Sheepshead Rules

Sheepshead players never play with a full deck. A Sheepshead deck contains 32 cards; the 2-6 of all four suits are removed. Fourteen cards are designated as a fixed trump suit. The trump suit contains the four queens, the four jacks, and the remaining diamonds. The remaining six hearts, clubs and spades are known as the "fail" suits. The trump cards are ranked from highest to lowest as follows:  Q, Q, Q, Q, J, J, J, J, A, 10, K, 9, 8, 7.

The six cards in each fail suit are ranked like the six lowest diamonds:  A, 10, K, 9, 8, 7

The aces, tens and face cards have point values associated with them.   A=11, 10=10, K=4, Q=3, and J=2 Thus there is a total of 120 points in the deck.

The object of the game is to capture tricks containing 61 points or more, i.e. the majority of the points in the deck. After dealing a new hand, players establish roles that are essentially offensive and defensive. One player challenges the others, declaring intent to take tricks worth 61 points or more. If that player is successful the losers sacrifice points to the challenger. If the challenger loses, however, the "defensive" players gain twice as many points, in recognition of their upset victory.

The Art of the Deal

The 32 cards are dealt so that each player receives an equal number, with a few cards reserved. Three players should be dealt 10 cards, four players seven cards each and five players six cards each. The remaining two cards (or four in four-handed) are called the "blind" (Hoyle calls it the "widow"). It is customary to deal the cards two or three at a time, dealing the "blind" cards between rounds. It is considered poor form to deal the blind from the bottom of the deck.

Pick and Win

Starting with the player at the dealer's left and circling the table clockwise, each player has the opportunity to "pick", that is, to pick up the blind cards. Picking up the blind signifies that one intends to challenge the other players. In three-handed games, the picker plays alone against the other two, who play in a team. In five-handed games, the picker identifies a partner, and they play two-against-three. In four-handed play, table rules specify whether the picker may have a partner or must play alone against the other three. In any case, a player who feels particularly skillful, lucky, or reckless may opt to play without the assistance of a partner. The picker may exchange the blind cards for some of those dealt, but must "bury" the same number of cards. [The picker adds the blind to hand before burying, and the buried cards may include cards that came from the blind. Neither the blind cards nor the buried cards are shown to the other players.] If aces, tens, or face cards are buried, their points count [in favor of the picker] as a head start toward the goal of 61.

If no one picks the blind, table rules specify whether to play a least or to declare a doubler and deal a new hand (see variations).

Identifying a Partner

Two methods of selecting a partner are common: "jack of diamonds" and "called ace". In the former version, the holder of the jack of diamonds is automatically the picker's partner. In the latter version, the picker calls the ace of one of the three fail suits, whose holder becomes the partner. In this case, the picker must have at least one card of the called fail suit and must reserve that card until the "called suit" is first led. Likewise, the partner must save the called ace until the called suit is first led, when the ace must be played. Either the picker or the partner may
lead the called suit. [The picker is not allowed to call an ace that is in his own hand.] For the jack of diamonds method, the partner may play the jack any time a trump card is allowed.

Table rules often allow some latitude to cover special situations. For example, if the picker finds the jack of diamonds as an unpleasant surprise in the blind, some groups allow him to "call up" the next higher-ranking jack, the jack of hearts. Similarly, if the picker has the ace or aces of all fail suits he holds, he may be allowed to call the ace of one of the other fail suits and to designate one card as an "under" or "unknown" card. That card is typically placed face down on the table before play begins to assure the other players that the designated card will be played when the called suit is led. If the picker holds all three aces of the fail suits, he may then call a ten of one of the fail suits instead of the ace. Then he must reserve the ace of the fail suit to play when that suit is first led. If the picker feels his hand is particularly strong, he may opt to go alone, and he must announce this before the lead to the first trick.

Keeping Score

If the losers take tricks worth 30 to 59 points during the play of one hand, each loses one cumulative point. If the losers take tricks worth 29 points or less, but take at least one trick, they lose two cumulative points each. Failing to take a single trick costs three points each. The 30 point threshold is commonly called 'schneider', for reasons that some German historian may someday explain. The challenger is obligated to take one more point beyond the threshold, i.e. 31 points to achieve "schneider" in the event of a loss. Likewise a 60-60 tie in points taken during one hand is awarded as a win to the defensive players, who receive two, four or six cumulative points each.

Since points won are deducted from the scores of the losers, scoring is a zero-sum exercise. The losers "pay" points to the winners, and the sum of all scores should always be zero. Thus some players' scores may be negative numbers. This scheme lends itself to the use of coins as scoring tokens; say, a nickel per point perhaps. Such practice is rare in polite social circles of course.

Least

If no one picks the blind, the hand may be played in "least" (or in common Sheepshead slang, a "leaster"). Least is a cut-throat game in which the goal is reversed. There are no partners. Each player tries to take as few points as possible rather than the majority of the points. Most groups require that a player take at least one trick to qualify to win. (Merely ducking every trick is not sufficient then.) This does allow the possibility of taking every trick and winning with 120 points. Such behavior is frowned upon, however. The winner of a least hand receives one cumulative point (or token, coin, or what have you) from each of the other players.

