fold, so there goes your fold equity. Plus, with AA, you want to be cautious about opening action that might cause you to fold the best hand. But with an underpair to those nines, the situation is different. Now you're not just fading the 9 he might or might not have, but the pocket 10s or jacks or queens he might have, and any overcards he might hit. In that case, your line of play is call on the flop and raise on the turn. Look how difficult you make life for pocket 10s that way.

The great thing about this kind of pocket-pair bluff is you can remain relatively blind to your situation. You might be bluffing, you might be value betting, and it really doesn't matter which. The less time you spend in poker having to sweat to figure out what your opponent has, the better off you are.

Bluffing the Texture, In Position, Heads-Up

The other kind of flop that's excellent to bluff at is a coordinated one, something like Q♣-J♣-2♥.



If my opponent bets into me on that board, I'm calling 100% of the time with nothing. So many good things can happen to that board—and I'm not even sure what they are! If the board busts, that might be good for me; maybe my opponent was playing the texture, hoping to hit a club or a straight card. Now the 4♦ comes off. He checks, I bet, and he can't call with whatever draw he has here. If he bets into me on the 4♦ turn, he might be betting because he thinks I flat-called the flop with a flush draw or a straight draw. When the board hits a blank, he might figure a bet will be an easy pick-up against the busted draw. Now I can raise and tell him he read me wrong. I mean, he obviously won't continue to put me on a flush draw, because who'd ever raise a busted flush on the turn anyway? Instead, he'll read me for a slow-played made hand. Obviously, this kind of raise is really effective when I actually have a draw. If I'm wrong, I can still get there with a good river card. That puts a lot less pressure on my bluff-raise.

Back on that Q♣-J♣-2♥ flop, let's say the texture hits with a 4♣ on the turn. This might also be good for you, because now your bet after his check (or raise after his bet) says, "Ah ha! I got there!" Either way, then, good card or bad, you can leverage what's happening on the board. And what's great, again, is how modest your investment is. When you raise on the flop, you're making an early expensive bluff without the benefit of much information or of the turn card to help validate the story you're telling. Worse, the flop raise suggests to your opponent that you're raising with a draw, hoping to win the pot outright or get a free card, a common hold 'em play. As you recall, you leverage this assumption when you raise with a set on textured boards, exploiting your opponent's tendency to think you might be raising on the come. Here, if you raise on the come, you're actually encouraging a call you don't want.

When you flat-call the texture on the flop, one of the likely hands your opponent will put you on is the draw. That's why he bets when the texture misses: to drive you off your draw. It's also why a raise behind is so effective—and why he checks when the texture hits the turn and meekly surrenders when you bet.

If, however, the texture does hit and your opponent continues to lead, lean toward giving up the bluff, again, with minimal investment and loss. After all, if he puts you on a possible flush draw and still bets when it hits, maybe he isn't so scared of your hand, after all. In that instance, it turns out that you needed the texture not to hit. Oh well. That's just 500 chips gone wrong, a small enough price to pay for those times when the texture hits and your storytelling is rewarded with a predictable check-fold.

A word of caution on the river, pertaining to both textured and untextured boards. If your opponent has shown a willingness to commit chips to the pot on both the flop and turn, be reluctant to bluff the river. On untextured boards, you have to credit him with having at least something call-worthy. If the board was dry, he wasn't calling with a draw on the turn and he's not likely to suddenly fold to your bet on the river. Save that third barrel. Call it a small busted bluff and move on.

Likewise, if the board is textured, you generally want to show the hand down if you believe there is any chance it can win. If your opponent was on a flush draw, you'll beat that hand with a showdown if you hold the smallest little pair or even ace high, so no need to bet there, since, peculiarly, you have the best hand. Only if you hold a hand that can't possibly win, like a 6-high or something, would you consider taking a shot at the river and hoping that your opponent will fold a busted flush. But sometimes you just have to lose. Again, it's not the end of the world and it's certainly not worse than firing an expensive third barrel in circumstances where you're too likely to get called.

If you're worried that this whole floating thing is a betting pattern that's fairly easy to detect ... don't be. Remember, you're flat-calling on the flop with top pair, sets, and certain draws. So when you call with intent to bluff, your opponent doesn't know where you're at; your real hands give complete cover to your bluffs.

Again, we see that "mixing it up" really makes no sense. In fact, it works against you. One of the easiest calls you can make is against someone who's mixing it up. The story he's telling becomes so inconsistent—weird, in fact—that it quickly adds up to only one ending: He's bluffing. Conversely, when you're making consistent plays (like flat-calling the flop) in disparate situations for varying reasons, your play turns opaque to your opponent. He might as well be looking at the surface of the sun.

I hope also that you see now how your approach to the game is one of full integration. You don't randomly bluff (you don't randomly do anything); rather, you think about lines of play that are not only good in and of themselves, but also reinforce the productivity and profitability of complementary lines in other situations. Take this holistic approach to your thinking and your game will improve by leaps and bounds.

Bluffing Out of Position, Heads-Up

Naturally, it's harder to execute bluffs out of position than in. Think about why floating in position is so powerful. For a cheaper price than raising on the flop, you get to see two streets of information before running your bluff. But you only get that advantage because, yes, you're last to act. Put yourself out of position and that edge goes *poof!* That isn't to say you can't execute a bluff from out of position. You just have to look for better spots, with higher value, before trying.

The Continuation Bet, Out of Position, Heads-Up

If you go into the flop as the leader, you should generally c-bet no matter what flops, even out of position. That, after all, is the main point of raising pre-flop, to earn the right to run the hand. As you now well know, your continuation bet, when sized right, has to win the pot only around a third of the time to break even. Even if you bet 75% of the pot, say leading 750 into a 1,000-chip pot, you're still getting 1.33-to-1, which demands a success rate (a fold from your opponent) only above 43% to find profit. Remembering that your opponent will miss the flop about 67% of the time, those c-bets are darn good value. So the continuation bet out of position in a heads-up pot isn't, strictly speaking, even a bluff. It's just good poker.

The Second-Barrel Bluff, Out of Position, Heads-Up

But continuation bets do get called, so now what do you do? Just give up on the turn? Not necessarily. After all, didn't we just go over a whole section on floating in position, calling with nothing on the flop to bluff the turn when your opponent checks? It stands to reason, then, that when a player calls you on a dry flop, he might be floating to bluff or else calling weak, say with an under pair, waiting to see what you do on the turn, leveraging that you have to act first.

So given that he might be calling with little or nothing, it can't be horrible to take another stab at the pot, betting a small enough amount that you only have to trigger a fold between 33% and 43% of the time to be in the black. This is especially valuable against players known to float a lot.

Moreover, if the pot is textured, your opponent might be calling to hit a draw or bluff a scare card. So a second barrel is warranted whether the texture hits or not, depending on your read. If it misses and you read your opponent for a draw, fire that second barrel to price him off his draw. If the texture completes and you read him for unhappiness at the turn card, you can also bet and represent the flush. Either way, the bet doesn't have to work that often to be profitable, so don't be afraid to try.

The Float on Dry Boards, Out of Position, Heads-Up

Though floats are most effective when you get to see your opponent act first, this doesn't mean you can't ever float out of position. If you spot an opponent who tends to freeze up when you check and call on the flop, an opponent whose arsenal seems to generally contain one barrel and one barrel only, you can try to float him even when you're out of position.

Let's say you call a raise out of position pre-flop against this kind of player when you're holding a hand like $K♥Q♥$. The flop comes $A♠-T♦-2♣$. You check and he bets. Clearly, you'll never call just to hit a jack (a 6% shot with one to come), so if you call here, you're bluffing with a bonus, the bonus being that you might hit the jack by accident. If you're against a player that you've seen c-bet most flops, you have the option to call to float.

But now the float takes three streets instead of two.

When you float the flop in position and your opponent checks the turn, you can bet to pick up the pot right there. Out of position, when you float the flop, you now check the turn. If your opponent checks back, it's likely he was just c-betting the flop with nothing and was done with the hand when you called. Now, after the check on the turn, you can bet the river, knowing that a half-pot bet has to win only a third of the time to break even. So you bluff on the river rather than the turn when you're out of position.

This type of float is effective against a late-position raiser when the board comes dry with a single king or ace. A button raiser can have the whole range of hands, including QJ, pocket pairs, and other hands that are naturally scared of overcards. You, on the other hand, calling out of position, are much more likely to have a good ace or good king—so you hit the flop in his eyes! Yes, he'll bet in position (as he should), but only once and only to see where he's at. If you're up against this sort of button raiser, who lacks the courage of his convictions, go after him with a float on the flop.

Against early-position raisers, conversely, coordinated low boards are the floater's friend. Such boards, like 4-5-6, are unlikely to have connected with a kosher early-position-raiser's hand, but logically could connect with a hand calling from the blind. On such boards against such bettors, you can try floating on the flop out of position in hopes of check-check on the turn and a lead-out-bet winner from you on the river.

But wheels within wheels, right? Recall that when you have something like top pair *in position*, this is exactly where and why you'll check behind a check on the turn: to pick off just this sort of river bluff from your opponent. So if you do float the flop out of position, gauge whether your opponent is capable of thinking along these lines. Most aren't. Most mistakenly bet the turn with top pair, which runs them into a bluff check-raise. Which, of course, you can also consider on the turn.

Let's say you check-call the flop, then check the turn, and now your in-position opponent takes a second bet rather than shutting it down. You can go for a check-raise there, knowing that only pretty strong hands will want to play with you. If you read your player for weak or second-barreling, by all means try the check-raise bluff. It has to work 50% of the time to break even, so if you read your opponent for folding at least half the time to that play, go for it. Just remember that it's costly to execute.

And as with the in-position bluff raise on the turn, the out-of-position bluff raise on the turn might be best executed as a semi-bluff, at least until you're more experienced and comfortable running these kinds of plays, plus more confident in your reads (having read everything Joe Navarro has ever written on poker tells).

Let's say you check-call with the $9♥8♥$ on a flop of $J♥-T♠-2♥$, then check the turn when the $4♣$ hits. If your opponent checks back, you don't even have to look at the river to see if you hit. You can play it as a straight float. But if your opponent bets the turn, you can check-raise semi-bluff, knowing that hands like top pair will lay down and even if you do get called, you still have 15 outs, a 30% chance of winning with the best hand after the bluff broke down. That's a nice insurance policy when you're just getting comfortable with these kinds of plays. Once you get a handle on when the check-raise works for you, you can start trying it in more stone-cold-bluff situations.

Bluff Check-Raising the Flop, Out of Position, Heads-Up

Although floating can tell a great story, in spots check-raising on the flop out of position can actually be quite effective, especially against a player who tends to check the turn to pick off bluffs on the river. Against that kind, floating loses effectiveness; he won't be nice enough to bet the turn for you, instead lying in wait for your river bluff. Against this guy, look to check-raise bluff the flop when he's a very late-position raiser, you're calling from the blind, and the board comes with a naked ace or king.

This would generally read quite weak to a smart opponent, but the good news is that the button is often so weak, he can't contend even if he puts you on the very check-raise bluff you're executing. The likelihood of running into a real hand here is quite small; so is the likelihood that a bad hand gets inspired to three-bet bluff you.

So the logic of this kind of bluff is pretty straightforward. The button can be raising with any two cards, which means he's unlikely to have an ace. The big blind is more likely to hold an ace than the button; after all, you did call a pre-flop raise. You check. He c-bets to try to win the pot if you missed. You raise pretending you didn't miss. He folds, more because he's so weak than that you told a good story (the story isn't particularly fabulous), and it's often easier just to let the hand go than to execute an expensive three-bet re-bluff. If he three bets, it's not the end of the world; it's not like you'll ever fold the best hand with your 6-high or whatever.

Note that against a first-position player, you'd never make this play; he's so much more likely to have a hand that can actually compete. Again, against that guy, you want the opposite sort of flop, which isn't likely to hit the sort of strong hand he raises with from early position, but is the sort of hand with which big-donkey you may have stubbornly defended your blind. Now you can check-raise bluff a board like 7-6-4, representing the sort of made hand that big-donkey you can't resist going for a check-raise with.

Flop-Dependent Bluffs, Out of Position, Heads-Up

Another out-of-position bluff you can try involves leveraging the texture of something like J♠-6♠-2♥. Here you can check-call on the flop with the intention of leading out if the texture hits. It's not the highest-percentage bluff, considering you only get to run it about 20% of the time, the frequency with which the third suited card hits.

But you can certainly have a whack at it, especially against unimaginative or timid players. If the texture doesn't hit, you can always revert to a float, checking the turn with the plan to bet any river if your opponent checks back. And, of course, if your opponent does bet the turn and you have a really good read on him, you could try that nice little bluff check-raise to pick off the guy who's betting just because he puts you on a busted draw. Check-calling a flushy flop gives you several different ways of bluffing, depending on what the turn card is and how your opponent likes to play.

The best companion to the out-of-position bluff is our old friend the orphan flop, something like 9-9-2. If that comes, you can check-call, what you'd do if you had a 9 (and were a conventional player), with the intention to check the turn. If your opponent checks, you can bet the river. If he bets, you can check-raise, exactly what a player holding the 9 would do.

The good news is that this is a high-percentage bluff. The bad news is that when you end up check-raising the turn, it's expensive. To reduce the expense, you might have an urge to try leading out on the turn, but that's problematic, because the lead-out looks weird to your opponent; why would you be leading with a 9? If you really hold a 9, you'd want to keep your opponent on the hook, checking again on the turn to milk another bet out of him. If you bet out on the turn, your story suddenly makes no sense (or rather, it starts to make sense as a bluff), and you're asking to be raised, at least by a good opponent. (This is why it can be effective to check-call and lead out when you *do* have trips. It doesn't look like what it is.) If you really want to win this hand, check the turn with the intention of check-raising if your opponent bets, but that takes balls, chips, and a cooperative opponent—someone who'll fire that second shot on the turn.

It's actually a better circumstance for you, albeit pricier, when your opponent bets the turn. The opponent who checks here might be planning to snap off the very river bluff you're planning to run. Remember that smart players will check on the turn with hands like overpairs or even underpairs on boards like this, not wanting to fade a check-raise with a hand that might be best, but can't stand to get raised.

Against a player who can check behind on the turn with the intention to call on the river to snap off a bluff, you've got a little problem. That's not to say you shouldn't bet the river; a smallish bet has to win only 33% of the time. Just understand that you can't defend against that line of play when you're out of position, so you'd rather hold one of those either/or hands like pocket 10s, because his check on the turn would indicate that your hand is probably good and your river bet is now a value bet, not a bluff.

Which brings us back to the point that when you have an either/or hand, a hand with no clarity, the best line is often to play it like a bluff. Thus, if you're looking at a board like 9-9-2 and you have a hand like 88, resist the urge to check-raise the flop, for you give a hand like TT or JJ a fairly easy call and you open yourself up to getting bluffed by a player who figures out that you aren't holding a 9. If you check-call instead, you can check the turn with the intention to lead the river if it's checked behind, or check-raise the turn if it's bet. The beauty of that play is that you never need to figure out if your opponent is holding an overpair. He'll throw that hand in the muck. Your hand plays too much like you hold a 9 for pocket 10s to stick around.

If you're bluffing out of position, look for situations where you can leverage what's going on with the board, where it would make sense that you might be slow-playing a hand out of position. Some boards are more dynamic than others. When the turn card can complete lots of different hands and your opponent gives you credit for calling and hitting, you can do a lot of damage with out-of-position bluffs.

Of course, you can also do damage to yourself, so handle with care. Or even don't handle at all. I can't stress this point enough: If you overall minimize your out-of-position involvement, you'll be miles ahead of the game.

Multi-Way Bluffing Opportunities

Actually, there aren't many multi-way bluffing opportunities and you should probably save most of your bluffing energy for heads-up situations, which you'll facilitate by generally raising rather than calling pre-flop. The issue is that bluffing requires your opponent to miss the board, or at least hit it in such a way that he's willing to lay down. The more players you layer into a pot, the less likely you'll encounter this circumstance, simply as a function of the greater number of hands out against you. Also, the more players in the pot, the more draws out there and the more likely someone might have actually hit the hand you're trying to represent. If you represent a flush in a heads-up pot, it isn't likely that's the hand your opponent has, but add in multiple players and the chances someone holds the flush increase accordingly.

The Continuation Bet Multi-Way

That being said, there are some opportunities to bluff in multi-way pots. The most common multi-way bluff is when everyone checks to you because you're the pre-flop leader, so you bet. Notice that you're in position on the field and get to see everyone make that check to you. Now you can take that half- to three-quarters-pot shot and try to win it right there. And because of the pricing you've set up, you need to pick up the pot only between 33% and 43% of the time to break even on the try. Now it's up to you to know your opponents and whether you think they'll fold that often.

For example, against stubborn loose opponents, I wouldn't recommend c-betting multi-way too often; more than two-thirds of the time, at least one of your loose opponents will probably call you. Also, recognize that dry boards are much better for c-betting than wet boards; boards with draws give your opponents more reasons to call. Now, obviously, you can make these in-position bets when it's checked to you, even if you weren't the pre-flop leader. You've seen the weakness. You can choose to attack it if you see fit.

Being last to act isn't the only criterion for trying to pick up multi-way pots. If you're second-to-last to act, you can also take these stabs. The players in front of you have demonstrated some weakness and you have to worry about only one more opponent behind you. As long as you think you can put that pot in your stack 33% to 43% of the time, depending on your bet size, seize these bluff attempts.

What you don't want to do is habitually c-bet into multi-way pots when you're in early position against a crowded field. It doesn't look like you'll win the pot often enough in these circumstances, so you're under no obligation to try. Against many players willing to call a raise pre-flop, chances are someone has hit the board or is willing to continue past the flop, especially since they have position on you. This is one time it's okay, even smart, to check the lead away.

Remember that sometimes when you're holding big hands or big draws on coordinated boards, you purposely check away the lead to try to get the check-raise in. Sometimes, then, you check away the lead in multi-way pots from early position, because you're giving up. But sometimes you have something big planned for later. This makes your checks harder for your opponents to read, always what we look for.

Recognizing Heads-Up Bluffing Situations in Multi-Way Pots

Aside from continuation betting, one of the easiest ways to bluff in a multi-way pot is when it's not a multi-way pot. I know that sounds like a Dr. Seuss sentence, but let me explain.

Often, a pot starts out multi-way going to the flop, but by the time the action gets to you, it's either already heads-up, might as well be heads-up, or could be made heads-up with action from you. When you recognize and exploit these situations, you turn your multi-way bluffs into heads-up bluffs, and we've already determined that those are easier to execute successfully. Let's look closer.

Certainly, the most obvious of this type of situation is when, in a hand that saw the flop multi-way, the action on the flop goes bet, fold, fold, to you. Now you're just back to the heads-up situation and, especially if the original bettor had the pre-flop lead and could be c-betting, you can call with air here, betting on the turn if it's checked to you or maybe raising if it's bet and you feel your opponent is vulnerable to folding the best hand. Now you're not bluffing a multi-way pot, but rather a *formerly* multi-way pot that's now heads-up. It's not as if the action went bet, call, call, and you're trying to bluff three people off their hands (which, except with strong suicidal tendencies, you wouldn't want to try).

You can try this float even with players to act behind you, either if only one player is left or if multiple players yet to act have already shown weakness. Let's say you're in a four-way pot in the cutoff.

Player A bets, B folds, and now it's up to you. With only one player left to act behind you, you could try flat-calling weak; if D folds, you're now perfectly set up for a float.

And your call will trigger a couple of good reactions. First, it'll be difficult for D to call; he has to overcall you and, as we know, that requires greater strength. This makes it more likely that D will just go away. Meanwhile, it's hard for player A to figure you for a float, since you called, even though you had D still had to act behind you. Player A credits you for more strength than you have, increasing his likelihood of laying down on later streets. So not only does your flat-call put you into a heads-up in-position situation, it telegraphs great strength to your one remaining opponent, *at the lowest possible cost to you*. Sweet, huh?

You can also make this kind of play if multiple players are left to act, but they've already shown weakness. If you're on the button in a four-way pot and players A and B check to C who bets, you can float-call there; A and B have already indicated their lack of interest in the hand. Thus, you can treat the hand as functionally heads-up before the action even gets to you (with your scary, strength-signifying flat-call decreasing A and B's interest that much more).

You can make this play out of position as well, though it's harder. Let's say you're in first position and check. Player B checks, C bets, and D folds. You could flat-call to float, knowing B has already shown weakness and will likely fold if you call. As you'll usually get around 3-to-1 to call in that spot, you need to believe your bluff will work only 25% of the time to break even on the play.

The last way to leverage what look to be heads-up situations in multi-way hands is simply to call bullshit on a bet by raising with players left to act behind you, especially if they've shown weakness already. If you're in first position in a hand and you check, players B and C both check, and D bets, you're allowed to check-raise there, declaring your belief that D is on a steal. Once again, by leveraging the fact that players are yet to act, you make your hand read stronger than it is. Since those two players have shown weakness, it's less likely they have anything, making your bluff-check-raise higher percentage, especially since you leverage their presence in the hand to make your play read stronger; with two players left to act, your check-raise looks like a strong hand to your button-betting opponent.

You can also make this kind of play with only one player left to act. Let's say player A was the pre-flop raiser and c-bets on the flop, something you know him to do with pretty much any hand when he has the lead. If B folds and it's up to you with just D behind, you could raise, calling bullshit on A's bet. Again, you're leveraging the presence of D to make your hand read stronger, but at the same time, you aren't particularly worried about D, because there's only one of him.

Interestingly, some of these raise bluffs are easier to sell in multi-way pots that devolve to heads-up situations than similar bluffs in hands that went to the flop heads-up to begin with. Flop raises, particularly on untextured boards, tend to read weak in heads-up situations and can make for an ineffective bluffing strategy. But in multi-way pots, opponents will give you more credit for a hand when you raise and you can use that to your advantage to end hands quickly when you read an opponent's bet as simple shenanigans.

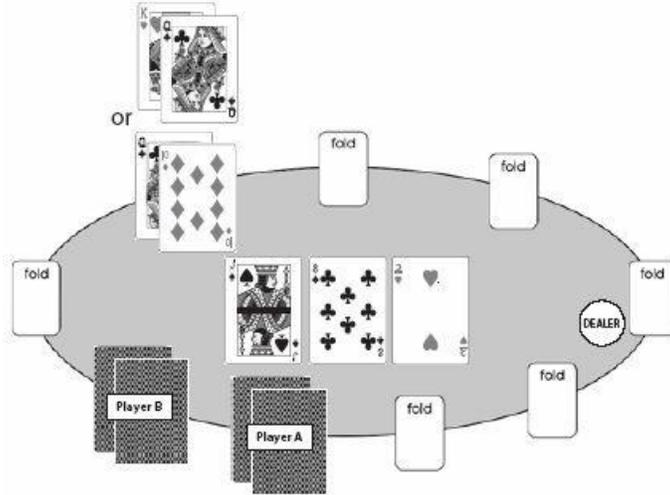
Squeezing Unsited Boards, Multi-Way

One multi-way bluff you can try is a little mini-squeeze on the flop.

