

The Problems

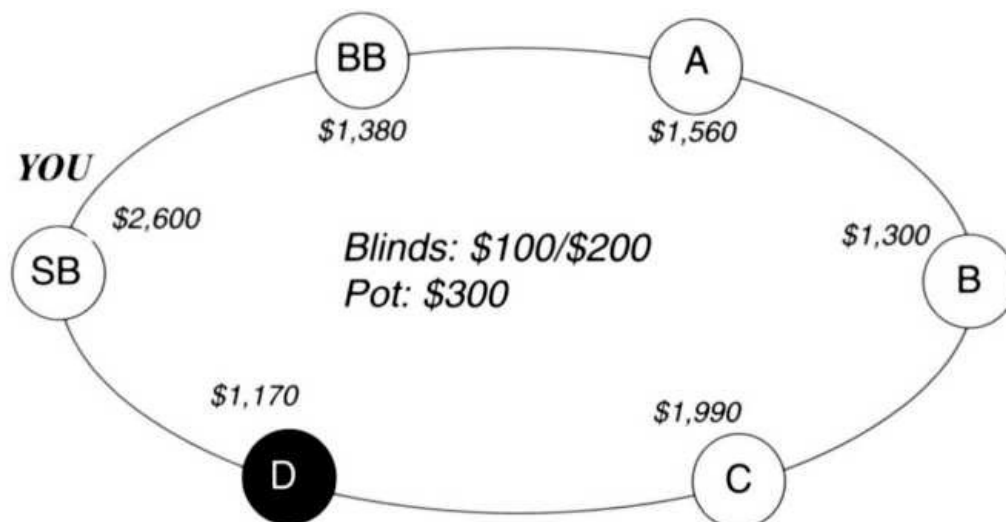
Problems 8-1 through 8-3 show some examples of bluffing and stealing. For some advice on when not to steal, look at 8-4. Techniques for defending against bluffs and steals are examined in 8-5 and 8-6.

Problems 8-7 through 8-9 cover other forms of bluffing: continuation bets, overbets, and semi-bluffs. The ever-popular steal from the big blind position is the focus of 8-10.

The intricacies of BSB play are covered in Problems 8-11 through 8-13. Problems 8-14 and 8-15 deal with miscellaneous types of bluffs.

Problems 8-16 through 8-19 show examples of slow-playing. The last two problems, 8-20 and 8-21, show the pros and cons of check-raising.

Hand 8-1



Situation: Single table online tournament, paying three places. The initially loose table has turned tight.

Your Hand: 8+54

Action to you: Players A, B, C, and D all fold.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: While your hand isn't much, the situation at the table is exceptionally favorable. Let's see why.

Note that while you are the big stack right now, there are no small stacks. That's very important. Everyone is still in the hunt. There are six players left and only three places get paid, so no one wants to be the next player eliminated. Usually at this point there will be a micro-stack or two, ready to go all-in with anything. But not here. This arrangement tends to make for the most conservative play you will see, and hence the very best stealing opportunities for the aggressive player. Right now, you want to be as aggressive as possible, so you should be quite happy to play your 8+54, especially with four players already out.

Next question: What's the more appropriate move here a call or a raise? Here I recommend just a call. If the big blind has a real hand, he'll raise you right here and you can get out cheap. If he doesn't have a hand, he'll just check. Then you can look at the flop and bet unless the texture of the flop is really bad. The combination of a call followed by a post-flop bet is less likely to be interpreted as a blatant steal than a simple raise from the small blind.

Action: You call. and the big blind checks. The pot is now \$400.

Flop: Q+9r8•

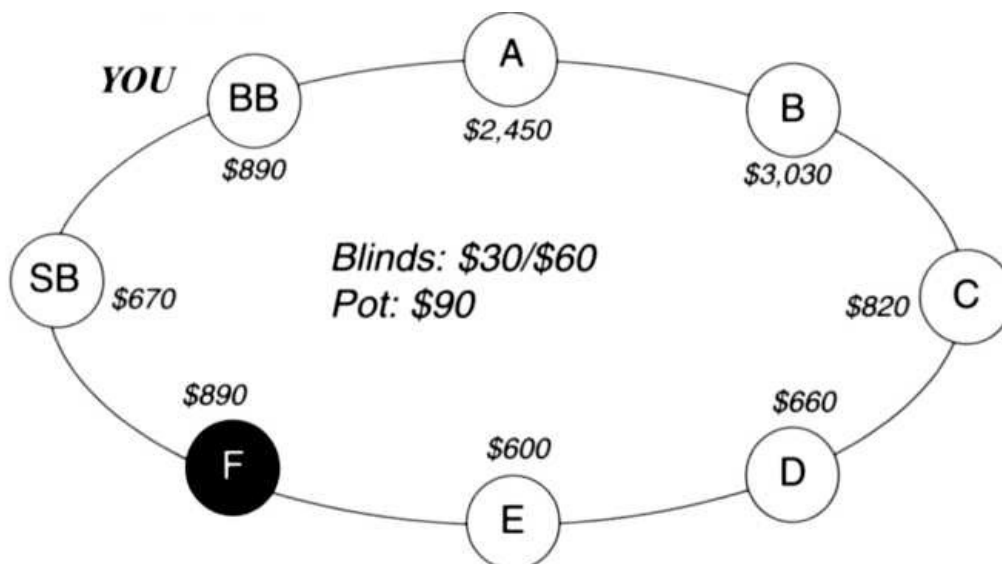
Question: What do you do now?

Answer: The shape of the flop is what I would call medium bad, with cards that could fit into a number of holdings, plus two hearts. However, you actually got a little piece of that flop yourself. Just the bottom pair, but it's better than nothing, and some compensation for the unfavorable shape. Now continue your play by making the standard bet of half the pot.

Action: You bet \$200, and the big blind folds.

The approach in this hand is more effective against weak players than strong players. At a table of strong players, a call is more likely to be interpreted as some sort of trap play. Weak players simply think that a call shows a weaker hand than a bet.

Hand 8-2



Situation: Player A limps into a lot of pots and has been lucky. He tends to fold to a big bet after he limps. Player D is tight. The blinds increase to \$50/\$100 next hand.

Your Hand: 8.34

Action to You: Player A calls \$60. Players B and C fold. Player D calls. Players E and F fold. The small blind calls. The pot is now \$240.

Question: Do you call or raise?

Answer: Our hand is worthless, but our position at the table is not. Let's look at the possibility of stealing this pot.

We know that Player A limps into a lot of pots, but will then fold to a big bet.

Player D is tight, but he didn't raise. His hand isn't worthless, but will he call a big bet with it?

The small blind was offered huge pot odds. The pot was \$210 when he called for \$30. Most players will call with almost anything in that situation.

If we make a large bet, I think A and the small blind are almost sure to go out. We can't be sure about D, but we know that most limpers fold to most large raises, so we're surely a substantial favorite to win the pot right here. If we're called, we about a 2-to-1 underdog to two overcards, so we have some winning chances later. That's good enough for me; I'm making a move here!

Next question: How much to bet? Some players would go all-in here, for two reasons.

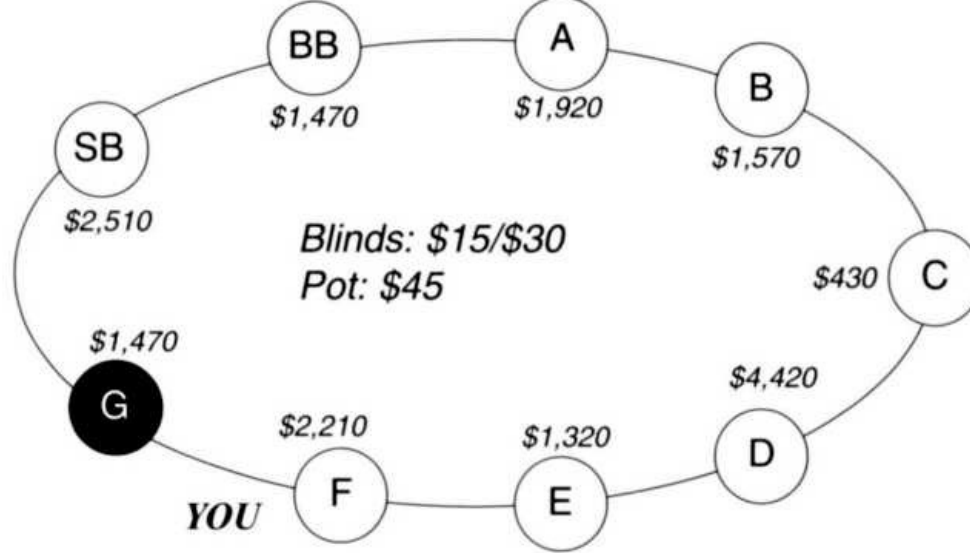
1. They think an all-in bet is more likely to steal the pot than a smaller bet.
2. They don't like their prospects if they bet a few hundred now, get called, fold after the flop, and then watch the blinds go to \$50/\$100, when they'd only have enough chips for three or four rounds.

I understand that point of view, but I don't agree. If my hand were a little more substantial, say ten-nine suited or something like that, where I felt I had reasonable chances if I were called, I might go that way. But here my hand is so weak that I want an exit strategy if my move doesn't work.

And while I'm sure not happy if the blinds go up and I have only \$500 or \$550 in chips, I can still look to make a move in the next round, with almost certainly a better hand than I've got now. So I'm going to raise, but I'm just going to raise to \$300. That's big enough to chase my opponents out if they want to go, and leaves me a little extra ammunition if the play doesn't work.

Action: You raise to \$300. Players A, D, and the small blind all fold. You take the pot.

Hand 8-3



Situation: Early in an online tournament. Player D has been loose and lucky.

Your hand: 9.74

Action to you: Players A, B, and C all fold. Player D calls. Player E folds.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: I don't mind playing a hand like nine-seven offsuit once in a while, as long as it's cheap and my position is relatively good. While I'm almost always throwing the hand away after the flop (and sometimes before the flop, if there is a raise behind me), there will be rare occasions when I hit the flop solidly, and on those occasions my hand will be very well disguised. Superaggressive players make this move far more often than I do, and for much higher stakes.

