

A man in a dark suit and light-colored shirt is smiling at a blackjack table. The table is covered with a green felt and has several stacks of colorful chips (yellow, blue, red, green, black) in front of him. The background is a blurred blue and green light.

HOW TO WIN
EVEN MORE

**BLACKJACK
TOURNAMENTS
VOLUME II**

by
Kenneth R. Smith

Review

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How To Win Even More Blackjack Tournaments – Volume II

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The material in this book is intended to inform and educate the reader and in no way represents an inducement to gamble legally or illegally.

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Dedication

In the months leading up to the publication of this e-book, the tournament community lost two giants of the game.

John Ressman's record in major events was simply amazing, and his personality was stellar to match. I competed against John on many occasions, including a UBT major event in St Kitts where both me and my wife Jan made the final table. We both were defeated at the hands of John's flawless play that day as he took home the well-earned first place prize. I considered John a dear friend, and always a formidable opponent. John passed away in late 2010.

Sam Vaughn earned his fame in the second Las Vegas Hilton Million Dollar Blackjack Tournament. When Sam picked up the million dollar first place prize, I don't think there was a serious tournament player anywhere who wasn't truly thrilled to see it happen. Sam was a familiar face at all the major events in Las Vegas for years. He was a friend to everyone he met, and truly served as an ambassador to the game. Sam passed away in early 2011.

John and Sam, this one's for you.

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Review

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Foreword

By Henry Tamburin

Ken Smith's first e-book ([*How to Win More Blackjack Tournaments*](#)) was so successful that we decided to publish a second volume containing more of his excellent strategies. It doesn't matter whether you are a beginner or an experienced player with many tournament notches on your belt, if you follow Ken's tournament strategies you will significantly improve your chances of ending up in the money. After all, you wouldn't want to face an opponent in a final championship round who has read Ken's e-books, now would you?

Henry Tamburin

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Introduction

Although many of you are probably already familiar with my first E-book “How to Win More Blackjack Tournaments,” don't worry if you have not yet read that volume. This second group of my writings on tournament blackjack stands alone, and you can gain its benefits without any knowledge of the contents of the first book.

The state of tournament blackjack itself has been volatile over the last several years. For a short time, player interest in tournaments was at an all-time high, culminating in the first-ever appearance of competitive blackjack on network television. That brief euphoric period of interest is unfortunately over. At the time of this writing in late 2011, while there are still pockets of strength in some casino tournament schedules around the country, many areas have seen a sharp reduction in the quantity and size of events. Historically, the popularity of tournaments has ebbed and flowed with casinos reducing the events for a while and then re-introducing events to try to draw more patrons to their games. Will the latest downswing be a similarly temporary hurdle? Only time will tell for sure.

One thing is beyond doubt: Tournament blackjack still maintains a very strong community of enthusiastic players. The strategies involved in skillful tournament play are like nothing else in the gambling world. The game offers endless opportunities for learning more. After years of competing, I still uncover new ideas regularly. The field is rich, deep, and fascinating. What more can you ask of a pastime?

So please join me on another trip into the fascinating world of tournament blackjack.

Review

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2 - Fourteen Years on the Tournament Trail

Published in Blackjack Insider, www.bjinsider.com, May 2008

A Concept is Born

To most readers, it must seem like I've been involved in tournament blackjack from the very beginning. However, I'm just as sure that there are readers out there that will know better than that. The truth is that blackjack tournaments were well established long before I started playing them fourteen years ago. In fact, it's taken until now, in 2008, that I can claim to have been involved for at least half of the lifetime of blackjack tournaments.

The real veterans of the tournament trail are the guys who started at the very beginning, back in 1979 at the Sahara in Las Vegas. The first blackjack tournament ever held was called the World Championship of Blackjack, and it was the brainchild of two brothers named Fishman. Attendance was very strong at these early tournaments, with more than a thousand players buying in to play the \$500 live money events. After a few years, the Fishman brothers moved on to other things, and their IGP tournament company faded away. No matter though ... tournament blackjack was here to stay, as more and more casinos began to see that tournaments could draw gamblers to their property. What the Fishmans had conceived lived on beyond their wildest dreams.

Of course, it also didn't take long for savvy gamblers to see that tournament strategy was nothing like regular blackjack strategy. With such large fields of inexperienced players, it had to be a very exciting time for the sharp players of the day. Indeed, those early years saw the dominance of groups of advantage gamblers who made a small fortune playing tournaments. Unfortunately, with that success by a limited number of players, it was inevitable that tournaments would become less appealing to the casinos themselves. After all, it's no secret that casinos prefer "square action," instead of "sharp action," at their tables. It's even worse if the casino's "good" square customers start complaining about the same group of "wise guys" always winning the tournaments.

