

# Three No-Limit Hold'em Realities

By Ed Miller

Eyewitness accounts are notoriously unreliable. An image enters the eye and hits the back of the retina. Almost immediately the brain goes to work trying to fill in the blanks. Was only half of a face in view? Just the back of a head? The brain seamlessly fills in the missing information, creating an image of what the entire person should look like. This process works out well enough to get us through everyday life, but it's simply not reliable enough to meet a "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard. Many of the things we "see" never actually existed. They are merely the creative products of an active human brain.

No-limit players can be similarly tricked by their eyes and brains. Any poker writer will tell you to observe your game – that important information is available everywhere if you're disciplined enough to look for it. It's true enough. But our brains don't dispassionately catalog data. Every morsel of information is automatically run through a series of cognitive filters to determine its significance and context. Two players can watch the same game and come to quite different conclusions. They both see the same raw data, but they each make sense of it their own way.

I'd like to offer you three no-limit realities. You can verify them by observing a game and logging events with a pen and paper. They have strategic significance. Yet many players play as if the opposite of these realities were true. I think their brains are tricking them.

## Most Pots Never Reach Showdown

Unless you play in a crazy, loose game, most pots won't reach the showdown. In many games far more than half the pots are won without showdown. Often the turn is the critical round: A good-sized turn bet will win a lot of pots. What's the significance?

You can clean up betting the flop and turn. You don't need a hand. You don't even need a draw. You just need to bet. Sometimes one bet will do. Sometimes you'll need two. They can't be wimpy \$20 bets into \$200 pots. You have to put some oomph into it. But it works in nearly every no-limit game.

I can't say how many times I've watched no-limit hands where the players all checked it down. Everyone shrugs, shows their junk, and someone gets the pot. Pots like these are freely available to anyone willing to bet.

But most players don't think this way. They just try to make a hand. If they miss the flop, they give up on the pot. They adopt this passive "make a hand" mindset because aggressive play has burned them in the past. Once they tried bluffing the flop and turn only to run into someone who decided to slowplay a big hand. "Not doing that again," they think.

No-limit rewards the persistently aggressive. You can verify that fact by watching a game and writing down when each pot is won. Aggression doesn't work every time. And if you try it every pot you'll land yourself in hot water. But betting the flop and turn, when tried judiciously, will make you a lot of money.

## Check-raise Bluffs Are Rare

On the turn and river, players don't check-raise very often. Check-raise bluffs are even rarer. You can easily watch a game for hours and never once see someone check-raise the turn or river as a bluff. What's the significance?

You can profitably bet the turn and river for value with a wide range of hands. Making these bets is critical to no-limit success. It's where the real money is made. After all, preflop and flop bet sizes are usually just a small fraction of those on the turn and river.

But many players would rather just see a showdown with decent hands like two pair than try to make more money. If you watch them play, you can tell they know that their good hands will probably win. They're just terrified of getting raised or check-raised. So they take the "safe" route and check it down.

The fact is, however, they're scaring themselves out of a lot of profit. When they bet, typically they'll get called by a weaker hand and win a big pot. Sometimes they'll get raised, but usually that raise will come from a strong hand made on the river like a straight or flush. These pots they lose no matter what they do. And every once in a while, on a rare occasion, they'll get check-raise bluffed off the best hand.

The consistent extra profit from successful value betting is more than worth the occasional catastrophic loss. Check-raise bluffs are rare, so don't let your brain trick you into fearing them. Bet your good hands.

## Pocket Aces Usually Win

I've seen hand databases from players who have played more than a million online no-limit hands. Over the tens of thousands of times these players have been dealt pocket aces, they have won more than 80 percent of the time. More than 80 percent! The fact is, pocket aces usually win.

Sure, if you play in a loose game where three or four players routinely try to crack your aces, you won't win quite that often. But even in these games pocket aces win more than half the time. And when they win, they win huge pots.

Many players treat pocket aces like they're cursed. They won't raise them preflop. They'll make a small bet like \$30 into a \$120 pot on the flop. They'll happily check down the turn and river. Then they'll breathe a sigh of relief when they drag the pot. Don't play like this!

Pocket aces usually win. Play them that way. Raise them preflop. Bet them confidently on the flop. Most of the time they'll win you a nice pot. Sure you'll occasionally endure a heart-breaking loss. But don't let your brain trick you into thinking a big loss is the expected outcome. The reality is that every time you get dealt pocket aces, it's like money in the bank. Play them that way.

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## How Suited Connectors Are Costing You Money

By Ed Miller

You're playing \$1-\$2 no-limit at your local casino. Everyone folds to you in middle position, and you limp in with **10♣ 7♣**. Another player folds, and then someone with about a \$150 stack raises to \$10. Everyone folds to you. You call, eager to see what prize the flop will bring.

Does that story sound familiar to you? If it does, then I fear I'm the bearer of bad news. Suited connectors are costing you money!

Most players play suited connectors too often. And not-so-suited connectors. And suited not-so-connectors. We can be inclined to play any of these hands if we're antsy to see some action.

Sometimes suited connectors are fine to play. But often they're not, and it pays to know when is when. They're fine to play if and only if your primary plan with them is to find a place to steal the pot. If you're going in thinking "let's get lucky and hit the flop hard and stack these donkeys," I think you're making two mistakes. First, you're overestimating how often you'll hit the flop hard. You're a huge underdog to flop two pair or better, which means most of the time "hitting the flop hard" for you will mean flopping a draw. Draws can be good hands, but a lot of their value comes from stealing equity.

Second, you're overestimating how much you'll win on average when you do hit the board hard. Say you have **6♥5♥**, for instance, and flop **K♥J♥7♦**. That's a decent flop, but not a great one. Why? Because everyone and their brother will notice if a third heart comes, and they'll be cautious, so you'll rarely win a monster pot by making your flush. And when you do play a big pot, you'll find yourself against a bigger flush fairly often. Your big pot-winning chances are generally better if you make a straight than if you make a small flush.

The bottom line is, small card hands (excluding small pocket pairs) aren't that great at winning huge pots. Sure, they win huge pots sometimes, but A-K wins huge pots sometimes too. When you play a small card hand, you should be thinking, "Maybe they'll let me slip into the pot and then steal it."

