

POKER BRAT

PHIL HELLMUTH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY



POKER

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Foreword

by Daniel Negreanu

For years Phil Hellmuth has been the most polarizing figure in all of poker. Knowing the man, I also think he might be the most misunderstood. Love him or hate him, there is no denying the fact that when Phil is playing on television, people watch. He wears the passion that he plays with on his sleeve for all the world to see. You get to endure every bad beat and tongue lashing his opponents may receive, as well as the child-like joy he emanates when he is victorious.

Phil cares so deeply about the game of poker that when you see him on a tirade after a bad beat, you are seeing his genuine feelings in that moment. These are feelings that I am sure we can all relate to when the river card dashes our hopes. Phil doesn't hold back and watching him play is reality TV at its best.

I say that Phil might be the most misunderstood figure in poker because the "haters", who don't know the man behind the brat-like tirades, don't get to see the kind, honest, joyous, family man that he is away from the table. I'll be the first to say that I think sometimes he crosses the line with his behavior at the table, but I also know his intentions aren't malicious. Nobody wants to win more than Phil. He puts his heart out there in every tournament and fights for every chip.

He is an asset to the poker community and, by reading this book, you will learn more about Mr. Hellmuth than the title "Poker Brat" suggests. What has made him successful all these years? What drives him? How is he able to stay positive and confident in such a profession that is so often stressful? This is a fascinating look into the mind of one of poker's biggest stars.

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Why Do I Act Like a Jerk Sometimes?

I've often pondered the reasons for my becoming the "poker brat." I know that it is closely related to the low self-esteem I developed while growing up (Chapters 2 and 3). Why is it so hard for me to lose a decent-sized pot? Why do I act out after losing that pot? Here I am, playing with some of my best friends, and I'm lecturing them (!) about why they shouldn't have done this, or done that, when they beat me in some pot. Basically, I'm alienating my friends! Thank goodness my best friends these days just laugh at me and my antics (Chapter 48), and just enjoy the show! I'm happy that they seem to see right through my poker brat behavior.

When my blood starts to boil, after losing a meaningful pot, it doesn't make sense, on so many levels, and yet there it is. Consciously, I know that I shouldn't let one bad pot, one bad hour, or one bad day affect me so deeply emotionally. Consciously, I know that I shouldn't berate other players for their winning play, or complain about how unlucky I was to lose a pot.

Consciously, I know that I should stay in the moment. Consciously, I know that when I'm beginning to feel like a loser I should focus on the fact that I have accomplished so much over the years, and that the players at the table are conscious in recognizing that I'm a great poker player. But for some reason, consciously knowing all the above has no effect on my actual behavior!

Losing a pot, especially one where I had outplayed my opponents, harkens back to the days when I felt that I had to beat my brother and sisters at every game, or else what did I have going for me? My brother and sisters had better grades and better athletics, and they played instruments and I didn't. Basically, my brother and sisters had everything that my parents valued. At least let me beat them at the kitchen table when we played games!

The positive part of the fragile self-esteem that I built for myself, the first 20 years of my life, was solely based on the fact that I was just fine at games, and that I could beat my parents, brother, and sisters at those games. Beyond that, I didn't have much to hang my hat on. So when I lost a game back then (or I lose a pot in poker now), I feel pretty worthless and I search for the reasons why I lost, eventually going off on someone else for being lucky, or for playing poorly.

In 1998, when I watched Martina Hingis lose the French Open final to Steffi Graf, I was struck as I watched Martina's behavior, and embarrassed for her, because it brought to mind my own conduct in the poker arena. Over the course of the last few games, Hingis served the ball to Graf underhanded and skipped the post-game ceremony and interviews. Before witnessing Hingis's epic meltdown I thought that she was a classy champion, so watching her act in this bratty way made me feel sick (in Hingis's defense, she was still a teenager then). At that moment, while watching Hingis, I realized the impact that I had on other people who witnessed my tantrums. I wasn't disrespecting the game the Hingis did in her meltdown, but still, it was hard to realize that I could act like that too.

Good Person

I know that I am a great person. I am honorable, honest, and respectful toward everyone (away from the table!). I know I am really good to my wife, kids, parents, brother, sisters, and extended family. I am solid, loyal, and supportive to my friends. I respect my relationships with people, and I constantly strive to improve myself, but what comes over me at the poker table I may not ever fully understand.

