



All Fours



The rules of All Fours, as much played in Kent in 1674



Perhaps this was the game that Charles II played with a pack of cards Paul Bostock bought for the Company ...

Two players, using the 52 card pack.

Cutting for deal [this ranking is a curious feature which only otherwise occurs in the game of “Put”]

For this part of the game only, and not at any other point in the game, cards rank 3-2-A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7-6-5-4. High deals first, thereafter the deal alternates.

The deal

The dealer deals six cards to each player in batches of three (yep that's three at a time rather than singles alternating – it helps make up for any poor shuffling) and turns up the next card, the 13th, to show the proposed trump suit. If the trump turned up is a jack, the dealer scores one point. The dealer's opponent can either accept the trump suit or “beg one”

by saying I beg. If the non-dealer begs, the dealer must choose whether to allow the non-dealer to score one point, or deal another three cards each and turn another card for trumps. If the second trump turned up is of the same suit, the dealer must repeat by giving another three cards each and turning up another for trumps and so on until a different suit is turned up.

If the new trump card is a jack, the dealer scores a point (yep, even if they had a point for a previous jack).

The play

The non-dealer leads to the first trick, cards rank from high to low: A, K, Q, J, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2. Players may trump at any time but otherwise must follow suit if they can. The higher trump wins, or if no trump is played, the higher card of the suit led. The winner of a trick leads to the next.

The reckoning

When all the cards have been played, points are scored in order as follows:

- Highest: one point for the holder of the highest trump dealt.
- Lowest: one point for the original holder (not the person who won it in the trick) of the lowest trump dealt.
- Jack: one point for a player who wins a trick containing the jack of trumps (curious fact: until All Fours was invented the Knave was the lowest ranked Court card. It is only in All Fours that it is properly called the Jack. Even in the 19th century genteel people called it the Knave and anyone who called it a Jack was thought to be non-U).
- Game: one point for the player whose tricks contain the higher value in cards. This is calculated as follows: ace=4, king=3, queen=2, jack=1, ten=10. If both players have the same card value in the tricks they have won, the point for Game goes to the non-dealer. NB. The card values are not points, there is only one point for Game.

A person who wins all four of these points in one hand is said to have won “All Fours”

The end

At your table of four, you will be changing opponents every 20 minutes so that in one hour you have played each of the other three for 20 minutes. On your score sheet, record how many points you win against each opponent. At the end of the hour add the three together, write your name on your score sheet and be ready to hand it in.

This score will determine which table you are on for the second hour of play after dinner.

“All Fours is a game very much played in Kent, and very well it may, since from thence it drew its first original.”

Charles Cotton (poet and writer 1630-1687), The Compleat Gamester 1674

“I am fully convinced that cards are justly stiled the Devil’s Books; and that this Game in particular, of ALL FOURS, is big with all the Evils that the Beast can bring upon the Earth.”

Gyles Smith, Serious reflections on the dangerous Tendency of the Common Practice of Card-Playing, especially the game of All Four. (1754).

“Of all the games on the cards All-Fours is the most Republican. For the high and the low mingle without pride and play their little game with propriety. In All Fours, as in society, however, Jack shows a proper degree of deference to royalty, through the ‘upper ten’ often succumb to, and consort with, the knave.”

Sketches of Life from Behind a Door, by N.P. Willis (American magazine writer 1806-1867) parodied in Hoyle’s Games Modernised (1863).

*“We have played together,
Many a time and oft, and Put and Crib;
And at All Fours have cheated with the best.
How can we reconcile such conduct with our honest seeming,
Or bear our heads so proudly in the world?”*

Martin Tupper (poet 1810-1889) parodied in Captain Crawley’s The Card Player’s Manual (1876)