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YOU CAN BET ON PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING THESE DAYS, EVEN THE RETURN OF CHRIST

By Sean Chaffin and Steve Schult

Traditional gambling expansion slowed in 2025, as few states passed legislation that would expand the current market. However, thanks to the rise of prediction markets, bettors now have a smorgasbord of different events to bet on.

Prediction markets allow customers to wager on the outcome of nearly everything. These platforms offer markets on political events, cryptocurrency prices, sports, and even the weather.

But with the increased number of betting topics comes a higher likelihood of insider trading. Last year, on the crypto-native platform Polymarket, a user with the account name “AlphaRacoon” won 22 of 23 bets in a single day, netting more than \$1 million.

All of the wagers were related to Google search markets, and many on social media believed it was an insider with the company. A blockchain engineer at Meta was one of the leading whistleblowers, pointing to the user’s track record on the site.

More recently, some believe that government employees cashed in after a couple accounts wagered large sums on whether Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro would be removed from power. The site accepted a total of \$56.6 million on Maduro’s ouster, but \$11 million was wagered on whether it would happen by Jan. 31.

Unlike a traditional sportsbook, where a bookmaker sets the line and adjusts it based on exposure to wagers on either side, prediction market odds are based solely on how much money is on each side. In other words, if the majority of cash comes in on one side, the odds are based on the ratio of money wagered for and against the outcome.

In early January, Polymarket showed a 63.5% chance that Maduro would stay in power. But overnight, those odds flipped and in a 10-minute span, the platform showed a 95.5% chance he would be removed. Soon after, the U.S. military captured Maduro and transported him to New York.

Despite any insider-trading concerns, prediction market platforms permit wagering on events that were previously unimaginable. For example, Kalshi currently has a market on whether Trump will buy at least part of Greenland. Gamblers have wagered more than \$2.5 million on the outcome so far.

The site also has markets on the high and low temperatures in several major U.S. cities, who will take over the Warner Brothers production studio, and countless other absurd ways to risk your money.

Even though election season isn’t until November, you can already wager on who will assume certain political offices.

Election betting is a relatively recent, but controversial phenomenon. Until 2024, betting on election outcomes was barred on large scales. But just before the Presidential election, a U.S. District Court sided with Kalshi in a lawsuit against the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, the regulatory body that oversees the prediction market platform. Kalshi argued that election bets should be permitted, and the courts agreed.



Then, the flood gates opened. Kalshi accepted \$132 million worth of wagers on the 2024 election, while Polymarket handled a whopping \$3.2 billion.

The following month, a few lawmakers filed legislation to ban election betting, but the bills never picked up steam.

To nobody’s surprise, these sites are facing legal backlash. Ironically, it’s not for election betting or the unique markets. Instead, it stems from their sports contracts.

Kalshi is facing legal pushback from several states including Nevada, Maryland, and New Jersey, over their sports contracts. These states believe that the platforms act as a loophole for illegal sports betting. Essentially, these prediction markets are creeping in on regulated sports books’ turf.

These legal battles won’t end soon, and the platforms are allowed to continue operations until the courts rule on the matter. In the meantime, gamblers are going to continue wagering on the outcomes of a wide array of events.

Both Kalshi and Polymarket accepted millions on who would become the next Pope after Pope Francis passed away last year. One bettor picked up \$52,641 on a longshot bet on Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost when the Chicago native became the 267th Pope of the Catholic Church. He is now serving as Pope Leo XIV.

If that wasn’t enough, Polymarket bettors even put a total of \$3.3 million on whether Jesus Christ would return in 2025. The “no” bets returned a 5.5% profit margin.

Pope Leo XIV is not a fan of the rampant gambling expansion over the last several years. At the end of 2025, he addressed the National Association of Italian Municipalities, where he warned about the dangers of gambling addiction.

According to the *Catholic News Agency*, he called gambling addiction a “serious problem of education, mental health, and social trust.”

Traditionally, the Catholic Church has not viewed gambling as sinful. Some parishes host bingo nights as part of a church’s fundraising efforts, for example. The church believes the activity only reaches a dangerous level when done in excess, or when gambling becomes an addiction.

Some clergy members even spend some time on the felt. In 2009, Father Andrew Trapp won \$100,000 on the *PokerStars Million Dollar Challenge* game show. The priest beat three opponents, including Daniel Negreanu. He even held a rosary on the final hand.

Trapp said he planned to use the funds for his church. St. Michael’s in Garden City, South Carolina. The priest played poker recreationally for several years before the six-figure score. ♠

GAMBLING TAX DEDUCTION REVERSAL STILL UNCERTAIN AS LAW TAKES EFFECT

By Sean Chaffin

On Jan. 1, the new gambling tax rules from President Donald Trump's spending bill took effect.

Last year, when Trump signed the "One Big Beautiful Bill" into law, there was a section that changed the tax code for gambling losses. Previously, gamblers could write off 100% of their losses. But under the new code, bettors can only deduct 90% of their losses.

The change creates "phantom income." If a poker player wins \$100,000 in a single tournament, and then loses \$100,000 in subsequent buy-ins, they didn't turn a profit, but could still owe taxes on \$10,000.

In the aftermath, there was a bipartisan effort to repeal this change and revert the tax code to its old rules. Rep. Dina Titus, D-NV, filed the FAIR Bet Act, which picked up the most support of any of the attempts.

The bill didn't gain enough steam to pass before the new law took effect. However, Nevada's lone Republican congressman said the tax fix is coming early in 2026.

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-NV, spoke with House Ways and Means Committee Chair Jason Smith, R-MO, who has significant influence over whether the change happens.



According to Amodei, Smith is on board with a reversal.

"We have been assured that when we wrap up this stuff in '26 appropriations, that fix will be in there," Amodei told the *Nevada Independent*.

While Amodei's comments produced optimism for those hoping for a change, another Republican became the first vocal opponent against a reversal.

Sen. James Lankford, R-OK, told *Punchbowl News* that he was against rolling back the new provision.

"It's not an unrealistic change," said Lankford. "It's a pretty minor change in that tax policy."

Congress has until April 2027 to make changes for 2026 tax returns. However, those in the industry are concerned that the longer the 90% deduction is in place, the more likely gamblers will stay away from casinos and poker tournaments. ♠

POKER PLAYERS DOMINATE CIRCA'S NFL SURVIVOR COMPETITION

By Sean Chaffin

With the end of the NFL regular season, the Circa Survivor NFL sports betting contest also wrapped up in Las Vegas with poker players dominating the competition.

Five teams survived the season, picking 20 games correctly to split the \$18.7 million prize pool. In other words, each winning entry took home more than \$3.7 million.

The annual competition charges a \$1,000 entry fee. This year's contest featured 18,718 entries and easily surpassed the \$10 million guarantee. Entrants must pick one NFL team to win each week and can pick that team only once in the season. The contest adds special holiday games as weeks in the competition.

Several poker players were a part of the five teams that cashed in. According to sources on Twitter/X, poker players were a part of four of the five teams splitting the prize pool.

Two-time *World Series of Poker* bracelet winner Shannon Shorr was among the winners, as was Galen Hall. Hall, who won a bracelet and the *PokerStars Caribbean Adventure*, said he was a part of two of the teams that made it across the finish line.

One of the game's first successful streamers, Jason Somerville, was part of the "JUICY KEWCHI" winning team. The group included Gabe Patgorski, who has \$7.8 million in tournament winnings, including a *Triton* title.

Former online pro and two-time *WSOP* bracelet winner Matt Graham was also part of a team. The "REAL BRO" team included Texas poker players Casey Diener and Joey



Michael. Diener said the Thanksgiving/Black Friday week was crucial in reaching the finish line.

"We knew a lot of people would be on the Eagles, and our entry would have a lot of equity if the Bears pulled the upset," he told *VSiN*. The Bears won and eliminated 489 entries that selected the Eagles. "It was a great opportunity to take a shot and it would put us in a great position."

The "DYLAN W-10" team was led by Dylan Wilkerson, a poker player from San Francisco with two *WSOP Circuit* wins and \$4.1 million in tournament earnings.

As part of the final week of action, Circa owner Derek Stevens hosted a viewing party for those still in the competition at the casino's sportsbook in downtown Las Vegas.

Of the six teams in the final, one lost after the Cleveland Browns hit a game-winning field goal to upset the Cincinnati Bengals. It was a roughly \$3.1 million loss, which meant an extra \$620,000 or so for the five winning teams. ♠

ILLINOIS GAMBLER DENIED SLOT JACKPOT OVER IMMIGRATION STATUS

By Sean Chaffin

A slot jackpot winner at Bally's temporary casino in Chicago says he was recently denied the \$1,250 payout because of his immigration status.

Nick, whose last name was withheld by *CBS News*, said he is seeking asylum and did not experience the issue after hitting a jackpot on Dec. 20.

"I've been a regular since they opened, and I've won 11 jackpots, I believe, in the past and never had any problems," he said.

He said he presented a "Real ID" to the property that was issued by the state of Illinois. The state issues limited-term Real IDs to immigrants seeking asylum.

"This time, however, they decided to not pay off because of my limited-term ID, and I've always had that kind of ID," Nick said. "It would mean a lot... especially now for the holidays."

Gaming consultant Elihu Feustel told *CBS News* that the limited-term ID should have been satisfactory to collect the winnings.

"His limited-term ID is issued to people who are not residents of the US but are here temporarily – in his case,



requesting asylum – and as we discussed, it's more difficult and more stringent to get that than it is to get a regular REAL ID driver's license," Feustel said.

In the weeks following the media reports, Bally's eventually paid the man the jackpot. But the news comes as Chicago-related gambling issues continue to receive lots of attention. The city placed an additional 10.25% tax on sports betting, but state lawmakers are pushing back.

Dating back to the spring of 2025, Bally's Chicago suffered construction setbacks because of a waste-hauling services company's alleged ties to organized crime. Additionally, Bally's was forced to relocate the project's hotel location to avoid damaging critical water lines. ♠

NBA BETTING SCANDAL SPURS LEAGUE TO SEEK CHANGES

By Sean Chaffin

After recent betting scandals involving players, coaches, and investigations by the FBI, the NBA is proposing specific changes it hopes will prevent similar issues in the future.

The league released a memo recently outlining some of its plans, *ESPN* reported. They include addressing tanking, increasing the frequency of injury reporting, and restricting the types of bets partner sportsbooks can offer.

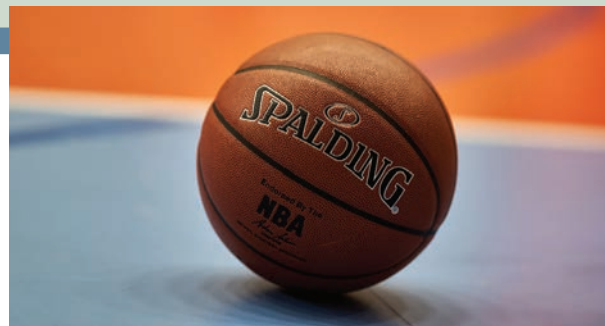
"Core to the NBA's position is that sports leagues should have control over the types of bets offered on their games," the memo states. "Because leagues currently do not have such control, any changes will need to be pursued via negotiation with sports betting operators, requests to state gaming regulators, legislative action, or some combination of these avenues."

The document didn't say when the NBA would implement the various parts of the plan. However, the plan did state the league will soon require teams to report injuries more frequently and early as possible.

Reports would be due between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Then, the league updates those reports on its website every 15 minutes instead of hourly. The league hopes the change will make "inside information" on injuries irrelevant, with more transparency on the issue.

The memo also said the league may alter the draft lottery process to prevent teams from tanking late in the season.

Lastly, the NBA will push sportsbooks to limit prop betting options involving individual player statistics. Some of those proposals include capping betting amounts and restric-



tions on "under" bets.

The NBA would also like to see a limit on the number of players bettors can place wagers on, while prohibiting bets on a single play.

The plan follows similar efforts by MLB, which put limits on pitching prop bets in November in response to the arrest of two Cleveland Guardians pitchers. The FBI and federal prosecutors allege they used certain pitches to benefit accomplices who were betting on the outcomes.

In the NBA, the league is responding to cases involving Portland Trail Blazers coach Chauncey Billups, Miami Heat point guard Terry Rozier, and former NBA journeyman and Cleveland Cavaliers assistant coach Damon Jones. They were all arrested in October for gambling-related crimes.

Federal prosecutors allege Rozier and Jones were involved in sports betting schemes to rig statistics, benefiting bettors in the operation. Billups and Jones were alleged to be involved in rigging high-stakes poker games. All three have pleaded not guilty. ♠



JACOB LONG NARROWLY DEFEATS UMUT OZTURK FOR 2025 MSPT PLAYER OF THE YEAR

By Erik Fast

The 2025 *Major Series of Poker: The Tour Player of the Year* race was one for the ages. Jacob Long came out on top in the heated battle, narrowly holding off back-to-back *MSPT* POY Umut Ozturk from a third straight victory. The final point standings saw Long edge out Ozturk by just 140 points, with 10,395 to 10,255.

Long captured eight side event victories throughout the year and made two *MSPT* main event final tables, including a second-place showing in the *MSPT Iowa Poker State Championship*. The Nebraska resident earned a career-best \$94,499 payday as the runner-up in that event, which had an 815-entry turnout back in July. His other deep run in a main tour event this year, at *MSPT Hollywood St. Louis*, ended in fourth place for \$43,989. All told, he cashed for \$314,604 on the season.

His POY victory was cemented thanks to two side event wins at the *MSPT Running Aces* series. Ozturk had a few shots in the final days to surpass him but was unable to run deep enough in the main event where he finished 84th, or a \$300 progressive knockout event in which he placed ninth.

Ozturk led all players in overall cashes for 2025 with 18, falling just one short of the record he set a year earlier. His \$408,512 in Season 16 earnings was the third-highest total, trailing only Corey Wick's \$416,479 and Ryan Eamon's \$412,289.



The *MSPT* Hall of Famer now sits in fifth place on the tour's all-time money list with \$881,162 in earnings.

The next closest competition for the top two was former POY winner, Josh Reichard. The *World Poker Tour* champion's 8,696 was 1,559 points behind Ozturk. Brett Reichard, Josh's father, finished one spot below his son in the final standings with 5,625 points.

Aaron Johnson, who took down the *WPT Prime Championship* in December (pg. 46) and also won the *MSPT* POY back in 2018, finished the season in eighth place overall.

Kou Vang, an *MSPT* Hall of Fame member, overtook the top spot on the tour money list thanks to a runner-up finish in the *MSPT Running Aces* main event for \$114,000. That pushed his career total to \$1,015,242, making him just the second player in the tour's history to accrue more than \$1 million in earnings. Richard Alsup slid to second with \$1,014,051. ♠



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ANTONIO ESFANDIARI WINS \$824,000 COOLER ON HIGH STAKES POKER

By Tim Fiorvanti

PokerGO dropped the entire 15th season of *High Stakes Poker* in late December, treating poker fans to big no-limit hold'em action with blinds starting at \$200-\$400 and climbing as high as \$500-\$1,000.

The games feature notables such as high-stakes crusher Andrew Robl, livestream boss Nikhil 'Airball' Arcott, Hollywood actress Jennifer Tilly, DoorDash founder Stanley Tang, and Antonio Esfandiari, who was making his return to televised action.

Esfandiari has plenty of experience winning astronomical sums at the poker table, and playing wild hands. The three-time *World Series of Poker* bracelet winner and two-time *World Poker Tour* champion won the inaugural \$1 million buy-in *Big One for One Drop* in 2012 for \$18,346,673. It remains one of the largest singular prizes ever won in tournament poker.

The former magician has largely stepped away from the tournament spotlight in recent years, but he's continued to play in high-stakes cash games and the occasional livestream. It didn't take long for him to get involved in one of the wildest pots of his poker career while seated at the PokerGO studio in Las Vegas.

With the blinds at \$500-\$1,000, Sameh Elamaway, the CEO of a financial services company, opened to \$5,000 with pocket aces. Esfandiari called with pocket eights, and Justin Gavri came along in the big blind with J♣ 7♣.

