

**A World Champion's Guide To
Winning Blackjack Tournaments**

PLAY TO WIN



NEW EDITION
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"Elimination
Blackjack"

KEN EINIGER

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**A World Champion's Guide to
Winning Blackjack Tournaments**

Ken Einiger

Huntington Press
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A World Champion's Guide to Winning at Blackjack Tournaments

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Dedication

To my “Uncle Jack,” who was my best friend and by far one of my biggest fans. Working with Uncle Jack from a very young age taught me that with determination and dedication, I could accomplish anything I put my mind to and become whatever I wanted to be. There’s not a day that goes by that you’re not thought of or missed. You will forever live in my heart.

Acknowledgments

To my friends and family, thank you. Your love, support, and friendship are so important.

To my mother-in-law, who offered comforting words after my devastating loss in the Hilton's Million Dollar Tournament. "I know you'll get that million dollars one day; you'll just have to piece it out tournament by tournament!" Thank you for believing in me. Your words have been a great motivator.

To Steve Ziplow, thank you for all the hours you spent bringing this book to life. I couldn't have done it without you.

To Anthony Curtis and the team at Huntington Press, I don't know where to begin. Thank you for all of your time, dedication, patience, and most importantly, for believing in my abilities to express my philosophy. Anthony, you're an amazing person. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with you, and I now feel even more fortunate to call you a friend.

To my fellow competitors, thank you for keeping me on my toes. You have made my journey such an exciting ride.

Last but not least, to my number-one fan and truest love: my wife Kimberly. With you by my side, there's no such thing as losing.

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Foreword

by Anthony Curtis

The first time I saw Ken Einiger, he was standing between me and about \$333,000. I'd competed in the first Hilton Million Dollar Blackjack Tournament partnered up with two friends, and one of them, Blair Rodman, had made it to the final table. Since the three of us had an agreement to split all winnings, I was looking at a potential third-of-a-mil payday if Blair could win the thing. Having been away from the tournament scene for a while, I didn't recognize any of the other finalists and turned to ask someone I respected if there were any threats at the table. "There's one," he said. "That Einiger can play." Blair didn't win that tournament. Ken didn't either. But he was close, coming within a double down of the championship.

Over the next couple of years, tournament blackjack got hot. The Hilton ran Million Dollar Tournaments II and III and GSN created the World Series of Blackjack. I played in all of them, so I got to see plenty of Ken Einiger. He intrigued me for one simple reason: He was always in the thick of things. No matter what the situation—runaway table with towering chip stacks or nip-and-tuck conservative battle—Ken was always there at the end. After watching him make strong play after strong play on the crucial final hands, I knew he was skilled.

But something else was going on. Something about the way he played leading up to the end was taking him farther, on a consistent basis, than the rest of us. I didn't know what it was, but it was *something*. In fact, when asked in my pre-tournament interview for the World Series of Blackjack whom I considered to be the favorites, I answered, "The two Kennys—Smith and Einiger."

By the time World Series of Blackjack II rolled around, Ken was on one of the most impressive tournament runs of all time, finishing either first or second in five of seven major events. It seemed there was no stopping him, but I was primed to try. We still hadn't played on a common table up to this point. Now, finally, after two years of studying his play (and becoming friends in the process), we met in the semi-finals of the WSOBJ. With just three hands to play, I was winning and felt completely in control, but I couldn't hold him off. In the end, Ken beat me by \$2,000. I went home and he went on to become the World Champion.

A couple weeks after winning the World Series, Ken told me that he was writing a book about his championship experience and tournament blackjack in general. He wanted Huntington Press to publish it. I couldn't wait to finally find out how he did it. And now you can, too.

In this book, a World Champion explains his approach to playing this exciting tournament game. Tournament blackjack is fun, and it can also be profitable, but you have to grasp the nuances that make tournaments different from the game you play against a dealer in the casino pit. Remember, it's not blackjack. It's *tournament blackjack*.

Whether you play in a mini, a major, one of the burgeoning online tourneys, or for the championship in the World Series of Blackjack, this book tells you what you need to know to *Play to Win*. Here's your chance to play tournaments the way they're played by one of the best in the world. Study it, practice, and we'll see you at the final table.

Introduction

Why I Wrote This Book

I've been playing tournament blackjack for 15 years. Off and on during that time, I thought about writing a book, but I wondered what great advice I had to offer and to what credential I could point. It wasn't as if I were the World Champion of Blackjack. Well, that was then and this is now.

Today, I write this book holding that title. Although I plan to continue playing for years to come, I can now stand before anyone and honestly say that at the tender age of 45, I am (at least for this year, 2005) the grand champion of tournament blackjack.

I've mastered the skills of this game and you wouldn't be reading this book if you, too, didn't want to get in on a bit of the action. While I can't promise to make you a champion, I can show you the ropes—procedures, angles, tricks, and secrets—of the tournament-blackjack world. That knowledge will give you the confidence to walk into any casino and sit down at a blackjack-tournament table, knowing you're equipped to play a respectable, and possibly winning, game.

