

**Friday, December 07, 2007**

## **Lying about your hand**

"Did you know that it's OK to lie about your hand, but you're not allowed to tell the truth about it?"

I heard that from a woman at the table yesterday at the Flamingo. It's not the first time that I've heard somebody make such an assertion. Most famously, Annie Duke said essentially the same thing during one of the 2006 World Series of Poker episodes. I suspect that the 700 million re-broadcasts of the series are ultimately the source by which most players "know" this rule.

But it's not true. The fact that so many people hear this and instantly believe it is just one tiny manifestation of the general societal problem that most people have precious little training or experience in critical thinking.\* Even if I weren't pretty well attuned to the subject of poker rules, just an overall skepticism about accepting as fact things that people say would have caused me to raise a quizzical eyebrow at Ms. Duke's claim. I would immediately think, "Can that really be true? If so, it doesn't make any sense at all."

Let me address this under three headings: (1) Why the "rule" as stated would be stupid and pointless, (2) What the rule actually is, and (3) What I think the rule should be.

### **The alleged rule would be stupid and pointless**

Suppose for a moment that there really were a rule that said that you could say any lie you wanted to about your hand, but couldn't tell the truth about what you were holding. Two prominent poker columnists have recently addressed this in detail, apparently both believing that there actually is just such a rule. They both do a nice job of explaining why it's ridiculous.

First is Steve Zolotow, writing for Card Player magazine (<http://www.cardplayer.com/author/article/all/57/10074>):

Someone in the main event told the truth about his hand, saying, "I have a king." His opponent folded, but he received a one-round penalty for telling the truth. Obviously, he should have said, "I don't have a king," then paused and added, "but there is a penalty for telling the truth." Thus, he could have conveyed the same information by lying about his hand. As long as we know that our opponent must be lying, we can assume the opposite is the truth. Unless players are allowed to use some mix of truth and lies, they effectively are telling the truth.

Next up is Mike Caro, who calls this "the idiot rule," because it prevents people from disclosing whatever they want about their cards only if both players are idiots (<http://www.pokerplayernewspaper.com/viewarticle.php?id=2351>):

But the worst rule in poker states that you can't tell the truth about your hand. For instance, you can't say, "I have three aces," if you actually do. That sucks. It sucks because, by rule, anything I say must be a lie to be legal. So, if I say I have a full house, opponents are given information. They know I can't have a full house or I'd be in violation of the idiot rule. So, I guess, if I wanted to tell someone I had aces full, I'd have to say something like, "One thing I can say positively is that I don't have aces full." If I said that and didn't have aces full, I'd be telling the truth and in clear violation of the idiot rule. For that reason, astute opponents would know that I'm lying--which is legal--and that I absolutely do have aces-full.

Exactly so. A rule requiring that everything you say about your hand must be a lie would be (1) unenforceable (because not every hand gets opened to check to see if the player was telling the truth or not) and, (2) completely ineffective. In fact, paradoxically, the more rigorously it was enforced, the less effective it would become at the presumed goal of preventing collusion.

### **That ain't really the rule**

Fortunately, nobody has yet, to the best of my knowledge, actually been stupid enough to implement the "rule" that Zolotow and Caro rail against. I'm really quite surprised that both of these columnists took the trouble to publish a critique of a rule that doesn't exist.

So where does this poker urban legend come from? As far as I can tell, the source is this language in the World Series of Poker rules (<http://www.worldseriesofpoker.com/pdfs/wsop.tournament-rules.07.pdf>):

52. Players are obligated to protect the other players in the tournament at all times. Therefore, whether in a hand or not, players may not a.) disclose contents of live or folded hands....

Notice that it doesn't say anything at all about "truth" or "lies." It forbids one to "disclose" the contents of one's hand. The number of ways that one can "disclose" one's holdings are limited only by the imagination. You could show your cards. You could just say what you have. You could tap it out with your feet in morse code. You could send smoke signals (well, except that they've banned smoking at the table now). You could let an opponent keep guessing, shaking your head "no" when he's wrong and nodding "yes" when he's right until he's got it, thus never speaking a word. Maybe if you have a touch of Marcel Marceau's spirit in you, you could pantomime it. It doesn't matter--they're all equally prohibited.

