

## ADVENTURES OF A POKER DAD



The author (right)  
with Roy, Kevin  
and Mike at NLOP  
headquarters

### *Poker for Prizes, 'Advergaming' And Some Crazy New Games*

**I'M A HUGE BASEBALL FAN.** I wasn't around when my favorite team, The Cincinnati Reds (originally known as The Cincinnati Red Stockings), and seven other teams formed the National League of Baseball Clubs (subsequently known as simply the National League) in February of 1876. However, I was around in June of 2006 when the National League of Poker (NLOP) was born. This fledgling site offered the opportunity for folks to play poker for free to accumulate points, which could be parlayed into prizes, including seats to poker's biggest stage...the main event. I played on the site in those early days and suffered through a lot of sys-

## Zen and the Art of Marketing Poker

### National League of Poker Site Thriving Despite UIGEA

by John Blowers

tem crashes. I even wrote about the site in my first novel, *Life on Tilt*. Today, NLOP boasts more than 250,000 members, including recently appointed spokesman Mike Sexton, and has added cash tournaments and a VIP membership option.

I recently traveled to Boston to meet with the leadership of NLOP. I arrive at a renovated mill operation just outside of town and I'm greeted by Mike Miner,

promotions manager for NLOP. He escorts me through the stately corporate headquarters. OK, it's not that stately, but it is quite nice for a young company and the staff is friendly and passionate about poker and NLOP's role in the game.

I interview Michael Clebnick, NLOP's chief operating officer, to learn more about their operation, what exactly "advergaming" is and the new variations

of poker the site has recently introduced to the online poker community.

**Poker Pro:** *The poker world recently celebrated, or mourned, the two-year anniversary of the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (UIGEA). Many poker sites lost out when this happened, however, NLOP flourished. Why?*

**NLOP:** The law created winners and losers. Operations based in the UK agreed to shut down U.S. players, but other sites based elsewhere didn't. There remains a possibility of U.S. players never seeing money from their site if banks start enforcing the law. In order for a site to be considered gambling, there has to be consideration, chance and prize. NLOP removes the consideration element.

**Poker Pro:** *Since there is no consideration, doesn't this dilute the level of skill involved?*

**NLOP:** When the UIGEA was signed into law, we did some research and discovered 80 percent of the people playing at PartyPoker hadn't deposited a dime. They just wanted to play poker for fun. We thought: How much fun is poker when there's nothing at stake? So we created our patent-pending point system, which ultimately rewards a more skillful player in the long run.

**Poker Pro:** *What differentiates NLOP from other poker membership sites, such as ClubWPT, PurePlay, PrizeWagon, SpadeClub, etc.?*

**NLOP:** First, we own our software, which is a tremendous advantage when it comes to making adjustments and responding to member suggestions. Second, our system is easier to understand than the others in this space. We've heard from many members the other systems are complicated and confusing.

**Poker Pro:** *What is "advergaming?"*

**NLOP:** Advergaming is the concept of blending gaming and advertising. At NLOP, we felt we could create an opportunity for sponsors to get involved with

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content. In this case, poker was the content. Think about it. Poker has approximately 80 percent downtime. This is a tremendous opportunity to monetize the content and understand the players better through surveys and other methods. This creates tailored advertising that connects the player to the vendors who offer the products and services they are interested in.

**Poker Pro:** *But isn't all this advertising distracting and annoying to the player who just wants to play some casual poker and try to freeroll into the World Series of Poker?*

**NLOP:** Certainly not all ads are interesting to all players, which is one of the reasons we created a VIP membership. For \$19.95, VIP members are exempted from ads and eligible for bigger prize payouts. About 7 percent of our members have elected to do this since we started offering this option late last year.

**Poker Pro:** *NLOP was recently acquired by Zen Gaming. Tell me how that came about.*

**NLOP:** NLOP was originally a pink sheet company, then we started down the path of exploring an IPO in early 2008, but the venture capital market went dark. There were zero IPOs in the second quarter of 2008. So we started looking elsewhere for partners and discovered Zen Gaming, a private group based in Las Vegas. They have a division called New Poker, which has been developing new variations of poker. You should talk to them about their operation.

Being the dutiful journalist, I decide to endure a visit to Las Vegas to meet with the leaders of Zen Gaming/New Poker. And if a poker game happens to break out, I won't get out of the way. The week after my visit to NLOP HQ, I find myself at Treasure Island sitting across a poker table from Vincent Zaldivar, president of Zen Gaming/New Poker, and Mike Sexton, spokesman for NLOP.