I can compare my behavior to the following situation: imagine a kid standing in the batter's box taking a nice cut at the ball and hitting the ball harder than he has ever hit it before. The ball flies off into the sky, where the outfielder barely catches it in "snow-cone" style (where the ball is sticking out of the glove as it is caught), and the outfielder is moving at flat out speed on the dead run. Now the kid trots back to the dugout, and starts the following tirade:

I cannot believe it; first off it was the longest ball that I have ever hit in my life, so I deserve that home run. Second, the outfielder barely caught it in snow-cone style! Third, why was he playing so deep in the first place? I have never hit a ball that far in my life. That guy should never have been playing that deep! Fourth, how can that outfielder run that fast? I mean there was only a slight chance that he would catch that ball, running full speed backwards like that! I was so unlucky; I deserved to have a home run!

Is the kid right about everything he said? Yes, the outfielder should not have been playing that deep, it was a lucky catch even for a speedster to make, it was a fluky snow-cone catch, and he did hit the ball farther than he has ever hit one before.

That kid is me losing a poker pot! This guy played poorly before the flop, I was unlucky that the turn card hit, and how could he call the all-in bet, etc?

For the last 30 years I have been trying to rid myself of the poker brat behavior that I am so famous for, because I'm 100% sure that getting that emotional hurts my play at the tables. In 2006 I actually controlled myself near perfectly for the whole WSOP, and the results were spectacular: I had a first, a second, a third, a fifth, and a 13th! And finished second in WSOP Player of the Year. Somehow for that one month, whenever something negative happened I was able to say, "Oh well, that's poker."

Phil's New Technique for Calming Down: Three Questions

When I lost a big pot, I used a new technique that I invented; first I would count down my chips, then I would figure out what the blinds were, and then would ask myself how to play optimal poker. Three questions. Somehow, this thought process took my mind off what had just happened to me, and put it squarely back in the moment. With my emotions in check in 2006, I remained calm at the table, instead of going off with a load of negative emotions, and all along tainting my own thought process. Thus, my entire focus was on playing the game the right way.

Hooded Monk!

I hope to get back to that non-emotional way of playing poker, where I act more like my earlier vision of a hooded monk at the table, completely in the moment and focused on winning, and I hope to stay that way for the next 30 years!

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The Greatest Poker Player of All Time, Already?

My performance in the 2001 WSOP was spectacular! In the 23 WSOP tournaments held that year (and they were two-day-long tournaments), I had five final tables: a first place, a second, a fifth (main event), a sixth, and a ninth. Add to that, a 15th place, and another 15th for good measure.

A few months earlier, *Card Player* magazine had polled us professional poker players, and I was voted the “Best No Limit Hold ‘Em Tournament Player in the World.” And who was voted second best, and third best in the world? The up and coming Layne “Back-to-Back” Flack was voted second best, and the legendary T.J. Cloutier third best in the world.

Strange then (or was it), that on April 23, 2001, in the WSOP \$2,000 buy-in No Limit Hold ‘Em tournament, in a field of 441 players, Layne, T.J. and I made the final table. Nine of us would come back the next day to duke it out.

“Drunk Layne” Runs Us Over!

Let’s go back a day, to the night before Day 1 of the WSOP \$2,000 No Limit Hold ‘Em tournament began. Layne went out drinking, all night long. So, Layne stumbled into Day 1 of the tournament completely hammered, and on zero sleep. Layne told me, “Phil, I breathed on someone at noon, and they almost fell over!” Fast forward 14 hours to 2 a.m. on Day 1, and Layne was so drunk he had trouble talking. The blinds were 1,000–2,000, there were 12 of us left, and nine made the final table. We would stop play for the day when there were nine players left.

I had 140,000 in chips, and I was at Layne’s table (Layne had 110,000), and the other four guys at our table had 40,000, 28,000, 22,000, and 18,000 in chips. “Drunk Layne” made it 10,000 to go, every hand, in the dark! Without ever even looking at his hole cards.

I was at Layne's table, and we all folded, over, and over, and over, again. "Drunk Layne's" "making a big raise in the dark every hand" tactics were winning tactics. Because we all folded so often – no one wanted to make a stand and finish in 12th, 11th, or 10th place – Layne was accumulating chips at a rapid pace. Every time we folded, Layne won 4,800 (1,000 small blind plus 2,000 big blind plus 300 in antes $\times 6 = 4,800$). For the rest of us, it was important to make the final table, because 40% of the money was in the top three spots. Thus, if Layne opened for 10,000 at our six-handed table, then these other players would have to commit all their chips, or fold. And it is hard, and takes a while, to find a hand that you want to go all-in with for your tournament life, especially when you know Layne will call you!

