

# The Intelligent Gambler™

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## Publisher's Corner

by Chuck Weinstock

It seems like only yesterday that we had the idea to send out a newsletter written especially for ConJelCo's customers. ConJelCo customers tend to have fun when they gamble, and yet treat the subject seriously. They want to know how to get the largest edge out of beatable games, and the most fun at the least cost out of those unbeatable games they decide to play. We decided to name our newsletter *The Intelligent Gambler* to reflect this attitude.

Nearly four years later you are holding the eighth issue, in your hands. Along the way you've read articles by some of the top gambling authors writing today. This issue is no exception with articles by Mike Caro, Bob Ciaffone, Nolan Dalla, Lou Krieger, Jean Scott, and Bill Zender.

The issue is a little poker-centric, but I think that are non-poker playing readers will find plenty to interest them as well.

## Distribution of This Issue

After our experiment of net distribution of the last issue, we decided to go back to hard-copy distribution to all readers who are on our mailing list and who we've heard from since mid-1994. A PDF version of this issue will also be available on our web site at [www.conjelco.com](http://www.conjelco.com).

If the last time we've heard from you was in 1994, you'll be dropped from our mailing list unless we hear that you are still interested in receiving *The Intelligent Gambler*.

## The Gambling Forum

We'd like to call your attention to a new site on the World Wide Web. Two Plus Two Publishing, publishers of top gambling books by David Sklansky, Mason Malmuth, Ray Zee, and Lynne Loomis, is on the web at [www.twoplustwo.com](http://www.twoplustwo.com).

Why are we telling you this? Because the site provides lots of useful information for the intelligent gambler. In addition to complete information about their books (including excerpts), they

regularly contribute original essays covering all aspects of gambling. In addition to original essays the site is the home of *The Gambling Forum*, an on-line discussion group that you can participate in. David Sklansky, Mason Malmuth, Ray Zee and other luminaries of the gambling community join in the discussion regularly.

Oh yes, there is one final reason we're telling you about the Two Plus Two web site. ConJelCo maintains it, and we're rather proud of both the content and the design.

## A Holiday Gift from ConJelCo

Steve Jacobs (author of our *Percentage Hold'em*) and ConJelCo would like to give you a video poker program as a holiday present. *Video Poker Freebie*, as we're calling it, can be configured to play nearly any video poker machine available today, including those with wild cards. As you play, *Video Poker Freebie* will tell you if you make mistakes and tell you the correct way to play a particular hand given a particular pay-off schedule. The software runs on Windows 3.1, OS/2, Windows 95, and Windows NT.

If you'd like *Video Poker Freebie*, ConJelCo will send you a copy for only the cost of distribution. *Video Poker Freebie* will be available after November 16th. If you have access to the Internet you can download a copy absolutely for free by going to URL <http://www.conjelco.com/vpfreebie.html>. If you would like to receive *Video Poker Freebie* on a 3.5" diskette, send us your check or money order for \$2.00 (U.S.), \$3.00 (Canada), \$4.00 (Europe) or \$5.00 (Elsewhere), payable in US dollars and drawn on a US bank. No phone or credit card orders please unless you are ordering other products as well. Orders for diskettes must be received by December 1, 1997. The online version will remain available indefinitely.

So what's the catch? There really isn't one. We're in the process of developing a commercial video poker program that we hope will take the gambling community by storm. We hope that you'll like *Video Poker Freebie* so much that you'll

consider the new product when it becomes available.

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An Exclusive Interview with Mike Caro  
*Editors note: in the last issue Mason Malmuth answered the question of whether a serious newcomer to poker is better off with stud or hold'em. For this issue I thought it would be interesting to get another leading figure in the poker communities thoughts on the same question and others.*

IG: You're a new player and you have decided to become fairly serious about poker. So, should you try to concentrate on seven-card stud or hold'em poker?

MC: You asked this question of Mason Malmuth in the last issue, and he made some excellent observations. This actually arises when I advise new players. First, let me point out that the choice might not be limited to seven-card stud or hold'em. There are areas of the country where hold'em is still little known. When I served as spokesperson for Canadian Mist whiskey, and we held charity tournaments in Minneapolis and Miami, we asked local players what the game should be. Few understood hold'em, and draw poker was the preferred game among those questioned, followed closely by seven-card stud.

That seems almost laughably alien to us—that draw poker would be a favored game—because we all seem to agree that it is a dinosaur. Dead as a doornail and petrified. Actually, draw was the staple of California public poker before hold'em and stud were finally legalized not too many years ago. Anyway, if draw is an alternative for you, then that might be the game you should start with. You can master many key concepts by playing draw poker and take these concepts with you into more sophisticated games.

If the choice is really limited to limit stud and limit hold'em, then I believe

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hold 'em is easier to teach a beginner. Because of the communal cards, there are simply fewer combinations of meaningfully different situations that arise in hold 'em. Additionally, a beginner doesn't have to interpret the cards exposed in other players' hands—something that can be quite difficult.

Nowadays, I advise players to learn hold 'em first. Where the most profit exists is another question. Getting a little off track here, I'll tell you a secret about professional poker players that they themselves don't know. Their main profit, sometimes all of it, comes from those rare games during their careers when the live one, the real producer, sits down and unloads a bundle. For most second-tier professionals, all the sessions between these paydays result in very little profit, no profit at all, or even slight losses. I know that's a daring assertion, worthy of challenge. Fine with me. Challenge it. But, I'm saying that among lifelong winning players, most are not day-in and day-out winners. They're just not stable enough to be. They need those unusual days when extremely weak players land at their tables with big money to lose.

I've already said that beginners should start with hold 'em, but seven-stud is fine, too. Of course, I teach that the most successful players are ones who can play all major forms of poker successfully. You never know where that weak player will decide to unload that million dollars, and you certainly need to be able to play the game he does when it happens. For that reason, the best specialists don't earn as much at poker as the best utility players.

Back to stud versus hold 'em. Hold 'em gives you more control over the outcome. Contrary to the complaints of some players, you won't be drawn out on as often in hold 'em as in stud. And, as I keep pointing out, there tend to be more medium-weak players in seven-card stud. This is not because weak players at first prefer stud (although perhaps they do), but because they can't survive hold 'em. If you have little clue what you're doing, it's easier to get lucky for a day or two in seven stud. Thus, weak stud players live the illusion of having a chance, although in the long run, they do not.

