

## Chapter 1

# A Bird's-Eye View of Texas Hold'em

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Setting your poker goal
  - ▶ Scoping out the game
  - ▶ Getting more hard core
  - ▶ Finding a place to play
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**T**wenty years ago, Texas Hold'em lived in relative poker obscurity. When I was playing in casinos, it was fairly common for people to come up and ask me about the game.

A few years ago, the perfect Hold'em storm was created: Chris Moneymaker won the \$10,000 Main Event of the World Series (pocketing more than \$2 million off of a \$40 entry fee), the World Poker Tour became the most successful program in the history of the Travel Channel, and online play became prevalent.

The poker craze has gotten so out of hand that my *mom* is now telling me about watching poker on TV: "It's a lot like quilting. You really have to pay attention to catch the nuances." Not exactly the way I look at the game, but the fact that she's even watching says something.

In this chapter, I give you an overview of everything else you can expect from the book. Read on and then venture forth where you will.

Oh yes, and good luck to you! Let's shuffle up and deal.

## Considering Why You Want to Play



Before you even cozy up to a card table, you should ask yourself a critical question: *Why am I here?*

There are several possible answers to this question:

- ✓ I want to make money.
- ✓ I'm just out to chill with my pals and have a good time.
- ✓ I want to sharpen my game.
- ✓ Hold'em has just crossed into my mental radar and I want to find out more about it.
- ✓ Baby needs a new pair of shoes.

Your reason may even be a combination of these things. Whatever your reason for being at the table, setting a main goal for your play and trying to reach it is critically important.

What I'm about to say will sound like I'm joking, but I assure you I'm not: You do *not* have to set a goal of making money at the table. The media pressure, and general public attention on Hold'em, has set up an expectation that you can, must, and should, win.

The sad fact is that roughly 95 percent of the people who play poker in professional establishments *lose* money. It's a devilishly hard game to beat because of the *rake* (a small percentage of the pot that the house takes to run the game — see Chapter 3 for more), and because the vagaries of chance even out over time, you have to truly maximize your wins and minimize your losses, or you'll watch your wallet slowly shrink.

If you decide from the outset that you have a goal other than winning, you won't beat yourself up when you don't. And believe me, *no one* at your table will argue with you if you don't mind losing.

Don't get me wrong, one of *my* requirements of sitting at a table is that I play to win — when I don't, it sets me in a foul mood for hours if not days. Because you're playing against other mortals — people full of pride and fallibility — you *can* beat the game. My friends and I have proven it over a mathematically significant period of time.

But winning takes perseverance, attention, and thought. Your reading this book is a great start. Keep going. Your will is already stronger than the average Friday-night player — now's the time to get your ability up there as well.

## *Working with Game Dynamics*

In order to begin appreciating the complexities of Hold'em, you need to understand two basic elements of the game: your position at the table, and the particular way the game is dealt.

### *The importance of position*

When Hold'em is played in a professional card room (be it online or in a brick-and-mortar casino), a dealer button acts as the theoretical point that the cards are being dealt from. This button moves one position clockwise around the table at the conclusion of every hand.

The player in the position immediately to the left of the dealer (that is to say, clockwise) *posts* an automatic bet called the *small blind*, and the player immediately to *his* left (or two places to the left of the dealer) posts an automatic bet known as the *big blind*. These are forced bets that players *must* make in order to get dealt into the game. All other players get to see their hands “for free.” (To get a better understanding of the dealer button and blinds, flip to Chapter 3.)

Players decide whether to play or *fold* (quit) in a clockwise position, starting with the player immediately to the left (clockwise) of the big blind.

In Hold'em, your position relative to the other players is critical. When you're in the beginning of the betting order, your cards *have* to be of higher quality than the cards you would normally play in later position — especially if lots of players are left in the hand — because you have no idea what evil may lurk beyond. (For more detail on playing by position, see Chapter 4.)

Likewise, if you're riding at the back of the calling order, you can afford to play *looser* hands (those that aren't as high quality) and hope to catch cards to break people's dreams. In fact, *pot odds* (the amount you bet relative to the amount you would win) say that sometimes you *should* call, even when you have a lesser hand. (Chapter 12 gives you more detail on pot odds and all things mathematical.)

### *Playing move by move*

Like all poker games, Hold'em has a very specific order in which the cards are dealt and played. (Chapter 2 has diagrams of Hold'em

hands being dealt if you want to see what they look like in action on a table.)