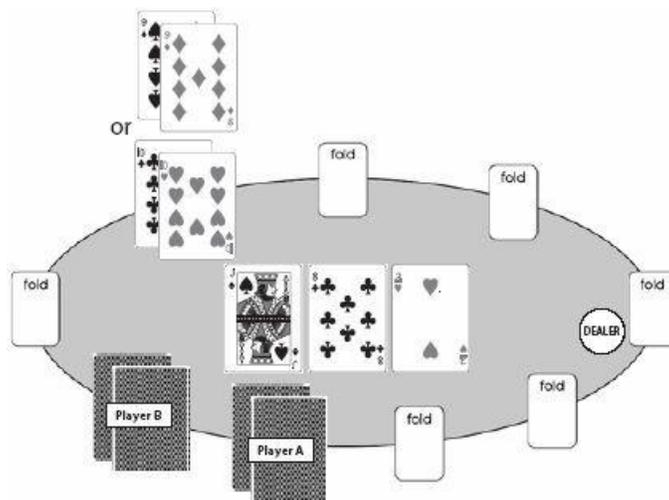
Say player A bets and B calls. You can now bluff-raise, using the classic squeeze strategy of leveraging B's presence in the hand to drive out A and the weakness of B's flat-call to drive *him* out. It's crucial, though, that you try this naked bluff only on an unsited board; if there's a suit on board that you don't hold, either the bettor or the caller most likely does and you won't squeeze them both into the muck.

So on a board such as J-8-2 rainbow, if the first person leads, especially on what seems to be a c-bet without muscle, and the second person calls, you can take a shot at squeezing the pot, especially if your bluff isn't completely naked. Since you'll have a lower success rate bluffing against two opponents than against one, it's nice to have a backup plan, such as actually making a hand.

On this J-8-2 board, for example, consider squeezing when you have KQ or QT. If someone calls, it's not the end of the world; you still might make the best hand. He'll probably check on the turn and you can either fire again if you read him for weak or if you hit gin, or take a free card if you read him for strong, miss completely, or improve to just one pair (which you'd check on the turn in a heads-up pot anyway).



Another great time to squeeze on that J-8-2 board is with a hand like 99 or TT if you're not sure it's any good. Maybe the lead bettor is on a bad jack. You'd sure like to get him to fold, wouldn't you? Again, from a storytelling point of view, the fact that the pot is multi-way gives more perceived strength to your raise, since in multi-way situations, people are less likely to play their big hands slow.



You can make this same kind of play out of position in a multi-way hand when you're unsure of your hand, don't want to play it out of position, and are vulnerable to the board. Let's say an early-position active player raises before the flop and picks up one caller besides you, in the big blind, holding TT. When the flop comes 2-6-7 rainbow, this can be a tough spot to play. You might have the best hand, but against two players it's difficult to know. You might be facing an overpair. Even if not, you really don't want to see a turn card; against two opponents, any overcard hitting will cause you fits.

If you lead into the raiser, it's both unlikely to end the hand right there and likely to trigger a raise, which is ugly with a hand sitting in the middle like TT here. So you can check with the intention of squeezing if both players continue and semi-bluff floating if you end up heads-up.

Let's say you check, the original raiser bets, and player B calls. Especially if you sense that B is calling weak, this is a great time to check-raise squeeze. Player A, the original raiser, can have anything here and B is reading weak. By check-raising, you can win the pot right there and not have to fade the turn card against two opponents with position on you. If it happens that A bets and B folds, now you could either raise and call bullshit on the bet or go for a float, since you're heads-up. Whether you end up floating or squeezing, you aren't sure what you have, so you treat your TT as a bluff.

Of course, you can execute this sort of out of position multi-way squeeze play whether you have a hand or not. Say you're looking at a J-8-2 board with something like AQ. Out of position, you check, the pre-flop raiser bets, and one player calls. If you read the bettor for a wide range and the caller for weak, squeeze away. Even top pair might fold here, your play looks so strong.

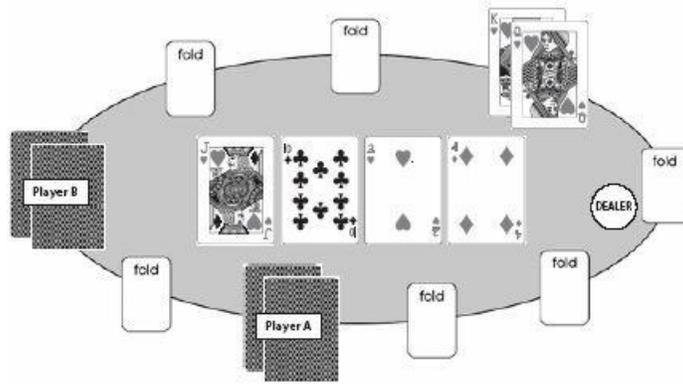
Do remember, though, that you're out of position and if you get called, you don't get to see your opponent check to you on the turn. Say you make that same play in position and get one caller. If your opponent checks to you on the turn, you can take a half-pot-sized second barrel at the pot, having seen the weakness in front of you. But if he bets into you, you can just fold and give up the bluff for nothing. Squeezing out of position, you have to fire that second barrel without the benefit of seeing your opponent act first. Or you check, show weakness, and maybe lose the pot to a re-bluff. Another reason why bluffing in position is always more profitable.

Again, if the board is flushing, going for squeeze plays when you don't have the draw against multiple opponents can be very dangerous, especially if they've shown they like to chase their flush draws. In other words:

DON'T TRY TO SQUEEZE A FLUSHING BOARD

Certain Semi-Bluffs

You can make some nice semi-bluff plays as an alternative to calling, even when the price is right to call, but especially when it's not.



Let's say the board is J♥-T♣-2♥ and you have a hand like K♥Q♥. You bet in late position and get two callers. By the time you get to the turn, a blank, the pot has 2,000 in it. Now the action goes bet 1,000 from player A, call from player B, and it's on you. With 4,000 in the pot, you're getting 4-to-1 on your call, more than the right price, making calling to try to hit a perfectly reasonable option.

However, you could also raise; now you're in a delightful situation to semi-bluff squeeze. If you do, raise about the size of the pot, a total bet of 5,000-6,000. Since you'll never fold here, you need to measure your expected win rate only against the extra chips you're raising with, not your total bet. Raise the size of the pot and you only need to win at least 50% of the time. Considering all your outs, plus your fold equity, you can do that standing on your head. In this case, then, you have two workable lines of play. You can take the juicy price to flat-call, getting 4-to-1 on a 2.5-to-1 shot, or you can raise and give yourself some extra wins by folding the field and not worrying about hitting your hand.

The choice changes when you have only an open-ended straight draw. Let's say you called on the flop with K♥Q♥, and the flop hits J-T-2, no suits. You call on the flop against two opponents and a brick hits on the turn. Once again, it goes bet 1,000 from player A and call in front of you from player B. Again, you're getting 4-to-1 to call, but now you're actually not getting the right price, assuming (a fair assumption) that your king or queen won't be good if they hit. Your straight draw is only 16% to hit, a little worse than 5-to-1. You'd have to be sure that you'd get paid on the river to even consider a straight mathematical call in this situation. So if you really want to continue the hand, play it as a semi-bluff, squeezing to pick up some fold equity. Because of the math, your choices are to fold (you're getting a bad price to call) or raise (if you think your opponents are vulnerable to that play). And it can't be that bad a raise; if you get called, you definitely have outs and can still win. Instead of making a bad mathematical call on the turn, make a good semi-bluff raise that might back-door into the best hand.

These semi-bluff turn raises work well multi-way. You can leverage all the players against one another. But they also work heads-up; in fact, in a sense, the math of the situation heads-up actually forces you to bluff.

Say you call a flop bet with your KQ and the straight doesn't hit on the turn. Now you're bet into again. Heads-up, you can't be getting the right price to call, but you can raise, because you're getting the right price on the fold equity of your bluff. And if you get called, you can still hit. Heads-up on the turn, then, your option to call is taken away. You either have to fold or raise. Multi-way, you might call if the pricing situation is correct.

Such bluffs work less well out of position, where two problems crop up. First, if you miss on the river, you don't get to see your opponent act first before you decide what to do. Second, if you hit your back-up outs, maybe making the straight, you'll have to act first, which makes it much harder to get paid. If you check-raise on the turn, it's unlikely that a check from you will trigger a river bet from your opponent. So you'll just have to bet out and hope he plays. This is particularly problematic if you're semi-bluffing a flush draw, since the texture is so obvious that it will freeze your opponent if it hits. Keep that in mind when choosing whether to run semi-bluff squeeze plays from up front.

Bluffing or Not? Who Cares!

A quick review of floating, which really bears reviewing.

Recall that when discussing medium-strength hands, we measured them against hands that were better than ours, worse than ours, and pure air. In our example, we had AQ, maybe up against AK or better, AJ or worse, or two random undercards. Through that exploration, we found a line of play that let us be blind to what hand we were actually against and do well against all of them, no matter what they had.

As you can see from the discussion, bluffing works the same way. Again, you often don't know if you're bluffing or not or what your opponent is holding, but it doesn't matter. If you run the bluff correctly, it'll be profitable against the range of hands, not just the hand he might have. Floating, then, as we've defined it, is essentially the same as calling behind with a medium-strength hand you're not sure of.

For the sake of this review, we'll give you AJ on a board of K-8-3, no suits. This is a dry board, and the kind of hands your opponent could have include AK, 99, QT, AQ, and so on. Note that AQ is now, functionally, air. If that hand is playing, it's a bluff. This is important: While you trail this hand with your AJ, you can easily take the pot away.

One of these hands—you don't know which—raised pre-flop and you called in position. Your opponent leads into you, which doesn't mean much, right? It's a c-bet or a real hand, but you don't know which. And if you fold, you'll fold to the best hand sometimes, and sometimes fold against hands that would easily muck if you pressured them. While AQ and 99 are technically better hands than yours, they shouldn't necessarily get to win this pot, not if you can take it away!

Most players will try to take the pot away with a raise right here on the flop. But if you do that, what happens? AK isn't going anywhere and he gets to make more money off of you. QT either folds (good) or reads you for weak and re-raises (very bad). What's more, 99 will likely play with you here and might re-raise; what the hell, there's only one overcard and you could be lying (in this case you are). AQ might fold or push, you just don't know. And on our standard pot of 1,000, a call would cost 500, but your raise costs you 2,000. If the lead bettor comes over the top, you're out 2,000. Even if he just calls, you've paid 2,000 for one piece of information and actually encouraged a better hand like 99 to mess with you, which you definitely don't want.

But if you just call on the flop, you'll win the pot from QT on the turn when he checks, you bet, and he folds, earning you the same 500 you'd have gotten if you raised on the flop and QT folded, but without the risk of the re-push. AQ is likely to play the same way. So is 99. So for your 500 investment on the flop and another 1,000 on the turn, you got most of the range of hands your opponent c-bets with to fold, without opening yourself up to the re-bluff. Of course, when you call the flop, you're paying AK, but AK is only one of the many hands you could face here. If you *assume* it's AK every time, you're, again, seeing monsters under the bed.

If any of these hands lead into you on the turn, you can raise or fold. Then, not only will all the lesser hands fold (even 99 and AQ, which are better than you), but even AK might fold. Had you raised on the flop, AK would never fold. Here he might, because your story's so strong. And that's the real key to this play. When they lead into you on the turn, your raise definitely does better against all the lesser hands, which are guaranteed folds, but it also does better against AK, KQ, or any other king. This is the line of play that gets those hands to lay down. They won't fold on the flop, but they might on the turn.

If they don't lay down, oh well. You're done betting and calling. Not all bluffs work. They're not all supposed to work. In the face of a heavy bet on the river, just release your hand. But look at the overall price you paid: a small call on the flop and a reasonable raise on the turn. Compare that to the conventional approach to bluffing: a raise on the flop, a bet on the turn, and if you have the chips and nerve, another bet on the river—that proverbial third barrel. The beauty of delaying your bluff until the turn is that's your *first* barrel, so if you bet on the river, that's a second barrel. You never ever have to take a third barrel.

Notice also that while AK is likely calling on the turn, he's definitely not betting on the river. He might make a crying call if you bet—which is why you have to think carefully before you fire again—but he's certainly not leading into you. That's such a scary story you've told, he's just hoping his hand is good.

Further, no law says you have to bluff at all on the turn. If it goes bet, call on the flop, and your opponent leads into you again, take a read. If you read him strong, you can fold. No harm, no foul. But you got two looks at him for the price of one, and that's something. Think about your cumulative edge in decision-making if you're making all your decisions based on two betting rounds, not one. That's huge. *And* you got away from your bluff for 500 instead of 2,000.

Further, the way this is set up, to tell such a strong story, you don't even have to make reads so well. Don't know if your guy is on AK or AQ? No worries. Maybe they both fold if you raise the turn. Those turn raises inspire fear in some pretty strong holdings. Flop raises? Not so much.

If you think your guy will get hip to your tricks and start decoding your bluff patterns, remember, you're playing your big hands the same way. That's some effective shit. Your opponent *knows* that you love to bluff. He even knows *how* you bluff. He just doesn't know if you're bluffing *now*.

One more myth to explode is the cheap bluff on the flop. Most people try to bluff early in the hand, thinking they're investing less money by betting into a small pot. But I just showed you that you actually invest less money, with more confidence, by waiting. Why don't most people wait? They're afraid. They want to take a cheap shot at a bluff and break it off if it doesn't work. And then what happens? They get re-bluffed, because the price is still pretty low.

If you call on the flop and raise on the turn, though, that takes the re-bluff completely away. If they want to re-bluff you on the turn, it costs them their eyeballs. And most people aren't willing to commit tons of chips to a re-bluff. When you bluff on the turn, for them to come back at you will cost them probably every chip they have on the table. So your turn bluff simultaneously shuts out the re-bluff and gives you confidence that when they *do* fire back, they have a real hand. While reopening the action on the flop is a worry, on the turn it's not, because only the very best hands will come after you. And that's what you want to find out anyway.

So here's the bottom line for bluffing:

WAIT

Wait till the time is right. Do this one thing right and your bluffs will become a devastating weapon in your arsenal, and what's not to like about that?

Your Right to Bluff (You're Right to Bluff, Too)

If you think about the categories of hands we've discussed in this book—monsters, draws, top pair, and bluffs—you'll see that I give equal weight to bluffs as I do to other types of hands. Bluffing doesn't happen by accident and it shouldn't be considered a "ghetto" part of your game. Rather, it should be the strategy you adopt when your analysis indicates you don't have the best hand and your goal is to win despite it. In other words, give yourself full freedom to bluff as much as the game you're in demands and allows, and I'll bet that right now you don't have nearly enough bluff in your game.

That said, it's a rare hand you'll go into saying, "I'm going to bluff, no matter what." The logic of that breaks down for two reasons. First, you don't know how the hand will develop, and if you're locked into a strategy, then it's not a strategy, it's a trap. Second, considering how hard it is to make a hand in hold 'em—for both you and your opponents—you'll find ample situational opportunities to bluff without ever having to go hunting for extra ones.

Now, you could call it a bluff, I suppose, to bet in last position without a hand before the flop when everyone folds to you. I mean, you know you don't have the best hand, but then again, that's just plain-ol' garden-variety aggressiveness. I wouldn't call that a bluff. Nor would I call it a particularly good idea to call in position before the flop with nothing, just for the sake of trying to bluff after the flop. Yes, you have position and that's good, but no, you don't have good cards and that's bad. In other words, you have no second way to win. All bluffs work better when they're supported by backup ways to win.

But think about it. Against a weak loose player, you can call in position before the flop with hands from the bottom of his range on up. Isn't that enough? Of course it is. You'll find plenty of opportunities to get involved. You don't have to go looking for reckless adventures that increase your variance in an already variance-heavy game. And if you go around calling with hands you know are crap just so you can get fancy later, I'd say you're a little too in love with your play and with the idea that you can win without a hand. Worse, you now have a serious goal-setting problem: Suddenly, your goal isn't to make good decisions or do good math, it's to feel like a stud, and that's just silly and wrong. Plus, if you play the way we've talked about in this book, you'll play something like 20%-25% of your hands before the flop. This is a high percentage of hands and if it's not enough for you, restrict yourself to heads-up matches where you get to play, basically, them all.

At the end of the day, though, the bluff is an awesome weapon that you should always be prepared to use. Just as betting big hands gives cover to your bluffs, betting bluffs gives cover to your big hands. And in position against lesser players, it's just sick. Your measuring stick should be the weakness of your opponent. The more control you feel you have over your opponent, the more afraid your opponent is of you, the more active your opponent is, the more you can call in position.

Some players out there literally only bet when they hit. You're not bluffing those guys. You're folding when they bet. You've got too many ways to pick up money from them without doing anything risky. So while these bluffing plays are awesome, and a necessary element of your game, you need to still be picking your spots.

Aim your bluffs at players who are too active, too prone to continuation bet, or too prone to weak leads. Especially bluff those weak leads. When

people weak-lead into you, call basically 100% of the time. They either rarely have a monster and mostly nothing, or a fragile terrified hand. So when you raise pre-flop and they lead into you on the flop, you can literally call with napkins, because they're just begging for you to take that pot away. Call them. Then smack them with a bet or a raise on the turn and take the pot away. Is that bluffing? Maybe. Maybe it's just common-sense poker. It's not your hand you're betting, it's your opponent's weak lead.

River Play In Position

If you look carefully, you'll notice that there's no chapter in this book titled, "Play on the Turn." That's because you can't make any decision on any flop without already knowing what you're doing on the turn. Granted, you don't know which card is coming off, but you do know, for example, that it'll either improve your hand or not, and you simply won't take action on the flop without planning in advance what you'll do on the turn when a suited card comes or a non-suited card comes or a Kansas tornado swoops down and carries all the cards, chips, players, and Toto away. (Okay, maybe not the latter.) In that sense, the chapter on turn play has already been written: It's scattered across and embedded in all the pre- and post-flop discussions we've already had.

While the same logic applies to river play—as you've seen in this book thus far, even on the flop and certainly on the turn, you're already planning your last-round attack—you don't get to the river that often in this game. While you make it to the river a lot, a lot of the plays you make on the river are actually meant to *prevent* the hand from getting to the river. And in lots of flop situations, your betting strategy is to ensure no further decisions on the hand, obviously eliminating any river decisions before you even get to the turn. Even when you find yourself bluffing on a hand, you generally bluff on the turn, so that's where those types of hands end. Think about it. What does it take to get a hand to the river? Either a lot of people betting and other people calling or nobody betting at all. For every reason we've discussed up till now, both of those strategies are losers.

So while you'll get lots of practice in your poker life at playing flops and turns, you'll actually get very little practice and experience playing rivers. A lot of people don't have extensive and useful river-play experience. As a result, they generally play this last betting round poorly. It's a practice issue and people don't have the right kind of practice. Thus, river play bears a separate analysis, which you'll find in this chapter. Because of the practice issue, it may take you longer than normal to absorb the following lessons.

In earlier chapters, we started our discussion with heads-up situations, then moved on to multi-way play. Here we'll pass through and pretty much dismiss multi-way play, for two reasons. First, even hands that start out multi-way usually end up heads-up by the river. Second, multi-way play on the river is so damn cut and dried. If you're not heads-up, you're either betting to bluff or for value. There's really no in between. I mean, if you have an iffy hand and you know it, it's not like you'll bet into a multi-way field, except with what you know to be a bluff. In all other circumstances, you're betting what you think is the best hand. And those are the only two situations in which you'd ever take a shot on the river in a multi-way pot. So, end of subject, case closed; every situation we discuss in this chapter is heads-up.

Are You Bluffing or Betting for Value?

When we get into river situations, we first have to ask ourselves a two-part question. The first part is, "Am I bluffing?" If the answer is yes, you have to measure whether you think your bluff will work, then go ahead and bet when you feel you can win the pot.

But if the answer is, "No, I'm not bluffing," very often the case when you bet the river, you need to ask yourself the second question, the important one: "If I bet, can I get paid off by a hand that's worse than mine?"

Amazingly, people don't really ask that question and here's why: They're so keyed into the concept of value betting and they know it's bad to miss a value bet, so they focus all their attention on making a really good value bet—without stopping to consider what a value bet actually means. It means betting a hand that can get paid off by a worse hand than yours. But what if no hand worse than yours can pay you? Then you're not value betting. You're bluffing. And it often happens when you're considering a river bet that you don't know which side of that equation you're on.

By this point in the book, of course, you're familiar with mysteries of this sort. We saw it when betting AQ into AK or AJ and bluffing into hands that might be better or might have missed. In those circumstances, we paid close attention to the risk of reopening the betting, such that if we get raised, we have to fold and maybe end up folding the best hand. So we want to value bet and extract every ounce of earn we can. At the same time, we don't want to step in something sticky.

Say you have KQ and the board is J-T-x-x going into the river. Now a queen comes off and, huzzah, you just hit top pair. Your opponent checks and you have to decide whether to bet. There was betting on the flop and turn, so you can be confident that your opponent has at least *something*. Before you value bet your top pair, you need to assess what hands are paying you off here. And you have to measure the likelihood of them making a crying call with AJ or AT against the possibility that they were dragging two pair or maybe just made two pair with QJ or QT. This isn't an easy thing to measure, but it helps if you break things down. There are several issues to consider, each in turn.

First, do you have position? Are you first or last to act? Second, what does your opponent have? Obviously, you don't know for sure, but you've had three good looks at him: pre-flop, on the flop, and on the turn. All those looks add up to a story of some kind. By now you should have a good idea of what it is, at least in terms of whether he's weak, medium, or strong. Third, evaluate your own hand's relative strength. If you're weak or strong, it's easy to think clearly. Weak, you're certain you're bluffing, not value betting. Strong, you're reasonably confident of betting the better hand. It's those medium-strength hands, especially when you judge your opponent to be likewise medium-strength, that put you on iffy ground, the place where the edgy value bet lives.

Say you've determined that you're medium-strength and your opponent probably is too. You'd like for him to pay you off with a weaker pair, but you're aware he may be ahead of you now. Ask yourself, "How aggressive is this guy?" Super-aggressive and super-passive players will behave differently here. Once you've taken these factors into account, you should be able to crystallize the situation somewhat like this: "I'm in position with a medium-strength hand, facing a medium-strength hand that might or might not have me beat and a super-aggressive player." Now, at last, you can proceed.

