

CHAPTER 18

NOT CHECK-RAISING VERSUS COLD CALLERS

Keep Going, Keep Thinking

I was in Los Angeles the first time I made this play.

It was folded around to an aggressive, thinking reg in the cutoff. He opened. The button was another aggressive and intelligent reg. He cold called. I called from the big blind with A♦-8♦.

The board came 10♣-6♣-5♣. I checked.

I was 23 at the time. The buy-in for this tournament was \$10,000. I didn't have that kind of money, but that didn't stop me from playing. I had been fairly nitty so far at this particular table.

The first aggressive reg bet. The second one called fairly quickly.

The thought flitted through my head, "I wish I had A♣-8♣ and not A♦-8♦."

The action was back on me. For some reason I was still holding on to my cards.

I thought, "But if I had A♣-8♣, I wouldn't get action if I check-raised here."

The two regulars stared at me. For some reason, they weren't hiding the fact that they didn't want me to raise.

"I wouldn't get action," I kept thinking, "because whenever someone check-raises here they have a made flush."

I grabbed one of my stacks of chips and fired in a nearly pot-sized raise. We were deep stacked. They had room to maneuver. But they didn't.

The first player folded quickly. The second player followed suit.

It wasn't until I was in my motel room later that night that I realized why that play worked.

Let's think of the ranges two aggressive regs will have in that situation.

The cutoff is opening a large percentage of hands. The button is not the kind of guy to have a disciplined cold calling range. He wants to get in there and mix it up.

When the cutoff continuation bets on that board, that doesn't mean a whole lot. He could have a club in his hand or a weak pair. He doesn't need much.

The button would consider raising with a made flush or set for value or just because the board is so coordinated. When he calls without much thought, he is likely to have a pair or a decent club.

This all raises the question, "What hands do they have that want me check-raising here?"

It's possible the cutoff flopped a flush and continuation bet it, but that is going to make up a small percentage of his range. Every made flush combination you can think of is exactly one combo. There are far more pairs and missed high cards in his range, combination wise.

If I check-raise around the size of the pot, my bluff needs to work 50% of the time. That means I need to know they are folding more than half the time. The only way I can be reasonably sure of that is if I am convinced they fold pairs most of the time.

That doesn't seem like much of a stretch. If we are targeting this play correctly then we are selecting good regulars who can fold a pair. We are only launching this play when we have a tighter image. If the whole table already knows that we're there to gamble, it is unlikely this play is going to work. We should fold in that instance.

But in this particular situation, I would not be surprised if either player folded a 10. How good would you feel with Q-10 and no club if a tighter player put in a huge check-raise on that board?

I've made that fold before. There are players I've played with for more than a decade who have never check-raised that board without a flush.

This is what you are trying to avoid. In multiway pots, many players play exactly the same way. With two pair or better, they start ramming and jamming because they assume somebody has something. With one pair, they call most bets because they don't want to build a huge pot multiway, but they also don't want to fold. With a high card, they fold to any bet.

Most players will not notice if you're this predictable. You'll get away with this strategy in most games. The problems will arise when you move up. I am a moderately successful pro. I've made good money for years exploiting players who are predictable post-flop in multiway pots. If you deal with the guys above my pay grade in higher buy-ins, then you're going to get fleeced even faster.

All you need to do to muddy the waters versus regs is throw in some change-ups.

For you poor souls who didn't get to watch baseball growing up, a change-up is when the pitcher throws the ball like it is going to be fastball but then it comes across the plate 15mph slower than usual. The batter gets revved up and swings at the "fastball" before the pitch actually crosses the plate. They doubt their timing from that point forward. They can't feel secure swinging like they did before.

In poker, you need to throw in some reversals and counters. You can't only check-raise multiple players in a multiway pot with made hands. If you play with the same guys in a cash game every day, that will get predictable.

If you're playing complete strangers, bet big in multiway pots with a hand and bet small without one. They call with most of their calling range (pairs) regardless of what bet you use. Buy extra cards and bluff with cheap bets when you don't have much of the board. Bomb it when you do have the best hand. Most random recreational players won't adjust, especially if you're playing on anonymous sites without HUDs that invite recreational players.

If you play against the same players every day online and live then you need to pay attention to what hands you show down when your varied bet sizes get exposed. If everyone is watching hockey on TV, you don't have to change much. If everyone is paying attention, then you can consider betting large as a bluff in a future multiway pot. If you have solid regs in the pot, it's likely they'll fold mediocre pairs (most of their calling range) when they've only seen you bet large with top pairs.

To be honest, if I'm ever in a cash game where a guy can make that fold, I'll change tables. There are enough loose games out there that I know I don't need to deal with those good players. But you will have no choice in tournaments. If they've seen you do something comically exploitative, ask yourself if you can use that against them in a future hand. Keep them guessing.

CHAPTER 19

NOT USING SMALL BETS MULTIWAY

Try This Sometime

You open 5♣-4♣ from the cutoff. The button cold calls you. The big blind calls you as well. You are deep stacked at the beginning of a session. Your opponents have large stacks too.

The board comes A♣-5♥-2♠. The big blind checks to you. What do you do here? Do you check? Do you bet?

Many players check. Others bet half pot. Both options pose problems.

Do either of these players know you well? Have they seen you make a large bet in a similar situation with an ace? If they did see, are they the types of players to remember it?

None of these questions get to the heart of the matter, however. The true question we should be asking ourselves is can anyone raise with an ace here?

If the answer is, “No, they would need two pair or better before they raise” then the right play is to bet small. You should bet 25% of the pot.

If you bet 25% of the pot your bet will need to work 20% of the time as a bluff to be immediately profitable. Your opponents will both need to defend collectively 80% of the time.

