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Sheepshead is the American evolution of the German game Schafkopf. The 4 player version of Sheepshead is very similar to the original German game.

Sheepshead is flexible, it can be played with 3, 4, or 5 players.

Sheepshead has shifting partnerships and hidden partners. In the 4 and 5 player game partnerships are determined by calling out certain cards, players will not know who their partner is until that card is played!

Sheepshead has an extra long trump suit, giving it a very different flavor from other trick taking games.

Hands of Sheepshead can be played quickly, and with the shifting partnerships, you'll never get bored!

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Information about Sheepshead and many other games can be found at www.pagat.com
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Gameplay Overview

Sheepshead is a game for 3 - 5 players using a 32 card deck, remove the 2 - 6 from a standard deck. Sheepshead is played for hard score, tokens, chips, or coins are used to track points. Sheepshead has a very long trump suit, the highest trumps are all of the queens, then all of the jacks, then the suit of diamonds. Sheepshead is a point trick game. Certain cards are worth points and can be won in tricks.

In a 3 or 5 player game, the cards are dealt out evenly, with 2 cards dealt face down in the middle of the table, called the "blind". In a 4 player game, all cards are dealt out evenly. In a 3 player game, a player can choose to play alone against the other 2 players. This player picks up the blind into their hand and then discards 2 cards back down onto the table. In a 4 player game, players can call an Ace that they do not hold, but that they hold at least one other card of that suit. The holder of that Ace is the partner of the player who called it. In a 5 player game, a player can choose to pick up the blind and discard 2 cards back onto the table. The holder of the Jack of Diamonds becomes the partner of this player. The player to the left of the dealer leads a card to the first trick. Players must follow suit if possible, and can play any card if they cannot follow suit. The winner of a trick leads the next trick. When all the tricks have been played, players add up the point values of all the cards they won in tricks. The team that won more than half the card points scores game points, the other team loses game points.

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Basic Strategy - Offense or Defense

The declarer and the declarer's partner will want to lead trump first, while the defenders will want to lead fail suits. The declarer likely has more trumps, or higher ranked trumps than the other players. By leading trumps, the declarer hopes to pull the trumps out of the other players hands so that they cannot trump the declarer's fail suits. Conversely, if the defenders lead fail suits and play cards that are worth points, they can tempt the declarer's team to use trumps to win those tricks. The final few tricks of a hand are often loaded up with high cards that people have been trying to avoid giving away during the rest of the hand. Whichever team or player can win the last several tricks can often win enough points to win the game. Therefore it is important to try to save winning trumps for the final tricks, or pull trumps from your opponents hands so that you can win the final tricks. When forced to play trump, for example, and you have only a Queen and the Ace of Diamonds, but you know you cannot take the trick, it may be better to sacrifice the ace. The Queen may take a trick with more points later or win the lead at a crucial moment.

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Basic Strategy - Butter

During any game of Sheepshead, there will be at least one set of players playing as a team during the hand. The most important strategy for players who find themselves in a partnership is to “butter up” the tricks that their partner is going to win by playing high value cards.

Sheepshead has a very long trump suit, but the top trumps are not the most valuable cards. That means that the valuable trumps can be won in tricks by less valuable but higher ranking trumps. If your partner is going to win a trick with a high trump such as the Queen of Clubs, follow suit with a valuable trump such as the Ace, 10, or King of Diamonds.

On the other hand, the fail suits are very short and the valuable cards in the fail suit can be easily won by low ranking trumps if a player has no cards in that suit. If you can void your hand of a suit (get rid of all the cards of that suit) then if that suit is led, you can’t follow suit and can play whatever you want. If your partner is going to win a trick with a suit you are void of, you can butter up the trick with a valuable card of a different suit.

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The Trump Suit

Sheepshead has an extra long trump suit. All of the diamonds are trump, as well as all of the Jacks and all of the Queens. The trump suit ranks from high to low:

Q♣, Q♠, Q♥, Q♦, J♣, J♠, J♥, J♦, A♦, 10♦, K♦, 9♦, 8♦, 7♦

The Queens and Jacks always count as the trump suit, not as the suit shown on the cards. The Q♣ is the highest trump, it is not in the Clubs suit for the purposes of playing tricks.

The Fail Suits

The non-trump suits are called fail suits. These are the Hearts, Spades, and Clubs. The fail suits rank from high to low:

A, 10, K, 9, 8, 7

Point Values

Points are scored for winning certain cards in tricks. The point values for the different cards are:

Ace	10	King	Queen	Jack	9, 8, 7
11	10	4	3	2	0

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Ace	10	King	Queen	Jack	9, 8, 7
11	10	4	3	2	0

What is a Trick?

