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DANIEL NEGREANU

Daniel Negreanu is one of the best and arguably the most charismatic player in the world of poker. Best known for his unorthodox and aggressive style of play, Daniel's track record in tournament poker competition is overwhelming. At the age of 23, he won his first World Series of Poker title, which earned him the nickname, "Kid Poker."

In 2004, he appeared at eleven final tables, scored two World Poker Tour victories, and won his third WSOP bracelet, earning more than \$4 million for his efforts. Daniel capped off the year by being named ESPN Player of the Year, *Card Player* magazine Player of the Year, and 2004-2005 WPT Player of the Year.

Negreanu exemplifies the confidence of the new generation of poker players who cut their gaming teeth on the Internet and video games, and are committed to poker as a sport. The young superstar appears regularly on the Fox Sports network, ESPN, and GSN. In addition, Daniel headlines the video game "Stacked," and the always popular website www.fullcontactpoker.com. He is also sponsored by PokerStars, where you will find him playing online.

Daniel is involved in the creation of a new poker training site called PokerVT.com, which is a web-based virtual training system that simulates one-on-one poker instruction from Daniel and a team of poker experts. The training curriculum features Daniel's in-depth video-based analysis of actual live hands that were played and a collection of training modules that reveal the secrets of the online pros.

As Daniel himself might say, "But wait, fans, that's not all!" He writes a nationally syndicated newspaper column, "Playing Poker with Daniel Negreanu," and a column for *Card Player*

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magazine. Doyle Brunson selected him to write the triple draw chapter for *Super System 2*, the celebrated sequel to *Super System*. Simply put, Daniel's success in poker is enormous, his talent unrivaled, and his personality unforgettable.

Negreanu's topic for this book is small ball, a revolutionary approach to winning at no-limit hold'em. The centerpiece of the book, his chapter will help you learn how to steadily increase your stack in no-limit hold'em tournaments without taking significant risks, just like some of the pros you see on TV. Many of the most successful tournament pros use the strategies Daniel gives you in this section.

“When you watch a player who is using a small-ball strategy,” the author says, “you will notice that he appears to be in control of the table, yet at the same time, seems to be playing with reckless abandon, giving little thought to the strength of his starting hand. You will soon understand the method to that madness... that this liberal strategy is firmly founded in sound mathematics and logic.”

The ultimate goal of this chapter is twofold. First, to show you that the key to success in no-limit hold'em is playing your opponent's hand rather than focusing on your own hand. And second, to teach you how to achieve extraordinary success at poker by doing exactly that.

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Daniel Negreanu

SMALL BALL PHILOSOPHY

I'm really hoping that this chapter will help you learn how to steadily increase your stack in no-limit hold'em tournaments without taking significant risks, just like some of the pros you see on TV. This style of poker is one that many of the world's most successful tournament competitors use, including players like myself, Phil Ivey, Alan Goering, Erick Lindgren, Ted Forrest, Phil Hellmuth, Michael "The Grinder" Mizrachi and countless others.

After you've read through the small-ball material, you'll have a much better understanding as to why this strategy works, how to play it yourself, and how to defend against other players who are using a similar strategy.

We will start from the very beginning—from the struggle for the antes all the way to the river where you'll need to decide how much to bet or whether to check a marginal hand on the

last card. Along the way, I'll be providing you with in-depth examples of how small ball works. When you watch a player at a table who is using a small-ball strategy, you will notice that he appears to be in control of the table, yet at the same time, seems to be playing with reckless abandon, giving little thought to the strength of his starting hand.

You will soon understand the method to that madness. You will learn that, in fact, this liberal strategy is firmly founded in sound mathematics and logic. Ultimately, this chapter will teach you that the key to success in no-limit hold'em is playing your opponent's hand rather than focusing on the strength of your own hand.

BLINDS AND ANTES

When you strip the game of tournament poker down to its core, it is a battle for the blinds and antes. The size of the blinds and antes dictates how many hands you should play and even how much you should invest in a hand. Let's look at an extreme example:

Let's say that you are playing in a no-limit tournament that has no blinds and no antes. In this situation, why would you ever play a hand unless it was precisely A-A? You could simply wait for aces and hope that someone else will play with you. However, if the others have any understanding of poker at all, they will be doing the exact same thing. The only time there would ever be a flop is when two players are dealt aces in the same hand!

Let's look at the other side of that extreme example. Let's say that you are playing in a one table, 10-handed tournament that starts you off with \$2,000 in chips, blinds of \$500/\$1,000 with a \$1,000 ante. Is there any hand you could justify folding in this situation? Of course not! Half of your money goes toward

the ante, so if you fold, you'll be all in on the very next hand for the ante alone. Chances are that everyone else will probably play their hands when you fold. That would leave you heads-up with \$1,000 in chips versus the opponent who won the last pot, who would have \$19,000 in chips.

Neither of those two blind-and-ante structures makes for a very interesting poker game. In a typical televised tournament, you start with \$10,000 in chips and the blinds start at \$25/\$50 with no ante. They then escalate as follows depending on the structure set up by the tournament director:

Blinds	Ante
\$25/\$50	None
\$50/\$100	None
\$100/\$200	None
\$100/\$200	\$25
\$150/\$300	\$25
\$200/\$400	\$50
\$300/\$600	\$75
\$400/\$800	\$100
\$500/\$1,000	\$100
\$600/\$1,200	\$200
\$800/\$1,600	\$200
\$1,000/\$2,000	\$300
\$1,200/\$2,400	\$400
\$1,500/\$3,000	\$500
\$2,000/\$4,000	\$500
\$3,000/\$6,000	\$1,000
\$4,000/\$8,000	\$1,000
\$5,000/\$10,000	\$1,000
\$6,000/\$12,000	\$2,000
\$8,000/\$16,000	\$2,000
\$10,000/\$20,000	\$3,000

The blinds and antes continue increasing until one player is left with all of the chips. Each level lasts anywhere from one hour to two hours, depending on the buy-in for the tournament.

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Smaller buy-in tournaments ranging from \$100 to \$300 generally have twenty- and thirty-minute levels, which makes for a much quicker finish than the big buy-in tournaments. Some of them last for two to four days, or in the main event of the World Series of Poker, for nearly two weeks until a champion is crowned.

To maintain your starting stack, you'll need to win at least one set of blinds and antes per round. Since the blinds and antes continue to increase throughout the tournament, though, that simply isn't good enough to survive. Eventually a \$10,000 stack will be in jeopardy, so you'll actually have to do better than breaking even. You'll have to fight a little harder to win more than your fair share of blinds and antes.

Premium hands coming to you when large pots are at stake are few and far between. Tournaments are won in the trenches by aggressively going after lots of little pots. The trick, of course, is learning how to do that without becoming reckless. Read through this entire chapter and you'll be one step closer to becoming a tournament winner.

STARTING HANDS

One thing you'll notice right away that separates this book from some of the others that you may have read, is that we'll be spending very little time talking about starting hand requirements. The theory behind small ball dictates that you'll be focusing more on what your opponent *doesn't* have than the strength of the cards you *do* have.

Here are some basic starting-hand guidelines that you should consider before playing a pot.

BIG PAIRS

A-A, K-K, Q-Q, J-J

Obviously, you'll be playing these hands in any position. The A-A and K-K are good enough to play for all your chips. There may be situations that come up where you could justify folding K-K, but it's not a good habit to get into. Having K-K when another player at the table has A-A is a rare occurrence. Even if you are unlucky enough to run into that trap, the K-K will still win the pot almost 20 percent of the time.

You should never feel ashamed of going broke with K-K before the flop. Now, folding K-K before the flop when no one had the A-A is a statistical nightmare! I've folded K-K before the flop exactly one time in my career. The situation was perfect and my opponent just had to have A-A. I threw my K-K into the muck face up, and my opponent turned up... Q-Q! Yikes! I'll never do that again. As you'll understand later in the chapter, when you are playing a fast-paced style of poker, your opponents will give you more action than they would if you were playing conservatively.

The good news is that you're more likely to get your A-A and K-K paid off. The bad news is that it'll be more difficult for you to play hands like Q-Q and J-J. Why? Because your opponents might try to take more shots at you because of your liberal style; therefore, it won't be as easy for you to fold hands like Q-Q and J-J when an opponent raises you. Frankly, you really don't want to play many big pots with Q-Q or J-J because more often than not, you are either way behind or only slightly ahead.

In fact, it's not a bad idea to play these hands a little bit more carefully preflop. You don't have to reraise with these hands, especially against a player who raised from early position. This will add yet another layer of deception to your game because

it will let the rest of the table know that, just because you didn't reraise, doesn't mean you have a weak hand. That will help you a lot when you start calling raises with hands such as 5-6 suited.

MIDDLE PAIRS

10-10, 9-9, 8-8, 7-7

Too often I hear people say that middle pairs are the most difficult hand to play. That's only true if you overvalue them and play them as though they are premium hands, which they're not. They are good hands, but that's mostly because of their *implied* value rather than their preflop strength. (More about implied odds later.)

If you are the first one into the pot with any of these hands, you should make a standard "small-ball raise" (for more on that, read the "Betting" section). Your goal with one of these hands is to win a big pot by flopping a set. If you play a big pot with one of these hands and don't flop a set, chances are you'll be in big trouble.

That doesn't mean you should just fold if you don't flop a set, mind you, but if the action gets too hot and heavy, you need to muck that hand in a hurry.

SMALL PAIRS

6-6, 5-5, 4-4, 3-3, 2-2

Small pairs should be played similarly to the middle pairs. Once again, your goal is to flop a set. What you don't want to do with middle and small pairs is reraise your opponents before the flop.

I've heard several TV commentators make that mistake time and time again, saying things like, "This is a raise or fold situation." In the long run, reraising with middle and small

pairs will just get you into trouble. When your opponent has a bigger pair, you'll be in a heap of trouble, and even when he doesn't, you may find yourself in a coin-flip situation against a hand like A-K. Sure, you'd be a favorite, but that's not how we want to get our chips in tournament poker.

Now, some players will reraise with small pairs before the flop and they'll do it successfully because it suits their style. But that's not what small-ball players do.

A-K AND A-Q

These hands really aren't that good at all in deep-stack tournaments. They might be a sight for sore eyes in a low buy-in, fast-paced tournament, but in the elite televised tournaments, these hands are often big trouble.

A-K is obviously substantially better than A-Q, but you still don't want to get all your money in before the flop with A-K. More often than not, you'll be on the wrong end of a coin toss; that is, if your opponent doesn't have A-A or K-K, which he will have often enough for it to be a legitimate concern.

A-K is certainly a hand you'd want to raise with before the flop, but it's the type of hand that doesn't play very well after the flop. Suppose the flop comes A-9-6 and you bet your A-K. Frankly, you don't even want a caller! Anyone who puts in any action after that flop could easily have A-9, A-6, 9-9 or 6-6, which would have you dead on arrival. A-K unsuited is a hand that will win you small pots, but is generally a dog if there is any significant action.

A-Q is just much worse in every way. Not only are you certainly dead if you play a big pot before the flop, but there is even more to worry about after the flop. If you play A-Q and the flop comes A-9-6, you'll have the same worries you'd have with

A-K—except that with the A-Q, you'll have to worry about A-K as well!

ACES AND PAINTS

A-J, A-10, K-Q, K-J, K-10, Q-J, Q-10, J-10

Now, here is something that may surprise you: In deep-stack tournaments, these hands are significantly better when they are suited. So much so, that it often makes the difference between calling or folding.

A starting hand such as K-10 offsuit, for example, is a hand that will end up making top-pair hands rather than made hands (straights and flushes). That's not a good thing in deep-stack tournaments because it doesn't go with our game plan. One-pair hands will rarely win you big pots, but if you play them wrong, they will often cost you big ones.

The other problem with a lot of these bastard stepchild-type hands is that they play second fiddle to all the premium hands and will do very poorly against them, costing you a lot of money. One in particular is known as the “rookie” hand because it looks tempting, but it's often nothing but trouble. K-J has probably mowed down more hometown heroes than any other hand.

The flop will come down K-5-4 and the rookie will never lay it down. Anytime he's up against a pro who is staying till the river, he'll be looking up at either a set, a K-Q, A-K, or A-A. Having said all that, it's more than okay to raise with any of these hands if you are the first player to enter the pot. In fact, you should do that and proceed cautiously afterwards, looking to win a small pot.

However, if someone raises ahead of you, then folding K-Q, A-J, and the rest of these hands will most likely be the best play—unless you are suited. The value of your hand rises

immensely if it is suited. The extra outs that suited cards might give you will often allow you to win pots in several ways: either by making the flush, giving you a chance to semi-bluff, or even flopping a flush draw and catching a pair at the river to win.

If you play a K-Q suited against a raise, you are not going to be playing the hand based on the merits of flopping top pair. If you make top pair, that's fine, but you'll look to play a small pot. Your real goal is to make a straight or a flush, and then play a big pot.

ACE-RAG SUITED

A♥ 6♥, A♣ 4♣, A♦ 3♦, A♠ 7♠

The only real value in these hands is their flush potential and their potential to make two pair. Flopping a pair of aces is a good thing, too, but you don't want to commit yourself to a hand with one pair and a lousy kicker. If you are the first one in, this is a fine hand to attack the blinds. However, if you get any resistance (someone reraises you before the flop), calling the reraise with a hand like A♥6♥ is suicide.

Ace-rag suited hands, in particular, are much better off being played from late position. That way, you can control the pot size and possibly earn free cards in the hope that you complete a flush.

KING-RAG SUITED AND QUEEN-RAG SUITED

K♦ 5♦, Q♠ 7♠, K♣ 3♣, Q♥ 6♥

These aren't hands that are generally part of the portfolio. In fact, you shouldn't be raising with them outside of very special circumstances. They are hands that you can limp into multiway pots with, but they aren't the right kinds of hands to be raising with.

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These types of hands scream of being second-best in many ways. You'll often flop top pair with a junk kicker, or worse, make a flush and lose a huge pot to the nut flush. King-suited hands are especially difficult to play, because a king-high flush is a hand that is extremely difficult to get away from.

The types of hands that do best with the small-ball approach are those hands that will be easy to get away from and aren't going to make a lot of strong, yet second-best hands in large pots.

SUITED CONNECTORS

5♣ 6♣, 6♠ 7♠, 6♥ 8♥, 4♣ 6♣, 4♦ 7♦, 5♦ 8♦

The small suited connectors are absolutely ideal for the small-ball approach. Since the goal with small ball is to make straights and flushes against top-pair hands, these hands give you straight potential and flush potential, plus two pair and trips.

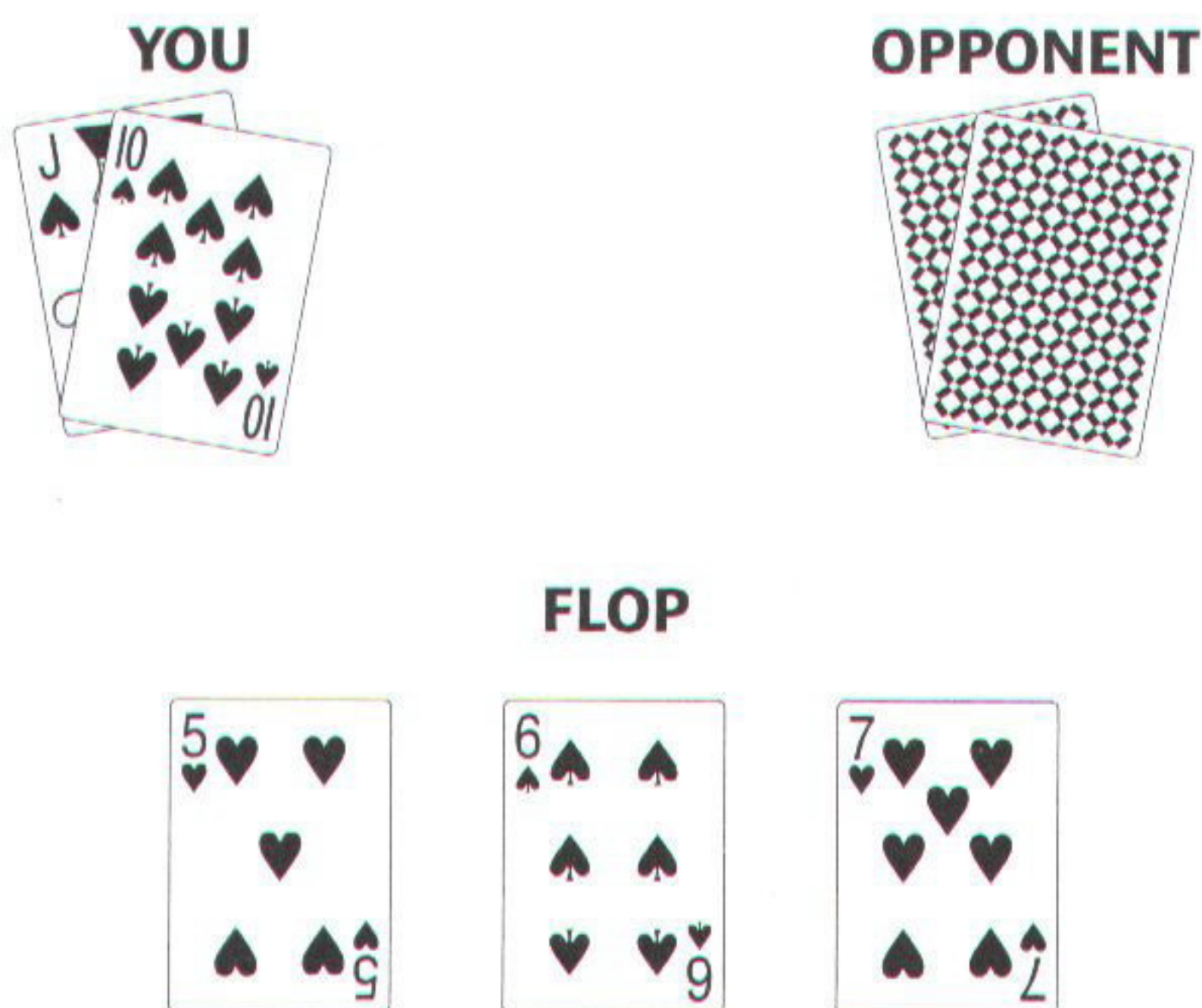
Against particularly weak players, you could break them with 6-4 on a 4-4-10 flop if they have an overpair. The key to the success of small ball, and in particular these types of hands, is that your opponents won't be able to put you on a hand, and will often overplay an overpair when they are virtually drawing dead. Think of it in terms of fishing. You are putting a little itty bitty worm on the end of a pole and looking for a big fish to bite. All you are risking is that worm, but the payoff could be enormous.

The other benefit to playing these types of hands is that they are generally easy to get away from. If you don't hit the flop, you might decide to take one stab at it, but that's about it.

Wait, there's more! Once people start to figure out that you like to play the little cards, you can use that to your advantage in a different way.

Hand in Action

For example, let's say that I called a tight player's raise with the J♠ 10♠ and the flop comes 5♥ 6♠ 7♥.



If I have position on this player, I could win the pot in one of two ways:

1. He has a hand like A-K and I can steal it on the flop.
2. He bets an overpair on the flop and I call him in the hope that another straight card comes on the turn. If a 4 comes on the turn and I bet, it would be an extremely difficult call for a player with A-A to make, especially since he knows that I'm willing to call raises with a hand such as 6-8.

The real homerun, though, comes when you hit a hidden straight against an opponent who can't get away from his hand. Say a hand goes something like this: A tight player raises in first position with K-K and I call with the 5♠ 7♠. The flop comes Q♠ 4♠ 8♦.

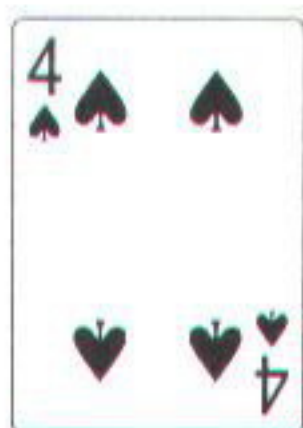
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TIGHT OPPONENT



FLOP



The tight player bets and I call with my flush draw and inside straight draw. If the turn card comes a 6, he won't know what hit him. I might just get his whole stack. I'd certainly get him to put all of his chips in if he had Q-Q, that much is for sure.

TRASH HANDS

Q-3, J-2, 9-4, 8-2

Trash hands are hands with no real inherent value, which should only be played when you are playing the *situation* rather than the cards. Examples of trash hands include 10-2, J-3, 7-2, 8-3, Q-2 and 10-6. Hopefully you'll be playing enough hands so that you won't even need to look twice at a trash hand. Since we aren't playing our hands—remember we are playing what our opponents *don't* have—there are definitely some situations where playing one of these hands might make some sense.

However, trash hands should only be played in situations where you are trying to win the pot with a reraise before the flop. Or when you are up against extremely tight players in the blinds who'll fold preflop a high percentage of the time or fold on the flop to a small bet if they miss.

Reraising before the flop with a middle pair isn't exactly the type of hand we'd want to do that with, but a hand like Q-3, 9-4, or even A-6 just might be. When you are making one of these plays, though, you must have the discipline to take your one shot before the flop without getting careless after the flop.

If you reraise a late position player with Q-2 offsuit and the flop comes with a queen, don't let yourself get carried away. Look to play a small pot and lose the minimum if you are beat.

BETTING

INTRODUCTION

The secret behind playing small ball isn't so much in the hands you choose to play, rather it's the amounts you choose to bet with the various hands you'll end up playing. In this section, you will learn how to bet less in order to win more. You will learn how you can get away with playing more hands before the flop without bleeding your stack.

We will also cover preflop bet sizes in different scenarios—when to call, reraise, limp, and fold when the heat is on.

PREFLOP RAISING

Popular theory is that a standard-sized preflop raise should be three times the size of the big blind. So, with the blinds at \$400/\$800 and a \$100 ante, that would mean you'd be risking \$2,400 to win \$2,100 at a typical nine-handed table. That's a decent return on your investment if no one calls the raise. If you did that two hands in a row, and on hand number one everybody folded, but on hand number two someone went all in and forced you off the hand, your net loss would only be \$300.

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That's not a terribly poor result, but look what happens when we lower the size of the raise to two-and-a-half times the blind. Now, you'd be risking \$2,000 in order to win \$2,100.

If we simplify the game to the point where all you do during a tournament is raise to two-and-a-half times the blind and then just fold if anyone calls, it is possible to build your stack, provided that all of your opponents fold 50 percent or more before the flop. Think about it. On hand number one, you make it \$2,000 and everyone folds—you pick up the \$2,100 pot. On hand number two, you go for another steal attempt, only this time, the player on your left reraises you \$10,000 more. If you raised with trash and fold, you'll lose back \$2,000.

Obviously, the more aggressive you become preflop, it will lower the percentage of the time that everyone folds preflop. If people view you as a loose player they will likely defend their blinds with more marginal hands than if they think you're a tight player. That's not bad for you either. More often than not, you'll be in position against your opponent and will have one more opportunity to earn this pot after the flop, but we'll get into more of that in the next section.

RAISE MORE VERSUS TOUGH PLAYERS

Since your opponents will call a raise of two-and-a-half times the big blind more often than they would call a larger raise, you can actually choose what price you want to lay certain opponents based on the amount you raise. I highly discourage you from varying your raise sizes based on your hand strength, but I am all for changing your bet size based on your opponent's level of skill.

Let's say you're at a pretty tight, easy table, but there is one other player at the table who is a strong player. Now, if you are going to raise his big blind, he is going to defend it a high percentage of the time and force you to play a pot with him

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after the flop. Why would you want to play a pot against the other tough player? If you want him out of the hand, you can do that by raising as much as four or even five times the blind when he's on it. Others at the table may be confused by this bet, but there is no reason to explain why you just happen to be raising more on this particular hand.

This play will also help define a tougher opponent's hand since your larger raise will help you narrow it down if he plays with you. If you raise a tough player's blind just two-and-a-half times the blind, it will be extremely difficult for you to gauge the strength of his hand. While that's a legitimate concern against a tough player, you'd gladly make the smaller raise against lesser players because the mistakes they make post-flop should outweigh what you give up by not defining their hand.

MORE ACTION FOR LESS MONEY

The biggest benefit of playing this aggressive yet small betting style is that you'll get more action on your strong hands while risking fewer chips. For example, let's say you finally pick up a premium hand like aces. If you've just raised three hands out of the last four, your opponents will suspect that you're raising with trash hands in an attempt to just steal the blinds. If a player behind you picks up a hand like 7-7, he may decide to reraise you before the flop, figuring he has the best hand and can get you to lay down your hand.

If you reraise him again before the flop, he may be confused by your "wild image" and make the call. If he sees you raising all these hands, he might not be able to distinguish the difference between your raising preflop and *reraising* preflop. The reraise steal after a raise isn't a play that works all that well if your image is wild. For the most part, if you are going to raise a reraise, you should have the goods. That play just doesn't fit well with small-ball poker, which is what you want to play.

However, it's not a play that you'd abandon entirely, especially if your opponents are on to the fact that a reraise from you generally means that you actually have a very strong hand.

I can still remember the first time I saw this method of madness put to good use watching old-timer O'Neil Longston playing in a no-limit hold'em tournament years ago. With the blinds at \$50/\$100, O'Neil was raising virtually every hand, but each one of those raises was the bare minimum. He'd make it \$200 to go, and if someone reraised him, he folded nearly every time.

Then he raised it again to \$200 and a young player made it \$1,200 to go with 9-9. When the action came back to O'Neil, he announced, "All in," and raised the young kid \$8,000 more. The kid called rather quickly, only to see O'Neil's kings.

As he was leaving the room, the young player made the following comment, "Unbelievable! How unlucky was that? The guy raises every hand, but the one time I have a hand, he wakes up with pocket kings." Ahh, but you see, the one clue that this young player missed out on was that while O'Neil was raising virtually every hand, this was the first time that he actually reraised. There is a significant difference between being the first player raising a pot and being the player that comes over the top of an opponent.

CALLING RATHER THAN RERAISING

Too often I hear television commentators say things like, "This is a raise or fold situation," when, in fact, this is the exact type of situation where a player should call! If you are one of the better players at the table, you want to make most of your difficult decisions after the flop, not before it. It's a safer way to protect your stack and you'll likely make better decisions after the flop than your opponent would.

I seldom reraise before the flop no matter what my hand is. By not reraising, I'm able to disguise the strength of my hand preflop and also am able to trap unsuspecting opponents who interpret my smooth call as a sign of weakness. I've busted lots of players by not reraising before the flop with A-A. Of course, you run the risk of being outdrawn on the flop, but the rewards far outweigh the risk.

An example: A player from early position raises and you think he may have A-K, A-Q, or a big pair (J-J, Q-Q, K-K, A-A). You look down at 7-7 on the button. Again, I've heard many commentators say this is a raise or fold situation, and while folding is sometimes correct, it's rarely ever correct to reraise in this situation. For one, your opponent will call you only with a bigger pair, or when he is in a coin-flip situation with a hand like A-K.

As long as the stacks are deep enough, the best play here is to call. That way, you can play the hand in position after the flop, and if you are lucky enough to flop a set, you might just be able to get all of your opponent's chips. Also, if the flop comes ragged, say a 9-4-2 or 8-4-3, your pair just might be the best hand. You should be able to figure out when to continue after the flop based on your opponent's betting—but we'll get to that later.

If you reraise with the 7-7, you give your opponent a chance to shut you out of the pot. With a good “bust 'em” hand like pocket sevens, your goal is to get to the flop as cheaply as possible. If you reraise before the flop, your opponent may come back over the top of you, forcing you to lay down the hand. That's an extremely bad result because you may either:

1. Miss your chance to bust your opponent if he has A-A, or
2. You might allow the player to semi-bluff you off the hand if he in fact has A-K.

In my own journey to learning how to play this game, I can remember how much it annoyed me when the guy on my left would smooth call all of my raises. If he reraised me, that would make for an easy decision. However, if I had to describe the one type of player that I'd least like to face at a no-limit hold'em table, it's the player that just keeps calling my preflop raises in position. So I decided, "Why don't I become 'that guy'?"

That's where this pesky little strategy was born. Most players show their biggest weaknesses with their post-flop play. Lots of people have read books and have studied how to play the various preflop scenarios, but there are so many variables to playing after the flop that it's a much more difficult task to master.

So, if you are playing against players whose strengths are pre-flop rather than postflop, it would only make sense to see more flops with them by simply smooth-calling rather than reraising. This is especially important against players who overplay their hands preflop. For example, if you are up against a player who likes to reraise with hands like 9-9, A-K or A-Q, you should avoid reraising him before the flop with anything but the best of hands. Even with hands such as J-J, Q-Q, or A-K, it's often better to see a flop first than to reraise before the flop against such players. A good player doesn't want to race, but they do. By reraising with marginal hands before the flop, you'll be playing into their hands by neutralizing your postflop skills.

DEAD MONEY GRABS

In tournament poker, what I like to call "Dead Money Grabs," are slightly higher risk plays that also offer a high success rate. A dead money grab is one in which your sole goal is to win what's already in the middle with no intention of playing your hand post-flop. Since you have no intention of seeing another

betting round, the value of your hand is basically unimportant. In fact, if you have a marginal to good hand, you might be better off not attempting a dead money grab at all, and instead, seeing the flop cheaply.

You wouldn't be a complete player if you stuck to one set of rules without ever varying from them. That's just not how poker works for successful players. The dead money grabs differ from many of the small-ball ideas in that you attempt to win chips preflop as opposed to postflop.

There are several ways to pick up dead money in a no-limit game. Following are a few tricks to get you started.

1. Pound the Limpers in Position

When you make the decision to rob the limpers, the most important limper to focus on is the first limper. Basically, the play works something like this: With the blinds at \$100/\$200 and a \$25 ante, the first player limps in under the gun. Then, let's say two more players limp in after him as does the player on the button. From the small blind, you look down at a 9-3 offsuit.

YOU



If you read the first limper as playing a weak hand, this might be the perfect opportunity to take this pot down. With \$1,325 in the pot, a rather large raise will win you the pot a very high percentage of the time provided that:

SMALL BALL

- a.** The big blind doesn't wake up with a hand
- b.** The first limper wasn't setting a trap
- c.** None of the limpers is severely short-stacked, or
- d.** The table is very loose and has been calling large bets with weak hands.

If you are going to try this play, you'll have to raise more than \$1,000. A \$1,000 raise with so much money already in the pot will invite opponents with hands like 7-7 or 8-8 to try to flop a set. A better amount would actually exceed \$2,000.

Let's say you decided on a \$2,600 raise. What you are basically doing is laying 2 to 1 odds that everyone will fold before the flop. That's not a bad price at all and, at most tables, your win rate will be much higher than 66 percent with this play. Once you've made this play a couple times, however, it starts to lose its effectiveness since people will eventually catch on. That could hurt you, but it could also really help you if you later find a hand like A-A or K-K in a similar situation and no one believes you. Still, it's not a play you want to overuse.

Also, it's extremely important to note that you shouldn't risk a high percentage of your chips on a play like this. If you invest too high a percentage of your chips, you may find yourself pot-committed with an absolutely trashy hand. For example, let's say you have a total of \$5,000 and try a dead-money grab by making it \$2,600. If you are being trapped, or if anyone plays back at you, you will be pot-committed even with a hand as bad as 9-6! Never put yourself in a position where you are pot-committed with a terrible hand.

2. Coming Over the Top

Just to keep your opponents honest and to let them know that every pot goes through you, sometimes you need to come over the top of them with a preflop reraise. Similar to pounding the

limpers, there are some things to consider before coming over the top with a reraise:

a. How many chips do you have?

If you are short-stacked, or a preflop reraise is too high a percentage of your stack, let it go. When you are coming over the top of an opponent with a trash hand, you are the one that's guessing. You don't want to be guessing when your tournament is on the line.

b. How many chips does your opponent have?

For example, imagine that your opponent has raised from late position to \$600. Take a look at his stack and see how many chips he has left. If he only has another \$1,200, leave it alone unless you have a hand worth playing for \$1,800. Generally speaking, if an opponent puts in over 25 percent of his chips on a raise, he'll call any reraise after that.

c. How does your opponent perceive you?

If you've already come over the top of the same guy a couple of times, it's probably not a good idea to go to the well one more time unless you are sitting on a big hand. If he appears frustrated, or you think he might be on to what you are doing, stay out of his way for a little while until he calms down and your table image is restored. Nobody, and I mean nobody, likes it when someone continually reraises them before the flop. Eventually, some guys just snap!

d. How much do I need to raise?

If you are going to make this play, you have to make sure that you don't price your opponent into the pot. Here is an extreme example: A player raises

SMALL BALL

from late position to \$600 and you reraise him to \$1,200 with Q-2 offsuit from the big blind. That is a terrible play. Your opponent will call your raise with any two cards in that situation. Effectively, all you've done is make the pot bigger while playing rags out of position. Not good.

Every opponent is built differently and will react to various sizes of bets differently. It's your job to really pay attention and watch how your opponents react to getting reraised. For example, let's say that you saw Player X raise to \$300 and when another player reraised him to \$900, he called quickly. When it was time to see his hand, you noticed that he called the raise with a rather weak hand, Q-10. That one play should clue you into the fact that if you come over the top of Player X, you need to raise more than that. If you want to steal his \$300, you probably must risk somewhere around \$1,200 to \$1,600.

Aside from it probably not being a good idea for you to come over the top of him, if you have no read on what your opponent's tendencies are when he gets reraised, you should generally make a substantial reraise, approximately four times larger than his initial raise.

If a player makes it \$500 and you want to steal the pot away from him, it's best to make it about \$2,500. By making a raise of that size or more, you will win the pot a higher percentage of the time while having a clearer picture as to the strength of your opponent's hand. If your opponent can call or even reraise that bet, it's very likely that you are dealing with a real hand. In other words, it might be time to abort mission and cut your losses.

There are many variations of a dead-money grab that can be useful plays, especially during the inevitable stretches during tournaments where you just can't seem to pick up a hand. You

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can't expect to win a big poker tournament by simply waiting for the best hands. You need to keep your focus sharp, be constantly aware of your table image, and always be looking to pick up pots before the flop that nobody seems to want.

PLAYING AGAINST A RERAISE

For the most part, if you are playing small ball, you'll be entering a lot of pots, and in the majority of those pots, you'll be coming in for two-and-a-half times the big blind. Obviously, you are going to run into various situations where you'll get reraised either by a premium hand, or even sometimes when people just get fed up with the fact that you won't stop raising their blind.

Generally speaking, when you get reraised, you should dump your hand unless the situation is just right. Several factors constitute the right kind of situation to take a flop, even after being reraised:

1. Your Hand's Strength

This should be pretty obvious, but if you have a premium hand like A-A or K-K, not only would you play against a raise, you should usually reraise before the flop.

2. The Reraise Was the Minimum

Suppose the blinds are \$100/\$200, you come in for \$500, and an opponent reraises you to \$800. There is simply no circumstance where it would be correct to fold, even if you were certain that your opponent had aces. In fact, if you knew your opponent had aces, it would be well worth calling an additional \$300 to try to outflop him. The minimum raise has been more recently coined the "nuisance" raise, in that it accomplishes very little except adding a little more money to the pot. It's extremely rare to see an initial raiser fold for the minimum reraise before the flop.

3. You Have Position

Position is power. Therefore, if the reraiser has position on you, you should be less likely to call a raise unless you have a strong hand. However, if the player who reraised you is out of position, your marginal hand can become worthy of making a call. For example, let's say that you are on a semi-steal with the 8♥ 10♥. With the blinds at \$100/\$200, you raise to \$500. If the big blind raises you \$1,000 more, this isn't a bad opportunity to take a flop since you are in position. Had you been out of position, it would be difficult to justify calling the raise.

4. Stack Size

Aside from hand strength, stack size is, without a doubt, the most important factor when deciding to play against a raise. Bust 'em hands such as 6-6 or 7♥ 8♥ play better against a raise in deep-stack poker than they do when the stacks are smaller. For example, let's say it's the early stage of a tournament and you raise to \$150 on the button with the 7♥ 8♥, leaving you with \$9,850 in chips. The small blind decides to reraise you to a total of \$500. He also started the hand with \$10,000 in chips.



Not only do you have position, you also have the type of hand that could hit a home run with the right kind of flop. You should call with this hand and hope to win the pot by either:

- a.** Hitting your hand, or
- b.** Bluffing your opponent by using board cards that may scare your opponent away.

Now, imagine you have that same hand, the 7♥ 8♥, only this time the blinds are \$1,500/\$3,000. You are sitting on \$88,000 and your opponent in the small blind has \$112,000. On the button, you go for the steal and make it \$8,000 to go. The small blind raises you to a total of \$30,000. In this case there is no play left. There is no home run to hit. Calling here would commit too high a percentage of your chips to the pot with a bust 'em type hand. Generally speaking, you shouldn't jeopardize more than 10 percent of your stack on a bust 'em type hand.

If you are serious about trying to apply a small-ball style of poker you must get used to being involved in a lot of pots, in many of which you'll get reraised. It's very important to keep your composure if that happens more than you'd like. Don't get away from your strategy by making sloppy calls. If you are having trouble laying down hands like Q-J, K-10, or K-Q to a reraise, it might be time to take a walk! All of those hands do horribly against a preflop reraise. Avoid them like the plague.

CALLING ALL-IN BETS OR RAISES

Later on in a tournament, you'll start to see more and more players getting short-stacked, which means you'll be faced with a lot more all-in reraises and all-in bets. When that happens to you, you should adhere to the following thought process when deciding if you should call the bet:

1. What Range of Hands Does My Opponent Have?

When deciding that, you should factor in all the variables including your opponent's level of desperation. For example, if a player goes all in under the gun for \$8,000 and the blinds are \$1,500/\$3,000 with an ante, you should drastically broaden his range of hands to include virtually any hand with an ace in it. If you have chips and a hand such as 7-7, it probably makes sense to call a desperate bet like that one.

Or, in other situations against tighter players, you can drastically narrow your opponent's range of hands based on his tendencies and the action in front of him. If a tight player goes all in, even after several other players have entered the pot, it would increase the likelihood that you are looking at a very strong hand.

2. What Price Am I Being Laid?

When faced with a bet, the first thing you should do is count what's already in the pot in comparison to the bet you are currently facing—otherwise known as calculating your pot odds. This practice should and will become common practice for you when you start to play in no-limit hold'em tournaments on a more regular basis.

Let's look at an example. With the blinds at \$2,000/\$4,000 and a \$500 ante at a nine-player table, you come in for a raise to \$10,000. The player on the button goes all in for a total of \$34,000 and the action comes back to you. Counting your \$10,000, the all-in player's \$34,000, and the blinds and antes, there is \$54,500 in the pot. The bet to you is \$24,000 more, so the price you are being laid is \$24,000 to win \$54,500 (\$24,000 divided by \$54,500 equals 2.27 to 1 odds). You don't need to bring a calculator with you to figure this out; it's not as hard as it might seem. Here's how I like to do it:

The bet, \$24,000, goes into \$54,500 at least twice so I know I'm getting at least 2 to 1 odds. What's left over is "about" \$6,000, which is about one-fourth of \$24,000. That gets me to about 2.25 to 1, which is close enough. You don't need to worry about being accurate right down to the decimal point.

3. How Does My Hand Stack Up Against the Range of Hands I Suspect My Opponent Has?

Now that I know my pot odds, it's time to figure out how my hand stacks up against the range of hands my opponent might

have. This can be a little more tricky and isn't quite an exact science, and you should definitely take your time if you need to work it out.

Let's look at an example of how I might think my way through such a decision. Okay, I have A-9, which I know for sure is the worst hand right now. I'm totally dead if my opponent has A-A, and am a little worse than a 2 to 1 underdog against any other hand. In fact, if he only has a pair of sevens or eights, I'm in a coin-flip situation. Even if my opponent has A-K, I'm not in terrible shape, only getting slightly the worst of it. So, I'll call.

Often, when you are calling an all-in bet, or any bet for that matter, you aren't calling simply because you think you have the best hand. You are calling because the odds the pot is laying you dictates that it would be a good investment.

Here's an extreme example to illustrate this concept. I tell you to pick a number from among 1, 2, or 3. Only one of those numbers wins for you, while if you guess wrong, I win. Your long-term win rate would be approximately 33 percent. Now, if we each put up \$100, that would be a silly bet for you to make. What if I told you that I'd put up \$400 to your \$100? Now, despite the fact that you are an underdog to actually win the bet, the bet has great value for you. All you have to do to break even is be correct one out of four times, but your win rate would dictate that you'll do much better than that.

Compare that to a poker hand. I have the A♥ 9♥ and you have K♣ K♠.

SMALL BALL



There is \$200 already in the pot and you go all in for your last \$100. In this case, you could show me that you have me beat, but I would be a fool not to take that bet! I'd be risking \$100 to win \$300. I'd be getting 3 to 1 odds when my hand is only about a 2 to 1 underdog against yours.

PLAYING A SHORT STACK

Unfortunately, our small-ball strategy of liberally raising a lot of hands before the flop gets thrown out the window when the chips dwindle. For small ball to be effective, the preflop raise needs to represent a very small portion of your overall stack size. If you have \$20,000 in chips and the blinds are \$50/\$100, raising to \$250 represents a little more than 1 percent of your stack size. Now, if you had that same \$20,000, but the blinds were \$2,000/\$4,000, a standard small-ball raise of \$10,000 would represent 50 percent of your total stack. In that case, the play becomes obsolete.

However, you still have ways to play a short stack that will allow you to use your post-flop skills. You'll just have to be a little more creative and add limping to your repertoire. Let's look at an example where you might be able to make this play work for you.

Let's say you are the first one into the pot and look down at **K♠ J♠**. Your stack size is \$100,000 with \$3,000/\$6,000 blinds and a \$1,000 ante. A standard small-ball raise would be \$15,000, which is 15 percent of your stack and is more than you'd like to invest with a hand that you'd have to fold to a

raise. K-J is not a hand you want to play for all your chips preflop, but it could become a strong hand after the flop.

By limping in, you increase your chances of getting to the flop. That is your goal on a short stack—get to as many flops as possible. Your opponents may misinterpret your limp as a trap and fear that you have a hand like A-A or K-K. Other players may raise anyway, but they likely would also have raised your \$15,000 bet had you made a standard small-ball raise. If they do raise, you'll likely have to play like a little mouse and give up on the hand, saving \$9,000 and leaving you with \$94,000 to play with.

When things start to look really bleak, you'll also have to cut out limping from your portfolio as well. If your stack happens to dip below 10 bets, then you'll have virtually no choice but to play for all of your chips when you finally find the hand you've been waiting for.

Small ball is most effective when your chip stack is above average. It's a style that should help you to continue to build without taking too many major risks. Once you've lost the ability to play deep-stack poker, you'll need to get back to a more traditional approach: play conservatively, wait for the right hand and situation, and then hope for the best.

FLOP PLAY

INTRODUCTION

The key to the whole small-ball concept is being able to outplay your opponents after the flop. The best players in the world are those who make good decisions after those first three cards hit the board. If your goal is to become a great player, the most important skill you'll need to improve upon is your post-flop play. Preflop play is a lot more systematic. After the flop,

so many different variables come into play that it makes for harder decisions.

In this section, we'll cover how small preflop raises will make it easier and less risky for you to steal pots after the flop. Also, we'll talk about how to play hands based on position, your opponent's tendencies, and the texture of your hand. This discussion will help you understand why the pros make the decisions they do. Once you understand that, you'll be able to make those types of decisions yourself by following a few of these simple rules.

SMALL PREFLOP RAISES CAN WIN YOU MORE MONEY AFTER THE FLOP

In the previous section, we talked about lowering your raises to two-and-a-half times the big blind; enough of a raise to get your opponents to fold the garbage hands, but almost forcing them to call with a wide variety of marginal hands.

A standard preflop raise is generally three to four times the big blind, but if you are planning on playing lots of pots and raising frequently, you'll do better in the long run when you lower the size of your raise. That way you'll risk fewer chips every time you raise and someone reraises you before the flop, while at the same time forcing the player in the big blind to either:

1. Fold a hand that he should have defended with;
or
2. Force him to play a marginal hand out of position against you.

Let's take a look at how a typical hand may look. With the blinds at \$100/\$200 plus a \$25 ante, you raise to \$500 as the first player to enter the pot with the $K♥ 10♠$. All players fold to the big blind who looks down at the $9♦ 7♣$.



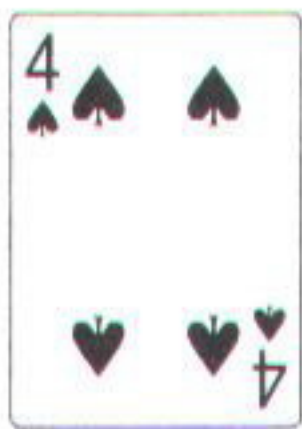
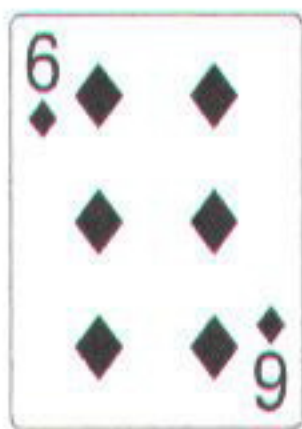
To make the call, the big blind would need to put \$300 more into the pot. With nine players at the table, he'd be getting over 3 to 1 odds (\$300 to win \$1,025 equals 3.4 to 1). Your K-10 rates to beat his 9-7 about 64 percent of the time, or close to 2 to 1.

If the big blind folds, that is an excellent result for you. You forced him into a mistake. You laid him 3.4 to 1 on a proposition where he was only a 2 to 1 underdog. Obviously, betting after the flop and his positional disadvantage have a major effect on the result. That's where the power of small ball really starts to come into play.

Here comes the flop: Q♣ 6♦ 4♠.



FLOP



SMALL BALL

You still have your king-high and your opponent still has his 9-high. Since the big blind missed the flop completely, he will likely check to you. At this point, with \$1,325 in the pot, it's yours for the taking.

So how much should you bet?

There's no reason to bet more than you need to. If your opponent will fold for \$1,325, then he'd also fold for a \$1,300 bet. You can take that a step further. Obviously, in this example, the 9-7 will fold to any bet, but generally speaking, a bet of anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the pot will give you the desired result. In this case, a bet of \$750 or \$800 will get your opponent to lay down his hand and give you the pot.

At the same time, when you happen to run into an opponent who has a hand, you'll be saving a few bucks on your bluff. Suppose your opponent had A-Q and intended to check-raise you on the flop. By betting \$750 instead of \$1,325, you save \$575 in chips. Those are chips you can use to attack the next blind.

Or, suppose you have a hand and flop a set against your opponent who has A-Q. You are still making a solid-looking bet and your opponent may check-raise you just the same. While it's true that you may make more in this specific situation by betting \$1,325 rather than \$750, it's important to note how rarely a situation like this will come up. More often than not, both you and your opponent will totally miss the flop. Besides, you can make up for the smaller flop bet on the turn or river. You could still potentially get all of your opponent's chips.

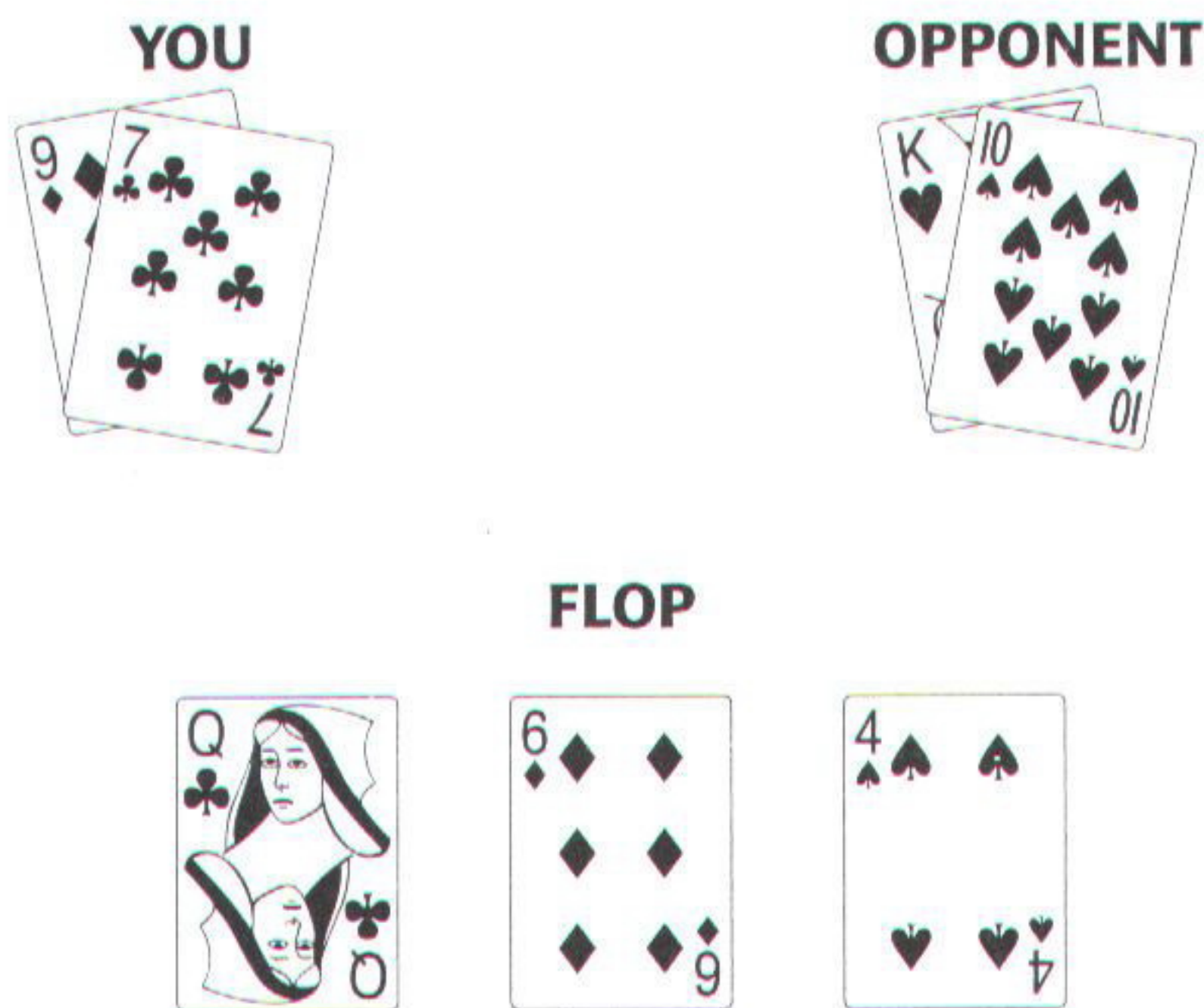
What you want to avoid doing is betting the \$750 when you are bluffing, and then betting \$1,325 when you actually have a strong hand. If you do that, it won't be long before your opponents are dialed-in to your betting pattern.

