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Texas Holdem Tournament Strategy – Winning vs. Aggressive Players

By Rick Braddy

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The Texas Hold'em poker phenomenon has taken the country by storm. There are reportedly over 100 million active poker players worldwide. Poker's popularity is largely the byproduct of technology and several recent trends: 1) online gaming, where players engage and socialize in real-time over the Internet, and 2) the broad publicity created by high profile TV shows like the World Series of Poker and World Poker Tour.

With all the poker-mania, there's an amazing shortage of quality information to help people learn how to play properly and become great players quickly. This is the first in a series of Texas Holdem strategy articles aimed at helping players learn how to win at Texas Hold'em poker. Tournament play is a popular, fun sport. These articles will help players understand how to approach tournaments, which differ greatly from regular "ring game" play.

This installment deals with the most-asked question: "How do I deal effectively with aggressive players?" Many players struggle against "maniacs", the aggressive, wild players who play most every hand, somehow seem to pull cards out of thin air, and often manage to dominate the table.

Here's what actually happened in a recent poker tournament. I entered a tournament at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Hollywood, Florida, about 20 minutes from my home in South Florida. This weekly \$300 entry-fee tournament fills the poker room with 220 players every Monday night.

The blinds start at 50/100 and go up every 15 minutes. I spent the first 30 minutes just hanging out and occasionally limping in to see a flop. The reason for "treading water" was to study my opponents and their playing patterns very closely. There were a number of solid poker players, but right away I spotted the aggressive ones.

I was sitting in the middle, directly across from the dealer. There were two "wild men" to my right. These two participated in most every hand, and agonized with themselves whenever they had to throw a hand away. This was hilarious to me, and it was also very telling. I knew these dudes were doomed from the onset, yet they were extremely dangerous if they caught something with one of their trash

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hands. These types are great targets, but only when you know how to play them correctly. If you do, you'll end up with most or all of their chips in your stack. The key is to get to their chips before someone else does.

There were some squeaky-tight and solid players, as usual. Finally, there were two other players to my left who knew one another very well and spoke what sounded like Russian. These two played very aggressively. They rarely called or checked. They would bet or raise the pot significantly, so if they played a hand, you knew they were going to bet it big and you'd better be prepared to push a bunch of your chips into the middle. As a result, the table became tight overall, except for these four players who controlled the early action and the dictated the table tempo for the first hour or so. They gambled with wanton abandon, trading chips with each other as the rest of us just observed and wished for a real hand to materialize.

It became apparent that our maniacs were playing mostly garbage hands, and using assertive chatter in an attempt to intimidate everyone. They were enjoying pushing everyone around with their aggressive betting and raising style. Humorously, they got into a number of showdowns, causing all of their trash hands to become openly exposed; e.g., 69 off-suit, Q3 suited, etc. I definitely had these guys pegged now - if only I could get a strong hand...

Later, one of my Russian "friends" came in over the top of a bet I'd placed with a huge raise, then smiled at me as he leaned his head back as if to say "Go ahead. I dare you". My middle pair just wasn't strong enough to engage with him, but I remembered this little "lesson" and my mistake. He'd used this tactic many times against the others and I should've expected it. I also realized that we had not seen any of his supposed "big hands", as he always mucked them. Whenever you see an aggressive player dominating, and then mucking all those supposed "great hands", you know you've spotted a target.

We played on, with the two maniacs to my right getting busted out by the Russian contingent. It's been an hour and fifteen minutes – and I still haven't seen even one decent hand yet! This is, unfortunately, typical poker.

After about an hour-and 45 minutes, I finally pick up a pair of wired 9's (99). Now I was hoping the flop would yield a set (trips). Sure enough, it came: 9, K, 5. I was elated and jumping up and down (inside). I was finally in a position to make my move, and hoped it would be against one of my aggressive Russian friends with their big stacks.

To prepare my trap, I delayed and muddled around for about ten seconds, and then casually "checked" verbally and using my hand in a chopping motion, with a slightly disgusted look. Next, the younger Russian moves in with a big bet of 3,000 chips. I was sure I had him now. As expected, everyone else quickly folded and got out of his way - except me. This fellow had pushed everyone around and I was finally properly armed and ready to do battle on my own terms. Note that this had been my "battle plan" all along. I was deliberately targeting these aggressive characters, knowing that when the time was right, their ill-gotten stacks would become mine!

