

Gold wins record poker payoff

By JEFF HANEY
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Jamie Gold isn't a familiar face in the high-stakes "Big Game" on the Strip, where poker's leading professional players mix it up for staggering amounts of cash.

As a television producer and former Hollywood talent agent, Gold has made most of his money outside of poker.

"I'm nowhere near as good as the best players in the world," Gold said after winning the World Series of Poker championship event early Friday at the Rio. "But for a week I was right there with them."

And he has the \$12 million grand prize to show for it.

Gold, a New York City native who lives in Malibu, Calif., outlasted a field of 8,773 entrants and a final table of nine players — including four poker pros — to win the biggest cash prize in poker history.

Although Gold has cashed in 15 major poker tournaments, the \$12 million alone was enough to make him poker's all-time money leader.

"Life is good," Gold, 36, said. Poker tournament pros often debate the relative merits of winning an event's championship bracelet — or even earning the respect of their peers — versus collecting the cash prize that goes with a victory.

Yet the raw numbers undeniably make the prize money the marquee attraction in the World Series of Poker. This year's main event, the 37th annual \$10,000 buy-in no-limit Texas hold'em championship, carried a total prize pool of more than \$82.5 million.

Runner-up Paul Wasicka of Westminster, Colo., collected \$6.1 million — more than any other tournament champion except Joe Hachem, who won \$7.5 million in last year's World Series.

It was a big deal when an obscure Internet gambler named Chris MoneyMaker earned \$2.5 million for winning the 2003 World Series. This year, sixth-place finisher Richard Lee of San Antonio took home a bigger prize, \$2.8 million.

The top 12 finishers in the 2006 World Series each became instant millionaires, collecting at least \$1.1 million.

"It's just phenomenal," Bob Daily, World Series tournament



SAM MORRIS / LAS VEGAS SUN

The projected image of Jamie Gold is seen over the final table of the World Series of Poker on Friday. Gold claimed the \$12 million first prize.

director, said. "It's very difficult to believe how much the event has grown over the past several years.

"Of course, we're ecstatic that we're able to award these huge prize pools, and it looks like poker is only going to continue to grow."

Gold plans to devote his prize money to the care and comfort of his father, 76-year-old Robert Gold, who is in the late stages of Lou Gehrig's disease.

Gold called his father in New York on a cell phone and left a message — "Hi, Dad, it's Jamie. ... I just won." — from the poker table just before 4 a.m. Friday.

"This will help my dad a lot, which is great," Gold said. "He's at home and he couldn't be here with us, but this is all for him."

Gold also saw his victory as an opportunity to repay family members and friends who supported him in his Hollywood career as well as his poker ventures.

"I'm surrounded by the greatest group of people in the world, and they will benefit from this," said Gold, who has represented actors such as James Gandolfini and Felicity Huffman. "I'm going to share it. They deserve it."

Gold plays regularly in high-stakes cash games in the Los Angeles area. BoDog, the off-

shore gambling operation, put up his \$10,000 buy-in. He received tips from his friend, Johnny Chan, the World Series champ in 1987 and 1988, throughout the tournament.

"Who knows if this will happen again, but this is not a fluke," Gold said. "I've worked really hard to become a great poker player."

Daily was moved by Gold's graciousness in victory and by his vow to use his newly won millions to help loved ones.

"I've been in poker a long time," Daily said. "As in any business, it's easy to get hardened to it. Tonight, watching the final hand, and watching how Jamie received his victory, it gave me chills. It reminded me of why I got into this business in the first place, and it renewed my commitment to stay in it for many more years."

Chan, who won \$625,000 for his 1987 World Series championship and \$700,000 a year later, said he had no regrets about the size of his purses.

"It's just the way the game's going," Chan said as he checked out the massive pile of bound hundred-dollar bills stacked on the final table. "This game is attracting more and more people willing to put up their money, so the prizes are just going to keep

getting higher and higher.

"I mean, I think this is just the beginning. Next year I think you might see a grand prize of \$15 (million) or \$20 million."

Chan speculated that the buy-in for the main event might have to be increased. It has been \$10,000 since 1970.

"They're probably going to raise it to \$25,000 at some point," Chan said. "Otherwise, there'll be no stopping it."

Harrah's executives marched down the hallway at the Rio's convention center Thursday night toward the main tournament area to deliver the \$12 million in cash. Escorted by security guards, they toted the currency in metallic briefcases that each bore an image, incongruously, of a Milwaukee's Best Light logo.

Stacked on a darkened and otherwise empty poker table next to the brightly lit final table, the prize money was never far from the minds of the competitors — although at times they had to erase it from their thoughts to concentrate on the poker action at hand.

"You can't think too much about the (dollar) figures while you're playing, because you can get knocked out any time," seventh-place finisher Doug Kim said. "But you have to play to

maximize your chances of winning the \$12 million."

San Antonio's Lee, a wealthy investor, said civic pride meant more to him than either the cash or the championship bracelet — a 14-karat white gold number with diamonds, rubies and a black sapphire (representing a spade).

"Honestly, the bracelet is just a symbol, and I'm not a big jewelry person," Lee said. "Whether it was \$2.6 million, \$6 million, \$12 million, the money would have been great, but I was more interested in winning the championship for the city of San Antonio."

Fifth-place finisher Rhett Butler, who won \$3.2 million and endured 3.2 million wisecracks about not giving a damn, said it was easy to lose sight of the prize money given the physical and emotional grind of competing in the World Series main event. The marathon tournament began July 28.

"I don't think it's so much the disappointment of not winning the \$12 million," he said. "It's the disappointment of busting out. I didn't show any emotion for 15 days, and now I feel like crying, ..."

"The best thing about winning would have been that suite (in the Rio) with your friends for a few nights — not to mention the \$12 million."

Early, unofficial predictions peg next year's World Series field at 12,000 entrants, which would equate to a prize pool far exceeding \$100 million for the championship event alone, and an even more imposing pile of cash on the final table.

"It's just a huge, grueling event," third-place finisher Michael Binger said. "It's a lot of money and a lot of fun. It's hard to say how big it can get, but I know I'll be here next year."

Holding a queen in his hand to pair another queen on the board, Gold stood up and exulted when Wasicka called his all-in bet holding pocket 10s on the tournament's final hand. Gold left a half-eaten bowl of blueberries, which he calls "brain food," by his chair.

"I've eaten blueberries almost every day for my entire life," he said. "I'll continue to."

"Twelve million dollars can buy a lot of blueberries."

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