Let’s play POKER

Professional poker player and author Lee Nelson teaches you how to play and beat poker tournaments.
LET’S PLAY POKER

ABOUT THIS BOOK

No Limit Texas Hold’em is a great game and it seems like it’s everywhere these days. But if you don’t
know what’s going on, actually trying to play can be a frustrating experience. There are a lot of good
poker books out there but most are aimed at people who already know a little bit or are at such a basic
level you’re almost no better off having read them.

If you want to get better at poker, there are two things you must do. The first is to keep studying and
analyzing the game. Read all you can and discuss hands with better players. The more you learn, the
more you’ll realize how much you still don’t know. The second is to critique your key hands away from
the table, thinking about what decision you would make next time and learning from your mistakes so
you play better in the future. I make mistakes in every tournament I enter, even the ones I win.
By analyzing and learning from these errors, I rarely make the same mistake twice.

Most importantly, have fun playing. Now let’s play poker!

Lee ‘Final Table’ Nelson
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The History of Poker</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Useful Internet</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How To Beat Play-Money Sit-N-Gos (SNGs)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART TWO</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>REAL-MONEY SIT-N-GOS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Playing Real-Money SNGs</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Key Poker Concepts</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How To Beat $1 SNGs</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>How To Beat The $5 SNGs</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How To Beat $10 SNGs</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>How To Beat $20 SNGs</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>How To Beat The $30 SNGs</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>How To Beat $50 SNGs</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>$100 SNGs</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART THREE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>MULTI-TABLE TOURNAMENTS (MTTS)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Position, Position, Position</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Differences Between Live and Online MTTS</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Starting Hands Early in the Tournament</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>STAGE 1 – Tournament Preparation</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>STAGE 2 – Early On In The Play</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>STAGE 3 – Middle Stages (With Antes)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>STAGE 4 – Approaching The Money</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>STAGE 5 – In The Money</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>STAGE 6 – The Final Table</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART FOUR</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PSYCHOLOGY</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Skill Versus Luck</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Tells And Reads</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bluffing</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX A</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How To Play Hold ‘Em</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX B</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hand Rankings</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX C</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Flop Hand Rankings</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>APPENDIX D</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommended Reading ; Glossary</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the author

Like many poker players Lee “Final Table” Nelson has an intimidating nickname. Unlike many poker players, his is well earned. Lee has over 50 final table appearances in major poker tournaments to his credit including winning the 2006 Aussie Millions tournament for $1.43 million. His books about No Limit Hold’em tournaments - *Kill Phil* and *Kill Everyone* - dramatically leveled the playing field by making the strategies of the professionals understandable by the average player.

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To all of you, my deepest gratitude.
It’s obvious that poker can’t be older than the cards used in the game, and decks of cards were used in China in the 13th century, arriving in Europe as a 52-card pack in Venice, Italy, more than 700 years ago. By that time, three other empires—the Indian, the Persian, and the Egyptian—had already influenced the deck. From very early on, the card rankings were the same as they are in the modern game, with the four suits containing 13 cards each, originally being swords, sticks, goblets, and coins, topped by junior viceroy, senior viceroy, and king. How the ace became higher than the king, when no one besides God was higher than the king, is a mystery. Suffice it to say that at some point the ace became the top card, while maintaining its ability to make a low straight and becoming the most powerful card in most games.

The modern game of poker most likely got its name from one of three sources: the German game of Pochen, or Pochspiel, which was popular from the 15th century; the French game Poque, probably derived from the ancient French verb poquer, meaning to bet, where bluffing and betting were key parts of playing. This French game might have come from its German predecessors. Or lastly, the word “poe” was used by underworld types in the early years of the United States as a code word for a stash of money. No matter how it came about, it’s a great name and perfect for the game.

Where did the current craze of ‘no-limit Texas hold ’em’ come from? Well, we have some clues, but are largely left to speculate. In an article in LIFE magazine dated August 16, 1968, A.D. Livingston (a known professional poker player and noted author of related materials) talks about the game, how it’s played, how widely it’s known, and how quickly it became a craze. This article drummed up interest in the game, so that many of the 40 million estimated poker players of the time started playing it. According to Livingston, in its early days it was often called “Hold Me Darling,” “Tennessee Hold Me,” or “Texas Hold ’em.” As with other nomenclature struggles, we now know which name won the battle… and the war!

According to some accounts, hold ‘em was first played in Robston, Texas, in 1905, but we’ll likely never know for sure. Here’s one of my favorite stories about how it all came about:

During a long hot southern night of cards, the game of choice was stud, specifically a new-fangled version of stud played with seven cards. A considerable amount of money was wagered during this marathon session and as the wee hours rolled by one player, known to be a sucker, continually seemed to get the card he needed on the last card, dealt face down. Hand after hand the final card made him a winner. Hand after blank came off the deck, but Mr. Lucky hit bingo after bingo. The other players knew that Mr. Lucky would eventually lose … but when?

Finally, one of Mr. Lucky’s opponents couldn’t take it anymore. He snapped and blurted out, “If you had to play the cards that I get you’d have no chance, no chance at all! You would never, ever, beat me! You’d never, ever, win! Never!”

Mr. Lucky laughed, “You must be kidding! Do you really believe that? Let’s do it that way and find out! You and I will play heads-up with one down card, and play the same cards from there on out. I only need one down card to beat you. Just one!”
Mr. Groan-and-Moan realized he was in danger of getting big-time flak from the others if he chased the poor-playing lucky player out of their game, so after spluttering for a moment or two, he came up with, “One card doesn’t seem very skillful to me, more like showdown; how about using two down cards … and we don’t have to keep anyone else from playing. The more the merrier!”

“Hmmmm,” replied Mr. Lucky. “I guess that a bunch could play, if no one else minds us changing the game.”

“Let’s start with two down cards, like we do in seven card stud, and then play the other five cards as community cards — just one card at a time that we turn up in the middle of the table and that anyone who stays in the hand can use,” suggested Mr. Groan-and-Moan.

“Okay,” agreed Mr. Lucky. “Two hole cards and five cards that anyone with a hand can use, and a betting round before each community card is turned up. Will that keep you from crying about your bad luck?”

“Yes it will,” answered a chastened Mr. Groan-and-Moan, who knew better than to complain in the middle of a run of luck by a fish.

And so the game of “hold them” was born. Later on it was contracted to hold ’em, and because it was most popular in Texas, it became known as Texas hold ’em. The Texas road gamblers, led by Doyle Brunson, played the game table stakes, no-limit, and with the cooperation of Benny Binion of the Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas, NLHE became the game of choice for the world championship of poker. In fact, it’s sometimes referred to as the “Cadillac of poker” — meaning that it’s considered by many to be the top of the line in complexity and skill.

Many felt that the game would be better and faster if the first three community cards were turned up at once, with no betting rounds in between them, thus the flop was born. Not coincidentally, this change favored the better players, since they could now see 5 cards before committing themselves.

Once the value of position was understood, a button that traveled around the table one station at a time was introduced, representing the dealer when a house dealer was used, so that everyone had the same opportunity of acting last.

Along the way, some terminology has changed. For example, we no longer call the flop the “turn,” as they did originally in Texas, and we tap the table to indicate checking instead of when we’re all-in, but the basic game remains the same.

Part of the original fascination with hold ’em came from the fact that up to 22 players could play at once, so in home games the number of players didn’t need to be cut off at 8, as in 7-card stud. There’d always be a seat for nice players, such as Mr. Lucky, who showed up with their pockets full of money. No longer did a special player, now commonly referred to as a fish, need to stand on the sidelines until someone else left the game. Because of the practical limitations in delivering cards and seating players around a table, few games ever had more than 12 participants, but tables were built for 12, 11, 10, 9, and occasionally 8 or fewer players.

Hold ’em was brought to Las Vegas, Nevada, in the 1960s and was first played as an ante-only game. At the Golden Nugget, in the downtown area, the biggest game was 10-20 limit hold ’em with a 50-cent ante. Soon a $5 blind was added and it traveled around the table, one spot to the left of the button. Demanding a faster game and loathing the frequent disputes that arose over who hadn’t anted, the players replaced the antes with a second $5 blind. Then the regular game became 15-30 (blinds of $5 and $10 in front of the button) with the first raise being to 25. Soon the big blind was raised to 15, with the first raise making it 30 to go. Finally, the little blind was raised to $10, which is now the standard for 15-30 limit hold ’em and is unlikely to change anytime soon.
Limit hold 'em, with its fixed betting structure, was the game of choice until poker became popular on television in around 2002. No-limit hold 'em, with its big pots and big drama, took the public by storm. New players saw the game on TV, so that’s what they wanted to play in casinos. The good players naturally followed the bad and NLHE is now by far the most popular form of poker. NLHE was played table stakes, meaning that a player could bet everything he had in front of him at any time, but couldn’t reach in his pocket for more money. Each player could only play a pot up to the amount he had on the table. If he bet it all, he was considered to be all-in. If other players had more, a side pot was created that involved only those players who had chips remaining.

The focus of this book is NLHE, so relatively little is said about other variations, such as limit and pot-limit hold 'em.

Structure drives the action in all poker games. In NLHE tournaments, the blinds, or forced bets, continually escalate as the tournament progresses. The relationship of the size of the blinds to your stack of chips and those of your opponents will strongly influence your actions. Important considerations include: How big are the blinds? How big are the antes (if the game has them)? What effects do these forced bets have on the action that follows? Considerations such as these, and many others, will become practically automatic as you become accustomed to tournament play.

Summary of Chapter 1

1. Poker dates back to the 13th century.
2. The game of no-limit hold 'em (NLHE) started early in the 20th century and evolved over decades.
3. The structure of any poker game (the size of the blinds and antes) drives the action.
THE USEFUL INTERNET

It’s everywhere! A few clicks and a free download later, you’re on, up, and playing at the stakes you choose—from completely free, playing with fun chips, all the way to wagering thousands of dollars on every card. You can meet folks from all over the world, play in your first games without any reservation or embarrassment, and make whatever type of faux pas you can come up with. Can’t find the right button? Can’t figure out what to do? Don’t know if you should call or fold? No problem. No one will see your face. No one will know who you are. You’re just a screen name that you made up in the cozy confines of your own home or office, or at the coffee shop or airport. Others see only your screen name, with or without an icon, before taking action on their screens.

You can play at any hour of the day dressed as you like, spilling drinks and food on your keyboard—and no one will complain.

For a beginning player, the major advantage of online poker is you can learn and practice for free. While you’d be hard-pressed to find a casino that would allow you to play poker for free, of the ten-million-plus players on PokerStars, a big percentage participate in the play-money games only. This means you can find any type of game at any hour and try it out, even if the game you want to learn is razz, five-card-draw high, or some other game that’s not popular where you live.

You’re also free to observe the action in any game that interests you, giving you front-row seats to watch and learn from some of the biggest names in poker playing some of the biggest games.

Once you get familiar with how it all works, you can play multiple games on multiple screens from anywhere around the globe. There’s no downtime for changing dealers or shuffling cards, so the hands fly off the deck at amazing speed—at least twice as many as you’ll get in a bricks-and-mortar casino. Online you can play for as little as a few minutes at a time, quit a winner, and no one will even notice. Come and go as you like.

So is there anything not to like about the Internet? That depends on your personality. For some players, not being able to see their opponents’ faces may be thought of as disadvantageous, but for newer players, opponents not seeing your face is surely a plus. They won’t be able to read your facial expressions and body language—you can jump up and down, scream, yell, or beg for them to fold if you’re bluffing, and no one will know. They won’t see you fumble chips nervously, as all your decisions are done with a click of the computer’s mouse. In short, it’s the perfect way for beginners to get started.

So my advice is simple - make use of the Internet to learn and play poker! Whether you’re a total beginner or a player looking for more action, I recommend logging on to www.PokerStars.com, the world’s largest poker website, which has the best software and the widest selection of games. This book will act as your guide, taking you slowly up the PokerStars ladder from free play, through micro limits, and finally to higher-level cash games when you’ve reached the requisite skill level.
The etiquette on the Internet is substantially different from that in a bricks-and-mortar casino. You can throw a tantrum, turn green, throw your favorite pillow up against the wall, or curse out loud and no one will know. But you should never discuss the hand in progress. Don’t talk about what you threw away, what you’re thinking, or what you guess some other player holds. Don’t make suggestions to someone in the hand as to what course of action he should take or give real or false information about what your intended action will be when it’s your turn to act. Even heads-up (only you and one opponent) doing any of these things isn’t good and can cause problems, but in multiple way pots (more than one opponent) it’s flat wrong. Opponents may complain to the site and if their objections are verified—after all, there’s a record of anything you say on the Net—a warning email may be issued. Players who persist in violating rules that impact other players may be asked to cease and desist or even be barred. PokerStars does its utmost to see that its rules are followed and that the games are kept fair and honest. It has sophisticated security systems designed to offer you maximum protection.

Some other advantages of online play are found under the options tab. Here you can choose the deck color, the pattern used on the back of the deck, the table setting, the background setting, the floor setting, to use (or not to use) icons, to use (or not to use) sound cues, where at the table you wish to sit even if that seat is taken, etc. Typically, you can choose (or not) to use the four-colored deck (one color for each suit, making the overlooking of a flush much more unlikely), along with even the smallest details, such as how the cards are delivered to you—one at a time or both at once.

You have chat choices as well—you can choose to see everything, from trash-talking to instructional comments. You can have a philosophical discussion, or hear about local casinos in Africa or Korea. You can read gripes and complaints about bad beats. After all, there’s surely a reason why your opponents think they’ve lost and it can’t possibly be random or their own ineptitude. Sigh! So under “chat” you have the option to see no chat, all chat, or a dealer summary (where, typically, the dealer announces every action). Chat options, hand histories, and some other choices are available by clicking on the dealer tray. In addition, you can block a particular player’s chat, if you find an individual to be offensive. This feature can be found by right-clicking on the player’s name or icon. Other options appear by right-clicking on a player, including yourself!

Three especially marvelous bonuses that online sites usually offer are: 1) the ability you’ll have to critique your own play by clicking on a “stats” button that tells you how many hands you’re playing, how far into the hand you go with them, how many are shown down, and how many you actually win; 2) access to a “hand history” where you can review how you and/or others played a hand, how much you and/or others bet, and even what hand they held at showdown, even when it wasn’t turned up; 3) and finally, you can take notes on every opponent you face for as long as he keeps that screen name—as to how he played a session or how he played in a particular circumstance or even a particular hand.

I’m going to give you a winning strategy in the one table sit-n-gos (SNGs), which are one of the most popular features in online poker. Of course, the advice I give you won’t be limited to SNGs, but will be applicable to other games as well. One thing that you’ll discover on PokerStars is that the tournament action is available 24/7, so you won’t have to wait long to play.

I recommend that at every step you keep records of your results. These can be useful even though you may start out by playing the 320-play-dollar sit-n-gos. I also recommend that you make a few remarks about each effort, something that makes each SNG special in your memory. Usually, it’ll be a few key hands that you played where you had important decisions to make, but sometimes it may feature a player and the poker personality he brought to the table.

In both SNGs and in cash games, you can follow the players with whom you want to play from game to game. Perhaps they’re players you enjoy playing with or can consistently beat. Game selection can become an important part of a winning formula.
You also should check out the “freeroll” option after clicking on the “Tourney” tab. Freerolls are tournaments that require no money to play, but often have cash prizes. I know a player who started playing this way and won a tournament. He used that free money to start playing in small cash buy-in tournaments and has slowly worked his way up the ladder. He now has several thousand dollars in his online account, and it all started with a freeroll.

Finally, you need to be aware of the possibility of getting into a satellite where you might win a trip to an exotic location somewhere in the world by clicking on the “Events” tab. Here you’ll have the possibility of going to the World Series of Poker (WSOP), the European Poker Tour (EPT), the Asia Pacific Poker Tour (APPT), the Latin American Poker Tour (LAPT), the World Cup of Poker, or the World Championship of Online Poker (WCOP) that can be played from one’s home. Typically, if you win one of these satellites, your prize is the entry fee into the main event, the hotel room, and cash for the plane ride. So be sure and give this a try. After all, Jeff Williams from Atlanta, Georgia, won the European Poker Tour Championship in 2006 in Monte Carlo and more than $1,000,000. I know, because I had the pleasure of being the announcer on the floor when he won it. He was only 19 years old—not even old enough to get into an American casino!

**Summary of Chapter 2**

1. The Internet is entirely anonymous.
2. Special etiquette on the Internet is strictly enforced.
3. Your options with online poker are numerous and various.

**Why I recommend PokerStars.**

During this book you will notice that I mention PokerStars quite a lot. There’s a simple reason for that (and it’s not just that I am a member of Team PokerStars Pro). PokerStars is simply the best place to play poker on the Internet. They have the most players, the best tournaments, and the best support.

Download at: [www.pokerstars.com/poker/download](http://www.pokerstars.com/poker/download)
As you’ll learn later in this book, an important component of winning poker is to take advantage of the other players’ weaknesses and tendencies. Players who have no financial investment (in other words, they play with play money only) are generally anxious to learn how the hand turns out. Consequently, they usually play too loose, calling bets with inferior hands just to observe the outcome. Knowing this, we can devise a winning strategy that capitalizes on this weakness.

The biggest mistake I commonly see when watching play-money SNGs is that bets and raises are way too small after the flop. Unless you’ve flopped a huge hand, such as quads (4-of-a-kind), a straight flush, or a full house, you seldom want to be called by more than one player, no matter what you have. I recommend that beginning players bet at least half their chips in any hand they decide to play. This is the down-and-dirty trick to winning play-money SNGs; it’s explained further below.

I suggest that you try this out in the many play-money SNGs on PokerStars.net. This is the way to become familiar with what goes on in SNGs without having to risk one red cent! Only move up to real-money games once you’re comfortable with the game and the stakes. To further prepare yourself, watch a few SNGs at the next level before jumping in.

I urge you to keep records. This will help you track your improvement, which can be fun, as well as give you an additional tool for learning. At a minimum, record the type of game you played and your result. Better still, make remarks and describe key hands. This can be done either by purchasing tracking software or the old-fashioned way, with paper and a pencil.

While you’re playing for play-money, you’ll probably run into many kinds of opponents. Some are trying to win and some are amusing themselves by clicking the buttons. Certain players try their best, while others just chunk bets into the pot to see what might happen, while they watch TV, chat on the phone with friends, or get drunk. Get used to a variety of styles while you’re playing for free, because the same types of players often await you as you move up the ladder to real-money games. By playing to win in every situation, you’ll more quickly gain the experience needed to advance.
Levels 1-3
In the early stages of a free SNG, it pays to be patient and play very few hands. The important ones, those that will win the most chips for you, are the big pairs (AA, KK, or QQ). With these hands, if the pot’s been raised, bet all your chips. If there’s been no raise, bet half your chips now and when the flop (the first 3 community cards) comes, bet the rest of your chips regardless of the new cards and action. Because free-play players call too frequently, you’ll often get called by inferior hands and amass a pile of chips!

During the first 3 levels, if the pot has been raised before it’s your turn to act, fold all other hands. If you’re the first to raise the pot (players who’ve matched the big blind—known as limpers—are OK), move all-in with TT, JJ, and AK-suited. When you’re dealt any other hands, fold.

Example

Blinds are 10/20 and you have KK and a stack of 1,500. Two players before you just call the big blind. There’s been no raise, so bet half your chips now: 750!

Blinds are 15/30 and you have QQ and a stack of 1,470. One player raises to 120 and another one calls him. All-in, baby!

Blinds are 15/30 and you have AQ-suited and a stack of 1,200. There are 8 players remaining and you’re first to act. Fold.

Blinds are 15/30 and you have a stack of 1,350. You’re on the button with JJ and 3 players have limped in for 30 each. All-in!

You have 1,500 with blinds of 25/50. The second player to act raises to 150. You have AK. Fold.

Limping in isn’t a recommended option at the free-play level. In every case, you’ll enter the pot with a raise or a re-raise, committing either half your chips or all your chips. Be patient: In Chapter 4, where playing in real-money SNGs is discussed, other options will become available.

Seeing a Free Flop from the Big Blind
The big blind is a situation that might need some clarification. The big blind acts last before the flop. After the flop, the small blind acts first (if still in the hand), the big blind acts next, and the button (dealer) acts last. Sometimes when you’re in the big blind, others will have limped in, but no one will have raised, allowing you to continue playing without putting any more money in the pot. If you’re holding AA, KK, QQ, JJ, TT, or AK (suited or unsuited), moving all-in is the best play. With all other hands, check and see the flop. After the flop, if you have two unique pair (where each of your hole cards matches a separate card on the board), move all-in. To clarify, if you hold 33 and the flop comes KKJ, you have not flopped two unique pair, because everyone else has at least the KK. If you hold K8 and it comes K82, you’ve flopped the kind of 2-pair we’re discussing; if you hold 82 and it comes K82 you’ve also flopped a playable 2-pair. Furthermore, move all-in if your flop trips or a set. “Trips” means you hold one card in your hand and two of that rank come on the board; for example, you’re holding 96 and the community cards are 66K. A “set” means you hold a pocket pair and another one of the same rank comes on the board. If, for instance, you hold 44 and the community board reads K84—you have a set of 4s.

If you flop a full house of any size, a flush (if you hold two diamonds and the board is Jd 6d 3d, for example), or a straight, (say you hold 63 and the flop comes 754), then bet one-half of your chips now and the rest on the turn (the fourth community card, which is followed by the next round of betting) no matter what card comes off the deck. If you flop a straight flush or quads, check and then raise to one-half your stack if you get the chance, then bet the rest of your chips on the turn. If everyone checks behind you on the flop, bet half your chips on the turn and the other half on the river. (The “river” is the final community card and signals the final round of betting.) If your hand is any worse than two unique pair (this will be the case the great majority of the time), check and then fold to any bet.
Avoid playing hands with 4 cards to a flush or straight. For example, fold Ah 6h when it comes Jh 4d 2h and an opponent bets, even though you’d have the best possible flush if a heart comes on the turn or river. Also, if someone bets, check and fold top pair (a hole card matching the top community card) with top kicker (the highest possible side card to a pair; for example, if you have As Ts and the board reads Th 7c 4d, you have top pair with top kicker). A hand such as As Jd with a flop of Jh 4d 2h, for example, may seem strong, and can be in the right situations. However, as a beginning player, you’ll struggle to identify which situations are profitable for you and which ones aren’t. Often, with multiple opponents as you’re likely to have when you see a free flop from the big blind, there’s a very good chance someone will have flopped 2-pair or better and has you crushed. After you improve your game by reading the rest of this book and other books, playing more hands, and thinking about those hands, you’ll occasionally be able to play on in the early rounds with such holdings. For now, however, and as long as you’re at the play-money level, simply check/folding these hands will be your best play.

From the fourth level on, as you’ll read below, top pair with top kicker is playable on the flop from the big blind, but during the first 3 levels, you should fold. You could easily have the best hand, but it’s best to wait for another time when you know you’re a strong favorite. I’m removing all the guesswork that I can, since at this point you’re probably not too good at guessing and that means I don’t recommend that you pursue drawing hands, such as four to the straight or flush, or one-pair hands in play-money SNGs just to see what might happen. Establishing good habits now will serve you well when you advance to real-money games.

Blinds are 25/50 and you have 1,425. You’re the big blind and hold 6c 4s. Three players limp in, including the small blind. You check, and the flop is Kh 6d 4c. The small blind bets 200. Push all-in! You have 2 unique pairs. Go for it!

You have Ac Qs in the big blind with blinds of 15/30 and 1,470 chips. There are 4 limpers to you. You decline your option to raise and the flop is Qs Th 9h. The small blind bets 100. Fold. Although you may have the best hand here, the small blind has bet and there are still 3 players left to act after you. The chance of someone having 2-pair or a made straight is too great. There will be better chances later.

Take a look at the summary tables at the end of this chapter. They list all the recommended plays for each stage of the sit-n-go. I suggest you print out these pages or have them open on your computer to refer to while playing.

**Level 4 and Higher**

As the SNG progresses, the blinds and antes increase, costing you more each orbit as the blinds move around the table. Suppose you have approximately the same 1,500 chips you started with at the fourth level on PokerStars, when the blinds go to 50/100. What now? You still have enough ammunition for roughly 10 orbits, which is the number that gives you just enough to play poker, as opposed to simply pushing all-in or folding before the flop. Despite your somewhat comfortable position, however, it’s now correct to shift gears and play more aggressively, because even winning only the blinds is meaningful.

Another way to think about it is that the preliminary rounds are over and the real tournament now begins. Ideally, you’ve been watching what the other players have been doing, making mental or written notes. In most cases, the other players won’t be changing their stripes, or rather, gears. The type of players they are has usually been revealed and the kinds of plays they’re likely to make have often already occurred, so use hand histories, notes, and stats to your advantage.

If you’re thinking that someone out there has noticed that you’ve been playing “tight” and only entering pots with excellent hands—great! If other players think that you’re too timid to enter pots without a big hand, they’re making a big mistake, as you’ll now be switching gears and playing much more

"Example"

---

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aggressively. The players who have you pegged as tight and timid will now almost always fold when you bet. This is great for you! This being said, however, at the lower levels it’s unlikely that anyone will be so observant. Furthermore, it’s also unlikely that they’ll alter their play because of it.

From the 4th blind level onward, AK (suits are unimportant) is also playable if multiple players have just limped in or if only 1 player has raised. If there’s been a single raise when you hold AK at the 4th-blind level or higher, whether or not it’s been called by other players, your best play is to go all-in.

You do this for several good reasons—you might have the best hand right now, but even if you don’t, AK has a very good chance of improving to beat better holdings by making a pair (note that when you make a pair with AK, it will always be the top pair with top kicker), and sometimes when you don’t have the best hand you force your opponent[s] to make a tough decision for all their chips and they just might make a mistake. When you move in, you have two ways to win the pot: Your opponent can fold or you can show down the best hand when all the cards have been dealt. This is a key concept in no-limit hold ‘em. If your opponent folds, wonderful!

As you can see, the idea here is to over-bet your really good hands early on, because other players will call you with garbage, especially if their hand is “soooted” (suited, when both hole cards are the same suit, is often referred to in jest as “soooted,” because many players, especially newer ones, overvalue this distinction) just to see how the hand unfolds when all the cards are out. Curiosity killed the cat—and many a poker player, as well! When you graduate to playing very small-buy-in real-money SNGs at PokerStars.com, you’ll notice this tendency for inquisitive players to play highly speculative hands, risking far more of their stack than their hand warrants. Their mistakes become your profits! Winning poker is all about making fewer mistakes than your opponents.

A hidden benefit of strict hand selection in the early going is that the other players are likely to be playing wildly and knocking each other out. Each time a player gets knocked out, you get closer to the top 3, and the top 3 are the winners in SNGs. Even though one player might double his chips, you gain in your expected return each time a player is eliminated.

Suppose 3 players have been eliminated. Even if you haven’t played a single hand, you’re now ahead of the game. Don’t worry about not having the most chips. You’ve still got lots of time to double your stack and be right in the thick of things. You might not even need to double your stack. It’s possible to win 3rd or even 2nd place in an SNG without ever winning a single meaningful pot. I’ve finished 2nd in SNGs without ever having more chips than I started with. Patience is truly a virtue in the early stages.

Play More Hands from the Fourth Level On

From the fourth blind level until only 4 players are left, you should become more aggressive by adding some hands to your repertoire. If an opponent has already raised, move all-in with any pair 99 or higher, any AK, or AQ-suited. Any time the action gets to you and no one has yet raised, you should raise all-in with any AK, any AQ, AJ-suited, AT-suited, KQ-suited, and any pair 77 or higher. If you’re the first one into the pot (no raisers or limpers) as the button or the small blind, also move all-in with any hand that has any pair, or 19 or more blackjack points in it (any picture card and the tens are worth 10 points, aces are 11, and 9s and 8s are worth face value)—these are (in addition to the aforementioned) A8, A9, AT, AJ, KQ, KJ, KT, K9, QJ, QT, Q9, JT, J9, T9. Remember, there are two ways to win when you go all-in!

When You Have Fewer than 10 Big Blinds

If you have fewer than 10 times the big blind at any time and the pot hasn’t been raised (multiple limpers are OK), you should additionally move all-in with any hand that equals 20 points in blackjack so long as it’s suited. For example, Kh Th is okay to move in with, while Ks Td isn’t. If someone raises before you, move all-in with any pair 77 or higher, AK, or AQ-suited. If two (or more) people raise before you, move all-in with pocket queens or higher, or AK.
**When You Have Fewer than 5 Big Blinds**

If you have fewer than 5 times the big blind at any time and the pot hasn’t been raised (multiple limpers are OK), you should move all-in with any ace, any pair, or any hand that equals 20 points in blackjack. For example, if you hold, 2c 2s, Ac 4h, Qs Js, Jh Td, etc., bet all your chips. If someone calls and shows a better starting hand, you can still get lucky. Understand that you’re increasing the number of hands you’ll play, because you’re desperate, with the blinds and/or antes eating away precious pieces of your stack. Waiting for big hands is no longer a viable option. If someone raises before you, move all-in with any pair 66 or higher, AK, AQ, AJ, or AT-suited. If two people raise before you, move all-in with pocket tens or higher, or AK.

See the summary table at the end of this chapter.

- **Blinds are 25/50 and you have A3-suited and a stack of 220. Six players remain and one player limps. You have less than 5 times the big blind, so it’s time to push it in and hope to get lucky.**

- **On the fourth level and beyond, if you get to see the flop for free in the big blind, push all-in if your hand is at least as strong as the top pair with the top kicker. Note that this is slightly different from the advice given for the first 3 levels. So if the flop comes 762, push all-in with A7, a pocket pair of eights or better, any 2-pair, or any set. If only 1 or 2 people see the flop with you, push all-in with the top pair and any kicker. All worse hands should check and fold.**

**Four Players Remaining – The Bubble**

When you get to 4-handed play and they pay 3 spots, you’ve arrived at what’s commonly called “the bubble” (meaning that those who advance one more spot get paid, whereas the one who finishes one out of the money, and is usually referred to as the bubble player, gets nothing). The most important thing to realize is that all your decisions can be reduced to two simple actions—move all-in or fold. At this stage the blinds and antes are high and you can’t afford to limp in, then fold your hand if someone raises, or make a raise and lay your hand down if you get re-raised. It’s all-or-nothing time and you’ll need to be courageous and bold. It’s time to throw caution to the wind and play a wide range of hands. At this stage, fearlessness is a virtue.

In play-money games, no one is trying to just squeak into third place and make the “money.” There’s no money here, only the ego victory of first place. However, the completely lunatic, wild, and loose players are more likely to be out than still in. There may be one or two left, but your opposition will probably be a bit saner. You might see play tighten up a tad near the end, but not as much as it probably would if there was real money involved.

As a result, any time you’re the first to enter the pot (everyone before you has folded), move all-in with any ace, any pair, or any hand that equals 15 points in blackjack. You’re hoping to pick up the blinds and antes and being the first one in the pot makes this job a lot easier. If anyone has limped or raised before it’s your turn, stick to your tighter default strategy.

- **Blinds are 200/400 and you have OJ with a stack of 3,600. Four players remain; the first player folds and the second raises to 800. You’re in the small blind. Fold. Someone else raised before you, so stick with your tight-play strategy.**

- **Blinds are 150/300 and you have 9c 6d with a stack of 2,600. Four players remain and you’re first to act. You have 15 blackjack points, so push all-in and pray everyone else folds. When you’re the first one to enter the pot, you’re hoping that you can push people out with your big move. It’s much easier to win the pot by pushing all-in than by calling an all-in. That’s why we’re aggressive with our pushes, but tight when someone else comes in first.**
Three Players Remaining
Your aggressive play will carry over as you move toward the top. When you play 3-handed, you’ll be “in the money,” but everyone is going for first, so don’t be afraid to move all-in and put your opponents to the test. If they allow you to win the blinds a few times, you’ll likely build up an insurmountable lead.

Heads-up Play
When you play 2-handed, you’re forced to play even more hands. The simplest of all strategies is just to move all-in every time you’re first to act or whenever he limps. This puts the onus on your opponent and forces him to make a big decision, often for all his chips. That’s right! Time for the mantra: When you move in, there are two ways to win.

Anytime you get called and turn over garbage (a random hand), you may get some verbal abuse. Just smile and move on. If that person now enters the next SNG with you, he might well call in the early stages when you move all-in and have him smashed.

At all other stages of the tournament, the small blind is directly to the left of the button and must act before the button on the last three rounds. In heads-up play, the small blind goes to the button, so that on the first round of play (before the flop) the button has the disadvantage of acting first. This is done to offset some of the power of the button acting last after the flop. Don’t let it surprise you the first time you see it.

What happens when he’s first and comes in for a raise? What kind of hand do you need to re-raise him with or call his all-in? Re-raise all-in with any pair (from the lowly 22 to the lovely AA) and with any hand that totals 20 or 21 in blackjack. Those hands are AK, A0, AJ, AT, A9, KQ, KJ, KT, QJ, QT, and JT. All other hands can be mucked. By moving all-in with these hands, you’ll put your opponent on his hind foot. It’s a fairly big selection of hands and is designed to give you the optimal chance of winning. Unfortunately, you’ll sometimes run into a bigger hand or a lucky opponent, but don’t let that persuade you to begin to play in some other way. Stay the course and you’ll be happy with your results in the long run.

If your opponent’s original raise is an all-in from the button before you’ve acted, the same hands listed above can be used to call or to re-raise all-in.

If your opponent only has enough chips for 4 big blinds or less, you should call his pre-flop all-in with any two cards. Similarly, if you’re in this situation, move all-in with any two cards.

Summary of Chapter 3
1. The most important thing to notice is that your hand values change dramatically as you go from nine starting players down to two. Additionally, the blinds and antes get much larger, which means that the reward for winning the pot becomes progressively more significant. Both of these changes cause a change in your play from cautious at the beginning to loose (you play a lot more hands) later on. Simply put, you no longer have the luxury of waiting for good hands, because the blinds and antes eat you alive if you wait for top hands. So you rely more on your opponent’s fear of losing by acting aggressively in short-handed situations. When you push all-in, your opponents can fold and you’ll win immediately or you might have the best hand when the hand is dealt out. This is a powerful one-two punch! While playing, refer to the charts provided for guidance.

2. Try not to get too caught up in results. What do I mean by this? Well, often you’ll throw away KJ, or 95, or K2, or 22, and notice that had you played all the way, the cards would have made you a winning hand. That doesn’t matter. Your goal is to win the event and you do that by continually putting your money at risk with the best hand. Damon Runyon once said, “The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but that’s the way to bet!” How true!
Now you’re ready to beat play-money SNGs. As soon as you’re a consistent winner, I encourage you to move up to real-money play, but for very small stakes. Depositing just $10 into your PokerStars account is enough to get you started. See you at the final table!