Action: You call. The button folds, the small blind calls, and the big blind checks. The pot is now \$120.

Flop: A+TV3V

Action: The blinds and Player D all check. What do you do?

Answer: You missed the flop, but three players have checked in front of you, indicating weakness. Is this a good time to try to bluff at the pot?

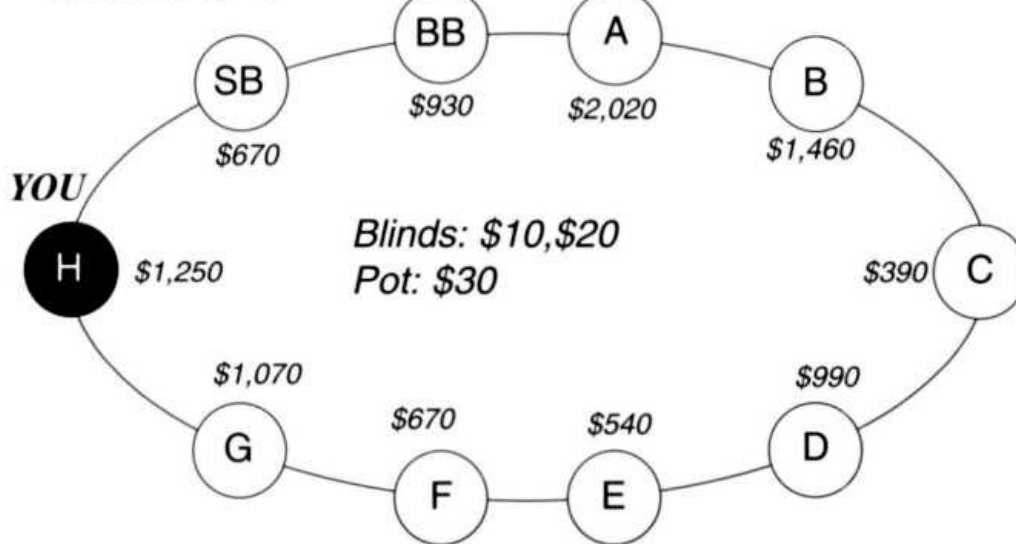
No. There are two good reasons for not wanting to bluff at the pot here: the number of your opponents and the flop. Let's take them one at a time.

1. Number of opponents. The more live players in the pot, the less you want to bluff. Ideally, you want to try to bluff a single opponent. A bluff against two opponents is possible but somewhat risky. Three opponents? Forget about it. There's just too much of a chance that someone will elect to stay in the pot against you, or, even worse, that their check was a trap and they'll now reraise you. Bluffing when last to act is marginally better than leading out with a bluff, but it's also an obvious bluffing situation, which will arouse suspicion.
2. The flop. When you're looking at a flop to bluff against, there are two cards you don't want to see: an ace or a ten. The ace is obviously a bad card, since players tend to play aces more than any other card. The ten is less obvious but also bad; tens are the most common card used in straights. (Tens occur in straights ranging from ace through ten down to ten through six. No other card appears as frequently.) When an ace and a ten both appear on board, you have to ask yourself "What hands could my opponents have that
 1. Were worth playing before the flop,
 2. Missed this flop completely?

You're losing to anyone who played a pair before the flop, or anyone who had an ace or a ten. In addition, any other high card hand like king-queen or queen-jack now has an inside straight draw besides two overcards to your hand.

You're happy to see three checks, but the flop is too dangerous for a move. Wait for a better opportunity.

Action: You check. A jack comes on the turn, and you fold to a bet from Player D who wins the pot.



Situation: Early in a single-table online tournament.

Your hand: A+2r

Action to You: Player A folds. Player B calls. Players C and D fold. Player F calls. Player F folds. Player G calls. The pot is now \$90.

Question: Player H decides to make a move to steal the pot and bets \$50. Good play or bad?

Answer: Many players have the idea that sitting on the button entitles them to steal any pot that comes their way. It's a dangerous notion, and if you believe it, you should disabuse yourself quickly.

There are advantages to being on the button, of course. Because you act last, you're going to have a better chance of winning any pot in which you're legitimately involved. But notice I said "legitimately." Don't go running into pots you have no business in playing, just because you're on the button.

Player H has another problem here. It's nice that he has an ace in his hand, but his other card is a deuce. Unless he catches a deuce on the flop, he's really playing with just one card --- a single ace. More often than not, when the hand is played out, the deuce won't even be part of his best five-card hand. It will be trumped by other, higher cards on the board. When you play hands like ace-king, ace-queen, or ace-jack, you're actually giving yourself two ways to win the hand. Your second card could provide your margin of victory. When you play weak hands like ace-deuce or ace-trey, you don't have that possibility. That's why you're quick to throw those hands away.

And here's one last problem: A \$50 bet won't chase anyone out. Anyone who wanted to play the pot for \$20 will now gladly toss in another \$30, because the pot odds will be irresistible.

In online poker, you'll meet a lot of players who will play any ace or any two suited cards. Be glad they're in the game because they're giving you their money.

What would I do here? Folding is far and away my top choice, although just calling isn't hopeless. The pot odds are reasonable, and I'd be hoping to flop some low cards and get a straight draw. Note that I wouldn't particularly be hoping to flop an ace too much danger that someone else has an ace with a better kicker.

Action: You actually raise \$50. The small blind calls for \$40, the big blind for \$30, and the three original callers all put in another \$30 each. The pot is now \$300.

Flop: K4944+

Action: Everyone checks to you. Should you try to steal again by betting \$100?

Answer: No. Normally I'd advise checking here, but the right play is to fold, so that you can't get yourself in any more trouble!

This is actually a particularly bad flop for you. With a king, a nine, and a couple of spades, and five callers out there, it's certain that someone either has a made hand or a draw to a strong hand. Anyone who was playing high cards either hit a pair of kings or else has something like queenjack or jack-ten and a draw to a straight. Someone could be playing two spades and is looking for a flush. Meanwhile, you have absolutely nothing. If you don't want to fold, just check and be glad you got a free card, even though hitting something on fourth street may still just give you the second best hand.

Action: You boldly decide to steal the pot by betting \$100. Everyone folds except Player E, who calls. The pot is now \$500.

Fourth Street: 54

Action: Player E checks. What should you do?

Answer: Just check and be glad that you're getting a free shot at drawing the nut flush. If you're contemplating betting, think about it this way - what could he have that would let him call after the flop, but fold a bet now? If he has a pair of kings he's sticking around to the end. If he was drawing to a flush, he just made it. You might be able to chase him out if he has a pair of nines, but that's about it. Remember, his call on the flop had to mean something. Your hand certainly didn't get better, but he might have a monster hand and be ready to check-raise you.

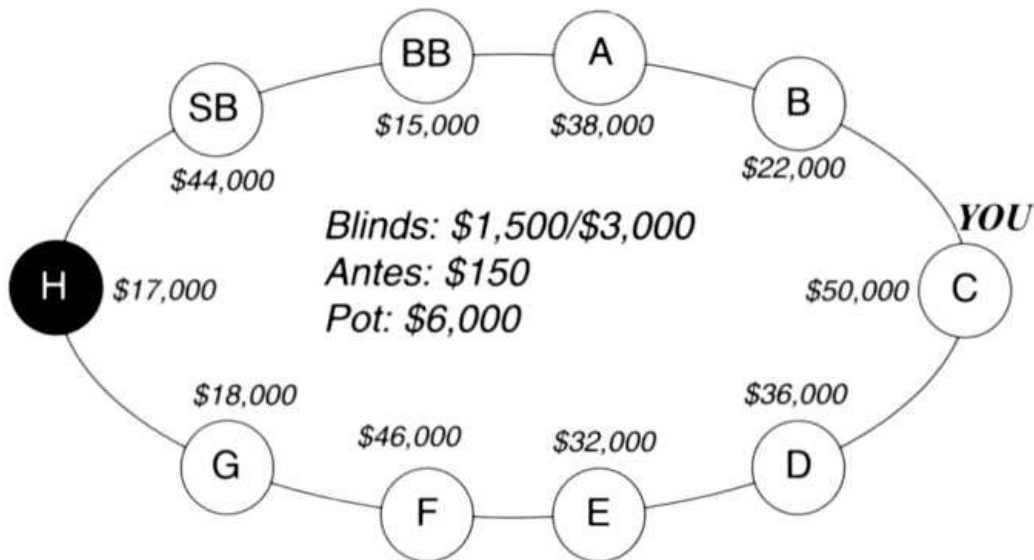
Action: You try to steal the pot again by betting \$200. Player E goes all-in by calling your last bet and then raising his last \$190. Should you call?

Answer: He's representing a flush, and given the way the hand has played out, he probably has it. In that case there are only seven spades left in the deck, and you need one to make the nut spade flush. There are now eight cards accounted for: your two hole cards, the four on board, and his presumed two spades, leaving 44 cards in the deck. Your odds against drawing the flush are 37-to-7, or a little over 5-to-1 against. What's the pot offering you? There's \$1,190 in there now, and you have to pay \$190 to call. That's roughly \$200 to win \$1,200, or 6-to-1. That's enough, so you can call, just based on the odds of drawing the nut flush.

Action: You call, and he shows 7444 for a flush. Fifth street is a Jr, and your ace-high loses to his king-high flush.

If you watch a lot of poker on TV, stealing pots with nothing looks pretty easy. It's not. Sometimes you make off with a few chips, but this hand is a good example of how things can go horribly wrong and half your stack can vanish in a couple of minutes.

Hand 8-5



Situation: Late in a major tournament. The table is a mix of conservative and aggressive players. Player D seems moderately tight. You have won three recent pots without having to show your hand.

Your hand: A4K♦

Action to you: Players A and B fold.

Question: What's your play?

Answer: Ace-king in an unopened pot is certainly worth a raise. You should raise about three times the big blind here, around \$9,000 to \$10,000.

