

VIDEO POKER

For the Intelligent Beginner



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Introduction

The rules of the game are a lot different for the informed than for the uninformed. This is a fact of life for many endeavors, and especially so in a casino. Casinos extract billions of dollars a year from the uninformed, while a small number of informed players manage to come out ahead of the game.

Video poker is one of the few games in a casino where thousands of players come out ahead every year. And several tens of thousands of players know enough about the game to enjoy casino vacations that cost them far less than retail.

Video poker is a *great* game. It's exciting, interesting, and the intelligent player, if motivated and willing to study, has a shot at learning to play well enough to win. There are more net winners at video poker than in all other casino games combined. And if you include the players who receive casino benefits worth more than what they lose, the winners are in the tens of thousands.

How can this be? Casinos aren't charities. They profit from video poker games. If the casinos weren't winning, the games wouldn't be there. How can there be winning players and winning casinos at the same time? That appears to be creative mathematics of the highest order.

The not-so-hard-to-understand explanation is that there are more video poker losers than there are winners. Many more. And the size of the losses exceeds the size of the net wins.

The title of this book stresses that it's a guide for the *intelligent* beginner. Many books on gambling promise that anyone who tries to win will be successful. That's simply not true. Video poker is, at its essence, applied mathematics. To grasp the concepts, you need to be

reasonably intelligent. You don't need to be an Einstein, but almost all successful players are smarter than average.

Most bright people who pick up this book *can* learn to do reasonably well at this game. *If* they want to badly enough. *If* they study hard enough. *If* they review frequently. If you have the will to win, this book will get you started.

So how smart do you have to be? For starters, you have to have some facility with numbers. Let me give you an example. Let's say one casino offers a 9/6 Jacks or Better game (which we will find returns 99.54%), a 0.33% cash slot club, and monthly mailers worth 0.25%. Another casino offers NSU Deuces Wild (99.73%) with a 0.17% cash slot club and monthly mailers worth 0.125%. Which is the better deal?

For bright people, it's easy to add up $99.54\% + 0.33\% + 0.25\%$ and get 100.12% in the first case, and $99.73\% + 0.17\% + 0.125\%$ and get 100.025% in the second, making the first game the better play. Yet a lot of players are either arithmetically challenged or otherwise unable to make this calculation. Many of those players choose the wrong game simply because they can't (or won't) take the time to add up the numbers. Or perhaps they just don't believe in them.

This book will *not* take you all the way to being a video poker expert. There's simply too much information to present to get to that level. But it will take you far enough so that you can understand the books that *will* take you all the way.

The "bible" of how to play the hands in video poker is the *Winner's Guide* series that I wrote with Liam W. Daily. Each of those volumes presents four different strategies, from beginner to advanced, for each game covered. These books average more than 100 pages in length, whereas no other author that I know of has written more than 10 pages in one place about how to play any specific game. In short, no other series even attempts to cover the games in such depth.

This book is very different. It covers how to choose the right machine. It covers how to evaluate slot clubs. It discusses several different promotions and how to evaluate them. It debunks several myths surrounding video poker.

Practicing on a computer program is essential if you wish to succeed, because the game is too complicated to master without com-

puter help. As such, a key part of this book is the step-by-step guide to using the features of *Video Poker for Winners*, the best computer trainer on the market.

This book does not cover advanced strategy for any game. It's simply too difficult for many players, and relatively unimportant. If you follow the concepts that are presented here, you'll have the ability to succeed at this game. You'll also have enough background to go to the *Winner's Guides* for the advanced strategy, which will give you a bit extra.

There are dozens of different video poker games, and if you consider pay schedules within variations, there are hundreds of different versions. No one can play all of them at the highest level. In this book I present strategies for five different games, which may or may not be the best games in the casinos where you play. It doesn't matter. The strategies are presented for the primary purpose of teaching you how to use a strategy chart. There's a relatively simple technique to use "top-down" strategy charts like the ones presented here. I teach it to you in Part II of this book and give you dozens of examples. If you take the time to master it, you can create the strategies for the games you play by using *Video Poker for Winners* and your results next year will be significantly better than your results last year. If you choose not to study the techniques, your results next year will likely be about the same as they were last year.

