

Op-Ed/Editorials: World Series Proves Poker Game Of Skill

October 10, 2007

The final table of the World Series of Poker's main event shows, once again, that poker tournaments are games of skill.

Courts have developed tests over the last couple of hundred years to determine whether a particular game is predominantly chance or skill. If courts and prosecutors were honest in applying these tests, at least No Limit Texas Hold 'em tournaments would have to be considered skill contests and not gambling.

Let's take a look at the most common tests and what happened on July 18, 2007.

1) A skillful player will win more than an unskillful one. The tournament started 12 days earlier, with 6,358 paying \$10,000 each to enter. All the chips that were lost by players went to other players, not the house.

2) Skill can be learned from experience, from real or mock play. Here's how the Associate Press described the nine players at the final table, in the order in which they were eliminated:

- Lee Childs, a 35-year-old software engineer from Reston, Va., who quit his job a month ago to play poker for a living.
- Philip Hilm, a 31-year-old Dane making a living from poker in England.
- Lee Watkinson, a 40-year-old poker pro from Cheney, Wash.
- Hevad Khan, an Internet poker pro from Poughkeepsie, N.Y.
- Jon Kalmar, a 34-year-old poker pro from Chorley, England.
- Alex Kravchenko, 36. No other information given. AP did not mention that Kravchenko has been in the money in numerous poker events, including winning three European tournaments.
- Raymond Rahme, a South African retiree. AP did not mention that Rahme had previously come in first, second and fourth in major South African poker tournaments.
- Tuan Lam, a 40-year-old Vietnamese Canadian online poker pro from Mississauga, Ontario.
- California psychologist Jerry Yang.

Question: If poker is not a game of skill, how can there be professional poker players? No one makes a living playing lotteries.

3) Skill games usually require a knowledge of mathematics and psychological skill. Here's how Yang described his playing style: "I study my opponents very carefully, and when I sensed something, when I sensed some weakness, I took a chance. Even if I had nothing, I decided to raise, reraise, push all-in or make a call."

When courts or attorneys general want to declare a game, such as poker, is predominantly luck, they focus on the fact that cards are involved. The most common argument is that even a complete novice could beat a professional if the amateur were dealt better cards.

This shows a fundamental lack of understanding of how poker is played. Nobody ever sits down to a single hand of poker. And even if they did, the rules of elimination tournaments require that there be more than a single hand.

And poker is not just about being dealt the best cards. We do not yet have the wonderful 20-20 hindsight provided by the cameras that show TV viewers the players' down cards. But we do know at least one important hand.

On the ninth hand of play at the final table, the flop was seven, four and deuce. Yang declared an all-in reraise. His opponent, Lee Childs, folded, showing pocket queens, face up.

Now, maybe Yang had the better hand, with two pair. But maybe not.

It is very possible that Childs' queens were the best cards before the flop. He might still have had the best hand after that flop of little cards. And he might have had the best hand if he had stayed in to the end. But Yang won.

Because it is fundamental to the game of poker that the best hand does not necessarily win.

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