

— ULTIMATE — POKER TOURNAMENT — GUIDE —



The Ultimate Poker Tournament Guide

Strategy, Discipline, and Mastering the Game

Poker tournaments are one of the most exciting and challenging formats of the game. Every hand presents a new decision point, every stage of the tournament brings shifting dynamics, and every player across the table is a puzzle waiting to be solved.

Over the past two decades, I've played thousands of live and online tournaments at every stake imaginable—burning out early, winning major events, and everything in between. Through those experiences, I've learned one thing: consistent success does not come from gimmicks or gut feelings. It comes from strategy, discipline, and constantly improving your decision-making process.

This guide distills what I've learned into a practical, easy-to-follow format. Whether you are just starting out or looking to sharpen your edge for the next big score, you will find strategies here to elevate your tournament game.

Why This Guide Matters

Poker isn't just a game of cards—it's a battle of logic, timing, and adaptability. In a tournament setting, you're not just playing a hand; you're navigating changing stack depths, adjusting to opponent tendencies, and making high-pressure decisions under shifting incentives.

Unlike cash games, where chips directly translate to money, tournament chips are fluid in value depending on the stage of play. That's why concepts like ICM (Independent Chip Model), stack leverage, and survival strategy are critical—and often misunderstood.

This guide will walk you through all the essentials:

- **Preflop strategy and range construction**
- **Postflop concepts, including c-betting, turn probes, and bluff catching**
- **Opponent exploitation techniques**
- **Advanced ICM dynamics and final table tactics**
- **Mindset mastery and post-session review habits**

We've also included **decision-making flowcharts** to help simplify your thought process in real-time, as well as practical tips you can implement right away in your next tournament.

No matter where you are in your poker journey, this guide is built to help you think deeper, play better, and win more often.

Let's dive in and take your tournament game to the next level.

— *Jonathan Little*

Preflop play sets the foundation for the rest of the hand. Understanding optimal opening ranges and responses to raises will help you navigate different situations effectively.

