

Chapter 1

Poker Basics

In This Chapter

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- ▶ Getting a feel for poker basics
- ▶ Looking at hand rankings
- ▶ Building a strong foundation for winning
- ▶ Getting acquainted with general rules and etiquette
- ▶ Recognizing different types of opponents
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If they're helpless and they can't defend themselves, you're in the right game.

—Mike Caro, noted poker authority

Poker is America's national card game, and its popularity continues to grow. From Mississippi and Michigan to New Mexico and North Dakota, you can find a game in progress everywhere. If you want to play you can find poker played on replicas of 19th century paddle wheel riverboat or on Native American tribal lands. You can play poker in two-table, no-frills cardrooms and elegant Los Angeles County megaclubs where 150 games (with betting limits ranging from \$1–\$2 to \$200–\$400) are in progress 'round the clock.

This book targets readers who are new to poker. If you've played in home games but have never played in a casino, this book can help you too. Even if you consider yourself to have a pretty good hand at the game, this book is bound to improve it.

Poker and the American Dream

Poker has always been a microcosm of all we admire about American virtue. It is part of the very fabric Americans have spent more than 220 years weaving into a national mosaic. Call it the American Dream — the belief that hard work and virtue will triumph, that anyone willing to work hard will succeed, that right makes might. It is an immigrant's song, a mantra of hope; it is an anthem for everyone.

Poker looks like such a simple game. Anyone, it seems, can play it well — though nothing, of course, is further from the truth. Learning the rules can be quick work but becoming a winning player takes considerably longer. Still, anyone willing to make the effort can become a fairly good player. You can succeed in poker the way you succeed in life: by facing it squarely, getting up earlier than the next person, and working harder and smarter than the competition.

Where Did It All Come From?

A profusion of western movies and gunfighter ballads has convinced the world that poker is a quintessentially American game, yet its roots go back hundreds of years. The Persians were said to play a poker-like game centuries ago. Germans played a bluffing game called *Pochen* as early as the sixteenth century; later, there was a French version called *Poque*. The French brought this game with them to New Orleans and its popularity spread — aided by the paddle wheelers that traveled the Mississippi.

Poque soon became known as *poker*, and the rules were modified during the Civil War to allow cards to be drawn to improve one's hand. Stud poker, still very popular today, appeared at about the same time. (See Chapters 3 and 5 for the full scoop on Stud games.)

People all over the world play poker, with hundred of versions played in home games everywhere. You can find games going on in casinos and poker rooms in most of the United States, England, Ireland, France, Holland, Austria, Germany, Finland, Australia, New Zealand, Aruba, Costa Rica, and probably a few other countries too. People play for pennies around the kitchen table and professionally for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Poker is Good for You

Like the American Dream, poker is good for you: It enriches the soul, sharpens the intellect, heals the spirit, and when played well — nourishes the wallet.

Above all else, poker forces the player to face reality and deal with it head-on. Oh, sure, people can ignore those realities — lots of players do. They are the ones who lose consistently, and rather than face the deficiencies in their own game, persist in placing the blame on fate, on the dealer, on that particular deck of cards, or on anything else — except themselves — that's handy.

But poker can also be bad for you if you don't know the key strategies and your own shortcomings. But don't dismay. You have us to guide you through the rough waters and jump-start your poker education.

Perhaps British author and poker player Anthony Holden said it best. In *Big Deal: A Year As A Professional Poker Player* he writes: "Whether he likes it or not, a man's character is stripped bare at the poker table; if the other players read him better than he does, he has only himself to blame. Unless he is both able and prepared to see himself as others do, flaws and all, he will be a loser in cards, as in life."



Your challenge for as long as you aspire to win at poker is this: Be willing to examine and analyze your character and game. If you do this, and have even a modicum of talent, you can become a winning poker player.

Before You Put on Your Poker Face

Like a house, poker requires a foundation. Only when that foundation is solidly in place can you proceed to build on it. When all the structural elements are in place, you can then add flourishes and decorative touches. But you can't begin embellishing it until the foundation has been poured, the building framed, and all the other elements that come before it are in place. That's our purpose here: to put first things first — to give you a basic understanding of what you need before you begin to play.

Planning and discipline

Some poker players, and it's no more than a handful, really do have a genius for the game — an inexplicable, Picasso-like talent that isn't easily defined and usually has to be seen to be believed. But even in the absence of genius — and most winning players certainly are not poker savants — poker is an eminently learnable skill. Inherent ability helps, and while you need *some* talent, you really don't need all that much. After all, you don't have to be Van Cliburn to play the piano, Picasso to paint, or Michael Jordan to play basketball. What you *do* need to become a winning player are a solid plan to learn the game and discipline.



