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Road Gamblers of the 21st Century

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Road Gamblers of the 21st Century

by

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On Friday, April 15, 2011, the U.S. Justice Department unsealed indictments against the most popular American poker websites – Full Tilt Poker, PokerStars and Absolute Poker - effectively shutting down the Internet poker industry in the U.S. This took away a hobby for millions of Americans and for a select few, their livelihood. Internet poker was still being played outside the U.S. and within days of the indictments, 25- year old Fort Worth native Ben Tollerene and other professionals made plans to leave their home to continue their poker careers. This shared a striking similarity with poker players in the 1950s and 1960s that traveled across the southwestern United States playing in underground games. These individuals were known as Road Gamblers who traveled to wherever they could to find action. In 2012, Road Gambling means living overseas and playing on the Internet, but the spirit of this pursuit is exactly the same.

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INTRODUCTION

"It was a violent world, y'know, and I was just a fresh kid. After I got money I started to carry a gun. I used to carry a .38-Special with no hammer, so's you could get it outta your pocket in a hurry. The road was real rough in them days goin' from town to town. You always had to worry about hijackers and the Rangers. All those Road Gamblers and thieves and cheaters. You have to know them cheaters in advance. I got me a rundown on most of 'em. They never slipped up on the blind side of me."

- *Inaugural World Series of Poker Champion Johnny Moss on his time as a Road Gambler in the 1960s*

January 2, 2012

Ben Tollerene was exhausted. Fifteen hours of travel had left him depleted and run down. The 25-year-old had crossed six time zones, switched planes three times, seen the inside of four different international airports and eaten "food" that various stewardesses swore had some measure of nutrition, although he wasn't totally buying it.

En route to his final destination, Tollerene had only one fear: customs officials. The kid from the Fort Worth, Texas suburbs had experienced the hospitality of these foreign gatekeepers and the memories weren't pleasant. On one occasion he had been interrogated for several hours while customs agents tried to determine what

he was really up to. If he hadn't possessed multiple documents proving his identity they might have never let him go, or worse yet, sent him back to America. Having learned the value of these papers, Tollerene traveled with his Texas driver's license, the deed to his home in Mansfield, Texas, bank statements and more.

When he disembarked he immediately started looking for those customs officials and wondering what terrors awaited him. Fortunately, an agent ushered him through with nothing more than a stamp on his passport and a "I hate this job as much as you think I do" glare.

Exiting, Tollerene realized just how small this international airport was. He wouldn't use the word "international" to describe it. It wasn't that much bigger than the municipal airport near his hometown.

He flagged a taxi and crammed his luggage into the dingy yellow cab. Its terms and conditions were prominently displayed in English, though he didn't bother reading it. After 15 hours of travel, the only thing on his mind was a hot shower.

First impressions are everything and while the exterior of his rented villa had all the trappings of a first class European residence, the interior was crumbling like the Greek economy. After setting his bags down and claiming a room, he went to the bathroom for a glorious post-travel shower that would hopefully put an end to the

stink following him. As he turned on the shower his spirits sank. The faucet signaled that his adventurous day was not yet over: The liquid was the same color as sludge.

“This isn’t what I thought it was going to be like,” he said.

For a kid who grew up outside Fort Worth (aka “Cowtown, Texas”), and on his first trip outside of North America, the island nation of Malta may not have been the best choice.

The island archipelago, where Tollerene was forced to move, is in the Mediterranean Sea almost 60 miles from Sicily, nearly 180 miles from Tunisia and 1508 miles from his tidy family house in Fort Worth, Texas. The U.S. government had basically exiled him there, not as part of a CIA probe into rocky island nations or as an ambassador of goodwill, but rather, because it was one of the few places left where he was free to play the game he loves:

High-stakes, million-dollar Internet poker.

Ben Tollerene is an unassuming guy. At 5-foot-9 inches tall, with closely cropped black hair, he doesn't stand out. But when players see his Internet poker screen name - Bttech86 - they take notice. Tollerene has made a name for himself over the last seven years as one of the most gifted Internet players in the world and with a bankroll in excess of \$2.5 million it is easy to see why. This gift had made him richer

than he could have ever imagined – until Black Friday left him temporarily unemployed.

On Friday, April 15, 2011, the U.S. Justice Department unsealed indictments against the most popular American poker websites – Full Tilt Poker, PokerStars and Absolute Poker - effectively shutting down the Internet poker industry in the U.S. In 2010, it was estimated that more than 6 million people in the United States played poker online for real money at least once a month, according to pokerresearch.com. These indictments took a hobby away for some and left others, including Tollerene, without a way to earn a living.

Poker was about more than just cards for Tollerene, it was what made him special – and what made him millions. He decided to leave the country: Internet poker still was being played outside the U.S. and within days of the indictments, he and other poker professionals across the country made plans to leave their homes to continue their poker careers. As long as Ben was outside the United States and used a non-U.S. bank account, he still could play online.

Right now, Tollerene and his cohorts have resuscitated the lifestyle of a bygone era – that of The Road Gambler.

In the 1950s and 1960s, legends such as Amarillo Slim, Doyle Brunson and Johnny Moss traveled the southern United States looking for high-stakes games in every bar, brothel, and backroom from New Orleans to Los Angeles. They were forced to move, staying one step ahead of the law, always on the hunt for some new action. That almost romanticized world gave way to the modern emergence of poker in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s – when the game moved out of the back rooms and

into huge casinos, televised tournaments and the highly popular World Series of Poker. Serious, big money poker went mainstream – no longer a shadowy, smoke filled game in hidden parlors. And, of course, like many things in the modern age, it crept onto the Internet.

