

Chapter 9

Two Inconvenient Truths

As a good and successful player, you have to deal with two unpleasant facts that seem counterintuitive at first glance:

- ♠ If someone wins really big at your table, it's not you
- ♠ You are more often the victim than the beneficiary of bad beats

Who scores the big wins at the table?

Let's say you hear that someone has shot a record round at a famous golf course. Who is most likely to have achieved this? a) Tiger Woods; b) John, a good and solid local player; or c) Wild Bill, who has no control over his shots? I guess you would say a), and that's by far the most likely answer.

Now, assume at your local card room you see somebody cash out with eight racks of chips. Who is most likely to win that big? a) Alan, a tough pro and the best player at that limit in the poker room; b) George, a tight and solid, but not very imaginative, local player; or c) Crazy Bob, a reckless player who likes to play and to raise with all sorts of hands? The natural choice is a) but the correct answer is nearly always c). The reason for

this has something to do with the standard deviation.

For our discussion we will assume a \$20-40 game. For a very good player the following assumptions are reasonable: He has a win rate of \$50 and a standard deviation of \$450 per hour. At three standard deviations from the mean this player can expect to make between -\$1,300 and +\$1,400 per hour¹²⁵. For four hours of play the standard deviation is not four times as high, because the standard deviation increases only by the square root of the number of hours played. Therefore the result for four hours of play is between -\$2,600 and \$2,800 per hour.

I have no idea what the numbers are for a reckless player, so we will make an educated guess. Losing at a rate of two big bets per hour and having a standard deviation that's three times as high as the expert should not be an outlandish assumption. In this case our crazy player can expect to make between -\$4,150 and +\$3,950 per hour. For four hours, the results lie between losing \$8,200 and winning \$8,000 (see the table below).

Possible session results for two different player types				
	Very good player WR = \$50/h $\sigma = \$450/h$		Crazy player WR = -\$100/h $\sigma = \$1,350/h$	
	Min	Max	Min	Max
1 h	-\$1,300	\$1,400	-\$4,150	\$3,950
2 h	-\$1,859	\$1,959	-\$5,828	\$5,628
3 h	-\$2,288	\$2,388	-\$7,115	\$6,915
4 h	-\$2,650	\$2,750	-\$8,200	\$8,000

The results show clearly that a loose and crazy player can make much more money in a single session than an expert. Of course, the reverse statement is true as well. If somebody loses at an extremely fast rate, he is most likely a bad player. These findings are by no means hypothetical.

¹²⁵ $\$50 - (3 * \$450) = -\$1,300$ and $\$50 + (3 * \$450) = \$1,400$

Professional Middle Limit Hold'em

Many times I have seen one of the worst players at the table win between \$5,000 and \$7,000 in the \$20-40 game at the Mirage.

As a good player, you may ask why things like that never happen to you. At least you know the answer now. My biggest win in the \$20-40 game was around \$3,000, less than half what I have seen other players take home. Recently someone scored the biggest win I have ever heard of in a limit game. In a \$100-200 game played at the Bellagio, a guy cashed out with 17 racks, winning about \$44,000. It's equivalent to winning \$4,400 in a \$10-20 game or \$440 in a \$1-2 game. Having played against him, I have no doubt that it is true because he is the type of guy who goes berserk when he runs hot.

Conclusion: Don't be mad because a player wins excessively and it's not you. It's actually a good thing, because it happens to bad players more often than not. Winning big makes them think they are superior players and gives them an incentive to come back. That gives you the opportunity to win your share of their winnings and some more besides. Additional note: If you are proud that you often score big wins, you should reconsider.

Bad beats

A "bad beat" is a matter of definition. Many players think every time someone draws out on them they have suffered a bad beat. There are even a few players who think every hand they lose must be a bad beat—how could they possibly lose otherwise¹²⁶?

I use the term in a more strict sense. "Bad beat" means a favorite hand lost against a long-shot where the lucky winner did not have the proper odds to draw. The latter qualification is important. If somebody hits a gutshot to crack your set and the pot was big enough to justify the call, that's not a bad beat but correct play. Had you been in your opponent's shoes, you would (hopefully) have played the hand the same way. Or take a more extreme example: Your opponent beats you with a one-outer at the end after you checked the turn. That's not a bad beat either. The only one you can blame is yourself because you gave your opponent infinite odds to

¹²⁶ Remember the famous Phil Hellmuth quote: "If there weren't luck involved, I would win every time."

draw at the one-outer. No matter what you hold before the flop, your opponent is never drawing dead. Even on the flop and turn this is only rarely the case. That's why bad beats happen; it shows you that your opponent was not drawing dead.

