

Table of Contents

About Dan Harrington	v
About Bill Robertie	vii
Introduction	1
Organization	1
Thanks to the Forums and Others	2
Part Eight: Making Moves	5
Introduction	6
Bluffing	7
Bluffing Pre-Flop	8
The Continuation Bet	9
Defending Against the Continuation Bet	13
Probe Bets	20
The Squeeze Play	22
The No-Limit Semi-Bluff	26
Back-Alley Mugging	29
The Dark Tunnel Bluff	31
Slow-Playing	34
Slow-Playing Before the Flop	35
After the Flop: General Considerations	36
After the Flop: Candidate Hands	37
After the Flop: The Check-Raise and The Check-Call	40
Massaging the Pot	46
The Check-Raise Bluff	47
The Post-Oak Bluff	49
BSB Play	51
Smallball Versus Longball	52

ii Table of Contents

Blending Moves and Styles	57
The Conservative Style and Bluffing	57
The Conservative Style and Slow-Playing	59
The Super-Aggressive Style and Bluffing	60
The Super-Aggressive Style and Slow-Playing ...	61
The Hidden Linkage Between Bluffing and Slow-Playing	61
The Problems	63
Part Nine: Inflection Points	121
Introduction	122
The Problem of Inflection Points	124
The Strong Force and the Weak Force: Magriel's M and Harrington's Q	125
The Zone System	129
More About M	132
Yellow Zone Strategy	133
Orange Zone Strategy	137
Red Zone Strategy	140
Red Zone Strategy in Action	142
Some Other Examples of Inflection Point Play	156
Playing Styles in the Endgame	158
Beware the Great Overthink	160
Structured Hand Analysis (SHAL)	162
The Problems	173
Part Ten: Multiple Inflection Points	221
Introduction	222
Assessing Position	223
Isolation Play	228
Calculating Pot Odds in All-In Situations	234
The Problems	239
Part Eleven: Short Tables	275
Introduction	276

Table of Contents iii

Effective M: Adjusting for Short Tables	277
The Tactics of Short-Table Play	280
Slow-Playing Before the Flop	280
Slow-Playing After the Flop	281
The Cooperation Play	285
Flyswatting: The 10-to-1 Rule	287
When in Doubt, Let the Pot Odds Decide	290
Controlling Pot Odds	293
Blending Strategy, Stack Size, and the Prize Fund ...	296
Win the Hand or Play for the Prize Money?	302
Managing Bet Sizes: Carrots and Sticks	303
Tracking the Big Stack	305
The Problems	306
Part Twelve: Heads-Up	363
Introduction	364
Hand Rankings in Heads-Up Play	365
Pre-Flop Heads-Up Play	369
One: Any Pair Is a Big Hand	369
Two: Almost All Hands Are Battles of Unpaired Cards	371
Three: Domination Isn't as Bad as You Think ...	372
Four: You Will Mostly Have the Pot Odds You Need to Play	372
Position and Bet Sizes in Heads-Up Play	374
High-M Confrontations Versus Low-M Confrontations	376
Basic Pre-Flop Betting Strategy	376
You are the Small Blind/Button	377
You are the Big Blind	378
Some Sample Heads-Up Sessions	380
Heads-Up Session No. 1: Ivey Versus D'Agostino	381
Pre-Flop Strategy When First to Act: Ivey vs D'Agostino	407
Heads-Up Session No. 2: You the Reader	408

iv Table of Contents

Part Thirteen: Final Thoughts	419
Introduction	420
Multi-Qualifier Satellite Tournaments	421
Making Deals	427
Putting It All Together	430
Conclusion	443
Index	445

About Dan Harrington

Dan Harrington began playing poker professionally in 1982. On the circuit he is known as “Action Dan,” an ironic reference to his solid but effective style. He has won several major no-limit hold ’em tournaments, including the European Poker Championships (1995), the \$2,500 No-Limit Hold ’em event at the 1995 World Series of Poker, and the Four Queens No-Limit Hold ’em Championship (1996).

Dan began his serious games-playing with chess, where he quickly became a master and one of the strongest players in the New England area. In 1972 he won the Massachusetts Chess Championship, ahead of most of the top players in the area. In 1976 he started playing backgammon, a game which he also quickly mastered. He was soon one of the top money players in the Boston area, and in 1981 he won the World Cup of backgammon in Washington D.C., ahead of a field that included most of the world’s top players.

He first played in the \$10,000 No-Limit Hold ’em Championship Event of the World Series of Poker in 1987. He has played in the championship a total of 13 times and has reached the final table in four of those tournaments, an amazing record. Besides winning the World Championship in 1995, he finished sixth in 1987, third in 2003, and fourth in 2004. He is widely recognized as one of the greatest and most respected no-limit hold ’em players, as well as a feared opponent in limit hold ’em side games. He lives in Santa Monica where he is a partner in Anchor Loans, a real estate business.

About Bill Robertie

Bill Robertie has spent his life playing and writing about chess, backgammon, and now poker. He began playing chess as a boy, inspired by Bobby Fischer's feats on the international chess scene. While attending Harvard as an undergraduate, he became a chess master and helped the Harvard chess team win several intercollegiate titles. After graduation he won a number of chess tournaments, including the United States Championship at speed chess in 1970. He also established a reputation at blindfold chess, giving exhibitions on as many as eight boards simultaneously.

