Free Video from Byron Jacobs:

In this short video, Byron Jacobs discusses the **FREE Bonus Chapter** he wrote for *Excelling at No-Limit Hold'em* and reviews some heads-up hands.

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Jonathan Little, May 2015

INTRODUCTION

by Jonathan Little

I am fortunate in that I get to travel the world to high stakes poker tournaments on a regular basis. Through my travels, I have become friends with many of the best players in the game. One day while I was discussing poker strategy with my friends (which we do constantly), I came to the realization that one of the reasons I have thrived in this game is because I get to have in-depth discussions with the best poker players in the world on a regular basis. For most amateur players, this will never happen. In this book, I am giving you that invaluable opportunity.

I hand-picked poker players and authors who have a wealth of knowledge to offer. I only asked people to contribute to this book with whom I have talked strategy or who have impressed me at or away from the table. I asked each author to write about a topic on which they are passionate. I know that when I am passionate, I produce excellent content. Fortunately, all of the authors did the same.

This book is a collection of chapters that will discuss numerous aspects of the game. Some chapters are aimed to help beginning players transform into strong amateurs and other chapters are aimed to help strong amateurs become world-class. I am confident that players of all skill levels will learn a huge amount from this book simply because the authors are some of the best players in the world and they are discussing the aspects of poker at which they excel.

Starting in late 2015, once a month, each author and I will host a live webinar (like a seminar, but online) where we delve deep into a specific topic where the author is a master. I have been hosting webinars for the past few years and my students love them because they get to interact with and ask me questions in real time. If you want to further your poker knowledge by being part of these exclusive webinars, please visit HoldemBook.com.
Poker is a peculiar game unlike any other. Among traditional casino games, it is unique because the game changes fundamentally as you move to higher stakes. This is not so in other games. Blackjack, for instance, is identical in strategy and the play of hands for the $5 and $5,000 per hand player. The same can be said for craps, roulette, baccarat, and other games.

While betting big on sports can move the market against you, the exact same methodology that you use to win at high stakes can be used equally well at any lower stakes. (Though, certain sports betting strategies are available to the small player that cannot be used by the big one.)

Comparing poker instead to strategy games, it is again unique. Say you play backgammon, for example. You can use the same approach against a club player and then against a much stronger player. You will win less often against the stronger player, but two different approaches are not required.
Poker, however, requires a shift in strategy and mindset as you move up. Playing bigger games is not just a matter of keeping a bigger bankroll, facing better players, and taking things more seriously. In many cases, the strategies that work at low levels – even strategies that are ideal at these levels – stop working completely as you move up. Many players find this fact extremely jarring, and, quite frankly, they never adjust. Because randomness plays such a large role in the short-term results in poker, many players never figure out why they can't progress beyond a certain level. The answer is hidden amongst hundreds of all-in bad beats, coolers, and pots folded uneventfully on the turn.

If you've tried to move up in the past and failed, I'm here to help. I present seven simple steps to move up in stakes. If you follow this seven step approach, you will climb with your eyes open. I can't guarantee that you'll succeed. The going gets tougher at every step – and there's always a lot of work to do to get from here to there.

However, I can promise that you won't be blindsided. If you struggle, you should be able to determine the reason by going through the steps in this chapter. Working through the problems systematically will help you to succeed.

So here are my seven steps to moving up in stakes... and staying there.

**Step 1** Identify your source of profit at your current level

**Step 2** Identify the major strategic errors recreational players make at the higher level

**Step 3** Determine the strategic adjustments the professional players have made at the higher level to exploit the recreational players

**Step 4** Work through hand histories to figure out how to add the professional plays to your game

**Step 5** Determine the strategic weaknesses of the professional plays

**Step 6** Work through hand histories to figure out how to add exploitations of the professional plays to your game

**Step 7** Hang on for the ride

Let’s get going.
What's my take on all this? First, I believe that most of these students are, indeed, modest winners at their levels. When I get to the nitty gritty of how they play, they tend to do enough things right to make a profit. But very few of my new students actually understand why they win. They can't articulate it. They've learned enough tricks that work at their level, but they don't fully comprehend the big picture.

If you don't understand why you win at your current level, you will not succeed if you move up to the next level.

It's that simple. Not only do you have to win at your current level, you should be able to explain exactly why. What do you do that causes money to accumulate in your stack? And why? Why do these things work to create a lasting edge in your favor?

Obviously I can't tell you what it is that you do to win in your games, but I'll point you in the right direction by describing some common ways to gain consistent advantages in small stakes cash games and tournaments.

In live cash games, there's one fact that's nearly universal. Compared to what a mathematically-correct strategy would look like, nearly everyone plays too many hands preflop. And it's not even close – the great majority of live cash game players play way too many hands.

From this fact, you can follow hand flows through logically to find the available money. When players add extra hands preflop, these are necessarily weak hands, since everyone is already playing all the strong ones.

