

“Bucking the Tiger” History and Rules of the Traditional Game of Faro



by Mark Howard

Many sources say the game of faro originated in France in the early 18th Century (about 1713), as a revised form of the popular British pub game, basset, which traces its roots back to the game of landsquenet, played by Teutonic foot soldiers in the 1400's. Basset was outlawed in France by King Louis XIV in 1691 and faro developed as an alternative that was also popular for a short time in Great Britain.

Most sources say an early version of the traditional game of faro was first introduced in the Americas around 1717 in what was to become New Orleans, Louisiana, by Scottish expatriate John Law (1671-1729). Law, a fascinating and colorful historical figure, became a prolific gambler and literally changed the course of history through his exploits. Law was the son of a goldsmith and banker. In his youth, he was a student, a dandy and a gambling addict. He became involved in a duel in England and because his victim was the son of a politician, he had to flee England to Amsterdam, where he continued his studies in economics and high finance. Later,



John Law

he returned to Scotland and in 1705, he proposed a National Bank and the printing of paper money, which was rejected by the Scottish Parliament and he moved to France to continue his “playboy” lifestyle. In 1714, Law was expelled from France by King Louis XIV for accruing heavy gambling debts for himself and the King’s young nephew, Philippe II the Duke of Orleans. Law returned to France after the King’s death and with the help of his friend, Philippe, then Regent (temporary ruler) of France, he went on to form the Banque Generale (Royal Bank of France), print the very first government-backed paper currency and eventually became the Controleur General of France. It was for Law that the French word, “millionaire” was coined. Law established the Mississippi Company and Compagnie des Indes (Indian Trading Company). For 25 years, his companies held a monopoly on all French overseas trade and he was allowed to sell shares of his companies as a form of stock. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Law’s game of faro quickly spread up the Mississippi on riverboats where it became a favorite among professional gamblers (which were commonly called “sharps”) and players alike. Law’s exploits and “schemes” were later blamed for sparking the economic implosion and financial ruin in 1720 that ultimately sparked the French Revolution. Law left France in disgrace and died in Venice, where he had supported himself by gambling. While many contemporary economists now

feel John Law was made a scapegoat for the collapse of the French Economy, he was considered a villain in French history for over two centuries.

It is said the name of the game was derived or corrupted from the Egyptian Pharaoh pictured on what is now the King of Hearts in the 16th and 17th century French card decks, which were imported to England at the time, although I have yet to find any concrete evidence of this as it seems there are none of these antique “Pharaoh” face cards in existence. I have searched and found a variety of playing cards from that period (the 1700’s and earlier) and have not found any such “Pharaoh” face cards cataloged anywhere. If you know of any, please advise.

Since the late 16th century, European-style royalty have been used on “face cards” (also called “court cards”) and “French Suits” (Spade Diamond, Heart, Club) were adopted as a standard throughout much of Northern Europe.

For that reason, common playing card decks in the 18th and 19th century were referred to as a “standard French deck.” Around the Turn-of-the-Century (1900), the rounded-corner, indiced, double sided deck (with numbers in opposing corners and double sided face cards) became popular for use in round games (such as brag and bluff poker, the forerunners of draw poker). Prior to that (during the Faro heyday), standard playing card decks were square-edged, one-sided (the royalty stood one way on the card face) and the numbered cards only showed pips, without indicia (numbers in the corners). Sample non-indiced, square-edged, faro cards are pictured left.



The term “buck(ing) the tiger” is said to have come from early card backs that featured a drawing of a Bengal tiger. There have also been references made to a Royal Bengal Tiger painted on the outside of travelling faro cases used in the Civil War Era. Again, I have yet to find any antique cards or cases with “tiger” patterns on them.

Regardless, since the mid-1800’s, the bengal tiger has been considered the presiding deity of the game of faro and both “bucking the tiger” and “twisting the tiger’s tail” have been common euphemisms for playing faro. In fact, alleys, streets and districts featuring many gambling parlors were often referred to as “tiger alley” or “tiger town,” due to the fact that faro was the predominant gambling game of the time.

Due to low rates of literacy among miners and other laborers, it is said a “Buck the Tiger” shingle or a colorful tiger drawing was usually posted outside a saloon, gambling club or even a barber shop, to indicate an active “Faro Bank” was inside. Some sources say many gambling houses, large and small, had oil paintings of tigers hung above their faro tables. But again, I have yet to actually see evidence of this in stories, pictures, drawings or paintings from the time.

