



## HOW A POKER NOVEL BECOMES A FEATURE FILM



# FILMMAKING IS A LOT LIKE POKER

## Three Strikes in the Search for a Bankroll

By John Blowers

**Editor's Note:** This is the seventh in a series chronicling the adventures of John Blowers as he works with a team to develop his novel, *Life on Tilt*, into a feature film. Last issue John found himself on a film set in New Orleans before heading to a major film director's house in L.A. to preview an upcoming feature film while trying to secure a director.

**IT'S A LITTLE AFTER MIDNIGHT** on a recent Saturday and I'm playing poker in the back room of a cigar shop. The game has been going for a few hours. The generous food spread the owner provided has been largely depleted and the players are focusing more on the game as the stacks are getting deeper and the action juicier. Suddenly the owner steps in, stops the game and signals the dealer to step outside. A shouting match ensues and I exchange looks with the other players, most of whom I know only casually through the poker community. Before long, the dealer bursts into the back room and announces the game is over. Fortunately, we are able to cash out and later learn there was a breach of trust regarding the dealer's rake methods and the owner's understanding of how this should work.

Poker is illegal in New York State. As a result, the games are unregulated. There is no governing agency, no rules committee, no court of appeals. Games in Saratoga, New

York (near where I live), are underground and the players have to trust each other (or at least the guy running the game) when they take to the felt.

A few years ago I played in a game with some friends. One of my buddies was losing pretty bad. By the end of the night another of my friends had won his landscaping business and I had gained a \$600 check from the losing friend that bounced twice. I still have the check. I don't still have the friend.

What does this have to do with making a movie? Filmmaking is a lot like poker. Your success is based on relationships, understanding people's motivations, trusting your reads and honoring your word. There aren't a lot of hard and fast rules. When I was more actively connected to the corporate world, I used to get involved in mergers and acquisitions for one of the largest companies in the world. The guy who ran the M&A division famously said, "Once you've seen one deal, you've seen one deal" – imply-

ing that each deal is unique and one can leverage relatively little from one to the next.

This is the challenge with financing a major independent film. There are as many ways to finance a film as there are film projects. You have to trust your money sources and be prepared to work with them over the course of several years. For this installment of our year-long series I'd like to share with you three deals we looked at before finding the right approach.

### SHOOT FIRST, ASK QUESTIONS LATER

I'm in Maryland for a corporate gig when my cellphone rings. "You still have that \$5 million in flash money?" I'm asked. The caller is referring to a practice in the industry where one party gives another access to their bank account so it appears they have more financing secured than they actually do. I reply in the affirmative. "Good. I've got a guy on the other line who can double that for you in the next two weeks."

"Will they throw in some swampland in Florida and the Statue of Liberty?" I cynically reply. He laughs and assures me these guys are the real deal. I take the call and talk

