

MS. CHIPS

**SHE PASSED
ON A PENN
DOCTORATE
TO BECOME
THE WORLD'S
TOP FEMALE
POKER PLAYER.**

PAGES 102-99



PHILADELPHIA

DAILY NEWS

THE PEOPLE PAPER

NEW DEAL FOR SLOTS IN THE WORKS

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K.M. CANNON/Associated Press

LADY LUCK

Former academic Annie Duke has become one of poker's blue-chippers

By **MARK KRAM**
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LAS VEGAS — Annie Duke's plane from Portland was late getting in, so she's running behind as she swings through the entrance of the Bellagio. Squeezing through the crowded lobby, aglitter with strolling women in designer dressers and spiked heels, Duke checks in, drops her bags off in her room and slips into Giorgio Armani to buy some makeup. She's dressed in jeans and a pale green top with the words "Daisy Duke" printed on it, yet looks less like the Catherine Bach character from the old TV program, "The Dukes of Hazzard" than a young Diane Keaton — Annie Hall, but without the floppy hat and suspenders. She's in Las Vegas to play in the 2004 2nd Annual Five-Star World Poker Classic at the hotel the following day, but as she's in the store she remembers she's got a call to return: A colleague just played in a big home game with some Hollywood pigeons and

she's got a piece of his action. She yanks her cell phone from the bag slung over her shoulder and flips it open. "So how did it go?" she says enthusiastically, walking away from the saleslady who is assembling her order. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I told you! I told you it would be great! You've got to get me in that game! Just once! Just once! Just once! Just one time!"

Traditionally, the women's place in the male-dominated world of poker has been upstairs and out of the way; they've only been welcomed into the inner sanctum with the boys if they're bringing in finger sandwiches. But Annie Duke didn't become one of the top female poker players in the world by serving up trays of cold cuts to men chewing on White Owl Miniatures. She did it by sitting down at the table with them, looking them squarely in the eye and beating them with intelligence, guile and an unlimited supply of sexy

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Annie Duke has won more than \$500,000 in her World Series appearances.

PREVIOUS CHAMPS

Here's a look at some of the winners in the 33-year history of the World Series and the dramatic increase in the size of the winning pot.

1971	1976	1981	1986	1990	1991	1996	2000	2001	2002	2003
Johnny Moss	Doyle Brunson	Stu Ungar	Berry Johnston	Mansour Matloubi	Brad Daugherty	Huck Seed	Chris Ferguson	Carlos Mortenson	Robert Varkonyi	Chris Moneymaker
\$30,000	\$220,000	\$375,000	\$570,000	\$895,000	\$1 million	\$1 million	\$1.5 million	\$1.5 million	\$2 million	\$2.5 million

Three-time winners: Stu Ungar; Johnny Moss. **Two-time winners:** Doyle Brunson; Johnny Chan

FACES OF THE GAME A glance at five of poker's most recognizable faces.

“Amarillo Slim”

Name: Thomas Preston
Achievements: One World Series title (1972).
Claims to fame: Most celebrated poker player ever. Among his famous victims are Willie Nelson (\$300,000 playing dominoes) and publisher Larry Flynt (\$2 million in a poker game). Played himself in Robert Altman's “California Split.”



Stu Ungar

Achievements: Three World Series titles (1980, 1981, 1997).
Died: In 1998, from drug addiction.
Claims to fame: Greatest No Limit Hold'em player. So good at gin rummy that no one would play him. A lousy golfer, he still bet thousands. Lost \$80,000 the first time he ever stepped on a golf course.



Chris Moneymaker

Achievements: Won the 2003 World Series, at age 27; it was the first tournament he ever entered.
Claims to fame: An unknown, he qualified at an Internet tournament held at pokerstars.com, for which he only paid an entrance fee of \$40.



Johnny Chan

Achievements: Won two World Series titles (1987, 1988).
Claims to fame: In 1988, lost the biggest pot in the history of the tournament, then came back to take the title. Immortalized in “Rounders,” in which he played himself as the best poker player in the world.



Phil Hellmuth Jr.

Achievements: At 24, the youngest ever to win the World Series (1989).
Claims to fame: Been at the final table of World Series of Poker events more than 20 times (with nine wins); like most of the big names, has his own Web site: www.philhellmuth.com.



