

PHIL HELLMUTH'S

Texas Hold'em

RULES, TIPS, AND STRATEGIES FROM THE CHAMP FOR PLAYING—AND WINNING—THE WORLD'S HOTTEST BIG MONEY GAME



PHIL HELLMUTH, JR.

“From the moment I first played poker with Phil I knew that I was witnessing something special. It wasn’t long after that he became the youngest player ever to win the World Series of Poker.”

Doyle “Texas Dolly” Brunson,
poker legend and nine-time World Champion of Poker



**LEARN POKER CHAMPION
PHIL HELLMUTH’S PROVEN SECRETS
FOR WINNING BIG AT
TEXAS HOLD’EM**

- ♠ The top ten Hold’em hands and how to bet them
- ♥ The five different “animal types” of opponents you’ll likely be facing
- ♦ The power of “position”
- ♣ Betting strategies for each stage of a hand—“the pre-flop,” “the flop,” “fourth street,” and “the river”
- ♠ When to raise and when to fold
- ♥ Interpreting your opponents’ bets

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*For my parents, Lynn and Phil, who helped me believe
I could do anything and who supported me even after
they freaked out over my newfound occupation.*

To Grandma Aggie, who loved a good game of cards.

In memory of one of my best friends, Andy Glazer.

The Universe Conspired to Help

The man had a dream
He knew what he wanted, it seems

Once he was sure in his heart this was it
He vowed someday that he would achieve it

He wasn't quite ready to do his thing
But he felt fairly certain what the
future would bring

When one day the time was right
When he was ready to fight the good fight

He conquered all his excuses and set forth
To take the risk-fraught first step
without any remorse

Once he took the first step down the line
The universe conspired to help make sure
he was fine

He never dreamed he would accomplish so much
That the universe would give him such
incredible luck

Now older and wiser he understood the hardest part
Was convincing himself that it was time to start.

—Phil Hellmuth



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The Universe Conspired to Help

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Introduction

The first thing that should be said about this book is this: The content is the same as that in the Texas Hold'em chapters in *Play Poker Like the Pros*, with a few scattered refinements. And there is also an added chapter that should knock your socks off: How to Win a No-Limit Hold'em Tournament. To me, this new chapter alone should be worth hundreds of dollars, for it will help you to understand the basic game theory that has allowed me to win dozens of no-limit Hold'em tournaments over the years.

I am proud of the fact that hundreds of people have come up to me and said, "Thanks for *Play Poker Like the Pros*. It turned my game around." The Hold'em strategy in that book (and now in this book) is solid and immutable; there is only one mathematically viable way to play winning limit Hold'em. As to pot-limit Hold'em and no-limit

Hold'em, many styles work, but you can never travel too far "off campus" (away from the math and fundamentals) without risking crushing failure. This book teaches you the fundamentals, as well as advanced theories, for all forms and levels of Hold'em.

When I penned these chapters, my goal was to help the worldwide public learn, appreciate, and convert to the poker games that the pros play. I felt that it was important to point out that the version of "poker" that most people play on their kitchen tables, with red, white, and blue plastic chips, is a world away from the games that the pros play, in both skill level and complexity. In those home games, people toss their money into virtually every pot, in a sort of "no fold'em" poker that is designed to keep everyone in to the end, and award the luckiest player the pot.

In these types of "poker" games the player who draws the luckiest card on the last possible card dealt wins the pot. Where is the skill in that? Where are the well-timed bluffs, the great calls, the tough lay downs, the judicious reads of opponents, the constantly shifting odds calculations, and the patience involved in the poker games that the pros play? These skills are inherent in real poker games like Seven-Card Stud, Omaha, and the ultimate, Texas Hold'em. Suddenly, people all over the world are playing one-table \$5 buy-in (or higher) no-limit Hold'em "tournaments" with their buddies. Nine players lose \$5, and when all is said and done, one

winner receives the \$45 first-place prize. It's the same game in the major tournaments, but there might be 700 buy-ins at \$5,000 apiece, a \$1 million first-place prize, and 44 others in the money. And it might take four days to get there. No-limit Hold'em, where you can bet any amount at any time—now that's poker!

Although I would like to take some credit for the explosion of poker worldwide, I believe everyone knows that the growth of the game has been fueled by ESPN's World Series of Poker (WSOP), Travel Channel's World Poker Tour (WPT), FOX's new poker coverage, and various internet poker sites such as UltimateBet.com. (By the way, to read about some ballsy bluffs, amazing calls, and memorable "key pots" on the professional poker tour, see my book *Bad Beats and Lucky Draws*.) Of course the WPT deserves most of the credit with its introduction—in this country—of an innovative way of showing the players' hole cards to the TV audience.

