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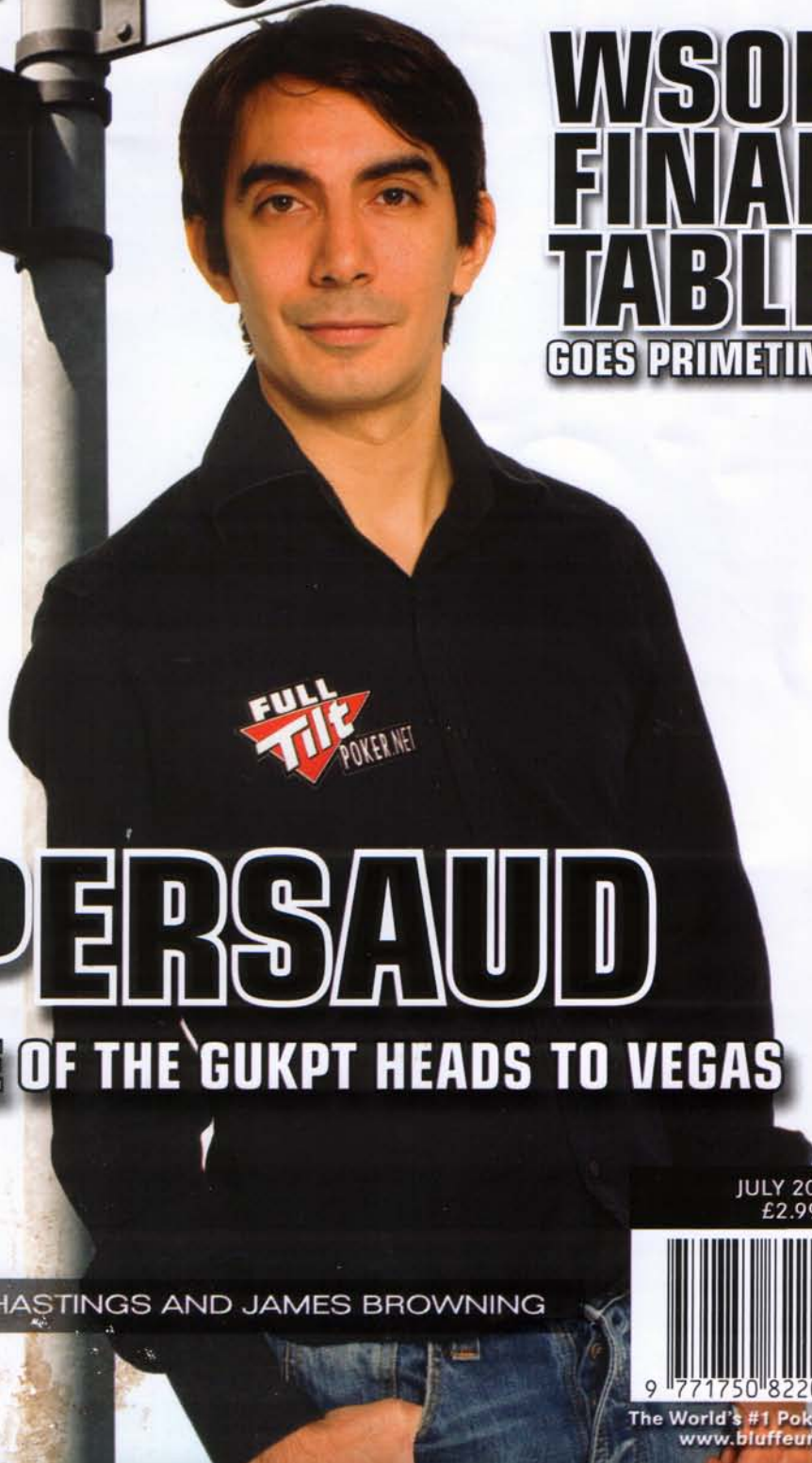
EUROPE

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VEGAS

**WSOP
FINAL
TABLE**
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IS THE MONEY
GOING OUT OF
HOLD'EM?



NIK PERSAUD

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JERRY YANG, BRIAN HASTINGS AND JAMES BROWNING

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PRO-file: James Browning

Sky Poker's James Browning is a gambler extraordinaire – this former European backgammon champion, professional blackjack player, stock trader and cash game poker player is now a successful tournament poker player, and is imparting his extensive knowledge to us through SkyPoker. Bluff caught up with him to reflect on one helluva life.

James, how did you become a gambler?

I used to be an entertainer back in the Seventies – a comedian and impressionist, touring the working men's clubs, nightclubs and theatres of the UK. I was up in Leeds and I met this comedian who asked me if I played backgammon. I said I did, and so we played. I lost. We played again. I lost. In fact, I lost and lost and lost. He wouldn't play me for me money because he said I couldn't play. I said, "Yes, I can!" He said "No you can't."

So I went away and found some books and seriously read up on the game. Then I saw an ad in the paper for the Amateur Championships of Great Britain, so I trudged off down to London to play. I lost my first round – and obviously thought I was unlucky – so I asked the organiser, a well-to-do stockbroker called Stephen Raphael, where else I could play backgammon in London. He said, "Crockfords." So I went down there to this grand casino, and because I'd been sent by Stephen Raphael, they showed me around all the stately rooms with their chandeliers, and at the end of the tour they asked me if I wanted to join. I said "Yes," and they said, "That'll be 26 Guineas." I thought, "Oh God!"

But this was my only chance to join, so I did. At Crockfords I saw all these great backgammon players, and I realised very quickly that I still didn't really know how to play, so I just sat and watched. They asked me if I wanted to play and I said, "Well, no, I'm terrible." So they gave me a head start to begin with, and eventually I learnt to hold my own. I began playing more than I was entertaining, and became reasonably good. I was getting a little disillusioned with the entertainment business and, bit by bit, backgammon took over and I began making good money. I travelled around playing tournaments in all these glamorous locations, like Monte Carlo and St Tropez,

and eventually, in 1984, I became the European Champion.