In 1976 he switched from chess to backgammon, becoming one of the top players in the world. His major titles include the World Championship in Monte Carlo in 1983 and 1987, the Black & White Championship in Boston in 1979, the Las Vegas tournaments in 1980 and 2001, the Bahamas Pro-Am in 1993, and the Istanbul World Open in 1994.

He has written several well-regarded backgammon books, the most noted of which are *Advanced Backgammon* (1991), a two-volume collection of 400 problems, and *Modern Backgammon* (2002), a new look at the underlying theory of the game. He has also written a set of three books for the beginning player: *Backgammon for Winners* (1994), *Backgammon for Serious Players* (1995), and *501 Essential Backgammon Problems* (1997).

From 1991 to 1998 he edited the magazine *Inside Backgammon* with Kent Goulding. He owns a publishing company, the Gammon Press (www.thegammonpress.com), and lives in Arlington, Massachusetts with his wife Patrice.

Introduction

In Volume I of *Harrington on Hold 'em*, I explained some of the basic (and not-so-basic) concepts you needed to be a successful no-limit hold 'em player. We saw how to evaluate a hand in the context of all the information available at the table, how to take into account the different playing styles you might encounter in your opponents, how to analyze hands and evaluate pot odds, and how to play before and after the flop, as well on later streets.

My emphasis in Volume I was playing in the early stages of tournaments, when most of the following conditions apply:

1. The tables are mostly full, with 9 or 10 players.
2. The stacks are large relative to the blinds.
3. The stacks sizes are roughly the same.
4. The money is still far off in the distance.

In this book, I'm going to show you what happens when we reach the ending stage of a tournament, and some (or all) of these conditions break down. Be warned: Ending play is very different from early play, and I'll introduce many ideas that you've never seen explained in a poker book before. But as in Volume I, I'll introduce them slowly and carefully, with plenty of hand examples along the way.

To be consistent with Volume I, the parts of the book will be numbered starting where Volume I left off.

Organization

Part Eight, "Making Moves," is really the last chapter of Volume I, but space considerations forced us to move it here to Volume II. In contrast to the discussions in Volume I, which were mostly concerned with betting for value, here I'll discuss bets that

2 Introduction

don't reflect the true value of your hand. We'll look at bluffs, delayed bluffs, check-raises, and the various forms of slow-playing. Most important, I'll show you the preconditions required to give your moves a high percentage of success.

Part Nine, "Inflection Points," is probably the most important chapter of the two volumes. Here I'll show you how to play when the blinds become a larger and larger portion of your stack size. I'll introduce the M and Q ratios, as well as my "Zone" concept, and show you how different types of hands become more or less playable as you move from zone to zone.

Part Ten covers the play at tables where stack sizes and inflection points are wildly different, so that each player is operating under a different agenda. Once again, you have to consider how the table appears to each possible opponent before making your moves.

Part Eleven, "Short Tables," shows you how to play when the table size shrinks to six, five, four, or even just three players. Starting hand and playing requirements change dramatically at these tables, and of course inflection points play a major role as well.

Part Twelve, "Heads-Up," shows you what to do when only one other player remains with you. This phase of the tournament doesn't usually last very long, so you have to be alert and decisive to squeeze out an edge.

Part Thirteen is our miscellaneous catch-all chapter, where I'll talk about some loose ends that didn't really fit anywhere else, like making deals and playing in tournaments with multiple qualifiers, as well as some final insights on the psychology of the game.

Thanks to the Forums and Others

The Two Plus Two Online Forums (www.twoplustwo.com) are an excellent source of poker discussions and commentary. We'd like to thank all the contributors who submitted comments

Introduction 3

and suggestions following the release of Volume I. All were appreciated, and we used some of the ideas to improve the layout of Volume II.

In addition, I want to thank David Sklansky and Mason Malmuth for their comments throughout this manuscript, and Ed Miller for his help in creating the index.

Making Moves

Introduction

In Volume I focus for the most part was on “value bets,” bets that more or less accurately reflected the true strength of your hand. When you play poker, however, you can’t simply bet when you have a hand and throw your cards away otherwise. If you do, even the most perceptually challenged opponents will eventually figure you out. Instead, you’ll have to mix in some moves with your value bets, pretending to be strong when you have nothing, and pretending to be weak when you really have a hand.

Moves break down into two broad categories. Bluffs, where you pretend to have a strong hand when in fact you don’t, and slow-plays, where you pretend to have a weak hand when in fact you are strong. Both can be powerful and effective tools. Both techniques can be underused, and both can be overused.

In this chapter I’ll look at the various forms these moves can take. I’ll show you what conditions provide a favorable situation to make a move, and when moves should be avoided. Remember that while moves can be used to set up your value bets, they can generate a profit on their own if properly employed.

Bluffing

Bluffing is a pretty straightforward idea. You have a weak hand, but you bet anyway, pretending to have a strong one. If your opponent believes you, you take down a pot.

In this section I’ll outline some very specific bluffing moves that have a better-than-average chance of success. First, however, let’s talk about some general characteristics of all bluffs.

How many players should you bluff? The fewer, the better. One is better than two, and two are better than three. Bluffing more players creates the appearance of a stronger hand, but increases the chance that someone may have a hand that’s strong enough to call or raise your bet.

Who to bluff? The ideal opponent is the weak-tight player. He thinks every glass is half-empty and every rising market is a bubble. The only hand he really wants to play to a showdown is the nuts. The weak-tight player looks for an excuse *not* to play a hand. A big bet by you could be just the encouragement he needs.

