

The FULL

Tilt

**POKER
STRATEGY
GUIDE**

**TOURNAMENT
EDITION**

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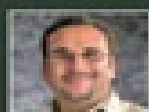
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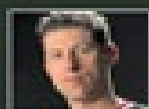
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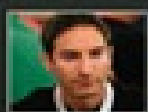
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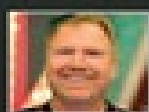
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HUCKLEBERRY SEED



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PART I

WELCOME TO THE TOURNAMENT
EDITION

Player Introduction: The Passion to Be the Best

by Phil Gordon

What does it take to be a champion at poker? What are the players at the final table of the World Series of Poker doing that is so special? How can I take my game to the next level? What are the fundamentals of winning online and in live games, in tournaments and cash games? If you're like me, these are the questions you ask yourself over and over in an effort to improve and gain insight into the fascinating game of poker.

I am very fortunate. I've been able to use my early success at the tables to infiltrate a unique fraternity of kindred souls—my fellow professional poker players. Very often, when we're standing around before a tournament (or, more commonly, drinking a beer or two after we've busted out), I get a chance to ask questions and learn from the best players in the game. Less desirably, I very often get firsthand lessons as pros like Chris Ferguson, Howard Lederer, and Ted Forrest stack my chips and count my cash.

I take every single opportunity to learn from these players. My combined experiences at and away from the table with the folks who wrote this book are my driving influence to improve, my guiding influences in my game, and my shaping influences for my ideas. In short, without their help, insight, and frequent theft of my blinds and bets, I wouldn't be the player I am today. In fact, I might not be a professional poker player at all.

See, if you're like me, you don't want to be good at poker—you want to be truly great. I want my name uttered in the same sentence with Doyle Brunson, Johnny Chan, Howard Lederer, and Erik Seidel. I want to be the greatest player in the world. And, perhaps egotistically, I think with continued hard work, practice, and tests, I can get there. I know it won't happen overnight, and I know that it won't happen easily. But that's okay. Just the thought that it could happen is all I need to continue working hard at the game.

The players who wrote this book, me included, want to help you become a better poker player. We want you to experience the same joy that we do when we make a great play, take a great read, cash a million-dollar check, and slide that bracelet onto the wrist.

Some players complain about the introduction of books that help other players improve. "Hey, what do you want to educate the fish? The games will be much tougher if you keep this up!" To those critics, I say, "Bring it on! I want tougher competition. I want my opponents to play better so that I have to play better. I want them to push me. I want them to force me to take my game to the next

level.” There is no Nicklaus without Palmer. There is no Jordan without Barkley. To be the best we can be, we need competition—fierce, tough, unwavering competition.

The strategies and plays you’ll find in this book will absolutely help your game. There is no doubt in my mind about that. But it’s up to you how aggressively you pursue improvement. It’s up to you how patient you’ll be with your improvement. It’s up to you how courageous you’ll be in trying out these techniques. It’s up to you how resilient you’ll be when you face the inevitable setbacks.

Aggression. Patience. Courage. Resiliency. These are the qualities of a champion poker player. These qualities and an intense desire to improve are why you see the authors of this book winning on television and cashing the million-dollar checks. Will you join us at the final table, push us, and give us a battle for the bracelet? We sincerely hope so.

See you at the final table.

Editor's Introduction: The Role of Books in Poker

by Michael Craig

A Book Made Me Want to Play Poker

I didn't start playing poker until I was thirty-two years old, and I started playing because of a book. My dad loaned me his copy of A. Alvarez's *The Biggest Game in Town*. I had never been interested in playing poker, but I became fascinated by the stories of the lives and games of the competitors at the 1981 World Series of Poker. (I'm pretty sure I still have that copy; sorry, Dad.)

Not long after, almost by accident, I picked up and read Anthony Holden's *Big Deal*. Having read just one poker narrative, I approached this book warily and, like a gambler, asked myself, *What are the odds this is going to be as good as Alvarez?* After devouring thirty pages, I looked at the dedication and acknowledgments and found out Holden and Alvarez were good friends and had played in a weekly game together for decades. (I later learned that another poker writer, the late David Spanier, had gotten kicked out of the game for playing too tight, and WPT/WSOP winner Mel Judah, then a London hairdresser, had played in it.)

I could not have imagined that I would become close friends with Tony Holden, appear as a character in the sequel, *Bigger Deal*, and, through Tony, become pen pals with Al Alvarez. (I even wrote a column about one of my experiences with Tony for *Card Player*, titled "Thank Mel Judah.") When I used the upcoming issue to introduce myself to Mel and ask him about his experiences in the Tuesday Night Game, he said, "Yeah, they kicked me out for winning too much. Terrible players.")

As I slowly overcame my fear of being the least experienced player in the crowded Mirage poker room, I started playing \$3-\$6 hold 'em whenever I was in Las Vegas. Soon I was finding excuses to "stop by" this poker room eighteen hundred miles from my home. I had moved up to \$10-\$20 and \$20-\$40 games and also played in some of the cardrooms outside Los Angeles and San Diego while on business in Southern California.

And I read.

It wouldn't be until the release of James McManus's *Positively Fifth Street* that I would find another poker narrative to fuel my imagination, but I found no shortage of challenging manuals on how to improve at the game. Like everyone else, I desperately wanted to get better.

