BTCards: Proof-of-Study for the Poker Masses

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Abstract. The knowledge that wins at poker has been locked behind massive paywalls and hoarded by the successful few to protect their edge. What is sold is often the least of it: solver-based strategy, preflop charts, some hand reviews and hours of podcasts or videos, primarily taught in ways that ignore how adults learn, while the player reads and exploits that actually win tournaments rarely leave the high-stakes rooms. This matters more every year. Over the past 14 years, the house's "real take" has grown by about one-third, from 12¢ on every dollar of buy-in to 16¢, while payouts have flattened toward a growing number of min-cashes, stripping equity away from the deep runs and final tables where skill is paid most heavily. Players cannot change what the game costs, but they can change what they know. We propose that poker knowledge be democratized: (a) withholding nothing; (b) streamlined and carried through to mastery, using scaffolding and other principles that research has consistently found effective; and (c) attainable at low cost, or none, for the players who need it most. Without it, the less-fortunate majority has little chance of closing the gap between losing and winning over time. BTCards (Beyond The Cards) introduces a learning system built on these principles, with a path to learn for free. Learn and apply at the tables to find your edge. Study and invite to learn for free.

1. Introduction

Tournament poker runs on a single flow of money: from the many to the few, and from everyone to the house. The vast majority of players lose, while only a very small minority wins steadily. Published research on the largest tournament series has found exactly this pattern: a small group of skilled players earns strong returns, while the field as a whole loses money. Research on online play has shown that results persist over time, which is the signature of skill rather than luck.

If skill decides who wins, knowledge should be the way out. It rarely is. The players who understand the game best have little reason to teach it, because the players they would teach are the players they beat. What they do sell is often the least impactful part of what they know: charts, solver outputs and long recordings, delivered in formats that ignore how adults actually learn. The most valuable skills, reading the specific players at your table and exploiting them, remain largely unsold.

What is needed is a path to winning knowledge that does not depend on financial fortune, the right connections, or the goodwill of the people profiting from its scarcity. In this paper, we describe the costs players face today and where skill is still paid, then set out three principles for closing the gap: withhold nothing, teach to mastery, and make learning available to all.

We believe the knowledge that improves a player's game should not be kept out of reach simply because it gives those who possess it a competitive advantage.

2. The Cost of Playing

Over the past 14 years, the share of tournament buy-ins consumed by rake has grown by about one-third, while payouts have shifted away from the deep runs where skill is rewarded. Players are paying more for the opportunity to compete, yet the knowledge needed to compete effectively remains expensive and unequally shared.

Every tournament has one player who never loses: the house. Its share, which we call the real take, is the difference between what players pay and what reaches the prize pool. It is not always what is advertised: comparing the entries with a published prize pool can show the house keeping more than twice the posted fee.

A study of over 2,000 tournaments, spread over 14 years from 2012 to 2026, shows the real take rising by about one-third. Over the same period, the average share of the field that gets paid has risen from about 9% to over 13%, while the share of the prize pool reaching the final table has fallen by roughly 10%. This flattening of the payouts has resulted in far more players winning prizes too small to recoup their overall investment, and far fewer winning scores big enough to produce significant profits. Section 7 sets out what these numbers mean for every player.

The take is only part of the cost. In my experience, tournament grinders fire an average of 1.8 to 2.4 entries per tournament, and a traveling player spends $150–$250 a day on travel, food and lodging. For someone firing twice into a $400 event, a single day of expenses can add 25% or more to the cost of playing.

3. Where Skill Gets Paid

Based on my experience and conversations with other professionals, here is the likelihood of a grinder or professional reaching each stage of a tournament, per entry:

Outcome	How often
Cash at all	14–18%
Run deep, short of the final 2%	6–10%
Reach the final 2% (the final table or close to it)	3–5%
Win	about 1%

Skilled players cash more often than the field, and they run deep far more often, because they play to win rather than to survive. They understand that a minimum cash rarely returns their total investment for the day, and that only a top 2–3% finish, worth four to five times a single buy-in, makes up for the many tournaments that end with nothing to show for them.

