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Going All In

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They gather under the hazy glow of the fluorescent lights in “The Den” in Friley Hall several times a week to play. They sit on faded gray chairs, ones that are comfortable for just over 15 minutes. For hours at a time, Jason Wallbaum and nine of his friends play poker. Texas Hold ‘Em. They sweat and joke and curse and cry with each flip of the cards on the two beaten square tables pushed together in the middle of the room. A foosball table guards the door. A television rests on top of a small loft with three microwaves of varying age and condition underneath, watching from the corner.

Jason and his friends are not the only Iowa State students spending their nights playing cards and gambling. They are part of a burgeon-
ing college culture where Texas Hold ’Em has become so widely popular it recently became an intramural sport. Many common areas in dorms and empty garages off campus are transformed into poker rooms several nights a week. Students have their own chips, and some even make their own poker tables. Others set up online accounts and play against opponents from around the world until the wee hours of the morning. And many of these students can’t even legally enter a casino.

The origin of Texas Hold ’Em has never been proven. Some believe it is based off an ancient Persian game called As Nas while others feel today’s game is based off the original poker played on Mississippi riverboats in the 1830s. Back then, poker was nicknamed the “cheating game” and was quite different, using only the cards 10 and higher in the deck. Regardless of its past, Hold ’Em has enjoyed quite a surge in popularity over the last few years. National tournaments have been featured on stations like ESPN, Bravo, and the Travel Channel. And ISU Recreation Services held its first intramural Texas Hold ’Em tournament last December in response to student demand. The second intramural tournament, held in August, drew 279 students.

In many of the games in “The Den,” the drama is just as big as the televised tournaments. The only difference is Jason’s group plays for smaller stakes. “Our group plays for fun,” says Jason, sophomore in mechanical engineering. “Gambling is recreational.” But Jason has never been in a casino, even though he is legally old enough to gamble at home in Minnesota, where the legal age is only 19.

Many of Jason’s fellow players feel similarly. “I like to keep it friendly,” says Daniel Short, freshman in engineering. Daniel started playing with $5 at the beginning of the semester. He’s turned that into $55, including a game where he won $38.50. “I’m having some beginner’s luck. I’ve won every game I’ve been in so far, but I’ve only played three times.” Daniel has never been in a casino either, though he might begin going when he turns 21 in two years. In the meantime, he’ll stick to playing in the dorms. “So far, it’s cheaper than a movie.

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Just after midnight in a dimly lit room on the fourth floor of Larch Hall, Jay Melancon plays Texas Hold 'Em online. The glow of the computer monitor provides most of the light. The clicking of the mouse — once for a fold or call, twice for a raise — is the only sound. Jay plays four online tables — each with their own virtual green felt and female dealers — simultaneously while his roommate sleeps.

Jay, sophomore in industrial engineering, didn’t get to play yesterday. He wants to make up for it today.

Oops. It’s 4:30 a.m.. No point in sleeping now, Jay thinks to himself. Calculus class is in just a few more hours. Besides he’s on a roll, up $1190, despite already taking two days off. Tomorrow he plans on buying a second computer monitor at a used computer sale.

It’s Day 12. Jay’s up $1190, despite already taking two days off. Tomorrow he plans on buying a second computer monitor at a used computer sale. Then, he’ll be able to play eight games at once. But he’s done for today. Seventy eight hands are enough. He got those in just before lunch. Now he has to study calculus.

Jay plays as much as possible, as many as 2,000 hands in a day. He tracks his progress on a sheet outside his door, between the ex-president nametags of ex-presidents Taft and Harrison. He wants to make up for yesterday’s lost time.

Jay is on a quest to win $3,000 in 30 days playing online Texas Hold ‘Em. The idea is a smaller version of what a friend of his read in an online gambling post. Twoplustwo.com is a popular forum for poker players, severa1 of whom, Jay says, have made successful attempts at winning $60,000 in 60 days.

The games he plays are live with other players from around the world. Most Texas Hold 'Em tables are for 10 players, but Jay is playing on short tables with six players. The blinds are 50 cents and a dollar with maximum bets of one dollar before the flop and two dollars after the flop.

Jay pulls on the strings of his red, hooded, Iowa State sweatshirt. He does this sometimes when he’s thinking. He stretches his 6-foot-6-inch frame and gets comfortable in his well-worn desk chair. He straightens his short brown hair, refocusing on the four online tables. He folds on table one. He calls on table two, raises on table three, and folds on table four. It takes less than three seconds.

