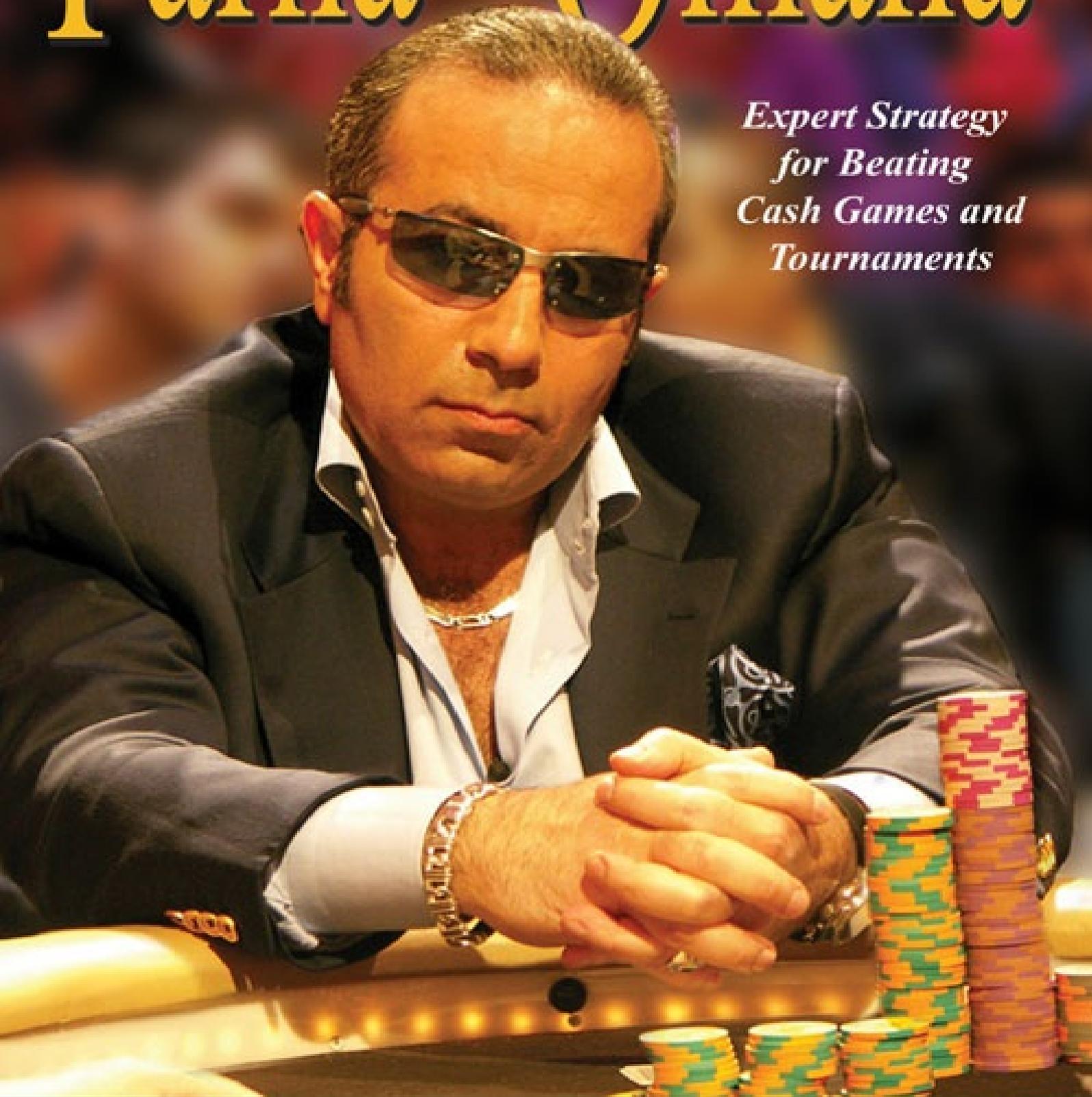


# Farha on Omaha

*Expert Strategy  
for Beating  
Cash Games and  
Tournaments*



**S A M ♣ F A R H A**

with Storms Reback

# Farha on Omaha

*Expert Strategy for Beating  
Cash Games and Tournaments*

by Sam Farha with Storms Reback







*To my family, who gave me a love of life. And to the memory of my parents, who gave me the will to succeed.*

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# Foreword by Lyle Berman

If you want to learn how to play winning Omaha poker, you'd be foolish not to start with what will surely be known as the definitive book on the subject, *Farha on Omaha*. Throughout its pages renowned poker professional Sam Farha shares with you many of the secrets that have made him one of the world's best Omaha players.

I can't emphasize enough what a great player Sammy is. He plays Omaha at the highest level with an expertise very few, if any, other poker pros ever approach. What's his secret? He puts extreme pressure on his opponents at all times. It's not unusual to see him raise the pot every hand in a single round. Although his style creates more volatility than most players are used to, at the end of the session Sammy is usually the one holding all the chips.

