

AMERICAN MAH JONGG

Primer VOL. 1

Everything you need to know
to transition smoothly

Michele Frizzell



**NATIONAL MAH JONGG LEAGUE
CARD ANALYSIS**

2026

AMERICAN MAH JONGG PRIMER

Companion NMJL Card Analysis 2026

Everything you need to know
to transition smoothly

MICHELE FRIZZELL



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Email correspondence should be addressed to:

michele@mahjlife.com



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/michelefrizzell>



<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyhydCuxDvVSX-yco5SHMDA>

AMERICAN MAH JONGG PRIMER COMPANION NMJL CARD ANALYSIS 2026

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Introduction

The National Mah Jongg League releases its annual card of valid hands for American Mah Jongg players each April. While the core rules of the game remain consistent (see Appendix A), the way hands are described—through colors, letters, numbers, and format—has stayed the same. The categories of hands have also remained unchanged over the years. The key difference each year lies in the shapes and patterns of the hands themselves.

This companion aims to summarize the differences between the old and new cards, offering insights into the nuances to help you navigate the transition smoothly.

What do the stats mean?

Numbers in parentheses throughout this guide give you valuable insights into yearly changes. A standalone number represents the total number of hands in each category or attribute. A **+number** indicates an increase from last year, while a **-number** reflects a decrease. Percentages show the proportion of hands that share a specific category or attribute, with values over **9%** highlighting predominant patterns or key trends to watch.

Smaller shifts such as **+1/-1** indicate nominal changes, while **+3/-3** reflect more significant changes. Monitoring these shifts allows you to better evaluate hand potential, recognize favorable patterns, and refine your strategies to optimize your winning potential.

What's New for 2026?

The 2026 card introduces a different kind of challenge. While there are fewer unique hand shapes, making the card easier to recognize and navigate, the game shifts toward competition for coveted tiles. Many hands share similar structures, allowing players to stay flexible longer and recognize patterns more quickly. At the same time, fewer pair-dependent hands create a more stable environment, so hands are less likely to collapse due to a single missing tile. That stability comes at the cost of demand.

There are nine hands holding bouquets, indicating that three or more flowers are required. As a result, players will be competing for flowers, and with that competition, jokers will be protected more than in previous years.

This changes how the game feels. Hands do not break as easily, but they stall more often when key tiles are not available. Players will need to balance patience with awareness, read the table more closely, and adjust their timing as demand becomes a key factor in decision-making.

This year's card rewards players who not only recognize structure but also understand how competition for tiles shapes the flow of the game.



The Hands

Making it Make Sense

Every hand on the card tells a story—but not all stories unfold the same way. To read the card effectively, it's not enough to recognize what a hand looks like. You need to understand why the combinations work. That comes from seeing each hand through four lenses: shape, pattern, attributes, and value.

- Shape shows you how the hand is built.
- Pattern reveals the tile relationships.
- Attributes tell you how the hand will play under pressure (e.g., discards, exposures, wall depth).
- Value reflects what the hand is worth—but not necessarily how easy it is to achieve.

When you begin to see these elements working together, the card becomes more than a list of options. It becomes a framework for decision-making—helping you choose hands that are not only possible, but practical.

Shapes refer to the structural blueprint of a hand—how tiles are grouped to meet the requirements on the card. This includes the size and combination of blocks such as pairs, pungs, kongs, quints, or sextets.

Shape also determines how flexible the hand can be as the game unfolds. Hands that share similar shapes often feel familiar to experienced players, making them easier to recognize and develop in real time.

Patterns describe the tile relationships required within a hand, such as suits, sequences, like numbers, or category-specific rules (e.g., Winds, Dragons, Consecutive Runs). While shapes define structure, patterns define the logic within that structure. Patterns influence how easily tiles can be obtained and often dictate how competitive a hand might be at the table.

Attributes are the defining characteristics that indicate overall use of the tiles. These include factors such as concealment, suit distribution, tile demand, reliance on jokers, and exposure requirements. Attributes shape the strategic feel of a hand—whether it is flexible or rigid, fast or slow, forgiving or fragile. Understanding attributes helps players anticipate challenges before they arise.

Values represent the point score assigned to a completed hand, as listed on the card. While higher values may appear more appealing, they often come with increased difficulty, tighter constraints, or higher tile demand.

Because command knowledge is key to playing this game well, we'll look at each lens and consider the specific changes on this year's card.

Shapes

The shapes of the hands change every year, so it is always worth taking time to study how they are built. This year, the shift is noticeable—not in complexity, but in consistency.

There are fewer unique shapes and more repetition across the card. Instead of a wide range of unfamiliar structures, many hands share similar frameworks built around pungs and kongs. Big multiples continue to anchor most hands.

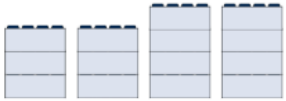


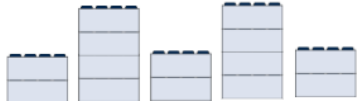

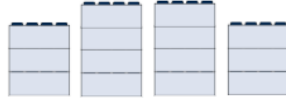


What stands out is the recurrence of familiar structures. Patterns like pung–pung–kong–kong appear frequently, along with variations that follow the same general form. Once you recognize one, you will begin to see it across multiple sections.

With fewer unique shapes than last year, the card becomes more predictable. That reduces confusion and makes it easier to stay in a hand once you have identified the structure.

When shapes repeat, recognition improves—and with it, faster, more confident decisions. Instead of searching for a hand, you can match what you have to a structure you already understand.

