

Canasta (Spanish for „basket“) is a card game most commonly played by four in two partnerships with two standard decks–108 cards including 6 jokers–although many variations exist for two, three, five or six players. Canasta was invented in Uruguay from where it spread through South America, North America, and the world.

## Rules

The classic game is for four players in two partnerships, with partners sitting opposite each other.

### Cards and deal

In Canasta, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, J, Q, K, and A are natural melding cards; 2 and Joker are wild melding cards; Red 3 are bonus point cards and Black 3 are safe discard options. Each card has a specific value which determines both the score and–except for the 3s–the minimum points a player needs before laying down their first melds:

- Black 3, 4, 5, 6, 7: 5 points
- 8, 9, 10, J, Q, K: 10 points
- 2, A: 20 points
- Joker: 50 points
- Red 3: 100 points

The initial dealer is chosen by any common method, although in Canasta there is no privilege or advantage to being the dealer. The deal then rotates clockwise after every hand. The dealer shuffles the pack, the player to the dealer's right cuts, and the dealer deals out a hand of 11 cards to each player. The remaining cards are left in a stack in the center of the table. One card is taken from the top of the stack and placed face up to start the discard pile. If that card is wild or a Red 3, another card is turned and placed on top of it. That continues until a natural card or a Black 3 is turned up.

If a player was dealt Red 3s, they must instantly play them face up in front of them and draw the same number of replacement cards.



## Commencing play

The player to the dealer's left has the first turn, and then play proceeds clockwise. A turn begins either by drawing the first card from the stock into the player's hand or by picking up the entire discard pile. However, there are restrictions on when one can pick up the discard pile. If the card drawn from the stock is a Red 3, the player must table it immediately, as one would if melding, and draw another card.

The player may then make as many legal melds as they wish from the cards in their hand. A turn ends when the player discards one card from their hand to the top of the discard pile. No player may „undo“ a meld or laid card, or change their mind after drawing a card from the deck.

## Melds and canastas

Each player/team keeps separate melds of the various ranks of cards. A player may never play to an opponent's meld. A legal meld consists of at least three cards of the same rank, and there is no limit on how large it can grow. Suits are irrelevant except that Black 3s are treated differently from Red 3s. Wild cards can be used as any rank except for 3s. 3s may never be melded in ordinary play, although three or more Black 3s may be melded in the final turn of a player going out.

A meld must consist of at least two natural cards, and can never have more than three wild cards. One team/player cannot have two separate melds of the same rank. If more cards of the same rank are melded, they are automatically merged into the preexisting meld.

A canasta is a meld of at least seven cards, whether natural or mixed. A natural canasta is one that comprises only cards of the same rank. A mixed canasta (or dirty canasta) is one that comprises both natural and wild cards. Once a canasta is assembled, the cards are squared up, and one of the natural cards forming it is placed on top - a red one to indicate a natural canasta or a black one to indicate a mixed canasta.

## Initial melds

During each hand the first time a team lays cards on the table, the cards of the combined melds must equal a minimum meld requirement based on the values of each of the cards. At the beginning of a game, both teams have an initial meld requirement of 50 points. The count towards the requirement cannot include the value of the cards a player could possibly pick up from the discard pile, but must come only from the cards in their hand and the top discarded card in case of picking up the discard pile. If the combined value does not meet the minimum requirement, they cannot play the cards on the table nor pick up the discard pile. After the first hand, the minimum meld requirement is based on a team's score before the hand starts.

Team score & minimum initial meld:

- Negative                      15 points
- 0-1495                        50 points
- 1500-2995                    90 points
- 3000 and above              120 points

## Picking up the discard pile

The discard pile should be kept squared up, so only the top card is visible. A player cannot look through the discard pile.

At the beginning of their turn, a player may pick up the entire discard pile instead of drawing a card from the stock. They may only pick up the discard pile if they can use the top card, either in an existing meld or by making a new meld along with at least two other cards from their hand (which can include wild cards). Only the top card is relevant for the player/team to pick up the rest of the discard pile. In addition, if the player/team has not yet melded, they must meet the initial meld requirement using the top card of the discard pile in order to pick up the pile. In this case the points of the top card are included to meet the initial meld requirement.

Discarding a wild card freezes the pile. The card should be placed at right angles to the pile, so that it is still visible to indicate a frozen pile after more cards have been discarded. A frozen pile may only be picked up (unfrozen) if a player can meld the top card with two natural cards of the same rank from the player's hand.

If a wild card or a Black 3 is on top of the discard pile, it may not be picked up. Playing a Black 3 does not freeze the pile; it just acts as a stop card, preventing the other player from picking up the pile. The card discarded after a Black 3 allows the pile to be picked up again (unless it is a wild card or another Black 3).

The discard pile is also frozen against a player/team that has not yet melded at all this hand, though at the same time it will not be frozen for another player/team that has melded.

## Going out and ending a hand

A player may go out by using all the cards in their hand only if that player/team has made at least one canasta. The player goes out by melding all his cards and may discard a single final card if necessary. It is not required to discard a card in the process of legally going out. If the player/team has not yet made any canastas, players in that team may not make a play which would leave them with no cards in their hand at the end of their turn. If a player can legally go out, but has three or more Black 3s in his hand, these may be melded at this time only. The hand ends immediately when any player goes out. Going out earns a bonus of 100 points.

When considering going out, a player may ask their partner for permission to go out. It is not required to ask partner's permission, but if done the player must abide by the partner's answer. If the partner refuses permission, the player may not go out this turn. If the partner responds „yes“, the player must go out this turn.

If a player melds their whole hand in one turn (including at least one canasta) without previously melding, they earn an extra 100 points for going out concealed, making it 200 points. To earn the bonus, a player cannot add cards to their partner's melds. It is allowed to go out concealed while picking up the discard pile. The relevant initial meld requirement must be met.

A hand can also be ended by exhausting the stock. Play can continue with no stock as long as players are able take the previous player's discard and meld it. In such a situation a player must take the discard if able to do so. As soon as a player cannot legally take the card, the hand ends. If a player draws a Red 3 as the last card from the stock, it is counted towards

his score, but the hand ends immediately since there is no replacement card to be taken. The player is not allowed to meld nor discard after picking up the Red 3 in this case.

## Scoring

At the end of each hand, the score for each team is calculated as follows.

The total value of all cards melded by that player/team, including cards in canastas minus the total value of all cards remaining in the player's/team's hands, plus any bonuses:

Bonus & value:

- For going out 100 points
- For going out concealed an extra 100 (200 total for going out)
- For each mixed canasta 300
- For each natural canasta 500
- For all four Red 3s an extra 400 (800 total for Red 3s)

If a player/team has collected Red 3s, but has not yet made the initial melds when the opposition goes out, then the bonus value of Red 3s counts against them (it is subtracted from the score along with the rest of the cards in their hands). If they collected all four Red 3s, 800 points are deducted from their score.

It is possible to have a negative total score. The game ends when a player/team's total score reaches 5000. If both players/teams reach 5000 at the end of hand, whoever has the higher score, wins the game. The margin of victory is the difference in points.

## Canasta for two or three players

Canasta can be played with fewer than four players with some variations in the rules. The most significant changes are in the number of cards dealt at the beginning of the hand and the fact that each person plays individually. In a game with three players, each player receives 13 cards. In a two player game each player receives 15 cards and each player draws two cards on each of their turns and discards one. If each player draws two cards, there is usually the additional requirement that a player must have made two canastas in order to go out.