



Mastering Poker Math

Become a Feared Shark

in Texas No-Limit Hold'em



How to Play Pocket Jacks Like A Pro!

by Chuck Clayton

Time and again I watch pocket jacks being misplayed. Afterwards many people say:

“I hate pocket jacks!”

What is interesting is that pocket tens aren't much less in value than pocket jacks, yet I never hear complaints about them. Although many players overplay them (like pocket jacks), they seem to be able to get away from tens mentally and emotionally. That doesn't seem to be the case with pocket jacks.

Note: Although this discussion will focus primarily on pocket jacks, similar tactics can be used with pocket tens.

The Conflict with Pocket Jacks

Pocket jacks are one of the most overplayed hands in the deck. I consistently see overbets of five or more times the big blind when players have pocket jacks.

Some players go all-in and just take down the blinds. Frequently, they run into a hand that is equal or greater than the pocket jacks. It gets ugly at times!

This type of play is extremely risky and shows poor math knowledge. Many players lose a lot of chips or bust out by overplaying pocket jacks.



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Pocket jacks are a premium hand and played correctly can do well over time. This begs the question:

Why would anyone risk their entire stack just to take down the blinds with pocket jacks, especially when the blinds are relatively insignificant?

Observations and conversations with players who overplay pocket jacks provides consistent answers.

Many players simply don't know how to play pocket jacks properly!

Because players know that pocket jacks are a premium hand, there is internal pressure to play them forcefully. The conflict is that players also know that the hand is vulnerable.

This internal conflict *short circuits the rational and emotional judgment* of many players, especially the ones who don't know the math. They can't resolve this conflict and play pocket jacks badly. This is fascinating!

Are Jacks Vulnerable?

Let's review the probability of an ace, king or queen hitting the flop when you have pocket jacks and one ace, one king and one queen were dealt to three other players.

With 44 (52 - 2 - 6) cards remaining in the deck there are nine cards (3 aces, 3 kings, and 3 queens) that can hurt you if three other players were dealt those cards. Thus, 44 - 9 = 35 cards that can't hurt you.

- 35/44 cards won't help another player get a pair (or more) on the first card that hits the flop.
- Subtract 1 from the numerator and denominator for each subsequent card.
- Multiply the percentages together.
- Subtract that number from 1 to get the probability of an ace, king, or queen hitting the flop (when one ace, one king, and one queen have been dealt to three other players).

$$(1 - 35/44 \times 34/43 \times 33/42) = 51\%$$



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Thus, 51% of the time an ace, king or queen will hit the flop that will potentially make another player's hand better than your pocket jacks when one ace, one king and one queen were dealt to three other players.

Notes:

1. I say potentially because one or more players may have folded an ace, king or queen before the flop. This is a key reason why betting before the flop is important with pocket jacks to try and get other players with a king, queen or ace (with a weak kicker) to fold.
2. If there are no aces, or kings, or queens in other player's hands, the percentage of scare cards that can hit the flop will be over 10% higher. Do the same type of calculations as shown above without an ace, king or queen in other player's hands.
3. See the Core Math Chapter of the book: [Mastering Poker Math](#) for an explanation on how some of the math is calculated in this article.

The danger for pocket jacks isn't over after the flop. There is still a significant probability of a scare ace, king, or queen hitting on the turn or river.

- There is a $9/41 = 22\%$ probability of an ace, king, or queen hitting on the turn.
- There is a $9/40 = 23\%$ probability of an ace, king, or queen hitting on the river.

This means that more than 1 out of 5 times an ace, king or queen will hit on the turn or river.

- There is a $(1 - 32/41 \times 31/40) = 40\%$ probability of an ace, king or queen hitting if you will see both the turn and river cards.

This means that 2 out of 5 times an ace, king or queen will hit when you will see both the turn and river cards.

Note: These 3 examples after the flop assume an ace, king and queen have been dealt to three other players.

