

# Mark's Hearts Tips

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## 1 Introduction

Einstein once said: “A system should be as simple as possible, but no simpler.” Hearts is such a game, and its simplicity is its real beauty.

A regular deck is dealt out completely to four players, such that each player has thirteen cards. At the beginning of each round, each player may pass three undesirable cards to the left, across on the second hand, to the right on the third hand, and on the fourth hand no cards are passed in what is called a “holding hand.” The first trick is led off by whoever holds the two of clubs and proceeds clockwise around the table with each player following suit, unless a player holds no cards in a suit, in which case he may “slough” cards from any other suit. The trick is taken by whoever plays the highest card who may then lead whatever he would like, except for hearts which must first be “broken” by being sloughed onto another player. Points are kept for each round: each heart being worth one point and the Queen of Spades being worth thirteen. If a player takes all the point cards, he gets zero points for the hand and all other players get twenty-six. The game is over when one or more players break one hundred points, and the player with the low score wins.

As mentioned earlier, the simplicity of the rules is the real beauty of the game. Within such an environment, players can devise all types of strategies from the wild to the sublime. A phenomenon that regularly occurs amongst players is that strategies become circular. One player will develop a style, the other players will catch onto it and try to trip him up, he’ll switch tactics, it will trip everyone else up—at least until they figure out his new approach, and the cycle will begin again. Figuring out who’s doing what, where you are currently in the cycle, and what you can do to keep ahead of the curve is a large part of the fun.

Another one of the things that makes Hearts so interesting is its high degree of randomness. This means that beginning players can often fare better against experienced players than they could in a totally non-random game like chess. Having a table full of experienced

players, however, tends to impose a certain order on the randomness. Because of this high random factor, we deal more with probabilities than absolutes when we lay out strategies.

Perhaps the most entertaining aspect of the game is all the table politics that occur: The bluffs, the comments, the threats, the challenges, the vendettas, the petty squabbles, the backbiting. . . . All of these add a dimension of light-heartedness and joviality to the game. A good game of Hearts, after all, should be an enjoyable social affair.

On a philosophical note, Hearts is a lot like life. At times it seems that you don't get dealt a fair hand, but sometimes you can dump your problems onto other people. Being the person in the lead often means having to deal with other people's problems. You can't get a high return unless you're willing to take some risk. You can survive by your wits, but you'll prosper with a little luck. Women are nothing but trouble. . . . The list goes on and on.

But enough philosophizing, let's get on to the more serious business of figuring out how to win.

In an entire round of play, there are essentially four questions which a player will encounter:

- What do I pass?
- What do I follow?
- What do I lead?
- What do I slough?

The Terminology section (Section 2) following this section gives some terms and their definitions.

In the One-Liners section (Section 3), some fundamental tips are given, which provide answers to the four questions previously posed.

In the Strategy Styles section (Section 4) later on, each of those four questions will be addressed according to how they pertain to a particular style of play (or role).

Finally, the Advanced Tactics section (Section 5) delves into some of the higher mysteries.

## 2 Terminology

This section covers a few terms that are often heard in a Hearts game and their definitions.

**Trick** Four cards set down, all of the same suit, one from each player, starting with whoever has the lead, and proceeding clockwise around the table.

**Taking a Trick** Playing the highest card in a trick The person who takes a trick will lead off the next trick.

**Round** Also known as a "Round of Play"—the thirteen tricks played in a particular segment of the game.

**Hand** The cards held by a certain player.

**Suit** One of the classes or categories of cards, either clubs, diamonds, spades, or hearts.

**Long Suit** Holding many cards of a particular suit, usually 7 or more.

**Short Suit** Holding a few cards of a particular suit, usually 2 or less.

**Void** Holding no cards of a particular suit. Having one or more voids is often advantageous.

**Lead** The first card played in a trick. This establishes the trick suit. All cards that follow must be of that suit, unless a player is void, in which case he may slough.

**Follow** A card played after the lead which is of the same suit as the lead card.

**Slough** (Pronounced: “Sluff”) If a player is void in the trick suit, he may play any other card. A player will often slough undesirable cards.

**Play** A card set down by a player. Either a lead, a follow, or a slough.

**Break Hearts** Also known as “Bleeding Hearts”—Hearts are broken when a heart is sloughed onto someone, as a result of being void in a trick suit. Hearts cannot be led until they are broken. The only exception to this rule is when a player has the lead and his hand consists of nothing but hearts.

**High Card** Also referred to as uglies. There is a difference between *a* high card and *the* high card:  
 A high card is a card that all the other players can *probably* get under. This can be as low as a 5, but is typically higher (say, in the 7 → Ace range).  
*The* high card is the highest card that was played in a trick after everyone has played. Whoever played it has the lead for the next trick.

**Low Card** A card that can probably be beaten by some other card played in a trick.

**Topper** A card that no one can beat. Initially, there is only one topper in a suit: the Ace. If an Ace in a suit has already been played, then the King in that suit will be a topper. Alternatively, if you are holding the Ace, King, Queen, and 10, and the Jack has already been played, then all of the cards you hold are toppers.

**Stopper** A high card which will take a trick to prevent someone shooting the moon. This is usually a high heart, but can be a high card of any suit.

**Out Card** A low card which will help you lose the lead. There are basically only three out cards in a suit: the 2, 3, and 4. This can change as play proceeds, however; As those lowest cards are played, the cards right above them (say, the 5, 6, and 7) become out cards. Late in a round, an out card is a most valuable possession.

**Go Around/Gone Around** The number of times that a trick in a particular suit has been played is the number of times that the suit has “gone around.”

**Shooting** Also known as “Shooting the Moon” or “Running it”—A player attempts to take all the point cards, thereby taking no points himself and sticking 26 points to all the other players.

**The Queen** The Queen of Spades, the Evil One, the Unlucky Lady, the Death-that-comes-a-walkin’-wearing heels, etc. As we all know, there are, in fact, four queens in the deck, but the Queen of Spades stands above her peers (hence the capitalization), she being worth 13 points and taking her can cause you to lose the game far more quickly than by any other means.

