



Photographs and layout by Jessica Lindsay

TEXAS HOLD 'EM AT LA SALLE

By Chris Dignam

In a dingy apartment just off La Salle's main campus, a regularly scheduled game of no-limit Texas Hold 'em pulls in a small number of hopeful but naive students. In the dark and smoky room of the apartment sits a round, wooden table with a single deck of red Bicycle playing cards and a long rectangular silver case on top. Eight male La Salle students, none of them more than 22 years old, fill the green plastic patio chairs set around the table. The smell of stale beer and cigar butts lingers in the air. As the players fish into their pockets for the \$25 buy-in, the locks on the long silver case are popped up, the shiny top is cracked open, and the clay, multicolored poker chips are removed. Tall pillars of red, blue, green and white chips are stacked up in front of each player while their money is calmly collected and put inside the long silver case. The tension and anticipation build as high as each player's chip stack. The first hand is dealt and the tournament begins.

"Probably the best time of the tournament," explains Matt O'Neill, a senior at La Salle. "You haven't won anything. You haven't lost anything. It's like a clean slate.

You're just waiting to make your first move."

O'Neill made his first move at a very young age. His father and uncles would play at family gatherings and young O'Neill wanted a piece of the action even before he hit double digits. "I was 9 years old when they first let me play. It wasn't really for real, though. I had always begged to get in on a game, and once they threw me a couple chips and let me play." From that moment on, O'Neill was hooked. He made sure he sat at every one of his father and uncles' games. "I remember my Mom would come in and would always say to my Dad, 'You're corrupting this boy.' She was joking, but it was probably true." Over time, young O'Neill became as adept as his elders at the poker table. The only thing missing was a beer in front of him. "Not drinking was probably a huge advantage," says O'Neill with a grin. "Something I still maintain today when I play cards."

For years, O'Neill played with his older relatives and carried on the game into high school. On weekends he would play cards with his friends from class. "We just played little \$5 dealer's pick games," says O'Neill. "That's

where you play a different poker game every time until the deal is passed. My favorite game was always 'Guts' because it got the most money in the pot." O'Neill had always liked the excitement of playing a big hand and the potential to win a lot of money. But playing \$5 poker games with his buddies was not enough for O'Neill. College would offer more chances for O'Neill to gamble, and not only poker. O'Neill expected college to broaden his horizons and open up opportunities, but this new environment also opened him to more ways to gamble and for higher stakes.

Just a few hands into the game, an anxious player moves all of his chips in and loses, leaving seven of the eight original players—the first casualty of the tournament. The seemingly friendly game of poker quickly turns serious after witnessing how fast one's time can come. The weekly tournament usually attracts a couple of newcomers who are more than happy to put up \$25 to sit down at the table and pretend to be like Johnny Chan, Phil Ivey or some other famous professional poker player that they have seen on ESPN or on all the other televised poker games. More often, however, the newcomers don't live out the fantasy for very long.

Tonight, there is one newcomer or "newbie," Corey, out of the seven remaining players seated at the table. He is wearing a blue-striped polo and his hair in a biff—the typical preppy look. O'Neill is also seated at the table, a couple of chairs down from Corey. In contrast to Corey's appearance, O'Neill wears a simple hooded sweatshirt and a pair of sunglasses, his demeanor unassuming. In fact, O'Neill could have been arrested for his resemblance to the Unabomber police sketch, but O'Neill's attire is purposefully assembled to conceal his face and any expressions or "tells" that could potentially give his hand away.

In the next room, two other young men stare and yell at the television set. One of them is Eric, a soccer player for La Salle with an evident temper. The other is a heftier young man that everyone lovingly calls Gandolf, a nickname that he uses as his online poker alias. They are watching Duke's Blue Devils play the VCU Rams in the first round of the NCAA men's basketball tournament. Both young men have money riding on the game—Eric with \$50 and Gandolf with \$100.

