

# A WSOP VIRGIN'S TALE

By Ronnie "Knuckles" Lebow



The Rio

## AGONY AND ECSTASY AT THE RIO



**I RAN INTO THE RIO** close to 9:30 p.m. with my heart in my throat and my luggage flailing behind me. I made sure when I booked my ticket that I gave myself plenty of time to get a seat in Event 51 (a \$1,500 NL hold'em event) of the 2009 WSOP. But a cancelled flight and two stand-bys in an unfamiliar East

Coast airport, combined with indefinite weather groundings on the runway, had me arriving almost 12 hours late.

I found the registration office and was told there were still 124 seats remaining for the event. I felt the ball loosen in my stomach even though I was technically homeless in Vegas, for when I called the online travel company to get a refund on the first cancelled flight, I somehow ended up cancelling the hotel as well.

Coming alone to Vegas was strange. Something felt dirty to me about it. I guess it stemmed from my underlying guilt and years of being told that poker players (and gamblers in general) are degenerates. Leaving your wife and

young children at home during a recession to fly across the country (and in my case, internationally) to play cards felt extremely irresponsible. But with several recent multi-player tournament wins, and a gift of the buy-in money from an old friend I call "Uncle Max" (under the condition I "smile at a final table"), I dismissed any negative thoughts and concentrated on the fact that I was finally going to play in the big leagues.

I placed an earlier status update on Facebook with the dates I would be in Vegas and had three "friends" respond. I haven't seen them in 20 years, but as I learned when I came the year before (looking to win my way in through satellites), all you really need is some form of a buddy in case something goes extremely wrong and/or to share a meal with

sometime during your stay. After buying my seat (what a relief!), my Blackberry informed me that they were in the hotel, and would meet me momentarily.

After a hurried reunion over some mixed Asian food in one of the Rio's restaurants, I headed over to Harrah's to see if I could get back my cancelled room. What I love most about Harrah's is that it is at the centre of the Vegas Strip and has all the great poker rooms within relatively short walking distance (including its own multi-table tournaments several times a day). Caesars Palace, with its large food court, is directly across the street, and a free express shuttle is on the premises straight to the Rio. To me, it's the main hub of the Vegas Strip. Yes, I've stayed at the Bellagio before. It's sweet. But I just need an affordable room with a clean bathroom and a comfortable bed to get six or seven hours of sleep each night.

Harrah's took one look at my player's card and the seat ticket to the WSOP and gave me a four-day rate on a beautiful room that could not be beat, especially for someone walking in off the street that night. It was almost midnight. The game was in 12 hours and I had only slept a total of four hours in the last 48. The burning desire to hit the tables was overshadowed by my need to go to bed.

### 'REGULAR DAY'

Waking up at 8:30 the next morning, I made it a regular day. I showered and shaved, walked across the street to Caesars for a large breakfast and walked around the Strip until it was time to head for the Rio. The desire to play and warm up was fierce, but I decided not to hit any tables for fear of walking into the WSOP on a bad-beat tilt.

At 10:30 a.m., I found myself waiting at the Rio shuttle stop outside of the Paris hotel. There were dozens upon dozens of people standing in the sizzling summer heat waiting to board the bus. The mood was extremely tense. Nobody said a word. I chatted up a nervous-looking college kid. I could tell he was studying economics or IT back home and he reeked of online play. He was on his way to the Rio to register for the event. It started in one hour and I told him there were only a handful of seats remaining the night before when I had bought my

ticket. I convinced him to share a \$10 cab ride with me instead of waiting for the hot bus with the other sheep to get us there quickly. At least, if all else failed, he could secure a seat in Monday's final \$1,500 event.

He turned out to be a pretty decent kid, all alone his first time in Vegas. I just knew deep down that his parents probably didn't love the fact he was here.

Walking into the Rio an hour before the event was like walking into a rock concert. Thousands of people were streaming through the halls and milling about. There was a buzz in the air and EVERYONE was getting high. I felt it too. Thanks to the clock ticking down the minutes until game time, an adrenaline rush was building inside me and it wouldn't let go. I've had this feeling before, only the last time I had a parachute on my back and I was boarding a plane. It was that intense.

Every player has some form of a strut. Many players walk around with an ego, a

sense that they have earned the right to be there. Myself included. After doing extremely well in cardrooms around Toronto, the time had finally come to see where my game would take me. My goal was to win the event. Not just for the money, but to prove to everyone who has ever doubted me that I can play with the best.

People call me a gambler, but I'm not a gambler. I play because I'm an adrenaline junkie. I play because I'm narcissistic. A gambler stands in front of a bank of elevators and bets money on which door will open. That's not me. I don't play chance and I don't play the house. I'm a card player. I describe poker as a game of psychological warfare, combined with probability and statistics, with the chaos factor thrown in just to mess things up. If you are a great player, you just need to try to avoid the last part. I came bringing my solid game with the hope that the cheap whore we all share named Lady Luck decides to hang on my arm for three



PHOTO: JOHN WENZEL

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days.