I play a lot of hands on the button. I avoid stuff like J-4, but I often play hands like T-8 offsuit or 6-3 suited. I'll raise preflop with them. Sometimes I'll even call a raise with them (usually only if the raiser is the only other player in the pot, and the raiser is someone I feel I have control over). My plan is to try to find a spot after the flop to steal. Maybe it'll be as simple as raise preflop, bet the flop, and win. Maybe it will be a more complicated steal that relies on a read of weakness. Maybe I'll flop a draw and try a big semibluff. Having the button is flexible and lets me formulate new plans on the fly. But the majority of the pots I win playing these hands I win by stealing, not by making a big hand.

In fact, when I do accidentally make a monster with one of the trashy hands, I often end up just “stealing” the pot anyway. The harder I hit the board, the less likely it is that my opponent hit it too. You can’t win a big pot without your opponent’s cooperation.

I don’t touch any of these hands out of position. And while 9-8 suited is better than T-8 offsuit or 6-3 suited, it’s not so much better. I usually don’t play 9-8 suited out of position either. It’s harder to steal when you don’t have position. It’s harder to play your draw when you don’t have position. It’s harder to win a big pot when you don’t have position. You don’t make your money playing out of position. It’s that simple.

Let’s go back to the hand I started the column with. You limp in with 9-7 suited, a player with position and a \$150 stack makes it \$10 to go, and you call. This is a bad situation for 9-7 suited. You’re out of position, so it will be hard to steal. If you do happen to hit the hand, most of the time you’ll have nothing more than a weak bottom or middle pair. If you flop a flush draw, it will be a small one that could get you stacked by a bigger flush. And even if you do happen to make a big hand and get paid, you’ll win only \$150 on your \$10 investment. That’s a decent score, but it’s not enough to make up for all the small and medium losses. When you strip away the hopes and dreams of flushes and straights, all you really have is a mediocre hand out of position.

So what would I do with the **9♣7♣** in middle position? I’d fold it the first time around. If something came over me and I happened to throw \$2 in the first time around, I’d definitely fold it to the raise. And then I’d wait for the button to come around to me again before thinking again about playing any of those little suited cards.

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## Five Traits Of Winning No-Limit Players

By Ed Miller

Every regular no-limit hold’em player wants to win money. Only a modest percentage of players, however, actually win over monthlong and yearlong timeframes. What factors determine who wins and who doesn’t? One could come up with thousands of little differences between winners and non-winners. I tend to be more big picture-oriented, so in this article I’ll present five broad traits that I see in winners that often are lacking in non-winners.

## Experience

Experience is the most obvious trait, and it definitely matters a lot. I would never back a rank beginner in a no-limit game even if he had seven Ph.D. degrees from Stanford and had won the Nobel Prize in economics. There's so much about no-limit you can learn only by putting in hands by the thousands.

But raw experience isn't the key. Plenty of players who have been playing for ten years or more don't win. And a lot of the recent big winners had been playing for only a year or less before they began raking in the money. Experience must be accompanied by the next trait to have value.

## Self-Evaluation

One of the many ironies about poker players is that the bad ones tend to be more certain of themselves than the good ones. Countless times I've heard a player lecture another at the table. "How could you do something so stupid? You should have done X instead of Y. Everyone knows that." Not even to mention how rude it is, with few exceptions the table coach's interpretation of events demonstrates his very shallow understanding of the game.

Winning players are self-critical. Unlike the table coach, they don't assume that the way they usually play a hand is necessarily the best way to play it. After a session they recall notable hands and pick them apart. They rethink each decision and consider whether they could have done things in a different way that might perform better on average.

Experience is nearly worthless without self-evaluation. You can play a million hands, but if you play them like a robot and never think about what you're doing you won't improve much. The more you engage your brain during and after your playing sessions, the more you'll improve. But you have to focus on the right things, which takes us to the third trait.

## Efficient Focus

So far I haven't said anything particularly revolutionary. But here's where I know many – if not most – players go astray. They play lots of hands. They even think about the hands during play and away from the table. But they think about the wrong hands and are focused on the wrong concepts. Good players focus their efforts efficiently in ways designed to give them the best return on their time. What is an efficient focus?

It's easier to explain what an efficient focus isn't. I receive a lot of emails from readers asking about a hand they've played. Easily more than half of the questions follow the same theme. My reader has a big hand. He gets all-in. He loses. Should he have played differently?

Nine times out of ten, the answer is, "No, you had a big hand and you put your money in. You did it right." Poker involves risk, and whenever you put your money in the middle you can lose it. These hands stand out for people because they are very emotional. Big losses are upsetting, and many players instinctively focus their learning to find ways they can avoid these negative feelings in the future.

If you want to get better at poker, though, you shouldn't focus on the most emotionally taxing hands. Ups and downs are an integral part of the game, and vainly trying to avoid them isn't going to make you a winner. Efficient focus means finding situations that occur frequently that you could play better. Look for situations where you're giving up on pots you could be bluffing at. Look for situations where you're calling on the flop without a plan for the rest of the hand. Look for situations where you are playing in a way that's too straightforward and readable. The good stuff is usually in the small and medium pots. If you just focus on all the obvious hands, you'll be wasting most of your efforts. Efficient focus demands reexamining the seemingly mundane pots. But even good players can't ignore the emotional aspect of poker, which brings us to the fourth trait.

## Emotional Awareness

Virtually everyone who plays poker responds emotionally to major events like winning or losing a big pot, winning or losing a number of hands in a row, and so forth. The trick for a good player isn't to bottle these natural emotional responses up. Instead it's to be aware of them and to react to them in a positive way.

Emotionally unaware players get frustrated at the table and react by playing much looser and crazier than they usually do. This describes the well known phenomenon of "steaming." A lot of players try to avoid steaming by actively refusing to play loose and crazy when they feel themselves getting frustrated. But this reaction has its own drawbacks. These players often play like they've lost the pot before they even get going. They stop raising their aces. They stop betting their good hands on the flop. They fold too easily to pressure.

The fact is that it's difficult to play well whenever you're in a strongly emotional state. Instead of trying to fight or hide the emotions, emotionally aware players quit until they are feeling fresh and positive again. After a particularly bad run, however, you might not feel like thinking about poker, let alone playing it, for a long time. How long that time can be is affected by the fifth trait.