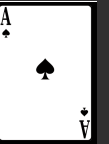
The final seconds of the basketball game tick away as the two young men clutch the couch cushions they sit on, and growl angrily. After the final score is projected on the screen, the two young men walk away slowly, muttering profanities. O'Neill, a good friend of both Eric and Gandolf, sympathizes. "Tough luck," O'Neill says consolingly. Losing \$100 is not foreign to O'Neill. In fact, losing well over \$100 is pretty familiar.

According to the NCAA, 35 percent of male college students bet on sports. March Madness and the college football playoffs, among the many other sporting events that are bet on, appeal to college students' penchant for gambling.

Amid the range of problems from alcohol to rape crises that La Salle has encountered, gambling has never been a major concern. Though in slight denial of his gambling addiction, O'Neill would find little help for his gambling problem from the university, despite what he sees as an endemic betting culture on campus. La Salle does not allow gambling of any kind on campus. Though the rule has been in place for many years, it has never really been enforced. And La Salle is not alone.

Among young American men ages 14 to 22, the number who said they gambled once a month rose by 20 percent from 2005–2006, according to the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Of the 2.9 million young people who gamble every week, 80 percent are men, and 50.4 percent of male college students gamble on cards at least once a month. With all the evidence of prominent gambling on college campuses, universities, including La Salle, have been slow to address the problem.

Four players remain at the poker table after two and a half hours of playing. The three who have recently been eliminated from the tournament have already collected their coats and left, sulking. Both O'Neill and the "newbie," Corey, remain with a respectable accumulation of chips. The two players are now sitting next to each other, the perfect picture of opposites—rivals. Corey has been playing smartly and conservatively, aware that in order to stay in the tournament with people he has never played with before, he must not make any sudden attention-getting moves. O'Neill, on the other hand, has played aggressively throughout the game, a testimony to his skill and reputation



**"MY
FAVORITE
GAME
WAS
ALWAYS
'GUTS'
BECAUSE
IT GOT
THE
MOST
MONEY
IN THE
POT."**



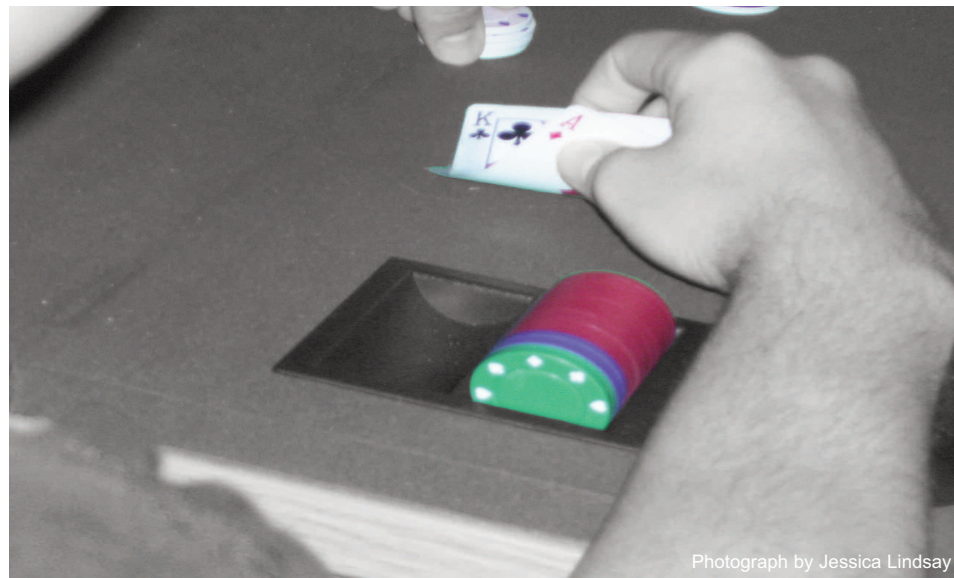
with the other players. He has the highest chip count at the table and doesn't let the other players forget it, raising almost every one of their bets.

"Games at La Salle are really not that important to me," explains O'Neill with a hint of conceit. "It's really just practice. Now, playing pot-limit hold 'em at the Taj in Atlantic City is the real thing." O'Neill's passion has always been poker, but every now and then he will dabble in Black Jack or other casino games. But when O'Neill is not playing actual poker at La Salle or in Atlantic City, he is playing poker online.