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Let's flip the script and see what happens if you have the 9-7 and your opponent has the K-10 in the blind.

Hand in Action

You open the pot with 9-7 and your opponent defends his blind with K-10. Once again, the flop comes Q♣ 6♦ 4♠.



Your opponent misses the flop completely with the K-10 and checks to you. You bet out \$750 to win \$1,325 and your opponent folds.

Now, ask yourself this question: In this example, does it even matter what you have? I mean, if you had 7-2 offsuit in position and made this play, would it have mattered at all? No, it wouldn't. You'd still pick up the pot because you aren't playing your cards, you are simply betting on your opponent to miss the flop so that you can pick it up with a bet.

However, there is no reason to stretch your list of playable starting hands that far. You'd be much better off having a hand that actually has some potential after the flop. Even a hand

like 6-4 offsuit has the potential to pay off big for you with the right flop.

From time to time, you are going to play against someone who wants to take the pot away from you with a bluff, and that's okay. Back to our example: Let's say that you have the K-10 and the blind has the 9-7 again. An aggressive player may check-raise your \$750 bet with absolutely nothing. Obviously, you'll let him have the pot and move on to the next hand. It's no big deal—you have to train your mind to believe that. You need to have faith in the fact that if you keep plugging away, your stack will steadily increase rather than bleed away.

You'll go through stretches where you flop absolutely nothing and get raised time and time again. But hey, that's poker! You just need to keep your composure and eventually you'll start hitting some flops. If not, there's always the next tournament.

Having people make plays at you with nothing can actually pay off for you as well. I mean, every once in a while you'll actually have a hand when you bet the \$750! The good news is that if your opponent check-raises you with nothing on the flop, you'll win some extra chips. After a bet of \$750, you can expect your opponent to make it at least \$2,250 or maybe even as much as \$4,000. At that point, you'll have options. You can continue to slowplay your hand in the hope that your opponent will continue to bluff through the hand. Or you could just take it down right there with a reraise. Your decision should depend on several factors: the texture of the flop, your opponent's tendencies, as well as how many chips you have left.

Your bluffs will cost you \$750, but when your opponent tries to bluff you back, it will cost him much more than that when he's wrong. This is a very aggressive style, but when executed properly, the losses are manageable. You aren't making any monster bluffs that risk your tournament life with this approach.

Instead, you will be chopping away at smaller pots looking to minimize damages until the right situation comes along where you finally flop a big hand and someone plays a pot with you.

As a general rule, you want to do the majority of your bluffing in the small pots while having the best of it in any of the big pots you play.

POSITION: THE BLACKJACK ANALOGY

For small ball to work best, position is extremely important. That's why, ideally, you want to play every pot you can heads-up against the big blind. When your opponent has to act first, you have the power to control the pot size and you can do it at little risk. If the player out of position wants to manipulate the pot size, he has to risk more chips and do a lot more guesswork.

To best illustrate the power of positional play in no-limit hold'em, let's look at how blackjack works. In blackjack, the dealer always gets to wait and see what you do before deciding what he'll have to do. For example, if you have 15 and catch a 9, the dealer wins. The dealer doesn't have to do anything—his hand is totally irrelevant.

As a blackjack player, you have no idea what the dealer actually has until you've already made your decision. Suppose you are dealt 16 and the dealer is showing a king. The book tells you that you should hit on 16 if the dealer has a face card. However, what if you knew that the dealer had a 6 in the hole? Well, according to the rules, you can stand on 16 but the dealer has to hit on 16. If you stand, you're a statistical favorite since you will win if the dealer catches a 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, jack, queen, or king. You will only lose if the dealer catches an ace, 2, 3, 4 or 5. You are about an 8 to 5 favorite to win the hand.

So how exactly does all of that apply to position at the poker table? Let's look at an example.

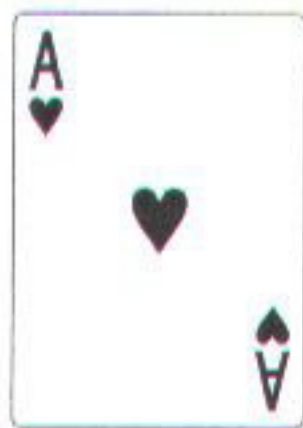
SMALL BALL

Hand in Action

You raise two-and-a-half times the blind with the 6♥ 7♦ from the button. The big blind defends with the 6♦ 7♥. The flop comes A♥ K♠ 9♣.



FLOP



Since you are in position and raised preflop, the big blind will likely check to you. Now, you go ahead and bet about 60 percent the size of the pot, and your opponent will likely throw his hand away. Of course, he may try to make a wild play at you, but that won't happen often enough to make your play lose money in the long run. Remember, sometimes you'll actually have a hand too!

While the big blind could win the pot by check-raising the flop, he may also be able to win the pot by simply leading out and betting the flop himself. In this case, you'd just fold your hand. Later on, I'll explain how even this defense against small ball is exploitable.

When you are playing no-limit hold'em in position against one opponent, it is akin to being the dealer in a one-on-one game of blackjack. The advantage lies in the fact that you get

information from your opponents without their knowing the strength of your hand or even what you will do.

PLAYING DRAWING HANDS ON THE FLOP

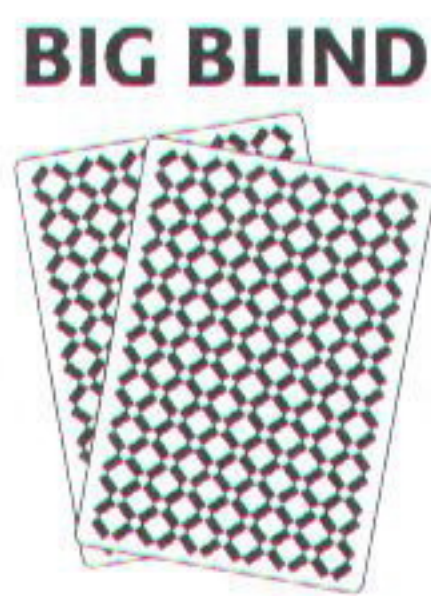
There are a few times that you will veer from your strategy of betting 50 to 80 percent of the pot after the flop. When you actually flop a drawing hand is one of those times. Of course, it depends on the type of drawing hand you have, as well as the tendencies of your opponents.

If your opponents have been at your table for a while, they have seen you continuously raise before the flop and then bet virtually every flop in position. Therefore, they will be even more likely to go for a check-raise against you since they figure you'll bet most flops.

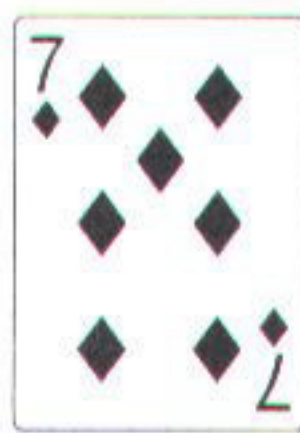
Hand in Action

One of the worst plays you can make in no-limit hold'em is to shut yourself off a draw by betting yourself off the hand. For example, let's say that you raised preflop with the 6♥ 4♥ and the big blind called you. Something about the way he called made you suspect that he had a very strong hand. Now, the flop comes K♥ 7♦ 3♠.

SMALL BALL



FLOP



This flop gives you a gutshot straight draw and a backdoor flush draw. Suppose your opponent has A-K or even K-K and is looking to set a trap for you. If you bet the flop, you'll have to fold if your opponent check-raises you, thus giving up the opportunity to fill your belly-buster straight draw.

However, if you give yourself a free card and check the flop, you could potentially win a monster pot if you hit the 5, or you could even pick up a backdoor flush draw.

The danger with checking this flop deals more with your overall table image. You don't want to make plays at the poker table that become too obvious to your opponents. If you check every time you have a drawing hand on the flop, but always bet with either garbage or good hands, it won't take a rocket scientist to figure out what you are up to.

More Considerations

There are very few absolutes when it comes to flop play. With all the added variables (stack size, position, player tendencies, flop texture, table image, and so on), you don't want to approach every situation the same way. You need to weigh

several factors and make sure that in the end, the strategy that you are applying isn't easy to decipher. There are several ways to mix up your play on the flop, which I'll go into more detail on in another section. For now, understand that you shouldn't always check the flop when you have a draw, nor should you always bet the flop with top pair or even a garbage hand.

We've touched on a weak drawing hand (the inside straight, backdoor flush draw hand), but what happens when you flop a legitimate drawing hand such as a flush draw, open-ended straight draw, or even an open-ended straight-flush draw with overcards? You need to put a lot of thought into whether or not you should bet a drawing hand. By betting out of position, your semi-bluff could end up backfiring if you get raised, or even called.

Betting the draw makes the pot bigger, which in turn means that if your opponent raises, the raise will be bigger as well. In fact, his raise could end up being so big that it forces you off the hand. Or, if your opponent calls your bet on the flop and you miss your draw on the turn, you'll be forced to totally guess as to what you should do. Continue the bluff on the turn? Check and call? You'll be forced into a difficult decision. A check and call may reek of a drawing hand and let your opponent know exactly where you're at.

Your stack size should be one of the key factors in determining whether or not you bet the flop with the draw, regardless of whether you are in position. For example, if you are extremely short-stacked, you have a perfect opportunity to semi-bluff with an all-in bet. If your opponent folds, great; but even if he calls, you'll have a chance to win a good pot and double up.

Or let's say you are a big stack and your opponent has a big stack as well. In this case, it's probably safe to bet a drawing hand since you'll be able to call if your opponent raises. The

times you might want to check a drawing hand on the flop are those situations when an opponent's raise on the flop might represent such a large portion of your stack that you would be forced to lay down the hand.

We are primarily talking about straightforward flush draws and straight draws. What if you have a monster draw? Let's say a straight and a flush draw, a pair and a flush draw, or even a flush draw with overcards? These are very strong hands. Usually, they end up being a statistical favorite after the flop. For example, let's give your opponent the A♣ A♠, while you have 6♥ 7♥ on a flop of 4♥ 5♥ 6♠. Despite the fact that at the moment your opponent has you beat, you have the better hand. Your hand will end up winning the pot almost twice as often as the A-A!

Favorites After the Flop

Let's look at the chart to see how hands match up after the flop.

FAVORITES AFTER THE FLOP		
Pocket Cards Matchup	The Flop	Win
A♠ K♠ vs. Q♣ Q♦	9♠ 4♠ 2♣	55%
10♥ J♥ vs. A♣ 9♠	9♣ 8♠ 4♦	50%
7♥ 8♥ vs. K♦ K♣	6♥ 5♥ 2♣	56%
K♥ Q♠ vs. 8♦ 8♠	10♥ J♠ J♦	56%
10♥ J♥ vs. 2♣ 2♠	8♥ 8♠ 9♥	69%

As you can see, a monster draw is a powerful hand. You can play aggressively with a draw like this because, even in the worst cases, you can't be in terrible shape. By being aggressive, you give yourself several ways to win the pot:

- 1. Your opponent folds;
or
- 2. You get your money all in on a coin-flip situation.

Let’s look at some extreme scenarios where a monster draw could be in trouble.

FAVORITES AFTER THE FLOP: 2		
Pocket Cards	Matchup	The Flop
A♠ K♠	vs. 9♥ 9♦	9♠ 4♠ 2♣
10♥ J♦	vs. 9♠ 9♦	9♣ 8♠ 4♦
7♥ 8♥	vs. 6♦ 6♠	6♥ 5♥ 2♣
K♥ Q♠	vs. A♦ 10♥	10♠ J♠ J♦
10♥ J♥	vs. A♥ 3♥	8♥ 8♠ 9♥
		Win
		25.5%
		25.5%
		42%
		45%
		45%

The beauty of these monster drawing hands is that even when you run into a strong, made hand, you still aren’t dead in the water. Even in the most extreme cases, you’ll still win the pot over 25 percent of the time. That’s not great, but it’s far from being dead.

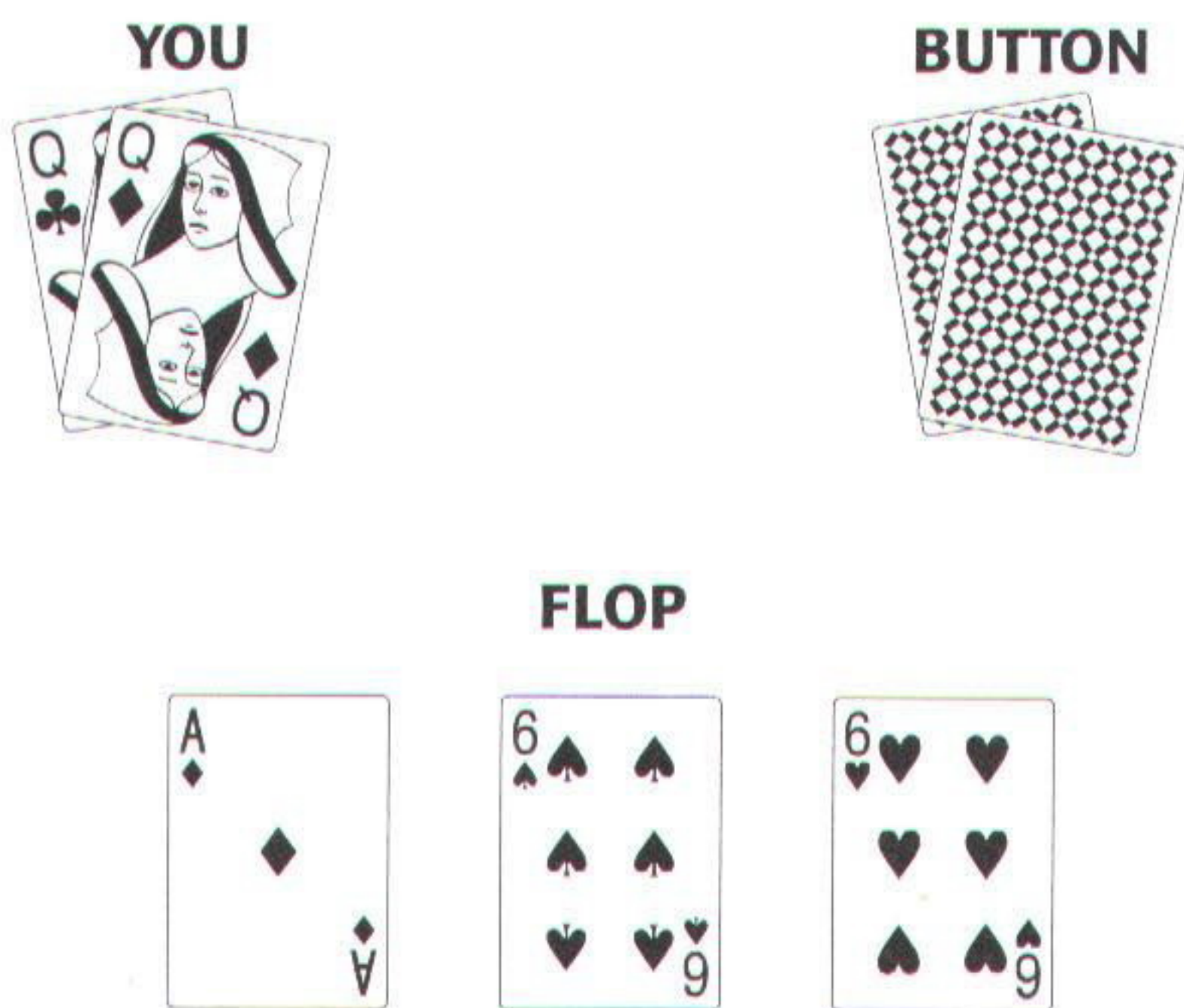
Deciding whether to bet a drawing hand in tournament poker should also heavily depend on what stage of the tournament you are in. This is an extension of stack size, but in general, it’s much safer to get drawing hands earlier in a tournament as opposed to later in a tournament when the blinds are high. At that stage of the tournament, you want to give yourself every opportunity to win the money in the middle. Besides, just because you missed your draw and didn’t pick up the pot on the flop doesn’t mean that you can’t try to take it down on the turn with a bet—but more on that in the section devoted to playing the turn.

PLAYING MARGINAL HANDS AFTER THE FLOP

While you always want to think aggressively when playing no-limit hold'em, it's often correct to play passively with marginal hands in marginal situations, especially when there isn't much danger of being outdrawn by your opponent. Let's look at an example.

Hand in Action

You raise with pocket queens and a player behind you calls on the button. The flop comes A♦ 6♠ 6♥.



This is one of those situations where if you have the best hand on the flop, it's highly likely that you'll win the pot, while if you don't have the best hand, you'll have little chance of winning it. There is just no good reason to play a big pot in this situation. And since no draw is present on the board, you take little risk in giving your opponent a free card. If you are in the lead, the best your opponent could have with a hand such as K-J is precisely three outs in the deck to outdraw you if a king hits the turn or the river.

Getting Information

Some will say that by betting the flop you'll find out where you're at in the hand. Will you really? So, if your opponent raises, that would mean what? Well, most likely that he has an ace, or maybe, just maybe, he doesn't think you have an ace and is trying to steal the pot from you. What if your opponent just calls? Does that mean that he has the ace or a six? Once again, that depends on your opponent's tendencies.

The point is, if you check you'll also get information, but it may cost you less money. If you check to a player that never bluffs and he bets, you can safely fold your Q-Q at no cost, saving that bet on the flop. If you are up against a looser, more aggressive player, it may be wiser to check and call a smallish bet on the flop and see if he follows through with the hand. While that play may seem weak, it's strangely deceptive. When you check and call on the flop, your opponent will know you have something. If he has nothing, he'll likely give up after firing a bullet at the pot.

By check-calling the flop, your opponent may even fear that you have A-K, A-A, or even a six in *your* hand. If he has a hand such as A-10, he may never make another bet at the pot all the way through to the river showdown. By playing the hand this way you actually make it *less* likely that your opponent will bluff you, at the same time risking less money.

Replaying the Situation

Let's go back and see what happens if you bet the flop. Say you made it \$500 before the flop and one player called. With the blinds and antes, there is \$1,525 in the pot. If you bet out \$800 on the A-6-6 flop and your opponent makes it \$2,500, what are you going to do? I'm guessing you'll probably have to lay it down since it's very likely that your opponent has an ace.

What if your opponent suspects that? From his perspective, he's looking at your \$800 bet and figuring that if you have the ace you might check, but if he raises he'll find out for sure. He could smooth call the \$800 on the flop and try to steal the pot on the turn (if he doesn't have the ace), or he could risk \$2,500 to win \$2,325 figuring that you either don't have the ace or won't call the raise.

If you check the flop, you take that play away from your opponent. If you don't bet, he *can't* raise you off the hand! If you check-call \$1,000, you'll put your opponent in a quandary on the turn wondering if he should continue to bet the hand through. For this play to be effective, you'll need to make sure that you play Q-Q, as well as A-K, the same way on the flop. In fact, if a player calls your raise behind you and the flop comes A-6-6, you should check a very high percentage of the time with any hand. Again, that may seem weak, but in the long run it's a more cautious way of making sure that you don't get bluffed off the best hand.

POSITION IS POWER. WHEN WE HAVE POSITION, WE NEED TO USE IT—

BUT WHEN WE DON'T HAVE IT, WE NEED TO RESPECT IT.

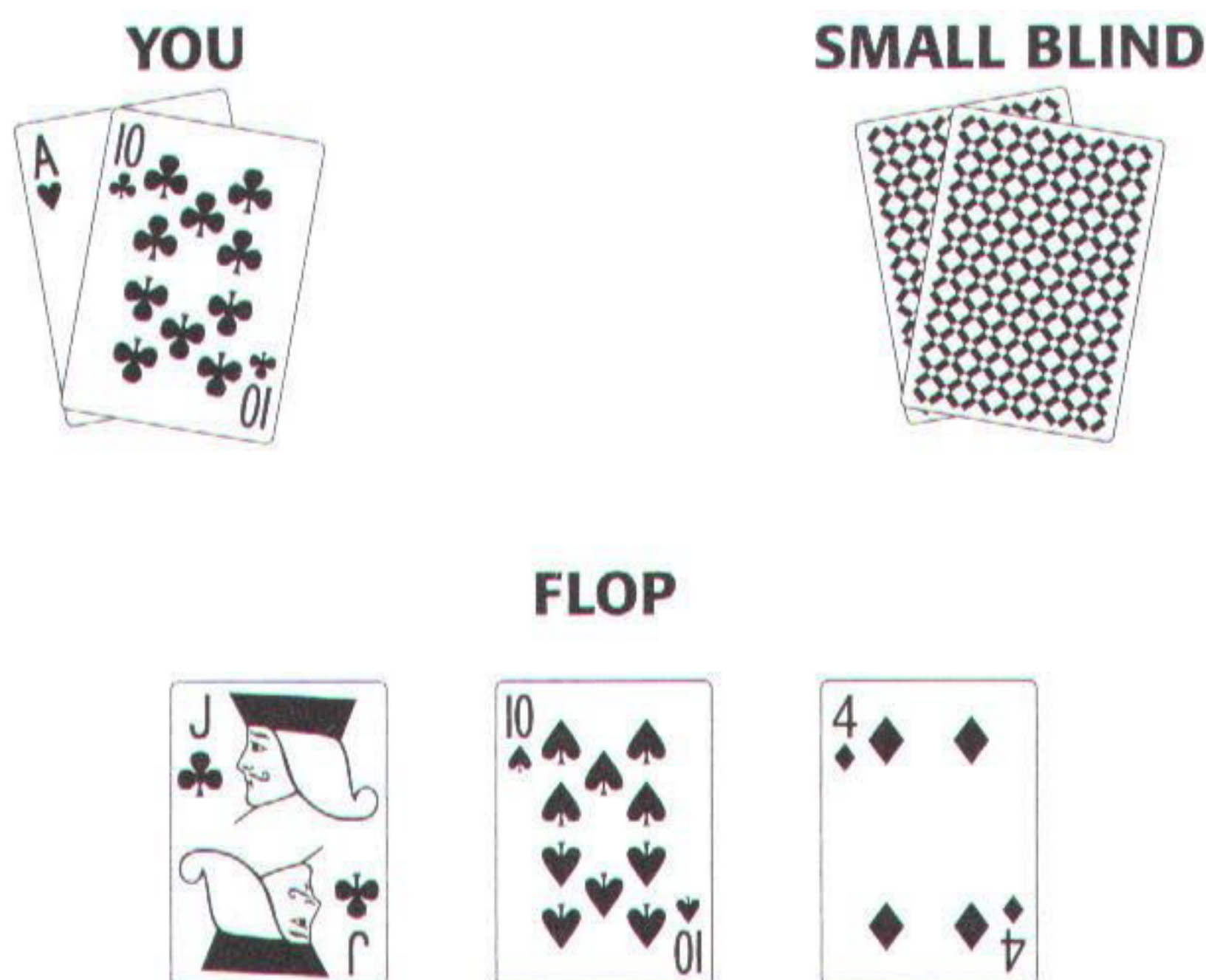
To play hands this way, you'll have to make sure that you have a good read on your opponents. Who likes to represent the ace a lot? Who will fire one bullet and give up on the turn? Would that player try to bluff-raise you on a flop

that contains an ace? The more you know about an opponent's tendencies in these types of situations, the better.

In this example, we were out of position and played meekly, which could almost be the motto for small ball. Position is power. When we have position, we need to use it—but when we don't have it, we need to respect it.

Hand in Action

Let's look at an example of how we might play a marginal hand in position. You've raised preflop with A-10 in late position and the small blind called. The flop comes J♣ 10♠ 4♦ giving you second pair with a good kicker.



There are several ways to play this hand and as always, several factors influence whether you lean one way or the other. If either you or your opponent is on a short stack, get your money in the middle. It's that simple. When you are on a short stack, you need to take a few risks and this is the kind of situation where it would make sense to go all in. However, if the stacks are deeper, you need to pay close attention to your opponent and see if you can pick up any physical tells as to whether he likes the flop or not.

If your opponent leads out at the flop, the standard play is to call the bet and see what develops on the turn, provided that his bet wasn't too big. More likely though, your opponent will check the flop regardless of what he has. At that point, you need to ask yourself some questions. What range of hands will this player call you with from the small blind? Is he the type of

guy that would call you with hands such as 6♥ 7♥? Or is he the type that likes to only play big cards and pairs?

If you decide that your opponent could have anything from 6♥ 7♥, 8♦ 8♠ and J♦ K♠, to A♥ Q♦, checking is the right play. By checking, you show some weakness. If your opponent is an aggressive player, he may see that as an opportunity to steal the pot from you on the turn if a blank hits. Also, if he indeed has pocket eights, he may feel as though he has the best hand.

Against K-J, we are in a little bit of trouble, but by checking we can minimize the damage. Other hands such as A-Q, K-Q and A-K are the ones that we'd be giving a free card to, but is that really so bad? None of those hands would likely fold on the flop anyway, so why not just see what hits the turn first before committing to the pot? If the turn comes with a 9, a queen or a king, you might be able to get away from the hand cheaply if the action gets too hot and heavy.

While the queen would give you a straight draw, it's probably the worst card you could see hit the turn since it hits every one of the hands you just gave the free draw to (A-Q, K-Q and A-K). The ace, while making you two pair, is also a card you should proceed with cautiously. You'd be dead against an A-J or K-Q, but it could also be a great card for you if your opponent called your raise with A-9 or worse. Still, you should be careful with aces and tens in this situation. You only want "some" action, not too much!

LOSING THE MINIMUM

One of the real keys to applying small ball effectively is the ability to get away from situations where it looks like you are in danger. By playing so many hands and playing them aggressively, you are going to find yourself getting raised quite often. If that gets under your skin a little bit, it could cause

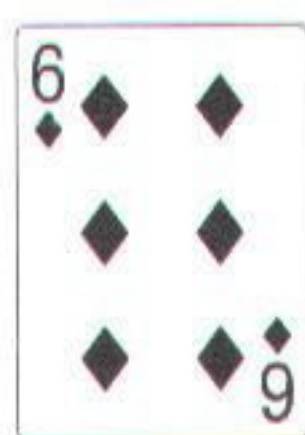
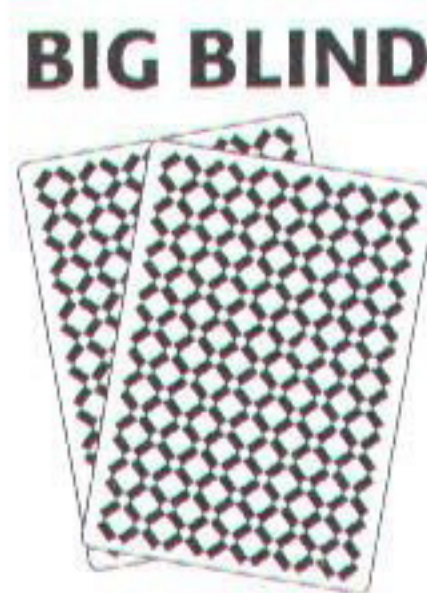
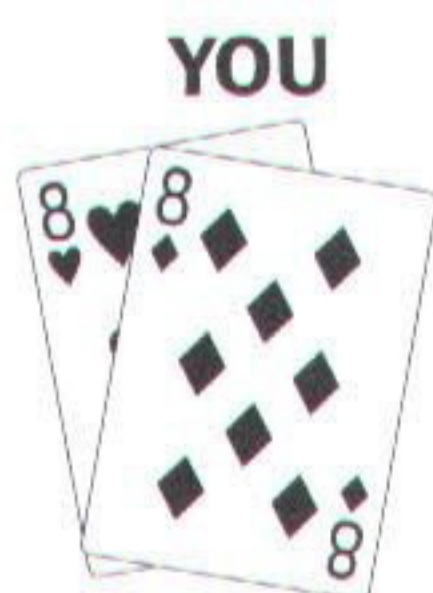
you to veer from the central concept that makes small ball effective.

While you want to be the aggressor at the table, you should be extremely cautious about continuing with the hand when someone plays back at you—unless your hand is very strong, or you strongly suspect that your opponent is bluffing you.

We talked about folding to reraises before the flop. The same applies to raises after the flop. Let's look at an example.

Hand in Action

You raise before the flop with 8-8 and only the big blind calls the raise. The flop comes J♥ 6♦ 4♣.



Your opponent checks, you bet about 65 percent of the pot, and your opponent check-raises you. This is a tricky situation. The main reason this is a more difficult decision than it might otherwise appear is that your opponent is more likely to raise you with weaker hands if you have been playing lots of hands and betting the flop consistently.

Depending on your opponent, he could have any of the following hands in this situation:

1. Top pair or better
2. A flush and/or straight draw
3. A pair lower than 8-8
4. Ace high
5. Absolutely nothing

How you proceed is obviously very read dependant, but I would strongly advise you to lean towards folding. Yes, while it's true that your opponents are more likely to be making plays against you, you don't want to play the guessing game in marginal situations for large percentages of your chips.

Also, the 8-8 just doesn't play very well after the flop. In fact, in this situation you'd be much better off with a hand such as K-6. It is almost as good as 8-8, but with the K-6, you'd have five outs to improve your hand rather than just two.

SMALL BALL THINKING

You are going to get bluffed from time to time. If you don't, you simply aren't playing all that well! The goal with the small ball approach is to look for high-percentage opportunities to play big pots, and avoid playing big pots that require a lot of guesswork. While this approach might seem easily exploitable, that's not the case. Players will often try to use a counterstrategy: They will try to force you to play big pots by overbetting the pot. With that strategy, though, your opponent is risking a higher percentage of his chips on his bluffs. And when you have a strong hand, he'll be giving you extra action with his overbets.

I can't stress enough how important it is to keep your composure when playing small ball. You'll go through streaks when you get raised time and time again—don't crack! Have faith in the system. A good opportunity will usually present itself. I've seen

far too many good, young players go broke after being reraised and bullied a few hands in a row. Eventually, the youngster gets fed up with it all, makes a move at the wrong pot, and winds up heading for the exit sign.

Let me illustrate a situation where that could happen to you.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$100/\$200, you make it \$500 to go with an A-J. The small blind reraises you to \$2,000. This is the fourth hand in a row that you've been raised before the flop! Out of frustration, you make the call.

That's mistake number one. Generally, if you've been reraised three times in a row and then a player reraises you after that, he's even more likely to have a strong hand—not less likely, as you might think. Calling a reraise with A-J is already a bad play, but in this case, it's even worse.

So anyway, now you've made it to the flop, which comes J♥ Q♣ 4♥.



Your opponent hesitates and finally checks. You decide to bet \$3,000 with your pair of jacks, and the raiser goes all in for \$7,000 more. It's pretty clear that you should fold your hand, but if you allow your mind to play tricks on you, you may find yourself looking for any excuse to believe that your opponent is bluffing. So you make the call only to find that you're drawing dead when your opponent turns over Q-Q. Oops! An "oops" that could have been avoided if you had kept your composure either before the flop or after it.

Here is probably the best advice I could ever give you when it comes to no-limit hold'em tournament poker:

PEOPLE DON'T BLUFF NEARLY AS MUCH AS YOU THINK THEY DO. PROS WIN BECAUSE THEY PLAY BIG POTS WITH THE BEST HAND, NOT BECAUSE THEY USE SUPER-ADVANCED BLUFFING STRATEGIES. PROS WIN BECAUSE THEY DEPEND ON THE FACT THAT YOU JUST WON'T BELIEVE THEM.

In order for a pro to cultivate that "wild" image, he may choose to play lots of hands, giving off the impression that he's doing a lot of wild bluffing. Watch a little closer. Sure, the pro may be raising tons of hands before the flop, but notice what happens when the big money goes in after the flop. Look at the types of hands a pro will turn over when everything is on the line. One thing you can be sure of is that you'll generally see a premium hand, not some random hand with no chance to improve.

Pros will bluff with drawing hands, but you'll rarely see a pro get all of his money in on a flop of A♥ K♦ 4♣ with a hand like 8-9 suited! Those types of plays are for the amateur player. If a pro gets his money all in on this type of a flop, expect to see him turn over at least aces and kings.

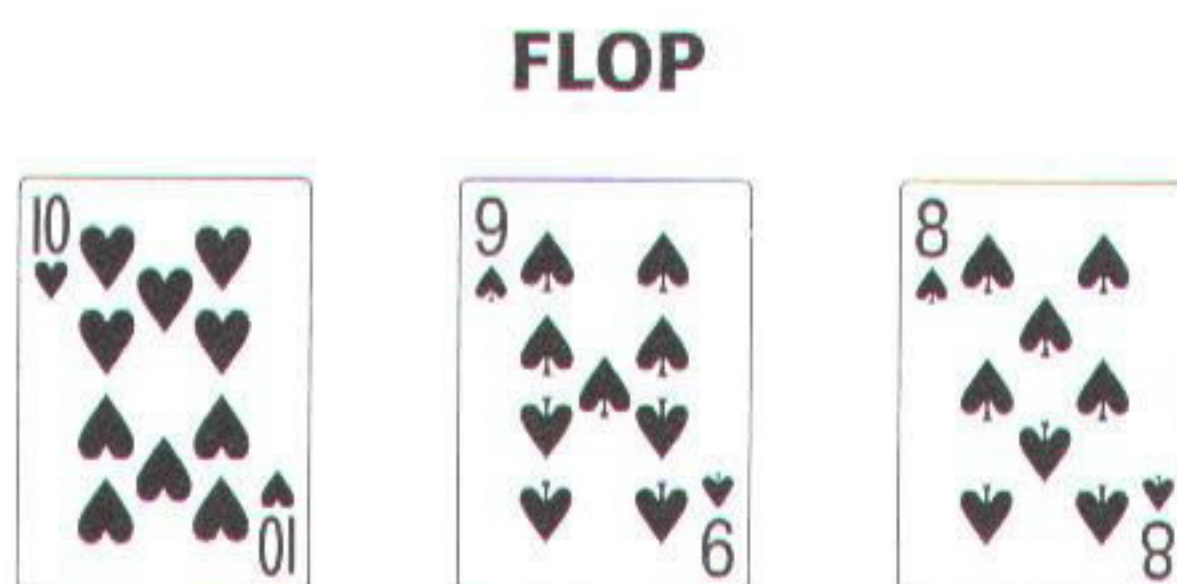
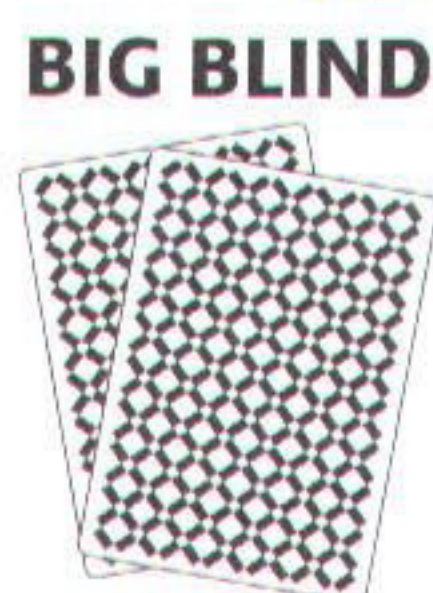
To become a top professional, there is one essential variable for success that can't really be taught—discipline. Discipline becomes even more important if you choose to apply the small-ball strategy. Playing small ball is a double-edged sword. You'll create more action for yourself and get your premium hands paid off more regularly, but at the same time, you will invite people to bluff you more often as well. As you improve as a player, you'll welcome those weak bluffs when you become more adept at sniffing them out. In the meantime, be content with letting the odd pot go to a bluffing opponent. If he keeps that up, you'll hopefully be able to trap him for a much bigger pot down the road.

KEEPING THE POT SMALL

Earlier I explained that you are often better off checking the flop with drawing hands so as to not bet yourself off the draw. Obviously, if you check the flop only when you have a drawing hand, your opponents will be able to figure you out very easily. Luckily, there are other situations where it might be a good idea to check the flop: when you flop a monster hand and want to trap your opponent; and when you have a piece of the flop, but not a big enough piece to feel great about your hand. Let's look at a few examples.

Hand in Action

You raise before the flop with the K♥ 9♥ and the big blind calls you. The flop comes 10♥ 9♠ 8♠, giving you middle pair.

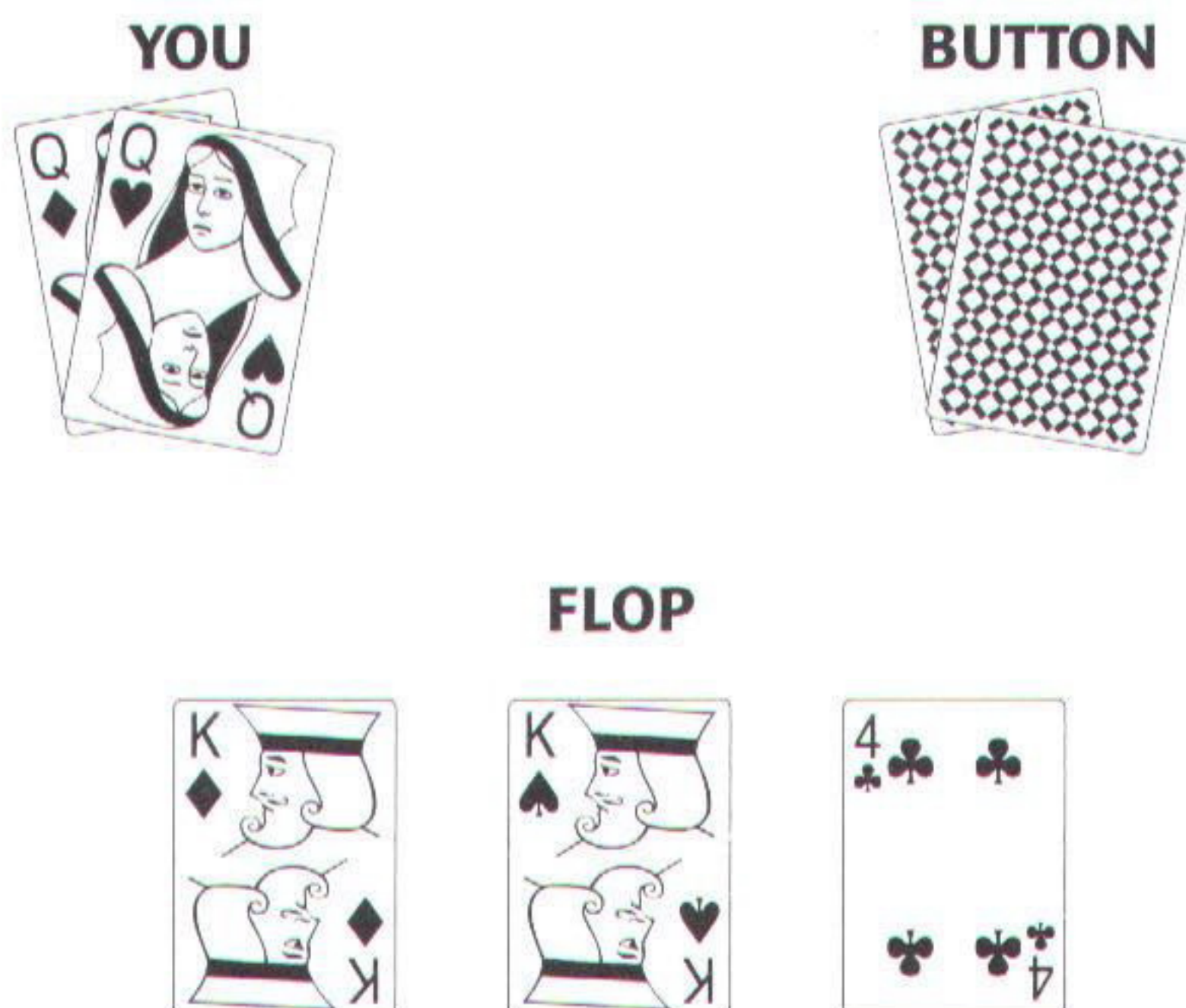


This is an extremely dangerous flop for your hand, which might lead you to believe that you should be aggressive and look to protect your hand with a big bet here. I don't think that's a very good idea. You could very easily be beaten on this flop. Even if you are ahead, there are drawing hands out there that wouldn't be afraid to play a big pot with you. If your opponent has a K-J, J-9, or any flush draw, he'll at least call a bet on the flop.

By checking the flop, you give yourself an opportunity to avoid losing any chips unnecessarily, while keeping the pot small so that you'll have a better chance of protecting your hand on the turn. For example, suppose the turn card is a 2♦ and your opponent checks again. You can make a decent sized bet to force your opponent into either taking a bad price by calling or letting go of his draw.

Hand in Action

Here's another situation. You raise preflop with Q-Q and the button calls you. The flop comes K♦ K♠ 4♣.



You have little reason to bet. If your opponent has a king, you're just dead meat. If not, the only hands you need to worry about are 4-4 and A-A. What's even more likely, though, is that your opponent has a maximum of three total outs against you. For example, if he has an A-J, you'll be giving him a free chance to outdraw you if you check the flop and he hits the ace. That's not such a big deal. Or, if your opponent has a hand such as 9-9, you might be giving him a free shot at one of the two remaining nines to beat you. Again, a very low percentage hit for him.

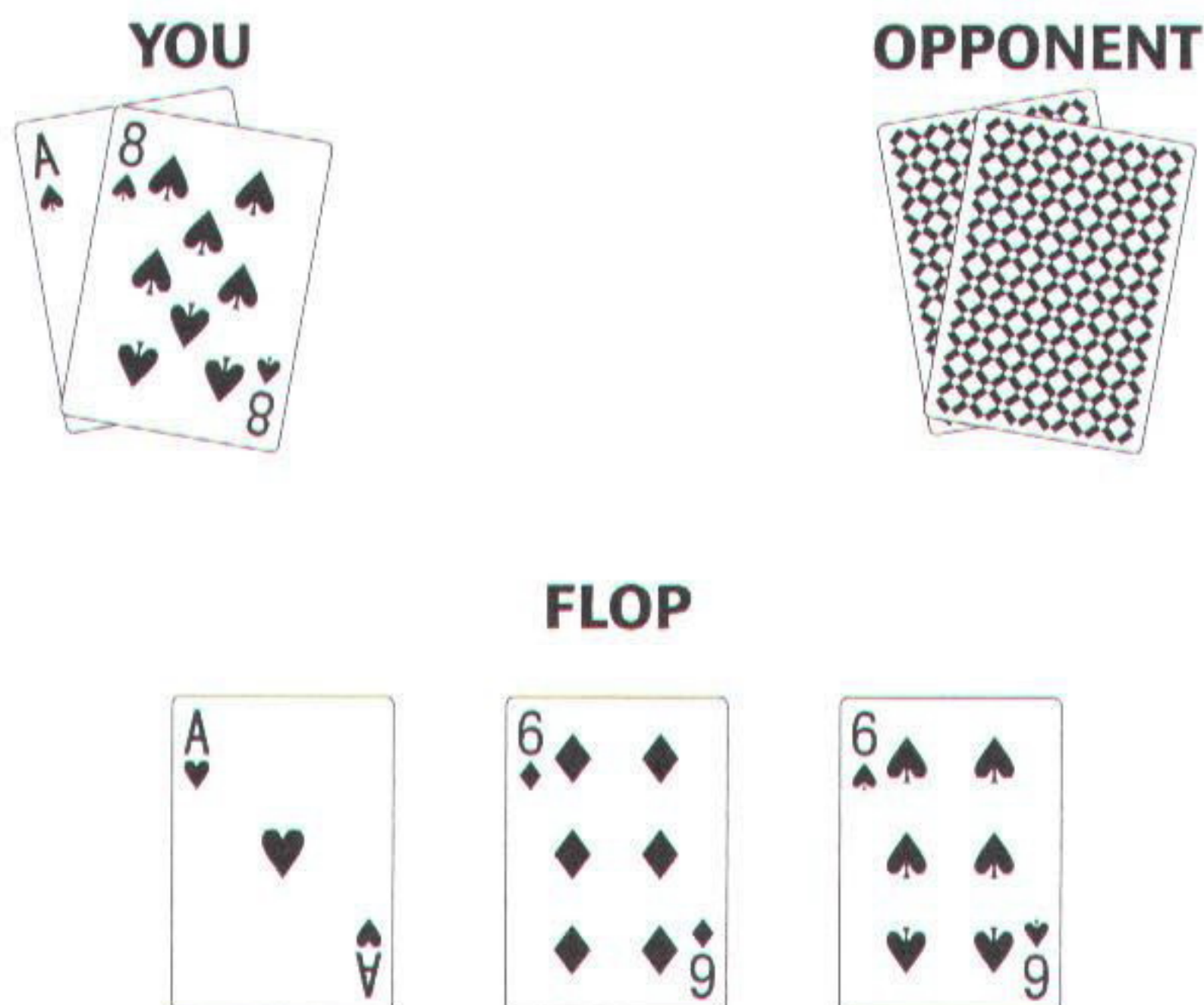
If the queens are good on the flop, they are probably strong enough that it's okay to play it weak since they'll likely be good by the river too. If you are beat, you want to cut your losses. The other key benefit of checking the flop is that you'll give your opponent an opportunity to either bluff off his money or protect what he believes to be the best hand.

If he has 9-9, he'll probably bet the flop to protect his hand and try to find out where he's at. No need for you to get frisky against a bet here—you should totally shut down and go into defense mode. I'm going to steal a quote from another top pro,

Layne Flack, who says, “Why do the pushin’ when the donkey will do the pullin’?”

Hand in Action

The texture of the board says a lot about how you should play marginal hands after the flop. For example, suppose a weak player limps in from middle position and you raise him from the button with A♠ 8♠. He calls and the flop comes A♥ 6♦ 6♠.



If the limper checks to you, what should you do? You have aces up on the flop, which look good. But what type of hands will your opponent call you with on a flop that has absolutely no possible draw?

There is an outside chance that he'll call you with a pocket pair if he is truly awful. But more likely than that, if he calls your bet on the flop, he'll have at least an ace as well. Your 8 kicker could be in trouble. And even if it isn't, chances are that by the river you'll be splitting the pot with your opponent. Any ace, 6, 9, 10, jack, queen or king would nullify your kicker.

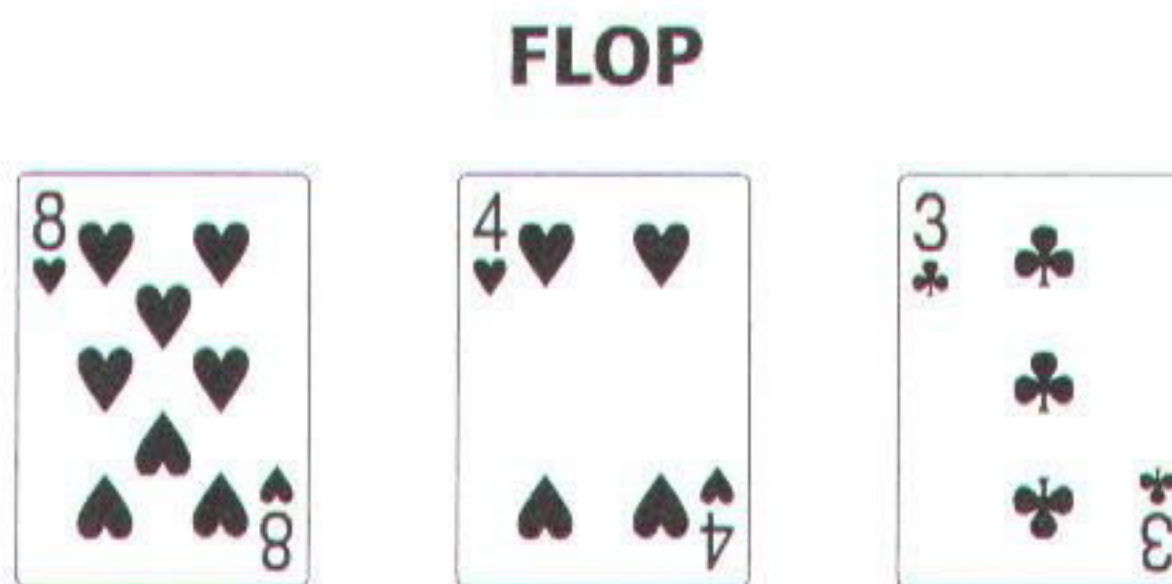
Why not check this flop? The only real danger in checking is that your opponent might have a hand such as 3-3 and catch a 3 on the turn. You'd be losing a pot you would have won with a bet on the flop, but that's simply not going to happen often enough to make you worry about it.

If you check the flop, you may induce a bluff from your opponent. Let's say the turn card is a 9, for example, and your opponent has 7-7. He may put you on a pair of queens or kings and try to represent the ace on the turn with a bet. If he does that, once again, there is no reason to raise him. He just might have you beat, and if not, your risk in giving him a free card is likely minimal.

The key reason you are able to check a flop with a marginal hand is that a bet likely won't change the outcome of who wins the hand. In the first example, any player with a drawing hand will likely call a bet anyway. In the other examples, there are very few cards that could outdraw you on the turn or the river. Now let's look at one more example.

Hand in Action

Before the flop, a tight player raises from under the gun and you call from the button with 10-10. The flop comes 8♥ 4♥ 3♣.



The tight player checks to you. In this situation, you should bet for several reasons:

1. You have position and a bet will help define your opponent's hand
2. Your opponent likely has A-K and if you check, you'll give him a free chance at catching any one of six cards (three aces and three kings) to beat you.
3. A flush draw is present. If your opponent has the A♥ Q♦ and you check the flop, he not only can catch an ace or a queen to beat you, but also might pick up a flush draw on the turn if another heart hits the board.

If a tight player check-raises you on the flop, it's a pretty safe bet that your tens are no good. Even if he just checks and calls a bet on the flop, you should proceed with caution. He could have aces and is waiting to trap you on the turn. With 10-10, you basically want to make your case for the pot right on the flop. But if there is too much resistance, you need to seriously think about letting the hand go. If your opponent

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is brave enough to check-raise you on the flop with the A♥ K♥, so be it. By the way, even with that hand, he'd still be the favorite—two overcards and a flush draw is a 55 percent favorite to your pocket tens.

