

## Journalism entry

### High-stakes gambling at Lehigh: big risks, big rewards

**Greg** Hogan was the president of the class of 2008, a cellist in Lehigh's orchestra, a chaplain's assistant, a Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity brother and an avid gambler. But only one of those things would cause him to make headlines around the world after Friday, Dec. 9., 2005. At 3:02 that afternoon, Hogan walked into the Wachovia Bank on Union Blvd. in Allentown and slipped a piece of paper to a teller that said he was armed and demanded money. He walked out with \$2,871. His reason? Desperation. Hogan was deep in gambling debt. Hogan's arrest and his lawyer's suggestion that he had gambling debts has shed light on a little discussed topic: gambling at Lehigh. Many students gamble here and elsewhere, but universities have been slow to react.

This is a story without statistical data, with omitted last names and altered place names. But the money students gamble away is real. And so is the thrill of gambling. And the shock of losing it all.

Five-card draw, seven-card stud, Omaha, High-Low. At Lehigh, students play a lot of poker, but no game is more popular than "No Limit Texas Hold 'Em," the most high-stakes game at the table.

At "Delta Chi Alpha" fraternity, visitors find the hazy air and bright lights of a night club — a spacious bar, pool table, 70-inch projection screen TV, and at the center of it all, the main attraction, a 10-person, hand-crafted poker table padded with jet black felt encircled with cup holders.

Tonight, like many nights, the table is full. The betting is fierce, sporadic; bets are re-raised and gone over the top again. The poker table becomes the dusty street corners of an old western gun duel. Players shoot not just to kill but to show they're not afraid to take the shot.

"What are you looking at — did you hit that queen? Two pair?" one player asks, staring unblinking at Dave, seated across the table from him.

"I don't know what you're talking about man," Dave finally answers. "I've got the nuts. So just fold and make your life easy."

He laughs and the smile on his face grows bigger each time his opponent fondles his chip stack.

But he doesn't have the cards. His bluff is called and he loses all his chips - \$145.

Without hesitation, he opens up his wallet and throws in \$40 more. Rebuy. His fourth of the night. Dave is in it for \$160 now. And it might as well be half a grand, because he's not going home until he's satisfied.

\*\*\*

**Joel** Ingersoll's office is more like a parlor than anything else. The lighting is dim and relaxed and the walls are a beach wave dark blue. The view of the University Center from out the window on the fourth floor of Johnson Hall and the paintings adorning the walls can make people forget it's an office at all.

Ingersoll has been the staff psychologist and coordinator for counseling services for the past four years at Lehigh and deals with a vast number of problems every day. He said gambling isn't one of them.

"My guess is, it's something that's underreported as a problem," Ingersoll said. "That, or they might only be in the mild category."

When students do come to counseling services gambling addiction is treated like any other type of substance abuse or addiction. First is an assessment — a basic survey of the student's background.

Ingersoll will start at the beginning, asking when the problem started before delving into how often and how much money is involved.

The survey also explores subtler issues like triggers, or cues. If a gambler often goes to Atlantic City, a trigger might be the bright lights, or certain smells particular to the casino or the noise of slot machines, Ingersoll said. For some people, a trigger can just be the sight of cards. One look and you're as good as gone.

After the assessment, counseling services offers individual and group counseling depending on the results of the survey.

But typically, this kind of scenario is used to treat things like drug addiction or substance abuse. Ingersoll only sees about a handful of gambling addiction cases a year.

"That's not to say people don't do it," he said. "It represents a small percentage of people that actually come in."

He attributes the discrepancy to a number of things. The varying scales on the continuum don't always allow for a precise classification for addicts. Ingersoll also fears that students with gambling problems may only come to counseling services after hitting "rock bottom," rendering preventive guidance useless.

"I want to point out that when people struggle with addiction-type problems, there is almost always this notion of 'hitting rock bottom,'" Ingersoll said. "It's hitting a point

where the problem becomes a priority in a person's life. As a result of that, if it comes to that point, everything else in that person's life gets distorted. We're not seeing these people because we might not be seeing these people who've hit rock bottom yet."

