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Issue 3

## Poker Tells: Hesitations When Betting

Amir Lehavot was one of the November Nine at the WSOP Main Event final table this year; he placed third for \$3.7 million. A couple weeks before the final table began, Amir asked if I'd like to help him with his final table preparations. My role was to analyze him and his opponents for possible behavior patterns, e.g. poker tells.

During the final table I watched the 15-minute delay broadcast, taking notes on all of the players' behaviors. One player I focused on a good amount was Sylvain Loosli, who would end up in fourth place.

Loosli was a primarily online cash game player. He was known to be very new to live poker, which was one of the reasons I wanted to concentrate on him especially. His pre-final table footage showed a lot of extraneous movement of his body, arms, and hands. It's a basic assumption of mine that whenever there are extraneous movements, (e.g. movements that don't contribute to a specific, practical action) there is some kind of information present. It may be information that is difficult to interpret and use, but it is there.

It seemed Loosli had made efforts to be more unreadable during his four-month break; he was much more stoic during the final table than he had been in the previous footage. But he still was probably the most behaviorally "loose" out of all the players. One of the situations where he exhibited a lot of extra movements was in the gathering of his chips before betting or raising. For most of his bets or raises, there was a lot of time spent between the time he reached for chips and when he actually placed those chips in the pot. During this time, he would move the chips around, stack the chips, and add or subtract chips before finally putting in his bet.

On the final table Loosli had KK twice and QQ once. In all three of these hands he three-bet (reraised an initial raiser) pre-flop. Before three-betting in all of these hands, Loosli showed a lot

of pausing and hesitation in the gathering of his chips. For instance, in two of these hands, there is a moment when he starts to reach for chips or puts a chip on his cards. It's obvious he's entering the pot, and then he pauses for several seconds before continuing to gather chips. Also, in the hand where he held AA and bet the flop, there was a moment when he looked down at his chips, making his interest in betting obvious, and then proceeded to shuffle his chips for several seconds before betting.

Comparatively, in the hands where he was three-betting light or betting post-flop with a weak hand, these hesitations were not there. The betting motions with the weaker hands were more straightforward and practical, with less useless motions.

The final table admittedly didn't offer a big sample size of hands for Loosli, so I wouldn't say that this is a definite pattern for him. But I am fairly confident that it was a pattern for him because this kind of tell is common among a lot of poker players.

**Hesitation =  
Uncertainty =  
Concealed Strength**

There are a couple reasons why players who have a strong hand might show signs of hesitation when gathering or placing a bet:

- 1) Whether consciously or just instinctually, they want to communicate that they have a tougher decision than they do in hopes of getting action.
- 2) Bluffers tend to want to communicate confidence and certainty in their bet, making it unlikely a bluffer will show signs of hesitation.

These two factors ensure that displays of hesitation fall mostly into the relaxed-with-a-strong-hand territory.

*Continued on page 7*

Be the poker Fox...



... Not the Hedgehog  
Page 4

ARE YOU a



MENTAL GAME FISH?  
Page 8

Easy Game



BALUGA WHALE Page 2

**Poker is a Skill: How to Stop  
Losing, Part 2. Page 5**

## Easy Game: Chapter Three: Preflop Hand Ranges and Postflop Equities

Preflop is undoubtedly the easiest street to play. The variables are greatly reduced—only two cards per person are in play. Unlike postflop where situations become extremely complex and difficult, preflop is easiest to deal with. Yet every student I've ever coached has begun with one major preflop leak—they're not thinking about postflop. To the average poker thinker, preflop is a vacuum in which we can raise K2o on the button because our hand is stronger than the range of the blinds.

How about this: If preflop were a vacuum, it would be profitable to raise 100% of your hands on the button. The dead money from when the blinds fold easily compensates for raising 72o. So, why don't we raise 100% on the button? Oh that's right... 72o is terrible postflop. K2o isn't too far behind.\*

One of the most common requests I hear is for help with won-money-without-showdown stats. The difficulty most players have with making money without going to showdown stems from their inability to play a well-formulated preflop game that is cohesive with their overall postflop strategy. There is a gap between their preflop plan and their postflop plan. In short, they're not thinking about equity. Let's explain.