Two More Key Points

Let's not forget the potential for straight draws, flush draws, two pairs, sets and more against pocket jacks after the flop.



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On the other hand, there is a 12% probability you will hit a set on the flop with pocket jacks (just like any other pocket pair). This is an excellent hand in which you may be able to take down a huge pot.

As can be seen by the numbers, pocket jacks are strong and weak simultaneously. Players have good reason to be concerned if they don't play their jacks correctly!

Betting with Pocket Jacks

Early and Middle Positions

Here are some options before the flop.

- **Raise** – If you are *first to open* the pot raising makes sense. Bet to try and eliminate limpers. You might only take down the blinds, although that may be a good outcome.

If a scare card (or two) hits on the flop check and see what other players do. If another player bets, decide on whether you should call or fold. Also, be concerned about straight draws, flush draws, two pairs, or a set.

If no scare cards hit, consider betting $1/3 - 1/2$ the pot if the board is relatively dry (no connectors and three different suits). If it is a wet board, consider betting, but be cautious since you are in early position.

For the turn and river cards, play like your play after the flop.

- **Calling a Raise** – There is probably enough money in the pot already. Re-raising usually isn't a good move since pocket jacks aren't that strong.

Calling disguises your hand well. And yes, it is stealthy! If the flop doesn't have an ace, king, or queen you might be able to take down a decent-sized pot, especially if someone gets top pair on the flop (lower than your pocket jacks) with a great kicker. Again, consider a $1/3 - 1/2$ pot sized bet. Just be careful if you get re-raised since you might have run into a bigger pair, or a set on the flop.



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In Late Position

Your options are like the early or middle position with a couple more choices.

- **Raise** – If you are the *first to act in late position* consider raising enough to just take down the blinds. Or, bet to try and keep the big and/or small blind in the hand.

If a scare card hits the flop you observe what other players do and make your decision on whether you should call, bet, or fold.

If no scare card hits the flop, size your bet to give you options. Consider a 1/3 to a pot sized bet depending on the wetness of the board and your read on the other players. The wetter the board, the more conservative your bet should probably be. There are too many scare cards that may show up on the turn.

You want to try and win, but not call off too many of your chips if a player gets a higher pair (or other improvement card) on the turn or river. Manage the pot since you only have one pair and are vulnerable.

If you get re-raised this may indicate a player with two pair, a set or a bluff. Or, it might be a loose-aggressive player who hit top pair on the board with a high kicker. Try to get a read on the other player and make your decision to call or fold.

For the turn and river cards, bet or call depending on your read of the other player(s) and the wetness or dryness of the board. Manage the pot since a player may be slow playing a set or more. In other words, you only have one pair, so don't overplay it.

- **Calling a Raise** – There is probably enough money in the pot already. Re-raising may not be a good move.

As earlier discussed, calling disguises your hand well. If it is a flop with no aces, kings, and queens, then you might be able to take down a good-sized pot, especially if someone gets top pair on the flop with a great kicker.

If an ace or king hits the flop (or you sense someone has a big draw) and another player bets, call or fold depending upon your read. Play the turn and river similar to the flop.



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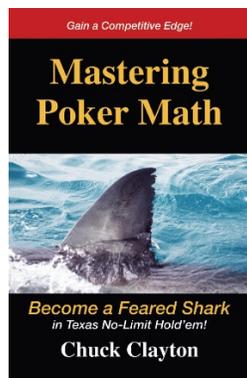
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In Conclusion

Pocket jacks are great hands when played correctly. They should help build your stack, especially when you hit a set (one of the most disguised hands in Texas No-Limit Hold'em). Many times, sets can double you up (or more) when played well with proper bet sizing.

When pocket jacks are played poorly, they can bring frustration and pain plus the loss of many chips, or even your entire stack.

If you would like to learn on how to play all pocket pairs with confidence and style, see the book: [Mastering Poker Math](#).



Available on [Amazon.com](#)

"Be so good they can't ignore you!" ~ Steve Martin



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