

Tournament Poker: 101 Winning Moves  
Expert Plays for No-Limit Tournaments

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## **Pre-flop Moves: The Isolation Play**

*6. In the middle to late stages of a tournament—Use the Isolation play with small to middle pocket pairs.*

The objective of an isolation play is to make a wager so big that it gets other players to fold so you can be heads-up against one opponent. An isolation play can be used to isolate a bluffer, a maniac, or a player on a draw.

An isolation play is best when you have a hand that does better heads up, like pocket pairs. When you raise as an isolation play you need to make a large enough bet to force other players to fold.

Example:

You have 8♠-8♣ in middle position. It is late in the tournament. The blinds are \$3,000-\$6,000. You have \$100,000. A player in early position with \$20,000 moves all-in. A second player, with \$120,000, calls this raise. What should you do?

You don't want to call since you would have to beat both players with your medium pocket pair. Since the second player did not re-raise, you can assume that his hand is not strong. The isolation play will get you heads-up against the all-in player.

Move all-in.

Example:

You have 3♠-3♣. It is the middle of the tournament. The blinds are \$500-\$1,000. You have \$22,000, and are in the big blind. Everyone folds to the button. The player on the button only has \$2,000, and moves all-in. The small blind, with \$18,000, calls for half a bet. What should you do?

Again, calling is not a good play since you have to beat two players with a small pair. You want to isolate yourself against the all-in player.

Move all-in.

## Pre-flop Moves: The Min-Raise

### 7. *The Min-Raise.*

When you reach the middle of the tournament, you want to win the blinds without a struggle. Picking up the blinds is key in accumulating chips. The min-raise, which is a raise of two times the big blind, is a move that can win the blinds uncontested.

Example:

You have Q♠-10♠. You have \$22,000, and the blinds are \$400-\$800. Everyone folds to you. You are in a middle position. What should you do?

If you call, you invite other players into the hand, and at the very least, you will see a flop. Also, if someone raises after you limp, you will have to seriously consider folding. A raise of three times the big blind will risk over 10% of your stack on a mediocre hand.

With the min-raise, you are hoping that the \$1,600 bet will get everyone to think twice about entering the pot. Opponents may put you on a small pair, an Ace-x hand, or a premium starting hand.

The other advantage of the min-raise is that it is an excellent defensive bet. A player, who would raise if he was first in the pot, may play it safe and just call.

Do not make this move after a player has already called the big blind. A min-raise is not going to get this player to fold.

Also, do not make this move from the big blind after there are a few callers. The worst play in no-limit poker may be when the big blind opens up another round of betting with a min-raise. Even if the big blind has pocket Aces, a min-raise from this position will not get players to fold.

## **Pre-flop Moves: The Position Power-Raise**

### *10. The Position Power-raise.*

Unlike a position steal-raise, where the objective is to steal the blinds, a position power-raise is designed to win both the blinds and the additional money in the pot from previous callers. It's a very effective play as you represent a strong starting hand to all your opponents.

Example:

You have K♦-10♦. It is in the middle of the tournament. You have \$20,000. The blinds are \$400-\$800. Two players limp into the hand for \$800. The pot is \$2,800. Everyone folds to you on the cut-off. What should you do?

A call is an acceptable play in this position, since you want to see a flop cheap. But this hand is going to be difficult to play on the flop. The limpers probably have hands around the same strength as your hand, or even better. The callers could have K-J, Q-J, J-10, A-10 and have you out-kicked if you flop any pair.

Instead of limping, try the position power-raise. Instead of playing your hand, play your opponents' mediocre hands by raising. Your raise needs to be large enough to get everyone to fold. Therefore, with \$2,800 in the pot, raise to \$4,000. It will cost the limpers another \$3,200 to call.

Unless one of the players behind you finds a premium hand, an \$800 calling hand is rarely worth another \$3,200.

What if a limper calls your raise? First, you need to put him on a range of possible hands that could call your raise. Second, you have the advantage of position. Third, you can use one of the flop moves in the next section to get him to fold.

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## **Pre-flop Moves: The All-in Re-Raise Against the Poker Pro**

### *13. The all-in re-raise against the poker pro.*

One of the challenges in major tournaments is playing against the poker pro. The pros are aggressive and raise pre-flop more than other players. They don't even need a hand to do this. In addition, they know how to outplay you on the flop, turn and river (something I hope to change with this book!).

It is interesting, but some poker pros will fold to your re-raise, while other pros will call your re-raise. The pros that call re-raises are very tough to beat, because if they sense weakness, they will outplay you.

The correct move against the top poker pros is not to try to continually outplay them. Instead, find your spots to move all-in and put on maximum pressure. Pros hate the all-in move pre-flop since it takes their skill out of the game. It also makes it easier for you since there are no other decisions needed.