**Spades Siege (or just “Siege”)** The inevitable attempt by players not holding the Queen of Spades to attempt to draw her out by repeatedly leading spades tricks, especially early in the game. (Note: If players are holding either the Ace or King of Spades, they might not be too inclined to lead spades either.)

**Table Talk** Communication between players around the table, often for the purpose of making “group” plans, but just as often to mislead other players.

### 3 One-Liners

The following guidelines do not describe any kind of comprehensive approach or master game plan, rather, they offer tidbits of dimestore wisdom that can be helpful to know as you are picking up the game. Styles of play are described in the next section on page 9. As with all other rules, every one of these has its exception so don’t get too excited when you see words like “Never,” “Always,” and “Thou Shalt” in the headings (because you will doubtless see some guidelines that contradict others).

**If You Have to Take a Trick, Take It High** Pretty self-explanatory, really. If someone leads a trick with the two of hearts, the other players follow with the 3 and 4, and all you’re holding is the 5 and the Ace of hearts, take it with the Ace (since you’re going to take the trick anyway). Then, lead back with the 5 since at that point, no one will be able to get under it. As an added bonus, you now have a void hearts suit (more on voids in later sections).

**Pay Attention to the Pass** What another player passed you can tell you a lot about what they’re doing.

If you get passed a bunch of low hearts, the passer is probably trying to shoot the moon. You will probably want to play a Sheriff style this hand (described on page 17).

If you get passed a whole bunch of cards in one suit, the passer is probably building a void. You probably don’t want to play high in that suit, especially if you suspect that the person who passed to you may be holding the Queen.

**Never Pass Spades** The Name is Hearts, but the real objective is to not take the QS. The winner of a Hearts game is usually the player who has taken the Queen the least. If the rules were changed such that hearts were worth no points, the game would probably still be played largely the same way.

The only spades people usually pass are the Queen, (because she's worth 13 points and holding her can be trouble) and the King and the Ace (because those are the only spades that can take the Queen). There is, however, a problem with passing these all the time.

Consider the following situation: You have just been dealt your hand and are about to pass left. You have 3 clubs, 2 diamonds, 3 spades, and 5 hearts. The spades you are holding are the 4, King and Ace. Your first, knee-jerk reaction might be to pass the King and Ace, but wait—what if someone passes you the Queen? You're going to wish you had the King and the Ace back so that you could hold up under the inevitable spades siege which will ensue in an attempt to draw out the Queen.

Bearing that in mind, you'd better hold onto the King and Ace of spades. But then consider this problem: What if you *don't* get passed the Queen? Then you'd be stuck with only the 4 to buffer you before you have to play the King or the Ace which would likely stick you with the Queen. What then, do you do?

Here's a solution: As you were only dealt 3 clubs, pass all of them and go void in that suit. This way, if you *do* get passed the Queen, not only will those additional spades help to see you through the siege, but you have a void suit in clubs and can easily slough the Queen should someone be foolish enough to lead clubs. Moreover, on the first clubs hand that goes around, you can slough a diamond and begin building another void suit (more on building voids in a later section).

If, however, you *don't* get passed the Queen, you can slough off at least the Ace on the first clubs suit (as you will be void in clubs). Moreover, if one or more of the clubs you passed left was rather high, there's a very good chance that the player sitting to your left will take the lead, and in true amateur fashion, blithely lead spades. You will be the last person in the circle to take the trick, can safely take it with the King, and presto, you're out of trouble. As an added bonus, after those first two tricks, you will only have one spade left. Lead back with it, and double-presto, you have another void suit.

Bearing these things in mind, the strategy becomes clear: Never pass spades.

**Never Pass the Ace of Hearts** It's either a great sheriff card or a great shooting card. Hold onto it.

If you do pass someone the Ace of hearts, you're either abdicating sheriffing responsibility to the passee, or encouraging them to shoot the moon. Neither one of those are especially terrific ideas.

**Never Lead with an Ace** Especially not before the QS has come out. Leading with an Ace means that nobody can beat the trick. It also means that other players can easily dump some of their high cards.

The exception to the rule is if you are holding the QS. First, because you know the worst you can take is a heart or two, and second, if you're in trouble with the queen (meaning you don't have a lot of other spades besides her) you don't want to surrender the lead until you've built a void in another suit.

**Take the First Heart** Often, it is a good idea to take the first trick that hearts is broken on. Doing this means that no one can shoot the moon but you.

**Play as Though Hearts Are Worth No Points** It is especially applicable to play this way when hearts are broken before the Queen has come out. Taking a couple hearts is cheap compared with taking the Queen.

**Try to Take the First Trick** Many people will play high clubs on the first hand—even a topper. They do this because it can be very advantageous to take the lead into the second trick. The reasons being:

1. You want to draw the Queen out as quickly as possible by leading spades—a bit amateur, to be sure, but a tried and true strategy all the same.
2. You want to build a void in some other suit (likely diamonds)—a bit more sophisticated.
3. You have the Queen, are in trouble because you don't have a lot of other spades besides, and don't want to give anyone else the chance to draw her out.

If you're not in much trouble (i.e. not holding the Queen or any high Spades), don't worry about taking the first trick.

**High Clubs Are Deadly** Typically, four Clubs are played on the first trick (unless someone sloughs on the first trick). This means that there are only 9 Clubs left that could be played for the rest of the round. Moreover, people usually get rid of high clubs on the first trick, meaning that there will not be many high clubs left for the rest of the round. The coupling of these two points means that if you play any high club—or even a mid-range club—you will probably take a club trick and very likely, someone else will be void in clubs—not a good position to be in.

**The Two of Clubs Is Evil** The two of clubs is a real stinker because you have to lead it into the first trick, you can't take the lead for the second trick, and you can't get rid of any high clubs on the first trick. As such, the two is often passed.

The problem is compounded when you consider that you want to hold onto a high club so you can take the first trick. If you're not holding the two, there's a good chance that you might have it passed to you, and then you'll be stuck with that high club! So take my advice and get rid of that deuce.

There is one exception to this though: don't pass the 2C to the left. See below for details.