By all accounts, the second most popular saloon game of the time was brag (a 3 card game that became 5 card brag) which later evolved into 5 card draw poker. Draw poker (“bluff” or “bluff poker” as it was called then) was actually a rarity on the frontier until the late 1870’s. In contrast, almost every saloon in the Old West featured at least one faro bank, particularly during the gold rush period from 1849 to 1890. In 1882, a well documented New

York Police Gazette study, estimated that more money was wagered on faro in the U.S. each year, than all other forms of gambling and sport gaming combined. I can pretty much guarantee any photos or paintings of what are believed to be people playing poker prior to 1870, is actually brag.

Faro is a fast-paced “banking” game where any number of players (which were then called “punters”) play against the dealer or the house, referred to as the “bank”. In contrast, brag and poker are “round” games, where the players compete against each other using colored “poker chips” of specified denominations (values) that are “anted up” into a common “kitty” and later cashed in..

“A dollar picked up in the road is more satisfaction to you than the ninety-and-nine which you had to work for, and money won at faro or in stock snuggles into your heart in the same way.” -Mark Twain (1892)

Chips & Checks

In faro, the individual punters use colored chips (more commonly called “checks” at the time, particularly by serious players) or “markers” that are unique for each player. Usually one of two methods were employed. Each player would get oblong or round colored markers that were of no value, but were used to mark (or identify) the owner of the bet, which would be placed under the marker with coin, cash or a number of colored valued chips (what would now be referred to as “poker chips”). More commonly, the punter would purchase a quantity of “checks” from the dealer. The punter or dealer would

agree upon a value for those “checks” at the time of purchase, the dealer would note the denomination of that particular color chip and only that player used that color, similar to the contemporary game of roulette.

In the Old West, ordinary faro check (chip) values ranged from “two bits” (25 cents) to \$5, the most common being “four bits” (50 cents) or a dollar. \$2.50 (“Quarter Eagle”), \$5 (“Half Eagle”), \$10 (“Eagle”), \$20 (“Double Eagle”) and even \$50 (“Slug”) gold coins were used with a lesser-valued colored check to bolster a bet. As with most “banking” games, the dealer often risked their personal fortune and therefore set the betting limits (both minimum and maximum) for their game.

Cheating

As you will soon learn if you do not know already, when played with even a minimum of strategy, the traditional game of faro does not provide any significant edge to the house. In fact, the player’s odds are almost as good as the Dealer’s (house) odds. As a result, card cheating became commonplace. As the popularity of faro spread, so did the cheating. Sleight of hand, trick decks and other forms of modified equipment were employed to give the house or bank a distinct advantage. A brass dealing box was invented by a Virginia gambler named Robert Bailey in 1822 to address this problem. But, since Bailey’s original box design concealed most of the deck, it was not widely accepted and was barred from use in many gambling houses.

In 1825, a new box design was introduced and patented by an Ohio watchmaker named Joseph Graves.

The new design (pictured left) was the spring-fed, open-top, dealing box that held a face up deck, exposed on one side. Cards were extracted by sliding a finger across the window, pushing the top card out a narrow slot and the dealer’s right side.

Grave’s new dealing box gained widespread acceptance and became what has since been considered the standard faro dealing box design.



Antique Faro “checks” and “markers”

Ironically, the dealing box makers of the time found they could significantly increase their profits by selling converted or “gaffed” dealing boxes for the purposes of cheating at faro. In the 1870’s, a standard German silver faro dealing box weighing about 4 pounds retailed for \$35. A cheating box by the same maker that looked exactly the same would commonly retail for as much as \$200!

There were generally two kinds of cheating boxes -- those that would indicate to the dealer what cards were coming up (a “tell” box) so the dealer (or an accomplice) could discreetly shift a player’s bet off the winning card before it was drawn and those that allowed the dealer to put through two cards at once (a “seconds” or “skin” box). Some very rare boxes actually did both quite well. These antique “gaffed” dealing boxes are prized collectibles today. Other forms of cheating by dealers included the use of stacked decks (with lots of paired cards) and corner-cut, shaved, textured or uneven card decks that allowed a dealer to discreetly shuffle or manipulate a deck in such a way as to create pairs or make paired cards much more likely during play.

Cheating became so prevalent in the United States that American Editions of Hoyle’s Rules began their faro section with a disclaimer, actually warning readers that an honest faro bank could no longer be found in the United States. Robert Foster, an early Hoyle Editor once wrote, “..to justify this [initial] expenditure [of opening a faro bank], he [the dealer or financial backer] must have some permanent advantage.”