Two Guns: David Sklansky and Mason Malmuth

I got lucky. The first book of poker strategy I ever owned was David Sklansky's *Hold 'Em Poker*. Originally published in 1976, this skinny book had a goofy cover, a typeface like a ransom note—and most of the concepts I have learned from the fifty to one hundred books I have read since (and the one you are reading now). With so many players learning poker and taking it seriously in the last few years, it may be difficult for a lot of people to understand how slow the learning curve was for a beginning player in the early nineties. With no poker rooms for almost two thousand miles, I probably played the same number of hands my first year as a new player today would in a week or two.

Semi-bluffing? Free cards? Pot odds? Imagine playing poker and being completely ignorant of those things. Just the idea that you played different cards based on your position at the table was a revelation.

Mike Matusow and Phil Ivey separately told me that that book was the only poker book they ever read. Howard Lederer told me, and he explains it in chapter 12, that Sklansky's book was responsible for his becoming a professional poker player. David and his collaborator/publisher Mason Malmuth deserve credit for permanently raising the quality of poker. I think I own a majority of the books they have written or published, have bought numerous copies for friends, and own multiple editions of a few.

The Book of Tells

Another book I picked up in the early nineties was Mike Caro's *The Body Language of Poker*. (It is better known by its current title, *Caro's Book of Poker Tells*.) I am not engaging in hyperbole when I say this book is as valuable to students of poker as Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* is to students of psychology. Frankly, Mike's book would be pretty valuable to students of psychology too.

I read through Caro but didn't study it until years later. Several players dismissed the book, saying "It was huge back then, but so many players are familiar with it that they correct for those tells, or incorporate them as false signals." I'm glad I finally rediscovered *Caro's Book of Poker Tells* a few years ago. First, even if not a word of it is true anymore, I owed it to myself as a writer to read any book that was actually responsible for changing human behavior on such a large scale.

Second, things haven't changed that much. Sure, Howard Lederer knows which players are likely to have that level of knowledge and how to fake some tells to exploit it, but I'm already handing over my chips to Lederer if he's at my table, unless I get lucky with the cards. I haven't played a tournament yet where I drew the same table as Howard, Annie Duke, Chris Ferguson, Chip Reese, Mike Matusow, Phil Hellmuth, Ted Forrest, Jennifer Harman, and Barry Greenstein. I have played with far, far more players who haven't mastered and exploited Mike Caro's revelations than I have played with those who have.

Third, and most important, when someone offers you something to help you at poker (or any activity involving skill), you can look at it in two ways—as a magic box or as a tool. Most criticism of learning tools is that they have flaws. They aren't a magic box.

Mike Caro's book is an incredibly useful tool, but not one to be used indiscriminately. I think clos

to 100 percent of the people who read it benefit from it, but that is far different from saying every word in it is correct or that for it to be worthwhile you have to automatically win every time you see behavior described in the book and act on it.

Dolly Llama

I found the Rosetta Stone at the Gambler's Book Shop in 1992. I had just discovered the funky store on Eleventh Street in Las Vegas. A lot of the books that sell big at GBS can be found at your local bookstore—now. In 1992, the selection of poker books at bookstores was almost nonexistent. There were always a few titles, but they always managed to be years out of date and/or concerned games that I never saw spread at the Mirage or the Bicycle Club. David Sklansky? Maybe one title. Doyle Brunson? Never heard of him, and neither had the store's computers.

I can barely describe my excitement when I saw *Super/System* for the first time: shiny silver cover, silly caricature of a roly-poly man dribbling a basketball, 660 pages, \$50 price tag. The book was practically an urban legend. I had read several things *about* it, but this was one of the few places on earth where I could see it and, better still, buy it. It didn't matter at all that I had never seen no-limit hold 'em (other than grainy VHS tapes of the final table of the World Series of Poker), or seven stud hi-lo split, or ace-to-five lowball, or that limit hold 'em as described by Bobby Baldwin was played with a single blind and antes.

Super/System described a way to think about poker. It didn't even matter what form the authors were writing about or what form you played. The best players in the world were discussing poker, and if you couldn't learn something by listening, then you weren't trying. I have described the book you are now holding as *Super/System* for tournaments, with better grammar and punctuation. Duplicating the concept of gathering great players (and great thinkers) and collecting their ideas was at the core of *Super/System*, and it is at the core of this book. *The Full Tilt Poker Strategy Guide: Tournament Edition* focuses on tournaments; *Super/System* and its sequel focused on cash games. This book has gathered a different but at least equally able group of gaming minds to share their insights.

Dan Harrington Detonates Poker

The current poker boom caught the strategists unprepared. Everyone wanted to play no-limit hold 'em initially in tournaments. There were few books about tournament poker, though David Sklansky's *Tournament Poker for Advanced Players* introduced many important concepts, including the "gap concept" (referring to the gap in quality between the hand someone needs to bet and the hand needed to enter a pot after them).

But it was not the equivalent of the other *Advanced Player* guides. It was not a comprehensive examination of no-limit hold 'em tournament poker. Dan Harrington and Bill Robertie became the first to fill that need with a product good enough that, like several of Sklansky's and Malmuth's books, it permanently increased the quality of play. Between late 2004 and early 2006, they released three volumes of *Harrington on Hold 'Em*.

Within a week of purchasing the first volume, I recognized that tournaments would soon consist of

two groups of players: those who understood the concepts in *Harrington on Hold 'Em*, and those who didn't. The books are a thoughtful, comprehensive, carefully reasoned approach to playing no-limit hold 'em hands and the strategic risks and opportunities created by how tournaments operate.