### Pre-Flop, Levels 1-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Limpers or Raisers</th>
<th>One or More Limpers</th>
<th>One or More Raisers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>From the big blind</strong></td>
<td><strong>You win!</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with AA, KK, QQ, JJ, TT or AK</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From any other position</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bet half your chips with AA, KK, or QQ.</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>All-in with JJ, TT, or AK-suited</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with JJ, TT, or AK-suited</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Post-Flop, Levels 1-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Hand</th>
<th>Post-Flop Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA, KK, or QQ as pocket pair</td>
<td>All-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 pair (each card matches a card on board)</td>
<td>All-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trips or set</td>
<td>All-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full house, flush, or straight</td>
<td>Bet half your chips now and half on the turn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight flush or quads</td>
<td>Check and raise to half your chips. Bet the other half on the turn. If the flop is checked through, bet half on the turn and half on the river</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything else</td>
<td>Check and fold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Pre-Flop, Level 4 and Higher (5 or more Players Remaining)

#### More than 10BB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Limpers or Raisers</th>
<th>One or More Limpers</th>
<th>One Raiser</th>
<th>Two or More Raisers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>From the big blind</strong></td>
<td><strong>You win!</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with 77+, AK, AQ, AJ-suited, AT-suited, KQ suited</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>All-in with AA, KK, QQ, or AK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From the small blind or button</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with any pair or 19 blackjack</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with 77+, AK, AQ, AJ-suited, AT-suited, KQ suited</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>All-in with AA, KK, QQ, or AK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From any other position</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with 77+, AK, AQ, AJ-suited, AT-suited, KQ suited</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with AA, KK, QQ, or AK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 10BB to 5BB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>One Raiser</th>
<th>Two or More Raisers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>From the big blind</strong></td>
<td><strong>You win!</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with 77+, AK, AQ, or 20 blackjack (suited)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>All-in with 77+, AK, or AQ-suited</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From the small blind or button</strong></td>
<td><strong>All-in with any pair or 19 blackjack</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wait until you’re beating the Play-Money SNGs before playing for real.
### Less than 5BB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From the big blind</th>
<th>You win!</th>
<th>All-in with any pair, any ace, or any 20 blackjack</th>
<th>All-in with 66+, AK, AQ, AJ, or AT-suited</th>
<th>All-in with TT+ or AK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From the small blind or button</td>
<td>All-in with any pair, any ace, or any 19 blackjack</td>
<td>All-in with any pair, any ace, or any 20 blackjack</td>
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</table>

### Post-Flop, Level 4 and Higher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Hand</th>
<th>1 or 2 Opponents</th>
<th>3+ Opponents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top pair, top kicker, or better</td>
<td>All-in</td>
<td>All-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top pair, less than top kicker</td>
<td>All-in</td>
<td>Check and fold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything else</td>
<td>Check and fold</td>
<td>Check and fold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Pre-Flop, 3 or 4 Players Remaining

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Limpers or Raisers</th>
<th>One or More Limpers</th>
<th>One Raiser</th>
<th>Two or More Raisers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 10BB</td>
<td>All-in with any pair, any ace, or any 15 blackjack</td>
<td>All-in with 77+, AK, AQ, AJ-suited, or AT-suited</td>
<td>All-in with AA, KK, QQ, or AK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10BB to 5BB</td>
<td>All-in with any pair, any ace, or any 15 blackjack</td>
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</table>

### Heads-Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You Are on Button or He Limps</th>
<th>He Raises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 4BB</td>
<td>All-in with any two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 4BB</td>
<td>All-in with any two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So you’ve decided to make the leap into playing for real money. Things get a little more serious now, since it really matters if you win or lose. Here are a few facts you should be aware of before you start tackling these games.

**Track Your Results**

If you don’t track your results, you’ll never know if you’re a winner or a loser. Sure, you can check your bankroll at the cashier, but so many people use selective memory to fool themselves that way. You may lose track of your deposits or withdrawals or you may fool yourself by saying, “I lost that money playing cash games, but I’m a winner in the tournaments.” Start tracking every single game you play and start your tracking now:

- What you played (1-table regular SNG, 2-table speed SNG, etc.)
- The buy-in
- What place you took
- How much prize money you won

If you’re super serious about tracking results, you can also track the following, but it’s not essential:

- The time and date of the tournament
- Key hands for review later

I suggest keeping a running spreadsheet on your computer, where you can just fill in this information after every session. You’ll be doing yourself a favor if you track this religiously and honestly.

There’s a lot of short-term luck in poker. You can’t get around it. But in the long run, skill always wins out. Unfortunately, it can often take a long time to reach that point. I’m continuously coming to the conclusion that the “long run” is longer than I previously thought. As a result, you can’t tell how good a player you are with only a few results. You’ll have streaks of good luck and bad. Even expert players have streaks of 10 or 15 tournaments in a row where they fail to reach the money. On the other hand, you may win the first 3 tournaments you play. You really have to look at a large number of tournaments to have any sense of where you stand. Even 100 tournaments aren’t enough to give you a good idea of
Chapter 4 Playing Real Money SNG’s

your strength as a player. A great player can still be losing money after 100 tournaments; a very poor player can make hundreds of dollars. Two hundred tournaments is probably enough to give you a sense of whether you’re a winner or a loser. It’ll take several hundred more for you to tell roughly how much of a winner or loser you are.

How Good is Good?
The key statistic for you to track is your Return on Investment (ROI) given by this equation:

\[
\text{Total Prize Money Won} - \text{Total Buy-ins} = \text{ROI} \\
\text{Total Buy-in}
\]

You’ve played 200 tournaments and won a total of $4,500 in prize money. The buy-ins for those tournaments total $4,000.

\[
4500 - 4000 = 500 \\
500 / 4000 = .125 \times 100\% = \text{ROI of 12.5\%}
\]

A breakeven player will have an ROI of 0% and most players have a negative ROI due to the commission (rake) taken by the site. Any positive ROI is good. If your ROI is above 25%, it’s probably not sustainable in the long run. You’ve hit a hot streak and have had some good results. This doesn’t mean that you’re not a great player, but you’ve been lucky too and can’t expect to make that amount of money long term.

Your ROI doesn’t have much meaning until you track it over a few hundred tournaments. As you play more and more tournaments, your ROI will become increasingly accurate.

Don’t Get Discouraged
If you start playing for real money and start losing, don’t give up. Everyone, even the pros, goes through losing streaks. Move down in buy-ins so you don’t feel pressured about the money. PokerStars.com has real-money tournaments for as little as one dollar. I encourage you to start at the one-dollar level and only move up once you feel comfortable enough to handle the increased buy-in.

Make Sure You’ve Got the ‘Roll
How much of a bankroll should you have to play SNGs? There’s no one right answer, as the bankroll you need varies with the profitability of your play. About 30 buy-ins would be in the ballpark for a good player. So to play a tournament with an $11 buy-in, you should have about $330. No bankroll is big enough to sustain a losing player, but 30 should be good if you’re comfortable with your game. Make sure you’ve got more than that (50 or more buy-ins) if you’re unsure about your performance. A useful alternative is to have an active bankroll of 30 buy-ins that you keep in your PokerStars.com account and a reserve bankroll of another 30 that you hope you never have to draw on, but is available to you from somewhere else should you require it. When you move up to the next level, make sure you have enough money in your online account and in your reserve bankroll as well. You could get away with fewer buy-ins if you’re willing to step down to a lower level if you hit a losing streak. Some people’s egos won’t let them do that—I’ll leave it up to you to decide.

Turbo or Regular?
Many online sites, including PokerStars.com, offer “regular” tournaments and “turbo,” “speed,” or “fast” tournaments. The main differences between the two are as follows: the length of each round (5 minutes versus 10 minutes); different time banks for extra time that can be used during the tournament (30 seconds versus 60 seconds); and less time to make a decision in a turbo (12 seconds versus 15). Both are quite playable and have their advantages and disadvantages. Regular tournaments allow you to use more skill when playing, especially in the early blind levels. If this is where you think your main advantage lies, then regular games are probably the way to go. The turbo games get to the push-or-fold...
stage, with players going all-in or folding, much sooner, so there’s a bit more luck involved. Knowing the correct strategy, however, can pay huge dividends. Many winning players observe that their absolute ROI is lower in turbo games, but they still earn more dollars per hour, since they can play more games. You should try both and see which one better fits your style.

1- or 2-Table Tournaments?
Single-table tournaments are far more popular than their 2-table counterparts. This book focuses on the 1-table variety, but the same strategies can be applied to the 2-table games. There are SNGs with more than 2 tables, but I consider all of those to be multi-table tournaments (MTTs), which I cover in other chapters. The 2-table games usually pay the top 4 spots 40%/30%/20%/10%, while the 1-table games pay the top 3 spots, 50%/30%/20%. This means that the most intense bubble situations in 2-table games occur when 5 players remain, rather than 4. In addition, the payout structure is flatter for the 2-table games, making it even more important just to make it to the money. That means proper play for 2-table tournaments is even tighter than I recommend here.

Summary of Chapter 4

1. Keep accurate records.
2. Due to short-term luck, it will take several hundred SNGs for you to determine how good you are.
3. Maintain an adequate bankroll for your level of play.
4. Decide where, what, and how fast (turbo or regular) to play.
Chapter 5

KEY POKER CONCEPTS

Poker is a unique blend of math and psychology. In order to be proficient, it’s important to have a working understanding of both. First, let’s take a look at the critical math concepts, which include expected value, outs, pot odds, and implied odds.

Expected Value
Expected value is the average of all possible outcomes weighted by the chance that each outcome will occur. It lets you know if an uncertain wager is worthwhile and profitable to pursue.

For example, let’s say that a friend asks you to draw one card from a fair deck. If it’s a club, he’ll pay you $2; if a red card, he’ll pay you $1; if a spade, you owe him $3. Should you take him up on his bet? We need to calculate the expected value (EV) of playing:

$\text{EV} = \frac{1}{4} \times 2 + \frac{1}{2} \times 1 - \frac{1}{4} \times 3 = +$0.25

You’d expect to gain an average of 25 cents every time you played. Since this is better than your alternative ($0 for not playing), you should take him up on his offer and you should play as many times as he’ll let you! Note that your expectation is 25 cents on every card drawn regardless of the actual outcome. The greater the number of trials, the more likely your average result will be 25 cents per draw.

If you only draw 10 times and happen to draw 4 spades, 3 hearts, 2 diamonds, and 1 club, you’ll actually be $5 behind, when your expectation is to be $2.50 ahead. This difference is accounted for by fluctuation, or in poker parlance, variance. The greater the number of draws, the less the variance and the closer the actual results will be to the expected value.

This is a key concept that applies to every kind of advantage gambling. If you have an edge, the more you play, the more likely your edge will manifest.

Outs
Outs are the number of cards that can turn your hand from a loser into a winner. If you have Ac Td, your opponent has As Kh, and the board reads Ad Jc 8s 4h, you have only 3 outs to win on the river. Only the three tens left will save you. If you have 7h 6h against As Ac on a Ks Qs 3h 2h board, you have nine outs — the nine hearts left in the deck. The more outs you have, the stronger your hand. Outs are strongly connected to pot odds, explained next.

Pot Odds
Pot odds form the backbone of almost every decision you make in poker. Put simply, the pot odds are the ratio of the amount of money in the pot to the amount with which you’re required have to call. If the pot contains $200 and your opponent bets $100, your pot odds are 3-to-1. The $200, plus the $100 your opponent just bet, makes the pot $300. Divide $300 by the $100 you have to call and you get 3.

The pot is 3 times as much as the amount you have to bet in order to call. If the pot starts at $150 and your opponent bets $100, you would be getting 2.5-to-1, since you only stand to win $250 for your $100 call.
When you play online at PokerStars, the amount in the pot is conveniently displayed on the screen. Knowing the amount of the pot, you can determine your pot odds by simply dividing the size of the pot as displayed on the screen by the amount that it costs you to call.

The bigger the pot odds, the more attractive it is to call, as there’s a bigger pot to win for the same amount of money.

The pot odds often determine whether you can profitably call with a draw. If the bet is all-in, your chance of completing the draw has to be higher than the pot odds. For example, let’s say you have 6s 5s and the board is Ks Th 4d 3c. Your opponent goes all-in for $200 into an $800 pot, making it a total of $1,000. You’re getting 5-to-1 pot odds, which is more than enough to call with an 8-out draw (any 2 or 7 gives you a sure winner—the nuts). Why? There are 46 unseen cards left in the deck, of which 8 give you a win, netting you $1,000. Thirty-eight cards leave you $200 lighter than if you fold instead of call. Your expected value for the draw is:

\[
\frac{8}{46} \times $1,000 + \frac{38}{46} \times (-$200) = $8.70
\]

Actually, calling is best as long as your pot odds are at least 4.75-to-1 in this example, because with those odds your expectation for calling would be zero, the same as folding. Put another way, with pot odds of 4.75 and this draw, you’d expect to break even in the long run, so either playing or folding are equivalent choices. With pot odds below 4.75, your expectation is negative and calling is a mistake, costing you chips/money in the long run.

If your opponent goes all-in and you have a draw (a hand that needs to improve in order to win), you can use the table below to determine if you’re getting enough pot odds to call. Note that the minimum pot odds, the breakeven point, are identical to the odds against making your hand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Outs</th>
<th>Minimum Pot Odds to Call on Flop</th>
<th>Minimum Pot Odds to Call on Turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the Pot Odds are higher than the odds against completing your draw then it is profitable to call.
You have 4 spades (a flush draw) with 1 card left to come. Nine spades are left in the deck. (Since we can’t see the other players’ cards, we don’t know whether or not they’re spades, so we can’t count them either as spades or non-spades and we just ignore them.) Checking the above chart, the odds against you making your flush on the last card are just over 4-to-1. If your opponent now bets all his chips, the amount in the pot including this last bet must be more than 4.1 times the chips required for you to call to make your call profitable. Less than this and you should fold.

In the above example, if the bet on the turn isn’t an all-in bet leaving both of you with chips, “implied odds” become a consideration (see next).

The pot odds given for calling on the flop assumes that your opponent never improves to a hand that could beat your made draw. In reality, this isn’t always the case, but it’s a minor effect.

Implied Pot Odds
Strict pot odds apply only when either you or your opponent is all-in and there’s no more betting. If you’re not all-in, you can consider the chance that you may get additional chips as well. This is called implied pot odds.

Let’s go back to the example where the board is Ks Th 4d 3c and you have 6s 5s. This time your opponent bets $500 into a $1,000 pot and he has $1,500 left in his stack. You have him covered (meaning you have more chips than he does). Let’s say you estimate that if you hit your straight, there’s an 80% chance that you can get him to call the additional $1,500. Your normal pot odds are only 1500-to-500 or 3-to-1, which isn’t enough to call with your draw (remember, you need 4.75-to-1). But if you think you’ll get his stack 80% of the time, then you can add 80% of $1,500, or $1,200, to the pot you’ll win. You won’t put in any extra money if you miss, so your implied odds are 2,700-to-500 or 5.4-to-1—more than enough to call.

No-limit thrives on implied odds, especially when the blinds are very small. That’s why during the early levels, it can sometimes pay dividends to chase good draws. Weaker players who can’t let go of a hand, even after they think your draw might have come in, should be your targets. If you hit your straight draw, they’ll still pay you off with their top pair.

Can a Draw be a Favorite?
On the flop with 2 cards still to come, a draw can be a favorite over a hand that’s ahead at the moment, such as top pair. The key is the number of outs. Whenever you have 14 outs or more on the flop, you’re the favorite. It’s crucial to understand this concept. As we’ll discuss later, if you’re able to bet and get an opponent to fold sometimes, you may be a money favorite when you bet, even if you have fewer than 14 outs, because you’ll win the pot when your opponent folds, without the number of outs coming into play. This is known as semi-bluffing, a tool we’ll discuss in detail later.

As your number of outs increases, you become a progressively bigger favorite. With 2 cards yet to come and 15 outs, you’re a 6/5 favorite (you’ll win 6 times in 11 trials). With 18 outs you’re 8/5, and with 20 outs you’re a 2/1 favorite. (You’ll find a good outs chart in Kill Phil.)
You have Jh Th and the flop is 3s 9h 8h.

Your opponent has Ac 9c, giving him top pair with the best possible kicker (side card). You’ll win for sure with any heart, any 7, any queen, and will also win with any jack or 10 when your opponent doesn’t improve. Counting your outs, you have 9 hearts, 6 straight cards (three queens and three 7s—you’ve already counted the queen and 7 of hearts and can’t count them twice), three jacks, and three 10s, any of which will convert your hand from loser to winner. You have 21 outs and will win more than 2 out of 3 times you play this hand out. Specifically, you’ll win 69% of the time and your opponent will win 31% of the time. Though you don’t even have a pair at this point, you’re a big favorite!

**Summary of Chapter 5**

1. Understand the concept of expected value (EV).
2. Outs are cards that can change your hand from a loser to a winner. Outs are strongly connected to pot odds.
3. Pot odds are the basis for many poker decisions. The bigger the pot odds, the more attractive it is to call.
4. Whenever you have 14 outs or more on a draw, you’re a favorite.
CHAPTER 6

HOW TO BEAT $1 SNGS

As you progress to higher and higher buy-ins, you’ll need more real poker skills. Beating play-money SNGs is pretty formulaic; you either get all your money in with a good hand or you fold. The $1 games use a similar formula, but we need to alter it a little, because our opponents’ strategies will be different. In the play-money games, our opponents didn’t care if they won or lost their play money. They were trying to take 1st place or bust out trying. Coming in 2nd or 3rd and winning some play credits is meaningless. But for real money, coming in 2nd or 3rd wins you money. In the 9-handed SNGs, the payouts are 50% for 1st, 30% for 2nd, and 20% for 3rd. That means when it gets down to 4 players, no one wants to be the next one to bust, because if just one more player is eliminated, they’re in the money. The tournament is said to be on the bubble. People tend to be very cautious and play timidly.

In contrast, players are usually too loose in the early levels of the tournament and make bad calls with weak hands and draws. To take advantage of both of these weaknesses, we employ the following style:

Play super-tight early and wildly aggressive late.

Levels 1-3
You should play very few hands during the first 3 levels of play. The blinds are so small that they won’t be worth going after and you don’t want to risk the tournament without a great hand. Let everyone else knock each other out—it doesn’t matter if you fall behind in chips.

Throughout this book, I refer to the following categories of pre-flop hands when giving pre-flop advice. Note that all recommendations are for the specified category or better. For example, Category 8 includes not only the hands listed in Category 8, but all the hands listed in Categories 1-7 as well.

Those of you who may have read Kill Phil will notice a difference in the hand categories. This is due to the fact that Kill Phil is a push-all-in-or-fold strategy, whereas this isn’t. When pushing all-in with a marginal hand, it’s preferable to have a hand such as 76 suited than KT offsuit, because you’re less likely to be dominated by hands that are likely to call, such as AK. In Kill Phil, 76s is a Category 6 hand and KT offsuit is a Category 10 hand, whereas both are Category 7 hands in this book. It might be a good idea to memorize as much of this as possible, or to print a copy for easy reference when playing online.

Category 1: AA, KK
Category 2: QQ, AKs, AK, JJ
Category 3: AQs, AQ, TT, 99
Category 4: AJs, KQs, 88, 77
Category 5: AJ, ATs, AT, KQ, KJs, 66, 55
Category 6: A9s-A2s, KJ, KTs, QJs, QTs, JTs, 44, 33, 22
Category 7: A9-A2, KT, QJ, QT, JT, T9s, 98s, 87s, 76s, 65s, 54s
Category 8: K9s, K9, K8s, Q9s, Q8s, J9s, T8s, T9, 97s, 98, 86s, 87, 75s, 76, 64s

Learning the hand rankings by heart will help you use this book more easily.
These hand rankings are a useful approximation for tournament play. For a more detailed analysis, see the rankings developed by one of my co-authors, Tysen Streib, in our book *Kill Everyone*.

In Levels 1 through 3, you should play only the premium hands of Categories 1 and 2. If no one has raised before you, come in for a **raise of five times the big blind**. If people have limped before you, **increase your raise size by one big blind for each limper**. If a raise would be one-third of your chips or more, **push all-in instead**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blinds are 15/30 and you’re first to act with Qh Qd. You have 1,400 chips. <strong>Raise to 150.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blinds are 25/50 and you’re on the button with Ah Kc and 1,000 chips. Three people limp before you. Normally, you’d raise to 400 (five big blinds, plus one for each limper), but because that’s more than one-third of your stack, push all-in instead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If someone has raised before you, make a re-raise to four times the amount of their bet with your Category 1 or 2 hands. Again, if this is more than one-third of your chips, push all-in instead. If anyone else calls the initial raise before the action gets to you, or if the pot is re-raised by anyone, push all-in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blinds are 10/20 and you’re in the small blind with Ks Kc and 1,500 chips. Someone raises to 80. <strong>Raise to 320.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that if you follow my pre-flop advice, you’ll never just call pre-flop. You’ll always be the one who puts in the last raise, unless you got to see the flop for free in the big blind. It’s very important to be the one to put in the last raise pre-flop, as others will tend to defer to your show of strength. They’ll be more likely to check to you on the flop and to fold when you bet. It’s good to be the bully!

Once you get to the flop, you’re looking to make top pair or better. With AK, you’re hoping that an ace or a king comes. If it doesn’t, just check and fold to any bet and be done with the hand. With a high pocket pair, you’re hoping that the flop comes with cards lower than your pair, giving you an overpair. If an overcard comes on the flop (you hold QQ and the flop has an ace or a king in it), be prepared to just check and fold. Your hand might be the best, but it will be too expensive to find out. Players in the $1 SNGs are very loose and will call you with very weak kickers. Don’t try to bet with KK on a flop of A73. A player with a hand such as A2 will probably call you to the river. It’s much better to bet only when you’re fairly confident you have the best hand—you’ll be paid off by these loose players often enough to make the wait worthwhile.

If you’ve made top pair or better on the flop, bet the size of the pot if it’s checked to you. If someone bets before you, raise the size of the pot. Remember that when raising the size of the pot, you count the amount of your call as being in the pot before calculating how much to raise. If any bet or raise is 1/3 of your remaining stack or more, push all-in instead. If your raise is re-raised, push all-in.

Any time you bet or call one-third of your chips or more, you should consider yourself pot-committed. This means that you’ve invested too much of your stack to fold at any point in the hand. Usually, you’ll put in the rest of your chips on the turn or river, but you can check and/or call if you think that’s the best way to play the hand. But never fold, no matter how scary the next card is!

| You have Ac Kc and raise pre-flop to 150. The button and big blind call. The flop is Qd 7s 2h and there’s 465 in the pot. The big blind checks to you. You should check. If the button bets, just fold. If he checks as well, check and fold the turn (the next community card) if someone bets, unless it’s an ace or a king. If an ace or king come on the turn, bet the size of the pot. If this amount equals 1/3 of your chips or more, move all-in instead. |

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**Example**

Beware the overcard – you are probably beaten.
You have As Kc and the flop is Ks 8s 7d. The pot contains 200 chips and you and your opponent have about 1,400 left in your stacks. He bets 100, making the pot a total of 300. Normally you’d make a pot-sized raise here, which is a raise to 500. You need to raise 400 more, not 300 more, as the 100 you use to call the bet gets counted in the pot size. But 500 is more than one-third of your chips, so you’re pot-committed. Because of this, rather than raising to 500, move all-in instead.

You have Js Jc and the flop is Ks 8s 7d. Again, the pot contains 200 chips and you and your opponent have about 1,400 left in your stacks. This time you’re first to act. You should check and fold if he bets.

You have Ad Kd and the flop is Kc 9h 8c. The pot contains 330. Your one opponent checks the flop and you bet 330. He calls. The pot now contains 990 and you both have about 1,000 left in your stacks. The turn is the 7c. He bets 400. You should fold. He probably called with a draw and it most likely came in. Save your chips for a better situation!

**Other General Pointers on Levels 1-3:**

- **Beware of check-raises!** In $1 tournaments, a check-raise almost always means a strong hand, usually 2-pair or better. Always fold to a check-raise unless you have at least top 2-pair (AK on a AK7 flop) yourself. If you have AK and the flop is KJ4, fold if you’re check-raised. Stronger opponents may do this on a bluff with a hand such as QT, but rarely in low-level tournaments. Just fold.

- **Don’t slow play!** Players call too often in the early levels. I’m recommending that you virtually never slow play or check-raise. If you have AA and the flop comes AQ8, don’t try to check-raise or just flat call. Bet or raise, then laugh when he calls you with QJ. The only possible exceptions are those exceptionally rare instances when you flop quads or a straight flush. Should this occur, you can slow play by checking the flop, but make sure that you try to get all your chips in on either the turn or river.

- **Don’t bluff!** They call too often… they call too often… Just keep repeating that to yourself. When they’re too loose, you get paid off when you bet your big hands. But it makes bluffing a losing proposition. Just give it up.

- **Use caution and common sense when you flop a draw while in the big blind for a free flop.** Open-ended straight draws and flush draws can usually be called if you’re getting 3-to-1 pot odds or better. Inside-straight draws (gutshots) should always be folded.

- **Not all open-ended draws are created equal.** Holding 98 when the board is 763 is a much better draw than when the board is JJT. In the first case, you’re drawing to the nut straight and you have two overcards. You might even win if a 9 or an 8 comes. In the second case, you’re drawing to the bottom end of the straight and the board is paired. Even if you make your straight, you could: lose to a higher straight; lose to a full house; or not be paid off, since the pair on the board scares potential callers.

- **Don’t worry about folding hand after hand.** Sometimes you won’t play a single hand during the first three levels. That’s okay. The blinds are so small that you probably haven’t lost that many chips. The pots are generally small enough that it’s not worth risking getting involved unless you’ve got a premium hand. Get over it and let the small pots go.

- **Pay attention to how the other players are playing.** Do they like to limp into a lot of pots? Do they always come in for a raise? After the flop do they call with weak draws? Do they make big bluffs? When they flop a set or trips, how do they play it? Do they bet, try for a check-raise, or just check and call? Take notes on how other people play. It’ll be time well spent.

- **Don’t assume that the other players are paying attention to how tight you are.** Don’t think that just because you’ve been playing so tightly for the last few hands, it’ll let you pull off this bluff just once. They call too often… they call too often…

---

**Example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Hand</strong></th>
<th><strong>Situation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Kc and the flop is Ks 8s 7d</td>
<td>You have As Kc and the flop is Ks 8s 7d. The pot contains 200 chips and you and your opponent have about 1,400 left in your stacks. He bets 100, making the pot a total of 300. Normally you’d make a pot-sized raise here, which is a raise to 500. You need to raise 400 more, not 300 more, as the 100 you use to call the bet gets counted in the pot size. But 500 is more than one-third of your chips, so you’re pot-committed. Because of this, rather than raising to 500, move all-in instead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Js Jc and the flop is Ks 8s 7d.</td>
<td>You have Js Jc and the flop is Ks 8s 7d. Again, the pot contains 200 chips and you and your opponent have about 1,400 left in your stacks. This time you’re first to act. You should check and fold if he bets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad Kd and the flop is Kc 9h 8c.</td>
<td>You have Ad Kd and the flop is Kc 9h 8c. The pot contains 330. Your one opponent checks the flop and you bet 330. He calls. The pot now contains 990 and you both have about 1,000 left in your stacks. The turn is the 7c. He bets 400. You should fold. He probably called with a draw and it most likely came in. Save your chips for a better situation!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

“**They call too often**” – remember this and you will know what to do.
Level 4 and Higher (5 or More Players Remaining)

At Level 4 and above, you should often move all-in pre-flop or fold. You’ll almost always have 15 big blinds or less in your stack, which means that a standard raise of 5BB (five times the big blind) will be one third of your stack. In those cases you should adopt an “all-in-or-fold” mentality. Again, you’ll never just call pre-flop (unless the other player is all-in); you should always raise or fold. The blinds will now be worth stealing, so you’ll be raising with weaker hands than Categories 1 and 2. The best time to raise is when everyone has folded to you. If this is the case:

★ From the button or small blind, raise with Category 6 or better.
★ From one or two seats off the button, raise with Category 5 or better.
★ From an earlier position or if you’re in the big blind and no one has raised, raise with Category 4 or better.
★ If you have between 5BB and 10BB, raise with one Category weaker than normal.
★ If you have 5BB or less, raise with two Categories weaker than normal.
★ Fold everything else; never limp.
★ All of the above points are summarized in the chart below.

If one or more players have limped before you, act as though you’re in early position (push with Category 4, 5, or 6, depending on stack size).

If someone raises before you, push all-in with Category 3 or better. Push with Categories 4 or 5 if you have less than 10BB or 5BB, respectively.

In summary:

Criteria for Raising Depending on Stack Size ($1 Games)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More than 10BB</th>
<th>10BB to 5BB</th>
<th>Less Than 5BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everyone Folds to You</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Blind or Button</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 Seats Off Button</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earlier Position</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or More Limpers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Position</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone Raises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Position</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you raise (but not all-in) and someone re-raises, your decision should be based on pot odds:

★ If you’re getting 2.5-to-1 or better, call with anything.
★ If you’re getting 2-to-1 or better, call with Category 5 or better.
★ If you’re getting 1.5-to-1 or better, call with Category 4 or better.
★ If you’re getting worse than 1.5-to-1, call with Category 3 or better.

The less chips you have the more aggressive you should be.

You may need to do a bit of creative math in these situations. If the raise is most, but not all, of one of your stacks, you should figure the pot odds as if it’s all-in, since you’ll be pot-committed.
Post-flop you should also be more aggressive if the chips aren’t all-in yet. Bet with top pair (any kicker) or better, usually all-in. If he bets before you do, you’ll need to consider the pot odds. You can always call with a hand such as top pair and a good kicker. Getting 2-to-1, you can call with top pair and a medium kicker. Getting 3-to-1, you can call with top pair and a weak kicker, middle pair and an overcard, or open-ended straight or flush draws (on the flop).

### Four Players Remaining—The Bubble

Play as you did with 5 or more players remaining, except push with 1 category weaker and call with 1 category stronger than before.

### Criteria for Raising On the Bubble Depending on Stack Size ($1 Games)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More than 10BB</th>
<th>10BB to 5BB</th>
<th>Less Than 5BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Everyone Folds to You</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Blind or Button</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Seat Off Button</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One or More Limpers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Position</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Someone Raises</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Position</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Three Players Remaining

You’ve made it to the money! Give yourself a quick pat on the back and start trying to win the tournament.

### Heads-up Play

My recommendation for heads-up play is simplicity itself:

- If you’re on the button, push all-in on any two cards.
- If you’re in the big blind and he just limps, push all-in on any two cards.
- If he raises on the button, push with Category 6 or better; otherwise fold. If either of you has 4BB or less, call with Category 7 as well. If either of you has 2.5 BB or less, call with any two cards.
Pre-Flop, $1 Games-All-in Strategy for Heads-Up Play

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevant Stack Size</th>
<th>You're the Button or You're Big Blind, He Limps</th>
<th>You're Big Blind, He Raises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 2.5 BB</td>
<td>Any Two Cards</td>
<td>Any Two Cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 to 4 BB</td>
<td>Any Two Cards</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4+ BB</td>
<td>Any Two Cards</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And that’s how you beat the $1 SNGs. Make sure you get a lot of games under your belt and are comfortable with playing before you advance to the $5 games. Remember, 10 games aren’t a lot.

Summary of Chapter 6

1. Play super-tight for the first few levels and let everyone else knock each other out.
2. Don’t call pre-flop and rarely call post-flop. The right move is to raise or fold, not call.
3. Never bluff in levels 1-3.
4. Push aggressively when it gets short-handed, but call only with your strongest hands.
5. Push every hand heads-up unless he raises first. The blinds you steal will more than makeup for the times a better hand calls you.
I recommend that you play very similarly to the strategy you used to beat the $1 SNGs, with only a couple of adjustments. If no changes are mentioned here, assume that the same actions are prescribed as for the $1 games.

**Levels 1-3**
Continue to play very few hands during the first 3 levels of play. Unless you’re on the button or in the “cut-off” seat (1 before the button), continue to play only Category 2 or better. If you’re on the button or cut-off and no one has raised before you, raise with Category 3 and 4 as well. If there’s a raise before you, fold the Category 3 and 4 hands and re-raise with 1 and 2. You can make your standard raise slightly smaller as well: Raise to 4 big blinds if you’re the first to enter the pot. If others have already limped in, add 1 big blind to your raise for each limper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>No Raise Before You</th>
<th>Raise Before You</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On Button or Cut-Off</td>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Raise</td>
<td>Raise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Raise</td>
<td>Raise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Raise</td>
<td>Fold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Raise</td>
<td>Fold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 5 or worse</td>
<td>Fold</td>
<td>Fold</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Post-flop, play the same as before. Make pot-sized bets and raises only, not more or less, and rarely just call if someone else bets. On the flop, if you have top pair without the top kicker, put in a bet if everyone checks to you. If someone bets first or if you get raised, fold the hand. Get in the habit of deciding if you like your hand on the flop, then raise or fold, rather than calling and having another difficult decision later with more chips at stake. Continue to resist the urge to bluff!

Blinds are 15/30, you have 1,500 with Ad Jd, and are on the button. Two players before you limp. You should raise to 180 (4 big blinds + 1 for each limper) with your Category 4 hand. The big blind calls and everyone else folds. The pot is now 435. The flop comes Ac 9s 8s and the big blind checks. You should bet 435. If he bets first or if he raises you, fold.
Level 4 and Higher (5 or More Players Remaining)
Since your standard raise is now 4BB, push all-in whenever your stack is 12BB or smaller, since a standard raise would be a third of your stack. The logic for this is simple: Whenever you raise a third of your stack, you’re pot-committed. What I mean by this is that if you’re re-raised, you’ll be getting at least 2-to-1 pot odds. Those odds are good enough that you should call the re-raise with any hand strong enough to raise with originally. Therefore, you might as well put your whole stack in now, to put maximum pressure on your opponents and increase the chances that they’ll fold, which is generally what you want them to do in tournament play.

Play as you were instructed in the $1 games, with the exception that if everyone has folded to you, make a raise with 1 category weaker than before:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Everyone Folds To You</th>
<th>More than 10BB</th>
<th>10BB to 5BB</th>
<th>Less Than 5BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Blind or Button</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 Seats Off Button</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earlier Position</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One or More Limpers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Any Position</th>
<th>More than 10BB</th>
<th>10BB to 5BB</th>
<th>Less Than 5BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Someone Raises

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Any Position</th>
<th>More than 10BB</th>
<th>10BB to 5BB</th>
<th>Less Than 5BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your opponents in the $5 games are a little tighter, so it pays to raise more often. If there’s a limper or a raise before you, play as instructed in the $1 games.

Four Players Remaining—The Bubble
On the bubble, play tightens up. Often one player pushes all-in and everyone else folds. As a result, you should tighten up your calls, but push much more frequently when first in. It also becomes critically important how big your stack is relative to the others.

★ As the big stack, raise with Category 8 or better from the small blind or button and with Category 7 or better from the cut-off. If you’re considering calling someone else’s push, you can call a 10BB push with Category 2 or better. You can call 8BB with Category 3, 6BB with 4, 4BB with 5, and 2BB with 6. If you’re in the big blind, you can call one category weaker (or with any two cards if the raise is only to 2BB). If there are two big stacks that both have a similar number of chips, avoid each other like the plague! Don’t put in a lot of chips against the other big stack unless you have the nuts, or close to it!

★ As a medium stack, you need to watch the bigger stacks. If all the bigger stacks have folded, act like a big stack yourself. If someone who covers you is still in, tighten up two categories when pushing. You can also act like a big stack if you’re calling a smaller stack and there’s not much chance of a bigger stack calling as well. If you’re thinking about calling a bigger stack’s all-in, be careful! Tighten up 2 more categories than you would as the big stack, although you can always call with aces and kings.

★ As the small stack, act like a medium stack when pushing, but you can call like a big stack. You can also use your own stack size as the size of the raise, even if someone else pushed in for more. If you get really small, say under 3BB, then push all-in on any two cards whenever you’re in a blind.
The following charts summarize this.

### Pushing All-In on the Bubble ($5 Games)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Position</th>
<th>Cut-off</th>
<th>Button or Small Blind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Calling a Push as a Medium Stack on the Bubble ($5 Games)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pusher’s Stack Size</th>
<th>10BB</th>
<th>8BB</th>
<th>6BB</th>
<th>4BB</th>
<th>2BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the Big Blind</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Calling a Push as a Big or Small Stack on the Bubble ($5 Games)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pusher’s Stack Size</th>
<th>10BB</th>
<th>8BB</th>
<th>6BB</th>
<th>4BB</th>
<th>2BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the Big Blind</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Any 2 cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example

- **Example**: Blinds are 200/400 with a 25 ante. You’re the big stack with 5,000 and are on the button with 7h 6c, a Category 8 hand. Push all-in and try to pick up the blinds and antes.

- **Example**: Blinds are 200/400 with a 25 ante. You’re a medium stack with 2,300 and are in the small blind. The big stack pushes to 5,000 from the cut-off and you have As Qc, a Category 3 hand. Use your own stack size of 6BB to determine if you can call. If you had a big stack, you could call a 6BB raise with a Category 4 hand. But as a medium stack you need to tighten up two categories. Fold. The bubble is a funny time. The medium stacks need to play possum and try to slide into the money.

