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# FOREWORD

**BY ANTONIO ESFANDIARI**

Heart.

If there is one word to describe Qui Nguyen's performance at the 2016 World Series of Poker Main Event, it's heart. Qui was willing to put it all on the line at any point and risk looking like a fool for a chance to be a hero. That's what it takes to win at No Limit Hold'em: Qui played near the point of recklessness without much concern for the consequences.

During the Final Table, I felt I was watching the Al Pacino of poker. Qui is bold and courageous in the way he approaches hands, the same way Pacino takes on his roles. Watching Qui, I was reminded of the famous scene in *Scent of a Woman* where Pacino makes the big speech at Charlie's boarding school hearing. Pacino just crushes it, commands the screen, and holds nothing back. He takes it right up to the edge with this speech, in danger of overdoing it, risking looking foolish, but in the end, he's brilliant. That's the way Qui played at the end of the Main Event.

For me, this was the best final table ever. All the players deserve credit for the fine, exciting play and the character they brought to the game, but Qui led the charge. His play was unorthodox, that's for sure. Several times

in the broadcast, you could hear how taken aback I was, so sure he would fold, back down in the face of resistance, but he just persisted.

Qui was just as likely to three bet with garbage as he was to fold. Nearly impossible to contend with, but exciting to watch. When someone plays this way, it is just so hard to pinpoint what they have, and it makes bluffing at them nearly impossible. You are on the defensive constantly, and when you play not to lose, it's very difficult to win.

One hand sticks out to me. On Day 2, Gordon Vayo (hand 109 on page 103) raises a little over 2x from the button with Qui in the small blind and Cliff "JohnnyBax" Josephy in the big blind. Qui calls with pocket fours, and Cliff puts a big three-bet in, almost four times Gordon's original raise. Gordon folds, but Qui shoves! With pocket fours! Sure, if Cliff has a big pair and calls then Qui may look foolhardy, but Qui has him covered and knows if Cliff instead has a big ace he's not going to want a race for his tournament life. It turns out Cliff did indeed have A-Q and folded. It was a remarkable and unconventional move by Qui.

Mostly, I want to thank Qui for helping bring fun back to poker. So many modern players bring such seriousness to the table both in their behavior and in their playing style. Too often, everyone starts playing like robots, afraid to show a tell and locked into what they think is the right way to play. Qui brought a swagger and charisma to the table, and was willing to live and die by his instincts and risk-taking. He has also reinforced the beauty of this game and the WSOP in particular: you can go from a low stakes grinder one day to World Champion the next. If you have a dream, intention, and the courage to go for it, you can achieve great things.

And if you're Qui Nguyen, you can do it in a way none of us will ever forget.

# INTRODUCTION

This book tells the life story of Qui Nguyen, beginning with his early days in Saigon, and culminating with his commanding victory at the 2016 World Series of Poker Main Event. In addition to his life story, there is an in-depth hand-by-hand analysis of nearly half of the 364 hands played at the final table. Except for some math sections marked “Steve’s Analysis”, the entire book is written by Qui Nguyen, in his own words.

During the ESPN broadcast, a fascinated Antonio Esfandiari remarked, “I could not figure out Qui Nguyen if my life depended on it. We’re going to have to get a new manual on poker... I can’t wait to buy his book.” Well, Antonio asked, and we delivered. To you, the reader, this is your chance to learn from the thought process of a great champion.

The hand-by-hand analysis is divided into three sections, representing each of the three days of the final table. In this book we’ll refer to them as Day 1, Day 2, and Day 3, even though in reality, the Main Event started back in July 2016, and these were actually Days 8, 9, and 10 when considering the tournament as a whole.

As the founder of [AdvancedPokerTraining.com](http://AdvancedPokerTraining.com), I’ve been using artificial

intelligence to teach computers to play poker for over 10 years now. I first became aware of Qui Nguyen when PokerNews.com contacted me to build a computerized representation of the remaining nine players in the WSOP main event (the “November Nine”). After running 1,000s of simulations of the WSOP final table, one thing became abundantly clear: the Qui Nguyen “bot” was frequently winning in the simulations, and often in a dominating fashion.