The action came back around to me, so now it was just the two of us heads-up. The two Russians said something to each other that the rest of us couldn't decipher. I delayed and bobbed my head around as

if to be struggling with my decision. Then, I motioned with both hands and uttered "I'm all-in". I knew this series of actions would likely trigger an aggressive reaction, since my "check-raise" made it appear as if I was trying to steal this pot! A check-raise almost always triggers a full-tilt response from an aggressive player.

He immediately called me – he was so aggressive (and pot-committed) that it was like a fish taking the bait and running for deep waters – hook line and sinker! I threw my pair of 9's over, revealing the trip 9's. There was a low murmur around the table from the other players. My young Russian friend reluctantly flipped his five/trash hand over – he had a pair of fives (with a King over-card showing on the board!). He was definitely angling to drive me out of this pot with his ascertive play - one too many times...

You see, no one actually gets that many great hands in poker – nobody. If someone plays 30% to 40% or more of the time, they're just "gambling" and bluffing. This guy thinks he has a "good" hand, because he actually had a real pair - something he doesn't often have when pushing everyone around with mostly aggressive betting as his only real weapon.

The turn came and it wasn't a five – then someone pipes up and says "he's drawing dead". Believe me, you never want to hear that when you're in a showdown! I looked over as he said something in Russian to his buddy – another violation of tournament rules, as everyone is compelled to speak English at the tournament table. It wouldn't matter, as he stood up, grabbed his jacket and left after receiving some consolation from his friend.

His older friend glared over at me and uttered something derogatory in Russian. I had no clue what he said, but I knew from his tone that I didn't like it. I also knew I'd gotten under his skin by taking down his buddy and raking in all of his chips. I responded with "what's that, I don't understand what you're saying since you're not speaking English?" loudly so everyone at the table could hear me.

He mumbled something about his friend...I smiled and said politely with a smile "I deliberately laid that trap for your friend and he fell right into it!", pushing the knife in deeper, knowing he'd be gunning for me anyway – might as well make sure my next trap was fully set. This also signaled to everyone else at the table that whenever I checked or limped, it could be extremely dangerous if assumed to be a sign of weakness – something I'd leverage later as the blinds and antes rose and the proper time to bluff and steal blinds actually arrived.

After a slight pause, my Russian friend noticed that everyone was now looking at him. He looked down at his chips and said "nice play" with a reluctantly polite tone.

Boy, I was elated! My battle plan was definitely becoming field-proven here – and my next target was clearly sighted. It had taken careful observation, planning and a lot of patience to wait for the right hand, and then play it correctly to take this highly-skilled, aggressive player out and rake in all of his chips.

About ten minutes later, it was tournament break time, after two hours of play. I counted my chips, which totaled 14,900 (we started with 5,000 each), then grabbed a quick bite to eat, reflecting on what

had just taken place.

Within ten minutes of returning from break, I finally picked up a serious starting hand: Cowboys (KK). I knew it was time for my new Russian friend and me to tango, so I fired out a bet of 3 times the big blind: 3,000 chips, bait that I was sure he couldn't turn down. Sure enough, he bit – big time. His all-in raise came almost instantaneously, before I could even get my bet onto the table. He was totally ready to engage, and had been laying in wait for me – just like I had planned. I had set him up by taking out his friend and then challenging his poker ego in front of everyone. He just had to retaliate against me - it was a totally predictable "full-tilt" response from this kind of player.

This is what the game of poker is really all about - having a well-defined strategy, the patience to wait for the right hand, and then executing properly. It's what makes poker a game of strategy instead of a game of chance (for some of us).

He raised by going all-in with around 8,000 chips to my roughly 14,000. I quickly called his all-in bet. Everyone else quickly folded and got out of our way.

I flipped my pocket kings over, then looked him straight in the eye and just smiled. Then someone says "Yeah! Now we've got some action!" He sighed and flipped over QQ – he actually had a real hand for a change. That's one of the problems with these kinds of "semi-solid, aggressive" players, like my Russian friend here, and other poker greats like Gus Hansen. You never really know exactly what to

expect from them. Of course, my opponent could've held pocket rockets (AA), but I'll play those KK cowboys strong each and every time I get them, since there's only one hand that can beat them heads-up. I also knew this aggressive player on tilt was likely to be overplaying his hand, improving my odds significantly.

