

The Greatest Poker Virtue

There are many qualities demanded of a good poker player such as the ability to read an opponent, to make a “big lay down”, to know one’s limitations – as Dirty Harry said – but in my humble opinion, the greatest virtue, and one best suited to on-line poker, is patience.

Like most players I remember the bad beats, but there are two occasions I recall in particular where I had the run of the cards; both were cash games. The first was in a live session where with a £50 minimum buy-in we were playing £1-£2 Pot Limit Omaha/Hold ‘Em (a round of each). The other was an on-line session on Ladbrokes, a site I don’t often play, although the site is not important, what happened, is.

In the live session, I had such a terrific run of the cards that in about twenty minutes I had turned my fifty pounds into over five hundred. In the on-line session, though I was multi-tabling, I “sat down” at one table, and in about the same time period, turned twenty dollars into over a hundred and fifty. This time I was playing Pot Limit Omaha Hi-Lo, my game of preference.

Being a dedicated small stakes player I seldom win big, but it is not the stakes that are important, rather the lesson to be learned. How often does a player sit down and increase his starting stack by a factor of ten or even seven in half an hour or less? The answer is very seldom, but once in a blue moon the cards do run for you like magic. The reason for this is not far to seek; cards, including electronic cards, are random, and it is possible though extremely unlikely to win several big pots in quick succession.

The downside of this is that it is extremely likely you will be dealt garbage hands for prolonged periods, or that the cards will run against you for hours at a time. If you are playing live, especially in a cash game, when the cards run bad there may be a temptation to push things, to play marginal hands, or hands that you really shouldn’t play, to draw too much, to see just one more card. The result can be disastrous. On-line where you can multi-table, there is no excuse for this sort of lax play. When I play cash games, four is my preference, but some people can handle six or even more tables comfortably. Even so, the cards can run bad on all tables; I have to say that for me at any rate, some sites are far worse than others. But when they run bad, you must fold, fold, fold. It really is not nice to raise a pot with a pair of kings at Hold ‘Em, to see an ace flop, and someone bet forcefully into it, but you should face the fact that you are probably beat, and that the wisest course of action is to fold and wait for the next hand.

Yes, it is incredibly frustrating to see loose players, neophytes or even total morons call raise after raise with borderline hands or even raise with total garbage and hit or suck out time and time again, but when you miss the flop, you must throw your premium starting hand in the muck. It will hurt, but it will hurt a lot more to chase, especially at pot limit.

What about tournaments? Now the fact is that even if you are both the best player and the luckiest player in the world, you can't cash in every tournament. And at No Limit Hold 'Em you can be busted out in one hand at any time, but patience does count here too, especially and perhaps even after the bubble or on the final table when you are short stacked. This is where inevitably everybody tightens up, but it is surprising how long you can wait, and how few hands you can get away with playing when both time and chips appear to be running out.

Patience is not to be confused with timidity and especially not with cowardice; a big draw may be a favourite over a pair, or even a set; whilst most players find it difficult and some find it impossible ever to fold a set – any set – a draw is still only a draw, and you should play or fold your hand not according to abstract principles like pot odds but according to the state of your bankroll, position in the tournament, and so on. You may be 75% to win the hand, but it means too you have a 25% chance of losing it, and if losing that one hand means busting out before the money when you can comfortably fold and allow a couple of the short stacks to be subsumed, folding may be the best option. Again, it will hurt, but not half as much as calling and losing. Remember what the man said: chip and a chair!