After the simulation was published, Qui Nguyen’s family made contact with me, and a decision was made: I would fly to Las Vegas to help Qui prepare, and to act as his personal advisor during the final table. I would partner with longtime Las Vegas poker pro Young Phan, which gave us a critical advantage during the final table. Due to the TV coverage, Qui would be wearing a microphone at all times – but Young could communicate with Qui in his native Vietnamese, making it less likely that our strategic discussions would fall into enemy hands.

Also included in this book are transcripts of some Q & A sessions I had with Qui that are quite enlightening.

Some people might view Qui as a wild gambler, but even though he is not trained in poker math, his decisions made great sense when viewed from a math perspective. Since poker math and game theory are my areas of expertise, but keeping in mind that this is not a poker math book, I will occasionally explain why his decisions also made sense mathematically. I’ll focus on how you can use this to exploit your opponents and improve your game, even if you are not a ‘wild gambler’ or math guru.

Enjoy, and see you at the final table next time! You’re welcome to contact me with any questions at [steve.blay@advancedpokertraining.com](mailto:steve.blay@advancedpokertraining.com).

Steve Blay

# 1) THE TWO FACETS OF POKER EXPERTISE

As a poker coach, it has always been my belief that to really master the game, you need a combination of *poker instinct* and *proper thought process*.

What is poker *instinct*? My wife, the one with the English degree in the family, says it might be more properly called *wisdom*, to distinguish it from a natural aptitude, or the inborn response of an animal. But we're going to stick with *instinct* in this book, since that seems to be the word used most often in the poker community to describe that kind of "gut feeling" that comes from experiential knowledge. Poker *instinct* comes from the sub-conscious brain. You might use your poker instinct when you determine whether an opponent is bluffing, or decide on your best play to confuse your opponents.

*Thought process* takes place on a conscious level, and involves thinking about the right things at the right time. It requires an understanding of probabilities, and even a little game theory, which is a branch of mathematics that governs games like poker.

Some memorization helps too. Most players know by this point that a

pair of deuces is going to win about half the time against Ace-King suited. You probably didn't learn that from seeing it play out thousands of times (experience), you just read it in a poker book or heard it during a poker show, and committed it to memory.

Thought Process is more than just math, too. It includes reading the board texture, understanding the tournament structure and how that affects your play, and other strategic elements.

Often, these skills are used together. For example, putting an opponent on a hand range might start with instinct, but we may need to crunch some numbers in our head to figure out how often we win against that range.

So what is poker instinct? Is it really something that can be learned, or do you have to be born with it?

What about poker thought process? If it often involves using math, than surely math geeks have a huge advantage in this area, right?

To answer these questions, some important lessons from the chess world can offer us some guidance.

## Poker Instinct

The first involves a study done on chess players beginning in the late 1930s. Unfortunately, there haven't been too many formal studies on poker players. But chess has been around for hundreds of years, and involves some similar skills (many chess players excel at poker, and the other way around).

A Dutch psychologist, Adriaan D. de Groot, tried to determine how thought process differed between chess masters and chess amateurs\*. Surely, he theorized, the chess masters were born with super-human skills – possibly a brain with superior computational firepower. Perhaps the chess masters could think ten moves ahead, whereas the amateurs could only think two moves ahead.

\* Adriaan D. de Groot, *Thought and Choice in Chess*.

What he found, however, surprised him. *Both the chess masters and amateurs could think an equal number of moves ahead!* The chess masters did however have superior instincts, from years of experience. They had possibly as many as 100,000 chess positions stored in their “mental da-

tabase”, which could be accessed for guidance in new positions. *But what they did not have was any genetic (or other) advantage when it came to computation.*

Occasionally a chess world champion will hold a press conference after a big win, and a puzzled reporter will ask, “How did ever know on Move 24 that sacrificing your bishop would lead to a win?”. And the champ will reply, “I just knew.” That’s instinct.