## Passion

Top players all have it. Every one of them, at least every one that I've met. They live, eat, and breathe poker. They want to talk about hands constantly. When they're home alone, they are reading books or watching videos. They're fiddling with PokerStove. They're reading forum posts. They don't get sick of it. Working on their poker game is the thing they enjoy most. You can win without single-minded passion, but if you want to win millions, you absolutely need it and there's no substitute.

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## Gearing Up After A Layoff

By Ed Miller

One of my Facebook friends recently returned to playing poker after a many month layoff. "Hope I remember how to play," she said. "Don't worry," came the replies, "you'll be fine. Playing poker is like riding a bike."

In my opinion, these helpful supporters are totally wrong. Returning to poker after a layoff is nothing like riding a bike. It's a lot more like going to the gym. Your first day back, you will be sucking wind.

I should know. I frequently take layoffs from poker. When I'm writing a book, I tend not to play regularly. I have a young son, and I've taken time off for parenting. I've also taken a few nice, long vacations.

In my opinion, there is no question that taking these layoffs sets your game back. If you look at most of the top several hundred players in the world, you will find that most of them play poker nearly every day and take few extended breaks. And when these players do take long breaks, they frequently return to find that they've lost some ground in the pecking order.






But here's the thing. I didn't become a poker player because I wanted to be slave to a rigorous schedule. For me, it was quite the opposite. If, for any reason, I want to take a day, a week, a month, or even six months off from playing, I can do that. Sure, I'll pay a price for it at the tables when I return, but it makes living my life so much happier.

Here are my observations and tips for returning to poker after not playing for a while.

## Betting Fashions Change

Ever since poker exploded in popularity over a decade ago, the game has evolved at an epic pace. The betting patterns that are popular one year are modified or changed completely the next. Bet sizings change. Aggression standards change. "Bread and butter" situations morph. In February you might see the same plays coming up over and over again. By October, this fashion may have passed, and a different play may be more popular.

Let's say you open raise and a player calls from the big blind. The flop is . Your opponent checks, you bet, and he calls. The turn is the . Your opponent bets out. What does his hand range look like?

This situation is subject to the whims of poker fashion. In February, it could be that most players have a hand like Q-9 when they make this play. But in October, it could be that players have stopped playing top pair this way, and now they tend to have hands like .

Poker is a social game, and humans, consciously or unconsciously, mimic one another in social situations. It's very common for the regular players in a particular game to adopt a tacit consensus on how to play certain situations. Players that buck the trend at first usually end up adopting it eventually. So if a few regulars start donk betting the turn with flush draws, over time you'll tend to see more and more regulars also adopt this play.

When you take a layoff, you aren't in tune with the fashion changes, and you will, therefore, misread certain situations. You'll treat bets as bluffs that now tend to be for value. And vice versa. This will cost you until you have regained enough experience to learn what's changed.

You can speed this process. Watch hands you aren't in and look specifically for these fashion-sensitive situations: preflop reraises, donk bets, flop raises, turn raises, and so forth. When you see one of these plays, follow the hand to the end. Does the action

surprise you, or is it in accordance with how people played months ago? If you follow these hands closely, you will minimize the mistakes you make when you are forced to make a read.

## Your Brain Gets Dull

Here's where the gym analogy applies. When you take a few months off from poker, your brain gets soft. You don't think as quickly or as clearly. I know it's true for me, and I'd bet it's true for everyone.

To get back what you've lost, there's no substitute for putting in hours at the table playing and hours away from it working on your game. But you can be on the lookout for specific weaknesses that your layoff may have created.

I find that when I return after a layoff, my turn and river play suffers the most. After all, it's not like I've forgotten that I open-raise K-T suited from three off the button or that I re-steal against button openers in the big blind with 3-3. The more rote the situation, the more it is, indeed, like riding a bike.

It's the decisions that require hand range analysis that suffer. My first day back after a three month layoff, I am unlikely to find accurate turn and river bluff-raise opportunities. More times than I'd care to share, I have meekly folded to a river bet from what post-mortem analysis revealed to be a weak hand range.

When I've been playing regularly for a long time, these bluff-raising opportunities almost jump out at me. But after a long layoff, I tend to miss them. My poker brain is out of shape, and the sharp edge to my game is gone.

So what to do about it? Well, the long-term answer is to restart a regular playing and study schedule and stick to it. But what do you do in the meantime, when you know you aren't as sharp as you could be?

If you're playing live, I suggest you take extra time for your turn and river decisions. Don't make any quick folds, especially not in big pots. Force yourself to take time to think everything through.

If a bad river card hits and it looks like you're toast, don't just fold. At least ask yourself why your opponent is betting. If it's a bad river card, might it also be a scare card for your

opponent? One that he'd prefer to check through rather than to bet? And if so, then might he be bluffing? Or might he be willing to lay down to a raise?

These are the sorts of thoughts any poker player should have, but when your brain is soft from a long layoff, it pays to take extra time and force yourself to think of them explicitly. If it might help, you can even write questions like these down and reread them periodically to remind yourself.

## Final Thoughts

If you are playing again for the first time in a while, don't kid yourself. You won't be at your peak performance right away. First, develop a playing and study schedule to get you back into gear. Next, watch out for changes in betting pattern fashion. And finally, remember to take extra time on the turn and river to make sure you're thinking things through.

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## Bet-Sizing Tells

By Ed Miller

If you play live no-limit hold'em, then your games are absolutely rife with bet-sizing tells. If you know what to look for, your opponents will tell you in pot after pot what hands they have by how much they bet.

Or, at least, your opponents will tell you exactly how they feel about their hands by how much they bet, and you can often then deduce what they have.

I recently played the following hand in a \$2-\$5 game in Las Vegas. I had a \$1,000 stack. A nitty regular player opened from under the gun for \$20 with a \$1,000 stack. Another nitty player directly to my right called. This player had about \$350 behind.

I was next to act, three off the button, with Q-Q. I called. I dislike reraising in this scenario for a few reasons. First, both opponents in the hand are certified nits, and it's unlikely they would call my reraise with worse hands except perhaps J-J or A-K.

Second, when it's close, I like to avoid raising early in a hand, because the longer I draw hands out, the more information I can gather to make good decisions.

