

The History of My Gambling Addiction

By John Schmidt

Going back as far as I can remember, my first encounters with gambling occurred when I was about seven or eight years old. I bet horses at Delaware Park with my Dad. I also bet horses at Brandywine Raceway with my Mom. But I remember playing the football tickets with my dad on the weekends the most. I'm not sure which one was first of these three activities, but I remember feeling pretty cool when I did any of them. Particularly, when I was at Brandywine Raceway, my mom would just give me a couple of bucks and I would go up to one certain window where my third grade teacher, Mr. Groff, would put my two dollar bets in. Kind of unethical when you think about it, but I think he "liked" my mom. He was my go-to guy for the next couple of years until the track closed down. He schooled me on exotic wagers as well as straight bets.

I also learned from my dad, and friends of my mom, at the racetrack how to read and understand the Daily Racing Form. Plus, I would get the money from my mom and go up to the stand where the man was selling programs. It just felt good to seemingly be admired by so many adults. I grew up with my mom and lived directly across the street from the track. Plus, she was a bartender. All of her friends would be up at the track. Sometimes I would be up until eleven or so on a school night. All of the neighborhood kids thought I was so cool for being at the track late.

As a young boy I felt my emotional needs were definitely getting met. I got so much attention, validation, and reinforcement that I was going to be a good handicapper of sports (football) and horse racing. It was my destiny. I was selling my dad's parlay cards at school. I got caught twice and was sent home by the principle in fourth and fifth grade. My mom was so embarrassed. She hated my dad for that, and not being in my life or paying child support. It's amazing that I wanted to be just like him. Another "area of expertise" was poker. I honed my skills playing poker with my stepbrothers and the kids in my neighborhood. But my strongest influence was my dad's side of the family. Every major family get-together included two tables for poker; one for the husbands and the other for the wives, including my grandmom and grandpop.

Once I got to my mid-teens I was sitting up at the table with my dad making strategic suggestions and help playing his hand. Then when I turned 18 I finally had a crack at the table on my own. I was going head up against the man who taught me all I knew, my pop. Even if I played 50 hands and only won one or two, I was ecstatic to outplay my uncles, dad, and my Grandpop. In my mind I was the man. I only played with them when I was home from Cincinnati. Out there was a whole different ballgame. Gambling became my validation. I would run to get all of the scratch-offs for the waitresses at Bob Evans when I worked there at the age of 16. I started running parlay tickets in High School and taking friends to River Downs with me. I got a fake ID when I was seventeen and started going to River Downs right after school. A few of their mothers voiced some displeasure because I apparently was a bad influence on their sons.

I also started drinking late in my high school years. But it was the women that kind of catapulted me to a different level of behavior when it came to gambling, drinking, etc. My academics were pitiful. I barely passed any of my classes. I spent so much time trying to impress the girls and my male peers with all of the gambling lingo, war stories about winning bets, and making up other crap, just to fit in. This was all a ploy to attract everyone. I wanted to be popular for all of the wrong reasons. But at the time my boys would jock me and give me mad props for doing my own thing when it came to gambling, staying out late, etc. There was constant reassurance that I was on the right track. So I kind of bought into the hype.

I called my dad on Saturdays and Sundays to play his ticket and also make some straight bets. It started out with ten or twenty. It then became fifty and a hundred. Then it was "hey, these bets are someone else's." My dad was a poor taker of his own advice. He would always tell me that gambling was no good. "The best way to double your money when it comes to gambling is to fold it in half and put it back in your pocket" is what he always told me. Sage advice from the ultimate addict.

After high school I moved to Atlanta for a sales job. No supervision. I gambled profusely, unchecked. Scratch-offs and lottery started in Georgia the year I got down there. People were running around crazy. I was one of them. I found a couple of local bookies and started betting down there. I ran up a hefty debt and called my mom to Western Union me the loot. She did. Never did pay her back. Meanwhile, I still gambled through my dad. One particular weekend I won over \$2,500 from my pop's bookie. I had big plans for that come-up. I call my dad on Sunday night and he tells me the bookie got smashed and went belly-up. No money. The kicker was that my dad did not know it was my winnings. I was pissed! I made up people's names so I could bet big and not catch any flack from him. I finally told him about that at a visit in Gander Hill six years ago.

