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Your First Major Tournament

When you arrive at the casino, look for signs directing you to the tournament check-in area. Follow the signs and tell the desk workers in the sign-up room who you are. You'll be given a package containing schedules, passes for the parties, and all the information you need to play. Often this check-in area is the front desk, where there'll probably be a special window for the tournament. Having pre-registered, all you have to do is present your credit card and sign the slip to cover your room and any incidental charges. Then the clerk hands you your room key and tournament package.

After you check in and get your welcome package, be sure to read every item inside the envelope. Look closely for information about your room rate. If the room is supposed to be comped or billed at a special rate, make sure you're not being overcharged by mistake.

Once you're checked into the hotel, you still need to get your seat assignment and play time. Your packet usually tells you where to go for these things. Head to the designated room inside the property where you'll find a table or two manned by the tournament hosts. They'll make sure you're on the list and see to it that you sign your credit-card receipt for the pre-registration entry fee. Alternatively, your entry fee can be paid with cash or, in some cases, the casino's own gaming chips.

(Casinos will not accept other casinos' gaming chips for tournament entry.) Once you've completed the entry process, you draw for your play time and seating position for the first round.

The number of players at each table is predetermined by the casino, which in turn determines the number of first-round tables. Even though there may be seven positions at a blackjack table, your particular tournament may seat only five or six players per first-round table. On rare occasions, you may have only three or four players. Six players per table is average in most blackjack tournaments.

Once you're done registering, it's usually time to kick back and enjoy yourself. There may be some perks for the players: jackets, DVD players, fruit baskets; it all depends on the casino and the size of the tournament. But there's almost always a welcome reception—some sort of banquet or free buffet, usually with an open bar. Make sure you wear the name badge that's in your registration package; it makes it easier to mingle. At the party, you may see, and possibly meet, some of the top blackjack players in the world. I could advise you not to be intimidated, but you probably will be. It's only natural. This is why I suggest you enter a number of smaller tournaments until you get used to the whole scene.

Unless you want to appear larger than life or be the Jackie Gleason of the room, I suggest you just chill. Be friendly and approachable. You'll make new friends during these receptions—remember, you all have something in common: a passion for the game of blackjack. Plus, you might learn something (maybe a player tells you he always bets the maximum on the last hand) that gives you an advantage at some point in the tournament. Stay sober, get a good night's sleep, and make sure you're there in time for your scheduled first round in the morning. If you play better with a hangover and two hours sleep, go for it. Most players don't. Do whatever works for you.

REGISTRATION TREPIDATION

When I walked into the casino lobby of the Las Vegas Hilton for one of the Million Dollar qualifiers, it was like Grand Central Station during rush hour in a Frederico Fellini film: half-naked girls in feathers; kids running around with balloons; guests checking into and out of the hotel; gamblers rushing around; and an entire press core and television-production crew setting up for a road-show production of "Wheel of Fortune" with Pat Sajak and Vanna White, filming at the Hilton at the time. Needless to say, a first-time tournament-blackjack player wouldn't have had a clue as to where to look for the tournament-registration station. Let's walk step-by-step through the Hilton's registration process to give you some familiarity with the way it usually works.

First, forget about the frenzy and look for the directing signs. Off to the side of the lobby at the Hilton was a sign pointing participants to the tournament-blackjack registration area. At most registrations, a giant fishbowl or perhaps several bins full of cards contain starting times, playing tables, and assigned seats for the players. Once you've checked in, you reach into the bowl and pick a card to find out when and where you'll be playing. When there are multiple bowls, it usually means that you have some flexibility in choosing your play time or can choose between a smoking or non-smoking table. This was the case at the Hilton.

Entry registration that day was from 4 to 7 p.m. I arrived a little early, about 4:30, so I had my choice of starting times. The four different times for the first round were 12:15, 1:30, 3:00, and 4:30 p.m. This particular check-in day was rather easy. I'd pre-registered by phone with my credit card, which saved me on-site paperwork time. Only three other players were waiting in front of me to draw times. Within five minutes I'd greeted the tournament host, showed her my driver's license for ID verification, signed my credit-card receipt, and picked a time slot—1:30 p.m., which would give me enough time to get in a half-day's work before I had to play. Except for the five-minute wait, check-in took about 45 seconds.

Table Manners

Each tournament has its own set of rules and procedures and no two ever seem to be exactly the same. When you get your rules sheet, make sure you go over it thoroughly before you play (see Appendix II).

Some rules don't allow players to talk to spectators or even other players when their round is in progress. Others don't restrict talking among the players at the tables, but strictly prohibit participants from speaking to anyone along the ropes or in the gallery. English is considered the only language of tournament blackjack. If you start speaking in a foreign tongue, the tournament directors might suspect you of attempting to communicate with someone in the gallery, which can result in an automatic disqualification. They can also remove your name from the bin, taking away any opportunity for you to return to the table through wild-card drawings.