Weak preflop hands are weak because they too often turn into weak postflop hands. So players playing too many hands preflop will have too many weak hands postflop. Players can do one of two things with these extra weak hands. They can fold them, or they can call (or raise) with them.

Ten years ago, calling with them all the way to the end was fairly common. You'd see people call down flop, turn, and river bets with bottom pair, middle pair, and the like. You'd be surprised to see they were behind two pair.

This means that you can create lasting, repeatable edges by bluffing in situations where opponents are likely to be saddled with too many weak hands.

In some games, like certain Las Vegas $2-$5 games, you can go hog wild with this idea. I've played in many games where it was likely profitable to bluff literally every time the action checks to you on the turn and river. Again, the reason this makes money can be traced back to very poor preflop hand selection – along with an inability to respond to postflop aggression.

Here's an example of this type of situation.

You're playing $2-$5 with $1,000 stacks. Two players limp and you make it $30 to go. A player on the button calls, the big blind calls and one of the two limpers calls. There is $127 in the pot and four players.

The flop is Q♥-10♥-6♣. It's checked to you. You bet $80 and only the big blind calls.

The turn is the (Q♥-10♥-6♣)-3♦. The big blind checks you bet $220 into the $287 pot and he folds.

I didn't tell you what hand you held here, because in some respects it doesn't matter. In general it would be good to hold a hand that has some equity if called, perhaps 5♥-4♥, A♣-J♣, 9♦-8♦, and the like.

This works because players are calling the $30 with far too many hands. On a flop like Q-10-6 with a flush draw, it's easy to find yourself with a hand you don't want to fold immediately. Almost any connected hand makes something on this flop. K-Q is top pair. 10-9 is middle pair. 9-7 is a gutshot. But when a brick hits the turn and the betting gets heavy, most players will bail on the majority of these hands.

On a "normal" board like this one, nearly all the added weak hands preflop turn into marginal and weak hands after the flop. These hands become deadweight that must, at some point, get jettisoned. Meanwhile, they've cost someone a bet or two.

In other games, you may find players calling or raising too frequently with these weak hands. This is more common, for instance, in the small stakes games in Los Angeles. You can also find this behavior in the very smallest online games. Players will indeed still call down with weak pairs. They will also bluff wildly, raising flops and betting turns with offsets cards that bear no resemblance to the flop.
For instance, in Los Angeles, you may encounter the following situation.

It's a $5-$5 game with a $300 max buy-in. Two players limp and you make it $30. The button calls, the big blind calls and both limpers call. There's $155 in the pot and five players.

The flop is Q♥-10♥-6♣. Everyone checks and you bet $80. The button and blind fold but the next player shoves for $300 more. You call with A-Q and your opponent shows J♦-3♦.

People are quick to label the J♦-3♦ shove as a “donkey” play – and it's not good – but it's a direct symptom of the original problem, which is playing too many hands preflop. This player is trying to find something to do with these extra junk hands besides just folding them. That is, in some ways, commendable.  

But, in the end, if you play appropriately tight preflop and recognize that your opponents are prone to making these desperate plays, you will make money.

Tournaments work a little differently, since the stacks get shallow quickly – particularly if you're playing small stakes tournaments. But again, if you are winning consistently at tournaments, you are doing something that creates a consistent edge for yourself. It behooves you to identify that edge in as much detail as you can.

A common error in low level tournaments is similar to the cash game error. Players are often too loose for small percentages of their stack, but too tight when playing all-in pots. This can lead opponents to fold too frequently to pre-flop shoves and to be too timid themselves about shoving preflop. It can lead players to call off a quarter to half their stack (or more) and then fold to the final bet in the name of surviving in the tournament.

For instance, say it's 400-800 with a 100 ante. You're in the big blind. Your opponent on the button has 9,000, and you have him covered. He opens for 1,800, and you shove. If the button isn't very careful both about constructing the set of hands he will open with on the button along with the range he is willing to call the shove with, he will lose money to you.

A typical error would be to open many hands for 1,800 (since the antes are attractive and it's just a percentage of his stack), but when faced with the shove, call with only premium and semi-premium hands. If these two frequencies are out of whack – the opening frequency and the shove-calling frequency – then it becomes profitable to shove from the big blind with any two cards.

If you want to move up, the first step is to look at what you're doing at your current level. Are you winning? And if so, why? Identify as specifically as you can what you do that wins you money. No, it's not because you fold a lot. No, it's not because any donkey will pay you off with bottom pair whenever you want. There's more to it than that.

Challenge yourself. Write out hand examples just as I have done that exemplify your sources of profit. "When hands go down like this, I do this, and that creates an advantage for me." Again, be as specific as possible. Force yourself to clarify your thinking. Write down as many substantially different examples as you can think of. Try to write down every last trick you know.

Once you are done with this exercise, you should be able to explain precisely what it is you do that makes you money.

If your list of examples is short, consider it perhaps evidence that you aren't quite ready to move up. Work on your game at your current level. Analyze your opponents. Figure out new ways to exploit them, and try them out. If they seem to work, write them down.

