

No Limit Holdem Advanced Strategy

Your Typical No Limit Holdem Game

I think there is a problem with most strategy books available for no limit holdem: They are all based on the premise that you are going to be playing against good opponents. Sure there are going to be some decent players at any level -- at least hard to get money out of -- but by and large, you'll be playing against novices. As poker has gotten more popular over the past couple years, there has been a greater flow of information for these new players, which has changed low limit NL holdem games in two ways: First, these new players all think they have an edge because they are playing what they consider to be "tight aggressive." Secondly, the games have changed to have more tighter players than looser players. A little knowledge is dangerous though and with any strategy, there is a counter strategy. Next, let's make a distinction between who your opponents are: You aren't playing against Phil Hellmuth, you are playing against the guy who read his book. You aren't playing against Dolye Brunson, you are playing against the kid who read Super System. You may find yourself in this same category -- which is fine. You are starting out, have read some literature and are trying to apply that to the cash games you play in. Note, this article can be applied to no limit holdem tournaments too, but it is primarily for cash games. One thing you may notice if you play what you consider a tight aggressive game in no limit holdem is that you make a little, but not much. You wait for AA, KK or AK, only to have everyone fold or you get bad beaten, while at the same time you see someone else who doesn't seem to be playing very well by your standards yet he/she has 5x their buy-in. The goal of this article is to turn you into that player, so you can consistently take down the chips in these loose passive lower limit games.

Comments About This Article

I'm not going to go out of my way with this piece to make the transitions well. I'm going to take a relaxed format since many of the things I want to discuss are just single tips. Like I said above, this is primarily for no limit holdem cash games (like the ones you'll find online). The concepts could be applied to tournaments too, but often times you play more frugally/aggressively in a tournament since you have a limited amount of time to earn. In cash games your goal is to get the most money and you're less concerned about bleeding some chips off with calls preflop. I don't want to qualify these tips into a certain limit/stakes. In other words, I'm not going to say that these concepts only work in games with blinds \$10/20 and below. Instead, I think you should look for the type of game it is and then formulate your strategy. You might find some low limit games that are really aggressive, so you'll have to tighten up. On the other hand you might find some middle limit games that are tight, but more passive so you can play more hands. The defining feature of a game is how often there are raises preflop. If no one will ever let you limp in, you'll have play better starting hands unless the people play very poorly post flop.

Limit Holdem Versus No Limit Holdem

NLH is different from LH in many respects, but the most important one is flexibility it gives you preflop in starting hand selection: In no limit holdem, an experienced player can play far more hands profitably than in limit holdem. How many more? Way more! The first reason is that there are more ways to win in no limit holdem than in limit holdem. Bluffs are more effective, hands are less likely to get showdowns, and people chase less. The second and more important reason why you can play looser in no limit holdem is that the upside is far greater in NLH. Let's do a quick comparison. Let's say you take a hand like 77 against a preflop raiser in limit holdem knowing full well that he has you beat so far -- he/she raises preflop and you cold call. You have already invested two small bets. Most of the time you'll miss the flop and have a hard time playing well after. The best case scenario is that you'll flop a set and get paid off -- this your upside. Your upside would probably be around three big bets and four small bets (two bets preflop, call the flop, raise the turn, bet the river, plus the blinds). So you have invested two bets to get back 10 bets, if you just see the flop. Notice that 2/10 is a 1/5 or a 4:1, the odds of you taking your 77 against a bigger pair. But you don't break even on this play since against the raiser because it is very hard to play 77 well since so many overcards hit and when you get outdrawn you pay off way more. Now let's do the same thing with no limit holdem. Let's say someone raises three times the big blind preflop and I call after limping in with 77. If I hit my set with a flop that my opponent also likes, my upside just isn't 10 bets. My upside is his whole chip stack. We can take this line of reasoning one step farther, since 77 isn't that loose of a call, let's say I call with 86s. If I hit, I win a huge pot, but if I miss, I just lose 3x the big blind -- which is tiny in comparison with the average pot that gets action. See this isn't possible in limit holdem. If you call someone's preflop raise with a suited connector heads up, in the long run you'll lose. It just a math game. If he starts with AA and you start with 67s, after a while, he will have all your chips since the initial investment is so great with what you could potentially get in return. Not true in NLH.

