

David Spanier. *The Hand I Played: A Poker Memoir*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001. pp 210-213; 222-225.

## Mood Music in the World Championship

*The only player who can beat me is myself.*

Stu Ungar, three-times world champion

Oh to be in Vegas, now that April's there! It is every poker player's dream, one day, to play in the World Championship. The tournament is held each year at Binion's Horseshoe in Las Vegas, down in Glitter Gulch. The event runs over four gruelling days, as the climax of Binion's month-long 'World Series of Poker'. The attraction is not (for me) the prospect of winning first prize of \$1,000,000 - which as an amateur player, of modest talent, one can rule out in advance. It is the thrill of competing in what everyone recognizes as the most exciting and dramatic game of poker, anywhere in the world.

I never expected to do it, to have that pleasure, though it is quite feasible to gain the \$10,000 entry fee by winning a satellite or, even more cheaply, a super-satellite. (In the former, ten players sit down at the table, putting up \$1,000 each, and the winner scoops his entry fee; in a super-satellite up to a couple of hundred players pay a minimal entry fee of a mere \$200, which produces, with rebuys, a pool large enough to stake half a dozen winning entries.) I did not have to go through all this, however.

A generous friend, with whom I play every week in an itty-bitty little home-town game - let me name him, George Hacker, what a guy! - decided to back me. George had a somewhat inflated idea of my ability, from observing my play aboard a poker cruise we took together in the Caribbean. (One does run around the world, via poker.) The money, to him, was not paramount. Still, no one had shelled out greenbacks for me in such quantity before in my life!

My experience of the World Championship was shattering. Of course, I couldn't do it justice in *The Independent*, the newspaper I write for - not as it actually happened, in all its gory detail. I wrote a preview of my hopes in my poker column, on May 15, 1997. "I have about as much chance of winning the event, which is no-limit Texas Hold 'em, as of beating Tiger Woods at golf," I wrote. "But that is not the point. "at counts is the thrill and experience of competing against so many great players, including a whole raft of world champions. Mat's more anyone can get lucky, which in this event means catching a few good hands at the right moment. "

I continued: "You may be a 100 to 1 shot, the enthusiastic and talented Vegas pro Annie Duke encouraged me, "but that means that once in 100 times you're gonna win!" I have seen too many friends crash in the World Championship to have any such illusions. One year, a player went out in the very first hand - he hit four aces and came up against a straight flush! No disgrace, but so painful.

My fellow poker writer Al Alvarez got trapped of queens early on when he played, and Tony Holdeta"" aces wired outdrawn by a lucky flush to finish in 11<sup>th</sup> place. "I reeled away badly winded," he recalls in *Big Deal* "as if I'd been punched hard in the stomach - a real pain, gradually giving way to a deep spiritual bruise."

My objective, I concluded, was a modest one. To survive the first session and if possible the first intention was to follow a policy of 'selective aggression,' i.e. playing very few hands but playing them hard, as recommended by Tom McEvoy in *Tournament Poker*. I might crash out, but I intended to give it my best shot. If I got through to the second day, that would time enough to consider my game plan. Fortunately, I reasoned, there was a ready cure for being busted - move over to a new game as fast as possible!

Let's skip my arrival in Vegas and cut to the chase. One thing which novice entrants to the World Championship do not lack is advice. Stewart Reuben, a pro and probably one of the best two or three players in England, said: (a) you have no chance, (b) just play aces and kings wired and nothing else. Frank Thompson, a Yorkshire lad and now one of the established players at the Mirage, agreed (a) you have no chance, (b) play pairs in the hole - you might get trips now and then. On the eve of battle, Richard Sparks, an old friend from down-home games in London, bought me a Chinese dinner to pep me up. Sounding like the ghost in Hamlet, he admonished me: "Remember this! Hold 'em is a game of situations, not cards!"

On the morning of the great day Tony Holden, who had himself played three times in the event in past years, took on the role of manager.

Tony: "Relax! Go to your room!"

Me: "Sure, I've got a couple of Asian babes waiting up there."

Tony: "Okay, but only the one!" In sober reality, I had a swim in the rooftop pool and then a modest breakfast. Down in the playing hall, which was Binion's old valet parking space now transformed to a vast white tent under a canvas canopy, scores of players were milling around, waiting for the off. Earlier I had cashed in \$10,000 in traveller's cheques for my entry fee.

This in itself was a strange experience. Ten thousand bucks is quite a lot of money, which most of us would scrimp and save to get together. Cashing in the cheques required an extensive process of countersigning and then verification via telephone by the cashier. Finally the transaction was approved and then - anti-climax - she dropped into my hand seven pathetic little plastic buttons, known as casino chips. Holding them 'in my palm and then handing them over to the tournament desk, the chips seemed like tiddlywinks, not money at all. I began to see how professional players could treat the enormous sums they gambled with so lightly.

The draw for places and tables was broadcast over a loudspeaker by tournament director Jack McClellan. Jack Binion, owner of the joint and long-standing backer of the World Series, came to the mike to pronounce the time-honoured phrase: "Shuffle up and deal!"