**Never Pass the Queen to the Left** This is incredibly dangerous because you are not in any kind of position to dump ugly spades like the King or the Ace, which you may get passed to you. Here's how it works: The only way to safely dispose of an Ace or King before the Queen comes out is to be the last person in the rotation to play. Chances are good that if the person to your left is holding the Queen, he's not going to lead spades. Contrapositively, there's a very good chance that the players sitting either across from you or to your right *will* lead spades, and may draw out your Ace or King before the Queen appears, allowing the player to your left to happily dump it on you.

Ideally, what you would like to do, is have the person on your left leading tricks as often as possible, leaving you as the last in the rotation. Being the last in the rotation means that you've seen everything that's been played, and you can either safely get under the highest card in a point trick and avoid taking those points, or take a point-free trick safely with your highest card, thereby getting rid of your uglies. The strategy then is to pass the guy on your left lots of high cards so that he will have to take the lead as often as possible.

Remember, however, that if you're playing with experienced players, they might all try to do the same, and what you'll end up with is a scenario where trick-leading proceeds around the table counter-clockwise.

**Always Pass the Queen to the Right** Pass the Queen of Spades to your right every time you can, and don't worry about holding either the King or Ace of spades, or any other high cards for that matter. Chances are real good that either the player sitting to your right or the one sitting across from you will lead spades and you can safely play either the King or Ace after the trick goes past the player to your right. In fact, once any trick has gone past the guy on your right, you can play as high a card as you want and know that you won't get hit with the Evil One. If the Queen gets drawn out or sloughed off, you should have plenty of low cards left to get under it.

An added bonus to this tactic is that throwing out high cards (especially high spades) before the trick has gone all the way around will lead other players to believe that you're holding the Queen—and possibly that you're in trouble. This, in turn, might encourage them to either draw out the Queen and/or take the lead with high cards, which will ultimately only help you. The safest place for the Queen to be sitting is in the hand of the guy on your right, and for you to know about it.

**Always Pass the Ace of Clubs to the Left** Remember, you want to have the person on your left leading tricks as often as possible so you can be the last of the four to play; this is advantageous because you can see what everyone else has played before you play, and you will probably be able to safely play your high cards. To that end, you want to pass the player on your left the Ace of clubs whenever it gets dealt to you. As mentioned earlier, people often play their highest clubs on the first trick, and people often want to take the first trick, so passing them the Ace means that they will very likely take the first trick and lead into the second. The only time this could be problematic is if they held onto the 2 of

clubs.

**Never Pass the Two of Clubs to the Left** Complementary to the previous point, you want the person to your left to lead into the second trick, and they're not going to be able to do that if they have to play the two. Therefore, even if it hurts, hold onto the two when you're passing left.

## 4 Styles of Play

The following styles expand on the basics and present more comprehensive styles of play. It is difficult for anyone to function in an environment where there are few or no rules, therefore people will often devise conventions to fill the void. Moreover, it is likewise difficult for people to function in any environment with a high degree of randomness and disorder. As Hearts is a very simple game with very few rules, and likewise an unpredictable game with a high degree of randomness, it can be helpful to follow a conventional style to give your gameplaying some order and orientation.

None of the styles presented here need be followed religiously. Indeed, doggedly sticking to only one style when a situation would lend itself better to another can often lead to a player's undoing. It is therefore advised that a player examine each hand when it is dealt to him and select the style that would work best for that hand.

### 4.1 The Low-Layer

The low-layer is a defensive player who wants to stay under every trick; Hence, low cards are prized, and high cards are evil. Ideally, the low-layer wants to take no tricks, and in so doing, take no points. More realistically, the low-layer will take a few tricks, but hopefully not any that have points in them—especially the Queen.

The basic approach of the low-layer goes like this:

#### 4.1.1 Passing

At first, one would think that the low-layer would pass his high cards with a bias first for spades and secondly hearts. This is often the case, but a bit amateur to be sure. The only time that it's really bad to be holding high cards is when you don't have any low cards to cover them; If you're holding the two and the three of hearts, then holding the King and Queen isn't all that bad. In addition, some low-layers don't concern themselves with building voids (see below) and are content to be holding cards in every suit, as long as they've got low ones in there.

The following approaches are given to help the aspiring low-layer determine where his trouble suits are to be found. Some of the advice given is far in away too complex to be of great use in much gameplaying, and would serve better as instructions for a computer simulation. They are simply given to get you thinking.

- Find the suit whose lowest card, is higher than the lowest card in any other suit. Pass as many cards as you can from that suit, starting at the top and going down. If in so doing you become void in a suit, but still have cards to pass, repeat the procedure with the next-highest suit. This is usually the easiest and quickest way to locate your trouble suits.
- If you're good at math, total up the average face value of each suit in your hand and pass the top three cards from whichever suit has the highest average (Jacks are worth 11, Queens 12, Kings 13, etc.). Once again, if in so doing you go void in a suit but still have cards to pass, repeat the procedure.
- Since averaging the pip value can be time-consuming and tedious, consider this alternative approach: Divide each suit approximately into fourths and assign each fourth a "weight" based on which fourth the card is in. To wit: 2, 3, and 4—worth 1 point; 5, 6, and 7—worth 2 points; 8, 9, and 10—worth 3 points; J, Q, and K—worth 4 points; and the Ace worth 5. Once again, average the cards based on this weight system and pass the top cards from whichever suit has the highest weight. (Note: Observe how this weight system parallels the order in which out cards often come out in play. Before any trick is played the 1-weight cards are your first out cards. After they go round, the 2-weight cards are your out cards (because the previous ones have already been played) and so on.)
- A variation of the above weight system: Don't include any spades lower than the Queen in the average of the spades suit. Essentially, this creates a bias on passing high spades. This is not always a good idea, however (See Never Pass Spades on page 6), and if you've got enough spades underneath to weather a siege, you don't need to worry.
- Another variation of the weight system: Treat the 2 of clubs as though it were worth 5 points, as it is a bit of a stinker.
- Rather than spending time adding and dividing to find an average, simply "cancel out" cards in a suit according to their weight: 1 weight canceling 4 weights, 2 weights canceling 3 weights. At the end, see what won't cancel and pass from whatever suit has the highest non-canceled weight. As the alert reader has likely already noted, Aces won't cancel with anything.