If I learned anything from conducting consecutive interviews with Chris Ferguson and Ted Forrest on no-limit hold 'em tournament strategy, it is that many different approaches can succeed. Although the pros tend to act indifferent to poker strategy books, the following opinions were generally held by the players I asked about Dan's book: (1) Harrington was an extremely skilled player (and you would be surprised how few players other pros will say that about); (2) his book contains a lot of good advice in nearly every area of tournament no-limit hold 'em; and (3) approaches different from his can work just as well and sometimes a lot better.

This is not a criticism of *Harrington on Hold 'Em*. Those books improved my own game, probably benefited all of the hundreds of thousands of people who bought them (if they read them), and, as I said, permanently lifted the level of tournament poker. You won't find anyplace in this book where a contributor describes something out of *Harrington* and then attacks it or explains how a different approach is better. You will, however, read advice that contradicts Dan Harrington's.

But guess what? Dan Harrington has done pretty well with his advice and so have people who followed it. And Chris Ferguson has done pretty well with his advice, and when he has given it, the people who followed it were glad they did. For that matter, you will read essays in this book that conflict with other essays here. One of my favorites is chapter 5, "(Don't) Play Like Ted Forrest," by Ted Forrest. I encouraged contributors to contradict each other, and specifically asked Ted if he wanted to say something about the common pre-flop strategy of raise-or-fold, which has been explained in this book by Howard Lederer, Chris Ferguson, and Andy Bloch.

Why Full Tilt?

I approached Howard Lederer about this project in November 2005, making the following points:

- Although there were a few good books about tournament poker, there would always be room for a comprehensive tournament guide—all the games, advanced strategy on both the play of hands and tournament tactics.
- Full Tilt Poker had a brilliant and diverse group of poker strategists among its pros and their insights would be valuable and desired.
- *A Full Tilt Poker Strategy Guide* would be consistent with FullTiltPoker.com's identification with helping players improve and the site's connection with professional poker (e.g., the site's weekly "Tips from the Pros" and Fox Sports Net's *FullTiltPoker.net's Learn from the Pros* television series).

I must have been persuasive, because Howard convinced the site's software company and helped me get other players to contribute.

Although I am friends with several Full Tilt pros, play on the site, and have thoroughly enjoyed the collaboration, I was not, during production of this book, an employee, consultant, or in any way affiliated with Full Tilt Poker. I am not saying that to avoid an association during this period of legal uncertainty about the status of online poker; during post-production, I began writing *The Full Tilt*

Poker Blog partly to promote the ideas of this book.

I am telling you this because I want you to know that this book will not ram FullTiltPoker.com (or .net) down your throat.

Full Tilt provided a unifying purpose to round up and motivate the contributors. But nobody will hector you to play poker online or to play on their site. There are few references to Full Tilt in this book that could conceivably be considered “persuasive” for the site. Even chapter 10, “Online Tournament Strategy,” by Richard Brodie, mentions the site several times only because it was necessary to describe how the limits and levels of online tournaments compared to casino tournaments. It would have been pretty silly for Richard to pick a tournament structure from some *other* site.

The Structure of This Book

No-limit hold ’em dominates tournament poker. Therefore, especially considering the accomplishments of the contributors, it is covered in a comprehensive fashion in this book. Chapters through 10 are all about no-limit hold ’em tournaments. Chapters 3 through 5 are essays by Chris Ferguson, Howard Lederer, and Ted Forrest. Chapters 6 and 7, by Andy Bloch and Chris Ferguson, respectively, are about pre-flop and post-flop play. Chapters 8 and 9 concern how to play a big stack (by Gavin Smith) and how to play a short stack (by Phil Gordon). Richard Brodie wraps up the no-limit hold ’em chapters by applying all these concepts to online tournaments.

Chapters 11 and 12 concern other forms of tournament hold ’em. Chapter 11 explains how to adapt no-limit strategy to pot-limit hold ’em tournaments, by Rafe Furst and Andy Bloch. Chapter 12, the longest of the book, is Howard Lederer’s strategy for playing limit hold ’em tournaments.

Chapters 13 and 14 cover Omaha. Mike Matusow was responsible for chapter 13 on tournament Omaha eight-or-better. Chris Ferguson wrote chapter 14 on pot-limit Omaha tournaments.

The next section of the book consists of four chapters on forms of stud poker. Chapter 15, by Keith Sexton, describes the play of stud hands in tournaments. Chapter 16, by David Grey, explains strategic concepts in seven-card stud tournaments. Chapter 17, by Ted Forrest, describes his strategy for playing stud eight-or-better tournaments. Chapter 18 was actually written by me, as a witness to a remarkable conversation between Forrest and Huckleberry Seed in the form of a razz lesson they gave me the night before that event at the 2006 World Series of Poker.

The concluding materials include an unusual and innovative examination of the mental game of poker. Chapter 19, “Roshambo and the Mental Game of Poker,” by Rafe Furst, explains how this children’s game (or, more accurately, a game now played for money by adults who behave like children) can teach valuable lessons on the mental game of poker.

When I wrote *The Professor, the Banker, and the Suicide King*, I had an ambitious, egotistical goal which I was smart enough to keep to myself. I wanted to write a book that would stand the test of time. My idols were Holden and Alvarez, and I placed McManus on that pedestal. I wanted to reveal a story, a world, and a group of people, all of which were too unusual to be real, but too compelling to be imagined.

