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THE CHECK-RAISE

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It's Different

The Myth Of Poker Talent sold enough copies to be a bestseller on Amazon's poker section for a few days. I worried when I saw that. I figured many of my best plays would no longer be useful. To my surprise, almost all of my plays still work. However, if you think it through, this makes sense. Even though the book sold very well, the number of regular poker players is huge so it's unlikely the book was read by more than a tiny percentage of this community. However, there is one play that I have seen become much more popular since the book was published, and that is the big blind check-raise. Note how I said "big blind check-raise."

You're allowed to check-raise out of position after flatting a three-bet. Actually, according to equity calculations that my friend Rihards Dobelis has shown me, you're supposed to be check-raising a significant portion of the time when you do flat three-bets. Yet, no one does that. Don't ask me why. I don't know people don't want to experiment on the felt. I am of the opinion that poker players are as good as they ever will be. Don't get me wrong. The

upper crust of poker is going to continue getting freakishly better, but 99% of players will never progress. They will keep making small gains, which will be offset by other over-adjustments.

What poker players love are simple changes they can implement that involve them not folding and also not making asses of themselves. Triple barrel bluffing, as we will discuss later, is one of the most effective plays you can make in live tournaments, yet no one does it. Why? Because if you're wrong you look like a horse's ass. However, check-raise bluffing fulfills a lot of requirements desired by the typical poker player profile we discussed earlier. It's cheap. It's easy to understand. If it fails, you merely check and fold. No one says a word to you. No chance for embarrassment. But you get a good chance to feel you outsmarted the jackass who keeps trying to steal your blinds. For this reason, it is now a popular play in Vegas and California to call a raise from the big blind, see a board that has one high card and two low cards, and then check-raise the opposing player. This has made check-raising less effective, as many player pools have gotten used to the play. However, that doesn't mean it's still ineffective.

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General Considerations

We're not going to spend time flatting three-bets out of position and check-raising. In my lessons, that situation seldom arises. People do not three-bet enough to justify the play 90% of the time. The last live database I looked at had such a small three-bet percentage that the note taker considered not keeping the stat anymore. The few people who do obsessively three-bet can be broken with a solid slowplay strategy and a tighter opening range.

We're going to focus on check-raising from the big blind, because it is still an effective play. For one, make sure you're calling raises that don't go beyond 2.75x the big blind. If there are antes you can go up to 3.25x, but you need to know that you can check-raise the villain on most boards. The way you will know that is by identifying someone who opens too much and continuation-bets too much. Fortunately for us, this player is not too hard to find in today's games. Any player opening from the lojack or later these days is statistically more likely to be opening 20%+ of the hands than not. 20% of hands is extremely difficult to defend post-flop. You miss most boards with those

hands. Beyond that, the steps are simple. The key factors required to check-raise someone from the blinds are:

- ◆ Someone opening too much (any player you have previously identified for ‘targeting’)
- ◆ Someone continuation-betting too much (practically every player on earth)
- ◆ A board worthy of check-raising (Anything without two Broadway cards, especially those including a ten. Generally not complete “chicken” boards, i.e. ultra-dry boards, usually featuring a pair).

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Let me expand on these points.

You need someone to have too many hands. If a guy only opens A-A, he’s not going to be missing too many boards. However, most normal people hate folding, so they open a little too much. This is especially pronounced if it’s folded around to late position. Practically every player continuation-bets too much versus a player who completed from the big blind and checked the flop. The in-position player assumes that the big blind player has flatted with a wide array of hands due to the reduced price, and has largely missed the board. If you imagine having Jd-9h as the pre-flop raiser on a Kc-8c-2d board, it would be strange to check back versus a big blind who just completed a bet and then checked. In general, it’d be an awful idea. Most of the time, the big blind is folding, and your bet turns a profit. For this reason, naturally, many players have learned to continuation-bet whenever they miss the board. This generally represents 50-60% of their range (no pair, no draw).

However, if they have 10c-10d on that same board or K-10, perhaps they’ve been check-raised before, and they don’t feel like they want to play a big pot with one pair. So, they check, assuming the other player will bluff one or two streets. For this reason, most players’ continuation-betting ranges are competent, capable of controlling pot size, and they allow for many successful bluffs. They are also gloriously exploitable for the few tens of thousands who will read a book such as this one. Because we can see, looking at that range, that it’s two-pair or better and nothing. And there’s many more combinations of nothing than “two-pair or better.”

