

Modified Pot-Limit Poker

BY KEN ADAMS

For most of us who play at the middle limits and lower, there is little opportunity to learn pot-limit and no-limit play. Very few casinos or cardrooms in the United States spread regular pot-limit games, and the few that do are not marketing the games to inexperienced players. This stands in stark contrast to Europe, where until recently there has been very little limit poker played in the card clubs.

In a past *Card Player* article, Jason Misa discussed the differences between limit and pot-limit poker in terms of "left brain" and "right brain" skills. Because limit poker rewards discipline and mathematically correct play, while pot-limit and no-limit play reward "people reading" skills, he recommended that limit players work on expanding their "right brain" skills, to add a dimension to their game. See "The Emer-

gence of the Whole-Brain Poker Player," *Card Player*, March 21, 1997.

The problem is, where can a middle-limit hold'em player find a pot-limit game that offers an affordable way to learn the very different skills required to succeed in pot-limit or no-limit play? The basic problem seems to be that weaker players cannot get lucky often enough to keep their bankrolls alive. In pot-limit or no-limit play, the price of playing too many hands and making too many loose calls is very high. In a pot-limit game, a bad call on the river can turn a winning session into a losing one every time. As a result, the skillful players win most of the money most of the time, and the weaker players drop out after a while as it becomes apparent that they cannot win.

This article describes a model for a modi-

fied form of pot-limit poker that will go a long way toward making it possible for limit players to protect their bankrolls while learning the very different skills of pot-limit poker.

Recently, I was invited to play in a private weekly game that has been going for more than 20 years in my hometown. Luckily for me, they lost a player recently and I was invited to join the group. The game is built around a modified pot-limit structure that makes it possible for middle-limit players to gain experience with the "right brain" aspects of pot-limit play, while avoiding the bankroll punishment that ordinarily would go along with learning to play pot-limit poker in a game with more experienced players.

Here is how our game works: We play weekly from 8 p.m. until 12:30 a.m. The

WHO AM I? A Poker Quiz

Below, you will find the baby picture of a world-famous poker player with whom "Oklahoma Johnny" has played poker for many years. This player will be featured in the forthcoming book by Hale entitled *Las Vegas Poker Stories and Other Lies*.



"Oklahoma Johnny" Hale
The Elder Statesman of Poker



CLUE

This is the only player to win both the *World Series of Poker* championship event and the *Seniors World Championship of Poker*.

Have you guessed correctly? Find the answer on page 98!

minimum buy-in is \$500. You cannot begin a hand with less than \$100 on the table. In most games, the dealer is the only one to post an ante. In the case of Omaha eight-or-better, the dealer antes \$5. On the first round of betting, the maximum bet is established by the size of the pot before the betting begins — \$5 in this case. If there is an opening bet, the next player can fold, call, or raise. Unlike a true pot-limit structure, the maximum raise is limited to \$5 — the size of the pot at the beginning of the betting.

Assuming that four players call the \$5 ante and see the flop, the pot now holds a total of \$25. After the flop, the maximum bet (and raise) is \$25 throughout that round of betting. Assume that one player bets the pot and one person calls. The pot now holds \$75, which establishes the maximum bet and raise for the next round of betting. Regardless of how big a pot grows, the maximum bet is \$200. Although it is routine for pots to exceed \$200 (especially in high-low games), I have seen only two or three \$200-maximum bets during the four months that I have been playing in the game.

What are the consequences of this modified pot-limit structure? First, the amount at risk is reduced significantly. It is rare for anyone to lose (or win) as much as \$1,000. Most wins (and losses) are less than \$500. That makes it possible for a player with limited pot-limit experience to learn the game without destroying his bankroll. And because the betting escalates more slowly than in a true pot-limit structure, the best hand is more often determined on the river than in a true pot-limit structure. It has been said that no-limit poker is a game of the flop, that pot-limit poker is a game of the turn, and that limit poker is a game of the river. A modified pot-limit structure fits in between. Compared to limit poker, it is easier to protect a strong hand on the turn, as the pot rarely will offer attractive odds for straight and flush draws on the river. On the other hand, compared to true pot-limit and no-limit structures, it makes it harder to close out the drawing hands on the second or third round of betting, partly because the size of the pot often does not enable you to bet enough after the

flop to discourage your opponents from drawing out on you, and partly because your opponent often will have started the hand with \$200 or less in front of him and will go all in for less than the full amount of your maximum bet on fourth street.

As with most life experiences, there is good news and bad news in this tale. The good news is that the modified pot-limit structure has made it possible for me to survive the transition from limit play without going broke during the learning process. The bad news is that it has whetted my appetite for true pot-limit and no-limit poker, and it has made it difficult for me to enjoy the more mechanical structure of limit play as much as I used to.

If you share my fascination with the challenges of pot-limit and no-limit poker, I recommend that you start a modified pot-limit game. My hope is that if enough limit players begin experimenting with modified pot-limit play, casinos and card clubs will begin to spread the game. Then, you will not have to wait 20 years as I did to be invited to fill the occasional empty seat in a private modified pot-limit game. ♦

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