By no means were the dealers the only ones cheating at faro! Carefully practiced distraction techniques and sleight of hand by dishonest players as well as professionally manufactured and home-made devices such as

the “horsehair copper” or “silk (thread) copper” which was a simple tool, used with a mild diversion, to discreetly pull the copper marker from a bet if that card was not pulled on the losing draw, making it available to win as an “un-coppered” bet with the winning draw. Most proven cheating resulted in gunplay or a brawl, both of which often gave better odds to the player, unless he was in a “brace house” or “skinning den” (both are terms used for a game set up where most of the people in the room were colluding together to cheat an unsuspecting player).

The Demise of Faro

As time went on, as explained above, professional faro dealers found they had to cheat to maintain any real “edge” for the house and remain profitable. This became more dangerous as anti-gambling sentiment gained momentum in settled communities and vigilantism gained popularity on the frontier. After the turn of the century, a variety of other games with much better odds for the house (but more enticing payouts for the players, such as craps and roulette) quickly surpassed faro in availability and popularity. In 1900, there were nearly 1000 registered gaming establishments offering Faro in the Arizona Territory, but in 1907, Faro was completely outlawed in Arizona. By the 1930’s, gambling been pretty much outlawed across the nation and the only legal faro games were in the State of Nevada. As it turns out, Faro did not have enough of a profit margin to be offered in underground gambling venues either and by the 1950’s, there were only five active faro banks known to have been in existence in all of Nevada. The renowned faro bank at the Horseshoe Casino in Las Vegas closed in 1955, the Union Plaza in Ely closed its faro bank in 1975 and last faro bank disappeared from the Ramada in Reno in 1985. Over time, faro came to be considered old-fashioned and faded into history, making way for slot machines and other gambling games that could “earn” more for the house.

One of the greatest injustices to the game of faro was the fact that the books, western films and serials of the 1940’s through the spaghetti westerns and popular western TV shows of the 1970’s, all disregarded faro in favor of poker. Because audiences (and the writers & directors themselves) were completely unfamiliar with the game of faro, while in contrast, poker was extremely popular and well understood at the time, authors and directors consistently portrayed cowboys playing poker in their books, films and shows because they knew their audience could identify with the game. As a result, several generations have been misled into believing poker was commonly played throughout the entire 19th century. It was not until John Wayne’s last movie, *The Shootist*, in 1976 that western film makers seriously attempted to “get it right” by



portraying faro banks in their movies. But, to add insult to injury, even many of those well intended filmmakers have shown faro being played incorrectly or have added unnecessary derogatory references, inaccurate statements and disparaging comments about the game that have led to a widespread misunderstanding of the game and those that played it.

In the end, it is only real history buffs and true aficionados of the Old West that have any clue as to the truth about faro.

Rules

Please keep in mind there were many regional betting variations and local conventions that were set by various dealers based upon their location, background, education and experience in the game. Additionally, this game was popular in Europe and the Americas for over 200 years and as the game evolved, many changes were made in the rules. The information here has been gleaned by many reliable sources and is correct for the period of 1853 to 1910 in the Western United States, where the game was not only extremely popular, but many fortunes were won and lost over the faro tables out west, particularly in the many boom towns and mining camps. Faro games in the South and Northeast (particularly New York State and the Boston Area) saw a variety of rule modifications and fluctuations over those years, just as the game “evolved” considerably in 20th century Nevada, before it’s demise. For this reason, you may easily find quite reliable information that contradicts the various rules and betting conventions outlined here. From what I have found in my research, the deck, layout, odds (payouts) and basic “laws of the game” were generally the same in all regions of the United States from 1803 to 1910. The greatest variety I have noted has

been in the types of bets allowed by dealers and specific (designated) bet placement on the layout.

A Faro Bank in Action

A single, standard, 52 card deck is shuffled, cut and placed face down in a stack or face up in a spring loaded card dealing box, in front of the dealer, on the playing table. The game begins with each punter (player) laying their wagers on or around the card layout (sample layout pictured left), consisting of all 13 card ranks (Ace through King) laid, glued or painted on the Faro table, generally in the spade suit (although the suits of cards in faro are not important).