When hold 'em is new in town, that's the game you should play. Most players shifting from stud or other games to hold 'em have very poor feel for how to play, and for weeks or months these games can be very lucrative. However,

hold 'em games get worse and worse under these circumstances. The first reason is that the weak players who may like hold 'em run out of money and can't continue. The second is that the survivors figure out what they were doing wrong and stop doing it.

One other thing to consider is the rake. If your games are raked, rather than charged rent, and the rake is capped at a maximum, then seven-stud may have a slight advantage at the same limit. The pots tend to be larger in stud, mostly because of the extra betting round, so the rake may be less of a percentage penalty. However, many casinos charge less or have a lower cap in hold 'em. In that case, hold 'em wins the advantage on the rake factor.

Anyway, the answer to your question is hold 'em. That's the game a beginner should learn first, provided it's available to him. Stud is more complex, but novices make costlier mistakes in hold 'em. Even after you've mastered both games, usually choose to sit in the hold 'em game when opponents are weak in both games. Choose to sit in the stud game when the opponents seem average in either case. You'll make more money against average opponents in stud in the long run, although it may be more of a roller coaster ride, due to higher fluctuations in day-to-day profit. There is more of a gap between an average stud player and a great stud player than between an average limit hold 'em player and a great hold 'em player.

IG: What are (in order of importance) the three most important skills an average poker player should master in order to become a great player?

MC: Ask me tomorrow and I might give you a different answer, but here's how it seems to me right this minute.

If you want to become a great player, not just a good player or an excellent player, but a great player, then you need to understand people. That means understanding tells and human nature. I'll put that number one on my list. You'd be surprised how many astute students of the game spend most of their analytical energy trying to eke out an extra two cents worth of value. They use statistical and first-level strategic analysis while at the same time saying things or using body language or choosing an attitude which is costing them two dollars, ten dollars or even a hundred dollars or more on that very play. Since I've researched and written extensively on both statistics and psychology, maybe the skeptics will at least consider

the possibility that I may be right about this. It may be harder to accept from someone who is only interested in the psychological aspects of poker.

The reason most very good analytical minds undervalue tells and psychology in poker is that their brains don't walk the human interaction path comfortably. Getting them to grasp it is like explaining blue to blind person.

What should we put second on the list? Things you should master to be a great player. I'm thinking. Maybe it would be the ability not to become frustrated when the cards run bad and turn a \$2,352 loss into a \$4,903 loss. That's so hard to master, because when you tack that extra \$100 onto a \$9,400 loss, so that it becomes \$9,500, it doesn't feel any different. But at the end of the year, that \$100 matters exactly the same as any other \$100.

Third, I'll pick the ability to convey a likeable, but bewildering, image. Actually, this could be included under the first item. The more opponents are confused by you, the more they will waste mental energy and the more profits they will supply. The word likeable is key here, because if you simply confuse your opponents by being unfriendly and belligerent, you're no fun to pay off and your opponents may be motivated to play better. You need to make losing to you as painless as possible, and getting lucky and beating you as happy as possible. That way, opponents will continue to pursue bad hands against you specifically. Lose pots graciously, and remember that if you're a superior player you're supposed to get drawn out on, because you're the one who usually gets involved with the better hand. The higher percentage of hands that you lose are bad beats, the better you're playing and the more you'll earn.

That's my list. All of those things were psychological. That doesn't mean that the basics aren't critically important along the road to mastering poker. The basics, statistics, strategy, logic, and analysis without much regard to psychology are things everyone needs to learn. Probably first. That's why I spend so much time teaching them. But, your question was about what you need to master to become a great player. Those things are always going to be psychological, because there's not that much difference in terms of profit against typical opponents between an excellent non-psychological player and a perfect non-psychological player. But there's an enormous difference in profit between

an otherwise excellent player not using psychology and an excellent player using it well.

That's why many serious students of poker, lacking the right human insights, go up against players with seemingly weaker strategic and statistical skills and lose again and again and again. Out of frustration, they may decide to ignore psychology and stick to their game plan, but they are invariably brought under the spell of the masters. And even when they're not, they don't win nearly as much money against average opponents as they should. What you need to master to become a winning player are basic concepts and discipline. What you need to master to become a great player are psychology, psychology, and psychology. But I'm not sure about the order.

*Mike Caro is often regarded as today's foremost authority on poker strategy, psychology, and statistics. He is publicly known as "the Mad Genius of Poker" through his books, columns, videos, and seminars.*

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Preferential Shuffling: The Inside Scoop  
by Bill Zender

Lately the big "buzz" in the gambling periodicals, websites and newsgroups is the alleged wide spread "casinos cheating" in the game of twenty one through the use of preferential shuffling. I haven't read a gaming magazine, reviewed a web bulletin board or scanned a newsgroup thread that hasn't batted around preferential shuffling at least a dozen times over the last year. I just finished reading several threads on the newsgroup "rec.gambling.blackjack", where several "news-groupies" intend to take to the newly formed Federal Gaming Commission their claims (among many others) that the casinos throughout the country are illegally deceiving the public by employing preferential shuffling. They claim to have documented evidence to this effect.

Are casinos in New Jersey, Mississippi, Illinois, and Nevada actually cheating the average everyday customer so they may fatten their greedy little coffers? First, let's start by understanding what preferential shuffling is and how it could be used against the blackjack players.

What is Preferential Shuffling?

Simplified the term "preferential shuffling" refers to a casino's technique that allows the casinos to "count cards" on the players. When a player counts cards

he is keeping track of the types of cards that have been dealt from the deck as the game is being played. By identifying which cards are no longer in the deck the counter has an idea which cards remain in the now depleted subset of the original deck. If the remaining subset is rich in ten value cards and aces the counter knows he has a slight advantage. If the subset is not rich in ten the counter is playing either with a slight disadvantage or even with the house. The "card counter" can use this information to raise and lower his bets, and alter his strategy when playing each hand. Since Dr. Ed Thorp published, *Beat the Dealer*, every member of the general public has had available information which could allow them to turn the tables on the casinos. Are players the only casino combatants counting the cards?