- **Example**: If two of your opponents are all-in and you’re considering overcalling (that is, being the 3rd one in the pot), think twice on the bubble. The only times you should consider overcalling are when:
  1. You’re the biggest stack still in the hand.
  2. You’re the second-smallest stack and the smallest stack is all-in.

- **Example**: In these cases, you can overcall with JJ or better (and AK if the middle stack between the three of you has 6BB or less). If you aren’t in one of these two cases, fold no matter what you have, even AA.

- **Example**: Blinds are 200/400 with a 25 ante. You’re in the big blind as the small stack with 2,000. The second smallest stack with 2,500 pushes all-in. The big stack in the small blind calls. Fold kings, fold aces, fold the laundry, fold everything! You’re being given a chance to walk into 3rd place and you should take it.
Three Players Remaining

Push with the same hands you would with four players, but you can start calling with hands one category weaker than you did on the bubble. The medium stack also only needs to tighten up one category when pushing into the big stack.

In other words:

### Pushing All-In With 3 Players Remaining

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>You’re the biggest unfolded stack</th>
<th>An active player has a bigger stack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Button or Small Blind</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Calling a Push as a Medium Stack (3 Players)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10BB</th>
<th>8BB</th>
<th>6BB</th>
<th>4BB</th>
<th>2BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the Big Blind</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Calling a Push as a Big or Small Stack (3 Players)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10BB</th>
<th>8BB</th>
<th>6BB</th>
<th>4BB</th>
<th>2BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the Big Blind</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
<td>Category 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Heads-up Play

Move all-in with any two cards heads-up, as long as either you or your opponent has 8BB or less. When both stacks are above 8BB, pushing all-in on garbage hands is probably a little riskier than necessary. So I’ll revise my heads-up recommendations to the following (in all cases the stack size refers to the shorter of the two stacks):

When on the button:

★ If 8BB or less, push all-in on any two cards.

★ If 8-12BB, push all-in with any Category 8 or better hand.

★ If more than 12BB, raise to 3BB with any Category 8 or better hand. If re-raised, call with any Category 5 or better hand.

When in the big blind and the button limps:

★ If 8BB or less, push all-in on any two cards.

★ If 8BB-12BB, push all-in with any Category 7 or better hand.

★ If more than 12BB, raise to 4BB with any Category 6 or better hand. If re-raised, call with any Category 4 or better hand. Notice that you make a bigger raise when you raise from the big blind. This is to compensate for your inferior position post-flop. The bigger raise is designed to win the pot pre-flop.

When in the big blind and the button raises:

★ If 2.5BB or less, call with any two cards.

★ If 2.5BB-4BB, call with Category 7 or better.

★ If 4BB-12BB, push or call all-in with Category 6 or better.

★ If more than 12BB and he makes a raise of 3BB or smaller, quadruple his raise with Category 5 or better and just call him with Category 6 or 7. If this raise commits 1/3 of either of your stacks, push all-in instead. If he raises more than 3BB, push all-in with Category 5 or better.

*After the bubble breaks you should be playing to win.*
Play after the flop:
Bet as you did short-handed (any pair and good draws), but also bet any ace-high hand as well.
★ If he bets first, lower your calling standards as well. Call with middle pair or bottom pair with an over-card kicker. For example, if the flop is Q72, you can call a bet with A2 or K2.

A summary of heads-up play:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Flop, No Raise to You - Push or Raise as indicated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant Stack Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-8 BB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-12 BB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12+ BB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Flop, the Button Raises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevant Stack Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-2.5 BB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5-4 BB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-12 BB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12+ BB, He Raises to 3BB or smaller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12+ BB, He Raises to more than 3BB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-Flop Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He hasn't bet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bet the pot on any pair, ace, flush draw, open-ended straight draw, or if you have two over-cards with an inside straight draw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He bets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call or raise with middle pair or better, or bottom pair and an over-card.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Chapter 7

1. Make your standard pre-flop raise 4BB plus 1BB for each limper.
2. Post-flop bets should be the size of the pot.
3. Play more hands from late position.
4. Pay attention to your stack size as well as everyone else’s. Be a bully with a big stack and be cautious as a medium stack unless the big stack has folded.
5. Stop pushing your worst hands when heads-up.
When you move up to $10 SNGs, you’ll need to refine the strategy you used in the $5 games by adding a few more weapons. At the $10 level, your opponents are a little smarter; they’ve learned not to be so loose. As a result, since you always want to adjust your play based on your opponents’ play, start betting more frequently. Against the looser opponents of the lower buy-ins, you only bet your strongest hands and you tried to get the most value out of them by betting big. But now you can also afford to bet a smaller amount than before to minimize your risk. I include a little bluffing in one particular situation, which is when you start playing some real poker.

Levels 1-3
On occasion, you should now flat call pre-flop. If no one has entered the pot before you, play as you did before: raising with Category 1 and 2, plus 3 and 4 in late position. But now you can sometimes call with smaller pocket pairs.

The Rule of 2 through 10: Here’s a simple rule for beginning players that provides guidelines for how much of your stack you should risk either raising or calling a raise with a pocket pair. When you’re dealt 22 to TT, you should call or raise up to the same percentage of your stack as the size of your pair. The specific examples of this are 2% for 22, 3% for 33, 4% for 44, 5% for 55, 6% for 66, 7% for 77, 8% for 88, 9% for 99, and 10% for TT. This gives you exact guidelines for situations that arise in every game.

Bigger pairs, starting with JJ, are different than their smaller cousins. With small pairs you’ll usually need to improve to win. Big pairs can often win without improvement, so if you’ve been raised, you can frequently re-raise. Considerations include your position, your stack size, your opponents’ stack sizes, whether the initial raiser is conservative or aggressive, and other bits of information you may have gleaned.

When using the Rule of 2 through 10, always bring it in for a standard raise of 4 times the big blind if you have sufficient chips to meet the criterion. Otherwise just call the amount of the big blind (limp in). For example, with blinds of 15/30 and a stack of 1,400, raise to 120 with TT, but just call for 30 with 44 and fold 22.

If you limped in with your pocket pair, check and fold after the flop unless you flop a set or an overpair. An overpair is better than flopping top pair, but is still vulnerable. Play it as you would top pair with the top kicker. Don’t re-raise on the flop with top pair or an overpair. If you bet and are raised, just call and reevaluate your situation on the turn. Hopefully, you’ve been paying attention to how people play throughout all your tight sessions. Do you think he has you beat? What kind of pot odds are you getting? Are you in or out of position? These questions will all affect how you continue to play the hand.

A set is a very strong hand and can be very deceptive, especially when someone else raised pre-flop. The best situation for flopping a set is when you call someone’s pre-flop raise with something like 55 and the flop comes AT5, or similar. You flop a set and he’s very likely to have flopped top pair. You may be able to pick up his whole stack on this hand.

With a set, you want to get all the money in if possible. If you’re the last one to raise pre-flop or if no one raises, you should always bet your set on the flop. Don’t slow play. If someone else raised and you
called, there are a number of ways to get the money in. Out of position, the best way to do this is by betting yourself when the flop contains an ace or a king and hope you get raised. If the flop is all low cards, it’s probably best to check-raise. Checking and just calling is another option, but you risk letting him draw out on you. If you’re in position, you should bet if he checks and raise if he bets.

In all cases, don’t slow play after the flop; always put in a bet on the turn and usually on the river too. If the river is extremely scary with lots of straights and/or flushes possible (Ah Kh Qs Tc 5d for example), don’t bother betting your set. If he bets on that board, you’ll have to decide if you want to call. Consider the pot odds as well as his previous betting actions. How likely is he to have made his hand?

**Blinds are 10/20 and you have a 1,300 stack with 9c 9s. Two players limp before you. You limp along as well, as does the button. Five players see the flop of 8c 7d 4c. Three players check to you. Bet 55, the size of the pot, with your overpair.**

**Blinds are 15/30 and you have a 1,600 stack with 6d 6s. One player with an 1,800 stack raises to 120. You’re in the big blind and have to call 90 more. Call, since that’s less than 6% of your stack. The flop is 7d 6h 4c. Try for a check-raise. Bet the turn no matter what card comes. If the flop is Kd Jh 6c instead, you bet first on the flop, hoping your opponent raises. Never worry about an opponent having a higher set than you. If it happens, it happens, but set-over-set is too rare to get worked up over.**

**Continuation Bets**

Start bluffing in one particular circumstance—when you make a pre-flop raise, but the flop misses your hand. This is called a continuation bet or c-bet. The bet on the flop is a continuation of the strength you represented before the flop. The raiser is more likely to have a stronger hand than a caller, so if both hands miss the flop, which happens fairly often, many times the pre-flop raiser can pick up the pot with a bet. If the flop is K76, you can bet at it with something such as AJ. Since you raised pre-flop, your opponents will probably suspect you have AK and fold. If the flop is 752, they might still fold to your bet, thinking that you might have a big overpair or at least bigger overcards than they do. You can also make continuation bets if you raise with a pocket pair and there are one or more overcards. If you raise with 99, you can put in a continuation bet when the flop comes AQ5.

This is the only time I recommend bluffing at the $10 level. If you miss the flop and your continuation bet is raised, just fold. If it’s called, just check and fold on the turn, unless that improves your hand. If you were about to c-bet, but someone bets before you, fold. I recommend that you make a c-bet in the following circumstances:

- **If you get 1 pre-flop caller:**
  - C-bet all the time.

- **If you get 2 pre-flop callers:**
  - Last to act, c-bet all the time if the first 2 players check.
  - First or second to act, c-bet if the flop contains an ace, a king, a pair, or trips.
  - If you’re last to act and have a straight draw, don’t c-bet.

- **If you get 3 or more pre-flop callers:**
  - Don’t c-bet. There may be times when this is correct after you become an expert player.
Chapter 8 How To Beat $10 SNG's

You raise with Ac Qc and get 2 callers behind you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>C-Bet</th>
<th>Don’t C-Bet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K75</td>
<td>J64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>994</td>
<td>754</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTT</td>
<td>432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BET SIZING**

Prior to reaching this level, you always bet and raised the size of the pot. If the pot was 400 you bet 400. Now you’ll be betting more frequently, and your opponents will be slightly tighter. Both of these changes require smaller bets. I recommend betting about 70% of the pot size from now on, no matter if you have a real hand or are just c-betting with nothing. So now with a pot size of 400, you should bet either 250 or 300.

**Level 4 and Higher (5 or More Players Remaining)**

Play the same as the $5 games.

**Four Players Remaining – The Bubble**

Again, your play should be very similar to the $5 games, but you can be slightly more aggressive if you’re the biggest stack left in the hand. If you’re in the small blind or on the button (and no one has come into the pot), you can raise with any Category 8 hand or better, plus any hand where both cards are 5 or higher. From the cut-off, raise with any Category 8 hand or better. Since you have a bigger stack than the remaining players, use the largest stack size of your opponents who still have cards (haven’t already folded) to determine if you should go all-in or raise to 4BB. If the biggest stack still in the hand has 12BB or less, move all-in. You can also make these aggressive raises when you’re a medium stack and all the bigger stacks have folded.

**Pushing All-In On the Bubble ($10 Games)**

You are the biggest unfolded stack | An active player has a bigger stack
---|---
Cut-off | Category 8 | Category 5
Button or Small Blind | Category 8 plus any hand with both cards 5 or higher | Category 6

**Calling a Push as a Medium Stack On the Bubble ($10 Games)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pusher’s Stack Size</th>
<th>10BB</th>
<th>8BB</th>
<th>6BB</th>
<th>4BB</th>
<th>2BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the Big Blind</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Calling a Push as a Big or Small Stack On the Bubble ($10 Games)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pusher’s Stack Size</th>
<th>10BB</th>
<th>8BB</th>
<th>6BB</th>
<th>4BB</th>
<th>2BB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the Big Blind</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Category 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Other Position</td>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can be even more aggressive on the bubble if you’re the biggest stack left in the hand.
Blinds are 100/200 and you’re a medium stack on the button with 3,500. The small blind has 1,700 and the big blind has 2,250. The big stack with 6,050 in the cut-off folds and you have 9h 5s. As a medium stack with the biggest stack of the remaining players, you should act like a big stack. Since you’re on the button and both of your cards are 5 or higher, you should raise. Even though you have 17.5 big blinds in your stack, your biggest active opponent only has 11.25. This means you should push all-in instead of raising to 800. Since your additional chips that cover your opponents aren’t “in play” this hand, you should act as though your stack is only as big as your largest active opponent.

You may find that there are times where all the chips don’t go in pre-flop and you’ll have to make some post-flop decisions. Since play is short-handed, you won’t need as strong a hand to compete post-flop. Assuming you raised pre-flop, bet the pot in any hand where you have at least 1 pair (either a pocket pair in your hand or you matched one of the board cards). You can also bet the pot on any flush draw, any open-ended straight draw, or if you have two overcards with an inside-straight draw. Again, if a pot-sized bet is 1/3 of your stack or more, push all-in.

If your opponent bets first, be much more selective in calling. Don’t call with worse than top pair and rarely call with draws unless you’re getting great odds. On the bubble, especially as a medium stack, it doesn’t pay to take unnecessary risks. Don’t put your tournament on the line by calling with a draw. Betting with a draw is, of course, another matter.

Blinds are 100/200 with a 25 ante and you’re the big stack with 6,000. You’re on the button with Qc Jd and you raise to 800. A medium stack with 3,000 calls in the big blind. The flop comes 9h 8h 4h. The big blind checks to you. You have two overcards with an inside straight, so you would normally bet the pot, 1,800. But that’s more than 1/3 of your opponent’s remaining stack (2,100); push all-in instead. Don’t be scared of a possible flush — if he’s got it, he’s got it. But it’s more likely that he’s worried about you and doesn’t want to finish in 4th place. You’ve got enough chips that you can afford to take chances and push the other players around.

Three Players Remaining
No changes from the $5 games.

Heads-up Play
No changes. Go forth and conquer!

Summary of Chapter 8

1. Call with low pocket pairs if the percentage of your stack required to call is less than the number of your pair.
2. If you just call with a pocket pair, give up the hand post-flop unless you have a set or an overpair.
3. Make a continuation bet on most flops when you raised pre-flop. Your bets post-flop should be about 70% of the pot. If you missed the flop completely, give up on the turn unless your hand improves to top pair or better.
Chapter 9

How To Beat $20 SNGs

Now we’re going to start playing some more poker. If you’ve gotten this far, you hopefully have several hundred SNGs under your belt. You’ve been playing tight, but you’ve still seen a lot of different situations and player types. You should now be experienced enough that you can start playing more hands in the first few levels. But first, I want to introduce a few new concepts.

CPR and CSI

Earlier, we were evaluating our stack size by the number of big blinds it contained. But this ignores the antes when they appear. To be more precise from now on, I use two important numbers: the cost-per-round (CPR) and your chip-status index (CSI).

Calculating CPR:
The cost-per-round, as originally described in Kill Phil by Blair Rodman and myself, is the amount of money it would cost you to sit through an entire round of play as the button makes one orbit around the table. It’s the total of both blinds and antes (if there are any). You can also think of it as the amount of money in the pot before anyone plays. For example, if there are no antes and the blinds are 25/50, the CPR is 75. If the blinds are 75/150, the CPR is 225.

With antes you have to add in the total of all the antes, so multiply the ante by the number of players and add it to the blinds. So if there are 4 players with blinds of 100/200 and a 25 ante, the CPR is 100 + 200 + (4 x 25) = 400.

Calculating CSI:
Your chip-status index, as defined by Blair and myself, is your chip stack divided by the CPR. Exact precision isn’t necessary; an approximation will usually do. For example, if the CPR is 150 and you have 1,085 chips, you don’t need to know that you have a CSI of 7.23. Simply knowing that it’s a little more than 7 is fine. We’ll use CSI from now on as our measure of stack size. It’s useful to note that if there are no antes, your CSI is 2/3 the number of big blinds in your stack.

The Rule of 5 and 10

Now that your poker skills are improving, you can drop the Rule of 2 through 10 in favor of the Rule of 5 and 10. This rule, devised by poker pro and author Bob Ciaffone, applies to small and medium pairs and suited connectors. This doesn’t apply to suited hands with one or more gaps. The rule stipulates to always call a raise up to 5% of your stack and always fold for 10% of your stack or greater. Between 5% and 10% it’s a judgment call. If you have position on your opponents, if you have a good medium pair (77-99), or if you consider an opponent to be particularly weak, you can raise or call a raise for up to 10% of your stack. For example, with 7h 6h in early position, be prepared to risk 5% of your stack, but with the same hand in the cutoff or on the button, you can commit up to 10%.

Always remember when evaluating these percentages that you must consider the cost versus the smaller of the stacks between you and your opponent. If your opponent bets 150 off a stack of 1,000 and you have 5c 5s and a stack of 3,000, although his bet is only 5% of your stack you can’t call, because it’s 15% of his stack and you won’t be getting adequate implied odds if you flop a set. Because you’re vulnerable to a raise or re-raise when you enter the pot in early position, I advise caution in playing small pairs and suited connectors. If you have enough chips to raise within the confines of the Rule of 5...
and 10, do so. Fold to a re-raise. If you only have enough chips to limp under the rule, just fold and save your chips for raising. Aggression is always preferable to passive play.

The Rule of 3 and 6
This rule applies to suited hands that are not connected (separated by one or two gaps) and to suited aces. Hands such as Td 8d, As 3s, and 9c 6c fall under this rule. With these hands you can always call for 3% or less of your stack, but should always fold if it costs more than 6% of your chips to play. In between it’s a judgment call. Avoid playing these hands from early position. If you have good position and have either a suited ace or a 1-gap suited connector, lean more toward committing up to 6%; with 2-gappers, stick with 3%.

Suited connectors are more difficult to play than small pairs after the flop. Not playing them at all in the first 3 levels in SNGs is a simpler approach and will cost you very little in expected value. I know an expert SNG player who plays 10 SNGs at a time in the $200-$500 range each and never plays suited connectors in the early levels, although he’ll push all-in with them in the later stages. The tiny bit of equity he gives up is more than compensated for by the fact that he doesn’t have to ponder difficult post-flop decisions while playing so many games simultaneously.

Bottom line: Playing suited connectors under the Rule of 3% and 6% can be fun and is good training for MTTs, but not playing them is also a viable option, especially if you’re playing more than one SNG at a time, an option we’ll review in an upcoming chapter.

Reverse Implied Odds
In Chapter 4 I defined implied odds as estimating the amount of money that you might win if you make your hand; it assumes you won’t put in any additional money if you miss your draw. The other side of the coin is called “reverse implied odds.” This applies when you already have a made hand, but there could be draws against you. In this case, you may have to put in additional money later if someone else completes his hand. It also applies in cases where you might be dominated and have to pay off multiple bets to see if you’re “good,” meaning you have the best hand.

Example
Everyone has about 1,500 stacks and the blinds are 10/20. A player in mid-position raises to 60. The small blind calls, as do you in the big blind with As 5s. The flop comes: 7h Td Ac. The pot is 180.

Both you and the small blind check. The pre-flop raiser bets 90 and the small blind folds. You’re being offered 3-to-1 pot odds, so at first glance it looks like you only need to have a 25% chance (3-to-1) of winning in order to call. He could have a worse hand than you, like a pair of tens or some pocket pair. The problem is your reverse implied odds. Your hand is unlikely to improve and you have to worry not only about this bet, but possible bets on the turn and river. Are you going to call those bets too? This hand might get too expensive to call with top pair and a weak kicker. Note that if there’s no more betting and his bet of 90 is an all-in, you can probably call, since you only have to win 25% of the time to break even.

Levels 1-3
In addition to calling raises with speculative hands, you can now start playing more often before the flop. I recommend the following strategy as long as your CSI is at least 20.
If everyone has folded to you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Usually raise with</th>
<th>Usually limp with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early (5 or 6 off the button)</td>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>88-55 and 0-gaps down to 65s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid (3 or 4 off the button)</td>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>66-22 and 0-gaps down to 65s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late (1 or 2 off the button)</td>
<td>Category 5 or better and no-gaps down to 65s</td>
<td>nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Button</td>
<td>Category 7 or better and 1- and 2-gaps down to 75s and 85s</td>
<td>nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Blind</td>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>All other suited cards that are both 5 or higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
If you’re in a position where you sometimes raise and sometimes limp, you should occasionally do the opposite to disguise your hands. If you occasionally limp with your raising hands and occasionally raise with speculative hands, you’ll be much more difficult to read.

If you find yourself with very aggressive opponents, stop limping in early and mid position. Usually fold these hands, but occasionally raise.

If someone limps before you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Usually raise with</th>
<th>Usually limp with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early (5 or 6 off the button)</td>
<td>Category 2 or better and AQs and ATo</td>
<td>TT-22 and 0-gaps down to 65s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid (3 or 4 off the button)</td>
<td>Category 2 or better and AQs and ATo</td>
<td>TT-22 and 0-gaps down to 65s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late (1 or 2 off the button)</td>
<td>Category 3 or better and ATs+ and AJo</td>
<td>88-22 and 0-, 1-, and 2-gaps with both cards 5 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Button</td>
<td>Category 3 or better and ATs+, ATo+, and KQs</td>
<td>88-22 and 0-, 1-, 2-, and 3-gaps with both cards 5 or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Blind</td>
<td>Category 2 or better and AQs and ATo</td>
<td>Any offsuit hands with both cards 10 or higher and any two suited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
After a limper, you should play more straightforward. You should still occasionally mix up raising and limping, but less so compared to being the first one in.

Due to all of these pre-flop changes, you’ll find yourself in many more marginal situations post-flop where you’ll have a lot more opportunities to play draws. I encourage you to play the draws when getting good odds, but continue to stay away from medium hands that don’t have much room for improvement. You always want to be in a position where you know where you stand, not one that leaves you saying, “Maybe I’m ahead, maybe I’m not…”

Let’s say that the flop is Qs 7h 6s and my opponent bets half the pot. I’d much rather have a hand like 9s 5s than a hand like Ad 7d, even though the middle pair is more likely to be best. With the first, I know where I am in the hand and I have implied odds working for me. With the middle pair I’ll always be left wondering, with only 5 outs to improve. This is a reverse implied odds situation and unless one of us has a very short stack, I should fold the middle pair.

In the first few levels only play good made hands (top pair with a good kicker or better) and good draws. Marginal hands without good draws should be abandoned. There’s simply no reason to try and see if your opponents are very aggressive you will have to tighten up and play more aggressively yourself.
you’re good. Wait it out. Play the good made hands aggressively and play the good draws when you’re getting good (implied) pot odds. You can also semi-bluff by betting your draws. It’s called a “semi-bluff,” because you have 2 ways to win the pot:

1. Your opponent(s) can fold.
2. You can make your draw and win the pot at showdown.

A normal bluff without much chance for improvement (or any bluff on the river) only has the first way of winning the pot. I recommend that you occasionally semi-bluff and rarely make a stone cold bluff (one where if you’re called, you’re essentially certain to lose the hand).

Blinds are 10/20 and everyone has about 1,500. You’re one off the button with As 5s. Two players limp before you and you limp along. The small blind makes a small raise to 60 and both the limpers call. You call, getting 5.5-to-1 on your call and great implied odds. The pot is now 260 and the flop comes Ks Qd 4s. The small blind bets 120 and both the limpers fold. You call. He bet less than half the pot. When I have a draw and am presented with good odds against poor or marginal players, I usually just call rather than try a semi-bluff raise. The pot is now 500 and the turn is the 7c. The small blind checks. Here’s your opportunity to try a semi-bluff. He hasn’t shown much strength and, while he might have a good hand such as KK or QQ, it’s more likely he has something marginal, such as AJ, Oh Jh, JJ, TT, or 99. If he had AA, AK, or AQ, he would probably have bet more on the flop. The best time to bluff is when your opponent has either a very good hand or a bad hand, but not a hand in between, such as AA, AK, or AQ, in this example. A good bet size is probably about 70% of the pot; betting more is unnecessary because you aren’t worried about him having a flush draw (you have the nut draw, meaning the best possible draw) and most straight draws are to only 1 card. However, you shouldn’t bet less, because a smaller bet may look suspicious enough to him that he may decide to call out of curiosity with a hand such as JJ. You bet 350 and he folds. Your semi-bluff has worked. Even if he calls, you still have 9 outs to an unbeatable hand on the river.

Blinds are 10/20 and everyone has about 1,500. Again, you’re one off the button with As 5s. Two players limp before you and you limp along. This time it’s the button who raises to 100. Both of the limpers call. Now you’re only getting 4.4-to-1, but it’s still worth the call, despite being out of position against the raiser, because stacks are deep and you have good implied odds. The pot is 430 and the flop is again Ks Qd 4s. One limper checks and the other bets 200. Now you should fold your draw, despite the fact that he bet less than half the pot. The pre-flop raiser is behind you and there’s the strong possibility that he could raise if you call. That possibility cuts down your implied odds significantly, making this a poor draw to chase. It was a good flop for you, but a bad betting situation. A much more common situation is for everyone to check to the raiser, allowing you to see what the limpers do and act last.

Level 4 and Higher (5 or More Players Remaining)

At Level 4 and higher, your CSI will rarely be above 20. And those times where you’re above 20, you’ll rarely if ever have an opponent above 20 as well, so you have to shift toward shorter-stack strategies. This means you have to stop limping, since it begins to get too expensive to call the bigger blind. Plus, the blinds become more valuable to steal, which takes precedence over trying to see a cheap flop. Revert back to the raise-or-fold strategy you used in the $10 games.

Four Players Remaining — The Bubble

Play the same as the $10 games, but now I’m going to introduce the concept of prize equity, sometimes called prize EV or $EV. Prize equity is simply your expected value (EV) of the prize pool, or the average prize you would expect to win. Your prize equity depends on your chip stack as well as the chip stacks of the other players.
At the start of the tournament, 9 players put in $20 to create a prize pool of $180. If everyone starts with 1,500 chips and everyone has the same skill level, your prize equity is $20. Later in the tournament, if 4 players are left and you’re the short stack with the same 1,500 chips, your equity is more than $20. Even though you’re the short stack, you have a good chance of surviving and making money.

Now imagine that only 3 players are left and you still have your 1,500. Your equity is more than $36, since you’re guaranteed that (the prize for third place is 20%) and still have a shot at more. The equity that you can make in tournaments by doing nothing and letting the other players knock each other out is substantial and often underrated. You need to make your decisions on what’s best for your prize EV, not your chip EV. What matters is how many dollars you bring home, not how many chips you had.

An anomaly in tournaments is that chips don’t have a constant value. There’s a non-linearity in chip value, so each chip you gain is worth less than the chip before it.

This non-linearity of chip value exists because multiple places are being paid in the tournament. If you win all the chips, you don’t get the whole prize pool. That’s why your prize EV is determined not just by your own stack, but also by everyone else’s. When someone is eliminated from the tournament, your prize expectation goes up, even when you don’t gain any chips. Pretty cool!

This non-linearity gets more and more pronounced as you approach the bubble. What it means is that because doubling up gives you far less than twice your prize EV, you can’t rely strictly on pot odds to make your decisions—you always need to be more conservative than pot odds dictate. It’s possible that a certain decision on the bubble is positive in chip EV and negative in prize EV, and prize EV is all that matters. That’s why you always call much tighter on the bubble or approaching the bubble, especially as a medium stack, where this distortion is biggest.

For a thorough analysis of prize equities, bubble effects, and how your decisions should depend on the prize structure, see my book Kill Everyone. It will give you more detailed insights and strategies for not only SNGs, but multi-table tournaments and satellites as well.
Three Players Remaining
No changes.

Heads-up Play
No changes.

Summary of Chapter 9

1. When your CSI is 20 or higher, you can limp with many more hands than before. Occasionally, do the opposite when you’re sometimes raising or limping. This helps disguise your hands and makes it much more difficult for your opponents to put you on a hand.

2. Use the Rule of 3 and 6 for calling raises with suited connectors and the Rule of 5 and 10 for calling with pocket pairs.

3. Be aware of reverse implied odds and when they apply (most applicable when you have a made hand with a pot that’s small relative to the remaining stacks).

4. Occasionally semi-bluff with a draw.

5. Tournament chips have a non-linear value, so each chip you win is worth less than the one before it. All your poker decisions should be made on your EV of the prize pool, not the EV in the number of chips.
CHAPTER 10

HOW TO BEAT THE $30 SNGS

We will now spend more time watching our opponents and trying to characterize their personality styles.

Levels 1-3

If you like to keep things simple as I do, keep betting about 70% of the pot size post-flop. This is an excellent default strategy and I know many winning players who routinely make this size bet, and only this size bet, on the flop. Keeping things simple has a lot to be said for it. If you consistently bet 70% of the pot with your made hands, draws, and c-bets, you’ll give nothing away about the strength of your hand based on the amount of your bet on the flop. An alternative tactic that some winners utilize is to bet somewhere between half the size of the pot and the full pot (so, with a 400 pot, between 200 and 400), depending on the flop texture.

What do I mean by texture? It’s the amount of draw potential. A flop of Js Ts 9s is at one extreme and flops such as Kh 7c 2d or Qs Qd Qc are at the other. Draws to straights and flushes abound on the first flop, but are nonexistent on the second two.

When you have a made hand that you think is best, betting serves two purposes:

1. To extract value from lesser made hands.
2. To make draws pay to see the next card.

The less likely it is that your opponent has a draw, the less important the second purpose is. At the lower levels you always bet full pot, because you could get a lot of value from people calling with bad hands. Furthermore, a full-pot bet was always enough to deny draws sufficient odds to chase. But now that you’ve had some more experience, you can adjust those odds based on how likely it is an opponent has a good draw.

With no straight or flush draws possible, bet half the pot, giving your opponents 3-to-1 pot odds, not enough to chase with a weak hand like bottom pair. On a draw-heavy flop like 7h 6s 5c (3 connected cards), As Ts 3s (3 flush cards), or Jd Tc 4d (2 connected cards and 2 flush cards), bet the full pot. That gives your opponents 2-to-1 pot odds, likely making it a mistake for them to call. Flops with some draw potential, such as Jd Tc 4s, 7s 7c 6d, or Kh Th 4d, require a bet in between, like 2/3 or 3/4 of the pot. If more than 2 players see the flop, you may want to bet a larger amount to discourage overcalls, which get better odds than the original caller, if someone decides to call your bet.

It’s very important that you vary your bet size only with the texture of the flop and not with the strength of your hand. If the flop is Kh Th 4s, you should bet the same amount if you have KQ, 44, 88, or A7. If you change your bet size with the kind of hand you have, observant opponents may pick up on this and exploit it.

Watch your opponents to see how many hands they raise with and how many they call with.
**Chapter 10: How To Beat $30 SNG's**

**Exception 1:** If you raise pre-flop with AK or AQ and you suspect that your opponents are weak players, always make a full-pot bet when the flop contains an ace. Many weak players can’t bring themselves to fold a pair of aces, no matter how weak their kicker. Extract as much as you can from these players before someone else does!

**Exception 2:** If you suspect that your opposition is weak and unobservant, you can try betting a smaller amount with your continuation bets that miss the flop. You can try to make those bluffs as cheap as possible, but don’t try this against better players.

Should you go with the graduated flop bet, depending on texture, or should you stick with the constant 70% bet, if you decide to bet on the flop? It depends on your feel and comfort with the game. You can win using either tactic.

**Level 4 and Higher (5 or More Players Remaining)**

Once you reach the 4th level, drop your standard opening raise from 4BB to 3BB. Play will be a little tighter, so there’s no need to risk so many chips. The “move-in” stage starts at about 7 CSI, so any time you’re below that point, it’s all-in or fold. Most of the rules from the $20 games still hold, but you should start getting into the habit of characterizing your opponents and bending the rules where appropriate.

What’s important to me when characterizing opponents in SNGs are 2 simple questions:

1. **How often does he raise from his position?**
2. **How strong of a hand does he need to call my raise?**

Answering these questions will help you decide if you need to raise or lower your requirements for playing any particular hand. The more often your opponents raise, the more often you should call. But the more often your opponents are willing to call, the **less** often you should raise. We’ll see that exemplified in the next section on bubble play, where characterizing your opponent becomes much more critical.

**Four Players Remaining — The Bubble**

From now on I’ll be talking about pushing and calling hands on the bubble in terms of “top % of hands.” This works much better than sticking to the hand categories that are optimized for early play. I making references such as “push with the top 20%” or “call with the top 15%.” To see which hands are in these categories, refer to Appendix C. Different hands are best for pushing compared to calling. Both of the lists in Appendix C, the hand rankings by % if you’re the raiser or the caller, have been optimized to be as accurate as possible in many different situations.

The bubble is the most important time to adjust your play based on the others’ playing styles. Let’s take an example where all 4 players have equal stacks of 3,375 and the blinds are 200/400 with a 25 ante. You’re on the button, debating if you should push or fold. How does your decision depend on how likely the blinds are to call? Since the big blind is more likely to call than the small blind, let’s see how often we should push as a function of how likely the big blind calls. The graph below assumes the small blind always calls 8% of the time (66+, AJo+, ATs+, KQs).
How Often You Can Push From the Button  
**When All Players Have 3,375 and Blinds are 200/400/25**

As you can see, the right move varies quite a bit depending on an opponent’s style. If he calls 8% or less, it’s right for us to push with any two cards (100%). But if he’s very loose, we can only push our best hands. If he calls 20%, we can only push 13% (approximately 44+, AJo+, A9s+, KQo, K9s+, Q9s+, J9s+, T9s).

As our opponents become looser in calling, we need to be tighter in pushing. This makes sense, because the looser he is, the less often we’ll steal the blinds with no contest. But the opposite is true when he’s the one pushing. The looser his pushes, the looser we can be in calling him. If we switch places with the big blind, let’s see how often we can call depending on how often he pushes:

How Often You Can Call From the Big Blind Against a Button Push  
**When All Players Have 3375 and Blinds are 200/400/25**
There are a few wiggles, but it’s a surprisingly linear relationship. In fact, pretty much every time you’re getting less than 2-to-1 pot odds, the number of hands you can call will be a constant fraction of the hands he pushes. In this case, we could call about 1/6 of his push frequency.

Use the 2 tables below to show what percent of his range you can call, depending on your pot odds and the situation:

**How High Are Your Bubble Effects?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opponent’s Stack</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Your Stack**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Often Can You Call?</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Moderate Bubble Effects</th>
<th>High Bubble Effects</th>
<th>Extreme Bubble Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pot Odds</td>
<td>Low Bubble Effects</td>
<td>Low Bubble Effects</td>
<td>Moderate Bubble Effects</td>
<td>High Bubble Effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0-to-1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8-to-1</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6-to-1</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4-to-1</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2-to-1</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.0-to-1</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here’s how you read these tables. On the first table, find the stack sizes that correspond to you and your opponent. This will tell if your bubble effect is low, moderate, high, or extreme. Then look at the second table and find the pot odds you’re being offered and look under the appropriate column. The percentage listed there is the fraction of his pushing range that you can call with.

**Example**

You have 2,500 and your opponent has 3,000. That’s defined as a “moderate-bubble-effect” situation. This player goes all-in, giving you 1.8-to-1 pot odds. You can call with about 50% of the hands he’s willing to push with. If he’s pushing 60%, you can call 30%.

You needn’t get fanatical about these calculations. A rough approximation will do. If you study these tables, you’ll get a good feel for the interrelationship between your opponent’s range of raising hands, the pot odds, and the bubble effects. I don’t expect you to do these calculations at the table. I certainly don’t. But you can examine your hand histories after the game and see if you made the right choices. That’s a wonderful way to learn this complicated subject.
Important adjustment: If exactly 4 players remain and there’s a stack (not involved in the hand) with 1,000 chips or fewer, raise your bubble-effects category up one notch.

These tables are for when there’s a total of 13,500 chips in play (like there is at PokerStars). If you’re playing elsewhere, multiply your stack by 13,500, then divide by the total number of chips in play. That will convert your stack into a PokerStars equivalent.

These tables can be used any time 4 or more players remain.

With 3 players remaining, lower the category by 1 notch and don’t increase it if there’s a sub-1,000 stack.

