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Harrington on Hold 'em

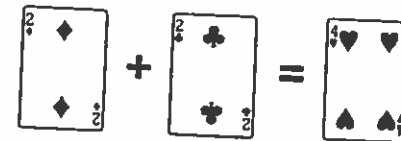
Expert Strategy for No-Limit Tournaments; Volume II: The Endgame

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Red Zone Strategy

By the time you reach the Red Zone, the alarm bells should be ringing loudly — “Danger, Will Robinson! Danger! Danger!” You’re now in a critical situation, and you’ll have to be alert and active to steer you way back to safety.

In the Red Zone, you have very little leverage in terms of bet size. A bet of two or three times the big blind will typically consume at least half your stack, effectively committing you to the pot. As a result, there’s rarely any reason to make a bet other than all-in. Moving all-in gives you the maximum chance of taking down the pot without a fight, which is your main goal anyway.

“What about a super-strong hand?” some will ask. “If you’re lucky enough to pick up a pair of aces with a small stack, shouldn’t you just make the minimum raise, to lure others into the pot?” In general, the answer is no. If you’ve made a couple of all-in moves and now just make the minimum bet, even the most doltish fellow at the table will realize something is amiss. A better approach is to hope that your previous actions will be sufficient disguise, and just go all-in with a strong hand. There’s no greater delight in poker than moving all-in a couple of times with weak hands, stealing the pots, then moving all-in with a pair of bullets and getting called by someone who just won’t be pushed around any more. It’s enough to make up for a month of bad beats.

Your hand selection itself should be very liberal. Big pairs, medium pairs, and two face cards are of course premium hands. Now, however, the small pairs and suited connectors have regained their value, and constitute very good hands as well. The truth is simply that in the Red Zone, first-in vigorish now dominates your actual cards as the determining criteria in the selection of hands to play. If your position is good enough (say because five or six players have folded to you) then you should be willing to go all-in with all but the very worst hands. If this sounds

overly aggressive (if not suicidal), remember these two salient facts:

1. Your opponents don’t know what hands you’re playing, or why. While you know you’re playing weak hands, they have to consider the possibility that you’re simply on a run of good cards. If you are called, you’ll mostly be an underdog, but often you will just pull down the pot. When your M is 4, just stealing the blinds increases your stack by 25 percent, a huge gain.
2. Failing to make these plays just means your stack mostly gets lower and lower. As your stack drops, your first-in vigorish shrinks. As your M gets to the lower end of the Red Zone, your first-in vigorish drops to just about zero. That’s a disaster, and you must fight to avoid it.

Here’s a simple example of first-in vigorish in the Red Zone that’s easily remembered:

1. If your M is exactly 3,
2. No one has entered the pot yet,
3. You think there’s a 50 percent chance that your remaining opponents will fold to an all-in bet,
4. You’re a 2-to-1 dog to win if you are called, then
5. You can move all-in with a positive expectation.

I call this the “3-to-1 Rule,” and it’s very handy to remember when you’re slogging through the Red Zone.

Red Zone Strategy in Action

Now let's take a look at just what good Red Zone play looks like in practice. Here's an actual sequence of 11 hands from the ending stage of an online tournament. There are only three significant prizes, with the money trailing off rapidly from fourth place on. At the beginning of the sequence, your situation is critical. Your M is only 2, and you're at the final table of ten players, three of whom actually have smaller stacks than you. Six players, however, have larger stacks, some of which are much larger. If you play a lot of tournament poker, this should seem a familiar situation — you made the final table, but you just have a few chips left. Compare how you would handle the situation to what actually occurs in these final hands.

