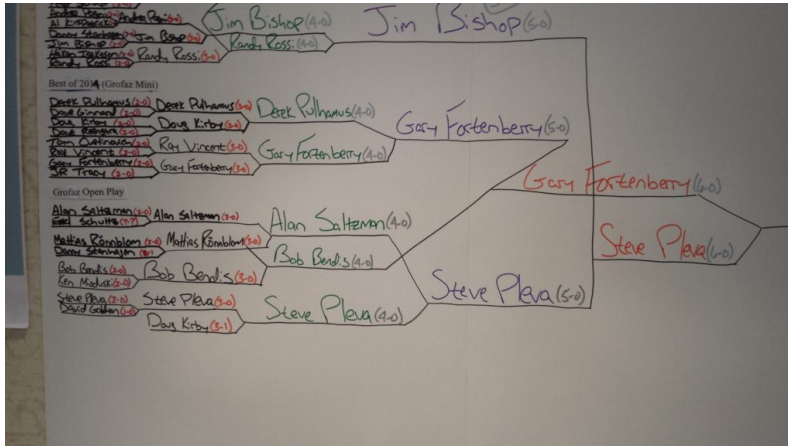# Making it to the Top: What Separates the Good Players from the Merely Average

## Description



First, this article is perhaps a little presumptuous of me. For starters, I am not sure I am anything more than merely average myself. Writing an article about what separates me from good to great players makes it seem as if I should have a clear path to improvement. It immediately begs the question "what's holding you back". Perhaps I will write about that in a future article because I am pretty sure I know what holds me back. For now, let's accept that I have played a lot of really good players from around the world.

I spoke with a few ASL players I know whom I consider to be very good to great ASL players. All of them have won tournaments and would generally be considered to be among the best ASL players out there. I have also had the pleasure of playing all of them on multiple occasions. When I posed the question of what makes them so good, the answers are varied. While they may not recognize why, let's accept I can recognize what separates me from them. With that understanding, let's take a look at what I think separates the top level guys from the rest of us mere mortals.

### They Know the Rules/Charts
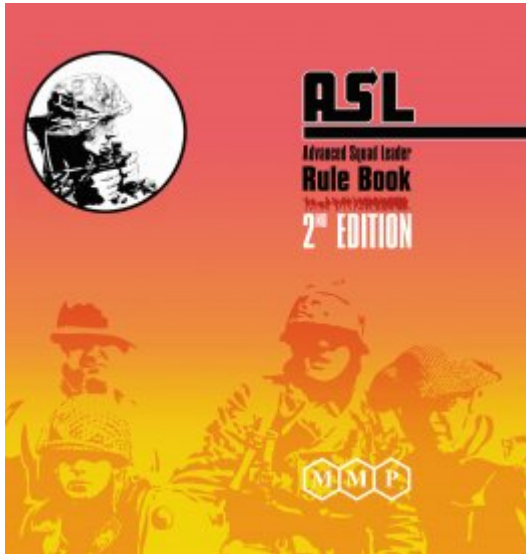
It seems silly to say this, but the better players know the rules. Generally speaking, they know the rules as well or better than anyone else in the room. In an earlier article I stated one definition of tactics is "*the art or skill of employing available means to accomplish an end*". Within ASL, our "end" is defined by the Victory Conditions (VC). The "means" are those things given in our Order of Battle (OB) on the scenario card. The rules define how we can "employ" those means. Not knowing the rules is effectively leaving a part of your tool kit on the sideline and trying to work without it.

This leaves the "art or skill" to the player. How to use those rules in combination with the OB on the card to accomplish the VC. The great players know the rules–which means they know all of their options. They absolutely know how to get the most out of what they have. This also means good/great players recognize what is in your OB and how it can be used against them.

**They Have a Plan**

Better players always seem to know what they are doing. One of the most intimidating things about ASL for many players is deciding what to do when they are presented with a scenario card for the first time. As a player, you need to develop a method for making a plan. It starts by examining the card, understanding the VC, and understanding your OB. We have talked about this here before in my ASL Tactical Maxims article. Knowing these is only the beginning of making a plan though. Good/great players give every piece a purpose and they will squeeze the last ounce of utility out of those pieces.