When I find myself beaten in a future major blackjack tournament—and you certainly lose many more of those than you win—it would be one of the greatest compliments I could ever receive if the winner came up to me and said, “Ken, I couldn't have done it without you.”

Part I
Preparing to Play
to Win

What Is Tournament Blackjack?

In regular casino blackjack, you play against the house. The object is to beat the house's representative, the dealer. You either lose your bet or win even money (unless you get additional payoffs from a natural, a double down, or a split) on every hand. You can play all night long or get up and leave after your next hand. You can find a game anytime; the *game* of blackjack has no beginning or end. It's always going on. In addition, the format and rules change little from casino to casino. You can pretty much go to a casino anywhere in the world and play a familiar form of blackjack. It's the most popular table game in the casino, played by millions upon millions of aficionados in casino pits all over the globe.

Tournament blackjack adds a handful of new wrinkles to the world's favorite table game. The object of each hand is still to beat the dealer—you can't win without the right cards—but in tournament blackjack, players are competing less against the house than they are against the other players. The object of the tournament is to wind up with the most chips at the end. Note that this means the game *ends*. It's not always going on the way it does in live play. Also, every blackjack tournament you play will be different than the others. The sponsoring casino decides on the format: how many hands per round, how many rounds in total, when the rounds are played, etc. The individual

casino also makes the rules: Are there re-entry fees and wild-card drawings? Is there an official chip countdown before the last hand?

A second way in which tournaments differ from regular blackjack is that you're playing for a big prize. Each hand is paid off in the usual fashion, but (usually) not with real chips. You can't cash tournament chips at the cage. The four or five players with the most chips at the end of the tournament take all, anything from \$500 in a mini-tournament to \$1 million in the Las Vegas Hilton's Million Dollar Championship. The losers get nothing.

And third, the tournament-blackjack yellow-brick road is weird and wondrous. Out-of-the-ordinary situations and odd-ball playing decisions and strange feelings about the outcome of hands arise continuously. Tournaments are more heady and exciting than the regular game. If you like blackjack and competing against other players, you'll love tournament blackjack.

Tournament Formats

In general, blackjack tournaments consist of four or more rounds during which 25 to 30 hands are played. A standard tournament—either “major” or “mini”—has five or six players per table per round. The size of the tournament determines the number of rounds. Most minis have somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 players, while a major will often have 150-200, but could have many more. Most tournaments are classified as “table-advance,” which means that players progress from table to table, with one, two, and sometimes three players advancing per round, until the final table is reached. The winner of the finals takes the grand prize. The runners-up usually also win some money.

A variation on this is an “accumulative-money,” or “total-cashout” tournament. In this format, it doesn't matter whether you come in first or second during a round. All the money you

accumulate through each round is totaled at the end of the tournament and the player with the most wins. I don't like this type of tournament, because you never know how much money you need at any given time. You have to keep putting all your money out and hope that you catch a monster run that gives you the highest chip count out of everyone in the tournament. Most of this book deals with table-advance, as it's the format most often played.

Both table-advance and accumulative-money tournaments can be further broken down into one of two categories: "entry-fee" and "invitational."

Entry-Fee Tournaments

Most tournament-blackjack events have an entry fee and are open to the public. Anyone can enter as long as they pony up the fee, which can range from \$10 to \$5,000. The house sets this amount.

In most tournaments these days, non-negotiable tournament chips ("funny money") are used in lieu of casino chips or cash. In a funny-money tournament, you can't lose more money than you've paid to enter. After paying the entry fee, there's only an upside. Your downside risk is strictly limited. Once you find the tournament, register, pay the entry fee, and get to the casino, you no longer have to worry about losing more money. Now you get to have fun—interacting with players, enjoying the rush of playing, and most of all, experiencing the thrill of advancing from round to round and, ultimately, winning.

Sometimes the tournament rounds are contested with real money. In these tournaments, players must pay an entry fee and buy-in for a prescribed amount, maybe \$300-\$600. You're still playing against the other players to advance, but your money is real—you keep whatever you have at the end of the round, whether you advance in the tournament or not. The casino, meanwhile, keeps the losses sustained by the losing players.

In fact, live-money tournaments usually deal more hands than funny-money tournaments, giving the casino a better chance of taking the live chips, due to the greater amount of play. In live-money tournaments your risk isn't capped, as you could advance from round one with something like \$150. If the buy-in was \$500, you're now down \$350 and you have to put up another \$500 for round two to continue. When you get into wild rounds where everyone is winning, you can actually make a profit for the tournament, even when you don't advance. Still, I recommend that novice tournament-blackjack players not participate in live-money tournaments. You should play a number of entry-fee-only tournaments that are played with funny money when you begin. Until you've worked out the basics of tournament blackjack, it's unwise to risk your own money during play.

Invitational Tournaments

An invitational blackjack tournament is exactly that: The casino invites preferred players to enter a tournament that's not open to the public. After you've paid your casino dues, either by playing high-stakes regular blackjack or by entering enough tournaments to become a recognized player, you'll begin receiving invitations to tournament-blackjack events.

