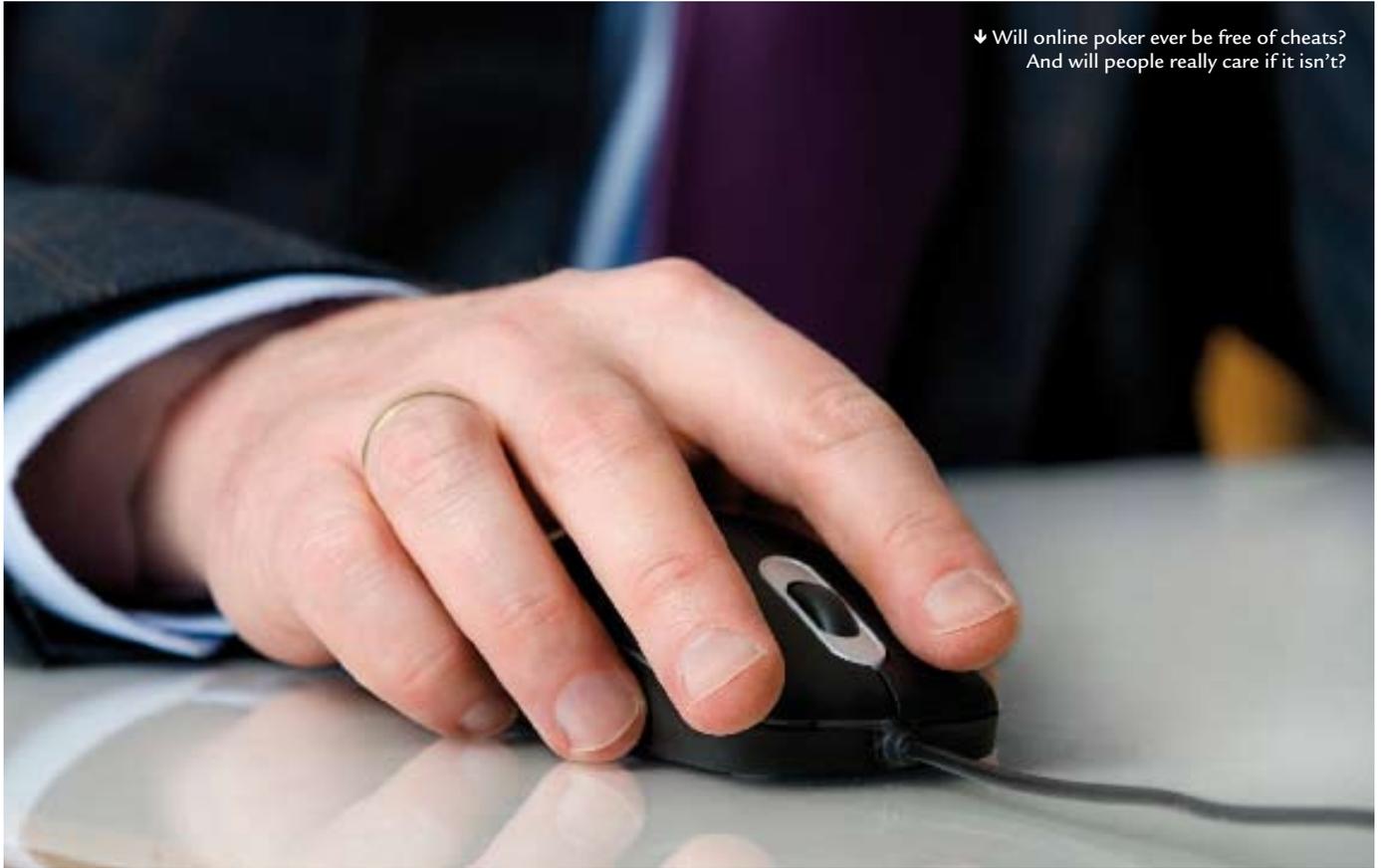


↓ Will online poker ever be free of cheats?
And will people really care if it isn't?



Roll With the Punches

Online poker cheating has escalated in the past couple of years with some high-profile cases. But it's not all doom and gloom, says Richard Marcus.