We hold K8o on the button. Our initial thought is to raise because our range is ahead of the blinds and we can collect dead money. So let's say we raise and the big blind calls. The flop comes down 9♠7♦3♣. The blind checks, we make a standard c-bet, and the blind calls. The turn card is the 2♠. The blind checks again. Boy-oh-boy do we have a conundrum. If we check it back, we'll inevitably go to showdown with a weak hand and we'll lose a decent pot. Seems pretty weak on our part. Or, we could bet... but the turn card isn't scary and he's unlikely to fold anything he called the flop with. Betting is often overly aggressive chip-spewy. The real problem with the postflop spot starts all the way back preflop. We chose a hand with poor postflop equity and thus we walk into unprofitable spots—situations where there's simply nothing we can do right. There's an easy solution though: choose hands that have good postflop equity.

### What kind of cards are these?

Suited cards are a good place to start—they have great postflop equity. When I say this, most people's immediate reaction is to tell me that suited cards only make a flush a small percentage of the time. That's true, but let's think about it in terms of equity:

On the left we have A♠6♠. On the right we have A♠6♦. We raise the button preflop, and the big blind calls again. The flop comes down 9♠7♠3♠. With A♠6♠ we have 100% equity, compared with about 50% with A♠6♦. About a 50% equity differential. That's significant.

But come on, how often do we really flop a flush anyway? Agreed... let's change the flop then—9♠7♠3♥. On A♠6♠ now we have 50% equity, compared with about 15% on A♠6♦. A 35% differential... that's significant as well.

Most importantly, though, let's consider a flop of 9♠7♦3♣. We bet and are called. The turn is a Q♠. A♠6♠ now has 12 outs. A6o has 3. Now, with the extra equity, we can stay aggressive. Thus, unlike A6o (where we have to choose between being weak or spewy) we can be appropriately aggressive with A6s. We'll talk about this more in the next chapter.

High cards also have great equity. Let's consider AQo. If we flop an A or Q, we usually have the best hand. However, on the vast majority of flops we miss, we are guaranteed six overcard outs. Often, that's enough equity to continue aggression.

Connecting cards provide equity as well, although not as significantly as suited or high cards. They do have advantages, as straights are among the most disguised hands in poker, but they have plenty of disadvantages as well. If there is a flush draw on the board, a straight draw's outs may be tainted. A straight draw has only 8 outs compared with a flush draw which has 9, or the nut flush draw which sits with 12. If we turn a straight draw, usually it's a card that makes the board more coordinated and thus harder to stay aggressive on. An example would be JT on a K75Q board. The draw is nice, but we probably won't be able to stay aggressive on such a strong turn card for our opponent's range (KQ comes to mind).\*\* A better example, though, might occur if the board was even lower and less frightening—say we hold JT on a 964r board and the turn is an 8. That's a very difficult spot for us to continue aggression despite our hand's strong equity.

In understanding all of this, we see that hands like A3s are extremely strong, mixing suited value, high card value, and connecting value. In fact, A2s-A5s are generally stronger than A6s-A9s, as the extra connecting card value usually more than compensates for the extra high card value (i.e. a six kicker isn't much better than a 5 kicker, but a straight or straight draw is a whole lot better than nothing). Hands like 76s are strong as well, despite having no high card value. So are hands like KJo, despite having no suited value.

Aggression comes with a lot of advantages: we win bigger pots with our strong hands, we make our opponents fold the best hand, we collect dead money constantly, and it makes it difficult for our opponents to read our hand. Now that we know which cards put us in spots that let us stay aggressive, we can start to consider common spots where we have equity and want to keep applying pressure.

### Addendum (2011)

I have a lot to say about this chapter. Its basic premise remains incredibly important—you should be thinking about the postflop implications of your preflop play. For a beginning player, understanding which types of cards will give you equity is a vital step toward knowing what to do with that equity throughout the hand. In fact, on that level, this chapter is one of the most important in the entire book. However, there are a lot of statements that are easily argued against. Some things I've come to realize are just flat-out wrong.