Finally, there are more boards you should be check-raising than boards you shouldn't. The one board I tell everyone to lay off of is the two Broadway card board with one 10. A board like K-10-x or Q-10-x has so many Broadways and solid pairs in a person's continuation-betting range that it makes it difficult to bluff. If there are just two Broadway cards, such as Q-J-3, that is a bit more viable, but it still allows your continuation-betting opponent to have a number of solid pairs. Ace high boards are also especially dangerous, since the vast majority of your opponent's combinations are going to be A-x unpaired hands.

The boards that are great for check-raise bluffing are boards with one high card and two low cards, featuring a draw. On that board, you would be check-raising sets and two-pairs for value as well as draws. Due to the number of viable hands you could have, many players will just pitch their weak second pairs, not wanting to deal with you. That means you've secured a fold 70% of the time. Co-ordinated boards where your opponent will bet/fold one pair are money in the bank, generally speaking. Take a board such as Ks-8s-2s. If you have a disciplined opponent, you can check-raise large here, and they'll generally show you an offsuit K-J and fold. That means they're bet folding most of their K-10, K-9s, K-8s, Q-Q, J-J, 10-10, 9-9, 10-8, 9-8, and 8-7 combinations as well. That's a lot of folding!

I personally also love check-raising this board in multiway pots. When one person bets, another calls, and you check-raise the size of the pot on that board it looks exactly like, "haha, now my small flush will get paid off!" Straight boards work well too. 10-9-8 will get many people to bet/fold a ten, which again will have people bet/folding 70% of their hands. Your raise size should be large enough to finish the pot on the flop. A pot-sized check-raise needs to work 50% of the time, but if you're folding second pair, then you're securing a fold 70% of the time. Senior citizens would do well to exercise this play often, due to the age bias exhibited in poker. People assume that when you fine folks check-raise, you have to have something. All those second pairs hit the muck before the chips even leave your hands.

Low boards are fantastic for check-raising as well, because people don't like raising with low cards. While that sentence sounds extremely basic this fact actually took me several years to learn. If the board comes 2c-3c-6d and you check-raise, then you can represent 2-2, 3-3, 6-6, and 5-4s, all likely hands for you to have when you flat the big blind. However, your opponent has abso-

lutely nothing as much as 70% of the time! The hands you should check-raise usually feature “clean” outs that are not outs at all. So, let’s take this 2c-3c-6d board. A good hand to check-raise would be K-Jo. If your opponent bet/calls and you turn a jack, then it’s unlikely your opponent hit it as well, because J-2, J-3, and J-6 are not popular raising hands.

However, if you were to check-raise with something like A-8, for example, then many of your “good” turn cards feature heavy reverse implied odds. The turn 8 will hit your opponent’s 8-6s. The turn ace will hit your opponent’s A-2, A-3, A-6. Now, out of position with a top pair facing two-pair, you are in for a world of hurt. The other problem with having the ace in your hand is that you’re blocking all of the A-x combinations you want bet/folding the flop. Since that makes up the largest part of your opponent’s bet/folding range, that is a serious crimp in your style. The only time it’s nice to have an ace is when that particular ace is blocking the nut flush draws in your opponent’s hand. So, if you have the Ace of spades on the 8s-3s-2d board, that actually blocks a lot of the A-x flush draws that your opponent would have been defending versus the flop check-raise.

Small pairs are good check-raising hands as well. Let’s say you have 3d-3c on a Kc-8d-2d board. If you check-raise and get called, fine, the jig is up. But if the turn hits you then, well, the party is about to start. Now, when I teach these strategies, many people ask me, “but if we check-raise on the flop then don’t we have to bet the turn?” I have no idea where in the world this notion came from. I’m guessing it’s from all the early Two Plus Two nerds who would get a rush from lecturing people about everything you “had” to do. There were many times they’d mandate having the same play on turn and river because they thought someone was playing both streets the same way. So, if you were calling with one pair on the turn because you thought the person was bluffing, it stood to reason that they would be bluffing the river as well. You had to call again if you called on the turn. Then, people wanted to sound intelligent, so they started applying this logic to situations where it made no sense. Case in point, check-raise bluffing.

