Alumni

Annie Duke, Poker Pro

In the macho world of high-stakes poker, this mother of four has racked up more than a quarter of a million dollars beating some of the best players around.

By
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A big poker game is reaching a pivotal moment at one of the peripheral cash games that take place during the World Series of Poker. A crowd gathers around the cordoned-off table as thousands of dollars in cash and chips are pushed to the center of the table. One player folds his hand and tosses in his cards. Two players remain at either end of the long green felt. One is Annie Duke, among the most successful women in poker history; the other is a wiry, middle-aged man in a baseball cap. The last cards have been dealt, and the man has just raised Duke seven thousand dollars: an entire rack of chips and a wrapped pack of hundred dollar bills. She pauses, as if considering raising him back, then calls the bet, tossing in a single red-white-and-blue $5,000 chip and two thousand-dollar chips. “I’ve got you beat, Paul,” she says. “I’ve got trip sixes.” The crowd exhales in unison. Duke’s opponent arranges and re-arranges his cards until the rest of the men at the table start giving him a hard time. “C’mon already, Paul, throw ’em in.” Finally he throws his cards down hard into the center of the table and the dealer pushes the money away from him.

Another day at the office for Annie Duke.

At first and even second glance, Annie Duke (Annie Lederer ’87C) seems an especially unlikely poker pro. Raised in Concord, New Hampshire, she is the daughter of writer and language expert Richard Lederer, who headed the English department at an elite prep school called St. Paul’s. As a child, Lederer was something of an outsider, a townie among privileged New England and New York City kids who would jet off to tropical islands for spring break. Lederer excelled in

school, though, and after St. Paul's went on to Columbia where she double-majored in English and psychology.

When she graduated from Columbia, Lederer began the traditional career path of an academic, going on to graduate school in psycholinguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. She proposed to and then married Ben Duke, a close friend from U. Penn with whom she had never previously been romantically involved. He accepted—clearly something of the gambler himself—and Annie moved to Montana, where Ben lived, to continue her studies remotely. But then, on the verge of finishing her Ph.D., things just started feeling seriously wrong. Eventually Annie Duke realized that she couldn't continue in academia and quit the program.

Without her doctoral work, Duke found little to do with her time. Then, with a small loan and a few tips from her brother Howard, already a successful professional player, she began playing poker in the state's legalized card rooms. "We talked a little about the game, and he told me to read [poker expert] David Sklansky's books for a foundation," she says. "I did the reading and started winning regularly almost right away." She soon earned the moniker "Annie Legend" and, calling herself "just a housewife from Montana," moved on to the tables of Las Vegas, where, without the normal intermediate steps through the low- and medium-stakes ranks, she began playing high-stakes poker—and kept on winning.

Poker is still a hugely male-dominated game, but Duke uses the testosterone-laden atmosphere to her advantage. "My mere presence enrages them," she says. "Guys can be, on the whole, winning players, and when they come up against a woman, they can't help themselves. They can't stand to be beaten by a woman. It happens again and again. They just call, call, call, when they should be folding."

Part of Duke's equanimity in the face of the sexist competition comes from an independence that René Anker, a friend of Duke's since eighth grade, noticed from day one. "Annie's very opinionated and sure of herself in a way that doesn't always make you well-liked, but she was so smart that people respected her even if she drove them nuts."

To watch Annie Duke play poker during the game's annual World Series is to watch something of a whirlwind. It's just before high noon, starting time. After finding her assigned seat in the large conference hall of Binion's casino, Duke moves through the crowd, saying quick hellos to friends, settling debts, huddling briefly with 2000

champ Chris Ferguson, perhaps trading a “piece” of the day’s action. (Players often sell or trade off pieces of each other’s potential winnings to cover their bets.) The tournament floor manager calls out, “Dealers, shuffle up and deal,” and Duke finds her table. Duke underdresses in an already dressed-down world, usually wearing ripped, heavily-faded jeans and a T-shirt. When she sits down at the table, she takes her shoes off and tucks a leg beneath her as if the World Series table were her living room nickel-dime-quarter game.