Example:

You have A♠-10♣. It is late in the tournament. You have \$40,000. The blinds are \$800-\$1,600. A poker pro who has been outplaying everyone at the table has \$80,000. In middle position he raises to \$5,000. Everyone folds to you on the button. The players on the blind are tight. What should you do?

Move all-in. Make the pro decide if it's worth risking half his stack.

There are players who are overly aggressive pre-flop and call re-raises. And, there are players who are overly aggressive pre-flop and fold to a re-raise. Try to take advantage of both types of players. You need to accumulate chips, and these players are an opportunity to add to your stack.

Embrace the risk in the game.

## Flop Moves: Floating

*51. Identify opponents who tell you if they are strong or weak by their betting patterns. Get heads-up against these players by floating, and when they check their hand, a bet will win you the pot.*

Floating is calling a bet from an opponent you believe is weak in order to take the pot away with a bet (bluff) on a later street. One way to find weak players is to identify their betting patterns. Weak players will size their flop bets to correspond to the strength of their hand.

For example, a weak player will make a pre-flop raise, and then bet a small percentage on the flop if he has a mediocre or weak hand. He feels he is obligated to make a continuation bet, and simply follows through with his plan. But if he gets called on the flop, he will give up and check on the turn.

If you have position on this player, you can call him with almost any hand. What he does on the flop and/or turn, will tell you how to play the hand. You are not playing your cards. You are playing his betting patterns.

Example:

You have x-x. It is the middle of the tournament. You have position on a player who you want to float since you know how he plays on the flop.

The flop is A♠-6♦-4♦. Your opponent bets 50% of the size of the pot. What should you do? You know your opponent will make a continuation bet, and will check the turn if he missed. You call his bet on the flop. When he checks the turn, you will take down the pot with a bet.

The flop is A♠-6♦-4♦. Your opponent bets 30% the size of the pot. This looks like a probe bet from this player. Raise the bet on the flop.

The flop is A♠-8♦-4♦. Your opponent bets the pot. What should you do? A bet the size of the pot means he has top pair. Fold.

If you are out of position, you can also float by either calling the bet and check-raising the turn, or calling the turn and betting the river when your opponent checks the turn.

## Flop Moves: When to Lead Out

*54. Even if you are in the worst position, lead out with a bet when you have a pair against two or less opponents.*

You need to be aggressive when you are against two or less opponents. The reason is that if you hit a pair on the flop, the likelihood that your opponents have also hit a pair is reduced. If you check, and your opponents also check, you have missed an opportunity to win the pot.

This play will not work as often if you have three or more opponents in the hand, and if there are multiple draws on the flop. The reason is that the more opponents, the less likely that everyone has missed. And with a flop with multiple draws, your opponents may decide to play their draws.

Example:

You have A♥-10♥. It is early in the tournament. You have \$4,000. The blinds are \$50-\$100. In an early position, you call the blind. Another player, with \$2,800, calls. The player on the button, with \$6,500, raises to \$400. The blinds fold. You call the raise, while the other caller folds. There is \$1,050 in the pot.

The flop comes Q♦-10♣-4♥. You are heads up, and have second pair. If you check, your opponent may also check if he missed the flop and wants to see the turn cheap. And, if he bets, you have to decide if you want to call with second pair.

Be aggressive against the pre-flop raiser. Use a probe bet. Bet \$300.

Example:

You have 8♠-7♦ on the big blind. It is the middle of the tournament. The blinds are \$400-\$800. You have \$28,000. A player limps under-the-gun, and another player in late position calls. Both players have slightly more chips than you. The player in the small blind folds. There is \$2,800 in the pot.

The flop comes A♠-9♦-7♣. You flopped third pair. What should you do?

You can check, and avoid trouble. Or, you can seize the opportunity and bet out. If no one has an Ace in their hand, it will be very difficult for one of your opponents to call your bet.

Even if you are called in these situations, you can improve on the turn. But, overall, it makes more sense to be aggressive and make a play for the pot. Use a probe bet. Bet \$500.

## Flop Moves: How to Set a Trap With Top Pair

*58. Set a Trap: When you are heads-up, in position and flop top pair with an Ace or King, check your hand.*

Poker pros are looking to accumulate chips and like to trap. One move they favor is to check when they flop top pair and act last. While it is risky, the reward can be a bigger win. Of course, this is a play that should be limited to flops that are not coordinated since giving a free card could cost you the pot.

Example:

You have A♠-J♥. It is the middle of the tournament. You have \$38,000. The blinds are \$400-\$800. A player in the middle position, with \$45,000, raises to \$4,000. You call on the cut-off. Everyone folds. It's heads-up. The pot is \$9,200.