(By the way, can you see how important it is to do this logical orderly analysis? The first few times you try it, it'll feel labored and awkward, and will seem to take forever. But it's like Wii tennis: You get better fast.)

Let's look at some sample situations.

In Position, Aggressive Bettor, Strong Hand

You're in position against an aggressive opponent who bets into you on the river. Your pretty sure yours is the better hand. The board is Q-J-7-3-

2 and you have 77. What should you do?

First, you judge your position. Yep, you've got that. Next, you judge your opponent's hand strength. Even though he's aggressive, he's not just betting his aggressiveness. In this case, the story of the hand tells you that he is, in fact, strong. You're strong too. But he's aggressive, likely to push a hand that's less than the nuts; that's what aggressive players do. But your hand is better. Now what?

In this case, you don't just raise, but raise big. After all, you're both strong. And this is an aggressive guy. You don't need to tease value out of him. You want him to pay you off big. And he will. His style of play demands it. Being aggressive, he knows his opponents will call bullshit on his bets much more often than against other players. Aggressive players have to call raises more often than non-aggressive players, lest savvy players mercilessly play back at them and take away pot after pot on the river.

Note what a small raise would do from a storytelling point of view: suggest to your aggressive opponent that you're trying to extract value—that, in fact, you're afraid to miss out on some, as so many players are. The small raise would actually be easier for him to get away from. But if you raise big, your story is much different. Now you look like someone who wants a fold. And because your opponent is also strong, you'll likely get a call. A small raise might also invite the aggressive player to play back at you and unless you have the stone-cold nuts, you don't want that. A big raise blocks that play.

Next case: Your hand is strong and you suspect this same aggressive opponent is either weak or medium-strength when he leads into you. Again you analyze. You have position, so you have the option of closing out the action, but you also have strength, so you don't fear re-opening it. The story of the hand suggests that you have the better holding and your (aggressive) opponent is out in front of his. In this case, you don't want to bet too big. Even if he reads you as scared, his hand isn't strong enough to call. However, you can still leverage an aggressive player's need to call too much by making a smaller raise. Yes, this is a value raise and it's likely to work, but you know what? Even if it doesn't, that's okay. Your opponent has already contributed on the river. Now you're just freerolling for an even better payoff.

In both cases, whether you read your aggressive opponent as strong or weak, you're using the same logic on sizing the raise, essentially asking yourself, "What's the biggest raise my opponent will call?" Obviously, the stronger you think your opponent's hand is, the bigger the raise you'll rate him capable of calling. So against the better hand, your raise size will tend to be larger. That said, look for opponents who love to read big bets as weak. Against that type, you can raise bigger on the river even when you read him for a middling hand; he may love to make hero calls. And we just love to punish people who love to make those calls.

One raise size I tend to avoid is doubling the size of his bet, a very fishy move. It reads like you're trying to squeeze out that extra little bit. But you can certainly do close to double and take the fishiness out of it. If there's 1,000 in the pot at that point and your opponent bets 500 into you, you don't have to min-raise or full-pot raise. You could call his 500 and bump him back another 800. That may be just the right price to get the curiosity call you seek.

Again, sometimes the fear of missing value is so strong that someone in your position would almost automatically make that min-raise, so desperate to get *something* that he'll settle for the least he can get. But see this from the other guy's point of view. If he's bluffing at the pot on the river, he's not paying an extra 500 no matter what. And if he's not bluffing, the difference between 500 and 800 won't keep him from calling. What *would* keep him from calling is his read that the min bet is exactly what it looks like: a desperate attempt to extract value with a hand he can't beat.

In Position, Aggressive Bettor, Medium-Strength Hand

Your hand is medium-strength and you suspect your aggressive opponent is medium to strong. For instance, you still have 77, but now the board is J-T-7-3-2, with three clubs. Note that your hand is no longer that strong. Not only do two sets beat you, but also the straights and flush. Top-pair top-kicker is likewise medium in this situation. You should rate a hand as medium when it has a good possibility of being the best hand, but is nowhere near the nuts.

So you're holding this kind of hand against an aggressive opponent whom you judge to be somewhere in the same range or better. He leads into you. What do you do? You can't fold, especially against an aggressive opponent when you might have the better hand. But you can't raise, because you read him for the stronger end of his range and he might have you crushed. This would be one of those circumstances where reopening the betting can cost you the pot two ways, either by having him call you with a better hand or by having him raise you off the pot altogether. Aggressive opponents are, by definition, capable of re-raise bluffs, so remember to keep action closed with a hand that might win a showdown, but can't stand to get re-raised.

Here, then, you just call, assuming: 1) that this is an aggressive opponent who doesn't necessarily need to be beating you to bet, and 2) the price is right. Obviously, if he shoves all-in, so that you're not even getting 2-to-1 on your money, you have to be damn confident in your read to call. But if he bets half- to full-pot, offering you 3-to-1 or 2-to-1 on your call, that's significantly reduced money pressure. You only have to be correct more than a quarter or a third of the time, respectively, to show profit on your call.

Another advantage to your call concerns the meta-game, the head game that goes on between players. Here, even if you're taking slightly the worst of it at that moment, you teach your opponent that he can't just lead into you for, like, half the pot and expect you to lay down. So even if your call has slightly negative expected value, you earn future equity by showing your opponent he can't bet you off your hand with a third barrel.

Remember, it's all about avoiding tricky decisions, and wouldn't it be great if you could train your aggressive opponent not to put you to too many of those on the river? Well, this is how you do it: by calling reasonable river bets from aggressive opponents whenever you feel your hand might be in the same range as theirs.

Now, again, if he's betting two times the pot or just shoving all-in, then you can take a long hard read and maybe fold your medium-strength hand. And now you've also trained your opponent to overbet the pot, which will pay off in the long run, too, when you hold a strong hand in that spot and his overbet puts him upside down in the math. But a lot of aggressive opponents will take small bets at the river and you should call them. You don't have to be right that frequently and you get the added metagame equity of slowing them down.

It's amazing, when you think about it, how many people call on the flop, call on the turn, and absolutely cave on the river. It's not just that they're weak and timid (though often they are). It's rather that they haven't bothered to think things through. They don't think about the relative strength of their hand. They don't think about their opponent's characteristics. They don't think long-term. And they absolutely fail to recognize that river bets tend to come from aggressive opponents (the passives tend to shut down there). Playing effectively against these players—calling with medium-strength hands to slow them down or make them overbet—is key to your overall success.

This business of training your opponent to overbet shouldn't be passed over lightly. When you let your aggressive opponent know you'll call reasonably sized bets, he'll be forced either to bet only when he has a hand (a pattern you can easily identify and exploit) or overbet. The overbet will cost him money in the long run, which has to be good for you. If you force a player to lay a higher price on the pot, he has to win that much more often to show profit. If he bets 2,000 into a 1,000-chip pot, he must win twice for every one time he loses just to break even. So his breakeven point is 66%. That's a helluva lot of mathematical pressure to put on a river bet and it's likely he won't reach that percentage (you got all the way to the

river with something, right?).

Aggressive players make their money by exploiting opponents who fold too often to even smallish bets. They bet amounts that let the pot lay them a price, knowing they'll win enough of them to make it worthwhile. Plus, the frequency of their bets makes it tough for players to put them on hands. By letting such opponents know that you'll call when you match their range, you force either a strategy change (they're more selective with their river bets) or a bet-size change (they start betting much larger amounts). Either way, you force them to a less profitable line of play.

Moving on. This time we'll give you a medium-strength hand and rate your aggressive opponent as weak to medium-strength. He leads into you and while you might think this is a good time to raise, being at least as strong and probably stronger, you can't raise; as before, you can't stand a re-raise. You have *relative* strength, not *absolute* strength. When you were strong, you didn't mind reopening the action, but here it's a problem. If you get re-raised, you might have to fold the better hand and it's super-important to avoid that wherever possible. Pot mistakes are so much worse than bet mistakes. If you occasionally miss a bet for the sake of protecting the whole pot, well, that's the better mistake to make, costing you less in the long run.

If you think you're missing value, think again. Remember, this is an aggressive opponent. Given the middling strength of your hand, he can't hold a large range that can call your raise. There's no value to a bet that can't get called by a worse hand. You either win nothing or lose the pot. If he's weak or purely bluffing, you're not getting anything more out of him, except possibly a re-raise that puts you to a hard choice. Really, what you're doing is negative-free-rolling, in the sense that your raise can't bring about many good outcomes, but can eventuate some very bad ones.

So when you're in this situation, where you know that if he re-raises, you'll have to fold, just call. You're in position. You can close out the action. And there's huge value in getting to see your opponent's hand here. Not just information value—you find out what he considers bet-worthy—but also training value. If he has to expose a naked bluff, it'll slow down his bluff attempts for some time to come. It shouldn't, necessarily, but it will; most players feel chastened when they get caught bluffing, then don't do it for a while.

If you raise and he folds, you gain no extra value. If you raise, he re-raises, and you fold, that's just a mess. And even if you raise and he calls, you show your hand and he doesn't show his, so you lose both the information and the exposure of the bluff. That's why I say you're negative-free-rolling when you raise this guy in this situation.

In Position, Aggressive Opponent, Weak Hand

Now we'll give you a weak hand, in position, against an aggressive opponent you suspect is medium-strength to strong. He leads into you. What should you do? Easy: You fold. You have the worse hand against an aggressive player who'll always lean toward calling. Next case.

Your hand is weak, you suspect your aggressive opponent is weak, and he leads into you. There's obviously a case to be made for folding here. If you're terribly weak, there's not a hand in the world you can beat anyway. But before you fold, consider this: Your opponent is weak, right? So maybe you can wind up with the pot, either by calling with a hand that's slightly less weak than his or by raising him off his hand.

Such a circumstance might occur when you're on a high flush draw, your opponent is on a low straight draw, and you both blank. Being aggressive, he bets, the only way he can win the pot. You might be sitting on something like QJ suited and logically conclude your hand is better. But even if you put him on the right range of hands—a draw—he might be on a different draw, like the same flush as yours, only his is king high, in which case you're right, but wrong. Not good.

Now we're back to contemplating a hero call, and you know I'm not a huge fan of that, because it's vastly overused. You're not here to be a hero, pal. You're here to play great poker. Only make the hero call if you rate your opponent's hand as either pure nothing that even your weak hand can beat or a huge hand, and nothing in between. If your opponent might have a hand in between the two extremes, you should raise. You can't beat any of those hands, so there's no value to the call. But you could make a lot of those hands fold, giving huge value to the raise.

This is why the hero call is appropriate only when the hands your opponent could be holding that aren't complete air could never fold to a raise. In that case, decide if your terrible hand will be better than his terrible hand often enough for calling to make sense. If, for example, he bets the whole pot, your hero call has to win 50% of the time to break even. The good news is that if your opponent has been putting tons of pressure on you with his river bets, a successful hero call will ease it somewhat; now your opponent (and everyone at the table) knows you can make sick calls.

But if you read yourself for anything other than beating him or being buried, you can raise. Not only will bluffs fold, but so will a crummy pair or even top pair or a bad two pair. And if they *do* fold, you don't have to show your hand, keeping information out of their hands. Yay, you!

One good way to figure out if your opponent might be sitting in that middle range of hands that can bet, but probably can't stand to be raised, is to look for blocking or defensive bets. Take note of such bets and see if they correlate with hands in the middle vulnerable range. Blocking bets are meant to save the bettor chips in situations where he knows that if he checks, he'll almost always call. Since he knows chips are going in, he leads out small instead of check-calling. If you see that an opponent has a pattern of making these small defensive bets on the river, you can read him for vulnerable when you see him make such a bet against you.

Now you can't call; you know he's not likely to be bluffing. But you can raise, triggering a fold from an opponent not looking to commit a bunch of chips to the hand.

All told, you want to consider the situation. Look at the board, measure your opponent, and see if his story, plus his river bet, add up to something like a three-street bluff or a draw that didn't arrive. Then look at your hand and ask yourself, "Is this a hand that beats most bluffs?" If it is, you can call (not raise, because you can't stand a re-raise). If your hand won't beat most bluffs, but a lot of hands will fold to your raise, you can play back.

Occasionally, under the right circumstances, you can make that hero call. And if you think you're up against some garden-variety schmo with a hand he thinks is better and would never fold to a raise, just fold and move on. As you can see, it's never just a matter of asking, "Is my hand the best?" You have to measure it against your opponent's, while assessing his friskiness. Analyze everything, *then* make your move.

To recap: You pick off a bluff with a hand that doesn't beat most good hands, but beats most bluffs. You make a hero call when you believe your opponent either has you crushed or is bluffing with a hand you can beat at showdown, but holds absolutely nothing in between. You bluff-raise when your hand doesn't beat most good hands or most bluffs, but will get all bluffs and maybe some weak made hands to fold. The former case will be situations like when you have a high flush draw and think your opponent was drawing lower. The latter case will be on a very dry board where you think your opponent might be betting something like third pair.

Thinking about that guy betting third pair right here, look at what his problem is. Does he think third pair is the better hand? If so, he's betting for value. Does he think you're on second pair and you might fold? Then he's bluffing. But you know what? He probably doesn't know *where* he is in the hand. I think most players have no idea why they'd be betting third pair there. They neither do the analysis nor have a clear sense of their own motivation. But you do and you will. You always know *why* you're doing *what* you're doing. You always know your goal.

In Position, Passive Bettor, Strong Hand

Okay, we're heads-up and in position on the river, but my opponent is passive. And let's talk for a minute about what that means.

Remember that a passive player isn't just passive. He's also straightforward, consistent, unimaginative, and a bit afraid. You can take most of his moves at face value and you can manipulate him with a fair degree of confidence.

Situation: Your hand is strong, you suspect your opponent is strong, and he bets into you. You know he's got a strong hand or he wouldn't be betting it. Therefore, you can put him on the top of his range. Your aggressive opponent would be value betting a lot of hands here, but not this guy. He thinks he has the winner, and by leading out he tells you that, probably, he's right. You'd need to be pretty damn sure he's wrong before you started throwing raises around. You'll probably just call and see who wins.

Say you have a king-high flush. You made your hand on the turn, but when this super-passive guy bet into you, you just called. Now he bets into you again on the river. You have second nuts, but your opponent's character is such that you should just call here. Maybe he has the nuts. Maybe he has a judgment problem and thinks his queen-high flush is good. You won't know until the showdown. You'd want to re-raise an aggressive opponent (especially on a busy board with multiple draws), but here you just call. He's more likely to beat you when he makes a second bet at a flushing board, but also less likely to call your raise with hands that you beat, like low flushes. That gives a raise much less value.

A lot of players make raises like this on the river and it's not until they get called that they realize they weren't raising for value, but actually bluffing.

Say your hand is slightly worse, like a jack-high flush. Your passive opponent bets into you. Most players who raise in that spot think they're raising for value, with the better hand, trying to extract extra chips from their opponent. Not until they get called, or even raised, do they realize the error. Have you been there? Have you ever raised with what you thought was the best hand, only to get called and realize, with a sick feeling, that he must have you beat in order to call? Turns out your raise was a bluff and you didn't even know it. Therefore, all I'm asking is that you think about the raise's value and intent *before* you get to where your opponent calls and beats you. Seems like a low bar to jump over.

Next, you have a strong hand and suspect your passive opponent is weak to medium-strength when he leads into you. What will you do here? Me, I'd go for a call-worthy raise, something in the area of two-thirds- or three-quarters-pot. If I'm lucky, I'll get a crying call from this guy. What I know I *won't* get is a challenging re-raise. Passive players don't do that. It's totally safe to open the action against a passive player by raising with a vulnerable holding. You never ever have to worry about folding the better hand and losing the whole pot. If he re-raises you, you're beat. Period. By not raising, you risk losing only the value of the raise. You're never protecting the pot.

I just can't stress this enough. Your opponents *aren't* that hard to read. You might not know what hand they have right now, but you for sure know, if you've been paying attention, how they play poker. Simply categorizing them as passive or aggressive tells you whether the right move is to call or raise when you're facing a bet on the river. Generally, the more aggressive the player, and the less you can call a big re-raise, the more likely you should be to just call it down, even when you think you have the best hand. Against the Timid Timmies, go ahead and raise.

In Position, Passive Opponent, Medium-Strength Hand

Now your hand is medium-strength and you suspect that your fawnish opponent is medium to strong. Against the aggressive opponent, you just call here, in part to discourage the pressure, but also because his range is wide enough to make calling profitable. But against the passive opponent, you can actually fold. His passivity dictates that he's betting the top of his range and your hand, by definition, only competes with the bottom of his range.

Anyway, why bother contesting here? Passive players give you so many ways to beat them that you don't have to worry about winning every pot. If he has the better hand and he's *telling* you so, give him the pot. It's cool. On top of that, you don't need to call to discourage him from making pressure bets on the river. Passive players don't do that. No need to waste your money discouraging someone from doing something his nature won't let him do anyhow. Just fold.

But if your hand is medium-strength and you suspect your passive opponent is weak to medium, perhaps making a defensive bet, now you can call. He's probably betting the top of his range, but now your range matches up favorably; you can beat a lot of hands up there. You can also raise; your opponent will fold most of the range he defensive bets with. And then you don't have to show your hand, which is always sweet.

In Position, Passive Opponent, Weak Hand

When your hand is weak and you suspect your opponent is medium to strong, fold. Can you make a case for bluff-raising here? I don't think so. Remember, he's passive and thinks his hand is good enough to lead out on the river. He'll hate calling if you raise, but he'll probably call just the same.

What about when your hand is weak and you suspect his is in the weaker range? Say he makes what looks like a blocking bet. You raise. He's never re-raising on a bluff here, and he's folding a pretty strong range of hands. You can see that he gives you some opportunities to take pots away. Not a lot of them, since passive guys don't get to the river that much, especially with weak hands. But the opportunities are there.

Maybe you're thinking, well, would a passive guy even bet there? Wouldn't he just check and fold? Not necessarily. Occasionally, they get emboldened or desperate or they're just emulating plays they've seen more aggressive players make. In fact, keep your eyes peeled for players who've been bluffed recently and had someone show them his hand. They'll often decide to fight fire with fire. Only not completely with fire. They'll make weird small river bets, a function of their conflict. They want to capture pots like the big boys do, but they don't want to risk a lot of chips.

Notice that there's no discussion of hero calls against passive players. For one thing, they never bet with nothing just to put pressure on you. Second, they fold a much wider range of good hands to the river raise than aggressive players, making the raise much more valuable. And lastly, you don't get the same kind of future value out of a hero call against a passive player that you do against an aggressive player. Against someone aggressive, a hero call clearly demonstrates you're capable of making sick calls and can, apparently, make soul reads. That discourages your aggressive opponent from putting you to tough decisions in the future. But again, your passive opponent doesn't need this kind of training, so don't put yourself under that kind of stress. Just raise if you think you can get your passive guy to fold. Don't waste your time making a sick read and flat-calling.

In Position, Aggressive Opponent Checks to You

Now let's examine hands where you're heads-up in position against an aggressive opponent who checks to you on the river. Maybe you had the lead on the turn or maybe he's surrendering the lead to you now. But remember, he's aggressive, so you can't automatically read his check as, "I give up. I'm done with the hand." When this guy checks, now you have to decide not only whether your hand is worth betting, but also whether he's checking because he's done with the hand or he has evil ideas about what he'll do if you bet. This is often where people make a certain mistake,

Interpreting that river check as weak and betting too liberally with a hand that either loses a showdown or faces a big raise. Word of warning. On the river, "Check" doesn't equal weak, especially when your opponent is feisty.

In Position, Aggressive Player Checks to You, Strong Hand

Keeping in mind that check doesn't equal weak against aggressive opponents, what do you do when your hand is strong, you suspect your aggressive opponent is also strong, and he checks into you?

You might think that after I've put all these thoughts of monsters in your head, I'll say, "Check behind," but instead, you bet and generally bet big. You think you have the better hand, right? And you know he's strong, so you know he'll pay you off.

But wait! He's aggressive. Maybe he's checking to induce a bluff. A small bet here might tell the story of a stab at the pot and get a raise out of him. However, it might also look like one of those famous desperate-not-to-miss value bets, and therefore be read as strong. That will get you a call for sure, but probably not a raise. A bigger bet, though, can be interpreted as a please-don't-call bet (aggressive players love to make this judgment) and induce the raise you're after from your strong opponent. And even if that bet gets flat-called, you still get more out of him than you would with a small suspicious bet.

Remember, you're looking for the biggest bet your opponent will at least call here. Since you read him for strong, he'll probably call any bet. So why not make it bigger? The small bet, the "sure-value" bet, really only gets good value if it induces a raise. If you know your opponent loves to check-raise the river, by all means go for the smaller check-raise-inducing bet. If you only get called, though, you definitely lost value. With the big bet, you might get the raise, but you'll definitely get the call, and for a larger amount than the "sure-value" bet would earn.

Now, let's give you the same strong hand, but you think Mr. Aggressive is weak to medium-strength. Here, you bet the biggest amount that will get him to make a heroish call. That might be quite small, where he just figures he's getting a good price. Or it might be quite big, if he's the type who interprets big bets as weak. You have to decide, knowing your opponent, how big you can go.

To hit your target of the maximum amount you think he can call, don't look so much at the size of the pot, but rather at the size of his stack. Very often, particularly in tournament situations, players' willingness to call is less about the price the pot is laying and more about how crippled they'll be if they call and lose. So bet into your opponent's comfort zone as a function of the size of his stack.

Also in a tournament setting, you can gauge his willingness to call against the ratio of his stack to the blinds. If his call will leave him with something like 40 times the big blind, he'll probably be willing to back his hero read with his chips, since calling and losing won't materially change his game state. In other words, you want to avoid invalidating the false bluff you've set up by betting too much on the river. Give your opponent a chance to "be smart" for the right price, that's all.

In Position, Aggressive Opponent Checks, Medium-Strength Hand

Now your hand is medium-strength and you suspect your aggressive opponent is medium to strong. If he checks to you, you should check behind.

This is one of those situations where the only hand that can call you can beat you. And if you get raised, you're really in a pickle where you'll have to fold. Remember the questions you need to ask yourself before betting the river, especially against an aggressive opponent capable of check-raise bluffing you off the pot.

First, ask if your hand can reasonably win at showdown. In this case, where you're holding a medium-strength hand, the answer is surely yes. So if you bet here, you're not betting to bluff, but betting for value. And against an opponent you've read for the stronger end of the range, how could there be any value in the bet? Hands worse than yours likely won't pay you, but might raise and bluff you off the pot.

