Texas hold 'em starting hands

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In the poker game of Texas hold 'em, a **starting hand** consists of two *hole cards*, which belong solely to the player and remain hidden from the other players. Five community cards are also dealt into play. Betting begins before any of the community cards are exposed, and continues throughout the hand. The player's "playing hand", which will be compared against that of each competing player, is the best 5-card poker hand available from his two hole cards and the five community cards. Unless otherwise specified, here the term *hand* applies to the player's two hole cards, or *starting hand*.

A pair of aces is the best pre-flop hand in Texas Hold'em Poker

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Essentials

There are 1326 distinct possible combinations of two hole cards from a standard 52-card deck in hold 'em, but since suits have no relative value in this poker variant, many of these hands are identical in value before the flop. For example, A♥ J♥ and A♠ J♠ are identical in value, because each is a hand consisting of an ace and a jack of the same suit.

Therefore, there are **169** non-equivalent starting hands in hold 'em, which is the sum total of : 13 pocket pairs, 13 × 12 / 2 = 78 suited hands and 78 unsuited hands (13 + 78 + 78 = 169).

These 169 hands are *not* equally likely (see *Poker probability (Texas hold 'em)*). Hold 'em hands are sometimes classified as having one of three "shapes":

- *Pairs,* (or "pocket pairs"), which consist of two cards of the same rank (e.g. 9♠ 9♣). One hand in 17 will be a pair, each occurring with individual probability 1/221 (P(pair) = 3/51 = 1/17).
- *Suited* hands, which contain two cards of the same suit (e.g. A♣ 6♣). Four hands out of 17 will be suited, and each suited configuration occurs with probability 2/663 (P(suited) = 12/51 = 4/17).

- *Offsuit* hands, which contain two cards of a different suit and rank (e.g. K♠ J♥). Twelve out of 17 hands will be nonpair, offsuit hands, each of which occurs with probability 2/221 (P(offsuit non-pair) = 3*(13-1)/51 = 12/17).

It is typical to abbreviate suited hands in hold 'em by affixing an "s" to the hand, as well as to abbreviate non-suited hands with an "o" (for offsuit). That is,

> QQ represents any pair of queens,
> KQ represents any king and queen,
> AKo represents any ace and king of different suits, and
> JTs represents any jack and ten of the same suit.

There are 25 starting hands with a probability of winning at a 10-handed table of greater than 1/7.[1]

Limit hand rankings

Some notable theorists and players have created systems to rank the value of starting hands in limit Texas hold'em. These rankings do not apply to no limit play.

Sklansky hand groups

David Sklansky and Mason Malmuth[2] assigned in 1999 each hand to a group, and proposed all hands in the group could normally be played similarly. Stronger starting hands are identified by a lower number. Hands without a number are the weakest starting hands. As a general rule, books on Texas hold'em present hand strengths starting with the assumption of a nine or ten person table. The table below illustrates the concept:

start here if hole cards are Offsuit (columns) — start here if hole cards are Same Suited (rows)

♠ ♥ / ♦ ♣	A	K	Q	J	T	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
A	1	1	2	2	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
K	2	1	2	3	4	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
Q	3	4	1	3	4	5	7						
J	4	5	5	1	3	4	6	8		S A M E			
T	6	6	6	5	2	4	5	7		S U I T E D			
9	8	8	8	7	7	3	4	5	8				
8			8	8	7	4	5	6	8				
7						8	5	5	6	8			
6		OFFSUIT					8	6	7	7			
5								8	6	6	7		
4									8	7	7	8	
3										7	8		
2											7		

Rank	Hole Cards	Playable Positions
1	AA, KK, QQ, JJ; AKs	Early, Middle, Late
2	TT; AQs, AJs, KQs; AKo	Early, Middle, Late
3	99; ATs, KJs, QJs, JTs ; AQo	Early, Middle, Late
4	88; KTs, QTs, J9s, T9s, 98s; AJo, KQo	Early, Middle, Late
5	77; A9s thru A2s , Q9s, T8s, 97s, 87s, 76s; KJo, QJo, JTo	Early*, Middle, Late
6	66, 55; K9s, J8s, 86s, 75s, 54s; ATo, KTo, QTo	Middle**, Late
7	44, 33, 22; K8s thru K2s, Q8s, T7s, 64s, 53s, 43s; J9o, T9o, 98o	Late***
8	J7s, 96s, 85s, 74s, 42s, 32s; A9o, K9o, Q9o, J8o, T8o, 87o, 76o, 65o, 54o	

* Playable in early position if game is loose/passive.
** Playable in middle position if game is loose/passive.
***Playable in late position if you are the first to bet.