- ✓ **Plotting a strategy:** If you aspire to play winning poker you need a plan to learn the game. While the school of hard knocks might have sufficed as the educational institution of choice 20 or 30 years ago, most of today's better poker players have added a solid grounding in poker theory to their over-the-table experiences. You can find a slew of information to help you learn the game. Check out Chapter 16 for our learning plan and suggested books, magazines, and Web sites.
 - ✓ **Discipline:** All the strategic knowledge in the world does not guarantee success to any poker player. Personal characteristics are equally important. Success demands a certain quality of character in addition to strategic know-how. Players lacking self-discipline, for example, have a hard time ever winning consistently regardless of how strategically sophisticated they might be. If one lacks the discipline to throw away poor starting hands, then all the knowledge in the world can't overcome this flaw.
- Knowledge without discipline is merely unrealized potential. Playing with discipline is a key to avoiding losing your shirt — or your shorts.

If you can learn to play poker at a level akin to that of a journeyman musician, a work-a-day commercial artist, you will be good enough to win consistently. You don't have to be a world champion like Doyle Brunson, Phil Hellmuth, Johnny Chan, or Tom McEvoy to earn money playing poker. The skills of a good journeyman poker player enables you to supplement your income, or — better yet — earn your entire livelihood at the game. If you go on to become the very best poker player you can be, that should be more than enough to ensure that you will be a lifelong winning player.

The object of the game

The objective of poker is to win money by capturing the *pot*, which contains bets made by various players during the hand. A player wagers a bet in hopes that he has the best hand, or to give the impression that he holds a strong hand and thus convince his opponents to *fold* (abandon) their hands. Since money saved is just as valuable as money won, knowing when to release a hand that appears to be beaten is just as important as knowing when to bet. In most poker games, the top combination of five cards is the best hand.

Number of players

Any number of players, typically from two to ten, can play, depending on the game. Most casino games are set up with eight players for a seven-card game like Stud poker or Razz, and nine or ten players for Texas Hold'em.

The deck

Most forms of poker involve a standard 52-card deck. For Draw poker and Lowball, a joker, or “bug,” is sometimes added to the deck. It’s not a wild card *per se*, but can be used in Draw poker as an additional ace, or to complete a straight or flush. In Lowball, the joker is used as the lowest card that does not pair your hand. For example, if you held 7-6-2-A-Joker, it would be the same as if you held 7-6-3-2-A.

Poker chips

Whether you use pennies or peanuts to bet with at home, nothing beats the feel of real poker chips. Originally made of clay, chips now come in a durable composite or plastic. (The plastic ones are a bit more slippery than the composite and, thus, are more difficult to handle.)

Chips are available in a wide range of colors and patterns. The designs and “edge spots” you see on casino chips vary because of security reasons, but the colors generally follow a set of traditional dollar values:

\$1	White
\$5	Red
\$25	Green
\$100	Black
\$500	Purple or Lavender

If you want to add a dose of Vegas-style playing to your home game, then try using real chips. Following is a list of the number of chips you’ll need:

3 to 4 players	300 chips
5 to 6 players	400 chips
7 to 8 players	500 chips
Large games or multiple games	1,000 chips

The Basics of Play

Poker is a simple game to learn, although one can spend a lifetime trying to master it. You win money by winning *pots* — the money or chips wagered during the play of each *hand* (or round) of poker, from the first cards dealt until the showdown. A hand also refers to five cards in the possession of a player.

You win hands in one of two ways:

- ✔ **You *show down* (reveal) the best hand** at the conclusion of all the betting rounds. When two or more players are still active when all the betting rounds are done, they turn their hands face up. The pot goes to the player who holds the highest hand during this showdown.
- ✔ **All your opponents fold their hands.** No, this doesn't mean they politely clasp their fingers on the table in front of them. *Folding a hand* (or, more simply, *folding*) means that a player relinquishes his or her claim to the pot by not matching an opponent's bet.

In this case, you may have had the best hand or you may have been bluffing — it doesn't matter. When opponents surrender their claim to the pot, it's yours.

In games like Seven-Card Stud and Texas Hold'em the best hand is a high hand. (For more detail about high hands, see the section titled, "Hand Rankings" in this chapter.) In other games, like Lowball and Razz, the best hand is a low hand. (The best possible low hand is 5-4-3-2-A; the next best is 6-4-3-2-A.)

