

Noblesse Oblige in Poker?



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Back on November 19th Gary Wise (who writes for ESPN and Wise Hand Poker) interviewed Seth Palansky, the World Series of Poker Communications Director. During the interview Palansky said that two members of the November Nine were asked to appear on *The Tonight Show* and *Ellen*, but in both instances the player (it's not clear if the same player was asked on both shows) declined the offer. It was hoped that delaying the final table would provide those who made the final table with more media attention and increased endorsement opportunities, and when this failed to materialize Palansky put much of the blame on the players:

But one of the reasons why I wanted to come on here with you tonight Gary, was to express a concern I do have for some of the advice and some of the moves poker players are making. Because if you want to mainstream a game, and if you're trying to get corporate America to buy into what you're selling, you need Tom Bradys, you need Peyton Mannings, you need Michael Jordans, etc. If we have guys that aren't willing to take that mantle, or the same ten, twelve guys that you see getting a lot of attention at the Main Event early on: the known names for their antics or whatever the case may be. If people want to leave it just to those dozen, they can't grow the game. For all the others, they've got to take advantage of the opportunities that get presented to them, and it's unfortunate that in situations where we had a successful pitch and an opportunity for our players to be on that national stage, they chose not to.

Wise then asked Palansky about whether it was reasonable for poker players, who often play because it gives them a freedom they can't find in other lines of work, to become "ambassadors for a selfish game". Palansky replied:

You know, I do. And maybe my judgment is clouded based on the position I hold, but I believe they owe it to the brethren of the poker community to take the mantle and try to elevate the game, just as any poker stakeholder is trying to do. I understand some people don't like the spotlight etc., but there are 54 other tournaments at the WSOP and everything else. I mean, you walk into the door of the Main Event, you know the ESPN cameras are rolling, you know what comes with the territory if you advance very far. And it's unfortunate that it simply comes down to "I want the money, but I don't want what else comes along with achieving that success".

Understandably there's been a lot of discussion about this. Is it fair to point the finger at the November Nine and blame *them* for corporate America giving the final table a miss? What exactly do poker players owe the game when they find themselves in the spotlight?

I think we need to look at one key word in the previous sentence—"owe". It's hard to say that poker players owe anything when they're the ones who bring the money to the table. Unlike the NFL and NASCAR (the sports where Palansky and WSOP Commissioner Jeffrey Pollack formally worked) poker is funded not by TV revenues and corporate advertising, but by the players themselves. One of the more awe-inspiring aspects of the World Series of Poker is that these massive prize pools are created not by some CEO cutting a check so his logo gets some airtime, but by players who think they have a shot to win more than their fair share of the loot.

Let's also not forget that Harrah's takes out a percentage of that prize pool to pay for staging the event. This year Harrah's took 6% of the prize pool, meaning \$4,106,400 of the players' money went directly into their coffers. Each of the 6,844 players paid Harrah's \$600 for their seat in the Amazon Room, regardless of whether they were there for ten minutes or ten days.

To be sure, it's expensive (and risky) to stage a huge poker tournament like the World Series of Poker. And Harrah's has to make a buck on this as well or there won't be a WSOP going forward. But when it comes down to a question about what poker players owe the game (and, by extension, what they owe Harrah's) the key point is this—the players ante up first. They're the ones who put the money in the pot first. They bring their \$10,000 to the window, they see Harrah's take \$600 of it off the top...now they want to sit down and play. Once players hand over their money, that's when their obligation ends. That's when the word "owe" ceases to hold sway.

Because it's perfectly reasonable for poker players, when asked to do interviews or go on talk shows or be an "ambassador" for the game, to say "no". Or to say, "what's in it for me?" Not for their fellow players, not for the game in general, but for themselves. As I said before, the players have already anted up. They've taken the same risk as everyone else, and if they're asked to take on a task no one else has it's reasonable to ask what's in it for them personally. And it's just as reasonable to say, "No, thanks".

In the 2+2 thread about the interviews a poster named Victor made much the same point and Gary Wise wrote, "I love that there are constant calls from players for a bigger piece of the pie while this is a prevailing opinion." Not to belabor the point, but the players are the ones who already bought the ingredients, rolled the dough, and baked the pie. Continuing the pastry metaphor, if Harrah's wants to the players to help grow the pie (by working to bring more corporate money into the kitty) the company has to step up and make it clear that they're not going to scarf down the extra slices.

So far Harrah's hasn't shared with players any of the money it's made via it's deals with ESPN, Milwaukee's Best Light, Planters, or any other sponsor. More importantly, they haven't shown any inclination of doing so. And therein lies the problem. When the Tom Brady's and Peyton Mannings of the world do commercials, they get paid for them. The NFL doesn't ask Peyton Manning to do all those MasterCard commercials because it'll help "grow the game". The NFL owners also share television, gate and other licensing revenue. When a player does something to boost the league revenue, he's also putting money in his teammates (and his own) pocket. If Harrah's wants poker players to promote the game and the WSOP, they have prove that they're willing to spread the wealth.

In a later post I'll discuss the talk show snubs and some other issues surrounding this topic.