This year, you are not learning more shapes—you are recognizing them more quickly.

Statistics (hand count includes variations [i.e., Evens #1 is counted as two hands]; >3%)		This Year	
Analysis by Recurring and Prevalent Shapes		Count	Card %
Pung pung kong kong		9	13%
Pung pair pair pung kong		5	7%
Pair pung pair pung kong		4	6%
Pair kong pair kong pair		3	4%
Pair pair pung pung kong		3	4%
Pung kong kong pung		3	4%

Sorted by this year's count in descending order.

See the Strategy section for additional details on the importance of shapes

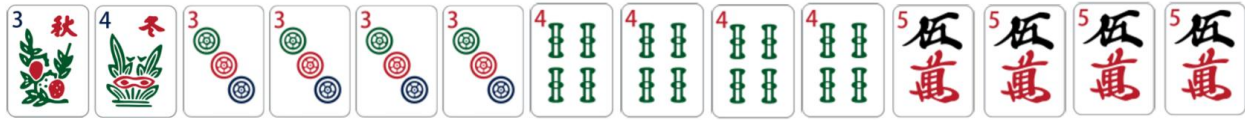
What This Means for Your Play

- Look for familiar structures before searching for specific hands
- Stay flexible longer—many hands share similar frameworks
- Commit when your tiles clearly match a repeating shape
- Let recognition guide your decisions, not memorization



Patterns

The pattern of a hand can be described by its components. For example:



Consecutive Run #7-2

The **shape** of this hand is a pair of flowers with a triple-kong, and the **pattern** is mixed suits.

The pattern of a hand comes from how the components work together—its shape and the attributes that support it.

This year, patterns are a bit easier to recognize. While mixed suits are still common, there is a slight shift toward more contained, structured designs. Fewer hands rely on broad, overlapping attributes, making patterns more consistent across the card.

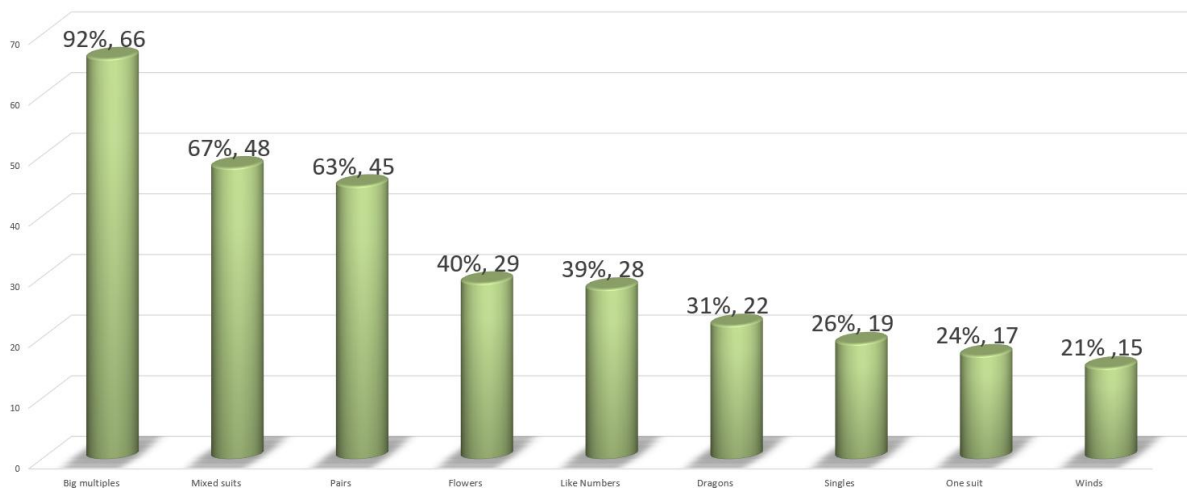
You will still see a variety of blocks—pairs, pungs, kongs, sextets, and occasional sequences—but many hands are built around familiar combinations. That makes it easier to connect what you have in your rack to what the card supports.

What This Means for Your Play

- Look for repeating structures across the card, not just individual hands.
- Let patterns guide your direction instead of preference.
- Be cautious with hands that depend on concealed sequences or single tiles.
- Use repeated patterns to stay in your hand longer and make more confident decisions.

Attributes

Attributes >9%



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Statistics (hand count includes variations [i.e., Evens #1 is counted as two hands]; >9%)		This Year		Last Year	
Analysis by Attribute	Delta	Count	Card %	Count	Card %
Big multiples (i.e., pung, kong, quint)	1	66	92%	65	92%
Mixed suits (including Dragons)	-3	48	67%	51	72%
Pairs	-2	45	63%	47	66%
Flowers	-3	29	40%	32	45%
Like Numbers	-5	28	39%	33	46%
Dragons	-2	22	31%	24	34%
Singles	-1	19	26%	20	28%
One suit	3	17	24%	14	20%
Consecutive Runs	1	17	24%	16	23%
Little flowers	-4	15	21%	19	27%
Winds	2	15	21%	13	18%

Sorted by this year's count in descending order.

There are subtle but meaningful shifts in this year's card that influence how hands develop and how decisions are made. While the foundation of American mah jongg remains consistent, the distribution of attributes changes how you should prioritize tiles and interpret opportunity.

American mah jongg continues to be a game driven by big multiples (92%, +1). This remains the dominant structure across the card, reinforcing the importance of collecting tiles that can quickly form pungs, kongs, and quints. Strong hands still begin with the ability to build density early.