In *split-pot games*, two winners split the pot. For example, in Seven-Card Stud, High-Low Split, Eight-or-Better (mercifully abbreviated as Seven-Stud/8) and Omaha High-Low Split, Eight-or-Better (or just Omaha/8) the best high hand *and* the best low hand split the pot (provided that someone makes a low hand composed of five unpaired cards with a rank of 8 or lower). The worst possible low hand would consist of 8-7-6-5-4. The best of all low hands is 5-4-3-2-A (known as a *wheel* or *bicycle*). While a high hand always will be made in split-pot games, there won't necessarily be a low hand. And when there's no low hand, the high hand wins the entire pot.

Most games require *ante* or *blind bets*. (See the sidebar titled, "Betting terms" in this chapter.) If antes are used, each player must post a token amount of money in order to receive cards. As for *blinds*, one or two players are required to make a bet or portion of a bet *before* the hand is dealt. This requirement rotates around the table so that each player pays his fair share.

Each time a round of cards is dealt, players have an opportunity to check, bet, fold, call, or raise. Any time a player decides to forfeit his interest in the pot, he may release his hand when it is his turn *to act* (to do something related to betting: raise, fold, check, or call). When a player folds a hand, he is not required to place any more money in the pot. If a player bets or raises and no one calls, the pot belongs to that player, the cards are collected and shuffled, and the next hand is dealt. If there are two or more players still active at the end of the hand, the best hand wins the pot.

While there are different rules for each specific version, poker really is this simple. Yet within its simplicity lies a wonderfully textured game structure that is always fascinating, frequently enjoyable, and, for some, a lifelong source of pleasure.

Hand Rankings

Seven-Card Stud and Texas Hold'em are the two most popular forms of poker in which the highest ranking hand wins. These games are played with a 52-card deck — there is no joker — composed of four *suits*: spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs. Each suit is equal in value, and there are 13 *ranks* in each suit. The ace is the highest ranking card in a suit, followed by king, queen, jack, and 10 through 2 (or deuce), in descending order. An ace may also be used as the lowest ranking card in a 5-high straight (5-4-3-2-A), which is also called a *wheel* or *bicycle*.

Although Stud and Hold'em are played with seven cards, the best hand refers to the best five-card hand. Hand rankings are a function of probability. The rarer the hand, the more valuable it is. See Figure 1-1 for an at-a-glance look at hand ranking in descending value.

Royal flush; straight flush

A *royal flush* is simply an ace-high straight flush, and is the best possible hand in poker. There are only four of them: A♠K♠Q♠J♠10♠; A♥K♥Q♥J♥10♥; A♦K♦Q♦J♦10♦; and A♣K♣Q♣J♣10♣.

A *straight flush* is five cards of the same suit in sequence, such as 9♥8♥7♥6♥5♥ or Q♦J♦10♦9♦8♦.

Four-of-a-kind

Four-of-a-kind, or *quads*, is a five-card hand composed of all the cards of one rank, plus one unrelated card, such as J♥J♠J♦J♣5♣. The higher the rank, the better the hand. For example, four kings beats four jacks.

Full house

Three cards of one rank and a pair of another make a *full house*. The rank of the full house is determined by the three-card grouping, not the pair. A hand like 9♥9♠9♦5♣5♠ is referred to as “. . . nines full of fives.”

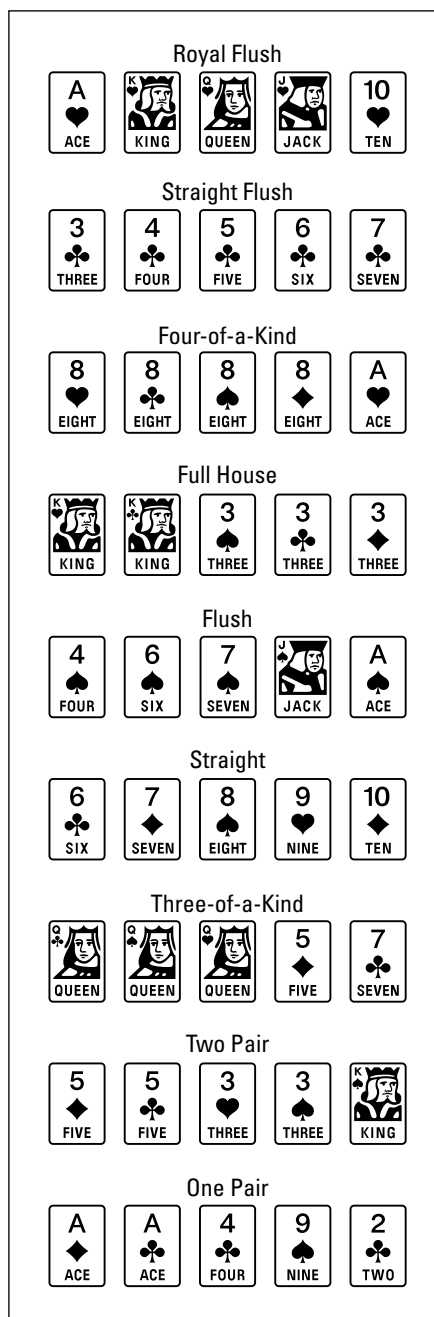


Figure 1-1:
Poker hands
in descend-
ing value,
with royal
flush as the
best hand.