But I have no need for false modesty with *The Full Tilt Poker Strategy Guide: Tournament Edition*. You will judge this book by the quality of its advice, the questions it leads you to ask, the answers it leads you to find, and, ultimately, the role it plays in your tournament poker experiences. I claim

credit for gathering this remarkable team of contributors, keeping them on task, editing their work, and delivering it in completed form. ~~The claim I am staking with the *Tournament Edition* is a bet on the quality and presentation of poker strategy by Andy Bloch, Richard Brodie, Chris Ferguson, Ted Forrest, Rafe Furst, Phil Gordon, David Grey, Howard Lederer, Mike Matusow, Huckleberry Seed, Keith Sexton, and Gavin Smith.~~

The twelve contributors to this book have won over *\$30 million in tournament poker*, including the following:

- Two World Series of Poker Championships (and four more final table appearances)
- Twenty-one World Series of Poker bracelets (including multiple bracelets by six contributors)
- Four Hall of Fame watches
- Four World Poker Tour victories (and seven more final table appearances)
- Two World Poker Tour players of the year
- Two World Series of Poker Circuit rings (and three more final table appearances)
- One World Series of Poker Tournament of Champions winner (and two more final table appearances)
- One Professional Poker Tour victory
- One National Heads-Up Championship (and two runner-up finishes)

I want the *Tournament Edition* to stand the test of time. With these horses, I like our chances.

Notes on Hand Representations

Many, many hands are described in this book, and several are graphically depicted. Most readers will be familiar with the shorthand notations, but here are the conventions followed:

- In the community-card games (see chapters 3 through 14), an X represents a random card. For example, A-X means an ace and a random card.
- In the stud-card games (see chapters 15 through 18), an X represents a hole card as it appears to other players. The hole cards, when their identity is known, are denoted by parentheses. For example, (T♣9♦)T♦ is a starting hand with the ten of diamonds exposed (or “in the door”) and hole cards of the ten of clubs and the nine of diamonds.
- Where the suits are not included with the cards, like A-T, that means the suits (and whether the hand is suited) are not material to the example. When listing minimum hand requirements, A-Ts means the ace and ten are suited, A-To means they are not suited, and A-T includes both suited and unsuited combinations of those two cards.

PART II

TOURNAMENT HOLD 'EM

Editor's Opening Remarks

For several good reasons, this book has, from its conception, been designed to be a *comprehensive* manual of tournament poker strategy. First, the stud games, the Omaha games, and the limit and pot-limit hold 'em games are still part of tournament poker. Although no-limit events are crowding out the other forms of poker, entries in those other events are still regularly breaking records. And who knows what the future will bring? As I describe at the introduction to chapter 18, razz has survived every conceivable means of killing it off. Finding experts willing to share their insights is a valuable service, even if most people are focusing on no-limit hold 'em. Second, whatever game you play, learning from great players, great teachers, and great strategic minds will improve your overall game. Howard Lederer points out at the beginning of chapter 12 that some central limit hold 'em skills may not have the same importance in other games but learning them at limit gives you an advantage when you can use them at those other games.

But the explosion of interest in tournament poker is due to no-limit hold 'em. The contributors to this book have won two World Championships and two other no-limit hold 'em World Series bracelets. They have also won two World Series of Poker Circuit Championships and three World Poker Tour events. I count at least eight other no-limit hold 'em wins, in other big buy-in events or major televised events. They have made dozens of final tables in no-limit hold 'em at the World Series of Poker, on the World Poker Tour, and elsewhere.

These pros have the pedigree to teach you a lot about no-limit hold 'em, even if one of the goals of this book was to teach all the games. This section of the book delivers.

Chapters 3 through 5 are essays by three of the most astute gaming minds alive: Chris Ferguson, Howard Lederer, and Ted Forrest. I asked Chris and Howard to pick something central to their no-limit tournament strategy that was either not well known or not well explained. Both chose aspects of betting strategy—Ferguson on how the best way to mix up your play is to play many different hands the same way, and Lederer on leverage, the process of making small bets that have the impact of big bets. I asked Ted to explain why he did things different from most other pros (especially some of the advice given by Chris and Howard, as well as Andy Bloch's advice about pre-flop play in chapter 6) and why it worked for him.

Chapters 6 and 7 are advanced guides to the fundamentals of no-limit play. Andy Bloch explains a comprehensive approach to play before the flop. Chris Ferguson, by explaining how fourteen sample

hands play after a variety of flops, in different positions, following different pre-flop action, against different numbers of opponents, provides a comprehensive approach to how to play after the flop.

Chapters 8 and 9 concern two important modifications of poker strategy: how to play when you have a big stack and how you play when you have a short stack. Gavin Smith was the World Poker Tour player of the year for the 2005–2006 season on the strength of his ability to punish opponents with a big stack, winning one event and making two other final tables. Phil Gordon, whose *Little Black Book* (originally *Poker: The Real Deal*), *Little Green Book*, and *Little Blue Book* have introduced hundreds of thousands of people to poker and taught them both basic and advanced strategy, explains how to play a short stack.

The no-limit hold 'em chapters conclude with chapter 10, Richard Brodie's analysis tying all these concepts to online poker tournaments. Brodie has unique qualifications for writing the chapter. A brilliant software programmer (as an early employee of Microsoft, he wrote and then headed the project team for the original version of Microsoft Word) and game player, he didn't start playing hold 'em until 2003. He was drawn to poker by his friend Andy Bloch's success in the early days of the World Poker Tour and used online tournaments as a proving ground, then to sharpen his skills, and then because he made money playing online tournaments. He also used that experience to go from neophyte to professional. He would bristle at the designation, but the results speak for themselves: he immediately began making final tables of tournaments, seven of them since 2003.

