



Tournament Strategy

Issue 1 Vol. 1
Dec. 21

I suggest one of the best tournament books ever written by Dan Harrington on Hold'em. It is a more detailed tactical approach to No Limit Hold'em tournaments.

Another prolific poker tournament writer is Tom McEvoy. He has written numerous books such as – Championship No Limit and Pot Limit Poker, Championship Tournament Practice Hands, How to Win No Limit Tournaments.



Tournaments are a fun and interesting way to play poker. For beginners, someone who has played less than 1000 to 5000 hands, I suggest playing smaller buy in tournaments. 1-10 dollar buy ins are small tournaments. This way you can observe how to play poker for a small amount of money for a long period of time.

In the beginning of these tournaments there are a many loose players who don't care if they lose the cheap buy in. Players who are playing K7os, Q8s under the gun or any Ace little out of position. These are sometimes high stake ring players who want to blow off steam, inexperienced players or just people who want to gamble. Unless you have the best hand or the experience to read these players stay away from them.

First stage

There are 2 points of view for the first stage of play;

1. Play real tight, only with the top 5-10 starting hands and don't chase
- Or
2. Play loose/aggressive trying to build your chip stack by outplaying weak/looser players.

Online tournament have a lot of inexperienced players and you can easily trap them in the beginning of a tournament.

If you are an inexperienced player I would suggest using strategy number 1. Play only the top 5-10 hands from the starting hand section of Total Poker Pro. If the flop does not help your hand throw it away. Do not chase a hand if it is going to cost you most of your chips.

You are trying to double up your chips. If you have lost your chips in a small amount of leaks and chasing then when those aces do hit your pocket you will not have any chips to double up.

Another good reason to play tight is because the blinds are so small. When you bet in poker you are essentially saying you are going to compete for the blinds. If the blinds are only 15 chips then you are competing for pennies of what is needed to win the tournament. You want to have a hand that the weaker players will risk all of their chips against and you have the best of all possible worlds.

Strategy 2 calls for playing a few more hands than strategy 1. If you are experienced I would suggest playing a few more hands from an advantageous late position. Perhaps QJs or a big raise with a pocket pair of 10's. If you do hit then you will have the opportunity to catch some loose chips from a big pot. This takes experience to notice when the pot is giving you the correct odds to fish then be able to read the flop and finally read other players. If you have identified a few loose players and are able to isolate them with a pocket pair then by all means take their chips. Don't chase a drawing hand. Try 5 to 10 hands in the first stage that are in the top 20 hand of the hand chart. Some good tournament players online play aggressive, pushing small edges to try and double up early, if they can't double up a few times in the first hour then they figure they could be making the same amount of money in a good ring game so they risk their tournament life more often.

I have placed in the money and onto many final tables with both strategies. Sometimes the cards don't give you a chance and you sit, mucking one bad starting hand after another until the golden Ace's come on a loose and aggressive board. You know someone will raise and re-raise so you limp UTG or you are in middle position and 2 people ahead of you have limped so you put in a raise that gets a few fish biting. You catch 2 people risking their chips and you suddenly tripled up. The times when the cards are bad and they don't give me the chance to make mistakes and I stay tight up until the late stages when you can steal blinds I have had some success making the final table after 3 hours. Of course the big pocket pairs came at the most advantageous situations.

Playing in a tournament does have a large luck factor because any one hand can mean you bust out. You have to risk your chips sometimes because the blinds are always pushing the tournament forward, ever increasing and challenging your abilities. In a ring game if you bust out your buy in you just reload. The blinds are static so they are not a factor, you can stay as tight as you want. But in a tournament you have to be aware of how many rotations you have left in your chip stack before it is time to risk it all on one hand.

All through the first stage you should be watching the tendencies of your opponents. Learn something about the players you think will make it to the later stages. What are their opening hands in certain positions? What type of hand do they bet with? Make notes; keep a book of notes on the players you have assessed.

Some other things to think about! If you have lost a majority of your chips in the beginning of the tournament do not fret and start to get looser. Do not take the view that any 2 cards

can win. This is the time you really tighten up and play only the best hands. Read players and wait, just wait for those golden 2 cards. There are many players who have gone on to win tournaments after being down to just 100 chips, including myself. If you double up 2 or 3 times then you will have enough chips to make it to the 2nd stage.