The implication is that you also can't "disclose" your hand by invoking a logical game such as Zolotow and Caro propose: "I do *not* have XYZ, but you know that I have to be lying about that." As they note, that is the functional equivalent of straightforwardly stating exactly what you have. Both are prohibited under the actual wording of the rule in question, because both are just two of the myriad methods by which one might "disclose" one's hand.

Let me repeat: *There is no currently published rule anywhere that says or implies that you can lie about your hand but not tell the truth about it.*

Let's look at some other common sources for poker rules, for the sake of completeness.

The Tournament Directors Association rule 12 is nearly identical to, and the probable source of, the WSOP rule:

Players are obligated to protect the other players in the tournament at all times. Therefore, players, whether in the hand or not, may not: 1. Disclose contents of live or folded hands....

Next is Bob Ciaffone's "Robert's Rules of Poker" (<http://www.lasvegasvegas.com/poker/chapter1.php>):

The following actions are improper, and grounds for warning, suspending, or barring a violator:

...Revealing the contents of a live hand in a multihanded pot before the betting is complete. Do not divulge the contents of a hand during a deal even to someone not in the pot, so you do not leave any possibility of the information being transmitted to an active player.

*Cooke's Rules of Real Poker*--for my money the best single rulebook yet--says this (p. 71, rule 10.20):

A player shall not intentionally expose a card or reveal it verbally in order to induce or inhibit action. However, in head's up matches (where only two players are dealt in) revealing a card shall be permitted.

I'm not sure if this is intended to cover literally only games where there are only two people playing the whole time, or if it is intended to extend to full ring games, when only two players are contesting the pot.

Lou Krieger and Sheree Bykofsky, in their book *The Rules of Poker: Essentials for Every Game*, go even further, and would disallow such disclosures even when heads-up (p. 79, rule 3.9):

Intentionally exposing a card to induce or inhibit action is a serious breach of poker ethics, and in certain instances can be considered a form of collusion. It is never permitted.

Notice that not even *one* of these sources says even a single word about lying versus telling the truth. So the next time you hear somebody make such a claim, ask him or her to point you to the actual source where the alleged rule is written. It's a safe bet that the speaker will be unable to do so.

### **What should the rule be?**

Let's talk about cash games first.

The overarching reason for any no-disclosure rule is to protect other players. For example, perhaps a player has moved all-in ahead of me before the flop and I have pocket kings. I move all-in, too, and show my cards before other people have had a chance to act, because I would really prefer to have to beat only the guy who is already all-in; large pocket pairs don't play well against, say, five or six opponents, so my action is intended to scare off opponents. But the person who first moved all-in may have something like suited 9-10, which plays much better, in terms of risk:reward ratio, when there are several players in the hand (because the payoff for hitting a straight or flush is potentially enormous). Obviously, the same reasoning applies to saying "I have two kings, so the rest of you should fold," even though the verbal disclosure leaves more doubt about the speaker's truthfulness than does showing the cards.

What about less specific disclosures, such as "I have a really big hand here"? I would outlaw them, too, on the slippery-slope argument. If you write the rule so that it only prohibits stating *exactly* what your cards are, then presumably it would be acceptable to say something like "I have a pocket pair bigger than queens." That comes so close to what is prohibited that the rule ceases to be useful. So I would move the dividing line all the way down to zero: you can't say anything that suggests--truthfully or not--the strength of your hand. I would also prohibit statements that come in the form of "I might have...", which is a common ploy of some players.

When there are only two players contesting the pot, however, a player disclosing his hand cannot do any harm to anybody except himself, and since I don't believe in protecting people from their own mistakes and/or stupidity, I'd allow it. There are times when revealing one or more cards can work to one's advantage in confusing or deceiving an opponent. Consider this absolutely brilliant ploy by Daniel Negreanu, where he combines showing one card, a statement about what the other one might be, and a scary-looking minimum raise, to get Sam Farha to fold a better hand: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d33K96MGzVA>. It's an ingenious trick, one of the slyest bits of deception I've ever seen deployed at a poker table.

