The classic game of roulette has charms that soothe the savage gambler. This slow-paced game tends to attract a more subdued, sophisticated—shall we say—civilized crowd. In European casinos, roulette is associated with tuxedoed men and stylish women; it has an air of elegance and nobility, grace and dignity. The exact origins of the game are hazy (some attribute its invention to the 17th century mathematician Blaise Pascal) but it became a fixture in European casinos by the mid-18th century.

The roulette wheel is considered the most instantly recognizable symbol of gambling in the world. This is somewhat ironic because, although the game is extremely popular throughout Europe, it has never been a big draw in the United States. It earns significantly less than the other table game heavyweights: blackjack, craps, and baccarat.

This second-class status can be attributed to the fact that American roulette wheels are “impure” in comparison to their European brethren. They contain “00” as well as “0.” This addition makes for a bigger casino advantage, thereby discouraging those who might enjoy the breezy simplicity of the game. A few American casinos offer single-zero wheels. Unfortunately, roulette tables with these wheels often have minimum bets as high as $25. That may put too much pressure on a recreational gambler’s bankroll, even considering the lower house edge. Conditions do change, though, and it’s always worthwhile to ask around.

Another explanation for roulette’s relative lack of success in the U.S. might be its personality—it’s a tranquil and passive game in a nation of ever-on-the-go movers and shakers. Still, roulette does have its devotees and it’s easy to see why. It’s a perfect game of chance, instantly comprehensible, requiring neither skill nor strategy. It’s a clean guessing game, in which you can’t really make a dumb bet, but you can’t really make a smart one either.

HOW ROULETTE IS PLAYED

THE SCENE

Roulette is a slow and relaxing game with momentary jolts of excitement. After all, everyone wants to know where the heck that little ball is going to land.

The Wheel

Nearly three-feet in diameter and about 100 pounds, the wheel is the star of the show. This finely tuned piece of equipment contains 38 numbered compartments or pockets. The pockets are colored red, black, or green. Numbers 1 through 36 are divided evenly among red and black pockets; “0” and “00” get green pockets.

Rather than being distributed haphazardly around the wheel, the numbers are ordered to achieve as much balance as possible among high and low, red and black, odd and even. Look at the diagram on page 150 and you can see the wheel is quite masterfully laid out. Directly across the wheel from every odd number is the next highest even number. Black and red alternate; pairs of even numbers alternate with pairs of odd numbers (with some variation around the 0 and 00). This design is standard for all 38-number wheels.
The croupier (dealer) spins the wheel counterclockwise and releases a small plastic ball clockwise on a track on the upper portion of the wheel. When the ball slows down, it leaves the track and eventually finds its way into a pocket after running into various buffers and ornaments that ensure a completely random result. Be prepared for the ball to bounce out of several pockets before it finds its final destination.

**The Table and the Chips**

The long roulette table can usually accommodate six to eight people. On the table is a layout containing all 38 numbers (see page 151). As with any table game, check the minimums before sitting down. If you're playing a $5 minimum table, you must place at least $5 for every bet you make on the outside bets. (Outside and inside bets are explained in detail below.) For instance, if you bet black or red, odd or even, high or low, you must place at least a $5 chip on the bet. However, your inside bets on specific numbers and combinations only have to total $5. In other words, you can make five individual $1 bets on the inside to meet the minimum.

Beginners are sometimes confused by the fact that roulette uses different chips from the rest of the casino. Each player is assigned a different color of chip; this enables the dealers to distinguish one player's bet from another's. The chips are purchased at the table with either cash or regular casino chips. These chips have no value at other gaming tables—they are for roulette use only. When you have finished playing, the dealer will exchange your roulette chips for casino chips.

When you sit down and buy in, the dealer will ask you what value you want your chips to be. For a $5 game, the minimum value for chips is usually $1. For a $1 minimum game, chips will probably be worth 25¢. Your choice should be based on the size and kind of bets you plan to make on each spin. The dealer keeps track of the value of each player’s colored chips by placing a lammer (a marker with an amount on it) on top of a chip of that color. All your chips will be worth the same amount—
25¢, $1, $5, etc. A stack of chips generally contains 20 chips. The stacks are then defined by the lammer that tops them. For instance, a 100 lammer indicates $100 per stack (meaning $5 chips) and a 20 lammer indicates $20 per stack (meaning $1 chips). So you may be playing the blue chips worth 25¢ (the dealer has a 5 lammer on a blue chip) when you notice the woman next to you is playing red chips worth $25 (a 500 lammer on a red chip).

