CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 8
Why I Wrote this Book 10
Read this First 12
The Numbers 14

The Players
Andre Akkari 16
Danielle Andersen 22
Matt Berkey 28
Liv Boeree 34
Justin Bonomo 40
Olivier Busquet 46
Daniel Cates 52
Mohsin Charania 58
Stephen Chidwick 64
Daniel Colman 70
George Danzer 76
Ari Engel 82
Antonio Esfandiari 88
Niall Farrell 94
Phil Galfond 100
Jeff Gross 106
Jennifer Harman 112
Isaac Haxton 118
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phil Hellmuth</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Ho</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fedor Holz</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faraz Jaka</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryn Kenney</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Koon</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance Kornuth</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Igor Kurganov</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Lamb</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Little</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike McDonald</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Marchese</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian Mateos</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Mercier</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Merson</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Monnette</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Moorman</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Negreanu</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominik Nitsche</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve O'Dwyer</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Obst</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug Polk</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Rast</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick Schulman</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik Seidel</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa Selbst</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Somerville</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Smith</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Tollerene</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JC Tran</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Wasserson</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Zinno</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Further Reading** 316
WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Over the past 12 years, I’ve been fortunate enough to have been tableside for some of the biggest moments in poker. I’ve also had the opportunity to interview the greatest players in the history of the game. Sometimes, those interviews came right after they’d won a major title. Often times they were longer, more candid discussions away from the table and dealt with more than just key hands or moments.

Through all my time covering poker, I have always been curious about what allows each of the best players to constantly succeed. There simply is no blueprint for how to become one of poker’s most successful players. Every player comes from a different background, has learned the game in a different way, and brings a different skill set every time they sit down to play. Even now, as they have risen to the level many poker players dream of, they continue to work at improving their game and getting better in unique ways.

Realizing that the path to poker success is very different for each person is what led me to write the book you’re now holding in your hands. I wanted to talk to some of the most successful players in the
game and dig deep into some of the methodology and tools that they’ve taken advantage of over the years. The hope is not that you read this book and copy the things that Daniel Negreanu or Chris Moorman or Phil Galfond did to become a great player, but rather you learn the numerous things that each of them have done and find a way to apply some of those to your own approach.

This book is the result of hours and hours of interviews and intimate conversations with these 50 players. My goal was to understand their paths from the first time they played poker to being considered amongst the best players in the world. No two conversations were alike except in one important way. They all started with the same question:

*How do you define success?*

On the surface it may seem like a rather innocuous question but, almost without fail, as each player began to work their way through their answer, each described something very unique that ultimately had a hand in how they got to where they are now. The resulting conversations gave me insight into some of the brightest poker minds the world has ever known. Each of those conversations became a chapter in this book.
The Pursuit of Poker Success is not a traditional poker strategy book. There’s actually no practical poker strategy in this book - but there is plenty to learn. With that in mind, here are five rules designed to help you get the most out of this book.

♦ Do not think of this a textbook - nobody likes textbooks - but do yourself a favor and grab a highlighter or your favorite pen, or even just a pencil, and keep it handy. As you read this book, you’re inevitably going to find things that will make an impression on you - little bits of advice or insight that you’re going to want to remember or revisit each time you pick the book up again. Highlight those passages, write notes in the margin and revisit them often.

♦ Do not read this book in a linear fashion. Read Chapter 1 and then skip ahead to Chapter 23 if that’s what suits your fancy. You’re not going to miss anything by bouncing around from
chapter to chapter. You may get more out of the book if you read it that way. You’re probably going to like some players more than others, so either start with the ones you like the most and work your way down, or get the ones you don’t like out of the way first. Just make sure you read each chapter at some point.

♦ Do not be afraid to re-read a chapter. There’s a lot of information packed inside this book and on first passage some things may not seem relevant or important to you. After you’ve read it once, let a few weeks or months go by and give it a second glance. You just may discover something you’d previously read and not gotten something from suddenly bears fruit.

♦ Do not think of the players featured in this book as some sort of poker deities. They’re all fantastic poker players and have worked hard to hone their skills. But they’re more like you than you may think. With that in mind, as you read each chapter, look for something that connects you to them.

♦ Do take this book with you when you go to play poker. Each chapter is broken down into easy-to-digest, quick-to-read sections. Instead of flipping through your phone or tablet between hands, thumb through this book. Re-read the chapters you’ve already gone through. Use the downtime to read the ones you may have initially passed over.
The 50 players featured in the pages of this book are some of the most successful poker players of all time - and the numbers prove it.