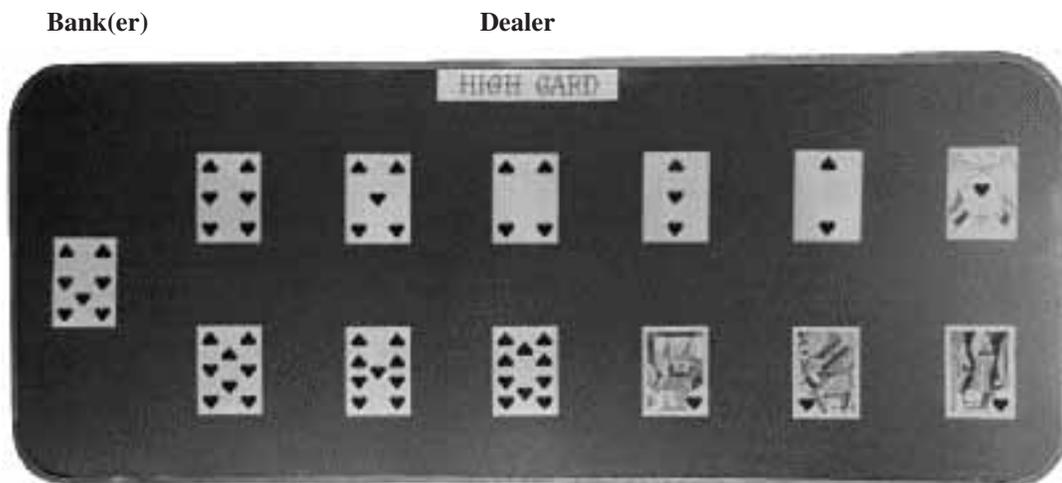
If the wager is placed directly over a card, the punter is betting on only that card rank (also called, “backing” a card, such as “backing the queen”). A bet on a single card was also referred to as a “flat foot”. Rather than reaching across the layout, a punter may hand his wager to another player or lookout nearer the intended card and say, “Flat the Ace” or “Flat foot the seven.”

Subject to “house” rules, a punter (player) may wager on multiple cards by placing his bet mid-way between a pair or group of three or four cards (also called “splitting” cards, such as “splitting the five-six” or “splitting the Ace-King”). A punter may place as many separate bets as he wishes or can afford, up to the posted table limit. Split bets (between two or more cards) are not a “split” like in roulette. The full wager is actually being bet on all adjacent cards, meaning, if you split the five-six (place between the 5 and 6 cards) then if the 5 wins, you win a

full bet, not half. If the 6 wins, you win the full bet.. See more on “splits” and “betting variations” in the detailed sections below. Similar to roulette, once a number of bets are placed, the dealer will wait for a lull or other indication that the players are satisfied with their bets and are ready for the turn to begin. The dealer will then state, “All bets are down” or make some other indication that players are to stop moving or placing their bets. Players are not to touch their bets again until the conclusion of the turn.

Once the dealer is satisfied the punters have stopped moving or placing bets, the first turn begins. If using a dealing box, the Dealer discards the top card of the deck (called the “Soda Card”) by sliding it out of the dealing box (pictured right) thereby displaying the next card. The card displayed is the “losing card” and it will eventually be placed in the losing position, on the dealer’s right, next to the dealing box. The House wins any wagers placed on the displayed card (e.g. if the card should be an Ace, the Dealer will collect all wagers staked on the Ace, regardless of suit). All other bets remain untouched.

Then the Dealer pulls the losing card (placing it in the right side of the box), revealing the next card, the “winning card.” If that card is, for example, a Five, he will pay off all wagers staked on the Five. The payoff is one-to-one (1:1 or “even money”). A dollar bet wins a dollar. The other card bets on the layout (other than the “high card” bet, explained below) are untouched by the dealer and remain in play for the next turn, unless pulled by the punter or clearly “barred” by the punter (meaning they suspend their placed bets for one or more turns).



Bank(er) Dealer
Player - Player - Counter - Player - Player

This is a proper faro layout. The ace should be on the dealer’s left and the six on the dealer’s right. The seven is at the far end of both rows and the face cards were turned to face right-side-up for the dealer. Generally the case counter was located directly across from the dealer and positioned to match the layout. If you see a re-enactor or movie with a faro layout that is not laid out like this one.. they are *wrong!*

After all losing bets are collected and the winning bets are paid, the Dealer will say, "Place your bets" or something similar to indicate the conclusion of the "turn". In the brief interval between turns, punters may pick up their winnings, place additional wagers, increase or reduce existing bets, move wagers from one card to another or leave the game (cash out). New players may also join the game between the turns. As mentioned previously, faro was a fast paced game. Usually, two turns were played each minute. Thus, each deck would play through in 12 to 15 minutes.



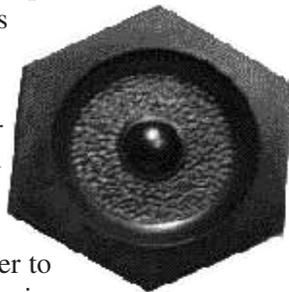
Your Honest Dealer, Evil Swede

A "piker" is a derogatory term for someone placing many small bets all over the layout. "Snowballing" is another faro term, referring to a strategy of placing many bets (generally large bets) covering most or all of the layout. "Whipsaw" or "Whipsawed" is a term referring to winning on two cards on the same hand (whipsaw the dealer), such as winning the coppered "loser" card and winning with a straight bet on the "winner". Similarly, the player can be "whipsawed" if their straight bet comes up the loser and their coppered (reversed) bet comes up the winner.

