

Cheating Gamblers a Bad Bet

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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In the Old West, cowboys would congregate in the local saloon to blow off some steam by drinking, carousing and playing poker. Of course, sometimes the poker would lead to more stress.

The popular phrase “ace up your sleeve” refers to the questionable practice of less-than-reputable players chasing big pots. It was a risky proposition, for the penalty for cheating was death by multiple revolver holes. After all, they didn’t call it the Wild West for nothing.

Deemed a dangerous vice, poker and all other gambling was declared illegal in most of the U.S. But like most vices, people will find a way to get their poker fix, and the card game is more popular than ever. Tournaments are on TV almost 24 hours a day. Many players travel to Nevada, Atlantic City or Indian casinos to play, or even go on gambling cruises outside of U.S. waters and the jurisdiction of law enforcement.

And also like most vices, the Internet has satisfied the high demand for poker. Online poker sites have mushroomed in the last few years, growing into an estimated \$12 billion a year industry. Like the Old Wild West, players are still cheating. While none have been shot, it’s probably more due to the anonymity of online play, not because we’re more civilized today.

Take Scott Tom and A.J. Ripper, for example. The pair is suspected of cheating in online poker games hosted by AbsolutePoker.com by looking at their opponents’ digital cards. They purportedly “won” between \$500,000 and \$1 million in a two-week period.

What’s really disturbing is that Tom is a part-owner of AbsolutePoker and Ripper is a former director of operations for the company. The heat is on the duo because the online player account was registered to Ripper and IP and email addresses were linked to Tom. Authorities cannot rule out the possibility, however, that someone else was using Ripper’s account or sitting at Tom’s computer.

While Internet gambling is illegal in the U.S., most online casino and poker sites are located offshore and are subject only to the regulations in their host nations. Although U.S. wire laws govern the payment of bets and winnings, they are generally interpreted to cover sports betting and not games of skill, such as poker.

AbsolutePoker is headquartered in a semi-autonomous Mohawk Indian territory outside of Montreal. The Quebec provincial police claim they aren’t bluffing when they say they are investigating the allegations. In addition, the Kahnawake Gaming Commission, which hosts AbsolutePoker, said it hired an independent investigator to audit the company.

Marco Johnson uncovered the cheating when he requested his hand history from AbsolutePoker after taking second place in a high-stakes online tournament. Instead of just getting his own cards, Johnson received a Microsoft Excel document that included the complete hand histories of everyone involved in the tournament, their e-mail addresses and the IP address of their computers.

After receiving some detective help from some fellow online professional poker players, Johnson turned the document and their findings over to the authorities. If the allegations are true, money may have to be refunded, AbsolutePoker could lose its license and individual culprits could be turned over to Canadian authorities.

If that’s the case, Tom and Ripper better hope their lawyers have an ace up their sleeves.

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