Third, there are still five unknown hands behind me. There's about a one percent chance each player has either A-A or K-K, making about a five percent chance in total that one of the two hands I'm most afraid of is lurking behind me. While five percent is not a large chance, when the decision is already close, it helps to swing me toward the cautious play.

I called. The small blind also called, so we saw a flop four ways with \$85 in the pot.

The flop came 9-4-3 with a flush draw. The small blind checked, the preflop raiser checked, and the nit bet \$60.

Here's the first bet-sizing tell. A \$60 flop bet into an \$85 pot is a big bet from a nit. This player is not likely testing the waters with a draw or a marginal made hand. He thinks he's likely to have the best hand. He may have a set or he may have an overpair. He likely doesn't have a nine, two pair, or any draw. It's possible he's got a very strong draw like the A-K flush draw or perhaps the A-5 or A-2 flush draw.

He's also not expecting to get called. With a bet this large on a board this dry, he likely expects simply to pick up the pot. He will be on alert if anyone calls him.

I called. Again, I see this as a marginal raising situation. I'm ahead of some hands he can have, but I'm behind others. He's a nit and he may fold a hand like T-T or J-J to a raise, while of course he won't be folding a set. If I raise and get called, it's not at all clear that I'll be the favorite to win the pot.

Therefore, I called. Calling also allows me to gather yet another round of information before I have to commit my stack.

The two players behind me folded. The pot is now \$205, and my lone opponent has about \$270 behind.

The turn is an offsuit 7, so the board is 9-4-3-7. My opponent bets \$65.

And here is the payoff for my patience. This bet carries with it a lot of information. Most poker players are ruled by their emotions. The plays they make are not determined by cold, rational analysis. Instead, they are determined by how they feel about the hand and about the situation.

Nits—players who play tight and are loathe to put much money at risk without a lock—are generally ruled by fear. They fear losing pots. They fear getting outplayed (at least when being outplayed means getting money in bad). They react to this fear in two ways.

If they feel they very likely have the best hand at the moment, but they fear getting drawn out on, they make particularly large bets. These bets are designed to “end the hand” and “win a small pot, not lose a big pot.” (While many people tell me that they prefer to win a small pot than lose a big one, my preference is to win big pots.)

If, instead, they’re afraid that they don’t have the best hand or that they’ve already been drawn out on, they check or make small, probing bets.

So this betting sequence—\$60 on the flop and then \$65 on the turn—is quite telling. The \$60 flop bet is large enough that it falls under the, “I’m good, now please don’t draw out on me,” umbrella of thought.

But the \$65 turn bet when the pot is \$205 and my opponent has only \$270 total says, “Please don’t let me be behind.” Since he would not expect the turn 7 to have beaten him, he must have one of the weakest hands in his flop betting range.

I put him on either J-J or T-T. With a set or even A-A, I would have expected more like a \$150 bet.

Given my read that I was now likely to be ahead, I decided to raise all-in. I thought about calling again, hoping to confuse my opponent and get the rest of his money on the river. As it turns out, just calling may have worked out better, as he folded J-J face-up.

I rely on these bet-sizing tells so much that if my opponent had bet \$150 or \$180 or \$270 on the turn, I would have folded my Q-Q. He simply wouldn’t be that bold with any hand I’m ahead of. I would expect to see a set.

## Final Thoughts

I cannot overstate how much information there is in your opponents’ bet sizes. This information is particularly abundant on the turn and river when the pots and bets get big and emotions run high.

When in doubt, I drag it out. I flat-call early in hands and allow my opponents to tell me how they're feeling with their turn and river bets. I then use this information to make accurate decisions.

Most no-limit players hate playing the turn and river. They like to end hands early to avoid the uncertainty that comes with seeing a troublesome-looking card. But for me, there's actually less uncertainty on the turn and river than there is on the flop. On the flop, it's harder to spot tells, and there's less information to go on. Later in the hand, people really tell you how they feel, and you can then sometimes play nearly perfectly.

If you are a hater of the turn and river, here's my advice. Watch your games. Watch hands you're not in. Watch other people play the turn and river. Count the pot, and look at bet sizes. You'll see clear patterns. Add in a little dose of psychology, and you'll begin to see things much more clearly.

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## Exploiting Must Move Games

By Ed Miller

Back when you could play online easily in the United States, most people I knew who grinded the smaller online games started each session with a ritual. They'd open up the lobby, find the stakes they normally played for, and put themselves on every waiting list of every full game going.

I tried this too, and I noticed something. As often than not, by the time a seat had opened for me, the game wasn't really worth playing. Often the seat that opened was the one vacated by the weakest player in the game. Or it was the seat of a pro who had played in the game until the weakest player went broke, and then quit. Either way, by the time I sat, only the regulars were left.

I had much more success starting games. I would find an empty table at the stakes I wanted to play and sit. After a while, someone else would sit. More often than not, this player would have a 40BB buyin which, at these games, was a nearly perfect tipoff that the player was clueless. (I'm not saying buying in for 40BB is bad. Just that nearly everyone who actually sat at my tables with 40BB happened to be clueless.)

Then the table would fill. Typical final makeup would be four 40BB players, a regular, and me. Sure, I wasn't playing as deep as I could if I sat at a going game, but I'd happily trade some stack depth for the opportunity to play with a few genuinely terrible players.

The prime conditions never lasted too long. Some of the 40BB stacks would bust quickly, pros (waiting on the list) would fill the seats, and the game would become unremarkable. But I'd been able to play hands with a bigger edge than usual.

I did my best to track my results at these newly-formed games versus results at more mature tables. My per-hand winrate at the new tables was considerably higher.

Which brings me to the title topic of this article. Must move games. These are the live poker equivalent to the newly created online games.

If you don't play in a cardroom where they have must move games, here's how they work. When enough players are on the list for a new game, the floor calls the game. If there is another game going of the same stakes, the newly created game is a "must move" game. Whenever a seat opens in the main game (or games if there is more than one going), someone from the must move game is required to move to fill it.

The floor maintains a list of the players in the must move game, and moves are typically required in first in, first out order. Thus, if you are first on the list of players called for the new game, you are first on the list of players required to move.

