

HARRINGTON ON MODERN TOURNAMENT POKER



Dan
Harrington



Bill
Robertie

Over the last ten years, the enormous growth of interest in poker and poker tournaments has led to an intense focus on the theory of tournament poker. The result was a re-examination of old ideas and the introduction of many new ones. The fundamentals of no-limit hold 'em did not change, but the game was revealed to have more depth than many older players could have anticipated. As a result, no-limit hold 'em tournament play has evolved into a newer, tougher, faster game, and good players have had to evolve to keep up.

In Harrington on Modern Tournament Poker, Dan Harrington takes a fresh look at the world of no-limit hold 'em tournaments. He explains how the game is currently played, and what you'll have to do to be a successful tournament player in 2013 and beyond. The topics examined include how to play different hand types preflop, when to 3-bet and 4-bet, how to analyze the flop, turn, and river, and how to size your bets. Dan also explains how to adjust your strategy as your stack size grows and shrinks, and how to handle the new breed of super-aggressive players that you'll meet at the table (and, if you want, how to play that way yourself).



Dan Harrington won the Gold Bracelet and the World Champion Title at the Main Event of the 1995 World Series of Poker. And he was the only player in recent history to make the final table in back-to-back years – 2003 and 2004 – considered by cognoscenti to be the greatest accomplishment in WSOP history.

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Harrington on Modern Tournament Poker How to Play No-Limit Hold 'em Multi-Table Tournaments

By DAN HARRINGTON
1995 World Champion
BILL ROBERTIE

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How to Play No-Limit

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*We can't change the cards we're dealt,
only how we play the hand.*

— Randy Pausch

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About Dan Harrington

Dan Harrington began playing poker professionally in 1982. On the circuit he is known as “Action Dan,” an ironic reference to his solid but effective style. He has won several major no-limit hold ’em tournaments including the European Poker Championships (1995), the \$2,500 No-Limit Hold ’em event at the 1995 World Series of Poker, and the Four Queens No-Limit Hold ’em Championship (1996).

Dan began his serious games-playing with chess, where he quickly became a master and one of the strongest players in the New England area. In 1972 he won the Massachusetts Chess Championship ahead of most of the top players in the area. In 1976 he started playing backgammon, a game which he also quickly mastered. He was soon one of the top money players in the Boston area, and in 1981 he won the World Cup of Backgammon in Washington D.C., ahead of a field that included most of the world’s top players.

He first played in the \$10,000 No-Limit Hold ’em Championship Event of the World Series of Poker in 1987. He has played in the championship a total of 15 times and has reached the final table in four of those tournaments, an amazing record. Besides winning the World Championship in 1995, he finished sixth in 1987, third in 2003, and fourth in 2004. In 2006 he finished second at the Doyle Brunson North American Championships at the Bellagio, while in 2007 he won the Legends of Poker Tournament at the Bicycle Club. He is widely recognized as one of the greatest and most respected no-limit hold ’em players, as well as a feared opponent in both no-limit and limit hold ’em side games.

His first two poker books, *Harrington on Hold ’em, Volume I* and *Harrington on Hold ’em, Volume II* have become two of the best-selling poker books of all time. He lives in Santa Monica where he is partner in Anchor Loans, a real estate business.

About Bill Robertie Bill Robertie has spent his life playing and writing about chess, backgammon, and now poker. He began playing chess as a boy, inspired by Bobby Fischer's feats on the international chess scene. While attending Harvard as an undergraduate, he became a chess master and helped the Harvard chess team win several intercollegiate titles. After graduation he won a number of chess tournaments, including the United States Championship at speed chess in 1970. He also established a reputation at blindfold chess, giving exhibitions on as many as eight boards simultaneously.

In 1976 he switched from chess to backgammon, becoming one of the top players in the world. His major titles include the World Championship in Monte Carlo in 1983 and 1987, the Black & White Championship in Boston in 1979, the Las Vegas tournaments in 1980 and 2001, the Bahamas Pro-Am in 1993, the Istanbul World Open in 1994, and the New York Metropolitan Open in 2011 and 2013.

He has written several well-regarded backgammon books, the most noted of which are *Advanced Backgammon* (1991), a two-volume collection of 400 problems, and *Modern Backgammon* (2002), a new look at the underlying theory of the game. He has also written a set of three books for the beginning player: *Backgammon for Winners* (1994), *Backgammon for Serious Players* (1995), and *500 Essential Backgammon Problems* (1997).