In the no-limit craze, do not overlook the last two chapters of this section. Chapter 11, by Rafe Furst and Andy Bloch, explains how to adapt no-limit strategy to pot-limit hold 'em. Chapter 12, "Limit Hold 'Em" by Howard Lederer, describes how to play that game by a player long considered one of the world's best. Howard's concepts will help you even if you never play a limit hold 'em tournament.

No-Limit Hold 'Em: How to Bet

by Chris Ferguson

Entering the Pot, Play All Your Hands the Same

One of the most important principles in no-limit hold 'em is to conceal the strength of your hand. To do this, experienced players agree you need to mix up your play. Most people believe this means playing the same hand in different ways, for example, sometimes limping with A-A and sometimes making a big raise with A-A.

This is wrong! To conceal the strength of your hand, you need to play *different hands the same way*. Once you decide you are going to play a hand, make the same bet whether it is the strongest hand you would play in that situation, like A-A, or the weakest, like 7-6. Playing the same hand in different ways may confuse some opponents but can still give away a lot of information about your hand. For example, if you sometimes limp with A-A and never limp with any other hand, and you sometimes make a huge raise with A-A but not with any other hand, observant opponents will be able to deduce exactly what you have whenever you limp or make a huge raise.

Raise, Don't Call

At all times, you should try to avoid calling and you should never be the first caller before the flop. Apart from the information you give away about your hand, raising puts pressure on the blinds and other players at the table. Chances are that by raising, you'll force marginal hands to fold before the flop, limiting the number of players you have to beat through the rest of the hand. You may even limit that number to *zero* and pick up the blinds and antes.

If you have A-A or A-K, you want strong hands to call you. A lot of strong hands that will call a raise, such as A-J, have a worse chance of beating you than weak hands that will fold to a raise, such as 7-6s. If everyone folds to the small blind (who calls) and you have A-K in the big blind, would you rather be up against A-7 or J-7? By raising, you will probably get the J-7 to fold and the A-7 will likely call, which is exactly what you want. If I told you I had a magical way to make opponents fold

hands that do well against you and call with hands that do poorly, you'd think I was nuts.

Well, here it is: raising with your strongest hands frequently accomplishes this.

When you have no money invested in a pot, you never do worse with larger blinds. By making a small raise instead of limping, you are either picking up the pot, if the blinds fold, or effectively making the blinds larger if they don't. This means making a small raise is a win-win over limping. The fact is, any hand worth a call is automatically worth a raise. That is the *real* reason why you should always raise if you are the first player entering a pot.

Obviously, I don't agree that you should make the first call with hands that play better against a large field. The idea behind this reasoning is that your call is supposed to induce others to call and create a multiway pot. But because you are signaling that you have this kind of hand, what if this induces players behind you to *raise*? Even if they do call behind you, they too will have hands that do well multiway, but they have position, giving them the best of it. If you limp with a strong hand, you are encouraging a multiway pot with opponents whose hands don't play too badly against you. The only possible circumstance for limping, therefore, would be in a pot in which there are already limpers, you have a hand that plays well multiway, and *you* have position.

So I say, raise or fold. If your hand is worth playing, it is worth a raise. If not, you should fold.

If you raise or fold every hand, you are giving away the minimum amount information. All your opponents know is that you don't have a folding hand. So you probably don't have 7-4o or T-6o. But you are equally likely to have 4-4 as A-A, and equally likely to have A-Ko as J-To.

Three Versions of Raise-or-Fold

There are three versions of the "never limp" rule: *strong*, *medium*, and *weak*. When I won the World Series in 2000, I played the *strong* version. I never called before the flop, except in the big blind or in a limped pot in the small blind. Never. If I was the first in, I raised or folded. If someone limped in before me, I raised or folded. If someone raised before me, I reraised or folded. That's the style I played back then. It was extremely effective against weaker players who played too many hands. If they limped in front of me, they had to give up their chips or play a weak hand for a bigger pot. It was also effective against stronger players who didn't want to gamble and gave too much respect to my raising hands, thinking, "If he raised instead of calling, he must be very strong."

I don't play such a strong version of "never limp" anymore, so I'm not saying it can't be improved on. But it is extremely difficult to defend against. This is the style I recommend for all beginners, intermediate players, and anyone playing against experts. This will give them the best chance to win.

I play the *weak* version now. I still never make the first call. With the weak version of the rule, you can limp after someone else limps first. They are making a strategic error by limping. They have to act before you for the rest of the hand, so suited connectors (which I generally don't like playing) and small pairs, where your goal is to win a big pot with a set or fold to a bet after the flop if you miss, become playable. You should have reservations about doing this, though. You are defining your hand more than the earlier limpers, who are more likely to be slow-playing. You have position over them, but you lose some of that advantage if someone limps behind you, and all of it if someone raises behind you. If you have to limp, do it where there are already limpers and when you don't expect players behind you to raise.

The difference between the weak and the medium version is that in the *medium* version you have t

reraise or fold if someone enters before you with a raise. The difference between the medium and the strong version is that in the medium version you can call if someone limps in front of you. (In limit hold 'em, I still play the medium version of never-limp.)

