

The Biggest Game in Town

Eight o'clock on a Tuesday night, and I'm standing outside a nondescript industrial building in the Perfume District, in the 20s, just west of Broadway. I've got three grand in my pocket and I'm about to do something either inspired or foolish, I haven't yet decided which. Perhaps both. I press a buzzer by the entryway, get the once-over from an unseen electronic eye, and am buzzed into the lobby. A minute later, I am riding the world's slowest elevator, an ancient, tiny, Otis-made box, on my way to the 7th floor. As I hear the chain winding, and cables straining, I make a mental note to take the stairs when I leave.

Some kind of construction is taking place on the 7th floor. Behind a glass wall opposite the elevator, there is a pile of loose wires and crushed plasterboard and a dark emptiness beyond. A small note is taped on the glass. It says, "Van's," and has an arrow pointing to the right. I follow the arrow to another door, beyond the stairwell. Affixed to this solid fire-proof door is a facsimile of the famous Coolidge painting of dogs playing poker. I enter, then get buzzed through yet another door, and I have reached the inner sanctum: a fluorescent-lit mini-loft with high ceilings, blacked out windows, and four oval-shaped casino-quality poker tables, green tops

glowing with promise.

A couple of dealers and players are milling around, drinking sodas. Van, the proprietor of the club, a wiry bearded former cop who bears an uncanny resemblance to George Carlin, emerges from a side door by a plexiglas teller's window, behind which lies the cash-and-chip cage. He shakes my hand. "Guys are on their way," he says. "You gonna play in the tournament?"

"Tell me again."

"Thousand buy-in, winner take all."

"I think I'll wait. I'm here for the pot-limit."

The pot-limit game at Van's is currently the highest regular big-bet poker action in New York. It's not that big by Vegas standards, where the high rollers and pros sometimes win and lose hundreds of thousands in a single night, and it may not even be the biggest game in the five boroughs (I've heard rumors of invitation-only games with Wall Streeters where the minimum buy-in is \$25,000), but it's the kind of game where a \$10,000 swing is not unusual, and for me and most of the people I know that's a lot of cheese.

Six years ago, there were two underground poker clubs in the city: the Mayfair (inspiration for the Chesterfield club in the movie *Rounders*) and the Diamond. When they were raided and shut down by the police, several enterprising hustlers tried to fill the void. They were vying for a limited pool of players, and competition was fierce. A number of clubs entered the fray, but only two survived: one uptown, one down. If you didn't like the games being offered, or you wanted to see some new faces, you had to go to Foxwoods or Atlantic City.

Then poker got hot. Televised poker tournaments made cult heroes and millionaires out of amateurs like Chris Moneymaker and created a whole generation of new players. The club that

I frequented in the West Village got so popular that on Sunday nights, when they ran a small buy-in no-limit hold'em tournament, the seventy seats were sold in a matter of minutes, and dozens of Moneymaker wannabes had to be turned away. Conservative estimates put the Village club's annual profits at upwards of 1.5 million. Van was working there as a manager. He knew an opportunity when he saw it, and left to open his own joint.

He wasn't alone. Half a dozen other new clubs have sprung up around the city in the past few months, courting the ever-growing population of serious players with prize giveaways, freerolls and other promotions. On any night of the week, uptown or down, you can find a game at limits ranging from \$4-\$8 to \$100-\$200, and everything in between.

I've been around poker for nearly forty years. I've played for nickels and dimes, I've played for a lot more than that. My passion and curiosity for the game has taken me out to Vegas to write about world champions like Johnny Chan and Phil Hellmuth. It has also taken me back there to play against them in the World Series of Poker's \$10,000 buy-in main event. I wrote my first book while supporting myself on poker winnings.

Recently, however, I've cut back. A freelancer's income doesn't provide much margin for error, and a bad run has cramped my style. When I've played lately, it has been at lower limits. Yet here I am, walking into Van's with my entire poker bankroll, \$3000, knowing I can lose it in an instant. There is really no way to explain it except to say I am taking a shot. I'm playing with the big boys again because—goddammit—nothing else is as much fun.

They begin trickling in, one by one: Mike X, Persian Steve, Andre the Russian, Alphonse, Lucky. At 8:30, their "little" warmup tournament gets off, ten of them coughing up \$1040 apiece (the forty is the juice—Van's profit). Tonio, a forty-year-old ex-currency trader who is now trying to write screenplays and support his wife and kids by playing poker semi-professionally, has won

the tournament the past three weeks in a row, making almost as much as he did for his final-table finish in a no-limit event at this year's World Series of Poker.

