Poker Crusher's Guide to Strategic Thinking

1. The Core Skill: Chess, Not Checkers

The fundamental difference between a novice poker player and a "Crusher" lies not in their ability to read people, knowledge of theory, or work ethic, but in their strategic foresight.

* **Novice Player:** Thinks one step ahead. They come to a conclusion ("betting is good because I win this pot a lot") and then seek evidence to support it.
* **Crusher:** Thinks multiple moves ahead, weighing several options and planning for various permutations. They consider, "If I bet, X happens. If I check, Y happens. Then on the turn, Z happens. Therefore, Y might be better than X." This is likened to playing "chess, not checkers."

2. Developing the Skill: Two Simple Questions

To cultivate this strategic thinking, players should ask two simple questions during every hand:

1. **What is their range?** This involves understanding the likely hands an opponent holds based on their pre-flop and post-flop actions.
2. **What happens if...?** This involves visualizing various scenarios based on different actions you might take and how your opponent might respond, playing out these permutations.

3. Practical Application: Case Studies

The briefing provides several detailed examples to illustrate the "What is their range?" and "What happens if?" framework.

Case Study 1: Button Open with T9s on A72 Rainbow Flop (vs. Recreational Big Blind)

**Initial Thought (Novice):** The YouTube comment suggests range-betting is "absolutely printing" on A72 rainbow if the opponent folds weak hands, implying a C-bet is good.

**Crusher's Analysis:**

* **Opponent's Range:** Wide, defensive big blind range (around 40% of hands), excluding absolute top (3-bets pre-flop) and absolute bottom (folds pre-flop).
* **What Happens if We C-bet?**
* **Opponent folds weak hands:** Good (e.g., Pocket 3s, King Jack suited).
* **Opponent check-raises:** We fold (we have 10-high).
* **Opponent calls:** This is the problem. On a static, dry board, opponents often slow-play strong hands. Our 10-high has no showdown value.
* **If we barrel big on turn:** Opponent's range becomes very strong (sets, two pair, strong AX). We get called by strong hands and fold out hands that might fold later (7x, 2x). We have no good river options.
* **If we barrel small on turn:** Pot remains small. Opponent still has strong hands. No good river options to fold strong AX or get value from weaker hands.
* **If we check back turn after C-betting flop:** Opponent likely has AX (if they float weak hands, they'd fold flop). We have no fold equity on river against AX. If they bet river, we have to fold.
* **Conclusion of C-betting:** While sometimes profitable (instant fold), when called, it's hard to define the opponent's range, leading to unprofitable subsequent barrels.
* **What Happens if We Check Back Flop?** This is where more information is gained.
* **Opponent Checks Turn:** Their range is weak (Showdown Value like pocket 3s, 7x, pocket 8s, or air/draws). Strong AX/sets would bet turn.
* **Action:** Double barrel big on turn, then blast River (e.g., 3x pot) to fold weak AX. "We can't really run into any brick walls here."
* **Opponent Bets Small on Turn:** (e.g., less than half pot) Still a weaker range (weak AX, draws, Showdown Value, bluffs). Not strong two-pair or sets.
* **Action:** Float turn, then raise River (if they bet small again) or bluff big on River (if they check). Our hand looks like a trap. We win two bets against weaker range. "Our opponent has told us twice in no uncertain terms excuse me sir I do not have a strong hand."
* **Opponent Bets Big on Turn:** Strong range (strong AX, two pair, sets, straights).
* **Action:** Easy fold. Opponent defines their range for us.
* **Conclusion of Checking Back:** Allows for better range definition and more profitable bluffing opportunities when the opponent shows weakness, or an easy fold when they show strength.

Case Study 2: Big Blind Defend with 76dd on 983 Flop (vs. Recreational Button Open)

**Initial Thought (Novice on Ace Turn):** "I don't have Showdown value. Let's just come out and bet on the turn because if I bet I just get to fold out a lot of hands like King high or Jack high or pocket fours or whatever."

**Crusher's Analysis:**

* **Opponent's Range (after Flop check-back, Ace Turn):**

1. **Ace X:** (e.g., Ace King, Ace Queen, Ace Jack, Ace 10) likely checked flop due to showdown value.
2. **Big Broadway Cards:** (e.g., King Queen, King Jack) that missed flop, didn't feel comfortable betting wet flop.
3. **Underpairs/Weak Showdown Value:** (e.g., Pocket 4s, Pocket 5s, Pocket 6s, 8x) checked back on flop.

* **What Happens if We Bet Turn?**
* We fold underpairs, 8x, King high (good).
* **Problem:** If called, opponent's range is mostly AX. River bluffing is difficult as they will often call. We either check and lose a street or bluff and get snapped off.
* **What Happens if We Check Turn?**
* **Opponent Bets (Ace X, Broadway cards):** They will bet their AX and often bluff with Broadway cards.
* **Action:** Check-raise! This "maximizes fold equity" against AX and gets value from bluffs. If called, we have a large pot for a river jam, forcing AX to fold.
* **Opponent Checks Back (Showdown Value):** (e.g., Pocket 4s, Pocket 5s, 8x)
* **Action:** Overbet River. Opponent likely doesn't have AX (would have bet turn). We look like AX or two pair and can fold out their weak showdown value.
* **Conclusion of Checking Turn:** "In almost all scenarios when we check the turn we win." It allows us to play perfectly against both strong (check-raise) and weak (river overbet) parts of the opponent's range, extracting more value or maximizing fold equity.