I would theorize that poker players like Qui Nguyen have a similar mental database. It contains every poker situation they’ve ever faced – not only things like their opponent’s betting patterns, but *every nuance of the way their opponents look when they are bluffing.*

“How did you know he was bluffing on Hand 24?” the interviewer will ask. “I just knew,” replies the poker master.

So, there’s the first half of poker expertise – instinct, which comes from experience. Qui hopes to help you in this area, by giving you examples in this book of how he applies his own instincts to actual poker scenarios.

## Thought Process

What about poker thought process, and using it in combination with poker instinct? To learn about that, we can turn to one of the most important chess books of all time, Alexander Kotov’s *Think Like a Grandmaster*. Like de Groot, Kotov also found that chess masters were not super-human. What they had was simply a superior thought process. When faced with a difficult decision, the chess masters would first use their instincts to arrive at two or three potential moves (called “candidate moves” in the chess world).

Then the chess masters would spend all their thinking time *concretely analyzing* all relevant replies by their opponent, and their replies to those replies.

In contrast, the chess amateurs *jumped aimlessly from idea to idea* in their head.

In other words, for the chess masters, it was a cohesive two-step process:



- ◆ Use their **instinctive brain** (guided by years of experience) to narrow down the problem at hand, and
- ◆ Use their **logical brain** to think concretely and deliberately about the pros and cons of each move.

Although no such study has formally been done on poker players (to my knowledge), I strongly suspect we would see the same result. The “poker master” uses instinct to pick a candidate move (say, “Raise to \$75”), and then assesses the profitability of that move by thinking concretely about the hands his opponent might be holding. The poker amateur, like the chess amateur, aimlessly jumps from idea to idea, eventually picking the one that appears to be least bad at the moment, when enough time has elapsed that he’s worried his opponents are going to call the clock on him.

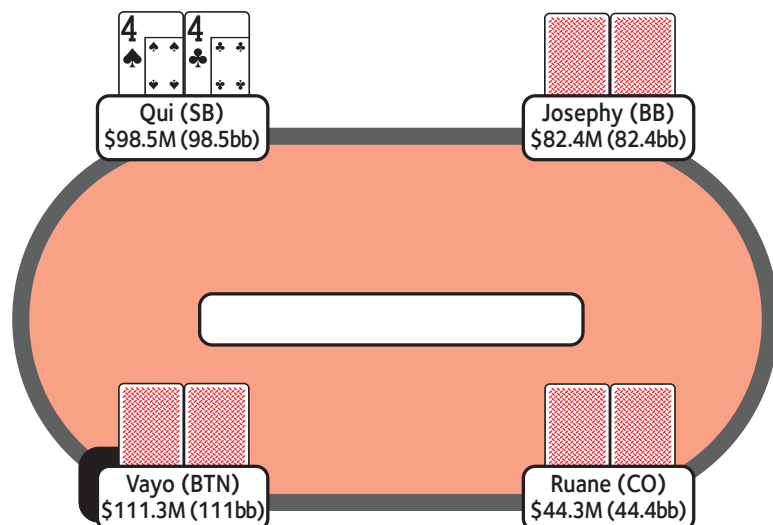
If that sounds like you, there’s good news: it’s not too late to fix your thought process. I hope this book can help.

## Hand 109

**Level:** 38

**Blinds/ante:** 500,000/1,000,000-150,000

**Players:** 4



**Preflop:** Qui is SB with 4♠-4♣

Ruane folds, Vayo raises to 2,300,000, Qui calls 1,800,000, Josephy raises to 9,000,000, Vayo folds, Qui raises to 82,250,000, Josephy folds

**Results:** 20,900,000 pot

Qui mucked 4♠-4♣ and won 20,900,000 (11,750,000 net)

Gordon Vayo raised to \$2.3 million from the button, and I called in the small blind with 4♠-4♣. Cliff Josephy hesitated and thought for about thirty seconds. I looked at Cliff, and I was quite sure that he was not acting. He was genuinely considering whether to call or three-bet.

Cliff made a large three-bet to \$9 million, which made me think he was trying to get rid of us.