Now, why is it the good player that usually suffers from bad beats while the bad player is usually the beneficiary? There are two reasons: First, a good player plays fewer and better starting hands than a bad player. Since better starting hands tend to make stronger hands at the end, the looser player is dependent on help from the board. Second, bad players not only play too many hands, they go too far with them after the flop, often chasing draws with no consideration of the pot odds. That will lead to putting bad beats on other bad players or on good players with legitimate hands that are often in the lead. Good players are the victims of bad beats because loose players, by drawing thin, sometimes get there. If several draws with insufficient pot odds are out, the chances to suffer a bad beat increase.

On the other hand, the good player only rarely benefits from a bad beat because he only draws when he thinks the pot odds warrant it, or there are other factors that make him think the play is profitable. When a good player benefits from a bad beat, it's because he couldn't know how strong his opponent really was.

Here is an example: In a \$30-60 game a first-position player raises the pot, I reraise with A♦-A♥ and the cutoff calls. Three-handed, we see the flop: 9♦-9♠-4♥. This is an excellent flop for the aces. First, given the betting, it's very unlikely that one of the remaining players has a nine. Second, there are no possible draws to straights or flushes, which gives my opponents very few outs. Third, though there is no draw out, I can expect to get action as any pair and probably two overcards will call.

The original raiser checks, I bet and both players call. The turn is the A♣. The first-position player checks. I think briefly about slowplaying. But there is only one ace left and if nobody has it I probably wouldn't get much action anyway. Betting has the advantage that if the case ace is out, it's probably A-K or A-Q, and the holder of that hand might raise, giving me the opportunity to win three big bets instead of two by check-raising. I bet and to my delight the cutoff raises. The first position player folds and I reraise.

Now something unexpected happens. The player behind me raises again. I had put him on a big ace after he raised on the turn, but when he raises again it becomes clear that this couldn't be his hand. So I figure he must have 10-9, 9-8 or pocket fours. That's pretty loose by any standard, but I have seen worse three-bet calls.

I reraise. He shakes his head in disbelief, mumbles something about "running into aces" and calls. The river is a blank. I bet and he calls. I turn over my aces and he shows A♠-9♠. That comes as a big surprise. I never expected to see that holding, and I realize immediately that I had been drawing close to dead on the flop.

You may say that he had no business with A-9s in that pot and that it serves him right that he lost the hand. That's correct as far as pre-flop strategy is concerned, but that doesn't change the fact that I got extremely lucky on the turn by catching the only card that could help me, the case ace. My opponent didn't suffer a bad beat because I was playing badly. It was inevitable, as there was no way I could have known how far behind I was on the flop. Had he shown me his hand then, I would have laid down my pocket aces immediately.

Though it may be hard to accept, it's a good thing for you that the biggest winners at the table are bad players and that these players put bad beats on you. Were it not possible that loose players could score large wins, many of them would give up poker. They have seen in the past that they can score big, and they want to do it again. That's one of the main motivations that drives them on. Were it not possible for loose players with their sub-standard hands to beat players with tighter starting hand requirements, the better player would win nearly every time. Then the bad players would either become frustrated and stop playing, or they would quickly go broke. Then only the better players would continue to play, and the game would become very hard to beat. I don't know about you, but that's not what I want to see.

Poker is probably the only game where amateurs and professionals play against each other with their own money at stake. Would you play a tennis match against Roger Federer or a chess game against Gary Kasparov for money? If you say yes, you would do it because you think the money spent is worth the unique experience to compete against such a champion and not because you truly believe you have the slightest chance to win.

The reason you have no chance is that there is hardly any luck involved in these kinds of sports. Poker is different in this regard. Give a monkey two aces and he is a big favorite against the best hold'em players in the world.

The large short-term luck factor present in poker creates the illusion that most players think they could win if they were getting their fair share of good cards. Bad players assume that the cards break normally when they win and they are unlucky when they lose, while in reality they have winning sessions because of the large short-term luck factor in poker. The good player has to accept the fact that large swings and bad beats are actually his friends because otherwise there wouldn't be much of a game.

Where does the winners' money come from?

