Chapter 4

Game Sessions

What now? What earth-shattering truth are you about to utter?

– Sophocles

Here are complete hand histories and commentary from three heads-up matches and a couple of six-handed sessions. Note a couple of things here. I don't play perfectly and I make no attempt to hide it. Even when someone is playing his best poker, he is still making a lot of sub-optimal plays, which is part of the beauty of the game – the fact that everyone always plays poorly in comparison to the perfect game means that there is always room to play better and earn more money.

It's impossible to analyze poker hands and come to definite conclusions about what was a good play, what was a bad play, and by how much was it good or bad. The value of this section is not so much in the final judgments I make and the corresponding good or bad plays that occur but in seeing all the factors that enter into a decision. You can take all the concepts and start factoring them into your own decisions. Over time, with much study and repetition, your judgment will improve.

Another point is that everyone plays differently. Another beautiful part of poker is that it allows people to play in extremely different ways and still

be skilled and win money. For this reason, it's important to focus not so much on the specifics of the lines I take but on the thought processes and ideas behind what is happening.

Session 1: $1/$2 NLHE, Six-Handed

This is a sequence of hands from a six-handed $1/$2 NLHE game. The hands are not presented with all the details, such as each player's seat position and exact stack size, but I believe the relevant information is there.

Hand 1

James ($350) raises to $7 and everyone folds to me ($200) in the BB with K♠-10♠. I call. The flop is A♠-9♣-4♠. I need to formulate a general plan. It is possible to bet and call a raise, bet and fold to a raise, bet and re-raise, check-raise, or check-call here. I am not thrilled about the more aggressive options in this situation for two reasons. First, I just have a flush draw with no straight or overcard draws. Second, the board contains an ace, and if the opponent has an ace, then he is probably not folding, and the bluff part of a semi-bluff loses some of its value. I check with the intention of calling, and he checks behind.

The turn is the 4♥. Betting out and check-raising are both options. A check-raise has merit because if he bets, he will probably fold to my check-raise, since he appears to be weak (he checked the flop), and even if he calls, I have outs and implied odds. It will be a disaster if I check-raise and he re-raises all-in, but since he checked behind on the flop, it is very unlikely. Also, a check-raise has merit because I usually have a weak hand when I check to an opponent twice, and he could exploit that by always betting on the turn when I check to him. A check-raise protects against that.

The problem with a check-raise is that given his flop check, he will probably just check behind on the turn, which might get him a free showdown and a win with any weak made hand. Also, it will give him a chance to bluff me

out on the river (I will miss my outs most of the time). So, I bet out on the turn for $13 and he folds.

Check-calling the turn is quite bad, perhaps even worse than check-folding. It allows the evil opponent to value-bet and protect his mediocre holdings instead of folding them when I bet out. A check-call gives him a chance to bluff me out on the river. Checking a flush draw here means that I would be playing too passively, checking too many hands to him on the turn, which makes it easy for him to win. Unless you have a specific reason for check-calling the turn, don't do it.

Hand 2

PMBAR ($62) raises to $7 and everyone folds.

Hand 3

Spades ($216) raises to $7, I call on the button with 4♥-6♥ and Crack ($220) calls in the SB. My call is loose, especially given that I have no reads so far on how Spades plays, and thus don't know what plan I should follow to exploit him. I should have folded here. With a call I am losing some EV, but a tiny amount, maybe a quarter's worth.

The flop comes A♠-6♦-K♥. Crack checks and Spades bets $16.50. I have a pair and outs to two pair, trips and a running flush draw. I also have absolute position, but my relative position is poor because Crack still has to act behind me, and if he ever raises in this spot it is a disaster for me. Also, Spades probably has a hand. He raised pre-flop, so he probably has high cards, and the flop connected with his range. Also, he is confident enough to bet into two people on the flop. He is representing a good hand, and I believe him. Even though I hit a pair, I cannot continue. I fold, as does Crack.

Hand 4

Spades raises to $7 and PM calls in the BB. PM has a short stack, so he cannot call with speculative hands on the basis of implied odds. He simply

needs high cards and pairs. But this is already the second hand he is playing out of four, and here he is calling out of position. I suspect he is a loose and sloppy player.

The flop comes A-K-2, and PM check-folds. Note that out of position, with PM's stack he probably should have just folded pre-flop with a hand like 6-6 or 9-10s, because this exact flop action will happen too often for him to profitably play those hands, which he apparently could have had.

