

Things to know about Tournaments

If you are competitive at all you are always looking for ways to improve your game. You read the books, watch the videos and maybe take a lesson, but ultimately, you are going to look for the best players to compete against. Nothing replaces good competition for improving your game. The place you find highest concentration of good players? A pool tournament! Pool tournaments draw some of the best players from the area, state, country, or the world depending on the type of tournament it is. However, be aware that playing in a tournament is nothing like playing on league night or showing up at your local bar or pool hall and shooting a few games. There are articles written on tournament preparation but they usually only cover billiard preparation. There is a lot more than just mechanics that you need to know to prepare for a tournament, and that's what we are going to discuss in this article.

Physical

Many people have told me that pool is not a physical sport. You don't do anything but walk around the table and shoot a ball. Well that's true. There is no contact like in football. You aren't running for 2 hrs. non-stop like in basketball. You are just walking around a 7, 8, or 9 ft. table and shooting a ball. Big deal! Let me set the record straight. Tournaments are tough because they are an endurance race, and you have to be physically, as well as mentally, ready to play over a long period of time. Let me give you a couple of examples.

I have played in many local tournaments. Local tournaments are nice because usually you get to go home and sleep in your own bed. Depending on how many participants, you can expect to play anywhere from 1 day to 3 days. It's very likely that you could be in the pool hall for most of the tournament. This could be 12 to 15 hours! You sit in uncomfortable chairs, eat snack food and play pool. If it's singles competition you could shoot upwards of several hundred shots in a day. If it's a team tournament, somewhat less.

National/International tourney. These are large scale events, as many as 300 hundred tables in use at all times. These events usually take place in a casino/resort. Some place that can accommodate several hundred pool players. It always seems the pool rooms for these venues are on opposite sides of the property from hotel accommodations. You walk endless hallway mazes and transverse casinos, restaurants, and stores. It has taken me, at times, more than 20 to 25 minutes to walk from my room to the pool event.

It is important to realize that the physical part of a tournament can affect your play. Earl Strickland used to run 5 miles every day to stay in shape. That's one of the reasons he can still compete regularly at 60 years old. To prepare for a tournament, devise a workout schedule. Yoga, pilates, or anything that encourages stretching is great. Walking or running is good also. Remember, being physically fit serves two purposes. Number 1, it produces endorphins that help your mental health, helps you relax and feel more at ease. Number 2, it prevents the normal aches and pains you get from sitting in crappy chairs and doing the standing, bending, sitting motions that are normal in a pool match. Your recovery time from sitting, commuting, or flying is much quicker than if you don't exercise.

Comfort

The atmosphere in a tournament is unique. It will be crowded. Air conditioning might not be working, or working too well. There might not be enough chairs to sit in. A good pair of comfortable shoes is essential. You might be standing for a long time. Make sure your feet are taken care of. Know the rules for dress codes at that tournament. Some leagues don't allow open toed shoes. Some don't allow jeans or hats. If you wear a short sleeve T shirt or polo shirt, think about taking along a light jacket or cover up to keep your arms warm. Maybe even take an extra shirt with you. Sometimes a shirt can start to smell as the day goes on and a fresh shirt might make you less self-conscious. Also, I tend to wear cargo pants when I play. These are comfortable and they give me lots of pockets to carry cell phones, snacks, a drink, and pool essentials. However, sometimes it is uncomfortable to play with all that stuff dangling from your waist. Empty your pockets of the excess when you go to your table. Turn your phone off or silence it. Be prepared, but be comfortable.

Know your location

Before your match get familiar with your location. Know where the food and drinks are. If there is something particular you want, know where to get it or bring it with you. Some tournaments require you to pay for the tables. Know where to get the change. Become familiar with the locations of the tables. Big tournaments can be spread throughout the hotel. Be aware of where they are. Know the process for getting your match paper work and where it goes when you are completed. Some tournaments have a phone app that lets you know your times. Others require you to access a computer or look at a posted board to find your match.

Speaking about food. Restaurants and stores at a Casino/Resort can sometimes be very high priced. If you are staying for an extended time learn where some local restaurants are and how hard it would be to get there. Also stop at a local grocery and stock up on essentials. Keep them in your room.

Many resorts offer a pool, spa, fitness center. Learn where those are. Fitness doesn't stop while you are at the tournament. It's important to keep as much of your regiment as you can. Not only for good health but because it allow your mind to unwind and prepare for the next battle. One of the things that happens in tournament play is we produce adrenaline. The further we go in a tournament, the more we seem to produce. I've gone to my room at 1 AM after a match and not been able to relax and sleep for 2hrs. Relax in the hot tub, swim a few laps, or run 20 minutes on the treadmill. It does wonders for getting rid of adrenaline.