There is a noticeable decline in mixed suit hands (67%, -5) alongside an increase in one-suit hands (24%, +4). While mixed hands still dominate overall, the shift suggests a slightly stronger presence of one-suit structures.

Pairs continue to decline slightly (63%, -3), and singles remain relatively low (26%, -2). When singles or pairs are required, keep them thoughtfully, especially in open hands, where flexibility can narrow quickly.

The most notable shift comes with Like Numbers (39%, -7) and Flowers (40%, -5), both showing meaningful decreases. While still important, these attributes are less dominant than last year. Be more selective, especially with flowers—and commit when you two or more to work with.

Consecutive Run remains a strong category due to its tile efficiency (24%, +1).

Winds show a slight increase (21%, +3). Since more hands use dragons than winds, pass winds more freely—but one at a time.

What This Means for Your Play

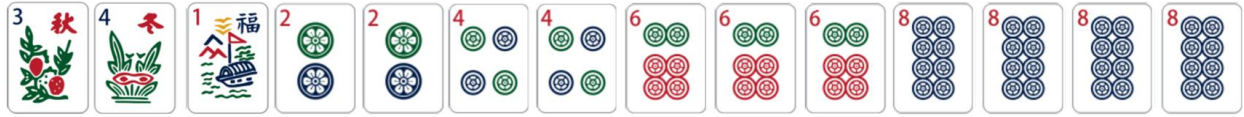
- Prioritize big multiples—they remain the backbone of most hands
- Stay flexible early, then narrow your focus when your tiles support it
- Be selective with flowers and like numbers
- Build strength through density, not just collecting possibilities

This year's card invites you to stay flexible and let your decisions evolve with the hand. Instead of committing too early or relying on familiar patterns, your advantage lies in adjusting to what your tiles and what you see happening at the table reveal in real time. As the game unfolds, your ability to recognize when to build, when to shift, and when to narrow your focus becomes more important than any single hand choice. An adaptive playing style—grounded in observation and supported by timing—will lead to stronger, more confident decisions during your transition.



Carry Over Hands

The following are hands that made the cut from last year.



Evens #5



Odds #7-2



Winds-Dragons #1



Winds-Dragons #8

This was an exposable hand last year and in a different order.



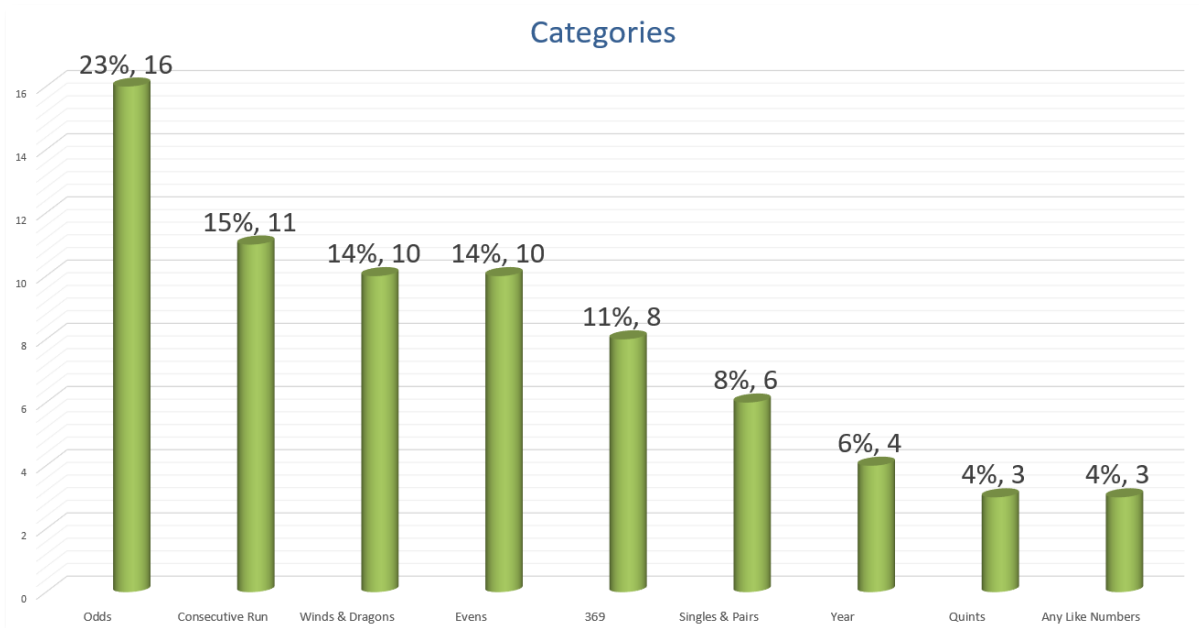
Singles and Pairs #6

Seems simple, but it is not!



