A Tournament Experiment

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Casino Regina, to its credit, frequently has an informal focus group, made up of a few regular players, preceding its major tournament events to discuss various issues. The 2005 Diamond Classic was no exception. This was a wise decision because it was serving as the final event for the First Canadian Poker Tour Championship and it was the first tournament at Casino Regina with a $1,000 entry fee. At the focus group, the tournament's format quickly became the dominant issue. Let me quickly describe the global format.

The tournament was going to be a two-stage tournament with the first stage spread over three days: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. Each of the three days were independent with 10% of the players advancing from each day to the second stage. The second stage was to be held on Saturday comprising the players who had qualified from one of the previous three days.

For a two-stage tournament, I believe almost all players prefer a format where advancing players move to the final stage with the chips they have accumulated during the first stage. If this is the case, then it is paramount that the playing field be level during stage one. What does one mean by a level playing field? Given that seating is random, so that there is no control over the opponents a player must face, the primary concern then becomes the number of chips in play. If the total number of chips in play one day is 500,000 and the next day it is, say, 1,500,000, then players advancing from the day in which 500,000 chips are in play have a serious disadvantage. Typically, there are one or two players who accumulate considerably more than their "share" during stage one. Consequently, there is likely to be a player or two from the day in which 1,500,000 chips are in play with a substantial chip lead over everyone from the other day. This is where the main problem arose for the 2005 Diamond Classic. By the time the focus meeting was held, it was clear the tournament was not going to sell out on any of the first three days. In addition, many players coming from out of town made it clear they wanted the opportunity to buy in for subsequent days should they fail to advance on any given day. Therefore, it was clear there would be essentially no control on the number of entries for any of the first three days. This meant there would be no control on the number of chips in play for any of the three days.

There were two suggestions that initially received serious discussion. One suggestion was to play down each day until there were 10% of the players remaining, and then let everyone start with the same number of chips on Saturday. There was some criticism of this for two reasons. First, it would lead to unhappiness on the part of the players who had done well the first day only to see themselves gain no chip advantage the final day.

Second, there were negative feelings about the effect this format has on playing strategy because survival is the most important feature of this format. Thus, this suggestion had only a lukewarm reception in spite of the fact it has been used elsewhere.

Another suggestion was to simply treat each table separately with one player advancing from each table. One strong complaint about this suggestion was that it was felt many players would be unhappy about paying a $1,000 entry fee and then find they were essentially playing a one-table satellite. One advantage, of course, is that all advancing players have the same number of chips to start on Saturday. The most serious problem with this format, when most of the available poker tables and dealers are used for the tournament, is that upon reaching the point in the tournament when most of the tables are down to one to three players, all of the available dealers and tables still are tied up with the tournament. This means you will have a couple hundred players no longer in the tournament eager to play ring games with essentially no tables available. This would be a disaster from several viewpoints.

I've done a fair amount of industrial consulting over the years with one of my specialties being scheduling problems; especially scheduling problems; especially scheduling problems that are amenable to combinatorial methods. So I made another suggestion which would look familiar to anyone who has used methods from design theory to solve scheduling problems. I mentioned to the group that all integers from 12 on may be written as a sum of fours and fives. So why not break the tables into groups of fours and fives, with four players advancing from a group of four tables and five players advancing from a group of five tables? The advantages I saw to this format were:

1) advancing players get to keep the chips they have accumulated during stage 1;

2) the average stack size of advancing players is the same for both group sizes;

3) players get to operate in a more familiar tournament format during stage one;

4) I believed the extra 100,000 chips in play for a group of five tables, as compared to a group of four tables, would not lead to significant problems for chip distribution among advancing players because one extra player is advancing; and

5) as players are eliminated from the tournament, tables become available for ring games at more or less the same rate as the demand.

Poker players, like most groups of people, are a somewhat conservative lot when it comes to embracing new ideas. My suggestion was politely received when first proposed and more or less disappeared as the focus group went on its way. A few days later, Les Cloutier called me and said he had decided to go ahead with my suggestion because he became convinced the other possible formats simply had too many potential problems.

I have to give Les a lot of points for making a rather courageous decision. Some players were perplexed and others were critical as the format was explained. Nevertheless, Casino Regina plowed ahead and ran the tournament following the format I suggested. The geographical layout of the tables was well conceived, the people in charge of the various groups ran tables smoothly, and the dealers did their usual fine job.

I was very interested in whether there might be significant differences in chip distribution for the different group sizes. The table below is a summary of the chip counts for advancing players. I hope you find these numbers interesting.

tables	maximum	minimum	above	below
5	242,000	10,500	2	3
4*	223,800	29,800	1	3
4*	196,600	42,200	1	3
5	188,000	33,900	2	3
5*	187,600	58,500	2	3
4	172,700	57,200	2	2
4*	171,900	50,700	2	2
5*	152,500	54,200	2	3
5*	152,200	32,200	3	2
4*	151,100	23,100	3	1
5	141,300	48,800	2	3
4	136,200	79,800	1	3
4*	132,500	70,600	2	2
4	111,000	89,000	2	2

The column headed *tables* gives the number of tables in the group. An asterisk by a number indicates that one of the tables in the group started with nine players instead of ten.

The columns headed *maximum* and *minimum* indicate the maximum and minimm number of chips, respectively, accumulated by advancing players from that particular group.

The columns headed *above* and *below* indicate the number of advancing players from the group with more than and less than, respectively, chips than the average of 100,000 chips. The numbers do not indicate any big advantage to players in groups of five tables, as two out of the top three chip leaders, or four out of the top seven, came from groups of four tables.