What happens if the casino also counts cards? If the casino also counted they could shuffle the cards when the players has advantage, and they could keep dealing deeper into the deck when the house's advantage rises higher than normal. Usually the casinos instruct their dealers to deal cards until they have reached an established point in the deck. Once reaching that point the dealers will break the deck and shuffle. This established shuffle point occurs either after the dealer deals a certain number of hands, when a certain percentage of the deck is remaining, or when an indicator card (cut card) appears.

In all the previous examples the shuffle point, which is part of the casino's procedure, has been designated before the dealer pitches a card. However, when a dealer breaks the deck, not at a designated shuffle point, but because of other situations, the he is shuffling at the dealer's or the casino's preference, i.e., "preferential shuffling".

How Would a Casino Use Preferential Shuffling?

Is it true that casinos use preferential shuffling? When I started dealing blackjack in the 70's, casinos primarily used single and double deck games. It was at a time when card counting was "the new way" to beat the casinos, and most casino executives were naive to the "ins and outs" of card counting. "If a player was winning he must be counting cards", seemed to be the standard claim. Several times a night I would hear, "shuffle up", "break the deck", "deal two hand and shuffle", in retaliation to a player's winning streak, or a big bet placed late in the deck. The problem with these executives was most

of them didn't know card counting. They might know how to count down a deck, but they had no idea at what count the player should increase his bet, how the player should vary from basic strategy with the count, and other information they should know to properly evaluate a customer's ability. Many of the previously described "game protection measures" were not always implemented because of card counters, but because of gambling superstitions. I remember executives pulling "unlucky" dealers from the game before their breaks, and changing "unlucky" decks of cards after ten minutes on the table. Some casinos had the dealers, "deal the cards all the way out," in hopes of changing the flow of the cards.

My first experience with actual preferential shuffling occurred when I was dealing at a small "break in" casino. The lone player on my table was ahead several thousand dollars and the casino was nervous. As I was preparing to deal a third round from the deck I felt the pit manager kick me in the heel. I was surprised that he would kick me for no apparent reason but I kept dealing. As I was preparing to deal the next round I got kicked again, but this time it was much harder. I stopped dealing to grimace and shake off the pain. The pit manager leaned in to me and whispered in my ear, "that means shuffle you idiot!" I later found out the pit manager had taken classes on card counting. He was assigned to count down the deck on any big play and have the dealer shuffle on positive counts. This, of course, was done by kicking the dealer on the foot. Fortunately there were twelve tables and only one of them so I didn't get kicked that often.

Since "breaking in" I have witnessed other forms of preferential shuffling. Several casinos employed the tactic of shuffling the deck when a player bet three to four times his original wager. This was usually performed on hand held games, but I have known casinos to shuffle up shoe games as well. It was assumed the player increasing his bet did it based on the "rich" cards remaining in the deck. Usually all the casino accomplished was upsetting an unsuspecting player, not to mention the other players at the table.

Very rarely have I found a dealer that could count and deal at the same time. I used to practice counting while I was dealing and discovered I made too many errors. I accomplished this mathematical feat by keeping the count in my head and change the total when a

player busted out. I would then finish the hand, taking and paying, and as I picked up the cards I would finish counting the remaining cards on the table. If I had to hold a conversation with a player or I was interrupted for whatever reason I would use half dollars to mark the count in the chip tray. However, they were several occasions when I had to stop what I was doing because I took down a winning bet or forgot to pay a player. But if I could count and deal, doesn't every dealer?

I have only heard of a couple of casinos in the Las Vegas area that trained dealers to deal and count. These dealers would only count when placed on big games and it wasn't that often. I doubt if one in five hundred blackjack dealers in Nevada know how to deal and count at the same time. In almost all cases of preferential shuffling the counting is done by someone on the floor, not the dealer at the table.

Should Preferential Shuffling Be A Concern to Blackjack Players?

I believe that forms of preferential shuffling are used very rarely. When preferential shuffling occurs it will most likely appear in small casinos, and on tables where a player is winning a large amount of money. Smaller casinos have a greater motivation to get every edge possible on their games, especially when large wagers are involved. There are several reasons why preferential shuffling isn't being used by the casinos to any great extent;

- Casinos are now being operated in a more competitive market. The old adage, "for every customer we chase out two come in to replace him," doesn't happen anymore. The competition will take who you throw out, but won't give up any of the players they have. Casinos are very customer service conscious and go to great length to provide a comfortable atmosphere in which the customer can play.

- Casinos executives are more aware of how difficult it is to make a profit counting cards at blackjack. Because of the card counting slight advantage over the game of twenty one, it takes numerous hours of play for the counter to make a decent return on his bankroll. The casinos also understand not everyone is a card counter, and many that do won't noticeably hurt the casino's bottom line.

- Executives understand the importance of time and motion when dealing casino games. Many anti-counter measures, like dealing only half the cards in the

shoe and then shuffling, have been abandoned because they decrease the number of results on the table. Casinos know they can't make money while the dealers are shuffling the cards. The modern casino executive understands that his increase in profits due to the increase in results more than offsets any losses to a "herd" of card counters.

- Dealers are not trained to count and deal, or manipulate cards. They are trained to deal the games, to get out as many hands as possible without making mistakes, and through proper customer relations provide the players with an entertainment value for their buck. Floor supervisors, who could be counting down decks, are needed for more important functions like handling customers credit requests, sustaining proper table chip levels, and servicing the customers.

- Since most hand held games don't utilize a cut card to determined the shuffle point, preferential shuffling on double decks and single decks can be accomplished easier and without too much notice. The shoe game is a different situation. Breaking the shoe before the cut card comes out could create some unhappy customers. Twenty years ago 90% of all twenty one games in Nevada were hand held. Today, at least 80% are dealt from the shoe.

- Hold percentages in twenty one don't reflect the use of preferential shuffling. Hold percentage in Nevada vary between 12% to 14%. If preferential shuffling was wide spread as some have alleged the hold percentages should be at least 2% to 3% higher.

