

EXPRESS™

THE RAILROAD CARD GAME

STRATEGY AND PLAYING TIPS



Express is a fun, exciting game that can be played many different ways. There is some luck involved, but the better players win more than their share of games. There is no one right strategy, but here are some general ideas to keep in mind if you want to be one of those people your friends always accuse of “being lucky.”

BEGINNER TIPS:

1. Pay particular attention to the cards you lay down on the first turn of the hand, as they will shape how the rest of the hand plays.
2. The most common initial play is two pairs plus Locos.
3. If you have more than two pairs, try to play pairs that no one else has played yet. Unless you have a **Steal** card . . .
4. You may even decide to play a single car instead of a pair that has already been played.

Example: In third position, your initial 12 cards (after you’ve drawn) include three **Tank Cars**, two **Piggybacks**, and a **Mail/Baggage**. Players 1 and 2 have each played a pair of **Piggybacks**. Consider starting a three-car **Tank Car** train and a one-car passenger train (mail/baggage) instead of being the third player with a pair of **Piggybacks**. There are only three more **Piggybacks** in the deck, while there are 13 more passenger cars, and the mail car is the best one to start a passenger train with!

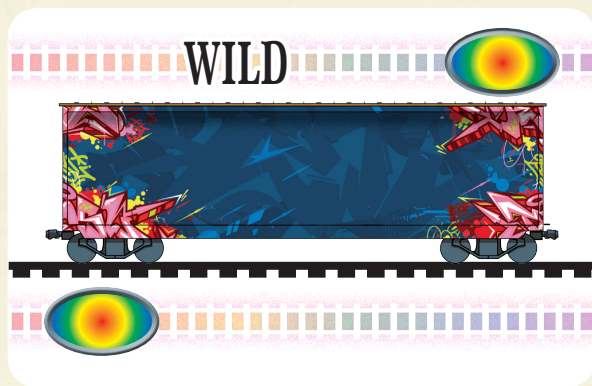
5. Don’t be in a hurry to show all your cards.
Example: If you are fortunate enough to be dealt four matching **Piggybacks** and a pair of **Coil Steel**, just play the two pairs on your first turn. A high-scoring four-car train might attract unwanted attention.
6. Don’t be in a hurry to start a third train, especially if you only have one or two matching cars. Unless you think another player is on the verge of going out, or are forced to play by the hand limit, hold off to get more cards which may guide you to what train to start. Ideally you would never start your third train without at least three cars (whether you play them all at once or not), but the card universe does not always cooperate.

7. Try very hard to avoid starting a fourth train, unless the hand is running long or you are willing to give up on going out this hand. Most players who go out have three trains, or even just two.
8. Don’t rush to play out your **Diesel**. One good rule: *never* play a **Diesel** face up to head a one- or two-car passenger train. The **Diesel** has no value whatsoever until the train is scoring. The **Diesel** is usually more valuable in your hand as a zero-point card, or even played face down as an engine to retain flexibility.
9. If you are forced to play a single-car train, the best general guidance is to play the card that you are most likely to match as the hand continues. Usually this is the smallest value car you have that no one else has played.
10. Unless the available discard gives you the cards to go out, it is almost always better to draw two cards from the draw pile instead of one from the discard pile. There are exceptions, of course, but each *Express* hand is a race to accumulate enough cards, and the right cards you need to go out. The only way to add card volume to your hand is to draw two cards.
11. Deciding who to hit with your Disaster cards, and when, is a key part of the game. There is no one right strategy. Hitting the leader has benefits, as does stopping someone who appears to be on the verge of going out (unless you want them to). Don’t forget that some Disasters can be played on yourself, usually to eliminate a one-car train that is making it hard to go out. Some players like to play Disasters immediately; some prefer to hold them until later for bigger impact. Generally, it is better to play a Disaster to help yourself instead of only hurting another player. Disaster cards are nice because you can hold them in your hand without risk of getting negative points. On the other hand, if you keep the Disaster you must discard something else that might turn out to be useful later.