Meanwhile, I tried re-raising him with 9-9, and he moved all-in! I was hot! And I made sure that Layne noticed my anger, which he did, because he respected my play. My anger slowed Layne down a little bit the rest of the way, which was good for me, because then I could win a few pots as well, by pressuring the short stacks.

Coincidentally, Layne and I were both being staked by Ted Forrest (we both had staking deals with Ted), and we were both staying at Ted's house. After Day 1 ended, I called Ted and I told him the good news: he had both Layne and me at the final table, and first place was \$316,000! I also told Ted that Layne had been drinking for 36 hours, and that he should make sure to wake up Layne at 11 a.m.

Layne Doesn't Remember He's at Final Table, and Makes a Bold Prediction!

In my bedroom, on the second floor of Ted Forrest's house, I woke up at 11 a.m. A few minutes later, I heard Ted waking Layne up. Layne says, "Dude, I'm way too tired and hungover to play today." Ted says, "Player (play-ahhh), you're at the final table." Layne, "Huh? Sweet!"

Some 45 minutes later, Layne, Ted, and I drive down to the Horseshoe together, and Layne asks who else is at the final table. I tell him that Stan Goldstein has the chip lead (I thought Stan was a tough player), and Layne says, "What? I'll destroy Stan in minutes." Sure enough, on the third hand, Layne has 9-7 on a 7♦-5♦-3♠ board and he's all-in vs. Stan's 6♦-2♦. Stan was a small favorite to win the pot, but Layne's pair of sevens held up. Nice prediction, Layne!

441 Players, and it's Down to the Three Best in the World!

When we hit the final three, it was Layne, T.J., and me. Who says there is no skill in poker? Our peers rank us first, second, and third in the world in No Limit Hold

'Em tournaments, and here we are, the last three standing out of 441 players! Layne finished third, T.J. finished second, and I won it. No deals, no saves, \$316,550 for first, and more important to me, my seventh WSOP bracelet.

The 2001 WSOP Limit Omaha 8-or-Better

I was really feeling it, coming into the last few tournaments at the 2001 WSOP. I had bracelet number 7 in the bank, and I had come close to another bracelet four other times this trip. In the \$5,000 WSOP Limit Omaha 8-or-Better (8/b), it came down to Bono (John Bonetti), Scotty Nguyen, and me. When Bono finished third, it was Scotty vs. Phil. Scotty wanted to make a save, and he was a better Omaha 8/b player than I was. It was \$207,000 for first, and \$103,000 for second. My only issue was that my make-up number, with Ted Forrest, including loans, was \$140,000. In other words, if we took \$30,000 apiece, and played for the other \$43,000, then I wouldn't walk away with any cash. I wanted to make some money, and I had to clear my make-up number with Ted before I could collect cash. Scotty was insulted that I refused to make a deal, even after hearing my explanation.

In a matter of minutes, I had Scotty down to 140,000 in chips to my 395,000. And then, a weird hand came up. I had A♥-2♥-10♣-9♦ in my hand, and the flop came down Q♥-8♠-3♥. I flopped the nut-flush draw, the nut-low draw, and a straight draw. We put in 4-bets on the flop, 20,000 in chips, 5,000 at a time (it was a limit tourney). The turn card was the 4♦, and we put in another 40,000, four big bets, and the river was the 5♠. I made a wheel, Scotty checked, I bet, he raised, I re-raised (30,000 each), and he called. I flipped up my wheel, and he laughed and folded. I was like, "What a weird reaction. I think Scotty has to be drunk or something. He gave me way too many chips, he's down to 50,000, and I feel sorry for him." (Never feel sorry for anyone during competition, and never underestimate anyone!)

Scotty, Verbally Abusing Me?

Around 30 minutes into our match, Scotty began to abuse me verbally, like I've never been verbally abused before. Both of our wives were in the stands, and it wasn't a smart move on his part, because I had the goods on him! I could have destroyed him, in front of his wife, but I decided that I would take it like a man. What could he say about me? That I had a big ego? That I whined too much? I would take it, and crush him for bracelet number 8.

Scotty and I played for three hours, before we finally made a \$30,000 save. After 90 more minutes, Scotty won the bracelet. I had given it everything that I

had. I knew Scotty was a better Omaha 8/b player than I was, but I had him down to 50,000 to my 485,000! 10-to-1 chip lead for a bracelet, and I lost, sigh.

The 2001 Main Event, Scotty Apologizes

There were 613 players anteed up for the \$10,000 WSOP main event in 2001. On Day 1, I was still upset with Scotty from a day or two earlier, so I found him in the middle of the main event, and I asked him to talk to me privately. There were so many people around that we went into a stairwell to talk. He gave me a heartfelt apology, I accepted, and now it was time to focus on the most important tournament of the year.

