

WINNING POKER STRATEGY

20 VALUABLE CONCEPTS & TACTICS REVEALED

BY THE UPSWING POKER TEAM

UPSWING  POKER



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A Foreword from Doug Polk



Poker has changed. Have you?

The days of relying on “reads” and gut instinct are over. Today’s best players aren’t guessing. They’re calculating. They’re leveraging data, studying solvers, exploiting, and playing a game years ahead of what most people at the table are even aware of.

If you’re still playing the old game, you’re already behind. If you want to win in 2025 and beyond, you need more than just feel. You need *strategy*.

This book is your shortcut to that strategy.

No fluff. No recycled advice from the poker boom era. Just the fundamental concepts and cutting-edge techniques used by the current best players in the world.

When online poker first took off, it was like the Wild West. I deposited \$20 online and ran it up to \$10k playing low stakes (though it did take a few tries). Back then, you could climb the ranks with solid fundamentals, a decent bluff, and the occasional heater.

But the game has evolved since then, and so must you.

This book is a roadmap to the new type of poker. The *real* game. This isn't the poker your uncle taught you in the garage when you were a kid. It's the poker that top crushers (*online and live*) are using to dominate in 2025.

Whether you're a regular grinding \$1/2, an aspiring pro, or someone who's just tired of being the "unlucky" one in the home game, you're going to find real, usable knowledge in these pages.

We'll break down the fundamentals, teach you to think in ranges (not hands), and show you how to consistently make the most profitable play.

You don't need to be a genius. You don't need a six-monitor setup with solvers on every screen. You just need the right approach and a willingness to level-up.

Inside this book, we're going to break down the core concepts that drive those profitable decisions: position, equity, ranges, pot odds, expected value, and more.

This isn't just theory. This is high-level strategy made clear and *actionable* with the exact tactics that serious players are using right now to win consistently.

If you want to be respected at the table...

If you want to stop bleeding chips to people who *shouldn't* be beating you...

If you want to take your game from decent to deadly...

You're in the right place.

Let's crush this.

~Doug Polk

*3x WSOP bracelet winner, founder of Upswing Poker, over \$10 million in lifetime
live tournament earnings*

A Few Words Before We Begin

This first section introduces nine fundamental concepts that every modern poker professional understands. These ideas form the foundation of today's winning strategies and will appear repeatedly throughout the Preflop and Postflop Strategy sections.

The fourth and final section shifts focus to more advanced concepts, building on the groundwork laid earlier in the book.

Note: If you come across a term you're unfamiliar with, refer to the [Poker Terms Glossary on UpswingPoker.com](https://UpswingPoker.com).



Scan to visit the Glossary

Fundamental Concepts

Let's make sure you're on the same page as the rest of the poker world. The concepts that follow are foundational to the strategies used by the game's best players. Some of them may already be familiar, but a quick refresher never hurts.

1. Position

Information is power in poker.

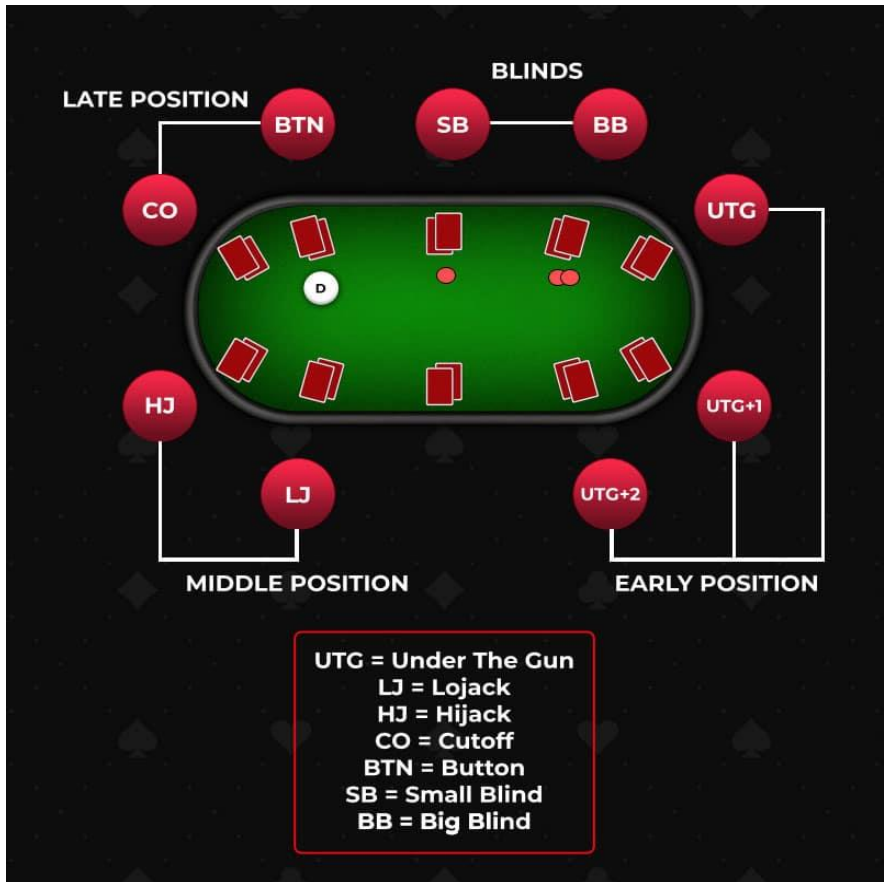
In every hand, the player who acts last has more information than everyone else.

When the cards are first dealt, each player has the same amount of information. They know their own two cards and nothing else.

But as the hand unfolds, players are forced to reveal information through their actions, such as folding, betting, calling, or raising.

When you act last, you get to see how every other player behaves before making your decision. This powerful edge is known as **playing in position**

Position is arguably the most fundamental concept in poker. You'll see it referenced often throughout this book, including mentions of specific positions like the following:



Why Position Matters

Playing in position makes the game noticeably easier. You can check behind to see a free card, control the size of the pot more effectively, find more profitable bluffing spots, and face fewer opponents when you raise.

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This is why you can play more hands from later positions compared to earlier ones. You will learn exactly which hands to play from each position in the Preflop Strategy section of this book.

There is one more important note about position. It is not just about where *you* sit, but also about who is sitting around you.

The player directly to your left will always have positional advantage over you. That can be especially difficult if they play a loose and aggressive style. On the other hand, when that same type of player is seated to your right, you will be in a much better position to capitalize on their mistakes.

2. Ranges

The days of trying to put your opponent on a single, specific hand are long gone. That approach may have worked reasonably well for Daniel Negreanu during the poker boom era, but even he has since shifted to thinking in terms of ranges.

What is a Range?

A *range* refers to the group of hands a player could have in a given situation.

For example, suppose a player raises before the flop and you respond with a re-raise. The hands you would choose to re-raise with—such as pocket aces, kings, queens, and similar strong holdings—make up your range in that spot.

Why is it Important to Understand Ranges?

Thinking about your opponent's range of hands is the most accurate way to predict their overall strategy, and it allows you to create effective counter-strategies.

If you try to put the opponent on one single hand, you will find yourself being wrong very often and thus your counter-strategy will prove ineffective.

Tool Introduction: What is a Range Matrix?

Thinking in terms of ranges is the most accurate way to predict an opponent's overall strategy. It allows you to build more effective counter-strategies.

Millions of poker players, including the world's best, use range matrices to study the game and sharpen their skills.

Below is an example of an empty range matrix:

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AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

How to Interpret a Range Matrix

The matrix, or grid, represents all possible hands in No Limit Hold'em. Hands with an “o” are offsuit. For example, 9♣ 6♥ is shown as 96o on the grid. Hands with an “s” indicates a suited hand, like A♥ K♥, which is shown as AKs.

To illustrate, consider a range that includes only the three highest pocket pairs: queens, kings, and aces. Add to that Ace-

King, both suited and offsuit. This narrow range is represented visually as follows:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: Tens are written as T rather than 10. For example, T9s represents Ten–Nine suited.

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How Range Matrices Are Used

Poker players primarily use range matrices in two ways:

1. Preflop charts. By studying charts for specific preflop scenarios, players can build a solid foundation and make well-informed decisions before the flop, setting themselves up for success on later streets.

For example, here is a chart from **Upswing Poker** that shows the optimal way to [play each hand from the Big Blind](#) when facing a raise by the player on the Button:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

In this chart, the Big Blind folds 56% of the time (blue), calls 30% (green), and 3-bets 14% (orange).

When a hand is shown with multiple colors, it means that more than one action is similarly profitable. In other words, either option is a valid way to play

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the hand. Here, green indicates a call, orange indicates a 3-bet, and blue indicates a fold.

2. Ranging opponents (and yourself). By narrowing your opponent's range based on the actions they take throughout a hand, you can build effective counter-strategies. The same logic can be applied to your own range, helping you anticipate how your opponent might respond to your play.

For example, suppose you raise preflop from the Button and the player in the Big Blind calls.

The flop comes 7♣ 3♣ 3♥. Your opponent checks, you bet, and they raise.

Now ask yourself: which hands would your opponent likely make this play with?

- **The most obvious is a hand that contains a 3.** Hands like A3, K3 suited, and 43 suited are certainly in play. Very weak hands, such as 32 offsuit, are unlikely because your opponent probably wouldn't have called a preflop raise with those.
- **Decent two-pair hands are also possible.** If your opponent holds a hand like A7 or 88, they may believe they have the best hand and decide to raise for value.
- **A full house is another possibility.** Your opponent could have 77 or even 73 suited. While many players would choose to slow play these hands on the flop, you certainly can't

rule them out.

- **Finally, your opponent could be bluffing.** If your opponent held a straight draw (e.g., 65) or a flush draw (e.g., 9♣ 8♣), they may raise to represent a strong hand. Some players will even bluff without a draw, hoping to force a fold from a hand you may have missed the flop with.

All of these possibilities make up your opponent's **range** in this situation.

3. Equity

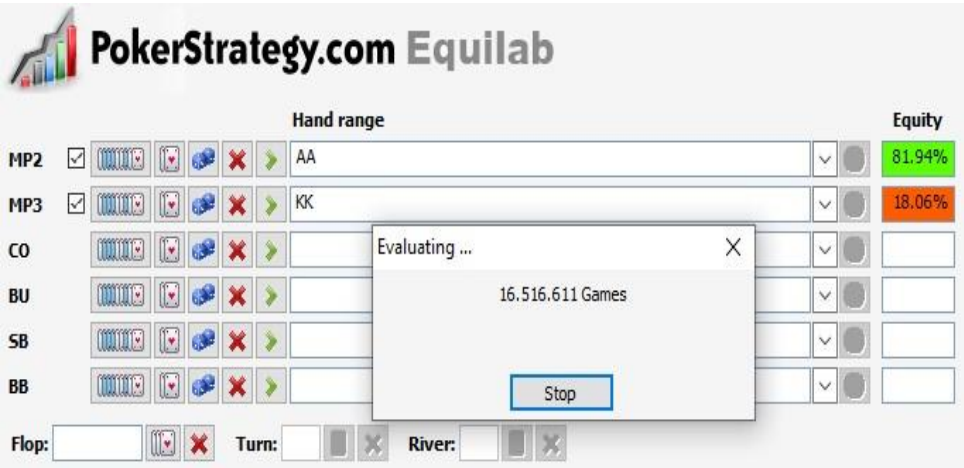
What is Equity?