Future Concerns With Preferential Shuffling

Recently, Mikon Gaming has been testing an optical dealing shoe which reads the cards as they are being delivered on the table. After the cards are read by the shoe a computer determines if the players won or lost based on the cards they and the dealer were delivered. The computer is programmed so the dealer isn't required to peek under the hole card with an ace or ten showing. The computer informs the dealer when his first two cards are a "blackjack". At present, the entire package which includes optical shoe, computer, table and chip tray is quite expensive and I doubt if the casinos, at present, are prepared to spend money on this type of equipment.

However, there has been some talk about using the shoe separate. By combining the optical shoe, computer, and the card shuffling machine, every

casino could employ preferential shuffling on every active table. The shoe could be programmed to alert the dealer whenever the deck became "plus" after half the cards have been used. At that point the dealer would be required to "break" the shoe. By using shuffling machines, down time between decks would be kept at a minimum. The shuffling machine would eliminate the unnecessary loss in time and motion normally experienced when the cards are hand shuffled.

Breaking the shoe every time the deck became "rich" in tens and aces would make card counting obsolete and put all players at a definite disadvantage. Today, either wide spread or occasional casino use of preferential shuffling is something I think players don't need to worry about. Tomorrow, who knows?

*For a number of years, Bill Zender has run a "counter friendly" blackjack game at the Aladdin Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. He is also the author of the landmark Card Counting for the Casino Executive, which Arnold Snyder says is one of the must-read books on blackjack.*

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Beating a Loose Game  
by Bob Ciaffone

I think there are a lot of players that take a seat in a loose game, get a bad result, and then wonder how such a collection of weak players could ever get their money. To be sure, there is a greater luck factor concerning swings in a loose game, in that the fluctuations are likely to be bigger. The idea is when you beat the game, a good bit of the time, the result will be a huge win. But maybe another factor is also at work. Perhaps you are not playing in an optimum way to take advantage of what appears to be a very favorable gambling situation.

A typical reaction to playing in such a game is this thought process: "These fools are playing such garbage, I can and should play more hands, because I'll still have an overlay. How can you stay out of the pot on a reasonable hand, when you are getting such a good price to play?" This kind of thinking may be getting you into big trouble, depending on the character of the game.

There are actually two types of loose games; we'll call them "Type A" and "Type B." In a Type A game, few pots are being raised. As a result, a lot of people are entering the pots on marginal hands. There is a lot of five-way,

six-way, and even seven-way action. In such a game, you can lessen your values a little bit, and still be playing better hands than most of your opponents. Note that the two ingredients needed for playing drawing-type hands are both present. You can get in cheaply, and will be facing a large field, insuring a nice payoff if your ship comes in.

It is the Type B game where the problems arise. In this game, there are also a lot of players in the pot on their starting hands (good for drawing hands), but most of the pots are getting raised, and even reraised (very bad for drawing hands). A lot of players use the same style of play for both situations, when in fact our two scenarios are vastly different. In a Type B game, you must have great restraint in entering pots, because the entry fee is two or three times greater than normal. Naturally, most players have the good sense not to be making cold calls in raised and reraised pots. But it is easy to get trapped into paying an exorbitant entry fee if the payments are put on the installment plan. This is another area where poker resembles real life!

Perhaps this is an appropriate moment to discuss how we are using the term “drawing hand,” and why it is so important to be paying a cheap entry fee when holding one. Lets use a limit hold'em game as an example. Having the best hand before the flop is not necessarily mean you can win without improvement, or have a better chance than the other players to win the pot. A small pair must buy help to get the cheese. A pair of sixes is a higher-ranking hand than an A-Q, but in a multihanded pot the A-Q is much superior. A “drawing hand” is the way I describe any hand that must improve to win.

Let's discuss that pair of sixes a bit more. It is clearly a drawing hand, because even if nobody has a higher pair in the pocket, it will seldom win without improvement in multihanded raised pots. The extra money holds many of the other players in until the end of the deal; the chances are slim that nobody will be able to beat 6-6 at the finish. Even if a miracle happens and the sixes are good, you don't figure to be still in the pot to claim your winner. How can you call a bet at any point after the flop, when there are only two cards in the deck that will help your hand? To win a multihanded raised pot, you need a two-event parlay. First you must flop a set of sixes, and then you must have them hold up.

The odds on flopping a set are over seven to one against you. That set will get cracked about a quarter of the time. One thing you can depend on; if you flop a set and lose, it will cost you plenty.

I like to see the flop on pocket sixes, but cannot afford to pay through the nose to do it. The long-run odds say that in an unraised pot I need to win about a dozen half-bets just to break even. (We use the term “half-bet” because in a normal betting structure the bet will be twice as much –a full bet –later on in the deal). If I were guaranteed that it would only cost me one half-bet to play, I would take a chance. But if the pot is raised, it costs me two half-bets, and I now need to win a couple of dozen half-bets just to break even for the times I miss the flop or get a set cracked. This is much harder to do. If I had to call a raise cold, I have a clear fold. But if most of the pots are being raised or reraised, it is foolish to tell yourself, “Maybe I can sneak in for a single bet.”

The thinking on any drawing hand should be much the same as your thinking on our example hand of 6-6. To have an overlay, you must see the flop cheaply. This entails not calling a double bet before the flop. In a game where most pots are being raised, it means not falling for the “installment payment” trap. Fold for even a single bet if the pot will likely be raised behind you.

Note that what kinds of hands are raising the pot scarcely enters into your figuring. If you have a drawing hand, the fact that the raiser might have a trashy looking hand like ace-ten offsuit does not help you. Even if the raiser is a maniac with total junk, the fact remains that you need to help in order to win. It actually might be better for you if the raiser had a big pair, as then you figure to get paid off handsomely if you buy help on the flop.

As you can see, in a game where a lot of pots are being raised, you must resist your impulse to go with the flow. When the entry fee is a lot higher, you need a much better hand to play. A loose *wild* game calls for you to tighten up your starting requirements considerably. Otherwise, the overhead you pay to see the flop will be too much to overcome. The fact that there are a lot of other players in is helpful, but not helpful enough to overcome the high cost of seeing the flop. A smart poker player knows there is a huge difference between a loose passive game and a

loose wild game. Tighten up to beat the wild ones.

