

Preface

It is worth remembering from time to time, that nothing worth learning can be taught.

– Oscar Wilde

A gentleman in a tuxedo fingers his poker chips while dabbing his left bloody eye with a handkerchief. He comments mischievously, even sadistically, “You changed your shirt. I hope our little game isn't causing you to perspire.” James Bond, sitting behind \$10 million worth of poker chips, responds, “A little, but I won't consider myself in trouble until I start weeping blood.” Interestingly, Bond is making a joke about a physical mannerism of Le Chiffre, upon which he commits \$10 million, making a poker play that he loses.

This scene, from the movie *Casino Royale*, illustrates a misconception about poker. It is a myth that it is crucial to observe someone's physical mannerisms – their eye movement, hand placement, how much they are sweating – to play good poker. Tells are only a supplementary tool. If Bond had understood the game of poker better, then maybe he wouldn't have lost the British Treasury's \$10 million.

One more scene from the movie is worth remembering. Le Chiffre is on a yacht, playing a hand of poker against an old Asian woman, and viciously shoves all of his chips into the pot. He declares, in complete smugness, “All in. I have two pair and you have a 17.4-percent chance of making your

straight,” and tells her she has to fold her hand. Instead of spouting memorized numbers to the thousandth decimal he should have focused on simply understanding the math. If he had, then he would have realized he was such a big favorite that he actually had to trick the woman into putting money into the pot. On a side note, he would have done well not to slam his chips into the pot; this is called “splashing the pot”, is poor etiquette, and makes it impossible to play.

It is possible to accurately guess the skill level of a poker player after he speaks just a few words about the game. I would be thrilled to bet 50 percent of my net worth in a poker game against Le Chiffre or Bond. Yet many people who watch the movie, even fans of poker, do not give an ironic laugh or smile at their actions. This illustrates that poker is a part of our culture and that people’s understanding of poker is poor. This is a good thing. It is our opportunity.

Though their poker takes place in a deep, dark cave, there is light that indicates the way forward. Even if the specifics are wrong, *Casino Royale* does emphasize the two basic facets of poker: psychology and math.

Poker is math; everything that happens in poker is a big word problem that can be converted into mathematical equations. The key is to achieve a deep understanding, so you can then move from math back into words and the actual poker hands you play. How can you arrive at Le Chiffre's 17.4-percent chance of making a straight? How much money could he have won if the woman called his bet instead of folding? Under what circumstances could the woman have profitably called? These questions can and must be answered using the underlying math.

Similarly, outplaying your opponent requires constant use of psychology. You need to understand what your opponent is thinking. I would be foolish to over-analyze the actions of a fictional super-villain, but I know if someone made Le Chiffre's action against me, I would ask myself, why is he betting so big? What does he expect me to do? What is he trying to accomplish? And from these questions I would deduce his hand and determine the correct response.

My goal is to share with you the ideas necessary to make you into Phil Hellmuth's metaphorical lion. I am confident in my ability to do this be-

cause I have consistently dominated the highest-stakes games of no-limit hold'em (NLHE) available online. Furthermore, I have spent a considerable amount of time becoming a writer so I can communicate the ideas to you without coming off as an idiot savant.

This book is divided into four parts. The first part is a textbook introduction to poker. It begins with the most basic ideas and continues to develop them while continuing to introduce more advanced poker concepts. The concepts will be illuminated through sample poker hands. There is a focus on math, and some of it is complex. All lions understand the math, at least instinctively, as presented here.

There is a limited amount I can do to help you learn poker (the small price tag on this book reflects this idea). I give test questions at the end of each chapter in an effort to bridge this gap. You need practice to learn the material in a meaningful way. Please answer each problem before checking the answers.

The second part of this book deals with general strategic concerns when approaching poker. It deals with having the correct mindset to achieve success, emotional control, bankroll management, taking shots, game selection and more. Most of these topics are quite simple compared to the rest of the book, but will be covered for the sake of completeness. In this section I will also explain how to review your own poker hands; this is one of the subtlest skills in poker, and an idea of particular importance.

The third part of this book is its heart. It contains detailed explanations of a collection of specific hands that I have played at high-stakes NLHE tables. The ideas introduced in the beginning of this book will be developed and applied to their full extent here. The focus of this section is on the psychology in poker: understanding what your opponent is thinking and using this to put your opponent on a specific hand.

This entire book has a big emphasis on learning poker through specific poker hands. You need to study poker to improve as a player. This concept is obvious, yet not widely practiced in poker books, probably due to inability and laziness. But in this book you will not see me giving math problems that are dressed up as poker problems, posing questions where the answer is actually given in the question, or refusing to analyze a hand by saying,

“the answer depends on specifics.” Those of you who have read enough poker literature will know exactly what I am referring to here, and those that do not, consider yourself lucky to have been spared this tedium.

The fourth and final part of this book is composed of poker sessions. This section shows how to apply the ideas introduced earlier in an actual poker game. It deals especially with game textures, reviewing your own hands, getting a read on your opponents and adjusting to them.

The important thing to learn from this book is what you need to think about while playing. I have played a lot of high-stakes NLHE, and I say from experience that the way I think about the game, the way it is presented here, and the way all top players think are quite similar. All the important concepts are presented here and applied with sound logic. Maybe you will see that I have made some suboptimal plays; this means my judgment failed me at the table. This happens to even the very best player, and I will not try to hide it. However, if you learn the tools, gain the experience and apply these with logic, then you will be able to play well when you find yourself in completely unique situations.

This book is useful for everyone who wants to understand or play poker better. Beginners at NLHE will not be able to use all the information immediately, but the part you are able to wrap your mind around will give you some firm ground on which to move forward. For experienced poker players, this book should be helpful in inverse relation to the stakes you play. I wouldn't presume to push my book on someone who is a winning \$50/\$100 NLHE player, but I would be surprised if a break-even \$25/\$50 NLHE player didn't learn something.

This book is helpful for playing NLHE with any number of opponents. Most of the example hands are from short-handed and heads-up (HU) matches. The important part of this book is not the specific plays I make, but the considerations that are taken into account. The considerations are the same in HU play and with eight people at the table.

This book is helpful for both online and live players. Finally, the ideas in this book will be helpful to people who play other forms of poker besides NLHE. The ideas transfer most readily to Pot-Limit Omaha, followed by Limit Hold'em, and then by all the other games. This book will help you un-

derstand what your opponent is thinking, which will help even in a radically different game, like stud, and thus help you outplay him and win more money.

All poker is a game of incomplete information in which you use math and psychology to understand a situation, compare the risk and reward in a number of cases, and make a play. It is really so much easier than rocket science, and, if the cards come just right, even quite a bit easier than remembering the multiplication tables. Good luck.