Case Study 3: Small Blind 3-bet with T9cc on QJ4 Flop (vs. Recreational Button Call)

**Crusher's Analysis (Out of Position):**

* **Opponent's Range:** Button defend range to SB 3-bet (15-16% of hands), not Aces/Kings (4-bet pre-flop), not weakest hands.
* **What Happens if We C-bet?**
* Folds out some better hands (Ace high, small pairs).
* **Problem:** When opponent calls (in position), "they slow play much much much more." This makes their range hard to define. Horses in the stable would triple barrel and get snapped off by strong hands that didn't raise earlier (Pocket Jacks, Queen Jack). This suggests an unprofitable triple barrel bluff.
* **What Happens if We Check?** Live opponents "massively over stab their good hands" when we check.
* **Opponent Checks Back Flop:** Weak range. They "usually don't have top pair, they don't have two pair, they don't have sets." Best hands are weak AX.
* **Action:** Big bet turn to target showdown value, then empty the clip on river with a big overbet. Not worried about brick walls.
* **Opponent Bets Small:** Weaker range (less strong AX, two pair, sets). "The more fold equity we have the less equity in our own hand we need."
* **Action:** Check-raise flop, jam turn. We get a lot of folds.
* **Opponent Bets Big:** "They're just screaming I have a strong hand."
* **Action:** Check-call with our open-ended straight draw. No fold equity to bluff.
* **Conclusion of Checking:** Checking allows for profitable bluffs against weak ranges or clear check-calls against strong ranges.

Case Study 4: Small Blind 3-bet with Pocket Kings on 965 Monotone Flop (vs. Aggressive Pro)

**Crusher's Analysis (Against a Pro, focusing on River):**

* **Initial Strategy:** Against pros, play simple. Check entire range on boards better for opponent, bet entire range on boards better for you. On this board (connected, monotone), check entire range, especially against aggressive player who makes betting mistakes.
* **Scenario:** Flop (965ccc) check, opponent bets small, we call. Turn (3d) opponent checks back. River (3s) board pairs.
* **Opponent's Range (on River after this line):**
* **No strong hands:** Flushes, straights, sets would keep betting turn from an aggressive player.
* **Thin Value Showdown Value:** (e.g., Pocket 8s, Pocket 7s, T9s, J9s) didn't feel comfortable 3-barreling.
* **Air/Whiffs:** (e.g., J10h, Q10s) stabbed flop, picked up nothing, even aggressive players don't triple barrel with pure air.
* **Conclusion:** Split into Thin Value and Air.
* **What Happens if We Bet River?**
* Opponent calls with thin value (our hand looks like AX).
* Opponent folds air. We win one bet.
* **What Happens if We Check River?**
* "Our hand looks like Ace King or Ace Queen...it just doesn't look like we have a good hand ever."
* **Opponent's action:** An aggressive pro "is very likely to bet both his air and his thin value on this River." They will bluff with air and bet for thin value.
* **Conclusion of Checking River:** By checking, we induce bluffs from their air and get larger thin value bets, winning more overall. "When you see a good move, look for a better one."

Case Study 5: Button Open with K5hh on J76 Flop (vs. Recreational Big Blind)

**Crusher's Analysis:**

* **Scenario:** Flop is wet and dynamic (J76). C-bet small to induce raises from strong hands and calls from weak hands/draws. Opponent calls. Turn is Jack (board pairs).
* **Opponent's Range (on Turn):**

1. **Jack X (Trips):** Strongest hands, would always call flop.
2. **Showdown Value:** (e.g., 7x, 6x, Pocket 8s, Pocket 9s)
3. **Draws:** (e.g., flush draws, 89, 54, 9T)

* **What Happens if We Bet Big on Turn?** (Pot or Overbet)
* Opponent (with Jack) likely just calls. Bigger bets lead to less fast-playing.
* Showdown value/draws: Mix of calls/folds.
* **Problem:** Opponent's range on River is very strong (predominantly Jack X). No profitable bluffing opportunity.
* **What Happens if We Check Back Turn?**
* **Opponent Checks River:** Still some Jack X trapping. Hard to fold hands like Pocket 8s without huge bet, risking being snapped off by Jack X.
* **Opponent Bets River:** We brick and have to fold.
* **What Happens if We Bet Small on Turn?**
* **Opponent (with Jack X):** Generally "tend to fast play when they have trips here on this turn." They will raise. This defines their range.
* **Opponent (with King High Flush Draw):** We get odds to call.
* **Opponent Calls:** Their range is now much weaker on the River. No full houses (7x/6x would raise flop). No Jack X (would raise turn).
* **Action:** Go for a "big boy overbet" on the River. Not worried about running into strong hands because their range is defined as weaker.
* **Conclusion of Betting Small:** Allows for "perfect play" because we have defined the opponent's range. Strong hands raise (we know to fold or get value), weaker hands call (we can bluff them later).

4. Key Takeaways and Principles

* **Range Definition is Crucial:** The ability to accurately assess and narrow down an opponent's possible holdings is foundational to making informed decisions.
* **Contingency Planning:** Always consider multiple branches of play based on your actions and anticipated opponent responses.
* **Opponent Tendencies:** Recreational players and even aggressive pros tend to telegraph their hand strength through their bet sizing and actions, especially when out of position.
* **Recreational Players (Out of Position):** Often over-stab their good hands when checked to. Don't slow play strong hands much.
* **Recreational Players (In Position):** Tend to slow play strong hands much more, making their range harder to define when you bet into them.
* **Aggressive Players:** More likely to make betting mistakes (e.g., bluffing too much with air) than calling mistakes. Capable of betting for thin value and bluffing.
* **Fold Equity vs. Value:** Strategic plays often involve maximizing fold equity (check-raises, big bluffs) when opponents show weakness or extracting more value by inducing bluffs/thin value bets.
* **"When you see a good move, look for a better one."** This chess analogy emphasizes the importance of continuous strategic refinement.

By consistently applying these two questions and understanding the behavioral patterns of different opponent types, players can transform their game from reactive to proactive, leading to more profitable outcomes.