

GAMBLING

Poker's royal resurgence is the real deal



LESLIE BARBARO/Herald News

Keith Reinhert, left, of Ringwood, and Matt Diehl, of Wanaque, founded the North Jersey Poker League in January 2004 with seven players. Now there are 18.

By ED BEESON
Herald News

Keith Reinhert, 29, of Ringwood, was lazing around with some buddies from high school on New Year's Day last year when one friend decided to break out his Christmas present, a poker chip set.

A deck of cards later and this group of seven was on its way to organizing a weekly home poker tournament, an increasingly popular pastime in North Jersey and beyond.

Soon, their ranks swelled to 18, the maximum Reinhert can fit at the two poker tables his friends built in his basement. At first, he had to turn away strangers who learned about the club online. Then he had to place his friends

INSIDE
The game is heating up at the World Series of Poker. C2

on a waiting list.

Poker's popularity began to surge two years ago, and the public seems nowhere near its saturation point with the sport. Even with rising concerns about gambling addictions, poker seems to be weaving its way into the fabric of American life.

Take, for example, the 36th Annual World Series of Poker, a nine-day tournament in Las Vegas that is scheduled to end tonight.

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Poker: Critics say games breed 'degenerates'

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After last year's number of entrants smashed the 2003 record, 2,576 to 839, more than twice that number, 5,619 people, entered the 2005 WSOP. Each player ponied up \$10,000 to compete for the \$7.5 million top prize at this tournament.

"The growth rate is extraordinary," said WSOP spokesman Dave Curley.

Televised tournaments like ESPN's WSOP and the World Poker Tour and a playing style called No Limit Texas Hold 'Em are all elements.

But it was amateurs like Chris MoneyMaker, the man who beat seasoned professionals to win the \$2.5 million top prize at the 2003 WSOP, who turned poker into a metaphor for an American dream: anyone can win, so long as they play their cards right.

"It's rampant proliferation all over TV makes it hard NOT to watch," wrote Allyson Leonard, 25, of Bloomfield, in an e-mail Thursday. She described the poker craze as a "viral social activity." About 50 million people in the

United States play poker at least once a month, according to poker industry officials like World Poker Tour founder Steve Lipscomb, although the source of their data is unclear.

"I learned because all my male friends were playing and figured, heck, I should learn just so I know what's going on here," Leonard wrote. Like other poker players, Leonard said that the real reward is more social than financial.

"Even when I sit in class, I hear the students talk about their own games," said Matt Biehl, 28, of Wanaque, a senior in sociology at William Paterson University. "You can't escape it. Even at the supermarket, I hear people talk about poker hands."

Biehl, a poker player for the past 12 years, helped organize the weekly tournaments in Reinert's house. Their setup is sophisticated. Reinert, a computer network administrator, developed a ranking system that statistically tracks each player's ranking. He then built a Web site, at www.northjerseypoker.com, where he posts each player's quarterly average and the player of the month.

His tournament starts at 8 p.m. every Thursday and lasts until about 12:30 a.m. "It's a school night," Reinert explained. Each player chips in \$20 to a communal pot, from which the final four players win cash. The top prize is \$160, a modest pot compared to other home tournaments.

"We weren't concerned about money," Reinert said, just "bragging rights."

"Remember, we're old high school friends. You got to rub it in."

Poker is a hobby, he said, and not one he wants to pursue professionally, like so many entrants to the WSOP.

"I briefly entertained (the idea), but I don't think it's my lifestyle," Reinert said. "I have a full-time job and I'm happy with it."

His friend, Biehl, once gave it a shot. He moved to Las Vegas in 1998 to try his hand at professional poker. "Oh, it was very short career," he said. "I lost everything pretty quick."

Realities like that give others pause. Despite how it seems on TV, the odds of winning big in poker are slim and the risk is po-

tentially high. Of the 5,619 competitors in the 2005 WSOP, only the top 560 contestants win \$12,500 or more. Only the top nine entrants win \$1 million or more. The remaining 5,059 people walk away \$10,000 poorer.

"It's a great thing for ESPN; it's a bad thing for society," said Karl Sloezen, the owner of the Brentwood Billiard Club in Wayne. "And you're talking to a professional gambler."

Not only does poker take players away from billiards, said Sloezen, but he worries that its popularity among college-age students will spark an epidemic of gambling addictions.

"It'll create a whole new generation of degenerates," he said, "and no one needs any more of those."

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