

WISDOM COLLUSIONSPEAK

Collusionspeak: The Official Language of Live-Poker Collusion

By Richard Marcus



How much collusion goes on in big-action ring games? Well, I can't tell you exactly how much, but I can tell you this: the bigger the stakes, the more of it you'll see. And in Vegas's biggest venues, you will more likely than not find some sort of collusion going on, especially where established pros lie in wait for high-rolling tourists and poker wannabees coming to challenge them at their own game. At these tables, I am not talking about the "soft collusion" that Jamie Gold admitted to en route to last year's WSOP championship. I'm talking about cutthroat play – "whipsawing" – where old-timers and young Turks join forces to siphon cash from well-heeled amateur players who don't seem to mind getting raised, reraised, and finally chopped up in these big cash games, perhaps just to boast that they got into the ring with the best of 'em.

The strategy for collusion teams (which normally have two or three players) is twofold. First, when none of their members has a winning hand, they attempt to drive their opponents out of the pot by raising and reraising, giving the impression that one of them holds a monster hand. Second, when one of the colluders really does have the monster hand, they use the same tactics to suck in as much money as possible, making their opponents pay through the nose to chase those straights and flushes. Both forms of this strategy are practiced with inconspicuous agility. Naturally, certain subtleties and "non-plays" are utilized to camouflage their operation.

Barring the massive \$1,000/\$2,000 games and up, where the household names abound and collusion play would just stick out too much to be done in comfort, it's going on just about everywhere. The infestation starts at the \$15/\$30 limit, peaks at \$20/\$40 through \$100/\$200, then begins to level off and drop as the limits progress from there. Anything below \$15/\$30 wouldn't be worth it, except for desperados looking to put together a bankroll or low-level colluders practicing to get into the big-time, which doesn't take long if they don't get their signals crossed.

HOW THEY DO IT

The key to modern live-poker collusion resides in the subtlety of communication amongst the colluders, mainly passing one another the value of their hole cards. As the vast majority of collusion takes place at Texas Hold'em Limit tables, I am going to stick with that game as a template. A common misconception is that sophisticated collusion teams use hand signals to communicate what they've got in the hole. Not so. The best and most undetectable method for this covert means of divulging their hole cards is using the hole cards themselves in conjunction with chips. What more natural way to do it than by using the two things most intrinsic to any poker game: cards and chips?

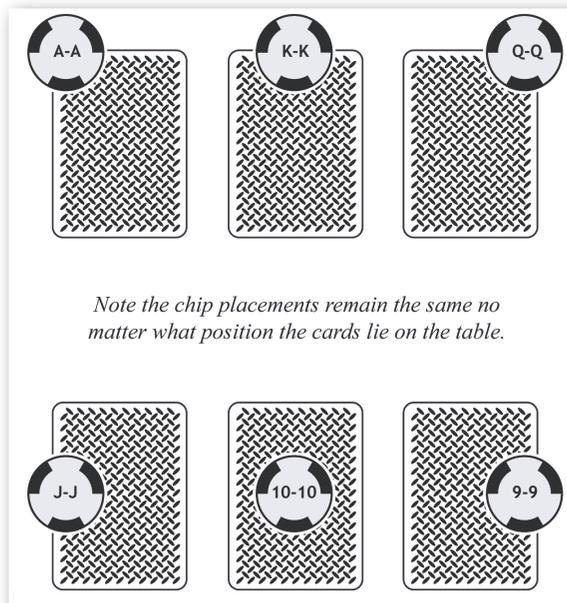
There are two things that virtually every poker player in the world does when sitting in a public poker game, and both naturally camouflage the passing off of illicit information. The first is that each player protects his hand by placing something over the facedown cards, very often a chip or multiple chips. The second is that every player in the world I've ever seen play, be it Phil Hellmuth or my long-deceased great-grandmother (who I did actually witness playing poker), constantly fiddles with his chips. What's the first sound you notice upon approaching poker tables in any casino or cardroom? I mean the first nonhuman sound. It's the rattling of the chips, right? The constant cacophony of clay on felt is as everlasting as the wish of a running stream. Even the hiss of spinning roulette balls in the outer casino cannot compete with this – roulette balls do take breaks from spinning.

Given those two indisputable facts of poker life, the cheaters take advantage and create their unspoken collusion language, all the while appearing to do nothing but protect their hands and fiddle with their stacks of

chips. It's as smooth as a dirty dealer dealing seconds without the slightest rasping sound to give it away.

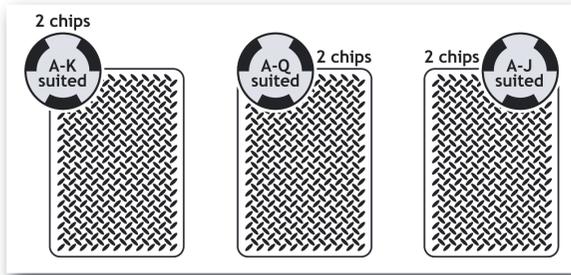
I was first taught collusionspeak by two experienced professional poker players, one of whom is rather well known on today's WSOP circuit. That was nearly twenty years ago, when the pair worked with me cheating casinos' table games. At the time, I was a novice at poker cheating, but as we stood watching a big-action \$20/\$40 Hold'em game on the rail of a Caribbean poker room, the woman I'll call "Carla" explained how it was done.