Not only will this exercise prepare you to move to the next level, but it will improve your performance at your current level as well. This is precisely the sort of work that separates those who reach their poker goals from those who flounder.

#### Step two

**Identify the major strategic errors recreational players make at the higher level**

Once you're at this point, you have to begin to sit in games at the higher level. If you're playing tournaments, I recommend playing events without rebuys and trying to sell some of your action to keep the extra financial risk of moving up to a minimum. If you're playing cash games, I recommend buying in for the same amount you bought in for at the lower level (e.g., if you buy in for $500 at $2-$5, then move up to $5-$10 but keep buying in for $500). You can also sell off pieces of your cash game action to friends if you like.
With the arrival of internet poker on a global scale in 2004 came many new interesting mathematical solutions for no-limit Hold’em. With these gleaming new theories in their arsenal many of the “new school” – players who came primarily from the internet – began to win the world’s biggest poker tournaments. But was this entirely due to the sheer number of new school players? There are 1,000,000 or more new school players versus 500 old school players. Although the old school players add up to less than 0.1 percent of the total players in the game, it would be a big mistake to think that the gigantic number of new school players is the only explanation for their disproportionate success. There are many great new school players who will stand the test of time, and there are many great new school theories that are so good they have already altered the tournament poker landscape forever. In this chapter, I am going to focus on one such theory: the short stack theory developed by the new school.

I have asked Liv Boeree to represent the new school. Liv will help me examine the differences between my own short stack approach (which has served me...
well since 1988) and the new school theories. A short stack is considered a stack containing 20BB or less. Context will be needed, so Liv and I will compare and contrast these theories both in online and live tournaments.

The 20BB stack

To me, 20BB does not seem short! After all, you can fold two rounds in a row (a whole 18 hands) and lose only 3BB to 5BB — depending on whether or not there is an ante each hand. But the new school theory has rules for a 20BB stack, based on playing countless online tournaments. According to Liv, these are the rules:

♦ Your opening ranges become tighter than before. You can rarely call 3-bets with this stack size and therefore you should avoid opening speculative hands such as suited connectors unless your table is particularly passive.
♦ Bet sizing, both preflop and especially postflop, should be smaller (e.g. 1/3-pot instead of your usual 1/2-pot bet). This is to give you more maneuverability; when you have value hands, you can still easily get your entire stack in by the river and, because your opponent knows this too, it allows you to make cheaper, believable bluffs.
♦ 3-bet shoving over a raise in late position becomes an option. It’s impossible to give predefined shoving ranges as it is always dependent on your situation. Fortunately there are a number of equity calculators that can help you deduce a correct shoving range. A particularly good site is www.holdemresources.net, which includes some free and purchasable calculation software.
♦ You can of course still call preflop raises with hands as you would with a deeper stack. It just becomes much more important to consider the postflop playability of your hand. For example, if you are on the button and facing a raise from the cutoff, small pairs should be shoved as they have strong preflop value and your stack is too shallow to allow for set mining. However, you can still call with a hand like K-J or Q♠J♠ because it often dominates the cutoff’s holding and plays well postflop.

♦ Depending on ICM, it may become correct to open shove some hands to force your opponents to fold almost everything, such as when you are close to a money bubble. Again, ICM calculators can help you work out exactly when/if you should be shoving.

I love Liv’s new school rules, except one. Personally I’m not keen on shoving 20BB with a small pair when faced with a raise from the cutoff. To me, whether or not I would make this all-in move is completely read dependent. If I read my opponent to be weak, then I would pull the trigger and move all-in with a small pair. If I read my opponent to be super strong, then I might call a 2.5BB raise and set mine, or I may opt to fold right there and then. However, if I’m facing an opponent on the internet then I would, more often than not, move all-in. The only time I wouldn’t move all-in is if I have noticed that my opponent has been playing really tight, in which case I would suspect that he is a lot more likely to have a hand that he could call me with.

Example 1 (20BB)

The blinds are 1,000/2,000-300, you are on the button with 40,000 (20BB). You have 4-4, and everyone has folded to you. What do you do?

Phil
I would raise it up to 6,000 (3BB) and hope that both players in the blinds fold. If either player in the blinds opted to move all-in, then I would fold.

Liv
Normally I would raise to 4,000 (2BB, which is my usual raise size with all hands during the middle and late stages of a tournament). This is because a min-raise usually achieves the same as a 3BB raise when the average stack is shallower and it’s important to maintain maneuverability. Furthermore, since I’m only raising to 4,000 I lose less of my stack if I have to fold to an opponent’s re-raise. However, Phil’s bigger raise size has some merit if the players in the blinds are loose-passive. We want to avoid players defending a wide range of overcards versus our small pair and forcing us to make difficult decisions postflop for our entire stack.

If the blinds are especially aggressive, I often raise with the intention of call-
ing a jam. This is because there are some hands in their shoving range that we dominate such as A-3, A-2, and a substantial number of hands we’re flipping against. Alternatively, you can profitably open shove the button if you know they’re very aggressive and don’t fancy the variance!

