

Joe McKeehen's quiet victories

MontCo's World Series of Poker champ tips his hand ... just a little



To become a great poker player, you can do all the practicing and research you want. You can study other people's games, calculate odds, memorize strategies.

Or, you could just be aware of what's going on around you.

That's about the closest thing to advice you're likely to get out Joseph McKeehen, but it's probably worth heeding. The 24-year-old North Wales native is the current World Series of Poker champion, earning the first-place spot in last October's tournament and taking home \$7.68 million in winnings.

As a professional, he earned his first big win in 2012: A first-place title worth \$116,230 at a side event at that year's PokerStars Caribbean Adventure. This year so far, he's continuing his streak. In January, McKeehen netted two second-place rankings at European Poker Tournaments events in the Bahamas, and recently came in first place at a World Poker Tour tournament in San Jose, California.

McKeehen's strategy, or at least as much as he's willing to divulge, is simple. "You just keep playing and pay attention to what other people are doing," he said in a phone interview in early March. "The more you play and the more you pay attention, the more you pick up."

That's what he's been doing since he was 16, when he first saw a game on television and decided to give it a try. He played online while attending La Salle College High School and during college at Arcadia University, where he graduated with a degree in math.

Eventually it became his career.

"When I kind of realized I was working a cashier job and I wasn't making anywhere near as much as I was playing poker, I thought it'd be a chance to make more money," said McKeehen.

Not much really changed for the champion once he went pro. It's still just the game, no matter what the stakes. You still just have to pay attention.

"A lot of people [in professional poker] are emotional. But you have to keep your emotions in check because there are just some things you cannot control, and if you get really mad at them you might start playing worse," he said. "If things aren't going someone's way, you can kind of pay more attention and then maybe take more advantage of a few more mistakes."

It's something that can crop up sometimes more often now that more tournaments are televised, and some players become media personalities.

"The people on camera might not want to look like an idiot on TV, or they might want to look like a huge hero on TV so they might take their game to a little more of an extreme than it needs to be," McKeehen has observed. "I think the best players tend to not care if they're on camera, though, and they just continue to play their game."

McKeehen's own personality, on-camera and off, betrays that sentiment. He's notoriously low-key, leading to headlines surrounding his win ranging from "Mystery works for MontCo poker champ" in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* to "Poker's new whiz kid is just like you," at the online *Daily Beast* — an article previously titled more bluntly as, "Will this non-asshole win the World Series of Poker?"

He did, of course, and did so in his own way: relaxing and sleeping in between rounds in Las Vegas, going to a small party after the win, and doing a series of interviews the next day.

"I didn't go from casino to casino and hop in every bar or get drunk or anything like that," he said.

Instead, McKeehen quietly took his winnings back home to North Wales. Back home, he'll occasionally play in local casinos, or enjoy other card games online. This time of year is busy with tournaments, which he's focused on. But even with last year's windfall, the games are still the same.

"It's nice to be in a position where I don't have to worry anymore," he said. "I just like to do what I'm doing. I don't think too far into the future. When you're in this job, it's kind of hard to think so far into the future when you're really focused more on what you're doing today, in the next week or next month.

"I'm not thinking 10 years into the future. Not yet, anyway. I've always been that way." ■

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