Between the early bust-outs and some new arrivals, Van asks if we'd like to start the pot-limit game shorthanded. "Sure. Why not?" is the answer.

My stomach is doing dollar-pancake flips as I hand Van my three thousand and take a seat at the table in the far corner that is cordoned off from the tournament table and the one other game going, a \$10-\$20 limit game.

Like most club owners, Van has taken a minimalist approach to interior decorating. No sense laying out a lot of money until he sees whether he can make a go of it. Right now he has three TVs mounted on the walls, all of them tuned in to a sports highlight show (many of the players need to check their other investments); there is a poster of Frank and Deano and the other Rat Packers in front of the Sands Casino, and a melamine marker board with the week's menu of games. Besides that, his improvements to the bare space consist of a kitchenette, a refrigerator, a table of snack foods, a pretty Asian waitress/masseuse, Joy, who will be relieved much later in the evening by a pretty dyed blond named Honey, and a glass-enclosed smoking room in one corner (Mayor Bloomberg would definitely approve).

Van's partner, Tony, brings me my chips, a rack of red and a rack of green, in \$5 and \$25 denominations. I stack them in front of me, ten columns of twenty chips apiece. My night's ammo. There will be no reloading, though this is not information that I need to share. To let the others know that this is my case money would not work to my advantage.

I look around. We are six-handed to start. Persian Steve and Mike X are still in the tournament, which is good. Persian Steve is, as far as I am concerned, the best pot-limit poker player in New York, and I (mostly) want no part of him. Fortyish, affable and self-deprecating,

with olive skin and a thick head of jet black curls, he manages to separate people from their money while making them feel good about it. It took me a while to appreciate his prowess; at first, I thought, as did most, that he was simply aggressive and lucky, dangerous mostly because his success in business (he owns a paper processing company) enabled him to play without fear. Only after numerous sessions did I begin to appreciate his uncanny ability to read players and sniff out strength or weakness, which he then exploited to the utmost, using charm and persuasion to coax an opponent into or out of a pot. No, I don't need him in this game; it's tough enough without him.

Of the six who are sitting the apple with me, I know several. There is Lucky, a Polish auto mechanic and bookie, who has a blond crew cut and the look and feel of Moose from Archie comic books. He kind of plays that way too: blunt, straightforward and solid. There's Richie B., the living embodiment of Ratso Rizzo, a former chef and current New York City school teacher, who ran bad for years and never missed an opportunity to tell you about it, but who lately has been running good to the point where on a big week he can eat in four-star restaurants and fantasize about early retirement (which, since I actually like him, makes me glad). There is Andre the Russian, a rounder who makes his living at cards and is generally loathed because unlike Persian Steve and Mike X (who both despise him), he rarely takes chances, and makes no one feel good when he beats them. Last but hardly least, there is Alphonse, a 60-year-old restauranteur and degenerate gambler, an action player who owns a red sauce joint in Little Italy and has lost hundreds of thousands since he showed up at one of the clubs a few years ago. Although he might be a favorite to lose the most money in this game, Alphonse is also a threat to win the most. He's never afraid to gamble, and that makes him dangerous.

The other two players I don't know, and that becomes a problem almost right away. The

game we're playing is Texas Hold'em: two cards down to each player, then a flop of three common cards on the table, followed by a fourth common card, called the turn, and a fifth common card, called the river.

Three hands in, I'm dealt an ace and a queen of diamonds in late position. There are a couple of limpers, and I make it \$55 to go. I get one caller, a guy in a blue Echo cap with a toothpick in his mouth and an elaborate tattoo sneaking out from the edge of his short-sleeved blue acetate shirt. The flop brings an ace, jack, two, with two diamonds, giving me top pair with a queen kicker. Echo Cap checks to me, and I bet the pot, \$125. The toothpick rides from one side of his mouth to the other. "I raise," he says. "The pot."

In this case, the pot is \$375. I try not to show my dismay, although I'm staring at the end of my night. This is the game. This is how it goes. Five minutes in, and I'm facing the gun barrel. I've got \$3000 in front of me (minus the \$180 I've put in this pot so far); if I continue with this hand, I'll be playing for all my chips. The next pot-sized bet will be \$1125, and the one after that the rest of my money. So I have to decide, does he have me beat, or is he just trying to muscle me? The problem is, I don't know him. I don't know how he plays.

In big bet poker, decisions like these are a matter of gut instinct. The best players are the ones who not only have the best instincts, but also are able to act on them. You need acumen and a sharp nose in order to know what to do, but you also need heart to do it.