As mentioned earlier, none of these approaches need be followed rigorously—don't go whipping out a calculator in the middle of a game, or anything. They are simply given to get you thinking about what weight certain cards carry and where trouble suits can be found. After some practice, you can usually spot your trouble suits just by eyeballing them.

#### 4.1.2 Leading

When it is the low-layer's turn to lead, he will do one of the following:

- If he's not holding the Queen and he's not in spades trouble (i.e. isn't holding the K, or A and/or doesn't have many low spades to cover them if he *is* holding the K, or A), blithely lead spades to draw out the Queen. A bit amateur to be sure, but it certainly has its place.
- If he has no spades or the Queen has already been drawn out, lead with the lowest card in any playable suit. Alternatively, lead with the lowest card in the suit that has gone around the fewest times.

### 4.1.3 Following

When the low-layer follows, all he wants to do is get just beneath the highest card that has been played in the trick. The only time a low-layer purist will take a trick is when he is the last in the rotation and the trick contains no points, in which case, he will take it as high as he can so as to safely dispose of a high card.

### 4.1.4 Sloughing

When the time comes to slough, the low-layer will use any of the approaches described in the "Passing" section above (Section 4.1.1) to locate trouble suits, and slough those off beginning at the top card and preceding down the line. Once it is exhausted, the low-layer will locate his next trouble suit, and begin sloughing them off.

### 4.1.5 Problems with the Low-Layer Style

Because the low-layer is not concerned about building voids, and because he plays low cards early and often, it's not unheard of for a low-layer to take all the tricks in the final stages of a round. This can be problematic as the last hands often contain a lot of point cards. To ward against this possibility, it can be a good idea to play some fairly high cards early in a round when they're less likely to hurt you.

## 4.2 The Voider

Having a void means having no cards of a given suit. Having one or more voids can be a great advantage because A) you won't take a trick, and B) you can slough off your uglies. Building voids means actively trying to eliminate all the cards in a single suit. This is best accomplished at the outset of a hand with the pass.

### 4.2.1 Responding to What You're Dealt

As a general rule, it's better to respond to what you're dealt than to doggedly try to go void in the same suit every time. Persistently passing three diamonds will not always build you a diamonds void (there's a chance that at some point you'll be dealt more than three

diamonds). Moreover, other players will eventually figure out your routine and stymie you simply by passing you a load of diamonds every chance they get.

When your hand is dealt to you, survey all your voidable suits (that is, suits with three cards or less), and do one of the following:

- Pick the suit with the fewest cards in it and pass them all. If you're still able to pass more cards, start on the next suit that has the fewest cards.
- Even if it doesn't have the fewest number, pick the suit that looks like it has the most trouble cards and pass all of them.
- A variation of either of the above: Ignore the spades suit in your consideration, since the spades suit is so important (See "Never Pass Spades" above on page 6).
- Another variation: Ignore the hearts suit as you can slough them off early in the game when someone leads into another of your void suits.

The way the suit distributions break out after the deal, you will always have the ability to go void in at least one suit, and occasionally in two.

#### 4.2.2 Picking What to Void

But which suits are the best candidates for voiding? The following subsections consider and give guidelines for each suit. They all apply to voiding a suit by way of the initial pass. As you can well imagine, the "holding hand" is the voider's biggest bugaboo.

**Fondness for Clubs** The advantage to voiding clubs is that you can easily slough on the first trick, either to get rid of some ugly high cards, or to begin building another void suit. This is especially handy if you are holding the KS or the AS, don't have the QS and don't have a lot of other spades underneath.

The other great thing about clubs is that if you've got four of them, you can still build a void in fairly short order. Simply pass three of them, play the remaining one in the first clubs trick, and presto, instant void.

**Voiding Diamonds** The diamonds suit is the only suit that doesn't have any remarkable features. Clubs you have to lead with, and it quickly goes short, hearts are each worth a point, and the spades suit holds the Evil One. The really distinguishing feature of diamonds, then, is that it is the only "normal" suit.

Diamonds are usually the second-best choice when deciding what you want to void. Because they needn't be broken like hearts, and because they're not quite as spicy as spades, they can often be a good candidate for voidancy.

**Voiding Hearts** What you're hoping for here is that you can survive well enough until hearts are bled. Once they are, there's a good chance that people will lead hearts, and then you can slough off your problem cards when those hearts tricks go around.

The best time to employ this tactic is when you have a boatload of spades under the Queen.

This can also be an amusing tactic when you want to try to shoot the moon (see The Shooter section below on page 15).

**Voiding Spades—A Devilish Maneuver** Given that many experienced players will not pass spades, a particularly cagey maneuver is to pass all of your spades and create a spades void.

The best times to do this are:

- When you know that the person passing to you is a fairly experienced player who abides to the “never pass spades” strategy.
- When you know that the person passing to you frequently tries to shoot the moon, because then you can count on getting passed a bunch of low cards (often low hearts).
- When the person you are passing to is either losing or has a great many points, and you want to help him in surviving a spades siege so he doesn't bust and cause the game to end.
- When the person you are passing to is good at playing the Equalizer (see page 14) and someone other than yourself is currently winning.

### 4.2.3 Playing after the Pass

Once a round proceeds, the voider will follow someone else's lead much like the low-layer. If a voider takes the lead, however, he will not necessarily lead out with just any low card, but with a card in the shortest suit that he holds, in order to begin building another void. Even if it's a fairly high card, the voider will feel pretty safe in doing this, because if he's short in a suit, chances are that no one else is. Naturally, the later on in the round, the less desirable it is to have the lead, and the less apt a voider will be to play any high cards. By that time, however, the voider should have been able to get rid of his uglies and hold onto some out cards so that he can quickly lose the lead.