When we play in the Big Game, all the players, including me, will refuse to play with Sammy if Omaha is the only game on the board. The only way we'll play Omaha against him is if we throw at least two or three other games into the mix. Otherwise, we're giving Sammy too big of an edge. If we only played Omaha, he might as well be holding the stone nuts every single hand.

If you've never played Omaha before, this book will provide you with an excellent introduction to the game, and if you're a longtime player looking to take your game to the next level, then look no further. You have found the perfect book, one the poker world has been anticipating for a very long time, as it reveals many things about the game no one has ever put into print.

What makes Sammy's tips so meaningful is that they're based on real hands he's played against the world's best players. If you absorb even half of the advice he shares with you in this book, you'll have all the tools you need to be a winning player.

—Lyle Berman

Chairman of the Board for the World Poker Tour

Three-time World Series of Poker bracelet winner

Author of *I'm All In: Lyle Berman and the Birth of the World Poker Tour*

# Introduction

While millions of beginning poker players have fallen in love with Texas hold'em in the last five years, most of the top professionals will tell you that Omaha is the more exciting and sophisticated variation of poker. With four starting cards instead of just two as in hold'em, most hands in Omaha seem playable and, if you play the game the way I do, these hands will not only be playable but profitable as well.

There are many false assumptions about Omaha, and one of the biggest is that you can't bluff, that the best hand is going to win the pot every time. Well, that's simply not true.

While playing pot-limit Omaha in a cash game at the Golden Nugget in 2005, I made a pot-sized raise before the flop. I am an aggressive player. When I play a hand, I like to come in for a raise. Not only does this get more money in the pot, but it's also an excellent way to obtain information. When one of the tighter players at the table reraised me, I knew that could only mean one thing: he had a pair of aces in his hand. When I know what my opponent has but he doesn't know what I have, that gives me a big edge. I called the raise, knowing that if I caught a good flop I could break my opponent.

His raise forced everyone to fold except for me, so we were heads-up when the flop came 9-5-2 with two spades. It completely missed me. I didn't even have a pair or any sort of draw. First to act, I checked.

My opponent checked behind me, which was suspicious. Nine times out of ten, the pre-flop raiser will bet on the flop. When a player doesn't bet his hand, he's giving away information about his cards. That's one of the main ways I read my opponents, the way they make their bets. His check confirmed my belief that he had aces.

Another spade fell on the turn. Three spades were now on the board, making a flush possible, and I knew he didn't have it because if he had a flush draw he would have bet the flop. His check on the flop was a sign of weakness, and I intended to take advantage of it.

Representing a flush, I led out for \$4,000. I thought that would be enough to make my opponent fold. It wasn't. He raised me \$8,000 more. This raise was as strange as his check on the flop. I knew he didn't have the flush, just as I knew he only had aces. If he had the nut flush draw, he would have bet the flop, but he hadn't. Thinking through the way he had played his hand, I decided that he had the "dry ace," that one of his aces was a spade, but he didn't have another spade to go with it. He was trying to represent having made the nut flush, but I knew he was bluffing.

Most players would have folded their hands in this situation because, despite knowing what my opponent had, I was still in a very bad spot. I didn't have a flush either—or even a straight draw for that matter—and he had more money on the table than I did. I only had \$12,000 in front of me. I could only reraise him \$4,000 more, and I didn't think he was going to muck his hand for \$4,000. There was no way.

The reason I didn't give up on this hand is that I don't play the cards. I play the player. I knew I could take this pot away from my opponent. All I had to do was think

of an act.

After a few minutes, I looked at him and said, “You’re so lucky it’s unbelievable. I flopped top set and gave you a free card and then you hit your flush on me. What the hell am I going to do? I flopped top set. I have to go all in or muck my hand, right?”

I talked to him like this for about five minutes, putting it in his head that I had a set but was scared of the flush even though I knew he didn’t have a flush. On and on I went while the whole table watched and listened. It was a performance worthy of an Oscar.

Finally I said, “Maybe you have the flush, but I have top set. I’ve got some outs. I have to reraise you.”

I pushed my last \$4,000 into the center of the table, and you know what he did? He mucked his hand! He shook his head and said, “You win, Sammy,” and threw his cards away.

There were some very good players sitting at that table, and I wanted them all to know that I could bluff any of them at any time.

“I never show my hand,” I said to them, “but I’ve got to show you guys this one.”

I turned over my cards, showing them that I had won the pot with absolutely nothing, no pair, not even a draw.

