

# The Fall of Rome

Protecting a Large Stack

By Michael Rome, 'The Poker Philosopher'

**T**here exists in human nature a strong propensity to depreciate the advantages.

*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

The destruction of the Roman Empire was caused in part by over-extension of its boundaries. The Romans were great conquerors, but ultimately couldn't "shift gears" to shore up and defend their borders. In other words, the same psychology that created the empire destroyed the empire.

A similar situation applies to tournament poker. The phrase "protecting a large stack" may sound counterintuitive, but how often have you seen the chip leader quickly become a short stack, or worse? The same aggressive talents used to accumulate chips can be self destructive when it's time to change rhythm. Many professional players understand the need to regroup after amassing a large stack: *Recently I changed my style. In the early stages of a tournament, I'll still be super-aggressive... but as soon as I've built a huge stack, I play a little more conservatively and lay down some hands. I put my car in neutral and slow down a bit before the final table.* Michael Mizrachi, *BLUFF* February, 2006.

The excitement of believing we are "in the zone" can blind us to adjusting our approach. There is a Zen story about the student who is told by his teacher to sit and clear his mind. After sitting for a long time, the student begins to experience his deepest fears and loses himself in horrible visions. The teacher strikes him with a bamboo pole while saying, "Stay centered." The student regains his composure and eventually becomes absorbed by feelings of ecstasy and bliss. The master strikes him again saying, "Stay centered."

Losing focus can cause our chips to "bleed out." Bleeding out is the result of believing we can afford to play numerous hands and make more calls. Subsequently, we take greater chances with weaker cards. The danger of this strategy is the cumulative effect of small wounds. A single piranha may not be able to finish off a cow; but for a hundred piranhas, that cow is just a Big Mac.

Some pros are lethally aggressive with a big stack, but that is not as easy to pull off as it looks. For most of us, the key is to be patient and pick our spots. Having the dominant stack at the table does not obligate you to be the table captain. For many pros, a large stack is simply a cushion against making a mistake without losing all their chips.

As amateur players, we may be wizards at surviving with a small stack, but have little practice with a large stack. Chip management of a large stack can mean the chips are managing us. Here are some things to keep in mind when you have the enviable problem of possessing a large stack.

- ♣ Don't play a lot of hands just because you believe they won't make a dent in your stack.

- ♣ Don't call a short stack that is all in unless you have a strong hand.

- ♣ Remember there is value in letting some of the other players knock each other out.

- ♣ Stay centered so you can focus and avoid the intoxicating effect of power.

As the Romans discovered, there are limits to everything, including apparently inexhaustible resources. Don't take your chips for granted when you have a large stack: Value them as you would with a short stack.

*Michael Rome can be found on his poker philosophy website at [www.rome-poker.net](http://www.rome-poker.net), and dedicates this article to his father, Jerry Rome. ♣*

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