BRAD J. GUIGAR/Daily News

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charm. And *that* only happened when she unexpectedly decided what she *didn't* want to do with her life and dropped out of the University of Pennsylvania within an eyelash of completing her Ph.D. in psycholinguistics. A Penn professor who knew her well remembers her as “a brilliant student,” but she couldn't bring herself to follow through with a career in academia, despite the fact that she had no inkling then that she'd reinvent herself as a poker player.

She's become a talented enough player that it wouldn't surprise any of her male peers if she won the \$10,000 Buy-In Event in the World Series of Poker — or as it is called, “The Big One” — which begins Saturday at Binion's Horseshoe Hotel and Casino and continues until May 28. With 2,000 players expected to enter the Texas Hold'em tournament, from actors such as Ben Affleck to less celebrated folk who have sharpened their skills playing on the Internet, it's a longshot, but you never know: Duke has been playing well this year, perhaps better than ever. By winning the \$2,000 Buy-In Omaha High-Low Event in early May, she won \$137,860 and became the all-time money winner among women at the World Series with earnings in excess of \$500,000. Significantly, she also won her first World Series brace-

let, a rite of passage that she says has provided her with an immense boost in confidence. Especially revealing is the fact that she chose not to play in the Ladies Limit Hold'em Championship that day, but to go after the bigger score in the larger, far tougher field of men.

Duke sits over a small plate of noodles in a Chinese restaurant at the Bellagio, her cell phone back in her bag. “I love when a woman sits down at the table to play because they are usually not very good players,” she says between forkfuls of food. “You cannot play with the necessary heart unless you simply look at money as a betting tool, not as something with which to buy groceries.”

She laughs and adds, “See, I don't care if my kids eat or not.”

Sick of school

Cards were in her DNA. How else can you explain how someone can just drop what appeared to be a very promising career as a scholar and end up playing high-stakes poker for a living? All she had to do to get her Ph.D. was to write her dissertation, which her co-adviser and friend, Dr. Lila Gleitman, says would have been a snap. She had worked for 5 years under Gleitman and her husband, Henry, in the area of language acquisition, and had impressed both of them with her quick, agile mind. “Incredibly creative and very charming,” Henry Gleitman says. The Gleit-

mans were fond of her — indeed, saw within her the abilities to do fine work in the years to come — except that one day Annie just vanished with no explanation, no goodbyes. It was rather astonishing, yet Lila Gleitman says, “Oh well, she was a kid. It happens.” Another graduate student came in, re-collected and reanalyzed the data, and earned a Ph.D. by writing a paper in *Cognition* 73 titled “Human Simulations of Vocabulary Learning.”

The subject of it is syntactic bootstrapping.

The former Anne Lederer is listed as the fourth author.

Lila Gleitman says with a chuckle, “So you see, she could have been a famous person instead of this obscure poker player.”

Her husband sighs and adds, “What can I say? It was a loss to psychology, but clearly a gain for poker. It was in her blood.”

Cardplaying was at the epicenter of the household in which she grew up. Years later her younger sister, Katy, a poet, would write a critically well-received memoir called, “Poker Face: A Girlhood Among Gamblers,” in which she describes how cards and other table games became the crosscurrent that captivated her intellectually adventurous family. Richard Lederer, her father, was a language expert and head of the English department at an elite prep school in New Hampshire; he attended West Philadelphia High

School, then Haverford College, and during a sabbatical when Annie was 4 taught English at Simon Gratz High School. Older brother Howard, who became an accomplished professional poker player himself, remembers “the knock-down, drag-out battles” he, Annie and their parents would have on the family-room floor over card games, and that it was not uncommon for Annie, given then to temper tantrums, to fling a losing hand through the air in anger. Says Annie, “All we ever did was play cards. Seriously, if I wanted to talk to mom, I had to sit down with her with a deck of cards.” Yet it never occurred to her then that you could possibly earn a living doing that.

Besides, the path she would cut for herself in years to come pointed toward academia. She was a superb student, as competitive in the insular world of scholarship as she would ever be in the equally insular world of poker. She did her undergraduate work at Columbia University, with a double major in English and psychology, and then joined the Gleitmans, for whom she developed a deep affection. She and Lila occasionally played tennis together, and Annie knew that both Lila and Henry had high hopes for her. Her work was nothing short of exceptional, full of challenging ideas and passion. Her Curriculum Vita sparkled with honors, published papers and recommendations. And yet somehow it was wrong, very wrong, and it dawned on her

that the only reason she was doing it was because she was good at it. The turning point came when she showed up for a job interview at New York University, began throwing up, and ended up in the hospital for 2 weeks.

