



# DOUBLE DECK PINOCHLE

## Tournament Rules for a Classic Card Game

By Joe Andrews

**P**inochle is a card game with European roots. Its origin can be traced to the mid 19th century, when it was derived from the similar French game of bezique. Pinochle became a mainstay in the United States during the late 1800s. At first, most variations were for two and three players. (Rules for these games—and for virtually all card games, in fact—can be found at [www.pagat.com](http://www.pagat.com).) Since the 1940s, however, the most frequently played version is double deck for partners. It has some similarities to the game of bridge, with multiple rounds of bidding, a trump suit, and a declarer.

### THE DECK

The official deck for double deck pinochle consists of 80 cards, ranking from high to low as follows: ace, ten, king, queen, jack. Custom decks are available from The United States Playing Card Company. You can also create a regulation Pinochle deck by stripping down four standard decks. Remove all cards from the nines down through the deuces. Each suit will then have four aces, four tens, four kings, etc., of each suit. Remember that the ten of each suit is ranked between the ace and king—this can take some getting used to.

There are two partnerships, or teams, as in bridge or spades. Partners sit opposite each other, and the teams are referred to as “North/South” and “East/West.” The game limit is usually 350 points, and organized tournaments set the limit at 500. Some groups prefer to play a fixed number of hands for each game. The dealer is selected by lot, and the deal rotates clockwise to the next player to the left. All of the cards are distributed, resulting in a 20-card hand for each player. It is permissible to deal in sets of four cards to make this task a bit easier. Prior to the bidding, a hand is

best sorted by suits, and put in rank order within each suit, to make it easier to determine point counts.

### MELDING AND SCORING

Before you bid or play, it is necessary to understand the term “meld,” which refers to the value of certain specific card combinations you receive. They fall into three categories:

#### Runs and Marriages (Class “A”)

A “flush” or “run”—A, 10, K, Q, and J in the trump suit—is worth 15 points. A double run in the trump suit is worth a whopping 150 points. The extremely rare triple run is worth 300 points. The odds against having a quadruple run (600 points)—requiring a “perfect” hand of all 20 trumps—are astronomical; you will never see a “quad” run in your lifetime.

A “marriage” is any K-Q combination in a non-trump suit, and is worth 2 points. A combination of K-Q in the trump suit is called a “royal marriage” and is worth 4 points. You cannot count the marriage that is part of the natural run in the trump suit; additional royal marriages are counted, however. A side-suit marriage in a hand with a royal marriage is sometimes called a “common marriage.” A “roundhouse” is the holding of four different marriages in the same hand (e.g., K-Q of four different suits), and is worth 24 points. Some groups of players allow additional points for a “double roundhouse.”

#### Groups (Class “B”)

This tier represents the number of aces, kings, queens, and jacks, in all four suits. If you hold the aces of three different suits, and no ace in the fourth suit, you do not

receive points for aces. However, if you have at least one ace in each suit, you have "aces around," and this is valuable. (See the table below.) A set of two or more aces in each suit is a very powerful holding. Reduced premiums apply to groups of four different kings, queens, and jacks, respectively. Interestingly enough, the tens have no meld value in this group.

Here is the point chart for Groups ("Class B")

*Note: Each "Set" represents four different suits.*

| Sets          | One | Two | Three | Four |
|---------------|-----|-----|-------|------|
| <b>Aces</b>   | 10  | 100 | 200   | 400  |
| <b>Kings</b>  | 8   | 80  | 160   | 320  |
| <b>Queens</b> | 6   | 60  | 120   | 240  |
| <b>Jacks</b>  | 4   | 40  | 80    | 160  |

### Special: Pinochles (Class "C")

A holding of the queen of spades and the jack of diamonds, called a "pinochle," in the same hand is worth 4 points. Two pinochles are worth 30 points. Three pinochles are worth 90 points, and the very rare holding of four spade queens and four diamond jacks rolls out for 270 points! It must be noted that pinochles, especially in pairs or triplets, provide lots of meld points but have virtually no trick-taking power.

Important: You do not score meld points unless you either make your bid or "save" your meld by picking up enough "counters," as will be explained later.

### SHOWING MELD

When the bidding phase is completed, each player shows (places his or her meld) on the table. This process is why pinochle is so different than many other card games. Other cards in your hand are irrelevant. The "magic number" (combined points for you and your partner) is 20. In other words, your side does not claim meld if you have fewer than 20 points. Exception: You must show aces around if you have four different aces, regardless of your other meld points.

### SAMPLE HAND EVALUATION

You pick up this collection:

- ♠ A K Q
- ♥ A 10 10 10 K K Q Q J
- ♣ A 10
- ♦ A 10 K K K J

This is a strong hand, with wonderful distribution. The nine-card heart suit is more than adequate for naming hearts

as trump, and you have the required royal marriage. There are lots of meld points, if you are able to win the bid. If you do, this is how you will declare your meld.

- 15 Run in Hearts
- 10 Aces around
- 4 Royal marriage (just one)
- 4 Pinochle (♠Q/♦J)
- 2 Common marriages (spades)

Total: 35 Points

### BIDDING

As in bridge or whist, the bidding phase in pinochle is critical. No matter how well you may be able to play hands, the wrong bid will land you in the scrap heap before a card is played. If you have a high meld count and a strong trump suit, you are primed for action. Remember—your bid indicates an expectation to win points via a combination of meld and counter points.

