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Beginners Strategy Guide to Online Micro Limit Hold 'Em

By Mike Hellmer

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It's hard to miss the fact that the last two winners of the World Series of Poker were not professional poker players and the fact that Chris MoneyMaker (2003) and Greg Raymer (2004) are online players. It's no wonder that online poker is exploding. With so many new players out there giving online poker a shot it's feeding frenzy for the skilled player, or even the player with a modest amount of skills. Most of these newbies start out at the lowest limit tables until they either bust out or improve their skills and bankroll enough to move onto the higher limit tables. Even if you're a veteran of the Friday night home dealer's choice poker games, you most likely will have to change your playing style to win consistently online. But fear not, there are more unskilled players at the micro limit tables than there are skilled players.

So for all the new to limit Texas Hold 'Em players who would like to improve their chance of winning at the lowest of the low limit tables, or micro limit tables, I've put together some very basic tips which should help you to win consistently. These tips will work for most online tables with limits of \$0.50/\$1.00 and lower. There are several online poker rooms with micro limits as low as \$0.05/\$0.10, which are excellent limits for honing your skills.

It's important to realize that strategies vary for different limits, due to the amount of money involved and the general skill of the players at the table. Micro limit poker has some interesting dynamics and culture due to the fact that the amount wagered at any time is not a lot of money to most of the online players. It stands to reason that the majority of the players play at these low limits because they are beginners trying to gain experience or they are on a limited bankroll. Many of the significant cultural differences between micro limit and the higher limit tables can be broken down into these key observations. (Throughout this article I will use common shorthand to represent the cards. AK means, of course, an ace and a king. T8 means a ten and an 8. QJs means queen jack suited, while QJo means queen jack off suited. Kx means a king and a card of no significance to the hand. A common term used will be connectors, which means cards connected in rank, such as 76 or T9.) Typically 50% or more of the players at a table will pay to see the flop when the table is full. This is due, in part, to the very low limits

causing many players to always call the big blind since it doesn't cost too much; it's low risk. The other reason is that these micro limit tables have many more players of lower skill levels. They often call with lousy starting cards when they should fold. Raising preflop does little to chase out players. Players who have not contributed to the pot yet may still call, even though they shouldn't. Players who have already called will not typically fold after they've been raised. A single raise preflop does little except to increase the size of the pot, which is good if you have a strong hand. Very few players will fold an Ax (ace and a low card). Unskilled players also like to hold any hand where they have paint (face card). After the deal there are 20 hole cards (10 players x 2 cards). Probability says that there is approximately 1.5 of each card rank. There will be 1.5 Aces, 1.5 Kings, 1.5 Queens, etc. Unskilled players will hold any two suited cards in hopes of a flush, even something as bad as 72. Unskilled players will call to the river with a weak pair no matter what.

Now that the observations are out of the way, I can get on with the strategy of how to win playing at these micro limit tables.

Preflop

The objective here is to go into the flop with a strong position or fold. Do you want to be a gambler or a poker player? There is a difference and not playing anything but strong hands preflop makes you a gambler. Unless you are getting a streak of good cards, you should be folding preflop 60–70% of the time.

1. Fold all but strong hands preflop. Strong hands are any pair, AK, AQ, AJ, AT, Axs, KQ, plus high suited connectors. The more players who see the flop, the lower your odds are of winning. So if you are going to put money into the pot, put it in when you have a strong hand. The exception is when you can call a big pot. For example, if you are in the small blind and everyone calls around to you there will be 19 small blinds in the pot already (big blind and 8 big blind calls = 18 small blinds, plus your original small blind). That means you are getting 19:1 odds to call the bet with one additional small blind size bet. Any time you can get huge odds like that preflop you can play just about anything, if you like.

2. Don't protect your blind. If you are in the small blind or big blind and you don't have a strong hand don't call a raise. Too many players in the blinds will call a raise because they've already invested the blind. But since most players like to limp in (call the big blind) preflop, a raise is a good indication the player is sitting on a strong hand, like AK or a pocket pair.

3. If you have a very strong hand preflop, raise. First of all, if you do happen to chase out a player or two with the raise then the odds of your strong hand winning have improved. Second, a strong hand has a good chance of winning the pot, so you want to get as large a pot as possible. Third, you show strength, which can help you to chase out players later on.

