



Top Left: Doyle Brunson risks another bundle - or does he?



Clockwise from top left: Phil Lask, Daniel Negreanu, Doyle Brunson, John Juanda



ALL ON THE LINE?

Is High Stakes Poker all it's cracked up to be? **Richard Marcus** investigates.

I will tell you this much: *High Stakes Poker* is certainly high-stakes but does that high stakes really have anything to do with all those big-denomination chips and bundles of cash we constantly see lumped into huge pots in the middle of the table?

Well, that's a matter of opinion, and my opinion is to say that somebody participating in that TV show is really making us the "boobs" when referring to television as the boob tube. Whether it's the network, the show's producers, the players, or some combination thereof, something is going on that does not meet the eye, or I should say the camera. What am I saying—that the show is a fraud? Well, not really. There is some high-stakes stuff going on, but it's not about the no-limit hold'em games you're watching. What it is about is ratings-boosting for the network, Web traffic increases for YouTube and exposure for the poker players who get more launching pads for their books, blogs, appearances and endorsement contracts. In short, *High Stakes Poker* is a myriad of TV and Internet buzz that spreads across the world enriching those directly involved in it.

What prompted me to write this article? Simply an e-mail from a suspicious person in the UK. He asked me if I thought the poker action portrayed on the show was real. "Were Daniel Negreanu, Doyle Brunson, Sammy Farha and the rest of them really risking all those hundreds of thousands of US dollars against one another?" he wrote. Before I answer that directly, let me go back to the opening page of my controversial book *Dirty Poker*, which was released in the spring of 2005. On that page I took a sideways look at another huge poker entertainment package. This one was Fox Sports Net's mega-poker tournament, which that mega-American network hyped as the biggest tournament in the history of the world. For those of you who don't recall this, it was slated to take place on July 12, 2006, and be hosted by Mansion Poker. It was called the richest poker event ever and was to be broadcast live around the world. It was to feature six famous players, each of whom would put up \$10 million of their own money to win the \$60 million winner-take-all-jackpot. In other words, a \$60 million freezeout! Two big-time players' names were mentioned as being among the six to put up the ten mil and take part: Phil Ivey and Joseph Hachem, the winner of the main event at the 2005 World Series of Poker. And if all that wasn't enough, Fox Sports Net promised us a repetition of the mega-event in 2007, with a \$75 million jackpot, and then yet another in 2008 with a \$100 million jackpot!

When I heard all this, I had lots to say. As *Dirty Poker* was released three months before the mega-event was to be held, the timing for my critique could not have been better. I basically begged Fox Sports Net to give me a break.

Come on, I wrote, if this isn't a prearranged hype of mega-crap to boost Fox's ratings while showing off the players, what is?

First of all, what poker player in his right mind would legitimately put up \$10 million to win \$60 million against true odds of five to one? There's no value in it. Pro players only take the action when they have the best of it, and against players of roughly the same skills, there is no best of it. Secondly, what poker player even has \$10 million cash, and if any do, then how many could afford to burn a spare \$10 million? No, I reasoned on the page, this was simply a mega-collusion between Hollywood and Las Vegas, where the six famous poker players became bankable movie stars for their

"roles." The network in turn reaps millions in advertising revenues and a huge boost in its ratings. What better way to perpetuate the Hollywood glamour that had already come to the poker world through the ex-movie star Jennifer Tilly's victory at the 2005 WSOP Ladies' Championship? And finally, I wrote, "And we will have to suffer this again in 2007 when the jackpot shoots to \$75 million...And again in 2008 when it rockets to \$100 million...Just a matter of time until they make it a billion!"

When my book hit the stores I immediately received a lot of criticism from the poker world.

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Those wishing to avoid any tainting of it were quick to dismiss me as a raving poker-conspiracy nut job. But the truth was that I was a threat to the pockets of a lot of people in the industry, people making millions on the proliferation of poker as a mainstream entertainment event. Then a funny thing happened. Out of nowhere, Fox Sports Net and Mansion Poker announced that their mega-poker tournament in conjunction with each other was being cancelled. Suddenly like a sour bomb dropping on a cornfield, this soon to be billion-dollar tournament was not to be at all. Coincidence? Well, I honestly don't know, but maybe one of the organizers got wind of my book and suggested to another organizer that maybe the public won't go for this "blockbuster event" after all.