When the voider has the opportunity to slough, he will want to take advantage of that occasion to build yet another void suit by sloughing off cards from whichever suit is the shortest. There are always exceptions, of course: If he's holding the Queen and hasn't got many spades, he'll probably dump the Queen. Also, as per the low-layer style, if he finds that he's got a trouble suit, he might deem it a better idea to first slough cards out of there.

Ideally, after several tricks have gone round, the voider should be holding only one or two long suits with a range of highs, mids, and lows in each one. At this point, the voider might

begin maliciously dumping points on other players, and who knows, if no point cards have been played yet, he might even try to shoot the moon (see “Shooting” below on page 15 to see how this is done).

#### 4.2.4 Tripping up a Voider

As you can probably guess, the best way to throw a wrench into the plans of a voider is to pass him cards that will fill his voids back up. Pay attention to what he passes you. If you observe that he has a habit of passing you clubs, pass him a whole bunch of clubs when you get a chance to pass to him.

A canny voider could use this psychology in his favor, however: Every time you pass to the player on your left, pass clubs. Every time you pass to the player on your right, pass diamonds. If you can fool them well enough, they’ll never fill your void suits, and may even supply you with long suits that you could use to shoot the moon. (A little table talk amongst the players could diffuse this in a hurry, though.)

### 4.3 The Equalizer

The Equalizer is an offensive player who seeks to hit other players with point cards—especially the player that is currently winning. Where other players try to “dump” point cards, the Equalizer aims them. Naturally, the Equalizer wants to be in possession of as many point cards as possible, and as such, will not pass them. Holding the Queen is the Equalizer’s fondest wish.

In order to hit other players with points, however, the Equalizer needs to have some void suits. Hence, the Equalizer style largely follows the same conventions as the Voider style. The suits of choice, however will most likely be either clubs and/or diamonds. An Equalizer would probably not void heart and spades suits because these hold the point cards, and point cards are what the Equalizer wants to have in his control.

**When to Play the Equalizer** Being an Equalizer is like being a bounty hunter: you’re trying to hit someone else, so someone else will probably be trying to hit you. Equalizers can end up taking a lot of points. The safest times to attempt to play the Equalizer are:

- When you’re holding a lot of spades in addition to the Queen, so that you can survive a siege and then dump her on whoever’s got the fewest points
- When you’re holding a lot of low hearts in addition to a lot of high ones, or in other words, you have a long hearts run
- When your voiding skills are well-honed
- When the guy who’s winning is holding a really bad hand (of course, you haven’t got a lot of control over this one, but if you’re passing to the guy in the lead, you can try to make his hand as ugly as you can)

## 4.4 The Shooter

Shooting the Moon is the act of taking all the point cards. A successful shoot will leave you with no points and stick all the other players with twenty-six. Shooting is like executing a jujitsu move where you try to use the other players' offensive moves (and paranoia) against them. A daring feat, shooting the moon is not often attempted by the uninitiated, as it can carry such a high cost for failure. This section gives some advice on how to make a shoot more successful.

### 4.4.1 To Shoot, or not to Shoot?

Deciding if you're going to try to shoot can happen at any of the following times:

- After your hand is dealt, but before you pass is the most common time for a player to decide. He will then pass in such a fashion so as to promote the shoot. Typically this means passing all your low cards, especially low hearts. If the person your passing to is paying attention though, this could blow your cover in a hurry.
- Late in the round after a player has taken a bunch of points already and figures he can take the rest with whatever material he's got.
- After a player has had the Queen dumped on him, and in an act of desperation, tries to make the best of a bad situation by attempting a run. Such desperation attempts are seldom ever successful.

### 4.4.2 Shooting Guidelines

The following items are general tidbits of advice on shooting. More comprehensive approaches are covered in the sections that follow.

- When you shoot, you want to take all the point cards—not all the tricks, just all the point cards. This is an important detail as some amateur shooters will often think they need all the tricks, blow all their toppers early on, and not have enough left late in the game to finish their shoot.
- Ideally, you don't want to let on that you're shooting until late in the game, so that the other players won't catch on until it's too late. Of course, what you're hoping for there is that point cards don't come out until very late in the game. This can be a lot to hope for.
- The best way to shoot is to have taken all the hearts, needing only the Queen to complete the shoot. This way, if you don't get the Queen, the worst that happens is you end up splitting the points with someone. Few people will be willing to sheriff you by taking the Queen. Conversely, the worst way to attempt a shoot is to have taken the Queen first and then need to take all the hearts.
- Hold onto an out card that you can use to lose the lead in case the shoot fails.

### 4.4.3 Approaches to Shooting

There are a number of ways to accomplish a successful Moon Shoot.

**High Cards in All Suits** After the cards are dealt, see if you're holding lots of top cards in every suit, especially aces. If you like, use the same "weight" system described in the "lay low" style to determine how many high ones you've got and decide on a threshold, to wit: "I'll only shoot if the total weight of my cards is 45 or better."

The problem then becomes your low cards; How do you safely get rid of them?

Early on in the game, you don't need, and probably don't want the lead, so lead and follow with your low cards and just pray that no one bleeds a point onto anyone else. This is a good occasion to develop your skills at counting cards to see how many cards are left in a suit and/or to be on the lookout for any stoppers that could hold you up (see Counting on page 24). With any luck, people will see you leading/following low and just assume that you are trying to lay low and dodge taking the lead.

If you end up going void in a suit and someone leads into it, you can take advantage of that opportunity to slough off other low cards that might otherwise impede your shoot.

Attempting to shoot the moon in this fashion has the advantage that other players cannot try to sheriff you by leading in a suit in which you are void, with the intent of bleeding out a heart on someone other than you; You will likely always be able to take the lead back, should you lose it, in whatever suit any other player leads. There is a big disadvantage, however: If the shoot fails because someone else takes a point, you're going to be in heap big trouble for the same reason: You'll be able to take the lead in any trick thereafter. Even if you still have a few low cards, chances are you've got a lot more that are toppers.

**One or Two Long Runs** The idea here is that you have a long suit with cards in a range from the top to the bottom. When the moment arrives that you decide to engage your shoot (i.e. you've seen a few key stoppers go out of play), you start at the top of your run, bleeding out all the remaining cards in that suit from the other players, such that once you get to the mid- to low-range cards in the suit, everyone else is void in it, and you can take all the tricks from then on.

