

Sheephead Rules

Sheephead or Sheepshead is a 4-player, trick-taking card game similar in structure to the game Hearts. It is played in many German-American communities throughout the Midwest.

The Deck

Sheephead uses only 26 cards of the standard deck.
All 4 of the Kings, Queens, Jacks, Aces, 10s, and 9s.
Then only the 8 and 7 of Diamonds.

The Object of the Game

To score points for your team during a hand. Winning by a lot means a bigger payout for you for that hand.

Shuffle & Deal

Decide who will deal first. Shuffle the cards in the deck thoroughly, and the person to the right of the dealer should cut the deck. Deal 3 cards to each player in a clockwise manner. Then place two cards in the middle of the table, these cards are called the blind. Then deal the remaining cards, 3 at a time to each player. The person to the left of the dealer becomes the dealer in the next hand. If a card turns face up during the deal, all cards should be collected, reshuffled, and redealt.

Teams

Sheephead is played with teams and the team with the most points gets paid by the other team at the end of the hand. Teams change with each new hand. The two teams are called the Picking Team (the picker and the partner) and the Defense.

The Picker

After the deal, the person to the dealer's left gets the first opportunity to pick up the two cards in the blind, hence the name, "picker". If you have a good hand (lots of trump cards) go ahead and pick, otherwise pass the opportunity to the next player because losing as the picker is more costly. The moment you pick up the cards, you become the picker (you can't put them back).

When you pick, the blind is added to your hand and you will have to choose two cards from your hand to "bury" back into the blind. The points from the cards that you bury are counted toward your team's points at the end of the hand.

You have the option to go alone (aka "chop") when you bury, this raises the payout risk/reward because the game becomes 3 against 1. Only do this if you are confident you can win without any help. If you are going to chop you must announce it before the first card of the first trick is played.

After the Picker buries, the person to the right of the dealer may play their first card.

The Partner

The picker's partner is the player with the Jack of Diamonds. At the end of the hand, the picking team (partner and picker) will win if the points in the bury and the points from their combined tricks won are at least 61 points. If both teams have 60 points, then the Defense wins.

If the picker has the Jack of Diamonds, then the game is 3 vs 1 and there is no partner. The same is true if the picker picks up the Jack of Diamonds in the blind, this means that they are going alone even if they didn't intend to. The picker has the element of surprise here because the other 3 players don't know the hand is 3 vs 1.

Card Rankings

The 14 **trump** cards rank as follows:

HIGHEST RANKING

Q♣

7♦

Q♠

Q♥

Q♦

J♣

J♠

J♥

J♦

A♦

10♦

K♦

9♦

8♦

Here are a few tips to help you remember the ranking pattern:

- ❖ 10s beat Kings (the game creators hated their King)
- ❖ 7 of diamonds is second most powerful card
- ❖ Queens and Jacks are ranked Club Spade Heart Diamond
- ❖ All trump cards are Queens, Jacks, and/or Diamonds

These are the **fail** cards and are ranked within their suits as follows:

A♣

10♣

K♣

9♣

6♣

A♠

10♠

K♠

9♠

6♠

A♥

10♥

K♥

9♥

6♥

Leading and Following

The first card played during a trick is called the lead card. The player to the dealer's left always leads the first trick, the remaining tricks are lead by the winner of the previous trick. The lead card impacts what cards you may play during a trick because you must follow suit when possible.

- If the lead card is trump and you have trump, you must play a trump.
- If the lead card is a fail card and you have a fail card of the same suit you must play it (even if you have trump).











Failure to follow suit when you could have is called reneging. If a player is caught reneging then that player's team should forfeit and pay the minimum fee. (Unless all players agree to a different penalty before beginning to play).

Trick Scenarios:

Lead Card	Other Cards	Winning Card	Rationale
10♣	A♥ A♠ K♣	10♣	Aces did not follow suit and 10 beats king
10♣	A♥ A♠ A♣	A♣	The ace of clubs is more powerful than the 10.
A♣	A♥ A♠ 8♦	8♦	The 8 of diamonds is trump

Point Value of Cards

There are 120 points among the 26 cards. Here are all cards categorized by point value:

Point Value	Cards
11 points	   
10 points	   
4 points	   
3 points	   
2 points	   
0 points	     

Calculating the End-of-Hand Payouts

Sheephead is commonly played for quarters. Winning by a lot can mean a bigger payout than winning by a little. When playing in person, everyone must settle up payments before playing the next hand.

Base Payout Schedule

2 vs 2 Games	Base Payouts			
Game Outcome Scenario	Picker	Partner	Defense 1	Defense 2
Picking Team Won All Tricks "Clean Sweep"	\$0.75	\$0.75	-\$0.75	-\$0.75
Picking Team Won with 91+ points	\$0.50	\$0.50	-\$0.50	-\$0.50
Picking Team Won with 61+ points	\$0.25	\$0.25	-\$0.25	-\$0.25
Defense Won with 60+ points (50% of points)	-\$0.50	-\$0.50	\$0.50	\$0.50
Defense Won with 90+ points (75% of points)	-\$1.00	-\$1.00	\$1.00	\$1.00
Defense Won All Tricks "Clean Sweep"	-\$1.50	-\$1.50	\$1.50	\$1.50

3 vs 1 Games (When Picker Goes Alone)	Base Payouts			
Game Outcome Scenario	Picker	Defense 1	Defense 2	Defense 3
Picking Team Won All Tricks "Clean Sweep"	\$2.25	-\$0.75	-\$0.75	-\$0.75
Picking Team Won with 91+ points	\$1.50	-\$0.50	-\$0.50	-\$0.50
Picking Team Won with 61+ points	\$0.75	-\$0.25	-\$0.25	-\$0.25
Defense Won with 60+ points (50% of points)	-\$1.50	\$0.50	\$0.50	\$0.50
Defense Won with 90+ points (75% of points)	-\$3.00	\$1.00	\$1.00	\$1.00
Defense Won All Tricks "Clean Sweep"	-\$4.50	\$1.50	\$1.50	\$1.50

Additional Payouts

If the hand is a Hand of Doubles then the base payout is doubled.

