

## CHAPTER 10

### Las Vegas 1979-1983

*Beware of getting a god complex.*

Each time I arrived in Vegas, I would use a certain set routine. After settling in by about 4pm, I would make no effort to play poker that day, nor the following day. I would try to stay awake, however tired, until after dark and then have dinner. I would play no poker on the day following my arrival. It would only be the third day that I would venture forth. This was all to help overcome jet lag. Several British players I know arrive in Vegas, check into their room and go straight to the poker table. 'I'm not feeling tired,' would be their cry. Surprise, surprise they were then a healthy chunk down almost immediately. The journey is tiring, but jet lag is not about that, it is about being disorientated. To reach Vegas from London one has to cross eight time-zones, your biorhythms become shot to pieces.

Then there is the matter of my having played pot-limit poker immediately before coming, rather than limit. It made sense to practice up on the \$5-\$10 game, rather than the bigger games. Thus I would go to Caesars Palace. They had a free slot machine and each time I would win a medallion. I think they must have cost \$2 in the gift shop. Later, in the game, I would hit a straight flush. The house gave me another medallion each time for that. These proved to be useful presents. One visit I hit the straight flush on card 5 and on card 6 made a six-card straight flush. My opponent checked fifth street, and so did I; then he checked sixth street, I

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bet and he passed. Thus all I got from the pot was some loose change and yet another medallion.

The social dynamics at the Silverbird was interesting. The cardroom was run by Eric Drache and Doyle Brunson. It is a bit grandiose to call it a room; basically it was a large alcove, off the main casino. We were utterly exposed to the noise of the slot machines and also to the country and western band in the showroom. The Silverbird is no more, it became the Eldorado and then that went collars-up and has remained dark ever since. Thus the lot, very close to the Sahara, has remained unused for some years. But why did such a small, unimportant casino attract much of the big money poker in town?

Major Riddle owned the Silverbird and four similar minor casinos, most of which didn't even have a hotel attached. He was dying of cancer and yet playing poker every day. The strong professionals saw it as their responsibility to relieve him of his cash. The game was very large and I saw not only \$1000-\$2000 played, but even \$2000-\$4000. This is an enormous game, even by today's standards. It was totally out of my league, in fact this may have been true for *all* the players; I expect that they clubbed together to form partnerships and then shared the winnings. Allegedly one particular dealer would occasionally steal a chip; this wasn't a bad living at \$1000 a pop. He was caught on video and was due to stand trial, when he was found dead in the desert, having died from an overdose. Please don't jump to any conclusions about that story, I never have.

Thus Eric and his friends were winning large sums of money. They would lend smaller sums to their friends or, alternatively, put them into the game. For once the trickle-down theory, of which politicians are so fond, worked in practice. Thus the games were getting bigger and bigger, while the standard of play didn't necessarily improve. However, I came in from the pool one day, looked at the table and asked whether I could borrow a camera. They asked why, 'So I can send a photo home and players will be able to see the type of player you can meet if you come to Vegas.' I think sitting there were Bobby Baldwin, Doyle Brunson, Eric Drache, Stuey Ungar and some other leading players. I arrived there intending to play \$20-\$40 and perhaps a little \$30-\$60. After about 10 days I was up to \$100-\$200 and even tried some \$200-\$400. I avoided tables teeming with players I knew to be good.

Basically, the oil wells gushed. This has happened to me a number of

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times in the past. Rather than win a nice, steady amount, suddenly you have a rush and it seems nothing can go wrong. If you lose your sense of perspective during this phase, you may go broke very quickly when it comes to an end.

One day Harvey (see below) said to me, 'You had a bad evening.' He didn't seem to have done very well either. In fact, he had won \$8000 and I had won \$11,000. I can understand why he had that perspective; it was, after all, limit poker. Thus, provided I had enough money on the table to play the pot out, no matter how many raises, it did not matter whether I took money off the table. In American this is called 'going South' and in Britain 'weeding'. The fact that it has a name indicates that the practice is quite common. Every time I went to the bathroom, I took my bankroll with me. When I returned, I had stuck more and more \$100 bills in my pocket.

### Harvey

It is a very long time since Harvey and I played together. He once paid me possibly the biggest compliment I have ever received. At the end of a seven-card stud hand I declared queens up, and he threw in his hand without waiting to see whether this was correct or not. Don't ever do that in Vegas – opponents are likely to over-declare their hand, and a player might well decide to try this cheap shot.

He was very interested in betting on 'jai lai', but his principal claim to fame here is that he was part of a consortium which beat a casino. Bingo Palace ran a promotion, drawing a \$20 bill every hour. The claimant most closely matching the number on the banknote won \$100. The group bought \$20,000 in \$20 bills. They also hired a room in the hotel and bought a computer. The bills were put into stacks and a program written where it was possible to find the best fitting bill quickly. Then they waited and usually won \$100 each hour. Occasionally, somebody would come in with perhaps five \$20 bills, and wait around for his free shot and win. Harvey told me that the promotion lasted only a month and they cleared a few thousand dollars, but that it was a lot of fun, beating the casino legitimately. Naturally the casino stopped the promotion as soon as it was possible to do so. People in Vegas are always on the lookout for these opportunities; inevitably when there are a number of promotions, some will have been wrongly calculated. Relatively recently betting under and over 13 in blackjack was introduced in Britain. This

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gave a good advantage to a card counter, and the offer was withdrawn in very short order.