Equity refers to the probability that a player will have the best hand at showdown, assuming they do not fold and all remaining community cards are dealt.

If you've ever watched poker on TV, you've probably seen percentages displayed next to each player during a hand. These numbers represent each player's equity.

Example: Suppose you go all-in preflop with AA, and another player calls with KK. There is an 82% chance that you will still have the best hand after the flop, turn, and river. In this case, your equity is 82%.

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The screenshot below shows an equity calculation tool called Equilab. It simulates over 16 million possible board runouts and determined that Pocket Aces have 81.94% equity against Pocket Kings.

The screenshot below shows an equity calculation tool called Equilab. It simulates over 16 million possible board runouts and determined that Pocket Aces have 81.94% equity against Pocket Kings.

Tools like the one above are most useful for calculating equities on the earlier streets: preflop, flop, and when facing a range of hands on the river.

Equity calculations on the turn are often simpler. While you can still use a tool like Equilab, you can also estimate the numbers in your head. All you need to know is how many outs the hand that is behind has to win.

For example, suppose I have A♥ A♣ and you have J♠ T♠ on a board of 9♠ 6♠ 2♦ 2♠.

To overcome your flush, I would need to hit either an ace or a two on the river to make a full house. There are 44 unknown cards remaining in the deck. Four of them are winners: three aces and one deuce.

Four out of 44 is approximately 9.1%, which is my equity with pocket aces against your flush.

There is a helpful rule of thumb for estimating equity when you know your number of outs. Multiply your outs by four on the flop or by two on the turn. While not perfectly precise, this shortcut gets you close enough for solid in-game decision-making.

Why Does Equity Matter?

Poker is a game driven by mathematics, with probability theory at its core. This does not mean the human elements of the game, such as psychology, body language, and timing, are unimportant. However, the mechanics of poker are built on a mathematical foundation.

Equity is the single most important driving force behind poker strategy. It is the tool players use to guide every decision, including when to bluff, when to call, when to value bet, and more.

Example: The best hands to bluff with before the river are often those that still have equity. Hands like flush draws or straight

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draws give you a backup plan in case the bluff fails. If your opponent calls, you still have a chance to improve and win the pot.

4. Expected Value

What is Expected Value?

Expected value (EV) is the average result of a specific play in the long run. In other words, it represents the average amount of money a particular action, such as betting, calling, raising, or folding, would win or lose if repeated millions of times.

Why is Expected Value Important?

Because the ultimate goal of poker is to win as much money as possible, understanding expected value is fundamental. By comparing the expected value of different actions, you can determine which option has the highest long-term profitability.

A Non-Poker Example to Help You Understand Expected Value

Suppose you sneak into the Golden State Warriors' practice facility and interrupt Steph Curry's free throw session. Strangely, he does not have you removed by security. Instead, he proposes a five-dollar bet on his next shot.

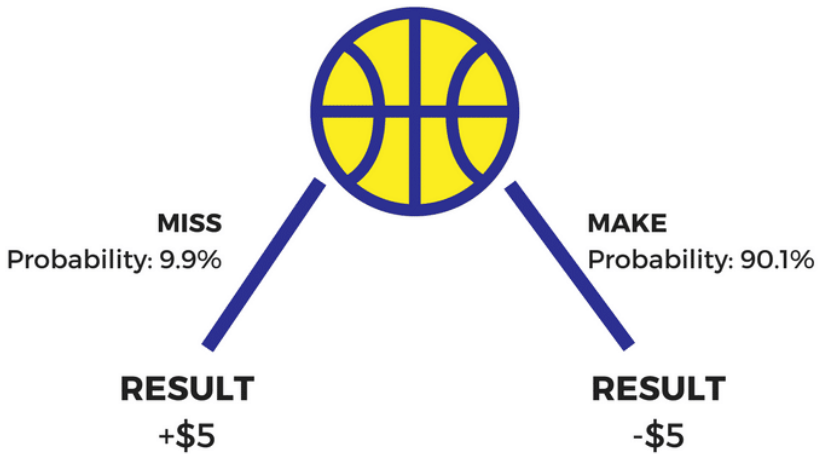
You hesitate. Steph Curry is, of course, an incredible free-throw shooter. But he is getting impatient.

"C'mon. It's only five bucks!" he says.

Should you take the bet?

Your first inclination is probably to decline, and you would be correct. At even money—your five dollars against Steph’s five dollars—this bet has a negative expected value.

Let’s break down why that is:



As you can see from the chart, there are two possible outcomes in this scenario:

1. Curry makes the free throw, and you lose five dollars. This will happen 90.1% of the time.
2. He misses, and you win five dollars, which will happen 9.9% of the time.

Note: Curry’s career free-throw percentage is very close to this figure.

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Just by looking at the two outcomes and their likelihood, you can probably tell that this is a losing bet for you. But exactly how much are you expected to lose?

To calculate the expected value of the bet, multiply the probability of each outcome (expressed as a decimal) by the result of that outcome. Then, add the two results together.

$$\text{MISS: } 0.099 \times \$5 = \$0.495$$

$$\text{MAKE: } 0.901 \times -\$5 = -\$4.505$$

$$\text{MAKE} + \text{MISS: } -\$4.505 + \$0.495 = -\$4.01$$

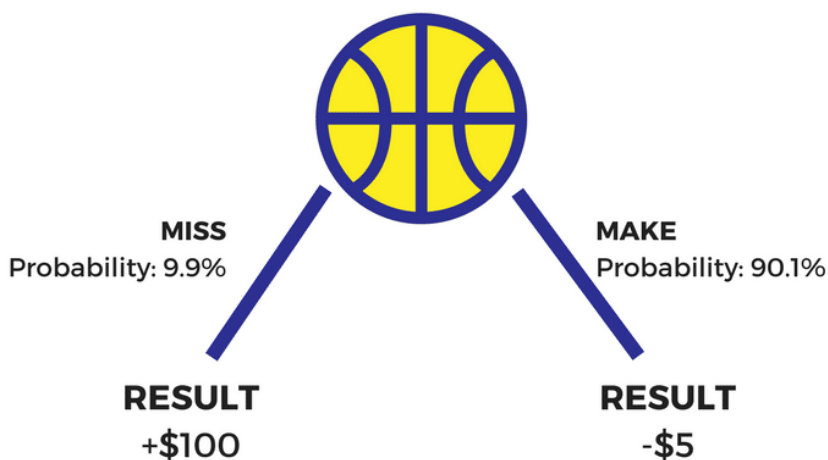
$$\text{EV} = -\$4.01$$

Your intuition was correct. If you made that bet 100 times, you would expect to lose a significant amount of money. Your expected value is negative \$4.01 per shot. Ouch.

(By the way, this is exactly how casinos make money from gamblers. They provide the games and allow players to make bets with negative expected value, knowing that over time, the house will almost always come out ahead.)

So, you decline the bet, and Steph scowls.

But now, suppose he offers you 20-to-1 odds: his \$100 to your \$5. What should you do?



Let's recalculate and see if this new bet is worth taking.

MISS: $0.099 \times \$100 = \9.90

MAKE: $0.901 \times -\$5 = -\4.505

MAKE + MISS: $-\$4.505 + \$9.90 = +\$5.395$

EV = \$5.39

Now we're talking. With the odds Curry has offered, this is a +EV bet. So, you accept.

Steph steps to the line, drains the free throw, and snatches the five dollars from your hand.

You might be thinking, What?! The bet was supposed to be +EV!

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It was a +EV bet, and you should absolutely make the same bet again if given the opportunity. However, that does not mean you will win every time.

Based on what you know about Steph Curry's free-throw percentage, you should expect to lose about 90% of the time. He is just that good at shooting free throws.

The key takeaway is this: your expected value only plays out over many repetitions. The more often you make +EV decisions, the more likely you are to realize those gains in the long run.

Bringing It Back to Poker

It's easy to see how EV works at the poker table.

Take a simple example: think of a time when your pocket aces were cracked after going all-in preflop. Would you ever consider folding those aces in hindsight?

Of course not. You know that getting your money in preflop with pocket aces is one of the most profitable plays you can make over the long term.

Being a successful poker player depends on consistently making profitable, or +EV, decisions. Many of these are more difficult to identify than others. Just as important, you need to put in enough volume to overcome negative variance, which is inevitable.

5. Pot Odds

What Are Pot Odds?

Pot odds are the ratio between the size of the total pot and the size of the bet you are facing. The total pot includes all previous bets, as well as the current bet made on that street.

For example, if there is \$40 in the pot and your opponent bets \$20, the total pot becomes \$60. You must call \$20 to try to win \$60, giving you pot odds of 3 to 1.

Why Are Pot Odds Important?

Pot odds are the mathematical foundation for deciding whether to call. Without them, you would have no way of determining which calls are profitable and which are not.

To make pot odds useful during actual gameplay, you need to convert the ratio into a percentage. This percentage tells you the minimum equity your hand must have in order to call profitably.

Fortunately, there is a simple three-step method to do exactly that.

Calculating Your Price to Call Profitably in 3 Easy Steps

Let's use the same example. There is \$40 in the pot and your opponent bets \$20.

Step 1: Calculate the final pot size if you were to call.

First, determine what the pot size would be if you decide to call the bet. In this example, the current pot is \$60, and it costs you \$20

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to call. If you make the call, the final pot becomes \$80 (\$60 current pot plus your \$20 call).

We will refer to this amount as the final pot.

Step 2: Divide the size of the call by the size of the final pot.

In this case, that comes out to 0.25 (\$20 call size / \$80 final pot size).

Step 3: Multiply by 100 to get the percentage

Now, simply multiply the decimal by 100 to convert it into a percentage. In this case:

$$0.25 \times 100 = 25\%$$

This means you need to win **more than 25% of the time** in order for your call to be profitable.

The next step is to evaluate whether your specific hand has at least 25% equity against your opponent's range.

While you can only estimate your equity during a hand, you can sharpen your intuition away from the table by using [poker equity calculators](#). These tools allow you to plug in various hands and ranges to see how different scenarios play out.

Let's walk through a few examples of how to do that.

(If you do not plan to experiment with equity calculators yourself, feel free to skip these examples.)

Example 1: Using Pot Odds Preflop

Note: The examples use cash game scenarios, but the same process applies in tournament hands as well.

Suppose you're playing a \$0.50/\$1.00 cash game. A player raises to \$3 in the Cutoff, and the action folds to you in the Big Blind.

Your hand is 7♦5♦. Let's walk through the step-by-step process to determine whether calling is profitable based on pot odds.

Step 1: Calculate the final pot size if you call

\$3 (the raiser's bet)

\$1 (your big blind, already in the pot)

\$0.50 (the small blind)

\$2 (the remaining amount you would need to call)

Total final pot = \$6.50

Note that your call size is only \$2, since you already have \$1 invested as the big blind.