Success in poker is measured by money won. A successful player wins more money than he loses in the long run. A player is successful because he makes better decisions than worse players. However, poker is unique in that you can make the correct decision and lose, or you can make the wrong decision and win. From the preceding discussions we know that bad players have two things working for them: If they run good they can score a better session result than the good player would, and they benefit from bad beats while the good player suffers from them. So, the question remains: where does the winner's money actually come from? How can he overcome the two advantages the bad player has over him? We will try to settle this question by looking at two hands, one where I "undeservedly" lost and one where I "deservedly" won.

The first hand occurred in a \$30-60 game. It was folded to me in the cutoff seat. I decided to raise with 7♥-7♣. Only the big blind, a loose Asian businessman, called. I knew beforehand that he would call because he hardly ever failed to defend his blind. We had played together for some time, and I knew he respected me. That meant he would proceed cautiously and not try to be fancy. The flop came K♠-7♦-4♥. He checked and I bet.

Most players, especially below-average players, would check here, thinking that giving a free card can't hurt, and may enable them to collect one or two bets when the stakes double in case the opponent catches something on the turn.

For this reasoning to be correct, two conditions must be met. First, your

opponent doesn't have anything and wouldn't call your flop bet. But if he has flopped enough to call, you lose money. It's even worse if he intended to check-raise or if he has enough to call on the flop but not on the turn. For instance, should my opponent have pocket sixes, he will most likely call a flop bet, but when an ace comes on the turn he will probably fold because now there are few hands he can beat. Second, your action has to be consonant with your playing style so it does not look too suspicious. In the case where I raise and get called by a single opponent who checks to me on the flop, I bet close to 100% of the time. It's important to bet your strong and weak hands alike; otherwise you are too predictable and an astute opponent realizes quickly that you check your good hands. I sometimes might check in this situation, but only against bad players I haven't seen before.

The Asian businessman called. On the turn came Q♥. Again he checked, I bet and he called. I was sure I had the best hand. I was only behind K-K and Q-Q, and I knew my opponent couldn't have one of these monster hands since he wouldn't have slowplayed them on the turn. The river looked good for me: Q♠. The Asian gentleman checked and I bet. Surprisingly he shouted immediately, "I raise," completely excited.

Now, the tough question was: should I reraise or call? It depended on whether he had three queens or queens full. It was clear that he most likely had queens full. My opponent was loose but cautious, so what hand could he have called with on the flop that contained a queen without having hit a pair? The only hand that comes to mind is A-Q. It's much more likely that he had a pair on the flop and that the queens filled him up. I called. He showed Q♦-7♠ and joyfully grabbed the pot.

If you want, that's a bad beat story¹²⁷. My opponent had to catch runner-runner to win that hand. Notice that a bad beat always signifies that your opponent was not drawing dead. He had some outs, and sometimes the underdog gets there. That means, mathematically speaking, that you didn't lose the whole pot because you were only entitled to win a fraction (okay, a large fraction in this case) of it. Take a look at the following table.

¹²⁷ If you call it a bad beat, it's because of the weak pre-flop call. Calling with middle pair on the flop is reasonable heads-up.

Pot equity							
		7♥7♣			Q♦7♠		
			Pot equity			Pot equity	
	Pot size ¹⁾	Outs	%	\$	Outs	%	\$
Pre-flop	\$140	-	69.4	97	-	30.6	43
Flop	\$200	-	99.6	199	-	0.4	1
Turn	\$320	42	95.5	305	2	4.5	15

¹⁾ After the action is completed

To keep things simple and to ensure comparability with the next example, we will look only at the pot equity on the turn (notice that a different river card would have changed the action at the end). The size of the pot is \$320. The trailing hand has two outs, therefore a winning probability of 4.5%, which translates into a pot equity of \$15. That's way below the 60 bucks the Asian gentleman had to invest to chase his draw¹²⁸. The other side of the coin is that I didn't lose the whole pot, because I wasn't entitled to win it all. Put another way, mathematically I lost \$305, not \$320.

Let's look now at the second example, again from a \$30-60 game at the Bel-lagio. The under-the-gun player raised and there were six callers. Being in the big blind, I would have been content in this spot with any remotely playable hand. So, clearly I was happy to call with 8♦-8♣.

The flop was also to my liking: J♥-8♠-3♥.

With a big pot and several players, there is no sense in slowplaying, even with the second nuts. You want to eliminate players quickly, or at least make them pay as much as possible to draw. I bet out, hoping the original raiser would raise. He didn't disappoint me. Three players called, I made

¹²⁸ Of course, that doesn't mean the call was incorrect because the Asian businessman couldn't know how far behind he was. That he only called with two pair on the turn showed how cautiously he played. I would have check-raised.

it three bets and everybody called. Five players still contested the pot.