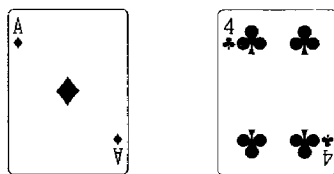
What kind of stack to bluff? Medium-sized stacks are better targets than either small or large stacks. The danger with a small stack is that the player may be getting desperate, and decide that his hand is just good enough for an all-in move. The large stack may feel he’s in a comfortable enough position to look you up and see what you’re doing. The medium-sized stack is probably more concerned about the danger of shrinking to a small stack than the opportunity of growing to a large stack, and is therefore more likely to fold a moderate hand in the face of apparent strength.

These are all very general guidelines, of course, and you’ll encounter many exceptions. Now let’s look at some specific types of bluffs.

Bluffing Pre-Flop

I won't say that bluffing before the flop is entirely a beginner's move. There's a place for pre-flop bluffing in poker, especially as the blinds rise relative to the chip stacks. However, beginners certainly get too involved trying to steal the blinds. Usually this occurs because beginners don't yet have the patience to endure the long runs of bad cards that prevent them from making any solid bets, so periodically they'll take a couple of worthless cards and make a move at the pot. (We saw a few examples in the problems in Volume I.)

While these random moves can certainly work from time to time, eventually they will become an expensive habit. Keep in mind that the starting hand requirements that I outlined in Part Five of Volume I *already include the equity of bluffing*. When you raise with something like



on the button, your move has a big bluff component already. You're not rooting for someone to stand up to you; you just want to pick up the pot when the blinds fold. But when someone does call, you still have a hand to play.

By using your starting hand requirements to generate your bluffs, you achieve an additional goal: randomizing your play. The shuffle will ensure that your bluffing hands arrive on a random time schedule, thus making your play harder to read.

The Continuation Bet

Continuation bets, which we discussed briefly in Volume I, are the most basic sort of post-flop bluff. A continuation bet occurs when you took the lead in the betting pre-flop, indicating strength, you missed the flop, and now you are in position to make the first bet after the flop, either because you're first to act or because the players have all checked to you. In this situation, you lead out with a bet. The bet "continues" your pre-flop action, and indicates to the table that you're still strong. Since it's consistent with your previous play, the bet has a reasonably high probability of success unless the flop really hit your opponent.

Here are a few ideas to keep in mind when making continuation bets:

1. **Bet size is important.** While you'll need to vary the size of your continuation bets to keep your opponents guessing, the basic continuation bet should be about half the size of the existing pot. That's both large enough to give you a good chance of winning the pot, while small enough to create favorable odds for yourself. A half-pot bet only requires you to win one time in three to break even.
2. **The number of opponents is important.** The ideal number of opponents when making a continuation bet is one. The more opponents, the smaller the chance of success. I might on occasion try a continuation bet against two opponents, but if I'm facing three or more players, I need to hit the flop to keep playing.
3. **The quality of your hand is important.** Did you completely miss the flop, or do you have a draw to a good hand? Completely missing the flop is a good indicator for a

10 Part Eight: Making Moves

continuation bet, since it costs you nothing extra to walk away from your hand when your move fails. If, however, you have a draw to a big hand, then a continuation bet could be a big mistake, giving your opponent another chance to chase you out of the pot. This advice particularly applies if you act last in the hand and have already seen your opponent check. Now taking a free card with a drawing hand is likely to be better than making a continuation bet. (Notice that this concept is the opposite of good strategy in limit games.)

4. **The texture of the flop is important.** A dangerous flop is one with several high cards, which are likely to have hit the holdings of the other players. You don't want to bet into a dangerous flop with nothing, for the obvious reasons. While a weak-tight player will fold, no one else will. Good flops for continuation bets have low cards, or a medium card and a low pair, or three widely separated cards. Flops of three different suits are always a plus as well.

When these criteria aren't in place, a continuation bet becomes a low-equity play that often just takes you off a hand that you'd really like to play. Here's a concrete example:

Example 1. You're at the final table of a major event, in the big blind. Your stack is \$65,000, and the small blind has \$83,000. Other stacks range from \$60,000 to \$180,000. The small blind is an experienced and tenacious player who likes to set traps. The blinds are \$600 and \$1,200, with \$200 antes, and the starting pot is \$3,000.

You pick up

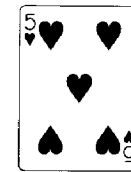
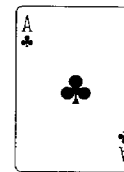
The Continuation Bet 11



The first four players fold around to the small blind, who puts in \$600 more to call. What do you do?

Answer: King-jack suited is a pretty good hand heads-up, so you might as well find out if the small blind is serious about playing. Put in a raise about the size of the pot. Most of the time, this will end the hand right here.

You raise \$3,600, and the small blind calls. The pot is now \$10,800. The flop is



The small blind checks. Should you now make a continuation bet, and if so, how much?

Answer: This is not a good spot for a continuation bet. You've missed your hand, but you have some good draws. A queen will almost certainly win for you, while either a king or a jack might also be an out. If you bet and your opponent check-raises, you'll have to throw your hand away, wasting your draws. His check might have indicated weakness, but he's certainly capable of checking a strong hand as well. You have position, so your opponent will have to make the first move on fourth street, giving you a little extra information. Preserve your draws and check. Note that if the flop had

12 Part Eight: Making Moves

missed you completely and you had no draws, a continuation bet would make much more sense.