Another reason to tighten up when you are short stacked is because when you do enter a pot all the larger chip stacks will want to take you out. They will most likely raise the pot and make you play all of your chips on that one hand. This is actually good and bad news for you. If you have been waiting for the best hand then you will feel secure in the fact that you have made your stand with the biggest gun. It is true, the more guns pointing at you the harder it will be to take the pot down. But, the good news is, the more people in the pot trying to take you down the faster you will be able to build your chip stack up. If 3 people try to take you down, your 100 chips will become 400 chips when you win. If only one person tried to take you down then you would only win 100 more chips. So, make your stand with the best hand. Even when you win the 400 chips the larger stacks will still want to take you down so this process could repeat 2 or 3 times. That is how you get back into the chip count. So never despair.

Middle Stage

The middle stage of the tournament is where people start to shift gears. There is a clear chip leader and usually half of the entrants have been eliminated. The blinds are starting to get larger and hopefully your chip count is large enough where you don't have to worry about the blinds eating you away. The money places are still far away but you have gotten past the loose players and are heading into the stretch run.

If you are short stacked then you must make a move now. Short stacked is when you can only stand 3-4 rotations of the blinds before busting out. You need to start looking for a place to go all in and steal some pots. If you don't get a hand in the top 20 starting hands or can isolate someone in a race between a pocket pair and over card draw then it has been suggested to keep waiting. It is up to you, make a stand with a mediocre hand like Ace/4 suited before the blinds are going to knock you out or just wait until the last possible hand. Deciding if a better starting hand will come is the choice.

The most important aspect of the middle and late middle period is to be able to shift gears. Usually right before the bubble and before a change in the purse earnings level, everyone tightens up. After these levels have been achieved then players loosen up and do not shy away from aggression. So being able to shift gears when you detect these changes is important. Most of the time everyone starts to tighten up so if you still have a good amount of chips, at least 5 times the blinds, then you may be able to steal a few pot by going all in. I recommend 5 times the blinds because essentially you want people to fear the amount of chips they may lose if they face your challenge. Pick on someone who has around the same chip amount or even up to 50 to 60% more than your chip count. Some players will not fear losing half their chips defending a steal but I would say your chances are 3 to 1 that they will not fold. You will still have the advantage since you initiated the betting, but remember, they may re-raise you all-in. Judge who you are going against, an aggressive player who will take a shot. I remember one time that I had pocket Kings on the button with no opponent opting to enter the pot. I raised the normal amount and it was almost half of the big blinds chip stack. The small blind folded but the big blind called. I busted out when he hit 2 pair, 5 and 2.

Be careful not to go against a very large stack that would rather just see you go away and does not mind risking 10% of his chips. If you have any of the top 10 starting hands then you should consider going all in pre-flop or right after the flop against smaller stacks.

You want to double up.

If you have a medium stack then pick your spots to continue accumulating chips. Don't chase a hand. You want to survive, have enough chips where doubling up means something, don't put all of your chips at risk unless you know you have the best of it. If you see a flop and it does not hit then throw it away. You can loosen up in regards to your starting hand qualifications and even steal a few blinds but calling off 1/4 to 1/2 of your stack on a draw in the middle of the tournament is sure death.

Another point to think about is what the total chips in play are. You should estimate getting 8-12 % to have an average chip stack at the final table. This makes your goal seem much easier to obtain in the middle of the tournament. You will see lofty chip stacks with the leaders having stacks 10 or even 30 times yours but I assure you, if you are not the chip leader you have not lost the tournament. Later in the tournament when the blinds start getting large there are more opportunities to double up a few times. In no limit and even limit tournaments the chips leaders change places multiple times, jockeying up and down the leader board. Sometimes a player will bust out and you have moved up a place without risking anything. Don't get over anxious and force your play (play poor cards without the value or start fishing for draws). If you have an average chip stack or 5-10% below the average chip stack you are in good shape to improve. You do have work to do but don't get desperate.