At busy or crowded faro banks, dealers often employed a "lookout" and/or "banker" that generally sat on the dealer's right side. They would supervise the game to prevent cheating and may also assist by paying or collecting player bets throughout the game. If the dealer was working alone, the dealer's bank was kept on his right side, behind the six. The term "behind the six" became a common euphemism for being out of funds and needing a loan, but it actually referred to needing to convert cash or gold dust into checks (chips) or to need credit from the faro bank.

Coppering

From 1853 on, punters had the option of "coppering" their faro bet(s). This means placing a copper token (traditionally a penny (pictured below) or later a 6-sided composite token such as the one pictured here, called a "copper") on top of a standard (often called an "open bet" or "straight bet") wager to "reverse" the bet. What this means is, a "coppered" bet wins on the first (losing) card, and loses on the second (winning) card, the opposite of a regular bet, whether it be on a particular card, a pair or group of cards or the "high card" bar. The 6-sided "coppers" are approx. 1" in diameter.



If a player has a significant "spread" (meaning they have many markers placed on the layout) they may opt to sit out one or more hands, called "barring" their bets. To do so, they must make their intentions clear to the dealer (or his assistant/banker if there is one) and again (usually by pointing at the bet and saying, "it goes") when they wish to resume play. This is a courtesy and the dealer or banker may ask them to "pull" their bets or cash out to avoid confusion or arguments, particularly if the table is crowded or busy.

The game continues in turns, with the first draw going to the dealer (losing card) and the second to the punters (winning card), until the deck is nearly exhausted. The bank pays even money on all bets except for the last turn. There are 24 regular "turns" in a deck.

Betting the Turn

This can be a very exciting time at a faro table.. after pulling the "soda" card and then playing through 24 hands of straight faro, only three cards will remain at the 52 card deck. Those three cards must fall in one of six ways. This



An active faro bank in Laredo, Texas. Pictured in *Harper's Weekly*, June 24, 1899

is called, “Betting the Turn” or “Making the Turn.” The bank pays four-to-one to the punter(s) that can call the turn of the cards correctly. That is to say, if the player can correctly say in which order the final three cards will be dealt. If two of the remaining three cards are the same rank, it is called a “cat hop,” and the bank pays two-to-one if the punter correctly bets the deal of the final 3 cards. If all three cards are the same rank (this is very rare), it is called a “case” and no bets are taken, the deck is shuffled and/or replaced and a new deal is started.

The House customarily collects any bets left on the layout after the last card is turned. The last card in the deck is called the “hock” card. If you’re at the end of the deck, you can be said to be “in hock”. The term “hocking” that is commonly used when talking about “hocking” valuables at a pawn shop comes from people placing jewelry, watches or valuables on the table to bolster their bet when betting the turn, meaning they were gambling the value of their item(s) on the last card in the deck, the “hock” card. For those that missed the first of the last 3 cards, in some cases, the dealer may allow them to play out the last 2 cards as a standard faro hand, paying 1:1. The dealer also has the option of playing through the turn and running 25 hands a straight faro.

The Case Counter

Part of the strategy of Faro lies in keeping track of which cards have been pulled. The players may watch the “Case Counter” (an abacus-like contraption, also called a “case,” “counter,” “cue box” or “coffin”) or may make written notes to aid their memories.

The cue box may be worked by the Dealer, one of the more sober punters or most often by the Dealer’s Assistant, often called the “coffin driver” or “lookout”

If an unwitting punter unknowingly places or leaves any bet on a “dead card” and does not remove it before the dealer’s last call (just before the next draw), the wager is considered public property and is lost to the bank or to any other player quick enough to notice the error and pick it up, usually calling out “sleeper” or “dead card!” Obviously, this could cause some discontent among players, but it has been a rule for as long as the game has been played. Generally, a dealer in a friendly game will warn a player once in the evening, but after that, their money is



The red and white markers are moved out from the center as each card is drawn from the deck during play. Thus, in the photo (above) the positioning shown would indicate all of the cards from Ace through 6 had been pulled and all of the cards 7 through King remain in the deck.

up for grabs if they leave or place a bet on a dead card.

The antique Mason & Co. faro case counter, pictured above, sold on eBay for over \$2600.00 in the Summer of 2003. If you are looking to buy any antique faro equipment, you must be cautious, as there are a lot of reproduction cards, layouts, case counters and dealing boxes being fraudulently sold as antiques.