Esfandiari got the dream flop of 8♥ 8♦ 6♠ right off the bat. The three-handed action checked all the way through. The A♦ on the turn made things even better for Esfandiari, giving Elamaway a full house.

Gavri checked, Elamaway bet \$10,000, and Esfandiari raised to \$37,000. Gavri quickly folded, and Elamaway, understandably, reraised to \$85,000.

Esfandiari just called, and the 3♦ river completed the board.

"A true dream for Elamaway," said recent Poker Hall of Fame inductee Nick Schulman on the broadcast commentary. "Actually, a nightmare."

Elamaway bet \$225,000, more than two-thirds of his remaining stack, and Esfandiari quickly put him all in for the rest. Elamaway snap-called, and quickly tabled his aces full.

"No good," Esfandiari replied, with a two-handed flip, one for each eight.

"I had a feeling," Elamaway said, a smile improbably creeping across his face. "That is so insanely sick," Esfandiari replied, smiling even wider as he scooped the \$824,500 pot.

Kevin Hart Plays For Piles

The new season also features comedian and poker aficionado Kevin Hart, who has made appearances on the tournament circuit over the years and plays in a home game with 17-time bracelet winner Phil Hellmuth.

"He uses his money to his advantage," Hellmuth told *Card Player*. "I'm sure they underestimate him, but nobody in my poker group does. We know how good he is."



Hart showed off his fearlessness against Robl, who remains one of the winningest players in televised cash game history.

With a \$4,000 straddle on, Robl raised to \$15,000 with 7♠ 4♠ from the small blind. Hart called with pocket jacks in the big blind, and Justin Gavri called with 5♥ 3♥ from the straddle.

The flop fell Q♠ J♠ 5♦ and Robl checked his flush draw. Hart bet \$35,000 with middle set, and Gavri got out of the way. Robl called, and the turn was the 6♦, giving him an open-ended straight draw to go with his flush draw.

Robl checked, and Hart bet \$100,000. Robl check-raised all in for \$391,000, and Hart snap called. The two agreed to run the river twice, and Hart scooped both halves of the \$899,000 pot with the K♦ and A♦.

Hart would end up giving some back, losing a \$500,000 pot when his A♦ 10♦ failed to connect against Robl's pocket queens on a flop of 7♦ 6♣ 4♦.

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SEVEN CONTINENTS AND SEVEN-FIGURE SCORES

Ben Tollerene Talks Global High Roller Domination

By Sean Chaffin



Even among the most intrepid world travelers, visiting all seven continents is a rare feat. Antarctica is simply too far off the beaten path, and a frigid, largely undeveloped land mass. But high-stakes poker pro Ben Tollerene had longed to visit the Great White South and was able to cross it off his bucket list.

Antarctica's scenery astounded the Texas native, who had envisioned a flat-landed landscape, but was surprised to see many more unexpected features like mountains, valleys, and wildlife. He saw orcas, and thousands of penguins.

"You can only go a few months of the year where it's not too cold – January or February during summer (in the southern hemisphere)," he says. "I had the opportunity to do a polar plunge, where you jump in the water off the boat. The water was just barely above freezing. It must have been like 35 or 36. It was just crazy cold. It was a shock to the system."

Ever since the shock, Tollerene has been the complete opposite of ice cold at the poker table. He's been a dominating force on the high roller circuit, with numerous seven-figure scores and a string of finishes that even the very best would envy. The 38-year-old recently spoke with *Card Player* about his life in the game and why he's been firing on

all cylinders for the better part of the last two years.

Burnout Leads To A Break

The closing days of a tournament series can be a bit of a decrescendo. The excitement ebbs as tables and chairs are removed and what was once a bustling scene is left with just a few players battling for a title. That was the experience for Tollerene at the *European Poker Tour* stop in Monte Carlo last May.

Tollerene was locked in competition at the final table of a €25,000 high roller event at about 4 a.m. The convention center had been closed, and the remaining players were relegated to a completely different room - seemingly out of sight, out of mind.

"We played on adrenaline and kind of rode that wave," Tollerene recalled. "I think I ended up winning at 5:30 a.m. It was a great feeling."

There have been a lot of great feelings over the last couple of years. Originally from Mansfield, Texas, Tollerene recently moved to Las Vegas after living in Vancouver for 13 years to play online. He has more than \$32 million in live tournament winnings in a career dating back to 2008, but it's been the last two years where he has done the most damage.

© PokerCO / Miguel Cortes



“I think a lot of the way that I’ve been feeling about it is just sort of in disbelief that I keep winning, because I know it’s not supposed to happen that often,” he admitted.

In 2022, Tollerene cashed in with a win in a £100,000 event at the *British Poker Open* for \$1,016,400. He followed that up with some big finishes at the *Triton Cyprus* series, winning a \$30,000 event for \$807,927 and taking fourth in a \$50,000 super high roller for \$535,000. He then grabbed another runner-up in a \$25,000 *Aria* high roller for \$175,000.

Then, after his plunge in the arctic, he took a two-year break from the game. Although he was worried his skills had deteriorated during the layoff, he found that he could suddenly do no wrong at the table.

The Heater Begins

“I came back and everything was running so hot. Everything was going so well,” he said. “I didn’t feel like I was playing all that well. I felt like I was pretty rusty, but the results just kept coming in. I came back for *Triton Montenegro* in May of 2024 and I think that trip was okay, kind of unremarkable. But then at the *WSOP* I got second on the \$250,000 [for \$3,537,135], and the results just got better from there.”

A few months after his career-best cash at the *WSOP*, he grabbed a pair of *PokerGO Tour* titles for a combined \$1,006,000. In November, Tollerene came out on top in a \$50,000 pot-limit Omaha event at *Triton Monte Carlo* for \$1,070,000 and followed that up with a runner-up in a \$100,000 PLO high roller at the *WSOP Paradise* in December for another \$1,577,660. In the latter series, he also snagged a third place in the \$50,000 PLO event for another \$746,790.

“It was a little weird on me mentality, where it just felt

so easy, and it was maybe skewing the reality of playing live tournaments a little bit.”

The hot streak continued into 2025, beginning with a string of six-figure scores at *Triton* events. In the March series in Jeju alone, he cashed seven times for a combined \$1,856,500. After picking up another \$244,100 at the *PGT PLO Series* in May, he quickly flew to Montenegro for another *Triton* series.

A Dream Series With Friends

After three cashes in the first dozen events for a modest \$346,000, Tollerene would dominate the end of the series. Although he didn’t snag the title, he did take home most of the prize pool after striking a deal with his friend and former roommate Jason Koon heads-up for \$3,437,344 in the \$150,000 no-limit hold’em event. Just two days later, he was hoisting a trophy in the \$10,000 PLO event, pocketing another \$2,390,000.

“That was just surreal,” he said. “I was kind of floating around that place. Seth Davies is also a good friend of mine, and he got second in the main event, and then won a \$50K [and also finished runner-up in another side event for a total of \$6 million]. Then Jason won two tournaments that trip [for a combined \$4 million]. So, the three of us were just looking at each other like, ‘This seems made up.’ On the last night we walked out to the beach, and we threw some stones in the water to commemorate that something like that would probably never happen again.”

How did they celebrate? There was no late-night booze fest or even a nice steak dinner. The nature of playing at that level doesn’t allow for cutting loose.

“There’s no time for anything like that,” he says. “At a *Triton* series, you play every day and you go to bed at like 1 or 2 a.m. Then you wake up and you start again at noon



or 1. Those two guys are both pretty disciplined. They have families, so I don't think they were looking for a reason to go out anyway."

The summer featured more big scores, including \$914,634 for taking third place in the *WSOP* \$50,000 no-limit hold'em high roller. He would also final table the \$250,000 event, banking \$581,411 for an eighth-place showing. In September, he headed back to Jeju for another *Triton* series, cashing five times for a total of \$992,000, before finishing out his year with three more final tables in Vegas for \$358,500.

In total, Tollerene has cashed for \$21 million in the last two years, making up more than two-thirds of his career \$32.4 million in earnings.

Finding An Edge

Despite recognizing that he has been on the good side of variance during this streak, Tollerene put himself in position to run good with hard work away from the tables. Although he did considerable work on his game overall, he has really stood out in PLO events. In fact, three of his top five scores have come in the four-card game.

"PLO is getting more popular and more people are playing. The tournament scene is growing, and I feel like I have a huge experience edge on a lot of the field. I've played millions of hands of high-stakes PLO cash, so I've seen the spots and am a little bit more familiar with everything. Then in hold'em, it's just been working pretty hard. I have a good set of friends that I can study with who helped keep me sharp."

While some poker players may have goals of winning certain events or a specific number of titles, Tollerene is just focused on becoming a stronger live player.

"Playing live poker, there's a lot of stimuli," he explained. "There's noise, bright lights, trying to not give away live

tells, a lot of close proximity with other people. I always felt a little bit of frustration that I was a stronger player online when I didn't have to deal with any of those things. Then live sometimes I would feel like I had a hard day because it was really warm at the feature table, the lights were really bright, and I couldn't quite focus and execute the way that I wish that I could. That's been a persistent goal for me, to keep improving at dealing with those conditions. I want to feel that I'm as strong of a live player as when I play online."

Flopping Around The Globe

The *Triton* events have been a major part of Tollerene's globetrotting schedule over the last few years. He likes to add a few *EPT* events to his itinerary each year as well to visit new destinations.

"I was in Vancouver, Canada, for 13 years prior to moving to Vegas," he said. "So, I feel more like I'm from Canada more than I'm from Texas nowadays. I was already familiar with Vegas, so it hasn't been too much of a change really... I knew what to expect. I don't love it, though. I think I'll move again soon, but for now, it's a good base and I'm exploring some other cities from here."

The late-night/early-morning *EPT* win in Monte Carlo was especially rewarding, although the \$485,742 he bagged for the victory barely cracks his career top 20. (pg. 19) Instead, the trip stands out for his experience in Monaco. His regular routine included walking along the boardwalk each morning, visiting a rotation of favorite restaurants for breakfast, and enjoying the nice weather and scenery. There were also plenty of opportunities to play one of his other favorite games – tennis. Clay courts are just a 10-minute walk from the hotel.

Beyond Monte Carlo and Antarctica, Tollerene also lists Montenegro as a great place to visit. The series is held at

“Playing live poker, there’s a lot of stimuli. I always felt a little bit of frustration that I was a stronger player online when I didn’t have to deal with any of those things. I couldn’t quite focus and execute the way that I wish that I could. I want to feel that I’m as strong of a live player as when I play online.”



coastal resort, offering stunning views of the Adriatic Sea. “The people are very nice and down to earth,” he says. “The weather’s good. It’s a beautiful place and that’s one of my favorite spots to play.”

The PokerGO Studio has also been a nice place to play for Tollerene, who has racked up several big wins and finishes in the venue. He loves the laid-back environment and camaraderie among the high rollers who frequent the tournaments.

“PokerGO is pretty heavy on regulars and pros and not a whole lot of more casual players,” he explained. “At the *WSOP*, you have so many casual players, so it changes the dynamic of everything. When I play in the studio, I’m just trying to play well, trying to play a little more according to theory. When I’m at the *WSOP*, it’s a lot of improvising and extra considerations. If I have a really soft table, then I need to adjust everything and be a lot more cautious, whereas that doesn’t really happen at the studio. You’re just trying to play well and execute.”

College Millionaire

While this level of live tournament success is new, Tollerene is no stranger to crushing the nosebleeds. In fact, his winning days date back to high school, when he traded video games for poker.

“It seemed like the skills translated into poker from the games I had been playing. I just picked it up and basically never looked back,” he recalled. “I had good results, pretty much the whole way.”

Tollerene headed off to Texas Tech in Lubbock, but he was so confident in his poker skills that he begged his parents to quit. They compromised. Tollerene would finish his degrees in business and finance, and then he could then give

full-time poker a shot.

He continued playing online and in occasional live events while in school. By the end of his freshman year, he had a \$30,000 bankroll. A year later, it was up to \$120,000. He was sitting on more than \$300,000 by the end of junior year and as he walked across the stage to receive his diploma in 2009, the poker-playing Red Raider had accrued over \$1 million.

“I felt like I was the richest person,” he said. “I didn’t have a hard time growing up or anything, but I never had any money like that. I just felt like I could do whatever I wanted. But I did become quite introverted and just spent a lot of time playing poker by myself. I think I kind of put aside a lot of the other parts of life to try to achieve what I wanted to achieve in poker.”

His two-year break in 2022 came after burning out and not feeling the love for the game he once had. Playing felt more like a chore rather than something he was doing for fun. That outlook has since changed and Tollerene is now enjoying the grind again.

“I’m still quite introverted, but I have also learned to get more enjoyment out of the people around me, and there’s a lot of interesting people playing poker. One of my friends [recommends] reminding yourself how lucky you are to be playing high-stakes poker for a living. A lot of extremely successful people are there, doing what we’re doing, but that’s what they’re choosing to do in their leisure time. They take a vacation to do what we get to do full time.”

“So, I try to remember that and see if maybe there’s something I could engage them with to not only improve the atmosphere at the table, but also just take advantage of being with all these interesting people from different parts of the world that share a love for this game.”♠



Top Tournament Scores

Date	Event	Buy-In	Place	Payout
June 2024	WSOP NLHE High Roller	\$250,000	2nd	\$3,537,135
May 2025	Triton Montenegro NLHE High Roller	\$150,000	2nd	\$3,437,344
May 2025	Triton Montenegro PLO High Roller	\$100,000	1st	\$2,390,000
Dec. 2024	WSOP Paradise PLO High Roller	\$100,000	2nd	\$1,577,660
Nov. 2024	Triton Monte Carlo PLO High Roller	\$50,000	1st	\$1,070,000
May 2017	Aria NLHE Summer High Roller	\$100,000	3rd	\$1,026,416
Sept. 2019	British Poker Open NLHE High Roller	£100,000	1st	\$1,016,400
June 2025	WSOP NLHE High Roller	\$50,000	3rd	\$914,634
Sept. 2022	Triton Mediterranean NLHE High Roller	\$30,000	1st	\$807,000
Dec. 2024	WSOP Paradise PLO High Roller	\$50,000	3rd	\$746,790
March 2025	Triton Jeju NLHE High Roller	\$125,000	6th	\$686,000
Jan. 2016	Aussie Millions NLHE High Roller	AUD\$100,000	2nd	\$646,898
June 2025	WSOP NLHE High Roller	\$250,000	8th	\$581,411
March 2017	PokerStars Championship Panama NLHE High Roller	\$50,000	1st	\$538,715
Sept. 2022	Triton Mediterranean NLHE High Roller	\$50,000	4th	\$535,000
May 2024	Triton Montenegro NLHE High Roller	\$50,000	5th	\$532,000
Sept. 2024	Poker Masters NLHE High Roller	\$25,000	1st	\$510,000
Oct. 2024	PokerGO Tour PLO Series High Roller	\$25,000	1st	\$496,000
May 2025	EPT Monte Carlo NLHE High Roller	€25,000	1st	\$485,742
Aug. 2017	PokerStars Championship Barcelona NLHE High Roller	€25,000	2nd	\$479,434

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'YUKON' BRAD BOOTH DISAPPEARED INTO THE WOODS TO GET HIS HEAD RIGHT

By Justin Young and Art Parmann



Legendary bluffs in high-stakes cash games, living at the Bellagio to take on all comers, and a month-long disappearance that transitioned into a two-year retreat in the Oregon woods. It would be quite an understatement to say that poker pro Brad Booth has had a unique life, and these were just some of the stories he shared in a recent appearance on the *Table 1* podcast.

Booth grew up in the town of Whitehorse in the Yukon territory of Canada, earning him the nickname 'Yukon' at the poker tables. He had a number of high-profile tournament finishes during the height of the poker boom, most notably when he finished third in the *World Poker Tour Mandalay Bay Poker Championship* for \$319,180. But Booth is most remembered for his fearless and hyper-aggressive play on televised poker shows like *High Stakes*

Poker and *Poker After Dark*.

One particular hand he played against Phil Ivey is still regarded as one of the best televised bluffs of all time. The 49-year-old discussed that viral hand as well as his time at the top of the poker world, and why he decided to walk away from the game entirely.