The flop is A♣-10♦-6♥. Your opponent checks his hand. What should you do?

Check as well. It is true that your opponent could have a straight draw, but why not take a chance to win a big pot?

In fact, your opponent's big pre-flop raise may indicate that he has a pocket pair that he was trying to protect. So, if he has pocket Jack's, your bet on the flop will get him to fold. However, the check may give him the green light to make a play for the pot.

The only caution is that you want to avoid making this play if the board is coordinated and has draws. For example, if the flop is A♣-10♦-9♦, your opponent could be working on a flush or a straight draw. Checking would give him a free card. You should bet your top pair to protect your hand.

## **Flop Moves: When Pre-Flop Steals Don't Work**

*65. If you improve on the flop, bet your hand. If you don't improve, you need to ask yourself some key questions.*

Stealing the blinds is a well-known move by all poker players. If you get called when you try to steal, you can't just give up. If you improve your hand, you should bet the flop. If you don't improve your hand, do not make a knee-jerk continuation bet. Ask yourself these questions:

- What range of hands do you put your opponents on?
- Do you think the flop helped their hands?
- What are their betting patterns from the blinds? Do they fold or defend? And, how do they play on the flop?
- Did you pick up any tells?
- If you make a bet on the flop, what hand are you representing?

If you are against one opponent you should lean toward making that bet, or you make a delayed continuation bet and check the flop, and bet on the turn.

If you are against two opponents, you should lean toward checking your hand. If your opponents show weakness by checking the turn, bet.

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## Turn Moves: Scare Cards

*79. Bet when a scare card appears on the turn to steal the pot.*

A scare card is any card that is dealt on the turn that appears to give a player a strong hand; usually, it gives a player a stronger hand than the one who took the lead on the flop. Common scare cards are Aces, Kings, and the third card to a flush or straight draw.

An example is when you call your opponent's bet on the flop holding a flush draw. When an Ace hits on the turn, even though it doesn't make your flush, you lead out and bet on the turn.

Example:

You have J♥-10♥. It is the middle of the tournament. You have \$23,000. The blinds are \$400-\$800. You raise to \$2,800 in middle position. The big blind, with \$19,000, is the only caller. There is \$6,000 in the pot.

The flop is J♠-8♦-4♦. The big blind checks. You bet \$6,000 wanting your opponent to fold. He calls. There is \$18,000 in the pot. You have \$14,200. Your opponent has \$10,200.

The turn is A♠. Your opponent moves all-in. What should you do?

This is a tough spot. What range of hands did you put your opponent on when he called the flop? What cards did your opponent call your raise with? Does he have a bigger kicker with his Jack? Is he on a draw? Is he trying to steal the pot since he has invested so much?

If you call his bet and lose you will be in real bad shape. But if you call and win the hand, you will almost double up.

You can see why this is such a strong play. In fact, other cards that would worry you on the turn are any diamond, a Queen, or even a 7. In fact, in this situation, your opponent may have figured out there are 15 cards on the turn that he could use to bluff.

Example:

You have Q♠-J♠. It is the middle of the tournament. You have \$22,000. The blinds are \$400-\$800. A player in middle position, with \$24,000, raises to \$2,000. You call on the button. The blinds fold. The pot is \$5,200.

The flop is A♦-J♦-4♣. Your opponent bets \$4,000. You call. There is \$13,200 in the pot. You have \$16,000.

The turn is an 8♦. Your opponent checks. What should you do?

This is an opportunity to bluff your opponent off his hand. It is another example of why having position is so important.

Your opponent has \$18,000. Move all-in, and put maximum pressure on him. Unless he has a great read on your play, he will not jeopardize most of his chips on a call with a made flush on board.

Poker pros are always thinking about how they can take the hand away from their opponents. Turn the tables on them, and look for opportunities where you can take advantage of potential cards on the turn that can get your opponent to fold.

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## River Moves: The Naked Ace Bluff

### 91. Use the Naked Ace Bluff Move.

As mentioned earlier, the Naked Ace Bluff is when you are holding the Ace that is the same suit as the three cards on the board, and you use this information to bet as if you have the nut flush. Since your opponent knows he doesn't have the nut flush, he folds.

Example:

You have 6♥-6♦. It is the middle of the tournament. You have \$18,000. The blinds are \$150-\$300. You raise under the gun to \$800. Only the big blind, with \$15,000, calls your bet. The pot is \$1,750.

The flop is Q♥-4♥-2♥. The big blind check to you. You check, since you will have to fold to a check-raise and want a free card for your flush.

The turn is J♦. The big blind checks again. Now your pair is worse than before. You don't want to build a pot with third best pair, and a potential flush on board.

The river is the 6♠. The big blind bets \$1,000. What should you do?

This looks like a blocking bet. You raise to \$3,000.

