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14



20



28



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**Features**

**14**

Doug Polk's Second Act:  
From Retirement To One Of The Game's  
Loudest Voices  
By Tim Fiorvanti

**20**

Joey Chestnut: Hot Dog Champ Talks  
Poker, Las Vegas, And Competitive Eating  
By Sean Chaffin

**News**

**10**

News From The Gambling World  
By Card Player News Team

**Tournaments**

**24**

PokerGO Tour Kicks Off 2026  
Season In Las Vegas  
By Erik Fast

**28**

Sam Soverel Wins Reborn National  
Heads-Up Poker Championship  
By Tim Fiorvanti

**32**

Giuseppe Iadisernia Crushes Lucky  
Hearts Poker Open  
By Erik Fast

**36**

Poker Leaderboard:  
Belgium All-Time Money List  
By Erik Fast

**38**

Circuit Update  
By Card Player News Team

**42**

Circuit Results  
By Card Player News Team

**Strategy**

**48**

Final Table Takedown: Lily Lotfy  
Captures WPT Ladies Championship  
By Craig Tapscott

**51**

How Cautious Should You Be With A-K?  
By Jonathan Little

**52**

Punt Of The Day:  
Bluffing Trueteller In The Biggest  
Online Tournament Of All Time  
By Sam Greenwood

**54**

Taking Away The Right Lesson  
From The Wrong Decision  
By Mark Mazmanian

**Commentary**

**56**

Man vs. Machine: The GTO Arms Race  
By Luke Geel

**Also In This Issue**

**8**

About Us

**58**

Tournament Schedules

**59**

Poker Glossary

**60**

Poker Odds

**62**

PokerCoaching.com Quiz:  
Improving On The Turn  
By Jonathan Little

**Poker Hand Matchups**

**38**

Martins Adeniya vs. Elio Saade

**39**

Thomas Boivin vs. Ted McNamara

**40**

Thomas Boivin vs. Ted McNamara

**55**

Thomas Boivin vs. Giuseppe Iadisernia

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# WHY PHIL HELLMUTH'S NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION COULD COST HIM \$1.5 MILLION

WSOP GOAT Sets Out To Prove Himself On The Cash-Game Circuit

By Michael Kaplan

Phil Hellmuth makes New Year's resolutions like anyone else, except that — unlike the rest of us — he's willing to bet seven figures on keeping them.

While ordinary people vow to cut down on drinking, or resolve to exercise more often, Hellmuth is risking \$1.5 million to shut up the haters — specifically those who have criticized his cash-game skills.

Hellmuth's reputation as a tournament player is beyond question. After all, he has managed to rack up a record 17 *World Series of Poker* bracelets.

But his cash-game skills are another story. For the better part of the last decade, numerous high-stakes pros have taken shots at his game. They say he plays too passively, sometimes calling him an outright nit. A couple years ago, he was needled so much for playing tight that he rage quit a cash game in the middle of a PokerGO broadcast.

"Phil is the greatest tournament player of all time, but he hasn't done it in high-stakes cash games," Daniel Negreanu wrote back in 2021.

"Phil is a tournament guy, cash games are different," Tom Dwan once diplomatically said.

"Phil doesn't play tough cash games," Doug Polk told his nearly 500,000 YouTube subscribers.

It's a negative reputation Hellmuth says is way overblown.

"I have this reputation for not doing well in cash games, but this is stuff that happened pre-2012," Hellmuth explained.

"Let's be honest. I've made at least \$10 million playing in cash games. I beat all cash games everywhere I go. I play in a regular game where I've won a lot of money. I play in the mixed games where I've won a lot of money. I play in the televised games where I've won a lot of money. But there are some who still think that I am horrible with cash."

Hellmuth does play in a regular home game in Silicon Valley full of tech CEOs such as Chamath Palihapitaya and David Sacks. He even gave poker lessons to NBA stars including David Lee and Draymond Green.

The games have allowed him to make connections in the business and entertainment world, where he has done very well for himself. Not too long ago, he told *Card Player* that he had billionaire aspirations.

"I sold some companies for \$10 million in 2017. [Back then] I told myself I was going to take a million and make it my [cash game] bankroll," Hellmuth told *Card Player*. "And for whatever reason, I just decided not to. But this time around, I'm sure I'm going to do it. I'm going to take \$1.5 million and just make that my bankroll. I am going to buy in for \$1 million, of my own money, a bunch of times in 2026."

He's bankrolling his most recent endeavor, at least in part, with the cash he earned from the recent sale of Prize Picks, a single-player daily fantasy sports site. In December, he told me that he had a piece of the \$4.1 billion payout.

In early February, a giddy Hellmuth shared the news in a video announcement on Twitter/X.

The 61-year-old has made headlines in the last year for stating that the *WSOP* had too many bracelet events, and that



the main event structure was too long. Perhaps his move to cash games is in response to tournament fatigue, but there's no doubting his desire to rewrite the narrative.

Even before setting off on this very intentional quest, the Poker Hall of Famer was hellbent on proving the naysayers wrong. He originally aimed to do it through the *High Stakes Duel* matches that aired a couple years ago on PokerGO.

As TV cameras rolled, Hellmuth squared off with Antonio Esfandiari and Negreanu in heads-up cash matches. He went into the matches with something to prove and did so in convincing style, sweeping the series against both opponents. (He also beat sports commentator Nick Wright, Scott Seiver, and split two matches against Dwan.)

With Negreanu, however, the beef was personal.

"Negreanu disrespected my play," Hellmuth told me when I interviewed him in 2022. "He said I am a lifetime loser in high rollers. I called him and said, 'I am up \$1.8 million.' What is he talking about? Then I had to look like an asshole and tell everyone how great I am. I looked cocky, but I had to defend my legacy."

This year, Hellmuth plans on proving himself through action rather than words. He believes that the \$1.5 million will carry him through a lot of big-money games and the inevitable swings that come with them.

"If the blinds are \$500-\$1,000, that's a thousand big blinds," said Hellmuth, referring to his anticipated seven-figure buy-ins. "I've lost a thousand big blinds before in a session, but it's rare."

Hellmuth figures that his conservative style will keep him from needing to re-dip.

"A million the way I play poker is a lot more than a million the way other people play poker."

For better or worse, he will also have no trouble finding games in which to splash around his dough.

"If this sounds egotistical, I apologize," said Hellmuth. "But, for whatever reason, it seems like everybody on the planet wants to play poker with me." ♠

## VEGAS CASINOS TAKING STEPS TO CUT COSTS, BOOST TOURISM

By Sean Chaffin

After Las Vegas experienced a slowdown in visitors in 2025, casinos are looking to cut costs and attract gamblers to head to Sin City.

The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority reported that the city welcomed 38.5 million tourists in 2025, down 7.5% overall from 41.7 million in 2024. As a result, efforts to save money and improve efficiency have taken many different forms.

MGM Resorts announced that all the company's Las Vegas properties would use solar power to operate during daytime hours. The company began accessing solar in December and hopes to eventually expand that to include all the companies' properties across the country.

"The new Escape Solar and Storage Project reflects our focus on scalable, impactful clean-energy solutions," MGM CEO and President Bill Hornbuckle told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. "It also demonstrates that our industry can operate more sustainably while delivering long-term cost stability, strengthening our business and supporting a more resilient energy future."

The cost-cutting effort comes after the company laid off 800 mid-level managers in September. That followed pink-slipping some concierge staff last spring.

At the start of the year, Morgan Stanley downgraded MGM stock over growing concerns about the company's financial picture. Additionally, MGM's stock price has struggled. It's down from both the COVID-19 rebound peak and from headier times in 2007-08.

Another potential problem for MGM could be the com-



pany's "asset-light strategy" approach. This involves selling the valuable real estate the casinos sit on and only being involved in the gambling operations.

The company sold the real estate for the Bellagio in 2019 and did the same at Mandalay Bay and MGM Grand in 2020.

Since tourism is declining, Derek Stevens is doing his best to attract visitors from the Great White North. The owner of the downtown Vegas properties The D, Golden Gate, and Circa released a video encouraging more Canadians to visit.

Stevens is offering a 'Vegas at Par' promotion for up to \$500. The offer allows for the exchange of Canadian dollars at even money for U.S. dollars, despite the current exchange rate putting the Canadian dollar at 74 cents for each U.S. dollar.

The deal is part of an effort to attract Canadian travelers to return to Las Vegas. Canadian visitors dropped by a whopping 20% in 2025, a number that's expected to fall further in 2026 because of pre-booked trips early in 2025. ♠

## PLANET HOLLYWOOD CLOSES POKER ROOM AGAIN

By Steve Schult

Planet Hollywood officially closed its poker room on Jan. 31, less than 10 months after its grand reopening.

The casino was a poker staple on the strip, running a successful, but small room from the poker boom through the pandemic. But in the aftermath, the Caesars-owned property shuttered the room in 2021.

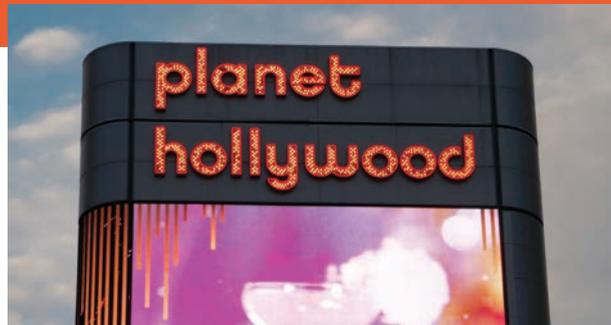
The room stayed closed until last spring. In May 2025, Planet Hollywood reopened the room in a different location. The previous room was in the center of the casino floor, in the middle of all the other table games. But the second iteration of Planet Hollywood's poker room was upstairs in the mezzanine section.

With 23 tables, the new room housed more than double the number of tables the original room had. However, the added space didn't translate to more games.

The property could only sustain a handful of \$1-\$3 no-limit hold'em games, and towards the end of its run was even spreading \$1-\$1 no-limit hold'em.

John Mehaffey, founder of *Vegas Advantage*, responded to a post about the upcoming closure on *Twitter/X*. Mehaffey said that even when the casino was busy, the traffic wasn't funneling to the poker room. He believed the room's location was a big reason for that.

"When we surveyed Planet Hollywood last week, the



casino floor was very busy," said Mehaffey. "The poker room had one short-handed game running. The room is very nice, but I don't think many tourists knew it was there."

Planet Hollywood attracted 616 entries to its \$1,700 no-limit hold'em *World Series of Poker Circuit* main event just before closing. Darren Rabinowitz took it down, claiming \$175,430 along with his first *WSOP Circuit* ring.

But any semblance of tournament demand was ultimately offset by the lack of consistent cash-game action.

The closure leaves 18 poker rooms in the Las Vegas Valley. The newest room at Green Valley Ranch reopened in December. Of the 18 rooms, 11 are located on the Las Vegas Strip with the only Caesars-owned rooms at Horseshoe and Caesars Palace. ♠

# KALSHI PARTNERS WITH TEXAS' LODGE CARD CLUB

By Sean Chaffin

Prediction market firm Kalshi continued its move into the poker space with the announcement of a deal with The Lodge, which operates two poker clubs in Texas.

"We are happy to announce Kalshi as the new predictive market partner for our livestream!" the company posted on Twitter/X. The announcement came with an exclusive promotion for new users.

The partnership comes after Kalshi signed Daniel Negreanu as an ambassador in September.

Promoting the brand on *Poker at The Lodge* livestreams allows the prediction market to further cater to poker fans. As part of the action, Kalshi will reportedly be offering event contracts on the results of the streamed games.

This will be the first time the platform has offered markets on the outcome of a poker game. It's unclear if this is a violation of Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) regulations.

The CFTC's Code of Federal Regulations prohibits certain activities from event contracts. Those regu-



lations ban "an agreement, contract, transaction, or swap based upon an excluded commodity ... that involves, relates to, or references terrorism, assassination, war, gaming, or an activity that is unlawful under any state or federal law."

Prediction market companies have courted controversy since they began offering event contracts on sports in 2025. That has led to allegations that the companies are violating state gaming laws.

While Kalshi won in court early, a Massachusetts judge ruled against the company in state court in January. Tennessee regulators also recent-

ly ordered the platforms to stop offering sports contracts in the Volunteer State. The company lost a lawsuit against Maryland as well.

Prediction markets have also drawn criticism at the federal level. In September, legislators circulated a draft letter to the CFTC outlining some of their concerns about sports prediction markets.

Those concerns included compliance with betting age requirements and other issues that legal sportsbooks must adhere to. The letter questioned whether the companies' sports offerings are simply a way to skirt state betting laws. ♠

## JUDGE'S RULING PUSHES POLYMARKET OUT OF NEVADA

By Sean Chaffin

A Nevada state court issued a temporary restraining order against Polymarket in February in the latest twist involving prediction markets.

The company was sued by the Nevada Gaming Control Board (NGCB) on Jan. 15. The ruling has effectively forced Polymarket to exit the market.

The NGCB argued that "Polymarket's event contracts are wagers."

In his ruling, Judge Jason D. Woodbury noted that the NGCB was "reasonably likely to prevail on the merits of the underlying case."

"The record at this early stage in proceedings indicates Polymarket offers 'event-based contracts' that relate to sporting and other events, including college basketball games, college, and professional football games and elections," he added.

Those offerings put the company at odds with state gaming laws, and Polymarket lacks a license to offer sports betting in Nevada, the ruling said. Woodbury said firms like Polymarket that operate without a sports wagering license



evade and harm the state's regulatory gaming structure.

Additionally, Woodbury noted that an unlicensed operator beyond the NGCB's control "obstructs the board's ability to fulfill its statutory functions." The temporary restraining order will initially last only 14 days; a hearing on a motion for a permanent injunction was held on Feb. 11.

Prediction market firms claim their offerings are different from traditional sports betting and solely regulated at the federal level by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission. Several state regulators have disputed that assertion. ♠



## STUDY PROJECTS MASSIVE GROWTH OF ONLINE POKER INDUSTRY

By Sean Chaffin

The global online poker market could see exponential growth over the next decade, according to a recent study conducted by Custom Market Insights.

The company offers consulting and business insights in a number of industries and projects the online poker market will grow from \$6.3 billion in 2025 to \$22.4 billion by 2034.

The industry is expected to see a compound annual growth rate of 15.2% over that time period. The study frames that growth as a part of high-tech entertainment becoming even more popular with users.

“With the increased penetration of mobile phones, rising availability of internet, and enhanced demand for internet-based entertainment, the usage of online poker games will be likely to see significant growth in the years to come,” the report said.

“The worldwide online poker game market is thriving in the backdrop of the wider digital entertainment explosion, driven by an expanding technology-sensitive base of consumers and innovations in game technology.”

Smartphones are a huge part of the growth of the online game, with more players now playing on those smaller screens. Operators have worked to gear play more toward a mobile audience in recent years. For example, CoinPoker recently launched a platform designed exclusively for mobile users.

A trend in consumers preferring interactive and competitive online gaming sessions may also contribute to the expected growth in the coming years, the study reports. The market is also becoming more competitive as more operators look to attract players.

“With the maturity of the online poker ecosystem, existing gaming operators and newcomers alike are entering the market, which is diversifying the market, and thus the market is becoming more competitive and inclusive,” CMI reports.

CMI forecasts that hold'em will remain popular, while other games like Omaha and seven card stud will also experience growth.

The study pointed to North America and Asia as sources of major growth opportunities in the coming years.

North America remains one of the most lucrative markets. Latin America is also seeing “incremental yet steady growth in the market for online poker driven by the increased adoption of smartphones, internet penetration, and mounting interest in digital entertainment.”

While the report is bullish on the industry's growth, there are some concerns. One of those is cheating and fraud. These issues seem to pop up every year in the world of online poker, including recent concerns about bots.

A major poker bot operation was revealed in Siberia in 2024. Issues like using real-time assistance, multi-accounting, and ghosting have also plagued the industry.



Another concern? Bans on online gaming. Restrictions on the industry could constrain growth if more jurisdictions enact prohibitions on iGaming, according to CMI. India went this route and banned online poker in 2025. The country's supreme court is now considering ruling on the issue.