Private invitational tournaments can be a great experience. Win or lose, the house treats you like visiting royalty. Your entry fee might be waived; your room is often comped; you may even receive baskets full of food and booze, logo jackets, and gifts. Usually, at the end of the event, the casino holds a banquet where trophies and cash awards are presented.

Why does the casino sponsor invitational tournaments and lavish players with comps, gifts, parties, and prizes? It's a marketing expense. During these events, hundreds of known gamblers might be in the casino for a two- or three-day period, and you can bet the rent that most of them eventually wind up back

in the main pits, gambling with their own money. The casino can count on more and bigger action at the regular blackjack tables during a tournament. The tournament perks are a small price to pay to get big-action players into the casino during non-tournament hours. These freebies aren't always a given, however. Depending on circumstances, even high-rated players with an invite for the weekend don't always get a free pass into tournament. They'll be given the opportunity to play and the possibility of winning the big prize, but they still must pay for this chance.

This leads to an important point. Keep in mind that tournament play doesn't count toward comps. Tournament tables and casino tables are two different animals when it comes to accruing casino freebies. Don't approach a host and tell him you've been playing for two hours in the casino's tournament and expect him to write you a ticket for the restaurant. He won't. Remember, the casino is holding the tournament for the specific purpose of getting you to gamble during non-tournament hours. Play a few hours in the casino each day of the event during non-tournament time and you'll find that the host will become your new best friend.

Re-Entry

Almost all entry-fee and invitational tournaments allow a "re-entry" option. Let's say you get knocked out of the game in the first round. The re-entry option allows you to pay a second entry fee, usually half the original, to stay in contention. This isn't a cheap pass into the second round. The casino takes all the first-round losers who are willing to put up the re-entry fee and allows them to play a second round one. You still have to place first or second at the table (or sometimes first only) to advance. If you lose the second time, you're out of it—after you've paid one and a half times the original entry fee.

If you bust out during the first round, I recommend always

putting up the additional fee and taking another go at it. You've gone to the trouble of entering and showing up to play, you're playing to win, and the first prize is five figures, right? You've already paid \$500, so what's another \$250? I always factor the re-entry fee into the total cost to play. The way I figure it, if I don't have the money to re-enter and I'm playing scared, I don't belong in a blackjack tournament.

Some blackjack tournaments even allow a "super re-entry" fee. This allows a player who's been knocked out of the second round to get a shot at advancing to the next round. Again, if it's offered, it's usually worth doing.

Wild Cards

Even if you get knocked out again after the re-entry, all still isn't lost. Many tournaments put the names of the losers into a bin during the semi-finals, or even the finals, and draw for a seat in the current round. Not every tournament does this, and the more players entered, the more losers there are; hence, the more names in the wild-card bin the less chance of being drawn. Still, the chance of being drawn from the drum is a sure way to keep those who lose in the earlier rounds hanging around the casino, hoping to luck their way in via that wild card. The downside to wild-card drawings is they force you to stay close all day long.

A framed poster for the Festival Fortuna Blackjack Tournament. The poster is enclosed in a double-line border with a decorative pattern. The text is centered and reads:
**Festival Fortuna
Blackjack Tournament**
Wild Card Drawings
Sunday, March 6
Wild Card Drawing for (10) Spots in Round 3
1:00 p.m.
♦
Wild Card Drawing for (5) Spots in Semi-Final Round
2:15 p.m.
♦
Wild Card Drawing for (1) Spot in Final Round
3:30 p.m.
▼
Must be present to win.
♦

Wild-card drawings are held on set schedules during a tournament. Notice the stipulation that you "must be present to win" your re-entry.

The Mini-Tournament

One more format subset is mini-tournaments. The major tournaments that we've been discussing thus far are full-blown affairs, while minis are sort of one-night stands. Minis are smaller and have fewer participants and lower entry fees than the big tournaments. Still, they can be an important part of the process of achieving your goal of cultivating the ability to play with experienced tournament-blackjack players on their turf. And playing a mini-tournament is a good way to find out whether or not you enjoy this brand of gambling.

When you enter your first mini-tournament, don't expect to find a line of hosts and staffers bearing comps and gifts. You won't get a free room; most minis are set up to start and finish in one day. There won't be any opening cocktail parties or closing awards banquets. You won't be comped to the buffet or get free-drink coupons. The mini-tournament is a minor event in the casino firmament, with entry fees in the \$20-\$100 range and modest prize money of \$400 to \$2,500. Anywhere from 30 to 100 players show up for these events. Most are locals and casino regulars.

Like the majors, some (it's about 50/50) have a re-entry fee. Some have wild-card drawings. One thing you don't have to worry about is excessive risk: No mini-tournaments use live money.

Use your time playing in minis to try out the skills you read about in this book. Consider them your spring training for the major events. I recommend that, if you can, you participate in at least a half-dozen mini-tournaments before playing in a major. If nothing else, you'll get an idea about what's involved in becoming proficient at tournament play. And win or lose, if you don't have a good time in the first couple you play, try video poker!