I met a girl where I worked and she left for college at Florida State. In 1995 I went down there to live with her. I frequented Biloxi casinos a lot with co-workers. I found bookies down there but ended up losing a lot of dough and had my 8 month old car re-po'd. I moved back up to Atlanta with my roommate. I was working at Outback when I met a guy who turned me on to a bookie who took a lot of action. I got in over my head one particular week in late October 1996. I was also fielding bets for a few friends. We all had a bum week and tried for an all or nothing move on the MNF game. Lost it all and found myself down over 17K. I ended up panicking and getting drunk to rob a bank. I guess that is where you could say things turned for the worse.

I was sentenced to 46 months in Federal Prison. But I got to prison and really started gambling a lot. I also told everyone many stories about my life, achievements, money, school, etc. that was not even true. Even in prison I was seeking validation from my peers by continuing in my self-destructive behaviors. I was convinced (and had this thought reinforced by others) that my gambling woes were just a streak of bad luck. So I operated off of that notion. I started running tickets in prison. I was gambling on my own skills at certain recreational activities like pool, Bocci ball, softball, etc. I really felt appreciated by the fellow inmates. I formed close bonds with a few. But they never really knew me because of the lies I told to create this pseudo-image of myself.

Once I was released from prison I went to the work-release center. I didn't really gamble too much there. Looking back, the opportunity didn't really present itself. But once I found employment it opened up some doors. Ironically, my dad never really lectured me or asked about my well being from a gambling standpoint. I started betting squares on football games and dabbled in the scratch-offs. Once I finished the work-release I was put on probation. Even my P.O. minimized my situation by saying "Don't go to DP or AC." Like that was going to stop me. From there I went all out. I started going to Atlantic City. I was promiscuous with several women and lied to them all about my life. Again, I did not feel comfortable in my own skin. I would come to learn that so many of these actions were shame-based behaviors. Inadequacy and fear of abandonment were always front and center in my life.

I started bringing girlfriends, co-workers, and other associates with me to have a good time in AC. I only gambled big in front of people that I wanted to impress. I loved it when big crowds of people would flock to the table I was at. I would always up my bet to evoke reactions from the on-lookers. A couple of my girlfriends did not like me betting large sums of money, so I would go off somewhere else for obscene amounts of time and go hard at a roulette, blackjack, or craps table. I would often ask these women to hold my money so I would not spend it. If I lost my money I would get hostile and aggressive to the point that I scared the girls into giving me back my money. Not in my character at all. But I felt desperate to get my losses back. I always felt *that* way.

I made good money waiting tables and bartending. But the lifestyle I created was very tough to live up to. I told so many stories that I was stressed out trying to keep everything straight. My need for attention began to snowball into a constant need for fuel to gamble. Once my work money began to wane, I immediately knew that I could go to a financial institution and solve my problems. I began to feel a lot of pressure from my girlfriend because my lies and my actual living arrangement did not add up. More panic set in for fear of me losing her. I had too many people that I was desperately trying to please and impress.

I slowly began to distance myself from family because I knew I was doing wrong. I kept thinking that after I robbed a bank my problems would go away. I just did not understand the nature of what was going on. Right at the end I was gambling insane amounts of money at the casinos and with my bookie. It was like I was trying to punish myself subconsciously. Right before a trip I was planning to go on with my girl to AC, I was arrested and incarcerated for several bank and hotel robberies. My life was officially over.

I was at Gander Hill (prison) for about a week before I found the ticket runner on the tier and started going hard. I broke him and took over the operation in less than a month. Not bragging, I just got lucky I guess. After filling out these diagnostic surveys and questionnaires I realized how much of my life had been affected by gambling...all of it. I stopped gambling on January 10th 2002. I have not made a bet since. I sought spiritual guidance and I immediately went on to attend weekly GA meetings. It is now quite apparent to me how much I gambled and to the extent that gambling preoccupied my life.