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Level: 0.50/1 Nr OF Hands: 2204 Filter: Not Used

Player Type: Semi Loose Aggressive (pre flop) - Aggressive (post flop)

Category	Stat	Value	Percentage	Count
Hand Selection	Pre Flop	37.0	%	(815 out of 2204)
	Vol. Put \$ In Pot	29.9	%	(658 out of 2204)
	Saw Flop Not Blind	28.9	%	(474 out of 1639)
Aggression	Pre flop Raise	11.4	%	(252 out of 2204)
	Aggr. Factor Pre flop	0.5	%	(91 out of 2204)
	Aggr. Factor Total Post Flop	2.2	%	(9 out of 236)
Stealing	Att. To Steal Blinds	27.2	%	(25 out of 92)
	Folded SB To Steal	50.0	%	(1 out of 2)
	Folded BB To Steal	25.0	%	(2 out of 8)
Blind Defense	Small Blind	0.0	%	100.0
	Big Blind	0.0	%	33.3
	First Action on Flop After Pre Flop Raise	Raise	0.9	%
	Bet	61.4	%	(145 out of 236)
	Call	12.3	%	(29 out of 236)
	Check	12.6	%	(30 out of 236)

Table 12631 [PTY] Live Tracker

Player	Hands	Win %	Loss %	Draw %	W\$D	W\$SD	W\$D %	W\$SD %
hbro73	55	55	44.5	14.5	62.5	62.5	100.0	100.0
Blackpeete	37	37	51.4	51.4	57.9	57.9	100.0	100.0
Borjoni	32	32	40.4	40.4	61.5	61.5	67.5	67.5
DonRime	14	14	64.3	64.3	44.4	44.4	100.0	100.0
Prehob27	36	36	33.3	33.3	63.3	63.3	60.0	60.0
Henska34	33	33	24.2	24.2	62.5	62.5	60.0	60.0
Thoney4	11	11	72.7	72.7	62.5	62.5	60.0	60.0
Quasone	55	55	34.5	34.5	52.4	52.4	60.0	60.0
Safhot	51	51	27.5	27.5	64.3	64.3	66.7	66.7
Tras2	55	55	32.7	32.7	72.2	72.2	69.2	69.2
All Table Statistics	55	55	39.8	39.7	62.4	62.7	75.3	75.1

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# To Mandius

This book is dedicated to my grandson, Mandius, and the poker players of the future. As a friend once observed: They'll be a lot like we were – and they'll go through all the same things. They'll gather around the same green felt tables, suffer the same bad beats, and experience the same agonies of seeing an opponent hit a two-over. They'll know the feeling of being down to their last dollar as the light comes up in the dawn, as well as the exhilaration of dragging in a mountain of chips on days when the angels hover around them. They'll experience high drama and low drama, hear great stories, experience laughter, and free food.

They'll meet people they otherwise would not have met – great people from every walk of life – some of the best people, it will turn out, they will probably ever know in life. If, as James Earl Jones once said, «Children are a message we send to a time and place we will never see», then these are our ambassadors to a poker future yet unseen. Accept this note of well-wishes from those who went before you – a message from the past.







## Introduction

One measure of poker writing (as perhaps with all forms of writing), is the «Ah ha!» factor – a sentence or thought that provokes a feeling of common experience with the reader. Our hope is for something of that here, in these pages.

Poker is a somewhat difficult subject to write about. As you learn certain truths and write them down, these truths can change for you later. What seemed quite profound to you at one time might seem a year later to be «obvious» – and no longer worthy of being mentioned. What has happened is that you have moved beyond this particular truth to a newer truth. In such a fashion, the player keeps moving beyond his own knowledge, out-dating it.

At the same time, to someone new to the game, these are still new truths, capable of changing one's thinking and approach, so in that sense, one is wrong not to include them. The bottom line is of a constantly changing and evolving experience. Aside from the very newest beginners, and the most experienced players, almost everyone in the game is at a different level of knowledge.

*The Tao of Poker* was written as a companion volume to my earlier book, *Zen and the Art of Poker* (Dutton/Plume 1999) and is a continuation of some of the ideas expressed in that book. While *Zen and the Art of Poker* dealt more with the psychology of the player – his emotions, motivations, and frustrations – *The Tao of Poker* focuses more on the game itself. In the earlier book, ideas were separated into 100 «rules». This was more an organizational technique than anything else. For structural and case-of-reading purposes, I have followed this same technique here.

The use of the phrase the «Tao of poker» refers to the Taoist belief system that originated in China somewhere around the sixth to fourth century B.C. (with the writings of the Taoist sages Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu). It postulates an underlying harmony of events – a harmonious balance that seeks to do things in ways that encounter the least resistance.

Strictly speaking, the word «Tao» means «the Way». The «Way» in this case simply means the attempt to get closer to the actual truth of the game – the underlying game, when it is perceived correctly.

This book is designed for average players in low- or medium-limit games – a series of ideas aimed at shedding light on the nature of the game and moving these players in the direction of this «Way» – the underlying truth of the game. It is my hope that some things contained in these pages will also be of interest to higher limit players.

Many poker writers have written that poker is a metaphor for life. In fact, it's an apt metaphor, for it contains many of the same elements that occur in life. Consider for a moment: We are occasionally aggressive, taking the initiative; at other times we are more prudent and withdraw. We do some rational things, and some that are not so rational. Every day is a new struggle – one that starts up all over again; our fortunes go up and down, we find ourselves involved in complex, even tense situations with both good friends and adversaries; and at the end of it all, we get up and say, «Gee, where did all the time go?»

Much like life, indeed.  
*Larry W. Phiffips*



## Chapter 1

### Starting Out – A Few Key Rules

#### **Rule 1: Don't dig yourself into a hole when you first sit down.**

If we had to pick a number one rule in poker, this might be a good candidate. It might not be the most *important* rule in poker, but it is a good first one. Try not to get way down, money-wise, right from the outset of the game. It is a lot less fun if you have to spend several hours digging yourself out of a hole you got yourself into in the early rounds of play. Start slow. Observe for awhile. Give yourself time to watch the texture of the game unfold and see how players are playing in order to get yourself into the feel of it and the rhythm of it.

The notion of avoiding doing anything flashy until you get into the flow of things is not limited to poker; it's an idea we see in all sports. There is a cautious feeling-out process that takes place in the early going. Play conservatively until a rhythm develops that you can recognize and exploit, and then join in. Ease into the game. Don't get yourself stuck early.

*«It is important in poker that when you catch a \$2,000 rush, you are not stuck \$3,000 at the start of it».*

– Roy Cooke

#### **Rule 2: If you think you're beat, get out.**

This is one of the basic rules of poker, but one that is – for some reason easily overlooked or forgotten. If you're beat, fold. And *listen* to that little voice telling you that you are beat. (We often hear players at the table tell us, «I know I'm beat» – as they continue to toss in the chips.)

Hanging on (and on, and on) in a hand is where a lot of the money goes.

*"You always told me this was ... rule number one: Throw away your cards the minute you know you can't win. «Fold the f--hand...»*

– Kevin Canty, *Rounders*

Also, forget the idea that they're bluffing or trying to «run you out.» You're almost always better off folding. Most of the time they *do* have something. (Or at least this is true *enough* of the time to justify folding on your part.) Generally speaking, when things start to go wrong in your hand, you're better off exiting the hand. Don't hang around hoping and wishing

(«I'll see one more card ... and one more ... and one more ...»). Meanwhile, other players are betting and raising with a «made hand». Unless you are up against players who deliberately make moves of this kind (to try to force you out), it is never a bad idea in poker, at the first sign of trouble, to get away from the hand.

**Rule 3: Start with premium hands. When you get them, bet them. If the hand starts to deteriorate, get away from the hand.**

This is only common sense, but it is surprising how easy it is to drift away from this basic concept. Have brakes and an accelerator. Use both.

**Rule 4: If you don't think your hand is good enough, it probably isn't.**

Notice how many times you think your hand is not good enough, and how many times it turns out that you were right. Your hand wasn't good enough – and it lost. It's a pretty high percentage. The suspicion that your hand may not be good enough can often reliably be taken as proof that it isn't. Listen to your gut.

**Rule 5: If you do make a mistake, correct it as soon as you can.**

If you do make a mistake, correct yourself at the next available opportunity in the hand. Don't just keep throwing in good money after bad. There's no reason you have to follow your original mistake with additional bets. Some players feel, having made the original bad call, that they are now obligated to stay until the end in order «to be consistent», so they continue to put in more and more money behind it. Get out.

**Rule 6: It's important that a player starts seeing «staying too long on marginal hands» as where the money goes.**

This is a rule for less experienced players, but even long-time players are guilty of this at times. And make no mistake, this is where the money goes. It's where the actual leakage takes place. In fact, it's a money «leak» of such proportions that it can bring down the entire rest of our game – a major avenue of seepage. If this were a house and we were looking for thermal-heating leaks, it would be the equivalent of having the front door open.

A good deal of the money lost in poker games is lost when players continue past the point in a hand when they should be out. Yet they are still in, still hoping for a miracle, still «donating». Not only is this «where the money goes», it is also where the winners get most of their money «from». The money that «fuels» most low-level poker games comes from this source.

**Rule 7: The money you don't lose from staying too long in a hand and the money another player does lose from doing this is often the profit you go home with.**

Maybe you got yourself «trapped» a few times on fairly good hands and found yourself staying longer than you wanted, but soon after that you came

to your senses and folded. A less experienced player, however, got trapped on some similar hands and stayed until the very end with them. The money difference in these two cases is often. The difference at the end of the game – the profit the better player goes home with.

Profit at lower levels of poker is often nothing more than a matter of getting «paid off» by bad players when the good players have a good hand. (And limiting your own mistakes so you don't give the money back.)

**Rule 8: The hand you really want to spend your money on may be right around the corner.**

Don't put in money on hands you feel «lukewarm» about. The real hand – the one you feel good about pushing a lot of chips in on – may be right around the corner. It may occur on the very next hand, and you want to have plenty of chips in front of you when it arrives. Think of the chips you're using to «chase» with on borderline hands as money you'll wish you had later to use – when that better hand comes along.

*Those who worship by folding two hands  
Or by raising one hand  
Or only by nodding their head  
And those who give offerings to images of Buddha,  
Even with only a flower,  
Will eventually realize an infinity of Buddhas.  
They will reach the highest realm.*

– The Lotus Sutra



## Chapter 2

# Staying on Your Game – Join in the Rhythm

*«All the passions produce prodigies. A gambler is capable of watching and fasting, almost like a saint».*

– Simon Weil, as quoted in *The Big Room*, Michael Herr

### **Rule 9: Don't arrive over-eager to play.**

Many players arrive at a poker game a little too eager to play. You can see it in their body language. They are rubbing their hands together, leaning forward in anticipation. They've «come to play», and they will tell you so.

This is an awful lot of eagerness when you consider that poker is basically a slow game that goes on for hours and hours, in which good hands occur only infrequently. Sit back. Relax. This isn't the hundred-yard dash. Cross your arms and settle in for the long haul. Approach the game for what it is: infrequently appearing good cards in a turtle-paced game.

«Back away» from the game, and from any feelings of over-eagerness. See how many hands you can fold. Make each hand «prove» that it is good enough to play. Such an approach will keep you out of trouble. Will doing this make you miss a good hand when it comes along? Or cause you to overlook it? It's doubtful. You'll still know when you have a good hand. Don't arrive at the game champing at the bit to play.

*«Lying in wait is the secret of success in poker».*

– R. A. Proctor, *Poker Principles and Chance Laws* (1880s)

### **Rule 10: How difficult is it to play tight?**

Is playing tight in poker hard to do? Sitting there all day without playing very many hands? Folding hands hour after hour? Let's put this issue in perspective. We're talking about *free money* here. (We're talking, generally, about low-limit games here.) If you do this (and *keep* doing it), you will often get free money in return. Remember that there are people who are toiling from dawn to dusk in disagreeable jobs for money – digging ditches, doing roadwork in the hot sun, washing dishes in restaurants fourteen hours a day – the worst possible jobs imaginable.

Are *these* things hard to do? All *we're* being asked to do – the great sacrifice we're being asked to make – is to sit in a comfortable card-room

and play tight, doing nothing when we get bad cards. How hard is this in comparison?

So we need to keep this issue in perspective. People do any number of disagreeable things in the workaday world for money, but when it comes to poker, we can't just sit there and fold marginal hands?

**Rule 11: Discipline must be kept up until the end.**

Here is another idea that we sometimes lose sight of. Play like a pro for seven hours, then play like an amateur for the last  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour, and you can undo all the good play you achieved earlier. Your grade? An A+ in four courses and an «F» on the final. You scored high at first, then fell apart – lost it all back.

Don't start out strong, then gradually fall apart as the night wears on. Play a consistent game the whole night through. Remember, we get no points for professional play in the first 90% of the game if we unravel later.

**Rule 12: If you find that playing poker is thrilling, adventurous, and exciting, there's a good chance you may be playing it wrong.**

One little-mentioned aspect of poker is that, when played correctly, it can be slightly boring. Not boring in the usual sense of the word, but in the choice of one's responses. These responses are pretty scripted. You get a certain hand, you do a certain thing. Stray too far outside this predictable «script» and the odds will turn against you. For this reason, if the game is adventurous, chancy, and exciting, you may be playing it wrong. It's when the game has a certain dreary predictability that you are beginning to play it correctly.

Poker is fun; winning at poker can sometimes be rather tedious.

*«In everything the middle course is best; all things in excess bring trouble».*

– Platus

**Rule 13: Think of your poker game like driving a car.**

Driving a car produces a similar «flow» of events as the game of poker, in which you have to find a way to merge with the flow. You've noticed those signs on the highway that say «Speed Limit 65». But do you also notice those other signs, the ones that say: «*Minimum* Speed 45?» This tells us that there *is* a «flow» – and that «in between» is a pretty good place to be. It's a rhythm – where things operate at their best.

And poker *is* similar to driving in traffic. You see other cars move over, so you move over; you notice a certain lane is open, you take it; a bunch of cars move one way as a group, you move the other; a major tangle appears to be forming, you look for a way to navigate around it. You try to pass someone in traffic, they speed up, you back off. A parking spot appears, you move toward it, someone gets there ahead of you, you back off. And so on. It is the drivers who refuse to merge with the flow – who try to «go outside the lines» – who usually have the bad things happen to them.

«Being in tune with what's happening on the court and fitting into the flow of action is far more important than trying to be heroic».

– Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*

**Rule 14: Don't pick the best *hands* to play – pick your spots.**

Look for the right combination of probability, weakness, hesitation (by opponents), body language, position, past tendencies, who is «short-stacked», and your hand's value in the overall scheme of things. Look for all of these things, and *then* play. This is called «picking your spots». Less skilled players simply «wait for a good hand». This is something quite different. The picking-your-spots approach considers *all* things before making a play. It is the one used by successful top players.

**Rule 15: Grab the momentum.**

In a game between highly skilled poker players, there is a certain «momentum» aspect to the game – and an alternating attempt to take control of this momentum. From hand to hand as the game progresses, this momentum is often up for grabs. It's a little like tennis, where one player charges the net while the other is forced to back up. Or perhaps you could compare it to a football team that starts «deep in its own territory» and never seems to get out of this spot, constantly backed up to its own goal line by the opponent.

Such use of momentum by skilled players is used to get (and keep) other players down. This grabbing of the momentum is sometimes called «taking control of the game». (This can happen over longer time spans, too. Player A may grab the momentum for hours, days, perhaps even weeks, then something will change and Player B will take control for a period of time.) To survive in this type of game, if the chance to grab this momentum offers itself, you must take it.

**Rule 16: Poker is a tango.**

Poker is a tango. The good player pushes right up as the other backpedals, and he does so perfectly as the other moves forward or backward. Perfectly done, there is no light in between, no space. This is the mark of the great players – there is no space in between. They are pushed and push absolutely as far as they can go forward in each instance, each case. This is probably true at the top level of all sports and games.

**Rule 17: Navigate around in the game.**

Good players may look like confrontational types to the casual observer – they may give this outward appearance – but in fact, if you watch them for any length of time, you discover that the thing they are really good at is navigating around problems instead of confronting them. «Navigating around» goes with «pick your spots» in the conceptual galaxy of poker ideas – these two are very near one another.

And the player should *think* in these terms too. You should navigate around in the game (especially around dangerous opponents) rather than



thinking in terms of going «up against» them. It's not a «battle of the gladiators» when you sit down at a poker table – a better image is of a boat trying to navigate the shoals carefully in shallow water. Changing your thinking to this approach will put you closer to the true reality of the situation.

Here's another way of phrasing this: One of the great secrets to poker is staying out of trouble.

And this is a secret the pros use. They navigate around the obstacles in the game.

*«I view each tournament as a gigantic minefield that I must navigate my way through without getting blown up. I'm likely to be wounded several times along the way, but as long as none are fatal, I'll get to the other side».*

– Richard Tatalovich,  
United States Poker Championship winner



## Chapter 3

# Making Correct Decisions

### **Rule 18: Take the long view.**

While you'd like to win in the short term in poker (in other words, today), what you really want is to win over the long term. Ideally, you want to end up with a poker history that includes both wins and losses, with the wins dominating.

The worst thing that can befall you in poker is to be winning in today's game using a strategy that fails over the long-term.

*«You are rewarded for correct play in the long run; in the short run, anything can happen».*

– Tom McEvoy, champion poker player

### **Rule 19: The goal of poker is not to win money, it is to play your cards right.**

Many players believe that the goal in poker is to win money. Actually, the goal is to make a series of correct decisions. This is the real goal.

Keep your focus on (his and the rest will follow naturally. Correct play on each card and each hand is your real goal as a poker player.

*«Winning isn't your job. Making good decisions is your job».*

– Mike Caro

### **Rule 20: Concentrate on how you are playing, not on whether you are winning.**

The idea of winning money, as we have seen, is a false goal. You can actually be playing quite poorly and be winning quite handily. This is *not* the victory it feels like, however, for eventually this bad play will catch up to you. And while it might be momentarily pleasing to win money, it is disastrous if you are achieving this by playing wrong. (Probably the thing we should hope for is to *lose* when we are playing wrong, for this will steer us toward the correct path.)

Money, as a measure of poker expertise, is quite unreliable. Here is an example. Suppose you are winning \$200 in a poker game. Going by this measure alone, this would mean you've been playing very good poker indeed. But suppose a better player, dealt the same cards as you've been

getting, would be up \$600? Now a different picture emerges. We see by this example that money alone is not a good measure of poker play.

You should go home from a poker game on some nights losing \$250 and be proud of the way you played. And you should go home on other nights a \$300 winner and be disgusted at the way you played.

Be as proud of yourself for playing well with bad cards as you are for playing well and winning. Achieve your sense of satisfaction by this path also. Actually *be* proud of yourself for doing this.

The *process* must always be kept uppermost, because it is what will win you money over the long run. Give yourself a pat on the back every time you make a correct play, not every time you rake in a pot.

### **Rule 21: Make correct decisions (Part II).**

As noted above, it is by making correct decisions that you beat the game. Here's an example. Let's say you make a straight, and then a possible flush appears on the last card (either on the board or in an opponent's up-cards). An opponent who you know only bets when he has a good hand suddenly lights up with joy at this turn of events. He fires in a bet, and you fold. Now let's say this happens again. And again. And again. In fact, let's say it happens six or seven times in a row, and you fold each time. You are beating the game by doing this – even though you're losing. Why? Because you are making correct decisions. A series of correct decisions, carried on long enough, will eventually «turn the tide» in your favor.

All you can ever do in poker is make correct decisions, moment by moment, in each specific situation you find yourself in.

### **Rule 22: Make correct decisions (Part III).**

We have all heard it said of a player, «It just kills him to lose». But have you ever heard it said of a player: «It just kills him to play his cards wrong?» Well, this is the way it should be. Because this is where the money goes – the leak, the fissure in the dike where the money seeps away. Be the player about whom they say: «It just kills him to play his cards wrong».

### **Rule 23: We should want to lose if we play badly.**

There are some times when we are better off failing in life, even if it's more painful at the time: shoplifting, betting a hundred dollars a hand in blackjack, making romantic advances to the boss's wife, and so on. Getting away with these things temporarily would actually lead to worse things for us in the long run. So maybe it's better if we fail at them right away.

We need wrong decisions to have bad consequences. We shouldn't want to be insulated from our mistakes, for they will guide us in the right direction and in the long run this will be to our benefit. Similarly, making mistakes in poker, and then winning by this means, while momentarily pleasing, is very bad in the long run.

### **Rule 24: Playing correctly without being rewarded for it is a concept the player must get used to.**

The player must get used to the idea of playing correctly without being rewarded for it. This will often mean playing correctly while going nowhere, and even losing. You simply do it because you do it. You do it without any expectations.

### **Rule 25: We need to listen to our instincts in poker.**

One possible reason we *don't* listen to them is because the answers we keep getting always seem unfair. It's always «them, them, them» (and «fold, fold, fold» for us). So we often rebel against the answers that our instincts are giving us. Yet if we stop and think, statistically, most of the time it *is* going to be them, them, them.

This is true for a couple of reasons. First, there are more of «them» than us, and second, because the majority of situations won't favor us. After all, you're only one hand out of four or five players as you look around the table. It's more likely that one of these other hands is going to «help» than yours, hence your «read» is simply going to be «no» more often. In fact, you might get ten or twelve «no's» in a row from your read, one after the other – or even three or four «no's» in a row in the *same hand*.

The point is, you're going to hear «no» a lot in the game of poker. The secret is to keep listening to the *correct* answer and acting on it – even if it is not the answer you want to hear. Because it is not about getting the answer you want to hear, it's about continuing to make correct decisions.

### **Rule 26: Rebelling against the read has predictable, bad consequences.**

As we stated above, the problem is not that players' instincts aren't good but that we often don't listen to them (or even rebel against them). Thus, we are not going by what our «read» is telling us.

There are a number of reasons for not listening to this inner voice:

1. «The read is unfair».
2. «The same read seems to be going on forever and never changes».
3. «I get tired of hearing «No» from my read».
4. «I get tired of continually folding based on my read, even if it is accurate and the correct thing to do».
5. «I he read always seems to favor the other guy never me. It always seems to be them, them, them».
6. «Every time I make a read, it seems to come up with this: Other-Guy-Strong, Mc-Weak, and I have to fold».

The thing is, you *are* beating the game (in the long run) if you go by your read and your read is accurate – even if it involves a lot of folding.

One of the secrets of poker is this ability to hear the word «No» over and over – without it bothering you. You'll hear «Yes» only infrequently, but it will be enough to win.

### **Rule 27: Get a bigger bankroll.**

Failure to have a big enough bankroll is a common failing in poker. It can lead to all types of adverse effects: the feeling that every hand is a «life or death matter», overly-emotional play, temper tantrums, mood swings and so on. Having an adequate bankroll allows us to suffer the natural swings of fortune that take place, and it lets us do so with composure and equanimity. One ought to try to get one's poker bankroll to a large enough amount so that the outcome of any one hand (or session) has no effect whatsoever on one's play.

Without an adequate bankroll, we tend to inject emotion into these fluctuations that occur. Having our heart and soul riding on each hand magnifies them and makes them larger in our mind than they should be. Take away this emotion, and things once again resume their natural place in the bigger picture.

*«Don't fly too high above your bankroll, for that is when you'll live and die with each pot. or at least with each session. Obviously, when each bad beat has so much significance to your financial well-being, you can't help but be affected».*

– Grant Strauss, quoted in *Card Player* magazine

### **Rule 28: Luck, good or bad, comes in bunches.**

Any experienced, long-time gambler is familiar with the «bunching» of luck. Play the same cards one night and they will be losers, while another night they will be winners.

Both good cards and bad *do* come in bunches. It's important to realize the «typicality» of this. It is *within* the bounds of probability that this occurs, not outside of it. Many players think of it as an aberration – that such occurrences are outside the framework of probability. They are not. They are *within* the framework of it. (There *is* a point where they do become an aberration, but this point is much farther along than most people would guess.)



## Chapter 4

# Premium Hands and Other Conundrums

### Rule 29: The value of starter cards.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of «starting cards» in poker. To the casual observer (or novice), this might not seem to be the case. Indeed, why would it? After all (they might think), a good hand could develop at any point *during* the hand, couldn't it? On the fifth card, or the sixth or seventh, and so on. So this might not seem logical. (And this is – needless to say – how bad players play the game.) Furthermore, they might argue, how can a hand «develop» if you don't give it a chance? How can it, if you keep cutting it off *early*, and folding, before it can develop into anything?

The explanation is this: If you operate without regard to your starter cards, you will often be «running behind» your opponents. For example, a player who has four low cards (in a low-ball game, say) is «ahead» of you if you only have *three* low cards. Over hundreds of hands dealt, his «better start» will soon manifest itself and make him victorious.

This law can be generally applied throughout life. Go into situations where advantages lean in your direction *at the beginning*. While this is still no guarantee of success, it will mean that you are not being penalized from the very *start* of the process fighting an uphill battle from day one.

### Rule 30: Staying more frequently in a poker game offers you greatly increased chances of winning – here's why it's a mistake.

One or two players every hand are likely to have a *great* hand. If you are going to play almost every hand, then you're going to have to beat a great hand *every* hand. If you think about it this way, it becomes obvious why it is foolhardy to «stay» on a large number of hands. The challenge you're giving yourself is insurmountable – trying to beat a great hand every time.

*«The biggest mistake weak players make is playing too many hands».*

– Avery Cardoza. *How to Play Winning Poker*



*«All things being equal each player will spend around 80% of his time without the ball».*

– Phil Jackson, basketball coach, *Sacred Hoops*

### Rule 31: Once you commit to a hand, you should play it strong.

From this rule we can see the problem that occurs if you start a hand with marginal cards. You've already got yourself in the middle of a conundrum, forced to play a bad hand forcefully and aggressively.

**Rule 32: You may as well bet if you intend to call.**

It is a generally accepted idea that if your hand is good enough to call a bet with, then you are better off betting. (And this is a situation that occurs very often in poker.) The thinking is that if you're going to call a bet, you might as well be the one driving the betting. It's going to cost the same amount anyway – at least this way you're in the driver's seat. There is an intimidation aspect that also accrues from doing this – whether in the individual hand, or cumulatively, over many hands – a general aura of aggressiveness.

**Rule 33: Don't go on the offense against a large field of players with a weak hand.**

Here's a poker secret: When you *don't* have good cards, someone else usually does. Don't go into the aggressive/offense mode in a situation where you're weak and they are a mystery. Remember, the good cards have to be *somewhere*.

**Rule 34: In the best players there is a streak of simple common sense.**

«Do I have the best hand? Then I raise».

«Am I beat? Then I'm out».

If we put things in these terms, the game seems pretty simple. Strategies are somewhat different than this at higher, more sophisticated levels of play, of course, but for most players this common sense aspect is something to keep in mind. It is possible for a player to get lost in convoluted scheming and overlook this simple truth – that a good portion of the game is simply common sense. And this trait is also present in the great players. In fact, the vast majority of plays in the game of poker are not fancy, sophisticated plays, but obvious ones. But these have to be done right too.

**Rule 35: If you're doing a lot of folding, won't this look odd to the other players? Won't they think: «Boy, he sure is a tight player?»**

You might sometimes get the feeling that all this folding you're doing looks pretty obvious to the other players. You can almost feel their watchful eyes on you – and hear them thinking: «Boy, he sure plays tight. He must be waiting for the perfect hand to come along».

If you took a survey, though, you would find this is not what most low-level opponents are thinking at all. Here is what they are really thinking when you are doing a lot of folding:

1. Nothing.
2. You're a player who must be getting pretty lousy cards.

3. Great – you're out of the way – let the action commence without you.
4. They really don't care (or even notice). Frankly, there are enough other opponents in the game to worry about, and the fewer opponents, the better.
5. You must be a fairly «tight» player – maybe a «rock».

Notice that the thing you were most worried about came in last – which it probably would in a real survey.

**Rule 36: One of the main ways we improve in the game of poker is by getting certain lessons pounded into our heads.**

Books, seminars, and other kinds of advice are all well and good, but nothing instructs us in certain lessons like experience. Lessons learned through painful experience tend to form a deep groove in the brain.

*«You can close your eyes to reality, but not to memory».*

– Stanislaw J. Lec



*«When you lose, don't lose the lesson».*

– Folk saying

Nevertheless, it's good to keep Rule 37 in mind:

**Rule 37: It's a mistake to use experience alone to determine what good poker play is.**

Long-time experience can be deceptive. Our memory can be selective. It can mislead us, overemphasizing some things that occurred and underemphasizing others. A big win may shine brightly in our memory, yet if looked at closer, it might not be backed up by good play. Always make sure you are playing right *first*, and *then* get a lot of experience at it.

Don't do it in reverse. Don't reference your many years of experience as proof that you must be playing right. This kind of self-referential argument is capable of containing numerous errors.

Similar card situations occur again and again, thousands of times. And some players have been playing them wrong – for years. Worse, such a player often learns to do so expertly! In fact, many of them become excellent players, amazingly adept at «working around» their own flaws and weaknesses. They become experts at starting out with their own self-imposed handicaps and overcoming them. They are like track stars who become very proficient at finding ever newer and more innovative ways to get over the hurdles that they themselves have put in their own way.



**Rule 38: Since poker is a game of positioning oneself to win (but with no guarantee of winning), there are going to be times when doing exactly the right thing leads to losses.**

There aren't many sports or games where you can have a lifetime of experience, make every play exactly right, and lose. But poker is one of them. This tells us something it tells us not to approach it like other games.

This is a difficult concept for some players to understand. They ask. «What am I doing wrong?» And if the answer is «Nothing», it leaves no rational explanation. Yet this situation is common in poker. Coolness must prevail. Clinical detachment and composure need to be embraced.

**Rule 39: When we are playing well but getting «burned», and we simply ignore this and play on, we are violating one of the deepest instincts of mankind.**

Avoidance of pain is one of the hard-wired parts of the human brain. It is organic, a built-in response. Everything we have ever learned suggests «avoidance» (or change of our behavior) in such situations. We almost have to go against every fiber of our being to continue doing a thing that we know is right but that is giving us negative feedback. Every impulse is telling us we must be on the wrong track, since the strategy we're using keeps losing. Overcoming this instinct and forging on in *spite* of it is part of the mastery of the game.

Continuing to make your self do things that will work in the long run but that aren't working in the short run is one of the hardest lessons of poker. To push on through this- despite the evidence that is right in front of our eyes – is a necessary phase in the education of a poker player.

**Rule 40: Don't create a false memory.**

When following correct poker strategy, don't make a special note of the times it fails, yet dismiss it from your mind when it succeeds.

Many players tend to give inordinate weight to the times when a strategy fails. It's human nature. This situation occurs when we get a good hand, bet it hard, then watch as it fizzles out and loses. Statistically, such a play may be successful 60% of the time and unsuccessful the other 40%, but in our memory we arrange it so the failed times stick out more. We put a star by these times, underline them, and remember them «out of proportion» to their actual importance. Doing this can distort our future play and make us back off from correct strategy. It is for this reason we must give *equal* weight to wins and losses and try to see things objectively.

**Rule 41: Success forms a deep groove in the pleasure center of the brain.**

There is no doubt that when something turns out well – even if the steps leading up to it were wrong – it forms a groove of pleasure in the brain, simply from having been successful. It may even do this in the face of logic. For instance, let's say you once won a poker tournament after staying up all night. You entered the tournament very tired, nearly exhausted, hardly able

to keep your eyes open. But then you went on to win the tournament. Ever since then, you've noticed a slight pull in yourself to enter tournaments when you were tired. The moral of the story: The brain is paying attention when these sorts of things happen.

Or a certain *hand* can have a similar effect – playing a marginal hand and winning a big pot with it, for instance. The temptation may be to look fondly on that hand forever after, and thus you may be more predisposed to playing it – even though it was in fact a bad play. One antidote to this sort of thing, of course, is large amounts of playing time. Through sheer accumulated volume of experience, the errant groove of pleasure is smothered over and ultimately driven from the brain.

«*Losing burned intensely: winning became tepid fast*».

Fredrick Barthelme – *Bob the Gambler*

#### **Rule 42: Measuring the joy of winning versus the pain of losing.**

Let's take a brief look at the joy-versus-pain aspect of poker. In fact, let's measure the two, one against the other. Exactly how much joy is there in winning a hand versus the pain involved in losing it?

The answer is somewhat surprising. We often feel *moderately* good when our hand wins, but we may feel quite frustrated and angry when it doesn't. In short, the failures often hurt more than the victories feel good. So things may be weighted more on the negative side.

One problem with this: If you win 54% of the time (by making a correct decision), and you lose 46% of the time, your *emotions* can't tell that difference. It's too subtle of a shading – they can't measure it. Emotions tend to think in broad strokes. Since the losses feel more hurtful, our emotions might guess that we're losing, say, 60% of the time when it's actually closer to 50%. They might draw the conclusion that we are playing wrong when we're actually playing right.

The underlying lesson is, again, the need to stay objective. We can't accurately analyze things about our game by the way *we feel*. It's inaccurate.

#### **Rule 43: Bad players often keep track of their wins and losses emotionally.**

Bad players may assign great, triumphant emotions to the wins and lesser emotions to the losses. Or they might do it in reverse, assigning angry, negative emotions to the losses and making no particular note of the times they win. Here again, we can see the importance of approaching things in an objective, level-headed manner.

«*What appealed to me about Zen was its emphasis on clearing the mind*».

– Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*

#### **Rule 44: The perils of reinforcing negative events.**

If I see you stumble and fall in a parking lot, and I rush over to you and give you a \$100 bill, and a few days later I see you fall again and I rush over to you a second time and give you another \$100 bill, and I do this a third time, a fourth, and a fifth, pretty soon you're going to be falling down all over the place. This is the problem with negative reinforcement. A repeated stimulus encourages more of the same behavior. Wrong lessons are reinforced. This phenomenon also applies to bad players making bad plays in poker and winning with them. Marginal, long-shot plays are intermittently rewarded by dragging in big pots. This is behavior that is going to have to be *unlearned* in the future.

**Rule 45: Different kinds of reinforcement affect our game differently.**

However cool, detached, and objective we may think we are, the ways we get rewarded do influence our game. They can't help but do so.

If you make a miracle long-shot draw in the game, and everyone at the table shakes their head in awe and congratulates you, saying admiringly, «Wow, how does he do it?», do you feel a special glow inside? If so, you may be silently reinforcing some erroneous decision-making – don't let this cause you to do some things at a higher rate of frequency than you should be doing.

If we play tight, aggressive poker for three straight months, as another example, and suffer a long losing streak, but then we switch to playing brashly and recklessly for two or three weeks and pile up a big win, it's hard to help but adjust our game slightly in that direction. This happens even though we know, logically, that the former scenario was actually a better one for us. We are human, and we cannot keep this reinforcement aspect totally offstage. A series of wrong lessons that get rewarded begin to interlock together and influence us – until greater experience down the road informs us to unlock them once again.

**Rule 46: Each day is a new day. Don't overcorrect.**

That weird rut you were in during yesterday's game? It's in the past. Dismiss it from your mind. Don't overcorrect your poker strategy based on what happened then. Don't try to rebuild your game from the ground up based on something that happened in a given session. Start over again, fresh – today is a new day. Unless you really learned some eye-opening new truth, or profound insight, don't make any hard-and-fast rules based on a single instance or session.



## Chapter 5 Betting and Control

*«Whenever you engage in warfare with enemies, you should strive to be the first to occupy advantageous terrain, so that you can win in battle».*

– Sun Tzu



*«Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die».*

– Anonymous

### **Rule 47: You're never going to win at poker by calling.**

Why are some players hesitant to bet when they have a good hand why do they just «call», passively, and check along instead? There are several reasons for this: an innate cautiousness and timidity; a feeling that attention will be turned (o them, perhaps, and other players will be able to «read» them (thus «revealing» their hand); a hope that maybe someone else will bet for them; a feeling that they are sticking their neck out, and that bad things happen whenever you do this (you get your wrist slapped); and so on. The player must get over this hurdle – must push himself beyond it.

Bet. Raise. Practice raising. If you have a good hand, *do* it. If you aren't very good at it, then do *more* of it. (Always with a good hand, however.)

*«Sever call; either raise or put down».*

– Ernest Hemingway to Lillian Ross



*«Fortune favors the bold».*

– Terence

### **Rule 48: Think of the raiser as your friend.**

It makes some players nervous when someone else raises. Try a different approach: Try seeing the raiser as your friend. Remember that if he raises and you re-raise him back, you have worked together to put a lot of pressure on the rest of the field. See the raiser as a cannon firing alongside yours.

### **Rule 49: Stay on your game.**

This might be one of the most important rules in poker. (At least, an argument could be made that it is.) What does it mean? It means: Stay on it at 3:00 P.M. It means stay on it at 4:00 A.M. (when you can barely keep your eyes open). Stay on it at dawn. Stay on it when seated for hours next to a loud obnoxious player. Stay on it while sitting next to a loud-voiced drunk who is getting lucky every hand. Stay on it despite a series of bad beats, one after another. Stay on it despite having great success and a mountain of chips. Stay on it whether you're up \$450 or down \$650. Stay on it despite failure and despite success. *Stilt* stay on it.

*«Perseverance on an even keel is what gets the money».*

– Steve Badger, professional poker player

### **Rule 50: Avoid being carried away by the «momentum».**

Re-evaluate your cards at each new moment of the game. Don't be drawn off your game by external forces – table-talk, dares, challenges, distractions, emotions, or even the seductive wash of chips going into and out of the pot. (Don't be drawn in emotionally by the excitement and lure of a big-money pot, either. Monster pots develop because other players have something. When the betting gets heavy, re-evaluate your cards in light of this fact.) Avoid getting carried away by the various kinds of «momentum» in the game. The rhythm of the game has a way of drawing us into hands we ordinarily wouldn't be in. The game always starts out neutral, of course – sane, logical, and objective – but it then becomes an emotional whirlpool. There is a strong undertow that seeks to pull us in, and this undertow can draw us off our game if we are not vigilant. It takes discipline to operate independently of all this activity.