To make it more concrete, let's say you hold a hand like Q♥J♥ and the board is 2♥-4♥-T♠-8♣-J♦. You flopped a flush draw, picked up a gutshot, and now have top-pair queen-kicker. This is surely a medium-strength hand that could win at showdown, but would have to fold to a raise. If you bet, there aren't a lot of hands that will pay you off. You'd have to hope that someone holding a hand like AT would be willing to make a hero call. That's unlikely. AA, KK, QQ are almost definitely not folding. And while AJ and KJ might fold (probably not), how could you give your opponent those hands anyway? Did they call all the way with AJ and then hit it on the river? That makes no sense.

There you have it. Better hands won't fold and worse hands won't call. But better and worse hands might raise, and that's a disaster. So this is the perfect hand to check and see who wins.

In Position, Aggressive Opponent Checks, Weak Hand

This one is easy. Anytime you think your opponent is weak enough to fold, you bet. Obviously, your hand can't win at showdown if you're weak. The only way you can ever hope to win this pot is to bet. If you get raised, so what? It isn't like you're ever folding the better hand here, so you can't forfeit a pot that belongs in your stack.

Thus, whenever you read your aggressive opponent for the weaker end, take a shot. If you bet half to three-quarters of the pot, you only have to win 33%-43% of the time to break even. Seems a reasonable mathematical proposition, doesn't it?

In Position, Passive Opponent Checks, Strong Hand

Another easy one. If an uncreative player checks to you when your hand is strong, you have a free bet. With the nuts, you'd obviously bet against anyone. But even without the nuts, you can bet against a passive player who'll never check-raise bluff you. It doesn't matter whether your opponent has a strong hand (he'd probably bet out anyway, as opposed to checking) or is checking to actually give up.

Your main decision here isn't about whether to bet, but how strong or weak your opponent is. You'll try to size your bet to one he'll call and the stronger he is, the more he'll be willing to pay. Just realize that an uncreative passive player will never make a read that if you bet big, you must be bluffing; this type of player does not make creative reads like that. So your river bets for value tend to be smaller against passive uncreative players who'll call less anyway. The weaker you read your opponent, the smaller your bet should be in order to have a hope of getting paid off.

In Position, Passive Opponent Checks, Medium-Strength Hand

Now let's give you medium strength and suspect that your passive opponent is on the stronger end of things. The board has scared him off of betting, but he has a hand you're sure is strong enough to call.

For example, let's say you think he's in the set or two-pair range. You also have two pair, but yours is vulnerable to the board. You might have J♥9♥ on a board made of A♦-J♣-9♠-2♣-3♣. Clearly, you have a good, but not a great, hand, as all aces-up hands and all flushes beat you. It would

make sense for a passive player to check a strong hand here; the flush might scare him from betting. So now, if you're checked to, it's the classic situation where the passive player isn't paying you with a hand worse than yours, but you really aren't bluffing, since you have a hand that can certainly win a showdown. So there's no value to betting. Just take the free check here.

Next, let's say your passive opponent feels weak to medium-strong. When he checks, you should definitely bet, though small. You can bet for sure, because again, your passive opponent won't check-raise you without the better hand, so opening the action isn't a concern. Your opponent's passiveness gives you a free straightforward bet for value. Knowing he's on the weaker end of his range and that passive players are easily spooked, a small bet is the only one you can make that'll get paid off, so you might as well make it.

If you're up against a passive calling station, bet big. Some passive players check and call, rather than check and get spooked. These players are the best of both worlds. They won't put a lot of pressure on you, but they do love to play sheriff. Give them as big a chance as they can stand.

In Position, Passive Opponent Checks, Weak Hand

In a situation where your hand is weak and you suspect your passive opponent is medium to strong and he checks to you, check behind unless you have some reason to believe that he's ready to fold his hand, in which case you wouldn't have read him for strong in the first place. The height of this player's creativity is going for a check-raise on the river with a huge hand, especially against a player like you with a knowledgeable aggressive image, who can be counted on to bet. Well, that's just an obvious trap. Don't fall into it.

However, when your hand is weak and you think Mr. Passive is likewise medium to weak, bet after he checks, whatever amount you think will make him fold. Here's a situation where the only hand that can call you can beat you, but a lot of hands can beat you that won't call you. I mean, if you're on ace high, you'll get this passive guy to lay down bottom pair all day long. He sees monsters under the bed. He sees monsters everywhere. Since you have a hand that can't win at a showdown, try to avoid a showdown here. Remember, passive players are reliably passive. Without strong evidence that he's got a calling hand, his check on the river indicates he's already surrendered and moved on to the next deal.

Unless this opponent has shown you that he really likes calling the river with almost anything just to see your hand, you have to be getting the right price to convince most of your passive opponents to fold here. The check signals true weakness, so take advantage of it. After all, if you bet half to three-quarters of the pot, you only have to trigger a fold 33%-43% of the time, which you'll do against this type of guy (but probably won't do against a calling station). Also, there's no need to bet bigger. Bets within this range tend to look more or less the same to your opponent; they're prepared to fold no matter what. So why bet huge? If you're mistaken in your read (it happens), you'll pay less to be wrong. Thus, tend to avoid full-pot bets here.

One caveat to these river bluffs: You want to avoid betting against someone who's pot-committed. In a tournament, the math may be such that he has to call you, because he has so few chips left and there's so much in the pot. In cash games, and you hear this all the time, the guy says, "I might as well go home" as he donks off the last of his chips. Yet his ridiculous bottom pair is actually good and you just gave him extra chips, because you didn't realize he was too short-stacked and disheartened to fold. Passive players are especially prone to this suicide stack-off on the river. They think they're throwing away the last of their chips. Don't give them a chance to be wrong.

Okay, now you've just seen about a billion different situations for playing against both active and passive players, in position, either when they lead into you or check. If you're having trouble keeping it all straight in your head, just remember to ask yourself before every river bet, "Am I bluffing?" By stopping and asking yourself this question, you'll stop betting all those hands that can win at showdown, but can't get called by a worse hand.

When the answer is, "Wait a minute, I'm not really bluffing. My hand could totally be best," you can then ask that follow-up, "Is there a reasonable set of hands worse than mine that will pay me?" Only if the answer is yes would you ever bet or raise. If the answer is no, you're done. You're checking or flat-calling forever. And if that's all you do to fix your river play, you'll have come a long way toward profitability.

River Play Out of Position

As we've seen in every phase of our investigation, poker is a lot harder to play when you have to act first and the river is no exception. You'll find yourself in all the same situations we just described—strong against a passive player with a strong hand, weak against an aggressive player with a medium-strength hand, what have you. But now the deal is complicated by having to go first. Your opponent, not you, gets the benefit of that information, that third look at your actions, before he has to decide what to do.

This makes for some sketchy situations. But again, there are ways to neutralize, or at least minimize, that positional advantage and that's what we delve into next, in the same logical break-it-down fashion we've used all along.

Out of Position, Aggressive Opponent, Strong Hand

You're first to act. Your hand is strong and you suspect your aggressive opponent is strong. If you think your hand is better, you want to get some chips in the pot. Your two choices are check to check-raise or lead out. Let's talk about the advantages of each.

If you're sure Mr. Aggressive will bet, but not sure he'll raise, then the check-raise is the way to go. You'll see this in a situation where he has something like top and bottom pair, a very good hand, but maybe not good enough to raise with, since it's unlikely to get paid off by a worse hand.

When you read your aggressive opponent for strong, but not the top end of the range, check to check-raise the bet he'll surely make. When you raise with your top two pair or set, he'll have real trouble getting away from his hand. He'll also have trouble re-raising, unless he has the stonemold nuts, because your hand reads so strong. After all, you went for a check-raise on the river. This line of play is great for extracting lots of value from an aggressive player you read for this range.

If, on the other hand, you're sure your hand is better and believe your opponent will raise on the river, lead out; it's more profitable than the check-raise. If you check to check-raise, your opponent might fold to the raise, but will certainly only call at most. If you bet and get raised, then that raise money is locked up and you are freerolling on whether your opponent will call the big re-raise you're planning. And you don't put him to a big decision that might trigger a good fold until you've already gotten that raise money in the pot.

Either way you go, checking to check-raise or leading out to induce a raise, you take a risk. If you lead, a range of hands won't call you here, but would have bet if you checked. That will tend to be the weaker end of things, so you'd have to misread your opponent for that to be the case. On the other hand, if you check, you run into that old poker aphorism, "Bet your own hand." Here's a situation where you might get a check back from a savvy opponent who reads you correctly for strength, especially if he's weaker than you thought. But that same opponent would call if you bet. So the check costs you.

How do you decide between the two lines of play, then, if they both have their pluses and minuses? Well, if you're pretty certain that the guy you're facing will bet almost all the time, check. You'll lock up his bet and be freerolling for whatever else he might be willing to call. If you think there's a good chance your opponent will raise you, both with a hand he thinks is strong and with many bluffs (which you'll know if you've seen him bluff-raise the river previously), and you know he'll pay you off regardless if he's strong, the lead-out will be more profitable. If you lead out, you never get the dreaded check, check that makes the other guy look like a genius and who needs that? At least get paid off on your lead-out bet.

When you lead, you want to bet an amount that doesn't announce the strength of your hand, yet at the same time might look like a cheap bluff. If you bet big, you won't get raised by any smart opponent who reads that bet for strong or weak and nothing in between. So bet something that looks either defensive or bluffy, in the 40%-50%-of-the-pot range, like a blocking bet. It's big enough not to look like you're begging him to call, but small enough for him to read as vulnerable to a raise. If you bet something around half-pot or slightly less, you'll get a call for sure from a strong hand (which locks up your profit) and you might get raised from someone who figures, why the hell not? Note that you can stand—would welcome, in fact—a raise here; as we'll see, you'll bet differently if you can't stand a raise.

All in all, then, against an aggressive opponent with a strong hand, you're mostly better off leading out, unless you know specifically that he's unlikely ever to raise you, but will bet if you check. Then you go for the check-raise. That's a pretty fine slice of analysis. Generally, you just bet. Note again how much edge you give up when you lose position. If you have position on this guy, you can always be confident of getting at least one bet in and never risk checking and having him check behind.

Now let's give your aggressive opponent a weaker holding. Your hand is strong and you suspect he's in the weak to medium-strength range. Here you'll have to take a moment and decide whether you think he's genuinely weak or medium. If you deem him medium, lead out; you do need to bet your own hand. A medium-strength hand will check behind you here, since he isn't bluffing, but can't get paid off by a worse hand. But a medium-strength hand will also tend to call you. So you must bet against a hand you believe to be in the middle range, like top pair.

In terms of sizing, you want to bet the biggest amount your opponent will call, keeping in mind whether your opponent loves his hero calls. If he does, bet bigger than usual to make it look like you're just trying to buy the pot. Believe it or not, these really big bets can often get called, because opponents are more suspicious of them.

However, if you think he's weak, plus aggressive, check and give him a chance to bluff. That's the only way you'll get value out of him anyway, so you really have nothing to lose. The only value to a bet here would be to induce a bluff-raise, so if you go for that play, you better have seen that from him, a lot, in the past. Checking to induce the cheaper, more reliable, bluff makes a lot more sense than hoping for him to go insane on the pot with a raise. So check to induce.

If he doesn't comply, it's no big deal; he probably wasn't paying you anyway. So you're freerolling for him to bet for you. Then you can check-raise. I know he won't pay off the check-raise, but don't check-call to show you know how to induce a bluff. That's just the ego talking and it'll ultimately discourage the mistake you want the aggressive player to make: betting too often when you check to him.

Looking one layer deeper at this ego thing, the aggressive player doesn't mind getting re-raised off his bluff nearly so much as he minds getting called and, as it were, publicly humiliated. If you check-raise and he folds his cards without anyone ever seeing them, he'll think, "Well, it didn't work this time, but next time it will." But if you check-call, you're basically showing him up, making him expose his bluff, and then he'll be like, "Won't get fooled again," and there goes all your—shall we call it?—induced-bluff equity.

Out of Position, Aggressive Opponent, Medium-Strength Hand

Now your hand is medium-strength and you're again against an aggressive opponent. Here it doesn't so much matter what your opponent has in terms of whether you bet or check. You know your hand can win by virtue of its medium-strength. But you're also unsure of it by the same virtue of its medium-strength.

Most people go for a blocking bet here, betting about half the pot, rather than checking and facing a pot-size bet that they have to call (against an aggressive opponent). But against a truly aggressive opponent, this is a bad idea for two reasons. First, a really good aggressive opponent can smell a blocking bet from a mile away and raise it into oblivion, even when he has nothing. Remember, your mid-range hand is just the kind that can't stand to be raised, so by betting, you risk folding a pot that belongs to you when you let your aggressive opponent read your bet for the defense it was. Second, the aggressive opponent will bet a wider range of hands than he'll call with.

Remember, your hand isn't that strong. You aren't bluffing, but you aren't beating the world either. If you bet, not a lot of hands worse than yours will pay you. But if you check, a lot of hands that you beat will bet.

So check. Check to avoid getting raised off the best hand. Check with the intention to call, unless of course you have a strong read that you're beat when he bets. Then you can always fold. Otherwise, call to pick off the bluffs and win against all the thin value bets.

And don't get any fancy ideas that you should check-raise here. Remember, you aren't bluffing. Your hand can totally win at showdown. But a raise won't ever get paid off by a hand that doesn't beat you. So if you raise, you turn a non-bluffing hand into a bluff. Oops.

Out of Position, Aggressive Opponent, Weak Hand

Next iteration. Your hand is weak and you suspect your aggressive opponent is medium-strength to strong. Check-fold. The great thing about this play, apart from it saving you money, is that it emboldens your opponent to further aggression. And if he's using aggression like a blunt instrument, without paying much attention to situations or relative hand strength, later on he'll bet thin (you've encouraged his aggression) and your hand will beat him.

Were you thinking about lead bluffing here? Please don't. I mean, your opponent is strong, right? Are you suicidal? How much will you bet? Half-pot gets a call or raise from real hands, and even a raise from some bluffs. Full-pot looks bluffing and gets a call from medium hands and a raise from strong hands. You're not shoving, just barfing your chips into the pot. So, hello, that's why it's hard to bluff out of position. Very few bets make much sense here.

When your hand is weak and you suspect your aggressive opponent is weak, you can either lead out to bluff or check to check-raise bluff, whichever you think will be more effective. Just be sure of your read, that your opponent is weak.

Then consider the texture of the board. Particularly when a scare card hits the river, you have to lead out if that's the consistent story, because all mid-range hands will no longer bet the river if you check; they'll get frozen by the flush hitting and check it down.

Say you've been calling the texture with the intent to bluff. If the texture lands, you must follow through. I've seen this a lot, where people think they might bluff on the river, but they get there (meaning the perfect bluffing card hits) and they lose their nerve. Remember, not all your bluffs will work, but being the sort of player who *plans* and *executes* bluffs is a goal worth striving for.

Note that you can't go for a check-raise bluff here. If your in-position opponent is driving a hand like top pair and a scare card comes on the river, that will likely shut him down. Scare cards often stop people from value betting, because the range of hands that will call them that they can beat narrows when the board completes to three of a suit, so you'll never get in the check-raise. Therefore, if you've set up a river bluff and the action goes check, check, you clearly haven't accomplished your goal.

But the same hands that check it down will fold to a bet. When the flush hits and you lead out, you put a ton of pressure on hands like top pair. Players who make a flush out of position will definitely bet it; they know the scare card kills action and they're afraid not to get paid off. So betting out is a compelling story that matches how the real hand would play it.

In other words, don't go for check-raises when something has very very obviously changed about the board. Instead, go for check-raise bluffs when your aggressive opponent has tried to tell a strong story that makes no sense, prompting you to decide that it's bullshit. In that case, you can seem to be representing hidden strength, trapping strength, but really you're just leveraging the bullshit.

Remember, your aggressive opponent will bet a wide range of hands once you check to him, so the check-raise bluff actually works a fair percentage of the time. Just make sure the board is such that he will bet the mid-range as well as the bluffs. With a weak hand, you can't beat the mid-range at showdown, but you can get that hand to fold to a check-raise. And make sure your read is good enough that he isn't super-strong when he bets. The check-raise bluff is a pretty crazy play, so the stars must align for you to try it.

If the board is dry, either because it was dry all the way or the texture didn't hit on the river, it's much harder to execute a bluff by leading out of position into an aggressive opponent. If, all of a sudden, you randomly lead when nothing much has changed about the board, that story won't pass the sniff test. At best, it's inconsistent, and inconsistent stories make for bluffs that get snapped off. Particularly against aggressive opponents, I like to do more trapping on the river with real hands, only leading into them when I can use the board to tell a tale that makes sense.

Out of Position, Passive Opponent, Strong Hand

It's not nearly so bad to be out of position against a passive opponent, who is so much easier to control and less likely to bring severe pressure to bear. So no, you don't have position, but yeah, you do have opportunities. Just remember that this is an opponent who needs to be romanced into paying you off, unless he's a calling-station type, in which case no romancing is required. More on that later.

Let's start where you're strong and you read your opponent for strong. Obviously, even passive opponents will bet if you check to them when they're holding a strong hand. But they can't be counted on to raise you, unless they're really strong, meaning that they have you beat if you don't hold the nuts yourself. So betting out won't induce a raise, unless it's one you'd never want to call. This drastically reduces the value of betting into a passive player as compared to an aggressive one. If you read your non-aggressive opponent for strength, you should check when you're also strong. Check with the intention of check-raising if you're very sure you have the best hand or when you are only pretty sure you have the best hand, but are against a calling station. Otherwise, check to check-call.

If you're strong, but worried that you're not strong enough, you could actually lead out, but that would be a defensive bet, looking to minimize your loss. Here you can make that blocking bet, because a non-aggressive opponent will never attack it by raising with a weak hand. Thus, if you're pretty sure you have the better hand and you know your opponent's excited about his, you check to check-raise. But when you're unsure if you have the stronger hand, you bet out, since the probability of getting raised by a passive guy is so low.

When your hand is strong and you suspect your passive opponent is weak to medium, bet out. If you're up against the scared passive type, bet

small. You're looking for the crying call here. You're against a passive calling station kind, bet as big as you think he'll pay, often quite big. What you don't have here, and did have with your aggressive opponent, is the chance that your check will induce a bluff. With a certain range of hands (weak to medium), your non-aggressive opponent is definitely hoping for check, check, and a free showdown. Give him the next best thing: a chance to call small and see your hand for cheap, if not for free.

Out of Position, Passive Opponent, Medium-Strength Hand

Your hand is medium strength and you suspect your passive opponent is medium-strong to strong. Here you want to make a defensive bet. In fact, this is the ideal spot for it. You don't know if you're ahead, but your hand is good enough to call a bet. You want to get out of this difficult spot as inexpensively as possible. You know a passive player will never raise your bet light; even if he recognizes the blocking bet, he's not attacking it. That's just not in his play book. If he raises you, you have the worse hand, can easily fold and sleep like a baby, knowing you didn't fold the better hand.

If you check to him, he may bet big, forcing you to pay off big. So beat him to it. Bet first and bet small. If he's on the low end of his range, he'll only call, because he's too strong to bluff and too weak to raise for value. If he's on the top of his range, yes, he raises and yes, you fold. You still got a big discount over checking and calling. Since your hand is strong enough to call anyway, leading out gives you either a cheaper showdown or a confident fold.

Here's another circumstance where your bet serves two functions at once. It controls your loss if your hand's not good and ensures that you get paid if it is. This is why you don't bet the full pot here. If you did, you'd negate both your goals. You'd be voluntarily paying full price, while giving your opponent a good reason to fold with the weaker range and not pay you off.

When your hand is medium-strength and you suspect your passive opponent is weak, bet only against a calling station. The calling station might actually pay you off with some really weak hands just to see what you have. So you can make a thin value bet against this guy. But against a timid passive player, you check. He won't pay you with a hand worse than yours, so the bet has no value. If you check, you at least give him the chance to try a random bluff. This won't work with the regularity it will against aggressive opponents, but with a timid player, checking is your only hope for getting any value at all. Just don't really expect it to work.

Out of Position, Passive Opponent, Weak Hand

If you're weak and you think your passive opponent is strong, check and fold. Seriously, were you thinking of doing anything else?

If you're weak and you think he's weak and he's timid, buy the pot. Don't try to check-raise. You won't get the chance. Timid and passive won't bet the river with nothing, just so you can check-raise him off his nothing. If he bets when you check, he has something, so you'd abort the play anyway. Just bet the smallest amount you think will make him fold.

If you're weak, you think he's weak, and he's a calling station, why are you trying to bluff? The value of this opponent is in getting paid off big when you're ahead. Don't bluff a guy who doesn't know how to fold.

What you should be seeing here is that when you're out of position, you often have to check to aggressive opponents, whereas against passive opponents, you have to do your own work. To put it another way:

**AGAINST AN AGGRESSIVE PLAYER,
PASSIVE PLAY IS AGGRESSIVE;
AGAINST A PASSIVE PLAYER,
AGGRESSIVE PLAY IS AGGRESSIVE**

Further to this discussion, I think people generally misunderstand what aggressive play really means. It's not just *bet, bet, bet*. Rather, aggressive play means manipulating your opponents to make them do what you want. When you raise pre-flop, that's aggressive, but not because you're putting more money in the pot. Rather, you're making people define their hands. You're making people fold. You're taking control of the action. You're also saying you've got the best hand, so they'd better be scared of you for the rest of the hand. Most of the time when you limp, you're not doing anything at all. You're one of those players who just takes up space in the game. I wouldn't call you a loser to your face, but ... you would be.

At times, limping can be aggressive, such as when you have an aggressive big blind who always calls your raises from the small blind. Raise there and you're just inflating a pot you have to play out of position. You can't narrow the field; it's as narrow as it's going to get. You won't have much of a lead, either; this guy doesn't believe you.

So you try limping—that's pretty passive. And you notice that every time you limp, he raises. That's fine. When you figure out he raises whenever you limp, you raise him back and take the pot away. Remember, you can lose six small blinds for every 3X-BB raise you win and still break even. And you teach him a lesson that he can't just raise you every time you limp. Let's call that passive-aggressive play. Your initial passive play keeps you in control of the situation. Your opponent is doing what you want and expect him to do. That's control. That's successful manipulation. And that, as I see it, is true aggression.

At times, calling is a super-aggressive play, like when you're floating the pot. Calling with nothing in a hand to take the pot away later is about as aggressive as play can get, and you aren't even putting in a raise. Passive-aggressive manipulation can truly be the most aggressive play of all.

One more point about river play. It often happens that you can't easily categorize your opponent as either passive or aggressive. Maybe he occupies a certain middle ground. Maybe you haven't gotten a lot of looks at him. Maybe he just moved to your table. In such circumstances, you might find yourself at the river saying, well, I really don't know how to handle this guy.

Here's a guideline you can use if you don't know your opponent or you put him somewhere in the middle.