Flash forward to 2012: With Internet poker in the United States effectively shut down, it was as if the serious players were going back to the future – just like the old days in the 1950s, the players had to hit the road in search of a game. This time, though, being a “road gambler” means traveling the world in pursuit of some action. Tollerene and other modern poker professionals have traded a car for a plane as they scour the far reaches of the world looking for a place to play.

From Thailand to Canada to Malta, the new era road gamblers are again playing in front of a computer – not around a green felt table stacked high with brightly colored chips.

Welcome to 21st Century Road Gambling. Welcome to Road Gambling 2.0.

“I was upset and kind of scared and angry at the government or the Department of Justice, because I don’t like being restricted,” Tollerene said one day while reflecting on the rollercoaster ride he’s been on the last year. “I don’t like the government telling me I can’t play a card game with a consenting adult, so I was very mad.”

Full Tilt Poker, PokerStars, Absolute Poker and their respective CEOs were accused of bank fraud, money laundering and operating an illegal gambling operation. As each company tried to sort out a deal with the Department of Justice, it became apparent that Full Tilt Poker did not have enough money on hand to “cash out” each player – pay them their account balance. Everyone who played on Full Tilt, PokerStars and Absolute Poker had a personal account where they could manage their funds. Similar to an online bank account, players used the money to participate in online games. The account fluctuated depending on how the player used the funds and whether he or she won. However, each player usually could “cash out” whenever he or she wanted and Full Tilt Poker would pay him or her the balance of his or her account. Poker websites, similar to games played at brick and mortar casinos, profit by taking a percentage of each cash game pot called “the rake,” and by charging entry fees for tournaments. Players were under the impression that the money in their accounts still was there, but when the news of Black Friday hit, all Full Tilt players wanted their money and Full Tilt’s pockets were empty.

Tollerene, like so many others, believed there was no risk in leaving large sums of money in his Full Tilt player account. Before Black Friday happened he had approximately \$400,000 in his Full Tilt account – which represented a portion of his substantial bankroll. Neither he nor anyone else has received their money from Full Tilt. American players are owed an estimated \$150 million from the site, according to the U.S. Attorney’s office. “A lot of players had money in their accounts. There was no reason to believe there was risk, because they had always gotten paid,” said Mark

Hichar, an attorney specializing in gaming law at the Boston firm of Hinckley, Allen & Snyder where he advises clients involved with the gaming industry.

Whether Full Tilt was a global Ponzi scheme or simply run by people with incredibly low business acumen has yet to be determined. Full Tilt has been in negotiations to be sold to several companies – it's widely believed that any deal with the U.S. Department of Justice must include a refund of all player money – although the negotiations have faced numerous problems and no agreement has been reached. Meanwhile, a class-action lawsuit was filed in Nevada on April 13, 2012, against poker superstars and Full Tilt co-owners Howard Lederer and Chris “Jesus” Ferguson, alleging they participated in the scheme that left Full Tilt players unpaid.

The U.S. Internet poker industry no longer existed, forcing Ben Tollerene to embrace the past if poker was to be his future.

TEXAS, SOMETIME IN THE 1960s

In a farmhouse outside Austin, Texas, Doyle Brunson sat among a group of his fellow Road Gamblers playing high stakes. The game was considered “big” for those days, and with a minimum buy-in of \$1,000, it still sounds pretty big for some players in 2012. This was part of the “Texas Circuit,” an unofficial name for a series of high-stakes card games played all over the Southwest. The games were dangerous because the money attracted cheaters, thieves and in some cases, stone-cold killers. Card gambling was illegal outside of Las Vegas, but the Texas Circuit presented legends like Brunson, Amarillo Slim, and Johnny Moss a chance to win big.

When you see him today on ESPN’s coverage of the World Series of Poker, Brunson’s old face seems lined with the mythic past of poker. From the cowboy hat to his southern drawl, Brunson seems to have stepped into Las Vegas from another time. At 74, he is the Babe Ruth of poker, someone who helped move the backroom game into the realm of mass popularity.

His high stakes games were often vulnerable to robbers. Because there was often thousands of dollars on the table, Brunson once said that robbers “were an occupational hazard.” And when seven men stormed the Texas card house like a SWAT team, breaking down doors and windows, brandishing shotguns, the fear was real. The masked men herded Brunson and the other gamblers against the wall, emptied their pockets, and forced them to pull their pants down. Being almost 300 pounds and a former college basketball player for Hardin Simmons University in

Abilene, Texas, Brunson was singled out. They knocked him around, causing blood to trickle down his forehead – right where the butt of the gun had been violently introduced. They stole almost \$7,000 from Brunson and proved that even a legend can be caught with his pants down. It was a long way from the “safety” of playing alone, in a room at your home, in another round of online poker.

IN HINDSIGHT IT MAKES SENSE

Tollerene is unusual; gifted people typically are. They are singularly focused. They don't view the world the way anyone else does and are fine with that. Their innate ability defines everything about them. They have something the rest of us don't. Whether it is the ability to drive a golf ball a mile off the tee, dunk a basketball or play 10 different hands of high stakes poker at the same time – these abilities are not common. In fact, these talents take years to nurture and bring to maturity. Some see that commitment and call it addiction; others see a competitive desire to be the best. Tollerene approaches his poker career like that of a committed CEO. He keeps meticulous records, studies poker theory and does whatever it takes to get an advantage.

