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VIVA LAS VEGAS!

You Made it to the Vegas Championships! Now What???

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Introduction

So, you're going to Las Vegas to play in the championship event?
Congratulations! Are you prepared?

Prepared for what, you ask? Good question! You've come to the right place!
If you have been to Las Vegas to play pool, then you may know some of the things I am going to share with you. Hopefully, you'll find a few nuggets of information that will help you have a better experience.

If you have not been to Vegas yet, then I hope these tips I am going to share will give you a bit of an advantage over those who have not had the wisdom to read my column.

There's a lot to cover, so let's get right to it!

Preparation

Obviously, you want to be prepared for your tournament. If it's your first tournament, your nerves might get the best of you. Don't worry, that happens to the best of us. I would suggest entering some local tournaments to get used to pressure.

If possible, play against another team in the same format as your upcoming Vegas tournament. Give yourself real stakes to play for to get you into "competition mode." Once you get to Vegas, you should be ready to take anyone on!

Plan your stay

Consider staying an extra day or two to enjoy Las Vegas. There is a lot to do there, including visiting the many casinos, seeing various shows, or riding awesome thrill rides. You don't want to worry about trying to make the Cirque du Soleil show time if your match runs late; you need to stay focused on your game. Planning on extra "fun" days allows you to focus on the task at hand.

Try to arrive a day early, at the very least. If your flight is delayed, or even worse, canceled, you want to make sure you have plenty of time to make it without forfeiting your first match!

When you are planning your stay, try to book your room as early as you can. You want to stay in a room close to the tournament area to minimize walking distance. Most of the time the hotel has deals associated with the tournament, so don't forget to ask.

Find out what restaurants are nearby – food is usually good in the casino, but can be pricey. There are *many* restaurants in Las Vegas, and if you shop around you can save some money.

If you're on a tight budget, consider bringing food with you. If you're flying and bringing food isn't an option, go to the grocery store and pick up a few things: breakfast cereal, sandwich makings, some hard-boiled eggs, etc. Don't forget snacks, too.

Know the Dress Code

Playing in the tournament is very similar to going to a job interview. Dress to impress. Do not show up in jeans, shorts, flip-flops, and tank tops. Most tournaments have a dress policy, so make sure you read it and pack accordingly.

And don't toe the line. Just because the tournament rules say you can wear nice jeans with no rips or holes doesn't mean that's what you should wear. Consider wearing slacks; they are comfortable and light, and they look good. Have you ever seen the way Rodney Morris dresses? He always looks better than everyone in the room. And now he's in the Hall of Fame (Congrats, Rocket!).

Don't wear tennis shoes (except to walk to and from the tournament room). Get yourself a nice pair of loafers or dress shoes that are comfortable and dressy. If they are new, wear them for a week or two before the tournament so you don't get blisters.

Many tournaments require the team to wear matching shirts. I recommend you do this even if it's not a rule. It will help to build the team dynamic, and it will be more intimidating to your opponents. Only wear those shirts when you're playing a match, however. Bring a change of shirt with you so you can keep the shirt as clean as possible. You should have a couple of them; you may need to wear them for over a week.

Traveling

Of course, we could write a whole book on good traveling tips. I want to focus on your equipment. You need to make sure your equipment gets to Las Vegas safely.

If you are going to take your cues on the plane with you, I strongly urge you to check it. Hoping that TSA is going to let you take it on the plane as carry-on is a gamble, and you don't want the hassle if they won't. I recommend purchasing a cue travel case to protect the cues. They are a very sound investment, and you can pack extra things in it with your cue.

You might consider having the cues shipped via FedEx or UPS to your hotel, if you don't trust the airlines to handle your cues properly. Another option is to have a friend take them with them if they are driving. But then, you risk not having your cues if they are delayed or detained.

Of course, if you followed my earlier advice and got to the tournament early, then you might still have time to get your cues if they didn't end up on the flight with you for some reason.

When booking your flight, try to get a direct flight, even if it costs a little more. Connecting flights increase the possibility of delays and lost or delayed luggage.

