

America's Big Gamble

Fashionable gambling is catching on among young people today. Is it just a harmless craze, or is something serious at stake? He's slumped in his chair, motionless. His baseball cap is tugged low to shield his eyes. And he's betting on a hand of cards that will win or lose him thousands of dollars in a matter of minutes.

Meet the new hero of today's kids.

He's Chris Moneymaker, a young accountant who emerged from anonymity to become a household name in 2003 when he won \$2.5 million after paying a \$40 entry fee to play in a televised poker tournament. Instantly, Moneymaker, and chip-tossing poker players like him, became the icon of hope and wealth for kids from Long Island to Long Beach.

"Sixteen-year-old kids don't want to be Derek Jeter anymore," says Ed Looney, director of the New Jersey Council on Compulsive Gambling. "They want to play cards on TV."

That moment of a celebrating Moneymaker, with stacks of poker chips piled in front of him, launched a poker craze that has turned the Texas Hold 'em card game into a daily TV series on ESPN, Bravo, Travel Channel and GSN (Game Show Network). Newspapers across the country now run weekly strategy columns about the game.

With around-the-clock TV coverage feeding the frenzy, online poker has also exploded, boosting the stardom of people such as Moneymaker even more. More than 1.8 million people today play online poker each week, wagering an average of \$200

million a day, according to . Online gambling in general pulls in \$2.2 billion annually, and gambling in all forms is an estimated \$80 billion annual industry.

A growing number of these card-betting players are teenagers. Kids still too young to drive have been swept up by Texas Hold 'em. On Bravo, it's Celebrity Poker Showdown, with actors such as Spider-Man character Tobey Maguire saying, "I'm all in." On ESPN, it's World Series of Poker. Gambling fever hit TV four years ago when Travel Channel aired a poker tournament, pulling the highest ratings in the 17 years of the network.

Fueled by the 1998 movie Rounders about a reformed gambler who returns to poker to help a friend pay off loan sharks, ESPN's World Series of Poker now creates legends and changes lives, making millionaires and megastars out of winners playing Texas Hold 'em. In three years, the prize money for the network's \$10,000 buy-in, no-limit tournament has shot from \$6 million to \$60 million, and the number of participants has increased from 839 to 6,000.

"I've been counseling people with gambling problems for 35 years, and I've never seen anything like this Texas Hold 'em rage," Looney says. "It's not just your college kids. It's your ... sixth- and seventh-grade kids."

The dark side of gambling is the addiction it causes for some. But that isn't evident to young people who watch a televised poker game and see winners being glamorized and pocketing millions of dollars.

Juveniles are at a greater risk of developing a gambling problem, says Keith Whyte, executive director of the National

Council on Problem Gambling in Washington, D.C., adding that an estimated 2 million youths today have some sort of gambling problem.

"We believe that most problem gamblers start young," Whyte says. "The earlier you start gambling the more likely you are to have a gambling problem."

Stories of teenagers accumulating huge debt are growing—a 16-year-old who owed more than \$10,000; a 19-year-old who sold his car so he could return to the casino to win back his losses; an 18-year-old who owed a loan shark \$6,000. "You don't do this for the money," the teen said. "You do it for the action."

"It's the adrenaline rush," Looney explains. "That's why they're playing. It's not just about the money."

The number of callers to the New Jersey council's gambling hot line doubled to more than 3,500 between 2002 and 2004. In Atlantic City, 384 underage gamblers were caught in casinos in 2004, an increase of more than 100 from 2003.

Michael Franzese, formerly a bookie with mafia connections and now a lecturer on gambling addiction, tells the story of a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin who murdered three college students in June 2003 because they introduced him to online gambling that resulted in his recklessly losing \$72,000.

"The thrill got him," Franzese says. "That kid hung himself before the case even went to trial. He was 21."

In seminars Franzese tells NFL, NBA and NCAA athletes—who he believes because of their competitive nature are “three or four times” more likely to gamble than the average person—the luring lie of gambling is that the next hand is a winner.

Franzese ran a mob-connected gambling operation for 15 years before becoming a Christian. He believes gambling is a more destructive addiction than drugs or alcohol.

“I’ve seen more lives destroyed by gambling than I have drugs and alcohol combined,” Franzese says. “I hate anything to do with gambling.”

Harmless Games of Chance?

The appeal of online gambling is anonymity. Whereas, the stereotypical gambler of yesterday was a middle-aged man playing poker in a smoke-filled room, Whyte says that because of easy online access, the typical card player today is likely to be a high school student playing alone in his bedroom. A survey last year showed that 55 percent of high school students had watched a televised poker game and 82 percent of those had gambled, he says.