20bb Early Position

20bb Middle Position

20bb Late Position

40bb Early Position

40bb Middle Position

40bb Late Position

60bb Early Position

60bb Middle Position

60bb Late Position

A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9	A10	A11	A12	A13	A14	A15	A16	A17	A18	A19	A20	A21	A22	A23	A24	A25	A26	A27	A28	A29	A30	A31	A32	A33	A34	A35	A36	A37	A38	A39	A40	A41	A42	A43	A44	A45	A46	A47	A48	A49	A50	A51	A52	A53	A54	A55	A56	A57	A58	A59	A60	A61	A62	A63	A64	A65	A66	A67	A68	A69	A70	A71	A72	A73	A74	A75	A76	A77	A78	A79	A80	A81	A82	A83	A84	A85	A86	A87	A88	A89	A90	A91	A92	A93	A94	A95	A96	A97	A98	A99	A100
B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9	B10	B11	B12	B13	B14	B15	B16	B17	B18	B19	B20	B21	B22	B23	B24	B25	B26	B27	B28	B29	B30	B31	B32	B33	B34	B35	B36	B37	B38	B39	B40	B41	B42	B43	B44	B45	B46	B47	B48	B49	B50	B51	B52	B53	B54	B55	B56	B57	B58	B59	B60	B61	B62	B63	B64	B65	B66	B67	B68	B69	B70	B71	B72	B73	B74	B75	B76	B77	B78	B79	B80	B81	B82	B83	B84	B85	B86	B87	B88	B89	B90	B91	B92	B93	B94	B95	B96	B97	B98	B99	B100
C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	C13	C14	C15	C16	C17	C18	C19	C20	C21	C22	C23	C24	C25	C26	C27	C28	C29	C30	C31	C32	C33	C34	C35	C36	C37	C38	C39	C40	C41	C42	C43	C44	C45	C46	C47	C48	C49	C50	C51	C52	C53	C54	C55	C56	C57	C58	C59	C60	C61	C62	C63	C64	C65	C66	C67	C68	C69	C70	C71	C72	C73	C74	C75	C76	C77	C78	C79	C80	C81	C82	C83	C84	C85	C86	C87	C88	C89	C90	C91	C92	C93	C94	C95	C96	C97	C98	C99	C100
D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8	D9	D10	D11	D12	D13	D14	D15	D16	D17	D18	D19	D20	D21	D22	D23	D24	D25	D26	D27	D28	D29	D30	D31	D32	D33	D34	D35	D36	D37	D38	D39	D40	D41	D42	D43	D44	D45	D46	D47	D48	D49	D50	D51	D52	D53	D54	D55	D56	D57	D58	D59	D60	D61	D62	D63	D64	D65	D66	D67	D68	D69	D70	D71	D72	D73	D74	D75	D76	D77	D78	D79	D80	D81	D82	D83	D84	D85	D86	D87	D88	D89	D90	D91	D92	D93	D94	D95	D96	D97	D98	D99	D100
E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12	E13	E14	E15	E16	E17	E18	E19	E20	E21	E22	E23	E24	E25	E26	E27	E28	E29	E30	E31	E32	E33	E34	E35	E36	E37	E38	E39	E40	E41	E42	E43	E44	E45	E46	E47	E48	E49	E50	E51	E52	E53	E54	E55	E56	E57	E58	E59	E60	E61	E62	E63	E64	E65	E66	E67	E68	E69	E70	E71	E72	E73	E74	E75	E76	E77	E78	E79	E80	E81	E82	E83	E84	E85	E86	E87	E88	E89	E90	E91	E92	E93	E94	E95	E96	E97	E98	E99	E100
F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	F12	F13	F14	F15	F16	F17	F18	F19	F20	F21	F22	F23	F24	F25	F26	F27	F28	F29	F30	F31	F32	F33	F34	F35	F36	F37	F38	F39	F40	F41	F42	F43	F44	F45	F46	F47	F48	F49	F50	F51	F52	F53	F54	F55	F56	F57	F58	F59	F60	F61	F62	F63	F64	F65	F66	F67	F68	F69	F70	F71	F72	F73	F74	F75	F76	F77	F78	F79	F80	F81	F82	F83	F84	F85	F86	F87	F88	F89	F90	F91	F92	F93	F94	F95	F96	F97	F98	F99	F100
G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9	G10	G11	G12	G13	G14	G15	G16	G17	G18	G19	G20	G21	G22	G23	G24	G25	G26	G27	G28	G29	G30	G31	G32	G33	G34	G35	G36	G37	G38	G39	G40	G41	G42	G43	G44	G45	G46	G47	G48	G49	G50	G51	G52	G53	G54	G55	G56	G57	G58	G59	G60	G61	G62	G63	G64	G65	G66	G67	G68	G69	G70	G71	G72	G73	G74	G75	G76	G77	G78	G79	G80	G81	G82	G83	G84	G85	G86	G87	G88	G89	G90	G91	G92	G93	G94	G95	G96	G97	G98	G99	G100
H1	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6	H7	H8	H9	H10	H11	H12	H13	H14	H15	H16	H17	H18	H19	H20	H21	H22	H23	H24	H25	H26	H27	H28	H29	H30	H31	H32	H33	H34	H35	H36	H37	H38	H39	H40	H41	H42	H43	H44	H45	H46	H47	H48	H49	H50	H51	H52	H53	H54	H55	H56	H57	H58	H59	H60	H61	H62	H63	H64	H65	H66	H67	H68	H69	H70	H71	H72	H73	H74	H75	H76	H77	H78	H79	H80	H81	H82	H83	H84	H85	H86	H87	H88	H89	H90	H91	H92	H93	H94	H95	H96	H97	H98	H99	H100
I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9	I10	I11	I12	I13	I14	I15	I16	I17	I18	I19	I20	I21	I22	I23	I24	I25	I26	I27	I28	I29	I30	I31	I32	I33	I34	I35	I36	I37	I38	I39	I40	I41	I42	I43	I44	I45	I46	I47	I48	I49	I50	I51	I52	I53	I54	I55	I56	I57	I58	I59	I60	I61	I62	I63	I64	I65	I66	I67	I68	I69	I70	I71	I72	I73	I74	I75	I76	I77	I78	I79	I80	I81	I82	I83	I84	I85	I86	I87	I88	I89	I90	I91	I92	I93	I94	I95	I96	I97	I98	I99	I100
J1	J2	J3	J4	J5	J6	J7	J8	J9	J10	J11	J12	J13	J14	J15	J16	J17	J18	J19	J20	J21	J22	J23	J24	J25	J26	J27	J28	J29	J30	J31	J32	J33	J34	J35	J36	J37	J38	J39	J40	J41	J42	J43	J44	J45	J46	J47	J48	J49	J50	J51	J52	J53	J54	J55	J56	J57	J58	J59	J60	J61	J62	J63	J64	J65	J66	J67	J68	J69	J70	J71	J72	J73	J74	J75	J76	J77	J78	J79	J80	J81	J82	J83	J84	J85	J86	J87	J88	J89	J90	J91	J92	J93	J94	J95	J96	J97	J98	J99	J100
K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	K6	K7	K8	K9	K10	K11	K12	K13	K14	K15	K16	K17	K18	K19	K20	K21	K22	K23	K24	K25	K26	K27	K28	K29	K30	K31	K32	K33	K34	K35	K36	K37	K38	K39	K40	K41	K42	K43	K44	K45	K46	K47	K48	K49	K50	K51	K52	K53	K54	K55	K56	K57	K58	K59	K60	K61	K62	K63	K64	K65	K66	K67	K68	K69	K70	K71	K72	K73	K74	K75	K76	K77	K78	K79	K80	K81	K82	K83	K84	K85	K86	K87	K88	K89	K90	K91	K92	K93	K94	K95	K96	K97	K98	K99	K100
L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9	L10	L11	L12	L13	L14	L15	L16	L17	L18	L19	L20	L21	L22	L23	L24	L25	L26	L27	L28	L29	L30	L31	L32	L33	L34	L35	L36	L37	L38	L39	L40	L41	L42	L43	L44	L45	L46	L47	L48	L49	L50	L51	L52	L53	L54	L55	L56	L57	L58	L59	L60	L61	L62	L63	L64	L65	L66	L67	L68	L69	L70	L71	L72	L73	L74	L75	L76	L77	L78	L79	L80	L81	L82	L83	L84	L85	L86	L87	L88	L89	L90	L91	L92	L93	L94	L95	L96	L97	L98	L99	L100
M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18	M19	M20	M21	M22	M23	M24	M25	M26	M27	M28	M29	M30	M31	M32	M33	M34	M35	M36	M37	M38	M39	M40	M41	M42	M43	M44	M45	M46	M47	M48	M49	M50	M51	M52	M53	M54	M55	M56	M57	M58	M59	M60	M61	M62	M63	M64	M65	M66	M67	M68	M69	M70	M71	M72	M73	M74	M75	M76	M77	M78	M79	M80	M81	M82	M83	M84	M85	M86	M87	M88	M89	M90	M91	M92	M93	M94	M95	M96	M97	M98	M99	M100
N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	N7	N8	N9	N10	N11	N12	N13	N14	N15	N16	N17	N18	N19	N20	N21	N22	N23	N24	N25	N26	N27	N28	N29	N30	N31	N32	N33	N34	N35	N36	N37	N38	N39	N40	N41	N42	N43	N44	N45	N46	N47	N48	N49	N50	N51	N52	N53	N54	N55	N56	N57	N58	N59	N60	N61	N62	N63	N64	N65	N66	N67	N68	N69	N70	N71	N72	N73	N74	N75	N76	N77	N78	N79	N80	N81	N82	N83	N84	N85	N86	N87	N88	N89	N90	N91	N92	N93	N94	N95	N96	N97	N98	N99	N100
O1	O2	O3	O4	O5	O6	O7	O8	O9	O10	O11	O12	O13	O14	O15	O16	O17	O18	O19	O20	O21	O22	O23	O24	O25	O26	O27	O28	O29	O30	O31	O32	O33	O34	O35	O36	O37	O38	O39	O40	O41	O42	O43	O44	O45	O46	O47	O48	O49	O50	O51	O52	O53	O54	O55	O56	O57	O58	O59	O60	O61	O62	O63	O64	O65	O66	O67	O68	O69	O70	O71	O72	O73	O74	O75	O76	O77	O78	O79	O80	O81	O82	O83	O84	O85	O86	O87	O88	O89	O90	O91	O92	O93	O94	O95	O96	O97	O98	O99	O100
P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	P21	P22	P23	P24	P25	P26	P27	P28	P29	P30	P31	P32	P33	P34	P35	P36	P37	P38	P39	P40	P41	P42	P43	P44	P45	P46	P47	P48	P49	P50	P51	P52	P53	P54	P55	P56	P57	P58	P59	P60	P61	P62	P63	P64	P65	P66	P67	P68	P69	P70	P71	P72	P73	P74	P75	P76	P77	P78	P79	P80	P81	P82	P83	P84	P85	P86	P87	P88	P89	P90	P91	P92	P93	P94	P95	P96	P97	P98	P99	P100
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q27	Q28	Q29	Q30	Q31	Q32	Q33	Q34	Q35	Q36	Q37	Q38	Q39	Q40	Q41	Q42	Q43	Q44	Q45	Q46	Q47	Q48	Q49	Q50	Q51	Q52	Q53	Q54	Q55	Q56	Q57	Q58	Q59	Q60	Q61	Q62	Q63	Q64	Q65	Q66	Q67	Q68	Q69	Q70	Q71	Q72	Q73	Q74	Q75	Q76	Q77	Q78	Q79	Q80	Q81	Q82	Q83	Q84	Q85	Q86	Q87	Q88	Q89	Q90	Q91	Q92	Q93	Q94	Q95	Q96	Q97	Q98	Q99	Q100
R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14	R15	R16	R17	R18	R19	R20	R21	R22	R23	R24	R25	R26	R27	R28	R29	R30	R31	R32	R33	R34	R35	R36	R37	R38	R39	R40	R41	R42	R43	R44	R45	R46	R47	R48	R49	R50	R51	R52	R53	R54	R55	R56	R57	R58	R59	R60	R61	R62	R63	R64	R65	R																																		

