



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

POKER EXODUS

*Where Top Online Players Like
Taylor Caby, Haseeb Qureshi, and
Doug Polk Have Taken Their
Talents*

ERIK VAN MECHELEN

Also: Isildur1, AIs Ship It, The Future of Poker

Poker Exodus: Where Top Online Heads Up Poker Players Are Now

Isildur1, Als Ship It, Alternatives, and the Future of Poker

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To the online players I battled.

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Isildur1

Taylor Caby was having a nice life. For starters, he was making money clicking buttons on the internet. He also had friends and relative freedom. When one of them, Andrew Wiggins, asked why he wasn't playing more online poker, because the games might not always be this good, Taylor said he was alright with making 1-2k a day in just a few hours of play. Maybe he was noticing, and it must be said—as a mere teenager!—that there are more important things in life than playing online poker 24/7.



Taylor demoing a heads-up match

In 2003, Taylor had arguably the best idea of his life: to 3-bet light in position.

This remarkably simple idea, now grinded into oblivion, made

Caby and others a significant amount of money on Party Poker, the wild wild west of online felt, where donks ran free and money changed hands as never seen before.

Later, Caby also was famous for his poker training videos as Greenplastic on Cardrunners. I remember coming across these on YouTube as a 19-year-old and immediately trying my hand at heads-up no limit. I was not a member of Ship it Holla Ballas nor did I make the Two Months Two Million short-list, but American college kids like me were certainly an influential group within the online poker landscape. (I went to school only a few hours drive from the likes of Phil Galfond at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.) I was certainly not among what Joey Ingram today might call the upper class, but I felt I was comfortably in the middle class in terms of how I approached the game. At least when I wasn't on monkey tilt or in reset-the-narrative mode.

I followed Caby's (and his friends') ideas about poker as closely as I would follow Haseeb Qureshi's or Doug Polk's. Because I read a fair amount, I've enjoyed snippets of numerous poker books, but several come to mind. *Harrington on Hold'em* ("Poker is a game of wagering"), Qureshi's *How to Be a Poker Player: The Philosophy of Poker* ("The customer is always right"), and Andrew "Lucky-Chewy" Lichtenberger's *The Yoga of Poker* ("Seeking freedom is what we are all doing in life through different means").

The first suggested a game-theoretical framework to approach the game, a game of wagering under conditions of imperfect information. The last two appealed to my reading tendencies in that they began to view poker within the context of life, to analyze opponents' and our own desires, to look for ways to find joy in an activity that offers innumerable opportunities for frustration.

Of course, I enjoyed reading strategy articles and watching videos, too.

In general, few of the early online training videos, perhaps with the exception of sit-n-go strategy vids, expressed the sacrilegious

sentiment that poker was a solved game. While such truths may have excited those players keen to study the underlying math and play game-theory-optimal strategies that won over the long-term, proclaiming that poker was solved would have been like saying God was dead.

No one wanted to admit the days of dissecting your opponent's strategy and finding holes to exploit were all but over. No one wanted to relinquish their cherished digital felt to robotic overlords. No one wanted to say, Hey guys, is this even fun anymore? (I will go on to argue that an activity need not be merely fun for one to gain from engaging heavily in it, but that there should be some element of the unknown, some hill to meaningfully climb.)

Watching the games in Rail Heaven, I dreamed of one day joining the likes of WCGRider, OMGClayAiken, and other NVG heroes to battle it out for stacks and rolls. The Durrrr challenges were intriguing, particularly their heads-up format, though ultimately disappointing. What wasn't disappointing was the arrival of one Isildur1, rising out of Tolkien-esque legend to slay living legends like Haseeb and Tom Dwan and even Doug Polk. As a fan of heads-up no-limit, this moment was invigorating. Was he really playing Ivey and Antonius at the same time? Was he really snap-jamming for hundreds of blinds? And who the f\$\$k was this man anyway?

The streak that Isildur had built defeating the likes of Durrrr and many others only came to an end when Brian Hastings took his shirt in an epic PLO session for \$4.2 million. What made it worse was Isildur ran over \$3 million below EV, turning what might have been a tough losing session of about \$1 million into a ruinous calamity. (He had not long before lost \$3 million to Patrik Antonius in what was the biggest losing day for Isildur prior to the \$4.2-million bloodbath.)



The crazy Swede.

While deep heads-up games didn't appear solved, 100bb games and lower seemed to be. Before anyone could proclaim or utter such a thing, Black Friday occurred, which saw over \$500 million in accounts frozen on Full Tilt Poker.

I recall having had a decent week on the new Zoom rooms, where the fast-paced pool style games suited my fancy, only to see the Department of Justice seize fulltiltpoker.com. At least, I thought, shrugging, I could unpack the boxes in my room. I'd graduated college a few months earlier and was working full time as an inventory analyst for Target in downtown Minneapolis. Fortunately, unlike numerous others, such as fellow Minnesotans Danielle Andersen (who finished 301st in this year's Main Event) or Mike Schneider or Matt Christensen, I wasn't relying on poker for a living.

Once a game is solved, it certainly continues to be playable, even enjoyable. As recently as September 2019, I happily played up to \$200NL heads up with mild success.

We humans like our gamble. Games like poker have just the right balance of unpredictability in a competitive environment with that dash of human variability—the knight's move on the chess board; the semicolon in a run-on sentence; the espresso-martini that

salvages a mediocre night.

Like Taylor Caby, as well as Doug Polk, Haseeb Qureshi, and many others, I don't play much if any poker anymore, live or online. If anything, I considered myself lucky to have seen my shots at \$1,000HUNL thwarted before I even graduated college. That allowed me to pursue tracked positions at Target, in both inventory management and software project management, before finding a new mountain to climb in writing about five years ago.

I feel as though I've been dealt pocket aces in life, and it brings me great joy to do other creative things with the hopes of occasionally creating value to myself or society. Fortunately, the process of creating is already an end in itself, regardless of what that process results in. It is interesting to see former poker players come to terms with poker's decline and also reach for new heights in their own ways. Taylor Caby is a businessman, Haseeb Qureshi a software engineer, Doug Polk a YouTube creator.

Even in self-destructive moments when I feel like I could stick my middle finger to the world and fold the aforementioned pocket AA, just to prove that I could, my conscience intervenes: "Erik, you know that's not a good long-term strategy." So I have to write.

I see as part of my value-add to society to describe experiences I've had, am having, or expect to have, that might be relevant to a class of people I've interacted with, whether they be young men, poker players, or twenty- or thirty-somethings with a shred of creative energy and modicum of competitive spirit deep down that might be let into the open.

In this moment of relative world peace, what should warriors do? What of generals? We can't all design games or make films, although Kickstarter and YouTube have made both easier.

Having previously shared a summary of a trip to Rinca Island, komodo dragon territory, in a post on twoplustwo.com, I know to keep irrelevant asides to a minimum, but like George Orwell complained in response to a critic's review of his now famous

Homage to Catalonia, the details of life's experience are also for my money what makes it interesting. Else we could retell the Cain and Abel or Adam and Eve story again and again. As it happens, on Black Friday, I felt as though I'd been kicked out of paradise. As it slowly opened back up, with fledgling sites finding ways to allow back American players, bots and AI assistants had improved.

Was this reason for despair? No. Marketplaces have changed and evolved or have been disrupted throughout history, often as a result of technological innovations. High-frequency trading changed investing in the stock market. Social media changed marketing. Bots and AI assistants changed online poker.

It seemed I would have to negotiate between new options for the supply of free time I'd previously devoted to the game.

Break Even

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