“The funny thing is, you know, here I am this Type A personality and I simply could not admit that it was not what I wanted to do,” Duke says. “So my body did it for me. It was like: ‘Bleep you.’ I just could not face the concept of being an academic.”

Nor could she face the Gleitmans. So she ran away.

“I'm such a horrible person for that,” she says, then explaining what happened. “Looking back on it now, I understand what was going on. I was young — 25, 26 is just so young. I felt a horrible obligation to these people, but I just didn't have any guts . . . I felt I had let them down so deeply.”

She married a young man named Ben Duke, and headed to Montana, where Ben had family. It was a culture shock, especially to someone who had grown up in an intellectually stimulating environment. All she ever saw out there was land. And sky. The wind blew. In the winter it snowed. Columbus, Mont., had a population of some 1,200 people. “Have you ever been to Montana?” Duke asks. “You feel like you have fallen off

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the face of the earth." Money was scarce, despite the fact they only had a \$125-a-month mortgage, but Annie noticed there were legal card rooms nearby in Billings. She called Howard, by then a pro poker player in Las Vegas, and asked him for some lessons over the phone. Howard then sent her a \$2,400 stake to get started, and she says, "I began winning right away. Not that the competition was particularly strong."

She played at a place called the Crystal Lounge in Billings, and it was exactly what you'd expect: smoky, and populated by locals with jaws jutting from beneath cowboy hats. When Annie walked in and sat down at the table, she says, "Everyone just looked up as if to say, 'Who the hell is this chick?'" She won \$2,800 that first month and says she thought, "Hmmm. This is pretty good." But she says her husband could never "get his mind around the concept of the short run vs. the long run," which is to say you might lose for a few days but then come back strong over the course of a week or longer. When she won, Annie says he thought it was great. When she lost, he would say, "Your hobby is costing us a lot of money." Moreover, Annie says she was keeping odd hours. "I think that was difficult for him." As soon as she got home, she would call Howard and go over the hands she had played that day, her questions rudimentary at first but quickly growing in complexity. Says Howard, "In very short order my answers to her were, 'Well, it depends.' I would have had to have been there."

One thing she picked up quickly without her brother's help was how she could use gender to her advantage. Men at that subterranean level of poker generally fall into two categories. The first type is the guy who will allow himself to be bluffed by a woman. Consequently, he calls when he should fold and ends up shoving chips into the center of the table to prove, as Annie says with a sly grin, "I can outplay this chick." The second type is the guy who Annie says "decides that he's going to sleep with me." He is overly solicitous, throwing her bets back at her and saying sweetly, "Don't call this hand, honey. I've got a flush." Annie says she would simply bat her eyelashes and say, "Oh, thank you." Some of these same men would offer her money to sleep with them, while others were just vulgar. Annie remembers on one losing night, the



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guy across from her at the table said, "Ah, that's OK honey, you can go upstairs, put your legs up in the air and earn it all back." Annie looked at him and said, "Oh, thank you. Do you treat your wife that way?" It was not long before she became known in Montana as "Annie Legend."

She smiles and says, "I guess you could say I developed some insight into the male mind. The *really* dark side of it."

Numero uno

She's walking through the Bellagio, her bag slung over her shoulder and swinging at her side, and saying, "Las Vegas isn't a good place to raise kids." She's got four of them by Ben, with whom she's separated, and is currently living with them in Portland, Ore., where she's a celebrity consultant for the online poker site, ultima.tebet.com. Though she's fond of Las Vegas as a place for adults to come and unwind, conceding that "everybody needs a release," it ultimately bothered her that there seemed to be a billboard on every corner that depicted a stripper, and that whatever culture that is here is provided by the casinos. She'd go to look at a house or an apartment and none of them would have bookshelves. Whenever she'd go to her son's preschool, every one of the women she'd encounter there had had implants.

"Nothing wrong with implants, but does everyone have to have them?" Duke asks. "Same with strip clubs. Nothing wrong with them if you are a consenting adult. Go

ahead, get a lap dance, knock yourself out. I just didn't think I should have to explain these particular activities to an 8-year-old."