MIXING UP YOUR PLAY ON THE FLOP

Here are some simple guidelines on how to mix up your flop play when using the small-ball approach.

When To Bet

1. **When you miss the flop entirely, but also have position, you should still bet the flop if you think your opponent also missed it.**

Be wary of flops that contain two or more cards above 8. Flops like J-9-7, A-Q-9 and J-10-4 hit a lot of hands that many opponents will call with.

2. **You should bet the flop with good hands that also need protection.** If the flop comes J-8-4 and you have K-J, you should bet the flop a high percentage of the time.

3. **You should bet monster drawing hands.** You want to either steal the pot on the flop, or build a bigger pot for when you hit your hand.

4. **When you pick up a tell.** Anytime you pick up a tell and feel as though your opponent is going to fold, even if you have a marginal hand, you should bet. For example, if the flop comes J-6-4 and you have 4-5, you should bet that flop if it looks like your opponent is legitimately uninterested in the hand.

When To Check

1. **When you have a drawing hand and want to catch your card cheaply.** If you bet the flop, your opponent may raise you, thus forcing

you to lay down a drawing hand that potentially could have won you a big pot.

2. **You should often check on flops that pose little danger of outdrawing your hand.** If you have A-A and the flop comes 2-2-9, there is little danger in giving away one free card. If your opponent has a hand like K-Q, you might win more money from him if he catches a pair on the turn. The risk of checking in this situation is minimal.
3. **If you have a marginal hand on a dangerous board.** In these situations, it's often better to check the flop and see what develops on the turn before committing any more chips to the pot. You can even do this with strong hands. For example, if you have 9-9 on a flop of 9♥ 10♥ J♠, checking wouldn't be a bad idea at all. If the turn card is a 7, 8, queen, king, or a heart, you could limit a loss that may have been inevitable.
4. **When you suspect an opponent has caught big on the flop.** When you pick up a tell on your opponent that leads you to believe that he's hit a big piece of the flop and you have nothing, checking is in order. Pay close attention to your opponent's behavior and you can save some bets in situations that might otherwise have been automatic betting situations.

HIT OR MISS FLOPS

Flops such as K-K-4, A-6-6, Q-Q-2, and 2-2-3 are what I like to call hit or miss flops. If you started with the best hand, it will remain the best hand after flops like these a high percentage of the time. Your opponents will either hit those flops big, or they will miss completely. By playing your marginal hands cautiously

after these types of flops, you'll be able to minimize your losses without taking a major risk of losing the entire pot.

HIT OR MISS FLOPS

Flop types your opponents will either hit big or miss completely

K-K-4
A-6-6
Q-Q-2
2-2-3

MANIPULATING THE POT SIZE

Keeping the pot small by checking the flop is one way you can manipulate the size of the pot. Other times you'll actually want to play a bigger pot when you hit a hand, and there are ways to do that as well. This concept is even more important in a game like pot-limit hold'em, but if you are playing small-ball poker, your approach to the game is similar to playing pot-limit hold'em since you rarely bet more than the amount that's already in the pot.

In the last section, we touched on keeping the pots small with marginal hands. However, when you have a monster hand and think your opponent does too, sometimes it makes sense to build a sizeable pot on the flop.

Before I continue, it's extremely important to remember that you shouldn't follow any of the strategies in this chapter to the tee. You want to use these tools as general rules, but anytime you always do the same thing in the same situation, you run the risk of giving away too much information. For example, I'm giving away a lot of information in this chapter about my own play. Players who are very perceptive should be able to better understand how I approach various situations, and be

able to use that knowledge against me—provided I don't mix up my play.

As I write this, I think to myself, “Wow, if I played against a guy who played exactly like this, it would be very easy to figure him out.” If you follow the “rules,” a raise on the flop would set off alarm bells in your opponent's head. Remember, we've already made it quite clear that we want to play small pots, so if we raise on the flop, it must mean that we have a monster hand. That should be true most of the time, but if it's true *all* the time, you'll just never get paid off.

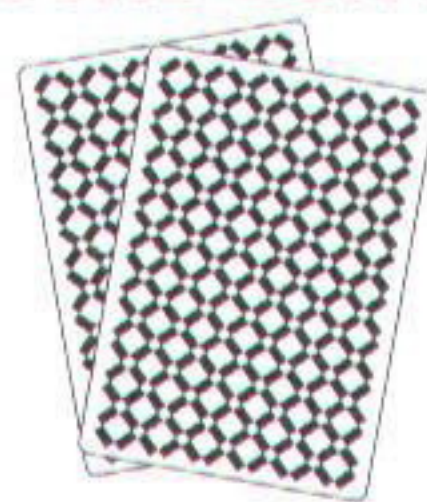
You need to raise the flop from time to time as a pure bluff in situations where you just *feel* that your opponent is weak and believe you can take the pot away from him.

Hand in Action

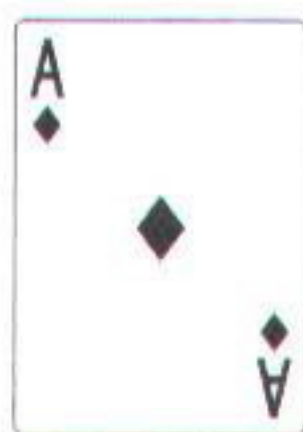
For example, let's say that a player raised to \$600 under the gun before the flop. You call from middle position with 6♥ 7♥. The flop comes A♦ J♠ 4♣.



UNDER THE GUN RAISER



FLOP



Your opponent makes a weak-looking bet of \$850 on the flop. Trust your instincts. If you don't think he has an ace, you should go after this pot on the flop with a raise. If you have, say, \$28,000 in chips at that point, risking \$3,000 to win about \$2,500 isn't so bad—if your instincts are sharp, that is.

The reason I bring up this bluff is that it's an integral part of being able to manipulate the pot size when you actually have a big hand and want to get paid handsomely. If you never bluff-raise the flop, you'll be giving away far too much information about the value of your good hands when you raise on the flop.

Now that we have that concept out of the way, let's look at ways to favorably manipulate the pot size in order to bust your opponent.

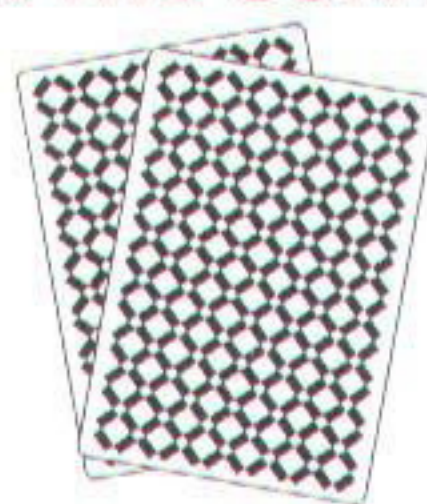
Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$100/\$200 and a \$25 ante, you call a preflop raise of \$600 from an under-the-gun raiser. You are in position with 3-3 in a three-way pot. All three of you have over \$30,000 in chips. The flop comes 8♠ 7♠ 3♦.

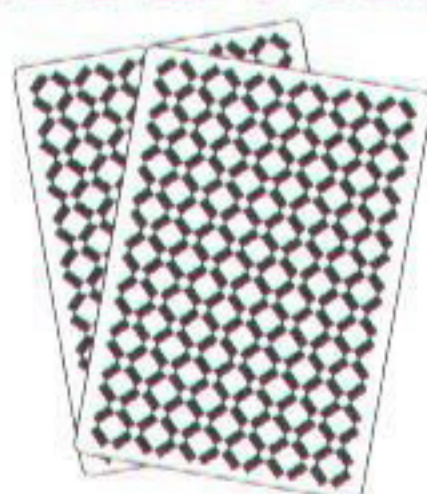
YOU



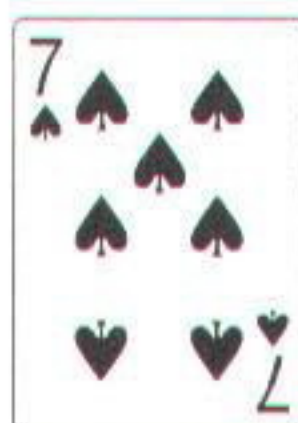
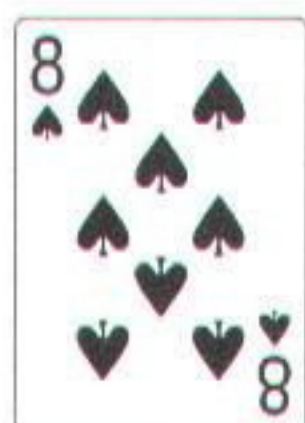
UNDER THE GUN RAISER



MIDDLE POSITION



FLOP



This isn't the type of hand you want to slowplay in this situation because a lot of cards could come on the turn to kill your action. The 6♠, 9♠, or 10♠ will complete several different draws, and an opponent with an overpair is likely to shut down.

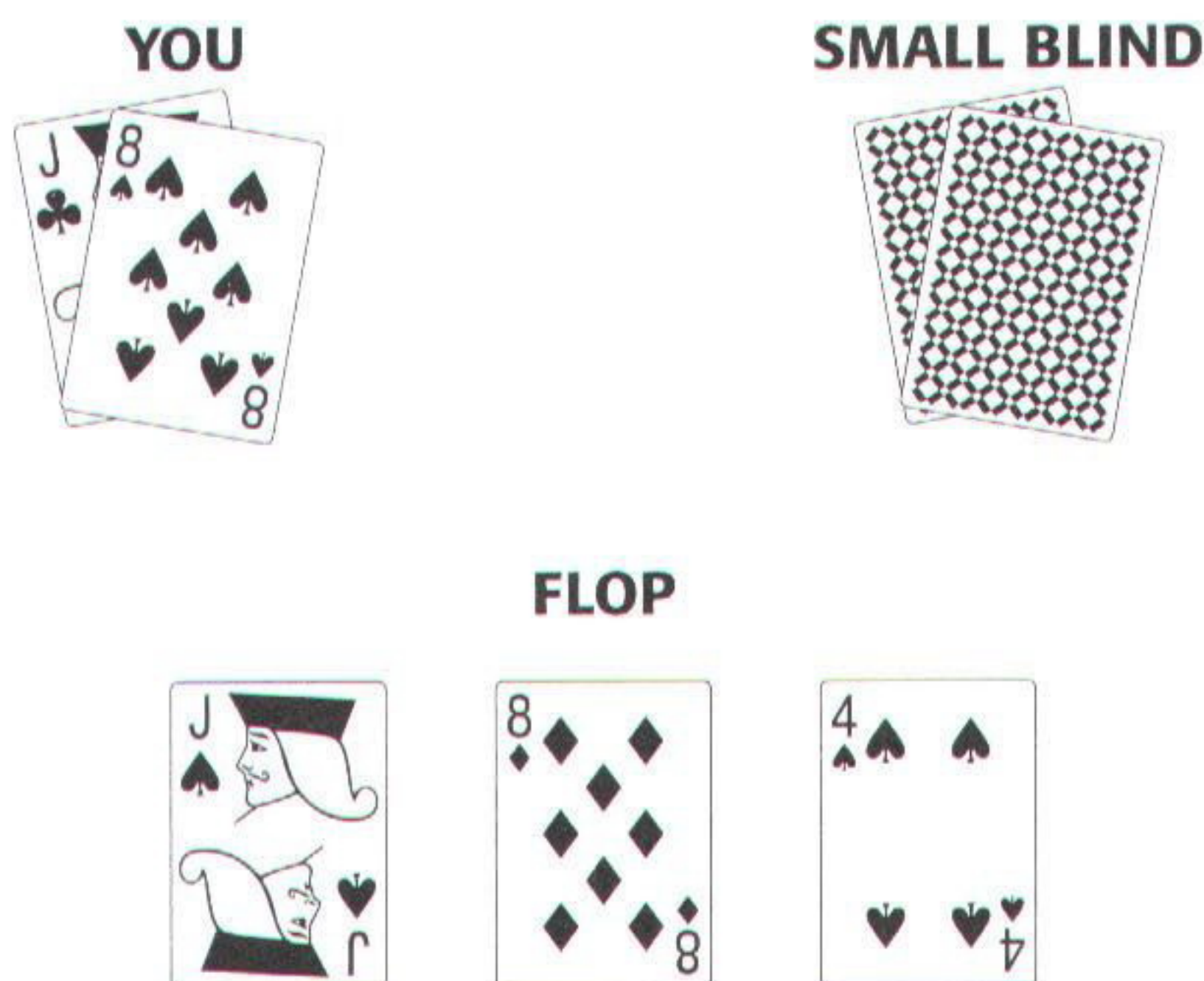
Let's say the initial raiser bets out \$1,500 and the middle position player calls. This is the perfect opportunity to build the pot. If you make it \$5,000 to go, for example, the initial raiser may decide to reraise in order to shutout a possible drawing hand in the middle. If he has A-A, he may be hoping that you have 9-9, 10-10, or J-J and can get the hand heads-up with you.

Suppose he does indeed have A-A and makes it \$15,000 to go. The middle player folds. Now you can stick in the rest of your chips. At this point, the player with A-A is all but committed,

and he could rationalize that you could have K-K, Q-Q, or a hand such as the 9♠ 10♠.

Hand in Action

Here is another example. Before the flop, everyone folds to the small blind, who raises just a little bit. You are in the big blind with J-8 offsuit and call with position. The flop comes J♠ 8♦ 4♠ and your opponent bets out at you.

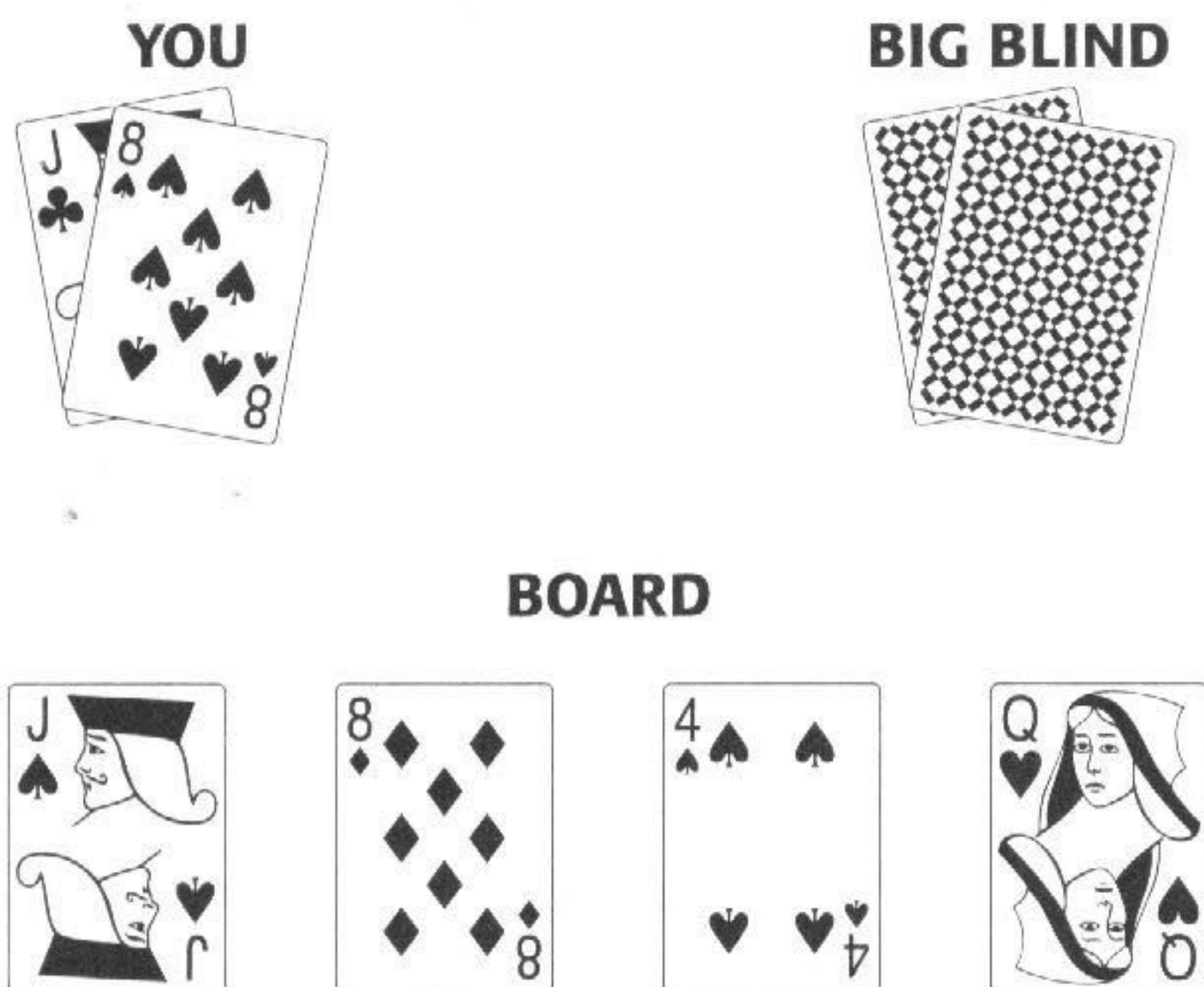


Your dilemma is to either smooth call the bet or raise the pot, hoping that your opponent has something like A-J, Q-Q, K-K, or even A-A.

There is an obvious problem with calling here. With a few straight draws on board and a flush draw present, there are too many cards that might hit the turn and scare your opponent into shutting down one of those premium hands. Any spade, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, jack, queen, king or ace could potentially be an action killer for you.

Hand in Action

Let's look at it from your opponent's perspective for a second. You are sitting there with A-J in the small blind and the big blind just called you. The turn card comes the Q♥.



What would you do in that spot? It's a terrible card for your hand. So terrible, it all but forces you to check the turn. You don't want your opponent to get away that easily from a trap that you have set up on the flop. By raising this hand on the flop, while you took the bluff away from your opponent, you also gave him a chance to bury himself if he decided to reraise you there.

As I mentioned earlier, it's very important to mix up your play a little bit to make this play effective. Sometimes, you must raise that flop with a hand like A-7 or even 3-4. You don't need to overdo it, or even risk too many chips, but I can't emphasize enough how important it is to avoid predictable patterns.

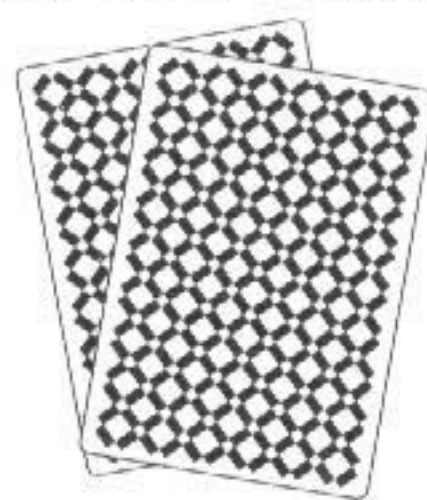
Let's look at one more situation.

Hand in Action

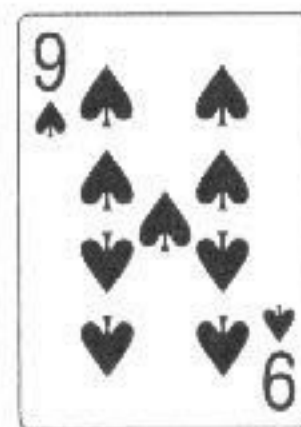
Before the flop, a player raises from early position and you call from the big blind with the J♦ 9♥. Miraculously, the flop comes perfect: J♥ J♠ 9♠.



PREFLOP RAISER



FLOP



You check to your opponent who bets out half the pot. Against a rookie player, you could smooth call and realistically expect him to bet the turn again without trips. However, most experienced players will be very wary of your call on such a board and will check the turn, even with A-A.

Therefore, since the jig will be up after you smooth call on the flop, why even bother? Why not check-raise the flop and hope that either:

1. Your opponent is trapped with A-J
2. He doesn't believe you and makes a re-steal attempt
3. He puts you on a drawing hand and tries to protect his overpair (A-A, K-K or Q-Q) against it

If number one is true and you don't check-raise the flop, you run the risk of minimizing your win. For example, if a spade hits the turn—or an 8, 10, or a queen—your opponent may fear that a drawing hand has gotten there and he'll shut down. Not only will he fear drawing hands, but aside from J-9 and 9-9, he'll also have to fear that you hit your kicker on the turn. If you check-raise the hand on the flop, there probably is no escape for him.

If you play the hand aggressively on the flop, you trap him when he also has a monster hand and you give him some rope to hang himself if he decides to bluff you. In fact, by playing the hand in a straightforward manner, it actually becomes deceptive.

Number two could come into play as well if you have been pounding on this particular opponent. If you've beaten him several hands in a row, he may get so frustrated with you that he tries to push back—and at the worst time possible for his own welfare.

If number three is true, your opponent may not want to guess on the turn and, instead, will try to find out immediately whether you have the jack. That's okay, since a reraise would have to be pretty sizeable, meaning that you'd get some more money out of him; and also avoid a disaster if he hits a two-outer (one of the two cards left in the deck that are the same rank as his overpair) on the turn or river by going all in.

CHECKING BIG HANDS ON THE FLOP

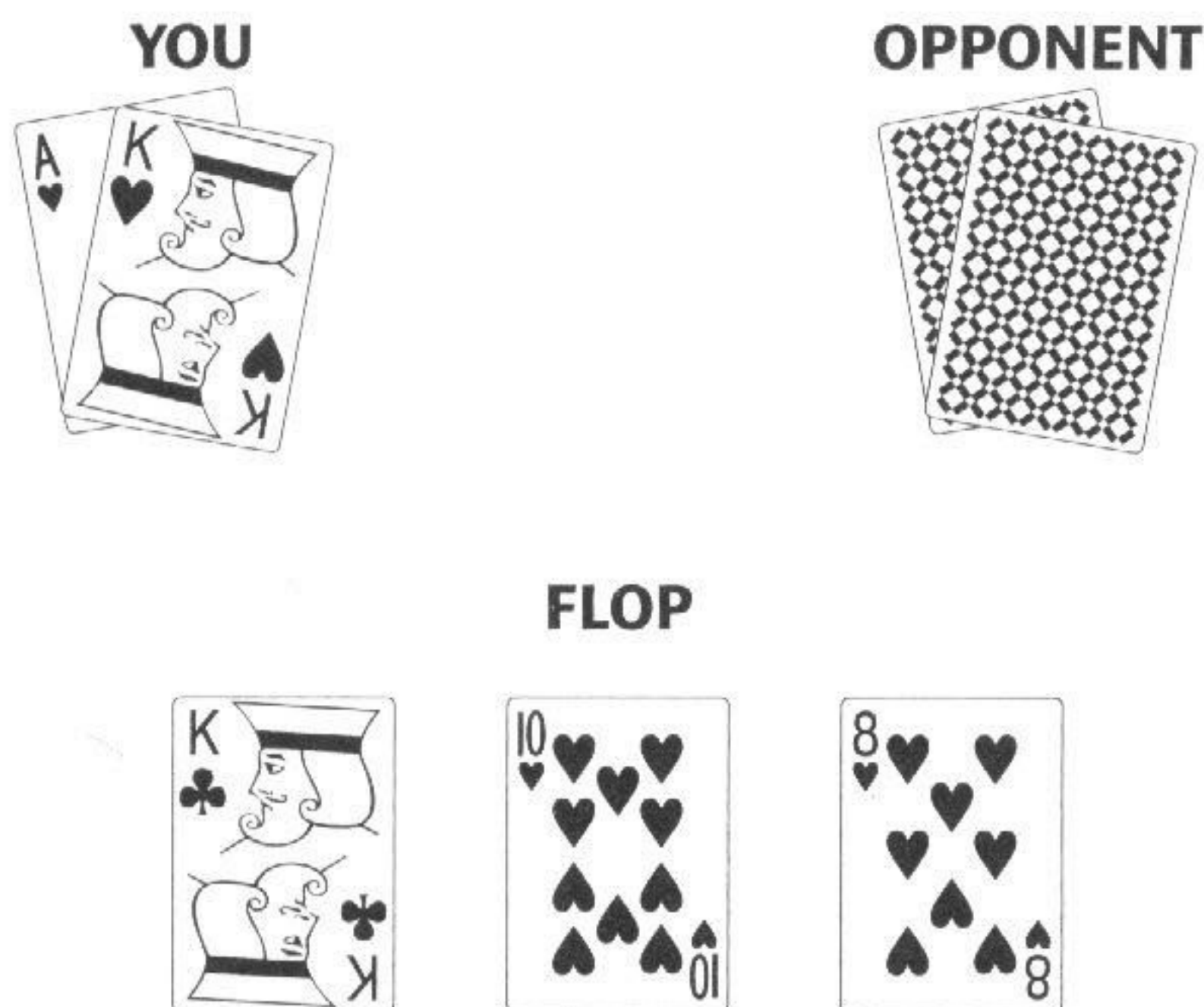
Another trick you should add to your repertoire is checking big hands on the flop to let your opponent catch up. We've already added some texture to our game by checking marginal hands and some draws, plus checking when we sense strength on dangerous boards. We also need to check some big hands as well.

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Following is a situation that illustrates the concept.

Hand in Action

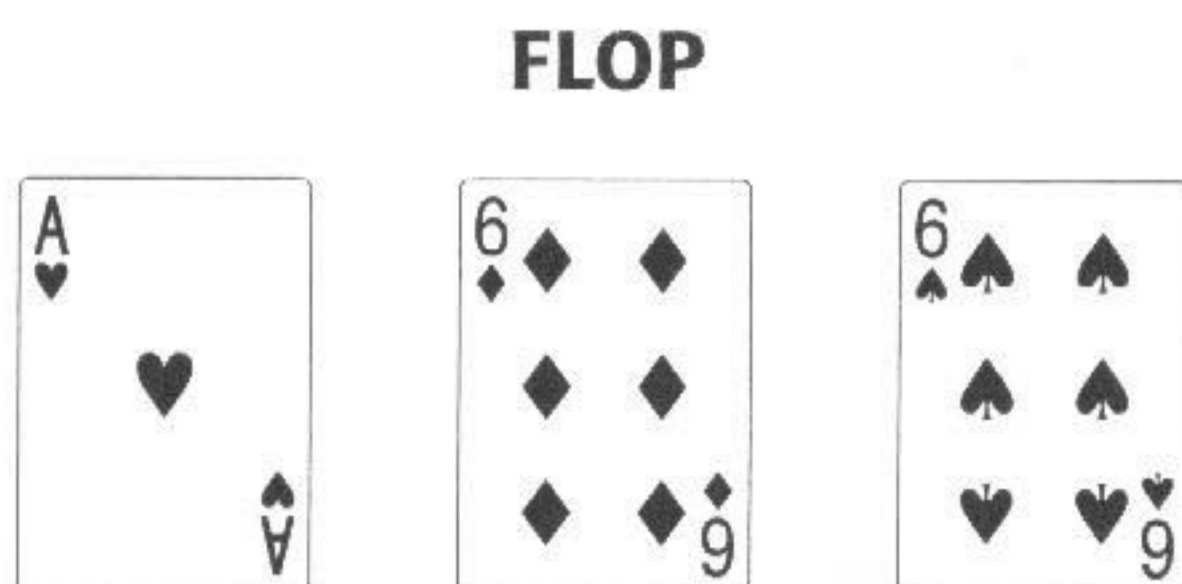
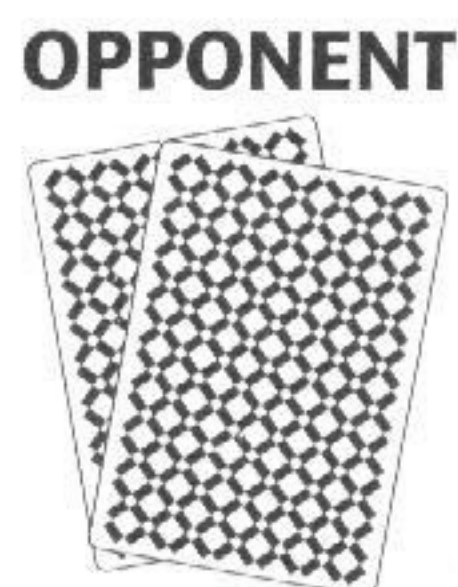
You raise before the flop with $A♥ K♥$ and the flop comes $K♣ 10♥ 8♥$.



This appears to be a dangerous board. If you check the flop, your opponent may misinterpret the meaning of that check for weakness. Or he may believe that you are on a draw—which you are, but with a strong hand as well. Checking this flop could allow you to hit a monster hand at the same time as your opponent, only you'll end up with the nut hand. If your opponent has a J-9 offsuit, for example, the $7♥$ on the turn could crush him. Even though you checked the flop, it would still be hard for him to get away from his straight.

Hand in Action

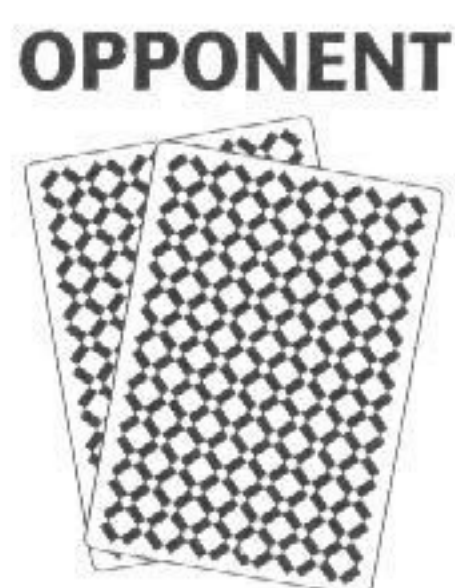
Let's look at an even better example: You raise with $A♠ A♦$ preflop and the flop comes $A♥ 6♦ 6♠$.



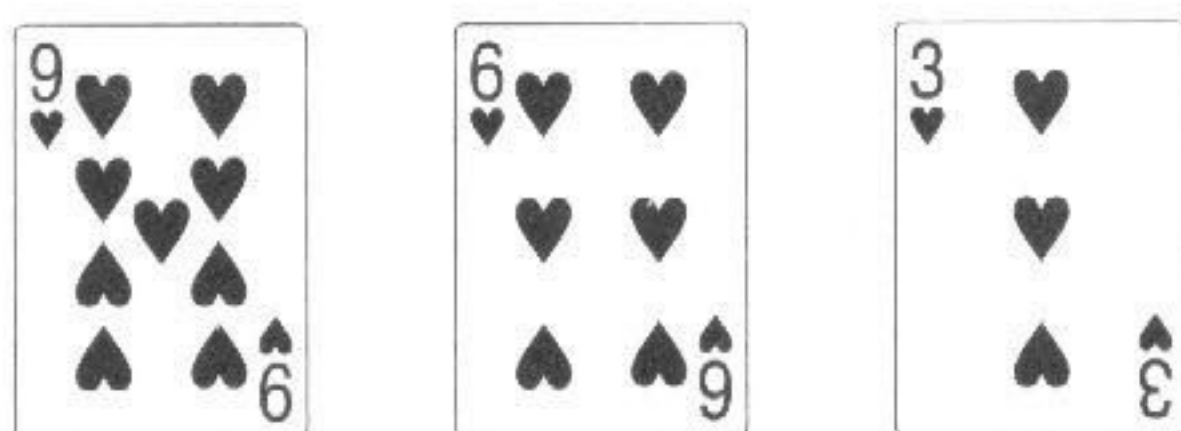
If your opponent has a 6 in this hand, you'll probably win a big pot no matter how you proceed. If he has a hand like 9-9, though, the only way you'll be able to trap is to let him see a free card on the turn. If it's a 9, that's your home run ball right there!

Hand in Action

One more example. You raise with A♥ A♠ before the flop and the flop comes 9♥ 6♥ 3♥.



FLOP



This flop is totally safe for you to check. Your check could trick your opponent into believing that you are either simply on a flush draw, have flopped nothing, or have a hand such as the $A\spadesuit K\spadesuit$. Since you checked the flop, your opponent may try to make an aggressive bet on the turn if a heart doesn't hit; or he may bluff if a heart comes. He may not believe you'd check the flop with the nut flush draw and/or a pair.

The best result you can accomplish with a check on the flop is to allow a hand such as $Q\heartsuit J\clubsuit$ to catch up a little bit. A heart might trap your opponent for a little bet, but a queen or a jack on the turn would likely induce him to protect his pair with a bet. Even if he has the $Q\spadesuit J\spadesuit$, a hand that has your opponent virtually drawing dead, hitting a pair on the turn could trap him into losing bets he would not have lost had you bet the flop.

CALLING ON THE FLOP WITH NOTHING EXCEPT THE INTENTION OF STEALING THE POT LATER

In most heads-up situations, neither you nor your opponent will hit the flop with a very strong hand. The player who is able to get the best of the situations where neither of you have much of anything after the flop is usually the player that will come out ahead in the long run.

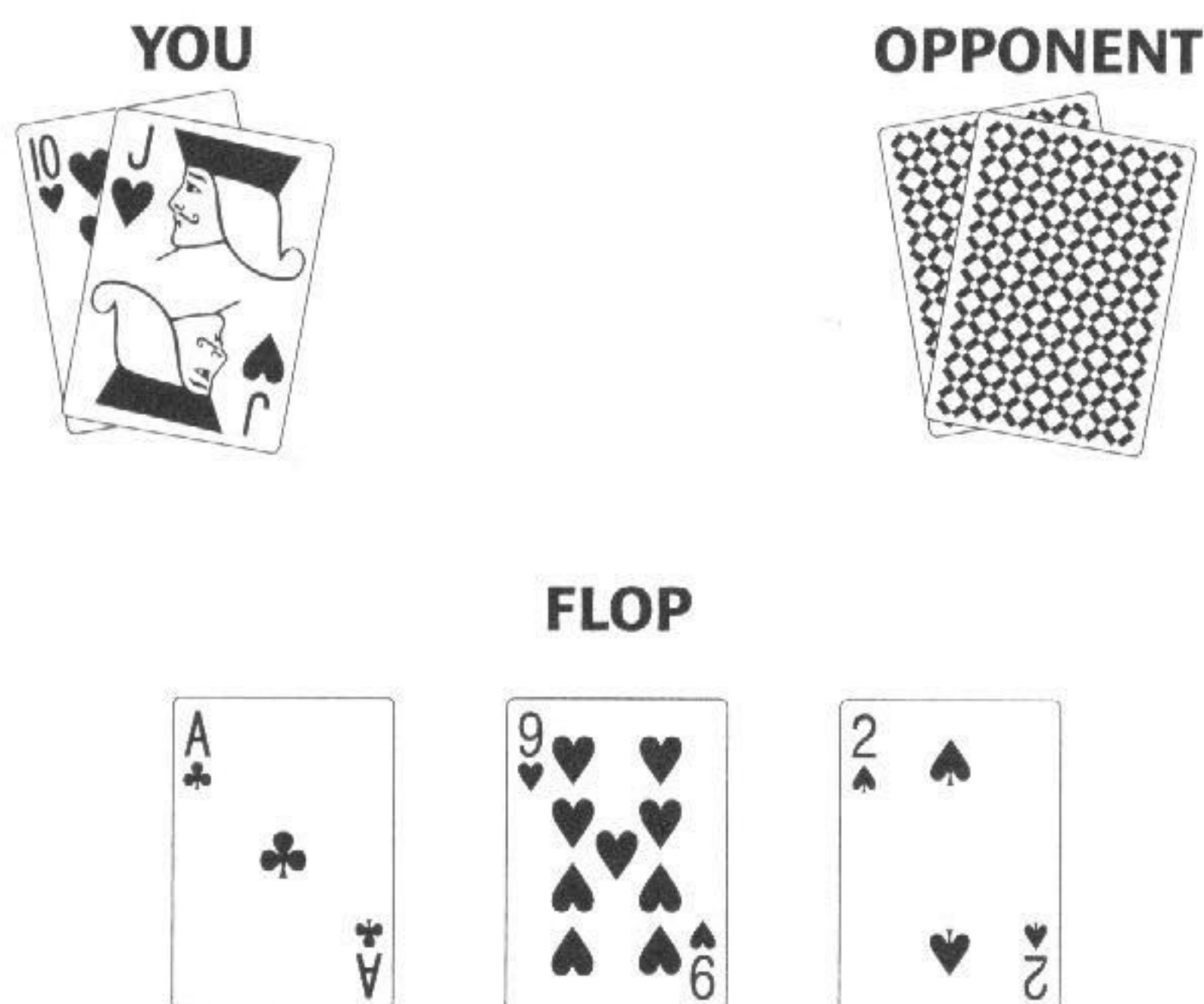
There are several ways to approach these types of situations, but there is one particular way of stealing pots from your opponents

that is low risk, has a high success rate, and fits the mold of the small-ball approach. When you are in position against just one opponent, your hand is often unimportant; instead, what's most important is the strength of your opponent's hand.

Let's look at a couple of situations to understand this concept more clearly.

Hand in Action 1

With the blinds at \$100/\$200 and a \$25 ante, a player raises to \$600 from late position before the flop. You call him from the button with the 10♥ J♥, and the blinds fold. The flop comes A♣ 9♥ 2♠.



Your opponent bets \$800, about half the pot. Normally in this situation, folding would be your best option since you've completely missed the flop and your opponent could easily have an ace. Or maybe not. Suppose your opponent has any of the following hands: 7-7, K-Q, 10-10, or 9-10. He may very well bet any one of these hands after the flop, but if you call or raise him, he will likely fold as he can only beat a bluff.

If you decide to make a play at the pot, smooth calling is actually a slightly better play than raising on the flop, especially since that's what you would normally do anyway if you had a hand such as A-J or A-Q. The other reason that smooth calling is a better play in this specific situation is because you actually have a hand that could turn into a monster draw with the turn of a card. An 8 or a queen would give you an open-ended straight draw, and a heart would give you a backdoor flush draw.

Let's say that you make the call on the flop. By the turn, you should have a much better idea as to the strength of your opponent's hand. If he bets, you should probably just give it up—unless you've improved your hand by catching a queen, 8, or a heart, and his bet is not too big. If you happen to hit a straight or a flush on the river, and your opponent has a set of aces, for example, the payoff could be huge. He'll have a difficult time putting you on a straight when the board comes A-9-2 rainbow!

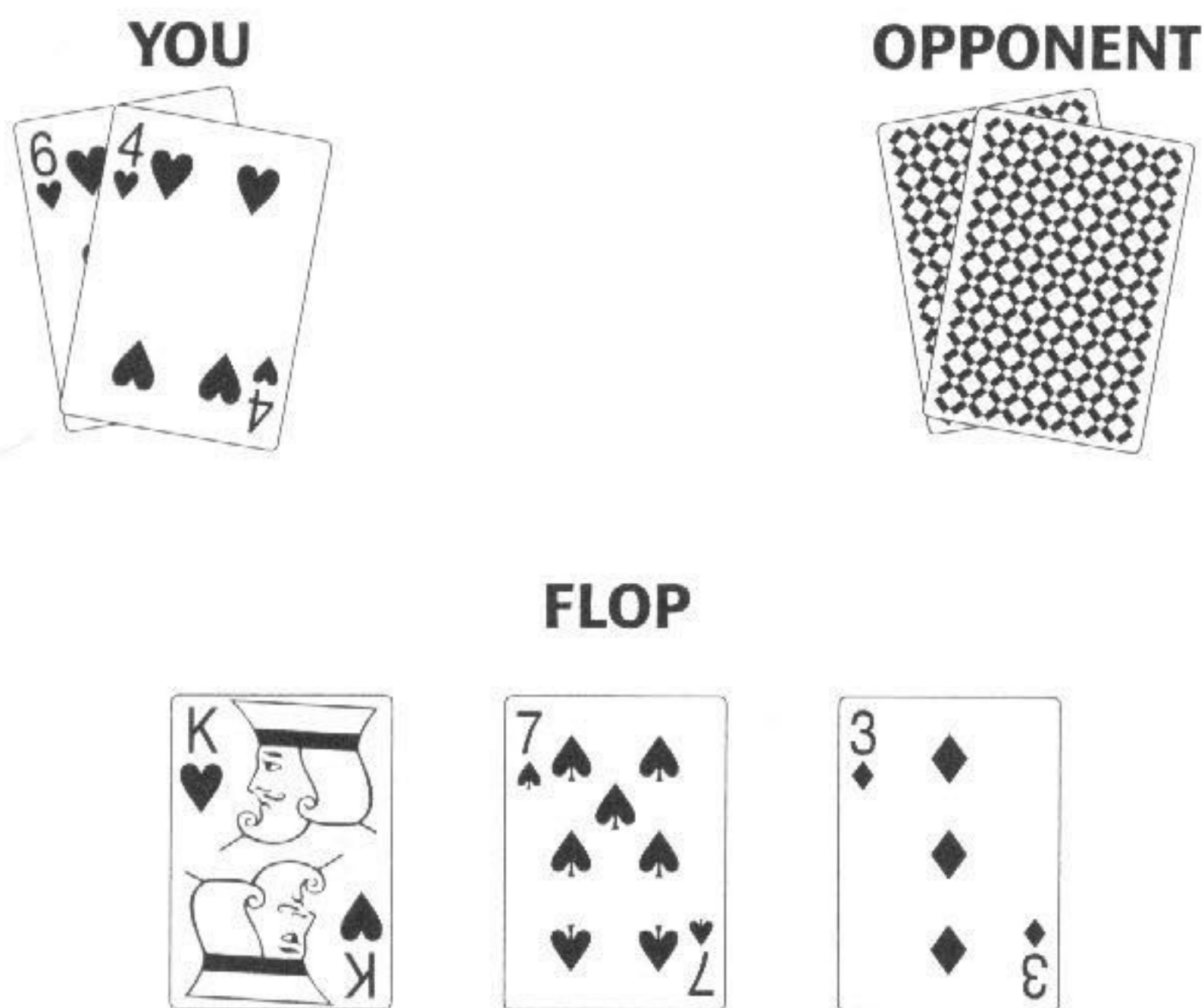
But what happens if your opponent checks on the turn, appearing to put up the white flag? With about \$3,000 in the pot, you could bet about \$1,500 and probably pick up the pot. Not always, of course, because a tricky player may decide to either check-raise you on the turn, or possibly even be happy to check and call with a better hand than yours. The point is that this play doesn't need to work even half the time to make it profitable since you are keeping your bets small, thus giving yourself a good price on the bluff attempt.

In this case, you'd be risking \$1,500 on the turn to win \$3,325 (\$300 in blinds and \$225 in antes). That's better than the 2 to 1 odds that your opponent will fold. Of course, if you factor in the \$800 call on the flop, that lessens your odds to something like \$2,300 to win \$3,325. However, that's not entirely true when your opponent actually bets the turn. If he checks and you pick up a draw on the turn, you could potentially win

more without having to invest anything on the turn. If you hit a backdoor draw, you have the potential to win even more.

Hand in Action 2

In this hand, you have a two-way play on the flop. With the blinds at \$25/\$50, your opponent makes it \$150 to go from early position preflop. Everyone folds around to you on the button. You call the raise with the 6♥ 4♥, and the blinds fold. The flop comes K♥ 7♠ 3♦.



With \$375 in the pot, your opponent bets out \$300. All you have is an inside straight draw, and you aren't really sure what your opponent has at this point. In one sense, you hope that he has A-A or even K-K, but if he has a hand like A-Q, that's not bad either.

Calling on the flop with this gutshot straight draw will actually give you two ways to win the pot. The most obvious way is to nail the straight on the turn, but the other way is to take control of the hand with a bet on the turn.

If your opponent has A-A, K-K, or even A-K, a 5 on the turn will look like a completely innocent card. In fact, if your opponent has K-K, he will think he has the absolute nuts. Based on that alone, it's often worth calling to hit the straight, because the potential payoff is huge.

That situation isn't going to happen very often, but that's okay because you can always fall back on Plan B. If your opponent raised with A-Q, Q-Q, J-J, A-J, or several other hands, he may be afraid of your call on the flop, thinking that you must have a king. If he checks the turn, you can often pick up the pot with a bet of, say, \$600. Betting \$600 to win \$975 in this spot is pretty good, with the added bonus of still having an out if your opponent calls.

Things change dramatically when you are out of position since you lose control of the betting and don't get enough information about your opponent's hand on the turn to make this play profitable in the long run. In position, you get the benefit of seeing your opponent either check or bet before you have to act. Out of position, this calling-with-nothing-on-the-flop play doesn't work nearly as well.

Let's look at an example.

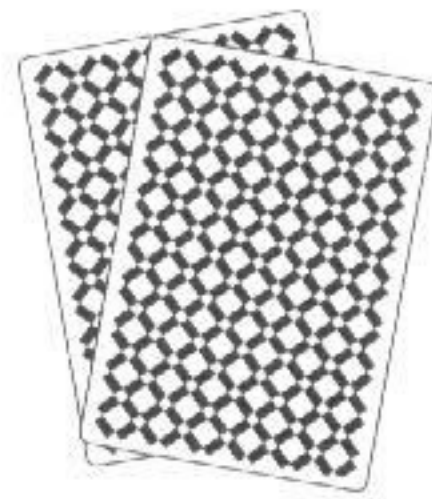
Hand in Action

The flop comes K♥ 7♠ 8♥ and you are out of position with J-9. You check the flop, your opponent bets, and you call. The turn is a 4♣.

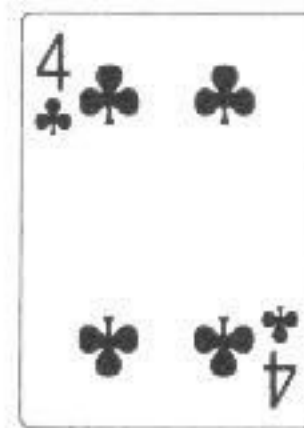
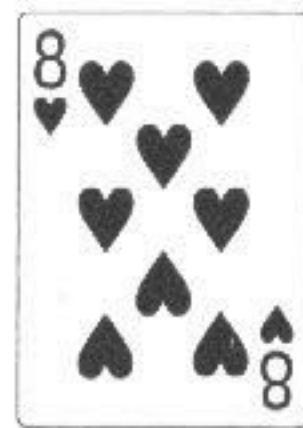
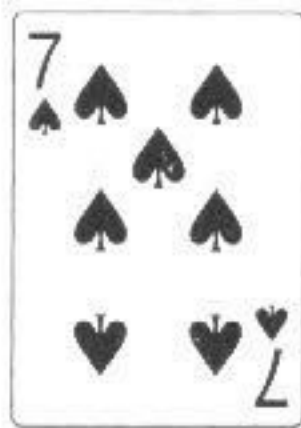
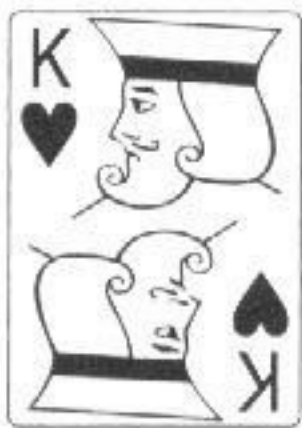
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



You check again. This time, your opponent also checks. Had the positions been reversed, you could have bet on the turn card in the hope of stealing the pot.

You do get one more chance to steal this pot on the river, but by then the play is much less effective. Based on the way you have played your hand, if you bet the river card, your opponent will call you with a wide variety of hands. You showed no real aggression until the river, plus several draws are on the board that you may have missed. For example, if your opponent has Q-Q, he will call your bet on the river a high percentage of the time. In fact, he may call you with as little as ace high!

The power of position allows you to take control of a hand like this and keep the heat on your opponent, who can't be sure that he won't be facing yet another large bet on the river. With marginal hands out of position, you may be able to force an opponent off a hand if you play your cards right.

The key to this play working for you is that your play has to be *believable*—as in, you would play a strong hand the same way as you are playing this hand. With a small-ball approach

to the game, you'll routinely be smooth calling with top pair, middle pair, sets, gutshots, overpairs, and all sorts of hands. Playing this way will make it easy to sell the idea that your call on the flop does not necessarily signify weakness at all, which will allow you to exploit your opponents even if they suspect what you are doing!

Seriously, the beauty of this approach to playing the flop is that, even if your opponents know that you like to smooth call with all sorts of hands, they don't know when you have a strong hand and when you are calling with nothing. Their defense against this sort of play is minimal since you are forcing them to play the guessing game.

WAITING UNTIL THE TURN FOR MORE INFORMATION

Another bone of contention I have with certain authors is the theory that you should play your hands aggressively on the flop so as to better define your hand, and at the same time, gain more information from your opponents. This theory is actually very effective in limit hold'em, but it doesn't translate well to no-limit tournaments.

The main reason it doesn't work as well in no-limit is simple: It's too expensive. In limit hold'em, a raise represents just one extra unit, but in no-limit hold'em, if you raise someone on the flop to "find out where you're at," it can cost you a pretty penny.

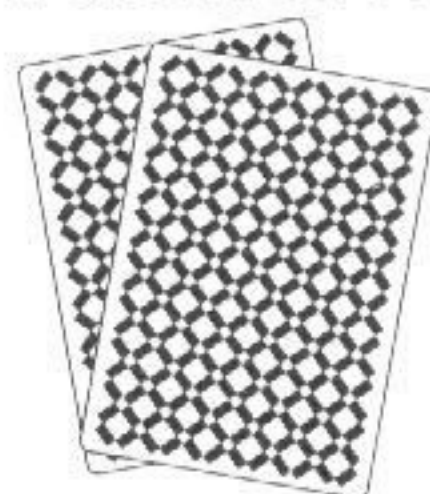
Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$50/\$100 a player from early position makes it \$300 to go before the flop. You call with the A♥J♥. The big blind calls, so three of you see the flop. It comes A♦8♠3♥.