Step 2: Divide the size of the call by the size of the final pot.

$\$2 \text{ call size} / \$6.5 \text{ final pot size} = 0.307$

Step 3: Multiply by 100 to get the percentage.

$0.307 * 100 = 30.7\% \text{ equity required to call.}$

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Step 4: Assess whether your hand has enough equity to call.

Now, you have to estimate your opponent's range and calculate whether your 7♦ 5♦ has at least 30.7% equity against it.

Since your opponent raised from the Cutoff, we can use the Cutoff raising range from [Upswing Poker's free live cash preflop ranges](#) as a reasonable estimate:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Cutoff Raise Range (Orange = Raise, Blue = Fold)

Editor's Note: If you don't have access to ranges like this, [get Upswing Poker's free preflop charts here](#).



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Next, input your hand and your opponent's estimated range into an equity calculator to see if your hand has enough equity to make a profitable call.

Remember, you need at least **30.7% equity** in this situation.

		Hand range										Equity		
MP2														☐
MP3														☐
CO	☒											7,86s+,76s,65s,54s,ATo+,KT o+,QT o+,JT o	63.11%	☐
BU														☐
SB														☐
BB	☒											75s	36.89%	☐

7♦ 5♦ has 37% equity against the Cutoff's range, which means you can call profitably.

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Note: There is one more relevant factor that goes beyond the scope of this section—[equity realization](#). You will learn more about that in the Advanced Concepts section near the end of this book.

Example 2: Using Pot Odds with a Draw

Let's continue with the same hand: the Cutoff raises to \$3, and you have 7♦ 5♦ in the Big Blind. Now you know that you have enough equity to call, so you do.

The flop comes J♦ 8♣ 2♦. You check to the preflop raiser and he bets \$4 into the \$6.50 pot.

Let's run through our steps to figure out if you can call this bet profitably with your flush draw.

Step 1: Calculate the final pot size if you call

\$6.50 (current pot)

\$4 (opponent's bet)

\$4 (your call)

Final pot = \$14.50

Step 2: Divide the size of the call by the final pot size

$\$4 / \$14.50 = 0.276$

Step 3: Multiply by 100 to get the percentage.

$0.276 * 100 = 27.6\%$ equity required to call.

Step 4: Assess whether your hand has enough equity to call.

To simplify this calculation, let's focus on your hand and skip estimating your opponent's range.

Consider your outs:

- You have **9 outs** to make a flush. That gives you roughly an 18% chance of improving on the turn (9 diamonds out of 47 unseen cards).
- You have **6 outs** to make a pair, giving you about a 12% chance. Making a pair may give you the best hand, and it also makes it easier to continue on the turn if your opponent bets again.
- You have **6 outs** to pick up a straight draw, which also comes out to around 12%. This type of improvement can strengthen your hand enough to call another bet on the turn.

That is nearly half of the possible turn cards improving your hand in some way. Hitting the flush right away is the ideal outcome, but picking up a pair or a straight draw is a solid secondary result.

In addition, your opponent will not always bet the turn when you miss. That means you will sometimes get to see a free river card, giving you one more chance to hit your outs.

In this example, it is clear that you have more than the 27.6% equity required to call profitably.

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Your intuition probably already told you that calling with a flush draw on the flop is a good play. Now, you can prove it.

Example 3: Using Pot Odds to Bluff-Catch on the River

Note: Bluff-catching refers to calling a bet with a hand that can only beat your opponent's bluffs.

When deciding whether to bluff-catch on the river, it is essential to consider your opponent's range.

Suppose you defend your Big Blind against a Cutoff raise with $9\clubsuit 7\clubsuit$. The flop comes $9\heartsuit 8\spadesuit 3\clubsuit$. You check and call a bet.

The turn is a $2\heartsuit$, and you check and call again.

Finally, the river is the $2\clubsuit$. You check, and your opponent bets \$20 into the \$40 pot.

Time to run through our steps.

Step 1: Calculate the final pot size if you were to call.

$$\text{\$20 (bet size)} + \text{\$40 (pot size)} + \text{\$20 (your call)} = \text{\$80}$$

Step 2: Divide the size of the call by the size of the final pot.

$$\text{\$20} / \text{\$80} = 0.25$$

Step 3: Multiply by 100 to get the percentage.

$$0.25 * 100 = 25\%$$

Step 4: Assess whether your hand has enough equity to call.

To determine this, you would input your hand and your opponent's range into an equity calculator. But first, you need to estimate the range of hands your opponent might have.

Your opponent raised preflop from the Cutoff and then bet all three streets on a board of 9♦ 8♠ 3♣ 2♥ 2♣. Let's quickly estimate the range of hands that beat your top pair:

Sets: 99, 88, and 33

Strong two pair: AA, KK, QQ, JJ, TT, 98s, A9s

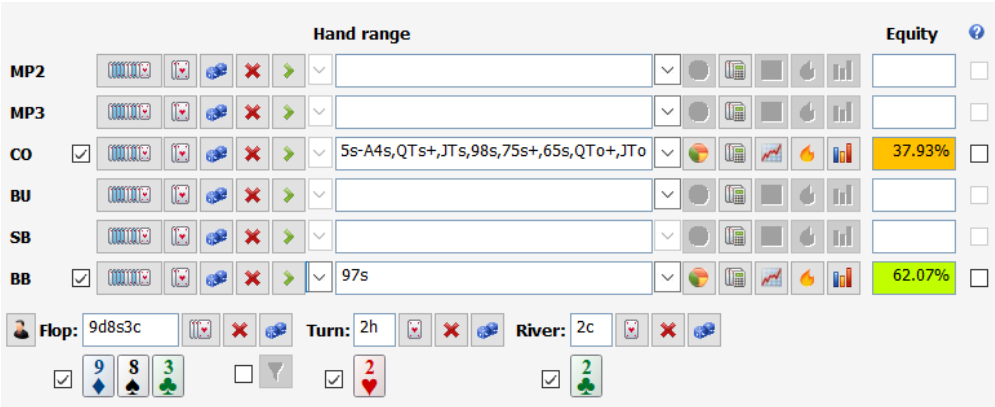
What about his potential bluffing hands?

There are quite a few missed straight draws your opponent could be holding—hands with no showdown value that he may use to try and steal the pot on the river. These include:

QJ, QT, JT, 76s, 75s, 65s, A5s, A4s

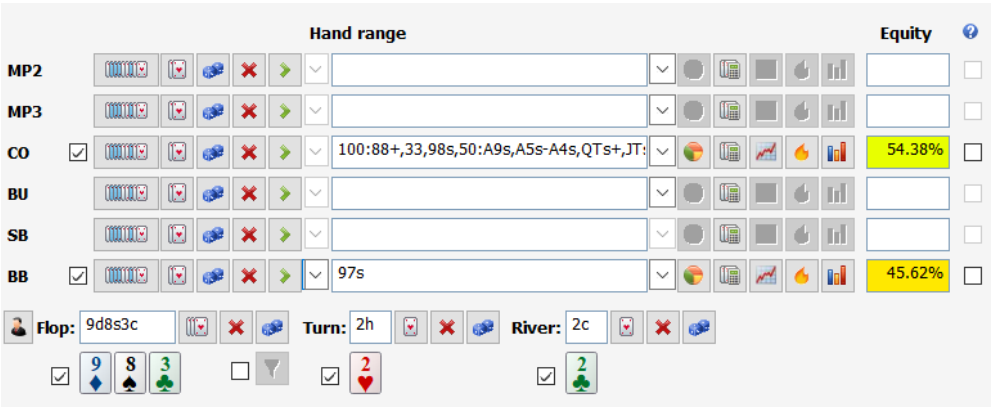
Here's how 9♣ 7♣ fares against this full range of value and bluffs.

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Since many poker players tend to [bluff less than theory suggests](#), let's take a more conservative approach.

When you run the calculation, cut the number of bluffing combos in half to reflect how a typical opponent might actually play this spot.



Your 9♣ 7♣ has 46% equity against your opponent's estimated range, assuming all value hands and only half of the potential

bluffs continue through the river. If this range estimate is reasonably accurate, calling is very profitable in this situation.

Note: Some poker players are tight and passive. They rarely raise preflop with speculative hands and are unlikely to bluff after the flop. If you suspect you are up against a player like this, folding in spots like this one is often the better choice.

6. Value Betting

What is a Value Bet?

A [value bet](#) is a bet or raise made by a player to get called by an inferior hand. It is the direct opposite of a bluff.

You will make most of your profit at the poker table through value betting. This is especially true when playing against weaker opponents, who tend to call bets and raises more often than they should.

If you believe you have the best hand, and you expect your opponent to call with a weaker one, value betting should be a big part of your strategy.

Let's look at a hand example that demonstrates the power of betting for value.

\$1/\$2 Cash Game. \$200 Effective Stacks.

You are dealt A♥ Q♥ on the Button

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6 players fold. You raise to \$5. Small Blind folds. Big Blind calls.

Flop (\$11): Q♣ 8♥ 2♠

Big Blind checks. You bet \$4. Big Blind calls.

Turn (\$19) 4♠

Big Blind checks. You bet \$24. Big Blind calls.

River (\$67) 4♥

Big Blind checks. You bet \$60.

Ideal result: Big Blind calls. You show your A♥ Q♥, Big Blind shows K♠ Q♠

In this example, you open from the Button with A♥ Q♥, and the Big Blind calls. Against a Button open, the Big Blind should defend with many Qx hands.

This makes the Q♣ 8♥ 2♠ rainbow flop a great result for your A♥ Q♥. You can bet this flop 100% of the time and expect your opponent to call with many worse hands.

When the Big Blind calls preflop and then calls again on the flop, their range consists of many Qx hands with a kicker worse than an ace. They might also have a lower pair, such as an 8 or a pocket pair like 66, or possibly a draw.

The 4♠ on the turn doesn't change the hand much. You can now bet big for value with your top pair, top kicker. When you make a large bet on the turn that is bigger than the size of the pot, and your opponent calls, there is a strong chance they are holding a weaker Qx hand.

Those weaker Qx hands are just the kinds of hands you're looking to target with aggressive value betting. The river comes a 4♥, which, again doesn't change much. It is unlikely your opponent has a 4 in their hand based on how the hand has played out. As a result, you can comfortably go for another value bet.

In this example, you have a strong hand (top pair, top kicker) and your opponent is likely to have a strong-but-second-best hand, such as top pair with a weaker kicker. When that is the case, you have the green light to bet as much as you think your opponent will call.

You decide to bet slightly under the pot (\$60 into a \$67 pot) and it works out. Your opponent holds a strong but inferior hand that is worth calling with.

This is a relatively large bet. The upside to betting big is that you extract more value when your opponent calls. The downside is that bigger bets tend to get called less often.

If you wanted to be called more frequently, possibly by middle pair hands like A8, you could opt for a smaller sizing, like something closer to half pot, such as \$33.50.

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Why is Value Betting Important?

Betting when you are ahead is the primary way you make money in poker.

