

THE FAST TRACK TO SUCCESS IN
NO-LIMIT HOLD 'EM POKER TOURNAMENTS

KILL PHIL

BLAIR RODMAN
LEE NELSON
STEVEN HESTON

FOREWORD BY
PHIL HELLMUTH, JR.

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION
INCLUDES THE KILL PHIL STRATEGY CARDS

"This book is a dangerous weapon in the poker world. A detailed strategy for future tournament-poker champions."

—Joseph Hachem, 2005 World Series of Poker Champion

"This book is going to liven up a lot of 'dead' money."

—Mike Sexton, WPT host; author of *Shuffle Up and Deal*

"Aggressive players win tournaments. KILL PHIL provides an ultra-aggressive style that can be followed by anyone. It's a winning formula that's going to give the top pros trouble."

—Josh Arieh, 2005 WSOP Pot-Limit Omaha Champion;
3rd place 2004 WSOP Main Event

"It's like giving the gun to the rabbit."

—Marcel Luske, winner of WPT and Hall of Fame titles

"KILL PHIL is not a poker strategy book, but rather a tournament strategy book ... And this book provides a wonderful approach for exactly that."

—Steve Rosenbloom, ESPN.com commentator, *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist, and author of *The Best Hand I Ever Played*

"As an old-school guy, I found a lot of the concepts discussed in KILL PHIL helpful as far as adapting some of my tournament game to the modern style. I've known Blair and Lee for years as tough players, and they've given up a lot of valuable information in their book."

—Vince Burgio, 1994 WSOP Seven-Card Stud Split
Champion, *Card Player* magazine columnist; author of
Pizza, Pasta, and Poker

"KILL PHIL is a well-written poker book that will likely raise a newbie to being competitive at no-limit hold 'em tournament play faster than any other method."

—Bob Ciaffone, author of *Improve Your Poker*; co-author of
Pot-Limit and No-Limit Poker; *Card Player* columnist

“KILL PHIL teaches the inside secrets that the pros don’t want you to know.”

—Mel Judah, 1989 and 1997 WSOP Seven-Card Stud
Champion, 2003 WPT Legends of Poker Champion

“Tournament poker has changed immensely since I won the WSOP and it will continue to evolve. KILL PHIL provides the tools to stay ahead of the curve.”

—Mansour Matloubi, 1990 WSOP Main Event Champion

“As a tournament director, I’ve had a bird’s-eye view of Blair Rodman’s strong play for years, and I recently watched Lee Nelson put KILL PHIL concepts in action in a dominating performance in winning the 2006 Aussie Millions. KILL PHIL is a must read for modern no-limit tournament players.”

—Matt Savage, 2004 WSOP tournament director

“Not only does this book introduce a quick and easy way to learn strategy on how to give yourself a chance at winning in the big tournaments, it also explains the logic and gives a frighteningly honest insight to how the top pros think.”

—David Colclough, 2003 European Poker Player of the Year

“I begged Lee and Blair not to write this book. There are a lot of books out there, but this one reveals secrets that pros really don’t want players to know.”

—“Crocodile” Billy Argyros, Australian tournament pro

“A must read, especially for those of you just getting into the poker tournament scene.”

—Mason Malmuth, publisher Two Plus Two

KILL PHIL

**The Fast Track to Success in
No-Limit Hold 'Em
Poker Tournaments**

**Blair Rodman
Lee Nelson and
Steven Heston**

Foreword by Phil Hellmuth, Jr.

Huntington Press
Las Vegas Nevada

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FOREWORD

BY PHIL HELLMUTH, JR.

One of the Phils Fires Back

First of all, let me—Phil Hellmuth, Jr.—say this, “Do not take the title of this book literally! No one wants that fate to befall any of the Phils. Rather, the authors want you to beat us Phils out of our chips at the poker tables.”

I admit I was amused, and flattered, when I heard that a book with such a title would soon be circulating through the poker world. “*Kill Phil*” obviously refers to me to some extent, but with Phil “Unabomber” Laak, Phil Gordon, and especially young phenom Phil Ivey also sharing the name, I wasn’t sure what portion of the attribution I could assume.

To be honest, I would prefer that this book had found no publisher. I mean, who wants a credible book out there by tough-as-nails poker players (Blair Rodman and Lee Nelson) telling the world exactly how to beat you? The strategy they present here is simple and effective. It’s basically an extension of one of the tactics that David Sklansky presented in his book, *Advanced Texas Hold ’Em Tournament Strategy*.

The tactics are about putting pressure on the great players by moving them all-in before the flop. In this way, you’re

forcing them to commit all their chips, which is something that none of the great players ever wants to do. Personally, I will go to great lengths to avoid putting all of my chips at risk in any hand, because when I'm all-in, then it's possible for me to be eliminated.

In 2004 I was even exploring the theory of folding hands where I was actually a 4½-1 favorite. For example, I folded pocket queens in the main event of the WSOP (World Series of Poker) even though I thought my opponent had a smaller pair. In that particular case, I was right: My opponent had pocket sevens, giving me a 17% chance to be eliminated. If I'm going that far to avoid being all-in, then it's correct for you to move all-in on me almost every hand. Even when I gave up the tactic of folding a 4½-1 favorite (I have to put the chips in sometime!), I was still going to great lengths to avoid moving all-in.

