

Thinking of entering your first tournament or looking for tips to improve your tournament experience?

We hope you enjoy the following list of tips
from Barney Gallassio's Tournament Crib Sheet
& compiled from members of our Mahjong Community.

BARNEY GALLASSIO'S TOURNAMENT TIPS CRIB SHEET

- **I AM NERVOUS!:**

This is your first tournament – you are going to be nervous – just be ready for that and accept it. Trust me, once you make it past your first game, your nervousness will be cut in half. Everyone, everyone, everyone feels this way in their first tournament. And when you make your first MJ you will feel GREAT!

- **KNOW THY CARD:** You should know the card very well. This is a given. If you are not very comfortable with the card (ex. groupings, sections, categories, etc.), you are probably not ready for a tournament. This does not mean you have the card memorized; it just means you need to know the hands very well.

Modern Mahjong Tournament Tips Continued

- **IS THAT A BIRD?:** All MJ sets are different. Tournament Directors often will ask their East players (East players bring their own MJ set) to bring “easy to read” tiles. If the East player thinks some of the tiles are confusing, like the One Bams or the Flowers or even some Dragons, they will start each round by showing those tiles to the players at the table. Good idea to ask to see those tiles if they are not shown to you. But again, most East players are using very basic tiles.
- **RULES ARE RULES:** You should know the rules of the game. On the day of your tournament (and sometimes even beforehand via e-mail), you will be given a rule sheet. Almost everything on that sheet should already be familiar to you. The tournament director will review the rules so any questions will be answered before the start of Round 1. The rules sheet will also tell you how to move between tables after the completion of each round. Since this is your first tournament, get there a few minutes early and read the sheet a few times, just to be sure. If you are going to play in more tournaments (and I bet you will!), it might be a good idea to play “tournament rules” at some of your home games. It makes for great practice.

Modern Mahjong Tournament Tips Continued

- **BE MINDFUL OF THE TIME:** Most tournaments require each round (4 games make up one round) to be completed in no more than 50 minutes. You should check your speed in some of your current games and see if you think you can do this. **IMPORTANT NOTE:** You CAN do it – almost everyone can. The odds of a table not finishing their round in 50 minutes is **HIGHLY** unlikely. The player designated as East at your table will assist the table in moving along, ensuring the pace is appropriate. By the way, all the East players are identified before the start of the tournament. If you did not volunteer to be East – you won't be East.
- **PACE IS KEY:** Related to the point above: be mindful of your pace. Pausing here and there is fine but pausing on every play you make could impact the timing of the game. When passing some of your tiles, you may need to make quick decisions that might not account for all possibilities – but force yourself to sacrifice some thoroughness for pace and speed. Keeping the game moving is key. It is important to remember that neither you, nor anyone else, is going to win every game!
- **YOUR SCORECARD:** Your points for each game will be recorded on your scorecard. You will be asked to review and sign off on everything written on your card. Please discuss any discrepancies right away with the East player at your table. For example, you get 10 bonus points for picking your own MJ. Check that you get the right number of points. Make sure you agree with everything on your scorecard before you leave the table. It is **VERY RARE** that anyone makes a mistake here so you don't have to worry about this one too much. The rules sheet will explain very clearly who signs off on each other's scores.

Modern Mahjong Tournament Tips Continued

- **PENALTY POINTS:** One thing that will be new for you is the concept of “penalty points.” Just like in your home, when you discard a tile that is called for Mah Jongg, you are penalized (since you pay double). In tournaments, you get penalty points for throwing an opponent’s Mah Jongg tile. The number of penalty points is based on the number of exposures that were showing for the person who gets MJ. The number of penalty points based on exposures is different throughout the country believe it or not. This is usually the first thing we look at on the rules sheet – figuring out how many penalty points will be assessed based on the number of exposures.
- **TO RACK OR NOT TO RACK:** A comment about “racking”. Whether you rack or not, you are going to find many tournament players rack their tiles. As we know, once a tile is racked, players cannot call for the last discarded tile. Whether you do this or not, I wanted to bring this to your attention as it often is a point of discussion/conversation with newer players.
- **A DEAD HAND:** This is a tournament and money/prizes are awarded to the top players. This necessitates a strict adherence to MJ rules. If you do something wrong, your hand might be called dead. So what! You will learn from your mistake and you probably will never do it again. It happened to me in my first tournament and it never happened again. [Here was my case. I called a tile for MJ and did not know I had to place that tile on top of my rack. I placed the tile with my other tiles and then put up all the tiles together showing my MJ. This was something I was not familiar with and I was called dead. First and last time for sure – and guess what, I’m a better player for it!]

