

Chapter Nine

Balance

Frequently, students ask me what they should look for at the table. Which opponent should they focus on? Should they look for tells or tendencies? How can they remember all of the stuff they are trying to observe?

As a general rule, they should pay attention to the loose players first, and look for tendencies before looking for tells. If you can isolate the tendencies of your opponents, you can read their hands much more easily and play more effectively against them.

However, while you are studying your opponents, some of them are busy studying you. They observe and analyze your play, your style and your specific plays. As a result, you have yet another player to keep close tabs on at the table: yourself!

In fact, almost all top players watch and review their own play with as much energy as they spend on their opponents. What they are striving for is *balance*, that happy state in which their opponents feel unsure of their reads and must guess what to do rather than respond with confidence. In other words, when a player achieves balance in his game, the opponents are off-balance and uncomfortable.

When you make *Illusion of Action* plays, you create balance between your big hands and some others so you can gain action on your powerhouses. But even if you never make that type play, there are many opportunities

to create balance by watching your own tendencies and sometimes playing against them.

You would think monitoring your own game would be a lot easier than trying to decipher your opponents' patterns. But for some reason, many players who watch their opponents like a hawk play their own cards almost routinely, making the same plays in the same situations over and over.

In this chapter, we will discuss:

- ♠ What is balance?
- ♠ When is balance important?
- ♠ How do you develop balance?

What is balance?

Most of the time, we play poker straightforwardly. If we have nothing, we fold; if we like our hand, we bet and raise. To keep our play from becoming easily readable, we must occasionally make a different play with the same hand.

For example, you bet the flop and got called. You missed your hand, so you correctly decide to check and fold the turn. So far, so good. But your opponent becomes happily conditioned to the fact that, when you check the turn, he will bet and you will fold. To keep him out of this comfort level, you must sometimes check the turn when you have a real hand, planning to either check-raise the turn or allow your opponent to continue a bluff on the river. When he discovers you are balancing your game by checking good hands as well as bad ones, he will be far less comfortable betting when you check.

Keeping your opponent guessing (off-balance) causes him to make errors, and we all know your opponent's errors result in your profits.

When is balance important?

Overall, balance is the most important aspect in playing in and beating tough games. You want your opponents to feel uncomfortable responding to your bets and raises and even to your checks. Let's look at an example.

Example

Assume you are heads-up and out of position when you get to the end. You have called to the river with a straight draw, but there was also a flush draw on the flop. You decide that if a flush card hits, you will bet out, hoping to represent the flush and get your opponent to fold. That plan sounds good to me.

But what if you are the type of player who, when he makes a flush on the river, always checks hoping to get in a check-raise? Your attempt to represent a flush by betting out will lack credibility to any opponent who has been carefully studying your play. He will simply call. Likewise, if you would have check-raised the flop with a flush draw, your representation now will have no credibility at all and will just be a waste of money.

In this example, we see when you need to really worry about balance:

1. The more aware your opponents are, the more you need to play a balanced game. Some opponents at every table are pretty oblivious, but many are not. The more observant your opponents are, the tougher your game is. These opponents are looking for patterns and willing to act on what they observe.
2. The longer you play with a particular opponent, the more important balance becomes.
3. The fewer opponents you have, the more important balance becomes. In heads-up play, creating balance in your game is vital, and it must always be one of your foremost considerations.

If you play online, your opponents have a huge variety of tools available to help them track your tendencies, summarize them, and make them available at a moment's notice. In addition to the copious notes many of them take, these tools let them easily review every hand you have shown down while they were playing (or sometimes even watching). Even if you think you see a lot of opponents and there is little point in trying to keep up with them all, I assure you that many of them are keeping up with you.

How do you develop balance?

By watching yourself play, you can get a very clear idea of what your trends are. Do you lead on the flop with one pair and always check-raise with two pair? Or do you always lead with two pair hoping to get three bets? Do you raise the flop when you want a free card, but call on the flop with a big hand and wait to raise the turn when the bets double? Do you raise the turn with big draws but wait for the river to raise with huge hands?

Any time you find yourself frequently making predictable plays like these, make a mental note to play against these tendencies in the future. Here are some areas to look for when assessing your game for balance.

Pre-flop

Most players think this is the key area for “varying your play”. Personally, I believe that it is far less important than play on the other streets, but there are aspects of pre-flop play that require assessment for balance:

- ♠ If someone open-raises and you three-bet, do you always have a big pair? Do you always have a pair?
- ♠ If you cap the betting, do you always have aces or kings?
- ♠ If you raise out of the blinds, do you always have aces or kings?

On the flop

Many players play very predictably here. Some areas to examine:

- ♠ If you have a flush draw, do you always bet out? Or do you never bet out?
- ♠ If you raised pre-flop, will you always bet the flop?
- ♠ If everyone checks to you on the button, do you always bet?

On the turn

Here are a few areas to think about:

- ♠ If you raise, do you always have a big hand?
- ♠ Likewise, if you bet the flop and check-raise on the turn, do you always have a monster?
- ♠ If you bet and get raised, do you always call?

On the river

- ♠ If you made a draw, do you always bet (or always try for a check-raise)?
- ♠ If you raise, do you always have the near nuts?
- ♠ If you raised the turn, do you always bet?

Notice that I used the word “always” in every example. The message is, if you always play a certain way under a specific circumstance, your game lacks balance. You must make an occasional counter-play so your opponents can't take advantage of your predictability in any area.

Conclusion

The easiest and most profitable opponents to play against are predictable ones. We spend most of our energy trying to find specific areas of predictability in our opponents' games. When we do find them, we exploit them to the limit.

Most people spend a lot less time looking for those areas in their own games. They play the way they play because they feel it is correct and comfortable, while examining the games of others.

The easiest game to examine should be your own. After all, you even know your hole cards every hand. If you look, you will find yourself falling into very repeatable and possibly exploitable patterns. When you find these, think about ways to break the patterns without making completely foolish plays. The more plays you can find that add balance to your game, the tougher opponent you will be.