Hand 5

I have red Q-Q and raise, second to act. James calls on the button. The flop comes 5♠-4♣-J♠. It is time to formulate a general plan. This is a good hand for playing a big pot. The board has draws, so if the opponent puts money in the pot, his hand range consists of all those draws (as opposed to a dry board like J-4-2 rainbow, where if he puts a lot of money in he cannot have a draw, and thus is more weighted towards sets) over which I have a large equity advantage. I could check-raise here, with the goal of building a big pot, but with no read that he will bet when checked to, it is too risky to allow him to check behind. I bet $14 and he calls.

The turn is the 8♥. This is a good card for me. It's not an overcard, which would be bad because it could scare the opponent, or could have hit the opponent and given him a better hand than mine. I bet out $32 and he folds.

It is unclear how to interpret this hand. He would never fold a flush draw or a good straight draw here. He most likely had a pair below jacks that didn't flop a set. Maybe he was making a bad and loose flop call with something like A-Q or 8-7. But maybe he just made a terrific fold with a pair of jacks, which would be a disaster for me. The action he took implies different strategies for me to adopt, but it is impossible to know what he was doing.

Hand 6

Crack raises to $7, Spades re-raises to $23 in the BB and Crack calls. I am not happy to see Spades re-raising before the flop. This shows aggression

and, especially against a raise from late position, this suggests he adapts to different situations.

The flop is J♠-8♠-7♠. Spades bets out $34 and Crack calls. The turn comes 7♣, which doesn't change much. Spades goes all-in and Crack calls. Spades has K♣-K♠ and Crack has 10♦-10♠. Crack got his money in with a tiny amount of equity. It seemed clear that Spades' hand range was weighted torwards A-K with at least one spade, and K-K or A-A, in which case Crack did not have proper equity to call. Crack was unlucky to be so dominated here, but this still averages out to a significantly negative-EV call. It is clear that Spades played his hand in a standard, solid, and aggressive manner. Crack overplayed his hand.

Hand 7

Crack raises, first to act, to $8 and James calls next. Here, I would never semi-bluff raise; I would only raise for value with a good hand. This is because Crack lost a big pot and is probably tilting and playing loose. Also, James is the player who earlier called my pre-flop raise on the button and floated the flop. Here, he calls with terrible position, which implies he is either a loose/bad player, or that his hand is strong. However, this is a good spot to widen my value-raising hand range to something as wide as A-J and 9-9. I fold 8-6. The flop comes A♥-5♥-4♠. Crack bets out $14 and James folds.

Hand 8

James opens to $7 UTG and wins the pot.

Hand 9

PM limps UTG for $2. PM is playing too passively and loose for his small stack. The way to take advantage of this is to value-raise in position with a wider hand range. This hand I have nothing, so I fold. It's folded to the BB, who checks. The flop goes bet-fold.

Hand 10

Second to act, Fraud ($200) raises to $7. I am next to act with 3♠-J♠. This is the first time he has played a hand, and I feel like he is just playing because he hasn't played yet. So far, other people have been raising and calling before it was his action, so he hasn't had a chance, but now that he does have a chance, he feels like "it is his turn," and he opens. It is important to note that he has exactly $200. This is compared to someone with a stack like $245, which indicates a player who is a bit looser, splashing around and winning some small pots. Fraud, on the other hand, doesn't do that. He apparently keeps losing his blinds and then reloading back to $200. I think he plays weak/tight. I raise him. I want him to fold, so I raise a little bigger than normal, to $29. It's folded around I win.

Hand 11

I fold 7-5 UTG. Next to act, Crack raises to $7 and wins the pot without a showdown. So far this table seems bad as far as table selection goes. No one has done anything crazy yet. There has been one big pot where two people had legitimate hands.

Hand 12

Fraud raises in the SB to $8. I am in the BB. I feel like he has a good hand. I read him as weak/tight, and then two hands later he raises right into me, the person who re-raised him. Weak/tight players don't adjust; they wait for good hands. So, when he bets into me, a person who just re-raised him, he is strong. Furthermore, he raised extra big to $8, more evidence he is strong. This is a hand where I just need to get out of the way. I would fold a hand as strong as K-J in position here.

Hand 13

James raises to $7 UTG and PM calls, next to act. The pattern repeats itself again and PM continues to play poorly. James bets the flop and wins the pot.

Hand 14

PM limps UTG and I raise on the button to $9 with K-10. This is what I want: position and high cards against him. I'm equally happy if he folds or calls. The problem is if someone else calls, and the real problem is when someone else raises. If anyone ever bluff-raises me here, that is a disaster.

The flop is Q-6-2o. The issue here in deciding whether to bet or check behind is that PM's small stack size allows him to more easily check-raise me all-in (with a marginal hand like eights). Even if he has something like Q-10, it would be better for me with bigger stacks where he would be more likely to call instead of raising, and then I would have another chance to hit three outs to a king. Normally I would say four outs to an ace, which I could bluff on, but this is the exact sort of opponent not to use the ace to bluff on. I bet $14, he raises all-in and I fold. This is bad luck. He could have folded pre-flop, I could have hit a hand on the flop or he could have folded the flop.

