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◆DESTINATION : FINAL TABLE◆

INTRODUCTION

The world that is online poker in 2008 is still a very profitable one for the player that is armed with strategies that are not only proven in the heat of battle but will continue to be proven for some considerable time to come.

Tournament poker is big business with literally tens of millions of dollars won and lost online every single day of the week in both live tournaments and online. Wouldn't you like to be coming first in some big online tournament or live tournament for that matter and cashing a cool \$250,000? These are life changing sums of money for many people and it sure beats grinding it out for hour after hour in boring cash games.....or at least this is how many people see it.

The techniques that you are about to read in DESTINATION : FINAL TABLE have been used to great success by professional players the world over for some considerable time. These are strategies that have been responsible for winning World Series titles and World Poker Tour titles as well as many others.

All of the major online poker sites have large multi-table tournaments, Pokerstars, Full Tilt, Party Poker and "The Dean's" sponsors Poker Heaven who have a regular €100,000 guaranteed MTT every Sunday starting at 20.00 GMT. As you sit and watch these tournaments then one thing becomes very clear, there is a tremendous amount of bad play taking place as many players are going after the big bucks who in reality have no chance simply because their play has no structure and they have no discernable plan of attack.

This e-book will give you one such plan of attack that will not only take you very deep into the tournament but will help get you to the final table and beyond.

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So let us talk about the author. Carl “The Dean” Sampson is an online poker professional and has been for almost six years. Carl has played successfully at numerous games and limits and is now recognised by his nickname of “The Dean”. He is now sponsored by Poker Heaven and can be found at www.pokerheaven.com/thedean

Carl shares his expertise these days with readers of the three poker magazines that he currently writes for, namely the World Poker Tour, Poker Pro Europe and Online Poker Pro. He also writes for one of the biggest poker websites in the world in the Hendon Mob website as well as for his own very popular website which is www.pokersharkpool.com . He has also written for Bluff Europe poker magazine as well in the past.

Earlier this year Carl wrote an e-book on single table tournaments called CRUSHING ONLINE SINGLE TABLE TOURNAMENTS which is endorsed by a WORLD POKER CHAMPION! He was also known for his professional blackjack team that he ran between 1998 and 2002 of which he told the story in his first book...”Princes of Darkness: The World of Highstakes Blackjack”.

So sit back and let DESTINATION : FINAL TABLE possibly transform not only your ideas about poker tournaments but also your chances of reaching that final table and getting into those final three places where the big money pay offs are.

- Gavin Mountford - Laytheodds.com

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PART ONE

What you must first remember about this e-book is that the strategy that is covered in it has been responsible for winning not just poker tournaments but literally millions upon millions of dollars worldwide. In fact, even today, many top tournament players either online or in live tournaments use this strategy or something closely resembling it.

Instead of me simply giving you instructions on how to play certain hands at certain stages of the tournament, I will strive to make you aware of what you are trying to achieve when you sit down at the table to play.

The target audience for this e-book are all of those players who participate in either online poker tournaments or live ones for that matter who struggle to make the serious money seats. Are you one of those players who accumulates chips early on and get yourself into contention only then to be faced with very aggressive play later on in the tournament and see your stack whittled away and so with it your chances of seriously cashing.

Or do you blow your stack too early in the pursuit of a huge stack and then have to sit and watch almost the entire tournament taking place before your eyes. Or are you the type who plays strong solid poker for several levels and amasses a decent stack only to then “bubble” constantly or “sneak” into the lower money places every once in a while.

If you recognise this as you then read on because your chances of winning your next large poker tournament are about to take a serious quantum leap forward. So what types of poker player actually win big field poker tournaments?

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Certainly not overly cautious ones that is for sure, they either get blinded off in the middle stages or perhaps later on during bouts of short handed play. Reckless players don't fare too well either although they do tend to accumulate very big stacks when they get lucky. But although reckless players fare better than overly cautious players and do actually win a tournament on occasion, chances are that their reckless play will get picked off by the sharks and the tight playing rocks out there.

So if reckless or cautious players do not fare well then who does? The player who knows when to be reckless AND cautious at just the right time that's who! The player who plays their tournament in the same way that they would drive a car and know when to change up and down through the gears.

Who Plays in Poker Tournaments?

Everyone.....everyone from professional players (if the tournament is big enough) to rank novices. Because tournament poker is so heavily marketed these days then it is this form of the game that people see on television and so wish to emulate it. Poker tournaments can also boast very large prize money or at least some of them do.

It is common now even in online play for poker tournaments to have over a million dollars in prize money. It is also standard practice with many tournaments for most players to arrive at their buy-in via some sort of satellite tournament where they bought in for a very small amount of money.

These satellite tournaments serve several purposes but their main purpose for the budding professional tournament poker player is that they not only swell the tournament by way of numbers and thus prize money, but they also swell the number of players who have weak or poor tournament styles and almost have no chance whatsoever of ever winning a big field poker tournament.

These players are known as the "dead money". The type of player who for them, getting into the lower money seats is a major achievement and a
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major goal for that matter and this reflects in the way that they play the tournament. For them, having got into a \$220 tournament for \$1 or \$5 and then getting into the money and winning say \$150 represents a serious return on investment.

The sheer number of weak players in these tournaments can be staggering at times and I would estimate that the dead money can be as high as 50-60% in some of them. Do not get the wrong idea here when I mention the term “dead money” with regards certain poker players.