First, I wrote this: "How about this: If preflop were a vacuum, it would be profitable to raise 100% of your hands on the button. The dead money from when the blinds fold would easily compensate for raising 72o. So, why don't we raise 100% on the button? Oh that's right... 72o is terrible postflop. K2o isn't too far behind. I wish somebody would have slapped me in the face and said, "So don't put any more money in postflop unless you make quads!" If opening 72o in a preflop vacuum is +EV, and the only problem is that we're losing money by c-bet bluffing or paying off with a pair of sevens, then we should just open 72o and never c-bet or call any bets. It's only moderately exaggerated to say that we should only put in money with quads-- we're making money from preflop only, so we can leave our commitment there. Obviously, if the flop is A22 we can feel fine value-betting. But, if the flop is A33, I'm probably just done.

Many of my students worry tremendously about their red lines (showing the amount of money they win without a showdown)--a great way to make your red-line go up is to steal more blinds. If you get called by somebody with a tight range, it's okay to be done. If you're opening 72o, they'll have to loosen up a lot to make your preflop plays come anywhere near -EV. Of course, remember that in small stakes games you're still going to make the bulk of your money from value-betting. This means your red line will go down (as your opponents call you more) but that your won-money-at-showdown will rise.

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*\*there is an incredibly simple counter-argument to this that I'll discuss in the addendum*

*\*\*This would actually be a fine spot to stay aggressive against a regular—we can get almost everything but KQ to fold.*



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# Be the Fox not the Hedgehog

“The Fox knows many things, but the Hedgehog knows one big thing.” -Archilochus

Poker Foxes know many ways to win a pot. Poker Hedgehogs know one big thing.

Poker Hedgehog’s one big thing is “Make a hand and stack someone.” Most people playing at the table have this plan. Some of them are going to have a good day and will indeed stack someone. This is like the Hedgehog that curls up into a ball and shows the world its spiky side. It is a good trick; it works some days. It is inflexible but a decent defense. In a world filled with other Hedgehogs, they will trade money back and forth and slowly lose to the rake and the Foxes.

Poker Foxes have a different view of the world. Given the same situation, they see many more ways of fighting for the pot. Their plans are flexible, and they are numerous. Let us look at two examples, one quick and one more extended.

Our poker animals are on the Button, having called an early position pre-flop raise with



The flop brings



The pre-flop raiser bets 2/3 pot.

The Hedgehog thinks: “I missed; he probably has an overpair. I fold.” Maybe he thinks: “I will take a turn. If I miss, I will fold if he bets again.” The Hedgehog will end up losing in this situation over time. Some days he will win, but mostly he will lose. He can go home and console himself that he did not make any mistakes— he just never made a hand.

On the other hand, if the Fox was in this same position, he thinks many of the following:

- This is a decent board to continuation bet on. I will bluff raise if Villain has been continuation betting too often.
- If this is a rote continuation bet, Villain will often check to me on the turn when a non-threatening low card comes on the turn. I can bluff if checked to.
- Many of the overcards on the turn will give me top pair with a solid kicker.

- Other overcards give me inside straight draws that I can semi-bluff if checked to, possibly semi-bluff raising when bet at if I think I sense a bet-sizing tell of weakness on the turn.
- Any club gives me backdoor nut flush draw.
- I can bluff if Spades come in.

The Fox has many more plans on how to win this hand. He can call profitably where the Hedgehog can not.

Foxes are always scheming, but maybe not always betting. Here is a “quiet” hand. It seems the Fox is doing nothing but checking down. In reality, the Fox is zigging and zagging mentally until the right moment when he wins the hand at the last possible opportunity, after the first several plans did not work. Each plan is profitable to the Fox, this is just the first one he can actually use.

An extended hand looks like this. The Fox is in the big blind with



A solid TAG opens from early middle position.

**Initial plan:** Fold

This Villain will use his position and likely has better cards that will beat me. I need to play suited connectors, but this player is too hard to beat out of position. I do not have to play every suited connector I get. I will exploit him by folding.

There are four callers including the small blind, so I change my plan.

**Revised plan:** Call

Now there is a really big pot brewing; I can close the action. While I do not expect the TAG to pay me off, the other players in this hand just might. The most dangerous Villain in this hand has three players after him. He will have to play very straightforward. I will likely need to make a hand, but the pot odds are compelling here.