The Amount of Your Raise

The amount of your raise should not give away the strength of your hand. I think it is fine to vary your raises but, before the flop, vary them based on your position, not on your hand. In general, if there are no antes, raise in early position to twice the big blind. In middle position, raise two and a half times the big blind. In late position, raise three times the big blind.

Here is the reasoning: I want to make my opponents' decisions as difficult as possible. If you make a big raise, you make your opponents' decisions easy: they can simply fold most of their hands, only playing their very biggest hands. Now, if you bluff with a big bet, you win very little most of the time but when you get reraised, you lose big.

But I mostly want to make things difficult for the big blind. In big tournaments, especially against good players, there is very little limping. There aren't a lot of multiway hands. When I enter the pot, I'm thinking about what the big blind is going to do. It is easy to make his decision difficult, and a smaller raise from up front does that. By raising in early position, I am advertising a hand strong enough to beat seven or eight players who haven't acted yet. Because I am representing such a strong hand, the big blind needs great odds to call. Thus, I can bet small and still give him a tough decision with a marginal hand.

I don't mind if the big blind calls. I've got position. I expect, if I am playing in a game with experts, that everyone will fold around to the big blind a lot of the time. If someone wakes up with a monster behind me after I make that early-position raise, I'll be glad that I raised only two times the big blind. If I am holding A-J or possibly A-Q and a player comes over the top, I can lay it down without having risked much. That's the main reason I raise small up front.

You might wish you had raised more if you make a small raise with A-A and get reraised. But if you had, you might not have been reraised. I'm not willing to telegraph that I make larger raises with some hands than others. Also, if you bet small, you will get your A-A reraised more often, because the players behind you are going to want to put a stop to you stealing blinds and antes with such a small raise. You are betting two units to win one and a half; someone may want to keep you from being successful with such a bet.

That small, uniform raise from early position accomplishes three things. First, it makes the big blind's decision as difficult as possible when he has a marginal hand. Second, it is cheaper to get away from the hand if someone reraises. Third, when you *want* someone to reraise you, you have made it easier for them to make that mistake.

If I am on the button and I am the first one in, I need to beat only the two remaining hands in the blinds, so I'm going to raise with nearly half my hands. If I make that same, small raise that I would make from early position, it is too easy for the big blind to call with a marginal hand. Since I am not representing as strong a hand from late position, I need to make a larger raise to give the big blind a difficult decision with his marginal hands. Of equal importance, I am less worried about getting reraised by a monster when I open the pot in late position since there are only two players behind me.

The amounts of these raises are not set in stone. I will take into account the players to act behind

me including the big blind. For instance, if I think the big blind will call with weak hands, I will put in a larger raise to build a bigger pot. The idea here is that you are likely to get action. Your semi-bluffing hands, which are your weaker hands, lose value. That kind of opponent, however, will pay you off more on your stronger hands. Your weaker hands have gone down in value and your stronger hands have gone up in value. In fact, your weaker hands might even have a negative value, so these should be folded. By putting in larger raises, you make even more off your strongest hands.

If your table is particularly loose and you can't steal the blinds with a normal raise, tighten up your starting-hand requirements slightly and make larger raises. If your opponents are playing too loose, take advantage of it by building bigger pots when you think you are getting the best of it.

The raise should also be a little larger if there are antes. Add about half the total of the antes to your raise.

Betting When You Are Short-Stacked

If you have less than ten times the big blind, your only real options are to move in all your chips or fold. The only exception occurs when you are in the big blind. If you have ten times the big blind, you can call a raise where you are getting good pot odds and still get away from the hand if you miss the flop.

Once you are under ten big blinds, when you bet, you are committed to calling just about any reraise, or at least having a very difficult decision when faced with a reraise. Likewise, you will have a tough decision on the flop if you are called. Try to stay away from difficult decisions and instead give your opponent as many difficult decisions as possible. By moving all-in in this situation, you are giving your opponents the tough decision and eliminating the chance that you have to fold or make a crying call.

After the flop, if you have less than about one and a half times the pot, you should move all-in or fold. If you are betting three-quarters of the pot, you are pot-committed so you might as well bet it all. By betting three-quarters of the pot instead of moving all-in, you are giving your opponent the decision of whether to fold, play for a three-quarter-pot-sized bet, or raise to make you put in all your chips. Why give your opponent that decision? By moving all-in, you eliminate one of those options.

Betting After the Flop

One of the biggest mistakes beginners make is sizing their bets to match the strength of their hand, making a small bet with a vulnerable hand and a huge bet with a huge hand. This does little more than telegraph the strength of their hand to their opponents. It is also easy and natural for opponents to defend against, frequently calling or raising small bets and usually folding to huge ones.

Just like before the flop, I don't want to size my bet in a way that reveals the strength of my hand. I do want the size of my bet to give my opponent a difficult decision with a marginal hand against my betting hands. After the flop, I ignore my actual holding and decide how much I'm going to bet *if* I bet. Once I decide the amount, I choose whether I'm going to bet that amount or check. This latter decision, whether to bet, takes into account my actual holding as well as several other factors. This

gives away the minimum information about the strength of my hand. My opponent is getting information only on whether I bet, not the size of my bet.

The size of my bet depends on how my opponent is likely to think the flop hit my hand, as well as how likely it is to have hit my opponent's. If my hand looks very strong to my opponent, or if my opponent is likely to have few outs if he is beat, I will bet small, about half the pot. If it looks like my opponent has many outs against my betting hands, I will make a larger bet, somewhere between three quarters of the pot and the size of the pot.