When Ben's father Gary visited him in Toronto, Gary asked Ben's roommate and fellow professional Luke Staudenmeier, if he was as good as Ben was. Luke laughed and politely confirmed what Gary expected – that Ben was the superior player. "He told me that Ben keeps a record of every hand he has ever played and while other guys are at the ba Ben studies those hands to learn what he did right or wrong," Gary said. That kind of work ethic and singular focus is part of the gift that enables him to do live this bizarre, exciting lifestyle.

Unfortunately, Ben's gift has not always made life easy for him as he struggled to adapt his "go it alone" mentality with his peers or more importantly, with his parents. Fighting with them over finishing college, or playing underground poker in shady parts of town, or moving to another country for a card game, Ben consistently

does what he thinks is best because he feels strongly about his gift. “I did pretty bad in school with teachers and got into a lot of trouble and have never been great at being told what to do... I had a lot of confidence in poker and figured it out real quick that I was going to be playing poker (for a career),” Ben said.

Tollerene’s parents were certainly not inveterate gamblers – and he didn’t really know gamblers growing up. Tollerene was born December 20, 1986, at Whidbey Island Naval Air Station Hospital in Washington. Gary and Cathy Tollerene were excited to give 18-month-old Jay a little brother. When Gary took a job with the defense contractor General Dynamics, the Tollerenes relocated to Mansfield just outside of Fort Worth.

As a child, Ben showed a profound, borderline freakish aptitude for numbers and games with a strategic component. “I had no idea that he was going to be a poker player, but in hindsight when you reflect back on the things he did as a kid, it makes you realize that he had something different going on upstairs,” his father said.

It was not unusual for Gary to wake up on a Saturday morning and find his three-year-old son with *The Dallas Morning News* or *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* spread across the living room floor and examining the Texas Rangers baseball box score from the night before. Even though he was still unable to read, Ben knew what an RBI was and how a batting average was calculated.

Ben understood what the letters represented and was able to tell his dad the earned run average for his favorite pitchers. He could understand the numbers and the fractions and he stayed really passionate about analyzing baseball box scores through kindergarten. The only thing matching Ben's love of numbers was a budding sense of competition. Regardless of the game or sport, Ben was intent on winning.

"I knew he had a knack for numbers just because he understood that stuff at an early age," Gary said. "As he got through elementary school, especially in the third grade, I got a call from his third grade teacher who told me, 'Mr. Tollerene we have a problem with Ben.'"

The teacher was concerned that Ben had been winning too much at a class game called "Around the World." The teacher sits at the front of the classroom holding up flashcards with math problems, two students stand at their desks and the first student to state the answer wins and continues standing to compete against the next child. When the class played the game Ben stood and never sat down.

"I told Mrs. Eidson, 'what you've got to do is challenge him,'" Gary said. "He and his mother have been practicing his ABCs and counting to 10 in Spanish, make him do it in Spanish."

The teacher agreed. When she called Gary back the next day, the teacher made Ben answer the questions in Spanish. Still, none of the other students could beat him.

When he was six, Ben approached his father about chess. Gary taught him the basics. Ben was obsessed with the game and its nuances. He spent hours studying chess and reading books from the library to better understand the game's intricacies. "We kept a chess game going all the time – it sat on the coffee table in the living room – whenever you walked by it you made your move," Gary said. "There was a piece of paper that said Dad or Ben and you turned it over to tell whose turn it was." By the time Ben was 10 he always beat his father. "He knew what all the famous chess moves were," Gary said.

As Ben progressed, he started playing against the computer and for the first time in his young life he was stumped. "My dad likes to talk about how when I was young I would try to beat the computer chess game, only to run out of the computer room crying because I couldn't win," Ben said.

Paintball was another competitive outlet for Ben who enjoyed playing on the weekends. "He just kicked everybody's butt, not because he was necessarily a great shot, but because he was mindful of the strategic element," Gary said.

"I have always been extremely competitive," Ben said, "I hate losing at anything."

Throughout his childhood, Ben's parents addressed that sense of competition by encouraging him to be happy that he had tried his best. "We always told him that if he played the best that he could, that was good enough," Gary said. "He was always extremely hard on himself."

When Ben entered middle school in 1998 it was apparent that Ben had serious talent in computer games, primarily those with a strategic component. Diablo – a role-playing game where a warrior battles otherworldly creatures to rid the world of the villain Diablo – and the military strategy game Starcraft, hooked him the same way that chess had earlier.

"When we got older I started to see, what was then, an indescribable skill that he had," said his brother Jay Tollerene, a 26-year old Fort Worth software developer. "He had the ability to think and act quickly and the ability to adapt to an opponent."

The brothers played soccer with other kids around the neighborhood, got into trouble together, and shared a room until Jay started high school. Whenever the brothers played computer games together or with friends, Ben annihilated all other participants. "I don't think I have ever beat him at any computer game," Jay said.