The turn was the A♠, a good card for me. It was no heart, and judging by the action, it was doubtful that anyone held pocket aces. I was confident that I still had the best hand. I bet. The under-the-gun player, a young, somewhat loose and aggressive player, raised, and only Joe, a tough local pro, called. I reraised and both players called.

To throw in a little hand-reading exercise, what are the young guy's and Joe's hands?

Let's start with the original raiser. He was a bit loose, but his under-the-gun raise indicated a quality hand. I put him on something like a pocket pair down to 7-7, a big ace, K-Q or two suited pictures like Q-Js. He raised the flop. You can rule out A-K and A-Q. He wouldn't raise two overcards with several players to act behind him. That leaves a split pair of jacks, pocket jacks or an overpair. The next clue is that he just called my reraise. That eliminates pocket jacks; with a large pot and a possible flush draw, you are not going to slowplay. An overpair (A-A, K-K, Q-Q) is unlikely for the same reason (remember, he was an aggressive player and would try to protect his hand). It is reasonable to assume he had a jack with an unknown kicker. He raised me again on the turn. The only logical deduction is that an ace had hit him. Hence, I read him for A-J.

Joe called two bets cold on the flop and turn, a clear indication that he held a draw. Joe was attracted by the big pot that was developing, and had called with two hearts before the flop. His exact holdings are unclear, but a tough player like Joe doesn't call two bets pre-flop with a trash hand. I was sure that he had two big hearts, hence he could have an open-ended straight draw, double belly-buster or gutshot as well as a flush draw¹²⁹.

My opponents looked to have plenty of outs. I definitely didn't want to see an ace, jack or any heart on the river, and a king, queen, ten, nine or eight could also be disastrous. The dealer burnt the top card and turned over 6♦. On the outside I remained emotionless, on the inside I breathed a sign of relief. I mean, to win or lose such a large pot makes a big difference not only for the session but even for the month. I bet, the young guy called and Joe threw his cards in the muck angrily. The original raiser indeed

¹²⁹ Open-ended straight draw: 10-9; double belly buster: Q-10; gutshot: K-Q, K-10, Q-9, 10-7, 9-7, 7-6 (the last three hands are unlikely for a player of Joe's caliber)

showed A-J and Joe had, as he told me later, Q♥-10♥.

It's interesting to take a look at the pot equity of all three hands.

Pot equity										
		A♣-J♠			Q♥-T♥			8♦-8♣		
			Pot equity			Pot equity			Pot equity	
	Pot size ¹⁾	Outs	%	\$	Outs	%	\$	Outs	%	\$
Pre-flop ²⁾	\$480	-	32.8	157	-	35.5	170	-	31.7	153
Flop ²⁾	\$930	-	1.8	17	-	35.7	332	-	62.6	582
Turn	\$1,470	4	9.5	140	13	31.0	455	25	59.5	875

¹⁾ After the action is completed ²⁾ Ignoring the other present hands

I used this hand as an example of the best hand holding up. Anybody with pocket eights on this flop would think he deserved to win. Indeed, the eights are a big favorite. But note that my pot equity on the turn was just \$875, though I won the whole pot. In other words, since the winner takes it all, I was overpaid.

Now things become much clearer. When you suffer a bad beat, mathematically you lose less than you think while in reality you lose more than you should. When your hand holds up (and your opponent is not drawing dead) it's just the opposite. Mathematically your fair share of the pot is less than the whole pot, but in reality you win more than you should. The conclusion is this: The times you lose because someone draws out on you are balanced by the times when your hand holds up. We can now understand where the winner's money comes from. The losses are overcompensated in the long run by the wins when his hands hold up. That includes the times when he gives up on unprofitable draws while a bad player keeps chasing, and when he draws with the right pot odds and gets there.

These findings are by no means academic. It helps to put things in perspective to understand that bad beats are unavoidable against bad players

Professional Middle Limit Hold'em

and that you are more than compensated when your hand holds up or you hit your draw. Handling bad beats is tough, but understanding the underlying mechanism may help you keep your cool. You should strive to not go on tilt, no matter what happens at the table. I know that's easier said than done. Limit hold'em is a game of small edges. When your game deteriorates, it can quickly cross the line and you no longer have the best of it. Don't let that happen. Take a break or stop playing. Then try to analyze what made you mad, so you can learn to deal with it. Bad beats are an indication that the game is good because somebody makes mistakes. Be the one who takes advantage of these errors and not the one who goes on tilt.