Arrival

When you get to your hotel, you will face many temptations. The slot machines and tables might try to lure you in, and you'll probably be very excited to check out the tournament rooms. Don't worry, there will be plenty of time for that – you did arrive early like I suggested, right?

First things first: Check in. They will give you the lay of the land. Go immediately to your room and unpack. Believe me, you don't want to get back to your room later in the evening (or worse, early morning!) only to have to root through your suitcases. Settle in first.

And before you leave the room to check out the tournament areas, put on a good pair of walking shoes!

Prepare for a LOT of walking

If you have a FitBit, use it! You're going to walk a LOT while you're in the tournament. If walking is a problem for you, most hotels have scooters that you can rent by the day or week. You may want to ask them about it when you are booking the room (I hope you're reading this before you leave, and not *after* you have checked in!). Be aware that many tournaments do not allow you to take the scooter into the tournament room. However, they will definitely save you a lot of walking to and from the tournament areas.

Make sure you wear comfortable shoes. I like to wear dress shoes when I'm shooting, so for walking to and from the tournament I'll wear a pair of sneakers, then change them when I get to the table. I only wear the dress shoes when I am in a match.

Don't forget anything in your room. I once forgot my chalk, and Aurora offered to run back to the room to get it for me. It took her 17 minutes round-trip! I think I still owe her for that, and it was 3 years ago!

Now, she and I are very prepared. She has a large tote bag with wheels and a handle that we use to haul everything. It can hold her purse, another bag with her iPad, extra shoes for her and me (she insists on wearing heels most of time—can you imagine walking through the casino in them?), bottles of water, and snacks. A flight attendant's overnight bag will work, too. Trust me, you'll thank me later!

Aurora also acts as my caddy. Having a person with your team who is willing to fetch things for you will really save you time, and allow you to focus on the task at hand: winning the match! She will fetch water, get the score sheet, and grab food, snacks and anything else that will save us from having to walk even more. If you have someone willing to do these things for you you'll be very grateful. Make sure you buy them a spa treatment while you're there.

Get a lay of the land

Ok, you have everything you need, comfortable shoes on your feet, and you're ready to play some pool! You may want to head down to the practice rooms about now. Since it's your first time in the tournament rooms, make sure you familiarize yourself with your surroundings and the locations of some key areas.

Most of the Vegas tournaments will have multiple rooms filled with pool tables. Find them, and note the table numbers in each. When you are assigned a table, you'll need to know where they are. This shouldn't be difficult; there are usually many signs posted with the information you need.

Find out where the Tournament Desk is. This is the hub of the tournament; they will hand out assignments and score sheets here, and it is where you need to return your score sheet once you have won your match. This is also the place to go if you have questions.

Since you are here, find out when your first match will be, and where it will be played. Most tournaments have this information available for days before the event, and will have the information online. If you don't know yet, now is the time to find out. If this is a team event, make sure all of your teammates know this information as well.

Most Vegas pool tournaments will have many vendors in attendance. I would tell you to go find them, but you really can't miss them. It might be a good idea to shop around a little bit to find out where the repair vendors are (in case you need to replace a tip), and where the best deals are on items you might need to replace (chalk, bridges, gloves, or even sticks).

Many booths have famous spokespersons working with them. If there is someone you'd like to meet, find out when his or her scheduled appearances are. For example, one of my favorites is Stefano Pelinga; he is a very nice guy, and always takes the time to talk to his fans. Tiger has sponsored him for quite some time, so you may get a chance to play a few trick shots with him.

You will find water stations everywhere... make sure you know where they are; it's a good idea to stay hydrated. And on a related note, observe where the bathrooms are. If you have to go in the middle of a match, you'll want to know how close the nearest one is.

Finally, make sure you know where you're going to eat breakfast. It truly is the most important meal of the day, and you need to start the day with a good meal. At the Rio, I recommend the Hash House. It's on the way to the tournament rooms, and serves an excellent breakfast. If you're trying to avoid the expense, then make sure you have

some good breakfast foods in your room. A Power Bar and a Red Bull aren't going to cut it.