What Is Video Poker?

Video poker, at its essence, is a very simple game. You place a bet. You're dealt five cards. You choose which of those cards, if any, you wish to hold. Additional cards are dealt to complete your hand. You're paid if you've made a paying hand. The end. You can begin another game by placing another bet, but you don't have to.

Hidden in this simplicity, however, are several complicating factors. First, there's the game itself. One large modern casino can feature more than 100 different types of video poker games. These can vary by denomination (1¢, 2¢, 5¢, 10¢, 25¢, 50¢, \$1, \$2, \$5, and up) or

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by game type (Jacks or Better, Double Double Bonus Poker, Deuces Wild, etc.). Soon I will give you the information necessary to make sense out of the different game types.

Within each game type, there are a variety of different pay schedules. You'll also learn these, and find out which are the best ones and which ones should be avoided.

For a 52-card game, precisely 2,598,960 different hands can be dealt, although duplicates make this number more manageable. For example, $5\heartsuit\ 5\spades\ 5\clubsuit\ 3\heartsuit\ 3\spades$ is a different hand than $5\heartsuit\ 5\spades\ 5\clubsuit\ 3\heartsuit\ 3\clubsuit$, but we play them the same. In a later chapter we'll explore how often certain types of hands occur.

For most hands, there is one unique best play. For a few hands, two different holds have equal values. In Double Double Bonus, for example, if you're dealt $2\heartsuit\ 4\spades\ 5\clubsuit\ 6\spades\ 8\heartsuit$, it's equally correct to hold 2456 as it is to hold 4568, and both of these plays are quite a bit superior to throwing everything away. For a hand like $2\spades\ 4\spades\ 5\spades\ A\heartsuit\ Q\heartsuit$, only one hold is correct, even if it isn't obvious (whether you hold the spades or the hearts depends on which game you're playing). If you want to play any video poker game, you need to learn how to play each hand correctly. Learning how to play each of 2,598,960 different hands may sound like a horrendously difficult task, but it's not, as you'll see as we progress.

Notice that video poker has only one betting interval—you bet once and you're in the game until the end. This makes the game fundamentally different from either live poker or blackjack.

Video poker is dealt fairly, at least if you play in Nevada, Mississippi, New Jersey, and other government-regulated states. This may not be true in casinos in New York, Florida, and Washington, among others. The device that determines which cards are dealt is called the random number generator, or RNG. It's actually a computer algorithm, rather than a "device." Many players become concerned about the exact nature of how RNGs work. To me, this appears to be a waste of time. The purpose of the RNG is to simulate a fair deal from a well-shuffled deck. No computer program can be completely random, but it can be close enough. There are statistical measures to determine whether an RNG is sufficiently random. I personally bet hundreds of millions of dollars a year on video poker and I know within what range

my results should fall. My results are very close to what they should be. I recommend you spend your time learning to play the games accurately and not worrying about the exact workings of the RNG.

What Makes Video Poker Special?

There are numerous gambling games of various stripes. For me, video poker is king. Let me tell you why I believe this.

The overwhelming reason I embrace video poker is that I've found I can make a very good living gambling at the game. Year after year. Video poker is not the only game where the best players can have a consistent advantage (blackjack, poker, and sports betting are others that qualify), but it's a game that I've found relatively easy to do master and the casinos let you play. My experience at blackjack was that by the time I got good enough at card counting to win regularly, several casinos demanded that I stop playing that game at their establishment. Although you can also be restricted from playing video poker, it happens much more rarely.

If I couldn't win at a game, I wouldn't play it. For me, this is a very simple choice. The driving force for me is money, though I get a lot of pleasure from matching wits with a casino and coming out ahead. I didn't derive that level of pleasure working in a corporation and earning a paycheck.