For example, assume I made a minimum raise from first position and was called by the big blind and the flop came with an ace. From my opponent's perspective, even if I don't have an ace, I am very likely to have a pocket pair, so even if my opponent has a small pair, he has no more than five outs against my likely holdings. I don't need to bet more than half the pot to convince him to fold.

If the flop is



the player in the lead now is probably the player who will be in the lead on later streets. The player with the ace and the biggest kicker isn't giving anyone more than five outs (two outs if they have a pocket pair, three if they have an ace with a lower kicker, four if they have an inside straight draw, and five if they have a middle or bottom pair). You don't have to bet much to give your opponent a difficult decision, or at least a wrong decision to call if you have an ace. If you bet half the pot, there is a good chance your opponent will fold, even if he knows you could be bluffing. If you raised and an ace comes and your opponent does not fold to your bet, you found out where you are cheap. If you missed the flop, you know you are done with the hand.

Most flops are heads-up and the most aggressive player wins the pot. Without a pocket pair, your opponent has only about a 1-in-3 chance of making a pair on the flop. Of course, those are your chances too, but if you are the bettor, the other player doesn't have much choice but to fold if the flop didn't hit him, and an A♣T♦5♥ flop doesn't leave him with many hands he feels good about continuing to play if you raised before the flop and bet after the flop, even if he knows you are betting most of the time.

When my betting hands don't look as strong to my opponent, I need to bet more to give him a difficult decision with a marginal hand. Say I raised from middle position and was called from the big blind and the flop came jack-high. Because the range of my betting hands was a lot weaker in this situation, I need to bet more to give him a difficult decision with a marginal hand like a small pair.

In addition, with a flop that creates a lot of potential draws, I am going to have to bet more to give my opponent a difficult decision. On a flop such as J♥T♦5♥, my hands and my opponent's are more likely to be close in value. I could easily just have overcards in this case, so my opponent is more likely to think his low pair could be good. Because of the number of draws available, the next card could also significantly change the percentages each player has to win the hand. You have to bet more to give your opponent a tough decision with a draw, in this case between three quarters of the pot and the pot.

One more factor influencing the size of my bet is the position from which I raised. If I raised from early position, I am representing a much stronger hand. Therefore, I don't have to bet as much to give the big blind a difficult decision. For instance, if I raised from early position and was called by the big

blind, I might bet as little as one third of the pot after a flop like A♣T♦5♥. With a flop like J♥T♦5♥, I might bet two-thirds of the pot after my early position raise.

These are just guidelines. If I know something about a particular opponent, I might make a different bet even if that means varying my bet according to the strength of my hand. If he thinks a big bet looks like I'm trying to buy the pot, I will make a big bet when I have a big hand. If he thinks a small bet will look strong, I will make a small bet with a bluffing hand. This can turn into a guessing game, especially after my opponent sees I have tricked him. I try to stay away from guessing games. I let my opponents play guessing games and look for opportunities to pounce when I am confident they will guess wrong.

Whether to Bet

You can't completely avoid giving away information about your hand when you act after the flop. When I act first or it is checked to me, I have to decide whether to check or bet. I have to put my hands into at least two categories based on my action on the flop—those I'll bet and those I'll check.

To avoid giving away more information, I will end up playing similar hands differently. The later we are in the hand, the less I mind giving out information and the more straightforwardly I play. That's because there are fewer streets for my opponent to take advantage of the information. There are hands I will check and very similar hands that I will bet.

Using the same example from the last section, let's say the flop is A-T-5. If I have A-K, I like betting. With something like A-J, checking may not be bad. I might be up against A-K, A-Q, A-T, A-2, or even a set. With A-2, if I'm in the lead, I'm giving up, at most, five outs by checking, but I'm saving a lot of chips if my opponent has me beat. If I am behind, I am the one who has, at most, five outs (and probably just three). If it's checked to the river, then I'll bet.

Also, it is important to establish that your check is not a sure sign of weakness. You have to let your opponents know that you can have an ace and check, or have a set and check.

There are still many situations where I will play the same hand in exactly one way, especially if I showed strength before the flop. If I raised from *early position*, I am almost certainly going to bet the flop, especially if the big blind called my raise and has checked to me. Because the size of that bet is based on the flop and on my position and because I am betting with so many hands, he still has little information about what I have. All he knows is that I had a raising hand and I bet out.

When I raise from an early position, I'm giving pretty good pot odds to the big blind. For everyone else, when they play, they are saying they have value in the hand. Their call says they have as good a hand as mine, because we are putting in the same amount of money. What is the big blind saying when he calls? He is not saying that his hand is anywhere near as strong as someone raising with nine players acting after him. He is saying only that he is getting the right odds to call with his hand, and with a small raise I am giving him those odds.

If I raise before the flop and a player with position calls behind me, I like to bet the flop. I am out of position, but that is actually one reason I like to bet. Betting out of position takes away some of my opponent's advantage. If I check, my opponent can see the next card for free. This is a very powerful option I take away by betting. Now, if he wants to see the next card, he has to pay for it.

When I have position, there are many reasons why I may want to check after the flop if it is checked to me. If I bet, I am reopening the betting and can get check-raised. True, my opponent has

shown weakness by checking, but I can't assume he isn't also trying to mix up his play. If I thought my opponent only bet his strong hands, I would definitely bet. Otherwise, I can check. I have position for the rest of the hand, so it is not as important for me to get the hand over with.