\* \* \*

In the ebbs and flows of poker history there has always been one variation of the game that is more beloved than all the others. When Johnny Moss took several million dollars off Nick “the Greek” Dandalos in Benny Binion’s Horseshoe casino in 1951, the two men played a variety of games but the most popular—at their table as well as in the poker-playing community at large—was five-card stud. Over the course of the next several decades seven-card stud supplanted the five-card version as the game of choice among those who played poker for a living. Then in 1963 Corky McCorquodale introduced Texas hold’em to Las Vegas’s California Club, and from there the game spread like wildfire to the most popular poker rooms in the city: the Golden Nugget, the Stardust, and the Dunes. Limit hold’em reached the height of its popularity in the 1980s just about the time Omaha was arriving on the scene.

Limit Omaha was an immediate hit with professional poker players when it first appeared in Las Vegas casinos in 1982. By the mid-1980s it could be found just about everywhere poker was played. In the two-plus decades that have since passed, the game has become a fixture in casinos all over the world as well as in cyberspace. It is by far the most popular poker game in Europe, and yet in America it continues to play second fiddle to Texas hold’em. American players love hold’em because it’s simple to learn and easy to follow on television.

Many of these players who were first introduced to poker watching hold’em on television have since become students of the game, reading as many of the countless hold’em strategy books that are on the market as they can digest. As these “fish” have grown increasingly less fishy, the average game of hold’em found in a casino is getting harder and harder to beat. In search of new money-making opportunities, many of these players have started to seek other types of poker to play. The most logical choice for such players is Omaha, hold’em’s close cousin.

The game has long enjoyed a reputation for attracting players who love to gamble.

Because those unfamiliar with it are unable to distinguish good starting hands from bad ones, it's not uncommon to see five or six players paying to see a flop, creating massive pots and plenty of action. For this reason, some players started calling Omaha "the action game" when it was first introduced into Las Vegas casinos in the 1980s; others called it "the game of the future." Well, the future is now.

Featured in every major casino and online card room in the world, Omaha is currently enjoying a renaissance. Just as Texas hold'em replaced seven-card stud as the most popular variation of poker in the world, I believe Omaha will be supplanting hold'em in the very near future.

\* \* \*

I started playing poker in the late 1980s in small home games in Houston. In those days I played all kinds of crazy games, games like King and Little, which is basically five-card draw with kings and the smallest card in your hand wild, and double Omaha, which is Omaha played with two different boards. Playing so many different variations of poker helped me to develop my poker mind. Although Omaha remains my best game, I can play all the other forms of poker, games like stud or badugi or razz, equally well. Every poker game is basically the same. You need to know what the best hand is and what the worst is, and that's about it.

I learned how to play Omaha by playing the limit version for very small stakes. I never made much money playing limit, but that's still the best way to learn how to play the game. You have to climb a ladder step by step. Only after I had mastered the basics and gained some confidence did I start playing pot-limit.

The first time I played Omaha in a casino was in 1990 at Binion's Horseshoe in Las Vegas. I was staying at the Golden Nugget, and I had about \$2,000 in my pocket when I first arrived. I had never played blackjack before but decided to play with a friend of mine. Big mistake. In about five minutes I lost \$1,500.

"Let's find a poker room," I told my friend. "Take me to the Horseshoe."

We walked across the street to Binion's.

"Do you want to go in with me?" I asked my friend. "\$500 each and we'll split the winnings?"

"Yeah, sure."

I played \$5/\$10 pot-limit Omaha and won \$6,000.

"That's good enough for me," my friend said. "Cut me out. I'm falling asleep."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's fine. Good luck to you. I hope you win more."

I gave him half of what I'd won, and then sat down to play some more. I ended up winning \$12,000.

I was hooked.

I started coming to Las Vegas more and more after that, but it wasn't like it is today where every casino has its own poker room and they're all packed with amateurs looking to have a good time. There were very few card rooms in Las Vegas back then, and no one played poker in the casinos for entertainment. If you were looking to play for entertainment, you played at home with your friends. For those who played in the casinos poker was their job, and for me it was no different. I wanted to make a living playing the game, and I thought playing Omaha gave me the best chance to do that

because it's an action game. There's more money in Omaha than in any other poker game.

I never liked playing Texas hold'em all that much. In those days you couldn't make \$500 a day playing hold'em. All the games were so small and the players were extremely tight. The old pros just sat there all day waiting for pocket aces or kings. That's not my style. There wasn't enough action for me playing hold'em so I concentrated on Omaha. It was the perfect game for me. There were so many bad players and so much action. Bad players love this game because there's so much money involved. The pots get so big it's worth it for them to chase. In a typical game you can usually count on getting five-way action so if you call \$100 before the flop and you hit your hand, you stand to win at least \$400 and perhaps a lot more if someone chases you all the way.

I started making a living playing pot-limit Omaha right away, and I managed myself well. I slowly built up my bankroll and never risked more than a certain percentage of it during any given session. To survive as a professional poker player, you have to have great money management. If you don't, one bad run could break you. The money management skills I learned out of necessity 20 years ago are still ingrained in my head. Just the other night, I flopped a big "wrap," the strongest draw in Omaha. If this hand had occurred earlier in the evening, I would have shoved all my money into the pot, knowing I was favored to win, but it was the last hand of the night, and I didn't want to risk losing what I had fought so hard to win over the course of the session. So I mucked my cards and went home a happy winner.