For all intents and purposes, they grew up the same way that every other kid in a Texas suburb did, but Ben was different. Ben was gifted. His elementary school teacher Mrs. Eidson had seen it in the classroom, his father had seen it on Saturday

mornings and on the chessboard, and his brother had felt the friendly teasing from buddies for having a younger brother who proved he was better than they were every day after school in computer games. The “indescribable skill” or “gift” Jay had seen continued to manifest itself in interesting ways, good and bad.

BULLIES, UNDERGROUND POKER AND HIGH SCHOOL

“For Ben, a lot of his problems had to do with the fact that he didn’t really hit puberty until later,” Gary said.

Like many kids, Ben was a victim of bullying. Ben had a rough time finding his place. For somebody who was smart and had a penchant for winning, high school left a bitter taste. “It was absolutely miserable. I get a very negative feeling; I get chills driving past the (school) building in my hometown. It was really, really, bad for me,” Ben said.

It seems that many of his problems began early in high school. When he wasn’t beating his brother in video games or practicing something that would help him be dominant, he played soccer. From childhood until high school, Ben played for various club soccer teams in the DFW area, Gary said. When Ben got to high school, he was small and for whatever reason had put on a little weight. He was ultimately cut from the soccer team.

Strangely, Ben is both shy and assertive. Where many high school kids would try to quietly blend in, he stood up for what he believed was right. “In 9th grade when everyone started getting drunk, I thought it was really dumb, and all the cool kids would go get drunk at a party and they’d be telling their stories in our group and I would tell them ‘It just sounds like you’re being really stupid,’” Ben said. “I guess

collectively they kind of used me for someone to make fun of or someone to outcast because I was different than them.”

Ben didn't even eat lunch in the cafeteria. A favorite physics teacher allowed him to eat lunch in his classroom where they would play chess and talk. “I had a really good relationship with him and he was just, I think, he was a child-genius-type person, and maybe the smartest person I've ever known,” Ben said.

Ben says that his high school experience still haunts him. “I think it's kind of lingered with me for a long time and it's something that I've tried to work on, to kind of get rid of or get past, but it has been a work in progress for a long time,” Ben said.

In 2003, during Ben's junior year, word began spreading about poker – it was the beginning of the multimedia phenomenon sweeping the Internet and TV. That year, an amateur player with the poetic name Chris Moneymaker won the World Series of Poker, No-Limit Hold'em Main Event in Las Vegas for \$2.5 million and the coveted gold bracelet awarded to the winner of each World Series event. The World Series is a collection of tournaments; ranging from Pot-Limit Omaha to Seven-Card Stud, culminating in the No-Limit Hold'em Championship known around the world as The Main Event. The best part... nobody knew who Moneymaker was.

This amateur from Tennessee had won a tournament on one of the online sites, PartyPoker.com, that earned him a chance to fly to Las Vegas and be one of 839 people playing in the Main Event. A legend was born – and suddenly there were

countless people around the nation, around the world, who thought they could be instant millionaires just like the former accountant.

“The Moneymaker Effect” is credited with Internet poker’s growth from an \$82 million industry in 2000 to one valued at more than \$4 billion in 2010, according to the American Gaming Association. The fad had even caught on among high school kids who would meet up to play cards for stakes of \$5 or \$10. The Tollerenes allowed Ben and Jay to cover up the pool table with a tabletop and invite their friends over to play. “Ben would usually win all the games and make about \$20 or \$30,” Gary said.

Jay claims that the first few hands of poker Ben ever played were at a friend’s house down the street. Ben and Jay were playing in a hand together and Jay thought he could get one over on his little brother. Nobody knows anyone better than their brother, especially if that “anyone” is their little brother. Jay went all-in – a term used when a player bets all their chips –with good cards knowing that his little brother would think he was bluffing and refuse to back down. As soon as Jay said “all-in” Ben called – agreeing to his brothers all-in bet – and the brothers shoved their chips in the middle of the table. Jay won. He had played Ben like fiddle and knocked him out of the game. “I could tell right then that he was extremely intrigued (by the game),” Jay said.

Over the next few months, Ben played little games here and there. Meanwhile, he often spent his lunch break with a physics teacher who taught him to calculate odds based on the cards showing, the cards in his hand and the total number of cards in the deck. This math is the basic strategic approach to poker.

When Ben turned 16, he earned the great symbol of teenage freedom, a driver's license. A few weeks later, he borrowed his parents' car and promptly disappeared on a Friday evening. His parents couldn't reach him on his phone and nobody knew where he was. "He was gone all night long and his mom and I were really pissed," Gary said.

The next morning, Ben rolled up to the house at 5 a.m. for an epic tongue-lashing from Mom and Dad. "We read him the riot act and told him that he was grounded," Gary said. "He reached in his pocket and pulled out seven \$100 bills and I said, 'Where have you been?' "

Ben had heard of a secret card game in a questionable part of downtown Fort Worth. His parents were blunt – they told him he could be robbed or even killed at a place like that. Ben responded by telling his parents they had no reason to worry: "Dad it's OK, it's where all the Fort Worth cops play. After I take all of their money they walk me to my car."

For the rest of high school, he was able to make \$500 or \$1,000 each weekend at shady poker halls around the city. The easy money and the success made it difficult for Ben to want to do anything else. He was a modest high school student who had a peculiar after-school hobby that enabled him to eat fast food and buy video games with his winnings.

Although Ben was beginning to find his footing in the poker world, his parents still hoped that he would have a more normal high school life and work a typical part-time job.