**TREAT OUT-OF-POSITION PLAYERS AS MORE AGGRESSIVE,
TREAT IN-POSITION PLAYERS AS MORE PASSIVE**

There are a couple of reasons for this. First, players first to act tend to bet out more frequently than they should. They make too many defensive bets and they're afraid of not getting in those river bets. Second, when I'm out of position against a player in the middle range of aggressiveness or one I've never faced before, I don't like relying on an unknown entity to do my betting for me. I also don't give unknown entities credit for being

capable of bluff-raising on the river. So I'll put him on the passive side of the spectrum and bet into him more liberally, rather than going for check-raises that I might not get.

Many players just check behind on the river and you've got to assume that that's what will happen with any player until you get evidence to the contrary. Against these unknowns, then, you have to lead bluff and lead for value.

Okay, that's playing the river and that's pretty much it for the bulk of the book. We've got some odds and ends to get through and then we can all go play cards.

Other Matters

Two Key Exercises

Here are two easy and fun exercises that will break down the accretions in your poker thinking. The first one will get you more comfortable with raising, the second will get you more comfortable with bluffing—two skills you need to nail if you plan to succeed at this game.

In the first exercise, I want you to play some one-table Sit-n-Go tournaments in the \$5-\$10 range (less and it's not real poker; more and the lesson's too expensive). When you play in these tournaments, I want you to pretend that you don't have *check* or *call* buttons. For the duration of the Sit-n-Go, your options are exclusively bet, raise, or fold. The only exception is when you're in the blind. You can check in the big blind and limp in the small blind if the pot is unraised. Other than that, it's raise or fold all the way, baby. The purposes of this exercise are to wean you from the habit of calling and limping too much, and to demonstrate how much pure power there is in the plain ol' raise.

Keep in mind that this is an *exercise*, not a *strategy*. As we've seen so many times in this book, on the flop, the call is king. However, if you have a choice between only calling or only raising, you'd be much better off with the latter; if you never bet or raise during a hand of poker, you can only win if you hold the best hand. You can't beat the other players; hell, you couldn't beat the rake.

So think of this exercise as an opportunity to stretch your raising muscles and set your inner aggressor free. Since you know you're not playing an optimal strategy, you also know you won't win, but that's okay; you have a different goal right now. When there's no expectation to win, there's also no fear of failure, nor any fear of looking bad because, hey, you're conducting an experiment.

You'll put yourself in some bad situations, like betting three times into a caller you know has a better hand than yours, just because you're first to act and you can't check. Don't worry about it. You're not playing to win, you're playing to set yourself free. And even if you're a player of long experience, it's a great idea to refresh your raise reflex. Over time, a lot of players become conservative without realizing it.

What does it mean to just bet or raise? If you're first action, you bet. (You can't check, because checking is calling a zero bet, and no calling is allowed in this exercise, except, as stated, in the blinds.) If you're second action, you raise. Third action? Re-raise. Multiple limpers in front of you? Don't join the limpede; raise. Look at you now: You're a betting and raising machine.

Obviously, you can fold if you don't like your hand or the situation, but you can't just call. Not from the first hand to the last. What you *can* do, though, is make the commitment to open raise any hand from any position if you're first into the pot. Call it extra credit for the exercise. Granted, it's a crap strategy, but it's really liberating.

When you've completed the exercise, take a moment to think about how you felt. Don't care about whether you lost a few bucks. Just think about how it felt to be that aggressive. Also, think about how it made your opponents feel. Maybe they *told* you how they felt. Maybe they said, "Slow down, maniac!" or "Keep playing that way, donk, and you'll go broke for sure." You will, but so what? That's not the point.

The point is to experience the power of the raise. With this exercise, you'll find yourself accumulating a bunch of chips, just by building pots, then taking them away. Yes, you'll usually donk them back. But at some point you'll be a big bully with a big stack. And it'll feel great, I promise.

Go do it. Do it right now.

When you're done with that exercise, do this one: Grab another full-table Sit-n-Go (budget price; no sense in going nuts here). This time play your normal strategy, except for one thing: *After the flop, if you're in position, heads-up, and someone bets into you, you call 100% of the time.* Then, also 100% of the time, try to execute a bluff on the turn, either by betting if they check or raising if they bet.

This will put you into some insane situations, where clearly it's not right to bluff and bluffing clearly won't work. That's okay. That's part of what's to be discovered here. Not only am I trying to get you to bluff more, I'm also trying to give you a sense of situations where this kind of delayed bluff-on-the-turn is likely to work and where it's likely to be a big ugly mess. Remember that sophisticated bluffing isn't something you learn all at once. Given that it's much easier to bluff in position than out of position, get good at bluffing in position (through exercises like this) before you even think about honing your out-of-position bluffing skills.

To execute this exercise, start by playing your normally selective pre-flop strategy. This ensures that people will put you on *some* kind of hand when you start getting all cally on the flop and bluffy raisy on the turn. Next, call in position on the flop every time. Then, when they lead into you on the turn, raise every time, or if they check to you on the turn, bet every time. You might step on a land mine—run into a set or a made straight—on the first attempt, but that's okay. Go back and do it again. You won't spend yourself broke and you'll get a better feel for which situations are bluff-conducive and which aren't.

As a secondary benefit, you'll get the same rush you got from that other exercise. You'll feel freaking free. But scared. You'll feel really scared. Even in a \$5 Sit-n-Go, and even when you *know* the money doesn't matter. When the flop comes A-9-3, and you have KQ, and someone leads into you, and you have to call, because *this time* is part of *100% of the time*, you'll feel like you're drinking the Kool-Aid. But then he checks to you on the turn and you bet and he folds, you'll be like, "I'm king of the world!"

Don't take my word for it. See for yourself.

To reiterate and to be clear, both of these exercises are very bad strategies, but you're not playing poker now, you're doing homework. The first assignment will show you the power of raising and convince you how important it is. The second assignment will show you the power of calling in position and open your eyes to the bluffing opportunities you have.

Squeezing Strong

Now that the squeeze play is such an open secret, in some games someone is always looking to squeeze or defend against it. If you're in such a game—and you'll know just by listening to how they all talk when squeeze situations come up—plan to squeeze not as a bluff, but as a means of extracting value from your really big hands.

Say you've called a raise in position with pocket 9s, then flopped a set on a J-9-2 board. The first bettor makes his standard continuation bet and a player calls in front of you. On such a non-threatening board, you might have a tendency to slow-play and flat-call to get more value on the turn. But a raise here could easily be read as a bluff by squeeze-minded opponents. Now you'll get action from all sorts of hands, both draws and weak hits,

just because they're including into their thinking the possibility that you can re-bluff your squeeze, either now or on later streets.

You just have to know your opponents—who's smart enough to read a squeeze for a bluff and who's bold enough to do something about it. But you also sometimes have to squeeze as a bluff against these knowledgeable opponents, so they'll fall into your *faux* bluff trap when you have a real hand.

This goes back to the idea that it's not really ever bad to lose some chips if that action ends up winning you more chips down the line. People who play poker expecting to win every hand they play aren't playing the game right.

Leveraging Pot Commitment

We've talked a great deal about sizing bets to put the least decision-making pressure on yourself and the most mathematical pressure on your opponents (often at the same time). Those discussions usually assumed stacks deep enough to allow for the bet you have in mind. At times, though, stacks aren't that deep and it's useful to know how to proceed when either you or your opponent is pot-committed.

First, let's define our term: You're pot-committed when you've bet enough that you must call if you're raised—generally, somewhere around 40% or more of your stack.

For instance, if there's 1,000 in the pot on the flop and you're aiming to make an appropriate bet of 800, but you only have 1,600 in your stack, your bet makes you pot-committed, not because you'd already have half your stack in, but because of what your bet of 800 does to the pot size. Suppose you bet 800 and the other guy raises your last 800. Now there's 3,400 in the pot; the 1000 in the pot at the start of the round, your 800, plus his 1,600. Almost no matter what's out there on the board, how can you fold? The pot is laying you 4.25-to-1 on your last 800. Unless you believe that there is really no possibility that your hand can win, the math tells you that you must call. So here's a situation where you must keep your stack size in mind and look deeper into the hand.

If you're going to have the right odds to call a raise on the flop or a bet on the turn, because you'll be pot committed by any reasonable sized bet you might make, you should shove on the flop, even though in this case you're overbetting the pot.

When you have sufficient chips, you should rarely bet outside the range of half-pot to three-quarters-pot on the flop. But when you're pot-committed, it's correct to bet more. You can also do this if your opponent is pot-committed. If you want to bet 800, but see that he has only 1,600 left, you can put him to a decision for the whole amount, since if he shoved all-in, you would have to call anyway with anything other than a completely naked bluff.

Interestingly, many people with a big hand won't do this because they're worried about losing the short stacker. But when you bet 800, your opponent already knows that it's going to be 1,600 anyway and he probably knows that you know it, so he starts to wonder, "Why so little?" Your half-stack bet actually looks milkier than putting him all-in. This is another storytelling situation. When you bet big, the story you're telling is, "I really don't want you to call." If your opponent has half a hand, you might get him to bite.

Now, all of this is pretty straightforward and well-known. Everyone knows what it's like to be pot-committed or face a pot-committed opponent. However, you can make a sophisticated and interesting play specifically against opponents who recognize and respect pot-commitment. In the right circumstance against the right opponent, you can leverage pot-commitment to find out if your hand is good and whether you should put your tournament life on the line.

Say you're short stacked in a tournament with a hand you think might be good, but you aren't sure. For example, you have a hand like AJ and the board is Q-J-2-3-8. Or you have Q♥T♥ on a K♠-Q♣-T♠-6♣ turn. Many players in these situations either cover out and fold to a bet or just say, "What the hell," and get their whole stack in. But what if you bet 40% of your stack instead? Your opponent knows you're pot-committed, right? He's 100% certain that you have to call if he raises. So he can't be moving in on you with a hand that doesn't beat you. Then guess what? You can fold. Really, you can, because he'd never raise you if he couldn't beat you. After all, you're pot-committed, right?

Now it's true that 60% of your original short stack isn't much, but at least it's something. At least you still have a shot. And you didn't stack off when you were beat.

There are times when not spewing your stack can save you in other ways, especially in situations where conventional thinking would be, "*Shove!*"

Suppose someone moves in pre-flop for 10 big blinds, 2,000 if the blinds are 100/200. You have two queens or two jacks in hand and 25 or 30 big blinds. Almost all players will think they have to isolate the all-in player with their queens or jacks, so they re-raise all-in themselves. I know you've done this. We all have. But take a beat. Recognize that the opener's 10 big blinds have already done the job of narrowing the field. Crap hands aren't competing here, no matter whether you call, raise, or fold. Not for 10 big blinds. And your flat-call of 10 big blinds already looks ridiculously strong. In fact, the flat-call looks stronger than the move-in because it reads trappy.

Do you really think a big range of hands will overcall a 10-BB bet that won't call the 25- or 30-BB bet? Not so much. So by putting in your whole stack, you don't accomplish any more isolation than you would have if you'd flat-called. What you accomplish, instead, is going broke when you happen to run into AA or KK. Then you walk away wondering why you were so unlucky as to run into such a big hand. Well, you weren't unlucky. You just played in a way that wouldn't let you get away from the hand.

What would happen if you flat-called the 10-BB all-in? If a player behind you comes over the top of you, can he ever be bluffing? Of course not. First, he knows there's an all-in player who can't fold. So he can't be bluffing that guy. Second, you look awfully pot-committed anyway, pot-committed and strong. So he shouldn't be bluffing you. If he can't be bluffing, then your queens or jacks can't be good. So if someone wakes up with aces or kings (and it would have to be those hands exactly to come in behind an all-in player and pot-committed you) and he re-raises, you can actually get away from the hand.

At the same time, players you wouldn't like to fade, guys on AK off-suit, look at your flat-call and think, *Well, he's pot-committed. Why didn't he shove?* Then they put you on aces or kings and they fold. That's called leveraging pot commitment and when you're short-stacked and imperiled in a tournament, it can be just the life preserver you need.

I hear you. You're saying, "But if I fold to a raise from that guy who's supposed to have aces or kings, I'm *really* short-stacked and imperiled." Well, yeah. But which would you rather be? Short-stacked and imperiled or on the rail?

You need to remember that raising isn't necessarily the strongest move you can make. As we've seen in this book many times, the flat-call behind looks so strong it's scary. When you don't shove in a situation where most people would, it makes you look scarier still. Competitive hands fall away and dominating hands turn themselves face up for you.

Don't Just Check It Down When a Player is All-In

In tournaments, a situation comes up all the time where one player goes all-in, two or more players call him, and now there's a main pot with what's called a "dry side pot," a side pot among the remaining players that as yet has no money in it. Most often, all the remaining players will now

conspire to knock the all-in player out of the tournament by checking the side pot down. The idea is that, because the side pot has no money in it, a bet by any of the remaining players can't win anything extra, so there's not much point in making it. As well, if you bet out, forcing a hand that might have beaten the all-in guy to fold, you just screwed everyone in the tournament by allowing the all-in player to stay in when he "should" have gotten knocked out. In fact, if you do bet into a dry side pot and knock out a winning hand, the players at the table will generally scold you for not checking it down.

The first problem with this plan of attack is that it's collusion. The remaining players are acting together, implicitly or explicitly, to gang up on the all-in guy to increase the chances that he gets knocked out. Thus, we have players not working to their own advantage, not maximizing their personal chances of winning the pot, but rather acting according to what's best for the group. That's bald-faced collusion. Sometimes it's even openly discussed. "Let's check it down," you hear them say. You hear it all the time.

Apart from being morally reprehensible to collude, it's also wrong-headed to think that there's much of an advantage to knocking out a player. Certainly, if 275 players are left in a tournament and 36 get paid, it doesn't matter if you personally contribute to the demise of player number 275. There's still so much tournament to go and the math of the rising blinds will ensure that players get knocked out on schedule.

The only time it makes sense to knock out a player is in bubble situations. Even then, only in certain ones. If you're in a satellite where, say, the top 18 get a seat into a main event and 19 or 20 players are left, it's definitely to your personal advantage to knock out that player. There's no incremental value to you in adding that pot to your stack, since 18th pays the exact same as 1st. Locking up the seat, not the pot, is what matters to you. Now if you check it down, you're working in your own best interest, not the group's, so that's not collusion.

As another example, if you're short-stacked, in danger of not cashing, and on the bubble, you want to knock out a player to lock up the cash and try to win from there. Your chips aren't worth that much right then and you don't have a lot of equity in your stack for the win, so you might as well lock up the cash first, then hope to get lucky and double up a few times. In that case, it makes sense to check it down to increase the chances of an all-in player getting knocked out. Again, you're working in your own interest, not the group's.

If you're big-stacked on the bubble, though, it's actually counterproductive to knock out an all-in player. You'd rather keep the bubble going. Players play way too tight on the bubble and as the big stack you can really leverage that to drastically increase your stack, thus drastically increasing your chances of finishing in the top three, where all the money is. So if you collude and check it down in that situation, you're working only in the group's interest and not yours. That's not only not right, it's also not smart.

It turns out that any time your hand has a chance of being best, it's better for you personally to bet into a dry side pot and try to get heads-up against the all-in player. Let's say you have a hand like A♥Q♣ and the board comes 2♣-5♦-T♥. Ace-high often wins here against a player who moved all-in before the flop, whose shoving range is quite wide and includes many KQ and KJ-type hands, plus worse aces. With a dry side pot, it makes sense for you to bet to increase your chances of winning the main pot. Obviously, AQ will do better against one player than against two or three, so getting heads-up plainly makes sense.

If you bet in this spot, on this board like 2♣-5♦-T♥, AK will fold, 77 will fold, and 66 will fold. No one bets a dry side pot unless he really has it. So those types of hands will read you for beating them. Now, think about how huge this is for you if the all-in player has a hand like KQ. You're beating the KQ hand, but not beating the AK or 77. By knocking out AK, you get to win a pot that otherwise would have gone to another player. And you knock a player out in the process.

Obviously, the all-in player might hit a king and beat you. And when he does, certainly the AK would have beaten him, knocking him out of the tournament. But what do you care? You were losing the pot either way and does it really matter if you lose it to the all-in guy holding KQ or the player holding AK? If you lose either way, you shouldn't care who you lose to. You should care about protecting your hand and increasing the chances you get to win the pot.

Think about this great advantage to betting. Sometimes you'll bet on the 2♣-5♦-T♥ board with your AQ and get a hand like J9 to fold. Now a jack hits on the turn. You get to beat the all-in player holding KQ and you forced the other player to fold a hand he would have hit and beaten you with. You win a pot you would have lost if you'd just checked it down like everyone else.

So if you're truly acting in your own best interest, in the interest of winning tournaments, never check down a hand when there's a dry side pot if you think your hand has a good hope of beating the all-in player. (By all means, if you're the one holding J9, check if you want. You certainly aren't winning the hand right now, anyway.) Obviously, if you're betting ace-high, you should bet all pairs too, which players also automatically check down. If you have two overcards or a straight draw and you're pretty sure the other player left in the hand has you beat, you can bet the dry side if you think he'll fold. Basically, any time you think you're better off against just the all-in player, it's better to bet (except in those really specific bubble situations).

I just want you to know that when you bet these dry side pots with weak hands like ace-high no-pair, the other players at the table will go nuts at you, especially if you force the best hand to fold and more especially if the folded hand would have knocked out the all-in player, but your hand doesn't. First, remember that it doesn't matter to you that another player would have knocked the all-in guy out, since you weren't winning the pot anyway. Second, remember they're yelling at you for *not* colluding. Basically, they're pissed that you acted in your interest, not theirs. Let them vent. Please don't tell them why they're wrong.

Management

Churn and Earn

We close this book with a discussion of three types of management: money management, ego management, and life management. It turns out that all three are related and mastering all three is necessary for your long-term success in poker and, if I may be so bold, in life.

We'll start our discussion by looking at "churn," basically your edge on any betting proposition multiplied by the number of wagers you make at that rate.

To see churn at work, consider this simple example. You and I flip a coin and somehow I persuade you to accept \$1 when the coin comes up heads, but to pay me \$1.05 every time it comes up tails. For every two times I flip the coin, I win 5¢ on average, assuming it's a fair coin that falls tails half the time. That means over the two tries, I'm earning 2.5¢ per try. As you can see, I have a 2.5% edge. If we make that bet only once, my expected value is just \$.025, but if we make that bet over and over and over again (which is my churn), well, it doesn't take a genius to see where all the money will go. I will win 2.5% of all the money we bet, not just the one dollar. That's called betting with the best of it, friends, and if you're net plus in your poker game, that's where your profit will come from: the churn. The higher your churn, the higher your expected win. You might sit down at a table with a \$100, but because you can bet that money more than once, you might churn \$1,000 through the game in a night. That means you exploit your edge not on \$100, but on \$1,000.

If your profit increases with higher churn, it stands to reason that you'll make no money if you have no money to churn. It's like investing in the stock market. You might know that Annie Duke Industries is about to go through the roof, but if you don't have any money to invest, it goes through the roof without you, right?

Same thing in poker. If you're a net-plus player (which, after reading this book, you presumably are), the more money you get to invest at a profit, the more money you make. Therefore it matters what kind of return on your investment you're getting, but what *really* matters is the percentage of your money you're putting into play, because if you put too high a percentage of your money into play, you'll go broke.

Let's say you have a favorable proposition going for you: You're rolling a five-sided die and you want to bet that a 3 will come up. Clearly this is a 4-to-1 proposition that'll occur 20% of the time. For some insane reason, though, I'm willing to offer you 9-to-1 odds. You're looking for a 3 on a five-sided die, but I'm willing to pay you as if you're looking for that 3 on a 10-sided die. Pretty sweet, huh? You'd make that bet with me all day long if you could and if the day was long enough, you'd take every cent I had.

But my question to you is this: Would you bet 100% of the money you had in the world on just one roll? Of course not. Though you have much the best of it in the long run, that 3 will still miss 80% of the time. You're a 4-to-1 favorite to go broke on the very first roll and never get to exploit your edge at all. By betting too big, you squander your churn and lose your chance to bet with the best of it. Bye-bye edge, bye-bye Annie Duke Industries.

I've heard people say that they'd take that bet for all their money, because their edge is so big. To them I say go back and read the section on risk of ruin and ask if that's really something they want to do. If you lose your bankroll, you can't earn.

Foiled by Randomness

Say you're running particularly good one month, like normally you're earning \$8 an hour in your \$1/\$2 game, but this month you've been winning at the rate of \$24 an hour. You think, *Well, I'm just that good*, and now you start to estimate that you're so skillful, you should win at that unexpectedly high rate (which, by the way, would be pretty impossible at \$1/\$2 no-limit unless the game played super-huge). Know what? No one's win rate is that far above the norm. A really fantastic poker player might have a 5% edge on the game and that's huge, because of the churn. If he sits in that \$1/\$2 game with \$200, his expectation isn't to win \$10 for the night. His expectation is to earn 5% on the total churn, the total money he runs through the game, betting and winning pots and betting that same money again. If he churns \$1,000 through the game, he should expect to earn \$50 on the night. If he plays for six hours, that's an hourly rate of around \$8. He might win \$250 one night. He might lose \$125 another night. But his expected earn will always be \$8 an hour, no matter what his daily results are.

So we have to draw a distinction between *running good* and *playing well*. Sometimes they overlap—your good play nets good results—but often it's just a case of a player being the beneficiary of a not-very-extraordinary string of outcomes. Nassim Nicholas Taleb describes this phenomenon in elegant detail in his book *Foiled by Randomness* and I commend it to your attention. It explains why a huge-field poker tournament always features at least one unknown and, let's face it, not very skilled player going deep into the money with a massive chip lead.

Say 6,000 players are in the main event of the World Series of Poker and half of them have the strategy of just going all-in on every coin flip they can find. Thousands of players will wind up on the rail, wondering where this strategy went wrong, but quite a few guys will wind up on the right side of a few coin flips in a row—not a statistically startling occurrence, by the way—and now they have a mountain of chips. It's like putting an infinite number of monkeys in front of an infinite number of typewriters. Eventually one of them will write this very book. (Go monkeys!)

Putting 6,000 players in a poker tournament with this coin-flip strategy is like parking monkeys in front of typewriters: Someone's gonna get lucky; someone has to win. Someone will inevitably be on the right side of a string of coin flips, whether he's playing well or not. If it happens to be you and now you suddenly think you're the second coming of Jesus (Ferguson), you've just been fooled by randomness, that's all. You happened to be the one who caught lucky.

If you keep running great, tournament after tournament, that's great, maybe you do have some skill. Because then you can say that the good result in the main event was *predictive* of how you'd do in future tournaments. But you can't link good results to good play on just one iteration until you use those good results to predict the future; otherwise you might have just gotten lucky.

