

Lucky Dog Poker: Players ask how to survive tournament money bubble

by Russ_Scott

Readers on opposite sides of the country have questions this week about making it to the money in tournament poker.

Q: I was in a \$240 no-limit hold 'em tournament with 124 entries and 10,000-chip starting stacks. With about 40 players left and blinds at 3,000-6,000, I was the leader with 149,500 chips. But before that level ended, I busted out! What's your opinion of how I played these hands at the end? €” Will B. in Roanoke, Va.

A: What a bummer, Will, to build up a nice chip count and then be eliminated so quickly!

The critical hand of those you described had you in the big blind (6,000) heads-up against a guy in the small blind (3,000). He held about 50,000 chips to your 150,000. Here's a recap:

He raised pre-flop to 20,000; you called with K-Q offsuit. You checked behind him on a flop of J-10-8. The four of clubs on the turn added a club draw to your possibilities, but he moved all-in for 30,000. You called. The river card was a blank and he won with his pocket pair of red sevens.

This hand bumped you out of the chip lead and started a terminal downward slide. But did you play it badly?

I don't mind your pre-flop call. If he has a small pair, which you correctly assessed, you're behind 46 percent to 53 percent. But there is 34,000 in the pot, counting antes, and it only costs you 14,000 to see the flop. Folding would have been safe but weak; pushing all-in would have been aggressive, but I'm certain he would have called.

The flop wasn't horrible. You still had six outs €” three kings and three queens €” to catch a likely winning overpair, plus eight new outs €” any nine or ace €” to make the straight. Unless he held pocket eights or a hand such as J-10 or J-9, you were in decent shape.

"I checked behind him wanting to see another card," you wrote. "I think the right play was to move all-in on the flop, but I was playing it safe with the large chip stack."

This was the key point in the hand. Your instinct to move all-in was sound. He showed weakness by checking. You would have seized control of the pot (as a 57 percent favorite), forcing him to make a tough decision for the rest of his chips. He might have folded.

Curiously, your decision to play it safe by checking also was sound. You didn't have a hand yet and couldn't be certain he would fold if you bet.

The four of clubs on the turn made it pretty easy to call his all-in bet. Not many players could lay down a hand with 21 outs to a flush, straight and two overcards. You were a 45.45 percent underdog, but getting better than two-to-one pot odds.

Summing up: This was a tricky hand, and your moves with a strong drawing hand all were reasonable. The coin-flip hand just went his way.

Two other hands you mentioned involved playing marginal cards against short-stacked players' all-in moves pre-flop, trying to knock them out with the money bubble still about 15 bust-outs away. You lost with J-3 against A-K and Q-8 suited against pocket fours.

Both plays were OK, based on pot odds. However, having a good chip stack doesn't make you the official "terminator." A rule of thumb holding marginal cards: If it costs more than 5 percent of your stack to make the play, just fold and wait for a better spot.

You said you sent me the e-mail because you "wanted to learn from the experience rather than just say, 'Oh man, I am so unlucky,' like some players do." That, partner, is the perfect attitude!

Q: Is it bad luck or a flaw in my game that finds me often on the money bubble and not in the cash when playing sit-and-go tournaments? â€” Jim T. in Las Vegas.

A: That's a tough one to answer without specifics, Jim, but here's my four-phase strategy for one-table and two-table sit-and-go events with only three or four players getting paid:

â€” Play only premium hands the first three levels and come in raising. The cheap blinds aren't worth trying to steal. Observe your opponents closely.

â€” With larger blinds now, step on the gas wisely, usually only from late position. Fold decent hands if you think you're beat.

â€” Protect a tall stack when you're really close to the money. If short-stacked, move all-in with a good hand against a single opponent and fold everything else. Avoid mistakes.

â€” Once in the money, open up your game and go for the gold!

E-mail your poker questions and comments to russ@luckydogpoker.com for use in future columns.

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