If you have a weak bladder, tournament blackjack may not be for you. Under no circumstances are you allowed to get up from the game. If you can't hold your water, I suggest you take that into consideration the evening before, and the m

Typically, the playing rules of the tournament reflect the house blackjack rules. Some tournaments allow smoking and

Casinos publish and distribute their tournament rules. Always read the rules sheet before playing your first round. See Appendix II for a sample rules sheet.

drinking at the tables; others don't. Some allow you to double down after a split. Some permit you to surrender. There's more about this later in the book. For now, just remember that every tournament is different and you need to familiarize yourself with the rules in effect. If you don't know that an option is available to you or an opponent, you could severely jeopardize your chances at a crucial point.

In live casino gambling, players who get bad cards might throw them in the direction of the dealer when they bust, or curse, or generally behave with disrespect. In tournament play, it's important to respect the people around you. Watch your language and don't come to the table intoxicated. Be prepared to play for 45 minutes to an hour, keeping your cool, obeying the rules of the tournament, and treating the dealers with courtesy. Otherwise, you could be ejected from the competition. At the very least, you'll get a bad reputation that will follow you to other events.

You're not allowed to hide your chips in any way. Other players must be able to see your chips at all times. Mixing different-colored chips is also never permitted. This is known as a "dirty pile," meaning, for example, a \$100 black chip is hidden within a pile of \$25 green chips. If you have a large number of chips, you're allowed to make different piles of the same-colored chips.

In a tournament where talking among players is allowed, one thing to be careful about is a comment or question from another player. For instance, say someone bets \$450 and the guy next to you says, "I'm not sure what he just bet. What do you think?" Don't help him. If a guy looks at me and says, "I've got three thousand four hundred [in chips]. How many do you have?" Just respond with something like, "I'm new at this. I don't know how much is here." If anyone is foolish enough to tell you how much he has, just turn to him and politely say, "Thank you." You don't want to volunteer information. You're playing to win, remember? As you'll learn later, having an accurate chip count of as many players as possible is one of the

most important tournament skills. If you have the ability to count chips well or the memory skills to keep a running count of your opponents' stacks in your head, there's no reason in the world to negate that advantage by sharing information. You're not there to help the other players beat you.

In fact, even if you're down to hardly any chips and you have no shot at winning, don't help the guy next to you, even if he's a friend. Helping other players at the table is bad form and it's never tolerated by the casino if they're aware of it or if someone complains.

Unlike regular casino blackjack, in tournament blackjack the dealer isn't supposed to speak to the players. If a dealer does say something to someone beyond simple instructions that pertain to the rules, you're within your rights to let one of the tournament directors know that the dealer is communicating with the players. The director will see to it that it doesn't happen again. This usually isn't a problem. First, any advice a dealer gives is usually superficial and probably isn't worth causing a ruckus over. And second, tournament-blackjack dealers aren't like the friendly ones you may run into at the casino tables. They're usually expressionless, mute, and all business.

Making Your Entrance

I can't stress this enough: Get to the tournament area well before your starting time. In some tournaments, if you're late, you're out. Others will begin the round and deduct \$100 from your stack for the first five hands missed. If you're not in your seat by then, you'll be disqualified and your entry fee won't be returned, though you'll probably be allowed to pay the re-entry fee after the first round is completed. You'll also be allowed to play if your name is pulled out of the wild-card bin. But if you're playing to win, I don't recommend this as a tactical move.

Personally, I think attitude matters. I always walk into the

tournament room with a winning attitude. Second place isn't even an option before the tournament begins. Yes, I want to have fun. I want to hook up with old friends. But first and foremost, I'm there to beat them, you, and whoever else gets in my way (and I'll be happy for you when you finish in second or third place).

You'll feel a terrific rush of adrenaline as the dealer prepares to start the round. It's an exciting few minutes, even before the first cards are dealt. Then what? It's time to play—the title of the next chapter.

THE CHAMP ENTERS LAST

Even as the World Series of Blackjack champion, I don't need to make a big entrance. Besides, that's not my style. As a top-rated tournament-blackjack player, I can sometimes feel a slight buzzing from the other players whispering to each other as I walk into the area. It's a wonderful feeling, but I also check my ego at the door. I greet friends and make myself approachable to others. I never go directly to my table to be the first one there. It's a bit of a mind game. I reason, "I'm the champion. Let the other players wonder who's going to be the last one to sit down at their table." As in boxing, the champ always enters the ring last. That would be me!

I want the other players to see me take my seat, then think, "Uh-oh! Not him on my first round." I take my seat, introduce myself to my opponents, acknowledge the dealer, and get ready to rock 'n' roll.

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Time to Play

Following is a description of what you'll encounter when you sit down to play. Knowing what to expect allows you to more easily react in common situations as you're getting your tournament sea legs.

Regardless of which stage of the tournament you're in, you need to know three key things: how many hands in the round, the minimum and maximum bet size, and most importantly, how many players advance. Don't laugh, I've seen guys playing away without knowing these things.