What helped me become a consistent winner when I was first starting to play professionally was the image I portrayed at the table. I would dress nicely and I would play a lot of hands and I would play them aggressively, and that made people think I had a lot of money and that I didn't know how to play. They thought I was a tourist. They used to laugh at me. They used to say, "Sammy is a producer. Sammy is an Arab sheik." Whenever I sat down at a table, there would be a long list of people who wanted to sit at my table. Nobody knew I only had \$4,000 in my pocket. They all thought I was an oil tycoon who was going to make them rich. They eagerly waited to play against me, and I would stay at that table until I had broken every last one of them.

After six years focusing almost entirely on Omaha, I grew quite proficient at the game, good enough to win my first World Series of Poker bracelet.

Occasionally some other player would say to me, "Sammy, you need to start playing other games."

"Why? If I've got you playing my game, why do I need to learn some other game?" And then I would laugh. "This game's been really good to me."

\* \* \*

Throughout this book I'm going to be describing many different situations you'll be facing at the tables, and from time to time I will advise you to muck your cards because "it's not worth it to continue." What I mean by this is that you don't have the correct "pot odds," the amount of money in the pot versus the amount of money it will cost you to call, to continue in the hand.

Every decision you have to make at a poker table is influenced by pot odds. When

your pot odds are low (the size of the bet you face is high compared to the size of the pot), you are going to need a very strong hand to call. If your pot odds are high (the size of the bet you face is small compared to the size of the pot) you don't need as strong of a hand. For example, if there's \$1,000 in the pot and your opponent bets his last \$100 on the flop, you're getting 10-1 pot odds so you should call with any hand that gives you better than a 10-1 chance of winning the pot.

To determine the odds of making your hand, you first need to figure out what the ratio of "outs" (the number of cards in the deck that will make your hand) you have is compared to the number of cards left in the deck that won't make your hand. If you have the nut flush draw with one card to come, you have nine outs. Of the 52 cards in the deck, 44 of them are unknown to you (you know the four cards in your hand as well as the four on the board). Of these 44 cards, 35 of them won't help you make your flush so the odds of you making your hand are 35-9 or a little under 4-1.

With two cards to come the odds of making certain hands get a bit more complicated. Because I like to keep my mind free to concentrate on other aspects of the situation, mostly my opponent's behavior, I have memorized the odds of making my hand in certain situations that frequently occur on the flop in Omaha. I suggest you do the same. A set is roughly a 1.9-1 favorite over a hand containing an overpair and a flush draw as well as a hand containing an overpair and an open-ended straight draw. A set is roughly a 1.4-1 favorite over a wrap that has 13 outs as well as a hand containing an open-ended straight draw and a flush draw. A set versus a wrap that has 17 outs or a hand containing a wrap that has 13 outs and a flush draw is about a coin flip. A set is roughly a 1-1.2 underdog to a wrap that has 20 outs as well as a hand containing a wrap with 17 outs and a flush draw. And a set is a 1-1.4 underdog to a hand containing a wrap with 20 outs and a flush draw.

Once you figure out the odds of making your hand, you need to compare that to the money odds the pot is offering. If the odds of you making your flush on the turn are 4-1, the pot needs to be at least four times the size of the bet you're facing. If your opponent bets \$50, there should be at least \$200 in the pot to make calling the correct play. If there were only \$150 in the pot, you would only be getting 3-1 on your money. If you called in this situation, you would be making a mistake. That's what I mean whenever I say, "It's not worth it to continue." I am explaining this important concept here so that I don't have to do it on every single hand I discuss throughout the book. This way I can spend more time focusing on the other important factors that help me make my decisions at the tables: my position, the size of my chip stack, the size of my opponent's chip stack, my opponent's demeanor, the chances that he might be bluffing, etc. If you don't understand the basic math involved in the game, none of this will matter. For those interested in learning more about the odds of certain hands winning in specific situations, I recommend you use the Omaha poker calculator at *CardPlayer* magazine's website: [www.cardplayer.com/poker\\_odds/omaha](http://www.cardplayer.com/poker_odds/omaha).

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Unlike the authors of most poker strategy books who offer one way to play the game—theirs!—throughout this book I am going to be making references to two different styles of playing Omaha, the "right way" and "my way." The right way involves being patient, waiting for great starting cards, folding when you know you're beat, and

raising only when you're dead certain you've got the best of it. From time to time I will also refer to Rocks, super tight players who, by sticking to this formula, can achieve moderate success at the game. Rocks play the right way hoping to keep themselves well supplied with hot dogs and beer. I, however, prefer lobster and champagne.