Position With Respect To The Raiser

In large multi-way pots, I like to be to the right of the raiser. Early position is actually better here since you get to see what everyone else does after he bets. You check, he bets, and then you have a good idea how the hand will shape up before you commit any chips. The worst place to be in multi-way pots is on the seat right to the next of the raiser, since his preflop bet will usually put you in trouble since you'll have no idea what anyone will do behind you. In heads up or threeway pots, you want to be in last position whenever possible. How much I value this position is often enough to decide whether or not I call or fold a hand. For example, I may pay the preflop raise with a suited connector or suited gapper, like 46, if I am after my opponent, but if I limp in with the same hand and it gets raised, I might muck. Having position on your opponent gives you leverage for winning the hand if you miss, plus you can make more on the hand if you hit. If for example you hit a flush and he checks to you, it puts him at a big disadvantage because he has no idea what you have. He has no good way of countering position. One more tip in regards to no

limit holdem position play is: Always base the strength of your hand on not only its merit, but how many players are yet to act behind you. Again, this can be enough of a factor to make a calling or raising hand a folding hand. For example, let's say you have QJ in the big blind, lot's of people are in, and the small blind comes out firing into a flop like this: J - 4 - 3. This is a folder for me. I may very well have the first bettor beat, but the chance of me beating everyone else in the hand is low. Why get involved? I'll muck this small pot and wait till I have a stronger holding, like J4 here.

Building A Pot In No Limit Holdem

In these lower limit games, you'll have a lot of people limping in (just calling preflop). What I will do when I am in late position, or even sometimes in early position, is to just double the size of the big blind or a little more -- just enough that everyone will still call. What this does is create larger pots so that if I do hit, each subsequent bet will be larger and I'll win more. You aren't committing yourself to the pot. I like to do this with rag hands, like 96s or 53s, small pocket pairs, etc. I build a pot knowing that many of the tighter players may have limped in with big hands in hopes to trap me. In turn I flip the bitch on them and flop something weird, punishing them for not raising preflop with their big pair or AK. In addition to increasing the pot size when you are in, this also paves the way for more action on your good hands. If people see you raising a lot preflop they will feel more comfortable when you raise a lot with a good hand. To put this into context, imagine an old guy who didn't raise all day and then made a big raise (preflop or postflop), what would you assume? You give the guy his respect, right? On the other hand if you see someone raising 30 hands preflop, you feel much more confident with your JJ against him. One major problem I see with a lot of newer players is that they value slow playing too much. Any hand that I can easily get trapped in myself, I like to play straightforwardly. I don't mess around with KK or AA by just limping in, unless I know someone will raise in which I can reraise and limit the competition. The worst thing you can do is try to get cute by limping in with AA only to get hammered by someone with 84s. Don't leave yourself hard decisions later in the hand by not raising enough preflop. If there are a number of limpers already, you can raise even more than you normally would to offset the odds they are getting. So if you typically raised 3 or 4x the big blind, you could raise 5 or 6x.

Risking A Lot For A Little

You should pick up your share of small pots by betting with position when everyone checks, but you should never risk a bunch of chips for little return. Speculative bets should be done only when the return is very large and the investment is very low. You should be interested in taking down big pots and creating an environment where you'll get that opportunity, while at the same time limiting your own risk. There is no reason to go all-in against someone else with just 55. That is the classic example of when you are right you'll only be a slight favorite -- if he has AK or two overcards -- but when you are wrong you are a huge underdog -- if he has a bigger pair.

Anxious Or Frustrated Players

One thing that I have found is that when people aren't running well or getting any cards, or if they have a short stack, they are more likely to bluff and put their chips in when the signs tell them otherwise. Let me give you an example of how to exploit this. Let's say you have a hand like TT, and one of the short stacks is in one of the blinds. Instead of raising a typical amount, raise a little less than half his stack. Often times that will coax the player into reraising all-in. I think part of it is that they feel you are trying to push them out of the pot because you have more chips than them and that influences them to fight back. Secondly, I think overbetting is generally confusing and again their first impression is that you are weak (why else would you raise that much if you actually had a good hand?) and they are going to fight back. This brings me to my next tip.

