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. Players know 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 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. One number who sits down as a 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 sameness by 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 hefty young man that everyone lovingly calls Gandolf, a reference to the hobbit 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 grow anxious. 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 60 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.
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 competition that showcase the attractive cable television poker games. But when O’Neill is not playing actual poker at La Salle or in Atlantic City, he is playing poker online.

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