In many of the tournaments that I've won, I've been all-in—and called—less than three times, and I'm proud of this distinction. Rodman and Nelson understand this and they're teaching you to put me all-in, so that I can fold one more strong hand—and you can win the pot by bluffing me. If enough people read this book, then I'll have to change my tactics, the tactics that have worked so well for so long, and the "*Kill Phil*" title will have earned real meaning: It will have forced me to change my game!

What was I to do when I was asked to write a foreword or jacket blurb for this book? Ignore its existence? Say no and walk away? After all, it did have my name on it, and what the heck, I'm a promoter! So I chose to read it over and then decide what to do. If it was good, then maybe I would recommend it.

With all kinds of books out there on the subject of poker strategy, I cannot and will not recommend too many of them. (Of course, I recommend the books that I have written!) Too often, a good writer, but mediocre poker player, has written

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a book that has some good points, but a lot of bad points as well. Rodman and Nelson truly have been through the wars and understand the game. So even though the title of this book is a bit unfriendly to me, I'm recommending that you buy it.

When you've completed your poker education, bring on your best game! I'll be waiting for you at the biggest and most prestigious poker tournaments in the world. Just don't take the title literally!

Good Luck,
Phil Hellmuth, Jr.

Introduction to the New Edition and Important Strategy Updates

Kill Phil (KP) was published in 2006. At that time, it was impossible to envision the changes that would occur in the world of poker in the next three-plus years. To this day, when a tournament player at our table pushes all-in, a la *Kill Phil*, other players at the table stare at us, like it was our doing! The truth is, the all-in move is a viable strategy, and accepted poker wisdom was headed in that direction, *KP* or no *KP*.

We released *Kill Phil* before the flood of modern-era poker books had reached the market and the poker explosion hit full swing. At the time, we were a bit apprehensive about unleashing the *KP* strategies on the poker world. We asked ourselves: While these strategies are the great equalizer for tournament novices, is publicizing them and “dumbing down” tournament poker the right thing to do?

In fact, while *KP* sold more than 30,000 copies and many players, rookie and experienced, used the strategies and concepts to improve their results, the phenomenon and evolution of no-limit hold 'em were bigger than any one book. The all-in move, especially at later stages of no-limit tournaments, is

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now utilized as a matter of course. *KP* didn't bring this about; it was just a bellwether of things to come.

From the advent of poker tournaments in the early '70s until the popularity explosion fueled by the Internet craze and hole-card camera took hold in 2003, advancement in the strategies of tournament poker had come about very slowly. Since the early 2000s, however, books, televised poker, and Internet forums and teaching sites have propelled poker knowledge forward in hyperspeed. Today's low-rung tournament specialist would likely have been a star in the '70s and '80s. Astute players attempt to stay on the cutting edge of evolving trends and strategies.

For example, pre-2003, if a player went all-in with a stack of any reasonable size, he'd generally only get called by players with a top hand. This was a function of the fact that players would only move in with very strong hands. Today, move-in ranges are much wider and calling ranges have adjusted accordingly. Young online-honed players who've played millions of hands of tournament poker online are now entering live tournaments and playing uber-aggressive poker. Inexorably, new-school poker, characterized by loose-aggressive small-ball play and tight-aggressive long-ball strategies, is crowding out old-school poker. Old-school players who are either unwilling or incapable of adjusting to the modern game will most assuredly struggle in the current climate.

The original *KP* move-in strategies were based on the calling ranges we estimated at that time. While generalized calling ranges today (2009) are significantly wider than they were at the time of the first edition, revamping the strategies isn't the solution. Wider calling ranges will lead to players tightening their all-in requirements, and so on. If we started trying to change the strategies to keep up with the evolving trends, we might chase our tails until we came full circle to the pre-2003 dynamic. The solution as we see it is to give you some guidelines to bring the strategies up to the present,

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but be aware that trends will continue to evolve. Top players constantly monitor changing conditions.

Here are our suggestions.

For new players: Stick with the Rookie strategy as presented. This should still give you the best chance for success until you gain some experience and move on to the more advanced strategies.

For intermediate and advanced players: The play of AA and KK was a major point of discussion when we developed the basic and advanced strategies. Our original idea was to give players a reasonable chance to garner some chips with those powerful and infrequent hands by raising less than all-in. However, in the modern climate, all-in moves tend to be viewed with more suspicion than smaller raises, so we suggest altering the play of these hands as follows.

Early in a tournament with huge stacks, if your opponents haven't yet pegged you as a KP player, the strategy as presented on pg. 73-76 is still viable, though not necessarily the best course of action. In the latter stages or if you're recognized as a KP'er, just move in with your aces and kings rather than messing around with a smaller raise. Your chances of getting called are much greater today than at the time of the first edition, so move in and hope to get action.

An advanced adaptation to the new style of hyper-aggressive play is to occasionally limp in with AA after a couple of mid-position raisers if you have some aggressive players yet to act who likely can't resist putting in a big raise when everyone appears to be weak. You can then come over the top and put them to a tough decision. They might think you're making a play at them and call you down with small to medium pairs or hands as weak as AJ or AT.

A play that we like making with AA or KK when short-stacked (CSI of 7 or less) is limping from middle to late position and just calling a raise pre-flop. We then check on the flop and call an all-in bet or move in over any bet. If our op-

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ponent checks back on the flop, we push all-in on the turn. This may be interpreted as a bluff and called by a weaker hand. We're willing to accept greater risks when short-stacked in exchange for a greater possibility of doubling up and garnering a decent stack size.

