Ten Skills to Beat No-Limit Hold’em Cash Games
By Ed Miller

Three Skills To Beat $1-$2
By Ed Miller

This PDF contains a summary of 10 skills you need to beat no-limit hold’em cash games. These skills are explored in depth in my latest book, The Course: Serious Hold ‘Em Strategy For Smart Players, which you can learn more about at EdMillerPoker.com.

The framework of the book is very straightforward. I believe that nearly anyone can learn to win at live no-limit hold’em games. Furthermore, I believe that you can break down what’s needed to beat the games into a series of increasingly complex skills.

First you learn the most basic, simple skill. Once you have it mastered, you move onto the next skill, which builds upon the first. And so on. After you learn a few skills, you can beat the softest games in the room—the $1-$2 (or equivalent) games.

To move up, you need to acquire some more difficult skills. But still, the path to improvement is fairly linear. Master the previous skill, then acquire the next one. One skill on top of the other.

This simple model for learning poker breaks down if your goal is to attack the toughest games in the world. High-level poker is complex, counterintuitive, and non-linear.

But the poker played in live cardrooms around the world for everyday stakes is not so difficult.

In this and a couple upcoming articles, I will give you a taste of what’s in the book. I will list out the skills needed to beat each level and give you a brief summary of each. This article starts from the beginning and takes you through what’s needed to beat $1-$2.

Skill #1. Play A Simple Preflop Strategy.

Without a doubt, most players’ problems begin preflop. Your typical live no-limit hold’em player plays way, way too many hands. If you play too many hands, by definition all the extra hands are bad hands. Playing too many hands creates an instant problem—how do you get rid of all the bad hands you are stuck with after the flop?
There are three ways to deal with bad hands after the flop. You can fold them. You can call down with them. Or you can try to bluff with them.

None of these three ways actually gets rid of the problem. They just try to hide the problem. If you choose to fold them, for example, then you can hope that your opponent doesn’t bet very often. If you call down with them, then, again, you can hope that your opponent doesn’t bet too much. If you try to bluff with them, then you can hope that your opponent doesn’t notice and keeps folding. (Perhaps he’s chosen to fold all his bad hands.)

The first step to winning at $1-$2 is avoiding this problem in the first place. You use a tight preflop strategy focused on playing mostly pocket pairs, suited big card hands, and suited connectors. You avoid ragged suited hands and most offsuit hands.

Furthermore, you raise frequently preflop. I recommend never limping from any position outside the blinds. I recommend this not because limping is always wrong, but because limping is usually wrong—or at least raising is usually better. I’d much rather most players miss the occasional spot to limp than fall into bad, self-destructive preflop habits.

I also recommend reraising a lot preflop. When I play no-limit, I am usually the tightest player at the table. I also am usually the player who 3-bets most frequently. This reraising strategy begins the process of punishing your opponents for playing too many hands.

Finally, I recommend learning a strategy and, for the most part, sticking to it. I used to advocate playing a fluid preflop strategy that depends on game conditions. “It always depends,” is something you’ve no doubt read a thousand times.

I don’t recommend that philosophy anymore—at least not for preflop play. Again, it’s not because it’s wrong to adjust your preflop strategy. Instead, I believe that you don’t gain as much by changing things up preflop as some people seem to think. And the pitfalls to playing an ever-changing preflop strategy are myriad.

The bottom line is that if you are at the stage where you are learning to beat $1-$2 (or learning to beat $2-$5 or $5-$10 as well), I believe you are best served by mastering a simple, tight, static preflop strategy.

**Skill #2. Don't Pay People Off**

This skill is simple, but powerful. It’s based on a strategic idea that applies nearly universally in small, soft no-limit hold’em games. When people make big bets and raises on the turn and river, they aren’t bluffing.
It’s not that they never bluff. But there is a theoretical percentage of the time that players should be bluffing if they want to play well. In nearly all cases, small stakes players will fall short of this theoretical percentage with their bluffing when the big bets come out. They bluff—but they don’t bluff often enough to make you want to call.

Therefore, if someone makes a big bet or raise, you should assume they have the hand they are representing. This usually means you should fold.