I am not necessarily referring to novices and beginners either. This statement could just as easily be directed to experienced poker players who for one reason or another simply do not have the proper game in which to succeed in big field poker tournaments or they are stuck playing their usual solid ring game style and cannot adjust once the play gets super fast and the blinds escalate.

But in most poker tournaments, the biggest money seats are found in the last three places. There are some poker tournaments out there where just getting into the money can represent a serious return on investment like some WSOP tournaments for instance.

But on the whole, to win a meaningful amount of money in most poker tournaments means getting into those last three places. This is what most tournament professionals are aiming at. Getting into this position just once or twice a year can mean significant profits for players of the biggest tournaments.

It is also a fact that many players who are present in poker tournaments are knowledgeable players but have got that knowledge out of poker books. This is not necessarily a bad thing depending on what book the student has read but many poker books simply do not get the job done when it comes to showing the player how to get to that final table and beyond.

Later on in this e-book I will show my tournament poker system which is also utilised by many top tournament professionals in tournaments either online or in card rooms the world over. It will not consist of any hand charts or anything as inflexible as that because in my opinion, anyone
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who plays that way is seriously handicapping themselves from going all of the way and winning the event.

Are You Prepared For Pain and Discomfort?

Believe me when I say that this is a very serious question. Are you prepared to put yourself on the line not just once but time and time again? Are you prepared to risk your tournament life in the constant battle to accumulate chips?

Many players simply cannot push the pedal to the metal at the correct times. Sure....they play good strong aggressive poker at the beginning of the tournament when they perceive in their own mind that their chances of winning are slim and their chip stack is small when compared to the total number of chips in play.

They find it easy to play good strong aggressive poker towards the middle or latter stages whenever their chip stack gets low. But playing aggressive poker under these circumstances is easy. The latter example and your move is forced so in a sense, the pressure is totally off and the decision has been made for you by a combination of escalating blinds and dwindling stack.

It is all too easy to play aggressive poker at the beginning when the winning post in a 1000+ field seems like a million miles away. Even if the player busts out then they say to themselves "oh well, my chances of winning were slim anyway".

But it is when you start to accumulate a meaningful stack that many player's outlooks and styles change. This is why having a set plan that has been cast in stone is simply not the way to win big field (1000+) poker tournaments.

When certain players get sizeable stacks then some players use those stacks as a weapon in which to launch even further attacks. But too many people in poker tournaments (the dead money people) treat having a sizeable stack as something that has to be protected at all costs and needs
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to be locked up safe in the vaults of the Bank of England only to be released unless the player is sitting there with the nuts.

This mindset and method of play would not even be correct for many ring games but for a tournament it is even worse. The mental error that players make in these situations is that they incorrectly think that protecting their chips is increasing their chances of not only getting into the money but also winning the tournament...an utter illusion!

The only thing that it is guaranteeing is that you will end up with a respectable finish and something to brag about to your mates later on. Although in my mind, anyone who comes 71st out of a 1200 strong field has absolutely nothing whatsoever to brag about anyway.

This is a feat that can be accomplished by ANYONE who has a remote understanding of poker and has hit a few hands early on and then sits on them. This is not skill, not even remotely. There are only three seats in the vast majority of poker tournaments that you should be interested in and they are the last three.

I have read in countless books that “tight is right” early on in a poker tournament. In my mind, while this advice is not bad advice, it falls a long way short of being optimal advice.

If you enter into any poker game whether it is a tournament or a cash game or SNG or whatever with a set plan then that is fine to a certain extent. In fact, if the set plan is strong enough and the opposition is weak enough then that plan will be enough to show a positive expectation in many cases.

But with your average poker player having access to an ever increasing library of poker knowledge and with many players multi-tabling and playing only the optimal hands then playing tightly at the beginning of a poker tournament is potentially wasting not only many steal opportunities but also opportunities to extract money from the “dead money players”.

Trust me, if you do not get their money then someone else will and playing tightly at the start of the tournament might get you to the middle

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stages with your stack relatively intact but just who do you think is going to be left at that stage of the tournament?

The better players and the ones who have accumulated chips that's who! The better players won't make the same mistakes as the dead money players and the players with chips can either bully you more or they could be protecting their stacks for later on in the tournament and hoping that the field condenses by other players getting knocked out.

But to win that tournament then you need to end up with all of the chips and while I am certainly not advocating that you act like a maniac, what I am simply saying is that you need to maximise your chances of being able to get those chips. Especially as chances to win in fields of 1000+ do not come around all that often.

But those chips that you need to get a hold of suddenly get harder to acquire when most of the dead money has gone and you are left with a small stack when compared to the average stack and this reduces your potential moves and also your ability to be able to absorb a loss and stay in the tournament.

Can your stack take a punch?

In all poker tournaments, you are simply not going to get to the finishing line without being outdrawn or by taking some other major hit. When this happens to most players, they either get eliminated or severely crippled and end up busting out shortly after when they push all in with some hand like ace rag and get called.

Then you can hear these players tell their bad beat stories on the rails or on the respective poker forums if it was an online tournament by saying how they "got their money in with the best hand, what more can you do".

Well....what more *can* you do? Quite simply....accumulate a bigger stack that's what! How do you do that? Simple, by playing aggressively from the very beginning and looking for opportunities from the very first hand of play.

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If I get my aces cracked and lose 7000 in chips, if I already have a stack of 27,000 to begin with then this is not a critical tournament ending loss. But if my stack was a mere 8000 then I am almost down to the felt or eliminated if my opponent had me covered and I was all in.

You cannot control what hands you get dealt and you cannot control many other things in poker but you have tremendous control over what strategy you adopt from the outset. Some of the best tournament players in the world have highly aggressive tournament styles and experience large fluctuations in their stacks during most tournaments.