### **Rule 51: If there is a lot of betting going on, from many different directions, there's a good chance that you're beat. Consider folding.**

Expert players make money by making good lay-downs. The money they save in spots like this is money that adds up over time. (And these sorts of situations are, indeed, one of the places where «giving it back» happens.) The profit accumulated by lesser players – painstakingly won through correct play, perhaps – often goes back across the table to their opponents in situations like this. If we are earning an average of just one big bet an hour, it's easy to see how all the profit from a day's play can melt away in a situation like this.

### **Rule 52: Play each hand individually; play each card and decision-point in each hand deliberately.**

Play deliberately at each step. Concentrate on making the correct play every card, every street, and every hand. Doing this helps short-circuit the «momentum» trap that sometimes occurs (the momentums of the game itself, as well as emotional momentums – anger, tilt, confidence, pride, and ego). Make each decision carefully, but not «panic-carefully».

### **Rule 53: Fine-tuning your game – it's in the details.**

It's relatively easy for any intelligent person, in any area of life, using broad general principles to make decisions that are fairly close to optimum. Any improvements that take place after this point, however – any subsequent fine-tuning that occurs – must come in individual decisions, rather than generalities. In other words, to move up to the next level, each *individual* decision has to be looked at and considered on a case-by-case basis. This is generally the case as we move up the ladder of expertise in any field, and it is also true in poker. It means breaking the game down into individual hands and looking at them. A well-informed overview is no longer enough.

### **Rule 54: Retain your ability to control events at all times, in increments.**

Control is control. Very few people seem to know this simple truth. Here is an example. You are driving down a road and a youthful driver pulls out up ahead, suddenly and without warning, very fast from a side road. You can tell by his expression behind the wheel that he knows he is about to be hit (by you), but it is too late because his momentum is now so strong that he has already committed. The rule here is to keep *control* of the joystick at all times. This joystick of control means to be able to go forward or back at *all* times and on a moment's notice. This is what control means (And it is what the pros do.) There isn't any excuse like «I was already committed» or «I had developed my own momentum by that point and couldn't stop».

The true professional in anything has control at each increment. He can «turn on a dime», switch gears, go forward, or backward on a moment's notice. Like a good tennis player, he becomes so good at these quick adjustments that he performs them seamlessly. To phrase it another way: There is more to his control panel than «Stop» and «Start». There is a whole incremental range in between.

Control means the ability to think at each *new* moment. (Don't get caught up in *any* momentum – whether yours or others.) This is why good poker players can bet, raise, and fold, all in the same betting round. They have control of the joystick. It is one of the things that distinguishes them from the average player. They have more than just a «Stop» and «Start» button. They have control of the joystick at all the points, by increments.

*«Sometime, look at a novice workman or a bad workman and compare his expression with that of a craftsman whose work you know is excellent and you'll see the difference. The craftsman isn't ever following a single line of instruction. He's making decisions as he goes along... He isn't following any set of written instructions because the nature of the material at hand determines his thoughts and motions, which simultaneously change the nature of the material at hand».*

– Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

**Rule 55: When you have an excellent starting hand, don't just blast away with bets from that point on until the end of the hand without regard to what happens next.**

This is an approach some players take. They wait until they get a high-percentage starting hand, then they bet away from that point on, without regard to anything else that happens after that in the hand. They take off like a rocket and never look back. While this approach may make money over the long run – since you are always starting with good hands – the fact is, you will make *more* money by playing the rest of the hand correctly, too. There are other decisions to be made as the hand progresses – not just correct decisions at the start.

One other thing worth mentioning: Experts tell us that the optimum style of poker play is one that is «selectively aggressive» – this is as opposed to being «*blindly* aggressive». One problem with the latter is that it becomes quite predictable in a hurry – it becomes a pat-tern that good opponents notice and exploit. («He always raises all the way to the end – hmm».) Then they simply let him bet away and hang himself, trapping him. *Blind* aggression is not good. A determination to «just» be aggressive is not sufficient in poker – more is called for than this.

**Rule 56: If you are betting vigorously and you run into a wall, and it seems like a wall, feels like a wall, has all the qualities of a wall, and has other stubborn wall-like characteristics – then it is probably a wall.**

For some reason, even the best of us have trouble at times realizing that our poker hand, good as it is, may not be as good as the other fellow's, the one who keeps raising us back and who can't get his money into the pot fast enough. (This probably says something about the human capacity for self-deception.)

Be aggressive in poker, but pay close attention to how much resistance you're getting. If you're getting a lot, then it may be time to withdraw to fight another day.

One common mistake of less experienced players is to push forward, and when they hit resistance, to push some more, encounter more resistance, and keep on pushing – all the while failing to see the outlines of what is going on. It's difficult to sell them on the idea that there may be a wall there. Pride, ego, and stubbornness become involved. Noticing things like this, swallowing one's pride and folding, is one of the things that distinguishes better players from the average player.

**Rule 57: Keep opponents on the "guessing" borderline.**

It's a well known poker truism that bets that hurt us the most are ones that put us «on the fence», unable to decide which way we should go. Perhaps the best way to explain this statement is to look at its opposite. Bets hurt *least* when a player's course of action is clear. For instance, if a player bets into you and you have a terrible hand, you fold. Very simple. You made the correct decision. His bet didn't hurt you at all. But if his bet catches you with

a borderline «can't decide» hand, that is the time you are in danger of making the most costly mistake.

Expert poker players love to put other players on that «fence»-right on that borderline of decision-making. They *love* the «fence» – having other players teetering on top of it, not sure which way to go. For that is when the opponent will make the largest number of mistakes. However, here's one note of caution: Don't think players are always on it, every time you make a bet. Once they are committed to a hand, now these opponents may be *off the fence* again, and your bets may not be hurting as much as you may think.

**Rule 58: Getting opponents to the point where they are guessing is one thing – maneuvering them into consistently guessing *wrong* is the real triumph.**

This is the true triumph – the true Holy Grail – to put players on the fence and maneuver them into going the wrong way. This is a very subtle, complex mechanism. It means picking up the rhythm of other players when they are strong, yet getting them to fold, yet, at the same time, getting them to stay to the end when they are weak. Maneuvering players onto this «wrong rhythm» takes a true master.

*«In battle, it is not sufficient for a commander to avoid error; he needs actively to cause his enemy to make mistakes».*

– Jon Latimer. *Deception in War*

**Rule 59: Be mindful of your opponents' changing view of you.**

Know what hands *you've* been showing.

If you stayed on a hand with bad cards and won, keep in mind where this puts your opponents' view of you. Or if you have a «lock» (or unbeatable) hand after that, and you win, and show it, keep in mind the changing effect this has on them. Be conscious of their changing short-term view of you as well as of their long-term view of your game.

**Rule 60: Once you can outplay someone and they realize It, it is time to be careful.**

From that point on, they may play tighter and sometimes may not even bet their good hands. This can be a dangerous point. Beware of your own expertise. You can have them so scared that they don't bet even when they have you beat. At this point, you may start betting right into them.

This rule is somewhat similar to Rule 61:

**Rule 61: When you push hard – that is, when you're representing a really strong hand – be sensitive to players who are still staying.**

You're looking strong, aggressive, and menacing, but some of your opponents are still staying. They're not getting out. This tells you something about their hand – something bad.



**Rule 62: If you call raises with a weak hand, you may as well be betting with a weak hand.**

A lot of players would never think of raising with a weak hand, but they have no qualms at all about *calling* raises with a weak hand - even though it amounts to the same thing. Common sense in poker should always be employed.

**Rule 63: A raise or re-raise is often the best use of one betting unit.**

Players will willingly put in one bet to call – unthinkingly, automatically, and forever. They’ll do it all day and all night without a thought, but they won’t put in one *more* bet to raise, which is often a much better use of one betting unit. Look at the things a raise does: It makes everybody stop and re-evaluate their cards, sets players back on their heels, causes some players to «back off» or even fold, instills fear, gets more money in the pot, perhaps induces someone to make a mistake, and changes the whole dynamics of the hand.

Look at the «bang for the buck» you’re getting for this one extra betting unit! The moral of the story is: Use your chips where they will do the most good. Five or six passive, grudging \$10 calls often do not have as much bang for the buck as *one* \$10 raise.

**Rule 64: Don’t bet all the way in a hand, then Tail to call the last bet.**

This is a mistake we sometimes see (even among more experienced players), and it’s easy to do if you’re not paying attention. This is how it happens. You’re playing along, calling the bets, observing the hand as it progresses, and a final assessment tells you that your cards just aren’t good enough. So you fold, overlooking the fact that the hand was at the end. One more bet and it was over. Obviously, you should have thrown in that last bet. Don’t contribute to the pot all the way, then drop out with one bet to go. If you’ve gone all the way – go the final step. (Assuming, of course, you’ve got any kind of hand at all.) Surprising things sometimes happen.

**Rule 65: Don’t oversell what a loose player you are.**

Selling the idea that you’re a loose, gamble-it-up player is not a bad idea. (It can make you money on the back end when you do tighten up, and it can also lead to bigger pots when you do have a winning hand.) But don’t overdo it.

Don’t start throwing so much money around that you’ll never recoup that amount of money on future hands. In short, give the impression that you have a reckless disregard for money, but don’t be such a good actor that you convince yourself. Don’t start having so much fun that you *become* Daddy Warbucks.

**Rule 66: Some losses are inevitably incurred in the process of proving you can’t be pushed around.**

These may feel like unnecessary losses – that you are simply throwing money away but there is more to it than that. It is occasionally necessary to

show you can't be pushed around, and won't be «run over». (In poker terms, someone who is automatically going to fold in the face of bets. And opponents *will* put you to this test, too.) So this thankless tossing of money into the pot is occasionally necessary, and while it *may feel* like bad poker play, it is not quite as dumb as it feels.



## Chapter 6 Bluffing

Bluffing, whether attempted in poker or «real life», is a combination of timing, rhythm, and a third element that might be called a «history». In hold'em, for instance, even though you may have «nothing» at the end of the hand, if you've been betting all the way up to now (a «history») the bluff may be successful. Or if you have a «history» of playing tight and never bluffing, for instance, or of only playing very good cards, the bluff may be successful – and so on.

### **Rule 67: Timing is crucial in bluffing.**

World-class poker player Bobby Baldwin once called bluffing a «small miracle of psychological read-out, and precision timing».

In his book, *Tales Out of Tulsa*, Baldwin makes the following observation: «Is the timing right? Acting too quickly labels your intention; too slowly suggests that it might be a last-ditch shot. Perfect timing is vital!»

We should also mention that in no-limit games the *amount* of the bet also becomes part of the bluff. Baldwin adds, «Too large an amount wagered can telegraph your play since a strong hand *wants* a call. Too small ... makes it easier for an opponent to call».

### **Rule 68: Don't show your bluffs.**

In general, it's not a good idea to show your cards when you've bluffed somebody. Doing this not only gives free information about your play and the kinds of cards you are playing, but it can also produce emotions that muddy the waters on future hands.

An example of the latter would be this: You bluff Player X out of a pot by making a bet on the end, and then you turn over your cards to show him that you had absolutely nothing. Now, how are you going to read this player on upcoming hands? Suppose that a few hands later you have a slightly better-than-average hand, and you bet into him, and he raises you? Now: *Why* is he raising you? Because he's mad about the earlier hand? Because this time he's going to give you a dose of your own medicine and try to bluff *you*? Or because this time he's got a really good hand and he's got you trapped with it? Showing him your bluff earlier makes it harder to read him on subsequent hands and identify his motivation.

### **Rule 69: If you're bluffing, you had better act exactly in accordance with the hand you are representing all the way and not hesitate at any point.**

Experienced opponents will notice any deviation at all from how you would play the hand if you really had it. You have to play the hand straight through from *their* point of view – without hesitation. In fact, more than this – without even looking like someone who is trying to *look* like he is doing this. One slip-up in what a person in your situation would do naturally in this situation will give you away. If you're going to bluff, you have to go all the way.

**Rule 70: Against expert players, if you push your money In the pot exactly the same way every time, they often will *still* be able to tell when you have a hand and when you don't.**

You have to make this sameness very much the same in order to fool great players. Approximate sameness won't be enough.

If there is any variation at all in the two different situations, good players will be able to spot it. Any slight variation in behavior, however brief or fleeting, is enough to tell an experienced player what play to make.

**Rule 71: «After-bluff» moves are important too.**

We noted above that in bluffing, you often have to be prepared to go «all the way». In fact (and this is something you rarely see mentioned), you have to go *more* than all the way. You have to go *beyond* the hand. «After-bluff» behavior is also very important. This includes how you act *after* you rake in a pot that you won from a bluff, because players are watching this too.

You still have to keep selling the idea that you had something. Letting them know (by your body language – expression of relief, etc.) that you were bluffing can cost you money down the road when you need to run the same bluff again. For this reason, revealing the bluff after the hand is almost as bad as revealing it during the hand. (For a good example of excellent «after bluffing» behavior, see the video of John Duthie in the 2000 Poker Million Poker Championship on the Isle of Man.)

**Rule 72: Don't bluff bad players.**

Confine your bluffing to intelligent opponents. The reason is well known: You can't bluff bad players. They don't fold. They are not observant enough, and they will often call with any hand at all. And worst of all, they will often call for *emotional* reasons, such as pride, stubbornness, obstinacy, ego, anger, resentment, or even habit. Don't try to bluff players who are not smart enough to drop out. This is also an example of why paying close attention to the other players in the game is important. You have to know who these players are.

**Rule 73: When bluffing, look away.**

When bluffing, it is helpful to watch an opponent in order to get a sense of his possible strength or weakness. However, it is also advisable not to be *caught* looking at him, because if he notices that you are looking at him, it may change his thinking. On the other hand, if he sees you *not* looking at

him, he may add this indifference of yours into the equation in your favor and fold.

Generally, the most information you can get from looking at a player is what you get up to the point when he notices you and looks back. Then the sound-and-picture goes blank.

**Rule 74: When playing in a game against average opponents, and bluffing, keep all your bets within the same timing range, like a rhythm. This will show that your betting isn't just an idea that suddenly came to you but is in response to a good hand you have held all along.**

When you use the same timing of bets on each card (and the same betting motion), it tics the rhythm together for an opponent. It gives him the reason he is looking for to believe that there is a pattern here – and that he should fold.

There's one other benefit of making your betting appear as a rhythm- If you have a good hand and win, the next time you start this same betting rhythm, opponents may feel a little foolish calling bets, remembering how it came out last time, and will fold. It's a little memory trick – for them.

**Rule 75: Notes on the many-opponent bluff.**

The many-opponent bluff is not particularly advisable, but it can sometimes work if you catch the players who are *last* to act shaking their heads and muttering. Here's why: The first players to act don't think you would bluff into this many players (sometimes known as a «protected pot»). Since they also have to worry about the players still to act behind them, they may fold stronger hands. The next players may be only moderately strong, and they may also fold (fearing the final two). And the final two, as we have seen, may be weak and drop.

And remember, this doesn't have to work every time – just often enough to show a profit.

**Rule 76: When bluffing on the end, keep in mind that you're only doing it to show a profit in the long run.**

Focus your thoughts on the following: «The only thing that matters in this situation is whether this play shows a profit for me over the long run. It doesn't matter what happens now, in this particular hand». Keeping this in the forefront of your mind will give you a certain indifference and detachment, which the opponent may very likely interpret as «not bluffing».

In some cases, successful bluffing is not so much a question of being deceptive, as it is of not really caring about the outcome of the hand.

♣ ♦ On Other Flavors Bluffing You ♥ ♠

**Rule 77: When heads-up at the end against an opponent, players who are not bluffing tend to have a slightly more relaxed, biding-their-time, «is-it-over-yet?» kind of look.**

Players who are not bluffing are usually more relaxed, knowing they are going to win. It's a form of naturalness and ease that is difficult to fake – as if they are just waiting for time to run out so they can drag in the pot (or their half of it).

Those who are bluffing, on the other hand, tend to sit more silently, holding themselves motionless, as if afraid to breathe.

**Rule 78: When somebody bets into you strongly, or raises you, look at them and ask yourself the following question: How serious are they?**

What is their level of commitment? There is a certain «solidity» to a player who really has the goods a kind of wall-like solidity of purpose. It usually has a kind of Mount Rushmore look to it. Look also for smoothness, naturalness, and ease of movement- these are mannerisms that show they are proceeding quite confidently without much fear at all.

Another way of asking the same question might be: «Am I beat?» In fact, most opponents will *tell* you, with their body language, demeanor, and betting, whether you are about to lose (or whether they are «ahead» of you in the hand). But you must *hear* it – and you must be able to act on the answer.

In low-limit games, try to move your poker play in the direction of matching your «folds» to how *certain* your opponents seem to be that they are about to win.



## Chapter 7 Know Thyself

*«The nature of the gambling experience drags our emotions and fears to the surface and forces us to deal with them».*

– Miron Siabinsky, *Zen and the Art of Casino Gaming*



**Rule 79: In the whole poker process, the least stable part is the player.**

The true glitch in the system is the human element. The weak link in the chain is us. Everything else is pretty well scripted and defined. The hands you should (and shouldn't) play, starting cards, stats, rules, probabilities, and best plays are all well known, tagged, and identified. The loose cannon in the process is the player. Therefore this is the part we have to work on and get under control.

**Rule 80: Master your self.**

At the more advanced levels of poker, mastering yourself becomes a key pan of the game. This is because at these levels of play, you already know the game, and so do your opponents, and everybody is approximately equal. The person who masters himself is the one who gains an important edge.

**Rule 81: Know thyself.**

What is your poker play like when you're hungry? How about when you're tired? How about when you're hungry *and* tired? What *kinds* of mistakes do you make at such times? How about when you've been up all night? Or when you're angry? Or when you're flush with money? Or when your day has been going badly? Or when you've had a couple of beers?

Know the ins and outs of your own poker mechanism. In other words, know yourself.

*Poker writer John Vorhaus once wrote, about the game of Omaha high-low;  
«You don't have to know your opponents, but if you don't know yourself  
you're dead meat»*

**Rule 82: Which is the higher psychic payoff – which the warmest, fuzziest feeling – being a respected winner, or a sympathetic victim?**

Maybe you really focused and concentrated and played very well, and as a result you won the admiration and respect of your fellow players. You made a mental note of this. And maybe on other occasions, you played poorly and lost, and you were seen as a sympathetic figure – a tragic victim of fate – and likewise, you made a mental note of how much sympathy you got for this. And suppose you compared these two states, and weighed them and you decided to choose the latter because overall you got more out of it emotionally.

Maybe the richness of the sympathy you received outweighed the looks of admiration and respect that you got as a winner. Maybe you like to beat your opponents, *really* like to beat them, but ultimately you'd like to be *liked* by them. We must continually be on guard against the effects of such emotional states in the game of poker.

### **Rule 83: .Nobody hales you when you're losing.**

Nobody gives you dirty looks when you're losing. Nobody ridicules you, resents you, wishes you ill, or mutters your name under their breath. When you're losing, everyone is quite sympathetic, everyone is your friend, and they all treat you with kindness, consideration, and respect. Don't fall into this trap. Don't walk through this subconscious doorway.

The problem is: losing can be quite comfortable, quite congenial. Often, players just simply flat out feel more comfortable when they're losing. You don't have to put up with the stares, grimaces, and snide comments that those unfortunates do who are dragging in pot after pot. You don't have to put up with looks of irritation from across the table, looks of envy, even hatred. («You've taken my rent money», one look says; «You've taken my paycheck», says another.)

Such slings and arrows can be insidious, all of them exerting a silent pressure on us not to be a winner. And all of this magically goes away when we lose.

This mindset is definitely one to be aware of. It's a hurdle we must overcome in order to become winners.

### **Rule 84: Avoid the «like me/don't like me» trap (continued).**

Some of the emotional dynamics of poker are quite interesting. When you win, fellow players begin to secretly admire and respect you at the same time that they become slightly annoyed and angered with you. Oppositely, when you lose, they become more friendly and sympathetic at the very time that they secretly begin to lose their respect for you. This peculiar four-way street of emotions can set up some strange emotional intersections in the mind.

Indeed, it is possible to be subtly manipulated by elements that occur on this «Like Me/Don't Like Me» spectrum. Such pressures operate on us in every other area of life, so why wouldn't they here as well? Without realizing it, they can start to bend one's behavior in a certain direction. We must be on the lookout for such effects as this.





## Chapter 8

# The Magnetic Appeal and Tempting Allure of Loose, Sloppy Play

One of the frequent downfalls of poker players is a descent into loose, sloppy play. Here are nine common excuses players use to justify or rationalize this type of play:

### **Excuse 1: I'll Wow Them with My Fast Game**

«My loose, sloppy play will create a fast-paced aura of smoke-and-mirrors in which my opponents will get swept up, deceived, and hoodwinked. It will be a dazzling web of excitement, action, fast play, and bigger pots in which they will get caught, mainly because it's unfamiliar territory to them, and once in it, I'm better at operating in it than they are. Therefore it will be to my advantage».

### **Excuse 2: Deliberate Tilt**

«It's been a long, frustrating session. I've been losing all night-treading water, going nowhere. Nothing I've done has worked. So I think I'll *deliberately* go on «tilt» in order to try to make something happen. I'm going to get something jump-started, dammit, even if I have to play bad hands to do it».

### **Excuse 3: The Cold as Ice Motivation**

This is the Frustration/Anger Syndrome. «I'm cold as ice. I can't make a hand, so I'm going to fight it. I'm going to bring in every hand now for a raise, no matter how bad my cards are. They can't push me around – I'll show them – I'll play back, at them».

### **Excuse 4: Action Hero**

«I'm playing this way because I like the «action». I've been playing tight and conservative for hours prior to this, but frankly, it's sooooo boring».

### **Excuse 5: Nothing Better to Do**

«I'm just playing in the game for the hell of it, to pass some time. I'm simply playing for entertainment and no other reason». (This excuse is sometimes known as, «The wife is shopping, and I've got a few hours to kill.»)

### **Excuse 6: Big Gamer**

«I only play well in bigger games, where there is a lot of money on the line. I don't really concentrate when I'm playing in smaller games».

### **Excuse 7: The «Can't Stand Prosperity» Problem**

These are players who, once they get ahead, proceed to give it all back. They are often gregarious, friendly, outgoing types. Whenever they are winning, they become big-hearted, jolly, happy, and the next thing you know, all their chips are gone again.

### **Excuse 8: The Show-Stopper**

«I think I'll wow the crowd – show them my miraculous draw-out abilities – go to the river with a real long-shot hand and try to hit a gutter-ball miracle of some kind. I know this will cost me a lot, but think of how it'll surprise and delight my opponents if I hit it».

### **Excuse 9: Follow the Crowd**

«Well, everybody *else* is doing it. It's late at night, and everybody else is getting slap-happy and reckless and crazy, lowering their starting-hand requirements and splashing money around all over. So that means I can do it too».

*«By inconsistency and frivolity we stray from the Way and show ourselves to be beginners».*

*– Hagakure, by Tsunetomo*

**Rule 85: Sometimes when we get way up in a poker game we forget that it's money and start thinking of it as «just chips». So we start to play a little looser, start fooling around a bit, and soon we notice that we're only up half as much. It's not until the end of the game that we realize it was, after all, real money we were playing for.**

One of the worst feelings in poker is piling up a mountain of chips then losing them all back again. While a player should be willing to put his chips in on good cards at any time (even at the risk of losing them back), you want to avoid frittering your chips away just because you happen to be ahead.

Be *careful* when you get way up. This doesn't mean you have to quit playing. It doesn't mean you have to be paralyzed and «freeze up» and sit on your lead. You can still play – just stick to good hands and solid play.

It helps when playing the game of poker to think of money as chips – and not as real money. But if you get way ahead, at some point it might be a good idea to start thinking of it as money again.

For morale reasons, it is sometimes good to take your profit at such limes. (Expert players don't do this – they continue to play the same way whether winning or losing. The only thing that matters to them is whether the game is still good, and whether they are playing at their best, and have

an advantage in the game. But in the low-limit or recreational world, there is nothing wrong with employing the phrase «Tomorrow is another day». Book the win, and go home.)

**Rule 86: If you've got a lot of money, don't use it for the wrong thing.**

Having a lot of money – from *any* source – whether being «up» in a poker game, hitting a big slot machine win, inheriting money, being successful in business, beating the stock market, or whatever it is, should free you up to play poker the way you *want* to play it. That should mean playing with no fear, proceeding based solely on your «read» of situations – free to bet, raise, and so on, as the situation dictates. It should *not* be used to free you up to «pay people off» more, to raise indiscriminately with bad cards, to «chase» in situations where you ordinarily wouldn't, or to have the luxury of seeing a lot more hands to the river (the last card). If this is how you're using it, this extra money is being poorly used.

**Rule 87: The Novocain Syndrome: losing without feeling any pain.**

Another poor use of money that sometimes occurs is using it to «lose-without-any-pain». This is an obscure, little-known use of money. What happens is that a cushion of cash permits a player to *lose without it hurting*. Now this is an attractive state of affairs for many people, one they've always wanted to experience. (They are used to losing *with* pain.)

For some players, losing with no pain is as close to the feeling of winning as they will ever get. It is just behind winning as a desirable state.

**Rule 88: Don't lower your standards.**

Don't loosen up your standards later on in (lie game (or as the night wears on) to enable you to get involved more and play in more pots. This situation sometimes occurs when a player notices he's been doing a lot of folding while everyone else is getting to play and have all the fun. He begins to feel left out. So he lowers his standards, and this frees him up to play in a lot more hands. Catch yourself when you start doing this. This is when the bad things begin to happen.

**Rule 89: Understand what happens with marginal hands in poker.**

To understand why it is important to limit yourself to playing good hands, it is helpful to visualize what happens statistically when we play the marginal ones. It is not that these hands all lose. Not by a long shot. It's more a case of statistical averages – over a lifetime, we may win \$59,000 with them and lose \$73,000 with them. And these figures, if averaged out, result in some negative figure such as -\$1.19 per hand, every time we play them. It's a long-term gradual seepage, in other words – a «leak» in our game. If we visualize it this way, it might help us in seeing the danger that playing marginal hands represents.

**Rule 90: Don't wait to start playing your best game until you're down \$100.**

The figure used here – \$100 – is not important. The point is that some people's best game only kicks in when they're down – and not a moment sooner. While it's nice to play like an expert when you're down, and important too, do it sooner. Don't make «fighting back tenaciously from being down» your *only* game.

Another name for this might be the «Pro-Am Syndrome» – you play like a pro when you're down and an amateur when you're up. Don't be the sort of player who has to lose in order to win.

A related problem is the «nice guy» syndrome – in which you give the other players a break through sheer casualness of play. You keep yourself roughly at the «even» mark by going back and forth from your «A» game to your «B» game – in the interest of companionship and good fellowship.

As a general rule, don't adjust your game with reference to your chips. In other words, playing well when you have few chips and playing poorly when you have a lot (or vice versa). You're supposed to be playing in relation to your cards and the game, not your chips. Play your best game whether you are ahead or behind. And it should be somewhat close to the same game.

**Rule 91: A player who is good enough to win is also good enough to break even.**

It's a funny thing about talent. It can be used for more than just winning. Or it can be used for less.

Violinist Itzak Perlman could use his talent on the violin to play «Lady of Spain» in a subway station. Microsoft founder Bill Gates could use his computer knowledge to become a very good computer repairman, if he so decided. Pro golfer Tiger Woods could use his talent to play with one arm tied behind his back. (Or to play drunk.)

All these people's talents *could* be used for less than optimum purposes. Make sure some variation of this isn't happening to you. Don't hamper your abilities by deliberately handicapping yourself in some way – in other words, by spotting your opponents some advantage through casualness, playfulness, lack of attention, or indifference.

**Rule 92: Often the decision to «give some back» is made before the game.**

This sounds odd, and there's no way to prove it, but it often seems as if a player decides the outcome in advance, before a poker game even starts. He may «decide» (for instance) to play in a friendly, noncompetitive way this particular session. Or he may «decide» by some state of mind that he brings to the game that he's not particularly going to care about money that day – to play loose, to be carefree and indifferent, to not have the killer instinct, or perhaps even to punish himself for some reason – perhaps to «confirm» what a lousy day he is having, and so on. Be aware of your state of mind going into a game.

**Rule 93: Be aware of your general tendencies on this particular day.**

This is somewhat similar to Rule 92 above. What are your tendencies today? How has your day been going? Have you been impatient? Irritable? Distracted? Feeling a little down-in-the-dumps? Tired? Absent-minded? Easily angered or annoyed? Factor these tendencies that have popped up on this particular day in your life into your poker play. Don't overlook this simple (and easy to overlook) item. Allow a little extra slack in those areas when you sit down to play. (And if they are too much, don't play at all.)

Be especially attuned to the following area: how you feel about having your plans thwarted, or «not getting your way» – having obstacles rise up in your path (like motorists, coworkers, and so on). Have you been acting frustrated or bullheaded in response? If you have, keep in mind that these tendencies in particular carry over poorly to poker.

**Rule 94: When you achieve a win that is significant for the size of the game you're in, consider booking the win.**

A lot of players go by this rule, either consciously or unconsciously. For instance, if you're up \$250 in a \$2-\$4 game, that's a big win for that size game. It's a big win if you're up \$400-\$600 in a \$5-\$10 game against fairly tough opponents. Your win *could* always go higher, of course, if you decided to stick around. But, if the opponents are good, more often than not this is the point where things will begin to fall back from the summit and go back downhill, the other way. There is nothing wrong with booking a win at this point.

**Rule 95: Beware of the «curiosity trap».**

You've got your poker radar set up to guard against sloppy play. You've steeled yourself against this and most of the other well-known traps and pitfalls: tilt, «chasing», anger, revenge, impatience. But how about curiosity? Are your defenses set up for curiosity? Curiosity – such a small thing, so ordinary and innocent that we hardly notice it – can sometimes slip underneath our radar.

It's not a highly visible threat. It's not raging emotions. It's not tilt. Just simple garden-variety curiosity. But it can be just as deadly because it keeps us in too long, staying until the end to see what another player has...

**Rule 96: The reinvesting myth.**

«Reinvesting» is simply another method of losing. The basic idea behind it is that whatever money a player wins, he plows back into the game. We have given it this diplomatic sounding name because that is what the player thinks he is doing. There is a type of player who loses perpetually and continually by this means.

«Reinvesting» isn't limited to poker. It can be used in slot play, blackjack, roulette, sports betting, the stock market, or any form of gambling. Its secret is simple. You always turn your winnings around, whenever you are ahead, and you plow them back in again. Carried far enough, it becomes playing *until* you lose.

*«At one moment I must have had in my hands – gathered there within a space of five minutes about 4,000 gulden. That, of course, was the proper moment for me to have departed (the casino), but there arose in me a strange sensation as of a challenge to Fate – as of a wish to deal her a blow on the cheek, and to put out my tongue at her».*

– Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler*

For the dedicated «reinvestor», there is no such thing as being ahead. He is always «doubling up», «letting it ride», trying for an even bigger score. Any win is simply a lottery ticket to a bigger prize – a chance to see what's behind Door Number Three. Then he either makes a big win, or he loses and goes back to square one again. Because of the nature of doubling up in gambling, it is usually the latter. The wins he makes are generally small islands surrounded by an ocean of losses piled up in the attempt.

*«When you push your luck, sometimes your luck pushes back».*

– Anonymous



## Chapter 9

# Weaving the Web

### **Rule 97: Don't abandon solid play in favor of dramatic play.**

Don't grow your legend, grow your game. This can be another aspect of loose, sloppy play.

Let's ask the following question. Would you rather win money in poker or «grow your legend» among friends and contemporaries? Often, the latter is the honest answer, and if it is, it can drastically affect your play.

For some people, the choice of whether to be a legend or a winner is no contest. They'll take the «legend» answer in a minute the chance to be remembered, talked about, discussed, and even admired. Unfortunately, opportunities do occur in poker in which you can attain «legend» status (pulling out a «miracle» win on the final card, and so on).

Such wins are indeed memorable and dramatic. They stick in everyone's minds. However, they also have a downside: drawing very thin on marginal hands against long odds, failing to pull off the miracle on many other occasions, and so on. But to some players, this is an acceptable tradeoff. («Did you hear what so-and-so did the other night in the poker game?»)

Becoming a legend is different than playing a solid, winning game. Dramatic play is not the same as solid play.

Don't grow your legend. Grow your game.

*«The occurrence of mysteries is always by word of mouth».*

*– Hagakure, by Tsunetomo*

### **Rule 98: Do grow your legend.**

Oddly, an argument can be made for the opposite of Rule 97, above.

For the fact is, you do want your legend to grow a bit. You want to expand it here and there around the edges. Because having a certain «legend» can help you win at certain times in the game.

So your legend does matter. Your opponents begin thinking of you in a certain way. («He's always lucky», or «He makes plays I could never get away with»). And make no mistake, this «aura» *does* win hands by itself – or helps in winning them – if it has enough believers around the table. It can have a measurable influence on the game. World-class poker players know this – that their reputation alone can help them win hands – and they will accept anything that gives them an edge. If their stature as a player can help them, they'll take that too.

## **Rule 99: Weaving a web...**

The great poker player doesn't just play the game. He spins a web. He weaves a story. It is a mystical netting, made of talk and image; seeming strength and apparent casualness; hopes, fears, and paranoia; past successes, and maybe a dash of down-home storytelling – with accompanying gestures – from the way he puts his chips into the pot to the clothes he wears. It's a web that other players get drawn into and caught up in. He is a master self-dramatist, but – and this is important – he does all this without seeming to. He spins a web. This web might be spun in a hundred different ways: by making a miracle draw-out on a key hand, by relying on other people's tales of his past prowess, by his imposing stature at the table, by his coolness, wit, or other forms of behavior, by his win record, or even by his quietness and solemnity.

One definition of this web might be the following: anything that keeps you from realizing that he is dealt the same number of cards as you are – that he puts his pants on one leg at a time, that he has all the same problems in the game as you do. Anything that keeps your mind off this basic fact.

What he really does is spin a tale that makes you relinquish your *point of view* – until the point of view relocates into *him*. This isn't obvious, usually. It's not like in the movies. It isn't the fast-talking riverboat gambler who dazzles the townsfolk with fast-paced patter and winds up with all the money in the end. No, in real life, it doesn't happen like that. It's more subtle. It's a thin web, very delicate, almost invisible. (In fact, that's the idea – to make it invisible.) The web is made up of small bits and pieces. A dropped comment here and there. A memory alluded to. A legendary hand remembered. Or it could be a story told by some third person about this individual. A group belief that somehow he «lucks out» more often than other players, perhaps. That he somehow gets better cards maybe, or is able to do more with them than other mere mortals, and is able to effortlessly get to the end of the hand with them -avoiding the problems all the rest of us face. It's a «legend», an aura built of stories and jokes, insinuations and rumors, allusions and gossip. It might be his clothes. It might be his hat, his jewelry, his attitude, his drawl, the way he carries himself, his self-assurance, or a certain gait to his walk. It involves everything about him, right down to his clothes, stories, friends, and maybe even the stuff lying scattered around his hotel room.

He spins a web.

It's *hype*, is what it is. it's self-promotion and legend-building – a demeanor that settles over certain players. And gradually, through all of this – the conversation and game situations and yams and the rest of it all pulled together, he begins to locate the «point of view» in himself. Suddenly, he has the podium. This is the point to watch out for and beware. For when this happens, you've been dazzled you've had gold dust thrown in your eyes. He begins to tell *his* story, and you hardly even notice that your story is quietly moving offstage. His story turns out to be one that *you* are inside of, instead of the other way around. It is for this reason that Doyle Brunson is not in



your game; you're in *his* game. Or that Amarillo Slim is not in your game, you're in his game. In some invisible way, the podium has shifted to them. How to defend against this? Just play the game. Ignore the hype, large and small, obvious and subtle, visible and invisible, which is promoted by this subtle form of story-telling. Your job is to *not* relinquish your own point of view.

So the good player spins a web, and the even better player spins a *bigger* web, with a bigger legend, and the lesser player abandons his web completely. He watches with awe and curiosity and wonder and he gets drawn into it and, finally, parts with his money.

The whole thing is a trick; don't fall for it.

Proof that all of the above is true? Its opposite; the bogus version of it, the fake version, the counterfeit version...

### **Rule 100: Don't try to make yourself into a better poker player through talk.**

We've all seen this type of player too. He's the other side of the coin. He has sensed the above equation, sniffed it out – he's sensed the «legend-building» aspect of it, and has decided to try it for himself. But like everything else he docs, he gets it wrong. He tries to do it in reverse, tries to wag the whole dog with the tail. It's pretty much of a toss-up whether his constant jabbering about his great poker prowess is meant to convince us or himself.

These are often the players who are too lazy to do the real work of the game. Instead, they decide to take the easier route of «talking a good game». And it *is* easier, too. They try to give themselves a legendary «spin» through various verbal commentaries of one kind or another – comments that they toss off into conversation or casual remarks they drop here and there. The good players see right through this, of course, for like all other things in life, there is a qualitative difference between the true thing and the cheap imitation.

*«Grand claims are difficult to live up to».*

*– The Confucian Analects*

### **Rule 101: Deny your opponent access to his unconscious.**

Here's an interesting rule. An opponent's unconscious mind will often set him right – his instincts will set him on the right track. So you try to keep him off that. You do this by operating in such a way as to keep his conversation (and play) on a conscious level. This may be part of what spinning the web is for: keeping the opponent on this conscious level. For if a player is able to clear his mind (and have clear access to his instincts, and his unconscious), he may start making the right decisions. But if he has to think everything through, consciously step by step, he may start to guess wrong. (This is also a comment, no doubt, on the dangers of trying to play the game solely with your conscious mind.)

Keeping a player on a conscious level is similar (strangely enough) to keeping him distracted. Ask him if he wants coffee. Does he want a second cup? Does he want sugar with that, or creamer? What's the weather like? Did anyone shuffle? How's the wife? Did anyone cut the cards? Discuss how he played his last hand. Such verbal tricks can be used to keep a player on a shallow level of thinking.