To deal with your low cards in other suits, or for that matter, *any* cards in other suits, you will want to lead, follow, or slough them early on in the round in such a way that you hold onto any high cards and keep your long run intact. Late in the game, a low non-heart card will probably still take the trick because people have been sloughing everything *but* hearts to try to stop you from shooting.

Shooting via a long suit is a much safer way to attempt to shoot than holding high cards in all suits, because should the shoot fail, you still have low cards at the bottom of your run(s) that you can either lead or follow with to get out of trouble.

**The Problem with a Long Hearts Run** As previously illustrated, holding a long run of cards can be a very effective and relatively safe way to shoot the moon. Since the bulk of

the point cards are in the Hearts suit, one might conclude that a shooter should be holding a lot of those. Indeed, most beginners think you need to hold a lot of hearts to be able to successfully shoot.

Uncanny as it may sound however, having a long hearts run does not often yield a successful shoot. This is due to the fact that someone else must bleed hearts first, and you'll need to take them when they come out. If you have a long hearts run though, it probably means that you don't hold many cards in any other suits. This means that if you still want to attempt the shoot, you're going to have to slough cards other than your hearts. Under those kind of conditions, most people can't take the lead, and can't hold out for long before they have to start bleeding their hearts!

On the bright side, if the shoot is unsuccessful, you'll make a great Low-Layer by playing your low hearts, or a great Sheriff due to your high hearts, or a great Equalizer due to all the points that you can foist off onto the player of your choice.

**Just a Few Pulls** A more effective means of pulling in all the points is to be holding the top 4 or 5 hearts (that is, the J, Q, K, and A), and not many hearts besides. Your only challenge under these circumstances is to take the first trick with a heart in it (hold onto some high cards in other suits so you can do this). Having accomplished taking the first heart bleed, all you need to do is lead hearts, starting at the top of your run, and bleed all the rest of them out of the other players. You should be able to do this with just a few pulls. Thereafter, all you need is the Queen. At that point, the worst that can happen is that you don't take the Queen, and end up splitting the points with someone.

**A Fiendish Approach** A more fiendish approach, however, is to have absolutely no hearts in your hand; Pass them all at the beginning of the round. With any luck, the passee won't believe that you're up to anything more sinister than getting rid of a few uglies. When you begin your run, and people catch on to what you're doing, they will likely try to hold onto their hearts, sloughing you only the stuff they've got in other suits. This can then prove their undoing, because as you begin to lead lower cards in the suits they've been sloughing, they'll probably be void and you can keep the lead even with low cards.

## 4.5 The Sheriff

When you are "Sheriffing" you are trying to stop someone from shooting the moon, or prevent anyone from shooting in the first place. The "Sheriff" style can be easily combined with any of the previous styles.

Playing the Sheriff is a lot like any other kind of law enforcement: a dirty job that somebody's gotta do and you'll often find yourself in the line of fire. Like the Equalizer, the Sheriff can often take a lot of points.

### 4.5.1 Sheriffing Guidelines

There are a number of things you can do to play an effective Sheriff:

**Pass a low heart** This is an especially effective prevention if the person you are passing to has a reputation for being a shooter. The five or six of hearts is usually about right, but if you're especially paranoid, you may want to go as low as the three.

**Hold onto a stopper** This is typically a high heart, but can be any high card. This tactic is especially effective when combined with the previous. Here's a little advice: when you have a chance to slough, dump the second highest card in the suit of your choice (usually a trouble suit). A Master Sheriff will have suits with plenty of low cards, and one topper.

**Pass a bunch of low cards of any suit(s)** While not often entirely feasible, you can achieve this if you are going void in a suit that has only low cards, or if you are trying to shoot the moon yourself!

**Bleed hearts early in the game** The earlier hearts are bled, the more difficult it is for a shooter to succeed because he must try to take more tricks.

**Split hearts** Easier said than done if you're up against an expert shooter. Try to place hearts onto two or more players. The best way to accomplish this is to give a heart to a player that usually tries to lie low. If you can bleed one onto a Low-Layer, he will likely not have what he needs to shoot, and will therefore take few or no other hearts. Likewise, a shooter will likely have a bunch of high cards and be able to take any number of point-card tricks thereafter.

**Lead in a suit in which the shooter is void** If the shooter is trying to shoot off of a diamonds run, but you know that he's void in clubs, lead clubs as much and as often as you can until someone can bleed a point onto somebody else.

**Give the shooter the Queen before you give him any hearts** As mentioned in the "Shooting" section above (Section 4.4.1), the most awkward way to shoot is to have taken the Queen and then be needing all the hearts. This is not a foolproof approach though. Sometimes, the Queen may be all the shooter needs!

**Take the lead after the Queen comes out** Coinciding with the previous technique: After you have drawn out the Queen (that is, someone other than yourself has taken her), try your darndest to take the lead and play as high as you can—pull out your toppers for this. Since the Queen is gone from play, there is very little risk in doing this. What you're hoping is that someone will bleed a heart onto you and prevent anyone from shooting. Once you

get a heart bled onto you, lead back low and try to stay under all the rest of the tricks. As an added bonus, you've managed to get rid of a lot of your high cards in a fairly safe manner.

**Pass a bunch of spades** This is perhaps the most devilish move of all. As mentioned before, the conditions under which you might do this are typically when you are passing to a renowned shooter. This makes it hard on them, because spades will draw the Queen out, and the shooter ultimately wants to take the Queen himself! This tactic is particularly effective when you can pass a bunch of low spades. The only way this could backfire on you is if the shooter has a long spades run to begin with, in which case you will add to the length of the run, and probably help them to shoot!

#### **4.5.2 So I'm Done Sheriffing. Now What?**

You have accomplished your job as sheriff by verifying that point cards have been taken by two or more players (one of which could be yourself), thus ensuring that no one can shoot the moon. At this point, you want to fall back on the Low-Layer style. Slough off any other toppers you might be holding, and stay under the rest of the point tricks.