**Example 2 (20BB)**

With eight players remaining (playing two 4-handed tables) in the (World Series of Poker (WSOP) 2012 $10,000 buy-in No-Limit Hold’em 6-Max Tournament, six-time WSOP bracelet winner Layne Flack was on the button. After Greg Mer-son folded the cutoff, Layne looked down at 10-9 with a stack of 230,000 (19BB) with the blinds at 6,000/12,000-2,000. Layne raised to 26,000, thinking that he had a tight table image and that 26,000 would have the same effect as a 40,000 raise. Layne likes a min-raise because it gives him more maneuverability. The player in the small blind re-raised to 62,000. Layne thought for a moment and then he decided that a 17BB stack played roughly the same as a 14BB stack, and thus he opted to call. The flop was J-10-8, the player in the small blind moved all-in and Layne called, doubling up versus his opponent’s A-9.

**Phil**

Although I would have opened for 36,000, I like Layne’s logic (he had a tight image) and I don’t mind his min-raise to 26,000. However, I would have folded to the 36,000 re-raise. I don’t think that 10-9 is the best hand very often and it’s not easy to hit that hand hard. Too often you will flop nothing (and bluffing is not much of an option with a short stack against aggressive players) and be forced to fold on the flop. And then when you do hit, for example when it comes Q-9-4, you could easily be in bad shape for the rest of your stack. Personally, I’m looking to conserve my chips and save them for a better spot.

As for the player in the small blind, I would have made a read, and if I sensed weakness, then I would have made a much bigger re-raise, perhaps to 55,000 more to go (81,000 total). I do not want to get called, and for that reason, my re-raise sizing is bigger than the new school standards. If my read is right, then I want to force the issue (and make my opponent fold): power poker!

**Liv**

Obviously it is very tempting to call and see a flop due to the 3-bet being small, allowing us to see a relatively cheap flop. 10-9 offset is just too weak but 10-9 suited is very close: depending on how many bluffs the re-raiser has in his range, the minimum hand I would see a flop with is somewhere around J♠-10♣. Layne’s point about a 17BB stack being worth around the same amount as a 14BB stack raises an interesting question; is calling and seeing a flop in this situation more or less profitable than getting one free orbit of hands? In this exact example where we are right at the bottom of our calling range, we have to make our decision based upon the range and playing ability of the small blind. If they are likely to be raising a range that mostly dominates our hand or are especially skilled postflop, then we should lean towards folding.

**Example 3 (18BB)**

Here’s an example featuring postflop play with this stack size. It’s folded around to us on the button with 10♥-9♠ with an 18BB stack in a 9-handed mid-stakes online tournament. The blinds are 50/100-10. The players in the blinds are reasonably tight and they both have us covered. What should we do?

**Phil**

We could make an argument for going all-in as, according to the equity calculator, 10-9 offset is exactly a break-even shove in this spot. If your opponents are very aggressive, we lean towards making this play, however in this example, the hand is playable enough against these opponents to make a small raise to 2BB. We do so, and the big blind calls. The flop is J♠-7♦-6♥ and the big blind checks to us. Do we bet and, if so, how much?

We have flopped some equity with a number of turns that can improve our hand, or give the perception of our hand improving. As such, our plan here is to bet small to maintain stack maneuverability for reasons discussed previously. We bet around 1/3-pot, 1.8BB into the 5.4BB pot. Villain calls. The turn is the (J♠-7♦-6♥)-Q♠ and he checks again. This is a good card for our range. In addition to our flop value hands, we conceivably have a number of Q-10, Q-9 and Q-8 hands with which we would continuation bet. It also allows us to apply pressure to any one pair hands that our opponent most likely flopped. The pot is now
9BB – how much should we bet? We have 14.2BB left in our stack and we want to ensure we have enough chips to make a sizable river shove. We bet around 35%-40% of the pot – 3.5BB. Villain calls. At this point, Villain’s range of hands is mostly one pair hands such as J-x, 8-7, 9-7, K-7, or A-7. He still has a few two pair hands but there aren’t many combinations of those, especially as the weaker two pairs would have likely check-raised by this point. He could also have a few combinations of A-10 that he just called preflop, called postflop because our bet was small, and has now turned some more equity.

The river is the (J♠-7♦-6♥-Q♠)-5♠. Villain checks. Do we go all-in? The pot is 16BB and we have 10.7BB left in our stack, which is big enough to make any reasonable, thinking opponent fold one pair. His range has very few straights and flushes; 9-8 would have likely check-raised the flop or turn, and our 9♠ blocks a number of flush combinations he could have. Meanwhile, our range can still have rivered straights and flushes, some two pairs, top pair and not that many bluffs. Therefore, this is a good spot to go all-in and we will likely win a healthy pot.