Ingersoll stresses "yet." He talks about a student on campus whose addiction may be classified as "mild" now but who will become a severe addict after graduation, with a diploma from Lehigh and the job and money that comes with it.

He wants more students to seek counseling services if they have gambling problems.

"I certainly want to urge students to e-mail me or

call the counseling services if they have a problem," Ingersoll said. "I want them to know that they have somebody to go to if they need help."

\*\*\*

***Alcoholism*** and drug abuse are well-publicized issues and Lehigh has grants to combat them.

In 1996, Lehigh became one of only six universities nationwide selected by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to receive a five-year grant to address abusive drinking and its consequences on other students and the community.

Lehigh was also awarded a three-year, \$99,994 grant to reduce sexual assault on campus by The Dorothy Rider Pool Health Care Trust in October.

But there is hardly the same concern over gambling addiction, despite its popularity on campus.

Dean of Judicial Affairs Christopher Mulvihill has been mostly quiet about the subject.

"Gambling doesn't violate Lehigh policy," he said. "It just violates Pennsylvania law."

Nowhere in the lengthy student handbook is there any mention of gambling on campus being prohibited in the code of conduct, despite the fact that it's illegal for anyone under 21 to gamble.

According to John Smeaton, vice provost of student affairs, any illegal behavior is subject to action through the code of conduct.

"That having been said, our primary role at Lehigh is as educators, not law enforcement agents," Smeaton said. "We respond to situations in accordance with the particular circumstances."

The appropriate response, Smeaton said, could range from a conversation, to counseling, to legal action — depending on the nature of the situation.

A few weeks before Hogan's arrest, Smeaton said that gambling is not a large problem on Lehigh's campus.

"In my view, gambling is a problem if it is illegal and/or causes students to experience difficulties in their academic or personal lives," Smeaton said. "In that context, I do not have evidence to support that gambling problems are widespread."

But after Hogan's arrest, Smeaton's views changed drastically.

"While student gambling is not a new issue, it is on the rise nationally and is a concern on campuses across the country, including ours," Smeaton said. "We do have professional counselors who are dedicated to help students with a wide range of personal problems, including gambling issues."

In 2003, the World Series of Poker had 839 entries. This year's event had 5,618 players, and the purse for the champion was \$5 million more. It's no surprise then to see the explosion happening at Lehigh.

Last year, Delta Chi Alpha set aside specific days of the week, usually two or three days, to host games. Now, there is a game every day and any time. Brothers play before dinner. They play after dinner. Before parties. Afterward. They even play in between classes.

And, they play with bigger stakes.

In many ways, the evolution of Delta Chi Alpha as a casual place to play poker to the premier table on campus can be seen in the construction of their 10-person, polished wood table. Its creator, Jon, a junior in the house and a regular in the game, realized how serious he was about poker and wanted to change the way it was played at the fraternity.

Before the table was made during the winter of 2004, Delta Chi Alpha was hard-pressed to fit even seven people to play comfortably. Now, the table is always full and the stakes have gotten even more serious.

Whereas in previous years, \$20 was the customary buy in amount, it's been upped to a minimum of \$40. Now you can buy in for as much as you want. Total pots typically get up to \$500 but they've been at \$1,000 on occasions. There have been times when \$1,500 exchanged hands throughout the night.

Jon explains that on slow nights or at random times of the day, brothers will play heads up games with one another for \$50 or \$60. But there's hardly any slow nights. Brothers call brothers, they call friends from other houses who bring friends. When one person has had enough, the seat is always filled by another person waiting in line. It's a constantly

revolving door at Delta Chi Alpha. It's well-known and the room is well furnished. The atmosphere is always the biggest allure.

"Everyone will tell you they come to make money but you look at these kids who lose constantly; you can't tell me they come to make money," Jon says.

The social aspect of playing poker, particularly at Delta Chi Alpha, is what attracts many different players to the table. Jon gambles because he loves the camaraderie and the atmosphere.

He admits that he wouldn't stop gambling if he stopped winning.

"I might slow down, but just think it's a slow streak or bad cards," he says.