All of this is probably another way of saying that there *is* a necessary subconscious aspect to the game of poker – an instinctive level. We can sometimes see this from the stunted game of players who try to play *too consciously*, deliberating at each lumbering decision. It's too cumbersome, like trying to describe tennis while you are playing it. (It can simply be inaccurate, too – the kind of «over-thinking» that turns into second-guessing.) We do have to tap into our instincts and into the subconscious somewhat in order to play the game. If we play too consciously, it's like trying to keep up with an ongoing rush of events with an old, very slow computer.

*«The Zen masters believed that intuition was a more direct way of reaching the truth than reflection».*

– Chuck Norris, *The Secret Power Within*



*«When the opponent expands, I contract; and when he contracts, I expand. And when there is an opportunity, I do not hit, it hits all by itself».*

– Bruce Lee

## **Instinct and Intuition in Poker**

The place occupied by instinct and intuition in poker is a hard-to-define, sometimes controversial subject.

But intuition is not mysticism. It is not ESP, or Uri Geller, or Miss Cleo of the Psychic Hotline. It's made up of past experience and a whole range of incoming signals. To not pay some measure of attention to it is an error in play.

This is not to say that intuition doesn't have its shortcomings. It *can* be the doorway into some bad habits if it's not kept in perspective.

It might not be as bad as some other psychic stereotypes, but it can be. A poor player can be seduced into taking this up as a deliberate pastime {and often getting reinforcement from it, from his winning hands). While instinct should be listened to, an underlying foundation in a conscious, solid game is always necessary. But there are a lot of players out there who don't hear (or listen to) this «inner voice» at all. We've all seen them, throwing in bet after bet as they say, «I know I'm beat». They're not listening to their inner voice. Intuition has a place in poker. You don't often see it recommended by poker writers, however, probably because of its ease-of-abuse.

## **Rule 102: Detachment helps us avoid the web that opponents spin.**

Let's say that you work in an office, and a friend of yours comes to you asking for your help. You're very busy, so you ask your secretary if she will intervene personally on his behalf to assist him. She responds rather indifferently, simply writing a phone number on a piece of paper and telling you, «Here, have him call this number». Angered, you say, «But he's a close friend of mine. I wanted a little more help for him than your just giving him a phone number to call». Still angry, you respond by returning to your office, crumpling up the paper with the phone number on it, and throwing it on the floor. Every time you see it laying there, for the rest of the day, it's a reminder of the anger you felt. It's like a little physical balled-up bit of anger lying there on the floor. A week goes by. Now you happen to come across this crumpled-up piece of paper again, still lying there, but all the anger has now leaked out of it. The incident is long forgotten, and now it simply looks like a crumpled-up piece of paper. It is neutral now. There's no anger attached to it anymore.

In a similar way, when we attach emotions to various things in poker play, we attach them to specific things – specific hands, specific people, bad runs of luck, other players' good runs of luck, and so on, just like the ball-of-paper. We attach, glue-like, this negative blob of our energy, anger, envy, resentment, indignation – but in so doing we create it into being, and unwittingly give it a larger reality than it deserves – one that doesn't really exist and one that is usually out-of-proportion in significance.

When we do this we give opponents power over us. We put power *into* them by doing this. We create it into them, just as we created it into the crumpled up paper. We create *their* fable, their myth, their legend (if only briefly), their power to defeat us – we inject life into it.



## Chapter 10

# Body Language and the Poker Face

*«How little do they see what is, who frame their hasty judgments upon that which seems».*

– Robert Southey

Body language, in poker, refers to the way people act and look during certain game situations. Expert players become sensitive to these signs and very good at reading them. The term «tells» is used to refer to the various signals and mannerisms coming from a player that «give away» his position in the game, or his cards.

Tells exist in everyday life, too, and in fact are quite common. They are all around us, and we are all familiar with them. For instance, we all know that sheepish «caught with his hand in the cookie jar» look when we see it on someone. We all recognize the «resigned to my fate» look, or the «cat that ate the canary» look. We know the «It's not my fault» shrug, and the «I don't need this» look, and the «pretending to be nice, but actually inwardly angry» look. We've all seen the «child-looking-up-at-a-parent-and-asking-him-a-question» look and the «grandmother bending over and scolding a child» look – and so on.

These (and hundreds of others like them) are tells that take place among the general population on a daily basis. We are all experts at reading them. Thus, while one might imagine that an expert poker player would have a great leg up in such matters, this is not really the case. Skill at reading body language in everyday life is fairly universal. Moreover, the majority of these everyday tells are of little importance.

There are two reasons for this;

First, the tells that exist among the general public are usually quite benign and harmless. There is simply no great secret to be revealed by them. (In fact, it's somewhat surprising how little of importance they do tell us.) Secondly, these everyday gestures take place in a free and easy manner because there is no pressure on them. Put great pressure of some kind on them, and you would undoubtedly see a great change. Put any of these people (above) on national television, at a podium in front of a large audience, or in a high-stakes poker game, and these same gestures would likely become stilted and wooden. It is one of the challenges of the poker player to keep his own gestures free and easy as the pressure mounts and escalates up the scales of stress.

**Rule 103: Concerning body language, the experienced poker player carries several mental lists around in his head: the way players act when they have a certain hand; the way they act when they are trying to disguise having these same hands; the ways they look when they don't have them or just missed them or are pretending to have them.**

The experienced player looks for differences in behavior and eventually begins to categorize them. He becomes hard to fool, too, because these various checklists that he carries in his head are founded on a big backlog of experience that he has been collecting and cataloguing for years.

Strictly speaking, of course, they are not «lists» that he has in his head. They are more like a general awareness assembled out of thousands of occurrences – seeing certain expressions occur over and over until a pattern develops. For instance, he might recognize any of the following:

- The «just missed his hand and is annoyed by the fact» look.
- The «missed his draw but trying to disguise having missed it» look. (Trying not to have a reaction is itself a reaction.)
- The «has no hand at all but is betting strongly in the attempt to disguise this fact» look.
- The «just trying to hang on by his fingernails and get half the pot» look.
- The «Oh great, I'm tied with another player and now I'm being quartered» look.
- The «I can't believe I just got drawn out on again» look.
- The «I think *you* missed *your* draw» look – followed by a bet.
- The «I hope he doesn't raise» look.
- The stubborn «I refuse to fold even though I know I'm beat» look.

And so on.

All of these are pieces of information that the good player is constantly refining and adding to until the various strands begin to separate out into discernible categories. It's like pachinko balls falling into different slots and beginning to add up – the categories of tells gradually accumulating in this way.

Here's one final comparison.

Let's say you're a vacuum cleaner salesman. You work at a small desk in a small office, where customers come in the front door. It's your first day on the job. The first customer comes in, bright and eager to buy a new vacuum cleaner. Then a second comes in with a slightly different expression – looking puzzled – she's thinking about buying one as a gift for a friend. Then a third comes in, looking annoyed – the vacuum cleaner she bought from your company doesn't work right. Without giving it much thought, you are gradually assimilating and noting the different expressions of these people. Silently, as time passes, you start to categorize them.

Twenty years go by. You're still there. By now all of these facial expressions are familiar to you. You can tell from the moment a customer walks in the front door, simply by their expression alone, what his or her motivation is. It's the same in poker. Something that may be invisible to the average person becomes a «billboard» to you.

Now your job defensively, as a player, is to escape these categorizations (by others) – to operate outside of the lists they have in their head, so they can't pigeonhole you.

#### **Rule 104: What do good players see? How do the pros read their opponents?**

Experienced players are observant. They notice things. They notice the things their opponents do, the things they don't do, and the things they do but suddenly stop doing. If you have a good hand, one that you feel pretty good about, and you get a cigarette out of your shirt-pocket, light it, and put your lighter down in front of your chips, then the next time you decide to smoke, when you don't have quite as good a hand, you'd better do all these things exactly the same way. Or if you're doing any talking, you'd better use the same tone of voice both times, and not be solid and confident one time and slightly quavering the next. Good players notice things. They notice something the opponent did an hour earlier, perhaps; some vague sense of his body language: the way he acted throughout a certain hand; the way he was slumping and bored for an hour and is now suddenly very alert; the way he was talking a minute earlier and suddenly stopped; a distant, nagging memory of the way he acted on one other occasion when he had a monster hand, and on and on. And remember, they can tie all this to the cards showing on the table, to other situational clues, to how the betting went earlier in the hand and so on. They notice all these things and file them away for future reference. So while some of us are staring off into space, or watching the television up on the wall and wondering why our favorite basketball team isn't rebounding on the offensive boards, they're paying attention to the game.

*«It's not enough just to have a poker face. You have to have poker shoulders and poker hands».*

– John Vorhaus

#### **Rule 105: Don't key your body language to your cards.**

Nothing about your gestures or body language should be keyed to your cards. Ideally, the two things should be independent of one another. (In the movie *Rounders*, the character played by John Malkovich has an «Oreo tell» – he puts a cookie up to his ear and fiddles with it when he has an unbeatable hand. This would never happen in real life. Experienced players would pick up on this in a minute. They would notice the connection and file it away in the back of their minds.) You shouldn't have any body movement that can be tied to the strength of your hand. One way to do this – a popular way – is to keep the two things on a separate and parallel track, your gestures and your play.

**Rule 106: Good players are able to separate their game personality from their regular personality. Their gestures and body language run on a separate, parallel track.**

Expert players often have gestures and mannerisms that operate independently of game play. For instance, it is not uncommon to see two good players carrying on a sociable conversation about some other subject at the same time they are battling it out in a game situation. They are entirely capable of having a friendly conversation at the same time they are locked in a deadly duel within the game itself. They are able to separate the two things in their minds. In fact, it is a measure of their skill – how ingrained it is – that they are able to do this.

But it is precisely because of this that you can't rely on their gestures for information. The gestures aren't reliable because they aren't connected to their play. (The ability to have two things like this running simultaneously is also a tip-off that this is not their first time at (the table.) Such players tend to operate independently of each other in general terms, too. One player sitting at the table, for instance, might have a fierce, dominating personality, while the player next to him could care less. Each is independent.

Most people in society, when they are in a certain proximity to other people, begin to subtly adjust their body language to the other people (as well as to other things occurring in their immediate sphere of activity). This is less true of poker players, and somewhat resembles the skill that actors achieve. Each exists independently, in his own world.

**Rule 107: Learn to be looked at.**

One skill a poker player needs to develop is to «learn to be looked at». While this is a skill many people already possess – from their careers and other activities – it is sometimes a new thing for first-time players and a skill they do not yet possess. This latter group is not accustomed to being looked at, and it can result in their being quite readable because of it. Those players who are used to this, however, develop the ability to function in exactly the same way whether they are being viewed or not. (Again, this is somewhat similar to the skill actors achieve.)

**Rule 108: As you move up to higher levels of play, you begin to look for smaller and smaller tells.**

At higher levels of poker play, the body-language clues of opponents get smaller. A player who moves his hand just a fraction of an inch, the downturn of a mouth a quarter of an inch for a fraction of a second, or simply a moment of sudden silence might be all that you get. Proof that this is so – that the tells get smaller – is simple. If you go back down to lower-limit games after this, the clues in the game suddenly seem very broad and obvious. (Heads shaking from side to side; angry and dejected looks; muttered obscenities – all tells that seem quite exaggerated in comparison.) At the higher limits you have to learn not only to read smaller and smaller tells but also to give *out* smaller tells yourself.

*«I ... became keenly aware of micro movements of the hands, head, and body as indications of how a player acted under stress and when he was or was not bluffing».*

– David Hayano, *Poker Faces*

**Rule 109: Don't expect the tells you are used to seeing when you move to the higher levels.**

As noted above, this might seem obvious, but sometimes these broad and obvious tells become such an integral part of our game at the lower levels that when we move up to the next level, it's a shock to find that they are missing. The player may be surprised at the difference it makes – what a big part of his game it has actually become.

For this reason, playing in a game where players light up with happiness when they have a good hand and shake their heads dejectedly when they have a bad hand is poor training for higher levels of play. At the higher level, opponents sit stony-faced, their expressions unchanging whether they have a bad hand or a good hand, or they may give out false tells.

*«Wicky examined Crow's dark Gaelic features. Of all the guys he played cards with, Crow was the most difficult to read. Something about him made you see what you wanted, or expected, or feared... He let himself imagine Crow as angry, frightened, sad, confident, proud, nervous ... All of those things-were there; he had only to think it, and the emotion would fit itself to Crow's features. The man was like a mirror. He had the perfect poker face – not a face that displayed nothing, but a face that reflected the hopes and fears of other players».*

– Pete Hautman, *Drawing Dead*

**Rule 110: If you play long enough with good players who have no tells, it turns out they have tells after all.**

After enough time spent playing at higher levels, tiny tells do begin to emerge that may have been previously invisible.

**Rule 111: The perfect poker victim is sometimes not who you think it is.**

The recreational player who only plays poker on an occasional basis often becomes the easiest victim for experienced players to play against. This is the player who *almost* knows the game. They can look at him and he hesitates in all the right spots.

Similarly, players who are often in the greatest danger are those who play almost as well as the other players but not quite, because they hesitate at all the right times. They are like people who are still in a stage that the other players have grown out of. Thus, the perfect poker victim is not necessarily the guy who doesn't know anything at all, but the one who *almost* knows what he is doing.



### **Rule 112: Look for the «overall tell».**

A mistake players sometimes make is to focus too much on looking for a specific tell – a single powerful «smoking gun» that will tip them off about a player's hand. This overly simplistic approach is just a little too «Hollywood». It is seldom this easy in real life. It's much better to look for an *overall* tell – a kind of overall sense emitting from the opponent of how strong or weak he is (sometimes called the «comfort level» of an opponent – a subtle combination of *all* bodily clues taken together).

One final point that should be emphasized is that this approach, like reading body-language of any kind, requires absolute honesty on our part – that means *no* self-deception. We must make sure that we are seeing what is there, not seeing what we want to see.

(A related mistake is seeing only the good news – observing accurately when opponents are weak but ignoring the signs when they are strong. For this reason too, it is crucially important that we be objective in our analysis.)

*«There is only the matter of constant awareness».*

*– Hagakure, by Tsunetomo*

### **Rule 113: Be attuned to the information derived from instinct.**

If, according to the book *The User Illusion*, by Tor Norretranders, the human brain is capable of taking in 11 million bits of information per second (most of it subconsciously), then in poker, we *must know* when we're beat. We have to know it. We just aren't listening to it. We are not hearing the message.

*«The truth knocks on the door and you say, «Go away, I'm looking for the truth», and so it goes away».*

*-Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

### **Rule 114: There's a difference between a «trying-to-push-you-out-bet» and a «strength» bet.**

You must know the difference between these two kinds of bets. The former is usually done with slightly exaggerated emphasis. As a bet, it's simply too strong; you could say it's a little «over the top». The latter is usually done with more solidity and quiet confidence.

### **Rule 115: Listen for growing certainty.**

In lower limit games where there is a lot of talking taking place, there is often a subtle change that occurs in a player's voice half-way through a hand – when a player has started out with good cards and bet them confidently, but who then goes on to improve and now *has* a good hand – a made hand. This change in tone is usually from one of confidence in great starter cards to confidence that now he is going to win. The earlier state more closely resembles pride and bluster, while the latter is more like certainty. Listen for this subtle change in tone. (Though it may seem like the

same tone – and the same betting – to the casual observer.) Listen for this change as the player becomes more certain near the end.

This applies to players as a group, too. There is a point in every hand, in low-limit games, where the transition is made (by the group as a whole), from winging in chips with laughter, confidence, and hoping ("betting on the come"), to greater certainty on their part that they are going to be among the winners. Look for and recognize this subtle change.

**Rule 116: Watch your own tone of voice.**

Many poker players make the mistake of having a steady graph-line of growing certainty in their voices that exactly matches their hand. The better their hand, the more self-assured and authoritative their voice becomes. It doesn't take long for expert opponents to calibrate their play to this.

It is difficult for almost anyone to keep their voice from «steading out» when they have a good hand. One's voice simply gets more firm, confident, and unwavering at such times.

A lot of poker players don't talk much. This may be why.

**Rule 117: Very few players have the ability to get convincingly enthusiastic about a bad or mediocre hand.**

This is a good rule of thumb to remember in low-limit games. It means that if they *are* enthusiastic, they've probably got something. It's a hard thing to fake.

**Rule 118: When players are hesitating at the end, there is almost always only one reason: Their hand isn't very good.**

This isn't true 100% of the time, of course, and it doesn't apply to very good players at all (who may be playing deceptively). But it applies to almost everyone else. By hesitating, we mean *hesitating*. Bet into this kind of hesitating.

**Rule 119: Watch for body language and reactions at two specific points in the hand.**

Two important points to be aware of – where significant information is revealed by your opponents in a poker game – are these: the «Initial Action» and the «Eventual Action». In other words, how opponents react first to their cards, and then the *eventual* action they take, and how they go about it.

This is applicable to many events in life, if we think about it.

A person's initial reaction to a situation that arises, and the eventual action he takes regarding it. These two things usually tell us most of the information we need to know.

Consider these examples: receiving a huge car repair bill, seeing someone dressed in an outlandish costume, or witnessing an accident or fire. Here we note that the same two things occur: first, the initial reaction

we have to the event; and second, the eventual action or response that we take regarding it.

In *between* these two points, an interval occurs – one in which a possible obfuscation of motives and emotions can take place, where people can put on a performance. But the two points at the beginning and end are generally the most reliable indicators. (These two end-points are also the hardest to fake or disguise.) If we are observing someone, we learn the least from the middle period, the «mulling it over» period in between.

**Rule 120: If you look at an opponent too long, you may get misinformation.**

Some players like to look at an opponent the whole time during a hand – a single, long, uninterrupted gaze. While information can be forthcoming from doing this (especially with bad players, who often go on gushing information all the time – everything from head-shakes to muttering under their breath to showing their cards to other players), with better players this middle period can be a source of misinformation. As we saw in Rule 119, there is a gap that occurs between the two bookends of the player's first reaction to his cards and the eventual action that he takes regarding them. During this interval, the player has time to put his «game face» on or to put on an act of one kind or another. In fact, this gap in time lends itself to thinking and scheming. Thus, looking at a player every moment of time during a hand may not be necessary, and can even be detrimental. (One possible exception to this rule, however, is players who are looking for the «comfort level» of an opponent – they might want to see the whole picture, so they watch their opponents constantly.)

*«Now I'm going to tell about the most important split-second in poker, the time when the stimulus occurs that causes the biggest burst of signals. These signals are by far the most reliable and the hardest to fake. They are the result of reflex ... Somewhere between the time the card is removed from the top of the deck and is placed in play, the eyes are going to recognize its configuration. This stimulus is going to cause some degree of pleasure or pain. A few players will mumble, moan, grunt, or even sigh if they've been holding their breath».*

– David R. Whalen, *Psychology of Poker Psimplified*

**Rule 121: Notes on uncovering deception in poker.**

The problem with uncovering deception in poker is somewhat similar to the problem of uncovering deception with a lie detector or polygraph test. You've uncovered an emotion – the needle suddenly went crazy – but what does it *mean*? Your opponent is nervous. Okay, but what about? *Why* is he nervous? Maybe it's for some other reason than the one you think.

The second problem with uncovering deception is that most of the expressions that appear on people's faces are «blends», as Paul Ekman, author of the book *Telling Lies*, has pointed out. They are not clear-cut but are instead *combinations* of emotions – such as «worried confidence», «hesitant enthusiasm», or «fearful joy» – some of which are even

contradictory. When emotions appear in blends, much of the truth is blurred that you are trying to uncover. (For more on this subject, see the book *Telling lies*, by Paul Ekman.)

**Rule 122: In low-limit games, there is often so much emotion going on that it is both easier – and harder – to read people.**

If poker at the higher levels is a kind of silent symphony, at the lower levels it's more like a brass band. In higher-limit games, emotions remain under wraps, and they pretty much stay that way for the duration of the hand (or the whole session). In low-limit games, by contrast, players are often shaking their heads, swearing under their breath, rubbing their hands with glee, hopping mad (or hopping with joy), and so on. A good player needs to take all this in neutrally. (It can sometimes be so shrill it is like «while noise»). He needs to observe it objectively, deduce a few conclusions from it, and try not to get drawn into its whirlpool. In a word, he doesn't need to hear every note of it. Taking all of it in can be a kind of information overload.

**Rule 123: Even actors have real expressions.**

As good as we might be as poker players, none of us are professional actors. As a result, there is often a real reaction underneath our «put-on» reaction. This real reaction is difficult to fake or to hide completely. The appearance of a terrible card that utterly destroys our poker hand produces a feeling that invariably results in a microscopic «face-drop» – of the kind that is difficult to disguise. The lesson here: There is always a real person there, somewhere – one with real reactions, underneath the surface of the poker player.

*«When emotion is aroused, muscles in the face begin to fire involuntarily».*

– Paul Ekman, University of California psychologist

**Rule 124: When a bad card hits for a player, the player almost always deflates, if only in some minute, subtle degree.**

Bad players deflate noticeably, of course. They look like Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloons being put away after the parade. The jaw drops, shoulders sag, their face falls, and the head moves from side to side. There may be a deathly pause that takes place too. A major derailment has happened in their plans. Better players, of course, deflate only a tiny degree. Shoulders might sag only a quarter of an inch – or maybe an eighth of an inch. It's barely noticeable.

It's only the best of the best who have no reaction at all. But if you look across the table and notice that the opponent you've been battling is not quite the imposing person he was a minute ago (even though outwardly he looks the same), you may have just taken the lead in the hand. Before, he looked like Mount Rushmore. Suddenly, he looks like a slightly scaled-down version of Mount Rushmore.

**Rule 125: Notes on the «micro».**

Paul Ekman, a psychologist who has done pioneering research on the subject of lying and deception, came across a facial expression in his studies that he calls a «micro». He describes it in his book. *Telling Lies*, like this:

«Let's begin with the most tantalizing source of facial leakage, micro expressions. These expressions provide a full picture of the concealed emotion, but so quickly that it is usually missed. A micro expression flashes on and off the face in less than one-quarter of a second ... Micro expressions are full-face emotional expressions that are compressed in time, lasting only a fraction of their usual duration, so quick they are usually not seen ... The micro is compressed in time, but the full display is there, shortened».

People who are asked to deliberately lie, and who are filmed as they do so, have demonstrated that «micros» do exist. (In poker, this instantaneous reaction usually occurs when a player looks at his cards or when a bad card comes up.) It is a *full picture* of how an opponent feels about his hand, but one lasting only a fraction of a second. You have to be watching for it. With better opponents, it is but the quickest blink, the most fleeting of moments. (With the worst players, it's held in place for minutes at a time, of course.)

(One possible idea for you as a player, on defense, is to create your own false micro – for *their* benefit. But *make* it micro. If they miss it, so be it.)

**Rule 126: There's more to the «eye-flicker» than meets the eye.**

Whenever a long-time, experienced player hits a great card one he really needs – near the end of a hand, there may be no reaction at all except for an instantaneous flicker – a sudden brightness in the eyes, just for a millisecond, before going dead again.

**Rule 127: Poker players can see out of the corners of their eyes.**

Have you ever come up to someone who was talking on the phone to give them a message that they were wanted on the other line? And as you approached, and stood there waiting, they nodded without even glancing in your direction? Don't underestimate the ability of people to notice things out of the corner of their eye. This also applies to the game of poker.

You may notice sometime when you look at someone who is across a room, or in a bar or restaurant – someone who is turned slightly to the side – that if you stare at them, they sometimes blink. This happens even though they are not even paying any attention to you. This blink is quite interesting. It is almost like a defense mechanism – an *awareness*, almost – as if they are fending off an «attack», even though they aren't looking in your direction or aren't even anywhere near you.

People do indeed have «eyes in the backs of their heads». They have the ability to see in three dimensions without seeming to. One reason for this is because there is a *mind* at work, too, not just eyes.

Try this exercise: Sit in a chair facing directly forward. Now have someone stand almost directly behind you, but slightly off to one side, and

have them make motions with their arms. You will see that you truly *do* have eyes in the back of your head, or very nearly anyway.

The moral is; Never underestimate the ability of poker players to notice things about you without seeming to.

*«The heart has eyes which the brain blows nothing of».*

– Charles Parkhurst



*«He who sees from the side has eight eyes».*

From the Japanese game of Go  
– quoted in *Hagakure*, by Tsunetomo

In poker, an expert player has his antennae extended for possible challenges from *any* direction – even the subtle, the oblique, the frail-appearing, the seemingly benign and harmless – especially these.

**Rule 128: Note the body language expressed in a flurry of movements.**

In lower-level games, look for movements on the part of players who miss their hands. By this we mean a small flurry of movements that sometimes can be observed. (This usually applies to players of about average or below-average skill.) This series of small movements resembles «squirming» (for lack of a better term), and it often occurs when they miss their hands. A previously stationary body is seen to move a bit – to the left, to the right – often several parts moving at once, hands, arms, and head. These are not necessarily *large* movements, but they are movements in a kind of symphony that indicate uneasiness, and there may be three or four of them occurring together. They may include such things as: handling their cards, turning their head, shifting all parts of the body at once (but in a minor way), moving arms or elbows slightly, shaking one's head, making small hand or arm gestures, or all of the above, (it is also significant (hat when they have a *good* hand, they are *not* doing these things.)

This phenomena is sometimes better seen out of the corner of your eye – that is, indirectly. (In fact, this perspective may be preferable, for if looked at directly, the person may freeze up and stop doing it.)

Here is another exercise to try. Hold your cards directly in front of you, resting on the table, and stare at them intently. Meanwhile, try to watch an opponent out of the corner of your eye, just using your peripheral vision alone. It is by doing this that this flurry of movements referred to above becomes visible.

(Note: Some top players also advise us to watch players' hands. And indeed, if we shut out all else and do this, hands do seem like a collection of scurrying little animals around the rim of the green felt, indicating a wide range of hesitation, confidence, doubt, skittishness, determination.)

### **Rule 129: The forehead is a reliable muscle.**

According to researcher Paul Ekman, author of the book *Telling Lies*, the forehead is a «reliable muscle» – one that is hard for a person to manipulate and control. (A muscle is considered «reliable» because it can be counted on by the *viewer*. «The person does not know how to get a message to the muscle to deploy it in a false expression», Ekman writes.) In other words, this muscle tends to react honestly to events. The poker player should notice, however – before he rushes out and tries to put this knowledge to use – that many poker players wear caps that cover their foreheads. Still others, perhaps *sensing* that the forehead can reveal a tell, lock it into place in one way or another, either very smooth or very lined. Locked *too* firmly into place, however, can itself be a tell – it can reveal a player who has a good hand and doesn't want to give it away by changing expressions. Still, it may be a muscle to be aware of in poker.

This business about the forehead is borne out in our practical experience. For instance, try this simple exercise; Smile. See how effortless and direct it was? Almost instantaneously the message went from your brain to your mouth. Okay, now try to do something similar with your forehead. Try to influence it in some way. Notice how it seems «farther away» – from being reached by your conscious control as if it was more disconnected from your thoughts. It is more out of our control. This may be a reason to buy a hat.

### **Rule 130: Pay attention to how opponents look just before they fold.**

At the times when you are out of the hand, try to get a line on players' actions and mannerisms when they are weak. This can be valuable information for you later. Pay attention to what poker writer Konstantin Othmer calls an opponent's «folding tells». Also, look to your left – observe the players who act after you, and the way they may be tipping their hand as to what they plan to do.

### **Rule 131: How is it possible to pick up tells from a player you've just met for the first time?**

Here's one tip. Don't look for tells – look for a level of experience (or lack of the same). Over a short period of Time, there *will* be clues forthcoming in this regard. A statement by a player such as, «You know, I played this game once before. It was in a casino» (while he glances around) «it was much like this one». Or, «Gee, if you win one pot in this game you can be back to even, even if you were way down!» Such statements are indicators of a novice, and they will inevitably be accompanied by poor play on future rounds. On the other hand, if a player you are observing exhibits smooth chip-handling abilities and other such indicators, he is likely to be an experienced player.

### **Rule 132: Deciphering the motionless player.**

It is unfortunate that an opponent's body language, when he is waiting in fear and trepidation, is often quite similar to the body language that occurs when he is waiting to pounce. If these two expressions were more dissimilar,

it would make a poker player's life a lot easier. Both states share a kind of benumbed, stationary hopefulness that looks very much the same. It is the same kind of holding back, hardly daring to breathe. (To further confuse matters, sometimes opponents aren't *sure* if they have a better hand than you do, or what they're going to do about it)

We have to learn to tell the difference, by observation, between a player who acts after us who is waiting *strongly*, motionless, and one who is waiting more in a «cowering» way, motionless. The difference in these states is often very subtle. One hint: There is usually some look of doubt, looking in our direction, for the weaker player, as opposed to the one who is getting ready to pounce.

### **Rule 133: Don't be afraid to watch the other players.**

A lot of players are, for some reason. They're afraid of making eye contact, of simply raising their heads from the game and watching the reactions of other players. They inwardly feel there's something intrusive and prying about this; – and this is probably the reason why they resist doing it.

There's no reason to be afraid of this, however. You may be surprised to discover that for the most part no one even notices or cares (usually because they're looking elsewhere).

To some extent, to play the game correctly, you *must* watch the other players, even though it may feel more comfortable not to do so. By this means all sorts of things may be revealed, such as players getting ready to bet, players getting ready to fold, players showing their cards to their neighbors dejectedly, and so on. Valuable information is often forthcoming.

### **Rule 134: Watch the way people check.**

Let's say that you're in a hand, and it's come down to you and two other players at the end. You see both of them look at their cards and pause at the other end of the table, as if frozen, and check, somewhat disconsolately. Then you look at your own cards and discover that you have a pretty weak holding. Your play in this situation? You bet.

Be observant of the way people look around the table. It can sometimes result in Free Money.

### **Rule 135: Bet, and watch your opponents' reactions; then check, and watch their reactions.**

You can often learn a lot in a poker game by betting on a rhythm, establishing that rhythm, then stopping suddenly and checking – and watching your opponents and their reactions at that moment. See who suddenly perks up during this checked round.

At lower levels of poker play, doing these two things will often give you a large quantity of information.

You must be careful, however. As with any rhythm you develop, it can result in an opponent's adjusting to it and getting ready to trap you. This happens when he has picked up this rhythm and knows you're going to bet



for him. This is often the point where you need to back off and go the other way.

**Rule 136: Vary your reactions and your emotions slightly.**

Let's take another brief look at the concept of lying – that is, trying to fool a lie detector test. How would you go about doing this? The following is a quote from *Esquire* magazine on how to fool a polygraph machine:

«The key to passing a polygraph is misdirection, throwing off the test's measurements of your breathing, perspiration, pulse, and skin conductance so that those measurements vary widely throughout the test. That way, the polygraph becomes useless; Your inquisitors don't know when you're telling the truth and when you're stretching it».

According to Charles Clifton, author of *Deception Detection*, here's how to do that:

- Feign anxiety when asked innocuous questions (Is today Monday?), and remain relatively calm during pointed interrogation (Did you steal three Armani suits?).
- Tense your muscles. One effective (and subtle) method: Tighten your sphincter for ten seconds, then release.
- Inflict pain on yourself (bite your tongue!), but maintain an unflappable visage.
- Mind your breathing – deviations from your normal pattern will be noted.
- Change your posture noticeably once – red flags are raised if you overdo it.

What is the message here? What is the lesson for the poker player? Vary your emotions; vary your reactions. Such all-over-the-map responses throw dust in the eyes of people who are looking for patterns.

**Rule 137: Most people's poker games are too predictable.**

Many players feel they've got their game honed down nicely to one workable set routine. They've eliminated most of their bad habits, weeded out the mistakes one by one, but in truth their game is kind of stationary and stagnating. It's become rather stale and one-dimensional, which is itself a mistake because it allows opponents to put them exactly on a hand. They'd really be better off if they were all over the map once in a while, even at the cost of a few chips.

The player needs to shift gears once in a while. Put in a raise on a marginal hand. Bet completely differently (in a way that is out of character, for you) once in a while. Do something different. Give opponents a different look. Vary your body language. Vary your facial expressions.

*«Industria lpsychologists call it the Hawthorne Effect. When the lights are turned brighter than normal on a factory floor, worker's productivity increases. When the lights are turned lower than normal, worker's*

*productivity ... also increases. In time, the effect wears off, hut in the short run, breaking a familiar routine enhances performance».*

– John Paul Newport  
quoted in *Men's Journal*

Vary your bets. Vary your game. Vary *something*.

**Rule 138: Have your chips in your hand.**

If you don't have your chips in hand, then at least know where they are and how to reach them. A situation that sometimes occurs is the following:

Joe, a poker player, looks at his cards and observes that he has a powerful hand- the best he's had all day. With studied casualness, he reaches for his chips, misjudges their exact location, and fumbles them all over the floor. After bending over for two minutes and finally picking them up with the help of two waitresses and an off-duty dealer, Joe looks up to notice that all the other players have folded. The problem is that this kind of fumbling looks like eagerness even if it wasn't. It looks as if the player can't wait to bet. It's not necessary to have your chips *literally* in hand, but it's a good idea to know where they are at. A universal «tell» is that people tend to glance toward their chips when they have a good hand. This is why. They want to be able to reach them smoothly.

**Rule 139: Be careful how fast you reach for your chips.**

The itch is irresistible. You look at your cards. They're wonderful, in fact, they're tremendous! Your eye goes immediately to your chip stack. Don't let it.

**Rule 140: Occasionally, however, when you have very good starter cards, don't be afraid to go ahead and reach for your chips eagerly.**

But, you might argue, won't doing this give away my hand? Fine. Let it. Many times you don't care if some of the other players drop out – you might *want* some of them to drop out. You want them to impute greatness to your cards. Often, you *want* to win the hand right away, right now. Besides, a lot of them won't care how eagerly you reach for your chips. Still others will take it the opposite way – as some kind of trick. So don't be afraid to do this at random times.

**Rule 141: Know when the camera is on.**

Know when the «prime-time» moments of poker are. These are the moments when all eyes are upon you. The reason that knowing this is important is because it allows for «quieter acting» on your part.

In the acting profession, an actor in a stage-play must act very broadly because he has to project himself to the very back row of the theater. The same actor in a movie, on the other hand, can act much «quieter». With the camera focused on his face in a close-up, he need only make the smallest of gestures and it -will be picked up by the viewer.

When the «prime-time» moments occur in poker, they are similar to the movie close-up – thus allowing us to make very sparing gestures (or facial expressions), and others will notice them. So when are these prime-time moments?

Usually, when the action is on us. The times when we raise, or during a tough call with a big pot on the line. All players remain in the background until such times, gray and anonymous – then one steps forward into the light, and all eyes turn to him. This is when the camera is «on» a player.

All of the above sheds some light on the nature of «acting» in poker. One tip-off as to whether an opponent is acting or not is something called «broad acting». In other words, his gestures are overdone. Why? For the simple reason that he wants to make sure everyone sees them. He's like an actor trying to project himself to the back row of the theater. He makes his gestures broader to make up for the possibility that you might miss them. These are the «street-walkers» of mannerisms, so overdone that they can be seen from a block away. In acting like this, however, he's tipping you off to the fact that he *is* acting.

On the other hand, it's more likely his reactions are real if they are *small*. If they are tiny and brief, they probably weren't fashioned just for your benefit.

Concerning your own play, it's important to know those times you are being watched, for then you can make your own gestures very understated at these times.

*«Man is a make-believe animal: he is never so truly himself as when he is acting a part».*

– William Hazlitt

### **Rule 142: Sell your table image to opponents during prime time.**

Whatever persona you wish to get across to opponents, the time when the camera is on is the time to do it. If you wish them to see you as being a lucky sort, or a loose player, then act quite cheerful and ordinary after a major luck-out to underscore that aspect of it. If you wish to be known as calm and unruffled at times of great stress, or being imperturbable after a bad beat, this is the time to leave a few hints in that direction. If you wish to be seen as serious, thoughtful, and determined, this is the time to leave hints about that. Look for these prime-time moments, and use them.

But don't *over-do* it. Remember, the close-up camera is on you then (like the film actor, not the stage actor), so a very tiny bit of acting will suffice. This *is* the time to sell it, however – whatever image it is you wish to leave opponents with as a view of yourself.

*«As an actor you don't think about acting – ever. If you do, it shows. An actor only thinks about being himself – the new self he's just become».*

– Arthur Hailey, *Detective*

**Rule 143: Most players are probably better off acting the *same* every time, rather than acting.**

Inexperienced players often think that acting plays a significant role in poker – a view undoubtedly derived from television and the movies. Actually, the best approach is probably to just act the same every time, no matter what kind of cards you have. (Most players who engage in a great deal of «acting» in poker simply haven't figured this out yet – that it is simply easier, and requires much less effort.) Bad cards or good cards, if you always look the same, opponents eventually give up trying to get information out of you.

**Rule 144: There is an underlying conflict between poker and acting.**

There is a major conflict that occurs between the two disciplines of poker and acting, and that is this: The body-language approach chosen by most players of always acting the same is a very bad platform from which to launch an acting career. A poker face (over the years) does indeed start in the face, and a kind of woodenness branches southward, from the face down, until eventually it takes over the whole body. Trying to show no emotion is a pretty bad foundation for suddenly trying to spring to life and produce acting-type reactions when a certain critical point arrives – it makes it difficult to switch gears.

*«She is watching my face. She thinks, like a lot of women Jo, that she can tell if I'm lying or not, that she can see it in my eyes. She's forgetting that I'm good at this – I'm in practice. When I'm good, I don't even let myself know if I'm lying or not».*

-Kevin Canty, *Rounders*

**Rule 145: Start noticing the sorts or things you do when you're weak, and do a little bit of them when you're strong – just a tiny bit.**

We're not talking about acting. Acting is too big a word for it. We're talking about a hint. A trace. A shade. Just enough for opponents to «find».

Scroll back your memory to times when you were weak in a poker hand – annoyed, irritated, hesitant, nervous – back to the way you acted. Work on putting a little of this into your game when you're strong – but again, just a tiny bit.