A player will play a card face up into the center of the table, this is called “leading a trick”. Going clockwise, all other players must also play a card face up into the center of the table. If possible, the other players must “follow suit” and play a card that matches the suit of the card that was originally led to the trick. If a player cannot follow suit because they have no cards of that suit in their hand, they can play any card.

If any trump cards are played to a trick, then the trick is won by the highest ranked trump card. If no trumps are played to a trick, the trick is won by the highest ranked card that matches suit with the card that was originally led. The winner of a trick leads the next trick by playing another card from their hand.

Remember that all of the Queens and all of the Jacks are trumps, not the suit listed on the card. If someone leads the Ace of Hearts to a trick, playing the Queen of Hearts does not count as following suit, because it only counts as trump and not Hearts. If someone leads the 7 of Diamonds to a trick, then playing the Queen of Hearts counts as following suit because the 7 of Diamonds and the Queen of Hearts are both trump.

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Four Player Sheepshead (Schafkopf)

Deal 8 cards to each player, there is no blind. Scoring is the same as 3p Sheepshead. There is an auction to decide who plays as the declarer. There are several contracts that can be called, if a player overcalls another players’ contract, the first player has an opportunity to call a higher contract. The contracts are, from low to high:

Partner Game

The declarer calls an Ace that they do not have in their hand, but they must have at least one other card of that suit in their hand. The holder of the Ace is the declarer’s partner. The partner must play the Ace the first time the suit is led.

Diamond Solo

The declarer plays alone against the other 3 players

Suit Solo

The declarer plays alone against the other 3 players, but they may choose a new trump suit besides diamonds. The Queens and Jacks are still the top trumps, but the new suit is also trump.

Queens and Jacks

The declarer plays alone. Only Queens and Jacks are trump.

Just Queens

The declarer plays alone. Only Queens are trump.

Just Jacks

The declarer plays alone. Only Jacks are trump

Four Player Sheepshead (Schafkopf)

Deal 8 cards to each player, there is no blind. Scoring is the same as 3p Sheepshead. There is an auction to decide who plays as the declarer. There are several contracts that can be called, if a player overcalls another players’ contract, the first player has an opportunity to call a higher contract. The contracts are, from low to high:

Partner Game

The declarer calls an Ace that they do not have in their hand, but they must have at least one other card of that suit in their hand. The holder of the Ace is the declarer’s partner. The partner must play the Ace the first time the suit is led.

Diamond Solo

The declarer plays alone against the other 3 players

Suit Solo

The declarer plays alone against the other 3 players, but they may choose a new trump suit besides diamonds. The Queens and Jacks are still the top trumps, but the new suit is also trump.

Queens and Jacks

The declarer plays alone. Only Queens and Jacks are trump.

Just Queens

The declarer plays alone. Only Queens are trump.

Just Jacks

The declarer plays alone. Only Jacks are trump

Five Player Sheephead

Deal 6 cards to each player and 2 cards to the blind.

Going clockwise from the dealer, players can either pass or pick up the blind and play as the declarer.

The declarer adds the blind to their hand and discards 2 cards face down. These cards count towards the declarer's card points.

The declarer's partner is whoever holds the Jack of Diamonds. This player does not announce that they are the declarer's partner, but keep it hidden. If the declarer finds the Jack of Diamonds in the blind, they must play alone against the other 4 players.

If no one picks up the blind to become the declarer, a leaster is played.

Trick play and scoring works the same as in 3 player sheephead. When scoring, the declarer will pay or receive payment from 2 of the defenders, while the declarer's partner will pay or receive payment from the 3rd defender.

Variant

If the declarer finds the Jack of Diamond in the blind, instead of playing alone, they can reveal the Jack of Diamonds and call the holder of the Jack of Hearts as their partner.

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Deal 6 cards to each player and 2 cards to the blind.

Going clockwise from the dealer, players can either pass or pick up the blind and play as the declarer.

The declarer adds the blind to their hand and discards 2 cards face down. These cards count towards the declarer's card points.