When it’s heads-up, there are no bubble effects, no matter what the chip stacks. You can call about 1.5 times as often as the “low-bubble-effects” case.

The above bubble-effects table is a little simplified, but fairly accurate. If you’re interested in a much more detailed analysis, including how the effects change in different situations and tournament types, see the work on bubble factors developed by my co-author, Tysen Streib, in our book Kill Everyone.

Three Players Remaining
Use the same player adjustments and calling strategies that I’ve advised previously.

Heads-up Play
For the most part, use the same heads-up strategies, especially if your opponent doesn’t seem too aggressive. You may want to reference the following two charts for heads-up play, which are a simplified version of the detailed strategy in Kill Everyone. In Kill Everyone we present an unexploitable strategy, as long as your CSI is 8 or below, and there’s nothing your opponent can do to take advantage of you. The charts below will help you come close to this strategy.

RAISING STRATEGY (ALL-IN OR FOLD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAA</th>
<th>AKs</th>
<th>AQS</th>
<th>AJs</th>
<th>ATS</th>
<th>A9s</th>
<th>A8s</th>
<th>A7s</th>
<th>A6s</th>
<th>A5s</th>
<th>A4s</th>
<th>A3s</th>
<th>A2s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKo</td>
<td>KK</td>
<td>KQs</td>
<td>KJs</td>
<td>KT5</td>
<td>K9s</td>
<td>K8s</td>
<td>K7s</td>
<td>K6s</td>
<td>K5s</td>
<td>K4s</td>
<td>K3s</td>
<td>K2s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AQo</td>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>QJs</td>
<td>QTs</td>
<td>Q9s</td>
<td>Q8s</td>
<td>Q7s</td>
<td>Q6s</td>
<td>Q5s</td>
<td>Q4s</td>
<td>Q3s</td>
<td>A2s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJo</td>
<td>KJo</td>
<td>QJo</td>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>JT5</td>
<td>J9s</td>
<td>J8s</td>
<td>J7s</td>
<td>J6s</td>
<td>J5s</td>
<td>J4s</td>
<td>J3s</td>
<td>J2s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATo</td>
<td>KTo</td>
<td>QTo</td>
<td>T7</td>
<td>T8s</td>
<td>T9s</td>
<td>T8s</td>
<td>T7s</td>
<td>T6s</td>
<td>T5s</td>
<td>T4s</td>
<td>T3s</td>
<td>T2s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is still a mild bubble effect with three players left as second pays more than third.
### Chapter 10: How To Beat $30 SNG's

**Find your hand in this grid:** Suited hands are on the top right, off-suit hands are on the bottom left, pairs are along the diagonal. The color-coding shows the CSI where it’s correct to push. As long as the short stack between the two of you is this CSI or shorter, push! Most players you meet are tighter than this strategy, both for pushing and calling. Therefore, against typical players you should push more often and call less often than this strategy suggests. However, the more skillful (or aggressive) your opponent is, the more you should stick to the above strategy.

These charts are a simplified version of the true optimal solution. If you want to learn the detailed solution, I suggest you pick up a copy of Kill Everyone. Reading it will provide you with the next steps in your development as a winning poker player.

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**CALLING STRATEGY (ALL-IN OR FOLD)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSI 6 to 8</th>
<th>CSI 3 to 5</th>
<th>CSI 0 to 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>AKs</td>
<td>AJs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKo</td>
<td>KK</td>
<td>KQs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJo</td>
<td>KJo</td>
<td>JJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATo</td>
<td>KTo</td>
<td>QTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9o</td>
<td>K9o</td>
<td>Q9o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8o</td>
<td>K8o</td>
<td>Q8o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7o</td>
<td>K7o</td>
<td>Q7o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6o</td>
<td>K6o</td>
<td>Q6o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5o</td>
<td>K5o</td>
<td>Q5o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4o</td>
<td>K4o</td>
<td>Q4o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3o</td>
<td>K3o</td>
<td>Q3o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2o</td>
<td>K2o</td>
<td>Q2o</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Summary of Chapter 10**

1. Either make a standard 70%-of-the-pot bet post-flop or vary your post-flop bet size according to the texture of the flop, not the strength of your hand.

2. Start characterizing your opponents depending on how they play. Everyone has a weakness and you should adjust your play according to the best way to take advantage of the others. Be aware that people can change their behavior as the number of players goes down and/or the blinds go up.

3. Push more often and call less often against tight players.

4. Be aware of what situations constitute high and low bubble-effect situations. Play more cautiously when you have high bubble effects, but take advantage of people playing tight because of their own bubble effects.

5. The minimum strength needed to call an all-in is a fraction of the number of hands your opponent is willing to push. This fraction depends on the pot odds you’re getting, as well as how high your current bubble effects are.

6. Follow the equilibrium push/fold strategy for heads-up play against a good and/or aggressive opponent. Against typical opponents, push more often and call less often than equilibrium.
At the $50 level, things are getting much more serious. There are still a few recreational players here, but most of your opponents have played hundreds or thousands of tournaments. Many of them have also played multi-table as well, playing 2, 4, or even as many as 40 tables at once (true story)!

If you haven’t started playing more than 1 table at a time, it’s probably about time to start. I’m sure you get pretty bored folding so many hands in the first few levels. Plus, you’ve seen enough situations to have a pretty good feel and to respond quickly. It’s best to start 2-tabling at a level you’re comfortable with, so play two $30 tables instead of one $50 SNG. Then, once you get used to 2, you can add a third and so on. Don’t add more than you can keep track of. The more tables you add, the harder it’ll be to keep track of your opponents’ playing styles. Therefore, I don’t recommend that you play more than 2 or 3 at once, unless you become you become really adept at this.

Levels 1-3
Most players at the $50 level not only know about continuation bets, but they use them regularly. You’ll often be c-bet against, and your own c-bets will be called more often. To adjust to your opponents, you’ll have to call more liberally when your opponent makes a c-bet and you’ll have to “fire a second bullet” (make a second bluff) on the turn occasionally.

If your opponent is a habitual c-bettor (and most players at this level are), then you’ll effectively always have position on him. If you always check, he’ll bet, and then you can decide what to do afterwards. Check-raise fairly often on the flop to make him pay for his perpetual c-bets. Lower your standards for calling and raising a c-bet. Top pair should almost always at least call on the flop, as should a pocket pair when there’s only one overcard. A check-raise often lets you know where you are in the hand; if he re-raises, you can let the hand go if you don’t hold a monster. If the flop contains an ace, he’s more likely to have hit the flop, so you should be more careful in these instances. You could try leading out with a bet if the flop contains an ace to see if your pair is good; most opponents will raise with top pair and a good kicker. Leading with a set is also a good idea when the flop contains an ace, as we saw in Chapter 7.

You’ll also find that people call your continuation bet more often than at the lower levels. Sometimes they’ll have a real hand and sometimes they’ll call just to see if you were c-betting and plan to give up on the turn. Against these players, you should make 2 adjustments:

1. Occasionally fire a second bullet by continuation betting the turn as well, even when you miss.
2. Check-raise the turn with your good hands more often than before. This traps the players who were just waiting around to see if you check on the turn, so they could take it away from you with a bet.
Blinds are 15/30 and most players have around 1,500 chips. You’re 1 seat off the button and everyone folds to you. You have Ks Qs, raise to 120, and the big blind calls. The flop is Ac Td 8h. The big blind checks, you bet 150, and he calls. The turn is the 5d and he checks again. Don’t automatically give up here. You should occasionally bet about 70% of the pot and hope that he folds. He may only have a pair of tens or a medium pocket pair and is seeing if you’re just c-betting. You are, but don’t let him know that. If he calls you again, I’d give up on the river unless you hit your straight. Firing a third bullet is usually just a waste of chips.

Blinds are 25/50 and you have 2,000 chips. You raise from mid-position with Ad As to 200 and the button calls off a stack of 1,800 chips. The pot is now 475. The flop is Qs 8c 7d, you bet 350, and the button calls, making the pot 1,175. The turn is the 7c. This is a good opportunity to try and check-raise. The button is unlikely to have called with bottom pair and your check looks weak. This may induce him to bet, perhaps even all-in.

Blinds are 10/20 and everyone has 1,500 chips. A mid-position player raises to 60 and you call from the small blind with 8h 6h. The flop is Kh Ts 5h. You check and he bets 60. This looks like a weak continuation bet. You could just call, but I prefer the semi-bluff check-raise. I raise to 200.

Level 4 and Higher (5 or More Players Remaining)

Pick up your aggression when play is down to 5 players. If you’re one of the two biggest stacks, raise more frequently, unless the other big stack is in the blinds. Your opponents usually understand bubble effects to some degree, so you can play close to your 4-player strategy when down to 5 players.

Players know to avoid going up against a big stack and to be especially careful when someone has a very small stack. You should follow this advice as well, but you’ll be taking advantage of their timidity. Only a few of your opponents will open up their aggressiveness enough. That’s where your advantage will be; you’ll steal from them more often than they’ll steal from you.

Four Players Remaining – The Bubble

Follow the more advanced bubble play I outlined for the $20 and $30 games. Recognize which players are playing tightly and seem to understand bubble effects.

One of the most important things you can notice about another player is when you see him make a weak call in a bubble situation. If you ever see a player do this, make immediate note of it and stop pushing weak hands when he’s in the big blind.

You should think about not only what bubble effects you’re experiencing, but also what your opponents face as well. If your opponent experiences high bubble effects from you and you’re low against him, it gives you the perfect opportunity to push him around. For example, if the blinds are typical and tight for this level, you can usually push 100% of your hands when you’re the big stack. This is because they’re under more pressure from the bubble than you are. Their chips are much more valuable to them and they won’t confront you without a premium hand.

Part of the reason you have tremendous power as the big stack is because you have lots of fold equity. Fold equity is additional value you gain when your opponents don’t fight you for their “share” of the pot. If you have two opponents who only call about 10% of the time, it means that about 80% of the time, you take the blinds without a contest. When the blinds are as big as they are on the bubble, each stolen round of blinds is valuable and adds 1 CSI to your stack.

Even though you have enough fold equity to push 100% of the time as the big stack, I recommend that you only push 80% or 90%. If you’re called and are forced to show down a garbage hand, a lot of your fold equity will disappear. Your opponents will know that you push with nothing and will start calling much more often.

Be careful of players who call too much on the bubble. Don’t push on their big blind.
Medium stacks should still be very careful when bigger stacks are in the blinds and open up when the big stacks have folded. Small stacks should be careful, because many stacks will call you just to try to bust you and end the bubble. As the shortest stack, I recommend that you push about the top 20% from the cut-off position (1 off the button), the top 30% from the button, and the top 60%-100% if it’s folded to you in the small blind. The smaller your CSI, the more often you should push from the small blind. Your stack size has less of an effect from the non-blind positions, unless you’re really short (under 2 CSI). In that case you need to push much more often, as you are in danger of being blinded out.

Remain very tight with your call strategy until you gather some evidence that your opponent is pushing with very weak hands. Best to assume that he’s not stealing at the start. If he shows down a weak hand or if he’s raising almost every single time it’s folded to him, lower your estimation of his pushing range, and thus your own calling range.

Blinds are 200/400 with a 25 ante and the stack sizes (before blinds and antes) are given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>STACK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cut-Off</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Button</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Blind</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Blind</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The cut-off pushes all-in and the button folds. The cut-off doesn’t appear to be playing the part of the big-stack bully. He plays occasionally, but isn’t pushing most hands. You have Ad Td in the small blind. Do you call?

Looking at the tables on pages 62-63, we’re in a high-bubble-effects situation. We have to call 2,775 into a pot of 3,700 (we can’t count the 2,000 chips that the cut-off has in excess of our stack), which gives us pot odds of 1.3-to-1. The second chart shows that we should be calling with about 15% of his pushing range (since 1.3 pot odds are right between 1.2 and 1.4). If we go to Appendix C, we see that ATs is a top 6% calling hand. Since we should call with about 15% of his range, that means we should call if we think he’s pushing 40%, or more (15% of 40% is 6%). This player doesn’t seem that active, so it’s correct to fold.

Same situation as above, except now the cut-off has been very aggressive and is raising almost every hand. Now ATs is an easy call. However, notice that even if we know for a fact that he’d be willing to push with 72o, we can only call him with the top 15% (33+, A9o+, A4s+, KQo, KTs+, QJs). If he’s really only pushing 70%-80% instead of 100%, then we need to be even tighter.

**Three Players Remaining**

Some players make a huge adjustment in attitude once the bubble breaks. The smallest stack is much more likely to become very active and start gambling. Sometimes the middle stack does the same, while other players with the middle stack remain cautious. Watch the way your opponents are playing and employ the best counter-strategy. Steal from the tight players and slightly lower your calling standards against the gamblers.

**Heads-up Play**

I hope by this point you’re very comfortable with your heads-up play when one of you has a CSI of 8 or less. This is my more advanced pre-flop strategy for deeper stacks taken from Kill Everyone:

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Example: After the bubble breaks a lot of players tend to become much more aggressive.
On the Button
Pre-flop raises should usually be 2 to 2.5BB, perhaps 3BB against a very loose player.

Top 50% of hands: Usually raise, but just call sometimes. “Usually,” in these heads-up contexts, means about 60%-80% of the time. The more straightforward and unobservant your opponent is, the less you need to mix up your play. An exception should be made for very strong hands (QQ+ and AK). With these monsters, usually just call, but occasionally raise. This way, your strong hands protect your weak ones.

If you raise and are re-raised, you need to weigh three factors:
1. Pot odds.
2. His aggressiveness (and his view of your aggressiveness).
3. Stack depth – play tighter with deeper stacks.

Depending on how these factors stack up (no pun intended), you should probably only call with the top 10%-20% of hands, unless you’re being offered better than 2-to-1. With very deep stacks, aces with medium kickers should probably be folded. Whether to put in a third raise with your very strong hands is a judgment call. You could just call for deception, or raise it up if you think your opponent can’t let go of a hand.

Bottom 50%-90% of hands: Usually call, raise sometimes. If your opponent raises after you’ve limped, most of these hands should be folded, unless the raise is fairly small. If your hand is suited and you’re getting better than 2-to-1, call most of the time.

Bottom 10% of hands: Usually fold, unless your opponent doesn’t seem to raise often when you limp. If he’s passive, call and try to see a flop. Even 72o is a 60% favorite against a random hand when a 2 flops and a 66% favorite when a 7 flops. Your opponent might also hit the flop, so you should be prepared to let the hand go if he indicates post-flop strength.

On the Big Blind
Pre-flop raises should be to about 4 times the big blind. You’re out of position and it’s best to end the hand quickly. The value of position heads-up can’t be over-emphasized. With your better hands, but out of position, you must play aggressively pre-flop.

If he just limps, raise almost all the time with the top 30% of hands.

If he raises to 3BB, call or re-raise with the top 30%, plus 0-gap suited connectors down to 54s, plus 1-, 2-, and 3-gap suited connectors with both cards 5 or higher.

If he raises to 2.5BB, call or re-raise with the top 60%, mixing up your calls and re-raises.

If he raises to 2BB, call or re-raise with the top 80%.

No matter his raise size, usually re-raise with your best hands (the top 10%-20% hands, depending on his aggressiveness). Against a conservative player, narrow your re-raising range; against an aggressive raiser, widen your range, but be prepared to call an all-in when you re-raise a hyper-aggressive player.

If he doesn’t seem to be raising frequently from the button, increase your minimum calling standards considerably.

Post-flop, I recommend a very aggressive strategy, betting almost every flop unless he shows strength. The most costly mistake players make heads-up is folding too frequently. Give your opponent a chance to go wrong. Any pair, even bottom pair, is fairly strong heads-up. Be reluctant to fold any hand where you have a pair. Ace-or king-high may be good sometimes as well.
Chapter 11 How To Beat $50 SNG's

Summary of Chapter 11

1. Occasionally make a continuation bet on the turn as well as the flop, even when you totally miss the flop.
2. Check-raise your good hands on the flop fairly often.
3. Call other players' bets that look like continuation bets more often. Raise or check-raise suspected c-bets as well.
4. When playing near the bubble, always be aware of the bubble effects impacting you and your opponents. If they’re under a lot of pressure, don’t be afraid to push close to 100% of the time. The bubble is where the good players shine. Be aggressive and pick up some chips. Very often, I’ll start the bubble with an average stack or small chip lead and finish the bubble with a massive lead.
5. When heads-up with deeper stacks, raise about half the time and limp the other half.
6. Mix up your play, but stay aggressive. Pounce on weakness after the flop and bet, bet, bet!
$100 SNG’s

When you reach the $100-SNG level and beyond, you’ll notice a large jump in the skill level of your opponents. While you’ll still find recreational-type players, a significant number of the players at every table will be professional types whose main goal is earning money. Because of this, playing at this level requires additional skill.

As Your Opponents Improve

How will you notice the better players? They’ll be playing a lot like you! Early in the tournament, they’ll play very tight and conservative, but as the blinds go up and the number of players goes down, they’ll become much more aggressive. In $50 SNGs and more so in the $20 SNGs, you had many opportunities to be the first pre-flop raiser in level 4 and beyond. Now, however, in many games you might only get one chance per round to be the first raiser—when you’re under the gun!

As you can see, in this type of game you’ll have many more opportunities to call an all-in and many less to raise all-in. So you’ll need to bone up on the proper calling strategy. Make sure you have a good understanding of the bubble effect. Also, if you plan to play a significant amount of time at this level of play, I urge you to read the book I co-authored, *Kill Everyone*, for a complete discussion of advanced SNG concepts, including an in-depth strategy for pushing and calling on the bubble.

The Re-Raise Steal

Up to this point, you only re-raised with an excellent hand. That’s because even on and near the bubble when proper play calls for aggression and wide raising ranges, your opponents played way too tight. Their raising ranges were small and even when they did hold a less than great hand, they were very likely to call your re-raise. Starting at the $100 level, however, many of your opponents have wide (and proper) raising ranges when they’re first to enter the pot, particularly in late position. They’ll also be capable of folding them to a re-raise. Therefore, when an aggressive opponent makes a standard raise, maybe 2.5 to 3 BBs, from late position and both you and he have enough chips to give you fold equity, you should often re-raise him all in.

Requirements for this Play

1. Both your stack and the raiser’s must be big enough to give you solid fold equity. This means that you must have at least 4 times the original raise in your stack and he must have enough chips left after his raise to call at least 3 times his original raise.

2. The conditions must be such that your opponent will fold at least half of the hands that he’ll raise with. This means that his raising range needs to be wide and his calling range narrow. Most professional-type players will fall into this category. Most recreational players won’t.

3. You must be able to raise enough so that one of you will be all-in if he calls.

4. All the opponents behind you, particularly the BB, must have enough chips to fold.
Other Factors to Consider

1. How strong are the bubble effects? As always, the lower your bubble effects, the more often you should be gambling. His is most important, though. The higher the raiser’s bubble effects, the more often you should re-raise him.

2. What’s your hand? When he calls, he’ll usually have a Category 3 hand or better. So a hand such as KT is vulnerable. Ideally, you’d like to have a suited connector, giving you a fighting chance against AK and big pairs. This doesn’t mean that you can’t re-raise with KT or any hand, but when you get called it’s beneficial when you have a hand that isn’t likely to be dominated.

3. How many players are behind you and what are your bubble effects against them? The fewer players and the lower your bubble effects, the better for re-raising.

4. What’s your image at the table? The tighter your image, the more often the raiser will fold, the better for re-raising.

Note that your better opponents will be keen to use this play against you, as well. Therefore, if you’re on or near the bubble and at least one player behind you is capable of this play and has enough chips with which to do it, never make a standard raise. Either move all-in or fold. This means that when you have more than about 8 CSI, you’ll be playing somewhat tighter than you were at the lower levels, since you’ll often have a hand that can’t stand a re-raise, but you have too many chips to move all-in.

Example

It’s better to try to steal with 76s than KT as you are much less likely to be dominated if you get called.

Five players remain with the blinds at 100/200, no antes. It’s folded to a good and aggressive player on the button with 2,600 chips. He raises to 500. You’re in the SB with 2,000 chips, holding the 4h 6h, and haven’t raised for a round. Move all-in.

Four players remain in level 7, with blinds/antes of 200/400/50. The SB has 1,200, the BB has 1,600, the player under the gun has 4,100, and you have 6,600 on the button. A reasonable player under the gun raises to 1,000. Move all-in. You don’t even need to look at your cards. The raiser likely only raised to 1,000 so that he can fold if you move all-in. His bubble effects are so high here that he can only correctly call with a premium hand, even if he knows you haven’t looked at your cards when you raise. This is an incredibly powerful use of this play.

With 4 players remaining in level 6, 100/200 blinds and 25 antes, it’s folded to you in the SB with 2,800 chips. The professional player in the big blind has 4,800. You have As9h. Fold! That’s right, fold, even though you have a decent ace in a SB-BB situation. You have a high-bubble-effect situation and you can’t risk 2,800 chips trying to win 400 with this hand. If you make a standard raise to 600, the BB is likely to re-raise you all-in and now you’ll have to fold 600 chips lighter.

The Squeeze Play (or Power Re-raise)

An opportunity for a squeeze play presents itself when someone raises and at least one other player calls. If you re-raise, you’re squeezing the initial raiser; he not only has to worry about you, but about the caller behind him as well. Very often you’ll have more fold equity using the squeeze play than when there were no callers.

Blinds are 50/100, 6 players are left, and all the stacks are between 1,500 and 3,000. One player raises to 300 and another calls. You’re on the button with 6h 4h. This is a time when you can occasionally move all-in. This is the squeeze play or power re-raise. The initial raiser probably won’t call without a powerful hand and it’s unlikely the caller has a strong hand either, or else he would have re-raised. If one of them calls with a good hand, you’ve got a nice suited connector that might get lucky.
You can make a squeeze play from the blinds as well as in position, but I recommend that you only do it if your raise is all-in. If stacks are deep and your re-raise might be called, your positional disadvantage becomes a major factor. The all-in push removes this problem.

**Four Players Remaining—The Bubble**

Keeping the Small Stack Alive: If you’re the big stack and there’s a very small stack still at the table, you have enormous fold equity with the two medium stacks. You should be raising every single time there’s no action before you and often everyone will give up without a fight. But if you bust the small stack, the bubble will be over and you’ll have lost most of your fold equity. Consider folding in a slightly profitable situation against the short stack, just to keep him alive a little longer. If he stays alive a little longer, you may pick up another couple rounds of blinds from everyone else. You’re giving up a small profit here in exchange for a chance at larger profits from continuing to steal for the next few hands. I’m not suggesting that you fold a premium hand, but folding a marginal hand, such as a small pair, may be profitable.

**Example**

★ Blinds are 200/400 with a 25 ante. You’re the big stack with 6,000 in the small blind. The big blind is the short stack with 1,100. Both of the medium stacks fold, as they have for the last few orbits. You have 4d 4s. Fold and give the small stack a gift.

★ Same situation as above except that you are in the big blind and the small stack moves all-in from the small blind. You have As Qc. Call. The small stack will be pushing a lot of hands here, as he’s desperate to get some chips. Your edge is too big in this situation to give up. Take his chips.

**Three Players Remaining**

No changes.

**Heads-up Play:**

No changes.

**Summary of Chapter 12**

1. At this level your opponents will be correctly raising more aggressively prior to the action reaching you.

2. Players with a high bubble factor who make a standard raise are candidates for a re-raise steal.

3. Never make a standard raise when you’re on or near the bubble and good players with big stacks left act behind you. Move in or fold.

4. Occasionally, try a squeeze play when the opportunity presents itself. You need to be confident that:
   a. The original raiser is capable of folding a good hand.
   b. Your raise size is large enough to have some fold equity.

5. On the bubble as the big stack, occasionally fold in a marginally profitable situation against the small stack, in order to prolong the bubble.
Before delving into the various stages of MTTs, let’s examine the enormously important value of position.

In no-limit hold ‘em, the value of position can’t be stressed too strongly. When you have the advantage of acting last on the flop, turn, and river, you have critical information at your disposal to use in decision-making. Acting last allows you to pick up a lot of pots when both you and your opponents have missed the flop.

The best players in the game play a wide range of hands when on or near the button. They’re betting their position rather than their cards. If they happen to hit the flop—great! If they miss, though, they’ll look for opportunities to win the pot by using their position, combined with the power of their chips. Often, a well-timed bet or raise, based on information gleaned from acting last, is what makes this type of effective manipulation possible.

Even inexperienced players should play a wider range of hands on or near the button than they’d play from earlier positions. From the button, I recommend limping, even with Category 8 hands, if several opponents have already limped in. You can also call a small raise from mid-position or later, with hands as weak as Category 8. If your opponent checks on the flop, bet about 70% of the pot whether you’ve improved on the flop or not. If your opponent bets the flop and you’ve completely missed, fold.

If your opponent bets and you’ve caught a piece of the flop, whether to call, raise, or fold depends a lot on your hand and the texture of the flop. For example, if from the button you called a small raise by a player in mid-field with 7h 6h, the flop comes 7d 4s 2c, and your opponent makes a half-pot-sized bet that’s often a continuation bet as he would with two overcards, consider raising. A raise in a spot such as this usually wins you the pot if he does, indeed, have two overcards to the flop. If he holds an overpair instead of overcards, he’ll generally re-raise you and you can now safely fold, knowing that you hold the inferior hand. As you can see, position gives you the flexibility and information needed to select the appropriate play to win the pot.

Against straightforward players, if you’re on the button, call a raise from any position, and after the flop it’s checked to you, you should bet regardless of the strength of your hand. I also recommend calling a post-flop bet from a pre-flop raiser, if you have second pair, so long as the bet is half the pot or less.
Many players have now read Dan Harrington’s excellent poker book, Harrington on Hold ‘em Volume 1, in which he recommends for players who’ve raised pre-flop to continue betting post-flop, even if they completely miss on the flop. He recommends betting about half the pot, whereas I’m suggesting you bet 70% of the pot until you get a better feel for the different situations that arise. These continuation bets, as Harrington refers to them, have now become so popular that the value of hands such as second pair should now be upgraded against a single opponent making a bet of around half the pot. If you call and he checks to you on the turn, bet about 70% of the pot; he’ll usually fold.

If he bets again on the turn, you’re faced with a tougher decision. If the bet is 2/3 of the pot or more, I’d fold, but if he makes an undersized bet (say 1/3 of the pot), I’d interpret that as weakness and would probably raise. Because he’s made such a small bet, I don’t have to raise much, relative to the size of the pot, to have the raise appear significant. For example, suppose your opponent bets half the pot on the flop and you call, now bringing the pot up to 1,000. On the turn, he now bets 300. This tiny bet usually connotes either weakness or a monster. But it’s much more common to have a weak hand than to make a monster, so I presume, until proven otherwise, that he’s weak. With second pair and this betting sequence, I’d probably raise that 300 bet on the turn to 900, if I had second pair. If he’s weak, as I suspect, he’ll fold and I’ll pick up a nice pot. The minority of the time when he’s got a big hand, he’ll re-raise me and I’ll fold. But as I said, this will happen far less frequently. On balance, I’ll make money by raising players who show weakness.

Better still are those less-experienced easy-to-read players who bet when they hit the flop and check when they don’t. As Amarillo Slim says, “You bet, I fold. You check, I bet.” Against players who don’t know how to disguise the strength of their hands, such direct thinking works like a charm!

Buying the Button
Position is so important in no-limit hold ‘em that sometimes it pays to buy the button. Let’s say you’re two seats to the right of the button, two players have already limped in before the action gets to you, and you have a hand such as Th 9h or 44. With these hands, you’d normally follow suit and limp along, but if you do, it’s likely that at least one of the two players with a positional advantage (the cut-off and button) will be tempted to call, taking away much of your positional advantage after the flop. In situations such as this, consider raising. You’re not raising based on the value of your hand, you’re raising primarily to “buy the button.” Your raise will probably chase out the cut-off and button, making you last to act post-flop, effectively making you the button. Even though these types of hands should generally be played as cheaply as possible pre-flop, being last to act on every round from the flop onward justifies a raise to “buy the button.”

Summary of Chapter 13
1. Position is of great importance in NLHE tournaments
2. Position gives you the flexibility and information to make the best play.
3. Learn to recognize and defend against continuation bets.
4. In some instances it pays to “buy the button” so that you’ll have the advantage of acting last on each round of betting after the flop.
Several significant differences between online and live tournaments call for adjustments in the way you play. Awareness of these can make a big difference in your results.

Players Online Play Looser
For obvious reasons, players are more relaxed playing online. Online they’re in the comfort of their own homes, no one is staring them down, and they’re not being scrutinized by crowds or TV cameras. This relatively more secure environment, combined with the ease of clicking a mouse rather than having to count out chips and put them in the pot, leads to looser calls and more bluffing than in live events.

Contributing to looser and more aggressive play online is the fact that players usually have less of an investment in online tournaments than in live events. Online, buy-ins are generally lower and there aren’t any travel expenses involved. Higher buy-ins and travel expenses incurred in live tournaments raise the incentive for most players to modify their decisions toward a more conservative survival strategy, instead of implementing a higher-risk aggressive approach.

Nowhere is this difference more marked than in the lower-buy-in NLHE events at the World Series of Poker. In these events, play is generally much tighter than online, except for the loose-passive “calling stations” who also frequent these events.

If players get knocked out of an online tournament, they can jump right into another one shortly thereafter. Either they build up enough chips to have a shot at winning or they bust out trying, then start fresh in a new event.

Adjustments to Capitalize on These Differences:
Bluffing: Because play is generally looser and players call more frequently, you should bluff less online. Here, players are often reluctant to fold if they flop top pair and a halfway decent side card. You’ll frequently see players commit all their chips with hands such as QsJs on a board of Qh 9h 4c, even though their opponent bets aggressively at every opportunity. In live play, it’s far more likely that a player will bail out long before committing all his chips with such a marginal hand.

To take advantage of this, bluff less, but overplay your big hands by betting a greater amount than usual. If you flop a set, bet 70% of the pot instead of checking to a pre-flop raiser. If he raises, just call. On the turn, bet again, but make it look weak, betting 1/3-1/2 of the pot. If he moves in (this may be on a bluff or with top pair), call. If he only calls on the turn, move all-in on the river. If he’s got top pair or better, most of the time you’ll get all his chips.

Because play is tighter live, you should bluff more frequently. You have greater fold equity, so you need to win less frequently at showdowns to have positive EV. This makes semi-bluffing more profitable in live play. Outright bluffs when scare cards hit, such as flush or straight cards, are also likely to be more successful live than online. Hands you represent live will command greater respect.
**C-bets:** C-bets are more likely to be successful in live play than online and should be used most of the time if you’ve raised pre-flop. Online, C-bets will be challenged more frequently, especially if the flop is coordinated, so they should be employed a bit more sparingly.

**Over-betting:** Over-betting is an effective play online. Since players call more frequently, you can sometime bet more than the size of the pot when you have a winner and still get called. As I said, many online players seem to have a phobia about folding. If they’re glued to their cards, keep firing away.

Also, if you suspect they’re on a flush or straight draw and are unlikely to fold, betting more than the pot will give them very poor pot odds for their draw. “Calling stations” get horrendously poor pot odds when you over-bet in this fashion, increasing your EV.

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**Summary of Chapter 14**

1. Online players tend to call more loosely and bluff more frequently than in live events.
2. You should bluff less online and overplay your big hands.
3. Continuation bets (C-bets) are generally more effective in live play than online play.
4. Over-betting can be an effective online tactic.
When considering starting hands, it’s important to address each particular situation. It’s not possible to make sweeping generalizations. However, a few questions can be asked every time. Some of these are:

What stage of the tournament are you in?
What actions have occurred in front of you?
What position are you in? Remember to think of position as the number of players behind you, not the number who have already folded.
What type of players are the opponents on your left who have yet to act?
How many chips do you have?
How many chips do the opponents to your left have?

When deciding on your course of action before the flop, think about the answers to these questions.

Hand Categories
The hand categories for MTTs are identical to those used in SNGs and listed on page 30. For convenience, I’ll reiterate them here. A word of caution—if you start playing no-limit, don’t mix it with limit play until you’re very proficient. Hand selection and approach in limit is different. Combining the two, especially initially, is likely to lead to confusion.

Category 1: AA, KK
Category 2: QQ, AKs, AK, JJ
Category 3: AQs, AQ, TT, 99
Category 4: AJs, KQs, 88, 77
Category 5: AJ, ATs, AT, KQ, KJs, 66, 55
Category 6: A9s-A2s, KJ, KT, QJ, QTs, JTs, 44, 33, 22
Category 7: A9-A2, KT, QJ, QT, JT, T9s, 98s, 87s, 76s, 65s, 54s
Category 8: K9s, K9, K8s, Q9s, Q8s, J9s, T8s, T9, 97s, 98, 86s, 87, 75s, 76, 64s

Hands that aren’t on this list should generally be avoided, unless you’re either in the big blind and get to see the flop without calling any more bets or you’re in the small blind with multiple limpers and can’t resist the odds you’re getting to put in an extra half-bet to see the flop. Another time you might play hands lower than Category 8 is when your stack equals four times the cost per round or less, everyone’s folded around to you, and you’re within two seats of the button. At such times, you should strongly consider moving all-in with any two cards. No-limit hold ’em is not for the faint-hearted!
Early in the Tournament

Up until the time when antes are required, there’s not much point in trying to steal a lot of blinds. Generally, you’ll have sufficient chips to play and the amount that you might steal is inconsequential. Your objective at these early stages should be to flop a big hand that wins a big pot. To accomplish this mission, it pays to see flops as cheaply as possible with medium-strength hands, but I don’t recommend slow playing big pairs. The only premium hands in hold ‘em are AA and KK. The reason I call them premium is because not only are they rare, but they also stand a good chance of winning the pot without improving. You only rate to get so many premium hands in each event and when you do, the challenge is to get as many chips as possible into the pot before the flop. Even hands as strong as these don’t do well against multiple opponents in no-limit hold ‘em, so limiting the number of players is beneficial. Raising aggressively fulfills both of these goals.

The three other highly valued dominant hands are QQ, JJ, and AK. They’re called dominant because they’re favorites against 97% of all starting hold ‘em hands. QQ and JJ are the third and fourth best starting hands, respectively. They’re greater than 4-to-1 favorites over any smaller pair. Even against AK, they’re 13-to-10 favorites. Ace-king dominates hands such as AQ, AJ, and KQ, making it a 3-to-1 favorite against those hands. You can raise or re-raise with any of these hands. However, if another player gets frisky and puts in a third raise, the only hands with which I’d feel comfortable continuing are AA and KK, and all my chips are going in right then with either hand. Unless you really know your opponent is a certifiable maniac, fold these Category 2 hands to a third raise early in the tournament. However, with hands as strong as TT or AQ-suited, I’d just call a raise, attempting to flop a well-disguised monster that might bust somebody. It also makes sense to play any pair or suited connectors, if you can play them for a small percentage of your stack. Here, you’re looking to flop a set with the pairs (3-of-a-kind with a pair in your hand) and a straight, a flush, 2-pair, or a monster draw with the suited connectors.

If you’re just beginning, I recommend following the Rule of 2 through 10 I described in the SNG section in Chapter 7. Once you have more experience, I recommend the rules of 5 and 10 plus the Rule of 3 and 6 I described in Chapter 8. Go back and review these rules if you need to.

With this overall scheme in mind, let’s look at each category:

Category 1 (AA, KK)

With these hands you can raise or re-raise from any position. Some players may tell you how smart they are by having folded KK pre-flop in some arcane situation. Fuhgedaboutit! If you can get all your money in pre-flop with this hand, go for it. Conversely, some players will tell you to milk AA for all its worth by making pissy little bets on each street. This is a recipe for disaster. Play them this way and you’ll frequently have a bad-beat story to tell your friends. Giving players proper odds to make a draw, then calling for all your chips when they finally do make their hand, is bad poker and bad thinking. If possible, try to get at least 30%-50% of your chips in pre-flop, then bet the rest on the flop regardless of what comes.