Postflop

So now you've made it to the flop with a strong hand. Does the flop help you or hurt you? Arguably there is not much in between because with five or more players seeing the flop there's bound to be someone that benefits from the flop, and if someone else benefits and you don't, then the flop hurt you.

4. Know what a draw drawing hand is. For example, a flush draw or a straight draw means that you need one card to complete the flush or the straight. Many unskilled players make the mistake that needing two cards to complete your hand is a drawing hand. This is called a runner–runner draw, and is not a drawing hand. If that's all you got then you should fold, otherwise you can typically call when you have a drawing hand. For example, you have KQo and the flop is JT5. You are sitting on an open ended straight draw where an A or 9 will give you a straight. You can bet out or call with this hand, but be very careful about calling raises. The reason has to do with the odds of making your hand and the amount in the pot, which is called pot odds. There are many fine poker books that explain the details of pot odds, but as a quick example, in the case of your open ended straight draw there are 8 unseen cards (four aces and four nines) that will make your hand and there are 47 unseen cards total (52 minus the 2 in your hand minus the flop). Your odds of getting your straight on the turn is 8/47, or about 6 to 1 that you won't get the straight. So for you to call any bet or raise, the pot (which includes the bets in front of you) when you call should be at least 6 times the amount of the call. But it's not that easy, because you actually have two chances to get the straight, on the turn and on the river, so looking forward your odds improved to 3 to 1 against. If you don't make it on the turn, then your odds jump back up to about 6 to 1 against. (Pot odds are a very important part of winning a poker, and I suggest that while you are cleaning up at the micro limit tables that you read a good poker book in preparation for

moving up to the higher limits. At the end of this article I list a few of the better ones.)

5. Know what a check–raise is. A check–raise is when a player has a good hand, e.g. a set (three of a kind) after the flop and he checks hoping that someone will bet out so that he can raise to get more money in the pot. Micro limit players overplay the check–raise. Most of the time a player who check–raises in micro limit has a great hand and they want to exploit it, but this is a tip to you that perhaps you should fold. You should check–raise when appropriate, but mix up your play or else you will be seen as predictable and will have trouble driving the pot up.

6. Know what slow play is. Slow play is when a player has a likely winning hand but calls or check–calls, trying to keep as many players in, hoping they make what they believe is a winning hand. Many times a player will slow play on the flop and turn, but then spring the trap on the river where many players will not fold after coming this far. For example, you have AKo and the flop is QJT. You have made the nuts — the best possible hand so far. You could slow play this by checking or calling hoping to keep players in. If you raise then the better players will probably put you on a straight and may fold. What you are hoping is that one or two other players have paired or maybe someone has 9 for an open ended straight draw. If the table checks around on the flop then consider betting out on the turn, otherwise you can continue the slow play on the turn and then on the river spring the trap. Some players will think your made your hand on the river card and maybe they think they have you beat. On the other side of the coin, now that you know about slow playing, try to identify if someone else is slow playing and avoid the trap. Look out for scary boards. If the board has three, and especially four, connectors the pot most likely will be won by a straight. Three or four cards of the same suit might indicate a flush is going to win the pot.

7. Don't fall in love with small pocket pairs. You will see the pros on TV betting their small pairs as strong hands. But, you have to keep in mind that small pairs are really only strong in heads up (1 on 1) play, which is often the case when you observe the high stakes games. A 22 vs. AK is sometimes

referred to as a coin toss, meaning that the odds are about even as to which hand will win. But if you have 5 players who are going to see the flop then pocket 2s is not so strong because of the odds that one of the other 4 players will draw a pair on the flop, turn, or river. Go ahead and call to see the flop, but if you don't get a set, don't be shy about folding. Lee Jones in his excellent book "Winning Low Limit Texas Hold Em" says that you should look for a reason to fold. I interpret this to mean, in this case, that if you have 44 and the flop is T82, you might want to consider the possibility that one of the other 4 players with the 8 cards between them paired up with the T or 8, eclipsing your 44. In a case like this if one of the other players shows strength throw that small pair into the muck.