Now players worldwide are saying, "I didn't know Hold'em was such an easy game to play. Four rounds of betting, five common cards in the middle of the table, and two hole cards, simple." Simple indeed, unless you actually want to *win* while playing Hold'em. In this case, there is a learning curve that needs to be mastered. Some of you will learn quickly, scaling the "poker mountain" in short order; others will need more time and effort. In either case, mastering the information in this book is essential to scaling that learning curve. "Texas Hold'em,"

so the classic characterization goes, “takes five or ten minutes to learn, but a lifetime to master.”

Those of you who do master the learning curve for Hold'em, whether quickly or slowly, can expect to see me sooner or later at the WSOP. I'll be the tall one wearing the black UltimateBet.com baseball cap and the Oakley sunglasses, being cantankerous at times (Poker Brat!) but happily grinding away at a poker hand, at the poker table, while slowly chasing poker history.

one



Skill versus Luck in Poker

Most people today misunderstand poker. Let's be frank: most people know poker from the low-stakes games they now play (or grew up playing) with their family and friends. In these low-stakes home games, luck often plays a much bigger role than skill.

The money to be gained or lost in a home tends to mean next to nothing, and everyone at the table plays almost every hand to the end. The dealer's choice games are often nonstandard, even bizarre variations (often fun) where, for example, deuces, black kings, or one-eyed jacks (or all of them) are wild. In this type of poker game, people just put their money in the middle (in the "pot") and hope to make the best hand. Often, there doesn't seem to be much strategy or thought involved. When the evening winds up, everyone seems to agree that "Johnny sure was hot tonight!" You don't hear any-

one saying, “Boy, did Johnny play great tonight. I sure am afraid of *him* at the poker table.”

One reason why luck has such a big role in home-style poker games is that many of the skills we use in pro-style games just don't come into play in a home game. For example, three of the more important skills that we use are being patient in determining which starting hands to play, bluffing, and reading people. Patience, like discipline, is a virtue in many areas of life, and poker is no exception. It is in the nature of professional or tough high-stakes poker games that it is mathematically correct to fold a lot of hands right away. If you are playing too many hands (which equates to too many *bad* hands) in a tough poker game, you will often find yourself “drawing mighty thin,” that is, trying to win by catching particular cards that are in short supply.

The plain fact is that if you play too many hands in a pro-level poker game, you just cannot win, certainly not in the long run and probably not even on just one given night, no matter how lucky you are. But if you're playing a lot of hands in a home poker game, you may be in good shape anyway, because the sheer size of the pot will wind up offering you odds sufficient to draw to an inside straight (add a nine, for example, to your 7-8-10-J hand) or another “unlikely to hit” hand. You'll usually lose, but when you do manage to hit the card you need, you're going to win a huge pot.

Further, the number of cards that can complete

what you need in the late rounds of a hand in a home game is often larger than one sees in the pro game, because the dealer has designated various wild cards or rules that allow you extra draws or give you chances to buy another card or replace a card.

Because you don't see these big pots and people paying you off with weak hands in a pro poker game, patience is crucial there. In the traditional home-style poker games, patience not only is not as important but may actually clash with the "spirit" of the game—that "We're all here just to have fun and gamble." Playing a more technically informed style may win you more money in a home game, but it might also mean that you're not invited back the next time the game is held! In a casino poker game or an online poker game, of course, you don't need to be concerned that you might not be invited back.

Another key difference between home poker games and the games that the pros play is that bluffing actually succeeds in the pro-style games! In a home game, it's extremely hard to pull off a bluff, because you usually can't bet enough money on the last bet to get your opponents to fold. For 25 cents, someone who is convinced he is beaten is nonetheless willing to throw the two bits into the pot, just to see what you have, and, oops, there goes your attempted bluff. In fact, in most situations in these home games where there is a "bet on the end" (in the last round of action in a given hand), someone

is always egging someone else on to be the “sheriff.” “Bill, you call that boy and be the sheriff this hand! We can’t let him bluff us!”

In the pro game, bluffing is a sound strategy, because in the late stages of a hand there aren’t many people who haven’t folded. If you’ve been playing very few hands (that is, patiently), and have seldom been *caught* bluffing during a day of play, then when you *do* bluff, it’s hard for those remaining in the hand to “call you down” through the last bet. Long live the bluff! Bluffing well is an art form, and I will be addressing it at various points throughout this book. The bluff is one of the poker craftsman’s tools that is seldom available to players in wild, friendly, low-stakes games.