Keep reading for highlights of the interview below. You can also watch or listen to the entire episode on YouTube, Spotify, Apple, or any podcast app.

Booth addressed the reasons why he has an occasional habit of withdrawing from society, which included a well-publicized disappearance in 2020.

Brad Booth: [The first time] I was just a young kid and my mother had passed away. I've run away a couple times in my life, actually, but that was probably the first time. Just an escape to get away.

It's funny now that 30 years later, talking about it can still get me teared up. I just didn't want to be around friends to see me cry and things like that, so I went up to the Yukon territory. I knew one person and just stayed there. It was just one of those things.



© Brad Booth



I went up north as a lost kid and just tried to find myself.

Justin Young: Were you still finding poker when you went up there?

Brad Booth: I was. One of the first things that I did was ask a cab driver where the card game was, and the first five cab drivers had no idea. By the time I got to the sixth one he said, 'Yeah, I'll take you there.' I was like, 'Okay, let's go.'

I had no idea where I was going or anything. He took me to a place called the Airline Inn, and it was in room 101. We used to play between \$2 and \$25 bets. There was no check-raise, there was no hold'em, and [we ate] smoke-infested bologna sandwiches. It was a wonderful place to play. I did quite well and built up a bankroll, or survival funds back in those days.

Booth also started winning online and moved to Las Vegas to play higher stakes, even living for a time at the Bellagio so he could be closer to the action. The discussion later touched on his infamous bluff against Phil Ivey on High Stakes Poker.

The 11-time WSOP bracelet winner notoriously folded pocket kings to Booth's 4♠ 2♠ on a flop of 7♠ 6♦ 3♦. Ivey bet

\$23,000 into a pot of \$31,000, only for Booth to move all in over the top for another \$260,000 effective.

Justin Young: Let's talk about *that* hand.

Brad Booth: It was just one of those hands where I was smart enough to be able to put Ivey on the hand. Then I was smart enough to realize what I would do if I was Ivey in that situation.

It was kind of before overbets were a thing. Now, you see it all the time. Ivey being one of, if not *the* best poker players... it's sort of just one of those things where he just has to find a better spot, right? Most players are going to fold in that spot and just find a better spot to pick off later.

Justin Young: You never have queens there. If you make it smaller, you could have queens or jacks.

Brad Booth: That was my only thought, that I wanted to make sure he didn't think I had queens.

Justin Young: Do you remember how long the tank was for? On TV, it felt like forever, but live it had to feel infinitely longer.

Brad Booth: It did feel infinitely longer. It was that moment where I

was really the deer in headlights, and was really thinking, 'Please fold.' I do remember he was grabbing some chips and he dropped one and I was like, 'Okay, he's going to fold now,' because I saw him really processing his thoughts on what to do. Then he kind of just took his mind off it for a sec and I thought, 'Okay, I'm going to get away with this.'

After revealing some of the ups and downs of his time at the tables, Booth reflected on his disappearance in 2020 and what led him to walk away from the game.

Art Parmann: You had your mistakes. You basically kind of fell off the map for eight years or so, 2012 to 2020. Then I think every poker player remembers the middle of the summer. All of a sudden it was like, 'Hey, we haven't heard from Brad Booth, he disappeared.' What happened?

Brad Booth: I'm here to be honest. I'm not running away from that. I would say it was just not taking accountability, all those types of things. Life catches up to you. Your mistakes and your errors. They catch up to you, and you have to finally hit a point where



“Life catches up to you. Your mistakes, and your errors. They catch up to you, and you have to finally hit a point where you realize your heart and your actions just aren’t matching. You have to take a timeout. This is going to sound so selfish, but I had to save myself.”

Watch The Full Episode



you realize your heart and your actions just aren’t matching. You have to take a timeout. This is going to sound so selfish, but I had to save myself.

Justin Young: Where did you go?

Brad Booth: I ended up in the woods in Oregon.

Justin Young: I read that you basically told your roommate, ‘I’m just going to go camping,’ and you just left. Then the roommate said you only had enough camping gear for one or two days.

Brad Booth: Yeah, it’s true. I had next to nothing, and then I just kept going and going and going. I never had a set destination. I was just hoping to hang in there. I went up out of northern Nevada into Oregon, and then just found a place there.

I became MIA. That’s why I was literally a missing person. No cell phone. Off. Done. Didn’t say goodbye to a family member, a friend, nobody. Just irresponsible as can be.

When I first got there, I stayed at a hotel and then was trying to figure out what I was going to do. Then I realized I didn’t have a whole bunch of money there to bankroll the situation. I ended up staying in a tent outside, just really facing all the stuff that I had to face. It was rough, and it was tough, and it was cold, and unique, and humbling.

Justin Young: How did you get pulled back?

Brad Booth: I knew I just couldn’t be there with my thoughts. I had to go do something.

There was some noise being made up the road from construction equipment. So, I just walked up there and said, ‘Hey, I’d love to give you guys some help. You don’t have to pay me, just looking for something new.’ They said okay.

I didn’t do a whole lot of ‘manly work’ as a kid or anything like that. After the first day they were just like, ‘Thank goodness this kid didn’t ask for any damn money.’ I didn’t know how to run a chainsaw. I didn’t know how to do anything.

By the end of it, I could cut down a tree, limit and buck it, and stack it. All that kind of stuff. Then I learned how to drive a skid steer and lawnmower. I really bonded with some people and they gave me that humanization, [reminding me] that I could be trusted.

Justin Young: Yeah, that’s invaluable. That’s something you can’t will, and you can’t buy, that’s for sure.

Art Parmann: Whenever I’ve had a really bad stretch or I self-sabotage



or do something to myself, the only thing that ever really brings me back to level is just completing something where I had full control over the process.

I spent a month building a greenhouse during COVID and it was the shittiest looking greenhouse you've ever seen. I probably spent \$2,500 on building this thing that I could have bought out of the box for \$800. But it just brought me back and I was like, 'Alright, it's done and I can plant some stuff and it'll grow.'

Even if you make the right choice in poker, you could lose, and you get that negative dopamine. Doing something completely different really makes a difference.

Brad Booth: It really does. The family and friends up there really just gave me a chance. It wasn't handed to me at the beginning. It was a slow trust thing. They let me use their vehicle. And then, rather than stay outside, I was staying inside. It was just really nice. It was beautiful.

I was reading a couple of things online once I did have access to the Internet, and people were saying, 'Brad Booth would never get a job.' That's still not true. I would totally get a job. I started helping out at this lodge with just little jobs outside and then inside, and then parking boats and stuff like that.

Then there was this other resort down the road that needed some help, so I'd just go there and help out. They wanted me there [one day] but I couldn't come. 'Well, the Reno police are looking for you anyways,' she said. At that moment, I didn't want to be found yet. I was not ready.

The first two years were really rough in the sense of living conditions, but really strong in brotherhood. After that, I slowly started re-emerging, but still going through a



massive identity crisis. I started having access to a vehicle, and then went out to some bars to play pool and stuff like that because I was really craving some competition. All those nights in the woods without playing cards and stuff was really tough for me.

Justin Young: Let's talk about the comeback. What's been the story since

the woods?

Brad Booth: I still live in Oregon. I live as close to Vancouver, Washington, as you can be on the Oregon side. I play a few nights a week up there. There's a place called The Game, there's a place called Final Table, and there's a place called Portland Meadows. Fantastic players, well-managed, all that kind of

stuff. All those places are great places to play.

Then there's also the smaller towns [with games] like Bend, Oregon, and down in Medford. So I'm just slowly accumulating some rounds, trying to keep the engine oiled, as far as no-limit hold'em goes and lower limit hold'em goes – with no ego.

Justin Young: Do you get recognized in those low-stakes games to the point of embarrassment? Not that I was ever as much of a rising star as you or anything, but I get that embarrassing feeling when I'm grinding lower.

Brad Booth: The embarrassment feeling came many years ago after playing \$4,000-\$8,000 [limit] in Bobby's Room or \$200-\$400 [no-limit]. I think as I went down from yellow chip-white chip, to green chip-black chip-red chip, to blue chip-red chip-occasional green chip.

I had that ego check quite some time ago. But the ego is something that I now just check at the door. It's more than poker for me moving forward. I'm very thankful and filled with gratitude to be where I am today, mentally, emotionally, and now we're going to work on it financially. ♠



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GORILLA MODE: JESSE LONIS BEASTS 2025 PLAYER OF THE YEAR RACE

30-Year-Old Nabs 10 Titles And \$13.4 Million In Earnings

By Tim Fiorvanti



2025 CARD PLAYER PLAYER OF THE YEAR JESSE LONIS

It's been a steady, but meteoric climb to the top for Jesse Lonis, who has risen from a mid-stakes tournament grinder to high roller crusher in less than five years.

Lonis first popped up on the radar in the 2021 *Card Player* Player of the Year race, ending the year in 43rd place. He improved to 32nd in 2022, and then followed it up with 18th in 2023. The Little Falls, New York native became a true POY contender in 2024, ending the year in third while banking \$6.7 million.

It would be nearly impossible for the vast majority of players to improve on that campaign, but Lonis did it once again in 2025. In fact, he basically doubled his success at the tables. The two-time *WSOP* bracelet winner did a lot of his damage in *Triton Poker* events in 2025, earning his second and third career *Triton* titles during the same festival in Montenegro. He also won big at the new *Onyx High Roller* series, picked up his second *WSOP Circuit* ring, two *PokerGO Tour* trophies, and a *European Poker Tour* trophy.

With 10 wins (eight qualifying for POY points) overall, \$13.4 million in earnings, and 29 final tables, Lonis made one final leap to the top of the rankings to claim Player of

the Year honors, sponsored by CoinPoker.

"I've always been a fan of *Card Player*, so to win this leaderboard is a great honor," said Lonis. "It's cool to collect another accolade like this."

Lonis stands alone as the top dog of 2025, or perhaps more fittingly, the alpha gorilla, the symbol he's chosen as something of a totem on his path to poker success.

A Long Road In A Short Time

Despite being only 30 years old, Lonis' incredible run over the last few years already has him within the top 50 on poker's all-time money list. Over the last few years, he has seamlessly acclimated to the high roller tournament environment. Between his \$50,000 pot-limit Omaha *WSOP* bracelet and three *Triton* titles, among many other significant results, money talks.

"I think in most ways, I've gotten better, for sure," Lonis said of his sustained success as he moved up in stakes. "In some ways, the better you get in some areas, you may lose focus on some other things in other areas. But I think overall, I'm getting better every year."

"I've always been confident," said Lonis. "The first time



I played [a high roller], I prepared a lot. When I got there, I was definitely nervous. You're just trying not to screw things up. But I knew I was supposed to be there, and I knew I'd get comfortable. I've played the biggest buy-ins, but you know, there's still a couple of levels I haven't reached yet. It just feels good to be comfortable at the \$50,000 and \$100,000 level, for sure."

The POY Path

It was a fairly slow start for Lonis in 2025. Despite his online *WSOP Circuit* win, he had just one qualifying POY result in January, and one more in February, both inside the PokerGO Studio.

Lonis was spending his days as a homebody, playing less than his typical volume for good reason. He welcomed his third daughter in February, and drew additional inspiration from his growing family.

"I don't think I'd even be playing this game still if I didn't have success when I was away, because that's what's kept my wife happy, knowing that I'm not just out there gambling," Lonis said back in July, when he appeared on the cover of *Card Player* for the first time. "I'm out there earning and providing for our future. Luckily, I'm in a spot now where they can travel the world with me."

March is when Lonis' POY campaign kicked off in earnest. He earned his first live victory of the year in a \$10,000 event during the *Wynn Millions*, and made his first deep run of the *PGT PLO Series*, finishing in third. That *PGT* festival spilled over into April, and Lonis only got hotter from there.

In total, Lonis made four final tables and cashed five times during the *PGT PLO Series*, with a win, a runner-up, and two third-place finishes. That earned him Player of the

Series honors, and Lonis was only just getting started.

Dad Makes It Worthwhile

He would soon hit the road, or rather the air, for a lengthy stretch in Europe that stands as the best run of his career to date. At the *EPT Monte Carlo* festival, Lonis made three final tables and recorded his third victory of the year in a €30,000 high roller.

"I started in Monte Carlo, and then right from the beginning there, I had good results. In my first tournament I made the final table, then I won one, and then in my last tournament, I got second. While I was there, I also played an online tournament, a \$10,000 event on GGPoker, and I won that too, so I had a lot of momentum heading into *Triton Montenegro*."

While his strong performance in Monte Carlo was in line with some of the better results of his career to that point, *Triton Montenegro* was a revelation. Lonis first won a \$40,000 no-limit hold'em mystery bounty event for \$619,000 from the prize pool, along with another \$800,000 in bounties. That victory put Lonis in the lead for the *Card Player* POY race, and his next result put him in a position to hold onto that spot for the rest of 2025.

In the \$100,000 no-limit hold'em main event, 180 entries built a prize pool of \$18 million. After three days, Lonis was once again the last player standing. His third *Triton* title earned him a career-high \$3,446,298 and 1,680 POY points. At a final table that featured two-time POY winner Stephen Chidwick, Fedor Holz, Artur Martirosian, and Christoph Vogelsang, Lonis came away with a decisive victory.

"It's emotional, I'm trying to hold the tears back," Lonis told reporters after closing out the momentous victory. "I

wanted to come out here and perform. I'm away from my family for a long time and I told them I was going to make it worthwhile."

In one individual festival of results, Lonis outearned every single previous year of his career.

"It was my first time in Montenegro, and it was a magical place," said Lonis. "I had good people around me, good food, great atmosphere. After I won the first tournament, it felt like I just had all the momentum in the world going into the main. It definitely stands as one of the early pinnacles in my career."

High Roller Wins Continue

Lonis' considerable POY lead carried him through a relatively quiet 2025 *WSOP*. Away from Horseshoe, however, he continued to pile up results. He won a \$25,000 high roller at the *Wynn Summer Classic*, and a \$15,000 no-limit hold'em event at the *Aria High Roller Series* to highlight his summer.

In mid-August, Lonis logged his third seven-figure result of 2025. Although his *Onyx* victory in Cyprus didn't help his POY totals given the invitation-only nature of the event, he was certainly not mad at the \$1.75 million payday. Two more final tables followed at *EPT Barcelona* in late August, and in September, there was a lucrative trip to Jeju, South Korea for another *Triton* festival.

Lonis banked his fourth seven-figure result of the year in a \$100,000 *Triton* PLO event, adding 800 POY points and \$1,261,000 to his totals. There was one more significant burst in late September and early October with four final tables inside the PokerGO Studio, including Lonis' eighth and final qualifying victory of 2025 in a \$5,300 PLO event.

He had just one qualifying cash each in November and December. His trip to *WSOP Paradise*, during which Lonis cashed five times and made a final table, garnered significant attention for a hand he didn't win. During live streaming coverage of the \$25,000 buy-in *Super Main Event*, he folded a set of kings. As it turns out, his opponent Ryuta Nakai had turned third pair with a straight blocker into a bluff.

Had he made the call, Lonis would have been poised for yet another massive score. Instead, he bowed out in 55th place for \$180,000. Lonis has received consistent positive attention during his run to the top of the poker world, but the first significant blowback of his career didn't seem to shake him.

"From the beginning, there was never any negative feelings for me at all," said Lonis. "I've played that spot probably 30 or 40 times throughout the year. You play a lot of hands. And I'm sure in that spot, I was right 80, 90 percent of the time. The guy that did it against me was one of the nicest dudes. I wasn't mad at all. I was more just proud of the guy for going for it."

Although he is among the youngest players on the high roller tour, Lonis is more of a throwback to the days when you could just size up your opponent and make a gut decision. Although he's not averse to a theory-based approach, Lonis has always been more of an old-school type of player, preferring a more exploitative style. He's not afraid to go for a big bluff or a big laydown, even if it makes him look foolish every once in a while.

"Obviously, I've gotten to the point where anything that I do at a poker table, I'm going to have positive and negative reactions. The fact that people care about how





“I think at this point the gorilla thing is more of a mindset than anything else,” said Lonis. “It’s just being totally engaged. Being the best version of you. And for me, it’s my aggressive style. I think it fits with the way I approach the game. It reminds me to always be hungry, to wake up and go for it, every day.”



