

## Journal Information

Journal ID (publisher-id): jgi

ISSN: 1910-7595

Publisher: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

## Article Information

© 1999-2001 The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Publication date: June 2011

First Page: 140 Last Page: 142

Publisher Id: jgi.2011.25.12

DOI: 10.4309/jgi.2011.25.12

---

## The Godfather of Poker

Leslie R. Herbert, LMSW[aff1](#)

University of Georgia

---

By Doyle Brunson, with Mike Cochran. (2009). Cardoza Publishing, Las Vegas, USA. 383 pp. ISBN 978-1-58042-257-4 (hardcover edition). \$26.95 USA, \$34.99 CAN.

With the upcoming release of the DSM-5 (scheduled for May 2013), professionals in the fields of gambling research and treatment will be working with the reclassification of disordered gambling as a “behavioral addiction.” Because of the increased popularity of Texas Hold’em poker on television, the availability of round-the-clock online gambling, and a generally more liberal legislative attitude towards gambling in recent years ([McMullan & Miller, 2008](#)), it is also likely that we will be seeing an increase in people seeking help for problem gambling, including poker players.

*The Godfather of Poker*, an autobiography by Doyle Brunson with journalist and fellow Texan Mike Cochran, is an engaging and sometimes frighteningly honest look at his life and the changing world of poker. The book sold more than 35,000 copies its first year, and is scheduled for paperback release in May 2011.

It is not an understatement to say that Brunson single-handedly changed the perception of the professional gambler. He is certainly held in the highest esteem by professional and amateur gamblers alike and serves as a father figure to an entire generation. His story has many of the elements of a great Hollywood drama. Growing up in a small town in Texas, he scraped and fought for every penny and every opportunity, and he even earned the chance to play professional basketball in the NBA, only to suffer a bizarre career-ending injury when his leg was broken by sheetrock. After discovering his talent for poker, Brunson spent several years on the notorious Exchange Avenue in north Fort Worth, an illegal gambling hotspot where all but 1 of his 32 friends died at the hands of thugs and gangsters.

Having survived through such adversity, and determined to have some sense of

normalcy in his life, Brunson married and made good faith efforts to settle down and earn a living. But despite the best of intentions, the gambling lifestyle soon lured him back. An unexpected battle with aggressive cancer seems only to have hardened his resolve to be a professional poker player. The next few decades were marked by stretches of penury as well as success, but Brunson nevertheless maintained belief in his ability as a high-level professional gambler.

Known throughout the gambling community as a master of the bluff, Brunson has won tens of millions of dollars. He has 10 World Series of Poker Bracelets, second only to Phil Hellmuth and tied with the great Johnny Chan. He is also one of only four players to have won the main event multiple times.

Though he is known as an honest man and a “straight shooter” at the tables, Brunson has maintained relationships with less savory characters. Of special note is mobster Benny Binion. In his typically humorous style, Brunson writes, “I know people wondered how or why an honest, educated Texas farm boy would befriend a known gangster and suspected killer whose victims included the King's English.” But ironically, this relationship enabled Brunson to lobby for and help establish the first legitimate, safe venue for professional poker players in Las Vegas.

Reading *The Godfather of Poker* feels a lot like sitting around the kitchen table with an elderly relative. Its writing style is conversational and unpretentious. The Texas “twang” is easy to hear in the mind's ear as the narrative unfolds. The latter half of the book seems to lose a bit of chronological focus but is still entertaining and informative. Even though his style is never overly florid or emotional, the gravity of the events themselves gives it a certain understated power.

In many ways, *The Godfather of Poker* is a story of resilience and persistence. Poker was what he felt he was best at, and there were costs to being a gambler. Being mugged and beaten, witnessing murders, and living life on the road away from his wife and children were all part of the costs of doing business. Even winning huge sums of money and then almost immediately going broke was normalized within his group of gambler friends.

This is a story of success and failure, control and helplessness. It is also a story with mixed messages. At one moment he celebrates his “blessed life” as a gambler, then turns around and confesses that he tried to steer his son away from gambling. After Brunson's irate wife informed him that their son dropped out of college his senior year to play poker professionally, Brunson reported that he responded, “Louise, I didn't even know he knew how to play!” Though he frequently encourages his readers to be willing to lay it all on the line, he certainly did not encourage those close to him to follow that same advice.

While there are many ethical considerations associated with Brunson's story for

therapists, researchers, and policy-makers, it is important to keep in mind that the rate of lifetime adult pathological gambling in the United States is estimated to be about 3 percent ([Martin, Usdan, Nelson, Umstattd, LaPlante, Perko, & Shaffer, 2010](#)). While it remains to be seen how increased acceptance and the repackaged media image of gambling will affect this proportion, it seems safe to say that gambling as a recreational activity and as a profession is here to stay.

Brunson's life story blurs many lines. While most of his early career was illegal, he maintained a code of ethics which earned him respect both inside and outside of the law. Throughout the septuagenarian's life, we can certainly see addictive behaviour: sports betting, poker, and his battle with overeating. His successes and failures are illustrative of the ongoing debates concerning the cultural and clinical definitions of addiction. As a history, a case study, and the story of a poker legend, *The Godfather of Poker* is well suited to the researcher, therapist, or policy maker who wishes to better understand motivations for gambling and the history of Texas Hold'em as a cultural phenomenon.

---

## References

- Martin, R.J., Usdan, S., Nelson, S., Umstattd, M.R., LaPlante, D., Perko, M., Shaffer, H.. ( 2010). Using the theory of planned behavior to predict gambling behavior. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 24 (1), 89–97.
- McMullan, J.L., Miller, D.. ( 2008). All in! The commercial advertising of offshore gambling on television. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 22, 230–251 [<http://jgi.camh.net/doi/full/10.4309/jgi.2008.22.6>].

---

Article Categories:

- book review

[Related Article\(s\):](#)