Day 2 of the 2001 WSOP Main, One of the Best Pictures of Me, Ever!

On Day 2, Irishman Mike Magee raised it up to 1,500 to go in early position, sitting in the big blind, I re-raised it to 3,000 with the A♣-6♣. Mike called, and the flop came down A♠-10♦-6♦. I flopped two pair, what a sweet flop! I bet out 3,000 and Mike moved all-in. If I wanted to call, then I would have to put in my last 30,000 (we started with 10,000 in chips). In my mind, I thought that Mike could easily have a drawing hand: like a pair of aces and a flush draw (A♦-9♦ or A♦-J♦), or he could easily have a straight and a flush draw, like K♦-Q♦, or K♦-J♦. I sat there, studying, sitting up on the back of my chair, with a big smile on my face: that's when someone snapped a great photo of me (see photo section). Usually, especially in the WSOP main event, I was grumpy, intense, and jittery. And yet, here I am, put to the test for my WSOP main event life, and I'm, apparently, thoroughly enjoying the moment!

I decided to fold my hand, and showed it to the table as I folded it. I even said, "Nice hand, Mike." I never asked Mike what he had. I folded, and that was that. Then, out of nowhere, Mike says:

I've never seen you handle yourself so well. I'm going to tell you what I had. I had the A♥-10♥. You were beat, and that was a great fold that you made! I actually thought you had flopped aces and sixes, and I moved all-in, because I knew you couldn't fold it!"

Whew, bullet dodged!

Day 3 of the WSOP Main Event

Late in Day 3, Daniel “Kid Poker” Negreanu, Mike “the Mouth” Matusow, and I flipped the chip lead, back and forth, for hours. And Phil Gordon folded pocket kings to my pocket aces, before the flop. But I think that it was an easy fold. The blinds were 2,000–4,000, Mike the Mouth opened for 20,000 (a huge oversized raise) in first position, Phil Gordon made it 80,000 to go (another huge oversized raise) with K-K, and I made 520,000 to go with A-A! I believe that everyone in the room knew that I had pocket aces. Phil folded his kings (it’s still impressive when someone folds kings before the flop), I showed my aces, and then I asked to see the flop. It was K-4-2, whew!

When we made the final table, National Public Radio (NPR) asked to interview me. I agreed. I was feeling my oats, because I told them, “Tomorrow, with a win, I will become the greatest poker player of all time! It would be bracelet number 8, another WSOP main event, and I’ve been crushing tournaments since 1989.” (NPR was not impressed with my ego.)

Day 4 of the 2001 WSOP Main Event, a Huge Opportunity

For a couple of hours, late on Day 3, Phil Gordon had been playing a dangerous game with me. Every time I raised it up in late position, and he was in the blinds, he moved all-in for a massive amount of chips! That tactic had worked for him for hours, and I had folded a ton of hands, but the table was set for Day 4.

Two hours into Day 4, everyone else folded, and, on the button, I looked down at pocket nines. The script was written. I felt like I knew what was going to happen. I would raise, Phil Gordon would move all-in, and I would snap call his last 570,000. That’s exactly what happened! Phil Gordon then showed his pocket sixes, and I was 4½-to-1 favorite to win the 1.14 million chip pot, and take a massive chip lead. I had waited hours to catch Phil Gordon, and now I was going to reap the rewards.

But, stunningly, the flop came down K-7-6! Surely, in the most important poker pot that I had played in, in ten years, I would find a way to win? Nope, an ace, and then an eight, hit the board. Wow. That was one of the worst bad beats of my life! At least I still had chips left in my stack.

K-10 Offsuit, the Hand I Never Played

An hour later, a hand came up that I have obsessed over, for years. I had K-10, Phil Gordon was in the big blind, and I was going to just call with my holdings. Then, Mike the Mouth called (he was sitting directly to my right). Mike was thinking what I was thinking, don’t raise the amateurs (Phil Gordon) big blind,

because he's likely to do something crazy. I had my calling chips lying in front of me, nearly in the pot. And then, a thought hit me hard, "I bet Mike has K-Q, or K-J, and has me in bad shape." So, I folded.

