

Texas Hold'em
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Mark "The Red" Harlan



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About the Author

Mark “The Red” Harlan was born in Rawlins, Wyoming, and has lived exactly the life you’d expect as a result. Armed with a degree in Applied Mathematics (from a university he loathes so much that he refuses to even utter the name), he fell headlong into a 20-year stint in the Silicon Valley’s computer industry.

Red’s professional experience includes human-interface work at Apple Computer, development of the bidding schema used by eBay, overseeing application development at Danger (makers of the T-Mobile Sidekick), as well as co-founding CyberArts Licensing (suppliers of the poker software seen on the MANSION and GamesGrid sites).

At the tender age of 8, he won a pinewood derby competition in the Cub Scouts, giving him his first heavy swig of victory that would forever warp his oh-so-soft-and-pliable mind. Under the influence of this experience, he started playing poker that same year (“might as well win money if you’re going to win”) and became good enough by 2005 to be a net money winner in that year’s World Series of Poker.

Red is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors and has an extensive writing background ranging from penning InfoWorld’s *Notes from the Fringe* during the heyday of the Internet, to being lead author of the book he thinks everyone should own (his mom does): *Winning at Internet Poker For Dummies* (Wiley). Red maintains a Web site of poker articles at www.redsdeal.com and welcomes non-spam e-mail at RedsDeal+HEFD@gmail.com (be sure to include the +).

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mom, Marijane, and my brother, J. Scott Harlan, mostly because you're two saintly islands in a world that could desperately use more of your type, and a little because you've put up with me all these years.

Author's Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Turn on the TV, drop by a news rack, spend ten minutes in any college watering hole, or for that matter walk into your local supermarket and you can see firsthand the stranglehold that Texas Hold'em has on the public. Twenty years ago, when I'd play Hold'em in a casino, it wasn't unusual for people to stop and ask me about the game. (I just have one of those ask-that-guy-he-looks-harmless kind of looks, I guess.) Now my *mom* tells me about it.

Hold'em is a game that is deceptively simple: There are four chances to bet (pre-flop, flop, turn, and river) and five ways you can act when you do (check, bet, call, raise, or fold). Yet within that simple mechanism, you'll find truth and trickery, boredom and fear, skill and misfortune — in other words, direct reflections of the things that make life worth living.

Hold'em is a game of both skill and chance — and infuriatingly, which of these things is the most important often changes without warning. Needless to say, this interaction is what makes the game gut wrenching at some times and great at others. If you want to find a sucker, don't hang out at a chess table. Then again, if you can't take being beaten by chance, it'll be better for your blood pressure if you spend your spare time knitting instead.

Amazingly, about 95 percent of the people who play Hold'em in a professional card room (be it online or at a casino), lose money — all because of the insidious nature of the *rake* (a small cut of every pot the house takes). Don't lose hope, though. Hold'em is a game that *can* be beaten, and by buying this book and referring to it often, you're absolutely taking the right first step.

About This Book

This book is a grand overview of Texas Hold'em.

All *Dummies* books are designed as references. You don't have to read it from beginning to end, cover to cover. My advice is to treat it like a salad bar: Load up on the things you're most interested in, and pass on the items that seem a bit too smelly.

In some of the later chapters, I make reference to concepts and ideas I cover earlier, but the cross-referencing here is heavy. I always point you back to the fundamental concepts for brush-ups.

Don't stress out as you read these pages. You're not expected to remember everything and, hey, you can always come back to anything you need to be recharged on.

Conventions Used in This Book

New terms are always written in italics, with a definition that follows close on its heels. If you're a text skimmer and find yourself running across a new word you don't know, back up until you find the italicized word (or just look in the glossary or index). You might also see italics used for emphasis — and I can definitely get emphatic from time to time.

`Monofont` is used for Web sites and e-mail addresses. There aren't a lot of site references in this book, and you certainly don't need to have access to a computer to learn or play poker, but there are some very valuable references out in cyberspace that you need to be aware of.

The sidebars you see in gray text are not required reading for the book, but will usually relate to the text being discussed to illustrate it more fully (or in some cases, it's just me trying to make you laugh). You'll find a sidebar at the end of this Introduction.

What You're Not to Read

Don't worry about any of the paragraphs labeled with a Technical Stuff icon. Those are present merely for completeness and to give more illumination to the terminally hard core.

There are two chapters you should bypass at the start. Get a little more general theory and practice under your belt before you tackle them:

- ✔ **Chapter 13:** This one is all about the concept of game theory and assumes you already understand the other poker concepts that are in this book.
- ✔ **Chapter 22:** Get solid in the other topics in this book before you go out and try to get even better. **Remember:** You need a good foundation before you can build a fancy house.

