

Poker star Toto Leonidas Call his bluff

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress

CALLING Pinoy poker player Alfredo "Toto" Leonidas' bluff is not always a good idea. Just ask poker living legend Phil Hellmuth.

Hellmuth, the owner of 11 World Series of Poker (WSOP) bracelets and arguably, one of the best poker players in the world, called Leonidas' bluff during the final table of the 2003 United States Poker Championship (USPC) and found himself with no more chips and his head buried in his hands in shock afterwards.

Hellmuth will always remember that moment as the championship that got away.

"Like I went crazy when he eliminated me... this time I picked him off and he outdrew me," Hellmuth said to ESPN.

"It was a good win for me. I think ESPN still shows that tournament," said Leonidas to the Asian Journal during an event at the Bicycle Casino, where they honored him as the team captain of the Philippines in a world team poker format.

Leonidas is one of the few Pinoy professional poker players in the WSOP circuit and World Poker Tour (WPT). He is perhaps the only Filipino to ever win a WSOP bracelet; one of the most coveted prizes a poker player can win. He's also won several other poker tournaments including the 2003 USPC.



Known in the poker circuit as an aggressive and unpredictable player who makes calculated risks, Leonidas has earned more than \$2.6 million in a 14-year professional poker career. Last year, Leonidas said he made more than \$700,000 in poker tournament earnings and cash games.

From Waiter to Poker Pro

The 48-year-old originally from Bacolod City, Philippines began a professional poker career in the mid-90's. As a waiter and bartender at a local Los Angeles casino, he often served people while they played the card game.

Poker never really interested Leonidas.

"I'm not a gambler," he said. "If I didn't know there was a skill in poker, I would have never played it."

But after he quit his job, he worked as a poker "prop house player" for another casino. Back in the early and mid-90's, poker was just a game played by a few customers and didn't have the glitz and glamour nor the TV coverage that it has now.

Leonidas said during that time, casinos would hire "prop house players" to play and fill out the poker tables in the casino. Leonidas' job was to fill the empty seats to make it appear that the game was full. He was being paid \$15 an hour to play poker. It is also where he honed and crafted his skill in the game.

Leonidas was doing so well in these games that he decided to turn it into a career.

With a few thousand dollars in his pockets, he ventured out to Las Vegas to play against the pros.

Greyhound

Leonidas remembers it

vividly.

Two years after he quit his job as a bartender/ waiter and casino prop house player, he found himself inside a Las Vegas Greyhound bus terminal sleeping on the cold hard floor. He was broke, except for the \$30 in his pocket for the bus trip home. He played against the best and lost everything. His money only lasted a month in Las Vegas.

"All my money was gone," recalled Leonidas. "I remember just putting up my stuff inside a locker and sleeping on the floor. I had no more money."

"I was broke," he added. "I was frustrated. Poker is a frustrating game, it's a game of ups and downs."

But losing all his money did not deter Leonidas. While most would have quit the game for good, Leonidas didn't.

"There was just something inside me that said I can get better," he said. "It was just a matter of time before I won the big tournament or the big game. I knew I was going to make a comeback."

He was also inspired when Phil Ivey, another renowned professional poker player, assured Leonidas' friend at the time that Leonidas was going to be a great poker player.

Leonidas recalled that Phil told his friend, "Don't worry. I know Toto. He's going to make a lot of money. It's just a matter of time."

After a slow start to his career, Leonidas' luck began to turn for the better in early 2000's. In 2003, Leonidas won a WSOP bracelet and captured the USPC in a final table against poker greats Erik Seidel, Hellmuth and John Hennigan. Leonidas said he won \$388,000 from that tournament.

"It was a great feeling," he said. "Those are some of the best poker players and I beat them."



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit - the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, Galing Pinoy literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



On the Road
Although he is a pioneer when it comes to being a Filipino professional poker player, there's a setback. He's usually the only Filipino playing in the tournaments.

Leonidas understands that not many Filipinos are at his level of play. The tournaments he attends are usually main events that require a \$10,000 entrance fee or more and travel costs. Many of the tournaments he goes to are in the East Coast or in Europe.

Still, he gets lonely sometimes on the road and wishes there was another Filipino poker player to keep him company.

"It's hard sometimes," said Leonidas. "During tournament dinner breaks, I just see all the Vietnamese players with each other, the Chinese, the Americans hanging out and they are usually in separate groups. It's good to have someone with you just to talk to and keep you company. It relaxes you and makes you play better."

Not that he condones Filipinos to quit their jobs to play professional poker to join him.

Poker is more than just a card game that requires luck. It's hard work, he said.

"This is not an easy game," he said. "It took me more than 10 years to achieve success and I'm still learning. There's a lesson in poker everyday. This is not a joke. You have to be prepared physically and mentally. If you're not, you're going to lose all your money."

He advises Filipinos who are seriously considering poker as a profession to think hard about what they are getting themselves into.

"If you're not ready, don't do it," he said. "It's not easy and I don't advise it. But if you think you're ready, just keep learning and spend a lot of time on the table." ■

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