Duke moved to Las Vegas from Montana when, in the spring of 1994, Howard told her, "Well, listen, you should come down and play in the World Series." She'd beaten the locals in Billings to a fare-thee-well, and it galvanized her. She jumped at the invitation. She finished 13th in her first World Series tournament there, third in her second and 23rd in the 10K championship event, winning \$70,000 that initial year. It was enough to convince her that, yeah, she could earn a living doing this. Though women had not emerged yet as factors in poker — only one had ever gotten to the final table in the 10K event — Duke became not just an excellent female player but an excellent player — period. In the years to come, she would be regarded as one of the top three female poker players in the world, along with Jennifer Harman and Kathy Liebert. Going head to head against the better male players, Duke found that her gender became less and less of an advantage, that opponents of the opposite sex viewed her and other women with their incisors bared. Says old pro Tom McEvoy, a former World Series of Poker champion, "I would cut the heart out of any woman I play against, but not because I have anything against them." McEvoy calls it simply "healthy respect" and says of Duke, "A very fine player."

The wiry Antonio Esfandiari calls Duke an exception. "I know of no other women who can play on her level,"

says Esfandiari, whose dexterity with cards has earned him the nickname, "The Magician." "Whenever a woman sits down at a table with me, I say, 'Oh, baby.' Because I know she is not going to be able to play."

Esfandiari pauses, then adds: "Annie is very good at reading people. If I have something, she folds. If I am bluffing, she calls. Very, very annoying."

Duke grins and says, "My sixth sense."

What Duke has discovered is that her years of academic work prepared her perfectly for her career as a professional poker player — especially the field of study she pursued. Howard says "the whole area of language acquisition" embedded in her a "very structured, internal logic. Certain things have to happen before other things can happen, and that is essentially what poker is." Duke agrees: "In order to be a successful scholar — which I was — you have to have exceptional critical thinking skills. And you have that same set of skills playing poker. So much of what I did academically had to do with statistical analysis, and that comes in very handy playing poker at this level."

When you play poker at that level, you have two avenues of revenue. One is tournament play, which presents the possibility of taking down a big score in the span of a relatively few days. The other avenue is the "cash game," which is what the friend she called in Hollywood was playing. Some of these games can be quite lucrative, depending upon the oppo-

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When Annie Duke is not being 'your typical mom' to her four kids, she is among the top poker players in the world.

Benny Binion

Longtime owner of the Horseshoe Hotel on Fremont Street in Las Vegas, site of the World Series of Poker. Packed up his wife and five children and left Texas for Nevada in 1946, where he became one of the city's legendary figures. He died in 1989.

Call

Make a wager equal to the current bet size.

Cash game

Any nontournament game; a game of poker generally played at someone's house.

Check

Pass without betting.

Fold

Throw in the hand and forfeit the game.

Psycholinguistics

Annie Duke's major at Penn, where she was working toward her doctorate. It's a branch of linguistics that analyzes the psychological factors involved in the perception of and response to language.

Raise

Add an additional wager to the "call."

Texas Hold'em

The game played for the World Series championship. Players receive two cards and must make the best hand using five community cards that are on the table.

World Series gold bracelets

Awarded in recognition of a first-place finish in any of the events associated with the World Series of Poker.

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ment. One wealthy Texan has dropped an estimated \$40 to \$50 million in "cash games." While Duke has no desire to play against him herself because of the stress it would involve, she would love to get in the Hollywood home game her friend played in, if only because "the players are really bad, and it is a big game." The only problem is that the players in it know who she is, which is to say: They are bad but not stupid. Given a choice between playing in tournaments and "cash games," she says she would prefer "cash games" only because of the regular income flow potential.

And yet they can be a grind. Hours and upon hours of play. The same faces. Nerves always on edge. "Tournaments are more friendly," says Duke, who adds that she once played in a "cash game" for 72 consecutive hours. "People are less crazy and are there to have fun. No one is losing their shirt the way they can in a 'cash game' or are being ground down by the process."

Side bets are always a dependable way to lessen the tension at the table. Duke says that one player once bet Howard, a vegetarian, \$10,000 if he would eat a hamburger. He did it. When the player exclaimed, "Howard, how could you do that?" Lederer replied, "It was \$10,000." Someone also bet another player who happened to hate olives \$10,000 if he ate four olives from a nearby deli tray. The olive-hater said, "No way. I hate those things." And then there was the guy who said to the player across from him, "I'll give you \$50,000 if you go to Des Moines for a month." The player did it, went to Des Moines, but crapped out before the month was up. Says Duke, who has become the poker coach for Affleck: "What else are you going to talk about sitting at the table hour after hour?"