The study also notes that payment processing issues could also present challenges as financial institutions and governments continue to place more restrictions and regulations on the industry. ♠

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# DOUG POLK'S SECOND ACT

From Retirement To One Of The Game's Loudest Voices

By Tim Fiorvanti



In late 2018, Doug Polk quit poker. He reiterated that stance in March 2020, stating unequivocally that he didn't like the game anymore, and he was done with the industry for good.

But it didn't stick.

Polk built his reputation by becoming one of the best heads-up online no-limit hold'em players. The unique skill set is what pulled him back into the poker world.

His high-profile heads-up challenge against Daniel Negreanu in 2020 and 2021, across 25,000 hands, earned the California native roughly \$2 million across the match and significant side action. The win, and the competition, also seemingly reinvigorated Polk's love for the game.

Polk's popular poker-themed YouTube channel will turn 10 later this year. With nearly 500,000 subscribers, he is one of poker's most recognizable faces. In fact, despite having

only one live tournament cash in the last two years, Polk has remained deeply involved in nearly every other facet of the game. That visibility has made the three-time bracelet winner a leading voice in the poker community.

The 37-year-old also co-owns one of the most successful poker clubs in Texas, The Lodge Card Club, with locations near Austin and San Antonio. The cardroom regularly streams tournaments and cash games, with Polk appearing in the biggest lineups.

Upswing Poker, the training site Polk co-founded in 2015, was sold to ClubWPT Gold last summer. The online site then changed their business model, using Upswing as part of a shift away from its sweepstakes-based platform. Notwithstanding his frequent criticisms of the site, the deal allowed Polk to become ClubWPT Gold's most marketable sponsored pro, with #CodeDoug becoming his calling card.

© PokerGO / Miguel Cortes



Over the last year, the spotlight has only become brighter for Polk. Another heads-up challenge, this time taking \$1.2 million from controversial casino owner Ossi ‘Monarch’ Ketola, represented the biggest single-day result of Polk’s career.

If that wasn’t enough, Polk has also stepped up to be a voice for change in the aftermath of potentially disastrous gambling tax changes implemented as part of Donald Trump’s ‘Big Beautiful Bill.’

Not only is Polk not out of the poker industry, he stands as one of its biggest modern-day stars. He even has crossover appeal, with two appearances on the popular stand up comedy show *Kill Tony*.

And though he challenges the implication, there seem to be at least a few parallels to the jack-of-all-trades career trajectory of Negreanu, his longtime adversary and the target of many of Polk’s verbal barbs over the years.

*Card Player* caught up with Polk to talk about his place in the poker world and to get a glimpse into his hectic schedule.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** At the end of last year you went on a long poker trip. Can you give me an overview of how much you managed to squeeze in while you were out on the West Coast?

**Doug Polk:** I went and I played *High Stakes Poker*. I played on *The Big Game*, which will air this year. While I was still in Vegas, I played Ossi Ketola in a super high-stakes heads-up battle where I ended up winning \$1.2 million. I did a promo shoot for ClubWPT Gold. Then I flew to L.A. to play the *Hustler Casino Live* games for really high stakes.

It’s weird. I flash back five years ago, when I moved to Texas to ‘retire,’ and now, here we are. I’m just playing poker all day, every day. Non-stop playing, non-stop content, non-stop work. But I’m loving it.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** Ketola made a lot of noise in the poker world, and not all of it was good, to say the least. How did that heads-up match come together, and what motivated you to jump into all of that?

**Doug Polk:** When the matches first started going down, of course, I was interested. Obviously, I love playing heads-up no-limit hold’em. It’s my game.

He played a lot of different people, but they typically played overseas in Asia and Europe, locations I’m rarely at, particularly not with a young family. So, when he reached out to me, he said, ‘Hey, I’d love to play an online match.’ For me personally, I had to figure out a way to make that happen on ClubWPT Gold.

We set up the game, playing \$2,000-\$4,000 with a \$400,000 buy-in, same format as his previous matches. I knew going in that this guy was going to Martingale, just continuing to double the stakes. I just mentally prepared myself for the highest stakes game I’ve ever played, \$800,000, winner take all.

It was surreal to get to play stakes that high. Even for me, it’s weird when the stakes get that big. You’re looking at the numbers and you’re just like, ‘Yeah, I’ll raise preflop here to \$20,000. That’s totally fine. That’s just a normal open.’

**Tim Fiorvanti:** Did you have any concerns about playing Ketola and giving him more time in the spotlight, considering his comments and online behavior?

**Doug Polk:** Obviously, he’s a controversial guy. I certainly don’t agree with some of the things he said online. But at the same time, I think poker needs heroes and villains, and I think that being able to watch people battle it out from both sides of that gives poker life. It gives it character.

And guess what? At the poker table, you don’t have to agree with people’s views to play poker with them. How often are you at a table and there’s someone there that’s

## Who Wore It Better?



clearly got different views than you. You can't just say, 'I want a table change because that guy's wearing a mask,' or, 'I want a table change because that guy's wearing a red hat. You sit there and play with whoever is in front of you.'

Ultimately, it was a crazy, high-stakes match. I think the viewers enjoyed it. There were some lulls along the way, but at the end of the day, winning \$1.2 million is a pretty good day at the office, I would have to say.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** You mentioned heroes and villains. Do you feel like poker is lacking in spectacle these days?

**Doug Polk:** It's a good question. I think we have so many events now in poker. In fact, from a poker content perspective specifically, we've never had more options for what we can watch. But at the same time, because of that volume of content that's being pumped out, it makes each one feel a little bit less special.

A good example is the *Million Dollar Game* over at *HCL*. I watched a little bit, and I thought it was interesting. Obviously, these were very high stakes, but if you just look at the raw viewership, the first time was a huge show. The second time, it was a big show. Third time, pretty big show. Fourth time was still a big show, but compared to what it was before, it does feel like it didn't have the same kind of boom as earlier episodes.

If you want to make poker interesting and special, you have to find personality mixes that make it entertaining to watch. Of course, you have to have the stakes, too, and where those things converge is where truly entertaining poker happens.

Honestly, I hate when people say [they'd prefer it] to be a

reliable amount of money. If you've ever posted \$1-\$3 clips online, or seen them, you know they don't do well.

I think we have a lot of people that are doing things the right way. I'm always going to advocate for what we're doing at The Lodge, obviously. PokerGO does a lot right, and *HCL* does a good job, too. *Triton* has some great streams. We have plenty of great shows for putting these kinds of things together. But there has to be a concerted emphasis on making a compelling product that people want to watch.

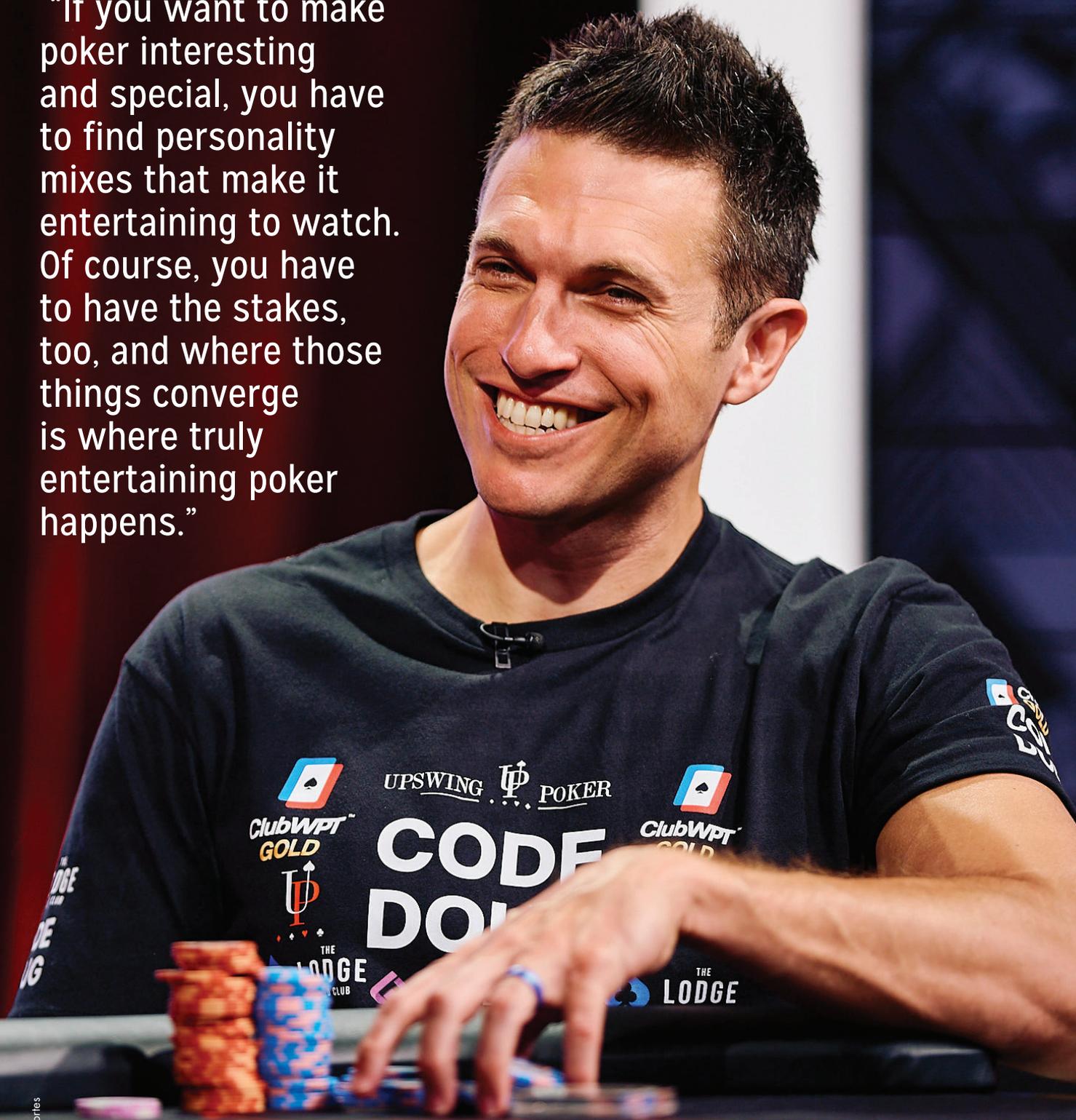
**Tim Fiorvanti:** You have a lot of irons in the fire right now, most notably with your online poker sponsorship. That all started with the sale of Upswing Poker. Beyond the significant financial upside, was there an emotional weight to selling this company you had built from the ground up?

**Doug Polk:** Let me give you a little backstory about Upswing Poker. It started in 2015, with myself, Ryan Fee and Matt Colletta, when me and two of my very good friends were like, 'hey, let's do a training site.' Matt knows digital marketing, Fee knows poker, and I'm a good marketing/content guy. We hadn't done it yet, but I figured we could.

We each wrote a \$5,000 check, we put it in, and then disaster struck. Month two, we realized we would need to put in another \$5,000. That was the last unprofitable month at Upswing Poker. The business made money every single month for more than nine years. It was a great company, and I felt like we took it as far as we could.

Upswing does a great job of teaching people in a different way. Nowadays, most of the big sites, frankly, copied what we did, which they should have. Look, it was my baby. I

“If you want to make poker interesting and special, you have to find personality mixes that make it entertaining to watch. Of course, you have to have the stakes, too, and where those things converge is where truly entertaining poker happens.”







promoted it all the time. Lord knows I love that company. I still love the brand. It is weird when I see it now, and that's not my company anymore. But it made sense for ClubWPT Gold, and it made sense for us.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** For all of the responsibilities, all of the poker, I imagine having a growing family at home has been a motivator in some of these big decisions.

**Doug Polk:** Being a father is great, because it's so different from playing poker. One of the things with poker that is probably the biggest drawback is that you get in the mindset of 'How do I get maximum EV?'

When you have a family, you learn about the people around you, doing things for them and loving them in a truly selfless way. When your kids laugh, it's the single best thing in the world. My kids are little, so I'm still just starting this journey, but it's already been incredibly rewarding and fulfilling. I'm proud to be their dad.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** In spending a lot of time at home in Austin, you've put a lot into your cardrooms. From the outside, things seem pretty healthy in terms of the poker scene in Texas. What's your perspective on Texas poker, and how does it compare to where things were a year ago?

**Doug Polk:** We've gotten some updates, where we had a case that worked its way up to the Supreme Court, about whether or not poker should be allowed in Dallas. Specifically, the technicals of the case centered around whether or not the city should have granted this occupancy, only to then take it away. The Supreme Court decided to not hear this case at that level, which could have potentially changed the entire industry.

I don't want to bore people with all of the details, but the headline for me is that poker in Texas has never been better. We have more clubs than ever. We have more games than ever. I think we're looking at the safest the industry has ever been in Texas, and it continues to grow and mature.

In my mind, we're in the early infancy stages and we're going to see what we saw in places like Florida and California. After so much growth, eventually we will head towards a full licensing type agreement.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** Speaking of legal concerns in the world of poker, you stepped forward as a voice for the players in

response to the gambling tax changes enacted by the 'Big Beautiful Bill.' You made mainstream TV appearances, and had Nevada Senator Cortez Masto on your YouTube channel to discuss the issue. What motivated you to become so vocal?

**Doug Polk:** What the bill did to gambling was fundamentally wrong. The government is taking money that we did not make, just because we cannot defend ourselves. And I guess, as somebody with a voice in this community, there are not many things we just stand together on. We can disagree on lots of subjects, but when it comes to taking money from us that should not be taken, I feel like I have a moral obligation to step forward and do something about it.

The bottom line is, there's only two parties. They both suck, and they both can go against you at any point.

When they do something wrong, and you have a voice in this industry, you should stand up and say something to try and help.

Will we get it overturned? I don't know. I've talked to a bunch of politicians. I've done videos on it. I've done podcasts on it. I've talked at length about this online. I will continue to fight for our community.

It's been a lot of months, and we haven't gotten it fixed. My hopes are not high, but I know there are some people fighting for us that hopefully can get this done. Hopefully we can keep this fight moving over the next year, and one day we can fix this.

**Tim Fiorvanti:** You're promoting a major poker platform, and you're one of the most consistently visible poker players in the world. You're advocating for the present and future of poker. To draw a parallel you might not like, would it be fair to say you've got at least a few things in common with poker boom era Daniel Negreanu?

**Doug Polk:** I think that the poker boom will always have its own [place in history], because so much money was spent promoting those people. All the big names, like Negreanu, Phil Hellmuth, Phil Ivey, Doyle Brunson. (*Or maybe Sam Farha?*)

I had to do it the old-fashioned way, making YouTube videos. (laughs) And so far, we've done pretty good. We've done a couple hundred million views overall.

Obviously, I've been on all the modern poker shows. I did *High Stakes Poker*. I've gotten on the *WSOP* broadcasts, on the featured tables. I hosted a season of *Poker Night in America*. I've done everything you'd want to do, on all these shows. But when you're doing that today, largely through social media content, you're only going to get the reach of people that click on it, versus when these large entities had the full weight of PokerStars and Full Tilt behind them, paying millions of dollars to ensure that they got their product in front of everyone else.

It's a different ecosystem now, a different environment now. I don't know if I'm the next Daniel Negreanu. I'm just trying to be *the* Doug Polk.

**Follow Polk on Twitter/X @DougPolkVids and check out his YouTube channel @DougPolkPoker.**

# JOEY CHESTNUT: HOT DOG CHAMP TALKS POKER, LAS VEGAS, AND COMPETITIVE EATING

By Sean Chaffin



Coney Island serves as Joey Chestnut's home court every summer. The Indiana native spends Independence Day at the Brooklyn amusement park as the favorite in the annual Nathan's Famous International Hot Dog Eating Contest.

Last year, he downed 70.5 hot dogs and buns in a 10-minute span. It was short of the record of 76 he set in 2021, but still well ahead of the next closest competitor.

The 42-year-old master of mastication brought his talents to Las Vegas in January for Siegel's Bagelmania *World Bagel Eating Championship* with \$10,000 in prize money up for grabs. Chestnut defended his title in the competition, consuming 16 and 7/8 bagels with cream cheese in eight minutes in front of the famed delicatessen and bakery.

As a regular Sin City visitor, Chestnut felt right at home and spoke to *Card Player* about competitive eating, how to prepare to eat massive amounts of food, hitting the poker table, and some great places to grab a bite to eat in Las Vegas.