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Statistics (hand count includes variations [i.e., Evens #1 is counted as two hands]; >3%)

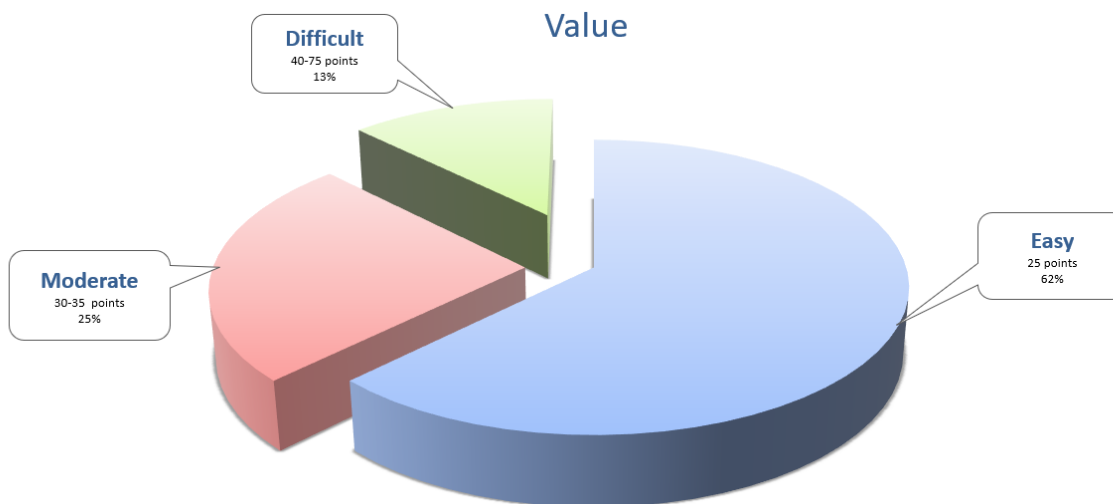
Analysis by Category	Delta	This Year		Last Year	
		Count	Card %	Count	Card %
Odds	3	16	23%	13	18%
Consecutive Run	0	11	15%	11	15%
Winds & Dragons	0	10	14%	10	14%
Evens	1	10	14%	9	12%
369	-1	8	11%	9	12%
Singles & Pairs	-1	6	8%	7	10%
Year	0	4	6%	4	5%
Quints	-1	3	4%	4	4%
Like Numbers	0	3	4%	3	4%
Total		71		73	

Sorted by this year's count in descending order.



Value

This section is for those who like to look beneath the surface of the card. If you enjoy exploring year-over-year analytical shifts, you are in the right place. The charts and data that follow highlight what has changed, what has stayed the same, and—most importantly—what those changes mean for your play. You do not need to study every detail to benefit, but for those who like to connect the dots, this analysis offers a deeper understanding of how these shifts shape the game.



Statistics (hand count includes variations [i.e., Evens #1 is counted as two hands])			This Year		Last Year	
Analysis by Value		Delta	Count	Card %	Count	Card %
25	Easiest	-1	45	63%	46	65%
30	Open	3	11	15%	8	11%
30	Concealed	-4	4	6%	8	11%
35	Concealed	3	3	4%	0	0%
40	Quints	1	2	3%	1	1%
45	Quints	-1	1	1%	2	3%
50	Singles & Pairs	0	5	7%	5	7%
75	Singles & Pairs	0	1	1%	1	1%
Total			72		71	

Sorted by this year's count in descending order.

The overall distribution of values on the 2026 card is normal. Most hands remain the easiest at 63%, with only a slight decrease from last year. Open hands increase modestly, while higher-value hands, including Quints, Singles and Pairs, remain unchanged.

One notable addition is the introduction of 35-point concealed hands, which helps bridge the gap between lower- and higher-value structures. Combined with fewer unique shapes this year, the card should feel more approachable, allowing players to recognize patterns more quickly and settle into play sooner.

Overall, the data suggests a smoother transition with a more balanced spread of hand difficulty.

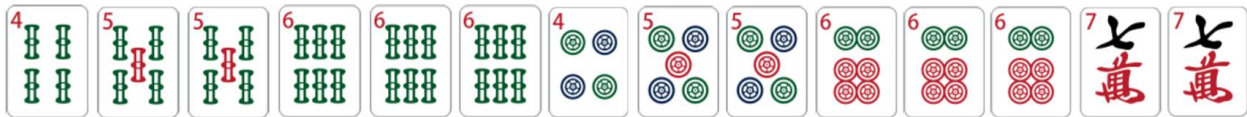


Valuation Oversights

Not all hands are valued in proportion to their difficulty, and that can influence how players approach the card.

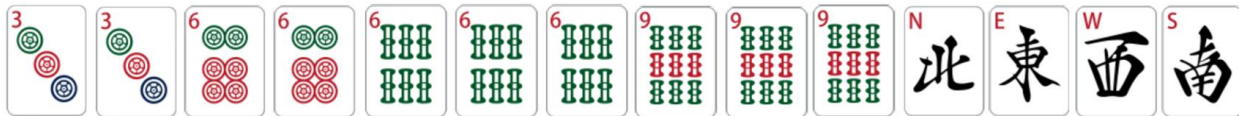
A few concealed hands stand out—particularly those built with two pungs alongside combinations of singles and pairs. While they are listed at 30 points, their structure requires the same level of coordination as hands valued at 35 points. *Consecutive Run concealed* reflects that more accurately, making it a useful benchmark. Similar hands in Year, Evens, and Winds-Dragons follow the same pattern but are valued lower.

These hands are not easier; they are simply undervalued. If you rely solely on the printed value, you may miss strong opportunities. Take a closer look at the following examples.



Consecutive Run #8

This is a 35-point concealed hand built with singles, pairs, and two pungs—consistent with historical valuation.



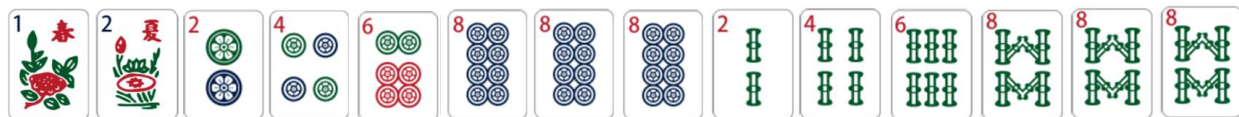
369 #4

This is a 30-point exposable hand with singles and pairs plus two pungs.