If you should fold, you should fold. Every time.

That’s the hard part. It’s easy to talk yourself into calling. Maybe you feel like you’re being bullied, so you decide you’re going to take a stand. (At $1-$2, it’s more likely you’re just running bad than that your opponent is intentionally manipulating you.)

Maybe you flopped a big hand and you just can’t accept that you were outdrawn.

Maybe it’s not clear what your opponent is representing, and you are confused or curious.

I don’t care. Fold. After adopting a solid preflop strategy, learning to fold in these situations is the most critical skill to beating $1-$2 games.

**Skill #3. Assess The Value Of Your Hand**

Everyone can figure out if they’ve flopped top pair or not. It’s a little trickier to figure out what your top pair is worth. This answer depends on kicker strength, board texture, number of opponents, and opponent tendencies.

A very common mistake many $1-$2 players make is that they allow themselves to be guided by a fear of being drawn out on. As soon as they flop top pair, they are thinking of ways to push people out of the pot so their top pair will hold up.

This is exactly the wrong approach. If a pot ends before showdown, it’s irrelevant that you held top pair. You might as well have held two blank cards. The only way it matters that you flopped top pair is if you can get the hand to showdown so that you can show off your pretty cards.

Your goal when you flop top pair or any other value hand, therefore, is to figure out how you can get the hand to showdown while charging your opponents the maximum value of your hand.

This skill isn’t as simple as the first two. It can be a little tricky to evaluate the value of your good hands. Furthermore, this value fluctuates depending on the turn and river cards. But master this skill and you will have everything you need to beat $1-$2.
Four Skills To Beat $2-$5
By Ed Miller

My book, The Course: Serious Hold ‘Em Strategy For Smart Players, is a practical guide to winning in live no-limit cash games. It starts with what you need to stop losing at $1-$2, and it adds on skills until you get to what you need to beat $5-$10.

I’m devoting a few articles to give you a taste for my recipe to conquer everyday cash games. Last article I covered the most basic skills needed to beat a $1-$2 game. In this article I’ll talk about the extra tricks you’ll need once you move up to $2-$5.

Skill #4. Barreling

There are a number of definitions of barreling, but here’s a simple one. Barreling is betting because your opponent (or opponents) checked.

Frequently, barreling is a type of bluff bet. You’re making the bet because you expect your opponents to have too weak a set of hands to put up a winning fight.

Barreling is a cornerstone skill to move beyond the most basic no-limit strategy. It’s a play designed to thwart two of the most common ways players try to get away with poor play.

Almost all live no-limit players play too many hands preflop. These extra hands are bad hands. (If they weren’t bad, then these hands wouldn’t be “too many”. ) After the flop, players have to figure out a way to get rid of or hide these extra bad hands.

At $2-$5, you will see people most commonly try one of two methods to deal with the bad hands. Most commonly, they will fold them. Also popular, many players will call with them.

Nearly all players mix these strategies to some extent. A player may fold most of the time, but call sometimes. Another player may call most of the time, but fold sometimes. Also, a player may tend to call on the flop and turn, but tend to fold on the river.

As a winning no-limit player, your job is to catch your opponents trying to hide their bad hands. For both folding and calling, the way to catch an opponent in the act is to bet.

If they’re folders, then it’s obvious why betting works. It gets them to fold. They put the money in preflop or on the flop and then they fold it away.

If they’re callers, then it’s perhaps counterintuitive why betting is important. While it’s true that you don’t want to bluff a calling station, you still need to barrel at calling stations. The only thing that
changes between folders and callers is which hands you choose to barrel. Against folders, you tend to want to barrel all your junk, but you might check back your hands with a little value like bottom or middle pair.

Against callers, it’s the opposite. You might check back your total junk, but you want to barrel all your marginal pair hands. A hand like a pair of eights that might have very little value against a folder can have quite a bit of value against a caller—since if they want to call with their bad hands, they will necessarily be calling with unpaired hands.

You check? I bet. It’s a basic $2-$5 skill.

**Skill #5. Evaluating Board Texture**

Board texture is poorly understood among most live players. I look at it like this. Preflop, every pot starts out identical. The same hands have value and the same hands don’t have value.