Action: You bet \$10,000. Player D, after a long pause, goes all-in for \$36,000. All the players fold around to you. The pot is now \$52,000.

Question: What do you do?

Answer: First, take a deep breath and don't be in a hurry to do anything. This is generally good games-playing advice, but I've always been amazed how often players will go into deep thinks about relatively trivial decisions early in a tournament, then call an all-in bet later on in a split second. Train yourself to be a cool customer, and your results will improve dramatically in the long run.

The next step is to check out the pot odds. Be sure you do this before you start to think about what hand your opponent might or might not have. I've seen lots of players talk themselves out of playing a hand, and then completely forget to compute the pot odds. Don't fall into that trap.

In this case, you can fold and have \$40,000 in your stack. If you call and win you'll have \$92,000, but if you call and lose you'll have just \$14,000. Calling means risking \$26,000 to win \$52,000, which means you're being offered exactly 2-to-1 odds on your bet.

Now you're ready to think about actual hands. What could your opponent have here? To keep things simple, we'll group his possible hands into three categories.

1. He has aces or kings. This is the worst possible result for you. Aces is worse than kings by a long shot, but let's group these two disasters together and say that you're about a 4.5-to-1 underdog when this happens.
2. He has a pair lower than aces or kings. It's probably queens or jacks, although I've seen people make this move with tens, nines, or even lower pairs occasionally. You're about a 13-to-10 underdog here.
3. He has some other hand, and is putting a move on you with a bluff or semi-bluff, or mistakenly betting for value. With these hands, you're somewhere between a 3-to-2 and a 2-to-1 favorite.

Don't make the mistake of discounting the possibility of Category No. 3. Just because you wouldn't make a move with something like king-queen suited doesn't mean that another player wouldn't do it. He might have 'read' you for a bluff. He might have decided that you'd been pushing him around and it was time to pick a hand and make a stand. Or he might have decided that the blinds were increasing too fast and he couldn't wait any longer to make a move at a significant pot. Over the board, you don't need to figure out which of these possibilities might be true. Just be aware that whenever someone shoves all his chips in the pot, there's a distinctly non-zero chance that he doesn't really have a hand.

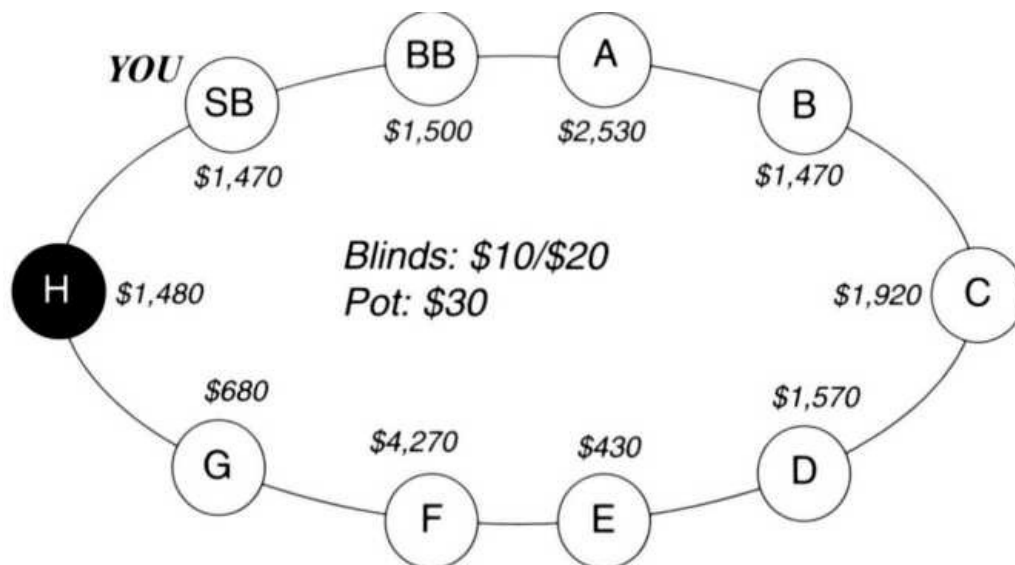
I'd estimate the chance of Category No. 3 at a minimum of 10 percent, perhaps as high as 20 percent. If that's the case, how big does the chances of his actually having aces or kings need to be for you to want to fold your hand? Without working through all the calculations here, the answer turns out to be around 50 percent. If you think that there's more than a 50 percent chance that he's holding one of those two hands, you should fold. If less, you should call.

In a tournament, I would almost always call in this situation. In order to fold, I'd have to assess Player D as super-tight, and I'd also have to know that I had been projecting a generally tight image myself, which would discourage people from making loose moves against me when I make a big bet. Here, the problem stipulated that I had picked up a few recent pots without showing a hand, and that increases the chances that someone will move over the top on me with a less-than-premium hand.

By the way, in a ring game where very old-fashioned, conservative play predominates, I would throw away the aceking in this situation. You're much too likely to find yourself being raised by the hands you fear most, aces or kings. Be aware, however, that cash games have recently loosened considerably with an influx of players accustomed to tournament play, and the old-fashioned conservative style of play is becoming rarer.

Resolution: You call, and your opponent turns up a pair of queens. His queens hold up to win the pot.

Hand 8-6



Situation: Early in a multi-table online tournament. Players F and G have been loose and aggressive. Player H has been tight.

Your hand: 6•5♦

Action to you: Players A, B, C, D, and E all fold. Players F, G, and H all call. The pot is now \$90.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Six-five suited is a bit low for a suited connector, but you're being well-paid for your troubles. The pot is offering 9-to-1 odds at this point, so put in another \$10 and take a flop.

Some players like to stick in a big raise here on the theory that everyone has shown weakness by just limping, so perhaps the pot can be stolen easily. That's a legitimate play as long as you don't overdo it, and as long as the table has played tight. It's less good in online play than in live play because the players tend to be looser. It's an especially bad play here. Both Players F and G have been loose in the early going, and they have extreme stacks. Player F has a big stack and so may feel he has little to risk by taking you on, and Player G is loose and probably desperate. That's two tough targets, and two too many for me. Just call.

Action: You call for another \$10, and the big blind checks. Five players are in the pot, which now totals \$100.

Flop: 6+3+2♦

Action: You are first to act. What do you do?

Answer: All in all, a very good flop for you. You have top pair, an inside straight draw, and you need two running cards for a flush. It would be silly to hold back; this isn't a hand you want to waste any time on. Just put in a bet of around two-thirds of the pot, and see what happens. Hopefully you may take the hand down right here.

Action: You bet \$60. The big blind and Player F fold. Player G calls. The button folds. The pot is now \$220.

Fourth Street: 2♦

Action: What do you do?

Answer: Three good pieces of news. You eliminated three players, the player who remains is loose and has a short stack, so he can't hurt you much, and the deuce on fourth street is unlikely to have helped his hand.

You should make a solid bet here. You're not really worried about preventing a draw, as the board makes a flush impossible and a straight highly unlikely. You just need to charge him for the privilege of hanging around. An amount around half the pot looks about right.

Action: You bet \$100 and he calls. The pot is now \$420.

Answer: At this point you should be wondering just what your opponent has. Presumably he's not drawing to a flush or straight. If he has an overpair to the board he could have raised at two different points but didn't. If he does have a six, it's almost certainly a better six than ours. Conceivably he stuck around with ace-trey suited and now has middle pair.

Fifth Street: K♦

Question: What do you do?

Answer: The king wasn't helpful, but it probably wasn't a disaster either. Players are much less likely to hang around with king-x than with ace-x. However, you don't have anything more than you have represented from the beginning, top pair.

There are two ways to handle the situation now. You could make a defensive bet of about \$150 or so, with the idea of heading off any bet on his part. Or you could just check and see what happens. If he has nothing, your check might even goad him into doing something stupid.

My top choice is just to check. I don't have a strong hand, and would be quite happy to just check the hand down and see what happens without getting any more chips involved. If that induces him to bet, then we'll decide at that point what we want to do.

Action: You check. He goes all-in for his last \$500. The pot is now \$980. What now?

Answer: We talked a lot about bluffing in this chapter, and now it's time to decide if we're being bluffed or not!

Let's first check the pot odds. We have to put in \$500 to call a pot of \$980, so we're getting almost 2-to-1 odds on our money. Under the circumstances (an all-in from a short stack) that creates a strong presumption in favor of calling. You'll need to be convinced you're beaten before folding here.

If his last bet was a value bet, what does he have and does his play of the hand make sense? There are really only two possibilities here:

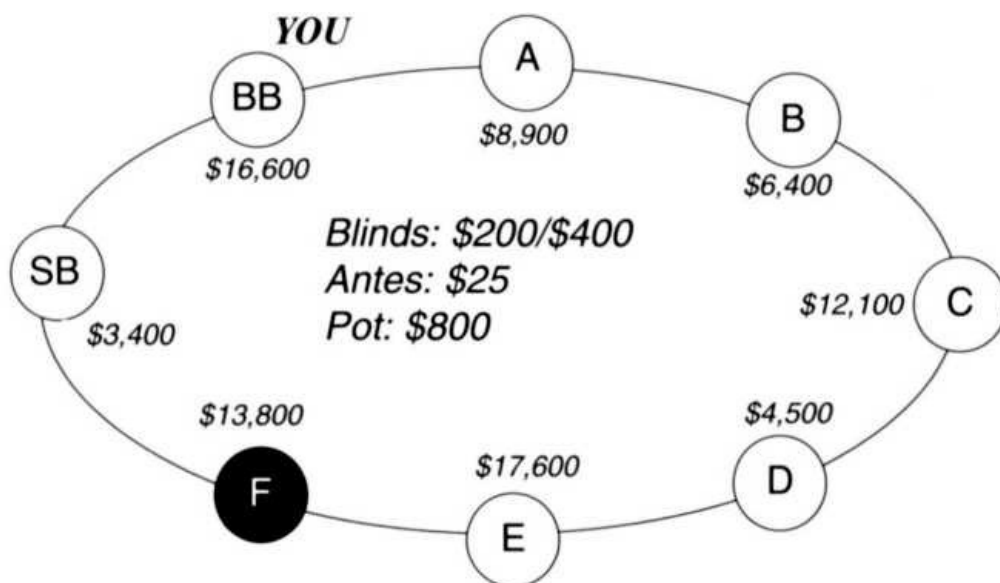
1. He has king-x and called to the end with it.
2. He has an overpair to the board and refused to bet before the flop, after the flop, or after the turn.