That makes the shape of the payout table decisive. Payout structures have become increasingly flat, shifting equity away from deep runs and final tables toward a growing number of min-cashes, which are much closer to luck. That hurts every player trying to improve: the deep runs they are working toward now pay less, and the min-cashes that replace them rarely cover the cost of playing. The margin has never been thinner, which makes the edge a player brings to the table matter much more, not less. Faster structures push in the same direction: the shallower the stacks, the more often a tournament is decided by an all-in, and the more every player's results drift toward the one certain outcome, the house's share.

Skill is squeezed from both sides. The house takes more off the top, and less of what remains goes to the finishes that skill earns. It is likely that fewer than 5% of tournament players profit after the take and expenses, and only about the top 1% earn returns of 25–40% on every dollar they spend. Studies of tournament regulars agree on the broader point: most of them lose money in a given year, even among the players widely considered the best.

4. Withhold Nothing

Now that we have quantified why skill matters more today than ever before, we turn to our solution: democratized knowledge, built on the three principles set out at the start. The first is the simplest: every skill that can create an edge should be available and taught to the masses, including the skills that are almost never sold.

I am a guilty party, among the fortunate who have extracted millions from this ecosystem, across live and online play, and for these past few years I passed almost nothing back. This paper is my way of paying it forward, and I hope it leads to a redistribution of knowledge, and of results.

In my early days of playing tournaments, my bankroll confined me to low-stakes tournaments, where the rake is highest. After spending many thousands of dollars on content from a half-dozen sites run by some of the world's best players, I realized I had fallen into a trap: dozens of hours of recordings that were hard to review, stacks of charts that told me what to do but rarely why, and countless lessons with no quick way back to the topics that mattered most to me. I wasn't yet skilled enough to see what was missing: barely a word on reading and exploiting the players in front of me, range-capping, or live tells.

The breakthrough came only after I changed how I learned. A private coach who specialized in the technical game complemented my feel for it. I also learned how to properly observe and label my opponents, and then how to apply common exploits to each player type. The difference was never talent or effort. It was access, and the way the knowledge was taught.

I learned much of what almost nobody is teaching, at any price:

- asking the right questions to build your opponents' ranges;
- using outside pressures and influences to adjust your own range;
- narrow versus wide table configurations;
- observing and recording tendencies in order to exploit player types;
- population adjustments;
- limping strategies;
- marginal re-shove play based on stacks and tournament pressure;
- range-capping, and setting up a believable story to bluff with;
- separating bluff from value candidates;
- using ICM to your advantage, and avoiding ICM suicide;
- live tells, and much more.

Beyond The Cards teaches all of it, and holds nothing back. In fact, one of the pinnacles the training builds toward is our own Action Funnel: a layered approach to finding the highest-EV play quickly, under real table pressure.

5. Teach to Mastery

Our second principle is that knowledge only matters once it can be applied at the table. Beyond The Cards is built on established principles of instructional design: short, focused modules (microlearning), lessons released in spaced monthly batches rather than all at once, and every concept turned into hands you play rather than lectures you watch or listen to. We have streamlined the path from knowledge to the table. Instead of hours lost searching through written or recorded content, reviewing what matters most to you takes only seconds: every finished module leaves its tips in your personal library, alongside your own bookmarks, highlights and notes – all of which you can sort and filter.

Complex skills are best learned with scaffolding: strong support at first, gradually removed as the player gains command. Independent research has consistently found that it improves learning. Each module builds on the last, and each concept is practiced with guidance before it is tested without it.

New modules arrive every month, and members cannot work ahead of what has been released. This is deliberate. Knowledge outruns application: when information arrives faster than a player can use it, most of it is lost. Each monthly batch arrives with online practice, and with time to take it to the tables, where new skills actually stick. Learning spread over weeks is retained far better than learning crammed into a weekend; each concept builds on the last, and a steady pace prevents the burst of enthusiasm that fades by the third week.

Learning does not end when a module does. Beyond each module's quiz, a set of extra practice hands deepens every concept. Every quiz and practice hand a member plays is kept in a personal hand library, where it can be filtered by topic or module, sorted from lowest score to highest, and turned into a practice run of the member's own choosing, scored at intervals the member sets, every 20, 50 or 100 hands. Every hand a member misses comes back for review, a few days later and then at growing intervals, until it is answered right. Quizzes can be retaken until passed, and a mastery score shows how much of what has been taught a member can actually apply. A concept is not finished when it has been read. It is finished when it has been mastered.

