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It's always poker night on campus

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

Every Sunday at 6 p.m., coast to coast, more than a thousand college students go online to compete for scholarship money in the qualifying rounds of a national poker tournament.



University of Georgia students during the finals of a Texas Hold'em tournament.

By Jeff Blake, AP

Others play the hot poker game Texas Hold'em in all-night tournaments, at campus fundraisers, in dorm rooms with friends, or increasingly, on the Internet.

Poker, once a pastime for cowboys in Wild West saloons but now a cash cow for cable TV, is at the forefront of a gambling craze that has swept colleges nationwide.

"The popularity of poker is absolutely phenomenal," says Elizabeth George, chief executive of the North American Training Institute, which specializes in dealing with problems of youth gambling. "It is head and shoulders over other types of college gambling."

"The word, conservatively, is 'epidemic,'" says Edward Looney, executive director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey. He attributes poker's surge to its glamorization on TV shows such as Bravo's *Celebrity Poker Showdown* and to the accessibility of the Internet and credit cards.

Half of college men say they have gambled on cards at least once a month this year, up from 45% in 2004, according to a study released in September by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. About 15% of them played at least once a week in 2005, up from 2% in 2002. Only 1.6% of

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college women said they played weekly this year.

Card players are more likely than other gamblers to go online, the report says. It cites a fivefold increase in weekly Internet betting since 2002.

Experts say poker's popularity is the result of a trend toward greater acceptance of gambling in the USA ? from horse racing in the 1930s to bingo, lotteries, riverboats, Indian casinos and the Internet. Toy stores now sell poker sets, and public colleges offer courses and even majors on gambling and casinos.

"Gambling has become a more mainstream activity," says Dan Romer, director of the Annenberg survey. He calls it a "worrisome" trend. "Younger people are more prone to addiction than older people. Some kids who play will get hooked."

The survey found that 54.5% of young people who gambled weekly reported at least one problem, including overspending or social withdrawal. It says card players reported more problems than other gamblers. Of those who gambled at least once a month, 10% said they owe people money as a result.

This month in Allentown, Pa., Lehigh University student Greg Hogan robbed a bank to pay off a \$5,000 debt incurred through online poker, according to his attorney, John Waldron.

Hogan, 19, appears an unlikely bandit. President of his sophomore class and son of a Baptist minister, he also played second-chair cello in the university orchestra and worked in the chaplain's office.

But Waldron says Hogan got addicted to poker in college and started borrowing money. "It just got him in the hole. It overwhelmed him," Waldron says. "He made a decision that just wasn't him."

"We're seeing a lot of good kids with gambling problems," Looney says that 5% of gamblers develop serious problems.

Those seeking help are "anxious, depressed ? they feel alone, isolated," says Dennis Heitzmann, a psychologist who has been director of counseling services at Pennsylvania State University for 20 years.

Many counseling centers are ill-equipped to deal with gambling addiction, says Clayton Neighbors, a psychiatry professor at the University of Washington. He says the problem is generally less understood than alcohol or drug abuse. He says college students, away from home for the first time, are vulnerable. "They are in that period where they're willing to experiment with almost anything," he says.

"We're not communicating adequately the risks," says Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling. "Government, which typically deals with these issues, has a conflict of interest," he says, because states profit from gambling ventures such as casinos and lotteries.

Those who've been addicted know the rush, and the risks.

"It was a euphoric feeling. It was a need, a drug," says Paul Delvacchio, 40, a married

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father of two in Marietta, Calif., who started gambling at age 16. He was accused in March of embezzling \$500,000 from his company to cover gambling debts, mostly from Internet sports bets. He could face at least four years in prison.

College players say they play to socialize and, if they're lucky, to win a few bucks.

Jeremy Olisar, an honors student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh who won a free semester of tuition in October from a tournament sponsored by Absolute Poker, says he plays a few hours a week.

"My passion is definitely music," says Olisar, who has a double major of clarinet and music performance. He bets money sometimes but says poker is not addictive for him. He likes the logic and mental challenge of the game.

"I like the competition involved," says Chad Flood, 21, a junior at the University of Minnesota. In May, he defeated about 25,000 competitors to win \$41,000 in scholarship money in the second annual College Poker Championship.

The tournament's host, Lou Krieger, expects this year's final round in June to draw 40,000 students, who qualify by playing well in the weekly Sunday games. There is no cost to enter.

Flood played chess in grade school, but by junior high he considered it a bit "nerdy." As a kid, he played poker, and in high school he learned Texas Hold'em. He plays with buddies on campus, but if he's serious, he goes online. "You don't want to take your friends' money."

Before the tournament win, he says, he won nearly \$4,000 in bets. He sees poker as a hobby, but he watches what he spends. "I recommend keeping track," says the economics major. "You need to know how to manage your money."

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