In fact, whenever you feel slightly nervous about anything as you go through your day (or hesitant or doubtful), take note of it. Observe your mannerisms. If something occurs that takes the wind out of your sails, what gestures or facial expressions appear? How do you look during life's various defeats and setbacks? Learn this in order to disguise it but also in order to use it. (Calling up a tiny bit of it as a reverse tell.)

Cards are going to come up in your poker career that are simply going to knock the wind right out of you. How do you look when this happens? What expression comes over your face? What body language do you exhibit at these times? What gestures do you make when it happens?

Find out.

### **Rule 146: Let opponents «find» a tiny expression on your face.**

Expert players seem to have a slight, almost imperceptible measure of uncertainty when they have good cards and a tiny, minute trace of confidence when they don't – expressions of such microscopic proportions that they allow discerning opponents to «find» (hem. There is an advantage to this slightness of expression.

Putting a tiny bit of pain on your face is relatively easy, and it will allow a sharp opponent to find a tiny bit of pain there.

The best players pride themselves on discerning slight changes in your demeanor. Give it to them. Let them find a tiny frown, or tiny smile, one that is right on the very edge of being imperceptible.

If you overdo it – shake your head with great sadness, or click your tongue dejectedly when you have a very strong hand – this will only work once. You can't use this approach a second time because then opponents will be wise to it. They will simply lag you as an actor and adjust their play accordingly. What you lose by this is all subsequent opportunities to act in a small way. If you want to act, do it in a very slight and subtle way.

### **Rule 147: Notice where other players are looking.**

One skill that experienced poker players possess is the ability to notice where people are looking. In fact, this is often a tip-off to why people take certain actions (as well as what actions they are *about* to take). This skill carries over into real life, too. They instinctively notice where friends, acquaintances, and passersby are looking-where their eyes are moving to – because poker players know that thoughts and actions that follow are going to be connected to that.

The human eye tends to follow things that change in a scene. This is an instinctive part of human perception, one that goes back centuries in our evolution. For our early ancestors, it was the things that changed in a scene that could represent danger and needed to be noticed, whether it was something slithering on the ground or crouching in the grass. Thus, movement is the key. But a foundation of non movement must first be established in order for movement to have any significance. Some poker players are stony of countenance (the foundation) and use movement sparingly, which will then be noticed (against this baseline of non movement), in order to manipulate someone who might be viewing.

### **Rule 148: Gathering information when people don't know they're being watched.**

A certain percentage of our impressions about other people are gained by observing them when they don't think they're being watched – maybe even the majority of our impressions about them. If true, then we can use this – to silently communicate things about ourselves to other people. This approach might be described as: getting yourself in their line of vision, pretending not to notice that they are looking at you, and then conveying what you wish to convey.

**Rule 149: People's facial expressions tend to be fairly consistent throughout life. They follow similar patterns and emotions. Rewind your memory back to how your opponents acted on previous occasions.**

If you misplaced your car keys ten years ago, or stubbed your toe, or dropped a grocery bag, the look on your face was probably the same as it would be if these things happened today. If you receive some bad news today, your expression is probably going to be similar to the way you looked when you got bad news six months ago or six years ago. People's reactions remain fairly consistent throughout life.

The same is true in poker. The last time you saw a similar expression on an opponent's face, it was likely caused by a similar event. (How did they act when they had a good hand? How did they act when they were betting but had nothing at all?)

Facial expressions and body language have been forming for a lifetime. As many hours as we all spend at the poker table, our time away from it still greatly outweighs it. These emotions and reactions that have been forming for a lifetime are difficult to disguise completely.

**Rule 150: Watch your own reactions to your cards.**

Bad players have no idea that they are transparent to other, better players. When they get a good hand and erupt with happiness, they don't think this has any significance. They also think that the times when they *don't* do this doesn't tell the other players anything either.

A player may think, «I have a lousy hand, and I'm getting ready to fold it anyway, so what difference does it make? Who cares if I shake my head in disgust? I'm going to pitch my cards in about ten seconds anyway, so what does it matter?» Well, it matters on subsequent hands when you *don't* do these things. The contrast is obvious to other players.

**Rule 151: By nature, the way a good player is beating a bad player is invisible to the bad player.**

This includes you and I as well – if we are up against world-class players. We can't see how they are doing it, anymore than terrible players who are playing against us can see how we're doing it.

**Rule 152: If you have a monster hand, be hesitant and nervous about the possibility that you may play it wrong.**

Be scared. Be slightly terrified that you won't get the most value (money) out of it. This may translate to the other players as doubt or nervousness about your hand. They may even interpret a bet here by you as an attempt to «push them out» and re-raise you.

Pick the times you get scared. Make this one of them. But again, don't overdo it. This isn't Broadway. Oscar-caliber acting is not what is called for, but do sit there and mull it over. The thing you are mulling over is how to get the most value out of the hand, and the thing you are scared to death about is the possibility of not doing it right.

**Rule 153: When you hit resistance, consider backing off a little, in fear, even if you *have* the better hand, because this is what resistance expects you to do.**

This kind of faltering on your part when you hit resistance plays into their dream. They knew they had a good hand, and now they are sure it is the best hand. This is a classic trap – for them. It uses their own dream against them.

**Rule 154: The universal tell.**

Everyone has a tell when they have a good poker hand. The tell is this: They bet. Because of this, the true strength of a poker hand is difficult to disguise completely. The player with the good hand keeps pushing chips toward the pot.

**Rule 155: Learn something from the people you play with.**

Many players you play against will do one thing very well. Borrow it, use it, steal it, add it to your repertoire. Copy parts of your opponents' game.

*«It would be good to make a model and to learn from that. To do this, one should look at many people and choose from each person his best point only. For example, one person for politeness, one for bravery, one for the proper way of speaking, one for correct conduct and one for steadiness of mind. Thus will the model be made».*

– Hagakure, the Book of the Samurai, by Tsunetomo



*«Watch, learn and emulate».*

– Louis Asmo, professional poker player

**Rule 156: Practice putting chips in the pot in different ways.**

Don't hesitate to imitate other players – a certain way they fold, bet, raise, or push their chips in the pot. All these small gestures combine to make a statement one which, all parts taken together, can add a certain spin to a larger statement you may be trying to make at any given moment in the game. How you handle your chips or your cards; how you check, fold, muck your hand; the way you put in your bets and raises; these can all have meaning. Practice different ways of doing these things so you have a whole repertoire to draw from. Each time you see a new way of doing something, add it to your «collection». Employ these various ways at appropriate times to emphasize different aspects of what you want to get across.

And don't dismiss these things as trivial. They are all noticed by others, considered and weighed. Each can add a certain spin to your hand (or the hand you're trying to represent). They can be used to indicate doubt, confidence, casualness, disappointment, certainty, hesitancy, resolve, determination, and so on. And they can also be used to set up future plays

in the game. («The last time he slid his chips into the pot quickly like that, he had a great hand – I'd better get out.») In such ways as this, seemingly innocent gestures can play a part in the game. Remember that these gestures are one of the few things opponents have to go by. Because of this, they have more effect than we may think. Borrow some of these moves and gestures from your opponents. (With the advent of full video coverage of some tournament final tables, it is now possible to watch the body language of top players – often for hours – to see how they do certain things.)

**Rule 157: The importance of having control over your body language.**

To the non player, this might seem trivial. But if you scratch your eye, rub your nose, take a sip of a cup of coffee, light a cigarette, pick up your poker chips to bet, glance at your cards a second time, move a toothpick around in your mouth, or tap the table with your fingertips, it is recommended that all these actions be done deliberately. Your hand and arm motions should be completely under your control as you are doing them. If they are not, an experienced player will be able to read something into these actions during play. For poker purposes, these movements should be deliberate and controlled. If they aren't, work on them.

If you wish to play poker, it is important to be able to control all your movements, but not in a way that looks controlled.

*«Maintain a perfect unity of every movement of your will».*

– Confucius

**Rule 158: Work on being unflappable, calm, and composed.**

Use tense times that occur in a game as a learning experience – to work on this aspect of your game. Develop a repertoire of gestures and movements that demonstrate calm and composure during tense situations. (This is important because composure at such times can suggest to opponents that you must have a good hand.) Use tense situations to practice picking up chips for instance – as a way to demonstrate to others around the table that your hands aren't shaking, for instance. (Players don't tend to work on this sort of thing. Everyone *gets* there eventually- simply through experience – but few people seem to deliberately work on it.)

**Rule 159: Buy a mirror.**

Here's an idea for players who play poker on the Internet or on computer poker software. There is a gap between the computer keyboard and the monitor that is about twelve inches high. Go to a hardware store and buy a mirror that fits in this space. Use it to monitor your facial expressions as you play.

Make a note of the way you look in certain key game situations. Pay special attention to how you look at emotional times – such as frustration, anger, or impatience – when a «bad beat» occurs, or in other similar high-pressure situations. In fact, whenever you feel strong emotion of *any* kind



while you are playing, glance at the mirror. These are the times you want to know what your expression looks like – what the other players are seeing. But also pay attention during «good» events too – like when you have a «lock» hand or are slow-playing a good hand. At these times, it is also helpful to know what your expressions look like.

Also; Turn the mirror around from time to time. It might seem strange that turning it around occasionally would be more effective than always having it facing forward, but if it is there too often, you'll stop seeing it. It will be like a painting on a wall you've long ago stopped noticing – and this familiarity will defeat the purpose.

### **Historical Notes on the Significance of the Mirror**

It's hard to think of the mirror as an «invention», but it really was. Before the 1500s it didn't really exist. But once it did, a surprising thing happened – a giant leap forward occurred in self-awareness. Prior to the mirror's arrival on the scene, people simply lived their lives in a kind of straight-ahead fashion, eyes focused on whatever was «out there», in front of them. In a sense, human consciousness changed once the mirror came along. For the first time people began to consider the idea of themselves within a scene.

Even today, most people are so busy perceiving – peering out from inside the window of themselves – that they forget to make themselves into an object to be viewed by others. But it is always something to keep in mind – especially in poker.

### **What We Can learn from the Mirror**

One thing that using a mirror demonstrates is the importance that composure plays. It clearly shows us that when we are at peace, it comes out in our expression – and that this is, indeed, one of the easiest routes to a detached, composed expression. (This is better than trying to fake or somehow «put» this look onto our face. Having its source in *true* composure is actually the best means to getting this expression onto our face.)

Using a mirror this way also shows the importance of slowing down our actions and reactions overall; it reveals the dangers of being too eager in the game. The mirror demonstrates that over-eager play is the source of many tells that come simply from moving too quickly. And this encourages detachment, too – the importance of being «backed off» a little from the game.

It also shows that whenever we are in moments of stress, what the viewer sees is a kind of general agitation in tiny amounts. What makes this dangerous is that this is exactly what an opponent is looking for: general agitation in tiny amounts. An attitude of disengagement from the game helps hide this too.

Finally, the most important mirror-related discovery is probably the idea itself; Know how what you're *feeling looks*. And the two *are* linked – much more than we think.

What is the value of this mirror exercise?

Let's answer that question with a question.

Do other players know what they look like when they are playing? Do they know exactly how they look – what is coming across to the other players? Do they know what they look like when they are slow-playing; when they are struggling, angry, confident; when they are betting or raising? You do.

*«The mind of a perfect man is like a mirror. It grasps nothing. It expects nothing. It reflects but does not hold. Therefore, the perfect man can act without effort».*

– Chuang Tzu, quoted by Joe Hyams  
*Zen and the Martial Arts*



## Chapter 11

### Twenty-Five Common Traps

**Trap 1: Put your focus on whether a hand is *going* to win, not on whether it should win or whether it deserves to win.**

Bad players do this. They match their hands against a hypothetical list of the kind of hands that «should» win, instead of looking at the actual realities of the situation in front of them. This is simply a form of victim-thinking.

Such players often hang on till the bitter end with these should-win hands, even if all the other signals are against it. They are always looking for proof that they should have won.

In a perfect world, this is the way things would work: your eights-over-threes-full-house would win one hand, and your opponent's queens-over-threes-full-house would win on another hand. The two good hands would take turns winning they would alternate. This is in a perfect world. In the *real* world, what happens is that both full houses occur on the same hand. Don't continue to stay, knowing you're beat, because your hand is of the sort that «should» have won in a perfect world.

Good players don't think like this. They are not looking for proof that the Poker Gods are against them, continuing to play the hand to the end to confirm this. To them, behavior of this sort is simply a form of whining. Calling many bets after this point (unless pot odds dictate you should) is simply a form of self-punishment.

**Trap 2: It's possible for our knowledge of a game or activity to be so complete that we are no longer paying attention.**

The end result of great immersion in an activity is sometimes not wisdom but boredom. Burn-out can occur. Maybe on the surface you're eager to play, but deep down you're tired of the game. You've played thousands of hours. Maybe you've played so much that at this point you should be the world's leading expert, but instead you're not even winning anymore. Despite years invested, you seem to have hit a plateau. Day follows day, and you alternate: lose, win, lose, win, lose, win ... Your game is stagnating. It has no spark; it's drifting. How can you have this much time invested, you wonder, and not be any further ahead than you are? Sitting there like Gandhi day after day, taking the long view, doesn't seem to be getting you anywhere. The guy sitting next to you who doesn't know how to play at all seems to be doing just as well. The problem may be that you are burned out. Over-playing is one possible cause. You're turning it into a job. Take a break from the game once in a while. As a challenge, poker may be

bottomless, but as an *information field*, it isn't. It does have a bottom, a place where everything starts to repeat and become tediously similar.

*«Firefighters are most likely to get killed or injured in their tenth year on the job, when they think they've seen pretty much everything there is to see on the fires. They become less open to new information ... Beware of the kind of expertise that leads to inattention».*

– Karl Weick, organizational psychologist

**Trap 3: If your object in the game is not to win, or play well, but instead to achieve *the feeling* of victory, you may end up doing some things that are erroneous in order to reproduce the feeling.**

Winning at poker, and pursuing the feeling of victory are not the same thing. (They may seem to be. but they aren't.) The latter, if not closely guarded against, can lead to various errors («chasing» is one), in an often fruitless attempt to reproduce the feeling that you had once when you won.

**Trap 4: Don't deliberately trap yourself just so you can have the thrill of being on the river and having the outcome hang in the balance in order to reproduce *that feeling*.**

Once the pot size grows past a certain point, it becomes mathematically correct to play (or chase) with much more marginal hands. Some players become very adept at getting themselves trapped like this so they will have no choice but to play on. Many of them like to reproduce that heady feeling of having everything riding on one card at the end. Of course, sometimes we *do* get trapped like this, but don't «make» this happen so that you are unable to drop out.

**Trap 5: The starting-hand-so-good-you-can't-let-it-go trap.**

These are starting hands so wonderful to look at that you just can't throw them in. Even after it's clear that you're beat (or at least running way behind), you can't lay them down. But good players do. That's because they know this can be a «leak» – a place in the game where significant amounts of chips disappear.

A distant cousin of this problem is Trap 6.

**Trap 6: The «staying-in-order-to-turn-over-your-cards-at-the-end» problem.**

Here is another trap, though a somewhat unusual, arcane one. Let's say you're playing well, getting good cards, playing them correctly, but you're still losing. The problem is that none of the other players will know this unless you stay till the end in order to turn over your cards.

In your annoyance at the way things are going, you stay till the end mainly to show all the other players what a good hand you had. This costs you several additional bets, of course, but it's worth it – to demonstrate how you are getting «snapped off» and thereby gain their sympathy.

Let's back up a moment and look at this behavior. Is this how expert players act?

We need to resist this sort of temptation. When your hand fizzles out, no matter how good it looked when it started out, simply muck the cards, face down. There's no need to flash them around in the air, like a stage magician, before doing so. An important part of poker is the ability to «release». Don't continue throwing in bets for *any* reason.

### **Trap 7: The best hand you've seen in an hour trap.**

Long stretches of inactivity during a game can tempt us into lowering our starting hand standards. Slightly above-average hands can start looking better than they really are. The biggest problem with these types of hands is that they still might not be good enough. After a long dry spell, cards that are B+ start looking like they are A+. It's the familiar mirage-in-the-desert syndrome, a clear cool lake of hope glimpsed by a person dying of thirst. We must try to get a grip on ourselves, think objectively, and shake this mirage from our minds. After a long drought, you certainly don't want to add «coming in second» to your woes.

### **Trap 8: If you find yourself in a beatable game with a number of terrible players, don't overplay. And if you find yourself in this type of game not getting any cards, don't do *anything*.**

One error that good players sometimes make when playing against bad players is impatience – getting over-eager to get their hands on their chips. They start to think that they should be defeating these opponents more decisively, more quickly, more frequently, and for more money than they are.

If bad players are in the game, don't fall into the temptation of being over-eager to get your hands on all that money they are throwing around. Just be glad they're in there when you *do* have a hand.

This is an easy trap to fall into. Players start smacking their lips at the juicy level of competition. They become impatient, and tend to overplay. Circumstances are so favorable that they start chomping at the bit and end up beating themselves thereby losing money in a beatable game.

One thing you don't want to do in a game like this is dig yourself into a hole. If you do, you may have to suffer the exquisite agony of watching other players cheerfully build up their chip-stack while you gradually – and painfully – try to make a comeback. (Or – what is worse – you may suffer the even greater indignity of watching the bad players suddenly decide to get up and leave, thereby leaving you holding the bag.) It is for this reason that patience is crucial in this type of game.

One other point to remember: Expertise in poker – that is, one player being better than another – can be something that only shows up rarely in game situations. Long periods can go by in which the opportunity to take advantage of it (the discrepancy in expertise) simply doesn't arise. Therefore, if you try to force it, it will often backfire.

### **Trap 9: The «wild game» trap.**

Every so often, a poker game occurs that becomes just crazy and wild – there are no other words for it. Betting and raising go off the chart, and the game gets to the point where it bears no resemblance at all to real poker. This type of game is usually instigated by one or two individuals who love to raise and re-raise, capping all betting rounds without any apparent regard to the value of the cards they hold, and so on. It's not long before the other players, noticing that these players are pumping in great amounts of money on weak hands, begin to join in and «call them down». This results in a game where six or seven or eight players are all staying to the end. No one folds, monster pots are created, and it often becomes nothing more than «showdown» at the end.

The «trap» situation here, is that this is not poker. It has, for the most part, left the poker realm, and has become just gambling, a crap-shoot. If this is what you want to do, fine. But recognize it for what it is. Play at your own risk in a game like this, because fluctuations and swings of fortune can be huge.

**Trap 10: Avoid games where opponents are playing way *under* their bankroll.**

This is somewhat similar to Trap 9, above. You would like bets by opponents in the game to have some meaning when they make them. If everybody in the game has way more money than the limit at which you're playing, so that bets and raises mean nothing in the game, this makes it harder to figure out where everybody is at. On the other hand, if you can find a game where the players are under funded and playing too high for their bankrolls, their bets will have a lot of meaning to them when they make them, and they will be easier to read and put on a hand.

**Trap 11: When another player in the game is hitting on all cylinders, and you're not, stop fighting it.**

Despite mathematicians assuring us that each hand occurs randomly and independently (which they do, in fact), every poker player has seen winning streaks woven together so tightly that there is a sense the hands *must* be connected in some way. Once or twice in every game, some player is going to go into this otherworldly state. Don't make it a personal crusade to try to stop him.

Don't bet into someone who is on such an uncanny run, just to prove that this simply can't be happening, according to the rules of probability. In such cases, it is happening.

This phenomenon drives some players crazy. They can't stand it. It becomes a matter of pride – even of obsession – trying to run this lucky player down and stop him. This can be a costly effort. Instead, you should sit back, relax, and let this person have his moment in the sun. Your job is to continue to play solid poker.

**Trap 12: The guy who's getting luckier than you will seem like he's outplaying you.**

This player will appear to be the very picture of calmness, composure, and rational decision-making. He will be seen carefully weighing all his options – mulling them over thoughtfully and choosing decisively as he keeps winning. Don't get frustrated by this phenomenon. The fact is everything is just working for him right now. Don't go out of your way to prove that you are the better player trying to make super-fancy plays in order to catch him. His cards are just falling into place right now, and yours aren't. Your choices are limited to about one option per hand, while he's getting about five or six options per hand. It's easy to make correct decisions when everything is working. Everyone looks like a genius under these circumstances.

**Trap 13: When you're losing, all *manner* of people are likely to be winning.**

Those who are winning in the game may be people who (A) have never played before, (B) don't know the game, (C) don't know the rules, are (D) drunk, (E) lucky, (F) loud and obnoxious, (G) undeserving, (H) rude, (I) insufferable, (J) laughing uncontrollably, or all of the above. Consequently, there may be a heavy irritation factor here.

The plain fact of the matter is that when you are playing and losing, it won't always be the best player who is winning your money. And it might not be the person you would *choose* to win your money, either. It might be a real rum-head. Know this going in. Be mentally prepared for this possibility. Great players come to terms with this idea. They have to, or they will be driven crazy by it.

Gambling is supremely democratic. It is open to all: the novice, the senile, the blunderer, the unskilled, the lucky, the stoned, the mentally unstable, and the monstrously uninformed. (And rest assured, you *will* see them all.)

As players, we have to get used to the idea that when we are losing, someone will be winning, and it is often not the person who we would choose to be winning our money.

Don't envy or begrudge other people their victories. Rest assured that on other nights, you will *get your* easy victories. Know that in almost every game, someone at the table is going to be «hot». This person will always exist. Grant him his wins, and keep playing solid poker.

*«Sometimes the lambs slaughter the butcher».*

– AmarilloSlim

**Trap 14: Poker nightmare: bad players are playing incorrectly and winning – you're playing correctly and losing.**

For many players, this is probably the most exasperating situation in poker, far ahead of whatever is in second place. It's on a par, roughly, with the tests of Job in the Bible – a kind of piercing poker purgatory. Some opponents are playing excruciatingly badly, but they're winning – while you're playing correctly, and losing. For players of a certain temperament, it

doesn't get any worse than this. Such a person will feel his blood pressure rise just reading these words. (Maybe the only thing worse than this is the bad player who has played for hours without a lick of common sense, who suddenly *gets* enough sense to rack up his chips and leave.)

Eventually bad play catches up with these people. (Though it never seems to happen when we're around, for some reason – it always seems to occur in some other game, far away. We hear about it through the grapevine, or rumor mill.)

The emotional solution to this problem is probably to stress to ourselves more those times when the bad players *don't* draw out on us – when we won a bigger pot because they were in. Notice these times more. Underline them. Make a mental note of the times such players *do* get «run over» due to their bad play. This is a way of seeing that there is an offsetting justice that does prevail.

*«Destiny has four feet, eight hands, and sixteen eyes; how then shall the ill-doers with only two of each hope to escape?»*

– Chinese Proverb

### **Trap 15: Recognize when a game turns bad.**

So you drove over to this high-class, upscale casino and walked into the poker room, and, luckily, you got a seat in a very beatable, cushy game filled with wealthy socialites in their mid-70s who were wearing a lot of jewelry but who had no idea at all how to play. In a matter of minutes, your chip stack was soaring. But then you felt an annoying hunger pang, and as quick as possible you raced to the casino deli to get something to eat. But quick as you were, you weren't quick enough, because in the short time you were gone, several of the wealthy dowagers disappeared and they were replaced by young up-and-coming poker pros wearing hungry expressions, designer jogging suits, baseball caps turned around backwards, and stereo headphones.

You said to yourself: «Oh, *great*», as you pulled out your chair, sat back down, and looked over at them with their sleepy eyes, idly fingering their chips, and trying to look as if they'd just accidentally sat down for some casual play. As quick as this, the game had turned bad and become a lot tougher than it had been before. The lesson: When the players change and a game turns bad, *notice* it, recognize it. Then adjust, or leave. (This also applies to games where the discrepancy is not as obvious as the above example – when a slight shift is made in the lineup, but one that is to your disadvantage.)

### **Trap 16: Don't bet to impress peripheral characters, acquaintances, hangers-on, passersby, gawkers, railbirds, rubbernecks, or other miscellaneous bystanders who happen to be watching the game.**

The people on the outskirts of the game, that is. Attempting to impress them with your splashy play, legendary flair, or no-holds-barred style of betting (or even showing them your hand) is a sure way to get farther into a



hand than you originally intended. By this means it is possible to lose back in one hand money that you have gradually accumulated over a period of disciplined play.

Here is an example. Let's say you have a straight in 7-card stud. As the hand has progressed, you've let another acquaintance (who is standing behind you) look at your cards and watch along. A lot of aggressive betting and raising has suddenly broken out from an opponent across the table, however, who has a lot of flush cards showing, and this makes you suspect that, good as your hand is, you are probably beat. But since your friend is watching, you can't very well pitch the hand (something you might do if he wasn't watching). Now you have to stay in to the bitter end to see how it comes out. This is a good example of how playing to the gallery can be detrimental to your chip stack.

**Trap 17: Some games (like Omaha high-low) have built-in, catastrophic swings of fortune that lie just beneath the surface of the game – swings that are not readily apparent to the naked eye.**

These big swings are not particularly visible. In fact, it's quite possible to play in these games for a long period of time – weeks, even months – and not run into them. We might say that they lie just under the surface of the game. The fact that they are hidden can sometimes lead to a false sense of security – and a false sense of how good our game is. (This may also be one of the chief attractions of the game to newcomers.)

Compounding the problem, the games themselves can look deceptively easy (to hit the flop, to finish a hand, and so on). The wins, when they come, seem to come effortlessly. What does this mean for the player in practical terms? It means clearly: Be *very* careful in such games. Do not treat them lightly. On the days when nothing is working, disasters can compound and big losses occur.

*«Be not too proud! For the fullness of the moon Is but a single night».*

-Hakuin

**Trap 18: Be wary of overconfidence when things are running well.**

We shouldn't begin to walk too tall when things are going well. Overconfidence can be a trap, too. Black holes of breathtaking depth are scattered throughout the poker firmament. Things can go wrong, then they can go wrong in bunches, and after that, they can get worse and turn really bad. A big profit you have built up can easily melt away. Humility should always be in the forefront.

In a more general sense, «humble» is an important part of poker. Why? Because nonhumble is finished learning. (And indeed, why shouldn't it be? It already knows everything. Its education is complete. It no longer has any reason to continue learning. It's already at the pinnacle.) Humble is necessary – if for no other reason than to avoid the pitfalls of nonhumble.

Be cocky, if you must – for the railbirds, the spectators, the gallery, or your opponents. Have a twinkle in your eye and a strut of assurance, but

never forget for a single moment how difficult things can get. Never go past a certain point in feelings of personal invincibility.

The Poker Gods can still get you. They can dump on you endlessly and relentlessly. The pros know this only too well. That is why, despite the image of confidence they always present, there is still a core of humility to them – almost a «quietness» about their demeanor.

**Trap 19: Money you don't lose now is money you don't have to win back later.**

If you think you're beat in a hand, get out. Don't keep hanging on and tossing in extra chips, extra bets. These are chips you will have to earn back later.

This has been written in many different ways by numerous poker writers, but it probably bears repeating in any poker book:

*«Money you don't lose is just as real as money that you win».*

– Roy Cooke



*«Die dollar you keep from losing on a losing day is the same dollar you add to a win on a winning day».*

– Mike Caro

**Trap 20: One of the worst things that can happen to you in poker is to be playing wrong and winning at it.**

Playing incorrectly and winning is a terrible combination, as we have seen, because the wins tend to reinforce erroneous play. For the bad player, when the luck ends (as it always does) the temptation is often to commit even *more* strongly to the strategies he was using in order to recreate the wins that occurred earlier. But he does not realize that these previous wins occurred randomly, for fluke reasons.

This phenomenon can be witnessed frequently in poker rooms. A player at a table is playing poorly but winning hand after hand. Other players are shaking their heads with puzzlement, asking each other, «How does he do it?» And it is indeed a mystery – until a month or so later when you see the same guy, and he's down to his last nickel. He's lost thousands, and he can't figure out why.

**Trap 21: Get away from hands where a lot of raising and reraising are starting to occur.**

The problem here is that this kind of betting usually happens for a reason. Unless you have a huge hand yourself, get away from the hand. Above all, don't call bets in this kind of situation just to show that you can't be pushed around.

### **Trap 22: Don't get involved in poker games that are about to break up.**

In this type of game, if you lose a few hands, there is often not enough time to win the money back before the game breaks up. Take a few hits and get down, and you may be tempted into playing looser in an attempt to catch up (thus increasing the possibility of even greater losses). You are allowing yourself to be influenced drawn off your game – by the time factor. It is for this reason these types of games should be avoided. Games that are breaking up usually have certain telltale signs. The players are talking about quitting right from the start. Two or three are glancing at their watches, mentioning how busy they are, and talking about all the things they «have to do». The aggravation factor is not worth it. It's just easier not to get involved.

### **Trap 23: Don't kid yourself about whether you hit the flop.**

This is a black hole into which a lot of money disappears, even among some experienced players. It has to do with players deluding themselves as to whether they hit the flop or not (with the accompanying result that they are unable to fold the hand).

It's important that if you didn't hit the flop, you get out. ("Fit or fold," this is sometimes called.)

Don't start dreaming about how some part of your hand hit the flop and how maybe, with a few more cards, some good things might start to happen. This error of partially hitting the flop and continuing on, is where a lot of money disappears. Expert players, of course, can function within the complexities of such situations as this. But average players ought to give strong thought to folding.

There is another expression in poker called «flop and drop». The idea behind it is that you *do* drop if you don't get anything.

### **Trap 24: The scared money trap.**

One long-standing rule of all gambling (including poker) is that «scared money never wins». When you're underfinanced at the table (that is, when you're playing with «scared money»), your decision-making becomes more tentative, defensive, and panicky. You make mistakes that opponents seize on and use against you. The «whatever-can-go-wrong-will-go-wrong» phenomenon starts to come into play.

It's not completely clear what causes this. Maybe we panic at the wrong times because we've got so much riding on the outcome. Or maybe it's the missed chances – situations occurring that we can't take full advantage of. Or it might be that we become more readable because we care too much, or we are more easily intimidated. Or that someone who is desperately afraid of failing tends to cut off his options and his possibilities, out of fear. (The sure thing that someone else would grab onto in a minute, he hesitates at grabbing, and in so doing, loses his chance. Through fear of failure, he created failure.) Whatever it is, scared money is a situation to avoid. Once you feel that cold chill of playing with the rent money – where

you simply *must* win – you’ll find that things very rarely go right from that point on.

Playing scared, if carried far enough, eventually leads to a phenomenon that might be called «the fetal position». This is represented by totally defensive play – a kind of deer-caught-in-the-headlights panic that takes us completely off our game.

Such a player often responds by playing «tight», but it is a false tightness – a kind of fear that constantly second-guesses itself. It zigs when it should zag, and is completely out of sync with events.

Scared poker play brings out something that lives in the dark recesses of the human brain. Some weird neurotrigger gets flipped that says, «Revert to your *earliest* game – back when you were first starting out. If it looks like you’re going to win, back off. But if you’re going to lose, then push in all your chips and bet the farm».

I recall one day when I was sitting next to a pretty bad player. He showed me his cards as he played. When he had only half a hand, or his cards were only moderately good, then he was all gamble. But as soon as he had a good hand, something peculiar happened. He suddenly froze up, got nervous, and checked it down. This pattern became so clear that it was almost comical. I asked myself what was going on here, psychologically. It almost seemed as if, on a hand where he was beatable, he became fearless because the outcome could go either way. In those cases, in a strange way, the pressure was off. When he had a monster hand, however, he became scared to death that a hand this good might get beaten, and the emotional toll this would take on him if it lost. A kind of fear seemed to enter inside him and freeze him up at such times.

I felt quite privileged. It was almost as if I was seeing the very genesis of bad play. As if a curtain had been drawn back, and I was seeing the very root cause of «playing wrong» demonstrated before my eyes – ziggling when you should zag, being «off-stroke» and the source from which it comes.

### **Trap 25: The rake/small game trap.**

High blood pressure is sometimes referred to in the health-and-fitness world as the silent killer. In poker, the silent killer is the rake. (The rake is the percentage the casino takes out of every pot.) It seems so small, so modest, so unassuming, that we often fail to consider its effect.

But there *is* an effect: A lot of chips are disappearing from the table. (And rest assured, these chips *are* coming from somewhere – they’re coming from the players.)

The rake is like a couple of jugglers throwing eight or nine balls back and forth between them, and every so often a hand reaches in from somewhere and takes one of the balls out of play. The total number of balls, we may notice, is shrinking.

In fact, if we watch this process long enough, it might occur to us that it’s really only an illusion that it is you versus me in the game. In reality, that hand that is reaching in is stealing the game out from under us.

The rake is completely invisible at the beginning of a person’s poker career, of course. You’re a new player. You simply play on happily, and you

don't really pay much attention to it at all. After enough sessions, however, you begin to sense something at work. You might win \$200 on one occasion, but lose slightly more – \$260, say – on another. Or you might win \$100, but you lose \$140, and so on. Gradually, the outline of a larger picture emerges, and it's a picture you've seen somewhere before; in the slot machine area of the casino, at the roulette wheel, or at the blackjack tables. Your good times are being milked, squeezed, raked. You somehow don't seem to win quite enough during the good times to make up for the bad times.

This makes it hard to beat the casino *small* game – maybe impossible, unless of course the players are playing very poorly. And even then it's an uphill road. If your opponents have any experience at all, it is generally a losing proposition – losing to the rake.



## Chapter 12

# General Poker and Gambling Tips

### Two Things That Separate the Good Player from the Bad Player

- *The difference in the game is how you play the bad hands and marginal hands.* There's nothing new about this statement – it has been written many times before. Almost every player in the world knows what to do with the good hands. And if such hands are virtually «self-playable», then it follows that one secret of the game must reside in how the bad hands are played, and the marginal hands. It is what you do with these hands that makes the difference in the game (and what gives the better player his edge).
- *The way a player responds when his game hits the skids is another thing that separates the good players from the bad.* Every poker player will go into mind-numbing «free fall» at one time or another in his poker career. This is that well-known state where every single thing that can possibly can go wrong goes wrong. How the person responds to this is another indicator of expertise. Did you come away from this poker session with a \$400 loss? Or an \$1100 loss? When your game started going downhill, did you try to «play through it» using prudence and common sense? Or did you jam the accelerator to the floor and increase the magnitude of the disaster as you barreled downhill?

A good player is someone who can have many things go wrong and still keep his losses to a moderate amount. As a player, this is another goal to have the kind of game where things can go disastrously wrong six or eight or twelve times, and then go right only a few times and you recover enough to keep your losses manageable or break even. (For this means that in sessions where things *aren't* going drastically wrong, you're going to be ahead.)

**Rule 160: If a player misinterprets times or luck as times of skill, then disaster awaits, because at some future point he will call upon this supposed skill when it doesn't really exist.**

Know why you won. If it was luck, call it by its right name.

Players who accept the bountiful gifts of luck and recast them as skill are flirting with disaster. Notions such as, «I'm outplaying the others – maybe even the whole table» during a run of good luck promise storm clouds on the far horizon.

It is necessary that we have an accurate assessment of ourselves and our game. Poker is very unsparing to people who lie to themselves.

*«Many had players wilt not improve because they cannot bear self-knowledge».*

– David Mamet

**Rule 161: See the first «bad beat» after a long winning streak as the doorway into hell.**

For some unknown reason, this is often the case. Things often seem to go downhill from that point on. It takes the wind out of our sails, and nothing seems to go right after that. We may have been winning steadily and comfortably up to that point, but once we took that one huge bad beat (or perhaps made that one big mistake that cost us a pot), things seemed to unravel. It affected our play. (How often have you heard something like the following: «You know, after I lost with those four fives that time, I don't think I won another hand»). For whatever reason, it affected us and derailed our game. Whenever a winning streak is interrupted by a bad beat, be careful from then on.

*«The hog is the easiest animal to train».*

– American folk saying

**Rule 162: Don't try to stretch a win.**

Don't get greedy. Be happy with the amount of your profit.

When the game started, you would have been thrilled to death to win \$100. But now you find yourself up \$300, and you're starting to dream a little bigger. Suddenly, nothing less than a \$500 or \$600 win will suffice. In order to make this happen, you are trying to «force» things a little, and this ends up with you overplaying your cards and losing a good portion of your chips back. Don't «press»; be happy with whatever profit level you manage to attain.

*«Pigs get fatter; hogs get slaughtered».*

– Poker room saying

Don't let a pipe-dream form in your mind with visions of ever greater riches. Play solid cards. Don't try to stretch a single into a triple. Don't try to turn a triple into an inside-the-park home run. It may have been *meant* to be a triple.

**Rule 163: If you get way down, monetarily, in any form of gambling, and then, through some miracle, you manage to get back to even, call it quits for the day.**

Every gambler has seen someone pull off this miracle make a heroic comeback, then continue playing and go right back down the slippery slope a second time. If you manage to get back to even after a major disaster, go

home. The Poker Gods are trying to tell you something. Be happy you made it back to even. Tomorrow is another day.

**Rule 164: When you win a big hand, don't jump right back in on the very next hand simply because you have a huge pile of chips.**

What makes this tricky is that you do have a certain momentum going for you, one that can be used to intimidate opponents on upcoming hands. The other players all tend to back off about an inch (and that's just enough collectively. In fact, that becomes a *Jot*, collectively).

In general, use good sense when you have mountains of chips in from of you. Your goal is to keep them.

Using your large stack of chips to «fire-hose» money right back into the game again on subsequent hands is usually the first step in having that stack of chips shrink back down to a small stack. Continue to play solid poker. Get used to prosperity.

*«When prosperity comes, do not use all of it».*

– Confucius

**Rule 165: When you hit something big, nurse the win for a while.**

This is a good rule in any form of gambling. Back off for a while; nurse the win. Let the money sit. Go for a walk. This protects you from giving it all right back.

**Rule 166: The 75% rule.**

One of the most difficult things in any form of gambling is knowing when to quit. (It's often easier to know when to quit when you're losing than when you're winning.)

