“NINE MONTHS LATER, I WON THE EUROPEAN POKER TOUR IN SAN REMO FOR OVER A MILLION DOLLARS.”
What came first, poker or faith?

I grew up going to church all the time, all my family are Christian, but I struggled in my late teenage years. There was never a point when I altogether didn’t believe. It was more that I went through a phase when my belief system wasn’t as strong. I felt like, “I don’t believe the same way you guys do” or “it’s just not for me” or “I’m not really sure”. I just kind of lived my life not thinking about it.

Two years ago, I had some experiences that have led me back to God. It’s personal, but I now have a renewed faith in God and Christianity. I’m much more open to talking about it. I get into conversations fairly frequently about God, Christianity and religion.

Do you ever talk about Christianity at the poker table?

It’s rare to get into discussions or religious debates at the poker table, but when I have done, it’s been very friendly, it’s never been hostile.

I feel like I don’t know enough to debate it. A lot of times, I’ll be left wanting to ask someone, like my dad or my brother, so I’m better prepared. I’ll ask them: “If somebody says this, what do you say back?” They usually have pretty good advice.

I don’t try to convince anyone, because most people you get into conversations with aren’t really the type to get swayed by your opinion. Sometimes I get into arguments – sometimes it’s unavoidable. It starts out like, “Let’s just have a discussion.” Then it turns into: “YOU’RE WRONG.”

In general, I try to not get angry or upset, I just explain my point of view and what I believe. I might ask them a question or two to make them think about what they believe and why they believe it – to question if what they believe is accurate.

A lot of people try to argue that the earth is 4 billion years old, but in the Bible it doesn’t say how old the earth is. Besides, time doesn’t apply to God – God doesn’t operate on time, it’s a man-made instrument.

If someone quotes Nietzsche and says, “God didn’t make man, man invented God,” I say that’s just an opinion. My opinion is that God made man, and all men stem from Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman. That’s from the Bible, so it leads to all sorts of arguments about whether the Bible is accurate – and that’s a whole new debate.

How do you feel about you playing poker?

Initially, it was a major issue. When I first started playing, I knew they’d be against it, so I kept it a secret. I played poker with my friends and didn’t tell them.

When I was 18, I started playing online. When my parents found out, it was a big problem and it became an ongoing struggle between us. There were multiple issues – it wasn’t just poker. I was missing classes and flunking out of school, so they were very much against everything I was doing. They told me I couldn’t come home… so I had to figure out what I was going to do and where I was going to live. I stayed with a friend for the summer, then went to my parents and told them I was going to stop playing poker.

I stopped for two months. Then I started playing again, and kept it from my parents. After a while, I couldn’t hide it anymore – I told them I was playing. I said they could kick me out if they wanted to, but I explained why I thought it was different to gambling and why I wanted to keep doing it.

We agreed on some terms. They said as long as I was going to school, getting good grades and working a job, I could play 15 hours a week. But to me, that was a green light to play whenever I wanted to.

I felt like I was lying to them, and not being honest about what I was doing, so it took a little bit before I was finally like, “I gotta tell ‘em.”

It wasn’t until I moved out and I was making a very good living from cards, that my parents were much more supportive of it. Once they saw the potential for travelling and playing live tournaments, and understood it as a sport, rather than a casino game, they were much more accepting of it.

What do you feel about you playing poker?

My parents were against all gambling. I remember when I was 11 or 12, I made a $10 bet against my uncle on the Super Bowl. I won, but when my parents found out,
I got into so much trouble. They made me give the money back to my uncle. They were very much against all forms of gambling.

**How were you able to persuade your parents to consider poker as a career?**

It took a while for my parents to understand it. They’d been asking me where I was going to university in the fall, and I kept saying, “I don’t know.” I was playing poker, trying to make a living, and my plan was to not go to university. So at this point I had to tell them I’d been playing 50 hours a week, making an amount.

My parents were shocked at how much money I’d made and the potential that was there – I had tournaments lined up in Monte Carlo and the Caribbean. They didn’t know what to say except, “Looks like you’ve got it figured out, so we’re just gonna let you do your thing.” At this point, I bought a place, moved out and started playing full-time. Nine months later, I won the European Poker Tour in San Remo for over a million dollars, so then it was like, “OK, we’re just gonna let him play.”