8. Don't assume that just because the table checks around that no one has anything. Many players are timid about betting out when they have a middle pair. For example, a player has K7o and the flop is A74. He may be scared to bet on his middle pair of sevens because he's afraid of someone pairing up with aces. Typically this player will check/call through the river in hopes that his pair hold. Also, some unskilled players are so afraid of telling their hand that they will check when they pair on the flop or turn. For example, a player has AK and the flop is K75. He checks and calls, if necessary, because he's afraid that if he gets aggressive he will be telling everyone he paired kings.

9. Be aggressive when you have a hand that may get outdrawn. Continuing with the example above, suppose you had the AK with the flop of K75. The problem is, even though a pair of kings with an ace kicker is a strong hand, if you let 4 or 5 other players stay in by checking there is a good chance that you will get outdrawn. What if one of the unskilled players called preflop with Q2o, even though this is a weak hand? Now, if everyone checks around after the flop, then Q2o with that K75 flop has absolutely

nothing, but gets to see the turn because no one bet. Now the turn is a Q and suddenly Q2o likes her hand. You still have her beat, now she's probably going to pay to see the river, especially since no one bet on the flop's king. Now the river is a 2 and your pair of kings is beat by two pair. With this kind of hand you want to scare as many players off as possible.

10. Look for the obvious tell from the check-caller. Many times in these micro limit games you will see the table check around past the players in early position and some player in late position bets out, then the early position player(s) call the bet; they check-call after the flop. Then on the turn one of the early checkers bets out. Why? After the flop this player checked then called a bet by a player in later position. More often than not the player who bet out in the previous round will bet out in the next round. When the earlier player bets out after the turn when he checked the after the flop is usually a tell that he made his hand. Look at the board. Many times this player has just made a straight or flush. The player gets excited and wants to get a bet out, not thinking that the player who bet out after the flop will probably bet out again giving the player who just made his hand the opportunity to check-raise.

11. Don't be afraid to lay down a hand. So many unskilled players will play out two pair, trips, or even a straight when they should lay it down. Suppose you have a straight but there are four clubs on the board and none in your hand. Is it possible that another player has a flush? Is there someone at the table who is betting out with 4 clubs on the board? You should probably lay down your straight when someone is betting like they made their flush. I know it's tough to do, especially if you have the nut straight, but more often than not, the flush was made.

Bluffing

12. Bluffing rarely works in micro limit. This is due to a couple reasons. One, many players will play out the weak hands in hopes of getting the pot. Many times you will see a player call all the way through the river and all they have is a low pair. It's very difficult to get these players to lay down their weak hands. The other reason is there may be players who want to keep you honest. Maybe they've called all the way to the river on a draw, did not make their draw, but decide that since they came this far, it's only one more bet to keep you honest. Bluff sparingly and do it right.

13. Don't be the one who calls just to keep the other player honest. A lot of players realize that bluffing doesn't work too often in micro limit so it's used sparingly. Yes, once in a while you will catch a player bluffing, but you will lose more than you win.

14. Know when to bluff. Sometimes it's unavoidable. Suppose you have been fast playing a drawing hand to try to drive others out. You have AKo and you correctly raised preflop. The flop is 754. Most of the time players are going to remember your preflop raise and check around to you. You can check to get a free turn card, letting all the preflop callers see the turn also, or you could bet because you have two very strong overcards. You should bet out with that flop because you are likely to get a couple players to fold before the turn. Now on the turn you still don't pair up and everyone checks to you and now you have the same decision, check for a free river card or bet to show strength. You should bet out in most cases. Let's recap. You raised preflop and you bet out on the flop and turn. This is a semi-bluff because you don't have a hand except ace high and if someone has paired up then you are dead, but you could still make your ace or king on the river, which may very well end out being the winning hand. Many times your show of strength up to this point may drive everyone else out or maybe one or two players follow you to the river. Now the river comes and you still don't pair up your ace or king. As a beginner your instincts may be to check because you didn't make your hand, but that would be a mistake if one of the other players were sitting on a low pair. Your only chance of winning may be

to bluff at the pot, and since you've shown strength all along the weak pair may put you on a stronger hand and fold, giving you the pot. You will probably lose as many pots as you win when this happens, but if there were several callers along the way, the pots you do win will normally exceed your loses on the others. It's worth it at this point to put in one more bet to try to steal the pot, because if you don't you will probably lose the pot for sure unless the other players can't beat ace high. Also when you check on the river after showing strength it's a tell that you were on a draw and did not make your hand, opening the door for one of the other players to bet out with strength.

