

Habitual Joker

A card game by Simon Bates



He who laughs loudest laughs last!

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Habitual Joker

A tactical, point-scoring game in which each player tries to amass more points while foiling opponent with blocks and other judicious plays.

- Equipment** One standard deck including 2 Jokers (54 cards).
Scoring device. A cribbage board is ideal; a paper and pencil is also fine, perhaps drawing five-bar gates to count.
- Players** Two.
- Aim** To out-score your opponent, having amassed more scoring cards in your stacks.
- Sequence of cards** Circular (no high-low rank) (Fig. 1):

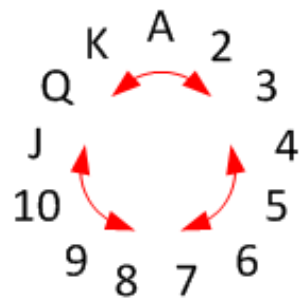


Figure 1: Cards form a continuous sequence.

Jokers have a special function and are not part of the sequence.

- Preliminaries** Remove the Jokers. Cut for deal. The card nearest A wins.
The winning card in the cut will be the higher up in Fig. 1.
Example: 4 beats 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10; 9 beats 7 and 8. If cards are equal (two Nines, 3 and Q, etc), cut repeatedly until there's a clear winner.
Non-dealer. Add the Jokers and shuffle the whole deck well.
- Deal** On completion of a deal, each player will have 5 cards in hand, 4 stack bases and 3 spare cards (spares) with a shared store¹ in the middle to draw from. The twenty-four dealt cards should look like Fig. 2, the face-up cards being an example only.

¹ The term *store* is preferred to *stock* so as not to clash with *stack*.

Deal (cont.)

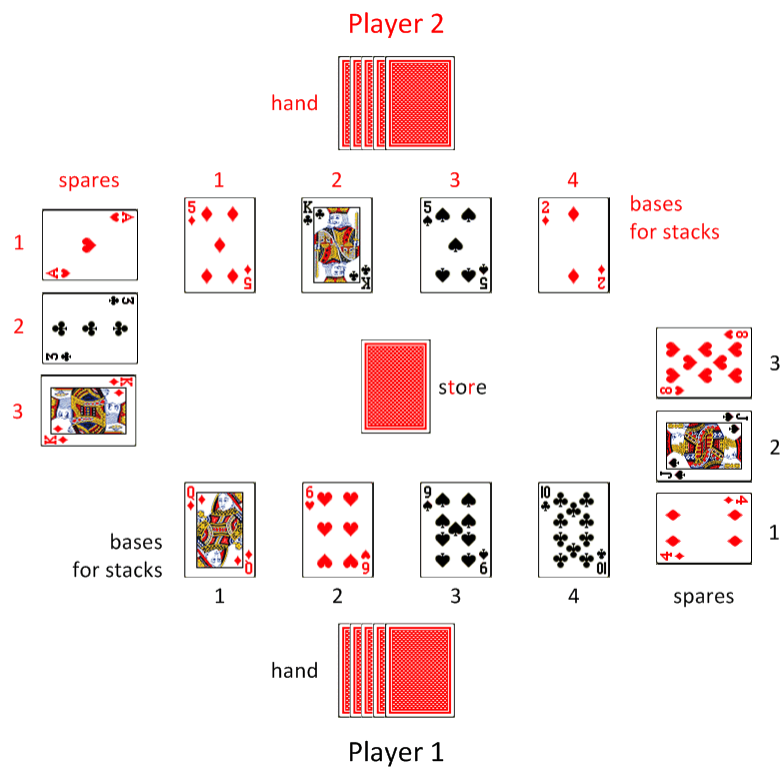


Figure 2: Example of a completed deal before the first play.

Cards to hands are dealt face-down, cards to bases and spares face-up.

Dealer (Player 1). Deal cards alternately, starting with **Player 2**: **hand**, hand, **base 1**, base 1, **hand**, hand, **base 2**, base 2...and so on...**base 4**, base 4, **hand**, hand. Then: **spare 1**, spare 1, **spare 2**, spare 2, **spare 3**, spare 3.

Discard any Joker dealt face up, dealing another card in its place to complete the starting position. Jokers discarded during the deal remain out of play for that deal.

Put the store face-down in the centre.

Play

Dealer plays first.