If you get involved in a multi-way pot with AA early in the tournament, I advise caution post-flop. Bet the size of the pot, but if you get called, and it’s checked to you on the turn, check it right back! If you’re first to act, just check and call. If your opponent bets on the river, simply call, don’t raise. Aces are a hard hand to fold, so try not to get in a situation with them early in the tournament where you’re put to a tough decision for all your chips. Keep the pot small!

Later on, once the antes have started and your CSI is lower, aces can be played much more aggressively post-flop. You’ll rarely be up against more than 1 opponent and your aces are probably the best hand after the flop. Fire away!
You hold Ac Ad in middle position, the blinds are 100/200, and you have 4,900. You raise to 600 and the button makes it 1,800 off a stack of 6,100. What should you do?

Count to 20 and move all-in. You’ll see “clever” plays, such as just calling the re-raise, in spots such as this, but with only 3,700 left over from calling the 1,200 raise, not to mention a sorely needed 3,900 already in the pot and ripe for picking, don’t get cute. Move all-in! You may have been re-raised by QQ and the turn may bring an ace or a king, killing your action. Remember, the idea is to get as much money as possible into the center of the pot pre-flop. Push! You’ll usually get called and be looking at KK, QQ, JJ, or AK.

You hold Kc Kd in the cutoff with blinds of 100/200 and a stack of 4,900. A player in early position makes it 600 off a stack of 5,300 and a tight player calls from middle position.

Move all-in. A pot-sized raise is 2,700, which is 51% of your stack, so clearly you’re never folding in this hand and should get your chips in now while you strongly suspect you have an advantage. If you “only” win the 1,500 that’s already in the pot, you’ll increase your stack by more than 30%. Often, one of the players will call and usually you’ll have a big edge.

In the $215 weekly Sunday Million MTT at PokerStars.com that concluded just prior to my writing this, a player (our hero) seated 3 seats to the right of the button raised to 1,800 off a stack of 23,000 with blinds of 300/600. The button with 12,000 chips called and the big blind now raised to 4,600. The original raiser thought until his time clock started ticking (a count to about 20—sound familiar?), then pushed all-in. The button thought for ages, then called, and the big stack in the big blind insta-called!

The hands: big blind-AK; hero AA; button 77. When the smoke cleared, our hero had 60,000 and was the table leader. Sweet! That’s the way to play aces.

**Category 2 (QQ, AKs, AK, JJ)**

These hands can be played in almost any pot. If you’re the first to enter the pot, you can raise. Early on in tournaments, it’s OK to just call normal raises with these hands, hoping to flop a well-disguised monster. Alternatively, you can also re-raise. If you raise and get re-raised, call. If you have QQ and someone has raised, re-raise. Otherwise, mix it up between these two alternatives (re-raise 50% of the time or any time that an aggressive opponent is playing 40% of the hands or more) and it’ll be difficult for competitors to read you.

If you have AK and flop either an ace or a king, make a bet of about 70% of the pot on the flop. If another player bets before the action comes to you, raise the size of the pot, remembering to include the amount required to call before calculating the correct amount to raise. If this raise requires more than 1/3 of your stack, just move-in. If you miss the flop entirely, bet about 70% of the pot if you have only one opponent or if the cards are uncoordinated, such as J73 or 862, and you have two or fewer opponents. Otherwise, check and give up without a fight. If you have AK and make a continuation bet on the flop and get raised, you also need to give up the hand if you failed to make a pair. After all, you can’t kiss all the girls. Every now and then, you’ll have to relinquish a pot.

If you have a hand such as QQ or JJ and the flop comes with three uncoordinated cards below that, play it the same as with AK above. If a king comes on the flop, make a bet of about 70% of the pot, but fold if raised. If an ace appears, bet into 1 opponent but check into 2 foes. If another player bets first, simply fold.

**Example**

An Ace or a King comes about 50% of the times on the flop.
Chapter 15  Starting Hands Early In The Tournament

A player in early position raises to 600 off a stack of 9,000 with blinds of 100/200. You have QQ, both black, and 10,000 chips. Raise to 2,100. After you match the initial 600 raise, there would be 1,500 in the pot; raise the pot or 2,100 total.

Your opponent calls. The flop is Jh 9h 5c. He checks. What do you do? All-in! Any reasonable bet will commit more than 1/3 of your chips. Move all-in and put maximum pressure on him if he's drawing to a straight or a flush. A big bet like this will give him much the worst of it if he's on a draw. Note that your only two realistic choices with this stack and this pre-flop action are all-in or check and fold, so pick one or the other in this type of situation, depending on the flop. If you're in doubt, stick the chips in when you're the better, and keep them for later when you're the caller. There's no doubt in this example. All the chips are going in.

Same situation as the last example and once again you have QQ. The pre-flop betting is the same. The flop is Ah 9h 5c. Your opponent bets 3000 into a pot of 4500. Fold! That 3,000 bet clearly commits your opponent to the pot. He's going all the way with his hand and most probably has you beat.

Category 3 (AQs, AQ, TT, 99)
These hands play best against only one opponent, so you should enter every pot where you’re first in with a raise. If someone else has raised, call. If there’s a raise and a re-raise before the action gets to you, muck any of these hands.

You have Ac Qc in the cutoff and a stack of 5,400, with blinds of 100/200. UTG raises to 600 and the player 2 seats to his left re-raises to 1,800 off a stack of 7,800. Fold. Your hand is dubious in this situation and you have to commit 20% of your stack to see a flop. The UTG raise represents strength and the re-raise is even stronger. Wait for a better spot.

You have Ac Qc in the cutoff and a stack of 5,400, with blinds of 100/200; it’s passed around to you. Raise to 600. You’re the first active player in the pot, have excellent position, and a powerful hand. Step on the gas!

You have Ac Qc in the cutoff and a stack of 5,400, with blinds of 100/200. The player in the 3-seat makes it 600 off a stack of 4800 and it’s passed to you. Call. You have a strong hand in good position, but not strong enough to re-raise.

Category 4 (AJs, KQs, 88, 77)
These hands are blind-stealing hands with some powerful potential. If no more than five players are acting behind you and you’re the first one in the pot, you should come in with a raise. With Category 4 hands, call if the pot’s been raised before it gets to you and see how play develops, following the rules for playing pocket pairs with your 7s and 8s. Although these are decent hands with which to call raises, be leery of them post-flop unless you flop a big hand or draw. Hands such as 88 and 77 play poorly if overcards come on the flop, unless you flop a set. What you’re looking for, and in fact what your early strategy for medium pocket pairs is underpinned by, is to flop a set. If you do so and another player has made top-pair/top kicker or perhaps 2-pair, you have a chance to double your chips early. Another acceptable option with Category 4 hands is to limp behind one or more players and delay the decision of how to proceed until you see the flop. The point here is that these hands have great potential, but they generally need to improve to win, so if you can get in cheap against several opponents, why not seize the opportunity?
Chapter 15 Starting Hands Early In The Tournament

You’re in the cutoff with 8h 8c and a stack of 6,900, with blinds of 100/200. The 3rd player to act makes it 600 to go off a stack of 6,100 and everyone passes to you. This is close. If you’re a beginner using the Rule of 2 through 9, you should fold. That 600 raise is a bit more than 8% of your stack and is about 10% of your opponent’s. If you’re a touch more experienced and using the Rule of 5 and 10, call. You have excellent position and a good enough hand to call up to 10% of the lesser of the two stacks and see what develops.

You have Ah Jh in the hijack and a stack of 6,400, with the blinds of 100/200. It’s passed around to you. Raise to 600. You’re the first one into the pot with good position, and you’ve an excellent hand. Enough said.

Category 5 (AJ, ATs, AT, KQ, KJs, 66, 55)

These hands are far above average hands and it’s fine to raise with them if no more than four players are yet to act behind you. If you’re in one of the first four positions in an early stage of the tournament, just let most of these hands go, since they’ve cost you nothing and may get you into trouble. With 66 and 55, follow the applicable rule.

With the exception of the pairs, you don’t want to call raises with Category 5 hands; they’ll usually cause you headaches, get you broke, or both. The big question is what do you do when you raise with 66 from the cutoff and the button makes a large re-raise? The truth is that there isn’t a clear answer and you’ll have to decide at that moment. You’ll usually be favored if they hold two overcards, but you’re greater than a 4-to-1 underdog, if they hold a higher pair. Of course, if you call and they turn over a smaller pair, you’ll be thrilled! If you want a rigid guideline, fold early in the tournament. You’d certainly fold if the player appears to be conservative. Later on, you may have to make a stand with these hands.

You have As Tc in the 3-seat and a stack of 11,400, with blinds and antes of 100/200/25. It’s passed to you. Fold. Your position is poor and 6 players are yet to act. If you have the same hand in the hijack (2 seats to the right of the button), raise to 600.

You have 6s 6d in the 5-seat and a stack of 11,400, with blinds and antes of 100/200/25. It’s passed to you. Raise to 600. This is within the restrictions of the pocket-pair rules and the hand has potential if you get called.

Category 6 (A9s-A2s, KJ, KTs, QJs, QTs, JT, 44, 33, 22)

Raise when entering the pot with these hands if you’re first in and no more than three players are behind you. If you get re-raised by a conservative player, you have to give these hands up.

You have As 5s on the button and a stack of 11,400, with blinds and antes of 100/200/25. It’s passed to you. Raise to 600.

You have 4s 4d on the cutoff with a stack of 11,400, with blinds and antes of 100/200/25. It’s passed to you. Raise to 600. You’ve got good position and the Rule of 5 and 10 applies.

You have 4s 4d UTG with a stack of 11,400, with blinds and antes of 100/200/25. Muck. A standard raise is over 5% of your stack and your position is the worst. Give it a pass.

There are no prizes for making hero calls early. You usually have enough chips to walk away.
Category 7 (A9-A2, KT, QJ, QT, JT, T9s, 98s, 87s, 76s, 65s, 54s)
Raise with these hands when you’re first to enter the pot and are on the button. Fold to a re-raise from either blind, unless the Rule of 5 and 10 applies. Don’t play these hands in any other situations unless you’re employing the Rule of 5 and 10, which applies to the suited connectors.

You have 9s8s on the button and a stack of 12,400, with blinds and antes of 100/200/25. As first in, you raise to 600 on the button and the little blind passes, then the big blind re-raises to 1800 off a stack of 11,800. What to do?

It depends on your read and your instinct. If the big blind is a tight-aggressive player, fold. But if he’s a loose-aggressive and you think he may be re-stealing, then all-in is the best play. Turn up the heat and be the maniac they fear! Even if he calls your all-in with a hand such as AK offsuit, you’ll only be about a 7-to-5 underdog. All those times that he’ll fold when you move all-in more than compensates for this.

Suited Connectors: With the suited connectors T9s, 98s, 87s, 65s, and 54s, I recommend limping from any position and calling a small raise, provided that it’s for 5 to 10% of your stack, according to the Rule of 5 and 10. This is a reasonable risk for the potential of flopping a hand that can win a big pot.

Category 8 (K9s, K9, K8s, Q9s, Q8s, J9s, T8s, T9, 97s, 98, 86s, 87, 75s, 76, 64s)
These are mostly hands that might get you into trouble. Nonetheless, they have some value and I recommend playing them under the following circumstances.

The Rule of 3 and 6 applies for the 1-gap suited connectors, such as J9s, T8s, 97s, 86s, etc., in the following instances:

From the button, if there’s been one or more limpers but no raise and it costs a tiny percentage of your stack.

From the small blind, if there’s been one or more limpers.

With these hands, you’re hoping to flop either 2-pair or better, or a big draw such as both a straight and a flush draw, a pair plus either a straight or flush draw, or a straight or flush draw with overcards.

You have 7c 5c in the cutoff with blinds of 100/200 and have 14,000 chips. An opponent in early position raises to 600 and everyone folds to you. Call. The Rule of 3 and 6 applies. The flop is Ah 7h 5d. Your opponent bets 1,500. What’s your play?

Move-in! If your opponent has a hand such as AK, it will be very hard for him to fold. Since 2 hearts are on the board, he may think you’re on a flush draw. If he has AK, you’re a 3-to-1 favorite. Push.

Blinds and antes are 100/200/25 at a 9-handed table. You’re on the button with 10,000 chips and 2 players have limped in, but no one has raised. You have 7h-6s. Call. You’re getting good odds (about 5-to-1) on the 200 it costs you to call, no one has showed any strength, and you’ll act last on all rounds. It’s costing you 2% of your chips. It’s worth the risk to try and flop a big hand or to take a stab at stealing the pot by betting, if everyone checks to you on an uncoordinated flop. The flop comes 4c 5d 7h, giving you top pair and an open-ended straight draw. The first player bets 1,000 and the next player calls. What should you do?
This is a great flop for you. With about 3,000 already in the pot and a good chance that both players will fold if you move-in, it’s time to get aggressive. Any 3, 6, 7, or 8 are likely winners if you get called. If not, you’ll increase your stack by 30%. Push all-in!

Blinds and antes are 200/400/25, 8-handed. The UTG player and the button have limped in. You have 6h 4h in the small blind and a stack of 5,000. What’s your play?

Call the extra 200. You’re getting an irresistible 8-to-1 odds on your 200. This is an easy call, even though you’ll be first to act on each round from the flop onward.

Summary of Chapter 15

1. By playing, you gain experience that can’t be taught.
2. Learn the eight hand categories or print them out for easy reference.
3. Early in the tournament, try to flop a hand that can win a big pot.
4. Go for potential over current status. For instance, early in the tournament call a raise with 77 (based on the Rules), but don’t call a raise with A7.
5. Early in the tournament consider just calling a raise, rather than re-raising, with hands as strong as TT or AQ-suited, in an attempt to flop a well-concealed monster. Later in the tournament you’ll usually be re-raising or moving in with these hands.
6. Use the Rules of 2 through 10, 5 and 10, and 3 and 6.
7. Play big hands and big draws aggressively. If you think a player is re-stealing, be prepared to fight the bully by moving all-in. You’ve got to have heart and be willing to go broke in order to succeed.
Properly preparing for an online tournament is important. First of all, clear the decks! Turn off the television, put away your papers, put the phone on answering machine, and turn off your mobile. Have a bottle of water and a light healthy (not potato chips or candy bars) snack handy; get some cushions for your chair and prepare to settle in for what might be a few hours of play.

A poker tournament needs to be viewed as a marathon, not a sprint, so you need to start with a long-term view. Don’t have some other plan later in the day that will conflict with winning the tournament. Why start something that you can’t finish? Begin with the idea that you’ll win and allot the time necessary to do so. For this reason, you may want to get your feet wet with the 45-player tournaments available at PokerStars.com. These are classified as SNGs, but only because they start as soon as they fill up. They play like a MTT and the small maximum-field size ensures that they’re finished in a few hours.

If you use medicinal aids, have them nearby. Don’t stress your body with more coffee, sugar, or carbohydrates than it’s used to (I realize that could be a lot). While these may give you an initial lift, this will soon wear off. Jangled nerves from too much coffee or sugar can lead to bad decisions. Fluctuations in blood sugar and insulin levels can be fatiguing later in the tournament when energy and focus count most. Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. While some players, such as Blair Rodman, claim that a single beer helps their game by loosening them up a touch and making them more fearless, any more than this is counterproductive. For me and most people, any alcohol at all clouds awareness. Missing a subtle sign can be the difference between winning and losing.

Focus is of paramount importance, so relieving both mind and work space of clutter sets the stage for your best effort. I routinely meditate prior to both live and online tournaments, using high-tech brain entrainment CDs. Other forms of meditation are also effective. Whatever clears your mind and floats your boat will work.

Now that you’re mentally ready and organized, it’s time to do a little preparatory work. First, find the blind-structure sheet that’s published on the tournament lobby page; go to the tournament lobby, then to the “tournament info” tab. This tells you not only how much time you’ll have at each level, but also the schedule for increases in the blinds and antes. As described earlier, once you know the structure, you can easily compute the cost-per-round (CPR) for each level of play. Simply add up the two blinds plus the total antes for all 9 players. For example, if the small blind is 200, the big blind 400, and the ante is 50, the CPR is \(400 + 800 + (9 \times 50) = 1,650\). This is the cost of each complete orbit at this level, if you don’t play a hand.

Next, prepare a worksheet, taking the CPR for each level and multiplying it by 10. This is the amount of chips you’ll need to have a CSI of 10, an amount sufficient to last 10 complete orbits at this level without playing. Below, I explain the significance of this number. Do this for all levels up to the second break, then continue to update as the tournament progresses, staying one break (4 levels) ahead.
In the weekly $215 Sunday tournament on PokerStars, for example, you’ll start with 10,000 chips and blinds of 25/50, or a CPR of 75; each level is 15 minutes. 75x10=750, so put this on the sheet. The next level is 50/100—a CPR of 150, or 1500 chips required for a CSI of 10. Continue this table for each level through the second break. Your sheet should look like this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>CPR</th>
<th>CSI-10</th>
<th>MINUTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25/50</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50/100</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100/200</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150/300</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREAK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200/400</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300/600</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400/800</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400/800/50</td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>16,500</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREAK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This takes you through the first two breaks, or 8 levels. At the first break, add four more levels to your table, at the second break add another four, and so on, so long as you’re still alive in the tournament.

So what’s the purpose of the “CSI-10” column? The amount of chips required to play ten orbits is the cutoff, above which you’re comfortable, and below which you’re beginning to feel the pinch of the blinds. Put another way, if your stack of chips is above a CSI of 10, you can play more speculative hands and make more moves to accumulate chips; below this CSI, you’ll need to adjust your play. While I still recommend aggressive play, you’ll no longer be able to play speculative hands in raised pots without committing too much of your stack to make this line of play profitable. Experts agree that CSI-10 is the pivotal point for this change in approach, so focus your attention on this critical juncture and act accordingly.

Once you’re seated at the table, check out the other players. Note where they’re from, as this may give you a line on their play. In my experience, players from Scandinavia, for example, tend to play aggressively, while players from the U.K., as a rule, tend to play more conservatively.

Of course, these are only general guidelines, but it’s a piece of information that might give you a valuable clue as to how they’ll play. This initial impression can either be confirmed or denied by direct observation. You’ll add other bits of information as you go along, forming impressions as to the types of players you’re up against. This may help later in decision-making.

Next, check to see if you have any recorded notes on any of the players at your table. You should make notes as you go along, using the “Notes” tab to identify each player and recording what type of player he is, including his weaknesses, strengths, and tendencies. Look for patterns in the way your opponents play and make note of them. Over time, you’ll put together an extensive inventory of notes that you can use to your advantage.

You’re now ready to play. Time to focus, focus, focus! Watch every action in every hand intently, whether you’re in the hand or not. It’s often possible to glean far more information about a player when you’re not involved in a pot than when you are. Pay particular attention to hands where the hole cards are shown, making notes where applicable. For example, if a player raises from under-the-gun (first to act) and, after all the cards are dealt, shows down a hand such as Td 8d, you now know that he doesn’t necessarily need a premium hand to raise in first position. Make a note. If a player raises frequently, but backs down when re-raised, make a note. If a player gets caught bluffing, jot it down. Record all observations that will help you build a profile on each of your opponents.
This type of information may prove to be very useful when you tangle with them later and may be faced with a critical decision. At times such as this, your observations may allow you to make a big call or to fold a hand that, had you played it, would have busted you. As you watch, try to predict the hole cards of the players. Start to think in terms of a range of hands that you think a player may have, then notice the results of the hand checking the accuracy of your “read.” Over time, this exercise in diligence will hone your hand-reading ability, enabling you to distinguish a bluff from a monster.

The tournament-lobby page provides a wealth of information—the size of the payouts, how many spots are paid, the length and frequency of the breaks, how long until the next break, how long the tournament has been running, how many entrants there were originally and how many are left, and more.

Additionally, sites such as PokerStars provide you with the average chip stack for the remaining contestants, updated instantly as players are eliminated. The largest stack and the shortest stack in the tournament are on each side of the average stack. This data is also available for each individual table. You can even watch another table while you’re playing. This is useful when, for example, there’s a very low stack at another table and his elimination means that all remaining players (including you) are in the money.

An important point to note, if you’ve fallen below the average stack, is that you needn’t feel pressured to get to average quickly. More important, keep an eye on your sheet and be fully aware of your CPR and CSI. It’s this, and only this, that should dictate your actions. If your stack size drops below CSI-10, then you’ll be ardently looking for opportunities to increase it and to take some risks to double up your stack. At CSI-7, your decisions become binary—meaning that your decisions are reduced to all-in or fold. Much of the excitement of poker on television—big all-in confrontations—is actually driven by an understanding of the math that applies to the situation.

If you have a stack size of CSI-7 or less (10 times the big blind is about equivalent) and make a standard raise of three times the big blind, you’ll have committed 35% or more of your stack. Once you put this much of your stack into the pot, you’re pretty much committed to calling a re-raise. This being the case, it’s a more powerful play for you to push all-in straight away, rather than making a smaller raise. Not only does this remove the possibility of re-raising you out of the pot, an idea that many aggressive players may have, it also puts your opponents to a guess as to the strength of your hand.

You should make this same all-in move with your marginal hands, such as AT or 44, and with your strong hands, such as AA and KK. Remember this idea—play your very strong hands in exactly the same way that you play your weakest hands—constantly putting your opponent to a guess as to the strength of your hand.

What you don’t want to do is to give away the strength of your hand by your betting pattern. For example, if you have chips equal to CSI-7, it would be an error to raise to 3 times the big blind with a big pair and to move all-in with your mediocre hands, trying to steal the blinds and antes. Sharp players will notice this pattern and start calling when you push in, while folding when you make a standard raise. Standardizing your bets disguises the strength of your hands. Pros, such as Howard Lederer and Chris “Jesus” Ferguson, choose to disguise the strength of their hands by playing all of them in exactly the same way. This is a good habit for new players to develop.
## Summary of Chapter 16

1. Clear the decks of all distractions before starting each event.
2. Don’t start an event you’re not prepared to finish.
3. Don’t jack your energy around by using artificial input.
4. When you’re not in a hand, closely observe what cards other players show in order to get a line on the way they play.
5. Keep your CPR and CSI calculations at least four levels ahead.
6. Check any notes you have on opponents, and continually add new ones.
7. Play your strong hands exactly the same your weak hands.
This book is about NLHE tournaments—the game that’s taken the world by storm. Here are some basic principles that will improve your chances of winning.

One key principle is to develop an understanding of the various personality types of your competitors. There are 4 basic personality profiles that I’ll describe here.

The Loose-Passive Player (LPP)
Also called the “calling station,” because that’s all he does (call call call), This type of player is stubborn and foolish, hanging around in hands long after wiser players would have folded. Because of this trait, he’s often derogatorily and dismissively referred to as a “donkey.” Donkeys have spawned a whole new poker vocabulary—donkish, donkoid, donking off chips, donkastic, donkfest, etc. They like to play lots of hands pre-flop, especially if they can limp. Post-flop they continue to be too loose, playing marginal hands and draws.

Don’t ever try to bluff the calling station, but watch out if he ever takes aggressive action. He usually doesn’t bet unless he has a hand. If he ever shows strength and you have a powerful hand yourself, don’t raise him up and don’t be afraid to raise a larger amount than normal. The key to playing against donkeys is never to bluff, but to over-bet your good hands at every opportunity, including going all-in on the river, as his curiosity will often get the better of him and he’ll pay you off. Loose passive players are the best type of player to prey on to build your chip stack in tournaments, but will be long gone and hard to find when the prizes are given out.

The Loose-Aggressive Player (LAG)
There are many flavors of the loose-aggressive; some are crafty, some are bullies, and some are just certifiable maniacs. But they all love to play hands and they all love to bet. The key against these players is not to let them run you over. Because they play so many hands, by definition they frequently must have a weaker than average holding. Since they love to bet, trapping and slow playing work well against them. So does fighting fire with fire. Take a stand and play back at them with a hand that you figure is ahead of their wide range. As a guideline, re-raise them with hands in the top 50% of the range of hands you assume they’re playing. It may take some courage, though. If the player you stand up to is ultra-hyper aggressive, you may find yourself risking all your chips! Be prepared for him to re-raise all-in and make up your mind in advance that you’re going to call.

Loose-aggressive players are most likely to be young wannabe stars, young soon-to-be stars, or young stars. They often band together and discuss most situations that come up in tournaments. They’re the modern version of the old-time tight-aggressive player, but with an edge. That edge comes from information—poker may be a game of incomplete information, but this group gets it, chews it over, and decides what the best plays are that they can make. Excellent examples of this kind of player include Patrik Antonius, Carlos Mortensen, and Phil Ivey.
Crafty players are often old veterans of the cash-game wars. They know how to make a lot of plays and moves, all with the intention of misleading you as to the strength of their hand. Once they have your head spinning, they swoop in for the kill. They’re great hand readers and make big calls if they smell a bluff. Examples of players who use this style are Freddy Deeb, Barry Greenstein, and Sammy Farha.

**The Tight-Passive Player (TPP)**

The tight-passive player has learned that good players are tight, but he just doesn’t have the courage to put in a lot of money without a good hand. This player may not realize how valuable it is to steal the blinds (when they get large) or how successful a continuation bet can be. He might raise pre-flop with AK, but when the flop comes all low cards, he’ll give up and curse his luck. "Why doesn’t AK ever win?" he thinks. He may go through phases where he doesn’t raise with AK, just because he doesn’t want to lose the extra money.

Many players in the mid-range of SNGs ($20 to $50 games) are tight-passive. They often finish 3rd or 4th and many of them make a small profit. Sometimes playing tight is all you need, but to make a big profit, you need to learn to run over your opposition. Against the tight-passive player, make frequent small bets after the flop whenever he shows weakness. Rob him a little bit at a time, taking lots of small pots away from him. Give up if he ever bets or raises.

**The Tight-Aggressive Player (TAG)**

This player doesn’t play many hands, but when he does, he plays them to the max. Once he shows strength, he usually continues his aggression no matter if he hits the flop or not. This is the right type of player to be, at least in the early stages, and he’ll play very similarly to the way I’ve outlined in this book.

Tight-aggressive is the old-school player who used to be the biggest worry in a poker tournament, but LAGs are now considered to be a bigger threat due to their unpredictability. Still, TAGs are no fun to have in the game, because they play well, they’re often in there with the better hand, and more important, you won’t make any plays against them that they haven’t seen before. They adjust what they do to the situation and read your moves for what they are—moves. Examples are TJ Cloutier, Dewey Tomko, and Tom McEvoy.

**The Situational Player**

A sub-category of the TAG is a tough new breed known as the “situational” player. Situational players pay close attention to what you’ve done in the past and will probably take advantage of your tendencies and weaknesses. They typically play the situation more than their cards. If they smell weakness, they’re not afraid to push. They carefully pick their spots and they’re not foolish with their chips. To get them you likely have to have a better hand or make a multi-street play. You have to bet convincingly or show them the goods. Examples would be Doyle Brunson, Allen Cunningham, Andrew Black, Nenad Medic, and Paul Wasicka.

The best personalities for you to adopt are tight-aggressive early, then shift toward loose-aggressive as the tournament progresses. The good players will make a shift in personality with you, but others won’t adjust their game enough. Don’t assume that a player won’t change his personality when the tournament gets short-handed or if his stack gets low. Watch how he plays, take notes, and adjust your play accordingly.

**Playing Against Passive Players**

By showing up at the start of a tournament, you’ll get a read on the way your table as a whole is playing. For example, if you’re at a “raise-and-take-it” type of table, where typically everyone folds when someone raises, you’ll likely play differently than if you’re at a table that is playing “ram-and-jam” style with a lot of chips going into every pot. If your table is passive and players are playing tight (tight-passive), an effective counter-strategy is to raise more frequently, but generally back off if you get re-raised. If your table is passive but loose (loose-passive), you can consider taking cheap flops with speculative hands, hoping to flop a big hand and “stack” (bust) an opponent.
Playing at Aggressive Tables
You’ll need to be more cautious at aggressive tables than at passive tables. Aggressive players can be either tight or loose, but both are more dangerous than tight or loose passive players. You can play more hands against passive players, because they don’t raise nearly as much. It’s more difficult to play a wide variety of speculative hands against aggressive players, because their frequent raises will chase you out of too many pots where you’d be getting the wrong odds to play.

Tight-aggressive players select premium starting hands or fold. When they play, they put in a substantial raise. They’re also often sufficiently disciplined to avoid getting stacked by possible flushes, straights, or 3-of-a-kinds. An effective counter-strategy against this type of player is to substantially tighten your entrance requirements in the early going. Later on when the size of the blinds is more appetizing, you can open up and steal blinds from this type of player. If you get re-raised, though, duck for cover!

Loose-aggressive players are probably the toughest to defend against. They play a lot of hands, betting and raising frequently. Their playing frequency makes them difficult to avoid. You can play more hands against this type of player than against the tight aggressive, but you’ll need to be more selective than when you’re up against a loose-passive player. If you’re fortunate enough to flop a big hand, such as 2-pair or better, against this type of foe, give him enough rope to hang himself. Like a martial artist, you can use the force of his aggression against him by letting him unsuccessfully try to bully you out of the hand, then zapping him with a big raise on the flop, turn, or river. This is known as “trapping.” Loose-aggressive players can be trapped. The less threatening the board, the later in the hand you can wait before springing your trap.

Adjusting Your Strategy for Your Opponents’ Tendencies
The guiding principle is that if the table is playing tightly, raise a bit more than usual if no one has raised, but be wary of calling a raise without a premium hand. If the table is playing loosely, play few hands, but play them aggressively. The correct strategy is to play opposite from the path chosen by most of your tablemates. In every case you want to be alert as to how your opponents are playing and react accordingly. At first, adjust your play about 10% based on the type of opponents you encounter and let the cards you hold make up the other 90% of your decision. As you gain experience you’ll be able to adjust these percentages—situational play will continue to gain in significance and you’ll need to rely less on the strength of your hand.

Observing Correctly and Understanding Your Table Image
Your “image” is the way your opponents perceive your style of play. This image will change as the tournament progresses. Which category of player are your opponents currently putting you in? Do they think you’re aggressive or passive, loose or tight? The impression you give your opponents is dependent on the quality of hands you show down, your level of aggression based on the frequency with which you bet or raise, and the overall number of pots in which you’re involved. Other players can’t see your cards if they aren’t shown down. Also, they weren’t there when Big Bubba folded his set to you last week. So they haven’t and won’t take those things into account when making decisions. The more pots you enter, the looser you’ll appear; the more you bet or raise, the more aggressive you’ll seem to be. Note that this appearance or image will be created whether its “true” or not. For instance, you may have just bet or raised in 4 of the past 6 hands, with all your opponents folding each time. Your image will be loose and aggressive, even if every one of your hands was aces!

A mistake a lot of beginners make is to try to create a certain image. Early in a tournament they go out of their way to play either very loose or very tight, but often at the expense of making less than optimal decisions in order to fulfill an image objective. These decisions cost them EV, which is often very difficult to make back. Their table may change later in the tournament and they’ll be playing with different players who weren’t there to witness their “show.” Even when they find themselves
facing some of the same players, they might not get the proper hands or face the proper situations to profitably take advantage of the image they created.

You can, however, have it both ways. The superior way to use table image to your advantage is to continually make the best possible decision in each situation based on your cards and how your opponents view you at that moment. Allow your image to develop and change naturally, an offshoot of how your recent decisions looked to your opponents. When you get a few good hands in succession, your image will naturally become loose and aggressive. You can take advantage of this by playing your better hands more aggressively. Sometimes you get very bad hands for hours at a time and your image will be tight and passive. Use this image to steal or re-steal with marginal hands to get back in the game.

You've raised pre-flop in 3 out of the last 5 pots and won unchallenged. You're dealt Ah Td three seats from the button and it’s passed to you. While you would normally raise here, in this instance you should fold. It’s likely that your opponents will assume you’ve been stealing due to your number of recent pre-flop raises and will re-raise with much weaker hands than normal, because their current impression of you is loose and aggressive. Since you can’t call a re-raise with this hand and they’ll re-raise more frequently than normal, it’s best not to get involved.

Evaluating and Taking Notes on Your Opponents
The first few hands against someone you’ve never seen before are going to make a very strong impression on you, one that may take many sessions, or even years, to alter. Try not to put too much emphasis on any one hand, since your opponent might have hit the wrong button or was just distracted by something. Don’t ignore what you see, but don’t get swept away by it either.

It takes hours of play to see people in various situations and pick up clues as to how they’re likely to act. If you play online at an efficient site such as PokerStars, it’s easy to take notes on how that person played a particular hand. If you play with someone awhile, you can make multiple entries that can easily be accessed when you’re faced with a difficult decision. Over time, you may be able to create a dossier on a player that not only makes it easier to remember him when you encounter him in the future, but also provides you with the elements of a plan to counteract and take advantage of his likely playing pattern.

Luck Versus the Quality of Your Decisions
Don’t rely on luck to get you to that final table. It’s the quality of your decisions that gets you there. In order to successfully navigate the path to success, you need to be at the top of your game—at all times aware of what’s going on at your table. Even when you play your best, you’ll lose part of the time, so regard every success, every win, as a special gift.

When you arrive with better weapons than your tablemates and consistently make better decisions, you’ll also get to the final table more often than others. Even then you won’t always get there…it’s just that you’ll get there more frequently than most of your opponents. Over time, the luck factor will unfold in a truly random way that favors no particular player. Image, focus, control, patience, fearlessness, and strategic planning are the legs of the final table. Luck is the thin layer of felt on top.

How the Size of Your Stack Influences Your Play
Poker events run with the idea of eventually ending up with one winner. The continual narrowing of the field is accomplished by periodically raising the blinds (and antes) in pre-announced time frames. These incremental increases in the CPR (cost per round) prevent players from just sitting back and waiting for aces before getting involved. The effect of this constant raising of the CPR is to take some of the chips from every player at the end of every time frame. If the blinds double, it’s equivalent to someone going around and taking half of each player’s chips! You just can’t sit forever and wait.
When you have a short stack, your options are greatly reduced. Often, the optimal play is to either fold or push all-in. The reason for this is that a standard raise will commit such a large percentage of your chips that you’ll be mathematically obliged to put the rest of your chips in the pot if you get re-raised. As previously discussed, it makes sense to move in or fold, rather than betting a smaller amount, when you have a CSI of 7 or less.

Having chips puts you in position to make speculative and situational plays. Your big stack will threaten other players who’ll realize that if they mess with you, they may be flirting with elimination. Also, you can afford to see more flops with speculative hands in hopes of flopping a disguised powerhouse. Your primary goal in the early part of each tournament is to be in good shape for the middle part of the tournament—I define that as having more than 10x CPR or a CSI greater than 10 as explained previously. Keep an eye on your stack and don’t wait too long to become more active when your stack begins to dwindle under a CSI of 10. Each fold becomes more costly as your CSI diminishes.

**Trapping with Aces**

Someone makes a pre-flop raise ahead of you and you have aces—nothing is sweeter! But sometimes you can make it even better by just calling pre-flop and not re-raising. If your opponent hits the flop, he may have trouble letting go of the hand. And in any case, you’ll usually get another continuation bet out of him. The best time to do this is when the raiser is in early position—he’s more likely to have a real hand and isn’t just stealing the blinds.

Another variation of this is to just limp in early position yourself with aces. Then if someone else raises, you can re-raise or continue to trap by just calling. The disadvantage of just calling is that you might not get the money in as a favorite. Plus, you’ll have to play the hand out of position. Also, when someone limps and then re-raises, the first thing the other players will think is, “Oh, he’s got aces or kings.”

A really sneaky play is to take advantage of that assumption and try the limp-re-raise with other hands, such as AK, 55, or 65s. They’ll naturally put you on a powerful hand and you can pick up a lot of pots, either before or after the flop.

**The Short-Stack Lure**

Imagine this scenario. Your opponent has a CSI somewhere in the range of 8 to 12 and you have him covered. He makes a normal-sized raise in late position and you’re in the blinds with a powerful hand such as AA or KK. If you re-raise, essentially putting him all-in, he’ll frequently fold a weak hand with which he was just trying to steal the blinds. However, if you just call pre-flop and check on the flop, he’ll frequently try to c-bet (often all-in), even when he missed the flop. This allows you to collect all his chips when he tries to bluff.