Chen formula

The "Chen Formula" is a way to compute the "power ratings" of starting hands that was originally developed by Bill Chen.[3]

Highest Card

Based on the highest card, assign points as follows:
Ace = 10 points, K = 8 points, Q = 7 points, J = 6 points.
10 through 2, half of face value (10 = 5 points, 9 = 4.5 points, etc.)

Pairs

For pairs, multiply the points by 2 (AA=20, KK=16, etc.), with a minimum of 5 points for any pair. 55 is given an extra point (i.e., 6).

Suited

Add 2 points for suited cards.

Closeness

Subtract 1 point for 1 gappers (AQ, J9)
2 points for 2 gappers (J8, AJ).

4 points for 3 gappers (J7, 73).
5 points for larger gappers, including A2 A3 A4

Add an extra point if connected or 1-gap and your highest card is lower than Q (since you then can make all higher straights)

Phil Hellmuth's: "Play Poker Like the Pros"

Phil Hellmuth's "Play Poker Like the Pros" book published in 2003.

Tier	Hands	Category
1	AA, KK, AKs, QQ, AK	
2	JJ, TT, 99	Top 12 Hands
3	88, 77, AQs, AQ	
4	66, 55, 44, 33, 22, AJs, ATs, A9s, A8s	Majority Play Hands
5	A7s, A6s, A5s, A4s, A3s, A2s, KQs, KQ	
6	QJs, JTs, T9s, 98s, 87s, 76s, 65s	Suited Connectors

Statistics based on real online play

Statistics based on real play with their associated actual value in real bets.[4]

Tier	Hands	EV
1	AA, KK, QQ, JJ, AKs	2.32 - 0.78
2	AQs, TT, AK, AJs, KQs, 99	0.59 - 0.38
3	ATs, AQ, KJs, 88, KTs, QJs	0.32 - 0.20
4	A9s, AJ, QTs, KQ, 77, JTs	0.19 - 0.15
5	A8s, K9s, AT, A5s, A7s	0.10 - 0.08
6	KJ, 66, T9s, A4s, Q9s	0.08 - 0.05
7	J9s, QJ, A6s, 55, A3s, K8s, KT	0.04 - 0.01
8	98s, T8s, K7s, A2s	0.00
9	87s, QT, Q8s, 44, A9, J8s, 76s, JT	(-) 0.02 - 0.03

Nicknames for starting hands

In poker communities, it is common for hole cards to be given nicknames. While most combinations have a nickname, stronger handed nicknames are generally more recognized, the most notable probably being the "Big Slick" - Ace and King of the same suit, although an Ace-King of any suit combination is less occasionally referred to as an Anna Kournikova, derived from the initials AK and because it "looks really good but rarely wins."[5][6] Hands can be named according to their shapes (e.g., paired aces look like "rockets", paired jacks look like "fish hooks"); a historic event (e.g., A's and 8's - dead man's hand, representing the hand held by Wild Bill Hickok when he was fatally shot in the back by Jack McCall in 1876); many other reasons like animal names, alliteration and rhyming are also used in nicknames.

Notes

1. *No-Limit Texas Hold'em* by Angel Largay
2. David Sklansky and Mason Malmuth (1999). Hold 'em Poker for Advanced Players. Two Plus Two Publications. ISBN 1-880685-22-1
3. Hold'em Excellence: From Beginner to Winner by Lou Krieger, Chapter 5, pages 39 - 43, Second Edition
4. http://www.pokerroom.com/poker/poker-school/ev-stats/total-stats-by-card/
5. Aspden, Peter (2007-05-19). "FT Weekend Magazine - Non-fiction: Stakes and chips Las Vegas and the internet have helped poker become the biggest game in town" (http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:NewsBank:FINB&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=1193 F162D085F718&svc_dat=InfoWeb:aggregated5&req_dat=0D0CB579A3BDA420). *Financial Times*. Retrieved 2010-01-10.
6. Martain, Tim (2007-07-15). "A little luck helps out" (http://docs.newsbank.com/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info:sid/iw.newsbank.com:NewsBank:ASTB&rft_val_format=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:ctx&rft_dat=11A694A707377538&svc_dat=InfoWeb:aggregated5&req_dat=0D0CB579A3BDA420). *Sunday Tasmanian*. Retrieved 2010-01-10.

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