From 1991 to 1998 he edited the magazine *Inside Backgammon* with Kent Goulding. He owns a publishing company, the Gammon Press (www.thegammonpress.com), and lives in Arlington, Massachusetts with his wife Patrice.

Introduction

In our two-part series *Harrington on Hold 'Em, Volumes I and II*, written in 2004 and 2005, Bill Robertie and I outlined the theory and practice of how to play in no-limit hold 'em tournaments. We explained how live and online tournaments were organized and structured. We showed how to evaluate preflop hands depending on your position at the table. We explained the basics of evaluating the flop and playing the flop, turn, and river. And, in what was probably the most important part of the books, we showed how your strategy needs to be adjusted based on your stack size and your 'M,' the ratio between your stack and the blinds and antes.

We believe our original books remain an excellent introduction to the world of no-limit hold 'em tournaments. But life moves on and times change. The enormous growth of interest in poker and poker tournaments led to an intense focus on the theory of tournament poker with the result being a reexamination of old theories and the introduction of many new ideas. The fundamentals of no-limit hold 'em did not change. But the game was revealed to have more depth than older players could have anticipated, and the result is that no-limit hold 'em has evolved over the last decade into a newer, tougher, faster game. And good players have had to evolve to keep up.

In *Modern Tournament Poker*, we're going to take a fresh look at the world of no-limit hold 'em tournaments. We'll explain how the game is played now, and what you'll have to do to be a successful tournament player in 2014 and beyond. While the fundamentals of no-limit hold 'em haven't changed, the tactics have. We'll introduce the sort of players you'll meet at today's tournaments and show how each style of play has weaknesses that can be exploited, as long as you understand what's happening.

No-limit hold 'em is a better game now than it was a decade ago. It's more exciting, it's got a faster pace, and it's more fun to play. If poker circa 2003 was like drifting down a lazy river, poker circa 2014 is more like white water rafting. In this book, we'll show you how to negotiate your way in this new world.

Organization of the Book

“Part One: Understanding the Basis of NLH Tournament Poker” explains the basics of no-limit hold ’em tournaments. If you’ve never played no-limit hold ’em or hold ’em tournaments, or have only played a little but don’t feel you have a real grasp of the game, this section is must reading. If you’re a pretty experienced player, feel free to skip it.

“Part Two: Stacks, Blinds, Antes, and Ranges” focuses on the building blocks of tournament strategy: blinds, antes, stack sizes, and hand ranges. We’ll show how to evaluate your stack size and the stack sizes of other players (at the table), and what effect this has on strategy. We’ll talk about the Independent Chip Model (ICM) and how useful it is in various tournament situations. We’ll also explain what a hand range is, and how to think about your opponent’s plays in terms of the hand ranges they represent.

“Part Three: Playing Preflop” describes preflop play. Here we’ll talk about selecting hands to play, how to play each type of hand, how to play on each street, how to size your bets, and how to make adjustments to your opponents. We’ll also discuss the different styles of play you’ll see at the table, how to exploit each style, and how to counter the kind of super-aggressive play you’ll see in modern tournaments.

In “Part Four: Playing the Flop,” we talk about play on the flop. Topics include how to properly size flop bets, whether or not to make a continuation bet, how to make and counter donk bets, and how to handle draws and monsters.

“Part Five: Playing the Turn” looks at the turn bet: Should you bet, check, bluff, or raise, and what do you do when you bet and get raised?

In “Part Six: Playing the River,” we move on to the river. How should you evaluate your hand at this point? What is thin value and when should you bet it? When should you bluff? And what do you do when your opponent takes the lead?

“Part Seven: The All-In Move,” is all about all-ins. Topics include when to move all your chips in and when should you call if your opponent moves all-in first?

In “Part Eight: Playing Styles,” we look at the key question of playing styles. We’ll talk about the four basic styles you’ll see in a modern tournament. We’ll also talk about the modern loose-aggressive style, show why it’s become the dominant style in today’s poker tournaments, and give some ideas for how a fundamentally tight player can accommodate himself to the modern game.

Like many complex subjects, poker has its own elaborate terminology. We’ve included a Glossary after Part Eight, and there you’ll find a basic explanation of all the words and expressions poker players use when they talk poker. Look there first if you run across a term that seems unfamiliar.

We the authors also want to express a few thank-you’s. The terrific cover design is the work of Nik Bourassa-Wright who won The Cover Design Contest on www.twoplustwo.com and who posts there as “Reaper421.”

