

Card Game for 4 Players

CANASTA

Historical Notes

Canasta (from the Spanish for a type of shallow basket) is named for the tray that holds the stock and the discards, and is virtually a requirement for smooth play. The game originated in Uruguay, evolved in Argentina, and was introduced into the United States in 1949. Within a year, it had become the biggest fad in the history of U.S. card games.

Concept

Canasta is a form of rummy that is all about melding lots of points. There are no tricks and going-out plays only a minor role. Tension is often high as the players strive to pick-up a point-rich discard pile. Luck is more useful than skill, but concentration will be rewarded.

The Players

Four, two against two as partners, facing each other. All players participate in the play of every round.

The Deck

Two standard 52-card decks with four jokers added for a total of 108 cards. All cards should have identical backs and be thoroughly shuffled together.

Wild Cards

Deuces and jokers may be substituted for any other card when forming melds.

Card Values

Aces and deuces are valued at 20 points each; jokers are worth 50 points; each king, queen, jack, 10, 9, and 8 is worth 10 points; and each 7, 6, 5, and 4 is worth 5 points. The 3s are treated differently, see below.

Melds

The main pursuit of Canasta is to group three or more cards by rank and lay the groups on the table. These groups are known as meld. A group of meld may contain wild cards, but must always have a majority of non-wild or “natural” cards.

Once laid down, melds cannot be put back into hands.

A meld is valued by the total card points it contains. For example, a meld of two 7s and a joker is worth $5+5+50 = 60$ points.

Seven (or eight) cards of the same rank are called a canasta. If there are no wild cards in the group, the canasta is “natural” (or “red” because a red card is placed on top to identify it) and is worth an additional 500 points. If a canasta contains one or more wild cards it is “mixed” (or “black”) and is worth an additional 300 points.

Red 3s (hearts or diamonds) are not collected, but must be laid down as soon as they are acquired. Each red 3 is worth 100 points at the end of the round, but does not count toward the initial meld. If the player discards while holding a red 3 in his hand, the card is transferred to the opponent’s meld upon discovery. If one side collects all four red 3s, their value is doubled (to 800).

Each time a red 3 is removed from a hand, a replacement card is drawn. Each time a red 3 is drawn from the deck, it is immediately melded and another card is drawn.

Black 3s (spades and clubs) cannot be melded unless and until their holder goes out, and then only if all four are held in the hand.

The initial meld in any round must be of a certain value, dependent upon the current score of the team making the meld, as follows:

All melds belonging to a partnership should be kept in front of one of the partners.

The Deal

The dealer (selected at random) gives eleven cards to each player, one at a time, left to right, face down, beginning with the player on his left. Then the remainder of the deck is placed in one side of the tray (or on the table, if there is no tray) and the top card is turned face up to begin the

discard pile on the other side of the tray. If this top card is wild (a deuce or joker) it is turned sideways to the deck so that future discards will not cover the card's index.

Current Score	Meld Required
Minus	15
0 – 1495	50
1500 – 2995	90
3000 +	120

The Play

Beginning with the player on the dealer's left, each player, in turn, must:

1. Draw one card from the stock or take the entire discard pile.
2. Make whatever melds he can and cares to. Remembering to lay down any red 3s and replace them with another drawn card.
3. Discard one card.

Picking up the discard pile requires that a player have a pair of cards that match the rank of the top card and that the player's team has made its initial meld or makes its initial meld at the time the pile is taken. The top card of the discard pile (and no other) may be counted as part of the initial meld. For example, if a team has not yet made its initial meld of 90, and the top card of the discard pile is a jack, the player may place three jacks and a joker on the table (value=80), add the jack from the discard pile for a total meld of 90, and then put the remainder of the discard pile in his hand.

If the top discard is a 3 — either red or black — the pile cannot be picked up. If the top card is wild (a deuce or joker) the pile cannot be picked up and it is "frozen." Wild cards are always discarded at a right angle to the rest of the pile so that other cards placed on top will not hide the fact that the pile is frozen.

A frozen pile requires that the taker have a natural pair of the top card to take the pile. If the pile is not frozen, it may be taken by having one

wild card and one natural card of the same rank as the top card. An unfrozen pile may also be taken if the top card is of the same rank as any group already melded by the player's team.

Whenever the discard pile is picked up, the top card must be melded along with any pair used from the player's hand. Other cards in the pile may be melded or not at the player's discretion.

For example, if your opponent places a queen atop an unfrozen discard pile, you may pick up that pile if (a) you have two queens or a queen and a wild card in your hand, or (b) your current meld includes a group of queens. On the other hand, if the discard pile was frozen, you would need two natural queens in your hand.

Once a rank has been melded, a player may add one or more cards of the same rank during his turn. Likewise, wild cards may be added as long as they remain in the minority in the pile.

The End of the Round

The round ends when there is no card remaining that can be drawn or when a player "goes out." To go out, a player melds all of the cards in his hand, with or without a final discard. A player cannot go out unless his team has melded at least one natural canasta, or he melds a natural canasta entirely from his hand at the time he goes out. Also, his team must have made its initial meld or he must make such a meld when he goes out. (Note that the bonus points for canastas do not count toward the initial meld.)

Before going out, a player may, and should, ask his partner: "May I go out?" The first time this question is asked, the answer is typically: "No." This tells the partner to make all possible melds on his next play (because all cards remaining in a player's hand at the end of the round count against that team). Nevertheless, a player may choose to ignore a negative response and go out anyway.

Scoring

At the end of the round, each side scores its basic count as follows: 100 for going out, 100 for each red 3 (or 800 for all four red 3s), 500 for each natural canasta, and 300 for each mixed canasta.

To this is added the total points within the melds minus the points remaining in the players' hands (see "Card Values" above).

The first team to reach 5000 points wins the game.

Variations

Canasta is a lengthy and complex game. It only makes sense, therefore, that it would attract players who like lengthy and complex games. Some of these players, not surprisingly, have invented numerous ways of making the game even more lengthy and complex.

- ▶ Some play that two natural cards are always necessary to pick up the discard pile.
- ▶ Some play that a player must answer "no" to his partner's initial request for permission to go out, and that the player is thereby prohibited from going out until his next turn.
- ▶ Some play that no card may be added to a completed canasta.
- ▶ Some play that groups of wild cards may be melded or that sequences may be melded.
- ▶ Some have promoted what they call American Canasta. Other versions are Samba, Bolivia, Canadian, Brazilian, Joker, and Oklahoma. Do a web search if you are interested in such.

Two-Handed Canasta

See Baskets card game..

Three-Handed Canasta

With three players, the rules are the same as the four-person game except:

- ◆ each player receives 15 cards to start.
- ◆ there are, of course, no partnerships.
- ◆ when drawing from the stock, draw two cards but still discard only one card.

two canastas (at least one of which is natural) are required before a player can go out. ■