## **5 Advanced Strategies**

The following section addresses more advanced strategies that can be employed.

### **5.1 Annoying Passes**

Having mastered the basic passes which will help you stay low, build void suits, get out of trouble, or help you shoot the moon, you can move onto developing passes which will irritate, annoy, and beshrew the poor recipient of your cards. Here are some nasty passes that come one-by-one, two-by-two, or three-by-three.

#### **5.1.1 Singles**

The following singles are pretty annoying:

- The two of clubs—You can't take the lead off the first trick with it, and it makes any high clubs you hold look real ugly.
- A club—Passing a club, any club, prevents anyone from sloughing an ugly card on the first trick if they've decided to go void in clubs (a fairly common occurrence). Passing them the two of clubs therefore serves a double duty toward annoyance.
- A low heart—Makes it real hard to shoot the moon. Especially effective when passed to a renowned shooter.

- A high heart that you can beat—They have to either work at getting rid of it or suffer you stymieing their moon shoot should they try.

### 5.1.2 Pairs

The basic approach is to pair or couple a set of cards which amplify the annoying effects of each other. The following are examples of such troublesome twosomes:

- The two of clubs and the Ace of clubs—Can't take the lead on the first trick, and you've got that bloody Ace that you have to get rid of somehow.
- A club and the Ace or King of Spades—That high spade can be a fright, and they won't be able to slough it off if they've tried to void themselves in clubs.
- A low heart and a high heart—Hard to shoot, and the victim has to work at getting rid of that ugly high heart.
- A club and a diamond—These are the two most common suits to go void in, so passing one of each will fill either void. If you pass high ones, the result can be a suit with only a single, high card. Can be trouble.

### 5.1.3 Triples

The triples are just adding greater injury to the doubles described above.

- The two of clubs and two really high clubs—Can't take the lead off the first trick, stuck with those ugly high clubs, and as an added bonus, if they've tried to go void in clubs, the only clubs they'll have after the first trick will be those two high ones you've passed, and they'll probably take anything. Be sure to lead clubs at your first chance to twist the dagger a bit.
- A club (especially the two) and the Ace and King of spades—The victim is stuck with those nasty spades, and they can't slough either one because of that pesky club. Note: Passing a player the Ace and King of spades can actually help them, and even hurt you, as described in Section 3 under "Never Pass Spades." The best time to employ this meddlesome pass, therefore, is when you have a long run of lower spades which can withstand a siege.
- A pitifully low heart (say, the three) and a pair of high hearts, all of which you can beat (i.e. you keep hold of the Ace or similar topper)—Hard to shoot, because of that low guy, which anyone can beat, and the fact that you can stop any of them. Also, it's hard enough to try to get rid of *one* high heart, but getting rid of two is going to be a real chore.
- A club, a diamond, and a heart—These are the three most common suits to go void in, so passing one of each will fill any of those voids. Once again, passing high ones can make it more injurious.

## 5.2 Got Queen Trouble? Bleed Out the Spades!

“Bleeding out spades” means that you are trying to draw all the spades out of the other players and take them out of play. You would most want to employ this tactic when you are holding the Queen and not many other spades besides.

Consider the following situation: It’s the second trick in the round (i.e. only the first clubs trick has gone around—spades haven’t been led yet), you have the lead, and you hold only the 3, Jack, Queen, King, and Ace of spades. Obviously, you won’t be able to survive a spades siege for very long. Moreover, it won’t take long before you have to start laying down your King and Ace, at which point it will be fairly obvious that you’re holding the Queen. What, then, do you do?

Answer: Don’t try to hide the fact that you’re holding the Queen at all. Consider the numbers: You are holding 5 spades, meaning there are 8 more “out there” amongst the other players. Since players don’t normally pass spades, they tend to be more evenly distributed than other suits after the pass. On balance then, you can count on each player having somewhere between two to four spades. The strategy then, is to bleed spades out of the other players before the others can play them to bleed the Queen out of you.

Therefore, lead out with the Ace. You might get a few stares and grins, but it’ll be worth it. You should take three spades, leaving only 5 more “out there” amongst the other players. Lead next with the King. You’ll probably take three more spades leaving only 2 spades out there. Next, lead with the Jack. Let’s say that this time you only take one spade with the Jack, leaving only one last spade “out there.” Lead finally with the 3, and presto, there are no more spades. At this point, you can simply hold onto the Queen, bide your time, work on building another void, and take tricks as high as you want. (Because you know nobody can give *you* the Queen.)

As an added bonus, if you keep following and leading high, you’ll be able to get rid of your ugly high cards. You might even convince the other players that you’re trying to shoot the moon, which could even discourage them from playing hearts on you, and maybe try to take the lead away. In the meantime, you can watch the other players squirm as they wonder: “How much longer...” and “Will I be the one?” When the time comes, be sure to drop the Queen on the most deserving player.

The situation described above could fail if one player is holding more than four spades. It is, however, not as likely that the spades suit would be so unevenly divided, especially considering that you are already holding five. Remember, the high degree of randomness means that we deal with probabilities, not absolutes. Building on the situation above, it would be easier still to bleed spades out of people if you were holding the 10 as well.

Furthermore, it is very important that you build at least one void suit as quickly as possible so that you have a place where you can dump the Queen. It is likewise important in such a situation to get rid of any trouble cards as quickly as possible so that you don’t end up taking the lead during the last stages of the round, because you wouldn’t be able to easily lose the lead. Should that occur, you will eventually have to play the Queen end up taking her yourself!

### 5.3 Three Against One

Hearts is dazzlingly fun when the three losers attempt to gang up on the guy in the lead. Hit-men coalitions of three players are not organized at the beginning of a game; they don't share secret handshakes or decoder rings. Rather, such coalitions are formed on an ad hoc basis as scores rise and different players take turns being the winner. The formation of a three-man coalition is usually an unspoken agreement made by the three current losers, although it isn't unheard of for one of the losers (usually the guy who's trailing by the most points) to make an announcement in the form of "We've got to get Brian, guys."