Meeting the pros

As I mentioned, many professionals will be in attendance. If there is a pro event going on, you will see many of them walking around. Most of them love to talk to their fans so don't be shy. However, make sure you give them some respect.

Be aware of what's going on. If they look like they are in a hurry to get somewhere, then leave them alone. They are there for the fans, but they are also there to focus and play their best, too. If you see them eating breakfast at the table next to you, you might want to let them eat in peace. Use your best judgment; you can usually tell by their body language whether they are receptive to being asked for an autograph.

Practice

Now that you are familiar with the tournament layout, you might want to get some practice time in. There are a couple of things to consider when you are looking for a place to shoot, and when you are practicing.

They will usually have a practice room set up. If they do, they probably have rules about not shooting on tournament tables. Respect the rules; don't just jump on a table when nobody is looking.

If they do allow you to practice on any open table, be aware of matches that may be in progress around you. Don't choose a table immediately next to a current match. Try to find a place where you won't be in their way.

If you have no choice, then respect their play; they should always have the right-of-way. They should never have to wait for you or ask you to move. Put yourself in their shoes; the last thing they need is some inconsiderate buffoon making them lose their focus.

If there are people waiting to play, be considerate. Don't practice for hours. Allow others to use the tables too. Common sense should prevail here.

Pre-Game

We call this practice, but in reality, you are at the big tournament, aren't you? The time for practice has passed. Your goal should be to get warmed up and ready for your matches. If you spend hours on the table playing game after game, you're just going to tire yourself out. You never see baseball players playing a game before the game, do you? No. They do batting practice, throw a few balls, and stretch.

Sometimes, though, you want to practice a shot you had trouble with during your last match. Focus on getting that shot down. Shoot plenty of times until you are confident that you won't have a problem with it again.

When warming up, take easy shots. You want to build up your confidence; confidence is what wins games and in a big tournament where it's easy to lose your confidence anything you can do to build it up will help. Just warm up your arm and get loose.

When it's time to play your match, make sure you get to your tables early to get a feel for them. You are usually assigned two tables to speed up the match. When you get on the table, you have a few goals.

First, learn the 3-cushion route to the corner pocket. I won't go into the details here, but if you've read my other articles, you know how important it is to know how the rails affect the path of the balls.

Next, check to make sure the tables are level by hitting a slow ball down the length of the table. Do the same across the width of the table at both ends. Observe any drift, and share this information with your teammates.

Hit a few practice shots to get a feel for the table's speed and cushion response.

Most importantly, whatever the condition of the table is, accept it. Do not complain about problems – accept them, share with your teammates, and realize that if you know and your opponent does not, you have an advantage.

Intimidate your opponents

When you are warming up before a match, don't try difficult shots. You don't need to impress anyone. Sure, you might scare your opponents if you make a tough cut

shot, but if you miss, your opponent will just end up feeling more confident: "awesome, these guys are fallible. We can beat them."

Instead, shoot some easy shots. Set up a few stop shots, and focus more on the fundamentals. Pop those balls into the pocket, one after another. You might think they are watching you, thinking "this guy only shoots easy shots," but the sound of the balls repeatedly popping into the pockets will get into his psyche. Trust me, this works.

Laugh and joke with your teammates. This shows them that you guys work well together, and enjoy being with each other. You're all friends. Even if there is a guy on your team you normally don't like and wouldn't give the time of day... today, you love him.

However, you should also be serious. Don't overdo the joking and laughing. Your opponents need to know that you mean business.

You're probably nervous. Guess what? So are they. Just realize that your opponents are scared, just like you are. Don't show it, but realize they feel it too. Give them a reason to be afraid.

If this is your first time here, do NOT tell them. They don't need to feel like they are more experienced than you. However, if this is NOT your first time here, talk about previous trips. They'll be thinking, "Oh, wow, these guys have been here before. They really know what they are doing!"

Match Time

When it's time for you to play, there are a few things to consider. Every tournament has its rules, and you should be very familiar with them. Learn them; ignorance of the rules is no excuse. I would like to cover a few things they don't usually put into the rulebook.