Learning compounds with effort and time. A member should not be twice as good a year later. They should be playing an entirely different sport.

6. Learning for ALL

Our third principle is that cost should not decide who gets the knowledge. Those who have taken the most from the game should pay the most, and anyone willing to study and invite others should be able to learn for free.

Subscribers pay in BiTCards*, training credits that top out at $30 each, and there are several ways to need fewer of them. Every subscriber who completes three modules in a month (from an average of 9–12 released each month) earns a Learning BiTCard: proof-of-study. Every friend you invite who subscribes earns you a Community BiTCard (even if their own subscription ends up free), every month they remain a subscriber.

Invited friends, in turn, receive a Welcome BiTPass: one free BiTCard every month, for as long as they stay a subscriber without a break. Founding Members receive a BiTPass too, for their first 12 consecutive months, together with 33% off each BiTCard, saving up to 50%. Founding Members on monthly plans retain the 33% discount by completing three modules each month. Again, proof-of-study: the same three modules that also earn their Learning BiTCard.

Each month costs a fixed number of BiTCards, set by career tournament winnings. Together, these paths bring that number down, all the way to zero:

Tier	Career tournament winnings	BiTCards per month	BiTPass (Founding or invited)	Learning BiTCard – 3 modules	Invited Subs to go free
Recreational	under $300,000	4	−1	−1	2
Regular	under $1 million	5	−1	−1	3
Grinder	under $3 million	6	−1	−1	4
Professional	$3 million and above	7	−1	−1	5

To claim a tier below Professional, subscribers link their public live-tournament results (such as a Hendon Mob profile) and confirm them each year; online results are on an honor system.

For an invited or Founding recreational subscriber, that means: study, invite two friends, and your month is free. Any subscriber who joined without an invitation or the Founding offer simply needs one more invited friend.

*BiTCards are training credits only. They are not a cryptocurrency or a token, not an investment, and they have no cash value. They cannot be sold, exchanged or cashed out. Their only use is training at Beyond The Cards.

7. Calculations

Between 2012 and 2026, across more than 2,000 tournaments:

Table 7.1. The cost of competing, then and now

	2012	2026
House's real take on every dollar of buy-in	12¢	16¢
Edge over the average entrant needed just to break even	14%	19%
Share of the field paid	about 9%	over 13%
Final table's share of the prize pool	baseline	down roughly 10%

If the house keeps a share r of every dollar entered, the field as a whole gets back only $(1 - r)$. To break even, a player must therefore beat the average entrant by:

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edge needed to break even = r ÷ (1 − r)
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Table 7.2. The edge needed just to break even, by house take

House take	Edge over the average entrant needed just to break even
10%	11%
12%	14%
16%	19%
20%	25%
25%	33%

These figures are before travel. Consider a regular who fires twice into a $400 tournament at a 16% take and spends $225 on one day of food, travel and lodging:

Example 7.3. One day, two entries, one trip

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Two entries:            2 × $400            =    $800
One day of travel:                            +  $225
Total cost:                                    $1,025
Average entrant gets:   2 × $400 × 84%      =    $672
Edge needed:            $1,025 ÷ $672 − 1   ≈     52%
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To break even on that day, this player must do about 52% better than the average entrant.

No player controls the house's take, the payout table or the structure. The only variable a player controls is what they know, and how well they apply it.

8. Conclusion

We have described a game in which the house's share keeps growing, deep runs pay less than they used to, and the knowledge that could change a player's results is held back by the people who profit from its scarcity. We propose to democratize the knowledge that wins at poker through three principles: withhold nothing, teach to mastery, and make learning available to all, charging the most to those who have taken the most from the game while enabling anyone who studies and invites others to learn for free. Without them, the less-fortunate majority has little chance of closing the gap between loss and profit.

The knowledge that wins at poker has been locked behind massive paywalls and hoarded by the successful few to protect their edge. There is now an accessible path to it for everyone. Join the waitlist and become a Founding Member at BTCards.net/manifesto.

Learn and Apply at the Tables to Find Your Edge. Study and Invite to Learn for Free.