Little did they know their son would make playing poker his career, and that he would be caught up in the political intrigue surrounding the U.S. government's attempts to regulate one of the most inherently unregulated industries known to man.

JOHN F. KENNEDY AND GEORGE W. BUSH HATE INTERNET POKER

The Wager Wire Act was signed into law in 1961, the result of a relentless effort by U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to pursue and prosecute organized criminals who profited from illegal gambling using telephone and telegraph systems.

Long distance communication may have made America smaller, but it also enabled bookies to take bets on horse races and sporting events in other parts of the country. Gamblers could place their bets locally and learn the results from the national racing wire – an illegal news ticker that published horse racing information for the entire country. This was the primary target of Kennedy’s Wire Act and he was determined to put the gangsters profiting from it behind bars, or, at least decimate their livelihood. In the two years after President John F. Kennedy signed the bill, federal prosecutors secured 288 racketeering convictions, compared with the 45 in 1960.

The Wire Act was successful in attacking the mob in the short term. But, in subsequent years, the federal government used other legislative tools, like the RICO Act passed in 1970 (that enforced greater penalties for those found guilty of organized criminal activities) to go after gambling. By the 21st Century, the Wire Act seemed destined to be remembered as a legislative footnote.

But, in 2000, some prosecutors dusted off the law and used it to zero in on Jay Cohen, a former investment banker and owner of the World Sports Exchange of Antigua – an online sports book that took bets via telephone from the United States. He stood trial for using the telephone and telegraph wires to illegally communicate bets. Customers in the United States would send money to the site via check or wire transfer and place sports bets like they would with a local bookie.

The U.S. Department of Justice charged Cohen and five other gambling executives with violating the old Wire Act. Some plead guilty and some who were managing their gambling operations outside the country chose not to return to the United States. Cohen, who ran his business from Antigua, turned himself in to federal authorities in New York City, hoping to clear his name and usher in a new era for his business. But he underestimated the federal government's resolve.

On February 22, 2002, Cohen was convicted of violating the Wire Act and ordered to serve 21 months in jail and pay a \$5,000 fine. To date, he is the only gambling executive to serve time in prison for violating U.S. law. The often forgotten Wire Act had transformed itself from a legislative relic to a thorn in the side of the new breed of American Internet gamblers. And the feds were moving closer and closer to the big online sites that seemed to be growing larger by the day – driven, in part, by that national mania for poker and all the attendant television coverage of major tournaments. There were bestselling books about poker, movies about poker, and news about celebrities playing poker – and as mainstream Americans took an

interest, and began pouring money into the online sites, it had morphed into a multi-billion-dollar industry.

On October 13, 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act – which made it illegal for banks in America to process transactions to or from poker sites headquartered in countries outside the United States such as France, Great Britain, The Isle of Man and Canada. For U.S. players it was suddenly extremely difficult to get money from a personal bank account onto one of the offshore sites via credit or debit cards – or to get their money back.

Congress had unsuccessfully tried multiple times since the late 1990s to ban online poker but now this new law seemed to have teeth:

Republicans cheered it as a victory for their family values agenda. Some critics said it was shortsighted – and it actually harmed the U.S. economy: “The best estimate I have seen puts the U.S. Internet poker industry at six or seven billion dollars and UIGEA forced a lot of money overseas,” said Martin Owens, who runs a private law practice in California where he specializes in online and interactive gaming law.

When the feds charged Full Tilt Poker, PokerStars and Absolute Poker, four of the nine charges dealt with alleged violations of UIGEA.

WELCOME TO THE DUSTBOWL

A year before the UIGEA, Ben had enrolled at Texas Tech University. He didn't have a passion for education per se, but went because his parents wanted him to. Unlike a large number of freshmen entering Tech, he chose not to live in the dorms and instead roomed with his brother Jay, a Tech junior, in an apartment off campus.

Ben spent that first semester of college playing poker, hanging out with his brother and struggling through computer science, his major. "I barely got through Calculus I and I just didn't have the work ethic for school," Ben said, "So I switched over to finance, knowing my brother had done it and he assured me that it was much easier."

He would often return from lectures and complain about his professors. "I remember listening to him say, 'I am smarter than he is,'" Jay said. Whether Ben was a super genius who couldn't be troubled with the teachings of mere mortals, or a kid just bored with old people telling him what to do, he was about to make his first big step in the world of poker.

Ben started playing on Full Tilt in 2005, his freshman year in college, and while he had some success, it was extremely up and down. He would put money online, play for a week or two, lose it all and then put more money online. But just like chess, the computer games and everything else in his life, he sought out information and leveraged it for success. Ben was a frequent reader of the forums on

twoplustwo.com. A thread on that website contained detailed information about how to manage poker money or “bankroll.” He had bought in on the Internet sites multiple times only to lose his money a few weeks later.

“Once I had that base line of information and once I had that roll, I started making friends in the poker community and we started working together and talking on IRC [instant chat messenger] or whatever we had back then,” Ben said.

Unfortunately, the passage of the 2006 UIGEA legislation meant banks had to process financial transactions differently. Prior to UIGEA, players could use their bank accounts to buy into poker sites the same way they would purchase a song off iTunes or a product off Amazon. After UIGEA it was much more difficult to get money on these sites. Unable to use his bank account, Ben had to get a little clever about how he got his money online.