### ***Hole cards***

At the start of a Hold'em hand, after the two blinds have been posted, all players are dealt two cards facedown. These are known as the *hole* or *pocket* cards. Players then make a decision to *call* the blinds (match the big blind), *raise* the blinds (increase the bet) or *fold* (quit playing and throw their cards away, facedown, to the middle of the table — known as *mucking*).

In the form of Hold'em known as *Limit*, the bets have to be of a certain specified amount. In *No-Limit*, players may bet any amount of their chips on the table. (You can find more on the different types of betting limits and how they work in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 (and on the Cheat Sheet), you can find more on the types of hands you should play as hole cards, according to your position, as well as information on how to bet them.



If you've just been invited to a poker party and don't have the time to even read Chapter 4, here's a general rule I tell newbies that works remarkably well:

If *both* of your hole cards are not 10s or greater (Jacks, Queens, Kings, or Aces), fold.

Yes, it sounds harsh, but it'll keep you pretty much only playing the cards that you should — and about the right frequency of hands.



Make sure not to show your hole cards to other players at the table (even if those other players are no longer in the hand). And after you've looked at your cards, you should protect them from being collected by the dealer by placing an extra poker chip (or some other small object) on top of them.

### ***The flop***

After the betting action is done on the round with the hole cards (also known as *pre-flop*), three cards are displayed by the dealer simultaneously to the center of the poker table — this is known as the *flop*. At this point, each player at the table has a unique five-card poker hand consisting of his two hole cards and the three community cards.

Because of the raw number of cards involved, the flop typically gives you the general tenor of the poker hand and definitely gives you a good idea of the kind of hand to look for as a winner. For example, an all-Spade flop (especially with a lot of players still in the hand) will be hinting at a flush as a strong possibility for a winner.

Betting begins with the first person still in the hand to the left (clockwise) of the dealer button. As a general rule, you want your hand to match the flop, and you should fold if it doesn't. (Chapter 5 is all about how to play the flop.)

In Limit play, the size of the bet you can make on the flop is identical to the amount you can make pre-flop.

### ***The turn***

After the flop betting round is completed, another community card is placed, known as the *turn* (or sometimes *fourth street*). Each of the remaining players now has a six-card poker hand made up of his two private hole cards and the four community cards. Hold'em is a game where only five cards count toward a poker hand, so everyone has a theoretical "extra" card at this point.

In Limit, the betting is now twice the amount that was bet pre- and post-flop.

Poker wags like to say, "The turn plays itself," meaning your hand gets better and you bet it, or it doesn't and you start giving strong thoughts to folding. This is more or less true. (You can find more details about playing the turn in Chapter 6.)

### ***The river***

After the betting round of the turn, a final community card is exposed, known as the *river* (sometimes called *fifth street*).

Each player left in the game has his final hand consisting of the best five cards of the seven available (two private hole cards and the five community cards). Players may use two hole cards along with three community cards, one hole card combined with four community cards, or just the five community cards (known as *playing the board*). Again, poker hands are made up of the best five cards — the other two available to any given player don't count. There is one final round of betting. (Chapter 7 washes you with the river details.)

### ***The showdown***

The *showdown* is what happens after the final river bets have been placed. Although it isn't formally required, typically the person who initiated the final round of betting is first to show her hand. The action then proceeds in a clockwise fashion with players either mucking their hands if they can't beat the hand exposed, or showing a better hand (at which point the dealer mucks the old, "worse" hand and continues around the table for any remaining hands).

Winners and losers are determined by the standard poker hand rankings. (Chapter 2 gives more details on those if you're not already familiar with them.)



If you're ever unclear about who is winning a hand, just turn your cards face up and let the dealer decide. *Never* take a player's word on what she has in hand until you've actually seen her cards with your own eyes — when you muck a hand, it's officially dead.

## Moving Up a Notch

After you have the basics of how the game is played, it's time to move into the deeper levels of the game.

### Gleaning your opponents



By *far*, the most important thing in a poker game is figuring out, and then playing specifically to, your opponents. When you've been bet into, what might be a raise against one player can be an easy and fast fold against another.

You need to factor in such questions as:

- ✓ How likely is your opponent to bluff?
- ✓ Does your opponent sense weakness in your betting action or in the way you're behaving at the table?
- ✓ Is your opponent's table position influencing the way he plays?
- ✓ Do the board cards hint at a good hand (or possibly a hand that has been "missed," and is your opponent now bluffing)?

If you read no other chapter of this book, look over Chapter 8 for *much* more detail on playing the players at the table.