In addition to the money, the lifestyle afforded by successful video poker play is very attractive. In the past nine years, my wife Shirley and I have spent 15 weeks cruising to Mexico, Hawaii, Alaska, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, and the Mediterranean—all free because we've played video poker. We've been given seven automobiles during that time period. Free. We've stayed in luxurious hotel suites and eaten in exquisite restaurants. Our home base is Las Vegas, but we get to travel to casino destinations across the country. I've seen more of the country and the world in the past decade, all on the casinos' dime, than in my previous five decades combined.

While my results are definitely better than average, they're not unique. Hundreds of other players enjoy these kinds of perks, and many readers of this book will eventually have these kinds of results.

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Some people are willing to lose money in order to obtain this lifestyle. I can understand that choice and I don't fault it. Fortunately, Shirley and I haven't been placed in the position to have to make that choice yet.

Although money and lifestyle are paramount to me, there are many other intriguing features about video poker. For starters, it's a solved game. The strategy for 9/6 Jacks or Better, for example, has been worked out perfectly and is relatively easily memorized—at least it is for intelligent people. This makes it very different from either poker or sports betting. In those activities, you're competing against all of the other players in the game. If the skills of those other players improve, you need to make adjustments.

It's easy to measure your skill level in video poker, as computer software is available to do this. *Video Poker for Winners* is the program I recommend. It records every error you make and yields accurate measures on how well you're playing. Although products are available to do this in blackjack, no product is available in either sports betting or live poker to accurately measure (or even estimate) your skill level.

Computer software also helps you get better. *Video Poker for Winners* corrects you when you hold incorrectly, allows you to analyze any hand you're unsure about, and even tells you what size bankroll you need to play a game. We'll examine other features of this remarkable product throughout this book.

A significant amount of literature is available about the game. If you want to get better, books, *Winner's Guides*, strategy cards, and the like are available. There are Internet bulletin boards available (vp-FREE is the biggest) where video poker is discussed 24/7.

Although the games themselves are constant, the environment keeps changing. Casinos change slot clubs and promotions regularly. Frequently, you'll find yourself operating in an atmosphere of incomplete information. To me, this is what keeps the game interesting.

There's relatively little human interaction when playing. Whether this is a plus or a minus depends on your personality, I suppose, and your people skills. There are a lot of one-of-a-kind personalities among video poker players, many of whom have not been successful at "normal" jobs. A lot of us, myself included, have found we can thrive being our own boss, while we didn't do so well working in large corporations.

Once you learn the key concepts (which are explained in this book), you can tell at a glance which machines yield a good gamble and which don't. This is not a difficult skill to master, but it's surprising how many players pay little attention to this important consideration.

I like the emotional highs and lows of winning and losing. Winning streaks are very heady. Losing streaks hurt like hell, but you know they're going to end. Other gambling games have similar types of swings; if they're too painful for you, you don't belong in a casino.

Finally, video poker is very likely to be available in casinos for many years. This means that if you take the time to study and become good, you'll reap the benefits for a long time to come.

Doing the Math

I showed a draft of this book to one of my nieces and she declared it "too mathy." Even though Erin is a college graduate and has a responsible job, she's not particularly adept at mathematics, so she shies away from math problems whenever possible. Her fiancé is much better in this area, so if something involving math needs figuring out, Erin lets Andrew have a go at it.

Erin has no burning desire to get good at video poker, so whether this book is too mathy or not is irrelevant. If she wasn't given a free copy by Uncle Bob, she'd never look at the book in the first place. But anyone interested in getting good at this game better at least make an effort to become competent at solving typical video poker math problems. Most of them aren't particularly difficult once you've been shown how to do them (which I've attempted to do throughout this book), but those who automatically shy away are severely limiting their potential of becoming good.

It's not required that you love doing the math. It's merely required that you know your way around these problems. If that's too much to ask, you might want to consider another hobby.