My way of playing Omaha revolves around one concept, and that is making as much money as possible even in situations where the chances of doing so look damn near impossible. While Rocks play by the book, I play as if I've never read a strategy book in my life, and the truth is I really haven't. The problem I have with the way Rocks play is that they are predictable, and in poker being predictable isn't good. Anytime a Rock comes over the top of me I know exactly what he has. It's like reading an open book. The only way these types of players ever get paid when they make a hand is if there's a sucker at the table.

My strategy is completely different. While Rocks only play good starting cards, I try not to limit myself in this way. I'll take my chances before the flop because I know that in Omaha the prettiest cards in the world often turn into junk once the flop gets dealt. More important to me than playing good starting cards are playing cards that have the best chance of connecting with the flop. 5-4-3-2 is not a great starting hand in Omaha, but if five or six players call a raise before the flop and I get that hand on the button, I'll call, knowing that most of my opponents will be holding big cards and that there's a better than average chance the flop will bring small cards. If I do catch a good flop and win the hand, it looks like luck, which fools my opponents into thinking that I'll play any four cards that are dealt to me. Many of them overlook the fact that my call before the flop was a calculated decision based on my reasoning about the sort of cards they held in their hands and the sort of cards that would probably come on the flop.

Playing like this, I make it look like I'm getting lucky on every hand. By giving a lot of action, I get a lot of action. By being aggressive and showing some bluffs, I get called more than most players. Some consider me "reckless," but I prefer to think of myself as being "unpredictable." This style has proven to be very effective for me. Every time I have a hand, I get paid off whether it's from a sucker or a pro. Against a sucker, I'll show him the best hand at the end. Against a pro, I can get away with playing hands in a trickier fashion because he'll have no idea where he's at against me.

A word of warning: if you're new to Omaha, you can't start out playing my way and expect to be a big winner every session you play. You have to learn how to play the game the right way first. You have to build your confidence. You have to learn how to read other players. You have to always know where you're at in a hand. You have to know when to lay it down when you're beat and when to raise when you're getting the best of it. These abilities cannot be learned overnight. They take time to develop. But if you're dedicated to learning how to play the game, you will eventually acquire these skills, and when you do you can start being the aggressor at whatever table you choose to sit at. This to me is the ideal way to play poker because when you're aggressive and someone comes over the top of you then you will know exactly what he has, but he will never know what you have. You will forever remain a mystery to him.

## From Texas (Hold'em) to Omaha

Right now Texas hold'em is the most popular poker game on the planet, but I don't think its reign is going to last much longer. Since the start of the millennium, millions of new players have been introduced to poker by watching no-limit hold'em tournaments on TV. Out of all the variations of poker, no-limit hold'em is the one best suited for television. It's easy to learn and simple to follow. But you can only play so much hold'em. Ask any professional. As soon as all these new poker players start getting bored with hold'em, they're going to want to learn a more sophisticated game, and that, by my estimation, is Omaha.

In the most popular form of hold'em (no-limit) players have a very powerful move at their disposal. At any point during a hand they can move "all in," shoving all their chips into the pot and forcing their opponents to make the difficult decision whether or not to call. While this move makes for exciting television, it's generally a bad play. Going all in takes away the play in a hand. A player who moves all in on the flop can't do anything after that, and if he gets called, the outcome is often based on pure luck. Instead of trying to outplay his opponents on later streets, he is putting his fate in the hands of the poker gods. But in poker you never want to count on your luck. You want to count on your skill. If you believe you're an underdog in a hand, you want to leave yourself with enough chips so you can bluff at the end if the board changes. Or if you believe you have the best hand, you want to be able to play it all the way to the river so that you can get paid off on every street along the way. In the most demanding form of Omaha (pot-limit) a player can only bet the size of the pot so you see much more sophisticated plays than you do in hold'em, making Omaha a truer test of one's poker skills.

Any poker player who has even the slightest grasp of how to play hold'em can easily make the transition to playing Omaha. After all, the two games share an almost identical structure. In both games players must post a small and big blind during each round of play, and they play off the same five community cards on the board. The main difference between the two games is that in hold'em players are dealt two starting cards while in Omaha they receive four, two of which must be used in conjunction with three cards on the board to make the best hand.

While seemingly small, this little difference has serious consequences as four hole cards create six two-card combinations, which makes nearly all starting hands—at least to amateurs—seem like potential winners. In hold'em, most pots are contested by two or three players at most; in Omaha, it is not unusual for five or six players to see a flop, creating pots far bigger than those typically found in hold'em. And that's just in the limit version of the game. In the two most popular forms of Omaha—pot-limit and high-low eight-or-better, also known as Omaha/8, where half the pot goes to the player holding the best high hand and the other half goes to the player with the best low—the pots are even bigger, which is all the encouragement you should need if you're a hold'em player who is tired of playing against players who fold every hand before the

flop unless they have big pairs or A-K.