Before play begins, look around at the players at your table. It's always good to know a competitor's playing habits. For example, does he bet a lot at the beginning or does he hold back till the last few hands of the round? Even if you don't know your opponents this time, in future confrontations, it will be beneficial to know the competition. Study the players at your table, so you'll know what to watch out for next time.

Always count the chips stacked and waiting for you in your betting circle. I've experienced situations where I was either one chip under or one chip over the proper starting amount. (Yes, I gave the chip back to the dealer.) Always verify that you have the amount of chips you're supposed to have. Also, glance around the table to make sure that none of the other players have extra chips.

Betting order is important at all times. The person who bets last on the last hand has a significant advantage, because he can base his bet on what he's seen all the other players do before him. Correspondingly, being second-to-last to act is second best, and so forth. The person who bets first on the last hand is said to be "on the button," and is in the worst position. The term comes from the "button" that moves clockwise around the table, indicating which player bets first on any given hand.

The tournament-sponsoring property determines which seat starts with the button on the first hand. This determination is made in various ways. Most tournaments use the five-card-poker-hand method. The dealer deals out five cards to each player and whoever shows the best poker hand gets the button and initiates the first hand. Any of several other methods of selecting who receives the button may be used. The dealer might roll a die and the player in the seat corresponding to the number that's rolled goes first. Or the player sitting at first base, the seat to the far left of the dealer, might simply bet first. But the five-card poker hand is the most popular method. Since the button moves from player to player on every hand, the player who makes the first bet is a deciding factor in who makes the last and most advantageous bet.

Here's your first strategy tip. The important thing to do first in any tournament—and I can't stress this enough—is to figure out in what position you'll be betting on the last hand. In Chapter 12, I tell you how to do the arithmetic to calculate this position in seconds (and recalculate your spot when necessary if someone drops out), but the important thing is to get it done. Why? So you know how close you are to being in that envious last-bet position.

"But I wouldn't know what to do with best position even if I have it," you might say. That's okay, there's still a reason to figure out where you'll be on the end. A fundamental rule in tournament play is to bet more aggressively the farther away from best position you'll be. The reason that this applies to a

beginner is that even if you don't know what to do with position, one or more of your opponents probably will. If they get to see your bet before they make theirs, you'd like to have as big a lead as possible, which might mean betting big and often. By calculating your betting position, you'll better know what you have to do.

Betting starts at the button and proceeds around the table clockwise. Play your best blackjack game, always keeping in mind a) how many of the 25-30 hands are left to play, and b) what chip position you need to finish in to advance. Your betting strategy usually depends on these two things. Knowing how many hands are left is easy, as the dealer keeps the running tally in clear view. But knowing your chip position requires being able to count your opponents' chips. It's an important skill: The better you are at determining chip counts, the more accurately you'll know how much to bet.

Most tournaments stop the round with five hands left to play to conduct an official "countdown," a tabulating of every player's chip count. Either the dealer or supervisor counts the chips and announces the totals. In some tournaments, they do this quickly and one time only, while in others they repeat the totals and even let you examine whatever record sheet they've put all the numbers on if you ask. Regardless, you'll now find out exactly where you stand in comparison to the other players. This is powerful information that you can use to hone your last five wagers.

Some tournaments also stop to count and announce chip tallies on the last hand of play. This is a big disadvantage to the seasoned tournament player, because those who can't keep track or count chips at all get something of a free pass (though it's great, of course, for beginners).

The Final Hand

This is the payoff hand, where the winners and losers are

determined. You'll never need to know more about what's going on around you than just before the last hand is played. All you need to do is beat the other players' bets by one chip, but betting so that you do that can get complicated. If you're the last player to bet, your necessary course of action is often clear. But if you're the first player to bet, it's sometimes impossible to know exactly what to do. Among tournament veterans, the doctrine is: "When in doubt, put it out."

Remember this phrase. It's powerful for a beginner and it applies in many different and difficult situations. Whenever you're not sure what to bet—the minimum, the maximum, or somewhere in the middle—your default should always be to put it out. This applies especially when you're the first player to bet on the last hand, because no matter what amount you may be in the lead by, most of the time you'll be correct to put out a maximum bet. Say you don't put out the max bet and everyone around you does, with some of them getting double downs; if everyone (including you) wins, you'll still lose, because they have more money on the table. The worst feeling in the world is when you win your last hand and still don't advance, because everyone else also won and you didn't bet enough. That's why it's always better to bet more than less.

This is exactly what happened in the 2005 World Series of Blackjack, which you'll read about in Part II. On the final hand, the chip leader didn't take a double-down opportunity. Thus, she opened the door for me to double down on an A8 and get an extra \$50,000 on the table. Though we both won the hand when the dealer busted, I wound up beating her by \$9,000 to win the whole thing.

