

Australian Poker Pentagon

IN THE EARLY HOURS OF A JULY MORNING AT BINION'S HORSESHOE CASINO, A FATHER FROM MELBOURNE WAVED AN AUSSIE FLAG TO THE EMOTIONAL CHANTS OF AUSSIE, AUSSIE, AUSSIE, OI, OI, OI. THE ROOM CLEARED AND THE FLAG WAS PACKED AWAY – BUT THE CANDLE THAT IS AUSTRALIAN POKER HAS CONTINUED TO BURN AND FLOURISH FOUR YEARS ON.

When you talk about the development of poker in Australia, it's near impossible not to mention our 2005 WSOP Champion Joe Hachem. However many other individuals and factors since then have also been key contributors in the growth of the local poker landscape.

As we close in on another World Series of Poker we decided to sit down with five Australian poker and industry experts and see what their views were on important issues that effect Australian poker – thus the Australian Poker Pentagon.

Tim DUCKWORTH

Providing a cross-reference of the poker spectrum we have:

JONNO PITTOCK • Crown Poker Director of Tournament Operations

BILLY 'THE CROC' ARGYROS • Australian Hall of Fame member and Full Tilt Poker pro

GRANT LEVY • school teacher turned PokerStars pro after capturing APPT Grand Final

DAVID SAAB • high stakes cash and tournament player based in the Philippines

JONATHAN 'xMONSTERxDONGx' KARAMALIKIS • online young gun taking the poker world by storm

The Numbers at both the APPT Sydney and Aussie Millions were down on preceding years, what are your thoughts on this?

Pittock: I think the decline in numbers was mostly attributable to the global economic crisis, rather than a decline in the popularity of poker in the region. We actually had more unique entries across all the Championship events in this year's Aussie Millions than any other year. What was most noticeable was the general downshifting of players to the smaller buy-in events. While the Aussie Millions Main Event had a 15% decrease in entries, the smaller events such as the Opening and Feature events both had record numbers and over 35% year-on-year growth.

Levy: Firstly, the APPT was run around the same time as an LAPT event and just prior to Christmas and the PCA. It didn't make sense for the US guys to fly down here then go back to the PCA before thinking of coming here again for the Aussie Millions. In regards to the Aussie Millions, the withdrawal of Full Tilt Poker was always going to have a negative impact on the numbers. In my opinion Crown did a wonderful job of promoting it and drawing a field as large as they did.

Karamalikis: I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. If poker kept growing at the rate it has been, local tournaments will start becoming seat restricted, or turn into WSOP-type numbers. Even though it means more inflow for the poker community – who really wants to play a 5,000-player tournament?

Following the success of the ANZPT Adelaide event, what impact do you see this series having around Australia and New Zealand?

Argyros: Hopefully Aussie's and Kiwi's will support this event as in the past there was very little poker in Australia. Now that the boom has exploded lets keep it going! This series should give many medium level players the opportunity to play in major tournaments at a reasonable cost.

Levy: I think the ANZPT is a massive thing for Australian poker. A regular tour in our own country has been long overdue, and with the might of the PokerStars satellite machine it will be around for a long time. It also brings more affordable buy-ins to the local poker community which can only increase player numbers.

JONNO PITTOCK

BILLY ARGYROS

GRANT LEVY

JONATHAN KARAMALIKIS

DAVID SAAB

Saab: This could potentially lead to domestic tour comparable to the APPT. As a general prediction, I think it will easily and rapidly become the premier tour in Australia and New Zealand. There exists already great grass roots support for poker right around the country so this is something to consolidate that growth. Personally, I believe it's critical to make sure that it ends up being televised so we end up with our own marketing collateral in this market space for the Australia / New Zealand market.

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How do you see online poker influencing Australia's poker growth in the years to come?

Pittock: While other regions are starting to hit a plateau and are even starting to see a decline; the Australian poker market has not yet hit its full potential. As the market continues to grow, we will find more and more online providers willing to support Australian based events. While there was no one major online partner for this year's Aussie Millions, there were more online rooms than ever before running satellite campaigns for the Main Event.

Levy: Most of the online guns have made the step recently into the live arena with mixed success. The thing with online is that it allows you to develop so much experience in such a short space of time. So now we have a bunch of teens and early 20-somethings amongst our most experienced players in terms of hands played.

Saab: Australia has always been an early adopter of ideas and technology so Australian poker players took to internet poker in droves. As a trend, I believe that Australian poker players will get tougher (more competitive on a world stage) whilst probably still not

leaving Australian shores.

Karamalakis: Online poker would have to be the second most influential cause of Australia's poker growth (after Joe Hachem winning the WSOP). It enables players to learn the game at a much faster rate, allowing people to play any form of poker, at pretty much any stakes whenever they want. Live players are now playing online to satellite into live events for such small buy-ins. I think poker will continue to grow, but at a much slower and steadier pace from now on.