**Card Player:** How do you prepare for an event like the Bagelmania *World Bagel Eating Championship*?

**Joey Chestnut:** Like all the contests, I practice, prep, [go through a] practice contest, recovery, cleanse, then I do way more practice. For this contest, because it's the first of the

year, I prepared for about two weeks. For similar contests, I don't have to practice as much. For the Fourth of July, it's like eight weeks of training.

I try to do a simulated contest, line up the food, and set it up similar to the contest, which can be a little bit hard. I live in Indiana, so it's kind of hard to get a real New York-style bagel. I actually like to scale it. Because of the way they're baked, it's a little bit hard to get that kind of hard shell on store-bought bagels.

My fiancée helps me. She yells at me and keeps me focused when I get too lazy. Sometimes I videotape it. I just try to get some notes about what I'm doing, I'll change my strategy a couple times and just try to make sure that I have a good technique going in, and that I'm comfortable with the food.

**CP:** What was the Las Vegas bagel competition event actually like?

**JC:** It's been going for three years and this is the fourth. I competed twice before and got two wins, both of them pretty close. I think I only won by half a bagel both times. It's a hard contest. Bagels are hard on the jaws, it's not a capacity contest, which is where I really excel. Toward the end of the contest, you're not full. Your jaws and your throat are tired.

Bagels – eat them in the morning, leisurely your whole life. Then it's really hard to eat them fast. It's not a food that you ever consider eating fast. Also, it's just really hard physically. It's hard to muscle them down. But I'm just excited. It's the first contest of the year. I want to set the tone and just want to dominate. (Editor's note: Chestnut would indeed, win the competition for a third time.)

**CP:** Do you enjoy competing in Las Vegas?

**JC:** Enjoy is an understatement. I love it, it's great. I think it's the food capital. It's funny that you can get awesome New York bagels in Las Vegas, awesome food from all around the world. That's one of the biggest battles because the day before the contest I do a cleanse where I'm not eating any real solid food. I'm just tortured to know that there's so much good food all around and I can't have it.

**CP:** When you do get to eat in Las Vegas, what are some places you like to eat?

**JC:** Piero's, it's one of the old Italian restaurants right next to the convention center – good seafood and Italian food. There are some great food trucks. The 303 food truck has been on my list for a long time and I want to go. There's Red Dwarf pizza. It's like a tiki lounge. That one's always fun, really good pizza, flavored drinks. It's a little bit off the Strip, but Sayulitas Mexican restaurant. They do a huge bacon-wrapped burrito.

**CP:** It really does seem like torture that you can't eat before a contest.

**JC:** It also reinforces discipline. I think if you love something, you should be able to go without it for a little bit. It reinforces how much you love it.

It's like people who can't control their alcohol. It's a good



test to go without it, like 'Dry January.' It really tells you if you have a problem. There are times where I mess up on my diet, I start gaining weight, and then I start losing and have to reel it back in. Food is the best thing.

**CP:** How often do you get to Vegas as part of your eating travels?

**JC:** Usually at least once or twice a year. I did a poker tournament in November.

**CP:** How was that experience playing on the *Celebrity Poker Tour*?

**JC:** Gosh, I was nervous. I drank a couple too many Jack and Cokes. (laughing)

I think most of the people there had played multiple tournaments. It was my first real tournament, and I definitely had nerves. But looking back, I made some poor decisions. I also made some good ones, but I think nerves got the best of me.

If they give me the invite, I'll be back. I think my nerves will be calmed down by then.

**CP:** Did you grow up playing the game?

**JC:** When I was younger I played and then I took a long break, and now once in a while I'll play with friends in Indiana. We'll go into their basement and play.

I'm not the best at bluffing, so people know if I'm [in the pot], I usually have something.

I think it's like anything, if you're good at something, there's a natural ability that you can improve on. For me with poker, there's not much natural ability. For competitive eating, I have a lot of natural ability that made it worthwhile for me to improve on.

**CP:** How did you actually get into competitive eating?

**JC:** I tried to eat healthy during the week in college and then the weekends would be my reward days. My friends were really impressed [with how much I ate], and eventually

they signed me up and made me do my first contest.

It was something I was kind of embarrassed about. But once I did it I was like, 'Oh my God. I don't have to be embarrassed.' It was crazy, people were cheering me on, beating these guys who weren't used to losing. So, it was perfect. It was unbelievable.

It's definitely some sort of gift. Once I started looking at it as kind of a sport, and really breaking it down, I really started to take off. I was never waking up and eating 70 hot dogs. It was a slow progression of getting better and practicing and trying to control a lot of variables. I remember the first time I ate 20 hot dogs in a contest. I felt really full. Now it's learning how to prepare and build that tolerance, pushing myself harder. Hopefully I'll be pushing close to a record next fourth of July.

**CP:** What's the vibe like with you and other competitive eaters?

**JC:** We're kind of frenemies and kind of a fraternity at the same time. We go around to these cities and awesome events and usually we try to hang out afterward. But we're also very competitive.

When it comes to the competition, we're not just trying to push ourselves to a number, we're trying to push each other past our level of comfort. It's not the food that hurt me, so and so made me eat too much.

**CP:** Do you eat hot dogs outside of training or competition, or are you sick of them?

**JC:** No, I still love them. I was just at Costco and I had to have one. (laughing) That's like the best hot dog on the planet. I still love hot dogs. I got lucky that the biggest contest is hot dogs.

**CP:** What's your favorite food?

**JC:** I'm not married to one food. I get cravings. I love good Mexican food – burritos or good tacos or chile rel-



lenos. I still love good prime rib, just slow cooked perfectly where the fat turns into butter. I usually don't have carbs in the house, so it's a really good weekend where there's no contest. I love good pasta. Bread and butter, oh my gosh. Good salted butter on warm bread. How could you not be happy? A hot dog and beer at a baseball game in the sun – that's great.

**CP:** What's a food you hate?

**JC:** The cow brain taco contest – that was rough. The taste was really metallic. That was gnarly. People were get-

ting sick on stage. I don't have any desire to eat cow brain ever again.

**CP:** Do you ever think about what a unique life you live?

**JC:** The whole thing is crazy. I got lucky. I went to school for engineering. I never thought that I'd have a job where I get to make people happy by eating. Now almost every day there's some sort of fan mail of people telling me that they look forward to seeing me compete. I'm very happy.

**Follow Chestnut on Twitter/X @joeyjaws and visit his website [joeychestnut.com](http://joeychestnut.com). ♠**

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## POKERGO TOUR KICKS OFF 2026 SEASON IN LAS VEGAS

By Erik Fast



The 2026 *PokerGO Tour* season got underway with the aptly-titled *PGT Kickoff*, a six-event festival that awarded double rankings points from Jan. 26-31. A total of \$4.5 million in prize money was paid out across the half-dozen no-limit hold'em events on the schedule, drawing a combined 745 entries along the way.

**Andrew Lichtenberger** ultimately captured the very first title of the new *PGT* season. The 38-year-old poker pro based out of Las Vegas outlasted 135 entries to successfully defend his title, having taken down this same tournament in 2025. He earned \$162,000 and his eighth career *PGT* title.

Lichtenberger went on to make three final tables during the series, finishing sixth in event no. 5 and fourth in event no. 6. All told, he cashed for \$265,500 and accrued 531 points, giving him the early lead in the season-long standings. The New York native is approaching \$25.1 million in career tournament earnings thanks to this latest deep run. The bracelet winner now has 47 scores of six figures or more, with five of those cashes worth over a million dollars.

In addition to his outright lead in the *PGT* standings, Lichtenberger is now also among the early leaders in the 2026 *Card Player* Player of the Year race presented by CoinPoker. He currently sits in ninth place, with four final tables overall.

The turnout was even higher for event no. 2, with 151 entries building a \$755,000 prize pool. **Brian Battistone** emerged victorious, taking home \$173,600 and 347 *PGT* points.

This was his very first *PGT* title, and the third-largest payday of his career. The Nebraska native's top score remains the \$304,920 earned with a win in the 2024 *World Poker Tour Voyage* \$25,000 high roller.

Dan Smith was the runner-up to Battistone. The bracelet winner finished the series with three cashes for a total of \$213,175. In addition to his near-miss in the second event, he finished third in the series finale. Smith is now approaching \$63.6 million in career tournament earnings, keeping him firmly locked inside the top 10 on poker's all-time money list.

**Andrew Moreno** got his 2026 campaign off to a strong start, taking down event no. 3 for \$162,300 and his third career *PGT* title. He defeated three-time bracelet winner Jim Collopy heads-up, topping a field of 159 entries, the second-largest turnout at this buy-in level in *PGT* history.

Moreno came painstakingly close to back-to-back titles, navigating his way through 145 entries to make the final three in event no. 4. His run ultimately ended in third place, though, with \$76,125 for his efforts. Moreno, the 2021 *Wynn Millions* champion, now boasts career earnings of nearly \$6.7 million.

**Taylor Paur** came away with the title in that event, earning \$174,000 and his first *PGT* trophy. This was the first live tournament victory for Paur in over a decade. The *WPT* champion, two-time bracelet winner, and 2010 *Card Player* Online Player of the Year defeated Ethan 'Rampage' Yau heads-up for the title.

Yau, a bracelet winner and popular poker content creator,



earned \$105,125 as the runner-up, growing his career haul to over \$4.2 million. It was his second final table of the week, having also placed fifth in the first event for \$40,500.

**Michael Berk** took home the lion's share of the series' largest prize pool. The first of two \$10,000 buy-ins attracted 103 entries, with Berk the last man standing in event no. 5.

Berk pocketed \$262,650 as the champion, his biggest score yet on the live circuit. Before this triumph, his top payday had been the \$229,000 he earned for a 42nd-place finish in the 2023 *World Series of Poker* main event. With the victory, the Las Vegas resident increased his career earnings to nearly \$2.7 million. He now has three live titles to his name, including in the 2023 *MSPT Iowa* main event.

Five-time bracelet winner Kristen Foxen made an impressive run at winning this event for the third consecutive year, but ultimately bowed out in seventh place settling for \$41,200. The cash extended her lead on the women's all-

time money list, with nearly \$15.2 million in total earnings giving her a \$4.3 million edge on second-ranked Vanessa Selbst.

**Ariel Mantel** bested a field of 52 entries in the series-ending \$10,000 turbo event. This was the first recorded live tournament win for the Argentinian, who walked away with the trophy and \$171,600.

Mantel defeated Clemen Deng heads-up for the win. Deng, who had finished fourth in event no. 5 earlier in the same day for \$92,700, secured another \$109,200 with this runner-up showing. Deng has climbed to 10th in the POY standings, having already cashed for over \$524,000 in 2026, with three final tables and one title.

Other top-ranked POY contenders who added to their haul at this festival included fourth-ranked Brandon Wilson, who had two fifth-place finishes, and second-ranked David Coleman, who finished third in event no. 3. ♠

# TOURNAMENTS

## PGT Kickoff - Aria PokerGO Studio - Las Vegas, NV



Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$5,300 NLH Jan. 26-27 Entries: 135 Prizepool: \$675,000	1 Andrew Lichtenberger	\$162,000	528
	2 Jeremy Eyer	\$97,875	440
	3 Shannon Shorr	\$70,875	352
	4 Cary Katz	\$54,000	264
	5 Ethan Yau	\$40,500	220
	6 Peter Mugar	\$33,750	176
	7 Spencer Champlin	\$27,000	132

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$5,300 NLH Jan. 27-28 Entries: 151 Prizepool: \$755,000	1 Brian Battistone	\$173,600	576
	2 Dan Smith	\$109,475	480
	3 Maksim Pisarenko	\$75,500	384
	4 Mike Zulker	\$56,625	288
	5 Yifu He	\$45,300	240
	6 Sam Laskowitz	\$37,750	192
	7 Nick Schulman	\$30,200	144

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$5,300 NLH Jan. 28-29 Entries: 159 Prizepool: \$795,000	1 Andrew Moreno	\$162,300	576
	2 Jim Collopy	\$135,775	480
	3 David Coleman	\$79,500	384
	4 Joao Simao	\$59,625	288
	5 Brandon Wilson	\$47,700	240
	6 Jared Jaffee	\$39,750	192
	7 Stephen Song	\$31,800	144

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$5,300 NLH Jan. 29-30 Entries: 145 Prizepool: \$725,000	1 Taylor Paur	\$174,000	576
	2 Ethan Yau	\$105,125	480
	3 Andrew Moreno	\$76,125	384
	4 Jeremy Becker	\$58,000	288
	5 Paul Roy	\$43,500	240
	6 Scott Eskenazi	\$36,250	192
	7 Justin Zaki	\$29,000	144

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$10,500 NLH Jan. 30-31 Entries: 103 Prizepool: \$1,030,000	1 Michael Berk	\$262,650	600
	2 Daniel Maor	\$169,950	500
	3 Brock Wilson	\$118,450	400
	4 Clemen Deng	\$92,700	300
	5 Neil Warren	\$66,950	250
	6 Andrew Lichtenberger	\$51,500	200
	7 Kristen Foxen	\$41,200	150

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$10,500 NLH Jan. 31 Entries: 52 Prizepool: \$520,000	1 Ariel Mantel	\$171,600	300
	2 Clemen Deng	\$109,200	250
	3 Dan Smith	\$72,800	200
	4 Andrew Lichtenberger	\$52,000	150
	5 Brandon Wilson	\$41,600	125
	6 Bin Duan	\$31,200	100
	7 Matthew Wantman	\$20,800	75



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# SAM SOVEREL WINS REBORN NATIONAL HEADS-UP POKER CHAMPIONSHIP

High-Stakes Pro Pockets \$500,000 In Tournament's Return Following A 12-Year Hiatus

By Tim Fiorvanti



The revival of the *National Heads-Up Poker Championship* brought back one of the most recognizable events in the history of the game. The 64-player heads-up championship debuted in 2005, pitting the best players against celebrities, athletes, and wealthy enthusiasts.

Phil Hellmuth won the inaugural edition of the tournament, which aired on *NBC*. The *NHUPC* ran every year through 2011, and again in 2013.

After PokerGO purchased the rights to the event, the Cary Katz-owned company brought the tournament back after a 12-year hiatus and filmed it in their studio on the Las Vegas Strip. Sam Sovarel was the last player standing, earning \$500,000 along with the championship trophy. He joins Hellmuth, Erik Seidel, Mike Matusow, Ted Forrest, Paul Wasicka, Chris Ferguson, Huck Seed, and Annie Duke as part of the event's list of esteemed champions.

"It was a great tournament," Sovarel said shortly after securing his victory. "When you're playing a big one, you fold, and you watch everybody play, and it's easy to lose focus. But heads up, you're just in there the whole time. It was nice to be in the moment the whole time."

Sovarel has enjoyed tremendous success among poker's most successful high rollers. He's accumulated over \$32 million in lifetime results, with four career *World Series of Poker* bracelet wins. Two of those bracelet wins book-ended his *NHUPC* win, with a June title in Las Vegas worth \$986,337, and a career-best \$2,594,000 in the \$100,000 buy-in *Triton* pot-limit Omaha main event in December.

He also finished runner-up in the \$100,000 *Super High Roller Bowl PLO* event in November for \$825,000, and third in the \$100,000 *Super High Roller Bowl NLH* event in December for \$350,000, closing out a year where he finished second in the *PGT* Player of the Year race. The Florida native now has nearly

\$32 million in career earnings.

But this *NHUPC* win may well be the brightest spotlight Sovarel has been in to date. All 10 episodes, which first debuted on *Peacock*, are now available in their entirety on PokerGO.

## A Look At The Field

One of the key elements of the *National Heads-Up Poker Championship* since its very first year has been the exciting mix of player types. Alongside the high rollers and the heads-up specialists, celebrities and athletes give casual fans a recognizable underdog.

In this edition, several of them fared remarkably well. Actor and comedian Kevin Pollak defeated two tournament heavy hitters, Liv Boeree and Shaun Deeb, on his way to the round of 16. Sports broadcaster Nick Wright beat Chino Rheem and Jason Koon before running into the eventual champion. Both Pollak and Wright won back their \$25,000 buy-ins for winning two matches.

National Football League Hall of Famer Richard Seymour went even deeper into the tournament, reaching the quarter-finals. The former defensive end's path to the final eight saw Seymour defeat Matt Berkey, Marius Gierse, and Andrew Robl, with the match against Robl lasting only one hand. Seymour's poker accomplishments include a deep run in a \$25,000 high roller at the 2018 *PokerStars Caribbean Adventure*, worth \$376,360, and a pair of strong showings in the *WSOP* main event.

