

Exposing Your Hand

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While playing limit hold'em online recently, the following occurred. I was in late middle position with A-K facing a raise from the player two to my right. I called and, as I suspected would be the case, we were heads-up for the flop. The flop came K-7-3. He bet and I raised. He called my raise and then checked and called my bets following the turn and river cards both of which were small cards.

I won the hand but instead of simply mucking his hand, he showed me his Q-Q before folding. This violates a rule of thumb that states "never show your hand unless you have an excellent reason for doing so." Did he have an excellent reason? Let's discuss this in more detail.

Poker is a game of decision-making in a context of limited information. Any time you expose your hand unnecessarily you are giving your opponents information. If your opponents are people you regularly play against, the information they gain about your play can be and will be used against you. Even in a single long session, astute opponents will begin to categorize your play. Don't help them by giving them extra information by exposing your hands.

Why do players expose their hands when not forced to? The player mentioned above with the Q-Q did so, I suspect, for the worst possible reason. He was essentially crying, "See, I'm not a bad player. I had a good reason to raise before the flop and I might have been ahead the whole way." The attempt to justify your play to the other players is something that should be avoided at all times. It makes a player appear to be weak as well as providing information about your play. In this case, instead of a range of hands I was pondering, he told me precisely what he raised with preflop in this situation.

Another component to players showing hands to opponents when the hands are big, especially true of K-K and A-A, is a certain level of aggression. They are essentially saying, "I have a really good hand and what were you doing calling my raise with that crap! You have no business winning the pot." Players who do this are giving away a lot of information as well. Not only do we learn that they are willing to call to the end just because their starting cards are strong (even if the board makes their hand just about hopeless), but we learn that the player may be angry. Angry players are prone to make further mistakes until they get themselves under control.

Another reason some players show their hands is to gloat over some move they have successfully carried off. This again is an aggressive action and can get to other players' emotions. If someone has bluffed you successfully and then

shows his hand to drive the point home, maintain calmness, congratulate him with grace, and add this piece of information to your store of knowledge about this player. Do not try to get even!

Here is how exposing your hand can have a dramatic effect. I was playing online and picked up four big hands in the first thirty minutes. I raised preflop in each case and won all four hands but had to show my hands all four times. A funny thing now began to happen. Whenever I made a preflop raise, either everyone folded or at most one opponent would call. The stage had been set for some deception.

In late position I raised with 6-7 suited and picked up the blinds plus one limper's bet when everyone folded. Later I raised on the button with 4-5 suited. Both blinds called. The flop was 5-5-4 which was a dream for me. An ace on the turn kept both blinds in until the end as each of them had an ace with a big kicker. I now had no choice about showing my hand because both players called to the end. The other players now had proof that I was raising with hands different from what they were envisioning. At this point it probably is wise to alter your play for a while because players now are likely to respond differently to your raises.

Because you are giving information to other players, one reason to expose a hand, according to some players, is to give false information. If you are going to attempt this, be careful. There are many players for whom the false information is wasted. These are players who don't think a lot about the other players' hands anyway. There are some players who will pay attention to what you have shown, but some of them will figure out it was a ruse. They now will be more careful against you which is not really an outcome you desire.

I have seen a few players expose hands with the obvious intent of putting a particular player on tilt. Like most prescription drugs, this play has negative side effects. There is the danger that the atmosphere at the table becomes charged with some level of anger. This is not a pleasant atmosphere for many players and some may leave the game or withdraw emotionally. Meanwhile, the player on tilt may be a bit like a bull in a china shop. It can be unpleasent.

At the other end of the spectrum are the players who expose their hands because they had some kind of wonderful draw like an open-ended straight flush draw. Encourage such a display by making positive comments about what a great draw that was. This is normally very good for the game. It helps create a friendly atmosphere at the table. In addition, you are gaining information about a player's willingness to forgo pot odds for the potential thrill of hitting a hand everyone will admire. In fact, I find the mix of psychology and mathematics fascinating. Even though a player realizes certain draws have negative expectation, he will make the draw because if the longshot comes home, the excitement overcomes the money he loses in the long run.

In conclusion, there are a few situations in which a player who knows what he or she is doing can gain by exposing a hand. However, I believe you won't go wrong by deciding to never expose a hand unnecessarily.