Once seated, she stands back up to confer with friends at neighboring tables, sits back down, talks, gestures grandly, plays with the many bracelets and bangles that adorn her right wrist, pulls or blows her impish bangs out of her face, and jokes and argues. All this in a room gently humming with the hushed clack-clacking of chips and murmuring of bets, a room filled with about 200 men and maybe five women, all of them nearly silent and still. One almost expects one of the Texas good ol’ boys or tough New Yorkers at her table—and, win or lose, the table does always seem to be hers—to tell her to shut up and sit down, but apparently they’ve learned that this is just not a good idea. Duke doesn’t exactly look for fights, but miniconfrontations, many of them playful, even flirtatious, are a fundamental element of her style and a big part of why she can play with the big boys: She never backs down. When she and an older southern gent in a Stetson bump into each other in the aisle between tables, he says something about how people have some manners where he comes from, and Duke says “excuse me” twice. When they’re finally seated at their separate tables, he’s still grumbling, and she shouts over to him. “Look, I said excuse me. Do you really want to get into this?” Altercation over.

When Duke’s daughter was about to turn six, Duke was faced with a tough choice: stay a few extra days during a trip to Las Vegas to play in a game that could have easily netted her a six-figure profit (her biggest payday to that point) or go home to Montana for her daughter’s birthday party. She went home for the party.

“I didn’t care what kind of money was at stake,” she says. “I’m not missing that party. My brother said I could’ve paid for her college education that weekend. I said, ‘You know what? When she’s 25 and in therapy, she’s going to be talking about how I missed her sixth birthday party.’”

Soon after she had her first child, her father posed a key question. “This exceedingly maternal thing you’re doing—is this at all a danger to your poker playing, or vice versa?” She fired back, “Dad, that’s the same sexist question that your son asked

me, and the answer is definitely no."

Happily married, she spends her time away from the game much like any other working mother: picking up, dropping off, feeding, playing, generally being a parent. At the end of every Annie Duke e-mail message is the tag "Mama to Maud (home-birthed, 3/7/95), Leo (home-birthed, 1/24/98), and Lucy (home-birthed, 6/16/00). Duke gave birth to Nell, her fourth (and, she insists, final) child in early March. While eight months pregnant with Lucy in May 2000, Duke came in tenth in the World Series championship event, the second-highest finish ever by a woman, earning $52,000 in the process. She gives much of the credit to her husband, Ben. "He really helps me accomplish what I want—even moving to Vegas to make things easier for me. And until you've moved from Montana to Las Vegas, you can't fathom what a sacrifice this is on his part."

Conversation with Duke is more than poker and family, though. During the course of a recent meal, topics ranged from her dissertation topic, "syntactic bootstrapping," to her sister Katy's recent endeavors as a poet (she's writing a family memoir, *Poker Face*) to a lengthy discussion of the correlation between the increased use of high fructose corn syrup and obesity since the 1970s. Of course, interspersed is a healthy dose of poker. A recurring theme touches on brilliant players who "go off in the pit," squandering millions in hard-earned poker winnings shooting craps or betting fifty thousand dollars on the putt of a golf ball.

"I'd rather be little old untalented me choppin' it out every day but never going off in the pit," she says.

Duke tends toward polarities: humility and cockiness, sassy charm and in-your-face competitiveness, raise or fold. She repeatedly asserts how boring poker is and wonders why anyone would want to read about it, then proceeds to tell another story of an incredible hand she's played or a character she's come across at the table. She often plays down her talents; she claims, for instance, that she "doesn't know how to bluff," but just a little while later yells across the tournament floor, "Hey, Johnny just said I was the best woman player in the world!" Both her humility and her pride seem completely genuine. When asked how she can stay focused on so many facets of the game—reading her opponents, constantly calculating odds, remembering every hand for up to ten hours at a time—she responds simply, "That's what I do." She also emphasizes the mundane logic of her success: "I approach it completely as a business. I do no other gambling. I don't let my emotions get in the

way of how I play.”

When she placed tenth in the championship event in 2000, Annie had already finished in the money in World Series events sixteen times for a total of $391,000. She is currently second all-time female money winner, and this is without ever entering in the “Women’s Championship” of the World Series in which the competition is much less fierce than in the open events. “No ladies’ tees for me” is all Duke has to say on the subject. She spends the greater portion of her playing hours in the rarified if smoky air of the cash games, which can be much more lucrative. Her friend Jennifer Harmon is the only other woman to play regularly in these $800–$1,600 and up (per bet) games.