Flush

A *flush* is any five cards of the same suit. The cards are not in sequence. If they were in sequence, it would be a *straight flush*. If there is more than one flush, the winning hand is determined by the rank order of the highest card, or cards, in the flush. A flush composed of A♥Q♥J♥6♥5♥ is higher than A♣Q♣J♣4♣3♣.

Straight

Five sequenced cards, not all of the same suit, compose a *straight*. If more than one straight is present, the highest card in the sequence determines the winning hand. A jack-high straight J♥10♠9♦8♦7♣ will beat this 9♠8♠7♦6♠5♣ nine-high straight.

Three-of-a-kind

Three cards of the same rank, along with two unrelated cards is called *three-of-a-kind*. This hand is also referred to as *trips*, or a *set*. If you held 8♣8♥8♠K♦4♣ you could refer to it as “. . . trip 8s,” or “a set of 8s.”

Two pair

Two cards of one rank along with two cards of another rank and one unrelated card composes *two pair*. The higher rank determines which two pair is superior. If two players hold two pair and each has the same high pair, then the rank of the second pair determines the winner. If both players hold the same two pair, then the rank of the unrelated *side card* determines the winning hand. If the hand is identical, then the players split the pot. For example, Q♣Q♥8♠8♦4♣ queens and 8s is superior to Q♠Q♦5♣5♠K♦ queens and 5s.

One pair

One pair is simply two cards of one rank and three unrelated cards. If two players hold the same pair, then the value of the unrelated side cards determines the winning hand.

No pair

No pair consists of five unrelated cards. When no player has a pair, then the rank order of the unrelated cards determines the winning hand. For example, if Harry has A-Q-9-6-3 and Adrien has A-J-10-3-2, then Harry wins because A-Q ranks higher than A-J.

Low hands

In split-pot games, like Omaha/8, the best low hand composed of five unrelated cards with the rank of 8 or lower, captures half the pot. A hand like 7♣6♥4♠3♦A♣ beats 7♦6♣5♥3♠A♦, but will lose to 7♠4♥3♥2♣A♠.



Determining the best low hand takes a bit of practice, but if you always begin with the highest of the low cards and continue in descending order, you can't go wrong.

Betting

Without betting, poker would just be a game of luck and the best hand would always win. Betting is the key to poker, and minimizing losses when holding a poor hand while maximizing wins with good hands is what poker is all about.

Every betting interval requires a check or a bet from the first player to act. Each player to the left of the first player to act may either check or bet if no one else has bet. Whoever makes the first bet is said make the *opening bet*. If a bet has been made, other players may fold, call, or raise.

When a player folds, he loses any chips he has contributed to that pot and has no further interest in the hand. After the final betting round a showdown among the players still active in the hand determines the winner.

Different types of games call for specific kinds of betting:

- ✓ In a *fixed limit* game, no one may bet or raise more than a predetermined number of chips. This limit, however, usually varies with the round of the game. In Stud poker, betting limits usually double when the fifth card is dealt. Thus, a \$10–\$20 game means that the first two rounds of betting are based on limits of \$10, while the last three are in increments of \$20. In Texas Hold'em, with four betting rounds, betting limits usually double on the third round.
- ✓ *Spread limit* games are similar to fixed limit, but the bettors can wager any amount within the limits. A limit might be \$2–\$10 any time, which

means that wagers can be made in any amount within those limits at any time, with the proviso that a raise must be at least the equal of the bet that preceded it.

- ✓ In *pot limit*, bets or raises are limited only by the amount of money in the pot at the time the wager is made. A player who raises may count her call as part of the pot. If there is \$10 in the pot and someone wagers \$10, a raiser may call that bet, making the pot \$30 and then raise the entire pot. When she is done, the pot will contain \$60.
- ✓ In *no limit*, a player may bet or raise any amount of chips she has in front of her at any time.

In most limit games, a bet and either three or four raises per betting round are permitted.

