

ture smaller turnouts of 200 players or fewer. Here I'll also include events with larger entry fees such as an HPO Regional Main Event with a \$1,115 buy-in although, again, with no guarantee attached. These will be tournaments featuring primarily local players with very few pros flying in to play.

Small buy-in events with guaranteed prize pools

Prize pool guarantees can attract bigger fields as well as encourage players to endure having to travel great distances in order to play. A tournament with a \$1,000 buy-in that has a \$500,000 guarantee attached to it would fall in this category, as would other similar events. WSOP Circuit events, including low buy-in preliminary tournaments, don't have guarantees, but they do have the allure of a WSOP-C ring, which can still attract bigger turnouts, including some professionals, to play. Depending on the location and/or how busy the tournament calendar is, tournaments in this category can attract 800-1,000 players or even more.

The divisions aren't cut-and-dried and you could certainly argue for places where they overlap. But it makes sense to think of these three levels of lower buy-in tournaments as having certain differences worth keeping in mind, while we might generally refer to all three as comprising the "minor leagues" of poker tournaments – not unlike Triple-A, Double-A, and Single-A leagues in baseball.

Strategies for daily tournaments

Given both the fast structure and typical skill level of opponents in daily tournaments, there is usually little need to engage in a lot of intense player analysis. While there often isn't enough time to construct reliable reads on players, the fact is that most players in these tournaments are going to exhibit a lot of the same tendencies which makes targeting individual players less of a priority. Most will be recreational players and most will fall into very predictable patterns.

Differences between bigger buy-in events and daily tournaments become noticeable right from the first hand. For one thing, people generally don't register late for the daily tournaments because the fast structures make doing so such a

bad idea. There's a reason Phil Hellmuth is always showing up six levels into the events he plays, because usually the structures are slow enough to make missing early pre-ante, low-blind levels less of a concern.

Also, in bigger buy-in tournaments, the level of play is high enough now that the early levels have become much less meaningful than was the case back during the "boom" years of 2004-2006. You used to find a lot of wild play during these early levels, with players willing to stack off for several hundred big blinds after flopping top pair. That's much less common in \$10,000 buy-in events today, making showing up late a reasonable option for many pros.

Those who do show up for the first level of a \$10,000 event generally play very snug, rarely, if ever, committing many chips without having made big hands. Small suited connectors and small pocket pairs are great to play during these early levels and, in fact, can be more valuable than A-Q, A-J, or even big premium pairs like aces and kings, unless you can find a way to commit your entire stack with them before the flop.

In lower buy-in tournaments, and especially in daily tournaments, you'll see players playing every single hand from the very start. They will limp in with any two cards. In fact it's not uncommon to see the action go limp-limp-limp-limp, then a raise, then call-call-call-call all the way around the table. That, too, is hugely different from what you encounter in bigger buy-in tournaments where preflop limping almost never happens, and only very rarely will a raise elicit multiple callers before the flop.

This preflop behavior, with lots of limps and calls before the flop, can be witnessed in our other two subcategories of lower buy-in events as well. Even in some \$1,000 buy-in events, I'll come in with raises frequently and encounter players complaining in response that I'm raising too often. That's because what I'm doing is atypical.

In bigger buy-in tournaments, once the antes kick in, you'll see players open up their games and become more aggressive, a strategic shift you've seen described before if you've read other tournament strategy books. However in daily tournaments, the exact opposite often takes place once the tournament moves out of that early stage once the antes are introduced. Players go from playing every single hand to shutting down entirely, becoming tighter as the blinds and antes increase.

It won't happen right away. When the blinds are 100/200 with a 25 ante,

you'll still see some splashing around as before. But when the blinds reach perhaps 400/800 with a 100 ante, that's when players start folding to those opening raises, even min-raises to 1,600. At that stage, if a regular small stakes player 3-bets before the flop, he or she almost certainly holds one of four possible hands – A-A, K-K, Q-Q, or A-K.

Again, what I'm describing is much different from what happens in a \$10,000 tournament, and indeed, this will be the juncture in a lower buy-in event that the pro more used to dealing with multi-level thinkers sometimes runs into trouble. In big buy-in events, players 3-bet and 4-bet constantly before the flop, both to take the initiative away from their opponents and also to "cap" their opponents' ranges. The player calling a 3-bet or 4-bet in those events generally won't be stronger than J-J (that is, won't have a hand with which to re-raise back), which helps a lot when it comes to narrowing hand ranges after the flop.

But back in the daily tournament (or other lower buy-in events), light 4-bets and other fancy plays simply don't work, since the player doing the 3-betting is going to be so strong. Again, we might think of these lower buy-in tournaments as reprising 2004 poker when re-raising before the flop so severely narrowed players' ranges and when a 4-bet *always* meant A-A or K-K.

Now when players *do* call your preflop raise in a daily tournament, which will frequently happen, they're also capping their range. You won't have to worry about them having A-A or K-K (although once in a while, you will run into a player who absolutely *never* re-raises preflop, no matter what).

I can't begin to tell you how many camps I've taught in which students exhibit this exact behavior, becoming so tight in the middle stage of a tournament that narrowing the range of their possible holdings becomes a relatively trivial task. I'll say to them over and over how it's *okay* to go broke with a hand worse than pocket aces. I'll insist it's even okay to make a move once in a while. In the labs, they'll follow my advice, proudly showing when they've done something like re-raise with rags or made some other unorthodox play. Then they get into a tournament, and they simply cannot pull the trigger when there's real money on the line.

