

So you want to be a cash game player

By icemonkey9

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Introduction

I have been playing poker since high school when a group of friends of mine got together for a regular “dealer calls it” game every Friday night. I wasn’t terribly good but enjoyed the company. I didn’t find friends in college who liked to play until my later years when the No Limit Holdem boom came on the scene. From there I would dominate my fraternity games which were usually the Sit N Go variety where it was played tournament style. Unfortunately, we never played for more than a few bucks.

After occasionally driving 45 minutes to my local casino to play in a tournament, I decided that driving 1.5 hours round trip for what could amount to be a \$50 ten minute adventure was a waste of my time. It was then I decided to put my time into online poker (again) ... however I didn’t have the time to deal with 2 to 5 hour multi-table tournaments due to my work and life schedule. So it was then I decided to move to cash game poker ... however my previous experience live cash games was negative and my online experience was nil.

Over the last 9 months I’ve accumulated knowledge about how to properly jump into the world of online cash game poker. This guide is best read by someone who is already familiar with how to play poker, and is looking for a good guide to help them get started playing online cash game poker (you might already be a SNG player).

This guide should help you jump right into the profitable world of cash game poker. The advantages to playing cash games over tournaments are well documented, and you probably wouldn’t be reading this if it hadn’t already piqued your interest. Enjoy the read, and best of luck to you in your endeavors.

Where to play online

For international users, there are a ton of places to play online poker. For people in the United States, there are a select few. There's an old adage from the good ole days in Las Vegas – *Go To Where the Action Is* and it holds up true for online poker.

Visiting this site - <http://www.pokerscout.com/> - lets you know traffic reports for all the major online poker rooms. Basically it boils down to this – if you are in the US or International Community – you need to be playing at PokerStars or FullTilt. International types (outside of the USA) can choose between PS (PokerStars), FTP (FullTilt Poker), the iPoker Network (TitanPoker, Bet365, Noble are all part of this network sharing traffic), or PartyPoker.

Personally I started on UltimateBet because I didn't know any better and a friend signed me up. I moved to FullTilt Poker because the action at UB was horrible (3 tables during peak hours for the 25n1 tables! Very sad!) and FTP offered up a 100% deposit bonus. What I had wished I knew then was that there are programs on the internet called *RakeBack* programs (Google it) where you sign up for the poker room through that website and they give you a percentage of all the rake you play back to your account. This makes playing at FullTilt a much more profitable situation rather than simply signing up on your own.

However, there's something to be said for PokerStars. Occasionally (two times a year or so) they have promotions for first time depositing (normally it's only \$50) but their Frequent Player Points promotion sets them apart from the rest of the sites. Their promotion is far and away better than the rest if you take away the option for RakeBack, with the ability to use the points for buyins to major tournaments or even cash bonuses. Personally I use their FPP points to enter into the 210fpp satellite to the Sunday 200k worth \$11 (which I unregister for and then sell the \$T for 99% of their value). On top of that each "level" of their promotion gets access to special VIP tournaments (free!). If you sign up for PokerStars through Cardschat.com (this is the only case I know about this, there might be more out there), they offer an extra deposit bonus on top of the one they provide at the site as-is.

So – I really lean in one of two directions. Either sign up for FullTilt Poker with a rakeback program provider (just search around the internet, you'll find one) or sign up for PokerStars through Cardschat. The advantage does to go Pokerstars in terms of traffic by a wide margin of almost 2 to 1, so keep that in mind too. I have personally cashed out on UB, PS, and FTP, and all three sites took no more than 2 weeks to get a check to my mailbox.

How To Deposit / Promotions / How Much to Deposit

There are really only two ways to “safely” deposit in my opinion – getting a pre-paid VISA card, or doing a wire transfer. I have used both and never had a problem with either method.

Prepaid VISA Card

This is the quickest method for depositing and easiest. It is also the most anonymous method as you don't even need to give away any information for it to work. There are two types of pre-paid credit cards that NETSPEND.com offers – one is a one-timer credit card that works once, and the other is a reloadable card that comes with a \$10 monthly fee.

I highly suggest just using the one-timer card. You don't get the double whammy of the “card fee” plus the “monthly fee” that really turns into some serious juice. To find a store local to you (again in the USA) go to www.netspend.com and at the bottom click on “GIFT CARDS” and look for the little BUY LOCATIONS area at the bottom. In there put in your zip code and click the “Search ZIP Code >>” button. A list of stores closest to you will come up and you can go there (typically gas stations or grocery stores) and buy the card. They come in denominations of \$25, \$50, or \$100. Obviously I suggest getting the \$100 card, and keep in mind it comes with a \$5.95 fee you have to pay on top of that. The good news is that the poker rooms online do not charge you a fee for processing a credit card.

