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First Person Account

Chips, Chatter and Friends

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You meet people at casinos. While you are playing for money, you can also socialize. Last week I began chatting with a woman who turns out to be a corrections officer. She and I discussed gambling problems among prison inmates (there are plenty). Another fellow player identified himself as a recovering alcoholic. He began comparing AA meetings with GA meetings. GA meetings are much longer.

A woman with a British accent tells me that her name is Barbara. I tell her that my name, Barry, was given to me to honor my grandmother whose name was also Barbara. She tells me that she was named after a racehorse. Her father had owned a betting shop in England.

Once I was explaining, in my academic style, how I had played a hand. I was talking to a professional player who began looking at me with a pained expression. "What are you —a teacher"? I nodded affirmatively. He introduced me to another teacher in the room, also a professor, now retired. It turns out that we went to college together, and played in the same poker game, week

after week. He met his present wife while playing poker in Las Vegas. It is now forty years later and we sit down to play poker, together again.

I first met Sal while he was playing cards at the low stakes poker table. Later I ran into him at my supermarket, where he was picking up groceries. We exchanged pleasantries. He told me he was getting groceries for his Friday night house game. I asked if I could join and he invited me along. I've been playing in this game for five years. Some have been playing together for 35 years. I've never laughed as hard as I did at some of those Friday night games. I'm the baby of the group, the average age being death. Some can't hear so well and some can't see, but we play on nonetheless. I imagine the day when we'll each have a nurse's aid behind us helping us bet, call and raise.

I have a special fondness for home games. Both my mother and father had weekly games, almost their whole lives. My mother played mah jong, and I remember falling asleep as a child to the sounds "one bam, two crack" and the mah jong tiles clicking across the table. There was always prime candy in the house on those nights. Years later, I was standing at a local auction and a guy held up a box and said: "I don't know what these are. Chinese dice?" I knew and bought a box of 100 mah jong tiles for \$10. I later sold the box of tiles, keeping one as a keepsake. I sold them to a craftsman who makes bracelets out of them.

Once, at a tournament, I began chatting with a fellow player. Turns out he is a professional player from Canada, as is his wife. I meet him again in Las Vegas, and we become friends, and he, his wife, and I have dinner when they come to Foxwoods. Through them, I meet Roy, a retired geologist, who also travels to Foxwoods. Poker is his hobby as is collecting gambling materials (antique cards, faro equipment, etc.). We exchange phone calls and visits, and he invites me to the next International Card Collectors Convention in New Haven, Connecticut.

At the Orleans casino in Las Vegas, I was playing in a low-stakes poker game when I overheard two of the players discussing how a third person wouldn't let one of them take a nap in his hotel room. "Take a nap in my room," I interjected. "I'm too old to molest and I've got nothing to steal." Ray took me up on the offer. He is a Las Vegas dentist who plays poker regularly and his friend is a retired insurance agent. They both appreciated my offer, and began showing up every day at the casino to have coffee with me and discuss the day's gambling. Now I call Ray every time I'm in Vegas, and recently he turned up at Foxwoods to visit and play poker.

My favorite way to play poker is in tournaments. Tournaments are fixed entry-fee poker contests. You buy in for a fixed amount, are given tournament chips, and you play to win the chips sold to other players. The prize is a percentage of the total pools (all of the entries sold). People are usually in better spirits in a tournament since the risk of losing is limited to the buy-in. Some people will only play in tournaments. One told me he had been an out of control gambler and drinker. He straightened out his life, and gave up all forms of gambling, with the exception of tournaments. Tournaments can offer all of the thrills of high-stakes games without the attendant risks.

Every Sunday at the Mohegan Sun casino, you can play in a seven-card stud tournament for \$20. With your entry fee the casino gives you a buffet ticket for breakfast. Over a 100 people show up each Sunday.

Most of my playing time is spent in poker tournaments. I meet the same people, week after week, playing in these tournaments. We schmooze, laugh, get irritated and try to win. At the last one, Flo leaned over and told me a delightfully raunchy joke, which you can ask me for if we ever meet.

The first tournament I played in was at Foxwoods as part of a major tournament series. They gave me a room at their hotel for \$30 if I entered a \$25 tournament. I lasted about five minutes in the tournament, was among the first ones knocked out, but I loved the thrill of the contest.

I travel from time to time to play in tournaments in other parts of the country. These are larger tournaments and are sponsored by the casinos; they attract thousands of people from all over the world. Often people in these tournaments get discounts on their hotel rooms and food. While I have won at smaller local tournaments, I have never won anything at these larger ones. Nevertheless, I get a big kick out of them. It is like a professional convention or a meeting of hobbyists. You will meet people from all over the world and in every walk of life. You'll meet famous players, who have the status of stars and have won million dollar prizes. And you can also meet less famous players (i.e. me). You can play against the "Tiger Woods" of the Poker World for the price of the entry. You will see them again, in Las Vegas, California and Connecticut. If you want (I never have) you can play in these events in Costa Rica, Russia, France, Austria, Finland, and at the Canadian National Exhibition.

In a recent article in the New York Times (April 30, 2000), Walter Goodman speaks out in favor of gambling. He feels that gambling transcends gaming. The other ingredient is the bonding of like-minded players who hope to outwit fate's pessimistic outcome.

As Goodman points out, all players, poker players, slot machine buffs and roulette fanatics see themselves as part of the gaming club. The rules of entry are very simple:

"Whatever game you favor, the casino makes it easy to join up. Women and men, blacks and whites, the disabled and the able-bodied – all are welcome...As the poker regulars like to say, all you need is a chair and a chip.

That is the special lure of the casino, be it upstate or downstate or on the reservation. For your time at the table or at the machine, loneliness is abolished; you are among a cadre of the like minded. Win or lose, the world seems a friendlier place. All right, if you win, it is a little friendlier."

I played daily for awhile with an elderly woman who came to the table with a walker. She played very well and now has some of my money. She was heard saying, "What would I be without poker? Just an old lady with a walker." Poker added pleasure to her life, as it does to mine, and to others.

Sex is good, but poker lasts longer. There are lots of players for whom sex is a memory, but they can still cut the cards.

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"My current research interests are focused on understanding the motivation to gamble and those factors which differentiate between problem gamblers and recreational gamblers. I enjoy the game of poker and hope that my research will keep me on the recreational side of the table."

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