\* \* \*

Those making the transition from hold'em to Omaha all seem to stumble over the same obstacles while learning the new game. Something as simple and straightforward as reading the board and determining what the best hand is suddenly becomes a daunting challenge. Players forget that they must play *two and only two* of the four cards they're holding. Reverting to the hold'em mindset, they mistakenly believe they can play one card from their hands along with four from the board. I've seen a lot of hold'em players raise and reraise as if they've made the nut flush when all they have in their hands is the ace of that suit.

I've also seen players get confused when there's two pair on the board and they have one card that matches that two pair. For example, there are two 7s and two 8s on the board, and they have an 8 in their hand. They think they've made a full house. In hold'em they would have a full house; in Omaha all they have is an expensive headache.

One time I got involved in a big hand in a cash game, and this player who was obviously new to the game shoved about \$20,000 into the pot on the river. I called with top full house, and he said, "I have a straight flush."

I stared at the board and didn't see any combination of cards that would make a straight flush possible. "Straight flush?" I said. "Really? Am I blind? Show me."

"Here, look," he said, fanning his cards out so I could see them.

He did in fact have a straight flush ... if he were allowed to play all four of the cards in his hand along with only one card from the board.

That was a \$30,000 mistake on his part.

Remarkably, I've seen a lot of players lose money this way, even at the higher limits. Not that I'm complaining. As a matter of fact, that's the best way to make money when you first start playing Omaha. Find a table that's got one or two of these hold'em players at it, sit down, and wait for them to make a big mistake because it's going to happen sooner or later. Just make sure it doesn't happen to you.

\* \* \*

To succeed at Omaha, a player hoping to make the transition from hold'em must adopt a completely different mindset. Hand values change significantly.

In hold'em the strength of your starting cards is pivotal. The best hand before the flop will quite often still be the best hand on the river. In Omaha the strength of your starting cards can't fully be measured until the flop comes, as the ultimate value of those cards depends on how they match up with the board. In hold'em the flop usually doesn't hit anybody. In Omaha it *always* hits somebody.

Because the flop is so important in Omaha, it changes the value of certain starting hands. In hold'em pocket aces is the very best hand you can have before the flop. It's a hand well worth risking all of your money on, and that's exactly how most players choose to play the hand. In Omaha, having a pair of aces makes your hand very strong, but the relative strength of the hand is not quite as great as it is in hold'em. In hold'em pocket kings is the second-best starting hand and many players play it exactly as they do aces, but in Omaha a pair of kings is significantly less valuable than a pair of aces.

After kings, the difference in the relative strength of certain hands becomes increasingly pronounced. A pair of queens is generally viewed as the third best hand in hold'em. In Omaha queens are fairly worthless unless they connect with the flop. From jacks on down, the disparity grows even more prominent. While small pocket pairs are playable in hold'em—before the flop they're slightly favored over a hand as strong as A-K—in Omaha they have almost no value unless you make a set on the flop.

Unlike hold'em, Omaha is a drawing game. A typical flop will give every player involved in the hand some sort of draw, which means that, no matter how well the flop hits you, you shouldn't think of your hand as being "made" until after the river card has been dealt. Even a hand as strong as a set should be considered a draw until it improves to a full house, a fact that those who cut their teeth playing hold'em can never quite believe. Thanks to backdoor draws, which require the board to finish with two running cards, even hands with no outs on the flop can still win the pot.

Backdoors are far more common in Omaha than they are in hold'em due to the fact that each player gets dealt four starting cards. Having four cards also affects the strength of straight draws and flush draws. In hold'em the best straight draw you can have is an open-ender, which gives you eights outs. But in Omaha you can have a wrap, which can give you as many as twenty outs. A lot of players coming from hold'em don't understand how important wraps are, and that's a huge disadvantage. In Omaha a wrap combined with a flush draw is even stronger than a set.

Beginning players must also be aware that the odds of hitting a flush draw in Omaha are different from the odds in hold'em. For example, let's say you're playing one hand of hold'em and one hand of Omaha and in both you go all in on the flop with the nut flush draw against a single opponent who isn't holding any cards of your suit. The "price" (the pot odds you're getting for a certain draw) is a little different. In both hands you have nine outs to make your flush, but in Omaha after subtracting the four cards in your hand and the four cards in your opponent's hand and the three cards on the flop, there's 41 cards left in the deck while in hold'em there would be 45. So the odds of making your flush in Omaha are 41-9 and in hold'em the odds are 44-9, which means you have a slightly better chance of making your flush in Omaha. It's not a major difference, but you still need to be aware of it. Every time I play aggressively in a hold'em tournament trying to make a flush I never seem to make it, whereas in Omaha they seem to hit more frequently.