The End Result

How you finish in a tournament is ultimately determined by a combination of your tournament-playing ability and good old Lady Luck. An interesting aspect of tournament blackjack

is that no matter how good you are, at some point you still need luck on your side. Conversely, even if you aren't skilled, a lucky run can carry you through. If any tournament winner tells you that he didn't have at least a little luck at the end, don't believe him. Playing skills and betting tactics are imperative throughout the tournament if you're to be in position to catch that bit of luck that will take you to the top.

You've already learned two of the most important concepts: playing according to your last-hand betting position and always leaning toward betting big. Part III of this book goes into other aspects of tournament strategy. But even if you never master them, you can play and usually compete by employing these two strong rules. If you're someone who studies hard, practices, and develops strong playing skills, the sky's the limit, as you'll see in the next chapter.

Ken hits tournament gold at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas.



Dabbling on the Dark Side

It's not all roses on the tournament trail. There are plenty of potential negatives.

I've already discussed the costs and time commitment that playing entails. But that's just the macro picture. From a micro standpoint, the time demands can be maddening. For some it's not a problem—they love spending as much time as it takes around the tournaments they're playing in. But for others, a format that—between playing and waiting and showing up for drawings—requires you to spend your whole day hanging around in the casino is an aggravating, though necessary, tournament evil. To get a first-hand look at this effect, see "Tournament Day—Round by Round" in Appendix I.

If you're a blackjack player who wants to keep a low profile, tournament exposure can shorten your live-play shelf life.

More than anything else, though, the possibility of a prolonged losing streak needs to be considered. It happens at some point to everyone and it's never easy to deal with.

Back for More at the Hilton

My close call at the inaugural Hilton Million Dollar Tournament left me craving redemption. I couldn't wait for another

shot at that payday and I was raring to go with the first qualifier for 2004. But that's when the roof caved in. One of the toughest things about playing in tournaments is that you lose most of the time. Of course, I knew this, logically, anyway. But I'd made it on my first try in 2003 and I'd been one hand away from winning it all. There was no way I could have expected what was to come.

Beginning with that first tournament for Hilton Million Dollar 2, I found myself unable to advance in the key qualifying round. One qualifier after another I'd advance to the money table, only to fall short. Everything seemed to go against me. On three different occasions, I was one hand away

I SHOULD HAVE BIN THERE

If you decide to enter a tournament, you have to play it all the way, giving yourself every opportunity for success. This means showing up for the wild-card drawings, even if it's inconvenient and the odds of being chosen are long. Unfortunately, I haven't always practiced what I preach when it comes to the wild-card draw.

On one of my Hilton attempts, I busted out after the third round. There was a lot going on in my business that day. I also knew that the odds of my name being picked were something on the order of 54-1. Perhaps if I'd been from out of town, I would have hung around the casino to be there for the drawing. But I was home and had things to do, so I left.

While at work that afternoon, I got a phone call from my good friend Joe Pane. He was so excited, I had to hold the phone five inches from my ear. Still, I heard him clearly say, "Where are you? Your name was just picked for the semi-finals!" He couldn't believe I'd left the tournament before the drawing. But 54-1! Who'd have thought?

Well, now I would—and you should, too. Learn a lesson from my mistake. There they were at the Hilton, picking my name to re-enter the tournament for a chance of at least going for the \$20,000 day prize. At worst, I would have gotten my \$1,000 entry fee back. I'd broken my own rule. I hadn't played to win on that particular afternoon.

from qualifying; the only way I could lose being if the dealers made 21. They did it all three times! When the smoke cleared, I'd entered all 12 monthly qualifiers and failed to win my way into the finals.

At the wild-card drawing on the eve of the second final, my name was in the bin 12 times, but was never picked. I had to watch the million-dollar contest from the sidelines, as Eric Kiel won a big double down on the final hand to walk with the first prize.

I wasn't alone in this non-qualifying hell. Anthony Curtis, the respected tournament player and publisher of this book, went 0 for 11 and missed the 2004 finals. Funny, but he and I commiserating after each defeat may well have led to our friendship and our business affiliation. Several other top players whom I respect immensely also 0-fered and had to sit out.

During a time like this, you're bound to question your play. My mind was on overload replaying every losing hand again and again. Although a long losing streak can chip away at your confidence, I felt that I was playing to the best of my ability, and more important, making the proper decisions. Therefore, I didn't allow the results to affect my future play. The fact is, no matter how good you are, you still have to get the cards, and I knew I'd eventually get my share.

Incredibly, my negative streak continued into the qualifying for 2005. I couldn't play them all in season three due to a busy schedule, but I found time to play six and again missed on every one. My string of losses in the qualifiers ran to 18 straight (eclipsing even Anthony, who qualified after losing 13 straight).

On a happier note, my name was pulled from the drum on the eve of Million Dollar 3. I didn't have a good run in the tournament, but at least I was able to go down on the battlefield in this one, which was won by local guy and mini-tournament-honed Sam Vaughn.