General

15. Observe the other players. Pay attention to their style of play. Is there a calling station? That's a player who will call almost every bet to the river hoping to catch something, anything. These guys can suck you out (beat your good hand by making their hand at the river) from time to time, but over the long haul they are going to lose. You can take advantage of these players, but don't let it put you on tilt when they do suck you out, because it will happen. Is there a loose aggressive player? This player will play just about anything aggressively. She will consistently raise, given the chance, and will drag some large pots, but playing loose will not win in the long run. Is there a timid player? This is common at

micro limits because there are many new players. This player will check–call with great hands. You won't believe your eyes when you see this person drag a tiny pot with a full house. The timid player is a problem in one sense because it's hard to get a read on him. On the other hand, by showing strength, many times you can get this player to fold, even though they shouldn't. Are there any tight players? This player will only play good hands preflop and will fold often post flop when the chance of making her hand is not supported by the size of the pot. This player may go the showdown only 10%–15% of the time. This is the worst player for you because they are your best competition, the type of player you should be, in all levels of Limit Hold 'Em.

Your next step should be to learn about pot odds and playing situations. I believe you can win at the micro limit tables with the tips I have outlined here, but to go beyond micro limit you will need additional skill, so if you're anxious to play, pull up a seat at a micro limit table and have some fun. In the mean time pick up one of these books, which are excellent for learning low limit Hold 'Em.

"Winning Low Limit Hold 'Em" by Lee Jones

"Hold 'Em Excellence" by Lou Krieger

"The Complete Book of Hold `Em Poker" by Gary Carson

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Now You Can Play Texas Hold 'em At An Online Casino

By Kevin Rose

Looking to play an action–packed game of Texas Hold Em anytime day or night? Keep your car in the garage and hop on the Internet for a quick trip to an online casino.

Texas Hold Em is sweeping the world and you can find thousands of games going on at nearly any online casino. Playing Texas Hold Em online is actually better than playing at a physical casino. Not only do you avoid the expense of travelling to a casino, but you avoid the crowds, the distractions, and the cigarette smoke in your eyes from the player sitting next to you.

But that's all you'll avoid because playing Texas Hold Em at an online casino comes with all of the thrills and some pretty big pots.

Not only can you find an open seat anytime that you want one, but many of the top online casinos sponsor Texas Hold Em tournaments where the prize money can get pretty big.

The rules for playing Texas Hold Em online are pretty much the same as they are in physical casinos, but you should always check for casino–specific variations just to be safe.

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If you are not an experienced Texas Hold Em player, you can get wiped out pretty quickly if you're seated at an online casino table with the "big boys". That's why many online casinos offer \$.50–\$1.00 Low Limit Texas Hold Em online poker games. With stakes that low you can afford to make mistakes while you hone your strategy without losing a bundle.

Once your skill levels improve you can move on to \$10 limit games where you'll be matched against more skilled players but you won't have to be worried about being clobbered by the high rollers who are playing online No–Limit Texas Hold Em.

Just because your bankroll isn't as big as you wish it was, you can still take advantage on the online casino Texas Hold Em tournament action by looking for \$10 Limit Sit–n–Go Tournaments which are limited to 10 players at a time.

Once you are confident of your abilities to play Texas Hold Em at the smaller online casino games, you can try your luck sitting down to play at the No Limit Texas Hold Em table with a buy–in as low as \$50. And when you really reach the top you can even play at multiple Texas Hold Em tables at the same time. That's something that you can only do at an online casino!

With many online casinos offering first–time Texas Hold Em players financial incentives like new player bonus dollars and match–play credits, it just makes sense to treat yourself to an online game of Texas Hold Em instead of packing up the family and heading out to some resort casino where you'll spend hundreds of dollars just on room and meals. Texas Hold Em and online casinos — it's a sure thing.

Kevin Rose is an author and consultant for [The 10 Best Online Casinos](#)

, and has many years of experience in online gambling.

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