$549,738,331
Total career tournament earnings including seven of the 10 highest-earning players of all time and 23 players who have won at least $10 million.

83
World Series of Poker bracelets including 32 players who have won at least one bracelet and two players who have won the WSOP Main Event.

20
World Poker Tour titles including six different players who have won multiple titles.
7 European Poker Tour titles.

10 Former Global Poker Index #1-ranked players. The GPI represents the top-ranked live tournament players in the world at any given time.

3 Former PocketFives.com #1-ranked players. Since 2006, PocketFives has been the foremost online poker player ranking authority.

543 Career wins including 21 players who have won at least 10 tournaments during their career. Phil Hellmuth alone is responsible for 57 of those wins.

5,132 Career cashes including four players who have cashed a minimum of 200 times during their career.

5 Former World Series of Poker Player of the Year winners.

5 Former World Poker Tour Player of the Year winners.

2 Poker Triple Crown Winners. Niall Farrell and Mohsin Charania have each won a WSOP bracelet, EPT title and WPT title.

4 Poker Hall of Fame members.
In the pantheon of online nosebleed cash gamers there’s one particular screen name that may elicit both fear and giggles: OMGClayAiken. His opponents feared him and the railbirds who flocked to watch him play couldn’t help but laugh at the screen name. The player behind the screen name is Phil Galfond, and throughout his career he has proven to be a formidable foe no matter what the stakes were. Along with the $8 million he’s reportedly won playing online cash games, he’s also picked up a pair of World Series of Poker bracelets and $2.4 million in live tournament earnings.

HIGHLIGHTS
♦ One of the biggest winners in the history of online poker cash games
♦ 2015 World Series of Poker $10,000 No Limit Deuce-to-Seven champion
♦ 2008 World Series of Poker $5,000 Pot Limit Omaha champion
Phil Galfond has played hundreds of thousands of nosebleed stakes cash games and managed to show a significant profit, but he has to go much further back in his career to think of the first time he felt like he was a successful poker player.

“I considered myself successful pretty early on when I became confident in my results. I had a big enough sample size that showed I was a winning player. This must have been at $20 or $30 sit-n-goes. I had played a bunch and had my ROI, whatever it was at that point, and I realized that poker could be my job during college, rather than whatever other job I would get.”

Once he decided to take poker more seriously, he had little trouble diving right in and obsessing over the work. As long as what he was working on captured his attention, he had an incredible focus. It’s a personality trait that Galfond discovered as a teenager.

“Up until high school my grades were good because it just came kind-of easy. In high school my grades suffered a little bit because it wasn’t as easy but I never developed a good work ethic for whatever reason. I struggle to concentrate on things that I don’t find interesting. Whereas if I do find something interesting, I can be completely immersed in it and, as a result, I have been able, in some aspects, to work really hard on poker because I found it so interesting.”

Despite the lack of interest in academics Galfond went to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, but dropped out to focus on poker. In many ways that decision was already made for him as he had dedicated more and more of his waking hours to playing or studying the game. School became an unnecessary distraction.

“I wasn’t a great college student. I was already playing quite a bit and it kind-of happened by accident. It was part of the path because it allowed me to focus on it even more but I think really it was, in some ways, a result of my focus on poker that was already happening.”
There was a time, not that long ago, when seeing Galfond playing in the highest-stakes games was a bit of a shocker. Going against standard bankroll management principles, Galfond often sat down at the biggest stakes to take a shot at proving his mettle and expediting the bankroll building process. It didn’t always work out and often times forced Galfond to move back down in stakes and almost start over again.

“I lost significant portions of my bankroll several times but I would just always move down. I was always taking shots underrolled. I was playing $5/$10 as my main game and I would play $50/$100 and I would lose two buy-ins and then I would just go back and play $5/$10 for a while and I was fine with that. I’ve never been at a point where I couldn’t play something that was enough to make a comfortable living.”

Every time Galfond jumped into a game that he didn’t have a big enough bankroll for, he didn’t feel that he was at risk of ruin. At that time, online poker cash games were significantly softer than they are today and he had plenty of opportunities to rebuild while also maintaining the quality of life he was used to. Galfond believes he could have followed traditional bankroll guidelines and gotten to the highest-stakes games, but taking a shot or two along the way allowed it to happen much sooner.

