

# Cigar Snob

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## The RUM ISSUE



# Q&A WITH CHRIS MONEYMAKER

Chris Moneymaker stunned the poker world and ushered in a new era in the game when in 2003 he became the first person to win the Main Event at the World Series of Poker after qualifying in online play.

INTERVIEW BY BY SEAN CHAFFIN



PHOTO: Neil Stoddart

**Moneymaker.** Even many who don't play poker on a regular basis know the name. It's become synonymous with the poker boom in the 2000s, when every other TV channel was airing some kind of poker tournament or high-stakes cash game. Chris Moneymaker's rise from \$86 online qualifier to 2003 World Series of Poker champion and winner of \$2.5 million helped make poker a sensation with repeats on regular rotation on ESPN. The game moved from the basement or casino back room to the bright lights of a television stage – and that growing popularity was attributed to the "Moneymaker Effect." He made the dream of an amateur beating the pros a reality.

Throughout 2018, the poker champ from Knoxville, Tennessee, crisscrossed the country as part of the Moneymaker Tour. His sponsor and where he won that initial qualifier, PokerStars.com, hoped to make the regular Joe dream a repeat performance. The company offered \$86 tournaments for the shot at a Platinum Pass, which gave these lucky players a \$30,000 package that included a \$25,000 entry into the PokerStars Player Championship (PSPC) in the Bahamas at the

Atlantis resort. The event included a field of amateurs and some of the best players in the world.

This summer marks the 50th anniversary of the WSOP. I caught up with Moneymaker in the Bahamas to discuss cigars, his poker life, and life on the road playing cards.

► **Can you tell me about your first cigar? Where did you first light up and what was that experience like?**

I don't remember where it was, but I do remember basically wanting to die because I inhaled the hell out of it. I was a cigarette smoker back then and it was in high school, probably 18 years old I guess.

I do remember inhaling the hell out of it because I didn't know any better. If you inhale a cigar it's not going to turn out very well. It's not the most pleasurable experience. Cigars are not supposed to be inhaled like that. So my first experience with a cigar was not very good. I got a mouthful of ... whatever it is when you don't cut your cigar right. We didn't know any better. And then I took a big puff and inhaled, and it was just not a very fun time.

► **Hopefully after that you figured out how to make it a more pleasurable experience.**

Obviously once you figure out how to cut it properly and how you're supposed to smoke, it becomes much more enjoyable. I like having a cigar when I have wine. It's a really good mix. I'm not educated enough to know the difference between a really good cigar and a bad cigar. I can tell you what cigar tastes terrible. I'm not a big fan of sweet cigars. I like a really big, round, earthy cigar. I don't like flavors of fruits or anything like that.

But if you were to go buy me a Cuban versus another type, I'm probably not going to be able to tell you the difference between the two. But I do know that just sitting out on the patio and having a conversation with a glass of wine and cigars is always really enjoyable. It's a nice way to relax, it's my form of meditation.

I also usually smoke cigars when I play golf out in California. We'll get there a couple of hours early and we usually walk about three or four miles before, and smoke a cigar and just talk and have a good time. We're always smoking cigars on the golf course.

► **Do you have a favorite brand for those trips to the West Coast or for some smoking on that patio?**

I used to smoke a bit more and it was always Cohiba. Those are the ones I knew, so they're the ones I always went to. Also I know that there are Cohibas that are Cubans and Cohibas that aren't Cubans. I somehow got my hands on some Cuban Cohibas. I couldn't tell the difference, but when you're smoking them they're supposed to be so much better.

► **This Platinum Pass/Players Championship really took the poker world by storm with both recreational players and pros in 2018 and early 2019. You've probably played more cards in the last year than you've played in a long time. Can you describe this whole experience crisscrossing the country for something like this?**

When they developed this tournament, we didn't really know what we were going to do with it. But when they developed the Moneymaker Tour I was excited because I love those events. Anything under \$500 price points, I've got a ton of fans and it's going to be exciting. Everybody's going to have more fun than take it so serious.

► **And that's been a big trend in the game, trying to bring the fun back to poker, right?**

Yes, it's nice. At Stones Gambling Hall [near Sacramento, California] for example, I think we had probably 20 people go out on the back porch and were just all smoking cigars. That's where I'd go out and smoke usually. So we took 20 of the players and they had a smoking room out there. We smoked cigars and hung out after we busted the tournament, which is no fun. It was nice to sit out there and hang out.

But the tour itself was incredible – going from stop to stop and seeing all these people who had never played poker before or were new to poker or haven't

played poker in years, and come out and play in this event. It was incredible. This was the first tournament I've played in 15 years where no one complained, which is pretty weird and rare in the poker world.

► **Let's shift to your World Series of Poker Main Event win in 2003. Beyond the money, how did that change your life just on a day-to-day basis? You're not a movie star or a pop singer, really just a regular guy and now there is so much fame involved. How often do people recognize you or ask you to pose for pictures?**

Obviously it changed my life significantly. I said it wasn't going to, but it had to. When you have basically an effect named after you, it's going to change your life whether you like it or not. So I quit my job like eight months later and my home life is obviously different than what it would have been if I hadn't won. I think my home life is pretty normal. It's basically getting up in the morning, taking the kids to school, picking them up, and taking them to all their different practices and games. Just a normal life – putting them to bed and doing the same thing over again. In my everyday life at home, I'm not doing pictures or a whole lot of that kind of stuff.

Once I hit the road then that all changes. It's essentially like I have two different lives when I'm at home versus while on the road. When I'm on the road, I know that I'm going to be in a casino. If I'm in a casino I'm going to be doing a lot of pictures, a lot of autographs, a lot of interviews, and when I'm at home I'm just a dad.