Now you’ve been playing for a while, and you win some games, but you rarely win when you end up at a table with the better players. You’d really like to take home one of those fancy plaques someday, so what do they know that you don’t?

TIPS FOR THE ADVANCING PLAYER:

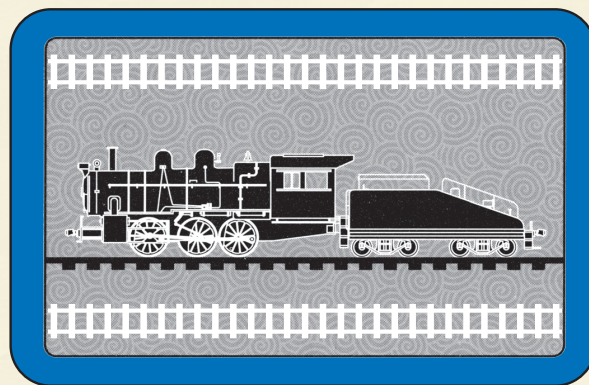
12. Pay attention to other players. If you are familiar with the players and their playing styles, so much the better. Know who is in the lead and by how much, and be aware of whose cards look promising for going out. As the hand develops, be aware when someone has exactly the right number of cards to go out on their next turn. Watch what they play, and even how they play. Are they struggling to figure out a discard? Are they frantically counting their cards multiple times? Did they make a seemingly unusual play, and what could that mean? Does their play tell you something about the other cards they are likely to hold, or not have? This can all give you potentially useful information. Of course, a good player who knows you are watching might pretend to struggle with a discard just to fool you, but that is another topic.
13. When to play Way Cars from your hand is a key element of the strategy. Different good players use different approaches, and some players change their playing style from hand to hand. Generally, playing a Way Car is usually better than starting another train you would prefer not to start. If you have duplicate Way Cars, when you play one you often want to play the second one too.



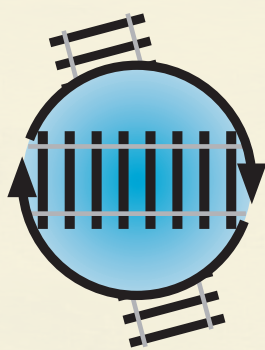
14. Having a **Wild Car** changes your thinking about the hand. In most cases your best use of the **Wild Car** will be as a transition, so you should be planning for your second “train” to follow the **Wild Car** in addition to your standard trains. Your **Wild Car** may also affect when to play a **Turntable**, or which trains to start when.
15. Don't rush to play your **Cabooses** or **Wild Cars**. Unless you think another player is about to go out, or you feel that you need to protect the train against being Stolen or Broken, hold onto that **Caboose** or **Wild** until you are ready to go out. Once again, there are exceptions, but keep in mind that once you close out a train with a **Caboose** or **Wild** transition, you will be irritated every time you draw a card that matches the train you closed out.

16. Be aware that a powerful train with a **Wild** transition becomes what is affectionately known as a “**Wreck magnet**.” The right time to play your **Wild Car** depends in part on whether your train could be Wrecked. If you have the **Wreck**, or a **Heavy Crane**, or if the **Wreck** has already been played this hand, it is much safer to play out a powerful train of any sort.
17. Note there is a theme here. Avoid playing cards that take away your flexibility, until you must, or until the time is right. Keep your options open as long as possible to wait for more cards (more information), which allows you to make better decisions.

Example: You have two trains down, and two pairs in your hand. It might be tempting to pick one of those pairs and start a third train, but if you are not forced to do so, it might be better to hold off until you must play. You might draw another card to match one of your pairs, or even draw a pair to match a single card in your hand. You would much rather have your third train with three cars than have a two-car train down with three matching cars in your hand. It's not always “bad luck” when that happens to you . . .