Other notables to compete in the tournament included Michael Mizrachi, Chris Moneymaker, Erik Seidel, Phil Laak, Mike Matusow, Stephen Chidwick, Doug Polk, Shaun Deeb, Alan Keating, Dan Cates, and Josh Arieh. There were also seven women in the field, with Kasey Lyn Mills, Esther Taylor, Maria Konnikova, Kristen Foxen, Liv Boeree, Xuan Liu, and Victoria Livschitz among the competition.



Soverel's Path To Victory

Soverel's enjoyed success across most tournament formats in recent years, but this appearance harkened back to his roots in his earliest days in poker.

"It was my main game in like 2009 and 2010," Soverel said of heads-up poker. "It's my favorite format, but I haven't really played it in 15 years."

Soverel didn't show many signs of rust. He was one of the first players in his bracket to advance from the round of 64. On the river of a J♠ J♥ 8♦ 9♠ 4♥ board, Soverel put *World Poker Tour* champion Jonathan Jaffe all in. Jaffe eventually called with A♠ 8♥, and Soverel's pocket tens were best.

In the round of 32, Soverel drew *Hustler Casino Live* creator Ryan Feldman. Soverel gradually built an advantage until Feldman was short stacked and all in with A♠ K♣. Soverel was dominated with A♥ 3♦, and found no help on the flop or turn. He then jokingly slid the three from his hand next to the board before the river hit, and the 3♥ arrived to deliver the knockout.

Soverel built an early lead over Nick Wright in the round of 16. He then found himself on the preferable side of a mega-cooler when his 9♥ 8♥ flopped a straight and a straight flush redraw on a J♥ 10♥ 7♣ board against Wright's flopped top set of jacks. The chips got in on the A♦ turn, and he rivered the flush with the 4♥ to close it out.

Luiz Phillippe 'Brazil God' Rizental's final hand saw him shove with 10♣ 7♦ on a 7♠ 6♣ 2♦ 4♦. Soverel called with A♥ 7♣. The K♦ river sealed Soverel's advance into the semifinals.

In the semifinals, Soverel faced the toughest challenge of his run to that point, taking on heads-up legend Phil Galfond. Soverel fell behind almost 4:1 in early action and had to fight all the way back. He found a crucial double with pocket aces against Galfond's A♦ Q♥ to take a 2:1 lead of his own. He doubled that lead to 4:1, and then took the last of Galfond's chips as his K♣ Q♦ bested A♠ 10♦ on a K♥ 5♦ 2♥ 8♣ 5♠ runoff.

The Finals

In the finals, Soverel faced off with Keith Lehr in a best-of-three showdown. The two-time *WSOP* bracelet winner had run an interesting gauntlet of his own, defeating influencer Bryce Hall, BMX legend and *MTV* host TJ Lavin, 2025 *Card Player* POY winner Jesse Lonis, seven-time bracelet winner Scott Seiver, and high-stakes cash player Charlie Hook on his way to the finale.

"I didn't really know what to expect from him," said Soverel. "He's a great player. He plays mixed, PLO, and all these different games. I don't really know much about his heads-up game, but things went kind of how I expected. Pretty solid, and just seemed like he didn't want to make any mistakes. So, I think he may have let me win too many small pots."

Soverel jumped out to an early lead in the first match, but a two-pair over two-pair cooler for Lehr flipped the script. Soverel called the last of his chips off with Q♥ 9♠ and failed to catch up to Lehr's K♣ Q♣.

Soverel had his back against the wall, needing to win two matches in a row to come from behind. He picked up a quick win in the second round when Lehr shoved a J♠ 5♠ 2♥ 5♣ board with A♠ Q♣. Soverel was all too happy to call with 7♦ 5♦, and his trip fives held, to send the finals to a decisive third match.

In the end, it came down to a coin flip. Soverel's pocket sevens battled A♥ J♦ with the last of Lehr's chips in the middle. The pair of sevens stayed ahead through a 8♦ 5♣ 2♠ flop, 9♣ turn, and 3♣ river to make Soverel the champion.

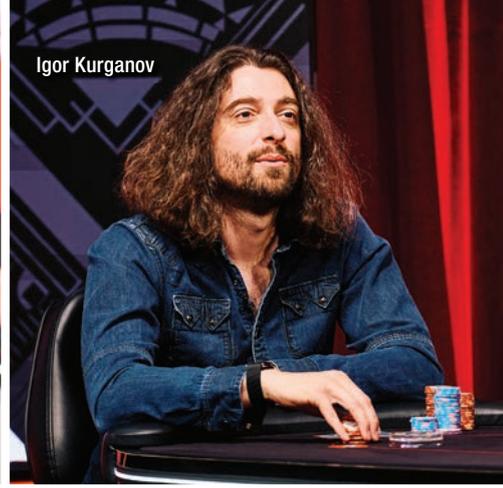
Lehr pocketed \$275,000 for the runner-up showing, giving the two-time bracelet winner a career total of just over \$6 million.

"Overall, I played well," said Soverel. "And yeah, I mean, I drilled the five for trips in the second match, and the first match, just [two-pair vs. two-pair]. I mean, those two hands would kind of play themselves. In the third match, there were a lot of small pots. Ultimately, I think I won a little bit more of those than I should have, and I got lucky in all the big flips." ♠

Charlie Hook



Igor Kurganov



Keith Lehr



Luiz Brazil God Rizental



Bracket Draw



Nick Wright



Phil Galfond



Richard Seymour



Sam Soverel



Scott Seiver



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# GIUSEPPE IADISERNIA CRUSHES LUCKY HEARTS POKER OPEN

By Erik Fast



**Giuseppe Iadiseria** is on fire to start 2026, earning two huge scores at the Seminole Hard Rock Hollywood in the span of a week.

The Venezuelan-born Florida resident kicked off his campaign with a runner-up finish in the \$25,000 high roller at the *Lucky Hearts Poker Open* for \$187,700.

Just five days later, Iadiseria battled his way down to the final two once again, this time in the \$3 million guaranteed \$3,500 *World Poker Tour* main event. Iadiseria was able to close out the victory, earning a career-best score of \$611,700 for the win. He now has more than \$2 million in lifetime earnings, and his name will be added to the Mike Sexton *WPT* Champions Cup.

In addition to the glory and the money, Iadiseria was also awarded 1,440 *Card Player* Player of the Year points after outlasting the field of 1,229 entries. With the 210 points he earned for his second-place finish earlier at the series, his total now sits at 1,650. That is currently good for the top spot in the standings presented by CoinPoker.

The strong turnout for the main event saw the guarantee surpassed by more than \$932,000. The top 154 finishers made the money, with notables such as Darryll Fish (20th), Jonathan Jaffe (17th), Loni Hui (16th), and Andrew Ostapchenko (9th) running deep.

The final day began with seven remaining and Iadiseria

in the lead of a familiar group. Incredibly, both the winner (Thomas Boivin) and the third-place finisher (Anatoly Nikitin) of the previously mentioned high roller joined Iadiseria at the final table.

It took a while for the first knockout hand to arrive. Eventually, Ted McNamara ran pocket queens into the pocket aces of Iadiseria to finish seventh for \$98,000.

It was also pair-over-pair that led to the next elimination, with Eddie Blumenthal's pocket threes unable to overcome the pocket nines of Boivin, who improved to a set on the flop and held from there. Blumenthal banked \$127,000 for sixth place.

The pattern continued in the next key clash. This time around, Nikitin was the one on the wrong side of the equation. He got all-in with pocket nines trailing the pocket tens of Jorge Gomez. Neither player connected with the ace-high runout, and Nikitin fell in fifth place for \$167,000.

When added to his third-place showing the week prior, Nikitin banked more than \$284,000 in Florida, giving him nearly \$1.9 million in recorded cashes.

Martins Adeniya made an impressive run at defending his title in this event, making it all the way down to the final four after previously beating out 1,162 to win this tournament in 2025 for a career-best score of \$512,600.

His final hand this time around saw him get all-in with

Jorge Gomez



Martins Adeniya



Anatoly Nikitin



Thomas Boivin



top pair facing a combo-draw for Iadisernia. The chips went in after the  $7\spadesuit 6\clubsuit 5\clubsuit$  flop with  $K\heartsuit 7\heartsuit$  for Adeniya and  $J\clubsuit 8\clubsuit$  for Iadisernia. The  $6\clubsuit$  on the turn kept Adeniya's hopes alive, but the  $2\clubsuit$  river sent him to the rail to collect \$220,000 as the fourth-place finisher. This pushed the UK poker pro's career earnings past the \$2.6 million mark.

Iadisernia soon got his revenge on Boivin after losing heads-up earlier in the week. He picked up  $A\heartsuit A\clubsuit$  on the button and min-raised. Boivin jammed with  $A\spadesuit 7\heartsuit$  from the small blind and was quickly called. The board offered no miracles and Boivin's run ended in in third place.

The Belgian banked \$295,000 for his latest deep run, and has cashed for more than \$9 million in the last 12 months alone. (pg. 36) Boivin was awarded 960 POY points. With 1,212 in total, he now sits in third place in the overall standings.

The final showdown for the title began with Iadisernia holding a more than 2:1 lead over Gomez. Even with multiple double-ups, Gomez was never quite able to make a full comeback. He was down to just over four big blinds when Iadisernia shoved from the button with pocket jacks. He called all in from the big blind holding  $9\spadesuit 5\clubsuit$  and failed to connect as the board ran out  $A\spadesuit A\heartsuit 2\heartsuit 6\clubsuit 4\spadesuit$ .

Gomez earned \$395,000 as the runner-up. This was his largest tournament score to date, topping the \$203,875 he

picked up for a fourth-place finish in a \$25,000 high roller at the same venue back in 2022.

#### Boivin Headlines Other Big Winners At The LHPO

The main event was hardly the only headline-grabber among the 57 completed events that were held at the South Florida hotspot from Jan. 6-20. There were a total of 3,555 entries made during the series, with over \$12.1 million in total prize money awarded along the way.

The first weekend played host to a \$2 million guaranteed \$600 no-limit hold'em event that drew 3,586 entries. **Justin Datloff** came out on top in the end, striking a heads-up deal with nine-time *World Series of Poker Circuit* ring winner Maxwell Young. Young took home \$231,552, while Datloff just narrowly topped his payout with \$232,848.

James Carroll, the two-time *WPT* champion who was banned from the *World Series of Poker* following his involvement in the 2025 *WSOP Millionaire Maker* heads-up controversy, finished fourth for \$103,000.

**Thomas Boivin's** win in the \$25,000 high roller saw him outlast 28 entries to take home \$310,000. Iadisernia earned nearly \$190,000, as mentioned, while Anatoly Nikitin secured \$117,570 for rounding out the podium finishers.

A second \$25,000 high roller was scheduled for this stop, but it was ultimately cancelled. This could be an early sign of the impact of recent changes to US gambling tax deduc-

## TOURNAMENTS



Justin Dattloff



Thomas Boivin



Justin Saliba



Randall Emmett



Yuval Bronshtein



Raminder Singh



Benjamin Moschel



tion limits. The field size for the one high roller that did run might also be an indication of the shifting high-stakes tournament landscape, as turnout was cut in half from the 2025 running, which drew 56 entries.

**Justin Saliba** defeated a field of 72 entries in the \$10,000 no-limit hold'em deep stack event to earn \$236,925. The two-time bracelet winner is now approaching \$11.7 million in lifetime cashes after this latest win on the circuit.

Film producer and frequent poker player **Randall Emmett** earned his largest payday yet on the felt when he came out on top in the \$5,000 no-limit hold'em event. Emmett beat out 117 entries to walk away with \$141,300, overcoming two-time bracelet winner Elijior Sion heads-up for the title.

Mixed-games master **Yuval Bronshtein** and Florida tournament king **Raminder Singh** both added to their trophy col-

lections during this festival, maintaining their tie atop the Seminole Hard Rock Poker major series titles leaderboards. They both now boast 16 such victories. Bronshtein's latest win came in the \$400 double board bomb pot pot-limit Omaha event for \$9,710, while Singh triumphed in a \$400 no-limit hold'em/pot-limit Omaha bounty tournament for \$7,015.

The \$1,000 no-limit hold'em event drew 608 entries, which more than doubled the guarantee to build a prize pool of \$589,760. The final five players ultimately agreed to a deal, with **Benjamin Moschel** walking away with the trophy and the biggest payout of \$63,853.

The next major series for the venue will be the *Seminole Hard Rock Poker Showdown*, which is slated for April 8-28. The *WPT* main event for that series kicks off on April 24. ♠

## WPT Lucky Hearts - Seminole Hard Rock - Hollywood, Florida



Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$600 NLH Jan. 7-12 \$2,000,000 GTD Entries: 3,586 Prizepool: \$2,000,000	1 Justin Datloff	\$232,848	660
	2 Maxwell Young	\$231,552	550
	3 Roy Young	\$137,000	440
	4 James Carroll	\$103,000	330
	5 Stephen Gerber	\$78,000	275
	6 Arun Balasubramanian	\$59,000	220
	7 Cory Rock	\$45,500	165
	8 Mitesh Shere	\$35,500	110
	9 Christie Yau	\$27,500	55

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$1,100 NLH Jan. 10-13 \$250,000 GTD Entries: 608 Prizepool: \$589,760	1 Benjamin Moschel	\$63,853	840
	2 George Hortelano	\$60,892	700
	3 Reynel Hernandez	\$57,729	560
	4 Tal Rothman	\$50,505	420
	5 Lou Ojeda	\$48,161	350
	6 Vitalijs Zavorotnijs	\$21,300	280
	7 Matthew Lambrecht	\$16,400	210
	8 Ronnie Day	\$12,700	140
	9 Andrew Pichee	\$10,000	70

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$25,500 NLH Jan. 15-16 Entries: 28 Prizepool: \$691,599	1 Thomas Boivin	\$310,255	252
	2 Giuseppe Iadiseria	\$187,700	210
	3 Anatoly Nikitin	\$117,570	168
	4 Manuel Fritz	\$76,075	126

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$3,500 Main Event Jan. 16-21 \$3,000,000 GTD Entries: 1,229 Prizepool: \$3,932,800	1 Giuseppe Iadiseria	\$611,700	1,440
	2 Jorge Gomez	\$395,000	1,200
	3 Thomas Boivin	\$295,000	960
	4 Martins Adeniya	\$220,000	720
	5 Anatoly Nikitin	\$167,000	600
	6 Eddie Blumenthal	\$127,000	480
	7 Ted McNamara	\$98,000	360
	8 Maryon Harper	\$76,000	240
	9 Andrew Ostapchenko	\$60,000	120

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$10,000 NLH Jan. 18-19 \$500,000 GTD Entries: 72 Prizepool: \$684,000	1 Justin Saliba	\$236,925	420
	2 Zachary Bruch	\$136,800	350
	3 Matt Lambrecht	\$83,790	280
	4 Filipp Khavin	\$61,125	210
	5 Qing Lu	\$46,170	175
	6 David McGowan	\$37,110	140
	7 Manuel Fritz	\$30,780	105
	8 Stoyan Madanzhiev	\$27,360	70
	9 Eli Berg	\$23,940	35

Event	Player	Payout	POY
\$5,000 NLH Jan. 20 \$250,000 GTD Entries: 117 Prizepool: \$549,900	1 Randall Emmett	\$141,300	480
	2 Elior Sion	\$95,000	400
	3 Justin Liberto	\$70,000	320
	4 Leandro Bianchini	\$53,000	240
	5 Peter Cross	\$39,500	200
	6 Maksim Pisarenko	\$30,500	160
	7 Aram Zorian	\$23,300	120
	8 Paul Fisher	\$18,100	80



# BELGIUM ALL-TIME MONEY LIST



Rank	Player	Earnings	Titles	Cashes
1	Thomas Boivin	\$17,665,774	10	210
2	Davidi Kitai	\$11,661,847	16	213
3	Kenny Hallaert	\$9,097,727	8	299
4	Pieter Aerts	\$8,275,586	5	72
5	Michael Gathy	\$6,132,918	8	139
6	Pierre Neuville	\$4,638,947	3	170
7	Bart Lybaert	\$3,671,790	7	160
8	Kevin Vandermissen	\$1,434,891	2	23
9	Gary Hasson	\$1,366,601	2	139
10	Matthias De Meulder	\$1,188,358	3	84

Despite a population equivalent to Ohio's, Belgium punches well above its weight on the global poker tournament scene. The European nation is best known for chocolate and beer, but is home to several highly accomplished players.