A few principles to bear in mind:

- a) Each player makes a single play in turn – no multiple plays are allowed in any one turn
- b) A single play consists of a single card played from one's *own* hand or from one's *own* spares to the layout (stacks and spares) with certain constraints as explained below;
- c) Play alternates between the two players regardless of the type of play made at each turn and regardless of whether or not a point is scored.

One point is scored by a player for every card (except a Joker) played to any one of that player's stacks (i) by either player from hand, or (ii) from opponent's spares. No other kind of play scores.

A player playing from hand must draw immediately from the store so as to maintain five cards in hand. Under no other circumstances may a player draw from the store. When the store is exhausted, play continues and the number of cards in hand is allowed to dwindle.

Any point scored should be recorded (pegged or written down) promptly, making it clear to both players who leads and by how many points as the game proceeds (*see also* the section on etiquette).

A card played to a stack must be immediately sequential (ref. Fig. 1) in either direction to the card at the top of the stack. The suit does not have to match. Thus, any Four or Six may be played on any Five; any King or Two may be played on any Ace; and so on.

The sequence may turn at any play. For example, if a Ten is played on a Nine, the next card (on the Ten) may be a Nine or a Jack; if it is a Nine, the next may be an Eight or Ten. Only the card at the top of each stack determines which cards may legally be played to that stack (*see also* the section on etiquette).

A player can block one or more of opponent's stacks, limiting the number of stacks available for play (Fig. 3). A player cannot block his or her own stacks.

A Joker played to an opponent's stack (from hand or spares) *permanently* blocks it for the rest of the deal. That is, no more cards may be played to that stack.

Play (cont.)

A card of the same suit played to one of opponent's stack (from hand or spares) *conditionally* blocks that stack. (Opponent scores 1 point for the card played to his or her stack.) There is no option to waive the block. The blocking card is placed at right angles on the stack (i.e. lengthways across) to show there is a block.

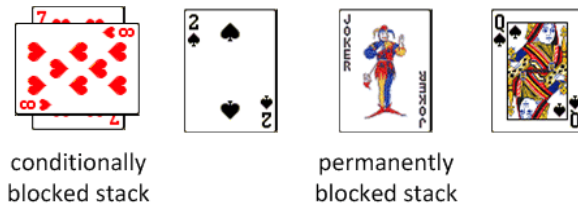


Figure 3: Stacks with one conditionally and one permanently blocked by opponent.

A *conditionally* blocked stack is so-called because it becomes unblocked again (with no option to leave it blocked) *if and when* the next card in sequence of the same suit is played to that stack (Fig. 4). Either player may unblock.

For example, the top card of a stack is ♥7 and opponent plays ♥8 on it to conditionally block the stack. The only card that unblocks that stack is the ♥9 (sequence ♥7–8–9); and, when ♥9 is played on this stack by either player the stack becomes automatically

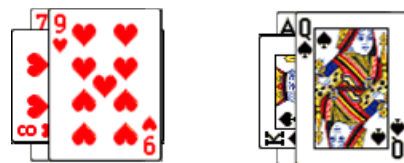


Figure 4: Unblocked stacks.

unblocked, and therefore open to the play of any remaining Eight or Ten over the Nine. A further example: if a player plays ♠K on opponent's ♠A, conditionally blocking that stack, the ♠Q is the one and only card that unblocks it

(♠A–K–Q). Then, any remaining King or Jack may be played on the Queen as the stack is no longer blocked.

A player may not play a Joker to his or her own stacks, although a player may play a Joker to his or her own spares.

A card of the same suit played to a player's own stack should be positioned in the conventional manner (not lengthways). See Fig. 5: neither stack is blocked.

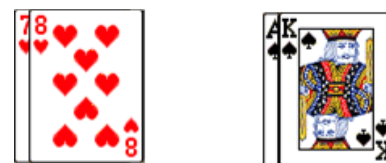


Figure 5: Play of cards of the same suit to one's own stacks, not blocking.

Spares are available to play to either player's stacks. Only a card played from spares to opponent's stack scores (for opponent, naturally).

Play (cont.)

At any time a player has fewer than three spares, he or she may play from hand to spares (face-up). This counts as a play. A player may never have more than three spares.

A player may not play to opponent's spares.

A player may not play from opponent's spares, only from his or her own spares.

A player must play a card from hand or spares if a legal play of any kind is available, for better or worse.

Play continues in principle until both players in consecutive turns each play their final card with none remaining in hand or spares. More likely, however, is that one player will find themselves with no legal play before that position arises.