Here's the thing. Must move games are often much, much better than the main game. The players in a must move game are all fresh. The only way you'll end up with another grinder in a must move is if one happens to arrive at the cardroom at roughly the same time you did. I've played in many must move games where every single one of my opponents was a tourist with little idea of how to play. This is almost never the case in a main game.

Like in the online analogues, stacks in must move games tend to be short. In a \$5-\$10 must move game, for instance, a lot of the players will buy in for \$400-\$800. But, again, I'd generally much prefer to play against tourists with \$600 stacks than regulars with \$3,000 stacks.

So what's the point? You might be able to increase your winrate when you play if you actively seek out the must move games. Here are some things to try to maximize your time in must moves.

### Tip No. 1. Put your name on the list for every game in the room.

Say you're normally a \$2-\$5 player, and you like to buy in for between \$500 and \$1,000. Put yourself on the \$1-\$2, \$5-\$10, and \$10-\$20 list also. When they start one of these games, you will get called, and you can see if the game is shaping up well or not. If the game fills with the best players in the room, pass. But if it's a lot of unknown faces buying in for 40-100 big blinds, jump in. You don't have to buy in for 100BB. You can buy in for the same amount that you'd normally buy in at \$2-\$5. Sure, the blinds may be bigger, but if your buy-in is the same as what you usually play, the game likely won't play that much bigger for you.

A juicy \$5-\$10 must move will be more profitable than your regular \$2-\$5 game with a bunch of crusty regulars.

### Tip No. 2. Try to get yourself near the bottom of the list of players to get called to the new game.

If you are the very first name on the list you will be the first one moved to the main game. That's no good. You'll likely get only a few hands in. Try to make sure your name appears 8-10th on the list for any game that you expect to get started soon. There are a few ways to do this. Watch the list and put your name on only when it grows to the right length. Ask the brush to "roll" your name to the bottom of the list if you get to the top. Tokens to the floor can help too.

### Tip No. 3. Learn when games tend to start.

Every cardroom has a rhythm. The first game of the day starts at 10am, say. Then they get another game going around noon. Then another at 3pm. And another at 5pm. And so on. Get to learn the rhythm of your local room, and plan to arrive when the juicy must move games generally get started. Even if you're a little late, the must move will likely still be good with a seat opening soon when you arrive. Don't arrive early. That could get you stuck in a bad main game.

### Tip No. 4. Bounce between rooms and stakes.

If you get moved to the main game, usually they won't let you move back to the must move unless you pick up your chips and sit out for a while. But sometimes you can bounce between must move games at two different stakes without waiting at all. When



you're about to get moved, get into the next game that starts at different stakes. Then move back to your original stakes after a while. You can also bounce between rooms if it's feasible where you play.

## Final Thoughts

It's not as comfortable as sitting in the same chair for ten hours, but if you learn the rhythm of your room and seek out must move games as they start, you'll improve your winrate considerably.

[This article appeared originally in *Card Player*, Vol. 25 No. 6]

## You Check? I Bet.

By Ed Miller

Most people I play against seem to think they're pretty darn good at poker. No matter the hand, no matter the situation, they have an answer for how to play it best. Check here, call there, fold a lot. That's all there is to it.

There's something about how so many of these people play, however, that I can't help but find amusing. Their well-considered strategy, honed over many tens of thousands of hands played, is strictly inferior to a strategy I can summarize in four words.

You check? I bet.

Here in Las Vegas, many a \$2-\$5 game goes off that can be beaten with just those four words. And the people you're beating with it are the very ones who have played so many hands and are so certain about what they're doing.

Don't believe me? Here's the math.

Say I'm on the button and everyone has folded to me. I raise preflop and get a call. Let's say for the sake of keeping the numbers easy that I've made it 10 to go and been called. (Let's also assume that any extra dead blind and ante money gets raked away.)

The pot is 20. The flop comes. My opponent checks, and I bet 10 (half pot). Half the time my opponent folds, and half the time he calls.

Say he calls. The pot is 40. The turn comes. My opponent checks, and I bet 20. Again, he folds half the time and calls half the time.

Say he calls again. The pot is 80. The river comes. My opponent checks, and I bet 40. One more time, he folds half the time and calls half the time.

If my opponent and I play ten thousand hands using these strategies, who do you think comes out ahead?

Notice I haven't mentioned specific cards at all. That's because I'm discussing two strategies, not individual hands. To get really good at poker, you must learn to zoom out from thinking about specific hands and think instead of one strategy versus another. So who wins?

My opponent folds 7/8 of his hands and calls to showdown with 1/8 of them. Let's assume that the 1/8 of hands he gets to showdown with are always the best possible 1/8 of hands (not a fair assumption, of course, as it assumes that my opponent is able to predict perfectly on the flop where his hand will fall by the river). In hands that get to showdown, therefore, I will win 1/16 of the time and lose 15/16 of the time. (That is, I will luck into a hand that beats his average showdown hand 1/16 of the time.)

Let's break it down. Half the time, I win 10 when he folds on the flop. One-fourth of the time, I win 20 when he folds on the turn. One-eighth of the time, I win 40 when he folds on the river. At showdown, I lose an average of 70 (accounting for the chance I luck into a winner).

So how do I do on average playing this game?

$$EV = (0.5)(10) + (0.25)(20) + (0.125)(40) + (0.125)(-70) = 5 + 5 + 5 - 8.75 = 6.25$$

I win an average of 6.25 per hand. That's more than half the preflop raise size. All I'm doing is betting half-pot whenever my opponent checks. I've given my opponent the benefit of psychic powers, and yet my couldn't-be-simpler strategy crushes his more considered strategy.

What's my opponent doing wrong? He's folding too much, of course. He's also not raising enough.

"No one actually plays like that," I can hear you protest.

I disagree. Lots of people play like this, at least in \$2-\$5 and to a lesser extent \$5-\$10 games in Las Vegas. Sure, no one plays precisely like this with exactly these ratios. But plenty play closely enough that a strategy to simply bet half pot whenever checked to beats them.

So I said my opponent folded too much. How much is too much? When do I start losing money by betting every time?