The 2004 World Series of Blackjack

During the time that things were going poorly at the Hilton, something big was in the works for blackjack-tournament players. The cable channel known as Game Show Network was preparing to change its name to (a hipper) GSN and it wanted to accompany the change with something that also signified a change in its programming line-up. The idea for a big televised blackjack tournament was hatched and word began to spread among the tournament community. No one knew what it would take to be picked to participate.

Just like anyone else who plays, I wanted to one day be able to say that I was the World Blackjack Champion. I'd played in lots of big tournaments over the years, winning some of them and coming up short in others, but none that I'd played in, apart from the Hilton Million, had anything that approached World-Champion-style clout. The problem was, no one had any idea how to get invited onto the show. I assume it was my final-table appearance at the Hilton that got their attention. Whatever it was, when I was asked to play in the World Series of Blackjack at the Mohegan Sun casino in Connecticut, I knew I had a chance to make my dream come true.

Important Tournament Concepts

People come up to me all the time asking what I think about different tournament strategies. They want to know, “How do you always get so close? You seem to have a shot at advancing in every round you’re in.”

Having played blackjack tournaments for many years, I’ve tried a number of different approaches. I’ve made large bets early. I’ve used money-progression systems. I’ve picked a certain hand in advance on which I’d make a big bet. I’ve played to keep up with whomever was in the lead. None of these techniques were successful on a consistent basis. Eventually, I developed the style that has been successful. It’s the way I play today and many of the components of that style are addressed in this chapter.

Following are discussions of specific skills and general concepts that can elevate your game. Some are reinforcements of ideas that I’ve already touched on; others haven’t been introduced yet. You have to seek out every advantage that you can and maximize opportunities when they arise. Working these ideas and techniques into your game, along with tournament experience, will allow you to recognize and exploit advantageous opportunities as they present themselves.

Unorthodox Play

Keep your mind open. Making an unorthodox play in tournament blackjack, especially near the end of a round, is often necessary as a last resort. You might, for example, have to double down on a hard 17 on the last hand of a round. Of course, the odds are against you in this type of situation, but if it's the only way to win, you have no choice. Once in a while, you'll get lucky. On many occasions I've seen a player pass up the only possible way he could win, because he didn't consider making a play he wouldn't ordinarily make.

Here's another example. We all know that taking insurance is a horrible bet in most cases in regular blackjack. But in tournament blackjack, doing so may be a wise move. Say you're ahead of a player in second place by \$5 and the dealer shows an ace. Your opponent plays before you and takes insurance. If you don't take insurance and the dealer has a blackjack, he'll pass you and take the lead. On the other hand, if you match his insurance bet, you'll retain the lead no matter what happens. This is known as "shadowing" or "covering" a player and is discussed further later.

If you're dealt a pair of tens on the last hand, you might have to split them, even if the dealer is showing a ten. In regular blackjack, you'd never split tens against a ten, but if it's the only way to win, you split. In tournament blackjack, basic strategy often gets left by the curbside.

And here's a really weird one. In tournament blackjack, there may be a time when either you or your opponent will need to double down on a natural blackjack. Despite the 3-2 payoff for the natural, it might not be enough to win the round, when a double down on the 11 would. In tournament blackjack, you can double down on your blackjack if you need to get more money on the table. I recommend that you consider this move on the last hand only. The gain from the potential win of the extra half bet for doubling usually isn't worth the risk, even with only two hands left to play. Still, you may encounter

a situation where it needs to be done (perhaps everyone is close and you'll wind up in last place on the last hand if you don't win a double down). If it's do-or-die, do it.

One warning is in order. Don't get too excited if you happen to take a wild shot and pull a great card on the last hand. Plenty of times I've drawn out to 20, or won a great double down, only to see someone else get even luckier and pull a better card when his chances were even more remote than mine. You just never know what'll happen until the very last card has been dealt.

Get to the End

Yes, I'm harping on this one again. You can't make those creative plays if you're not in the game. Bet the minimum out of the gate. Wait for the others to lose their chips. There's nothing better than getting to the chip lead without risking yours. You want to be there on the end, where you might have to win only a single bet to advance, rather than win many throughout the course of the round.

Shoot Your Bullets

I've made my point about hanging around, but when it's time to bet, bet. And don't be afraid to bet big. The best analogy I've heard is to think of a tournament as a gunfight and the chips as your bullets. You have to shoot your bullets (when the time comes) to win. Don't leave them in the chamber. Get to where you need to be or lose all your chips trying.

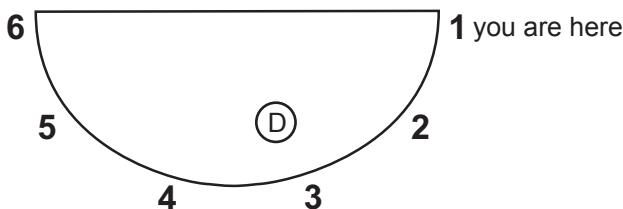
Calculate the Button

You should be able to do the arithmetic regarding your position in seconds. Regardless of the number of people at the

table, the math is basically the same. For example, if six people are at the table, the round is 30 hands, and the guy to your left bets first, you'll be betting last on the first hand, but first at the conclusion of one trip of the button around the table, which is hand 6. That means you'll also be betting first on hands that are multiples of six: numbers 12, 18, 24, and the crucial 30 (last hand). You have to make this calculation every time before play starts. Here's a three-step method for calculating button position.

