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IT'S 9.30 on a Friday evening and on the streets of Dublin protesters are "saying no to Dubya". As the demonstration against George W Bush's visit to Ireland begins to wind down, an assortment of demonstrators carrying Socialist Workers Party placards, anarchist banners and giant Cuban flags mingle among the thinning crowds.

While the organisers of the 10,000-strong protest, the Irish Anti-War Alliance, have attracted a broad spectrum of support, the majority of the marchers who linger at the top end of Merrion Street seem more firmly rooted in good old-fashioned international socialism and left-wing agitation.

Just around the corner in a gracious Georgian townhouse in Merrion Square, a sharply contrasting economic and political model – one of cut-throat capitalism – is being played out. Within the four floors of the Merrion Casino Club are many of the world's best poker players: intimidating hustlers, flashy professionals and big money-winners who have come to Dublin to play in a week-long knockout tournament billed as the World Poker Championship.

With a prize fund of €730,000 and a cool quarter million to the winner, and with lucrative sponsorship deals and satellite television coverage in place, the event has attracted top players from the US, Britain and Ireland, as well as from across Europe and the Middle East. The field even includes American Greg Raymer, who won a staggering $5m four weeks ago at the game's richest tournament, the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas.

The Dublin championship is an event that perfectly illustrates Walter Matthau's observation that poker "exemplifies the worst aspects of capitalism that have made America so great". It is a tournament in which it's every man for himself (even though more and more women are playing). It is a game in which players' success is judged by one criterion alone: their financial muscle – the number and value of the chips they have accumulated.

Poker is a dog-eat-dog world in which players must be prepared to use any tactic, trap, and act of deception and aggression to win. In tournaments such as this, coming first is all that counts: in the heats, it's the only guarantee of getting to the final; in the final, it's the only way to win big money.

It's about survival, ingenuity, courage and chutzpah. It's about the cold logic of the odds and the warm glow of lady luck. It's little wonder then that poker has always been seen as the game of the grifter and the American pioneer, the honeypot to which every easy-money hipster and ruthless individualist seems inextricably drawn.

Fifteen of these modern poker cowboys have now gathered in the Merrion Casino's "Regency Room" for one of the tournament's eight heats, which is due to start in a few minutes. It is a handsome, high-ceilinged room with ornamental cornices and an old marble fireplace, and it's packed with organisers, sponsors, PR women, hangers-on, glamorous girlfriends, television cameras, technical crew, and three raised rows of spectators. Without the fog of cigarette and cigar smoke, there is the sharp, musty smell of men. There are two kidney-shaped card tables, both with dealers who are laying out chips and shuffling the cards.

And there is a place at one of those tables that, rather terrifyingly, has my name on it.

The hottest game in town

Poker is just about the hottest and hippest game in Ireland right now. Once the staple of many an Irish pub game, hotel competition and St Stephen's Day family feud, the coolest game in town has rapidly expanded onto television, the internet, glossy magazines, national radio programmes, and the professional card tables of such well-appointed city centre establishments as Dublin's Merrion Casino Club.

In turn, its audience has exploded. A recent ICM poll for bookmaker Ladbrokes suggests that a quarter of all British adults have now played poker; it's likely that a similar, if not greater, percentage of players exists in Ireland. Channel 4's pioneering poker series, *Late Night Poker*, broadcast after midnight, has attracted a remarkable audience of 1.3 million.

With the amount being gambled daily on poker websites worldwide having grown in 2003 from €9m to almost €60m, poker is also big business. Irish bookmaker Paddy Power has sponsored a tournament and American cable and satellite networks such as ESPN, Bravo and The Travel Channel have benefited from large increases in viewing figures by broadcasting poker events.

The game even has celebrity endorsement. John Rocha, Tony Cascarino and Ken Doherty are regular players, and Martin Amis, Stephen Fry, Ricky Gervais and Rory McGrath have all appeared on television playing poker. Two weeks ago, Ben Affleck won more than €430,000 at a tournament in California, and Martin Sheen, Tobey Maguire and Matt Damon have all been closely associated with the game. Damon even starred in the Hollywood high-stakes poker film *Rounders*. In short, poker has gone mainstream.

The World Poker Championship in Dublin is emblematic of poker's radical transformation. Sponsored by online casino and poker room The Gaming Club, and to be broadcast as a 10-part series on Sky Sports later in the year, the event is unusual in the world of televised poker in that players are being allowed to wear logos. It means that the top professionals and prize-winners, all of whom have sponsorship deals with one of up to 150 online poker rooms, can advertise their sponsors' product – in return, of course, for their expenses and tournament "buy-in" (entry fee).

