



## **Think Before You Sit**

**By**

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### **An Intelligent Approach to Table and Seat Selection**

A common and costly mistake among small stakes players is that they are in such a hurry to sit down and start playing poker that they give little consideration to the table they are joining or the seat they are plunking their virtual butt into. They *sit before they think* and over time this backwards approach to table selection winds up having a noticeably negative effect on their win rate.

Being a successful poker player is a lot like being a successful fisherman. Bad or inexperienced fishermen tend to show up at the river, pick a spot at random and start fishing. They may get lucky on the odd occasion, but more often than not they spend the whole day fishing without getting so much as a nibble or an old shoe. In their rush to start fishing, they usually pick a spot with few or no fish to be caught and no matter how many casts they make or the number of lures they try, they will likely see no positive influence over their results.

Good fishermen know that the first thing you need to do when you get down to the river is to stop, take a moment and survey the water. The section of the river bank you are fishing on may be large, but not all spots along it are created equal for catching fish. Experienced fishermen know that there will usually be 2 or 3 key locations that will generally out-fish all the other spots by several orders of magnitude. Before you ever make your first cast, you need to stop and think about where these prime locations will likely be.

In this respect, poker and fishing are identical.

### **Finding the Fish**

When you first open up your favorite poker client and look in the lobby, you will likely see dozens of tables available for you to take a seat at or join the wait list. But only a few

of these tables will give you a real bang for your buck. Your job, like an experienced angler, is to take a few moments and use your powers of observation to locate the best places to find your fish. So let's get started:

### **Manual vs. Software Table Selection**

There are two ways to go about the task of finding a good table: Manually and with Software Assistance. Although I personally do my table selection manually, there is a case to be made for the software assisted method. Using Poker Tracker 3's *TableTracker* as an example (Or Hold'em Manager's *Table Scanner*), we can gain the following benefits from using software to assist us with our task:

- More detailed information - Manual searches from the lobby on sites like Poker Stars tell us very little about the quality of tables other than pot size and number of players seeing a flop. A program like TableTracker will give us the above listed information, plus information on the VPIP, average stack size, and the type of player sitting at the table (drawn from hands in our PT3 database).
- Multiple site scanning - If you play on more than one poker site, your software will be able to simultaneously scan all of the tables on each site, allowing you to find the best possible tables for you amongst all the sites that you play on.
- Speed - Instead of taking 5-10 minutes to find your tables, you can locate and sit down at quality tables almost immediately.

While there is a cost for such a service (*TableTracker* costs anywhere from \$10-\$35 per month; *Table Scanner* costs a one-time fee of \$64.99), if you are playing 25NL or higher, the advantages offered by software assisted table selection will pay for itself rather quickly.

### **Manually Selecting Your Table**

Now having made a case for software, for most micro or low stakes players there is nothing wrong with doing your searches manually. Although it takes longer, with a little bit of elbow grease we can acquire a similar amount of useful information. Here is a list of steps to help with the task:

1. Start by doing a quick scan of the lobby in your preferred poker client. Look for games with a good percentage of players seeing the flop.
2. Open up a selection of promising tables and watch each for a few hands. Look for:
  - a. Large stack sizes - We want to actually get paid when we hit our hand
  - b. Many players entering the pot
  - c. Lots of limping - This makes it more likely that we will be getting favorable odds and good playing conditions for our high implied odd hands
  - d. Lots of limpers calling raises - This allows us to build big pots for value when we want to

- e. Weak hands displayed at showdown - This indicates that we are going to be able to extract more value across several streets of betting
3. See if you can spot any weak players that you can identify by name at the table
4. Check your HUD stats for lots of loose pre-flop numbers
5. If you are seeing a number of promising factors then you either want to think about selecting a seat or joining the waiting list. If you do join the waiting list, try to avoid joining tables with more than 3 people waiting to play. The other players in line are probably targeting this table for the same reasons you are, and by the time you actually get to sit down there is no guarantee that the fish will still be swimming there. There will be a bunch more fishermen and trading coolers with a bunch of regulars is not how to make money in the long run.

### **Seat Selection**

Now say you have found a few tables that look promising, do you plunk yourself down and start playing right away? Not yet . . . It is important to remember that there is such a thing as a *bad seat at a good table*.

Bad seats generally have the tight players on your right and the loose players on your left. Money at the poker table tends to flow clockwise, and if the weak players are on your left, other stronger players will be isolating them before you have a chance to get in on the action. You will get very little action from the tight opponents on your right.

Ideally you want your seat to have the loose players with decent sized stacks on your immediate right and the weak-tight players to your immediate left. With this arrangement you can raise to isolate your loose opponents and blind steal relentlessly from the tight ones.

At times it can be profitable to have the loose aggressive player on your right. You can let them use their aggression to your advantage by allowing them to bet your strong hands for you. Often they will donate more money to you in their efforts to bluff you off your hand than they would if you were to bet into them on multiple streets. Allowing the loose aggressive player on your right to do your betting often has another positive effect. When you enter the pot softly with a strong hand and the LAG raises, other players yet to act will often not place much emphasis on the strength of that raise. The other players will in turn raise it up even more, setting you up nicely to win a nice pot with a monster hand.

### **Have a Plan of Attack**

Once you have found your seat, you should have a plan for how to work the table. You selected this table for a reason so you should have a pretty good idea of where the money will be coming from and how you are going to collect it. Does the player two to your right have a high *Fold to Continuation Bet* stat over a significant sample? If so, you want to actively plan to isolate them pre-flop and then c-bet them relentlessly on the flop to take the pot away from them. A big part of winning poker is being able to identify who the weak players are at your table and developing a clear plan for exploiting them.

## **Monitoring Table Conditions - Is Your Seat Still Good?**

It is important to remember that table selection does not stop once you find a seat and sit down. Table conditions can change quickly and what might have been a good table when you sat down 30 minutes ago can abruptly turn into a money losing situation. You need to be alert to these changes and if you can no longer identify the reasons for why you are sitting at a table then you need to get up and leave.

A helpful tip for monitoring your tables is to avoid using the *auto-post blinds* feature whenever you sit down. Before you post your blinds at the end of every button rotation, you want to stop and quickly survey the table conditions to make sure the table is still worth playing at. Every time I am asked to post the big blind I do a quick scan around the table to make sure I still have a reason to sit at that table. If the table conditions have changed and I can no longer see where the money is coming from I save myself the blind, get up, and start the process over for finding a new table.

### **Summary**

Table and seat selection is not difficult; it just takes a few minutes of your time and the application of your powers of observation. By making a habit out of using the selection process whenever you play you help stack the odds in your favor every time you take a seat!