### Playing the roles

When it's your turn to bet, you really only have some subset of five choices:

- ✓ **Check:** If no one else has bet yet
- ✓ **Bet:** If no one else has bet
- ✓ **Call:** If a player in front of you has bet and you want to match the amount to stay in the game

- ✔ **Raise:** If a player in front of you has bet, but you want to increase the amount
- ✔ **Fold:** If you've decided you can't take it any more

With such limited choices, some people may think there isn't a whole lot to the game — but nothing could be farther from the truth.

## ***Bluffing***

One of the things poker is best known for is *bluffing* (acting as though you have a hand that you don't actually have, in an effort to get your opponent to fold). Bluffing is the point where your psychological rubber hits the steely money road — and it's the glorious difference that separates poker from nearly any other game you can mention.

Bluffing works best when:

- ✔ You're playing against a weaker opponent (who is likely to fold).
- ✔ There is a large amount of money at stake, where winning the hand would make a difference to your stack.
- ✔ People have reason to believe you aren't bluffing.
- ✔ The community cards hint at a hand you could have (for example, a straight or a flush) but that you actually don't.



Bluffing is a bad idea when:

- ✔ You try to get a player to fold who is very prone to calling, “just to see what you have.”
- ✔ There is no other obvious reason for you to bluff.
- ✔ You're playing with people who think, “Sure, I'll call — that guy always bluffs.”
- ✔ You gain nothing (or nearly nothing) by doing so.

For more on bluffing, see Chapter 9.

## ***Slow playing***

*Slow playing* is the expression used to describe a player who has an extremely good hand, but doesn't bet it strong from the start, all in an effort to squeeze more money out of his opponent.

The good news is, if you slow-play it can help camouflage your hand, leaving the unsuspecting at your disposal. The bad news is it can backfire and give your opponent a chance to draw cards that can ultimately beat you.

Chapter 10 is your slow-playing headquarters. In the name of indifference, it's best to act like you're actually going somewhere else as you mosey on over to Chapter 10 and take a look.

## Figuring in math

If playing your opponents is the most important thing to know at a poker table, the next most important is mathematics.

The math behind poker isn't complicated — much of it you can already do off the top of your head, assuming you know little things like the fact that a deck has 52 cards: 4 suits, each with 13 ranked cards (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, Jack, Queen, King, and Ace). What you can't (or don't want to) figure out you can memorize.

The two important things to pay attention to are the chances of making your hand on a draw (for example, you have four Clubs between your hand and the community cards through the turn — what're the chances of seeing one on the river?), and what are the pot odds if you do (that is, how much do you win relative to how much you bet?).

I cover mathematics in detail in Chapter 12 — and I promise it's not the yawner that it was in school.

## Places You Can Play

Playing poker is easy, assuming you can find a game. Of course, thanks to the current poker craze, you can find a game nearly anywhere.

### Home games

For poker, there's truly no place like home. For one thing, there's no rake. For another, you can slap on your Judas Priest album and bang your head — and your tablemates can just join in.

The upsides:

- ✔ You get to play with your pals. (This is an upside only if you actually *like* your pals.)
- ✔ You get to play as naked as you'd like.
- ✔ You call the shots on *everything*.



The downsides:

- ✓ Your dog might eat the food you spread out on the counter.
- ✓ The equipment isn't as nice as a professional card room.
- ✓ Your place tends to get a little bit trashed.

For more on home games, take a look at Chapter 14. Chapter 20 has some ideas on making your home games better.

## *Casinos and poker rooms*

As far as a place to play goes, you can't beat the equipment, comfort, and cocktail waitresses of a professional card room. A professional dealer lets you focus all your attention on the game (and not having to fumble with the cards yourself), and gaming commission rules ensure that you're getting a fair deal.

When you go to a professional card room, you should check in with the *board person* (the person responsible for the waiting lists) to find out the limits and games that are being spread. The floor-person will seat you and help you get your chips.

Chapter 16 has the rundown on professional card rooms, and hey, don't forget to tip your dealer!

## *Online*

The biggest poker room in the world is no farther away than your computer. All you need to do is transfer money from your bank account to a third-party transfer agent, and then from there to the poker site of your choice. (This is a process similar to using PayPal for buying stuff off of eBay.)

As soon as you have money in your account, you can be off and playing. The good news is, the rakes tend to be less and there are more bonuses than at brick-and-mortar card rooms. The bad news is, the physical absence of a player at your table makes reading tells *much* harder.

See Chapter 15 for more on the online world. Chapter 18 details some differences between the online and "real" worlds. And hey, if you *really* get into playing online, you can just pick up a copy of *Winning at Internet Poker For Dummies* (published by Wiley), which I wrote with Chris Derossi. It dovetails almost perfectly with this book.