Some groups simply ignore the blind when playing least. Others allow the dealer to identify one trick before play begins, the winner of which gets the blind along with the trick. In that case, the unfortunate player is usually allowed to peek at the blind before continuing.

Playing a hand

The player at dealer's left (who had the first opportunity to pick) leads the first card, and play continues clockwise. The winner of each trick leads the first card of the next trick. Once a card is led, subsequent players must follow suit if possible. (Remember that trump cards are a suit in themselves, and so must be followed when led.) If a player does not have a card of the suit which has been led he has two options. He may "fail off", that is, play a card from one of the fail suits, or he may play a trump card. The choice is a matter of tactics and strategy, of course.

Each trick is taken by the person who played the highest ranking card [that is, the highest trump if any were played, or if not, the highest card of the fail suit that was led; cards of fail suits different from the led suit can never win]. That person then leads the first card of the next trick.
After all tricks have been played the offensive (picker and/or partner) and defensive teams count the points in the tricks they have taken to determine the winners of the hand. Then the cumulative score is adjusted (or tokens are exchanged) and players analyse each other's skill while the next dealer shuffles and deals another hand.

**Tactics**

Sheepshead can be a game of considerable subtlety. Fortunately there are some helpful rules of thumb to guide one's decisions. Naturally none of these guidelines is absolute. There are occasions when one must abandon conventional wisdom. These tactics probably cover 80% of one's decisions, however.

* **Offensive players lead trump; defensive players lead fail.**

This fundamental principle is fully appreciated only after trying the opposite approach. Leading to a trick is an opportunity to exert control over the other players. They must follow suit when possible, which limits their choice of cards, or they must decide whether to try to wrest control away from the leader. Leading trump means one is trying to control the power cards. Leading fail means one is conserving trump or trying to harass the offense by forcing the picker (and partner) to decide whether the trick merits a high trump card.

When using the called ace method to choose a partner, it is usually wise for a defender to lead the called suit when possible. You know the picker has at least that one fail card, and you know the picker cannot possibly take the trick. If you have two or more cards of the called suit, lead the highest scoring card. This may be your best opportunity to get those points home for your team.

The application of this guideline signals which players are on the offensive and defensive sides. Until the called suit is led and the called ace is exposed, (or until the jack of diamonds is played), the identity of the picker's partner is not known to anyone but the partner. When a player other than the picker leads trump, it is a sign that the player holds the designated card and is playing along with the picker.

It is possible to break this rule of thumb with brilliant skill. More often, however, one incurs the wrath of one's teammates by straying from this principle.

* **Pay attention.**

In particular, try to count the number of trump that have been played. The game tends to revolve around the fourteen trump cards. If you know there are many, one, or none left to be played, you can choose your play accordingly. Watch who plays trump, and when, for clues about who is the picker's partner.

* **Position is power.**

Your position with respect to the first (or next) lead will affect your play. When you are at the dealer's left, with the first chance to pick, you do not have the luxury of knowing how many other players might pass or wish to pick. On the other hand you also have the chance to set the pace of the game with your initial lead. At the end (as the dealer) you may be able to pick with a weaker hand than usual. The other players have all indicated some degree of weakness by passing. The fact that no one will pick may also indicate that crucial high trumps are in the blind. But beware the mauer who passes despite a strong hand.
As a picker or partner, you want to be at the lead or on the end. At the lead you can dictate the choices of the defence. On the end you can survey a trick before making a decision. As a defender, you want to keep the offense in the middle. Then you can force the picker to make a difficult decision, knowing that your hostile teammates await their turns to validate or overturn the picker's choice of card.

* Sacrifice points before power.*

Regardless of which side you play on, you will usually obtain a greater return by taking a trick with a high-ranking card later than by hoarding your points. When forced to play trump, for example, and you have only a queen and the ace of diamonds, but you know you cannot take the trick, it may be better to sacrifice the ace. The queen may take a trick with more points later or win the lead at a crucial moment. You may wish to bend this rule when you know you would be giving away the game-winning points.

**Tactics for three-player sheephead**

Three-player sheephead reduces the emphasis on trump and shifts some of it to the fail aces. With only three cards per trick an ace has a good chance of taking a trick. Quantity of trump and aces becomes almost as important as quality. With ten tricks to play, stamina becomes a factor. It's quite possible to lose a three-handed game despite holding all four queens. One rule of thumb is to pick when you have seven or more trump and aces combines.

As a defender, you want to set up a crossfire between you and your teammate. Try to keep the lead in front of the picker.

**Tactics when playing least**

"Leasters" annoy some players so much that they refuse to play them at all. This has led to variations that eliminate their necessity. Others find the sudden shift of tactics to be stimulating. In least it is often tempting to dump one's aces and tens on a trick that is already won by an unfortunate rival. This can make later tricks much cheaper, however. It is often prudent to ration one's "schmier" (aces and tens) by doling out the points to players who seem to be getting by too easily. It can be disastrous to have a lone ("bare") ace or ten of a suit, however. Then it's wise to dump those counters whenever one has an opportunity. A leaster is often won by the player who spends a high-ranking trump card to buy a relatively cheap trick.