

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Poker holds aces in fund-raising today

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A Night at the Races is put out to pasture.

Monte Carlo night is passe.

The newest fund-raising event in Western Pennsylvania is poker -- specifically Texas Hold 'Em.

Fire companies, schools and church groups from Montour to Monessen, from Bower Hill to Bentleyville, are using the game -- "As seen on TV," signs and fliers trumpet -- to fill sponsors' coffers.

"It's the new fund-raiser for the millennium," said Sara Lazzara, of the city's Banksville section, an event planner who runs Sara's Hold 'Em. She has organized poker games for 15 years.

The Pittsburgh area has at least one tournament every weekend.

For a buy-in of about \$125, poker players can get the equivalent of thousands of dollars in chips and a meal -- all in support of a local sports team, fire company or church group.

The tournaments, though, can bring their own ethical -- if not legal -- dilemmas.

Skip Ebert, president of the Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association, said poker games in which the house takes a cut are illegal. But each district attorney is free to handle it on a case-by-case basis.

"There are a lot of nuances," said Ebert, district attorney for Cumberland County. "It's very hard to police."

Dormont police Chief Russ McKibben, president of the Pennsylvania Chiefs of Police Association, said the association has no policy regarding poker games.

"We don't even go there," he said. "You can't win. ... Are you going to shut down a volunteer fire company's poker night?"

John Shepner, a funeral director who is president of the Montour Basketball Boosters, watched a poker tournament at Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Robinson. There was no conversation, no fellowship.

"I run funerals that are more fun," he said.

Shepner said he's worried the tournaments will attract "semi-pro" players rather than parishioners or boosters. Still, the basketball boosters plan a Nov. 6 tournament at the Forest Grove Fire Hall in Kennedy.

Most players at Holy Trinity Church's poker night were local or had local ties -- drawn to the game because they love playing it or out of curiosity, having seen it on television.

Joe Davidson of Swissvale, one of the dealers at the Holy Trinity tournament, said broadcasts of poker tournaments in Las Vegas on ESPN led to the spike in interest.

"TV's done it all," he said.

Tracy Hoge, of North Fayette, said she learned how to play the game through osmosis -- her husband, neighbors and friends played. She participated in her first tournament at the Holy Trinity event.

Hoge said she had butterflies in her stomach and felt a little intimidated.

"I couldn't even eat," she said.

Hoge made her goal, surviving the first raising of the blinds -- the initial bets in each game -- after 15 minutes.

She was not the first person out of the tournament. That dubious distinction went to Ken McArdle of Collier.

"That's poker," he said. "Sometimes it's your night. Sometimes it's not."

Schepner said one reason he came to the Holy Trinity Tournament -- run by Pittsburgh Hold 'Em of Castle Shannon -- was to see how the company ran the tournament.

Several companies have sprouted up to run poker tournaments. Representatives said they haven't encountered any legal problems.

Sara's Hold 'Em runs at least two tournaments a weekend. Pittsburgh Hold 'Em conducts about two a month.

Pittsburgh Hold 'Em, which formed about three months ago to respond to the demand, collected a fee of \$120 per player.

Here's how that fee was distributed:

- Holy Trinity Athletic Association received \$20 for its volleyball team.
- Pittsburgh Hold 'Em got another \$20 for bringing tabletops, chips, cards and dealers.
- The remaining \$80 goes into the pot.

With 89 people playing at Holy Trinity, \$7,120 was paid out to the Top 10

finishers. Typically, payouts range from 60 to 90 percent of the gate.

Some organizations offer players a meal. Holy Trinity parents cooked for the tournament. Pittsburgh Hold 'Em took in \$1,780 for the night. So did the athletic association.

"We were real happy with that," said Dianne Ritter, one of the organizers.

Most of the players at the Holy Trinity tournament were men -- which amused the women playing or working at the tournament.

"It's like bingo for men," Ritter said.

Not quite, said Charles Klein, president of National Bingo Corp. in Linden, N.J.

Klein said his business, which serves New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, has received inquiries about poker equipment. He said bingo remains the nation's most popular gambling activity. He said New Jersey has 7,500 bingo games a week -- about one for every 1,100 of the Garden State's 8.6 million residents.

In the past year, the Allegheny County Treasurer's Office has issued 400 bingo licenses. The office issues four types -- general, senior, limited and recreational.

Klein, however, said he can't deny the increased popularity of Texas Hold 'Em.

"It's probably something we will be doing in the not-too-distant future," he said.

HOW TO PLAY

Games are typically five to 10 players.

The player to the left of the dealer makes a bet. The next player to the left makes another bet, which is usually the minimum bet set before the cards are dealt and twice the amount of the first player's bet.

Each player is dealt two "pocket" cards, which are face-down. Another round of betting ensues.

The dealer then issues three cards, face-up, into the center of the table. It's called "the flop."

After another bet, the dealer turns over another card -- "the turn."

After one more bet, the final card is turned over -- the river.

Players then form the best hand from their pocket cards and the five on the table.