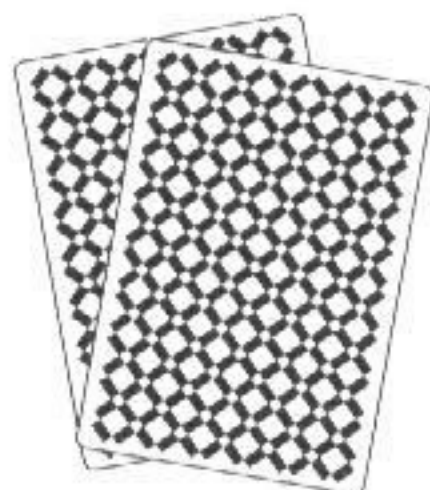
YOU



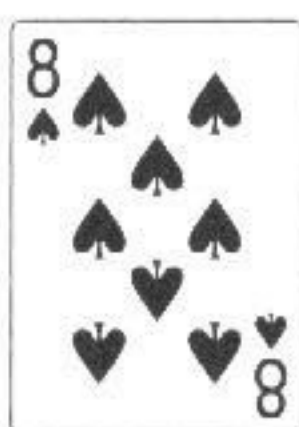
EARLY POSITION PLAYER



BIG BLIND



FLOP



The big blind checks and the preflop raiser bets out \$800. If you were to raise him here, a standard raise would cost you about \$2,400 in chips. So, let's say you do put in a raise, the big blind folds, and now the first raiser calls the bet.

Exactly what information have you gained? What if the under-the-gun player reraises you? In this case, it would seem as though you've gained some valuable information and your A-J is likely behind. You could fold and take your \$2,400 loss.

Let's look at the benefits of just calling on the flop. You'll see that, instead of \$2,400, you can get the same information with an \$800 call on the flop, plus a chance to reevaluate on the turn. Okay, so you just call on the flop and the big blind folds. The turn card is a queen and your opponent bets \$1,600. You still aren't sure if your A-J is the best hand, but the fact that

your opponent bet again should direct you towards thinking that you are beaten. Since you are unsure, though, you call the \$1,600.

At this point, it has cost you the exact same amount of chips that you spent when you raised on the flop instead of just calling. The only difference is that playing this way, you've made it all the way to the river. To help you figure out the best course of action on the river you have the following information: Your opponent raised preflop and followed through with a continuation bet on the flop. You called the bet, a queen hit the turn, yet your opponent wasn't afraid and bet again. You called that bet as well. Therefore, if your opponent makes a big bet at the river, he has to know that you have a strong hand and are not on a draw.

That's a lot of information. Your opponent could still bluff you on the river, but the same could be said about his flop reraise. He may be coming over the top of you on the flop with a weaker ace or just as a bluff.

There is one other key benefit to smooth calling on the flop in this situation rather than raising—you allow yourself a chance to suck out! If your opponent has A-K, bets the \$800, you make it \$2,400, and now he reraises you off the hand, you've just lost \$2,400 with no chance to get lucky. However, if you just call the flop, you could get really lucky and spike a jack on the turn or river. Or, you could even make a backdoor flush with the hand and possibly win a big pot.

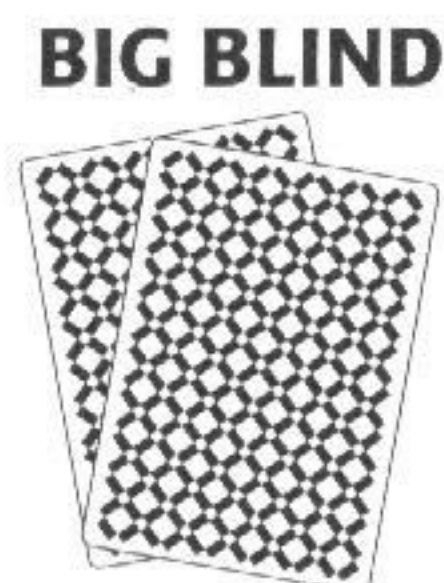
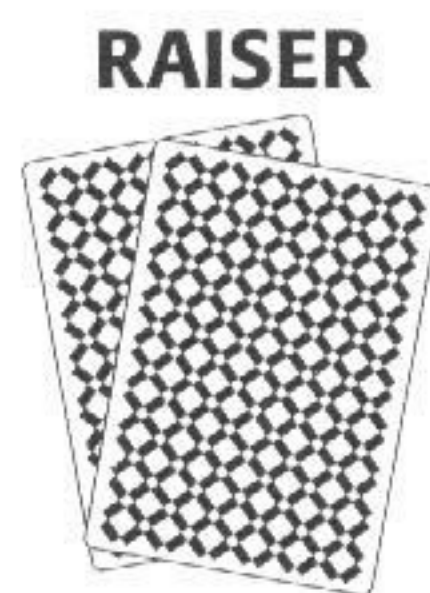
The only thing that's better about raising on the flop is that you protect your hand from being outdrawn when you are ahead, and you also get information about your opponent's hand quicker. However, getting outdrawn with A-J on an A-8-3 rainbow flop should be the least of your concerns. If you are in the lead, you will be substantially in the lead. A worse ace can

only hit one of three kickers, and a pocket pair can only hit one of two cards. The biggest threat is a total of five outs if your opponent has a hand such as 8-9. That's hardly something to be overly concerned about. As for the other benefit, who cares when you find out your opponent has you beat? If it costs you no more to see the river, but it takes longer to come to the conclusion that your opponent has you beat, how could that hurt you in the least?

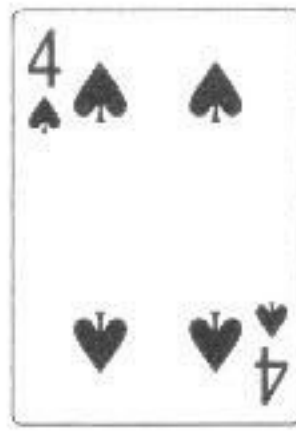
The next example combines several small-ball concepts.

Hand in Action

The blinds are \$200/\$400 with a \$50 ante when a player from middle position raises to \$1,200 preflop. You are sitting right behind him with Q-Q and smooth call the raise. The big blind also calls, building the pot to \$4,250. You are sitting on \$85,000 in chips, the big blind has about \$22,000 in chips, and the preflop raiser has about \$71,000. The flop comes J♣ 4♠ 5♦.



FLOP



The big blind checks and the preflop raiser bets \$3,000. You could make a case for raising to knock out the big blind, but that's a risky play in this situation. Here's why: Suppose you make it \$12,000 "to find out where you're at" and the big blind folds. The preflop raiser then decides to go all in. You don't know much about this player, so you are in no-man's land as to what you should do. You are behind against A-A, K-K, and any set, but you can beat top pair.

The real problem lies in the fact that if your opponent has an A-J, he may genuinely believe that he has the best hand and is pushing with it. Because you smooth called before the flop, playing careful small-ball poker, he might think that you have a jack with a worse kicker. The safe play for you to make here would be to fold your queens, forfeiting the \$12,000 you put in on the flop, plus the \$1,200 you called before the flop. All the while, you could easily be folding the best hand.

Once again, let's see what changes when you just call on the flop. If you smooth call on the flop, your opponent may put you on one of the following hands: a jack with a mediocre kicker, a pocket pair like nines or tens, or possibly a set of fours, fives, or jacks.

If the turn comes a blank, your opponent will likely give up on the hand if he can't beat a pair of jacks, though he might continue to bet with a pair of jacks or better. You have a strong overpair, but your opponent could easily be holding a bigger pair, or possibly even a set.

If your opponent bets the turn, I would suggest smooth calling once again unless the turn card is an ace. In that case, you will have to do your best to get a read on him. If you can't come up with anything, you should still call the turn provided the bet isn't too big.

APPEARING TO PLAY WEAK POKER

Anytime you choose to play what appears to be weak poker, you're probably giving up something. That's true, but there are also several things you gain. Let's look at both sides of the coin.

What You Give Up

Free cards. By not playing aggressively on the flop or the turn, you give your opponent a free shot to outdraw you. But how risky is that really? If your opponent has a pocket pair smaller than yours and you allow him to see the turn *and* the river, he will win the pot just 8.38 percent of the time. If your opponent has an A-J, he has a total of five outs against you. If he sees the turn and the river, he'll win the pot just 20 percent of the time. That's really not that scary, especially considering the fact that if he does outdraw your pocket pair, you'll get to see it.

Either an ace or a jack on the turn would be a scare card to your hand. The biggest draw he could legitimately have would be A-K. With an A-K, if he goes to the river, he will outdraw you 23.54 percent of the time. It's a risk, but I wouldn't call it the end of the world when you factor in the benefits of being cautious.

What You Gain

You trap an opponent with top pair into continuing to bet thinking he has the best hand. You show weakness, which he may pick up on, and decide to push through the hand with something like 9-9. Lastly, by cautiously playing a hand such as

queens against a flop like J♣ 4♠ 5♦, as in the example above, you make it highly unlikely that you'll be bluffed off of the best hand.

Over the years, there has been so much emphasis on being aggressive that the idea of being passive is often seen as weak or poor play. Aggressive players may even mock a player who proceeds cautiously, not understanding that there is a time to be aggressive, and there is a time to be careful and protect your stack.

Aggressive players will often amass large stacks of chips by playing wildly aggressive after the flop. If they continue to play recklessly, it's only a matter of time before they will run into a trap that they can't escape.

Playing small-bet poker as a style will keep you involved in lots of pots, but the main objective is to win the pots you are supposed to win without taking any unnecessarily large risks. A small-ball player isn't trying to get all in before the flop with pocket queens, or get all in on the flop with top pair or an overpair. In fact, a small-ball player doesn't ever want to be all in at any point in the tournament—unless he has the absolute nuts, of course!

Playing cautiously after the flop will help you avoid getting involved in large pots in marginal situations. Yes, you'll lose some extra pots when your opponents outdraw you, but you will more than make up for that with the money you save by avoiding playing big pots that you'll lose, and with the money you earn by letting your opponent bet the hand for you.

PLAYING SMALL-BET POKER AS A STYLE WILL KEEP YOU INVOLVED IN LOTS OF POTS, BUT THE MAIN OBJECTIVE IS TO WIN THE POTS YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO WIN WITHOUT TAKING ANY UNNECESSARILY LARGE RISKS

TURN PLAY

Without a doubt, the most difficult and important decision you'll have to make in a typical hold'em hand will come on the turn. That's when you need to collect all the information you've processed up to that point and decide whether it makes sense for you to continue to the end of the hand.

More specifically, the turn is the most crucial street in small ball because you are nearing big-pot territory after the preflop and postflop action.

WINNING POTS WITH POSITION

The majority of your stack-building during a tournament will come when you are playing hands in position. Out of position, it is hard to get maximum value for your winning hands unless you have a very strong hand. Further, it is difficult to successfully execute bluffs.

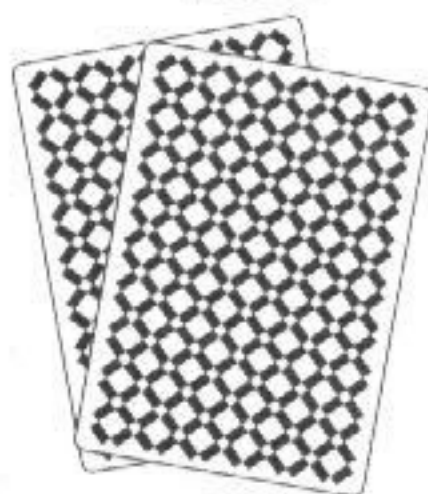
The real beauty of small ball is best illustrated by turn-play in position. You can keep the pot small with your betting, and force your opponent to take large risks if he decides to get aggressive. Let me share an example with you that really helps tell the story.

Hand in Action

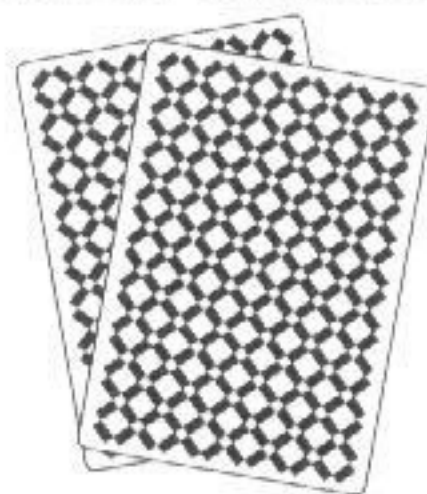
In this hand, I'm not even going to tell you what you have just yet. With the blinds at \$50/\$100, a player from late position makes it \$300 to go. You call on the button and take the flop heads-up. The flop comes A♠ 8♦ 4♠. Your opponent hangs on to the lead by betting \$600 on the flop. You call.

The turn card is the 5♠.

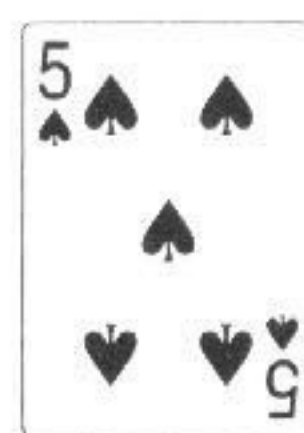
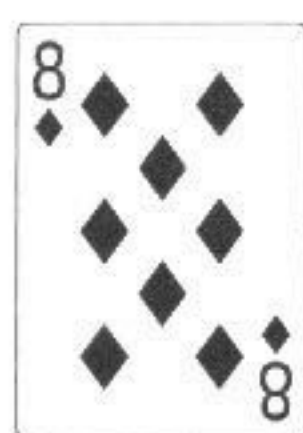
YOU



LATE POSITION



BOARD



Whatever your opponent has, he is not going to love that card—unless he has the absolute nuts of course. The 5♠ hits a 2-3 straight, a 6-7 straight, and also makes a flush possible. If you were in your opponent's shoes with a hand like A♥ K♥, how much would you really love your hand on the turn? Sure, you have aces with a king kicker, but if you play a big pot in this situation, how in the world could you ever be in good shape?

Many players might check the A-K in that spot, and if you are a small-ball player, you should too. If you bet the turn and get raised, your opponent could easily be semi-bluff-raising you with the A♦ Q♠, for example. Since it would be difficult to call a raise with the A-K when you're out of position, checking is the cautious play.

Okay, so we still don't even know what we have yet—and I'm still not going to tell you! With \$1,950 in the pot, you should bet about \$1,200 with virtually any hand. If you have the flush, you are betting it for value; if you have 8♣ 9♣, you are betting it as a bluff; and if you have an ace you'll be betting it to:

1. Protect your hand, and
2. Help define your opponent's hand.

Here's where the beautiful part comes into play. Even if your opponent knows that you'll often "float" the flop with a weak hand, because he is out of position and his weapons are limited, raising would not usually be his best option. In fact, anything other than checking and calling would be a risky play. Folding may be a little too weak facing a \$1,200 bet and check-raising is usually very costly when a player is beat.

While you actually prefer your opponents to check and call rather than check and raise so that you can control the pot size, even when they check-raise, in the long run it's beneficial to you as a small-ball player.

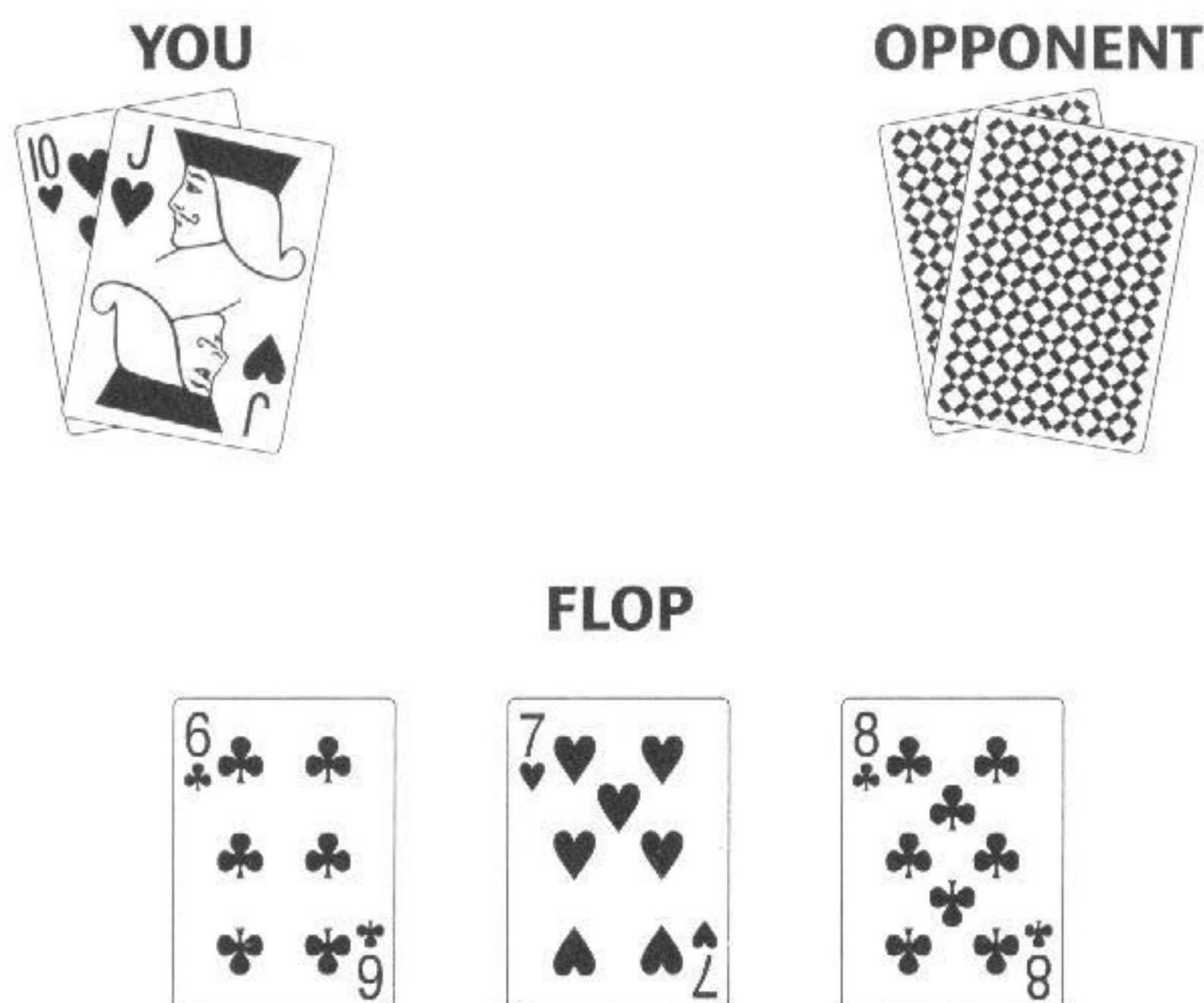
If your opponent check-raises you with his A-K, he'll probably risk anywhere from \$4,200 to \$6,000, or possibly even his whole stack. That puts him in a vulnerable position and allows you to play a big pot on your terms. If you are bluffing, oh well, you let him have the \$1,200 bet. It's not the end of the world and won't put a huge dent in your stack. However, when you do have the goods, your opponent has already laid a big bet out there for you to capitalize on. In fact, with his check-raise, he may have committed himself to a pot where, in many instances, he will be drawing completely dead.

Let's look at another example, only this time I'm going to tell you what you have!

Hand in Action

With \$100/\$200 blinds, you raise preflop from late position to \$500 with 10♥J♥. The big blind, a rather conservative player who rarely reraises unless he has a premium hand, reraises the bet to \$1,500. It's \$1,000 more to you, and both you and your opponent are sitting on about \$30,000 in chips. You call.

The flop comes 6♣ 7♥ 8♣, giving you nothing but a gutshot straight draw and a backdoor flush draw.



Your opponent bets \$2,000 into the \$3,100 pot.

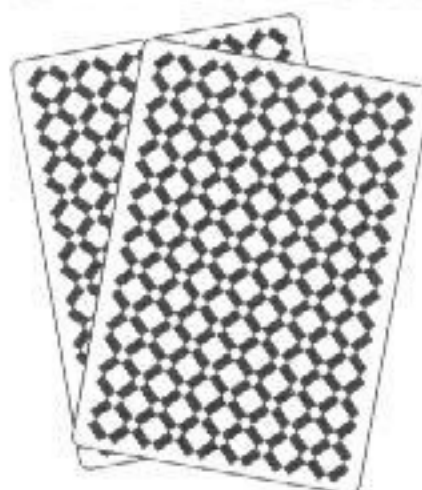
Despite having only a measly gutshot straight draw, this is an excellent flop for you given the fact that your opponent's hand is pretty transparent (A-A, K-K, Q-Q, or A-K), while your hand is well-disguised. Lots of different cards could roll off on the turn that will help you take this pot away from your opponent. If a 4, 5, 8, 10, or any club hits the turn, your opponent is certainly going to worry about your hand being better than his. Add all of those draws to the fact that you also could easily have flopped a set, and this board is perfect for you to make a play at the pot. Also, if you happen to get really lucky and hit a 9 to make your straight, you can milk your opponent slowly, being careful not to scare him out of the pot.

Okay, so let's say the turn card is the 5♠.

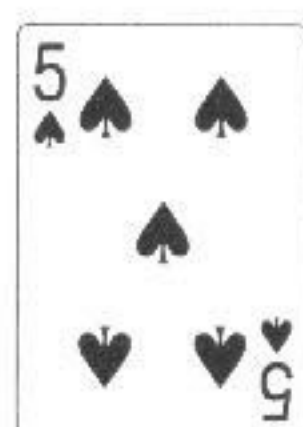
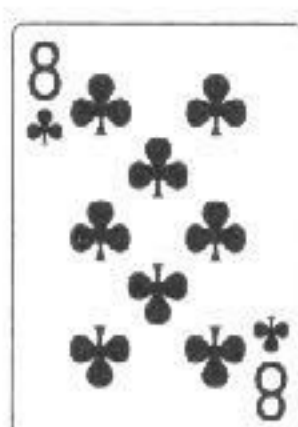
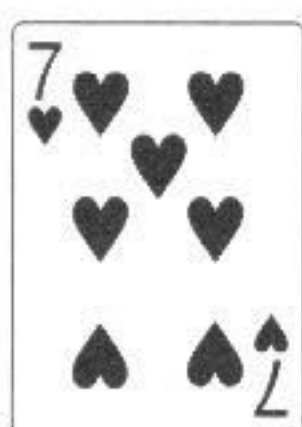
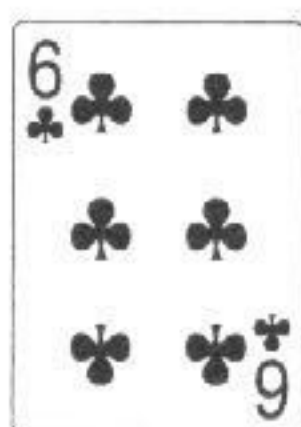
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



Your opponent will likely check the turn. If he doesn't and bets, you should seriously consider making a raise. It doesn't have to be a big raise either. If your opponent bets \$4,000, you could make it as little as \$9,000 to go. Any raise will get you the desired information you are looking for, and by making a smallish raise, you might convince your opponent that you are inviting him to call.

If he checks, as he is more likely to do, then you can approach the situation one of two ways:

1. You can make another smallish bet on the turn. If he was just making a continuation bet on the flop with an A-K, he'll fold to a small bet on the turn. However, if he has A-A or K-K, he may decide to call a small turn bet and see what you do on the river. Making the small turn bet is actually the "greedy" way to play the hand, provided that you are committed to bluffing the hand on the river as well. By making a minimal turn bet, you increase the likelihood that your opponent will call the bet, which will give you more chips to steal on the

river! If your opponent calls your bet on the turn, you'll need to make a much larger bet on the river to take it down.

2. This option is actually a little safer since it will usually end the hand right then and there before anything crazy happens. If your opponent checks the turn, a bet of anywhere from 50 to 65 percent of the pot will allow you to take it down, even if he has A-A.

When making these types of plays, you must make sure that you are up against the right type of opponent—one who is on the conservative side and who is aware that you could have any sort of a hand in this situation. Strangely, small ball works even better when your opponents know that you'll sometimes raise with small cards. It actually opens up even more bluffing opportunities since you could feasibly hit any flop, whether it comes with high cards, middle cards, or even wheel cards. Every flop could look dangerous to your opponent.

The worst type of image you could have in a deep-stack, big buy-in tournament, is that of a player who only raises with pocket pairs and ace-paint. If your opponents know that you only raise from early position with those types of hands, they'll have too much information, and that will work against you when the flop comes small or is coordinated. When a flop comes 5-6-7, that sort of image will hurt you regardless of whether you have A-K or K-K.

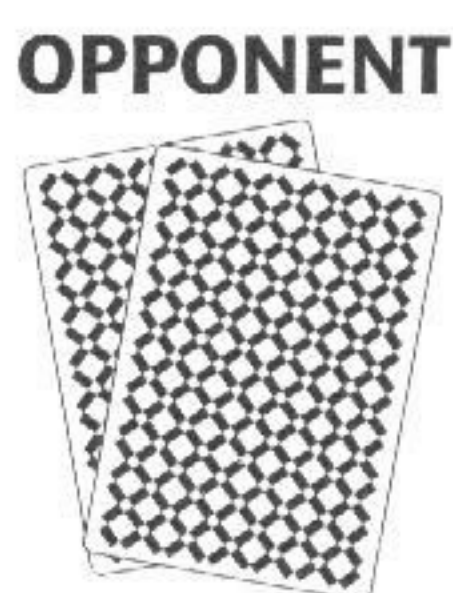
THE JOHNNY CHAN PLAY

I can't think of anything better to call this play. Since Johnny Chan is the master of the check-call, and lead-the-turn play, I thought it would only be appropriate to credit him with this weapon.

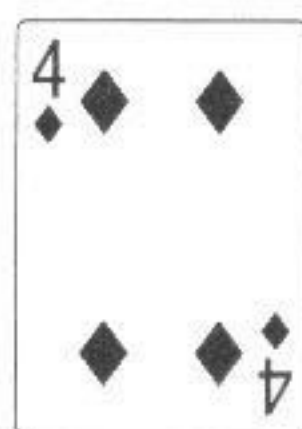
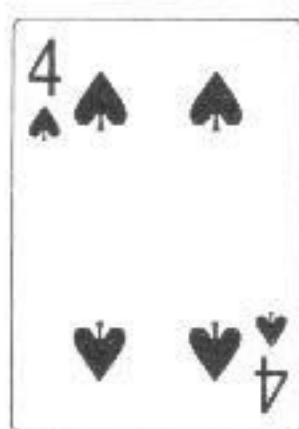
When you are out of position on the turn, your ability to maneuver is limited. Chan developed a play years ago that would allow him to neutralize his opponent's positional advantage over him at minimal risk. Strangely, this is a play you should never consider making in limit hold'em, but in no-limit hold'em, it can be a very effective way of taking control of a hand while playing small-bet poker. Let's look at an example of how this play works.

Hand in Action

At a nine-handed table, with the blinds at \$200/\$400 and a \$50 ante, a player raises to \$1,200 from middle position before the flop. You—pretend you are Johnny Chan for this example—call from the big blind with 10-10. Both you and your opponent are sitting on more than \$30,000 in chips. The flop comes Q♥ 4♠ 4♦.



FLOP

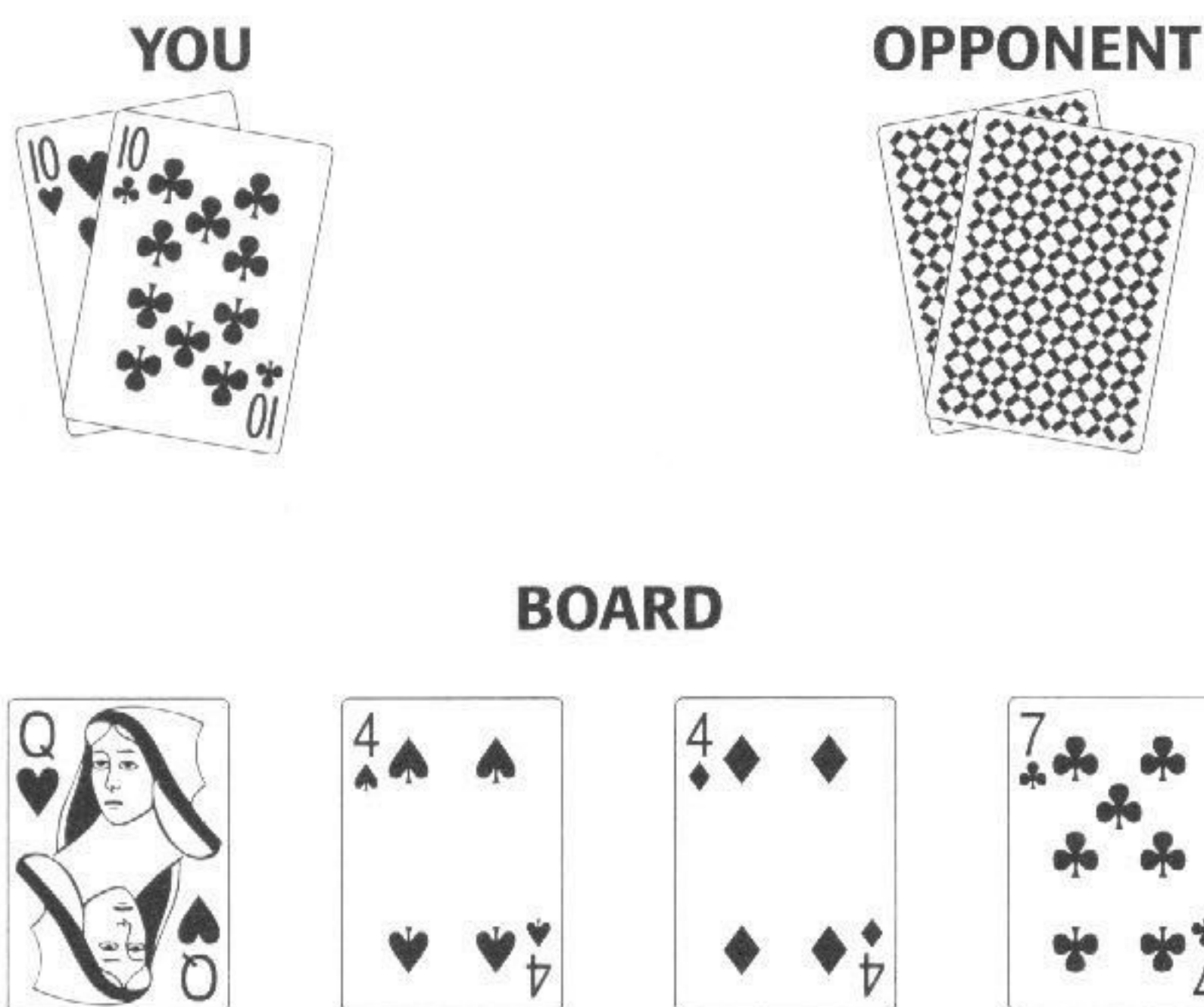


Not a great flop for your hand, but it's not exactly a terrible flop either.

You check and your opponent makes a continuation bet of \$2,000. You have three options here, all of which you may use depending on your opponent.

1. If your opponent never bluffs, you can consider folding on the flop.
2. If your opponent usually plays pretty aggressively, you could check-raise the flop to around \$5,500.
3. Or you could do what Johnny Chan or I might do: Just call the bet.

Let's say you've called and the turn card is a meaningless 7.



You could check it again and hope that your opponent gives up on the betting, or you could pull a Chan and take control of the hand by betting it yourself. If you bet \$3,000 on the turn, your opponent will be forced to guess where you're at. Could you have the 4? Of course you could; you were in the big blind, after all. Could you have the queen? Why not?

If your opponent is sitting there with the best hand, there is a chance that he might not even raise you. With queens, kings

or aces, he may fear that you have the 4 and just call your turn bet. If he does call, you have to assume that your tens are no good. So unless you catch a 10 on the river, you can safely muck your hand if he bets after the last card. If you do have the best hand, by betting the turn yourself, you avoid having to face a large bet on the turn, guessing whether your tens are good and your opponent is bluffing.

Your bet is a protection bet in many ways. It protects against overcards when you have the best hand, and it also protects you from facing a large bluff on the river. Your opponent could raise you on the turn as a bluff, but it's highly unlikely—only a handful of players are capable of that play.

There is an added bonus to playing your hand like this—you could bluff out the best hand. Let's say that instead of 10-10, you have 6-6. You make that same play and you'll have a good chance to take the pot away from an opponent with 7-7 through J-J. If he happens to call you on the turn, it will almost certainly be check-check on the river, so all it will cost you is the turn bet.

More Thoughts on the Johnny Chan Play

To keep opponents off your back, you'll also need to play very strong hands this way from time to time as well. You might be wondering why this play is sometimes better than just check-raising on the flop. While it costs you virtually the same amount, the information you receive won't be as telling. Your opponent is more likely to call a check-raise on the flop with a wider range of hands than if you check-call on the flop and lead on the turn.

Since your opponent is more likely to call the flop bet, that creates another problem for you on the turn. What do you know? With the pot being much bigger now, a standard bet is going to cost you about \$10,000 in chips. Betting is very

risky, since your opponent called the flop. More often than not, you'll be forced to check the turn and then be forced to guess on the river if your opponent bets.

Obviously, this play has pros and cons and should be used only occasionally. I've talked about the pros, which far outweigh the only real con—giving free cards. By letting your opponent see the turn card, he might outdraw you if he has an A-J or something similar. The good news is that his hand won't be hidden. If an ace hits the turn, you aren't committed to following through with the play and can abort mission. Besides, you won't be giving your opponent two free cards, since if the turn is a safe card, you'll be taking over the lead right there.

In limit hold'em, this play just doesn't make any sense. In limit, you would certainly go ahead and check-raise the flop if you planned to bet the turn. Check-raising isn't as risky since it only costs you one bet on the flop, and it doesn't affect the size of the turn bet. However, check-raising in no-limit hold'em makes the pot bigger, which also means that it will force you and your opponent to make larger bets. Since this is a marginal situation at best, that's the last thing you want to do, especially out of position.

By using the "Chan Play," you take control of the size of the pot on the turn by not allowing your opponent to decide how much goes in on the turn—unless, of course, he is prepared to raise you.

Any time you are using a play, it is important to make sure that you have the right opponent. Many top pros will see through this play, recognizing it as a weak leading-bet, and they *will* pounce on it as a bluff. These types of players are in the minority. Most average players would never try to take this pot away from you.

CHECK-RAISING THE TURN

One powerful weapon at your disposal on the turn is the check-raise. However, although you should often use it in limit hold'em, you should check-raise only occasionally in no-limit if you're a small-ball player. There are three main reasons for this:

1. The most obvious reason is that a check-raise makes the pot bigger, so you had better be sure that's something you want to happen before making this play.
2. If you're out of position and your opponent calls you on the turn, you'll be faced with a difficult decision on the river.
3. A check-raise might cost you pots that you could have won. That could happen one of two ways.
 - a. You check-raise with a drawing hand and your opponent reraises, forcing you off the hand.
 - b. He could reraise you as a bluff, representing a hand that he doesn't think you have.

The turn check-raise is a powerful weapon, but like all power tools, it should be handled with great care. The play also goes against many small ball concepts since it is designed to get more money in the pot which will force bigger bets on the river. This is good when you have the nuts or close to it, and it's also why I suggest that you have a monster hand when you check-raise the turn.

Check-Raising With Drawing Hands

One of the worst moves I see players make—those with some talent, but rough around the edges—is to check-raise the turn with a flush draw or a straight draw. Yuck! The reason I don't like this play very much is that you have an opponent who has bet the turn, which shows significant strength in most cases.

Far too often, he will at least call your check-raise, or worse, move all in on you. If he moves in, you will be forced to gamble for your whole tournament life on a draw with one card to come, or waste a bet with no chance to even see the river card. On the other hand, if you just call the bet, you'll have a chance to hit your draw and potentially get paid off on the river.

The only time when these plays have some merit is when the stacks are extremely deep, but even then, the check-raise with a drawing hand on the turn is a kamikaze-like gamble that doesn't fit into the small-ball strategy very well. If you consistently make this type of play, it will be difficult for you to have any sort of consistent results on the tournament circuit. You'll catch lightning in a bottle on the odd occasion, but more often than not, this type of play will cause you to hit the rail prematurely.

Check-Raising With the Nuts

Once your opponents catch on to the fact that you will often check-call out of position, that will make some of them more likely to fire a second bullet on the turn in the hopes of either:

1. Protecting their hands, or
2. Stealing the hand from you with nothing.

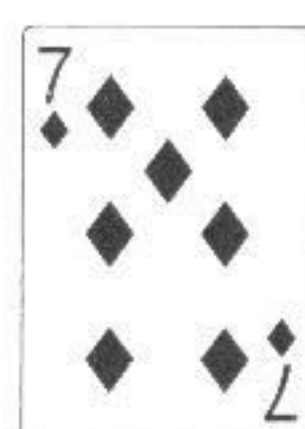
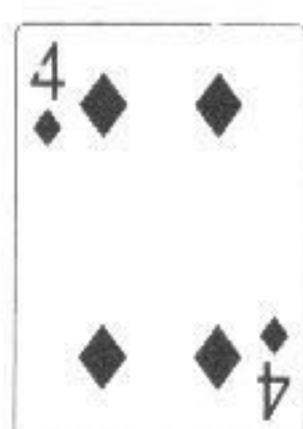
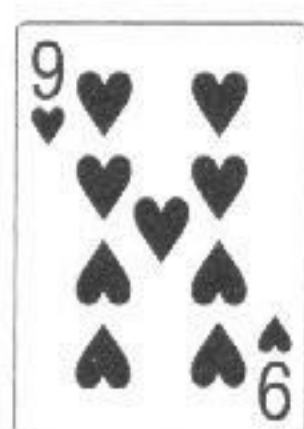
Against these types of players, check-raising on the turn with a set, a flush, or a straight will be a play that works well.

Here's an important thing to think about on the turn when you have the nuts: If you check-raise, make sure you don't take the "play" away from an opponent who may want to try a re-steal, or even a re-raise with a hand he thinks is the best hand. Let's see how this might play out.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$25/\$50 both you and your opponent are sitting on \$10,000 in chips. You raise to \$150 from early position with 9-9, and the opponent to your left makes it \$400 to go. You suspect a strong hand, but decide to call anyway to try to flop a set. The flop comes perfect, 9♥ 4♦ 2♥. You check, and your opponent bets \$600. You could play this hand several ways, but suppose you decide to represent a drawing hand and just call, in the hope that, in fact, the draw misses.

The turn card is perfect, the 7♦.

**BOARD**

You check once again, and this time your opponent bets \$1,800. With only \$10,000 in chips, you could go all in now, but since you put your opponent on a strong hand preflop, likely A-A or K-K, you don't want to scare him off. Additionally, you want to represent a drawing hand so that your opponent shoves after you check-raise.

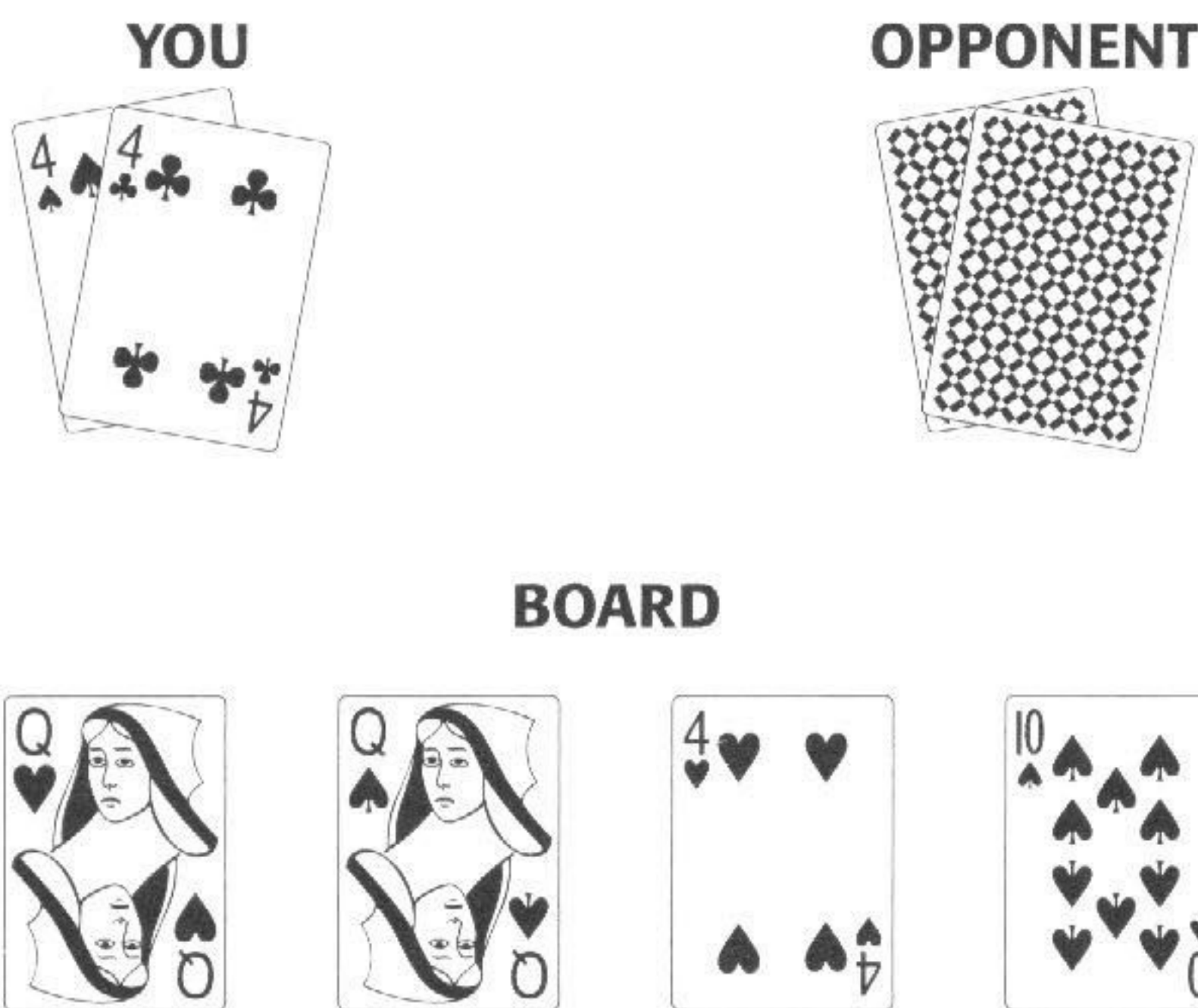
With \$9,000 in chips after the preflop and postflop betting, I would suggest raising the bet to around \$4,000, just \$2,200 more. If your opponent has an overpair, he may decide to

protect what he feels is the best hand, and shove it all in. Sweet! Had you moved all in yourself, he still may call, but the all-in bet may scare him off too.

This example shows how you might approach check-raising with the nuts when you put your opponent on a strong hand. But what about when you put your opponent on a bluff? Let's look at that.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$100/\$200 and \$18,000 in chips sitting in front of you, you raise to \$500 preflop with 4-4 and get one call on the button. The flop comes Q♥ Q♠ 4♥, giving you a full house. You check the flop and your opponent checks as well. The turn card is the 10♠.



You decide to check again against an aggressive opponent who you don't think can sit on his hands for two streets in a row! As expected, your opponent fires out a bet for \$1,000. You see that he only has about \$7,000 left, so you don't want to discourage him from continuing to play by putting him all in.

Instead, you'd rather see him make a move on you for his last chips. It's a perfect opportunity to put in a check-raise.

Any amount from \$2,000 to \$2,500 is a good number of chips to raise. That way, if he thinks you're bluffing, he may decide to represent the queen (little does he know that's no good!) and shove it all in with anything from A-10 to a straight and/or flush draw.

Two different examples, but in both you allow your opponent to hang himself. The lesson here is that when you have the nuts, you always want to give your opponent a chance to hang himself by making a play at the pot. If your raise is too big, you take that play away from him.

Check-Raising as a Stone Bluff

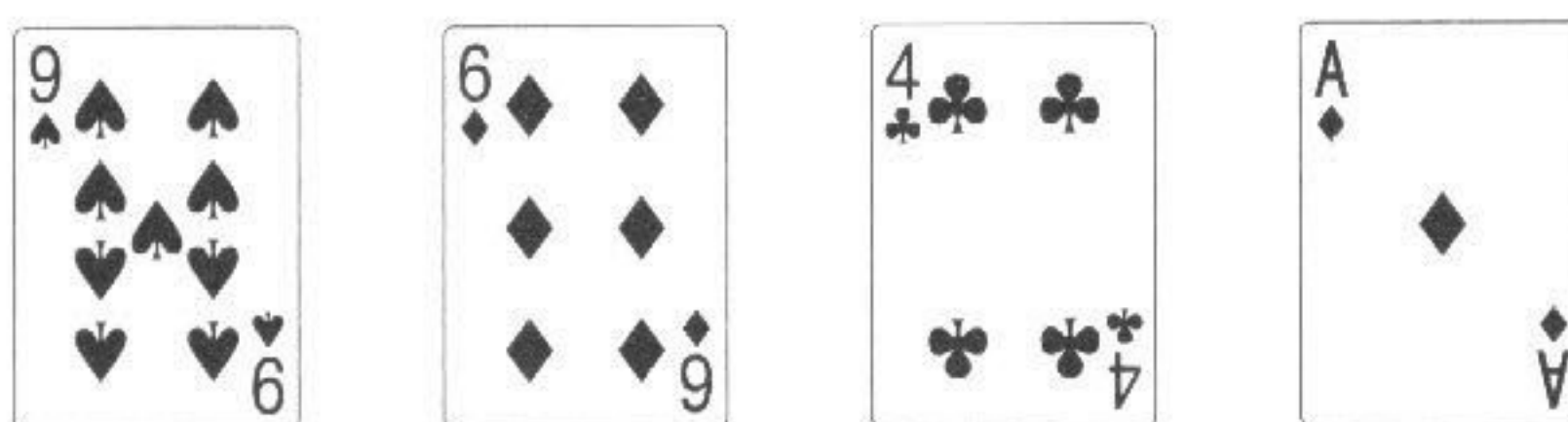
Your bluff-raise is going to look just like your legitimate raises when you have the nuts. To effectively bluff the turn using a check-raise, you'll need to have a good read on your opponent. If you just sat down at a table and have no information on your opponents, you simply shouldn't bother with this play. However, once you've mapped out the table and know who the rocks are, and have spotted the bluffers and the weak players, you can use your reading skills to take some pots away from your opponents with absolutely nothing. Let's see how.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$50/\$100, an aggressive player raises preflop to \$300 from late position. You are the only caller, coming in from the big blind with Q-J. The flop comes 9♠ 6♦ 4♣. You check and your opponent checks. The turn brings the A♦.



BOARD



You check again. Now, your opponent bets out \$350.

Based on your read of this particular opponent, if he had ace high on the flop, he would have bet to protect his hand. You also picked up a tell—based on his bet size and the way that he bet his chips—that he doesn't have the ace at all. There is no flush draw present, and if he had a straight draw on the flop, your read tells you that he probably would have bet on the flop. Your hand is irrelevant in this situation.

Including his \$350 bet, there is \$1,000 in the pot. By making it \$1,000 to go, you are essentially making an even-money bet that your information was accurate: A \$1,000 raise to win a \$1,000 pot.

Your check-raise here should win you the pot more than half the time, and that's all you need for it to be a profitable play. Sometimes you'll be wrong and he'll have an ace, and sometimes he may even bluff you back, thinking that you don't have an ace. Or maybe he flopped a set and was setting a trap. All these outcomes are possible. But the good news is that the play didn't cost you very much and, even when you get caught,

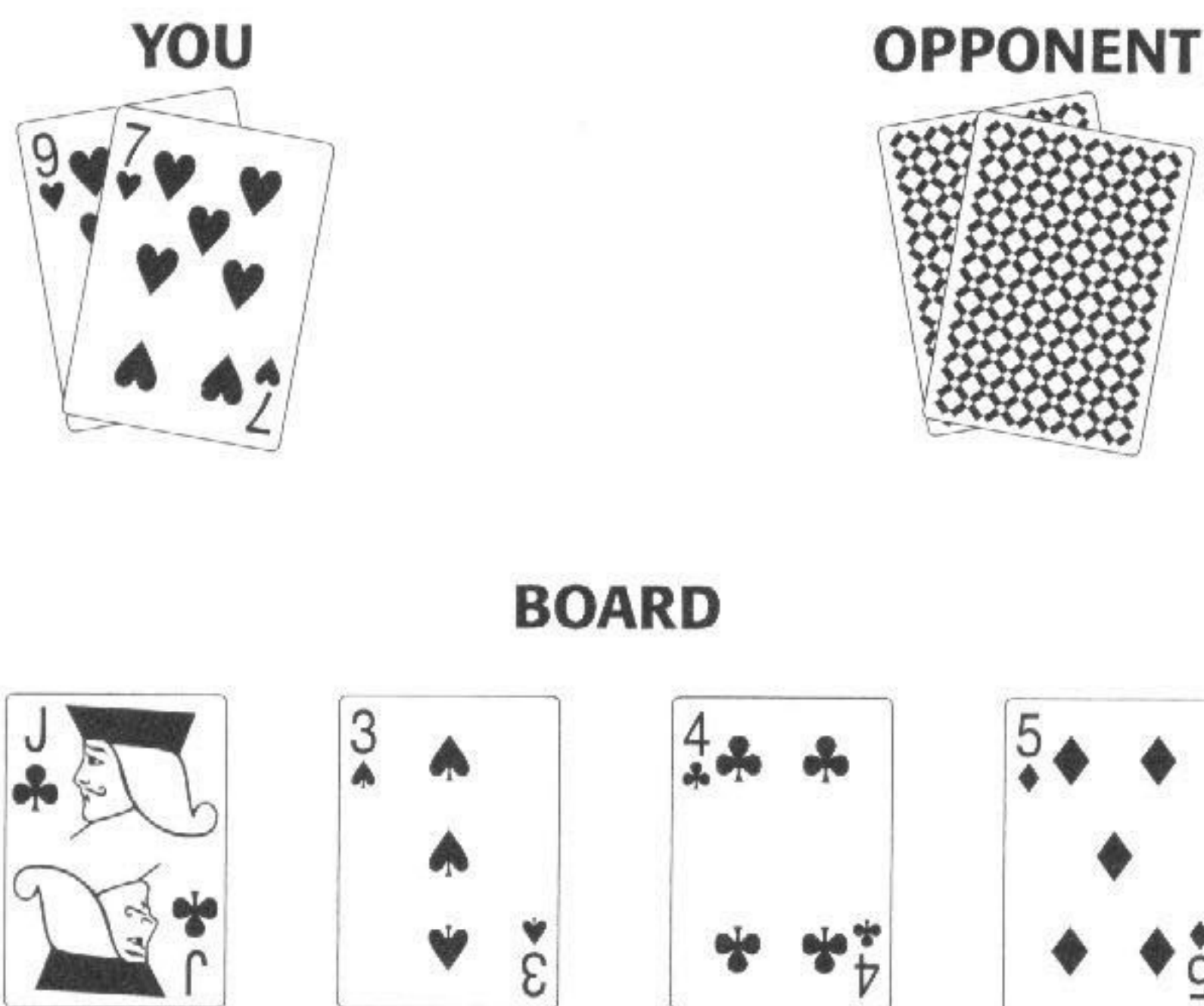
you can use that play to enhance your table image later in the game when you check-raise with the nuts.

