

6.4. POSITION: A CRITICAL PART OF TOURNAMENT STRATEGY

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When you take a seat at a tournament table, you should be armed with a basic strategy of how you plan to approach the game. But there's one unknown about your round that won't be settled until you sit down at the table. Seating position can have a big impact on your chances for success in a tournament round. Most tournaments assign seats in a random fashion, by having the player draw from a blind set of seating choices. However, some tournaments allow players to choose their seats. When available, this option can give you an extra edge if you know how to take advantage.

Let's take a look at why some seats are better than others. There are two main areas in which position matters. First, there's the impact of the betting button. In tournament play, the first-base button moves around the table, and each player in turn must bet and act in sequence starting at the button. If you're "on the button", that means you're forced to choose your bet before the other players, and don't have the benefit of knowing what they will bet behind you. Also, during play of the hand, you'll have to play your hand before seeing any of your opponents play. By way of contrast, the player to your immediate right has a considerable advantage on this hand, being able to see all players bet amounts before making a decision.

By rotating the button around the table, each player has a roughly equal number of bets "on the button" and "last to act", as well as everything in between. But, not all hands of a round are of equal importance. In particular, the last hand is usually the determining factor of who advances and who is eliminated. With that in mind, there's a big advantage to be gained if you manage to be last to act on the final hand.

If you'll have that edge on the last hand, you can afford to be a little more conservative in the rest of the round, knowing that you'll be able to fine-tune your bet at the end by seeing everyone else's bet. If you're last to act on the final hand, you don't necessarily have to be the chip leader to be the favorite to advance. On the other hand, if you're on the button for the last hand, being the chip leader is very important for your chances.

Of course, most tournaments choose the starting button position randomly, meaning you can't pick a seat that is more likely to have a favorable last hand button. There are exceptions. I've played some mini-tournaments where the button always starts at seat 1, to the dealer's left. If you're able to choose your seat in an event like that, it's well worth the effort to figure out the most likely final button position, and ask for the seat to the immediate right of it. For example, if there will be 6 players, and the round has 20 hands, I'd ask for seat 1. If all 6 players stay in for the entire 20 hands, the button will end up in front of seat 2 on the last hand. By asking for seat one, I have a better than usual chance of having the last bet on the final hand. Of course, players often drop out before the end,