While "the legendary Irish hospitality" and "good craic, as they say over here" are frequently mentioned to me as explanations for the presence of so many top players in Dublin, most observers know that poker is now similar to most high-profile sports: sponsorship, advertising and television rights are driving the game.

Still, the number of star players the tournament has attracted – in its very first year – is impressive. As well as Greg Raymer, the field includes Phil Hellmuth, one the best-known and most successful poker players of all time; 2004 British Open champion Dave 'Devilfish' Ulliott; The Hendon Mob, a quartet of feared players from north London: film star (and former Mrs Tom Cruise) and poker enthusiast Mimi Rogers; and the aptly named Chris Moneymaker, who won the big Las Vegas tournament in 2003.

The strong Irish contingent consists of Padraig Parkinson, who finished third in the World Series in 1999; former

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Ireland Olympic swimmer Donnacha O'Dea, another big money winner in Vegas; Mike 'The Man' Magee, who has won more than 200 tournaments in the past 10 years; and 'Gentleman' Liam Flood, so called because he always plays in a suit and is highly respected as an ambassador for Ireland and the game.

"This is the most stunning international field of top players ever assembled outside America," says Brian Johnson, chief executive of The Gaming Club. Phil Hellmuth agrees: "It's quite amazing – there are probably 16 or 17 of the top 20 tournament players in the world here." Liam Flood says it's a coup for Dublin and Ireland to be hosting this event: "This championship is a sporting event on a par with a grand-slam tennis tournament or a golfing major," he says.

It makes the desire to win it – both for the prize money and prestige – all the more powerful. "These are the most bullying and aggressive players in the world – they're using sledgehammers at the table," says Tim Flanders, an experienced English player who has competed the day before. "These guys put so much pressure on you that it's easy to take your brains out and let the emotion centre kick in. It's really brutal out there."

The players

"OK, shuffle up and deal." I've just sat down at the card table and barely had time to settle, when tournament director Mel Judah announces that the game is to begin.

The seven players around me look as if they've come straight from poker central casting. Opposite is the wonderfully named Ramanarine Jerrybandan, a Trinidad-born Indian who now lives in the US, where he divides his time between playing poker and running several successful real estate companies. He has white hair, and a white beard and moustache, and looks like an ancient shaman or new-age spiritual leader. I learn later that he teaches yoga and has a reputation for being an uncanny reader of character. He is wearing a beige Nehru shirt, a magnificent array of gold rings, bangles and chains, some encrusted with diamonds, and a smile that manages to be at once beatific and menacing.

Next to him is a 24-year-old trainee maths teacher from Texas named Matt Dean. On his polo shirt is a logo advertising one of the biggest poker websites, Poker Stars; it makes him a top sponsored player. Rigorously eschewing any information about my opponents before the game, it is only afterwards that I discover Dean came seventh, out of 2,570 entrants, at this year's World Series. He won $675,000.

To my left is Philippa Flanders, wife of Tim Flanders, a woman it would be easy, I imagine, to underestimate. On the face of it, she looks like a fairly typical middle-aged English housewife; she is wearing sensible shoes, a floral dress and a light cardigan. She uses a walking stick to get around, and her voice, at times, seems timid, even shaky. At one point, she turns to me and confesses that, in the bright television lights, she is having trouble differentiating the colours of the chips. It has to be a bluff, I decide – especially as I subsequently discover she has won several British tournaments.

The others at my table are a little harder to gauge, but I can't help notice that the three players to my right, ➥

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American Tod Skarecky, Londoner Garry Bush, and Irishman Denis O'Mahoney, are all wearing sponsors' logos. It makes them 'made' players, the kind of characters who seem unimpressed when I pull down my *Sunday Tribune* cap to let them know that I too have backers. Which I do. As well as being supported by this newspaper, my buy-in has been put up by The Gaming Club.

The final player at the table is a young and super-confident English-born Indian guy named Taj Jugpal, who rifles his chips with the ease and insouciance of a practised magician and who, like all the others at the table – except me – sports dark, reflective, wraparound sunglasses. He also, again like the others, employs a marker, a lucky charm – in his case a small piece of polished stone – that he places on top of his cards after they have been dealt to him. It's called a card protector because it eliminates the possibility of tampering or interference – and I do not have one.

Wild card

So I pull down my cap further to shield my face, but in this company – as much as I have told myself that I have nothing to lose, nothing to fear, that I'm the wild card, the unpredictable outsider – I feel naked, exposed, vulnerable.