The key to check-raising the turn for a profit is understanding your opponent's betting patterns and playing your hand in such a way that your opponent will believe your lie. Let's look at another example.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$100/\$200, a tight player raises preflop to \$600 in first position, and you call from the big blind with 9♥ 7♥. Both you and your opponent have over \$15,000 in chips. The J♣ 3♠ 4♣ flop completely misses you. You check and your opponent also checks behind you, which leads you to believe that he either flopped a set of jacks or has an A-K. Since there are two clubs on the flop, though, you lean more towards your opponent having an A-K.

The turn card brings the 5♦.



You could take a stab at the pot right here, or you could see what develops if you check. You check the turn and your opponent bets \$1,000. If he has an A-K, he's probably thinking that his hand is still good, and he doesn't want a free card to come off. With his bet, there is \$2,300 in the pot.

With a 3-4-5 on board, there are lots of hands you could represent: A-2, 6-7, 5-5, 4-5, and so on, or a hand as simple as J-10. To steal this pot, all you need to invest is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$2,500 to win \$2,400 in a spot where it doesn't look as though your opponent has much of a hand. At the same time, the board looks like it could easily have hit your hand. The fact that you actually have just 9 high and a gutshot straight draw is irrelevant since you know that your opponent is unlikely to call a check-raise with a hand such as ace high.

Contrary to popular belief, poker isn't all about bluffing, nor are elaborate yet risky all-in bluffs the way to consistently win on the poker circuit. When they work, you may look like a Mozart, but more often than not you'll end up looking foolish.

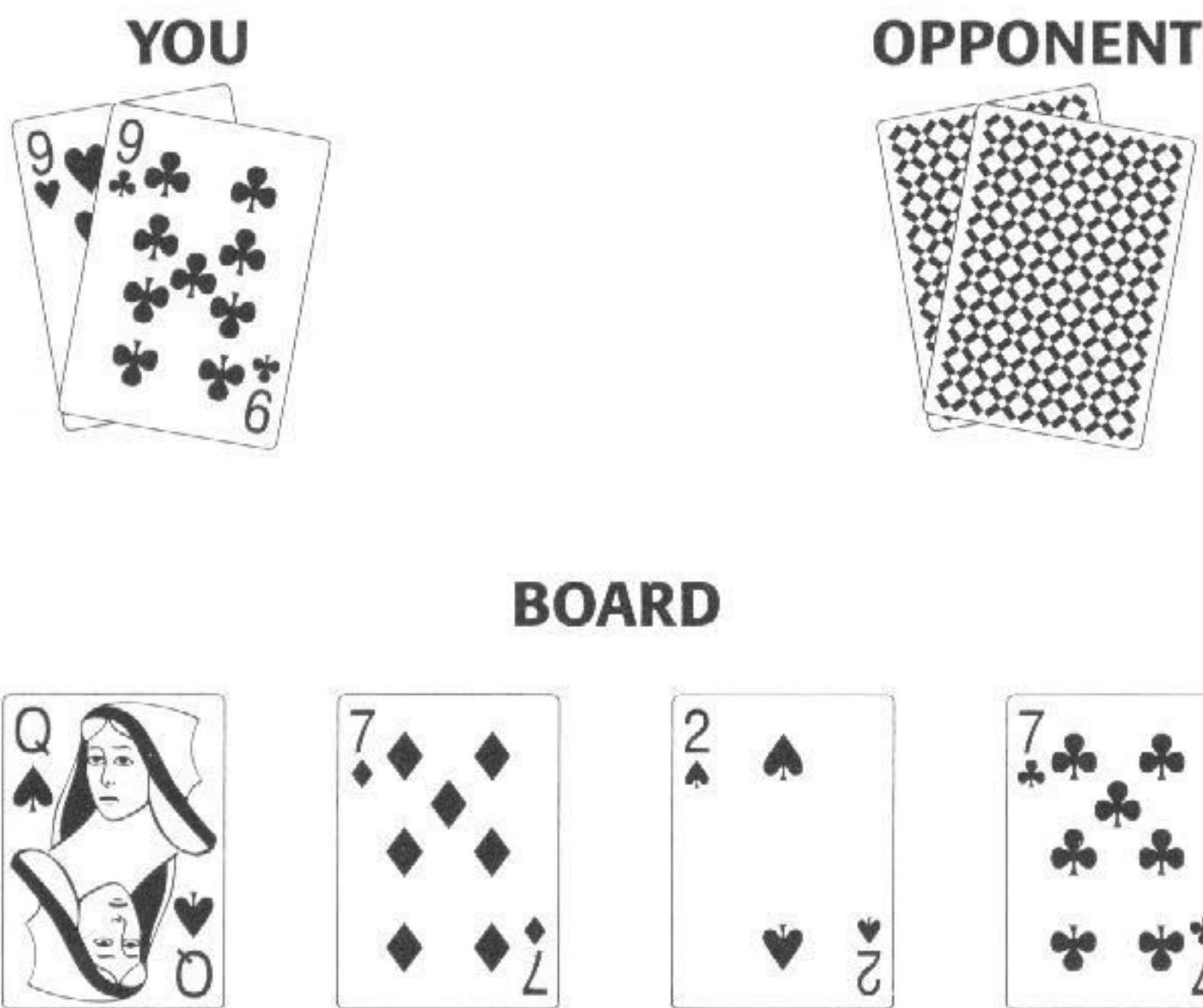
Bluffing is an art form. In a sense, it's believable story telling that doesn't require bets that are out of character for you. In fact, when you make outlandish bets that don't seem to fit in with your playing style, alarm bells go off in your opponent's head telling him that you are likely to be bluffing. When bluffing is effortless, you know you're doing it right!

Check-Raising to Find Out Where You're At

Once again, this isn't a play I'm too fond of, but it can be useful in certain situations against the right opponents. It's an extension of the Johnny Chan "check-call lead-the-turn" play. You use the check-raise to help define your opponent's hand, possibly bluff him off a better hand, and protect yourself from facing a large river bet. Let's see how it works.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$25/\$50, a player raises preflop to \$150 from middle position. You call from the small blind with 9-9, and it's the two of you to the flop: $Q\spadesuit 7\spadesuit 2\spadesuit$. You check and your opponent bets \$300. Unsure if your hand is good against an aggressive player who routinely bets the flop after raising, you decide to call to see what the next card brings. The turn is the $7\clubsuit$.



You could use the Chan play here, but you are worried that this particular player is capable of sniffing out the weak-lead play and will bluff-raise you. You check, and your opponent bets \$600. Still unsure as to whether your hand is good, you could call and hope that the river bet is small, or you could check-raise the turn to define your opponent's hand.

That 7 should scare your opponent a little bit if he doesn't have it. You could easily have a hand like 7-8. With the flush draw present, your opponent may even bet a hand such as 4-4 to protect it against what he perceives to be a flush draw. Your biggest worry, though, is that if you call \$600, your extremely aggressive opponent is capable of firing a third and large

bullet at the pot on the river, which would put you in a difficult situation.

One defense against that is to check-raise the minimum on the turn. Anything from \$1,200 to \$1,500 should scare your opponent and he will almost never play back at you as a bluff. If he reraises you after you make this play, you should feel pretty safe that your 9-9 is definitely beat.

Again, the added bonus is that your opponent may let go of J-J or 10-10 to your raise. However, if your opponent calls the turn raise, you should check the river, unless you hit the 9, of course. Your opponent should be slightly worried that you are going for another check-raise on the river and will likely be happy to check down the best hand if he has you beaten. In essence, you'd be paying him off on the turn (\$600) and river (\$600 to \$900 depending on how much you bet), but on your terms. You decided how much the river bet would be by check-raising the turn.

Of course, if your opponent calls the turn and then bets the river when you check, he has you beaten. It's plain and simple. The only hand he could have that he'd be bluffing with on the river is a missed flush draw. Even then, very few players will bluff at the river in this situation after you have check-raised the turn.

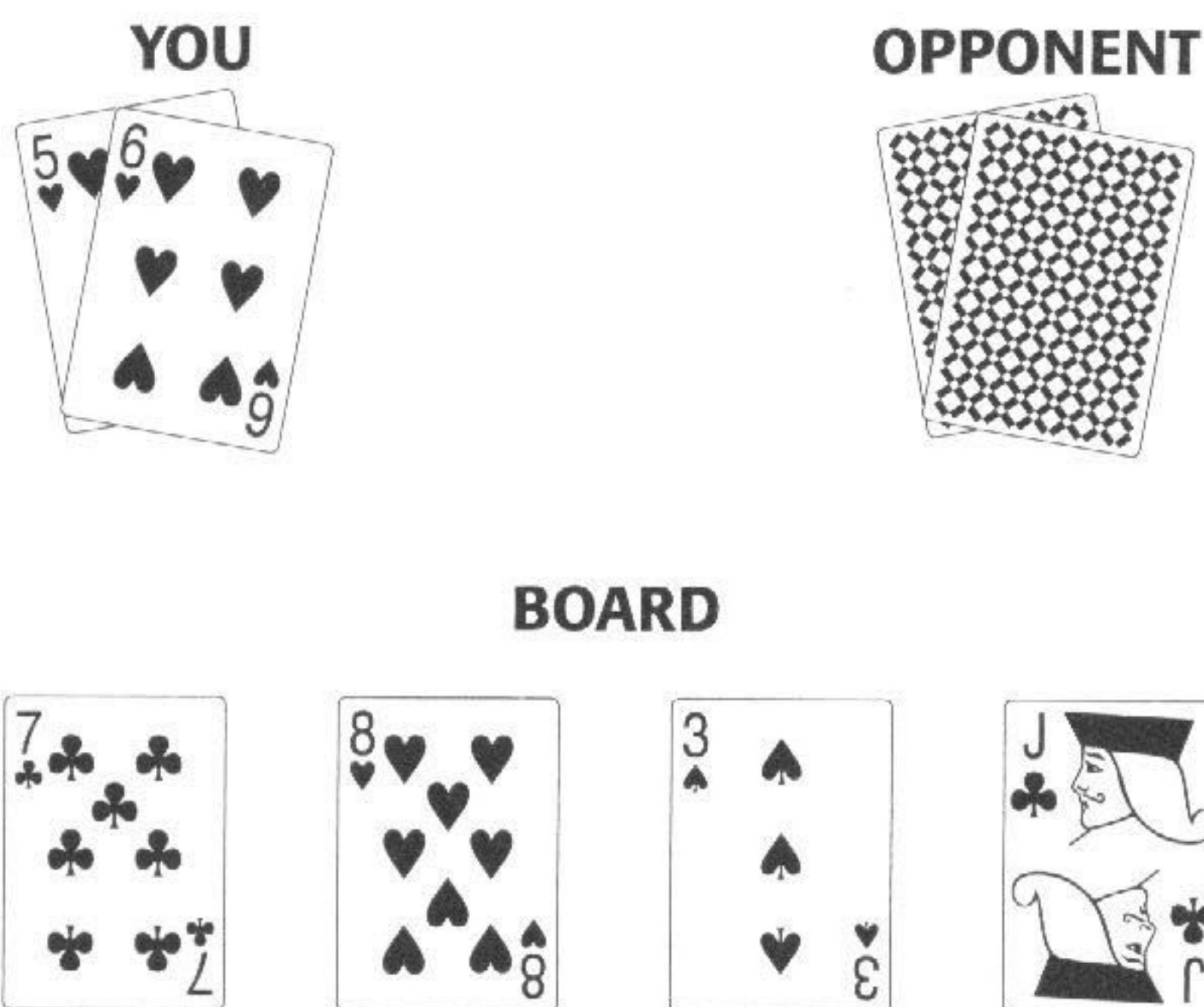
REPRESENTING HANDS ON THE TURN

When you flop a drawing hand, you should always think about ways you could win the pot if you don't happen to make your draw. If you are always banking on hitting the flush or straight without ever bluffing when you miss them, it'll be difficult for you to show a profit with drawing hands after the flop. Let's look at an example of how to use fake "extra outs" to help you win more pots.

Hand in Action

With nine players at the table and blinds of \$400/\$800 with a \$100 ante, you call \$2,400 from the button preflop with 5♥ 6♥ in a four-way action pot. The raiser is in first position, and there is a middle position caller, yourself, and the big blind. Every player in the pot is deep in chips with over \$100,000. The flop comes 7♣ 8♥ 3♠ and the initial raiser bets \$5,000 on the flop. Knowing this player, you know that he will make a continuation bet a high percentage of the time, even with an A-K on a flop like this.

The first player folds, you call, and the big blind folds. The turn is the J♣.



Your opponent checks. This is an excellent card for your hand. No, it didn't help you one bit, but your opponent has to think that if you didn't flop a set, there is a very good chance that you have 9-10 for a straight, or maybe even J-9 or J-10, which he still can't beat with a hand such as A-8, A-K, or K-7.

Although you still have a draw at your straight, it isn't a "good draw" anymore, as it's unlikely that you'll be able to hit a big

payday. If a 9 hits, a four-card straight will be on board. Even if your opponent has a big hand, he's probably not going to call unless he has the straight. Besides, the 9 might be no good to you anyway as he also could make a straight with it if he has a 10 in his hand.

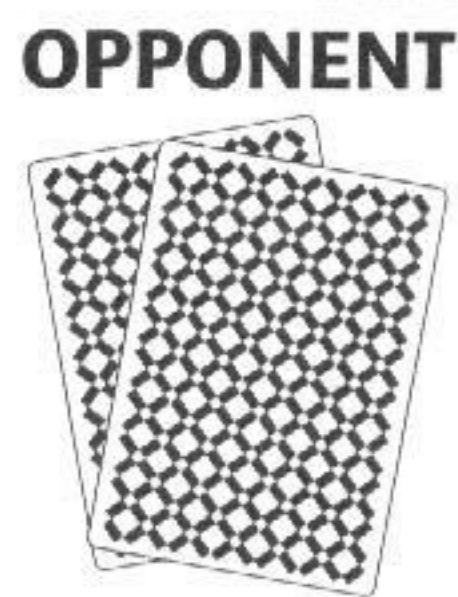
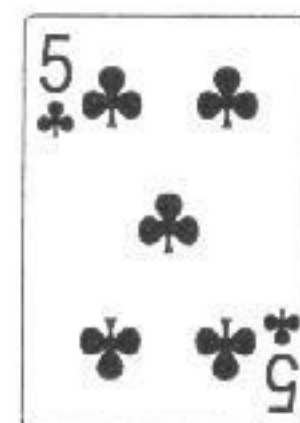
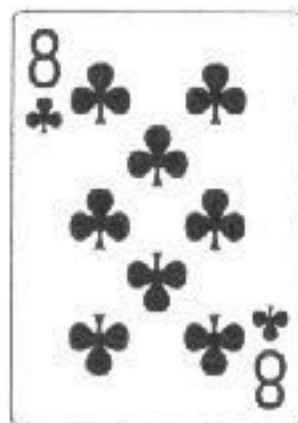
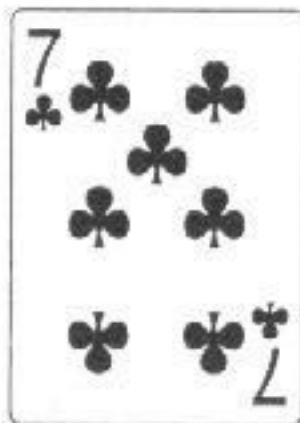
With \$22,900 in the pot already, this would be a good situation for you to represent the straight and pick up the pot. A bet of anywhere from \$10,000 to \$12,000 should do the trick. Even if your opponent has A-A, he may consider folding on the turn! If not, you are still getting a good price for your steal attempt, risking \$12,000 to win \$22,900. Also, even if he calls you on the turn, you might be able to steal the pot with a bigger bet on the river. Remember though: Don't bluff at the river unless you are in the right situation against the right type of opponent.

Hand in Action

Let's look at a simpler example in a hand that's less stressful. With the blinds at \$50/\$100, you decide to limp in with the 9♥ 10♥ from early position. Another player limps in, and the button makes it \$500 to go. You call, as does the other limper. The flop comes 7♣ 8♣ 4♠, giving you an open-ended straight draw and two overcards, although you are legitimately worried that the raiser has a pair of queens or better.

You check to the raiser, as does the limper. The preflop raiser bets \$1,500. You are sitting on \$37,000 and your opponent has \$24,000 in front of him, so you call hoping to win a big pot. The other limper folds.

The turn card is the 5♣.

**BOARD**

You just have to bet that card. You have nothing, and could even be drawing dead, but you have to take your chances on such a dangerous looking card. The way the hand has been played up to this point, your hitting that card is very believable, while it's unlikely that the preflop raiser liked the card. A bet of \$4,000 represents about 60 percent of the pot, and is serious enough to make your opponent consider folding an overpair. The only real risk you face is that your opponent not only has an overpair, but he also has a club in his hand and has picked up a flush draw. Well, that and $A\clubsuit K\clubsuit$, but let's hope he doesn't have that!

If your opponent doesn't have a club in his hand, he'd be making a very risky call on the turn in the hope that you have precisely the 9-10. After all, what could he beat other than that?

If he calls, you will face a dilemma on the river. Obviously, if the river card is a club, you must wave the white flag and give it up. If you make your straight, you can go for a value bet. If it's a blank, though, you'll have a tough decision to make as to whether or not you should bluff. Once again, you really must

know your opponent to justify throwing any more money into this pot on the river. If you have no idea what this player would do with A-A on the river, you should probably conserve your chips and let him have the pot.

Finally let's look at one more example of a draw that misses, but one in which the turn card opens up a bluffing opportunity:


Hand in Action

The blinds are \$300/\$600 with a \$75 ante when a tight middle position player makes it \$1,800 to go preflop and gets called by the button. You're in the big blind and defend with A♦ 3♦. The flop comes 5♦ 6♠ 7♦.

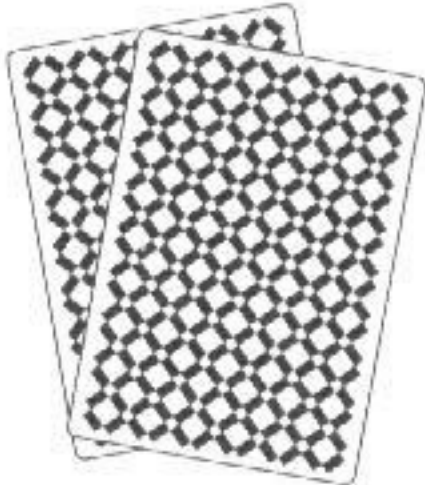
You put the initial raiser on a premium hand, either an overpair, A-K, or A-Q. You decide to bet \$2,500 on the flop to try to figure out where your opponent is at in the hand. The middle position player raises to \$6,000, the button folds, and you call, leaving you with \$54,000 in chips.

The turn card is the 9♥.

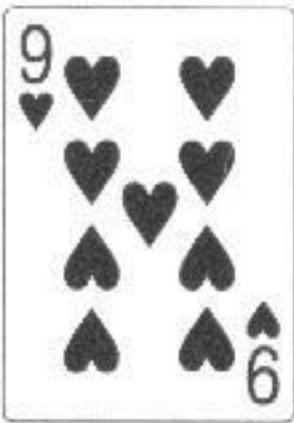
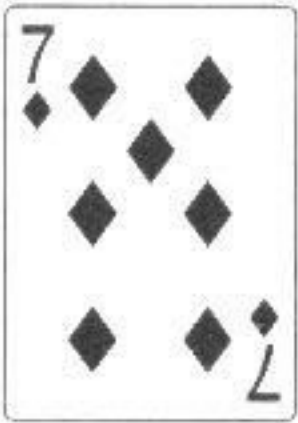
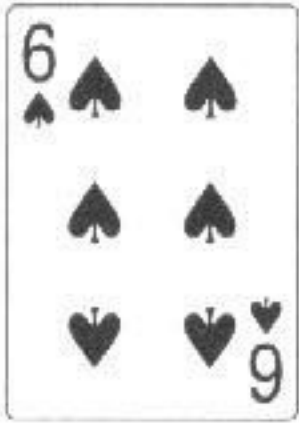
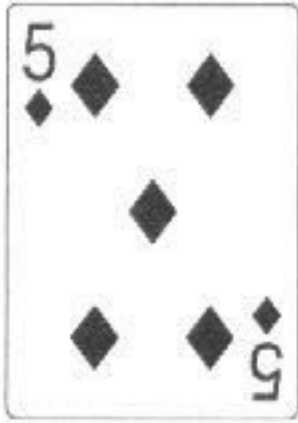
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



Since you don't think your opponent has an 8 in his hand, and there is no reason why you couldn't have an 8 in your hand based on the way the hand has been played, you should take the lead on the turn with a bet of anywhere from \$9,000 to \$12,000.

Unless your opponent had precisely 8-8, how can he raise you? He really shouldn't, but if he does go all in (highly unlikely), you'll be forced to fold. What is more likely, though, is that the bet will force your opponent to lay down A-A. If he calls, that's not the end of the world either since you have outs with your flush draw. If he calls, what you do on the river depends on many factors that I'll touch on in the next section.

CALLING WITH DRAWING HANDS ON THE TURN

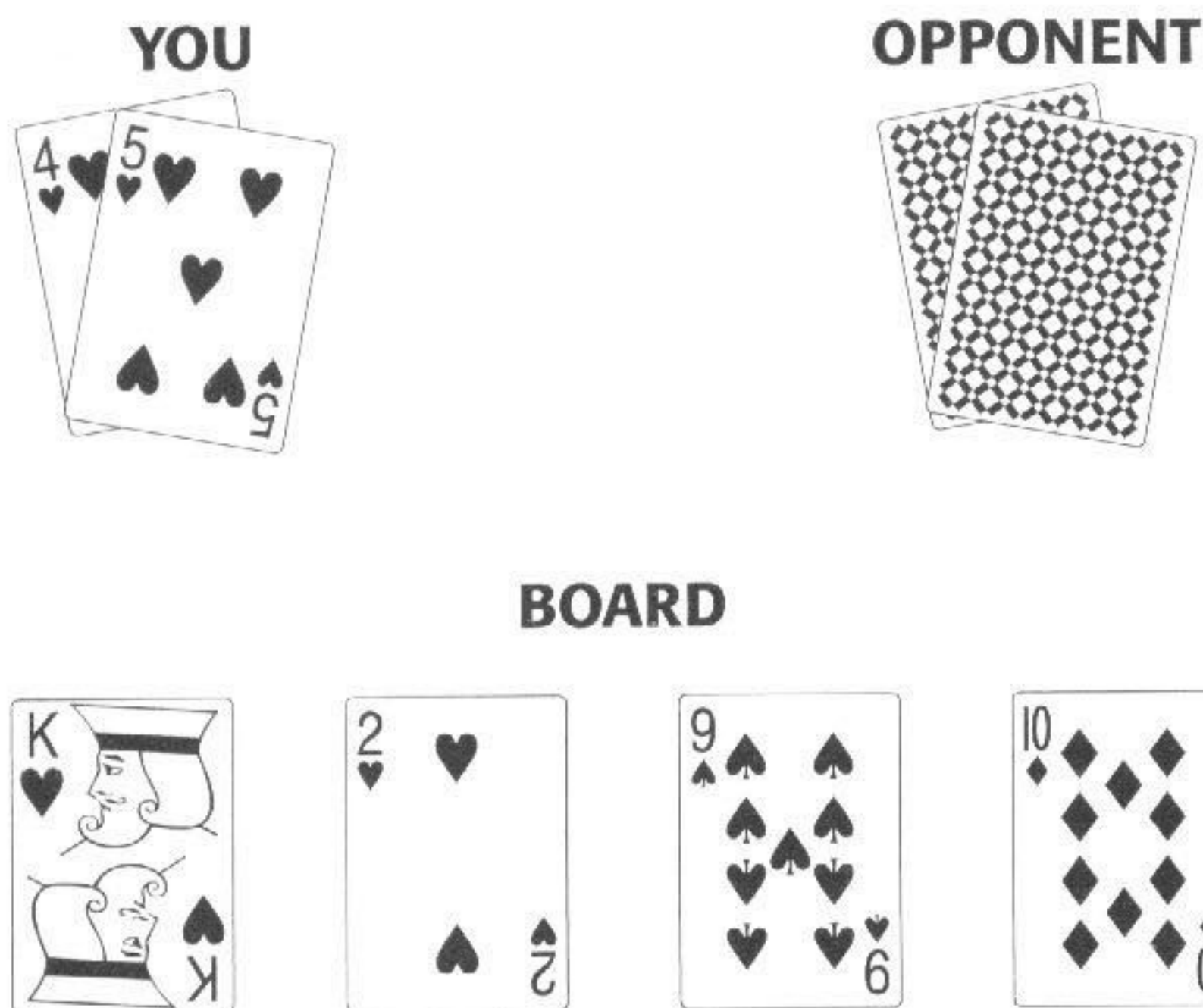
Playing drawing hands on the turn can be tricky, but there is a basic set of rules you should follow with drawing hands on the turn. If you put some thought into your decision-making, drawing hands will often play themselves. Here's a quick set of tools that will help you make the right decisions.

The first thing to consider is the pot odds you are being laid. For example, if there is \$3,000 in the pot and your opponent bets \$1,000, your pot odds would be \$1,000 to win \$4,000, or 4 to 1—the \$3,000 in the pot plus your opponent's bet, versus the \$1,000 you need to call to see the river card.

Once you've figured out your pot odds, the next step is to determine the odds of catching the card you need.

Hand in Action

For example, let's say you have 4♥ 5♥ and the board reads K♥ 2♥ 9♠ 10♦.



In this case, you'd need to catch one of the nine remaining hearts in the deck out of 46 unseen cards. You already know your own two cards, plus the four board cards, leaving 46 cards that you haven't seen. Of those cards, nine are good ones, and 37 are bad. So, your odds of making the flush would be 37 divided by 9, which works out to 4.111 to 1.

On the surface, it seems like you are getting the right price to call with your flush draw, but there are other considerations to factor in. Could your opponent have a higher flush draw? If so, that could cost you a big bet on the river. If your opponent has a set, two of your outs are taken away, as the 9♥ and 10♥ will no longer help you.

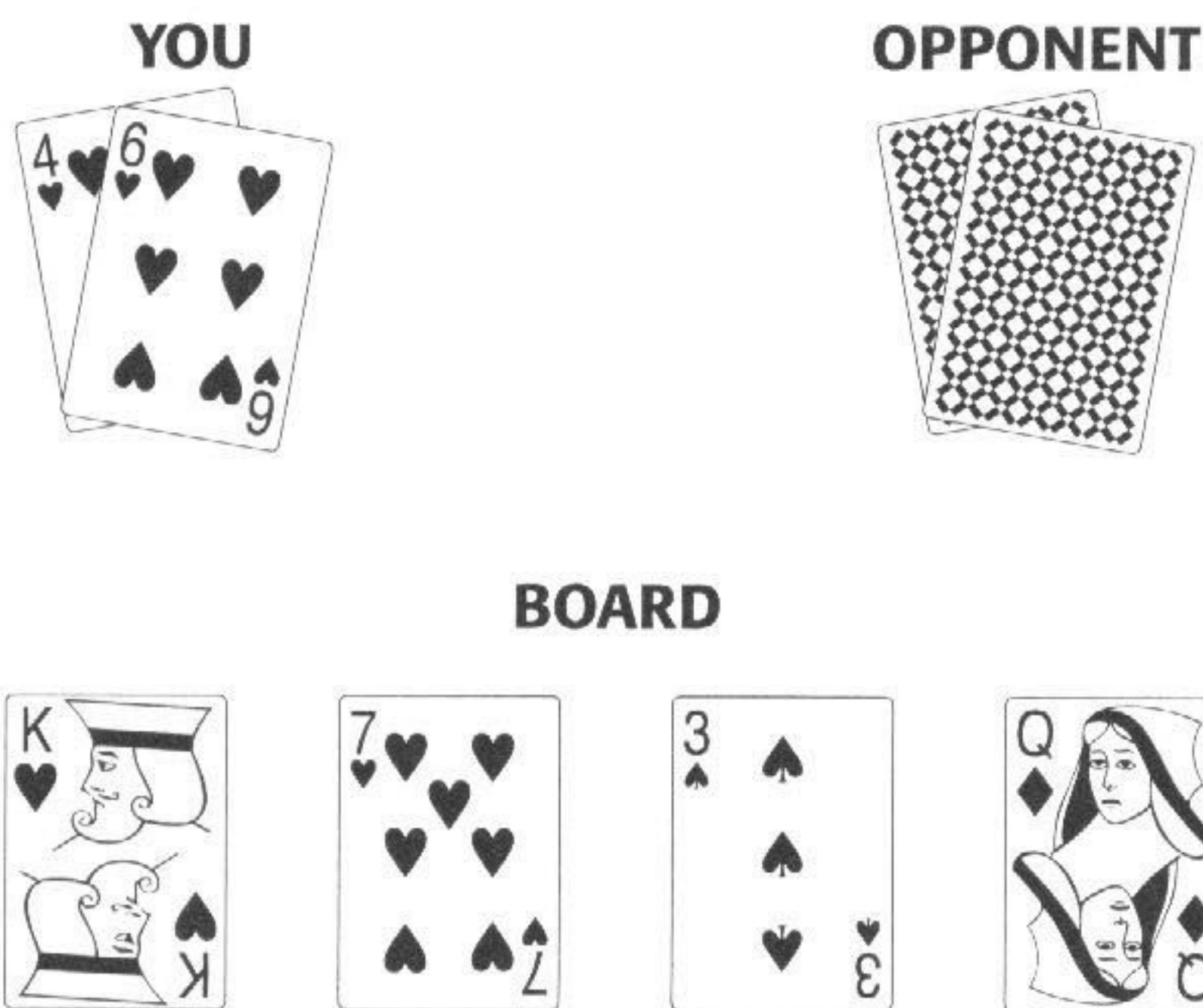
You understand your pot odds, the odds of making your hand, and you're asking yourself if you're drawing at a winning hand or a second-best hand. But there is more to consider. The next step is to determine what the implied odds might be. Calculating implied odds is an inexact science since you can never be certain what your opponent will do on the river.

However, much like chess, it's important to think ahead and factor your river play into the equation.

Let's look at a more complex example to see this more clearly.

Hand in Action

You have the 4♥ 6♥ and the board reads K♥ 7♥ 3♠ Q♦. Both you and your opponent have \$12,000 in chips. There is \$800 in the pot and he bets \$600.



You go through your routine:

Pot Odds: \$600 to win \$1,400, 2.333 to 1

Odds of Improving: 9 hearts + 3 fives equals 12 cards out of 46 unseen cards—12 good ones and 34 bad ones equals 2.833 to 1

If there will be no additional betting on the river, you should fold your hand. The pot odds are smaller than the odds of your hand improving. Therefore, if your opponent is all in for \$600, for example, you should muck your hand. However, when you factor in the implied odds of catching a 5 or a heart to swing

things in your favor, this situation has the potential to pay off in a big way, especially if you hit the 5 since you would have a well-disguised hand.

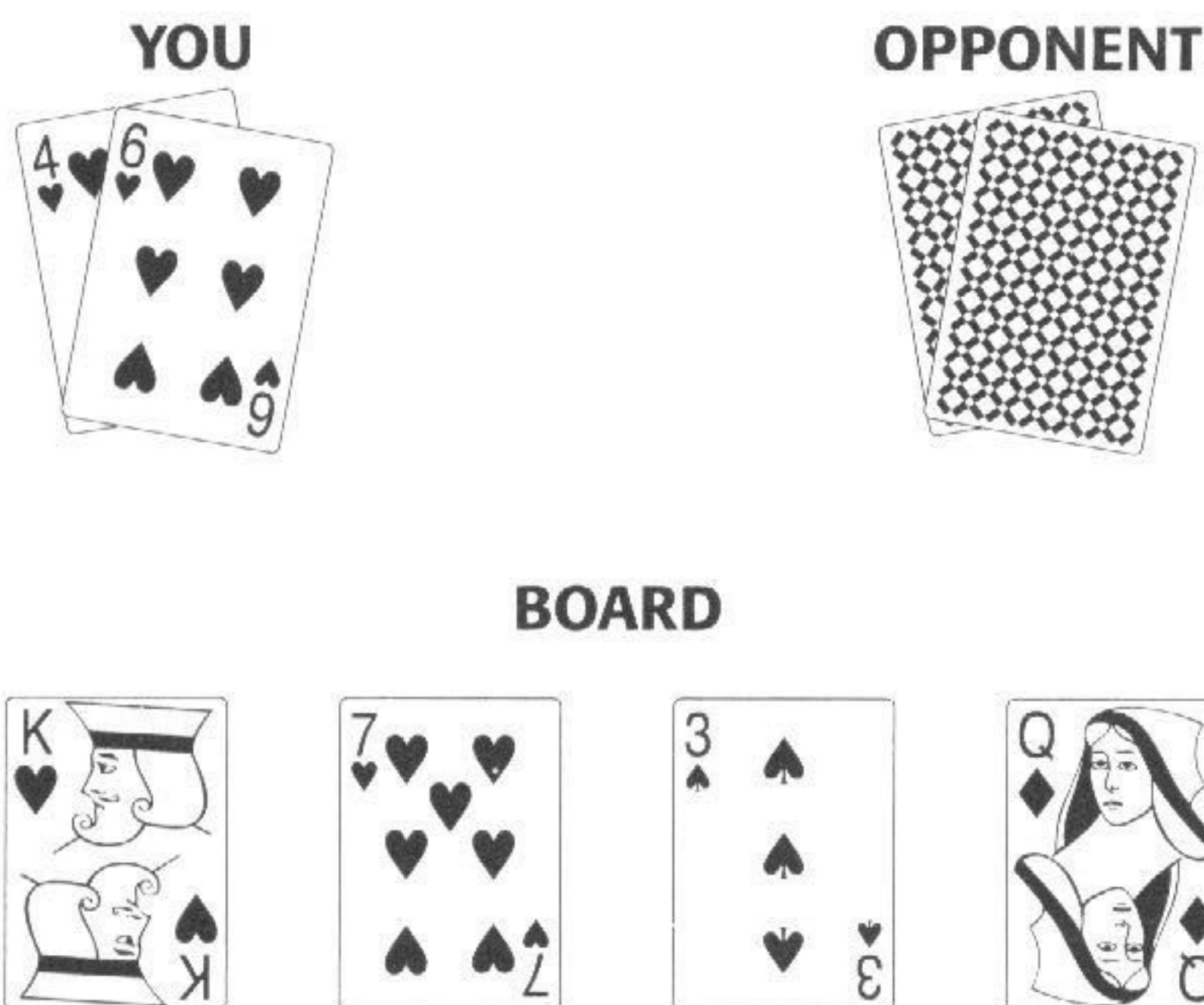
There is some danger here that also needs to be considered: You might make a losing flush, but the addition of the gutshot straight will counteract that. In these types of situations, despite the fact that you obviously know your opponent has the best hand, it's still important to figure out what he might have. You should figure it out on the turn; it will help you with your little math problem, in that the strength of your opponent's hand will dictate how much you can win on the river.

For example, suppose you think your opponent is very strong and has a hand such as K-Q or K-K. In that case, you should be able to get paid off on a rather large bet on the river—and possibly end up with all of his chips—especially if you catch a 5. However, if you think your opponent has a marginal hand, your implied odds will be diminished since he would be less likely to call with a hand such as Q-10, for example.

So before making the call on the turn, you need to decide how much you will bet on the river if you hit your hand. Figure out what you will bet depending on what your opponent does. As an exercise, let's figure out a sum for all the possible outcomes in the following eight scenarios.

- | | |
|--|-------|
| 1. You hit a 5 and your opponent checks | _____ |
| 2. You hit a 5 and your opponent bets \$1,500 | _____ |
| 3. You hit the A♥ and your opponent checks | _____ |
| 4. You hit the A♥ and your opponent bets \$1,000 | _____ |
| 5. You hit the Q♥ and your opponent checks | _____ |
| 6. You hit the Q♥ and your opponent bets \$2,000 | _____ |
| 7. You hit the 2♥ and your opponent checks | _____ |
| 8. You hit the 2♥ and your opponent bets \$600 | _____ |

Even more scenarios are possible, but let's start with these. Fill in each one and then we'll discuss what it has done to your pot odds on the turn call. Again, here is how the situation looks:



1. You Hit a 5 and Your Opponent Checks

If your opponent checks an innocent card like a 5, it's unlikely that he has a strong hand. This means that you won't be able to make a big bet since he'll be less likely to call. With \$2,000 in

the pot, a bet of about \$900 sounds good. Those implied odds will change the original problem so that you are now getting a good price, 2.833 to 1 against to hit your hand, but \$600 to win \$2,300 (if he calls), which equals pot odds of 3.833 to 1. Even if your opponent folds on the river, you would still only be making a very minor mistake on the turn by calling as a 2.833 to 1 underdog, only getting 2.333 to 1 odds on your money.

2. You Hit a 5 and Your Opponent Bets \$1,500

This is the ideal situation, the home run ball you've been waiting for. If your opponent bets the river, there is a good chance that he is prepared to call a big reraise, or maybe even go all in with a hand such as K-K. You could raise him anywhere from \$2,000 to \$4,000 more, depending on how strong you think his hand is. For example, suppose you raise him \$3,500 more. Let's take a look at what that does to your turn problem. You were a 2.833 to 1 underdog to make your draw, and the pot odds you were being laid were 2.333 to 1. Assuming your opponent calls the river bet, that figure changes dramatically, from 2.333 to 1 to 9.667 to 1 (\$5,800 divided by \$600). That's a pretty sweet payday, and it could be even tastier if your opponent decides to go all in. Of course, if he folds for the \$3,500 raise, that's not so bad either. Your investment still would be positive at \$600 to win \$2,900, or 4.833 to 1.

3. You Hit the A♥ and Your Opponent Checks

This isn't a great card for you if your opponent checks the river. It's unlikely that he'll be able to call a big bet, especially if he has a hand like K-J or Q-10. In fact, he might not call a bet of any size with such a scary river card. With \$2,000 in the pot, you don't want to bet more than half of what's in there, unless you think that will cause your opponent to think you're bluffing. Your betting history with this opponent will play a big role in how much you should bet, but for this example we will use \$800 as a general guideline. Your opponent will probably

still fold, but you don't really want to bet any less than this amount, because it will hurt you in the long run to make such a drastically obvious change in your betting pattern when you want to be called.

I would guesstimate that your opponent will call the \$800 approximately 25 percent of the time, depending on the player, of course. At that rate, three times you'll be getting slightly the worst of it on your turn call (2.333 to 1 on a 2.833 to 1 underdog), but one out of four times you'll get 3.667 to 1 odds on your turn call. That works out to \$600 to win \$1,600, or 2.667 to 1—only a marginally bad bet for you.

4. You Hit the A♥ and Your Opponent Bets \$1,000

This can be a very tricky situation and how you respond to his bet is very read-dependant. Unless you have an excellent read on your opponent—you know that he is aggressive and would bet without a flush on the river—you should lean towards just calling the bet (\$600 to win \$2,400, or 4 to 1). Raising on the river with such a small flush is a dangerous proposition since it could not only cost you valuable chips, it could also allow your opponent to steal the pot from you. For example, let's say he has a hand such as Q♥ 10♠. If you raise on the river, your opponent may decide to reraise, knowing you can't have the nuts since he holds the key card, the Q♥. What would you do then? Now, I'm not ruling out raising on the river as an option, but if you are going to raise with your baby flush, you had better know a great deal about what your opponent is capable of doing. If you make the aggressive move, you could raise as little as the minimum, \$1,000 up to maybe \$2,000.

5. You Hit the Q♥ and Your Opponent Checks

If your opponent checks when the Q♥ hits, chances are that he doesn't like it. Either that, or he thinks you've made trips or a flush and he's looking to check-raise you with a full house!

For all of those reasons, it doesn't make sense to make a big bet in this situation. If your opponent check-raises you, you'll probably be forced to fold. Also, if you bet too much, your opponent may release a hand like K-10. Once again, I would suggest a bet of approximately \$800.

6. You Hit the Q♥ and Your Opponent Bets \$2,000

Consider folding. Seriously. If your opponent makes a pot-sized bet after the Q♥ hits, it's highly unlikely that he is value betting with a hand that you can beat. The size of his bet makes it look like he's hoping that you have a strong hand, figuring that you are forced to call. I'm assuming here that you have some kind of feel for how your opponent plays. But what if you don't? If you don't really know your opponent's tendencies, you should probably make the call, getting 2 to 1 odds on the river, hoping that your opponent made trip queens or is somehow running a bluff at you. There are lots of new young players in the game today that will make some wild bluffs in bizarre situations, so with a hand as strong as a flush, you'll have to keep them honest until you have more information about their game.

7. You Hit the 2♥ and Your Opponent Checks

Your opponent may be checking with a hand as strong as A-K here. He may be worried that you've made the flush, and is happy to check-call rather than being raised on the river and being put to a decision. In this case, look to get some value for your hand, betting anywhere from \$1,200-\$1,600. If you choose to bet \$1,500 on the river and your opponent calls, your initial decision to call the \$600 on the turn with your drawing hand will earn you \$2,900 (4.833 to 1). Since you are only a 2.833 to 1 underdog to make your hand, betting \$1,500 on the river will be a profitable play, provided your opponent calls the bet.

8. You Hit the 2♥ and Your Opponent Bets \$600

A \$600 bet into a pot with \$2,000 in it on the river usually signifies a pretty weak hand. It's a defensive bet designed to keep you from betting more on the river. As always, you need to really understand your opponent in these types of situations in order to make the best play available. Folding is out of the question because you have much to gain with little relative risk. Calling is the safest play, but you should probably try to get some value out of this hand by putting in a raise. You want to make a raise that's not so big it scares your opponent off. At the same time, you don't want to put a huge dent in your stack in case the hand doesn't work out. Raising to \$1,500 or \$1,600 is reasonable.

Thinking Through the Turn

There is more to making a turn call than simply figuring out the current pot odds. Your perceived implied odds can turn what seems to be a longshot draw into a very profitable play under the right circumstances.

If there is one street in hold'em where you should take your time and think it through, it's the turn. Not only are you thinking about the bet you are currently facing, but you should also be one step ahead, planning what you'll do on the river.

CALLING WITH DRAWS AND FACTORING IN BLUFF OUTS

As you can see from the previous section, there are certain situations where it's highly likely that your opponent will fold to a bet on the river when you hit some of your drawing hands. Knowing this, you can take advantage of your opponent by sometimes calling with longshot draws with the intention of either:

1. Hitting a home run,
or
2. Bluffing your opponent when a more traditional draw hits the river. I call those “bluffing outs,” cards that could hit the river that will scare your opponent into folding the best hand.

Using bluffing outs in your calculations on the turn is an advanced skill. Not only are you factoring in your pot odds, your odds of improving, your odds of drawing to the second-best hand, and your implied odds, you are also thinking about what cards could hit the river that will likely win you the pot by allowing you to bluff your opponent. Being able to read your opponent, understand his tendencies, and determine his likely hole cards are a big part of using bluff outs. Let's look at an example:

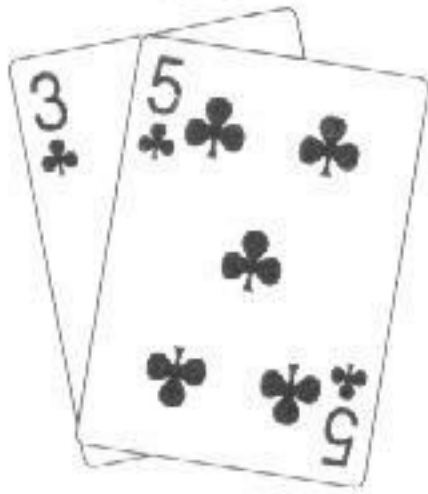
Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$100/\$200, a tight opponent raises to \$600 from first position before the flop. You call the \$600 with 3♣ 5♣ from middle position. Everyone else folds, so you will see the flop heads-up. Both you and your opponent have \$45,000.

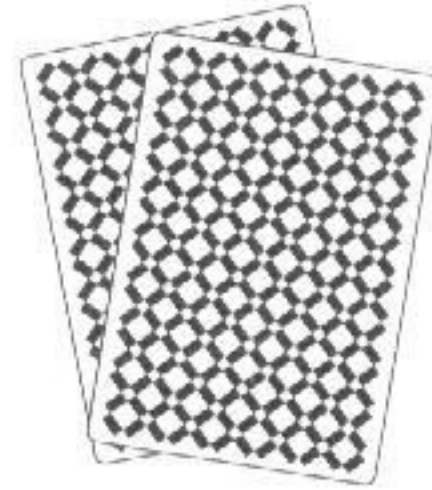
The flop comes 5♠ 6♣ 7♠, giving you bottom pair and a gutshot draw to the idiot end of the straight. You could easily have the best hand with a pair of fives, but if your opponent bets it hard on the flop and turn, he probably has a big overpair. On the flop, your opponent bets \$1,000. Trying to catch a 3, 4, or a 5, you call the bet.

The turn card is the J♣.

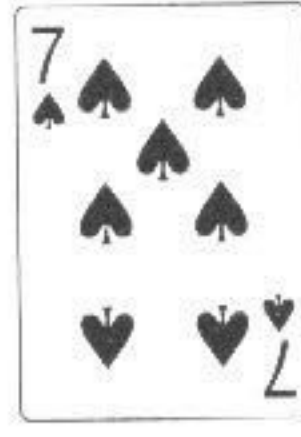
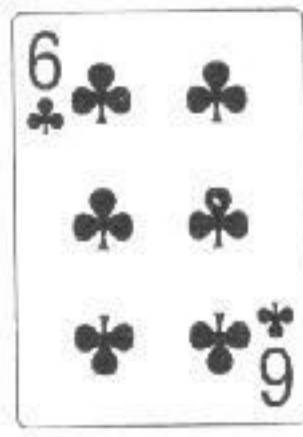
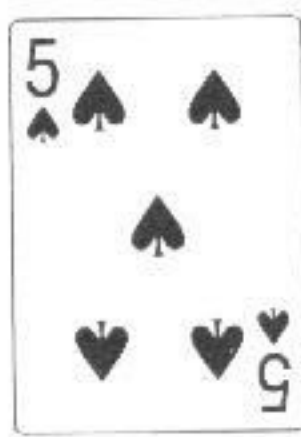
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



The J♣ gives you a backdoor flush draw as well. With \$3,500 in the middle, your opponent overbets the pot by putting in \$7,000. Now it's time to go through your routine:

Pot odds: \$7,000 to win \$10,500 equals 1.5 to 1
Odds of improving your hand: 3 threes, 2 fives, 3 fours, and 9 clubs equals 17 outs out of 46 unseen cards—17 good ones and 29 bad ones, 29 divided by 17 equals 1.705 to 1.

Despite the fact that you likely have a ton of outs against your opponent, you are still not getting the right price to call the bet, unless you factor in implied odds and bluff outs. There are loads of cards that could hit the river that miss your hand completely, but would look like they could easily have hit your hand. An 8 would put an open-ended four-card straight on board. Rivering a 9 would mean that if you had the four-card straight draw with an 8, you would have just completed that straight. On top of that, the flush draw on the flop is a hand you could easily represent if it hits the river.

I'M GOING TO REMIND YOU ONE MORE TIME TO STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS CONCEPT: IN ORDER TO MAKE PLAYS LIKE THE FOLLOWING, IT'S ESSENTIAL THAT YOU HAVE A VERY GOOD READ ON YOUR OPPONENT'S TENDENCIES. IF YOU DON'T, I WOULD ADVISE YOU TO AVOID THESE PLAYS ALTOGETHER.

With the type of draw you have, there are some cards that could hit on the river that would win you a really big pot. There are also a lot of cards that could hit that will scare your opponent into thinking that you've just hit one of your draws. If you only play suited connectors with the hope of making straights and flushes, you will become very

easy to read. Sure, people will know that you play all kinds of goofy hands, but they will soon catch on to the fact that when the funky draws hit and you bet big, you've got it. Perceptive players will stop paying you off unless you mix up your play by making calculated bluffs as well.

Seven Scenarios

Let's take a look at how to proceed if you call the \$7,000 bet and various cards hit on the river. Again, both you and your opponent have \$45,000 each. Here are seven scenarios:

1. A club falls	_____
2. You make a straight	_____
3. You make trips	_____
4. You make two pair	_____
5. The river card is an 8	_____
6. The river card is a 9	_____
7. A spade falls	_____

1. A Club Falls

Obviously, if a club hits, completing your flush, you are going to make a value bet in the hope that you get paid off. With \$17,500 in the pot, a bet of anywhere from \$9,000 to \$12,000 will put pressure on your opponent, but not so much that he might look you up. After all, there was only one club on the flop, so it will be difficult for him to believe that you hit a backdoor flush.

2. You Make a Straight

If you hit the straight, it will be the dummy end with the 4, but since your opponent is a conservative player it's unlikely that he has the 8 in his hand. As far as a betting amount goes, you have a lot of options, but you have to understand that your opponent will be hard pressed to call anything. You could even try to milk him for as little as \$5,000, but it's probably better to bet between \$7,000 and \$9,000. You don't want your value bets to stick out by making them so much smaller than your bluffs. You don't want to make your bluffs any smaller either, since that will make them less effective.

3. You Make Trips

Rivering a 5 is probably the absolutely best card you can catch because your opponent might think it was a good card for him if he has A-A. If you hit trips on the river and you put your opponent on an overpair, you should go for a good payday, betting between \$12,000 to \$15,000 on the river.

4. You Make Two Pair

Your opponent isn't going to be very afraid of a 3, but at the same time, he isn't going to bet that card either. If you bet the river, he's probably going to pay you off if he has an overpair. Once again, I suggest a bet between \$9,000 and \$12,000.