A loose, desperate player just might call down with a king, although players are much more likely to make that play with an ace. Would a loose player have refused to bet the whole way with an overpair? Sorry, I'm not buying that. There's plenty of doubt about how this hand was played, so I think there's a solid chance that he's bluffing. Combined with the excellent pot odds, you have an easy call here.

Action: You call, and he turns up ace-seven offsuit. You win the pot.

It's always nerve-wracking to call when you don't have much of a hand, but if the betting scenario is suspicious and the odds are good, you have to make him show you the cards. This is doubly true online, where the players don't have as much invested in the tournament and bluffing is much more common.

Hand 8-7



Situation: In the middle of a multi-table online event. Player E has been aggressive.

Your hand: K+T+

Action to you: Players A through D all fold. Player E raises, putting in \$800. The button and the small blind fold. The pot is now \$1,600. It costs you \$400 to call.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Your hand certainly isn't strong enough to raise, but it's plenty good enough to call given the 4-to-1 pot odds.

Action: You call. The pot is now \$2,000.

Flop: J•7r44

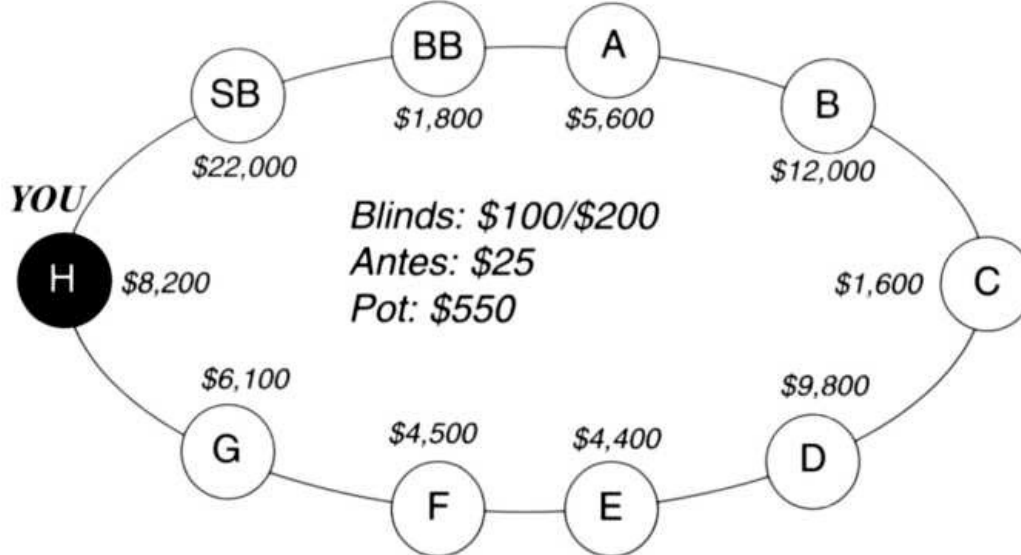
Action: You act first. What do you do?

Answer: This is a textbook scenario for a good probe/steal bet. You missed the flop, but it's a flop that could easily have missed your opponent as well. If you don't bet, the pot will almost surely be taken away from you. If you bet half the pot, will you win the bet one time in three? In my experience, the answer is certainly "yes." So toss in \$1,000 and see what happens.

Action: You bet \$1,000, and Player E folds.

Were you afraid to go up against the big stack? Remember, you're the second-biggest stack, so you can hurt him almost as much as he can hurt you. In a balance of mutual terror, whoever acts first has the advantage.

Hand 8-8



Situation: Middle of the first day of a major tournament. The small blind has been playing strong, perceptive poker.

Your hand: K4K♦

Action to you: Players A through G all fold.

Question: Do you call, raise \$600, raise \$1,800, or go all-in?

Answer: Wow. Nice situation. You have a big pair of kings, and just two players to act behind you. The typical play is to make a solid raise to \$600 here. That's three times the big blind, but not so much that someone behind you who has some kind of hand can't call. With a great hand and position, you want action. But you don't want to let anyone in for free, in case someone has ace-small. Then an ace on the flop would crush you. So \$600 is a good, solid play with your hand.

What kind of hand would bet \$1,800 here? Well, that's an overbet, a scared bet, from a hand that's not very good but wants to steal the pot anyway, using the advantage of the button.

If you were the big stack in the small blind, what would you think of a \$600 bet? You wouldn't be able to tell much. Might well be a steal, but it could also be a bet from a reasonable hand looking for action.

And in that position, what would you think of an \$1,800 chip bet? You'd probably think, "That little creep is trying to steal the pot from me. If I've got any two decent cards, I'm going to step on him like a bug."

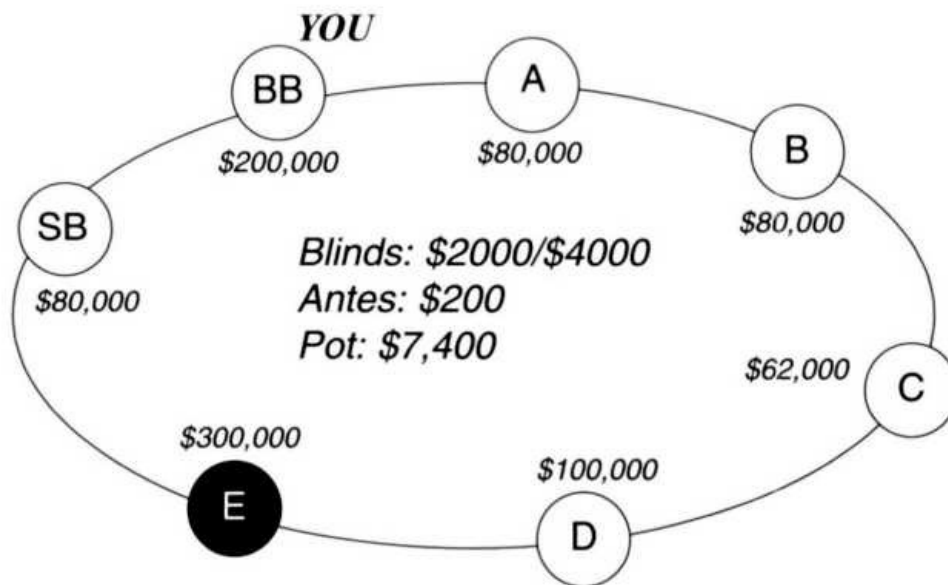
That's why you should bet \$1,800 here (or some similar amount). It's the perfect bet against a perceptive player, given your stack and the small blind's stack. It's a stealing situation, it looks like you're trying to steal, and a \$22,000 stack might see this as a great time to come over the top and take your bet away from you. Moreover, your bet is small enough in relation to your own stack (\$8,200) so that (from his point of view) you could walk away and still have a very significant pile of chips. And the big stack is big enough so that, in a worst-case scenario, it could lose an all-in bet and still be doing well.

Action: You raise to \$1,800. The small blind puts you all-in. The big blind folds. You call. The small blind turns over Q+Tr. Your pair of kings hold up.

A great hand, and worth repeated study. Remember that the best way to execute a trap is to imagine the hand you're representing, then play the hand exactly as you would play the imaginary hand.

Note again that this play only works against a strong and perceptive player, one who would understand why you were overbetting the pot. A weak player with an average-plus hand would just see the big bet and throw his hand away.

Hand 8-9



Situation: Late in the second day of a major tournament. Thirteen players remain at two tables. Only 1 1 places will be paid. Player C is a solid player who has recently lost a couple of key hands.

Your hand: 9+646

Action to you: Players A and B fold. Player C raises to \$19,000. Players D and E fold. The small blind folds. The pot is now \$26,400, and it costs you \$15,000 to call.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Fold. Your pot odds are okay, but your hand is very weak. There's no reason at this point to think that Player C is making a move. He's simply put in a reasonable raise from middle position. It could mean anything, but in the absence of any other information you should assume it means what it appears to mean - a good hand.

Also, don't assume you can somehow muscle Player C out of the pot with a fancy move or a bigger stack. He just put one-third of his chips in the pot, so you have to give him credit for being willing to go all the way with this hand.

Action: You actually call for another \$15,000. The pot is now \$41,400.

Flop: K+5+34

Question: It's your move. What should you do?

Answer: Some hands have a moment or two when it's possible, with a shrewd bet, to win a hand that might otherwise be lost. This is such a moment. At the table, you need to develop a sense of these moments; all good players have it.

Let's consider the possibilities here.

1. If you check, Player C will assume you missed the flop and bet. Since his stack and the pot are right now the same size, any reasonably big bet on his part will commit him to the pot. You will either have to fold his bet or be prepared to go all-in to win it.
2. If you go all-in, he will interpret your bet as weakness. After all, if you had a king in your hand and had just hit top pair, would you try to chase him out? No. You'd try to squeeze a little more money out of him with a smaller bet. An overbet practically screams that you have a flush draw and would like him to go away quickly. If you go all-in and he has anything at all, he'll deduce that he has the best hand and will call.
3. If you lead out with a medium-sized bet, you just might win the pot. That's a bet that makes sense for a player that had just made a pair of kings, and will scare him more than any other play. It's also a typical no-limit hold 'em semi-bluff. You might win the pot right now, and if you get called, you'll still have some outs with your club flush draw.

Once you've decided to make a bet, you need to decide how much to bet. Since your stack is very large compared to Player C, you'll need to take your cue from the size of Player C's remaining stack. So far, Player C has bet \$19,000, leaving him with \$43,000. You need to bet enough so that your opponent has to think about folding. You also need to consider what would happen if your opponent decides to go all-in after your bet. Would you have a call or a fold at that point? Let's look at some candidate bets and see how they stack up.

