

L'Hombre

This introduction to L'Hombre is based on a description by Jens Brix Christiansen on pagat.com

L'Hombre (pronounced "lomber") is a fast-moving trick-taking game, played by 3 (or 4) players. It has an illustrious history, going back to the beginning of the 17th century, or earlier. This version describes how the game is currently played in L'hombreklubben 1935.

More about L'hombreklubben 1935 can be found on www.lhombre35.dk

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Historical background

L'Hombre was developed in Spain in the early 17th century, as a variation of an earlier four player game, also called *Hombre*. The three player version, which in Spain was originally called *Hombre Renegado* spread rapidly across Europe and during the 17th and 18th centuries became the premier card game, occupying a position of prestige similar to Bridge today. It was variously known as *Hombre*, *Ombre* or *L'Hombre*, and over the years it acquired many variations, of increasing complexity. Its popularity was eclipsed in the late 18th century by a new four player variant *Quadrille*, which was in turn displaced by *Whist*, *Boston* and eventually *Bridge*.

Although L'Hombre died out in other parts of Europe, it remained popular in Denmark right up to the 21st century. It is played mostly in Jutland and on the island of Funen, and is organised by the *L'Hombre union*. Versions of the game have also survived in Spain itself, where it is known as *El Tresillo*, in the Faroes and in Iceland, and in Peru and Bolivia, where it is known as *Rocambor*.

L'Hombre was one of the first games to introduce bidding, through which one player becomes the declarer, trying to make a contract, with the other players cooperating to prevent him. The declarer was originally called *Hombre* (i.e. the man). It was from L'Hombre that the idea of bidding was adopted into other card games such as Tarot, Skat and Boston.

An excellent account of the early history of L'Hombre (from which some of the above information is taken) can be found in a series of three articles by *Thierry Depaulis* in *The Playing-Card (Journal of the International Playing-Card Society)*. They are entitled "*Ombre et Lumière. Un Peu de Lumière sur L'Hombre*" and appeared in *Vol XV, No 4, pp 101-110*, *Vol XVI, No 1, pp 10-18*, and *Vol XVI, No 2, pp 44-53*.

General Description

L'Hombre is a three-handed trick taking game. It is also quite often played by four people, but there are still only 3 active players in each hand; the player opposite the dealer sits out. A deck of 40 cards is used. Each active player is dealt 9 cards and the remaining 13 form the talon. Each hand begins with an auction. The winner of the bidding becomes the declarer, and plays alone against the other two players (defenders) in partnership.

The final bid by declarer determines the contract. Declarer plays either a game contract, where his objective is to take more tricks than either defender, or a nolo contract, where his objective is not to take any tricks at all.

When the contract is known, the players take turns exchanging cards with the talon, subject to restrictions particular to each contract.

Afterwards, nine tricks are played. However, as soon as the outcome of the contract is clear, declarer will face his hand and make a statement to that effect.

After the play, immediate payment is made in the form of tokens. In general, the amount of payment increases with the rank of the contract. When declarer makes his contract, the defenders each pay declarer; when the contract fails, declarer pays each defender.

The general direction of rotation in the game is counter-clockwise.

The following detailed description of the game is based on the rules approved by the "Danish L'hombre Union". In comparison with other players' rules, it seems reasonable to describe this version of the game as "pure" or "minimal".

Strictly, the version described here is called "Rasle L'Hombre". The Danish L'Hombre literature also describes *Pot L'Hombre*, in which most of the payments are made to and from a pot, rather than between the players, but few if any people now play this way.

Terminology

Like many card games, L'Hombre has a particular terminology. When played in Denmark, a mixture of Danish, French, German, and Spanish terms are used.

In this presentation French and Spanish terms have been left as used in Denmark, but equivalent English terms have been substituted for Danish terms (with Danish terms in brackets).

German terms have been avoided.

The Cards

L'Hombre is played with a deck of 40 cards in the four standard suits. From a standard deck of 52 cards, the 8s, 9s, and 10s are not used.

Ranking of Cards

The ranking of the cards depends on the type of contract.

Nolo contracts

In nolo contracts, there is no trump suit. The black suits and the red suits are ranked differently as follows:

Black:

K Q J 7 6 5 4 3 2 A

Red:

K Q J A 2 3 4 5 6 7

Game contracts

In game contracts, there always is a trump suit. The black aces are permanent trumps, independent of which suit otherwise is trumps. In this capacity, the spade ace is called *spadille* (abbreviated **S**) and the club ace is called *basta* (abbreviated **B**).