Phil
If I’m playing super tight poker (like I usually do), then I would either fold the hand preflop, or open for 3BB (300). I would make my decision as to whether or not I raise or fold based on how often I have opened pots in the last 30 minutes (do my opponents think I’m playing super tight?). If I have indeed folded a high percentage of hands over the last 30 minutes, then I would raise it to 300. My thinking here is that I want to give my super tight image a chance to win some much needed chips risk free. Also, opening for 3BB gives me a better chance to induce both blinds to fold preflop compared to opening for 2BB.

Assuming that I did open for 3BB, and that I was called preflop, then I think that putting a bet in on the flop after my opponent checks is reasonable. I also think that checking behind on the flop is a reasonable, but slightly weaker, play. I prefer a flop bet of about 50% of the pot size as it gives me (and my tight image!) another chance to win the pot.

Assuming that my 300 bet is called on the flop, I would check on the turn and take a free card. I am reasoning that I only have 1,200 left (after betting 300 and 300), and there is 1,200 in the pot. Thus my ability to bluff the next two streets is diminished. Plus, I think that most online players will call a 1,200 all-in bet into a 1,200 pot if they have a marginal hand, such as a pair of sevens, in this spot. I don’t mind giving up here after running into resistance both preflop and on the flop. Of course, I can always hit my straight with a queen or an eight, or I could hit a pair of tens or nines. In the case of hitting a pair of tens or nines on the river, and my opponent checking to me, then I would value bet the river.

If my opponent did check to me on the river after the 5 hit, I would probably give up and check back. I hate to surrender, but I feel like my opponent would call me with a weak hand as even a lowly pair of fives! Sometimes discretion is the better part of valor...

The 15BB stack

Phil
At 15BB, to me it’s starting to feel like I have a short stack. However, at the WSOP I start each no-limit hold’em tournament four to six hours late, so I’m quite used to a 15BB stack. Liv and I are in agreement that you have play even tighter before the flop with this stack size. The key question is this: is there room to raise before the flop with the intention of folding to a re-raise?

Liv
Yes, you can definitely still raise and fold with this stack (especially if you are following my rule of using small raise sizes!). You should always be looking for good spots to steal the blinds and antes to keep yourself afloat.

The biggest difference with a 15BB stack is that you can no longer profitably call preflop raises with Broadway type hands as you could with 20BB (unless you’re in the big blind where it often only costs 1BB to see a flop).

Another point is you can widen the range of hands that you 3-bet shove with. This is because the win of approximately 5BB (blinds + antes + the opponent’s raise) is a much bigger percentage increase to your stack than when you had 20BB.

Lastly, you are now able to open shove a wider range of hands in late position. For example, it is perfectly profitable to open shove K-Q from the cutoff as opposed to raising with the intention of either calling or folding versus a re-raise (depending on opponent type). Again, this is because winning the blinds + antes is worth so much more to your stack.
Variance is what makes poker profitable. Without good luck and bad luck, players would be immediately rewarded for playing a hand well, or punished for playing it poorly. Although you may hate taking a bad beat or having your opponents show up with a hand they had no business playing, remember that without variance poker would be as profitable as chess. There aren’t many chess players making a lot of money these days.

Variance may be what allows you to make money from poker, but it’s also the toughest thing to deal with mentally. Poker is a game where you can do everything right and consistently lose for long periods of time. That is why even the best players can go on tilt.

In a game of small edges, eliminating tilt is one of the best ways for your earn rate to take a big leap forward. Imagine how valuable it would be to shake off a bad beat and continue to play as if nothing untoward had happened. How much bigger would your bankroll be if you didn’t spew off several buy-ins because of...
tilt? How many more opportunities would you have to play higher stakes or go deeper in tournaments? How much more confidence would you have in becoming a successful player? Tilt is costly in many ways and some you won’t even realize until after you’ve stopped tilting.

You may not even believe it is possible to stop tilting. Many players assume that tilt is just part of the game, as if there were a rule that taking sickening bad beats turns you into a raging tilt monkey. If this were really true, everyone would have the same reaction to bad beats, and obviously that’s not the case. Tilt does not have to be part of your game. I’ve seen thousands of players improve how they handle the most tilting aspects of the game. Whether they’ve been my private clients, or players who have read my book, The Mental Game of Poker, I’ve seen players transform their game by eliminating tilt.

For the past seven years I’ve been working with poker players as a mental game coach. In that time, I’ve coached over 400 players from around the world, including some of the best in the game. My clients have won WSOP bracelets, EPT titles, and millions of dollars more as a result of their progress in their mental game. I have a master’s degree in counseling psychology and am a licensed therapist. I originally worked as a mental game coach with golfers, including players on the PGA and LPGA tour, but in 2007 I turned my attention to poker after meeting legendary grinder Dusty “Leatherass” Schmidt. Since then, I’ve created a program for poker players that is proven to solve their tilt problem, not just temporarily, but permanently.