Nonetheless, tournaments survived and even thrived. Despite the casinos' apparent love/hate relationship with blackjack tournaments, the events still provided a good way to fill the tables during normally slow times. While the attendance would never again reach the massive numbers seen in the early IGP events, there was certainly a large group of interested players that began to travel the circuit, scheduling trips to attend many of the larger tournaments. That was the state of affairs when I came to the game.

My Personal Tournament Start

Casinos came to my home state of Mississippi in 1992, and I began to take a lot more interest in the game of blackjack. While I had studied the game briefly before that, it was more of an intellectual exercise than anything more. After all, Vegas and its green felt tables were a long way away. Once the first casino opened near home, my interest returned and I studied the mathematics of the game intently.

Therefore, I happened to be in the Grand Casino in Gulfport, MS in the summer of 1994 when I noticed a sign about a weekly blackjack tournament. Moreover, what a nice weekly event it was, with a \$50 entry fee and a \$10,000 prize pool every week. In coming months, I rarely missed an event, and my bankroll grew quickly as a result. There were a handful of sharp players in these events, and the final table was usually drawn from the same handful of names week after week. I picked off a first-place win worth \$5,000 in my first month of play, and went on to duplicate that feat countless times over the next few years.

For me, the late 90s were a fantastic boon to my bankroll, as the wins kept rolling in. It was during those years that I accomplished what I still consider the most amazing feat of my tournament career. The Isle of Capri casino in Biloxi, MS held a medium sized tournament three times a year, which featured a \$100 entry fee and a \$20,000 prize pool, with \$10,000 for first place. It now seems odd in hindsight that this event would be considered our "big" tournament, because every week we still had the \$10,000 prize pool events.

Still, with an entry fee of twice as much and a schedule of only three events per year, all of us in the area heavily anticipated these events. In one particularly amazing stretch, I managed to win first place in that Isle event five times in a three-year stretch. From the first win to the last, it was a run of five first places in eight tries. There's an awful lot of luck involved in a run like that, and of course, I knew that at the time. However, it is also not surprising that my bolstered confidence had me starting to head out on the tournament trail a lot more seriously.

In the next few years, I played tournaments all over the country. I played in Mississippi on the Gulf Coast and in Tunica. I played in Louisiana. I played in both Chicago and Peoria, Illinois. In Nevada, I played events in Las Vegas, Laughlin, Lake Tahoe, and Jean. I played in the Bahamas. I headed to Minnesota and discovered a vibrant tournament community there. Along the way, I began to report on my exploits for a tournament magazine called *Blackjack Confidential*, along with several other regular columnists. Fans of that magazine will, without a doubt, hold fond memories of one of the best, the late Joe Butterfield, aka "GI Joseph." Joe's experiences on the tournament trail were followed by a legion of fans, me included.

So it was for quite a few years. Many of us tournament regulars came to know each other well. The appeal of the tournament trail was as much about friendship as it was about competition. The same players appeared at sizeable events no matter where they were located. Sequences of back-to-back events in Las Vegas would draw the "usual suspects" out for a week of events, where you changed venues every couple of days. Even the Vegas cab drivers started to catch on to the circuit. After you had loaded

your bags into the cab, once the driver realized you weren't headed for the airport but instead to another casino, he might well ask if you were in town for the tournaments.

Blackjack on the Internet

Sometime around 1996 I decided to create a website about blackjack. The Internet was still relatively young at the time, and there really was not very much information on blackjack available. I posted a useful tool called the Blackjack Basic Strategy Engine, where players could input the rules of their favorite casino and get an accurate basic strategy chart for that particular game. The site immediately became popular. In January of 1998, I moved the site from its original complicated address to the new domain BlackjackInfo.com. Over time, it came to dominate the search listings for the term blackjack, and became the world's most visited blackjack website, a distinction it still holds today.

In 2003, *Blackjack Confidential* magazine decided to stop publishing, and the loss was felt all over the tournament community. In that time, I decided to launch a new site to fill the need for tournament fans to share information about upcoming events. BlackjackTournaments.com was launched in November of 2003, and continues to be the best online community for blackjack tournament players. Among other popular features, you'll find an extensive schedule of upcoming tournaments, which is maintained by the members themselves. It's a terrific example of the power of community.

