

Some Bad Blackjack Plays

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After 34 years of playing blackjack, I can truly say I have “seen it all”. For example, last month I watched in horror as a player started to double down on a 10, 4 (14). The other players (myself included) thought the player didn’t understand what he was holding so we tried to explain that doubling down on a hand the could bust with one draw cared was not a smart play. But our advice fell on deaf ears and he did what he wanted to do and doubled. Sure enough he drew a picture card and busted losing twice his original wager in the processes. As bad as that play was, trust me when I say I have seen worse. In fact just a few days later I watched a poor player stand on ace, 4 when the dealer showed a 3. That’s really bad.

I often wonder why players make such foolish plays. Often it’s because of their ignorance about the game of blackjack (these players are often referred to as “ploppys”). There is not much that you can do when a ploppy decides to make a foolish play other than to shake your head and hope that someday he will come to his senses and buy a book on blackjack before he runs out of money.

But even experienced players often make wrong plays, not because they don’t know any better, but because intuitively they feel the right play is wrong. Case in point – being dealt a pair of 8’s when the dealer shows a 9 or 10. Most players are reluctant to split because even if you draw two 10’s to the split 8’s for pat 18 hands they feel you’ll still probably lose two bets instead of one to the dealer’s 19 or 20.

On average casinos have a 2% edge over the masses that play blackjack. That’s 1.5% more than a basic strategy player. This gives you some idea of how poorly the majority of the public plays a “beatable” game.

What follows is a list of common plays that make most players uneasy and indecisive and a brief explanation as to the logic behind the right play. Hopefully, you won’t make a playing error the next time you are dealt one of these uncomfortable hands.

8’s against a 10

The right play is to split the 10’s. The reason is that two hands of 8 is a much better starting point when the dealer shows a 10 than a single hand of 16. You are giving yourself two decent starting hands while breaking up the horrible 16. However, both of the split 8’s will lose money in the long run but the combined losses will be less what a single hand of 16 would lose in the long run. Yes, it’s sometimes difficult to think long term when you are staring at your 8’s and your five bucks is on the felt. But the bottom line is that if you don’t have the courage to make this play then you shouldn’t be playing blackjack.

12 against 2

Now here’s a horrific hand! Hit it and you just know you are going to draw a 10 and bust. But it turns out you have more chances of not busting then busting when you hit (you have a 9 in 13 chance of surviving the hit). Plus the dealer is not as vulnerable with a 2 face card as he is with a 4, 5 or 6 which is another reason why you hit 12 against a 2 (and 3) but stand against a 4, 5, and 6.

16 against 7

Most beginning blackjack players will hit 16 against a dealer’s 10 but not against a 7. In fact

it is a much worse mistake to stand against a 7 than against a 10. David Sklansky in his book, "Sklansky Talks Blackjack", says it best. "Against either a 10 or 7 you have the same high risk of busting when you hit that 16. However against a 7 the reward for that risk is much greater. The reason is that when you do catch a small card your chances of winning are greater against a 7 (since he often has 17) than it is against the 10 (since he often has 20). In purely mathematical terms, hitting 16 against a 10 moves you from a 54-cent loser to a 52-cent loser. But against the 7, your hit moves you from a 48-cent loser to a 40-cent loser. So these numbers confirm that you gain more by hitting against the 7 than against the 10".

11 vs 10

Most players know that's it's smart to double down on an 11 but against a dealer's 10 they get queasy figuring the dealer has a 10 in the hole for a pat 20. It turns out that the dealer's chance of making a pat 20 are less than your chance of making a 20 or 21. The bottom line is this: if you hit you win 56% of the time at one betting unit each. If you double you win 54% of the time but at two betting units apiece. What would you rather do, win \$5 56% of the time or \$10 54% of the time? The choice should be clear.

A,7 vs 9

Most players don't think twice about standing on soft 18 when the dealer shows a 9 face card. Well think of this. If the casino offered the proposition that they would automatically give you a pat 18 on every hand for the rest of your life, would you take them up on it? If you did you would eventually die a small loser. The reason is that overall the casino has a tiny edge against a player that stands on 18. And the dealer's 9 face card doesn't change the situation one iota. If you stand you will win 8 out of 20 hands. If you hit until you got a soft 19, hard 17 or busted, you would win 9 out of 20 hands. The ace gives you flexibility on a soft 18 so take advantage of it and hit.

Taking Even Money

And why not? You get an even money payoff for doing nothing. It's like the bird in the hand. Well guess what? That bird in the hand is costing you 4% of your profits. Over time you'll win more money when you decline even money.

If you master the above plays you are on the way to improve your chance of winning. If you continue to make the wrong plays, well it's your money