5. The River Card is an 8

If the river is an 8, you have a good opportunity to steal the pot from your opponent. You don't want your bet to look any different from a bet you'd make had you actually made the hand. If you bet \$12,000 on the river, your opponent will be hard pressed to call. He might, but even if he calls you one half of the times you make this type of play, your river bluff will still be profitable as you are risking \$12,000 to win \$17,500.

6. The River Card is a 9

Same as above, when the river card is an 8.

7. A Spade Falls

This is the most common draw that you could be on after calling the flop bet, and it is probably the card that your opponent is most afraid of. You want to play it as if you were looking to get paid off handsomely, and should bet between \$12,000 and \$15,000. As is the case with all of these scenarios, the amount you ultimately choose should depend on your opponent and his perception of you, plus the past hands he has seen you play.

So, despite the fact that you really only have what looks like 17 outs, when you factor in the bluff outs, there are 28 cards that could help you win the pot. That's well over half the deck. Of course it's not that simple, as you will get yourself into trouble occasionally when you hit your hand and it's a loser; or when an opponent who doesn't believe you calls your bluff. Overall, though, adding these plays to your repertoire will help you out in the long run since your value bet-to-bluff ratio will be very high.

Bluffs are most effective when used sporadically and in situations where it seems "obvious" to your opponent that you must have the best hand.

PLAYING TOP PAIR AND OVERPAIRS ON THE TURN

When you play deep-stack poker, it's important to understand that one pair, regardless of how big it is, is rarely ever good enough to risk going broke with after the flop. You obviously wouldn't fold A-A or K-K before the flop. On the flop, it's usually correct to continue until the turn since the pot size is still manageable. On the turn, however, the bets generally get larger. And the turn is the street where you'll often have to make the critical decision as to whether you should continue to see the hand all the way to the river.

WHEN YOU PLAY DEEP-STACK POKER, IT'S IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT ONE PAIR, REGARDLESS OF HOW BIG IT IS, IS RARELY EVER GOOD ENOUGH TO RISK GOING BROKE WITH AFTER THE FLOP.

Overpairs and top-pair hands can be trap hands that cost many players their tournament lives when they overplay them. As a small-baller, these are the types of players that you'll thrive on when you fill a belly-buster straight or flop baby trips.

When you are the one with the overpair—yes, we play those hands too sometimes!—it's important to think in terms of avoiding traps that can get you broke. To do that, you are often going to sacrifice value and lose a few extra pots all in the name of protecting your stack.

PLAYING OVERPAIRS OUT OF POSITION

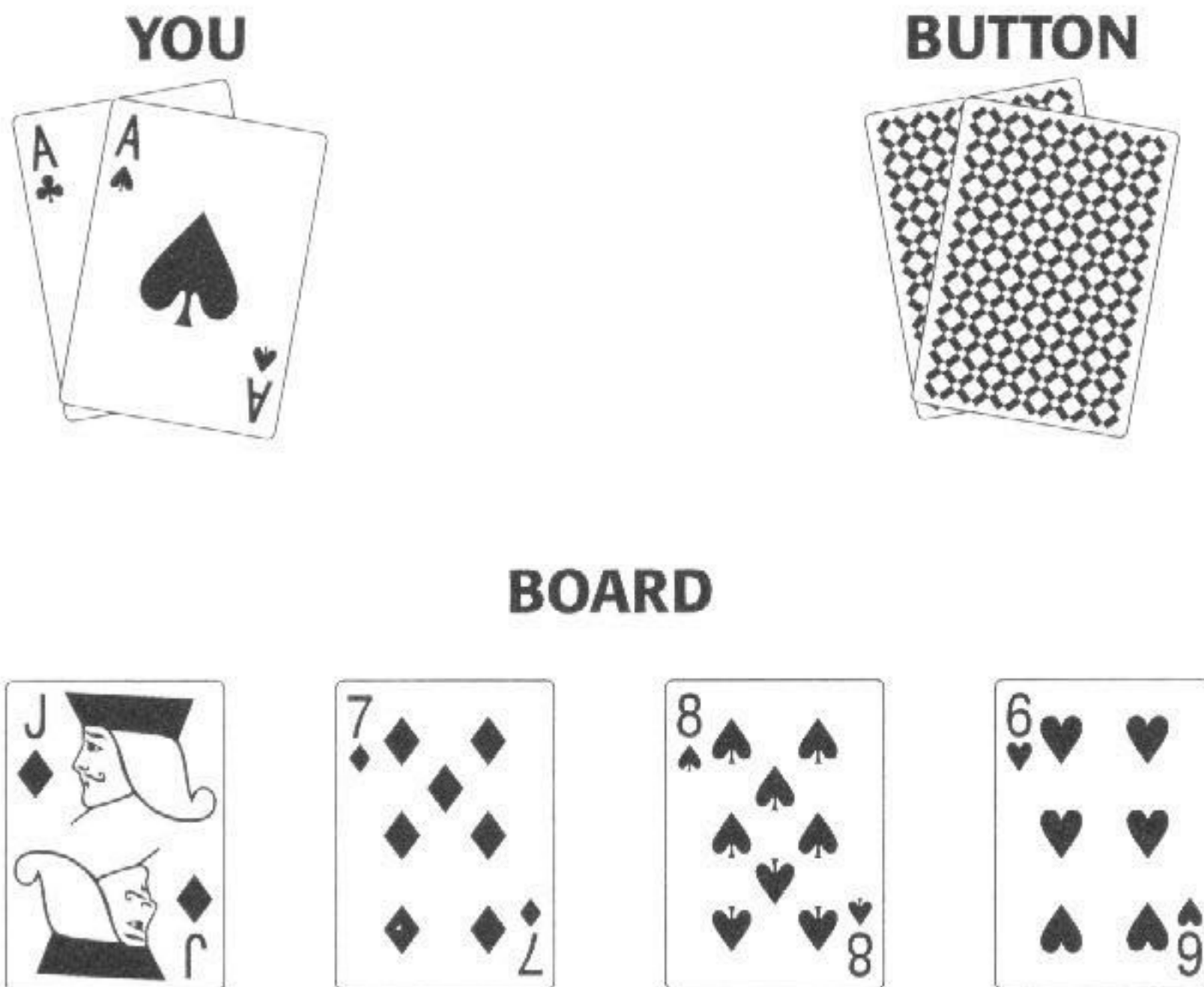
Let's look at a few examples of how to play an overpair in various situations.

Hand in Action 1

With the blinds at \$50/\$100, you make it \$250 to go with A♣ A♠ before the flop. A player on the button calls you, as does the

big blind. The flop comes J♦ 7♦ 8♠. The big blind checks and you bet \$600. The button calls and the big blind folds.

The turn is the 6♥.



This is a potentially dangerous situation for you since you have a strong hand that's difficult to get away from. You could easily be in big trouble. If you bet this hand on the turn, you run the risk of getting raised and making the pot bigger, while not knowing for sure if you are ahead or behind.

Before deciding whether to bet or check on the turn, the absolutely most important thing to consider is your opponent's playing style. You have to answer these five questions:

1. Does he call raises with hands like 9-10 suited?
2. Would he call you on the flop with K-J, or would he raise you?
3. If he had a set, would he smooth call you on the flop?
4. If I bet the turn and he raises, could he be bluffing?

5. If I check the turn, will he try to bluff at it or value bet the worst hand?

Against an unknown opponent, I would suggest betting somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1,200 to \$1,400 on the turn. If an unknown player raises you on the turn, you must think long and hard about a hand you can beat. The safe play is to fold and wait for a better situation when you have more information. An even safer play, though, is to check the turn against an unknown opponent. If he bets, you can call and see what develops on the river. This way, you accomplish these things:

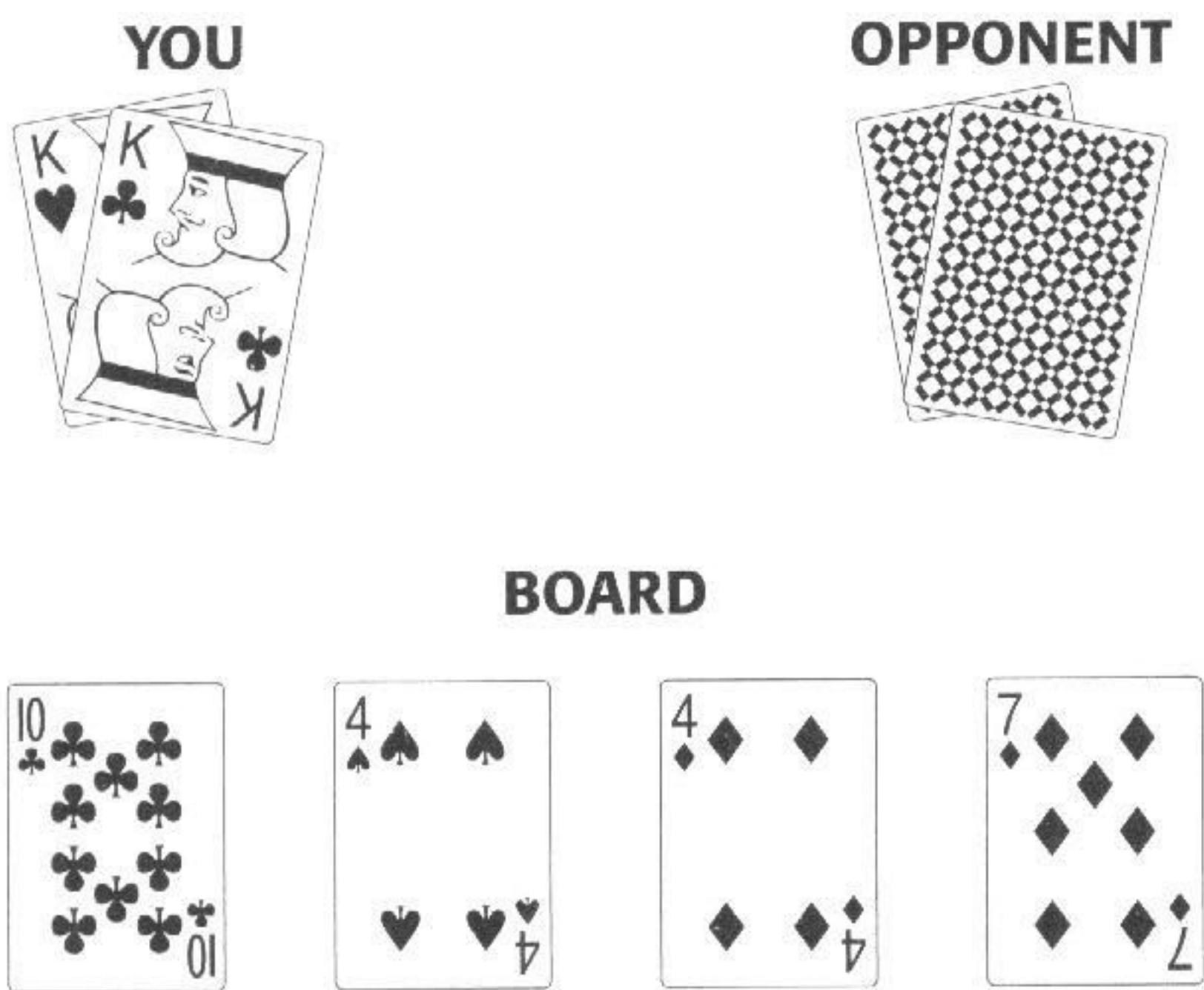
1. You keep the pot small in a dangerous situation.
2. You lose the minimum amount when you are beat.
3. You induce the worst hand to value bet against you.
4. You avoid being bluffed by a hand such as A-J. If your opponent checks behind you, that's okay too. The weakness you showed on the turn may convince your opponent to call you on the river with a much weaker hand than he would have otherwise.

For example, if your opponent has 10-10, he may call the flop bet. Then on the turn, when it goes check-check, he'll likely think he has the best hand. Provided the river card isn't too scary, he'll have to pay you off on the river with his 10-10 in a situation where he may have folded to a bet on the turn. While checking the turn may seem weak, there are several benefits to the play—most importantly, keeping the pot small and protecting your stack.

Hand in Action 2

Let’s look at a similar example to further illustrate this concept:

With the blinds at \$600/\$1,200 with a \$200 ante, everyone folds to you in the small blind. You look down at K-K and make it \$3,000 total. The big blind calls, so you’ll see the flop heads-up. Both you and your opponent have \$65,000 in chips. The flop comes 10♣ 4♠ 4♦. You bet \$4,800 on the flop and your opponent calls. The turn card is the 7♦.



What would you do?

This is what I call a “hit or miss” type of flop. That is, your opponent either has you crushed and you have only two outs, or you have your opponent dead to two or three outs. There is no gray area here. Since this board has no draw to protect against, I would suggest checking the turn for several reasons:

- 1. If your opponent called on the flop with the intention of stealing the pot on the turn, let

him try! If you bet the turn yourself, you may discourage him from continuing with the bluff.

2. If your opponent has a 10 in his hand, he will surely bet to protect his hand. Therefore, whether you bet or not is irrelevant since it makes no difference who bets—money will go into the pot.
3. If your opponent has a 4, he will bet, but his intention will likely be to not scare you off. Therefore, he'll make small bets that allow you to lose the minimum when you are beaten.

The problem with being aggressive and out of position on the turn is that you'll put yourself in situations where you'll often be forced to guess. It's true, you'll also be guessing when you check the turn and your opponent bets; but the size of the bets will make it easier for you to call. However, if you bet the turn and get raised, you are in an impossible situation: You have to make a huge decision as to whether your opponent has a 4 or a 10. If at all possible, it's best to avoid putting yourself in these types of situations, even if that means that you will get outdrawn a small percentage of the time.

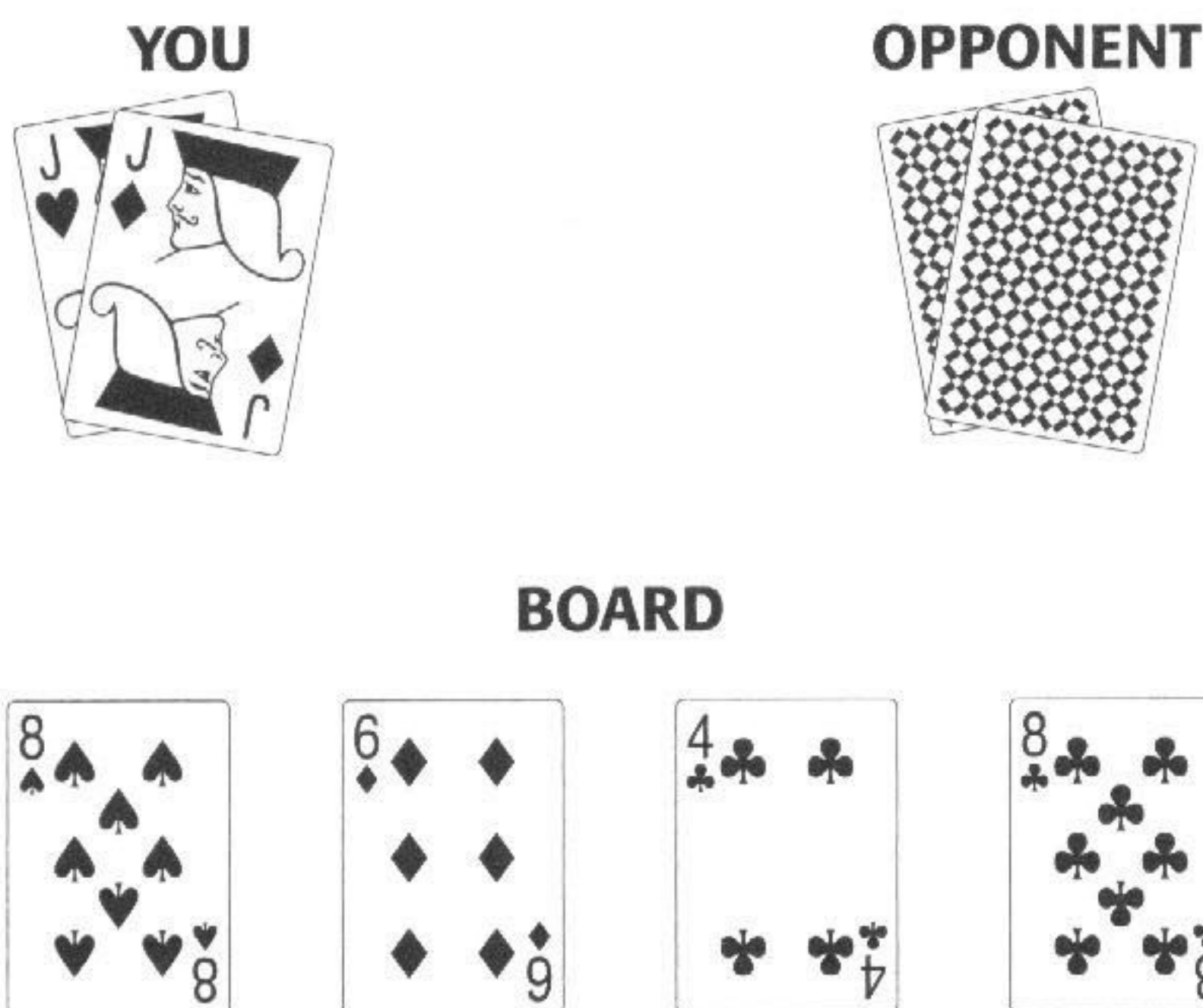
PLAYING OVERPAIRS IN POSITION

In the above examples, you were out of position. Now let's look at an example of how to play an overpair when you are in position.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$1,000/\$2,000, you raise to \$5,000 preflop with J-J from early position. Only the big blind calls. Both you and your opponent have over \$150,000 in chips. The flop comes 8♠ 6♦ 4♣. Your opponent checks and you bet out \$8,000. He calls.

The turn card pairs the 8.



Your opponent checks again. Based on your read of the situation, you don't think your opponent has an 8, yet the safe play in a tournament is to also check. The worst-case scenario is that you allow your opponent a free chance to hit a draw against you. On the other hand, your check on the turn accomplishes several important things:

1. Checking protects you from being bluffed. If you bet the turn and your opponent raises, what are you going to do? Guess? This is precisely the type of situation you want to avoid.
2. Checking induces a bluff on the river. Since you checked the turn, your opponent will often bet the river whether he improved his hand or not. Your check on the turn is a sign of weakness, so if your opponent misses his draw, he might bluff at the river. If the river is a complete blank, your opponent may even value bet with a 4 or a 6 if he perceives it to be the best hand.
3. Checking keeps the pot small in a marginal situation. J-J is a decent hand, but there are a ton of hands out there that could have you beat.

As you can probably tell by now, your mindset with an overpair on the turn should be one of caution rather than excitement. In deep-stack tournaments it's rare that an overpair is in the lead when an all-in pot is played on the turn. As you get deeper and deeper into a tournament it becomes more likely that your overpair is ahead. Certainly in the early stages you should not be too happy about being all in with pocket aces on a board of 2-3-6-7. If you're not up against a set, you just might be up against a straight. In either case, the most you'll have is two cards in the deck to save you.

FUNDAMENTAL TOURNAMENT CONCEPT

There is a grand misconception about what it takes to be a successful tournament player in today's landscape. All you hear about is aggression, aggression, aggression—but it's careful play in marginal situations that separates the world's most successful tournament players from the rest of the pack.

IN DEEP-STACK TOURNAMENTS, IT'S RARE THAT AN OVERPAIR IS IN THE LEAD WHEN AN ALL-IN POT IS PLAYED ON THE TURN.

LOOKING FOR TELLS

While the majority of your energy on the turn should be dedicated to going through the details of the hand, you shouldn't abandon the presence of any physical tells that your opponent is giving off. Even if you don't think you are noticing anything consciously, your subconscious mind works in mysterious ways. If the subconscious mind recognizes something, it will help you make a better decision.

Some call it instinct, intuition, feel or whatever. I believe that it's more like tapping into a vast database that has seen thousands of similar situations and recognizes patterns in behavior. What's difficult about this process is that being in tune with yourself, or having a conversation with yourself that taps into

your subconscious mind, isn't an exact science. It doesn't quite work like, "Hey subconscious mind, is he bluffing or what? Should I call him or fold?"

I don't claim to be an expert on the subconscious mind and how it works, but I genuinely believe that sometimes when you look at someone, despite the fact that you don't think you see anything peculiar, you really might be seeing what you think you see. Despite the fact that you can't verbalize what tell you are seeing, it's there.

A perfect example of this is my good friend, Jennifer Harman, who, incidentally, is one of the top players in the world. Jennifer has an innate ability to sniff out bluffs and read weakness in her opponents. She'll often make some excellent, risky calls in high pressure situations, but when you ask her why she called, she might say, "I dunno, cause I figured he was bluffing."

"But, how did you know that, Jennifer? Was it the way he played his hand? Did you pick up a tell? What was it?"

She might reply, "I don't know, something just told me he was bluffing."

What "told her" that an opponent was bluffing was her subconscious mind. It has seen so many hands played that it has become very good at spotting tells and relaying them to her conscious mind. Jennifer does herself a big favor by listening to those "feelings."

FOUR TELLS TO LOOK FOR

There are some things, however, that you can look for on a conscious level that will help you make good decisions. Here are some to keep in mind.

1. Early Reachers

Some players have a tendency to reach for their chips prematurely. Be on the lookout for that. If you are planning on betting against one of these players, make sure you take your time and are very deliberate. A few extra seconds and your opponent may give away his intentions before you actually make your bet. Be careful, though, as some of your opponents are actors, and will reach for their chips to discourage you from betting.

2. Speed of Their Action

Pay close attention to how long it generally takes an opponent to call a bet on the turn and you may pick up some patterns. For example, if a player calls quickly on the turn, it could mean that he is on a draw and isn't thinking about whether or not he has the best hand. A quick call could mean something completely different too. A quick call from your opponent may signify that he is trying to discourage you from betting the river, almost like saying, "I got you, man. Don't even think about betting the river because I'm calling you down."

Each tell could have various meanings. It's your job to accurately discern what your opponent is trying to accomplish with his actions.

3. Card Protectors

This one is rare, but if you find yourself up against a player such as I describe, you'll be able to exploit him pretty easily. Basically, you should focus on how well an opponent is protecting his hand. If he normally has a chip on his cards, but this time he doesn't, that could mean he isn't all that interested in this particular hand. Or conversely, if he seems overly protective of his hand, it could signify that he is hanging on to that monster and doesn't want anything to happen to it.

4. Quick Checkers

Paying attention at all times is the best way to pick up on physical tells. Often, players will check very quickly on the turn. That means something. Depending on the player, it could mean that he plans to check-raise you, or is on a draw. It's different with all players, so you should label the action as one way or the other. Every instance is different, and it's your job to figure out which is which. I can't do everything for you!

GIVING AWAY FREE CARDS

Throughout this section, I've stressed the importance of protecting your stack in favor of protecting the pot. As a result of this philosophy, you are going to end up allowing your opponent to see some free cards. It's not the cardinal sin that people often make it out to be. In limit hold'em, it may be true that giving away a free card is often foolish, but in no-limit, it's essential for your survival and will help you avoid several traps where your more aggressive opponents would surely go broke.

It's important to understand that by playing small ball, you will take more lumps and lose more pots than when you are playing big-bet poker. That's the bad news. The good news is that if you are emotionally stable enough to handle some rough patches, playing this way will allow you to stick around longer in the tournaments, as well as ensure that your entire stack will not be at risk very often.

Let's look at a few examples.

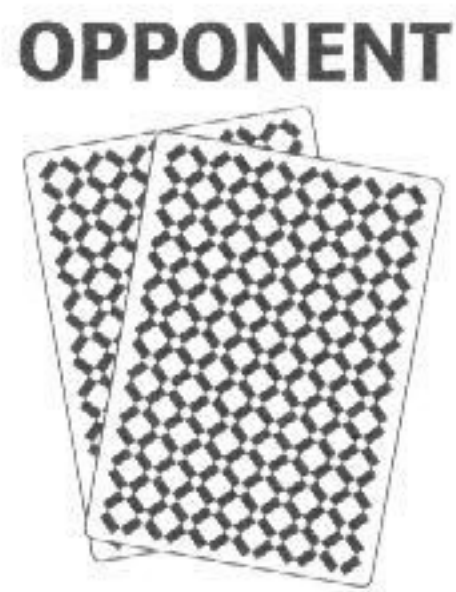
Hand in Action 1

With the blinds at \$1,500/\$3,000, you raise to \$8,000 preflop in late position with J-J. The big blind plays back at you, reraising \$20,000 more. Both you and your opponent have over \$400,000 in chips, so you call.

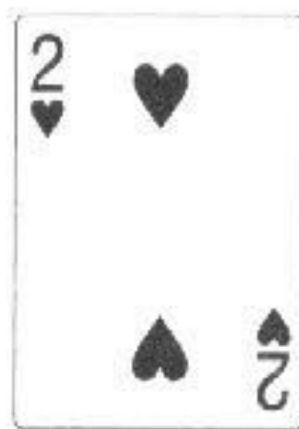
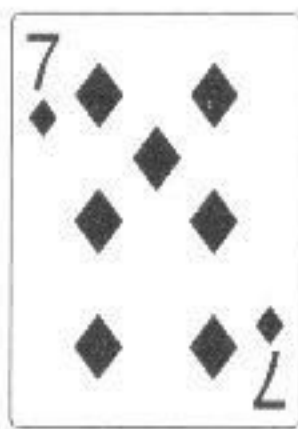
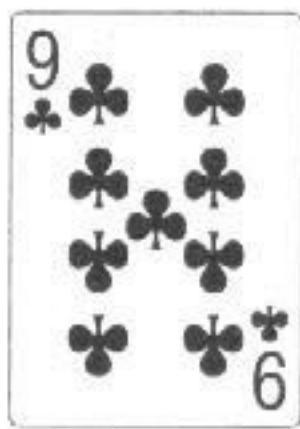
SMALL BALL

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The flop comes 9♣ 7♦ 2♥. Your opponent bets out \$30,000 and you call the bet, still unsure as to whether you have the best hand. The turn is the 2♠



BOARD



Your opponent checks, leading you to believe that he has an A-K. The standard play here would be to bet around \$50,000. But if your opponent is at all tricky, he might be setting a trap for you with A-A or K-K. If he check-raises, it opens up the opportunity for him to bluff you and you'll likely be forced to fold. Instead, let's say that you check, giving away a free card. If your opponent has the A-K, he only has six outs (three aces and three kings) to beat you. Only 14 percent of the time will he catch an ace or a king. At the same time, if your opponent is trying to trap you with A-A or K-K, you give *yourself* a free shot at hitting one of the two remaining jacks.

If the river card is a blank, your opponent will probably bet with A-A or K-K, at which time you can decide whether your J-J is good. If your opponent checks the river, you should look to value bet your J-J. By that point, he may call you with just ace-high since you showed weakness on the turn. If he has a

hand such as 6-6 or 8-8, then it's very likely that he'll call a value bet of about \$50,000.

That situation reminds me of a story that Gus Hansen once told me about a hand he played against a player he knew very well. It's almost identical actually.

Hand in Action 2

Gus raised with J-J and the big blind reraised him. Gus knew that his opponent was a tight player and probably had A-K or a better pair, so he decided to just call and see what hit the flop.

The flop came 7♣ 2♠ 3♦ and the big blind checked to Gus. Knowing his player, Gus was still suspicious that his opponent was setting a trap for him so he checked behind him. The turn card paired the 2.

GUS

OPPONENT

BOARD

Once again, his opponent checked. Gus figured that his opponent would not check twice with A-A or K-K, so he must have A-K. However, Gus also figured that his opponent would call an all-in bet on the turn with A-K. Further, Gus believed

that his opponent would call him on the river with A-K high, whether he made a pair or not.

So, rather than risk a 14 percent chance of going broke on the hand, Gus decided to check what he knew to be the best hand. That way, if an ace or king hit the river, Gus could evade being eliminated from the tournament. At the same time, it wouldn't cost him any value since his read led him to believe that he could get all his chips in on the river when there was no risk of being outdrawn.

This is obviously an extreme example of a situation where a player had a dead read on his opponent, but it helps illustrate the bigger lesson. (By the way, Gus went all in on the river when a 4 hit and his opponent called him with A-K, doubling him up.) That is, it's often better to allow an opponent to outdraw you for free in a smaller pot than it is to play a big pot for your tournament life where you could take a bad beat and be eliminated from action.

MAKING A WEAKER PLAY FOR BIGGER CONSIDERATIONS

A lot of poker theorists are going to strongly disagree with the above paragraph, claiming that the best approach is to maximize your equity in each hand you play, but there are other considerations to think about. Namely, if you are doing great in a tournament by chopping away at small pots and you think you'll be able to continue to do so, why would you risk even a 14 percent chance of going broke? Surely getting all of your money in as over a 4 to 1 favorite isn't a bad thing, but if there is an alternative that helps you avoid risking your whole stack, you should consider making what, for all intents and purposes, is the weaker play.

This concept is hard for a lot of people to wrap their head around. Tournament poker is different from playing in a

cash game. When you play for money, all that matters is that you make the play with the highest expected value. But in a tournament, your expected value is directly tied into the likelihood of your going broke and being eliminated from the tournament. It's the reason you always hear the pros say they want to avoid coin flips. It's the reason why a player like Phil Hellmuth may fold pocket tens preflop against a player that he thinks has an A-K, despite the fact that he is a 57 percent favorite. He doesn't want to take the risk of being eliminated 43 percent of the time, because he truly believes that he can build his stack without taking these types of risks.

I agree with him. If you want to be a consistent winner in million dollar events, this is a concept that you need to accept.

RIVER PLAY

INTRODUCTION TO RIVER PLAY

When playing a small-ball brand of poker, your goal with many of the marginal hands you'll be playing is simply to get to the river without investing too high a percentage of your chip stack—unless you actually have a monster hand and want to build the pot to get maximum value for the hand.

Since your table image will likely be one where people suspect that you are bluffing throughout the hand, the river is not the time to make them right. With the small-ball approach, your bluffing frequency should be lower than if you were playing a more traditional style of hold'em. The key reason is simply because people will lean towards calling you more often because you are playing more than your fair share of hands. If you watch some of the world's best no-limit hold'em tournament players, you'll notice that they don't bluff on the river nearly as often as you think. They understand that once an opponent

has played a hand all the way to the river, he is likely going to see it through to the end if he has any kind of a hand.

Gus Hansen is an excellent example of a player who personifies the wild, crazy image. But watch his play more closely and you'll see that while he'll raise with hands such as 9-2 and 10-4, rarely will he waste large amounts of chips on the river as a pure bluff. It is an understanding of table image that forces Gus to have the goods on the river if he bets. That is, he has created an image that will get him more action. It's no coincidence that Gus is one of the most successful tournament players of all time. His approach to the game has a lot of merit.

With these river concepts in mind, you should understand that the river isn't a time for wild, sophisticated bluffs, although you can occasionally bluff in the perfect situations. Instead, the river is a time to extract full value for your strong hands, avoid losing more chips than necessary, and induce bluffs from opponents who think you are weak.

GETTING MAXIMUM VALUE

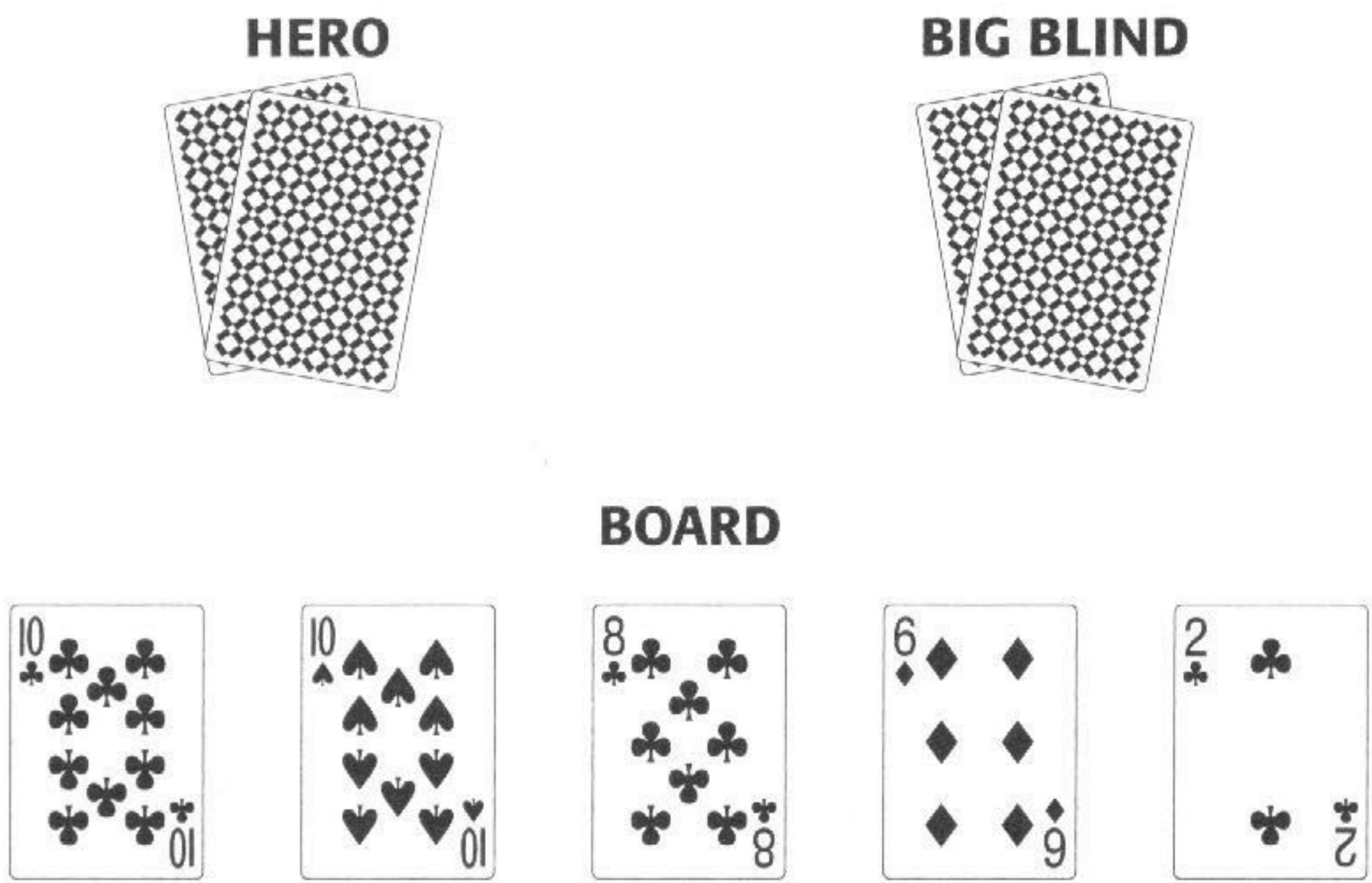
One of the key things to avoid when playing small ball is falling into predictable patterns based on your bet sizes. For example, you don't want your bluffs to be 60 percent of the pot and your value bets to be 80 percent of the pot. In theory, that would work out extremely well if no one paid attention, but in reality your more perceptive opponents will pick up on these patterns and exploit you. They'll reraise-bluff your smaller bets and lay down strong hands against your bigger bets.

The best way to value bet the river with hands you want to get paid off on is to bet the same amount that you'd bet if you were bluffing. Essentially, the size of your bluff bet and the size of your value bet should be close to identical.

I’ve actually seen some young players apply a version of small ball who made it ridiculously obvious, purely by the size of their bets, when they had a strong hand and were looking for extra value.

Hand in Action

For example, our hero raised from late position to \$250 before the flop. With the blinds at \$50/\$100, the big blind called. The flop came 10♣ 10♠ 8♣. The big blind checked and our hero bet \$350. The big blind called. The turn was the 6♦ and again the big blind checked. This time our hero bet \$900. The blind called again. The river card was the 2♣.



With \$3,050 in the pot, our hero went a little nuts and bet \$6,500.

Earlier in the session I noticed that the kid had gotten caught bluffing twice, and on those occasions, his bets were 50 to 60 percent of the pot size. Considering that I knew he was trying to play small pots, he made it too obvious that he had a monster hand. The big blind showed pocket aces and mucked them face up! I’m certain that if the kid would have bet \$1,700

to \$2,200 the big blind would have called him instantly. The kid drastically overpriced the hand and it cost him an extra \$2,000 or so.

I've used a blackjack analogy once before regarding small-ball poker, and I'm going back to it one more time to illustrate my point. I'm assuming that most of you have heard of card counting in blackjack, and know that when done properly, card counting can give blackjack players an advantage over the house.

Essentially, it works like this: When the remaining deck is rich with high cards, it is good for the player. When the remaining cards in the deck are mostly smaller cards, it is good for the house. Card counters are notorious for varying their bet sizes based on the "count," the high-low card ratio of the remaining cards in the deck. When the deck is pro-player, they increase their bets; and when the deck is pro-house, they lower their bets.

Almost every card counter in the world gets caught, but many of them get caught quickly because they are too greedy. Similar to our example with the kid trying to make a big payday (he had made a full house on that hand), a bad card counter alerts the house to his favorable situation when he makes drastic changes in his bet sizes. Imagine you were a pit boss in a casino and you have a player betting \$10 a hand at the start of a shoe. Then after about six hands, his bets go to \$500 for the rest of the shoe. Hmm... you think he might be counting cards?

The key is to make subtle changes to your bet sizes so that they go unnoticed. Therefore, rather than jumping from \$10 to \$500, maybe you double up and increase to \$20 after a win and \$40 after another. But you don't vary your bet sizes so drastically that your cover is blown like the hero in our poker hand example who got greedy and overbet the pot.

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CORRECT VALUE BET SIZING

In a tournament, the small-ball approach is one where you want to avoid big pots at all costs unless you have the nuts. By default, pots will get bigger when you get to the river, and that puts you in dangerous territory. In fact, small ball works best when most hands *don't* even get to the river, but when they do, one player just makes a small bet and another player may call. The value in this approach to the game isn't to make large value bets in dangerous situations, but instead to nickel and dime your opponents in the marginal situations. And on the rare occasions when you have the nuts, you hook them for a bigger bet along the way.

IN FACT, SMALL BALL WORKS BEST WHEN MOST HANDS DON'T EVEN GET TO THE RIVER.

However, when you do have the nuts, or what you think is clearly the best hand, you shouldn't veer from the small-ball betting patterns that you'll be using throughout the tournament. In fact, you shouldn't bet more than the amount in the pot. There are

some very rare cases where you may want to bet more than that, but for the most part, your value bets shouldn't exceed the pot size.

The key to figuring out the correct value bet size is figuring out the strength of your opponent's hand. The stronger you think your opponent's hand is, the more you should bet. Conversely, if you think your opponent has close to nothing, then you want to make it easy for him to justify making a bad call. In extreme cases, you might even want to bet the minimum, even if it represents only 10 percent of the pot!

In a tournament, the amount you bet when value betting should also take into account the amount of pressure your bet will be putting on your opponent. For example, if you make a pot-sized bet that would put your opponent all in, you might

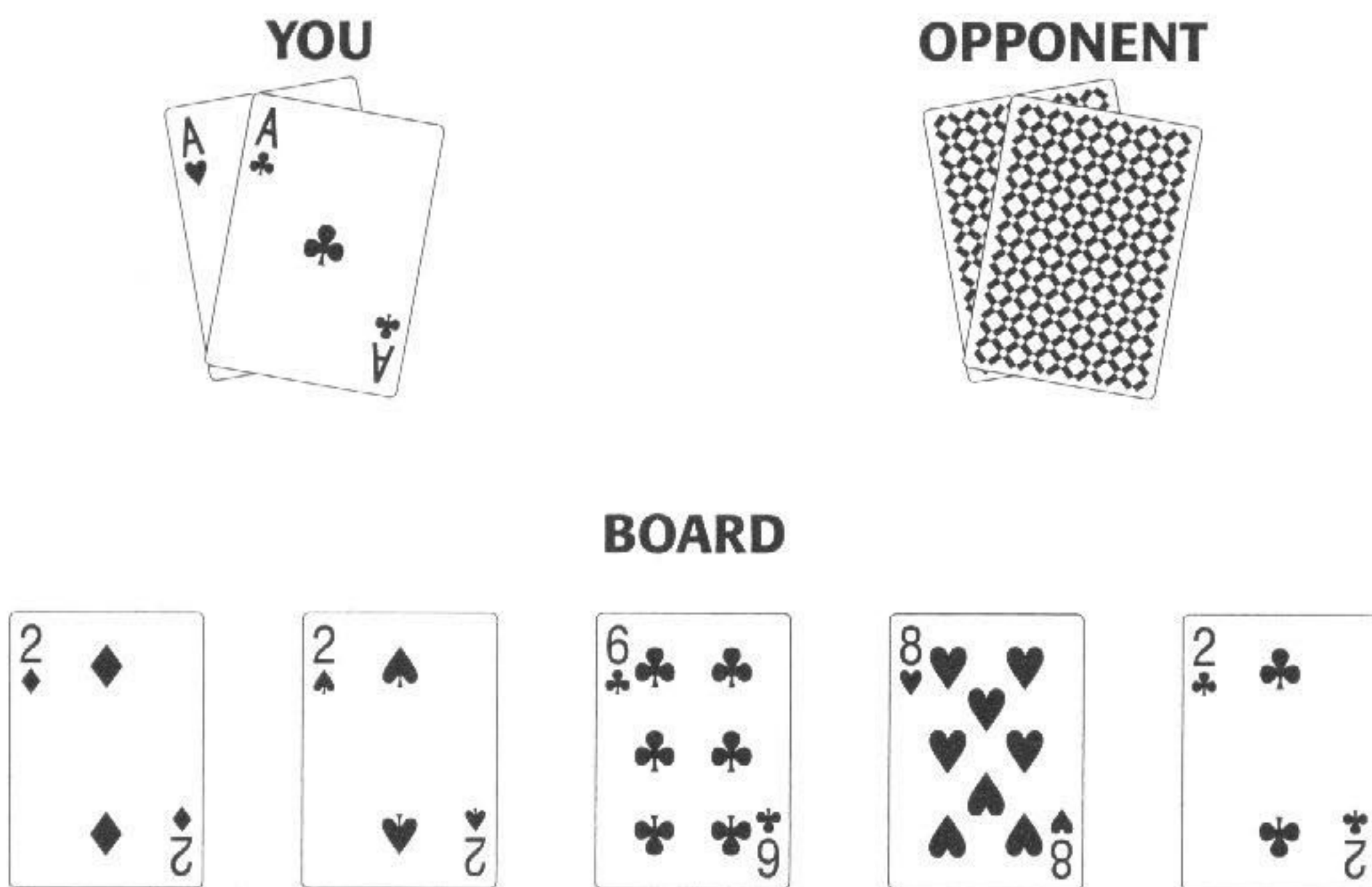
scare him away from calling since he desperately wants to stay in the tournament. In a case like that, instead of betting 100 percent of his chips and putting his tournament life on the line, you might want to bet 75 percent of his chips. That way, he may think, “Well, I think I have the best hand here, but even if I’m wrong, I’ll still have some chips left to play with.” And then you get “some” of his chips!

Let’s take a look at three examples and try to figure out what size value bet makes the most sense:

Hand in Action #1

With the blinds at \$100/\$200 a player from first position makes it \$600 to go before the flop. You reraise him from late position to \$2,100 with A-A. He calls. The flop comes 2♦ 2♠ 6♣. Your opponent checks and you bet \$2,500. He calls. The turn is the 8♥.

Your opponent check-calls \$4,000. The river brings the 2♣.



Your opponent checks on the river. Both you and your opponent have \$16,000 in chips remaining and there is \$17,500 in the pot.

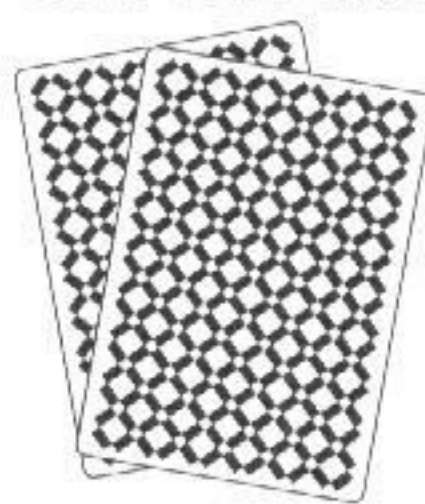
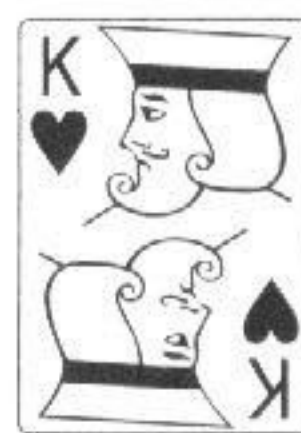
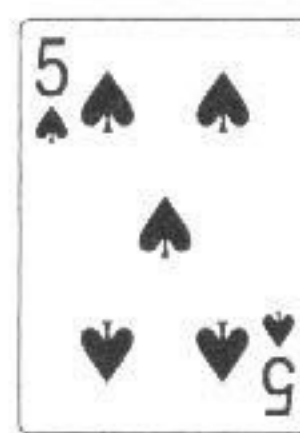
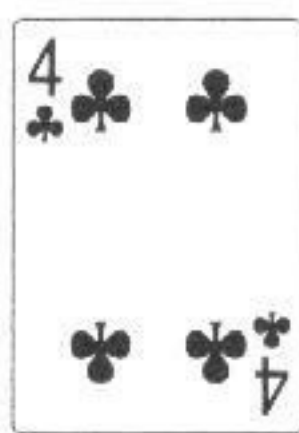
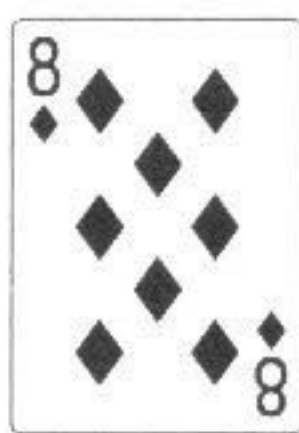
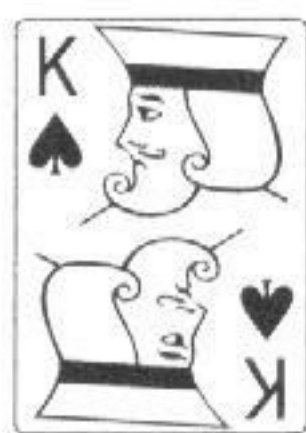
How much should you bet?

1. \$4,000
2. \$10,000
3. All In

Hand in Action #2

With the blinds at \$50/\$100, you raise preflop to \$250 from the button with A♠ 8♠. The big blind calls. The flop comes K♠ 8♦ 4♣. You both check the flop. The turn is the 5♠.

Your opponent checks, and you bet \$400. He calls. The river is the K♥.

YOU**OPPONENT****BOARD**


Both you and your opponent have over \$10,000 in chips and there is \$1,350 in the pot. How much should you bet?

1. \$1,350
2. \$550
3. \$1,000

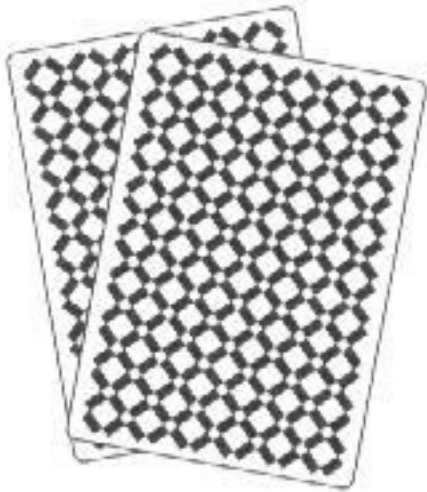
Hand in Action #3

With the blinds at \$400/\$800 and a \$100 ante, a player from early position makes it \$2,400 before the flop. You call from the button with the 7♣ 8♣. The flop comes K♦ 5♣ 6♦. Your opponent bets \$3,000 and you call. The turn is the A♥ and both of you check. The river is the 4♣.

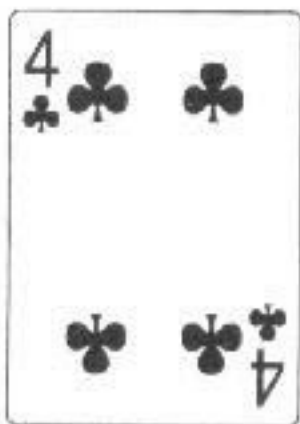

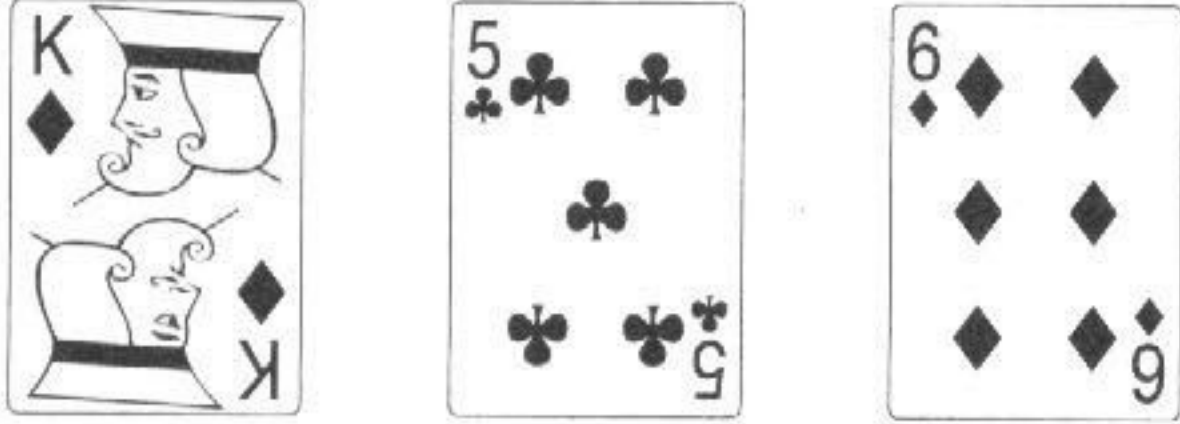
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



The 4♣ gives you the nut straight. Both you and your opponent have over \$50,000 left in chips and there is \$12,900 in the pot.

Your opponent checks to you on the river. How much should you bet?

- 1. \$12,900
- 2. \$8,500
- 3. \$4,000

Let's see how you did.