Missing value bet opportunities can seriously hurt your win rate. It is often tempting to check back on the river in spots like the example hand above, especially if you are worried that your opponent might be trapping with a monster hand.

However, you must avoid letting fear dictate your decisions. Value betting when you have the best hand is essential. The pot is largest on the river, which means your biggest and most impactful bets will also happen on the river.

Imagine if you had checked back on the river in the previous example. You would have let your opponent off the hook in a situation where you were clearly ahead, and missed out on valuable chips in the process.

Thin Value Betting

Some value betting opportunities are straightforward, such as the example above. AQ is a very strong hand on a Queen-high flop with no possible straights or flushes.

Other times, however, you will find yourself holding a more marginal hand, and it may not be so clear whether your opponent will call with a worse one.

When you bet in these kinds of situations, it is known as value betting thinly.

For example, suppose you raise preflop with $A\clubsuit T\clubsuit$ and the flop is $K\heartsuit J\spadesuit T\spadesuit$.

Both you and your opponent check, and the turn is the $4\heartsuit$.

You both check again, and the river is the $7\clubsuit$.

You may only have the third-best pair, but the passive actions your opponent has taken in the hand suggest that you probably have the best hand. In this case, you can go for a thin value bet and expect to be called by hands like 88 or T9.

7. Bluffing

What is a Bluff?

Bluffing is when you bet or raise while holding a relatively weak hand in an attempt to make your opponent fold a stronger hand.

Why is Bluffing Important?

Bluffing at the right frequency and with the right hands makes you a much tougher player to beat.

A player who rarely or never bluffs is very easy to exploit. Think about it. If you realize that an opponent almost never bluffs, you could simply fold to every bet and raise unless you have a monster hand.

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On the other hand, a player who bluffs far too often is also easy to exploit. Once you identify that your opponent is a maniac who loves to bluff, you can start calling with marginal made hands. You can also slow play your strongest hands, setting a trap that the bluffer is likely to walk into.

The goal is to find the middle ground between these two extremes. By mixing bluffs into your strategy at a reasonable rate, you become a much more difficult player to read and a lot harder to exploit.

Let's take a look at an example hand to see how bluffing works in practice.

\$1/\$2 Cash Game. \$200 Effective Stacks

You are dealt T♣ 9♣ on the Button

6 players fold. You raise to \$5. Small Blind folds. Big Blind calls.

Flop (\$11): Q♣ 8♥ 2♠

Big Blind checks. You bet \$4. Big Blind calls.

Turn (\$19) 4♠

Big Blind checks. You bet \$24. Big Blind calls.

River (\$67) 4♥

Big Blind checks. You bet \$60.

Ideal result: Big Blind fold A♠ 8♠. You take down the pot.

Notice that this is the same situation as the value betting example. This time, however, you have a missed straight draw instead of top pair.

When you held A♥ Q♥ in the value betting example, you bet all three streets to get your opponent to call with a worse hand. With T9 suited in the bluffing example, your goal is the opposite—you are trying to get your opponent to fold a better hand.

A hand like T9 is a strong bluffing candidate on the flop because it has backup equity. In this case, you have a gutshot straight draw and a backdoor (i.e. runner-runner) flush draw. A jack on the turn would complete your straight, while a club would give you both flush and straight potential heading into the river.

(Note: In general, your bluffing hands should oftentimes have backup equity like this. But some situations warrant bluffing without a draw, as we'll explore later in this book.)

The turn 4 doesn't help your hand on this runout, but you can continue to bet, playing this hand the same way you would play a value hand like AQ.

The river brings another 4, and you arrive at the final betting round with just ten-high. Your hand has virtually no chance of winning at showdown, so you continue bluffing in an attempt to get your opponent to fold.

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If your opponent has a marginal hand (like middle pair), they're going to be hesitant to call down against this big bet. And if they have a missed spade draw, like A♠ 7♠, they will certainly fold.

Of course, your opponent may just have that same KQ from the previous example and call. But that's okay. Not all of your bluffs are going to work. What's important is that you are capable of making these bluffs in addition to your value bets.

By playing your value bets and bluffs the same way, you make yourself tough to play against. Your opponents will struggle to predict what you have. You'll learn more about this when you reach the 8th concept in this book (Balance).

General Rules For Bluffing

1. Bluff more early in the hand and less on later streets

The reasoning behind this rule is simple. In terms of equity against an opponent's calling range, your bluffing hands are at their strongest preflop. That equity gradually diminishes as the hand progresses.

For example, suited connectors typically have around 30% to 40% equity against the types of hands your opponent will continue with preflop. This means you can include more of these "weaker" hands relative to the number of strong hands you would normally raise for value.



On the flop, many of your bluffs will be draws or backdoor draws, which still carry decent equity. On the turn, the equity of these hands drops, since only one more card remains. This leads to the river, where bluffing hands usually have no chance to improve.

In other words, your range should contain the highest proportion of bluffs preflop and on the flop. That proportion should decrease on the turn and decrease further still on the river.

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2. Avoid bluffing on the river with hands that might win at showdown

If you decide to bet on the river, you must be clear about your intention. You are either bluffing or value betting, there should be no in-between.



Avoid betting with hands that fall somewhere in the middle. These are hands that are not strong enough to get called by worse, but not weak enough to need to bluff.

In other words, your river bluffs should be hands that are clear losers at showdown and have no realistic chance of winning unless your opponent folds.

Note: The poker term showdown value refers to hands that have a chance to win at showdown. You'll see this term used later in the book.

3. Consider the pot odds you'll be giving your opponent if you decide to bluff

This concept will help you determine the appropriate frequency at which you should bluff. The bigger your bet, the higher the proportion of your betting range that should consist of bluffs.

For example, suppose you bet \$100 into a \$100 pot, giving your opponent 2-to-1 odds to call. In other words, they must call \$100 to win \$200.

To make your opponent indifferent between calling and folding with a bluff-catcher, your range should contain one bluff for every two value bets. That means you need to be bluffing one-third of the time in this spot.

If your betting range includes 30 combinations of value hands, you would need 15 combinations of bluffs to maintain the correct ratio.

Note: Making your opponents indifferent—meaning they are stuck between multiple options that seem equally profitable—is a fundamental principle of optimal poker strategy.

The idea is that your betting range becomes profitable regardless of your opponent's response. Because your value-to-

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bluff ratio matches their pot odds, your play is unexploitable. Whether they call or fold, you win in the long run.

Pro tip: You should adjust this strategy based on what you know about your opponent. If you are up against someone who rarely folds the river, you should reduce the number of bluffs in your betting range.

8. Balance

What is Balance?

Balance refers to playing both strong and weak hands in a similar way within a given situation. The goal is to avoid creating patterns that your opponents can exploit.

Think back to the two examples on the Queen-high flop. In one case, you had top pair with A♥ Q♥. In the other, you held a missed straight draw with T♣ 9♣. Even though the hands were very different in strength, you played them the same way, betting all three streets. That is what balance looks like in action.

Why is Balance Important?

Balance is extremely important from a theoretical standpoint because it prevents opponents from identifying and exploiting weaknesses in your strategy.

In practice, balance matters most when you are playing against strong opponents. It is less critical when facing weaker players who are not paying close attention to your frequencies or patterns.

Even so, it is important to understand how balanced strategies function. A well-balanced approach provides a solid baseline. As you gain information and develop reads on your opponents, you can then make targeted adjustments to that baseline strategy to exploit specific tendencies.

9. Stack-to-Pot Ratio

What is Stack-to-Pot Ratio?

[Stack-to-pot ratio \(SPR\)](#) is exactly what it sounds like: the ratio of the shortest remaining stack to the size of the pot. SPR is calculated on a street-by-street basis and is a key factor in postflop decision-making.

For example, suppose you're playing a \$2/\$5 cash game and every player has a \$500 stack. You raise from the Button to \$15, and only the Big Blind calls.

The pot is now \$32 (we're playing in a magical world with no rake) with \$485 stacks behind. So, the SPR in this case is:

$$\text{SPR} = \$485 / \$32 = 15.15$$

As the SPR increases, the complexity of the hand increases as well. This gives skill a greater role in determining the outcome. An SPR of 15 is considered quite high, so you can expect a lot of postflop maneuvering in this hypothetical hand.

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On the other hand, when the SPR is smaller, there is less room for creative or strategic play. As a result, luck tends to have a larger impact on the outcome.

Anything under a 5 SPR is considered quite low. In short stack scenarios, you may even find yourself playing with an extremely low SPR like 1.5. In those cases, you should often be much more willing to commit chips with otherwise marginal hands.

Why is Stack-to-Pot Ratio Important?

SPR is particularly useful for determining postflop hand strength.

For example, imagine that you have top pair, top kicker with A♦ T♦ on a connected flop of T♠ 8♦ 7♠.

If the SPR is 1, your A♦ T♦ is very strong. So strong that it's worth playing for all of the remaining chips. If you got the rest of the money all-in on the flop, you should expect to be ahead of your opponent most of the time.

By contrast, if the SPR was 15, your A♦ T♦ is still strong, but it can shrivel up fast if a lot of money starts going into the pot. Getting it all-in on the flop with so much money behind would be a disaster. You'll almost certainly be up against a better hand, such as J♥ 9♥ or 8♠ 8♥, or a powerful draw like Q♠ 9♠, which could actually be a favorite against you.

One-pair hands perform best in low-SPR situations, where the money is shallow relative to the pot. But when the SPR is high, you need stronger hands to justify building a big pot.

In other words: big pot, big hand.

PREFLOP STRATEGY

The Fundamental Goal of Preflop Strategy

The fundamental goal of preflop strategy is to win the pot as often as possible while risking the minimum.

In a hypothetical world with no forced bets—no small blind, no big blind—and perfectly played poker, there would be no mathematical reason to raise with anything other than pocket aces.

But in the real world, there are forced bets, and poker players make mistakes all the time. This creates opportunities for well-constructed preflop strategies to gain an edge.

So, how should you approach preflop play? Which hands are worth playing, and what factors should influence your decisions before putting chips in the pot?

That is exactly what this section will cover.



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Preflop Open-Raise Sizing

When it comes to choosing the best preflop raise size, your goal is to put the middling part of your opponents' ranges in a difficult spot, ideally, a situation where calling or folding are both close in expected value.

Mathematical simulations have shown that the most effective open-raise size is typically between 2 and 3bb (big blinds).

In general, online raise sizes from Under the Gun to the Button range from 2 to 2.5bb, with the Button often favoring 2.5bb. From the Small Blind, players typically raise to 3bb.

In online games, this 2 to 3bb open is much more efficient. It allows you to risk less while still achieving the same strategic goals: building the pot when ahead, applying pressure, and isolating weaker opponents.

If you are playing live poker, you will often see open-raise sizes of 4 to 5bb, or even larger. These bigger raises can be effective in live games, where players tend to be looser and less aggressive.

Live players tend to call raises more frequently and 3-bet less aggressively than online players. Because of this, larger open sizes in live games can extract more value from weak hands that should have folded and help isolate limpers more effectively. In softer live environments, bigger raises often face less resistance, making them a profitable adjustment.

