

Pitch

Pitch (also sometimes known as Setback or High-Low-Jack) is the most popular of a number of similar games originating from the game All Fours, a seventeenth-century English game. The name All Fours is a reference to the four points players try to take: High, Low, Jack and Game. The goal of all fours is to take “all four” of these points. The original All Fours incorporates some of Euchre’s elements, including offering a turned up suit as trump.

How the Game Is Played

Pitch is a trick-taking game using a standard 52-card deck; each player is dealt six cards. Each player can bid on the value of his or her hand and plays to take tricks and get points. Although one player wins the bid and tries to take all the points, all players can get points by taking key cards. The goal is to be the first player to reach the winning score (7, 11, or 21).

Bidding

You can bid on the value of your hand. Possible bids are two, three, four, or smudge (smudge is really a bid of five).

For two, three, and four, you are bidding how many of the points below you can win. For smudge, you have to win all the points below, and take all six tricks in the round.

High: You win the trick which has the highest available card in the trump suit.

Low: You win the trick which has the lowest available card in the trump suit.

Jack: You win the trick which has the jack of the trump suit.

Game: You get the most game points in the round. All 10s are worth 10, aces are worth 4, kings are worth 3, queens are worth 2, and jacks are worth 1. Other cards aren’t worth anything.

Each player in turn bids or passes; bidding always starts at two. Bidding only lasts one round (each player only gets one chance to bid or pass). If all players pass, the cards are redealt and bidding starts again.

Note that since not all cards are dealt every hand, ace and 2 aren’t always the high and low card (sometimes a queen may be the High and a 4 the Low, for instance). And there may not be a jack in any given hand (since only 24 of 52 cards are dealt in a hand).

Scoring Points

All points scored go to the player who scored them, but the pitcher must try to get the points he or she bid.

If you are the pitcher, and you win your bid, you get the number of points you took, even if this is higher than the bid. For instance, if you bid two, and took High, Low, and Jack, that player gets 3 points.

But if you lose your bid, you are *set back* (lose) the number of points you bid, even if you made some of the bid. For instance, if you bid three, and get High and Low (but not Jack or Game), you lose 3 points, since you did not make all of your bid. If other players get the points you bid, they score those points. In this example, if another player got Jack and Game, he would get 2 points.

It is possible for two or more players to tie for Game (both receiving the same amount of total game points); in this case, no player gets that point. And again, if there is no jack dealt, no one gets the Jack point.

Note that you must bid smudge to get the fifth point for winning smudge. Merely getting all six tricks and High, Low, Jack, and Game will still only give you 4 points if you didn't bid Smudge. If you bid Smudge, you must get all 4 points and win all the tricks, or you lose 5 points.

Bids are always scored in the order High, Low, Jack, and Game. Scoring stops when one player reaches the winning score. (This breaks any ties in the game.) For example: in a game played to a winning score of 11, Linda has 9 points and Chris has 10 points. If Linda wins High and Low, and Chris wins Jack and Game, Linda wins the game, because she gets 2 points for High and Low, making 11, and Chris thus never gets his 2 points for Jack and Game. (This means in a close game, the person who's behind can win if he or she wins the right bids.)

Taking Tricks

The player who won the bid (called the pitcher) plays a card to the board; the suit of this card is used as trump.

Each player must play trump if he or she has it (trump is shown in the upper right corner). The player with the highest trump card wins.

The player who won the first trick leads the next trick with any card. Each player, in turn, plays a card. If you have a card of the suit led, you must either follow suit or play a trump card. If you don't have a card of the suit led, you can play any card (trump, or any other suit).

Important! In Pitch, you can always choose to play trump, even if you can follow suit. If you don't have a card in the suit played, you can play any card, including trump.

The trick is won by the player who played the highest trump card, or, if there's no trump, the player who played the highest card of the suit that was led. The winner of each trick leads the next trick, and may lead any card.

Strategies

Bid based on the strong cards in your starting hand. If you have the Ace and a 2 or 3, a bid of two is a strong bet. If you have an ace and king, and other high cards, try bidding four. And an ace, king, and 2 is an excellent bid of three.

Be careful about bidding based on holding a jack, unless you have other cards in that suit to protect it (ideally higher cards); there's no guarantee you'll keep a jack in your hand if you don't have supporting cards—and someone else is likely to get that point. Watch out for your 10s! 10s are worth a lot of points towards the Game bid, so be careful you don't give them away too easily. If you know you're likely to lose a trick (because it's been trumped or an ace has been played), you might want to sacrifice a face card instead of a 10.