Add to this the fact that this was perfect situation for Cliff to make a “squeeze play.” He knows that Gordon, the original raiser, is risk-averse and is always looking to avoid confrontations. He is the player most likely to fold to a three-bet. Plus, since I just called Gordon’s initial raise, it is unlikely

I have a very strong hand.

When you are trying to get a read on someone, it is all about putting the pieces of the puzzle together. The evidence above made me almost certain that Cliff did not have a big pair. I trust my reads, always. When the action got back to me, I shipped all-in right away, to look strong. Cliff folded his A♥-Q♦ almost immediately.

Antonio Esfandiari commented that the way I just called Gordon's initial raise made it look like my hand is weak, and a small pocket pair would be my most common holding. That may be true, but does Cliff want a coin flip for his entire stack?

Note that I could have made a smaller four-bet to, say, \$25 million, but I still would have been virtually committed at that point, given Cliff's stack size. The danger of making a smaller raise is that it gives Cliff the opportunity to go all-in, and then I might get stuck in a coin flip for \$160 million chips. Or, he might call my four-bet, which is equally unpleasant. Then I am stuck playing pocket fours out of position on a four-bet flop. Not the kind of situation I want to be in.

One final thing to say about this hand: I'm surprised that Gordon folded his 6♦-6♣. This is a difference between us. As the chip leader, in position, I think he should be standing up to Cliff here, regardless of the fact that I am still to act behind him.

## Steve's Analysis

Qui states above, "I looked at Cliff, and I was quite sure that he was not acting." How? I asked Qui what he specifically saw that gave him this impression. He couldn't tell me; he just knew subconsciously.

You might find it worthwhile to look up the work of a Dutch Social Psychologist named Ap Dijksterhuis. A few of his favorite publications of mine are *On Making the Right Choice*, *On the Benefits of Thinking Unconsciously*, and *A Theory of Unconscious Thought*. He proposed his Unconscious Thought Theory (UTT), the gist of which is that when faced with complex decisions, humans make the right choice more often if they let their subconscious brain do the work.

Your conscious brain works great when facing a simple decision. Let's

say you go to buy laundry detergent. Simple. You'll probably check out the price, number of ounces, and some consumers might consider scent and whether it's organic or not, those types of factors. The conscious brain can process all that, and you'll probably walk out of the store relatively happy with your decision.

Buying a new car is another story. There are just too many variables to consider, and the conscious brain gets flooded. Dijksterhuis found that consumers actually made *better* decisions when they allowed themselves to be distracted for a while (perhaps they took a quiet walk and didn't think about the car), and then came back and chose the car based on instinct.

It's rather a frightening study for people like me who think they can solve everything by math and logic. Clearly math and logic are a large part of poker, but reading your opponents, taking in every aspect of their body language, comparing the nuances of their behavior to similar opponents you may have faced years ago, now that's a complex problem, which has to be solved by the subconscious mind.

I'm still in the process of formulating how best to apply this to poker, but the bottom line is: you better know your poker math, but you also need to be able to "let go" in certain situations and trust your instincts.

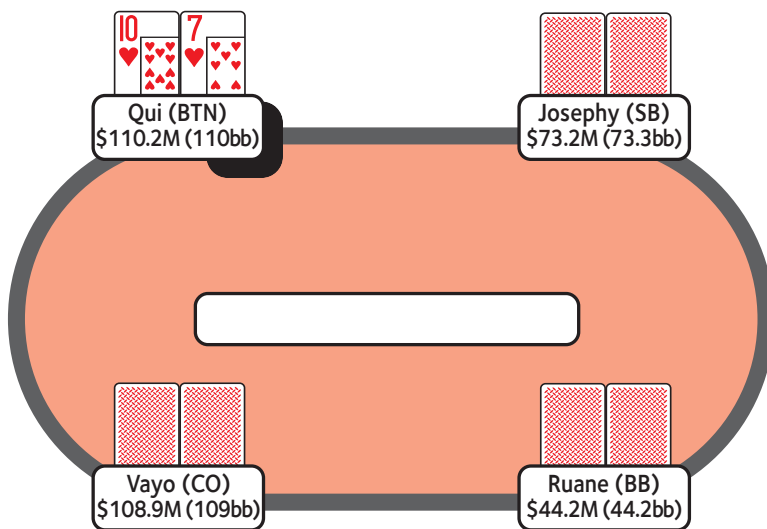
I think Qui Nguyen gives this theory credibility. If you read his back-story, you knew he grew up in a rough period in Saigon. Selling goods on the street, there was no way to use math to tell who was going to try to kill you or rip you off. He had to rely on his instincts; his life depended on it. It would only make sense that he would have finely tuned instincts, and would possess the courage to "let go" and rely on them when necessary, which is more difficult for a player like me.