In daily tournaments, and in the majority of lower buy-in events, most players refuse to give themselves permission to go broke with less than a premium starting hand. A good strategy then, once the antes come into play, is to begin min-raising before the flop, continuation bet afterwards, and fold when faced with significant aggression.

By adopting this straightforward approach, you'll soon discover your opponents pretty much telling you what they have by how they respond. If you pay attention early in the tournament, you'll learn who raises the flop with top pair, who raises with two pair or better, and who raises or calls with draws. Those tendencies are likely to remain the same later, so when you are met with resistance to your preflop opens or continuation bets later, you'll know whether to fold.

People *do* bluff in these tournaments, but the times when they do so are usually limited to a couple of specific instances. Firstly, on the turn after you have checked back the flop rather than continuation bet. Secondly if you continuation bet the flop and then check back the turn, they'll bluff the river. It's very rare to run into players in these tournaments who check-raise the flop or turn as a bluff. Usually a check-raise is an unambiguous signal that your opponent has a strong hand. Meanwhile, when players bet into you from out of position after having called your preflop opening raise, they are also usually strong. Again, watch for patterns early on associated with these moves, as players generally don't change from their usual habits in these situations later.

The great majority of players in these events play very "A-B-C", betting or raising when they have a strong hand and checking or folding when they don't. They are not going to be very deceptive. They will try to steal your blinds and antes occasionally, but usually only if you've shown weakness. On the other hand, in \$10,000 events, check-raise bluffing and making other creative plays are needed both to balance your range and to deceive your opponents. There, you're running into players who are "third-level" thinkers and above, but almost everyone you face in lower buy-in tournaments is going to be either "first-level" (focused only on their own hole cards) or "second-level" (focused also on your hand). Players in daily tournaments and other lower buy-in events will not be coming back over the top of you with Q-5 on an A-10-2 flop. It just is not going to happen. However, that is always going to be a possibility in a higher buy-in "pro"-level event.

One other useful strategy in small tournaments is just to call your opponents' raises before the flop. I actually don't 3-bet a great deal in the smaller events. You'll find that for a lot of players in these tournaments, once they have raised before the flop, will call a lot of 3-bets even with fairly suspect hands just because they have already committed chips and can't bring themselves to fold without seeing a flop. If I do 3-bet, then, it is generally only for value, not as a

bluff or to take action away, because people will call re-raises with hands like A-7 or A-6 from out of position (the kind of thing that is a disastrous play in any tournament).

Calling preflop raises with position then allows you to take advantage of your opponents' straightforward play after the flop. When the flop comes and they hit top pair, for instance, they have an extremely hard time letting go, which makes it relatively easy for you to decide what to do in response. If you manage to make something better than top pair and you see your opponent calling your postflop bets or raises, you're in a position to go for extreme value, increasing the bet-sizing liberally, knowing your opponent is not going to fold.

Small buy-in events *without* guaranteed prize pools

Most of what I describe above with regard to daily tournaments will still apply once you find yourself in tournaments with higher buy-ins (say \$300 up to \$1,500) that don't feature guarantees and thus usually will have smaller fields and not a lot of pros traveling to them to play. Even so, there are a few additional ideas that come into play once you move from the daily tournaments to these slightly larger events.

One big difference is the need to devote some effort to player profiling. By that, I mean you'll have to move away from assuming nearly everyone plays in a certain way (as you can largely get away with in the daily tournaments) and start paying closer attention to how each player is playing, then develop strategies that are suited to counter each player.

In daily tournaments such efforts are mostly wasted for two reasons. Firstly, most of the players that you are likely to encounter play a very similar style (most are the same player, really, just in different skins). Secondly, the rapid structures don't really make it worthwhile to start developing more nuanced profiles of individual players.

But in these small buy-in tournaments with non-guaranteed prize pools – the kind of tournaments I'll sometimes refer to as “regional tournaments” –

you're often going to encounter some more creativity from players around the table, thus making it necessary to pay closer attention to what each player is doing and adapt accordingly. The min-raise plus continuation bet “rinse and repeat” formula that often will get you deep in a daily tournament can't be practiced as easily here because of the greater variety of player types and skill levels you'll be facing. Some of these players will be more advanced and sophisticated and also more aggressive, so you'll need to sort out early on which opponents are more savvy and which are less so.

The business of profiling players obviously requires watching how they play their hands, but for me that work often begins even before the first hand is dealt. You'd be surprised how much you can learn about players, especially in these smaller buy-in tournaments, just by their appearance and how they communicate with you or others at the table.

For example, if I see a player at such an event who is carrying a backpack, that immediately suggests to me the player has at least some experience, likely more than the average player. Players with backpacks know that by playing a tournament they might be in the poker room all day and so have come prepared for that eventuality by bringing snacks and other needed items. In the mental tally I start making right away before a tournament begins, I'll give those players a “+1” in the experience column and give them credit for being a little more advanced than others. Then, of course, I'll pay attention to how they play hands during the first couple of levels to see if they confirm that early expectation I've made of them.

I'll look also at how players are dressed for the tournament. Sometimes a player wearing a flashy Rolex watch or something similarly conspicuous is going to be looser or less disciplined as a player. (This will also happen in higher buy-in events now and then.) At these regional tournaments you'll also occasionally find players who will signal to you just by what they are wearing that they are a local. For example, I was recently in a tournament in Columbus where I saw several Ohio State jerseys, which made it relatively easy to assume those players hadn't traveled very far to play the event.

Meanwhile, if I see a player wearing an Ohio State jersey at a tournament down in Florida, I won't make such an assumption. In fact, I'll be curious to find out from that player if indeed he's traveled some distance just to play the event. Did he come because of the value he perceived the tournament as having for