What if my opponent folds only 30 percent of the time when I bet? The new numbers are

$$EV = (0.3)(10) + (0.21)(20) + (0.147)(40) + (0.343)(-52.56) = 3 + 4.2 + 5.88 - 18.03 = -4.95$$

I'm losing now. Let's try one more with a 40 percent fold percentage.

$$EV = (0.4)(10) + (0.24)(20) + (0.144)(40) + (0.216)(-62.72) = 4 + 4.8 + 5.76 - 13.55 = 1.01$$

I'm winning again, but now it's just a small percentage of the preflop raise size. At a 40 percent fold rate, we're close to the break-even point.

I'm done with the math, but think again about the conclusion. Even if my opponent calls me 60 percent of the time on each street, my strategy to bet every time beats his strategy to call me down with his good hands and fold the rest. Regardless of how he chooses which 60 percent of hands make the cut at each juncture—he no doubt puts a lot of thought into each decision—he loses.

I think of it like he's running repeatedly into a brick wall.

## A Few Thoughts

Say someone raises preflop, and you call with two unpaired cards. How often do you think you make a pair or a draw on the flop? It's a whole lot less than 60 percent of the time. If you're just checking and folding on the flops you miss, you're beating yourself. (A fix? Check-raise when you miss. A lot.)

Say someone raises preflop, and you call with any hand you're likely to play. How often do you think you have top pair or a strong draw by the turn? Unless you're really tight preflop, it's not 36 percent (60 percent of 60 percent) of the time. Again, if you're folding everything else, you're beating yourself.

Betting half-pot when checked to is very frequently a good thing to do.

If you find an opponent who you think folds too much postflop, as much as possible build up pots early in the hand. For instance, if we could raise preflop to 20 instead of 10, we double the average win per hand. Cheat your preflop raise sizes big when the table isn't getting to showdown often. And cheat your flop bet sizes bigger also.

Most players increase their folding percentage as the hand proceeds. They'll call preflop raises most frequently and call flop bets frequently also. The turn is where they really start folding, and they'll fold all but the very strongest hands to a big river bet. This pattern performs even worse than a flat percentage against my "You check? I bet." strategy. By calling so much early in the hand, my opponent just builds pots that I will eventually win.

In real poker, it's not this simple. But it's close. So many players, particularly "solid" regular players, can be beaten by the simplest of strategies.

Actually, they beat themselves. You're just there to collect the spoils.

[\[This article appeared originally in \*Card Player\*, Vol. 25 No. 3\]](#)

## Mistakes \$1-\$2 Players Make

By Ed Miller

This article is the first in a three part series about typical mistakes that live regular players make. I have the articles separated by stakes. This article is about the mistakes that \$1-\$2 players make.

Of course not every \$1-\$2 player is the same. Everyone comes at the game with a different perspective. And someone who typically plays \$10-\$20 could sit in your \$1-\$2 game tomorrow. But I've had a lot of success over the years by assuming that an unknown player at a certain stakes level will tend to play much like the other players at that level.

I believe that there are many traits that \$1-\$2 players tend to share, and I feel comfortable extending assumptions about these traits to a player who is completely unknown to me. Every once in a while I get proven wrong, but it works out well by far the majority of the time.

In this article (and the ones to follow) I'm talking about Las Vegas games, because Las Vegas is where I play. I believe the ideas are useful even if games play differently where you live.

So let's get to it. This group, the \$1-\$2 players, actually varies a lot. Some \$1-\$2 players are first-timers, brand new to casino poker. Others have played regularly for over 30 years. But I still believe they share some common traits.

## Bad Reactions To All-In Bets

The biggest flaw with \$1-\$2 players is they tend to need work on their hand reading. This bites them the worst when they are facing an all-in bet. I've seen \$1-\$2 players make ridiculous folds against all-in bets. For instance, I remember a hand a long time ago where I raised preflop and got called by the big blind and a couple others. The big blind bet out a **K♣ 10♦ 4♣** flop, and I raised. He started shaking and called. It was a clear tell to me that he was uncomfortable putting money in with his hand. So when a **6♠** hit the turn, he checked, and I shoved.

He tanked for about two minutes and folded T-T face-up! "I know you have to have three kings," he said.

I didn't.

That kind of error is the exception, though I've definitely seen a number of bad folds at the level. More common is that \$1-\$2 players will make bad all-in calls.

Here's a hand I played recently. Two players limped, and I raised to \$12. The big blind called, as did the limpers. The flop came **A♦ 9♠ 7♦**. The big blind bet out for \$20. The two limpers folded, and I raised to \$60. He called.

The turn was the **4♦**. He bet out \$50. I shoved for \$220. He called with **A♥ 10♥**.

It's really a poor way to play A-T on this board. I would have checked the hand both times he chose to bet, but the worst play he made was to call the all-in. It's a very optimistic

call. There's no way I'm shoving a weaker ace, so I have to be bluffing, and apart from T-8 suited or 8-6 suited or maybe a random 7, I can't have many bluffing hands here— certainly not many compared to the value hands I can have.

As it turned out, I just had A-K with no flush draw. My opponent's action (with the flop donk bet and the small turn donk bet) strongly indicated to me that he held an ace with a suspect kicker.

My opponent had no business going broke on the hand, and yet he all but shoveled his money into the middle.

The way to take advantage of this is to shove good one pair hands for value. I would not have been nearly so quick to shove A-K against a strong player in a hand like this one. But when you can count on players to make poor decisions against all-in bets, it makes sense to shove with more hands.

Strong top pair hands are the most common hands that I will shove against these \$1-\$2 players. Sure, sometimes I run into two pair or trips or a flush. But I also get weak top pairs to call, bad draws to call, and even sometimes weak pairs to call. Every once in a while someone makes a real head-scratcher fold.

## Bad Donk-Betting

The A-K versus A-T hand above illustrates another extremely common mistake among \$1-\$2 players. They donk bet too much, and they do it with a very predictable set of hands.

Donk betting (betting into the previous street's aggressor) got its name many years ago as it was perceived to be a “donkey” move. Theoretically, donk betting has its place in a sound strategy. But the way most \$1-\$2 players use it, it's still a donkey move.

That's because they try the play with only a specific set of hands. For instance, in this hand the flop was A-9-7 with a flush draw. Say my opponent held 9-9 or 7-7. A donk bet might be a strong move with these hands—but the typical \$1-\$2 player will check these sets. At this level, players typically donk bet for one of three reasons:

1. To attempt to protect against giving a free card.
2. To probe for information.
3. To try to win the pot with a cheap bluff.