Once the deal (deck) was completed, it was traditional to tip an accurate “coffin driver,” particularly if you won the final bet on the deck (see Betting the Turn, above), which paid 4-to-1 odds, meaning a \$5 stake returned a total of \$25. A tip was in order because it is each punter’s

own responsibility to keep track of the cards played and a diligent and attentive counter operator was needed in order that the ranks of the final three cards be known with any degree of certainty. If the wrong cards are bet at the end of the deck, those bets are forfeited to the dealer. In later years (1880’s on) tablets (called “tabs”) were made available to, or purchased by, punters so they could track the cards played for themselves. This is where the term, “keeping tabs” came from.

Splits

Betting between two or more cards is often referred to as “splitting” cards and as mentioned above, the bet is really not “split” as the full bet is counted towards



Your beautiful Coffin Driver.
Mdm. Wicked



“Scene in a New York Faro Bank: The Critical Moment: Making the Turn” from *Harper’s Weekly*, February 23, 1867.

all adjacent cards, which is good for you if one of your cards wins and good for the dealer if one of your cards loses. During play, when the dealer refers to a “split” during play, he is most often talking about a problem that occurs either when the first (loser) and second (winner) card are of the same rank (a pair), or if a Punter has “split” their bet between two or more cards, and one card has lost while the other won. In both cases, the house takes half of the split bet. If the amount cannot be cleanly divided in two, the difference goes to the dealer (for this reason, it is best to make even valued wagers that can be split evenly). It is worth noting here that in the “Stuss” variation of faro, the dealer takes the whole bet in a split (see Stuss, below).

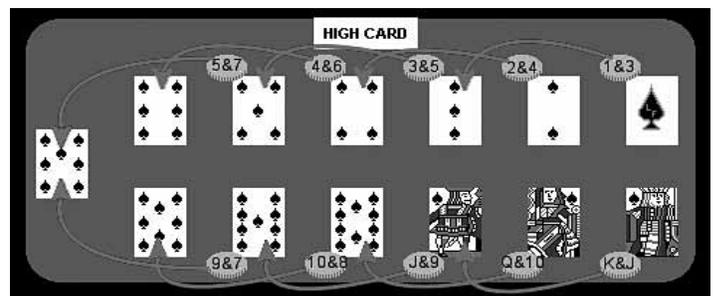
Betting Variations

There are many acceptable conventions for making combination bets, besides the obvious placement directly between two adjacent cards, such as a “5-6 split” (side-by-side, as shown in position 2, in diagram on left) or a “5-9 split” (across from each other, as shown in position 4), it is common for most dealers to allow a 3-way bet to be placed in the area between the 6-7-8 (as shown in position 1 on the diagram left), called “betting the pot.” Similarly,

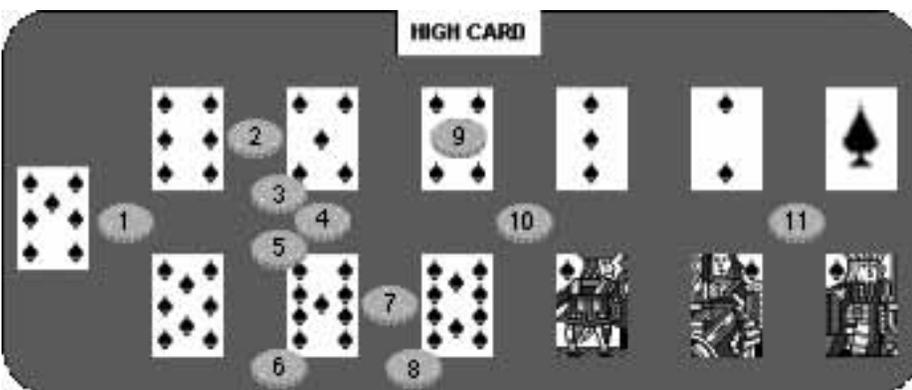
most dealers will also allow a 4-way bet in the area between any 4 adjacent cards (as shown for example, in positions 10 & 11), so long as you make your intentions clear at the time the bet is placed. Four way bets were referred to as “square” bets and each had a name, such as the “Jack Square” (3-4-10-J) and “Grand Square” (A-2-Q-K).

Corner bets can get a bit tricky (as shown for example, in positions 3, 5, 6, 8) and it is best to check with a dealer if you intend to place any unusual bet, even if you see others placing similar bets. Precise placement can be critical in ensuring your wager is credited properly. Some dealers may discourage or prohibit the use of “exotic” corner bets. Understanding the “flow” of the board (see the red lines in the diagram below) and which locations are used for betting (and which locations are not) is important if you are making corner and split bets. For example, after looking at the diagram, is it clear that a bet placed at the upper/left corner of the 5 card would be a 5-7 bet? Or, that a bet placed at the bottom/left corner of the King would be a King-Jack bet? (see diagram below).