**Poker Pro:** *Mike, you are widely regarded as the ambassador of poker. What attracted you to NLOP?*

**Mike:** I saw tremendous potential in what they are doing. Their structure appeals to the recreational player who finds the skill level of free sites unappealing. Poker is boring when there's nothing at risk. I think this will introduce many more players to the game.

**Poker Pro:** *You've played in some of the biggest tournaments against the world's best players. Now that you've also had a chance to play at NLOP, how do you find the quality of play there?*

**Mike:** Certainly it's not at the level of the World Poker Tour or other major events, but it's a competitive brand of poker. The players there (at NLOP) are serious about the game.

**Poker Pro:** *It's widely known you were a pioneer in online gaming at PartyPoker. With all the recent scandals, regular accusations of collusion and the seemingly unenforceable Internet gaming law, what do you see as the future of online poker?*

**Mike:** It needs to be regulated and licensed, just like any other industry. It's clear self-regulation isn't working. While these new measures won't eliminate scandals in the future, it will provide the mechanism to take violators out of the market.

**Poker Pro:** *Vince, tell me about Zen Gaming and New Poker.*

**Vince:** I founded New Poker two years ago and we currently have two games

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patented. One of them is played in Vegas at Treasure Island. It's called No River Hold'em and involves three hole cards for the players, the normal flop and turn. But there's no river.

**Poker Pro:** *Sounds like a hybrid between Omaha and hold'em. I tried to play the game here the other night, but it wasn't being spread.*

**Vince:** We're still going through the acceptance phase for the game. It's available at a half dozen casinos so far and we're looking forward to exclusively offering the players at NLOP the opportunity to play the game.

**Mike:** I think it can be very popular... the players get to see more flops and the hands move along quicker.

**Poker Pro:** *I read about another game New Poker is ready to launch. It sounded like pinochle poker from what I remember. (Mike laughs)*

**Vince (also laughing):** Well, sort of. It's called Royal Hold'em and it's played with 20 cards, just the tens through aces. Obviously, the action can get pretty crazy. It's currently played at O'Sheas

on the Strip. [Editor's note: As of January, both No River Hold'em and Royal Hold'em are being exclusively offered at *nlop.com*.]

**Poker Pro:** *Besides expanding NLOP's roster of games, are there any plans to expand their geographic reach? Right now the membership is exclusively U.S. and Canada.*

**Mike:** Latin America could be next. NLOP has proprietary software and Spanish is one of the easier languages to translate.

**Poker Pro:** *I learned about advergaming while visiting the team in Boston. Are any companies off limits?*

**Vince:** When it comes to alcohol or tobacco companies, we're keeping the door open. Although, we'll need to limit tournament registration based on age. We also are governed by the Nevada Gaming Commission. Therefore, no adult or porno sites are allowed. There's no gray area here.

**Mike:** And, of course, we're not open to other poker sites advertising with us.

**Poker Pro:** *Speaking of other sites, many of them boast of a stable of pros who*

*endorse and play on their sites. Do you see more pros being added to NLOP besides yourself?*

**Mike:** We do plan to add other pros down the road. Interacting with members in a meaningful way is part of the NLOP experience.

**Vince:** I see us taking a look at other celebrities beyond the poker world. For example, we have found mixed martial arts fighters who like to play poker. Last year there was an NLOP promotion with NASCAR drivers.

I asked both the Boston and Vegas teams the same last question.

**Poker Pro:** *What will NLOP be known for in five years?*

**Mike M., NLOP:** America's home for online poker.

**Katie, NLOP Creative Director:** The MySpace of the poker world. Where social networking and online activities will blend with the game of poker.

**Kevin, NLOP CTO:** We will cater to the casual poker player who considers poker entertainment.

**Michael, NLOP COO:** An affinity-based, massive, multi-level gaming environment. Much more than a poker site where gamers can play with like-minded constituents.

**Mike Sexton:** Committed to the players...giving them the best experience they can have in a safe, competitive environment.

**Vince:** It's the marketing engine educating masses about new poker games, while deriving tremendous revenue from advertisers. ♠



*The National League of Poker can be found at [www.nlop.com](http://www.nlop.com). John Blowers is the author of Life on Tilt: Confessions of a Poker Dad ([www.lifeontilt.com](http://www.lifeontilt.com)). You can contact him at [johnblowers@lifeontilt.com](mailto:johnblowers@lifeontilt.com).*