**THE ACTION**

Roulette moves at a leisurely pace as players place their bets down on the table's layout. Different players' chips often share the same position (no problem—thanks to those differently colored chips). Feel free to stack your chips right on top of other players' chips. The dealer can tell them apart by the color. You have plenty of time to place your bets; you can still bet while the wheel is spinning and after the dealer releases the ball, but not after he announces, "No more bets" and waves his hands over the table.

When the ball comes to rest in a pocket, the dealer calls out the winning number and places a clear cylindrical marker on the number's spot on the layout. The table is swept clean of losing wagers before winners are paid. The dealer will pay the bets furthest away from him (the outside bets) on the table and work in, until he gets to the inside bets, which get paid last.

Don't touch the table to collect or place chips until the dealer removes the marker from the layout and announces, "Place your bets." Remember to pick up whatever chips you don't plan on betting again. And then it's time for the next spin.

**THE BETS**

A multitude of roulette bets are illustrated by lettered chips in the diagram on page 152. The bets are quite straightforward, but make sure you position your chips precisely. You don't want to miss a payoff because of an errant chip. Quick review of how payoffs work: The odds are stated as A to B, which means you'll win A dollars for every B dollars you bet. For example, a $1 bet on a single number pays 35 to 1; if the number hits, you'll win $35 and get back your $1 bet for a total of $36.

**THE OUTSIDE BETS**

These wagers are placed "outside" the 38 numbers of the layout, and refer to groups of numbers or colors. All outside bets lose if the ball drops into the 0 or 00 pocket.

- **Red or black:** A bet that the winning number will be the color you bet on. Pays even money (1 to 1). *Chip A on diagram.*
- **Odd or even:** A bet that the winning number will be either—surprise—odd or even. Pays even money. *Chip B.*
**Low or high:** A bet that the number will either be low (the 1–18 spot) or high (the 19–36 spot). Pays even money, *Chip C.*

**Columns:** A bet on the 12 numbers contained in any one of the three long columns on the layout. Just place your chip on the "2 to 1" spot at the end of the column you want to bet. Yes, it pays 2 to 1. *Chip D.*

**Dozens:** A bet on either the first dozen numbers (1–12), the second dozen (13–24), or the third dozen (25–36). Pays 2 to 1. *Chip E.*

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### THE INSIDE BETS

These bets are made on specific numbers or combinations of numbers either within the number layout or on its border.

**Straight-up bet:** A bet on a single number (including 0 or 00). Place your chip(s) squarely in the center of the number you want. This is the longest shot in the game and it pays 35 to 1. *Chip F* is a straight-up bet on the number 8.

**Split bet:** A bet on any two adjoining numbers (including 0 and 00). Place your chip on the line separating the two numbers. If either of the two numbers shows up, this bet pays 17 to 1. *Chip G* is a split bet on 29 and 32. By the way, a split bet on 0 and 00 can be made at the border of the two numbers or on the line separating the second and third dozen. Apparently, this is a labor-saving device for those at the far end of the table.

**Street bet:** A single bet, paying 11 to 1, that covers three numbers in a row. Place your chip on the outside line of the row you want to bet. *Chip H* is a street bet on the row containing 13, 14, and 15.

**Corner bet:** Also known as a square bet or quarter bet, the corner bet is a single bet on four adjoining numbers that form a square. Place your chip at the point where the four numbers converge. If any of the four numbers show up, the bet pays 8 to 1. *Chip I* is a corner bet on 2, 3, 5, and 6.

**Five-number bet:** There’s only one five-number bet, and that's fortunate because it's the worst roulette bet you can make. (This will be explained further in the odds section.) *Chip J* indicates this horrible bet, which covers 0, 00, 1, 2, and 3. Place your chip at the corner intersection of 0, 1, and the first dozen. It pays 6 to 1.

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### Six-number bet: Also known as a line bet.

This bet covers two adjacent rows of numbers. Place your chip on one of the outside lines at the intersection of two rows. The bet pays 5 to 1. *Chip K* is a line bet on 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, and 36.