Blackjack's presence on the Internet certainly wasn't limited to only the informational type sites that I launched. True online gambling was there too, and it could be surprisingly profitable for the savvy player. I started playing online in 2000 and made a lot of money by playing for the generous online bonus money that was offered to players as an incentive. In all my gambling experiences, I've rarely seen such a lucrative opportunity as bonus hunting online.

Tournaments also popped up online, with Global Player casino being the first to launch true multi-player blackjack tournaments. Later there were others entering this field, such as Bet21.com (a skin of UltimateBet), Golden Palace Blackjack, and Blackjack21.com. For a while, online gambling and online tournaments seemed to really be gaining speed. Then, in late 2006, legislators in the US dealt a fatal blow to the nascent industry. Slipping the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act into a completely unrelated port security bill, Congress and President Bush made the online casinos' transfer of funds for the purposes of gambling illegal. Overnight, the entire industry changed. Billions of dollars were lost in market value, as many large publicly traded companies lost almost all their value.

On a personal note, the timing could not have been worse. Just a month before the bill was passed, I had landed a substantial celebrity sponsorship deal with Golden Palace, one of the online casinos readying a new tournament blackjack product for market. The new law doomed my deal, along with the entire product from Golden Palace. In addition, the bulk of the advertising revenue for my popular BlackjackInfo.com site was lost overnight. C'est la vie. One day soon, I hope the US is again a viable market for regulated and taxed online casinos.

Tournament Blackjack Comes to TV

In the 2000s, the Internet was not the only new frontier for tournament blackjack. Other major developments in tournament blackjack were the Las Vegas Hilton Million Dollar Blackjack tournaments, and the first coverage of tournaments on TV. The Hilton's series of monthly tournaments leading to a final event with a one million dollar first place prize reenergized tournament players everywhere, and brought back many players who hadn't competed in years. In fact, the first LVH Million winner was Eddie Rhoades, who hadn't played in many events at all in the years since he had won one of the first IGP tournaments. The Hilton tournament continued for several years with TV coverage on the Travel Channel.

However, cable network's GSN really shined the spotlight of TV on tournaments. Kevin Belinkoff was an executive at GSN at that time, and after he experienced the excitement of tournament play himself, he saw the potential for a blackjack show as offering something different from the dominance of poker shows on the air. So was born the World Series of Blackjack (WSOB). The first season featured 25 invited players, competing for a prize pool of \$250,000. Three more seasons followed, as the field expanded to 40 players and the prize pool increased to a million dollars in cash.

GSN's venture into televised blackjack also led others to consider the opportunities offered by the television market. Russ Hamilton is a World Series of Poker champion, who also has experience in tournament blackjack. After participating in one of GSN's seasons of WSOB, Russ came up with an alternative tournament format that he felt would increase the excitement level needed for TV. He launched the Ultimate Blackjack Tour (UBT), whose first season was bankrolled with a healthy prize pool of more than a million dollars. Using Hamilton's innovative Elimination Blackjack rules, the shows did indeed bring more excitement to the concept, and two seasons of shows aired on the major television network CBS.

The post-TV world of tournament blackjack

After four seasons of WSOB on the GSN network, and two seasons of UBT, televised blackjack ran into trouble. Ratings of both shows in the later seasons were lower than hoped, and the shows stopped producing future seasons.

So, why the collapse of interest? It appears that no matter how fascinating we diehards find the game, it just doesn't work for the general population. I think the main problem is that the game is just too difficult to play well. At a minimum level, playing well requires players to do basic arithmetic in their head at the table. For many players, that just sounds like too much work. Even for a TV audience aided by a skilled commentator, it takes a fair amount of mental effort to follow the strategy, and the twists and turns the game takes. That's just not what a typical television audience is looking for when they sit down to watch. Blackjack and television just aren't a good fit it would seem.

I can't guess where this trend will bottom out, or whether or when tournaments might come back in favor. Nevertheless, I'm afraid there's no doubt that for now the tournament scene is decidedly less interesting than it has been for years. Does this mean that tournaments are dead and gone? Of course not. There are still reasonable

events being held at venues around the country, but the size of most events has been scaled back. More and more casinos have either canceled their events, or switched them to invite-only affairs for their most favored players. If you're a fan of tournament blackjack, it's time now to start mentioning that fact to your casino hosts. If you are invited to fill out a survey form after visiting a casino, make a point of mentioning your interest in future blackjack tournaments.

As a person who has gotten immeasurable joy and challenge from blackjack events for many years, I hope we see yet another resurgence of tournament blackjack. For those who enjoy the challenge, there's nothing quite like it.

Review

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