In the fall of 2006, Ben bought five \$100 Visa gift cards from a Lubbock Albertson’s. He called Full Tilt’s toll-free number, read the Visa gift card numbers to someone on the phone. And, with that act, he had a \$500 bankroll that he could use to play poker.

Over the years, Ben played a mix of Internet and live poker. He greatly preferred playing online and often said he would never, ever have a home in Las Vegas. “It’s actually a really tough place to live,” he said.

For Ben, the Internet provides him several advantages that in-person poker simply doesn't. The new era of professionals had developed their game on the principle of volume. The logic was simple: the more hands that were played, the greater the opportunity to win money. Internet poker allows a player to play a significantly greater amount of hands per hour versus sitting down at a table and having the cards dealt by hand. The computer programs used by the sites cut out dealers, force players to act within a given timeframe and allow the user to play more than one hand at a time. It isn't uncommon for Tollerene to play 10 to 12 hands of poker at one time for a period of eight hours or more. Still, events like the World Series of Poker give online professionals a chance to play for the biggest prize pools against a larger number of recreational players, and most importantly, prestige.

When Ben, a sophomore, returned home from college for Christmas in 2006, he had turned those five Visa gift cards into almost \$32,000 through online play. Over the next year he continued to play on the Internet and at various warehouses, bars, apartments and houses around Lubbock – most of them sketchy. “The games were very uncomfortable, but you knew someone that knew someone and once you got in there it all seemed pretty harmless,” Ben said.

Ben's parents have always supported their children, whether on the youth soccer fields or in their garage where Gary built them highly sophisticated paintball guns, but accepting that Ben was going to be a professional poker player was not easy.

“We were not always fans of his poker playing and told him to get his degree and get a job like a normal person,” Gary said.

He had had “regular” jobs before and really didn’t like them: In high school, Gary had encouraged Ben to get a part-time job at a local Subway fast food restaurant. Ben didn’t like it. It was difficult for him to justify the long hours and minimum wage salary he was earning while he had a gift that few people in the world had. Needless to say, his stint making five-dollar footlongs was short lived. “We tried to get him to get a regular job, but working at Subway for seven dollars an hour didn’t hack it,” Gary said.

Through college, Ben kept playing and winning. The big turning point was his 17th place finish at the 2008 World Poker Tour No-Limit Hold'em Championship Doyle Brunson Classic in Las Vegas. Ben had used some of his online winnings to fly to Las Vegas during Christmas break from Texas Tech to play in the tournament.

The night before the Classic, Ben bought into a live satellite tournament for \$1,000 and played until 5 a.m. where he was one of the 15 finalists given a seat in the high stakes event. Normally, the buy-in would cost a player \$15,000, but because Ben had won that seat, he played in the tournament for only \$1,000.

The long night left him exhausted, but the high stakes opportunity got his adrenaline going. Ben sat down with an irrational confidence and quickly had a moment like

Matt Damon's character from the movie Rounders, where Damon went toe to toe with a poker icon and didn't flinch.

Ben's table assignment had him sitting next to 35-year old poker superstar Phil Ivey – one of the most popular players in the world and winner of eight World Series of Poker events. Ivey has won almost \$15 million playing live tournament poker, according to bluffmagazine.com.

The two did battle and Ben just kept raising him for bigger and bigger stakes. Although they ended up tying and splitting the money on the table, it was one of those personal moments that told him he belonged. "I was just so confident," Ben said.

The 17th place finish out of 101 players won him \$55,000, which validated his skill level to his parents. As Ben neared the end of college he had more than \$350,000 in his bank account. There is only so much that a parent can say to a child whose bank account is nearly bigger than their own.

Talking about it today, Gary and his wife thought they had to let him do what he wanted because he was making so much money. "Eventually, his damn bank account got so big that I had to finally admit that, 'Damn, you really know what you're doing here son,' " Gary said.

Ben had cut a deal with his parents that allowed him to only take nine hours a semester so he could continue focusing on his poker career. The only caveat was that he had to take summer school to even out the hours missed. "I wanted to quit school, and their biggest fight was that I finish school and do what I want after that," Ben said.

Despite countless arguments about his education, he earned his degree, a B.S. in finance in May of 2009. Within days of graduation, Ben headed to Las Vegas for the World Series of Poker where he placed in two events and won almost \$40,000.

But he had not stopped playing online – and his reputation online continued to grow along with his bank account.

ON TO THE WORLD SERIES, EH?

In the spring of 2011, his life resembled every young adult male's fantasy: He had more money than anyone his age not in the NBA and didn't have the last name Zuckerberg. He owned a two-story home with a professional office where two 30-inch computer monitors sat on a magnificent mahogany desk. To top it all off, he spent the summer months in Las Vegas competing in the World Series of Poker tournament. He could do whatever he wanted. Then, just as things were going so well, they turned sour.

In the weeks leading up to what was basically a government ban on the game, Ben had almost all of his bankroll on Full Tilt Poker. When he realized this he sought to even out his money between the two sites. On the day that Black Friday sent shockwaves through the poker world, Ben had 55 percent of his money on PokerStars and 45 percent on Full Tilt Poker. Fortunately, Ben kept the vast majority of his money offline at a Fort Worth-area bank. Even then, that 45 percent of his bankroll on Full Tilt Poker represents almost \$400,000.