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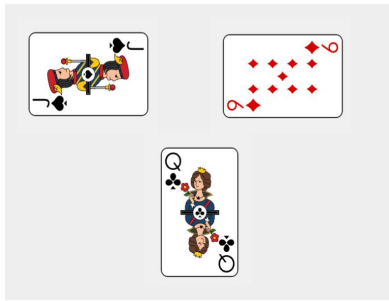
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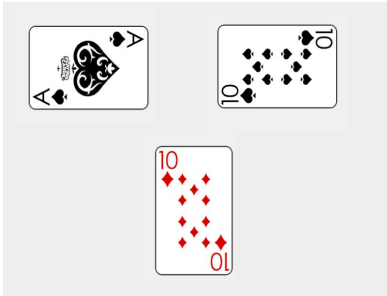
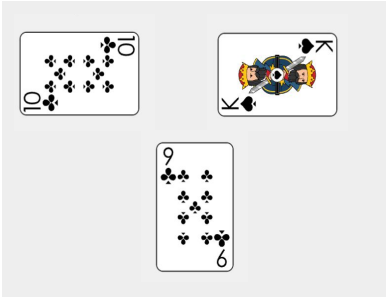
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Trick examples:



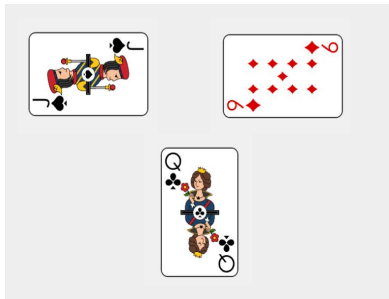
South leads the trick by playing trump, the Queen of Clubs. West follows suit with the Jack of Spades (also trump), and East follows suit with the 9 of Diamonds(also a trump). South wins the trick and leads the next.

South leads the 9 of Clubs. West follows suit with the 10 of Clubs. East has no Clubs, so can play any card. They play the King of Spades. West wins the trick and leads the next.



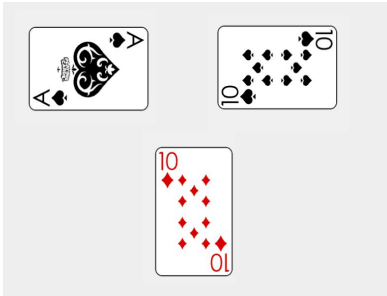
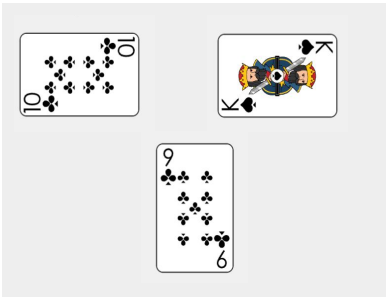
West leads the trick with the Ace of Spades. East follows suit with the 10 of Spades. South has no Spades and can play any card. They play the 10 of Diamonds (a trump) and win the trick.

Trick examples:



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South leads the 9 of Clubs. West follows suit with the 10 of Clubs. East has no Clubs, so can play any card. They play the King of Spades. West wins the trick and leads the next.



West leads the trick with the Ace of Spades. East follows suit with the 10 of Spades. South has no Spades and can play any card. They play the 10 of Diamonds (a trump) and win the trick.

Three Player Sheephead

Shuffle the deck and deal 10 cards to each player. Deal 2 cards face down on the table as the blind.

Going clockwise from the dealer, players can either pass or choose to pick up the blind and play the hand alone against the other two players. The player who decides to play alone, the declarer, picks up the blind and adds it to their hand, they then discard any two cards from their hand face down on the table. These discards count towards the declarer's final score.

The player to the left of the dealer leads to the first trick. Players must follow suit if possible and can play any card if they cannot follow suit. Winner of a trick leads the next trick.

After all the tricks have been played out, players count their card points to determine the winner.

If no players decide to pick up the blind and play alone, then a leaster is played. In a leaster, the goal is to score as few points as possible. The player to the left of the dealer leads the first trick like normal.

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Scoring

In a normal game, if the declarer wins 61 or more card points, they win the hand. Each opponent gives them one coin or score chip from their pool of coins or chips. If the declarer wins less than 61 card points, they lose the hand and give one coin or score chip to each opponent.

Schneider

If any side, either the declarer or the defenders, fails to win at least 30 card points (if the other side wins 91 or more points) they go Schneider and must pay the other side 2 coins or score chips each (if the declarer goes Schneider they pay 2 coins to each defender. If the defenders go Schneider they each pay 2 coins to the declarer)

No Tricks

If any side, either the declarer or the defenders, fails to win any tricks at all, they must pay the other side 3 coins or score chips each.

Leaster

If a leaster is played, then the player who won the least amount of card points wins the hand and receives 1 coin or score chip from each other player.

No-Trick Leaster

If a leaster is played and a player wins no tricks during the hand, then they receive 2 coins or score chips from each opponent.

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