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Preflop 3-Bet Sizing

For 3-betting, the optimal size depends on whether you are in position or out of position. Here are some reliable rules of thumb:

1. In position: 3-bet between 3 and 3.5 times the open-raise size
2. Out of position: 3-bet between 4 and 5 times the open-raise size

Example: Suppose you are playing a \$1/\$2 online cash game, and you are on the Button. The Hijack opens to \$5, and you decide to 3-bet. Since you are in position, a good sizing would be around \$15 (3 times the \$5 raise).

Now imagine you are in the Small Blind, and the Button opens to \$5. Since you are out of position, a standard sizing would be between \$20 and \$25, using the 4x to 5x guideline.

Preflop 4-Bet Sizing

4-bet sizing is a different beast, whether you are in position or out of position.

When your opponent 3-bets out of position, for example to 11bb from the Small Blind, and you are in position on the Button, your standard 4-bet sizing should be around 2.3 times their raise. So if they 3-bet to 11bb, you would 4-bet to 25bb.

On the other hand, if your opponent 3-bets in position, such as from the Button, and you are out of position in the Small Blind or

Big Blind, your standard 4-bet size should be around 2.5 times their 3-bet. For instance, if you open to 2bb, they 3-bet to 7, and you are out of position, you should 4-bet to 18bb.

These sizing suggestions assume you are playing with 100bb stacks in a cash game. If stacks are shorter, which is often the case deep in tournaments, it can make sense to reduce your sizing. In some cases, especially with 4-bets, going all-in becomes the default play when stack sizes are shallow enough.

Open-Raising

To [open-raise](#) or not is the most frequent decision you will have to make at a poker table. Open-raising is also known as raising first in (RFI) or simply opening.

Open-raising with the wrong hands can have a significant negative impact on your results. Depending on how far you deviate from sound preflop strategy, there may be no amount of postflop skill that can make up for open-raising with a hand that is simply too weak.

The good news is that you can play very close to a perfect preflop strategy by using the preflop range charts provided by Upswing Poker. These charts offer optimal ranges for every position, with separate versions tailored for online cash games, live cash games, and multi-table tournaments.

Poker is an almost infinitely complex game, and it is impossible for humans to replicate the exact postflop strategies produced by

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solvers. What you can do, however, is nail down your preflop open-raising ranges with a high degree of accuracy.

Many of the biggest mistakes in poker begin with an incorrect preflop open. By eliminating these from your game, you will gain a meaningful edge over opponents who open too loose or too tight.

As your position gets later, you can open a wider range of hands. This is because there are fewer players left to act who can 3-bet you or otherwise prevent you from winning the pot.

For example, from the Lojack, you can profitably open around 18% of hands. From the Button, that number jumps to more than 40%, thanks to your positional advantage and the reduced risk of facing resistance.

Playing vs Open-Raises

Playing against an open raise is the second most common situation you will face at the poker table.

It is easy to play too loosely in these spots, especially by calling with hands that seem good at first glance. But this can be a costly mistake, particularly if you fail to account for both your position and your opponent's position.

This is where a resource like Upswing Poker's preflop charts becomes invaluable. These charts allow you to play a nearly perfect preflop strategy when facing an open raise. They include ranges for

every position, showing how to respond to an open from any seat at the table.

For example, let's look at a preflop chart that shows how you should play from the Button when facing a raise from the Under the Gun player at a 6-handed table. In a full-ring game, this position would be referred to as the Lojack.

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AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

In this chart, green represents a call (6%), while orange represents a 3-bet (8%). All blue hands are folded.

So if you are on the Button facing an Under the Gun open, here is how you might play a few specific hands according to the chart:

- **AK suited:** 3-bet 100% of the time
- **Pocket Tens (TT):** Call 50%, 3-bet 50%
- **Low pocket pairs (22–55):** Call 25%, fold 75%

These frequencies reflect a balanced strategy that mixes calls and raises in situations where either option is viable. Against weaker opponents, you can lean more heavily toward one action or the other based on how they respond to aggression.

When a hand mixes between multiple options—such as raising and calling instead of just one—it means that the EV of each decision is the same. In practice, you can choose between these options in one of two ways: by using a [random number generator](#) (RNG) to stay balanced, or by leveraging your opponent's tendencies to choose the option that is most profitable in that specific moment.

Compare that to the chart for the Hijack facing that same Under the Gun raise:

Modern Poker Strategy

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Notice that there is no green anywhere on this chart. When you are in the Hijack facing an Under the Gun open, you should either 3-bet (8%) or fold (92%), with no calls.

There are simply too many players left to act to justify calling. Someone behind you is fairly likely to wake up with a strong hand and squeeze you out of the pot with a 3-bet.

This advice assumes you are playing at a reasonably tough table. If the players behind you are weak and unlikely to 3-bet, you can consider calling with certain medium-strength hands, especially pocket pairs.

Playing Vs 3-bets

After raising first in, you will face a 3-bet roughly 20% of the time at a table with competent players.

When that happens, it is important to know which hands are strong enough to call, which hands you should 4-bet, and which hands you should simply fold.

Calling too often against 3-bets can leave you at a disadvantage postflop, especially out of position. On the other hand, folding too frequently allows aggressive opponents to exploit you and pick up pots without resistance.

This is where Upswing Poker's preflop range charts come into play again, specifically the RFI vs 3-bet charts.

Let's look at an example. The following chart shows how you should play from the Cutoff when facing a 3-bet from the Button:

Modern Poker Strategy

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Green represents call (25%), orange represents raise (which would be a 4-bet 22% of the time in this case), and blue (54%) represents fold.

It might be surprising to see that, in addition to the usual suspects like JJ+ and AK 4-betting for value, there are also some fringe hands that 4-bet on rare occasions, such as small pocket pairs and suited connectors.

You may also notice that while hands like 54 suited always continue, other suited connectors such as 76 suited, 87 suited, and 98 suited begin to fold more frequently when facing 3-bets.

This reflects a balanced strategy that mixes in low-frequency bluffs and recognizes the subtle differences in equity and playability between similar-looking hands.

Let's compare that to the chart for when you raised from Under the Gun (Lojack in 6-max) and the Button 3-bet:

Modern Poker Strategy

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Green represents call (32%), orange represents raise (21%), and blue (47%) represents fold.

Your Under the Gun RFI range is the tightest of any position, and the Button's 3-bet range against it should also be tighter than usual. Because of that, your calling range from Under the Gun when facing a Button 3-bet should be more selective as well.

These preflop charts give you a solid baseline strategy for responding to 3-bets. Making good decisions in these spots is critical, since 3-bet pots tend to be large, and mistakes in big pots are more costly.

As you gather information on your opponents, you can begin adjusting your strategy to exploit them. For instance, if you know your opponent is very tight, you can fold more often—starting with the mixed decision hands (the ones that appear partially blue on the chart above).

Note: When a hand is mixed between two actions, it means that those two options have the same expected value. This is often referred to as indifference. But if you have information that sways the decision one way or the other, that indifference fades away.

4-betting vs 3-bets

You can't only 4-bet premium hands. If you did that, you're not taking advantage of all the times your opponent will fold. And if your opponents caught on to your "only 4-bet premiums" strategy, they would always have an easy decision versus your 4-bets.

Of course, if you have a read that your opponent is unlikely to fold versus a 4-bet, you should weight your range more towards the premium hands and cut out most or all of the bluffs.

Modern Poker Strategy

Your goal when 4-betting is to make your opponents' decisions hard. This goal is accomplished when you put most of their hands in a gray area between continuing or folding.

There are three steps to this:

1. Identify your value 4-betting range

The first step is to decide which strong hands are worth 4-betting for value in a given situation.

This will depend on a number of factors, including but not limited to:

- Your position
- Your opponent's position
- Stack depth
- What you know about your opponent's game

2. Add bluffs to your 4-betting range

The best 4-bet bluffing hands are suited Ax and Kx hands that can not profitably call the 3-bet. Some offsuit Ax and Kx hands get mixed into the bluff 4-bet range too, as do other hands on occasion.

The Ax and Kx hands have the best blockers to your opponent's continuing range, which makes it a bit more likely they will fold (see: card removal).

A blocker is a card held by a player that makes it impossible (or less likely) that an opponent has a hand that includes that card (or a card of

the same rank). When you hold an Ace in your hand, for example, it's a bit less likely your opponent holds Pocket Aces.

The specific hands and how often you should 4-bet with them depend on your value range. As your number of value 4-bets increases, so should your number of bluffs.

3. 4-bet to an amount that puts your opponent in a tough spot.

Your 4-bet size should put the 3-bettor in a marginal spot with most of his hands, forcing him to call with a decent portion of his 3-betting range. If you use too large or too small of a size, your opponent will have an easy decision with most of his hands.

Bad 4-bet sizes essentially let your opponent off the hook too easily. They're much more likely to make a mistake if you use a size that puts most of their range in a grey area between calling and folding.

Playing vs 4-Bets

You will face 4-bets less frequently than 3-bets, but when you do, it is even more important to respond correctly. These are big pots, and decisions in these spots can make or break your session.

For example, suppose the Button opens, you 3-bet from the Small Blind, and the Button responds with a 4-bet. Here is a quick look at the chart for that situation from the Small Blind's perspective:

Modern Poker Strategy

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Green represents call (36%), orange represents raise (26%), and blue (38%) represents fold.

POSTFLOP STRATEGY

Single Raised Pots

Single raised pots (SRP) are those that happen when a player open-raises and another player calls. These pots can also occur between multiple players, also known as multiway pots.

For example, if the Hijack player opens and you call in the Big Blind, that's a single-raised pot. If the Hijack opens, the Cutoff calls, and you call in the Big Blind, that's a multiway single-raised pot.

If the Hijack opens, and the Cutoff 3-bets (raises), that pot is no longer a single-raised pot.

As Preflop Raiser (IP and OOP)

Playing as the preflop raiser gives you a significant advantage. In most cases, you will have the stronger range going into the flop.

Because your opponent only called your raise preflop, you can often remove—or at least significantly discount—the strongest hands from their range. In general, the preflop caller's range will consist of medium-strength hands and worse.

A solid opponent will rarely flat hands like AA, KK, QQ, or AK. These hands almost always go into their 3-betting range, with only a few exceptions—such as AK offsuit from the Big Blind against an

Modern Poker Strategy

Under the Gun opener. As the preflop raiser, however, you can still have all of these premium hands in your range.

This gives you a range and equity advantage on most flops, whether you are in position (IP) or out of position (OOP). That strategic edge creates opportunities to apply pressure through aggressive continuation betting.

A continuation bet (c-bet) is when you bet as the aggressor from the previous street. For instance, if you raise preflop, your opponent calls, and you bet the flop, that flop bet is a c-bet—it continues the aggression you started preflop.

As Preflop Caller (IP and OOP)

Playing as the preflop caller in position is vastly different from playing as the preflop caller out of position.