You check. The pot is still \$10,800. Fourth street is the Q♥. Your opponent checks. What do you do?

Answer: You've made your straight but there are now three hearts on board. Your opponent probably doesn't have a flush, but you can't let him draw at a flush for free. A bet of at least half the pot will require him to take 3-to-1 odds on a 4-to-1 flush draw, so that's good enough to push him out if he has a small heart. It's also small enough to allow him to call if he's just made a pair of queens or perhaps two pair.

You bet \$5,000, and the small blind folds.

Players who have moved to no-limit from limit hold 'em will recognize the continuation bet as a variation of a limit move called the lead bet. In limit play you almost always (if you were the pre-flop aggressor) make a lead bet after the flop, because so often your opponent will just throw his hand away, and the cost of discovering that information is very cheap. But in no-limit the cost is not nearly so cheap; you're making a bet that, when it fails, will cost you half the pot instead of something like one-quarter to one-sixth of the pot.

Defending Against the Continuation Bet

Since continuation bets are a powerful part of no-limit strategy, what can you do when you're on the other side of what may be a continuation bet? What's the best defense?

The first part of a successful defense is *knowledge*. As you study the table when you're not directly involved in the action, one of the most important things to observe is how players behave when they're in situations where a continuation bet is a possible strategy. How often, after taking the lead pre-flop, do they make bets after the flop? How many of those bets are in the neighborhood of half the pot? (The optimal size for a continuation bet.) Are most of their bets in this range, or do they like pot-sized bets instead? Or do they prefer making little probe bets? (One-quarter to one-third of the pot)

As you're watching, keep one key fact in mind: *Most flops miss most hands*. If you notice that when a particular player took the lead before the flop, he almost always bets after the flop, you know that a lot of the bets are simply bluffs, since he couldn't have hit his hand that often. (On the other hand, a player who rarely bets after the flop but who makes pot-sized bets when he does bet is just a super-tight player who wants the nuts before he commits his money. Play at him when he doesn't bet and stay away from him when he does.)

A tough player will by definition be hard to read after the flop. If he showed strength before the flop, he'll probably be taking the lead 50 to 60 percent of the time after the flop. He can't be filling his hand quite that often, but you're going to have a hard time deciding when he's got a strong hand and when he doesn't. And his bets won't all be around half the pot. There will be some pot-sized bets, some probe-sized bets, and some overbets in the

14 Part Eight: Making Moves

mix as well. Against such a player, you'll need to use your best judgment, but for the most part you're going to need a real hand to continue to play.

One further fact to consider: Continuation bets are a good tactic against a single opponent, or two at the most. If a (competent) opponent led out before the flop and was called by three or four players, and now leads out again after the flop, he's almost certainly got something and he's making a value bet, not a continuation bet. Stay out of the pot unless you too have a good hand.

Now let's consider the interesting cases. Your opponent, who took the lead before the flop, makes a continuation-type bet after the flop. You are his only opponent. From your observations, you know that this player makes continuation bets with some frequency after he misses his hand. How should you proceed? We'll break our analysis down into a few cases.

Case 1: The flop gave you a monster. This is the most pleasant case to analyze, since your options are all good. You've flopped a set, or a straight, or the nut flush. (The non-nut flush is a little different. We'll look at that in a bit.) How do you extract the most money from your great hand?

The standard play is to simply call the continuation bet, hoping that your opponent already has something and will lead out again on the turn, or that he will catch something on the turn so he will call a bet by you later on. If he does lead out on the turn, you'll win at least that bet, plus possibly much more if he's willing to go to the end with you.

The other play is to raise his continuation bet. If he has nothing, he'll throw his hand away right there. (This looks like a bad result for you, but keep in mind that if he had nothing at this point, you most likely weren't going to make any more money on the hand anyway.) If he has something, either a pair or a draw, he may call this bet; whether you make any more money depends on just how much of a hand he has and what comes on fourth street.

Defending Against the Continuation Bet 15

Of the two plays, simply calling is the technically "better" play against most opponents, in the sense that it will win more money, on average, if your opponents aren't watching what you're doing. Since unfortunately they will be watching, you'll need to vary between the two plays on occasion. I'd recommend a mix of two-thirds calls and one-third raises on a random basis, to keep them guessing. Note one important exception, however: If an ace has come on the flop, there will be a better than average chance that your opponent is betting with a pair of aces. In this case, you should simply raise his bet, and be prepared to get all your money in the pot on the flop or the turn.

The case where your monster is a flush that's not the nuts is a little trickier. Let's look at an example.

Example 2. Blinds \$50/\$100. A solid conservative player in middle position puts in \$300. From past observations, his most likely holding is two high cards, but he would bet a high pair the same way. You elect to call on the button with T♥9♥. (It's a bit unusual for you, but you're varying your play to keep the table guessing.) The blinds fold. Just the two of you are in the pot, which is now \$750. You each have about \$8,000 remaining. The flop is Q♥7♥3♥. He bets \$400. What should you do?

Answer: You've made a flush, but it's not the nut flush. Should you slow-play and just call? It's an idea, but there are some problems.

You may already be beaten if your opponent raised with A♥K♥ or A♥J♥ before the flop. (Ace-small of hearts is pretty unlikely from a solid opponent.) That's unlikely, but must be considered.