The flop was K-K-Q, and Phil Gordon bet out 60,000 with Q-J. Mike just called with K-J (I had been right, Mike had had what I thought he had!). On the turn, a ten hit and Phil checked, and then Mike checked. On the river, a four came off, and Phil bet out 200,000, and then Mike raised another 200,000. I was shocked to see that Phil had called the 200,000! What a horrible call in that spot. And I had "folder's remorse." All I could think about was how Mike and Phil would have paid off a ton of chips (to my full house), and I would have had the chip lead. Looking back now, I'm proud of the read that I made. How did I put Mike on exactly K-Q, or K-J?

I Expose My Hole Cards!?! What? My 2001 WSOP Bust Out

With five players left, I limped in with Q-10, and four of us took the flop, which was Q♣-9♠-6♠. Both players in the blind checked, and I bet out a smallish 40,000. Two players folded, and then Carlos Mortensen made it 150,000 to go. It got back to me then, and it suddenly hit me that either Carlos had flopped two pair, or he had exactly Q-J. I decided that if he had Q-J, then I could bluff him out. So, I moved all-in for over 600,000 in chips. Carlos said, "Count?" The dealer said, "Call." So I flipped my cards face up, and as I was flipping them up, Carlos said, "I didn't call." It happened so quickly. That's the only time in my entire life that I remember exposing my hole cards, when another player hadn't acted yet. I covered them with my hands, super quickly, and Carlos claims that he never actually saw my cards. Carlos took another two minutes to call my all-in bet, so perhaps he hadn't seen my exposed hole cards.

But I had a routine I was going to use, and this disrupted it, at the very least. My routine was this: If Carlos didn't call me instantly, then I was going to say, "Whew, you don't have two pair! Thank god!" And then I was going to fist pump. Carlos knew how tight I played, and that I never put my chips in weak, and that I rarely put them all-in on a drawing hand. I don't know what would have happened, if that dealer hadn't said, "Call." Perhaps my routine would have made Carlos fold his hand? It was a super tough call. Or perhaps Carlos would have called anyway.

In any case, Carlos did call 450,000 more. The turn card was a jack, which was great for me, even though it made Carlos two pair; because it gave me an open-ended straight draw (eight wins – four kings and four eights). Carlos shouted, "Yes!" And I said, "That was a great card for me!" Then Carlos said, "Oh, yeah." We were all tired after four grueling days of play in the main event.

The last card was a blank, and I busted out; and collected \$303,750. After I busted, the young Benny Binion (the grandson of the Benny Binion who had started Horseshoe Hotel and Casino, and the WSOP), told me:

Phil, I don't want to rub salt in your wounds, but if you had won it, it was decided that we would have put you into the Poker Hall of Fame, immediately. In essence, we would have publicly declared you the greatest poker player of all time.

Man, what a dream scenario that would have been for me! By the way, Carlos, who is an amazing poker player (and inductee to the 2016 Poker Hall of Fame), went on to win the 2001 WSOP main event.

Ted Forrest, and \$550,000 in Cash...

Ted's share of my 2001 WSOP haul, including his make-up money (taken off the top), and his 50% of the profits, was over \$500,000. I had tried to pay Ted his cash several times over the last two weeks, but one of us was always busy. So, finally, at the end of the WSOP, Ted and I went to the Horseshoe's cage. I opened my temporary box, which was filled with chips, and I counted out \$550,000 for Ted. I asked the cashiers for a check, for my portion of the haul, but Ted asked for cash! And did they have some sort of a bag to put it in? Have you seen what \$550,000 in cash looks like? It's like a small bale of hay!

The cashiers found a bag for Ted, like a cheap plastic gray duffel bag, and then Ted filled it with cash. And asked me, "Do you want a ride somewhere?" I said, "Sure." Then Ted walks across the street to the dingy, poorly lit, parking garage (in dangerous downtown Vegas). And as Ted is a bit absent-minded, he can't remember where his car is! I told Ted, before we left the casino, that we should hire a security guard from the Horseshoe to come with us; and that I wasn't going to get shot by a robber, defending his cash. If someone robbed us, I was hoofing it!

Did Ted take the duffel bag full of cash to a casino and secure it in his account, or a safety deposit box? No, he took it straight to his house!

Ted and I Conclude our Business, Quite Profitably!

Ted had started staking me in late 1999, and I immediately made him some money, and then I headed down, down, down, primarily in cash games. But during the time that Ted was staking me, I was afforded the luxury of taking a lot of time off from the poker world, and spending that time with my wife and kids. What was the sense of traveling around and playing \$200-\$400 limit mixed games, when

my “make up” number was \$220,000?

In the end, I made Ted \$300,000 or more, I’m not sure what the exact amount is, but he had my back for 18 months (and loaned me money to pay my bills for nine months): Ted deserved every penny!