*Bob Ciaffone is a regular columnist for Card Player magazine and the author of several books on poker including Pot-Limit and No-Limit Poker, a book called “by far the best information on these games in print” by Mason Malmuth. This article is an adapted from Bob's latest book Improve Your Poker.*

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## Aggression

by Lou Krieger

A philosopher by inclination and a poker player by choice, Dennis Jones has often been quoted as saying: “I'd rather ask forgiveness than permission.” It's a terrific expression — an updated rephrasing of *Carpe Diem*, an old Latin maxim meaning “Seize the Day,” and one I wish I could have taken credit for. But credit belongs where it is due: to Dennis.

Not only does his catch-phrase hold true for a variety of endeavors, it is particularly pithy when applied to poker. If you've read much poker literature, you know that just about every credible authority recommends aggressive play. But how aggressive you should be, when you should be aggressive, and when you ought to play passively, are playing techniques worth revisiting every so often.

“I'd rather ask forgiveness than permission,” implies a willingness to throw oneself headlong into some gray and murky area where the rules of engagement are not quite clear, and the only certainties are “to get there first” and “possession is nine-tenths of the law.” Possessed of any common sense whatsoever, few of us are willing to run headlong into some vastly superior force regardless of how valorous or aggressive we might imagine ourselves to be.

Dennis' expression holds as true for poker as for life itself. In low-limit games, you'll find players at both extremes of the passive-aggressive spectrum. Some are timid regardless of the circumstances, while some are rocks on the order of Mt. Rushmore who won't come out swinging unless they hold the nuts. Still others are kamikazes who can't wait to gamble it up, firing raise after raise at the pot regardless of the cards they're holding. You'll even find such players in bigger games, but they're fewer and farther apart because those at the polar edges of the passive-aggressive bell curve are prone to go broke.

So if you'd rather ask forgiveness than permission, it is important to realize you can't play every hand aggressively. You have to pick your spots. Aggression has to be meted out selectively. Remember, it's "seize the day," not "seize every day." One of the most important steps in becoming a good player is learning which hands to play aggressively — and why.

If you're playing hold'em and are dealt a big pair before the flop, you already know you should raise, but do you know why? This is not a trick question, and the answer is obvious: to get more money in the pot. Plain and simple, if you've got what figures to be the best hand, getting more money in the pot produces a bigger reward when you win. On those occasions when you hold a big hand before the flop but lose, you might come away thinking you could have saved an additional bet if you hadn't raised. If that's the case, just stop right there, sit down, and start over, because when you win, each additional bet draws in extra money from the opposition.

Raising also provides a golden opportunity for your opponents to make mistakes by calling when they shouldn't. Suppose you hold a pair of kings but didn't raise before the flop. If the flop did not help any of your opponents and you bet, reasonable players who haven't picked up at least a draw will probably fold. Why? They have a bad hand and there's not enough money in the pot to make it worth chasing. The result is that your opponents have all folded and you're left with a big hand — and a small pot. But if you raised, your opponents will have an investment of two bets. Now some of them will chase you. They might make the mistake of chasing with as little as a backdoor draw to a flush — where they have to catch two running suited cards to win.

Your raise created a larger pot and gave your opponents the opportunity and motivation to play badly. Some, most assuredly, will do just that. They'll pursue you even when the odds against making their hand substantially exceed the odds offered by the pot. When they chase under circumstances which usually prove futile, your subsequent bets will keep them calling until they run out of hope or money. Aggressive play gives your opponents an opportunity to make mistakes, while allowing you to manipulate the size of the pot.

Here's another example. You're on the button with A♦ 10♦. Five players call.

What should you do? If you're aggressive, a raise in this position can be a strong play for a couple of reasons. First, you may have the best hand — and probably the best ace — since no one raised in front of you. Your raise will place more money in the pot from the five prior callers, since having called once they are unlikely to abandon their hand before the flop.

Your raise also stands a good chance of dropping the blinds, adding some dead money to the pot. Suppose you flop two diamonds. Even if there is bet in front of you, a raise can be a good play. While you probably no longer have the best hand, you do have the best draw, and if another diamond falls on the turn or river, and it does not pair the board, you will have the nuts.

Aside from additional money in the pot, there's another advantage. Most of your opponents will not put you on a flush draw because you raised before the flop. Most likely they'll suspect two pair and presume you're raising to drive out anyone holding a low or medium pair, or a backdoor draw. If a diamond falls on the turn, anyone else making a flush will probably bet, and you, of course, can raise. If the turn card is a blank and the pot is checked, you can check too and see the river for free. While you could bet, it seems unlikely that your bet would cause all your opponents to fold. And a bet on the turn, which is twice as expensive as that bet on the flop and unlikely to garner as many callers, may no longer be justified when you compare the odds against making your hand to the pot odds.

With a hand like this, the river should play itself. If you make your flush, of course you'd raise if someone else bets, or bet if it is checked to you. If you miss your hand, you'll have to determine whether a bet stands enough of a chance of dropping all your remaining opponents to make it worth while. For example, if there is \$40 in the pot, you'll have to decide whether a \$4 bet will cause your opponents to fold more than 10 percent of the time, since the pot is offering 10-to-1 odds. If you think your opponents will fold one time in five, go ahead and make the bet. If you think they'll fold only once in 20 times, save your money.

In the final analysis, aggressive play pays a wide variety of dividends. It enables you to build the pot while influencing your opponents' behavior — often giving them extra opportunities to make mistakes. But you have to apply

your aggression selectively. And if you want to seize the day, remember that aggression — like discretion — is frequently the better part of valor.

*Lou Krieger is also a regular columnist for Card Player. This is an excerpt from Lou's latest book More Hold'em Excellence, a Winner for Life.*

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Video Poker—My Meat and Potatoes  
by Jean Scott

This is a nuts-and-bolts look at my game of choice: video poker. This is the game I use to get the things that I want from casinos. Since the freebie system in Las Vegas is designed to reward gamblers, you have to be a player if you expect to tap into the richest veins in the system. And to come out ahead, you have to play positive-expectation games. Blackjack is an obvious candidate, but I've found that I can do even better playing video poker. By playing the schedules that return 100% or more, and milking the benefits of good slot clubs, I can pretty much write my own ticket in Las Vegas. But it all comes back to playing the game well enough so I don't lose back everything I gain (like 99.9% of players do).