Foolish Assumptions

I've made several assumptions about you as a reader — might as well clear 'em up right here to avoid any future embarrassment. I assume that

- ✔ **You're familiar with playing cards.** You know that a deck has 52 cards, with 4 suits and 13 cards in each suit. You know what a Jack, Queen, King, and Ace are.
- ✔ **You would rather beat other people in poker than have them beat you.**
- ✔ **You have any range of poker experience going from none to a lot.**
- ✔ **You want to improve your game, no matter how good it is, right now.**
- ✔ **Trying in vain to get a cocktail waitress's attention is worse than having one stop by your table when you don't need her.**

How This Book Is Organized

I've organized this book in parts to make it more readily digestible. Yum.

Part I: Everything's Bigger in Texas: Welcome to Texas Hold'em!

Chapter 1 gives a synopsis of larger concepts you'll run across in the book: how the game is played, how *to* play the game, and *where* the game is played.

The remainder of Part I talks about the hand rankings in poker, how to read a hand, betting, blinds, and etiquette. It's this section that also talks about one of *the* most important facets of the game: your bankroll.

Part II: Texas Hold'em: Play by Play

This section covers, in detail, the betting and play surrounding your hole cards, the flop, the turn, and the river. It includes getting hints as to whether you're holding a winner or a loser and subtleties like check-raising.

Part III: Movin' On to Higher Stakes: Advanced Strategies of Hold'em

This is where things start getting really meaty. Knowing how to play other players at the table, bluffing, and trapping are all covered here. This part is also the one that deals with math (including pot odds) and game theory.

If there's one part you should really focus on in this book, it's this one.

Part IV: Casinos, Card Rooms, and the Internet: Places to Play Hold'em

If you can play poker someplace, I talk about it here. This is also the place where I fill you in on tournament play.

Part V: The Part of Tens

All great *For Dummies* books have a Part of Tens. In mine you find:

- ✔ A comparison between online and real-world play
- ✔ Common mistakes people make in Hold'em
- ✔ Great ways to make your home game better
- ✔ Bad beats (because everyone likes a good horror movie)
- ✔ Ways to get better

Glossary

Most *For Dummies* books don't have a glossary (and neither do lame poker books), but poker is *so* full of slang that I felt a glossary was almost mandatory. New expressions in the text will always be in *italics* followed by the definitions — the glossary wraps them all together in a nice, tidy package.

Icons Used in This Book

Icons are those little pictures in the margin that flag your attention for a particular reason:



When you see this icon, you'll find suggestions that save you time or money. When you see the Tip icon, think "clever."



Careful! These are things that if you ignore them could cost you time or money.



When you see this icon, you'll find information meant for the hardcore poker player. If you see something with a Technical Stuff icon that you don't understand, don't sweat it: You don't need to know it to improve your game.



Items flagged with this icon are things you'll need to know either at the poker table or later in the book.



While I highly advise against playing No-Limit ring games as a beginner, you could run across a No-Limit tournament situation when you're just starting off. I mark No-Limit special cases with this icon.

Where to Go from Here

Where you go is totally up to you. If you've never played Hold'em or poker before, just carry on into Chapter 1. If you have played, but you find yourself always losing, I suggest going to Chapter 8 and reading about the other players you're up against. If you've played a lot and just happened to pick up this book, either on a whim or at a friend's house, flip to Chapter 13.

And hey, if you ever want to check me out, go to www.redsdeal.com or send an e-mail to redsdeal+hefd@gmail.com. I'll respond to anything I get (as long as you aren't a spammer).

My bankroll, this book, and you

Before I started writing this book, the last time I played Hold'em was in the 2005 World Series of Poker (money winner, thank you very much). I figured I should be playing as I wrote, to keep the game more alive.

Playing only in tournaments, over the course of three months, and never playing in tournaments where my entry fee was more than \$33 (although some of my wins were to satellites in bigger-entry-fee events), I have won:

- ✔ \$3,596.85 in cash
- ✔ A \$535 satellite seat for the World Series Main Event
- ✔ A \$535 satellite seat for the World Series H.O.R.S.E. Event (Hold'em, Omaha, Razz [7-Card Stud Low], 7-Card Stud, 7-Card Stud Eight or Better [high hand splits with low hand])

I mention this not to brag (well, at least not too much), but to illustrate a point: Because you play Hold'em against *people*, the game is beatable. I won this using nothing more than years of practice combined with the exact concepts I put forward in this book.

If you practice and pay attention, you can — and will, over time — win.

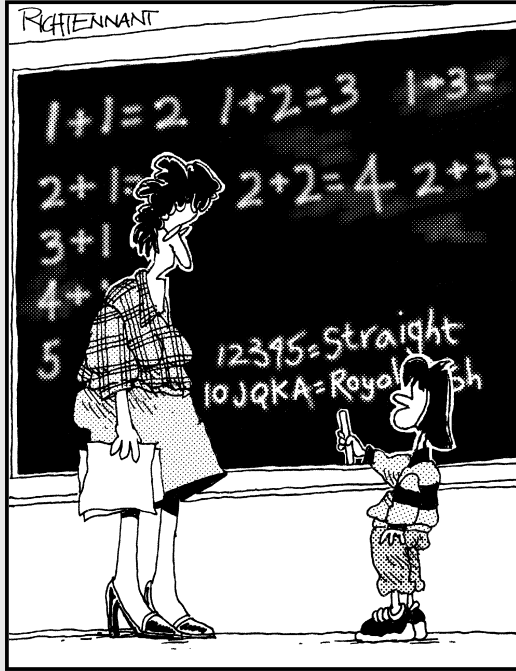
Good luck to you.

