

# *Gary Lentin...*

## **and the Sun City Million Dollar Poker Tournament**



### **G**ive us the Background to Gary Lentin

I left school in 1983 and went to the Air Force where we had a law officer who gave out the leave to all the personal. A group of us would then play poker with some of the officers in the law office and when we won they would pay us by giving us extra leave days. This is where I first realised my passion for poker and from this point it would always be a part of my life.

After the Air Force I went to University where after 3 years I was presented with an opportunity to become one of the first

10 traders in futures in South Africa which I duly accepted and was still going to study part time through UNISA. After a while I did not continue my studies as I thought I was making more money than I could anywhere else and so I continued along this trading path and at the time continued playing poker. After a while I got an offer to trade the local futures, gold index, industrial index and all share index which I accepted and moved over to the JSE floor for the next 6 years which was definitely the most exciting period of my career. It was extremely stressful but also loads of fun and I made some great friends. Some of my old school friends were on the floor so it was a great time. Each day was extremely eventful and the one constant was the evenings filled with poker. I used to get to work at 7am trade like a lunatic for my clients, clock off at 6pm, hit the gym for an hour and then it was a quick bite to eat and into the poker clubs in Hillbrow.

After 6 years I left the market thinking that at 27 I had enough money to retire, but after a bit of travelling I realised that in order to keep on doing the things I enjoy I needed to get back into business. I joined a manufacturing business where I had a small share and after 3 years it went public and from there it was pretty much the same thing, go into a business I thought had potential, built it up and sold it on and throughout there was always poker, horseracing and sports betting. I was never a wild gambler but rather played the games where I thought there were profits to be made. When I was a youngster I burnt my fingers plenty of times in a casino and realised from then on that casinos are not a place I would gamble I needed the odds to be in my favour.

Then I would say about 4 years ago I went to the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas where I went to play in some of the smaller events and also to experience what it was all about. I realised then that the world was crying out for major poker tournaments and it was here that it sparked an idea. I came back to SA. At the time I had a security company which I decided to sell and it was time to venture into the poker industry.

### **So the Million Dollar idea started to unfold, how did you go about putting it all together?**

I only wanted to put the tournament in place if I could get it staged at Sun City. I immediately went about assembling a team which I thought would be the strongest to take this forward. Larry Nestadt for me was an obvious choice. He needed no introduction having been a founder of Investec and being one of the most successful businessmen in South Africa.

The reputation and financial backing that came with Larry was important as well as the fact that he has so much to teach about business and I have so much to learn. I then went to Selwyn Nathan, a very flamboyant and well known businessman who is on the panel of the 2010 Soccer World Cup bid. I presented my idea and plan for the tournament and they both dived at the idea immediately which then gave me the confidence that I was onto something great.

I set about developing my strategy and business plan which was to make the top directors at Sun International jump at the idea and back my team from the start. It is a no-brainer that Sun City would be a great venue, the hard work was getting the directors to give the go ahead. So we presented them with a no-risk plan for Sun International, we would cover all the risk of the tournament from the expenses to the guaranteed prize money and marketing and that was what sold it to them and after 3-4 months of negotiations we signed a deal and ShuffleUp Poker and the Sun City Million Dollar Poker Tournament were born.

### **Tell us about the difficulties you faced now that it was a done deal, Sun International are a tough group to please so your task was not going to be made any easier.**

You are right they are a tough group but they are fair and very professional and that is something which has made them succeed in the casino business in South Africa and around the World. In year one Sun International were extremely sceptical, they were worried we were only going to get 100 players and were also worried that there was an outside company running an event in their casino. After the success of the first tournament their views changed completely and they approached us to change our 5 year deal with them

believe that after 5 years if we are not bigger than the Aussie Millions I would not have achieved my goals.

For this year there are less obstacles but at the same time there are some important issues to sort out and mistakes to remedy from last year which I intend to do. Then of course I want to set the record straight about a few rumours and misconstrued ideas that certain parties had about the tournament last year.

Last year it was extremely sad to see some players, other tournament organisers and representatives of certain big companies in the industry bad mouth, degrade and berate a tournament that in all honesty was going to begin putting South African Poker on the map. They did not once begin to think that a tournament of this nature would assist everyone involved in the industry. Why would people want Sun City to fail? This is a question which I still have not found the answer for.

### **Tell us about the scepticism before the first event, every poker related company in South Africa had an opinion.**

I was very shocked at some of the things that were said even before the event had taken place, we all in this business to make the game of poker grow and one thing I never understood is why some companies in South Africa did not support the event from the start. I mean whether it was All Africa Poker, 3Piggspoker or SilverSands were they not going to benefit by sending players to the event or promoting it to their players? Surely it would benefit all in our industry if this event reaches its potential.