► **With so much time at casinos and at the tables, do you still get a lot of joy from playing cards?**

Oh yeah. Especially this year. For me it woke me up to the fact that we're very privileged in what we get to do. Handing out these passes and seeing people cry, and how excited they get from the fact this is a bucket list item for them, it really wakes you up to the fact that I get to do this for a living. How cool is that?

Obviously as you do it over time you become a little bit numb to it, but I definitely still enjoy playing poker. I don't think I play poker as much as I did in the past, but I still play a lot of poker. I was playing a \$220 Sit and Go with fans last night. Tyson Apostol from "Survivor" was playing and everybody was having a good time.

► **Have you ever had any strange requests from players or fans?**

I guess it depends how you quantify weird. I've had people pull up and ask for an autograph at my house while my kids were playing in the driveway, which is weird.

► **Did you still sign something for them?**

Yeah. I didn't like them pulling up in the driveway, but yes I signed it for them. I get a lot of fan mail asking to sign different things, sign different body parts.

► **I have to ask what body part.**

It's not really strange, but a bunch of them were boobs.

► **So it's like you're really a rock star?**

I don't sign that many boobs. My wife likes this comment, but the problem with being a poker rock star is it's mostly dudes. Sometimes they're boobs, but they're not really the boobs you want to sign. But boobs are few and far between.

Sometimes you get random stuff in the mail, where someone has a million pictures of you and wants you to sign them all and send them back to them. And it's like, "Wow, I didn't know this many pictures existed of me." You come across some weird things here and there, but for the most part everybody's pretty normal.

► **Okay, back to poker. The growth of the game slowed a bit after the federal government basically shut down online poker in 2011. But in recent years, there seems to have been a rebound. Is that what you're seeing out there as you've traveled on the Moneymaker Tour?**

Yeah for sure. Obviously in 2003, we had this really good-looking guy win the tournament and exploded the game, but the growth was never going to be sustainable. We were growing so fast, but eventually it had to stop. You can't just continue on that uptrend forever. It had to plateau at some point, and then obviously we plateaued. Not only did we plateau, but we had Black Friday, which took a lot of the advertising dollars out of the market. And when you take the advertising dollars out of the market, a lot of the recognition or a lot of the buzz

kind of goes away and that that void is filled by things such as Esports or Daily Fantasy Sports or sports betting or whatever.

We had a void where there wasn't a whole lot of poker advertising or poker marketing going on, especially in the U.S. It had gone more overseas. You have Brazil, India, China – all of these are really emerging markets and growing really fast. The European market really matured over those years and if you were to travel to the European Poker Tour, you'd see the numbers are growing over there. Just in the U.S., it obviously looked like poker 'died.'

Now with states starting to regulate and starting to legalize, and sports betting definitely gets the gambling talk going, people were getting back into poker. People tried the DFS [Daily Fantasy Sports] or tried Esports, but if you're 21 it's really hard to play video games. I'm not very good. I've tried to play Fortnite with my son. I've tried to play all these games. I'm just better at poker. Poker is more interesting to me.

So I think just with the advertising coming back into the market, you're getting buzz again and with Twitch you're seeing people get back in the game. The difference between now and 10 years ago is players are more knowledgeable. There are so many more resources out there where people can learn and come into the game prepared.

► **When not playing poker or representing PokerStars, do you have any other business interests you're involved in?**

I'm a little bit in the cannabis business. That and crypto are the two things I really follow. I've got a small share in CBD [a chemical compound found in cannabis plant and used to treat a wide range of health issues without the euphoric effects associated with THC] oil business and then I'm looking at potentially doing something in the whiskey business. You buy barrels of whiskey and you hold them for four years, and they buy them back from you. Or you can just keep them and rebrand them to create your own whiskey brand. You pay like \$800 for a barrel of whiskey and it sits there, and they give you \$1,600 in four years.

► **We could possibly see Moneymaker whiskey? It's got a nice ring to it.**

I don't know. We'll see.

► **Back to gambling. I know you've been a pretty regular sports bettor. What's your involvement with PokerStars' betting brand BetStars?**

I've been working with the BetStars for two years and love it. It's fun. They asked me to offer insights and analysis, and make picks. Between myself and Jason Somerville we've been doing that going on a year and a half, and I imagine now that PokerStars has partnered with the UFC, there's going to be a lot more UFC content coming out from PokerStars doing analysis and picks. Obviously BetStars will be on the forefront of offering different opportunities within the UFC platform and I think PokerStars just signed a deal with the NBA to offer a platform there. It's definitely something I want to be involved in.

I have a meeting in about two hours with the higher ups at PokerStars and I'm sure a lot of that's going to be discussed – some of the things I want to do and that's definitely high on my list. That includes being involved in creating content and being involved in getting the word out about those services. We also have a fantasy site. It's only in four states right now, but it's something I want to push as well.

► **Lastly, what are some things you have planned for 2019?**

My goal for 2019 is to really work on my social media and get a YouTube channel going, and maybe do some vlogging and things like that. Look out for my social media stuff hopefully going into 2019. I'm getting old to start that, but I'm young at heart. The game keeps you young and it seems especially for PokerStars, that's where a lot of things are going. I imagine myself going that way, and trying to get into that. I saw a really cool camera the other day that I want, so I'm going to give it a shot.

Sean Chaffin is a freelance writer in Crandall, Texas. His work appears in numerous websites and publications. Follow him on Twitter @PokerTraditions.