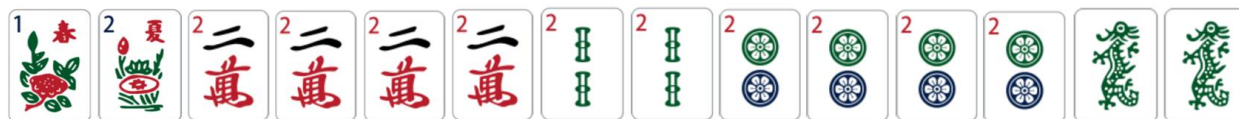
Year #4

This is an exposable hand that requires singles and pairs with two pungs, and it has a 30-point value.



Evens #8

This is a concealed hand that requires singles and pairs with two pungs, and it has a 30-point value.



Any Like Numbers #3

This is an exposable hand that requires two kongs and three pairs with a 25-point value.

This is the same type of hand with the same components as Odds #7, which has a 30-point value.



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What This Means for Your Play

Remember that these hands are not easier; they are simply undervalued.

That matters in play. Concealed hands require more commitment, and once tiles are discarded or claimed, the hand can quickly become difficult—or impossible—to complete. If the value does not match the effort, the risk increases.

Be cautious with undervalued hands. Pay attention to tile flow, watch what is leaving the table, and be ready to pivot if the hand stops developing. Flexibility and awareness will help you avoid getting stuck in a hand that is both difficult to complete and not worth the risk.



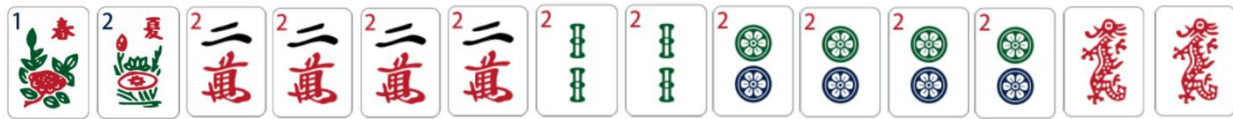
The Fine Print

Mah jongg is a game of strategy, tradition, and evolving rules. Understanding key standards in preliminaries, game mechanics, and complex rules can help you navigate the game with confidence. While the back of the card offers guidance, space is limited, making deeper knowledge essential for accurate rule interpretation and effective play.

For a comprehensive collection of league-published guidelines and rulings, visit the Mahj Life Wiki, where you can read detailed articles with insightful commentary to help clarify complex rules and their practical applications.

Problematic Parentheticals

Most hands on the card include text in parentheses that provides flexibility or limitation. They can also lead to mistakes or disputes at the table if they are misinterpreted. The shapes and patterns are represented by colors, letters, and numbers. The text in parentheses offers both flexibility and limitations. In cases of conflict, the text in parentheses takes priority. The following are visual examples to clarify and help prevent confusion.



Any Like Numbers #3

Any like numbers with a pair of any dragon



Quints #3, Any Dragon

This hand requires quints of any two numbers in one suit, with any off-suit dragon.



Consecutive Run #2

The chow in this hand must be in the middle. I call this the “nested chow” hand.



Winds-Dragons #2, Any Dragon

This hand requires a four-number sequence in one suit with all three dragons; you choose which dragons are the pungs and which is the kong. The kong does not need to correspond to the suit of the sequence.





Winds- Dragons #6, These No. Only

This hand should be taken literally; it requires ONE North, TWO Easts, THREE Wests, and FOUR Souths.



Winds- Dragons #5

The spaces between the letters and numbers for a hand on the card are blocks. A player can claim a discard to expose (meld) any block of three or more identical tiles

Double pung allow a player to take a progressive approach to hand development because they can claim a discard to complete one pung at a time.



Any Like Numbers #1

A sextet requires an all-in commitment.



Back Left Panel

Game Begins

There is a note that says, "A player's turn begins when they either pick or claim a tile." To elaborate, a player's turn begins in one or two ways:

- 1) They pick a tile from the wall and use it to request a joker exchange, or they place it in the sloped part of their rack, or
- 2) They claim a discard and place it on the flat part of their rack, or they expose tiles from the sloped part of their rack. Requesting a joker exchange as the initial transaction is a disqualifiable offense.

Claiming a Discard

Rule #1 was moved from under Rules for Jokers in the middle panel and rephrased for clarity. A discarded tile can only be claimed to complete a block of three or more identical tiles in an exposable hand. A block with singles or pairs (e.g., 234, 2026, NEWS) cannot be claimed unless you are ready to win.

Rules #5 and #6 were modified to clarify the priority when two players claim the same discard for exposure or mah jongg, and to establish that if one player racks the discard or exposes tiles, they get preference. However, the revision failed to mention that the original rule was designed to protect the player who is paying attention when the player next in turn is not.

These rules could be combined into a single statement: "When two players want the same discard for the same reason, the player next in turn gets the tile. However, if the player next in turn is not paying attention and another player claims the discard by racking it or exposing tiles, it is too late for the player next in turn."

Rule #7 states that a player can change their current exposure during their turn. To be clear, an adjustment can be made with the number and type of tiles in an exposure until a player has either requested a joker exchange or discarded. The rule does not address the risk of disqualification if a player racks the wrong discard by mistake; in such a case, they may be disqualified.

Back Middle Panel

Misnamed Tile: There are TWO of the FIVE misnamed discard scenarios that can occur during a game. For the other rulings, click the QR code to the right.



