

World Series of Poker winner faces USD 6 million lawsuit

A week ago Jamie Gold was on top of the poker world. The 36-year-old Malibu resident won the World Series of Poker, the largest and most prestigious tournament. By capturing first prize of USD 12 million among a field of more than 8,700, Gold was supposed to be enjoying his status as a nouveau multi-millionaire. Instead, he's getting sued, is the subject of tabloid rumors that he's a fake, and facing tax problems.

And oh, yeah, he hasn't yet received the money, and it's quite possible he won't.

Welcome to the world of high stakes tournament poker where – more often than not – the truth is not known until the cards are laid face-up on the table.

This is much is known:

Gold, a self-described former Hollywood agent turned television producer, was sponsored by Bodog.com, an online gaming company. Bodog ponied up Gold's USD 10,000 entry fee, and, in turn, Gold agreed to promote the site by wearing advertising logos (Harrah's Entertainment, owner of the World Series, stipulated the logos should be "dot net" rather than dot com") and to convince some of Hollywood friends to do the same.

Enter Bruce "Crispin" Leyser, also a television executive who is friends with Gold – the two met last month in a Las Vegas poker room. They talked about developing a concept for a new TV show, and Leyser in court documents claims he agreed to help Gold secure celebrity endorsements for Bodog, and to "share" the seat in the tournament.

Crispin secured two celebrities to wear Bodog logos: Matthew

Lillard, who played Shaggy in the Scooby Doo movies, and comedian Dax Shepard. Thereafter, Crispin alleges, Gold insisted that to satisfy his agreement with Bodog, he – rather than Crispin – would play in the tournament, but both would share in any prize-money.

And then, Gold went on to outplay more than 8,700 opponents and capture first prize in the world's most prestigious poker event. Witnesses said Gold said very little to reporters after he won the USD 12 million and quickly disappeared.

He hasn't been seen since.

"What a surprise," quipped a poker wag.

Crispin went to court, and on Friday, Chief District Judge Kathy Hardcastle granted a motion temporarily restraining Harrah's from releasing half the prize-money – USD 6 million – to Gold. A hearing on the temporary restraining order is scheduled Sept. 1 in District Court.

"Our lawsuit alleges breach of contract and unjust enrichment," said Las Vegas attorney Richard Schonfeld, who with David Chesnoff represents Crispin.

Schonfeld said Crispin is interested in only half the prize-money – plus legal fees.

"We don't want to interfere with money that Jamie's entitled to, just as he shouldn't interfere with money he's not entitled to," the attorney said.

And what proof does Crispin have that he's entitled to half the World Series prize?

That, according to the court filing, would be Crispin's answer machine recording from Gold the day before he won the World Series:

"I have a real good plan on what to do for today. Thank you

for all your help. I wanted to let you know about the money. You're obviously very well protected. Everything will be fine, but nothing's going to happen today. That's for sure. I have the best tax attorneys and the best minds in the business working for me from New York and LA and what we're probably going to do is set up a Nevada Corporation ... So it might take a few days, so please be patient. I promise you – you can keep this recording on my word – there's no possible way you're not going to get your half ... after taxes. So please just be with me.”

Within a week of the tournament, Gold has attained dubious legendary status as the poker world's equivalent of D.B. Cooper, hijacker who leaped from an airliner with USD 200,000 in twenties strapped to his torso in 1971 and was never seen again – dead or alive.

In the week since Gold disappeared, the Internet and local and national tabloids have been rife with stories of Gold stiffing professional players whom he had promised “coaching” payments, should he win, and of misrepresenting his achievements.

“Gold, who boasts about having repped everyone from Sopranos star James Gandolfini to actress Lisa Liu, reportedly came up dry in the celebrity wrangling department,” states an article in Hollywood Interrupted.com

“Jamie Gold never represented any of the people he keeps saying he has,” notes defamer.com.

Perhaps, but one thing's for sure: Gold is a fitting addition to the world of “professional” poker – filled with Runyonesque characters who would sell their grandmothers for a buy-in to a big tournament, and who love to sell shares of themselves – sometimes as much as 200 or 300 percent.

Enter into this shady scene the influx of Internet poker and you can just imagine the public relations nightmare awaiting Harrah's and other legitimate and well-respected brick and

mortar ventures that try to cash in on the ongoing world-wide poker frenzy.

Harrah's, of course, is not commenting on the lawsuit against Gold. Nor would spokesmen for the world's largest gaming corporation comment on whether Gold has attempted to retrieve any of his prize-money.

"The matter apparently is now in litigation," Harrah's spokesman David Strow said. "It would be inappropriate for us to comment."

Likewise, Susan Mainzer, spokeswoman for Bodog, declined to comment on the matter, referring a reporter to a company release that states: "Jamie truly epitomizes the Bodog spirit. We are incredibly proud of his achievement and thrilled by his performance in the tournament."

It's likely that Harrah's officials, who have already prohibited the display of dot com logos during major poker tournaments, will become less and less enamored with the growing representation of online gaming sites – both through Web tournaments that offer as prize-money entry fees in brick and mortar events and through sponsorship deals.

After all, the House in July passed the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act – otherwise known as the Goodlatte-Leach bill – and many officials outside Nevada believe Internet gambling already is illegal in the United States. It's just not enforced. Yet.

"The issue is complicated because there are so many people who qualify for major tournaments in Las Vegas by playing on these Internet sites," said Anthony Cabot, an expert on gaming law. "Some states say it's against the law and the player could be committing a felony, so clearly there is a lot of ambiguity."

But one thing is clear. The game of poker is on such a world-wide winning streak, it surely will go on, laws or no laws.

“Everything passes,” said longtime tournament director Jack McClelland.