At the end of the day I pride myself that we were 100% honest, my office doors are always open and I received a lot of calls from players themselves asking me to clarify certain things they had heard. I mean I had people taking bets that I would not get 200 players to the event, I had

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and instead of them being minority share holders they wanted to come on board as full 50% shareholders and partners which we duly accepted. This year it has become so much easier as Sun International has stepped up and given us so much support. Year one was extremely tough but I had to persevere and was not going to fail. I

organisers of a certain tournament series saying that I had no agreement with Sun International and that the event was not going ahead, this was never a possibility. We had lodged guarantees and ordered all our staff and equipment as we have already done this year. I took the approach that I was not going to get involved in these



rumours and would just let them all come to Sun City and see for themselves what we could achieve.

**Do you find that there seems to be a certain apprehension for companies within the industry to support other events and to begin to realise that if all the major events in the country start striving it is better for all involved?**

You know I do not understand this concept that has been adopted, I look at SilverSands and I believe that they provide a lot more support for the local events in the market than say 3Piggs. I know for the SA Poker Open at Monti Casino 3Piggs ran a series of satellites which is great as it was one of the first major tournaments they supported outside of their All Africa tournaments but I believe they should be doing this for as many tournaments as possible. I mean it is only going to benefit them if the tournament is filled with All Africa players. Last year there were players who wore these huge All Africa Poker logos and I said nothing as I am happy if they get some exposure. I am always happy when the poker market grows and we try support as many other events that we can and see other poker tournaments as a positive for us and the industry as a whole.

I still believe that when the online gaming licences start rolling out in about 12 months time the major tournaments in South Africa are going to benefit, I mean the truth is that the monopoly we face in South Africa at the moment is going to change and the free market is going to take this industry forward. With 8 sites in South

Africa they are going to be fighting to send players to the events because they will realise that this is exposure for their brand. Why would they want to limit themselves. This is where the tournaments like the SA Poker Open and Sun City Million Dollar will benefit and receive the support they deserve and need to keep growing.

**Ok so take us through the tournament last year, what mistakes were made and what did you learn from the experience?**

I learnt that I have to lose weight because my feet were extremely sore after 6 days of running around (laughs all round) On a more serious note I learnt that even though there were people there that only wanted to criticise there were 10 times more people who were extremely positive and wanted to truly help the event to grow and be a success. One of the things I realised that there are some very jealous people out there and I learnt that I cannot waste my time trying to please the minority of people who were there to bury Caesar than to praise him. Rather I should concentrate my efforts on more positive issues. We are presenting the players in this country an opportunity to play against the best players in the world, to play for prize money of an international standard and to have a great weekend and experience what poker is all about. All this at a fantastic venue.

**From my experience you also need players to come with right attitude as there is always going to be some mistakes made.**

Exactly, players must come with the

right attitude, I learnt that I could not convince people to have a great time, if people want to come there and be negative there is nothing I can do to change that attitude. I tried everything to get the players the best value that I could, from cheaper hotel rooms to rounds of golf, I am not Super Man and I will not get everything right but I will always make the effort. This year we have added many new features and ideas that will make things run even smoother than last year and we have also included plenty of additional tournaments and cash games to increase the players options.

**Now to the tough question, the burning issue from the whole event was the story around the rake and the confusion around how much rake was taken. Rumours were flying on the forums and amongst players that ShuffleUp had taken nearly R4 million from the pot and you only paid the \$1.1 Million, I think you have remained silent on the issue but could you set the record straight for our readers and perhaps we can once and for all put this issue to rest and begin to focus on what lies in store this year rather than what happened last year?**

You know you are exactly right; I have remained silent as I did not want to focus any attention on something which we apparently did wrong but rather concentrated on the positives from the event. I have wanted to have my say and set the record straight but I wanted it done in a professional manner and I wanted a medium that was professional so hence our interview together today. So here's what happened...

For the event we guaranteed \$1, 1 Million which was 3 times bigger than any prize pool this country has seen in poker tournaments. We took that risk and put our own money straight into Sun International's trust account and at the end of the day if just you and Peter Vermaas rocked up and played the event you would have played for the \$1.1 Million, there was no backing down from us. At the end of the day I am here to make money too, I am a businessman and I would also like at some stage to realise a profit in this event. But having said that I am not going to ever reach this goal if I rip off the players who are the sole reason an event is either successful or a failure. In other words we carried a tremendous amount of risk and surely we are entitled to some reward for our courage and work that we do.

If we take a step back and look what happened at the heads-up tournament just before the main event, ShuffleUp took a 4.5% rake which was not even enough to

cover the lighting and staff bill for that event. But we did it as we thought it would be great exposure for the event and I will predict right now that the heads-up tournament at Sun City will be the biggest heads-up tournament in the world in 5 years time. This will also help the local poker industry get world wide exposure.