The trump suit has the following ranking

Black:

S 2 B K Q J 7 6 5 4 3 (11 cards in all)

Red:

S 7 B A K Q J 2 3 4 5 6 (12 cards in all)

Spadille is thus always the highest trump, and *basta* is always the third highest trump. The second highest trump is the card that would have been the lowest ranking card in that suit if it had not been chosen as trumps (black 2 or red 7). It is called *manille* (sometimes abbreviated **M**). In a red trump suit, the ace is the fourth highest trump and is called *ponto* (sometimes abbreviated **P**). The collective term *matadors* is used for the highest three trumps: the *spadille*, *manille* and *basta*.

When a suit is not the trump suit, it retains its ranking as in nolo contracts, but since the black aces now have their role of *spadille* and *basta*, there remain only 9 cards in each black suit.

The Deal

The first dealer is chosen at random; thereafter the turn to deal rotates. The dealer is also called the *backhand* (**Bh**). The player on the dealer's right is called the *forehand* (**Fh**); the player on the dealer's left is called the *middlehand* (**Mh**). **Bh** shuffles and **Mh** cuts. Each player is dealt nine cards, three cards at a time in rotation, starting with **Fh**. The remaining 13 cards form the talon, which is put aside face down to be used later for exchanging cards.

The Auction

In the auction at his turn, a player has the following choice of call:

pass (Danish: *pas*)

A player that passes drops out of the auction and gives up his chance of becoming declarer.

bid (Danish: *melding*)

A player may make any bid that outranks any bid previously made in the auction.

self (Danish: *kan selv* or *forhånd*)

A player may equal a bid previously made in the auction by a player who is after him in rotation (**Fh** can call self over any other player; **Mh** can call self over **Bh**).

The first half of the auction takes place only between **Fh** and **Mh**. **Fh** calls first, and **Mh** and **Fh** then take turns calling until their part of the auction is settled (when both have called, and at least one of them has passed). Then **Bh** enters the auction, which continues with players taking turns until the entire auction is settled. If all three players simply passed, the hand is a wash-out, no play is made, and the turn to deal proceeds to **Fh**. If at least one bid was made, the auction ends when two players have passed. The player who prevailed in the auction becomes declarer, and the final bid determines the contract.

A sample auction might go

- **Fh**: game
- **Mh**: tourné
- **Fh**: self
- **Mh**: pass
- **Bh**: solo
- **Fh**: self
- **Bh**: pass.

Resulting contract: solo, played by the forehead.

The Bids and Contracts

The bids, and the corresponding contracts, are ranked as shown below (lowest bids first). The *rates* are provided for quick reference when scoring.

Simple Game (Danish: (*Simpelt Spil* or more commonly *Spil*))

Game contract. Declarer names the trump suit. First declarer, then the defenders exchange cards with the talon. **Rate: 1.**

Spade Game (Danish: *Spar Spil* or *Spil i Spar*)

Like Game, but spades are trumps. **Rate: 1.**

Tourné - ranks equal to **Simple Nolo**.

Game contract. The top card of the talon is faced; it determines the trump suit (for this purpose, *spadille* and *basta* signify spades and clubs, respectively). When declarer exchanges with the talon, he gets the faced card as his first card. **Rate: 2.**

Simple Nolo (Danish: *Købe Nolo*) - ranks equal to **Tourné**.

Nolo contract. Declarer (only) exchanges with the talon. **Rate 2.**

Grand Tourné. (Danish: *Grand Tourné* or *Tourné Respekt*)

Like tourné, but the bidder must have been dealt *spadille* and *basta*. The custom is for the bidder to show the two cards as he bids. **Rate 3.**

Solo

Game contract. Declarer plays his hand as dealt; the defenders exchange cards with the talon.

Rate 3.

Pure Nolo ranks equal to **Spade Solo**. Both: **Rate 4.**

Pure Nolo (Danish: *Ren Nolo*) is a nolo contract. Neither declarer nor the defenders exchange cards.

Spade Solo (Danish: *Spar Solo*) is like Solo, with spades as trumps.

Nolo Ouvert.

Like Pure Nolo, but the declarer has to face his hand openly on the table for both defenders to see before the first card is played by Fh. **Rate 6.**

Following the auction, the winner defines the contract. For Simple Game and Solo, he needs to name the trump suit. For Tourné and Grand Tourné, he faces the top card of the talon to determine the trump suit.

As a special rule, a player who has won the auction for a bid of Simple Game may define a contract of Spade Game, Tourné, Simple Nolo, and Grand Tourné at this time.

Exchanging Cards with the Talon

Declarer has the right to exchange cards with the talon when playing low level contracts (including Grand Tourné). The defenders are allowed to exchange cards against game contracts, but not against nolo contracts.

Declarer always exchanges first (if the contract allows it), then each of the defenders exchanges, in rotation.