Of course, the most important aspect of winning at video poker is studying the game—learning how to pick the machines with greater-than-100% returns, then playing them optimally. You can accomplish this by studying the work of video poker experts like Lenny Frome, Dan Paymar, and Bob Dancer.

After learning the playing skills, however, many find that the realities of actual play are a little daunting. In this section, I discuss a few of the more practical concerns of the average (and low-rolling) video poker player. I play a lot and I talk to a lot of other video poker players. They ask me questions about things like perfect play, low-roller bankroll requirements, when to change machines, and when it's proper to deviate from video poker's basic strategy. Here are a few answers.

When Full-Pay is Not Full-Pay  
One of the most common questions that people ask me is, "Why would a casino offer a machine that pays more than 100%? Doesn't the casino have to have an edge on every game? How are they going to pay for all the lights?" (It's amazing how concerned people are about the casinos pay their light bills.)

The fact is, the casinos retain a healthy edge on machines that have the potential to pay back over 100%. How is that possible? Two reasons. First, the 100%

payback is for max-coin play only (the bonus for a max-coin royal flush is worth 1.5%-2%). Secondly, the positive payout assumes the players employ a perfect playing strategy. Most regular players understand at least a little about video poker strategy, but perfect play is a tall order.

I've seen full-pay deuces wild machines in more than one casino with signs that say, "This machine pays back 98%." Now, I know that full-pay deuces returns 100.6%, so why are they advertising it as paying back 98%. Here's why. The casino knows that in the past, when it's tallied all its wins and losses from that machine, the bottom line has been a profit of 2%. This is due to "short-coin" and sub-optimal play. Almost no one plays at a positive level, so the casino wins its 2%-or more.

A lot of 100%+ video poker machines—deuces wild and double bonus progressive, for example—have such strange strategies that if you don't know and abide by them, you could be playing at several percentage points below the 100%-return level. Some play so poorly they'd be better off playing slot machines.

How Much Money Will I Need?

This is another common question I'm asked, though a lot of people just assume I can do what I do in the casinos because I have all the money in the world. Everyone wants to know how much money is necessary to allow the percentages to bear out. My answer is, "Not too much." Let's not forget that we're talking about a low-roller playing quarter video poker and making \$1.25 wagers here.

In his book, *Video Poker—Precision Play*, Dan Paymar has a chart that's very useful. It's labeled "Bankroll Necessary to Hit a Jackpot." That chart indicates that if you're playing quarter deuces wild, you should have a bankroll of at least \$2,850 to be 99% sure of hitting the royal flush before going broke. My own experiences confirm this. I've been playing video poker for more than six years, three to six hours a day, at least 100 days a year, and I've never needed a "bankroll" (the amount of actual money I have to gamble with) greater than \$3,000. In other words, my longest losing streak never resulted in total losses greater than \$3,000.

The one time that I came close to accumulating losses of \$3,000 was the most inopportune time of all for Lady Luck to leave me. It was the week the "48 Hours" video crew was following me

around. As chance would have it, I lost consistently during that week, nearly reaching a \$3,000 loss point. (For the record, I recouped the money and redeemed myself when I won an \$18,000 automobile in a drawing that "48 Hours" caught on camera and aired on national television.)

There's no guarantee that you'll hit the jackpot before exhausting a \$3,000 stake, but 99% is good enough for me. If you have a partner and two of you are playing, you don't both have to have that much; between the two of you, you figure to hit the royal flush twice as fast. If you want to have a little more than the minimum bankroll, just in case, you might feel better with \$4,000 or \$5,000 for two players. I do.

Well, I don't have \$3,000 to lose," you might say. Neither do I! I mean, I have it, but I certainly don't want to lose it. This bankroll that I've been talking about is not \$3,000 that I intend to lose permanently. I like to think of it as a gambling bankroll that I sometimes loan back to the casinos while I wait.

Slot Club Benefits

In the conversation above, I'm talking only about winning and losing on the machines themselves, which doesn't take into account the cash-back from slot clubs and promotions. This is where much of your profit (and your reserve in case of poor luck) will come from. When you take a 100%+ machine and add in slot club cash and promotional winnings, you are playing at well over 100%, and the profits add up fast. One of my goals is to play a good enough pay schedule, combined with a good enough slot club and a good enough promotion, so that if I never hit the royal, I'll still break even. When that's accomplished, the royal flushes represent pure profit.

Changing Machines

One thing that many people agonize over is when they should change machines. The answer is, it doesn't really matter. But it's amazing how many people refuse to believe it. The math, remember, is based on play over the long term, and it will take you 40,000 hands, on average, to hit a royal flush. So it's all the same whether you play 40,000 hands on one machine or 1,000 hands on 40 different machines or 100 hands on 400 machines.

Of course, in real life you could get zero royals in 80,000 hands or five royals in 20,000 hands. Still, it makes no difference how many machines it takes you to do it.

Do I ever change machines? Sure I change machines. I change machines if the seat's not comfortable, or the buttons are sticking, or the air-conditioning is blowing cold air on my neck, or the person playing next to me is a grouch or a smoker. And I don't mind admitting it, but I occasionally change machines just because I'm disgusted with the one I'm playing, when it hasn't given me anything good for a long while. Again, it doesn't have anything to do with the math. It's just that losing is making me angry and I want to walk around, clear my head, and start fresh in a different part of the casino.

Go ahead: hop from one machine to another. But as you do, remember that it's for a psychological feeling, not for a mathematical reason.

Deviating from Basic Strategy

People ask me if, on occasion, I ignore the strict rules of video poker's basic strategy. They want to know if I sometimes have a feeling or a hunch that something's going to happen, and whether or not I act on it. My answer is "NO, NO, NEVER." If you don't trust the strategy charts, which have been derived by mathematicians and computer scientists, then there's not much hope for you.

Think about it. When you buy a video poker strategy book for \$20, you're purchasing the results of thousands of dollars worth of research conducted by high-priced experts. Once you own it, all you have to do is spend a few hours, at most, learning the strategy for your game.