The flop comes



It is checked to the Fox. He has the aggressor and three others left to act.

**Flop plan:** Check-raise

With a TAG in the lead here, if he bets, the most likely value hand is an overpair. He could be continuation betting, but that is unlikely. My

range is much wider calling multi-way from the Big Blind. I could represent open trips with the Four by check-raising small on the flop then barreling the turn and river. It will be difficult for his simple overpair to call to the river in the face of this bluff. If he bets and everyone folds to him, I am going to three barrel him.

I have a bluff catcher. If I bet, there are plenty of medium pocket pairs out there, 88+, that will call me. I do not want to build a pot out of position with such a weak hand. It is a decent bluff catcher. The flop is checked around.

**Revised flop plan:** Check, since I did not get a chance to check-raise.

The turn completes the rainbow with



It is checked to Fox.

**Turn plan:** Stick with the bluff catching. Someone might take a stab at this.

It is checked around.

The river brings



It is checked to Fox.

**River plan:** Stick with bluff catching. We might have the best hand.

I check to terrible player on the Button. He bets 1/5 pot. This was the weak stab Fox was hoping for. These are great odds to call and likely have best hand.

The Small Blind calls.

**Revised River plan:** Check-raise bluff

Fox is likely behind now. Hands such as any Ten, 77-99, and most Sixes outkick him. The Small Blind likely has something. However, if the Small Blind had a hand he was really proud of, such as a Four, he would have at least min-raised. Neither of these guys have a strong hand, but Small Blind is ahead. The Fox fires in a pot sized reraise.

**Result:** Fox wins the hand. Be a poker Fox.



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# Poker Is A Skill: How To Stop Losing, Part 2

## Understand Relative Hand Strength

Whenever someone new would show up at my old home game and want to learn poker, the first thing they needed to know was the ranking of hands. They'd get a card that looked something like this:

• Royal Flush	A♥ K♥ Q♥ J♥ T♥
• Straight Flush	J♠ T♠ 9♠ 8♠ 7♠
• Four of a Kind	K♥ K♠ K♦ K♣ 4♣
• Full House	8♦ 8♠ 8♣ Q♦ Q♥
• Flush	A♦ J♦ 9♦ 8♦ 2♦
• Straight	9♠ 8♦ 7♠ 6♣ 5♥
• Three of a Kind	6♠ 6♥ 6♦ 4♦ 2♣
• Two Pair	A♠ A♣ 8♠ 8♣ 2♥
• One Pair	J♠ J♣ K♦ 7♥ 2♠
• High Card	A♠ K♥ 8♦ 4♦ 3♥

While the card doesn't specify whether aces and eights beat kings and queens or whether heart flushes are worth more than club flushes (of course they're not), it does give the beginner a very simple frame of reference. It allows the fledgling player to see how high up the food chain their hand ranks. But it also fails to highlight one of the most essential qualities of poker, even while alluding to it.

If you're one of those players still learning the ranking of hands, then the above chart might be the most useful part of this article. But if you've played a bunch of hands without getting the results you want, then understanding the following is probably the most important thing you can do at the table.

## Poker is a game of relative strength.

If you and I play five card draw, where just the two of us get five cards each with one opportunity to replace whichever cards we discard, I can be fairly confident if I make any hand that utilizes five cards. That is to say, if I am dealt a straight or better, then I have a good chance of winning the pot, particularly if I see that you need to draw multiple cards to improve your hand.

However, if you go on to raise me after the draw, fully knowing that I have drawn no cards, should I be confident with a Six-high straight? No, I shouldn't. In fact, my hand has gone from powerhouse to bluff catcher. The absolute strength of my hand has not changed, but the relative strength has greatly diminished.

## How to judge relative strength.

There are three major components to the relative strength of a hand.

The first one is the absolute strength. A royal flush will always be the nuts. Unless you are playing some wacky home game with wild cards and someone makes five of a kind, a royal flush will always win the pot. If, on the other hand, you hold seven-high (7,5,4,3,2 of multiple suits), then your hand will never win a showdown unless you happen to be playing deuce-to-seven lowball (in which case that old royal flush will be the worst possible hand). But ignoring lowball for the remainder of

this article, where your hand ranks on the overall continuum of poker hands will be the starting point for determining its relative strength.