When we developed the Online Strategy, we did so with the understanding that online players were much looser and called with more hands than did live players. The influx of online players into live tournaments has caused a shift toward the online dynamic. Our suggestion at the present time is to lean heavily toward the Online Strategy in live tournaments. The essential differences are that Group 2 hands, and to a lesser degree Group 3 hands, are given greater value, while suited connectors are downplayed.

Another adjustment can be made in the area of defending against late-position raises, employed by aggressive players with a considerably wider range of hands than at the time of the first edition. You might consider adding suited connectors and 1-gap suited connectors to your re-raise arsenal against suspicious late-position raises if you have enough chips that you retain fold equity. For our purposes, we consider fold equity as offering our opponent less than 1.5/1 odds to make the call.

As your experience and skill at playing the player (pgs. 114-117) increase, the more success you'll have when you use these variations. While variations make a simple strategy more complex, players work very hard to improve their game these days and if you want to retain your respective edge, you need to follow suit. However, for the player who simply wants a strategy that gives him a reasonable chance of success without requiring a major effort, the strategies as presented still give you a better chance than anything else out there.

While we received some criticism when the book was released that we were simply telling players to become push-monkeys, not only was that never our intention, but it's not

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true. In fact, that criticism often came from players who hadn't read the book and would likely benefit from some of the concepts we cover.

Kill Phil is a learning platform that's different from other teaching approaches in that we come at the game from the top down. Other books give pre-flop starting-hand charts, but once they get to post-flop play, they become hopelessly confusing to the rookie. Players adopting that approach to learning the game have little chance of success until they've paid for lots of expensive real-life lessons. *Kill Phil* provides a method that gives a new player a realistic chance of success, while gaining real-time experience at the tables to observe and learn from good players.

Opponents' reactions to *Kill Phil* practitioners have been varied and often comical. Some players become frustrated to the point of losing their cool and making huge mistakes. Blair vividly remembers an online player who berated him endlessly in the chat while he was experimenting with the strategies, then decided to teach him a lesson by calling a huge all-in with Q3!

Similarly, Blair was on a radio show with Gavin Smith, one of the top players who's known for playing many pots and outplaying opponents post-flop. Blair asked Gavin how he'd react to a *KP* player at his table. "I guess I'd have to tighten up and stop splashing around." Amazing how a complete novice could force a top player to change his game. Powerful stuff, indeed!

After the publication of *Kill Phil*, we did numerous interviews and radio shows. One of the questions we frequently heard was how to counteract a *KP* player. It would have been silly to present an immediate solution to the problems we created for opponents in *Kill Phil*. However, while Blair chose not to get involved in writing a follow-up poker book, in 2007 Lee teamed up with math-modeling expert Tysen Streib and *Kill Phil* co-author Steve Heston to write *Kill Ev-*

eryone, which presents the answers to many questions raised by *Kill Phil*, and much more. After reading *Kill Phil* and gaining some playing experience, we suggest you advance by reading *Kill Everyone*. It targets intermediate to advanced players and is replete with useful information about unexploitable equilibrium strategies for multi-table tournaments, Sit-and-Go's, and satellite tournaments. *Kill Phil* and *Kill Everyone* together are a powerful tandem that needs to be on every tournament player's bookshelf.

While *Kill Phil* was being prepared for publication, other poker books were hitting the market, notably Dan Harrington's *Harrington on Hold 'Em*. Some of the concepts we covered were simultaneously being treated by Harrington, so similar concepts had different names. What we call "CSI" he calls "M." Likewise, our "Power Re-Raise" is his "Squeeze Play." While M and squeeze play have become the accepted poker terms, we've decided not to change the *KP* nomenclature, since our readers are familiar with the *KP* terminology. Just be aware that they're the same concepts.

Our forum, KillPhilPoker.com, came online shortly after the publication of the book. A bunch of new players took to the book and shared their ideas and progress on the forum. Many of them developed into skilled players with notable successes. Our forum members are very willing to share their experiences and help new members with their poker education. They even put together a series of private small-buy-in online tournaments that are fun and educational. They have become some of the toughest tournaments around! Check it out—it's a cool place to hang out on the Net.

Finally, one more key change in this second edition is the inclusion of the strategies in the Kill Phil Strategy Card format, which you can find in Appendix XII. After much discussion, we decided to do this for a couple of reasons. First, it adds significant value to your investment in this book. But more important, it gives you an alternate and possibly more

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familiar method for memorizing and applying the strategies. When *Kill Phil* was published, the formatting in the book was the common style of the time. Soon after, however, a different method—using hand values instead of hand groups—became the standard, and when Steve Heston formulated the strategy cards, he used that method to lay out the strategies. This is the method used in most of today’s poker literature. Experiment with both methods and use whichever works best for you.

THE MATHEMATICS BEHIND KILL PHIL

Steve Heston played a vital role in the development of the Kill Phil strategies (as well as the accompanying Kill Phil strategy cards). For the first edition, Steve was concerned that his association with a gambling project might have a negative effect on his reputation as a math professor at a major university, so he asked us to downplay his role. However, since then he's changed his stance and the value of his contributions were strong enough to include him on the cover of the second edition as an author.

Steve Heston's explanation of the math behind the Kill Phil strategies follows.