© PokerGO / Antonio Abregó

I'm playing, the reason I'm here, is because obviously I'm doing something right."

Holding On For The Title

The race came down to the wire. Punnat Punsri, the number one player on Thailand's all-time money list, pushed until the very last series of the year in Las Vegas, but ultimately fell one result short. (pg. 32) While Lonis is appreciative of the award, and the achievement, his priorities after another busy year on the road were with his family as Punsri made his run.

"[Punsri] played a few tournaments that were probably way better value for player of the year things. He was definitely a little more aware of it than I was. I was enjoying myself with my family in the Bahamas, so I wasn't going to leave early for something like that. It was kind of in the back of my mind. I didn't chase after it too much. If it comes, it comes."

Lonis indeed held on to the top spot when the final events of 2025 had wrapped up. With another career year in the books, Lonis' approach to the game continues to prove successful at almost every turn. While his embodiment and embrace of the gorilla as his spirit animal might seem, on the surface, to be a means of posturing, Lonis has a deeper depth of appreciation for how it represents his path in poker.

"I think at this point the gorilla thing is more of a mindset than anything else," said Lonis. "It's just being totally engaged. Being the best version of you. And for me, it's my aggressive style. I think it fits with the way I approach the game. It reminds me to always be hungry, to wake up and go for it, every day." ♠



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Top 10 Scores Of 2025

Date	Event	Place	Payout	Points
May 23	Triton Montenegro \$100,000 NLH	1	\$3,446,298	1,680
Sept. 21	Triton Jeju \$100,000 PLO	3	\$1,261,000	800
Aug. 25	EPT Barcelona €100,000 NLH	3	\$826,956	400
May 17	Triton Montenegro \$40,000 Mystery Bounty NLH	1	\$619,000	924
May 2	EPT Monte Carlo €30,000 NLH	1	\$508,276	504
May 21	Triton Montenegro \$50,000 NLH	4	\$457,000	510
June 23	Wynn Summer Classic \$25,800 NLH	1	\$410,242	420
April 4	PGT PLO Series \$15,100 PLO	1	\$308,850	504
May 15	Triton Montenegro \$25,000 NLH	4	\$280,000	462
July 3	ARIA High Roller Series \$15,100 NLH	1	\$278,400	360

BEST OF THE REST: THE TOP CONTENDERS FOR 2025 POY

By Erik Fast



New year, new race.

The points have officially been tallied for the final 2025 *Card Player* Player of the Year standings presented by CoinPoker, and it was another massive year on the live circuit. The top 10 finishers alone collectively accumulated more than \$84 million in POY earnings.

As the 2026 campaign gets underway, we pause to take a closer look back at the most impressive performers from the last dozen months on the tournament scene. While Jesse Lonis came away with the honor (pg. 26), the accomplishments of the rest of the top 10 were significant and deserve their own time in the spotlight.

2. PUNNAT PUNSRI

Total Points: 10,540

POY Earnings: \$11,041,805

Titles: 4

Final Tables: 27

Thailand's all-time money leader Punnat Punsri is so far ahead of the pack that his POY earnings from 2025 alone would be almost enough to double second-ranked Kannapong Thanarattrakul's \$5.9 million career mark. Punsri now has nearly \$32 million overall after cashing for over \$11 million in 2025.

Punsri managed to improve on his fourth-place finish in the 2024 POY race with another incredibly consistent campaign on the circuit. His 27 final-table finishes were tied with the ultimate winner of the POY award for the most of any player, and he wound up falling just 268 points short.

It's been a meteoric rise to the top for Punsri, who had just \$131,000 in career cashes heading into 2021. He's recorded 10 seven-figure scores since, with five of those being for multiple millions. In 2025, he took down the \$125,000 *Triton Jeju* event for \$2.6 million. Punsri is now one of seven players with five trident trophies, having earned three in 2025 alone.

He backed up his big win in Jeju with a victory in a \$25,000 pot-limit Omaha six-max event in Montenegro for \$550,000.

Then in September he emerged victorious in a \$50,000 no-limit hold'em event for another \$1.7 million. He also came close to taking down the first-ever *Triton One* main event, finishing second from a field of 1,046 for \$1.2 million and 1,600 POY points, the largest points haul of his 2025 campaign.

After very nearly winning this year's POY race, the 33-year-old poker player appears poised to be a threat at the highest levels of the game for years to come.

3. ALEX FOXEN

Total Points: 9,371

POY Earnings: \$11,306,229

Titles: 5

Final Tables: 19

Alex Foxen has finished inside the top 10 in the year-end POY standings for eight straight years, with a third-place showing in 2025 marking his fifth top-five performance in that span. He also placed second in 2019, third in 2018, and fourth in both 2021 and 2022. In fact, he's placed worse than ninth only once in that stretch, with his 19th-place landing spot in 2017. He has arguably been the most consistent live tournament player over the last decade.

While many players padded their stats in the final stretch, with December in particular hosting a buffet of high-impact tournaments, Foxen managed his podium finish despite not making a final table in the final two months of the year. He also didn't begin his spree until March. That being said, he did manage an incredible 19 final-table appearances and five titles in between the dry spells.

The 34-year-old kicked off his run with two final-table runs at *Triton Jeju* in March for nearly \$1.3 million in combined earnings. He then ripped off seven final tables in six weeks, accumulating three titles and more than \$1.8 million in prize money along the way. The wins came in a \$15,000 *PGT PLO Series* event, a \$15,000 event at the *U.S. Poker Open*, and a \$25,000 high roller at *Triton Montenegro*. That last triumph saw Foxen earn \$755,000 and his third career trident trophy.

Foxen managed one more podium showing in Montenegro before heading back to Las Vegas for the *WSOP*. He added another three final tables at the series, cashing for nearly \$3.8 million in those events alone. The highlight saw him finish second in the \$250,000 high roller that he won back in 2022 for a career-best score of \$4.6 million. He secured nearly \$3.1 million this time around.

Another half-dozen final tables were added to Foxen's tally in the fall, including his fourth and fifth titles of the year. Both came in *PGT* events, bringing his total wins on that high-stakes-centric tour to four on the year. He won a \$10,000 event at the *Poker Masters* in September, then took down an early \$5,000 progressive knockout at the *PGT PLO Series II* for his last POY-qualified score of the year on Oct. 16.

The \$11.3 million in POY earnings that Foxen compiled this year grew his overall total to more than \$56.1 million, which puts him in 10th place on the all-time money list.

4. QUAN ZHOU

Total Points: 8,704

POY Earnings: \$3,501,337

Titles: 2

Final Tables: 14

China's Quan Zhou kicked his run to the top four into high gear with a runner-up showing in a massive \$25,000 event at *Triton Jeju*. He placed second from a field of 391 entries for a career-best \$1.2 million payday. Before that score, he had just two final-table finishes on the year.

Zhou added another two final tables in May, then kicked off his *WSOP* run with a fourth-place finish in a \$2,000 no-limit hold'em event for \$153,576. He then finished seventh in the \$50,000 pot-limit Omaha high roller for \$294,013 and third in the \$10,000 PLO championship for another \$650,567.

The first outright victory of the year for Zhou came in a \$3,000 PLO mystery bounty event a few days later at the *Wynn Summer Classic*. He earned \$307,025 as the winner with another \$130,000 in bounty payouts as well.

After a few months without many results, Zhou ripped off four final tables in as many weeks to close out the year. Among those deep runs was his second title, which saw him overcome 421 entries in the \$5,000 mystery bounty event at the *WSOP International Super Circuit Cyprus* for another \$319,000, with \$94,000 coming from seven bounty pulls.

Zhou, who also finished inside the top 10 in the 2023 POY standings, grew his lifetime earnings to nearly \$13.9 million after another huge year on the circuit.

5. ARTUR MARTIROSIAN

Total Points: 8,514

POY Earnings: \$10,639,056

Titles: 3

Final Tables: 18

In addition to his consistent success on the high-stakes scene, Artur Martirosian found a win in a multi-flight event with multiple thousands of entries to boost his POY score. The 28-year-old from Voronezh, Russia navigated his way through a field of 2,091 entries in a \$3,500 buy-in at the *Wynn Summer Classic*, earning \$1,016,763 as the champion along with 1,620 POY points. This was by far the largest field he'd ever topped across his 20 recorded wins, easily topping the 852-entry turnout for the 2021 *European Poker Tour Sochi* main event.

Martirosian's other two titles in 2025 were more in line with



Punnat Punsri



Alex Foxen

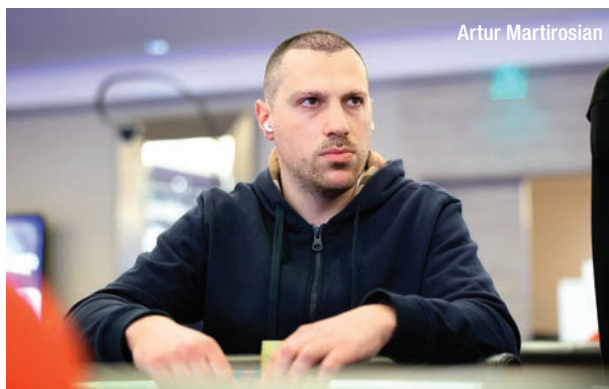


Quan Zhou

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TOURNAMENTS

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Artur Martirosian

© PokerGO / Antonio Abrego



Brandon Wilson

his usual diet of high roller events. In June he came out on top of a field of 64 entries in the \$25,000 heads-up championship at the *WSOP* for \$500,000 and his third career gold bracelet. His final victory came at the *Triton Jeju* stop in the fall. He bested 60 entries in the \$25,000 pot-limit Omaha six-max event for his third trident trophy and \$421,000.

His largest payday of the year came at the same venue back in the spring. He placed third in the \$100,000 buy-in event for \$2.6 million, the second-largest windfall of his career. He also placed third in a \$100,000 pot-limit Omaha event at the *Triton Montenegro* stop, adding nearly \$1.1 million with that podium showing.

There were 10 players who managed to accumulate eight figures in POY-qualified earnings, including Martirosian and his \$10.6 million. With nearly \$34.6 million in lifetime scores, Martirosian is the clear leader atop the Russian all-time money list. In fact, his haul in 2025 alone would be good for third on that leaderboard.

6. KLEMENS ROITER

Total Points: 8,362
POY Earnings: \$7,472,071
Titles: 2
Final Tables: 18

To say 2025 was Klemens Roiter's best year on the live scene is an understatement. Just one of his top dozen scores came prior to 2025.

The 34-year-old won his first bracelet in 2025, overcoming a staggering field of 9,920 entries in the *World Series of Poker* \$1,500 Monster Stack to earn \$1.2 million.

While the Austrian only captured one more title after that breakthrough, it was a hefty one. He emerged victorious from a field of 57 entries in a €30,000 high roller at the *European Poker Tour Barcelona* festival with \$594,108 and the trophy.

Klemens Roiter



Roiter cashed for nearly \$7.5 million in 2025, pushing his lifetime haul over \$9.3 million in the process. He made 18 final tables, a total that only nine players surpassed. Two of those came in the same week at *Triton Jeju* for a combined \$1.1 million.

His largest windfall came just a few weeks before the year ended. He placed fifth out of 237 entries in the \$100,000 *WSOP Paradise Triton* main event, earning a new personal-best payday of \$1,462,000 for his efforts.

7. BRANDON WILSON

Total Points: 7,868
POY Earnings: \$6,402,092
Titles: 5
Final Tables: 15

Fresh faces aren't always easy to come by at tournament poker's highest stakes, but every so often, a player manages to make the leap. Brandon Wilson established himself as one to watch with a hot streak in high rollers at the Seminole Hard Rock Hollywood in 2023 and 2024. He won four titles there in the span of 16 months, capping off the run with a victory in a \$25,000 high roller.

The 32-year-old carried the momentum into 2025 and managed to come away with his best year yet. The majority of Wilson's \$9.8 million in career earnings were tallied during the year, with \$6.4 million amassed across 27 in-the-money finishes.

The Illinois native made 15 final tables, coming away with five titles. In September he finished second in a \$50,000 buy-in at *Triton Jeju* for \$1,150,000. Roughly seven weeks after that close call, he battled his way to a fourth-place payout of \$1,132,000 in a \$125,000 *Triton* event at the *WSOP Paradise* series.

The biggest win of Wilson's year came in the \$25,000 finale at the *Poker Masters* in October. He beat out 63 entries to secure \$464,000 and one of two *PGT* victories. He then closed out his campaign in style, taking down a \$25,000 high roller at the *WPT World Championship at Wynn Las Vegas* for \$341,250 just a week before Christmas.

8. SAM SOVEREL

Total Points: 7,267
POY Earnings: \$7,072,865
Titles: 6
Final Tables: 17

Sam Soverel doubled his bracelet count in 2025, securing his third during the summer and fourth at the *WSOP Paradise*. Both of those wins cracked his top five career scores, with the



Sam Soverel



Stephen Chidwick

latter being his largest payday yet on the circuit. He beat out 103 entries in the \$100,000 *WSOP* Triton pot-limit Omaha main event, earning \$2.6 million and the hardware.

Nearly five months before that in Las Vegas, he triumphed in the \$10,000 no-limit hold'em six-max championship, outlasting 546 players to walk away with \$986,337. The two previous bracelets for Soverel came in a 2023 *WSOP Online* \$5,300 high roller and the 2016 \$1,000 pot-limit Omaha event.

The 35-year-old won four more POY-qualified titles this year and made another dozen final-table runs on top of his six victories. His incredible consistency helped propel him to a top-10 showing in this race while also putting him in pole position in the *PokerGO Tour* standings heading into the *PGT Last Chance* festival and the \$1,000,000 *PGT Championship*. Check back next issue for those results.

The Florida native closed the year strong, winning three of his five titles in the final two months of 2025. He placed third in the \$100,000 *Super High Roller Bowl* just before the year-ending holidays, adding \$350,000 to bring his POY earnings to nearly \$7.1 million. Also, he took down the *PGT Heads Up National Championship*, the results of which were embargoed until the tournament aired on *Peacock*.

Soverel now boasts lifetime cashes of more than \$32 million after this standout showing.

9. STEPHEN CHIDWICK

Total Points: 7,254

POY Earnings: \$12,476,018

Titles: 2

Final Tables: 19

While there were a couple fresh faces near the upper echelons of the POY race, 2025's ninth-place finisher could not be more of a staple near the top of the standings. Stephen Chidwick, who won this award twice (2019, 2022) logged his seventh top-10 finish of the past nine years in 2025. Even his two down years in that stretch, in 2020 and 2021 were hardly disasters, as he finished 23rd and 15th, respectively. His average finish in the year-end rankings from 2017 through 2025 sits at just shy of eighth place.

The 36-year-old tournament superstar's latest entry in a long line of incredible performances saw him bank nearly \$12.5 million across 19 final tables, with two POY-qualified wins along the way. The Deal, England native captured two of his three largest scores ever in 2025, including taking down the *Triton Jeju* \$200,000 short deck event for \$3.5 million and finishing second in the \$125,000 no-limit hold'em event at that same festival for another \$1.9 million.

He managed another seven-figure score with a runner-up



Andrew Ostapchenko

showing in the *WSOP* \$50,000 pot-limit Omaha event for just shy of \$1.4 million. His other title for the year came in a \$50,000 high roller at the *PokerStars North American Poker Tour Las Vegas* festival. He took home \$557,930 along with the spade trophy.

Chidwick's career earnings have grown to a staggering \$76.8 million. That is good for second on poker's all-time money list, trailing only Bryn Kenney's \$81.1 million.

10. ANDREW OSTAPCHENKO

Total Points: 7,248

POY Earnings: \$2,816,248

Titles: 3

Final Tables: 14

The two largest scores of longtime poker pro Andrew Ostapchenko's career were both recorded at the *WSOP* last summer. The 35-year-old Southern Californian fell just short of securing his first bracelet when he finished second from a field of 392 in the \$25,000 eight-max no-limit hold'em event. While he didn't hoist the gold that day, he did walk away with just shy of \$1.3 million.