Then we get to the main event and as I said ShuffleUp guaranteed \$1.1 Million, my staff and I worked like animals day and night for 3 months. We brought the South African market an opportunity to play in a world class tournament and the opportunity to play with a world champion in Joe Hachem. This is not something which many players will experience everyday and let's be honest we all want to win a million rand but to play for an opportunity to win 4 million rand? That is life changing and something which people who entered must also realise. As I said earlier the major poker companies in South Africa were only providing negative support and we were fighting all these ridiculous rumours and we still went out and did exactly what we promised to do.

Then the event concludes and all the negative minority who were earlier running around laughing at how much money ShuffleUp was going to lose and how much of a failure it was going to be suddenly changed their tune and started screaming about how much money we made and how we ripped off the players. None of them had any idea about what actually happened.

I went out to the poker market and on the invitation it stated how much money we were guaranteeing for the entry fee you pay and I never thought that I would then have to justify how much money I made on top of that guarantee, but I was wrong, the poker public want to know exactly how much money you make but at the same time they are NOT interested in how much an event like this costs to stage. All they are interested in is how much you got in and how much you are paying out never mind the expenses. But having said that we are a company in the public eye and we do want to be transparent, so I am going to lay out a few facts about what happened.

The announcer at the tournament, Rick Usherwood, was in his first event that he hosted and at the end of the re-buy and add-on period he stood up and said congratulations to everyone and incorrectly announced that we had taken in R14 Million instead of saying that there were 14 Million in chips in play after the re-buy and add-on period. Now you can imagine what this did for the trouble stirrers, they had spent the whole week trying to look for things to complain about and it was just given to them on a platter. So onto their

little soap boxes they jumped and began their ranting.

Now I want to clarify the situation, and as I have said you can put my email address at the end of this article and any of your readers are welcome to contact if they have any other queries. Fact, there were 14 Million worth of chips in play and not R14 Million in entries and rebuys. ShuffleUp Poker took in exactly R10, 020 000 and we paid out over R9 Million in prize money and special gifts. Players did not take into

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account that the value of that \$1.1 Million prize guarantee was not R7 Million but actually over R8 Million and that the last lady in the field received a diamond worth R250, 000, the trophy designed by Jenna Clifford was R60, 000 and together with over R350, 000 in freebies the total paid out was comfortably over the R9 Million mark which if we do not add any other expenses means I took in less than 10% of the rake for ShuffleUp Poker.

There is an added complication of free rolled players. People ask why the free rolled players should not count towards the prize pool? I say because a player like Joe Hachem is in the field it brings in another 15 - 20 players and those 15-20 people add to the prize pool. In the figure of just over 10 million that I said we collected I have included all the free rolled players as if they had paid up, and we will continue to do this in future years. This can be viewed right at my office and I welcome anybody who wishes to verify this to give me a call.

Once again I will say it, if we had to make an excessive profit after taking into account all other expenses we would definitely add to the prize pool. This is not because we have to but because we want to show some gratitude to the players and to encourage them to keep returning to the event. We want to be as fair as possible but for any business to continue it has to make commercial sense and I must try get this balance correct.

**So let's go onto a more lighter note, tell us what we can expect this year from the events planned to the celebrities we can expect to take part.**

Ok, firstly we are extending the heads-up tournament to 32 players, last year it was so successful and I think it is one of the greatest formats in the industry. The face of

the tournament will be Shannon Elizabeth, we also have Shane Warne coming, obviously he needs no introduction and the one reason why I am bringing these two in particular is that they are approachable and are not there to just show their faces but will be here to win the tournament and to make everybody at the events stay more enjoyable. We will also be bringing at least 2-3 of the top ten professionals in the world to Sun City; I don't want to release their names at this point but will be doing so

after the WSOP concludes. Just to wet the poker publics appetite I will say that we have been approached by Scotty Nguyen and Patrik Antonius' agents as they are both really keen to be here this year. There will be others as well but I don't want to give away to many secrets to early.

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We will also be ironing out some of the mistakes from last year, we have 15 models that have been hired to take care of the players requirements while at the tournament thereby making life much easier for all our players. This year there will definitely be a full gala dinner at the Valley of the Waves on the Thursday night and then of course there will be golf times for the players as well as spa times for the ladies. We hoping for 400-450 players for the main event and we will be adding another event to the schedule which will be announced soon.

We are also getting the best accommodation rates possible for the players and we are just asking all players to come to Sun City and enjoy themselves as the event is going to really be bigger than last year and ShuffleUp Poker is going to be pulling out all the stops in making the 2008 event one to remember. Whether it's the huge prizes, the great venue, the opportunity to play with celebrities and world class poker players or just to be apart of Africa's biggest poker event I assure you that no one will be disappointed this year. ■