Hand 15

James raises in the SB and PM folds the BB.

Hand 16

I fold 7-5s UTG. This could be a raise or a fold. But no one is making crazy plays at this table so there is no reason to go out of my way to play a hand. James opens on the button and the SB and BB fold.

Hand 17

It's folded to me in the BB.

Hand 18

James opens UTG to $7 and wins the pot. James is playing the most actively at the table, but he hasn't done anything out of line. He is playing well.

Hand 19

It folds around to me on the button. I raise to $6 with K-2. This is a simple immediate-odds problem. Will my raise win the pot 2/3 of the time? I feel it will win about that often, but that I can win a bit more when someone calls and I hit a king, or that I can use my position to bluff them out post-flop. The blinds fold.

Hand 20

It's folded to me and I raise with 10-8 to $7. No one is doing anything interesting pre-flop, so I have to take advantage by raising pre-flop and winning the pot with nothing. They fold.

Hand 21

I am second to act with K-10 and raise to $7. Again, no one is doing anything special before the flop. This is a very straightforward table, so I will just raise and take down the blinds. Everyone folds.

Hand 22

It folds around to Spades in the SB. He raises and Fraud folds in the BB.

Hand 23

Spades raises to $6 in the button and wins the pot.

Hand 24

PM raises to $7, second to act, and Fraud calls on the button. PM probably has a good hand here since he raises here, having playing so passively so far. He bets the flop and Fraud folds. Fraud has played weak/tight this whole time. I have reads on all the players now. Fraud is weak/tight. Crack is a straightforward and slightly poor player. James is loose, okay and possibly skilled. PM is loose and poor. Spades is straightforward and okay.

Hand 25

PM limps UTG and Fraud raises to $10 in the CO. I fold 5-10s, but it's actually a great time to raise because Fraud is weak/tight and straightforward. Because he is straightforward, when he raises a limp from a poor player, it doesn't mean he has a great hand; it just means he wants to isolate a poor player. Since he is weak, he will not fight me when I go ahead and isolate *him*. But in the game I see a poor hand and fold without thinking.

PM calls. The flop is 2♥-J♥-7♠ and PM check-calls a $14 bet. The turn is the K♠ and it goes check, check. The river is the K♦. PM bets $14 and Fraud calls. PM has A♥-5♥ and Fraud has A♦-4♦.

All of my reads are validated, and the players were predictable. PM played poorly, let Fraud split the pot even though PM's hand was much better on the flop, and then made a wild river bet that would not make better hands fold or worse hands call. Fraud made a straightforward pre-flop isolation raise.

If someone like Spades made that isolation raise pre-flop, I would be less inclined to play back at him. Crack, on the other hand, just lost a big pot and probably isn't making isolation raises, but just waiting for a good hand to double up on. James also is the loosest player at the table. But Fraud was the perfect player for me to take advantage of.

Hand 26

I raise to $7 on the button with 10-J and James raises to $24 in the BB. This is the first time he has re-raised pre-flop, and though he has been active, there is no convincing proof that he is out of line. Still, though, he is playing so many hands that it seems likely his hand range is wide here. But at the same time, I am not sure how he will play that hand range. Without a better read, this is an extremely marginal spot to consider calling or re-raising. It's most likely that James just made a skilled adjustment to my increased raising frequency pre-flop and value-raised me with something like A-Q, or even A-J or K-Q. Here, James has apparently outplayed me. I fold.

Hand 27

Crack raises to $7 in the CO and everyone folds. This would have been a bad time for me to re-raise on a bluff after the last hand, where I was forced to fold. It would look like I was spazzing out in reaction to being outplayed.

Hand 28

Everyone folds to Fraud in the BB. This is sloppy playing by everyone, since Fraud is a weak player and people should steal his blind with any two cards.

Hand 29

PM raises to $7 in the CO and it folds to me in the BB with A♣-2♣. This is an easy fold.

Hand 30

Spades raises to $7 on the button and Crack calls in the BB. Crack check-raises the flop from $11 to $32, and Spades quickly folds. Crack hasn't played a hand in a while, so no matter what he had, this was a good play. He can credibly represent a good hand, since he has been playing so solidly and there is nothing Spades can do about it.

Hand 31

Fraud opens to $6 in the CO. I have A-K on the button and raise to $21. I should have just called. Fraud is weak and a target to bluff-raise pre-flop, so when I have a good hand, I can do the opposite and just call.