At his turn, a player may exchange as many of the cards in his hand as he wishes, from none at all up to the number of (remaining) cards in the talon. The player first discards (face down) all the cards he wishes to exchange; then he picks up an equal number of replacement cards in order from the top of the talon, so that he again has nine cards. It is a principle of the game that each player remains responsible for the correct procedure. A player who fouls up the exchange procedure is deemed to have lost the contract and pays accordingly; a defender also pays what the other defender owes declarer.

Any cards from the talon that are not used for exchange are left face down for the remainder of the deal.

The Play

Play is counter-clockwise. No matter who is the declarer, forehand always leads to the first trick.

A trick is won by the highest card of the suit led, unless it contains a trump, in which case the highest trump wins it. The winner of a trick leads to the next.

Players must follow suit if they can, playing any card they wish from the suit led. A player with no card of the suit led may play any card, including a trump. Note that in game contracts, *spadille* and *basta* belong to the trump suit, not to the suits marked on them.

In game contracts, the obligation to follow suit does not apply fully to the matadors (the *spadille*, *manille* and *basta*). When a trump is led, the holder of a matador need not play it, unless a higher matador was led to the trick, and he has no other trumps. It follows that *spadille* can never be forced out. For instance, suppose the *manille* (second highest trump) is led. If the next player has the *spadille* and no other trumps he need not play the *spadille*, but may play any card. If the second player had the *basta* and no other trump, he would have to play the *basta*, because it is lower than the *manille*. If the second player had **S K 4** of trumps, he would have to play a trump, because although his **S** cannot be forced out, his other trumps do not enjoy this privilege. If the trump 4 is led, the second player plays the *spadille*, and the third player's only trump is the *basta*, the third player does not have to play the *basta* but can throw a card of another suit. In this case the *spadille* was not **led** to the trick but played second, so does not draw the *basta*.

In game contracts, each player keeps track of the tricks he has won; in nolo contracts, the defenders keep track of declarer's tricks and no one keeps track of the defenders' tricks.

In the great majority of contracts, play continues only until the fate of contract is clear. For game contracts, four outcomes are possible:

win

Declarer takes more tricks than either opponent. This happens as soon as declarer has five tricks, or if the tricks are divided 4-3-2 (4 to declarer). Play ends immediately when it is obvious that declarer will win (but see Tout).

bête

Declarer takes exactly as many tricks as the defender with most tricks. This happens when the tricks 4-4-1 or 3-3-3.

kodille (Danish: *kruk* - some Danes will understand *kodille* as well)

The declarer has fewer tricks than one or both of the defenders.

Tout

Declarer takes all nine tricks. Declarer must announce his intention to take all tricks at the latest as he wins the fifth trick. Leading to the sixth trick is always understood as a try for tout. (Tries for Tout are rare).

For nolo contracts, the outcomes are defined as follows:

win

Declarer takes no tricks.

bête

Declarer takes one trick.

kodille

Declarer takes two tricks

Scoring

After the fate of each contract is known, payment in tokens is effected immediately.

win

Declarer receives a number of tokens from each of the other players (including the fourth player that sits out), depending on the contract. The number of tokens is 1 for simple games, 2 for tourné and Nolo, 3 for Grand Tourné and Solo, 4 for Pure Nolo and Spade Solo, and 6 for Nolo Ouvert.

bête

Declarer pays the appropriate number of tokens to each of the other players. The rate for each contract is exactly as for winning.

kodille

Declarer pays the other players as for a bête, plus an additional penalty. The extra penalty is 1 token.

Tout

If declarer wins an announced Tout, he receives one additional token from each of the other players. If fails to win an announced Tout, he pays a token to each of the other players, but he still receives payment for winning the game.

Abandoning the Hand after the Exchange

In game contracts (other than Solo and Spade Solo) and in Simple Nolo, declarer has the right to abandon the hand provided that he has not yet played to the first trick. He does this by paying for bête and facing his hand. This option is, of course, exercised when declarer's exchange was so disappointing that the risk of kodille outweighs the chances of winning.

Jargon, Customs, Conventions

When a declarer holds four or more of the top cards of the trump suit, it is customary to describe him as holding that many *matadors*. For instance, with diamonds as trumps, the hand

D: S 7 B A K Q 3 S: - H: 2 6 C: -

would be said to hold 6 matadors. In spite of this custom, the special exemptions from following suit still only extends to the trumps that outrank the king.

Similarly, a solid holding of top trumps, but lacking Spadille, is described as a number of *faux-matadors*.

There is a custom that any player holding 9 matadors (possibly after an exchange) receives a special prize of 2 Danish Kroner from everybody in the room, regardless whether they participate in the game. This custom is now very symbolic after a century of inflation, but until recently you could read accounts of players holding 9 matadors in local newspapers. In fact at the beginning of May 1997, the Danish newspapers carried the story that the former Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen had recently held 9 matadors in clubs while playing l'Hombre privately. The 2 kroner per person were promptly paid.