To be able to put themselves into situations to win tournaments then this is the price that they are prepared to pay. They are certainly not afraid of busting out early or of even being the very first casualty for that matter. All they care about is accumulating meaningful amounts of chips and keeping the pressure on their opponents whenever possible.

This is where many players go wrong, they accumulate a meaningful stack of chips by a combination of skill and luck early on and then sit back and go into their shell and try to last to the money. The fact of the matter is that you have no guarantee whatsoever of even making the money when you do this so you may as well keep on attacking.

The Decreasing Chip

Lots of novice tournament players are blissfully unaware of the fact that their chips are worth less the more of them that they have. Let us look at an example tournament with a \$1000 buy-in and 250 players competing with the \$250,000 in prize money broken down into the following.

1st Place Winner: \$100,000

2nd Place Winner: \$60,000

3rd Place Winner: \$30,000

4th Place Winner: \$15,000

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The remaining \$45,000 is divided amongst the other final table finishers. Each player has 1000 in chips to start with so there are 250,000 in tournament chips in circulation. The winner of this tournament will end up with all 250,000 of the chips in play.

Yet despite this they will only end up with \$100,000. The difference between losing 2000 in chips to someone who holds 20,000 of them compared to someone who holds only 2000 is enormous. The first player has only lost 10% of their stack while the other player has lost 100% of their stack and is eliminated.

The first player still has a fantastic chance to win the tournament while the second player now has a 0% chance of success. At first this piece of information may sound as if I am advocating hanging onto your chips for grim death...not at all.

All I am pointing out is that the more chips that you accumulate, the less they are worth. All the way up to victory where you have in your possession \$250,000 in tournament chips that are only worth \$100,000 because \$100,000 is the prize for coming first. So every \$1 in chip value is actually only worth 40 cents to the winner of the entire tournament.

It is this fact that many players ignore who then go into their shells towards the latter stages of poker tournaments.

Becoming the Samurai

In ancient times in the far east there lived a warrior that was highly feared and especially by those who were to enter into combat with them. These warriors were known by the name of Samurai and one of the things that made them so feared was not just because of their superb sword fighting skills but because of their attitude towards being killed in combat.

They fought almost without fear of being killed as the intense doctrines and training that had been their everyday existence shielded them from the fear that was normally encountered by their opponents during life or death struggles.

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The Samurai were big believers in that life was merely a temporary existence between periods of not existing and this outlook gave them a tremendous advantage in combat over their more fearful opponents. They could fight without inhibitions and flow far more easily than they would be able to do with fear handicapping their every move.

The Samurai have much to teach us as do many of the ancient philosophies that originate from the far east. The legendary motor racing driver and ex-world champion Mario Andretti once remarked that to reach the very top, a driver had to drive beyond the limits of what was actually safe.

Was this determination and desire to push the boundaries and go past the limitations of other competitors what caused the death of the brilliant Ayrton Senna who like Andretti before him was an absolute legend in Formula one.

Both Andretti and Senna were Samurai warriors in their own chosen field and both of them were prepared to drive themselves and their cars to limits that were not entirely always under their control. But yet both of them are remembered as legends and will still be remembered long after we are gone.

Why? Because both of them were not advocates of playing it safe. There are lots of good drivers out there and lots of exceptional drivers with bags of talent. But talent is not always enough and especially with a game like poker where the number of active participants are in the tens of millions worldwide.

To stand out from a global poker population of untold millions then you have to be something special and to be something special then you have to do something special. To do something special means that you simply cannot play the same way as the majority of the other players.

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The analogy between poker tournaments and motor racing is very instructive when you think about it for a minute. The willingness to put your tournament life on the line is akin to the Samurai warrior going into combat and without fear of death.

Why is this so important in a poker tournament? Well for a start, there will be a very large number of players all playing various styles. Some styles of play will be very similar to other styles of play but no two players will play exactly the same.

But many players will play tight to begin with and play tight throughout. These players have two chances to win a big field poker tournament...slim and non and slim just rode out of town.

The rapidly escalating blinds and antes will kill any tight player who remains tight throughout the tournament. You must change gears at some stage but this goes contrary to how I play poker tournaments. I play a style that has no fixed style simply because I have no objective to play a certain way at a certain stage of the tournament unless there is a very strong and powerful reason to do that.

Then there are those players who start off loose and then turn tight when they accumulate chips. These players tend to bust out early but they can get hold of a meaningful stack during the early to middle stages of the tournament. But then something takes over them and they suddenly become fearful to play a hand and wait for premium hands.

Then we move onto the player who starts loose and keeps on playing loose. These types can go very deep in some tournaments and even win one or two when their luck holds out but they tend to run into rocks and sharks too often and blow whatever chips that they managed to amass.

A far more successful tournament player is one who starts playing very tightly at the outset of the tournament when the blinds are very small and gradually loosens up as the field diminishes towards the middle to late stages. This style of play was very popular a few years ago and still is today as this is the style that is preached in many books.

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The only problem with this tight to start and then loosen up style of play is that too many players are using it PLUS...it does not take advantage of the dead money that is available at the start of all big field poker tournaments because you are simply not in action often enough.

How can you break the three loose playing novices on your table who are ripe for throwing their entire stacks away when you are folding hand after hand after hand. Who do you think is going to get their chips?

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◆PART TWO◆

The “System”

In this part of the book I am going to explain or attempt to explain not only my system of tournament play but the system that is utilised by many very successful tournament players in general. In fact the word “system” is probably wrong but I suppose that we all play to some kind of system even if it is a system that is unconventional and not something that is used by the masses.