The instant a player cannot make any play (*see also* the section on etiquette), that player *stops* for that deal. Then, the other player either (i) *if leading*, wins immediately, or, (ii) *if trailing or level*, continues play alone to try and take victory.

The stacks of a player who has stopped are frozen and cannot be played to by the continuing player. The continuing player scores with his or her own stacks for as long as a legal play is available.

Play immediately ends for a deal, with the player having more points declared as the winner, when:

1. neither player has a card left to play, *or*
2. neither player has a legal play available, *or*
3. one player has the lead and cannot logically be caught, even if further legal plays are available.

The margin of victory is immaterial.

A tie arises under conditions (1) and (2) if both players have the same number of points.

**Scoring plays —
recap**

A player scores one point when any card other than a Joker is played to his or her stacks:

- **from hand, *or***
- **from opponent's hand, including conditionally blocking cards, *or***
- **from opponent's spares, including conditionally blocking cards.**

<p><i>Other legal, non-scoring plays — recap</i></p>	<p>A player may at his or her turn do <i>one</i> of the following with no point scored to either player:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • play a Joker from hand or spares to permanently block an opponent's stack • play from hand to spares (includes Joker) • play from spares to his or her own stacks (excludes Joker).
<p><i>Illegal plays</i></p>	<p>To amplify, a player may <i>never</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make two plays together • decline to play (pass) if a legal play is available • play a card <i>from</i> a stack • transfer a card from one stack to another • play a card to spares when there are three spares there (the maximum allowed) • play a spare into hand • move a card within spares and claim a play • play a card <i>to</i> or <i>from</i> opponent's spares • play a Joker to his or her own stacks • conditionally block his or her own stacks (sequential cards of the same suit played from one's own hand or spares to one's own stacks are legal but never blocking) • conditionally block his or her own or opponent's spares • play to the frozen stacks of an opponent who has stopped.
<p><i>Etiquette</i></p>	<p>Players should endeavour to keep stacks squared up so that cards below the top one are not visible. Cards played as conditional blocks should nevertheless be left at right-angles.</p> <p>A player who cannot play should place his or her hand face up. If either player sees a legal play, it must be made there and then, the player picking up his or her hand again to play on.</p> <p>Degree of leniency around the process of scoring is a matter for personal agreement. Strictly, however, a player shall be allowed to score a point earned from a play only until <i>that player</i> makes his or her next play, a <i>play</i> having started when a card moves away from hand or spares. Thus, a player scoring a point through the play of his or her own card can record it even during or after opponent's next play; a player receiving a point from an opponent's card should record it right away.</p>

Tactical notes

The play of a Joker in hand to block an opponent's stack is a strong and in many cases compelling play. It also makes sense to play from hand to one's own stacks to score points.

Such plays should not be made without due consideration for alternative plays, however. See the *illustration of play options* further on.

For example, conditionally blocking one or more of opponent's stacks gives points to the opponent but also restricts the opponent's opportunities to score more heavily. Even better if the blocking player also holds the unblocking card in hand or spares.

A card played to one's own stack should be done mindful of opportunities for the opponent to then block that stack. Playing such a risky card instead to one's spares might be safer, as it can always be played to the stacks later, albeit without addition to scoring, if the threatening card has gone.

Playing from spares leaves gaps there which can be filled with cards from hand, particularly those cards that could also be played to opponent's stacks and give points away.

As well as having a mental image of cards played and not yet seen, card management should bring rewards not least towards the end of the deal. One may be left with legal plays that only serve to boost opponent's score! Careful placement of cards to maximize the number playable to one's own stacks, and conditionally blocking an opponent's stack to render other cards in one's own hand unplayable, are two ways to try and avoid a last-minute demise.

There may be two or more options for play at any given turn and the choice of play may have a bearing on the outcome of the deal.

Illustration of play options

Deal completed, Player 1 to play. In hand, Player 1 has a Joker, ♥K, ♥J, ♣9 and ♠3 (Fig. 6).