Your opponent willingly bet into that board. That fact makes the high-card hands containing a single heart much more likely than the high-card hands without any heart. Now you must confront the possibility that your opponent has a

16 Part Eight: Making Moves

draw to a flush that will not only beat you, but which might win all your chips.

On balance, slow-playing with a call is too dangerous here. I would assume that my opponent held a single heart, and make a bet that they couldn't call if they saw my hand. In this case, suppose my opponent holds $A♥Q♣$. Now six hearts are accounted for, and seven remain in the deck, out of 45 unseen cards. My opponent's odds of drawing a heart on the turn are 38-to-7, or about 5.5-to-1. With the pot now containing \$1,150, you should call his bet (making the pot \$1,550) and raise him about \$750 more. Now he'll be getting 3-to-1 odds to call, not enough if he knew that the flush was his only out. If he calls anyway, he's made a mistake, which is what you want no matter how the hand turns out.

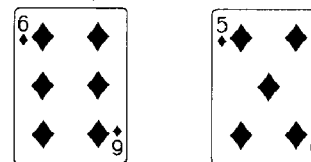
Case 2: The flop hit your hand, but you don't have a monster.

Sometimes the flop will hit your hand and give you middle pair or bottom pair. Your hand certainly isn't a lock, but it is worth something. In general, if your opponent now makes a continuation-type bet, you should call it. Your game plan is to see what happens on fourth street, and take the pot away if he shows weakness.

Remember that a continuation bet contains a weakness: When you bet around half the pot, you're offering about 3-to-1 calling odds to your opponent. (If the pot contains \$20,000, and your opponent makes a \$10,000 continuation bet, you have to put in \$10,000 to see a \$30,000 pot — 3-to-1 odds.) Those are good odds when you already have something and you probably have some number of outs as well. So call, and if your opponent checks on fourth street, be prepared to move at the pot. In many cases, a continuation bet represents a player's last attempt to win a pot cheaply. If it doesn't work, they're prepared to throw their hand away rather than lose a lot of money. For your part, you're willing to pay some money (at good odds) to see if they were making a continuation bet or not.

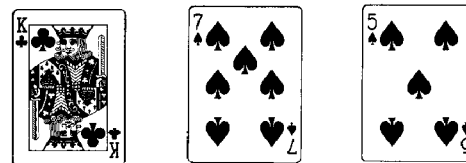
Defending Against the Continuation Bet 17

Example 3: In the middle of a multi-table tournament. Blinds are \$300/\$600 with \$50 antes. At a 10-player table the player in fifth position with a stack of \$35,000 raises to \$1,500 pre-flop, and you, with a stack of \$40,000, call on the button with



It's a weak holding, but you're varying your play. The blinds fold behind you. The pot is now \$4,400.

The flop comes



You've hit bottom pair. Your opponent bets \$2,000. What do you do?

Answer: Your pair of fives aren't worthless, so don't be in a hurry to throw your hand away. It costs you \$2,000 to see a pot of \$6,400, so you're getting pot odds of 3.2-to-1. You could easily have the best hand now, and the fives and sixes are probably all outs even if you don't. Call, and see what happens on the turn.

You call. The pot is now \$8,400. The turn comes 4♦. Your opponent checks. What do you do?

Answer: That was a good card for you. You added eight more outs to the five you already had, and your opponent checked besides. You should bet about \$5,000 to \$6,000.

18 Part Eight: Making Moves

You may hold the winning hand now, and you have many ways to get a big hand on the river.

You bet \$5,500, and your opponent folds.

Case 3: The flop missed you. Your opponent bet before the flop, and you called. The flop missed you, and your opponent bets again with a continuation-sized bet. *What should you do?*

Answer: Absent any specific information, you should mostly just fold. There's no shame in avoiding the loss of a lot of money on a hand when you don't have anything and you don't know where you stand. You should only play here under certain (somewhat rare) circumstances.

1. Although you missed your hand, you have a draw with close to the right odds.
2. You've seen this player make many continuation-type bets in the past, so you know there's a reasonable chance he does not have a made hand.
3. On occasion, you've seen him fold to a bet on fourth street after making a continuation-sized bet on the flop.
4. You haven't seen him check good hands after his flop bet was called

Put all of these circumstances together, and it's reasonable to call his bet with the idea of taking the pot away from him on the turn. Remember, many players who make a continuation bet on the flop will surrender the hand on the turn if they encounter resistance.

Be cautious, however! The money odds for stealing the pot on the turn are not particularly favorable. For example, suppose the pot has \$2,000 after the pre-flop betting, you

Defending Against the Continuation Bet 19

miss the flop, and now your opponent makes a continuation-sized bet of \$1,000. The pot now contains \$3,000. At this point you can fold your hand, losing nothing more. If you decide to wrestle the pot away from him, you'll need to invest \$1,000 to call now, plus a \$2,000-\$3,000 bet on the turn, assuming he checks. That's an investment of \$3,000 to \$4,000 to win a pot that's currently \$3,000. You'll need to think that you're an actual favorite to get away with this play in order to make it. While that can be possible, you need to know your opponent very well. It's not a move that's suitable for a table of strangers.

Probe Bets

A probe bet is a cross between a bluff and an informational bet. It's a lead-out bet of somewhere between one-quarter and one-third of the pot. The bluff part comes from the fact that it is, after all, a bet. Sometimes your opponent will just lay his hand down to any bet, and in that case you scooped the pot without risking much. But mostly the probe bet has an informational function. It's a way of asking two questions:

1. Please tell me a little something about your hand?
2. Wouldn't it be nice if the two of us could just see the next card cheaply? (Can't we all just get along?)