Sitting atop the pile of the top Belgian performers is **Thomas Boivin** with \$17,665,774 in lifetime cashes. Boivin has been particularly hot recently, with over \$9 million in cashes since the start of 2025. That massive sum, accumulated across 34 in-the-money finishes, accounts for more than half of his career haul.

Boivin has earned three titles during his streak. All three of his seven-figure scores were recorded in 2025, including the \$2.3 million that came with a fifth-place showing in the *WSOP Paradise* \$250,000 invitational. His most recent trip to the winner's circle came in a \$25,000 high roller at the 2026 *Lucky Hearts Poker Open*. Boivin also finished third in the *World Poker Tour* main event at that stop. (pg. 32)

**Davidi Kitai** is the only other Belgian besides Boivin to

surpass \$10 million in total cashes. The three-time *WSOP* bracelet winner has live results dating back to 2006. In 2012 he defeated a field of 745 entries in the *EPT Berlin* €5,000 main event to earn a career-high payday of \$930,816. That was but one of the 22 six-figure scores he's accumulated over the years.

Rounding out the top three is two-time *WSOP* main event final tablist **Kenny Hallaert** with just shy of \$9.1 million in lifetime earnings. The part-time pro and tournament director's two runs to the last stage of the biggest event in the world account for nearly \$4.5 million of his overall winnings, with the \$3 million that came with his fourth-place showing in 2025 doing the heavy lifting. Hallaert has had plenty of success outside of the big dance, though. He has another 10 six-figure finishes under his belt, including a deep run in the 2017 *WSOP Europe* €111,111 *One Drop* high roller for \$345,303.

High-stakes regular and bracelet winner Pieter Aerts sits in fourth place, while four-time bracelet winner Michael Gathy completes the top half of this list. ♠

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# ELVIR NUHIU WINS POKERSTARS OPEN CAMPIONE

By Erik Fast



Elvir Nuhui came into 2026 with just a handful of live tournament results to his name. The Swiss player's largest score was recorded in the final weeks of 2025 at the *European Poker Tour Prague* festival, with a fifth-place showing in a €1,100 side event. He stepped his game up in a major way at the *PokerStars Open Campione* in Italy.

Nuhui outlasted 1,582 entries in the €1,100 no-limit hold'em championship, striking a three-way deal at the end that saw him secure the title and \$236,755 in prize money.

"I'm mostly a cash-game player, but I was at *EPT Prague* and cashed some events," Nuhui told PokerStars staff. "I was not planning to come here, but I had to drive a friend to Milan and saw this festival nearby and decided to come. It feels really special to reach this kind of final table. I wanted, so badly, this victory."

The tournament was held at Casino di Campione, which opened in 1917 across the lake from Switzerland and is Europe's largest casino. The strong turnout easily surpassed the €1 million guarantee, with \$1,792,889 in total prize money paid out between the top 223 finishers.

The final three-player deal that brought the tournament to a close saw Italy's Vincenzo Petruzzello (2nd – \$197,692) and France's Christian Stantchev (3rd – \$177,748) both secure career-best scores. Eduard Fondos also took home six figures in fourth place with a \$101,504 payout.

Michele Brandes finished fifth for \$78,081. Just days earlier, Brandes took down a €220 pot-limit Omaha side event for just over \$5,400, bringing his total haul for the festival to over \$83,000. ♠

Player	Payout	(POY)
1 Elvir Nuhui	\$236,755	1,080
2 Vincenzo Petruzzello	\$197,692	900
3 Christian Stantchev	\$177,748	720
4 Eduard Fondos	\$101,504	540
5 Michele Brandes	\$78,081	450
6 Renzo Pedrotti	\$60,074	360
7 Thomas Olivieri	\$46,197	270
8 Giorgio Favotto	\$35,553	180
9 Tanmmay Jhunjhunwala	\$27,352	90

© PokerStars / Manuel Kovsca

## TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2026 WPT Lucky Hearts Poker Open  
\$3,500 No-Limit Hold'em Championship



Martins Adeniya  
7,325,000 Chips



Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 82%  
After Flop: 90%  
After Turn: 95%



Elio Saade  
5,100,000 Chips



Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 18%  
After Flop: 10%  
After Turn: 5%

### PREFLOP

With 16 players remaining, an eight-handed table, and blinds of 50,000-75,000 with a big blind ante of 75,000, Eddie Blumenthal raised to 150,000 from under the gun. Martins Adeniya three-bet to 525,000 from UTG+1. Elio Saade four-bet to 1,250,000 from the hijack, and Blumenthal folded. Adeniya called.

FLOP



Adeniya checked, and Saade bet 775,000. Adeniya called.

TURN



Adeniya checked, and Saade bet 1,500,000. Adeniya called.

RIVER



Both players checked.

### COMMENTARY:

The *World Poker Tour Lucky Hearts Poker Open* no-limit hold'em main event was down to 16 players out of 1,229 entries, with first place set to earn \$611,700. Everyone left was guaranteed \$33,500 and facing a sizable pay jump, with 15th place earning \$40,500. One short stack had 11 big blinds and another had 16, so Elio Saade, with his stack of about 65 blinds, had to proceed cautiously facing two raises from early positions. Still, pocket queens were good enough to play in that scenario. Facing the cold four-bet, the normal play for Martins Adeniya would have been to shove all in. Covering his opponent by a considerable amount, he didn't need to worry about busting out, and Saade could have a few weaker hands for value, all combos of A-K, and some bluffs. If Adeniya felt that five-betting would just isolate himself against aces and drive away weaker hands, just calling the four-bet made sense. How Saade played after the flop depended on how he envisioned Adeniya's continuing range. Queens were in good shape, having around 60% equity if Adeniya was never just calling with aces and kings. If Adeniya was calling those hands, then it was closer to 50% on both sides. The latter scenario favored minimal betting post-flop, even as the board ran out pretty dry and theoretically safe for queens. Saade had a top-five stack before the hand, and losing about 70% of his chips knocked him into lower levels of the counts. He wound up busting in 13th place shortly thereafter.

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)

# JUNE KIM OUTLASTS 3,220 ENTRIES AT TALKING STICK

By Tim Fiorvanti

The *Major Series of Poker: The Tour* made its debut at Talking Stick Resort in Arizona, crushing a \$1 million guarantee three times over. A whirlwind final day culminated in a significant victory for local June Kim, who took home a career-best \$397,350.

On his way to victory, Kim outlasted a field of 3,220 entrants in the \$1,100 *Diamond Poker Championship*, which built a total prize pool of \$3,121,900. For Kim, the victory more than tripled his previous best live tournament result, a third-place finish in an \$1,100 buy-in event during the 2022 *Wynn Summer Classic*.

Kim and Carlton Taylor made a deal heads up, splitting the remaining prize pool via an ICM chop. The \$345,649 Taylor received for second place was far and away his career-best result as well, surpassing a modest previous cash of just \$4,500.

It was a long road to victory for Kim, who was one of 345 players to return for the start of day 2. Zilong Zhang held the chip lead for most of the final table. Zhang already had an *MSPT* title to his name in 2026, having won the *MSPT Golden State Poker Championship* in mid-January.

The hand that all but brought the tournament to a close came three-handed when Kim's  $K\spadesuit 7\spadesuit$  was all in against Zhang's  $A\clubsuit 10\heartsuit$ . Zhang appeared to be on the verge of winning the pot and taking a considerable chip lead into heads-up play, but the  $7\diamondsuit$  on the river gave Kim the winner, and more than 60% of the chips in play.



Zhang went out on the next hand, and Kim and Taylor promptly agreed to the ICM deal that ended the tournament. ♠

Player	Payout	(POY)
1 June Kim	\$397,350	1,200
2 Carlton Taylor	\$345,649	1,000
3 Zilong Zhang	\$185,000	800
4 Lawrence Goldstein	\$140,500	600
5 Jonah Labranche	\$117,100	500
6 Johnny Watson	\$93,700	400
7 Anastassios Leotsarakos	\$70,200	300
8 Douglas Jacoby	\$58,500	200
9 Brett McCollum	\$46,800	100

© MSPT

## TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2026 WPT Lucky Hearts Poker Open  
\$3,500 No-Limit Hold'em Championship



Thomas Boivin  
13,475,000 Chips

Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 59%  
After Flop: 77%  
After Turn: 91%



Ted McNamara  
6,675,000 Chips

Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 27%  
After Flop: 5%  
After Turn: 0%



### PREFLOP

With nine players remaining and blinds of 75,000-125,000 with a big blind ante of 125,000, Thomas Boivin raised to 275,000 from the hijack. Ted McNamara called from the big blind.



McNamara checked, and Boivin bet 200,000. McNamara check-raised to 550,000. Boivin called.



Both players checked.



McNamara bet 1,300,000, and Boivin folded.

### COMMENTARY:

Down to nine players in the *World Poker Tour Lucky Hearts Poker Open*, the tournament was once again on a money jump. The next player eliminated would earn \$60,000, with the jump to eighth place worth \$76,000. The middling stacks feel the most ICM pressure in these situations, and that's where Ted McNamara found himself, playing about 54 blinds and pondering a big blind defend against chip leader Thomas Boivin. Playing without ICM considerations, it was a clear defend. But given this situation, folding 10-3 suited to a raise bigger than the minimum would have been a defensible play, especially considering Boivin was the most accomplished player at the table. Boivin used a small size on the flop, and gutshots with a backdoor flush draw are some of the best check-raise bluffs. They block value, and players don't have to lose any sleep bet-folding them. Boivin called with a hand that was beating bluffs and had potential to improve. On the turn, McNamara recognized that the  $A\diamondsuit$  favored Boivin's opening range and correctly checked. Boivin had a clear check back with show-down value and a hand that didn't want to inflate the pot. On the river, McNamara had no show-down value and opted to bluff, targeting a hand like the one Boivin had. The solver favors bluffing more with the absolute worst hands in the range, like 6-5, and combos like 10-8 and 9-4 that block some of the calling range. But McNamara did bet big enough to pressure the worst pairs in Boivin's range, so the Belgian high roller decided to give up the pot when he had such a holding.

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)

# SANDRO CARUCCI SCORES COMEBACK WIN IN MARRAKECH

By Tim Fiorvanti

When the final eight players in the 2026 *World Series of Poker Circuit Marrakech* main event began their dinner break, Sandro Carucci was among the shortest stacks. After play resumed, he bided his time, laddered up, and won a key coinflip to kick off his ascent.

The 36-year-old from Switzerland continued to spin it up from there, and by the time the dust had settled, Carucci won the *WSOP Circuit* ring and \$330,000.

The €1,500 main event at Es Saadi Marrakech Resort in Morocco drew 1,694 total entries, for a prize pool of more than \$2.5 million.

After a brief discussion of a deal four-handed, which ultimately didn't go anywhere, Malcolm Franchi doubled his way back into the chip lead through Turlough Mchugh. Carucci promptly took a big chunk of those newfound chips, as he called a button jam with A♥ 10♥ and held against Franchi's Q♦ 9♦.

Carucci pulled himself into true title contention during three-handed play when his K♠ 10♥ connected with the 10♦ on the flop, doubling through Franchi's A♠ 2♠. He then doubled up again through Mchugh after picking off a big bluff attempt with a rivered backdoor flush.

The short stacked Mchugh was eliminated short thereafter in third place by Franchi for \$187,000, setting up the heads-up showdown for the title.

Despite not recording any of the eliminations at the final table, Carucci ultimately got the last knockout of the tour-



nament when his A♣ 6♥ got lucky against Franchi's A♠ 9♠ after a flop of A♥ J♦ 6♣. The turn and river were clean, and Franchi was forced to settle for the \$253,000 runner-up prize. ♠

Player	Payout	(POV)
1 Sandro Carucci	\$330,000	1,080
2 Malcolm Franchi	\$253,000	900
3 Turlough Mchugh	\$187,000	720
4 Anonymous	NA	
5 Salim Sefiat	\$103,400	450
6 Aitor Cruz	\$77,000	360
7 Alexandre Bermon	\$56,650	270
8 Luc Ramos	\$42,350	180
9 Mehdi Chaoui	\$33,000	90

© WSOP

## TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2026 WPT Lucky Hearts Poker Open  
\$3,500 No-Limit Hold'em Championship



**Thomas Boivin**  
12,150,000 Chips

Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 40%  
After Flop: 25%  
After Turn: 14%



**Ted McNamara**  
9,000,000 Chips

Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 59%  
After Flop: 75%  
After Turn: 86%



### PREFLOP

With nine players remaining and blinds of 75,000-150,000 with a big blind ante of 150,000, Thomas Boivin raised to 300,000 from UTG+1. Ted McNamara three-bet to 750,000 from the cutoff, and Boivin called.



Boivin bet 400,000, and McNamara called.



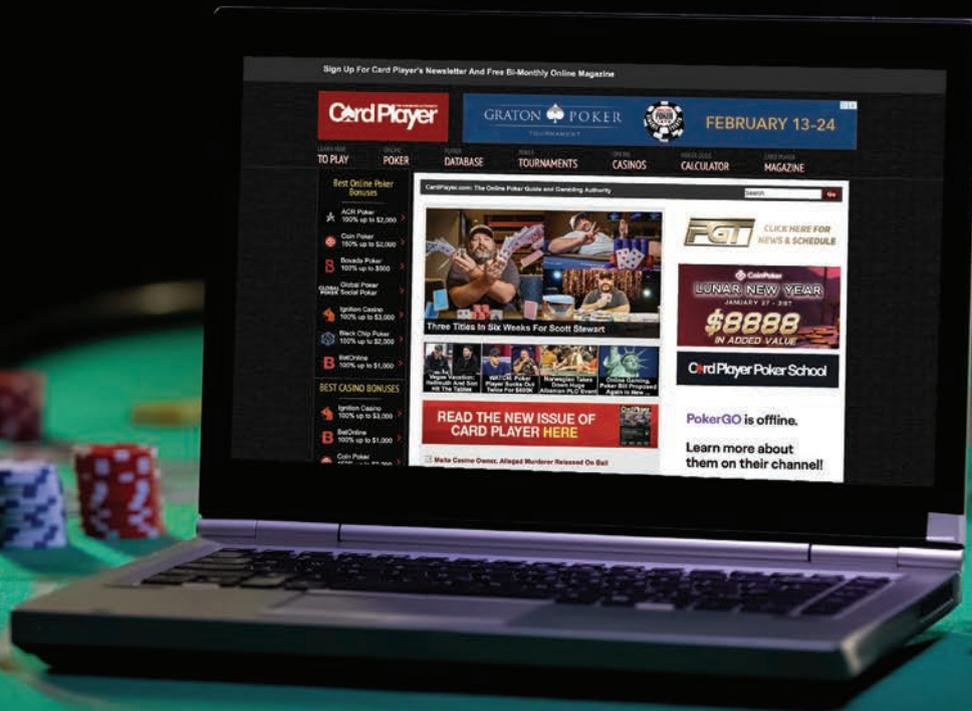
Boivin bet 650,000, and McNamara folded.

### COMMENTARY:

Still nine-handed at the *World Poker Tour Lucky Hearts Poker Open*, the stacks were getting closer together as the blinds rose and nobody pulled away with a lead. Thomas Boivin still had the top count, but his competition had closed the gap. There were a couple of players hovering around 15 blinds, however, so Ted McNamara and the other middle stacks still had serious ICM pressure. Despite that, McNamara did have a good hand to three-bet bluff, and he pulled the trigger. Boivin opted to see the flop since the three-bet was relatively small, but the solver doesn't recommend continuing with these offsuit holdings out of position facing what should be a very tight range. Once there, Boivin went for a very unusual lead. McNamara had been one of the more active players, and Boivin had blockers to two of McNamara's best pairs. He knew that McNamara should almost never have a nutted hand, since he likely wouldn't three-bet low and medium pairs preflop. However, at the same time, McNamara should have been suspicious of the lead, since Boivin could have gotten more money in the pot by check-raising if he actually had a good hand. McNamara decided to call and see what happened on the turn, but the solver prefers a fold, since A-10 was actually the worst unpaired offsuit ace that McNamara was supposed to show up with. Boivin decided to continue his aggression, targeting unpaired overcards, and McNamara had little choice but to give his hand up unless he planned to hero call some rivers. Since he was still in solid chip position, he could fold a low-value holding and not affect his standing in the tournament too much.