In the above hand, I believe he was primarily trying to protect against giving free cards, with perhaps a little probing for information mixed in.

The problem with these reasons is that “getting the most money in with a great hand,” is not among them. This makes donk-betting ranges unbalanced and weak. I felt like I could value-shove my A-K with relative impunity, because the typical \$1-\$2 player simply doesn’t play stronger hands this way. Sure, I knew it was possible I’d run into a flush. But I was fairly sure that my opponent had just the sort of hand he did—far surer than I had any right to be. A better player would not be nearly so predictable.

On certain board types, particularly static ones where you wouldn’t be so concerned about being drawn out on, a donk bet at \$1-\$2 is nearly always weak. For instance, say I raised preflop and got called by a few players including the big blind. The blind bets out small on a J-7-4 rainbow flop. Assuming everyone folded between me and the blind, I would tend to raise the flop small and bet big on the turn with most of my hands.

Because there’s not much out there to protect against, I’d assume that my opponent was either trying to bluff or probing for information. In either case, I am likely to win with a small flop raise and, failing that, a big turn bet.

## Final Thoughts

\$1-\$2 players make tons of mistakes. If you are struggling with the level, focus first on the all-in action. Make sure you stop making poor all-in calls. Then look for spots where your opponents will likely make a mistake against a shove and stick the money in.

[This article appeared originally in *Card Player*, Vol. 27, No. 9.]

## Mistakes \$2-\$5 Players Make

By Ed Miller

This is the second in my three-part series about mistakes that live no-limit players make. In this article I talk about mistakes typical of regular \$2-\$5 players. For the purpose of this article, I’m talking about \$2-\$5 as it plays in Las Vegas. It’s entirely possible that in your area, players at \$2-\$5 play more like the ones I discussed in the \$1-\$2 article—or that they play more like the ones I’ll talk about at \$5-\$10.

In general, regular \$2-\$5 players have learned a few important lessons since they've moved up from \$1-\$2. They've learned how to do a little hand reading. In particular, they've learned not to call all-in bets with weak pairs and wild hopes. They've learned how to pot control—they try to keep the pot small with modest-strength hands with showdown value. And they've learned that they can beat weaker players by pushing the betting when they hit strong hands.

Still, \$2-\$5 players make tons of mistakes that are easy to exploit if you know what you're looking for.

## They Wear Their Hand Strength On Their Sleeves


The hand-reading skills of \$1-\$2 are generally poor, such that these players often don't know what they want from their hands. At \$2-\$5, players are much more aware of where they are in hands. For instance, a \$2-\$5 player holding A-T on an A-9-7 board will know that it's likely that they have the best hand, but that it becomes much less likely if there's a lot of action.

In response to this understanding, \$2-\$5 players will try to get their A-T to showdown with only moderate betting. To accomplish this, they will check a street or two, or they will shade their bets to the small side.

In contrast, holding 9-9 on the same board—or even A-K—these players would have a different outlook. They'd be trying to get money into the pot. After all, this is one of the things they've learned to do that helped them to move up. They've learned to consistently get value from strong hands. So they won't check streets with these hands, and their bet sizes will shade larger.

In many cases, all you have to do is observe the flop and turn action, and you can have a very strong idea about your opponents' attitudes toward their hands. You may not know the specific cards they hold, but you can fairly easily reverse engineer their strategy in the hand. This will often give you clear opportunities to exploit on the turn and river.

Let's look at a few different theoretical flop and turn betting sequences and try to decode them using the logic of a \$2-\$5 player.

A typical \$2-\$5 player opens for \$20 from two off the button, and you call on the button. The blinds fold. The flop comes . There's \$47 in the pot and \$500 behind.



### **Scenario 1. The preflop raiser bets out for \$65.**

The bet is bigger than the pot, which indicates that the player is not concerned about keeping the pot small. But it also suggests that the player wants to protect a hand to the maximum, so the preflop raiser perceives his hand to be vulnerable. I'd expect to see a hand like A-Q or K-K after this action.

Holding two pair or a set, I'd just shove the flop, expecting to get called. With a draw—particularly a straight draw like 8-6 that is fairly hidden—I'd call the overbet planning to bluff for stacks on the turn and river if a spade hits.

I'd just fold the flop with a hand like J-J.

Let's say you call and the turn is the **3♥**. Typically on a brick like this, the preflop raiser will come out with another whopper of a bet—\$150 or more. This bet would confirm my read, and I'd act accordingly. I'd never try to bluff (even with a combo draw), and I'd just shove any hand that could beat A-A.


Let's say you call and the turn is the **10♠**, putting both the flush and several straights on board. On this card, the preflop raiser will typically either check or make a small bet—perhaps another \$65 or just slightly more. Either action tends to confirm my read. Against a check I'd make a small bet (perhaps \$100), planning to shove most rivers. Against a small bet, I'd tend to minraise, again planning to shove most rivers.

You don't want to commit your opponent with too large a turn bet, since it's possible your opponent will feel compelled to call with a hand such as **K♠K♦**. I'd prefer to let the river brick, leaving my opponent with one pair, and then apply the maximum pressure.

### **Scenario 2. The preflop raiser bets out for \$30.**

This thought behind this bet is less clear. It could be a draw, a weak-pair hand like T-T or Q-T, or it could possibly be a big hand like 9-9.

Because the bet is small compared to the pot size, however, I will tend to call with most of my hands (the ones that connect with the board—not 3-3 or **A♦3♦**) and watch my opponent's reaction to the turn card.

Let's say you call and the turn is the . If the preflop raiser checks, it's an automatic bet. On this board, if the preflop raiser held something of value, he'd almost certainly want to protect it with a bet. So against a check I'd bet the turn and likely, if called, the river.

If the preflop raiser bets big—\$100 or more—he's got a hand. Either he's got something like a set, or possibly he has what he considers to be a very strong draw. You won't see hands like Q-T after a betting pattern like this. I wouldn't bluff against this bet size, since you're likely getting called. With a legitimately strong hand like A-Q, it might be worth a call in hopes your opponent has a draw, bricks the river, and checks so you can check it down. If I called the turn with A-Q and my opponent shoved a river brick, I'd fold without much thought.

