America’s game? Try poker

By Glenn C. Altschuler, Globe Correspondent | November 8, 2009

Although the latest edition of The New Oxford American Dictionary doesn't include the terms "flop," "hold 'em," or "Omaha," poker, by most accounts, has become one of America's favorite games. Invented 200 years ago in New Orleans, James McManus explains that what began as "The Cheating Game" embodies our fascination with "risk, initiative, and democratic opportunity." "Poker thinking" extends into law, military and diplomatic strategy, business, the Internet, and artificial intelligence.

A sequel of sorts to "Positively Fifth Street," McManus' account of his fifth place finish in The World Series of Poker, "Cowboys Full" is a deal-me-in delight. Starting with a sweeping survey of the history of the game and its role in American culture, McManus ends with a smart, insiders' analysis of how poker has been - and should be - played.

The book is stuffed with anecdotes. "Crooked Nose" Jack McCall, an "unimposing local," McManus suggests, shot Wild Bill Hickok through the back of his Prince Albert frock coat while he was playing "high draw" in a Deadwood saloon. The reason? The legendary lawman had relieved McCall of $110 at the poker table and then condescendingly offered to buy him breakfast. Holding aces and eights, known ever after as "The Dead Man's Hand," Wild Bill may have had a nine of diamonds as his kicker. Convicted of murder and hanged, his killer was buried with the noose around his neck.

Though he knows it's apocryphal, McManus also passes along an account of Nick "the Greek" Dandalos, taking a break from a marathon poker game to give Albert Einstein a tour of Las Vegas. Meet "Little Al from Princeton," Nick told local gamblers. He "controls lotta the action 'round Jersey."

McManus argues that poker prepared presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Obama for the game of diplomacy, where luck, deceit, and calculating costs and benefits are essential, information is always incomplete, and the best hand doesn't always win. Bluffs, re-raises, and smart lay downs, moreover, were at the heart of Cold War "game theory" developed in the 1940s by mathematician John von Neumann and economist Oskar Morgenstern.

As the nuclear arms race threatened to spin out of control, McManus reminds us, von Neumann and Morgenstern made the counterintuitive assumption that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would launch a first strike as long as their leaders knew that the other would retaliate with full force. Branded by some as "inhuman," the doctrine of "mutually assured destruction" apparently made von Neumann a model for Stanley Kubrick's mad scientist in the movie "Dr. Strangelove." It almost certainly persuaded Nikita Khrushchev to fold his hand during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Beyond its importance as a model and metaphor for American culture, society, and politics, "Cowboys Full" demonstrates, poker is fascinating in its own right. And, ever since Holocaust survivor Henry Orenstein invented a table with glass panels through which cameras could reveal hole cards, it has exploded in popularity as a cable TV spectator sport, making celebrities out of Doyle "Texas Dolly" Brunson, Phil "The Poker Brat" Hellmuth, Chris "Jesus" Ferguson, and Phil Ivey, the game's Tiger Woods.

Viewers favor tournament hold 'em, McManus points out, because it strikes a better balance between exposed and hidden cards than seven-card stud. And they love the "no limit" version, in which players can push their chips "all-in" at any time.

Acknowledging that "it's absurd to deny that skill is the dominant factor in poker," McManus shows that "mastering the luck" sets poker apart from other games of chance. Although luck is not relevant in the long run, the short run can last for quite a while.

In no-limit, single elimination competitions, where the antes keep increasing and a rank amateur can force a seasoned pro who has no clue about his opponent's style of play to risk his tournament life by going "all-in" on a single hand, Lady Luck often finds a seat at the table.

At the main event of the World Series of Poker in 2003, McManus reports, Chris Moneymaker, an aptly named accountant from Tennessee, outlasted 839 players to win the title and $2.5 million with "the bluff of the century." Ever since, with thousands of players on hand, many of them beneficiaries of cheap, on-line contests to win the $10,000 buy-in, poker's elite has been obscured in the shuffle.
Although no-limit hold 'em is more complex than chess, McManus predicts that in the not-too-distant-future, a computer “with killer apps,” scrutinizing all permutations, combinations, psychology, and past performances will be able to defeat any players, skilled or unskilled. After all, “the best bots” never “get tired or intoxicated, never need a bathroom break, never go on tilt.” They can vary their patterns of play better than human beings, whose “brains are hardwired to see patterns.” And they never exhibit facial tics or other “tells.”

Artificial intelligence might even drive poker completely off-line. To real places, with potato chips, pretzels, a brew or two, green felt, and “humans only” action. Right where it belongs.

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