Though it was once necessary to live in Las Vegas or Los Angeles to play poker professionally, the emergence of poker on the Internet has changed that. You can now sit undisturbed in the quiet of your home and play for high stakes, which Duke and others believe has drawn to poker an increasing number of women — who otherwise might be intimidated to sit down and play in a casino. In the case of Duke, she flies into Las Vegas and other poker venues from Portland, a city which had

well-gardened parks and a sense of community that she says Las Vegas lacks. Gone between 6 and 10 days in any given month, during which she leaves her children with a nanny, she looks forward to going back home, where she can leave the poker world behind and become what she characterizes as "your typical mom."

She shrugs and says, "I just have an incredibly hectic life."

Drawing cards

At her place at one of the tables, Annie Duke is seated in her chair with shoes off and legs curled up underneath her. The Five-Star World Poker Classic at the Bellagio has just commenced in a cordoned-off area on the casino floor, the room full of figures who have become increasingly familiar as the popularity of poker has grown. One of them is Howard Lederer, impassive, always calculating, appearing as if he were awaiting the results of a cholesterol test. Nearby is Affleck, unshaven, a vintage Boston cap yanked down over his eyes; Duke says he has become a world-class player, but he appears to be laboring today. Scattered around them is the independently wealthy Barry Greenstein, who always donates his winnings; Mel Judah, the former hairdresser from Arcadia, Calif.; and assorted others wearing sunglasses and headphones.

The fans line up around the velvet ropes. One of them asks, "Excuse me, but who is that older fellow sitting over there — the one in the cowboy hat. The one with his back to us."

"T.J. Cloutier," he is told.

"Is that T.J.?" the man says. "Thank you. You know, you see these players on TV and wonder who they are."

Close to 400 players entered the tournament, but only a handful of them were women. While the Internet has indeed drawn more women into poker, they still tend to stay away from it as a game of choice. All you have to do to understand the dynamic at play is to walk into any casino and take a look around. Immediately, you notice that the men are usually hunkered over the poker tables, while the women are off in the corner dropping quarters into slots. What Duke says it comes down to is that "a certain type of individual is attracted to poker" and that generally does not include women. Nor does it include what she calls "geeks ... introverted guys sitting there tinkering with their computer." Says Duke, "To succeed in this takes some super-

male qualities."

Eliminated from the tournament that Saturday fairly early (it was won by Cloutier), Duke came back a few days later to try again. In a field of 162 players in the same cordoned-off area at the Bellagio, Duke played superbly, and with an aggression that has become her hallmark. Clean towers of chips

formed in front of her. Her opponents played passively, tossing their hands away as Duke forced the play, sweeping up piles and piles of chips from the center of the table. One by one by one, players excused themselves as the field dwindled to a final table. Relaxed yet focused, she continued pressing the action until there were just

two remaining players. It came down then to the final hand, as her opponent went "all-in," sliding in his remaining \$50,000 in chips.

Duke looked across the table at him. He needed a five.

She called.

The card came out.

And Annie Duke walked away with \$157,140. ★



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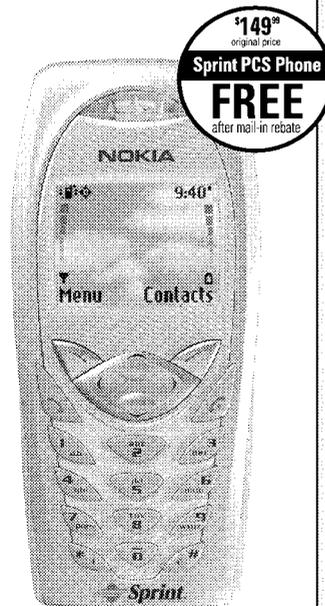
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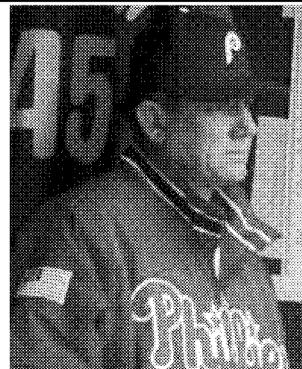
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