Limping With AA, KK, AK In Late Position

Never will I do this in a cash game. I will reraise or flat call another person's raise with these hands in the back in hopes to trap them later in the hand, but I do that with full knowledge that I have them beat. I wouldn't allow the blinds to play for cheap so if the initial raise wasn't enough, I would bump it again. If on the other hand no one has opened yet and I have AA, KK or AK in the back, I'm likely to actually overbet the pot instead of just raising 3 or 4x the big blind. Again, this is confusing to people and if they have a hand like JJ, TT, 99, you are likely to get reraised. Overbetting the pot preflop makes them assume weakness and their response is to try and punish you (which is exactly what you want). The last thing they think is that you would risk not getting any action with your AA. By raising more than is typical you are telling the other players you don't want them to call. They may put you on a hand like AJ or a small pair. If they reraise you, you can just flat call with KK and AA and then see the flop. This is consistent with what they already assume: You tried a move and got caught. Then when you raise later in the hand after they are committed and the last hand they will put you on is a big pair.

The Art of Trapping

Trapping in no limit holdem is what I consider the meat and potatoes of the game. Trapping at it's fundamental level is the process of getting an opponent to overvalue his hand, and bet it as such, and undervalue your hand. The primary component of trapping is deception. How can a good, tight aggressive player who plays only the top 10 holdem hands, use deception? The first way these tight players can trap is to play a hand weakly. For example, someone may just limp in with AA or KK and hope they can get a lot of money out of a weaker hand since no one expects the big pair. Secondly, the tight player can use deception by betting a weak hand strongly. For example, maybe the tight player missed the flop with AK yet still bets it to the river. Notice the inherent risk in both of these strategies. In the first way, to limp with a big pair can have disastrous results if someone else hits a big flop. I see this happen all the time, a tight player gets cute preflop and then pays for it after the flop when they can't lay down a the hand. In the second way of a tight player using deception -- to bluff -- it also takes on unneeded risk. Bluffing is

part of the game, but having to defend all your preflop raises into weak opponents isn't very fun or profitable. An example of this might also be a tight player raising with KK, then betting the whole way into an Ace high flop against a weak player. It is hard for a tight player like this to get away from a hand since they wait so long for them. If you play more hands, the strength of the hand is defined by its postflop value, not preflop. KK doesn't look any nicer than 84, after a good flop. Getting married to a hand is a big weakness for tight players. One starts to feel entitled to win just because you have waited so long. This leads to frustration and finally a bust out. You'll hopefully be there to stack their chips. As a player who sees more flops, you'll have more opportunity to flop big hands against these types of opponents. When you do flop something big, there are a number of ways you can get the result you want. The first way of deceiving someone is to obviously slow play and play the hand more weakly than it merits. Get them committed to the pot and then pull the trigger. The difference between when you do this and the guy above does it is that the opponents have no idea what you hold since you are in more hands and you base your hand strength on the flop value. Playing more hands has a huge deception effect. Often times player's response for just a call on the flop is to bet big on the turn to protect their hand against your loose calling. That's the perfect time to raise and suck them in. Another kind of trapping you can do is to get an emotional response from the player. An example of getting him to put in his chips with the worst hand is to check raise him twice in the same hand for a small amount of money. Or you might overbet a pot, like going all-in on the river. Anything that seems confusing to people will make you money. This why with your lock hands, like a set, you shouldn't just try to get value on the river. I like to put in a large bet and hopefully get them to bust. I'm not in there to nickel and dime it. I would rather not get called on the river 3 times and then bust someone on the fourth, than to just value bet a little hoping to get a call each time. Note that players do want to show their hands down, they don't like feeling pressured out of a pot.