The second component exists in games like hold'em, where the community cards impose some restrictions on the hands which are possible. You may only hold a Six-high straight, but if the board is 3♠2♥6♦K♣Q♣, then your 4♠5♠ is the nuts. That is to say, there is no way your opponent can beat you. When you hold the nuts, it doesn't matter whether it's four-of-a-kind or just three Queens (e.g. Q♦Q♥ on Q♠J♦7♠3♣2♣). You may as well be holding a royal flush. The relative strength of your hand in this case would give you absolute power to win the pot.

When you're playing a game with a board like hold'em, instead of thinking of where your hand fits within the overall rank of poker hands, you should instead value it based on how close it is to the nuts. If you take that board of 3♠2♥6♦K♣Q♣ where a Six-high straight was the nuts, you can see that a set of Kings would be the second nuts, a set of Queens would be the third nuts, and so on. Top two pair, Kings and Queens, would be the seventh-best possible hand on this board; Ace-King, for top-pair/top-kicker, would be the seventeenth-best possible hand, and on and on.

When you have King-Jack on this board, you don't need to be thinking that you have the eighteenth-best possible hand. But you do need to have a general idea of where your hand lies on the spectrum of hand strength.

The third and final major component of relative hand strength is the betting action taken by you and your opponents. Whether, when, and how much your opponents bet should give you some indication as to the strength of their hands. (Part 3 of Stop Losing will delve deeper into the concept of reading hands and putting your opponents on a range, but for now just think about what your opponents' actions mean.)

Also consider the actions you've taken to this point in the hand. Have you shown a lot of strength? If you have been betting and raising the whole way, then when your opponent plays back at you, he is representing a very strong hand. Sure, he may be bluffing some of the time, but he is unlikely to hold a hand of moderate strength. When the action gets heavy, moderately-strong hands become weak hands. Strong hands become only moderately strong, and it takes a very strong hand indeed to remain strong in a relative sense.

Remember: the strength of your hand only matters in relation to the strength of your opponent's hand. Either you have the best hand or he does. (Sometimes you have the same hand and you split the pot.) It doesn't matter how much you win by. It only matters that you win. In fact, the largest pots are often won by the thinnest of margins. If you have a great hand, would you rather your

opponent hold a mediocre hand or a great-but-slightly-less-great-than-your-hand hand? The second one is the way you get paid the maximum.

It's also important to remember that the relative strength of your hand changes as the flop, turn, and river come out. When you hold Aces before the flop, you have the nuts. You want to get as much money in there as you can. But if your aces are black and the board comes out 9♥8♥7♥, then your hand has lost a lot of its value. If, however, the turn and river are both nines, then you should be happy about your hand again. You beat everything except for straight flushes and quads.

Let's wrap it up with one example which shows how all of this works together.

You are dealt 4c3c on the button and everyone in front of you folds. You make a small raise and only the Big Blind calls.

The flop comes out 2♣5♥6♣. Hooray! You've flopped the nuts. Not only is your hand the absolute best possible hand right now, you've also got a flush draw, so if your opponent also flopped a straight, you're on a freeroll. Your opponent checks, you bet, and he calls.

The turn is the 7♥. You flopped a Six-high straight and now you've got a Seven-high straight. But has your hand improved? Absolutely not. While the absolute ranking of your hand has improved, the relative strength has decreased. You can lose to an Eight-high straight or a Nine-high straight, neither of which was possible on the flop. You still bet when your opponent checks and you're happy with his call, but you're not quite as happy as you were on the flop, and you're worried about a lot of the possible river cards.

Speaking of river cards, the K♣ comes off on the end. You've made a flush! But has this actually improved your hand? No. You were confident you held the best hand when your opponent just called

*Continued on page 6*

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# To the Newbie

“A Minute to Learn...A Lifetime to Master”

- James R. Becker

Because of factors like the World Series of Poker on ESPN, the movie Rounders, and hearing stories of professional players, the gap between fantasy and reality for new, aspiring poker players just seems to grow. I've spent enough time now with newer players to have made some observations that may be helpful to others.