Answer to Hand in Action 1

“A” is incorrect. It should be clear in this situation that your opponent has a strong hand and has shown a willingness to pay off decent-sized bets. The way the hand has played out makes it look as though your opponent likely has a decent sized pocket pair, so \$4,000 is too small a bet in this situation.

“B” is correct. A bet of \$10,000 represents a good percentage of the pot. The bet is not so big that it will apply maximum pressure on your opponent, which will increase the likelihood of him paying you off.

“C” is incorrect. It wouldn't be a horrible play, but let's consider what hands your opponent likely has here. He probably doesn't have K-K or you may have heard from him sooner in the hand. His most likely hands are in the range of 9-9 through Q-Q. An all-in call would be a very risky move for his tournament life, and the fact that you've forced him to make that decision could convince him that he's beat. That's not the result you want. If he folds, your bet sizing error could have cost you a nice value bet and call on the river.

Answer to Hand in Action 2

“A” is incorrect. Why bet so much when you have a marginal hand? If he is slowplaying a king, you are costing yourself more than you need to. By betting the whole pot, you decrease the chances that your opponent will make a loose call with bottom pair or even ace high.

“B” is correct. The way the hand played out doesn't look like either you or your opponent has a very strong hand, so any value bet here with second pair and an ace kicker should be considered a very thin value bet. There is no guarantee that

your hand is the best one, so by making a smallish bet you accomplish two things:

1. You lose less when your opponent has you beat.
2. You increase the likelihood of your opponent paying you off with a very weak hand such as bottom pair or ace high.

“C” is incorrect. For the same reasons you shouldn’t bet the whole pot in this situation, you shouldn’t bet \$1,000 either. If you are beat, your \$1,000 bet will never get your opponent to fold—all it will do is cost you more chips when he shows you 10-10 or K-3. When making a thin value bet with a marginal hand, you don’t want to waste that good read by letting your opponent off the hook by overbetting. You know your hand is likely the best hand, so make sure you get something for it.

Answer to Hand in Action 3

“A” is incorrect. If your opponent had a strong enough hand to call a pot-sized bet, what makes you think he would have checked on both the turn and the river? Your opponent likely checked because he didn’t like the ace or the king and has a hand like Q-Q. If not that, maybe he has a K-Q and just didn’t like the ace. In either case, it doesn’t look as though he has A-K, A-A, or K-K, so he just isn’t going to call a pot-sized river bet.

“B” is incorrect. Based on the way the hand played out, it should be obvious that your opponent isn’t overly strong as he would have been betting on the turn or river. A bet this big will usually convince him that his pair of queens or K-Q is no good, and you’ll let him off the hook.

“C” is correct. By making such a small bet in relation to the pot size, you’ll be laying your opponent an excellent price to look you up and see if you are bluffing. Also, if he has K-Q, he may believe that you are betting with a pair of kings and have

a worse kicker than he has. The only significantly important factor in choosing this bet size is that, in some rare cases, if your opponent is trapping you with A-A, K-K, or A-K, he likely won't be satisfied with earning your \$4,000 river bet. He may decide to raise it \$12,000, at which point you can reraise again and hope he pays that off as well.

WHEN CHECKING WINS MORE THAN BETTING

Maximizing your profit on the river isn't always about how much you should bet. In certain situations it also is about the following: Is your opponent more likely to call your bet, or bet if you check to him? The standard situation for this ploy is when you have a marginal to strong hand, but think your opponent either has you crushed or has missed his draw. In these types of situations, betting the river won't do you any good because when your opponent has you crushed, he is going to raise you; and when he misses his draw, he's just going to fold anyway.

Hand in Action

Let's look at an example where checking a strong hand might earn you extra value while a bet would be less effective.

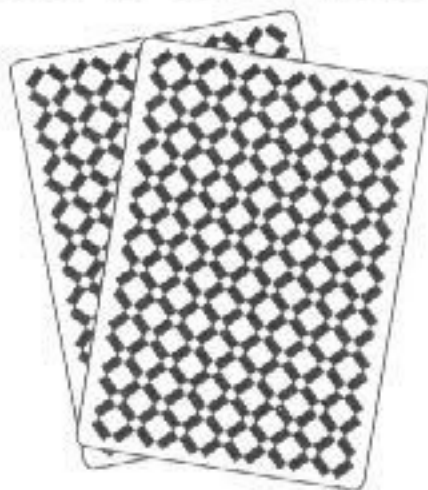
You are playing in a \$10/\$20 blind no-limit cash game and decide to limp in from the small blind with A♥ 3♥. The big blind makes it \$60 and you call. The flop comes A♠ 10♠ 4♥. You check. Your opponent makes a continuation bet, as expected, pushing forward \$80 worth of chips. You call.

The turn card is the 4♣ and both you and your opponent check. The river is the 8♦.

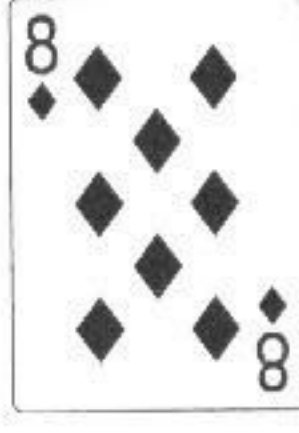
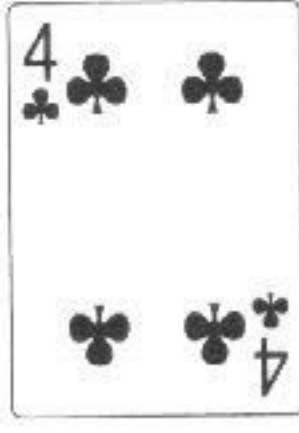
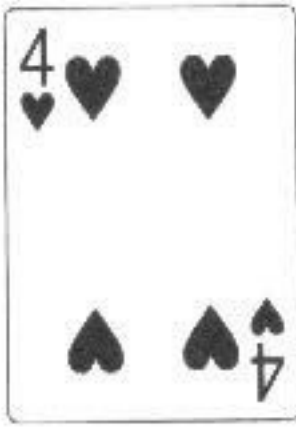
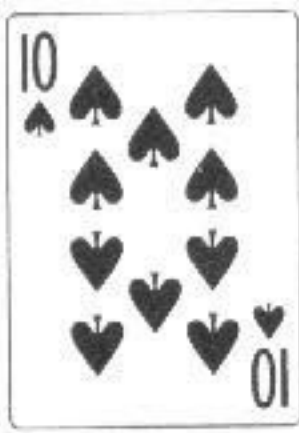
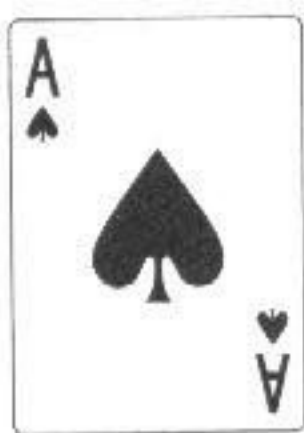
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



It is a close call as to whether betting or checking the river is the better play. Your ultimate decision on how to proceed depends on how you read your opponent. If he doesn't really bluff and you don't think he would value bet a hand such as J-J, Q-Q, or K-K, you should probably bet about \$120 and hope he calls.

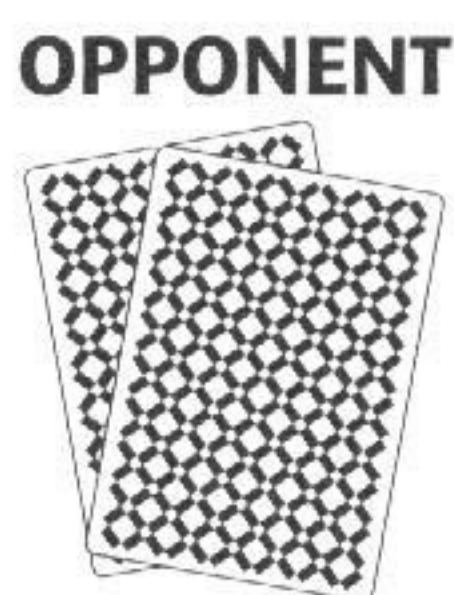
Most players don't fit that category, however, and would not only value bet a hand such as Q-Q, they may also decide to bluff the river by betting with a hand such as Q-J. Against a player like this, checking will often be the more profitable play. Whereas your opponent won't call a bet, he may see your check as a sign of weakness and decide to take one more stab at the flop.

Eventually your opponents are going to pick up on the fact that you'll often check marginal to strong hands on the river looking to induce a bluff. But that's also something that you should be able to exploit in another way. If your opponents are on to your tendency to check some good hands on the river, they will think twice about making thin value bets against you. Their hesitancy to value bet the river could earn you some

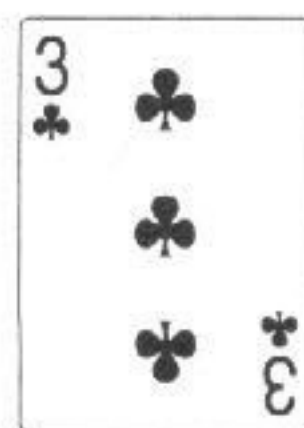
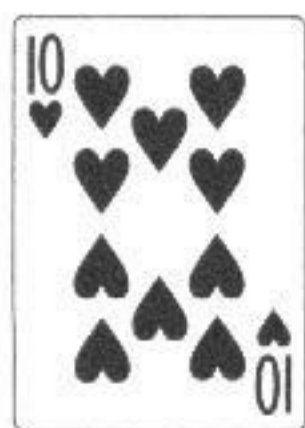
free showdowns in situations where you were planning to call a bet.

Hand in Action

For example, suppose you are in the same \$10/\$20 no-limit cash game. This time a player raises to \$60 from middle position. You defend your blind with the A♠ 4♠. The flop comes Q♠ 10♥ 4♥ giving you bottom pair and a backdoor flush draw. You check-call your opponent's \$80 flop bet. The turn is the 10♦, and both you and your opponent check. The river card is the 3♣.



BOARD



This is a situation where making a bet yourself has little to no value. Although it looks as though you may have the best hand, you'd much prefer seeing your opponent check the river behind you.

Let's say your opponent has J-J. With the 10 pairing on the turn, he can't win if you called with a 10 in your hand, and he also can't beat a queen. If your opponent bets about \$150, you very well might call the bet thinking that he missed his straight or flush and has nothing but ace high. If your opponent is

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perceptive, though, and has caught on to the fact that you have been checking some hands on the river that you could have bet, he may decide not to value bet the river since he may believe that there is little that he can beat if you call.

That's actually the place where you eventually want to get. You want your opponents to think twice about making thin value bets against you. Playing small ball is all about keeping the pots small, especially when you're out of position in marginal situations. Since those situations are much more common than ones where you have a monster hand on the river and look to play a big pot, it's in your best interest to have your opponents play cautiously against you on the river.

Obviously, if your opponents begin to make an adjustment to your play by checking hands that they may have otherwise value bet, you'll have to start betting your own hands for value a little more often. Sadly, your opponents won't habitually do it for you anymore! I'm going to share a real life example of this exact scenario playing out online at PokerStars.com.

BETTING FOR VALUE WHEN YOUR OPPONENTS WON'T

I was playing heads-up with a player who I knew little about other than he was a winning, aggressive player. In the first thirty minutes of play, a pattern kept developing: I would check the river with top pair or middle pair and my opponent would value bet a worse hand. For example, we played the following hand.

Hand in Action

I check-called a flop of J-9-4 with a J-10. The turn card was a 2 and it went check-check. The river came a 3.

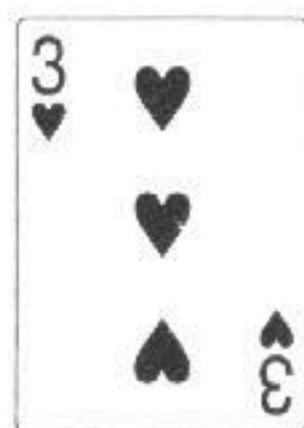
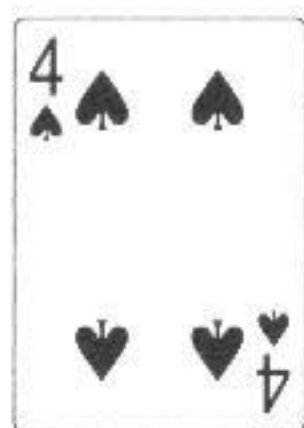
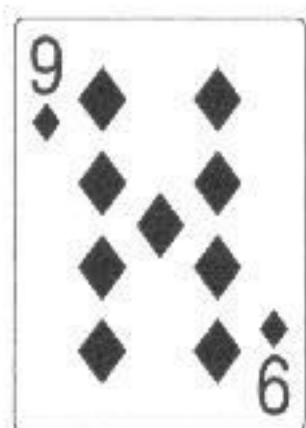
DANIEL



OPPONENT



BOARD



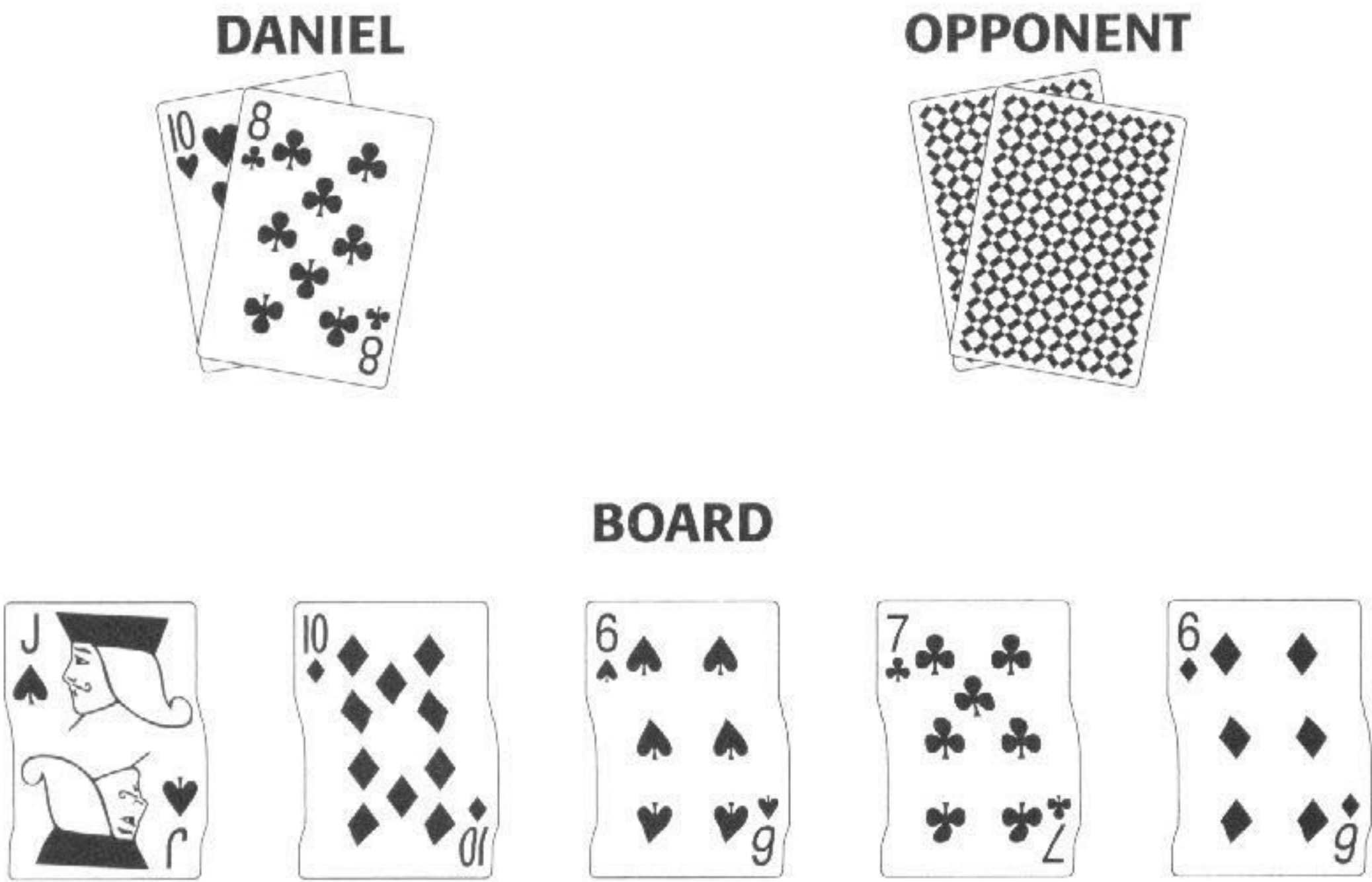
I checked again hoping for my opponent to bluff at the pot. He didn't bluff, but he value bet his Q-9 assuming that it was the best hand.

There was absolutely nothing wrong with his play. That was a pretty standard value bet for him on the river. As you can see, however, my checking the J-10 didn't cost me anything because he would have just called the bet if I had bet the river. The money still went in the middle, but my play sent my opponent a clear message: Just because I check the river doesn't mean I have nothing!

I continued to play that style against him out of position and eventually he made an adjustment. That's precisely what I was hoping for! He had picked up on my tendency to play cautiously on the river and just check-call, which forced him to change his strategy and avoid making value bets with hands that he would normally bet. The adjustment he made actually saved me lots of river bets in situations where I would have called, but didn't have to since he checked. Here is a hand that we played later in the session.

Hand in Action 2

My opponent raised before the flop and I called with a 10-8. The flop came J-10-6. I checked and he made a small bet. The turn was a 7 and I checked again, as did he. The river was another 6.



It went check-check on the river. I showed my pair and he turned over K-10! This is a hand that he clearly would have bet for value earlier in the session.

The strategy isn't complete, however, without a minor adjustment. Knowing that I've lulled my opponent into checking down marginal hands on the river, I now bet my own hands for value a slightly higher percentage of the time on the river. It's a cat-and-mouse game that you can play on a regular basis, more specifically when playing heads-up. In sticking with the small-ball concept, though, you always want to tame your opponent into keeping the pots smaller, especially when you're out of position. This generally means that you'll be playing cautiously or weak when you're out of position—but that's okay. Remember, your goal is to minimize your losses when

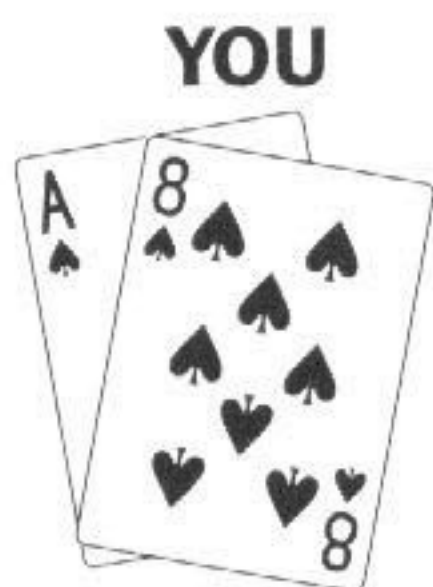
you're out of position, and maximize your profits when you're in position.

USING THE DEFENSIVE BET

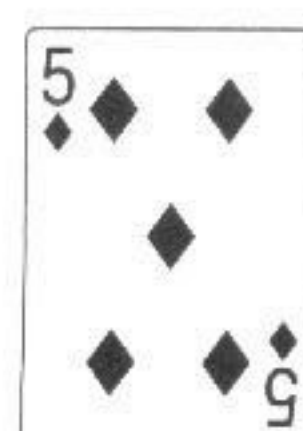
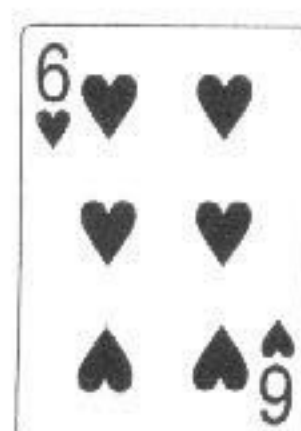
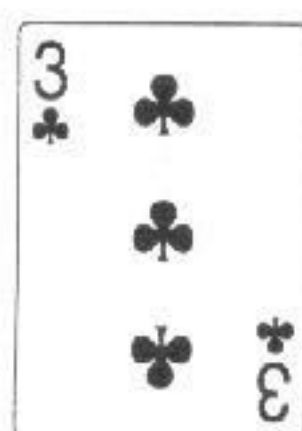
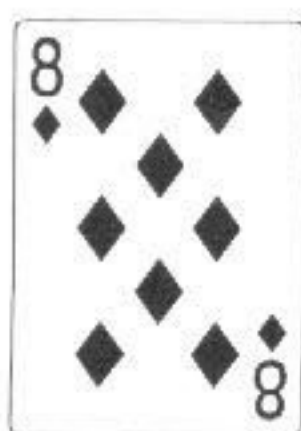
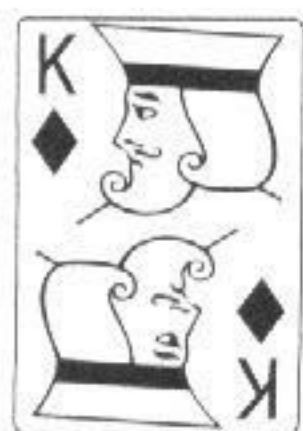
The goal with the defensive bet is essentially to minimize your losses in marginal situations where you are uncertain whether you have the best hand, but think you have to call an opponent's bet if he bets the river. The idea is to bet a smaller amount than you think your opponent would bet, which will force him to raise you on the river if he is looking for more value on the hand. Most of the time, however, your opponent won't have a hand strong enough to make that play. Even when an opponent suspects that you may be making a defensive bet, he still probably will just call on the river—unless he has the nuts or close to it. Let's take a look at a few examples of how to use the defensive bet effectively.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$50/\$100 before the flop in tournament action, a player raises your big blind to \$300. You defend with the A♠ 8♠. The flop comes K♦ 8♦ 3♣. You check to your opponent and he also checks. The turn card is the 6♥. You check the turn, slightly worried that your opponent is trapping you with a king. He bets \$450 and you decide to look him up. The river card is the 5♦, putting a third diamond on the board.



BOARD



If you are up against an aggressive player who is capable of making large bluff bets on the river, or even a value bet with a hand such as A-K, this might be a good time for a defensive bet since you can now represent a flush. If you bet the river, your opponent is not going to raise you unless he actually hit the flush. Even with a set of kings, your opponent will likely just call on the river rather than raise. However, if you check the river, he'll likely make close to a pot-sized bet with a set.

Since you aren't really sure where you stand in the hand, the last thing you want to do here is face a large river bet. The best way to avoid facing that is to make a defensive bet. With \$1,550 in the pot, you could bet as little as \$550 on the river. Your river bet really isn't intended to be a bluff at all, but it accomplishes the following:

1. It takes your opponent's big-bluff weapon away from him on the river.
2. It allows you to see the hand through at a cheaper price.

Your opponent isn't likely to fold any hand that beats you for such a small bet, but that's not the goal of making a bet. The bet is designed so that you can minimize your own damage on the hand and not be faced with calling a large river bet in a situation where you would be unsure what to do. The bet simplifies your decision for you.

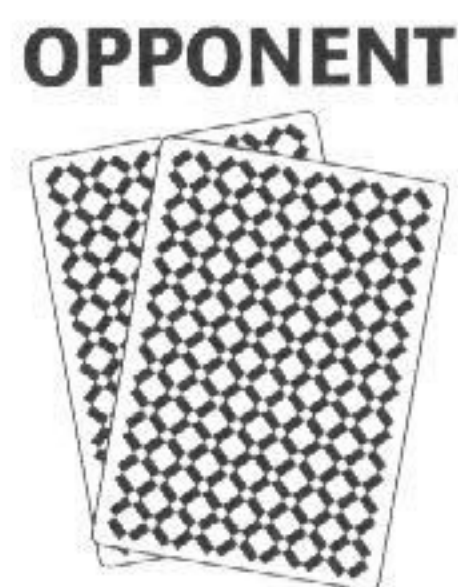
If your opponent raises, well, you should probably dump your hand as he's likely to have made a flush on the river. Now,

there are some players capable of pouncing on a defensive river bet as a bluff, but they are few and far between. Besides, we have a plan for those guys that we'll get to later. But before we move on to that, let's look at some other scenarios where the defensive bet works well.

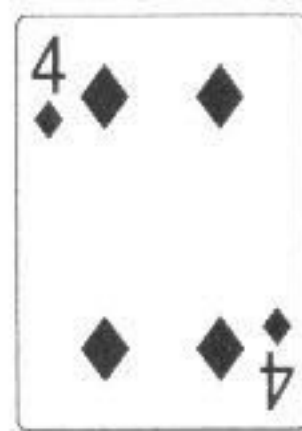
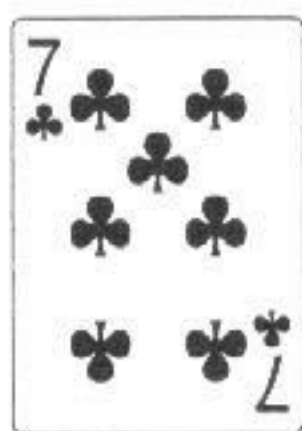
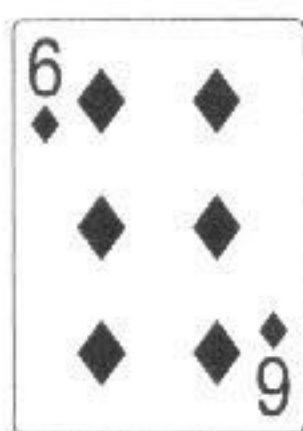
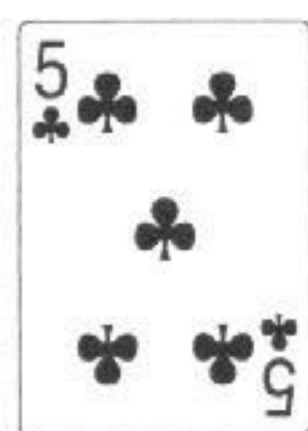
Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$100/\$200, you have pocket fives in the big blind and call a \$600 raise before the flop. The flop comes 5♣ 6♦ 7♣. You check and your opponent bets \$900. You raise the bet to \$2,500 and he calls.

The turn card is the 2♠. You bet \$3,500 and he calls. At this point, you put him on an overpair, but are unsure. He may have a flush draw or a possible straight draw. The river card is an ugly one, the 4♦.



BOARD



If your opponent has been calling with an 8 in his hand, he may have just made the straight. Despite that, this is the perfect opportunity for you to make a defensive bet. If you bet on the river and your opponent raises, you'll simply have to fold your set. It's extremely unlikely that he could raise you on the river

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without the straight, especially since you were in the big blind and could have made the straight yourself.

There is \$13,300 in the pot and your turn bet was \$3,500. You don't want to bet less than \$3,500, but you don't want to bet much more than that either. If you check the river, your opponent may decide to get aggressive and try to steal the pot away from you and bet \$12,000 with a missed flush draw. Even though you can beat a bluff, poker is so much easier when you don't have to face such high-pressure decisions for large percentages of your chips. Instead, betting anywhere from \$3,500 to \$4,500 on the river is the way to go.

In addition to helping you defend against a huge river bet, there is an added benefit to this bet size. If your opponent has A-A, he may decide that you were bluffing with a flush draw and pay you off! If your opponent has an 8 in his hand, he might not even raise you fearing that you won't call unless you also have at least an 8, and you could even have flopped a straight with an 8-9.

Checking isn't a terrible option here, but it's more dangerous. If your opponent makes a big river bet, you'll be forced to play the guessing game. The defensive bet allows you to control the pot size by dictating the amount of the river bet rather than allowing your opponent to decide how big the pot will be. Obviously, the defensive bet is a bet that is always made out of position. If you are in position, there is no need to bet at all in these marginal situations.

The only real danger in using this ploy is that sometimes you'll be facing perceptive opponents who may pick up on your pattern and decide to bluff-raise when you make a defensive bet. As I mentioned earlier, this type of player isn't common, but he does exist and you should be prepared for him. When you think he's aware that you use the defensive bet, you can

actually bait him into bluff-raising you by making the defensive bet when you have the nuts!

Let's take a look at an example.

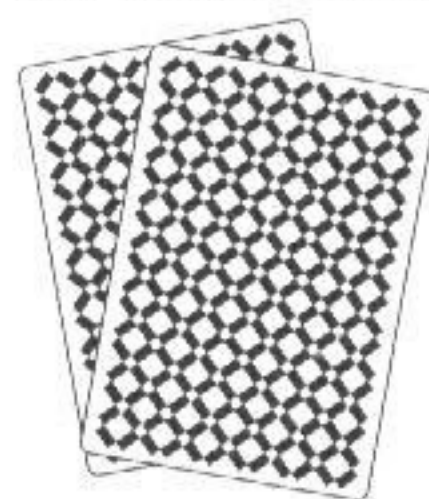
Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$200/\$400, you raise preflop to \$1,000 from middle position holding 10-J. A tough player on the button calls your raise. The flop comes K♦ Q♥ 4♣ and you decide to check the draw to your opponent. He bets out \$1,800 and you call. The turn is the insignificant 2♣. You decide to play the hand meekly and check again. This time your opponent also checks. The river is the 9♦.

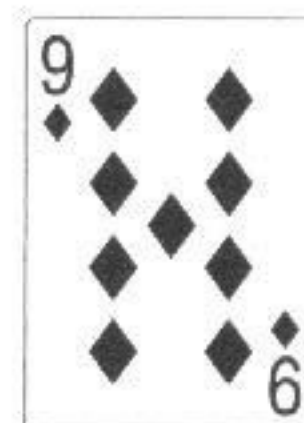
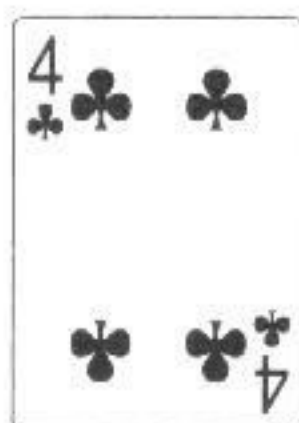
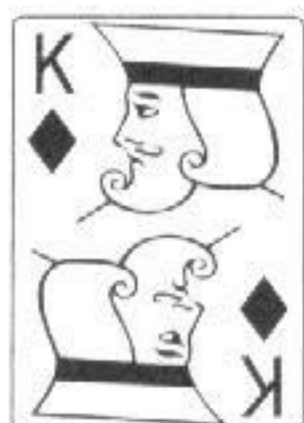
YOU



OPPONENT



BOARD



The 9 gives you the nut straight and an opportunity to make a defensive-sized bet, trying to sell the idea that you have a hand such as A-Q. Keeping in line with your real defensive bets, \$2,000 is around the right number. That bet size doesn't look like the type of bet you'd make if you have just made the nuts. In that situation, you usually would want to bet more to get full value. However, an aggressive player who may be on to your

defensive betting style may see this as the perfect opportunity to represent exactly what you already have!

You see, if he puts you on a hand such as A-Q, or even A-K for that matter, a river raise in this situation is very believable from his perspective. The way he has played the hand, he could easily have the nut straight, and if he does, he'll probably make a raise to \$6,000 or \$7,000.

Let's say that your opponent has 6-6. He might bet the flop in position to win it right there, but once you call, he knows you have something, so he checks the turn. But on the river, he senses another opportunity to steal this pot. If you bet bigger on the river, you take his play away from him, making him less likely to pounce. If you check, he may decide not to try the bluff since it looks like he'll get called. The \$2,000 bet in this situation is the perfect play. He'll call it with a queen or a king, and he may also raise you with absolutely nothing!

As with virtually anything relating to poker strategy, the key to success is learning how to mix up and adjust your play according to your opponent's perception of you and your style. Maximizing value on any particular hand is just as much about knowing your opponent as it is playing the hand fundamentally correctly.

That's actually one of the reasons I have a problem with using absolute terms when it comes to poker. One bet is rarely better than another in every situation. So much of it is dependant on the opponent you are playing. For example, take that last hand we just covered and change the opponent from a tough, aggressive player to a weak player who calls too much on the river. Against that kind of player, a defensive bet would be foolish. Instead, you would want to bet about \$6,000 on the river and hope to get a call from a king or a queen. Your

defensive bet has little value since your opponent won't raise you on the river unless he has, well, the same hand as you!

The defensive bet is an important weapon, especially in tournament poker. It's a bet that will help neutralize an opponent's positional advantage and allow you to take control of the river with minimal risk. It's a play that's most effective, though, when used sparingly. The situation has to be just right for it to work properly. Knowing when the right time to use it is a skill that should come with experience.

LAYING DOWN HANDS ON THE RIVER

You can't become a great poker player if you never lay down the best hand on the river from time to time. However, you don't want anyone to know that you are capable of making big laydowns, because if you do that, your opponents will attempt more bluffs against you, which will just make things more difficult in the long run. Conversely, the image you'd much rather have is one of a calling station. It's usually an insult when someone pegs you as a calling station, but the rewards of that image should far outweigh the bruising to your ego. When they see you as a calling station, your opponents will be less likely to try creative river bluffs against you. This table image will also make it that much easier for you to make laydowns in situations where you know your opponent wouldn't try to bluff the "calling station."

The real reason that it's difficult to lay down hands on the river correctly is because the pot is generally laying you a good price to call. Allowing the price you are being laid to influence your thought process too strongly will absolutely cloud your judgment, and you'll start coming up with all kinds of excuses to make sloppy river calls.

The Math Player

A specific type of player will often justify making bad calls on the river because the pot odds are correct. He will often neglect to realize that, no, the pot odds aren't right because opponents will beat him in that situation more often than he might convince himself that they will. Let's take a look at an example in which a "math player" makes a bad river call because his thinking on the river is influenced too strongly by the pot odds.

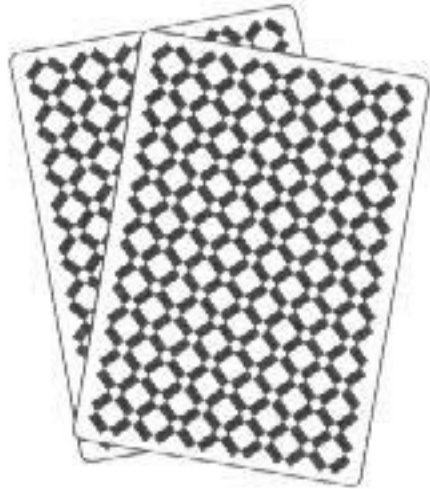
Hand in Action

Math Guy raises preflop to \$600 with the A♣ 7♦ with the blinds at \$100/\$200 and a \$25 ante at an eight-handed table. Only the big blind calls the bet. The flop comes K♣ 4♦ 4♠. The big blind checks, so Math Guy makes a continuation bet of \$900. The big blind calls. The turn comes with the 9♦ and both players check. On the river, a 6♠ hits. Here is how the situation looks:

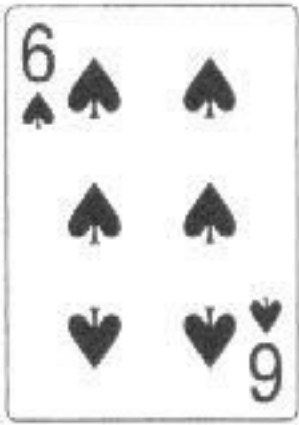
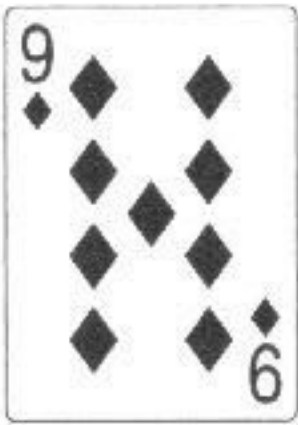
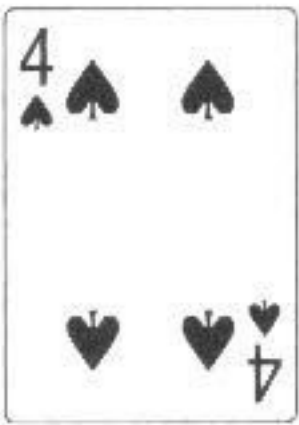
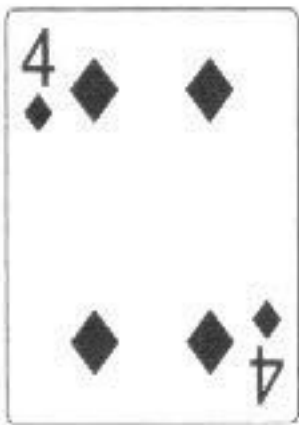
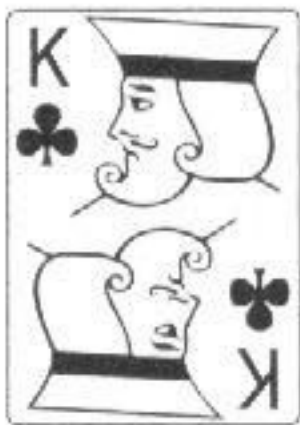
MATH GUY



BIG BLIND



BOARD



The big blind bets out \$400. That's an extremely small bet and, because of that, it only costs Math Guy \$400 to win \$3,700 if

the big blind is bluffing. That means that Math Guy only needs to pick off a bluff one in nine times to show a profit on the call. Those are amazing pot odds, but the problem is this: What hands could his opponent have to play this way that don't beat his A-7 high? No draw was present on the board, so the only way Math Guy can justify making this \$400 call is to believe that the big blind has been setting up an elaborate bluff, hoping that a really weak bet on the river (the extra \$400) would look strong. The other possibility is that the big blind is making a defensive bet with ace high, in which case he might split the pot provided that his ace high has a low kicker as well.

While it seems that the price is right, in reality the likelihood of that A-7 being the best hand based on the way the hand was played is minimal. So minimal, that not even 9 to 1 is the right price when your best hope is a random berserko bluff or a split pot! This is a rare and extreme example, but it helps illustrate the point that when you are trying to figure out whether a call makes sense, you shouldn't allow pot odds to incorrectly influence you into making sloppy calls. Pot odds should always be an important consideration, but again, don't let it be the only deciding factor in making your final decision to call or fold. Let's look at a likely situation.

WHERE POT ODDS MISREPRESENT A SITUATION

With the blinds at \$50/\$100, you raise to \$250 before the flop with J♣ J♦. A player on the button calls your raise, as does the big blind. The flop comes Q♥ 7♠ 2♠. The big blind checks and you decide to take control of the hand by betting \$450 into a pot of \$800. The button calls and the big blind folds.

The turn card is the 9♦ and you decide to try to win the pot one more time with a second bullet. This time, you fire out \$900 into a pot of \$1,700. Again, the player on the button calls. The

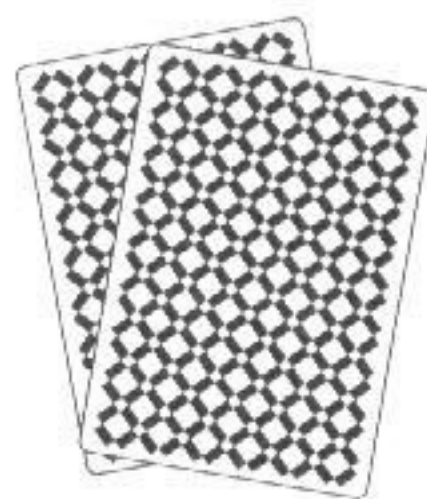
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river card is the K♠, an ugly-looking card. You decide to check to the button since it looks very likely that you are beat.

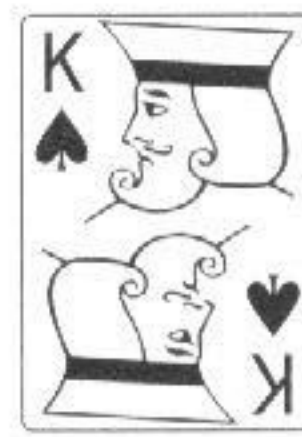
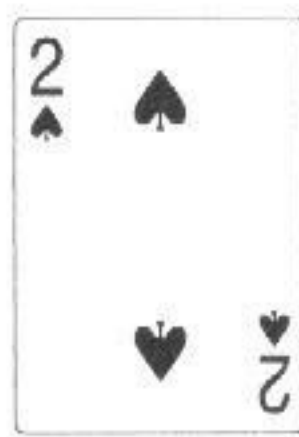
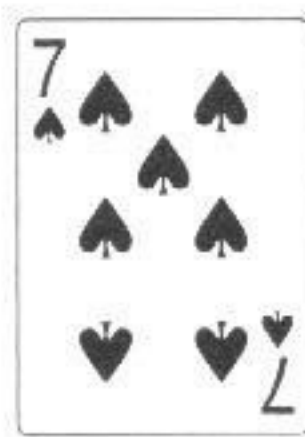
YOU



BUTTON



BOARD



Your opponent bets \$1,100. Yuck. There is \$3,500 in the pot already, so that means you need to call \$1,100 to win \$4,600. That's better than 4 to 1 odds that your jacks are the best hand.

Here is what I want you to avoid doing: Do not let your first thought be, "He only needs to be bluffing about 20 percent of the time for my call to be correct." It's a thought you should get to eventually, but I strongly urge you to get out of the habit of that being your *first* thought as it might make you lean towards making a call for the *wrong* reasons.

Instead, go through the hand from the beginning. Your opponent just called you from the button. What type of cards would he do that with? It could be hands such as K-Q, A-Q, 8-8 or 10♠J♠. Obviously, the type of hand he has depends on the type of player he is. Now, move to the flop. He called you on an uncoordinated board with an overcard to your jacks and three players in the pot. At this point, you can narrow down

his hand even further. He may have a flush draw, he could have a pair of queens, he may have a set, or he might have a hand such as 8-8 and is calling because he thinks he might have you beat. He may even have a hand such as 7♣ 8♣ for middle pair. All these hands are possibilities.

On the turn card you bet to protect against having a flush draw or a hand such as 7-8 beat you. When your opponent calls again, you should assume that you are either behind, as your opponent likely has top pair, or that your opponent is drawing to the flush. The 9 on the turn may have even helped him with additional outs and he may have picked up a straight draw as well.

The river is the nightmare card: Another overcard, and it's a spade. By this point, you've narrowed your opponent's most likely hands to:

1. A pair of queens
2. A flush

When a flush card hits *and* your opponent bets, the amount of his bet should be a factor for sure, but you should be better than 90 percent sure that your jacks are not the best hand. So, unless you are getting 10 to 1 odds on the river call, you should still fold despite the fact that it “seems” like you are getting great pot odds on the call.

Your opponent's bet size screams of a value bet hoping to get called. He may have made the flush, or have a hand such as K-Q and hope you'll call with a pair. Either way, calling here would be a mistake. Yes, it's true that a small majority of players are capable of setting up a bluff on the river this way, but it's highly unlikely, and it's not a good situation to try being a hero. Besides, if your opponent were setting up a bluff, his river bet would likely be much larger so that he wasn't giving you such great pot odds on the call. Remember, he doesn't know you

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have J-J, so if he is trying to move you off a hand such as A-Q or better, he will likely think that a bigger bet is necessary.

You can use your common sense in making laydowns on the river, but for the most part, it's always better to err on the side of paying it off in marginal situations where you don't yet have a read on your opponent's tendencies. The key to being able to make big laydowns on the river, though, lies in your read of your opponent. Without that knowledge, a sexy, monster laydown would be foolish against a player you don't know.

MAKING BIG LAYDOWNS BASED ON READS

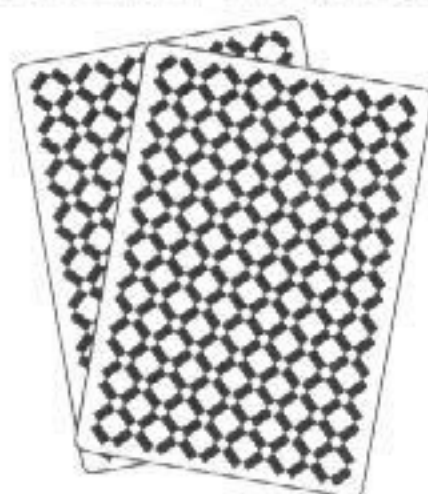
I recently made a laydown playing in a \$25/\$50 no-limit hold'em game online at PokerStars that many people questioned.

Hand in Action

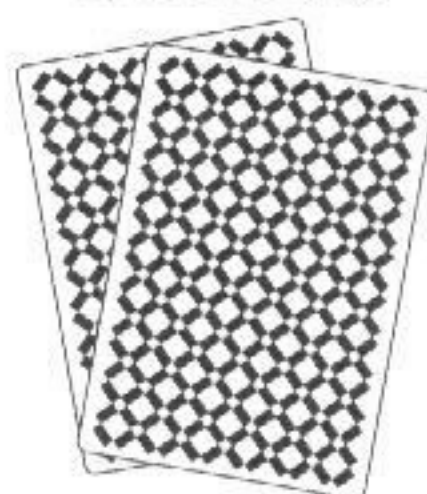
A tight player that I knew fairly well limped in from first position. The button limped and I completed the bet from the small blind with the Q♣ 8♥. The big blind checked and four of us took the flop: Q♥ Q♦ 4♣. I decided to check to the player on the button, as did everyone else, and he bet \$150. I obviously thought I had the best hand, but didn't exactly see this as a dream situation because if one of the other players in the pot had a queen, his kicker would likely beat mine. By calling, I figured I would get information from the other players' actions behind me. The big blind folded, but the player who limped in under the gun overcalled. That worried me.

The turn card was the 10♠ and I once again checked, as did both of my opponents. The river card was the J♦.

TIGHT PLAYER



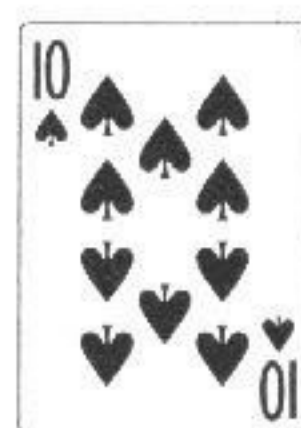
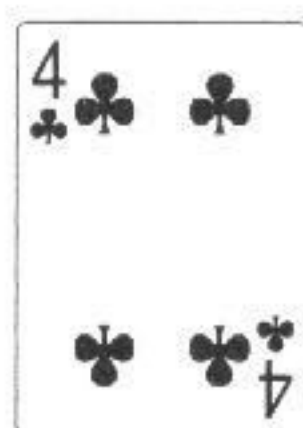
BUTTON



DANIEL



BOARD



Rather than bet, I figured no one would call me with a worse hand, so I checked to see what action developed behind me. Besides, that wasn't a great card for my hand as I'd now be losing to an 8-9, A-K, or J-J. The player under the gun bet \$400 into a pot of \$650 and the button folded. Now, it was up to me. Raising never crossed my mind for even a second. The price the pot was laying me wasn't much of a consideration either—I was getting 2.6 to 1 odds on the call. What I focused on was the situation, the overcall on the flop, and the bet size on the river. Knowing what I did about the player, I knew that for him to overcall on the flop, he had to have a strong hand. I also knew that he was very unlikely to bluff in this situation.

Even though I had three queens, a seemingly strong hand in a small pot like this one, the range of hands I could beat was

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miniscule. The idea of a split pot was something I deemed impossible. This particular player would never limp in from first position with worse than a Q-10.

The only real hand I could beat was A-A or K-K. There was a possibility that he would limp in before the flop with one of these hands, but because I knew my opponent's tendencies rather well, I didn't think he would even bet the river. Even if he did, he likely would have bet something like \$250 or \$300. I folded the hand and my opponent showed A-Q for trips with a better kicker. Yeah, me!

The point of sharing this hand helps illustrate situations where you can make laydowns based on the situation and the fact that your opponent's range of hands is very narrow. The goal in poker is to improve to the point where you can put your opponent on one of just a few hands rather than a wide spectrum of hands. The fewer hands you can narrow it down to, the easier it becomes to make good laydowns based on the pot odds you are being laid. For example, had my opponent bet something like \$100, even though I was pretty sure I was beat, I would have certainly called that bet as I wasn't that certain!

TELL-BASED LAYDOWNS

Never underestimate tells or your ability to recognize them. You'll surprise yourself if you spend a little more time focusing on the man and what he is doing with his body, his eyes or his hands. It's not easy to spot tells in every player, but some players give off very specific information about the strength of their hand. If you recognize something in particular, it can make the difference between paying off a losing hand, or picking off a bluff with bottom pair.

However, I still think that making a tell-based laydown is something that you should do only after you've already

exhausted all of the other information in the hand—what happened preflop, postflop, and on the turn. You also look at things like the players' betting patterns, the situation, and the pot odds. Once you've processed all of that information, then look for a physical tell. Before you get totally confused, it would help to know what exactly to look for. Well, it's likely not something you are magically going to see for the first time. Instead, it's probably something you should have picked up on before you played the particular hand you're playing.

Tells vary from player to player, so simply looking for a guy covering his mouth or clenching his teeth won't tell you very much unless you've seen it before and know what it means. An extreme example is something like seeing an opponent who is chewing gum suddenly stop chewing when you stare him down. That might lead you to believe he's bluffing, but on what basis? Have you seen him do that before? Does he do it when he's bluffing, or does he always do it? That's why paying attention is so important. Reading tells is certainly not a reliable science because each individual has distinct tells that are exclusive to him. Unless you know what you are looking for, nothing you see will necessarily be much good to you.

For example, I recently played in a tournament with an older French gentleman. He made a river bet against me and I stared him down a little bit. He looked extremely comfortable, his body appeared loose, and I couldn't really get a read off him, although it looked like I was beat. But I called him for two reasons:

1. For information
2. Because I had a pretty strong hand myself

Well, that same French guy was in a pot later with another player at the table and made a bet on the river, but this time, his body stiffened, he stared blankly at the flop, and he looked

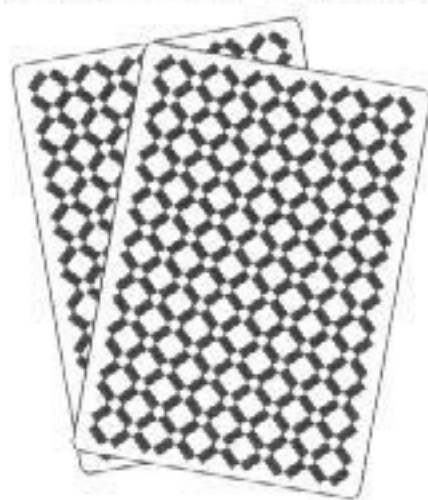
very uncomfortable. The other player folded and the French gentleman showed a bluff. About an hour later, I got my chance with him again. I checked the river to him and he made a pot-sized bet. Because I had some information already stored in my brain, I made a decision based not only on the play of the hand, but also on a physical tell. I had bottom pair and I felt like he was pushing me around. I looked over at him and he didn't look back. His body looked tense, almost like a statue. I called and his hand hit the muck.