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By late afternoon on the first day, the rhythm of championship had imposed itself and I felt more settled. The betting had risen, the Texan on my left had exhausted his tale of crime and passion and was whining on about nuthin' in particular. To my surprise, I found aces wired again. I bet five hundred and the big blind called. The flop came down something like 3-4-8 off suit. He checked weakly, I checked along, hoping to trap him on the turn card. Terrible play, because the turn brought a 5. Now I did feel nervous of the flop. He bet \$1,200 at me. I stopped to think. This bet was way above the level the table been betting up to then and, first thought, I put it down to a bluff to run me out. On the big blind, I figured, he might have played two low cards, for a straight draw, or had a low pair with a straight draw. He knew I was nervous and, if not an absolute beginner, certainly a rank amateur.

I did not want to pay \$1,200, about a fifth of my stack, and face another big bet on the river. He wore dark spectacles which he took off from time to time when he bet. I folded. Afterwards, and when I say afterwards I mean forever and a day afterwards, I berated my weak play. I should have bet the aces, should have called or, better yet, raised him \$1,200 back. Put the heat on him. These are the might-have-beens of the World Championship, turning points between winning a pot on the way to survival or going down without a fight.

At the end of this session I still had about \$7,500 which, was all right to go on with. The Texan finally got busted, holding aces and kings against trip 9s, by a Norwegian player who showed by his taciturn aggression that he knew what he was doing. The guy who had made me put down aces did not last long either, which was some satisfaction. The table was reduced to six and with an hour to go, we were moved.

I found myself at the opposite end of the tent at a table with former world champion Doyle Brunson and half a dozen other players all of whom had \$15,000-\$20,000 in chips compared with my meagre stack. I was too nervous to greet Brunson, as I so easily and flatteringly could have done, since his photograph adorned the jacket of my recently reprinted paperback of *Total Poker*. Nor did I recognize a lady at the table who was, of all things, a kalooki player from the Vic in London. She had a mound of chips too.

I was curious to see how Brunson played. Sure enough, on the first hand he was in, he called a small bet to a flop of A-2-6 and hit a magical 4 to make a low straight. Then he checked his hand against two 6s showing on the river, and won the hand with a pair of aces in the hole! Clearly, this was not a guy you could easily read.

Meanwhile the antes went around at \$25 each player with \$100 and \$200 blinds.

With about \$5,700 in chips, I calculated I could last four or five rounds before I had to make a move. I picked up the blinds, which gave me more breathing space.

There was about an hour to go before close of play for the first day - the first real test of survival. I knew I wanted to get there with, if possible, about \$20,000. I reckoned that to come through with only half my starting stake, say under \$5,000, would be tantamount to failure, since I would still have to double through almost immediately to survive at the next level of blinds on the second day's play.

So with about half an hour to go, I found jacks wired in the hole on the small blind. Everyone folded round to me and I decided just to call on the big blind. I wanted him to bet, so I could raise him back and double my \$5,000. Down came a beautiful flop, so I thought - 10-8-7. 1 a higher pair and a gutshot straight draw. I bet my \$5,000, easily my biggest bet all day. He thought a moment and called me. He probably put me on K-10 or Q-10 or maybe a straight draw with a 9. The dealer burned and turned the cards. No nine for me, no jack, no pair, no improvement.

I still thought I had won the hand, but he showed me 10-8 in the hole for two pairs. As I said in my poker column, Exit Dave. I stood up, my vision in a blur, and stumbled out of the hall. O-U-T spells out.

I didn't feel too bad at first, because I thought I had taken my best shot at survival. Not so! I called Frank Thompson who asked me what hand I went out on. When I told him, he immediately explained that I had misplayed it - badly. I had to bet the jacks before the flop! If I had bet all my chips I would have certainly won the antes, which

would pay for another round. If I had made a smallish bet, say \$1,000, would he have called? What for? As it was I simply gave my opponent a free draw to improve. HW might have had the very worst starters at Hold 'em, 7-2 offsuit, and still hit something playable. Why give him that free roll?

As the realization sank in that I had misplayed the hand and very badly at that, my spirits sank. Tony Holden was the first to offer his sympathy, which he did very generously. When he had played, he explained, there were only 186 players in it, not 312, so I had in effect survived far longer than he had done. He said all the right things, but the awful ache in the pit of my stomach did not go away.

One of the most fitmous stories about the world championship was the way the late, great 'Treetops' Jack Straus had won the title in 1982. He had fought his way back starting from a single \$500 chip, which he had found under his cigarette pack. He had won the blinds, played it up, doubled through, and by good fortune and good judgement come right back into the event. Finally he had won the championship. I had blown it.

I wandered around aimlessly, took a walk around the block - it was still steamy hot outside - came back, sat down, had a glass of water and talked desultorily to a few friends, hurting all the time. It was now about 10.30 p.m., play had ended for the day and a crowd of happy triumphant players streamed out, all smiling and chattering, to go to the buffet upstairs. Donnacha O'Dea, whom I had consulted in London, was ebullient - he had \$26,000, far more than he expected on the first night, which gave him a real chance.. I could not possibly eat. I wanted to wait until 1 a.m. when I could call George in England and give him the bad news.