**They Understand How Terrain Influences Movement**

This one is harder to define but you see it when they play if you're smart enough to recognize it. Good/great players treat ASL like it's a game of time and space. They recognize the timeline to victory and as such, their pieces are always right where they need to be. They recognize the need to move into position before you do and when you finally recognize the need, you find they already have the move covered.

This means they are generally positioned better than you are at just about every stage of the game. They cut your rout paths. They have your skulking positions under fire. When you try to pull back, they are in position to shoot or place fire onto your movement paths. If you're playing a good/great player and they do something you don't understand, think about what you might have to do next turn. You can also ask them to recall the moment later and explain what they were thinking. I can promise you, it will be enlightening.

More easily seen, these players usually move aggressively at the beginning to buy themselves more time at the end. They have examined the terrain and know the pacing they must achieve to win. On the attack, they push sharply into the defense. On the defense, they push out to interdict and disrupt the attackers timeline. If they can delay you one turn now, it puts pressure on you to be more aggressive later likely yielding them better chances to inflict casualties.

# GOOD/GREAT PLAYERS REINFORCE SUCCESS

As you read through this, keep this in mind. If a good/great player creates an opportunity, expect everything he has to support that success. The full weight of their attack will exploit the break and force you to scramble to cover the breach. If one unit survives crossing a fire lane, another will try, then another, and another until they are all through the fire lane and your position is unhinged.

### They Take More Bounding First Fire Shots

I am always surprised how many people don't take Bounding First Fire (B1F) shots. At ranges of less ≤ 6, the odds to hit with a B1F shot can be pretty good. Starting with a base to hit of 10, a turreted AFV taking a B1F shot CE can hit on an Original DR 6. Add in an Armor Leader or a large target and the numbers become even more favorable. In AFV combat, the AFV that shoots first is most likely to win. These players know Gun Duels and how to ensure they shoot first. Knowing the charts, they instinctively know what Original DR they need to hit and how that interplays with special ammo to give themselves two

bites at the apple.

Not only will they use special ammo to get multiple chances to roll low on the TH DR, they are willing to take HEAT shots when shooting Infantry to get two cracks at them too.

**They Encircle the Enemy More Often**



Better players seek out chances to encircle your positions in their Movement Phase. Even if they do not break your units, the doubling of MF's to leave the position is punishing in its own right. Without a leader, half of a unit's available movement is required to even enter an open ground Location. This makes it easier for them to out pace you to the VC. It makes it tougher on you to maintain a cogent defense. It diminishes your attack with a +1 DRM and reduces your units' morale by 1 making them more brittle. Suddenly, that Normal Morale Check is a One Morale Check. Rather than the odds of passing being in your favor, they are against you.

**They Cut Rout Paths**



New players quickly learn that two units, 180 degrees apart, surrounding a broken unit will cause those units to surrender or die for failure to rout. Good to great players see ways to do this from a distance. It gets to be the rout phase and some combination of units 3 or more hexes away, in LOS of the broken unit, are either restricting the direction

your units can rout in or are outright eliminating them for failure to rout.

Absent that, they have managed to get adjacent and have the ability to Interdict any Open Ground Locations you must rout through forcing you to surrender.

When it's their units that break, they always have a rout path. There is always a leader handy to pick up the mess. This means for the better players, their leaders are often some of the last pieces to move in their turn. If not, it may be one of the last pieces in that section of the map. This allows them to see what has been broken in First Fire and by thinking ahead to RtPh, position a leader to be in place for the upcoming RPh. This means their attacks don't lose momentum.

## They Take Snap Shots

Good/Great players use more Snap Shots than the average player, particularly in urban terrain. They know a 2e Snap Shot has a better chance of getting a result than a 4+2 or a 4+3. What's more, the 2e shot opens up the bottom of the IFT whereas a +2 shot removes it. Only the bottom of the IFT eliminates units absent a Fate DR.