You may have previously received advice on how to deal with tilt, and it may have worked for a short time. The fundamental difference between the common approaches to tilt and my program comes down to how emotion is viewed. Previous advice attempted to cure tilt by trying to block it out, think positively, or breathe deeply. When emotion is viewed as the cause of problems at the poker table, it makes perfect sense why conventional wisdom would urge you to become robotic, trick your mind, or become desensitized to emotion. In essence, traditional tactics suggest that emotion is inherently bad, so you must get rid of it. Of course, your end goal is to get these emotions out of your game, but they are a symptom—not the real cause of why you play poorly.

The other big reason my program has been so successful is the level of detail given to all of the reasons that a player tilts and the unique ways in which they tilt. Tilt is a complex problem and you need a program that accounts for that complexity. Previous solutions to the problem of tilt have either been so simplistic or mysterious that it has felt completely unsolvable. What I have brought to poker is a logical and systematic approach to dealing with tilt that is based on a foundation of over ten years of experience working with athletes and poker players.

One of the big reasons tilt had been such a hard problem to solve is that the definition is too broad. Some players use it to refer to being angry and reckless. Some players use tilt to describe when they start playing a more loose and passive game. Others simply use tilt to describe any instance where they play badly. When the definition is so broad that it refers to any instance of bad play—regardless of the cause—you cannot begin to understand why it happened. Only when you know the cause of your bad play can you develop a strategy that can correct the problem. In my work with poker players over the years, I have found that most of the time players refer to being on tilt, they’re describing being angry or frustrated. For that reason, I define tilt as an anger problem.

Putting every problem under the heading of tilt is like a doctor saying you’re “sick” when you have a high fever, achy muscles, and sore throat. “Very funny doc, so are you really going to tell me what’s wrong with me?” would be an appropriate response to such a terrible diagnosis. Instead, when your doctor says that you have the flu, gives you antibiotics, and tells you to rest, you’re a lot happier because you know why you feel that way and what’s going to cure it.

In addition to anger, there are other mental game issues that can cause you to play badly. Many players struggle to deal with fear, laziness, overconfidence, loss of confidence, procrastination, anxiety and a lack of focus. The key is to determine whether your poor play is caused by anger or another mental game issue, because each one requires a different strategy to solve it. Once you know the cause of your poor play, you’re a step closer to getting the correct prescription.

This chapter focuses only on tilt. After reading it, you will have the most up-to-date explanation of how to break tilt down and correct it.

## Tilt myths

For you to have a chance at solving your tilt problems you need good information about tilt. Only when you understand tilt and the nature of anger can you begin to correct the underlying flaws that cause it. Otherwise, your efforts will only
produce short-term progress that will eventually have you tilting because you’re still angry!

Let’s dispel some popular myths about tilt and jumpstart your efforts to kill this problem for good. Here are the ones that are most common and damaging.

**Quitting is a cure**

Quitting is a way to protect yourself from the damage that tilt can inflict on your game, and it’s a wise strategy to use until you learn to control it. The problem is that some players get so good at quitting at the first sign of tilt that, not surprisingly, they stop tilting. You can’t tilt if you aren’t playing. Over time, however, they forget they even have a tilt problem and guess what happens? They develop a motivational problem. Now they will only play if they feel perfect, so they aren’t playing enough. You may think this works as a way to cure tilt but, in the long term, there is a massive opportunity cost. Rather than saving yourself money by not playing on tilt, think of all the money you could be earning if you actually eliminate tilt for good.

**Anger is inherently bad**

Have you ever been annoyed and then used this feeling as fuel to play better than you’ve ever played? Very often players will make a few mistakes early in a session because their poker brain isn’t in gear, and getting annoyed at those mistakes is the kick in the butt they need to wake up and play great. Michael Jordan was famous for using anger toward his opponents to get himself energized and focused... and we know how that turned out. Of course, anger doesn’t always create this kind of fuel to perform at a high level and I don’t believe it’s an ideal source either. However, you can’t say that feeling angry is a bad thing because that’s simply not true. The key is recognizing and understanding when anger has become a problem and consequently solving the root cause of it.

**Absolute control of tilt**

Players often get annoyed that they’re tilting – the tilt of tilt. They’re angry because they expect to always be able to be in control of tilt. This especially happens to players after they’ve made progress with their tilt. As you’ll soon learn, you need mental energy in order to control tilt. If you’re lacking mental energy because you’re tired or worn down, you cannot expect to be able to control tilt. This reality can’t be changed because it’s based on how the brain functions. Keeping your expectations in line with reality will ensure that you can avoid putting yourself in a situation where tilt becomes likely. In other words, it’ll keep you from gambling with your mental game.

**Everyone tilts**

Players who tilt often make the excuse that “everyone does it” as a way of making themselves feel less bad about tilting. If everyone tilts then it’s really not that much of a problem and they don’t need to worry about doing anything about it. If you find yourself making that excuse, or you hear someone that you want to help saying it, call yourself or them on it. One of my most successful clients told me that she had received advice from a well-known coach who said not to worry about tilt because everyone did it. That was until she started working with me. Over the next several years she quietly became one of the most profitable heads-up players in the world due in part to the fact that she no longer tilted.