When asked what she wants out of poker, Duke can be coy: she’d like to earn a living, put her kids through college, and own a nice house—suspiciously modest ambitions for someone who radiates such brash confidence. Multiple World Series champion Phil Hellmuth has called her “the best all-around woman poker player in the world today.” While Duke seems to enjoy such gender-qualified endorsements, they also undoubtedly increase her competitive zeal. By the time she’s finished, Annie Duke may be considered about the greatest ever to play the game, period—someone you wouldn’t even think of calling a “woman” poker professional.

At the same time, you’d damn well better not forget she’s a woman.

Read more from ***Jamie Berger '86CC***

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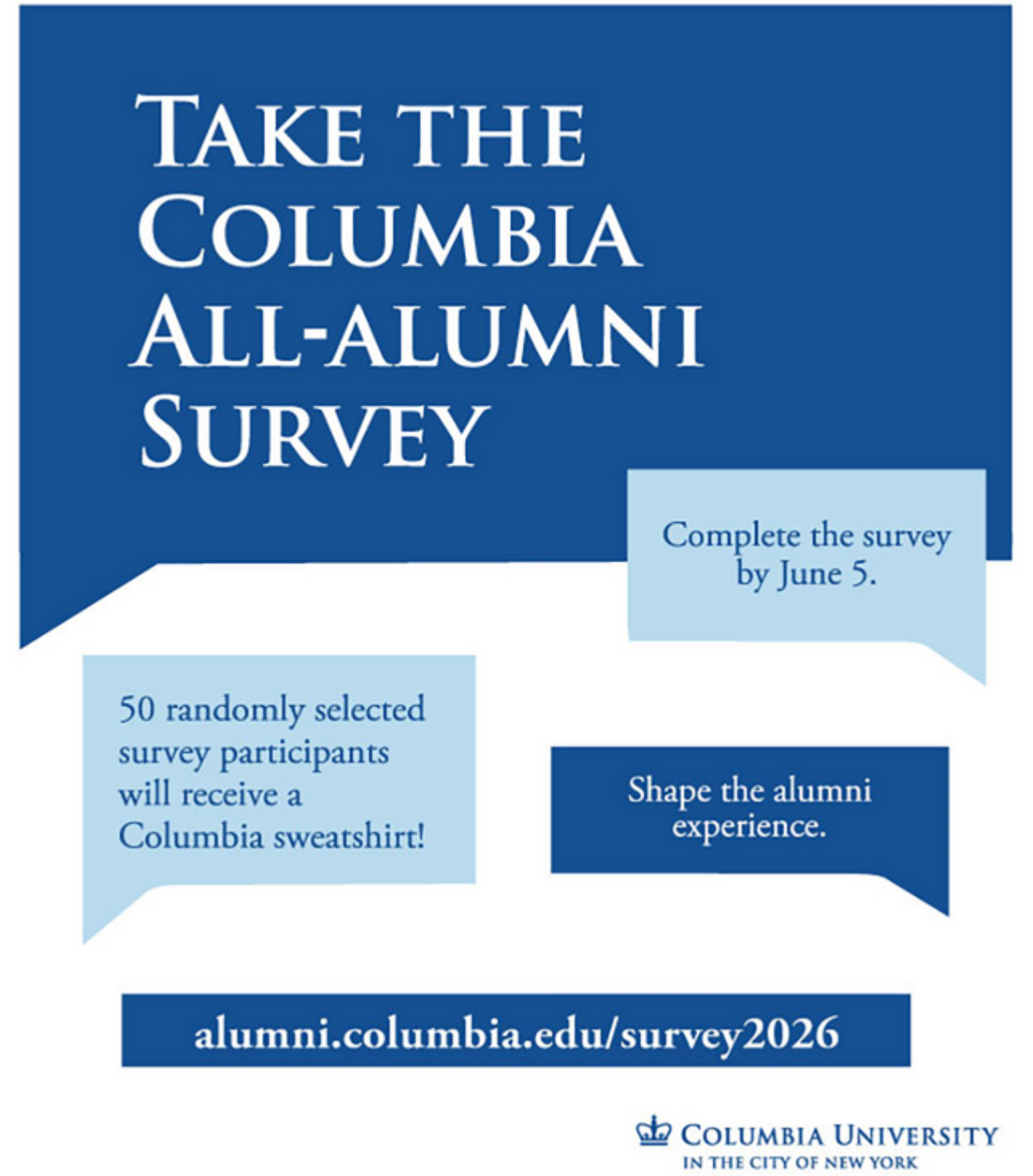

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