

WSOP calls on an A-Team of dealers as the Main Event stakes grow higher

Las Vegas -- Two TV cameras. Two guys holding boom microphones. Three ESPN producers. At least 50 eager spectators leaning in over the rail, including four boisterous 20-something males who appear to have already downed at least six cups of beer each. A table supervisor and floor announcer. And nine poker players with millions at stake.

That was the scene at one of the three remaining tables inside the Amazon Room early Monday afternoon, seconds after yet another „all-in call“ was announced over the loud speaker.

And sitting in the middle of it all was Jenna Phillips, a petite and unassuming-looking blonde from Missouri. Phillips is dealing the action on Day 7 of the World Series of Poker's Main Event, where a field of 6,844 has been whittled down to 27 and by days end will get down to nine.

With the TV lights pounding down on the back of her neck, Phillips remains steady with the deck of cards in her left hand, waiting for a prompt from the ESPN producers. When the tap on her shoulder comes, she has to burn a card, quickly slide three more off the top of the deck and then spread them face-up on the table for a flop that will likely cause thousands of dollars to exchange hands.

If Phillips fumbles at all with the cards, it will destroy the anticipation and drama that ESPN so desperately desires. Even worse, if she turns over the flop too early or hastily forgets to burn a card, it will affect the game itself. Instead, Phillips gracefully rolls over the flop without a hitch. As soon as she spreads out the cards, the crowd roars, every player at the table jumps out of his seat and the four guys

buzzed on Milwaukee's Best Light raise their arms in the air and begin wildly trading high fives, mugging for attention from the camera. Another player has been all but eliminated from the Main Event.

Of course, it's no surprise that Phillips handled the flop, as well as the turn and river that followed, flawlessly. Not only is the 26-year-old one of just six dealers that was selected from a field of 900 to work the TV tables during this crucial moment of the Main Event, but she was also named „WSOP Dealer of the Year.“ She is supposed to manage this exact circumstance with brilliance. That's why she and her fellow elite dealers – Ben Beighle, Jennifer Schmidt, Louis Richardson, Laurie Scholes and Frank Augusta – are still here at the Rio All Suite Hotel & Casino, working on the grandest stage in all of poker while hundreds of their colleagues have gone home.

But that doesn't mean she still doesn't get a little nervous.

„Yes, it's always a little nerve-wracking when you know that so many people are watching and you're the one with the cards in your hands,“ she admits. „But this is why you're doing what you're doing. This is what it's all about. So in addition to being nervous, I'm also very excited to be here and to be doing this. I see it as an honor.“

Last week on Day 1 of the Main Event, there were 155 tables in action. Seven hundred dealers worked one of the three shifts on that 12-hour day of poker. And all of them were among the best of the best that Harrah's could hire. But one group of dealers stood a cut above the rest. They were used exclusively at the two „TV tables.“ The main featured table sits in the middle of the No-Limit Lounge, surrounded by bleachers and a make-shift bar up above that serves beer to its thirsty, poker-crazed patrons. The secondary table is located just outside the lounge and is also clad with TV lights and cameras and always draws large crowds of spectators standing on the

rail.

For the past 11 days, the same 12 to 15 dealers have been taking shifts at the two tables, dealing an hour at a time with 30 minute breaks, eight hours a day. But on Monday when just three tables were in action for the 27 remaining players, a new „Magnificent Six“ was chosen to throw the cards in the air.

„We’ve had a lot of tremendous dealers during this year’s World Series,“ says Tournament Director Jack Effel, who just happens to have broken into the casino business as a dealer. „But these six are the ones who can really handle the cameras and handle being prompted by a TV director, all while having good game control and remaining calm the whole time. It’s not as easy as it looks.“

Indeed. Dealers do more than deal the cards. They direct the action at the table. They call out who is betting and how much. And they simply must be a stickler for the rules.

„Knowing the rules is probably the most important thing,“ Phillips says when asked what makes a good dealer. „As long as you’re not confused by anything that happens at the table and you pay attention to what’s going on, you’re going to be OK.“

Despite all that they are responsible for at the table, the TV-table dealers we spoke to agreed that once they sit down and get settled in at the table, they are able to ignore the „lights-camera-action“ moments and simply do their job.

„We’re just like the players,“ says Beighle, 32, of Cincinnati, who was chosen as one of the elite six for the second straight year. He spends the rest of the year traveling the country, working as a dealer for a number of different poker tours. „We’re professionals and once the game begins we don’t give all the other outside stuff a second thought.“

Schmidt, 26, has been dealing since she was a kid. Her parents

owned poker rooms in Oregon and she says that the job has always come naturally to her.

„Usually, I'm not nervous at all,“ says Schmidt, who is also a traveling circuit dealer. „But you always think in the back of your mind that you don't want to do something stupid and make a mistake that could cost someone USD 9 million. That's just an amount of money I can't even fathom.“

At last year's Main Event final table, there was almost that much – USD 8,250,000 to be exact – at stake when Richardson was sitting at the featured table in between Jerry Yang and Tuam Lam during heads-up play. Lam trailed by a huge amount of chips when he said the magic „all in“ words, pre-flop. Yang called him and that's when the ESPN crew took over control of the table. Richardson said it felt like an hour elapsed between the time Yang made the call and he finally got to flip over the flop, turn and river.

„When I turned that river card and Jerry caught the straight, I felt like I was the one who won USD 8 million because I was just so relieved that the moment was over,“ says the 58-year-old Denver native who has been dealing for 12 years and has sat at the Main Event final table for the past four years. „Even after all this time as a dealer, you still get anxious. But it's fun. I really enjoy it.“

Late Monday night, the 2008 Main Event final table will be settled. In November, those players will return to the Rio for what will be the most-anticipated finale in the WSOP's 39-year history. Because she won the „WSOP Dealer of the Year“ award, Phillips, is the only one of the six dealers guaranteed to be part of the three-dealer rotation when the Main Event picks up again in 117 days.

„I'm ecstatic about it,“ smiled Phillips, who also received a ladies-design watch worth USD 4,000 as part of winning the dealer award. „I really love my job and I think anyone who

likes what they do for a living always does a better job at it. To be chosen as one of the best dealers and to be picked to deal the final table is exciting. It's going to be a lot of fun."

As for the other five dealers that were flipping cards on Monday, they'll have to wait and see if they're selected. Effel said that the top dealer from the Rio's poker room – a person yet to be determined – will join Phillips, as will one other dealer to be named later. A few alternates will also be named.

Either way, a weary Schmidt said on Monday that she's looking forward to some down time. Right now she's not concerned with November.

„I'm tired. I'm ready for a few days off," she said with a roll of the eyes. „We've been dealing non-stop at these tables for two weeks now. I can't wait until I can wake up in the morning and not have to look at a deck of cards or a poker player. I need some rest."