Jay’s quest began Friday, September 17 with the $400 he already had in his account with Empire Poker, an online gaming site. Two days later, he was already transferring that $400 to his checking account after winning several hundred dollars. “Right now, I’m playing with their money.” By Day 5, Jay is up $800, more than one-fourth of his goal in less than a week.

It was the 1998 movie “Rounders” about backroom poker games in New York City that ignited Jay’s passion for poker. “I’d watch that movie and get pumped up. ‘Let’s play some cards!’ I must have seen that movie a hundred times.”

Jay has played over 30,000 hands since he opened his account at Empire Poker. Most of those were practice but playing so many hands will help him reach his goal quicker. Jay only wins one hand in 15, and well over half of the time — 63.12%, according to the software he uses to track his play — he folds even before the flop. But Jay believes in the odds. He bets smart — with his head, not his heart. He’s an engineer, a math person. He’s always loved the odds in card games.

“My parents have always played cards,” Jay says. “Five Hundred, Canasta. But we usually play poker if we had enough people together. I love cards. I’m a card player. I’ve played poker since my freshman year of high school when we’d get together and play for baseball cards.”

Jay hasn’t told his parents of his $3,000 goal, but they know he’s a regular Hold ‘Em player and that he plays for money often. In fact, they’ve known since he was a junior in high school. He got caught trying to use an older friend’s ID to get into Canterbury Park, a racetrack and casino located just outside Minneapolis.

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Jay’s only complaint is some people will come to watch him play and then lecture him for playing poker so much. “They wouldn’t be lecturing me if I was waiting tables somewhere. I’m considering this to be like a job. I’m a card player, not a poker player.” Jay feels there is a big difference between the two. Poker, he says, can easily become more about the betting than the cards, while card players just want to play.

“I don’t think it’s a problem,” he says. “I don’t play every day. I have people paying attention.” Day 7 and Day 10 on his tracking sheet are blank, con-
firming his words. Calculus homework was the culprit. With a shrug, he adds that the video game "Halo" might have an impact on his poker time as well.

The rise in popularity of Texas Hold 'Em does have some local gambling experts concerned. It's the time college students spend gambling that worries Frank Biagioli, executive officer of the Iowa Gambling Treatment Program. "If they're spending too much time playing poker and it's affecting their studies, then they're a problem gambler." Students feel invincible and think they can overcome any losses. "You can go online and gamble the entire night away," Biagioli says. "When that can happen and happen regularly, it quickly becomes a problem."

The Iowa Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System is an ongoing telephone survey conducted by Biagioli's office, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In 2004, the highest percentage of gamblers are in the 18-year-old to 34-year-old age group. In this age bracket, 33.7 percent of people have gambled in the past year. Biagioli says gambling, including Texas Hold 'Em, can be an "invisible addiction" for many college students.

Most Iowa State students appear to know where to draw the line when it comes to cards and gambling, however. ISU Student Counseling Service has not seen a rise in gambling-related problems, says Marty Martinez, an SCS staff psychologist. "I've seen it at a few other campuses I've been to, but not at ISU. Yet."

"It's early, though. It's something we pay attention to, especially with all these tournaments being shown on cable television in the past two or three years." Martinez and SCS will have a better idea of how Texas Hold 'Em is affecting students in the coming weeks. "Texas Hold 'Em is so popular right now. We do expect a rise of some kind after students start missing midterms."

Poker is still fun for Jay. But because of the quest, playing has become more like a job. "If I have an hour between classes, I'll play. Before dinner, after dinner, I'll play. I'll play if I have 20 minutes. It's not like I have to drive anywhere to play. Playing for $3,000 in 30 days keeps me focused on the long term. It reminds me that the odds will always play out. It's an easy way for me to make money... if I do it right."

Getting to $3,000 means winning a lot of poker hands. Most of the pots Jay wins are around $15. But the biggest pot Jay has won is $77. It doesn't take a high winning percentage to come out ahead if you fold early on bad hands, Jay says. The most he usually loses is a dollar or two.

Nothing fazes Jay when he's playing Hold 'Em. His friends are over all the time – playing Halo, studying, or just watching him play online. It doesn't matter to Jay. "Heck, I'm on the phone right now," he said when I first contacted him for this story. "I'm up 50 bucks since you called."

The call wasn't a lucky charm, he added. Jay has had success regardless of circumstances. After Day 24, he was up $2,392. That's $8 behind the pace he needs to maintain to reach $3,000 in 30 days. And this total is despite Jay having not played at all on seven of the days thus far. When it comes to playing Hold 'Em, there is no luck involved. "I'm all about the math, the odds," Jay says. "I'm 100% against superstition, but you can't turn your back on luck. Eventually the odds will play out."

The sheet on his door will have the final say on Day 30. e