



HOW TO WIN MORE BLACKJACK TOURNAMENTS

Tips, Tricks, and Strategies to
Supercharge Your Game

by

Kenneth R. Smith

"There's always a better bet"

How To Win More Blackjack Tournaments – Tips, Tricks, and Strategies to Supercharge Your Game

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I've benefited from the knowledge of hundreds of players over the years, and a list of all those who have so generously shared their time and thoughts with me would be long indeed. You all know who you are.

I do want to single out one particular player, who was instrumental in my move from the mini-tournament world in Mississippi to the larger events in Las Vegas. Richard Rockwell of New Orleans has been a successful and avid player for many years, and it is likely that without his influence on my early career I wouldn't be here writing this today. Thanks RR.

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Foreword

By Henry Tamburin

I had a vision when I started my “Blackjack Insider” Newsletter. First, I wanted it to contain solid information that would help players at different skill levels become better blackjack players. Second, I wanted to assemble a team of writers who would contribute their knowledge and experience in blackjack to my subscribers. One of the writers whom I wanted was Ken Smith but not solely for the reason you think.

There is no question about Ken’s expertise when it comes to winning blackjack tournaments. His accomplishments say it all: He has played in over 1,000 tournaments with almost 40 first-place prizes to his credit, including his recent stunning victory in the premier episode of the Ultimate Blackjack Tour on CBS. But what sets Ken apart from the majority of his peers is his willingness and enthusiasm to share his world-class strategies with average players. He does so every month in my newsletter, and virtually every day on his popular web sites www.blackjackinfo.com and www.blackjacktournaments.com

I’ve had the pleasure of traveling with Ken to different tournaments. I take the opportunity to pick his brain about specific tournament hands. He often amazes me how he analyzes each situation, and their possible outcome, to arrive at the best play. I can honestly say I have learned a lot about tournament blackjack strategy from Ken, and I know you will too when you read this book.

So without further ado, let me introduce the man who is on top of the blackjack tournament world, Mr. Ken Smith, and his “How to Win More Blackjack Tournaments” book. Enjoy.

Henry Tamburin

Introduction

I'm Kenneth R. Smith, and I've been competing in and writing about blackjack tournaments for more than a dozen years. My tournament roots were grown in the highly competitive Mississippi Gulf Coast region, where weekly tournaments in the mid 1990s created some of the best tournament players in the country. There's nothing like the availability of five to seven mini-tournaments each and every week to hone a person's skills. A similar process is happening today in the Pacific Northwest, where a thriving mini-tournament world is creating another new batch of tournament aficionados.

Even with a tournament career that now extends for more than a dozen years, I certainly wasn't one of the real trailblazers in this area. By the time I arrived on the tournament scene, there was already a well-established group of players who dominated the tournament prize pools. I learned a lot from many of those players, and I'm glad to say I've become friends with a large number of them over the years.

In my experience, the tournament blackjack scene seems to attract a wonderful group of people. They're generally highly educated, articulate and generally very friendly. Wherever tournaments are offered around the country, you'll find a devoted group of regulars who play the events. When a typical casino player first begins to participate in tournaments, it is amazing how often they make the same observations about the tournament crowd. In contrast to the often surly and rude patrons you'll regularly see at the live tables in the casino, tournaments seem to bring out the best in people, which is surprising given the very definite competitive nature of the game. Whatever the cause, I've made countless friends among the many players I've met over the years, and that is one of the main benefits of playing tournaments.

My own playing career grew from the Gulf Coast events and led me to the larger Vegas tournaments. I became a writer for *Blackjack Confidential* magazine, and also for Henry Tamburin's *Blackjack Insider* Newsletter. When *Blackjack Confidential* published their last issue in late 2003, I launched the BlackjackTournaments.com site, which joined my existing popular regular blackjack site BlackjackInfo.com. Both sites continue to grow and provide a community to fans of casino blackjack. I also am a contributing editor for *All-In* magazine, providing tournament strategy coverage for the blackjack half of that magazine.

When blackjack tournaments arrived on TV, I was there too. I'm one of only three players who have been featured in all four seasons to date of the World Series of Blackjack on GSN. Then, when Ultimate Blackjack Tour aired on CBS in 2006, I won first place in the premiere show, a win worth \$50K and a seat in that season's Tournament of Champions, where I finished in fifth place. So far, I've competed in a total of thirteen tables of televised blackjack tournaments. The recent TV tournaments aside, my favorite accomplishment in my playing career goes back to the mid-90s in Mississippi, where the Isle of Capri casino in Biloxi held medium-size events three times a year. With a \$100 entry fee and a \$25,000 prize pool, I won an amazing five first place finishes in nine attempts.