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Part One

Understanding the Basics of NLH Tournament Poker

Introduction

Before you can succeed in no-limit hold 'em tournaments, there are certain basic concepts you need to understand. If you're already an experienced player, or you've read *Harrington on Hold 'Em*, then you've probably already encountered these basic ideas and can move on to "Part Two: Stack Blinds, Antes, and Ranges."

If not, or if you need a quick review, then this section is for you (and a quick review never hurts). We'll also use the concepts explained here throughout the book, so make sure you're completely comfortable with them before moving on.

Some of the general ideas to be discussed like pot odds, implied odds, and types of bets, apply not just to hold 'em but to all forms of poker. And while you may have encountered many of these ideas before, their application to no-limit hold 'em may be slightly different than you've seen, so don't rush through these sections too quickly. These concepts do have a mathematical basis; however, the mathematics are not difficult. Success at no-limit hold 'em requires clear, logical thinking, not advanced mathematics.

Other ideas like tournament structures, escalating blinds, hand ranges, and flop textures, are unique to no-limit hold 'em tournament play, and understanding them is crucial. If these are unfamiliar ideas, pay close attention to the material here, as we'll be using it extensively in Parts Two through Eight.

Why No-Limit Hold 'em?

The poker variation known as no-limit hold 'em dates back to Texas in the 1950s and maybe as early as the 1920s. No one now remembers exactly how it originated, but by the early 1960s, it had replaced five-card stud and lowball as the preferred game of the big-time road gamblers.

Why did hold 'em elbow aside games like five-card stud and five-card draw? The answer has to do with an idea which is the basis of all poker games: the idea of *incomplete information*.

In all forms of poker, you're in possession of some information, but you're missing other information. In classic five-card draw, for instance, you know your own hand and all the bets that have been made at the table. But you know nothing about your opponent's hand except for how many cards he drew. That's a lot of missing information.

In five-card stud, however, you're at the other extreme. You know your own cards and you know about all the betting. You also know all of your opponent's cards save one: his hole card. That's a lot of known information, and only one piece of missing information.

So how much incomplete information makes the best game? The answer, it turns out, is not too much and not too little. With either too much or too little information, the best strategies tend to be simple and mechanical. Hold 'em exists at a sweet spot, where the two unknown cards (your opponent's hole cards) create a well-balanced and very complex game where proper strategy is anything but mechanical.

By the 1960s, hold 'em, especially the no-limit form, had become the most popular game among the big players. As they migrated to Las Vegas, they brought the game with them. In 1970, a bunch of the big players thought it would be fun to hold a tournament to pick the best of the bunch, and no-limit hold 'em was the natural choice for the game. Johnny Moss was proclaimed the best player, and the World Series of Poker was born.

The tournament grew in popularity every year after that, and gradually wealthy amateurs joined the crowd. The World Series settled at Binion's Horseshoe as its permanent location, but by the late 1970s and early 1980s, other casinos realized that there was money to be made running poker tournaments, so the number of tournaments increased slowly but steadily. This trend continued until 2003 when the combination of online poker, TV tournaments with hole card cameras, and an unexpected WSOPE winner with a perfect name, Chris Moneymaker, caused the popularity of no-limit hold 'em to soar. The result was hundreds of tournaments around the world with gigantic prize funds, non-stop television exposure, and a steadily growing class of professional players.

While online poker tournaments were crippled by the government crackdown on PokerStars and Full Tilt Poker in April, 2011, live poker tournaments have retained their popularity. The largest tournament of all, the Main Event of the World Series of Poker, still draws between 6,500 and 7,000 participants every July, numbers only slightly below the peak of 8,800 in 2006, and still many times higher than the attendance pre-2003. Live tournament poker has become a fixture on the international gaming scene.

How No-Limit Hold 'em Tournaments are Structured

Live no-limit hold 'em tournaments are now held around the world. The greatest number are in the United States, but there are plenty in Europe, and in the last few years we've seen tours arise in Asia and South America. If you had the inclination and could afford the expenses, you could play live tournament poker nonstop from January to December. Tournaments are usually held in casinos or public card clubs like the Commerce and Bicycle Clubs in Los Angeles.

A tournament isn't just a single event lasting a few days. Most casinos will allot two to three weeks for a tournament. The 'main event' will usually have the largest entry fee and will take place in the last few days of the allotted time. But prior to that will be a long series of events with smaller entry fees that last only for a day or two, along with satellite events where the winner's prize is an entry fee to the main event. The majority of these tournaments will feature no-limit hold 'em, but some will have competitions in other forms of poker like limit hold 'em, Omaha, and lowball.