Dead Hand: There are TWO of the THIRTEEN circumstances that may lead to disqualification, along with the next steps.



Rules for Jokers: This section outlines EIGHT of the EIGHTEEN joker protocols, covering when and how jokers can be used, their limitations, and specific scenarios where they cannot substitute certain tiles. These select rules ensure fair play and consistency in the game, but they are not comprehensive.



The Playbook

There are powers (i.e., pros) and pitfalls (i.e., cons) that apply to each category on the card. Consider the pros and cons when deciding which category or hand to focus on, especially when the choices are equitable. For example, both choices use most of your tiles, or both choices use most of your multiples. This advice applies to all categories:

- **Hot commodities** will be flowers and year tiles (e.g., 2s, 6s, White dragons). This is the decade of deuces, and I predict that this will be the Year of the Bouquet. Avoid passing these tiles during the Charleston and count the cost of discarding them in the end game.
- Gather tiles to support the strength of the hand regardless of suit.
- Choose a category based on the strength of your hand. If you are between options, choose the option where there are no gaps (e.g., gathering tiles for 369 but have no 3s) and few weaknesses (e.g., a single that needs to be a pung, a pair that needs to be a kong).

Let us take a brief look at the powers and pitfalls in each category on the card.

Year	
Powers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you play in this category, you can thwart others from completing the big year hand, the highest value hand on the card (last hand in Singles-Pairs). 	Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands use only two tiles. • Anyone playing an Evens hand can impact the availability of 2s and 6s. • Anyone playing a 369 hand may impact the availability of 6s.
Advice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider this category if you have a strong representation of the year's tiles. • Passing Year tiles is risky because of Singles-Pairs #6, so be mindful when passing 2s and 6s. • Watch for white dragons in discards and exposures. 	
Evens	
Powers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you get odd tiles, you may have options in Consecutive Run. • Uses two efficient tiles, 4s and 6s. 	Pitfalls <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since there are gaps between four even numbered tiles, switchability is limited. • Fewer tiles might be available for this category if they are also needed for Year hands.
Advice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider this category if you have gaps in your consecutive tiles or more multiples with even tiles than odd tiles. • If you get odd tiles, consider switching to the Consecutive Run category, especially if you get 5s, since it is the most efficient tile in the set. 	



Any Like Numbers

Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Depending on which hand you are focused on, you may be able to switch to another category containing hands with like numbers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hands require one number in mixed suits.If you play Any Like Numbers #1, anyone playing a bouquet hand (e.g., hand with three or more flowers)

Advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There are three hands to choose from, but do not be deceived – there are like numbers in every category.Passing like numbers will be almost as risky as passing a pair.

Quints

Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use of big multiples (e.g., pung, kong, quint) so jokers can be extremely helpful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A pair of flowers is in one hand.

Advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consider this category if you have big multiples and at least one joker, but more is better. A minimum of 2 jokers will be required this year.If you play Quint #2, limit yourself to one exposed quint until you have the pair in your hand.

Consecutive Run

Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use of number tiles 1-9 in three suits with flexibility of a 5-number range.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Availability of 2s; consider beginning your run at 3 or higher.

Advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consecutive Run is the most powerful category on the card because hands use tiles numbered 1-9 in three suits. Also, they are efficient because you can adjust your starting number if the tiles you need become unavailable. If you choose to play a hand in this category and have mixed suits, keep tiles in a four- or five-number range around your multiples or predominant pattern for the greatest flexibility.Consecutive Run more to offer than one of two categories with the most hands because of tile efficiency. If you are in between categories with equal potential, choose Consecutive Run.Consecutive Run #4 has a concealed chow (e.g., three in a sequence). Make sure you have the chow intact before you claim a discard for any exposures.

Odds

Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There are three hands that use five numbers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Since there are gaps between five odd-numbered tiles, switchability is limited.

Advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">If you get even tiles, consider switching to the Consecutive Run category, especially if you get 4s and 6s, since these – with the 5s – are the most efficient tiles in the set.

Winds-Dragons

Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none">There are two hands of least resistance this year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hands are not as switchable because there are only four hands outside the category using Winds.



Advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider this category if you have a strong representation of winds or dragons in your dealt hand. • If you are not playing in this category, pass winds and dragons separately and one at a time. There are far more hands containing dragons than winds, so consider passing winds before passing dragons. • Monitor the number of winds discarded in the begin game. If too many are discarded and you have number tiles, consider switching to another category. The switch sweet spot is 70 tiles remaining in the wall, so you have time to gather tiles to develop a different hand. • Odds with North/South and Evens with East/West, are on the card as hands of least resistance, so take advantage of them! These combinations are fixed, and the number tiles cannot be swapped. For example, you cannot use North and South with evens.

369	
Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands use like numbers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since there are gaps between the only three numbered tiles, switchability is extremely limited.

Advice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although the 369 category has a fair number of hands, it is not very flexible because it only uses three number tiles that have two-number spans between them, limiting your ability to switch categories. Consider this category if you have a strong representation of 369 with no gaps in your dealt hand. • If your hand does not develop by the middle game, consider switching to Any Like Numbers if you do not have exposures or exposures that can be used.