If you have a large stack then protect your stack while flexing your muscles. You can try to knock the smaller stacks around and take them out if you have a good hand. Spending 5 to 10% of your chip stack into a speculative hand or a strong draw against a small stack that is probably playing weak cards because they can't survive another rotation is a way to continue building your stack. If you tighten up too much in the this stage then everyone will catch up to you as the middle stacks take out other people or the small stacks catch cards to take out other people.

It is a balancing act. I have seen large chip stacks try to push and intimidate too much and get knocked down or even out of a tournament. Other players with medium stacks will try to trap you more often or you will start making mistakes because you feel like you have a few chips to burn speculating. Don't get carried away. Once again, protect, tournament are about survival. In the late stages of the tournament you will be able to last through more rotations of the blinds and be able to scoop up the more desperate players.

Look for the flow of the game. Is your table so tight that no one will call a pot unless they hold aces? Is there someone stealing blinds because everyone is playing too tight? You have to consider all of these events. As always, try to learn more about your opponents. At this point you should decide whether you want to win or just make it into the money places. This will determine how loose your starting hand requirements should be.

In every tournament there are opportunities due to your position (button or 1 position away from the button), your chip advantage and your ability to not put all of your chips at risk.

Look for these opportunities with less than optimal hands. For example, I was in a tournament during the middle stages with around 9,000 chips. The blinds were T\$100/200 so it was still early in the structure. There were 4 or 5 players with around the same amount of chips as me at the table. I am on the button. The UTG player bets 2x the big blind (T\$400) the next player re-raises another 1x the big blind (\$600) and one person calls putting T\$1600 in the pot. I have 4/5 suited. Normal reasoning would say fold due to 2 raises and a cold call but look at these numbers. I am risking less than 10% of my chip stack for 3 times my bet and I have position on all of them. No one dominates another player's stack so if the flop is bad for me I am not risking my whole tournament bankroll. There is the real possibility that the UTG raiser will go all-in instead of just calling the re-raise and I will lose the T\$600 but it is still in the early middle stage. Well I called, a loose call but these are the times for opportunity to strike and strike it did. A flop of three 5's, quads for me hit the table. The UTG player goes all in, the next player calls his all in and the next player calls that all in. What is going on here? They each had pocket pairs, J's, Ace's and 7's. They all had full boats but I had 4 of a kind. I collected over T\$30,000 in chips right there.

Mind you, that was the most extreme event, but they happen every tournament. You flop a monster from a speculative hand in good position. You called because of position and by following the 5/10 rule; don't risk more than 5-10% of your chip stack on a call. If you are going to push someone around use the same rule. Essentially you must think survival, don't risk your chips needlessly. Sometimes fold if you are not driving the betting unless you are sure the other person is betting out of place for their cards (bluffing or overstating).

There is no doubt that this is the point when you will have to catch some luck from the Poker Gods. There are two things to remember if you want to win a tournament.

1. Make the least amount of mistakes. Fold if you think you are beat. Don't call raises unless you have a good hand or are getting the correct odds.
2. Get lucky when luck is needed. This you cannot control but you can put yourself into a position for luck to happen to you.

There are a lot of trees to cut down in a tournament. Don't needlessly challenge someone.

Final Stage

So you are in the money round or at a final table. Things get hot and heavy here. People will go all in at any time. Since everyone is going to make some money the play gets looser. Premium cards are what you need and want when you enter a pot. You must loosen up but you must also ask yourself, would I call an all in raise with these cards? If the answer is no then throw them away. A majority of the hands will have all-in bets pre-flop or on 4th street. This is why you should not panic in the middle part of the tournament if you are not the chip leader or even in the top 20. If you have the average amount of chips then a double up or a triple up from a pivotal hand will happen. After the first bubble pops the all-in bets get more frequent until the next bubble level.

Usually at this time the blinds are very large and many of the players will not be able to last 1 or 2 passes of the blinds. This is another reason people will go all in at any time. If

someone commits all of their chips, look and see if they are in 1st position right before the blinds hit them. Look at their chip stack. If it is small, then this is probably an inferior hand.

For the rest of the tournament the battle between a made hand and an over-card drawing hand really appears. AK vs QQ or AA vs JJ. If you have a strong starting hand you should raise with authority. You should try to steal the blinds as often as possible. Since the blinds are so large the other players will not contest your raise unless they have a very good starting hand.