Wire Transfer

When I deposited originally at FullTilt they used MoneyGram as their provider but I heard that this might have changed recently. PokerStars used Western Union which is very easy to find. To use this method (good for depositing \$300+) you need to email the cashier for the poker room, let them know your account name, let them know that you want to deposit via wire transfer, and for the proper instructions. In less than an hour you should have your answer in the form of a highly detailed instructional email. Most likely you will be sending your money to a very random person in a very random part of the world. Rest assured, this is just how it is and yes it will work.

The fees associated with a wire transfer can be as much as \$40 so make sure you know the fees before you go to send the money off. Also realize that you will need cold hard cash to make this wire transfer, so don't expect to be able to put it on your credit card or to bring a check. Usually this entire process from getting the email to wiring the money to having the money in your account takes 2 to 3 hours (during the business day).

Others

The only other way I've seen people deposit regularly is through their non-debit VISA or MASTERCARD. Yes, that works. Is it anonymous? No. Does it have juice associated with it? No! So good luck.

Tracking Software – What to Use

There are two main software packages offered at the time of this article being written – **PokerTracker 3** and **Holdem Manager**. Both are exclusive to the Windows operating environment, and both pretty much do the same thing.

Why?

If you are going to take your game seriously you need to document, categorize, and break down every single thing you do every single time you play a hand in online poker. You can track yourself and you can track your opponents. It's "legal" with the poker rooms and good players are doing it, so you should be too. There are two main thrusts why you should be tracking:

- 1) So you can see how you are doing (win/loss), analyze your stats, analyze your opponents, etc etc
- 2) So you can have a HUD up on the table as you play that gives you stats on your opponents to help you make decisions.

The HUD is the biggest key to multitabling. It helps you keep notes, lets you see real-time stats on your villains, and gives you key playing patterns in certain situations with your opponents.

Which One?

Both pretty much do the same thing. At the time of this article neither program is 100% complete and operational. PokerTracker 3 has an amazing set of stats, the ability to run custom statistical reports, and a huge online community supporting the software. What PokerTracker 3 doesn't have is a fully functional HUD – it will crash, be inaccurate, and not show your stats at regular times during your poker sessions. Holdem Manager has a lot of stats, all the bells and whistles that PT3 has, as well as boasts a fully functioning HUD. The negative is that there is absolutely no support for Tournament and SNG play with Holdem Manager (there will be in a future update).

What this means for the cash game player is that Holdem Manager is the program to buy. It offers two tiers of pricing – one for a "low stakes version" which I think is \$59 and a fully featured one for \$79. Both are well worth your investment and you can always upgrade from the small to the full edition at any time for only the difference in price. The key is that this program has the working HUD. That's critical in using this type of software.

How do I figure out what all these stats mean and how to use them?

Now it's time for you to do some research on your own to figure it out. Guides longer than this one address this very topic, and you'd be doing well for yourself to start at CardsChat.com and the 2+2 forums where it's been documented many times over.

Communities

I've referenced two communities of poker players already – CardsChat.com and the 2+2 forums.

Links:

Cards Chat: <http://www.cardschat.com>

2+2 Forums: <http://forumserver.twoplustwo.com/>

It's critical that you are a part of at least one of these forums immediately and get to know the regular users. Here are the great things about both forums:

Cards Chat

- Friendliest Poker community on the internet
- Very supportive mod and management staff
- Exclusive freerolls and "added money" tournaments for members
- Free membership
- Great community for players in the 10nl-50nl range for FR Cash Game Play
- Fun website events and meet-ups

Two Plus Two Forums

- One of the largest online poker communities
- Very wide range of poker players here, from SSNL (small stakes no limit) to high stakes 6max players
- Free Membership

The bad news for the 2+2 forums is that it's littered with snout nosed elitist types that constantly degrade each other in order to make themselves look good (think 7th grade mentality). If you can filter yourself through all that, there's some brilliant posts and members there.

Clearly, if you are only going to pick one, I highly suggest Cardschat.com – it's a great place with friendly people and good information. The regs there are highly informed solid poker players and even regulars out there have a lot to learn from some of the talent that regularly populates the threads there.

There are other forums that do not offer Free Membership, like the ones at Stoxpoker.com , so you are on your own to explore those options. I have heard the ones at Stox are solid and populated by the same instructors you find taping their training videos. It seems on the surface to be worth a look if you are a serious 6max player.

Picking the right game

There is limit holdem poker, no limit texas holdem, pot limit Omaha, etc etc. Since you are probably like 90% of the rest of the poker population chances are you are playing No Limit Texas Holdem. Now from there we need to divide you into two classes – 6max and Full Ring (9 players). It's not to say one is mutually exclusive to the other – a lot of good players go between both. However, it's my research that suggests that the progression eventually moves cash game players to the 6max setting once they get to high takes (200nl +).