Blair and Lee didn't just pull the Kill Phil strategies out of thin air. Well, actually they did, until they enlisted my help! While Blair and Lee were confident that their combined poker knowledge and experience enabled them to put together highly effective strategies, they wanted to really nail it and requested my assistance.

When we wrote *Kill Phil*, there was growing interest in no-limit hold 'em, but few books for beginners were avail-

able. No-limit cash games had dried up many years previously. This happened because cash games typically use large stacks, more than 50 times the blinds. The correct strategy is to play extremely tight when the money is this deep. To quote poker expert Mason Malmuth, it became as interesting as watching paint dry. But all this changed with the popularity of hold 'em tournaments and online poker. These new games are fast-paced and always end up short-stacked. So beginners can play real no-limit poker without investing a lot of time or money.

Players responded enthusiastically to the first edition of *Kill Phil*. In extreme cases, beginners have posted to our forums (www.KillPhilPoker.com) that they actually won tournament prizes on the first day they purchased the book! Experts have also rendered generous praise. They acknowledge that our push-or-fold strategies are effective for beginners and that they invariably use similar strategies themselves when stacks are small. Indeed, this book documents cases where professionals have actually played slightly inaccurately in the end stages, because they have less experience in those situations.

Along with the laurels, a few misconceptions about *Kill Phil* have also emerged. Curiously, these have been held by players who aren't complete novices, but not yet experts. Some think our strategies involve moving in, or "doing the all-in rhumba," indiscriminately. This would indeed be suicidal.

Fortunately Kill Phil strategies are highly selective. Most importantly, they win. One noted gaming author had the patience to test our mechanical strategies on 500 single-table tournaments, and he showed a tidy profit at small stakes. This isn't a matter of statistical significance. When you put the strategy into practice, you'll routinely see low-limit players call with worse hands and high-limit players fold worse hands. That's when you know the strategy is working.

Perhaps some of these misconceptions arose because readers didn't appreciate the underlying math. The biggest surprise of all has been that some readers actually want the gory mathematical details! These readers understand that poker is a game of math, and players who apply game theory and optimization have a decided advantage over those who don't. Our subsequent book, *Kill Everyone*, explains more of the underlying equilibrium concepts and gives sophisticated analyses of tournament situations.

An important mathematical point is that although *Kill Phil* uses a nonrandom strategy, your opponents won't be able to read your hands. This occurs because the strategy mixes powerful hands like AK with bluffing hands like 54s. Offhand, it seems foolish to use a strategy that bluffs with such weak hands as 54s, much less publish it and inform your opponents! Presumably, opponents could beat you by simply calling with hands as weak as 64s. Unfortunately for them, it isn't quite so easy. When you move in, they can't tell whether you have AA, AK, or the bluffing hands. The strategy is mathematically calibrated to balance these hands, so opponents can never tell whether you are really bluffing or not. The only defense is to call with a really good hand. Your opponents won't have really good hands very often, so you'll ironically avoid confrontations by being selectively aggressive. If you want peace, you must prepare for war.

The exact optimal (equilibrium) strategy for no-limit hold 'em isn't solvable with current or foreseeable computer technology. Even if we could solve it, the length and complexity of such a strategy would require a book so heavy you couldn't lift it. Besides, the optimal strategy against an expert opponent is definitely not the best strategy against your average tournament opponent. So what should we do?

For *Kill Phil*, we assumed plausible opponent strategies based on our tournament experience and computational experiments. We also made a computational compromise by

assuming an infinite number of decks. This is slightly inaccurate, because the infinite-deck assumption doesn't account for effects of removal. For example, in a real 52-card deck, it's slightly less likely for your opponent to hold an ace if you already hold one yourself. But the inaccuracies of our assumption are minor and it makes the poker problem computationally tractable.

Also, we chose the raising and re-raising hands to maximize the expected profits against the range of opponent hands. This depends on the number of players and pot odds in addition to opponents' strategies. In practice, you should bluff less against loose opponents who call too much and call more against loose opponents who have low raising standards. But overall, the strategy works quite well.

Computers were useful in crafting other important details of the Kill Phil strategy. For example, KQ is ranked two hand groups below a similar hand, AQ. This is because KQ performs particularly poorly against other high hands. In particular it gets dominated by both AK and AQ, the most likely hands for your opponent to call. To illustrate, suppose your opponent will call with AJ and 77 or better. Against him, KQ actually has slightly less pot equity than KJ. In other words, KQ is arguably worse than KJ. Therefore we ranked it two full categories below AQ.

Calculations also emphasize the need to loosen up in short-handed situations. For example, suppose you're heads-up with an effective stack size of ten times the blinds. And suppose your opponent will call with any pair and any two cards ten or higher; that's 18% of hands. That means you can successfully steal the blinds 82% of the time. In order to break even, you must expect to lose less than .82 times the blinds on those 18% of hands where you get called. On those occasions, you'll contribute your stack of 10 times the blinds to build a pot of 21 times the blinds. If your pot equity is 26%, you'll expect to lose 4.54 times the blinds. Fortunately, this

happens only 18% of the time, so the contribution to your expected loss is only .82 times the blinds, exactly offsetting the gains from stealing the blinds. Therefore, you only need 26% pot equity to make a steal worthwhile. Even the worst hands have at least 27% equity against your opponents calling range, so you can profitably raise with any hand. As *Kill Everyone* explains, in certain tournament situations it can be optimal for your opponents to play tight and call with only 18% of hands. In these situations you should literally raise with any two cards. The Kill Phil strategy incorporates these insights by loosening up dramatically in short-stack and short-handed games.