I always think that many people approach poker tournaments in the wrong way and I will mention no names but many books do this as well. Do not get me wrong here, it can be correct to give novice players solid guidelines to keep to first and foremost but you need to understand that playing to a strict set of rules is not going to cut it in a big field poker tournament these days.

Many of the problems that many players face today with regards playing poker tournaments is that they tend to put them in a category all by themselves. They perceive that the playing of a poker tournament is totally different to the playing of a cash game and they are wrong.

There are far more similarities with cash games than many people realise. Whenever I play a poker tournament whether it is a big field event or a simple SNG then I am basically playing my normal ring game strategy with a few modifications.

This statement confuses many people when they first hear this because they associate ring game poker with tight solid play and then think that anyone who plays like this has absolutely no chance whatsoever of ever accumulating a big enough stack to get into serious contention to win the event.

When people ask me this type of question and demand an answer then my answer is very simple.....”it depends on how you play ring games”.

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The way that a top ring game player either online or in live games will play a cash game will bare no relation to most other ring game players who may just sit there and wait for the nuts or some other strong holding that will automatically play itself before the flop and after the flop to a large extent.

You should really stop trying to force things to happen in poker tournaments. Stop trying to accumulate a stack to rival the current chip leader as that will likely be someone else shortly. Stop trying to rival the players on your table. So what if the guy across from you has a stack that is three times what you have got. Does that guarantee that he will win the tournament or make the money?

When I say to people that I play good strong solid ring game poker when I play tournaments then some of them look at me as if I have just told them that the moon is made of cardboard. They just do not envisage this statement to mean anything other than someone who sits there waiting for strong hands and who will get blinded away towards the latter stages of the tournament.

But I am constantly watching and adjusting to the players in a cash game and this is exactly what I would do in a tournament. If I am certain that the two players to my left who are in the blinds are both very tight playing rocks then I will open raise from the button with literally anything.

I will even raise with a 7-2 if the blinds are tight enough. This is not a raise based on the merit of my hand but on the styles and objectives of my two remaining opponents in this hand. But if you showed this play to a panel of intermediate players and told them it was very early in the tournament and that the person making the play was a very good player, they would judge this play as someone who was deliberately playing loosely in the early stages and taking big chances trying to amass a huge stack.

Or they could think that I was just a maniac who always played like this when in actual fact I am merely adjusting to my opponents and I will do this irrespective of what stage of the tournament we are at.

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Playing in this way gets me around the potential problem of attempting to force the action of which millions of tournament players the world over are guilty of. If I start the tournament by playing in the normal conventional way, that is to play tight early on then this is not because of some set plan to play a certain way at this stage in the tournament.

More likely that there is a lot of loose aggressive play going off on my table and my opportunities in which to make plays have been seriously diminished and I have been left waiting to try and hit a hand and have been dealt a succession of junk.

When you need to make a move

But there are of course some differences between cash games and tournaments and those differences must be factored in. One of those differences is that in a freeze out tournament then you simply do not have the option to buy back in or to replenish your stack like you can for a cash game. You also cannot walk away from the table if you are ahead or behind either.

This is why you cannot let your stack erode to such an extent that your bets and raises are meaningless. If the blinds are at the 100-200 level then it is pointless letting yourself get blinded away and going all in for say 600. If you lose a big confrontation and end up with 600 because you had your opponent covered then that is a different story and something that cannot be avoided.

You must avoid the situation of your bets and raises not carrying enough weight to be able to steal blinds and antes. I have seen it mentioned in numerous poker literature about not letting your stack get below 6 big blinds. Personally I think that this is a little low and too low for my taste. I try and make an all in move if my stack gets to around the ten big blind stage.

I am trying to promote action and overbetting the pot forces an opponent to call an amount that is above what they would ideally like to get involved with. By making a move at the 10 big blind stage instead of
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waiting until it reaches 6 then my moves carry more menace and have the capacity to inflict substantial harm on my opponents and this helps me to steal the blinds more without a confrontation.

I can easily steal several lots of blinds and buy myself some much needed breathing space if my opponents don't have anything at that particular moment in time. Of course it is not always practical to stick to this 10 big blind rule as if there are raises and re-raises before it gets to me and I am sitting there with utter junk then I cannot get involved.

But there has been many times where I have waited and gone down to around 6 big blinds only to then wish that I had made a move earlier.

Spotting the differences

But the problem with poker tournaments with regards how many players approach them is that they do in fact reward "survival" tactics at certain stages of play. The player who survives and makes the money is rewarded. The player who survives one more place gets an increase in prize money on the next payment level. The player who survives until the final table gets bragging rights etc.

The key word here is "survival" and it is this tendency to survive that predominates many outlooks and strategies in most poker tournaments. Experienced players recognise who is trying to hang on and attack them mercilessly.

The best players to attack depending on what stage the tournament is at are the players who have got something to lose and that means the bigger stacks rather than the shorter stacks. Small stacks tend to have a "what the hell" kind of attitude and there is a certain element of excitement attached to going all in and many action junkies love this move because of the thrill and the rush that comes with it.

I once wrote an article for a major poker magazine about some of the common myths that were inherent in poker and the big stack myth was one of them. It is accepted "conventional" wisdom that two big stacks should not get involved in a major confrontation with each other. But
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some authors expand this to never getting involved with another big stack at all and this is blatantly wrong.