Betting terms

Following are some of the key terms to describe the action that occurs during a poker game:

- ✓ **Ante:** A token sum of money contributed by each player before the cards are dealt. Antes are used in Seven-Card Stud, Seven-Stud/8, Razz, and many other games.
- ✓ **Bet:** A wager of a certain amount of money by a player in a poker game. Bets can either be in *fixed limits*, such as \$3 and \$6, or *spread limits*, which allow a player to wager any amount within the limits at any time (such as \$2–\$10). *Pot limit* is another form of wagering, in which a player can bet any amount up to the sum total currently in the pot. *No-limit* poker allows contestants to wager any amount of money they have in front of them. (For more detail about betting, see the section titled “Betting” in this chapter.)
- ✓ **Blind bet:** A forced bet by one or more players *before* the cards are dealt. This takes the place of an ante. The requirement to post a blind bet rotates around the table from hand to hand, so that each player pays his fair share. Blind bets are common in Texas Hold’em and Omaha. In most casino games there are two blinds: a big blind and a small blind. These blinds are considered “*live*,” which means that players who post the blind have the opportunity to raise when the action gets back around to them.
- ✓ **Call:** To equalize the amount wagered by putting the amount of money wagered into the pot.
- ✓ **Check:** A check is a bet of zero dollars. By checking, a player retains the right to call any bet made by player who acts after he does, or even to raise. But if someone’s already bet when it’s your turn to act, you can no longer check, and must either fold, call, or raise.
- ✓ **Checkraise:** To check and then raise if one of your opponents bets. This is generally done to trap players for a bet or two, when the checkraiser has a very powerful hand.
- ✓ **Fold:** To decide not to call a bet or raise. By folding, a player relinquishes her interest in the pot.
- ✓ **Raise:** To increase the amount wagered by an amount equal to your opponent’s bet — or by a greater amount, if the game is spread limit, pot limit, or no-limit.

Rules of the Road

Call them rules, conventions, or poker etiquette, there are some guidelines that are common to all forms of poker, especially poker in card clubs or casinos. While you may find some minor variations from one casino to another, many card casinos are working diligently toward a uniform set of guidelines.

Going all-in

If you don't have enough to cover the bets and raises, you are said to *go all-in*, and are simply contesting that portion of the pot your money covers. Others who are active in the hand can still make wagers, but those bets constitute a side pot. At the hand's conclusion, the side pot is decided first, then the main pot. You are not eligible to win the side pot since you invested no money in it, but you can win the main pot. You can buy more chips or put more money on the table between hands.

Few things you remember from Saturday matinee westerns happen in a public cardroom. Players don't leave the game in mid-hand, go get the deed to the ranch, then use it to cover a bet. You cannot drive someone out of a pot just by betting more money than he has in front of him. The player with the limited chip supply goes all-in — by calling with the remainder of their chips. If the all-in player loses, he either buys more chips or leaves the game.

The forbidden string-raise



In a western, someone's always saying: "... Mighty big bet, cowboy. I'll just see your twenty," while reaching back into his stack for more chips, and with a long, lingering glance for effect, drawls "... and raise you forty!" As dramatic as that move may seem, you won't see that in a real poker game. Calling a bet, then reaching back for more chips and announcing a raise is called a *string raise*. It is not permitted. Rest assured someone will shout "String raise!" The dealer then informs the hopeful raiser that a string raise just occurred, and he'll have to take his raise back and simply call. Now, if someone shouts "String raise!" and another opponent says something like "That's okay. Let his raise stand," be assured your hand is in big trouble — real big trouble!

The string-raise rule prevents a player from reading the reactions of his opponents while he puts some chips in the pot, then deciding to raise if he thinks he's got the best of it.

How to raise

If you want to raise, just say “Raise.” Then you can go back to your stack and count out the proper amount of chips. If you want to let your action announce your intention, you usually must put the correct amount of chips into the pot, and do it all in one motion. Otherwise . . . string raise.

No splashing

Avoid *splashing* the pot: Don’t toss chips into the center of the table where they mingle with the others. Instead, stack your chips neatly on the table about 18 inches in front of you. The dealer will pull them into the pot when the action has been completed on that round of betting.

If it’s your first time in a public cardroom, tell the dealer so he can help you through the mechanics of the game. After a few sessions, you will be familiar and comfortable with the majority of playing procedures. Soon you, too, will feel like a regular.

Protecting your hand; cards speak



In a casino, unlike in many home games, you are always responsible for your hand. Toss it in the *muck* (the pile of discarded cards), and your hand is fouled and cannot win. The rule in all cardrooms is that *cards speak* — your hand is worth whatever value the cards have. Dealers, however, can make mistakes. If you think yours is the best hand, turn your cards face up and announce it. Place it halfway between your chips and the pot, and hold on to it while the dealer determines the outcome.