A bankroll doesn't hurt, either. Playing on case money is a handicap. I stare down Echo Cap. He looks back, his eyes black and impenetrable, challenging me. A thin sheen of sweat on his temple catches the light. I've got him beat. I can feel it.

My rational mind stops my mouth and my arm from moving. I've only got \$180 in this pot. I don't want my night to end here.

I fold.

A few hands later, Echo Cap raises preflop against Andre the Russian, then bets out \$200 when a nothing flop comes down. Andre raises him \$500. The toothpick gets chewed, time ticks off; Echo Cap eventually mucks his hand but the cards flip up, accidentally, exposing a seven and a deuce offsuit. Nothing.

Over the next hour, I watch Echo Cap play several more hands, all of which confirm that my read on him was right, that he is a wild man, and I had him beat. Ah, well.

Mike X joins our little game after busting out of the tournament. I have played with him numerous times. He is late 30s, Greek, with a cheerful, swashbuckling energy. He makes every game a little party, though usually not at his expense. He is a man of enthusiasms who lets you know very quickly if he likes you or loathes you, and not in a quiet way. Rumor has it that he owns a number of apartment buildings in Queens. I asked him once what he did and he said, "I'm whatever you think I am. Some people think I'm a thug because of the way I look and because I collect money. It's true that I own a few things and they generate money. I used to be very serious about it, now I'm less serious. I'm looking to do less, not more. I can play in any game I want—and most of the time that's what I do."

He and the rest of them. Persian Steve, Richie, Alphonse, the whole crew. They may have jobs or companies or restaurants, but they go from club to club, looking for the best game, the biggest game, four or five nights a week. It's an odd way to live, and no one knows or understands that better than the guys they're sitting with, the guys whose money they're trying to take. That understanding often becomes the basis of friendship. Animosity, too.

A guy named Eddie shows up and takes a seat at the game. He's a character, loud shirt, even louder voice. He talks like he's standing in a wind tunnel. "Anybody hungry?" he asks. "I'm

gonna order some food!" A minute later he launches into a story about the last time he was eating at a game and this guy Martello came up and took a couple of his onion rings on his way to the bathroom.

"I don't even like the guy! I say, 'Hey, don't you ever touch my food!' He thinks I'm kidding. He's laughing. I say, 'I'm not joking!' He keeps laughing and heads off to the bathroom. Now, I know on his way back he's gonna go for more onion rings. So I take the plate and I spit all over them. He comes back a few minutes later, I'm leaning over the table like I don't see him. He grabs a couple of onion rings. He's holding them up behind me, waving them, showing off for the table. Then he eats them.

"Now everyone is dying. They're laughing their asses off. He thinks they're laughing at me. He doesn't know they're laughing at him. Someone says, 'Martello, Eddie spit all over them.' 'Yeah, right.' He didn't believe it. He kept right on laughing. You shoulda seen him, it was hilarious."

I am always aware, sitting at the big game, that we are having more fun than the lower limit games. The amateurs and the grinders who play \$5-\$10 or \$10-\$20 tend to have the joie de vivre of factory workers on an assembly line. They are playing for less money, yet they seem to take it more seriously. This is why Persian Steve and Mike X loathe Andre the Russian. He is at heart a grinder—and they resent him for it. He is a black hole in their good time. Every hand he wins robs them of a little light.

"Put out a red four," Andre says, right before the dealer burns and turns the river card in a hand he's playing with Richie. Incredibly, the dealer produces a four of hearts, and Andre gleefully bets \$100 into a small pot. Richie folds, and Mike X is incensed.

"I burn candles and make offerings and you call for a card and get it? It's bad enough that

I wind up contributing a hundred and fifty bucks to you every game."

"How'd you come up with that number?" Andre asks.

"You think I'd ever let you put a real hurt on me?" X says.

"Once at Houston Street. You made a mistake."

"You remember that? It's very ungraceful of you to bring that up."

"Things happen."

"Other things could happen. I hear this isn't a safe neighborhood late at night."

"Andre," Echo Cap says, "Why does everyone hate you so much?"

"Who says everyone hates me?"

"I don't hate you," Echo Cap says. "But everyone else seems to."

"Maybe because I tell people the truth," Andre says. "And the truth hurts."