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)

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# CIRCUIT RESULTS



© Wynn

Event	Player	Payout	POV
Signature Series  Wynn Las Vegas, NV  \$600 NLH Jan. 15-18 \$250,000 GTD Entries: 660 Prizepool: \$336,600	1 Rex Clinkscates	\$48,302	420
	2 Ryan Pasquale	\$40,726	350
	3 David Oppenheim	\$38,241	280
	4 Matthew Schulte	\$29,639	210
	5 Jonathan Stephens	\$19,130	175
	6 Anthony Danna	\$14,467	140
	7 Jesper Olsen	\$10,970	105
	8 Jeff Yarchever	\$8,045	70
	9 Matthew Lew	\$5,735	35



© WSOP / Poker.org

Event	Player	Payout	POV
WSOP Circuit  Thunder Valley Lincoln, CA  \$3,250 NLH Jan. 22 Entries: 82 Prizepool: \$246,000	1 David Stamm	\$69,711	288
	2 Daniel Lee	\$45,197	240
	3 Matthew Wantman	\$30,471	192
	4 Scott Stewart	\$21,392	144
	5 Casey Sandretto	\$15,666	120
	6 Mark Egbert	\$11,990	96
	7 Wenxin Huang	\$9,610	72
	8 Andrew Ostapchenko	\$8,084	48
	9 James Minghini	\$7,155	24



© Thunder Valley

Event	Player	Payout	POV
WSOP Circuit  Thunder Valley Lincoln, CA  \$400 NLH Jan. 15-18 \$250,000 GTD Entries: 1,228 Prizepool: \$405,240	1 Anthony Banuelos	\$58,437	384
	2 Micah Bell	\$38,580	320
	3 Benjamin Primus	\$27,410	256
	4 Thomas Morris	\$19,770	192
	5 Teng Vang	\$14,490	160
	6 Thomas Phillips	\$10,780	128
	7 Dylan Anderson	\$8,969	96
	8 Peter Li	\$6,270	64
	9 Juan Olmos	\$4,900	32



© WSOP / Poker.org

Event	Player	Payout	POV
WSOP Circuit  Thunder Valley Lincoln, CA  \$1,700 NLH Jan. 23-26 \$500,000 GTD Entries: 764 Prizepool: \$1,157,460	1 Jaime Haletky	\$205,460	912
	2 Franklin Chavez	\$136,920	760
	3 Casey Sandretto	\$95,650	608
	4 Julius Roque	\$67,920	456
	5 Donald Landwirth	\$49,040	380
	6 Stephen Kujubu	\$36,020	304
	7 Manjunath Mulinti	\$26,920	228
	8 Roman Dorokhin	\$20,470	152
	9 Spencer Gore	\$15,850	76

All payouts in USD.

# TOURNAMENTS



© Merit Poker

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Montenegro Championship	1 Timur Margolin	\$132,000	720
	2 Nikolay Fal	\$90,000	600
Splendid Hotel & Resort Budva, Montenegro	3 Paul Esau	\$61,800	480
	4 Jon Kyte	\$44,160	360
	5 Eric Sands	\$33,600	300
€1,650 NLH Jan. 19-25	6 Yaser Sakarya	\$27,000	240
	7 Ufuk Erkmen	\$22,320	180
€500,000 GTD Entries: 414 Prizepool: \$685,584	8 Andrei Daniliuk	\$17,760	120
	9 Oleksii Shchukin	\$13,224	60



© Diamond Poker Series

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Grand Renovation Series	1 Gergo Nagy	\$126,201	
	2 Jonas Kronwitter	\$72,098	
Portomaso Casino St. Julian's, Malta	3 Aki Vihikainen	\$42,067	
€15,300 PLO Jan. 19			
€300,000 GTD Entries: 21 Prizepool: \$240,366			



© Commerce

Event	Player	Payout	POY
LAPC	1 James Pilcher	\$78,955	456
	2 Beth Hall	\$45,985	380
Commerce Casino Commerce, CA	3 John Gillis	\$41,985	304
	4 Michael Nia	\$34,760	228
	5 Paul Hizer	\$33,415	190
\$600 NLH Jan. 19-25	6 Jarod Einsohn	\$28,640	152
	7 Cody Blades	\$15,060	114
\$300,000 GTD Entries: 998 Prizepool: \$513,970	8 Jason Nikora	\$11,980	76
	9 Qun Dang	\$8,990	38



© Diamond Poker Series

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Grand Renovation Series	1 Lauri Varonen	\$282,374	600
	2 Lucas Vandenbelt	\$175,702	500
Portomaso Casino St. Julian's, Malta	3 Alexander Petersen	\$136,467	400
	4 Gustav Christensen	\$103,840	300
	5 Dennis Weiss	\$84,547	250
€10,300 PLO Jan. 20-22	6 Patrick Rasmussen	\$71,803	200
€1,000,000 GTD Entries: 103 Prizepool: \$1,142,476	7 Jelle Kroon	\$60,770	150
	8 Alessandro Furneri	\$49,796	100
	9 Angelo Vietti	\$38,763	50

# TOURNAMENTS



© Diamond Poker Series

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Grand Renovation Series	1 Jonas Kronwitter	\$239,068	672
	2 Dario Alioto	\$148,680	560
	3 Anonymous	NA	
Portomaso Casino St. Julian's, Malta	4 Marco Levato	\$87,615	336
	5 Tom-Aksel Bedell	\$71,213	280
	6 Sander van Wesemael	\$60,416	224
€5,200 PLO Jan. 22-25 €1,000,000 GTD Entries: 192 Prizepool: \$1,109,200	7 Christian Stratmeyer	\$51,448	168
	8 Youness Barakat	\$42,421	112
	9 Tom Ungemach	\$33,453	56



© SHR Poker Blog

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Winter Poker Open	1 Michael Valore	\$65,940	384
	2 Nathan Seifert	\$40,700	320
Seminole Hard Rock Tampa, FL	3 Ben Chelladurai	\$30,680	256
	4 Drew Dodge	\$23,340	192
	5 Thomas Minnich Weber	\$17,930	160
\$400 NLH Jan. 21-25 \$200,000 GTD Entries: 1,209 Prizepool: \$398,970	6 John Coleman	\$13,900	128
	7 Brandon Padula	\$10,880	96
	8 Vaughn Steeves	\$8,600	64
	9 Robert Thomas	\$6,860	32



© Running Aces

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Big Stack Avalanche	1 Eric Eelkema	\$49,770	420
	2 Michael Wilklow	\$30,569	350
Running Aces Columbus, MN	3 Nikolas Stone	\$22,275	280
	4 Francis Meyer	\$16,588	210
	5 Matthew Alexander	\$12,560	175
\$500 NLH Jan. 21-25 Entries: 549 Prizepool: \$236,072	6 John Gallenberg	\$9,479	140
	7 Charley Baker	\$7,346	105
	8 Jessica McGuire	\$5,688	70
	9 David Danielson	\$4,502	35



© SHR Poker Blog

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Winter Poker Open	1 Yan Jiang	\$133,430	720
	2 Kyle Sturgis	\$82,440	600
Seminole Hard Rock Tampa, FL	3 Rafael Reis	\$59,470	480
	4 Justin Fawcett	\$43,580	360
	5 Brandon Padula	\$32,460	300
\$1,700 NLH Jan. 29-Feb. 1 \$300,000 GTD Entries: 419 Prizepool: \$628,500	6 Robert Lebeau	\$24,570	240
	7 Michael Hollander	\$18,910	180
	8 Robert Capote	\$14,810	120
	9 Bradley Robertson	\$11,790	60

# TOURNAMENTS



© Dusk Till Dawn

Event	Player	Payout	POY
UK Poker Championships	1 Hong Pham	\$138,370	480
	2 Haydn Dickinson	\$86,310	400
	3 Paul Tait	\$59,527	320
Dusk Till Dawn Nottingham, United Kingdom	4 Jacque Ramsden	\$40,237	240
	5 Nicholas Rose	\$27,743	200
£560 NLH Jan. 22-26 £500,000 GTD Entries: 1,159 Prizepool: \$761,491	6 Stephen Blow	\$19,523	160
	7 Jose Bazan	\$14,043	120
	8 John Hall	\$9,933	80
	9 Alistair Massie	\$7,193	40



© PokerStars/ Danny Mawell

Event	Player	Payout	(POY)
PokerStars Open	1 Manuel Ferrari	\$102,424	360
	2 Thierry van den Berg	\$64,003	300
Casino Campione Campione, Italy	3 Filippo Candio	\$45,713	240
	4 Samuele Salvucci	\$35,164	180
€2,200 NLH Jan. 27-28 Entries: 214 Prizepool: \$484,835	5 Viktor Jensen	\$27,046	150
	6 Luis Biasillo	\$21,122	120
	7 Jorge Ufano	\$17,606	90
	8 Lorenzo Arduini	\$14,679	60
	9 Mauro Guastamacchia	\$12,768	30



© MSPT

Event	Player	Payout	POY
Colorado Showdown	1 Vincent Moscati	\$107,376	840
	2 Kyna England	\$66,930	700
Bally's Black Hawk, CO	3 Faraz Jaka	\$48,694	560
	4 Justin Lynch	\$35,959	420
	5 Roger Low	\$26,969	350
\$1,100 NLH Jan. 22-25 \$300,000 GTD Entries: 528 Prizepool: \$508,720	6 Kent Biel	\$20,476	280
	7 Scott Horvath	\$15,982	210
	8 Corey Dodd	\$12,486	140
	9 Jeremy Ahillen	\$9,489	70



© ROPS

Event	Player	Payout	(POY)
RunGood Series	1 Jose Garcia	\$88,007	480
	2 Andrew Robinson	\$61,547	400
The Lodge Austin, TX	3 James Black	\$40,069	320
	4 Kyle Stein	\$29,069	240
	5 Kevin Easterling	\$22,149	200
	6 Matt Cosentino	\$17,804	160
\$600 NLH Jan. 29-Feb. 1 \$250,000 GTD Entries: 1,018 Prizepool: \$512,054	7 James Cazin	\$14,742	120
	8 Thomas McCutcheon	\$11,706	80
	9 Zachary Evers	\$8,691	40

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# Final Table Takedown: Lily Lotfy Captures WPT Ladies Championship

By Craig Tapscott



Lily Lotfy fell in love with poker around a crowded table during long Thanksgiving weekends, in a family where cards were always in play. Poker was actually just one game among many at first, but it stuck with the Boston native as she ventured off to Northeastern University and began her career in technology product management.

While living in New York City from 2017 to 2019, she cut her teeth in low-stakes underground games, learning the unglamorous but essential lessons of discipline, patience, and exploiting human tendencies.

But in 2022, everything changed when she discovered tournament poker. A deep run in a \$600 opener at the *World Poker Tour Lucky Hearts Poker Open* was enough to flip the switch. That same year, she made her first trip to the *World Series of Poker* — and she hasn't missed one since.

Lotfy has spent most of her adult life balancing structure and risk. Over the years she's taken some 'career breaks' that have allowed her to focus on poker, and the game has pulled her in deeply enough that she openly flirts with the idea of turning pro, even if she hasn't fully crossed that line yet.

Lotfy regularly plays daily events at Encore Boston Harbor, where she's quietly built a strong track record with several wins. She also has a *WPT* side event win at Playground Poker in Montreal.

In December, Lotfy took down the *WPT Ladies Championship* at Wynn for a career-best \$82,636. *Card*

*Player* caught up with her to break down a couple of key hands that led to her victory.

**Event:** WPT Ladies Championship  
**Buy-In:** \$1,000  
**Entrants:** 445  
**Prize Pool:** \$429,425  
**First-Place Prize:** \$82,636

**Craig Tapscott:** As poker players, we are always trying to get better. What has been the most significant improvement in your game recently?

**Lily Lotfy:** I think some of the most significant improvements in my game have come from practicing more restraint. I'm being more selective in the spots I choose to take vs. pass up. It's a play style that's a little more conservative than my norm.

I think I have a naturally aggressive play style which has helped me because it goes against the stereotype a lot of women have at the poker table. Being able to rein it in a little has helped my game significantly though, by giving me more control over my stack and reducing high-variance spots.

**CT:** What's your plan for 2026? I know you've toyed with the idea of playing professionally.

**LL:** I'm just taking life month by month. I'm taking the first couple months this year to visit family in Egypt, and I'll



be traveling a bunch to different parts of the world. I'm very excited to be playing my first *Irish Poker Open* in Dublin starting at the end of March. Beyond that, who knows? I wouldn't be surprised to find myself back for a good portion of the *WSOP* this summer.

**HAND NO. 1**

**Stacks:** Lily Lotfy – 4,250,000 (85 BB) Villain - 1,000,000 (20 BB)  
**Blinds:** 25,000-50,000 with a 50,000 big blind ante  
**Players Remaining:** 10  
**Players:** 5

**Villain raised from the button to 125,000.**

**LL:** I'm in the small blind and look down at queens. This is a pretty obvious three-bet, because it's a strong hand and because I'm the chip leader on the final table bubble.

I had been using that stack to apply a lot of pressure to my opponents. It's one of those spots where the chip leader who's been abusing the bubble actually has it, which was nice.

**CT:** What sizing would be best in this spot from the blinds?

**LL:** When thinking about the bet size, I wanted it to be small enough that she could continue with worse hands and be tempted to see a flop in position. So, I made it a little less than 3x.

**Lotfy raised to 350,000 from the small blind with Q♣ Q♦. The Big blind folded.**

**LL:** Under other circumstances, I might have raised to a larger size from the small blind. It's also worth noting that I've spent the majority of day 2 playing at the same table as this opponent.

**CT:** Did you have any reads?

**LL:** I found her play to be quite conservative and tight. So

even with button opening ranges tending to be wider, I still expected her to have something worth continuing with.

**Villain called.**

**Flop:** Q♣ J♣ 7♥

**LL:** Awesome. I've made top set on the flop, so my thought process continues to be, 'how can I get the most chips in the middle?'

I decided to check since it's highly unlikely she has a queen or overpair. I also want her to be able to seek value with hands worse than top pair, like A-J, A-K, 10-10, 9-9, etc. If she has a super strong hand like J-J, we're getting the money in either way.

**Lotfy checked.**

**Villain bet 250,000.**

**LL:** She bet small 250,000 into 850,000. Definitely an interesting size because she left herself only 400,000 back, and the SPR of her remaining stack is small. I still didn't see any reason for putting her all in with two streets left.

**Lotfy called.**

**Turn:** 10♦

**CT:** That's not a great card for you.

**LL:** I know. I don't love this card because A-K now gets there, and I definitely think that's a possibility given this opponent's conservative nature.

**Lotfy checked. Villain moved all in.**

**LL:** When I checked, she quickly went nearly all in, leaving 10,000 behind. I'm obviously calling. If I'm beat and she has A-K, I can still boat up on the river. The odds I'm getting make it a must call no matter what.

**Lotfy jammed all in. Villain called.**

**LL:** She threw her last chip in, and I was quite surprised to see she had just 9-9. She was open-ended.

**River:** 2♦

**Lotfy won the pot of 2,100,000.**



**LL:** I was lucky to fade the straight draw on the river, eliminating her and getting to the final table with a commanding chip lead. After that hand, I had over 100 big blinds, which was almost double the next closest stack.

**HAND NO. 2**

**Stacks:** Lily Lotfy – 5,500,000 (44 BB)  
 Villain - 7,000,000 (56 BB)  
**Blinds:** 75,000-125,000 with a 125,000 big blind ante  
**Players remaining:** 3

**LL:** When we got to three-handed play, it was the first time during the entirety of day 2 that I wasn't chip leading and was vulnerable to elimination. I chose this hand, not because there was a lot to write about strategically, but because I think it was the most consequential hand of the final table for me, leading me to the win.

**Villain raised to 275,000 from the button. Lotfy called from the big blind holding J♠ 7♥.**

**LL:** I felt like calling and defending this hand was my only option, since both folding and raising seemed bad. It's worth noting that this opponent was the most aggressive I had faced throughout the day and was not afraid to put people in very tough spots.