In this hand he shows no particular strength. He opens when people fold to him in LP, and he even makes a smaller raise than normal (just to $6) at that! I expect his hand range is decently wide, and thus weak, and that he will proceed weakly with it, so I should expect him to fold to a raise. But I have

A-K and position, so I can try to win a big pot. If I just call, then maybe we can both flop a pair of aces and I can win a big pot, but Fraud is the sort of player who may even fold A-Q to my pre-flop raise. Also, if I just call, then someone can make a play behind me. However, I raised, and everyone folds.

Hand 32

In the next orbit, Fraud opens to $6 in the CO and I raise to $21 with A-6. Here it is tempting to just fold, "to adjust," since I have already raised Fraud so often. Yet Fraud is a weak player. He doesn't seem to be adjusting. It is that simple. I can keep hammering on him. He doesn't give me value when I have A-K, so I have to win money from him somehow, and that is by winning small pots without a showdown. Everyone folds.

Hand 33

Next hand I raise the CO to $7 with K-10. James raises me to $24. This is a close situation. James seems to be a solid player who is adjusting to me. He sees me raise a lot pre-flop, so he re-raises me a second time here. The reason to fold is that he probably has a better hand than me. The reason to call is so he doesn't feel that he can re-raise me whenever he wants, because I have about 2:1 pot odds and I have position. It is close. The deciding factor is that I feel I can outplay him. I call.

The flop is A♥-10♠-J♦, and James checks. I don't want to put a lot of money in this pot. He raised me pre-flop, so he is saying he has high cards, and this flop nails any high cards he can have. I have outs to two pair, trips and straights, so I want to see more cards. It is okay to put some money in, maybe, but I need to be more inclined to call his bet here, not bet and have him call me. If he check-calls, he is saying he has a hand that can see a showdown. Any hand that can see a showdown beats me. If he bets, maybe he has a hand that can see a showdown, but maybe he is bluffing. In considering a bet on the flop I have to ask, if I bet, will a worse hand call? No. Will a better hand fold? Very rarely. So I check.

The turn comes an ace and he bets $32. On the one hand, since I checked

behind on the flop, I am representing a weak hand, so I have to be more likely to call. However, other factors point to a fold. The fact that I called him pre-flop and hit a pair *does not* mean I have to call his bets after the flop. I only call his bets post-flop if I think my hand is best. The turn card is bad for me. It takes away my outs. It turns my trip outs into outs to worse trips. My two-pair outs are meaningless now, and my straight outs might be second best to a full house. Additionally, when the ace comes on the turn, it makes it less likely that James has a good hand because now there is one less ace he could have in his hand. So, why would James choose a non-scary card to bet on? Probably not to bluff. Probably because he actually has a good hand. This is basic psychology. I fold.

Hand 34

I raise to $7 in EP with black 7-7, Crack calls on the button and Spades calls in the BB. The flop is 3♣-5♣-6♣. Here I can consider check-calling, check-folding or bet-folding. Bet-calling is way too loose and wild, of course. If I check-call, I want to have a chance to win at showdown. I want cards that can come to improve my hand (because I am guaranteed to see at least a turn) and I want the opponents to be able to bet with worse hands, but there is no particular reason to think that if I check and the button bets, I am "trapping" him here and he has red overcards. Crack doesn't have a history of making loose bluffs (in fact the opposite). If I call, I have no reason to think that a club will give me the best flush; most likely it will give me a worse flush. But I do have an overpair, straight outs, flush outs and set outs. I raised pre-flop, so maybe they hit nothing and will fold the flop. I bet. Crack raises to $40. Easy fold.

Hand 35

Crack raises UTG. I have K-10 in the BB. This is a clear fold.

Hand 36

Crack raises UTG to $7. Next to act, I call with Q♣-9♣. This is a bad call. The

hand is pretty, but there is absolutely no reason to call a tight player with a marginal hand, especially when he raises UTG.

The flop is 7♣-5♣-6♥. Crack bets out $9. I have to make a plan for this hand. How good is my hand? Since he opened from EP, his hand range is high pocket pairs, missed over cards, and ace and king high flush draws. It is nice that I have straight outs here so if I am against a higher flush draw it moves my equity from 20 to 28 percent. I decide that if I have to, I am okay getting all my money in on the flop. It's unlikely I would be a favorite, but it's also unlikely I would be a big underdog. The advantage to raising is that he can fold, and he can also call and then check it to me on the turn. I raise to $42. The opponent raises me all-in. My decision is already made and I have immediate odds to call. He has K♣-J♣.

I made a poor play, but not too terrible. He will have a king- or ace-high flush draw often enough when we go all-in that my play is -EV, but not so often that my play is a disaster. In retrospect, I made this play because the table is so dry. This was a loss of control on my part. Since the table is not profitable, and because I made a bad play, I quit after this hand.