Regardless, the best place to start for a beginner to the cash game world is full ring because the degree of difficulty is lower and the game moves slower. Although many sites offer 5nl and 10nl stakes (10nl = \$0.05/\$0.10 blinds) I definitely suggest starting off at 25nl. The players aren't very good, but the stakes are to the point where people aren't playing blindingly stupid because they could care less (due to the stakes being so low). It's a nice starting point ... and to properly play at this level you'll need to have a minimum of 20 buyins (\$500). Yes, \$500. What's that, you don't have \$500? Then you have a choice – grind it at 10nl (with \$200 in the account) or wait until you do have the right amount of money to be playing at the level.

Okay – so you have the right bankroll, you know the game you want to play ... now it's a matter of what table to pick. On FullTilt this should be very easy – just open up 18 tables, have your software program capture hands for about 15 minutes, and pick the tables with the highest VPIP percentage (discounting of course tables that have 3 or more shortstackers). On Pokerstars you cannot datamine the way you can on FullTilt (a plus for FullTilt actually) but you can sort the tables by the average number of people per flop. The higher the VPIP the BETTER and also make sure the average pot is at least \$3 to \$4 for the 25nl level and that the number of shortstackers (people that buy in for less than half of the max buyin) is no more than 3 (or really 2 if you can help it!) in a full ring game.

From there, it's up to you to win. There are so many strategy sites, articles, posts, and books out there so go out there and find some that help your game.

Strategy resources

Between the two free poker forums that I listed before in the community section, you will find plenty of free strategy resources. If you're a book worm, I highly recommend the recently released *Harrington on Cash Games Volumes 1 & 2* which are chalk full of good strategy and examples of play.

At Cardschat, there is a specific section for Poker Strategies here :

<http://www.cardschat.com/f11/>

Also, one of Cardschat's best players (who started out at microstakes and has worked himself up to the middle level stakes) ChuckTs wrote a wonderful strategy guide to playing microstakes (50nl and below) which is highly recommended to read:

<http://www.cardschat.com/f11/10k-post-micro-stakes-full-ring-guide-long-112835/>

Another great link at Cardschat is their Hand Analysis (HA) section where you can post a hand and users will break down the play and point out good points and mistakes to help you understand higher level poker thinking (or just another perspective).

<http://www.cardschat.com/f50/>

Finally there was someone who put together the mother of all links to the 2+2 archives ... I have found that these links are extremely valuable and well worth the read. There are a LOT of posts here but they go from "noob" type of information (lingo & abbreviations) to complicated poker theory.

<http://www.pr0crast.com/2+2.NL.Anthology.v1.htm>

Right now the craze is all about online poker universities. For 6max cash game poker, the best place going is StoxPoker.com ... I have been very impressed with their videos as well as their forums. Cardrunners.com and DuecesCracked.com also appear to be legit poker education resources (for a fee) that have had positive feedback.

When To Move Up / When to Move Down

First, don't be like me. I deposited \$240 and jumped into the 10nl games, got bored, and with the same exact bankroll moved to 25nl. I was under 10 buyins! I still don't know what I was thinking. We've already gone over that if you are starting out cash game play, you really should start at 10nl (if you are a penny pincher), 25nl (modest bankroll of about \$500), or 50nl (you have the money, you don't have the experience).

So you've been playing and you need to know "gee I'm getting killed should I move down" or "I am CRUSHING these guys I think it's time I move up" ... there are two factors I really think you should consider:

- 1) **Time.** Let's say you play 50,000 hands in 2 days (impossible, but for the sake of the example) and make the bankroll to move up. But let's face it ... you've only played at the level for 2 days. Did you face a good sample size of the total players at this level on the site? Probably not! You really should give yourself the right amount of time at a level to be successful long term. This is a debatable point that I am making here, but I think you shouldn't rush yourself to a new level just because you're on a hot streak.
- 2) **Bankroll.** I've heard anything from 20 buyins to 50 buyins is the threshold for moving up in stakes. I would agree that 20 is a nice minimum number before considering moving up in stakes. 25 is better, and 30 is best. 35 might be overkill but if you have no confidence or are prone to huge swings (LAGs, etc) it's best to give yourself a buffer in bankroll so you don't freakout and go on tilt if you drop 4 or 5 buyins right away.

I would drop down back to a previous level if:

50nl: Drop 5 buyins. Only have 20 buyins for 50nl in the bankroll, time to move back to 25nl

100nl: Drop 5 buyins. Only have 25 buyins for 100nl in the bankroll, time to move back to 50nl

Dealing with Tilt and a Downswing

As some of you know I went through a really rough 12,000 hand stretch where I couldn't win. I was barely breaking even or losing and every time I took 2 steps forward, I was taking 2 steps back. In the same session I was seeing AA get cracked by QQ all in preflop, and then my KK all in preflop would be up against AA and lose. It's the kind of stuff that mentally destroys a poker player.

