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Play Blackjack Like a Pro

By W Turner

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If you don't have much Blackjack experience, it can be daunting stepping up to the tables for a game. You can, however, hide the fact of your inexperience very simply by remembering these straightforward rules. (Note – the rules of BlackJack will differ from area to area and from casino to casino, but the general principles are the same. When in doubt, ask!). A typical BlackJack table seats a dealer and up to 7 players. Starting with the dealer, the first seat on his left is '1st Base', while the first seat on his right is referred to as 3rd Base. In front of each player's seat is a betting square, printed on the felt. Right in front of the dealer is the chip tray, while on his left is the deck (a.k.a. shoe) and next to that is the 'minimum bet sign', which tells you how 'expensive' the table is. As a beginner, you will want to stick to the low bet tables to keep any losses under control. On the dealer's right is a money drop slot. This is a security feature – casinos don't really trust their employees, and all cash and chips are deposited here to prevent 'leakage'.

Next to the drop slot is what's known as the 'discard tray'. Play starts after the dealer shuffles the cards, the deck is 'cut' by a player using a 'marker card' (NOT the bare hand), and finally the dealer 'burns' a card (or throws it away in order to ensure randomness). Before the cards are dealt, you make your bet by placing chips or cash into the betting box. Be aware that you can sit out a hand or 2 if you like – maybe you need a break, or the dealer is just on a lucky streak. Note that if the casino is busy, you may be asked to give up your seat so another punter can take your place (or alternatively resume the game yourself). If you really don't want to play, just get up and vacate the seat – you can always come back later!

When all players who want to play in this round have placed a bet, 2 cards will be dealt to each player going from left to right. Some casinos deal the cards face down. Elsewhere the cards are dealt face up, in which case NEVER touch them – the assumption if you do is that you are cheating! The dealer deals himself 2 cards – 1 down and 1 up. Card values are, as everyone knows, 10 Jack Queen and King are worth 10, an Ace is worth 1 or 11, all other cards are worth their face values. In noisy casinos, be prepared to use hand signals to indicate whether you want to hit or stand.

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How do you indicate 'hit'? If the cards are dealt face down, flick the cards gently across the felt 2 times. If the cards were dealt face up, point at the cards with your finger in a jabbing style. You can nod your head to emphasise the desire for a hit. If you'd prefer to stand, move your hand horizontally from left to right (palm down) to indicate 'no'. Always keep your hands a few inches off the table to avoid suspicion. If you like, you can emphasise the stand by shaking your head 'no' at the same time.

Should you play single or multiple deck games? Only in Vegas do they still play single deck, and the tables are usually full – it is much easier for amateurs to 'count' in a single game, and keep the odds pretty fair, which explains their popularity. Multiple deck games will usually be based on even number of decks (up to 8 decks in the shoe at a time). Multiple decks allow the dealer to deal more hands per hour (less shuffling etc), which makes them more profitable for the casino, and they reduce the chances of a player 'counting'. Dealers HAVE to follow straightforward rules, and must hit if they have 16 or less. On the other hand, if the dealer has 17 or more, he MUST stand, except in some smaller

casinos, where he can hit on a 'soft 17'.

You as the player can do anything you like, standing or hitting as it suits you. If you get a BlackJack (an Ace and a ten right off) you win 1 and a half times your bet. You can only double down on 2 card hands totalling 9, 10, or 11 (a very few casinos allow doubling on any 2 card hand). If your cards were dealt face down and you want to double, turn them over and put them on the dealer's side of the betting square. Otherwise point to them and say 'double' when it's your turn. You will have to put an equal amount of chips next to those already in the betting box (NEVER put new chips on top of old chips – it looks like cheating!). You will get one new card.

Splitting is kind of similar – cards dealt face down need to be turned over and placed them a little apart. Otherwise point at them and say 'split' when it's your turn. Place an equal amount of chips in the betting box near the other card (remember, NEVER on top). You are now playing 2 hands exactly as normal (unless you just split two aces in which case you only get one card – a 10 would be good!. If it is a 10 the hand isn't a BlackJack, meaning you only get the standard odds of 1/1 and not 1/1.5 as you would for a 'natural' BlackJack. Be careful how you split – it is possible to end up with 4 or 5 hands simultaneously! Likewise, it's probably not good to split two 5s – you will be replacing a hand that is great for drawing on or doubling down on with (probably) 2 poor hands. Insurance only happens when the dealer's face up card is an Ace, when the dealer will ask the players if they want insurance (he won't know what his face down card or 'hole' card is at this point, so you won't be able to read his expression for clues). Insurance means that half the player's bet is placed on the 'insurance' semicircle printed on the felt. If the dealer gets a BlackJack the player wins the the insurance bet but loses the original bet meaning a zero hand because insurance pays 2 to 1. If the dea

ler does not get BlackJack, the insurance bet is lost and the hand is played normally with the remaining half bet. Don't bother with insurance unless you are trying to card count (take it when the number of non '10' cards to 10s drops below the 2 to 1 margin). You may also come across 'Surrender' – it's not widely used, but there are 2 versions you may find, 'early surrender' and 'late surrender'.

Early surrender means quitting on 2 card hands if you don't like the dealer's up card (e.g. a ten or court card). Surrendering in this way will give you a small extra advantage whcih is why casinos don't like it.

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Late surrender means waiting until the dealer checks for BlackJack, at which point if he doesn't, you may decide to surrender. As we say, not very common, so ask before joining the table whether you can or not. And that's it! Stay cool, and don't panic, and nobody will guess you are a casino newbie!

Wilma Turner is a professional blackjack player who writes for

How To Play Blackjack

By Adel Awwad

Whether you call it Pontoon, 21, or an investment. Blackjack is easy to learn and even easier to play. The aim of Blackjack is to accumulate a winning hand of 21, or as close to 21, without going over (bust.) That's all there is to it. No flushes, straights or trying to outsmart the other players, who, like you, are all just trying to beat the Blackjack dealer.

Despite its simplicity (Blackjack is truly accessible to all); some players inevitably try to complicate Blackjack. For all the talk of systems and odds, all you need to know is how to win and how to avoid losing! Here's how it works: Two cards are dealt to every player and play moves from the dealers left - each participant elects whether to hit (take another card,) stand (play with the cards they were dealt,) or surrender, in which case they fold at the cost of half their original bet. Once all the participants have finished hitting, the dealer plays his hand and pays out to players who beat his score.

The good news is: Blackjack dealers are bound by the house rules; you're not. For example, dealers stand on all 17's. In other words, he'll keep hitting until he reaches or exceeds 17. If he draws a king and a six, he's bound by convention to play on, while you've got the get-out clause of an early surrender.

The better news is: you can 'Double Down' and double your winnings! Double your bet on a potentially winning deal, provided you can hit once and stand. You can even 'Split Your Pairs' and double your chances! If you're dealt two cards of identical value, split them and play two hands for the price of one!

The best news is: in Blackjack, you can win big and win quickly. Blackjack is the name and the aim of the game. A Blackjack is a total of 21 in your initial deal; a picture card / ace combination. A blackjack can only be beaten by a dealer's blackjack. Any other score of 21 just won't cut it.

Blackjack is a truly elegant game: uncomplicated enough to engage players, but sufficiently captivating to keep them coming back – once you start playing Blackjack, you might just find you can't stop. Blackjack is enjoyable, exhilarating, and instantly compelling. No wonder it's played and enjoyed the whole world over.

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