And here's where players get confused. Based on a string of good outcomes, they falsely conclude that they're much better players than they are and can therefore afford to play higher, or spend money as if they'll keep winning at that rate—two great ways to go broke. The logic of this is seductive. If I'm earning 5¢ on every \$1 we bet, why wouldn't I want to earn 50¢ on every \$10, or \$5 on every \$100, which I tell myself I can do just by committing a much larger percentage of my bankroll to my play?

Here's why that won't work: Even if I'm every bit as good as my short-term results would have me believe (which I'm not, by the way), if I play with

too large a chunk of my bankroll, eventually variance will catch up to me. I'll go broke, maybe not even with bad play, but just from bad luck. And then I'll have no money to back my over-inflated sense of self.

We can see, then, that in order to be a winner in this game, you need to be not just a good poker player, but a good money manager, because without your bankroll, you can't do business. And one way of being a good money manager is to keep your eye on randomness. There are predictable pitfalls to avoid. We've all heard, for instance, about talented poker players who blow their bankrolls on negative-expectation wagers like craps. It's not just that they're action junkies (a lot of them are). It's also that when they're running hot, they fool themselves into thinking that they'll always run hot. They think that the money they're making at poker at this moment will continue to come in at that rate, so they can afford to take bad gambles, just for fun or for the buzz.

They're not certain to continue winning at that rate.

In fact, they're certain not to.

And then they'll go broke and they'll cry.

So here we see two types of mismanagement at work. First, there's the money mismanagement—squandering the bankroll. Second, there's the ego mismanagement—the sense that you're better than you are. Let these two beasts loose and you're really in the soup. Just ask any talented railbird who's ever hit you up for a loan.

I'm not telling you never to play craps or baccarat or slots or whatever. I'm just saying that that money had damn well better be recreational and not have a negative impact on your poker bankroll. If it does, you're like a carpenter who starts hocking his tools, or melting them down to make tin whistles. It just doesn't make any sense. You're the one who's supposed to have the edge, right? Not the house.

So some players go broke when they let their bankrolls leak. But even players sensible enough not to play keno (!) still go broke by putting too high a percentage of their bankroll on the table at once. This is particularly common online, where you can accumulate money very quickly. You get a lot of hours in. You get in a lot of churn. And if you hit a lucky streak with a lot of churn, you'll accumulate a lot of money very fast.

And think you can continue to win at that rate.

And put too much on the table at once.

And go broke in a day.

The story is famously told of a blue-collar guy who liked his poker and played a sensible responsible game. He had no bankroll to speak of, so he just played satellites. Satellite after satellite, enjoying his poker and doing a good job of ego and life management. Then one day he caught lucky, won a satellite into a big tournament, and cashed out of the event for \$250,000.

Can you guess where this story is going?

Now he's got a quarter of a million dollars and suddenly thinks he's too good to play satellites. So he just starts buying into every tournament that comes his way. It takes five months, but he manages to burn through all \$250,000. Maybe he wasn't even that bad a player. Maybe he just got really lucky once, then not unusually unlucky for a not-unusual length of time. Anyway, that's a quarter-mil he let go of.

It's hard to get hold of a quarter of a million dollars. Ask anyone.

So if you're to play poker successfully, you'll need some bankroll rules. And I know I said that the first rule is there are no rules, but this is the exception that proves that one.

Bankroll Rules

When you hear my bankroll rules, you might think they're insanely tight. But if you happen to have no other income besides poker, they're absolutely vital. The good news is they absolutely work. How well? This well: If you follow them, you'll never go broke. You'll always be in action. And even if you're playing poker on the side and have other income, you should still be playing with a set-aside dedicated bankroll. If you don't ever want to have to replace that roll with outside money, then also follow these rules.

We start with a rule of thumb.

NEVER BET MORE THAN YOUR EDGE

If you have a 5% edge in a game, you can risk 5% of your bankroll in a single game. And you have to be realistic and clear-eyed about how big your edge is. Hint: The very best players in the world have, maybe, a 10% edge if they're in a game full of really bad players. Maybe. So treat 5% as your ceiling and you won't go too far wrong.

How do you use this rule of thumb to figure your buy-in? First, you count your bankroll. Let's say it's \$10,000, of which 5% is \$500. So that's what you take a shot with.

What game should you be in? The answer to that question lies in the variance of the games you're thinking about playing, but generally you want to risk somewhere between 100 and 200 big blinds per game in a no-limit big-bet game (more on why in a second). If the game is high variance, you need to be willing to risk toward the high end of the range, 200 big blinds. If you're in a lower-variance game, you would risk 100 big blinds. (Remember that the variance is a function of the tightness or looseness of the game and the tightness or looseness of you. Loose games or loose you equal high variance; tight games or tight you equal low variance.)

This means that your \$500 shot would comfortably work for a game with \$1 and \$2 blinds. That same \$500 would be the absolute minimum for a game with \$2 and \$5 blinds, a game you could sensibly play only if you knew it was tight enough not to put too much pressure on your 100 big blinds.

When I tell people these guidelines, they're shocked. "I have ten grand!" they exclaim. "I can play much higher than that. Ten-twenty blinds, easy."

Yep. And they'll go broke, too. Easy.

If you're playing \$10/\$20 no-limit hold 'em, you're willing to risk between \$2,000 and \$4,000. You don't have to lose too many times in a row to go through ten grand pretty quickly. And everyone who's ever played poker knows that losing streaks are not uncommon. That's variance. And when it comes to your bankroll, variance is *not* your friend.

For proper bankroll management, you need to meet both the conditions of the right percentage of your bankroll and the right number of big blinds for the game you want to play. Too big a cut of your bankroll and you risk too much. Too few big blinds and you can't play correctly. Sorry if you don't like it, but it's true.

I think a lot of people with \$10,000 bankrolls actually have what I'd call theoretical bankrolls. That is, they know they can put their hands on ten grand if they have to, but mostly they don't have to, because they're playing at the right level. This is a good way to go. I mean, if you think about it, you don't need ten grand in cash in front of you to know that if you lost that amount, it'd be a disaster. So go ahead and think of your bankroll in

theoretical terms if you like, but just remember that the money you risk by playing too high isn't theoretical, it's real.

There's a real advantage, by the way, to playing at the low end of your range. The players are worse there, so your percentage edge, your return on investment, in that game is likely to be higher. Yes, in absolute terms you might make a little less, but also with less variance. If the game is weak enough, you can sometimes earn as much or more in the smaller game, and with less bankroll pressure.

Think about it. To play \$1/\$2 no-limit hold 'em, you really should have a minimum bankroll of \$4,000. That's if you have a 5% edge and only ever risk \$200 in a session. If you step it up to \$2/\$4, your minimum bankroll is \$8,000 and should actually be higher, since your edge on the game is likely to be lower. You might need as much as \$16,000 if you think you have only a 2.5% edge.

If I told you that you could earn \$8/hour in the \$1/\$2 game, because the players are so bad, but if you play \$2/\$4 instead, you'll still earn \$8/hour, because the players are that much better, would you go for the \$1/\$2 game? If you're sensible you would, since you need only a half to a quarter of the bankroll to earn the same amount per hour in the smaller game. It's totally logical. Yet many players still go for the higher game, usually so they can feel like a bigger deal. That's ego talking, and ego has no place in money management. Be rational. Choose the game with the best earn for the bankroll you want to commit, not the one that makes you feel like Joe Cheese.

No matter what game you buy into, I suggest not putting on the table the whole amount you're willing to risk all at once. If you're planning to risk 100 big blinds that session, buy in for 50 big blinds first. Then re-buy if necessary. If you're planning to go for 200 big blinds, you could start with 100 and plan on using two 50-big-blind bullets thereafter. (Sometimes your choice will be constrained by the structure of the game. For instance, if the blinds are \$2/\$5, you'd like to buy in for \$250, but the buy-in may be capped at \$200. That's fine. Your variance is actually lower there and you're not giving anything away to other players in terms of stack size, because the buy-in is capped for all.)

You might think that the downside of buying in for just 50 big blinds (in a game without a cap) is that you don't necessarily have everyone at the table covered and when you have really good hands, you won't necessarily maximize your value. But is that really true? Fifty big blinds is enough to get through any reasonable hand of poker. I mean, for you to get \$100 in the pot playing \$1/\$2, something really unusual would probably have to happen, like AA vs KK or QQ vs AK or TT vs Q♥J♥ on a T♥-9♠-2♥ board. You're as likely to be crushed as be crushing in the first case and you're flipping a coin in all the others. If you really want to get more than 50 big blinds in on a coin flip, you should just go flip coins for big money.

Thus, you don't need to have everyone covered. You only need enough money to play a hand of poker through to the river without having to go all-in because you're short.

More important, by not putting your whole bankroll on the table, you give yourself a chance to stay in action even if something bad happens or you make a big mistake. Let's be honest. No one plays mistake-free poker forever. Not even the best players in the world. And in no-limit, one mistake can cost you your whole stack. By not putting all your money on the table at once, you give yourself a chance to fade that one mistake and keep on playing, because now you can buy back in.

Don't want to think about mistakes? Well, mistakes are how you learn, so look at them positively. Even so, giving yourself two or more bullets in a game also lets you fade a variance disaster, like getting your money in with AA against 55 and having a 5 hit the flop. By giving yourself more than one bullet, you get to buy back in and keep playing in what is, obviously, a pretty juicy game.

And if you're new to the game, it's better to buy in smaller, rather than risk too much at once in situations where you might not be the best judge of where you stand in terms of edge.

A lot of players face a real ego challenge here. They think they have the skills to play high, so they pretend they have the bankroll to play high. I don't need to tell you that honesty is called for here. You're not the greatest player in the world—yet. And your bankroll is exactly what it is, not a penny more. So play within your bankroll, no matter how great a player you think you are, because even the greatest player in the world can't earn a dime if he can't buy in.

Stop Win and Stop Loss

Generally speaking, players find it easy to quit when they're winning, but hard to quit when they're losing. I can prove it. Have you ever seen a guy at a poker table have his wife or girlfriend come up to him and remind him they're supposed to go to dinner? If that guy is stuck, he'll usually say something like, "Honey, I can't go. This game is too good," or "I just need to get even first." Make that same dude a winner and he can't find a rack fast enough. This is completely ass-backward. Our friend (or you) should be eager to get up when he's losing and reluctant to get up when he's winning. Which is why you should always set loss limits.

Stop Loss

Let's talk about strategies for when things aren't going well at the table. One of the worst things that can happen to you in a poker game is to dig yourself into a hole you can't easily get out of. If you lose more in a single session of poker than you could reasonably expect to win in one session, that often causes you to make higher-variance choices in an attempt to get your money back, either today or in the long run. (This is why knuckleheads rob banks.)

And if you're losing big, you're probably playing like crap.

So you have to set loss limits before you sit down in a game, when you're thinking clearly and still rational. It's like handing your car keys to someone when you're sober, knowing that later you might be drunk and not thinking so clearly. If you set a loss limit before you sit down, a maximum amount you're willing to lose in the game, you won't have to decide how deep you're willing to go when you're not of right mind, tilting and playing poorly because you're losing.

Your stop loss should be something like 100 to 200 big blinds, a signal that it's time to get up, depending on how wild the game is. In a tight game, your loss limit would be closer to 100 big blinds. In a loose game, 200 big blinds. Remember, when you're losing, you aren't always the best judge of whether you're getting unlucky or outplayed or just flat not playing well. Obviously, anyone in a heightened emotional state (and you're in it, de facto, if you're losing) isn't too objective or making optimal decisions. With the loss limit in place, you don't have to judge and you don't have to decide. You've hit your loss limit, so you're done. Case closed.

Leaving when you're losing, by the way, has an incredibly positive secondary benefit (besides stopping the bleeding). Given that you're never on your best game when you're stuck, leaving when you're stuck minimizes the overall number of hours you're not playing your best, leaving a higher percentage of hours when you *are* playing your best. Isn't that great? You can improve your long-term average earn just by not playing when you're not at your peak. And if you think you're at your peak of performance, but just getting unlucky, well ... maybe. But isn't all that bad luck negatively affecting your mental state? Of course it is. You can't be playing your best—even if you want to insist it's all luck's fault.

Still think you're playing great even when you're losing? Consider your table image for a second. It erodes when you're losing. People come after you. They put you to more decisions than they normally would, put more pressure on you, and give you more opportunities to make mistakes. They

think you're playing bad or scared and holding crappy cards and losing. So they target you. Which makes your decisions at the table harder. And when you're running bad (even if it's all luck's fault), it's a ton harder to bluff. People know you're ill and want to get well. Of course, they'll call you down. And that's bad. Very bad. It's hard to make a hand in hold 'em. When you lose your bluffing tool, you're really in the shit.

So you don't want to be handcuffed to your cards. You don't want people running you down, putting pressure on you, victimizing your losing frame of mind. You don't want to play when you don't have confidence and might not be playing well (and not even know it). And you'd really like to reduce the number of hours you are playing badly or with a bad table image. For all these reasons, you have a loss limit—100 to 200 BB—that triggers your exit from the game.

The main reason you set your stop loss at 100 to 200 big blinds is that you never want to lose more in a single session of bad poker than you can reasonably expect to win in a single session of good poker. This does one other hugely great thing: it lets us treat every session as an individual entity. We never get so stuck in the game today that coming back and playing well tomorrow is a problem.

It could be, you know. It could be a huge problem. If you lose more in one session than you can reasonably win back in the next, how do you think you'll feel going into that next session? That's right: already stuck. Residually stuck. With carryover loss from the day before. You'll be playing psychologically behind from the start. And not playing your A game from the start. Which increases the number of hours you put in playing poorly, even when you should be coming in fresh.

So here's another excellent rule of thumb:

DON'T LOSE MORE IN THIS SESSION THAN YOU CAN WIN BACK IN THE NEXT

No one knows what the next session will bring, but we can have some reasonable expectations. If you're playing in a \$200-buy-in game, what's a big win? How often have you ever won a thousand bucks in that game? Or even \$800? That's a rare occurrence. A lot of things have to go right. You have to be in a really good game and getting a ton of great hands. And you have to win most or all of them. That doesn't happen very often. So why would you want to lose five times your buy-in? Why would you want to dig that deep a hole? Why would you keep committing buy-in after buy-in when you're probably playing like crap?

Don't forget that all those buy-ins are taking a bite out of your bankroll. By the time the dust clears, you've gone off for 20%-25% of your total roll. Know what effect that'll have? As a function of protecting your bankroll, you now have to play smaller. And since earn is tied to the limits you play, you just lost earn. So by not leaving a game that's beating you, you're negatively impacting not just today's results, but your long-term poker equity, both psychologically and mathematically.

Show of hands. Who thinks that's good?

And by the way, you should apply stop-loss techniques even when you're winning. Say you're up \$300 and your stop loss is \$150. If you lose that \$150 back, you just quit. Why? Because how you're playing, what your psychological state is, and what the quality of your table image is are all determined by local, not global, results. You might be winning overall, but if you just lost a few bad hands in the last half-hour, trust me, you aren't playing well. You're probably tilting a bit and everyone at the table will treat you like a loser.

So we're back to the same problem. You might be playing well and getting unlucky or you might be playing poorly, but it doesn't matter which; you've just lost \$150 and your judgment has sailed off too. So it's time to quit. It doesn't matter why. Maybe the game's lineup has changed. Maybe you've gotten tired. You've hit your stop loss. So just quit because:

LOSS LIMITS APPLY AT ANY POINT IN THE GAME, NOT JUST THE STARTING POINT

When you buy in to a \$1/\$2 game, don't go in saying you're willing to lose \$200 as your net result for the night. What if you're up \$500 at some point, then bottom out at minus \$200? Didn't you just lose \$700? Not really, but *trust me*, you'll treat it that way psychologically.

If you break even in a game where you never had much of a result during the course of your play, you don't have much of an emotional reaction to the result, right? But if you're down \$200 in a game, then come back and break even, now you're super-happy to have broken even, yes? And if you're up \$500 and slide back to even, you're really pissed off, no? In each case, your net result was the same. You broke even.

Why do we have such different reactions? Psychologically, it *matters how you got there*. That's why you have to set loss limits from your high point in the game. You never want to be in a spot where breaking even, or even winning a little, leaves you grumpy and playing poorly, not just today, but tomorrow as well, because you feel like you need to get that money back.

Obviously, if you were just a computer, you could react the same to the break-even result no matter how you got there.

Money in your stack doesn't belong to you till you cash out. So the road you took to get to your result shouldn't matter. But you aren't a computer, so it does matter. And making sure you aren't tilting about a breakeven result is really important.

So be strict about your stop loss, always resetting it to your high point. If your stop loss is \$100 and you're up \$500, quit when you get down to \$400. If your high point is \$350, quit when you get down to \$250. If you're \$50 in the black, quit when you're \$50 in the red.

If all this teaches you is never to blow back a huge win, you'll be a long way to better bankroll management and much more psychologically stable in the process.

Stop Win

To maximize your hours when you're in a good game with a good table image, some people say you should never quit a game you're beating. Those people are only partly right: You should quit a game under some circumstances even if you're winning.

Let's say you buy in for \$100 and run it up to \$500. If \$100 is 5% of your bankroll, all of a sudden you have almost a quarter of your bankroll in play (a little less than a quarter; now your bankroll is \$2,500, not \$2,000). You could say that it doesn't count as part of your bankroll, because you just won it and it's still on the table, so you haven't locked it up. And that's true mathematically, but probably not psychologically. Having that much money on the table likely affects how you play. Maybe you played strong (or just got lucky) to run up that sum. Now you screw down your game; you don't want to lose back what you won. That's not winning poker. That's defensive poker. There's got to be a better way.

Well, there is. Get out of that game and go find another that you can buy back into for \$100 so you don't feel like you have to play to protect your win.

This is easy to do online. You can change tables or sites. In the real world, it's a little harder. Many card rooms make you either keep all your winnings in play or take a 30-minute break. Fine. If you're playing poorly (you are if you're playing to protect), take the 30 minutes and come back

with \$100 so you can play right. Thirty minutes off is better than 30 minutes playing defensive poker.

So when you feel your play is becoming inhibited by how much you've won, forget the conventional wisdom of "don't quit when you're winning" and cash out. You don't have to quit for the night. You can just change games. And when you buy in for a lower amount, you're reducing variance, always a plus.

Also, don't imagine you have to stay in a game, because it's juicy. I'd put it to you that if you're in a card room or on a site that has one game with bad players in it, it probably has several. Bad players aren't that hard to find.

Obviously, if your play isn't affected by how much you have on the table, by all means stay in your game and leverage your great table image. The one disadvantage to changing games is that you lose that image you worked so hard for. At the old table, everyone thought—and treated you like—you were on a rush. At the new table, you have to start from scratch. So if you can get over the fear of having all that dough on the table, it's better to stay and keep winning. But know yourself. If you can't get over it, leave.

Stop Time

Another thing that stops you from playing under conditions where you're winning is time. You really shouldn't play sessions longer than six to eight hours. I don't have to tell you that poker is an intellectually fascinating game. Very engaging. Time passes quickly. But look at it this way. How would you feel if you were sitting in a car with someone who had been driving for eight hours and said he could go nine or ten more? Even worse, think about whether you'd feel safe driving after your longest session of poker. When I ask people what their longest session ever was, I often hear answers like 18 hours, 24 hours, 36 hours. As sick as it is, my longest session ever was 72 hours. (Hey, I didn't start off being a good self-manager. I had to learn this stuff, too!) And after that long a session, how do you think you'd feel if you had to drive?

Yikes. That's how you'd feel. Just yikes.

Poker is a lot harder than driving. So if you wouldn't feel safe driving a car, you shouldn't feel safe risking your money at a poker table.

Or imagine sitting in a math class and doing algebra problems for eight hours. That's really tiring. And that's what poker is like, only thanks to all the adrenaline, you don't realize how tired you are. Also, consider that when you're playing in a cash game, there are always fresh players coming into the game. If you're super-tired, it's a disaster to play against those wide-awake players who just sat down. Their decisions will be sharper than yours. (In tournaments, you don't worry about this, because no one is fresh. Everyone has to play for the same amount of time.)

So to stop-win and stop-loss limits, now add a time limit. Leave when you reach the limit. It's another way to minimize the number of hours you log when you're not playing your best. Just absolutely.

It isn't just time that might get you to quit when you're winning. Sometimes, you realize you just don't want to be at the table. Or way before six hours is up, you realize you're really tired. Or you get in a fight with someone at the table and that puts you in a bad mood. Or you start to feel unwell. Those are all great reasons to quit. If you aren't physically or mentally into it, you shouldn't be playing, win or lose. Go home. Come back when you feel more up to it.

The other thing—and this one's gospel—is never, never, *ever* stay in a poker game when human interaction is scheduled. If you've made an appointment to see someone away from the poker table, keep that appointment at all cost. Among other things, this will keep you from pissing off your friends (you need your friends, so don't piss them off). Even if you have an understanding friend who won't be pissed off when you say you're stuck, but the game's really good, ask yourself how good can the game be if you're stuck. And how will you fare from this point forward, knowing that you blew off a friend to try to get well at poker? You wouldn't stay if you were winning, right? You'd go meet your friend and tell him how great you did. So don't stick when you're stuck. That's all. Just don't.

The poker game goes on and on and on and on and on and on and on. It never ends. You can always win your money back tomorrow—if you don't bury yourself today. So why are you still there just because you're losing? You're chasing your loss. You can't possibly be playing well now, because chasing your loss is a bad decision, and bad decisions equal bad poker. So never miss human interaction. It's *always* more important than poker. (If you're young and you don't know that yet, trust me, you'll learn.)

Win Goal (Don't Do It)

Often players come into a game with a goal in mind for how much they want to win that night. In tournaments, they might set a goal for how many chips they want to have by the end of the day. In cash games, they might decide they want to win \$150 that night.

This is bad for a lot of reasons. In tournaments, let's say you set a goal that you want to finish the day with triple your starting stack of 10,000. If you're at 20,000 close to the end of the day, you could actually start to feel desperate, even though 20,000 may be above-average chips. You feel like you have a lot of work to do when you should just be focusing on the play at hand.

On the flip side, if you're up to 45,000 in chips, you might start playing super-reckless, since you're so far above your goal and possibly feel like you have chips to burn.

See how illusory these goals are? As long as you have more than 30 big blinds in a tournament, you can play reasonable poker and aren't really in danger. If you're playing to reach an end-of-day goal, rather than playing correctly, that's a disaster, especially if you're sitting on a healthy stack in relation to the blinds.

In the cash situation, setting a win goal can minimize your hours spent playing well, both by causing you to quit early and by triggering bad play when circumstances should be favorable. If you set a win goal of, say, \$150 in your \$1/\$2 game, what happens when you reach the goal? You probably quit. But you're winning and playing well with a good table image. Why would you quit then?