So that blew away only to make way for GSN's *High Stakes Poker*. Now we see a dozen of today's

brightest poker stars rushing to ante up a \$500,000 buy-in and throw \$10,000 packets of cash into huge pots as Gabe Kaplan gets to revive his long moribund career as the poker "color man" describing the intensity and strategic maneuvering that we all just have to know about. "Come on, gimme a break, Gabe!" I said aloud to myself as my eyes took in Daniel Negreanu's stacks of \$100 bills chasing those of Gus Hansen, and then Sammy Farha and Barry Greenstein lancing their monetary bricks like medieval warriors did their swords. And of course everyone at the table is constantly laughing and buddy-buddying up with one another. I wondered in amazement how the public could go for this. How can intelligent people really believe that these guys are really risking hundreds of thousands of dollars without having any significant edge? After all, the difference in skill level at high-stakes poker between any of these top pros is minimal, and for those who argue that it's not, it is still not enough to warrant risking that type of money. So why would these players risk such large sums of money against one another when they could simply go play in high-limit games in Vegas and California where there is an ample supply of suckers with the same big money. Aren't pros like these better off going up against well-heeled amateurs with huge bankrolls who think they're pros?



Another thing I can tell you is that pros like Phil Hellmuth, Phil Ivey and Barry Greenstein would not need to play another hand of high-stakes poker in their lives to continue living them in style with all the money they could ever need. So why would they risk it? Are they gamblers at heart? Well, they're not supposed to be; they're professional poker players governed only by true odds. So, then, is there a reason to their collective advantage to keep playing for so much money on television? You bet. It's all about promotion. These top pros can make much more money promoting themselves to the public and the media and attaching their names and images with handsome contracts to online poker sites than they could ever make playing high-stakes poker. And add to that their bestselling books, poker boot camps, appearances and everything else not related to playing that they do to earn large sums of money. Nobody can dispute these facts. But in order to keep their names in the limelight they have to keep playing high-stakes poker—or at least give the image they're playing high-stakes poker. So, let's say for a moment that I am not a strung-out poker conspiracy theorist and that maybe I am exposing a realistic scenario.

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What would that scenario be?

Try this: Within the body of GSN's high-stakes poker players there is an unspoken law, call it the high-stakes poker players' "Omerta," similar to that infamous Italian Mafia code of silence that for centuries prevented the truth from ever getting out. What would high-stakes Omerta be amongst the players? Simply this: Let's give 'em a good show for their advertising dollars and then we'll give each of us our money back after the show is over.

This way we make the world think we're playing for cash millions, get all this exposure and reap all the benefits (including whatever deals they have with GSN) without risking the loss of as much as a wooden nickel. See what I mean? Isn't this more believable than Daniel Negreanu losing \$300,000 in a single pot against Gus Hansen? Isn't it more believable than any of these guys (or women like Jennifer Harman) repeatedly risking their bankrolls

against players of equal or better caliber? And ultimately, can all these players really afford these kinds of losses? I tend to doubt it.

What about the non-poker pros in these TV lineups, people like Jerry Buss, the Los Angeles Lakers owner, Dr. Amir Nasser, a Las Vegas physician, and the Chicago restaurant owner, Fred Chamanara? What do they have to gain if they're not looking to enhance their poker stature and possible endorsement contracts? Maybe nothing, and maybe they are not even involved in whatever is really going on in the show. Perhaps these wealthy gentlemen are in it for other reasons and don't care what's going on between the pro players. Maybe it's their egos on display, who knows? But as they are small in numbers they don't have much effect on the games and are never a significant threat to the best pro players at these "high-stakes" tables. And even if they have the same suspicions I do, perhaps they don't care.

So, is the GSN going to discontinue this hugely popular poker show because of my innuendos? No way, Jose! It's too established and too hugely popular. But getting them to axe the show is hardly my motive. *High Stakes Poker* is, before anything else, great entertainment, especially if you love watching big-time poker, or the simulation of big-time poker. But remember one thing: just like everything else in this world, don't believe everything you see and hear. www.richardmarcusbooks.com