The Ideal No Limit Holdem Game For This Strategy

The type of game that this strategy will work best with, is a game in which many people see the flop, and there are usually not that many raises preflop. Most online lower limit tables will be like this. Certain elements of this article will work at any game, but if the table is constantly raised when you try to limp in, you'll need to tighten up a bit and play more only from late position with your marginal hands. Don't fall into the line of thinking that one strategy beats all games, it doesn't. A good poker player adjusts his play based on his opponents. The tougher the game, the more fluid and flexible you'll need to be to beat it. No one set strategy will work, you'll have to mix it up.

The All Mighty Set, 2 - 5's

I love little pocket pairs in NLH, especially in games where the competition is tight. First of all, when the competition is tight, people are playing big hands, hands like AK, AQ, KQs, big pairs, etc. When you flop a set with a tiny pair, it is totally innocuous. Just think how bad you can punish someone when he limps in with KQ and flops K-Q-2 when you

have 22. I play any pocket pair, in any position. I'll even pay the raiser preflop to see the flop. So if I limp in with 22 and get raised 3 or 4x the big blind and I think my opponent is likely to get trapped, I'll call.

River Bets When You Know You Are Beat

An important concept when playing NLH is how you deal with river bets when you think you are beat. Let's take an example, say you have a good hand and bet it to the river, only for the flush draw to complete. Now your opponent, who is in earlier position than you, bets. Do you call or fold? Many people fold to bets that they shouldn't. A bet that is small in relation to the pot needs to be called. What goes through their heads though is, "my opponent obviously has a flush and he is trying to bet an amount I'll call, so I'll fold." That's incorrect. If you have a \$1000 pot and the opponent makes a tiny bet of \$200 into it on the end, you have to call as if he didn't have the flush. You need to pay off some hands. You don't do this though if the bet is large. Then the only time you would call is if you think you are good still.

Online NLH Minimum Bets

Often times in these little games I'll see someone just press "bet." The pot could be \$600 and someone just bets \$20 into it, the minimum. 99% of the time that is a weak bet, so don't be afraid to raise it. If you get reraised, fine you can reevaluate your holding, but don't give looks at the turn and river for this cheap. Also, if you do have interest in the pot, you'll be happy you found out where you were at early in the hand when it was cheaper.

Defensive Betting

Let me talk about a hand that happened yesterday to illustrate defensive betting in NLH. I had 99 on the button. Everyone folded to the player to my right who raised just a small amount. 99 is the kind of hand that I just want one opponent with so I reraised. The big blind reraised me and the first player folded. I called. The flop came back and it was King high, the only overcard. The guy from the blind came out firing. Because I had position, my two best options were to either fold or to raise. The fold would be the safe play, but his bet in relation to the pot size wasn't very large. I figured that either he had a very strong hand, or was afraid of the king, so I raised. He immediately reraised me. I mucked. I raised to find out information on how to play the rest of the hand and I raised in case he had a hand that wouldn't like a King high flop (like QQ, JJ, TT, etc). Defensive betting can be used at any point in the game. It works best with position. A defensive bet may mean beating KK into an Ace high flop against one player, betting the turn for the same amount, then checking the river. A defensive bet helps to keep you from getting bluffed. Another example might be if you are in charge the whole hand and then the flush hits on the river. By betting some, not a lot, you force your opponent to double that size for a bluff. If the person raises, you can fold, but it makes their chance of forcing you off your

hand harder. Lastly, defensive betting works well heads up, but not so well in multi-way pots. You need to always play more cautiously when you are up against multiple players.

Value Betting

A value bet is a bet that you make when you aren't sure that you are ahead, but you are leaning that way. An example happened yesterday. I had QQ and the flop was 8-8-5-T-8. I was against a tight preflop raiser. I had position and just called. He had bet the whole way and on the river, bet half of his stack. I decided to put him all-in. He called with AK and lost. This may not be the ideal example of a value bet, but it does represent the key feature: you aren't sure if you are the best, but you think so, so you put in some more chips. Value betting isn't applicable when you have a huge holding, like a set or straight. The value bet instead is when you have a flush, but not the biggest flush. I think the only real tip I have for when to bet for value is: A check usually means what it is, weakness. People rarely check raise the river. If someone checks, consider it a sign that whatever is out there scares them, so you put in a moderate bet that you expect to be called.