Singles and Pairs	
Powers	Pitfalls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hands have the highest value on the card. • The hands are all concealed, so you can switch to a related category if your tiles become unavailable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands are shallow because they are comprised of singles and pairs. If you switch to a hand outside the category, it will take time to build.
Advice	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider this category if you have no jokers and a few big multiples from the dealt hand. • Hands typically align with another category on the card, such as Consecutive Run, Evens, or Odds. If you draw jokers, consider switching to another category before the middle of the game (e.g., 70 tiles remaining). • The big year hand will be difficult this year, so try to win this one early because everyone will be adjusting to this year's nuances and strategies. 	

Each category on the card has its own powers and pitfalls. Understanding both helps you make better decisions, especially when you have a viable cross-category option.

When your choices are close—for example, when two hands use most of your tiles or offer similar potential—look beyond preference. Evaluate how each category uses your tiles, then consider availability, flexibility, and risk.

Some tiles will always be in higher demand, especially flowers and year tiles (2s, 6s, white dragons). Be cautious when passing year tiles, rarely pass flowers during the Charleston, and always consider the cost of discarding them later in the game.



Let the strength of your hand drive your decision, not the category itself.

What This Means for Your Play

- Choose your category based on tile strength, not preference.
- Avoid categories with gaps or missing key tiles.
- Favor flexibility when options are equal.

Let tile efficiency and availability guide your decision.

The Power of Resistance and the Reality of Demand

Not all hands behave the same way, and understanding that difference can change how you play. Some hands are relatively indestructible, some hold together well, and others rely on a single tile to stay viable—they stall because the tiles they need are in high demand. This section introduces three ways to look at the card—Hands of Least Resistance, Hands of Slight Resistance, and Hands of High Demand—so you can better understand why hands succeed, struggle, or never quite get there.

Keep an eye open for opportunities to play hands with varying shapes using two pungs and two kongs. These are called **Hands of Least Resistance** ([Article 215](#); mark these with a yellow highlighter or red dot), and they are relatively indestructible because you can use any number of jokers in every block.

Hands of Least Resistance	15	Internal survivability Relatively indestructible structures
Kong pung kong pung	1	Evens #4
Kong pung pung kong	1	Winds-Dragons #1-1
Pung kong kong pung	3	Winds-Dragons #1-2, Winds-Dragons #3, and Winds-Dragons #4
Pung kong pung kong	1	Winds-Dragons #5
Pung pung kong kong	9	Year #1, Evens #1 (2), Consecutive Run #4 (2), Odds #2 (2), 369 #1 (2)

There are also **Hands of Slight Resistance** (mark these with a grey highlighter or red dot). These hands consist of one pair with big multiples. With the flexibility to use any number of jokers when the pair is in your hand, these hands are indestructible (9; -4).

Hands of Slight Resistance	2	Single Pressure Point Pair vulnerability, but when in-hand relatively indestructible structures
Pair kong kong kong	2	Consecutive Run #7 (2)

If you ever feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or discouraged with the game, consider playing with these hands for a brief time to relieve stress and build your confidence.

Hands of High Demand (HHD; NEW) are not difficult because of how they are built—they are difficult because of what they require. These hands compete for tiles that other players are also chasing, which makes timing and early development critical.

Quints are a good example. They rely on big multiples, and you should have at least one joker in your hand from the deal. Without early support, they can stall quickly.



Bouquet hands follow a similar pattern. If you do not have three or more flowers early, it is usually best to let them go. If you do, commit—because you will be competing with the table.

The key to HHD hands is knowing when to lean in and when to walk away. Enter with strength, and when your hand does not come in by 70 tiles remaining, pivot. If you are committed because you have an exposure, pivot to another quint, or fold and block.

Hands of High Demand	17	External Pressure In demand due to bulk or covetous
Pung of Flowers	10	Year #3, Evens #5, Consecutive Run #2 (2), Consecutive Run #5 (2), Odds #5 (2), 369 #3 (2)
Double-Pungs of Flowers	2	Evens #6, Winds-Dragons #5
Sextet of Flowers	2	Any Like Numbers #1, Consecutive Run #6
Quints	3	Quints #1, Quints #2, Quints #3

The *American Mah Jongg Skills and Strategies Matrix* ([Article 210](#)) contains links to the latest video demonstrations of how to play with these shapes in mind (Appendix B). Consider using [removable highlighters](#) (Highlighter Tabs-A) for quick reference when playing the game.

American mah jongg is a game of multiples. To optimize your winning potential, start every hand by targeting multiples. Keep tiles to support the multiple and focus on a category that uses most of your tiles to simplify and expedite hand development.



Pivoting

One of the most common ideas players reach for—especially at the start of a new card—is the concept of a “backup hand.” It sounds smart and gives a sense of control. This can create a false sense of security. The game does not unfold according to a pre-selected plan—it unfolds based on discards, exposures, and timing, with information revealing itself moment by moment.

Pivoting is about recognizing when your current hand has been weakened or wounded—when key tiles are no longer available, or your hand is no longer progressing—and then reassessing in real time.

When your hand changes, pivoting comes down to two decisions:

Dependencies

Your exposures matter. Once you expose, your flexibility narrows. The more committed you are, the fewer realistic options you have.

Feasibility

- What has been discarded?
- What has been exposed?
- How many picks are left in the wall (wall depth)?

A pivot is only viable if the tiles are still available—and there is enough time to complete the hand.

This is where the idea of backup hands breaks down. You cannot decide your pivot in advance because the key variables have not been revealed yet. Pivoting happens in real time—based on what the table is showing you.

Strong players don't rely on memorized alternatives. They read the table and respond to what is still possible given the remaining tiles and the time left to act.