Responding to Raises

In poker, how you react to a raise can significantly impact your win rate. The best approach depends on multiple factors, including your position, hand strength, opponent tendencies, and stack depth. Below are key tips to refine your response strategy:

- **3-Bet Light vs. Frequent Openers** – Use hands like suited connectors and small pocket pairs to apply pressure on aggressive opponents.
- **Call in Position** – Hands like pocket pairs, suited aces, and Broadway cards play well in position, allowing you to extract value and control the pot.
- **Defend the Big Blind** – Given the favorable pot odds, widen your calling range, but adjust based on stack depth and opponent tendencies.
- **Consider the Raiser's Position** – Early position raises signal strength, while late position raises are more likely to be steals, influencing your response.

Postflop Strategy

Postflop play requires a balance between aggression and control. Knowing when to continue betting, slow down, or fold is crucial for long-term profitability.

C-Betting Decisions

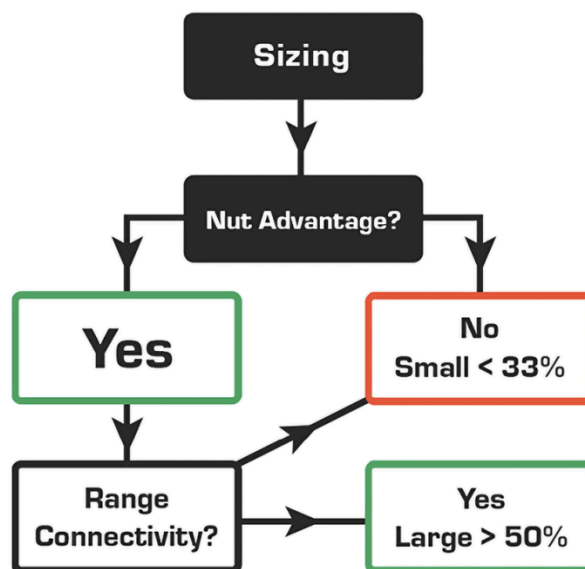
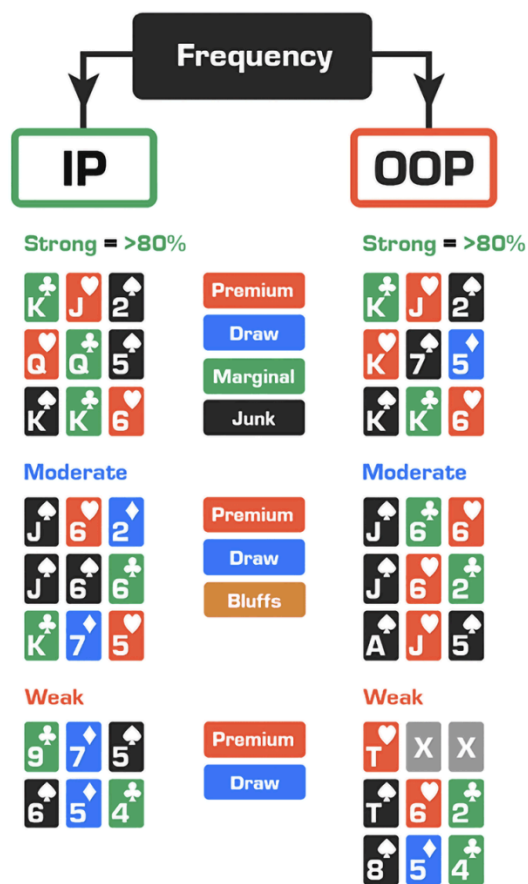
A continuation bet (c-bet) is a strategic move where the preflop aggressor bets on the flop, regardless of whether they've improved their hand, to maintain initiative and apply pressure on opponents. Mastering c-betting involves understanding factors such as position, board texture, range advantage, and bet sizing to optimize its effectiveness.

