

Chapter Two

Fundamental Poker Concepts

For most sitngo formats understanding raise-sizing, ICM and short-stacked strategies are the key factors in becoming successful. However, in formats where more play is required whilst the blinds are still low – such as heads-up and six-max games and high-stakes games where the blinds are deeper or longer (for example a Step 6 satellite on Pokerstars starts with 150 big blinds and 10 minute levels) – a more general understanding of poker theory is necessary. This will also allow you to play more profitably in other formats whilst the blinds are low.

Therefore we will now look at some fundamental poker concepts that will inform your decision making in the time before the blinds get very high and ensure that you have an understanding of deeper-stacked poker theory that will allow you to outmanoeuvre your opponents whilst avoiding making costly mistakes yourself. Even in the standard sitngo formats this is now vital, since the advances in ICM programs and availability of information on sitngos in recent years has brought most players much closer together in terms of general and late game strategy.

Tournament Strategy

The important facts to remember when playing any tournament or sitngo format are that you will have a limited chip stack and be playing relatively shallow-stacked compared to a cash game, where stacks are deep and can be replenished

at any time. For this reason, cash game players, and anyone else wishing to understand the differences in strategy that they will need to implement when playing tournaments or sitngos, will have to reconsider the number of hands they wish to play, and the way in which they play them based on these facts. The adjustments necessary are however fairly simple to understand and implement.

First, because your chip stack is finite and losing a significant percentage of it will increasingly limit your ability to speculate in hands and maximize value and leverage against other players (since you will have less big blinds and be able to win less chips from them) you should therefore be cautious about playing hands that may have only a very small positive expectation. Instead be prepared to wait for better situations if you have time, rather than gambling for a large percentage of your stack early. Of course in some formats and situations the amount of time you can wait may be limited, or you may feel the need to accumulate chips early in order to have a chance of a good result, and therefore be more willing to gamble in marginal spots, but you should still always try to consider these options consciously and make a decision based on them.

Second, try to minimize the variance in the hands that you do play so that you maximize your opportunities to accumulate chips (at least until you have a large stack). For example, whereas raising in early position with a small pair or suited connectors might be standard play in a six-max cash game with deep stacks, it may be best avoided in a six-max sitngo. Similarly, while re-raising light in a cash game in position with many suited or connected hands is now a standard strategy, in a sitngo it is less advisable as risking elimination in a marginal spot in the early game is not desirable due to ICM considerations. Furthermore, it may cause you to miss better opportunities to accumulate chips later.

There are also some fundamental differences between different tournament formats that are important to understand and result in different tournament strategies being favoured. An example is the difference between a standard sitngo and a multi-table tournament. In the latter you will usually face large fields and need to accumulate many chips to even make the money (since only 10-15% of the field get paid) then need to accumulate even more to have a shot at making the final table. For this reason, good MTT players (especially online ones where the structures are generally faster) are often much more willing to gamble in marginal spots to accumulate chips in the early stages so that they can use them to their advantage later.

You can often show a profit in sitngos without accumulating several times your starting stack (for example, in a double-or-nothing game you may barely need to

win any hands if other players are knocked out quickly). Avoiding marginal spots even where ICM suggests them to be profitable will often be the correct strategy if you have a good chance of making the money without gambling. Your prospects of doing this depend on the format you are playing, so in a large field or winner-takes-all sitngo you might revert to the more aggressive strategy.

Protection Versus Value

Anyone who has observed or listened to both tournament and cash game players will know that there are significant theoretical differences in how they approach the game and the play of hands post-flop. This means that players successful in one area often struggle to adapt to the other. Cash game players are usually more sophisticated in post-flop skills such as hand-reading and planning because they have more experience in these areas and play with deeper stacks, but even they will need to make some adjustments in their post-flop game in order to succeed in tournaments.

The reasons for this are based on the general principles of tournament strategy that we have already discussed, i.e. that you cannot rebuy in tournaments when you lose some or all of your chips and that you generally play with shorter stacks than in cash games. Because of these facets it therefore becomes more correct to protect your hand by betting and raising in certain situations in order to take the pot down at once. In a cash game you might prefer pot control or try to gain additional value, but in tournament play you can less afford to be outdrawn and the ratio of chips in your stack to those in the pot is lower than in a cash game, making them more valuable – especially since you cannot rebuy and they will give you extra leverage and time.