A few critics have been disappointed by the simplified philosophy behind *Kill Phil*. They worry that our strategies won't enable students to ascend to higher skill levels. Some demanding readers have even complained that this book won't literally guarantee you will beat Phil Hellmuth. This reflects a misunderstanding of how to use the book.

The goal of *Kill Phil* is not to use mechanical strategies forever. The careful reader will find a number of places where we advocate expanded strategies that demand skill and judgment, even for beginners. Frankly, we find virtually all other no-limit hold 'em books to be incomplete. The best ones give sound starting-hand advice and general guidance. But they invariably encourage students to invest money in hands that can leave them in very uncomfortable and potentially costly pots. Our basic strategies are easy to use in stressful tournament situations and provide a "safe harbor" to avoid tricky spots. The beginner can take our intermediate and advanced advice to deviate from these strategies. Readers will soon learn to have more fun and earn more profits by mixing small-ball poker into their perceptions of opponents. We're proud that many students have come to the KillPhilPoker.com forums and become formidable players.

Of course, learning expert poker is fraught with perils as

well as profits. On this note, we must relate the story of our publisher Anthony Curtis. Anthony is a respected gambling expert and has won many large prizes in blackjack, crap, and other types of tournaments. You can imagine our surprise when we went to YouTube and saw our publisher in a big hand with notorious poker expert Sammy Farha (“Farha’s 33’s Crack AA’s!!!”).

Unfortunately, Anthony had yet to fully learn the *Kill Phil* deviations and chose the wrong time to get creative. Curtis raised roughly 10% of his stack with pocket aces. This violates our recommendation to raise 16% of your stack. Farha instantly knew that Anthony had a large pair and called with pocket threes. Farha realized his own hand was inferior, but he also suspected that Anthony would be unable to get away from his aces. Unfortunately for Curtis, a three came on the flop and Farha busted Curtis’ aces with his set. Importantly, Farha would not have called a bet of 16% of Anthony’s stack. He would have known what Curtis held, but would have been unable to profit.

This demonstrates a moral to the story: There is an underlying mathematical logic to our strategies. You can lose a lot of money by improvising your own strategies before appreciating this logic. So learn the basic strategies first, then enjoy yourself with advanced tactics.

LET'S KILL PHIL

*Poker is like sex—everyone thinks they're the best at it,
but only a few actually know what they're doing.*

—Layne Flack

Poker, baby! No longer does the mention of this game evoke images of smoky back rooms, card sharps, and low-lives. Nowadays, bring up the subject of poker to nearly anyone and you'll wind up talking about no-limit hold 'em (NLH), the World Poker Tour (WPT), the World Series of Poker (WSOP), or one of the many other televised poker shows. Big-name players of the day have become TV stars. Win a nationally televised tournament and suddenly everyone knows your name. The biggest names, like Gus Hansen, Howard Lederer, Daniel Negreanu, Annie Duke, and of course, the "Phils"—Hellmuth, Ivey, etc.—are living the lives of celebrities. They hang with Hollywood stars, get preferred treatment, sign autographs, and garner lucrative endorsement deals.

No less than Ben Affleck and Tobey Maguire have won big-time poker tournaments. Affleck pocketed a cool

\$350,000 for winning a major event in Los Angeles, and Lord knows he needs the money! Almost any day in L.A. you'll find a big-name star in one of the huge card rooms. The star-studded cast playing in the last two World Series in Las Vegas would make a film producer drool: James Woods, Leonardo DiCaprio, Gabe Kaplan, Matt Damon, and, of course, Ben Affleck. In 2005, Jennifer Tilley beat 600 other ladies to win a coveted bracelet and more than \$158,000. There's even a TV show dedicated entirely to celebrity poker.

The money involved in poker today is staggering. First prize at the 2008 WSOP main event was more than \$9 million! No other sporting event comes close. Winning poker's World Series is worth more than winning Wimbledon, the Masters, and the Kentucky Derby combined! Players from all parts of the globe vie for multiple hundreds of thousands of dollars every *week* in poker tournaments around the world. TV audiences thrive on the excitement, as hidden cameras that reveal the players' cards allow the viewers to get into the game. It's like the ultimate "Survivor" show, as players use every trick in the book to send their competition home. The hundreds of thousands of dollars (sometimes a million or more) in cash dramatically stacked up on the green-felt tables goes to the last man (or woman) left standing—it's a seductive arena. Meanwhile, online tournaments can now attract more than 8,000 players at a time, and they continue to grow. Big money, movie stars, glamorous venues, television—no wonder poker is exploding.

And the phenomenon shows no signs of slowing down. Today, an estimated 50 million Americans play poker. This American pastime has become a worldwide mania, especially when played in the form that's all the rage—no-limit hold 'em. This is the game played in virtually all major tournaments today. Teaching you how to compete in no-limit hold 'em tournaments is the focus of this book. But not *just* compete; you'll also learn how to win! That's right. Assiduously

applied, the principles you learn here will give you a real shot at the big money.