Know your opponent

No I'm not saying do a background check or troll him/her on the internet. Introduce yourself. Find out where they are from. Becoming more familiar with your opponent makes you more at ease. In a handicapped tournament you'll be playing someone of a similar handicap. But.....remember why we chose to be in a tournament. We wanted to play better players. The players you meet will be the best of that handicap. And.....all handicaps are not equal. Let me explain. In a city like Detroit or Chicago, you have a high density of players and therefore also have a higher density of quality players. This

skews their handicap system somewhat. A person a high skill level in a rural county might have a lower handicap in a bigger city. Just due to the volume of players.

So, getting back on track, talk to your opponent. What I've found out is that almost every one of the people I have faced was there for the same reason I was. To play the most competitive people, and challenge themselves. The unexpected result was in almost every case, after the match, a short conversation ensued discussing things that happened and a friendship resulted. Segway alert....To emphasize this, I played a tournament several years ago and won a match against my opponent. He went through the losers bracket and came up against another player I had beaten. We discussed the match and he ended up taking second place in the tournament. I took third...grumble, grumble. That's a story for a different time. Anyway, I was playing in Las Vegas and ran into him in an elevator. He remembered our match and the tournament and invited me to have breakfast with him. We had a great conversation. This kind of thing happens a lot.

Mentally Prepare

It's easy to become overwhelmed at the size of these tournaments. Learn as much about the tournament as you can beforehand. Talk to people who have been there or similar tournaments. Try to get all your questions answered before you go. Then you can concentrate on just the pool. Also, in every tournament there are people there that run it and are more than happy to answer questions. Find out who they are and don't be afraid to ask questions or let them know if you have a problem.

I've asked this in other articles. What is the difference between a 7 ft. valley table in Grand Rapids Michigan and a 7 ft. valley table in Las Vegas? Absolutely nothing! It measures exactly the same. The pockets are the same. The rails might have a little more or little less bounce. But basically, it's the same. What about the pool balls? My guess is that they still measure 2 1/4" in diameter and are in better shape than what you are used to playing with. So why should it matter where we play? Answer. It shouldn't. We won't go into a big left brain right brain scenario but essentially, our right brain wants us to take in all the distractions and tell us those tournament tables are bad and we will not be able to play well. That is why we do all of the other things in this article. To convince ourselves that there is nothing different about where we are playing. The more comfortable we are going into a tournament the easier it will be.

One thing I do, wherever I play, is to take the cue ball, (the cue ball is always free. Sometimes you have to pay for the balls.), set it on the spot and shoot it at the center diamond on the far rail. A simple stroke drill. My intent is to bring the cue ball back and hit the tip of my cue. This forces me to hit straight and not jump up. I do this for about 5 strokes. Then I do the same thing at lag speed. 5 times. Then lag speed plus half the table. 5 times. Then lag speed plus one table length. That gets me hitting center ball, getting my speed down and instills muscle memory. If I'm nervous or stroking bad it's readily apparent and easily correctible. It also brings my focus in.

The next thing I like to do if I have time is check the banks. Bank a few shots from corner to corner. Some tables play long, most play short. Learn that before the game. Then bank from the corner to side.

There is a lot more to the mental game than I can right here so if you want to know more go to my web site and read one of the many articles on the mental game. Just remember. You earned the right to be there and you have as much ability to win as the next person. Luck favors the well prepared so if you have practiced and prepared for this tournament there is no reason for you not to do well. Tell yourself that 100 times before you go to bed every night.

Practice

There are several articles about how to practice for a tournament. I won't go into all of them but there are certain things that you should feel at ease with when you go to a tournament. Practice stroke drills every day. Get that proper stroke into muscle memory. Practice getting your break consistent. The break is the most important shot of the game. If you don't make a ball on the break your opponent can run out. Don't give them that opportunity. Next, practice safeties. Safeties will win you matches. They are the difference between good play and quality play. Practice getting out of safeties. Your opponent **will** play safeties and you **will** need to get a hit without giving up ball in hand. You need to know how to kick, jump (if allowed), or swerve the cue. Short banks. These come up all the time and if you are comfortable with them you can turn a game around with one bank. Rail shots. These come up all the time also. It's surprising how many people have trouble with them.

A caution. Don't go overboard practicing certain shots. There have been studies that show once you have done something 15 to 20 times you get bored and start getting sloppy. We don't want that. If things aren't going right, move onto something else. If you practice while being sloppy you are just reinforcing bad habits.

Eight ball. Set out 3 balls of solids, 3 balls of stripes and the eight, randomly. Choose one and run out without missing a shot. Move to 4 balls, then 5, so on and so forth. This teaches good pattern play.

Nine ball. Throw out 4 balls randomly. With ball in hand run out all four balls sequentially without missing. After you do that make it 5 balls, then 6, so on and so forth.

This is by no means a definitive guidebook to tournament play but it should give you an idea on how to approach a tournament.