I was on the bad end of another skillful bit of deceptive revealing by an opponent a couple of months ago. I started with a strong hand (can't remember exactly what it was), but hated seeing three hearts on the flop, when I had none. The turn brought a fourth heart to the board. I bet, my tricky opponent took a long time to decide what to do. While thinking, he turned over the 7 of hearts. He finally called. The river was a blank. I decided that with just a 7-high flush, he must be worried that I had a higher flush, so I moved all-in. He insta-called with the look on his face of the cat that caught the canary (as, indeed, he had). His other card was the king of hearts. He had flopped the king-high flush, and his showing the lower card tricked me into thinking exactly what he wanted me to think: that he just had a low flush and was in a difficult spot, when really he had the second nuts. Well played, sir--you lured me in perfectly.

That kind of clever psychological gambit should absolutely be part of the game, as long as only two players are involved. So showing one or both hole cards, or announcing or hinting at your hand--honestly or dishonestly--is fine by me.

What about in tournaments? The same considerations hold for multi-way pots, but there's an added wrinkle in tournaments that makes the picture less clear for heads-up situations. That relates to the concept of "tournament equity." This isn't the place for detailed analysis, but basically, depending on the payout schedule, late in a tournament, how one player acts in a hand can dramatically affect the amount of money that other players--even those not involved in the current hand--can expect to win. This is at the heart of an interesting debate between Lee Jones and Daniel Negreanu, at <http://www.biggerdeal.com/2007/10/05/daniel%e2%80%99s-wrong-i%e2%80%99m-10000-sure/>. Be sure to read the

comments, too. (One of the commenters is me. I'll let people guess which one.)

I don't know the optimal way to balance the advantages of allowing the kind of Negreanu-esque ploy, which has traditionally been an integral part of the game, against preventing injury to uninvolved players' tournament equity. Perhaps starting the ban on disclosing one's hand, even when only two people are in the pot, when the money is reached, or a few places before the money, or at the final table, would strike the best balance. Of course, even if it works that way, when it gets down to the final two contestants, the rule serves no purpose and could be taken out of effect again.

### **Back to the start**

But all of that is mostly irrelevant to where I started this discussion. I began with griping about how so many players just hear somebody say what a poker rule is, and accept that as the gospel truth, without looking it up anywhere, without thinking very hard about whether the alleged rule makes any sense or not, etc. To compound the problem, these people then repeat it to others, spreading the disinformation. It makes me crazy. It's not that hard to find out what the rules really are.

So when you hear somebody claim that there's a poker rule that says \_\_\_\_\_, and you've never heard it before, ask for evidence. Hold the thought in suspension until you can verify it. Don't pass it on as if it's the revealed word of God.

And for Pete's sake, don't talk about your hand!

\*I risk going off on a full-tilt tangent here, because this is one of my biggest all-time sources of frustration and dismay about the world. In fact, if I had the magical power to cure just one ill of humankind, I think it would be the lack of critical thinking. I would make every person on the planet instantly inclined to critical thinking, and skilled at it. This would immediately solve countless woes, from the relatively trivial (people wasting their money on pills that the sellers promise will cause miraculous weight loss, enlarge male genitalia, or make the user irresistible to the opposite sex) to the truly world-changing (people being led to believe that if they fly a commercial jet into a skyscraper they will be rewarded with a bevy of virgins in heaven). So don't get me started.

### **Addendum, December 7, 2007**

I emailed Mr. Caro to tell him of my disagreement with the premise of his column (Mr. Zolotow doesn't have a published email address). He responded quickly, for which I am grateful. With his consent, I'll share his comment:

About the issue on "can't tell the truth." I know that rule is in existence. It only applies to tournaments, though. Many directors have since modified it. Hopefully, my urging had something to do with it. I was, I think, instrumental in arguing against it on several televised events I participated in. They even waived the "can't show cards" heads-up rule in both the National Heads-up Championship (NBC) and Superstars, when I participated. That wasn't my influence alone. Many others felt it made for good TV to adopt these changes.

I even had the honor of roasting the person who first put the rule into place at the WSOP.

This is useful information. I can't find any such rule in current, published sources, but it's certainly possible that, as suggested in Mr. Caro's reply, there are tournament directors who use such an unpublished rule specific to their facility, and/or that if I looked at older versions of tournament rules I would find it. I freely admit that I didn't investigate older materials, so if a must-lie rule previously existed, I wouldn't know about it (having been in the poker world for only a couple of years now).