1. Be sure of where the button starts. That player will bet first on the first hand.
2. Divide the number of hands in the round by the number of players at the table.
3. Determine where you will bet on the last hand as follows:
 - a. If the result of #2 is an even number, the first bettor on the last hand will be one place to the right of the person with the button on hand 1.
 - b. If the result of #2 has a remainder, mentally move one person to the left the number of the remainder.

For example, you're in seat 1, the button is on player 3, and



there are 30 hands in the round.

Step 1: Confirm that the button is on seat 3 for hand 1 (it's usually marked with a "D" for dealer).

Step 2: Divide the number of hands (30) by the number of players (6)— $30/6 = 5$.

Step 3: 5 is an even number, so option 3a is in effect—the seat before the button (seat 2) will bet first on hand 30. This means you'll bet last on the last hand (you have perfect position).

Now say that everything is the same, only there are 25 hands in the round. Now the equation for step 2 is $25/6 = 24$ with one remaining. Now option 3b is in effect. Mentally move the button one spot to the left of seat 2. Seat 3 will bet first on the last hand and you will bet second from last (still good, but not perfect).

Of course, your position can change as players drop out, but your first assumption should be that all players at the table will still be there at the end and you should tailor your play accordingly.

When and if players are knocked out of the game, you'll have to recalculate where you'll be when the final hand comes up. You'll often be able to make the calculation the same way you did at the start. If not, just move the button mentally from player to player, ticking off the hands remaining to be played as you go. For example, if five players are left and the player two spots to your right bets next on hand 24, you count "24" (him), "25" (the person to your right), "26" (you), then from player to player "27, 28, 29, and 30." Number 30 lands on the player to your right, which means that he'll bet first and you'll bet second out of five.

Be in the Lead

I want to make sure I put enough emphasis on how important it is for you to be in the lead, or at least in the position

you need to be in to advance, going into the last hand. When you're in that position, you've set yourself up to win or advance by simply winning your last hand (though it may have to be a winning double down or split). If you have both the lead and good position, it's a double whammy in your favor.

Taking a Lead (or Not)

This is one major area of tournament play where I break with traditional thinking. For most experienced players, it's pretty much doctrine that your big bets should always be formulated to put you in the lead, or at least in an advancing position. As I've been discussing, this is true at the end of a round, but not necessarily early. I feel that my strategy on when to take a lead—along with how I get into position to do so—might be the most important part of my overall game.

I've found that it isn't that important if someone, or everyone, takes a lead on the early hands. If you're in the first 15 hands of a 30-hand tournament, who cares? I always laugh to myself when I see players worrying about being \$50-\$500 behind, or even \$3,000 if the maximum bet is at least in that range, when there are still 10-15 hands to go. Of course, that maximum-bet amount is important. Let's say you start with a \$500 bankroll and the max bet is \$500. Who cares if someone is ahead of you by \$200? You're one big bet away. Stay calm and focused. Now if someone has a lead of \$600 or \$1,000, that's a different story. In this case you'll have to win two or three big bets to take the lead, and that's assuming the leader bets small enough for you to swing him. Here, you can't wait too long before making a move. However, in most cases the leader will be within a single bet.

For this discussion, let's assume that the starting bankroll is \$5,000 and the maximum bet is \$5,000. Only one person advances. If you're \$2,000 or even \$3,000 behind with 10 hands to go, you can begin to position yourself for the win. I

call this the set-up. When the button goes by you, it's time to act (at this point you're last to bet and no one will be able to react to your wager). Let's say you have \$4,500 and the leader has \$7,500; you're down by \$3,000. The next two hands will be your crucial ones. You never want to put your whole stack in on one hand until you really have to. I would bet only \$1,500 to close the gap. Note that this is not a bet to take the lead, which isn't necessary at this point. If you win, you'll have \$6,000 and be in real striking range (plus, a double down on this hand gets you even). If you lose, you still have \$3,000 to go all-in on the next hand. Now, if you lose that second bet, you were at least there till the end with a great shot. But if you win the hand, you'll be at \$6,000—close with five to seven hands to go and a shot at catching some good hands to win your table. As long as your all-in bet is a bet of consequence, one that gets you near the lead with at least a couple of hands left to play, it doesn't have to be one that puts you in the lead.

Don't get overly concerned with taking the lead with every big bet you make. Make bets that won't put you out if they lose and that will position you to snatch the lead late when it really matters—on (and after) the last hand.

