

LUCKY YOU

POSTED ON 16 NOV, 2009
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If you asked your typical poker player "Do you think you're a lucky, or unlucky?" I'd bet that the vast majority would pick the latter. Poker players tend to remember their bad beats and not their brutal suckouts. Also, if you admit that from time to time you've been luckier than you deserved that is a de facto admission that you weren't playing that well. And poker players tend to overestimate their skill about as often as they underestimate their good fortune.

I thought about poker players' unusual relationship with luck as I watched Joe Cada win the World Series of Poker Main Event. Cada is obviously a good poker player, with years of solid results behind him (despite the fact that he's just (expletive deleted) 21 years old). But there's no denying that he got lucky at that final table. Very lucky. Like, freakin' UNBELIEVABLY lucky. After losing a huge pot to Jeff Shulman with A-J to Shulman's A-K Cada was down to a bit more than 2 million chips. That was about 1% of the chip in play, not even three big blinds, I think. He was toast. Done. Hit the bricks, pal.

But there's that poker aphorism we're so fond of repeating, "All it takes is a chip and a chair". It's odd to think of a 2-million stack being little more than table scraps; players started the Main Event with 30,000 chips and so that's like combining the stacks of 67 long-dead donkeys. But Cada was down to the felt, dead in the water. To come all the way back would be a miracle.

Which is just what happened. Cada survived a race with Phil Ivey when his pocket fours held on against Ivey's A-8. And then came the two hands that changed the course of poker history, as Cada doubled with pocket threes and pocket deuces against Shulman's Jacks and Antoine Saout's Queens, respectively. Twice Cada was all in and thoroughly crushed by his opponent's overpair, and twice he flopped sets. A bit later, racing against Saout's pocket eights with Ace-King, Cada rivered a King to sent the Frenchman out in third place to set up the heads-up battle with Darwin Moon. Which, of course, Cada won, along with the title, the bracelet, and \$8.5 million dollars.

I'm not saying that Cada played these hands *poorly*, by the way. We could discuss the merits of pushing with small pairs all day and all night but it's hard to make a pair in Hold-Em and, considering that these hands are drawn from a sample of 364 played at the final table I don't know how much insight we can draw from them. But twice Cada found himself all-in and in jail, and twice the flop saved him. And as I watched his stack rise from the dead and these incredible reversals I wondered how that might've affected Cada's psyche. Do you start to believe that you're invincible, that the cards won't let you lose no matter what? Do you start to believe in Destiny, that you have been touched by otherworldly powers in order for you to do great things in the future? Or, perhaps, do you worry that this is merely the setup for the soul-crushing fall that's about to take place (and indeed that's what I was thinking when Moon dominated heads-up play early on and seized a 3-1 chip lead). Or is Cada, even at his age, experienced enough to accept such good fortune in stride, even when it's happening at the final table of the Main Event?

We got some insight into Cada's thoughts when he posted a [brief \(and somewhat incoherent\) note over at Two Plus Two](#). "Lets first by saying if anyone thinks I'm denying I got lucky at the final table then im not," Cada wrote. A bit later he says, "Did I get extremely lucky during the final table of the main event? Yes I did, but as an extreme critic to my self play I was not mad about how I played any hand even though I got lucky." And that is a salient point, both about the WSOP Final Table and about poker in general. You can make the reasonable play, the perfect play, even, and still lose. Ask Kevin Schaffel, who got all his chips in with pocket Aces to Eric Buchman's pocket Kings and saw Buchman flop a set and turn quads. What can you do? Cada seems to make the same point here—the hands played out in a reasonable fashion and, most of the time, Cada would've found himself headed to the rail. Instead, against the odds, he's the World Champion.

Every player who makes it to the final table benefits from good luck along the way. Whether it's your table draw or you get action with your big hands or you simply suck-out in some egregious way, the massive Main Event field takes probability and psychology and twists them together in fascinating ways. Is getting incredibly lucky reason to feel ashamed, or superior to your vanquished foes? Poker players like to say that in the end the luck evens out, but how long does it take for that balancing to occur? I've heard quite a few professional players say that one lifetime isn't enough for luck to find it's equilibrium, that no one plays enough to give a true and final accounting of luck's effect on the game. We understand the math, the statistics, and we know that in the long run luck doesn't matter. But human beings live in the short-term, and it's possible that the "short-term" covers everything from one hand to one's career. How poker players deal with luck, how they even define it, will always be one of the most interesting aspects of the game,

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