Once you've cultivated the necessary skills, the tournaments you see on TV aren't out of reach. There's no special qualifying. You don't have to be drafted or invited. All it takes is the money to enter and the guts to sit down and play. Coming up with the money is your job. Providing you with an approach to playing that will give you a chance, regardless of your level of experience, is ours.

Think about the big-name players you've seen on TV. Do they really have that big an edge over a player who's relatively new to the game? Certainly, they have an advantage in knowledge and experience. But because of the fundamental nature of no-limit tournaments, if you know how to tailor your game to your own level of experience, you can compete in the no-limit arena with a very real chance of success. The application of certain key concepts allows you first to level the playing field, then move to a point where you become a player to be feared—especially by the best players! Imagine walking up to a table and hearing a player you recognize from TV say something like, “Oh, no, not *you*.” Wouldn't that be fun? It's possible, because it's the *style* of play that they fear. The style you'll learn from reading this book. We show you the type of player top pros love to see at their table, and the type that they hate. Then we show you how to become the real threat that they detest.

Is it a gimmick, nothing but an over-simplified answer to a complex question? Yes and no. Simple strategies won't give you a long-term edge against the best. But idiosyncrasies in tournament no-limit poker open the door for an inexperienced player who's been properly trained.

We begin with Kill Phil Rookie, a simplified strategy for those who've never played a tournament before. We then move on to Kill Phil Basic. Armed with the basic strategy alone, even a complete novice has a decent shot at getting

in the money. Later, we improve on basic by incorporating some powerful poker concepts. Understanding and modifying your game in accordance with these concepts will make you an above average player. Finally, we cover some high-level plays and strategies. Master everything in this book and you could be the next superstar!

Who is *Kill Phil* For?

Kill Phil is for tournament players of all levels.

Complete novices benefit from a strategy that offers a genuine chance of success while they acquire the valuable real-time experience needed to make consistent profits in tournament play. Beginners also benefit from primers on the mechanics of no-limit hold 'em and tournaments in general, as well as the sections on rules and ethics.

Players who've had some experience, but little success, gain from the more advanced strategies, which could put them over the top on their way to success.

“Old-school-style” players who've been struggling learn how to transform their games to the modern style of play.

Players who are competent in the small-ball arena, but are having problems with the nuances of long ball may find the strategies enlightening.

Even already successful players can find valuable nuggets of information.

Regardless of your current level of expertise, the many pointers throughout this book can help you gain perspective and add ammunition to your playing arsenal.

These pages contain strategies for both online and live play. If you're exclusively an online player, the strategies presented allow you to successfully modify your playing style to adapt to live-tournament play.

Who's Phil?

“Phil” is our code name for any accomplished tournament player. Certainly, several poker superstars are named Phil—Phil Hellmuth, Ivey, Laak, and Gordon among them—but we’ve lumped all the best players into the Phil category. We had to call them something. Plus, we thought it made for a damn funny title.

Many of the Phils with whom we confided our plans for this book begged us to abort. Their fears were genuine, because this strategy hurts the best players the most. Their lifeblood, the timid inexperienced player, suddenly becomes a threat. That’s the essence of *Kill Phil*—prey becomes predator and vice versa.

How This Book Came About

Blair Rodman has been a full-time professional gambler for more than 25 years and has experienced success in many different areas of the gambling world. He’s an accomplished blackjack player, was a member of Stanford Wong’s famous gambling-tournament team in the ’80s and part of a highly successful sports-betting group for more than 10 years, and has in-depth knowledge and experience in many other areas of casino advantage play. But his first love is, and always has been, poker—both as a tournament and live-game player. In 2007, he won his first World Series of Poker bracelet and \$707,000.

Lee Nelson is a retired doctor whose medical fields of interest are nutrition and prostate cancer; he’s the author of the book *Prostate Cancer Prevention and Cure*. Over the past six years, Lee has performed in poker tournaments with remarkable consistency, making final tables with such regularity in international tournaments that he’s now known by the nickname “Final Table.” He won the 2006 Aussie Millions Main Event and its grand prize of Aus\$1,295,800 (about US\$1,000,000).

Steve Heston, a professor of finance at a prestigious East Coast university, developed option and quantitative- investment models used on Wall Street. His research includes game theory.

Blair Rodman met Lee Nelson through Huntington Press publisher Anthony Curtis. Blair and Anthony have been friends and gambling partners for years, while Lee had authored his prostate-cancer-prevention book for Huntington Press. Anthony knew Lee originally through poker and when Lee decided to author a book on poker tournaments, he came to HP for publishing. What Lee didn't know was that Anthony was already talking to Blair about a poker book (Blair and Lee knew each other by reputation only at this point). Anthony told Lee about Blair's ideas and it was decided that Blair Rodman and Lee Nelson should meet.

It didn't take long for the two authors to come to the conclusion that, together, they could produce a work on tournament poker that would rival anything done by the other professional players. They set to work on the project, putting together a comprehensive outline on no-limit hold 'em poker tournaments.

Time was of the essence, as it was obvious that there would soon be a wave of books on the market. In fact, not long after serious work began, the authors realized that a masterwork on the subject would take far too long to complete, given that the flood of new poker books had already begun. Both concluded that their work, regardless of its merits, would get lost in the shuffle. On the verge of abandoning the project, Blair proposed an alternative—a simple method that would encourage novice players to participate immediately, allowing them to accumulate valuable real-action experience, while maintaining a reasonable chance of success—in essence, a simple, but effective, basic strategy for no-limit hold 'em tournaments.