Above and beyond, play the game with dignity and respect. If you do that, everything else will fall into place. For those who need a little help in this regard, here are a few tips:

When it's not your turn to shoot, sit in your seat and wait for your turn. Be aware of any rules regarding talking to your teammates when you're not shooting. In some tournaments, it is not allowed.

When you are at the table, be aware of your surroundings. Sometimes you might have to wait for another player to shoot because they are in the way of your shot. Don't let it bother you... if it interrupts your rhythm, go get a sip of your water, wait for her to finish, then go shoot your shot.

Make sure when you are playing that you stay hydrated, and try to make sure you eat before your match. If you don't have the time to eat a meal, then consider having a snack. A candy bar, granola bar, or trail mix are good options. And always stay hydrated.

Don't drink. This isn't necessarily a rule. It's more of a guideline, and my strong recommendation. Even if the tournament allows you to have alcohol in the tournament rooms (most do), try to refrain from drinking. It does not improve your game, and if anything, it encourages you to be a little "loose" with the recommendations I have provided. Don't be "that guy."

When you are not playing a match, be there for your teammates. Cheer for them and offer them a high-five or fist bump when they do well. Remember that confidence is the key to winning tournaments, so bolster each other and be supportive. Even if you don't like the guy; for now, he's your best friend!

Respect your opponents. Don't always assume that they are cheating, or sharking, or being otherwise underhanded. And if they *are* doing those things, don't retaliate. Play your game and be above all of that.

Disputes

If you do have a dispute with your opponent, don't argue or escalate the issue. Calmly call a referee over to help out. They are there to solve disputes, and to watch questionable shots in case of a possible foul.

To call a ref, usually you walk to the middle of the table arena and hold your stick high in the air. Don't scream out "REF!" You wouldn't want someone to do that to you when you are down on a shot. Wait until the referee sees you and walks to your table.

If your opponent is about to shoot a shot and you think he might foul, politely tell him that you would like to have a referee watch the shot. Do not do this when he is mid-stroke. You should have plenty of time to tell him before he gets down on the shot. And

when your opponent tells you he wants a referee to watch your shot, smile and say “sure thing!” He’s not trying to shark you.

When the referee has made their decision, it’s final. No... it’s FINAL. Do NOT argue with them. If you truly feel that a referee is not being fair, then you can file a complaint later. For now, simply accept the decision and play on. You don’t want to be the story everyone is talking about later that night: the team that got thrown out of the tournament.

Play with dignity and respect, and you’ll have no problems.

Other Considerations

If your tournament run is over, there is still plenty more to do! Don’t despair; you can still have a lot of fun!

- If you have other teams from your room or area in the tournament, go be their cheerleaders!
- Enter a Mini-Tournament. These are usually going on all day every day. They are usually single eliminations, 8 players, and cost \$10 to play for a first place prize of \$50. Just don’t enter one when you’re about to play a match, thinking you’ll be done in time. Your main tournament takes precedence; your teammates are counting on you.
- Enjoy the Las Vegas nightlife (and day life too!). Go see a show or find a great restaurant. Visit Hoover Dam. Go ride a roller coaster. Just be safe, and travel with friends.

Conclusion

Las Vegas can be scary, intimidating, and quite overwhelming to someone who hasn’t been there before. Just remember that more than half of the people there are new, too! If you follow the plan I have outlined, and go to Las Vegas prepared, you give yourself quite the advantage over the others who have not had the privilege of reading my column.

If you are a veteran, then you know most of what I have said. I hope I was able to impart a little bit of knowledge to you as well. If you have some green players on your team or from your room attending the Vegas Championships for the first time, take them under your wing and show them how it's done.

Have fun, be respectful, and take home that trophy!

And if you see me there, please be sure to say hello. Unless I'm eating breakfast. Then, leave me the @\$% alone! ;)

If you have any questions you'd like me to ask, use [#AskTheBilliardsProfessor](#) on Twitter (@billiardsprof) or drop me a line at pool@billiardsprofessor.com. I can also be found hanging out with fellow billiards enthusiasts at [reddit.com/r/billiards](https://www.reddit.com/r/billiards). Come on by and join the discussion!

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