When he woke up the morning of Black Friday he approached it like any other day: He drank some coffee, flipped through the TV channels and sat down at his computer to play. It didn't take him long to realize that something was wrong. The PokerStars site would let him log in, only to kick him off moments later. Full Tilt did the same thing. The poker community quickly realized what had happened.

"I guess we were all just dumbfounded," said Ben.

Instantly, online pros started analyzing the gambling laws of other nations, what their visa processes were like, and whether foreign guests were permitted to open a bank account. They then shared their findings on high stakes poker forums with other pros.

“I knew I wanted to pursue poker; it wasn’t a matter of if I’d move, it was just where I’d move,” Ben said. Breaking this news to his parents was not easy, although they were a little more prepared for the seemingly random, confusing nature of their youngest son’s life.

Canada seemed like an obvious choice to Ben given its proximity to the United States, cultural similarities and lax Internet poker regulations.

As expected, Ben’s father was not happy with this new decision. “I really didn’t want him to leave the country,” Gary said.

Jay supported his plan. “I thought it was a chance for him to have an adventure,” Jay said. “To get some perspective, learn how to live on his own.”

Ben heard the advice of his family and then, like most situations in his life, did exactly what he wanted to do. He believed that his gift was unique and was the one

thing he knew made him special, there was no chance he was going to give that up just to mollify his parents.

He decided to move to Toronto immediately after the 2011 World Series to continue his Internet poker career. But first, he was primed to have his most successful World Series to date.

SHUFFLE UP AND DEAL

The 2011 World Series of Poker began in May with more than 75,000 entrants in 58 separate events. Poker players occupied almost 100,000 square-feet of the convention center at the Rio-All Suite Hotel and Casino in hopes of snagging a portion of the \$191,999,010 prize pool.

Despite the money and opportunities for fame, the buzz around the poker tables was about where people were moving. Of course, players had their eyes on the championship bracelets and the money and the fame, but in between hands, the discussion centered on who was traveling where.

“We talked about it (moving outside the United States) a ton, tables are playing and everyone is talking about it,” Ben said. “We were talking about everywhere, Canada was the biggest one, the UK, Europe in general. And then you have the guys that mentioned Thailand, South Korea, South America, Central America, Australia.”

The No-Limit Hold'em, 6 Handed Championship event brought him closer to big money and a gold bracelet – the championship award – than he had ever been before. As he got closer to the final table, the lights got brighter, the money grew larger, the cameras became more obvious, and finally, anxiety reared its ugly head. Ben had dealt with this before. Live poker events are extremely intense and when a player makes a final table, especially at an event like the World Series, everything is magnified.

He was breathing heavily and having difficulty regaining his internal composure. The legitimate poker stars on his table only increased the attention. The lights from the cameras were in his face and there were hundreds of people crowded around the table. All of the distractions got into his head and at the worst possible moment, he froze. The brighter the lights shined the poorer his decision-making became.

Ben's strategy is all about pressuring his opponents – bets, raises and re-raises are the tools he uses to impose his will on other players. As the ESPN final table loomed his nerves got the best of him and he started doing things that went against this basic plan. He played it safe when he should have been aggressive and he was aggressive when he should have played it safe. When the tournament took an hour for dinner he just couldn't slow his mind down. "I tried everything I knew and I couldn't slow it down. My mind was running me in circles. I didn't want to mess up my big opportunity," Ben said. This was his best chance to prove to his parents, himself, the world, that he was as good as he thought he was. Unfortunately, he folded under the pressure.

Chris Moorman, a young poker sensation in his own rite, knocked Ben out of the tournament. Ben had earned seventh place in the tournament and was the last person eliminated before the final table. Even though he won almost \$100,000 the defeat was crushing.

After being knocked out of the tournament, he had to stand in a long line of other players waiting to collect their tournament winnings and tax information. Everyone was either on edge or had lost it completely. "The system is horribly inefficient and everyone in the line is just raging with anger because they just suffered a huge defeat. Its terrible," Ben said.

After he walked out of the Rio Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, he saw his friend and fellow pro Jason Summerville, who knew exactly what to do. "Instead of trying to say anything, he just gave me a hug," Ben said.

All told, Ben placed 143rd out of 6,865 players in the Main Event and collected \$99,493 and by the end of the summer, after playing in other tournaments, he had almost \$200,000. But with no online poker and no occupation to return to, all that was left was to head to Canada.

MOVING TO CANADA, EH?

For his career, Ben has made more than \$300,000 in live tournaments and more than \$1.2 million in online tournaments, according to bluffmagazine.com. The rest of his winnings are derived from Internet cash games – conventional poker where the chips in play represent actual cash value. Internet poker was where his gift was most noticeable and that is why he made the decision to go to Toronto.

Customs officials, especially in a post 9/11 world don't play around. When Ben stepped off the plane at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, he politely informed the customs official that he would like to remain in Canada for six months and when they asked why, he told them he needed a place to play Internet poker. Then they interrogated him for over two hours.

Asked why he would ever return to America, he showed them the deed to his home and the title to his truck. Asked if he could support himself, he showed them his bank statements. Asked where he was staying, he showed them his hotel reservation and informed them of his plans to rent a condominium with his roommate Luke Staudenmaier, a friend and fellow online professional. They ultimately let him in, but Canadian law only permitted him to stay for six months consecutively within a 12-month period.

For somebody who had only been a few times to Mexico, this was a big step. The first three weeks in Toronto were simply about making the necessary arrangements to obtain a bank account and get his account on Poker Stars up and running again.

