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## POKER FACES

November 13, 2005

Matt Whittaker

*The Monitor*

### Game gaining fame in Valley

As the band playing at McAllen's Gaslight Club struck up their inspired version of Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb," Ron Rodriguez â€” architect of a novel business model in the Valley that allows for poker tournaments in bars â€” brought decks of cards around to tables where more than 60 players waited to begin the night's second session of Texas Hold'em.

The pub was dimly lit, but that didn't stop some of the players from wearing dark glasses. This was poker. This was serious. Well, sort of.

About 15 minutes into the game that started shortly before 10 p.m. on a recent Wednesday, 20-year-old Aaron Guerrero was down to six chips. Looking down at his paltry stash of roundels, his sigh of disappointment turned into a smile of acceptance. According to the rules of the game, it was his turn to put down a mandatory bet for the next hand.

Before that was dealt, the man next to him gave him five chips â€” not a move likely on ESPN's broadcasts of the World Series of Poker, to which many players in the Rio Grande Valley aspire and where the stakes can reach into the millions of dollars. But this



Alex Jones/The Monitor

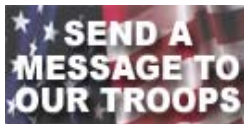
Mission resident Steve Slawson, left, collects his chips after winning a hand during a recent poker tournament at Hotties Grill & Bar in Mission.

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night's game was all in fun; the poker lovers played for points and prizes — not for cash, which is illegal in Texas bars.

A little later, at about 10:40 p.m., Guerrero, a stocky, dark-haired waiter with an earring in his left lobe, had won more chips. But he was still fairly desperate and went "all in." He won the hand with four eights to admiringly jealous smiles and chuckles around the table. "That's a poker hand," said the man who had donated chips to the Guerrero fund. "You'll be talking about that for days."

Poker, specifically Texas Hold 'em, has taken the country by storm in the past few years as a bevy of shows — including both game coverage and dramatic series — have appeared on stations like ESPN, the Travel Channel, Bravo and E!

That popularity has made Rodriguez's business, Valley Club Poker, possible. He started it with his 22-year-old son, Ronnie, in July. The elder Rodriguez got the idea while working for a similar operation in Corpus Christi.

"I don't think anybody else is doing it here in the Valley at all," he said. He's heard of similar ventures in San Antonio, Austin, Florida and the Midwest.

The business offers free poker tournaments on weeknights and Sundays at bars like the Gaslight, Mission's Hotties Grill & Bar and some in Laredo. There's no cover charge on game nights or "buy-ins" for the games themselves.

Valley Club earns money by charging a fee to participating bars, which benefit from the tournaments attracting customers at times when the establishments don't do a lot of business. And the players are so focused they don't get rowdy.

As he sat at the bar watching the first session that night at the Gaslight, owner Jim Stiles was pleased with the way the partnership with Valley Club was working out.

Games started at the pub on a Wednesday this summer with three or four tables. Word of mouth and the company's Web site spread the concept and now the bar hosts eight to 10 tables for two sessions Wednesdays and Sundays.

He pays \$300 a night to host the games, but his business has increased 40 percent to 50 percent on Wednesday nights, which would otherwise normally be slow, because of the poker games.

"It's a good crowd," Stiles said. "Never had one raising their voice. Everybody here is having fun."

Rodriguez provides the table tops and chips and supervises the games so Stiles doesn't have to do anything except watch players buy his beer.

He said the business model is unique. "I don't think anybody had really thought about it."

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"It's sort of a momentum that's built up week by week," Stiles said, as players have told friends and coworkers about the tournaments. "It's really caught on. You could call it a poker revolution."

"Like a little family"

The previous night, at Hotties in Mission, owner Aaron Ball hosted the bar's first ever tournament. He was still warming up to the partnership with Valley Club, and had paid \$150 for the night. After that the charge would be \$300.

"I don't even know how to play. I'm just a businessman trying to make a buck," he said. "Right now they're drinking a little bit. There's a lot of people not drinking when they are playing because they're too serious. We'll see if it's going to be cost-effective for me."

Before agreeing to try it, he checked out a tournament at Mint. "It's a good way of advertising basically," Ball said. He thinks the games could bring in future customers for his bar, restaurant and catering business.

"It's getting pretty big," Ball said of poker's popularity. "You can see it on TV, celebrities playing this and that. This stuff is going crazy."

Even though they're not gambling for money, players new and old flock to the games because they want to hone their skills and pal around with people who have a common interest. Most harbor the longshot desire to be on the World Series of Poker. Some come for stress relief.

"Between work and school, this is more or less a calming environment," said Diana Daniel, a 33-year-old general manager for South Texas Beauty Supply in McAllen. She played both sessions at the Gaslight.

Yudel Salazar, another local waiter, was there too. The 20-year-old said he plays with Valley Club mostly to develop skills to use against his brother, roommate and cousin in games at his South McAllen apartment. "You pick up quite a few things playing against people here," he said.