C-Betting Fundamentals: Position, Board Texture & Range Advantage

- **Play in Position Whenever Possible:** C-betting in position provides more control and flexibility, allowing you to apply pressure effectively. Out-of-position c-bets require more caution due to your opponent's positional advantage.
- **Evaluate Board Texture Before C-Betting:** C-bet frequently on **dry boards** (e.g., K-7-2 rainbow) where opponents are less likely to connect. Slow down on **coordinated boards** (e.g., 9-8-7 with two suits) where opponents can easily have draws.
- **Leverage Range Advantage:** If the flop favors your perceived range, c-bet aggressively. If it benefits your opponent's range, proceed cautiously or consider checking.

Bet Sizing & Adjustments Based on Opponents

- **Adjust Bet Sizing for Maximum Effectiveness:** Use **small bets (around 25%)** on dry boards to maintain fold equity while risking less. Use **larger bets (66% or more)** on wetter boards to charge draws and protect value hands.
 - **Adapt to Opponents & Game Context**
 - Against players who frequently **fold to c-bets**, increase your bluffing frequency.
 - Against **sticky opponents**, focus on value betting stronger hands.
 - In **multi-way pots**, reduce your c-betting frequency unless you have a strong hand.



Watch C-Betting Decisions Breakdown

Jonathan Little

\$7 Million Tournament Winnings

14 Career Titles

2 Time WPT Champion

Discord Community

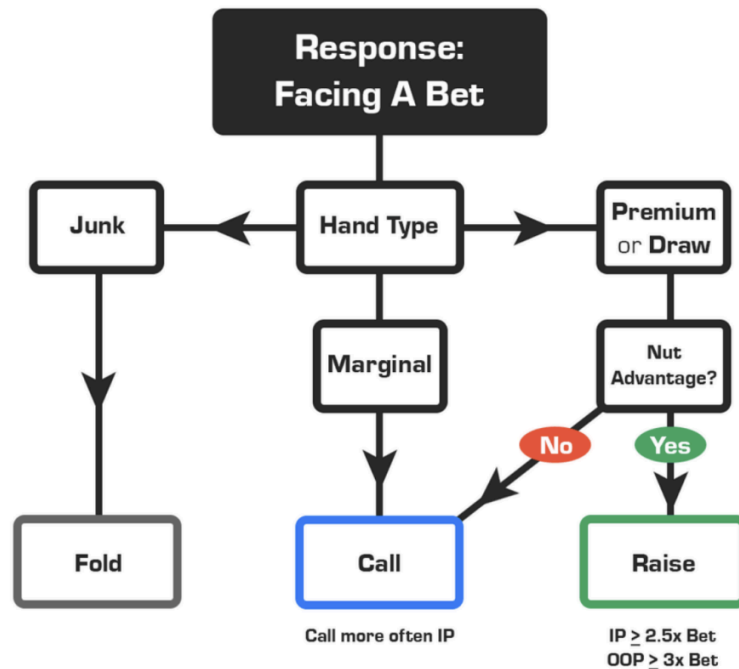
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Facing a Bet Decisions

When you face a flop continuation bet (c-bet), it's important to decide whether to call, raise, or fold based on your hand strength, position, and the board texture. Many players c-bet with a wide range, so understanding how to respond effectively can give you a big edge. The Facing a Flop C-Bet Flowchart walks you through the key factors to consider — like whether the board favors your range, how your hand fits into your overall strategy, and how aggressive your opponent is. Use it to navigate tricky flop situations and make smart, strategic decisions.



The deeper the SPR, the more premium the hand needs to be to raise.

Watch Facing a Bet Decisions Breakdown

The screenshot shows a video player interface. On the left, the flowchart from the previous section is displayed. On the right, a video thumbnail features Jonathan Little, a professional poker player. Below the thumbnail, his name "Jonathan Little" is listed along with his social media handles. To the right of his name, a list of his achievements is shown: "\$7 Million Tournament Winnings", "14 Career Titles", and "2 Time WPT Champion". At the bottom of the video player, the text "Cash Game Masterclass" and "POKERCOACHING.COM" are visible, along with a Discord community link.

Turn Probe Decisions

A turn probe is a bet made out of position on the turn after the preflop aggressor checks back the flop. This situation often indicates weakness from your opponent, giving you an opportunity to apply pressure. The Turn Probe Flowchart helps you determine whether to fire a bet based on factors like board texture, range advantage, and potential for fold equity. By following the decision points in the chart, you'll learn when a turn probe is a profitable play and build good ranges in game.