1. Suppose you bet \$10,000. Your opponent will need to put in \$10,000 to call a pot of over \$50,000. The 5-to-1 pot odds will make a call almost mandatory if he has any hand at all.

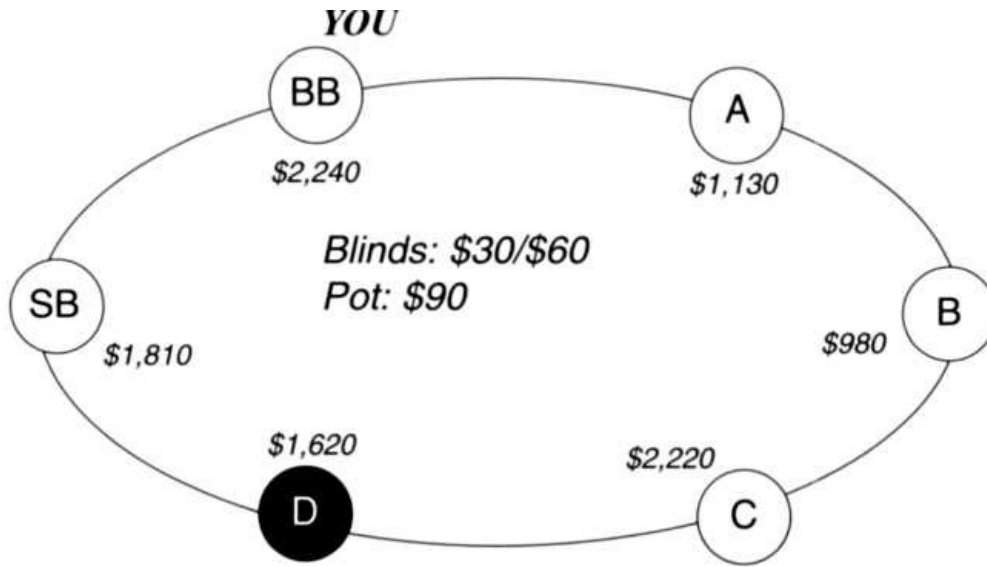
2. Suppose you bet \$15,000. Now he needs to put in \$15,000 to call a pot of about \$55,000. He's getting almost 4-to-1 odds, so again he can call with almost anything. If he comes back with an all-in raise, you'll be faced with a \$95,000 pot and \$25,000 to call. You'll be less than a 2-to-1 underdog to make your flush in two cards, and you'll be getting just under 4-to-1 odds from the pot, so you'll have to call his all-in raise.
3. Suppose you bet \$20,000. Now he needs to put in \$20,000 to call a pot of about \$60,000, so he's only getting 3-to-1 odds. He'll still call with most hands, but if he's missed his hand entirely he should fold. If he raises you all-in instead, you'll be faced with a \$95,000 pot and \$20,000 to call. Again, an easy call on your part.

Any bet will allow you to call the all-in raise, so bet the amount that is most likely to get him to fold: \$20,000.

Action: You actually go all-in, and Player C quickly calls. He turns over KV94, and his pair of kings hold up to win the pot.

As the hand played out, there actually was no play that could have won the pot or chased him away. But remember this principle for the future: A small bet can be much scarier than a big bet, especially to a strong player.

Hand 8-10



Situation: Late in a single-table satellite. Player C and the small blind are very aggressive.

Your hand: 4+4+

Action to you: Players A, B, C, and D all call. The small blind folds. The pot is now \$330.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Although the standard play here would be to check and see a cheap flop, this is actually a great stealing opportunity. Think about it. Four players, one of whom is known to be very aggressive, have just limped into the pot instead of raising. The requirements for raising are smaller than usual since the table is down to just six players. What could they have? It looks like you're facing perhaps one or two players with unpaired high cards, or maybe ace-x where the "x" is a low card, or some hands with suited connectors or connecting cards, drawing at flushes or straights.

I'd put in a good-sized bet here, at least \$600, and see what happens. Most of the time, all four players will lay down their hand rather than call a big bet and face a presumably strong hand heads-up. If you make a bet like that and you do get called, at least you have a pair, so although you're out of position, you still have some chances to win from that point.

This is a pretty elementary move and an easy one to spot, so don't overdo it. Most of the time I would just check with this hand, even in this position, but occasionally I'll trot out the "Big Blind Steal" move to swipe a pot.

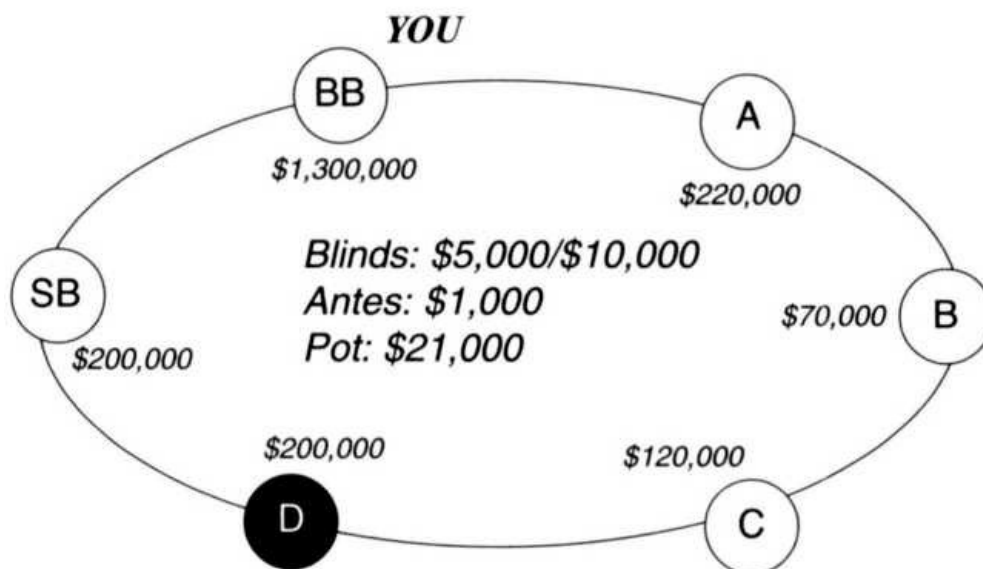
Action: Actually you check. The pot is still \$330.

Flop: TV8+7+

Question: What do you do?

Answer: You didn't flop a four, there are three overcards to your hand, and a spade draw. Since you didn't bet before the flop, you can't plausibly try to steal now. The texture of the flop is particularly bad for you. Too many possible hands either got hit by this flop or now have strong draws at straights or flushes. With four opponents, at least one player has to have you beaten right now. I'd check, then fold after someone bets.

Action: You check. Player A goes all-in for \$1,070. Players B, C, and D all fold. You fold as well.



Situation: Major tournament, final table. You are an experienced pro with a solid reputation. Player A is a daring and feared player. Players B, C, D and the small blind are all amateurs, some at their first major tournament. The final table has just gotten underway and the TV cameras are rolling.

Your hand: T49+

Action to you: Players A, B, and C all fold. Player D raises, putting in \$30,000. The small blind calls, putting in \$25,000. The pot is now \$76,000.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Before you make a move, remember to take the whole position into account. In poker, your position includes everything you know: about your hand, about the players at the table, the chip counts, the situation - anything that can provide a clue about how the people you're facing will behave.

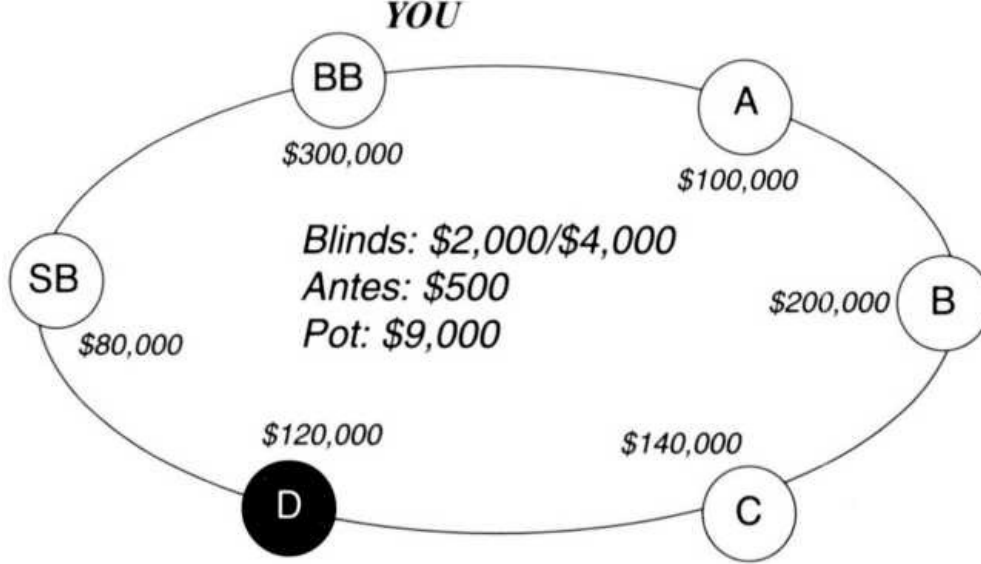
What you're seeing here is a good example of what I called BSB play. We have a bet from the button, which might be an attempt to steal the pot, and a call from the small blind, which doesn't necessarily indicate any strength. Your first thought should be that a big bet here might work. Then you need to consider what's unique about this situation, and see if those factors make you more or less eager to make your play.

The really unique aspects of this particular position are the relative stack sizes, the fact that your opponents are amateurs rather than experienced pros, and the TV coverage. Here's how I would weigh these factors:

1. TV coverage. Being on television tends to make people nervous, and most people, when they get nervous, get cautious. Above all, they don't want to look foolish in front of millions of people.
2. Amateurs rather than pros. They are less likely to see your play as part of a move, and more likely to see it as just a strong play from the big stack.
3. Relative stack sizes. This factor cuts both ways. A big bet offers them a chance to double up and get back in the tournament, but it also offers a chance to exit quickly in sixth place, with a smaller prize payout. Even amateurs react differently to this situation. Some are just happy to be in the money and feel the pressure is now off, while others are calculating the value of moving up the ladder a rung or two.

