

Lucky Dog Poker: Amateur watches his 'poker dream come true' on network TV

by Russ_Scott

Watching himself play against five top pros last week on NBC's "Poker After Dark" was "as enjoyable as it was being there," amateur Arnold Thimons said Saturday after the sixth and final recorded episode aired.

Missing, however, was the nerve-racking part.

Thimons, who won a \$20,000 seat on the show for free by qualifying online, knew how the match ended, of course. At the October taping in Las Vegas, he finished third in his pursuit of the \$120,000 winner-take-all prize. For him, however, the experience was the pinnacle of his poker-playing lifetime.

"As far as poker goes, I don't think anything can top this, other than maybe winning the World Series," he said during the show's recap episode. He has a point.

The format allows the online qualifier to select which pros he'll face. Thimons (silent "h," rhymes with Simmons) chose Johnny Chan ("best in the world"), Daniel Negreanu ("most popular player today"), Mike Matusow ("a great player who's fun at the table"), Phil Laak ("a really nice guy and super player") and Jennifer Tilly ("well, because she's Jennifer Tilly!").

Even at a World Series event, it's unlikely you'd get the chance to compete at the same table against that many big-time players.

The downside is that you have only a slim shot to win.

Still, Thimons took the opportunity seriously, studying up on his opponents for about three months prior to the match at the Golden Nugget. He formulated a game plan that gave him a good chance to make it to the final two or three, at which point in a poker game almost anything can happen.

The 44-year-old amateur from Greensburg, Pa., decided he would play tight early then switch up his game late, fold weak Ace-rag hands out of position and expose his hole cards to lull the pros into thinking he was nervous, inexperienced and easy to beat.

The plan worked on some levels, but not all.

For example, folding most of his A-x hands " and there were quite a few " proved to be smart because almost every time, someone acting behind him had a better hand. He likely would have finished fifth or sixth without sticking to that part of his strategy.

What backfired, however, was giving the pros added information by showing his hand too often when he folded. His opponents realized they could force Thimons to fold good hands with well-timed bluffs. By the time Thimons started pushing back, he was at a big chip disadvantage and couldn't recover.

Also, Thimons' game plan probably didn't factor in one other weapon the pros used against him " the power of table talk. In other words, lies. Several times, the pros said something that convinced Thimons he held a losing hand, so he stuck with his play-tight strategy and folded.

Tilly got him twice in Episode 2, for example. She talked him into folding his flopped pair of kings when she held rags and no one else was betting, then he gave her too much credit for a hand when he folded pocket jacks on a raggedy flop containing just one overcard (a queen).

After the pocket jacks hand, Arnold shook his head. "I think I should have called," he said, truthfully stating he folded a pair of jacks. Tilly maintained her ruse. "I had ace-queen. You made a good fold." She actually had a pair of sevens and was a big underdog in the hand.

In a post-match blog report at www.luckydogpoker.com, Thimons wrote, "I picked up some things on Jennifer. She talks more when she's weak."

And that's a critical lesson for any poker player, especially amateurs: Try to learn something new about the game itself or your opponents every time you play. That accumulated knowledge will pay off at some point.

One thing Thimons learned on the show that he'll cherish most is that the pros he picked were "incredibly genuine people who couldn't have been nicer. This really was a dream come true."

He also brought joy to Chan, who beat Tilly at the end to claim a record fourth "Poker After Dark" title. On the recap show, Chan said: "Arnold, I'm glad you picked me. Thanks a lot! You just made me \$100,000 richer!"

E-mail your poker questions and comments to russ@luckydogpoker.com for use in future columns.

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