Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 8(10) – The Main Event: ESPN covers recovery and redemption

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On October 31, 24-year old Greg Merson won the Main Event of the 2012 World Series of Poker. As a part of their coverage of the biggest live poker tournament in the world (6598 entrants, 7 days of play during the summer, two days of play during October), ESPN and other poker media covered his struggles with addiction, from his past with marijuana and cocaine to his current efforts and strategies for staying clean. Today's Addiction & the Humanities explores this coverage.

ESPN's coverage of Days 1 through 7

During the summer, teams at ESPN edited hours of footage from Main Event Days 1 through 7 into twenty-six forty-five minute episodes. They wrote scripts for their play-by-play/color duo to fill the silent time between and during hands. They also developed biopic featurettes and clips from sit-down interviews with players. During years past, ESPN's coverage highlighted the nine players who made the final table, especially the chip leaders. Greg Merson ended Day 7 on July 17 third in chips, so it is no surprise that ESPN researched his story.

During one ESPN interview, Merson described how he'd been battling a drug addiction since age 18 and how he felt grateful to be alive. "I constantly go to meetings… [Staying sober] is the most important thing to me and it has to stay number one for me to keep my life in order." For his featurette, "At Home With Greg Merson", ESPN shot footage of him in a yoga class and recorded audio of him endorsing it as a way to relax and relieve stress. Although the featurette itself makes no mention of drugs or addiction, researchers such as Professor Beth Marcus at Brown University and Professor Mark Smith at Davidson College have been investigating the effects of exercise on addiction and its possible efficacy as a component of drug treatment programs (Marcus et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2008).

On July 26, just over a week after Day 7 ended, Merson used his newfound

celebrity and started a thread on the Two Plus Two Poker Forums where he summarized his past with drugs:

- He checked himself into rehab during August 2007 at age 19 (cocaine, marijuana).
- After one year clean, he started drinking socially.
- During February of 2011, he relapsed and used cocaine while under the influence of alcohol.
- That summer, at the 2011 World Series of Poker, he alternated between using marijuana as a sleeping aid and using adderall to stay awake.
- After the summer, he moved to Canada to play online poker and started using roxycontin. His usage increased from 15mg a day to 150 mg per day in a matter of weeks.
- He got clean again on December 10, 2011, in part, with the help of two close friends and fellow poker players.

ESPN Poker Editor, Andrew Feldman would later reference this post in his interview with Merson for the August 30 episode of ESPN's The Poker Edge podcast. "I've got to bring up a post you made on Two Plus Two. It's apparent that you face a lot of challenges in your life. How have you been able to get back on track?" He then gave Merson several minutes of uninterrupted time to bring up the words "drug" and "addiction" on his own terms, retell his story, and deliver his message. A few days later, Gary Wise followed up with the online article "Merson defined by addiction", which included a discussion of the links between drugs, poker, and Merson's "all-or-nothing" addictive personality. Despite the title, it too cast Merson in a favorable light as a person fighting back from adversity.

Broadcasting Days 1 through 7

Greg Merson's first appearance on ESPN television was during Episode 17, the first episode for Day 6. As the field thinned from 97 to 27 to 9, Merson became a mainstay. He was portrayed as a fan favorite to root for, partially because of his calm demeanor and professionalism, partially because of the support color commentator and fellow Maryland-native Norman Chad provided him. It was only five episodes later that those only watching on TV learned of Merson's past with addiction. During Episode 22, ESPN aired the sit-down interview where he talked about being grateful for being alive. During Episode 23, ESPN aired the "At Home

With Greg Merson" piece. Through those last episodes, the commentators limited their references to Merson's recovery to, at most, once an episode. Each mention was just a few sentences, long enough to get the point across and pique some viewers' interest but short enough not to be overbearing. Those who wanted to learn more about Merson's story could read Wise's article or listen to the Poker Edge podcast. From there, Google searches such as "Merson addiction" and "Merson addiction twoplustwo" lead to other articles and the thread on Two Plus Two.

The final table and beyond

On October 29, they reconvened the Main Event and played from 9 players at 7:45pm ET to 3 players at 3:12am ET the next morning. At 8:45pm ET that evening, they resumed and played until Merson emerged victorious at 8:49am ET on October 31. ESPN and ESPN.com aired all 18 hours virtually live with a 15-minute time delay.

To their credit, they limited references to Merson's past with drugs to a handful of mentions on Day 8 and only four on Day 9. The commentators made the most of those short comments, delivering balanced statements about the struggles many addicts share in common ("He knows – because of the relapse – that he doesn't have [full] control of the addiction and it's an ongoing battle.") and noting ways that Merson's experience may be different from others' ("That's one way to rehab. Just lock yourself in a hotel room for three days. Most people can't do that… Most people have to go to a center and have certain guidelines and procedures."). For those more interested in Merson's story, Norman Chad offered up one last piece of further reading: Lance Bradley's article "A Clean Getaway" in Bluff Magazine. There, Bradley included details about the extent of Merson's relapse, what one of his friends said to convince him to get clean, and some of the measures he took do so. For many watching the final table online, it provided an added dimension to the coverage and something to do during lulls in the action.

After the post-victory interview and award ceremony, ESPN released one last tournament summary article and ended its coverage of Greg Merson's story. Still, from the television episodes back to the content on ESPN.com back to the post on Two Plus Two and other sources, interested viewers were able to piece together Greg Merson's journey of redemption and his message of hope. In the past, sports journalists and commentators had to strike a delicate balance between reminding

viewers about the competitors' backstories for added drama and rehashing the past so much that viewers tuned out. By using extra outlets both within ESPN's control (ESPN.com, The Poker Edge) and outside of it (Bluff Magazine, Two Plus Two), ESPN was able to satisfy more of its audience, from those peripherally interested to those emotionally invested in Greg Merson's result.

In both the post-win press conference and on the Two Plus Two Pokercast two weeks later, Greg Merson continued his outreach in helping others in recovery. "Anything I can do to help the community with this problem… [because] it's so easy to get caught up in the wrong stuff." He continues to go to meetings and maintain his own support network, noting "having the right people in your corner is huge". He also is still active in his Two Plus Two thread on drug addiction. His posts contain words of encouragement and advice for those struggling with addiction. "One day at a time," he writes, "to the fellow addicts struggling tonight around the world." In just twelve of those days, he himself will celebrate 365 days sober and earn his Narcotics Anonymous one-year chip.

– Matthew Tom

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