

# 21-year-old Jeff Madsen is the surprise star of the WSOP

At some point, Jeff Madsen will get used to this whole youngest-player-ever-to-win-a-World-Series-of-Poker-bracelet thing. But for at least the next week or so, he'll still be getting the hang of it. You see, people who win multiple bracelets and \$ 1.4 million aren't supposed to worry about getting a room at the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas, which hosts the WSOP main event.

It's only been a few days since Madsen, a 21-year, 1-month, 19-day-old film student from UC Santa Barbara won the second of his two WSOP gold bracelets. He's still carrying a rather endearing innocence about going from college student to poker god in less than a week.

„I got a room at the Rio for the next three days, but after that, I'll have to move somewhere else since they're all booked," he said. „I thought about dropping the fact that I won two bracelets, but I don't know if the people at Suite Reservations really care.“

Umm. Here's guessing that poker's resident brat, Phil Hellmuth, wouldn't be having this kind of problem.

Maybe it's better, though, if Madsen doesn't stay at the luxury all-suite hotel. After all, he came to Vegas two weeks ago with a college buddy and just enough money to pay for his buy-ins at the WSOP. They booked the cheapest room they could find – \$ 80 a night at the Hooters Casino – and played in small-time cash games up and down the Strip to help pay for it and their board.

„He'd never been to Vegas before, so I didn't want him to get lost," said Matt Poldberg, 23, Madsen's buddy from UC-Santa Barbara who makes enough money from playing poker online and

in Los Angeles-area casinos to live a comfortable life in Isla Vista, the college town next to their school.

“I wasn’t going to go until the Omaha event, but he actually asked me to come with him and show him around,” Poldberg said. „I’ve been to Vegas five or six times, so I went about a week-and-a-half earlier than I’d planned. What was I going to do, let him go to the biggest tournament in the world and sit in a hotel room by himself in a city he’s never been in before?”

Here’s the thing, though: This was no Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure. Madsen planned on winning this thing. It’s how he sold his parents on letting him take \$ 6,000 from his college fund and a \$ 3,500 loan (he insisted on repaying it) from his parents to pay for his buy-ins to six WSOP events.

„We actually talked about (lending) him the money two or three months before,” said his mother, Harriet. „But he convinced us because he said he could do well. I’ve always taught my children to believe in themselves, so why should I stop now? I have no worries about my son being a gambler. He’s in it because he’s a competitor and he loves the strategy. Anything he does, he does it very, very deeply. So he’s pretty deeply into being a student of poker.”

Still, it’s not like Madsen had a long resume to base his confidence on. His biggest wins before his \$ 1.4-million score at the WSOP were a couple of \$ 2,000 checks from Sunday tournaments at the Chumash Indian Casino (which allows 18-year-olds to gamble) in Santa Ynez, Calif. Somehow, though, he knew he was ready for the big time. He’d read just about every book ever written on the game, studied every pro on TV and played enough hours at Chumash to feel like he could read other players’ hands better than they could read their own.

Madsen admitted to a few butterflies when he saw poker legend Doyle Brunson strut across the room on the first day. But pretty soon, he was getting chummy with one of the game’s

best.

„Chris Ferguson sat next to me at the first tournament,“ Madsen said. „I wasn't intimidated or anything because I've watched him on TV a lot, so I know how he plays and he doesn't know how I play.“

Instead of talking poker, Madsen asked Ferguson – better known as „Jesus“ in the poker world (for his looks and style of play) – about high school. „I knew he was from Pacific Palisades (Calif.) so I asked him if he went to Palisades High, like me, and he did,“ Madsen said.

At one point, another player at the table told Madsen that he'd better watch out for Ferguson – as if the kid didn't know who he was. Ferguson laughed and told the guy that he'd better watch out for the kid, who was rapidly amassing a huge chip stack. „That was cool of him,“ Madsen said. „It showed he respected me as a player.“

By the end of his second tournament victory on Saturday, Madsen was coolly facing one of poker's stare-down kings, Erick Lindgren, in the \$ 5,000 short-handed no-limit Hold'em event final. After his first bracelet win – in the \$ 2,000 No-Limit Hold'em Event on July 17 – there was plenty of room for the skeptics out there to call Madsen a fluke. Poker involves a fair amount of luck. The WSOP is a different beast. An amateur can get on a rush and make a final table once. It's been happening with greater frequency in recent years as the sport grew in popularity. But with a field as big as the WSOP, and a talent pool as deep, it's fair to say that two victories in less than a week is more than a rush.

Madsen insists it won't change him ... much. Unlike many of the young guns who've scored big at the WSOP, Madsen plans on returning to UCSB in the fall to complete his degree in film studies. He's planning on being the same old Jeff, too. Nice guy, a film major with a lot of night classes, who likes to go

out in downtown Santa Barbara with his buddies on a Friday night.

„I know he went out and bought some Lacoste shirts after he won. But he’s still wearing skater shoes,” Poldberg said. „Next year, he might wear some nicer clothes more often, but as far as his priorities, I don’t think he’ll change much.”

Nicer clothes aside, the biggest difference to Madsen’s daily life will probably come on weekends. Instead of driving a half-hour to Chumash, he might jet to Aruba for a World Poker Tour event.

“One-point-four million: It’s so ridiculous I don’t know what to say,” he said. „It’s like, ‘I guess I have a lot of money now and I can buy stuff.’ ... But I’m just trying to focus on winning bracelets and playing good poker.”

One thing he’s got to work on, though, is putting those gold bracelets to work.

After winning his second bracelet on Saturday, Madsen was invited to party at the hot nightclub Pure. He was still wearing the same outfit from earlier in the day, and the bouncer wasn’t going to let him in with skater shoes.

„He wasn’t like, ‘Dude, do you know who I am?’ “ Poldberg said. „He was like, ‘Whatever, let’s go someplace we can all hang out.’ That’s just the kind of guy Jeff is.”