Turn Probes		OOP Range Disadvantage	
		Strong	Weak
			
OOP Turn Card	Bad 	Rarely Overbet	Rarely Bet Large
	Good 	Sometimes Overbet	Often Bet Small

Watch Turn Probe Decisions Breakdown

Turn Probes

OOP Range Disadvantage

Strong

Weak





OOP Turn Card

Bad 

Good 

Rarely Overbet

Rarely Bet Large

Sometimes Overbet

Often Bet Small



Jonathan Little

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 \$7 Million Tournament Winnings

 14 Career Titles

 2 Time WPT Champion

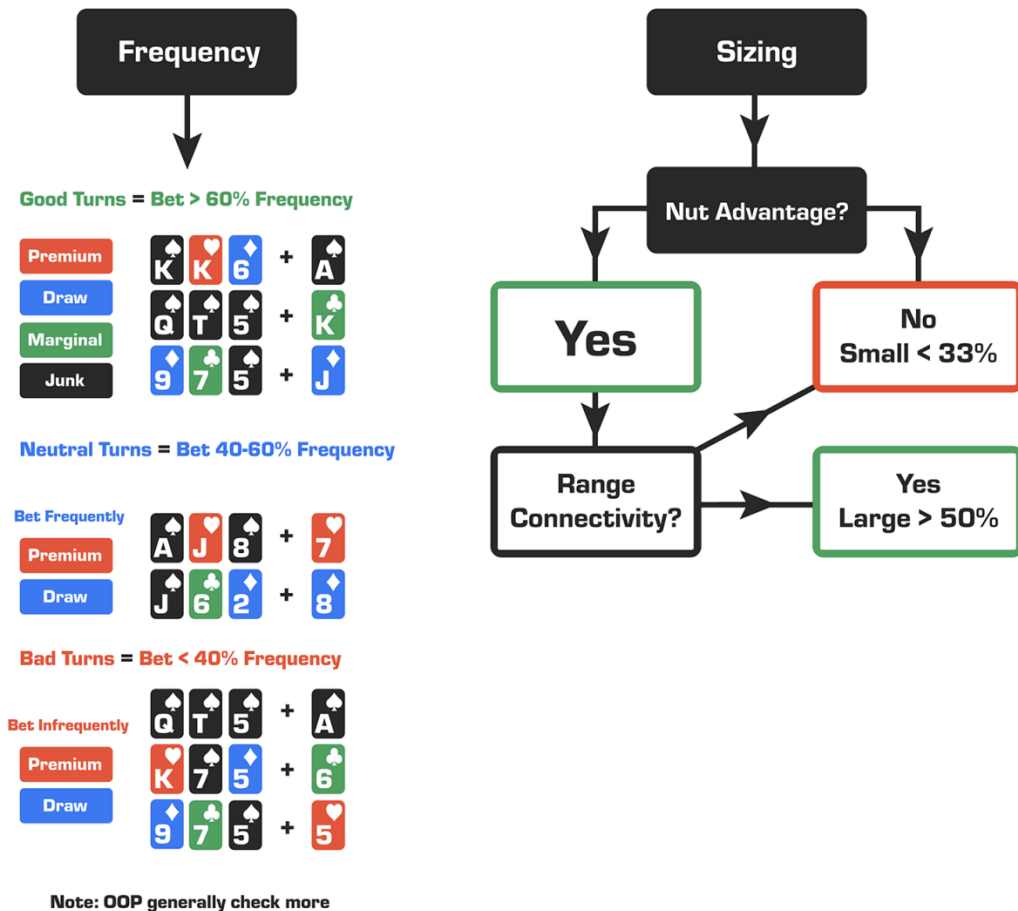
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Turn C-Bet Decisions

A turn continuation bet (turn c-bet) is made by the preflop aggressor after they already c-bet the flop and are now deciding whether to fire a second barrel on the turn. This is a key decision point in the hand, where many factors come into play — like how the turn card changes the board, how ranges interact, and whether you still have fold equity. The Turn C-Betting Flowchart guides you through this process, helping you evaluate when to continue applying pressure and when to slow down. Use it to make more confident and profitable decisions on the turn.



Watch Turn C-Betting Decisions Breakdown

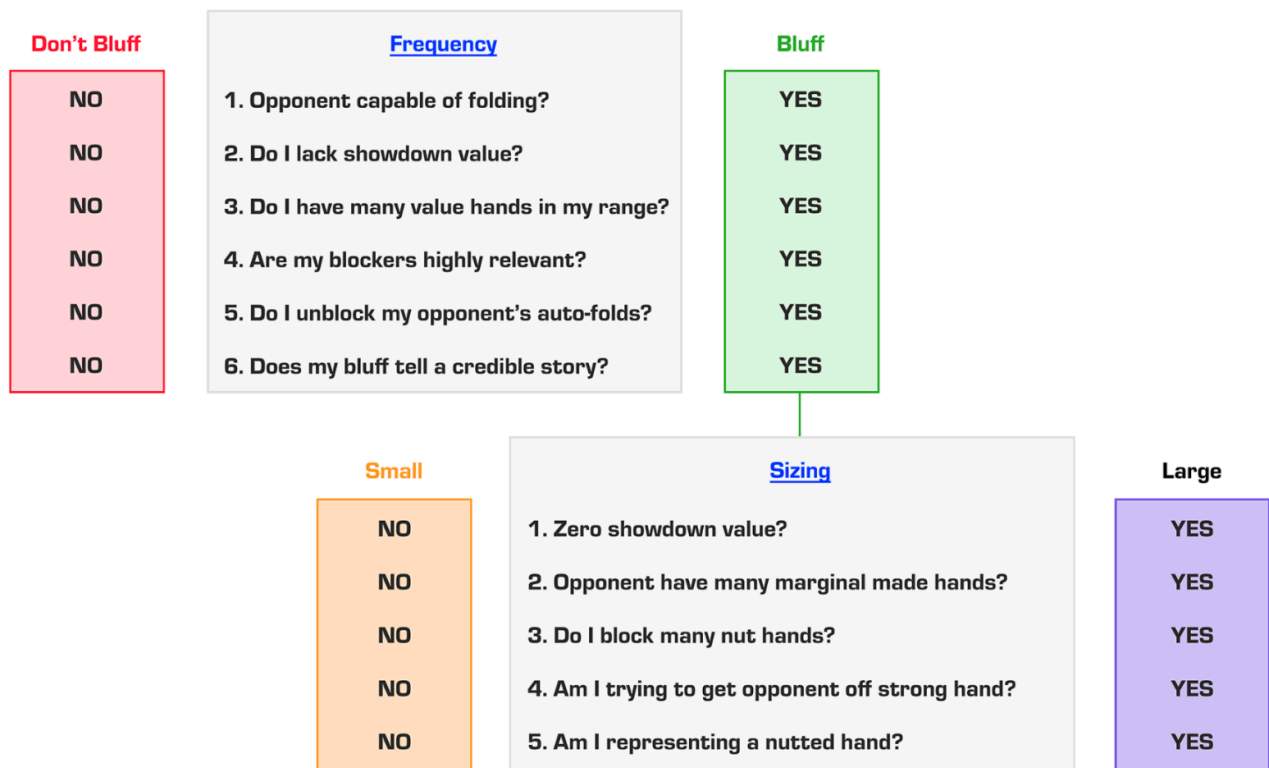
The video thumbnail features a breakdown of the Turn C-Betting Flowchart. It includes the same card examples and flowchart logic as the main image. On the right side of the thumbnail, there is a profile for Jonathan Little, a professional poker player, with the following statistics:

- \$7 Million Tournament Winnings**
- 14 Career Titles**
- 2 Time WPT Champion**

At the bottom of the thumbnail, there is a banner for **Cash Game Masterclass** by **POKERCOACHING.COM**, along with a **Discord Community** link.

River Bluffing Decisions

Bluffing is an essential part of winning poker — especially on the river, where your final decision can either steal the pot or cost you valuable chips. Unlike earlier streets, river bluffs have no equity fallback — if you're called, you lose. That's why your decision to bluff needs to be rooted in solid logic, not emotion or desperation. The Bluffing Decision Flowchart is designed to help you determine when a bluff is actually profitable by walking you through key considerations: Are you telling a believable story? Do you block your opponent's strongest hands? Can they realistically fold better hands? This tool is especially useful in river situations, where your range and board awareness must align to make a compelling bluff. Use the flowchart to build disciplined, well-timed bluffs that maximize fold equity and keep your opponents guessing.



Watch River Bluffing Decisions Breakdown

A video thumbnail for a poker coaching session. It features the same bluffing decision flowchart as above. To the right of the flowchart is a portrait of Jonathan Little, a professional poker player, with his name and social media handles. Below his name are statistics: '\$7 Million Tournament Winnings', '14 Career Titles', and '2 Time WPT Champion'. At the bottom of the thumbnail, there is a black bar with the text 'Cash Game Masterclass', the website 'POKERCOACHING.COM', and a Discord community link.

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River Bluff Catching Decisions

Bluff catching on the river is one of the toughest — and most crucial — decisions in poker. At this point in the hand, all the cards are out, there's no more betting to come, and you're facing a bet that can only be beaten by a bluff. Calling too often can bleed chips, but folding too much lets aggressive opponents push you around. The River Bluff Catching Flowchart is built to guide you through this high-stakes decision. It walks you through key factors like your opponent's betting patterns, how your hand fits into your overall range, and whether you block potential value hands or missed draws. By following the chart, you'll learn to spot when your opponent's story doesn't add up — and when your marginal hand is actually a hero call waiting to happen. Use it to sharpen your instincts, protect yourself from over-folding, and make more confident calls in big pots.

Fold

NO

NO

NO

NO

NO

0. Am I beating any value hands? (*Not a bluff catcher*)

1. Does opponent's range have enough obvious bluffs?

2. Is opponent capable of finding right number of bluffs?

3. Is opponent capable of turning weak showdown hands into bluffs?

4. Does my hand unblock most obvious bluffs?

Call

YES

YES

YES

YES

YES

River Bluff Catching Decisions Video

Fold

NO

NO

NO

NO

NO

Bluffing Catching Decision Flowchart

0. Am I beating any value hands? (*Not a bluff catcher*)

1. Does opponent range have enough obvious bluffs?

2. Is opponent capable of finding right number of bluffs?

3. Is opponent capable of turning weak showdown hands into bluffs?

4. Does my hand unblock most obvious bluffs?

Call

YES

YES

YES

YES

YES



Jonathan Little
@JonathanLittle @jonatlittle

\$7 Million
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Exploiting Opponents

Recognizing opponent tendencies and making adjustments is one of the biggest edges in tournament poker. This section breaks down common player types and how to counter them.

Opponent Types & How to Counter Them

Opponent Type	How to Counter
Loose-Passive	Value bet relentlessly, fold to aggression.
Loose-Aggressive	Trap with strong hands, widen 3-betting range.
Tight-Passive	Steal blinds aggressively, avoid overvaluing top pair.
Tight-Aggressive	Avoid marginal hands OOP, bluff selectively.
Recreational	Identify leaks, play straightforward value-heavy poker.

ICM Basics

The Independent Chip Model (ICM) is a mathematical framework used in poker tournaments to assign a real-money value to each player's chip stack, considering factors like stack sizes, payout structures, and the percentage of the field that cashes. Understanding and applying ICM principles is crucial for making informed decisions, especially in the later stages of tournaments where prize money differences are significant.