If they call or raise 75% of the time, that means your bet is going to fail three times out of four. However, you will still be making money.

You’re not betting with nothing. You have a gutshot, a pair, and a back-door flush draw. You want to see turn cards.

If your opponents can't raise with A-10 here, then betting larger makes little sense. There are only a couple of hands your opponent can have here.

By the way, whenever someone asks me how to hand range, I always tell them to start this way. "Ask yourself about two pair or better hands, one pairs, high cards, and draws. Just remember the pre-flop action and ask yourself what hands he has in those categories. Add the post-flop deductions to your analysis to narrow down those categories or even eliminate them."

If you start with those categories, you'll be able to deal with many basic regs and recreational players. The problem most new players have is they try to think about every possible individual hand any opponent could have and they get lost in the stress of the moment. Just start with those categories and you'll be well on your way to learning hand reading.

Let's go through those categories in this example. Your opponents can't have draws because there are no flush or straight draws on this board. They would have a straight with 3-4, but that seems an unlikely hand for either player to have.

Two pair or better? Yes, either player could have A-5 or A-2. The button likely would have A-5s and A-2s. He might not cold call with the unsuited hands. Pocket twos and pocket fives make perfect sense for both players as well.

How about one pair combinations?

How about aces? Yes, they have aces a large percentage of the time. Those are popular hands to play pre-flop.

5-x and 2-x seem less likely because those are terrible pre-flop hands. They're less likely to be in the cold caller's range than the big blind. They're not impossible for either player to have, but we'll discount them.

High cards? Yes, a number of suited connectors and broadways missed this board.

This is an example of the kind of hand reading you can do at the table. It gives you a much better focus as you continue to play. As you can see, anyone can do this kind of work. It's not perfect and it's certainly not exact, but even basic hand reading will put you ahead of 99% of opponents in looser recreational games.

Of course, if you practice this kind of work in private, you will become much better at doing it on the fly when you're on the felt. That's why you need to study whenever you can find some spare minutes. Even if you commit 15 minutes a day that will help you tremendously over years and years.

Let's return to the situation at hand. If you normally bet half the pot here, look at the ranges we're considering and ask how that bet interacts with them.

If you usually check here, ask what your opponents will do with their ranges.

There are numerous reasons we can consider a small bet here. If your opponents have two pair or better, they're likely raising regardless of what you bet. You're folding to a raise anyway. If you bet smaller and then fold, you will save a big blind or two. That adds up to a ton of money over the years.

If your opponents have an ace, are they going to raise it? They should raise with aces to get more value, but the average player struggles to do that. If they get three-bet on this board after raising with A-10, they get furious with themselves. They opt for a call to avoid this fate.

It's difficult for either player to have a good ace. Did that thought already go through your head? The big blind probably would have squeezed with A-K and A-Q. It's possible the button would have three-bet A-K, A-Q, A-J, and even A-10.

That makes a continuation bet here more desirable.

If you bet small are either of these players going to raise A-9? If they're not going to raise that hand, are they going to raise any of the weaker aces?

If they have high cards, they are going to fold to any bet you put out there. It's a multiway pot and the board came ace high. They assume somebody has something.

They can't have draws because no draws are available.

If you bet more than a quarter of the pot, what hand is going to fold that wasn't folding to our smaller bet? It's possible you could fold out 5-6s to a larger bet, but not likely. People don't like folding pairs to a single flop bet.

When you think through the ranges like this, the smaller bet makes more sense. Additionally, if the big blind is the only one to call, we just effectively purchased a turn and river. Most of our opponents will not lead the turn once they call our flop bet. And we can check back to see the river for free if we want. This is attractive when we have a gutshot, pair, and backdoor flush draw.

We shouldn't make this small bet with zero equity. Our bet only needs to succeed 20% of the time, but our opponents are going to have a ton of aces. We do want to make this bet when we have a hand that doesn't exactly work as a check-calling, check-folding, or check-raising hand.

The button will likely bet the flop with all his aces. If you allow him to se-

lect the sizing, you might not like what he puts out there. If you check-raise, it's unlikely any good ace is going to fold. Check-folding is too tight given all your draws.

Again, this play rests on a couple of questions. If we change around the positions but not the board, we can ask ourselves the same questions. How good are his top pairs? Is he raising any of them?

If we raise from under the gun and UTG+1 cold calls, it's much more likely that A-K or A-Q is in his range. If we try this cute bet, we will get raised a larger percentage of the time. We should consider checking there.

Some of you at this point might be asking yourself, "Wait, you're saying bomb the pot there with a good ace, but bet small when you want to see the turn? Won't that become wildly obvious to our opponents?"

No. No it won't.

You are someone who reads poker books. Your opponents probably do not work on their game. They are on their cellphones during every deal. They might buy poker books, but they don't read them. They might learn poker buzzwords, but they don't understand them.

Most people play poker to enjoy themselves. When the flop is coming out, they are not thinking about their day at work. When they call a river and get to see your hand, it is a thrill. They don't work on their game. It's no different than a group of guys going to play a round of golf. Sure, they will talk technique sometimes, but they don't know what they're doing.

Most opponents don't pay much attention during live games. Whenever you show down a hand, pay attention to who is looking at the cards.

I don't know why people do this, but some people will flat out broadcast the fact they are paying attention. Perhaps they think it is an intimidation tactic? I couldn't tell you.

Make a note of who saw you do what play and try to change it up on them. If you are paying attention to other people's showdowns, don't let anyone know you're paying attention. Look at the cards then look at the TV. Have the board already in mind when the showdown comes out.

Online fewer people are paying attention than you think. If you're playing anonymous poker, people don't get enough hands with you to make a read.

If you are playing in tougher games, then you will need to pay attention to what pots you've played with a person. That is where note taking will come in.