

Diary of a Novice Hold'em Player

BY KEN ADAMS AND MARK WEINBERG

I got a call recently from an old friend and law school classmate who made an unusual request. Mark and his law partner planned to be in Las Vegas for a week to attend a tax planning conference. Mark enjoys playing craps and blackjack occasionally, but he was looking for something else to do while visiting Glitter Gulch — preferably something that would not chew up his bankroll as fast as the table games. Mark knows that I have logged my share of hours at the limit hold'em tables in Las Vegas and California over the years, and he had called to ask if I would teach him enough that he could enjoy playing casino poker during his trip. I said that I would be happy to try, and we made a date for a Saturday afternoon lesson.

Mark is not exactly a novice. He is an accomplished chess and Othello player, and has played his share of recreational bridge and poker over the years. But he never had played poker in a casino or public cardroom, and had been too intimidated by the unfamiliar rituals of the cardroom to sit down and play during previous visits to Las Vegas and Atlantic City. I decided to attack that barrier first.

Before Mark arrived for his lesson, I set up my dining room table to simulate the distractions and disorientation that I knew he would experience the first time he sat down to play in a casino. I filled the

chairs with huge stuffed animals from my daughter's room — a 3-foot-tall stuffed poodle wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses, an enormous zebra decked out with a scarf and jacket, a big Raggedy Ann doll wearing a feather boa, and so on. I also had both a radio and a television blaring in the background. In that homemade theater of the absurd, I sat Mark down, gave him some chips, and began to deal out hold'em hands.

After going through the basics, I instructed Mark to play at a \$3-\$6 table, and to follow a few simple but unalterable rules. The rules were that Mark would not be permitted to call any bets or raises before the flop unless he had A-A, K-K, or A-K suited. The only exception would be on the button or one seat to the right of the button in a full game — in which case he could play Q-Q, J-J, 10-10, A-K, and A-Q suited. I warned him that if he followed my instructions to the letter, he could expect to throw away most of his hands, and might find it boring after a while. But I promised that if he could handle the tedium, and resist the urge to play more hands just to have fun, he probably would win money if the cards broke even.

The only thing left to do was to practice reading the board, so that he would know how to get away from dangerous flops and turn cards. We spent an hour or so practicing that skill. I would deal a flop and ask, "What is the best hand at the moment?" After

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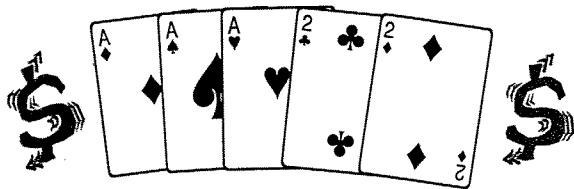
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dealing the turn card, I would pose the same question, and again after the river card. After a while, Mark became adept at quickly noticing how the changing complexion of the common cards changed the strength of various holdings that he or his opponents might hold. I sent him home with instructions to practice his "flop reading" skills as much as possible, and recommended that he install the *World Series of Poker* software on his computer, so that he also could try out the rules I had given him against simulated opponents.

A month later, Mark left for Las Vegas. After a few days of working all day and playing craps and blackjack at night, he summoned up his courage and walked into the poker room. He was seated almost immediately in a full \$3-\$6 game at 4 p.m. on a weekday afternoon. He played until 8 p.m., took a dinner break, and played until midnight. He spent the next few hours in his hotel room writing notes of what had transpired. At 4:30 in the morning (7:30 in Washington, DC), he called me to report how things had gone. What follows is an edited version of Mark's "Diary of a Novice Hold'em Player."

4 p.m.: I bought in for \$100. After discarding every hand for a while, I mistakenly threw in three \$5 chips before the flop while holding a suited K-J (contrary to Ken's "system"). I flopped top pair and everyone folded when I bet. Three hands later in the big blind, I raised with pocket kings. Everyone folded. After discarding the next 15 hands before the flop without grumbling, I realized that one consequence of following Ken's system was that I was building a table image as someone who had the goods when I bet. Although I could see how that would set up opportunities to bluff, I vowed to follow Ken's instructions not to bluff under any circumstances in my first session. Learning to exercise judgment about when to bluff would have to wait until the fundamentals were well in hand. I lost a big hand toward the end of the hour when I had to fold wired kings on the river in the face of an obvious straight. I took a short break after an hour, as instructed by Ken. Chip count at the break: +\$23.

Hour No. 2: My pocket aces won a nice pot, beating pocket kings. Easy game! I started to loosen up, and played suited connectors and chased second pairs and flush draws. I gave back three-fourths of my hard-earned \$48 profit. Chip count at the break: +\$13.

Hour No. 3: It was time to return to the system. I played only two hands in an hour. Many seats were empty as players broke for dinner. Chip count at the break: +\$33.

Hour No. 4: I played only one hand beyond the flop. I called with 9♣ 8♣ on the button. I flopped an ace-high flush against three other players. All three called after the flop and on fourth street, but no one called on the river when no more clubs came. It was time for dinner. Chip count at the break: +\$61.

Hour No. 5: My previous table broke down, so I moved to a new table of older players, apparently locals who mostly knew each other. Not being part of the clique, there was no one to talk to and nothing to do but play cards. Boredom got to me, along with overconfidence from my predinner win. I started playing more hands, abandoning Ken's system. I dribbled away a lot of chips on hands that missed. When my nut straight lost to a flush on the river, it looked like hours of patient play would be wiped out. I bought another \$20 worth of chips, to make sure that I would not run out

