

Diary of a Low-Limit Player: A Report From the Trenches at the Taj Mahal

By Kenneth L. Adams

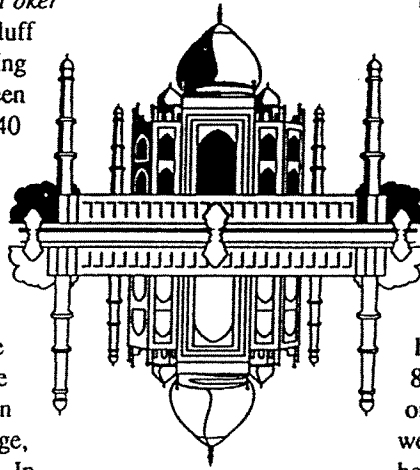
I have read Sklansky and Malmuth and Brunson and Zee. I have watched the *World Series of Poker* video tapes. I know how and when to semibluff and how to compute the implied odds of drawing hands. The occasional times when I have been foolish enough and flush enough to play \$20-\$40 hold'em, I've done my best to play "by the book." But most of the time, I play in games for which no book has yet been written, probably because the world-class hold'em players who write poker books don't play in these low-limit games.

I am referring to the \$3-\$6, \$4-\$8, up to the \$7.50-\$15 games that are spread in abundance across the country. I am talking about games in which five to seven players see the flop on average, regardless of whether the pot has been raised. In those games, 90 percent of the hands are won by the player who improves most after the flop, not by the player who flops the best hand. If the leader after the flop does not improve, he often does not win the pot; when he does win, it is usually a small pot in which no drawing hands were out.

If you are a low-limit player, you know what I mean. Playing by the book — at least by the books written by Sklansky and his ilk — does not seem to win the money. You have to modify the book, and more important, your expectations. You cannot expect premium pairs to win many big pots. If you play only group one and group two hands, you will not be in enough hands to take advantage of the weaker players; and frequently your premium hands will be outflopped or tracked down by players who don't know — and don't care — how big an underdog Q-7 or 9-6 offsuit is to your J-J, before the flop and also after the flop comes 10-7-4.

Let me share with you my notes from a recent Saturday session in the \$7.50-\$15 hold'em game at the Taj Mahal. (For those of you who have not made the pilgrimage to Atlantic City yet, the smallest game at the Taj is the \$3-\$6 table. Most of the strong players are at the \$15-\$30 and \$50-\$100 tables.)

9:30 a.m. Seated in the No. 3 seat. Two players have been playing all night and are having trouble staying awake. One has a few chips, the other a lot. The No. 2 seat is drinking beer with a shot,



seems to be loaded, and is constantly annoying the dealer and the players by asking, "How many chips to call?" Three players seem to play well after the flop, though they see a lot of flops. The first two rounds, I see four flops with A-A-x suited (twice), and K-Q. Flopped one flush draw; lots of action after the flop, with five callers. The \$250 pot was won by player with J-5 suited, who flopped bottom pair, played to the river, and caught a jack.

11:30 a.m. Still have not dragged a pot. Move to No. 7 seat when player's wife picks him up to go to the beach. Win first hand with K-8 suited in big blind. Flop top pair; bet out; one caller. Bet out on turn; no call. Small pot, but welcome. Players in No. 1 and No. 6 seats have been playing everything and hitting everything for an hour. Boredom and frustration are overwhelming. No premium hands yet. People playing trash and dragging big pots.

12:15 p.m. Wired threes in big blind. Six players call the raise by button. Flop comes A-6-3 with two clubs. At last a shot at a good pot. I check-raise; no one folds. Club hits on turn. Small blind bet out. Four players call. Board does not pair. Down \$350 and ready to scream.

12:25 p.m. Dealt J-J (both black) in late position. Strong play in No. 3 seat raises. I reraise, hoping to shrink the field. Four players see the flop: K-10-x with K-10 of clubs. Drunk in No. 2 seat bet out. Based on his prior betting, he could have anything — any pair a straight draw, or a flush draw. Original raiser (No. 3 seat) folds. I call. So does No. 10 seat. Turn card is 9♣. Drunk goes all in with \$10 partial bet. I raise to get heads up with him. Unfortunately, No. 10 seat calls. River is Q♣ — a miracle card. When my straight flush beats his A♣ 4♣, the drunk becomes abusive to the dealer and to other players, who try to calm him down. I drag my first good pot.