The biggest tournament in the world is still the World Series of Poker, held in Las Vegas over a period of six weeks in June and July. The Main Event occupies the last week of the tournament and attracts a crowd in excess of 6,000 players, some of whom pay their own way, while others win their entry in single-table and multi-table satellite tournaments. Despite inflation, the entry fee is the same \$10,000 as in the first World Series tournament held back in 1971.

To enter a tournament, you show ID and pay your money at the cashier's window and receive in return both a receipt and a card that indicates the starting date and time, your table number, and your seat number. When the starting time arrives, you find your table, take your seat, and give your card to the dealer who verifies your ID and presents you with a stack of chips. When the starting time arrives the dealer deals the first hand and you're off and running.

Rising Blinds and Antes

Tournament play is divided into levels (sometimes called rounds). The dealer will announce the blinds and antes at the start of each level which lasts for a set amount of time. It can be as little as 20 minutes in a small, fast tournament or satellite, and as much as two hours in a big event. At the end of a level, the blinds and antes increase and play starts at the new level. In addition, players generally get a short break every couple of hours, and a longer break at dinner time. Also, playing sessions can be long, so don't be surprised if play starts at noon and continues until the wee hours of the morning.

The distinctive feature of tournament play is the steadily rising blind levels. A tournament might start with blinds of 50 and 100, and if your starting stack was 20,000, blinds of 50 and 100 won't seem like much. But at the second level, blinds might be 75 and 150, and by the third level they might be 100 and 200. And by the sixth level, you might be looking at blinds of 200 and 400, with a 50-chip ante. At that point, each circuit of the table is costing you over a thousand chips, and if your stack hasn't increased from that 20,000 amount, there's a good chance it's going to start to shrink quickly.

Understanding the effect of the inexorably rising blind levels is the key to understanding poker tournament strategy. In cash games, where the blinds don't change and are small compared to the typical stack size, it's possible to be profitable with a conservative strategy that simply waits for good

cards and then tries to play them well. (It's not an optimal strategy, but it should show a profit in weaker games.) In tournaments, however, this conservative approach won't make profits fast enough to stay ahead of the constant attrition of the rising blinds. Tournament play requires you to adopt a more aggressive approach.

The Bubble

As play continues and the blinds rise, the field starts to shrink. Most tournaments pay prizes to the final 10 percent of the field, and the first group of prizes are generally around twice the entry fee. As the prizes get closer, we reach a part of the tournament called "the bubble." Players with smaller stacks may have given up on the idea of winning, but they'd very much like to get their entry fee back and show a small profit for all the time and effort they've spent. Usually, they try to husband their chips and stay out of action with all but the best hands.

Meanwhile, the bigger stacks see their opportunity and relentlessly attack with all sorts of weaker hands, picking up pots that the short stacks are afraid to contest. And by the time the bubble bursts and the survivors are in the money, the aggressive players have padded their stacks considerably, while the field is full of tiny stacks who have just managed to get in the money but have little chance of doing anything else.

After the Bubble

In the post-bubble phase, the tiny stacks start moving all-in with any reasonable hand, hoping for a few lucky double-ups to get back in contention. In this stage, another half of the field might get eliminated within a couple of hours.

Play then reverts to something approaching normal poker until a new bubble stage emerges as the field gets close to the final table. That's because prizes at the final table are large, and a position at the final table might bring with it some publicity and television exposure. Once again, the smallest stacks get conservative while the biggest stack try to attack and exploit the situation.

The Final Table and Heads-Up

Once the final table starts, stacks are typically fairly small relative to the blinds, and each step up the pay ladder represents a considerable increase in prize money. At this point, many hands are decided by an all-in move either preflop or on the flop. As the number of players at the table shrinks, the survivors find they need to play more and more hands to stay in contention. The tournament concludes with a heads-up battle between the last two survivors, followed by the crowning of the winner.

Table Structure

Most tournament play occurs at a full table, usually nine or ten players. As players are eliminated, seats will open up around the playing room. It's the organizer's job to keep track of the open seats and once enough seats are open, an existing table will be broken and the players moved to fill in open seats. Only when the tournament is down to a few remaining tables will you find yourself sitting at a short-handed table (usually six or seven players) for any length of time.

Seat Names

In this book, we'll use certain conventions for naming seats at both full and short tables. We'll list the seats here in the order of action preflop.

At a Full 9-Handed Table

UTG	Under-the-gun
UTG + 1 MP	Middle Position
MP + 1 HJ	Hijack

BB Big Blind

At a Short 6-Handed Table

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