Example 6-1: In this first hand you're seventh to act. The blinds are \$1,000/\$2,000, and the antes are \$100. The initial pot is \$4,000. Here are the chip counts and the Ms of the players at the final table:

Player 1	\$33,400	M = 8
Player 2	\$10,400	M = 25
Player 3	\$4,700	M = 1
Player 4	\$26,500	M = 6.5
Player 5	\$52,200	M = 13
Player 6	\$17,300	M = 4
You	\$8,000	M = 2
Player 8	\$2,500	M = 0.5
Sm blind	\$20,400	M = 5
Big blind	\$4,500	M = 1

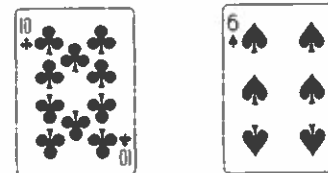
This is a pretty typical chip distribution at the end of a large, multi-table online tournament. The Ms are generally low; even the

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big chip leader only has an M of 13! Three players have Ms of 1 or lower.

In live events, the situation will be slightly better. The chip leader will have an M in the 30 to 40 range, but there will still be one, two, or even three players in the Red Zone, with the other players scattered in between. If you're one of those Red Zone players, your plays should look like the plays I'm about to describe.

In the first hand you pick up



The six players in front of you all fold. *What do you do?*

Answer: You push all-in. With a Red Zone M, your only decision is whether you move all-in or not. Whether you push all-in or not depends on the answers to two questions:

1. *Has anyone entered the pot in front of me?* If the answer is yes, then you need a reasonably good hand to play, a little weaker but similar to the sort of hand you would require early in the tournament.
2. *How good is my hand?* The answer to the question is much less important than the answer to Question No. 1. I'm only folding the very worst hands here. Ten-six offsuit is plenty good to play.

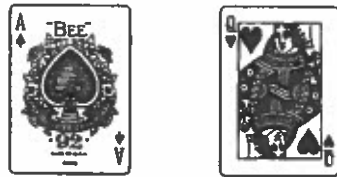
Notice the question I *haven't* asked: What is my position? With a low M, your position doesn't matter much any more. The reason is that the worse your position (i.e., you're first or second

43.5 = 22.9 M = 5
4

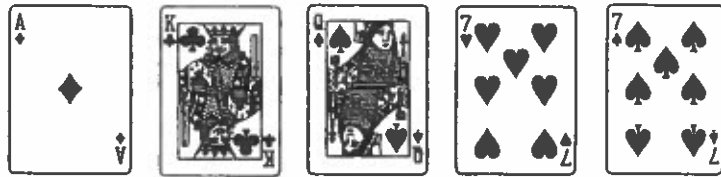
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to act) the closer you are to the blinds, which will chop away a huge percentage of your stack. Paradoxically, when your position is bad, you're under even more pressure to be the first player into the pot and grab your first-player vigorish. When your position is good (at or near the button), you are under less pressure to jump right in as it happens.

You move all-in, and Player 8 (the button) calls, moving in \$2,400. The blinds fold. He shows



and the board comes



You lose the hand.

A disaster on Hand No. 1! Not because you lost the hand, but because everyone else at the table got to see the kind of hand you were willing to play all-in. An ideal (and more common) sequence is successfully stealing a couple of pots before you get called by a better hand, then get lucky and win. At that point you've won enough chips that you can pull back a bit. Now it's back to work with a smaller stack, and with your cover blown.

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Example 6-2. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are sixth to act with $6\heartsuit 2\clubsuit$. The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$10,300	M = 2.5
Player 2	\$4,600	M = 1
Player 3	\$26,400	M = 6.5
Player 4	\$52,100	M = 13
Player 5	\$17,200	M = 4
You	\$5,500	M = 1
Player 7	\$8,800	M = 2
Player 8	\$19,300	M = 5
Sm blind	\$2,400	M = 0.5
Big blind	\$33,300	M = 8

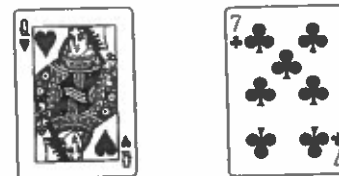
The first player folds, but Player 2 goes all-in. Players 3, 4, and 5 all fold. *What do you do?*

Answer: You fold. Without the first-in vigorish, your hand is as worthless as it looks.