1:15 p.m. Drunk becomes more obnoxious and abusive. Two loose, passive players leave as a result. Replaced by two strong players I recognize from trips to Las Vegas. Bad trade. But No. 6 seat opens up, and I claim it. Previous occupant hit for \$800. Finally, drunk is asked to leave, and game settles down again. I get

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K-K on button. Five players call my raise. Flop comes 9-7-4 with two diamonds. The No. 10 seat bets out, two players call, I raise, and big blind (who has seen every flop and rarely folds before the river) calls. No. 10 reraises. Four of us see the turn. A king! Checked to me; I bet; two callers. When a diamond hits on the river, everyone checks. My set wins a nice pot. No. 10 seat flopped a set of sevens. I had two outs; lucky again. Next hand I muck 7-4 offsuit. Would have flopped two pair and filled on the turn! Break for lunch when blinds come around.

3:00 p.m. Game still very live. Since lunch break, I've won two small pots with top pair on flop, no callers. Most pots still being won by group 12 hands. Watch several unplayable hands hit flops (K-4 offsuit, 5-3 offsuit, and so on). Boredom and frustration getting to me. Call in late position with A-9 offsuit. Flop comes A-7-6. Turn and river come 10-8! Bad play is rewarded again.

3:10 p.m. Suited 10-8 in small blind. Five players see unraised flop: Q-8-8. Action from two loose seats. Turn and river are J-Q. I win by outdrawing 10-9 (straight) on the river, after she outdrew me on fourth street.

4:30 p.m. After treading water for an hour and winning two small pots, take a break to walk on boardwalk and visit friends playing high-low Omaha at Resorts. Soon after returning, flop a set with wired sixes, board pairs on river, drag nice pot.

5:30 p.m. K-Q in big blind. Flop top pair. Big pot builds. Club hits on river, making flushes for two players. Two hands later, another big pot builds when flop comes Q-Q-9; J-J beats 10-9! (I mucked Q-8 offsuit before the flop.) Next hand I raise with Q-Q. Flop comes 9-8-2. Action all the way from 9-5 offsuit. Another nine hits on the river. A few hands later, see unraised flop with

6-4 offsuit in big blind. Muck after flop comes Q-5-2. Would have hit gut-shot three on turn. Fight the temptation to give in to the feeling that the way to win is to play bad.

6:30 p.m. Flopped a set with wired nines; filled up on river. Also won small pot with suited A-3. Flopped flush draw; missed draw but won when ace hit on river.

7:30 p.m. After hitting one more small pot, raised on button with suited K-Q. Four players called. Flop came K-Q-9. No. 2 seat bet out; I raised. Three players called. Fourth street brought an offsuit five. No. 2 seat bet out again, I raised again, and she reraised. I called. When another king hit on the river, she bet out again. I raised; she just called. Once again, I needed to get lucky on the river (to beat her pocket fives).

8:30 p.m. Split a big pot. Played suited Q-6 in late position (boredom had struck again). Flop came K-6-6. Split with 9-6 offsuit when ace hit on river.

9:00 p.m. Cashed out \$400 win and headed for train station to catch last express train to Washington.

As I reviewed my notes on the train ride home, I calculated that I had spent about nine hours at the table. Between the inexperience of the dealers and the impossibly cumbersome chip procedures imposed by the Casino Control Commission, about 20 hands an hour on average were put out. Of the 180 hands I was dealt, I stood to win 18 if all other things were equal in a 10-handed game. I won 12 pots outright and split one. In nine of those 13 pots, I had to show the best hand on the river to win. Only four times were my bets not called by at least one other player, and those wins were all small pots where I flopped top pair, bet out, and no one called beyond fourth street.

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Report From the Trenches

(Continued from page 37)

I am far from ready (or qualified) to write "the book" on low-limit hold'em. But I am ready to venture a few preliminary observations from this session and many others like it (not all as successful).

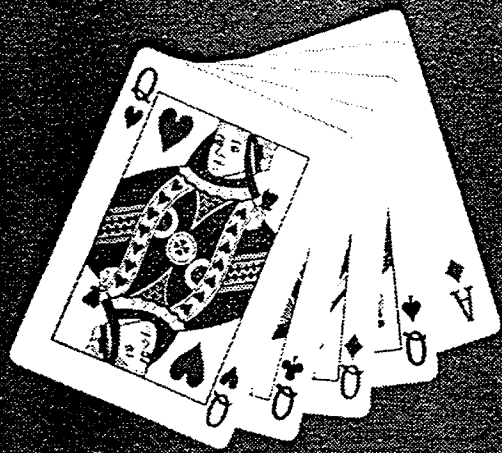
1) My biggest wins came in situations where I had the best hand before the flop, was outflopped or outdrawn on the turn, and redrew on the turn or the river. Throughout the day, most pots were won by the hand that improved most on fourth and fifth streets. I could not have hit those two- and four-card outs in a bigger game against better players. I would have known how slim I was drawing and would have had the possibility of correctly laying down the hand. But in a low-limit game, against players who raise and call indiscriminately without much awareness of pot odds and drawing odds, it is too costly to put them on a hand and lay down any strong holding. Several times I laid down top pair when I did not improve and found myself conceding pots to middle pairs and busted draws that got called by even worse hands.

