

Wild, wild cards in the World Series of Poker

Las Vegas – In 2003, Tennessee accountant Chris (no nickname needed) Moneymaker won the Main Event at the World Series of Poker after earning his USD 10,000 seat in an online tournament. Poker's biggest, richest showdown has been dealing out wild-card winners ever since.

Last summer, former Hollywood agent Jamie Gold won the Main Event in his first try. Past champions including Doyle Brunson, Johnny Chan and Phil Hellmuth went out the first day.

„You can't, no matter how badly you wanted to, ever play in a regulation NBA game ... unless you were a member of that team. You couldn't buy your way onto an NFL playing field," said Jeffrey Pollack, commissioner of the tournament run by Harrah's Entertainment. „But at the World Series of Poker, anyone can enter, anyone can win.“

Action starts Friday at the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino with 55 events over 47 days, capped by the 12-day Texas Hold'em Main Event. That's up from 46 events last year.

When Moneymaker won, ESPN's tape-delayed coverage totaled seven hours. Now the network is doing 32 hours for the third year in a row. It will air the final table live on pay-per-view for the second year.

Moneymaker's victory in a field of 839 players earned him USD 2.5 million. Last year's Main Event set records with 8,773 entries and a top prize of USD 12 million.

Whether that growth continues remains to be seen after a wild card dealt last year.

A federal law adopted last fall prohibits banks and credit-

card companies from making U.S. customer payments to online sites for any type of gambling that is illegal under U.S. law. The WSOP says it won't accept third-party registrations, such as Moneymaker's in 2003, from online sites doing business with U.S. residents.

The impact could be significant. Pollack declines to speculate on what the turnout may be. However the online hand plays out, he says the tournament still has its tradition and everyman appeal.

„The World Series of Poker started in 1970 and grew tremendously before the Internet was ever made available to the general public ... we're here to stay,“ Pollack said. „That said, ratings will come and go, attendance will come and go, but that's true for NASCAR, the NBA, the NHL, Major League Baseball and any other global sports property. That's part of the price you pay for being on the big stage, and we accept it.“

Online sites adapt to law

The law passed last October, the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, may not be the final word.

In April, U.S. Rep Barney Frank, D-Mass., introduced a bill to allow federally licensed online companies to accept wagers. According to a news release, his bill has „protections against underage gambling, compulsive gambling, money laundering and fraud.“

Meanwhile, online sites are improvising.

Poker Stars, which paid Moneymaker's way in 2003, is offering to deposit USD 10,000 (plus USD 1,000 for travel) into the Poker Stars account of any winner of its satellite tournaments so they can register themselves for the Main Event if they choose.

Poker Stars says it sent about 1,600 satellite winners to the Main Event last year, including about 1,000 U.S. players. That was about 18% of the field. Poker Stars, based on the Isle of Man, isn't speculating how many it will send this year.

„This is the first year we're kind of letting go of the reins, per Harrah's instructions, and letting players buy themselves in. We hope to get a good number, but we can't say for certain," said Susan Lindner of Lotus Public Relations, a New York firm representing Poker Stars.

Online poker offered beginners a less intimidating venue than casino play, according to poker pro Robert Williamson III.

„You could sit in your underwear at home, crawl out of bed and play a few hands at night and in the morning," Williamson said.

He says the new law „definitely hurt poker in the first few months." But, he added, „People are going to find a way to play, whether it's in brick-and-mortar casinos or whether it's online."

The full specifics of the new regulations aren't due until this summer. In the meantime, there are gray areas, and some U.S. residents still play online, says John Pappas, vice president of government affairs for the Poker Players Alliance, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group.

„There are certainly not as many as before, but there still are companies out there offering poker services," Pappas said.

He'd prefer legalization: „What we don't want to see is an underground system developing, because companies that want to be good actors are forced out."

Norman Chad, in his fifth year as ESPN's commentator for the World Series, says poker's staying power on TV has been sustained by interest and advertising revenue generated by

gaming sites.

„I don't know how it will play out with Congress or legally, but no matter how it plays out, people are still going to play on the Internet in the long run,“ Chad said. „So as long as that occurs ... I think it helps the little poker boomlet on television survive.“

Cameras help build drama

Poker shows of all sorts compete for viewers. They include National Heads-Up Poker and Poker After Dark on NBC and the World Poker Tour and the Professional Poker Tour on the Travel Channel.

Amid that saturation, ESPN's 32 hours of World Series programming last year averaged a 1.0 rating (962,000 households). For the Main Event, it drew a 1.3 rating (1,238,000 households).

That's no threat to the NFL, but the World Series has come far from its early years in the 1970s, when it wasn't even aired.

Now cameras catch everything, including hidden hole cards. This year, for the first time, it all will be televised in high definition. And the tape delay enables ESPN to cut the poker drudgery and highlight made-for-TV moments when the chips are piled high.

„Poker is essentially the best reality show on television because the other reality shows aren't anywhere close to reality,“ Chad said. „Most people aren't living on a desert island or eating spiders.“

Many play poker, and the relatively recent addition of the hole-card camera gives viewers a look at the game even the players at the table don't have.

In the Texas Hold'em Main Event, each player is dealt two hole cards face down. Three more cards are turned face up on the

table – the flop. Then comes a fourth face-up card – the turn. Then a fifth – the river. Each player can use his two cards and the five on the table to produce the best five-card hand.

Cameras built into the tables reveal the hole cards to viewers, which is no problem with a tape-delayed telecast (they're not shown on the live pay-per-view).

„I don't think there's anything remotely equivalent as far as its importance to the telecast,“ Chad said. „Football on television is 50 times better (now) than you have replay. ... The hole-card cam is even more important to poker on television.“

ESPN first used the hole-card camera in 2002.

„If you're watching ESPN Classic poker from the '70s and the '80s, there weren't any hole cards (hole-card cameras). It was a very different show to watch,“ said Jamie Horowitz, ESPN's senior producer for the World Series.

But Horowitz says the appeal goes beyond the sneak peek. He says the game itself offers an inside look at personalities and the game: „What makes poker particularly good for TV is there's a narrative within every hand. Every time you're going around the table, there's some sort of drama.“

Hopes brought to final tables

For Brunson, a 31-year WSOP veteran, there's no drama like the first day of the Main Event.

Last year, the mass of everything poker made Brunson think of legendary director John Ford's *The Long Gray Line*, a story about West Point instructor Marty Maher (played by Tyrone Power).

The movie reminded Brunson of poker's long, gray line – the old-timers who built the World Series – and he was moved to tears.

„They are all dead and gone, but their memory isn't lost in the sea of poker tables for me," Brunson said. „To see how far poker has come, it's amazing. And every time I think this thing can't get any better, it gets better. All those old-timers I used to play poker with would love it."

So what if the final table at the Main Event again doesn't include familiar names such as Brunson?

„It doesn't matter, because if we do our jobs correctly, producing the show, Chris MoneyMaker is never just the name of a guy that shows up at the final table. You know about how he qualified for \$ 39 online," Horowitz said. „When Greg Raymer shows up the next year, he's not just a name. He's a patent attorney with a dream. When Joseph Hachem shows up the year after, he's a guy carrying the hopes of Australia with him."

Who will it be this time?