In a cash game you can rebuy and the stack-to-pot ratio is higher, so it is usually better play to try to gain value from worse hands through calling or pot-controlling. This protects your stack by avoiding building big pots in situations where worse hands are likely to fold and better ones stay in. Here the utility value of the extra chips is usually irrelevant since you can rebuy if you lose and your goal is to make the most money in the long term rather than take pots down early, even if it results in some tough decisions or bad beats.

Of course these are subtle differences, and there are both situations in tournaments where you will be happy to slow play and risk being outdrawn to gain extra

value, and situations in cash games where you may be betting a hand for both value and protection or simply to try and take the pot down. But this concept forms the basis of the difference in strategy between tournament and cash game play and trying to understand and apply it in marginal situations will help you to move successfully between the different disciplines and develop a more nuanced understanding of poker theory in general.

Continuation Betting Versus Pot Control

Continuation betting refers to making a bet which continues your prior aggression in a hand – typically when you have raised before the flop and been called – in an attempt to use this momentum to take the pot down. Usually you will have missed the flop or flopped a marginal hand and for this reason most players tend to continuation bet and try to win the pot at once rather than trying to showdown a marginal or weak hand. They also bet their stronger hands too in the hope of getting action.

This strategy tends to work best in sitngos and faster-paced tournaments where all players are fairly short-stacked and play straightforwardly. This contrasts with deeper-stacked cash games and tournament strategy where players are more apt to pot control by checking the flop a higher percentage of the time in order to get their hand to showdown more cheaply. This avoids building a large pot with a marginal hand and thus protects their stack.

However, pot control is less effective when short-stacked for a number of reasons. Firstly, with stacks that are very short for most of the tournament it is not very effective at limiting the proportion of your stack that you can lose, since even after checking the flop your opponent can still usually threaten most of your stack by betting the turn and river. Next, whilst players in cash games are often more likely to check down hands like ace-high or weak pairs, players in tournaments tend to fight more for chips and react to another player checking back by betting the next street in an attempt to win the pot or simply as a reflex action. This is fine if you have a hand with which you are comfortable calling down, but calling down with a marginal hand for a large percentage of your stack can risk ruining your tournament. This can be especially disastrous in sitngos where you do not need to ac-

accumulate many chips – unless you are sure it is a profitable line and that you are happy to induce bets from your opponent.

Finally, because of general tournament strategy and the flat payout structures of most sitngos, players are far less likely to play back at you than in a deep-stacked cash game or multi-table tournament. This makes continuation betting a more effective strategy even with marginal hands like bottom or middle pair, since you will rarely be bluffed or floated by a worse hand and you deny your opponent the chance to bluff you later.

Of course however you should not be continuation betting 100% of the time even against very weak opponents and there are some situations where pot control becomes more important even in sitngos. In heads-up sitngos, for example, players will often have or make marginal hands. For this reason, and also the lack of ICM considerations to constrain your opponents' play, you should be much more wary of being floated or check-raise bluffed and thus pot control more. You will also be playing with deeper stacks for the most part in this format and the lack of ICM considerations means you can call down more easily since your only concern is being unable to rebuy.

Similarly in full-ring and six-max sitngos pot control may be useful in certain situations. Against very tight regulars you may wish to check reasonably strong hands back for deception and pot control if you are unlikely to get three streets of value from them, or bet the flop and check the turn for pot control, then bet the river. Against more aggressive or maniacal opponents – who are likely to give you some tough decisions – or against aggressive six-max players, you may also revert to pot control in a conventional fashion whilst the stacks are still deep and you flop a marginal hand on a co-ordinated board.

Finally you may also elect to not continuation bet in some circumstances where you have missed the flop but it is very coordinated and the chances of it having hit your opponent are so great that it is not worth bluffing since you will get so few folds. This is typically the case when regular players flat call your raises in certain situations and are very likely to have speculative hands that connect with boards that contain a lot of middling and/or suited cards, or against weaker players who are very loose and rarely fold. Here you may instead elect to try a delayed continuation bet on the turn if they check back the flop, or simply decide to surrender the hand. However, if you often make this play you should also sometimes check-raise a big hand or draw here in order to balance your play.