“For me, it wasn’t a mistake for a couple of reasons. One, some people would just take a shot and lose two buy-ins which would then take them a very long time to win back at smaller stakes. And they just wouldn’t be able to. They would try to chase their losses at high stakes. That was never an issue for me. So that’s a big problem that most people face when they take shots that I just, for whatever reason, didn’t.

“It was a pretty big motivator for me because I always wanted to get up to those games and so it motivated me to work harder and play more, just put in more hours at the stakes I was playing so that I could develop enough of a roll to take a shot.

“Lastly, I do think in some ways it helped me because obviously there’s a lot of variance involved but I remember moving up and there were several shots that failed. Most shots failed but then eventually one stuck and I was now a $100/$200 player or whatever it was. I don’t know this for sure but I would suspect, on average, that it gives you the best chance at moving up fastest.”
Between mid-2014 and the end of 2017, Fedor Holz was the poster boy for success in poker, winning $26.54 million. Prior to that he was the #1-ranked player on PocketFives three different times. He’s recorded 16 live wins with 10 of those coming in tournaments with buy-ins of $25,000 or more. In 2016, after he won his first WSOP bracelet, the German phenom announced his retirement to focus on other interests. Despite this, he’s continued to play and remains one of the best no-limit tournament players in the world.

HIGHLIGHTS
◆ 2016 European Poker Tour Barcelona Super High Roller champion
◆ 2016 WSOP $111,111 High Roller for One Drop champion
◆ 2015 Alpha8 Five Diamond Poker Classic High Roller champion
◆ 2017 World Series of Poker $1,500 No Limit Hold ‘em champion
Every poker player has a unique definition of success and Fedor Holz is no different. While many of his peers or colleagues believe that financial rewards, fame or the freedom that comes from playing poker for a living are all key components of their own personal success, Holz believes that the times he’s enjoyed the most success have been the times when he’s had the most fun.

“The way I see success for me as a poker player is mostly just enjoying, really enjoying, what I do. That’s at least how I see it now. One or two years ago, especially when I was playing a lot, I was measuring success a lot more by money but, looking back at it, the times when I when I had the most fun playing weren’t my most financially successful ones.

“Just having a lot of fun playing the game and learning the game, that was the time where I would say now that I was the most successful because I learned the most and got the most out of the game.”

Holz’s enjoyment of the game wasn’t reliant on the turn of a card though. Even in his early 20s, Holz knew he had to manage his approach to the game, both playing and studying, to maximize the times when he was, in his own words, having the most fun.

“I rarely studied the game when I didn’t want to. Sometimes obviously it’s super-exciting and then sometimes it’s just okay. I’ve never really studied when I felt ‘I don’t want to do this’, because I think that’s what poker was about for me, was to never feel forced to do it.”

As optimistic as that may sound, Holz arrived at that definition by experiencing the other end of the fun spectrum. He spent his childhood in Saarbrücken, Germany playing chess and computer strategy games and eventually found a love for poker. The love for the game, though, wasn’t shared by those around Holz and even though he was enjoying some early success, he never felt he had the support system to truly excel.

“Especially in the beginning when I played, before moving to Vienna, I was not in a good place, very undisciplined and really lost in some way. I didn’t really have
a career path or a clear vision of where I wanted to be. That was not a good time for me personally. The time when everything just went extremely well was after that, when I moved to Vienna. Basically, from that day on it just went up. I think I was in a different mindset, I was around good people and I could just focus on learning and becoming better at the game and that was crazy - that had such a positive impact on my life.”

The move to Vienna came after Holz, who had been traveling through Spain, met some like-minded poker players who invited him to make the move from Germany to Austria and join them. While some players may see moving to another country as a massive life disruption full of the unknown, Holz knew it was an opportunity for him to focus on the game without the questions from friends and family and pressures from society to fit a career narrative that he wasn’t interested in at all.

“What it was was, I was finally in some way in a somewhat stable surroundings. I had enough social interaction with people that that supported me, and that was just the kick-off. Even if it’s two people. I mean, I came from a place where everyone told me, I could just feel every single day, how I’m kind-of a disappointment. I’m not going to study and get a job and whatever and I had no poker friends in my close surroundings and just sometimes met with friends to play. Then I moved to Vienna where it was poker every single day and it was positive and it was totally fine to do that. Once that changed into ‘Hey this is totally fine to do that’, then immediately I could just focus in a healthy way on the game.”

In 2015, Holz put together his first million-dollar year thanks to two six-figure cashes at the European Poker Tour Grand Final and another two at the World Series of Poker. While everything looked great from the outside, Holz couldn’t help but felt like it was a serious of missed opportunities and he was growing frustrated.