**“The fresh start”**

After a really bad day of tilting at the tables, players will often start a new day thinking “today is a new day.” They actually believe that because something miraculous occurred while their eyes were shut overnight they don’t have a tilt problem anymore. If only it were that easy. Believing this can happen is like believing you can wake up and play poker like Phil Ivey. Or a casual golfer waking up and thinking they can play professionally. No one really believes they could get that much better at poker or golf overnight, and yet many players wake up thinking their mental game or tilt control has improved just because it’s a new day.

If you believe any of these myths are true, expect to continue tilting. That’s the only real result you’ll see.
The seven types of tilt

People very often think that nobody understands their problems. But in reality, human beings are not that different from one another. All poker players go on tilt for a similar set of reasons. So similar, in fact, that I’ve been able to take all of the hundreds of reasons players tilt and narrow them down to only seven main reasons. That may sound a bit surprising, but over the three years since The Mental Game of Poker was first published, I have challenged players to identify an additional type of tilt that isn’t explained by one of the following seven. So far no one has succeeded.

To simplify tilt into seven types, I looked at all the various ways and reasons players tilt and organized them by the root cause. My goal was to make it a lot easier for you to both spot the type of tilt that you struggle with and solve your tilt problem altogether.

After listening to players talk about tilt for years, these are the seven types of tilt I found.

Running bad tilt

It doesn’t take a genius to see what this type of tilt is all about. This is the tilt that is caused by an extended bad run of cards – whether it is for the session, the week, the month, or even longer. Of course, it’s completely understandable why you would get angry while running bad, but running bad is only a small part of this type of tilt. The real cause of tilt during a bad run is that players experience so many tilt-inducing occurrences in such a short amount of time that the mind can’t process it all. Normally, a few bad things (for example bad beats and mistakes) happen each day, so by the time you play again, your mind has reset itself. However, during a bad run you lose with the best hand a lot more and make a lot more mistakes in such a short period of time that your mind can’t reset itself. So each day some tilt carries over to the next and that makes you more likely to go on tilt faster than the day before. Eventually, tilt can accumulate so much that you’re practically on tilt before even playing a hand. The key to understanding and solving this type of tilt is to prevent tilt from accumulating. The only way to do that is to solve every type of tilt that accumulates during a bad run, such as the two types of tilt used in the examples, injustice tilt and mistake tilt. Be sure to pay close attention to the other six types of tilt so you can spot the one(s) affecting your game.

Injustice tilt

This type of tilt happens after you’ve been rivered, coolered, and bad-beated for the umpteenth time and your head is about to explode. You can’t believe how unlucky you got. Bad players suck-out in the worst possible spot, strong players run over you, and you tilt thinking about how much should have won. Ultimately, you’re annoyed because it doesn’t feel like you’re getting your fair share of good luck. That feeling of unfairness or injustice is what best distinguishes this type of tilt. While a thorough understanding of variance is a big part of what can cure this type of tilt, many players deep down wish they could control variance so they wouldn’t have to lose. Or they’re just terrible at spotting good variance so it always seems like they’re getting bad luck and no good luck. They also might be falsely assuming they’re running bad, when in actuality they’re just making a lot of mistakes.

Hate-losing tilt

While losing is a reality in any competitive environment, it is especially true in poker. What other game can you think of where you have to lose as often as you do in poker? I can’t think of one. Despite that reality in poker, many players get highly tilted from losing. Those players are most often incredibly competitive and, for that reason, another term for this is “competitive tilt”. Players with this type of tilt are so competitive that they cannot handle losing no matter how it happens. Just the fact that they lost is enough to make them insanely angry. Even if they have a good handle on how much variance impacts short-term results in poker, they still can’t stand losing. To be clear, being competitive and wanting to win are not problems. The problem is how you handle the inevitable losses... often handling them so badly you end up losing more as a result.
Mistake tilt

Poker is a game where every player, even the best in the world, will make mistakes. The problem isn’t that you make mistakes, it’s that you beat yourself up for making one. Maybe you felt like you knew what the correct play was, and you’re tilted because for some reason you didn’t execute it. You may even beat yourself up for a mistake that wasn’t even a mistake – like when you play a hand well and get unlucky. Maybe you’re tilted because you made such an obvious and terrible play (one that could only happen from already being on tilt), but you didn’t realize that tilt could force such poor decision-making. Or, strangely, quite a common type of mistake tilt – you hate it when your opponents play poorly. An example is when a mistake by a normally strong player ends up costing you money. There are many reasons to be annoyed with mistakes and often players aren’t really aware of this type of tilt. Anger at making mistakes – whatever the reasons for the mistake – is often a sign that you have a flawed understanding of the learning process. Understanding the learning process isn’t something that many people were taught. Once you fix these flaws, you’re a lot closer to solving this type of tilt.