Today, O'Neill's hobby, formerly known as a vice, is more glamorous than ever. College students are the prize demographic for the attractive cable television poker competitions that showcase the Johnny Chans and Phil Iveys. But they are also aimed at by glittery betting Web sites like PartyPoker.com and PokerStars.com. University administrators may finally be looking to address the trend. But pitched against a student body with easy credit, Internet access provided by the university, and idle time, gambling's lure may have the better hand.

"At the college and university level, poker is pretty much the hottest thing going," says Mike Edwards, business development and marketing manager for absolutepoker.com, an Internet poker Web site. The Web site actually caters to college students by offering to pay a semester's tuition for tournament winners.

O'Neill has been gambling online since his college career began. After creating an online bank account that could automatically transfer funds from his local bank to the gambling Web site, O'Neill was free to gamble virtually any time he wanted. "There is never not a game you can join online," explains O'Neill. "There are thousands." O'Neill refuses to report how much money he has



Photograph by Jessica Lindsay

A La Salle student flashes his hand to the camera as he raises the stakes at a Texas Hold 'em game on campus April 11th.

won or lost from player poker online, but admits that he's "just doing fine." But after talking for a short time about online poker, O'Neill expresses some aversion to and skepticism about online poker sites. "It's harder to make judgments in a hand online," says O'Neill. "You don't know if the person you're heads up with is jumping up and down or biting his fingernails after betting. I prefer playing an actual game with people that I can see in front of me."

O'Neill watches the two players across the table from him as Corey calls an "all-in" bet. The cards are flipped and Corey prevails. "That's no limit, baby," says the third place finisher of the tournament as Corey collects his chips after making a straight on the last community card, also known as "the river." Corey has now taken the chip lead by a significant margin. The two final players are

Corey, the self-proclaimed amateur and newcomer to the table, and O'Neill, the now-frustrated contender. The winner stands to win \$150 and the runner up, a mere \$50. A few people hang around to see the outcome of the tournament.

They stand around the table, leaning over to see if they can get a peek at the cards that the last players are holding.

In contrast to his aggressive playing strategy that he employed earlier in the game, O'Neill is now playing hands very carefully and very seldom. "You can't lose what you don't put in the middle," remarked O'Neill before he was in this position. The "newbie" has taken control of the tournament and O'Neill, visibly disgusted at this, continues to submit by mucking his hands in a resigned manner. O'Neill's behavior suggests that he believes his opponent has

TODAY, O'NEILL'S HOBBY IS MORE GLAMOROUS THAN EVER.

been lucky and unfairly assumed the chip-leader position. Despite his wallowing, O'Neill remains patient and waits to make that one move that could change the outcome of the game, desperate but perpetually hopeful, like most gamblers down on their luck.

There are 44 different Gamblers Anonymous meetings a week that take place in various cities in

Pennsylvania, seven of them in Philadelphia. The fact is, for some people, gambling can become addictive. As gambling expands outside of Atlantic City and Las Vegas through Internet Web sites and onto college campuses, new outlets for young people to develop gambling addictions have increased. Universities across the country, like La Salle, are not prepared to curb gambling among students on campus. As gambling continues to grow among students, more pre-

cautions need to be implemented. College students, above all people, cannot afford to lose it all.

"Few players can recall the big pots they have won, strange as it seems, but every player can remember with remarkable accuracy the outstanding bad beats," O'Neill recites from one of his favorite movies, *Rounders*.

After being dealt a decent hand, O'Neill moves all in against the chip leader, Corey. He is called and loses to the supposed newcomer to

the game. A tough beat. O'Neill pretends to be content with his \$25 profit, but as he leaves, he punches the door frame as he exits the apartment. He catalogs the mistakes he thinks he made during the tournament and curses the victor. But this is just one link in the long chain of poker games O'Neill has participated in. O'Neill will have a clean slate in the next tournament he enters, but whether or not he wins, ultimately, depends on the luck of the draw. ✓