**Flop:** 8♣ 7♣ 7♦

**LL:** Once again, I've made a very strong hand on the flop. I'm pretty much always checking here and given the aggressive nature of this opponent, it made even more sense.

**Lotfy checked, and Villain bet 250,000.**

**CT:** You can go either way here. Be sneaky and trap, or check-raise. What did you feel was the best way to approach this flop?

**LL:** I needed to decide whether to raise or slow play. I decided against this particular opponent, it was worth it to get more money in on the flop, given her aggressive style.

**Lotfy raised to 750,000. Villain shoved all-in.**

**LL:** And to my surprise, she snap went all-in for my remaining 5,100,000. This was huge, given we were first and second in chips, with third in chips at the table trailing us by quite a bit. We were quite deep.

**Lotfy called.**

**LL:** I snap-called, and she showed...

**Villain revealed Q♣ 10♠.**

**CT:** That had to be a huge surprise for you.

**LL:** I understood she was trying to put max pressure on me, given the ICM pressure with the shorter stack still remaining, and she thought she was targeting an eight or smaller pair. I think my decision to raise such a strong hand on the flop really paid off as a result.

**Turn:** 8♥

**River:** 3♦

**Lotfy won the 11,075,000 pot.**

**LL:** I was able to breathe a huge sigh of relief, fading her flush draw, boating up, and having her drawing dead on the turn. This pot gave me 11,000,000 of the 17,000,000 chips in play, which was huge.

I think my biggest lesson from this event is in line with what I described as my overall biggest learnings from 2025. I practiced a great deal of restraint in this tournament even while holding the chip lead through most of day 2. I was very determined to protect my chip lead and fine tune my aggression. I still used my chip stack to my advantage in many spots, but I also passed on a lot of spots I typically would have taken in order to protect my lead.

**Follow Lotfy on Twitter/X @lilylotfy. ♠**



## HOW CAUTIOUS SHOULD YOU BE WITH A-K?

By Jonathan Little

I recently played an interesting hand in a slow-structured \$3,500 buy-in live tournament where we started with 150,000 at 500-1,000.

Everyone at my table was playing pretty tight, waiting for someone to make a big mistake, so I adjusted and made a point to steal every pot once it was clear no one was interested in winning it. This allowed me to double my starting stack within two hours with almost no risk, which is always an amazing result.

However, when you are constantly pushing your opponents around, your observant opponents will eventually assume that you are playing too aggressively and may adjust.

At 1,500-3,000 with a 3,000 big blind ante, a weak-tight player who was clearly waiting for strong preflop cards raised to 4,500 out of his 66,000 stack from first position. The hijack and button called. I looked down at A-K in the small blind and just called.

When facing a first position raiser who almost certainly has a premium hand, bloating the pot from out of position will get you in trouble. You must realize that A-K will only win around 40% of the time against a range containing only A-A, K-K, Q-Q, J-J, and A-K, which is almost certainly what you will be against if the initial raiser decides to four-bet.

If you three-bet and the initial raiser calls, everyone else will likely call, forcing you to play a four-way pot from out of position.

Since both results are quite bad, calling is likely the best play because it forces your opponents to stay in the pot with hands you dominate, while also under-representing your hand.

The flop came A-10-8, giving me top pair. I checked, as I would do with all my hands, and the initial raiser bet 9,000 into the 21,600 pot. Everyone folded around to me.

While I would normally call to keep my opponent in the pot with hands that are drawing thin, such as A-J and K-K, I was convinced that my opponent liked his hand.

Since I have an ace in my hand, I am unlikely to be against A-A. I thought it was fairly unlikely that he had 8-8 because he would have likely limped with that preflop. (To be clear, limping 8-8 is vastly inferior to raising.) This means that unless he has exactly 10-10, I am either chopping against A-K or ahead against A-Q or A-J.

I did not get the vibe that he would fold his strong hands because most amateur players who use an overly tight preflop strategy tend to go way too far

with their marginal made hands. They feel that since they rarely enter the pot they must win every time they connect with the board.

So, I went all-in for my opponent's 52,500 remaining stack. My opponent proudly called and turned up his A-Q. He could not believe it when I turned up A-K because in his mind, I "must" three-bet with A-K before the flop.

Recognize that just because you would play a hand in a particular way does not mean that your opponents will.

If you want more resources to help you improve your game, I put together a course called *Master the Fundamentals*. This course covers the basics, preflop, post-flop, multiway, turn and river strategy, and much more. This course is completely free inside *Card Player* Poker School!

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- Free Course: The 25 Biggest Leaks And How To Fix Them
- Free Training Every Week ♠



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

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# PUNT OF THE DAY: BLUFFING TRUETELLER IN THE BIGGEST ONLINE TOURNAMENT OF ALL TIME

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.*

The first super high roller I ever played was the *PokerStars Caribbean Adventure* \$100,000 event in January 2015. PIOSolver was released a couple months later in March 2015, and while private solvers existed as early as 2013, most of the early solver adopters played high-stakes cash games, particularly heads-up.

So, when PokerStars announced they'd be running the "largest-ever buy-in online tournament" as part of the 2015 *World Championship of Online Poker*, I marked it down as a tournament to play.

At the time, the best cash and tournament players' skillsets didn't overlap much, and they rarely played against each other. Tournament players were not using solvers, nor were they playing vs. people who used solvers.

(Side note: I remember the first time Jonas 'OTB\_RedBaron' Mols overbet the turn against me, and I sat there with the nuts running through my timebank totally baffled as I did not know what to do. I ended up raising, incorrectly thinking he was greedily overbetting for value against a tournament donk like me who can't fold top pair. He snap folded, of course.)

This *WCOOP* event presented an interesting opportunity for me, as most of my edge would come in later stages of the tournament where my short stack and tournament games were strong. But there was enough value in the tournament early on that I also wanted to play from the start, even if I would often be the fourth-best deepstack player at the table.

I didn't remember much about the tournament (it took place 10 years ago and a belated congrats to Ben Tollerene for winning it), but when I rewatched my commentary series on *Run It Once* where I reviewed my play, I got A-K under-the-gun, saw Timofey 'Trueteller' Kuznetsov in the big blind, and I began to remember today's hand.

**Event:** 2015 PokerStars WCOOP \$50,000 No-Limit Hold'em

**The Hand**

I had 27,542 and looked down at A♥ K♠. I raised to 750 from under-the-gun at the six-handed table. It folded to Trueteller in the big blind with 52,125, and he called.

**Flop:** J♦ 9♥ 8♣

Trueteller checked, and I bet 1,400. He called.

**Turn:** Q♣

Trueteller checked, and I bet 2,345. He called.

**River:** 4♠

Trueteller checked, and I bet 4,690. He called with A♦



Timofey 'Trueteller' Kuznetsov

10♣ to take the pot.

**What Was I Thinking?**

The flop favors my range and is dynamic, so I do want to bet on the larger size.

I don't want to bet a large size on the turn, however, because it's hard to bluff when he can often have a straight, so half pot is an appropriate bet size. A-K is a good hand to barrel as well, because it can improve to a better hand vs. a straight.

I'd mostly keep barreling with flush draws, including hands like A♣ 9♣ or A♣ J♣, while occasionally betting sets and two pair, but I'd never bluff with no pair, no draw.

On the river, I don't have many hands to bluff with. I would want to give up with flush draws because they block his weakest continues.

I'd want to value bet straights, and A-K without a club is one of the few turn barrels I have without a club. It blocks A-10 and K-10, so I want to bet it on the river, but I don't want to bet much larger than half pot because I can never get a ten to fold.

**What Did I Get Wrong?**

I've taken to skipping basic preflop decisions in this section, but I'm reviewing a 10-year-old hand where I made a lot of mistakes, so I'll start with a pat on the back.

I open-raised A-K offsuit. That's a good play!

On the flop, I was probably pure c-betting with range, which seems like a reasonable play when you raise UTG and have 57% range vs. range equity. But it's actually a mistake.

This board is connected enough that I don't want to bet everything. Even a very high equity hand like A-A starts feeling the heat if it gets check-raised, so I play some checks with range.

When I bet, I mix a big bet (my size is fine) and a small bet (let's say 25% to 33% pot), and as is often the case on boards where A-K whiffs, A-K mixes between all three options.

In my initial analysis, I state that on a turn like this I do not get to bet a big size. That is incorrect.

My ideal turn size is 150% pot, and it includes K-10, A-10, some sets, some flush draws, some K-x and A-x with a nothing kicker, and yes, some A-K, but mostly with a club.

No matter what size constraints I give my flop or turn strategy, A-K bets both the flop and the turn sometimes.

The problem is not how I played my hand, but with my strategy. I'm pulling way too many of my turn bluffs from A-K. I am not betting the turn enough with total air, partially because my preflop range is too tight, (I don't have K-5 through K-7 suited in my preflop range) but also because I am not finding any no-equity two-barrels.

I didn't mention 3-3 thru 6-6, 5♥ 4♥, or A♠ 2♠ as hands

I could bet the turn with, but the solver bets with them a lot. This means if the river is a club, ace, king, or ten, I will not have enough hands to bluff with on the river.

My turn and river sizing make sense, in that I don't want to overbet into a straight that will never fold, and he has a straight around 30% of the time on the turn. However, we are deep enough that I can actually get straights to fold.

If I bet 150% pot on the turn, a bare straight folds 12% of the time. When I shove the river, I also get a non-nut straight to fold around a third of the time. Even if I missed the turn overbet and bet half pot on the turn, if I then shove the river for 2.5x pot, I get a queen-high straight to fold 30% of the time.

I don't know if I could have gotten Trueteller to fold a straight in 2015, but it's not impossible.

The problem with my line is that I make life too easy for middle-of-range hands. When I bet 150% pot on the turn, two pair almost always folds. When I bet half pot, it never folds, and it is a reasonable bluff catcher on a blank river versus a half-pot bet.

I thought I was bluffing cheaply in case I ran into a straight, but I was actually making it so that I never get a straight to fold and I can get hero-called by hands that would fold on the turn.

Granted, when my bluff doesn't work, I do lose a lot more money, but believe it or not, the solver's sizing choices and overall strategy with range are superior to what my 2015 instincts wanted me to do.

As played, the river bluff is generally fine. If I force myself to bet half-pot on the turn, I do have some half-pot value bets with queen-high straights. And for bluffs, A-K can over-

bet shove, bet half-pot to target one or two pair, or check.

One lesson with A-K is that, post-flop, you often need to spread your A-K high combos throughout many different parts of your range, and that remains true on the river.

**Types Of Errors I Made**

Poor Range Strategy

Lack Of Creativity

**Grade**

This is a classic hand that looked fine in 2015, but after a closer examination, I could see all the holes in my overall strategy.

Raising A-K and three-barreling it on a board where I have a gutshot to the nuts, no flush draw blockers, and no showdown on the river all seems reasonable, and it's one of the most natural bluffs for me to have here. The problems are that my preflop range is too tight so I don't have enough suited kings to bluff with, my flop strategy is off, my turn size loses EV, and I am not bluffing with enough no-equity combos to such an extreme degree that A-K high might be my only bluff on the river.

This all adds up to a C. ♠



*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*

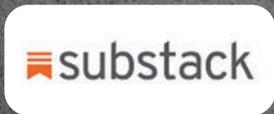
*them down street by street on his Punt Of The Day Substack. You can reach out to the Run It Once coach on Twitter/X for private coaching @SamGreenwoodRIO.*

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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# Taking Away The Right Lesson From The Wrong Decision

By Mark Mazmanian

Sometimes in poker when things do not go smoothly, it can feel like walking with two left feet. That is exactly what happened to me with two separate hands from a couple of recent sessions. It's important to draw the right lesson when things don't go your way. The wrong lesson will do more harm than good in the future.

The first hand came in \$5 pot-limit bomb pot Drawmaha 49. In this game, every player antes \$5, and there is no preflop betting. Everyone gets dealt five cards, and half the pot is awarded to the best traditional Omaha hand, and the other half to the most pips in the hole.

Face cards are 0, aces are 1, and other cards count for number value. Since each player is dealt five cards, the maximum pip count attainable is 10-10-10-10-9 for a ceiling of 49 points. Additionally, since the game is Drawmaha, each player may draw post-flop.

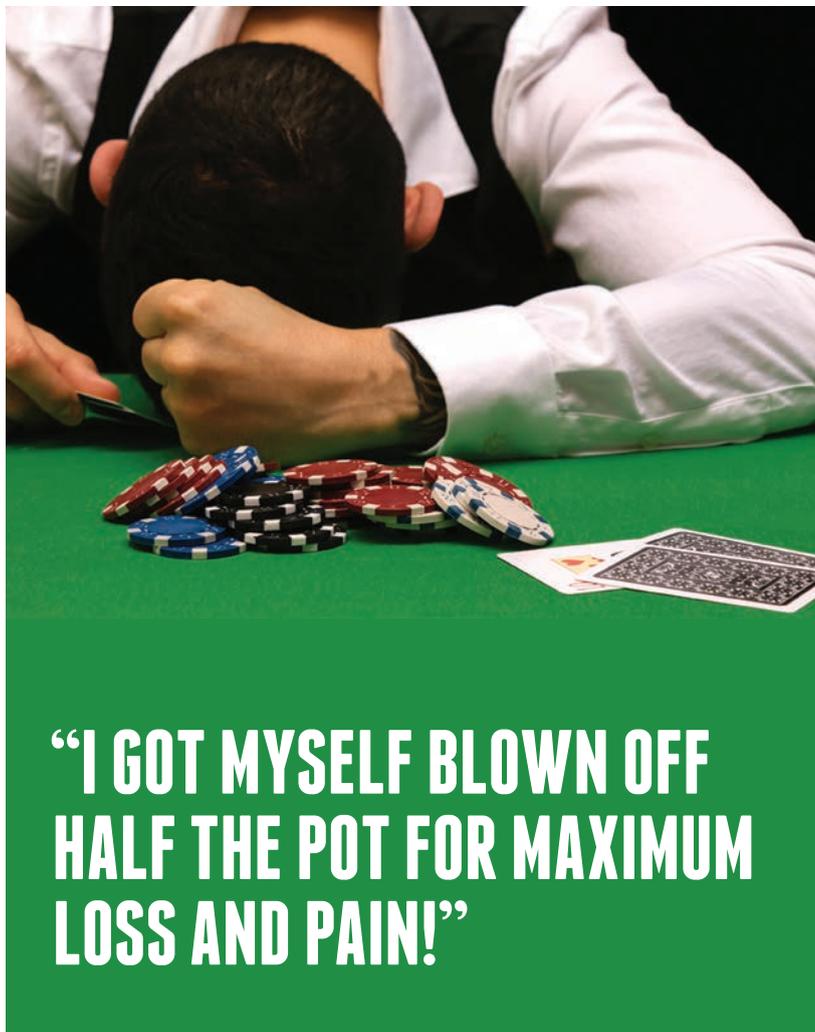
Seven players were dealt in, so we took a flop of K-5-2 rainbow with \$35 in it. My holding was 9-8-8-Q-3 on the button, which was rather formidable since I have 26 points, two cards to draw, plus I'm last to act.

Everyone checked, so I potted for \$35 and was called by a pro (who has a mixed game bracelet) as well as a recreational player. They drew two and three cards each. I threw away my queen and three, adding a six and a seven for a total of 38 (9-8-8-7-6).

The turn was the 10♥, adding a heart draw to my hand. The first player checked, and the rec potted for \$140. I called, and the other player folded making the pot \$420.

The river paired the 10, and opponent checked. I felt comfortable that I most likely had at least half the pot locked up with my points, and I had never seen this player check-raise in any spot. I thought a check-raise was unlikely and that if he did, his hand was likely built around the tens as he bet out after the draw, and then got tricky on the river.

Alternatively, if he had a busted draw like A-Q-Q-J with hearts, he



**“I GOT MYSELF BLOWN OFF HALF THE POT FOR MAXIMUM LOSS AND PAIN!”**

may fold half the pot if I bet out. We were over \$850 deep with \$420 in the pot, so I considered what type of bet could win me the \$210 that didn't belong to me.

I announced \$200, and before my chips even hit the felt, my opponent check-raised all-in. I thought for a moment before deciding a 10 with more points was most of his range, and folded.

He promptly tabled K-K-J-J-Q, so I got myself blown off half a pot for maximum loss and pain! Awesome.