This approach fit in perfectly with the Huntington Press

philosophy. While other gambling-publishing companies often focus on the elite player, over the years HP has catered to the many occasional gamblers that have neither the time nor inclination to become experts, but still want to have a fighting chance. In fairness, the fundamentals of a no-limit tournament basic strategy had been touched on before, most notably by David Sklansky in *Tournament Poker for Advanced Players*. However, the idea hadn't been thoroughly explored.

An outline was prepared and the authors spent several intensive weeks perfecting the strategies. Blair has a long history as a blackjack player; consequently, the Kill Phil basic strategy is similar in many ways to blackjack basic strategy. It takes about as long to assimilate and memorize and is adaptable to strategy cards, which can be used as learning aids or even brought along to the table. Like blackjack, it greatly evens the odds and allows beginners to be competitive, though it doesn't yield a long-term advantage. But just as blackjack basic strategy provides a gateway to that game's powerful count strategies, so too does the Kill Phil basic strategy lead to more powerful and winning strategies for tournament poker.

More Help

The poker world is changing so rapidly that any book is subject to become outdated quickly. Kill Phil principles are being employed effectively in tournaments by more and more players every day. In order to keep our followers abreast of how these changes relate to the Kill Phil strategy as presented in this book, the authors will maintain a website at KillPhilPoker.com, which will provide articles, blogs from our tournaments, a message board, and other interesting features pertaining to the world of poker.

Additionally, as a supplement to this book, condensed versions of the Kill Phil strategies are available on portable strategy cards (see ad, back of book). The cards reference the

Rookie, Basic, and Advanced strategies, and can be taken with you to consult or use at the tournament table. There's also an online card for use when playing computer tournaments.

THE ESSENCE OF KILL PHIL

While no-limit hold 'em is a game of infinite complexities, it can be reasonably broken down into two main tactical elements: "small ball" and "long ball."

- Small ballers are singles hitters. They chip away with a variety of intricate strategies. It's a style that requires a great deal of effort and many hours of experience at the tables to reach proficiency. Small ballers are involved in a lot of pots, waiting for the fattest opportunities. If someone presents one, they're poised to go for the kill. The primary province for small ball is *after* the flop.

- Long ball, also known as "big-pot poker," is analogous to home-run hitting. It's an approach that's much easier to learn and implement. It doesn't take years of study and experience to rear back and swing with everything you've got. Long-ball tactics are usually employed *before* the flop.

In NLH cash games, where the blinds are relatively small compared to the average amount of money that can be at stake, small ball is one of the primary weapons of winning players. For example, in a 25-50 no-limit game, most players will have at least \$5,000, or more than 66 times the total of the blinds, in front of them. This leads to a lot of post-flop play, as winning just the blinds is essentially insignificant. In tournaments, long ball has a much bigger role, especially late in an event. Early on in tournaments, there's lots of play post-flop, because the blinds at that point are generally small compared to players' stacks. Similar to cash games, this is small-ball time. However, unlike cash games, in order to bring about a conclusion of a tournament in a reasonable amount of time, the blinds increase at set intervals. As a tour-

nament progresses, the blinds (and antes, which are generally instituted fairly early on) become much more significant.

For example, at the start of the second day of the championship event in the 2004 World Series of Poker, the 250-500 blind/100 ante structure meant that if an average stack didn't play a hand, it would be gone in 12 rounds. In this type of situation, the struggle for the pre-flop pot becomes much more important and long ball is a much more viable strategy. By the time the tournament is down to the final table, the blinds and antes are usually so high that all-in moves pre-flop become the norm. It's not uncommon to watch a final table for an hour or more without seeing a single flop.

So, if there are two distinct areas of skill in no-limit hold 'em tournaments and expert players are well-versed in both, which should the aspiring player focus on first? Let's look.

Small Ball ...

- is complex and difficult to master. The best players have years of the experience necessary to excel in this arena.
- is primarily employed at the earlier levels of a tournament, when pressure from blinds is light and inexperienced players can simply choose not to get involved without a monster hand.
- is not mandatory for success in no-limit hold 'em tournaments.

Long Ball ...

- is formulaic and much easier to learn.
- is the prevalent strategy late in tournaments, when it matters most.
- can be a stand-alone strategy.
- gives the tournament novice the best chance to “get lucky.”

The Ball is in Your Court

The answer is clear. No-limit hold 'em tournaments are unique in the poker world, because they offer the novice player a real chance at success—provided he's equipped with the right easy-to-wield weapon. In this book, we provide you with that weapon, along with instructions on how to use it.

Does this mean that small ball is an unnecessary skill? Absolutely not. Small-ball experts are able to use their talents to amass chips at the early levels of a tournament, taken from the less skilled opponents who choose to trade punches with them. The great thing about our method is that it gives you the opportunity to spend hours at the table observing the small-ball experts at work—soaking up knowledge without having to spar with them. Combine this valuable exposure with a study of small ball from some of the excellent poker books now hitting the market and eventually you'll be ready to join the fray. Before you stick your toe in, however, remember that sharks swim in shallow water and it's easy to get bit.

CALLING ALL PLAYERS

Players of differing skill and experience levels will extract value from this book in different ways.

Absolute beginners can build a ground-up strategy starting right here—it's not necessary that you read another poker book first. In fact, you could hold your own in a poker tournament tomorrow, simply by skipping to Chapter 6 and learning the simplified strategy, "Kill Phil Rookie."