- **ICM Fundamentals:** ICM evaluates a player's chip stack to estimate their equity in the remaining prize pool, differing from cash games where chip values are directly tied to monetary amounts.
- **Strategic Adjustments:** As tournaments progress, especially near the bubble or final table, players should adjust their strategies to account for ICM pressure, often tightening their ranges to avoid busting before significant pay jumps.
- **Common Misconceptions:** While ICM provides valuable insights, it's essential to recognize its limitations and avoid treating it as an exact science; instead, use it as a guideline alongside other strategic considerations.
- **Practical Application:** In high ICM pressure situations, such as on the bubble, making conservative decisions can be more profitable, as the value of surviving outweighs the chips potentially gained from marginal spots.
- **Continuous Learning:** Regular study of ICM scenarios and utilizing tools like ICM calculators can enhance decision-making skills, improving tournament outcomes.

Final Table & ICM Adjustments

As the tournament progresses, your strategy needs to shift. The final table brings significant ICM pressure, meaning chip preservation and strategic aggression are crucial.

ICM Strategy & Payout Structure Adjustments

ICM is a crucial concept in tournament poker, as it assigns a monetary value to players' chip stacks based on their likelihood of finishing in various payout positions. Payout structures significantly influence ICM dynamics, affecting strategic decisions throughout a tournament.

Understanding Payout Structures & ICM Pressure

- **Standard Payouts (15-20%)** balance rewards between min-cashing and deep runs.
- **Flat Payouts** encourage tighter play, as securing a cash holds more value.
- **Steep Payouts** incentivize aggressive chip accumulation, as most of the prize pool is concentrated at the top.
- **Bubble Play Considerations** – Avoid unnecessary risks when shorter stacks are likely to bust first, as survival significantly impacts your tournament equity. Attack medium stacks, as they are more likely to fold to avoid elimination.

Strategic Adjustments & Chip Leader Play

- In **flatter payout structures**, prioritize survival and avoid taking thin edges.
- In **steeper payout structures**, take calculated risks to build a stack capable of competing for top finishes.
- As a **chip leader**, leverage your position to steal aggressively and pressure shorter stacks, forcing them into ICM-driven folds.

ICM Pressure Adjustments

ICM exists in every stage of a tournament. As such, it should be top of mind in nearly every decision you make. Use the table below to develop a better understanding of what adjustments you should make to your ranges and post-flop strategy as ICM dynamics change throughout a tournament.

Stack Size	Early Stage	Middle Stage	Late Stage
Big Stack	Balanced	Aggressive	Very Aggressive
Mid Stack	Balanced	Conservative	Balanced
Short Stack	Aggressive	Very Conservative	Aggressive

- **Very Conservative**
 - A strategy focused on minimizing risk by playing an extremely tight range of hands. You should look to avoid situations where you might lose chips unnecessarily, prioritizing survival over accumulation of chips. This approach is common when your tournament life is at significant risk, such as on a short stack nearing the money or pay jumps.
- **Conservative**
 - A slightly less restrictive version of the very conservative approach. You should still focus on tight hand selection and cautious post-flop play, but also may take limited, calculated risks when the reward justifies it.
- **Balanced**
 - A well-rounded strategy that is focused on theoretically optimal play. You should aim to maintain a GTO strategy to guide your decisions.
- **Aggressive**
 - A strategy that focuses on applying pressure to opponents through frequent raises, re-raises, and bets. Aggressive play capitalizes on fold equity, aiming to build a large stack by forcing opponents into difficult decisions.
- **Very Aggressive**
 - The most high-pressure strategy, characterized by relentless aggression. This approach seeks to dominate the table by taking risks to exploit opponents' hesitancy, maximize chip accumulation, and force your opponents to make incredibly difficult decisions with their tournament life on the line..

Final Table Strategy Matrix

The Final Table is where decision-making can be the difference between a disappointing ninth place finish and a life-changing first-place score. Navigating this tricky landscape requires immense focus and attention to detail of your opponents relative stack size. While this topic is incredibly complex, use the table below to help you better understand when you can apply pressure, when you should proceed cautiously, and when you can ignore ICM completely.

Your Stack	vs Big Stack	vs Mid Stack	vs Short Stack
Big Stack	Proceed cautiously as other big stacks are the most dangerous to your tournament life.	Attack these players relentlessly as they are under the most ICM pressure which forces them to play extremely conservatively.	Keeping these stacks at the table allows you to apply maximum pressure to the mid stacks and accumulate even more chips. However, don't pass up on opportunities to eliminate them and get the pay jump.
Mid Stack	Avoid large confrontations against these players as they are most likely to put you in extremely difficult situations and you want to avoid busting the tournament before the short stacks.	Minimize your risk by playing small pots against the other mid stack players, but don't hesitate to apply pressure when you sense weakness or it's a theoretically sound opportunity to build your stack.	Apply pressure by raising their openings and going all-in post-flop when you have significant fold equity and direct equity. However, be sure to be a more conservative when calling all-ins from these players.
Short Stack	Look for opportunities to steal and re-steal, but understand that some big stacks will incorrectly call too wide which will increase variance.	Leverage your fold equity by 3-bet jamming a theoretically sound range against these opponents as they are most likely to call with a tighter range because you represent a significant threat to their chip stack.	Focus on preserving your stack while applying pressure against other short stacks to maximize your full equity. However, be sure to do so with hands that are strong enough to have to give you good backup equity when you are called.

Player Types & Adjustments

Opponent Classification

Opponent Type	Characteristics	Counter Strategy
LAG	Aggressive, many bluffs	Trap and call down
TAG	Solid, value-focused	Bluff and steal
Fish	Loose, passive	Value bet thin
Nit	Very tight, fearful	Steal and pressure

When to Play Aggressively vs. Survival Mode

Stack Size	Recommended Play Style
Big Stack	Apply maximum pressure, widen opening range, steal often.
Medium Stack	Look for profitable reshoves, preserve fold equity, avoid confrontations with chip leaders.
Short Stack	Identify good push-fold spots using ICM calculators or Nash charts.

