READING YOUR OPPONENTS: REAL LIFE

REAL LIFE APPLICATIONS

By Aaron B. Rochlen

like an open book by your opponents is never fun. My first experience at having my pages turned was in a Venetian Deep Stack tournament. I miraculously survived 300 players, making it to the final two tables.

I was getting short-stacked and hoping for more than a meager min-cash in a top-heavy tournament. With the blinds inching up, I knew I had to make a move. In middle position, I looked down at pocket tens. Under the gun, I led out with a bet. One guy called and a vocal big stack three-bet. If I call, it's for everything.



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A tough spot. Big decision. I had to do some serious thinking. As it turned out, big stack did it for me. With a surprisingly friendly southern accent he said:

"Well, you can't be happy with that move. You finally got a pocket pair, tens MAYBE jacks. Best hand you've seen in hours. You liked the call – hated my push. You have no fold equity, lousy position."

If that wasn't enough, he took a long sip from his beer and added:

You are the type of player who wants to have the best of it in, preflop for your tournament life. Right now you're thinking you are either beat or at best in a race. Probably beat. Bummer to whimper out now. Might as well hang on for a better hand, better position. Save us some time and gray hairs. Fold already."

I did. So did the other guy. Maybe I should have been folding his laundry as well. The dude owned me. He knew my hand, playing strategy, and tournament goals. He probably knew my family tree and what I ate for dinner the night before.

I had no idea how I'd been giving away such vital information. I was equally annoyed that I seemed to lack the reading skills of my beer-drinking opponent.

The good news? This was a key moment for me. I was finally grasping the importance of this critical skill that needed improvement in my game. Successfully reading opponents = winning poker. Some players have almost a sixth sense for the reads, as if they know their opponents' cards before they are dealt.

As a researcher, I decided to use my interview skills to figure out exactly what "it" is. If I couldn't do "it," I could at least do some research and draw conclusions. So, I talked to several pros known for their reading abilities. I learned a few key themes. For one, expert "readers" give different answers as to how their skill developed and how it unfolds. Some attribute their reads to practice - a refined skill, honed over time. These players talk about how they make reads constantly while in a hand or not, while evaluating their accuracy over time. They describe how their reading skills evolve over time based on this information and more practice.

Others say they had their reads from day one at the tables. These players note how they had the reading skills far before the more technical, statistical angles of the game were mastered.

The "how to" descriptions also differed. Some attributed their reading to intuition. These players have a gut reaction of what others are holding and make their reads accordingly. It's instinct – a decision made almost instantaneously.

Others describe a more calculated, logic-driven process. These players take mental notes. They accumulate facts. They keep track of what reads are and are not working and go with the best data available.

Where it gets really interesting is hearing more about what "reading" involves. Of course, hand strength is at the top of the list. But that's just part of the equation. Reading opponents goes much deeper. It's actually a more personal process.

Expert players describe the process as "putting themselves in the shoes" of their opponents. Those who are really able to read their opponents envision how others would respond to different poker situations. It's about switching seats, carefully attending to how someone else is likely to react, think and feel. If you genuinely know this much about your opponent, their hand strength is "second best" information.

With this new data, I realized I did know something about reading oppo-

nents. I just had to put on my psychologist's hat, use a different language. In psychology, we have a term for this as well: Perspective Taking. Like in poker, perspective taking is not easy to do. And it has serious value, if you can pull it off.

But here's the deal and the irony: In poker "perspective taking" is used to distance yourself from your opponents, to help take their money. In life, "perspective taking" brings you closer to others, reduces conflicts, and increases shared winnings.

The truth is we need reading and perspective-taking skills on and off the felt.

Consider your skills in both areas. In life and poker, figuring out the strength of others' hands is a decent starting point, but it won't take you to the next level.

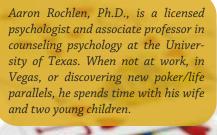
The real value is understanding others' perspectives and communicating that viewpoint back to your opponent or partner.

It's also about knowing how others are responding to your moves. That pays off.

Give it a shot. You might be pleasantly surprised by the results.

Poker and life have many parallels. But life, unlike poker, is a team sport.

Treat those on your team less like opponents.





WHAT YOU WILL FLOP

Pairing at least one hole card	,
Pairing both hole cards	
Four-flush when suited11%	
Four-flush when not suited	,
Flush with two suited cards)
Straight-flush draw w/suited connectors 3.4%	,
Making a set with your pocket pair11%	,
Making a full house with a pocket pair	,
Trips with no pocket pair	,
Straight draw with your connectors	
A pair on the board	,

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE FLOP

Flop	Odds	Percent
A pair	5-1	17%
Three suited cards	18-1	5.2%
Three of a given suit	72-1	1.3%
Two suited cards		
Three different suits	1.5-1	40%
Three in sequence	28-1	3.5%
Two in sequence	1.5-1	40%
None in sequence	0.8-1	56%
Three-of-a-Kind		

Hold'em Odds And Probabilities

ODDS AGAINST BEING DEALT SPECIFIC HANDS IN FIVE

CARDS (This is also what you

can expect to see on the five-card board in hold'em.)

Hand Odds
Royal Flush 649,740 to 1
Straight Flush
Four-of-a-Kind
Full House
Flush 508 to 1
Straight
Three-of-a-Kind
Two Pair
One Pair
No Pair