On balance, it seems to me that the situation presents an even stronger case for betting here than normal, so I would put the two players all-in with a \$200,000 bet.

Action: You bet \$200,000, and both players fold.



Situation: Major tournament, working its way down to the final table. At this point 12 players remain at two tables. Player D is aggressive and in the past has moved at the pot from the button.

Your hand: J•2♦

Action to you: Players A, B, and C fold. Player D raises to \$15,000. The small blind folds. The pot is now \$24,000. It costs you \$11,000 to call.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

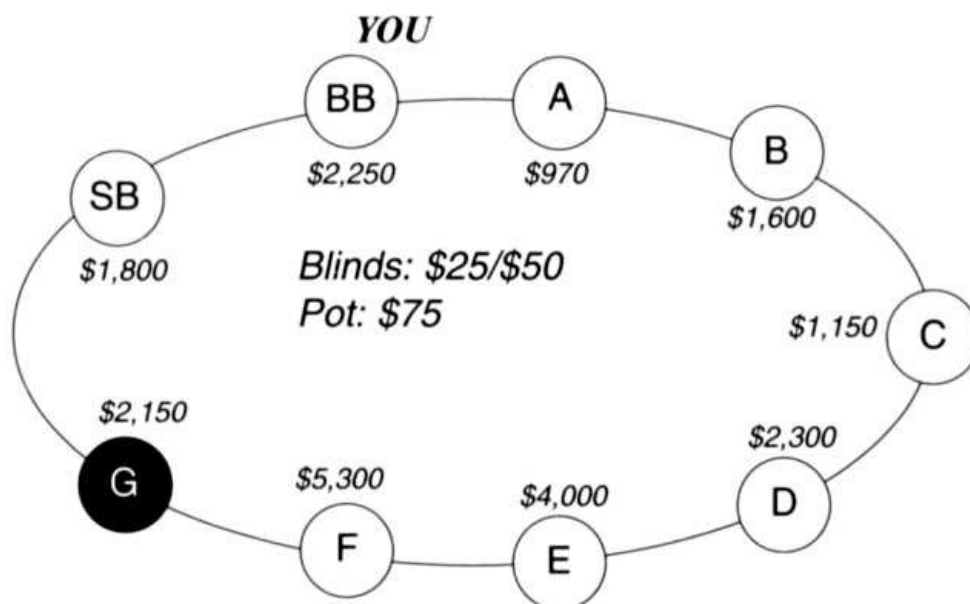
Answer: Despite your weak holding, you should often raise here - perhaps \$30,000 to \$40,000. The raise is good for two reasons:

There's a significant chance (probably as much as 60 percent) that Player D was stealing and will now fold. If he calls, your hand will catch some flops and win some pots. If he reraises, you are definitely beaten and you can lay down your hand. Any bet that can win immediately 50 to 60 percent of the time is a profitable bet to make.

In the latter stages of a tournament, you must defend your blind and let the other players know that you are not to be trifled with. They'll get the message and pick on someone else at the table. Much of poker psychology harkens back to lessons that boys learn in schoolyards. "Stand up to a bully." "Don't let anybody push you around." "Show you're willing to fight, and the other kid will back off." What worked on a playground works at a poker table as well.

Action: You raise to \$50,000. Player D folds.

Hand 8-13



Situation: Early in a major tournament. Player G has seemed moderately tight.

Your hand: K+Q♦

Action to you: Players A through F all fold. Player G raises, putting in \$100. The small blind folds. The pot is now \$175.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Here's an example of typical button small blind big blind play. The button raises, which could be anything from a pure value bet to a blatant steal attempt. You have a much better than average hand in the big blind, so you're entitled to make a substantial reraise. Not raising is a clear mistake. The button will have position on you throughout the hand, and you'd like to eliminate that disadvantage as quickly as possible. So raise now and try to end the hand.

Action: You reraise to \$400. The button goes all-in for his last \$2,050. What do you do?

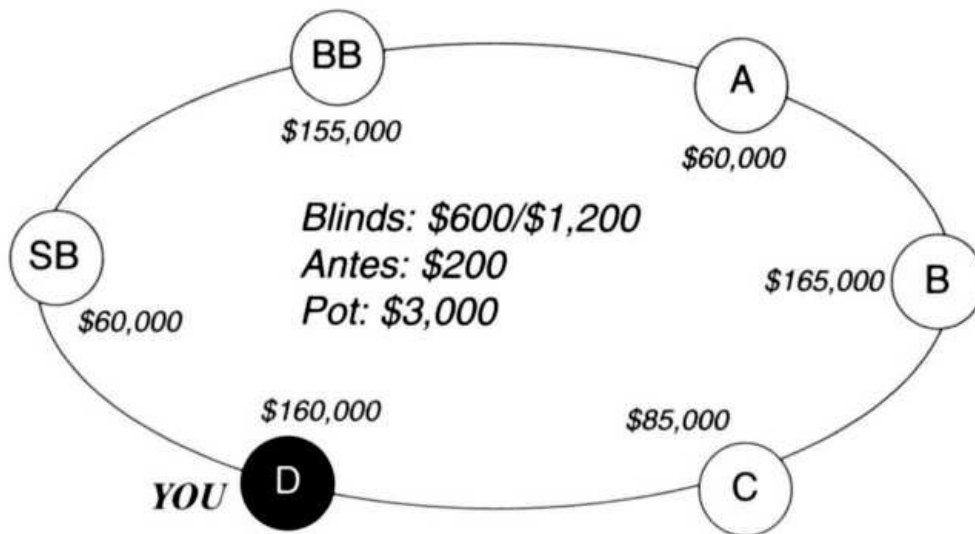
Answer: You asked a question and got a clear answer. He says he has a real hand, probably a high pair. It's early in the tournament, his stack was solid, and there wasn't any obvious reason for him to jeopardize all his chips with nothing. So believe him and go away.

Two more points to remember here:

1. Never be afraid to let a move go if it doesn't work. Strictly speaking, our raise with a king-queen can't be considered a "move." We had plenty of value given that the raise came from the button. Still, we hoped to take the pot down or at least set our opponent back on his heels a bit, and we failed. There's no disgrace in admitting a bet didn't work and just letting the money go. Remember that going all-in with a king-queen offsuit was not our intention when we bet.
2. Even online, an all-in bet usually means something. It's very rarely just a complete bluff. There just aren't that many players who have the stones to take a seven-three and
 - A. Make a move with it, then
 - B. Go all-in against someone who's shown strength.

Action: You fold.

Hand 8-14



Situation: Final table of a major tournament. The big blind has been generally tight. On a couple of occasions you've seen him make a move at a pot, then back down after a sizeable reraise. You are known to be aggressive.

Your hand: JVT+

Action to you: Players A, B, and C all fold.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Jack-ten on the button is good enough to make a move at the blinds, especially since the small stack is in the small blind, and the big blind is known to be tight. Just put in the standard pre-flop raise (at this table it's been \$5,000 during this round) and see what happens.

Action: You raise to \$5,000. The small blind folds but the big blind calls.

Flop: The flop comes 9+7+7♦

Action: The big blind checks. The pot is now \$13,000. What do you do?

Answer: What could the big blind have at this point? He was offered very favorable odds to call before the flop. The pot was \$8,000, and it cost him \$3,800 more to call, so he had better than 2-to-1 odds. Even a tight player would have called with most pairs or a couple of high cards. A high pair would mostly have prompted a reraise pre-flop, especially from a tight player. Unless he called with a pair of nines or a high card and a nine, this flop shouldn't have helped him, so there's nothing mysterious about his check after the flop. Your best guess at this point should be that he has either

1. A low to medium pair,
2. A high card and a nine, or
3. Two high cards.

If he has two high cards, a bet should chase him off the hand.

Should you bet? The answer is clearly yes. The shape of the flop is very good, with all cards lower than yours. If your opponent was holding two high cards, the flop has missed him completely. If you bet and are called, you have ten probable outs: three tens, three nines, and four eights for a straight. The final (and important) argument for betting is that your opponent is known to be tight.

If you're going to bet, should you make a continuation-sized bet (about half the pot) or a pot-sized bet? Either bet should chase him away if he holds two high cards, and neither bet will chase him away if he holds nine-x. A low pair will probably stick around in either case as well. I would go with the continuation-sized bet simply because it should accomplish the same goal with less risk.

Action: You bet \$12,000. The big blind calls. The pot is now \$37,000.

Fourth Street: K♦

Action: The big blind bets \$20,000. What do you do?

Answer: After calling pre-flop and checking on the flop, the big blind now bets half the pot after a king appears. If the big blind is representing a king in his hand, what king could he have? Ace-king or a pair of kings would have reraised pre-flop. King-queen, king-jack, or king-ten would have thrown the hand away after your bet last round. K-9 or K-7 would probably still be slow-playing, since you are known to be aggressive. A king just doesn't seem like a plausible holding at this point.