And even if you don't quit, your play will be affected. You'll try to protect your win and lock up your goal for the night, so you'll play scared. And if you slip back below your win goal, you'll feel disappointed, affecting you both now and the next time you play. Win goals have no upside.

Play Zen. Play in the moment. Only worry about your overall result as it applies to stop loss.

Moving Up and Moving Down

Another thing you have to think about long term is how to go about moving up in the game. But as we contemplate this issue, a certain Catch-22 appears. In the name of good bankroll hygiene, we can't move up until we can afford higher games; however, as a practical matter, we might not be able to build a bankroll for those higher games until we move up. What's a chicken and egg to do?

The answer is twofold: Be prepared to step up and be prepared to step back.

Say you're used to playing \$2/\$5 no-limit, but you look over at the \$5/\$10 game and think it looks pretty good today. You see several players in

the game you've played with before in your regular \$2/\$5 game and know to be bad. In absolute terms, you don't have the bankroll for the game, but that doesn't mean you can't take a shot. You just buy in light is all, at the 100 BB end of your buy-in range. That way, if the game goes wrong and you lose, you haven't lost more than you could reasonably expect to win in your smaller regular game: 100 blinds at \$5/\$10 is \$1,000 and 200 blinds at \$2/\$5 is \$1,000.

So you haven't played outside your bankroll. By setting your loss limit at the lower range in the higher game, you make sure you don't fade a loss that negatively impacts future sessions.

You can also sell off some of your action to a friend or two. By keeping your risk in the higher game low, you minimize the risk of digging yourself one of those deep ugly holes.

The important thing about stepping up is to pick your spots and take your shots. Just because you play high one day doesn't mean you now have to make that your regular game. A normal losing day at a higher level could equal a whole losing month at much lower stakes. And for a lot of people, losing big in a big game leads not to their dropping back down, but to their staying in the game. They think they need to get even quick and figure the fastest way to do that is in the bigger game.

Thus, for reasons both psychological and mathematical, it makes sense to buy in light and minimize your exposure in a game above your normal comfort zone.

If you lose, just step back down and win the money back. If you win, you can keep an eye on the big game and take other shots when the game looks good. When you're a consistent winner, you can stay at that level. And that's how you move up. Three steps forward, two steps back, until you've established a firm and profitable foothold at the higher level. But you always have to be willing to come back down.

And you can't get too hooked on labels. A lot of people do, you know. They get this sense that they're, for example, a \$10/\$20 no-limit player and even if the \$5/\$10 game looks really good, they won't play it, because in some existential sense, it's beneath them.

I don't need to tell you how ridiculous that is. That's the ego talking and nothing more. People think they're a big deal and in the name of preserving some counterproductive self-image, they look off profitable opportunities in smaller games.

It happens every day. You walk into the casino and see that the \$10/\$20 game is filled with players you know you can't beat. If you're honest, you admit this to yourself, then play in a good \$5/\$10 game or even the \$2/\$5 blind game, which is full of deep-stacked drunks. If you're not honest, if you're all up in your ego, you play in the big game and get crushed. How does your ego feel now?

It's simple. You're not a \$10/\$20 blind player. You're not a \$1/\$2 blind player. You're a *poker* player. You'll play in the best game you can find, where "best" is a function of your bankroll, state of mind, and opponents you face.

Remember that the smaller game has several tangible advantages. Worse players. Less variance. And an opportunity to do something that's really great for your game: play your best, no matter what the stakes. A lot of people just can't do this. They get into a small game and figure that the money doesn't matter—they really can't get hurt too bad—so their discipline and strategy go out the window and they basically fart around.

You know what? I could be playing in a \$.01/\$.02 game—hell, I could be playing in a no-money game—and still be committed to doing the only thing that matters: making good decisions. I don't need the money there to keep my attention. The game itself keeps my attention. Solving the decision-making problem keeps my attention. And it should for you, too.

In other words:

DON'T DEFINE YOURSELF BY THE MONEY DEFINE YOURSELF BY THE GAME

When that happens, it's the decision-making process, not the money, that gets your rocks off, and then a lot of negative stuff tends to go away. Among other things, bad beats don't bother you at all (well, not much). When you get your opponent to take the wrong price on the flop and again on the turn, but he sucks out on the river, oh well. You forced two mistakes. If you're only about the results, you hate that. But if you're there to play correctly and make the other guys do otherwise, you don't care. You know that money's coming back to you, purely as a function of your decision-making edge.

Losing Streaks

Bad things happen to good people. It's a fact. And losing streaks happen to the best players in the world. So the question is, how do we deal with them?

Obviously, if your bankroll is depleted, you move down. And this does all those good things we've already discussed. It lowers your variance, pits you against worse players, builds your confidence, and builds your bankroll. But even if your bankroll isn't depleted, you still want to downshift when you're losing; the confidence boost of playing with players worse than you goes a long way to turning things around. Just don't come off your game and get crazy because the money's so small. Keep playing your best poker. You'll show better results, now that you're a lot better than the game.

When you're on a losing streak, then, just drop down, work on your game and confidence, then return to your "home" level with renewed brio.

And bear in mind that sometimes your ego issues are hardest to deal with when you're on a bad run. A certain resentment and defensiveness build up. You become quite self-conscious and might even feel that to step down is somehow to lose face. Ignore that feeling. If moving down is the best decision to make, make it. Don't care what anybody says about you. And don't ever get in a battle with anyone about who's the better player. I don't care if everyone I meet is a better player than I am, as long as they're not at my table.

This is where ego and honesty come into conflict. The ego wants to be the best and feel good. But honesty wants to see things as they are and make good decisions. If a player at the table is better than I am, I want to be aware of it, acknowledge it, and play against that guy with appropriate circumspection. I might even set the goal of learning from him, but I'm definitely setting the goal of winning my money from the other players at the table.

Now note that I can't do any of my useful goal setting if I get into a whole big deck-measuring (as it were) contest with this guy. Nor would I. My ego doesn't roll that way. I admit I could fill my whole house with people who are better poker players than I am. So what? As has been famously put, "Don't challenge strong players, challenge weak ones. That's what they're there for." And they'll contribute handsomely to your earn, but only if you keep your ego out of it.

To put it another way, save your ego for the cashier's cage.

Life Management

For long-term success in poker, money-management skills are important, but life-management skills are paramount. You want to keep human

interactions in the center of your life. Find and value good relationships with good people. This includes, by the way, trusted poker friends you can rely on to tell you the truth about your play.

If you've made a donkey play, it does you no good to have friends tell you that you played it right or you had no choice. They think they're giving you moral support and I suppose in a sense they are, but how will you ever grow your game if no one ever points out your flaws? The emperor has no clothes, right? So he goes around naked.

It's been said, and I think it's true, that to be a long-term winner in poker, you need fire in your belly: a passion for the game and a passion to keep learning and growing. But the fact remains that you also need balance in your life.

In the beginning of your poker career, you need to be thirsty for knowledge and experience. That's how you grow in the game. But if you don't put other things in your life on a par with poker, you'll get hooked on the stimulation (poker is a damn powerful stimulant) and eventually it'll be the only thing that gets you off. Then it's not a career or a passion, it's just an addiction.

And on that note, we're done with this book. I wouldn't be surprised if you had to go back and reread it once or twice in order to absorb everything that's in it. For one thing, there's a lot of stuff to absorb—strategy, math, and psychology stuff—and it's hard to take it all on board at once.

There's another issue, though, which has to do with what you learn as a function of what you already know. I think you'll find that you won't be able to deploy some material in this book effectively until you've deployed it—I don't know how else to put this—somewhat ineffectively for a while.

You'll sort of get, for example, that you should call behind on the flop with certain hands instead of raising. But until you put the concept into action, you won't really understand why it works or how well it works. Then, if you go back and reread the section covering that sort of play, you'll get a new and deeper understanding out of it, based on what you've learned at the table. The notion was beautifully put by Heraclitus, who noted that you can't step into the same river twice. Either you've changed or the river's changed or both.

And, really, that's a great way to think about yourself in the context of both your poker and your life as a whole. If you're playing the game right (both poker and life), then you're constantly learning and changing and growing. And as it's the nature of the game (again, both) to change, one thing you'll be constantly called upon to do is adapt.

So keep doing that. Keep making excellent decisions based on available information. It's not hard to play great poker and it's really not hard to live a great life.

All you have to do is decide.

Glossary

Advertise—To play in a way that convinces people you play differently than you do. Generally used as a term for showing a bluff. But can be used to refer to showing a very good hand to convince people you play tighter than you do.

Air—Your hand when you flop no pair and no draw. When players say, “I flopped air,” they mean that they missed the board completely.

All-In—When a player puts all of his remaining chips into the pot.

Ante—A small amount of money each player at the table must put in the pot before the cards are dealt on each hand. This is in addition to the small blind and big blind in flop games. Antes are usually about one-tenth the size of the big blind.

Baby—A card that’s very low in rank. Usually, a 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Back Raise—To limp into a pot, then re-raise or three-bet a player who raises after your limp.

Back Door—Any draw you hit that requires a card on the turn and the river of a hand to complete; when you pick up a draw on the turn, then complete it on the river. For example, if you have A♥T♥, the board is K♠-5♥3-♦, and you hit a 6♥ on the turn and a Q♥ on the river to make a flush, you’ve back-doored the flush.

Bad Beat—Losing with a hand that’s a big mathematical favorite, usually because another player has played poorly.

Belly Buster—See “inside-straight draw.”

Big Blind—A bet that the player two seats clockwise from the button must put into the pot before any cards are dealt. Usually, twice the size of the small blind.

Big Slick—A hand that has AK in the hole.

Blank—A card hitting the board that’s unlikely to change who has the best hand or to help a player’s hand improve. For example, on a board like A♠-K♠-9♥-8♥, if a 2♠ hits the river, it would be called a blank; it’s unlikely to improve anyone’s hand.

Blind Escalation—in a tournament, the size of the small and big blinds goes up at regular intervals. The blind escalation refers to how quickly they get higher, both in terms of the interval they go up and by how much.

Blocking Bet—A bet made on the river in first position with a hand that’s marginal. The bettor bets an amount less than he thinks his opponent would bet in order to reduce the amount lost on the last betting round. Only done when the player is sure he’d call his opponent’s bet if he checks and the opponent bets. Also called a “defensive bet.”

Bluff—To try to win a pot by betting with a hand that could not win at showdown. Betting to get other players to fold the best hand.

Board—The up cards in a hand of poker. The community cards in hold ’em and Omaha or the face-up cards of a player’s hand in stud games.

Boat—A full house.

Bottom Pair—When you pair a card in your hand with the smallest-ranked card on the board. For example, if you have A♥8♥ and the board is K-Q-8, you’ve flopped bottom pair.

Breaking Order—The order in which players at starting tables are assigned to other tables in order to consolidate a multi-table tournament.

Brick—A card dealt that doesn’t help your hand. Used when a player has a very big draw, with many outs, and misses. For example, you have Q♥T♥ vs. 66 and the board is J♥-K♥-2♠. A 2♦ on the turn would be called a brick, as in, “I hit a brick” or “I bricked on the turn” or “The board bricked.”

Broadway—A straight to the ace: T-J-Q-K-A.

Bubble—The point in a tournament when a significant event will happen as soon as the next player gets knocked out. Usually refers to the point at which players will win money in the tournament after one more player is eliminated. Can also refer to the point at which players will reach the final table after one more player is eliminated.

Bullets—Aces.

Burn Card—A card taken out of play before each betting round. The top card of the deck is dealt face down and removed from play.

Button—A round disk that usually has “Button” or “Dealer” written on it. The dealer button moves clockwise around the table, passing from player to player after each hand. In professional games, players don’t deal the cards themselves. The button signifies the player who would be dealing if there were no professional dealer. The player “on the button,” meaning the player who has the button in front of him, gets dealt last and gets to act last on each betting round.

C-Bet—See “continuation bet.”

Call—To match the bet of the player(s) before you.

Call for a Clock—In a tournament, when another player is taking an inordinate amount of time to make a decision, you can call for a clock. When the clock is put on the player, he then usually has one minute and 10 seconds to make a decision about his hand.

Call Time—To request extra time to make a decision at a poker table. Used rarely, only in situations where a decision about a hand is particularly difficult.

Calling Station—A player who calls all bets, often with very weak hands, and rarely folds if he thinks he has any way to win the pot.

Cap or Cap It—To put in the last raise. Most poker games have a 4- to 5-bet limit on any given betting round. “To cap it” means to make the last available raise.

Case Card—A single card remaining in the deck that will help a player’s hand. For example, if you have AQ vs. KK and two players have folded AX, when the flop comes A-T-2, you hit a case card, the only ace remaining in the deck. In this example, the card is referred to as the “case ace.”

Cash—To make the money in a tournament. To last long enough in a tournament to win some of the prize pool.

Cash Game—A poker game in which players are playing for chips that have a cash value. Those chips are purchased for cash, at face value, and can be cashed out for money at face value at any time during the game.

Change Gears—To alter the way you play, usually for the purpose of confusing your opponents; e.g., you play very loose and fast, then change to a tight style, or vice versa.

Chase—To try to draw to a hand that’s behind, usually when you should fold mathematically, as in, “He chased the flush.”

Check—To pass the action to the next player.

Check Down—When all players check on all streets, so the hand goes to a showdown with no bets. Often done by agreement when two players (usually friends) get heads-up in a pot or two players are in a pot with a third player who’s all-in in a tournament situation. Either way, checking a hand down by agreement is collusion.

Check-Raise—To pass the action, then raise when someone else bets.

Chop—To split a pot or with one or more players, sometimes by agreement. Also, to split a tournament prize pool among the remaining players before the tournament plays out to one winner.

Cold Call—To call. Generally refers to calling a raise.

Cold Deck—When you hit a hand that’s extremely strong, nearly the nuts, but you’re still up against a better hand. For example, if you have KK and the flop is A-K-2, but you’re against AA, you’ve been cold-decked. Comes from the days when cheaters preset a deck, then snuck that deck into the game. Because the deck hadn’t been handled before, it was cold in temperature.

Collusion—When two or more players play in concert, agreeing to play together to benefit themselves and cheat the other players in the game. For example, if one player signals another player what his hand is, that’s collusion.

Community Cards—The five face-up cards on the table in a flop game like hold ’em or Omaha that all players get to use in their hands. Shared cards.

Continuation Bet—A bet made on a street after a player has taken the lead on a pot. Usually refers to a bet made on the flop by the player who raised before the flop. Also called a “c-bet.”

Cooler—A hand that involves a cold deck. As in, “I lost with a set of kings to a set of aces. It was a cooler.”

Coordinated—See “coordination.” When cards on the board are related to one another. Also called “wet” or “uncoordinated.”

Coordination—The relationship of cards on the board to one another. When board cards are related, for example, if there are cards of the same suit or cards that make a straight or straight draw, the board is considered textured, e.g. J♠-T♠-2♦. When board cards aren’t related, the board is considered untextured, e.g. A♦-9♥-4♠. Boards that have a lot of texture on them are also called “wet” or “coordinated.” Boards with no texture on them are also called “dry” or “uncoordinated.”

Counterfeit—To pair a card in a high/low flop game that changes your hand from the nuts to a bad hand. For example, if you have A2XX in Omaha 8 or Better and the flop is 3-8-7, you flopped the nut low. But if you hit a 2 on the turn, your hand is counterfeited. Now an A4 is the nuts and A5, A6, 45, 46, and 56 all beat you.

Cowboys—Kings.

Cutoff—The position at the table directly to the right of the player on the button. The player who gets to act second to last.

Dark Bet—A bet made without looking at your hole cards or the next card(s) to come; e.g., if you raise before the flop, having looked at your hand, but then bet before the dealer puts the flop down, you’re “betting in the dark.”

Dead Cards—Cards no longer in the deck. Generally used as a stud-poker term to refer to cards that have already been seen and aren’t available

to be dealt into your hand.

Dead Hand—Any hand that's killed. For example, if a hand is dealt to a player in a tournament when the player isn't sitting at the table, his hand would be dead. If a player discovers he has too many cards in his hand during play, his hand would be dead as well.

Dead Straddle—A straddle bet that's not allowed action after placing the bet in the pot when no one has raised the straddle bet. For example, if the blinds are 100/200 in a tournament and a player under the gun straddles for 400 chips (in other words, he places a 400-chip bet in the pot before the cards are dealt) and a player calls the the 400 and the big blind checks, the player who straddles would not have an option to raise if he wants. He must just see the flop for the straddle amount if no one raises his bet. Generally, straddles in tournament games are always dead.

Dead-Man's Hand—A hand that includes a pair of As and a pair of 8s. The hand Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he was shot in the back of the head.

Defensive Bet—See "blocking bet."

Dominated/Domination—When a player's hand shares a card with another player's hand, but has a smaller kicker; e.g., if player A has AJ and player B has A8, player A is dominating player B, since they both share the ace, but player A's kicker is higher.

Donkey, Donk—A bad poker player.

Door Card—The first up card in seven-card-stud games. The first card exposed of the flop cards; e.g. "I got my money in with AA versus JJ, but there was a jack in the door." This means the first card exposed on the flop was a jack. Also called the "window card."

Double Belly Buster—A straight draw where you have two ranks that you can draw to the inside to complete your hand; the hand has eight cards that help, instead of four cards, as in a regular belly-buster straight draw. For example, on a flop of Q-8-6, if your hand is T9, you can hit a J in the middle for a Q-high straight or a 7 in the middle for a T-high straight. Even though you don't have four consecutive cards in rank, you still have the same number of ways to win as an open-ended straight draw. Also called a "double gutshot."

Double Gutshot—See "double belly buster."

Downside—The money you'll lose if you hit your hand and it's no good. Also known as "negative implied odds."

Drawing Dead—When there are no cards you can hit that will give you the best hand. For example, if you have 6♥7♥ and the flop is Q♥-Q♠-9♥, you're drawing dead to the flush if your opponent is holding Q9, since he already has a full house.

Drawing Slim—To draw to a hand that has very few outs.

Draw Out—To hit a hand that's way behind. To improve a hand to a winner that was highly improbable to improve. To "suck out."

Dry—When cards on the board are unrelated to one another, as in a board with no draws. Also called "untextured" or "uncoordinated."

Dry Side Pot—A side pot that has no money/chips in it. This happens when one or more players go all-in and the rest of the betting is on the side, but no extra money is in that side pot yet.

Ducks—2s, deuces.

Early Position—Having to act first or near the front of the betting order, due to the seat at the table and its relationship to the button and blinds.

Equity—The money you rate to make or lose in the long run. Positive equity means you rate to make money in a situation. Negative equity means you rate to lose money in a situation. Does not refer to the results of a specific hand.

Expected Value/EV—The money you rate to make or lose in the long run. +EV means you rate to make money in a situation. -EV means you rate to lose money in a situation. Does not refer to the results of a specific hand.

Fade—To avoid a bad event. For example, if you have AA and someone has 8♥7♥ and the flop comes 9♥-6♥-2♦, you might say, "I had to fade half the deck." If you have AA and someone has 45, you might say, tongue in cheek, "I got it all in with aces and had to fade the four-five."

Family Pot—When all players in a game enter the pot to see the flop.

Favorite—The hand or player mathematically most likely to win.

Felt—To cause a player to lose all his money or to lose all your money, as in, "He felted me." Because a poker table is covered in felt, when you've lost all your chips, you're "down to the felt."

Fifth Street—The river in flop games like hold 'em and Omaha; the fifth card dealt in stud games.

Final Table—The last table in a tournament.

Fish (Fishcake)—A bad poker player.

Fixed Limit—A form of poker where the bet sizes are limited by a pre-agreed-upon amount. In fixed-limit poker, the size of the bets and raises are fixed.

Flat—To flat-call. As in, "He opened the pot for a raise and I flatted him with nine-nine."

Flat-Call—To call.

Float, Floating—A particular form of bluffing where one player calls another with a hand that can't win unless he bluffs. The call sets up a bet on a later street that can then win the pot. The call to bluff on a later street is "call floating."

Floor—A floorman who can make a ruling at the table. When there's a dispute at the table, the dealer "calls for the floor."

Flop—First three community cards dealt face-up in the middle of the table. All players can use these cards to make their hands.

Flop Game—A form of poker in which cards are dealt face-up on the table that all players get to use in their hands. Any poker game in which there are community cards.

Flush Draw—A hand in poker where you have four cards of a single suit and are trying to draw the fifth card of that suit. If you "flop a flush draw," you flop four cards to a flush and are looking to hit another of the suit on the turn or the river.

Fourth Street—The turn in a flop game like hold 'em or Omaha; the fourth card dealt in stud games.

Free Card—A card dealt after a round in which there was no betting. Any card that's dealt that comes after a round in which all players checked.

Free-Roll—1) A tournament in which there is no entry fee. 2) Any situation in gambling when you've locked up a breakeven or win situation and still have a chance to win even more. For example, in hold 'em on a board of Q♥-J♥-T♠ where you have A♥K♥ and your opponent has A♠K♠, both of you have a straight, so you're guaranteed half of the pot. But because you have a heart flush draw, you might win the whole pot. In this situation, you're free-rolling for the whole pot.

Freeze Out—A tournament in which no re-buys are allowed.

GG—An abbreviation used online for "good game."

Gin Your Outs—To play a hand in a way that knocks players out of the pot in order to increase the cards you can hit to win. For example, you have AK against one player with QQ and another with A4. The flop is T-8-4. You can now "gin your ace" by raising A4 out of the hand. Now, if you hit an ace, you'll have the best hand, after forcing A4 to fold.

Gutshot—See "inside straight draw."

Hand Odds—The chances or probability your hand will win.

Heads-Up—When only two people are playing a pot, either in a hand at a table that started with more than two players or because the two players are playing head to head at a two-handed table.

Hero Call—Making a big call with a very weak hand that can really only beat a bluff.

High Variance—Big statistical fluctuation around a mean. Big swings in your chip stack or bankroll. Can refer to a game as well. A "high-variance game" rates to have big fluctuations in your chip stack.

Hijack—The position at the table two seats to the right of the player on the button. The player who gets to act third to last.

Hole Cards—Cards in your hand that your opponents can't see. Cards dealt face down.

Implied Odds—Chips you believe you can win on later betting rounds if you make your hand. The money that's implied to come your way if you hit your hand. The bets your opponent will lose to you when you make your hand. Can also refer to the money you'll lose if you hit your hand and it's no good.

In the Lead—See "lead."

In the Money—When you're still in a tournament at the point when all players have cashed. When you've lasted long enough in a tournament to win some of the prize pool.