The flop, turn and river came and went without another Queen and it was done – my cowboys stood up and I had all of both Russian's stacks, which included most of the other two poor maniac's chips (who lost to the Russians earlier). This instantly made me by far the chip leader at our table with well over 22,000 chips!

I went from having an average chip stack to being the table chip leader, against tough, aggressive opponents, within less than half an hour by:

- a) Playing solid, reasonable tournament poker,
- b) Not taking big, undue risks with weak or "drawing" hands,
- c) Studying my aggressive prey and where the chips were sitting,
- d) Formulating and refining a battle plan while observing the game progress,
- e) Remaining patient while waiting for the right hand to make my move, and

f) Executing this plan with precision against a predetermined opponent, and on terms of my choosing - not the opponent's.

There was no luck involved at all - except that my opponent didn't hold AA or pull some lucky cards with a trash hand - which was simply playing the odds in my favor.

I started out with a high-level strategy to target aggressive chip leaders, and go after them with strong hands from the right position. I planned this before I ever arrived at the casino that day, or knew who these players would be. Then, I refined my plan once I knew for certain whom the evening's targets would be and how I'd provoke them. It certainly helped that I caught two decent hands during those first hours of play.

Unfortunately, I later lost to a legitimate full house, but made it into the top 40 - it happens...

The key to playing against aggressive and maniac players is having a viable Texas Holdem strategy you can profit from when you get some good hands. If you have a good plan, you can convert it into a formidable stockpile of chips – a stack that you'll definitely need as the blinds and antes increase and the tournament field narrows in the latter stages.

This is how I approach Texas Holdem strategy for tournaments now – at least when the tables are full with 8 or more players, some of them aggressive and maniacs. So, the next time you encounter wild and aggressive players at your poker table, get ready to have some fun! It's like Tae Kwon Do – using the opponent's own energy and momentum against them.

In the next installment, we'll detail this Texas Holdem strategy more formally, along with exploring some other tournament tips for playing better Texas Holdem poker.

Until then - good luck!

Rick

Rick Braddy is an avid writer, Texas Holdem player and pro software developer and marketer for over 25 years. His websites and

specialize in helping people become better Texas Holdem poker

players. If you're a poker player, be sure to visit his

today and learn how

you can play better Texas Holdem, too.

Winning Texas Holdem Poker Strategy

By Adel Awwad

In any type of game, strategy is an important part of winning. Adapting to the differences in each game, understanding the importance of position and realizing that knowledge is essential are three main parts of Texas Holdem strategy. There are many different approaches to strategy, but if a player uses these three key parts, then they should discover they have a winning strategic approach.

Adapting to the differences in the game is an important part of strategy. Not every approach works in every situation. A player that finds, during the course of the game, that another player is picking up on their strategy may need to change their style a little to throw the other player off. Being able to make quick decisions and being flexible with game play is also part of adapting. Adapting is relevant in every game, every time Texas Holdem is played. A player who does not adapt will find keeping up a winning strategy is difficult.

Understanding the importance of position is most relevant to the game of Texas Holdem than any other poker game. Texas Holdem is based on the fact that the position a player is in has great influence over that player's game. Position is based on literally where a player sets during the game. The ideal position is to have a player on the right side that bets often and high. On the left side a player wants someone who does not win often. This ideal position sets the player up to win big more often. It is also a good position to be the last player to act. This allows the player an advantage of seeing the other players' actions and the ability to get basic information about their hands. Position can often times mean the difference between a bad game and a good game.

The biggest advantage to a winning strategy is information. A player who keeps themselves informed throughout the game will have the best odds of winning. A strategy that includes observation and the gathering of information sets a player up to be able to determine other players' actions and bet accordingly. Texas Holdem is all about information and how a player uses it. A player should aim to get as much information as possible while giving little information to other players. Strategies differ from player to player and from game to game. The idea behind a winning strategy is to be able to make it work in any game. This means being able to adapt it to the situation of the game, having a good position and gathering information. A strategy may change or be altered throughout a game of Texas Holdem. The basic structure of a winning strategy, though, is made up of the three key parts regardless of its implementation.

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