Later that week, I found myself in \$5 double board five-card PLO bomb pot on the button with A♣ 9x 7♣ 4x

3x. Seven players were dealt in, so the pot was \$35 when flops of Q-10-2 rainbow and A-7-3 with two clubs came down.

It checked to me, and I fired full pot of \$35. I was a little surprised when four players called, bloating the pot to \$210.

The turns made the boards Q-10-2-5 and A-7-3-4.

The five helped tremendously as I added a wrap on a board I was previously dead on, but the four wasn't very beneficial. It checked to me, and I happily took free cards.

The rivers made the boards Q-10-2-5-10 and A-7-3-4-8. The first river

paired the 10, and the second was the 8♣ completing my nut flush.

The first two opponents checked, and the third player fired out \$125. The next player folded, and I had to contemplate if it was better to raise or flat. A raise would only be beneficial if I could get value from the bettor, and a flat would be better to induce action behind me.

Since I held the A♣, I thought it was most likely that the bettor was betting strength on the other board which had paired. As such, I was expecting some kind of full house combination. Alternatively, if he did have a lower flush, he would most likely have my A-9 high beat on the other board and split with me if he called my raise.

All things considered, I decided the most profitable play would be to flat call and hope I got action behind.

After I called, the next player sighed and tanked, and finally folded (he told me afterwards he mucked a king-high flush, and I believed him). The next opponent folded, and the bettor said, "You probably scoop," as he sheepishly tabled 8-8-K-J-9 with no clubs, which of course I split with since I couldn't beat 8-8 on the other board.

This was incredibly frustrating, as had I simply elected to even minraise with my nut flush, I would have collected his \$125 plus the \$210 in the middle (\$40 of which was mine) which would have profited me \$295. As played, we split the \$125 action on the river, and I collected half the \$210 for \$105, \$40 of which was still mine for a mere profit of \$65.

As I reflected on it, I couldn't help but notice it was the exact opposite situation of what occurred in the other game, and again I achieved the result of maximum loss and pain. This time, I got there by taking the passive route hoping to keep people in whereas before I got there by aggressively trying to drive an opponent out. However, let's analyze the lesson each hand truly offers.

In the first, I correctly analyzed that I was risking \$200 to win \$205, so I only needed just under 50% success to be profitable. Additionally, my loss is when I value bet myself or get blown off my hand.

What I failed to consider was if my opponent check-raised, what I would do about it. It wasn't very likely, but I at least would have been prepared

if and when push came to shove. Not considering it was a lesson I could learn from for next time around.

Now, on the other hand, I profited \$65 instead of \$295, and my play allowed for a king-high flush to at least consider calling even though he did eventually find a fold. How often would a bettor in that spot go kamikaze into four opponents? Honestly, I'd be surprised if it happened even 5% of the time as it is such a risky play on that river knowing there's five-way action and the flopped flush draw indeed got there.

So, I think I made a sound decision that happened to not work out. And making sure the right lesson is taken away is how to improve our analysis for the next time a similar spot arises, regardless of the pain of the moment. ♠



Mark Mazmanian has been a mixed-game specialist for more than two decades playing in games all over the country. The Las Vegas resident can be reached on IG at [mazztastic1](#) or by email at [markmazi7@hotmail.com](mailto:markmazi7@hotmail.com).

# TOURNAMENT HAND MATCHUP

2026 WPT Lucky Hearts Poker Open  
\$3,500 No-Limit Hold'em Championship



**Thomas Boivin**  
11,800,000 Chips



Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 45%  
After Flop: 23%  
After Turn: 11%



**Giuseppe Ladisernia**  
15,875,000 Chips



Winning Percentage  
Before Flop: 54%  
After Flop: 73%  
After Turn: 89%

## PREFLOP

With seven players remaining and blinds of 125,000-250,000 with a big blind ante of 250,000, Thomas Boivin raised to 500,000 from UTG+1. Ladisernia called from the big blind.



Ladisernia checked, and Boivin bet 300,000. Ladisernia called.



Both players checked.



Ladisernia bet 350,000. Boivin raised to 1,200,000, and Ladisernia called.

## COMMENTARY:

The final seven players were in the money at the *World Poker Tour Lucky Hearts Poker Open* and guaranteed \$98,000, and the next elimination would mark both a pay jump to \$127,000 and an official *WPT* final table appearance. Thomas Boivin and Giuseppe Ladisernia were the top two stacks, so both players had a lot of incentive to keep pots small, although none of the players left had a prohibitively short stack. Boivin opened with a questionable holding, one that would have been more appealing if he wasn't up against the only covering stack in the big blind. Ladisernia defended and had a straightforward check-call against the small sizing on the monotone flop. Boivin's first real choice came on the turn, where he decided not to continue barreling despite picking up equity with a gut-shot. He was supposed to primarily bluff hands that have a heart in them, so checking was the best play. On the river, Ladisernia must have felt he had the best hand in order to bet such a small size. Since Ladisernia only bet about 15% of the pot, Boivin wouldn't have to call with worse very often in order for the play to be profitable. Against the small bet, however, he had a number of options. Obviously, he could have just folded a low-value hand and moved on in a still-healthy position. He could have also called in hopes of beating a hand like J-10 with a heart. He decided to raise small, representing a medium-value hand like a pair of kings or perhaps two pair. Ladisernia wasn't buying it, and it's never a good sign for the utility of a bluff when it gets called by one of the hands it's hoping to fold out. Boivin had to be targeting weak pairs with that smaller sizing, and it backfired. Ladisernia took a commanding lead with almost one-third of the chips, and he rode that to a win worth \$611,700.

**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)**

# Man vs. Machine: The GTO Arms Race

By Luke Geel

Long before the explosion of ChatGPT in November 2022, a different kind of artificial intelligence was honing its skills in the world of high-stakes gambling. While the public is only now beginning to grapple with AI's implications, the gambling industry has been quietly developing and simultaneously battling against intelligent systems for decades.

Step into any major Las Vegas casino in the early '90s, and the pit boss wasn't the only one watching you. From the moment you parked your car, unseen digital eyes were tracking your every move — analyzing your spending habits, how long you stayed at each table, and the path you took across the casino floor. This was an early form of artificial intelligence using algorithmic surveillance — primitive by today's standards, but powerful for its time.

On the surface, its purpose seemed straightforward. It quickly flagged known card counters or other advantage players, allowing security to discreetly escort them off the premises. Additionally, the 'eye in the sky' was used to identify players in case of disputes at the table.

However, the real gold was in the data. By understanding intricate patterns of guest behavior, casinos could architect their entire environment, guiding multimillion-dollar remodels, marketing strategies, and future investments. They were using AI to design a more efficient money-making labyrinth.

But the house wasn't the only one getting in on the AI action. Players were starting to arm themselves, too.

For decades, poker represented a monumental challenge for artificial intelligence. Unlike chess, a "perfect information" game where all pieces are visible, poker is a labyrinth of unknowns. Researchers attempting to solve poker with AI were forced to grapple with bluffing, incomplete information, and human psychology, a challenge many believed was impossible.

The first real signs of AI entering the poker world came in 2005 during



the "World Series of Poker Robots," hosted by the online poker room Golden Palace. During the event, poker pro Phil Laak narrowly defeated a bot named Poki-X in a heads-up limit hold'em match. Despite his victory, Laak admitted the match was "tough" and predicted that machines would eventually surpass the best humans. He was right.

The team behind that bot, from the University of Alberta, was relentless. By 2008, their next program, Polaris, was already beating human specialists in heads-up limit hold'em. Seven years later, they unveiled Cepheus. This program was so advanced it had effectively "solved" the game, playing a strategy so close to perfect that it could never be beaten over the long run.

However, limit hold'em, with its fixed-betting structure, is a far simpler beast than poker's most popular and complex variant. No-limit hold'em became the next great challenge, taken up by a competing group of researchers at Carnegie Mellon University.

Their first major attempt, Claudico, faced four top professionals — including Doug Polk — in 2015, playing over 80,000 hands. While the humans finished ahead by more than \$700,000, the result was deemed a statistical tie given the staggering \$170 million wagered.

There was no ambiguity two years later. In 2017, Claudico's successor, Libratus, left no doubt. In a high-profile showdown, it crushed a team of elite pros, winning over \$1.7 mil-

lion (in virtual chips) across 120,000 hands.

The winning streak didn't end there. In 2019, the same CMU research team unveiled Pluribus, an AI capable of playing six-handed no-limit hold'em — exponentially more complex than heads-up play. Facing five elite professionals, including Seth Davies, Linus "LLinusLLove" Loeliger, and 2012 WSOP main event champion Greg Merson, Pluribus didn't just win, it dominated. The era of man versus machine at the poker table was over, and the machines had won.

But while these victories were a theoretical showcase, the practical impact of AI on poker was only just beginning.

For modern poker players, AI is no longer an abstract academic concept. It is both a companion and a formidable threat. This paradox is embodied by the rise of poker "solvers" — sophisticated training tools that allow players to analyze virtually any situation and see the Game Theory Optimal (GTO) solution.

Early solvers were limited to pre-solved scenarios, but new AI-driven tools like GTO Wizard AI, released in mid-2023, allow players to customize everything from ranges to stack sizes. This unlocked a level of strategic depth that once required hours of computation. But this power came with a dark side, creating a new threat to the integrity of the game: Real-Time Assistance (RTA).

Online poker players have known for years that RTA is a growing threat.

In recent years, several high-profile professionals have been banned from major sites for using these tools to gain an unfair edge. Modern platforms now log solver queries and compare them against hand histories to determine whether a player was using RTA in real time or reviewing hands after the fact.

But cheating in the digital age goes beyond humans using AI tools. The most insidious threat isn't even human at all.

Let's talk poker bots.

The sophisticated AIs developed in university labs didn't stay there for long. Their commercial, black-market descendants found their way to the online felt. These are no longer research experiments—they are automated systems designed for one purpose: relentlessly extracting profit from human players.

For the average, everyday online grinder, bots feel like a digital plague. Ask anyone who plays online poker, and they'll have plenty to say. Some avoid certain sites entirely, while others quit online poker altogether, convinced the games have become

unbeatable.

That paranoia gained terrifying validation in January 2026, when a video resurfaced on Twitter/X showing a so-called "bot farm" from a few years ago. The footage appeared to show more than 20 computers in a single house, each running accounts on major poker sites. These bots weren't just playing near-perfect GTO poker — they were colluding, sharing hole-card information to operate as a hive mind. That's an advantage that makes them virtually unbeatable.

As poker pro Charlie Carrel explained in a viral YouTube video, the scale of the problem is staggering and threatens the foundation of online poker itself. Yet in this technological arms race, the very tools causing the problem may also be the solution.

To combat the infestation, major online poker sites are deploying their own AI, fighting fire with fire. These companies train machine-learning systems to act as digital bloodhounds, sniffing out bots across massive datasets of confirmed cheaters and legitimate players.

These systems analyze volumes of

data no human ever could: impossibly consistent bet sizing, inhuman reaction times, and decision patterns that are just a little too perfect. With a bird's-eye view of the entire ecosystem, security AIs can also detect collusion rings and chip-dumping schemes in real time.

It's a constant, evolving battle. As cheating AI grows more sophisticated, so too must the AI designed to hunt it down.

The casino floor was once watched by cameras in the ceiling. Now it is watched by algorithms in the cloud. The players may have changed, but the game — man versus machine — is just getting started. ♠



Luke Geel is an artificial intelligence expert with a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University. The Boston native works as an engineer for the U.S. Air Force and on an AI-driven real estate startup. In his free time he can be found at the poker tables at Encore Boston Harbor or The Nash. You can contact him at [geelluke@gmail.com](mailto:geelluke@gmail.com).

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# SCHEDULES

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FEBRUARY	Feb. 16-March 22	Wynn Millions	Wynn ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Feb. 25-March 31	DeepStack Showdown	Venetian Hotel & Casino ■ Las Vegas, NV
	Feb. 26-March 9	WSOP Circuit Indiana	Horseshoe Casino ■ Hammond, IN
MARCH	March 1-15	PokerGO Cup	Aria PokerGO Studio ■ Las Vegas, NV
	March 5-15	Triton One Jeju	LES A Casino ■ Jeju-do, South Korea
	March 5-15	RunGood Poker Series	Graton Resort & Casino ■ Rohnert Park, CA
	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 14-April 1	Triton Super High Roller Series Jeju	LES A Casino ■ Jeju-do, South Korea
	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 20-29	PGT PLO Series	Venetian 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
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
April 16-27		WSOP Circuit Lake Tahoe	Caesars Republic Lake Tahoe ■ Lake Tahoe, NV
April 16-27		WSOP Circuit Mississippi	Horseshoe Casino & Hotel ■ Robinsonville, MS
April 21-26		MSPT East Chicago	Ameristar Casino & Hotel ■ East Chicago, IN
April 23-May 4		WSOP Circuit Texas	Texas Card House ■ Austin, TX
April 28-May 3		MSPT Festival Wisconsin	Potawatomi Hotel & Casino ■ Milwaukee, WI
April 30-May 10	European Poker Tour	Sporting Monte Carlo ■ Monte Carlo, Monaco	
MAY	May 7-18	WSOP Circuit North Carolina	Harrah's ■ Cherokee, NC
	May 12-17	Michigan Poker State Championship	FireKeepers Casino ■ Battle Creek, MI



**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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# POKER ODDS



Who was the favorite? How big of an underdog were you? Satisfy all your burning poker math questions with the *Card Player* Poker Odds Calculator. Available for free with hold'em, Omaha, Omaha eight-or-better, stud, stud eight-or-better, razz, and 2-7 lowball.



## 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%

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# IMPROVING ON THE TURN

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](http://PokerCoaching.com/CardPlayer).



In a \$1,000 buy-in event at blinds of 250-500, you have 12,000 in the hijack with A♥ Q♦. You raise to 1,300 and only the cutoff calls. The flop comes 6♠ 4♣ 2♠.

**Question 1:** Should you check, bet 1,200, bet 2,400, or bet 3,600?

**Answer:** From out of position, you should check a lot on low card boards because your range should contain relatively few low card hands. That said, if you expect your opponent's range to not contain many low card hands as well, then perhaps continuation betting frequently for a medium amount could be fine.

When you are unsure of your opponent's strategy, it is best to default to the GTO play of frequently checking, especially with medium-strength hands like A-Q.

**You both check and the turn is the A♦.**

**Question 2:** Should you check, bet 1,200, bet 2,400, or bet 3,600?

**Answer:** While your turned top pair is quite strong, it is important to remember that you have your entire relatively wide range on the turn, including lots of unpaired hands like K-Q, K-8 suited, and J-10 offsuit. Even though your best top pairs are certainly good enough to bet for value, if you bet with most of them, it will weaken your checking range substantially. For that reason, you should mix it up with your top pair, sometimes betting and sometimes checking.

**You check and your opponent bets 1,600.**

**Question 3:** Should you fold, call, raise to 4,000, or go all in?

**Answer:** Again, due to your decently weak checking range, you should mix up your play between calling and raising. A-Q is strong enough to raise for value, but if you raise with all of your top pairs, your check-calling range would again be far too weak. Considering the GTO strategy, A-K prefers to check-raise most of the time, but A-Q check-raises only about 30% of the time. Check-raising on a card that hits your range quite well also screams strength to many players, which could easily result in them folding lots of marginal made hands that you crush, so calling is probably best, especially if your opponent will keep bluffing on lots of rivers.

**You call and the river is the 9♦. You check and your opponent bets 2,100.**

**Question 4:** Should you fold, call, raise to 4,400, or go all in?

**Answer:** The smallest bet size an in-position player should use on the river is usually roughly 50% pot. When your opponent uses a smaller size, it implies they are playing nowhere near the GTO strategy. So, it is up to you to figure out if they are betting small for thin value, to induce you to raise because they have a premium hand, or because they simply have not studied GTO strategies.

In general, if you think your opponent is a novice player, small river bets typically indicate decent, but non-premium hands, such as a weaker top pair. If you are confident that is the type of player you are against, raising small to 4,400 is an excellent way to extract value.

If you are unsure of your opponent's tendencies or if you think they are tricky, the prudent play is to check-call, accepting that you are potentially giving up a little value in exchange for never getting raised all-in.

**You call and your opponent loses with an oddly played 8-8. ♠**



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