Inside Straight Draw—A straight draw where you have four cards that can make a straight if you fill in one gap. For example, with 7♥8♦T♠J♥, the 7 and 8 are consecutive and the T and J are consecutive, but there's a gap between the 8 and T. You need to hit a 9 to make a straight. With a belly buster, you're drawing to only four cards that can help you in order to complete the draw to a straight. Also called a "belly buster" or a "gutshot."

Insta-call—A very quick call. An immediate call.

Isolate—To raise in order to knock all other players out of the hand and get heads-up with the original bettor. Used as, "I raised to isolate."

Joint—A huge hand. Generally used to refer to flopping a huge hand. For example, if the board is K♥-J♥-T♦ and you have A♥Q♥, you'd say, "I flopped the joint." Can be interchangeable with "the nuts."

Juice—The rake taken on a bet. The percentage the house takes on a bet. In poker, usually refers to the fee that the house takes on a tournament entry, or the rake in a cash game. Also known as the "vig."

Juicy—An extra good game. A super-soft situation. A tournament full of bad players or a game filled with fish.

Jump the Fence—To call a re-raise when one player raises and another player re-raises. For example, player A raises, player B re-raises, and player C calls; C is “jumping the fence.”

Kicker—When a player has a pair, the kicker is the unpaired card in his hand used to break ties. For example, you have AT and the board is A-K-7-6-2; you have a pair of aces with a 10 kicker. The T will be used as a tie breaker if another player also has a pair of aces. So you would beat a player with A9, because your kicker is higher, but lose to a player with AJ, because his kicker is higher. Also called a “side card.”

Kill Game—in split-pot forms of poker, when a player scoops the pot in a kill game, he gets a kill button, which means that 1) the limit is raised for the next hand; and 2) the player with the kill button must post a blind.

Ladies—Queens.

LAG—An abbreviation for loose aggressive. Refers to a player with that playing style.

Late Position—When a player is near the back of the betting order, getting to bet after most or all of the other players.

Lead—The state of power in a hand wherein other players defer to the player with the lead. The lead sits with the player who puts in the last raise on the previous betting round. Having the lead causes players to check to you.

Lead Out—To bet, generally referring to betting from first position on any of the after-the-flop betting rounds.

Limit—Refers to either the structure or the size of the game. In terms of structure, it's a form of poker where the bet sizes are limited by a pre-agreed-upon amount. In limit poker, the size of the bets and raises are fixed. Also refers to the size of the game you're playing. When players ask what limit you're playing, they're inquiring about the size of the blinds in the game, regardless of whether it's limit, no-limit, or pot-limit poker.

Limp In—To enter a pot by just calling, instead of raising, the big blind.

Live Cards—Cards left in the deck. Generally used as a stud-poker term to refer to cards that haven't been seen yet, so are available to be dealt into your hand.

Live One—A fish. A donkey. A losing/bad poker player.

Live Straddle—A straddle bet that is allowed action after placing the bet in the pot, even if no one has raised his straddle bet, in the same way that the big blind has an option. For example, if the blinds are \$5/\$10 and a player under the gun straddles for \$20 (places a \$20 bet in the pot before the cards are dealt) and a player calls the \$20 and the big blind checks, the player who straddles still has an option to raise if he wants. Generally, straddles in cash games are always live.

Lock—When you're guaranteed a win, you're a lock. Also, used as “locked up,” as in, “I had the win locked up.”

Loose—Playing a high percentage of hands before the flop and/or calling hands after the flop that most players would fold.

Loose Call—Calling with a hand that most players would fold.

Low Variance—Small statistical fluctuation around a mean. Small swings in your chip stack or bankroll. Can refer to a game as well. A low-variance game rates to have small fluctuations in your chip stack.

Made Hand—A hand that's already complete, not drawing. For example, if a player flops a set, the hand is “made.” A player flopping a straight draw doesn't have a made hand until the straight card hits.

Main Pot—When one or more players is all-in, the remaining players with chips can still bet. The bets they put in the pot after they've matched the all-in bet go into a side pot that only those players can win. The original bets constitute the main pot. The all-in player can only vie for the center or main pot to which he has contributed chips. He cannot win the side pot; none of his chips are in that.

Make the Money—To cash in a tournament. To last long enough in a tournament to win some of the prize pool.

Middle Pair—When you pair a card in your hand with the middle-ranked card on the board. For example, if you have A♥Q♥ and the board is K-Q-8, you've flopped middle pair.

Middle Position—in the middle of the betting order, with some players having to act before you and some after you.

Minimum Raise/Min-Raise—To raise the smallest amount allowable. For example, if the blinds are 100/200, to raise to 400, the smallest legal raise.

Mortal Nuts—Holding a hand that's not only the very best hand possible, “the nuts,” but also can't be drawn out on; e.g., you have QQ and the flop is Q-Q-4. Sometimes used just as an emphatic “the nuts.”

Monster—A huge hand. A big hand that's already made or is a huge draw.

Move In, Move All-In—To put all your remaining chips in the pot as a bet (not as a call).

Muck—The discard pile. Also a verb meaning to fold or discard your hand into the muck, as in, “I mucked my hand.”

Multi-Way—A pot with more than two players who continue with their hands to see the flop or play post-flop.

NC—Abbreviation used online for “nice call.”

Negative Implied Odds—See “downside.”

Needle—To tease a player at the table.

NH—Abbreviation used online for “nice hand.”

Nit—A player who only plays the nuts, never wants to gamble, only takes the best of it, doesn’t give any action.

No-Limit—A form of poker where the size of the bets isn’t limited. Players can bet up to all of their chips on any given betting round.

Nuts—The best possible hand. Before the flop, the nuts would be AA, but the term usually refers to a hand after the flop. For example, if you have KJ and the flop comes A-Q-T, you could say, “I flopped the nuts.”

Off-Suit—Cards that aren’t of the same suit.

On the Button—The player with the dealer button in front of him on a given hand. He’s dealt last and acts last on each betting round.

The One Hole—The player under the gun, in first position. You also hear people talk about the two hole, three hole, etc., to refer to the positions to the left of the one hole.

Open—To be the first player to enter a pot for a raise. If you raise with a hand like AK in first position, you would say, “I opened the pot for six hundred with AK.”

Open-Ended Straight Draw—A straight draw that’s not a “gut-shot,” where the four cards in your hand are all consecutive in rank, so you can hit a card at either end of the draw to complete a straight. Eight cards help you in an up-and-down straight draw; four cards complete the straight at the bottom end and four cards complete the straight at the top end. For example, if you have J♥T♥ and the board is 2♠-9♠-Q♠, you have an open-ended straight draw, because you can hit either a K or an 8 to complete the straight. Also called an “up-and-down straight draw.”

Open Shove—When a player is first to act, everyone has folded to him, and he has enough chips to call or raise, but pushes all-in instead as his first action.

Outs—The cards that can help you win your hand. For example, a spade flush draw needs one of the other nine spades in the deck to complete. So you have nine “outs” that help you win. Also called “wins.”

Overlay—Anytime the odds of winning are better than the price the pot is laying you. For example, if you’ll win the hand once for every twice you lose it and the pot is paying you 4-to-1, you’re an overlay. The pot is paying you as if you only need to win the hand once for every four times you lose. When you’re an overlay, you’re making money.

Overpair—A pair in your hand higher than the highest rank on the board; e.g., QQ on a board of T-9-5-4-2.

Paint—A face card; it comes from all the design and color on jacks, queens, and kings.

Par—The average chip-stack size in a tournament.

Parlay—When you have to hit two or more events in order to win; e.g., you can only win if you hit the turn *and* the river.

Pay Off—To call a bet with the worst hand.

Pick Off—To call a bluff.

Play Back—To raise a player who has raised you, as in, “I raised, then he played back at me.”

Pocket Pair—Two cards of the same rank dealt in the hole. When your starting hand consists of a pair.

Pocket Rockets—Two aces in the hole.

Position—Where you’re sitting at the table in relation to the betting order. Early position means you bet early in the order, middle position in the middle, and late position last or very late in the betting order.

Positive Implied Odds—See “upside.”

Pot Limit—A poker game in which the maximum bet is the size of the pot and no more. Players can bet anywhere from the size of the big blind all the way up to the size of the pot, but no greater than the size of the pot.

Pot Odds—The amount in the pot compared to the amount in your bet. For example, if the pot has \$20 and your bet is \$10, there’s twice as much money in the pot as in your bet. So the pot odds are 2-to-1.

Premium Hand—Any of the top starting hands. Usually AA, KK, QQ, AK.

Price—Another word for odds. Price can refer to the pot odds, as in the price the pot is laying you. If the pot odds are 2-to-1, the price is also 2-to-

1. Price can also refer to the odds your hand will win.

Probe Bet—A small bet made to try to extract information from one's opponent(s). Generally executed as a small lead into an opponent who has raised before the flop.

PWN—From online poker to mean "own." Became popular after a rant from Phil Hellmuth, in which he was trying to tell his opponent that he would own him, but he kept misspelling "own" as "pwn."

Quads—Four cards of the same rank. For example, if you have QQ and the board is Q-T-5-9-Q, you have quads.

Rabbit Hunt—To ask to see the next card(s) after a hand is already over. When a player folds a hand before all the cards are dealt and wants to see if he would have made the hand if he'd continued instead of folding. Usually when the player folds a draw, like a flush draw.

Rags—Cards low in rank or that don't make anything.

Rail—The spectators of a game. Also used as a verb, as in "to rail a game" or "come rail me at this table."

Railbird—A spectator, who's "railing" a game. Sometimes used as a derogatory term for someone who's out of action, broke, and can only watch the games, because he has no money to play.

Rainbow—A flop when all three cards are of different suits.

Raise—To put in more chips than the player who bets before you. In no-limit hold 'em, the smallest raise allowed is to increase the bet by the same amount that the player before you either bet or raised himself. If a player bets \$10 after the flop, the minimum raise allowed is \$10, or a total bet of \$20.

Rake—A percentage of the pot the house or casino takes from each pot. Usually 3%-5% of the pot. Also refers to the fee the house takes on a poker-tournament entry.

Rank—The index on the card. A, K, J, Q, T, 9, 8 etc. are the ranks of the cards.

Read—An assessment of an opponent's strength. If you're trying to figure out what an opponent's cards are, you take a read on him.

Re-buy—To buy more chips. Usually refers to a tournament in which, during the first few blind levels, players can buy more chips if they dip below their starting chip amount. Sometimes, players can only re-buy if they've lost their whole stack.

Re-buy Period—The time in a tournament during which re-buys are allowed.

Re-buy Tournament—A tournament in which re-buys are allowed for the first few blind levels.

Redraw—To get a second chance to draw at a hand. Can refer to 1) a hand in which after you hit your draw, you can still draw to better hands. For example, in Omaha, if you hit a straight on the turn with a hand that can redraw to a bigger straight or to a flush or full house. 2) A hand in which a player sucks out on you on the turn, but you can still redraw to a better hand. For example, if you have a hand like A♥Q♥ and the board comes A♠-Q♦-4♥ and you're against 5♠5♦. If a 5♥ hits on the turn, you still have redraws to the flush and full house.

Represent—To play a hand in the way a stronger hand would play to try to convince your opponent that you're holding a certain hand. For example, on a board with three flush cards, to play your hand as if you have the flush is to "represent" the flush.

Re-raise—To raise a player who has already raised in front of you. Also called a "three bet."

Ring Game—A cash game that's full-handed, that has the maximum players in it. Usually 8, 9, or 10 players.

River—The fifth and final community card dealt. Also called "fifth street" in flop games.

Rock—A player who plays only premium hands. A solid player.

Runner Runner—When you hit two running cards to win a hand. Winning with a hand that was losing unless perfect cards hit on the turn and the river. For example, if you have 9♥T♥, the board is K♠-5♥-3♠, and you hit a 6♥ on the turn and a Q♥ on the river to make a flush, you hit runner-runner flush. On the flop you can say you have a "runner-runner flush draw."

Running Good—When you're winning more than your fair share of hands. When your results are well above your statistical expectation.

Rush—When you get better than average cards and win more than your fair share of hands for a period of time in sequence. When your results are above your statistical expectation, you can say, "I was on a rush."

Satellite—A tournament played to win entry into another tournament.

Set—Making 3-of-a-kind with a pair in your hand and another card of that rank on the board. For example, if you have JJ in your hand and another jack flops, you have a set of jacks: three jacks, with two in your hand and one on the board.

Ship, Ship It—Slang meaning to win a tournament or a hand; e.g., "I shipped the tournament." Also used as an exclamation as in "Ship it!" meaning send the pot to me.

Shootout—A multi-table tournament in which you must win all the chips at your table in order to advance to the next round. In each round, you must win your table to advance.

Short Handed—In tournament or cash-game play, when a table has fewer than the maximum players, usually six or fewer.

Shove—To move all your chips into the pot.

Showdown—When the last card is dealt, all the betting is finished, and the cards go face up to determine which hand wins.

Sick—Describes something statistically far out of the ordinary; unexpected, unusual. Used as emphasis to describe an event; e.g., “I took a sick beat,” “I won a sick hand,” or “That is so sick.”

Side Card—See “kicker.”

Side Pot—When one or more players is all-in, the remaining players with chips can still bet. The bets they put in the pot after they’ve matched the all-in bet go into a side pot that only those players can win. The all-in player can only vie for the center pot to which he has contributed chips; he can’t win the side pot, as none of his chips are in it.

Sit-n-Go—A tournament that has no preset starting time. Players register at any time and as soon as the tournament is full, it starts. Can be single- or multi-table.

Slow Play—To play a very strong hand as if it were a very weak one. To bet in a way that makes your hand seem bad when it’s good. For example, checking a big hand on the flop.

Slow roll—At showdown, when it’s a player’s turn to show his cards, to delay in a way that causes the other player to think he has the best hand, then turning over a huge hand that was sure to be the winner. Generally, very bad etiquette.

Smooth Call—To just call with a hand, usually referring to calling with a very strong hand that could raise in order to trick or trap an opponent.

Snap Call—Calling instantly. A very quick call.

Snowmen—Slang for two eights.

Splash the Pot—To throw chips into the pot in such a way that they hit chips already in the center. Not allowed; it prevents the dealer and players to ensure you put the proper amount in the pot, since your chips are now “splashed” in with the others. Chips are placed in the pot in front of you, with separation between your bet and the pot.

Split Pot—A pot in which a single player does not win the whole pot, either because both players have the same hand or the game is a high/low in which the high hand wins half the pot and the low hand wins the other half. Players sometimes split a pot by agreement.

Squeeze Play—A form of bluffing where you re-raise two players in order to squeeze them out of the pot. Specifically, when there has been a raise and a call to you, a re-raise bluff is called a squeeze play.

Stack Size—How many chips you have in your stack.

Steal—To bluff. To win the pot when you don’t have the best hand. To take the pot from a player who would win at showdown.

Steaming (Steam)—See “tilt.”

Straddle—To place a bet out before the cards are dealt when a player isn’t in one of the blinds. Usually happens when a player is on the button or under the gun. See “Live Straddle” and “Dead Straddle.”

Straight—Five cards consecutive in rank. For example, T-9-8-7-6.

Straight Draw—A hand where you have four consecutive cards and are trying to draw the fifth consecutive card to complete a straight. If you flop a straight draw, that means you flop four cards to a straight and are looking to hit the fifth card on the turn or the river. Can also refer to a gutshot straight draw.

Street—A round of betting.

String Bet—Any bet made in more than one forward motion. For example, if you say, “I call” and put your chips into the pot, then say, “I raise” and go to put more chips into the pot. It’s a string bet any time you place chips in a pot, then try to go back to your chip stack to put more chips in unless you verbally declared your intent before taking any action. Never allowed in a card room.

Stuck—Losing in a cash game.

Suck Out—Winning with a hand that’s a big mathematical underdog.

Suited Connectors—Cards of the same suit and consecutive in rank, e.g., 8♥7♥.

Sweat—To watch intently, anticipating an event, hoping for a good result. For example, in hold ’em, if you’re against a player with a flush draw, you’re sweating the cards, hoping no flush hits, or “sweating the flush draw.” If you have AA and are all-in against a player with TT, you sweat the T, hoping it doesn’t hit. The player with TT is also sweating the T, hoping it hits. If you have a bet on a football game, you can be said to be sweating the game.

Table Captain—A player at the table who's running the action, telling other players what to do, correcting and directing the dealer. A table captain is awesome if the dealer is bad and not running the game. Often, though, the table captain is just a control freak.

TAG—An abbreviation for tight aggressive. Refers to a player with that playing style.

Tell—A physical display that gives away something about the strength of your hand. For example, if a player starts blinking very quickly, it's usually a sign of weakness.

Texture—The relationship of cards on the board to one another. When board cards are related, for example, if there are cards of the same suit or cards that make a straight or straight draw, the board is considered textured, e.g. J♠-T♠-2♦. When board cards aren't related, the board is considered untextured, e.g. A♦-9♥-4♠. Boards that have a lot of texture on them are also called "wet" or "coordinated." Boards with no texture on them are also called "dry" or "uncoordinated."

Textured—See "texture." When cards on the board are related to one another. Also called "wet" or "coordinated."

Third Street—The first street in stud games. The betting round when the players have just been dealt their two down cards and their one up card in stud.

Three Bet—See "re-raise."

Tilt—The state of being so emotional at the table that you play very badly because of it. Usually happens because of a bad beat. Also called "steaming."

Tight—A player who plays a very small percentage of his starting hands and has high standards for continuing in a hand.

Tight Fold—Folding a hand most players would call with.

Token—Tip.

Top Pair—When you pair a card in your hand with the highest ranked card on the board. For example, if you have A♥K♥ and the board is K-Q-8, you flopped top pair.

Tournament—A poker competition in which players pay an entry fee and receive chips that have no cash value. The goal is to be the last player standing with all the chips. When players lose their chips, they're eliminated. As players are eliminated, the tournament consolidates. Players get moved to new tables. The tournament consolidates until only one table is left. Then that table plays till there's only one player left.

Trap—To play a very strong hand as if it's very weak in order to trick an opponent into thinking he either has the best hand or can bluff you off your hand. Used to extract money on later betting rounds from another player.

Trips—Three-of-a-kind with one card from your hand and two cards from the board. For example, if you have AT and the board is 5-6-T-Q-T, you have trip 10s: three 10s where one is in your hand and two are on the board.

Turn—The fourth community card dealt. Also called "fourth street."

Uncoordinated—When cards on the board are unrelated to one another. Also called "dry" or "untextured." See "coordination."

Under the Gun—The player who must go first before the flop is under the gun. The position at the table directly to the left of the player in the big blind.

Underdog—A hand or player that is not a mathematical favorite to win.

Untextured—When cards on the board are unrelated to one another, as in a board with no draws, e.g. A♦-9♥-3♠. Also called "dry" or "uncoordinated." See "texture."

Up-and-Down Straight Draw—See "open-ended straight draw."

Upside—The money that's implied to come your way if you hit your hand. Also known as "positive implied odds."

Value Bet—A bet made on the river with a weaker hand in a situation where the player believes his hand, despite being weaker, is 1) good, and 2) will get paid off by hands worse than his.

Variance—Statistical fluctuation around a mean. The up and down of your chip stack or bankroll. In high-variance situations, the fluctuations are big. In low-variance situations, the fluctuations are small. Can refer to a game as well. A high-variance game rates to have big fluctuations in your chip stack.

Verbal Declaration—Any voicing of intentions at the table. Verbal declarations are always binding and override physical actions. For example, if you declare, "I call," then place a raise in the pot, the raise chips will be pushed back to you; your verbal call is binding.

Vigorous, Vig—The juice or rake taken on a bet. The percentage the house takes on a bet. In poker, usually refers to the fee that the house takes on a tournament entry or the rake in a cash game.

Walk—When all the players at the table fold around to the big blind, letting the big blind player win the hand. The big blind "gets a walk" when all players fold.

Weak Lead—A bet made by a player in a heads-up pot wherein the player bets out into an opponent who raised before the flop. Usually done with a weaker hand, thus the name.

Wet—When cards on the board are related to one another. Also called “coordinated” or “textured.”

Wheel—The lowest possible straight. A straight from the ace to the 5: A-2-3-4-5. Also, 7-5-4-3-2 in deuce to seven lowball games.

Window Card—See “door card.”

Wins—See “outs.”

X—Refers to an unimportant card in a player’s hand, a side card. For example, A2, A3, A4, A5 etc. can be referred as AX.

About the Authors

Annie Duke earned a double major in English and psychology at Columbia University and an MA in Cognitive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. She was also a National Science Foundation Fellow from 1988 to 1991.

Since 1994, she has dominated poker, quickly establishing herself as one of the world's best players. In her very first tournament at the World Series of Poker, she placed 13th.

In 2004, she won her first WSOP bracelet (in the \$2,000-buy-in Omaha Hi/Lo Split). That same year, she knocked out nine poker legends to win the no-limit Texas hold 'em invitation-only WSOP Tournament of Champions.

In 2010, Annie won the prestigious NBC National Heads-Up Poker Championship, beating 64 of the world's top players on her way to a \$500,000 first prize.

Annie parlayed her skills into an industry-leading career that encompasses tournament play, advising gaming companies, authoring instructional books and videos, and as a proponent of players' rights. A longtime industry advocate, Annie has testified in front of the U.S. House of Representatives' Judiciary Committee on online poker legislation and the U.S. House of Representatives' Financial Services Committee; she continues to be a leading voice for online gaming.

Annie has also become a prominent television personality, and is recognized worldwide for her runner-up finish on Donald Trump's "Celebrity Apprentice."

Today, she is League Commissioner of Federated Sports + Gaming. She's also an instructor at the World Series of Poker Academy. Her website is annieduke.com.



John Vorhaus has written more than two million words on poker, including the *Killer Poker* book series and the poker novel *Under the Gun*. He has also penned the "sunshine noir" mystery novels *The California Roll* and *The Albuquerque Turkey*, as well as dozens of television and film scripts. He travels the world teaching and training writers—26 countries on four continents at last count.

"As a poker player," says John, "I'm a pretty good writer."

He lives in Southern California and secretly controls the world from johnvorhaus.com, where he always welcomes your visits.

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Huntington Press is a specialty publisher of Las Vegas- and gambling-related books and periodicals, including the award-winning consumer newsletter, *Anthony Curtis' Las Vegas Advisor*.

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“Annie is the rare player who not only plays well, but is also an amazing teacher. She and John Vorhaus have closed an important gap in the poker literature by writing about the art of poker, not the mechanics. This is an essential book for anyone who wants to take their game to its peak.”

—Erik Seidel, 8-time WSOP bracelet winner, 2011 National Heads-Up Champion, all-time tournament-poker money leader

HE WHO HAS THE BEST PLANS WINS THE MOST HANDS

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