



Trump tight

Sheepshead players in the Chippewa Valley face the trick of keeping the card game alive.

By Alyssa Waters
Leader-Telegram staff

CHIPPEWA FALLS — Herman Meinen plays one of the most difficult card games known to man.

That might be a slight exaggeration, but the game of sheepshead is so advanced from Go Fish, skillwise, that it makes casual observers shake their heads in confusion.

Meinen, 34, of Chippewa Falls, began playing when he was 4 — and that's no exaggeration.

"I don't even remember learning how," he said while mentally preparing for a couple of hands of cards at Burly's bar in Chippewa Falls earlier this month. "I remember going to my grandpa when I was young and sitting on his lap."

For the Meinen family, sheepshead isn't a game — it's a way of life. When Meinen was a child and the cards began to fly, he would crawl onto his grandfather's lap and take it all in. He wanted to be part of the action, and in doing so, he became part of the sheepshead phenomenon.

Ahead of the game

If a person knew absolutely nothing about cards, sheepshead likely would be an easy game to learn. The frustration begins for experienced card players when they realize queens are high cards and aces and kings rank lower than jacks — the opposite of the way many games are played.

Participants use unfamiliar words like "trump," "schneider" and "blind." And if that's not confusing enough, Milwaukee resident Brian Weis, co-founder of the Web site Sheepshead.org, said not all people play by the same rules.

"There are just so many variations to the game," he said. "Usually around the holidays I get a couple people e-mailing me on clarifications on the rules. I give them guidelines, but there are a lot of variations on the subtle nuances of the game."

He tries to stay out of family debates as much as possible, as the game can get fairly competitive.

"Usually when I get an e-mail, it's a heavy family debate," he said with a chuckle. "I tell them there is no right or wrong, you just have to make sure you agree (on the rules) before you play."

History of Sheepshead

Sheepshead, sometimes called schafkopf, is a card game that originated in middle Europe in the mid-to late 1700s, by some accounts.

The game is thought to have been developed by peasants fed up with their government. They expressed their discontent by giving the king card a lower rank than usual. To this day, sheepshead has a strange order in the ranking of cards.

The literal English translation of the German schafkopf is "sheep-head" although the original word "schaffkopf" has nothing to do with sheep. The name is believed to have originated from where it was played — on the lids (heads) of wooden barrels or kegs (schaffen).

Schafkopf led to another card game — skat. Residents of Altenburg, Germany, developed a primitive version of skat around 1811. It is the descendant and melding of three other games — sheepshead, hombre and tarot.

Source: Sheepshead.org



Herman Meinen, 34, of Chippewa Falls played four-handed sheepshead at Burly's bar on Canal Street earlier this month. Meinen's grandfather taught him how to play the difficult card game when he was 4.

Staff photos by
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■ For more information about sheepshead, visit www.sheepshead.org. For tournament information, visit www.sheepsheadcentral.com.
■ To play online, visit www.games.yahoo.com/card-games and click on Sheepshead.

Game's glory days

A group of friends at the Chippewa Falls Senior Center agreed years ago to play by certain guidelines. One important rule is to donate \$1 a round to the senior center. The other main rule is to have fun for a couple of hours every Thursday.

Nine senior citizens sat at two tables earlier this month to get their sheepshead fix. For the eight women and one man, the gathering seemed to be more about the camaraderie than the actual game.

One player looked at her hand in disgust. In a gutsy move, she showed her cards to Catherine Schmitz, the woman next to her.

"What would you lead, with something like that?" the woman said, pointing to her lousy hand.

"Close your eyes and throw one," Schmitz said with a smile.

All of the players at the center have been fans of the elusive sheepshead for decades. Many have taught their children, and that's how the game continues through generations, a few of the women said.

"My son said he paid his way through college playing sheepshead," said Pat Klinger of Eagleton.

Schmitz, 80, and her husband, Bob, 82, have two grown sons whom they taught to play the game.

"We play it about once a year when we get together," Schmitz said. She gets most of her playing time at the center.

"This is their place, and they come to play every week," said Sharon Pribyl, the center's director. "They have people to play with. They count on that."

The Schmitzes raised their children in Stanley but moved to Chippewa Falls about 30 years ago.

"People just don't socialize anymore," Schmitz said, recalling past days when neighborhood get-togethers were common.

"Women are working, and after work they have housework to do. Everyone is just so busy now, there's no time to play cards," she said.

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Game Lingo

Blind — Two cards left face-down in the middle of the table that are not dealt to any players. The picker adds the cards to his hand. The picker must discard two cards before play begins.

Picker — The player who chooses to take the blind. This person is obligated to try to win at least 61 points.

Partner — To choose a partner, the picker names an ace of any suit (or jack of diamonds by some rules), and the holder of that ace or jack becomes the picker's partner. The partner's identity is not revealed, even to the picker, until the ace or jack is played.

Schneider — When the opposition fails to get 30 points but has 29 points or fewer, the picking team "schneders" the opposition and wins double what it would have.

Trick — Cards that are played and won in a single round. Each game of five-handed sheepshead — a game of five players — is made up of six tricks.

Trump — The 14 trump cards are four queens, four jacks and the rest of the diamond suit (or club suit by some rules): ace, 10, king, nine, eight and seven. To "trump it" is to take a trick using one of your trump cards.

Trump tight — When players have an abundance of trump, which can make the game more challenging for them.

Fail — The 18 fail cards are seven, eight, nine, 10, kings and aces of all suits except the trump suit. Fail cards always lose to trump cards but differ in point value. A common term is "fail off," which means to use one of your fail cards instead of a trump.

Source: Sheepshead.org



Local residents Phyllis Weeks, left, and Olga Schlub have played sheepshead at the Chippewa Falls Senior Center for several years. The center offers the game at 1:30 p.m. Thursdays.