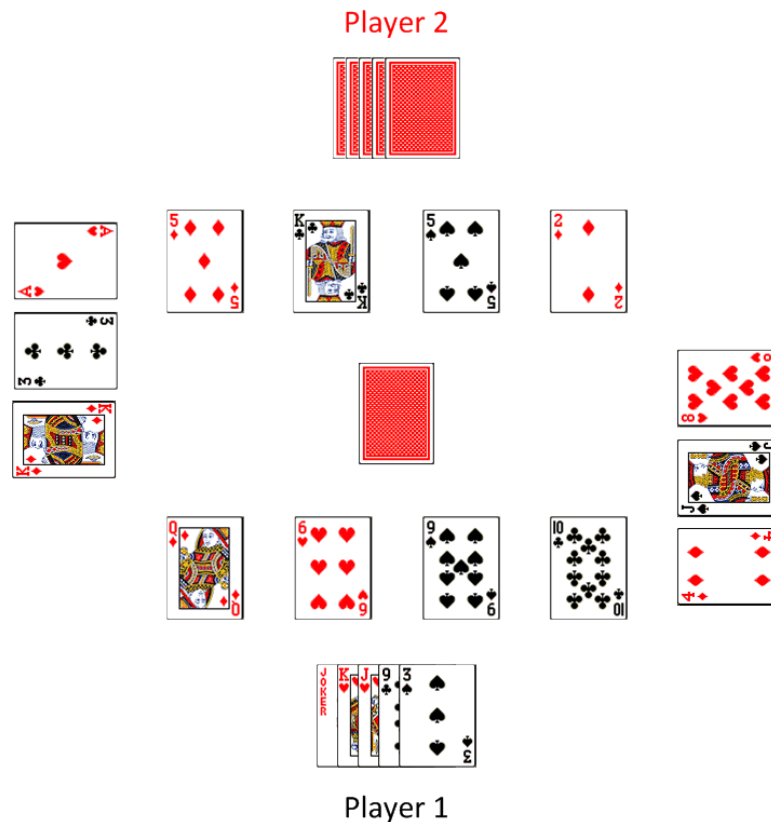


Figure 6: Position with Player 1 to play.

Player 1's options for play are these:

- (a) *Joker to opponent's stack (no score to either player)*. Which stack? Any one, but playing Joker on ♣K is possibly best. This leaves opponent with two stacks showing a Five — which will tend to limit opponent's choices until he or she can develop those stacks — and a stack showing Two. Player 1 *may* get a chance to conditionally block the 'Two' stack later with ♦4 from spares if ♦3 comes along — and with ♦5 unavailable that would be a permanent block in effect. (Player 2 had better play ♣3 or ♥A from spares!)
- (b) *♥K from hand to stack, over ♦Q, scoring 1 point*. This also has the benefit of stopping opponent from conditionally blocking the same stack with ♦K from spares. Player 1 doesn't have the ♦A to unblock: it's still 'out there' ...maybe in opponent's hand! The other potential value of ♥K is to conditionally block if and when opponent plays ♥A from spares to one of his or her own stacks.

**Illustration
(cont.)**

- (c) ♥J from hand to stack, over ♦Q, scoring 1 point. This also protects the stack from immediate conditional blocking.
- (d) ♥J from hand to stack, over ♣10, scoring 1 point.
- (e) ♣9 from hand to stack, over ♣10, scoring 1 point. (This does not conditionally block the stack, as it is Player 1's own stack.) This play does give Player 1 two stacks showing Nine, which tends to be a bit more restrictive, although this is mitigated somewhat by the ♥8 in spares.
- (f) ♠3 from hand to opponent's stack, over ♦2, scoring 1 point for Player 2. This looks a poor option relative to the foregoing ones as no special benefit accrues for Player 1 — only the standard one when playing from hand of being able to draw a card from the store that might be more powerful, a benefit also accrued to some degree or other with plays (a) to (e).
- (g) ♥8 from spares to the ♠9 stack (no score). This would leave a space in spares to be filled from hand should the need arise but this need is not immediate. The greater value of this spare is as an unblocking card should opponent play ♥7 onto Player 1's ♥6 in an attempt to conditionally block, so it is perhaps better left where it is initially, defending.
- (h) ♠J from spares to the ♦Q or ♣10 stack (no score). The same consideration as for ♥8.
- (i) ♦4 from spares onto Player 2's ♦5, scoring 1 point for Player 2. This conditionally blocks that stack, with ♦3 not in opponent's spares for a quick unblock (although it might be in Player 2's hand). It also opens a place in spares.
- (j) ♦4 onto Player 2's ♠5, scoring 1 point for Player 2. A very cheap point to opponent, developing Player 2's stacks away from the Pair of Fives, and a powerful card wasted!

Player 1 thus has a number of progressive plays here, notably (a), (b), (c) and (i). Player 2 will have his or her say next.

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