



## Taking the Next Step

Moving up the poker ladder not only means your skill on the felt has to improve, but your overall strategy for getting better as a player has to step up. Making the jump in stakes is not simply a matter of coping with the increased profit and losses that will occur. Developing a solid approach to learning is imperative if you want to improve and take your game to a new level, as mental game coach Jared Tandler explains.

**C**limbing to the next rung of the poker ladder is a matter of development, not only of your fundamental poker skills, but the skills you use to assess, quantify and evaluate every aspect of your game. It may seem an obvious point, but as you move up in stakes, the game gets tougher and the pressure on your abilities ratchets up. It's this pressure that magnifies your weaknesses and gives you less room for error.

While a few players have experienced meteoric surges through the ranks, these rises are atypical and often have positive variance fueling them. Indeed, this positive variance has sheltered them from mistakes they were making while moving up, giving them breathing room to plug their leaks once establishing themselves at a certain level. For the majority of players, however, the climb is less dramatic and, therefore, requires a strategy for improving.

Poker is a constantly evolving game, so even if you're on top now, you'll eventually fall behind if you stop learning or fail to learn effectively.

These players commonly view moving up in stakes as simply a "sink or swim" process where they either move up or fail. What I'm advocating is a different approach and one that advocates a proactive strategy to learning the often overlooked, but key areas of your game.

These areas are: getting used to the money and bet sizing, fixing weaknesses at your current limit, increasing your knowledge of variance and the ability to assess other players.

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### BECOMING NUMB TO THE MONEY

Becoming desensitized to the money is something that often happens over time just by playing at those stakes. However, you can speed up the process by making yourself more familiar with the amounts of money and the size of common bets.

Actually study the numbers because the more familiar you are with



them, the more likely you are to make the best decision and not back off because of the betting amounts.

You can also get used to larger amounts of money faster by taking a page from Dusty

Schmidt in his book, *Treat Your Poker like a Business*. Dusty describes a bankroll as inventory rather than stacks of money. Inventory is the basic tool a business utilizes to create income, which, for you as a poker player, is your hourly rate. Rather than focusing on the actual wins or losses on a given day, seeing your bankroll as an inventory will allow you to focus on the bigger picture and the correct decisions.

### BREAKING DOWN YOUR GAME

**How you assess the quality of your game is important as you move up.**

You need to evaluate how the regulars at higher stakes are better than you are and how they'll exploit your weaknesses. You can get a better understanding of your weaknesses by taking shots at higher limits, but do so with the mentality that once you make the leap you aren't bound to that level. Often players take shots to find out if they can make it or not, but that logic is flawed because of variance. Instead, look at taking shots as a way to figure

out what you need to learn. It gives you a chance to discover what mistakes you are getting away with at your current limit that you don't want to be any more. You can use this process as a way to uncover the things you need to fix at your current level, so when you move up, those mistakes have already been fixed. Basically, shot taking is an opportunity to look at what is required to play at the next level, without the risk of having to play there to improve.

Often you'll hear players say their game is solid, and while that may

be true for their current level, it isn't necessarily true for a higher level. A \$1/\$2 player would see glaring weaknesses in a \$.10/\$25 player's game, but a \$25/\$50 player would see similar glaring weaknesses in the \$1/\$2 player's game. Indeed, these weaknesses may not be apparent to the \$1/\$2 because they aren't being exploited in the games they play. You always have weaknesses, but the question is: do you have a process to figure out what they are? Taking shots is a great way to find out.



### KNOWLEDGE OF VARIANCE

**Every player has a certain degree of knowledge about variance, even weak players.**

A weak player's understanding of variance is often completely illogical, though, which is a main reason why their game is so weak. As you climb up the stakes you have to improve your ability to recognize an increasingly subtle amount of variance beyond the

suckouts, coolers and obvious shifts in fortune. While you're actually playing you need to know whether you're performing well or poorly, and that gets much easier when you can spot variance as it happens. This is a huge point that people often miss and, moreover, never work on improving. Ideally, your knowledge of variance should match your level of poker skill.

### ASSESSING YOUR OPPONENTS

**The skill and ability to assess your opponents is crucial.**

Challenge yourself to recognize how many hands it takes before you know how to exploit your opponent, as though you're a contestant on Name That Tune. Assessing another player's game is a skill, which means you can improve how you go about spotting opponents'

strengths and weaknesses. Simply labeling a player a fish doesn't help you understand how to specifically exploit that player. Many players don't bother to focus on understanding how weak players think because their edge is already so great.

However, when you move up or take shots, the pressure to tap into another

player's thought process increases because your edge decreases.

Entering the poker stratosphere takes as much dedication and strategy away from the felt as it does on it. Moving beyond your current level is more than knowing how to 3-bet effectively; it requires a solid mental approach to improving many areas of your game. WPT