It is really not too complicated.. this diagram shows all 10 of the available outside corner bets.. of course, each can be “coppered”, so that would make a total of 20 outside corner bet combinations in a regular hand of faro.



Flat bets and standard 2 card split (combination) bets are always acceptable. 3-way, 4-way and inside or outside corner bets were usually subject to house rules. Most dealers will accept about any bet, so long as it is clear what the bet is on BEFORE the draw.



1. “Betting the Pot” 6-7-8 (3-way) bet.
2. 5-6 bet.
3. 5-8 bet.
4. 5-9 bet.
5. 6-9 bet.
6. 7-9 bet.
7. 9-10 bet.
8. 8-10 bet.
9. Bet on 4.
10. “Jack Square” 3-4-10-J (4-way) bet.
11. “Grand Square” A-2-Q-K (4-way) bet.

Keep in mind, there are at over 130 potential betting positions that can be wagered on the standard faro layout and all bets on a regularly dealt hand pay even money, including the “high card” bets (explained below) and “coppered” bets (explained above), so there is really no need to make the game overly complex by trying to place “exotic” or confusing bets which may lead to a disagreement or misunderstanding.

I can’t emphasize this enough. Faro is a straightforward game and it is unnecessary to make it complex by trying to place unusual or exotic bets. Flat bets, splits, be they two-way, three-way or four-way, high card and coppered bets alike, you win and they all pay the same - even money.

Whatever bets you do place, it is your responsibility to ensure the dealer and lookout (if there is one) know what your wager is staked on because if there is any confusion, it is up to the dealer or lookout to use their best judgement as to what was intended by the bet. Their decision is final, so it is up to the player to ensure they understand what is intended by a specific bet, either by asking or advising the dealer when the bet is placed and before the card(s) are drawn.

What this means is, don’t toss your chips haphazardly on the layout all night, then try to convince everyone you had intended to precisely place your bet at a corner when the corner bet happens to come up a winner!

It is important that you do not touch any wagers or reach across the layout until all bets have been satisfied. Touching or moving bets before they are paid may result in confusion that will likely result in the bet not being paid. It is understood that by touching or moving a bet, you are indicating you are satisfied. If another player (or the dealer) say, “Hold on” as you are reaching out toward the layout.. that means STOP and wait until the dealer has satisfied all of the bets. If in doubt, wait until you hear the dealer say, “Place your bets” or something similar.. even then, if a player objects or says “hold on,” then wait until the dispute or oversight is settled to everyone’s satisfaction before you touch or reach across the layout.

High Card

In most games after the 1840’s , there was a “High Card” or “HC” bar across the top of the layout (nearest the dealer). Wagers placed on the High Card bar are betting the winning card (the second card drawn) will be higher than the losing card (the first card drawn). This bet may also be “coppered” to reverse it and bet on the losing card (first draw) being higher than the winning card (second



“The Faro Game” by Camillus S. Fly
Orient Saloon, Bisbee, Arizona, circa 1900

draw). Winning punters are paid off one-to-one. This is a popular play, because Punters betting on (for-or-against) the High Card bar are getting action each turn, while punters betting on valued cards many not get any action on their bets for several turns. When betting on high card, keep in mind, the cards are ranked from lowest (Ace) to highest (King) in order. In later years, some faro banks began to offer even-odd bets, wagers on rows and other unusual wagers, each having a specific place on the dealer’s layout.

Stuss

Often called “Jewish Faro”, the Stuss variation of faro was a more domestic (non-professional) version of the faro game and generally considered better for the players although the banker had slightly better odds than in the regular faro game detailed above. Stuss is played by standard faro rules, except, the dealer is selected by auction.. meaning whomever will cover the highest bet or allow the highest limit. Once a dealer is selected, the cards are shuffled by at least one of the more sober punters (with clean hands) and then finally cut or shuffled by the dealer/ banker.



A busy faro bank pictured in *Harper’s Weekly*, published in July of 1889.

The deck is laid face down in front of the dealer and played without the use of any “dealing box,” without a “soda” card being pulled and without “betting the turn”.. it is 26 turns of straight faro, often without the use of any complex 3-way or 4-way bets. The only other difference, as mentioned above, is that the dealer wins all “splits.” Although the resulting odds were changed slightly in favor of the house, many players preferred to play Stuss, finding they faired much better in an straightforward game. Although a case counter may be employed, often in Stuss games, the individual punters kept their own card count using small counters, paper or printed tablets, called “tabs”, rather than a “professional” case counting device. Stuss can also be played among friends using a rotating bank, where each player takes a turn as dealer/banker for one deal (26 turns or one deck), then the bank position then passes to the next player, so long as they can cover the pre-set table limit.