The flop changes the rules of this game. It reorders the hand rankings. It alters the distance in value between hands. The turn does the same. As does the river.

What doesn’t change, however, is the math of the game. A $50 bet into a $100 pot always offers 3-to-1 odds to the caller, no matter what’s on board.

What makes this game tricky is to square the things that don’t change—preflop hand values and pot and bet sizes—with the things that do change—postflop hand rankings and equities.

Most $2-$5 players do a terrible job of this. When a board comes 8-4-2 rainbow, certain types of hands have value, and the equities work a certain way. When the board comes Q-T-T with a two suit, hand values change, and the equities work differently. Each type of board texture resets the strategic rules, and most $2-$5 players can’t keep up.

This misevaluation leads typical $2-$5 players to fold too much on certain board textures and to call too much on others. It leads them to stop betting too quickly with some relatively strong hands while they bet far too recklessly with other hands that actually aren’t so strong.

If you learn the basics of how board textures work and you practice looking at how hand ranges behave on certain types of flops, turns, and rivers, you will be able to identify and punish the errors your opponents make.
Skill #6. Making Live Reads

Live reads are the general term for all the bits of information available in a live cash game. Of these, I consider bet sizing tells to be the most important. One of the great things about no-limit is that players get to choose their own bet sizes. Hidden within these bet sizes, for most live no-limit players, is information about how players feel about their hands.

A player who wants you to fold might shade a bet a few chips bigger. A player who is worried about getting raised might shade a bet a few chips smaller. A player who is looking for information might bet even smaller.

At the $2-$5 level, players frequently try to control the action by making bets that are intentionally small. They figure that if they bet small first, you won’t be able to bet big instead. All this bet sizing information can give you clear direction for how to exploit a situation.

Physical tells are useful sometimes. Also, there are subtle “vibes” that contain information. These vibes actually appear all over the place when you play live. Players give off weak vibes frequently, for example. I believe these vibes are actually physical tells that brains process and interpret unconsciously—as opposed to the conscious observation and translation associated with traditional physical tells that you might find explained in a book.

You can learn some rules of thumb for live reads, but ultimately you will learn how these work with experience and intentional observation.

Skill #7. Emotional Numbing

The amounts of money that change hands at $2-$5 are significant for most people. To play successfully at this level, you must learn to numb yourself to the emotional ups and downs. Bankroll management plays a role. So does self-talk and self-coaching. Hand analysis away from the table is also important. The ultimate goal is to build up tolerance to losing—both for magnitude of losses and for prolonged bad runs. I don’t have all the answers, but in the book I have a few tips that have worked to help me make sharp plays and keep me in action.
Three Skills To Beat $5-$10
By Ed Miller

My book, *The Course: Serious Hold ‘Em Strategy For Smart Players*, is a practical guide to winning in live no-limit cash games. It starts with what you need to stop losing at $1-$2, and it adds on skills until you get to what you need to beat $5-$10.

I’m devoting a few articles to give you a taste for my recipe to conquer everyday cash games. Last article I covered the skills needed to beat a $2-$5 game. In this article I’ll talk about the extra tricks you’ll need once you move up to $5-$10.

**Skill #8. Exploiting Aggression**

Skill #2 was a simple commandment. Don’t pay people off. If they bet big on the turn or river, they won’t be bluffing often enough to justify a call. So fold. Fold and don’t think twice.

That skill is very useful in $1-$2 and $2-$5 games. It can be useful in $5-$10 games as well—against opponents who play like the ones you’ll find at $1-$2 and $2-$5. But once you venture into $5-$10 games, you’ll find that you’re up against many players who are more than willing to bluff big. This requires you to abandon (temporarily) Skill #2 and develop this skill instead.

There’s usually a big flaw in the aggression many players use at $5-$10. Since they play too many hands preflop, they end up with lots of bad hands after the flop. But they don’t want to just fold these hands, nor do they want to call down hopelessly with them. So they turn them into bluffs. The problem is that all bluffs need to be supported by an appropriate number of good hands.