## Hand 110

**Level:** 38

**Blinds/ante:** 500,000/1,000,000-150,000

**Players:** 4



**Preflop:** Qui is BTN with 10♥-7♥

Vayo folds, Qui raises to 2,350,000, 2 folds

**Results:** 3,100,000 pot

Qui mucked 10♥-7♥ and won 3,100,000 (1,950,000 net)

I was dealt 10♥-7♥ on the button. I had just won two hands in a row, so I thought about folding here. Sometimes players will get upset (without even knowing it) when you win too many hands in a row, and will play back at you.

But that can work in your favor too. Good players might have the opposite reaction to my raise here. They might say, "Qui knows that he has already won the past two hands, and we are likely to play back at him. So, in this case maybe he actually does have a real hand."

Additionally, I had just finished stacking my chips from the previous hand when the action got to me. Often a player stacking their chips is con-

cerned about making sure all their stacks look just right, and is more apt to fold marginal hands. Yet another reason why my opponents, who are all good players, might think I have a real hand here.

Finally, I had just regained the chip lead, and as such, I am the last player anyone wants to mess with. Michael Ruane is in the big blind. If he can help it, he wants to get his chips in against Cliff Josephy, not Gordon Vayo or me. If he can double up against Cliff, it would be huge for him. Cliff would be down to \$30 million chips, and Michael would move up in his expected prize money. Thus, Michael is much more likely to fold to my raise here, and wait for a better spot.

I raised to \$2.35 million and everyone folded.

### Steve's Analysis

Qui makes an interesting observation above – that Michael Ruane should prefer to double up against Cliff Josephy, as opposed to Gordon Vayo or Qui. He claims that, “Michael would move up in his expected prize money” (by specifically doubling up against Cliff Josephy). Qui has never claimed to be a mathematical player; he knows this by instinct.

It seems to make logical sense. Cliff would be down to \$30 million chips if he doubles up Michael. Another player close to elimination has to be good for Michael.

But can we actually back this up with math?

The answer is yes, and to do this you'll need a simple online tool I put together, the Advanced Poker Training payout chop calculator. You can find it at: [www.advancedpokertraining.com/chop](http://www.advancedpokertraining.com/chop)

In its most basic form, this prize chop calculator will help you decide the fair payouts to each player, when several players agree to chop the prize money at the final table. Hopefully most of you reading this know that dividing up the prize money proportionally to how many chips each player has left is not a fair way to distribute prize money. If the chip leader has a huge stack, he might get *more than* first place money. This is known as a “Chip Chop” payout distribution, and it generally (unfairly) favors the big stacks. (Which is why you might want to suggest a chip chop distribution if *you're* the big stack, but I leave that up to you and your conscience.)

The fair way to distribute prize money is to use the Independent Chip Model, and do what’s called an “ICM chop”. The inner workings of this “ICM chop” are not that complex; suffice it to know that it’s a well-known formula generally agreed upon in the poker community, and rooted in mathematics.

The APT payout chop calculator will show you the payouts for both the ICM Chop method (fair) and Chip Chop method (unfair). We’re interested in the ICM Chop payouts.