When you call in position, you will have a much easier time reaching the turn and river, since you always act last. By contrast, when you call an open-raise out of position, you will have a much harder time getting to those later streets. This difference relates to a more advanced concept known as equity realization, which we will cover later in this book.

Here is a simple example to illustrate the difference:

Imagine you have a weak flush draw in position. You can easily call a bet on the flop, and if your opponent bets again on the turn, you will often still have the option to call. If you complete your draw, you will certainly have the chance to bet for value. And even

if you miss, you may still find an opportunity to bluff, since you act last.

Now imagine having that same weak flush draw out of position. Calling the turn becomes much tougher. And whether you hit your draw or not, your opponent gets to act last on the river. This makes both bluffing when you miss and value betting when you hit much more difficult.

Multiway Pots

Multiway pots are theoretically complex. In many ways, they remain an unconquered frontier—solver technology is only just beginning to evaluate these situations effectively, and even then, the results are still imperfect.

Solvers take hundreds of times longer to calculate optimal strategies in multiway pots compared to heads-up pots. Even among top-level players, there is some skepticism about the reliability of solver outputs in these situations.

That said, multiway pots are very common, especially in live poker. They also present a huge money-making opportunity, since most players have little understanding of how to play these spots correctly.

Let's run through a few rules of thumb to help guide your play in multiway pots:

1. Defend your Big Blind tighter in multiway pots

Modern Poker Strategy

Hands like Q9 offsuit, J8 offsuit, A7 offsuit, and 84 suited may be reasonable to defend from the Big Blind against a late-position open in a heads-up pot.

However, these same hands become much less appealing when facing an open raise and one or more callers. In multiway pots, it is harder to realize your equity, and you are much more likely to be dominated—a situation that leads to reverse implied odds, which we will discuss later in this book.

2. Check often when OOP vs. two or more players postflop

Let's say you open-raise from early position and both the Cutoff and Button call.

The flop comes J♣ 8♦ 6♥.

Hands such as AJ, KJ, or QJ often make better check-calls than bets. Not only because you are more likely to be up against a better hand like 88 or 66, but also because checking helps protect the rest of your range. By checking with strong hands occasionally, your opponents will have a harder time putting you on a specific hand. They will not know if you are checking with something like AK or a top pair like AJ.

Your very strong hands—such as JJ, 88, and 66—make excellent check-raise candidates as the original raiser from early position. And if you are up against a particularly splashy opponent, you can even consider check-raising hands like AJ or QQ on this flop, aiming to build a big pot against hands like JT.

3. Lean towards bluffing with high-equity draws in multiway pots

Your overall betting frequency should decrease significantly in multiway pots. This means you will be value betting less often and bluffing less often as well.

If you do choose to bluff, you need to be very selective. The best bluffing hands in multiway spots are combo draws, strong flush draws, and open-ended straight draws with overcards.

When you are out of position against multiple players, even strong draws should be checked a fair amount of the time. If you face a bet, you can then consider check-raising with those strong draws as a way to apply pressure and regain initiative.

3-bet Pots

3-bet pots can easily make or break your sessions. These bloated pots occur when one player raises and another player re-raises preflop.

For example, suppose your opponent raises to \$10 preflop, and you 3-bet to \$30 from the Cutoff. If your opponent calls, the hand proceeds as a 3-bet pot.

3-bet Pots As Preflop Raiser (IP and OOP)

Just like in single-raised pots, the last aggressor—in this case, the 3-bettor—usually has the strongest range on the flop.

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The reasoning is the same: the 3-bettor can still have all the super-premium hands like AA, KK, QQ, and AK. Meanwhile, the player who just called the 3-bet will usually not have those hands, since they would often 4-bet with them instead.

As a result, the 3-bettor typically holds a range advantage and should c-bet frequently on the flop. This puts immediate pressure on the caller, who is often working with a more capped and medium-strength range.

A capped range is a range that contains no (or very few) strong hands.

For example, let's say you 3-bet preflop, your opponent calls, and the flop comes A♦ K♠ 2♣ with no flush draw possible. Flops with no flush draw are referred to as rainbow.

On a board like this, the 3-bettor should c-bet almost 100% of the time, especially when in position. This flop heavily favors the 3-bettor's range, which includes all the strongest hands, while the caller's range is often capped and weighted toward medium-strength hands.

To illustrate this concept more clearly, let's look at a couple of preflop range charts. The first chart shows the Button's 3-bet range when facing an open-raise from the Cutoff:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Green represents a call (2%), orange represents a 3-bet (14%), and blue (84%) represents a fold.

Note that this range is slightly more aggressive than some others you may encounter. It accounts for the impact of rake at

Modern Poker Strategy

stakes like 500nl and lower in online games, where increased preflop aggression helps to avoid playing small, rake-heavy pots.

Consider how good that A♦ K♠ 2♣ flop is for this range. The 3-bettor can have AA, KK, AK, and even A2 suited on rare occasions. On top of that, there is a wide selection of strong top pairs in the range, including AQ and AJ.

As the 3-bettor, you can leverage this range advantage by c-betting aggressively—not only with hands that hit the flop, but also with hands that missed, knowing your opponent's range is capped and vulnerable.

Now let's take a look at the range the Cutoff would use to call the 3-bet:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

The Cutoff's calling range makes far fewer super strong hands on the A♦ K♠ 2♣ flop. While there are a few top pairs like A7 suited and medium pairs like KQ suited, much of the range consists of middling hands or complete misses, such as 87 suited, 77, and marginal draws like QT suited or 54 suited.

Modern Poker Strategy

In this example, the Button has what is known as a nut advantage, meaning more combinations of the strongest hands. The Button also has a range advantage, with higher overall equity, and a positional advantage by acting last.

These three factors (nut advantage, range advantage, and position) create a strong incentive for the Button to play aggressively on the flop. If you find yourself in a spot like this, you should often c-bet with most or all of your range.

3-Bet Pots As Preflop Caller (IP and OOP)

As the preflop caller, you are at a disadvantage on the flop.

Here is an important distinction to keep in mind when playing as the caller, depending on whether you are in or out of position:

- In position: You should play passively against aggression—for example, by just calling with your strongest hands.
- Out of position: You should often respond to aggression with aggression—by raising with your strongest hands rather than calling.

These strategic guidelines are rooted in several concepts explained throughout this book. One of them is stack-to-pot ratio, which was covered earlier. Others, which are explored in the Advanced Concepts section, include equity realization, nut advantage, board coverage, and balance.

Even though you are at a structural disadvantage as the 3-bet caller, there are a few tactical adjustments you can make to help level the playing field:

1. Check-raising aggressively when you're out of position.

Playing passively when out of position in a 3-bet pot makes your opponent's life way too easy.

When you flop a draw or a strong top pair as the out-of-position 3-bet caller, you should check-raise at a relatively high frequency. This is in addition to check-raising with very strong hands like two pair and better.

2. When you're in position but the flop favors your opponent's range, just call with strong hands

Imagine you raise from the Button, the Small Blind 3-bets, and you call with 7♠ 7♣.

The flop comes A♠ Q♦ 7♥.

The Small Blind should c-bet this flop at nearly a 100% frequency. As the in-position player, you should just call because it gives your opponent the chance to keep betting.

This board greatly favors your opponent's range, and for that reason, he should be playing very aggressively across all streets, with both value hands and bluffs. You can take advantage of that by slow-playing your strongest hands.

Modern Poker Strategy

If you raise right away, you risk scaring off his bluffs, and you may even force folds from decent hands like top pair.

ADVANCED CONCEPTS

10. Bluff-To-Value Ratio

The world's top players approach every street with balance in mind. A game theory optimal (GTO) approach to poker involves playing each street with a clear understanding of the bluff-to-value ratio in your betting ranges.

The bluff-to-value ratio refers to the number of bluff combinations versus the number of value combinations in a betting range. For example, if a player's river betting range contains 12 bluff combinations and 36 value combinations, the bluff-to-value ratio is 1 to 3.

Reminder: There are 12 combinations of every offsuit hand, 6 combinations of every pocket pair, and 4 combinations of every suited hand.

The theoretically optimal bluff-to-value ratio varies by street. Preflop should be your most bluff-heavy point in the hand, since your bluffing hands still retain a decent amount of equity. As the hand progresses, your betting range should become more value-heavy.

The size of your bet also plays a crucial role in determining the optimal bluff-to-value ratio. The larger your bet size, the more often you can profitably bluff. The smaller your bet size, the less often you should bluff.

Modern Poker Strategy

While these factors all interact in complex ways, the following general rules of thumb can serve as helpful guidelines.

General Bluff-to-Value Ratio Guidelines

- 2 to 1 bluffs to value on the flop
- 1 to 1 bluff to value on the turn
- 1 to 2 bluff to value on the river

When you bet using a theoretically optimal bluff-to-value ratio, you are not actively trying to exploit your opponent. You are simply allowing them the opportunity to make mistakes against a balanced strategy. This is known as passive exploitation.

But in practice, some opponents are so far from optimal themselves that you can increase your profit by deviating from GTO.

Here is an extreme example: Imagine you are playing against a rich calling station who rarely folds any pair after the flop. If you continue betting with a perfectly balanced range, you are leaving money on the table. Instead, you should remove most or all of your bluffs and expand your value range to take advantage of their tendency to call too often.

Additionally, on many boards, it makes sense to bluff slightly less than the optimal ratio due to removal effects. When you hold potential bluffing hands, it becomes slightly more likely that your opponent has a strong hand, and slightly less likely when you hold value hands. Accounting for this subtle effect can make your bluffing strategy more precise.

11. Equity Realization

What is Equity Realization?

Equity realization is the percentage of the pot a hand can expect to win, based not just on its raw equity, but also on the many postflop variables that come into play.

In other words, it is your equity after accounting for how often you reach showdown, get bluffed, bluff your opponent, and so on. You could argue that realized equity is a hand's true equity—the portion of the pot you can reasonably expect to claim after factoring in all situational dynamics.

For example, let's say your hand has 40% raw equity against your opponent's range preflop.

Raw equity is the chance your hand will win if you reach showdown. Those equity calculating tools used earlier in this book calculate raw equity.

After accounting for the postflop factors you are about to explore, you estimate that your hand will realize only 75% of that raw equity:

$$\text{Equity realized} = .75 * 40\% = 30\%$$

In other words, your hand will win three-quarters as often as the raw equity might suggest.

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Keep in mind that calculating a hand's exact realized equity is nearly impossible. The best you can do, especially in-game, is to make a solid estimate based on your experience, the board texture, and your opponent's tendencies.

Understanding equity realization will help you make more profitable decisions by avoiding negative expected value (EV) calls, whether preflop or postflop, that look good on the surface but fail to win often enough in practice.

How to Estimate How Much Equity Your Hand Will Realize

Your hands will realize more equity when you are in position and less equity when you are out of position.

When you are in position, you act last on every street. This allows you to make more informed and more accurate decisions. You can bluff and value bet more effectively, since you have the benefit of seeing what your opponent does before you act.

As a result, you realize a greater share of your hand's equity compared to when you are out of position.

1. Position

Your hands will realize more equity when you are in position and less equity when you are out of position.