One good rule of thumb is to try to take home 75% of your winnings. The goal is to get out the door with the bulk of your win – or at least a significant chunk of it – that's the idea behind this rule. (It doesn't have to be exactly 75% – it could be 66% or 80% – whatever figure you're comfortable with.) There's nothing wrong with booking a win. Again, tomorrow is another day.

**Rule 167: Don't play last week's heater.**

Today's game is a new game. Don't assume everything is going to be working effortlessly, as it may have been last week. Some players try to raise their whole game up to the level of their latest success, expecting an easy time of it from here on out. That's not the way it works. Each game is an independent event from previous sessions, good or bad.

**Rule 168: If you win a lot of money gambling, it will feel as though it was effortless and easy. It will also feel as if it is «typical» – the way things are «supposed» to work. But it isn't typical; it never was.**



When the wins happen, they tend to happen so easily and effortlessly that it may feel like the norm. But it isn't. It's not the norm. Protect your win. Protect and guard the money you've won.

Don't get the impression that some kind of fountain of money has now been turned on – one that will be flowing most of the day and into next week.

Likewise, if it's in poker (where your cards have been running well), don't get lulled into thinking this is the way things are going to be from now on. It isn't. Don't use a run of good cards to redefine the game.

This concept applies to the long-term, too. If your cards have been running well for weeks on end, it's easy to start readjusting your game so that you are operating permanently at this level – planning your strategy around this wonderful new state of affairs. Always remember that there is *another* level, a darker level that is always lurking.



## Chapter 13

# On Steaming, Calm, and Composure

*«He submits to be seen through a microscope, who suffers himself to be caught in a fit of passion».*

– Johann Kaspar Lavater



*«We one can achieve serenity until the glare of passion is past the meridian»*

– Cyril Connolly

### **Rule 169: Try to keep emotions out of the game.**

One important poker objective is to try to stay as neutral as possible – and not to get emotionally caught up in the game. The reason is because it is much harder to get a clear sense of what is going on in the game once heated emotions come into play. A certain measure of indifference is therefore helpful. Another way of putting it would be: Stop *caring* so much. Caring – deeply and passionately – tends to wedge itself between us and our play. It interferes with clear perception and objective analysis (not to mention making us more readable).

Eliminating emotions from the game also has the side benefit of eliminating *very* negative emotions, such as the joys of payback, the pleasures of one-upping someone, the thrills of revenge, anger, hostility, and so on. These bad-karma emotions are also among those done away with under a program of abolishing all emotions.

Finally, if you show emotion during poker («I'm angry! I'm not getting any cards!»), opponents only need to look for a continuation of those emotions (or lack thereof) to read your play.

*«To play at the top of your form, you cannot be emotionally involved in the results».*

– Arnold Snyder. *Card Player* magazine

### **Rule 170: The importance of emotional management in poker.**

«Money management» is a term frequently mentioned in the poker literature, but emotional management is equally important. Extra focus on composure is necessary to offset the extra measures of anger that are contained in some of these games. Frustration is such an intrinsic part of some of them (Omaha/8, for instance), that we should probably sit down in

the game with this subject in the forefront of our minds. Our emotions need to be thought of as a separate project, not as some kind of side issue or something peripheral

There is a lot of anger in poker. The usual reason is because of the luck factor (draw-outs, bad beats) and also because the markers used in the game (the game pieces) *are* money – other people’s money – and that makes it personal. Emotional management therefore needs to be kept in the forefront of our focus and not be put on the back burner.

**Rule 171: If you go on tilt, it may be better if you lose.**

It sets a bad precedent for future play if you go on tilt when something bad happens in the game, and you win by this means. It reinforces this as a possible approach to take on future occasions. In the back of your mind will always be the memory of how you dug yourself out of a big hole one other time by betting wildly and irresponsibly, so you may be tempted to try it again. When such «tilt hands» win, it can be difficult to put the old standards back in place. It is perhaps better, therefore, in the long run, if we lose when we go on tilt.

**Rule 172: Don’t make a target of yourself.**

The player should avoid making a «target» of himself in a poker game. This state of affairs usually arises due to challenges and dares of one son or another – either addressed to one opponent, several, or even the whole group. Opponents become less predictable when this happens. It’s harder to guess their motivations for betting and raising. They can also gang up and act together, all of which makes your job more difficult. A better plan is for you to blend in and act normal. Your job is to take home the money, not throw down the gauntlet and achieve some kind of weird satisfaction in a «manhood» contest.

**Rule 173: Feeling generous? Charitable? Sympathetic? Compassionate? Big-hearted? Always remember that punishing your opponents in poker is part of the game – not who you are.**

These things are part of the game in the same way that castling is part of chess. Some players have a problem with this, however. Their core personalities are simply too nice, too congenial, that they just can’t get past this. They are such naturally nice people that it almost requires a personality change, a willed look of malevolence in order to make the switch to the kind of person who would raise or «punish». (Look for this look among these types of players.)

They think it makes them a bad person if they do it. The thing to remember: It’s a game. It’s (rue that money is used as playing pieces, but it is still a game. Raising, re-raising, and check-raising are like moving a bishop in chess or moving the little metal top hat in Monopoly. There’s nothing personal about it. It doesn’t make you a lesser person.

Poker is one of the few games where taking people’s money is the object of the game. Not just the idea of *playing* for money, but money as

markers that are used in the game, and the object is to take away the other person's markers.

**Rule 174: Inside and outside the game.**

While the actual goal of the game of poker is winning money, always keep in mind your larger goals, as well as your larger life and personality and values. For instance, I once saw a player lose a guitar in a poker game. At the end of the game, the winner of the guitar simply handed it back. This seemed like an important lesson: *within* the game, your goal is to win it – to take away the guys guitar. Outside the game, you resume your real personality.

**Rule 175: Develop habits of gentlemanliness and politeness from the beginning of your poker career.**

Make these things a priority from the beginning, and they will be inserted early into one's evolving poker mind. They will develop a deep groove there and will not be subject to transitory whims in order to keep them in place, and by this means gentlemanliness will not itself be a thing that comes and goes.

*«He who observes times and seasons to regulate his conduct is not a man of wisdom».*

– UruangTzu

**Rule 176: A word about affirmations.**

Poker theorists introduced the idea of «affirmations» a few years ago. Affirmations are self-motivational phrases the player can repeat to himself to get himself into a winning frame of mind phrases such as, «I'm a lucky person», «I'm a winner», or «A winning force surrounds me», and so on.

The whole idea of affirmations seems pretty silly – grown-up people walking around saying things like this to themselves – silly, that is, until we notice the strength and power of *negative* affirmations («I never win», «I know I'm going to lose», or «I'm never lucky»). Once we see the power of negative affirmations, it isn't so clear that positive affirmations are such a dumb idea.

**Rule 177: Understanding the cold spell.**

Understanding the «cold spell» and what constitutes it is a necessary part of the education of a poker player. Without this understanding, a small voice within us tends to cry out in agony when this happens, and it can seriously disrupt our game. The player needs to have an understanding of where this phenomenon fits into the overall scheme of things in order to come to terms with it. He also needs to understand it *emotionally* – his own emotional responses when it occurs. But isn't this self-evident, you might ask? Not necessarily. It is possible to be on the inside of it in such a way that, looking out, you are blind to it.

**Rule 178: Develop the ability to watch yourself.**

One important skill in poker is to be able to watch yourself – to almost have a second personality that can take a step back and watch the activities of the first – take note of his temperament, how he's reacting, his moods, how tired he is, how impatient, how annoyed, or angry ...

**Rule 179: When you play a poker session lasting twelve hours or so, expert to have a built-in four or five hour cold streak.**

Players who don't know this are going to have problems dealing with it when it occurs. A twelve hour poker session is going to include a four or five hour cold streak (or longer) on a fairly consistent basis.

This is especially true if you are restricting yourself to playing good cards. The player must be mentally and emotionally prepared for this when it happens, and should anticipate that it will occur. Those who aren't prepared for it often self-destruct when it occurs.

**Rule 180: Be prepared for *long* cold spells.**

Many newer players are surprised at how long a cold spell can last. It's not unheard of for things to go wrong for a player for two or three weeks straight. (Or longer – and by this, we mean very wrong, as in day in/day out wrong.) To a player who is doing basically everything right in his play, not making a lot of mistakes, this often comes as a shock. Be mentally and emotionally prepared for this too when it happens.

**Rule 181: Playing against excellent opponents will make you seem colder, card-wise.**

The better your opponents, the more you will be forced to restrict your play to good hands only and to folding more hands, and therefore the «colder» you may seem to be (because these good hands will come farther apart). You may interpret this – erroneously – as: «For some reason, every time I'm in a game against good opponents, I never seem to get any cards».

**Rule 182: Three or four times a year, you are going to have a poker session that is simply and utterly horrendous. Some years, you may have half a dozen of these sessions. Other years it might be only two or three. Know ahead of time that they will occur, and try to get through them as cheaply as possible.**

Long-time poker players know that this is a built-in aspect of the game. It is unavoidable if you play on a regular basis. They know that a few times a year, a day is going to occur when you are going to get *destroyed*. These times will be rare, but they will occur. Plan on their occurring, and try to minimize the disaster when they do. Try to keep the bleeding to a minimum, if you can. Above all, don't respond by going on tilt, raising the stakes, throwing in ever more money out of frustration, trying to play from way down while exhausted, or any similar foolishness, all of which only deepens the nightmare.

Say to yourself: «Today is, unfortunately, one of those handful of utterly terrible days that occur every year. It's annoying that today is one of them, but this seems to be the case. My goal now is to get through this with as much dignity, composure, and good sense as I can muster – and also to get through it as cheaply as possible».

Here is a quote from Nike chairman Phil Knight about the business world, one that also applies to poker: «There's going to be a down cycle ... and our job is to recognize that and keep the downs as shallow as possible». Keep the downs as shallow as possible. This is good advice for poker too.

**Rule 183: If you have a run of bad cards, don't leave the game. Sit there, and let it teach you something.**

Some players think they can «run away» from a cold streak. They will trick it or outmaneuver it somehow by changing games, changing casinos, changing decks, or tables, or chairs, or dealers, or some other variation of trying to «out-run» it.

A better approach might be to use it to *learn* – to sit back, pull in your home; play only premium hands, scale back your game, and let it teach you something. Try to play through it; use it to work on your game – on your patience. Because we have to know how to operate under these circumstances too. We can't just run away every time something unfavorable happens in poker.

**Rule 184: Have an emotional strategy for each phase of the game.**

You've been folding cards for five hours straight? Have an emotional strategy in your arsenal for this. Losing on the river to a two-outer several times in a row? Have an emotional strategy for this situation. You've had six or seven cold sessions in a row? Have an emotional strategy for this. And likewise for all phases of the game.

*«Too is the thing that accompanies all other things. Its name is Tranquility' amid all Disturbances».*

– Chuang Tzu

**Rule 185: You don't *have* to play any hand.**

It's sometimes helpful to remember that you don't *have* to play any hand. You can fold every hand, all night long, if you choose. You can fold 200 hands in a row if you so desire. Simply keep throwing in your cards face down. Players sometimes forget this.

Don't put pressure on yourself to play some artificial quota in the back of your mind of hands that you «must» be in on. Nobody can make you play any hand you don't want to play. Realizing this can add a certain detachment and serenity to your game.

*«It's difficult to excel at something you don't truly enjoy».*

– Jack Nicklaus

**Rule 186: You must like playing for its own sake.**

Every so often we encounter players who are absolutely miserable at the poker table. They go through anguish and torment of an unimaginable kind on almost every hand. One little-known secret of poker is that you have to like doing it for its own sake. To some extent – in some way, shape, or form – it has to be fun.

You rarely see this mentioned, but it is probably necessary for success in the game. It helps to enjoy the larger experience the game and the poker scene in general. Not only does this keep us from putting too much emphasis on winning alone, it gives us a more rounded game (allowing us to fold for long periods, and so on) if we enjoy the larger experience all around it. It also becomes harder to explain losing sessions to ourselves if the only reason we're there is to win.

Another way of putting it is this: Don't get hooked strictly on the thrill of winning alone – because a lot of times, that thrill won't be there.

*«The moment of victory is much too short to live for that and nothing else».*

– Martina Navratilova

**Rule 187: Avoid taking yourself too seriously.**

It's possible to become such a student of the game that great seriousness gains the upper hand. Mirth starts to elude us, and all forms of jollity and lightheartedness depart. We're at the table for one reason and one reason only. We wear our game face at all times. The problem with this approach: It's not having any fun. In almost all endeavors, playfulness is part of creativity. There's some bit of casualness and indifference; some twinkle in the eye. Having fun is not a luxury or an extravagance, but a necessary part of the game. Putting on a grim game face and bearing down too hard can be counterproductive without seeming to be.

*«He wins every hand who mingles profit with pleasure».*

– Horace, *Epistles*



## Chapter 14

### Tips for Low-Limit Games

**Rule 188: In some low-limit games, some of the most experienced players are afraid to bet.**

For the most part, these are good players. They play tight, know the game well, know correct hand values, and have plenty of experience. They're just overly conservative when it comes to betting. They adopt an overly-cautious stance and play too defensively. Their game could take a big step forward if they went on the offense once in a while, for the simple fact that most of the rest of their game is pretty well in place.

**Rule 189: Bad players who are belting away with great confidence on marginal cards are sometimes some of the hardest players to play against.**

One of the trickiest opponents to play against can be the highly confident and aggressive, terrible player. This is especially true when this type of player is getting lucky or there are more than one of these types in the game. Such players are capable of frustrating even the best players at times.

A second category of dangerous opponents can be those who embrace loose, sloppy play that simply throws money around.

You can't have a volatile game simply to confuse opponents – and for no other reason. Occasionally you have to win money. Some players are difficult to play against for this reason. They use their chips in the way that is (the most annoying and frustrating to you, without any regard for whether they win or not. The problem with this strategy, of course, is that you still have to *win* once in a while. You *can't just* attempt to frustrate opponents. Thus, while such players can be dangerous adversaries, they are also losers most of the time.

However, while this may be ineffective as a long-term technique, the good player might borrow a page from it occasionally – to keep opponents off balance.

**Rule 190: If you depart from normal, solid poker, make sure everyone hears about it.**

If you're going to play loose, or make some kind of questionable play, make sure everybody knows it. (The poker term for this is «advertising».)

Also, when «advertising», don't forget the players on either side of you – show them what you are doing. (They are within easy reach.)



### **Rule 191: Develop your poker system.**

Once you've attained a certain level of experience in poker, you can be said to have a «system». Assuming your system is accurate, you should try not to deviate from it too greatly or too often (except occasionally to mix up your play – to keep from being too predictable).

One idea for mixing up your play is to play a few of those hands that are correct but that you don't like. These are hands you may dislike for one reason or other (including superstition).

For example, let's say you don't like getting a pair of 10's in your starter cards in 7-stud or hold'em, or you don't like getting a 2-3-4 type hand in Omaha high-low. They're not *bad* hands – they're just hands you've never been lucky with. The book (in terms of poker odds) says it is OK to play them occasionally in certain situations. So deviate from your usual system of play with hands like these. Remember that being too predictable can be as fatal to your game as anything else.

Also: Don't just mix up your play with a few slightly different hands, but play your good hands in different ways. Check with them sometimes; bet with them at other times; check-raise, and so on.

Mixing up your play becomes especially important in «home games» where everybody knows everybody else because they've been playing together for years. Robbie knows that Ross always starts with three low cards in Stud/8. Gobeli knows that Old Max always calls on the river, no matter what. Angelo always bets a certain way when he has a certain hand, and Kip always raises the flop. Kenny hardly ever slow-plays a good hand, and Duck usually check-raises with the nuts. And so on.

Even players' unpredictable games fall into the «predictable» category once you've seen them enough – so it may be time to rearrange the furniture a little. Break your patterns. Do some things that are new. And mix up the mixing up, too – don't just mix it up in one-dimensional ways. Go against your opponent's expectations.

Here's one final thing: The player who always plays exactly the right cards (according to the book) also becomes too predictable. He may be playing «correctly», but by doing so we know what he has, what kinds of cards he plays, and exactly how he always plays them. This kind of predictability – even when based on «correct» play – can also be fatal.

### **Rule 192: How systems break down.**

Systems: We all have them. They are the familiar order we do things in, the little things we do throughout our day – things such as: having our car keys in hand as we leave a building; never moving too fast when we're holding a cup of coffee; never leaving our eyeglasses lying on a chair; never backing out of a parking stall too fast; putting out our clothes for work the night before; putting a sticky note on our car dashboard to remind us to purchase something. All of these are part of our larger life system.

What is interesting, though, is how these systems break down.

A breakdown invariably is caused by pressure of some kind or other. It can be time pressure, or emotional pressure, or any kind, really – but the result is the same. Some type of overload occurs on the system.

A classic example of putting pressure on a system would be taking the family car out on the highway, running it up to 100 miles (160.93 km) an hour, and holding it there until something gave out. Radiator hose? Transmission? Engine failure? Here is an example of a system under pressure.

Let's say you're having one of your usual days, and you suddenly find yourself doing several small things at once. The phone is ringing, someone's at the door, you're in the midst of scolding a child, and you are also in the middle of writing a check. Since all this is happening at once, well, you're cutting some corners. You're doing all of it slightly faster than you ordinarily would. The result; You accidentally tear the check in half when removing it from the checkbook.

Now this is a small event – a minor one – but it's a good example of how systems break down under pressure. (Often, the strain on one part of the system becomes a strain on *other* parts of the system. A secretary goes on vacation – so to cover for her, another employee takes over her job and gets stretched too thin, and her own job begins to suffer.)

Here's one final example. You go to set a cup of coffee on a table – you always take an extra half-second whenever you do this, of course – you concentrate briefly to make sure the cup rests squarely on the table. But now, since you're in a hurry, you skip this step. You reach out, put the cup down, and walk away. And then you hear a crash behind you in the background.

In short, problems arise when we try to cut corners. When we «push the envelope». Suddenly bad luck appears out of the blue, and we are penalized in some way.

Now, what does all this have to do with poker?

Well, poker is a system too. If enough of the wrong kinds of pressure build up from enough different directions, we may start cutting corners too, and our system can break down, and bad things begin to occur. That is why we must make sure to be on *top* of our game, and in control of it, rather than the other way around.

### **Rule 193: Aspects of being «off-rhythm» – always going the wrong way.**

Occasionally we find ourselves on the wrong «rhythm» in poker. This often shows up at the very end of a hand, when we're heads-up with one other player. It seems that every time we bet a semi-strong hand, our lone remaining opponent has a better hand than we do. And every time we become more hesitant and check in these situations, it turns out we *would* have won had we bet, and the opponent would have called. Sometimes, this goes on for hours.

We are off-rhythm. We are betting when we should check and checking when we should bet. But how does this happen? What are the elements that make up this phenomenon? Certainly fear and defensiveness

are part of it (afraid to bet when we should), and perhaps even anger and stubbornness (we do bet when we shouldn't have). Eventually we may get so fed up at guessing wrong that we bet every single time, just so we're right half of the time.

Let's compare this to driving a car. You're at an intersection, getting ready to pull out. You see a car coming toward you about 100 yards (91.44 m) up the road, and you have time to pull out ahead of it, but you momentarily freeze up. Then it is too late. Now you have to wait. On the opposite end of the spectrum, you get tired of getting pushed around like this so you begin to pull out at wrong times that is, too early, when other cars are too close. You have gotten yourself off rhythm.

Such problems are certainly fear-based, in part. One possible explanation for being off-rhythm in poker: fear of making a good read on your opponent – «he is weak» – and then being *wrong* about it – having your read fail. This can be a very deflating, psychological setback for a lot of players.

Here are some ways of solving the problem:

1. Remove your fear by increasing your bankroll size to the point where there is no monetary pressure at all that enters into your decision-making process. You are completely free to make any betting decision you want – there is no money pressure at all on your shoulders of any kind.
2. Completely clear and neutralize your mind so that you can «read» situations with absolute objectivity.
3. Act on your real feelings. Work on «pulling the trigger» in connection with your reads.
4. Make sure that the feeling you have and the eventual action you take are in sync. Don't become a «negative predictor» – in other words, don't make great reads and analyze situations absolutely correctly, then freeze up and go the opposite way.
5. Go with your first instincts; they are often the best. For instance, you look at a player and you sense fear in him. Now, though, you continue to look at him longer, and the longer you look, the less fearful he seems. Now instead of betting, you check. Go with your original read; don't buy into the eventual aura he is giving off doing this you become mired in a lot of conflicting signals that end up paralyzing your ability to act.
6. Don't second-guess yourself afterwards if your read was wrong. Simply clear your mind and move on – don't beat yourself up over it.

**Rule 194: Too much respect for money makes a bad poker player.**

To a certain extent we have to disrespect money (or at least give the appearance of it) to play the game of poker. A person who values money too highly will find himself in many conflicting situations. He will have difficulty

putting money into the pot: it pains him to do so and goes against his every instinct. In the course of play, he tends to panic too frequently, telegraphs this fear to the other players, and generally makes bad decisions, which his opponents use against him.

Knowing how much he values money, they will raise him at crucial times, knowing it will pain him greatly to call the bet. He will be subject to every kind of manipulation. Often – ironically – this person sees himself as a very *good* player, because he thinks he is very tight and conservative in his play. But he is actually too predictable. There is a certain adventuresome aspect to poker; being willing to splash a little money around from time to time makes you a more unpredictable opponent.

You can't play it safe. You have to take a chance on going broke. It's part of the game. Poker can't be approached from a position of total safety.

*«You must have enough courage to go broke on every hand. I could have, should have won the hand will not get it done; you must have enough courage to play the hand».*

– «Oklahoma Johnny» Hale, professional poker player

**Rule 195: If your opponents' view of you is that you are the sort of player who is likely to call any bet, and they are still betting strongly into you, why aren't you out?**

Opponents obviously aren't bluffing if they know you will call any bet. So that must mean they have something. (This is another reason it helps to make it look like you disrespect money, or have no qualms about spending it.)

If your opponents know this about you, it will limit them in certain ways. They will be less likely to try to bluff you, for one thing. It will also tell you quite a bit about their cards, because if they are betting (knowing you will likely call any bet), then they must have something. Get out.

There is a similar corollary in rule 196.

**Rule 196: Once you've established that you can't be bluffed out, stop proving it.**

Quit spending money to prove how obstinate you are. *Let* them push you out once in a while. You've accomplished your task; You've shown that you're capable of «calling down» any and all bets. Don't keep proving it over and over. At some point, the price becomes too high.

**Rule 197: If you think you're beat, don't go on putting money in the pot just for the looks of it.**

Challenges sometimes get laid down in a poker game. Remarks get made – and we feel we can't just swallow our pride and do an about-face in the middle of a hand. If we fold, we think it will look bad in view of all those foregoing comments. Reputations are sometimes on the line: who is really a «big bettor» and who is a «real player», and so on. Don't keep putting in bets on the basis of this kind of B.S. Fold quietly, diplomatically, and

indifferently. There'll be other opportunities down the road to defeat these players. (In fact, you *are* actually beating them when you are playing like this.) One of the most important aspects of poker is the ability to «get away from a hand».

**Rule 198: Don't worry about being consistent.**

Lei's say you raised and re-raised in the early betting rounds because you had excellent starter cards. But then your hand went bad, so you folded. This provoked a few stares – and raised eyebrows – around the table. («First he raises, and now he folds», one player mutters.) Ignore them. Don't feel a need to be «consistent» – that is, continuing to throw in good money just because you were the original bettor, or raiser.

This is a mistake some players make. They keep betting out of a sense of obligation that they must be consistent with their previous actions. One sign of a good player is to be able to turn on a dime – in other words, to bet, raise, and fold all in a short space of time.

*«To be swayed neither by the opponent nor by his sword is the essence of swordsmanship».*

– Miyamoto Musashi

**Rule 199: Other players seeking to attach emotions to your play. Opponents sometimes try to attach emotions to your actions («Ha! You bet, and [hen we made you fold]»).**

They attach an emotional meaning of some kind to your actions (or at least they try to). When you raise, for example – «So he's *raising* now». Then, when you miss your hand and have to fold: «Well, well – I thought he had something. He was raising before, and now he's folding».

To the good player, this behavior is strictly humorous.

It is a good idea to possess a Teflon-type outer shell so this son of thing slides right off you. The good player simply chuckles at such attempts, and eventually the opponent gives up on these types of ploys.

**Rule 200: You don't have to play really tight to beat a game – you just have to play a little tighter than the rest of them are playing.**

This is advice you sometimes hear about a loose or wild game.

If a player plays extremely tight against a loose lineup, he is not really participating in the game. He is not really taking advantage of the opportunity in front of him. In a sense, he is «sitting out». This will work, of course, and will win money, but the player needs to at least get involved enough in the game to take advantage of the situation. Get in there; play. Stay on slightly better hands than they are playing, and out-play them.

**Rule 201: Don't forget what it looks like you have.**

We should never forget that poker is a game, not only of what we have, but what it *looks* like we have (especially in games like 7 Stud, 7 Stud High-Low, and similar games). While this might seem obvious, it should probably be

included in any poker book. At those times when none of the other players has a decent hand, what it *looks* like you have can be extremely valuable.

It is easy to forget this. Novice players often just sit there quite passively, heads down, playing their «real» cards and forgetting this aspect entirely. Bet on what it looks like you have too. Don't forget to use this as a tool.

**Rule 202: People who are betting very strongly may be on trips.**

People with good hands tend to bet strongly. However, if they are betting a little stronger than this even, in many forms of poker, they may have «trips» (three of a kind). This is because trips are that curious anomaly that suffers greatly at the hand of draws. They *really* don't want other people in. They want to drive them all out before these other players make their hands (such as flush draws, and straight draws).

Look for a little extra forcefulness in betting as one of the signs that a player has trips.

**Rule 203: If you are heads-up with one other player and have a «lock» on one end of a split-pot, don't stop betting. Don't just assume the other player has half the pot and you have the other.**

This is a frequently made mistake. If there is any chance your opponent might fold (or that you might have him beat both ways), keep betting. Some players pull up on the reins at this point and quit betting. They assume they are going to split the pot, so they think, why keep betting? Only to find out later that they had a two-way winner.

You can cost yourself numerous bets by thinking this way. Any time you have a «lock», the general rule is; Keep betting. (One exception to this rule: if you think you're tied with a chance of being «quartered», say, as in Omaha high-low.)

**Rule 204: If you lost the hand, make *sure* you lost.**

Take another look at all the cards at the end of the hand. Did the player who announced, «I've got a straight», really have a straight? If another player is announced as having a better hand than you, does he really? Take an extra moment to look and make sure. Don't just give up all (or part) of the pot automatically in these situations. If somebody across the table tells you that you're beat when the cards are all turned up, don't take his word for it either. Look at the cards yourself. Make sure. World-class players and long-time experienced poker dealers can all tell plenty of stories about hands misread and pots wrongly awarded. Take that extra minute to really focus, and look things over at the end.

**Rule 205: When you drop down in limits, it is good to remember that sometimes your opponents don't have anything.**

Sometimes when we move from a higher-limit game to a lower-limit game, we take our judgments and expectations with us and we super-impose

them, wrongly, on the new game. We forget that the level of play is going to be different, and oftentimes, it's going to be worse.

I remember a game of Omaha high-low I was in, in which I had the second-best possible low hand. After the last card came up, a player in early position bet. The next player raised, a third player re-raised, and another player capped it. Two more players then called. All of this action happened ahead of me. Seeing this, I threw away my second-best low hand, logically figuring that one of these players had me beat. All the players then turned up their cards, and nobody had anything.

A situation like this would be very unlikely in a higher limit game (six callers and nobody with a hand). The lesson: When you drop down in limits, remember that you're entering a slightly different world – one in which the play can be worse. What might be a dangerous second- or third-best hand at the higher limits might actually be a playable hand here. This is something to keep in mind and factor into your decision making.

**Rule 206: Much of what you know about poker you may throw out when you move to a lower-limit game.**

For some reason, problems arise when we drop down in limits to a smaller game. It's harder to keep our interest up, for one thing, and we're a little bit out of our element. Some players in these games are admittedly terrible, but others are very good at that particular limit. We know we're up against people we could beat in a bigger game, but now we're playing *their* game.

We can't bet enough to drive them out, and many of them are familiar with all the proper game-points at which to either fold or keep limping along. Finally, as a result of banging our heads against this wall of shrewd tightness, our emotions may come into play. We may end up «pressing» and overplaying, and discard some of the hard-earned lessons we've known for years. Since the better opponents at these lower limits don't unravel like this, they tend to win, and we tend to lose.

**Rule 207: Just because a player knows what you have doesn't mean that he has you beat.**

The player across the table says, indicating you, «Well, let's see, he has three of a kind, so with my straight I've got *him* beat. It's the other two guys at the other end of the table I'm worried about, because they may have bigger straights than I do».

Hearing this, you fold your three-of-a-kind. Then it turns out this player only had two pair, after all; he didn't have you beat. Don't do anything based strictly on what somebody says at the table.

**Rule 208: Remember the Edward O. Thorp model.**

The Edward O. Thorp model comes from the world of blackjack. It says, in a nutshell: Bet 10 units when things are in your favor and bet 1 unit when the odds are against you. Bet more at the favorable times and less at the unfavorable times. (One common mistake to avoid: Don't bet 10 units

during the good times *and* 10 units during the bad times. Then they simply cancel one another out.)

Similarly, in poker – you should bet the most at the times when things are in your favor, and scale back your involvement at times when they aren't.

**Rule 209: Basic poker equation: The pots you win must equal the pots you lose plus your false starts.**

The pots you win have to be big enough to cover your «expenses» – that is, the money you put into pots you lose at the end, *plus* the hands you go partway into before folding. This is a basic equation of poker.

In theory, if looked at this way, this shouldn't be too difficult. After all, the pots you win are going to be much larger in comparison to your false starts (a small amount) and the pots you lose. (You might only be one player out of three or four, in which case you're only contributing a fraction of the pot.) We can see from this why «scooping» the pot is an important poker concept.

**Rule 210: Good players let you win smaller pots.**

One way for good players to defeat you, as a group, is to keep the size of the pots you win small, and good players will do this.

This is called «giving no action». Experienced players constantly adjust to changes in your game. When you gamble, they gamble; when you tighten up, they tighten up.

Good players who beat you aren't necessarily doing it on the big dramatic hands, as it may seem; they are often beating you when you have very good hands yet you only rake in small pots. You may not even be aware of it, because you're just happy to win. This is a common sight – bad players gleefully raking in small pots, while the better players are looking out the window.

City planners sometimes use motion studies – high-speed films of pedestrian movements – to study the flow of traffic in an urban area. These films, when they are speeded up, reveal patterns that would otherwise be invisible to the naked eye. One question to ask is: What would your poker game look like, around the table, if it was played out at very high speed? What patterns would emerge? Would you see mountains of chips moving toward some players, while smaller streams of chips headed towards others?

**Rule 211: Don't volunteer any information.**

It's amazing how some players volunteer information about their hands in poker. Even some good players are guilty of this. Some will even come right out and tell you what cards they have, if you ask them. And sometimes – to prove it – they will even show you their cards! A single offhand comment, which might seem quite innocent and irrelevant to the person making it, is often enough to give another player the final piece of information he needs to play his hand.



So it may seem pretty basic, but it bears repeating: Don't volunteer any information.

On the other side of the coin, you should learn to take advantage of this tendency in others. Listen to the table-talk. Sometimes it may be nothing more than challenging interplay between two players who are trying to best each other, but at other times it may result in bits or pieces of information that could mean \$20 or \$30 to you in additional bets you make or save.

**Rule 212: Don't be utterly ridiculous. Know the odds.**

Here is a situation that sometimes arises in low-limit games. One player has a huge hand – such as an aces-full full house – and he bets and bets, but then he suddenly quits betting. When asked later why he quit betting, the player indicates his opponent and says, «I was afraid he had quads». Now what are the actual odds that this other player had 4-of-a-kind? Answer: not very good.

**Rule 213: Folding should be neutral and mechanical, with no emotion attached.**

Folding, in poker, ought to be entirely neutral and mechanical. There shouldn't be any emotion attached to it (and especially not any negative connotation, in the sense of disappointment or dejection) when folding your cards.

Of course, there are many reasons people hate to fold – especially sitting there doing it hour after hour.

First, it's boring. Second, it's expensive (albeit, in a gradual sort of way). Third, everybody else is getting to play and you aren't. Fourth, when you finally do stay (after two hours of folding), the contrast is so stark to the other players that they all instantly muck their hands. Fifth, a feeling starts to occur, far back in your mind, that as an *activity* maybe you're wasting your time here – surely you could be doing something more constructive than this.

The sixth reason players hate to fold is that it rubs them the wrong way. After all, this is a competitive situation, right? A contest, a challenge? Everything about the idea of folding goes against the grain. It calls up images of quitting, throwing in the towel, surrendering, conceding defeat. These are all phrases that describe folding.

«Hang in there» we've been told since youth. Stick with it. Persevere. Don't give up! In some distant corner of our mind, folding goes against most everything we've been taught.

Reason number seven is that folding, as a strategy for success, contradicts human logic. (Dropping out of a contest is the road to victory?) How can you win more victories by joining in *less* battles? It doesn't make sense – this too goes against everything we've been taught.

And finally, the eighth reason is that all of the above, combined, gets to be rather irritating, in a cumulative sort of way.

A person must overcome these hurdles to arrive at the proper state of mind concerning this subject. He must get to the point where he accepts the fact that successful poker *includes* folding as part of the basic strategy of the game.

**Rule 214: Good play rewarded only rarely; bad play penalized severely.**

This is another of the mental hurdles which have to be overcome. Long stretches can occur in which good poker play seems to lead nowhere, while bad play is severely penalized. This can be a battle with oneself. It is one of the things that makes the game an ongoing challenge. It is a psychological hurdle to be overcome.

**Rule 215: Poker is a life-lesson on how to make mistakes.**

Poker teaches many lessons. One lesson that it teaches is how to make mistakes.

Make them with composure. Make them without putting a lot of emotion into them (both during and after). Make them without denial, blame, self-blame, or second-guessing. Don't make them in a way that extends them and exaggerates them, so they lead to even more problems. Confine their area of influence. Correct them, learn from them, move on.

**Rule 216: Use chips to put players into different situations to see how they react.**

Very few players will trade chips for information. Yet information is oftentimes more valuable than chips because it can lead to getting *more* chips, down the road. Information gained on these hands can pay off on later hands.

Suppose, for example, that you re-raised with a terrible hand into a player you were pretty sure had a good hand, just to see what the look on his face was like when he really had something. Then you freeze-framed that look and filed it away in the back of your mind for later use. From then on, every time that look was missing, you raised, and every time you saw that look again, you dropped out. It cost you two bets to learn this. This is an exaggerated example, but the reader will understand what I mean.

**Rule 217: Avoid probability self-righteousness.**

The guy sitting next to you in the game you're in isn't very good. In fact, he's a failure in almost everything he does (including poker). On this night, to top things off, he's also drunk, verging on incoherent. He's even having difficulty sitting up in his chair. But an odd thing is happening: He's winning. He's beating everyone, you included.

Resist the temptation to think that this situation gives you some kind of inherent edge that *must* emerge. It might, it could, it probably will, but it doesn't have to. Stick to your game plan. Treat him *humbly*, as you would any other player. Remember that his cards aren't drunk.

**Rule 218: Bad players tend to lose at the game of poker, but completely *innocent* players seem to be protected by a higher power.**

We've all seen the bad player who comes into a game and gets pummeled, due to his poor play. But who hasn't seen the player who is completely naive and innocent – a total «babe in the woods» – who seems to have angels who hover around him protecting him from all manner of harm. Knowing nothing at all about a game often seems preferable to knowing a little; it seems to offer a kind of cosmic, serendipitous protection.

**Rule 219: The best players are often silent, almost invisible.**

A good player is not usually terribly visible. He often disappears in the game. He re-emerges as a force from time to time, of course, during the game and usually at the end by cashing out the most chips the most often.

**Rule 220: It's quite possible to know all the strategies, probabilities, and expert plays, yet sit down and play a different game entirely – one unconnected to this knowledge.**

Make sure you don't sit down knowing one game and end up playing another. (This is a more common situation than we might think.) You must be able to blend the two – *merge* the two – seamlessly.

**Rule 221: If you have a monster hand in a low-limit game and you happen to be showing it to your neighbor at the table (especially on the river), think about shaking your head slightly.**

It doesn't hurt to be shaking your head ever so slightly – *very* slightly (just a couple of centimeters) – with this huge hand. It can throw people off at the other end of the table, looking at you, who may then bet or raise into you.

**Rule 222: It's possible in poker to drift away from our roots.**

Let's say that there was a year once, an era when you were just starting out when you were «the Kid». You were playing tight, solid, aggressive, innovative, and imaginative poker. You were playing on the cutting edge, terrorizing the table, inspiring fear in all your opponents.

And then what happened? Time passed. Somehow you became one of the regulars. You blended in and took your place as one of the group; you fit into the overall rhythm of the game and simply became one of many good players. Maybe you even got a little lazy at some point, complacent. After an initial burst of enthusiasm in the early days of your poker career – an intensity and excitement fueled by the newness of the activity – you reached another stage where you seemed to pull back a little and get too comfortable.

The truth is, it takes a lot of energy to stay on the cutting edge of *anything* (not just to *get* there but to *stay* there), and this is true whether we're talking about poker, athletic achievements, business, entertainment, art – anything. It can be draining to be on top, so eventually we fall back a little. We're comfortable with letting somebody else take the lead for a while.

It is sometimes helpful to «return to our roots» in the sense of reaching back to this best, sharpest self. We should try to resurrect once again that time when we were playing at our best. We need to get that edge back, not just lay back in a warm cocoon of complacency.

**Rule 223: Don't try to duplicate some image of yourself out of the past that might not have been true.**

This thinking is the opposite of Rule 222, above. Don't be a slave to some image of yourself from out of the past. The reason: Memory can be selective. It can offer us a false image – perhaps even a «dashing» image – from the past that might not even be accurate. It may emphasize the winning sessions and overlook the bad times. An attempt to live up to such an image from another time can lead to mistakes in the current era. In fact, playing poker to live up to *any* image can be a mistake.

