

CRIBBAGE: GAME OF CHANCE OR SKILL?

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The title question is often asked. Let's consider the game from beginning to end in light of that question. Undeniably some portions of the game are the results of pure chance. Those elements of the game which cannot be associated with any type of strategy are considered to be the result of chance. What are those elements over which player strategy has no influence?

1. The shuffle of the cards.
2. The cut of the cards prior to the actual deal.
3. The distribution of the cards.
4. The cut to determine the starter card.

I believe it is reasonable to assume that any game which requires a shuffle, cut, and card distribution could demonstrate that these items are beyond the influence of individual strategy and are not influenced by player choice. This is true of bridge as well except in those cases where the distribution of cards and hand composition is pre-determined as in duplicate play.

The following portions of the game are heavily influenced by the strategies employed by the individual player.

1. **Hand recognition and counting** is the first area in which the player begins to develop strategy. So strategy and related decision making begins as soon as the cards are picked up by the player. The selection of cards to be retained will be analyzed with board position in mind. A clear understanding of board position strategy will influence the type of cards retained. Does player need cards with pegging potential? Is primary need to score large number of points? If so, what are best cards to retain and which cards are more likely to benefit from the turn of the starter card? Can player afford to discard good cards to opponent crib or is there a need to "balk" crib? If own crib, what are best choices to build crib and enhance score of crib?
2. **Discarding to crib** is an area in which much knowledge is required in order to develop an effective approach. During the period 1990-1999, I personally recorded the results of over 250,000 cribs in actual play. From that research, a discarding strategy was developed based on the average points that any discard selection would provide when discarded to self or opponent. That data suggests that a player should put cards to own crib which have high scoring

potential. What are those cards? In order of preference and as available discards to own crib should look like this: 5-5, 2-3, 5-J, 5-6, 5-K, 5-10, 5-Q, 4-5, 7-8, etc. Some of these discards are strong enough to sacrifice points in the hand. Part of the discarding strategy to own crib then becomes making those selections and thinking of the crib as an extension of the hand and to view the score of hand/crib as a combined value. What are the cards which are likely to produce a low score when discarded to opponent? Those cards look like this: 10-K, 9-K, 9-Q, 6-K, 6-Q, 8-K, 7-10, 6-10, 7-Q, A-Q, and 7-K. There are **small hand/large hand formulae** which can be employed as effective discarding strategies.

3. The pegging portion of the game includes many strategies. Among those are the following:
 - A. **Magic eleven** (I call them “Elevens from Heaven”). These are cards which total eleven points and are instrumental in scoring 31-for-2 or more. Two card elevens favor the dealer (5-6, 4-7, 3-8, 2-9, A-“10”). Three card elevens favor the non-dealer (A-A-9, 2-2-7, 3-3-5, 4-4-3, 5-5-1). Four card elevens favor the dealer (A-A-4-5, A-2-3-5, 2-2-3-4) and often result in huge pegging scores when a portion of the eleven point combination is a triple: A-A-A-8, 2-2-2-5, 3-3-3-2.
 - B. The **five card trap** is an essential pegging strategy and is employed frequently by successful players. This trap play can be executed by either dealer or non-dealer. On many hands this trap is possible and a player must engage the strategy on the play of the opening card.
 - C. The **Jack trap** or “**rattle trap**” as I call it is a very effective pegging strategy.
 - D. **Low card and middle card trap** strategies have been developed and refined by many players.
 - E. Proper utilization of “**sleeper**” cards in pegging is an integral portion of successful pegging strategy.
 - F. **Enticing the play** in a manner which benefits your pegging prospects is a common strategy even among kitchen players.
 - G. **Faking a flush** in play is a strategy designed to confuse opponent and gain pegging opportunities.
 - H. **End of game pegging** involves strategy unlike that employed in other areas of the board. How do you prevent dealer from pegging at game end? How do you secure pegs at game end which when combined with score of hand will win game? Which cards have high pegging value? Which have moderate pegging value? Which have low pegging value? Are there cards which have no pegging value?
4. One of the efforts of advanced crib players, and authors of crib strategy is to get players to **view the game logically and to make percentage plays**.