The bid always commences with the eldest hand (the person to the immediate left of the dealer). It starts at 50. Your side must have at least 20 points in meld, with prospects of winning the requisite number of counters (depending on your final bid, and assuming you name trump). You can glean a lot of information from your partner's bids, as well as from the opponents' calls. Some hands become a real battle, as two players may both have great trump suits and plenty of meld. The bidding continues until three consecutive players pass. Once you pass, you may not bid anymore. The highest bidder at the end of the auction names the trump suit. There are three basic tenets for bidding:

Your team must have the minimum meld requirement of 20 points. (Either member of the partnership may bid with any number of points; however, if you don't have 20 yourself, you are taking a risk of winning the bid with insufficient combined meld.)

The "maker" or "declarer" of the trump suit must have a marriage in the trump suit. Otherwise, you are "set" (defeated) before a card is played. The hand is terminated, and the opponents receive their meld points (as long as they have at least 20 between them).

Bidding starts at 50, and goes up from 50 to 60 by a minimum of 1-point increments. Of course, a player may overcall a previous bid in the 50 to 60 range by more than 1 point. After the bidding reaches 60, it then proceeds in increments of five (e.g., 65, 70, 75, etc.). There are times it may reach the century mark, or even higher. (At 100 or higher, the bidding goes up in 10-point increments.)

There are some basic bidding conventions. It is important that you and your partner develop a rapport and familiarity with each other's techniques. Most players show "aces around" by bidding 51 in first seat, or by making a raise of 1 when their turn arrives. (Some pairs play a raise of one over one as a request for partner to show his or her meld.) If you have 20 meld, you should

open with a bid of 52, and a holding of 30 meld calls for a bid of 53 or a raise of 3. These principles apply to first-time bids.

Some very elaborate and advanced bidding systems have been devised. Seasoned players know all about "jump" bids and "strength" bids. To learn more about bidding conventions, I suggest that you explore one of the many books that are devoted to pinochle.

## COUNTERS

Aces, tens, and kings are "counters." During the trick-taking phase of the game, it is desirable for each side to capture as many of these counters as possible. In order to score your meld, you must have at least 20 points in declared meld, *and* you must gather at least 20 counters during the course of the play of that hand. There are 48 counters in the deck, and there is a bonus of 2 extra points for winning the last trick of the hand. The general idea is to discard a counter on any trick your partner is going to win (this is sometimes a guess), and drop non-counters (queens and jacks) on tricks the opponents are winning.

## TRICKS/PLAY OF THE HAND

Pinochle is a trick-taking game. Each trick has four cards, and order of play is clockwise. Some basic requirements apply to each trick:

1. You must follow the suit that has been led.
2. As in bridge or whist, the highest trump played on a trick wins it; if no trumps are played, then the highest card of the suit led wins the trick.
3. Unlike in bridge or whist, you must always try to "top" or "beat" the highest previous card played; if you cannot, you can play a lower card.
4. If you are unable to follow suit, you must play a trump.
5. If you cannot follow rule #4, you may discard any card.
6. When duplicate cards in a trick are high, the first one played wins the trick.

Before you begin play of the hand, you should take the time to examine any trump meld run that has been dropped on the table. If you are the declarer, this is especially important, as you will be trying to fulfill your bid. The defenders must also be aware of what is going on, as they will be trying to "save" any meld of 20 or more by scoring at least 20 counters. Of course, if the opportunity for a set arises, your side should go for it, since the reward will be substantial. The standard rule is that when the declaring side fails, the amount of their bid is subtracted from their score. The usual tournament rule, in order to limit the length of games, is different: The amount of the failed bid is added to the successful defenders' score (along with their melds and counters, if at least 20 each).

If you win the bid, a good general strategy is to cash



out or play your side-suit aces first, especially if you have fewer than eight trumps. This applies if you have the ace of a short (four cards or fewer) side suit. If you have a long trump suit and side aces, it is a good idea to bleed out the trump in order to set up your winners. One useful convention is to play a queen under the opponent's lead of an ace. This implies that you hold an ace in that suit. (The play of a jack in the same situation shows weakness in that suit.) Some players prefer to hold their aces, hoping to win them later. Obviously, do not drop counters on the opponents unless you are forced to play them.

Finally, it is a very good idea to practice counting the cards that have been played, especially in the trump suit. There are only 20 trumps in each deal, and this will become second nature. Then you can move on to counting aces and tens in the non-trump suits.

## PLACES TO PLAY PINOCHLE

The Internet is a great way to meet fellow cardplayers online. From the comfort of home you can play pinochle without worrying about revoking (failing to follow suit when able, also called "renegeing"), keeping score, or forgetting to climb (sometimes called "crawling") when a certain card is played. Yahoo! Games is a great place for Internet card games, including pinochle.

There are also some very good downloadable pinochle programs, which you can find by searching online, that provide an opportunity to practice against computer opponents.

"Live" pinochle tournaments offer an opportunity to meet other cardplayers in person. The annual World Series of Pinochle is organized and directed by the The Grand Prix Classic Card Games group ([www.grandprix tournaments.com](http://www.grandprix tournaments.com)). Tournaments are also run by other groups, including the National Pinochle Association (<http://npapinochle.org>).

Warning! Pinochle can be habit-forming! 