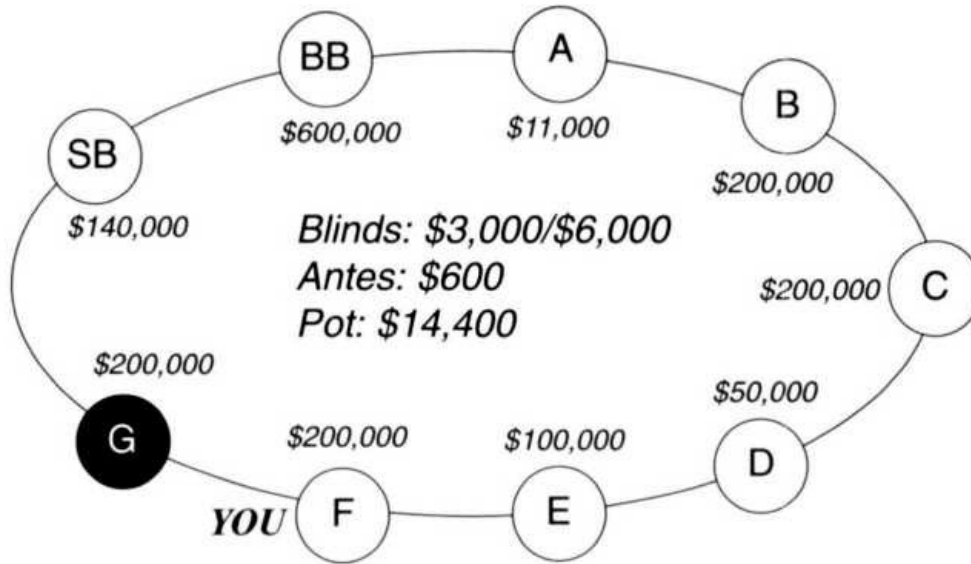
A more likely holding is something like a medium or low pair, in which case this bet represents a last stab at winning the pot. In addition, you've seen this player make a couple of such stabs in the past and then back away when raised. The right move here is pull out the back-alley mugging play and come over the top, representing that the king helped you (reasonable from your previous strong betting) with a bet large enough to show that your opponent may eventually have to commit all his chips to the hand. Note also that even if your bet is called, the king has given you four more outs, as now queens fill your straight.

Action: You raise to \$48,000. The big blind folds.

At this point some readers may be asking "Wait a minute. How do you know that those previous times you saw the guy fold after a late bet weren't just a set-up? Perhaps he knows you remember those plays and now he's sprung a trap on you, getting ready to take all your chips?"

Well, you don't of course. In poker you always have to make these judgments based on what statisticians would consider an inadequate sample size. But unless you play with the same people over and over again for weeks and months at a time, that's all the evidence you're ever going to have. In the final analysis, it's just a matter of going with the best evidence you have, sketchy though it may be, while combining it with common-sense reasoning and pot-odds analysis.

Hand 8-15



Situation: Final table of a major tournament.

Your hand: 5V5♦

Action to you: Player A goes all-in for \$11,000. Player E calls. The pot is now \$36,400.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Here's a chance to make a play that every good player knows by heart.

The all-in move from Player A doesn't necessarily mean anything. He's about to be gobbled up by the blinds in the next two hands, so he might go into the pot with almost anything.

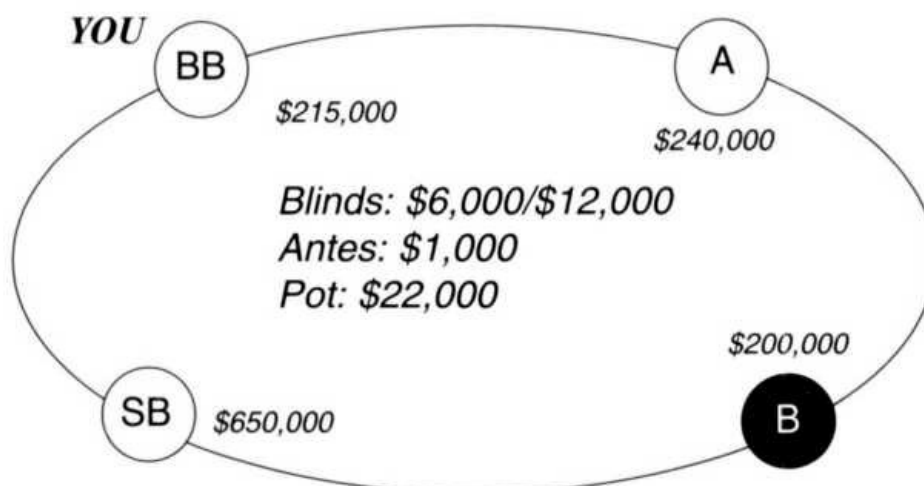
Player E's call is more interesting. He presumably knows that Player A went into the pot with a random hand, and may be trying to pick up a few cheap chips with a hand that's just slightly better than random.

The right move here is to come over the top with a goodsized bet, about \$40,000. If Player E lays his hand down, you can take back \$29,000 of your chips and you'll be heads-up against Player A, but with plenty of dead money from the blinds, antes, and Player E still in the pot. Of course you need some kind of hand to make this play, but a small pair is good enough.

Action: You raise to \$40,000. Player G and the blinds fold. Player E folds. The pot is now \$47,400, of which you contributed just \$11,000. Player A shows J+41. Your pair of fives holds up to win the pot.

This is a great money-making move, but it doesn't arise that often. Player E made a beginner's mistake. If he was going to play, no matter what his hand was, he should have put in some kind of a raise, just to head off this move.

Hand 8-16



Situation: Final table of a major tournament. You're playing in your first big event. The small blind is a tricky, super-aggressive player, recognized as one of the best in the world.

Your hand: J+8 ♦

Action to you: Players A and B fold. The small blind raises to \$24,000. The pot is now \$46,000. It costs you \$18,000 to call.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: Most players correctly think of jack-eight as a relatively weak hand. At a full table it certainly is. But headsup, it's just a little below average. When you couple this fact with a raise from a super-aggressive player, which he might have made with any two cards, and the huge pots odds you're being offered (better than 2.5-to-1), and your positional advantage, it's clear that a call is mandatory.

When you play against super-aggressive players, remember that all your hands are stronger than they look. Against a conservative player at a full table, J+8r looks like trash because all the hands your opponent might play are better than that. But a super-aggressive player in the small blind could easily be making a move with four-trey offsuit, in which case your hand is a solid favorite. In these situations the pot odds and your position, not your cards, are the best guide to when you want to play.

Action: You call. The pot is now \$64,000.

Flop: J+8+2 ♦

Action: The small blind checks. What do you do?

Answer: You've hit top two pair on what would otherwise be a mediocre flop, so you have a tremendously strong hand. Your real problem now will be trying to figure out how to make the most money from a great situation.

Your opponent checked, which from a super-aggressive player probably means he has something. Super-aggressive players have a tendency to check strong hands and bet weak ones after the flop, especially against players they consider weak. Right now he'll be trying to deduce what you have from how you respond to his check.

1. If you check, he'll conclude you have nothing, because that's what first-timers do when they have nothing.
2. If you bet, he'll put you on a pair, probably jacks. He'll figure
 - A. You couldn't have had a pair before the flop, since you didn't reraise,
 - B. You wouldn't bet here with just a pair of deuces, and
 - C. You'd be a little scared to bet with just a pair of eights. If whatever he's holding is lower than jacks (which is likely), he won't get too involved with the hand.

Your best bet to make some money here is to slow-play, starting with a check. If he does have something, he'll deduce that you have nothing and start betting on fourth street to take down the pot.

Action: You check. The pot remains \$64,000.

Fourth Street: 34

Action: The small blind bets \$30,000. The pot is now \$94,000. What do you do?

Answer: The temptation here for most players is to stick in a big raise, in effect saying "Ha! I outsmarted you!" Resist this temptation. Your objective when you play poker is to win your opponent's money, not to demonstrate how clever you are.

Instead, you should employ the rope-a-dope strategy and just call. The 3+ probably didn't help your opponent's hand, but it did put two clubs on the board. When you call, your opponent will try to figure out what you have. Here's what his reasoning will look like:

1. You didn't have a pair before the flop, because you didn't reraise.
2. You didn't pair your jacks on the flop, because you just checked after him.
3. You called a bet after the 34 appeared, putting two clubs on the board.

The most reasonable guess of a hand that fit all these facts is two clubs, one of them high. You were getting 3-to-1 pot odds to call, which is not quite enough to call based on just the flush, but if you held a card like the K4, you might think that the three remaining kings were all outs.

By calling here you've provided your opponent with a plausible but incorrect scenario for your hand. That's a great play when you can make it, because if a blank comes on fifth street and you bet, he'll be convinced that you missed your hand and are now bluffing him.

Note that you can only be this tricky against a very good player. A dope won't know what you're doing and won't try to figure it out either.

Action: You call. The pot is now \$124,000.

Fifth Street: A*

Good and bad news. Your opponent may be afraid you paired aces. On the other hand, it's not a club, so if he thought you were drawing at a flush, he knows you missed it.

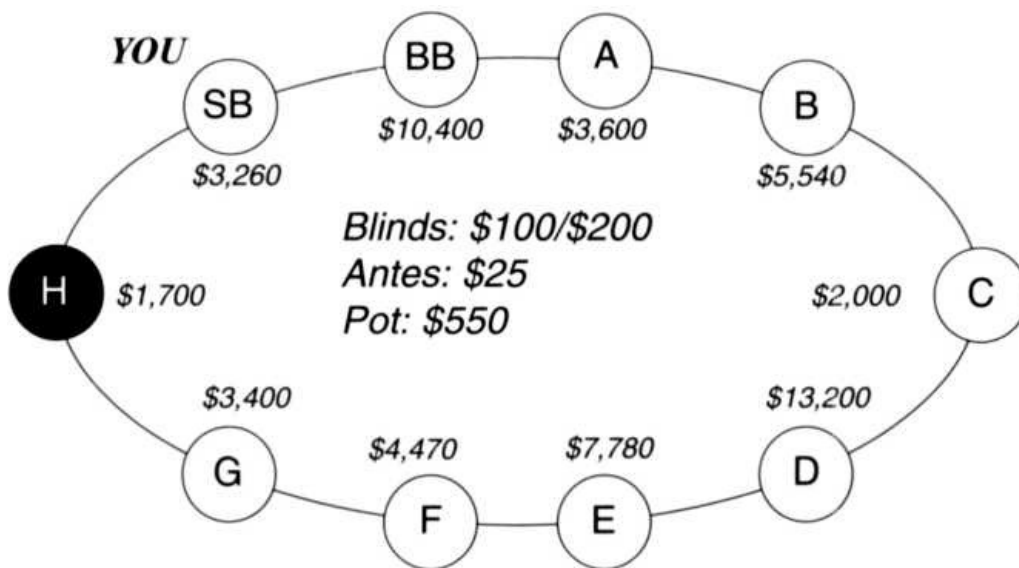
Action: The small blind checks. What do you do?