Minutes before the doors opened, there was much nervous chatter and pacing, a guy was catching a quick catnap in the corner, and another dressed in a full first-nation outfit – complete with an extremely impressive, feathered, chief ceremonial headdress – made sure he was seen near the live radio booth. You could almost hear an imaginary starting pistol when the doors opened.

I found my seat in the No. 1 position on table 216 – just one of 2,781 entrants – and quickly sized up my competition. WSOP newbies, just like myself. That is, until the guy in the seat to my left sat down. I took a look at the patch on his shirt and asked why it said “The Maven”?

“That’s my nickname,” he responded.

It hit me quickly. “Holy s--t,” I thought, “I’m sitting beside David Chicotsky!” David is one of the top online poker players in the world. I had just read about this kid hours earlier and he’s now sitting beside me. How f---ing cool is that?

### GETTING STARTED

Nobody said a word at the table during the first hour of play, and David and I chatted it up heavily. Many players never fully understand that this is supposed to be a social game. I figured...if I’m going to have a kid that made a half million this year playing online sitting beside me, I’m going to learn something. I wasn’t really fishing for his tells, I was looking for his story. And the one he told me was quite inspiring. We were very chummy and somewhere along the way we exchanged business cards. At one point, holding pocket aces, I raised the blind 2.5 times and everyone, holding junk, folded around to me. Not getting any action, I decided to show my hand (the only time I did this during my entire stay in Vegas) and David nodded with approval. “Exactly the bet I would have made,” he commented.

The first four hours of play felt like 15 minutes. It was great poker. No donk moves, no heavy muscle, I think everyone read WSOP 101 where you are told to play real tight at the beginning. Large pocket pairs, A-K, etc. By the end of Level 4, I had built my stack to more than 7k in chips (from the original 3,000). By Level 5, The Maven had busted out and I can

honestly say that this excited me. I outlasted the pro. No matter what happened later, I would take home this fact.

Once the antes came into play, the game turned into a shoving match as the short stacks tried to build quickly. It was during Level 5 when I looked down at my hole cards and caught sight of bullets once again. I raised, and got called by a shorter stack. I prayed silently, and sighed with relief as the flop fell A-8-2. I checked and my opponent moved all-in, and I called. He turned over 5-5. It hurt like absolute hell when the turn and the river brought a four and a three giving him a straight!

Losing with trip aces to runner-runner? Lady Luck truly hates me. I had been a 98 percent favourite on the flop.

By the end of Level 5, severely crippled in the small blind, I shoved my remaining stack with suited A-10 against the big blind that had me covered by very few chips. He instantly called with 3-3. Just my luck. He couldn’t have been holding 8-4? His pocket treys held up. I shook the guy’s hand and I walked out, like a wounded puppy with my tail between my legs.

### LEAVING, BUT NOT ALONE

I sucked it up and remembered my sponsor’s words before I left: “No matter what happens, have fun.” And I did. I realized that almost EVERYBODY leaves the Rio with a bad-beat story and a slightly bruised ego. Why should I be any different?

I had made it more than halfway through the playing field. I outlasted several pros. I lost due to some bad luck and simply put, that’s poker. This game is a cruel mistress.

The rest of my trip saw me losing to two-outers in four different tournaments around the city. I was eliminated from another one when a tired dealer on a 20-hour shift handed me an ace in the big blind (which consisted of the majority of my stack), then exposed the second one he was about to deal me, rendering it dead. I just couldn’t catch a break.

On my last day, I went back to the Rio to watch a friend play in Event 54. Like me, he got a seat directly beside a pro – Phil Helmuth. When Phil finally arrived and sat down during Level 4, I made a crack about my being there thanks to his

“Million-Dollar Poker System” video. He chuckled and I scored what I considered a small victory. Damn, he’s tall.

My buddy ended up busting out thanks to a two-outer on the river, and I had to listen to him moan and cry on my shoulder for an hour. As any good friend would do, I made sure to shoot video of his pain to share with friends back home.

### LAST NIGHT

That night brought an invitation to the “Ultimate Bet” party and I decided to skip it to see if I could win my bankroll back in one final game. I chose Harrah’s \$150 deep-stack tourney and went upstairs to pack and relax with some TV before the cards flew. I also changed into my lucky shirt and went downstairs for a bite to eat.

This was my swan song. My luck was so bad this week it had to be different this time. I played some of the best poker in my life over four days and never got the results I was expecting. For \$150 more, I planned to turn it around.

This was exactly the type of game that got me to Vegas. Ninety-four mediocre players with a ton of tells. Within ten minutes, I knew them all and remained in full control of my table. I had to get up to go to the airport at 7 in the morning, but by 3:45 a.m., exhausted and even-stacked, the remaining five of us decided to split the prize pool, each taking home roughly the equivalent of second place.

As I rode the cab to the airport, watching the sunrise over the desert, its rays glistening off the Strip’s hotels, I patted the fat pocket holding my win and grasped that I was coming home with my bankroll intact and could look forward to next year.

“Smile when you make a final table,” Uncle Max had said to me before I left.

And I did. ♠

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*You can reach him at lebow@sympatico.ca. Event 51 was eventually won by German Joh Carsten. Andrew Chen of Mississauga, Ontario, finished second, with Owen Crowe of Nova Scotia coming fifth.*