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- Autos
- Classified Ads
- Real Estate
- ChicagoJobs.com

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Local News

Today's Headlines

- Yesterday
- Past Week
- Obituaries
- Police Blotter

News In Depth

- Crime in Illinois
- Election/Politics
- School Report Cards
- War in Iraq
- War on Terrorism

National/World News

- Associated Press
- Chicagoland News
- Illinois News
- Today in History

Weather

Business

Local Headlines

National Headlines

Wall Street Update

Entertainment

Movies

More

Features

Special Sections

WebStreetCafe.com

More

Opinions

Columnists

E-The People

Letters to the Editor

Speak Out

More Opinions...

Sports

Local Sports

Pro / College Sports

Sports Update

Site Tools

About Our Paper

About Our Site

Advertiser Index

Privacy Policy

Search

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Texas Hold 'em hobby becomes poker windfall

Naperville man rakes in \$14,000 for tuition

By Kate Houlihan
STAFF WRITER

When Naperville's Jeremy Olisar was a child, playing classic card games like blackjack and Old Maid with his siblings was a common occurrence. They would play "just for fun" and eventually found computer versions of the games to entertain them. Now Olisar has turned a favorite pastime into some serious cash — a semester's worth of college tuition, to be exact.

Olisar entered AbsolutePoker.com's "Win Your Tuition" fall tournament and beat out thousands of people playing Texas Hold 'em to win the grand prize — one semester's worth of tuition. Olisar attends Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he said tuition is about \$14,000 per semester.

He formed a penchant for poker three summers ago when watching the World Series of Poker on television and got hooked.

"I was like, whoa, I had no idea poker was such a big thing," he said.

He started learning the nuances of the game, and while logging on to facebook.com one night, he found out about the AbsolutePoker.com tuition tournament.

"Since I had nothing to lose and it was free to participate, I figured why not," Olisar said.

Before the final round of play, Olisar faced some stiff competition on what were known as the satellite rounds, according to AbsolutePoker.com business development manager Mike Edwards.

"To put it in perspective, Jeremy had to play in a satellite of 2,000 people to get to the main event," Edwards said. To play in the final game, a person had to be in the top 20 percent of his or her respective satellite.

Olisar said as the tournament progressed, the level of play became more challenging as there were less people likely to risk everything and be eliminated. He said his strategy was to play conservatively.

"After the first hour or so of play, you'd have the people who'd play less strong hands and a little less risky," he said.

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The final round of the tournament, which took place Oct. 15, lasted about 5½ hours, Olisar said. When it was over, he was "just in disbelief and shock."

"From the beginning I wasn't expecting to win," he said. "I was just going in to have fun. As the tournament progressed, the adrenaline was rushing. I was actually home that weekend, so both my parents and younger brother and sister were there as well."

Olisar, a senior who has a 3.97 grade-point average, two majors (clarinet performance and music composition) and four minors (music education, computer science, conducting and bagpipe) had been paying for tuition with assistance from his parents, student loans and grants.

He also used his job teaching children music theory on Saturdays at the college's music preparatory school to help with the cost.

Jeremy's mother, Noreen Olisar, said she felt "a little shocked. These kind of things just don't happen to us."

She said the tuition win will help greatly, "especially since I still have another kid in college and two more on the way."

"With a young staff heading a young company, Edwards said coming up with the tuition tournament for students was a combination of player suggestions and staff ideas.

"It was really destined from the fact that three of the founders of the company used to play poker," he said. "With people still in university, (tuition is) frequently a topic of conversation around here."

The next "Win Your Tuition" tournament is slated May 27.

According to Edwards, Olisar is "welcome and eligible to participate again."

But will Naperville's new poker champ be up to the challenge?

"Of course," Olisar said. "I don't see why not. Now that I've won it, I know it's possible."

11/13/05



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