Attacking big and medium stacks can be a good source of profit because it is these players that have got the most to lose by getting into a confrontation with you. Small stacks can simply have a “what the hell” type of attitude and simply call your raise or move in on you. But a bigger stack is going to have fear that the small stacks will not have.

The medium and large stacks know that time is on their side and they simply do not need to get involved. This is why I get active very early during most poker tournaments that I have played in because it is at this stage that ALL players have a medium stack and every single player has time on their side in which to wait for big hands and big situations.

But as I have stated earlier, I will not blindly attack and will still focus on what appears to be happening on my table at all times. In the next part of this e-book I will present some tournament situations that will hopefully highlight my outlook and philosophy towards playing them even further.

I simply do not believe that you can enter any poker tournament or cash game for that matter with any set plan of attack. It is wrong to say “well I will start out playing tight and wait until the weak crazy players get busted”.

It is wrong to say “I will make it my goal to have tripled my stack by the end of the fifth level”. Does this mean that if you triple your stack by the end of the second level that you sit back because you have tripled it a lot earlier than your self imposed target? Or does it mean that should you not have reached this goal by the fifth level that you now have to go crazy and lump it all in.

Having targets and set goals is not the way to get to that final table and beyond. The best way to get there not just in any one tournament but on a consistent basis is to deviate your game around what is happening on your table at any one time. You must learn to go with the flow of what is happening.

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All poker games whether they be cash games, SNG's, tournament tables etc have a flow to them. All of the players on the table will have their own individual objectives and patterns and styles and it is up to you to try and identify as much of that as you possibly can as early as you possibly can.

Once you can do this then this will mainly dictate how you play not just in poker tournaments but in all poker games. Because concentrating on the table that you are on now and the opponents that are on that table is simply the best way to go.

Do not think, "there are over one thousand players in this tournament, somebody must have tripled their stack by now and the leaders will be moving away from me so I need to do something".

This train of thought will simply lead to you becoming desperate too early and making the wrong moves at the wrong times. You are simply immersed in the game that you are in now, at this minute. The rest of the tournament will take care of itself and rushes of luck and good situations can be just around the corner so why hurry?

◆PART THREE◆

In this section of the e-book we will be taking a look at a few tournament situations to try and highlight my overall philosophy of play a little better. The first scenario takes place on the very first round of play.

This is a 1200+ field with a starting stack of 1000 in chips. The starting blind level in this example is 15/30 and we will assume that we are talking about the same tournament throughout for continuity.

♠1.

I have sat in this game and have gone through the blinds on the first orbit of play. During these initial first 8 hands, I have observed only two pre-flop raises and on one occasion it was folded around to the BB who also folded and on the second occasion the raise was called by a player on the button who then proceeded to fold to a flop bet.

The rest of the hands have been players folding around to the big blind or several players limping in and creating multi-way pots. We don't really have an awful lot to go on yet with regards information but yet we still have 8 hands to get our teeth into which at least is something.

This table in its very early stages at this particular moment in time (will not always stay that way) seems cautious to me. This may be totally off the mark but I don't intend on waiting around for 30 minutes to find out that I could have taken a few blinds during this stage but did absolutely nothing about it.

I get dealt 10♠8♣ one to the right of the cut-off and it has been folded around to me. I raise to 90 in this situation and I will give the reasons why.

A. The game seems relatively tight so far and I want to pinch those blinds even though they are only low.

- B. My hand is deceptive in nature and has the potential to bust a weak player who overplays something like top pair top kicker or two pair if I hit something like a straight.
- C. This hand is very easy to get away from pre-flop if I get played back at.
- D. I can also steal more chips than just the blinds if I get cold called by a weak player who then folds meekly to my flop bet and this is something that many players overlook who say that the blinds are not worth stealing early in the tournament.
- E. I am exploiting the conventional book type players who are trying to outlast the crazy early players even though the signs are at this moment that there are non present on this table.
- F. I am also exploiting the players who are following the advice that the blinds are too small to be worth bothering with.

I could easily list loads more reasons here for why I am raising with this hand at this particular moment. Another reason would be that this style of play is less in need of a gear change because I am already playing a highly fluid style of poker.

I believe that this style of play is superior when you enter the later stages of the tournament where the overall ratio of good players to bad players is a lot higher. These good players will be watching you a lot more and not only that but they will be the ones who will have the knowledge to make correct adjustments based on what gear they think that you are in.

Good players are very sensitive to other players changing gears and will adjust their own games based on that. But starting out in a highly fluid gear and continuing in that vein makes it difficult for strong players to know what you are doing and if you have to show a hand down then you make the necessary adjustments in future hands.

You will be amazed just how many chips that you can amass when you play this way and when you start to hit hands early on then you can amass a huge stack playing this style. Of course you still need a large dose of luck to win any poker tournament but in many of them, it is the players who generate their own luck who succeed and get to that cherished final table. Lets take a look at another situation.

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♠2.

I get dealt the 9♦7♦ in a similar situation and it gets raised to 90 by a player in middle position and I am in the same seat. When I say similar I mean with regards the stage of the tournament and not the make up of who is on the table.

In this situation, there has been aggressive action on almost every hand so far and I will fold in this situation and for the following reasons.

- A. I will have less chance of bluffing because of the apparent early nature of the game.
- B. I will not float in situations like these because of the tendency of many players to get all in too soon and to overplay their hands so floating post flop is a chip burner in these situations.
- C. Although my position is decent, it could still get re-raised after me.
- D. I have time on my side and can pick far better situations than this and I am certainly not looking for big confrontations at this or any other stage of the tournament unless I am short stacked or holding a very strong hand.