The type of poker we are playing, and that is featured on all the new poker television programmes and internet sites, is a long way from the traditional draw poker found in Irish pubs and homes. In draw, players are dealt five cards face down and allowed to exchange (or 'draw') cards from the dealer's deck; a pair of Jacks or better is usually required as a starting hand.

In the variation of poker that has been popular in Las Vegas for almost 40 years, and that has come to dominate the poker world – Texas Hold'em – each player is dealt just two cards, but five subsequent cards are placed face up in the middle of the table and are communal. It leads to close hands, fast action, tricky decisions, improbable bluffs – and usually lively banter, although these expert players are giving so little away that, at one point, one joker at the back of the room cries out: "Jaysus, it's like Madame Tussauds in here." And I, for one, am certainly not prepared to come to life just yet.

Then, just half an hour into the action, I get dealt the bullets, the pocket rockets. I look down at the cards in front of me and there is the best starting hand of them all: a pair of beautiful Aces, one red, one black. It doesn't happen very often; the probability is 0.45% or 1 in 222.

Two conflicting poker adages start whirling around in my mind. The first, and probably the best-known, is this: if you're sitting at a card table and you don't know who the mug is, then it's you. I understand this – that I am the patsy, the sucker – even before I sit down. Almost all of the other players know each other, at least by reputation or research. I have no form, no record. While I have been playing poker with friends in Dublin, Kenmare and London for almost 10 years, and have entered the odd low-stakes casino tournament, I know that I am hopelessly out of my league. My only hope is that my opponents think I'm a talented internet player or that I get supernaturally lucky.

The second maxim, however, was the favourite saying of legendary Las Vegas poker promoter Jimmy the Greek: "if you ain't a tiger, baby – forget it!"

High on aces

Aces can be tricky, but you can't be scared of them; you have to be a lion not a lamb (although sometimes, in the same hand, you need to be both). So, when the action passes to me, I raise the pot (this particular tournament is a 'pot limit' event, which means my maximum raise is determined by the value of the chips in the middle). We've all been given 100,000 units of chips at the start and it's important to divorce yourself from their monetary equivalent. It's only afterwards that I work out I have put in €1,400.

Everybody folds, apart from the white-haired guru of gambling opposite me, who calls my bet with a casual yet threatening air. Three cards are dealt in the middle: 'the flop'. One is an Ace, making my hand three-of-a-kind – trip Aces. It's a monster hand, so big and so perfect that it's scary. It's a curious aspect of poker that the best hands are often the most unsettling and intimidating; if you're on a bluff, you're more likely, paradoxically, to appear steady and calm.

I'm first to bet, and I'm trying to stay as unruffled as possible, but I can feel my palms moistening and my heart pounding against my ribcage. I'm determined to take my time (maybe Mr Jerrybandan will take it for uncertainty). I'm tempted to check the bet to him, to play the lamb in order to encourage him to make a bet, so that I can then 'come over the top' with a lion's re-raise. But, as well as my Ace, there are two spades in the flop, and I decide that I'm not prepared to let him make a lucky flush with the next card. So I bet the pot again (this time, it's more than €3,000).

Ramanarine Jerrybandan, the sage of the big stake, the reader of men, the eastern philosopher of poker, looks resolutely across the table at me. I can see his eyes boring into me from behind his dark glasses; he is hardly moving and, apart from the rhythmic rise and fall of his mandibles, his face is giving nothing away.

Which is more, I'm certain, than can said about me. I am trying to stay as composed as possible, to keep my eye movements to a minimum, but – and this is really weird – I can actually feel him inside my head. He is rummaging around in there and not stopping – he is going deeper inside me. Again, I can feel it – it's almost as if he is looking into my soul, my essence, uncovering the place within me that is shouting: YES, I HAVE THREE ACES!

He looks at me for what seems like half an hour, but that is perhaps no more than two minutes. He asks me how many chips I have in front of me – a classic ploy that suggests he is about to re-raise and that will no doubt give him some extra information about my demeanour and state of mind – and therefore the strength or otherwise of my hand.

And then, slowly, indefatigably, he folds. As the chips are pushed over to me by the dealer, he continues to watch me and I try not to appear too celebratory or relieved. But, for the moment, I am the chip leader. I am winning this game.

learn about you as an individual'

Test of character

The primary attraction of poker is its unerring ability to act as The Great Educator. Unlike bridge, which is played too readily for the society, and chess, which is too much for the mind alone, poker is a powerful test of temperament and character. It is, for those who have the 'intestinal fortitude' and the ability to pay the fees, a game that can subtly instruct you in the ways and dispositions of your friends and enemies. Ultimately, of course, it can teach you about yourself.