It was five years since I had last come to town, and then it had been for only five weeks. The very first serious game (you can't count \$5-\$10 as that) I sat in, three players greeted me by name. Being English naturally I stood out as an out-and-out foreigner, but where were those mug punters?

*Poker is a prime example of Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection.*

If you can't hack it at poker, either you get out or get a job and continue feeding the hawks. Remember, you have to be better than average in the game just to break even; the expenses eat heavily into your returns.

The Silverbird wasn't the only place where big seven-card stud games were spread. Friends told me about the game at the Las Vegas Hilton, which was much more salubrious and quieter than the Silverbird. I went there and maintained a low profile. My old-time buddies came looking for me and dragged me back to the Silverbird, 'You've blown my cover,' I complained. 'They might have thought I was a tourist.' 'But the game is at the Silverbird. We won't come looking another evening.' Indeed the Silverbird was where it was at, and I wonder why they thought me such a good catch for the game. Perhaps it is because you need numbers playing, in order for the tourist to be tempted to sit down. Few of them will join a short-handed game. Also I looked like and sounded like one myself; indeed perhaps sometimes I was a tourist.

### Eric Drache

In many ways, Eric is America's equivalent of Ted Isles. He is a poker host par excellence and also quite a strong player. You will remember that I first met him in 1974 in England. On that trip he was introduced to his future wife, Jane, by Hungarian Lou. As with all specialist fields, poker can be a very small society.

Eric can be utterly charming and has the ultimate skill for a host of making you feel that he is concentrating on you to the exclusion of all others. He used to be the director of the World Series of Poker. As I understand it he received no fee, simply a high credit limit. This is very important to Eric. When asked why he always flew first-class rather than

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economy, even for internal US flights where there is no advantage, he had this to say. 'What difference does it make; the added cost is just an ante in a big poker game.' Well, you know I have warned against this very dangerous attitude. He went on, 'Anyway, who will I find to lend me money in economy?'

He told an old friend, Bruce, that he had flown over the family from Europe for a wedding. 'First-class, of course,' he added. 'I wouldn't have believed you if you'd said anything else,' was Bruce's response. Bruce told me that Eric was always like this, even as a youngster in New Jersey; the idea of doing anything other than in style was alien to him.

Eric told me that he was having dinner with the Binion family, still headed by Benny, one year. It was just after a famous shooting incident surrounding the Horseshoe Casino, owned by the Binions, which is where the World Series has traditionally taken place. Urban myth has it that a punter lost his money and got annoyed with the Horseshoe. He went outside and hurled a brick through a window, but he was then pursued by a security guard who shot him dead. Commenting on this, Eric told me that Mama Binion said, 'Well, it was a \$60 window.' Later it was rumoured that it was Teddy Binion who got the needle and shot the punter dead. The security guard simply took the rap and went to prison for 18 months in exchange for a large pay-off. I doubt whether we will ever know the full story. After Benny died, there were many squabbles within the family. Teddy was later murdered, and it is believed that a large cache of money was stolen from him. Anyway, all this is rumours and hearsay and has nothing directly to do with my story. Of the family, I have only ever met Jack and he seems an affable person who loves poker and the company of the players. His sister Becky bought out his share in the Horseshoe, and he now runs a casino in Tunica, Mississippi where there is a big tournament series every winter. Basically we have seen the end of the large, family-run resorts in Vegas.

Eric even had an interesting slant on the way in which rumours and stories spread. I tackled him about the newspaper report that there had been somebody laundering money in the game in the Silverbird. No doubt that happened, and no doubt I have sometimes been the recipient of such largesse. Well, rather me than the income tax inspector. Eric said, 'That's amazing. You heard about that in England. It was a report in the local Vegas paper about a gambler laundering money through a casino and next to it was a story about the Silverbird game.' The two

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stories were unconnected, but people associated them together.

Many years later Eric asked me to do him a favour and cash in a substantial number of chips at the Mirage cage. Naturally I was happy to oblige and afterwards Eric gave me a comp for the finest restaurant in the Mirage resort where he was poker host, and where the big games were spread by that time. Steve Wynn was the chief honcho at the Mirage and other Vegas resorts. He was very fond of Eric but at one time the two of them fell out. For a time Eric moved to London, and he played in the pot-limit games in 1990. Life had moved on from seven-card stud, but we did play a few £1000 buy-in games, especially with him to egg us on. It is said that he never won in London. He later moved to Los Angeles and hosted a very big Hollywood style game with the proprietor of *Hustler* magazine at its centre. More recently I am told he has moved back to Vegas and is running a room downtown in the Golden Nugget.