So, back to the original claim, that Michael Ruane is better off to do battle with Cliff Josephy. Let’s use our payout chop tool to determine the fair prize money for each player at the start of the hand:

Number of players			
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10			
\$ %			
Payouts	Stacks	ICM Chop (Fair)	Chip Chop (Unfair)
\$8,005,310	110,275,000	\$5,185,454.25	\$6,124,484.64
\$4,661,228	108,900,000	\$5,163,360.72	\$6,048,119.50
\$3,453,035	73,250,000	\$4,515,073.54	\$4,068,179.55
\$2,576,003	44,200,000	\$3,831,687.48	\$2,454,792.30
<b>Total: \$18,695,576</b>	<b>Total: \$336,625,000</b>		

**Compute**

What you’re looking at above is a screenshot of the actual tool. You enter the values for the Payouts and Stacks, and it computes the rest.

In the payouts column, I entered the payouts for 1st place through 4th place, in order. In the Stacks column, these are the starting stack sizes for Qui Nguyen, Gordon Vayo, Cliff Josephy, and Michael Ruane, respectively.

After pressing the compute button, the remaining values appear. The “ICM Chop” column is the fair way to divide the prize money\*. If the four remaining players were to agree to a chop before this hand had started (not that the WSOP would condone that), Michael should be getting \$3,831,687.

The “Chip Chop” is the unfair way. If we look at the last value in the Chip Chop column, we can see that Michael Ruane would only get \$2,454,792 by that method, which is *less than the 4th place prize of \$2,576,003*. So clearly Michael should never agree to a Chip Chop.

\* Of course this assumes that you and your opponents are all equally skilled. If you are by far the best player at the table, you would not want to agree to even an ICM chop.

So, we now know Michael's fair prize money at the start of the hand, \$3,831,687. Now, what if he doubles up against Qui. Let's double Michael's stack, take the chips away from Qui, and press the Compute button again.

Number of players

2 3 **4** 5 6 7 8 9 10

\$ %

Payouts	Stacks	ICM Chop (Fair)	Chip Chop (Unfair)
\$8,005,310	66,075,000	\$4,319,830.62	\$3,669,692.34
\$4,661,228	108,900,000	\$5,129,615.15	\$6,048,119.50
\$3,453,035	73,250,000	\$4,473,826.57	\$4,068,179.55
\$2,576,003	88,400,000	\$4,772,303.66	\$4,909,584.61
<b>Total: \$18,695,576</b>	<b>Total: \$336,625,000</b>		

Compute

Michael is up to \$4,772,303 in fair prize money now, a jump of \$940,616 from before. Now, the crux of our hypothesis, is he actually better off to double up against Cliff Josephy? Let's take the chips away from Cliff instead of Qui, and press the Compute button again.

Number of players

2 3 **4** 5 6 7 8 9 10

\$ %

Payouts	Stacks	ICM Chop (Fair)	Chip Chop (Unfair)
\$8,005,310	110,275,000	\$5,215,660.19	\$6,124,484.64
\$4,661,228	108,900,000	\$5,193,891.75	\$6,048,119.50
\$3,453,035	29,050,000	\$3,439,728.43	\$1,613,387.25
\$2,576,003	88,400,000	\$4,846,295.63	\$4,909,584.61
<b>Total: \$18,695,576</b>	<b>Total: \$336,625,000</b>		

Compute



Yes, now his fair payout is \$4,846,295, up \$1,014,608. This option gains him an additional \$73,992, roughly a 7.5% bigger increase in prize money. The reason why boils down to this law:

*In a percentage payout tournament, each chip you amass is worth less than the one before it.*

While the reason for this might not be mathematically obvious, hopefully it makes sense that your very last chip is worth a lot to you, because without it you're out of the tournament! Furthermore, no one can win *all* the prize money, so each additional chip you collect is worth a little less than the one before it.

When Michael Ruane takes chips from Qui Nguyen, those are actually less valuable chips (to Qui), by the law above. When Michael Ruane takes chips from Cliff Josephy, that hurts Cliff's bottom line severely (in real money). Since Cliff would be hurt more by doubling Michael up, the other players benefit *more* as well. As you might have noticed, it's even better for Gordon Vayo, who wasn't involved in the hand. You can see Gordon's payouts in the second row of each screenshot above.