Half-Max-Bet and Max-Bet Leads

There are advantages to having leads of just over half the maximum or the full maximum bet. With more than a half-max lead, you can bet the difference between yourself and second place, keeping a single chip more on the table, and force your closest opponent to win a double down if you just win your bet. Here's an example: Assuming a \$500 max bet, if you have \$755 and your opponent has \$500, you can bet \$250, leaving \$505 on the table. If he bets \$500 and you both win, he has \$1,000 and you have \$1,005. If you both lose or he pushes and you lose, you also win. Since there's no money left to double down, your opponent can beat you only by winning

while you lose, or being dealt a blackjack (and you can still make a double of your own at that point to overtake him by \$5). If the bankrolls were \$1,000 for him and \$1,250 for you, a half-max lead is less powerful, because you can also lose if your opponent wins a double down, but it's still a strong position to be in.

With more than a full-max lead, the situation is even better. Now you can bet the difference to also cover a double-down win by your opponent with an undoubled win of your own. If the chip counts are \$1,505 to \$1,000, for example, and you bet \$500, you can lose only if he wins and you lose, or he wins a double down and you push.

These are powerful positions to be in, but they're tough to get to. Experienced players will make bets to get to these spots when possible, but for beginners, it's enough to know about these key points and be aware of what they mean if you find yourself at one of them.

A Lock

On rare occasions, you won't have to bet at all on the end. Whenever you have a big lead on the last hand, calculate the most your opponent can end up with. If it's not enough to catch you, bet the minimum. For example, if you have \$1,550, your opponent has \$760, and the max bet is \$500, the best he can cash out by getting all his money on the table with a double down is \$1,520 (also, a max-bet blackjack takes him to only \$1,510). Bet \$5 and you can't lose.

Opposition and Correlation Betting

If you're behind and want to catch up, bet when they don't and don't bet when they do. In blackjack, since everyone is playing against the same dealer up-card, results tend to be

similar on a given hand. That is, most players generally win or lose together. Hence, your best shot at catching someone is to have a big bet out when he's bet small. Use position to do this, making your critical bets when you're last to act. Also understand that you can get the swing you want by betting small when the player you're chasing bets big in front of you. Looking for swings by betting opposite your opponents is called "opposition betting."

The opposite, where you "match" or "shadow" an opponent's wagers, is known as "correlation betting." If you've obtained the chip-leader position late in a match, the best way to maintain it is to make bets that are equal or close to the bets of players you want to fend off. The farther ahead you are, the less closely you have to match their bets perfectly, but it's usually better to have medium to large bets out than just the minimum when you know they'll be chasing. In Chapter 13, I refer to bets that "cover" an opponent on the high or low side. This is an offshoot of correlation betting.

Counting Chips

The greatest skill you can have as a tournament player is the ability to count. Not cards. Chips! Even a player with the most calculating mind in the world can't crunch the numbers if he doesn't know how many chips he has in relation to the competition.

Almost all tournaments take a chip count five hands before the final hand. This is a tremendous equalizer for most players. But as you get more experienced and sophisticated with your bets leading up to the final hand, there's a great advantage in being able to look across the table and know exactly what your closest competitor has in front of him. And it's absolutely essential for long-term success to have at least a good idea of the chip counts of everyone still alive on the final hand. A lot can change between the countdown and the final round of betting.

Estimating is better than nothing, but the top players can count a stack down perfectly. If you work at it, you can teach yourself how to determine how many chips are in a pile just by looking at it. A good way to practice is to make chip piles of different amounts, then attempt to count the stack. Do this over and over until you get a feel for it. Another good technique is to play at a regular blackjack table with a friend, keep an eye on his pile, and attempt to determine his chip count at various points of play. Then you can ask your friend for the “official count” to see how far you were off. Best, though, is to practice in actual tournament play. Players who enter lots of mini tournaments can hone their chip-counting skills to a fine edge.

During play, use down time to count the stacks. You can count up threatening stacks after you’ve played your hand, while the dealer is collecting the cards after a round, or while the cards for the next round are being dealt. During a shuffle, you can often get a count of everyone at the table.

COUNTING CARDS

Card counting isn’t important in blackjack tournaments. I’ve heard many beginners reason that they can’t be competitive, because they don’t count cards and other competitors do. Nonsense. This game is about betting and position. The duration of each round is too short for card counting to have an appreciable effect.

Surrender

Some tournaments, and recently most of the big ones, offer surrender. This rule can wreak havoc on the last hand, as it opens up a grab bag of options for savvy players (some of these are discussed in Chapter 13). But while the last-hand implications of surrender can be formidable, a value from the rule can be captured by the average player. It relates to my advice to bet

small in the beginning of a round. The surrender option allows you to give up half your bet when the dealer has a good hand. This is another way to preserve your bankroll for the big bets at the end. Always surrender when you have a 15 or 16 against a dealer 10, no matter what the size of your bet. By the end of the round, surrendering might make the difference between advancing and busting out.

More on Equity

In Chapter 2, I discussed considering equity when you choose a tournament to play. Tournament equity is the fundamental measure of a tournament's playability. All tournament players must pay attention to it and it's essential that the beginning player understand it.