Five weeks later, he battled his way back to heads-up play at the series. The second time around he was able to close out the win, defeating fellow top POY contender Brandon Wilson in the \$5,000 no-limit event to lock up the bracelet and the top prize of \$606,849.

Ostapchenko now has more than \$5.3 million in lifetime cashes, with more than half of that total earned in 2025. Prior to his breakout this summer, his top score had been the \$282,360 he earned for winning the 2024 *Bay 101 Rising Star* event.

While his summer was the headline of his year, Ostapchenko was consistent throughout. He made 14 final tables in total, including a win in the *WSOP Circuit Thunder Valley* \$3,250 high roller in January and another triumph in a \$1,100 side event during the *World Poker Tour* stop at the same venue in the spring. ♠

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2025 Card Player Player of the Year

Sponsored by  CoinPoker

Rank	Player	Points	Titles	Final Tables	Earnings
1	Jesse Lonis	10,807	8	27	\$11,601,757
2	Punnat Punsri	10,540	4	27	\$11,041,805
3	Alex Foxen	9,371	5	19	\$11,306,229
4	Quan Zhou	8,704	2	14	\$3,658,337
5	Artur Martirosian	8,514	3	18	\$10,639,056
6	Klemens Roiter	8,362	2	18	\$7,472,071
7	Brandon Wilson	7,868	5	15	\$6,402,092
8	Sam Soverel	7,267	6	17	\$7,072,865
9	Stephen Chidwick	7,254	2	19	\$12,476,018
10	Andrew Ostapchenko	7,248	3	14	\$2,816,248
11	Benjamin Tollerene	7,141	2	17	\$12,010,040
12	Matthew Wantman	6,856	1	19	\$3,247,893
13	Jose 'Nacho' Barbero	6,828	2	16	\$8,245,853
14	Jun Obara	6,755	2	12	\$7,167,133
15	Martin Kabrhel	6,570	4	12	\$5,454,003
16	Jeremy Ausmus	6,463	3	18	\$4,388,854
17	Joao Simao	6,280	4	13	\$8,648,696
18	David Coleman	6,226	2	16	\$8,674,399
19	Isaac Haxton	5,967	1	15	\$10,998,493
20	Chino Rheem	5,891	4	16	\$3,447,108
21	Jason Koon	5,854	3	15	\$11,125,993
22	Biao Ding	5,844	2	18	\$7,825,998
22	Daniel Rezaei	5,844	2	6	\$6,239,439
24	Thomas Boivin	5,716	2	16	\$6,142,253
25	Stephen Song	5,697	2	13	\$2,671,849
26	Aleksejs Ponakovs	5,694	3	11	\$11,817,501
27	Daniel Dvoress	5,560	1	16	\$7,981,718
28	Shannon Shorr	5,545	6	15	\$3,050,725
29	Nick Schulman	5,540	2	18	\$3,042,012
30	Kiat Lee	5,473	2	14	\$8,931,328

Card Player Player Of The Year Winners

Year	Player
1997	Men Nguyen
1998	T.J. Cloutier
1999	Tony Ma
2000	David Pham
2001	Men Nguyen
2002	T.J. Cloutier
2003	Men Nguyen
2004	Daniel Negreanu
2005	Men Nguyen
2006	Michael Mizrachi
2007	David Pham
2008	John Phan
2009	Eric Baldwin
2010	Tom Marchese
2011	Ben Lamb
2012	Greg Merson
2013	Daniel Negreanu
2014	Daniel Colman
2015	Anthony Zinno
2016	David Peters
2017	Adrian Mateos
2018	Jake Schindler
2019	Stephen Chidwick
2020	Vincent Wan
2021	Ali Imsirovic
2022	Stephen Chidwick
2023	Bin Weng
2024	Adrian Mateos
2025	Jesse Lonis



CIRCUIT RESULTS



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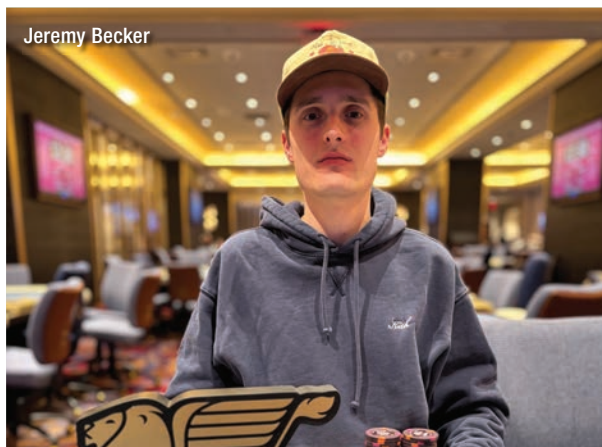
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Event	Player	Payout	POV
Pirates Poker Series	1 Stefan Drusca	\$150,462	432
	2 Daniele Sacchi	\$86,112	360
Kings Casino Rozvadov, Czech Republic	3 Helmut Phung	\$61,542	288
	4 Youssef Aananouch	\$43,992	216
€480 NLH Dec. 14-22 Entries: 1,531 Prizepool: \$728,539	5 Szymon Politowski	\$35,451	180
	6 Anonymous	NA	
	7 Lulei Hu	\$22,230	108
	8 Deep Singh	\$18,428	72

Event	Player	Payout	POV
DeepStack	1 Dylan Wilkerson	\$17,000	173
	2 Mohamed Serry	\$14,890	144
Venetian Las Vegas, NV	3 Armen Minasyan	\$9,418	115
	4 Semsettin Ilyas	\$6,871	86
\$400 NLH Dec. 21-23 \$75,000 GTD Entries: 274 Prizepool: \$90,420	5 Anonymous	N/A	N/A
	6 Daniel Barker	\$3,877	58
	7 Kevin Kim	\$3,002	43
8 Jeff Yarchever	\$2,372	29	
9 Derek Blenman	\$1,915	14	



© OLA Poker Tour



© Venetian Las Vegas

Event	Player	Payout	POV
OLA Poker Tour	1 Sasaki Seiji	\$58,144	360
	2 Yusuke Mizuno	\$38,688	300
Asia Poker Area Taipei, Taiwan	3 Lian Lee	\$28,448	240
	4 Christopher Lim	\$21,152	180
NT\$22,000 NLH Dec. 19-22 NT\$10,000,000 GTD Entries: 497 Prizepool: \$317,600	5 Chung Ho	\$15,904	150
	6 Jun Lin	\$12,096	120
	7 Atsuhiko Bingo	\$9,312	90
	8 Chia Tsai	\$7,264	60
	9 Zhi Wang	\$5,696	30

Event	Player	Payout	POV
DeepStack	1 Jeremy Becker	\$71,805	720
	2 Kfir Nahum	\$51,322	600
Venetian Las Vegas, NV	3 Evan Sandberg	\$37,205	480
	4 Ivan Angelov	\$27,358	360
\$1,100 NLH Dec. 27-30 \$300,000 GTD Entries: 406 Prizepool: \$389,760	5 Jeremy Eyer	\$20,412	300
	6 Mitja Rudolf	\$15,456	240
	7 Jeevandeep Singh	\$11,879	180
	8 Imran Mukati	\$9,269	120
	9 Jesse Kertland	\$7,345	60

All payouts in USD.



© Hard Rock Tampa



© Sochi Casino

Event	Player	Payout	POV
Holiday Mega Stack Seminole Hard Rock Tampa, FL \$600 NLH Dec. 23-28 \$100,000 GTD Entries: 374 Prizepool: \$194,480	1 Cory Wood	\$39,350	300
	2 Jesse Hunnicut	\$29,190	250
	3 Mark Glazewski	\$18,790	200
	4 Erick Wiedemann	\$13,700	150
	5 Daniel Comeaux	\$10,170	125
	6 Shane Dellus	\$7,680	100
	7 RYAN Wyant	\$5,900	75
	8 Thomas Villetto	\$4,610	50
	9 Gabriel Fuller	\$3,680	25

Event	Player	Payout	POV
Sochi Grand Final Sochi Casino Sochi, Russia R120,000 NLH Dec. 24-29 Entries: 617 Prizepool: \$790,324	1 Vyacheslav Golovchenko	\$135,005	840
	2 Artur Adamyants	\$97,200	700
	3 Alexander Lakhov	\$65,760	560
	4 Aleksei Istomin	\$48,300	420
	5 Albert Sevymyan	\$34,950	350
	6 Gleb Ershov	\$26,670	280
	7 Svyatoslav Sazonov	\$21,150	210
	8 Sergey Prostavkov	\$17,010	140
	9 Nail Aberkhayev	\$13,800	70

TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2025 Super High Roller Bowl X
\$100,000 Buy-In No-Limit Hold'em



Thomas Boivin
512,500 Chips

Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 33%
After Flop: 5%
After Turn: 98%



Daniel Negreanu
285,000 Chips

Winning Percentage
Before Flop: N/A
After Flop: N/A
After Turn: N/A



Jeremy Ausmus
353,500 Chips

Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 66%
After Flop: 95%
After Turn: 2%

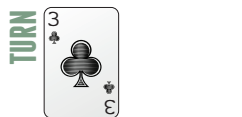


PREFLOP

At a seven-handed table with blinds of 2,000-4,000 with a big blind ante of 4,000, Thomas Boivin raised to 9,000 from the lojack. Jeremy Ausmus called from the small blind, and Daniel Negreanu called from the big blind.



Ausmus and Negreanu checked. Boivin bet 9,000, and Ausmus check-raised to 27,000. Negreanu folded. Boivin three-bet to 80,000, and Ausmus called.



Ausmus checked, and Boivin bet 80,000. Ausmus called.



Ausmus checked. Boivin moved all-in, and Ausmus called all-in for 185,000.

COMMENTARY:

In December, the *Super High Roller Bowl X* drew 23 entries, but only 16 of those came on day 1. When this hand occurred, 14 players were in the field and registration was still open, so there were no ICM considerations to worry about. Thomas Boivin raised his suited ace and was called by both players in the blinds. After the flop, Jeremy Ausmus opted to check-raise his fives full in a spot where the solver favors playing a strategy of continuing with only calls. Ausmus could bluff with plenty of straight draws that have backdoor flush potential like A-4 and 7-6, so he can implement some raises into a balanced strategy. Since the vast majority of Thomas Boivin's continuing hands would prefer to just call, he could have used a strategy that didn't include any raises as well. However, he raised right back to continue building the pot. Ausmus' aforementioned bluffing candidates would have had equity against trips, plus Boivin could charge hands like J-J that might check-raise for value and protection. Such hands would surely pay to see at least one more card, since they beat bluffs and had disguised nut potential. Once Boivin drilled his one-outer, the rest of the hand was mostly a formality. He just needed to get all of his chips in the middle by the river. Ausmus had a holding that was still beating plenty of value hands, as Boivin could have been going for it all with his big pairs, so there was no getting away from it.

NOTE: WINNING PERCENTAGES DO NOT INCLUDE TIES. ODDS PROVIDED BY [CARDPLAYER.COM/POKER-TOOLS/ODDS-CALCULATOR/TEXAS-Holdem](http://CardPlayer.com/poker-tools/odds-calculator/texas-holdem)

TOURNAMENTS

Aleksei Istomin



© Sochi Casino

Leonardo Flores



© Hard Rock Hollywood

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Sochi Grand Final Sochi Casino Sochi, Russia R375,000 NLH Dec. 25-28 Entries: 126 Prizepool: \$513,324	1 Aleksei Istomin	\$120,000	396
	2 Vyacheslav Balaev	\$102,504	330
	3 Ruslan Nasirov	\$62,970	264
	4 Semen Komlev	\$46,260	198
	5 Roman Orlov	\$33,480	165
	6 Vladislav Ivanov	\$25,530	132
	7 Anonymous	N/A	N/A
	8 Mikhail Martov	\$16,290	66
	9 Nikita Zemlyanoi	\$13,200	33

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Fun In The Sun Series	1 Leonardo Flores	\$47,540	384
	2 Timothy Miles	\$31,500	320
Seminole Hard Rock Hollywood, FL	3 Jalal Farooq	\$23,500	256
	4 Adi Ben Ami	\$17,600	192
	5 Kirk Smith	\$13,300	160
\$1,100 NLH Dec. 28-29	6 Vincent Bryant	\$10,100	128
\$100,000 GTD Entries: 222 Prizepool: \$215,340	7 Shoval Malin	\$7,800	96
	8 Carlos Bermudez	\$6,100	64
	9 Jason Prest	\$4,740	32

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TOP PAYOUTS IN POKER TOURNAMENT HISTORY



Rank	Player	Payout	Event	Buy-In	Place
1	Bryn Kenney	\$20,606,421	2019 Triton Million Charity Invitational	£1,050,000 (\$1,321,950)	2nd
2	Antonio Esfandiari	\$18,346,673	2012 WSOP Big One For One Drop	\$1,000,000	1st
3	Aaron Zang	\$16,810,979	2019 Triton Million Charity Invitational	£1,050,000 (\$1,321,950)	1st
4	Daniel Colman	\$15,306,668	2014 WSOP Big One For One Drop	\$1,000,000	1st
5	Elton Tsang	\$12,188,889	2016 Big One For One Drop	€1,000,000 (\$1,119,620)	1st
6	Daniel Weinman	\$12,100,000	2023 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st
7	Alejandro Lococo	\$12,070,000	2024 WSOP Paradise Triton Million	\$500,000	1st
8	Jamie Gold	\$12,000,000	2006 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st
9	Sam Trickett	\$10,112,001	2012 WSOP Big One For One Drop	\$1,000,000	2nd
T10	Bernhard Binder	\$10,000,000	2025 WSOP Paradise Super Main Event	\$25,000	1st
T10	Justin Bonomo	\$10,000,000	2018 WSOP Big One For One Drop	\$1,000,000	1st
T10	Michael Mizrachi	\$10,000,000	2025 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st
T10	Jonathan Tamayo	\$10,000,000	2024 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st
T10	Espen Jorstad	\$10,000,000	2022 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st
T10	Hossein Ensan	\$10,000,000	2019 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st
T10	Martin Jacobson	\$10,000,000	2014 WSOP Main Event	\$10,000	1st

Unsurprisingly, the five largest payouts in the history of the game were all awarded in million-dollar buy-in events. Seven of the 16 players in poker history to cash for \$10 million or more did so via deep runs in tournaments that cost seven figures to enter, with the remainder being the champions of the largest *World Series of Poker* main events. There's also Bernhard Binder, who took down December's record *WSOP Paradise* super main event.

In an interesting twist, the single largest payout ever awarded went to a player who did not win the event in question. **Bryn Kenney** secured over \$20.6 million via a heads-up deal with **Aaron Zang** in the 2019 *Triton Million Charity Invitational* in London. Zang went on to win their heads-up battle after the agreement was struck, but walked away with \$16.8 million as the champion, which is good for third on this list. The event cost £1 million to enter, which amounted to more than \$1.3 million USD at the time, making it the largest buy-in

poker tournament ever held. With 54 entries, there was nearly \$65.9 million in prize money awarded, with multi-million-dollar payouts for the top seven finishers.

The second-largest payout in poker history was the \$18,346,673 earned by **Antonio Esfandiari**, the champion of the first \$1 million buy-in ever held: the 2012 *WSOP Big One For One Drop*. He bested 48 entries on his way to securing the hardware and the massive top prize. Sam Trickett's runner-up payday of just over \$10.1 million puts him just ahead of the seven-way tie for 10th. The pileup at \$10 million includes multiple world champions, the aforementioned Binder, and 2018 *Big One* winner Justin Bonomo.

The fourth- and fifth-place spots both go to two other *Big One For One Drop* champions. **Daniel Colman** took down the second running in 2014 for \$15.3 million, while Elton Tsang won an invitational version of the event held two years after that in Monaco. ♠

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Final Table Takedown: Aaron Johnson Banks Seven Figures At WPT Prime Championship

By Craig Tapscott



Aaron Johnson started playing poker professionally in 2014, and very quickly made a name for himself on the mid-major tournament circuit and even had a couple of deep runs in the *World Series of Poker* main event.

Johnson broke through in 2018, cashing 11 times on the *Mid-States Poker Tour* including a win, two runner-up finishes, and a fourth-place showing. It was more than enough to crown him *MSPT* Player of the Year and place him in the tour's Hall of Fame.