Another important element in pro poker games is reading your opponents. Are they riding on “hot air” or the real thing? In a lot of home games, there is just so much money in the pot, relative to the size of the final bet, that it makes sense to call that bet. (What do you have to lose?) In pro poker, there is enough money involved, and enough actual thought processes are being utilized, that many situations come up where you can take advantage of a good read—which might arise either from your ability to detect weakness or strength in body language or from your ability to assess the implications of the betting pattern on the hand—and make either a good call or a good fold. But it’s hard to read someone who hasn’t really been thinking about the hand and can’t possibly be nervous about losing \$1.75!

The skill factor in poker is much higher in the pro game. There is just too much at stake for anyone to rely solely on luck.

Let's take a quick glimpse at the high-stakes poker world, an enterprise that yields several of my friends over a million dollars a year! At this level, too, luck is a factor on any given day, week, or month, but what's different is that if you play better poker than your opponents do, pretty consistently, you'll find that over almost any *two*-month period your winnings have exceeded your losses. Furthermore, if you play better poker than your opponents over a *six*-month period, your results will have moved very solidly in the winning direction. Making a few well-timed bluffs each day will add up to a lot of money each year!

In fact, if an inexperienced poker player were to sit down for a few hours with a group of world-class poker players, he would have virtually no chance to win over even an eight-hour period. This very fact is why five or six top pros might be willing to sit down in the same game with this fellow and each other: the money that even one amateur is likely to contribute makes it worth their while to do battle with so many respected opponents.

This is why so many of the top poker players today drive fine cars and live in palatial homes. Right now, as you're reading this book, there is a \$600–\$1,200-limit poker game at the Bellagio Casino in Las Vegas and a \$400–\$800-limit poker game at the Commerce Casino in Los Angeles.

There is a \$200–\$400-limit poker game in Tunica, Mississippi; a \$100–\$200-limit game at the Taj Mahal in Atlantic City; and a \$200–\$400-limit game somewhere in New York City. They're playing no-limit poker in San Francisco at the Lucky Chances Casino and high-stakes pot-limit poker in London at the Grosvenor Victoria ("The Vic") and in Paris at the Aviation Club de France. In Vienna, at the Concorde Card Casino, they're playing \$75–\$150 Seven-Card Stud. (I'll have more to say about these two-figure games in Chapter 2.)

If that's not enough action for you, four nights a week in Los Angeles, there is a \$2,000–\$4,000-limit Seven-Card Stud game at Larry Flynt's Hustler Club Casino, with Larry himself often playing. In the \$400–\$800-limit poker game it's easy to take a \$25,000 swing in one hour. In the \$2,000–\$4,000-limit game, where movie stars, former governors, and billionaires play, it's not uncommon for someone to win or lose \$250,000 in one night. In these "nosebleed" poker games (the term refers to the altitude of the stakes), strategy, discipline, calculation of the odds, and practiced observation contribute to a game that involves much more skill. Better play wins more hands in the long run.

Imagine yourself facing down Larry Flynt in the \$2,000–\$4,000 Seven-Card Stud game at the Hustler Club Casino. You're sitting there trying to figure out if he has a strong hand or is full of hot air (bluffing). If you decide right, you will win \$25,000, but if you're wrong, it will cost you \$25,000. What

do you do? You make a good read—of the situation, of the odds, of your opponent—and make an educated guess, rather than a plain old boldfaced guess! The chief difference between your home poker game and the games of the big players is the preponderance of luck in the one and the preponderance of skill in the other. In a game (the Flynt game) where winning just one \$4,000 bet a night would mean an income of \$16,000 per week (this game runs four days a week), one carefully earned bet can make a great deal of difference.

That's the way things look in the high-stakes "side game" world at large, but there is even more evidence that skill is present and important in high-stakes poker tournaments today. (When I say "side-game" world, I mean the nontournament poker world.) Why do the same people, by and large, keep winning poker tournaments year after year? They win because they apply finely honed strategies and tactics, calculate and recalculate the odds, read their opponents well, avoid becoming predictable, and know how and when to make a good bluff.

Some of the most famous poker players in the world today have made their names in poker tournaments. Doyle "Texas Dolly" Brunson has eight bracelets (titles) from the World Series of Poker at age 66. I have nine, and so does Johnny "The Oriental Express" Chan. "Amarillo Slim" Preston—whose name is known even to the general public—has nine WSOP titles, depending, as Slim himself would say, on "who does the telling."