2) There is no point in raising with premium pairs before the flop in order to shrink the field. Everyone calls anyway, and you just build the drawing odds for the chasers. The only pre-flop raises that make sense are raises for value. However, with five to seven players seeing most flops, plus several players calling to the river with any pair and any draw, it is hard to know what constitutes "value" before the flop. I am coming to believe that suited A-K, A-Q, A-J, and K-Q may be the only hands worth raising with before the flop.

3) You can (and probably should) play a lot more starting hands than in a higher limit game, as long as you are able to throw away a lot of hands on the flop and turn if you do not improve significantly. But there is always a risk that after watching premium hands get beaten by trash repeatedly, you will start playing the same trash as the weaker players. At some point, you'll realize what Mason Malmuth (or was it John Vorhaus) was talking about when he said, "If you are playing bad cards, you are playing bad." It sounds simple enough, but it is amazing what you can talk yourself into when you see bad play rewarded hand after hand.

4) If there are four or five good players in the game, try to spread out. If you sit in adjacent seats, the loose players start to tighten up. They see four or five players folding in a row, and they start to do the same thing, killing the action.

5) Be prepared to accept the fact that luck is as big a factor as skill in any given session. If you do not get your share of luck, you are going to lose money to less skillful players. Skillful play will not overcome short-term luck when five or six players are chasing you every time you enter the pot. It is tough to maintain faith that over time skillful play will be rewarded, when every session there seems to be at least one unskilled but lucky player taking down pot after pot. You know that he or she eventually will give it back, but not necessarily in that session and not necessarily to you. As in virtually every form of poker at all betting limits, discipline is essential. The lower the limits, the more frequent the bad beats and the tougher you may find it to maintain the discipline needed to be a winner ♦



Queens Poker CLASSIC IV

January 5-25, 1994
Satellites January 2-4

over \$2,500,000 *expected prize pool*

DATE	TIME	EVENT	BUY-IN	ENTRY FEE
January 2, 3, 4		Satellites		
1. Wed., Jan. 5	Noon	Limit Hold'em	\$500	\$50
2. Thu., Jan. 6	Noon	7-Card Stud	\$500	\$50
3. Fri., Jan. 7	Noon	Omaha Hi-Lo Split	\$500	\$50
4. Sat., Jan. 8	Noon	Ladies Limit Hold'em	\$500	\$50
5. Sat., Jan. 8	5 p.m.	Ace To 5 Lohall	\$1,000	\$50
6. Sun., Jan. 9	5 p.m.	7-Card Hi-Lo Split (New Event)	\$500	\$50
7. Mon., Jan. 10	Noon	No Limit Hold'em	\$500	\$50
8. Tue., Jan. 11	Noon	7-Card Razz	\$1,000	\$50
9. Wed., Jan. 12	Noon	Deuce to 7 No Limit (Re-buys 1st 3 hours)	\$2,500	\$60
10. Thu., Jan. 14	Noon	Omaha Hi-Lo Split	\$1,000	\$50
11. Fri., Jan. 14	Noon	Pot Limit Omaha (Re-buys 1st 3 hours)	\$1,000	\$50
12. Sat., Jan. 15	Noon	Ladies 7-Card Stud	\$500	\$30
13. Sat., Jan. 15	5 p.m.	Limit Hold'em	\$1,000	\$50
14. Sun., Jan. 16	5 p.m.	7-Card Stud	\$1,000	\$50
15. Mon., Jan. 17	Noon	Pot Limit Hold'em (Re-buys 1st 3 hours (New Event))	\$500	\$30
16. Tue., Jan. 18	Noon	7-Card Hi-Lo Split	\$1,000	\$50
17. Wed., Jan. 19	Noon	Pot Limit Hold'em	\$1,000	\$50
18. Thu., Jan. 20	Noon	No Limit Hold'em	\$1,000	\$50
19. Fri., Jan. 21	Noon	7-Card Stud	\$500	\$30
20. Sat., Jan. 23	Noon	Limit Hold'em	\$500	\$30
21. Sun., Jan. 23	Noon	No Limit Hold'em (Re-buys 1st 3 hours)	\$500	\$30
22. Mon., Jan. 24	Noon	Queens Poker Classic (No Limit Hold'em)	\$5,000	\$80
Tue., Jan. 25		Championship		

Events #4, 12 & 22 not included in best all-around player award.

\$20,000 in cash bonuses to best five all-around players. Side-game players will be eligible for two \$5,000 seats to be awarded for the Queens Poker Classic championship event.

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