I know that many top tournament players will play hands like these even to a raise but I think you need better position than this to do it. Your swings are going to be violent when you make plays like these although it has to be said that if your post flop play is very strong then you can probably get away with it in some instances.

In some tournaments, the players will be so tight that you can steal an awful lot of chips before someone finally makes a stand. Then it can be really sweet when you actually start to hit real hands and real flops when players start to play back.

But the reason why I am not going to include loads of different hands and situations inside this e-book is simply because of the style of play that I am preaching. That style is to be constantly looking to be on the attack at all stages of the tournament. But yet this does not mean that I am playing reckless...no way! I may be looking to attack but I am still picking and choosing my spots in which to launch those attacks. The two previous

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examples highlight my thought patterns not just in tournaments but cash games as well.

Following is another brief look at nine typical hands in a typical poker tournament. These hands are at the very beginning of the tournament but they could just as easily be at any other stage of the tournament as well. I do not dramatically alter the way that I play unless I begin to get short stacked.

The first round of play has passed and the blinds are at the 15/30 level and the first nine hands of play have been very cautious. I will include my thought processes as well for each hand.

Hand 1:

Position: UTG

Hand: A♠6♠

The first round of play may have been tight and cautious and I could be sitting on a table full of absolute rocks but I am still under the gun when all said and done. My position is bad on all betting rounds and my hand is no great shakes. It could be argued that if the table was very loose passive that I could maybe limp in with the suited ace but the table is certainly not like that.

Even if it was, you must still respect your positional inferiority. I like to attack but you have to know where to draw the line. When I am the opener then I like to open with a raise and opening with a raise from UTG with a hand like this is not sound poker so folding is the best play in nearly all cases.

Hand 2:

Position: UTG+1

Hand: K♦10♦

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Next hand and my position is a little better and my hand is not bad. The game is not overly aggressive but there are numerous players on the table who seem like conventional book type players to me at this early stage. This means that there will be plenty of players potentially raising from position in order to exploit that.

I don't want my early position raise called in a couple of spots because then I won't even know if I like the flop or not unless I hit it big with a flop like K♣10♥2♠ or 10♥10♠5♥.

So position is still crucial and I don't want to get carried away with my attacking intentions and still need to pay respect to the fact that numerous other players have a positional superiority over me. So despite the decent looking hand, it still goes into the muck.

Hand 3:

Position: UTG+2

Hand: 2♦2♣

Looking at what has happened on this table so far and all of the pre-flop raises have been coming from position. So limping in and hoping to flop a set on the cheap does not seem like a viable strategy to me at this stage. Many players limp in with hands like these in the totally wrong circumstances.

They then get raised by someone on the button and call the raise hoping to flop their set and bust their opponent. Firstly, you are only going to hit your set one flop in every eight on average and to make matters worse, you are only flopping bottom set anyway and set under set is a stack killer.

It is a little too early in the orbit to be raising with a hand like pocket deuces so folding is the better play here. Once again it is a case of looking to be aggressive but knowing where to draw the line. But who says that you are going to bust your opponent anyway even if you do hit your much hoped for set.

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This makes your implied odds very poor as you don't get paid off often enough anyway to make the play viable. You have to speculate to accumulate to win big field poker tournaments but there is a world of difference between speculation and being rash.

One of the things that you need to consider in these large field poker tournaments is that you tend to have your opponents undivided attention (referring to online play here) as you tend to find that there will not be all that many players multi-tabling because of the size and importance of the tournament (if it is big enough that is).

There is a world of difference between a tournament with \$250,000 in prize money and playing \$5-\$10 limit hold'em. One demands more concentration and attention (or at least it should do) than the other where numerous players will multi-table.

This means that if I think that more players are watching the game then I will be a lot more self conscious of my image at the table and will base more (not all) plays with regards to that.

Hand 4:

Position: middle

Hand: 6♠6♣

The average knowledge base of your average poker player is a lot higher these days than what it used to be. You really need to take this fact into account because knowing and understanding what your opponents are thinking of you and how you are playing is crucial to your overall chances of success.

It is for this reason that I will sometimes open raise from this position with a hand like pocket sixes if the following criteria are met.

- A. My table image is tight
- B. The table line up is not overly aggressive at this stage.
- C. It is deceptive and can potentially bust a novice player.
- D. It can be folded easily to aggressive action.

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E. It is a raise from a non conventional steal raising seat which adds deception to the play.

Five very important reasons to make the play and I raise to 90 after it has been folded around to me. The button cold calls the raise and both blinds fold. The flop falls A♦10♠3♥ giving me a pretty weak hand but something that I can represent given that I raised pre-flop.

I bet two thirds pot and take it down safe in the knowledge that if I get played back at then I can simply fold the hand. No doubt there will be many readers of this e-book who will be disappointed about the fact that I have not mentioned how to play in numerous situations but to that I can only say this.

I have read more books and articles on poker both tournaments and cash games than most people over the years simply because it has been my business to do so. But I can tell you here and now that I am still waiting for the book to arrive that will tell you everything that you need to know in order to succeed in poker.

Yet the little hidden statements and paragraphs that you see in most poker books are where the real gems of information lay and not in attempting to learn how to play every individual hand in every potential situation that could arise.

That by the way is literally an exercise in futility as there must be an infinite number of situations that could arise in any game of poker. You have undoubtedly read in some poker book that poker is a “highly situational game”.

You have probably committed that statement to memory and can recite it when called for. But I have lost count of the number of times that a student has come to me to ask me how to play a certain hand in a certain situation and I have been guarded in my response and then told them about the situational nature of poker.