When in position, you get to act last on every street and thus can make more informed and more accurate decisions. This means you'll be able to bluff and value bet very efficiently, as you will have

one more round of information than your opponent. Consequently, you realize more equity.

2. Playability

There are three general rules for a hand's playability as it relates to equity realization:

- The stronger a hand is, the more equity it will realize.
- The more connected your two cards are, the more equity your hand will realize.
- Suited hands realize significantly more equity than their offsuit counterparts.

The first rule is fairly intuitive. When you have a strong hand, such as AA or AK suited, you will reach showdown more frequently and therefore realize your equity more reliably.

The second and third rules relate to how often a hand can flop something with decent equity. The more connected and/or suited your cards are, the more likely it is that you will make a straight, flush, open-ended straight draw, gutshot, flush draw, or even a backdoor draw.

When your hand connects with the board in one of these ways, you are more likely to continue in the hand, see later streets, and ultimately realize more of your equity.

Modern Poker Strategy

For example, you can see below how often 76 suited flops something meaningful compared to its offsuit counterpart:

Suited vs Ofsuit

Comparison to Determine Equity Realization



Hand has hit 62.4% of the time

>=quads	0.03%
full house	0.09%
flush	0.82%
straight	1.29%
3 of a kind	1.35%
two pair	2.02%
overpair	0%
top pair	3.67%
pp below tp	0%
middle pair	15.0%
weak pair	10.3%
ace high	0%
no made hand	65.4%
flushdr.(2 card)	10.9%
nut fd (1 card)	0%
OESD	9.60%
gutshot	16.6%
overcards	2.52%
flushdraw+pair	1.68%
flushdr.+oesd	1.24%
flushdr.+gutsh.	2.11%
oesd+pair	1.47%
gutshot+pair	2.94%
gutshot+overc.	1.13%



Hand has hit 55.9% of the time

>=quads	0.01%
full house	0.09%
flush	0%
straight	1.31%
3 of a kind	1.35%
two pair	2.02%
overpair	0%
top pair	3.67%
pp below tp	0%
middle pair	15.0%
weak pair	10.3%
ace high	0%
no made hand	66.3%
flushdr.(2 card)	0%
nut fd (1 card)	0%
OESD	9.71%
gutshot	16.8%
overcards	2.53%
flushdraw+pair	0.56%
flushdr.+oesd	0.27%
flushdr.+gutsh.	0.45%
oesd+pair	1.47%
gutshot+pair	2.94%
gutshot+overc.	1.14%

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76s hits the flop 62.4% of the time while 7♥ 6♣ (offsuit) hits the flop 55.9% of the time – a difference of 6.5 percentage points.

This gap exists because 7♠ 6♠ will flop a flush draw much more often, and it will occasionally flop a made flush. Those extra times you flop something allow you to realize more equity with the suited version of 76.

3. Stack Depth

The general rule of thumb is that the **higher the stack-to-pot ratio (SPR), the more equity the in-position player will realize.** Conversely, the out-of-position player tends to realize less equity as the SPR increases.

Additionally, suited and connected hands tend to realize more equity when the SPR is high, because they are better equipped to make strong hands and win larger pots when they do.

4. Range Advantage

The player with the stronger range tends to realize more equity, since they can apply more pressure with the weaker parts of their range. This increased aggression often forces the opponent to fold hands that still have some showdown value.

For example, when defending your Big Blind, you are likely to realize more equity against a Button open than against an Under the Gun open. The Button's range is wider and contains more weak hands, which gives you more opportunities to apply pressure and win the pot.

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5. Skill

There are two key components to how skill affects equity realization:

1. Your opponent's skill level.

This comes down to how frequently and effectively your opponent applies pressure on the flop, turn, and river. For instance, if your opponent does not c-bet often enough on the flop, you will get to see more turns and rivers—allowing you to realize more equity than you would against an aggressive opponent who c-bets at a high frequency.

2. Your skill relative to your opponent's.

If you consistently know when to call, when to fold, and when to raise, you will realize more of your hand's potential equity. But if you make mistakes in those areas, your equity realization will suffer.

It also helps to understand how to exploit your opponents. Knowing the correct theoretical decisions is important, but being able to adjust based on your opponent's tendencies—and implement effective counter-strategies—will help you realize significantly more equity than if you played a purely balanced, GTO-based game.

12. Equity Denial

What is Equity Denial?

Equity denial occurs when you prevent an opponent from realizing their equity by forcing them to fold before showdown. For example, if you make your opponent fold a hand that had 30% equity to win the pot, you have successfully denied them that 30%.

Equity denial is most impactful preflop, which is one of the key reasons why limping (just calling the big blind preflop) should generally be avoided. When you limp, you give up the opportunity to win the pot outright and allow your opponents to realize their equity more easily.

Although this concept may sound similar to bluffing—and even overlaps with it—they are not the same.

Let's take a look at an example to illustrate equity denial in action:

Online \$0.50/\$1. 6-Handed. Effective Stacks \$100.00.

Hero is in MP with 4♥ 4♣

Under The Gun folds. Hero raises to \$2.2. 3 players fold. Villain calls from the Big Blind.

Flop (\$4.7): 5♣ 5♦ 3♦

Villain checks. Hero bets \$2. Villain folds K♥ 8♥

In this case, it is not right to call this a bluff by Hero because he didn't force a better hand (one with higher equity) to fold.

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What Hero's c-bet did do, though, was prevent the Villain from realizing his equity.

This is important for his specific hand because on many turns, any diamond (except the 4♦) or high card, he will likely be forced to fold versus a bet.

So, Hero's decision to c-bet with this hand prevented 3 bad outcomes:

1. Villain hitting a King or 8, which happens on 12% of turn cards.
2. Villain bluffing Hero out of the pot on a scary turn card (any non-4 diamond or scary high card).
3. Hero calls Villain's bluff on the turn, but is forced to fold to a final bluff on the river.

Equity denial is an essential concept for any poker player to understand.

13. Implied Odds

What Are Implied Odds?

Implied odds refer to the amount of money you expect to win on future streets if you hit one of your outs. This concept, when used alongside **pot odds**, helps you determine whether calling a bet with a draw is profitable.

If you believe you will win more money from your opponent after hitting your draw, then you have **good implied odds**. On the other hand, if you think your opponent will shut down and stop putting money in the pot, you have **little or no implied odds**.

How do implied odds work?

Imagine you're playing a \$1/\$2 cash game and you have K♥ Q♥ on the turn in position. The board is A♥ 6♦ 2♠ 9♥ — giving you the nut flush draw — and your opponent bets \$15 into a \$20 pot.

However, with only one card to come, your flush draw has roughly 20% equity, so if you only consider the current pot, calling would be a mistake.

This is where implied odds become important.

Here is the formula for calculating how much you would need to win on the river to justify calling on the turn:

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HOW TO CALCULATE IMPLIED ODDS NEEDED VS. BET STEP 1: FILL OUT FORMULA

$$\frac{\text{AMOUNT TO CALL } \$15}{\text{OPPONENT'S BET } \$15 + \text{POT SIZE } \$20 + \text{AMOUNT TO CALL (AGAIN) } \$15 + \text{WHAT YOU WILL NEED TO WIN ON RIVER } \$X} = \text{YOUR HAND'S EQUITY (EXPRESSED AS A DECIMAL) } 0.2$$

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You may notice that this formula looks very similar to the one used for calculating pot odds. The only differences are the added “X” in the denominator—representing the extra money you hope to win—and the use of your hand’s actual equity on the right-hand side of the equation.

Now, let’s solve for X:

HOW TO CALCULATE IMPLIED ODDS NEEDED VS. BET STEP 2: SOLVE FOR 'X'

$$\frac{\$15}{\$15 + \$20 + \$15 + \$X} = 0.2$$

$$\frac{\$15}{\$50 + \$X} = 0.2$$

$$0.2 * 50 + 0.2 * X = \$15$$

$$0.2 * X = \$5$$

$$X = \$25$$

Note: Don't worry—no one is doing complex calculations like this at the table. Even top pros just estimate. But walking through the formula now is a helpful exercise that will strengthen your in-game intuition.

In this example, when you hit the flush on the river with K♥ Q♥, you will need to win more than \$25 to make your turn call

Modern Poker Strategy

profitable. Since the pot is already \$50, you would only need to extract a half-pot bet on the river, on average.

That outcome seems quite reasonable, especially considering the potential to win a much larger pot in situations like flush over flush. Therefore, calling the turn in this hand is the correct play.

But **implied odds** have an evil twin known as **reverse implied odds**.

14. Reverse Implied Odds

What Are Reverse Implied Odds?

Reverse implied odds are the amount of money you may lose on future streets after calling a bet. Like implied odds, reverse implied odds are an extension of the concept of pot odds.

As the name suggests, reverse implied odds are the opposite of implied odds. Instead of focusing on how much you might win after hitting your hand, reverse implied odds highlight how much you might lose, especially when your draw or made hand ends up second-best.

Reverse Implied Odds Example

You're in a \$1/\$2 game with \$500 effective stacks.

You have 6♥ 4♥ on the turn with the board reading A♠ J♦ 7♥ 2♥. Four players are in the hand, and one of them bets \$75 into a \$100 pot. Both of the other players call, and the action is on you.

It will cost you \$75 to call to win a \$325 pot, which means you need 18.75% equity for calling to show an immediate profit.

You will hit a flush on the river 19.5% of the time, so calling must be profitable, right?

Not necessarily. With three other players in the hand, one of your opponents may have a superior flush draw. If that is the case and a heart falls on the river, you will almost certainly lose at least another bet. **Reverse implied odds refer to those potential losses.**

The takeaway from these past two sections is this:

- Implied odds can turn a losing call into a profitable one.
- Reverse implied odds can turn a winning call into a losing one.

Why Do Reverse Implied Odds Matter?

Understanding reverse implied odds can help you construct your ranges in more profitable and resilient ways. Let's bring this concept into the practical realm with a more detailed hand example.

Say you hold the J♦ 5♦ after defending from the Big Blind against the Button raise. The flop comes T♥ 9♣ 5♥. You check, and the Button makes a 66% pot-sized c-bet.

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Consider what will happen if a Jack comes on the turn to give you two pair:

- On any Jack turn, both KQ and 87 will become straights.
- Should the turn fall the J♥, all of the flush draws in your opponent's range will complete as well.

Because of these potential nightmare scenarios, you would be correct to say that this J♦ 5♦ suffers from some reverse implied odds here.

You might still justify calling in this scenario. After all, you have a pair, and it's just one flop bet. But reverse implied odds should at least give you pause.

There's something interesting that happens in situations like this: you may actually be better off calling with weaker hands, **especially those that don't carry the same reverse implied odds risk.**

For example, 5♦ 3♦ is a much better calling hand than J♦ 5♦ in this scenario, despite being the same pair with a lower kicker. If you hit two pair on a 3 turn, no straights complete, and your hand is much more disguised. You have the same issue as before on the flush-completing 3♥, specifically, your outs are cleaner, and you may even have some implied odds when you improve.