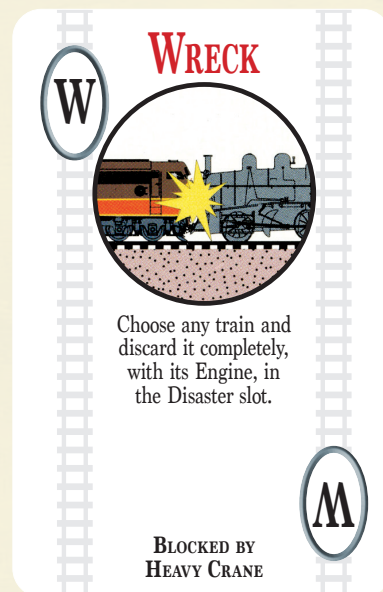


18. Engine play strategies. Many beginners get into the habit of playing their highest point cars face down as engines, so their hand has the fewest points in case someone goes out. There's some logic there, but it can be dangerous. If a good player knows you always play that way, you may be the target of an unexpected **Switch Engines**, for example. Give some thought to what engine goes with which train, especially if you have a train that might be someone's best target for a **Wreck**. It's annoying enough to lose your train, but unnecessarily losing an important engine too is on you.

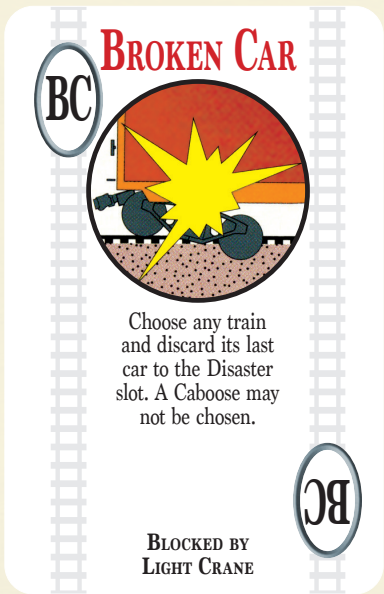


19. **Turntable** strategies. As a beginner, it is easy to see the **Turntable** as an extra turn you should take as soon as you draw the card. That's not a terrible strategy, but there are some nuanced ways to use the **Turntable** that a lot of players miss:

- a. If there is one scarce train car that you really need, keep in mind that you can use your **Turntable(s)** to effectively dig down into the discard pile. Suppose your perfect **Commuter** car is the second card down in the pile. Pick up the top discard, then play the **Turntable**, then grab your vital **Commuter**. And imagine what you could do with all three **Turntables**!
- b. Suppose you are dealt two **Turntables** and the player to your left is the clear leader. Play one **Turntable** early in the hand but hold onto the second one. Maybe another player will play one too, and you can effectively deprive the leader of multiple turns. Using similar logic, if the leader is sitting to your right, you might wait a round or two to play your **Turntable**, hoping someone else plays one first.
- c. (tournament play rules) A **Turntable** makes a **Wild Car** even more powerful. You can use your Wild as a transition, then play the **Turntable** to get an extra turn. On that extra turn you can legally go out.
- d. (tournament play rules) A very effective (some would say nasty) play – especially when the other players have several cards in their hands – is to use your **Turntable** right after the previous player laid out a huge spread of cards including a **Wild** as a transition. It is evident to all the world that player will go out on their next turn. Play your **Turntable**, empty your hand so you get the maximum points, then watch the other players groan as they get stuck with negative points.
- e. Even if none of these apply, consider the advantages of holding onto your **Turntable**, especially if your hand looks promising for going out. Good players notice when you have the right number of cards to go out and will sometimes send annoying Disasters your way at that point. Saving the **Turntable** to play when you have everything you need to go out except for one more card can sometimes catch them by surprise. You might even catch them with lots of points in their hand.