People come to this game with many delusions. I'm not going to take the time to begin making an incomplete list, but here I can give the cure for almost all of them.

1. You won't get rich quick.
2. You're not half as good as you think you are.
3. To consistently make any money worth talking about, more work than you've imagined is required.
4. To consistently make any money worth talking about, more time than you've imagined is likely.

After playing some inconsequential number of hands, a mix of the following results and deductions will have taken place with possible varying degrees (all are about equally likely for any player).

## Results:

1. They made a ton of money relative to the limit played.
2. They lost a ton of money relative to the limit played.
3. They broke even.

**Deductions** (not necessarily correlating with the same numbered results):

1. I'm a highly skilled player.
2. This game is all luck.
3. Because my opponents are so terrible, I can't make any money. No one respects my raises.

New, aspiring players will have to go through most of the following stages.

1. They play terribly, but don't know they do.
2. They realize their ignorance.
3. They start to learn some concepts.
4. They start to misapply those concepts.
5. They get a glimpse of concepts they don't know and repeat steps 3 and 4.
6. They start to know they know some things and recognize what others don't know.
7. They start to think they're good.
8. Rinse and repeat.

Luckily for those just starting poker, they're not relying on the game for income. So, I offer this advice. If you're not dedicated to hard work and study, just accept the fact you'll lose money. If you persist in playing, play for entertainment value. You'll save yourself a lot of grief.


When you're just starting, it doesn't make sense to play a ton of hands. If you're not studying at least twice as much as you're playing, you're doing yourself a huge disservice. Hopefully you'll notice numerous subtleties in 100 hands or so that offer you something to analyze.

Also, make sure your playing time is quality time. Be sure you're focusing on the game and not a TV show or some other distraction.

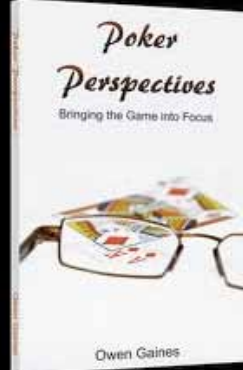
Getting good at poker is a serious commitment achieved through blood, sweat and tears. Buckle up and settle in for a long trip.

**Owen Q-TIP Gaines**

- Professional poker player
- Author of **Poker Perspectives** where this article first appeared



- Author of **Poker Math that Matters**
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*Continued from page 5*

the turn, and now you have the nut-low flush. Your opponent needs a flush to beat you, but any flush your opponent can hold will beat you. He checks. You evaluate the relative strength of your hand.

Your opponent could have just made a flush. But he could also have any number of worse hands, all of which you beat. You know that this opponent would often check/raise his flush draws on the flop, so you put in a sensible value bet, hoping for a call from a pair or two-pair type of hand.

Your opponent now raises all in. Everything has changed. Your hand went from the nuts on the flop to a slightly less nutty hand on the turn and river. But you were still looking good when your opponent was being passive. But now he's committed his whole stack, representing a bigger flush. Does he have it? I don't know. Maybe he's holding  $A\clubsuit 7\clubsuit$  and is begging for a call. Maybe he has  $A\heartsuit 2\heartsuit$  and he's praying for a fold. It's up to you to decide how likely your opponent is to have the hand he says he has. We'll look at that and the question of pot odds in parts 3 and 4. For now we'll focus on the takeaway.

While the absolute strength of your hand can change from street to street, it's more important to focus on the relative strength of your hand. You do this by reading the board to see what hands are possible and where your hand fits in on that spectrum, then considering the betting action taken by you and your opponent(s). Do your best to stay one step ahead of your opponents, both in relative strength and thinking.

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## Coaching Directory

### Doug Hull

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- Phone/Text 508.904.9626
- Coaches at Mohegan Sun, Foxwoods, WSOP
- Coaches NLHE \$1-\$1 through \$5-\$10 live cash and Single Table Satellites
- Coaches live/phone/skype
- Author of **Poker Plays You Can Use**
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- Teaching a man (or woman) to fish

### Jared Tendler

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- Coach for +300 poker players from 40 countries
- Coaches players at all stakes/game types
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## Why Get Poker Coaching?

This is the question I asked myself several years ago when I was thinking of getting coached by Ed Miller. Am I really going to give this guy \$500 to sit in a Starbucks and talk about poker? My initial answer was, "No!"