All the players behind you fold, and Player 2 collects the pot.

Note that the big blind made a huge blunder. After Player 2 moved all-in, the pot contained \$8,500 and it cost the him only another \$2,500 to call. He was getting almost 3.5-to-1 odds. Since Player 2, with his M of 1, could have moved in with almost anything, I would have called in the big blind with any two cards.

Example 6-3. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are fifth to act with



The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$8,500	M = 2
Player 2	\$26,300	M = 6.5
Player 3	\$5,200	M = 13
Player 4	\$17,100	M = 4
You	\$5,400	M = 1
Player 6	\$8,700	M = 2
Player 7	\$19,200	M = 5
Player 8	\$1,300	M = 0.3
Sm blind	\$31,100	M = 8
Big blind	\$10,200	M = 2.5

Player 1 goes all-in. Players 2, 3, and 4 all fold. *What do you do?*

Answer: You fold. Without the first-in vigorish, you need a real hand to play, and queen-seven offsuit isn't good enough. Notice that on the first hand I was happy to make the initial move into the pot with ten-six offsuit, but now I'm folding a much better hand, just because the first-in vigorish is lacking.

Player 6 calls the all-in and the other players fold. Player 1 had a pair of tens, Player 6 a pair of jacks. Player 1 survives when he makes a straight on the river.

Although no one got eliminated (Player 6 had Player 1 covered) there was some good news this hand. Look how strong the hands were that the players showed down. While this may have been a coincidence, it may also be a sign that the players at the table require much better hands than you do to get involved. If true that's a big plus going forward.

Example 6-4. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are fourth to act with 3♣2♥. The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$26,200	M = 6.5
Player 2	\$51,900	M = 13
Player 3	\$17,000	M = 4
You	\$5,300	M = 1
Player 5	\$200	M = 0.05
Player 6	\$19,100	M = 5
Player 7	\$1,200	M = 0.3
Player 8	\$30,000	M = 7.5
Sm blind	\$8,100	M = 4
Big blind	\$20,800	M = 5

Players 1, 2, and 3 all fold. *What do you do?*

Answer: I don't play every hand when I'm potentially first to act, just most of them. Fold the trey-deuce. There are too many players left to act, and the combination of the position and the hand is too bad.

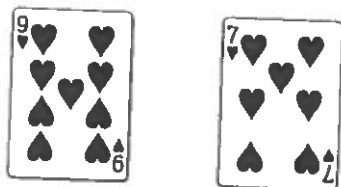
Player 5 goes all-in for his last \$100 and Player 6 raises \$4,000 to chase out the players behind him. The other players fold. Player 5's seven-six offsuit loses to Player 6's ace-jack.

Note that Player 6 could have merely called to let others in to cooperate in eliminating Player 5. In this case cooperation was trumped by greed.

We've sat out three hands in a row, but that could potentially be beneficial for us. In the first hand we were forced to show down T♣6♠. Hopefully by now some of the players will have forgotten the move, or at least forgotten that we made it, and our next all-in move might get more respect as a result.

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Example 6-5. Next hand, table now nine-handed, same blinds and antes. You are third to act with



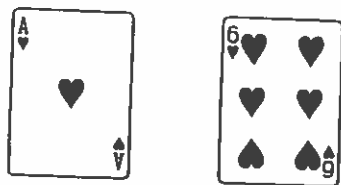
The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$51,800	M = 13
Player 2	\$16,900	M = 4
You	\$5,200	M = 1
Player 4	\$23,100	M = 6
Player 5	\$1,100	M = 0.3
Player 6	\$29,900	M = 7.5
Player 7	\$7,000	M = 2
Sm blind	\$18,700	M = 4.5
Big blind	\$26,100	M = 6.5

Players 1 and 2 fold. *What do you do?*

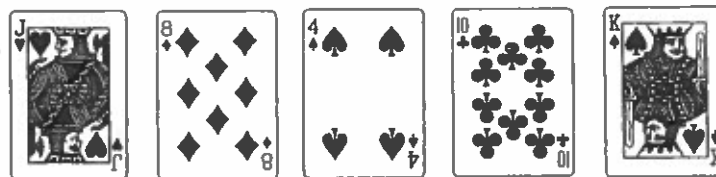
Answer: You now have first-in vigorish with a medium-strength hand, so you go all-in and take your chances.