**Some Poker Wisdom**

**Aphorism #1: “You can’t win a tournament in the first hour... but you can lose it!”**

The reason that it’s not possible to win the tournament right away is the simple practical limitation that if 210 players enter an event, only nine opponents are likely to be at your table. Even if you could somehow eliminate all nine opponents on the very first hand of the event, you’d still have 200 opponents left that you’d have to overcome. Of course, you’d have an enormous chip lead, but there would be many hours and many decisions ahead of you. By the time the final table arrives, your success at your first table will mean relatively little. You’ll have less than half the chips needed to have an average stack at the final table.

Looking at the other side of the coin, you could be one of those nine players that gets eliminated on hand 1. In this case, your tournament is obviously over, hence the aphorism. Many top players have suffered the ignominy of defeat on hand 1 in some big event or another. I escaped this occurrence for many years, but while writing this book, it happened. I flopped top 2-pair and was stacked by a set on the very first hand of the opening event of the Victorian Championships at Crown Casino in Melbourne.
Understanding probabilities helps soften the blow. If it happens to you, don’t let it bother you too much. Some player that you’ve never seen before may move all-in on the first hand of the main event of the World Series of Poker and you look down at the best possible starting hand in hold’em — AA. Calling here is always correct. On average, you’ll double up your starting stack more than 4 out of 5 times and get off to a flying start, but you’ll still lose sometimes. Those 1-in-5 chances do hit about 20% of the time (funny how that works), and there’s nothing you can do about it, other than to understand the probabilities, grin, and move on.

**Aphorism #2: “In order to live… you have to be willing to die.”**

This great quote about tournament poker is attributed to poker pro and WSOP bracelet winner, Dr. Max Stern. You must overcome your fear of perishing and put your chips, all of them, into the pot if that’s the right play. Fearlessness is a huge asset in NLHE. Many times players tell me how they “knew” that if they pushed in a certain situation, their opponent couldn’t have called, but they didn’t have the courage to do so. This is an area where the best in the game excel. If they smell weakness, they’ll put enormous pressure on their opponent, forcing him to fold. Conversely, if a player’s bets don’t add up and they think he’s bluffing, they’ll risk everything on the strength of their conviction. Players who run scared generally can’t win poker tournaments.

**Aphorism #3: “It takes a stronger hand to call a raise than to make a raise.”**

This adage can be proven mathematically. Let’s say you only have sufficient chips remaining to play 7 orbits around the table (CSI-7). Let’s further assume that your opponent is an IBM supercomputer and plays perfectly. What percentage of hands should you move in with and what percentage of hands should the computer optimally call with? The correct answer is for you to move in with the top 57% of all hands and for the computer to call with 36% of the hands. If either you or the computer deviates from this, you’d be giving up equity. Detailed discussions of situations such as this go far beyond the scope of this book, but are discussed in detail in *Kill Everyone*.

**THE FIRST FEW LEVELS IN A MULTI-TABLE TOURNAMENT**

Your mission is to accumulate chips and it’s much easier to get your chips from inexperienced players now than it will be try to pry them loose from Phil Ivey, Patrik Antonius, or an Internet-tournament wunderkind later on. So how can this be done?

**Play Hands That Can Win Big Pots**

Look for hands that can become monsters and win big pots if you hit the flop, while costing you precious little if you miss. Our objective is to try to make sets, flushes (especially nut flushes), and straights, as these types of hands have the potential to stack an opponent, while hands such as a pair don’t.

**Try to Flop a Set**

Small to medium pairs also play easily early on. Here you’re trying to flop a set. Remember, when you have only 1 in your hand and 2 are on the board, that’s known as trips and isn’t a set. When you start with 4c 4d, sometimes you’ll make a powerful fully hidden hand on a flop, such as 9h 4s 2s, where you might well bust a player with an overpair or even a hand such as A9. On the other hand, if you miss the flop entirely, for example Ah Ks Jc, it’s easy to muck the pocket 4s when faced with a bet and move on.

I’ll give you a practical example. You start an online tournament with 2,000 in chips and the blinds are 10/20; your CSI is over 66! A player in first position (UTG) makes a standard raise to 60 and it’s passed around to you on the button. According to the Rule of 2 to 9, you can play for up to 4% of your chips with 44. With only the blinds left to act and given the fact that the raiser has shown strength by raising under-the-gun, you doubt that either blind will re-raise, so you call for 3% of your stack. At this point you’re hoping—nay, you’re praying—that the raiser has AA or KK. Why? Because if you flop a set you can bust him, and all he can win from you is that measly 60 that’s already in the pot. If you don’t flop a set, adios! If he has AK or AQ and doesn’t make a pair, you won’t stack him when you flop a set, but you may collect some more loot if he tries to bluff.
Say the flop comes Qh 4s 2s. Perfect! Now beside aces and kings, if he has AQ he’s like a fat man on a thin limb! If he’s got AA, KK, or AQ, how can he release it? You’ve invested 80 to win 2,000. Note that even if the flop comes with all low cards, but without a 4, such as 7h 5s 2d, you should fold if your opponent bets. If a single opponent checks to you, however, go ahead and make one, and only one, bet.

**Playing Suited Aces**

Flushes, especially ace-high flushes known as “nut” flushes, are very powerful hands in NLHE. With As 5s, you can make a flush much easier than with Ac Qd. Because of this potential, early in the tournament I’d rather have the weaker A5s than the AQo. This might seem counterintuitive at first, because so many times you’re taught to play big cards—and I’m not saying that you should throw your big cards away. I’m merely suggesting that the somewhat more speculative hands such as A5s are more valuable in certain deep stack situations. The A5s is less likely to get you in trouble than the AQ when the blinds are small. AQ is dominated by AK, a hand virtually all players will play. When you tangle with AK and an ace flops, you’re in a world of worry. You may think you’ve got too good a hand to fold, even in the face of heated betting from your opponent. Before you know it, you may become pot-committed and get busted.

A5s is much easier to fold under pressure. If you’re playing properly, you won’t lose a big pot with A5s, but you can win a big one. Besides possibly flopping the nut flush, you could make a well-disguised small straight if a 234 hits the board. Also, a flop such as Ah 5h 2c will look innocuous to an opponent holding AK and you might be able to get all his chips. A flop of Ah Qh 2c, on the other hand, will look much more threatening to an opponent holding AK, especially if the betting gets fast and furious. The A5 is more deceptive.

With As 5s you also have the potential of flopping a big draw. A flop such as Ah 4s 2s gives you a pair of aces, plus the nut flush draw and a gutshot straight draw. If your opponent has AK, he’s ahead for the moment, but is an underdog to win the hand after all 5 cards have been dealt. You’ll win if any of the 9 remaining spades or any 3 show up. Since you’ve already counted the 3 of spades, add 3 more winners. You’ll also win whenever one of the three remaining 5s comes (unless a king comes as well). With 15 probable winners and 2 cards yet to come, you’re about a 6-to-5 favorite to prevail. This is the type of hand that calls for aggression. Bet the flop and if your opponent raises, move in! You may win the pot right then, but even if he calls, your chances of winning are better than his (see Fold Equity).

**Playing Suited Connectors**

Moving down the ladder we arrive at suited connectors. These have value, because when the stacks are deep, you’ll use them to make a big well-disguised hand and stack your opponent. Sometimes, it’s OK to risk your entire stack without a made hand, so long as you’re the one doing the betting or raising. When you risk your entire stack on a draw, you usually want to do so on the flop when there are two cards yet to come and you might possibly be the favorite even when called. With only one card to come, any draw will be a substantial underdog. You have fold equity working for you and if you take a five-way flop with 8c7c and it comes 9c6s4c, or 8d 6c 5h, or Jc 8s 2c, etc., then moving in is often the best choice.

Note that in these examples, you have more than the normal 9 outs you’d have with a flush draw. The more outs you have, the more willing you should be to move all-in on the flop rather than checking and calling a small bet or folding to a big one. Furthermore, play only the suited connectors. If your connectors aren’t suited, they won’t be able to make enough big hands to be profitable.

If you choose not to move all-in and check instead, you’ll most likely be facing a bet at some point. You’ll want to call only if the bet is small compared with the size of the pot (half the pot or less) and a further raise by another opponent is unlikely. Base your call on the pot odds and implied odds (see page X and Y). If you don’t flop a straight draw, flush draw, or 2-pair, check and fold your suited connectors post-flop.

In the early going be careful with hands that might win a small pot, but lose a big one. Conversely, risk a small percentage of your chips on hands that may lose a small pot, but may win a big one!
Summary of Chapter 17

1. Understand how your table image appears to others at various times and learn how to take advantage of it.
2. It takes a stronger hand to call a raise than it does to make a raise.
3. In the early going, try to win big pots by taking flops cheaply with speculative hands, but be wary of hands that may win a small pot but lose a huge one.
4. Remember to keep fold equity on your side, whenever possible.
The antes have begun. Now the tournament gets a lot more serious. The CSI is lower, forcing you to play or perish. “How do you get more chips?” Look to your right. That’s exactly where your next infusion of chips is likely to come from—the player on your right or on his right. If you have a passive player on your left, perhaps he’ll also make a significant contribution to your stack.

Chips Flow around the Table in a Clockwise Fashion
Chips tend to flow in a circle around the table in a clockwise motion. Why? Simply put, players seated on the left have position and wield the threat of further action over those players on their right. If you had a choice about where to sit at the table, you’d always opt to be behind the loose-aggressive players, with the tight-passives on your left. This is the tried-and-true formula for success in poker and those who tell you otherwise are on their own very strange voyages. So look to the right to see who’s likely to back down and who you can frequently bully by raising or re-raising; look to the left to determine if he’s timid and whether you can steal from him. If so, raise nearly every time you’re in the small blind and he’s in the big blind when everyone else has folded, regardless of your hand.

Action in the Late Positions
It’s possible for you to have a key confrontation from any position, of course, but most likely you’ll be in one of the last five positions when you move all-in and risk your entire tournament life. Those five positions (starting two to the right of the button and continuing in a clockwise direction) are called the hijack, the cutoff, the small blind, and the big blind. A lot of times someone in the hijack, the cutoff, or the button brings it in for a raise with mediocre hands, hoping to take the pot down right away without a confrontation—they have only four or fewer players to beat, so their hand requirements are much weaker than for someone who may have raised from an earlier position. Years ago, this tactic was quite successful, since they’d only be re-raised if someone in the few spots behind them picked up a premium hand. In the modern game, however, the range of hands used to re-raise a late position raiser has expanded greatly.

The Simple All-in Steal
When your CSI is 7 or less, your only actions are all-in or fold. Many times when everyone folds to you, you’ll have a chance to push and pick up the blinds. Stealing blinds is immensely profitable, since most players don’t call as often as they should. In fact, sometimes it’s right to steal so often that here I’m adding 3 more categories, with weaker hands, that you should only consider playing when stealing or re-stealing the blinds.

Category 9: K2-K7s, K5-K8o, Q3-Q7s, Q9o, J6-J8s, J8-J9o, T5-T7s, T8o, 95-96s, 85s, 74s
Category 10: K2-K4o, Q2s, Q2-Q8o, J2-J5s, J4-J7o, T2-T4s, T6-T7o, 93-94s, 96-97o, 84s, 86o, 43s
Category 11: Everything else, even 72o, the worst hand in hold ’em!

The following table is my estimate of the hands with which the big blind is likely to call you, depending on how big your stack is and the position you raised from. This is obviously a round estimate, using our defined-hand categories, but I believe it’s reasonable.
Assumed Calling Requirement for Big Blind Based on Your Position

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<th>Pusher’s CSI</th>
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Players besides the big blind will call less frequently than the categories given. If these calling assumptions are true, then an optimal strategy can be calculated to determine which hands to steal the blinds with. The details of these calculations are beyond the scope of this text, but the results show that if your opponents call this often, you can push quite a lot! The table below shows how often you can push.

Best Pushes Against Previously Assumed Calling Requirement

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As you can see, when it’s folded to you in late position, you have a prime opportunity to take the blinds. Only a few players have a chance to call you and they usually don’t call often enough to make it incorrect for you to push with garbage. Sometimes it can be quite scary to see two low cards, then drag the slide bar over to the right and press raise. But once you do it a number of times, the fear wears off—just remember, they can’t see your cards and have no idea you aren’t pushing with AK. To be successful at tournament poker, you’ve got to be willing to go broke, providing you’re making mathematically sound and aggressive decisions.

Now sometimes you’ll get called and most likely it will be by a strong hand. That’s okay. You still have a chance to get lucky. If you win, there’s some good and bad news. The good news is that you’re still in the tournament and you’ve now doubled up. The bad news is that the whole table has seen that you pushed with a weak hand. They’ll probably start calling more frequently and won’t let you get away with it as much. That means you’ll have to ease up on the throttle just a bit.

So if the table knows you’re a thief after seeing you show down a sub-par hand (or suspects it since you’ve been raising a lot in the last several hands), push only with the following hands:

Once people see you steal a few times – even if you actually had good cards – they will start to call more so you may need to tighten up a little.
Toning down your aggression just a bit shows everyone that you do occasionally fold, and prevents you from having to face a showdown with the absolute worst hands.

What if you’re on the other side and it’s a short stack pushing against you? One of the things you should not do is assume he’s pushing as much as I recommend here. Almost nobody does. As we saw in Chapter 8, the less often he’s pushing, the tighter we have to be in calling. Actually, the assumptions we made for how often people call is probably a good recommendation for when to call the typical player. That frequency is about right when people aren’t pushing very often.

And what if you suspect that someone at your table is an inveterate blind stealer and he keeps going after your big blind? Maybe you’ve seen him raise nearly every time he’s in late position, or perhaps you’ve seen him show down a couple of weak hands. Maybe he’s even read this book! If that’s the case, you need to call him more often to punish and discourage his rampant stealing. If you continue to fold meekly, that’s all the more incentive for him to keep stealing. I recommend you call this often:

Naturally, players have different degrees of aggressiveness between passive and full speed ahead. Depending on your evaluation of his level of aggression, the right hand to call him with may lie between this table and the default calling strategy in the first chart above.

**The Re-steal**

Currently, if you make a raise from one of these late positions, often an aggressive player, smelling weakness and still to act from one of the blinds, will re-raise (re-steal) by making a raise that threatens all of your chips! He knows that you’ll have to like your hand a lot to call when your tournament life is on the line. What type of hand might he have in order to make this large re-raise or all-in maneuver? Well, if he’s confident enough in his read, he doesn’t even need to look at his cards, as two napkins will do! If he’s convinced, for example, that you need at least a pair of nines or better, AK, or AQ to call, hands that many solid old-school players would require, it’s usually correct for him to push with any 2 cards!
This may make you understandably uncomfortable, or as poker-pro move-in specialist Hoyt Corkins aptly puts it, he “likes to have a little pop when he puts it all in.” If you feel more comfortable with a modicum of value, as Corkins says he does, you can use the following guidelines for re-raising: AK, AQ, AJ, AT, A9, A8, KQ, KJ, KT, K9, QJ, QT, Q9, JT, J9, (19, or greater points in blackjack), any pair, and suited connectors down to 54 suited. You’re still relying on fold equity, but you’ve got a fall back position, if called. Sometimes you’ll run into a bigger hand or even get called by a hand that dominates you. You may have one common card and be behind on the other one, such as KJ versus AK. That’s poker! You can’t win ‘em all. You gave yourself a chance to win and that’s what this game is all about. If you’re looking for certainty, take up chess. In poker, if you stay aggressive and take calculated positive EV risks, you’ll eventually get the money. It’s as simple as that. Timid players, however, get lost in the shuffle.

If the shoe’s on the other foot and you’re getting re-raised by the blinds when you steal-raise from late position, you’ll have to make a stand at some point to stop this undesirable behavior. How strong a hand does he need to re-raise? Weigh this against your pot odds when considering a call. This is very similar to what we did in Chapter 8 for SNGs. Most situations in MTTs have low bubble effects compared to SNGs. So put him on a range and call according to this table:

### Calling All-In Recommendations for Most Tournament Situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opponent’s Raising Range</th>
<th>All-In Pot Odds</th>
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<td>All-In Pot Odds</td>
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<td>Category 11</td>
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As the bubble approaches, we’ll adjust these calling standards, as discussed in the next chapter.

**Example**

Blinds are 100/200 with a 25 ante for a starting pot of 525. A very aggressive player in mid-position raises to 700. You have a stack of 2,000 on the button and are considering moving all-in. How strong do you need to be? If you push, you’ll be giving him 3,225-to-1,300 or almost 2.5-to-1. That’s enough for him to call with anything, so you have no fold equity. But your pot odds aren’t as high. You should calculate them as if he raised to 2,000, putting you all-in from the start. That’s 2,525-to-2,000 or a bit over 1.2-to-1. A very aggressive player from mid-position is probably raising with Category 6 hands. That means you need a Category 4 hand (AJs+, KQs+, 77+) to move in. If he’s a tighter player, raising only Category 4 hands, you’ll need a Category 2 to move in.

The bubble effects in most MTTs are much lower than for SNGs.
Two Negatives Can Make a Positive
What makes this play (the re-steal) so valuable is that it labels you as fearless and willing to risk it all. Believe me when I tell you that professional players will hate this situation (I sure do) and, if they see this move a couple of times, they’ll give you a wide berth. The pro will probably put you into the “maniac” category and won’t want to dance with you unless he’s got a monster. Phil Hellmuth is famous for laying down hands where he thinks he’s a 3-to-2 favorite early in tournaments, whereas I’m telling you to put all your chips in when you might be an underdog mathematically!

There are several reasons for this, but the most important is fold equity. When you move all-in and there’s a 25% chance that your opponent will throw away a better hand than you, suddenly a hand that’s only 45% to win, if the hand is played out, has positive EV. Combining the money won when your opponent folds with what you’ll win when your hand prevails makes the overall return profitable, even if your opponent calls 75% of the time and is a favorite when he does so. This is counterintuitive and difficult for some to grasp, but it’s accurate. Fold equity is a powerful ally.

In 2007 a good young player going to the final table in a major event in Asia, without a dominating chip position, confided to me that the first time the player on his right raised, he intended to move all-in without looking at his cards! He’d pretend to look, but wouldn’t, so that he couldn’t give anything away if scrutinized. He did just that and his opponent folded! The next time the player on his right raised, he moved all-in again! Successful again, he’d now gained respect from the entire table, as well as greatly increasing his stack, and he could now play poker. He’d become the table captain by demonstrating that he was willing to move all-in, risking everything to win. Cautiously moving up the payout ladder was clearly not part of his game plan. This is the type of player who others with a low tolerance for ambiguity want no part of, including most professionals. He was feared by everyone, but especially by those players who were on his right, as he might come over the top, even all-in, at any moment, when they brought it in for a raise. His opponents became defensive, fearful, and far more selective in their hand selection before getting involved. Reducing the aggressiveness and increasing the predictability of your opponents’ actions are valuable assets at the final table. You can read more about this concept, which I’ve dubbed “Fear Equity,” in Kill Everyone.

Antes Have Started—Steal!
When antes are added to the blinds, the dynamics change. Not only does it cost more to play each round (increased CPR), but beginning pots are now juicier and ripe for the picking. Early in the tournament the blinds were puny and not that meaningful. Now they’re worth stealing. If your opponents are timid and scared of you, steal them blind!

Enter Pots with a Raise
Once the antes start, if you’re first in, always enter the pot with a raise. Don’t limp in. Find the minimum amount you must raise to get them to fold. Usually this is about 3 times the big blind, but sometimes at tight tables even as little as twice the big blind is sufficient to pick up pots pre-flop. Players such as Antonio “The Magician” Esfandiari raises just under 3 big blinds from any position with a wide variety of hands. With blinds of 200/400 and a 50 ante (1,050 in pot 9-handed), he might make it 1,100 to go. If everyone folds, as they often will, he’s gotten virtually a 100% return on his 1,100 investment. If he gets called, he still has the opportunity to flop a big hand or to outplay his opponents. By making the same size raise with both his strong hands and his speculative ones, it’s impossible for his opponents to evaluate the strength of his hand based on the size of his raise. If he gets re-raised, he’ll fold his weaker holdings, but re-raise with his stronger ones.

When you raise from one of the steal positions (hijack, cutoff, or button), you should know in advance what you intend to do if you get re-raised. Consider not only your action, but also the most likely reaction, before you put your first raise into the pot. I’ve seen Chris “Jesus” Ferguson raise from late position, get re-raised, and call with marginal hands such as KT offsuit, J8 suited, 55, etc. Why? He wants to indelibly inscribe the idea into his opponents’ minds that if they re-raise him, they will get called. This puts them on notice—re-steal at your peril. Once players believe that their fold equity has been compromised and they’re likely to get called, they’ll usually only re-raise with sound values. When
they get called they must play the hand out of position, a daunting prospect when they have a weak hand against an aggressive player.

**The Mini-Raise**

Many players loath getting mini-raised and are frequently unsure how to deal with it. Mini-raising is making the minimum raise, just double the amount of a bet. I don’t recommend mini-raising pre-flop (except when heads-up), but post-flop it can be a cheap and powerful weapon. If you start mini-raising, I recommend that you do it both with powerful hands and big draws. If you only do it with one or the other, your opponents may be taking notes—you take notes, don’t you?

When low-level players mini-raise, it’s almost always a powerful hand, frequently a set. But high-level players do it with powerful hands, good draws, or nothing at all. It sometimes is used, in combination with a turn bet, to pick off continuations bets. For example, he bets on the flop, you mini-raise, and he flat calls. On the turn, he checks, you bet, and he folds if all he has is overcards. You don’t necessarily have to have a hand—you just have to hope he doesn’t have one.

This move practically forces the original bettor to make a decision on the flop if he wants to continue with the hand. If you want to try this move as a bluff, the best time is when the flop comes up low cards. A c-bettor with overcards will have a difficult time. I hate being mini-raised even when I have a strong hand, such as top pair, because if I’m behind I have very little chance to improve.

Mini-raises have multiple uses, but the basic idea behind them is that when you have a strong hand, you want to offer your opponent tasty pot-odds so he’ll be tempted to play on. This way, you can perhaps suck more money out later in the hand. Aces pre-flop or a set post-flop are the usual candidates for mini-raises. At least that’s how it used to be. These days it often means that the threat of one of those hands allows the mini-raiser to steal pots with a large range of hands. There are a lot of positive reasons to make that mini-raise!

**Committed to the Pot**

As we discussed in the section on sit-n-go’s, if you put 1/3 of your chips or greater into the pot, you’re committed to play the hand through. Folding is no longer a viable option. If you’re facing a bet or raise that will create this situation if called, decide if you’re willing to go all the way with this hand prior to calling. This same principle applies to your opponent. If he makes a bet that commits 1/3 of his chips or greater, assume he’ll call you if you push all-in. In other words, your fold equity is close to zero. Play smart, plan ahead, and act accordingly.

**Value-Betting**

On the river bet top pair/top kicker or better, if your opponents haven’t shown any aggression. This is a bet for value, as many opponents will call you to the river with second pair or even worse. If the turn or river completed any obvious draws, you should be more careful, especially if they come out betting. An opponent who checks to you likely didn’t complete a draw—usually if he makes it, he can’t help but bet. If you’ve been the one showing strength on the flop and turn, he’ll need a good hand to bet on the river, most likely 2-pair or better. One pair is probably no good, not even top pair. If you have 2-pair or better, you can usually value-bet the river most of the time, unless the board is very scary (like 4 cards to a flush or straight).

**Continuation Bets**

Another concept we discussed in the SNG section is the continuation or c-bet. C-bets are more prevalent in MTTs than SNGs. In fact, based on the extraordinary (and well-deserved) popularity of the Harrington on Hold ‘em series of books, c-bets have now become the norm, rather than the exception. Having said this, it’s still correct to bet on the flop the majority of the time, if you raised pre-flop. If your opponent has two unpaired cards, he won’t hit the flop 2/3 of the time, so a bet will often win if your opponent has missed. A c-bet is really betting that your opponent has missed the flop and can’t
Because 50% of the pot is the published standard for c-bets, I suggest betting 70% of the pot, so it looks more like a value bet than a c-bet. Even though this looks less like a c-bet, innovative (often young) opponents may be suspicious and will either raise to see whether or not you have a real hand or call to see what you’ll do on the turn. Depending on what type of player you’re up against, you’ll often have to either bet again or check and fold, if they bet.

**Betting Tactics After the Flop**

On the turn you should play similarly to the way you played on the flop. If you still have top pair or better, make a pot-sized bet if it’s checked to you. If you had an overpair on the flop, but an overcard comes on the turn, don’t automatically give up the hand. Bet if it’s checked to you, but fold if he bets first or raises you. If he calls again on the turn when you have an underpair, check on the river and fold if he bets. With top pair, if you were called on the flop and the turn card completes an obvious draw, consider folding if he bets or raises.

**Pot Control**

Suppose you have AA in middle position and you’re the second biggest stack at your table with 42,000 chips and blinds and antes of 200/400/50. You raise to 1,200 and get called by the table leader in the big blind with 50,000 chips. The flop comes 862 rainbow. He checks, you bet 1,000, and he calls (pot = 3,250). The turn is a 9. He checks again. Now what? You should check. Your opponent has sufficient chips to bust you and he called on the flop. Now a possible straight card has come. Before acting, you should consider what you’ll do if he raises. You could bet around 2,000 and see what he does, but you’ll hate it if he now puts in a big raise, representing a hand that’s better than yours (straight, set, 2-pair). By checking you keep the pot small and avoid possibly being faced with a difficult decision for all your chips. When you’re either well in front or way behind, it makes sense to control the size of the pot, keeping it small. You’ve increased the chance that your opponent will make a better hand on the river, but even if this happens he’s unlikely to move all-in. From his perspective, your hand appears to be something such as AK or AQ and he’s likely to make a smallish bet in hopes of getting paid off, if he’s got a hand that beats you. Your check on the turn also gives you the opportunity to pick off a bluff on the river. Call if he makes a reasonable (up to pot-sized) bet.

If he checks again on the river, you can bet around 75% of the pot. Given this sequence of bets, very few players will check again with a hand that beats your AA, so if you’re checked to on the river you can make a value bet almost without any thought of being beaten. As you see, checking on the turn is actually a clever play that often gains you more chips, while keeping the pot under control and costing you less when you’re beaten.

If your opponent had 5,000 instead of 50,000 it’s a different story. All-in, baby!

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**Summary of Chapter 18**

1. The natural flow of chips around the table is clockwise.
2. Stealing and re-stealing occur predominately from late position and are more prevalent once the antes commence. You can loosen your standards for stealing and calling aggressive re-stealers. When you need chips, consider re-raising all-in against an aggressive blind stealer.
3. You can have positive EV even when your all-in bet is called the majority of the time and you’re an underdog when called.
4. Mini-raising both with very strong hands and draws can be an effective tactic.
5. Control the size of the pot when you’re either way ahead or way behind.
The Bubble
In SNGs the bubble is when only one more player needs to be eliminated for the remaining three to make the money. In large tournaments with more than 500 entrants, an extended bubble begins at the table before the money. So if the tournament pays 45 spots, from 54 to 46 is the extended bubble. If it pays 100 spots, then 109 to 101 is the extended bubble, et cetera.

Although technically the bubble is still defined as one from the money in MTTs as well as in SNGs, in the modern game with big fields it doesn’t adequately address the pressure players are under when their goal is to get to the money. Online, you run into players who’ve won satellites and who’re only interested in making the money, so they play exceedingly conservatively and slowly. The same thing can happen in bricks-and-mortar events, of course, but somehow having the anonymity of only a screen name gives some players more courage. In person they have to pretend on every hand to be interested in what they hold, far harder for them to do. Ultimately, if they’re blatant enough about what they’re doing, they can be warned or penalized. In some extreme cases, they’ve even caused the rules to be changed so that the playing field is more level.

Hand for Hand
As a good example of this, several years ago a player from Las Vegas/Oklahoma used to sit for many minutes while “deciding” what to do, while other tables continued to play hands. This resulted in the hand-for-hand rule that’s now implemented one spot from the money in most tournaments. This requires all tables still playing to complete each hand before the next hand is dealt. This is seldom applied to more than one spot from the money, thus unfortunately allowing the angle-shooter to stall when two from the money. Online, this is less of a problem; the players are always on a clock, which begins to tick about 15 seconds after the action moves to a player. They can, of course, use their full 15-second allotment without losing any time from their extra-time clock and some players will do so every hand. The tournament clock that determines when the blinds and antes go up keeps ticking, so fewer hands are usually played near the bubble.

Deep Stacked … or Not
Of course, there’s a big difference in tournaments: In deep-stack events, you have time to select your situations, hands, and plays. Often, these are multi-day events. In the typical “fast” structure used on the Internet or in smaller buy-in bricks-and-mortar events, you may be forced to “push and pray,” as they often say in the trade. In either case, I strongly suggest that you use CPR and CSI to decide where you stand and what action you should take.

Playing Aggressively on the Bubble
Since many players tighten up on the bubble, some players take advantage of this situation by playing very aggressively. At the 2007 Aussie Millions I was at the table with Patrik Antonius at this stage (one from the money) and he raised every single hand! No one challenged him for something like 13
consecutive hands. Phil Hellmuth has also been known to raise every hand. In the Main Event of the Aussie Millions several years back, I raised about 2/3 of the time during an extended bubble period, going from a short stack to chip leader. This is a time when aggressive pros go to work!

The Psychology of the Bubble
When the smell of money approaches, most players begin dividing themselves into two camps:

1. Those who are trying to hold on and make it to the money.
2. Those who have their sights on the top prizes.

Players in the first camp will tighten up, often to an extreme, and never get involved without a premium hand. Medium and short stacks (as long as they’re not extremely short) are more likely to want to avoid confrontation. Also, if this is a big tournament, especially if lots of people earned their buy-ins through a satellite, you’ll see more players trying to hold on for a payday that may be huge compared to the paltry online-satellite buy-in that got them there. Play is much tighter on the bubble of the WSOP Main Event than in a $5 tournament online.

In the 2006 Aussie Millions that I went on to win, with 53 plus players left Phil Ivey asked how much 48th paid (the lowest spot that paid money). He asked this with a straight face, even though he clearly couldn’t have cared less, having about the 5th biggest remaining stack and risking far greater amounts nearly every hand in his everyday cash games. Why did he ask this question, which he repeated again as we lost more players? I theorize that he wanted to make sure that the other players at the table knew they were approaching the money and how much they were in line to win. He wanted to emphasize what was at risk, so he could steal from them more freely with his aggressive play. This worked for him for a while, but he went out about 50th when he tried to run over the unbluffable Jamil Dia by firing at the pot with all four barrels (betting on every card) on a complete bluff. Ivey showed a willingness to go broke in this spot in order to acquire a mountain of chips that could enable him to win the tournament.

The key point to these stories is that as you approach the money, the top competitors step on the gas and get even more aggressive.

John Juanda wrote a magazine article about raising a lot when you’re near the money, as it gives any aggressive player the opportunity to replenish his stack. The defense against this strategy is to re-raise, but if you decide to stand up to against hyper-aggressive players, it’s probably best to push all-in. If you just re-raise, be prepared for them to move in. If they think they can push you off the hand and have significant fold equity, they won’t hesitate to pull the trigger!

Avoid Re-raising Conservative Players
I strongly recommend that you don’t try to run over a conservative player who’d raised or re-raised you at bubble time. It’s one thing to stand up to a bully; it’s quite another to take on a tight player. If a tight player raises, or worse still re-raises, your AK is a piece of Swiss cheese! A re-raise almost certainly represents AA or KK; what else would be worth risking his tournament life?

Examples for Bubble Play in MTTs

Example
You’re four spots from the money and have Ah 9h in the cutoff at an 8-handed table, with blinds and antes of 400/800/100 (CPR 2,000) and a stack of 14,800 chips (CSI is around 7.5). The tight-aggressive (TAG) player UTG raises to 2,800 off a stack of 22,000. What should you do? Pass. A tight-aggressive player has raised UTG and you’re not desperate with a CSI of more than 7. Your A9 suited is probably behind. Even though you have position, it’s best to fold.
You’re four spots from the money and have As 9h on the button, with blinds and antes of 400/800/100 and a stack of 14,800. The cutoff raises to 2,400, off a stack of 18,000. What do you do? Move in! You don’t love your hand, but he’s in a steal position and will give up the pot about 90% of the time, because if he loses it, he’ll be crippled. Even if he calls, you can still win. The combination of fold equity and the chance of winning if you’re called makes this a positive EV play.

You’re four spots from the money at a 9-handed table and have the Kc Qh on the button with blinds and antes of 600/1200/200 (CPR = 3600) and a stack of 52,000 (CSI of about 14.5). A player raises to 4,000 from mid-position off a stack of 11,000. What do you do? Pass. You’re not committed, but he is, and will call any re-raise. You have no fold equity and probably have the worst hand. Look for a better spot to invest your money.

You’re four spots from the money and have Kc Qh on the button with blinds and antes of 600/1200/200 and as stack of 52,000. The player sitting in the hijack seat raises to 3,600 off his stack of 26,400. The cutoff now calls this raise off his stack of 31,000. What do you do? Move in! As I’ve said before, no-limit isn’t for the faint of heart. This is an ideal situation to make a move. They both have enough chips to pass and are still likely to make it to the money. If the blinds fold and the raiser has anything besides a top 2% hand (JJ-AA or AK), you’ll probably win 10,800 uncontested. Occasionally, you may get called by a medium pair (66-TT) and be in a “race” as a small underdog. Even so, if you lose, you’ll still have chips left. Occasionally, you’ll run into a hand that dominates you, such as AK. Even if that happens, you can get lucky. Don’t let fear of the worst scenarios keep you from making the right play.

Calling All-in Raises Near the Bubble
As I’ve been saying, most players tighten up too much near the bubble. Some tightening up is called for, but not as much as you might think. During the table before the money, I suggest you tighten your calling requirements by 1 category. If you’d normally call with a Category 4 hand, call with Category 3 now. If you have more than an average stack and are contemplating an all-in for at least 80% of your chips, tighten up another category. Since so many players are more reluctant to push near the bubble, you might be facing a stronger than normal raising hand.

For very large field tournaments, tighten this way during the table before the final table as well. In many big tournaments, the “final table bubble” can be even more significant than the money bubble. This is especially true in the WSOP Main Event, where making the final TV table is a particularly big deal.

Learning from Your Mistakes
We all make mistakes in tournaments. In every tournament I play in, I look back and realize that I’ve blundered. To continue developing as a player, I try to be brutally honest with myself in post-tournament introspection. If I don’t recognize that I’ve erred and instead choose to complain about my “bad luck” or try to justify a wrong decision, I’m hurting my growth as a player. It’s incredibly hard to play really well and most mistakes go unnoticed at the time. Remember them and try not to make the same mistake twice.

Mistakes come in varying guises. In a tournament in which I recently finished fourth and only the top three places were paid, I made a mistake by not heeding the payout structure closely enough. First paid $50,000; second $30,000 and third $20,000; fourth paid nothing. Unlike most tournaments, the jump between fourth and third was as big as any other step and twice that of the difference between third and second. Additionally, it was clear to both myself and my opponents, who played in a
Chapter 19: Approaching The Money

straightforward manner, that I was the most competent and experienced player at the table. The payout combined with these favorable intangibles should have persuaded me to make sure I had at least third place locked up before taking any big risks, but as I said, I made a mistake.

One player had 50,000, the other two had just over 15,000, and I was marginally low-stacked with 13,400. The blinds were 400/800 with a 100 ante, so it was costing 1,600 per round. I had a CSI of 8+ and was in medium-stack territory when I picked up KQ off-suit in the small blind, a Category 5 hand. It was passed around to me and I raised to 2,400. The Kill Phil play with my hand and this stack size would be to move in. I rejected this, however, because I thought a smaller raise would do the trick or I might well be able to outplay my opponent post-flop, since I had a lot more experience in this type of situation than he did. The big blind, a TAG, re-raised 5,000. Calling this bet would pot-commit me, so I thought awhile before making my decision, then decided to move in. Note that this is practically an automatic call for my opponent, considering the pot odds he’s getting, so my all-in move here has practically no fold equity. Indeed, he called, showed me pocket queens, and my long day came to a sudden unrewarding conclusion. You could just stop at thinking I was unlucky, but the truth is I made a mistake.