Entitlement tilt

This type of tilt is caused by the belief that you deserve to win. In essence, you view winning as a possession that you believe is rightfully yours and you tilt when someone undeserving robs it from you. “I’m supposed to win against fish,” you think to yourself after a session where you played great and lost. “How can you make such a terrible play? You don’t even belong at the same table as me,” you mutter to yourself as your chips get stacked by an inferior player. “The cards shouldn’t matter, I can outplay him,” you believe subconsciously, but don’t allow yourself to say. The interesting thing about entitlement tilt is that it often makes people seem really arrogant, when they’re not at all. There’s just something about poker that brings that side out. Believing that you’re such a good player that you should win all the time doesn’t just show your disregard for variance, it is also a great example of what happens when you have too much confidence. That’s right, overconfidence is a problem that doesn’t get a lot of attention, but can be a big problem in poker.

Revenge tilt

Revenge is common in everyday life, so there should be no surprise that it should be common in poker as well. There are many reasons to seek revenge in poker. For example, another player has been particularly aggressive against you and you feel you’ve been disrespected. Or your opponent thinks they’re better than you, or something about them just tilts the hell out of you. As a result, you feel the need to play back at them, show them they can’t push you around and you look for any opportunity to play a pot with them. Maybe you even start to play terrible hands against them in the sheer hope that you can suck out on them and put them on tilt. Revenge would be sweet if it worked. However, since you abandoned a winning strategy in an attempt to cause them pain or get your money back, the joke is now on you – your opponent has won.

Desperation tilt

Desperation is a feeling that can be hard for players to spot. In order to find it they have to look at the intent behind actions such as playing overly long sessions trying to get unstuck, playing outside their bankroll to get back to even, or forcing the action so they can win immediately. The urge to win money is so strong you start to make huge mistakes, become negative EV in the game, and, worse, you’re in a blind rage and don’t care. You just keep playing. The more the losses mount, the more you’re willing to gamble to try to make back your money – even by playing casino games or sports betting. This is desperation tilt and it’s the worst kind of tilt. Desperation tilt can get so bad that it makes profitable poker players look like they have a gambling problem. There is a line for each player between whether this is a performance issue or if they actually have a gambling problem that requires professional help. If you decide to tackle desperation tilt using the strategies in this chapter, be sure to make quitting – as soon as possible – a top priority until you can prove that you’re making progress. Desperation tilt can become so intense that it carries the potential to destroy your poker career, so take correcting it seriously.

Having read about the seven types of tilt you may have already begun to spot the type(s) of tilt that you struggle with the most, and you’re ready to start...
solving them. That section is coming soon, but first it’s important to review some basic theory so you can learn how to best apply your strategy to correct tilt.

**Tilt theory**

When learning to play better poker it’s important not just to learn how to play certain hands from certain positions. You need to learn sound theories for the game so you can start to think like a poker player. The same is true in the mental game. The following is a theory that is critical for your understanding of what causes tilt and the steps you’ll need to take to solve it.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law describes the relationship between all emotion, including anger, and a player’s performance. Emotion is essential for performance; it’s only when there is too much (or too little) emotion that there is a problem. This is true of both positive emotions and negative emotions. Having too much confidence is a problem because it shuts down your ability to think. Being tired is a problem because you don’t have enough energy to think.

Understanding the relationship between emotion and performance, as shown by the following principle, makes solving tilt easier. This law states that your performance improves as your emotions rise... but only to a certain point.

If emotion continues to rise and crosses your threshold (the top of the curve), performance starts to decline because the emotional system shuts down your ability to think. You can’t perform as well because you can’t think as well – and if you can’t think as well, you can’t access the skills you’re currently learning. This demonstrates what happens when you are on tilt. The anger that is caused by getting outdrawn, losing to a fish, or making a mistake becomes intense, and has the power to actually shut down your ability to think. The more anger you have, the less you’ll be able to think until you can’t think at all and you’re in a blind rage.

Excessive anger shuts down your ability to access higher level brain functions and you’re left with the part of your poker game that comes easily and automatically, also known as your C-game. This does not mean that you’ll automatically turn into a mindless zombie. There are solid parts of your game that you’ve mastered and you actually know them so well you can even rely on them when you’re tilt. For example, by folding marginal hands out of position when on insane monkey tilt, you’re demonstrating a deep understanding of the importance of hand selection and positional awareness. Some players still have C-games which can crush.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law also helps to prove why anger can be a good thing. If your emotions are too low, getting angry is a way to get your brain into gear. Seeking revenge or getting angry at a self-inflicted mistake can fire you up and give you the emotion you need to play your best. That may not be the purest way to play your best, but it’s also not the worst.

The power that your emotions have over your ability to think is something that no one has the ability to control – it’s a pattern hardwired in the brain. Many of you know it as the “fight or flight response” and your mind is essentially malfunctioning as if it were a computer short-circuiting. This is what causes you to play poorly when you’re angry. If the brain weren’t organized this way, you would simply be angry and would still be able to play just as well as if you weren’t.

Very simply, if your emotions are too high, you make poor decisions because the brain prevents you being able to think straight. The following also happens:

- Your mind goes blank
- You miss key features of the hand
- You overweight the importance of some information, or fixate on irrelevant information
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