Eleven thirty, and I'm down a couple of hundred. Time passes the way it does in a poker game. You look at your watch and the hands have spun and it feels like you just got here five minutes ago. Or maybe it was a day ago. It's hard to tell. Insults are traded. Jokes. Profanities. A hand that ended a round ago is still being discussed until someone gets weary at last and says "Shut the fuck up already!" The dealers come and go on the half hour. "Time up. Six bucks."

The tournament is over. A guy named Marty won. They've started a second pot-limit game at the other table. Persian Steve is over there. Tonio. A skinny young kid named Dan, who buys in for ten thousand, two five thousand dollar packets that he separates from a larger roll. He's 22 or 23 years old. I try to remember what stakes I was playing for at 22. Fifty cents, a dollar, I think.

Mike X is cleaning up at my table. He flops a set against Alphonse's pair of kings, and all the money goes in. A five thousand dollar hand.

"Sorry, Poppa," he says. "I wish it'd been Andre."

"It's all in the flop, buddy, you know?" Alphonse growls. "What are you gonna do?"

Half past one. A couple of people go broke and the two pot-limit tables combine. Persian Steve decides to leave. He's up three grand. An average night for him. "I've gotta work tomorrow," he says. Dan does not go home. He sits down at our table with \$13,000, up three K from his buy-in. I've seen him half a dozen times and I've never yet seen his eyes. He's got the TV poker pro look. Faint mustache and goatee. Silk designer shirt, gold necklace, gold bracelet. Flame tattoo on one arm. And the mirror sunglasses. He looks like a hired killer, but when he opens his mouth, his voice is mild, almost sweet. Someone told me that he won several hundred thousand at the World Series of Poker a couple of years ago and apparently he's never looked back.

Near two in the morning, a big pot begins to build. Mike X, in early position, makes it \$55 to go. Dan, to his left, who is in the middle of getting a massage from Joy, flicks in a call with a long-fingered flourish. I call, and one other player calls. I have pocket sevens and am hoping to flop a set. If I do, I am certain I will double up against aggressive players like these.

The flop comes king, queen, nine with two hearts. A dangerous flop, no question, although it doesn't help me. Mike X, fearless as always, bets right into it. Two hundred and thirty-five dollars. The pot. Dan looks him over, his face still as a windless lake. "Raise," he says. He matches Mike X's bet, then breaks off six hundred in chips from one of the walls of the small castle he's built.

I shrug and throw away my hand, relieved in a way to have an easy decision. The other player in the pot also mucks, and the action comes back round to Mike X. Without any hesitation, he reraises \$1200 more.

Dan cocks his head ever so slightly, the only sign of surprise he shows. Joy continues to knead his shoulders. He goes to his cash this time. Counts off twelve hundred-dollar bills and tosses them in. The whole table is watching, trying to figure out what this all means. I put Mike X on a set. Does Dan have the straight? I'm sure he would raise. Maybe X has the straight and Dan has the set.

The turn card comes. Eight of clubs. It changes nothing.

"What's in the middle?" Mike X asks.

"Forty-one thirty-five," the dealer says.

"Twenty-five hundred," X says. He counts out the bills and puts them in the pot.

"How much you got left, bro?" Dan asks him.

Mike X does a count. "About four thousand."

Dan goes into the tank now. While he thinks, Joy continues to massage him. She seems oblivious to the drama taking place right in front of her. Dan works his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger. At last, he stops, counts off twenty-five hundred more and says, "I call."

The river is the six of diamonds. No apparent help to anyone.

"I bet everything I have left," Mike X says. He counts it down and deposits it in the pot. "Thirty-nine hundred dollars."

Dan again goes into a think. This time for even longer. At last, he counts off thirty-nine one-hundred dollar bills. When he's finished, he sneaks a quick peek at Mike X, who is staring straight ahead.

"I call," Dan says.

"Good call," X says immediately. "I have a pair of eights."

Dan shows a king and a queen. Top two pair. He rakes in the pot, which is over \$16,000.

As the other players murmur and exclaim, trying to make sense of it, Mike X gets up and takes a walk. Twenty minutes later, he comes back, just as I'm stacking up my chips for the night. He sits and produces a thick wad of rubberbanded cash. "In case anyone's interested," he says, announcing the amount of money he intends to play, "I'm ten thousand behind."

I get up and walk over to the cage window with my chips racked up, feeling like a soldier who just walked through a battlefield and emerged unscathed, the only sign of enemy fire being a bullet that flew by and lit my cigarette: I'm up \$140.

When I look back at the hardcore eight who are left, Mike X is cracking a joke, the dealer is making the deck, and Dan, Richie, Andre and the rest appear to be settling in for a long night.