If you’re not sure whether you have the best hand or not, turn all of your cards face up at the end of the hand and allow the dealer to read your hand. If you are in a poker club or casino and there is a doubt or debate, even if the hand is over, casino security cameras can review the hands that were shown down in order to determine the winner.

Table stakes

Most games, including most casino games are *table stakes*. You cannot add chips or money to the amount in front of you during the play of the hand. If you run out of money during a hand, you can contest only that portion of the pot that your bets cover. You cannot *go light* — that is, pull more money out of your wallet — as you might do in a home game. You can, of course, always add more money to your playing stake between hands.

Time out

Anytime you are unsure of anything, the best procedure to follow is to call “Time!” This freezes the action. Then get your questions resolved prior to acting. Poker etiquette suggests that you not abuse this privilege, particularly if you are in a game where you are charged a fee for sitting at the table. Players usually want a fast, efficiently run game, with as few interruptions as possible.

Decks and dealing

Dealers — and decks — generally rotate every half-hour. In addition, players unhappy with their run of cards are prone to holler “Deck change!” Most card rooms permit a change once a deck has been in play for an entire round.

The finer points: Etiquette

Poker rules and etiquette helps speed the game along and keep it orderly. These conventions are as much a part of the game as the cards themselves. In fact, when you play casino poker for the first time, poker etiquette may take more getting used to than the game itself.



Keep in mind the following points of poker protocol:

- ✓ **Act in turn:** Each player is expected to act in turn as play proceeds clockwise around the table. If someone bets and you plan to discard your hand, wait until it is your turn to act before doing so. Not only is acting out of turn impolite, it can give a big advantage to one of your opponents. If he knows you will fold your hand, it makes it easier for him to bluff, and is unfair to the rest of the players. In poker, as in most things, it's considered polite to wait your turn.
- ✓ **Keep your cards in plain sight:** In order to maintain the integrity of the game, it is important for players to keep their cards on the table during the play of the hand. The best way to protect your hand is to keep it on the table, and look at the cards by shielding them with your hands while lifting a corner of each card to peek at it. In a game like Texas Hold'em, where players have only two cards in front of them, it is customary to leave them on the table after looking and to place a chip on top of them. This alerts the dealer that your hand is still in play.
- ✓ **Avoid discussing hands in play:** Discussing your hand with others, even if you have released it and are no longer contesting that pot, may provide information that would give another player an unfair advantage. If you want to discuss a hand with a neighbor, wait until the hand is concluded.

✓ **Practice toking:** We're not blowing smoke here, but *toking* (poker parlance for *tipping*) the dealer is customary when you win a pot. In poker casinos, tokens constitute a significant part of each dealer's income. The size of the pot and the game's betting limits generally determine the amount of the token. If you're new to casino poker, take your tokening cue from the other players at the table. In games with betting limits of \$10–\$20 or higher, a dollar is a typical token for all but the smallest pots. In smaller games, tokens of fifty cents are the rule.

What Will Your Opponents Be Like?

The kinds of players sitting at your table in a poker parlor will vary with the limits you play. If you play in low-limit games, you are not going to find either last year's World Series of Poker winner, the eight toughest card players in your hometown, or any legends of the game. While there are many ways to classify players as you try to build a book on your opponents, the easiest way is to group your opponents into three types: casual recreational players, regulars, and professionals.

Casual recreational players

Casual recreational players love the game, but when push comes to shove, they are not that concerned about winning or losing. They play for the fun of it. It is simply a hobby, and no matter how much they lose, it is less expensive than keeping horses, restoring classic automobiles, or a hundred other hobbies that devour money. Naturally, you'd love to play exclusively with recreational players. If you can't beat a table full of these players, you just might want to find something else to do in your spare time. No one, however, will come right out and admit to being a casual recreational player. If someone does, watch out. He probably is not, and you're forewarned: Take heed when he fires a raise at you.

Cardroom regulars

Regulars come in a wide variety. This includes retirees, homemakers, students, people with no fixed job hours, dealers who are playing before or after their shift, and almost anyone else you can imagine. Some regulars have independent sources of income and often play in big games. Take it for a fact that all the regulars you encounter have more playing experience than you do. Even if you are a stronger player but are just making the transition from home games to casino poker, they will have the best of it for a while. After all, they are in playing shape. You, on the other hand, are in spring training and will need some time to adjust to this entirely new environment.

Regulars and casual recreational players constitute the majority of poker devotees. Some are good. Most aren't. But they're in action on a regular basis.