Going Against The Odds

How can anyone successfully go against the odds? Math is math, and there no changing that, but in poker a hand's value, how it is played, isn't only relevant to the present. How you play the current hand can set someone up for a later hand. We've already talked about how in NLH, the upside is always great, so sometimes you should look for ways to play against a big hand. One spot I like to dribble some chips away in is rainbow flops with gutshots. A rainbow flop is one in which there are no immediate flush draws, each card is of different suit. Yesterday I had an opportunity to call one of these. I had 45off in the big blind. One person raised, another called, so I called. The flop was A - Q - 2. Notice that a 3 would give me the absolute nuts. The opponents were both very tight players. I wouldn't have been surprised if the raiser had a set or top two. I paid to see the turn, even though the immediate odds weren't in my favor. I missed and folded. Had I hit my 10:1, I think there is a good chance I would have busted him. I would have probably bet the turn, a medium amount. Then he would have raised me with glee, only to have me go all-in. Most likely he would put me on a smaller two pair. The spot that I put him there is almost impossible to fold in, especially if you haven't seen a good hand all day and finally hit a flop. Should you always make these plays? No. To call off your money with 45off routinely isn't ideal. Occasionally you should call though to mix up your play. There is a nice by-product of this too: When you call a lot of hands, and see a lot of flops, people assume you play anything. When the flop comes back low and they miss, often times you can get a look at the turn and river card just for calling the flop. Also, since you sometimes call the flop and then fold on the turn, it gets them into the right place for when you set them up with a big hand. Their response for a perceived loose player will be to bet more on the turn to protect their hand, which is exactly what you want when you hit.

Fearing Raises

When you first start playing holdem, it is scary. You always think that someone has a big hand out there trying to sucker you in. Most of the time though, they don't. Don't fear raises until they happen, then respect them. An example might be if you have A2 and the flop is A-Q-4 and everyone checks to you. Sure, you don't have a great kicker, but it is more likely that everyone doesn't have an Ace than someone is trying to slow play. If they call, bet again. At that point if they raise, you know what to do, but other wise, full steam ahead.

Weird Hands

Even when you are playing your best, there are going to be a couple hands a day that you can't help but lose in. An example just happened to me yesterday when I had JJ against an under the gun player. I raised a lot preflop, and he called. The flop came back with 944. There was no way I could put him on a 4 so I paid the hand off. Do I fault myself for that play? No, if I were to always fold in spots where there is a lot wagered, I wouldn't ever make much. I was actually more concerned about him having an overpair than a 4. Another hand happened yesterday too, I had 87 and the flop was 8-7-3. I was against a tight player. He beat me with a set of 7's. That was very unlikely and I didn't have a way to get out of the hand. Likewise though, I had KQ into a KQ2 (all diamonds flop), I made two tough calls to bust someone and I got all my money back and then some.

Trouble Hands

Let's say that you are limping in with a wide range of hands against tight passive players (wide range meaning anything from 86 to Q2). The hands that will be most dangerous for you will be ones that compete with the same cards they have. Hands like: AJ, KJ, KQ, AQ, JJ, TT, etc. Those hands easily make second best against a tight player. You want to play hands that when they hit, will be very strong. A hand like AJ when you get action from a tight player is usually a loser. But on the other hand if you have a hand like 96s against his AK when he didn't play it properly preflop to get you out, you can win a big pot. Something that I don't hear at all in poker literature is the concept of competing cards. If everyone is looking for good hands, like AQ or AK, what happens to all the low cards? By playing low cards sometimes you give yourself more chances to win yet you don't take on that much extra risk since most of the tight players won't be competing for the same hands. Most of the hands you play you just see the flop and fold. Since everyone is expecting you to raise your good hands, I sometimes just limp in with AK from early position. Note that if you do this, you are playing it with the chance someone may trap you, but you might also win a big pot because no one puts you on that hand. I don't do this from late position though, nor would I do it with QQ or KK.

Using these types of tactics, you should be able to extract more money from the tight passive players that the last two years of poker has created. You'll see more flops, be less married to each hand, get free cards, set more traps, be unreadable, more deceptive, and you'll be less trappable yourself.