The Laws of the Game

The actual laws of faro are few and are based upon justice and equity. Except for the 12 rules listed below, the remaining rules for the game (listed above) are basically guidelines and open to agreement, negotiation and interpretation. All disputes arising in a game may be settled by referring to these 12 laws:

- All bets are to be forfeited and paid out as they lie upon the card except when there is an expressed and agreed understanding to the contrary.
- The intentions of a player are not to be considered by a dealer. At the time of the draw, it must be assumed all bets have been placed or left on the layout to clearly represent the player’s wager.
- Barring a bet is a courtesy that must be communicated clearly to the dealer by the player. If a dealer allows a bet to be barred, he will respond in acknowledgement and that bet will remain barred until the player says, “it goes” and receives clear acknowledgement from the dealer of same. Any other special exception granted, is assumed, in principle, to remain so until the end of the deal (deck), unless the request or exception is expressly withdrawn or revoked by the player or dealer earlier.
- Should another player or the dealer, banker or lookout alter the bet of another by accident or design, they are responsible to cover the loss, if any.
- The dealer should take and pay correctly and not make a mistake through design or carelessness, nor should he alter the position of wagers in play on the layout without the player’s expressed permission.
- In all cases, the dealer has the right to the last shuffle and cut; and where he may permit a player to shuffle or cut, it is an extension of courtesy to the player and not a right.

- The dealer has the right to inspect any item placed upon the layout.
- If a player is not satisfied with the deck or the shuffle, they may ask to inspect the cards or he may ask the dealer to count out the cards in their view, at the end of the deal (deck). A player is not obligated to place bets and they do not have a right to interrupt the play in the middle of a deal (deck).
- It is not the dealer’s responsibility to keep case (count the cards in play). That is the job of the case keeper.
- The case keeper is not obligated to cover losses that are based upon their miscounting or mishandling of the case counter or inattention to play. It is each player’s responsibility to supervise the proper counting of cards in play or keep their own tabs.
- The dealer is responsible for covering all bets for which he turns, up to the posted or expressed table limit. The dealer always has the option of turning his box over and closing his game, between completed turns, in the middle of the deal (deck), or playing through the end of the deal without giving the option of betting the turn.
- When the players have broken the bank, the dealer pays copped bets first, then the largest bets next, until all of the bank funds are depleted. Players are not obligated to take I.O.U.s or extend credit to the dealer and may recover their winnings, to their satisfaction, by impounding bank equipment.

In regard to shuffles, cuts and inspection of cards; If a suspicious player would like to “inspect” the cards before or after a deal, it would be common practice for a player to request a new deck or a “snow out” (that the cards be spread out upon the table, all face up or all face down). Please keep in mind that players should ask permission before touching or handling the cards at any time, including when they are laid down in the “snow out.” Ordinarily, players do not touch the cards, unless the dealer offers them the courtesy of a cut or shuffle, as mentioned above.

A Final Note

Faro is a fun, fast-paced, social game that certainly deserves it’s rightful place in history. After thoroughly familiarizing yourself with the rules, it may be hard to see how anyone could say the game of faro gives an unfair advantage to the house. The fact is, a “square” (honest) faro game gives overall odds to the house of less than 2%. Strategic betting by an alert player can reduce the house edge to zero. These are better odds for the player than can be found at any other gambling game played in any contemporary casino, anywhere.

As mentioned in the “history” section, during the hey-day of faro, cheating became commonplace. Sleight of

hand and rigged games dishonestly parted many a player from their hard-earned money. In his 1882 exposé on faro gaming, In 1882, Inspector Richard Fox of the NYPD, estimated the overall odds could be skewed, to as much as 25% in favor of the house, when a “professional faro-sharper” employed gaffed equipment, the tools of his trade, with well practiced diversions and sleight of hand, honed 8 to 10 hours a day for 10 to 20 years. He also noted that much of the standard equipment associated almost exclusively with the game of faro; the square cornered pastboard deck, the open-top/face-up card dealing box, the case counter and even “coppering” tokens, were all developed and employed to thwart cheating by the dealer, make the game fair for the players and restore confidence in the game of faro. Likewise, the “laws of the game” (listed above) were instituted and generally accepted to discourage cheating and make faro equitable for both player and dealer.



For more information on Faro, visit www.faroking.com or www.knightsofthegreencloth.com