When confronted with a probe bet, I like to employ the Travis Bickel Defense. "You wanna know somethin' about my hand? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to ME?!!," and then toss in a big raise. This usually takes the pot, and when it doesn't, I'm gone. (I don't actually start screaming, it's just a metaphor.)

While probe bets may look like a cheap, low-risk way to gain information, they contain a potential hidden downside. Consider the next example.

Example 4. Late in a minor tournament. Blinds are \$600/\$1,200, antes are \$75. There are 10 players at the table, so the starting pot contains \$2,550. You have \$13,600, and are in sixth position holding 8♦8♠. The player in first position, who has \$24,000 but who plays tight and weak, calls. The intervening players fold to you. What do you do?

Answer: A raise is certainly reasonable. A weak-tight player would almost certainly raise with a high pair, so you're probably facing two high cards or a low pair, in which case

Probe Bets 21

your hand is best right now. You also want to be sure to chase out the players behind you so you have position during the hand.

You raise to \$5,000. The players behind you and the blinds fold. The first player calls. The pot is now \$12,550. The flop comes A♣7♣7♥ and your opponent bets \$1,200. What do you do?

Answer: Your opponent, who has a much bigger stack, bets 10 percent of the pot. You probably have the best hand right now, but you can't be sure and you don't really want to lose your whole stack on this hand if he's trapping. Just call.

You call. The pot is now \$14,950. The turn is the J♥. Your opponent bets another \$1,200. What now?

Answer: There are two overcards to your pair on board, but he's giving you 12-to-1 odds, so you can't fold.

You call. The pot is now \$17,350. The river is the 9♥. He checks.

There are three overcards to your pair and a heart draw on board, so don't even think about betting. Just see his hand.

You check, and he turns over 4♠4♣. You win a nice pot.

You did nothing wrong, and won a nice pot for your effort. But look at what happened to your opponent. His call of your raise before the flop was weak. Then he made two probe bets, to prevent you from raising. He succeeded, but in this particular case he actually would have been better off just checking after the flop and throwing his hand away if you bet (which you would have). His plan worked, but cost him an extra \$2,400. A series of probe bets with a very weak hand aren't necessarily an improvement on folding — they just look more active.

The Squeeze Play

The squeeze play is an advanced and elegant bluff. You make a large reraise after two players have already entered the pot, the first with a raise and the second with a call. The first player is trapped between you and the second player (the “squeeze”). While he may believe he has the pot odds and cards to play against you, he can't be sure what the second player will do. Hence he throws his hand away. The second player felt he had enough equity to play against one raiser, but not against a reraiser. So he mucks his hand as well, and you take the pot.

A successful squeeze play is a delight when it works, but to make the play several preconditions are required.

1. You need some reason to believe that the first player does not quite have the hand he's representing with his initial raise. Some sort of tell is nice, but usually you're looking for a player who's been aggressive for some period of time, and who's clearly been pushing some marginal raising hands.
2. The second player has to just call, not reraise. If he reraises, he has an excellent hand and you can't play. If he just calls, he could be on any number of drawing hands that he's willing to play against one raiser but not two.
3. You should have a reputation for at least solid play, if not outright conservative play. Don't try this move if you've been caught bluffing lately. If you've shown down any hands in the past couple of hours, they should have been good hands.
4. Don't try this move if you've already made it once at the session (even if you actually had a hand that time). It's a big move and people will remember, so don't overdo the play.

The Squeeze Play 23

If all the pieces fall in place, the squeeze play is a powerful weapon that can win a lot of chips. Here's a good example from last year's World Series.

Example 5. Final table of the 2004 World Series of Poker. Seven players remain, with chip count and positions given below.

Sm Blind	Glen Hughes	\$2,375,000	
Big Blind	David Williams	\$3,250,000	A♠Q♣
1	Josh Arieh	\$3,890,000	K♥9♠
2	Al Krux	\$2,175,000	
3	Greg Raymer	\$7,920,000	A♣2♣
4	Matt Dean	\$3,435,000	
5	Dan Harrington	\$2,320,000	6♥2♦

The blinds were \$40,000 and \$80,000, with \$10,000 antes, so the pot was \$190,000 to start.

Josh Arieh. Josh opened the betting with a raise to \$225,000, a little less than three times the big blind. So far, Josh had been active at the final table, and his bet looked to the other players like a pretty standard raise on his part. Actually king-nine offsuit is a little weak for an opening raise even at a seven-handed table. I like raising for value at seven-handed in opening position with hands like ace-ten, ace-nine, and king-queen.

Al Krux. Folded his hand.

Greg Raymer. Greg had been crushing the table for a long time, although in the last hour his cards had cooled off a bit, and some of his lead had been trimmed away. He elects to call with ace-deuce suited. That's another aggressive play, although as the cards lie he's actually a favorite over Josh.

24 Part Eight: Making Moves

If Josh had been playing a conservative game, the gap concept would apply and Greg would need an even stronger hand to call than the minimum hands Josh would need for opening. Since Josh has been playing aggressively, Raymer doesn't need hands of that strength. In Raymer's position I would call with the same hands I might use for opening in third position — ace-seven, ace-six, king-queen, and any pair. With medium pairs, I would actually be raising to try to win the hand pre-flop. I wouldn't, however, make a call with ace-deuce, a hand which is just too vulnerable to being dominated.