Plus, there is the allure of the competition.

"Poker is like any other sport, you want to be the best," Jon says. "You want to sit down at the table and know you can play with the best."

Some of the students who sit down are experienced but some are "fish." They are popular because of their inability to make good reads and for their likelihood to contribute vast sums of money.

One of these fish, Jake, another regular at the table, has accumulated a debt of \$300 this month. He receives a monthly allowance from home and usually remains in debt until he receives more money from his parents. He drives a Jaguar.

\*\*\*

**Andrew** kept seeing "Internal withdrawal transfer error" on his computer screen. He didn't know what it meant, or what to do. And the worst part was, he finally won some money. He just didn't know how to take it out.

Andrew had been betting on football games since the season began, using an obscure, Costa Rica-based betting Web site to place his bets.

At sportsbetting.com, he bets on NFL and baseball games, NASCAR races and golf tournaments. He did a boxing match once, too. Andrew started gambling when he was in ninth grade when he took bets on football for kids in his high school, and since then, has dabbled in almost everything.

Another Web site he uses, intertops.com, allows users to gamble on politics. Intertops.com receives bets for things such as first coach to get fired and how long celebrity couples will last. Users can even bet on the stock market.

The problem isn't usually picking what to bet on but actually receiving money. Andrew put \$250 in at sportsbetting.com and doubled that amount in a week after the Giants beat the Redskins on Nov. 6, but couldn't take out the money and ended up losing it all after one more week. The Web site cites payment options that include cash, direct deposit, bank-wire transfers and checks. Nothing worked. No one from the Web site responded. But Andrew kept gambling anyway.

"I just have an addictive personality," Andrew replied, smiling but sincere.

Andrew often skips classes to watch sporting events he's bet on and leaves class assignments incomplete because he's too busy juggling betting accounts on various Web sites. Other students spend vast amounts of time on online poker sites.

"Lehigh doesn't do anything about gambling on campus," Andrew says. "But why should they? It's not their money at stake. If it was, they probably would care, too."

\*\*\*

*Dave* is the kind of poker player who exists even away from the table. At a party last week, he scopes another player out, talking fast in his telemarketer kind of way, telling him things like "Dude, never alter your pre-flop raises because inconsistency makes you look less confident about your hand and that makes you look weak." His mind never stops playing the game.

Even though he has previously lost often, he is back at the poker table again tonight.

Dave says he's here for the competition, but his close friends know him well enough to know why he gambles.

Unlike Jon, who admits that he plays for the camaraderie of the event and for a side income while at school, Dave's aims are entirely different. No matter how much money he throws in, he wants to pull off the biggest bluff of the night. He wants to make players think he has rags when in fact he's got a made hand. For him, it's all psychological.

He pauses, and for awhile, all people hear is the rattling sound of chips being shuffled; despite the Kanye West song blaring on the speakers near the bar and the Sixers game playing loudly on the projection screen in front of them.

"I'm going to raise," Dave finally announces to Mike, the only person left in the hand.

Mike's smile actually grows bigger.

"I'm all in." Dave stops shuffling his chips and stacks them up for a final count.

Mike doesn't hesitate. He throws in his chips and turns over his cards, showing a King-high flush. He is laughing, already scooping up the big pile of chips in the center of the table.

"Hold it," Dave breaks in, and slams down his two aces.

With the ace on the flop and a second nine on the turn, he has a full house, the winning hand.

Dave gently pushes away Mike's hand and begins to take all the chips.

"Hey, you win some and you lose some," he is saying now, laughing wildly, giddy as hell. "And sometimes you win more than you lose."

He pauses and takes a long drag on his cigarette, blowing out one, two, three clouds of smoke behind him.

"But man, when you take a pot like that down, it makes everything else worth it."

Dave doesn't even bother stacking up his chips while he deals out a new hand, spraying cards quick and precise to each player.

"I'm raising," Dave announces.

"It's not even on you yet, man," one player mumbles, annoyed, and folds.

"I know, I know, I'm just putting it out there," Dave answers. "So just fold now and get it over with."

He hasn't even looked at his cards.