I never thought I would be subject to tilt like I found out I really am. Then I thought about myself ... when I play sports (I'm a hockey player) am I the level headed presence on the ice? No. I'm the guy that gets pissed off and plays more with his heart than with his abilities. This trait has definitely endeared me to my coaches and teammates, but it's the wrong way to be when playing poker. You have to be level headed, have to look at things from an analytical point of view, and understand why things happen in certain situations and see if you simply came out on the wrong side of the odds OR if you played poorly.

When you are on tilt the best thing you can do is NOT PLAY. Take a break. Leave. Go play sports, go work out, go read a book, go visit a friend. Just get yourself the hell away from the computer/live poker room. After that time, it's time to go back to the books and study. Watch videos of good play, read articles, study the Hand Analysis threads ... and get yourself back into a studious poker mindset.

In the strategy links from 2+2 mentioned above there are some fantastic links that demonstrate why downswings happen even if you are a winning player. In addition players from Cardschat shared their win graphs over the course of the last 6 months during my downswing and it showed at damn near the same time they all hit a breakeven or loss streak.

So it's not a matter of IF you hit a downswing or IF you go on tilt. You will. That's how it goes. It's how you recover from it and handle it (grow that thick skin NOW) that will define you as a poker player.

As a final note, if you really want to learn more about tilt and the true nature of the statistical swings you will see as a poker player, I highly suggest the book *The Poker Mindset*. Although somewhat redundant in parts, the gist of the material in the book should benefit you and your ability to control tilt in the future.

Video Capture

So you've just put in a session and you want to look back and what you've done.

Video Capture

For the Windows PCs out there, unfortunately there is one program that really is reliable to record audio and video from the desktop – Camtasia Studio. It's not cheap but worth the cost if you plan to record your sessions to re-watch them or even share them with other players so they can break down your play.

Using camtasia, there's a great tutorial here:

<http://www.cardschat.com/f53/guide-how-make-video-lots-pictures-86301/>

In addition, I wrote a guide on how to compress the video properly. I was seeing people compress 50 minute videos into 1.5GB files which was ridiculous, and you should be able to get a 50 minute video of you 4tabling down to no more than 350mb. You can read it here:

<http://www.cardschat.com/f53/super-duper-video-compression-tutorial-106501/>

Being able to watch what you've done is a key asset in breaking down your game and seeing flaws that you need to fix. In addition you will be able to share this video with your poker acquaintances that you meet on forums who will be willing to watch the video and breakdown your game for you.

On top of this, many players arrange what is called "Sweat Sessions" where a player will watch you play and comment as you go. This is best accomplished by using:

1. Skype. Use this for chat and for connecting computer-to-computer voice chat. The audio clarity with Skype is stunning and its free.
2. Mikogo plugin for Skype. Use this for allowing someone to watch your screen on your computer (or vice versa). It has minimal lag time associated with it and runs smoothly. Again it's free so you can't beat that.

Blogging

A lot of poker players have blogs and write down their thoughts about the game and often recap sessions they play and post hands. The reasoning they do this is obviously specific to each individual player. There are good benefits for you to keep your own poker blog:

1. You can keep track of your progress mentally as a poker player and look back and see when times were good (if they are bad now) or when times were tough (if they are good now). This can provide very important perspective to maintain your growth.
2. The internet poker community can read your blog and offer you advise on tough hands, your poker mental state, and other concerns. This helps tremendously if you have a tough session and realize that you're not all alone out there on the internet.
3. You could actually make money. Some people have turned their blogs into regular gigs with places like Bluff Magazine, while others have imported Google Ads and see a modest check come in every few months.

The easiest way to set up a blog is through Google/Blogger (Google owns Blogger). The set up is totally free and they have a few templates to choose from that you should like. If you are versed in HTML you will be able to totally customize the format and look of your blog to your heart's desire. If you want to take it one step further and have your own domain name (i.e. www.icemonkey9.com) the setup and cost is easy and cheap. Through the blogger software administration panel there is an option to buy your own domain name for only \$10/year. From there you are set and it usually takes 24 hours to complete and install (self setup, you don't have to do much).

Final Thoughts

Hopefully this guide can be a great blueprint of *How To Be A Cash Game Player*. There are plenty of strategy resources available to you to make sure you can become a successful player. This guide should really get you going in terms of what the learning curve is like. This isn't a huge long resource, it's meant to be concise and to the point and basically point you in the right directions to get yourself started.

Good luck and good poker!

Icemonkey9