With experience from more than 1,000 tournaments, and countless hours of analysis and writing about tournament strategy, I feel uniquely qualified to produce this collection of articles about the game. I hope you'll receive the same pleasure from putting these ideas to work in your game that I got from creating and presenting them.

Note: I used the masculine "he" in this book when referring to tournament players to avoid the awkward usage of he/she. To be clear, there are many skilled female blackjack players on the blackjack tournament circuit.

Tournament Basics

The first section of this book covers the basics of blackjack tournaments for novice players. After you read this section, you will know:

1. The different formats used in blackjack tournaments and the skills needed to become a competitive player.
2. The trifecta of sound tournament strategy: Risk and Reward, Similar Outcomes, and Basic Playing Strategy.
3. How to bet at different stages in a tournament.
4. Which opponents you need to pay more attention to.
5. The negatives of making a minimum bet on the last hand.
6. A thought process to help you decide how much to bet and how to play your hand.

1 - Blackjack Tournaments 101

By Henry Tamburin

From Kenneth R. Smith: "Most of my articles in this collection assume the reader already has a basic understanding of the nature of blackjack tournaments. To bring everyone up to speed on the basics, my editor Henry Tamburin has kindly included his article on Blackjack Tournaments 101 in this book."

The information in this article is intended for blackjack players that have never had any experience playing in a blackjack tournament. Let's begin by comparing what you already know - playing blackjack in a casino - to what you might not know - playing blackjack in a tournament.

Casino blackjack

1. You play against the dealer.
2. Your goal is to win money.
3. How your fellow players bet, or play their hand, or how much bankroll they might have, has no influence on your chances of winning.
4. You never root for the dealer to beat the table.
5. With a modest bankroll, it's rare to win a large sum of money in any one session.
6. There is no limit on how much you could lose per session since you can always dig in to your wallet or purse for more money.
7. You should use the basic playing strategy to play every hand.
8. You get the edge by learning card counting.
9. The chance of becoming a "star" because of your blackjack prowess is slim to none.

Tournament blackjack

1. You play against a dealer *and* against your fellow players.
2. Your goal is not to win money, but to wind up with more chips than your fellow table players, even if it means you end up with fewer chips than you started with.
3. How your fellow players play and bet, and how much bankroll they have, has a major impact on your outcome.
4. You sometimes root for the dealer to beat the table.
5. It's possible to win a large sum of money – six figures or higher – if you win a major tournament.

6. Your losses are limited to the amount of your entry fee.
7. You should know the basic playing strategy, but more importantly, when to deviate from this prescribed strategy.
8. You get the edge by learning how to play better than your opponents.
9. Your tournament skills could land you on national TV and gain you stardom, similar to the fame achieved by previously unknown poker players.

If you are surprised at the differences, don't be, because most blackjack players really don't know about the nuances of playing tournament blackjack.

The objective of tournament blackjack is fairly straightforward and easy to understand.

Players pay an entry fee to play in a tournament. You and your fellow table players start with the same bankroll and play a set number of hands (usually 20 - 30). The player with the most chips after the hands are completed wins the table and advances to play other table winners. After several tournament rounds, the initial large field of players is whittled down to six or seven players, who play a final round to determine the tournament champion. Monetary prizes are given to the top six or seven players (sometimes prizes are also given to the semi-finalists), with the player finishing in first place receiving the lion's share of the prizes (in the past, as much as a million bucks).

The main goal of tournament play is to end up with more chips than your fellow players. You could have a starting bankroll of 1,000 chips and wind up with only 100 chips but still advance if your fellow table players have fewer than 100 chips. Yes, you are still playing your hand against the dealer's hand but you've got to keep an eye on your opponents' bankroll so that you know if you are ahead or behind and can bet accordingly. Obviously, if you are leading, you want to protect your lead. If you are behind, you want to try to bet more to catch up and hopefully pass the leaders. How best to go about this will be discussed shortly, but for now let's review the different formats used in blackjack tournaments.

1. Traditional elimination tournaments, which is probably the most popular format. In these tournaments, you are playing only against the players on your table, with the table winners advancing and the others eliminated (although in most elimination tournaments, you can pay a rebuy fee and play again).
2. Non-elimination or accumulation tournaments. Here you compete against all the other players in the tournament with the goal of trying to win the most chips after several rounds. The tournament leaders are often posted on a leader board so all players have an idea of how much they need to win to overtake the leaders.
3. Tournaments that have elimination hands. This format was implemented by the Ultimate Blackjack Tour (UBT) to make blackjack tournaments more exciting for players and also television viewers. In the UBT format, the player with the lowest chip count after hands 8, 16, and 25 are completed is eliminated from play. The televised World Series of Blackjack also employs elimination hands.