There will be a fair amount of pre-flop raising, heed the pre-flop betting; if there is a raise and a re-raise then your hand needs to be very good for you to join the dance. The person who bet out all-in may not have a good hand but usually someone who calls a big raise has something. You don't want to get in the way of 2 people who are intent on putting their chips at risk. If there is a chance that one person will get knocked out fold unless you hold either AA or KK and feel like you can knock both of them out. For every battle that happens in front of you that knocks someone else out is one more money spot up the pay ladder. Right before the final table things will tighten up until the smallest chip count has to risk or get taken out by the blinds. Chip management and blind stealing are essential here. You cannot continue to leak chips waiting for the small stacks to bust out or you will become the small stack.

I have been at the final table many times hovering between 7th and 10th place. I would win one key hand to keep me alive but not the level of chips the leaders have. I play conservative at this point looking to double up. Any one of those large stacks wants to take you out and get to the 4-5 chip leader showdown and win the big money. But an amazing thing happens at the final table, one showdown after another occurs knocking out small and sometimes devastating a large chip stack. All of a sudden I am in 6th place, then I catch a key hand and I move up in the leader board. Then another person gets knocked out and then I catch another big hand. Survival, accumulate, never say die.

Usually very quickly the final table will be short handed and then you should loosen up your starting hand requirements. For every person less than a full table the more powerful the over cards become. Wired pairs become gold. This is when the battle between a made hand and an over card drawing hand really appears. AK vs. QQ or AA vs. JJ. If you have a strong starting hand you should raise with authority. You should try to steal the blinds as often as possible. Since the blinds are so large the other players will not contest your raise unless they have a very good starting hand.

I suggest reading up on shorthanded play and playing in some sit and go tables. These are excellent mini-tournaments to practice your later round play. In the beginning of a sit and go it is about chip management and analyzing your opponents. When the first few players get knocked out then you can start to play more shorthanded strategy. Big cards are gold and pocket pairs are power.

You will not make the final table every time or even hit in the money. 1 out of 10 times hitting the money is a good percentage. You are always looking to make the final table but the opportunities (cards) might not always be there. At some point you may have to make a decision to just survive and not bust out before the bubble, make the money. You will play

tight and wait for the smaller stacks to bust out. Get some money for the next tournament buy in and a fresh start to hit the final table or even win it all.

Some Thought about Online Tournaments

Many books discuss strategies that are best used for brick and mortar tournaments. B+M tourneys have a much slower structure than online tournaments. Most online tournaments are essentially 3 hours and the larger ones (either money 100+ but in or 800 players+) may be 5 hours+. These structures would be considered satellite tournaments in a B+M location. The common thoughts on satellite tournaments are to be more aggressive due to the structure. Some sites have the blinds increase anywhere from 8 minutes to 15 minutes.

After the first 4 to 8 levels an ante may start to eat away at your chips creating more stealing and more need to play looser but more opportunities because of the increased pot size and the odds you would be getting for speculative/drawing hands. The structures create the atmosphere. Be aware of the structures and the timing of every tournament.

Some advice is to play in a small priced buy in tourney and play real tight, try to make it as far as possible just to get a feel for that particular online sites structure. Another thought is to just be an observer for the whole tournament and take notes as to when the more experienced players change gears. When the tournament changes gears. How many players are usually remaining during different blind/ante levels, what are the average chip stacks, leading chip stacks and what level does the bubble usually fall upon. I always tell new players to understand the pace of the tournament.

What I mean by pace is when you need to shift gears, what amount of chips are needed at different stages of the tournament to have a chance at the final table. I have seen players obtain the chip lead in the late stages, get knocked down to less than the buy in amount and then jump back up to the top 5 players again. In a no limit tournament you are never out of achieving final table status. The cards and your skill level will do that for you.

Beginner Poker Room

This is a typical Pacific Poker tournament and sit n go schedule. They have inexpensive satellite buy-ins for the larger \$20,000 daily tournament. Every week they have a \$75,000 tournament. Free-rolls and micro limit tourneys are available for your practice.