In the past year, we've seen one major online poker cheating scam after another. They have come from the inside, from the outside, from the deeper inside, from the further outside, and from the middle of all of that. We've seen multi-accounting, botting, collusion, hole-card-peeking, funds-stealing and even sophisticated money laundering schemes through online poker accounts. We've seen heralded players exposed as super frauds. We've seen respected poker magazine editors and writers fired from their jobs because of their implication in cheating rings. We've seen online gambling sites' owners and employees, and thousands more ambitious cheats attacking the integrity of online poker—and succeeding while raking in tremendously large pots.

But does all this mean that online poker is doomed? Does it mean that in five years 95 percent of players playing online (or should I say people occupying online poker tables by whatever means) will be doing everything but playing legitimate poker hands? Well, if I had to answer this question right now, I would say that online poker is not on the path to extinction, but I would also say that unless some serious measures are taken (and I do not know if those measures are even possible to offset much of the cheating), we will have very little honest online poker games going on.

But the irony of that dire outlook is that it might not even matter. People playing online poker might come to think of cheating as the norm and accept it, which means that it might just become incorporated as part of the strategy

of the game. For instance, the competition of thinking simple and complex poker strategies we see now might give way to a competition of writing simple and complex poker bot programs. The use of sophisticated bots equipped with artificial intelligence might become so ordinary that hooking them up will be nothing more out of the ordinary than keying in your credit card numbers or whatever the source of your account funding might be.

Another way to look at the 'online poker cheating revolution' is to see it the way we have seen the very game of poker change over the past few decades. Before we even had online poker we had five- and seven-card stud in brick and mortar poker rooms. The word 'Texas' being bandied around poker tables only had significance as to where a great percentage of



↑ Former Absolute employees got caught cheating.

the tables' occupants may have come from. But now 'Texas' is the holy grail of poker. And just the same, cheating may become just that of online poker.

The point is that the cheating might only serve to increase the competition, as we have seen in several mock or serious bot tournaments, depending how you look at them. The old adage 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em' might be the defining moment for the future of online poker. Whatever the case, I now hardly believe that online poker will ever disappear from cyberspace, and inasmuch I doubt that online sites will ever be able to stop all the cheating... from either the inside, outside, middle, top or bottom. What I do think is that online poker will go on regardless of its degree of corruption.

Why? Because the competitive element in all of us will make us strive to be the best we can be—no matter how we may become that way. And



↑ People said Texas Hold 'em wouldn't catch on. Steve Wynn (standing right) wasn't one of them.

the writing of this article has nothing to do with sport and performance-enhancing steroids... or at least I thought it didn't.

You certainly can feel safer while gambling at online casinos playing blackjack, craps, roulette and baccarat than you can while playing online poker, right? Of course you can! Why? Because when you play any of those casino table games, you're only playing against the casino, nobody else.

When you're playing online poker, you're playing against other players who might have the incentive to cheat you with bots and collusion methods of play. Even more important is the fact that while playing in online casinos you face much less risk of being cheated by employees of the sites or ex-employees of the sites who have access to the source codes. For instance, in recent online poker insider-hole-card scams, employees or ex-employees of Absolute Poker and UltimateBet used their access codes to peek at opponents' hole cards, allowing them to cheat their victims mercilessly. This kind of cheating would not occur in online blackjack, roulette or craps games because other players would gain absolutely nothing from your losses. There couldn't be bots or collusion efforts against you either.

Does this mean you are absolutely free of cheating threats while gambling at online casinos? No, but it makes you much safer than when playing online poker. There is still of course the remote possibility of running into a crooked online casino whose software is rigged to cheat you, but since the very early days of online gambling, there has not been any major cases of casinos messing around with random number generators. And in the last few years I have not heard of any major online casinos simply absconding with players' funds.

So in all, do not worry about being cheated in online casinos. As far as online poker goes, don't worry about too much cheating—just keep in the back of your mind that it's part of the game. **GOM**



↑ Can you ever be entirely sure you're not being hung out to dry when you stake your money online?