Getting everything set up in Canada required hard work. PokerStars was extremely weary of reinstating the accounts of American players because of the ongoing legal issues. They required each player to prove that they were no longer physically in America by showing a Canadian lease agreement, a Canadian bank account with a Canadian address on it and a landline telephone on which PokerStars security could reach him. "PokerStars security is very rigid. They're good, but they are very cautious," Ben said.

It took several weeks before he was able to log in to PokerStars and play poker online. When he finally was able to play again, it wasn't quite the same. Ben had grown used to playing \$25-\$50 No Limit Hold'em cash games with 9-different tables open on his computer screen at once. In Canada though, with fewer people online and only \$40,000 in his player account, Ben had to take what he could get.

"I hadn't gotten to play online in like four months and I was just playing \$5-\$10 (No Limit Hold'em cash games), but I was so happy to be just playing on three tables. I didn't care that I was playing small; it felt great to get to play poker," Ben said.

Toronto turned out to be a good experience for Ben. He enjoyed his routine of early morning coffee, studying, playing poker, working out and playing more poker. One of the most international cities in the world, Toronto had all the amenities he could ask for like a Whole Foods Market and a nice gym.

The condo he rented was off of King's Street in Spedina, downtown near the entertainment district. Ben and his roommate didn't frequent the bars often, but it was nice to live in an active environment.

"I remember just walking around the street, I didn't have a car. I walked everywhere. I was right in the middle of downtown, I really loved it," Ben said. "I had quite a big summer and a very successful stay in Canada."

Although Canada was an Internet player's dream, everyone there was on borrowed time. The Canadian government wouldn't let them stay indefinitely. Other American poker players talked about moving again. Ben had a poker friend in Malta who testified to the beauty of the exotic locale. "We talked about it and decided that we should all go live together in Malta, so we worked out a budget and booked a place and flew over there," Ben said.

His parents were seriously displeased. Canada was one thing, but moving to an island off the coast of North Africa didn't strike him as a good idea. "I told him he was an idiot," Gary said.

Despite his father's concern, Ben packed his bags. He and a few friends made the journey halfway around the world, connecting to flights in New York and Dusseldorf, Germany. When they arrived at the tiny Malta airport, the group was prepared to spend several hours with Maltese customs agents. Thankfully though, there was no interrogation. They got their passports stamped and caught the yellow cab.

"We were hoping it was this beachy place with pretty water and rich people vacationing," Ben said. "It's really just, like, a rocky island." The villa they moved into appeared nice on the outside, but the inside was rough and prone to moments of that brown water seeping from the faucets. Ben describes himself as a "picky eater" who values being comfortable more than almost anything. Malta was everything but comfortable for him. He was sharing the space with four roommates and struggled to get the Internet working half the time. Considering that the Internet was how he and his friends made their money, this was a big problem.

"If you think about it, it's halfway between Africa and the bottom of Italy. And it's really hard to get stuff here, I don't know why I didn't fully think about it, it doesn't make sense for it to be totally first world here," Ben said.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

Shortly after Christmas 2011, the Department of Justice announced it had reinterpreted the Wire Act: Interstate transmissions of wire communications that do not relate to a “sporting event or contest” fall outside the reach of the Wire Act.

“The clarification in December related to only sports betting, but everything else is OK. As long as it is not involving sports betting the law does not apply, “ said Whit Askew, vice president of government affairs at the American Gaming Association. “This changes the debate seriously.”

This new interpretation opens up the possibility that intrastate gaming – online poker played within a specific state – could be done on a state-by-state basis. The only other option would be a federal law that would establish a minimum set of standards for each state to follow, Askew said.

The American Gaming Association – the lobbying arm of the big Las Vegas Casinos – believes that the best way to protect consumers and obtain tax revenue is through a federal law. “The AGA has been calling for federal legislation that would amend the federal gaming laws to establish a set of minimum standards that would avoid a patchwork quilt of state regulation,” Askew said.

Nobody can speak with certainty about the future of Internet poker.

Players like Tollerene have left their families, are still gambling, are still spending their money everywhere but the United States. At a time when the national debt sits near \$16 trillion, some supporters of online poker could be a part of that solution. The American Internet poker industry is estimated to be worth almost \$7 billion a year and that might be revenue that the federal government and state governments would welcome.

GOOD LUCK

After living in Malta from January to the beginning of March 2012, Ben and his poker buddies left Malta to travel through mainland Europe. They zoomed through Rome, Amsterdam and Barcelona. They played poker everywhere except Italy, which only allows Italian citizens to play.

Ben was awarded an Australian visa and flew from Barcelona to Sydney in early April 2012. The visa will allow him to play poker Down Under for an entire year. From Texas to Canada to Malta to Italy to Amsterdam to Spain to Australia, he has no plans to do anything other than play Internet poker.

Ben will head back to Las Vegas for the summer to take another shot at the World Series of Poker. Hopefully, he will get to Texas to spend some time with his family.

His gift has taken him around the world and made him a multimillionaire at the age of 25. It has given him so much, but doesn't allow him to see his family regularly and forces him to spend much time alone. It forces him to live in uncomfortable environments and various legal systems, all for the sake of a game.

There is no telling when players abroad will be able to play Internet poker in America again, so Ben and his fellow Road Gamblers continue down that well trodden path of an age gone by looking for action anywhere they can find it.

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