

Easy come, easy go; easy to get hooked

New generation of gamblers have options online and in casinos

BY SARAH TRANUM

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The game didn't matter. As long as the table was full and the stakes were high, Tony Smith was ready to hang the proverbial open sign outside his parents' garage.

Smith started running illegal games — blackjack was his favorite — when he was just a teen growing up outside Buffalo's city limits, and he accepted cash or trade as an ante.

"I became a kind of pawn shop for those who didn't have the money to get into the games or pay off their debts," he said.

Soon, Smith transitioned from blackjack to poker and was a regular at Casino Niagara, Seneca Niagara and Turning Stone. Online poker filled the time in between.

"I was going to the casino four or more times a week and running my own games at night," he said. "I am a social person and gambling was a social thing for me. Online poker didn't satisfy the social aspects, but it was convenient and allowed me to play any time especially when I didn't have time to get to the casino."

Gambling consumed more and more of his time.

"I could spend 24 to 48 hours straight in a casino," he said.

In one marathon gambling streak, Smith typically dropped several thousand dollars. He made the rounds to casinos across the region competing in poker tournaments and often found himself winning. It was when one of these winning streaks turned sour that Smith began to see that he had a serious gambling problem.

He headed to the casino with \$7,000 and the goal of multiplying his stake, but he quickly found that his luck had run out.

"I lost it all. It was all gone, all of it, and I was crushed. I didn't know what to do".

It is at this point that Smith began to evaluate the time and money he was

spending on his gambling habit and the negative effects it was having on his life.

"It almost broke up my marriage," he said. Now 23 years old, Smith is getting counseling for his compulsive gambling and hasn't stepped inside of a casino (actual or virtual) in over seven months.

"I have a regular job now and am working to create a stable life for my wife and new baby."

Renee Wert, Director of the Jewish Family Services Gambling Recovery Program in Buffalo, saw a 53 percent increase in the number of clients seeking counseling for gambling problems from 2003 to 2004. She believes the jump was largely caused by the emergence of new gaming facilities, including Seneca Niagara and slots at the Hamburg Fairgrounds. Poker's emergence as a TV presence didn't help either, nor did hundreds of new online poker sites.

Wert doesn't distinguish between casino and online gambling as she explains, "there is an overlap between those problem gamblers who are going to the casino and those going online to play."

But she does say that the accessibility and anonymity of Internet gaming will very likely lead to more young people developing compulsive gambling problems.

A study published by the American Psychological Association (APA) found that "a majority of those with Internet gambling experience had the most serious levels of gambling behaviors... Internet gamblers were also more likely to be unmarried and younger than those who never used the Internet for gambling."

The study added that convenience eliminates the need to leave home. Under the guise of doing work, playing a game or just surfing the Net, you can win and lose thousands of dollars and no one would ever know.

Smith knows this as the truth.

"I could spend 7 to 8 hours at a time online playing poker, dropping \$1,000 or more. I didn't need to make excuses to my wife or anyone else for where I had been, like I had to when I spent hours at the casino."

The other danger inherent to online poker is the disconnect between playing a game for fun and playing for real money. Online sites like PokerRoom.com and Pacific Poker are deceptive with interfaces that resemble video games, even though thousands of dollars are often transacted.

And the addiction, Wert said, knows no gender boundaries and faces few preventative measures.

"Women are just as likely as men to be

problem gamblers, but we know that young people are more likely than older people to develop a problem," she said.

"Most people in their teens, 20s and 30s, grew up with drug and alcohol prevention programs in their schools. The potential dangers of these substances were drilled into your brains, but there is no such program for gambling in the schools yet."

Gambling is everywhere.

"Texas No Hold'em is the flavor of the month and everyone is trying it. You can go anywhere, to any bar and find a game. It's not hard to find," Smith said.

Editor's note: Smith's name was changed to protect his identity.

Warning Signs of Gambling Addiction

- Talks only about wins, not losses.
- Gambles more often, for longer periods, for more money.
- Hides gambling losses from family members.
- Lies about gambling directly or by omission.
- Uses gambling as a means to cope.
- Gambling in spite of negative consequences, such as large losses or family problems.
- Unexplained absence of household or personal items.
- Withdrawal from friends or family.
- Started gambling with

groups but now gambles alone.

■ Bored if not gambling — says there is nothing else to do.

■ Gambling is primary form of recreation and socialization.

■ Unsuccessful attempts to cut back or quit.

■ Borrowing money from friends and family.

■ Unable to meet living expenses previously met.

■ Depleting financial reserves: Cashing in savings, retirement, pensions, 401K, IRAs

and

insurance plans to get money to gamble.

■ Gambling on credit: credit cards, bank loan, second mortgages, "kiting" checks.

From National Council on Problem Gambling

To Get Help

With four locations in and around Buffalo, the Jewish Family Service Gambling Recovery Program is available to help those facing a gambling problem. If you think that you or someone you love may have a gambling problem, call them at 1-800-213-2304.