Quick Strategy Tips

- **Play tighter in the early levels**, widening your range as blinds increase.
- Identify weak players and **exploit their tendencies**.
- **Focus on relative stack sizes** to make optimal plays. The same hand may play very differently based on the effective stacks in play.

Mindset & Preparation

Poker is as much about psychology as it is about math and strategy. The best players don't just play the cards—they play the players. And before they do that, they master themselves.

Maintaining a strategic mindset over emotional reactions is essential for long-term success in poker. By focusing on making optimal decisions rather than being swayed by the outcomes of individual hands, players can improve their performance and resilience.

- **Detach from Emotional Swings:** Avoid letting the highs of winning or the lows of losing influence your decision-making process.
- **Focus on Decision Quality:** Concentrate on the strategic soundness of your plays

rather than the immediate results.

- **Accept Variance:** Recognize that both winning and losing are inherent aspects of poker, and a single hand's outcome doesn't define your overall skill.
- **Reflect Objectively:** After each session, assess your decisions to identify areas for improvement, independent of whether you won or lost.
- **Cultivate Mental Discipline:** Develop the ability to stay calm and focused, ensuring that emotions don't cloud your judgment during play.

[Proper preparation](#) is essential for excelling in live poker tournaments, as it enhances focus, endurance, and decision-making abilities. By studying beforehand, maintaining physical well-being, and adopting a positive mindset, players can navigate the challenges of long tournament days more effectively.

- **Study Before You Play:** Develop a poker strategy before the tournament. Avoid last-minute cramming and trust in your preparation. Mastering fundamental concepts—like preflop ranges and standard betting lines—not only improves decision-making but also preserves mental energy. By eliminating the need to think through routine spots, you can conserve focus and stay sharp for deep-stack play and high-pressure decisions later in the tournament.
- **Get Plenty of Rest and Nutrition:** Get adequate sleep, consume a nutritious breakfast, and plan healthy snacks and meals to sustain energy levels during extended play.
- **Build Mental Resilience:** Anticipate natural fluctuations in chip stacks and remain emotionally detached from outcomes to maintain optimal decision-making.
- **Familiarize with the Venue:** Acquaint yourself with the tournament environment beforehand to increase comfort and reduce potential distractions.
- **Drink Plenty of Water:** Keep water readily available to maintain hydration, which is crucial for cognitive function and overall performance.

Post-Tournament Review Tips

Improvement in poker comes from reflection and study—reviewing your hands and discussing strategy is essential to becoming a stronger tournament player. By analyzing key spots, identifying mistakes, and refining your approach, you can consistently level up your game.

- **Analyze Key Hands** – Use poker software to review your most impactful hands, focusing on decision-making rather than just outcomes.
- **Identify Leaks & Fix Mistakes** – Don't just focus on hands you lost; recognize strategic errors and areas for improvement in both winning and losing hands.
- **Engage with Other Players** – Discuss hands with fellow players or in online forums to gain fresh perspectives and uncover alternative strategies.
- **Study ICM & Late-Stage Play** – Review Independent Chip Model (ICM) spots and shove/fold ranges to sharpen your decision-making in high-pressure situations.
- **Commit to Continuous Growth** – Poker is an ever-evolving game, and adapting to new strategies and opponents is crucial for long-term success.

Bankroll Management

Effective [bankroll management](#) is crucial for poker players aiming to progress beyond small stakes, as it ensures the ability to handle variance and minimizes the risk of going broke. By maintaining a dedicated poker bankroll and adhering to disciplined financial practices, players can steadily move up in stakes and achieve long-term success.

- **Separate Your Bankroll:** Treat your poker bankroll as distinct from personal finances; never use it for non-poker expenses to prevent depletion.
- **Maintain Adequate Funds:** Keep a sufficient number of buy-ins to withstand natural game variance.
- **Adjust for Game Type:** Recognize that tournament play involves higher variance than cash games, necessitating a larger bankroll relative to buy-ins to manage potential downswings.
- **Be Mindful of Rake:** Understand that high rake can significantly impact profitability; seek games with lower rake structures and adjust your strategy to mitigate its effects.
- **Exercise Discipline:** Implement strict guidelines for moving up or down in stakes based on your bankroll and performance, and avoid impulsive decisions that could jeopardize your financial stability.

Study. Adapt. Win.

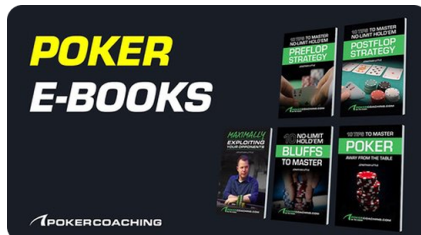
Poker is an ever-evolving game. It rewards those who put in the work, both on and off the felt. The resources in this guide are here to help you beyond the fundamentals and into the deeper layers of strategic thinking. Use them to reinforce the concepts you've learned in this guide—whether it's refining your preflop ranges, mastering ICM pressure, or making sharper postflop decisions.

The more you study, review, and apply these ideas, the more confident and consistent you'll become in tournament play. Growth doesn't happen all at once, but with the right tools and mindset, you'll be well on your way to lasting success at the tables.

Free Resources

To help you continue growing and refining your tournament skills, I've included a list of free resources—ebooks, courses and strategy articles—that I believe will make a difference in your game. Take advantage of them, dive deeper into the concepts we've covered, and keep pushing to become the best player you can be.

Free Poker E-Books



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Fundamentals Articles