Part I

Everything's Bigger in Texas: Welcome to Texas Hold'em!

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"We're studying arithmetic, Emily, not
Texas Hold'em."

In this part . . .

Think of it as Texas Hold'em 101. I walk through the rankings of poker hands, the mechanics of Hold'em, proper poker manners, and bankroll basics. Your introductions to everything from flopping to dropping are all here.

Chapter 1

A Bird's-Eye View of Texas Hold'em

.....

In This Chapter

- ▶ Setting your poker goal
 - ▶ Scoping out the game
 - ▶ Getting more hard core
 - ▶ Finding a place to play
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Twenty years ago, Texas Hold'em lived in relative poker obscurity. When I was playing in casinos, it was fairly common for people to come up and ask me about the game.

A few years ago, the perfect Hold'em storm was created: Chris Moneymaker won the \$10,000 Main Event of the World Series (pocketing more than \$2 million off of a \$40 entry fee), the World Poker Tour became the most successful program in the history of the Travel Channel, and online play became prevalent.

The poker craze has gotten so out of hand that my *mom* is now telling me about watching poker on TV: "It's a lot like quilting. You really have to pay attention to catch the nuances." Not exactly the way *I* look at the game, but the fact that she's even watching says something.

In this chapter, I give you an overview of everything else you can expect from the book. Read on and then venture forth where you will.

Oh yes, and good luck to you! Let's shuffle up and deal.

Considering Why You Want to Play



Before you even cozy up to a card table, you should ask yourself a critical question: *Why am I here?*

There are several possible answers to this question:

- ✔ I want to make money.
- ✔ I'm just out to chill with my pals and have a good time.
- ✔ I want to sharpen my game.
- ✔ Hold'em has just crossed into my mental radar and I want to find out more about it.
- ✔ Baby needs a new pair of shoes.

Your reason may even be a combination of these things. Whatever your reason for being at the table, setting a main goal for your play and trying to reach it is critically important.

What I'm about to say will sound like I'm joking, but I assure you I'm not: You do *not* have to set a goal of making money at the table. The media pressure, and general public attention on Hold'em, has set up an expectation that you can, must, and should, win.

The sad fact is that roughly 95 percent of the people who play poker in professional establishments *lose* money. It's a devilishly hard game to beat because of the *rake* (a small percentage of the pot that the house takes to run the game — see Chapter 3 for more), and because the vagaries of chance even out over time, you have to truly maximize your wins and minimize your losses, or you'll watch your wallet slowly shrink.

If you decide from the outset that you have a goal other than winning, you won't beat yourself up when you don't. And believe me, *no one* at your table will argue with you if you don't mind losing.

Don't get me wrong, one of *my* requirements of sitting at a table is that I play to win — when I don't, it sets me in a foul mood for hours if not days. Because you're playing against other mortals — people full of pride and fallibility — you *can* beat the game. My friends and I have proven it over a mathematically significant period of time.

But winning takes perseverance, attention, and thought. Your reading this book is a great start. Keep going. Your will is already stronger than the average Friday-night player — now's the time to get your ability up there as well.

Working with Game Dynamics

In order to begin appreciating the complexities of Hold'em, you need to understand two basic elements of the game: your position at the table, and the particular way the game is dealt.

The importance of position

When Hold'em is played in a professional card room (be it online or in a brick-and-mortar casino), a dealer button acts as the theoretical point that the cards are being dealt from. This button moves one position clockwise around the table at the conclusion of every hand.

The player in the position immediately to the left of the dealer (that is to say, clockwise) *posts* an automatic bet called the *small blind*, and the player immediately to *his* left (or two places to the left of the dealer) posts an automatic bet known as the *big blind*. These are forced bets that players *must* make in order to get dealt into the game. All other players get to see their hands “for free.” (To get a better understanding of the dealer button and blinds, flip to Chapter 3.)

Players decide whether to play or *fold* (quit) in a clockwise position, starting with the player immediately to the left (clockwise) of the big blind.

In Hold'em, your position relative to the other players is critical. When you're in the beginning of the betting order, your cards *have* to be of higher quality than the cards you would normally play in later position — especially if lots of players are left in the hand — because you have no idea what evil may lurk beyond. (For more detail on playing by position, see Chapter 4.)

Likewise, if you're riding at the back of the calling order, you can afford to play *looser* hands (those that aren't as high quality) and hope to catch cards to break people's dreams. In fact, *pot odds* (the amount you bet relative to the amount you would win) say that sometimes you *should* call, even when you have a lesser hand. (Chapter 12 gives you more detail on pot odds and all things mathematical.)

Playing move by move

Like all poker games, Hold'em has a very specific order in which the cards are dealt and played. (Chapter 2 has diagrams of Hold'em