I particularly like to check with my weak draws such as inside straight draws. If I bet and get check-raised, I have to throw my hand away and miss out on the opportunity of hitting my draw and winning a monster pot.

Some Examples of Whether to Bet After the Flop

Some of the principles regarding whether to bet are easier to understand if you see them applied. I have started with two sample flops, A♣T♥5♠ and J♠T♥5♠. In each example, my starting hand is in parentheses.

Example 1—I raise three times the big blind from late position and only the big blind calls.

The flop comes A♣T♥5♠. The big blind checks to me. If I bet here, I will bet about half the pot. The ace scares my opponent more than it scares me so I can afford to bet small.

Example 1a (A-K)—I like my hand here. I am hoping my opponent has an ace too. I will probably bet.

Example 1b (A-J)—I will bet here too. I don't like this hand nearly as much as A-K because my opponent has more ways to beat me. But because I raised from late position, the player in the big blind probably doesn't have much strength anyway. If I feel like slow-playing some hands, this hand might be one of them.

Example 1c (A-2)—This is a hand I really want to check. I think I'm ahead, but if my opponent has an ace, I am hopelessly behind. On the other hand, if I am ahead, my opponent has few outs so I don't lose too much by giving a free card. I more than make up for giving free cards by inducing my opponent to bluff. I will probably check the flop and the turn and bet the river if my opponent has not bet. I will call any moderate-sized bet made by my opponent.

Example 1d (K-K)—I will play this exactly like A-2, and for the same reasons. Note that, since I don't have an ace myself, my opponent is about 50 percent more likely to have an ace than if I had A-2.

Example 1e (7-6)—I will bluff at the pot on this flop. I am betting so many powerful hands that I can afford to throw in some bluffs and still get my opponent to fold.

Example 1f (3-3)—This is a tough hand. The problem with checking this hand down is that you are giving your opponent a number of outs with overcards. Consequently, I am much more likely to bet this on the flop than K-K. I generally don't think you should bet with middle-strength hands, but this is an exception because I am making a continuation bet. I can get a lot of hands that have outs against me to fold. A hand with six outs, like Q-8, will probably fold. I might even get hands that beat me to fold. Would an opponent with 4-4 call?

Example 1g (9-9)—This is another middle-strength hand. It lies between K-K and 3-3. I would probably check this on the flop, but if I raised from early position I would bet.

Example 1h (A-A)—I would play this hand different ways. I might want to slow-play because I have the deck crippled, making it unlikely my opponent has an ace. By slow-playing, I am

hoping to induce a bluff. But there is nothing wrong with betting. It may be hard to find an opponent to give you action on this flop. If you get the hand over with now, at least you avoid the disaster of letting your opponent make an inside straight draw.

Example 1i (A-T)—This is a very strong hand, and one I will probably bet. I have shown strength before the flop, so I am going to bet most of the time in this situation. I am looking to get three bets in with this hand—flop, turn, and river.

Example 1j (K-Q)—I will probably check this hand. I don't want to get raised and lose my inside straight draw. If my opponent has a pair but does not have an ace, I potentially have ten outs, making a straight or the best pair with a king, queen, or jack.

Example 1k (T-9)—Similar to 9-9, I will usually check this hand. Note that with a middle pair, I probably have five outs if my opponent has an ace. With a pocket pair, I have only two.

Example 2—In this example, I have again raised to three times the big blind in late position and been called by the big blind. The flop this time, however, is J♠T♥5♠.

Example 2a (A-K)—If I have A♠K♠, I will definitely bet. With two overcards, a flush draw, and an inside straight draw, this hand is a monster on this flop. If I don't have the flush draw, I will check. I don't want to give up my inside straight draw plus the likelihood that an ace or king could put me ahead. I don't want to have to give up this hand or make a weak call if I get check-raised.

Example 2b (A-J)—I will bet this hand to protect it.

Example 2c (A-2)—With A♠2♠, I would definitely bet. Without the flush draw, it is a close decision. I will likely check this hand down and hope ace-high is good.

Example 2d (K-K)—I like my hand and will usually bet to try to protect it.

Example 2e (7-6)—If I have 7♠6♠, I will likely bet this hand. Even if I don't have a flush draw, I will probably bet as a complete bluff.

Example 2f (3-3)—I will usually check this hand down and hope it is good.

Example 2g (9-9)—I am even more likely to check this hand than 3-3 because I am giving my opponent a lot fewer outs to beat me if I am ahead.

Example 2h (A-A)—I am equally likely to bet this hand to protect it as I am to slow-play and try to induce a bluff out of my opponent.

Example 2i (A-T)—With A♠T♠, I will definitely bet. A pair and the nut flush draw is a monster hand and I don't mind getting a lot of chips in on the flop. Without the flush draw, I am as likely to bet as to check.

Example 2j (K-Q)—With K♠Q♠, I have a monster hand, with a flush draw, an open-ended straight draw, and two overcards. I want to get as many chips in as possible on this flop. Even without the flush draw, I am likely to bet with the straight draw and two overcards.

Example 2k (T-9)—I would bet this hand if I also have the flush draw, but usually check it if I don't.

As you can see from these examples, I am frequently checking strong hands and betting weak ones. It is important that checking is not a sign of weakness and equally important to occasionally throw in bluffs when you are betting. The tough part is knowing which strong hands to check and which weak ones to bet. Hopefully, the examples I have set out will guide you to make better decisions when choosing how much to bet and which hands to bet with.

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