With Stewart Scott being crowned the first local Aussie Millions Champion do you see this as a spark to a secondary poker boom in Australia?

Pittock: I think having a home grown Champion validates the overall skill that the Australian players have, and makes the event more accessible to the everyday player. The Aussie Millions is a major stop on the international tour and as a result the field is always really tough, so having a local Champion definitely proves that Australian players have what it takes to mix it with the best of the best.

Argyros: I think it will assist, but nowhere as big an impact as when Joe Hachem won the WSOP in 2005.

Levy: No, not really. I think it's boomed and boomed again. I don't see it making a significant difference. While Scott's win was huge and carries a lot of significance in the Australian poker community, there has now been three home grown millionaires and Australians are probably becoming more used to the idea that poker can make you a lot of money!

Saab: My heartiest congratulations to Stewart Scott, but who is going to be his corporate sponsor? Crown? Full Tilt? PokerStars? Without a significant corporation behind him with a marketing machine, it is highly unlikely that this effect will rate very high. Our market is approaching maturation and as a result, nothing short of another Aussie winning an event like the WSOP Main Event will do much to kick start things.

Karamalakis: No, I don't think so. Joe Hachem and Grant Levy's wins had a lot of media coverage that may have shocked Australia (sparked a boom). Now most people already know what huge stakes are on the line in these tournaments.

The 2009 Australian Hall of Fame was recently held, who do you believe are worthy for nominations next year?

Pittock: It was great to be part of the Hall of Fame Induction, and it was one of the highlights of this year's Aussie Millions for me. There are so many great players and administrators that have been involved in the growth of this game in Australia – and they all deserve recognition. I would like to see Marsha Waggoner inducted next year – she has been at the forefront of pushing Australian poker internationally

over the past 10 years.

Argyros: All I can say is that it will be a player or players with at least eight years of playing or assisting in the poker world.

Saab: I loved the Hall of Fame! Well done to Maurie Pears and Crown Casino. As to who should be nominated next year? Well that's a toughie. I would nominate Danny McDonagh as he has contributed so much, not just to Australia but to poker in this part of the world. There are so many deserving people – I leave the tough decisions to the committee!

Do you consider poker to be a sport?

Pittock: Poker is definitely predominately a skill-based game, but I think the element of chance in relation to skill is too high for it to be considered a sport. There are aspects of tournament poker that can be considered a sport, especially the deep-stack, multi-day events that require more discipline and skill. Overall I think it's a game, albeit one where the most skilful players will win overall in the long run. I just think the short-term variance is too high for it to be considered a sport.

Argyros: I am going to have to say no on this as many athletes and sportspeople train very hard to be at their best in their field. However if you are fit, it certainly is an advantage in these large tournament fields where you need many hours of concentration and endurance.

Levy: Yes

Saab: sport – noun; an athletic activity requiring skill or physical prowess and often of a competitive nature, as racing, baseball, tennis, golf, bowling, wrestling, boxing, hunting, fishing etc. No, of course not – see above. By definition it is not.

Karamalakis: No, not really. Sports are meant to be physical. I consider poker to be a strategy game.

Do you think poker has become mainstream and thus accepted in the wider community as a respected sport following celebrity ambassadors such as Shane Warne and Jeff Fenech?

Argyros: 100% yes! Poker has now become a lot more accepted in the community and its stigma image of smoke-filled card rooms with seedy undesirables playing no longer exists. Celebrities have assisted in making poker cool and the new in thing to be doing just by them playing in tournaments and giving poker their approval.

Levy: I think it is becoming a lot more mainstream. I don't know how much you can attribute to Warne and Fenech. It was probably becoming that way before their

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involvement, but their involvement certainly doesn't hurt. I think the role that PokerStars play is pivotal to poker becoming more mainstream with their push for poker to be accepted as a sport.

Saab: Yes, I think poker has gone mainstream. When I started playing it was in a dark room playing with old Greeks and Italians playing Manila, 5-card draw, 7-card stud and Chinese poker with 5% rake uncapped. Nowadays you can play in casinos, local taverns, online and even watch it on TV – yes this is mainstream. Has celebrity ambassadors such as Warne and Fenech helped? In all truth and honesty, I don't know if it has helped poker. I know the boys are genuinely interested about the game and I've come to discover that sporting stars are a big thing. It has increased the profile of poker – I guess that's a good thing.

Karamalakis: Yeah I guess so. I'm not convinced it's a sport though, but having ambassadors such as Shane Warne and Jeff Fenech definitely lift the profile of poker. A lot of celebrities with competitive sporting histories enjoy playing poker as it is the most purest form of competition – but without physical strain.

These five Australian poker and industry experts may all stem from different poker backgrounds, but they all arrive at the same answer – Australian poker has never been stronger. Hall of Fame inductions, a new national tour, a thriving and successful online community and celebrity ambassadors are the wax and wick to the candle that Joe Hachem lit with his 7♣3♠ those many moons ago.

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