And there's another benefit. Playing perfect strategy is actually comforting. It cushions the blow when you lose. And you will lose. Everyone who plays video poker loses more sessions than they win. But when you're in a losing session, or even a series of them, it's very comforting to know that the math is correct. You can say, "I may be losing now, but I know that I'm doing the right thing. I also know that I have a small edge, and that eventually I'll come out ahead.

*Jean Scott is one of the country's most renowned and successful low rollers. How does she do it? She belongs to slot clubs. She participates in promotions and drawings. She uses funbooks. She befriends slot hosts. The Las Vegas Advisor pegged her the Queen of Ku Pon in 1994 and in 1995, the CBS news magazine "48 Hours" aired an entire hour-long segment revolving around her, in which Dan Rather dubbed her the Queen of Comps.*

*This is adapted from her new book The Frugal Gambler.*

Searching for Stu Ungar:

by Nolan Dalla

### The Rise, Fall, and Comeback of the World's Greatest Poker Player

Stu Ungar is a man of striking contradictions. He's known as "the Kid," yet bares all the wear and tear of every poker war won and personal battle lost. He has been called the world's greatest poker player, while occasionally teetering on financial bankruptcy. He's a devoted father susceptible to trite sentimentality, yet is a brutal cut-throat competitor at the poker table.

Indeed, sitting across from Ungar with the cards ready to be dealt is not an appealing predicament. It's a poker player's worst nightmare, sort of like being trapped inside a lion's cage. Ungar outwardly displays lion-like tranquility, seemingly harmless on the surface. He's a far cry from what might be expected of someone who's made millions of dollars outplaying, outwitting, and destroying people both financially and mentally. Ungar plays a very unique style of poker, the kind played by only a select few. Like the lion, when the hunt starts or the game begins—natural instinct seems to take over.

I first met Stu "the Kid" Ungar last May inside Binion's Horseshoe, on the eve of his third world poker championship. With eyes shielded by trademark blue-tinted sunglasses he looked conspicuous, even in a city as jaded as Las Vegas. He looked boyish despite his 43 years. Ungar waltzed amidst the gallery of high-limit poker superstars indifferent to the fact that the next day he would play for \$1 million in cash. Polite but covetous encouragement came from the biggest names in the game: Chip Reese, one of the few living members of the Poker Hall of Fame; Lyle Berman, a high-stakes player and Grand Casinos CEO; Johnny Chan, a two-time world champion; and Bobby Baldwin, a former world champion and now President of The Mirage. All were eliminated early in this year's championship and could only watch the final table from the rail—looking toward Ungar with envy, like the rest of us.

Despite his public confidence, Ungar's private life has been far less certain. He's a virtual recluse—part Howard Hughes and part Bobby Fischer. Brilliant and eccentric. Cold and calculating one minute—unpredictable and aloof the next.

Someone once professed that poker is not a game of cards....it's a game of *people*. In a game as deceptively simple as Texas Hold'Em, the complexity of the game derives from picking up "tells," knowing how to play position, and in carefully managing a stack of chips. Make one single mistake at this level of play and you'll be busted and broke, "playing for the world title one minute and standing at valet parking the next," as Tournament Director Jack McClellan likes to say. In the long run, everyone usually gets the same quality of cards—a few good hands and plenty of bad ones. It's how you play all those hands collectively that matters. Although it's important to catch helpful cards at critical moments, more than anything else tournament poker is a game of psychological warfare.

"I really think Ungar is the greatest player in recent history when it comes to making the right move after the flop," said Mickey Appleman, one of the top professionals on the circuit. "I've been watching him and he just doesn't ever seem to make a mistake." If Appleman were talking just about poker decisions, he would probably be right. Away from the felt it hasn't been so easy.

There were signs early in Ungar's childhood that he wouldn't be living the life of a Norman Rockwell portrait. A New York native from the Lower East Side, Ungar was the son of a bar owner. Early on, he became acquainted with the "wise guys" who frequented his father's tavern.

Men in fancy suits staked with wads of cash and colorful stories only whetted Ungar's passion for life on the edge. Naturally, gambling was a part of daily life. He showed an uncanny gift for numbers and an incredible memory for cards. By age five he was beating his mother at gin rummy. While other students were doing their science projects, Ungar was playing cards, learning games of chance, and picking-up street smarts that would serve him—and derail him, at times—later in life.

As a teenager Ungar established himself as a sort of child prodigy at gin rummy. He played the local New York circuit and catapulted himself into the most feared player in the city. After he beat them all, he moved to Miami. Southern Florida was widely acknowledged at the time to be the hotbed of big-time gin. Not even twenty years old, he won there too. Ungar won so often that finally one day, he looked round and nobody wanted to play against him anymore.

He would have to find a very different kind of game with new playmates.

Las Vegas seemed the natural next step. But in Vegas, gin wasn't where the money was. It was in poker. Arriving in 1976, Ungar came, saw, and eventually conquered. In a flash, he was playing in the biggest games in town against the best players in the world. They gathered every night at the Dunes or the Golden Nugget. The greats must have wondered where the new marvel had come from. Who was this kid in his early 20s? Poker was not supposed to be a game one could master in such a short time. If he was so good he would have to prove it by playing in the World Series.

In 1980 at age 24, Ungar decided to enter his first world championship. He won. A few critics thought it was a fluke. It wasn't. A year later, he won it again. Some observers began calling Ungar the greatest player in the game, already placing him on a pedestal with the legends—Sailor Roberts, Puggy Pearson, Johnny Moss, and Doyle Brunson.

Two years after his second consecutive championship, his daughter Stephanie was born. Ungar seemed full of hope and had a new sense of purpose in life. The sky seemed the limit. But something went wrong. As quickly as success came, it ended. What followed was a long and painful slide into the depths of depression and personal struggle. Ungar admits that he didn't play it smart. "I really did some stupid things," he said looking back.

The roller coaster of gambling highs and lows were extraordinary. Once he lost \$900,000 playing \$5,000-\$10,000 limit stud and razz—in only six hours. Another time he is reported to have lost over a million dollars in a single craps session. He gambled away countless fortunes in race and sportsbooks. But there were a few high points along the way too—which helped Ungar sustain himself. With a small group of investors he shared in a pick-six payoff that paid \$1.8 million. He accepted a private challenge to play poker against controversial publisher, Larry Flynt, and did so four times. Ungar reportedly won more than \$5 million from the porno kingpin.