The big blind re-raises to \$10,000. What should you do?

There is now \$15,750 in the pot. If you call this bet and lose, you will be left with \$7,200. You fold.

Your opponent shows you the A♥, before he mucks. Was he using the naked Ace bluff move here? Or did he flop the nuts?

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### **Tip: What is Table Image? Why is it So Important?**

The playing style that a player has at the table is considered his table image. If an opponent has not played any hands for a long time period, he will have a tight table image. A player who enters many pots with a raise will have an aggressive table image.

It is important to try to determine the playing style of your opponents since it will improve your decisions. For example, holding A-Q is a stronger hand against the aggressive player than a tight player. The reason is that the aggressive player is entering many hands and probably does not have a hand as strong as yours, while the tight player will need a premium hand to enter the pot. As a result, while raising the aggressive player is a smart play, folding may be the right play against the tight player.

It is important to think about the table image you have created for your opponents. Importantly, you will find that not all of your opponents perceive your image the same way. As a result, your decisions against one opponent may differ against another opponent.

As a general rule, though, you want to play the opposite your table image. If your opponent views you as never being able to bluff, it will be easier to make a play that will bluff him out of a hand. If your opponent views you as a maniac, you will be much more likely to be called or even raised to put you to the test.

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### **Tip: Fear. Dish It Out. Don't Take It In.**

Ask yourself the following question: Will your bet put fear in the heart and mind of your opponent? If it will create fear for your opponent, make that play. If not, is there a move that will?

If your opponent makes a bet that puts fear in you, ask yourself if that is true or false. Remember that fear is often referred to as False Evidence that Appears Real. Is he bluffing? Semi-bluffing? Calling your opponent's bet may slow him down, or raising his bet may make him hide in the corner.

### **Tip: Domination Isn't All That Dominate in Poker**

Players like to have hands that “dominate” their opponent. A dominated hand scenario would be when you and your opponent hold the same highest-ranking card, but you have the better kicker. A common example is the A-K versus A-Q. In general, in these types of situation the player with the better kicker is better than a 2-1 favorite.

Unfortunately, the word domination is a poor choice. Domination means you have control or power over someone. You don't have anything of the sort. You are going to lose almost one in every three heads-up battles when you “dominate” your opponent.

Does that sound like domination or just being a solid favorite?

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### **Tip: What Are Odds? Why Are Odds Important?**

a) The pot odds are the ratio of the size of the pot to the size of the bet. For example, if the pot has \$800 in it, and your opponent bets \$400, the pot is \$1,200. For you to call that bet, you have to put in \$400.

Therefore, the ratio of the size of the pot is \$1,200, to the size of the bet or \$400. \$1,200 to \$400 is 3-1.

b) The pot odds are important since you want to make bets where the pot odds you are getting are better than the odds of you making your desired hand. (An odds chart is in the appendix).

In the above example, if you flopped a straight draw your odds are about 2.2-1 to make your desired hand by the river. Therefore, assuming you are going to the river, you are getting favorable pot odds and should call the bet.

c) Implied odds are based on how much you expect the pot to be at the end of the hand. It is often calculated where you plan to fold if you miss on the next street, but you will continue to play if you make your desired hand.

The implied odds are important since there are times where the pot odds are not good enough to call a bet, but the implied odds change a fold to a call.

Using the above example, if your opponent had bet \$1,000 into the \$800 pot, your pot odds are \$1,800 to \$1,000 or 1.8 to 1. These odds are not favorable for a straight draw. However, if you and your opponent have deep stacks, and your straight is not obvious when you hit, you may be getting favorable implied odds to make the call.

That is, if you hit your straight on the turn, you might estimate that your \$1,000 bet will end up in your winning a pot of \$5,000 or more. That would mean you believe you are getting implied odds of 5 to 1.

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### **Tip: Exercises to Improve Your Hand Reading Ability**

Hand reading is about trying to narrow down the range of hands an opponent is playing against you. Here are some exercises to help improve your hand reading ability. You will lose your money in some of these exercises, so select lower limits, but not at blind levels where no one ever folds.

Play a low blind, limit poker cash game and raise every hand pre-flop. This will put you in a situation where the action and play revolves around you. You will feel the power of being in charge. It will also put you in the position of having to make difficult decisions.

Play in a small no-limit poker tournament, and raise pre-flop once out of every three hands. Again, you will see how players respond to you. You will learn to be creative and build your hand reading skills.

Watch a table of limit or no-limit poker for an hour and try to identify betting patterns and put players on hands. Think about how you would have played against players, or what you would have done. This is easier to do online.

Do some player mapping. The next time you play in a tournament, actually write down notes about your opponents, especially their betting patterns. See if they hold true, and if it helps you to play better. Again, this is easier to do online.

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