Ronnie Rodriguez's girlfriend, 21-year-old Kacey Flores, a senior majoring in biology at the [University of Texas-Pan American](http://University of Texas-Pan American), was a hard sell, but now she's hooked. She's been playing poker for about a year.

"I used to hate it, actually. I didn't get it," she said at the Gaslight. But her boyfriend taught her the ropes, playing for Christmas candy. "Now we don't get enough of it," she said. "I've met so many people, lots of different personalities."

She plays home games for money occasionally, but she said she likes playing for points better.

At Valley Club games, players sign in, are given a number and play at assigned tables. The points they earn are listed on the company's Web site, [www.valleyclubpoker.com](http://www.valleyclubpoker.com). It takes about three hours to play a session and whittle down several eight-player tables to one winner. Each player gets chips totaling \$1,100 — not real dollars — at the start of a session. A player is out once he or she runs out of chips. The session winners get trophies, and the top 64 players each month go to a special tournament and play for prizes like a big screen TV and a trip to Las Vegas.

"This is one of the biggest things to sweep the nation," said 36-year-old John Brown, who sat at a table with seven other players during the first session at Hotties on a recent Tuesday. "It's a friendly competition. It becomes like a little family."

Budweiser airship lights hanging over pool tables dimly lit the pub, along with neon signs on the wall and a few other scattered bits of light. There were 66 players for the first session that night and Ron Rodriguez, who is 45 years old and lives in Weslaco, expected more for the second session. A recent tournament at Graham Central Station drew 85 players for the first session and 101 for the second.

Husbands and wives play, as do businessmen and landscapers. "Everybody's equal at the table," Brown said.

The spirit of competition attracts Brown, who lives in North McAllen and plays poker with his 9-year-old daughter, who watches it on TV. The former AOL/Time Warner technician who now publishes and edits a local magazine also plays for the prizes.

A trophy he won after a couple weeks playing is on his mantle at home. "Everybody wants the trophy," he said.

Prestige is important at the local tournaments, and although the millions of dollars to be won at the World Series of Poker would be nice, Brown said the national attention would be even better.

"This is kind of like practice for a lot of people," he said. "You're never playing the cards. You're always playing the people."

The adrenaline rush that comes from getting a good hand makes the games addictive, Brown said, and many players don't confine themselves to gambling-free poker evenings at the bars.

Nationwide phenomenon

Online poker is also popular and has become more so as televised games draw an ever-larger audience.

ESPN has been showing poker since 1994 as one- or two-part series. But 2003 was the year it really took off, with seven one-hour broadcasts of the World Series of Poker. While the early shows rated well, said spokeswoman Keri Potts, "I don't know if we thought we'd see it go to 32 episodes this year."

The popularity of televised poker and the growth of the online poker industry have fed off each other, said Mike Edwards, the business development manager for absolutepoker.com, which boasts that it offers the fourth largest online poker room in the world.

"There's a strong correlation between the two," Edwards said. "It's a mutual growth. Our traffic is constantly increasing."

Founded in 2003, the business has grown from a four-person team to 300 employees in offices in Costa Rica and Canada. Edwards did not provide specific data on site traffic.

Online poker outfits advertise on the television shows and sponsor players.

"Poker has suddenly gone from underground to mainstream," said Anthony Munnely, vice president of sports and events for sportsinteraction.com. The site started as a sports book in 1997 and began offering online poker last year.

"In the last year, what had been bubbling under suddenly came to a boil," Munnely said.

The television shows have also helped at least one local retailer.

Sales of poker tables, chips, cards and Texas Hold 'em kits have increased 60 to 70 percent at Academy Sports & Outdoor in McAllen since the poker broadcasts became popular, said Larry De Los Santos, a salesman in the sports department.

There is also a correlation between the television exposure and people's interest in traveling to Las Vegas, said Tyri Squyres, spokeswoman for Las Vegas-based Allegiant Air, which began direct flights from McAllen to Sin City in June.

"One of the reasons they're coming is poker," Squyres said.

"It's getting bigger and bigger."

At the Gaslight, where cheers went up for the Houston Astros during the "other" World Series, Guerrero had finally run out of chips.

He ended up playing a consolation game and reminisced about his online poker days. "I lost too much money," he said. Over the two years he's been playing poker, he estimates he's spent more than \$1,000 on betting, his own table and chips.

Playing with people face to face offers advantages to online play. "You can read somebody's eyes," Guerrero said. Players catch others bluffing. "Some people give it away. In person, you can pretty much tell."

There's another advantage to Valley Club Poker nights.

"Here, you're having fun for free," Guerrero said.

Valley Club is partnered with 10 bars for 12 games a week in McAllen, Mission and Laredo, and Ron Rodriguez is working on expanding his business to the Mid-Valley and Brownsville.

As long as the televised poker games keep piquing people's interest, he will likely find plenty of players to fill his tables wherever he goes in the Valley.

"The World Series has had a big impact on everybody," he said. "People think they can sharpen their skills and make it."

His son, Ronnie, who plans to study business and marketing at [UTPA](#), said the venture is booming, fed by people who need their poker fix.

"It's exploding, man," he said. "It's getting bigger and bigger."

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