It took some time for them to come on board, but now my dad follows the live updates when I’m playing. He’ll stay up all night and sweat. My dad’s asked questions, so despite never playing, he has a very good grasp of Texas Hold’em and what happens in tournaments. My mom doesn’t really know what’s going on, she just looks to make sure that I’ve won.

**Do your parents ever come and watch you play in tournaments?**

Sometimes – they both came to watch me play the $25K in Florida last week, so they were very excited about that. It was the first time they’d seen me win, which is crazy because I’ve won so many tournaments. It was pretty cool for them to be there for a win, but they’ve actually come to Vegas a couple of times for the World Series of Poker and to the Bahamas for the PokerStars Caribbean Adventure.

**Poker tournaments tend to be held in casinos – how do your parents feel about coming into casinos to watch you play?**

I don’t think that’s an issue. My dad used to work in production, so he’s had to work in casinos before. They’re not necessarily against casinos in general, it’s rather that they’ve always viewed gambling as a slippery slope. It’s something you don’t want to do because you don’t want to get addicted to it – work hard for your money, don’t just give it away.

**You spend a lot of time travelling on the poker circuit – how often do you manage to go to church?**

I go to a non-denominational church about once a month – just because I’m on the road so much. I’ve gone a few times when I’ve been in Vegas and here in Barcelona I’ve been to the Sagrada Familia. It wasn’t for a service – it’s more like a museum – but it was a very beautiful and cool experience.

I think it would be nice if I made a little effort to visit some churches, especially over here in Europe. It’s difficult because I have tournaments to play and I have to fit it in sleep. I can be playing poker until one in the morning on a Saturday – then on a Sunday, I have a tournament starting at noon. I’d also have to find a church to go to, so I just try to go when I’m home.

In Christianity it’s not like you have to be at church every Sunday. You should go, if you can, but I think a man has a responsibility to his family and to himself to make a living and sometimes that comes with sacrifices. There’s family time and church time. I only feel guilty for not going on a Sunday if I’m home. If I’m up all night and miss church because I sleep in, then I’d feel guilty, but I don’t feel guilty about not going when I’m on the road.

**I can see you’re wearing two crucifixes. Can you tell me about them – do they have a special meaning for you?**

They both have special meaning. This smaller one, I bought it off my brother, when I was nine or ten years old. It represents working hard and earning what you want. It represents family to me, because it was my brother’s originally. This larger one, I actually found when I was 15 years old. I was bagging groceries in a parking lot. I should have probably turned it in, but I decided to keep it.

My parents were so strict, I didn’t even show them that I found it when I did, because they’d have made me return it. I ended up finding it in my stuff two years ago. I was like, “Wow, this is really cool.”

It’s crazy I kept it all this time. I only recently started wearing it out. A lot of people keep saying, “Oh, nice Jesus piece.” I just say “Thanks.” For me, anything that brings forth the name of Jesus and encourages people to talk about him, or see that I represent him, I think is a good thing.

**How do the people who go to your church feel about you playing poker for a living?**

Most people view it as really cool. I haven’t had anyone say they’re against it. If anything, they’re excited to see me and ask me how it’s going.
Is charity an important part of your life? Do you give away a certain amount of your winnings?
Yeah. It’s not exactly charity, but I give to the church that I go to. I usually give a lump sum, once a year, based on how the year’s going for me financially. They use that money to either support the church, or support missions trips or other churches.

Looking to the future, when you get married, is it important to you that it’s to someone who shares your beliefs?
Yeah, for sure. I’ve gone on dates with girls where they’ve told me they think God doesn’t exist, and right away I know that’s not the right person for me. It’s very important to me that my significant other would have the same belief system as me.

Does your Christianity affect your poker – or vice versa?
There can be a lot of temptation in this industry. Gambling, women, drinking, drugs – they’re all prevalent in poker, and avoiding them is sometimes difficult. I don’t cut out alcohol completely, but I’ve gone through periods when I haven’t drunk any. I just try to live as a Christian. Sometimes it’s difficult, but I try my best.

What does living as a Christian mean to you?
The most important thing about being a Christian is having faith. It’s believing that Jesus died on the cross and was brought back to life and is the Son of God. That’s the beginning – the rest is how you live and why you do what you’re doing. It’s about being kind and generous and living the right way – just trying to be how Jesus was.