If the picker doesn't win a trick personally during a hand, they have to pay every other player \$1. This is called the No-Trick-Pick Dollar Penalty. If it is a Hand of Doubles, the picker still only pays \$1 for this penalty. This rule applies regardless of whether the picking team won or lost.

Hand of Doubles Scenarios

If everyone passes during picking, then the dealer redeals and the hand becomes a hand of doubles.

If the current hand was already a hand of doubles then the current hand and the next hand will each be a hand of doubles and so on.

If a game ends in 60/60 the Defense wins and the next 4 hands will be doubles. This is called a "Round of Doubles" because 4 hands = 1 round.

Stealing the Blind

If someone else has picked before you had the chance, but you feel you have a good enough hand to win without a partner, you may steal the blind as soon as the original picker has finished burying *but **before** the first card of the first trick has been played.*

Blind Stealing is very similar to picking and chopping because it has the same amount of risk/reward only you don't get to see what the original picker buried until the end of the hand.

Additionally, both the blind theif and the original picker are subject to the No-Trick-Pick dollar penalty.

The blind cannot be stolen again from the blind theif.

Sheephead Beginner Strategy

Deciding Whether to Pick

Here are some hands that I would consider picking with:

- 2 or more of the top 3 cards
- 2 or more of the top 5 cards, another trump, plus some points to bury
- 1 of the top 3 cards, plus 3 other trump, plus some points to bury
- 5 middle-of-the-road trump

Note that if you are the first person being offered the chance to pick you don't know very much about the other players. If you are the last person being offered to pick (backhand), you know that the trump cards are likely pretty evenly spread out across the other players because none of them felt like their hand was good enough to pick with.

There are hands that I would pick with being backhand that I wouldn't pick with being first.

If you are brave you can pick with less and hope that your partner will be able to help you.

Remember that there is an 8% chance that you pick up the Jack of Diamonds in the blind so if you are picking light remember that there's a risk that you will be forced to go alone.

Deciding what to bury

Use the bury to remove cards from the game and store points for yourself for the end of the hand.

Often that means burying your most valuable and lowest ranking cards. For example, if I have the 10 of spades and the Ace of spades and the Ace of diamonds. I would bury the two spades and keep the Ace of diamonds in my hand.

I typically try to have as much trump in my hand as possible. Players sometimes sit on their high point value cards until the last few tricks and so having enough trump to last can make a big difference.

Deciding whether to Go Alone (Chop)

Applying the same conditions that I have listed up above for picking but better. Like if you have the top 4 cards in your hand, you are going to win 4 of the 6 tricks no matter what happens, that's probably enough to chop with.

If you have the Jack of Diamonds, don't announce that you are chopping because you already are and keeping it a secret is advantageous because the other players won't know who to give their high point value cards to.

Deciding which card to lead with

The hard fast rule is this: If you are on the picking team, lead with trump. Otherwise, lead with a high point value fail card.

Why is that? The picker is supposed to be the player with the most trump. If the picker gets the game to a state where all of the players have only fail cards and the picker has all trump remaining, then the picker will be guaranteed to win the rest of the tricks in the hand. When the picker or partner plays trump they are forcing the other players to play trump, this is called "bleeding trump". It also prevents the high-value fail cards from being played too early where the other players can take them from the picking team.

When you are on the defense your hope is to play a fail card of a suit that the picker and partner have because then they are forced to play a card of the same suit and hopefully one of your team members can take the points from them and lead again on the next trick. Also, it means that your teammates get to hang onto their trump for another trick.

As the partner, a good card to lead with can be the Jack of Diamonds because it will let the picker know who you are so that the picker doesn't fight you for points.

Deciding which card to follow with

When you are following you are deciding whether to throw in points, take the trick, wait it out, or share information.

If you know your team is going to take the trick, then you should play your most *valuable* card. If your team member played a high-value card, then they are expecting you to play your most *powerful* card so you can take the trick.

If you know your team has lost the trick, minimize the damage done by playing a low value, low power card and wait it out for the next one.

If you are the last player in the trick (back hand), you have the most information about the trick (obviously) which can make this position advantageous.

Strive to remember always what the highest-ranking card that has not yet been played is so that you know once it appears whether a guaranteed trick loss or victory has happened for your team so that you can respond accordingly.

Table Talk is Frowned Upon

From the time a hand begins being dealt and until the start of the last trick, players should carefully guard what they say and keep table-talk to a minimum.

Why not talk? Here are few reasons:

- An unscrupulous player may try to use code words to share information about their hand with their partner to gain an advantage.
- Asking a question about what to do in a given scenario will strongly suggest that you are presently in that scenario or a similar one which can be used maliciously to influence the other player's actions.
- Remembering which cards have been played is an important part of the strategy, talking about previously played cards can refresh your opponent's memory and influence their actions.

If you are unsure of whether your comment/question would be influential, say/ask it at the start of the last trick and find out whether it would have been okay to say/ask during the hand. Since each player only has one card left on the last trick, table talk can't influence the players' remaining actions.

Game Name Origin

According to the [Sheephead Wikipedia page](#), the game's name comes from an older Bavarian derivation called "Schafkopf" (German: *Schaf* = sheep, *Kopf* = head) where each player's score was kept by adding a line to their own drawing of a sheep's head. Once one player finished their sheep's head illustration they'd win the game (similar to keeping score in Hangman).