What This Means for Your Play

- Do not pre-select a backup hand.
- Reassess options when your hand is weakened or wounded (e.g., tile availability)
- Check your level of commitment before considering a pivot (e.g., exposures, discards).
- Only pivot when it's feasible.



The Toolkit

Want to Learn More?

For a video presentation where you can follow along with the details, check out the link here: [VIDEO LINK TBD]. If you are new to the game, be sure to visit the American mah jongg wiki article (Appendix B) to learn how to play.

Appendix A: Mahj Life Wiki, a FREE and Searchable On-Demand Resource

On the Mahj Life website, you will find a mah jongg wiki, which is a free and searchable on-demand collection of mah jongg-related articles. Each article is categorized by subject matter using keyword tags. To find an article, enter either keywords or a specific article number in the search box. After reading the article, you can find tags in that page's footer that you can click to take you to an index of related articles.



Mah jongg terms used in this guide and in my YouTube videos can be found in the wiki glossary.

If you have a situation that is not covered by a wiki article, submit ideas or content using the form found at the bottom of the wiki page.

Appendix B: YouTube Videos

If you are new to American mah jongg, please visit the Mahj Life YouTube channel where you can watch video lessons and livestreams. If you have not already, subscribe and click the little grey bell to get notifications when I upload a new video or broadcast a livestream!



For fundamentals and skill-building exercises, look for links under the download section in the Mahj Life Wiki articles *American Mah Jongg* ([Article 162](#)) and *Direct Links to NMJL YouTube Videos* ([Article 192](#)).

To learn even more essential skills and strategies, review the Mahj Life YouTube channel's video posting and livestream schedule. There, you can find links to videos and wiki articles on diverse topics. To access this schedule, go to the Mahj Life wiki article *American Mah Jongg Skills and Strategies Matrix* ([Article 210](#)).



You can leave comments in the comment section below each video if you have any questions.

Appendix C: Connect and Engage

Please subscribe to the Mahj Life Email list for important announcements and to receive content updates.



Join the following Facebook Groups to join online conversations at Michele Frizzell #MAHJLIFE, Learning Lab #MAHJLIFE, Mahjong Community, and Mah Jongg, That's It!

Find a mentor through the Mahj Life Instructor Guild directory on the Mahj Life Website.



Appendix D: Tips for a Smooth Transition

1. Limit your category or hand options to ease into playing with the new card. I call these “Jump starters” because they can help you understand the key concepts of the new card while minimizing overwhelming complexity. This makes the transition less intimidating and encourages confidence as you gradually explore the rest of the card.
2. Practice at home by doing hands-on skill builders:
 - Category Modeling: Helps you understand the flexibility and limitations of each hand on the card, sharpening your ability to assess potential hands and improving your strategy.
 - Charleston Modeling: Focuses on decision-making during the Charleston phase by practicing with random tiles. It builds the skill to make informed choices on incoming passes, helping you streamline your thought process.
 - Charleston Chain Reaction: Tests your instincts by comparing different hand development approaches with the same set of tiles. By analyzing the results, you can learn to trust your decisions and refine your hand development strategies.
 - Charleston Force: Forces you to think outside the box by selecting random categories during the Charleston exercise. This helps develop the flexibility to play various hands under pressure and broadens your hand development skills.
 - Charleston Sprints: Builds the ability to make quick decisions under time constraints. This is crucial for both online play and in-person games, where fast thinking and decision-making can be pivotal.
3. Connect with others and play often!
 - Join Facebook groups to get the latest news (Appendix C)
 - Consider working with a reputable instructor (Appendix A)
 - Play with peers to relax and have fun and play with advanced players to learn by observation.
 - Play online. I recommend I Love Mahj because they have a fantastic exercise room and intelligent robots (use MAHJLIFE for an extra week in your trial). I like Mahjong Time because its interface is realistic. Send me an email for a free 30-day VIP trial. I am an affiliate partner with both providers, so I will get a small commission if you decide to become a paid subscriber. Monies are used to support my YouTube channel.
 - Use the Mahj Life as your go-to source!
 - Wiki-Digital Repository with rules, etiquette, strategies, and teaching tips (Appendix A)
 - Recurring Skill Builder Videos (Mondays 9:00 AM Eastern)
 - Weekly American Mah Jongg Let Us Play Livestreams
 - ◎ Nitty-Gritty (Mondays 1:00 PM Eastern)
 - ◎ Simply Social; gameplay with commentary (Fridays 5:00 PM Eastern)
 - ◎ Beat the Pro; play with me or watch and learn (Fridays 6:00 PM Eastern)



About the Author



Michele Frizzell is an avid mah jongg player, group leader, and instructor. In 1973, she and her mom learned how to play Wright-Patterson Mah Jongg, a version popular in the military community. Michele has since learned other ways to play, including the National Mah Jongg League version. She began teaching and leading mah jongg groups in 1990. In the fall of 2017, Michele moved to rural Georgia and discovered that there were no mah jongg players in the area. As a result, she decided to become a YouTube creator to share her lessons and skill-building drills online. As of this publication date, the Mahj Life Facebook group has 47k members, and her YouTube channel has grown to over 42k subscribers with more than 2.7k videos published.

Michele has two grown sons, and she lives in north Georgia with her husband, David.

May all your picks be keepers,

Michele Frizzell

Mah Jongg Instructor, Author, Speaker



678-261-8500

michele@mahjlife.com | mahjlife.com

6175 Hickory Flat Hwy, Ste 110-335

Canton, GA 30115



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“
**LEARN FAST
PLAY HARD
MOST IMPORTANTLY
HAVE FUN!**
”

Michele Frizzell



