

Fun game, dark side

■ As poker surges in popularity, health and law officials see increase in gambling addiction and related crime

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

OCEAN CITY — The river card comes down. Ten of diamonds. Barry Neeb shoots his hands in the air as he pulls the straight and knocks his wife out to win a long game of Texas Hold'em on the back porch with friends and a few beers.

At least that's how the Ocean City policeman imagines it happening despite his admission he rarely bests his wife when they host poker games a couple times per month.

Of course, all winning would do is get him out of having to get beer the next time anyway.

That's how an uncountable number of poker games go down in living rooms and on back porches throughout the region — sometimes for bragging rights, sometimes for beer and often enough for a few dollars, too.

Like so many others since ESPN began turning professional Texas Hold'em players into superstars a few years back, Neeb said his wife learned how to play the game watching television about two years ago, taught him how to play and then the couple started hosting a friendly game.

"It's interesting to watch how they try to out-think each other on TV," Neeb said. "But the draw for us is not the lure to win money, it's joy of spending time with friends and a deviation from work, career and life's problems."

Phases of gambling addiction

WINNING. The first phase is when the gambling isn't a problem and a person is excited by initial success.

LOSING. The second phase is when gamblers begin losing, lying to family and friends and bet money they don't have.

DESPERATION. The third phase is when gambling leads to illegal acts, hopelessness and even suicide.

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Abraham Karotki of Ocean View, on the other hand, got into it for the money when he began watching Texas Hold'em on ESPN more than two years ago and told himself he could beat the pros.

He was right. Last February Karotki won \$433,000 in a tournament in Atlantic City, qualified for the biggest Hold'em tournament in the world this June in Las Vegas and has since been solicited by gaming businesses to sign endorsement deals that he says prevent him from speaking to the press without permission.

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Matthew S. Gunby photo

Courtney Schupp concentrates on a hand while playing poker Friday night in Salisbury.

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However, before winning a dime, Karotki said he learned by entering local \$20, \$50 and \$100 games, eventually putting down \$10,000 in the Atlantic City tournament before his big pay day ever came.

Somerset County Health Department Addictions Program director Craig Stofko said it's those sort of exponentially increasing stakes that pull people down the wrong path.

The recent pop culture resurgence in poker has introduced many to a downward spiral, Stofko said, citing national studies that show 5 percent of all Americans have developed serious gambling problems.

"It's just like alcohol in that what is recreational for one person ruins another person's life," said Stofko. "The problem is you can't tell which one you are until it's too late."

When Stofko researched gambling problems last year while exploring the possibility for grants to a potential gambling addiction program in the county, he said he learned gambling has three phases as it grows into a mental disease.

First is the winning phase, when the gambling isn't a problem and a person is excited by initial success. Then comes the losing phase when gamblers begin lying to family and friends and bet money they don't have, said Stofko.

Finally, Stofko said, comes the desperation phase when gambling leads to illegal acts, hopelessness and even suicide.

"Go to Las Vegas or Atlantic City and you always find a lot of graveyards outside of town," said Stofko.

The dark side of the pathological gambler's actions — not actual enforcement of illegal gambling activities — is where Wicomico County Sheriff's Department Maj. Gary Baker said police will become most affected by a rise in the popularity of gambling.

"We see it as far as the remnants of the problem," said Baker. "When a gambler incurs a debt and the person gets in a situation where they have to get money quick, they turn to illegal acts like stealing and theft."

"You can rationalize as it gets

more popular it's obvious there will be more situations where people get in dire straights and resort to doing something illegal," Baker said.

And to rein in what has been identified as a growing societal and individual problem, the Delaware Department of Substance Abuse and Mental Health has contracted with the Delaware Council on Problem Gambling since the state voted to allow video lotteries back in 1995.

One percent of funds from video lotteries goes to fund gambling education measures and provide treatment to problem gamblers, but Delaware Director of Substance Abuse Services Jack Kemp said that this year the number of problem gamblers treated has still significantly increased.

Not to mention, Kemp said his department has found adolescents have recently been identified as an extremely high-risk group for developing gambling addictions inside the current culture of gambling glamorization.

"We do an annual survey of problem behaviors and we've added gambling questions because we've identified the trend with adolescents," said Kemp. "That's a big problem if it continues unabated."

But kids aren't the only ones drawn in by the Chris Fergusons and Daniel Negreanus on TV, and for every Karotki who becomes a big-time winner while trying to be like the big boys, there are many more who follow down the much more common, three-phase system of gambling addiction.

Stofko said people should know that, and education is a must.

"Once there's a problem, you're talking treatment," said Stofko. "We want to address it before there is a problem, with education. The more you know about the problems it causes you, the safer you are."