Then my buddy says to me, "Doug, I have seen you make some seriously questionable calls for \$500 where you did not learn a damned thing." He was right; I gave it a shot. My book [Poker Plays You Can Use](#) documents the changes I made in my game after coaching with Ed and how I made them. I should have paid Ed \$1000.

Good coaches can see where your mistakes are, where your missed opportunities are, and why you are stalling out at your current thinking. We can see that because we have been there ourselves.

*Your coaching bio here, [hull@ThreeBarrelBluff.com](mailto:hull@ThreeBarrelBluff.com) for pricing.*

## The Lost Highroller Episode #4 There Will Be Fish

In poker, the old saying goes, “If, after thirty minutes at the table, you can’t tell who is the fish in the game...it’s you.” Well, let me just say that it doesn’t take me any thirty minutes to figure that one out. I know who the fish is the moment my dorsal-fins hit the chair in most games. It’s me! If the other players have a pulse and can pronounce their names without pausing more than once to think about it, then, like most fish, I’m probably in too deep...way over my head.

Hey, someone has to be the big tuna, the king of the carps, the ATM with fins, the all-time worst poker player ever...and I nominate myself, yours truly, Carl Needmore outta Flatpan, Missouri. I’m told that I give-up tells in seven different body-language – including Braille! All my poker life, ethereal phantom rounders, in swirling hoodies and dark sunglasses, have hovered above me – haunting me – throwing throwing nets over my scaly scalp and dangling tasty morsels on hooks in front of my rather large mouth.

I am the world’s foremost calling-station. Heck, I’m from Missouri, the Show-Me-State – and by-golly you gotta show my fanny a hand. I’ve been known to call a frog from a dry well. It’s been said that I am a more active calling-station than the pay phone in a penitentiary. Heck, I’m constantly calling the chip runner. Recently a chip runner took my money and failed to return with any chips. When I went to the desk to complain, the floor person said they just went ahead and distributed my chips evenly among the other players in the room. They told me it would save everyone else a lot of time, and I would save money on the rake such that I actually would come out way ahead on the deal. How could I argue with that?

Part of my problem is my poker background.

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*Continued from page 1*

Showing hesitation when betting is like a player saying, “uhhh” or “ummm” before announcing their bet or raise size, or shrugging when making a big bet. These kinds of things are trying to communicate, “I guess I’ll do this, but I’m not sure.” Among amateur players, these kinds of more on-display types of hesitation will almost always be a strong hand.

When playing in your game, start looking for obvious and not-so-obvious displays of hesitation when a player puts in a big bet or raise. Once you are tuned into it, you may find that some players in your game leak this kind of information frequently.

And always keep in mind that this pattern, like all behavioral patterns, should be correlated with specific players first. There may be a player

I live on a small farm in Missouri. Game selection is a little thin around my hometown of Flatpan, so finding a full ring game of primates or better is harder than drawing inside to a set of one eyed ducks. My opportunities for any regular game are limited to farm animals. My home game sucks. The pigs are the worst to play with – even though they are the best no-limit players on the farm. The clever little porkers somehow managed to make fake IDs from cornstalks and melon rinds and they purchased a keg of beer from a local market. Ever tried to play hold’em with a bunch of hooting and hollering future pork chops? They’re either slowing the game down with bathroom breaks or popping and repopping raises, pre-flop, every hand. They’re relentless. My donkey sucks a two-outer on the river every other round; listening to him bray afterwards can be downright painful. The squirrels are always checking the nuts, the cows want to bring their own chips to the game, the woodpeckers are usually all tapped out, and every time I reach for chips to make a call, the crows on the rail cackle and laugh till their eyes water. Anyone who thinks barnyard poker is a duck walk can just bring it to Flatpan. Ever try to check-raise a Viagra stimulated bull or get a good read on a dead armadillo?