**Rule 224: Watch for weaknesses in your game that only reveal themselves in certain situations.**

Let's say that overall your game is quite strong, but it is precisely because of this that you might not notice certain weaknesses that occur only at certain specific times.

When you get way down, let's say, due to the annoyance and emotion factor, you get more readable. Or let's say you play very well when getting good cards, but you don't play quite as well with bad cards. Or you play solid and aggressive in almost every part of your game, yet «loose» in one particular aspect of it. Or you play one particular kind of hand wrong.

Don't let your overall strong play hide a handful of situational weaknesses, and keep you from noticing them.

**Rule 225: Bad players sometimes try to win by recreating a certain mood that worked one other time.**

They try to reproduce a certain mood that worked on some earlier occasion, when they were on a lucky streak. It's a sort of jovial, upbeat, cheerful, excited state of mind (which makes sense, because it was a mood they were in when winning). The problem with this is that it is putting the cart before the horse. What they forget is that the mood came second – it came *after* the fact that they were winning. Trying to recreate the mood first, so it will cause you to win, is a case of trying to make the tail wag the dog.

Strange as this sounds, it is relatively commonplace at low limits. The player employs various machinations intended to get himself back into that same wonderful flow. It's a little like a baseball pitcher who once pitched a no-hitter trying to do it again by touching his lucky hat brim over and over – trying to get the magic to work again, by doing it in reverse.

**Rule 226: Be careful during a hot streak.**

Hot streaks (when your cards are running very well) can be an unbroken streak of one winning hand after another – but not always. There may be

lulls that occur in between, before the good luck starts up again. Or there may be losses scattered in between.

We have to play these in-between hands carefully so they don't detract from the money we are piling up from the other parts of the winning streak. We can also use them to heighten our table image, of course, and bully the table, and extend the rush in order to win more. But we still have to be careful when we're hot. We still have to play well. You want to go home with a \$400 win when your winning streak happens – not a \$150 win.

**Rule 227: At any given time,  $3/4$ ths of the players in the game will be «cold».**

For some reason, people think the ratio between hot and cold players should be 50/50. A simple glance at the chip stacks around a poker table tells you that this is rarely the case. A more common sight is two or three players hitting very good, and everyone else struggling.

And maybe it's better to think of the game this way. For to see it as a 50/50 proposition is to wonder why we so frequently seem to be in the «cold» camp. The explanation, of course, is that more people are in the cold camp than not.

**Rule 228: Don't tic yourself up in knots trying to make something happen when it clearly is not happening.**

Here is another common sight in poker. You see players who are struggling, steaming, tilting, fighting themselves – they're tied up in knots like a club fighter who is trying to punch himself.

Having things going well is very different from being cold in the game. Realize when things are not happening and the ways it may be affecting your game. Take a step back and adjust, or leave the table.

**Rule 229: If you start to play less poker, and get out of practice, you'll find yourself reduced to «hoping» on hands.**

Rather than knowing exactly where you're at in a hand (as you used to, when you were playing regularly) and knowing exactly where you're heading (and heading there very aggressively), you'll find yourself acting more hesitant, more tentative. You feel like you're more in the dark, reduced to simply «liking» your hand and «hoping». (You will also find yourself with more of a tendency to imagine the worst.) In fact, the main thing that you will be going by now is that you like your hand. Unfortunately, this is not enough against experienced opponents. This phenomenon often happens when a player has been taking time off from the game. We go through a lot of stages on the way up the ladder to poker expertise. We start out playing tentatively at first, unsure of where we're at, then we gradually become more confident, more skilled, and more aggressive. It makes sense that if we lay off poker for a period of time, to some extent we will go through some of these stages in reverse.

**Rule 230: Comments on being in the Zen ...**

Is it possible to somehow «will» yourself into the winning zone in poker?

Being *out* of the zone is certainly a condition comprised of many components (with bad luck chief among them). When we're out of the zone, we need to try to break it down into components to see if any of them are ones we can change (a situation which is usually made more difficult because we're in the middle of negative emotions at the time).

We may not be able to will our way into the winning zone—simply through a sheer act of determination. But we can identify the zone we *are* in, and we can adjust that, and adapt our game to it, and begin to lift our way up from there.

**Rule 231: Poker as an exercise in long-term problem solving.**

It is good to remember that poker is not a problem you have to solve right away, today. It is something you can work on and fine-tune over a lifetime. It's a hobby, a kind of long-term problem-solving.



## Chapter 15

### A Few Words About Luck

*«Poker is a combination of luck and skill. People think mastering the skill part is hard, but they're wrong. The trick to poker is mastering the luck».*

– Jesse May, *Shut Up and Deal*

#### **Rule 232: Luck is a resource that must be managed.**

Some would argue that it is ridiculous to think of luck as a resource. Yet if we look a little closer, we find that luck *is* a resource (good luck, we mean). It's something not to be squandered.

We can see that the idea of managing luck is not ridiculous by looking at its opposite: the player who *does* squander it – who manages his luck poorly. He is the kind who goes on a «rush» during a game, begins winning every hand, piles up a mountain of chips, then pushes the accelerator to the floor until all the chips are gone again. His good run of cards ended, and he played recklessly until bankruptcy was once again in sight.

Here is an instance of an individual who has managed his luck poorly. And if it is possible (o manage one's luck poorly, it follows that it must be possible to manage it well – thus making this a viable concept.

The error here is that the good luck, after waiting patiently for so long for it to arrive, finally *did* arrive – and when it did the player misused it. These are the times you are supposed to be using to make up for all the bad times. They are the times you have been waiting for, suffering through all the droughts, dead spots, and dry spells for. And finally it *did* come, and now there is nothing to show for it.

There are only going to be so many nights in your life when you have great cards all night long. If you go home with nothing to show for it on these nights, you shouldn't be playing.

#### **Rule 233: People sometimes forget that if a game is «90% luck», skill will still be the deciding factor.**

You sometimes hear the statement made, usually in a disparaging way, that «This game is 90% luck!»

The way the person says it tells you they don't realize the difference between a game that is 90% luck and a game that is 100% luck. The two things are not the same. In fact, a skillful player eagerly anticipates a game that is 90% luck, because he knows it will seem like it is *all* luck to his opponents, thus giving the illusion that they have a chance. At the same time, he can use the 10% skill factor to gradually grind them down without

their knowing what is happening. In fact, in a game where skill is *more* of a factor, his skill might become too apparent to them, and they'd quit.

*«Given enough time, (he skill/id player knows how to work around this thing called luck».*

– Louis Asmo, poker player, in *Poker Digest* magazine

### **Rule 234: Measuring luck versus skill.**

Over the short term, luck is huge in poker, and skill is minor. Over the long term, it's just the reverse.

It's hard to name anything more powerful than luck in the short term. Luck in the short term is so powerful it can defeat anything, up to and including the best experts, highest skill levels, best strategies, and most years of expertise. Over the long term, though, skill rises to the top and begins to thoroughly dominate.

*«There are times when you surf on chance, riding and gliding inside it, swept along by and just ahead of its force, and you can do no wrong. The big hands swell like they'll never crest, and you're encapsulated in a blessed pocket, others wiping out all around, but not you. For the delirious duration of these streaks you seem to catch every card, make every hand, communicate directly with the gambling gods».*

– Paul Lyons

This might be a good time to make a few observations on the winning streak.

### **The Winning Streak**

The *feeling* of a winning streak – that wonderful heady feeling when it is happening, of being in that zone where you can do no wrong – is familiar to most poker players. Things become almost laughably easy. The game becomes an exercise in giddy ease, frictionless euphoria, joyful lightheadedness. It's a sensation so real you can almost feel it. It resembles clairvoyance – it's eerily predictive. You can almost announce the cards before they appear – like one of those stage magicians who requests a certain card, points to the deck, and the card elevates out of the pack. The cards keep falling into your hands right out of heaven. Such sessions as this need to be maximized, and the profits protected by continuing solid play.





## Chapter 16

# On Losing, Slumps, Bad Beats, and Bad Luck

*«I caught a frozen wave of cards like you read about».*

– Kevin Canty, *Rounders*



*«Busted, disgusted, and can't be trusted».*

– Stanley Lipinski, dealer, *Card Player* magazine

### **Rule 235: The nature of signs, omens, and premonitions.**

Many gamblers believe in signs. This is not strictly superstition, as it may first appear. For while they know that bad fortune is something that can drop out of the sky all at once, full-blown, they also believe that it is something that can start to assemble itself slowly, by bits and pieces, over time. Thus, by noting these bits and pieces as they begin to occur, they can take steps (they think) to avoid it and head it off. This may or may not be true, but it is probably the origin of why they look for signs.

### **Rule 236: A storm brewing on the far horizon.**

Losing streaks tend to trigger similar feelings that we had on other, similar occasions in our poker careers. So it's almost as if we can sense them coming ahead of time, emotionally. It's like a dog that perks up his ears before a storm. You feel all the same inner feelings starting up – all the old familiar feelings of frustration, irritation, panic, and disaster beginning to appear on the horizon. Many players, for good or ill, use these foreshadowings to tell themselves to lock down their game – to batten down the hatches before the storm arrives.

### **Rule 237: While it is true that good cards and bad cards even out over time, it is possible to get your share of good cards, but at the wrong time.**

You might be getting flushes that are losing \$200 and 4-of-a-kind's that are winning \$5. Looked at strictly in a mathematical sense, you *are* getting your share of good luck. You're getting both good cards and bad, just like everyone else in the game. This demonstrates a kind of secondary form of bad luck – getting your share of the good luck at the wrong time.

### **Rule 238: Surviving a cold streak.**

One of the dangers of a cold streak is that your growing anger can begin to cloud your ability to evaluate hands. This might seem impossible, that you could literally lose the ability to look at your cards and tell if they are any good or not, but it can happen. It is possible for rage and confusion to so distort our vision that we don't know what we're looking at anymore.

A second problem with a cold streak can be vanity – our pride kicks in and convinces us that we're good enough to «play our way out of it». We're different from other people. When other people have cold cards they have to tighten up and pull in the horns – but not us.

We have certain skills that we can use to play our way out of it. This thinking too can be a trap.

And finally, a third problem with going through a rough patch in poker is that you can't turn to your friends for sympathy, because they're usually the ones who are doing it to you.

### **Rule 239: Driver's ed film.**

There is a certain type of poker session that a friend of mine likes to call the «driver's ed film». I might see him in a poker room and ask him how it's going, and he'll shake his head and say, «driver's ed film».

Remember those old high school driver's education films? You're in the driving simulator, behind the wheel. The film starts. You're driving down a quiet, leafy suburban street. In the film, a car suddenly swerves into the intersection from the left. Then a logging truck appears from the right. A ball bounces out with a kid chasing it from the left, a mother with a baby carriage lurches in from the right, and a second woman with a shopping cart comes in behind her on the left. Trees, boulders, telephone poles seem to fall from every direction, one after another as you move along down the street. Old people, toddlers, perambulators, fruit wagons, tennis balls, bicycles, babies, and so on come into view, one after the other. There's no let-up for the entire length of the film. Every time you look up, another obstacle enters the frame.

There are sessions like this in poker. As you proceed down poker's leafy boulevard, everything but the kitchen sink falls out of the sky or leaps out in front of you.

### **Rule 240: Never drop «I'm being outplayed» from your list of reasons why you may be losing.**

It is important to always include on the list of reasons why you may be losing, «I'm being outplayed». To drop this possibility from the list is to open the door to self-deception and inaccuracy.

*«Doubt is the beginning, not the end, of wisdom».*

– George Iles

**Rule 241: When things are going wrong in your life, they may also go wrong in poker.**

If a lot of things are going wrong in your life, it might be wise to withdraw from any form of poker (or gambling) on that particular day. From a karmic standpoint, these sorts of things all seem to work together. A rut in one area of life often seems to overflow into other areas.

Observe the small things in your day – they may be indicators of how your poker game will go. A day spent dropping bars of soap in the shower, bumping your head, stubbing your toe, knocking over cans full of soda, and misplacing your car keys is not a good choice as a day to do any form of gambling. You are simply not in a proper state of mind.

The fact that you lost a hand in poker with four-of-a-kind, and the fact that on the same day the door handle fell off your car may be connected in a way science doesn't yet understand.

It's almost like there's an invisible force field, undetectable to humans, whereby, when two or three things go wrong, other, unrelated things start to go wrong. Sometimes these things are mechanical, while other times they may be people or objects. It's as if there is «something in the air». This is why, on the day you get laid off from your job, the toilet won't flush.

Such situations also seem to apply to poker.

*«Most of us can tell stories of friends or acquaintances who left their homes in their cars in a bad mood and came back in the front seat of a tow truck or the back seat of an ambulance».*

– K.T. Berger, *Zen Driving*

**Rule 242: How the rest of your day has been going is an indicator of how things will go in a poker game (Part II).**

Why does this happen? How are these things connected? It's not as big a mystery as it might seem, and it's not mysticism, either. These things are usually connected by your responses. Your reactions to events are similar, and the anger and irritability factor (or tiredness) of your responses is similar, and this is the common denominator – the reason things continue in the same vein.

It's like having the «drowsies» all day. You wake up feeling clumsy, and you bump into things all day long. Other things – external events (even your own attitude) – might be the kickoff, but your *responses are* what tie everything together. Try quitting smoking sometime, or going through your whole day really tired, or with the flu, or with severe tooth pain. Go through all your normal activities and watch yourself as your responses thread a certain similarity through all the events that occur throughout that day.

So it's not bad karma or mysticism. The pattern is forming, not in your stars, but in your reactions. They are the glue holding it together, and the reason to avoid applying them to the game of poker as well, is for this reason that some of the signs occurring *outside* of poker also apply to poker.

**Rule 243: How to survive a losing streak.**

The time-honored advice for coping with a losing streak goes something like this: Tighten up; pull in your horns; play only the best hands; play through it, or (if it's affecting your play) leave the game.

(Another thought might be; *Don't* leave the game. Sit there and let it teach you something.)

These are the «do's», but the «don'ts» are also important.

Don't start splashing a lot of money around out of anger and frustration; don't lower your starting card standards; don't go on tilt; don't «chase», and so on.

Also (in regard to this losing streak), how is your game? Are you playing correctly to begin with? Maybe there's more to your losing streak than just bad luck. Break down your game, and see if you're playing right.

Taking a break from the game for a while is another possible option; get away from it in order to start fresh later.

#### **Rule 244: The nature of poker slumps.**

You say you haven't had good cards for three weeks? Or three months? That's not possible ... is it?

Take a look at the sports page sometime. A well-known athlete (football player or pro golfer, for instance) is having a bad *year*. Think about that: a bad year. You might also read about a major league baseball pitcher who started the year 12-0, but then his game unraveled and he lost every game for the next three months, finishing 12-14.

Now the following year, once these athletes get back in their groove again, the sportswriter invariably writes: «He's had a recent string of successes after coming off one of his worst years ever». (Worst years *ever*.) You see this all the time. The point is: If a pro athlete can slump for a year, can you slump for three months? Or six months? Of course you can.

The moral: You can be in a slump for a long time. And no, there is not something wrong with the whole universe when this happens.

#### **Rule 245: Notes on playing well and getting annihilated.**

The effect of playing well and losing is a little like one of those families you sometimes read about who are very good – very moral and churchgoing, they give to charity and spend Saturdays working on community projects, helping the poor and so on. In short, they are the type of people who do everything right – but who keep getting hit with deaths in the family, car accidents, cancer, and so forth. The scope might not be the same, but the *idea* is the same. It's a case of doing everything by the book and getting annihilated for your efforts. Or at least this is the way it feels.

#### **Rule 246: If you get way down, don't try to catch up.**

This might seem like odd advice, but trying too hard to catch up in poker often leads to disaster. It can result in overplaying and further exaggeration of your losses. You become like the basketball team that gets down ten points and starts throwing up three-pointers from a long distance away, thus

turning the ball over to the other team, which scores even more and widens their lead.

Instead, take a step back, and regroup. If you are going to lose, you are going to lose. But don't magnify the disaster. Go home a \$150 loser, if you must. But don't go home a \$450 loser because you went berserk.

*«Avoid going on tilt. Resist the urge to recoup, pull even, make up lost ground, or you will wind up chasing rainbow pots, throwing good money after bad».*

– Doc Holliday, as quoted in Bruce Olds's *Bucking the Tiger*

### **Rule 247: Bad luck is always amazing.**

There is no level of experience at which it ceases to be amazing that you can play poker all day long and not go on a hot streak for fifteen minutes, while across the table another player has been on one for six or seven straight hours. There is just no amount of expertise where this stops being an awe-inspiring sight – but it is something we have to deal with, and learn to integrate into our game. Probability tells us that such a thing is simply going to happen once in a while. Still, it is always just as wondrous to behold the first time you see it as the 500th.



It might be instructive to take a look at the true downside of poker. This is something that doesn't receive a great deal of attention in the poker literature, but which is a very real part of the game for players at all skill levels.

*«If you play enough, accept that from lime to lime you are going to go bust, because from time to time, everyone, even the best of the best, does. Every professional eventually is faced with having to hardnose the highway».*

– Doc Holliday, as quoted in Bruce Olds's *Bucking the Tiger*

All real gamblers know the feeling that Steve McQueen had in the movie *The Cincinnati Kid* or Matt Damon in *Rounders*: that walking-outside-in-the-cold-dawn-after-losing-it-all, completely-tapped-out feeling. They know the feeling of standing in the morning sunlight with their pockets turned out and not a cent to their names.

They know that feeling of serious re-evaluation, of taking stock of one's life. They know the feeling of: Maybe you're in over your head; maybe you *never* understood this game from Day One and you've been fooling yourself all along. Your opponents had your number all along and you didn't know it. Oh sure, a period occurred when you were running well, and that threw them off briefly – and allowed you to keep the fiction going to yourself – but by and large they had your number all along.

All real gamblers know the Inner Scream. It's like the face in that one painting, *The Scream*, the oval-headed guy with his mouth open and his

hands on his cheeks. It's exactly like that, only it's on the inside. It's a scream for just *average* luck, not even for *good* luck anymore. For that wondrous state of affairs where, every time you get annihilated, there is some kind of offsetting win of some kind, somewhere. It is pleading just to break even.

Even the most calm, serene, and composed among us has a limit. It might be 7 losing hands in a row. It might be 7 bad beats in a row; it might be 7 hours or 7 weeks or 7 months. However long it is, there is a limit beyond which our sense of humor begins to leave us.

A true cold spell is a thing of wonder. It is almost breathtaking in its scope and depth. It is breathtaking in the way that it feels as if the oxygen has been sucked out of the room. It's a feeling caused by a combination of events so unlikely, so statistically improbable, (hat it's really hard to believe. And yet we see it happen right before our eyes, often over and over again.

Statistical occurrences that are 20-1 against, 50-1 against, 100-1 against happen routinely, in an unbroken string. And as a player you *know* these odds. And you know that they are even longer when combined.

So as a player, you know how unlikely it all is. You know the statistical likelihood of missing the flop a couple of hundred times in a row. You know the statistical likelihood of every player in the game getting playable hands except you – and of having this go on for days – or weeks. You know the statistical likelihood of sitting in a certain seat for eight straight hours without getting a playable hand, only to move to a different seat, and watch the guy who took your old seat start a winning streak that lasts for four straight hours. You know the statistical unlikelihood of this sort of thing, and it is this that creates the emotional component – anger, rage, resentment.

But the annoying part, really, is not the losing. And it's not the money either. Because you can always get more money. It's a feeling of betrayal almost, the appearance of a suddenly topsy-turvy world where logic no longer seems to function, where bad players win effortlessly, and good play is penalized. It's a funhouse-mirror world where logic – and the familiar laws of long experience – no longer apply. It's as if you accidentally dropped something, some object, and now the object falls up, not down. It's the dismissal of a world you knew – or thought you knew.

You question your game. You question deeper things too: your luck (ill-starred from birth?), your fate, your destiny. You start to dredge up the memories of *all* the losses in your life, going back to grade school and beyond. And in retrospect, they all *do* seem to form a pattern. You begin to question your grasp of the fundamentals, your body language («Am I *utterly* transparent to the other players?»). You begin to question your religion, your God, your place in the universe.

You become the dictionary definition of «indecisiveness» – doubtful, tentative, defensive, and fatalistic. On a personal level, «feeling sorry for yourself» reaches a level you didn't know existed – and certainly wouldn't have believed you were capable of. It reaches the final level, the one that doesn't just soak itself in self pity but involves a thick seasoning of bitterness, anger, and resentment.

## **Rule 248: Understanding Macro-Tilt.**

The minor version of this phenomenon – micro-tilt, let's call it – is a brief, fleeting form of poker meltdown. It usually lasts for five or six hands, after which we simply regroup and resume our normal game. Macro-tilt is something else entirely. It's a complete poker breakdown. It's «the tilt that goes beyond tilt» It's the wider, broader version the gift that keeps on giving.

It's similar to the tilt we are familiar with, only it lasts for weeks or months instead of just hours. If tilt is a single motel room, macro-tilt is the whole resort. If tilt is a single carnival ride, macro-tilt is the whole carnival. If tilt is a head cold, macro-tilt is pneumonia. It is in every way the broader, larger, more encompassing version.

Is it a crisis of confidence? No. That's too small, too puny a term for it. We're talking about a complete poker breakdown. We're talking about all phases of one's game heading for the bottom, taking up residence next to the hull of the *Titanic*. We're talking about the poker equivalent of a nervous breakdown, where you get beat on the river so many times, for so many weeks, that you can almost no longer function in the game.

In the process, you've struggled against novices, amateurs, rookies, first-timers, locals, drunks, and greenhorns. You've struggled as you watched all manner of opponents come and go in the game, rack up chips cheerfully by the basketful and leave. And now, finally, you just lost it. Not over this game, over the whole thing.

Shortly after that, your game unraveled completely. The few threads holding it together frayed and fell apart. You stopped caring completely. And yes, you *know* that every poker book ever written cautions against this feeling. You just don't care anymore. The law of odds and probabilities no longer functions as far as you are concerned. You've stayed on literally hundreds of hands that should have won and didn't. It's way past anything that could be supported by any version of probability or logic.

You may have started off with a series of annoying losses, but it developed its own momentum after that. Your chief role now is just another body at the table, holding down a chair – taking up space.

For the poker player, macro-tilt is the last straw, the card player's Waterloo. Nothing he or she does seems to work, and though the nightmare may have begun with a statistically unlikely series of events, by this point you're willing to admit that a lot of it probably *is* your fault. The disaster is self-caused. You admit it.

You've now picked up the ball yourself and are running with it. You've gotten so gun-shy, so *shocked* when anything good happens that you really aren't sure how to play your hands anymore. Other players sense this too, of course, and walk all over you. Bad players have new confidence when playing against you. Even card room regulars you've intimidated out of their boxer shorts for years are starting to wonder what's the matter with you.

*«A man once bitten by a snake fears a rotted rope».*

– Folk saying

**Rule 249: Enter the While Fear. A really devastating loss can change your perception of the game.**

There is a certain kind of loss in poker that is almost psychologically crippling. It is of such intensity and dimension that it takes the wind out of your sails and knocks you completely for a loop. It is both the magnitude of the loss and the way it happens that grants it special recognition, moves it up into your personal «Top Five» category of horror-shows. It almost feels like a personal offense, a betrayal, the way it happens.

Will such an occurrence make you change your long-term approach to the game? Probably not. But you'll never think of the game in quite the same way again. Something changes in you. For you now know that this type of situation is out there. It can exist, and it *can* happen. From now on it will always be in the back of your mind, and will color the way you play the game forever.





## Chapter 17 Other Players

### **Rule 250: Know the other players.**

The expert player has a «line» on how he matches up with each player at the table – almost as if there is a string attached from him to each one of them. For instance, he knows he can have a much weaker hand against the timid, more passive player in seat #3 (and he *will* have less at these times), but he knows he must have a more solid hand when it comes to the good player in seat #7 (and he will). And so on. All these strings, held firmly in his grasp, go out from himself to every other player at the table – representing knowledge of their play. He will try to have just enough in his hand to beat each of these players at their own level of play, and he will watch carefully to see when these situations arise. By this means, the expert player tries to outplay each player individually, based on that person's tendencies, strengths and weaknesses, and past performance.

### **Rule 251: Any poker game can be tough which is made up of two kinds of players: the kind who are playing correctly, and the kind who are playing incorrectly but getting lucky.**

This can be a tough combination. And what is worse, in some ways this is almost always the case in poker.

### **Rule 252: Putting other people on tilt: If you have a long-odds draw for a miracle card, and it will cost you only a minimal amount of bets to attempt it, and hitting it will annoy an opponent to no end, go for it.**

You don't see this mentioned too often, but making a miracle draw-out can put certain opponents on tilt practically forever. If this is the case, it is often money well spent to take a shot at it.

Also, if you're going to do this sort of thing, it's sometimes helpful to do it when you have a big pile of chips – it's even more annoying then, because they wonder how you can play like this and still be winning.

As a general rule, when such an opportunity arises (to get a player to «go off»), consider trying it. Don't go out of your way looking for this situation, but if it lands in your lap, use it.

### **Rule 253: A note on «step-by-step» opponents.**

Opponents who are keeping up with you in terms of skill, but just barely, and who are straining to do so – to match you step by step, are somewhat

like over-matched runners. They are laboring to run alongside you, but without trying to let on that this is so. In reality, they are only a step or two away from losing and throwing in the towel. They're casually trying to make it look like the effort is not killing them.

**Rule 254: Never complain; never explain.**

This was the motto of a famous American businessman, and it is pretty good advice for poker players too. Don't get in an «explaining match» with another player about how you played your hand. This is generally a waste of breath. The bottom line is usually that they are angry at your winning (or, conversely, their own losing). Just smile enigmatically and move on. Never complain; never explain.

**Rule 255: An above-average grasp of the game, backed by large amounts of money, will often triumph over great expertise operating on a limited bankroll.**

A B+ grasp of the game, wedded to great sums of money, makes for a dangerous opponent. It is often the case that a B+ game and an A+ bank account will triumph over an A+ game and a D+ bank account.

**Rule 256: A card-room conundrum: shrinking concentric circles of players.**

There are certain players who play extremely well against a table of bad players. In fact, some play brilliantly against such players. Nonetheless, while good play against bad players is an important skill, it is not the end of the line in poker knowledge.

For let's take a look at what happens at the next level: when you're playing against a table of players who *also* play well (a situation where, to quote poker champion Jack Straus, «the target shoots back»). Now we have an entirely different situation. Knowing how to play at this level is quite different and becomes important when we encounter the following situation that sometimes occurs: «shrinking circles» of players.

This happens when the bad players who've been playing in a game or card-room start to get weeded out, and only the good players remain. When this happens, the good players find themselves up against each other, often thinking back fondly to «the good old days» when bad players abounded and it was easy to book a win every time. A second set of skills is now required.

**Rule 257: The expert poker player is not the person who sits down and wins \$300. He's the one who sits down and loses \$250, and then next time he wins \$500. This is the sort of pattern that begins to take place. It is this money difference over the long term that makes him the superior player.**

Life in the old television westerns was pretty simple. The legendary-poker player strode into the saloon, glanced around with a squint, sat down at the poker table and started winning – immediately – with no waiting. In real life, however, the poker expert is not this person at all. He's not someone who

never loses – someone who can win on demand – he’s someone who simply wins more over the long run than he loses.

A second thing that makes him the best player is not that he’s winning, but that he’s down \$100 at times when another player might be down \$200 playing the same cards. Or he might be down \$200 when another player might be down \$500; and so on.

Don’t make the mistake of connecting expertise only to the winning of money. It is quite possible for the best player at the table to have only a small pile of chips in front of him.

#### Three Good Poker Rules

1. Play as well as you can every session and enjoy the people.
2. Never mock a new player or acquaintance in poker, because in six months or so you may find he is a very good friend.
3. Most long-time players would agree whole-heartedly with the following sentiment: It is generally the case that if I never won another dime in the game of poker, that the people that I have met through the game (and otherwise would not have met) have made the whole experience worthwhile.



## Chapter 18

# The Jagged Upward Zig-Zag Graph-line to Success

*«The fox makes many little mistakes, the hedgehog makes one big one».*

– Isaiah Berlin

### **Rule 258: Don't expect your superiority over another player to emerge in a single game, or a single session.**

This is a trap some players fall into. They expect their superiority over bad players to emerge in a single game, and they become angry when it doesn't. Unfortunately, as we have seen, expertise emerges over the long run in the game of poker. In fact, the structure of the game is set up as a kind of «safety net» for the bad player. He has to make a great many mistakes in order to climb out of this net (and he will, of course, eventually). But it will often allow him to hang on for a surprisingly long time before his mistakes catch up with him.

Thus, you may encounter many, situations in which you are clearly the superior player, yet no matter what you do, you can't get this fact to emerge in the game in front of you. (And attempting to force it to emerge usually backfires, and makes matters worse.)

### **Rule 259: The game is a safely net for the bad player.**

As noted, the structure of the game itself is a kind of safety net for the bad player. If you ever want to see proof of this, stand behind a bad player sometime and watch him play. But don't just do it for a minute or two: watch for a half hour or forty-five minutes. You'll likely be surprised by what you see.

The first thing you will notice is that he plays much worse than he looks like from «the front» (when you are playing against him, across the table). Second, you will be amazed by the various ways that luck protects him as the game goes along. This occurs through several means: (A) When a lot of other players stay in a hand with him (and he doesn't fold as he should), he often accidentally ends up playing correctly, from a mathematical standpoint (due to the large field of players); (B) By betting at the wrong times (checking very good hands, for example, or calling bets with bad hands) a certain accidental deceptiveness is added to his game that makes him difficult to read; (C) When others drop out toward the end of a hand, he often wins because he's one of the few left in the hand, thereby «backing in» to a win (in split-pot games); (D) Other times, he will have a terrible hand and simply luck out, drawing out with some miracle card on the river, and (E) Occasionally he actually *will* have a good hand, and he will get

good action on it because no one gives him credit for having it. They will think he has his usual bad cards, like all the other times.

Combine all these things, and it covers a lot of different game situations. Collectively, it works as a kind of mesh-like web of protections for him, a web that shields him from his own efforts to lose.

Good players often fail to see the outlines of this. The structure of the game itself protects the bad player – and it does so to *keep him playing*. The good player ought to welcome it, therefore – even if it is painful to behold in the short term. Almost everything the bad player does wrong will *not* hurt him – at least not right away.

If this safety net were not in place, the skill of better players would quickly emerge, the bad player would be overwhelmed, and he would leave the game in short order. In fact, there would hardly ever be any bad players in any game. The structure exists so that the bad player can attempt to shoot himself in the foot over and over and constantly find himself foiled in the attempt.

Now, if you are playing against a *field* of such players, a different situation arises. For think how difficult it is going to be to beat them all, as a group, if each of them has all these safeguards (mentioned above). It is not surprising, in light of this, that one of the challenges for the good player is emotional management – keeping one's sanity in the face of this.

Facing a group of such players is a little like having a shootout in the Old West against four or five very bad gunfighters at the same time. As bad as each of them may be individually, there's a strong chance that one of them is going to get you, simply because there's so much lead flying around. Similarly, in poker, one of them is indeed likely to shoot you, simply by accident. There are simply not enough cards in the deck to miss them all.

Good players take steps to minimize this effect, of course – chief among them, waiting until they have an excellent hand before taking on this nefarious gang who «can't shoot straight». Their mission is to work around all these built-in protections possessed by the bad players. The good player needs to navigate around these obstacles on the way to the mousetrap to get the cheese. And he should always expect it to be this way. These hurdles will keep popping up, but the cheese *is* there, and it *can* be gotten.

If we all thought of the game this way, perhaps our mission would be easier. For the fact is, the cheese *always* sits in the mousetrap behind these numerous bad beats, draw-outs, players who are in the middle of lucky streaks, and so on. These things guard and protect it, and they are part of the process. They are part of getting the cheese, and because of this, our progress toward getting it will always be an erratic one – a jagged, upward graph-line that never goes straight up but zig-zags up the mountain toward eventual victory.

*«Income in poker is not made in a linear way».*

– Steve Badger, professional poker player

Perhaps one key to the game is (hat, after a good-sized win, you take a seat again the next day, or next session, knowing it is likely to go

backward again. The ball is very likely to roll backward once again partway down the hill. You must be *wilting* to risk losing some back, as a condition to moving forward once again. The player has to be willing to go back down in order to have it go back up again later. It is two steps forward and one step back, or it may be one step back and two forward. Here again, we see the erratic zig-zag progress up the mountainside.

**Rule 260: Beware of paralysis through winning.**

The Paralysis-Through-Winning trap is that you have been having such a good run of luck lately that it's making you back off and become defensive – you're freezing up, afraid to make a move. Your whole game locks up in a kind of «don't move» tightness. Frankly, you'd like to freeze it at this point forever. You'd like to sit on your winnings and never go downward from this point forward. But somewhere in the back of your mind you realize the truth: There's nowhere to go but back to the world of risk, where things may very well go down before going back up again.



## Chapter 19 «Schooling» (A Group Is Hard to Beat)

*«In draw poker, two small pair is a favorite against someone drawing cards, and often against two players drawing cards. But beyond that, the hand often becomes unprofitable. In poker, you see, a hand can be a favorite against each opponent individually and still lose money against a large field of opponents collectively».*

– Mike Caro



*«Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups».*

– T-shirt slogan

**Rule 261: It's often surprising how a handful of pretty bad players will take turns defeating a very good player.**

Despite their lack of expertise and bad play, it is possible for one of them to outdraw the good player in an ongoing succession. (It almost seems like an equation: Several players with a bad hand equal one player with a good hand.)

It's one of the mysteries of poker that a table of bad players can be almost as hard to beat as a table of good players. If the good player played against any of these individual weak players one-on-one, he'd destroy him. Bring them together in a group though, and something serendipitous happens that helps to protect them.

There must be something going on here. Some equation must be at work – some principle in nature whereby weak units, when combined, achieve a strength beyond their individual capacity. And there is, of course – it's everywhere in nature, from spider threads that are fragile and delicate when taken singly but strong when woven together, to the cohesion of water droplets above the rim of a glass (each droplet weak on its own), to the concept of the herd, in which a single animal can be picked off by a predator but sticking together in a large group protects them. The fact is that people who play poker poorly gain strength in numbers.

This is especially true if the group operates as a united front (if they all stay till the river, for instance). Poker theorist Andy Morton called this «schooling». It's almost as if bad players sense it, too, in some pan of their brains. They hang together like the citizens of the small town against the tough hombres who ride in to shoot up the place. They hang together in the

face of this assault by one or two very good players. (As if to say to each other, «Do you want to go up against the good players *alone*? If you do, they'll outplay you. But if we all get in at the same time, it'll help protect us». And the strange thing is, they're right.)

Actually, it's harder to beat a group at anything – whether it's horse-racing, mumblety-pegs, or alley-fighting. A horse suddenly comes from out of nowhere in the horse race, or a lucky punch comes from out of nowhere in the alley-fight and does you in. It's not the quality of opposition that gets you, it's the numbers.

*«Strength of numbers is the delight of the timid. The valiant in spirit glory in fighting alone».*

– Gandhi

### **Rule 262: Look for leaks in the game as a whole.**

One question to ask in a poker game is this: «What is the table as a whole doing?»

At any given time, the table as a *whole* is doing something – probably making a mistake of one kind or another (staying too long, as a group, for instance, or playing too tight, or too wild, and so on.) Notice what the trend is, and take advantage of it. If you are bluffing, and no one ever folds, then go the other way – tighten up. Wait until you get very good hands before you play.

Look for leaks in the game as a whole. Then adjust your game in a way that takes advantage of this.





## Chapter 20

# Practice and Improvement

*«It takes almost a lifetime to learn how to do a thing simply».*

– Joseph Mitchell



*«A path is formed by constant treading on the ground».*

– Chuang Tzu

**Rule 263: Poker know-how, like expertise in any field of life, usually goes to the person with the desire to keep learning and growing.**

This is a truth we rarely see mentioned. We may hear «decades of experience» mentioned (with regard to a player). Or we may hear «years and years of experience» mentioned. Or «a lifetime of experience». But what if expertise was more than just a «time» thing? In other words, what good are «years of experience» if the person is playing along absent-mindedly during 90% of it? What good are «years of experience» if the player is simply replaying the same mistakes over and over?

Poker is one of those activities in which you have to force yourself to get better. A determination to keep learning and adjusting can compress more progress into a year than many players pack into forty years.

There is a phrase that is sometimes used in the writing and journalism business. It concerns people who claim to have a lot of experience. The phrase is this: Has this person written a hundred articles, or has he written the same article a hundred times? In other words, has he been growing, or is he just endlessly repeating the same (limited) experience over and over? The same could be said of poker. «Has this individual played in a 1,000 poker games, or has he played in *one* poker game a thousand times?»

We have to continue to grow and learn as we play, not just continue to play more. Some players were playing uninspired poker the first time they sat down, and they're still playing the same way 1,000 games later.

*«Throughout your life advance daily, becoming more skillful than yesterday, more skillful than today. This is never-ending».*

– Hagakure, by Tsunetomo



*«At every stage of your poker career, you will continually be learning. Those who stop learning are left behind».*

– Daniel Negreanu, professional poker player

#### **Rule 264: Mastering a game in any environment.**

Perhaps it is the case that to master a game you must master it in every «environment» – that is to say; in different geographical locations, different cities, different casinos, different internet sites, and software – in home games, corner bar games, riverboat games, and tournaments here, there, and everywhere – in order to be well rounded. It is interesting how a new environment can throw our game off, despite the fact that the game itself is the same one we've played for years.

If you take the same game you've played in casinos, and you suddenly change to a kitchen table – or vice versa – you might find that the unfamiliar surroundings can take you off your game slightly. So you practice in *all* the environments, and by doing so, your game attains a kind of «depth» – the same depth we used to admire as kids in the candy-apple paint jobs on the cars in *Rod & Custom* magazine-coats of paint that were like an endless pool you could look down into. It was still only paint, nothing more, but nonetheless there was something indescribable there. Mastering a game in every dimension gives us this same kind of depth.

