

Chapter Nine

Post-Flop Concepts

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Introduction

If you have read through the previous material and understood it, then you are by now about 75% of the way towards being a decent player at the low limits. If you are playing a \$1-\$2 game or a \$2-\$4 game and you can play well at the pre-flop stage then – even if your post-flop play is poor – you are probably going to be at least a break-even player. However, your post-flop play is not going to be poor. In this section we are going to look at how you handle your cards once the flop arrives and how to play the turn and the river.

Pre- and Post-Flop Play

Hold'em divides quite neatly into pre- and post-flop play in a manner similar to how bridge divides into the auction and the play of the hand. In bridge the auction is susceptible (within reason) to exact analysis in much the same way that pre-flop hold'em play can be analysed in great technical detail. Anyone so inclined can memorise tables which denote the 'correct' play in virtually all situations. Many books offer readers such tables and imply that memorising them will lead to perfect pre-flop play. I have chosen not to do this in this book, as I believe that understanding what you are trying to achieve pre-flop is of more relevance than learning tables.

Once the flop appears a similar situation arises to when the auction is complete in bridge and the play of the cards begins. You can still find strong technical players, but there is now much more room for imagination and making plays. It is fairly common to come across hold'em players who have horrible pre-flop standards (and are thus constantly handicapping themselves in their games) but nevertheless actually play rather well after the flop. They have a good feel for what is going on and understand what they and the other players at the table are trying to do.

The Flop and the Turn

Most books make a clear distinction between flop and turn play and discuss them more or less separately. However, I am not sure this is the best way to consider the play in hold'em as the two are very closely related. I think it makes more sense to break up the play into the following three sections: pre-flop play; flop and turn play; and finally river play.

This seems to me to be more logical. The three sections break down (crudely) as follows.

The Play of a Hold'em Hand

- 1) Pre-flop play decides whether you are going to get involved in the hand or not.
- 2) Flop and turn play dictates how the deal plays out when everyone still has chances to improve their hands.
- 3) River play is rather different in that all the cards are now out and you either have the best hand or you don't.

Furthermore, it is quite common to make a play on the flop in order to prepare a particular play on the turn. This is another reason for considering the two rounds together. However, there are two important distinctions between flop and turn play.

Distinctions Between Flop and Turn Play

- 1) The bet size on the turn doubles. As we know, in a \$5-\$10 game the betting unit on the flop is \$5, increasing to \$10 for the turn (and river).
- 2) When the flop arrives you have two further chances to improve your hand; after the turn just one remains. This makes pot odds calculations very different.

The Arrival of the Flop

The arrival of the flop is really the key moment in a hold'em hand. You already know your two cards and now, in one fell swoop, three of the five board cards arrive. Thus, pre-flop you knew two of the final seven cards (29%). Now you know five of the final seven cards (71%). This is a huge increase in information.

The value of a hand changes dramatically when the three board cards come down. Hands which were very strong pre-flop can suddenly be left looking rather feeble, while modest pre-flop holdings can turn into monsters. Being able to judge where you stand in a hand at this point is a key skill in hold'em.

The arrival of the flop can be a very frustrating time as it is a sad fact that most flops miss most hands. Many players play perfectly well pre-flop but become enveloped by a fog when the flop comes down. They have waited a long time to pick up a decent hand and now they have one and they have pushed it hard pre-flop. They are now in the mood for a fight and they are not going to let a few lousy board cards dampen their enthusiasm. No sir. Sometimes it can be possible to push hands hard which have missed the flop but doing so blindly is a recipe for disaster.

Having said that, it must be emphasized that when you have what appears to you to be good hand you *must* play actively.

Aggression

All good poker players play actively. Some are merely aggressive, others are very aggressive and some are super-aggressive. One thing you won't hear people saying about a world champion player is: 'Boy, is he good – he really creates problems for his opponents by being cautious at just the right time.'