20. **Wreck** strategies. The **Wreck** is the most powerful Disaster; there is only one in the deck, so if you get it, use it wisely. Its best use is to take out a huge scoring train, especially if the player with that train is doing well in the game so far. The other common use is to take a long train away from someone who seems close to going out. If you have the **Wreck** (or a **Heavy Crane**), you can be more confident in putting out long trains since they can't be wrecked. Note that once you play your **Wreck**, everyone else can have that same confidence, so you might not want to use it too early in the hand on a less than obvious target.
21. **Switch Engines** strategies. This is an underappreciated card. It can significantly improve your hand if you use it correctly (and get a little luck). If you are dealt a whole bunch of random single cards, and a **Switch Engines**, play it as soon as you can. Get rid of two or three cards that appear useless (e.g., a single where there are several matching cards on the table) and give them to someone else who will likely also find them useless. Their engines can't be any worse than yours, and might just give you a pair or two. Or maybe you know a certain player always plays big cards as engines, and you have some single big cards . . . The strategy is very different if you have a promising hand. Early on you don't want to get rid of cards, so you tend to hold the **Switch Engines** for later. Suppose the player discarding to you has been struggling to find a discard for a couple rounds. That might mean there are juicy cards you would like in that hand. In a perfect world that player is sitting with no cards in their hand when you strike with your **Switch Engines**. You might get the perfect card for you, or you might take away a card they need for their grand plan. Sometimes both!



22. **Broken Car** strategies. This is an effective card to play on yourself, if you end up with a lonely one-car train that needs to be eliminated. If your hand looks like it may develop that way, avoid playing the **Light Crane** since that will prevent you from making the play. If you are attacking someone to take points away, taking out the **Light Crane** they played out, or any high-scoring car they have on the end of a train is a useful approach. But if your goal is to stop someone from going out, you may not want to attack their highest scoring train. Suppose they have a train with six **Auto Carriers** (yikes). It's tempting to take those 5 points away, but that won't affect their timing to go out. It might be more effective to break a two- or three-car train to make that train harder to complete.
23. **Steal** strategies. Generally, your priority is to steal a card that improves your trains. Ideally this would involve taking that card from the leader, but this is a rare situation when you might play it on someone who is far behind. It is particularly helpful to steal a scarce card, which might be a high-scoring car or one where you and two other players have the same train out. Sometimes having a **Steal** affects the trains you play out. You might normally avoid playing a pair of **Piggybacks** if another player has already played a pair, but your **Steal** card might change that thinking.

24. **Derailment** strategies. If you are well into a game and there is a clear and obvious leader, there's nothing wrong with derailing them early just to set them back. But in a close game, or early in the game when the leader is not clear, it might be better to hold onto it to see how the hand develops. When you notice someone might be getting ready to go out, taking away the turn on which they were going to have exactly the right number of cards to go out might improve the results of the hand.
25. If you play *Express* regularly with the same players, especially in a competitive tournament setting, be careful not to become too predictable in your play. As a beginner, you typically fall into routines about your engines, your discards, when you play out your Way Cars, etc. Good players notice these things and it gives them an advantage. Try to mix it up a little.
26. Try not to give away too much information with your body language and comments. Knowing whether you have a good hand or a bad one is useful for other players. Then again, if you complain bitterly that every hand you are dealt is the worst one you've seen all year, players will always assume you are in good shape even when you are not.

TEACHING *EXPRESS* TO NEW PLAYERS

When you teach the game, you may find it worthwhile to simplify the first few hands by removing the Diesels and all the passenger cars. That lets you skip the relatively complexities of consist order and passenger-train scoring, and teach the simple rules about train-building and Disaster-dropping.

Once all your players have those basic rules nailed, reward them by shuffling the Diesels and passenger cars back into the deck, and teach them how to build an express train!



**STEVE
JACKSON
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Many players have wished for an extra deck of *Express* cards, so that one can be shuffled thoroughly while a hand is being played with the other deck.

This extra deck is identical to the deck in the box, except that the border is red.



www.warehouse23.com/expressdeck