One of the best parts about Pacific Poker is the Sit and Go tournaments. Sit and go tournaments are an excellent way to practice for late stage tourney play. When there are only 10 to 20 players you have to play a different type of way. The 20 player tournaments pay out 5 places or 1 in 4 players win money. \$16, \$8 and \$2 20 player SnG.

REGULAR TABLES						TOURNAMENT TABLES		Learn More
Hold'em	Omaha Hi	Omaha H/L	7 Stud	7 Stud H/L	1 On 1	Sit & Go	Multi Tables	SPECIAL
ID	Date		Game		Buy-In	State		
1543821	\$500 Gntd	Dec 10- 12:00	Hold'em	Fixed	\$5 + 50¢	Running		
1581828	\$20K Super Satellite	Dec 10- 12:30	Hold'em	No Limit	Free Roll	Running		
1544329	Fast \$2000 Gntd	Dec 10- 13:00	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$30 + \$3	Completed		
1544753	\$1500 Gntd	Dec 10- 14:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$10 + \$1	Running		
1581890	\$20K Satellite	Dec 10- 14:30	Hold'em	No Limit	\$3 + 30¢	Running		
1545123	\$1500 Gntd	Dec 10- 15:00	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$20 + \$2	Registration open		
1592406	\$6,000 Guaranteed	Dec 10- 15:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$15 + \$1.50	Registration open		
1545379	\$1750 Gntd	Dec 10- 16:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$10 + \$1	Registration open		
1581946	\$20K Satellite	Dec 10- 16:30	Hold'em	No Limit	\$6 + 60¢	Registration open		
1545604	Fast \$1200 Gntd	Dec 10- 17:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$5 + 50¢	Announced		
1545763	\$2000 Gntd	Dec 10- 18:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$30 + \$3	Announced		
1545906	\$1400 Gntd	Dec 10- 19:00	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$10 + \$1	Announced		
1546062	\$3000 Gntd	Dec 10- 20:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$20 + \$2	Announced		
1537783	\$20,000 Guarante...	Dec 10- 21:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$30 + \$3	Registration open		
1546219	\$2200 Gntd	Dec 10- 22:00	Hold'em	Fixed	\$100 + \$9	Announced		
1546371	Short Handed	Dec 10- 22:30	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$50 + \$5	Announced		
1546451	\$3200 Gntd	Dec 10- 23:00	Hold'em	No Limit	\$30 + \$3	Announced		

REGULAR TABLES						TOURNAMENT TABLES		Learn More
Hold'em	Omaha Hi	Omaha H/L	7 Stud	7 Stud H/L	1 On 1	Sit & Go	Multi Tables	SPECIAL
ID	Game		Buy-In		State		Enrolled	
1608261	5 Seats	Hold'em	Fixed	\$5 + 50¢	Registration open		1 out of 5	
1608262	20 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$2 + 20¢	Registration open		10 out of 20	
1608250	Stack Att...	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$15 + \$1.50	Registration open		1 out of 5	
1608266	Heads Up	Hold'em	No Limit	\$100 + \$5	Registration open		0 out of 2	
1608264	5 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$30 + \$3	Registration open		1 out of 5	
1608219	Fast	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$30 + \$3	Registration open		0 out of 6	
1608239	10 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$30 + \$3	Registration open		2 out of 10	
1608196	10 seats	Hold'em	Fixed	\$2.50 + 25¢	Registration open		9 out of 10	
1608245	10 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$10 + \$1	Registration open		6 out of 10	
1608242	20 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$8 + 80¢	Registration open		7 out of 20	
1608276	Fast	Hold'em	Pot Limit	\$5 + 50¢	Registration open		0 out of 6	
1608277	5 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$10 + \$1	Registration open		0 out of 5	
1608275	5 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$2.50 + 25¢	Registration open		3 out of 5	
1608279	Heads Up	Hold'em	Fixed	\$10 + 50¢	Registration open		0 out of 2	
1608278	Fast	Hold'em	Fixed	\$10 + \$1	Registration open		0 out of 6	
1608268	5 Seats	Hold'em	No Limit	\$100 + \$9	Registration open		0 out of 5	
1608270	Heads Up	Hold'em	Fixed	\$50 + \$2.50	Registration open		0 out of 2	

