

O P I N I O N

DIRTY POKER

IN ATLANTIC CITY

WHEN I RELEASED MY BOOK *DIRTY POKER*

in the spring of 2006, the reviews were mostly unfavorable, some even horrible. I was lambasted in the press, in poker-room conversation, on Internet forums, everywhere by everyone who either thought they knew everything about cheating in poker or really did know everything but didn't want to admit publicly what they knew. It seemed that nobody wanted to believe that all the cheating I said goes on really does go on.

Nobody wanted to believe that the Fox Sports Net super "mega-tournament," where six players were going to put up \$10 million each and vie for it all in a freezeout, was nothing more than a big hype to increase Fox's ratings and get major exposure for the participating players, most of whom hardly had \$10 mil to risk on such a venture. Funny, but just after the release of my book, the mega-tournament was canceled. But still, nobody wanted to believe that the high-tech wrongdoing I spoke of could actually happen in the poker world. In short, nobody involved in big-time poker wants to believe or publicly acknowledge anything that can give it a bad name.

But now it's happened. If Jamie Gold's antics in last year's WSOP were a blip on the cheating radar screen, then the huge bust in June at the Borgata in Atlantic City was the Pearl Harbor blitz that blew big-time cheating onto the poker map.



PHOTO: SUPRI SUHAROTO

THIS WAS BIG

This scam was, indeed, huge! So huge that no one wanted to talk about it. And no one did until nearly a month later, and then only because George Knapp, an investigative reporter in Las Vegas, somehow got the scoop on it and broke the story on KLAS-TV's 11 o'clock newscast.

Knapp reported that the scam had first been linked to the Borgata's Summer Open tournament in Atlantic City. Supposedly, high-tech thieves were intercepting the signal from the cameras filming players' hole cards. That would have been a mind blower, but then we learned that the scam, although employing the same inherent scheme to clandestinely film players' hole cards, had actually taken place in a private high-stakes game in one of the Borgata's hotel rooms high above the poker room.

According to the New Jersey attorney general, a certain Steve Forte, a highly respected anti-cheating consultant to casinos worldwide and someone I know quite well, was the mastermind of this scam, with three accomplices. Naturally I was shocked to hear that Steve was accused. Despite some run-ins with the law over shady casino matters decades ago, I was convinced that Steve had been far removed from cheating at poker or anything else. The charges against him claim that he and his cohorts set up a hotel room in the Borgata with several well-camouflaged cameras positioned to film the hole cards of the unlucky players having the misfortune to play there. Also, the cards in play were marked, for which I don't see any necessity unless the cameras were not picking up enough of the hole cards enough of the time. And if that was not enough of an edge, poker simulation programs were in use to further aid the cheaters with playing decisions.

This is all the information that was released to the press. So what really happened? And why all the secrecy? Given that the basics of the news reports are true, that the scam only targeted high-rolling cash players in a private Texas hold'em game and that the Borgata's nervous declarations that the tournament was completely unaffected

can be believed, how did this high-tech scam go down? Well, more or less the same way the heretofore biggest scam of its kind happened in a three-card poker game at a London casino in 2005. In that scam, a woman held a tiny camera in a low-slung handbag that filmed the cards coming off the deck in the dealer's hand. An accomplice with the video feed outside in a white van, slowed down the digitalized image to where he could read the value of the dealer's cards and those dealt to other players at the table. The guy in the van then transmitted the information to a second man playing large at the table who wore a tiny earpiece to receive it. That scam netted a cool half million.

THEY KNEW THAT THE MORE HANDS THEY PLAYED, THE QUICKER THEY'D GET THE MARKS' MONEY

The Borgata's equivalent of the white van was the room next-door. While two cheats sat at the big cash game, whose stakes are believed to have been \$1,000-\$2,000, two geeks were camped out in the next room with five laptops and sophisticated transmitting equipment. Four of the screens showed the images from four hidden cameras, while the fifth ran the simulation software. The two cheats in the game wore tiny earpieces to receive the information. They no doubt heard it as clearly and monotonously as stock quotes: "Position-1, ace-king; Position-2, pocket threes; Position-3..."

PERFECT SCAM?

They processed it quickly, added the marked cards that flashed in their eyes, then made their decisions. They played loosely, as they could afford to. They knew that the more hands they played, the quicker they'd get their suckers' money.

Not to use a cliché, but it was the perfect scam, right? Then, what happened?

How did they get caught? Thieves thieving in the privacy of their own hotel room are not normally something hotel and casino security are privy to. Unless, of course, somebody from surveillance or undercover security was inside the room as the scam was going down. Given that the two cohort geeks were alone watching the action in the room next-door, it had to have been one of the players who'd been set up as a mark. But who? And how?

The answers to these questions – which is really what the New Jersey authorities don't want anyone to know just yet, for reasons probably related to an ongoing investigation concerning the probability that these rigged private games had either gone on in Vegas during big tournaments or been about to during this year's WSOP – are not as complex as people seem to believe. The key is that someone around Atlantic City recognized Steve Forte and remembered that Forte had been busted in that town many years earlier for having switched in a cooler (cards prearranged in a shoe to take off the casino) at a blackjack game. Knowing that Forte was now a revered consultant to the entire gaming industry, it didn't make much sense that he would be involved, either legitimately or illegitimately, in a private high-stakes poker game, which in itself was illegal.

Even though the scammers did not let anyone besides specific marks know about their game, it was impossible to keep it as secret as they would have liked. So somebody told somebody who told somebody else who finally recognized Forte, kicking off the chain of events that led to the investigation. The authorities managed to get one of the "somebodies" to infiltrate the game. Who this person is will not come out until a trial, or probably never if the case is disposed of in a plea bargain, which is almost a guarantee.

Before this scam made international headlines, I had more or less decided never to write another poker book. But now I'm kind of thinking that "The Borgata Poker Scam" will make a great opening chapter for *Dirty Poker 2*. ♠