In reflecting on this hand after the tournament, I realized my error. There was virtually no hand my tight-aggressive opponent could have against which I’d be a favorite. The best I could hope for would be a pocket pair, JJ or lower, against which I’d be about a 6/5 underdog. I’d be getting a good price against these hands as the pot was offering me 16,200 (1,600 + 2,000 +1,600 +11,000) to my 11,000, or about 1.5 to 1 odds. But other hands, such as AK, AQ, AA, KK, and the one he actually held, QQ, would put me in bad shape. Against other possible holdings, such as AJ or AT, I’d be about a 3/2 underdog, almost exactly what the pot was offering.

The math here makes the decision borderline, but my mistake was greater than a borderline error once you add in the intangibles. If I pass the 5,000 re-raise, I still have enough left for about 7 orbits—still a medium stack and not in any immediate danger. The other players were all playing very tight and, had I passed, I’d still have plenty of opportunities to pick up chips. I was clearly the most aggressive player left and their fear of me worked in my favor. Given my table image, in order to take me on my TAG opponent had to have a big hand in this spot that was likely to have me crushed.

I couldn’t rely just on pot odds. Adding in the flat payout structure, which at the time I failed to consider, magnifies my error. Usually putting money factors aside and playing for first place is an asset, but in this case, it was a detriment. When there’s an all-in confrontation in such circumstances, the expected value of the players not involved in the hand dramatically increases. In retrospect, given all these factors, it was a clear pass. This isn’t a mistake that I’m likely to make again. Honest reflection on plays such as this is likely to pay future dividends.

Summary of Chapter 19

1. Be more aggressive on the “bubble” table when your goal is to finish as high as possible.
2. Take into account how your opponent is playing. Can you control him?
3. Observe how your table is playing. Are you in control of it?
4. Analyze your mistakes and learn from them.
STAGE 5
IN THE MONEY

The CSIs
OK, you made it to the money. What now?

Step back for a moment and take stock of the situation—figure out your CSI. Note the CSI of everyone at your table. Who has medium-sized chip stacks, big stacks, and short stacks? These counts don’t need to be exact; close is good enough. What’s the average chip count for all players remaining in the tournament? If you’re playing online at PokerStars.com, this information can be obtained by clicking the info tab. In live play it’s often displayed on a screen that also tells you how many players remain and how much time is left at the current level. At your table, is the average stack sufficient to play poker (CSI of 10 or greater) or is everyone approaching “push-and-pray” time, where they have to move all-in on every hand they play? (Remember that if you’re committing more than 1/3 of your chips by raising, it’s best to push all-in.) All these factors have a major effect on what course of action you should take.

Sizing Up the Players
Not surprisingly, you’ve entered a stage where many players will go broke. They’ve made the money and there’s palpable relief in the air. The dynamics have now changed in potentially advantageous ways. Some of the short stacks who hung on like grim death and folded their way into the money will now open up, sticking it all-in with a wide range of hands and the attitude, “I’m going to gamble and double up … or go home!”

What tactics should you employ to take advantage of this? In general, you want to avoid players who probably have real hands and gamble a bit more with those likely to have random hands. You’ll need to decide who’s who and nothing I say can provide an exact guideline. By carefully observing the opposition, however, you may unearth some helpful clues. Here are some things to look for online:

1. Pay careful attention to hands that are shown down. If a player is raising with weak hands, you can expand your range of calling hands. Conversely, if a player has a liberal range of calling hands, you’ll need to tighten up your raising requirements.

2. Identify players who don’t seem to have regard for position or don’t take advantage of position. A player who’ll play a marginal hand out of position is a good one to target. Players who have position, but don’t have the courage to bet without having a good hand if it’s checked to them, are also prime candidates for plucking. A big part of playing position is the ability to pick up pots by betting when everyone else has checked. Players who can’t bet without a decent hand lose a lot of the advantage that comes with being last to act. When they check behind you on the flop, you can usually pick up the pot by betting the turn. Playing pots against these players is lucrative.

3. Look for players who don’t seem to understand pot odds. A player who tries to complete a draw when he’s being offered poor odds is making a mistake. For example, if you bet the size of the pot on the turn and your opponent is drawing to a flush, he’ll only be getting 2-to-1 pot odds as a 4-to-1 underdog. You want to get involved with gamblers such as this.

Try to play more hands against bad players and less against good ones.
4. Identify those who don’t seem to understand implied odds and let you in cheaply when you can make a hand that can bust them. Inexperienced players with a hand such as AA may make tiny bets attempting to suck money out of you, while giving you a very good price to draw to a straight or flush. Then when you make it, they’ll call when you move in. Perfect!

5. Earmark players who seem to be playing too many hands. If a player is raising 30%-40% of the time, he can’t have that many premium hands. These are good candidates for re-steals, usually by moving all-in. Most of the time, their hand won’t be strong enough to call.

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**Example**

You hold Jh Jd and have a stack of 54,000 in the hijack seat with blinds and antes of 600/1200/100. A loose-aggressive player to your right makes it 2,400 to go off a stack of 32,000. What should you do? Re-raise to 7,200. You don’t have to move all-in here to play the hand properly. You also don’t want to just call and let those behind you enter the pot cheaply. The chance that the LAG player has a big hand are quite small. Not only is it much easier for him to be fishing around for a cheap flop, but he made this mini-raise after the first three players passed. If it goes back to the mini-raiser and he moves all-in, I’d call for multiple reasons. First, you have more chips than he does. Second, he might make this play with AOs or 77 or any other hand that has some value, in hopes that you’ll lay your hand down, or that he’ll get lucky. Third, his play makes little sense after 3 passers. Fourth, our hand is Category 2 and is only inferior to a few other hands. And last, this player is a LAG, so his actions are suspect. The result of this analysis is an easy call, even if it’s hard to verbalize all the reasons until you gain more experience.

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**Picking Off the Desperados**

Who’s likely to have a random hand? Someone with a CSI of less than 3, for example, is desperate to find a playable hand. An example of this might be someone with 6,400 when the blinds are 600/1,200 with an ante of 100. For a chart that will help you understand which hands to raise and call with at a CSI of over 10, see Appendix C. Of course, you don’t want to double up any short stack unnecessarily, but once you recognize how desperate the other player is, a call is correct in many cases.

When someone goes all-in for no more than 2.5 times the big blind, it’s correct to call with any two cards. No hand is more than a 3-to-1 underdog against a random hand, so if the pot’s offering you bigger odds than this, you should call in every case, no matter what you hold! I encourage you to call before you look, so that a garbage hand doesn’t give you second thoughts. If you pass, you might survive longer, but you’re giving up value that could lead to an intimidating presence.

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**Example**

- You have Ah 4s in the big blind with a stack of 34,000 and blinds and antes of 600/1,200/100 (CSI=12). The cutoff moves all-in with a stack of 5,500. No one else is in the pot. Call. He has a CSI of 2 and should move in with many hands. Your ace-high is strong enough to call. Even if he shows up with KK from time to time, you can still win the hand. If you lose, you won’t be severely damaged.

- You have 7c2h in the big blind with 19,000 chips (CSI of 7); the blinds and antes are 600/1,200/100 and the button moves all-in for 2,900. No one else is in the pot. Call. It’s not necessary to even look at your cards. It costs you 1,700 more to win 5,600. Even with this, the worst of all starting hands, you should call.

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**Isolation Play**

At this stage of the tournament, there will be times when a short stack moves-in. If you and other players behind you have substantially larger stacks and you have a playable hand, you’re faced with a decision. Should you raise or just call?
If you call, other players who have yet to act may also call. It’s a common misconception that this improves your equity, since two of you are now ganging up on the all-in player. You’re often better off isolating the all-in player, who’s frequently desperate and has only a marginal hand, by raising and chasing off other competitors, maximizing your chances of winning the pot. Calling rather than raising also offers aggressive opponents the opportunity to re-raise and chase you out of the pot.

The result of these dynamics is that you need to use your strongest hands to protect your more vulnerable ones when calling, while re-raising with your medium-strong hands. I suggest the following approach if you’re in position (between the raiser and the button):

**Call** with AA, KK, QQ, and Category 4 and 5 hands. If you’re on the button, call also with Category 6 hands.

**Re-raise** with AK, AQ, JJ, TT, and 99.

If you’re out of position in the small blind:

**Call** with AA, KK, QQ, and Category 6 hands.

**Re-raise** with AK, AQ, JJ, TT, 99, and all Category 4 and 5 hands.

Notice that you play more aggressively when out of position than in position. This is due to the fact that you’ll have to act first post-flop if the big blind calls, so you want to discourage the big blind from playing. When you do call, you’ll do so with your strongest and weakest hands, leaving your opponents guessing.

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**Example**

You hold Ac Jh and have a stack of 28,400 on the button with blinds and antes of 600/1200/100. A loose-aggressive player two to your right moves all-in for 5,400. What should you do? Call.

It’s incorrect to either re-raise or to fold. Some players would move all-in, but that would be a mistake. The pot has been raised already and by calling, you keep a lot of options open. You have position throughout the play of the hand if someone does over-call and if you make a strong hand, you might be able to punish him.

Now you’re in the little blind and everything else is the same as in Example 1 above. Now what? Move-in! Because you have to play the whole hand out of position if the big blind enters the fray, pushing all-in is now your best move. Notice the importance of position in making the correct play.

You have 32,000 in the little blind with blinds and antes of 600/1,200/100 and a hand of 6h 6d. The cutoff goes all-in for 5,300. It’s passed to you and the big blind is an aggressive player with 38,000 in chips. What’s your play? Move all-in. You don’t want to call, only to have the big blind over-call with position behind you for the rest of the hand. Unless you flop a set, your hand is unlikely to play well after the flop. If your aggressive foe re-raises pre-flop, it’s even worse. Now you may be put to a tough decision for all your chips. Guess wrong and you’ll likely be walking to the exit, replaying the possibilities in your mind and thinking there must’ve been a way to win the pot. Instead of opening all these unappetizing options for your opponent, just move all-in and put him to the test. The only pair he’s likely to lay down that beats you before the flop is 77, but he won’t be calling with hands such as Q9s and KJo that you’d rather he didn’t play. It’s hard enough to beat the all-in player, much less expose yourself to the problems the big blind might give you. Only 4% of the time will the big blind wake up with a bigger pair than 66.

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**Defending Against the Isolation Play**

Factors to consider when defending against the isolation play are your chip stack, the strength of your hand, and the tendencies of your opponent. Here are a few examples that illustrate the integration of these considerations.
A player in middle position makes a standard raise to 3,600 off a stack of 10,400 with blinds and antes of 600/1,200/100. The cutoff moves all-in for 31,000. You’ve just come to the table and know nothing about the playing styles of these two players. You have Ac Kd in the small blind. Whether or not to call depends on the size of your chip stack. If you have a CSI of either more than 25 (67,500) or less than 10 (27,000), call. Between these two extremes and lacking any additional information, fold.

Everything is as in Example 1 above, but now you hold 9c 9h in the big blind. Calculate your approximate CSI and use the same guidelines. If you have a big stack of more than 25 CSI or a smallish stack of less than 10 CSI, call. If your CSI is between 25 and 10 the best play is to let it go.

Same situation as the two above examples only this time you’ve identified the player in the cutoff as a loose aggressive player (LAG). You’re in the big blind with 9c 9h and a stack of 39,000. Call. Even though you may have to beat two players, your focus in the hand is the LAG with the bigger stack. It’s likely that he’s making a play here and will show down a small pair or, at best, two over-cards such as KQ. If he had a bigger pair than you, would he play it this way? Unlikely. It’s a lot more likely he’d raise it to 10,000 and hope to get a customer.

Attacking the Short Stacks
This is the one stage of a tournament where I recommend actively going after short stacks. Whenever you have the biggest stack that has yet to act out-chipped by about a 4-to-1 margin, you can put on your bully hat and move all-in. Push all-in with every hand you play, so you’re certain to have your opponents covered, while giving away nothing about your hand. You can make this play with any pair, any ace, any two suited cards, and any hand that has a blackjack value of 15. Fold equity is what makes this play correct. Often, your opponents will fold a better hand than yours.

If You’re the Short-Stack
When you have a CSI that has dipped below 5, consider yourself short-stacked and move all-in at any time with any two cards if you think there’s a good chance that you won’t be called. If there’s a limper in front of you, ignore him if your all-in is at least six times his initial bet. If two or more limpers have entered the pot before you act, add one big blind for each limper to the above requirement—with 3 limpers you need at least 8 big blinds to move in. Although it might be more difficult to get past three limpers, no one has shown any strength and it’s likely they’re all trying to see a cheap flop. If they do all fold, you’ve picked up some precious extra chips.

This is an easy play to make if you have some value in your hand. Value can be any pair, any ace, suited connectors (even those with a gap), and any hand with 19 blackjack points in it, but if you’re at a tight table and have a big enough stack to still be threatening, you can loosen up your standards a bit more. It’s best to err on the side of aggression and go out in a blaze of glory with some hope of winning, rather than to be eaten alive by the rising blinds and antes without putting up a fight.

You need a better hand to call a raise than you need to push when you’re first in—Category 5 or better if you have a CSI of 5; Category 6 or better if you have a CSI of 4; Category 7 or better if you have a CSI of 3 or 2; and Category 8 or better if you have a CSI of 1.

If you’re short-stacked move in whenever you think you won’t be called.

You hold 9h8h in the hijack position with a stack of 10,700 and the blinds and antes are 600/1200/100. It’s passed to you. What should you do? Move all-in. The standard raise would be to 3,600 and that’s more than one third of your remaining stack. Moving all-in increases your fold equity, eliminates all decisions, and maximizes the chance that you’ll win it right now.
Chapter 20: Approaching The Money

You hold As Js in the cutoff position with blinds and antes of 600/1,200/100 and a stack of 13,000. It’s passed to you. What should you do? Move in your entire 13,000 stack. Hopefully, you chose this option without a lot of hesitation. Looking at Appendix C, you’ll see that AJs is in the top 10% of all hands dealt. If you’re called, you’ve a reasonable chance to win and if you’re not called, you’ll increase your stack significantly.

You hold Qs9s in the cutoff position with blinds and antes of 600/1,200/100 and 10,400 chips, a CSI of 4. It’s passed to you. What should you do? Move in. You’re desperate to acquire chips and should take this opportunity to try to pick up the pot.

Summary of Chapter 20

1. Evaluate the remaining field, and your table in particular.
2. Play situations, adjusting to what your opponents are likely to do.
3. Use the isolation play, and know how to play against it.
4. Attack, and confront, short stacks.
5. Play aggressively when you’re the short stack, especially when no one has raised.
STAGE 6—THE FINAL TABLE

Initial Adjustments
OK! You’ve arrived at the final table! “Final Table” is a nickname given to me years ago by the tournament director at Crown Casino in Melbourne, Australia, who said that I get there so frequently. I’m like “final-table furniture.” I still get a buzz every time I reach the final table. The only more exhilarating feeling is winning! The tournament has moved from two short-handed tables to the final table of nine or ten players. What adjustments are necessary?

You’ve just come from a 5- to 6-handed game, where no one wanted to get knocked out and aggressive play was profitable. The first adjustment that you need to make is this one—you’re now at a full game and you need to be more aware of the fact that when you’re up against nine other hands, rather than five, the chances are excellent that someone will actually started with a good one. Play fewer hands from the first positions, repairing any vestiges of the maniacal image you may have created at the previous table. Your objective is to lull the competition into a false sense of security with your conservative play, so you can open up again when you get down to 5-handed.

Adjusting to a Shrinking Field
At the final table, positional considerations become even more important. Play fewer hands from the first five positions, but stay aggressive in late position, especially if the re-draw to the final table has put a few of the more passive players on your left. As players get eliminated, gradually increase your range of playable hands. This might seem counterintuitive at first, but the fewer players who remain, the lower the hand value required to raise the pot. From nine players until you’re heads-up, every pot you enter should be with a raise. Fold or raise, make those your choices. If it’s good enough to play… raise it up!

Playing with Five Players Left
Many of the other players will play too tight, just hoping to move up the pay scale or to “get hit with the deck” (pick up a lot of good hands), so that they can stay alive. You’re not a favorite to find a “no-brainer,” a premium hand that plays itself, so don’t assume you will. On average, you’ll start with AA or KK once every 110 hands. Sure, you might get them in two consecutive hands, but I wouldn’t count on it. The odds against this happening are more than 12,000-to-1!

Having re-established your tight image, it’s now time to step it up. Pick on the medium-size stacks. They’re not desperate and won’t want to tangle with you without a premium hand. Look for situations where you can re-raise a conservative player who raises from the button or the cutoff. Hands such as 8c 7c or AQ are strong enough to put a tight player to the test. Make the same re-raise even if there’s a raiser and a caller in front of you. This play, known as the power re-raise or squeeze play, is a strong move. The initial raiser must concern himself not only with your re-raise, which probably represents an extremely strong hand, but also with the caller, who may have been trapping with AA or KK. If you get by the first player and the second player doesn’t have AA or KK, as is most frequently the case, you’ll pick up a very nice pot. Moves such as this win tournaments!

Re-raise with suited connectors if, and that’s an important if, the raise has come from a tight player with a medium stack seated on your right. Notice how circumstances have changed dramatically.
There were times during the preceding stages when you wouldn’t even enter the pot in a similar situation.

Instead of hoping to connect on a flop, be aggressive before the flop. If you get called, follow up with a continuation bet after the flop, and I don’t mean a wimpy c-bet. After most flops, bet 70% of the pot, with two exceptions: 1) If you’ve picked up a tell based on your opponent’s reaction to the flop. In live play, perhaps you’ve observed him glancing down at his chips when the flop came down, or you’ve 2) If the flop has really poor texture. Suppose you have Ac Kc with a flop such as Jh Th 9c, or 8d 7d 6d. Check and fold if your opponent bets. Otherwise, stay aggressive!

Be Aggressive
Aggressive players win tournaments. That’s a fact. When was the last time that an old-school player won a WPT event? Mike Sexton gave himself this label (“old school”), but having seen everyone’s hole cards on the WPT for several years, he’s now changed his game and won some events by being more aggressive. Even seeing the edited version of television hands has dramatically changed the game for many players and dangled big carrots in front of budding young poker champions. “You mean I can play a game…and make a lot of money when I get good at it? Send me in, Coach!”

When you do pick up a big hand, try to get all the money you can into the pot. At a 5-handed final table, say you’ve raised with 8c 7c, As Ts, and 9h 9c, in three of the last five hands, and you raise again on the next hand. At this point some of your opponents may be getting highly suspicious and will play back at you with weaker than normal hands. This is when having a premium hand pays big dividends. If I pick up AA after raising the previous three hands, the timing couldn’t be more perfect and my only problem is how to get as many chips into the pot as possible, especially before the flop. Now I’ll raise the exact same amount that I’ve been raising, even though I picked up the holy grail of poker hands. I want to re-emphasize the following point, because so many inexperienced players make the mistake of not following this precept:

Play your weak hands and your strong hands exactly the same way!
This not only will allow you to play more hands, it’ll provide you with a deceptive image. It’ll make it very hard for an opponent to analyze your betting pattern and make plays against you based on your choice of bets—especially when he sees markedly different hands at showdown after similar betting patterns. By the way, never voluntarily show your hand when you’ve won a pot unchallenged. Make your opponents pay for information.

Settlements
At most final tables there will come a time when someone may suggest a settlement. A settlement is a redistribution of the remaining prize money amongst the contestants who are left. Factors that influence a deal are the respective chip counts, the expertise and image of the players, the importance of the money, and even the position of the blinds. The best material on making a deal can be found on pages 168-171 of *Kill Phil*.
You’re under no obligation to accept any proffered deals. If you have any doubts about the deal, just say no. Saying no is quite acceptable. You might say no for a variety of reasons—you like your position at the table, or you want the others to be under more pressure if a deal isn’t cut, or you want the thrill of playing it out to see if you can go all the way. You aren’t required to give the other contestants a reason for declining or for demanding more than your fair share based on the respective stack sizes.

Often the players will agree to play for part of the prize. In my view, this is a good idea, because it preserves the excitement of the moment and when you win, you’ll feel you earned it. At the PokerStars.com Sunday Millions weekly tournament, leaving part of the prize for the first place finisher is compulsory. Although the “standard formula” is to divide the prize pool in accordance with chip counts, this is fair only if only 2 players remain. With three or more players, an equitable settlement would award the smaller stacks a bit more than the chip count dictates. With this in mind, I recommend the following guideline when making a deal:
If you have the biggest or one of the biggest stacks, negotiate for a deal based on
chip count. If you have one of the smaller stacks, demand more than a proportional
distribution.

One caveat: Always remember to deduct the amount that’s allocated to the lowest finisher before
doing the split. If 3 players are involved, the amount of 3 times the third-place prize should be deducted
from the remaining prize pool, because each participant is entitled to at least this amount. The balance
should then be split under the negotiated terms. For example, if first prize is $100,000, second is
$60,000, and third is $40,000, then $120,000 should be deducted from the $200,000 prize pool, since
all players must get at least $40,000. The deal negotiation should revolve around how the remaining
$80,000 is split.

Heads-Up Play
Heads-up you’re in a different world. Even 3-handed you could throw most of your worst hands
away. Heads-up you’ll only be throwing away about the bottom 10% of your hands, adjusting the
actual percentage and your play to the personality of your opponent. Hand values must be upgraded
substantially for heads-up play. The idea that K6 offsuit is a good starting hand and that KT offsuit is a
great hand may be difficult for some to understand. Look at the charts in Appendix C to discover what
the bottom 10% of hands look like. I hope they’re never dealt to you!

Please re-read pages 39-41, which provide specific guidance about playing heads-up. Playing this way,
you’ll be a formidable adversary to your one opponent at the final table.

If your CSI falls to 8 or below, use the charts found on page 63 to make your online decisions. They
provide simplified guidelines as to which hands to play at varying CSIs. At these CSIs, pushing all-in
or folding is the correct strategy. For a strategy that even the top pros, such as Phil Ivey or Daniel
Negreanu, can’t exploit, see Kill Everyone. Play this way and you’ll be playing like a pro, optimizing your
chances to win. For live play, you may need to memorize them, but at home it’s easy to put them on a
screen in front of you. Many card rooms now have a no “cheat- sheet” rule. Although paper and pencil
are still universally allowed, advice sheets are no longer tolerated in the majority of card rooms.

Position is a huge factor in heads-up play, where the small blind is the button and acts first on the pre-
flop betting round, but last on each subsequent round of betting. This means that mathematically it’s
correct to play the top 90% of hands when you’re the small blind. Whether to limp or raise depends on
your overall evaluation of the situation. It’s best to mix it up in order to keep your opponent off balance.
If you’re in the big blind, raise aggressively with strong hands, such as an ace with a decent kicker
and small to medium pairs. If the button has raised to 2-3 times the big blind, re-raise by 4-5 times this
amount. Your objective is to win the hand pre-flop so that you don’t have to play it out of position. If a
raise means committing 1/3 of your stack or more, move all-in instead.

If you choose to raise almost every hand that you play, you won’t be making a big mistake. In heads-up
play the most aggressive player often wins. Err on the side of being overly aggressive rather than too
passive. Your objective is to weaken your opponent by keeping him under constant pressure. He may
keep folding hoping to pick up an elusive monster and bust you. Hopefully, you’ll have a big hand when
he finally does play back at you, but most of the time you’ll chip away at his stack, weakening him and
setting him up for the kill.

Heads-up play is often a mind game and usually the most aggressive, courageous, and observant player
wins. Johnny Chan (twice the world champion) says that when it gets heads-up, he doesn’t want to
make a mistake; it’s so hard to get there that he doesn’t want to waste the opportunity.
## Summary of Chapter 21

1. You just moved from 6- or 5-handed to 10- or 9-handed. Adjust your game accordingly.
2. Play your strongest hands exactly like your weak hands.
3. If you play, a lot of hands, expect to be challenged.
4. Aggressive players have a much better chance of winning than timid ones.
5. When you raise multiple times within a short period, tighten up your raising requirements.
6. In general agree to chip-chop settlements if you’re the big stack, and demand a premium if you’re not.
7. When heads-up, play most of the hands.
8. Position is super-important in heads-up play. When out of position, raise and re-raise aggressively with strong hands.
9. Heads-up battles are often won by the most aggressive player. Err on the side of aggression.
Okay, you just won a big tournament, you’re all pumped up, and you can’t wait to play another event. You played well—you had to read situations correctly and make some key bluffs and some key laydowns, but you also undoubtedly won a number of all-in confrontations, some of which would have resulted in elimination. It’s important to realize that there are two components to winning—your skill level and luck.

Luck undoubtedly played a significant role in your victory. It’s easy to forget, as you wish to beat your chest and declare yourself the greatest, but the truth is … you were lucky! Now this doesn’t mean that luck alone will take you to the top because it won’t—skill, experience, and adept decision-making put you in position to get lucky. Tournament poker combines short-term luck with long-term skill. You need both to win. My Kill Phil co-author, Blair Rodman, won a coveted bracelet in a $2,000-buy-in NLHE event at the 2007 WSOP. In a number of previous tournaments he got unlucky in key hands and got knocked out. This time, he admits that he got lucky in key spots. What a difference! Fortunately, luck has a way of balancing out. He didn’t play any better or worse than in previous events, but this time he got the cards he needed when it counted.

Luck comes in various guises. When you’re dealt a slightly better hand than an opponent, such as Jamie Gold when he was dealt QQ several times versus JJ in the 2006 WSOP Championship Event, that’s lucky! When I was dealt KK in a high-stakes 6-handed $120,000 winner-take-all event while heads-up against Jason Gray who held QQ, that was lucky. Not only was it lucky to be dealt the better of two powerful hands, it was also fortunate that the opponents in the above hands didn’t improve and win.

Twice in the 2006 Aussie Millions Main Event that I was fortunate enough to win, I was all-in with pocket kings against Kenna James, who held A9 and AQ, respectively. Both times my kings prevailed. Did I have the best hand both times? Absolutely! Was I lucky? Absolutely! The chance of me surviving both encounters was about 50/50—a coin flip. Heads I’m out; tails I go on to win the Aussie Millions.

How much of tournament poker is skill and how much is luck? Overall, I’d say it’s about 75% skill and 25% luck. In any given hand, though, luck is a big factor. Even if you’re a 3-to-1 favorite, such as with AK versus AQ, you’ll still lose 1 out of 4 times. That’s a fact. Having a 75% chance of winning is a big edge, but it’s not a lock. Some players act as though their opponent has just won the lottery when their AQ prevails over AK. Far from it. Statistically, you’ll lose 25% of the time with this match-up, so it’s more constructive to take losing with it in stride, maintaining your equanimity.

There’s a famous Court case that dates back 20 years or more, in which Billy Baxter, a poker player, took on the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. tax authority, at a trial. The U.S. tax office refused to
accept “professional” poker as an authentic profession, claiming that it was all luck, no skill. After hearing the evidence, the judge in the trial in Reno, Nevada, looked over at the prosecuting attorney and asked him, “Do you really think that playing poker is all luck?” and the trapped attorney responded, “Yes, your Honor.” To which his Honor responded, “You may think that you’re telling the truth, but I can guarantee you that if you sit down at a poker table with Mr. Baxter, you have no chance of winning!”

The reality is that in years past, the novice had no chance of beating a professional poker player at the pro’s own craft. Currently, though, a lot of information is out there— instructional books, articles, and DVDs; final tables reported hand for hand; television shows where you get to look at the professional players’ hole cards; and Internet games that click by so fast they can make your head swim. Online services, such as cardrunner.com, or cardacademy.com, allow you to watch pros playing in real-money situations, while explaining every move they make. The learning curve for a novice player has accelerated off the top of the chart. A young gun can now learn in months what older competitors might have needed decades to achieve. To a great extent, the game of no-limit hold ‘em, by its very nature with a prevalence of all-in bets levels the playing field for fearless new competitors, increasing fluctuations that, in the trade, are referred to as “variance.”

A wealth of knowledge is available in books and columns that only the pros used to know. When I write a book, I try to present as complete a picture as possible, much to the chagrin of some of my colleagues. I reveal secrets the pros don’t want you to know. Why? Because the continued growth of poker is good for everyone. The game will continue to evolve and there will always be a hierarchy of players with varying levels of skill. Through the miracle of the Internet, we all have more information literally at our fingertips than exists in the Library of Congress. It’s just a matter of knowing where to find it and how to use it.

To become good in anything takes study. You have to study the work of those who’ve gone before you, watch the moves they make, play many hours in your game of choice. Talk, though beneficial, is cheap. Until your rear end is in the chair and your money is actually on the line, it’s just talk and theory. How do you feel when you have an OK hand—not a great hand, but an okay hand—and your opponent makes a large bet? How do you feel when you know you’re supposed to bluff at a pot in a particular situation? Can you pull the trigger? If so, is your breathing controlled? Is your heart racing? Are your eyes blinking too frequently? Are you fearless and intimidating? Or are you a tender flower that wilts at the first sign of heat? Do you have the courage to evaluate yourself? These are serious questions for aspiring poker players. Of course, poker is also a great form of relaxation. Online play avoids many of the tough questions above. By selecting tournaments with buy-ins that are within your budget, you can relax, have fun, and learn.

I’ve noticed that repeat winners are those that not only have the desire and competitiveness to keep on winning, but also actually work on their game. It’s OK, even welcome, to be lucky, but if you want to be a great player, make sure you put in the required time. Lady Luck may love you, but she likes to see some sweat on your brow...

Here are a couple of examples of luck in tournaments. In my first major tournament win at the St. Maarten Open, when down to three players, I was the short stack and moved all-in with 9h 8s. I was "insta-called" by a player holding pocket tens! The flop of J77 looked hopeless, but a 6 on the turn and a 5 on the river gave me a miracle straight (note that a ten was no good to me, as it would have given my opponent a full house). From there, I went on to win. My good luck!

While playing a no-limit hold ‘em event at the Aviation Club in Paris, France, a couple of years later, we were down to 5 players at the final table of a 1,000-euro-buy-in event. I’d been raising aggressively and the other 4 players were getting tired of it. I’d come from fourth in chips to second and was now on the button, having raised unchallenged the 3 previous pots, when I picked up two red aces! I raised again, but this time, the chip leader decided to take a stand and call. The flop: Ks 3d 2d.
To my surprise, the chip leader pushed all-in! I called and he showed me Qc Js! He was on a total bluff. Winning this hand would have given me 80% of the chips, making me the overwhelming favorite to win this event. The turn: As; river Tc! His Broadway straight topped my trip aces. My bad luck! Just the opposite side of the coin from when I made that 9-high straight in St. Maarten.

In the long run, luck balances out and skill prevails, so no matter what result you achieve in your first tries, be modest and realize that you have a lot to learn. If you get to the money or even win an event, it means that you were lucky at the right moments. It’s a great accomplishment, but just the beginning. Try not to forget, in your moment of glory, that you’re a student of the game, not yet a master. The best players know that there’s always more to learn and never stop studying. Stay focused and study. Regard poker as both a science and an art. The more you learn, the more you’ll realize how much more there is to learn.

**Summary of Chapter 22**

1. Winning a tournament requires both skill and luck.
2. Luck comes in many guises. Getting the right hands at the right times is crucial.
3. You need to play well to position yourself to get lucky.
4. Even the court system of the United States has had to recognize that poker is a game that requires a significant amount of skill.
5. Poker is about information. The more information you have about the game and the other players, the more successful you’re likely to become. Read and play as much as possible.
You study your opponent, scanning for information. The flop comes down and she quickly looks away, after glancing furtively at her chips. You’ve spotted a couple of tells—mannerisms, body language, or other specific parcels of information that reveal the strength or weakness of a hand. Based on what you’ve observed, you think she’s loaded. Sure enough, she comes out firing! Your attentiveness has paid off. You’ve dodged a bullet.

A tell is a specific bit of information that may reveal the strength or weakness of an opponent’s hand. Careful, though! Tells are often highly accurate when they’re inadvertently projected by amateurs, but they’re just as often deliberate and deceptive when observed in a pro. Tells are sometimes very useful, and you need to be aware of them, but be wary of buying into them when you’re staring down a normally steely-eyed expert.

A read is different than a tell. A read is an agglomeration of multiple bits of information gathered over time that allows an attentive observer to create a “gestalt,” an organized whole impression that’s more than the sum of its parts. Virtually all great players have the ability to synthesize plays they’ve seen an opponent make with hands shown down, betting patterns, past conversations and expressed opinions, and a multitude of other factors, without conscious discursive thought to make an intelligent read and act accordingly. Note that reads are more art than science and require a lot of experience to perfect.

I recently played in the New Zealand Championship event. Early in the second day an interesting hand came up. I was in the small blind with blinds of 400/800 and a 100 ante. I had around 45,000 chips, a healthy CSI of 22.5, so I wasn’t under any pressure. My opponent had more chips than I did. It was passed around to me. I had Ts 8h and limped in. An aggressive player in the big blind whom I know well declined his option to raise. The flop was Qc Tc 8c.

I had bottom 2-pair, but of course, a flush was possible and I had no clubs. I bet 1,200 into the 2,400 pot and my opponent quickly raised to 3,600. What to do? My read was that he didn’t have a made flush. This read was made without consciously analyzing all the bits of information at my disposal, as I’m going to do for you now, but the gestalt that clearly came together was “no flush.” In this battle of the blinds, my aggressive opponent would have raised pre-flop with any pair, any ace, and most kings, so it was unlikely that he flopped a set or was holding either the ace or king of clubs; he’d also have raised pre-flop with QT, and probably also with Q8, a better than average hand. If he flopped a flush that didn’t include the ace or king of clubs, knowing the player, his raise on the flop would have been greater than 2,400. If he didn’t have a flush, a set, or 2-pair, what could he have? His most likely holding was top pair, either with or without a club draw, or just a draw. Hands such as Qh5c, Td9c, Jc3h, or something similar were in the range of hands that I put him on. I decided that I had the better hand.

Knowing that my opponent was enamored with the concept of fold equity, I decided to re-raise enough to show him that I was willing to commit to this hand and to try to convince him that he had no fold equity and was an underdog, if he was drawing; I re-raised to 15,000. If he called, and anything except a club came on the turn, my plan was to move in. To my surprise, he quickly went all-in! Even with my tournament life on the line, I was confident in my read that he didn’t have a made flush, straight, or a set, although his chance of having Q8 escalated a bit in my mind. If he didn’t have this precise hand, I

Unlike in the movies, tells are not anywhere near 100% accurate.
was confident that I was ahead, so I called. He turned over Jc7d, a flush draw and a gutshot straight draw, giving him 12 outs. I was a 55%/45% favorite to become one of the chip leaders with only about 25 players left. A 3h on the turn catapulted me to about a 4/1 favorite, but a fatal 2c on the river had me walking. Bad luck! Even when you make the right read and have way the best of it, doesn’t mean it will always pan out. That’s poker.

A tell is more specific than a read. It involves observation of a distinct sign that indicates either strength or weakness. Often, but not always, this sign has been intentionally created to convince an opponent to make a desired action. For example, a player may slam his chips into the pot when he’s bluffing in an attempt to convince you that he’s strong (see “Live Tells” below).

Live or online, one of the most important parts of analyzing the likely holding of a person whom you know nothing about is his betting pattern—does it make sense? Does it tell a story? Is it consistent with how he might play a hand that beats yours? If not, you should be more likely to call. If so, it militates against calling, although you may need more persuasion to be convinced enough to fold.

One of the direct insights into your opponents’ thinking is observing the hands they show or that you can quietly look up online. To quickly check what an opponent mucked on PokerStars, click on the chip rack, then click on “Instant Hand History,” and find the hand you want. Think back through their actions and put the story of their hand together, noticing how they play various holdings. Jot down a note. This information will help you read them later when you lock horns.