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I have three pieces of advice for players looking to make the transition from hold'em to Omaha. First, always go for the nuts. Never try to make the second or third nuts against a table full of players and expect the hand to be good. It won't be. If you're on a draw, make sure you're drawing to make the best hand. You should never try to make a hand like a jack-high flush until you've gained enough experience to know when such a hand might be good enough to win the pot.

My last piece of advice to hold'em players is to never slowplay your hand in Omaha. In hold'em it's a popular strategy to slowplay strong hands, hoping an opponent will catch a card that might fool him into thinking he's got the best hand. If you flop a set in limit hold'em, it's almost obligatory to check-raise your opponents on

the turn so you can make the most money from your hand. Some hold'em players will even slowplay pocket aces before the flop, merely limping in with the hope of outplaying their opponents later on in the hand. In Omaha, very few hands, outside of quads or a straight flush, should ever be slowplayed. If you give an opponent a free card, that card will surely help him in some way, and when you end up losing the hand you will have no one but yourself to blame. Bet your hand.

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Omaha players are a completely different breed from hold'em players. The game attracts more "action" players looking to mix it up on every hand. Their presence at the table and their willingness to chase long-shot draws leads some hold'em players to believe that there's an inordinate amount of luck involved in Omaha. The refrain most often cited by hold'em players attempting to learn the game is, "Omaha is a crapshoot." Nothing could be farther from the truth. I would argue that Omaha provides a truer test of one's poker skills than any other variation of poker, including Texas hold'em.

Hold'em has become so popular because it is an easy game to learn. Omaha, on the other hand, is not an easy game to learn. It's a little too complicated for some people, and that's why they're scared to play it. They sit down at the table, and they are genuinely frightened. They don't know how to play their hands. Every time the board changes, they get terrified. They have no clue where they're at. They are completely lost. These players are the meat upon which experienced Omaha players, such as myself, happily dine.

If you want to give yourself the best chance to make money playing poker and make yourself a better all-around poker player in the process, Omaha is the game for you.

# Part I. Limit Omaha High-Only

# Basic Strategy I

If you've never played Omaha before, you're going to want to get your feet wet playing the most straightforward and (relatively) risk-free version of the game, limit high-only. After enjoying an initial surge of interest when it was first introduced into casinos in the 1980s, the popularity of limit Omaha has been on a long slow decline ever since. For every 20 tables of Omaha/8 or pot-limit at a typical online poker site, there will only be one table featuring limit high, and yet the game survives, not solely as a relic from a past era but also as a necessary stepping-stone along the path of every Omaha player's evolution.

In limit, nearly every hand results in a showdown on the river so you get to see what types of hands your opponents play. By watching the way other players play, you will learn what works and what doesn't. You'll see what sort of hands they like to play before the flop, how hard they'll chase a draw, if they like to bluff or not—all valuable information. By closely observing your opponents, you'll hone your ability to read other players, and in poker that's one of the most important abilities you can have. Interestingly, you can learn just as much from studying bad players as you can from studying good ones.

In this way limit Omaha is very similar to limit hold'em. It's the kiddie pool where you learn to splash around before venturing into the deep end. You can't get hurt too badly in a foot of water. When I played it for the first time, we were playing for dimes and quarters. That's how long ago it was. *Dimes and quarters*. Some beginning players are too impatient to start at this level. They want to jump right into the biggest game of pot-limit they can find, but the lessons they learn at the higher levels can be very damaging to their egos as well as their bankrolls. Playing pot-limit with little or no experience is like choosing to jump into the middle of the ocean with a severe nosebleed for one's first swim. The sharks are going to smell you from a mile away.

This is not to say that limit Omaha is an *easy* game. It's not. In fact, I find it more difficult than pot-limit because it requires so much patience, and I'm not a very patient player. I like to take chances, and in a limit game you simply can't do that. You have to play by the book. You have to play the "right way."

Because you bet in such small increments in a limit game, each decision you make seems fairly trivial. That's the trap that most beginning players fall into. They'll call a bet on the flop with nothing more than an inside straight draw and justify their decision by remarking how small the bet was compared to the size of the pot. They think that making a few bad calls like this isn't going to hurt them very much, but those players aren't thinking beyond their current session. Professional poker players think of poker as one long game, and over the course of a lifetime all these bad calls will eventually amount to staggering losses.

Chip Reese, one of the greatest limit players in the world, once described this disparity well. "In no-limit hold'em you can make some mistakes and come out smelling like a rose because it's no-limit," he said. "You know if you make the wrong

move at the right time and win a big giant pot, you're fine. But in all those limit games? They are a little more precision-type games where there are little decisions you make that's a difference between one bet or two bets and...those add up."

The most important thing to remember while playing limit Omaha is that you can't give your chips away because you won't get many opportunities to win them back. It's the same way in any limit game you play. You have to play like a Rock. You have to play good starting cards. You have to use your position at the table to your advantage. And you should play draws conservatively and made hands aggressively. This is the right way to play the game. And in limit poker even I play the right way.