If the preflop raiser bets small, I will frequently call once more due to the good pot odds and gauge my opponent's reaction to the river card.

### **Scenario 3. The preflop raiser checks the flop.**

Most of the time, this will mean the raiser doesn't have much and is concerned about the flop. I'd bet the flop small (about \$30), planning to bet many turns if called. Most of the time, the raiser won't last past the turn. On the off chance he is playing possum with a big hand, he'll usually checkraise the turn, and at least I won't have to worry about losing a river bluff.

## **Final Thoughts**

While \$2-\$5 players have learned not to make gross errors, they don't do enough to disguise their hands. If you observe their actions and use some logic, you can usually figure out what they're trying to do. Then you just make sure they don't get what they want.

*[This article appeared originally in [Card Player](#), Vol. 27, No. 10.]*

# Mistakes \$5-\$10 Players Make

By Ed Miller

This is the final article in my three-part series about the mistakes that live no-limit players make. This article covers the mistakes that \$5-\$10 players make. As with the other articles, I'm talking about how \$5-\$10 games play in Las Vegas. They may play differently where you live. But don't take my stakes levels literally—the stages in no-limit player development are more universal, and you should be able to find players in your pool who fit the mold.


Even the weaker \$5-\$10 players tend to have some sophistication about them. Most commonly, \$5-\$10 regulars possess fairly decent hand-reading abilities, and many of the errors that separate the weaker players from the stronger ones in the pool depend on hand range construction. The weaker players tend to play a looser, more haphazard preflop game, which taints their play through the end of hands.

Players often try to make up the difference by forcing bluffs in inappropriate places. An example of this represents my first mistake.

## Imbalanced Ranges On Certain Board Textures

One of the hallmark errors of \$5-\$10 players is that they build pots with unbalanced hand ranges on some board textures. I played two hands recently at the level that illustrate this error.


A loose, weak-for-the-level player limped in, and I made it \$40 with 8h6h on the button. The big blind called, and the limper called.


The flop came . Everyone checked to me, and I bet \$70 into the \$125 pot. The blind folded, and the limper check-raised to \$210. We were about \$3,000 behind.

I have middle pair, a backdoor flush draw, and a blocker to the ten-to-six straight. More than that, there are relatively few hands that my opponent should want to check-raise on a board like this one. He could have a set or T-6, but my six blocks some of those hands. He's unlikely to hold an overpair since he limp-called preflop.

He could have check-raised A-T, but in my experience he likely wouldn't have check-raised weaker tens.



This is a situation where loose \$5-\$10 players like to make plays. I thought he could have any gutshot draw or also a number of overcards hands. Because there are so few good value hands on this board, I thought he was a fairly big favorite to be bluffing. My hand is the sort I'm happy to defend.




The turn was the . He bet \$330. I called again. It's a good card for me, and he bet well less than the pot size.

The river was the . He checked, and I checked. He showed 8-7 offsuit for a flopped gutshot, and my hand was good.

It's not flat-out wrong to bluff boards like these. But because value hands are scarce, you must be measured also with your bluffs. I made an assumption that this player would bluff too many combinations on a board like this one. This time, at least, I turned out to be correct.

In this second hand, I'm the one who got caught with the imbalanced range.

I open-raised   to \$30 and got called in middle position and on the button. The button was likely my strongest opponent in the game. The big blind also called. He played more like a \$1-\$2 player than a level-appropriate one. There's \$125 in the pot, and we're all at least \$2,000 deep.

The flop came   . The big blind bet out for \$80. I made it \$210, and the next player folded. The strong player on the button called. The original bettor folded.

I was in trouble. I had raised the big blind's donk bet, since I felt it was very unlikely he was betting a hand that could handle any pressure. I would have raised a wide range of hands (here I raised two weak overcards with a backdoor flush draw), and I had very few legitimate value hands in my range. I likely would have just called with most overpairs or T-9 or 9-8 suited or 9-9. I would have raised 4-4 and A-9 suited, but that represents just five hand combinations.

So, realistically, I have a lot of bluffs and very few actual value hands. With a strong player on the button and lots of money behind, I'm toast. When the turn bricked, I checked and folded to \$200 (a good bet size on his part that reflects his understanding of the situation).

I'm not sure what his range to call my flop raise was, but it could have been quite wide. There's nothing I can do about it when he calls, and I get caught with such a poorly constructed range.

## Value Betting Too Thinly

The pros that play \$5-\$10 are of varying quality. Many are just good enough to beat the weak players at the level. A few are much better than that.

One of the common plays that the weaker pros make is they value bet the river too optimistically. Standard no-limit hold'em advice is to value bet thinly to maximize your profit. If someone checks to you on the river, try to squeeze that value out of the weakest hand that you can.

When I play these pros, however, I find that they consistently value bet hands against me that are unprofitable. Sure, sometimes I'll bluff-catch them with something weak, and they'll win. But I have too many better hands in my check-calling range, such that they would have been better off just seeing a showdown.

For instance, I open-raised **A♠ Q♠** for \$30 from two off the button. A pro called me on the button.

The flop came **9♣ 4♣ 3♦**. I checked and called a \$50 bet. There's \$175 in the pot, and we're about \$1,500 behind.

The turn was the **K♣**. I checked, and he checked.

The river was the **A♦**. I checked, and he bet \$90. I called. He showed K-J offsuit, and I won.

After this action, I have an ace an awful lot. Ace-high overcards are smack in my flop checking and calling range. I can also have hands like A-4, A-5, and even A-9 suited.

Furthermore, what other hands do I play this way that possibly merit a river call? I likely bet the flop with most overpairs. I might play a hand like **J♥ 9♥** this way, but I'm not a lock to call the river, whereas I'm certainly calling with an ace.

I can even potentially have K-Q.

There's no way my opponent wins with his hand more than half the time that I call. He should have just checked for a showdown.

When in doubt, I like to check-call the river against \$5-\$10 pros. They tend to bet the river too frequently—both as a bluff and for thin value. I find these players often make more errors when you show weakness than when you bet into them.

## Final Thoughts

Everyone who plays small- and medium-stakes live games on a regular basis makes lots of mistakes. The nature of these errors changes as you move up the limits, but they're always there. If you think logically and practice, practice, practice, any of these games is beatable.

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