I'm proud to say that before the 2004 WSOP I was the all-time leading money winner in World Series history, with over \$3.5 million won. In fact, at that time no one else had crossed the \$3 million-dollar mark other than Johnny Chan and me. (He beat me there! But I'll win the race to \$7 million!) Although the same people don't win *all* the poker tournaments, by the time year's end rolls around, the same people always seem to end up having won several tournaments, year in and year out. This is one of the appealing aspects of poker tournaments: the record is out there for everyone to see; some players are consistently successful, and others are not. (The side games, though very lucrative, keep no records.)

If serious poker were a game where luck predominates, this would not and could not happen. Everyone involved would win about the same number of tournaments as everyone else (as tends to happen in slot tournaments or craps tournaments), and no one would make (or lose) any serious money. But that's not what years and years of proven, recorded results show.

two



Texas Hold'em: Setup and Basic Play

This chapter will introduce you to Texas Hold'em, commonly referred to as “Hold'em,” the most popular poker game in the world today. The chapter should teach you enough to allow you to sit down and play the game without needing to ask your fellow players a lot of what feel like embarrassing questions. (Beginners, by the way, shouldn't feel embarrassed about asking questions; everyone has to start somewhere.) Later chapters will guide you through the subtleties of beginning, intermediate, and advanced strategy.

Learning the basic structure, or format, of Texas Hold'em is easy. This doesn't mean, though, that there isn't a great deal of strategy involved: there is. But the way the game is constructed is fairly simple, compared with a game like chess, where you must learn how to move many different pieces, or even compared with many wild home poker games,

where the rules for a game often take way too long to explain. (“Seven-Card Stud, threes and nines are wild, but if you catch a three face up you must match the size of the pot to keep the card or else fold. You can buy an extra card on the end for \$20 or replace a card on the end for \$10, and if you catch a four face up you get an extra card free.”)

If you were to walk into a card room or a friend's house to play Hold'em, and hadn't seen Hold'em before, you would want some explanation. But once you understand the pattern of the deal, whose turn it is to bet, how much that player can bet, and what all of the options are (*checking*, *calling*, *betting*, *raising*, and *folding*) during the play of a hand, then you'll have a solid foundation for understanding the basic strategy tips you'll find in the later chapters. After reading (and absorbing) this chapter, you'll be able to introduce Hold'em into your own Saturday night poker game, although I wouldn't recommend playing it for much money until you've learned some strategy!

♠ THE ROLE OF THE DEALER

In most poker games, including Texas Hold'em, the deal rotates clockwise. When you're playing at home, you simply change dealers after each hand, moving the deal around the table clockwise, one player to the next, but in a casino there is a professional dealer at the table who deals every hand. The

dealer, whether at home or in the casino, will shuffle, deal, keep the bets right, manage the pot, and help control the tempo of the game. A good dealer will keep things moving, both by dealing quickly and reliably and by diplomatically encouraging action from the slower players. (In the home game, of course, the dealer is also a player.)

♠ THE ROLE OF THE BUTTON: WHOSE DEAL IS IT?

In “casino-style” Hold'em, the dealer uses a white plastic puck roughly 2 inches in diameter, called the *button*, to indicate who the dealer would be if the game were being played without a professional dealer. Usually, the puck has the word “dealer” printed on each side. Instead of simply passing the deck one player to the left after each hand, as you do in home poker games, you sit still while the professional dealer moves the button one spot to the left after each hand, and then deals. Why bother with this step? For one thing, no one has to wonder, or ask, whose deal it is. More important, the “dealer” (the player sitting behind the button) acts last in Hold'em in each round of betting and thus has a significant positional advantage, because (among other things) that player has more information available to him when it's his turn to bet than the players who had to act first. The use of the button ensures that each player—though never actually dealing the cards—gets a

chance to enjoy that advantageous position once in each round of hands. (And of course with eight or more players at the table, next-to-last is a pretty good spot to be in too.)

The button also enables us to determine the order of play for each hand. The player seated to the left of the button acts first (except on the very first betting round), and the player who owns the button acts last (with that same first-round exception). We turn to those exceptions next. By the way, I recommend that you use a button even when you're playing Hold'em in your home poker game, and dealers are truly dealing. It helps remind people who dealt, and whose turn it is to deal next, and I think it also makes for an easier transition to playing casino Hold'em.

♠ THE TWO "BLINDS" TO THE LEFT OF THE BUTTON

Before the first round of betting, and before any cards are dealt, those first two players, directly to the left of the button, post (place in front of them) what we call the *blinds*. We call these the "blind" bets because those two players must invest them in the pot, in preset amounts, before they can look at any cards. Immediately after the button, we have the *small blind*, which is usually, but not always, set at half the size of the next blind, which is called the *big blind*.

The size of the blinds is determined by the size of

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