## They Know the IFT

**A7 INFANTRY FIRE TABLE (IFT)**

| DR/FP | Backblast dr ATR 1/20 | 2/30 | MOL 4/37 | [ 6/50 | A-P Minefields 8/60 | PFk C37 ] 12/70 | PF sN 16/80 | C75 20/100 | C105 24/120 | DC 30/150 | A-T Mine Set DC 36+/200+ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ★Vehicle | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| ≤0 | 1KIA | 2KIA | 2KIA | 3KIA | 3KIA | 3KIA | 4KIA | 4KIA | 5KIA | 6KIA | 7KIA |
| 1 | K/1 | 1KIA | 1KIA | 2KIA | 2KIA | 2KIA | 3KIA | 3KIA | 4KIA | 5KIA | 6KIA |
| 2 | 1MC | •K/1 | •K/2 | •‡•1KIA | •‡•1KIA | ••‡•1KIA | •‡‡•2KIA | •‡‡•2KIA | •‡‡•3KIA | ••‡‡•4KIA | ••‡‡•5KIA• |
| 3 | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | •K/2 | ‡•K/3 | ••‡•1KIA | ••‡•1KIA | •‡‡•2KIA | ••‡•3KIA | ••‡‡•4KIA• | |
| 4 | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC | 3MC | ‡•K/3 | ‡•K/4 | ••‡•1KIA | ••‡‡•2KIA | ••‡‡•3KIA• |
| 5 | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC | 3MC | 4MC | ‡•K/4 | •••‡•1KIA | ••‡‡•2KIA• |
| 6 | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC | 3MC | 4MC | ‡•K/4 | •••‡•1KIA• |
| 7 | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC | 3MC | 4MC | ‡•K/4‡ |
| 8 | — | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC | 3MC | 4MC‡ |
| 9 | — | — | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC | 3MC‡ |
| 10 | — | — | — | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC | 2MC‡ |
| 11 | — | — | — | — | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC | 2MC‡ |
| 12 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC | 1MC‡ |
| 13 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | PTC | NMC | 1MC‡ |
| 14 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | PTC | NMC‡ |
| ≥15 | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | PTC‡ |

I know that this seems intuitive to many people but most newer players don't really grasp the full extent of the meaning. A good/great player would rather take two 6 -1 shots than a single 12 -1 shot. The more they are rolling on the IFT the happier they are. It presents more chances to get a low DR which can punish their opponent.

Conversely, good/great players will combine units into large firepower shots when facing +2/+3 or greater shots. This increases the odds of getting a result, especially when getting up past 12 firepower.

Good/great players also recognize not all shots are equal and there is an order to them. Encirclement isn't the only time this matters. For instance, the Sniper's Location and possible effects mean that shots can possibly be ruined by a SAN need to be taken first. Taking high-odd shots (e.g. likely to get an effect) can free up another unit to do something else useful.

Good/great players know what it takes to DM your broken units.

Good/great players know how to properly stack to hit columns on the IFT. Rarely will you see them say "11 rounds down to 8" or something similar. They will move with this in mind. If they have the odd firepower, they will use it to DM units or take unlikely pot shots. Good/great players know that rolling as often as they can on the IFT gives them the best odds for results.

## Their Usage of AFVs

Good/Great players will get everything they can out of an AFV. They will move, use the Smoke Dispenser, fire the Main Armament and MGs, and finally Bypass freeze your key Location. They will use their AFVs in combination with their Infantry to unhinge your defense.

Conversely, on defense they will have mutually supporting positions. They will know how to defend against Bypass freeze. Expect them to use Street Fighting, LATW, and lay resid to protect their positions. They will use the full bag of tricks to diminish the effect of this tactic.

## They Take You Apart Piece by Piece

Good/Great players won't attack across the breadth of your defense. They will focus on one small piece and destroy it with overwhelming power. Then they will look around and find the next piece to destroy, relentlessly pushing forward and eating your units up one bite at a time. Good/Great players know all about bringing firepower to bear on the critical piece of the defense to unhinge the whole line.

Conversely, on defense good/great players will recognize opportunities for a local counter-attack to destroy an isolated unit. They will see AFVs left in motion as juicy targets andwill be well aware of what you have that can hurt them and seek to take that away fromyou.