Matt Dean. Folded his hand.

Dan Harrington. Of course I could throw the six-deuce away, but Raymer's call has created the perfect conditions for a squeeze play. My sense from Arieh was that he had a good hand, but not a premium hand. (Raymer may have picked up on this as well). If I was right, then it would be nearly impossible for him to call a big raise with Raymer still to act behind him. Raymer's call, on the other hand, probably indicated a hand that was not strong enough to raise. It might also indicate a hand that Raymer felt was adequate for calling a bet from Arieh (who had been playing loosely) but not me (who had been playing conservatively). In any event, it was clear that a big raise on my part had an excellent chance of winning the whole pot immediately.

The next question was — how much to raise? Here I thought back to how the table had been playing over the last couple of hours. In general, the table had been loose, and players had shown a willingness to call raises, based on their good pot odds. (This varies from final table to final table. In 2003, the final table had played somewhat tighter.) I thought it was likely that a normalized reraise, to perhaps \$450,000 or \$500,000, stood a better-than-usual chance of being called. As a result, I made an unusually big bet for me: \$1,200,000. I wanted both Arieh and Raymer to know that by betting more than half my chips, I was committing

The Squeeze Play 25

myself to the pot, so they couldn't have any notion about calling and then maneuvering me out of the pot after the flop.

Glen Hughes. Folded his hand.

David Williams. Williams picks up the best hand at the table, ace-queen offsuit! Unfortunately, the action in front of him has been raise, call, and big reraise, and ace-queen just can't stand that kind of action. He correctly (given what he knows) folds his hand.

Josh Arieh. He has no interest in playing king-nine offsuit with two players active behind him, so he folds.

Greg Raymer. At this point, he has to assume that either his ace is dominated by a bigger ace, or he's facing a medium-to-big pair. In either case, he's not getting close to the pot odds he needs, so he folds.

The No-Limit Semi-Bluff

A semi-bluff is a post-flop bet that's partially a bluff and partially a value bet. The flop gave you something, or perhaps a combination of little somethings — say a medium pair plus a straight or flush draw. You doubt that your hand is the best one at the table right now, but it might be. If you hit your draw, it almost certainly will be. In that case, you might lead out with what we call a semi-bluff. It's a bet which will probably be profitable because it offers multiple ways to win:

1. You might win right away if your opponent folds his hand.
2. You might get a call, but win because your hand is actually best.¹
3. You might get a call, but win because of your draw.

In addition, since your bet represents strength, you may get to see both the turn and river cards for free, as your opponent may interpret a future check as a trap and refuse to bet.

The semi-bluff works best against a tight opponent, of course. But if you think there's as much as a 30 percent chance that your opponent will lay down his hand right away, then the semi-bluff is usually a profitable move, even if your plan is to fold to an immediate reraise.

The no-limit semi-bluff is frequently made with an all-in move. You usually don't want to go all-in with your very strong hands, since you want people to call, not go away. A semi-bluffing hand, where you have for example a pair and a flush draw, is a

¹ The traditional definition of a semi-bluff, as defined by David Sklansky in *The Theory of Poker* discounts this option.

more likely candidate for an all-in move. Now you'd really like your opponent to go away, you have outs based on the flush draw, while the pair may generate a few outs on its own. The multiple ways to win will make the move profitable.

Good players understand this point, while beginners and intermediates often do not. When the board shows two of a suit and their opponent makes a big bet or moves all-in, most top players would think that a semi-bluff flush draw is now the most likely hand they're facing.

Between experts, a cute variation on the no-limit semi-bluff is a play which simply *represents* the no-limit semi-bluff. Consider the next example carefully.

Example 6. Final table of a major tournament. Five players remain. You are in the big blind with an average-sized stack of \$100,000. The button, an imaginative and aggressive player has slightly more chips than you, with about \$110,000. Blinds are \$600/\$1,200, with \$200 antes, so the starting pot is \$2,800. The first two players fold, the button raises to \$5,000, and the small blind folds. Your hand is A♥3♠. What should you do?

Answer: With plenty of chips, you're under no pressure to get involved in marginal situations. However, here your situation looks pretty good. The button bet more than four times the big blind, a larger-than-usual raise which looks like he'd prefer that you go away quietly. You have to put up \$3,800 to see a pot of \$7,800, so you're getting more than 2-to-1 odds. And finally, you do have an ace, although it's not a strong ace. It's reasonably likely you have the best hand at the table right now, so you have a very easy call.

You call, and the flop comes A♠T♣3♠. You act first. The pot is now \$12,800. What do you do?

Answer: Under the circumstances, top and bottom pair rates to be a very strong hand. If your opponent was trying to steal the pot in the first place, a bet may chase him away, but a

28 Part Eight: Making Moves

check may induce him to try and steal again. Check, and see if you can make a little extra money.

You check and the button bets \$12,000. What do you do?

Answer: You could call, but the combination of your call before the flop and your call after the flop with an ace showing is going to make even the dullest opponent a little suspicious. If he's not holding an ace, you're not going to make any more money in the hand.

You could raise him another \$12,000. He'll probably fold his hand now, but he might stick around with a pair of aces. With smaller pairs he should go away and concede you the pot.