That's one of the most fascinating aspects of poker and something that certainly differentiates online poker from live poker. Obviously, this French player could have been using a reverse tell in the hope that I would call him. That is a talent in itself. Playing the physical tell game certainly isn't easy for beginners or online players, but it's something that can give you that extra edge in tight spots when you aren't sure what to do. My French friend was pretty dependable.

Hand in Action

Not twenty minutes later, I picked up K-K on a board of 9-6-3 and bet the flop. He called. The turn was an ace.

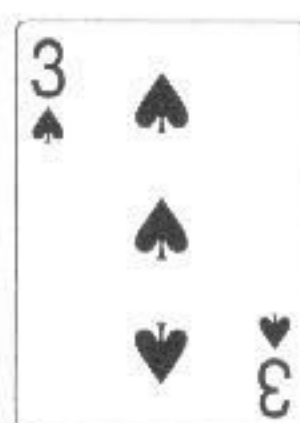
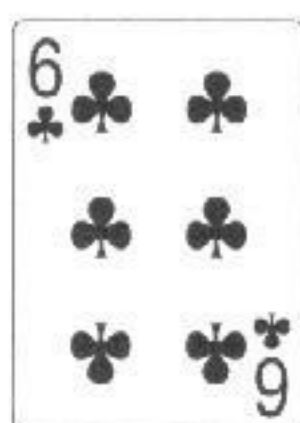
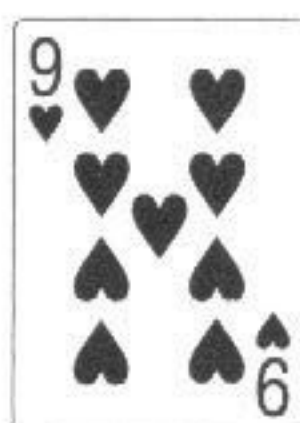
FRENCH PLAYER



DANIEL



BOARD



I checked, and he bet. I looked over at him and he smiled right back at me. I folded my K-K and he happily showed me A-6 for two pair.

On that first hand, I made the wrong decision in calling because I had no reliable tells on him. But once I was able to spot something, it allowed me to play flawless poker against him for the rest of the session.

Anyone who informs you that looking for physical tells is overrated is limiting his potential as a player. They are out there, and if you focus, I promise that you will amaze yourself with the subtle things you see.

FIGURING OUT THE CORRECT RIVER BET

Hand-reading skills are essential in figuring out how big your river bet should be, or even if it would make more sense to check the river. Having an idea about what your opponent might have will allow you to gauge how much he is willing to call when you are looking to make a value bet, or even how small a bluff bet you can make when you think your opponent missed a draw.

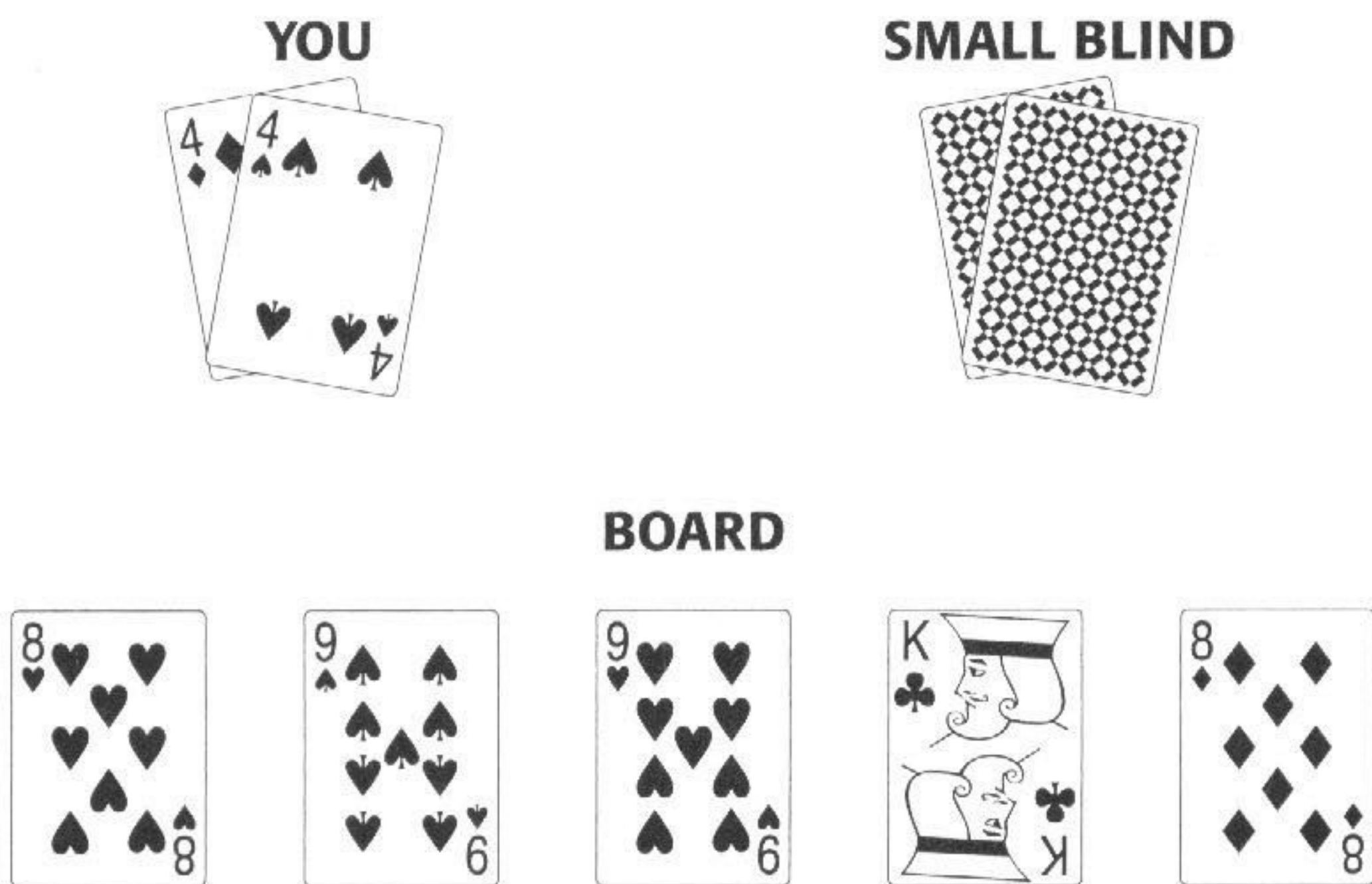
In situations where you put your opponent on a missed draw, if you plan to bluff the hand, your bet size should be on the smaller side. In case you are wrong and your opponent wasn't on a draw, there is no need to lose more chips than necessary with your bluff. Let's look at an example.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$50/\$100, you raise preflop to \$250 in late position with 4-4. The small blind calls the bet and the big blind folds, so you'll see the flop heads-up. It comes 8♥ 9♠ 9♥. The small blind checks to you and you bet out \$400. He calls.

The turn card is the K♣. The small blind checks again and you decide to take one more stab at the pot in case your opponent is drawing. You bet \$650 and again your opponent calls. You put him on either a flush draw or a hand such as J-10. Since he didn't raise you on the turn a 9 is unlikely. In this scenario, you normally would have put in your last bet on the turn unless a 4 hits the river, in which case you'd make another value bet.

However, the river card is the 8♦ counterfeiting your pair and leaving you to play the board. Here is the situation:



Your opponent checks and you decide that it's very likely that he is also playing the board. A bet here could steal his half of the pot for you. There is \$2,700 in the pot and if your opponent has the type of hand you put him on, a big bet simply isn't necessary. He'd be hard pressed to call you with the board on the river, knowing that his best-case scenario is a split pot. Virtually any bet will win you this pot if your read is correct. But you don't want to make the bet smaller than your turn bet because it may be too enticing for your opponent to call. Also, with a slightly bigger bet than your turn bet, you may force your opponent off an ace-high as well. A bet of about \$800

should do the trick. A bet that size into a \$2,700 pot looks like a legitimate value bet. At the same time, it's small enough so that when you are wrong, the damage to your stack is minimal.

Replaying the Scenario from a Different Perspective

Now, what if that same scenario were slightly different. All of the details are the same—you still figure your opponent for the draw—but this time you actually have an A-9 for a full house. This might be a good time to make what may appear to be a goofy bet of, say, \$400. For \$400, your opponent might just call playing the board thinking that he is getting a good price on the call. Better still, he may see your goofy bet as a sign of weakness and go for a bluff check-raise.

As I mentioned previously, gauging when it's appropriate to make a goofy-looking bet like this one depends heavily on the type of hand you put your opponent on. If you think your opponent may have an 8 or a king, or is the type of player that always thinks you're bluffing, a bigger value bet would be in order. Against a player like that in this scenario, you'd be better off with a bet of \$1,200 to \$1,400.

RECOGNIZING SITUATIONS

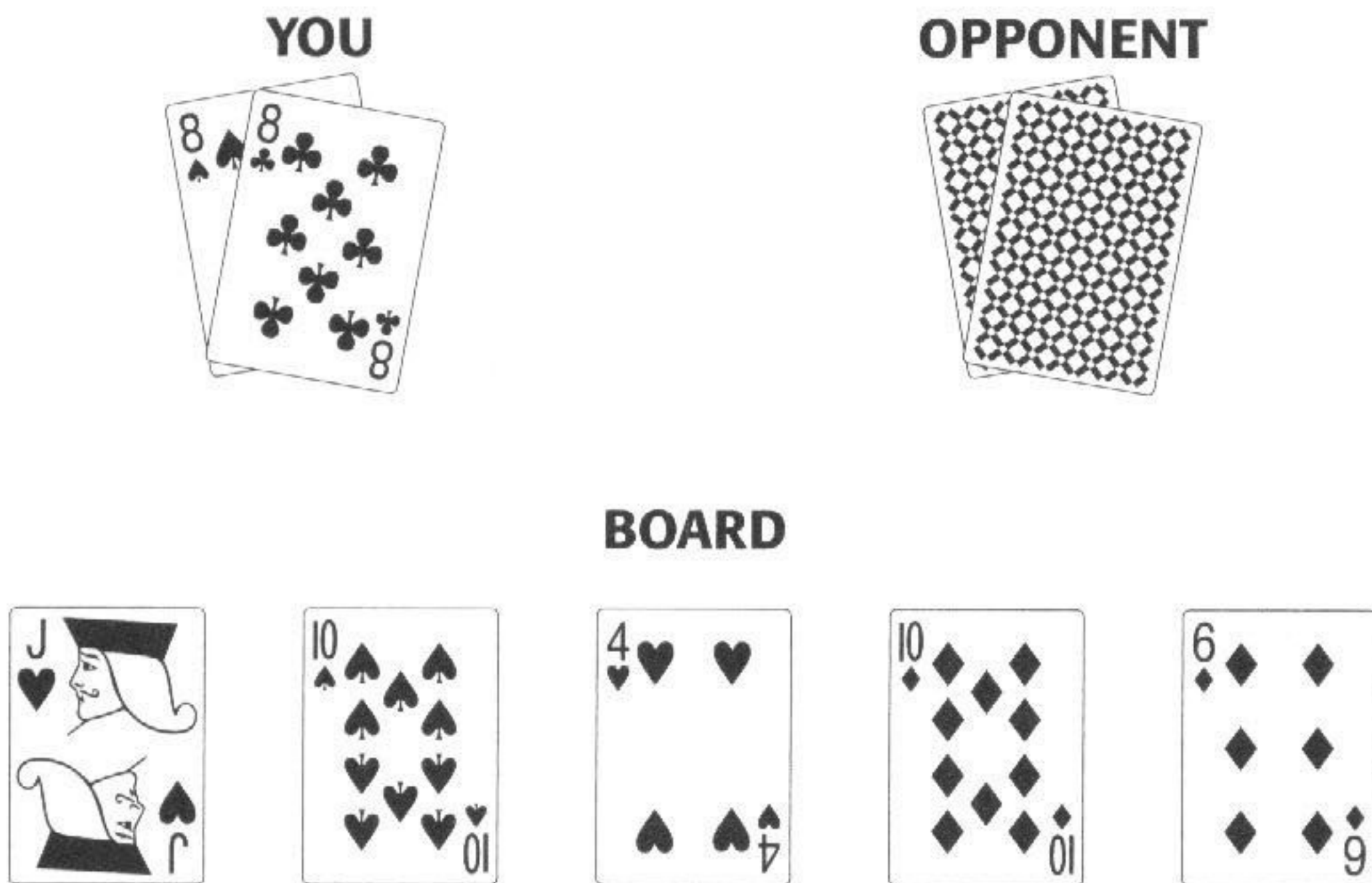
The best players in the world are all very good at recognizing situations on the river where checking is better than betting. They also are good at using their hand-reading skills to come up with a bet that makes the most sense based on what they think their opponent has. That skill, figuring out your opponent's hand, is the most important factor in deciding how much to bet on the river, or whether it makes more sense to check. Poker isn't as simple as, "Well, I have the top full house and want full value, so I may as well bet the whole pot." Approaching your decisions that way will cause you to lose out on opportunities to gain a little extra value here and there when your opponent might call a smaller bet.

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Let's look at a few more examples.

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$25/\$50, a player limps in preflop from early position and you limp in from late position with pocket eights. Both blinds call. In four-way action, the flop comes J♥ 10♠ 4♥. All players check and you bet \$150 to test the waters. The blinds fold and the limper calls. The turn is the 10♦ and once again, your opponent checks to you. Your read tells you that his most likely hand is a draw so you bet again, \$375 this time. Again your opponent calls. The river is the 6♦ and your opponent checks.



At this point, you figure that your 8-8 is the best hand. How you proceed on the river is completely reliant on your read of your opponent. If you have no read at all, the safest and most logical play is to check behind him and hope that he missed entirely. Things change a little bit, though, when you have some information on your opponent. For example:

- If you know your opponent is tricky, you should check the river.

- If your opponent plays his hands meekly, you should check the river because he may be checking a jack.
- If your opponent thinks you bluff too much and may be betting a busted draw, you should value bet the 8-8! A bet of \$500 may get called by a hand as weak as ace-high in this situation. If your opponent has the 6♥ 7♥, for example, he is also very likely to call your river bet.

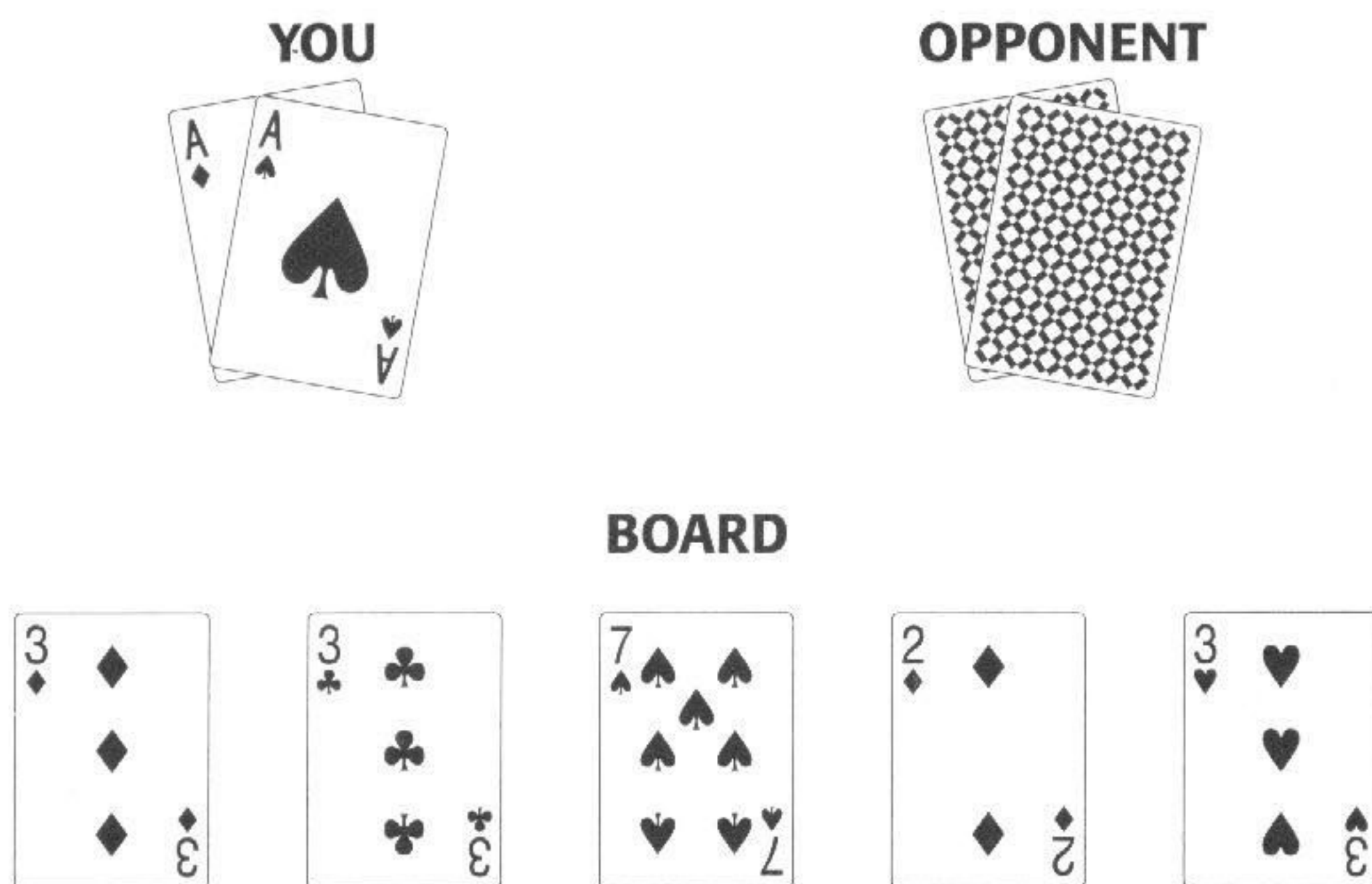
As you can see, your decision about whether or not a bet makes sense is entirely dependant on your read of your opponent. Let's take a look at another example.

Hand in Action

A player under the gun raises to \$600 with the blinds at \$100/\$200. You look down at pocket aces from the small blind and reraise to \$2,100. Your opponent calls. That leaves you with \$45,000 in chips while your opponent has \$85,000. The flop comes 3♦ 3♣ 7♠. With \$4,400 in the pot, you bet \$2,500, which should appear to be either a continuation bet with A-K or an overpair. Your opponent calls the bet. At this point, it looks like your opponent must have a strong hand because:

1. He raised under the gun
2. He called a reraise
3. He called you on a bad board

It looks as though he also has a high pair. The turn is the 2♦ and there is now \$9,400 in the pot. On the turn, you decide to bet \$5,500 and your opponent calls again, building the pot size to \$20,400 and leaving you with \$37,000 in chips for the river. The river comes with the 3♥, giving you a full house. Here's how it looks:



Now it's time to decide how much to bet. Before you do that, you must review what you know about the hand and then think about reads you might have on your opponent.

What You Know

- His hand has to be strong to call on the flop and turn; it looks very much like he has a pocket pair.

What You Need to Figure Out

- Is this player capable of making a big laydown if you bet too much?
- Will this player think you may be running a big bluff?
- Is there any chance you're beat?
- What's the most he will call without making him feel like it'll hurt too much?

Against a typical opponent—one that is likely to pay you off with kings, queens, jacks, and maybe even tens, nines or eights—a big bet is in order on the river. With \$20,400 in the pot, a bet such as \$17,000 would make sense, leaving you with

\$20,000. Betting that amount could possibly even sway your opponent into thinking that you bet \$17,000 so that you'd still have \$20,000 left if your bluff didn't work. The reason a big bet is not only appropriate, but should work in this situation, is because of what you know—your opponent has a strong hand. If you didn't think your opponent was very strong, you'd have to lower your asking price accordingly.

Let's take a look at a more complicated example.

Hand in Action

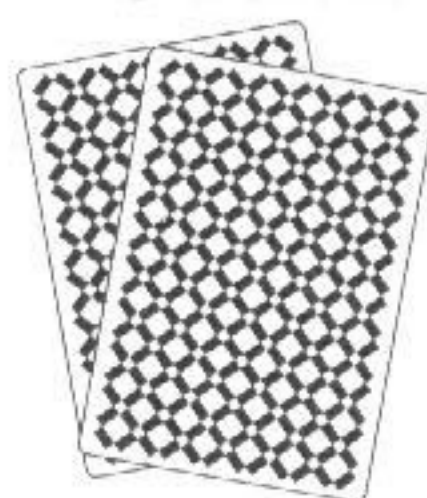
With the blinds at \$100/\$200, you raise preflop to \$500 from middle position with the A♣ 7♣. The big blind calls you. The flop comes Q♥ 7♥ 4♣ and the big blind bets \$800. Still unsure what your opponent has, you decide to take the safe approach and just call. The turn is the 2♣, giving you a backdoor flush draw along with the pair of sevens.

This time your opponent bets \$1,800 and now you are starting to suspect that he has a hand such as Q-J or K-Q. You call. The river is the A♥.

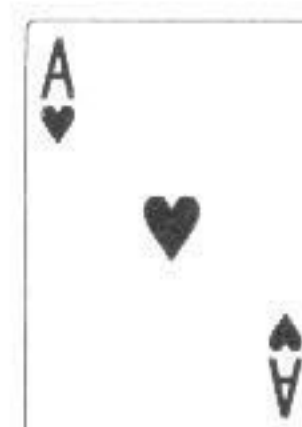
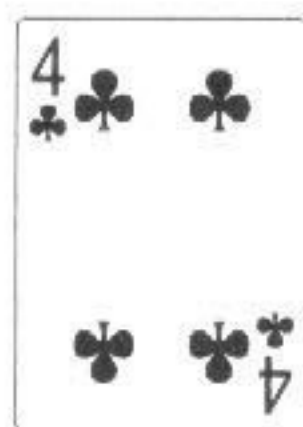
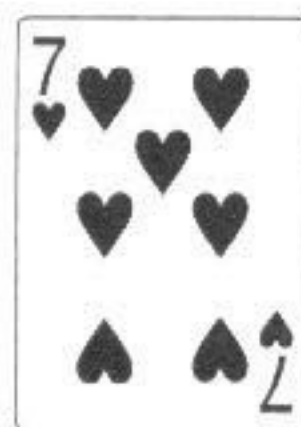
YOU



BIG BLIND



BOARD



Not exactly the card you were pulling for, but still a good card as you now have a two-pair hand, aces up. That card also brought the flush with it, which may scare your opponent. There is \$6,300 in the pot and both you and your opponent have \$30,000 in chips left. He checks and it's up to you.

What You Know

- It appears that your opponent has a pair of queens. You can't be sure about that, but it looks that way.

What You Need to Figure Out

- Is it likely that your opponent has you beat? If so, you'd check, but that seems weak. It's unlikely that he flopped a set, made a flush, or rivered two pair (aces and queens) and checked.
- Is this player the type that pays off big bets, or would a big bet scare him off? A bet that's too big will scare away most players, even if they suspect you're bluffing.
- What does this player put you on?
- What is the most you can bet to make your opponent feel like he's forced to pay you off?
- Would your opponent go for the check-raise if he made the flush? If that's the case, then you don't want to bet too much.

Pick a number from \$2,000 to \$2,600, something like \$2,200, and make the bet. You'll give yourself a decent chance to win the pot if your opponent happens to put you on the straight draw, 5-6. It's a longshot to get paid off, but a bigger bet than that will minimize your long-term profit against most players. By betting about one-third the pot size, you may convince a player to make a "pot-odds call," even though he thinks he's probably beat. You'd be surprised how often players will find

a way to justify making a longshot call on the river when the pots get bigger.

In summary, figuring out the right river bet is heavily dependant on your hand and your people-reading skills. The better you become at this aspect of the game, the better you'll be able to play tricky situations on the river. You simply can't have any success in deep-stack, no-limit games unless you develop the ability to determine the correct amount to bet on the river to the point that it becomes "easy."

CHECKING IN MARGINAL SITUATIONS

Tournaments require an adjustment from playing no-limit cash games. One of the key adjustments that you need to make often comes at the river in marginal situations where you might consider checking rather than looking to squeeze out a value bet. This premise holds true both in and out of position. We'll address both of those situations separately, starting with hands when you are out of position. Here's an example of a hand where you might consider sacrificing value in favor of protecting yourself from playing, and possibly losing, a big pot on the river:

Hand in Action

With the blinds at \$50/\$100 a player in first position makes it \$300 to go before the flop. A late-position player calls and you also decide to call from the big blind with the 4♦ 5♦. The flop comes 6♣ 7♦ Q♣, giving you an open-ended straight draw as well as a backdoor flush draw. You check, the preflop raiser bets \$550 and the third player calls. You also call. At this point, each of you has over \$15,000 in chips.

The turn card is the K♦, giving you a backdoor flush draw to go along with the straight draw. Fearing that the raiser has a strong hand, you decide not to semi-bluff the turn, so you check. The original raiser bets again, this time firing \$1,800 at

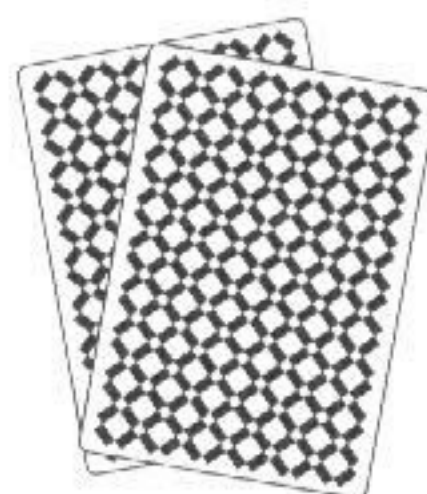
466 DANIEL NEGREANU'S POWER HOLD'EM STRATEGY

the pot. The third player calls the \$1,800, which means that you are getting very good odds on hitting your hand, so you also call the bet.

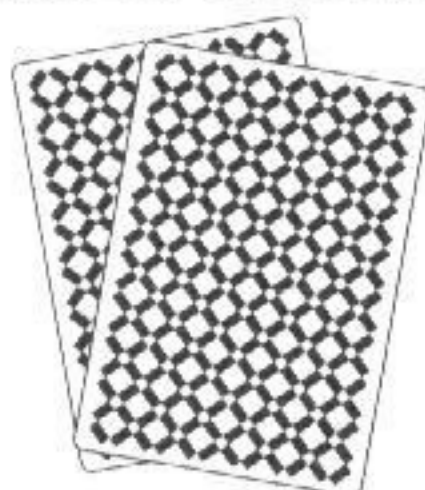
The river is the 8♣—you’ve made your straight.



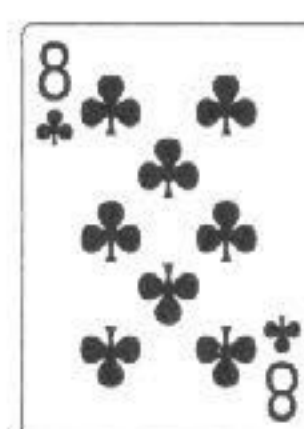
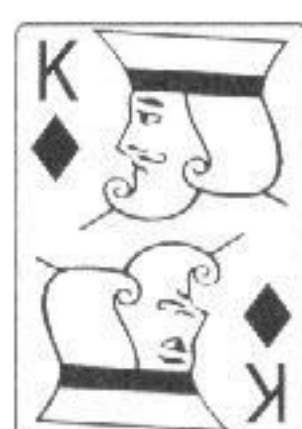
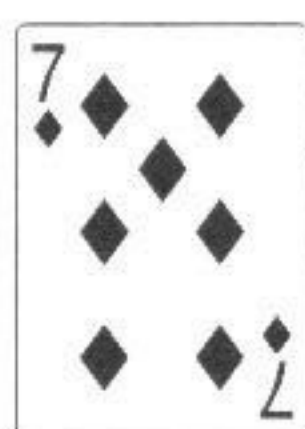
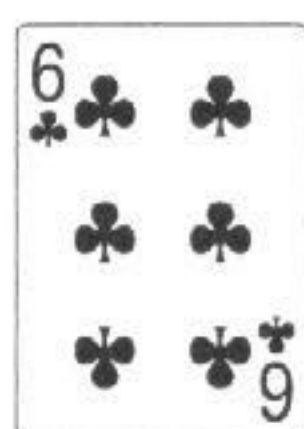
FIRST POSITION



LATE POSITION



BOARD



The 8 is a good card for you but, obviously, an offsuit 3 would have been much better. Unless the original raiser has been pushing with a draw, it’s very likely that you have him beat. However, the real danger lies with the other player in the pot, the one who has just been calling all along—something he might do if he was drawing to either the flush, or maybe even hitting the 9-10 inside-straight draw since the turn card would have given him a double belly-buster straight draw (needing either an 8 or a jack).

The pot at this point has \$8,000 in it, which is a pretty large pot given that the blinds are just \$50/\$100. Since you are out of position, you are in no-man's land in terms of being able to get information from your opponents before you have to act.

We learned about a deadly weapon in an earlier section, the defensive bet, and that is certainly an option here, albeit a slightly dangerous one. You have to really know your opponents in a situation like this so that you don't open up the door for an opponent to bluff-raise you on the river. The safest play, especially in a tournament, is to check despite improving your hand by rivering a straight. You would hope that both your opponents also check. If one of them bets the river, you will be put into a difficult situation. If neither player bets, then you will likely turn over a winning hand, despite possibly missing out on a few extra chips if one of your opponents might have called you with a weaker hand.

In this situation, you really have only two viable options: the defensive bet or checking. Once you check, if the player in last position bets, you'll be faced with one of the toughest decisions in poker. You stuck around with a draw, improved your hand to a straight, and now must decide if your opponent is either bluffing or possibly value betting a hand that you can beat. There aren't too many hands that the 4-5 straight can beat that most players would value bet on the river in this situation. It's usually going to be a bigger straight, a flush, a bluff, or possibly three of a kind. Three of a kind, however, is the least likely since there was no raise on the turn. In a three-way pot with a draw-heavy board, most players would look to protect a set so, really, all you can beat if the third player bets is a bluff.

The problem is: What kind of hand would he call the flop with, call the turn with, and then feel the need to bluff with on the river? If he had a queen or a king, he'd likely be happy to check it down and hope it's good. For him to be bluffing in this

spot, the only legitimate hand he could have and play that way would be a hand such as 8-9 for a straight draw that paired on the river, or maybe a hand such as the 10♦ 8♦.

When you dig deep into this hand, it should become clear that the result you desire on the river is a street that's checked around. In fact, if you really have a good read on your opponents, this is a situation where you wouldn't need to waste a defensive bet for information, since any bet by an opponent should give you the information you need.

THOUGHTS: IN AND OUT OF POSITION ON THE RIVER

When playing hands out of position on the river where a value bet is questionable, you should always lean towards the side of caution, especially in a tournament, and especially when the pot has become sizeable. Some players who choose a more aggressive style for tournaments may squeeze out some extra value on the river with thin value bets, but in the long run, those types of bets usually end up costing you money.

For one, if you plan on calling a river bet with a marginal holding, you cost yourself money by betting it yourself and thus taking your opponent's possible bluff away from him. Secondly, and more importantly, when you bet marginal hands on the river out of position, you run the risk of being bluffed if your opponent senses weakness or tries to make a play on you. The goal with small ball is to simplify the game a little bit—not depending on crazy, wild river plays, but instead choosing a more passive line that will lead to less trouble.

The situation changes a great deal when you are in position and your opponent has checked to you. At this point you have the opportunity to simply turn your hand face up and win the pot if it's the best hand. By checking, you can no longer be bluffed or outplayed.

FIVE KEY RIVER QUESTIONS

As with any decision you make at the poker table, you should ask yourself a few key questions before you act. For these particular situations—that is, whether to value bet marginal hands in position—you should ask yourself these five questions every time.

1. Will Your Opponent Call?

Before deciding whether you should value bet the river, you first have to figure out if your bet has any value at all. In other words, is there a hand that your opponent will call a bet with on the river? In order to answer that question, you have to replay the details in your mind and try to put him on a likely hand.

The second step is gauging your opponent's tendencies. Is he a calling station? Is he a good player? What type of player does he think you are? So before you do anything, you first must come up with a rough idea of what percentage of the time your opponent will call a bet on the river with the worst hand. If the percentage is very low, a check is probably the best play.

2. Is He Capable of Check-Raising You on the River?

To answer this question, you have to delve into your memory bank and think about this player's betting history. Have you seen him do it before? Is he a tricky player? Once you've answered these two questions, you can compare notes. For example, if the player is unlikely to call with the worst hand, but is also capable of check-raising, then by all means, a bet would be a mistake. Or if your opponent is a calling station that would never check-raise on the river, you are in a situation where a bet likely holds significant value.

3. Will He Check Hands That Have You Beat?

Once again, you need to think about the type of player you are facing. Does he play slightly weak on the river, or is he a player that rarely misses value bets? Does he perceive you as a bluffer? If he does, is he likely to figure that there is more value in checking top pair and letting you bluff than betting it himself? Have you picked up on a pattern that indicates this player will often check some of his stronger hands? If so, you should be wary of making thin value bets against him because that's exactly what he is setting you up to do—make value bets, but ones that only hold value for him!

4. Will He Check-Raise Bluff on the River?

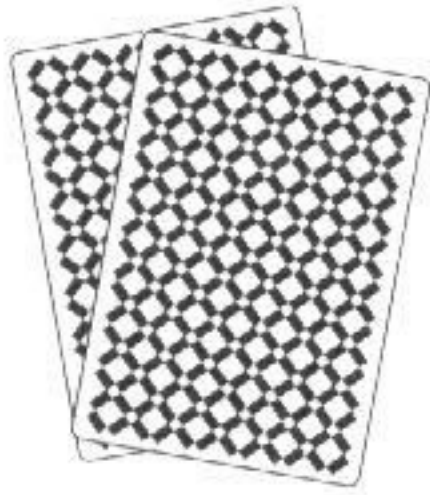
Against a strong, tricky player who is capable of sensing weakness or picking up on the fact that you are trying to make a thin value bet, betting is extremely dangerous. It actually could cause you to lose a pot that you already had won if you had checked. I remember seeing David Chiu use this play against a young, up-and-coming Internet player at Niagara Falls in a World Poker Tour event. David had been playing pretty tight up until that point and Genius28 (his online screen name) surely picked up on that fact.

Hand in Action

Genius28 raised preflop and David called from the small blind. The flop came 4♠ 5♣ 7♠, David checked, and Genius28 took a stab at the flop with a K-Q offsuit. David called. The turn card was the K♦ and both players checked. Presumably, Genius28 may have been a bit worried about facing a set.

The river was the Q♠, giving Genius28 top two pair.

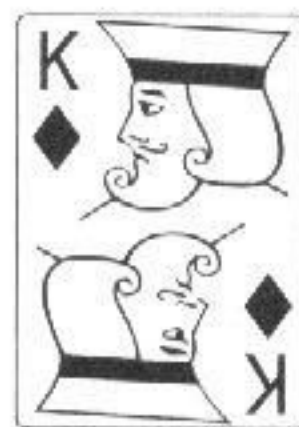
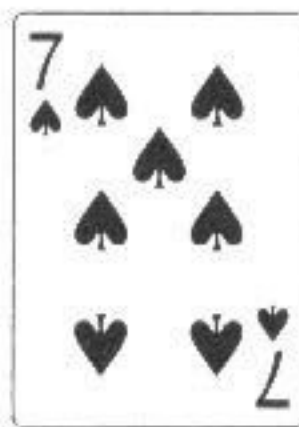
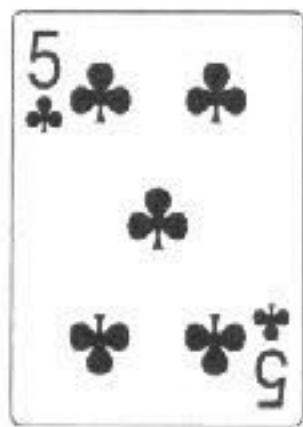
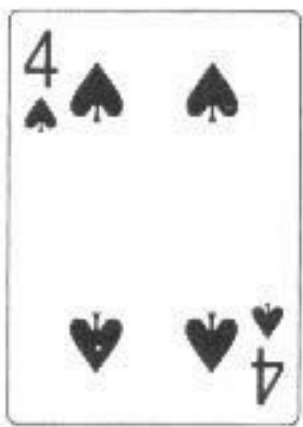
DAVID



GENIUS 28



BOARD



David checked the river once again and Genius28 decided to get some value for his two pair. David looked over at him, and I think he sensed that his opponent was making a value bet. But he probably also figured that if he check-raised the river, the young kid would be hard pressed to call based on David's image and the way he had played the hand. David did check-raise the river, and Genius28 thought for quite a while before folding his two pair face up.

David looked over at the youngster and said, "I only made that play because I knew you were a good player." He turned over the A♠ J♣! Now, I don't fault the kid for making this river bet, but the hand clearly shows the danger in value betting against smart, thinking players who are capable of making sophisticated plays. Instead of picking up a little pot, Genius28 ended up losing the pot, along with a few extra chips with his river bet.

The lesson here is that you really need to be wary of tricky players, especially successful players who likely won't call you as often as you'd like with the worst hand, but may steal some pots away from you when they sense some weakness.

5. Is It Worth It to Bet? Do You Really Need the Risk?

This question essentially sums up all four of the previous questions, but more from the point of view of table composition and chip count, as well as the other key factors. The premise here is to gauge whether you really need to make any marginal plays at all. Or are you in such command of the table that you can wait for better, higher percentage plays to invest your chips?

For example, if the table is letting you get away with highway robbery, stealing pot after pot, you probably don't need to worry about squeezing out a little extra value on the river in a marginal situation since you're able to have your way with your opponents with less risk. There's that consideration, as well as your chip stack. Simply put, if you have a healthy chip stack and your opponent in the hand does too, do you really need to mess with thin value bets against him and put yourself in danger? Conversely, if a thin value bet represents a significant portion of your chip stack, it's likely more important to protect what's in the middle and check it down. That way, you avoid a possible check-raise, as well as maintain your precious chips in situations where you end up value betting the worst hand.

As a general rule, the more precious the chips you'd be value betting are to you, the more you should lean toward taking the safe route and checking it down.

Whether you are in or out of position in a no-limit hold'em tournament, choosing the safer route is usually a recipe for long-term success. The whole small-ball concept dictates a simpler approach to river play so that you don't get caught up in difficult dilemmas for large portions of your stack.

BLUFFING

While bluffing on the river isn't a huge part of the small-ball arsenal, there are certainly some situations where bluffing will

make sense for you, especially if your opponents are on to the fact that you prefer playing a more cautious, straightforward style on the river. In fact, unless you are facing an opponent who has at least a little understanding as to your approach to river play, you should probably avoid bluffing entirely.

The best targets for bluffing on the river are smarter players who think they have you all figured out. Those players have been paying attention, and have noticed that while you are entering a lot of pots, you usually have the best hand when you put your money in on the river. More and more great young players are in the game today, players who are capable of thinking at a higher level and who will also fold big hands on the river, especially against small-ball players whose entire strategy is based on playing lots of hands, creating a wild image, and exploiting opponents who buy into the idea that they're crazy players and paying them off on the river. The exploitation happens on the river when the confused player ends up calling a big bet with a marginal hand thinking, "I have to call that guy. He plays every hand!"

On a personal level, adjusting my strategy is something that I was somewhat forced to embrace when younger players—who may have read some of my written material or watched me play on TV or YouTube—stopped falling into my traps. They learned how to play against me by being aggressive with me on the flops. And if I made a big raise on the turn or a big bet on the river, they correctly recognized that, even though they had a strong hand, for a player like me to choose to play a big pot with them at that point, I must have an even stronger hand.

As with any adjustment in strategy, however, there is a counter strategy. This strategy adjustment goes slightly against most small-ball principles and requires even more focus and skill than the standard small-ball goal of projecting the image,

“I’m a wild man, pay me off,” followed by the never-actually-bluffing strategy.

I found that the major adjustments players were making against me opened up more opportunities for me to steal bigger pots. The trick to successfully employing this approach is twofold: first, you need to make your bluffs very believable and second, you can’t go to the well too many times or it will run dry.

The ability to read your opponent’s hand is the most important aspect of successfully bluffing. If you can’t figure out the strength of your opponent’s hand, you simply won’t know when a bluff might work. The best bluffers are players that can sense weakness, and then make a believable play that their opponents buy. The other key to selling a river bluff is your bet size. A bluff on the river usually should represent exactly what a value bet would look like. If you make a bet that’s too small, your opponent may decide to make a loose call because the price is right. A bet that’s too big may raise suspicions. You want your bluffs to look like you are doing everything you can to get your opponent to call you.

Let’s take a look at an example. This hand took place at the 2007 inaugural World Series of Poker Europe event in London that 18-year-old Annette Oberstad won. I was at a tough table with loads of action, with the likes of Gus Hansen and Patrick Antonius.

Hand in Action

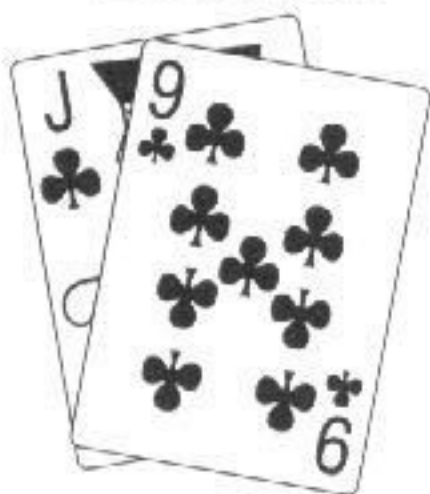
With the blinds at \$1,200/\$2,400, Gus Hansen made it \$6,000 to go under the gun. Gus had a monster stack and was playing to form, raising lots of pots from every position with a wide variety of hands. I also had a decent stack and called from the button with the J♣ 9♣.

The flop came $K\spadesuit$ $10\spadesuit$ $5\spadesuit$ and Gus fired out a bet of \$8,000. I didn't think he needed to have a very strong hand here, so I decided to represent something and hope that Gus folded. I made it a total of \$22,000. Gus thought for quite a while, as he often does, which led me to believe that he had a hand such as A-Q or A-J and was trying to work out his pot odds. Either that, or he had a pair smaller than kings. He finally called the raise.

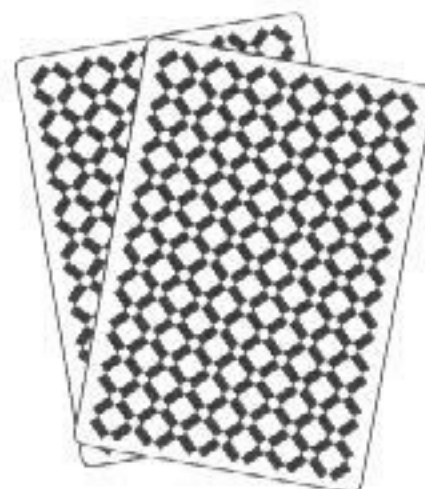
The turn brought the $4\spadesuit$ and we both checked. I thought a bet here would be too suspicious, as Gus knows that I'm not likely to raise him on the flop with a flush draw; and if I had a king, I would lean toward checking it against him.

The river was a blank, the $8\clubsuit$.

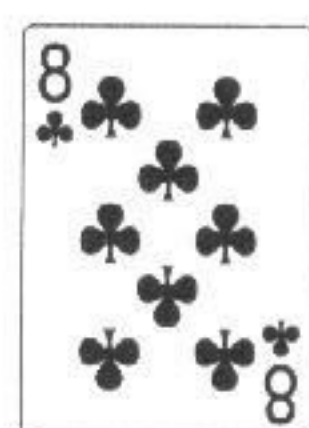
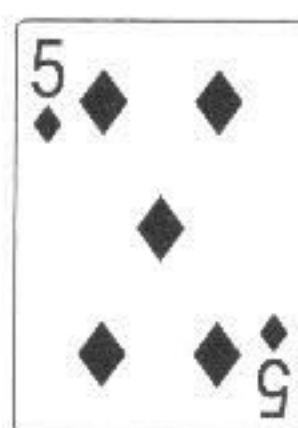
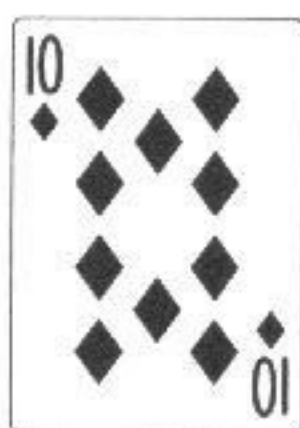
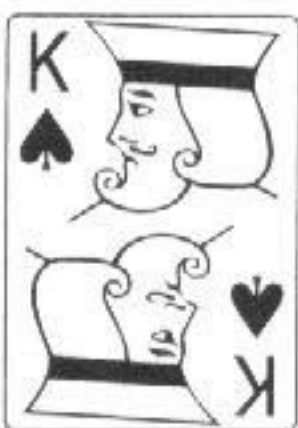
DANIEL



GUS



BOARD



Gus checked again. After my acting job on the turn, one that was trying to sell a hand like K-Q, I decided that I needed to take this pot away from Gus because it looked like he couldn't beat a king. Before deciding to bluff, though, our past history and his perception of me was of the utmost importance in helping me come to my decision. I knew that Gus's read on

me was that I didn't bluff on the river that much—which was correct, especially against him. I also knew that Gus thought that I would make thin value bets against him on the river, a perception based on countless hands we'd played in the past.

I finally decided to nonchalantly throw out a bet that looked like it was screaming for a loose call. I bet \$20,000 despite putting in a raise to \$22,000 on the flop! Gus thought for a bit, and then folded what I presumed was an ace high.

I started explaining the hand from the very beginning because all the preceding facts that led to the river were important parts of the story, from Gus's chip stack and loose play to his perception of me. That's how good bluffs work. You don't ever throw in a bluff without any thought, saying, "Well, I can't win if I check." For a good bluff to work, all the facts need to line up—and then you have to make the right bet, because otherwise, you'll get caught.

In the example with Gus, I made a very small river bet, but I don't recommend that line in most cases. This was a specific case where I knew my opponent and was very aware of how he would perceive a bet of that size. As a general rule, your bluffs should mimic your value bets; so, anywhere from 50 to 75 percent of the pot would make sense on the river. Unless, as was the case in my example with Gus, you have reason to believe that a smaller bet might work, or maybe even an oversized bet. The bet size you ultimately choose is solely dependant on how you think your opponent perceives you and what you think will work playing against him.

SUMMARY

In this section, you learned that the river isn't a street where you want to overcomplicate things, that the easiest, less stressful approach is usually the best approach. That has been the theme

in almost every section, from checking in marginal situations to paying off river bets.

For the small-ball player, the river is the street where the big pots should go your way more often than not. If that's not the case, then you aren't following the rules properly. It's a street where you want to minimize your own risk and allow your opponents to make the bigger mistakes. In the end, that's what poker is all about, really—capitalizing on other players' mistakes. Sure, it's nice to romanticize about sick bluffs and crazy laydowns, but in the end, the player who wins is the one who plays what appears to be an effortless game, and does not get involved in random, high-fluctuation pots or bluff-rebluff-rebluff situations.

For the small-ball player, the river is a street where you hope to end up with the best hand and choose to play a small pot when you aren't certain about that. It's a street where bluffs are few and far between, but also have a very high success rate. Most importantly, the river is the street where all the hard work you have put in creating that wild image really tends to pay off.

CONCLUSION

I hope this chapter has helped you understand how building a big stack and getting deep in tournaments is relatively easy, provided you have a good system, solid discipline, and of course, decent hand-reading skills.

The small-ball approach is designed to confuse your opponents without taking major risks. It's a style that requires playing a lot of hands, making lots of decisions, while at the same time controlling the pot size so that you can avoid major confrontations in marginal situations.

In this chapter, you learned the correct preflop raising size and the types of hands that work best with the small-ball approach. You then learned how to use position to win pots whether or not you hit the flop. I also instructed you on how to proceed cautiously post-flop in marginal situations, especially when out of position, and listed hands that would help you to avoid going broke unnecessarily. As a byproduct, the small-ball approach will often allow you to pick up extra value when an opponent misinterprets your cautious play as weakness and foolishly tries to bluff you.

Another key concept I emphasized is that by lowering your average bet sizes after the flop, you actually save yourself chips in the long run—chips that you can use to see more flops while you're waiting for that home run flop!

You also learned that big-time bluffs are overrated. Although bluffing is an integral part of the game, it's more effective when done sporadically and targeted to appropriate situations. The safer, more methodical approach that I laid out for you in this chapter will help you consistently build chips in tournaments time after time.

LAST WORDS

LAST WORDS

Daniel Negreanu

I sincerely hope that you got everything you were looking for out of *Power Hold'em Strategy*—and more. The tons of excellent information in this book will help your no-limit hold'em game improve immensely, whether you are an online grinder, a low-limit tournament player, or even an aspiring pro looking to play on the big-time poker circuit. We tried to fit in as many helpful hand examples as we could without creating a 1,000-page monster!

When you apply the advice we've given you to your own game, I have no doubt that you will improve rapidly. Equally important, this book should help you understand the mindset of small-ball players so that when you face off against one, you won't be confused by his approach. Instead, you will be able to exploit him.

If you enjoyed *Power Hold'em Strategy* and would like to further your poker training, www.PokerVT.com is the closest you can get to obtaining one-on-one training with me and several other

top players. PokerVT.com (the VT stands for Virtual Training) is an interactive educational site with fresh and regularly updated content.

You'll find the small-ball concepts presented in great detail at PokerVT.com. You also can watch videos of me and other top players playing online. You'll receive a customized course based on your own skill level, with my commentary and analysis from real, live poker hands. Plus, you'll get an opportunity to ask me questions directly. Drop in anytime!

I look forward to seeing you at the tables!