Some think that I am copping out by being evasive and others say things like....”yeah I know that Carl, that’s obvious”.....and then go and say

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something like.....”so how do you play ace jack to a raise when you are in the big blind and they are under the gun?”

This is the problem with how people are attempting to learn poker. In fact the word *learn* is not really one hundred percent relevant here because the vast majority of players are attempting to learn the wrong principles and end up not knowing information that will only lead them into trouble.

If I have digressed here from the hand examples then that is because this is something that needs to be underlined clearly and that hand examples in any form are of use if they highlight key principles and philosophies and not part of some general rote learning experience.

But poker is not a place for idle minds and card dependent strategies and a situational game requires situational thought and this means concentration and hard work. Unfortunately this is not what many players are looking for and there are millions out there who are chasing some easy system of play that will make poker a serious revenue stream for them with minimal work.

Hand 5:

Position: middle

Hand: 7♠6♠

Now I am finally starting to get somewhere with regards my position as I am now only one to the right of the cut-off. Depending on just how tight the table is then I may raise earlier than this with a suited connector. This play goes totally contrary to how many other people perceive that the game should be played and that is fine by me because if there is one thing that I simply try to avoid at all costs in poker is to play the game like everyone else.

I tend to find that the best way to get the weaker players money in tournaments these days is not by limping in with speculative hands from early position hoping for multi-way pots as most players understand

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concepts like pick up plays and position raises and you just end up burning chips when you do this.

I find that raising with speculative hands yourself can create situations where weaker players call you and especially when the blinds are low because a raise to 3x the big blind at the 15/30 stage is still not big enough to deter weaker players speculating and gambling early on.

It is when you hit the flop big that you can really reap the rewards and your opening raise can win you the pot in numerous ways even when you don't hit it.

I am looking for situations to attack and possibly accumulate chips all the time. I am also looking to avoid possibly damaging confrontations with dominated hands as well, hence the play with the K♦10♦ earlier. But this does not mean that I would never open raise with a hand like that from any position under any circumstances, just that I would be very careful with the hand and be very cautious from the flop onwards.

But with a hand like the 7♠6♠ then I may also just limp along if I am on the button for instance and I think that this could be the best play to speculative with a hand like this and maybe get a weak player to overplay top pair top kicker after I have flopped a straight. Or maybe a weak player checks the top two pair looking to check raise and it gets checked around and I make my gutshot straight draw on the turn and bust them that way.

The fact is that there are loads of ways to get the dead money in the early stages of the tournament but you must actively strive to get it before someone else does.

Hand 6:

Position: Cut off

Hand: 10♦4♥

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Fine, so we are in the cut-off position with a junk hand. The mistake that many players make in situations like these is that depending on their own individual style of play, they do the automatic thing.

If they are aggressive and steal raise almost automatically whenever it has been folded around to them then they tend to automatically raise even with junk hands. Then we have the types who just see this hand as junk and automatically do not try to steal with it under any circumstances.

While both plays can be the right thing to do in many circumstances, they both fall short of being optimal because they simply fail to take into consideration the changing dynamics of the game. Poker hands are not independent of each other and if you have raised with three hands in succession and not shown down then this may just be a bad time to steal raise with junk.

Your “apparent” bullying tactics could very well be with quality raising hands but the point is that your opponents do not know this. It could be quite possible that one of your remaining opponents to your left is getting a little hot under the collar with your raises and is incorrectly viewing them as bullying tactics.

Raising with a 10-4 is not a standard solid poker play and will not be found on any card dependent strategy chart. But raising with a hand like this *is* solid poker if you have correctly figured out what your image is and what type of opponents are sitting to your left. If you have not figured that out yet for whatever reason then fold the hand. But you could try an exploratory raise to test the blinds and see what they stand for.

There have been times in games where I have been running over the table and then steal raised with a hand like 9♥5♣ and been played back at. Next hand and I raise again and get played back at by the same player. Something has changed in this game and you must learn to feel the flow and go with it.

On the very next hand on the button I fold A♠7♣ because I suspect that the player in the big blind who has re-raised two hands running will do it again and my hand is too weak to stand a re-raise. In that situation I am

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just hoping that I will get dealt a premium hand so that my ordinary raise gets played back at and taken for a steal attempt.

Even in the arena of online poker, it is still perfectly possible to be able to feel the flow of the game and to tune into any changes in a players frame of mind or game plan that may be happening. This is far more difficult to do if you are multi-tabling.

Hand 7:

Position: Button

Hand: 8♠5♥

A player open limps in middle position, a play that you would likely not see further into the tournament where the ratio of good players to bad players is greater. This limp indicates weakness and it is then folded around to me with the 8-5 on the button.

This situation is not too far removed to the previous one and the correct play is not always the seemingly obvious one. Here the obvious play is to fold but once again we have the opportunity to steal chips here. But care still needs to be taken and the following points need to be considered.

- A. You are in an obvious steal raising seat so the likelihood of being played back at is increased.
- B. You must assess not only the players to your left in the blinds but also what your table image is as it is this that will be a major criteria in what you can get away with and how often.

If the limper had raised instead of limping in then the correct choice is still not clear cut even then. I will even call a raise with a hand like 8-5 if I can ascertain that I can outplay my opponent from the flop onwards. This is where I would deviate from cash game strategy because I would hardly ever make a play like that in a ring game and especially online where the average stacks are smaller due to the maximum buy-ins.

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But online tournaments put you under more time pressure to accumulate chips and you need to take more risks in order to get those chips.