Professionals

You find professionals and semi-professionals in most of the larger games. Generally speaking, you don't encounter these players at limits below \$10–\$20. While a pro would have an easier time of it at lower betting limits, she just can't earn a living in a \$2–\$4 game. In these lower limit games, you'll be competing with regulars and recreational players, not professionals. But when you graduate to the higher limits you can expect to encounter some players who earn all or part of their living playing poker.

Proposition players

Proposition players, or props, play on their own money but are paid a salary by the club to help start or prop up games. You'll typically find them late at night when the club is trying to keep games going, and early in the morning when it's trying to start up a new game.

A prop's life can be tough. Playing in short-handed games, or games struggling to get off the ground isn't always a bed of roses. The minute a live player wants his seat, the prop is pulled from it — often when the game is just starting to bear fruit. Props typically play better than most regulars do, but not as well as top players do. Their defining characteristic is that they tend to be conservative.

Many cardroom newcomers panic at the thought of a prop in their game. Since the casino pays the prop, players often believe he has a big advantage. Not true. They play their own money, and as long as they're reliable and maintain a playing bankroll the card club cares not a whit whether they win or lose. I suspect that given a choice, any cardroom would prefer to employ a weak player as a prop, rather than a strong one, simply because the weaker player is a bigger draw. In fact, the ideal prop would be a poor player with a winning personality and an unlimited bankroll.

Playing in a Casino

Casino poker differs from typical home games. While kitchen-table poker may be long on camaraderie and unusual variants of the game, there are many reasons to play in a public cardroom. The most important factor may be that there is always a game. In fact, you frequently have a choice of games, which are often available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Another major advantage, especially in the very large poker clubs in urban locations, is the safety of public cardrooms. These venues offer professional dealers, floorpersons, and video security the equal of any Las Vegas casino to ensure that games are run squarely. Because people walk around cardrooms with large sums of money, there are more security guards than you'd find in most banks. Parking lots are brightly lit, well-patrolled, and free of strong-arm crime. Since most large clubs offer check cashing, safe deposit boxes, and ATM machines, there's no need to walk around with large sums of money in your pocket. You can also take advantage of the *players banks* available at many large clubs. While you can't write checks against it, a players bank is like a conventional bank account except that it's in a casino. You can deposit money and withdraw cash when you need it.

In a public cardroom there's never any pressure to stay. Nobody minds if you quit the game a winner. Someone else is usually waiting for your seat. You do, however, have to pay to play. It costs more to play in a casino than a home game where all you have to do is split the cost of food and drinks.

Casinos, however, offer a variety of games. If you don't feel like playing Texas Hold'em you can play Stud, Lowball, or Omaha High-Low Split. If weak players are at your table, you can punish them continuously. Weak players in home games eventually become ex-players if they can't win some of the time.

You'll find the pace of a casino game to be much faster than most home games. Dealers in a casino try to maintain a quick pace. If you are playing in a game with a time collection, you are paying the same fee per half-hour of play regardless of how many hands are dealt. Consequently, dealers act efficiently and players are expected to make prompt decisions.

Things you've probably done in home games just won't happen in a card room. No one ever fishes through the discards. The dealer handles the deck. You play your cards without the help of a neighbor.

More reasons to play casino poker

Casino playing certainly has its advantages over home games — you get variety, increased safety, and playing efficiency. If you've never played casino poker before and are thinking about giving it a shot, here are more reasons why you should:

✓ Even the toughest of games have a social aspect: rich, poor, young, old, students,

business execs, movie stars, homemakers; people of every race, color, and creed — you'll meet them all in a casino card game.

✓ Become skilled at the game and you have a hobby that pays. Golf, tennis, and boating all cost money, but thousands of people all across America earn money at poker.

How to get in a game

When you enter a cardroom, you may see a white board full of players' initials. These initials are listed under games that are available. For example, if you walk into a large casino you might find seven players ahead of you waiting for a \$2–\$4 Hold'em game. Just give your initials to the board attendant and indicate the games you want to be listed for. You might say: "My initials are ABC. Put me up for the \$2–\$4, \$3–\$6, and \$5–\$10 Hold'em, the \$5–\$10 Stud, and the \$4–\$8 Omaha High-Low Split games."

That's all there is to it. It's as easy as taking a number at Ben and Jerry's. Your initials will go up on the board for each game you request, and you'll be called as seats become available. If the board for a particular game is so long that the club can start another, the attendant will announce that game and call the players in the order they are listed. When you hear your initials, go to the table and grab a vacant seat. You're in the game.