#### **Rule 265: There is a difference between wanting to win and wanting to get better as a player.**

A desire to win is not enough. Everyone wants to win. Some players want to win very badly. Some want to win much more than other players do. But this isn't enough, and some of these players who want to win very badly often do very poorly.

In fact, wanting to win is actually a pretty superficial goal. It's like wanting to be rich – on its own, it's not enough. More is required than this. The player who wants to get *better* – who puts these «wants-to-win» emotions to work to motivate himself to learn – is on the better track.

Just wanting something more than your opponents isn't sufficient. In fact, this greater desire often only results in this player ending up more frustrated than anyone else. (Every year in the NFL at playoff time, there seems to be one football team that stands out as having more desire to win than the other teams – the fans get caught up in it, the players get caught up in it. It's a team that «wants it very badly» – wants it more than all the rest – yet very often this team ends up getting beat. Why? They get *out-skilled*.) Don't rely on your competitive spirit alone. Intense desire alone is not enough.

*«Examples of the ruin of merciless warriors is conspicuous in both past and present».*

– Hagakure, by Tsunetomo

#### **Rule 266: Don't «demand» anything of the game.**

You will notice that some of the players who have the biggest problems in the game are the ones who «demand» something from it. It's as if it owes them something, or they «have something coming».

The game of poker is a little like a lover you can only attract by showing you are indifferent to her – the minute you show that it really means a great deal to you, that you really want it badly and feel you deserve it, she becomes disenchanted and walks away. A certain measure of indifference is required.

*«Not till you abandon all thoughts of seeking something will you be on the right road to the gate».*

– Zen proverb



*«The bird of paradise alights only on the hand that does not grasp».*

– Zen proverb

**Rule 267: If you are feeling impatient in any way, shape, or form, you don't belong in a poker room.**

Strongly desiring to have something happen, and desiring it very impatiently, is a destructive attitude to have in poker. If there is any feeling of impatience at all, you shouldn't be in a poker room.

*«Scratch the surface of impatience and what you will find lying beneath it, subtly or not so subtly, is anger».*

– Jon Kabat-Zinn



*«Money flows from the impatient to the patient».*

– Warren Buffett

**Rule 268: Put the proper value on practice and time.**

Those who truly value time tend to make bad poker players.

The best players have come to terms with time in some way – they have pronounced it «unlimited» for one thing (and indeed, must). They are under no time constraints, their play is not hampered by any artificial pronouncements about time being short.

To play poker seriously, the player must come to some kind of terms with the idea of time. He can't be sitting there feeling anxious about time's passage, glancing at his watch every few minutes.

The following is a quote from Joe Hyams's book, *Zen in the Martial Arts*. It is a story about time. In the story, the author is learning a martial art under Korean master Bong Soo Han.



*One afternoon following a workout, Master Han invited me to have tea with him. After he had served the tea, he began, «You will never learn to do any endeavor properly unless you are willing to give yourself time. I think you are accustomed to having everything come easily to you, but this is not the way of life or of the martial arts».*

*«I am patient», I said.*

*«We are not talking now about patience», he answered. «To be patient is to have the capacity of calm endurance. To give yourself time is to actively work toward a goal without setting a limit on how long you will work».*



To give yourself time is to tell yourself that time is unlimited. You have no set limits on it. This is different than mere patience.

*«By being impatient, matters are damaged and great works cannot be done. If one considers something not to be a matter of time, it will be done surprisingly quickly».*

*– Hagakure<sub>y</sub> by Tsunetomo*



## Chapter 21

# The Strange Geography of Poker

### **Rule 269: Expertise is often right next door.**

Often the place you want your game to be, the place you *don't* want it to be, and poker greatness are crowded together pretty closely on the spectrum. They're not that far apart. In fact, they're right next door to each other. We often see this – or at least get a hint of it – as our game shifts back and forth between them. If true, this would explain a lot – how we can go from competent to incompetent so quickly, from brilliant to bad, and then make the sudden leap once again into very good play.

### **Rule 270: A little past playing good is playing badly.**

The geography of poker can be strange – as odd and distorted as the landscape in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. A tiny step past playing well can be playing *less* well – for then we may be «pressing» and trying to go a step too far, and end up second-guessing ourselves (or outthinking ourselves). It's a little like the children's game of Rock, Paper, Scissors – one step beyond success actually results in being behind. One step past being in the lead, results in losing. It's a strange, misshapen landscape where the worst players can suddenly (and accidentally) outplay you.

This peculiar geography of poker can be frustrating, because just as the player has arrived at a certain level of expertise, he finds that by simply thinking ahead one more step ... he can be back once again in the territory of *bad* play. It's like working all your life to get rich, only to find that the final step leads through a doorway that makes you poor again. The existence of this strange geography can try the soul at times.

This trap is very subtle, and it can suddenly appear, as if out of the blue. You can go one step past your own expertise.

### **Rule 271: The dangers of «moving on» from things we shouldn't move on from.**

The human mind has a natural tendency to sum-things-up-and-move-on – to file away what we know and go on to the *next thing*, something more «advanced».

This is especially true of the Western mind – a desire to move on from the concepts we already know. But what a bad idea this is for some things! For what if there is no next step? The problem is that some things shouldn't be moved on from. A lot of concepts need to stop right there, *on* the dime. (Honesty, integrity, love, and serenity are a few examples.) They are not a

«phase» or stepping-stone on the road to something else. There isn't a next step past them. So our natural tendency to do this can lead to problems. And this phenomenon occurs in poker too, as we try to move on from things we already know.

This is probably true of all sports or games. We reach a level of expertise and then backslide into bad habits we've long ago instructed ourselves out of, as we make an attempt to move past them. We can also reach a point of impatience, when our good play doesn't seem to be going anywhere. So we start to press a little, and we push too hard, leading to inferior play. By so doing, we find ourselves once again in the land we once inhabited as an amateur. We have walked back through a door into our own past again.

**Rule 272: Don't try to get suddenly, markedly better than you are if you are already good.**

This is a mistake some players make. They try to force themselves to the next level – by trying to markedly improve (having gotten tired of improving by microscopic degrees). They end up over-reaching, and often end up worse off than they were before. These forced attempts to «move up the ladder» can be the result of frustration, boredom, or even ambition.

But the fact is, any player who is already good is not going to get hugely, markedly better. Chances are, he is already playing fairly close to the way the game should be played, he's not going to make huge leaps of progress anymore. Remember: A bad player's game can make huge leaps in progress. Perhaps yours can't. Or, to use a golf metaphor, you can't take ten strokes off your game anymore – the new player often can. To even make such an attempt may backfire, and end up having the opposite effect. Things can start to go back down the hill the other way, and by this means, the player can end up *less* of a player than he was before.



## Chapter 22 Tiredness

«Every gambler knows how a person may sit a day and a night at cards without ever casting a glance to right or to left».

– Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler*

### **Rule 273: The small hours of the morning are usually when the bad play starts to occur.**

It's 5:00 A.M., and all the players around the table are groggy, punchy, and bleary-eyed – throwing their money around indiscriminately and recklessly. Hey look, the sun's coming up. Hey, it's getting light outside.

Marginal poker hands can start looking pretty good at 5:00 A.M. in the morning. In this punch-drunk slate, you might not even *care* what cards you play. You may win, or you may lose. What difference does it really make?

You started the game with a strategy, of course, a game-plan, but you can rest assured that it has now deteriorated, perhaps even vanished. Remnants remain, of course. The «skeleton» of how you usually play is still intact. (It should be, given all the years you've been playing.)

But a host of questionable plays have been creeping in around the edges. And you're not the only one doing this, either. In fact, the whole table has deteriorated into a kind of chip-throwing version of «show-down» – everyone tossing in their money and hoping to hit something and get lucky. Hell, you figure you're playing against *other* people's groggy decision-making, so what difference does it make?

In the interest of our overall poker financial well-being, we ought to try to limit our participation in such situations as this.

### **Rule 274: Marathon games can injure your play.**

Let's say you played forty hours straight at the poker table – two full days, almost, during a marathon session. The first ten or twelve hours were excellent play on your part, let's say, but the final twenty hours were sloppy and uncaring play. The harmful part of those last twenty hours is that it's twenty hours in which you are *training* yourself that loose, careless play is permissible – it's not really that bad. It's twenty hours of input, in some obscure corner of your brain, which may have to be unlearned again.

### **Rule 275: Tiredness and other distractions.**

If you find when you sit down to play poker that you are a little tired (or ill, or in some other way impaired or distracted), you should get in the habit of

immediately switching to a conservative mode of play. This should be your default game. Any sign of absentmindedness, fatigue, or indifference should call this default game forth- like a blinking neon sign that says, «T shouldn't even be here – I shouldn't even be playing, the way I'm feeling. But since I am, let's tighten it up to the best hands and muck everything else».

The larger rule is, of course: Don't play when tired, when upset or distracted. (And, we might also add; when you're in grief, when preoccupied with a personal problem, when hungover, when you have your mind on something other than the game, after going to the dentist – or before you go, when you are in pain – when quitting smoking, or getting over an illness, when you have a splitting headache, or an injury, are recovering from surgery, feeling dizzy, feverish, flu-ish, and so on. Any of these sorts of things can seriously disrupt your game.)

One pitfall here is that poker can seem like the perfect activity at such times. After all, it lets you pass the time, right? And that's what you may be trying to do. You may be looking for the kind of activity that makes the time go by quicker. However, these things also make you edgy, irritable, and impatient and tend to take you off your game.

### **Rule 276: Match your poker play to your energy cycle.**

The following item comes from a sales brochure, but it has some bearing on poker play: «Match your energy cycle to your daily 'to do' list. Draw a curved line with peaks and valleys. Put your creative or more difficult tasks along the peaks and your less creative or errand-type tasks in the valleys». This is a point worth noting with regard to the game of poker.

### **Rule 277: Set a time to go home.**

We've all been there. We intended to leave the game at 11:00 P.M. so we could go home and get a good night's sleep. Now, suddenly, it's 4:00 A.M. A great percentage of the time, these extra hours are just wasted play. For instance, how many times have you been down \$100 at midnight and still down \$100 six hours later? Or you were, say, up \$100 at midnight and seven hours later you were up \$105? What does this tell us? It tells us that we usually don't lose much by setting a time to go home and sticking by it.

### **Rule 278: The tiredness problem.**

Take a step back and look at yourself in your daily life sometime when you're tired. Look at the way you do things, the way you make decisions, and the kinds of mistakes you make. Note the way you try to «cut corners» mentally – over-simplify things, skip over a few complexities because it's too much trouble. Well, the same thing occurs in poker.

Not making decisions when you're tired is probably a good rule for life, as well. You wouldn't make a major decision about buying a house or a car or about changing jobs after being awake for twenty-four hours straight. Yet we think nothing of making poker decisions in this state.

Tiredness makes us more indifferent to outcomes. We don't analyze things accurately, we miss certain details, and we don't really care that we



miss them. Tiredness is a time-machine – it takes us back in time. It takes us back to the level of poker play we were at several years ago. It brings us back to the amateur self we once were.

The lesson here is; Don't play tired.

**Rule 279: There *is* a difference between your sharpest, best self during the daytime and your more fatigued self later (hat same day.**

A lot of poker games take place at night, after people have been working and doing other activities all day long. At the end of a long day, it's difficult to be at your best. It's not an illusion that you are less sharp or that your decision-making ability is less agile at such times. Here again are the fruits of tiredness.

*«Now dealer and players alike united in an unspoken conspiracy to stave off morning forever ... For the cards kept the everlasting darkness off, the cards lent everlasting hope».*

– Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*

**Rule 280: If you play poker for thirty straight hours, this additional time gives your talent a chance to emerge over (he other players – hut it also gives tiredness, fatigue, and the rake a chance to emerge as well.**

Given enough time, your talent will emerge – but so will a few other things.

**Rule 281: Don't play poker after just waking up, before your brain is working properly.**

Don't get into a poker game right after waking up or after taking a nap. Why not? Well, have you ever tried any motor-skill activities immediately after waking up? (Such as typing, say, or some similar activity as this.) Sometimes it's all we can do to get our arm in a shirtsleeve for the first five minutes. Don't go right from this state of mind to the poker table (and some players do, right from the hotel room to the poker room). Give yourself a chance to wake up.

**Rule 282: Why poker games don't break up.**

There are four main reasons that poker games tend to go on and on and never seem to break up – why no one ever seems to want to quit:

1. You don't want to leave if you're down.
2. You don't want to leave if you're winning.
3. You don't want to leave if you're even.
4. And ... You might win a lot of money on *the very next hand*.

The real question is not why poker games go on into the wee hours of the night, it's why they ever break up at all.

**Rule 283: Problems can occur when we raise the «thrill level» of life too high.**

There is usually a penalty to be paid in life when we raise the thrill level too high. The ordinary person looking out of a window is probably closer to the actual level of excitement we should be expecting from life. Raising it way, way up past this, into a kind of action/adrenalin junkie atmosphere – such as can happen in any form of casino gambling – is not particularly realistic (or sustainable). This is also likely to result in some downside cost occurring somewhere later along the line. This cost might come either in our readjustment (or inability) to come back down from it, or it might come from our high expectations, which are difficult to sustain over an extended period of time. There is also the problem of starting to feel uncomfortable *while* doing it and also missing it when you *stop* doing it. You paint yourself into a corner.

At any rate, there is usually a cost to be paid when we try to come back through the locks of the canal back to normal again.

**Gambling Motives**

*«Gambling releases us from the real world. We are isolated. There is no outside, no past or future, only here and now».*

– Lance Humble and Carl Cooper,  
*The World's Greatest Blackjack Book*



*«You're approaching Las Vegas! The air feels different. It's narcotic».*

– David A. Daniel, *Poker: How to Win at the Great American Game*



*«There are no clocks in the palace of pleasure».*

– Florentine proverb

**Rule 284: For a little bit of money, you can purchase pure escape.**

It has been observed that there is no time-keeping in the game of baseball – in other words, once the game starts, it becomes «timeless», continuing until it is over. This timeless aspect no doubt adds to the aura of escape. Likewise, and for the same reasons, there are no clocks in casinos. Gambling too obliterates time – annihilates it, disperses it, and blocks it out. Time itself ceases to have any meaning.

The casino also sets out (in much the same way) to obliterate the idea of money. Money leaves its usual stressful realm and becomes instead colorful, friendly, play-chips – bright pieces of plastic that can be treated with indifference and disrespect. There are no diets in casinos, either You're free to eat what you want, drink, or smoke at will.

Through the above means, gambling can become pure escape. Day-to-day tribulations disappear. Family problems vanish. Business difficulties are forgotten. This escapism can take you out of yourself, out of your world and your problems. Therefore, one question the poker player needs to ask himself is: Is this what I am purchasing? Is this one of my motives for poker play?

There is a technique that is sometimes used in psychiatry to treat phobias. The patient is asked to count backwards from 100 by 3s. The reasoning is that this mental exercise focuses the person's mind so that he is unable to think about his problems. In fact, it can't help but do this, for the mind has trouble thinking of two things at once.

Poker can be the same, a mental escape through problem-solving. Focusing on this very complex challenge in front of us can be simply another version of counting backward by 3s. Through escaping into the game, all problems and stresses simply vanish, and the world is reduced to the harmless oval of green felt.

### **Rule 285: Poker as escape: notes on the steady endorphin drip.**

When deeply immersed in poker as an activity, it can attain something of a preoccupied, almost trance-like state, one comprised of adrenalin, excitement, fun, late nights, and camaraderie. For its true aficionados, this steady endorphin drip of fun, excitement, and concentration can be used to completely block out the real world.

It's not much different than the steady endorphin drip of the political junkie attending a national political convention, or the mountain climber on a sheer rock face, or the country music fan attending the Grand Old Opry. A steady endorphin drip in the brain can be used, and overused, to shut out real life.

### **Rule 286: Remember who you are.**

This may seem like odd advice in a poker book, but one danger that can occur is to get too carried away with the game. Players can become «wired» on the gambling aspect, zoned out on the experience itself – the people, the action, the adrenaline, and the stumbling sleeplessness of it – to the point where they are immersed in a murky late-night world of flashing lights and ringing slots.

This can be a tempting trap, in an odd sort of way. Don't forget who you are. Revisit your real self. Ask yourself why you are doing this thing. Perhaps you started out as a poker player, but you now notice that you no longer sleep or eat right; and in fact, you might notice you're not even particularly on your game anymore. You're not playing poker, you're just throwing yourself into this zombie-like state – this lights-and-action-and-comps netherworld, for purposes of escape, and you're trying to stay there as long as possible. This has become your main preoccupation.

The fact is, it's sometimes possible to get lost in the game itself, to go *too far* inside it. You want to be «taken out of yourself» briefly, to be someone else ... but you don't want to *become* someone else. Step back.

Remember who you are – or were – originally. Remember who you came in as.



## Chapter 23

# The Tides of Luck and When to Leave

*«Sometimes, it all depends on how you're running and other factors like that. It shouldn't matter, but somehow it does. Just because you lost the last five hands in a row doesn't mean that you're going to lose the sixth one. The odds never change, the odds on the sixth hand are the same as they were on the first one. But you don't feel the same about it – nobody ever does».*

– T.J. Cloutier

### Cyclical Luck

Here is a subject I discussed in my previous book, *Zen and the Art of Poker*. On the subject of cyclical luck, I wrote:

*It can't hurt to monitor one's hick and the general trend of it: how hot or cold you are is a legitimate factor in the decision-making process. This is not just a question of academic interest. It has a direct bearing on your fortunes. Use this tool to answer some of the borderline decisions you make in the game.*

*If your cards are below average, but you've been winning with anything and everything, you might want to play more hands. Conversely, if you've been getting fairly good hands, but you've lost with all of them, you might want to fold some of these.*

*Monitor trends in your luck – but not excessively. Keep an eye on them, but don't become a slave to them.*

*Mathematicians tell us that each hand takes place independently of all others. This is good advice to ignore. If things are going badly, back off. Don't go home from a card-room with a horrendous loss just because you read somewhere that mathematically «every hand is independent of every other», so you just kept betting away, despite the fact that you were losing every hand, one after the other. For your purposes the hands weren't operating independently of each other.*

This is advice for the part-time, low-level, recreational player. It is advice for your brother-in-law, your neighbor, or your daughter's boy friend, who you might encounter in a card-room getting crushed in a poker game. If they are «running bad», they ought to leave the game. This is not the same

advice you would give an experienced player, however. There are a few things included in the phrase «running bad», which pros know about – that makes the phrase a kind of shorthand for the list of these other things.

As we say, players who play at a higher level do not think like this. These players play into «an infinite horizon». They play by the year, not the individual session – in fact, they see poker as «a single long session» over a lifetime, and their sole interest is in making the correct play at each point in a game. They don't pay attention to the ups and downs of luck, or whether they are ahead or behind, except as these things have a bearing on *other* areas of their game, causing them to no longer play at their best – distracting them, putting them on tilt, giving their opponents new confidence against them, hurting their table image, and so on. (Also, if everybody else at the table believes in this luck effect, this can have its *own* effect.) But the vagaries of luck itself don't concern them, and don't determine whether they slay or exit a game.

Perhaps there are different levels of wisdom for different groups of players. There are people for whom «Don't play the game at all» is wisdom. There is a second group for whom «If your cards are running bad, leave the game» represents wisdom or, «If you're way up, consider taking the money and booking the win» or, «If you're getting pummeled and you've lost the farm, get out before you lose the second farm». This represents wisdom at this level. And there is another, higher level of player for whom, «Never leave a game at all due to bad luck, unless it is affecting your play in other ways» is wisdom.

Certainly one of the major problems with attempting to determine the «hotness» or «coldness» of how your luck is running in a poker game is that it shifts back and forth very quickly and elusively. A second problem is that evaluating this phenomenon is very subjective – a kind of moment-by-moment «Am I hot? Am I cold?» second-guessing that soon becomes a hall of mirrors.

For low-limit players, playing more hands when hot and less hands when cold is generally harmless, and often works to protect them from major catastrophes. As an exercise, it also gets them attuned to the general rhythms of the game, as well as other players' changing perceptions of them (and their current image) at the table. It should never become a *major* preoccupation, however, and cross the line into full-scale superstition.

In *Zen and the Art of Poker*, I also wrote the following.

*Beware of the situation that sometimes occurs in which you find yourself  
Jailing behind on all fronts: your bankroll is low, you don't have the  
resources of your opponents, your chip pile is shrinking, you are getting  
slightly worse cards than your opponents, your luck is slightly off its mark,  
and you are also being outplayed, because your opponents are using all of  
the above against you in combination to gradually wear you down. In  
addition, you may be responding to this situation by retreating into an  
extremely tight, defensive posture, something that becomes progressively  
self-strangling, as well as easy to read by the other players. This is a good  
time to get out.*

Again, the phrase «running bad» includes many elements. Experienced players know that it includes the aforementioned things – you’re tired, you’re not playing well, you’re acting defensive, other players’ perception of you has changed, and so on. They will leave the game because *of these* factors, but not for bad luck alone. (They will also leave if the game itself has «turned bad».) For the low-limit recreational player, the advice: «If you’re running bad, consider leaving the game» is a short-hand description for the phenomenon that better players know contains a lot of other elements besides just bad luck.



## Chapter 24

# Four Brief Concepts and a Short History of Poker

### How to Figure Your «Outs» in Poker

Players sometimes talk about «outs» in poker, meaning how many cards out of the deck will make their hand. Figuring your outs is a little bit guesswork – because you don't know exactly what your opponent has. For instance, let's say you're in a hold'em game. You have the **A-Q** of spades, and the flop comes with two spades – let's say **8s 6s 2d**. You've got a chance for a spade flush.

You have 2 cards, plus the 3 cards on the flop, which makes 5 cards that, are missing from the deck, leaving 47 unknown cards. 9 of these unknown cards are spades – that could help your hand – and the other 38 are cards that won't help your hand. This ratio (**38-9**) represents the odds of making your hand. (**38-9 = 4.22-to-1** against.)

### A Couple of Other Considerations

There are a few other considerations, however, that need to be looked at in order to fine-tune this number. First, there are 2 more cards to come, in our example, so you've really got 2 shots at it (or 3, or whatever it is – depending on the situation and the game), that will increase your chances of making your spade flush.

Secondly, suppose that one of those spades that might come up to make your flush would also pair the board and give your opponent a full house? Well, you can't count *that* spade as one of your outs.

Third, suppose that the other aces and queens in the deck (3 of each) if they came up would also give you the winning hand – since you have **A-Q** in your hand. (You *could* possibly count these then, as outs.)

So what do we have here? We have the «sure» outs (8 outs to the absolute nuts – that is, an unbeatable hand – all the spades that don't pair the board); we have «possible» outs (queens or aces that might come up and give you a victory); and we have «probable» outs (the other, board-pairing spade that probably *won't* make your opponent a full house – but that could).

As mentioned, we're never *exactly* sure of the number because we don't know what our opponent is holding. When the hand is over – providing all the cards are shown- then we will know exactly how many outs we actually did have. In some games, such as 7-Stud, it is easier to keep track of your outs because more cards are turned up.

Here are some rough guidelines to use in your figuring:



- If you have 2 pair and you're hoping to make a full house, you have 4 outs.
- If you have 3 of a kind and you're hoping to make a full house, you have roughly 10 outs.
- If you have a straight draw (open-ended), you have 8 outs. (This is true unless some of the cards you need for your straight will make someone else a flush, a full-house, or some better hand.)
- A flush draw (as we have seen) is 9 outs.

The question you need to ask yourself is: How many cards are there in the deck that will help this hand?

Okay, now – we know how many «outs» we have to make our hand – what do we do with this information?

Well – as we saw earlier – we are interested in the ratio of cards left in the deck that *won't* help our hand versus the number that *do* help our hand. This gives us our odds. Then we compare those odds against what kind of odds the pot is laying us for our bet, to see if this is a good wager.

### Calculating Pot Odds

You mean there's more to this? Yes. You also need to know, roughly, the pot odds. To figure the odds you're getting from the pot, simply take the pot size and divide it by the wager size. In other words, divide the size of the pot right now (that is, when the action comes around to you) by the amount it will cost you to call. If there's \$100 in the pot, and it costs you \$5 to call, then the pot odds you are getting are 20-to-1. At this point, the question you should ask yourself is: «Will I win this hand I time out of 20 or more?» If the answer is «yes», you should call. But just as we saw in the «outs» discussion (above), there are a couple of other considerations. They are:

- Will my hand win if I make it? (If you're hoping to make a straight, and you know the odds of this, and you also know the pot odds, but it's pretty obvious that your opponent already has a flush, then all of these calculations won't help you much.)
- Suppose you miss your hand completely but bluff, and you win that way?
- Suppose the pot will be much bigger by the end of the hand than it is right now because of the way certain opponents play?

Here's an example of this latter possibility. Let's say that Uncle Harry always raises all the way to the end of the hand, no matter what cards he holds, so I know that the pot I'm going to win will *actually* be much bigger by the end than it is now – thus, the odds I'm getting are actually *better*. This is sometimes called «Implied Pot Odds».

You have to add in to your figuring other bets that might be put in before the hand is completed. In another example, you might have a hand

good enough to justify calling one bet on the river, but if two players are going to go back and forth, raising and re-raising and putting in a lot more bets, then you won't. By the time they finish with this, you'll be getting terrible pot odds, so you fold your hand.

At any rate, your pot odds can be fine-tuned this way – but even a rough calculation is better than none. The above examples are oversimplified somewhat – mainly, you just want an approximate idea of where you stand with regard to the odds the pot is giving you to continue with your hand.

As we say, none of this has to be exact. In low-limit games, and «micro» games, it's not a matter of great consequence. Once you start getting up into the bigger money games, however, making mistakes on these calculations can cost you hundreds, even thousands of dollars. Practice looking at the pot and telling yourself, silently, what kind of odds you are getting from the pot. What you mainly need to know is the ratio of the pot size to the bet you are calling.

### **Expected Value, or EV**

The concept of «**EV**» is another subject that sometimes comes up in poker conversation. It stands for «**expected value**». For instance: «**+EV**» means that an action you are thinking of taking will be to your benefit (or will make you money), on average, over the long run. (You might also hear it called a «positive expectation».) As an example, we might say that calling a very large bet in the attempt to hit a long-shot, inside straight is **-EV** (negative **EV**). Or we might say that running a stoplight in your car is **-EV** (i.e., a losing proposition in the long run). Or we could say that buying a nice gift for the boss's wife is **+EV** (plus **EV**), as it will lead to positive results in the long run. In short, you want your plays in poker to be **+EV**, because over the long run this will put you in the plus column.

### **Where to Sit in the Betting Rotation**

The conventional wisdom on this subject is that you want the wild, loose, aggressive, gamble-it-up type players sitting on your right, and the passive, timid, more predictable players sitting on your left. Money tends to flow clockwise around a poker table. The players acting after the player to their right tend to end up with their chips and they in turn tend to give them away to the players on *their* win.

The reason you want the wild, aggressive gamble-it-up players on your right is that since you play after them, you will know what action they are going to take. Imagine if they were on your left. Every time you tried to «limp in» for one bet with a borderline hand, they'd pop it for a raise. Or – worried about this happening – you might have to fold hands you wanted to play. So you want such players acting first, ahead of you.

Remember: boisterous and gamble-it-up on your right timid on your left.

### **A Short History of Poker**

The game of poker originated around New Orleans in about 1820. The word «poker» came from a French card game named «Poque» that probably mispronounced its way into the language as «poker». Poker evolved throughout the mid-1800s, the deck expanded to contain fifty-two cards, and the game worked its way up the Mississippi on the riverboats. It was played by Civil War soldiers on both sides and banned out to other areas of the country when these soldiers went home from the war. In the early 1900s, through about the 1930s, the poker world existed at a collection of scattered locations – games were held in private residences, clubs, and hotels. (See the movie *The Cincinnati Kid*.)

In 1931, Nevada voted to make gambling legal. The building of Hoover Dam in the mid-1930s created both the power and water for a desert city, and it also sent workers up the road looking to gamble, thus helping Las Vegas get underway.

In 1949, a marathon heads-up poker game between two famous gamblers, Nick (the Greek) Dandalos and Johnny Moss, at Binion's Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas brought attention to the game. The match took place over a five month period, and Moss was the eventual winner.

The 1950s were a time of the famous «road gamblers» of Texas, men who traveled the highways to Dallas, Fort Worth, and many stops in between.

In 1970, Benny Binion, owner of Binion's, started the *World Series of Poker*, a competition among the world's best players. Johnny Moss was voted the best player, and the following year, 1971, Moss was the winner again. In 1972, Thomas «Amarillo Slim» Preston won the title. With numerous colorful television appearances on the *Tonight Show* and others, he brought new attention to the game. There were seven players the first year the World Series of Poker was held, and thirteen the second year. Today, the event has mushroomed in size, and there are thousands of participants (and thirty-four preliminary tournaments). A guaranteed \$2 million first prize goes to the winner of the main event. Many other tournaments have followed in its wake, and online poker, both tournament and live-action, appeared in the late 1990s.



## Chapter 25

# Philosophy and Poker: Miscellaneous Ramblings About Poker Players and the Poker World

*«I want to be with those who know secret things, or else alone».*

– Rainer Maria Rilke



*«He has the watchful eyes of somebody who is both predator and prey».*

– Wyatt Earp, as described in *Tombstone*

### **Rule 287: The downfall of poker players as heroes is self-interest.**

The downfall of gamblers as heroic figures is probably self-involvement. Spirals of self-interest undermine a verdict of greatness. This makes it hard to reach the highest levels -the heroic levels. Objects of fascination? Yes. Colorful characters? Unquestionably. Objects of awe, intrigue, and curiosity – yes. But ultimate honor and greatness is undercut by too high a dose of self-interest. At the highest levels, players may be like virtuoso violinists – and are – but still with this single flaw: They are too much wrapped up in the Big Me. And they have to be.

On the plus side of the ledger, however, poker players get high marks for a few other things: for camaraderie, for «heart», for possession of a complex and arcane knowledge, for honesty, honor, courage, fearlessness, loyalty, perseverance, patience, composure, and concentration. Also for their unconventionality and their maverick or «outsider» status. We can't overlook the historic factor, either, the rich tradition of the game played on the Mississippi riverboats and in the Old West.

They also have the ability to «make a decision» (which seems to be a dying art – no poker player ever stood outside his house for an hour saying, «Let's see – should I paint it blue or green?») – as well as the ability to make *quick* decisions under stressful conditions. They also become good at holding two opposing views in their minds at the same time («I may lose a lot here or I may win a lot») – something that tends to make the average nonplayer very uncomfortable.

Poker players sometimes come as close to true nobility as anyone when in comradeship with each other – legitimately, comradeship, on a level

many people wouldn't understand. It's a closed society, like soldiers in a foxhole, a situation often beyond the understanding of outsiders.

Finally, poker players' personalities tend to swing back and forth between humility and self-confidence – two very good things to have one's personality swing back and forth between.

### **Today's Poker Scene – the Number of Players**

Card expert John Scarne once estimated that 65 million Americans play poker. A more commonly cited number of poker players in the United States is 50 million. This figure probably originated from a *Life* magazine article on poker that was published on August 16, 1968. In that article, the magazine stated that there were 47 million poker players in the United States and that they wagered \$45 billion annually.

These figures seem high. If they include anyone who has ever played the game, then they might be accurate. But for the number of *active* players, 50 million seems high, even today.

A more accurate estimate is probably 5-10 million. This figure includes the whole cross-section: church basement games, college dormitory games, home games, after-golf games, the game at the yearly insurance convention, liar's poker at the local tavern, the weekly game at the Elk's Club, the annual game at the Eagle's Club summer cook-out, the firemen's ball, and so on. It is made up of recreational players, for the most part. On the other end of the spectrum are about 50,000 hard-core devotees (a group comprised of pros, semi-pros, regulars, weekly players, traveling pros, tournament players, advanced amateurs, and serious recreational players/hobbyists). These players are the «tip of the spear» in the poker industry. The remainder (of the spear) is probably scattered across the nation, as stated above, in a hundred other forms. We should keep in mind that these are figures for the United States alone. The game has grown tremendously in recent years, all across the world.

In the 1950s, there were probably just a handful of great poker players in the world; today there are thousands. Modern media and computers have contributed to this statistical jump. Computers have established once and for all many of the basic elements of the game – the correct odds, best starting hands, optimum plays- exact scientific answers about the game have replaced the homespun «back-room» advice of earlier eras – and modern media has widely disseminated this information.

Poker's growth has been very big in Europe too. (In a television series in England called *Late Night Poker*, under-the-table camera technology was utilized that allowed TV viewers to see what cards the players held and to see when they were bluffing, and so on. This proved to be a breakthrough in the broadcasting of the game – the show became an instant ratings success, with millions of viewers tuning in nightly.)

New players come into the poker «system» every year, of course. This is good news for the continuation of the species – some come and go, of course, but the core audience of serious players seems to remain fairly stable. And this latter group is indeed «hard-core» – those who take the time to buy and read the books and poker magazines, go to the

tournaments, and create the industry itself, in a serious approach to the game.

## **The Poker World**

The poker world is centered around a number of events, locations (casinos), cities, publications, and Web sites. The tournament circuit is a moveable feast of friends, acquaintances, and adversaries who make regular stops at the location du jour. These stops include, as of this writing, the World Series of Poker (Las Vegas in May); the Jack Binion World Poker Open (Tunica, Mississippi); the World Poker Challenge (Reno, Nevada); the United States Poker Championship (Trump Taj Mahal, Atlantic City, New Jersey); the L.A. Poker Classic (Commerce Casino, Commerce, California); the World Poker Finals (Foxwoods Resort Casino, Ledyard, Connecticut); The World Poker Tour (different sites); and a large number of «lesser» tournaments.

There are also the magazines, *Card Player* magazine and *Poker Digest*, and a widely read Internet poker newsgroup called RGP (short for the group's online handle, «rec.gambling.poker»), which is a computer forum for the exchange of views, information, and all things poker. Ideas and strategy are discussed among top players and poker writers on a regular basis. There is also a similar poker newsgroup known as «2+2» that is run by poker authors David Sklansky and Mason Malmuth, and [www.unuedpokerforum.com](http://www.unuedpokerforum.com), run by Mike Caro and Roy Cooke.

There are a number of other informational poker Web sites as well, chief among them [www.PokerPages.com](http://www.PokerPages.com), [www.Poker.Casino.com](http://www.Poker.Casino.com), [www.twoplustwo.com](http://www.twoplustwo.com), [www.Cardplayer.com](http://www.Cardplayer.com), and [www.playwinningpoker.com](http://www.playwinningpoker.com).

## **Internet Poker**

Internet poker is one of the hottest subjects on the contemporary poker scene. A growing number of computer Web sites now exist where you can play for real money against real opponents from around the world – [PlanetPoker.com](http://PlanetPoker.com), [Ultimatebet.com](http://Ultimatebet.com), [PartyPoker.com](http://PartyPoker.com), and others. The largest such Web site, Paradise Poker ([www.paradisepoker.com](http://www.paradisepoker.com)), has upwards of 50,000 players logged on, with 2,000 players playing nightly at 200 cyber tables. The site has dealt over 200 million hands to date. Internet tournaments are also held on a regular basis, with hundreds of participants, for big-money stakes. A yearly tournament hosted by the online Web site PartyPoker ([www.partypoker.com](http://www.partypoker.com)) awards a hundred seats for a cruise, along with an entry into an onboard tournament worth a million dollars. Two other recent entries are «The World Series of Online Poker» (WCOOP) at [Pokerstars.com](http://Pokerstars.com), and «The World Series of Online Poker» at [UltimateBet.com](http://UltimateBet.com)



## Chapter 26 All-Star Ideas

Here are some ideas that were inspired by some of poker's greats. For more information, see the list of books on page 216.



According to John Vorhaus, in a poker game, when the action gets to you, hesitate before you act. Hesitate a little before you make your play. Doing this sows confusion; it can make your opponents who act after you think twice (and hesitate themselves, even though they have a better hand – and check); a hesitation can make a raise (by you) look like an afterthought, or desperation (or a number of other things). Also, the extra time allows you to think it through. Hesitate slightly before you make your play.

– John Vorhaus



One of professional poker player Bob («Coach») Ciaffone's ideas is the «bones dictum». If a hand gets shorthanded at the end, and other players are checking, you can't let the dead money just sit out in the middle of the table. Bet! You can't just leave the «bones» out in the middle of the table to rot. It would be impolite. Somebody has to take them.

– Bob Ciaffone



Linda Johnson points out in her book *Championship Stud* that in the early stages of a hold'em tournament, you can play a range of lesser hands more cheaply. If you have J-10 in your hand, for instance, you can see the flop live times for the same price it is going to cost you later in the tournament to see the flop once with a better hand. You get to see «five flops for the price of one» – often with hands you can't even play later in the tournament.

– Linda Johnson



«The live ness of your cards in Stud/8 is always an extremely important factor». Poker pro Max Stern reminds us here to always make sure that (he cards we need to make our hand (in Stud/8) are «live» – that is, they haven't already appeared on the board, or in somebody else's hand as up cards that they are still in the deck and available to us. This is a critical factor in the game of Stud'8, perhaps the critical factor.

– Max Stern



When playing the game of Omaha, poker legend T. J. Cloutier tells us, don't play hands that have «three cards and a dangler». In Omaha, you should have all four cards working together to have a playable hand-Avoid hands like **2-3-4-K**, in other words (with the king, in this case, being the «dangler»). A simple but powerful idea for the game of Omaha,

– T. J. Cloutier

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In a discussion of tournament play, 1983 World Champion Tom McEvoy reminds us that there will be times when you will find yourself in desperate straits, up against it, short-stacked, and where you are simply going to have to «take a stand». Just go ahead and do it, he tells us – be aggressive, and don't second-guess yourself later. This latter point seems especially important. Pick a good hand (or as good as you can find), pull the trigger, and don't look back.