Answer: You're almost certainly best, so it's time to spring your trap and bet something. You can't bet too much, however, because you don't want to chase him away. A good number is a little less than half the pot. He'll be afraid of the ace, but he'll know you missed your draws, and the pot odds will be a big incentive to call.

Action: You bet \$50,000, and your opponent calls. He shows T+T*, and your two pair win the pot.

When you have a great hand against a super-aggressive player, let him take the lead in the betting. Try to combine slow playing with the rope-a-dope. You often only need to put in one bet, on fifth street.

Hand 8-17



Situation: Major tournament, early on the second day. The big blind is a very aggressive player who likes to come over the top and raise people out of pots.

Your hand: A4A♦

Action to you: Players A through H all fold. It's just you and the big blind.

Question: How do you handle your aces?

Answer: While slow-playing a hand like aces before the flop can be a poor play, there are situations where the move makes sense, and this hand shows one of them.

The only question here is the best way to bet so as to get all your chips in the pot, and his as well. If you raise and your aggressive opponent on the big blind has any kind of hand, he'll interpret your raise as a small blind trying to steal the pot, which no true bully would ever permit. But if he has absolutely nothing, even a bully will throw his hand away. A call, on the other hand, signifies a pretty feeble hand in this position (not even worth making a half-hearted attempt to steal), and will get reraised by anything. So I vote for just a call.

Action: You call for \$100, and the big blind raises you \$400. Pot is now \$1,050.

Question: What's the best way to proceed?

Answer: That was obviously a good result. Now what? If possible, we want to get all our chips in the pot before the flop comes. If he's raising on a medium-strength hand, and the flop misses him completely, and we've shown resistance, it becomes hard to justify continuing to play, even for the most certifiable lunatic. So we want to make one more raise, to keep the pot alive and give him one last chance to push us out. But it can't be too big a raise -- we don't want to scare him. We just want to act like a mouse with a little swagger still left.

I'd settle on calling his \$400 and then raising an additional \$600. That will put \$2,050 in the pot and give him over 3-to-1 odds on his call, probably an irresistible number. In addition, an all-in bet at that point might start to look good to him.

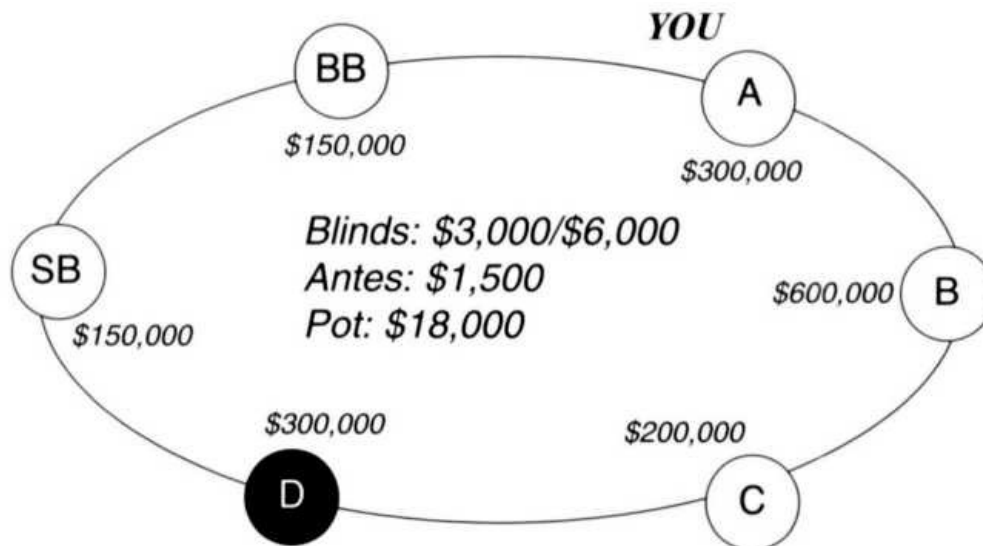
Consider the situation from his point of view. We started the hand with \$3,260 and have so far put in \$1,100, leaving us with \$2,160. If he puts us all-in, we can (he thinks) still retreat with about two-thirds of our original stack. We're not committed to the pot yet, so he could still push us out with a big bet. If we bet more than \$1,000 right now, it will be obvious that we're committed to the pot, and that might hold off a semi-bluff on his part. So putting in \$1,000 right now looks pretty good.

Action: You put in \$1,000, and he puts you all-in for \$2,160. You call.

Perfect! Now we just have to win the hand.

Resolution: He shows down A+6+. The board comes T-8-6-5-3 with no clubs, and we double up.

Hand 8-18



Situation: Final table of a major tournament. Player D is an aggressive player who has shown that he will try to steal pots with a positional advantage.

Your hand: A4T+

Action to you: You are first to act.

Question: Do you fold, call, or raise?

Answer: At a full table, ace-ten suited would be a little weak for opening the pot. In a six-handed table, it's a perfectly good opening hand. You should make a solid raise here.

Action: You actually raise to \$25,000. Players 13 and C fold. Player D calls on the button. The blinds fold. The pot is now \$68,000.

Flop: K+TV34

Question: Do you check or bet?

Answer: You've made middle pair, but with a king and a ten on board, you're vulnerable to a lot of plausible holdings. Any king has you beaten, but other high card combinations could be drawing to a straight.

There are a couple of ways to play this hand. The straightforward way is to just bet out for about half the pot, perhaps \$35,000. This might win the hand right here, and will certainly give you some solid information about your opponent's hand if he chooses to call or reraise.

A second way is to check and allow your aggressive opponent to try to steal the pot. This is both more dangerous and potentially more profitable. Given what you know of your opponent, there's a high probability that most of his bets from this position will be made with hands that you can beat.

Action: You actually check. Player D bets \$40,000. What do you do now?

Answer: There's \$108,000 in the pot and it costs you \$40,000 to call. Since Player D is very aggressive, there's a good chance he's just on a steal and you have him beaten. Easy call.

Action: You call. The pot is now \$148,000.

Fourth Street: 6♦

Question: Do you check or raise?

Answer: The six didn't help you, but it probably didn't help your opponent either. Having picked a strategy for the hand, you should continue with it and just check.

Action: You check. Player D checks as well.

Fifth Street: 64,

Question: Do you check or raise?

Answer: If the first six didn't help your opponent, then the second six didn't help him either. Unless your opponent has a king in his hand, you are winning right now. His check on fourth street was a mistake if he had a king, unless he's running a trap that's really deep. There's a move that some very strong players occasionally employ, which I call the "bet-check-bet" move. Here's how it works. You're holding a hand like ace-king, and you get a flop like the one we have here, king-x-x. You make a bet of half the pot on the flop, which might indicate strength or might be a standard continuation bet. Your opponent calls. On fourth street you check, indicating that your first bet was just a continuation bet and now you've given up on the hand. On fifth street you bet again, indicating that you decided the pot could be stolen, and you're making a stab at it. When this play works, your opponent calls or raises you on the end with a medium or small pair, figuring you missed your hand, and you win a big pot.

Is this move likely to be happening here? Probably not. But be aware of it. It's a tool in the arsenal of all top players.

Meanwhile, what should you do here? Betting out might take the pot, but checking could induce a desperate attempt to steal on the end. Having checked thus far, you should be consistent and check on the end as well.

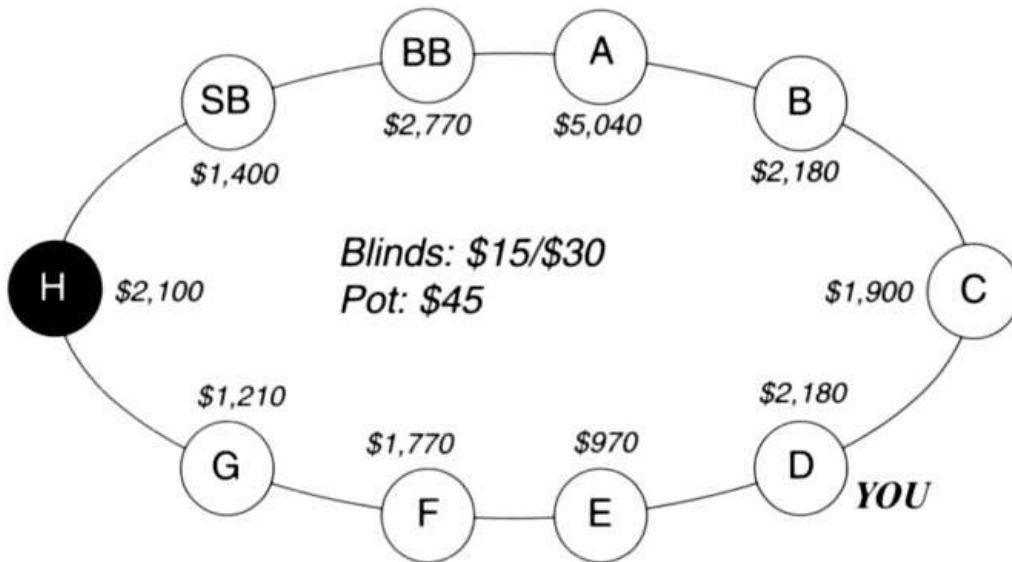
Action: You check. Your opponent bets \$80,000. The pot is now \$228,000. It costs you \$80,000 to call. What do you do?

Answer: The call is clear, of course. The pot is offering you almost 3-to-1, and there's an excellent chance that your tens are good.

Resolution: You call, and your opponent shows 715♠. You take the pot.

You had a good but not great hand, against an opponent who liked to steal pots. The rope-a-dope approach netted much more money from the hand than any straightforward betting could.

Hand 8-19



Situation: Early in an online tournament. The big blind has been aggressive. Player F has just arrived at the table, and you have no information on him.

Your hand: 9474

Action to you: Players A, B, and C all fold.

Question: Do you call, or raise?

Answer: The purely conservative play is just to throw your hand away, of course. Super-aggressive players are very comfortable playing hands like this in middle position. (If you watch some tapes of tournaments that Gus Hansen has won,