Some cardrooms don't use a board. Just give your initials or first name to the attendant and tell him the games you want to play. In small cardrooms, where there are only one or two tables, ask the dealer if a seat is available or if there is a waiting list for the game.

Buying chips

When you first sit in the game either the floorperson or dealer will ask you how much you want in chips. Each game has a minimum buy-in. Give the floorperson your money and you'll get your chips. Large casinos have chip attendants. One of them will take your money, announce to the table that "Seat five (or whatever seat you occupy) is playing \$200 behind." That means you bought in for \$200, and the casino is in the process of fetching your chips. You can play that hand, even though your chips have not yet arrived. The dealer will either lend you some chips or keep count of how much you owe the pot. Your chips should arrive about the time that the first hand is played to its conclusion.

Shuffling and dealing

You may never have noticed, but the shuffle procedure in a casino is much more rigorous than it is in a game with amateur dealers. Home game players are usually unfamiliar with the mechanics of a good shuffle, and many lack the manual dexterity to perform one. Well-trained casino dealers assemble the deck so the cards face the players, frequently preceding that by scrambling the cards on the table. This is followed by a four-step procedure of shuffle, shuffle, riffle, and shuffle. Finally, the dealer cuts the deck and deals. The procedure is efficient, quick, and designed so that no cards are flashed in the process.

How Casino Poker Differs from Home Games

If you've watched a few games in a card club while waiting for a seat, you'll notice that players do not play as many hands as they do in home games. While there is seldom a spoken agreement to play every hand in a home game, because of the chummy atmosphere, many players simply play lots of hands. That's not the case in a casino. Players are more selective. Still, the biggest mistakes most players make is playing too many hands and calling on early betting rounds when they should have folded.

Tighter than home games



Low-limit cardroom games, while tighter than comparable home games, are still much too loose. In tight games, the players with the stronger hands tend to enter the pots, while in a looser game, more players enter more pots than they really should. If you simply play better starting cards than your opponents do in these low-limit games, you will usually be a *favorite* (favored to win money in the long run).

However, you won't be a favorite in any game right off the mark. Since it will take you some time to get familiar with cardroom play, give serious consideration to starting in very small-limit games. You'll probably be *paying for lessons* the first five or ten times you play in a public cardroom, and there is no reason to make these lessons any more expensive than they need be.

If you come from a home game into a public cardroom, especially the fun-to-play, jam-it-up kind of home game, you quickly realize that you can't play every hand, or even many hands, for that matter! You need standards. This is true for all forms of poker.

Players are more selective

Bobby Baldwin, former World Champion of Poker and now president of the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, reflected on his early days at the table: "I was floating around, trying to figure out which hands were playable, which hands called for a raise, which hands should be thrown out. Without standards, he said, "you have to use 90 percent of your concentration deciding each time what to do with a given hand. All that mental energy should be devoted to studying your opponents and trying to decipher the small things which made this hand slightly different from familiar hands you've seen in the past."



Poker Advice from Johnny Moss

"In order to learn any game, you have to find the best players and play with them."

"In an otherwise even contest, the man with the best concentration will almost always win."

"If you're afraid to lose your money, you can't play to win."

"Nobody wins all the time, so when you lose, you need to learn what you can from it, then let it go. Forget it."

(From *Johnny Moss: Champion of Champions*, by Don Jenkins.)

Baldwin's advice is succinct. "Never sit in a game without having a preconceived set of guidelines [starting standards] telling you what your minimum calling hands and raising hands should be."

After all, you don't have to play every hand you're dealt. Folding weak hands that will prove to be unprofitable in the long run, is — like discretion — the better part of valor. Each form of poker has its own set of good hands, and you'll find out what they are as you work your way through this book. For now, it's enough to remember that you should fold more hands than you play.

Games are faster

The first few times you play in a casino, the speed of the games might startle you. You may also think that the players are better than your home game cronies are. But after becoming familiar with the environment, you'll find that your skill level is right up there with your opponents' abilities. Most of them aren't students of the game. Recreational players want to have fun and that's it. Most of the regulars, who run the gamut of skill levels, don't bother to study the game. Though many of them have been playing in cardrooms for years, they simply repeat and reinforce the same errors they've been making for decades.

Don't worry too much about the skill level of your opponents when you first begin playing in a public cardroom. By studying and playing the game you should soon catch the field — begin to play as well, or better, than your opponents. Mind you, if you live in an area in which poker has only recently been legalized, you probably don't have any catching up to do at all. You can start ahead of the crowd and never look back. Think of yourself as a wire-to-wire winner. Your opponents may improve slowly, simply through osmosis. But through frequent play and study, you can improve at a much more rapid rate.