If that wasn't enough, he also had quite the year on the *Heartland Poker Tour*, making three final tables with a win. As a result, he was also named *HPT* Player of the Year, holding both titles simultaneously.

Johnson has since added two more *MSPT* titles and a runner-up finish to cement his place in the tour's Hall of Fame, but he has also upped the stakes with some massive scores in the last two years. In 2024, the Minnesota pro finished second in the *WSOP Monster Stack* event, pocketing a whopping \$732,000 from his initial \$1,500 investment.

Most recently, Johnson outlasted a huge field of nearly 10,000 entrants in the \$1,100 *World Poker Tour Prime Championship* at Wynn Las Vegas for a career-high payday of \$1,010,400. *Card Player* caught up with him to discuss a couple key hands from his latest victory.

Event: 2025 WPT Prime Championship
Buy-In: \$1,100
Entrants: 9,876
Prize Pool: \$9,579,720
First-Place Prize: \$1,010,400

Craig Tapscott: About a decade ago you lost 90 pounds and have kept it off ever since. I learned that you credit the decision to get in shape for your poker success as well as your personal health.

Aaron Johnson: I think exercise and fitness translate directly to performing better on the felt. So many aspects are improved: brain power, focus, discipline, stamina, table presence, general confidence, posture, etc.

On days where my routine is dialed in, I will legitimately feel more zoned-in and fresh at hour 10 than I was at hour one. But it's common for other players to feel miserable as they count down the minutes until bagging.

CT: What were a few of the key takeaways for your game going forward after winning the *WPT Prime Championship*?

AJ: My goal is to continue to improve and refine my game. It's easy to become complacent after big wins, but complacency will destroy you in a game like poker. I played okay this tournament but still made too many mistakes. My

© WPT



plan is to get right back to running miles and working on my game.

I surprised myself by how effortlessly I was able to dissociate from the money on day three down to the final table. I got very fortunate to have a cooler set up in my favor the first level, and after that I was chip leader or near-chip leader for all of day three. My only objective was to apply constant pressure and accumulate chips for the final table.

Deep runs like this win and my runner-up finish in the *Monster Stack* provided invaluable experience and confidence for future tournament runs. I can't take these experiences for granted.

CT: It was a huge field with a lot of re-entries. What's your best advice to navigate the early levels in an event like that?

AJ: Adapt to the table. Every table is going to be different in a large event like this. Some tables you'll be able to get away with murder; others you'll need to walk on eggshells. Tailor your strategy accordingly.

Also, simply try harder, from the very first hand you're dealt. It boggles my mind how lackadaisical some players can be in the first few levels of the tournament. Are you there to play poker or doomscroll Tik-Tok?!

HAND NO. 1

Stacks: Aaron Johnson – 4,500,000 (56 BB)
 Stephen Song – 6,500,000 (81 BB)
Blinds: 40,000-80,000 with a 80,000 big blind ante
Players Remaining: 125

CT: When did this hand occur?

AJ: This was very late on day 2. We were only a few hands away from bagging for the night. I went into the last break of the night with just over 2,000,000 in chips but had built up to around 4,500,000 when this hand occurred.

I was on the button and Stephen Song was in the big blind with a covering stack. For the uninitiated, Stephen is one of the best US regs and one of the most capable players out there. He's also a previous winner of this event. (2022)

We had managed to not play any large pots versus each other for the few hours he had been there, but sometimes poker violence is unavoidable.

Johnson raised from the button to 160,000 holding K♥ J♥. Song reraised to 640,000 from the big blind, and Johnson called.

CT: What was the plan?

AJ: I think everything was fairly standard here. At somewhat shallower depths I think I can consider a four-bet all-in with K-J suited. It has great properties of purging his A-X bluffs and has good equity retention against value hands like pocket sevens through tens, or A-Q.

However, I think a call was preferred in that environment. We headed to a flop with 1,400,000 in the middle.

Flop: 9♥ 6♥ 4♣

Song bet 750,000, and Johnson called.

AJ: Clearly a great flop for my hand with two overs and a flush draw; but a so-so flop for my range. Stephen's range is stronger here with his obvious overpair advantage.

CT: I'm curious why you didn't move all in? Was that play on your mind at all?

AJ: It did cross my mind. I think there are good arguments for simply jamming. We would immediately get his bluffs to fold, and we would ensure our equity is fully realized. It is disastrous to just call and then face a turn jam unimproved.

I decided to go the call route and was prepared to turn my hand into a bluff on a later street if necessary.

Turn: J♦

Song bet 1,000,000, and Johnson called.

AJ: The turn was obviously wonderful. With top pair I



was able to call a triple barrel, and my hand needed essentially zero protection.

CT: Did you contemplate other options on this turn?

AJ: I think call is the only play. We want to keep in his bluffs and we're still behind (most of) his value. Unimproved river jams will be slightly uncomfortable, but we'll now be snapping off for our tournament.

River: 3♣

AJ: The river is a brick. Stephen takes a bit of time and ends up...

Song checks.

AJ: I took a moment and...

Johnson checked. Song revealed A♠ 2♠, and Johnson won the pot of 4,900,000.

AJ: It was an unsurprising high-pressure play from Stephen, and I do like his decision to give up on the river. I think my decision to check back river is somewhat mandatory. He's mostly going to have bluffs that have given up.

There was an outside chance of a better hand that's mixing in a check versus a range like that, and there is virtually no benefit in betting. I was content to show down and bring a top 10 stack into day 3.

HAND NO. 2

Stacks: Aaron Johnson – 207,000,000 (51 BB)
Fernando Martin Del Campo – 188,000,000 (47 BB)

Blinds: 2,000,000-4,000,000 with a 4,000,000 big blind ante

Players remaining: 2

Del Campo limped from the button. Johnson checked his option from the big blind holding A♠ 5♠.

CT: Why not raise in this spot?

AJ: Fernando is going to be limping a fairly balanced range here consisting of many different hand classes.

My hand often should three-bet for value, but I was fairly content with keeping pots small, especially out of position. I had begun heads-up play with a 2.5-1 or so chip disadvantage and had just taken the chip lead. I was fine staying the course.

Flop: 8♥ 8♦ 4♣

Both players checked.

AJ: My check is standard. His check back is also relatively standard, though I expected a fairly high bet frequency on this texture. Not too much to glean from the action so far.

Turn: 2♦

Johnson checked, and Del Campo bet 8,000,000.

CT: What do you make of this bet on the blank turn?

AJ: Things felt a little off. The turn was quite bricky and he was using a two-thirds bet size, trying to represent mod-

erate-heavy value.

Johnson called.

AJ: The decision to call was still very easy with ace high and a gutter. I was ahead of all bluffs and had additional equity if needed.

River: K♣

Johnson checked, and Del Campo bet 25,000,000.

AJ: When he bet close to pot size my immediate instinct was to snap it off. The king on the river is about as bricky as you can get.

CT: Please take us through your breakdown.

AJ: He shouldn't have many (if any) K-X that are betting that size on turn. He was somewhat polarized to 8-X plus and bluffs. When someone is repping that narrow heads-up, you often just need to make them prove it—especially if you have a reasonable bluff catcher.

I, however, did not make him prove it. After using several time extensions and considering the possibilities I ended up talking myself out of the call and sending my cards into the muck.

Fernando ended up having 10♣ 7♣ for a bluff.

CT: You can't win every pot, but your instincts were spot on. I don't know if that makes you feel any better about the fold though.

AJ: Somewhat. But one of the most frustrating aspects of poker is going against your intuition and being wrong. My intuition was truly screaming 'call!'

The river just felt like a bluff. The story he was telling wasn't totally adding up. However, the fear of calling and him rolling over a trickily played 8-X and regaining the clear chip lead led me to fold.

Find Johnson on Twitter/X @AyeGeeJay. ♠

Don't Slow Play Yourself, Build The Pot!

By Jonathan Little

Early in a \$500 buy-in tournament, everyone at the table had been playing tight and passive. No one was acting too crazy.

At blinds of 75-150, the action folded to our Hero in the lojack seat who raised to 375 out of his 9,000 stack with $K\heartsuit Q\spadesuit$. Only the cutoff and button called.

When you raise and do not get three-bet, it is usually safe to assume that you are not up against premium preflop hands, like $Q-Q$ and $A-K$. Instead, you are likely against marginal pairs, non-premium big cards, suited aces, and suited connectors.

The flop came down $Q\clubsuit 5\heartsuit 4\clubsuit$, giving Hero top pair with a backdoor flush draw. He bet 600 into the 1,350 pot.

When you bet for value, make a point to choose a size that can realistically get called by worse made hands. On this board, if Hero bets large, perhaps 1,200 or more, his opponents will usually only call with top pairs and strong draws.

Since his top pair is only in marginal shape against that strong range, a large bet is not ideal. If he bets smaller, as he did, many made hands that he crushes can call, such as 7-7 and 6-5, allowing him to extract value.

Both the cutoff and button called. The turn was the $10\heartsuit$, giving Hero a flush draw in addition to his top pair. He bet 1,000 into the 3,150 pot.

Again, Hero's bet is purely for value. By using a small size, numerous worse hands that are drawing thin can continue, and if Hero happens to be behind, he still has plenty of outs to improve on the river.

The cutoff raised to 3,000 and the button folded.



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At this point, the cutoff probably has a premium hand, perhaps two pair and better, plus a few premium draws such as $K\clubsuit J\clubsuit$.

Although Hero is likely beat at the moment, calling with a flush draw makes sense given the excellent pot odds and implied odds. Hero has to put in 2,000 more to win the 7,150 pot plus the 2,000 he would be putting in, meaning he needs to win at least $2,000/9,150 = 21\%$ of the time to justify calling.

Notice that in the worst-case scenario, when his opponent has a set, Hero will only win 18% of the time, making this call slightly unprofitable. If his opponent does not have a set, his call is immediately profitable.

Also notice that if his opponent happens to have a set, Hero will likely be able to win a sizable bet on the river if he improves to a flush, meaning he is risking 2,000 to win the 7,150 pot plus an additional 5,925 (the remaining stacks) on the river.

Hero called 2,000 more. The river was the $A\spadesuit$, completing his flush. He decided to lead all-in because he feared that his opponent would check behind with two-pair or three of a kind on this "obviously" scary river, but still call a bet because the obvious flopped flush draw missed.

Hero was pleased to see his opponent instantly call with a set of fours.

So, where did the cutoff go wrong?

He should have simply raised Hero's flop bet. When you flop a set on a draw-heavy board, you should usually try to build the pot. Instead, the cutoff elected to make a small raise on the turn, allowing Hero to profitably continue with all his draws. This time, his error cost him his tournament life. ♠



Jonathan Little is a WSOP bracelet winner, two-time WPT winner, and PokerGO Cup champion. The best-selling author of 15 educational poker books and 2019 GPI Poker Personality of the Year wants to help you increase your poker skills and learn to crush the games. Check out PokerCoaching.com/CardPlayer.

PUNT OF THE DAY: ROLLING THE DICE (RANDOMIZING) AWAY FROM AN AGGRESSIVE PLAY

By Sam Greenwood

Even the best players in the world make mistakes. Join Sam Greenwood as he breaks down and analyzes hands played from the circuit on his Punt Of The Day Substack.

Something I've alluded to in many posts, but haven't directly written about, is randomizing. It's something all poker players do intuitively, and many top players, myself included, do systematically.

The idea is that in no-limit hold'em, you will often have a hand that wants to play a mixed strategy. To make sure your game isn't too predictable or exploitable, you have a mechanism that gives you a random number that dictates your play.

For many players, a low number indicates a passive play and a high number indicates an aggressive play. Some players randomize using a system that includes every number from 0-100, but my system uses intervals of 5 from 0-100.

I won't tell you what my exact system is because I am always paranoid of someone discovering it. I don't want someone seeing I rolled a 100 and then calling me light. But it's not all that complicated, and I have a variety of different systems that can change depending on the tournament or my mood.

Some reading this might ask, 'why would I need to randomize when I'm playing Billy from Poughkeepsie?' (To steal a line from Will Jaffe.)

There are actually many spots versus weaker players where you do not need to systematically randomize. If a guy who has three-bet once all day looks really excited and three-bets you, you do not need to randomize four-bet bluffs with A-5 suited.

However, you also want to keep your overall game plan reasonable. If a weaker player raises the lojack, are you going to three-bet every suited ace 100% of the time from the hijack? If so, you need to recognize that the lojack and every player behind you might pick up on what is happening and play back at you.

Once you decide something like, "well sometimes I'll three-bet A-10 suited and sometimes I'll call it," using a randomizer as a tiebreaker for that individual decision has some merit. If you are playing versus expert players who are actively trying to exploit your tendencies, then randomizing becomes even more important. One's natural poker gravity will usually lead them towards certain plays. When playing against top pros, you need to self-correct to prevent picking the same sorts of plays too often or too rarely.

For example, if you pull the trigger on every 5% bluff combo on the river, each bluff technically is breaking even according to the solver, but your overall strategy is so out of whack that any observant player will start calling with any bluff-catcher and your bluffs will start losing a ton of EV.

I would not recommend every reader of this blog ran-



Mario Mosböck

domize in every hand, just as I would not recommend every reader of this column consider hero calling the river against every single opponent they ever play with. But randomizing is a powerful tool that can help you in tricky situations versus top competition, and learning to implement it in your game will have benefits.

Event: 2024 WSOP Paradise Triton Million \$500,000 No-Limit Hold'em

The Hand

It is level 1 of the tournament with blinds of 2,000-3,000 with a 3,000 big blind ante. I have 974,000, just below the starting stack.

Mario Mosböck, who started the hand with 1,004,000, raises to 8,000 from the lojack. I defend from the big blind with K♠ 8♠.

Flop: 9♠ 7♠ 6♣ (pot: 21,000)

I check, and Mario bets 14,000. I call.

Turn: K♥ (pot: 49,000)

I check. Mario bets 55,000, and I call.

River: 3♥ (pot: 159,000)

I check, and Mario bets 225,000. I decide to fold. The hand was played off stream, so I don't know what he had.

© Triton Poker

“A problem with randomizing is you often lose the forest for the trees.”

What Was I Thinking?

In my notes for this hand I also recorded my rolls. I rolled a 40 on the flop, a 5 on the turn, and a 20 on the river.

I did not write down my preflop roll, because I thought I had a pure call, but it turns out there are some low-frequency three-bets.

This tournament was an invitational that began with a split field of pro and VIPs. The pros played the pros, and the VIPs played the VIPs. At the end of day 1 the fields combined, so my overall gameplan involved playing less aggressively to make it more likely I made it to day 2. That being said, a pure call preflop seems fine.

I know that on the flop I thought I mixed raises, but I rolled a 40 and thought a 40 was right on the cusp of being a raise. I decided that since I was playing more passively in the invitational format that I should call. I also did not think Mario was supposed to play big bet on the flop very often with range, and I thought he was marginally more likely to be greedy with a top of range hand than setting up a huge bluff.

On the turn, I thought I had a hand that would occasionally raise and could get better one pair hands to fold, but I couldn't raise it on such a low roll. I was also con-

cerned that Mario's turn bet was not solver-approved and considered he might be being greedy. (It's a normal bias for people to find outlier sizes more often with the nuts than with bluffs.)

I felt I had an adequate bluff catcher on the river, but my low roll, combined with the situation discouraging aggressive play and my reads on the flop and the turn, pushed me into a fold.

What Did I Get Wrong?

I was wrong about Mario's flop bet size. He doesn't always continuation bet this flop, but when he does, two-thirds pot is an appropriate size with range.

Given I rolled a 40, I should have raised the flop. The only 8-X with a flush draw that would not raise on that roll are special combos like A-8 with the nut flush draw, a flopped straight with 10-8, and 8-6, which is an open-ender with bottom pair. However, calling the flop was fine if I want to decrease my aggression a little because it's an invitational, or because I think Mario is a little overweighted to value.

