

BOSTON GLOBE

By Bella English, Globe Staff, August 22, 2006

Mike Zakarian is president of the student government at Emmanuel College and co-captain of the baseball team. He hopes to go to graduate school in education. But he's also a whiz at online poker. He's so good that, at age 21, he won \$12,000 and a seat at the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas, where last month he took home \$15,500 more.

Zakarian started playing Texas Hold 'Em with friends in high school, and moved on to Internet poker in college. He'd win \$50 here, \$100 there, and lose only occasionally, he says. His first big score came at the end of his sophomore year: He put down \$40 to enter an online tournament, and won \$4,000.

His earnings have helped pay his tuition and afforded him nice vacations. But Zakarian hasn't always been cavalier about the game. "There were times when I could feel myself inside losing control," he says, "and I left it for a couple of months until I felt better. I just didn't want to get caught up in it and lose everything I'd won."

Zakarian was among five Bostonians, none older than 31, who participated in the 2006 World Series of Poker -- sponsored by PokerStars.com, a site popular with young players -- after they won online tournaments. Two of the 10 players who made it to the final table were recent college graduates, and they took home about \$2 million each.

How are college students getting so good at a game that once was the dominion of older men? The answer lies online, in the 2,500 Internet-based casinos that lure teenagers with offers of free tuition and other prizes. It is creating what some call an epidemic of gambling -- and debt -- on campuses everywhere.

Online gambling has spread through high school and college campuses, ensnaring young men who hope to beat the odds. Sometimes they do. More often they don't. Greg Hogan, who was president of his class at Lehigh University, robbed a bank last December to pay a \$5,000 debt amassed in online poker. Hogan, 20, will serve at least 22 months in prison.

"I can tell you it is a problem," says Laurajane Fitzsimons, an addiction specialist with the counseling center at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. "College is a time when students have freedom from their parents and access to credit cards and money, but they don't really understand the ramifications of gambling."

Even those who don't cut classes to sit in front of their computer, she says, report that gambling is on their mind "all the time," making it difficult for them to focus on school work. The college has trained resident advisers to look out for students holed up in their rooms. At freshman orientation, officials discuss the dangers of alcohol, drugs -- and gambling.

The Massachusetts Council on Gambling held a program last spring with the state Department of Public Health about gambling on campuses, and it attracted administrators from 40 schools. "A lot of them are starting to realize they need to have policies around it like alcohol and drugs," says council spokeswoman Margot Cahoon.

The appeal of online gambling on campus is obvious: It's just a click away. There's no group to organize, no snacks to serve, no drinks to pour. You don't have to get dressed. You don't have to make small talk. You don't have to go home, because you're already there.

Online casinos lure new players by allowing them to practice with "play money" and then "giving" them real money to get started. "Come grab your \$888 Welcome Bonus today!" promotes one company in an unsolicited e-mail sent out nationwide. Says another: "Complete with . . . state-of-the-art graphics, a knowledgeable and helpful 24/7 phone and live chat support team, fast payouts and a payout rate of over 97%." It also offers \$300 free, "just for trying our casino."

What they don't mention is people like the recent Harvard graduate who gambled away \$35,000 online.

Even after he gave away his computer to curb his habit, the young man would spend hours at Kinko's, buying computer time. "I'd stay there all night," says John, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because his family doesn't know about his plight. In three years he spent \$2,000 in Kinko's fees alone. That was nothing compared to all the money he lost.

And even when he won, he lost.

“I once won \$6,000 at an online casino, and I wanted to cash out,” John says. “And they said I hadn't spent enough money to cash out. I had to wager \$2,100 [more].” He borrowed money from friends to meet the wager requirement, and kept gambling. Then the online casino told him it would take five to seven days to process the check for his payout, which was now down to \$3,000.

“These places are on the Greek islands,” says John. “I needed the money to cover my debts. So I said, what am I supposed to do between now and then? They said, ‘You can gamble.’ I did, and I gambled it all away. And then another \$15,000 on top of that.”

John now attends Gamblers Anonymous meetings. Though he used to go to casinos and buy scratch tickets, John says online gambling is more addictive. His advice for other young people who are into online gambling: “If you are gambling for more than an hour or two and can't switch your focus, you have a problem.”

A lot of young men apparently have a problem. The number of male college students who say they gamble online regularly has quadrupled since 2000. Worldwide it is a \$12 billion-a-year industry, and nearly half of it comes from the United States -- where it isn't legal. The US government considers the enterprise illegal, but industry executives say that Web casinos -- which operate offshore, in such places as Antigua and Costa Rica -- fall outside US jurisdiction. The issue has yet to be resolved in court. Still, the House of Representatives passed a bill last month that would make it illegal for US credit card companies to process payments for online casinos. The Senate has not yet voted on it.

Even if legislation passes, enforcing the law against credit-card companies would be an uphill battle, and there are other ways -- wire transfers and Internet-based payment processors -- to pay for the virtual chips. All of this creates an environment where the online casinos flourish.

Knowing when to fold

Ben, a 20-year-old from the South Shore who is a junior at a college in Washington, D.C., started playing poker online two years ago, after watching it on television, and says he has won \$20,000. At first, he used "play money." Then a friend won real money, and Ben wanted to try. He made \$20 his first hand. Now he plays an hour a day and feels it's a hobby he can handle. Still, he admits, there are times when it's hard to walk away from the screen.

"When I'm down just \$100, I feel, oh, I just took a \$100 bill out of my pocket and handed it to someone," says Ben, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because his family is embarrassed that he gambles. "Your tendency is to want to win it back."

The online casinos have a number of gimmicks to lure young people. Absolutepoker.com runs tournaments in which the winner gets a free semester of tuition. Hi-Roller offers an \$888 "welcome bonus." PokerStars.com hands out frequent-player points to use at its online store for items ranging from clothes to iPods. Other sites give you additional chips if you recruit a new player.

Dot Duda, director of the Prevention and Recovery Center at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, which has a program for gamblers, says it is easy to get addicted in college. It is "something you can do by yourself at 2 in the morning," Duda says. "It's like a piece of chocolate cake; it's a terrible temptation."

Treating gambling is difficult because there's so much denial and such pull to play, she says.

"They're in debt, and they don't see any way of getting out of it unless they play again, and more times than not, they go further into debt," says Duda. Not everyone does. Stephen Garabedian, who will be a senior at Suffolk University, has made \$17,000 from poker in the past year. He played in the World Series of Poker last month but didn't finish in the money. He has a system: He brings a certain amount to the table, and after half an hour, if he hasn't met his goal, he turns off the computer. "It's so easy to let it get away from yourself," he says.

Joel Wertheimer, who graduated from Tufts University last year, says he has made \$20,000 online. He began in college, and won a spot at the World Series of Poker after playing an online tournament from 6 p.m. on a Sunday until 2 the next morning. ``It's something I love," says Wertheimer. ``But it's something I can walk away from, too."

As successful as Mike Zakarian has been at online poker, his parents say they are concerned. ``It's very easy to get addicted, to get in over your head," says his father, Raymond Zakarian, who lives in Lakeville. ``We've cautioned him, because these places aren't in business because they lose all the time."■

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