## They Leave a Lot of Residual Fire Power



Good/Great players will lay down a literal WALL of residual firepower. They know each of those little green counters is another opportunity to roll on the IFT. A chance to get their opponent to roll morale checks. These players will place interlocking fire lanes and seek to channel you into kill boxes where they can bring loads of firepower with favorable DRMs.



Conversely, on attack, good/great players will risk RFP shots, even a 1 -2 or 2 -1 if the reward is there. A 7 morale unit attacked by a 1 -2 fire lane will break < 35% of the time. They will move units one at a time, through your RFP and fire lanes and continue to do so as long as they are being successful.

## They Use SMOKE (In All Its Forms)



If a better player has a movement factor left, don't be surprised to see him try for Infantry Smoke even with an exponent of 1. He has nothing to lose if the unit is where he wants it to be and has an additional +2 DRM to gain.



Expect to see a good player shoot for SMOKE every chance he gets. Don't be surprised if he Intensive Fires a 5/8″ mortar to place an extra SMOKE counter. Don't be surprised

when he uses his OBA for SMOKE. The good player realizes SMOKE helps him to close on his objectives.

## They Treat Final Fire as Prep Fire for the Upcoming Turn

This is why good/great players will work to put your skulking positions under fire. Units which break under Final Fire won't be there to oppose his units in the upcoming movement phase. These units will be someplace in the rear seeking to rally and get back into the game. By breaking your units in Final Fire, his units are free to move in his upcoming turn. He gets to have a fire phase AND still move the same units in his own turn.

These stacks of broken units represent opportunities to good/great players. Good/great players will seek to keep these stacks DM. Worse yet, they will also work very hard to put them into surrender/failure to rout situations. Don't be surprised if these units never get back into the game.

## They Think Outside the Box

First, think outside your own box. Don't fall into a rut when playing. It is easy to counter predictable play. Playing outside the norm isn't a call for reckless play however. Try to learn from your opponents, especially those who act or play differently than you. These are opportunities to enrich your personal toolbox.

For example, take a look at the German set up devised by Toby Pilling in Illuminating Rounds 37: Tired and Unsupported – YouTube. Faced with utilizing such a small force and needing to defend a wide area, Toby uses the first Rally Phase to recombine two HS to augment firepower at the expense of field coverage. He disguises the weakness of his field coverage by stacking one concealed 7-0 leader with a PSK it cannot fire and another 7-0 with three concealment counters. This imaginative set up helped win a scenario that is overwhelmingly pro-US according to ROAR.

## Personal Morale Check (Or Why Jim Fails to Win More Often)



Many battles are lost in real-life because the vanquished believed they had lost. In spite of the situation, the losers lost heart and the battle was lost. Same in ASL. There are many

times a game is indeed lost; however, there is a bit of luck in this game, and if you find yourself down and out, take a break: get a drink, use the restroom or whatever. Then with the VC in mind, come back and look at the game from a fresh perspective. Do you have a chance to win? Is it a reasonable chance? If you figure you have a one-third chance of winning, then don't give up.

Personally, I know the math and when repeatedly subjected to low-odds attacks going against me, I get frustrated with the balance of the DRs. This frustration then feeds into my life-long battle against impatience. The combination of the two can then push me into a pessimistic spiral as my opponent continues to get luckier and luckier. My frustration boils over and then I lose focus and begin playing badly, further tilting the game against me. It doesn't help that my life-long struggle with impatience is a reinforcing feedback loop into this spiral.

Good/great players can take advantage of luck that goes their way (something I can do too) but minimize the damage of luck going against them (something I can do once, maybe twice, but I come unglued as they stack up).  Good/great players know bad things are going to happen and they can roll with the punches.

**Conclusion**

As I said at the beginning, I do not consider myself a great player, but even as a novice artist can recognize the greatness of Michaelangelo, I too can recognize the skill of the greats in ASL. It takes time and effort to get good at anything, and ASL is no different. Taking these lessons to heart, and mastering them, one at a time, will make you into a better player over time.