The main reason you are check-raising as a bluff is because the person starts with many garbage hands and only gets to the turn with good pairs.

If this is the logic for check-raising why on God's green earth would you bet the turn? All he has now in his range are good pairs! You can just check-raise with your J-10o on Ks-8s-2c, get called, tank on the turn, check, and fold to the bet. Show your jack and go, "I had jacks. I wanted to see where I was at. But I'm calling next time!" This throws everybody into a confusion. You are check-raising second pairs for value? What the hell? If you sound legitimately testy, they might think you're actually not folding next time. That means they think you have an expanded value range on the flop, to which they need to fold their third pairs and some second pairs.

Stack Sizes

Stack sizes play a critical role in check-raise bluffing. In tournaments, when I am 25 to 35 big blinds deep, I will call with any garbage hand from the big blind just to check-raise the person on the flop. I do this because people will generally continuation-bet damn near anything from their wide range, but when you check-raise them as a bluff they are forced into moving all-in as a bluff to prove you wrong. Let's take the board 2-2-8 in a cash game. You have J-10, think the continuation-bettor has a high card, and you check-raise. The continuation-bettor has a very simple defense. Your range is pretty capped on that board too. You probably don't have many 2-x hands. You aren't check-raising with an eight. Most guys won't check-raise an overpair. So they call to see what you do on the turn. If they want, they can three-bet you as a bluff, and they won't be risking more than 20-25% of their stack.

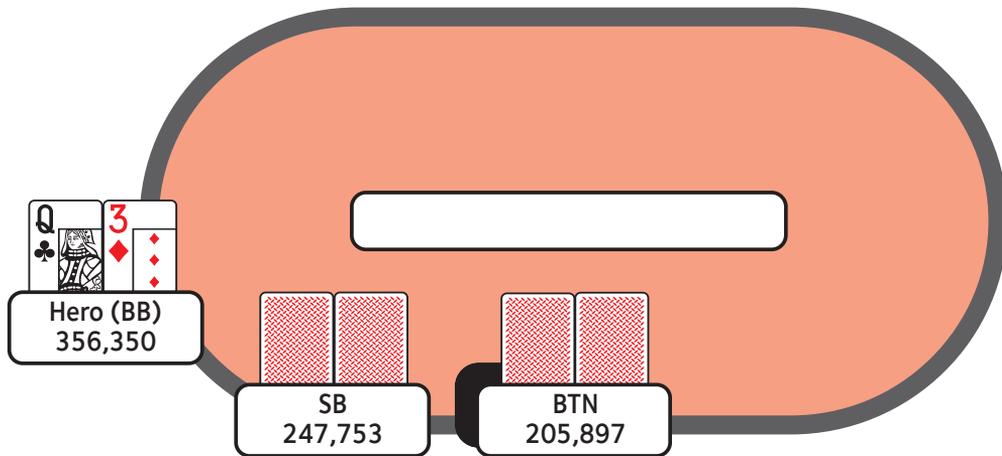
However, if they have 23 big blinds, they continuation-bet 3x, and then you make it 7.9x from the big blind and they have garbage, they are going to have to jam their K-high to see what you do. Most guys are not going to be willing to do that. So, they fold. This makes "chicken" boards far more valuable with short stacks. Notice how I didn't put such clear hit-or-miss boards in the last section. That's because they get played back at continually in cash games. However, in tournaments, when the person's next play is an all-in (an all-in they will have to table face-up no less) most guys aren't going to find the play. They'll cuss you out, sure, but remember the profile of the "fallen hero" we discussed. Their ultimate fear is being exposed as a fool, which can certainly happen if they jam a Jack-high into someone's set as a bluff. If they cuss you

out and fold they can always claim they had an underpair and just were not feeling it. Even if you show a bluff no one is going to blame them.

Hand Quiz 9

Game: Tournament in Baltimore, buy-in \$1,000
Hand: Q♣-3♦
Position: BB
Players: 3
Blinds/ante: 4,000/8,000-1,000

06



You are fighting for first place. The player on the button is a 25-year-old player, wearing a backwards hat and a basketball jersey. He talks often in poker lingo.

Preflop: Hero is BB with Q♣-3♦
Button raises 16,000, 1 fold, Hero calls 8,000

Flop: (36,000) K♠-8♣-2♠ (2 players)
Hero checks, Button bets 12,800, Hero...?