You go all-in. Everyone folds down to the big blind, who calls and shows



The board comes

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and your straight takes the pot.

Good news and bad news. We won a nice pot, increasing our stack by \$7,000, but again we had to shown down a weak hand, this time nine-seven. In addition, our M only increased to 3, so we must keep fighting.

Example 6-6. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are second to act with 8♠7♦. The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$16,800	M = 4
You	\$12,100	M = 3
Player 3	\$23,000	M = 3
Player 4	\$1,000	M = 0.25
Player 5	\$29,800	M = 7.5
Player 6	\$6,900	M = 2
Player 7	\$17,600	M = 4
Sm blind	\$20,900	M = 5
Big blind	\$51,700	M = 13

Player 1 folds. *What do you do?*

Answer: You push all-in again. Again you have first-in vigorish, and now your stack is big enough to seriously damage anyone at the table except the big blind. In addition, you're hitting the blinds in two hands, so your situation is worse than it appears.

Notice that as you move from the low end of the Red Zone to the high end, you're theoretically less desperate to

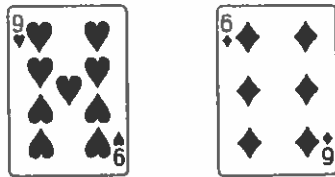
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attack the pot, but your stack gives you much more clout when you do attack.

Everyone folds and you take the blinds.

Your M moves up another notch, this time to 4.

Example 6-7. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are first to act with



The table now looks as follows:

You	\$15,900	M = 4
Player 2	\$22,900	M = 5.5
Player 3	\$900	M = 0.25
Player 4	\$29,700	M = 7.5
Player 5	\$6,800	M = 1.5
Player 6	\$17,500	M = 4.5
Player 7	\$19,800	M = 5
Sm blind	\$49,600	M = 12.5
Big blind	\$16,700	M = 12.5

What do you do?

Answer: You fold. Your M is back up to 4, at the top of the Red Zone. If you hadn't been so active, you might even bet here, but having played (and won) the last two hands means your opponents will be getting antsy and you're now a target. Take away their target and relax for a hand. You'll be in action again soon enough.

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You fold. Players 3 and 6 get all-in against each other, and Player 3 survives when his K♦9♣ triumphs against Player 6's pair of jacks.

Example 6-8. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are the big blind with Q♥6♠. The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$22,800	M = 55
Player 2	\$5,500	M = 1.5
Player 3	\$29,600	M = 7.5
Player 4	\$6,700	M = 1.5
Player 5	\$16,600	M = 4
Player 6	\$19,700	M = 5
Player 7	\$48,500	M = 12
Sm blind	\$14,600	M = 3.5
BB (You)	\$16,700	M = 4

Player 1 folds. Player 2, who just survived last hand, goes all-in for his last \$5,400. Everyone else folds to you. *What do you do?*

Answer: This problem has very little to do with stack sizes or Ms, but everything to do with pot odds. The pot was \$3,900 and Player 2 called your big blind for \$2,000 and then raised you his last \$3,400. The pot is now \$9,300, and it costs you another \$3,400 to call, so you're getting not quite 3-to-1 on your money. Player 2 had an M of only 1.5, with his blinds coming in two more hands, so he could have raised with almost anything. On average, you'll probably be a slight underdog in the showdown since queen-six offsuit is just about an average hand, and he wouldn't go all-in with his very worst hands. But you're getting huge odds, so that's fine.

