

# Basics of Blackjack

## Premise of the Game

The basic premise of the game is that you want to have a hand value that is closer to 21 than that of the dealer, without going over 21. Other players at the table are of no concern. Your hand is strictly played out against the hand of the dealer. The rules of play for the dealer are strictly dictated, leaving no decisions up to the dealer. Therefore, there is not a problem with the dealer or any of the other players at the table seeing the cards in your hand. Indeed, if you're playing at a shoe game, the player cards are all dealt face up. In any event, when you're just learning to play, don't hesitate to show the dealer or other players your cards and ask questions.

## Values of the Cards

In blackjack, the cards are valued as follows:

- An Ace can count as either 1 or 11, as explained below.
- The cards from 2 through 9 are valued at their face value.
- The 10, Jack, Queen, and King are all valued at 10.

The suits of the cards do not have any meaning in the game. The value of a hand is simply the sum of the point counts of each card in the hand. For example, a hand containing (5,7,9) has the value of 21. The Ace can be counted as either 1 or 11. You need not specify which value the Ace has. It's assumed to always have the value that makes the best hand. An example will illustrate: Suppose that you have the beginning hand (Ace, 6). This hand can be either 7 or 17. If you stop there, it will be 17. Let's assume that you draw another card to the hand and now have (Ace, 6, 3). Your total hand is now 20, counting the Ace as 11. Let's backtrack and assume that you had instead drawn a third card which was an 8. The hand is now (Ace, 6, 8) which totals 15. Notice that now the Ace must be counted as only 1 to avoid going over 21.

A hand that contains an Ace is called a "soft" total if the Ace can be counted as either 1 or 11 without the total going over 21. For example (Ace, 6) is a soft 17. The description stems from the fact that the player can always draw another card to a soft total with no danger of "busting" by going over 21. The hand (Ace,6,10) on the other hand is a "hard" 17, since now the Ace must be counted as only 1, again because counting it as 11 would make the hand go over 21.

## The Deal of the Cards

Once all the bets are made, the dealer will deal the cards to the players. He'll make two passes around the table starting at his left (your right) so that the players and the dealer have two cards each. (European and Australian players: See exception at the bottom of this section.) The dealer will flip one of his cards over, exposing its value.

In the shoe games, the players cards will be dealt face-up, and the players are not allowed to touch the cards. If you're just beginning, you'll probably want to start at the shoe game where you don't have to worry about handling the cards.

In the hand-held games, the player's cards are dealt face down, and the players pick up the cards. When handling the cards in a hand-held game, here are a few important things to remember.

- You are only allowed to touch the cards with one hand. If you're a poker player, this can take some effort to break old habits!
- You must keep the cards over the table.
- Any cards that the dealer subsequently deals to your hand must be left on the table, not added to the cards in your hand.

Once the cards are dealt play proceeds around the table, starting at the first seat to the dealer's left, also called first base. Each player in turn indicates to the dealer how he wishes to play the hand. The various player decisions are covered in their own section below. After each player has finished his hand, the dealer will complete his hand, and then pay or collect the player bets.

Now, the exception I mentioned: Some casinos, mostly in Europe, give the dealer only one card face up until all the players have finished their hands. The dealer then deals his second card, and finishes his hand. This is called the European No Hole Card rule. This can change a player's strategy if, and only if, the dealer collects all player bets in the event of a dealer blackjack. Some casinos that deal only one card at first to the dealer will refund any double-down or split bets if the dealer turns out to have a blackjack. This type of no hole card rule does not have any effect on the player's optimal strategy, and should not be described as European No Hole Card rules.

### **How the Dealer Plays His Hand**

The dealer must play his hand in a specific way, with no choices allowed. There are two popular rule variations that determine what total the dealer must draw to. In any given casino, you can tell which rule is in effect by looking at the blackjack tabletop. It should be clearly labeled with one of these rules:

- **"Dealer stands on all 17s"**: In this case, the dealer must continue to take cards ("hit") until his total is 17 or greater. An Ace in the dealer's hand is always counted as 11 if possible without the dealer going over 21. For example, (Ace,8) would be 19 and the dealer would stop drawing cards ("stand"). Also, (Ace,6) is 17 and again the dealer will stand. (Ace,5) is only 16, so the dealer would hit. He will continue to draw cards until the hand's value is 17 or more. For example, (Ace,5,7) is only 13 so he hits again. (Ace,5,7,5) makes 18 so he would stop ("stand") at that point.
- **"Dealer hits soft 17"**: Some casinos use this rule variation instead. This rule is identical except for what happens when the dealer has a soft total of 17. Hands such as (Ace,6), (Ace,5,Ace), and (Ace, 2, 4) are all examples of soft 17. The dealer hits these hands, and stands on soft 18 or higher, or hard 17 or higher. When this rule is used, the house advantage against the players is slightly increased.

The dealer has no choices to make in the play of his hand. He must simply hit until he reaches at least 17 or busts by going over 21.

## **What is a Blackjack, or a Natural?**

A blackjack, or natural, is a total of 21 in your first two cards. A blackjack is therefore an Ace and any ten-valued card, with the additional requirement that these be your first two cards. If you split a pair of Aces for example, and then draw a ten-valued card on one of the Aces, this is not a blackjack, but rather a total of 21. The distinction is important, because a winning blackjack pays the player odds of 3 to 2. A bet of \$10 wins \$15 if the player makes a blackjack. A player blackjack beats any dealer total other than blackjack, including a dealer's three or more card 21. If both a player and the dealer have blackjack, the hand is a tie or push.

The dealer will usually pay your winning blackjack bet immediately when it is your turn to play. In the face down games, this means that you should show the blackjack to the dealer at that time. Some casinos may postpone paying the blackjack until after the hand is over if the dealer has a 10 card up and has not checked for a dealer blackjack. Other casinos check under both 10 and Ace dealer upcards, and would therefore pay the blackjack immediately. Regardless, when you are dealt a blackjack, turn the cards face up, and smile. It only happens about once every 21 hands, but it accounts for a lot of the fun of the game.