Or you could go all-in! With the two clubs on board, one explanation for this play is that you're pulling a semi-bluff. You're representing a hand with two clubs, where you just want your opponent to go away and give you this sizeable pot, but you'll have a few outs if he doesn't. Mostly, of course, this play will just win the current pot like your other options. But occasionally the button will call your apparent bluff only to discover it wasn't a bluff after all!

You go all-in, and your opponent folds.

Back-Alley Mugging

Betting When a Big Card Comes on a Late Street

Another nice bluff to have in your arsenal is what I call the back-alley mugging. A scary card arrives on fourth or fifth street, a card that could swing the hand. It missed your hand, but your opponent doesn't know that; you make a big, scary bet, and he folds.

This is a nice play when you can make it, but a number of preconditions are required.

1. **The card has to plausibly fit some hands that you might have been playing.** If a king or a queen hits a board of mostly low cards, *review the betting* and make sure that holdings like ace-king, ace-queen, or king-queen would fit the bets you've made thus far.
2. **Make this move against a player of medium strength.** Weak players pay much more attention to their own cards than to whatever their opponents might hold (a big reason they're weak). Your subtle trap may simply go unnoticed. A very strong player, on the other hand, has seen it all before. He'll wonder if you're making a move and he might spot something in the betting sequence that you didn't. A medium-strength player is a good target; he'll see what you're representing and worry about it.
3. **Make this move against a player who has shown he can lay down a hand.** Mentally review what you've seen him do. Has he been able to lay down a hand once he's committed some chips to the pot? Some players can't lay a hand down after they've made a couple of bets with it. Make sure your opponent can give up a hand.

30 Part Eight: Making Moves

4. As with most bluffs, bluffing a tight opponent is better than bluffing a loose one.

The Dark Tunnel Bluff

Hollywood cranks out a lot of cheap horror films which revolve around a pretty simple formula. A demented lunatic, armed to the teeth with axes and hatchets, stalks about committing mayhem. A bunch of supporting characters decide this would be a really neat time to start wandering around caves, tunnels, and abandoned houses, looking for clues. While the audience shrieks, the maniac dispatches them in ever-more-gory fashion.

This scenario often reminds me of how many beginners and intermediate players approach poker hands. They find themselves making bets which aren't really bluffs, but which aren't value bets either. They're just — bets. I call these "dark tunnel" bluffs. You don't know where you stand, you don't really know what you're doing, but it feels more active to bet than not, so you put more money in the pot. Eventually you've lost a big pot where you never really had much of a chance.

The cure for this syndrome is simple: stay out of dark tunnels. Always know why you are making a bet, and what you expect to gain. Every good bet should either give you a chance to win the pot right there, or provide you with information about your opponent's cards that you can act on through the rest of the hand.

Example 7. First day of a major tournament. Blinds are \$100/\$200, no antes yet. You are in the big blind with \$17,000 in chips. The small blind, a well-known world-class player, has \$22,000. Everyone folds to the small blind, who calls. You have



32 Part Eight: Making Moves

What do you do?

Answer: The pot is \$400, and you very likely have the best hand, so you have no reason not to bet. Your opponent's call most likely means he has a little bit of a hand and he's looking to see a cheap flop. Just bet \$300 or \$400, and you will most likely win the hand right here.

You actually raise \$1,000, and your opponent calls.

\$1,000 is an unusual bet size. If your opponent is going to fold, he would probably have folded to a \$400 raise.

The flop comes



The small blind checks. The pot is \$2,400. What should you do?

Answer: The flop missed you, but it may have missed your opponent as well. The shape of the flop isn't great for you; the queen and the ten are certainly danger cards. However, his most likely holdings at this point are ace-x or a medium pair, so you may still have the best hand. Since you led before the flop, it's worth thinking about taking a stab at the pot with a continuation bet to see if you can take the hand down. Even if your bet is called, you may have ten outs. A jack gives you an inside straight, and either aces or kings may be outs as well.

On the other hand, as in the previous example, you could just take a free card. With ten draws to what should be the winning hand, do you want to give your opponent a chance to take you out of the pot?

The Dark Tunnel Bluff 33

The play I actually like here is the *delayed* continuation bet. Check to take a free card now, then bet on fourth street if your opponent checks. Daniel Negreanu is a specialist at this play, and he's worked it to perfection on many occasions.

You bet \$1,500 and your opponent calls. The pot is now \$5,400. The turn comes an 8♥. Your opponent checks. What now?

Answer: You didn't improve your hand, but you still have outs and your opponent gave you a chance for a free card on fifth street. Check and take the free card.

You actually bet \$2,000, and your opponent calls.

The "dark tunnel bluff" rears its ugly head! You bet before the flop and got called, and you bet after the flop and got called. Your opponent says he has something and he's not going away. Your last bet was reasonable, but this tiny bet is just blind aggression. What can the bet accomplish, aside from sweetening a pot you are almost certainly losing right now? If your opponent reraises, you will have to drop, and you'll have taken yourself right out of the pot.

Players who bet like this are usually thinking that a failure to bet will show weakness. Their pre-flop bet showed strength, their continuation bet showed strength, and now they're afraid that not betting here will reveal that they don't have anything yet. That's all true, but it's not a reason to blow another \$2,000 *if that bet can't win the pot.*

The river is a J♣, giving you a straight. Your opponent checks, you go all-in, and after long thought he calls. You show your straight and he shows J♦9♣.

You're saved by some great luck, and you win a nice pot.