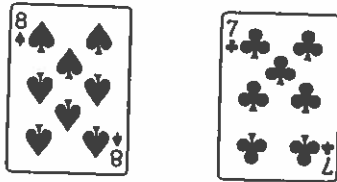
You call, and he shows A♠5♣. His hand holds up to win.

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A bad break, as that was a way-above-average hand for his situation. You can't complain, though, since you've done well in the luck department so far.

While you know that you made this call because of the pot odds, not all of your opponents will be aware of this. Many players are too lazy to calculate pot odds on the hands where they're actually involved, let alone the hands where they're sitting out. To these players, you're just the lunatic at the table who will push all his chips with a queen-six offsuit! Always stay aware of the perceptions your plays are creating. The sophisticated players at the table will understand what you just did and see you as a dangerous opponent. The fish will see you as an even bigger fish.

Example 6-9. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are the small blind with



The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$12,700	M = 3
Player 2	\$29,500	M = 7.5
Player 3	\$6,600	M = 4
Player 4	\$16,500	M = 4
Player 5	\$19,600	M = 5
Player 6	\$48,400	M = 12
Player 7	\$13,500	M = 3.5
Sm B (You)	\$10,300	M = 2.5
Big blind	\$22,700	M = 5.5

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Player 1 folds. Player 2 raises to \$6,000. Player 3 folds. Player 4 goes all-in. Players 5, 6, and 7 all fold. What do you do?

Answer: Fold, of course. Someone is serious about this hand and it's sure not you.

The big blind folds and Player 2 calls. Player 2 shows A♦T♣, and Player 4 shows a 9♥9♠. The nines hold up.

The small stacks are winning all these confrontations, so the table is not shrinking.

Example 6-10. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are on the button with 6♦4♣. The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$13,000	M = 3
Player 2	\$6,500	M = 1.5
Player 3	\$36,700	M = 9
Player 4	\$19,500	M = 5
Player 5	\$48,300	M = 12
Player 6	\$13,400	M = 3.5
You	\$9,200	M = 2.5
Sm blind	\$20,600	M = 5
Big blind	\$12,600	M = 3

Players 1 through 6 all fold. What do you do?

Answer: You'd like a better hand than six-four offsuit in this spot, but that's what you got dealt. The situation, with six players already out and no callers yet, is just too good to fold. Go all-in, and see if anyone will call you. Remember that your stack is plenty big enough to hurt the players behind you, so they will be cautious.

The blinds fold, and you take the pot.

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A quick win with no cards boosts your stack by almost 50 percent.

Example 6-11. Next hand, same blinds and antes. You are on the cutoff seat with



The table now looks as follows:

Player 1	\$6,400	M = 1.5
Player 2	\$36,600	M = 9
Player 3	\$19,400	M = 5
Player 4	\$48,200	M = 12
Player 5	\$13,300	M = 3.5
You	\$13,000	M = 3.5
Player 7	\$19,500	M = 5
Sm blind	\$10,500	M = 2.5
Big blind	\$12,900	M = 3

Players 1 through 5 all fold. *What do you do?*

Answer: Finally you pick up a semi-real hand. You go all-in, of course, but now your previous play has put you in a good position, as you might actually get called by a weaker hand.

The button and the blinds fold. You take down another \$3,900 pot, and your chip stack reaches \$16,800, with an M over 4.

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We'll end our little Red Zone movie at this point. You survived a difficult stretch, teetering on the brink of elimination most of the time, and pulled up to fifth place out of nine players.

The summary of the 11 hands looks like this:

1. You folded five hands, mostly when someone entered the pot ahead of you.
2. Three times you went all-in and were not called.
3. Twice you went all-in and were called. Both times you were an underdog when called. You won one, and lost the other to a small stack.
4. Once you called an all-in from the big blind with great pot odds; again you were an underdog and lost.

This was not a very unusual sequence in these situations. Your best hand was only a king-jack offsuit. You won more than half of your all-ins when no one called you. You were never a favorite when you were involved in a showdown, but your two losses were to stacks smaller and more desperate than you. Most important, you survived and moved up to the middle of the pack.