The first thing Carla taught me was that the actual signal of chips on the cards would only last a fleeting second and be part of the constant playing-with-chips sequence that took

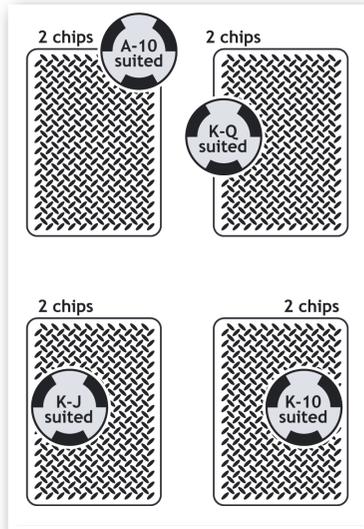


place during every deal. Once the intended receivers of the signal identified it, then that particular telling chip (or chips) would be removed from the cards and the meaningless sequence continued.

In Texas Hold'em, I learned, the most important starting hands are high pairs. Carla told me that when dealt a pair of aces, I must drop a single chip from my stack on the top



10, you used two chips on one of four different positions across the top of the hole cards. When your hand was K-Q, K-J or K-10, you used one of three positions across the middle of the cards. With Q-J or Q-10, you dropped to two positions at the bottom of the cards. When these hands were suited, the two chips were placed



precisely one atop the other. It followed logic: neat like that implied “suited,” as if it “fit well.” When the high starting cards were off-suit, the top chip would be angled slightly off the bottom chip. Again, you could follow the same logic: sloppy and therefore “unsuited.” I quickly learned that the secret visual language of poker collusion was sound in its application.

What about after the flop? A colluder’s pre-flop signal of suited high cards did not identify which suit it was. How does he tell his cohorts that he’s flopped a flush draw, or a made flush when all three cards are of the same suit?

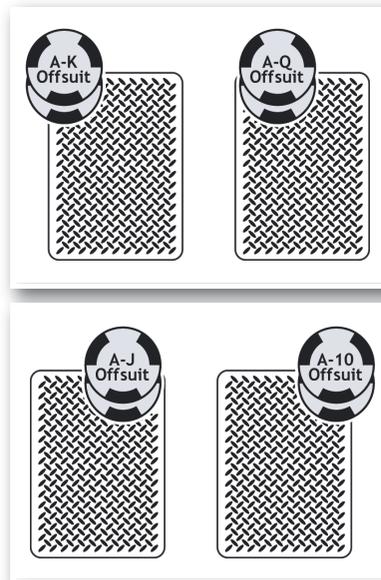
The signal used to communicate flush draws is a simple continuation of the suited high-cards signal given after the deal: two chips lying neatly atop the cards. If the flop contained two cards of the right suit or all three to make the flush, the person with that

left corner of my cards. The chip had to be set half on and half off the cards in order to prevent confusion when reading it from any position at the table. If the starting hand were a pair of kings, I’d lay the single chip on top of the cards, but this time in the middle, again half of the chip parted from the cards to lie on the table’s felt. For pocket queens, the chip would occupy the top right corner.

I learned the rest of the signals for high pairs. Jacks, tens, and nines followed the pattern by placing the chip from left to right across the middle of the cards. So if I had a pair of tens off the deal, the single chip would go dead center. Eights, sevens, and sixes used the bottom of the cards. “Learn to place your chip quickly on your cards,” Carla said. “You don’t want to be out there looking like you’re painting a goddamn logo on them.”

It all seemed easy enough, so I asked how strong non-pair starting hands were signaled. Carla’s boyfriend, who I’ll call “Preacher,” answered with a knowing smile. “We use two chips,” he said, which made perfect sense because you had two cards with different values. “But it’s slightly more complicated because we have to differentiate between suited and off-suit cards.” Sure, I reasoned, my cohorts had to know whether I had a flush draw or not.

Preacher further explained that only high running cards were worth signaling. When indicating hands such as A-K, A-Q, A-J, or A-



hand would simply drop a third chip on top before removing all three in favor of the innocuous chip shuffle.

Straight draws worked basically the same way, although by knowing the value of each person’s hole cards we could deduce when a straight draw came alive simply by looking at the board. When the straight draw or made

straight was not clear (due to lower running cards that had not been signaled before the flop), we would switch down to the bottom of the cards and place the chips in the location exactly opposite the flush signals.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO WHEN UP AGAINST IT?

So now that I’ve told you how I learned the secret language of collusion and how it plays out in cardrooms, what can you do to protect yourself from the cheating teams out there speaking it? Well, you can look out for these patterns of dropping one, two, or three chips on certain areas of the hole cards, and if you’re sharp you might spot it happening. But the problem is, just like in baseball where a catcher changes his fastball and curveball signals to confuse an opposing runner on second base who might steal them, good collusion teams often have backup sets of signals. They may turn to using chip signals off the cards, or rotating the cards to different angles, or in some cases abandoning the cards and chips and just using hands and fingers.

The point is, you’re not always going to have success intercepting their signals or even proving to yourself that particular chip fiddling is indeed collusionpeak. So the best thing to do remains judging the other players’ actions on the pots. If you notice certain pairs or threesomes of players constantly raising and reraising, something might be going on – especially if you see players repeatedly folding their hands on the river after having either reraised or seen multiple raises. Legitimate players don’t display this kind of play on a repetitive basis, unless of course, they’re steaming. Try also to observe the collective fortune of the two or three players you notice engaged in the whipsawing. If you can determine that amongst them there is a profit and that as a group they are winning more pots than percentages would dictate, then you have further reason to believe there’s a collusion team aboard.

My best advice, having been a participant in and witness to many crooked poker games, is simply to get up and find another table (or poker room) whenever you’re wary of collusion taking place. I know that it’s sometimes difficult to do that, but in the long run it’s the best move. Even the most skilled players are not going to win out against the best collusion teams.

Richard Marcus is considered the world’s greatest casino/poker cheater and is the author of Dirty Poker and the World’s Greatest Gambling Scams. Today he works as a casino consultant. ♣