– Tom McEvoy



In an article by poker writer Lee Munzer that appeared in *Poker Digest* (May 4, 2000), Munzer praises poker player Harold Huntington and gives him high marks because «he consistently bets with the same motion and time interval». There is an important idea here for what we need to do as players. Disguising our hand is not so much a case of acting differently every time as it is of acting the same every time.

– Lee Munzer



One of well-known poker writer Roy Cooke's most famous dictums is to avoid being «results oriented». Keep your eye on the process, in other words, and the kinds of decisions you're making. These are the things that are going to win for you over the long haul. Play by the year, not by the individual session. What is important is whether you played it right, not whether you won or lost. Don't be results oriented in a single individual session or hand.

– Roy Cooke





The legendary Doyle Brunson tells us that one quality world-class players possess is that they are adept at «shifting gears» in their play – going from very aggressive, to withdrawing from the action, and back again. For best results, try making these shifts suddenly, he suggests. In his own play, he sometimes tells himself: All you need is first gear and third gear– you don't need second.

– Doyle Brunson



There are going to be boring stretches, monotonous stretches. It's not all going to be thrills, excitement, and dashing poker play. After his championship run, Steve Badger, 1999 Omaha high-low World Champion, wrote: «I just played 22 hours of Omaha high-low (14 Tuesday, 8 Wednesday/Thursday) for the World Championship. Of that 22, 17 hours were like watching paint dry, 3 hours were even duller, and about 2 hours was like bungee-jumping from a helicopter into a vat of flaming eels».

– Steve Badger



*Card Player* columnist Michael Cappelletti notes that in a tournament situation, you should «avoid toss-up situations that put you all-in. The more often you bet your stack, the more likely you are to lose it». A series of such all-in bets like this, in other words – over and over – are going to catch up to you eventually. Limit the number of times you do this.

– Michael Cappelletti



Why do people gamble? To poker writer David Spanier's mind, it's a ritual in which increased stakes increase the «weight of feeling». Without the stakes, this ritual wouldn't matter as much. People do it to feel «the experience of being alive more intensely».

«Momentarily they feel alive, involved, possibilities exist, victories are possible, and tomorrow the game exists to be played again».

– David Spanier



Poker player (and anthropologist) David Hayano did a study of poker players and the poker subculture in 1982 in which he theorized about the meaning of gambling. He noted that the poker subculture offers certain things to its inhabitants – namely: the «opportunity to make one's own decisions, the desire to be greedy, generous, or noble, and the quest for

some form of organized social activity that is repetitive and ritualized and yet offers unpredictability and action».

– David Hayano



Poker great Bobby Baldwin had an important idea in his book *Tales Out of Tulsa*, when he said that if you find yourself way down in a poker game, really getting battered, look to see if you can «salvage» something out of the session. If you're losing \$500. don't try to get it all back, set as your goal to try to get some of it back – \$200, say. See if you can chip away at it and make inroads on the big negative number, and claw your way back a little before you leave the game. World-class thinking here, in a tough spot.

– Bobby Baldwin



«Winning at stud poker is simple enough, either limited poker or table stakes. The secret is to stay on higher cards than your opponents do».

Another simple idea, but a powerful one. It's a game of high cards— whoever starts with the highest cards has an advantage.

– Herbert O. Yardley



«It's okay to play your best game all the time».

Mike Caro wrote this in his book, *Caro 's Fundamental Secrets of Winning Poker*, and for some reason, up until that was written, it never dawned on a lot of us that this was true – that it was an okay thing to do, and that we should try to do it every session.

– Mike Caro

## Biographies

### ♠ Bob Ciaffone

Respected high-limit player; teacher, and columnist (for *Card Player* magazine); the «Coach» has been a long-time poker writer and player; author of *Improve Your Poker* and numerous other poker books: third place finish in the World Championship event in 1987.

### ♠ Linda Johnson

1997 World Series of Poker Razz champion; former editor of *Card Player* magazine; one of the most respected voices in poker. Coauthor of *Championship Stud*, with Max Stern and Tom McEvoy.

♠ **Max Stern**

Long-time player and 1997 World Series of Poker Seven-Card Stud 8/or Better Champion. Coauthor of *Championship Stud*.

♠ **John Vorhaus**

Recognized poker authority and writer for *Card Player* magazine. Author of *The Pro Poker Playbook* and other books.

♠ **T. J. Cloutier**

One of the top money winners of all time in tournament poker; recognized as one of the top players in the world; coauthor of *Championship Omaha*.

♠ **Tom McEvoy**

Author of *Tournament Poker* and coauthor of *Championship Omaha*. 1983 World Champion.

♠ **Lee Munzer**

Lee Munzer is a recognized authority on poker and respected long-time writer for *Poker Digest* magazine.

♠ **Roy Cooke**

Long-time professional player and columnist for *Card Player* magazine; author of *Real Poker: The Cooke Collection*, with John Bond.

♠ **Doyle Brunson**

1976, 1977 World Champion; universally acknowledged as one of the greatest players to ever play the game; author of *Super/System – A Course in Power Poker* and *According to Doyle*.

♠ **Michael Cappelletti**

Long-time tournament and cash-game player; well-known columnist for *Card Player* magazine.

♠ **David Spanier**

Poker authority and author of *Inside the Gambler's Mind*, and *Inside the Pleasuredome*.

♠ **David Hayano**

Anthropologist and long-time poker player; author of *Poker Faces – The Life and Work of Professional Card Players*,

♠ **Bobby Baldwin**

One of the world's top high-limit players; casino executive; 1978 World Champion and author of *Tales Out of Tulsa*.

♠ **Steve Badger**

Professional poker player and writer; 1999 World Series of Poker Omaha high-low Champion; creator of the popular poker Web site [www.playwinningpoker.com](http://www.playwinningpoker.com).

♠ **Herbert O. Yardley**

Author of *The Education of a Poker Player* – one of the early, seminal books on the game.

♠ **Mike Caro**

One of the most respected voices in poker, Caro is a noted columnist and the author of *Caro on Gambling*, *Caro's Fundamental Secrets of Winning Poker*, and many other books. Founder of Mike Caro University of Poker, Gaming and Life Strategy.



## Chapter 27

### Notes on Online (Internet) Poker

It is sometimes said of people who have a physical handicap (such as blindness or deafness) that their other senses become more acute. A little bit of this effect occurs in online poker. Deprived of the usual clues we are accustomed to seeing in a game, we strain harder and become more attuned to clues that *are* available, thus enhancing our abilities in this area more than we otherwise might.

Playing poker online doesn't offer opponents very much information about us: our play (of course), our nicknames, location, stack size, the cards we show down, the timing of our bets, and whatever we might choose to type into the chat box – that's about it. That's all they will ever know about us. (Unlike real-world poker, where people are on full view and body language, facial expressions, conversation, and a host of other things get factored in.) Since so few of these «information bits» exist in our online identity, maybe we should give some thought to how we present them to our opponents.

#### How to Pick a Name

When you first log in to a poker Web site, you will be asked to pick a player name (your «Player ID»). Choose a name that sums up the identity you wish to project to the other players. If «Norm» or «Babs» sums up everything you want opponents to know about you, then pick a name like this. If «Enigma» sums up the kind of image you want to present to opponents, choose this kind of name. If you want to be difficult to remember, pick a number to use as a name: «D3Y69J5794». If you prefer foreign and mysterious, maybe something like «JacqucsPerdue» or «IshmaelBonjae» would fit the bill. If you want to be even more cryptic and distinctive, perhaps all characters would suit you: \*\_J!\$^\$!!\_\* If deceptive is what you are after, and your name is Ed, pick «Thelma». If you want to be easy to locate by friends, use ALL CAPS (which will make you stand out on the player list), or choose the name «AAArbogast» if you wish to always be listed first (alphabetically) in online tournaments.

Some other popular choices among players include: a variation on your pet's name («Fido24»), your hobby («ILikeNags», «Mr.Tennis» or «GUN-DOG»), the city you are in («Biloxi713», or «MrChicago»); a word suggesting an evocative mood («MidnitcParis»), or a mood you would like to induce in your opponents («MrPain», «DrDeath»); or possibly just a mellow sound («Windwalker»). You might also choose a comedy reference («MoeCurly», «ArtVandelay»); your favorite drink («RustyNail»); sports

team («DolphinsFan»); ethnicity («IrishJack»); band («BeatleBoy»); significant date («3-25-48»); favorite poker legend («A.Slim», «CincinnatiKid»); your view of your own game («AlwaysChasin», «Tailspin», «Blaster»); or some *part* of your game («HitsTheFlop», «4thStreetFreddy», «RiverBoy»); your initials («JM1948»); your job («Salesman41»); your name and city («LWT/Boston»); or – Heaven forbid – just simply your name («Al Snyder»).

## **Big Stack**

When playing online, some players like the advantage of having a big stack of chips and the psychological edge this gives them. The theory here is: If your opponents all have about \$150 or so in front of them, and you have \$1200 in front of you, it does several things.

- First, it sends a message. It puts the other players on notice that you're a serious player, one who is not going anywhere, and one who is there to win.
- Second, it tells your opponents that you got this pile of chips from *somewhere*. The two choices are «bought in for a lot», and «ran over» a lot of players to get it. Opponents are likely to suspect the latter, with all the intimidation this implies.
- Third, a large stack also holds out the possibility – in terms of your image – that maybe you're a loose player, capable of throwing some serious money around (which can also be an exploitable image).
- Fourth, a big stack frees you up to play your long-term game – in other words, to operate independently of short-term fluctuations.
- Finally, it tells you that the players who bet *into* you usually have a good hand. Players are more hesitant to bluff into a big stack without a good hand, and knowing this allows you to make more accurate lay-downs.

## **Positive and Negative Effects of Online Play**

Extensive Internet poker play will probably help your regular poker game in some ways and hurt it in others. This will vary according to different personality types. Here are some of the advantages and disadvantages of online play.

- One advantage is that since we are playing more «in the dark» online, at least compared to a live game (we can't see opponents and their body language, and so on), we tend to play more by the book (at least until we get to know our opponents). This probably helps our by-the-book game, which is usually our default game the one we fall back on whenever we find ourselves in a new situation, with little information to go by. This «playing in the dark» helps sharpen this aspect of our game, and it strengthens our discipline to stay on it too, during long sessions.

- Online poker play has the effect of tightening up our overall game because more hands are dealt. If you are accustomed to playing thirty hands an hour in a live game, and you suddenly jump up to sixty hands an hour in Internet play, it becomes easier to muck bad cards and wait for better hands. The feeling is: «There'll be another hand coming along in a minute, so I can pitch these». And it's true – there will be another hand along very shortly, perhaps within the minute.
- Another advantage of Internet play is that we become more cognizant of times when we are tired or in the wrong mood to play poker. This happens because of the unlimited choice of online games, with games going at all hours of the day and night. Constant access to available games spoils us into realizing that we don't have to play at those times when we don't feel like it – when we're tired, or aren't in the mood. This is a lesson that might take years to sink in from live game play, where a player is usually forced to play when a game is going on, tired or not. Having games always going on demonstrates to us what the pros have been telling us all along – that our game is hurt when we play tired. So we begin to «cherry-pick» the times when we are in the best state of mind to play, and that's a good habit to get into in any case.
- One final thing on the plus side of the ledger: Online play is entertaining, and fun, and does improve our online play (which is good if we intend to continue to do it). It is also one of the few places in the world that inexperienced players can find a range of low-limit games (50 cent-\$1, or \$1-\$2, etc.) and low-limit tournaments in which to practice the game.

### **Online Tells and Other Notes**

One of the first things players notice when they start playing poker online is that there are no «tells». However, as they play more, it becomes apparent that online tells do exist, they just come in a different form.

Playing poker online is, simply put, a different venue. If you never had a driver's license, for instance, and you never drove a car, but suddenly you *did* start driving, you would miss a lot of «car tells» that are very obvious to other drivers. You would miss signs that told you cars ahead of you were getting ready to turn left, vehicles were trying to edge into traffic, or getting ready to back up, and so on. As a new driver, you would miss these signs because you're not used to looking for them – you're in an entirely new element-Online poker is a little like this – you don't notice some of the signs because you're still new at it.

Now, a lot of the tells in all of poker – whether real games or online – are *situational*. They are tells that exist within the context of the current hand or game. (How did this opponent bet previously? Did he fire in a bet quickly when he had an unbeatable hand, and pause for a moment when he didn't? How is he acting in relation to the current board cards? – i.e., «situational».)

But more general tells exist too in online poker.

### **Watch for a Quick Check**

A quick «check» almost always means weakness (except with better players, of course).

### **Quick Bet, Big Hand**

A quick bet almost always means a big hand (as it currently exists in relation to the board-cards). The vast majority of fast bets, at least among average players at lower levels of play, indicate a coordination with whatever the board is showing so it's usually safe to fold.

### **The 85% Rule**

At lower levels of play, most of the actions that take place match the hand that the bettor has. In other words, 85% of the time, if a player checks, he has a weak hand. This is good, because this allows you to correctly proceed based on this information. And as we said earlier, the thing that matters most in poker is making correct decisions. If someone checks, and you bet, and they check-raise you, then 85% of the time he is not bluffing, and he probably has a good hand. You soon find out who these people are. (Note: This 85% figure is merely a randomly chosen percentage – meaning «most of the time».)

### **The «Stall»**

The «Stall», as player/author Steve Badger has aptly named it, is when the betting action is on a player who has an unbeatable hand, and he stalls for a long time before he bets – as though he were seriously mulling things over. This is usually pretty transparent, due to the nature of the game-situation (in other words, there could only be one hand he has), and it sometimes verges on the comical.

### **Prechoosing the «In Turn» Buttons ... (Check/Bet/Raise)...**

Most online poker sites have buttons that can be checked in advance to allow the player to make his play ahead of time, before the action gets to him. There are naturally some obvious tells associated with this. If you hesitate for a while before you play, this will show (in subsequent action) who had what buttons already checked. For example, let's say you raise, and the player behind you calls your bet instantly. He must have had the «call» button checked ahead of time, indicating he has a strong enough hand to call anything you were going to do. For this reason, it's not a bad idea to always pause a few seconds before acting, if for no other reason than to see which players behind you had which buttons checked.

### **Steaming Tells**

The tells associated with «steaming» are pretty universal, whether in a live game or online: an outburst of continuous raising after a bad beat; a player who is suddenly playing every hand, a sudden flow of words in the «chat box», etc. Look for all the well-known, familiar reactions.



## **Chat Box Tells**

*Chat box tells:* sometimes a player will come right out and tell you – in the chat box – something you want to know. Or he will type in something that reveals something about his game. («I never raise more than once»; or «I'm not really a hold'em player»; or «I've never played Omaha before»; or «I play \$40-\$80 every weekend at Foxwoods»; or «I came in 5th at the Four Queens tournament».) All of these are tells that reveal what kinds of opponents you're up against. Sometimes two players might start insulting each other in the chat box – this too is a «tell», because it explains their subsequent betting and raising behavior. Be attuned to these «chat box tells».

## **Learn Who the Opposition Is**

Pay attention to which players are in your game. As time goes on you'll get to know the other players – how they play and whether they are good or bad, and you'll soon know who the better ones are. While it's important to know who the bad players are too, unfortunately, don't get too attached to them because a lot of them might not be around too long.

## **Game Selection**

Game selection is very important in any kind of poker, and it's equally true of online poker. If you suddenly notice your game is stocked with strong players at every position, check out other games and put your name on a different list. Remember, though, that a certain advantage accrues from playing in the same game for a length of time with the same players. You develop a certain table image that you can begin to use to your benefit. Hopping around from game to game can forfeit some of this benefit.

## **Be Attuned to Your Seating**

This is another thing to be aware of in online poker. Are you playing behind The kind of player you like to sit behind? Are you playing ahead of a player you like playing ahead of? Are the wild players where you want them to be in the betting rotation? Be aware of these factors, and if you're not comfortable with your position, get out of the game or make adjustments.

## **Set Some Rules**

When players first start playing poker online, they tend to go overboard. They may find themselves staying up all night long and playing, and so on. It soon becomes apparent that a few rules have to be set: «I *will* go to bed at a certain time», «I *will not* play tired», and so on. A good suggestion here: Set some personal rules.

## **A Player's Attention Can Drift During the Game ...**

It's hard for the average person to stare at a flat screen showing a green oval felt and small oval circles for hours at a time. There simply isn't enough going on to keep our attention. Remember that in a live game you're looking at reality, in all its three dimensions. Online, it's just a flat screen.

This makes a tremendous difference when it comes to the «holding one's interest» factor, and this phenomenon can result in loss of attention, in which you miss the very details you watch for in a real game that are responsible for your winning. It's very easy to have one's eyes drift to a television playing off to the side, or other distractions. This is a pitfall to be aware of in online play.

### **Play Money Doesn't Play Like the Real Thing**

Play-money games on the Internet (as training for real-game play) are not as helpful as they might appear. While they do familiarize newer players with the basics of the game (how the dealer button moves, the blinds, the types of hands that usually win, reading the board, and so on), beyond this point they can become detrimental. In many play-money games, you will see most of the betting rounds capped (a bet and three raises). This is poor training for a real game, unless you plan to move from play-money games into the wildest real-money game ever spread in a casino. Better advice is to move to the lowest *real-money* games instead, where things have some kind of perspective. It should hurt a little when you lose at poker if it doesn't, then none of your opponents' actions have any real meaning behind them.

### **Should I Play Two Games at Once?**

Playing in two games at once is an option offered by some online poker sites. For most players this is a bad idea. While it may look good on paper («I'll get to see twice as many hands in the same amount of time, so I can «cherry-pick» the very best hands to play», etc), what happens in actual practice is that the games tend to overlap on the computer screen and become confusing. Also, the person may discover for the first time that he really *does* follow certain nuances in a hand as it progresses, and when the screen is flipping back and forth from one game to the other you lose all that. It's also surprising how often you get a «thinker» type hand in both games at the same time which can lead to poor (even disastrous) play. If you feel you absolutely must play in two games at once, get used to clicking on the «sit-out» button in one game the instant you catch a big hand in the other.

### **Keep Track of Your All-Ins**

Always make sure you have your «all-ins» set to the maximum amount at all times when playing Internet poker (on sites that have this option). If you get disconnected during a hand and have no all-ins left, your hand will be folded. You will then lose not only the pot you might have won, but all money you put into the pot up to that point (Most players learn this the hard way: by getting a monster hand, betting and raising with it, getting disconnected and coming back online to discover their hand has been folded.) Always keep an eye on your all-ins status.

### **Server Crashes and Disconnects**

The regular online player gets used to occasional server crashes, disconnects, freeze-ups, and other technological foul-ups. He gets used to

integrating these things into his play, unemotionally, and moving on. This is a negative that he turns into a positive that can actually work in his favor. The online newbie may find his emotional game completely derailed when such things happen, while the experienced online player gains a slight edge by simply factoring them in calmly and going on.

### **It's Easier to Call a Bet in Internet Poker Play**

In online play, all you have to do is click a «call» button. While you have to worry a little about the effect this might have on your play, the real effect on the game is when other players are doing it (that is, the effect multiplied by nine other players). The result is often more «loose calls», «chasing», and more weird draw-outs than you are used to seeing.

Another way of putting it: You will see some calls made on the internet that you wouldn't likely see made in a live game – if the player had to look across the table at an intimidating opponent, physically lift his chips up, and put them in the pot every time there was a bet and a raise. He'd more likely fold. By being able to simply click on a button on a computer screen, however, a lot of the anxiety and hesitation is removed for the player. It's simply a fact that digital money is easier to click on and spend (a fact not lost on clothing manufacturers, toy companies, booksellers, and so on).

It should also be noted that there is less peer pressure involved online. There are no resentful looks or group disapproval for the player who is playing wrong – another factor that aids in making loose calls.

### **Reading the Cards Online**

It's actually easier to misread your hand in a real game. Online poker is designed so your cards are right in front of you at all times, which makes it hard (but not impossible) to misread what you have. This can spoil the player a little. Peeking at one's down-cards and remembering them in a real game can be a problem for those who have been deeply mired in Internet play.

### **Online Poker Can Be Pretty Streaky**

Online, we get faster play, bigger fluctuations, and longer losing streaks. Bad beats in online play can feel worse than in a real game. Yes – hard to believe, but there's no one at the table to tell, no one to commiserate with – you suffer your misery alone, in the silence of your home. You don't get that helpful look of sympathy, that knowing nod, or eye-rolling gesture of commiseration that says, «I know how you feel» – looks you get in a real game that confirm for you that the universe is temporarily out of alignment. Instead, you're completely on your own. You get ... nothing.

Therefore, «steaming» can be a problem. Online play also makes it easier to «dehumanize» opponents – and treat them with anger, resentment, even hatred. In a real game, you can look across the table and see that the bad beat/ugly draw-out was put on you by dear old Betty, or Slow-Speed Freddy (who needs the money), or Jerry, a guy you respect for reasons other than his poker play. On the Internet, opponents are nothing

more than an infernal blinking light. Dehumanizing opponents – turning them into anonymous faceless automatons (and targets for our anger) – is much easier to do, and this can exacerbate the steaming problem.

Online players often report big swings, and longer losing streaks. One common explanation is that they don't notice these same losing streaks as much in a real casino, or pay as much attention to them, whereas in online play, the «bottom line» of how you're doing is always in front of you, in black and white. But there is something else subtle going on here. Online play is faster, so it's like several sessions linked together. It's like playing two or three sessions at once (of your regular play); thus you might see a losing streak that indeed, you have never seen before in live play. One other factor: Many players are hesitant to send a large amount of money to offshore Internet poker sites. Thus, a large number of players are probably under bankrolled in the game, which leads to scared money play-Note-Taking During the Game

It's true that one of the advantages of Internet play is that you can take notes (on opponents' tendencies, and other things) while you play. This would seem to be an ideal situation, except for the fact that a lot of players don't want to go to the trouble of taking notes while they play. However, here's the minimum you ought to do: Assess your opponents' general level of expertise around the table (in particular, the worst players and the best). Watch their play and note the kinds of cards they are turning over. From there, go as deep from that point as you want in recording more specific examples of their play. Request a hand history if you're curious about what happened during a specific hand.

### **Bet-Timing**

The usual time-frame for a bet in online poker is probably somewhere in the range of 1-10 seconds. Often, against more experienced players, it's even shorter – somewhere in the range of 1-5 seconds. If you bet on the quicker end of this range, it looks like your hand is whatever flopped; bet on the slow end of this range, and it looks like either a «stall» (where you're pretending to be thinking), or incredible naiveté, a complete newbie who is having trouble reading his hand. Sophisticated players, of course, mess with the psychology of this timing. They'll fire in a bet quickly to make you think they're trying to push you out, when they actually have a good hand; and the next time fire it in quickly when they have nothing – a bluff – and so on. But most players at the lower limits (85%?) are quite predictable in their timing.

### **Bet-Timing: The Range of the Normal**

All lines and queues in life have a certain established waiting time.

The line at the butcher's shop might be four minutes for each person ahead of you; the line at the convenience store might be two minutes per customer ahead of you. At the optician's, a single person ahead of you in line might mean fifteen minutes of waiting. At the movie-theater ticket-window, the wait might be twenty seconds per person. Each represents the

accepted time-frame for polite interaction for the person who is up ahead of you, being waited on.

The betting action in a poker game, as it proceeds around the table, is also a «line» you are waiting in, in a sense. It is a queue – people standing in line, waiting to bet (or to act). The allowable window of time that players get used to operating in while playing online poker is fairly short, as we have seen (about 1-10 seconds – and often 1-5 seconds). Let's call this the «range of the normal». It is within this range that tells often occur. It is within this small framework – this duration – that things *mean* things, so we need to be attuned to them.

Decisive, Deliberate Play in Online Poker Make your moves decisively, as you should in any poker game. Decisive does not necessarily mean instantaneous (as some bad players do); but firmly, crisply, and confidently. The feeling you're trying to convey is of someone who clearly knows what he is doing. This gives you the aura of a knowledgeable player, something that can win hands for you in an overall session. We can see some of this by contrast: Those who take a long time to make a decision reveal themselves as amateurs.

The decisiveness with which somebody bets indicates expertise and authority and it can be used to sell the idea that this time you really have something. Such proper bet-timing is therefore important in gaining an edge in online play, as in any other.

Match the timing of your bets to what you want to get across about your hand. That is to say, the speed with which you bet should match what you are trying to represent about your hand – but not amateurishly so. You want to use this timing to make a statement of some kind, if possible.

Here's an example. You get a hand you're not real terribly fond of, but it's one you realize you must call with, so you call instantly. This «instantly» is part of the statement you are making. You're giving your hand a little extra spin, slightly more than it is worth. Or let's say you flop top pair in hold'em, and you would like to narrow the field of players, so when a player bets ahead of you, you immediately raise. That sort of thing. Use the timing of your bets to *augment* your hand.

In one further example, let's say you limp in, in Omaha/8 with a 10 in your hand. The flop comes 10-10-7. You bet fairly quickly and decisively – because you don't want anyone else drawing. You give it *that spin*, in other words – just a touch quicker than normal, perhaps – more decisive. In this way you are using bet-timing to enhance your hand.

You'll note that some players try to make their bet-timing the same on every hand, or simply randomize it, which is probably a good second choice.

## **Poker Betting Rhythms**

During any poker hand, we could say that there are three different betting rhythms taking place, simultaneously.

- First, the rhythm you want to establish of yourself as a bettor and player over many hands (deliberate, decisive, thoughtful, and so on).

You seek to keep this pace going. It is «who you are» as a player, a pace you've been refining for years. It's the rhythm that accompanies your Lifetime Player Personality.

- Secondly, the rhythm of the betting as it is currently going around the table, on this particular hand. Every player is betting very fast on this hand, for instance, and you may wish to make a statement within this rhythm – such as, «I won't be pushed around either», etc. It is often helpful to have your bets match the timing of other bets as they go around the table. Everyone checks, let's say. So perhaps you'd like to do this in the same rhythm as everyone else because this will help the players behind you come to the same conclusion; that is, to check.
- Third, a «hesitate slightly» or «bet-slightly-quicker» rhythm that can augment your current hand, or whatever idea you're trying to represent.

We may notice that we do these three things in life too. We each have our overall personality, our place *within* a group discussion – where we fit ourselves into the rhythm of it – *and* the individual spin we put on a certain thing we say.

Good players merge all of the above rhythms seamlessly. Just as in a live game, online betting needs to stay in the rhythm of your own betting (your overall «player personality» rhythm) and within the rhythm of the other players' current betting rhythms, as well as adding a slight spin to what you are trying to represent at any given moment. Doing all these correctly helps gain an edge in online play.

Here are a couple more bet-timing examples:

- It's at the end of a hand in Omaha high-low. It's heads-up. You're in early betting position, the five up cards are on the board, and you've missed your low draw and all you have for high is a pair of queens. If you check very quickly in a situation like this, you are going to give your opponent confidence to bet – in fact, you're practically inviting him to bet – whereupon you will probably have to fold because you don't have much of a high hand and no low hand at all. Pause four or five seconds, however, and if he has only a borderline hand himself (or nothing at all), this might give *him* pause. Whereupon he then checks too, for instance, and your pair stands up – and wins half the pot. See the relation here between bet-timing and winning money? It is a very real thing – not something theoretical.
- When playing online, it is helpful to time your bets to match the length of time a person would likely be thinking about betting with the hand you're trying to represent. For instance, in the example above, you might hesitate as long as it takes a person to think: «Well, I've got half the pot won – but I'm not sure; maybe I should just check». This thought took a certain length of time. You should match your hesitation to the length of time it would take to think it.

- Or let's say you make a full house on the last card. You hesitate, as if thinking, a little bit worried, then you bet forcefully. This might look to an opponent like a «trying-to-push-you-out» type bet. What you're going for is the duration of time it would take a person to think: «Heck, I missed my hand. Well, I'm going to bet it anyway». These thoughts all have a certain «time length» to them. Consider what they are, and match your pauses to them.
- The following is one of the worst timing mistakes that is made in online poker: Whenever you check very quickly in early position, this tells the players who are yet to act, «Well, there's *one* player I don't have to worry about».

For that's what your opponents are doing at the other end of the table – they're eliminating players around the table, crossing them off the list of who they don't have to worry about. Suppose the following situation:

Three players see the flop in hold'em. The flop comes all one suit. You instantly check in early position. To the second player to act, this tells him: «Well, the first player doesn't have it – I only have to get past one other player to win this pot».

Alternately, let's say you instantly check in early position, and so does the next player, right behind you. What does this tell the third player? It tells him to bet. A better idea? Always insert a four or five second delay before acting in early position.

In general, any time you plan to check in a hand, you ought to pause a little. This pause doesn't have to be long or dramatic. If you put in a reasonable pause at this point, it can give opponents the idea that you have some kind of hand, and it can stop them from betting, and possibly induce a «check» that will give you one more free card to get your hand home.

## Other Examples

- You're under the gun (first to act) with **A-2** in Omaha high-low. You might not want to instantly call the big blind – this would look like you have a strong hand to others, in early position. («Hmm. He called awfully quickly from early position».) So maybe you delay it slightly. Not enough so that you're going for an Academy Award, but somewhere in between – three or four seconds.
- Here's one final example. You have a big hand in middle position – a monster hand – and you decide you want a lot of callers around the table, so you want to enter the pot as unobtrusively as possible. This usually means making your play *within* the bet-timing that is going around the table.

All of the above are simply illustrations that bet-timing is important in online poker, and can help your hand. It should be observed that with some Web sites, however, it doesn't matter too much what your bet-timing is, for the simple reason that the software itself operates in a jerky fashion, thus delaying your bet going into the pot for a number of seconds.

## **Other Miscellaneous Notes on Online Poker**

If you've been playing online poker for awhile and then go back to real-game play again, the real game is going to seem much slower. The cards are dealt out slower in real life, it takes longer to split the pots, players call for a «setup», various interruptions occur, and so on. Online poker zips along much faster, without any of these interruptions. This disparity could lead to the following phenomena:

- You become slightly over-eager to play (when you're back in a real game) – when a hand finally is dealt out. And this leads to:
- Staying too often («It seems like hands only come along every five minutes, so I better stay») – as well as «chasing» on marginal hands, and so on. And this can lead to:
- The tells associated with over-eagerness. When you finally do get a very good hand in a real-life game, your thoughts may be, «Finally!» – whereupon you lean forward (finally!), eager to play – a reaction that becomes quite visible to the other players in the game.
- And finally, from playing too much poker online, you will have both more tells ... and less tells. How is it possible to have both more tells and less tells at the same time? I'll explain.

## **The Blackjack Phenomenon**

Poker players generally welcome blackjack players into a poker game because blackjack players are not accustomed to hiding their emotions. In blackjack there is no reason to hide your emotions. (Watch a game of blackjack in progress in a casino sometime and note the way the players act.)

When blackjack players move to a poker game, of course, they adjust – a little warning bell goes off in their brain telling them that they better tone themselves down, but it is generally not enough. Long hours of training at «Yes, Blackjack!! Whoopee!!» still tend to leak out around the edges, and these players tend to be more readable.

How does the blackjack phenomenon relate to poker? Let's take the following hypothetical example. Let's say you played in a real-money poker game for many years, but you then decided to switch to online computer poker instead, exclusively. (You made the switch because it was easier, more convenient, you didn't have to leave your home, and so on.) You played exclusively online many hours a day for about a year or so. Then let's say you went back to real-game play again. Further, in our hypothetical example, you were curious about how your body language may have changed in the interim, due to playing poker online, so the other players let you prop up a mirror in front of yourself during play so you could monitor your expressions. Here's what you would see:



## **More Tells**

You would notice slightly more tells than you remembered having before, especially when involved with negative events: bad beats, draw-outs, anger-type situations, and so on – but you would also see tells with some good situations too – getting a monster hand, slow-playing a good hand, and so on.

Thus happens because you have spent a long period of time sitting by yourself alone at a computer where you developed the bad habit of having no reason to hide your emotions. As a former live-game player, you sensed this was a bad tendency, and you resisted it at first, but finally, through the passage of time, you began to think, «Well, hell, there's no one watching», so your real reactions began to leak out around the edges. Online play has to some extent hurt your «poker face».

## **Less Tells**

You would also notice (from looking into your propped-up mirror during live-game play) that something has happened to your overall personality. You seem to be more wooden, less animated and less social than you remember yourself as being. You remember yourself as being rather witty and gregarious and congenial; now, you're surprised to find that you are more stiff and inexpressive, less talkative, and so on.

This is because you have spent the previous year as a «mushroom» – logging hundreds of hours online, and not being around the company of real players. Your brain eventually concluded that there was less reason to develop a social personality because you were always sitting by yourself, alone at a computer. While you have not yet become the «wooden man», you are moving in that direction.

Interestingly, this effect does not just occur in the context of the game, but in your overall personality as well. As a consequence of not being around people very much in the last year, you are more excited to see them than ever, while at the same time – in another way – you lose interest in them and seem strangely indifferent to them.

At any event, the result is:

*More* tells from lack of practice at hiding your reactions.

*Less* tells from your newly developed personality as a no interacting, slightly less social «lump on the log».

## **Trigger-Hesitancy**

Finally, one other effect that can occur as a consequence of online play is a hesitancy to «pull the trigger» on your reads when you go back to a real-life game. In online play, your entire poker game, in all its many dimensions, has been squeezed into a few small icons on a flat screen. Moving back to a real game again, it follows, in reverse, that there may now seem like there is too much information coming in. For instance, you might see a player who bets, and bets strongly, and then a card or two later his face suddenly goes ashen and he checks.

A real-game player would in most cases immediately take this as a sign of weakness and as a cue to bet. After playing too much online, however, you become less sure of these types of situations (facial expressions, and so on) – from being out of practice at seeing them – so maybe you «check» instead. This might seem like a fairly harmless effect, but it can be fatal in certain situations – such as when there is a big pot on the line, or when you’re in the late stages of a tournament.

There is also the possibility of making this mistake in reverse – having become unused to watching faces – from extensive online play – you bet into somebody who is faking this ashen look, who then raises you back. The point here is, you become slightly more hesitant to «pull the trigger» from lack of practice at looking at real people (at least until you get back into the swing of things again).

All of the above effects are of course a matter of varying degrees, depending on different people.

### **Common Myths and Rumors About Online Poker Play**

You might hear myths and rumors like these about the games on the Internet:

- The whole system is fixed. It’s rigged so it’s impossible for the average player to win. «They» decide when you’re going to win, when you’re going to be «cold», when you will go on a losing streak, and so on.
- The cards aren’t random. Contrary to what online casinos would have us believe, the cards are not dealt out in a random fashion. They are skewed in any number of ways that hurt our play.
- Collusion. Any number of other players in the game are colluding together, talking together on the phone as they play, telling each other their cards, and doing this so craftily that there is no way for anyone to uncover it.
- Bots and shells. Online casinos have computer-programmed «bots» (robots) and shells that are in the game. They are not real people, but are computer-generated and unbeatable. Their purpose is to make the Web site even more money than it is already making.
- Hackers have hacked into the system. These computer-geek types can see everyone’s cards as they play, as well as the flop cards before they are even dealt, and this explains why they always win.
- The «cash-out» curse. Once you cash-out some money, you won’t get a decent hand for weeks, maybe months afterward.
- There are some players playing five different hands at once. It’s those dam computer geeks again. Some of them have five different computers sitting side-by-side in a room, thus allowing them to play many hands at once.
- «All-in» abusers are rampant. Halfway through a hand they’ll stop playing, go into a possum act and pretend they’ve been disconnected.

This way they can get to the end of a hand cheaply, putting in no more bets, and be treated as «all-in».

All of the above is included because the online player is likely to run across these rumors or accusations at some point in his play. Probably some amount of this occurs. Online card-rooms have security measures against collusion, and they are constantly on the lookout for computer hackers, and unusual patterns of play. It is completely in their financial interest to pursue online abusers, as well as to run things on the square, thus avoiding the situation described in Aesop's Fables:

*«Thinking to get at once all the gold the goose could give, he killed it and opened it only to find – nothing».*

– Aesop



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2 Pair: 14.7:1, 7.0:1

Buttons: FOLD, CALL 5€, RAISE 10€

More Detailed Stats - 0.50/1

Level: 0.50/1 Nr OF Hands: 2204 Filter: Not Used

Player Type: Semi Loose Aggressive (pre flop) - Aggressive (post flop)

Category	Stat	Value	Percentage	Count
Hand Selection	Pre Flop	37.0 %	(815 out of 2204)	
	Vol. Put \$ In Pot	29.9 %	(658 out of 2204)	
	Saw Flop Not Blind	28.9 %	(474 out of 1639)	
Aggression	Pre flop Raise	11.4 %	(252 out of 2204)	
	Aggr. Factor Pre flop	0.5	(91 out of 2204)	
	Stealing	27.2 %	(25 out of 92)	
Stealing	W/oSD %	64.0	20.0	12.0
	WSD %	20.0	0.0	0.0
	W\$SD %	16.7	50.0	16.7

Table 12631 - [PTY] Live Tracker

Player	Hands	Win%	Loss%	Draw%	Pre Flop Turn %	Pre Flop River %	Pre Flop Fold %	Pre Flop All-In %
hbro73	55	14.5	14.5	62.5	62.5	100.0	100.0	12.0
Blackpeete	37	51.4	51.4	57.9	57.9	100.0	100.0	-12.5
DonRime	14	64.3	64.3	44.1	44.1	100.0	100.0	-3.75
Prehele27	36	33.3	33.3	63.3	63.3	60.0	60.0	-4.25
hensko34	33	136	24.2	25.7	62.5	65.7	60.0	47.8
honey4	11	11	72.7	72.7	62.5	62.5	60.0	60.0
Quasire	55	34.5	34.5	52.4	52.4	60.0	60.0	-16.5
Safohot	51	27.5	27.5	64.3	64.3	66.7	66.7	16.25
Trasiz	55	32.7	32.7	72.2	72.2	69.2	69.2	-4.75
All Table Statistics	55	39.8	39.7	62.4	62.7	75.3	75.1	-5.4

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