In poker, as in life, if you want to be successful you have to make things happen for you. This is done by taking the initiative in pots: betting and raising rather than checking and call-

ing. In post-flop play (and pre-flop for that matter), it is absolutely crucial that you play aggressively. There is no winning style of play that relies on passively responding to your opponents' play.

Getting Paid

Limit hold'em is – at heart – a rather technical game. Those of you whose main exposure to poker is via Hollywood films may regard the game as a tremendous battle of egos, where winners can triumph by sheer force of personality. If you are competing live in a major tournament playing no-limit hold'em then there is an element of this in the play. In no-limit hold'em you can bet any amount of money at any time. This means that it is possible to run huge bluffs and bully weak opponents. However, in an anonymous online limit hold'em game such factors are almost completely irrelevant. The amount you can bet at any point in the hand is fixed and so the possibility of shoving all your chips into the pot whilst eyeballing your opponent is not open to you.

Why do better players beat weaker players at limit hold'em? There are many possible answers but there are two very key reasons:

Why Better Players win at Limit Hold'em

- 1) They win more money with their winning hands.
- 2) They lose less money with their losing hands.

That's it. That's more or less all there is to it. When a good player has a good hand they know how to push it hard and extract the maximum from their good cards. When they have a good hand but someone else has a better one, they can see the danger and avoid losing as much as a weaker player will.

Why do better players win more money?

- 1) How do good players win more money with their good hands? They bet and they raise.

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2) What do weaker players do that costs them money?
They check and they call.

Sometimes it is the correct strategy to check and call. However, this is not very often. If you have a good hand then you should be betting and raising. I cannot emphasize this enough. Even if you play badly, but aggressively, it is very much harder for players to beat you than if you play badly but passively.

When strong limit hold'em players are eyeing up games, what really makes them salivate are players who play passively. Such players are easy to push around. When they hold good hands they let you come along cheaply so that you have chances to outdraw them, and when they have bad hands they happily come along, calling your bets and hoping that something will turn up. Make sure you do not play like this – it is a foolproof strategy for being a loser.



WARNING: There are some games where it is possible to win playing a conservative strategy: you can win a tennis match from the baseline and you can have a successful football team that is based on a rock-solid defence. You *cannot* do this in poker. You simply cannot be a long-term winner if you play a safety-first game. It is not possible.

Assessing the Flop

When considering pre-flop play there are usually specific solutions to specific problems. When you have a decent grasp of the principles involved then the correct play in different situations becomes fairly clear. You have just two cards and your opponents have just two cards. They have either bet them or they haven't. With some experience you can get a good handle on how strong your hand is vis à vis the competition.

Post-flop play is much more slippery. Suddenly there are a lot more variables to consider and a lot more questions that need asking. Pre-flop you are really only asking one question: 'Do I belong in this pot?' When the flop comes you need to consider:

Post-flop Concepts

Flop Questions

- 1) How good is this flop for me?
- 2) Is it likely to be good for other players?
- 3) If it is good, should I bet and/or raise or should I just call?
- 4) If I have a little something but suspect other players have better hands, then do I have pot odds/implied odds to play?
- 5) If it is bad, can I justify hanging around or should I just give up?
- 6) How many opponents do I have, and is that good or bad?

You also need to remember how players (including you) entered the pot in the pre-flop round.

What happened Pre-flop?

- 1) Did they bet and/or raise – implying strong holdings?
- 2) Did they limp – implying weak holdings?
- 3) Did they open the betting – implying a solid hand?
- 4) Did they only join in when one or more others had already called – possibly implying more speculative holdings?
- 5) Did they get a free/cheap play from the blinds – now they could hold absolutely any cards?
- 6) Did I show strength pre-flop – will players expect me to have a good hand?

That's a lot to think about and there is no straightforward A-B-C way to play. For the moment we will just look at some flops and decide how well they coordinate with our cards and where we think we might stand. For the moment we will not worry about how we will bet the hands (if at all). We just want to assess the impact of the flop. We will worry about the betting later.