I was right about Mario's turn bet size, however. betting 120 percent is never used with range, and his most common size should be around two-thirds pot again. When he bets two-thirds pot again, K♠ 8♠ is a pure raise, which gets K-Q

TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2025 Super High Roller Bowl X
\$100,000 Buy-In No-Limit Hold'em



Nick Schulman
680,000 Chips

Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 84%
After Flop: 81%
After Turn: 91%



Andrew Lichtenberger
500,000 Chips

Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 15%
After Flop: 17%
After Turn: 9%



PREFLOP

With six players remaining and blinds of 10,000-20,000 with a big blind ante of 20,000, Nick Schulman raised to 45,000 from the cutoff. Andrew Lichtenberger three-bet to 135,000 from the small blind, and Schulman called.

FLOP



Lichtenberger moved all-in for 365,000, and Schulman called.

TURN



RIVER



COMMENTARY:

With six players left in the *Super High Roller Bowl X* and a \$200,000 min-cash available for fourth place, ICM considerations loomed big. Andrew Lichtenberger had the shortest stack with 25 big blinds, so he was under the least pressure. Nick Schulman was also in a position where he was more concerned about accumulating chips than outlasting anyone, since he had one of the three shortest stacks and wasn't going to be able to sit on his chips until the money. Lichtenberger had a good holding to three-bet bluff preflop, since K-8 would fold out some dominated hands held by both the opener and the big blind. Schulman decided to slow play the aces with position and shallow stacks. Aces are the best and only slow play when stacks get this shallow since they are not vulnerable to overcards arriving on the flop. Once the flop gave him a gutshot and overcards, Lichtenberger decided to just shove with a roughly pot-sized bet. This was a mistake. While some hands should indeed shove in this situation, the potential bluffs are more equity driven like K-6 and A-3, since they win more often when called. K-8 without a backdoor flush draw was too weak of a hand, so Lichtenberger exposed himself to possibly being all in and crushed, which was what happened. A smaller bet could have driven out some of the same hands that an all-in bet was targeting, such as suited Broadway combos without any flush potential. Lichtenberger paid the price for the misstep by busting in sixth.

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POKER STRATEGY

and K-J to fold, while also generating some A-K folds and occasionally getting called by hands I dominate like 8-8.

If I only give Mario one turn size, betting 112 percent, he still bets the turn frequently, almost half the time with range. I can raise 80% pot and now I get A-K and A-A to mostly fold, or I can pick a giant raise size like 150% pot and get sets and two pair to start mixing folds. In practice, I don't think I am ever getting kings up to fold, but I think if the smaller raise size would get stronger one-pair hands to fold while also getting called by draws I have dominated, I think that is what I should have done.

A problem with randomizing is you often lose the forest for the trees. It's possible if someone asked me what the best play on the turn is, I could have said raising as a merge, but once I rolled a low number I needed to be very confident to override my low roll.

On the river, I didn't consider leading with my hand or range, but it's frequently used, as I have a lot of strong top pair and some draws that are total air with no showdown. I can bet a hand like mine on the river and hope to get called by something like 10-9 while slowing down Mario's bluffs.

Given that I felt his sizing on the flop and turn had polarized him quite a bit, I don't think leading would make sense with my reads, because he probably has fewer combos of hands like 10-9 or 10-10 than he's supposed to.

Once I check, the smallest river size he uses is 140%, and he can bet as large as 565% all-in. All the K-8 hands are breaking even or losing a very small amount to call on the river. Having the K♠ is slightly bad because it does not block two pair, and that lowers the EV of calling by 1.5 big blinds, which sounds like a lot, but is not that much when your

opponent is betting 75 big blinds into a 53 big blind pot.

Given my general reads about his flop and turn betting strategy and that my hand is a pure fold on the river in the sim I ran, I am happy with my fold.

Types Of Errors I Made

Failure To Merge

Grade

In today's punt I considered merging, but ultimately chickened out. Was this a reasonable pivot because Mario's range was too strong?

Given how he played the rest of the day, I don't think so. I still think this was a reasonable deviation in an invitational, even if it was a single re-entry tournament. And while Mario ran some big low-frequency bluffs throughout the day, this turn check-raise really only works if he's consistently playing top pair like this.

If he's overplaying two pair and sets on the turn, just calling is probably the right deviation. I don't think I made a clear mistake in this hand, but I feel I let randomizing cloud my thought process throughout, so I will give myself a B-. ♠



Sam Greenwood is one of the winningest tournament poker players ever and is third on Canada's all-time money list, having cashed for \$42 million and counting in high roller events all over the world. The former stock trader-turned-champion has played millions of poker hands and is breaking

them down street by street on his Punt Of The Day Substack. You can reach out to the Run It Once coach on Twitter/X for private coaching @SamGreenwoodRIO.

Hi, my name is Sam Greenwood.

I've played millions of hands of poker and cashed for millions of dollars in tournaments, but I've also made millions of mistakes along the way.

Every day on my Substack I am going to revisit the blunders I've made, walk you through what I was thinking in the hand, and explain why I was unable to execute to the best of my abilities. My hope is that you'll gain some insights from my punts and we can all learn something together.

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Spice Up Your Home Game: Capped Big Bet Variants

By Kevin Haney

Most mixed-game players prefer limit poker due to the faster pace of play and more congenial atmosphere as decisions are less complicated and one bad cooler hand won't wreck your entire evening. Many also enjoy buying in for a large amount and building huge chip castles when having a good session.

Sometimes a regular home game is comprised of those who also enjoy big bet games. Or to expand your player pool, it may be beneficial to entice some potential fun players by adding some to the rotation. Common ground can often be found by adding a few no-limit or pot-limit variants, while instituting a cap on the amount that could be lost on any one hand.

Five-card pot-limit Omaha eight-or-better (i.e. **Big O**) is a very popular form of poker with big-bet enthusiasts. It's also a game that is usually acceptable to the limit crowd. The cap is often 10 times the limit big bet, so if you are



playing \$20-\$40 stakes in the limit games it would be \$400. Posted blinds are usually half what they would be for the limit games, so in this case they would be \$5-\$10 instead of \$10-\$20.

Some might object to that ratio, stating that they don't often lose \$400 in a limit hand. This is certainly true, and

TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2025 Super High Roller Bowl X
\$100,000 Buy-In No-Limit Hold'em



Joao Simao
1,940,000 Chips



Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 41%
After Flop: 28%
After Turn: 9%



Jason Koon
4,960,000 Chips



Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 58%
After Flop: 72%
After Turn: 91%

PREFLOP

With two players remaining and blinds of 20,000-40,000 with a big blind ante of 40,000, Joao Simao raised to 100,000. Koon three-bet to 400,000, and Simao called.



Both players checked.



Koon bet
375,000, and
Simao called.



Koon bet
400,000, and
Simao called.

COMMENTARY:

Joao Simao and Jason Koon were the last two left in the *Super High Roller Bowl X*, playing for a \$460,000 difference between first and second place. Simao had an easy open, Koon had an easy three-bet. Simao had a clear call, as $K\spadesuit 10\spadesuit$ has too much playability in position to be turned into a bluff. Koon whiffed the flop but did have a relevant blocker in the $A\heartsuit$. He could have bet small for value, but checking was a fine option as well. Simao had a similar decision. Overcards with backdoor spades could have started to bluff, targeting hands like Koon's for an eventual fold. When the nine paired and completed the possible flush draws, Koon bet with a medium size, and Simao made a non-standard call. While king high has some showdown value, the solver prefers a fold in this situation. Many of Koon's bluffs, especially those combos with one heart in them, would have bet the flop. Furthermore, Simao didn't have enough equity against Koon's value holdings to peel with king high. He could only justify the play if he thought he'd win a showdown reasonably often or get a river bluff through. When the river didn't change much besides devaluing flushes, Simao may have expected a more polar betting strategy from Koon, one revolving around full houses and bluffs. In reality, Koon went for a very thin value-bet, one that was actually solver-approved, since Simao was supposed to call with many weaker ace-high hands. He called even wider than that and wound up paying off in a huge pot.

NOTE: WINNING PERCENTAGES DO NOT INCLUDE TIES. ODDS PROVIDED BY CARDPLAYER.COM/POKER-TOOLS/ODDS-CALCULATOR/TEXAS-HOLDEM

POKER STRATEGY

there are a few options if this poses a problem for your group. The cap could be set to a lower amount such as \$300, or the blinds can be lowered (e.g. \$5-\$5), or a combination of both. Where allowable and agreed upon, running big pots twice can also smooth variance.

Pot-Limit Omaha Double Board Bomb Pot is a game that is now the rage in many cardrooms, often being played after a dealer change even in no-limit hold'em games. In bomb pots there is a rotating button, but no posting of blinds or preflop action. Everyone instead antes and play commences after the dealer spreads two flops. The final pot is split between the winners of the two boards or all to one lucky individual if they scoop. With a \$400 cap the ante can range from \$2-\$5, depending how deep or shallow everyone wants to play.

The main benefit of bomb pots is that they drag every player to the two flops and automatically insert them into potentially tricky situations. This can result in sizeable sums changing hands which may liven up the entire mix.

Another option is **Pot-Limit Ultimate Bomb Pot**, sometimes also referred to as "Best Best." This is a split-pot game where the holder of the superior high chops with the best low over both boards. One potential drawback is that what wins can be slightly confusing, and novices can get burned quickly. Consider the following hand where player 2 scoops.

Player 1: A♠ 2♠ K♦ Q♥ J♦

Player 2: 5♣ 6♥ 7♠ 9♣ Q♣

Top Board: 6♠ 7♥ 10♠ J♠ 8♦

Bottom Board: 4♣ 6♣ 9♥ K♣ A♣

Player 2's Flush: A♣ K♣ Q♣ 9♣ 6♣ > Player 1's Flush: A♠ J♠ 10♠ 6♠ 2♠

Player 2's Low A-4-5-6-7 > Player 1's Low: A-2-6-7-8

Player 1 might end up with an unpleasant surprise, the A-2 combination won't always make the nut low as there are two boards in which it can get counterfeited. And in a similar way an ace-high flush can also lose when a player with a lower flush overtakes it with a key river card. In this scenario Player 2 holds the nut high and can bet and raise with impunity.

Mixed-game players are often open to playing **No-Limit Deuce-to-Seven Single Draw** as it can be exciting and not a game frequently spread. However, there are only two streets of betting, so that must be considered when determining both the cap and posting of blinds. There's also the matter of whether to employ a common rule for cash games that outlaws limping, forcing players to come in for a raise.

It's also in the spirit of the game to allow the ability to make very large river bets. Suppose you are playing with \$5-\$10 blinds and a \$400 cap. There's a raise to \$30, the small blind calls, and the big blind three-bets to \$120. If both players call the pot will be \$360 but there's only \$280 left in the cap to bet after the draw.

While that's a hefty wager, it's not the size of the pot and ideally it should be played a little deeper. One option is to structure the game with \$5-\$5 blinds and a mandatory open of at least \$20. This would ensure that the average pot is of a decent size but leaves the door open for aggressive leveraged play after the draw.

If your home game is in the mood for something entirely different you can try **Captain**, a unique variant of deuce-to-seven drama. If the stakes are \$20-\$40 it could be structured with blinds of \$10 and \$20. The button (the captain)

TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2025 Super High Roller Bowl X
\$100,000 Buy-In No-Limit Hold'em



Jason Koon
2,710,000 Chips



Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 65%
After Flop: 45%
After Turn: 14%



Joao Simao
4,190,000 Chips



Winning Percentage
Before Flop: 27%
After Flop: 16%
After Turn: 7%

PREFLOP

With two players remaining and blinds of 25,000-50,000 with a big blind ante of 50,000, Jason Koon limped in from the button. Joao Simao raised to 250,000 from the big blind, and Koon called.

FLOP



Simao bet 135,000, and Koon called.

TURN



Both players checked.

RIVER



Simao checked, and Koon bet 450,000. Simao check-raised all-in. Koon called all-in for 2,325,000 total.

COMMENTARY:

Jason Koon was playing a heads-up strategy that included button limps at the *Super High Roller Bowl X*, and such strategies generally mix in almost every type of hand, including Broadway combos. Joao Simao had a mandatory raise with an above-average hand that could get called by many worse holdings. His flop continuation-bet was good, and queen high was far too good to fold from Koon's position since it could still be the best hand. On the turn, both players had holdings that were almost dead against kings up or trips, but were beating everything else. Checking to the river to avoid bloating the pot made sense. Then, a relatively tame hand got crazy. Simao checked with a hand the solver mixes but prefers betting. He could have gotten value from small pocket pairs, hands that paired the jack, and possibly even ace-high hands. Koon had an obvious value-bet, and he was quite perturbed when Simao check-raised all in. Koon said right away he was leaning toward a call, and his hand made sense for it. It blocked only value hands, including J-J, and didn't block bluffs in theory, since Simao shouldn't have been bluffing with hands as good as Q-X or J-X. Furthermore, Simao hadn't really played his hand like he had a big one, since kings up or better should have most likely bet the turn and/or the river. Koon called off with a hand that he wasn't loving and was rewarded by doubling back into the lead. As for Simao's bluff, it was too wide, as mentioned, since he had one of the better hands he'd reach the river with in this line. However, it didn't wind up costing him, as he ultimately won the back-and-forth heads-up match after several more hours of play for \$1.1 million.

NOTE: WINNING PERCENTAGES DO NOT INCLUDE TIES. ODDS PROVIDED BY CARDPLAYER.COM/POKER-TOOLS/ODDS-CALCULATOR/TEXAS-HOLDEM

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puts in \$100. All players are dealt five cards except for the captain, who receives six.

Starting with the under-the-gun player, everyone decides whether they want to match the \$100 or fold. That’s the only money to be wagered for the remainder of the hand.

The dealer puts down a flop and any player contesting the pot has one option to draw to improve their deuce-to-seven low and Omaha holdings. However, the captain must discard at least one as they need to finish the hand with five cards. The turn and river are then dealt, and the pot is chopped between the best low, and Omaha high holding.

The main challenge is taking on the captain whose sixth card strengthens their range considerably even though they will only end up with five. If you crunch the numbers, you will probably find that the captain is around three times

more likely to be dealt a good low or a premium draw. Then when entering from early position, you also must worry about the other players as well.

This can be played with all dramaha variants, and others have given funny names for them such as Lieutenant for dramaha high or General for dramaha low dugi. Spice up your home game and think of something clever. ♠



Kevin Haney is a former actuary but left the corporate job to focus on his passions for poker and fitness. The certified personal trainer owned a gym in New Jersey, but has since moved to Las Vegas. He started playing the game back in 2003, and particularly enjoys taking new players interested in mixed games under his wing and quickly making them proficient in all variants. Learn more or just say hello with an email to haneyk612@gmail.com.

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SCHEDULES

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JANUARY	Jan. 7-March 1	L.A. Poker Classic	Commerce Casino ■ Commerce, CA
	Jan. 19-Feb. 8	DeepStack Showdown	Venetian Hotel & Casino ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Jan. 29-Feb. 9	WSOP Circuit Florida	Harrah's ■ Pompano Beach, FL
FEBRUARY	Feb. 3-10	PGT Mixed Games Series	Aria PokerGO Studio ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Feb. 5-16	Blizzard on the Beach	bestbet ■ Jacksonville, FL
	Feb. 8	Big Game Bounty Tournament	Ocean's Eleven Casino ■ Oceanside, CA
	Feb. 9-24	WPT Las Vegas Spring Festival	Venetian Hotel & Casino ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Feb. 10-16	Ohio Poker State Championship	Jack Casino ■ Cleveland, OH
	Feb. 11-23	Potomac Winter Poker Open	MGM National Harbor ■ Oxon Hill, MD
	Feb. 12-14	Mixed Games Super High Roller Bowl	Aria PokerGO Studio ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Feb. 12-23	WSOP Circuit North Carolina	Harrah's ■ Cherokee, NC
	Feb. 16-March 22	Wynn Millions	Wynn ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Feb. 17-22	MSPT Club Poker Championship	Potawatomi Hotel & Casino ■ Milwaukee, WI
	Feb. 18-March 1	European Poker Tour	Palais des Congres de Paris ■ Paris, France
	Feb. 19-March 2	WSOP Circuit Baltimore	Horseshoe Casino ■ Baltimore, MD
	Feb. 26-March 9	WSOP Circuit Indiana	Horseshoe Casino ■ Hammond, IN
MARCH	March 5-16	WSOP Circuit Oklahoma	Hard Rock Hotel & Casino ■ Catoosa, OK
	March 11-15	MSPT Festival Larchwood	Grand Falls Casino ■ Larchwood, IA
	March 12-23	WSOP Circuit New York	Turning Stone Casino & Resort ■ Verona, NY
	March 16-April 1	WPT Rolling Thunder	Thunder Valley Resort & Casino ■ Lincoln, CA
	March 17-22	MSPT Festival Riverside	Riverside Casino & Resort ■ Riverside, IA
	March 19-30	WSOP Circuit Las Vegas	Horseshoe Hotel & Casino ■ Las Vegas, NV
	March 24-29	Missouri Poker State Championship	Ameristar Casino Resort & Spa ■ St. Charles, MO
	March 26-April 6	Irish Open	Royal Dublin Society ■ Ballsbridge, Ireland
	March 31-April 12	World Series of Poker Europe	Hilton Hotel ■ Prague, Czech Republic
APRIL	April 2-12	Spring Poker Round Up	Wildhorse Resort & Casino ■ Pendleton, OR
	April 2-13	WSOP Circuit Illinois	Grand Victoria Casino ■ Elgin, IL
	April 7-19	7 Clans Poker Cup Series	Coushatta Casino & Resort ■ Kinder, LA
	April 7-19	Minnesota Poker State Championship	Running Aces Card Room ■ Columbus, MN
	April 8-28	WPT Seminole Hard Rock Poker Showdown	Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino ■ Hollywood, FL

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Action Card - A card that causes an increase in betting.