This is not advice as such but just my philosophy of playing large field poker tournaments with rapid level increases, you just need to get in there and gamble but within reason while still maintaining some element of control. The bottom line is that if I think that I can get away with something then I will make a play *irrespective* of what my hand is.

If I think that I can steal the blinds, I raise. If I think that I can float a player and then steal on the turn, I float. If I think that I can re-raise on a semi-bluff and get a guy to lay their hand down then I re-raise. This is a philosophy that follows me in any poker game that I play in be it cash games, tournaments, SNG's or whatever.

Hand 8:

Position: Small Blind

Hand: A♣J♦

One of the reasons that makes poker so tough to learn for an awful lot of people is when they see a player raise with a hand like 10♥4♣ and then fold a hand like A♣J♦. This can really throw many people and especially those who have been following hand charts of some description.

Then they see some player like Gus Hansen play a hand like 10-4 on some televised event like the World Poker Tour and then totally fail to comprehend why he is playing it. So why is Gus playing that hand?

Difficult to say really without being there or being able to get inside his head and interpret both his style and just how he is perceiving his opponents at that time. But what many novice players misunderstand is that he is neither playing the hand because he rates the hand nor is he playing it because he has taken leave of his senses either.

Quite often he will be playing it because the nature and dynamics of the game dictate to him that it could be profitable to do so. Maybe he has

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position over someone who he believes he can outplay by whatever means....who knows.

Also of course, we come to one of the most important reasons for why Gus may be playing that hand. The situation in question is not just a poker tournament but also the final table of that poker tournament. This means escalating blinds and antes which obviously do not happen in a cash game.

He is also locked in combat with other good players as well which they probably are as they would not be on the final table with him. Good players can lay marginal hands down more than weak players. This brings me onto another very important point about using cash game strategies in tournament poker situations.

Remember that I said earlier “it all depends on how you play cash games”. Well to take that a stage further, the style of play that gets the money in low stakes cash games is a long way away from what I meant. That is a style that is certainly not conducive to winning big field poker tournaments. The style that I use for instance in a \$10-\$20 no limit hold'em cash game or a \$25-\$50 for that matter is a long way removed from how I would play in a \$2-\$4 game.

In a \$2-\$4 cash game, chances are that I would be multi-tabling and playing in a solid automatic pilot style of play with few or no gear changes and certainly no tricky moves. I sit there and wait until someone basically makes a mistake and gives me 100 big blinds.

Unlike how I play in a \$25-\$50 game where I take a far more pro-active route to winning their money and this style means taking far more risks albeit calculated ones.

So back to the A-J hand, a player in early position raises to three times the big blind and it gets folded around to you. Should you play the hand? Well, how big is your stack for a start, you could consider moving in if you are low but you have a potentially dominated hand. Even if you have a decent stack then your position is bad and will be throughout the hand.

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Calling can get you into trouble. But you can win a pot with 7-2 in the right circumstances and lose one with A-A so why buy yourself trouble? What is wrong with mucking the hand? I have no problem mucking hands like these whatsoever simply because I don't have to sit there waiting for big cards for me to win pots.

Hand 9:

Position: Big Blind

Hand: A♠9♠

You are sat in the big blind with a suited ace nine and it gets raised to three times the big blind by the player in the cut-off.....so what! I see players all the time go for their entire stacks when they flop something like top pair top kicker with the nine or top pair mediocre kicker with the ace and get stacked needlessly.

Unless your opponent has a history of attacking your blind or you are getting to a stage where your stack is getting on the short side then simply let it go. You have bad position and your opponent is certainly not immune from being dealt a premium hand in late position.

The problem with a hand like A-9 is that you really don't know what you want to hit unless the flop comes something like 9-9-5 or some other equally unlikely fall. If you are short stacked or the apparent stealer is literally taking you for a ride then by all means play back.

But even then, in a big field tournament you may not be on the same table as them for all that much longer anyway. So the lesson is that you should not get riled all because you are in the big blind and don't take the attack personally.

Even if it is a steal attempt then you can still let the hand go and let the guy have his little victory. Folding helps your image anyway. The fact is that whatever play you make, you can still turn that play to your advantage later on in the tournament. You can fold a hand and that fold is preparing you to take their chips in some future confrontation so folding should not be viewed as being passive.

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On the contrary, it should be viewed as some overall long term plan of attack in which you are placing thoughts into the mind of your opponent and it is these thoughts that will mould their future play against you.

All of these nine hands are basically not too far removed from how I would have played them either in a cash game or in the vast majority of tournament situations.

There are circumstances where you will need to deviate from a ring game style and one of those is that you must attack somewhat more than what you necessarily would in a cash game simply because of the pressurised nature in which you must accumulate chips and this is especially the case with the structures that are inherent in online tournaments.

But to tell someone strictly how to do that in every situation that could possibly arise in a game of tournament poker is an exercise in futility in my opinion. There are just too many variables and too many situations that can arise to be able to show any student of the game what to do in every single situation that could arise.

It is simply a far too complicated a topic to be able to do it any real justice in any one individual book irrespective of who the author is or how thick the book is. But I sincerely hope that the content of this e-book will not only help you to play a better poker tournament the next time that you sit in one but will also hopefully help you to think about how you play poker tournaments in general and the ideas and concepts that I have put forward in this book assist you in getting to that final table and beyond.

I hope that you have enjoyed reading my philosophy of tournament poker but please understand that this is all it is.....my philosophy.

Good luck at the tables

Carl "The Dean" Sampson

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