Modern Mahjong Tournament Tips Continued

- **NOISE LEVEL:** Many people only play in home games. These settings are generally quiet. The room in which you will play the tournament will be much louder since you'll hear tiles being moved around, people calling out their tiles etc. If you think this could be distracting, I would suggest playing a public game somewhere - perhaps at a Meet-Up location in a public space like a Panera Bread. You have to be ready for some level of noise in your tournament play. One other word about noise. If your table ends early, please be mindful of other tables still playing. If you want to talk, please leave the playing area all together so others can concentrate on their game still in progress.
- **SHHHHHH:** Talking during the game? A few words here or there might be fine. But in all honesty, there is minimal to no chatting while the game is in play. There will be lots of time for conversation (and commiserating!) in between games and in between rounds and of course at the lunch/snack breaks. And keep your cell phone off or in silent mode while the games are being played. This last point is so essential that some tournaments have introduced a penalty for those ringing phones! It's always worth checking - especially after you come back from lunch or a break.
- **YOUR CHECKLIST:** What to bring with you? Any special dietary requirements - contact the tournament director beforehand. This way she can let you know how this will be handled for you on the day of the tournament. Otherwise all the food and snacks you'll ever need will be there. If you are bringing a mug of some sort, make sure it has a good lid to prevent spills. Dress comfortably and in layers. Have a sweater in case it gets cold. Try not to wear any clothing or jewelry that hangs off your body too much. I have seen people knock over their tiles when reaching for the wall, for example, since their jewelry or blouse sleeve was dangling too much. Some people are sensitive to very strong perfume; please be mindful of that on the day of the tournament. Have your current NMJL card with you. It is actually a requirement for play. Should you forget it, someone will have an extra.

Modern Mahjong Tournament Tips Continued

- **NEW FRIENDS:** Tournament players are nice people – usually VERY nice! Tournament Directors go out of their way to make it a great experience for everyone and that starts with having nice people play in their events. People who are NOT NICE are generally not welcomed back. If you happen to come across someone who is not nice, be yourself, play like you always do, and wait for your next table with a new group. Sometimes people seem intimidating because they are hyperfocused and perhaps rushing. Don't take this as a personal affront; assume the best about them and usually you will see their true personalities outside of the game time. By the way, if you are ever uncomfortable with anything that anyone does to you in a game make sure you let the director know. A good East player will also help ensure that everyone is being polite to one another.
- **INSIDE SCOOP:** If possible, talk to a friend who has been at the specific tournament you are playing in. She or he can provide any special insights to this event. For example, what is parking going to be like on that day? Are there any special requirements for getting in/out of the building? What were some of the things she learned the last time(s) she played here? Finally, I am sure the tournament director would not mind an email or call from you if there was anything you needed before showing up at the event. These directors are very special people and will help you in any way they can.
- **ENJOY:** Get ready to energize your game. Have fun. I'm betting good money that you will play in many more tournaments after this one!
- **FOLLOW IT:** One of the Tournament Golden Rules: Be kind to everyone – we live in a very small Mah Jongg world! I hope this was helpful. I plan to update this from time to time. If you have a suggestion for something I should add to this list, please let me know. Perhaps your recommendation will show up on a subsequent version of this crib sheet.
Thanks so much! Barney Gallassio

Modern Mahjong and Facebook.com/groups/MahjongCommunity

Here are additional tournament tips from Comments in Mahjong Community:

- Enter a Modern Mahjong Virtual Tournament that can be played online or in-person. This is a laid back setting at your convenience to get used to the tournament format and scoring. Registration information on ModernMahjong.com
- Don't stress. Seriously. Tournaments are just a great way to meet and play with other players.....and you never get better unless you play with OTHER PLAYERS. You just need to play 4 games within an hour (or 55 minutes); be comfortable with the card, and don't play as defensively as you do at home. Remember...when you make a mistake in your home game, everyone pays for your mistake. In a tournament, it's your choice to take a chance....and only you will be penalized a small number of points. Check out the tournament rules that you are attending. Most tournaments follow similar rules....but there are some hosts who like to put their own personal spin on things. They might offer special bonuses, or score slightly differently. Oh yes....and only the 1st game is daunting. The rest is a piece of cake. You are playing with others who may also be a bit nervous or excited. After the first game...its just like home.... fun, funny, at times serious.
- Plan ahead. Bring a cardigan or sweater if you are often cold. Find out in advance about breaks for lunch and drinks. Think what would make you comfortable and bring it along - some mints, a snack for during breaks away from the game. Remember to bring your National Mah Jongg League Card! Consider entering a ModernMahjong.com hybrid (online or in-person at home) tournament to get used to the idea of playing in a tournament. Practice tournament scoring.
- Check out our Events Directory on ModernMahjong.com where we post local and national tournaments.

Suggestions Continued:

- 1.) Play your best 2) Given that, expect to win zero games. Focus on the fun of playing, not on winning. If you win some games, bonus! 3) Try not to make any dumb-ass mistakes. (I made a couple, despite trying not to! This is SUCH a good reason to play tournament rules all of the time, so that playing the "right way" becomes second nature!!!!)
- Jump in! Try a local one day event to get your feet wet and I bet you will love it. 99% of the people are fabulous and I've made wonderful friends around the country from playing in tournaments. Remember that you can say wait a minute and think in a tournament as long as you don't touch it! The rules are emailed in advance and Director goes over the rules in advance.
- Suggestion: if you feel overwhelmed just pick and throw and just watch. The older players tend to be more aggressive. Younger players are usually easier. Sometimes tournaments have organizers that recognize "beginners". Just ask. Good luck!
- If you go in with the mindset that you will learn and have fun, it will be great. There are some players at all tournaments that are very competitive and that may come across to a new player as unfriendly, and some can be unfriendly - but this is just like everything else in life. Make sure you familiarize yourself with any specific tournament rules - especially on racking, calling etc. Most tournament directors will email these in advance or will make them available if you request them.
- Practice playing 4 games in 55 minutes which seems really hard at first but it's very doable. Keep the chatter to a minimum, mix the tiles quickly, and keep moving. You do learn to make decisions quicker. It's a lot of fun.

Suggestions Continued:

- I play in tournaments because I just love to play Mahjongg. Most players are nice, but if I come across a grouch, I just give thanks that I'm not that way. There's usually a nice breakfast & lunch included which makes it a pleasant day. Most tournament players play in them often and look forward to the next one. Remember that you're not stuck playing with the same people all day. You will move around and meet new players. Be sure to post again to let us know how you liked the tournament.
- 1. Read "Mah Jongg Made Easy" and really learn the rules. 2. Decide on a tournament. 3. Contact tournament director and ask for a set of special tournament rules that may differ from NMJL rules. You will then be as ready to play as anyone.
- I taught a few ladies how to play who wanted to try a tournament. I suggested, and they did, practice with me for a few days beforehand. It helped with their speed and rules. I suggest you practice, with friends for 'speed'..and playing defensively before you go..but go. Relax..do your best..and have fun. My first tournament was an experience for me. I lost badly and whined as I did it..lol I got the booby prize for being a minus score! lol I learned a lot..and have played other tournaments, since. Never won, but had fun trying. I love the game and like meeting new people. So...I'm on for two more this winter..here in Florida!
- I was so nervous with my first tournament but once I was there and was talking with others I found many were there for the first time. I was hooked and have played in other tournaments and have hosted mini tournaments at my home. So so much fun. Good luck and I wish you many jokers. And wins.

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