In other words, if you want to bluff when the flush card comes, then you’d better be a threat to have the flush as well. If you want to bluff when the board pairs, then you’d better also be able to have trips or a full house.

The flaw is, in many cases, players at $5-$10 try to bluff in situations where they do not have enough good hands to back them up. Or even when they do have some good hands to back up their bluffs, they try to bluff with so many bad hands that the bluffs flood out the value hands.

Either way, you can exploit this aggression by anticipating it and then by calling. It’s a tricky skill, however, because you need to understand clearly which good hands are likely and which ones are unlikely. You also need to be able to guess which bad hands will be present, and how often the player might try to bluff with them. When the bluffs crowd out the good hands, you call. When it’s the other way around, you fold. To thrive at $5-$10, you will need to learn to tell the difference.
Skill #9. Playing Deep

Typically, $1-$2 and $2-$5 games come with capped buy-ins that limit losses. Even when the buy-ins aren’t capped—or the cap is high—many players come to these games and buy in short. These are games that everyday folks play, and they want to gamble in the three figures, not the four or five figures.

At $5-$10, that dynamic begins to shift. Games at this level often have a high buy-in cap or no cap at all. These games begin to attract recreational players with big bankrolls and even bigger egos. They also attract pros who think nothing of covering a table with $20,000 or more. The game plays deep.

Now you don’t have to play deep to play at this level. You can buy in for $600 at a $5-$10 game and play it that way. There’s no shame in it at all.

But if you want to become one of the pro-level players who buys in to cover the table, you will have to learn to play deep.

Mathematically, there’s nothing fundamental that changes when you play deep. Since bet sizes tend to increase exponentially in no-limit, even buy-ins that are very large compared to the blinds open up only another one or two possible rounds of betting or raising.

I’ve found that there is one key adjustment when you’re playing deep.

You have to learn the psychology of it. Some players are far too eager to play for stacks when you’re very deep. Other players are too fearful to play for stacks when you’re very deep. Players who play for stacks at roughly the correct rate are rare.

The deeper you are playing, the more significant the errors people make on the final bet become relative to the preflop action. In other words, if you have $5,000 stacks, it’s far more important to catch someone making an error in how they play the final $3,000 than it is to catch them making an error on the first $100. This is true even though players have the chance to make preflop errors much more frequently than errors for stacks.

So the trick to playing with deep stacks is often to determine first whether your opponent is liable to get stacks in too easily or to be too fearful to play for stacks. Once you’ve determined that, you want to bloat pots preflop more than you might in a shorter stacked game. You don’t want to go wild with this, but in general, you should

1. Be more willing to 3-bet preflop than you might in a shorter stacked game.
2. Be much more willing to call a 3-bet preflop than you might in a shorter stacked game, particularly if you are in position.
3. Be more willing to 4-bet preflop than you might in a shorter stacked game.
This preflop play seeds the pot and prepares you to take advantage of the predictable errors your opponents make.

**Skill #10. Taking On The Pros**

Once you hit $5-$10, you will be playing with professional players. These pros have, to some extent or another, acquired all the skills in this book. The only true, long-term way to beat them is to master these skills better than they have.

But on the way to that goal, you can take shortcuts here and there. A big way is to use reverse tells. I don’t mean that you should wiggle your ear when you’re strong when you usually wiggle it when you’re weak.

Instead, I mean that you can mimic the weak plays that other players make, but have a surprise in store. For instance, you may notice that recreational players like to bet out in a certain spot to see where they are at. You can mimic that play, but do it with either strong hands or hands you are willing to make a big bluff with.

Or you can check value hands on the river that you’d normally bet, because it’s easier to get the pro players to bluff or to bet weaker hands than to get them to call with a worse hand.

Once you have acquired and mastered all these skills, you should be able to hold your own in virtually any live no-limit hold’em game anywhere on the planet.

Ed’s newest book, *The Course: Serious Hold ‘Em Strategy For Smart Players* is available now at his website [EdMillerPoker.com](http://EdMillerPoker.com). You can also find original articles and instructional videos by Ed at the training site [RedChipPoker.com](http://RedChipPoker.com).