

# 11 DON'T PLAY A BIG POT UNLESS YOU HAVE A BIG HAND

JOHN JUANDA MAY 30, 2005



I'm at Foxwoods playing the \$2,000 No Limit Hold 'em event. We all started with \$3,000 and now I've got \$15,000. At my table is Richard Tatalovitch, a player whom I've competed against many times.

I raise pre-flop from middle position with K-J offsuit and Richard calls from the big blind. The flop comes 9-6-4 with two diamonds on the board.

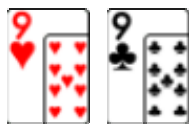
Richard hesitates for a moment before checking, and I put in a pot-sized bet. Richard thinks for a while and calls. All of a sudden, I don't like my hand -- so much.

Imagine my relief when a non-diamond J hits the turn. Now I have top pair and a pretty good kicker. Then Richard comes out betting. Uh-oh.

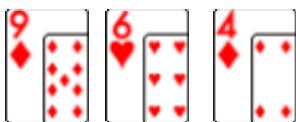
John Juanda's Hand



Richard Tatalovitch's Hand



The Flop



The Turn



Now, let me back up a moment and mention that when someone hesitates before checking, it's usually a huge tell. But Richard is the king of delayed action, so I ignored his tell and bet the flop anyway. And his bet on the turn just screams, "Raise me! I dare you!"

I go into the tank and my thoughts go something like this:

1. He flopped a set. That explains the smooth call on the flop - he's trying to trap me into staying, hoping I'll bet the turn, too.
2. No. If he had a set, he'd have checked the turn and waited for me to hang myself right then and there, or let me catch something on the river. He can't have a set.
3. The jack helped him. I don't have the jack of diamonds. Maybe he does, and he called the flop with a jack-high flush draw. If so, I like my kicker and my hand.
4. He's betting on the come with a flush or straight draw and is hoping to buy the pot right there.

I run through these possibilities and reach no conclusion.

Normally, I would just call here. We both have a lot of chips, and I don't want to put them all in with nothing but top pair. Then, I have the misfortune to remember a hand from a month earlier at Bellagio:

Richard had been running bad and was complaining about a string of horrific beats. I saw him check and call with top boat because he was afraid of quads! A guy that afraid of monsters under the bed isn't going to check-call top set on the flop with a flush draw out there.

"All in!" I declared.

Oops. This is now a Big Pot. And rest assured, top pair doesn't even resemble a Big Hand.

In the four years I've been playing with him, I've never seen him call so fast. I am drawing dead to his perfectly-played 9-9.

Sometimes, we all forget that big cards don't always equal a big hand and that the smart move can be to play conservatively instead of going for the quick kill. As for Richard - he had the good sense to be in a Big Pot with a Big Hand, and the patience to make it pay off.