Was there a lot of money in backgammon in those days?

Yes, there was. Casinos would put on backgammon tournaments to attract people to the casino, just like the poker tours do now. And there were some really big events. It's tailed now, though. I think it suffers from the fact that it's a heads up game. Whereas the poker boom has been fired by the internet, online backgammon sites have to charge too high a rake because there are only two players per table – it makes it hard to be a long term winner, whereas poker has room for winners. The online sites need to be happy with their edge on their slot machines and accept they can't make much money from backgammon. It's the only way to encourage players. Although it's the world's oldest game – it was invented in Persia 5,000 years ago – I can't quite see the backgammon revolution taking place quite yet.

A lot of backgammon players have, like you, made the transition from backgammon to poker, haven't they?

Yes, and I think the connection is very,



very strong. After I won the European Championships, I went to New York to play, where there was a very big backgammon scene. I went to the famous Mayfair Club, and that's where I met Erik Seidel. And people like Dan Harrington, Jason Lester and Howard Lederer were part of that scene before they became poker players. Later, you have players like Gus Hansen, Phil Laak and Mads Andersen making the transition. What backgammon teaches you is to have a very good understanding of value and I think that's what's helped me with my poker. I've always been a very good money player. In

backgammon you have to understand when to double and when to take, and it's all down to value. When you see Gus Hansen make an amazing call and you think, "How can he call with that?" I think it's his backgammon brain clicking in. He's thinking, "This may look strange but I've got value."

When you take a double in backgammon, if there are no gammons around, you're always behind, but you can afford to take it even if you only have a 25% chance of winning it. It may not look like a clever play, but it's still mathematically correct.

Are you more of a cash game poker player than a tournament player?

Well, I used to be, but this year I've been travelling around a bit and I've already made seven ranking finals, so I'm very pleased about how that's going.

What mistakes do you think players who are used to playing tournaments make when they sit down at the cash games?

They forget that they can actually wait. They can be very selective because the blinds aren't going up. As a result, they

tend to make swashbuckling moves, which may be correct in a tournament, but in a cash game is simply an overplay. Suddenly a brilliant play becomes a very foolish play and they're only going to get the wrong customers. There are a lot more traps in a cash game. I know lots of people who are pretty good tournament players and pretty bad cash game players.

So how did you become a poker player?

Well, first, I started playing blackjack. Someone told me I'd be very good at it –

The thing about blackjack – and this something very important for a poker player to understand – is that you can make the correct play and still lose. This is a very difficult concept for people to accept.

he could tell from the way I played backgammon. I had an enormous respect for this guy's game so I took him seriously. He taught me all sorts about blackjack and I started to travel the world playing. This was the mid-Eighties and, at that time, poker tournaments were appearing in the casinos. I'd pretend I was going for the tournament, but in reality, I couldn't wait to get knocked out and hit the blackjack tables. Because I used to be an impressionist, I would have fun and games at the tables, doing all sorts of funny voices – I turned the whole thing into a cabaret show, and it

was very hard for anyone to believe that I could be a clever player when I was larking around so much. The problem is, though, if you're any good, you're going to get barred.

The thing about blackjack – and this something very important for a poker player to understand – is that you can make the correct play and still lose. This is a very difficult concept for people to accept. You can make the right play and lose and lose, but if you make it in the long run, you will win. This mindset informed all my gambling thinking.

You were a trader on the US stock exchange too...

Someone who knew me as a blackjack player approached me and said he wanted me to trade options for him. I said, "Well, I don't know anything about it." He said, "It

doesn't matter. You understand value and that's all you need. We can teach you."

They offered me a deal where they put up all the money and I got 50% of the profit and I couldn't refuse. I went to America and became a trader, but my timing was somewhat off. I was the last trader to join before the crash in 1987. I was playing a dead market, which was terrible, so I packed it all in, went off to Atlantic City and started to play blackjack – I felt a lot better.

From Atlantic City I went to Vegas, where I played a little poker, and, in 1990, I came back to the UK and began playing 7-Card Stud. There was a very big Pot Limit game up in Newcastle, in which I played and I did well. And then we found the game of Hold'em. I think the casino was wondering what to do to attract customers, so we decided to run a Hold'em tournament every week. It took off. That's how the North East discovered Hold'em (laughs).

How did you get into TV presenting?

I think I saw an advert for Poker Night Live. Something just made me contact them. I went to London to see them and got on so well with the producer, he said, "Do a trial tonight. Just join the presenter." He put me straight on, and I guess it worked, because they asked me back.

Poker Night Live was great fun. All the people who joined it, from the presenters to the camera guys, were just an amazing bunch of people. It was quite touching how so many people were sad when it finished.

I didn't pursue presenting when it finished, but someone asked me to go on Sky Poker as a guest player, then a guest analyst, and now I'm full-time, which is great. I guess it satisfies two things. Somewhere deep down there's still an entertainer inside me – I don't think you lose that – but also, I'm a gambler and a player.

What next, James?

Well, I've just got a sponsorship deal with BlackpoolClubPoker.com – it's actually a new skin on the iPoker network. I'm very pleased to be involved with these guys, because iPoker is the fastest growing network in the world at the moment – they're number four in the world, and this is just in one year. They're going to be massive. It's a great way to learn the game as well – they have a fantastic hand history system – you just click a button and there it is, presented really clearly – and that's a very important learning tool. It's just a great, lively network which is constantly improving itself. I'm very happy to be associated with these guys. ■