In a nutshell, equity is the percentage of entry fees returned to players in the form of prize money. How can you determine which ones have good equity? Sometimes the casino just tells you, advertising that "100% of entry fees are returned." Or you can do an analysis of the prize structure. It's really not that hard. Just add up all the cash prizes and divide the total amount by the maximum number of players allowed in the tournament. Then compare that number to how much you have to pay to enter.

For example, consider the following tournament. It has a \$60,000 first prize. Prizes for second through sixth are \$15,000, \$10,000, \$4,000, \$3,000, and \$2,000, and \$500 is awarded to each of 12 semi-finalists who don't make it to the finals. That's a total prize pool of \$100,000. Now let's say that the casino caps the entries at 200 players. Divide \$100,000 by 200 to get \$500. If the entry fee is \$500, it's a 100%-return tournament, which is good. If the prize money is guaranteed and less than 200 enter, you have a positive-equity situation, which is even better. But what if the tournament allows 250 entrants? Here, \$100,000 divided by 250 is only \$400. This is

negative equity (only 80%). That's not good. What this means is that if you win your fair share of tournaments (and finish in the other paying spots the expected number of times), you'll still wind up losing 20% of what you pay to enter.

One of the great aspects of the Hilton Million Dollar Tournament was that it was almost always positive equity to play, which meant that even slightly below-average players would win money over time. The *Las Vegas Advisor* analyzed the complicated payback structure and determined that it was a positive play any time there were 160 entrants or less, and there were usually less.

One way to make sure that the tournaments you

THE BIG DRAW

Pros consider equity for many things. The importance of the concept is obvious when analyzing the wild-card drawing for the 7th spot on the final table of the Hilton's million dollar tournament. The prize for the winner of that table was \$1,000,000 and second through seventh places split an additional \$86,000, putting the total amount of prize money at \$1,086,000. There was a drawing for one spot at a 7-man table to play for that pot. What was being chosen for that 7th spot worth? Assuming all the players were equally talented, it was worth 1/7 of the entire amount, or \$155,142.85.

The calculation can be taken further. Actually being drawn was a longshot, so let's factor that into the equation. There were 194 names in the drum that day and only one would be picked for the \$155,142.85 in equity. By dividing the value of the seat by the number of names in the drum, you can determine what it was worth for anyone who was eligible to take the time to attend the drawing: \$799.71. Since most players probably were staying in (comped) Hilton hotel rooms, figure it took them five minutes each way up and down the elevators and another 10 minutes waiting in the hall for the drawing. That's 20 minutes total, which fixes the per-hour equity for being there at \$2,399.13.

enter are at or close to even equity is to enter early. Some tournaments offer an “early-entry discount” if you sign up before a designated date. Plan ahead and take advantage of early entries when you can.

More on Minis

More than a few major-tournament champions have cut their teeth and honed their skills in mini-tournaments. These tournaments are often exact replicas of the big ones, only they cost much less to enter (typically \$20 or \$25). Rounds are usually set at anywhere from 20 to 25 hands. You’ll still employ your usual style of play, but—and this is important—if you’re playing with fewer hands per round, you can’t allow yourself to fall too far behind. If you wait till hand 20 to make a move, you might not have enough hands left to play catch-up.

Try not to be too nervous when you’re ready to test your skills at your first mini-tournament. There’s not much reason to be. You’re not investing a large sum of money. The prizes are lower. There will probably be fewer rounds. In fact, sometimes if you make it past the first round, you’ll find yourself in the semi-finals.

As soon as you sit down, calculate in which position you’ll be betting on the last hand and be prepared to recalculate if someone drops out. Use these tournaments to practice counting other people’s chips. See how good you are by comparing your numbers to the official countdown before the last five hands. And just get an overall feel for how a tournament progresses and when you have to make a move.

By the end of the tournament, you’ll have made some mistakes, but that’s OK. Just chalk it up to experience. At your next tournament, you’ll have a chance to iron out previous misplays and adjust your style. Even as a pro, the possibility of a mistake is ever-present and you’re always fine-tuning your play.

The amount of the prizes is not your prime consideration here. Sure, it's great when you win the prize, but it's more important just that you've begun the process of learning what you need to know before stepping up to a major event. There's nothing better than actual playing experience for learning to play tournaments well.

In Las Vegas, you can find a mini-tournament on any day of the week. The listings at www.worldblackjackchampion.com and the other sites listed in "Resources" in Appendix III will lead you to them.

Playing Online

Look for more to come, and come fast, in this arena. Online poker tournaments are everywhere and blackjack tournaments can't be far behind. It's a matter of creating the proper software interface and several sites either already have, or have plans for, adding blackjack-tournament play to their offerings. This online model doesn't require traveling, so you'll be able to play even five-hand "sit-and-gos" any time you want and perfect your last-hand decision-making as you go. I expect the number of online options to multiply rapidly. Check the Websites listed in "Resources" for listings of these sites as they show up.