“That was actually one of my biggest down phases both mentally and also downswings in poker. Everything was going well outside basically, so everyone thought I was winning a ton, but it wasn’t actually going so great. I had a good summer but the rest of the year went quite bad - lots of close close calls. I cashed in Monaco, the high rollers, and cashed in in Vegas, but besides that not much went my way.
For the better part of a decade, Vanessa Selbst was one of the most feared poker players in the world. After beating high-stakes online cash games while attending Yale, Selbst graduated in 2005 and began playing live tournaments. Between 2008 and 2014 she won two North American Poker Tour events, the Partouche Poker Tour Main Event and three WSOP bracelets, all while completing her Law degree at Yale. Her success in poker can be traced back to her parents, both of whom were competitive bridge players.

HIGHLIGHTS
◆ 2014 WSOP $25,000 Mixed Max No Limit Hold ’em champion
◆ 2013 PokerStars Caribbean Adventure $25,000 High Roller champion
◆ 2012 World Series of Poker $,2500 10-Game champion
◆ 2008 World Series of Poker $1,500 Pot Limit Omaha champion
It should come as no surprise that an Ivy League-educated lawyer would have a results-oriented definition of poker success, but the amount of money won is only a part of that definition. In Vanessa Selbst’s eyes, somebody reflecting on their career at the end of it has to be able to show that they were a winning player who maximized the opportunities presented to them, but a player still working their way through a career has to focus on a number of elements that should eventually lead to results.

“At the end of the day it is about having good results in the long run. It’s about making the right decisions more often than not, making the correct decisions as often as possible. There’s also other things that make someone a successful poker player, like seeing good opportunities, managing your risk, not tilting and all those other things. So I think the best measure of success at the end of the day, if you’ve had a long enough career, is tied to results but, you know, on a shorter-term basis those are the kind of things you want to be looking at.”

Anybody who’s ever played poker with Selbst will tell you that she’s got a competitive streak that rivals anybody else in poker. When she sits down at the table to play she doesn’t simply want to beat her opponents, she wants to be the best player at the table.

“Beating the game and being as good as I can be or being among the best – for me that’s a really important piece of it. Other people play poker to make money and that’s the more important goal for them. Great, just beat up $5/$10 and make six figures per year and live your life and be happy. But for me it’s about beating the game.”

Selbst had a different upbringing from most people her age and it clearly impacted her ability to pick up various poker games as she got older. Other kids may have been playing with toys or video games but Selbst was playing all kinds of card games and board games with her family.

“I’ve been addicted to games my whole life. Pretty much any game I could learn, I could beat it if it was an interesting game. That comes from my family. My mom and dad met playing bridge. They were both really avid bridge players. They
would travel to bridge tournaments and growing up that was always what we did, we played cards. I didn’t play with toys or play any other games. So it always really came pretty naturally to me.

“We used to play Mastermind and it was never good enough. There is a code of a few different colored tags and you have to get the code in the right order and you get clues as to how to do that and we would be happy if we got the code at all, but that wasn't good enough. My mom was like: “No, did you do this in the most efficient way?” It was always like a test: ‘Why did you do this? What were you thinking? Is there a better move?’ So that kind of way of thinking was just drilled into me from an early age.”

A lot of the lessons learned while playing those games, combined with the competitive drive that came to the surface during those game nights, are part of what Selbst credits with being key parts of her success.

“I’m naturally pretty logically inclined. My deductive reasoning is extremely good. I’m pretty intuitive - well intuitive is a weird word, but I think I’m more perceptive than other people.

“The logic thing is really good because not only can I put poker hands together, but I think I can also extrapolate information to make reads on other situations pretty well. I can take one situation, and that incorporates some psychology, it’s sort of logic and it’s also psychology. It’s like: ‘Okay, how is this person thinking about this situation and, given that, how would they think about other situations?’ And so it’s a combination of this kind-of perceptiveness - the perceptivity and then I was always good at math so that stuff came really naturally to me. I’m not a super-mathy player compared to some of the other high-stakes players but all of the quick calculations that you have to make don’t pose a problem and I know for some people those are more difficult.”

Taking stock of her skill set relative to the rest of the players she was playing against on a regular basis gave Selbst the opportunity to evaluate her own level of skill. The fact that she was a winning player very early on in her career was proof to her that she was a successful poker player, but every time she looked back at the player she had been two or three years prior, she saw a player who actually wasn’t as good as she had initially believed.