

Learning Las Vegas

BY KEN ADAMS

For the past eight years, I have traveled to Las Vegas for the final week of the *World Series of Poker* to watch the championship event and play in the side games. Lately, I have been privileged to be assigned by *Card Player* magazine to write up the final-table play. Each year, I look forward to that week in May, and each year's trip has been a source of great enjoyment, except for the years when the tournament has conflicted with my daughter's birthday and I have missed her birthday celebration.

Last year, when I asked Yvonne if there was anything special she would like to do to celebrate her 21st birthday, she

said, "I want to go to the *World Series* with you." Her college exam schedule prevented her from traveling to Las Vegas with me for the beginning of the championship event, but she arrived on Wednesday afternoon, when the field of 295 contestants was down to two tables.

When the tournament ended on Thursday, we talked about what she would like to do during her first trip to Las Vegas. We cruised the various amusements; watched the pirate battle at Treasure Island; oohed and aahed our way through Cirque de Soleil and Siegfried & Roy; enjoyed the dolphins, tigers, and 20,000-gallon fish tank at the Mirage; dined at the revolving restaurant

atop the new Stratosphere Tower; and did as many of the other tourist things as we could. She lost a chunk of her birthday present (a \$200 gambling bankroll) playing blackjack and the slots. She tried to listen as I explained the mesmerizing mysteries of the craps table, but she kept being distracted by the trio of conventioners across the layout who were playing black chips and betting \$500-\$1,000 on each of several numbers. ("Dad, that guy just lost on one roll what I make in a semester at my pet store job.") But what Yvonne really wanted to do was play poker.

Over the years, we have spent many hours at home playing no-limit hold'em

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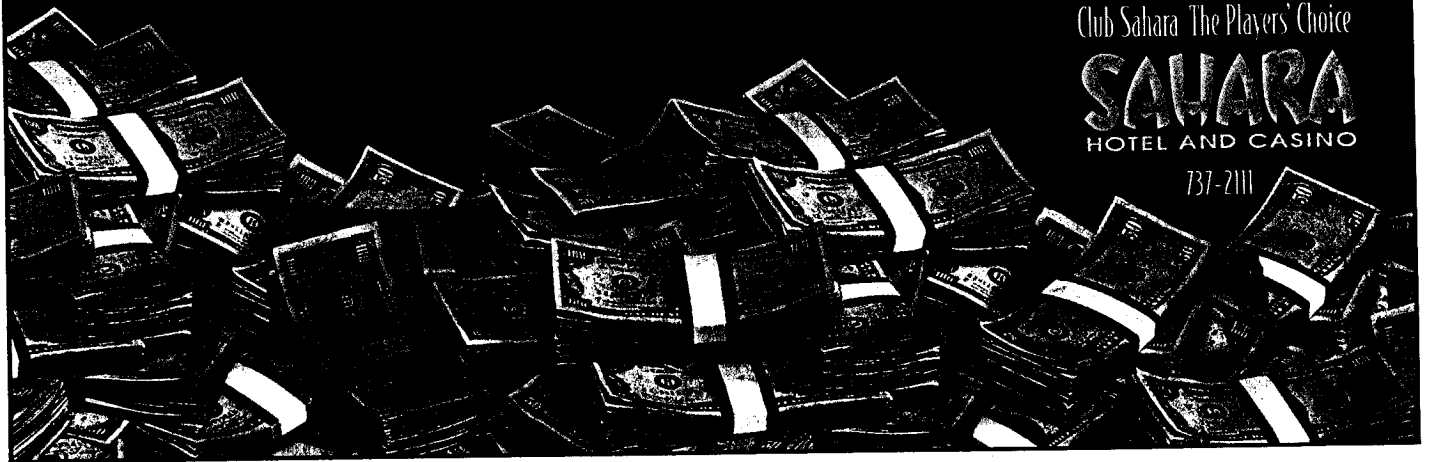
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at the kitchen table, heads up, pretending that we were the final contestants in the *World Series* championship event. Apart from her tendency to bluff too much, Yvonne was always a tough opponent, but when we stopped in at the Mirage poker room, she was not prepared to play against live opponents in a ring game. The whole scene was just too intimidating for a first-time player, so I came up with an idea for how to break the ice.

On Saturday morning, we went to the Luxor and signed up for the \$17 buy-in hold'em tournament. A tournament seemed like a good way for her to get comfortable with the rhythm of a center-dealer ring game. After paying the buy-in, no money is risked on each hand — only the opportunity of finishing in the money is at stake.

The tournament was a two-table freezeout. Each player received \$300 in tournament chips. The structure started with blinds of \$5 and \$10, and limits of \$10-\$20. The blinds and limits increased every 20 minutes for an hour and a quarter, then the structure changed to no-limit. The first four places received prize money.

I gave Yvonne a few simple suggestions. "During the first hour, play nothing but A-A, K-K, A-K, and (in late position only) Q-Q and J-J. Raise or reraise before the flop, and throw them away if the flop looks dangerous and someone makes a move at the pot. That should get you to the final table. After that, you are on your own. Just play tough, and don't hesitate to push in all of your chips in the right spot."

