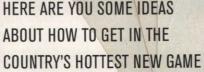
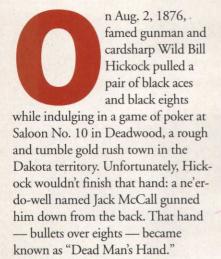
Poker





BY MARK LUCE



Thankfully, the game of poker has become a bit more civilized since the early 19th century, when a variation of poker, played with 20 cards, was used by riverboat mountebanks to rob unsuspecting suckers of their "poke," or money. While the word "poker" wasn't officially used until 1834, links to the game go back to the French game of *poque* and the German bluffing game *pochspiel*.

Now, of course, the country has flipped for poker, fueled in part by ESPN's coverage of the World Series of Poker, the Travel Channel's World Poker Tour, the Bravo's Celebrity Poker Showdown, films like *Rounders* and James McManus's thrilling book, *Positively Fifth Street: Murderers, Cheetahs and Binion's World Series of Poker*. From local taverns to VFW halls, from the cyber-rivers of online action to the neighborhood game with buddies,

Texas Hold 'Em tournaments have captured the American imagination with a frenzy that shames fads such as pet rocks, Cabbage Patch Kids and Rubik's cubes.

So what's the draw? Well, it takes nerve, psychology, luck and smarts to play the game well. Then there's the visceral thrill of winning. In the words of hustler extraordinaire Fast Eddie Felson, "Money won is twice as sweet as money earned."

Texas Hold 'Em is a quick game, too, with two cards in the hole (only you see them) and then five cards up (community cards). From those cards, you build the best five-card hand possible. The game can be invigorating and heartbreaking simultaneously. Watching it on television is surprisingly exciting.

Now before you rush out and blow \$10,000 to try to get a seat at a table in the World Series of Poker, let's talk a little common sense. Gambling can be addictive, which can ruin your life and family. If you remain hot to play for stakes at a casino, know your limits and learn the game and its rules (Hoyle's *Rules of Games*). Trust me, losing money doesn't make you smarter, better looking or more manly.

It only makes your wallet thinner. If you're going to head to the casino, take an amount that you know you can afford to lose. Otherwise, stay at home and sit at an Internet table and play with fake money.

AURA WATILO BLAKE

If you're like me and you enjoy the game but don't want to lose \$200 to folks you don't know, host your own game. Anywhere from five to seven players make for a decent poker night. In our game, we don't bring more than \$20 to the table, and play nickel/dime/quarter games — Low Chicago, Pass the Trash, Seven Card Stud, Baseball, Five Card Draw — with a maximum of three raises per turn. With those stakes, even the worst card player can survive for a few hours.

You'll improve over time by playing at home or online because you'll learn how to bet, bluff and fold more effectively.

While we're on the subject of crucial poker skills, Kenny Rogers had it right: Knowing when to fold 'em is probably the most important skill to have in playing poker.

Mark Luce is a freelance writer who lives in Lawrence, Kan., where he can't ever seem to win with just two pair.

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