

As casinos open, many look for new career as poker dealer

Fort Lauderdale, Florida –Barbara Hausman knows how to turn the odds in her favor. The 48-year-old real estate agent played in the Ladies' World Series of Poker last year, her first major tournament, and placed in the top 9 percent. Now, she's raising the stakes, hoping to try her hand as a professional poker dealer.

„It's a ground-floor opportunity," said Hausman, of Delray Beach, who just graduated from the Casino Dealer's Academy in Hollywood. „The writing on the wall is that there will eventually be full-scale gaming in Florida."

Poker dealing is becoming a hot job in South Florida as the opening of new casinos brings more people to both sides of the poker table.

„Some people are looking at it as a way to start a new career," said Scott Poole, poker manager at Gulfstream Park Racing & Casino in Hallandale Beach. He said he gets two or three job inquiries a day from „lawyers, real estate agents ... all walks of life."

Gulfstream opened a 20-table poker room in April, followed by a new casino and slot machines. Mardi Gras Racetrack & Gaming Center in Hallandale Beach is renovating its 30-table poker room and plans to build a new one later this year, said Dan Adkins, the chief gaming executive.

The Seminole Casino in Coconut Creek recently expanded from eight to 15 tables. And at the Isle of Pompano Park, a new casino at the harness racing track will include a poker room with 34 tables.

„We get a steady stream of applicants,“ said Mike Smith, director of poker operations at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, which has 48 tables and employs 200 dealers. „It’s the in thing right now. Our guys listen to rock ‘n’ roll music all day long. Plus, you can make a good living.“

Poker dealers make their living on tips, and a good one can earn as much as USD 1,000 a week. The average dealer will deal 17 games every 30 minutes, and earn USD 1 to USD 2 in tips per hand.

Warren Targia, poker manager at the Seminole Casino in Hollywood, said his dealers include a teacher and a nurse working second jobs.

„Let’s put it this way, if I fill 10 dealer spots, we probably do 60 to 100 auditions,“ Targia said. „The more people who come to play poker, the more people get the idea to be a dealer.“

People like Mark Evensen, 59, of Margate, a poker player for 35 years. He retired six years ago from the medical manufacturing business. With time on his hands, Evensen enrolled in poker school and hopes to get a casino job.

„I understand the game. I can multitask and I can manage 10 people,“ Evensen said.

Poker is all in the family for Pam Sturt, 41, a mother of six. Her dad taught her to play when she was 6. Her husband, David, is an instructor at the Casino Dealer’s Academy. After 20 years as a waitress and bartender, she tried her hand at poker dealing school and got hired at Mardi Gras casino.

„Personality is important,“ she said. „I know how to handle all kinds of people.“

Since opening three years ago, the Casino Dealer’s Academy has

almost doubled its student roster, with 60 at any given time. The students are betting the USD 1,200, six-week course will pay off with a job at a casino.

Pinnacle Gaming Inc. in Davie and The Academy of Professional Poker Dealers in Lake Worth teach 120-hour courses with tuition about USD 1,200.

Professional poker player Antonio Pinzari opened the Lake Worth school this year, drawing about a dozen students from as far north as Port St. Lucie. One is a public school teacher who plans to moonlight, another is a retiree who wants to supplement his Social Security. Many hope to get jobs at the Palm Beach Kennel Club, the only parimutuel poker room in the county.

„Gaming is coming our way. This state is going to erupt in the next two or three years,“ Pinzari said. „At one time, the poker game was a smoke-filled environment in back of the pool room. Now it’s out in the open, it’s acceptable. It’s on national TV.“

Hausman, the real estate agent, learned to play poker on her own about three years ago. Her two teenagers think she’s „a cool mom.“ Her husband doesn’t mind, but doesn’t join her. „Never gambles,“ she said.

„I want to like what I do and have some WAM – walking around money,“ said Hausman, who is still selling houses but hopes to find a casino job.

During the Ladies’ World Series tournament in Las Vegas last summer, Hausman sat two tables away from celebrities playing poker, like Mimi Rogers, and poker players who are celebrities, like Jennifer Harman. She was hooked.

„That’s as good as it gets,“ Hausman said.