Sometimes you don't get the cooperation of all three players in ganging up on the guy in the lead. If the second-in-place guy is only behind the winner by half a dozen points, he might be more content to just sit back and "draft" behind the winner, letting him take all the heat from the other losers. Right up until the last stages of the game, of course, at which point he'll pull a dramatic move where he drops the Queen on the current winner and move into first place. Then when it's too late, he'll drop points on one of the other losers, cause them to bust, and win the game himself.

If three against one odds doesn't sound very fair to you, it's probably because you're the guy in the lead.

### 5.4 Contractual Passes

A well-crafted pass between two experienced players can communicate more than a whole evening of table talk. The state of the scorecard is an enormous factor here as it often is the skeleton key to the message in the pass. Typically, a contractual pass is exchanged between two losing players who want to stick it to the player who is currently winning. This tactic comes under the umbrella of "the losers ganging up on the winner" as described in the previous section. As a general rule, any contract with lasting terms becomes null and void should you become the player in the lead. You can however, count on the losers at that point making contracts to gang up on you.

The following are examples of contractual passes and their meanings:

#### 5.4.1 The Queen of Spades and Two Other Spades

The state of the scorecard is thus: Both you and the player you are passing to are losing, and somebody else is winning, probably by a lot. Basically what you are saying with this pass is:

I really want to aim the Evil Wench at the guy in the lead, but I don't have enough spades to hold out under any kind of serious siege. I therefore agree to give you control of the Queen, as well as a generous spades buffer, which I hope that combined with any spades you possess, will keep you safe until you can stick the Queen to the player who most richly deserves it. In return, I humbly

request that you not stick it on me, especially if I get passed an Ace or King which I am compelled to play in a spades trick because they are the only ones I've got, having passed you all my other spades.

Here's what you're assuming when you make this pass:

1. The fellow you are passing to is rather experienced, and as such, has not passed any of his spades. (Especially if you're passing to the guy on your left and he knows that you know that it's really not bright to pass the Queen to the left.)
2. He wants to win just as bad as you do, and as such, would not be so foolish as to dump the Queen on another losing player.

#### **5.4.2 All the Materials You Need to Shoot the Moon**

Naturally, these materials can come in a variety of forms, but is typically indicated with something to the effect of: Three high hearts (typically including the Ace, King, and the like); or, a couple of high hearts (once again, likely the Ace and King), and the Queen of Spades. The state of the scorecard is thus: The fellow you are passing to is losing by a lot (say, in the mid to high eighties), the other two losers are somewhere in the middle (around say, 40's or 50's), and the guy in the lead is skunking everyone (at around 20 or 30). Moreover, the guy in the lead has been consistently dropping points on the guy in last place, in the hopes of pushing him over a hundred and quickly finishing as the winner.

This is basically what you're saying:

I willfully encourage you to shoot the moon and will assist you fully in the endeavor by not sheriffing you. I recognize that I will take 26 points myself, but I do this hoping to level out the scores and breathe new life into this game. In return, I request that you remember me in the future, and keep sticking it to the guy in the lead, and not to me.

Here's what you're assuming with this pass:

1. The guy in the lead will continue to wantonly dump points onto the fellow you have passed to (the passee) thinking to push him over a hundred, but this will turn on the winner's own head as it will enable the passee to shoot successfully. Furthermore, we're hoping that the winner won't realize what's going on until it's too late.
2. The other guy that's got points in the 40's or 50's will also support the passee in shooting the moon, that the game be not over.
3. You really hope that the passee has figured out that you might be up to something like this, and is already preparing to shoot the moon, and furthermore that he knows a thing or two about shooting.

If all goes according to plan, you will have one, well-prepared shooter, two people supporting him, and only one guy (the player currently in the lead) trying to stop him. As you can see, you're hoping for a lot with this one, giving up a lot (you will take 26 points if it works), and because of those reasons, coupled with the fact that the circumstances described are not altogether common, this kind of contractual pass is not common.

## **5.5 Counting Cards**

Counting the cards will help you more than any single other strategy. Not coincidentally, counting cards is also one of the most difficult things to keep track of. Typically, the player with the best memory will be the one that wins the most.

The following are a few approaches to counting:

### **5.5.1 How Many Times a Suit Has Gone Around**

This is one of the easiest ways to count, as you are not keeping track of the number of cards but just the number of tricks of a complete suit. Since the numbers are smaller, it can be a lot simpler. Furthermore, if you want to find the number of actual cards in a suit that have been played, simply multiply the number of tricks by four and there you have it.

### **5.5.2 On the Lookout for Stoppers**

If you're trying to shoot the moon, you want to be on the lookout to see if any cards come out that would put a halt to your moon shoot. Once you see the stoppers have been played, you know your toppers can't be beat, and you can proceed more confidently with your moon shoot.

### **5.5.3 How Many Cards in a Suit Have Been Played**

This counting tactic is a little more involved, as you are keeping track of larger numbers. Most people can only feasibly keep track of one suit.

The most common suits to keep track of are:

- Spades, to see how much longer it will take before the Queen comes out.
- Hearts, to see how many have been played, and often to see how many more you need to take—or in what sequence you should play your own hearts—in order to shoot the moon.
- Any suit that you are having trouble with, i.e. you don't have (m)any low cards in that suit, and you want to know how many more are out there.
- Any suit that you are long in and you will use to try to shoot the moon

When you are keeping track of the number of cards in a suit that have been played, it can sometimes be helpful to think of the game being between yourself and a nameless, faceless “out there” consisting of the rest of the players. When the number left “out there” starts getting low, however (i.e. when one or more players go void and begin sloughing off other cards), then it becomes important to start paying attention to just who is void in that particular suit, and who is not. Your second priority then, will be to pay attention to what cards are being sloughed off by those that are void.

#### **5.5.4 Exactly Which Cards Have Been Played**

This is Rainman stuff. Most people can't do this without a cheat sheet. The heck of it is though, if you can count the number of cards that have been played, and keep on the lookout for stoppers, you don't really need to keep track of every single other card that's been played. If you can pull it off, though, more power to you.