



A Seat At The World's Most Famous Home Game



ALL IN tangles with Steve Dannenmann and the New Cut Crew on their turf **BY JIM MERCURIO**

WHEN PREVIOUSLY ANONYMOUS "everyman" Steve Dannenmann finished second in the 2005 World Series of Poker Main Event, he won \$4.5-million. Some people might go on crazy spending sprees after such a score, but not Dannenmann. He's really only tapped into the winnings to spend on one thing: remodeling the poker paradise that is his basement.

After I interviewed Steve prior to the 2006 World Series of Poker, I asked him if I could play in his home game outside of Baltimore next time I was on the east coast. In December, I was visiting some

friends in D.C. and gave Steve a call. It was perfect timing. He was having two new poker tables and a customized chip set delivered for the game. This was going to be the first time that his buddies in the "New Cut Crew," a group made famous on those ESPN broadcasts in which Steve claimed to be only the fourth-best player in his home game, were going to see their refurbished arena.

Steve gave me the tour of the space, which contained a shuffleboard, the two poker tables, his wall of fame (photos of him posed with some of poker's finest), a

kitchen area, and two large flatscreen TVs, which, of course, were showing this year's WSOP. In case there is a poker fan alive who doesn't know it, Dannenmann is an accountant who kept his day job after his World Series windfall. But he is just as handy with a hammer as he is with a calculator; he did most of the work on the basement himself.

It was exciting to watch Steve's buddies show up and see the basement for the first time. Most are college-educated but with blue-collar roots—guys who will wear loose (not baggy) jeans and a t-shirt or

sweatshirt for a guy's night out. And one only has to take a step into the bathroom to see that this really is *guy's* night out. Yes, it's true, Steve has his very own urinal.

The night started with a \$200 buy-in tournament. And if any officials from the state of Maryland are reading this, please note, that, by "tournament," I mean imaginary event played with fictitious money. There were also re-buys for the first hour of said make-believe contest.

Steve and I drew the same table. Because the New Cut Crew takes poker seriously, the blind structure was pretty reasonable: \$5,000 in starting chips, 20-minute levels. The courtesy and stiff formality of "Don't bust Jim or the **ALL IN** article will be really short," lasted only about 10 minutes. After a player named Nick doubled up against Steve, he check-raised me and we exchanged a litany of epithets that only one Italian may say to another.

Mark Schaech (better known as "bubble bitch" to his friends), who finished 201 spots ahead of me in 33rd place in 2006's opening WSOP event—slow-played top two pair (A-J) and let Steve spike a set on the turn. Re-buy! I was completely card-dead, so my A-Q under the gun looked

like pocket aces, and I raised. When an ace flopped, I fired out a continuation bet, but then got min-raised by a guy named Eric Nickerson, whose company manufactures Big Slik Poker Tables. I pondered it for a while, but I couldn't call a raise with A-Q from a guy whose company is named after A-K. He later told me that he did indeed have that hand.

Steve and I got to mix it up in one pot. He slow-played two pair on the flop and raised me on the turn. As a courtesy, he showed me his cards. Later, I flashed him my "Hachem"—a 7-3 offsuit, the cards that Joe Hachem beat Steve with in the final hand of the 2005 Main Event, and

told him that I should have played it. He said, "That hurts, Jimmy."

Over the course of the evening, I learned why Carl Kolchak wasn't a poker player. It's hard to bring your "A" game when you have to stop in between hands to make pithy comments into a tape recorder. I found a spot where I was getting 4-to-1 pre-flop to call with 9s-10s. When the flop came nine-high, I shoved in all of my chips—an overbet of the pot even with my paltry stack—thinking I was going to take it down right there.

Jeffrey Lovalvo, Steve's "computer guy," took a good long minute to call. I figured that was bad news. To my surprise, he



Dannenmann's tournament table in action. TOP LEFT: Steve settles up with the delivery man. BOTTOM LEFT: The poker palace, prior to everyone's arrival.



Dannenmann and Mercurio show 'em down. TOP LEFT: Steve's "Hachem" beat Jim on the final hand of the night. BOTTOM LEFT: Dannenmann's "wall of fame."

only had three outs—any of the remaining aces. Before I could even say, "Woo hoo, you are dominated, a 7-to-1 'dog,'" an ace fell on the turn. And before he could even say, "Woo hoo, you are dominated, a 15-to-1 'dog,'" the river ragged off and I was sent to the rail. And to pour in the proverbial salt, he wouldn't even give me Steve's WiFi access code so I could check my e-mail.

Jeffrey put my chips to good use and went on to win the tournament. I asked him later to describe his play and he used the words "pretty conservative." Instead of screaming, "Conservative?! You called me with three freakin' outs," I was much more mature. I deciphered Jeffrey's secu-

rity codes, hacked into Steve's computer, and wired myself the \$200 buy-in for the ensuing ring game.

The cash game was dealer's choice for any No-Limit flop game. For some reason, everyone was calling Omaha Eight-Or-Better, a game that half of the table didn't even know how to play. During a stretch of Hold 'Em, a strange thing happened. Three times in a row while in the big blind, I picked up the "Hachem." And every single time, a miracle flop or runner-runner came that would have made me scoop a huge pot. I pulled my 7-3 out of the muck each time to show Steve and tell him, "I almost played them." His response: "That hurts, Jimmy."

I won some, I lost some, and by the end of the night I was just about even and had to survive only one obstacle: the last hand of the night. You know what I'm talking about—the last chance to get some action or get unstuck. So of course, the remaining five of us saw a flop for \$15 each. I was in the small blind with 3-4. The flop came 3-5-6. *What the hell, I'm open-ended*, I thought. I went all in for another \$100 or so, expecting to take the pot down. Steve, who was in the big blind, insta-called.

I thought to myself, *Oh, well, even against aces, it's a coin flip*. So what did Steve turn up? The Hachem. Yep, 7-3 offsuit. I was way behind. He called it a great read, but I think it was intended to be a donation. I got excited for a second when I rivered two pair, but that gave him the straight. Our \$200-something pot ain't exactly the Main Event, but Steve and I have bonded over our common pain. We have both lost big pots to the 7-3. And you know what? "That hurts, Stevie." 🍀

Jim Mercurio is a filmmaker, writer, and poker player. Information on his latest film, Hard Scrambled, can be found at Hardscrambled.com.

The Tale Of The Tables

Talk about customer service ... Not only do Eric Nickerson and Mike Bershada of Big Slik Poker Tables (bigslikpokertables.com) hand-make each table, they drove 825 miles themselves to deliver two tables for the "grand opening" of Steve Dannenmann's refurbished basement. The boss table has a row of lights around the rail, sturdy wooden legs, and a table-top attachment that morphs it into a dining room table. The mini-boss table is a high-end folding table with the same personalized felt and perfect softness for chip shuffling.

"All of our tables are made to order," Bershada explained. "Our goal is to give the customers exactly what they want." —JM

