

The Latest in Job Cuts: Automated Poker Without Dealers

Folsom, California – Most card rooms and casinos in Northern California offer live poker the old-fashioned way: with dealers doling out cards and players tossing chips into the center of a table.

But here at the Folsom Lake Bowl Sports Bar and Casino, just outside Sacramento, the action is entirely different – no cards, no chips and no dealers whatsoever.

Instead, players gather around poker tables outfitted with game control software and computer touch screens that display virtual cards and chips representing money. Gamblers say the new technology, called PokerPro, has transformed a game that can become tedious into something quick, easy and fun.

“It’s what I call no-brainer poker,” said Ron Wills, who plays at least three times a week. “No chips to stack, no cards to shuffle, just sit down and play.”

This level of automation might well become the poker room of the future. At a time when computerized gambling is becoming increasingly popular, PokerPro mixes the speed and efficiency of Internet poker with the stare-them-down, in-your-face quality of playing live.

The vendor behind the technology, PokerTek of Matthews, N.C., has supplied these high-technology tables to more than 10 new card room and casino customers since May, including an American Indian casino outside Chicago and the Galaxy StarWorld Hotel and Casino in Macao.

PokerTek’s chief executive, Chris Halligan, said the company

had plans to sell a version of PokerPro for restaurants and bars. "It's all about accessibility," Mr. Halligan, a former executive at Dell, said. "We're using technology to make the game even bigger than it is today."

The technology, he said, benefits both sides of the table. For the lessees of the table, the 10-seat PokerPro enables poker rooms to use fewer dealers and increases revenue from the percentage the house keeps from each pot. Here, the math is simple: while dealer poker yields an average of 30 hands an hour, PokerPro doles out an average of 46.

In a California card club, a regulated gambling house where players compete against one another, the tables would increase the house's share to about USD 150 a table an hour.

But playing more hands an hour could help gamblers, by improving the odds that each person will see a playable (and potentially winnable) hand. Players' bankrolls last longer at PokerPro tables since there are no dealers to tip after winning hands.

"If you're doing well, tossing in USD 1 or USD 2 after every win can add up," said Matt Harkness, general manager of the Four Winds Casino Resort in New Buffalo, Mich., which opened this summer with a fully automated poker room. "This technology keeps that money with the players."

PokerPro mimics the flow of a regular game. In the center of the table, a large screen displays communal cards as they might look on a regular table. Around the edge of the table, individual touch screens display hands face down, and only make the cards visible when players cup their hands over the screens as they would with real cards.

The software has built-in features to protect against player error: it gives each player up to one minute to make a decision, and every action must be confirmed before play continues.

Some, though, are not convinced that the technology represents an improvement.

Larry Anderson, who plays PokerPro at the Black Oak Casino in Tuolumne, Calif., said that while he enjoys the automated game, occasionally he misses the feel of real cards and the sound of clinking chips.

“Every now and again, I want the real thing,” he said, and when he does, he gets into his car and drives to Reno, Nev., to play there. “Sometimes, you just can’t beat a real live game,” he said.