Applying logic as a strategy causes players to note cards that are not present in opponent hand without having visual proof of the non-existence of that card. Such a game strategy causes players to develop X-ray vision. What is the percentage lead when holding A-4 or 2-3 couplet? What should your opening lead be when holding 6-7-8-10? What should your response to a Q lead be if holding A-6-7-8? How should you lead from a four card run? How should you respond from a four card run after your opponent's lead?

5. **There are strategies built on a game psychology.** Hesitations on the drop of a card may encourage pairing by opponent in play. Some players act as though they are about to pull another card from their hand at end of play which may influence play of opponent. Lengthy hesitation near end of game may be an indicator that a very poor hand has been dealt. And there are many more behaviors developed as strategies that have their base in game psychology.
6. The basis of all game strategies is board position strategy. The "**Theory of 26**" has been developed by Delynn Colvert and applied to actual play by thousands of cribbage adherents with amazing results. Playing **critical position zones** is another concept espoused by the author. Both establish a positional strategy as to where a player needs to be at end of hand one, two, three, etc. Playing this strategy begins with the opening deal of the game. The players who adhere most fully to such a board strategy have higher winning percentages in play at home or on the tournament trail. This strategy is covered in detail in *Play Winning Cribbage*, pages 78 through 104.
7. Essential to success in cribbage is a **thorough knowledge of mathematical probability or frequency of occurrence.** What are the typical results of a 1000 games? What advantage does the dealer of the opening hand gain? What are the average number of points pegged in game by dealer and non-dealer? Does dealer or non-dealer score the larger hands? How many point are scored in the typical crib? What are the margins of victory in most games of cribbage played?

The game of "cribbidge" was invented by Sir John Suckling around 1631. Game strategies have been outlined in written form since that time. The first major title, "A Treatise on the Game of Cribbage", was published in 1791 followed by a second edition in 1807. Only one copy is known to exist in the USA and is located in an Ohio library. The *Cribbage Player's Text-book* was published in 1837, consisting of 128 pages. These first three works were published in London. One of the earliest American efforts to outline cribbage strategies and general rules of play was "Cribbage Made Easy" published in New York around 1830. This effort included 143 pages. Many other books have followed.

The five best known contemporary books are: "All About Cribbage" by Douglas Anderson; "Cribbage for Experts" by Dan Barlow; "Cribbage: A New Concept" by John Chambers; "Play Winning Cribbage" by Delynn Colvert; and "Win at Cribbage" by Joe Wergin.

If you left crib strategy out of these books, you would have only a cover and a few cartoons.

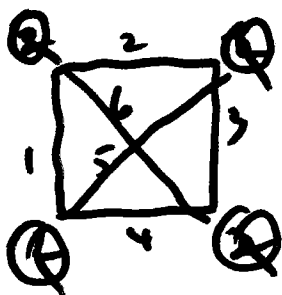
Public information relative to crib strategy is available on the internet from American Cribbage Congress, www.cribbage.org. The Tip Library menu selection there includes hundreds of pages of crib strategy. Mike Schell, Washington State resident and statistical analyst, does a great job of studying and analyzing a variety of crib strategies on the internet. His homepage would convince the greatest skeptic that cribbage is a game of skill. Check it out at <http://members.aol.com/schell77/>. Successful players from internet gaming areas outline strategies for success in game of cribbage. Player notes relative to game strategy may be viewed on www.zone.com/cribbage/. Artful Dodger's Page is another homepage focusing on crib strategy. There are many others as well.

Classes have been taught on cribbage in many parts of America. Such information is available from the American Cribbage Congress. Many middle school general math students learn cribbage as it is a game which enhances the development of basic mathematic skills. Lea Hornbeck, 3710 I St, Washougal, Washington 98671 is an advised contact if more information is needed on education programs of the American Cribbage Congress. The author of this article teaches classes on cribbage to adults. Classes are 90 minutes in duration, require ninety minutes of practice to apply instruction to actual play, and the complete course is comprised of twelve classes. A suitcase full of material relative to game strategy has been developed for this course. It seems apparent that a game of chance would not be the subject of written matter nor would it become valid classroom material.

Just peggin' along,

RAS

know how many points in hand before crib



6 pair