15. Minimum Defense Frequency

Minimum Defense Frequency (MDF) refers to the portion of your range with which you must continue (either by calling or raising) when facing a bet, in order to avoid being exploited by bluffs.

In other words, MDF tells you the minimum percentage of time you must defend against a bet to prevent your opponent from profiting by bluffing you every time.

The formula to calculate MDF is straightforward:

- $\text{MDF} = \text{pot size} / (\text{pot size} + \text{bet size})$
- Then, multiply the result by 100 to convert it into a percentage.

While this formula is not perfectly accurate when there are still cards to come or when ranges are asymmetrical, it serves as a solid baseline—especially for river situations or simplified strategic analysis.

Let's go through an example:

Online \$1/\$2. 6-Handed. Effective Stacks \$200.

Hero is dealt J♥ T♥ on the Button

Under The Gun folds. MP raises to \$5. Cutoff folds. Hero calls. 2 folds

Flop (\$13): T♠ 9♥ 3♠

MP bets \$8.5. Hero calls

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Turn (\$30): 6♦

MP bets \$22.5. Hero calls

River (\$75): A♥

MP bets \$37.5. Hero...?

In this spot, Villain is risking \$37.5 to win a pot of \$75. Let’s plug that into the MDF formula:

$$\$75 / (\$75 + \$37.5) = .67$$

The minimum defense frequency in this spot is 67%. This means that if Villain were bluffing, the bet would need to force a fold at least 33% of the time to break even. In order to prevent Villain from profitably bluffing with any two cards, Hero must defend more than 33% of the time.

For quick reference, here is a table showing the minimum defense frequency for some of the most common bet sizes:

Bet Size as % of Pot	MDF
100	50%
75	57%
66	60%
50	67%



Why Does Minimum Defense Frequency Matter?

This concept is especially important on the river. Since there are no more cards to come, hands either have showdown value or zero equity. In these spots, minimum defense frequency helps you determine whether a bluff is profitable and how often your opponent's bet must succeed to make bluffing worthwhile.

In practice, MDF is not something most players calculate at the table, even top professionals. However, it remains a foundational concept that shapes many advanced strategies behind the scenes.

Understanding minimum defense frequency helps you construct ranges that are more resilient and less exploitable. It also gives you a clearer sense of when your opponent's aggression is likely to be profitable, and when it is not.

16 & 17. Blockers and Unblockers

What Are Blockers (And Unblockers)?

A blocker is a card held by a player that makes it impossible (or less likely) that an opponent has a hand that includes that card (or a card of the same rank). Also known as card removal or combinatorics, blockers are a fundamental concept in poker game theory.

For example, if you hold $A\spadesuit J\heartsuit$ and the board reads $Q\clubsuit 8\clubsuit 6\clubsuit 5\heartsuit 6\diamondsuit$, your opponent(s) can't have the ace-high flush as you hold the $A\clubsuit$ blocker. Similarly, if you hold $9\spadesuit 9\diamondsuit$ and the board reads $T\spadesuit 8\heartsuit$

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7♦ Q♠ A♠, it is significantly less likely that your opponent has a straight as you block half of the possible combinations of 9-6 and J-9.

When a hand is said to have unblockers, it refers to holding a card that does not lower the probability that an opponent has a certain hand. In other words, an unblocker is a card that makes hands that don't contain that card more likely.

For example, if you hold 7♥ 7♣ and the board reads 8♦ 6♥ 5♦ Q♣ K♠, your hand blocks the possible straights while also unblocking the missed flush draw, since you are not holding any diamonds.

Why Do Blockers and Unblockers Matter?

Poker is a game of small edges, and the edge you gain by using blockers effectively can make a meaningful difference to your long-term win rate.

Blockers and unblockers are especially useful in a few key scenarios:

- Deciding whether to bluff, based on whether your hand blocks the types of hands your opponent would call with and unblocks the hands that would fold.
- Deciding whether to bluff-catch, based on whether your hand blocks strong value hands and unblocks hands your opponent might be bluffing with.

The most important thing to remember is this: **do not overvalue blockers**. Many players fall into the trap of overthinking blocker

logic and lose sight of more important context—such as bet sizing, player tendencies, or board texture.

Blockers and unblockers are a useful concept, but they are just one small piece of the puzzle.

18. Range Advantage

What Is Range Advantage?

The player whose range has the most equity has a range advantage.

For example, let's examine a common situation: a Hijack open (RFI) with a typical 23% range, and a Big Blind defend. We'll begin by looking at the Hijack's opening range:

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AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Below is a look at a typical Big Blind defend range against a Hijack open. In this example, the Big Blind is folding 66%, calling 27%, and 3-betting 7% of hands:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

These two ranges are placed into matrices using the Equilab poker calculator. You can input the ranges against each other and see how they perform in terms of overall equity:

Modern Poker Strategy

Hand range						Equity
					44+,A2s+,K9s+,Q9s+,J9s+,T8s+,97s+,87s,76s,65s,ATo-	59.09%
					TT-22,AQs-A2s,K2s+,Q2s+,J3s+,T4s+,95s+,85s+,75s+,J	40.91%

The Hijack RFI range is entered in the top field, while the Big Blind calling range goes in the bottom field. In this matchup, the Hijack holds 59% equity, which means they have a significant range advantage.

Why Does Range Advantage Matter?

Range advantage matters because, as your equity edge increases, you can bet profitably at a higher frequency. When the advantage is large enough, it enables you to use a high-frequency betting strategy that puts real pressure on your opponent's range.

For example, let's say I raise from the Button, and you call in the Big Blind. I begin the hand with a range advantage, because my preflop range is stronger—and that advantage almost always carries over to the flop.

A typical Button RFI range will have around 54% equity against a standard Big Blind defend range.

On some boards, my range advantage will increase, such as:

- $A\clubsuit K\heartsuit Q\spadesuit > 56\%$
- $Q\heartsuit J\clubsuit T\heartsuit > 56\%$
- $K\heartsuit Q\clubsuit T\clubsuit > 56\%$

- K♣ J♦ 4♥ >55%
- Q♥ T♣ 3♦ >55%

On other boards, your range will pick up some equity, though it will rarely be enough to take the lead. Here are a few such boards:

- 9♣ 7♠ 5♥ <54%
- 7♦ 5♠ 5♥ <54%
- 8♠ 7♦ 6♣ <54%
- 7♥ 6♣ 4♦ <52%
- 6♠ 4♠ 3♦ <51%

The pattern is pretty clear: **higher boards tend to favor the Button's range, while lower boards often favor the Big Blind's range.**

Significant range advantages are also common when the Small Blind or Big Blind 3-bets, and the initial raiser calls. In these situations, the 3-bettor usually has the range advantage and is often correct to use an aggressive, high-frequency c-betting strategy.

However, the preflop aggressor does not always have the range advantage.

When a player raises preflop and gets cold-called by someone in position, the cold-caller will often hold the range advantage. This is because a cold-call—especially with players left to act—typically indicates a strong and tight range.

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While the preflop raiser will still have more super-premium hands like JJ+ and AK, those strong combos may be outweighed by the many weaker or missed hands also included in their range.

19. Nut Advantage

What is Nut Advantage?

A player has a nut advantage when they hold more combinations of super strong hands (typically two-pair or better) relative to their range, compared to their opponent.

Let's revisit an example used earlier in this book:

Let's say you open raise from the Hijack, the Big Blind calls, and the flop comes A♣ K♥ 2♠.

The Hijack has the nut advantage in this spot because they have AA, KK, and AK in their range, while both players may have A2 suited and 22. This gives the Hijack many more combinations of natted hands than the Big Blind on this board.

Why Does Nut Advantage Matter?

Nut advantage is important because it directly impacts how big a player can bet or raise in a given situation.

When a player has the nut advantage, they can justify using larger bet sizes. This allows them to extract maximum value when holding a strong hand, and to apply maximum pressure when bluffing—since they can credibly represent more strong hands.

Let’s say you raise from the Button, and I call in the Big Blind.
The flop comes A♠ K♦ 5♠.



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In this situation, you have every combination of AK, KK, and AA, while I have none. Because of that, you should use a very large bet size—for example, Lucid’s preferred size here is a 133% overbet—to give yourself a real chance to stack me by the river.

My hands are tied. I can either call you down with a reasonable range, or I can over-fold, which allows you to bluff profitably. In other words, I’m stuck choosing between getting stacked often or getting bluffed often.

The preflop aggressor does not always have the nut advantage. If the board in the example above were low and connected, the Big Blind would often hold the nut advantage instead.

Unsurprisingly, these are the same types of boards that tended to favor the Big Blind in the range advantage section:

- 9♣ 7♠ 5♥
- 7♦ 5♠ 5♥
- 8♠ 7♦ 6♣
- 7♥ 6♣ 4♦
- 6♠ 4♠ 3♦

There is a natural overlap between nut advantage and range advantage, because nut advantage directly influences a range’s overall equity. When your range includes more natted hands with 80% or greater equity, those outliers increase the total equity of your range.

On low, connected boards, the Button should adopt a less aggressive c-betting strategy. Otherwise, they risk getting

exploited by frequent check-raises from the Big Blind, who will often hold strong hands in these situations.

When both players have a similar number of nut combinations, neither player has a clear nut advantage, and there is no need to adjust from standard strategies.

20. Board Coverage

What Does Board Coverage Mean?

Board coverage refers to how well a range of hands will interact with all of the potential flops, turns, and rivers.

For example, if you raise with a range containing only high pairs and high-card hands (AA, AK, KK, etc.), your range has bad board coverage. Such a range will never hit low flops and medium flops (such as 8♥ 7♣ 6♠ or 6♦ 4♠ 2♥). In this context, "miss" means that your range rarely contains natted hands, like sets or two pair, on those boards.

By contrast, if you raise with a range that includes high pairs, high-card hands, suited connectors, and low pocket pairs, your range has much better board coverage. At least some portion of your range will connect with every type of flop. Whether it comes A♠ A♣ K♠ or 6♥ 5♥ 4♣, you're covered in the natted hands department.

Why Does Board Coverage Matter?

Modern Poker Strategy

Board coverage is a very important concept from a theoretical standpoint. When your range lacks certain strong hands on specific boards, it creates opportunities for your opponent to exploit you.

In other words, if your range never includes strong hands in certain spots, even just a few, you become exploitable.

Why does this matter? Because a savvy opponent would recognize that you are capped and would use larger bet sizes with more value hands and bluffs. Knowing you never have a super strong hand to call down with, they can bluff more often, extract thinner value, and increase the expected value of their entire range against you.



To deepen your understanding of poker and build on the principles you've learned in this book, consider joining the Upswing Poker Lab. It's a comprehensive training platform designed to help you sharpen your skills and take your game to the next level.

About the Authors

Upswing Poker's mission is to provide poker players of all skill levels with the strategies, tactics, and tools they need to accomplish their goals.

Founded by Doug Polk, Ryan Fee, and Matt Colletta in 2015 with the goal of helping poker players get better at the game they love, Upswing Poker has grown from a blog offering free preflop charts to the world's biggest poker training company with courses and tools for every popular game type.

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