But the money never stayed with Ungar very long. It always found its way into the wrong hands, into dirty pockets, running around with the wrong crowd on a merry-go-round of delusion, until finally Ungar seemed a shadow of his former self.

By late 1996 Ungar had gone seven years without winning a major tournament. He was seen around town playing small-time poker in the \$20 buy-in daily tournaments—a far cry from contending for world titles. Most who cared enough to notice wrote him off. He was forgotten. Not only did Ungar seem inconsequential as a serious threat—but some thought he might not even show up at this year's World Series. The glory days were long gone.

An hour before the 1997 World Series of Poker began, Ungar didn't have enough money to post the required \$10,000 buy-in. It took a last second telephone call from an anonymous backer to finally raise the money. Ungar was the 308th to sign-up in a record field of 312.

The comeback began Monday, May 12th at 10:00 am. Ungar thrust into his aggressive style early, blasting opponents relentlessly with pure intimidation and well-timed raises. At the beginning stage of big tournaments many players are fearful of making a mistake that will risk elimination. Ungar's aggressive tendencies combined with his opponents' (generally) more passive style of play gave him a significant advantage. He slowly but steadily built a stack of chips. At the end of the first day Ungar was in seventh place with \$47,175.

Players continued to fall by the wayside. After the second day only 27 remained. Ungar was second in chips with \$232,000. As the third day concluded, there were only six players left—with Ungar firmly established as the leader with \$1,066,000 in chips. The buzzing around the room was evident....everyone knew the Kid was back.

Down to six players at the final table on the last day, Ungar displayed the raw nerve and old magic that won him public exaltation and two previous world titles. He appeared self-assured and eager, yet was careful never to underestimate his opponents.

"I just played so perfect —so perfect," Ungar said later. It would be difficult to argue. Perhaps Ungar's poker genius can be summarized in one single hand. Midway through the third day Ungar made an unbelievable call that unnerved his opponents and later propelled him into the chip lead. His opponent, David Roepke with a K-T (suited) opened for a \$35,000 bet. Ungar with K-Q (suited) called. The flop came 7-6-2 (offsuit), presumably no help to either

player. Roepke pushed all of his chips into the pot (about \$47,000). Ungar contemplated his action. He called and won the showdown with a king-high, snapping-off his opponent's bluff. "No other player at the table would have called in that spot," Ungar would say later.

At the final table, Ron Stanley, a popular Las Vegas pro came within \$200,000 of taking the lead back from Ungar. But on a critical hand Ungar blew the audience away with a pure bluff that severely crippled Stanley—who held the best hand but failed to make the correct decision to call on the end. It was a devastating blow not so much financially, but psychologically. In military terms, it was like getting stunned with nerve gas. Stanley never recovered.

Two hours later it was over. Stu Ungar became only the second player in history to win three world titles (the late Johnny Moss is the other). Piles of \$100 bills were stacked before the new champion and the Dom Perignon was cracked open. Ungar and Horseshoe owner Jack Binion raised fluted glasses and toasted for a flurry of photographers. The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* added to the epic melodrama the next day, giving Ungar a new nickname: "The Comeback Kid."

"The only person capable of beating me—is me," he said afterward. Watching Ungar—both at and away from the table—that may be an understatement.

After the victory Ungar departed Las Vegas and went to Florida where his daughter now lives. During the World Series he kept a picture of Stephanie, now age 14, in his shirt pocket for inspiration. A few weeks after that, Ungar disappeared again, making the comparisons to chess' Bobby Fischer inevitable.

A few weeks after his victory, I spoke with Ungar. During our conversation, we talked about the personal costs he has paid during his course of achieving poker immortality. It's a reputation Ungar seems to relish as he is extremely candid when asked the most personal of questions. I asked him about his future plans and what next he had in mind.

He paused. There was silence. Then and there, I had my answer. It was a silence that spoke a thousand words.

*This article was originally printed in Midwest Gaming and Travel Magazine. Nolan Dalla is a regular columnist for Card Player magazine. He writes frequently on poker and gambling issues.*

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## What's New?

by Chuck Weinstock

There have been lots of new products introduced since the last edition of *The Intelligent Gambler*. They are highlighted in the catalog itself, but here is a quick summary.

Remember that unlike other retailers, we only add items to *The Intelligent Gambler Catalog* that we feel will provide a good value for our customers. We haven't seen some of the items listed below at press time, but based on the authors' other works we expect that they will all measure up.

### Blackjack

George C has issued two new books, *Advanced Card Counting*, and *The Unbalanced Zen*. In addition to his new *Blackjack Wisdom* (which includes reprints from *The Intelligent Gambler*), Arnold Snyder is revising *Blackbelt in Blackjack* for the first time since it was originally issued. Allan Pell has issued *Blackjack Bootcamp*, a three volume video—the first blackjack video that we've seen that is good enough for us to recommend to our customers. Finally, John Auston has augmented the simulations he did for *Blackjack Attack* with *The Worlds Greatest Blackjack Simulation*.

### Poker

Mike Caro was one of the original authors and a behind the scenes editor of *Super System*. His *Guide to Super System* will help anyone reading the book for the first time today to get the most out of the classic. Hot on the heels of his acclaimed *Pot-Limit and No-Limit Poker* comes Bob Ciaffone's new book *Improve Your Poker*. Lou Krieger's *More Hold'em Excellence* was excerpted in this issue. David A. Daniel has written *Poker: How to Win at the Great American Game*, a companion to which is the new software *PokerWiz*. Wilson Software has issued Windows versions of *Turbo Seven Card Stud* and *Turbo Texas Hold'em*. And by the time you read this the *1997 World Series of Poker* video should be available.

### Video Poker

Jazbo Burns has issued a new set of large format *Video Poker Strategy Cards*. Masque Publishing has released *Video Poker Strategy Pro*.

### Other

Jean Scott's *The Frugal Gambler* will help you to maximize the value of your gambling vacation. *Lyle Stuart on Bacarrat* is an entertaining look at that high-stakes game.