It’s not just television and the Internet that are enticing youth to gamble. The main door-opener is parental acceptance. “What can it hurt?” is the typical parent’s perception, Whyte says.

“Parents don’t realize the risk,” he says. “By letting their kids gamble at home once a week, they feel they’re protecting them from going out and drinking and driving and having sex.”

Whyte says kids who gamble are actually three times more likely to take drugs and to drink. "So, it's just the reverse; it's not a protective factor," he says. "It's a risk factor." He believes parents should for their children's sake apply the same precaution to gambling that they would to drugs or alcohol.

More than just unchurched teens pick up a hand of cards and bet. A recent Barna Research poll stated that 45 percent of born-again Christians surveyed thought gambling was "morally acceptable."

Chad Hills, a gambling research analyst with Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colorado, isn't surprised by the spike in youth gambling. He notes that this is the first generation to grow up amid widespread approval of gambling such as government-supported lotteries or parental consent. He believes gambling in today's society will only continue to be portrayed as fun and games and lead to a rise in the number of young, compulsive gamblers.

"We're only beginning to see the problem," Hills says. "I'm hearing about kids who aren't even old enough to drive being brought in for counseling. Sixth-graders know how to play Texas Hold 'em because they've seen it on TV."

For Steve Yelenich's 18th birthday, his friends took him to Red Wings Casino near Tacoma, Washington, to play poker. Yelenich and his friends had played Texas Hold 'em nearly every Friday night at a friend's house for the previous six months, having to show \$25 to play. Winners were pocketing nearly \$200.

"It's just for fun," Yelenich says. "It's not like we're hooked or anything."

But often well past midnight, while his parents are asleep, Yelenich will sit on his bed as he plays Texas Hold 'em online on his laptop computer. The game is free, and no money bets are placed.

"Who am I hurting?" asks Yelenich, who plays online poker a couple hours every day. "I'm playing cards."

Whyte says studies show that about 80 percent of young people in the United States and Canada said they gambled during the last year, with about 10 percent of them showing early signs of gambling problems.

Yet online-poker Web sites continue to spend millions of advertising dollars targeting teenagers. , one of the largest and best-known online gambling outlets, has begun advertising on the social-networking site Facebook.

In the photo accompanying the ad, college students are shown hugging each other while the cutline reads, "Just wanna have fun?" The ad also offers a \$50 sign-up bonus. Another site, , carries an ad link that proclaims, "College Students—Win Your Tuition."

Danny Olson, a sophomore at Washington State University, says Texas Hold 'em games are going almost every day in his dorm. "A guy in my dorm lost over 300 bucks."

Whether it's a game in someone's room or someone playing online, Olson says a game is always waiting. "I'll play three or four times a week," he says. "But I don't play for a lot of

money.”

Yet while gambling is on the rise, so is the plea for help. Of the nearly 20,000 calls to New Jersey’s state help line in 2005, 28 percent came from gamblers. That’s up 4 percent from 2003. Studies show that the No. 1 reason for teenage suicide today is gambling addiction, topping drugs and alcohol.

Yet most casinos in Las Vegas have added poker rooms to meet the surge in interest. Casino-poker earnings increased 48 percent from the previous year in Nevada, the biggest increase in state history.

Each state except Utah and Hawaii allows a form of legalized gambling. However, Looney says only 17 states help to fund programs for problem gamblers.

Whyte asked ESPN and Travel Channel to run public-service advertisements about the risk of gambling addiction, but he has been ignored.

“I don’t think they’re interested,” he says. “What we want is to show some kind of balance. All that’s presented are the winners.”

The results of winning are intoxicating, but Whyte points out that TV networks should also show the other side of the coin—“the guy who’s losing everything.”

“Legalized gambling revenue alone last year was \$85 billion in the United States,” Whyte says. “For cash-strapped governments, it’s hard to give up.”

The Low Side of Aces High

However, politicians at both the state and federal levels are starting to take note of the issue. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Unlawful Internet Gambling Funding Prohibition Act in 2003 in the hope of blocking credit card and debit card companies from permitting the flow of dollars to illegal gambling sites.

No state explicitly allows online betting, and three states—Nevada, Louisiana and Illinois—have banned online casinos. The attorneys general of New York, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Missouri have used existing laws to shut down the few online gambling sites based in the U.S. Essentially, all online gambling venues, even if owned by American businesses, now are located offshore and thereby avoid American laws and regulations.

The advent of government regulation alone, however, cannot stop gamblers from taking a lighthearted approach to gambling's deceptive question: "What could it hurt?" Often, they don't learn the answer for themselves until it's too late.