ONLINE TELLS

Online, you’re not looking for a shaking hand, crossed arms, or furtive glances, but there are still some patterns to observe. The most common one is simply how long an opponent takes to respond. Of course, we don’t know if the baby just turned breakfast over, or the doorbell rang, or the curtains are on fire … but in most cases a long pause adds emphasis to the action being taken. If a player thinks a long time, then checks, he likely has a weak hand and wants to see another card, hoping that you think he’s considering betting. He’s looking for a “free card.” Don’t accommodate him. Bet!

If a player “goes into the tank,” activating his time extension, and then bets … look out! Often, he’s got a huge hand and is just pretending to have needed an eternity to think. He may be thinking about how big a bet you’ll call. The most likely scenario, though, is that he’s just “hollywooding,” acting up a storm, and hopes you’ll think he’s weak. This is one of the situations where it’s most useful to be able to take notes. You might be unsure the first or second time you observe this pattern, but by the third time you’ve likely picked up an important tell.

A famous online player whose name I’ll keep to myself routinely stalls when he has a monster, making sure his time clock has been activated prior to putting in a substantial raise. In every instance, he’s shown a big hand when called. Most amateurs act right away with both very strong and very weak hands, but think about the hands that they’re unsure about.

Professionals are harder to pigeonhole, but most generally try to take the same amount of time on each decision, a la Chris “Jesus” Ferguson. Against amateurs, though, they may try to sneak in a curve ball if they think it might work, by making either slower or quicker decisions, depending on the circumstances.

Keep several other things in mind. Of paramount importance is position. Would you have called with his hand from the five-hole with four players yet to act? Would you have called a raise with his hand from that position?

One clue to a player’s expertise is whether the math involved in a decision influences him. Did he even pause in calling a player where he’s likely to be a 10-to-1 underdog and the pot is offering him only 4-to-1 odds? If not, why not? Most commonly, the reason is that he’s oblivious to the odds, but
is listening to his gut, his intuition. After all, every situation is 50-50 for him—either he’ll win or lose. Make a note about these weak players.

Next, observe whether implied odds influence a player. Does he understand the concept and make decisions based on it? Does he call with a draw, getting the wrong price, when his opponent is all-in (no implied odds here)? If an opponent hits his draw and moves in, will he pay him off? These patterns and tendencies may win you a big pot later.

Frequency of play is important both online and in person. If your opponent is in 80% of the hands, then you’re dealing with someone who’s taking the flop with a lot of weak and vulnerable hands, such as 9c 7h. You may be able to trap a player such as this for all his chips, especially if he overplays his hands on the flop and beyond. Pay particular attention to how this type of player plays draws and how you can best exploit his tendencies.

Putting out a bet of an odd amount that visually looks imposing is another potential tell. An example of this would be a bet of 99 dollars (a stack of three $25 chips, four $5 chips, and four $1 chips). The theory is that most players are much more willing to call the smaller looking bet than the more threatening looking big stack of chips—even though in actuality the $99 bet is less than a $100 bet.

**Live Tells**

When you can study players live, you’re privy to an onslaught of information that’s not available to you in online tournaments. Players must now look at flops unemotionally, put chips into the pot instead of clicking a mouse, and face long stare downs when they’re bluffing. Changes in posture, facial expressions, chip handling, and eye movements are there for all to see. Knowing that they’re under intense scrutiny, players often try to mask their actions by acting in a manner opposite to the strength of their hand.

The classic tells can be described in a simple way—a weak acting player is strong and a strong acting person is weak. What do I mean by that? Well, people who appear not to know that it’s their turn to act—they may be watching television or ordering drinks; they may fail to put their bets over the line into the pot or seem more interested in flirting with the cocktail waitress than playing the hand—usually are holding a monster … especially when taking a break from these “distractions” to bet.

On the other hand, if someone stared at you, splashed his chips into the pot aggressively, or talked to someone at the table, he probably doesn’t want you to call. Mike Caro has written an excellent book on tells that includes photos. Tells, and reverse tells, are also discussed in both *Kill Phil* and *Kill Everyone*. (See the appendix for recommended reading).

Common tells in inexperienced players include preparing to discard their hand before it’s their turn to act, staring at the flop if it hasn’t helped them, and glancing down at their chips after seeing the flop. These are so common and important that a brief discussion of each is warranted.

**Preparing to Discard Before It’s Their Turn to Act**

Many new players are eager to see their starting hand. If it’s unplayable, they immediately lose interest and prepare to discard. If you’re seated a few seats to the right of the button and observe a couple of players to your left preparing to muck their hands, this may be a good time for you to steal the blinds. To avoid this tell yourself, always look at your hand only when it’s your turn to act. This way, you’ll be able to study the other players when they check their cards and see their reaction, picking up valuable information that can help you decide how to play your hand.

**Staring at the Flop**

Inexperienced players who stare at the flop generally have no part of it. When they hit the flop, they usually stare away. Watch for this when you’re not involved in a hand, comparing opponents’ reactions.
to the flop with their actions and cards shown. If you pick up a pattern, it can be an extremely reliable
tell. It’s almost as if they “tell” you, “I missed that flop, so you can safely bet,” or “I hit that flop, so look
out!” Thank you very much!

**Glancing Down at Their Chips**

Opponents who furtively glance at their chips like their hand and are preparing to bet. You can use this
tell in some advantageous ways. If you have a mediocre hand, fold. If you have a strong hand and want
to be raised, just limp in. Your opponent will then usually raise and you can come over the top (re-raise).
A corollary to glancing down at chips is called “loading up.” Some players actually organize their
intended bet in advance. If you see a player loading up, it’s similar to glancing down at his stack. It’s
best to get confirmation of this tell prior to relying on it, as some seasoned players use this ploy to try to
scare you out of betting.

When you’re playing against pros, it’s best not to rely on tells. They know what they’re doing and, like
a baseball manager sending out false signs, they can feed you a lot of misinformation, depending on
their evaluation of your level of expertise. Several years ago, I was playing in a 6-handed tournament.
Ben Roberts, a smooth U.K. pro seated on the button, had his cards off the table and cocked between
his thumb and index finger, in classical discard position. As it was folded around to him, noticing that
everyone had folded, he drew his cards back and raised. It appeared as though he was about to throw
his hand away, but seeing that everyone had folded to him, he’d now decided to steal the blinds. I was
in the big blind and decided to challenge him. At the end of the hand he showed me pocket aces! I’d
been well and truly duped.

At the 2007 Aussie Millions, we were down to 36 players from a starting field of more than 700 and well
into the money when this hand came up. I raised from mid-position with Kc 9c and was called by Gus
Hansen in the big blind. The flop contained two queens and two clubs. Gus checked and I made a small
bet of 25,000, around 35% of the pot. Gus now raised to 75,000. As he made the raise, his hand was
visibly shaking. A slight tremor can mean two distinctly different things. In inexperienced players, it
can indicate a monster, since they’re unable to bridle the rush of adrenaline. More commonly, though,
it indicates slight nervousness when bluffing. Gus is a pro and I couldn’t bring myself to believe that he
was shaking with excitement, yet I was convinced that the tremor wasn’t an act. I decided that there
was a good chance that he was bluffing. I had the second best possible flush draw and decided to move
in. Gus insta-called and showed me Ac Qs! I had totally misread his tremor and was unceremoniously
relegated to the status of observer.

**Summary of Chapter 23**

1. A tell is a specific trait or mannerism; a read is an agglomeration of various bits of information.
2. Delayed action emphasizes strength to a bet or weakness to a check.
3. Acting weak often means a strong hand; acting strong often indicates weakness.
Bluffing! To many new players, this is what poker is all about. There’s no better rush than sticking it all in with absolute rubbish and having your opponent dutifully muck his hand.

It may surprise you to learn, however, that big bluffs, the kind that get your adrenaline flowing, are relatively uncommon. Players frequently make small bluffs on the flop or turn, but big bluffs require a lot more courage. Sure, they do occasionally pull off a big bluff (especially at a TV final table), but a pro’s bread and butter is taking small pots away from his opponent with small bets and raises. I don’t mean to say that big bluffs don’t happen and aren’t an important part of the game. They do happen and they are important. But the vast majority of the time, players who make big bets have big hands. Good players may show you some small bluffs and when they shove it all-in you may believe they have nothing. Don’t count on it.

The first thing to understand about bluffing is that you need a really bad hand. With mediocre hands that may be good, it’s usually best to check and call or to make a “blocking bet” in an attempt to keep the pot small. If you bet, you’re likely to chase away hands worse than yours, but better hands will rarely fold. To bluff, you need to have next to nothing, at least for the moment.

**Semi-Bluffing**

The most common (and the best) bluffs are what are called “semi-bluffs.” A semi-bluff is made with a hand that’s probably behind at the time of the bluff, but has a chance to improve to a winner. For example, suppose you have Ah Jh and the flop is Th 5s 2h. You don’t even have a pair at this point, but your hand has great potential. If you catch a heart on either of the next two cards, you’ll have the nut flush (best possible flush), and if either an ace or jack comes, there’s a good chance that you’ll also have the best hand. With this hand, you’re actually a small favorite over hands such as QT or KT with two cards to come. When you add fold equity into the equation, making a big raise (perhaps all-in) has a lot of merit. If your opponent folds, you’re happy. If your opponent calls, you’re still a favorite to win a massive pot.

Semi-bluffs are a great way to keep fold equity on your side. Remember that all-important poker precept, which by now should be second nature. It’s probably the single most important thing you can learn from this book:

*When you bet or raise, there are two ways to win a pot. When you call, there’s only one way to win—show down the best hand.*

You don’t even have to be a favorite to have the best of it when you semi-bluff. If you have 14 outs or more, you’re a favorite, but suppose you have only 12 outs and put your opponent to the test by pushing all-in? He doesn’t know you’re drawing. You may have a set or 2-pair and already have him in big trouble. He’ll fold some percentage of the time. If his tournament life is on the line, he’ll fold more frequently than when he has a big stack and can afford to call. The combination of the outs that will make your hand a winner, combined with the chips you’ll pick up if he folds, makes your big semi-bluff a money-winning play in the long run. Remember, two negatives can make a positive.
To be sure, sometimes your semi-bluff will be called and you’ll lose significant chips, perhaps even get knocked out. That’s part of the game. Remember that bit of poker wisdom: **You’ve got to be willing to go broke to have a chance to win.** But often your opponent will back down to your semi-bluff and you’ll take down the pot, or he may call and you make your 12-outer, winning a huge pot. These are the kinds of calculated gambles that can take you to the final table!

**Hands that may warrant semi-bluffing include:**

1. A straight, or flush, draw with one or two over cards to the flop.
   Example: You have Kh Qc and the flop comes Jd Ts 5h.

2. A flush and a straight draw.
   Example: You have 8h 9h and the flop comes Th – Jc – 4h

3. A flush or straight draw plus a pair.
   Example: You have 6s 7s and the flop is 4 5 6.

4. A flush draw and a gutshot.
   Example: You have 8h 6h and the flop is 5h 9h Ac.

Beside semi-bluffing on the flop, at times you might semi-bluff on the turn. Suppose you have Ad Jd and the flop is Kd Qc 8s. You raised pre-flop, made a c-bet of 70% of the pot when checked to (you have position), and your one opponent called. The turn card is the 3d. You now have 8 more cards to make the nuts (you’ve already counted the ten of diamonds), 12 total outs when you include your gutshot. Your ace also potentially provides you with 3 additional outs if your opponent has only 1-pair without an ace kicker. Now he bets 60% of the pot on the turn. Sure, he might have something really good like 2-pair and be in tricky mode, but he most likely has one pair, hoping to find out where he’s at in the hand without risking all his chips. He’s testing you. Test him back. **All-in!**

Even if you’re called, say by AK, you’ll still win 27% of the time by making your flush or straight on the river. The combination of the chance of making your hand, plus fold equity, makes semi-bluffing a very strong play that you need to integrate into your game plan.

**Outright Bluff**

Much less common than a semi-bluff is a bluff made with no hope of winning, if called. For this type of bluff to be successful, a scare card must come that doesn’t help your opponent and you must represent a hand that’s consistent with the way you’ve played the hand. Here are a couple of common examples.

**Representing a straight or flush, or both:** Suppose you have Td Tc on the button and you call an early-position raise to 2,400 from a tight-aggressive player. The blinds are 400/800/100, and both of you have about 40,000. No one else calls. The flop is 2d 4h 7d. Your opponent bets 3,000 and you raise to 10,000. Your opponent calls, which you read as a probable pocket pair bigger than tens. The turn brings the 9s and you both check. The river is the Ad and he checks again. This is an ideal spot for a bluff. It’s unlikely you’ll win by checking. Working through the hand, you can eliminate a number of holdings. You know that your opponent is a TAG and raised from early position pre-flop, then he bet the flop and called a substantial raise. If he had a single ace in his hand, he wouldn’t have called your raise on the flop. If he had AA, he wouldn’t have checked on both the turn and river. If he just made the flush, the only hand that might meet his pre-flop raising requirements is exactly Kd Qd, and he would have had to pass up a lucrative betting opportunity on the river—an extremely improbable parlay. **All-in!**

The second highest card on the board pairs on the turn: Since many players will call the flop with second pair, if a repeat of the second highest card on the board comes on the turn, it means potential trouble for a player with top pair. Say the board is Ks 9c 7d, your hand is As 7s, your opponent makes a small bet on the flop, and you call. The turn is the 9h. If your opponent bets again, go ahead and raise, particularly if the stacks are deep. You could have easily had the 9s in your hand instead of the 7s.
This is technically a semi-bluff, as you have 5 outs (three aces and two 9s) if you’re up against a pair of kings. Because your chances of winning when called are slim, you need a high chance for the bluff to be successful before you pull the trigger. A wimpy bluff in a spot like this won’t cut it. If you think there’s a good chance your opponent will fold top pair, raise at least the size of the pot. If you both have deep stacks, a pro-like creative alternative might be to mini-raise on the turn (showing strength), then if your foe checks on the river, push all-in!

A word of caution about bluffing—don’t overdo it. Pick your spots, then make a convincing (often all-in) bluff, if you decide the conditions are right. Remember, bluffing with outs (semi-bluffing) is always safer than outright bluffing.

**Summary of Chapter 24**

1. Bluffing is an essential part of poker.
2. In big pots, players bluff less than you might imagine.
3. Bluffing to win small pots is far more common than bluffing to win big pots.
4. Keep fold equity on your side, as much as possible.
5. Semi-bluffing keeps fold equity on your side and gives you two ways to win a pot.
6. Outright bluffs are sometimes possible if the board is consistent with the way you’ve played the hand and you make a convincing bet when a scare card comes.
HOW TO PLAY HOLD ‘EM

THE GAME: Hold ‘em is a form of poker played with a 52-card deck.

THE RANKINGS: Standard values of hands are used—if you’re unsure of what they are, review Appendix B.

BUTTON: A button representing the dealer is randomly placed in front of one of the players and moves clockwise one spot after every hand.

BLINDS: Two blinds or starting bets are placed into the pot in front of the button to create action.

ANTES: Every player also puts up an ante when most tournaments have run for a while. How much and when this happens varies, so consult the structure sheet.

PLAYERS: There are usually 8, 9, or 10 players at the table. When fewer than half the chairs are filled, the game is short-handed.

SHUFFLE: The standard shuffle gives a random mixing of the cards.

DEALING: The dealer now delivers two cards to each player, face down.
**PRE-FLOP:** After all players get their cards, they have the opportunity to fold, call, or raise, in turn, starting one spot in front of the big blind and moving around the table in a clockwise fashion. A fold is releasing the cards face down, in a forward fashion. A call matches the biggest blind and is a minimum bet. A raise is double the biggest blind, or previous raise, or more. The maximum raise is to move all-in, in other words to bet all the money and chips in front of one immediately. Any raise between the minimum raise and the all-in is still a raise.

**BURN:** The top card of the deck is placed aside after each betting round before community cards are turned up.

**THE FLOP:** The dealer brings turns three cards up in the middle of the table. These are community cards and can be used by anyone that still has a live hand after the first round of betting. This event is commonly called the flop.

**A ROUND OF BETTING AFTER THE FLOP:** Now that three-sevenths of your hand has arrived in one bundle, you have to decide whether or not to continue. The second round of betting ensues.

**THE TURN:** After the second round of betting is completed, the dealer delivers one community card face up. It’s commonly called the turn.

**ROUND OF BETTING AFTER THE TURN:** The third round of betting takes place.

**THE RIVER:** The dealer now turns the final community card face up in the center of the table. It’s commonly called the river.

**FINAL ROUND OF BETTING OCCURS AFTER THE RIVER:** Possibly using their own hole cards, available only to them, all players choose their best five-card hand and bet one last time.

**SIDE POT:** This happens when there are three or more players and at least one of them is all-in. An all-in player can only be involved for as much as he has in front of him. When the other players bet more than the all-in player has, a side pot is formed. Only those players involved in the side pot can win what’s in it. Sometimes, the amount in the side pot exceeds what’s in the main pot.

**SHOWDOWN:** Players with live hands now turn them up.

**ELIMINATION:** When someone is all-in and loses, he has busted out of that event and must leave the table.

Signing up on the Internet at Pokerstars is free, after which you can play for free or watch live games for real money. I recommend that you do this in order to gain familiarity with how the hands occur and what you’re likely to see.
HAND RANKINGS

1) The best possible hand is a royal flush: the ace, king, queen, jack, and ten, all of one suit.

2) The next best hand is a straight flush, comprised of 5 cards in sequence and all the same suit, ranked by the highest card. The smallest possible straight flush is made of 5, 4, 3, 2, ace all of one suit. Notice that the ace can be used as a 1 to complete a straight as well as being the highest card in the deck.

3) Next is 4-of-a-kind, or quads—four cards all of the same rank. Four kings always lose to 4 aces and always beat 4 queens. The kicker is always unimportant when you have one of the quad cards as one of your hole cards.

4) Next is a full house, 3-of-a-kind plus a pair. The highest possible full house is AAAKK and the lowest possible hand is 22233. Full houses are always ranked by the three cards of the same rank first, and the pair secondly.

5) Next is a flush, consisting of five cards of any suit. The strongest flush is A, K, Q, J, 9 of one suit. The smallest possible flush is 7, 5, 4, 3, 2 all of one suit. Suits have no bearing on the strength of a flush. If you hold the ace of any suit in your hand and make a flush with it, you’ll have the best possible flush, known as the nut flush, unless a straight flush is possible, and the best possible hand, unless the board is paired.

6) Straights are next and consist of five cards in a row of any suit.

is a straight, for example, but remember that

is also a straight, because the ace is not only a high card, but can be used as a 1 in a 5-high straight. If it’s used as a one in a “wheel,” or 5-high straight, it can be beaten by any other straight, such as a 6-high straight. If the hold ’em layout is:

then hand one will beat hand two, because when playing the best five cards they both make a straight, but hand one’s straight will be higher.
7) 3-of-a-kind is still a very strong holding and it comes next. The biggest 3-of-a-kind is AAA and the smallest is 222. In hold 'em, there are three ways to make 3-of-a-kind. The first is when the board shows 3-of-a-kind. This is the weakest 3-of-a-kind to have, as all your opponents will have it also; if it comes to the side cards, your best possible holding would be AK. If someone has better than this (any pair), he has a full house, which beats 3-of-a-kind.

![Card Images]

Hand 1 loses to the full house of hand 2.

The second way to make three of a kind is to hold one of a category in your hand and have two matching cards appear on the board. This is called “trips” and is a strong holding.

![Card Images]

The final way to have 3-of-a-kind is to make a “set.” This means that you hold a pocket pair and another of that same denomination appears on the board. This is a very powerful holding and often results in a lot of action, since the strength of your hand is disguised.

![Card Images]

8) 2-pair is the next strongest hand. The highest possible 2-pair is AAKK and the lowest possible 2-pair is 3322; you often hear 2-pair described as the bigger pair first as in “aces up or in our second example, “threes up.”

![Card Images]

This could be read as “nines up,” although sometimes you’ll hear “2-pair” or “nines over fours.”

9) The highest one pair hand is ace-ace and the lowest possible pair is 22. Many hold ’em hands are won by one pair.

10) “No pair” is the last stop for our valuations. The best possible no pair is AKQJ9 of more than one suit.

Never assume that you have a winner or that you’re beaten on the river. The safest thing to do in every case is to turn your hand face up on the table. Online, if your hand is still live, the best hand will be chosen automatically by the computer.
### Summary of Appendix B

1. In ascending order, with each hand that follows being able to beat all the hands that are mentioned before it, we have: no pair, one pair, 2-pair, 3-of-a-kind, straight, flush, full house, quads, straight flush, and royal flush.

2. You’ll make some full houses, but the hands that beat full houses are quite rare. Don’t expect to see quads and straight flushes in every play! Some people play for years before they make their first royal flush.
# Pre-Flop Hand Rankings

The first chart rates the hands for raising, the second rates them for calling a bet or raise.

## Hand Rankings by % If You’re the Raiser

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentile</th>
<th>Hands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 2%</td>
<td>JJ+, AKs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 4%</td>
<td>99+, AKo, AQS+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 6%</td>
<td>99+, AQo+, ATs+, KQs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 8%</td>
<td>77+, AQo+, ATs+, KTs+, QTs+, JTs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 10%</td>
<td>66+, AJo+, A9s+, KTs+, QTs+, JTs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 15%</td>
<td>33+, ATo+, A7s+, KQo, K9s+, Q9s+, J9s+, T9s</td>
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<td>Top 20%</td>
<td>22+, A9o+, A3s+, KJo+, K9s+, QJo, Q9s+, J9s+, T8s+, 98s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 25%</td>
<td>22+, A7o+, A2s+, KTo+, K9s+, QJo, Q9s+, JTo, J9s+, T8s+, 98s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 30%</td>
<td>22+, A3o+, A2s+, KTo+, K8s+, QTo+, Q8s+, JTo, J8s+, T8s+, 97s+, 87s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 35%</td>
<td>22+, A2+, K9o+, K5s+, QTs+, Q8s+, JTo, J7s+, T9o, T7s+, 97s+, 86s+, 76s, 65s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 40%</td>
<td>22+, A2+, K8o+, K2s+, Q9o+, Q5s+, J9o+, J7s+, T9o, T6s+, 96s+, 86s+, 75s+, 65s, 54s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 45%</td>
<td>22+, A2+, K7o+, K2s+, Q9o+, Q4s+, J9o+, J5s+, T8o+, T6s+, 98o, 96s+, 85s+, 75s+, 64s+, 54s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 50%</td>
<td>22+, A2+, K4o+, K2s+, Q9o+, Q3s+, J8o+, J4s+, T8o+, T6s+, 98o, 95s+, 87o, 85s+, 74s+, 64s+, 54s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 60%</td>
<td>22+, A2+, K2+, Q6o+, Q2s+, J8o+, J3s+, T7o+, T4s+, 97o+, 95s+, 87o, 84s+, 76o, 74s+, 64s+, 53s+, 43s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 70%</td>
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<td>Top 80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top 90%</td>
<td>22+, A2+, K2+, Q2+, J2+, T2+, 92+, 83o+, 82s+, 74o+, 72s+, 64o+, 62s+, 54o, 52s+, 43s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100%</td>
<td>Any 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

RECOMMENDED READING


GLOSSARY

**Act:** To fold, call, or raise when it’s your turn to do so in a poker hand.

**Action:** Lots of chips going into the pot during the play of a hand.

**Aggressive:** To bet, raise, and re-raise frequently.

**Air:** A hand worth nothing; it implies action with a bad hand.

**All-in:** Betting all your remaining chips at any time during a poker hand.

**Ante:** An obligatory amount that all players must put into the pot before the cards are dealt.

**Around back:** To be in late position.

**Bad beat:** To lose a hand in a mathematically improbable way.

**Backdoor flush:** Making a flush by catching two consecutive cards of the same suit on the turn and river.

**Bet:** To make a wager during a poker hand by placing chips into the pot.

**Betting line:** A line behind which you can organize your chips prior to betting. Any chips that go over the line often constitute a bet that can’t be taken back.
**Big-bet:** Pot limit or no-limit poker where you can bet an amount equal to or greater than the size of the big blind every time it’s your turn to act.

**Big blind:** The largest of the mandatory bets into the pot before the cards are dealt, the purpose of which is to stimulate action. It’s usually two places to the left of the button.

**Bingo:** To catch a winning card.

**Blank:** A card that doesn’t improve any of the existing hands.

**Blind:** Forced bet that’s put into the pot before the cards are dealt to stimulate action. In no-limit hold ’em, the small blind is half the size of the big blind.

**Blocking bet:** A smallish bet, often on the river, to discourage your opponent from making a larger bet.

**Bluff:** To wager with an inferior hand hoping to win the pot by getting your opponent to fold.

**Board:** The face-up community cards available to everyone still active in the hand.

**Bricks-and-mortar:** A physical location, such as a casino, where you go to play poker.

**Broadway straight:** A straight comprised of AKQJT—the highest possible straight.

**Bubble:** One place out of the money.

**Burn:** Placing the top card face down before dealing the community card(s).

**Busted:** also Bust-out: A player who has been eliminated from the competition.

**Busted flush draw:** A hand with flush possibilities that misses making the flush.

**Button:** An acrylic disc that symbolizes the dealer (all games played in a casino or online use a professional dealer). The button moves clockwise around the table after each hand is completed, dictating where the dealing begins for each hand, as well as the location of the blinds.

**Call:** To match a bet that has been already made.

**Casino; card room; club; host; house:** The location of poker games.

**C-Bet:** Continuation bet.

**Chasing:** Calling in hopes of catching a card that will allow an inferior hand to win.

**Check-raise:** To check initially, then raise after another player bets.

**Chip-chop:** Settlement on the final table that uses the player’s chip counts as a guideline.

**Chips:** Clay disks that represent money and come in various denominations.

**Chip Stack Index (CSI):** The cost of a round of poker (blinds and antes) divided into your stack.

**Chop:** To split a pot when two or more opponents have the same hand after all the cards have been dealt.

**Chopping:** To win many small pots against your opponent.
Cold call: To call one or more raisers when you have nothing in the pot prior to your action.

Come: From ‘on the come’ describing bets, raises, and semi-bluffs that are made with a hand with little current value, but great potential.

Come over the top: To re-raise or re-re-raise.

Community cards: Cards placed face up on the table that can be used by any player with a live hand.

Continuation (bet): A bet on the flop after raising pre-flop, regardless of the value of your hand.

Cost per round (CPR): The cost of a round of poker including the blinds and antes.

CPR: Cost per round.

CSI: Chip stack index.

Cut: To place the upper part of the deck on the bottom of the deck, as is customarily done prior to dealing.

Cutoff (CO): The position exactly one to the right of the button.

Dead Money (noun 1): A player entering an event without much of a chance of winning it. (noun 2): Chips left in the pot by players no longer involved in the hand.

Deal (verb): To deliver the cards. (noun): An agreement made to divide a pot in a cash game or the prize money in a tournament.

Dealer: The one who delivers the cards to the players.

Dominate: Two hands that hold a common card, but one has a bigger kicker. Example: AK dominates AQ.

Donkey: A stubborn player who calls most bets.

Double through; Double Up: To win a hand when you’re all-in, thereby at least doubling your chip stack.

Downcard(s): Cards that are seen and can be used only by one player. Also called “hole” cards.

Drawing dead: When no card or cards can possibly convert your hand from a loser to a winner.

Drawing hand: A hand that needs a particular card to come for it to become a winner.

Dry pot: A pot with three or more players, where one player is all-in and the other players are competing in an empty side-pot.

Early position: One of the first players to act; the first three positions after the blinds.

EV: Expected value.

Exposed card: A card that was accidentally turned up for all to see.

Fear equity: Value achieved by instilling fear in opponents by playing aggressively and unpredictably.

Felted: To bust someone. Brought into use by Phil Laak.
Fish: A sucker. A player who loses regularly.

Flop: The three community cards turned face up after the first round of betting.

Flush: Five cards of one suit. See Appendix B.

Fold: To act by choosing not to play at the required price.

Fold equity: The value realized when an opponent folds to either a bet or raise.

Forward motion: Moving toward the pot with chips.

Free card: To allow the next card to come without betting.

Full house: A poker hand comprised of three of a kind and a pair.

Gappers: Hands where numbers are skipped. Example: 97 is a one-gapper, J8 is a two-gapper, and 73 is a three-gapper.

Gestalt: An understanding that is larger than the sum of its parts.

Getting busted: Losing all your chips.

Ghost: A person who makes seemingly weak plays that win consistently.

Gutshot: A straight draw that only one specifically ranked card will complete. Example: 3567. Only a 4 will complete the straight.

Hand: The cards you start with.

Heads-up: Playing poker with only two players.

Hijack: The seat two to the right of the button.

Hole: A player’s position at the table.

Hole cards: The exclusive down cards that each player receives.

Hollywooding: Acting.

In the tank: The time it takes to have a long think, often several minutes long.

Inside Straight: To have a straight draw that can only be made in one way. See Gutshot.

Insta-call: To call instantly, usually indicating a strong hand.

Kicker: The side card of any holding.

Late position: One of the last players to act before the flop.

Lay down: Folding a hand.

Leading at the pot: Being the first one to bet at any pot.
Limit: Poker where the betting limits are preset for every round.

Limp: Calling the minimum amount before the flop.

Live hand: A hand that can be played (not yet folded).

Live player: A player who plays a lot of hands.

Loading up: To organize a bet or raise before putting it into the pot.

Look you up: To call another player.

Loosey-goosey: A player who's in far too many hands.

Maniac: A person who plays a lot of hands with reckless abandon.

Micro-limits: Very small limits, invariably played online. Lower stakes than could be found in a bricks-and-mortar casino.

Middle position: Usually the 4th and 5th players to act after the blinds.

Mini-raise: The minimum raise.

Misdeal: A cancelled distribution of cards because of a mistake.

Monster: A very powerful hand or a huge draw.

Move: To make a play at winning a pot, possibly without having the best hand.

Muck (noun): The discard pile. (verb): To throw away a hand.

No-brainer: A hand that virtually plays itself.

No-limit: Being able to bet everything in front of you at any time.

No pair: The lowest hand ranking. See Appendix B.

Nut-flush: The best possible flush.

Nuts: The best possible hand.

Offsuit: To hold two unsuited cards in the hole.

One-gapper: A hand with one number missing, such as 97.

Open-ended: A straight draw that can be completed by catching a card on either side of the sequence. Example: 6789.

Over-bet: To bet more than expected, perhaps far more than the pot.

Over-card: To have a card bigger than any on the board.

Over-pair: To hold a pair in the hole that's bigger than the highest card on the board.
Over the top: To raise, re-raise, or move all-in after another player has already bet or raised.

Pair: Two cards of the same rank.

Play back: To re-raise a raiser, usually a raiser who’s in a late position.

Ploy: To intentionally misrepresent the value of your hand by any legal means.

Pocket pair: Two down cards of the same rank.

Poke: A stash of money.

Position: Where you’re in relationship to the blinds or to other (active) players.

Post-flop: After the flop.

Pot: The chips, or money, that have been put into play.

Pot-committed: Making a bet or raise that’s sufficiently large that it’s incorrect to fold. In this book, committing 1/3 of your chips or greater is enough so that folding is no longer a recommended option.

Pot-limit: A top-end bet that’s limited to the size of the pot.

Pre-flop: Action taken before the flop arrives.

Profiling: A way of categorizing opponent’s playing styles.

Quads: 4-of-a-kind. See Appendix B.

Rainbow (flop): A flop of three community cards all of different suits.

Raise: To wager at least twice what the bettor or blind has in the pot.

Read: Putting together a number of bits of information to work out an opponent’s most likely holdings and to act accordingly.

Represent: To bet or act in a manner that leads opponents to believe you have a hand other than what you really have.

Re-raise: To raise a raiser by putting in at least twice the amount of his raise.

Re-steal: To re-raise a player you think is raising with less than a premium hand, such as a late-position raiser you suspect is trying to steal the blinds with a weak hand.

Ring game: A full, or nearly full, cash game (not a tournament), usually with 8 or more players.

River: Common slang for the final community card in a hold ’em hand.

RNG: Random number generator.

ROI: Return on investment.

Royal Flush: The best possible hand in hold ’em, an ace-high straight flush. See Appendix B.
**Runner-runner:** Catching an essential card on both the turn and the river that converts a losing hand to a winner.

**Rush (noun):** To win a series of hands, or several big hands, in a short period of time. (verb): To get a “high” or “joyful” feeling from making a good play.

**Satellite:** A tournament where the winner goes on to a more expensive tournament.

**See:** To access and play future streets by calling a bet or raise.

**Set:** A pocket pair plus a card of the same rank amongst the community cards.

**Semi-bluff:** To make a bet or a raise with what is likely to be the worst hand at the time, but has the potential to improve to a winner.

**Shorthanded:** Play with 6 or fewer players.

**Showdown:** Turning the cards face up to see who wins after all betting has been completed.

**Shuffle:** Mixing the cards so that their distribution is random. Online, this is accomplished by using a random number generator.

**Side pot:** A secondary pot that’s established when one player is all-in and two or more additional players still remain in the hand.

**Sit-n-go (SNG):** A one- or two-table tournament.

**Slow roll:** To turn up a winning hand after a lengthy delay. Considered to be very poor etiquette.

**Small blind:** A mandatory bet of half the size of the big blind posted by the player immediately to the left of the dealer once each round.

**SNG:** Sit-n-go.

**Sooted:** Slang for suited. Often used when referring to people overplaying suited cards.

**Spike:** To hit a winning card.

**Stack:** 1) Twenty chips of a particular denomination. 2) The total amount of chips that you have.

**Stacked:** Modern slang in no-limit used to connote winning all of an opponent’s chips.

**Standard raise:** In no-limit hold ‘em, when a player raises to three times the big blind.

**Stare-down:** To stare at an opponent for a prolonged period of time, searching for information in order to make a decision.

**Steal:** To attempt to win a pot without holding the best hand.

**Steal position:** A late position, usually the button, hijack, or cutoff seats.

**Stone-cold:** Absolute. Often used to describe a bluff, or the best hand. “He was on a stone-cold bluff.” Or “He had the stone-cold nuts.”
**Straight**: Five cards in succession regardless of suits. See Appendix B.

**Straight flush**: Five cards in succession, all of the same suit. See Appendix B.

**Street**: A round of betting that follows each revealed community card(s).

**Structure**: The schedule for escalation of the blinds and antes in a poker tournament.

**Stud**: A form of poker with some cards revealed and others concealed.

**Suited**: Two cards of the same suit.

**Suited ace**: A holding of an ace with another card of the same suit.

**Suited hand**: A holding of two cards of the same suit.

**Table stakes**: Betting that’s limited to the amount you have in front of you at the start of a hand.

**Texture**: The make-up of [the hand][the board][the game].

**Three bet**: A re-raise. Raising subsequent to a bet and a raise.

**3-of-a-kind**: To have three cards of any rank. See Appendix B.

**Tilt**: To play poorly because you lost a prior hand or hands, often as the result of a bad beat.

**Trap**: To get someone else to put chips into the pot when you have a big hand.

**Trips**: To have two of any rank on board and a third one (of that rank) in your hand. See Appendix B.

**Tournament**: An event where entrants are progressively eliminated until only one player has all the chips.

**Turbo**: An accelerated tournament where the blinds and antes progress faster than usual.

**Turn**: Sometimes called fourth street. Slang for the single community card exposed when the betting that follows the flop has been completed.

**2-pair**: Two sets of two cards of the same rank, such as 9944. See Appendix B.

**Underdog**: The hand that has less than a 50% chance of winning.

**Under the gun**: The first person to act after the cards are dealt.

**Uns suited**: Two cards in your hand of different suits.

**Up card[s]**: The exposed part of your hand.

**Up front**: One of the first three players to act in a poker game.

**UTG**: Under the gun.

**Value bet**: A bet made by a player with a hand that he believes is best.

**WCOOP**: World Championship of Online Poker.
Weak lead: To make a small bet into a pot after the flop or turn.

Weak-tight: A passive player.

Wheel: A five-high straight.

WPT: World Poker Tour.

WSOP: World Series of Poker.

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- equilibrium plays
- bubble factors
- endgame strategies
- optimal heads-up play
- and much much more!

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