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The first step to becoming a successful limit player is making yourself play great starting cards, in general the higher the better. In pot-limit I play all sorts of hands, but in limit I don't. For example, I'll almost always play a hand like 9-8-5-4 in pot-limit, but in limit I'll just throw it away. In pot-limit I'll play 7-6-5-4 every time. In limit I won't. Why? Because these are "gambling hands," hands that might win you a big pot once in a while but are big losers in the long run. You can get away with playing gambling hands in pot-limit because the reward often outweighs the risk, but in limit you can't. If you want to play limit the right way, you should always fold your gambling hands before the flop. In the long run you simply can't win with these cards. The better starting hands will inevitably take all the money.

Which hands should you play? I'll go into specifics in the next chapter, but the general rule is the bigger the better, and ideally they should be "suited," that is having two cards of the same suit. Being "double-suited," having two cards of one suit and two cards of another, makes a hand even stronger. The main reason you should try to avoid playing small cards is that you could make the low end of a straight and end up paying someone off who made the high end of the straight with his bigger cards. Or you could make bottom two pair—a bankroll killer in Omaha—and end up losing to top two pair. In the long run, playing little cards will cost you a lot of money.

As important as it is to play good starting cards, I value good position even more. Some believe that position is less important in Omaha than it is in hold'em, but I'm not one of those people. In fact, I think sitting in late position is the strongest advantage you can have in any form of poker. Being the last one to act gives you a huge edge over your opponents. Getting to see what everyone else at the table does gives you all the information you need when deciding how to play your hand. If everyone checks to you and you have a strong hand, you should bet, but if everyone checks to you and you only have a weak draw, you should check and take a free card.

In Omaha free cards are extremely valuable. A lot of players sitting in early position will check, hoping you'll bet so they can raise you, but if you check behind them, you can really punish them. Let's say a player in first position flops top set and checks, and it comes to you, and all you have is an inside straight draw. Check and take that free card. If you make your straight, you're going to be able to punish that player for his mistake. You can also pick up backdoor flush draws this way. If the flop completely misses you, and everyone checks to you, and you check, and a second diamond comes on the turn, and you have two diamonds in your hand, including the ace of diamonds, suddenly you have nine outs to make the best hand.

The other advantage to sitting in late position is that you can bluff at the end if everyone checks to you and you sense weakness, but the odds of you getting away with it depends on how many players are in the hand. If there are two or three players involved and you have no part of the flop, it makes no sense to bluff. One of them is going to call you. It's very hard to get away with a bluff in limit Omaha. You have to know exactly where you're at. If conditions are just right you can bluff on the river, but you can rarely get away with it on the flop.

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While your position relative to the blinds is very important, you also need to be aware of your position relative to the most aggressive player at the table. I am usually the most aggressive player at any table I sit at so let's say you choose to sit at the same table as me, and you have a choice of two different seats. Do you want to sit on Sammy's right or on Sammy's left?

If you choose to sit on Sammy's left, you have the advantage of seeing how he's going to act before deciding how to play your hand. Because he's going to be raising nearly every hand, you're going to need to play much better before the flop, only playing great starting cards. What you really want to avoid doing is calling his raises with mediocre hands because if someone reraises him, you are put in the awkward position of having to decide whether to fold your hand after calling two bets (a terrible play) or calling and getting stuck in the middle of a raising war with a bad hand (potentially much worse). When you're sitting on Sammy's left, you need to play only the best starting hands and take full advantage of having position against him on the flop. You should punish him when the flop helps you and take a free card when it doesn't.

I know a lot of players like to sit on my left for these very reasons, but if I were them, I would prefer to sit on my right. Having Sammy on your left will force you to play great starting cards because you know you're going to get raised every time. The worst thing you can do in this situation is limp in with a bad hand and then fold to his raise. A lot of players will do this against me. They limp in for \$100, I raise it, and they fold. "Why would you call \$100?" I tell them. "Save your \$100 next time. You know I'm going to raise every time." When you have an aggressive player like me sitting at the table, you should always expect to get raised. If you're not going to call the raise, don't limp in.

The other advantage to sitting on Sammy's right is that it will help you spot the traps other players will be trying to set for him. Let's say you have a playable hand in middle position and it's been checked to you. You should check and let Sammy bet and if it's only two bets to play when it comes back around to you, then you can call and see a flop. But if one of the players in early position checked with the intention of check-raising, you'll be able to see him do it, and you can muck your hand without having to put in a single bet. Sitting on Sammy's right, you can also be the one who does the trapping. You can check in early position with a great hand, let someone else bet, let Sammy raise, and then you can reraise when it gets back to you.

I am less concerned about Rocks, but I do like having them on my left. Rocks muck a lot of hands before the flop, which means if one of them is sitting on my immediate left I'll often be getting the button twice, which is a big advantage.