*Eric Drache is the eighth best seven-card stud player in the world. His problem is that he always wants to play with the seven who are ahead of him.*

David Sklansky

### Stu Ungar

I had to go to Vegas to be known as Big Stew, although I am only 5 foot 3 inches (142cm) tall. My biggest weight ever has been 149 pounds (68 kilos), but that was before I had a stroke. At the time I knew Stu, I was probably closer to my current weight of 136 pounds (57 kilos). In truth, Stuey was bigger than me, but at 28, he still had the appearance of a slight 18-year-old. Well, maybe he wasn't bigger, Mike Sexton said he weighed in at 105 pounds sopping wet.

We only played poker in the same game a few times; I don't go looking for the world's best with whom to cross swords. I remember a \$100-\$200 seven-card stud game that we played. I was low card with a deuce and there was no raise, Stu having called with a jack. I hit an open pair of deuces and actually had trip deuces; I could check or bet \$200, but chose to bet \$100. Stu had his \$200 ready to call me, but was pulled up short by my unusual play; he virtually did a double take. He called, immediately hit open jacks and I had to call him down in limit poker. Thus the effect of my unusual action simply saved me \$100. At any rate, it showed that I could still introduce imaginative plays.

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On one occasion we both played in a peanut-sized hold'em tournament which was run to open a new cardroom. Basically this was doing the new manager a favour as he had run games elsewhere. We were at the same table and Stu proposed that we have a last-longest bet. I wasn't crazy about the idea. Had this side bet been for any substantial sum, he would have changed his entire strategy and, by comparison with him, what did I know about no-limit hold'em? As I expected he was out in a couple of hands. The action wasn't there for him, but he had affably lent his name to a new venture.

Eric and I were having dinner once, possibly at the Dunes, shortly after Stuey had won his second successive World Series of Poker main event in 1981. Eric told me that Stuey was so naïve that he had to show him how to use a checking account. Stuey joined us for dinner for a while, but I don't remember his ordering anything; our pace would have been too slow for him, after all I was by now 42 years old. He was very taken with the fact that his achievement in winning his second bracelet in the 'big one' had received wide attention in England. I also remember his eating part of my bread roll, which I had already started, without asking for permission!

In many ways, Stuey's life makes pretty dismal reading, but I wonder. He came from New York and became the breadwinner in his family at the age of 14. He made his first money playing gin rummy, according to many experts he was the best they have ever seen. When he moved to Vegas, the problem was that he rapidly ran out of opponents. Gambling isn't like chess or bridge, many don't want to play against players they know are too good for them. Apparently he had a photographic memory and he next turned his attention to blackjack. It probably took him even less time to get barred from playing that. It is hard to remain anonymous when people are still asking for your ID to prove that you are over 21.

Thus Stuey turned to poker as his third card game, and it is well-known that he made a lot of money. Some high rollers even get their kicks from playing against the world's best. Also, if you play in tournaments, nobody is going to win them all and players will still enter. After all, superstar has two distinct meanings in poker: those who are extremely strong, and those who are extremely weak.

Stuey had two enormous problems. He loved to gamble on anything, and must have lost about four fortunes on sports betting. It is said that he lost \$80,000 on his first visit to the golf course with Jack 'Treetops'

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Strauss – before they reached the first tee! Presumably this was on the putting green. Many poker players love to gamble on their prowess at golf, and it doesn't really matter who is the better player, provided the handicap is right. It is OK to play for \$50,000 a hole, provided the end result is going to be one or two holes difference, and provided, that is, you can afford to lose \$100,000 or more. Probably even worse was his sports betting, since this can go on all the time, even in your sleep or in the middle of a poker game. If you are a loser, then the bookie's edge will grind you down, and Stuey just loved to be in action continually.

His other problem was his consumption of drugs. When I last saw Stuey in 1997 he sported enormous sunglasses. If you looked closely, these could not conceal that his nose was wasted away. Presumably he was a coke addict; I have no idea what other drugs he took, but presumably they included speed.

I saw him at the final table of the World Series of Poker main event that year. He was put into the game by friends and led the field from start to finish. I was told that he was already even money favourite to win after the third day. That says it all, he hadn't won since 1981, there were 27 players left and yet the bookmakers made him even money against the field. Or at least that is how they had to set the prices in order to try to have a round book. Of course he won.

On 22 November 1998 Stuey was found dead in a Vegas motel with a few hundred dollars in his pocket. His body held only traces of drugs and there is no suggestion it was an overdose. He left behind a wife and a 16-year-old daughter, whom he reputedly loved dearly, so it wasn't all gambling and drugs.

Really, the only thing we had in common was a love of poker and the same first name. I believe I am right in saying they dimmed the lights of Las Vegas in his memory when the news came through that he had died. They could hardly have switched the lights off in the poker rooms; all the money would have vanished.

Yes, his passing was desperately sad, but was his life so dismal? Perhaps it is better to have shone briefly than not at all. A film of his life story was made in 2003, entitled *High Roller, The Stu Ungar Story*, but it does not seem to be widely available. A biography, *The Man behind the Shades: The Rise and Fall of Stuey 'The Kid' Ungar, Poker's Greatest Player* by Nolan Dalla and Peter Alson (with a foreword by Mike Sexton) has yet to appear at the time of writing.