You would think that learning poker down on the farm would mean that I am a fairly skilled at H.O.R.S.E. The fact is, that down in Flatpan, we don’t play any H.O.R.S.E... we don’t even play C.O.W. We do play a game called A.S.S. – jacks or better with the jacks played upside down or bottoms up – but I’m the only one here who plays the game really well. We also play a game called C.A.L.F. That’s two hours of Canasta, then two hours of Anaconda (pass two to the left and one

who frequently shows signs of hesitation when betting a wide range of hands, strong or weak. You should always observe a player first and be reasonably sure the pattern applies to them before basing big decisions on that information.



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to the right) follow that with two hours of Liars-Poker Missouri style (a form of Indian poker with blindfolds and cattle prods) and finally two hours of Fish (or “go fish” for purists). I didn’t finish that well in our last tournament but Hey! – I did spike a runner-runner thousand to one shot to eliminate my parole officer from the tourney.

My last major tournament actually started in the parking lot when I backed the trailer hitch on my flatbed into the tournament director’s new Mercedes-Benz. What made it worse, the son of a gun was inside the car when I did it. He didn’t seem to appreciate my comments about my being “a scratch player” or “It was nice bumping into you.” Gee, talk about rubbing someone the wrong way. I shrugged it off and went and got in line for the tournament. I waited in line for an hour and a half only to find out it was actually the buffet line. The buffet cost \$17.50. By the time I finished eating and located the actual sign in table, I was told (by the tournament director himself) that I was too late to sign up for the tournament. Including the buffet cost, I saved \$132.50 by not entering. The potato salad at the buffet (it smelled sort of funny) was not too good, and four times on the way home I threw up like seasick jackal. Talk about gut check time. Who says poker’s not a sport? All things considered, it was my best finish to date in a major tournament.

Well, I gotta go do some chores, but Hey, if you’re in the Flatpan area and looking for a little no-limit action – any stakes you like – my pigs are game... as long as you’ll take their markers.



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# FREEROLL

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# Mental Game Fish?

If you are reading this article, it's likely you are not a poker fish. Most people who read poker articles, and in particular strategy articles, tend to work hard on their game and are hard to associate with the term 'fish' – which we tend to use to describe purely recreational players.

You may, however, be a Mental Game Fish.

There is so much strategy advice out there on the technical aspects of the game that it is not hard for a novice player to become a very tough competitor in a short amount of time. The same cannot be said for the mental side of poker. The psychological aspects of the game are still shrouded in mystery and misunderstood – even though mindset issues like tilt can have such a profound impact on your bottom line.

In my book, *The Mental Game of Poker*, I use the term Mental Game Fish to highlight how far behind most players' mental games are from their technical poker game. Don't be too concerned if you are a mental game fish – most poker players are, including some of the very best.

You may be a solid winning poker player who recognizes the shortcomings of a bad player, but as far as the mental game is concerned, you are likely no different. A solid player is a mental game fish if they:

1. Change a proven winning strategy because they are running bad/hot.
2. Never recognize when someone has played well against them and/or believe everyone they play against is bad and just gets lucky.

3. Try to win every hand.
4. Think the outcome of a hand can be changed by shouting, praying, or playing a favorite hand.
5. Get frustrated when a bad player plays badly and they even educate them as to why they are bad.
6. Read a poker book cover to cover and think they know everything in it.
7. Watch some of Phil Galfond's training videos and think they should now be able to crush the game like him.
8. Believe that they are cursed or that other people are luckier than they are.
9. Play badly when the stakes are too small for them to care.
10. Tell bad beat stories to anyone that will listen, while doing nothing to improve how they react to bad beats.

If any of these sound familiar, your next question should be, "how do I stop from being a mental game fish?" The answer is simple, the same way you stopped being a poker fish—by working on your game. Only in this case you're working on your mental game.

Just as is true when improving your poker game, the quality of instruction and the amount of work put in often determines the winners and the losers. Don't think there are losers in the mental game? How many players do you know who are very skilled but can't stop from busting their account or destroying big chunks of their bankroll?

The mental game can't make you more knowledgeable about how to play QJo from the button at an aggressive table, but it's what allows you to consistently utilize the knowledge you already have.

Think about how much your big poker mistakes cost you. These are caused by mental errors not poker errors. You know the right play. You're just not executing what you know because of a flaw in your mental game. Didn't know these big mistakes were caused by mental game issues? This is further proof that you're a mental game fish, and it's time to get to work.



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