Says Looney: "Come to prison cells like I have for the past 35 years and I'll show you. Businessmen who have lost their careers. Attorneys who couldn't stop gambling. Smart people who are so hooked into gambling that they risk everything."

And most have lost everything.

"I talked with a kid who was all-state in football, basketball

and baseball,” Looney says. “That’s unheard of. He’s 33 now and sitting in prison. He was writing bad checks. Gambling ruined his life.”

Franzese says gamblers aren’t just betting money. They’re gambling with their spiritual lives. “Gambling will destroy you spiritually,” he says. “Gamblers think of nothing but gambling. I don’t feel you can conquer anything in your life without God in your life.”

Gail Wood is a reporter and freelance writer living in Lacey, Washington.

The Luck of the Draw

Jerry Prosapio, who first gambled during the third grade, is exposing the dangers of gambling addiction.

Jerry Prosapio started gambling as a third-grader, playing cards for pennies. Later as a husband and father, he gambled for thousands of dollars, eventually maxing out 17 credit cards and running up debt of more than \$100,000.

Behind on a gambling loan from a mobster, Prosapio received a threat. “My wife called me and said a friend had stopped by,” Prosapio says. “He had wanted to see our son.”

The visit was a subtle warning that changed Prosapio’s life.

“I got cold chills,” he says, describing how he felt upon

hearing about the visit to his home. He knew what the man had in mind.

The mobster's threat was to kill Prosapio's son if Jerry didn't pay his debt. The incident sent Prosapio to his knees crying out to God for help.

"I was in my car and I couldn't even turn the key," Prosapio says. "I was so desperate. I said: 'God, I'm so sick. Please help me.' I had so much shame and guilt."

Today, a 53-year-old Prosapio is part of a Christian ministry aimed at warning and helping people with gambling problems. At a Gamblers Anonymous meeting, a Christian led Prosapio to salvation through Jesus, helping him gain control of his addiction and debt.

Gambling Exposed, co-founded by Prosapio and Ken Darnell, an Assemblies of God minister, reveals the spiritual damage of gambling addiction and shares the hope and healing of Jesus Christ. Prosapio and Darnell visit churches by invitation to discuss the dangers of gambling.

Today's youth are particularly vulnerable with television and the Internet acting as a gateway to gambling.

"Gambling is an epidemic right now," Prosapio says. "So many Christians' thoughts about gambling are, What can it hurt? My purpose is to share my message that it can."

It took Prosapio 12 years to pay off his gambling debt.

A survey by the Crestwood, Illinois-based Gambling Exposed showed that 32 percent of teens from a Christian school gambled. Prosapio says he hears parents say that they don't care if their children gamble.

"They just don't understand the risks they face," Prosapio says. "I ask that pastors address this problem. It's not going to go away. It's only going to get worse."

When You Can't Stop Playing

Researcher Chad Hills explains how to tell if you or someone you love has a gambling addiction.

When talking with teenagers about gambling, Chad Hills asks a simple question to determine whether they have a gambling problem.

"I ask them if they think about gambling very often," says Hills, a gambling research analyst with Focus on the Family.

"Preoccupation" is considered a symptom of a gambling problem.

"If you have a gambling problem ... you can't stop thinking about it," Hills says. "It's like you're infatuated."

"I talk with kids who say gambling is a benign thing," Hills says. "I ask them, 'Well, do you think about this very often?'"

Often, Hills says, their answer is yes. "That's an indication

of a problem.”

The National Council on Problem Gambling defines problem gambling as “behavior patterns that compromise, disrupt or damage personal, family or vocational pursuits.”

Hills says that parents concerned about whether or not their children might have a gambling problem just need to determine if an infatuation exists. If a child is withdrawing from regular activities to pursue gambling, there is likely a problem, he says.

Reports show that problem gamblers develop a sense that all their troubles subside while gambling. Hills says studies show that someone on crack cocaine and someone playing a slot machine have the same level of pleasure hormones.

The National Council on Problem Gambling uses a 10-question self-examination quiz to determine if someone has a gambling problem. Besides including questions about preoccupation, the form seeks answers for whether or not a person is lying to family members about gambling, borrowing money to pay off gambling debts and gambling to escape personal problems.

When teens or children are involved in gambling, parents need to wear the mantle of protector, Hills says.

“We’re focusing on the fruit and ignoring what’s really going on here,” Hills says. “If you’re only looking on the symptoms you’re ignoring a much deeper problem.”

Hills says that deeper problem is the relationship between

parent and child.

“There is a myth that teenage kids don’t care what parents say,” Hills says. “Parents say, ‘Well, they just ignore me.’

“What I’d say to parents is: ‘Don’t give up. They are listening to you.’”