Air - A bad hand with little to no value.

Angle (Shooting) - An unethical play used to gain information or an advantage.

Backdoor - A draw needing two streets to complete.

Balance - Playing different hands in the same way so opponents can't read you.

Bankroll - The amount of money you have to play poker with.

Barrel - A continuation bet followed by a bet on the turn and/or river.

Blocker - Holding one of your opponent's outs.

Bluff Catcher - A weak hand that can only beat a bluff.

Bounty - A prize earned for a knockout in a tournament.

Brick - A blank card that is unlikely to have helped.

Broadway - A straight to the ace.

Bubble - The time period right before a tournament reaches the money.

Burn - A card that is removed by the dealer to prevent cheating.

Calling Station - A loose, passive player who rarely folds.

Chip Race - Coloring up the smallest chips in circulation during a tournament.

Chop - A split of the pot.

Coin Flip - A situation where the odds for each player are roughly 50/50.

Collusion - Working with another player to cheat.

Continuation Bet - When the preflop aggressor makes another bet on the flop.

Crying Call - A call from a player who does not believe his hand is best.

Dead Money - A player with no chance of winning. Also, extra money in the pot.

Donk Bet - An early position bet by a player who was not the aggressor in the previous betting round.

Drawing Dead - When your hand can no longer win.

Drawing Live - When your hand is behind but can still draw out.

Effective Stack - The smallest stack among two players in a heads-up pot.

Eight-Or-Better - A qualifier common in high-low split games.

Equity - The mathematical expected value of your hand.

Expected Value - The weighted average of what you should profit in the long run.

Family Pot - When every player at the table sees the flop or fourth street.

Felted - To lose all your chips, such that there are none left on the felt.

Float - To call with a weak hand with the intention of bluffing later.

Freeroll - A tournament with no buy-in, or a tournament stake with no makeup.

GTO - Game Theory Optimal play aiming for an unexploitable strategy.

Gutshot - An inside straight draw.

Hero Call - Calling with a relatively weak hand when you suspect a bluff.

Hollywood - Exaggerating and overacting to sell strength or weakness.

Horse - A player financially backed by someone else.

ICM - The Independent Chip Model assigns monetary value to tournament chips.

Implied Odds - The additional chips you expect to win if your draw improves.

Juice - Rake, or the fee collected by the house or casino.

Kill - A button that temporarily increases the stakes of the game.

LAG - A loose, aggressive player.

Limp - To enter a pot by calling the minimum bet rather than raise.

Muck - To fold.

Nit - A rock, who rarely takes risks or gives action, and only plays premium cards.

Nuts - The best possible hand on a given board.

Open - To bet first.

Orbit - A full rotation of the blinds at the table.

Overbet - To make a bet that is more than the current size of the pot.

Overcall - To call a bet after others have already called.

Paint - A face card jack, queen, or king.

Pat - A hand that no longer needs any more draws.

Polarized - When a player's range is split between either very strong hands or air.

Quarter - To win 1/4 or 3/4 of a pot by tying a hand in a high-low split game.

Rabbit Hunt - To look at future cards after folding and the hand is complete.

Railbird - Someone who hangs out on the sidelines of a poker room.

Rainbow - Three or four cards of different suits.

Range - The possible starting hands a player might have given their action.

Ratholing - Going south or sneaking your chips off the table during the game.

Scoop - To win both halves of the pot in a high-low split game.

Semi-Bluff - To bluff with a drawing hand that could improve to the best hand.

Slowroll - To delay or avoid showing when you have the best hand.

Snow - Holding on to bad cards in draw poker in order to bluff.

Straddle - A voluntary bet placed before the deal to increase pot size and incentivize action.

TAG - A tight, aggressive player.

Tell - A detectable change in a player's behavior that gives away the strength of their hand.

Tilt - Frustration or anger that leads to poor play.

Variance - The statistical measure of how results differ from expectation.

VPIP - The percentage of hands voluntarily played preflop.

Wet Board - A dynamic board with many several possible draws.

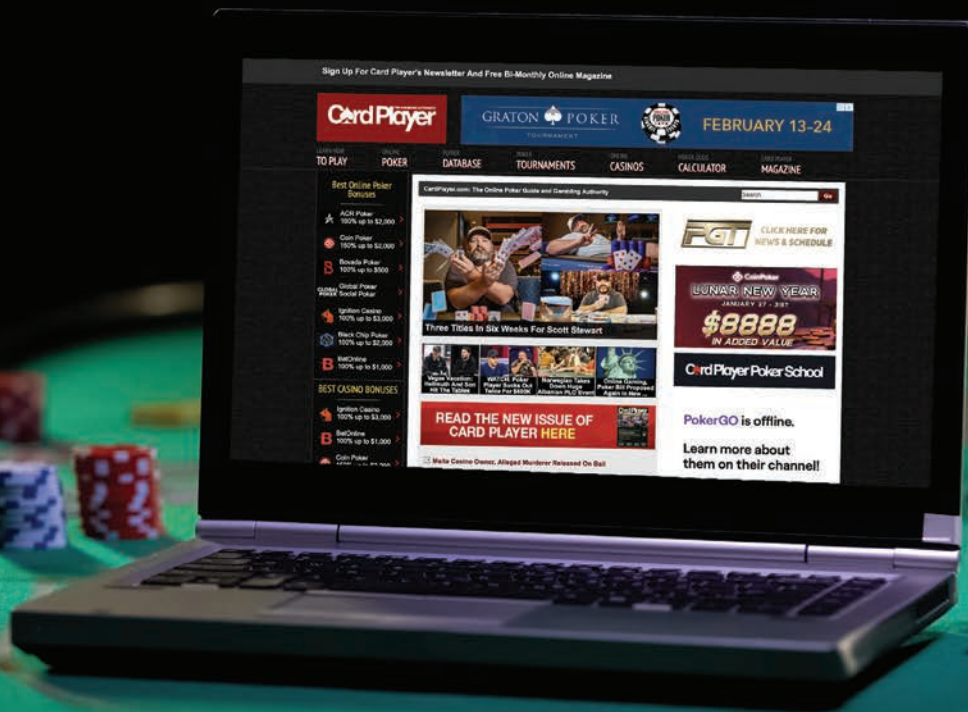
Wheel - A five-high straight.



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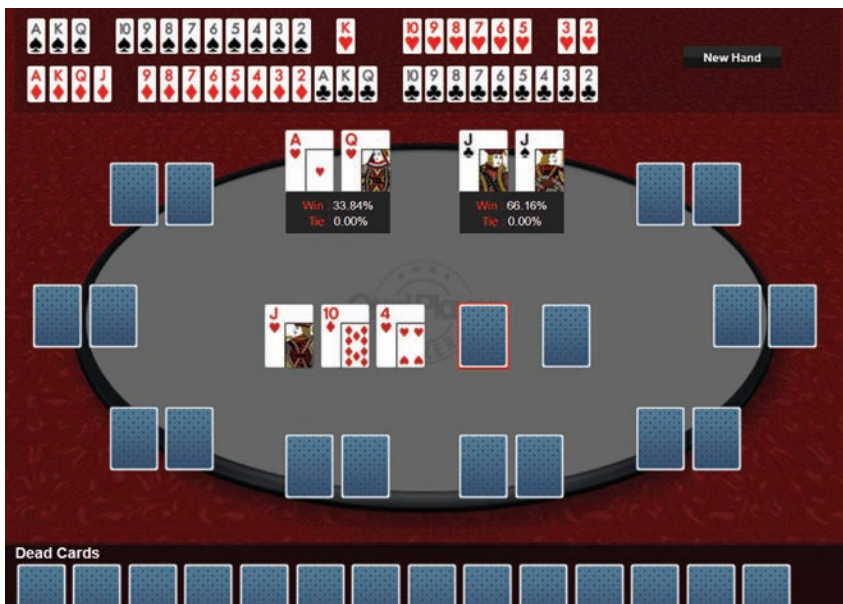
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CALCULATING ODDS

Outs	Situation	After The Flop	After The Turn
21	Straight And Flush Draw, With Two Overcards	70%	45%
20		68%	43%
19		65%	41%
18	Straight And Flush Draw, With One Overcard	62%	39%
17		60%	37%
16		57%	35%
15	Straight And Flush Draw	54%	33%
14		51%	30%
13		48%	28%
12	Flush Draw With One Overcard, Or With Gutshot	45%	26%
11	Straight Draw With One Overcard	42%	24%
10		38%	22%
9	Flush Draw	35%	20%
8	Straight Draw	32%	17%
7		28%	15%
6	Two Overcards	24%	13%
5		20%	11%
4	Gutshot Straight Draw	17%	9%
3	Need To Pair Kicker	13%	7%
2	Pocket Pair Needs To Make A Set	8%	4%
1	Set Needs To Make Quads	4%	2%

HAND MATCHUPS

Situation	Example	Odds	Percent
Higher Pair vs. Lower Pair	J♠ J♣ vs. 7♥ 7♦	4.09-1	80.3% vs. 19.7%
Pair vs. Two Over Cards	7♠ 7♣ vs. A♥ J♦	1.23-1	55.1% vs. 44.9%
Pair vs. Two Under Cards	Q♠ Q♣ vs. 9♥ 7♦	4.77-1	82.7% vs. 17.3%
Pair vs. One Overcard	J♠ J♣ vs. A♥ 7♦	2.50-1	71.4% vs. 28.6%
Two Higher Cards vs. Two Lower Cards	Q♠ J♣ vs. 6♥ 5♦	1.70-1	62.9% vs. 37.1%

*Approximate Percentages

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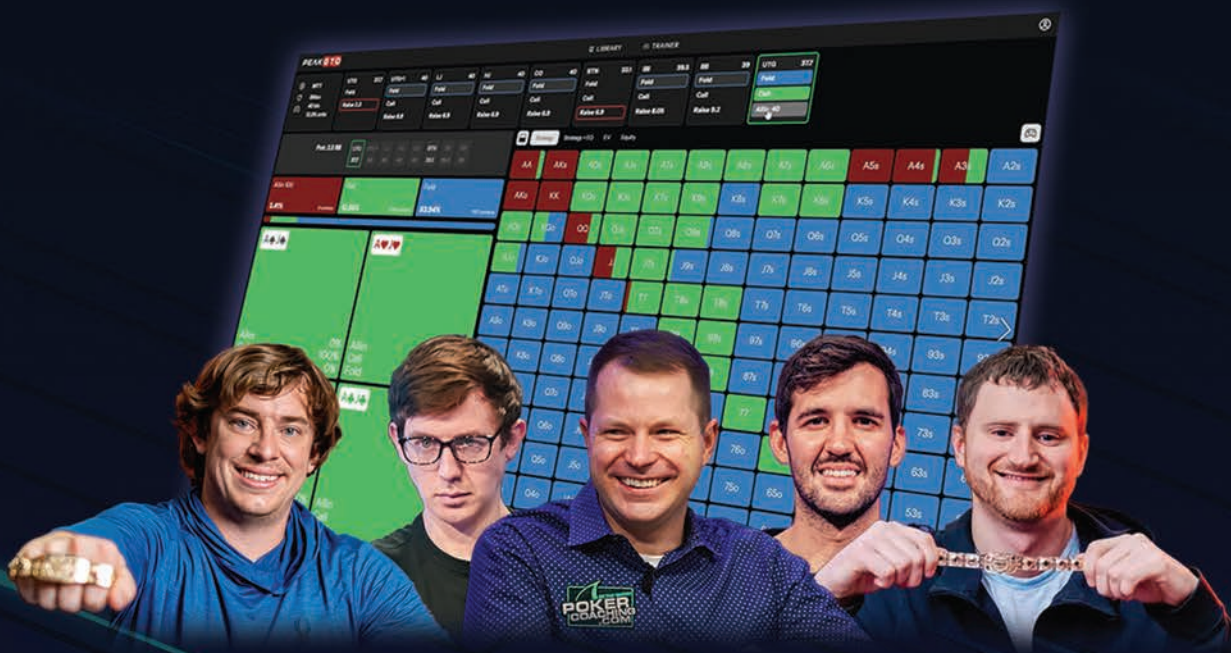
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TOP SET ON A DYNAMIC BOARD

By Jonathan Little

Join more than 150,000 players worldwide who have taken their game to the next level. To develop your poker skills and learn how to crush games, check out PokerCoaching.com/CardPlayer.



You are eight-handed in a \$1,000 buy-in live tournament, with 124,000 at blinds of 500-1,000. The lojack, a somewhat tight, straightforward player, raises to 2,500 and the button calls. The small blind folds. You are in the big blind with 10♣ 10♠.

Question 1: Should you fold, call, reraise to 8,000, or reraise to 12,000?

Answer: Three-betting to 12,000 would be the best play if the lojack was a normal or loose player, but since they are tight, you should likely tighten up a bit yourself and just call. If you were to face a four-bet, you would have to either fold or put in a lot of chips from out of position with a hand that could easily be crushed.

Instead, simply call and see what the flop brings.

You call and the flop comes 10♥ 5♠ 4♠. You all check, and the turn is the 3♣.

Question 2: Should you check, bet 3,000, bet 7,000, or bet 14,000?

Answer: When the flop checks through, it is safe to assume both your opponents do not love their hands. So, in order to ensure you get money in the pot, you need to bet.

While it may be tempting to bet gigantic to force as much into the pot as possible, since your opponents' ranges are both marginal, you should bet smaller. In this case, bet 7,000 in order to get calls from weak pairs and ace-highs.

You bet 7,000 and only the lojack calls. The river is the 2♦.

Question 3: Should you check, bet 7,000, bet 21,000, or bet 42,000?

Answer: Check. Any deuce is a terrible river for you because much of your opponent's calling range contains an ace. So, you have two viable options: checking and betting small.

If you check and your opponent bets, you will be in a tough spot because most straightforward players will not value bet many worse hands than yours. That said, if you fold a set, you are folding one of the best hands in your range. That would not be a good play against someone who is inclined to bluff, but it is best against a tight, straightforward player.

If you bet small, you could somewhat reasonably get called by a worse hand while being able to easily fold if you get raised. As you expect your opponent to call a small river bet with lots of worse hands, that becomes the preferred play.

You bet 7,000 and your opponent calls. You show your set and win the pot. ♠



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Overbetting In Deep Stacked Cash Games
WSOP Circuit Win Review with Jonathan Little
How to Study and 'Memorize' Preflop Ranges
Analysis of Live Tournament Hands
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How to Make The Most of a Small Bankroll
GGPoker SuperMillion\$ 1st Place Review
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Strategies For Beating Small Stakes Tournaments
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FREE COURSES

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The 25 Biggest Leaks and How to Fix Them
5 Day Preflop Challenge

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