

# One night out gambling

“There’s three things, man: there’s sex; there’s foot planted in a sports car; and there’s all in at Texas hold ‘em poker.”



## ‘The first rule of Poker Club is there is no Poker Club.’

Texas hold’em is taking off internationally but is not offered by any NZ casino. DUNCAN GREIVE eavesdrops on an illicit poker tournament, where secrecy is paramount, thousands of dollars change hands and every knock at the door could spell disaster. BEN CLARK photographed the action.

All the chips are in. After nearly five hours of manoeuvring, buy-ins and bluffing, two players survive to contest the final round. Miles needs a spade to complete his flush. Greg, coated in a thin layer of sweat, holds two pair. It all hinges on the next card.

The dealer turns over a three of hearts and Greg, who 30 minutes earlier faced elimination, walks away with the \$800 first prize. He stands, arms aloft, and the room erupts, with supporters whooping and hollering. Miles slumps, crestfallen and attempts a smile. An illicit inner-city game of no limit Texas hold ‘em is over.

Six hours earlier 30 cell-phones rattled, as the location for the evening’s game was revealed. Days earlier an email circulated supplying only absolutely necessary facts.

There were to be two streams, low and high rollers, with entrance fees of \$40 and \$100 respectively. The tariff was to be deposited into a bank account no later than three days prior to the event. The organisers provide alcohol and food, with the rest of the money held as prizes for first and second in each pool.

We walk into the inner city office which has been revealed as our venue for the evening, and the normal detritus of the publishing firm has been pushed aside roughly to make way for hastily assembled poker tables and a motley collection of cheap plastic chairs. The air in the room feels thick with testosterone.

“Only men here. What a surprise,” says Max, a thirty-ish tertiary employee who has come for the high rollers event. He is dressed in a fine tailored pin-striped suit, and his cocky manner puts the sizeable contingent of lawyers to shame.

The assembled competitors are simultaneously diverse and homogenous. They include young lawyers from some of the city’s most storied firms, video store workers, students gambling with the rent and marketing managers getting their first taste of the mortgage. All men, most are under 40, and all bar two are white.

Pizza is brought out, and beers are opened. The 30 gamblers start sizing up their competition. Hands are shaken: “You’re a cold-blooded man.” A nervous energy permeates the room. All are clearly anxious to start proceedings, but unwilling to appear over-eager.

There are any number of different approaches to the pre-game banter. Some, like Max, are loud and confident. Others are self-deprecating. “I’m just here to try and get through \$40 worth of pizza and booze,” says Kevin, a

casually dressed business analyst, who ends up one of the night’s early casualties.

Dave, one of two brothers who has organised the evening, takes the floor.

“The first rule of Poker Club is there is no Poker Club.” He’s joking but there is a serious message. A loose lip could sink this ship, and no one wants to see the club receive any unwelcome visitors.

After a quick run through the rules, cards appear and chips are distributed. Max, who is Maori, is indignant.

“I’d like to know why white’s the most valuable chip. Have you guys got something against chips of colour?”

The prize pools are announced, with up to \$800 available depending on the pool and the placing.

As soon as the games are underway the atmosphere lightens considerably. Bottles of Canadian Club and Jim Beam start swiftly disappearing. At the high roller tables, initial nerves are replaced by the crude, functional vocabulary of the poker table.

“You’re betting like a bitch on that one mate.”

“Burn and turn. Down the river.”

“Shit bro. That was a big cock hand. And the rich get richer.” Max again.

Within 30 minutes the first low roller blows out the bottom. Rick is an IT manager in his late 20s, dressed with slovenly disinterest. The room applauds, and Rick doesn’t seem too perturbed by his early exit.

“I have \$25 lunches sometimes, when I’m hungry.”

Over at the high rollers there are two casualties. One is pretty nonchalant about the whole thing, but Nigel, immaculately clad in slate grey and black, seems less impressed.

“I’m a little gutted, to be honest. The beer and pizza certainly help. If it weren’t for that I’d probably walk out of here, get a gun and shoot myself.”

Dwayne is the reigning champ at the other low-rollers table. A balding security guard from Glendene, he’s already in deep trouble. His protégé Glen has amassed a huge stack of chips, while Dwayne, by some distance the oldest and most experienced competitor here, has already bottomed out and bought back in. He looks in danger of heading out the back again.

He gambles big on a high pair, and it doesn’t work out for him.

“Watch what happens when the champ goes down. I’m like an old slut though, I keep coming back for more.”

He starts asking around the table to see if anyone will loan him anything for a third buy in, a hint of desperation in his voice. Someone suggests the ATM out on the street, but it’s not an option.

“My girlfriend keeps my card, eh. So it can’t be done. I’ll be alright though. It’s still fun to watch and deal.”

He is far from convincing though, and when someone offers to get the cash out his response is instantaneous.

“Well what are you waiting for? Get down there bro, get down there.”

Dwayne cheerfully admits he has a gambling problem. “I just like the shame and humiliation.”

Every half hour the blind is raised, and by now the stakes are such that each group has combined on one table each, with most people spectators. The big bets are now accompanied by shouting, as players barrack for those they know, or who are going “all in”, putting their poker lives on the line. When this happens the player is forced to stand and immediately becomes a crowd favourite.

Max finally bows out after a few heavy losses.

“I was expecting to lose a lot earlier. I’ll be fine. Don’t know about my wife and kids though. I think they’ll be going hungry.”

When a spot prize turns out to be somewhat smaller than expected he can’t resist another dig.

“That’s 1840 all over again with that sort of fuckin’ deal. That shit is ridiculous.”

The high roller table is down to three. Greg has a meagre handful of chips to his name and appears resigned to bottoming. He brings out the sunglasses and slides his pile towards the centre, before standing in accordance with the rules. The betting ratchets up and silence descends on the room.

When the fifth card is flipped, giving Greg the pile and a new lease of life, the room erupts. Clive, a red-faced IT technician who’s well into the whisky, starts yelling.

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Calvin, the unwilling chief benefactor of Greg’s revival, is looking decidedly sick. He has lost a nearly insurmountable lead in the high stakes game and is back to level pegging. Within two hands he will be