When defending a game contract, it makes a considerable difference how the defenders divide the tricks among them. If the defenders take five tricks, a 5-0 distribution yields kodille, a 4-1 distribution yields bête, and a 3-2 distribution yields a win for declarer. It is therefore good strategy to play in such a way that one defender takes as many tricks as possible. The negotiation between the defenders as to who should be the stronger takes place during the exchange of cards with the talon. For simple games, declarer has usually left around 8 cards in the talon. The convention is that when the first defender exchanges at most one or two cards, thus ensuring that his partner can exchange as many as he could need, he is signalling that he expects to be the weak defender. Conversely, if he determines that his cards merit that he try to be the strong defender, he will exchange freely.

When exchanging freely for a game contract, declarer and a strong defender usually retain only trumps and kings; declarer may sometimes retain a king-queen pair of a side suit. A weak defender (last in hand) will usually try for a void in a side suit. Most tricks in game contracts are won by trumps or side suit kings.

In nolo contracts, the defenders try to give declarer a trick. This requires both that a defender has a low card in a suit, and usually that his partner is void in that suit, so that he does not overtake declarer. Usually, therefore, defense starts with one defender cashing a long suit, hoping that his partner will become void in the suit and be able to discard in another suit, or simply to pave the way for an attack in that same suit. As an extreme example, in a nolo game where the diamonds are distributed so that one defender has **K Q 7**, the other has **2 3**, and declarer has **4 5 6**, the successful defense is to cash the **K** and **Q**, then to trap declarer with the **7**. In order for the defenders to determine when to play the **7** in cases like this, the following carding convention has been developed: the defender following suit starts with his second lowest card, continues with higher cards, and finally plays his lowest card to signal that he is now void. In the example, the defender will follow with the **2** on the first trick and with the **3** on the second trick; his partner will then know from the high-low sequence that he has no more diamonds.

Because defence is inherently more difficult than declarer play, the card requirements for successful contracts are fairly modest. If, for a game contract, you would exchange only two cards with the talon, you should usually be playing Solo.

Simple Nolo is usually a fair chance on a hand that exchanges only one card, while exchanging 3 or more cards is normally against the odds.

Because there are 11 trumps in black suits but 12 in red suits, black-suited game contracts win on hands that appear slightly weaker than similar red-suited hands.

For game contracts, all cards from the talon are usually used. Hence, it can usually be assumed that all the trumps participate in the play of the cards, and the players can take advantage of exact counting. In side suits, counting is somewhat pointless.

A declarer exchanging from a side suit with **K Q J** will sometimes discard the **K** and **Q**. A subsequent play of the **J** can mislead the weaker defender who might not play a trump on the **J** because he expects his partner to beat it.

A defender exchanging only a few cards usually is best off by trying to make himself void in a side suit.

Cards from the talon that are not used are said to "sleep".

During an evening's play, all contracts except Nolo Ouvert are usually played. Nolo Ouvert is played once every 5-10 evenings. Tout is almost equally rare.

Accommodating four players.

Usually only three players are active at a time. The player opposite the dealer sits out, and when two decks are in use, he shuffles the idle deck, leaving it on his left (which is the right of the next dealer).

The fourth player participates in the payment after the play as though he were a defender.

Variations on Contracts and Bids

Several types of additional contracts and associated bids are played in some circles. Those who play with them need to agree in advance (or fight during play) on the ranking of the bids and the scores involved.

Variation on Simple Nolo

If the contract becomes Simple Nolo, the fourth player can join the contract and participate in the play. After declarer has exchanged cards, the dealer picks up all 13 idle cards (the remaining talon **and** declarer's discards). Of these 13 cards, he discards four, thus obtaining a hand of 9 cards. At this point he may abandon his hand for *bête*, but if he plays to the first trick, his fate is scored as if he was a second declarer; he and declarer settle their accounts independently of each other, each counting as a defender against the other.

Grand

This is L'Hombre's equivalent of No Trumps at bridge. Only *spadille* and *basta* count as trumps. Both declarer and defenders exchange cards with the talon. Declarer must exchange at least five cards, and a win requires at least **five** tricks.

Grandissimo

This is like Grand, but the declarer does not exchange any cards. This contract is to Grand what Solo is to simple Game. The declarer has to make at least **six** tricks to make a win.

Grand Tourné on assorted features

Some players allow Grand Tourné to be bid on holdings other than two black aces. The specific holdings allowed vary widely; many of them must be considered wildly gambling and would seem to undermine the original idea of bidding in the game. Some of the combinations seen are:

- two red aces
- one red and one black ace
- three (or four aces) - scoring an additional bonus
- the 7 of diamonds

Once you open this bag of variations, there is no limit to the holdings that you can agree should qualify for a Grand Tourné.