Poker is about skill, chance and calculation. You have to know the odds and make them work in your favour; you must know which hands to bet everything on and which ones to walk away from; and you need to perfect the subtle intricacies of poker's greatest gift, the bluff. Yet the game is also about self-discipline, patience, humility, nerve and inscrutability, and about, as we have seen, keen observation and human nature – you "play the man not the hand".

Poker can also teach you your own nature; you and your belief systems are often cruelly exposed when you are under pressure at the poker table. It's a game in which, as Martin Amis once said, "everything is wobbled through the prism of personality", with that dispersing light revealing a spectrum of internal dramas and inalienable truths about, for example, your self-belief and self-doubt, optimism and pessimism, humility and arrogance, mercilessness and masochism – as well as your attitudes to risk, control, fate and free will. It is not for nothing that the collective noun for a group of poker players is a "school".

And sure enough, it can teach you – once again – that pride comes before a fall. Having won another reasonably big hand soon afterwards, I decide to sit tight and take in the action, to rest on my laurels and wait for the big cards. The longer I wait, of course, the further I fall behind.

Although there are few sizeable pots, and even fewer showdowns in which players' cards are revealed, some of these players seem to be imperceptibly accumulating chips. They are re-raising opponents they consider weak or uncertain and 'stealing' good pots. I am being led by the cards; they are making the cards work with and for them.

Yet still, I am by no means the first to be eliminated. With three from my table out of the tournament, Simon 'Aces' Trumper, one of the most formidable of the British players, joins us from the second table to make up numbers. He is tanned, bald and be-jewelled, and I have never seen anyone appear as comfortable with themselves and the game. While his eyes are alert and ignited, his body language is cosmically relaxed. He also appears supremely polite – not having been introduced to me before, he decides to call me "sir", ominously, whenever I am in a hand.

Having played the 'leather ass' and sat out perhaps half an hour of hands, I'm suddenly dealt an Ace and a Jack. I know it's a classic come-on, two cards that flatter to deceive, a hand that is weak unless you make something powerful on the flop, but my stack of chips has been gradually depleted and I'm in good position. I've got to make a move. It's now, I decide, or never, and I raise the pot. Without any hesitation Trumper re-raises.

The problem is I've already committed almost half my chips; to back out now would be suicide. So I call. I'm "all-in". I've put the equivalent of more than €5,000 in the pot. And if I lose this hand, I am out of the tournament.

Psychological warfare

With alarming predictability, Simon 'Aces' Trumper turns over an Ace to match mine, but his second card is a King and it's the same suit, a Heart, as his Ace. It makes him the massive favourite. The flop helps neither of us, except that there are two more hearts, giving him a flush draw. I need a miraculous Jack, maybe even two. But on the fourth card in the middle, 'the turn', he catches his flush and I am busted out of the tournament. After almost three hours of play, I have finished ninth out of 16.

As the cameras zoom in on me and the audience applauds, I look over at Ramanarine Jerrybandan and he offers me his hand. "You're a good player," he says, and for once I decide to take it at face value.

Afterwards, I get talking to Denis O'Mahoney about the challenges of the game and our heat. At the table, he could not have been more steely and stern-faced; I hardly dared look at him. Sitting in the club's restaurant, he is open and friendly. O'Mahoney is from Clonmel, but he left Ireland in 1986 and now, as well as playing poker semi-professionally, runs profitable computer hardware companies both in London and Boston.

"You were in a very difficult position in that you had four players before you who were all going to attack you, as a player and a person, because they wanted to quickly find out what kind of a player you are," he says. "In those pressure situations, we – and you – learn something about you as an individual. We learn whether you are the type of player who is going to stand up or capitulate. That's what this whole thing is about – poker is warfare, psychological warfare."

Ultimately poker, especially at this level, is a form of social Darwinism in which only the strongest and most ruthless survive. It is an arcane, intense and dysfunctional subculture – poker players are by necessity monomaniacal – in which its practitioners must perfect the art of bringing out the worst in themselves: at the table they must be cruel, egotistical, unfeeling, conniving and remorseless.

It's almost as if a player's poker personality is a nastier, uglier version of himself or herself – one that must be exploited and exaggerated to win at the table, and conquered and bettered to win at life. The problem is, I suppose, when the poker mask becomes the human face. In the end, I decide that for me the mask doesn't quite fit, that as much as I might pretend, I don't quite have that killer instinct.

As I leave the club, it's 2.30am and most of the detritus of the anti-war protest has already been cleaned up. There is one rainbow banner, however, tied to the Merrion Square railings opposite Government Buildings.

In the middle of it is stitched one word: 'Peace'. I give it a wry smile. For now, my poker war is over. I'm giving peace a chance. i