If your goal is to become an accomplished player, to get a perspective on the subject, you should begin by reading the introductory topics in Part I, as well as the sections on "Rules" (pg. 209), "Ethics" (pg. 221), and "Basics of No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em" (Appendix II). Then move on to Part II, "The Kill Phil Beginner Strategies," which is the foundation of *Kill*

Phil. With a reasonable amount of study, you should have little trouble becoming proficient in its use.

For online play, we've altered the strategy somewhat to account for the different style you encounter there. The Internet is a wonderful place to hone your game; many of today's young stars began playing online. If that's your preferred arena, practice Kill Phil with its cyber-adjustments in small-buy-in tournaments until you're comfortable with that strategy.

Once you're adept at using the basic strategy, we urge you to move on to the powerful concepts in the "Kill Phil Basic Plus" (Chapter 8). The techniques discussed add much to the Kill Phil strategy's effectiveness, as well as a general understanding of the dynamics of no-limit hold 'em tournaments.

The concepts covered in "Kill Phil Expert" (Chapter 10), combined with an increasing understanding of post-flop play gained through study and observation, puts you well on the road to becoming a successful no-limit hold 'em tournament player. The sample tournament in Chapter 11 helps you to understand how many of the concepts work in real tournament situations.

Sit-n-Go's, or "SNGs," have become very popular, especially on the Internet. They're similar to one-table satellites, which are prominent at major bricks-and-mortar tournaments. For those interested in this variation of tournament, we've included advice on how to tweak the strategy for best results. Several of the players who tested the strategies for us experienced success in this area.

And in a mildly ironic turn, it's our firm belief that one of the prime benefactors of the Kill Phil strategies will be one of the most experienced subsets of the poker universe. Many veteran old-school players are no longer seeing the results they once saw in tournament play. While their small-ball skills are intact, they're failing to adjust to the direction the game has taken. At every tournament these days, more

and more players are effectively employing variations of the Kill Phil strategy, and those who don't adjust are being left in the dust.

Blair is a prime example. He was the epitome of the old-school player, having competed in tournaments almost since their inception. While he saw a change taking place in the way tournaments were being played, he couldn't put his finger on it until recently. His change in philosophy coincided with his dramatically improved results beginning in 2004. The exercise of writing this book crystallized these ideas and his success has been ongoing. Players against whom Blair has competed for years now remark on his revamped style—though they don't necessarily grasp it. Other old-school players can make similar changes through an understanding of the principles discussed in this book.

Warning: Playing the unaugmented Kill Phil requires an uncommon level of patience. Remember that the strategy is designed to give a new player the best chance of success, a goal best achieved by avoiding unfamiliar (and dangerous) situations. Entering the small-ball fray before you have sufficient experience to sidestep the pitfalls is a recipe for disaster. Accordingly, *Kill Philers* must throw away many tempting starting hands in the early going.

It's a difficult thing to do; folding hands as strong as QQ, JJ, or AK in unraised pots pre-flop is bound to frustrate you. Likewise, our advice to make oversized raises with AA and KK will foster comments and puzzled looks from opponents. Some who are frustrated by your style might even make derisive remarks. Even worse, this style of play won't look anything like what you've seen on TV!

Keep three things in mind. First, the TV players are, for the most part, extremely experienced and their games have evolved immensely. Second, what you see on TV is final-table poker, which is vastly different from the early game. And third, the action level on TV is the result of editing to feature

big hands. Someone isn't really going all-in with 96 off-suit every hand.

Still, most new players want action and all these things may tempt you to wade into the small-ball arena before you're ready. Don't do it. The time for that will come (we provide a reading list in the Appendix that you can use to learn), but at the outset, don't get too far away from the Kill Phil strategy as written. As a bonus, many of the Kill Phil long-ball strategies will remain the cornerstone of your approach to the game, regardless of your level of advancement.

Another warning: Poker is jargon-intensive. There's a reason for this, as the descriptive nature of the lexicon facilitates an efficient conveyance of ideas. But if you don't know it going in, you'll be lost. Many poker terms are included in this book's extensive Glossary. Some have been given quote marks when they first appear in the text, and a few are accompanied by brief parenthetical explanations. Most, however, simply appear naturally. If you encounter a term that you don't understand, take a moment to consult the Glossary. Doing so enhances your overall understanding of the text, as well as better prepares you for live play.

No doubt many of you will be content with the occasional successes and moments in the sun that *Kill Phil* can help bring your way. Others will use it as a platform from which to build a world-class game. Whatever your objective, remember to enjoy the challenges, rewards, and entertainment that poker can provide—not to mention the rush of bagging yourself a Phil.

A FINAL WORD

It's absolutely critical that you pay attention to and grasp this seminal point: Kill Phil is not a poker strategy, it's a tournament strategy. If someone reacts to your play by saying, "That's not poker!", simply acknowledge that he's right.

There are few true experts in both the cash and tournament arenas. They're related, but separate, skills. There are tournaments in many gambling games—blackjack, craps, baccarat, even keno. The proper strategy in these tournaments is often a distant relative of proper play in a non-tournament setting. Tournaments are a discipline unto themselves. While you may not be as skilled a poker player as your opponents, it's very likely that you'll become a better tournament player—and that's what gets the money.