

C H E A T S

2007 WAS A HORRIBLE YEAR FOR CHEATING — WHAT WILL 2008 BRING?

by Richard Marcus

WE ALL KNOW that 2007's biggest poker story was not the World Series of Poker, was not Annette Obrestad (the Norwegian wunderkind online multi-table specialist who also won the European World Series of Poker) and was not any other player or tournament. It was, of course, the Absolute Poker scandal, the biggest cheating scam in the history of online poker, where a few insiders had "super" accounts and were able to view opponents' hole cards.

And as that cheating story was the year's biggest, a few others, some of them online and others brick-and-mortar, certainly made the top ten. In addition to the large-scale cheating stories that made headlines, there are the cumulative facts and figures of poker cheating that I will give to you, much the way the FBI releases its annual crime statistics for the nation as a whole. But instead of going over the numbers, which I don't think you want to read about, I will just state the plain obvious: Poker cheating is sharply on the rise.

Obviously, the biggest upward trend in underhanded play is on the Internet, but not surprisingly, at least to me, home-game cheating and public-cardroom cheating are all on the increase as well.

HOME IS WHERE THE CHEAT IS

The first of these negative upward trends is home-game cheating. As the number of home games increases, so will the number of crooked players posing as your friends while cheating you.

To give you an example of how pervasive this might be, I can share a funny topic with you. As I receive many e-mails and comments about my blog, I have noticed a fair increase in those I get from magicians and sleight-of-hand artists. Many of them include card tricks in their routines, and of course, they all show off their talents for false shuffles followed by top, bottom and second dealing, along with other ways to manipulate the deck. Some of these magicians, feeling a certain confidence and camaraderie with me, relate stories about their cheating antics in home games.

"As poker games have sprung up all over this affluent neighborhood," one wrote me, "I just couldn't resist the urge to join the biggest one and make some ends meet."

And I heard quite a few similar stories, which means that those with special cheating skills will gravitate toward home games for the simple reason that there is absolutely no risk of them getting anything more than a black eye if caught. So instead of risking their trade in public cardrooms, where they could be subjected to arrest and prosecution if caught, they play it safe in the confines of someone's home.

PUBLIC CARDROOMS

Which brings us to those public cardrooms, where we will see growth in the number of cheaters and improvements to the technology they use, as well as another possible trend I've been made aware of that is quite troubling. We've long been aware of professional cheating teams in live poker, especially those working the collusion angles, and there is no indication that this type of cheating will subside.

Another concern is the threat of high-tech cheating in public cardrooms, using cameras to film players' hole cards as well as top cards coming off the deck. There are also new advances in card-marking technology. But these elements of poker cheating I've expected to continue their upward trends. However, something recently brought to my attention threw me for a loop.

Back in October, I received an e-mail from a suspicious brick-and-mortar player who said he'd read my book *Dirty Poker* and then spoke of a high-limit game in which a well-known Russian tennis player sat across from him at the table. He swore that this tennis player was engaged in collusion with at least two other players at the table, neither of whom uttered a single word the entire time. His reasoning for this was that the two other players he suspected didn't want to reveal Russian accents, or maybe they couldn't speak English. I completely dismissed this once he mentioned the tennis player's name, and wrote him back that perhaps he was too anxious from having read my book.

Why, I asked, would a high-profile ex-tennis champion be involved in a poker-cheating racket?

Well, I forgot about it until I received a second e-mail from another B&M player stating that he also played in a game with another ex-Russian tennis player whom he believed was involved in a collusion scam as well. My curiosity was certainly piqued, but again I wrote back that this was probably a figment of his imagination and that he should forget it.

But he wrote me back. He explained that the first Russian tennis star I'd been alerted to, whom he didn't know was the subject of another person's e-mail, had not only been implicated in a 2003 match-throwing scandal but was also caught in photographs with known Russian mobsters. This was just before he retired from tennis to take up poker on what could be considered a professional level.

Then this e-mailer reminded me of the Vera Shimanskaya poker card-marking scandal, which also occurred in 2003, and she, you recall, is also a famous Russian athlete. Vera was a gold-

medal-winning gymnast at the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics. Finally, he went as far as to warn that there are professional poker-cheating teams peopled by ex-Russian athletes!

I got to thinking. The first thing that came to mind was more Russian tennis players implicated in gambling scams. Just last year there was the Nikolay Davydenko scandal that is still brewing and actively being investigated by the ATP. Davydenko, a top-ranked player, lost a match to a much weaker opponent when there happened to be so much online betting on the underdog that the online sports betting giant, Betfair, canceled all bets. There was also the pair of Italian tennis players who were just recently suspended and fined for betting on tennis matches.

After all this and doing extensive research on a few dozen former and current professional tennis players, I am indeed convinced there is a connection between professional tennis and poker cheating. Way out? Maybe, but let's see if any more incidents come to light. You have to believe that if people will cheat at pro tennis, they certainly will cheat at poker.

DRUGS AND ONLINE POKER

Finally, what's new in the online poker cheating world? From what I can see it's something rivaling baseball cheating. I'm not talking about steroids, but I am talking about online poker players abusing prescription medications to gain an unfair advantage on the net. I was first made aware of poker players using these drugs by way of a disturbing e-mail I received from a mother whose teenager she suspected of "poker doping." She wrote that her son was staying up all hours of the night playing online, missing sleep, missing school, missing out on just about everything. She said she'd found the drugs Modafinil and Adderall hidden in his medicine cabinet. Did I know why he could be doing this? she asked.

Well, one thing I knew was why these kinds of drugs appeal to all-night online poker players who want to be just as sharp while playing as they are sleepless. Online players often play multiple games at once and need to retain more data and play more hands in much less time than when playing a single game. This requires a keen alertness unadulterated by sleepiness.

For example, if one normally plays a maximum of three tables simultaneously and wants to increase that without losing the ability to keep track of all the variables, he may search for the added "fuel" needed to make this jump possible. Short-handed games alter this tracking effect even more, as players tend to devote more focus on the short game than the filled tables. Everyone is different, of course, but for most players the natural comfort level where they don't feel like they're giving up anything due to distractions is three tables, or 27 simultaneous opponents.

But with Modafinil and Adderall, prescription drugs that keep you awake and supposedly enhance short-term memory, some players are able to extend their effective gamesmanship to six tables with relative ease. Their increased attention to detail allows them to reliably track player movements on all

tables, most importantly when new players come into any game. They feel they have the ability to track the movements of more than 50 simultaneous players, with perhaps the capacity for even more as they experience growing confidence in their "poker's little helpers."

Whether the drugs work or not, they are an unfair advantage, and Adderall is addictive.

Hopefully, in spite of these negative trends I've outlined, poker cheating in all three of its major venues will be controlled and kept to a minimum. What is most essential is that online poker rooms stay abreast of any possible cheating situations to prevent the huge disasters we saw in 2007. ♠

Richard Marcus is the author of Dirty Poker: The Poker Underworld Exposed, and is often considered "The World's Greatest Casino Cheater." Visit him at richardmarcusbooks.com

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