The tournament got under way at noon. A half-hour later, I violated my own advice to Yvonne and busted out when the board paired on the river and my nut flush lost to a full house. When I went over to the other table, Yvonne had \$600 in chips. She had played one hand (K-K), had flopped a set, and got action from two other players before the flop and one player to the river.

I took a seat behind her and watched her make several good plays including an excellent laydown for a novice. She held A-X in the big blind. Four players saw the unraised flop, which came A-J-9. She made a small bet, another player made a substantial raise, and she mucked her hand. It takes years for some new players to learn that you can lose a lot of money flopping top pair with an ace and a weak kicker and trying to outdraw a stronger ace. She made only one apparent mistake, laying down J-J after three rags came on the flop and a player with a short stack moved all in, in what appeared to be an attempt to steal the pot.

She won one more hand and a small pot with A-A, and mostly watched as other players busted out. After a while, only four players remained. She was in the money! Unfortunately, she did not pick up any premium hands, and her conservative strategy became costly as the escalating blinds ate at her stack. Realizing her plight, she took a stab at one pot after flopping second pair in an unraised pot. A player with top pair called, and Yvonne was left with only enough chips for one more round of blinds. When she picked up a suited A-6 in last position, she called the big blind. The small blind put in a raise

equal to the amount in the pot. The big blind called. With a chance to triple her stack, Yvonne called as much of the raise as she could, putting herself all in. No ace fell and the small blind won the pot with J-J. Yvonne was disappointed, but was justifiably pleased and proud to finish in the money in her first tournament.

When we returned to the Mirage, she still was not comfortable with attempting the \$3-\$6 live-action game, so I took a seat and she watched for about an hour. At that point, she whispered to me, "Some of these players are terrible. I could play in this game." I assured her that not only could she play in the game, she could win if the cards broke even and she played as well as she had in the tournament. So, she put her name on the list, and eventually got a seat. She played cautiously but well, and after an hour, she was ahead \$50. That amount was nearly two days pay at her minimum-wage job in the pet shop, and was enough to recoup what she had lost playing blackjack and the slots, so she cashed out.

The next morning, before we left for the airport, I heard her on the phone with a friend, summarizing what she had learned on her first trip to Las Vegas: "Playing slot machines and blackjack is like flushing your money down the toilet, but you can win money at poker. All you have to do is play better than half the other people at the table."

My daughter is only 21, but I'm not sure there is much more that I can teach her about Las Vegas. ♦

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Glenn Abney

MY GAME IS GIN



A funny thing happened on the way to a gin rummy tournament. I heard about it from a regular tournament player who gave me the following account of the incident.

Player A knocked with three kings, the 5♠6♠7♠9♠, plus an ace, a deuce, and a four of different suits. (Knocking with

a count of seven was legal, as the rules allowed a 10-knock.) Player B laid off the 10♣J♣, and put down three nines, the 4♦5♦6♦, plus an offsuit jack and an ace. A count of four points was given. As the cards were being scooped up, Player B noticed the mistake in Player A's hand and exclaimed, "You don't have the 8♠!" The player who told me this story asked my opinion on what the ruling should have been in this situation.

I answered that once you have laid off, picked up the cards, and scored the hand, it is too late to make a correction, and so the score stands. But let's suppose that you catch the error before you lay off your two cards. The rule then would come under the "overknock" rule, and the 9♠ would become a part of the odd knocking cards. Player A then would have to play an open hand, and would be forced to knock if he drew an add-on or a low card that made the knock legal. Player B could not force him to knock by discarding a low enough card, but Player A would have the option to take the low card and knock.

Another unusual ruling was needed during the Showboat Hotel and Casino gin rummy tournament last June. Player A knocked early with eight points, grabbed the cards from the tray (both the discard pile and the drawing pile), and then smiled while he waited for a count. The knock card number was six, so Player A had overknocked. I was called to make a ruling. The first option for Player B, the nonoffender, was that if he wanted to play the hand, we would shuffle all the scooped-up cards and play from there, and the offender would have to play an open hand. The second option was to throw in both hands and redeal. The cards were redealt.

Showboat Hotel and Casino Gin Rummy Tournament results ... In this \$30,000 prize money tournament, Vic White (Wyoming) won the two-day singles event. The one-day partner's event was won by David Kundert (Minnesota) and John Hainline (California). Joe Stienbach (Colorado) won the second-chance tournament.

Hearts Tournament ... Are you interested in a world championship in hearts? I am working on designing such a tournament that would be held at a major hotel casino. On two *Card Player* cruises, I conducted small hearts tournaments with 16 entrants that worked out very well.

Upcoming events ... Plan to attend a big gin rummy tournament in October or November (details later), as well as one Dec. 1 at the Tropicana Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, followed by the *Super Bowl* gin rummy tournament Jan. 19, 1997. While you're at it, begin planning for the 12-day *Card Player* poker, gin rummy, and hearts cruise to the Panama Canal in February. If you are interested in any of these upcoming events, or in a "world championship" hearts tournament, please drop me a line and I will put you on the mailing list. Address your letter to: Glenn Abney, P.O. Box 10305, Palm Desert, CA 92255. ♦

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