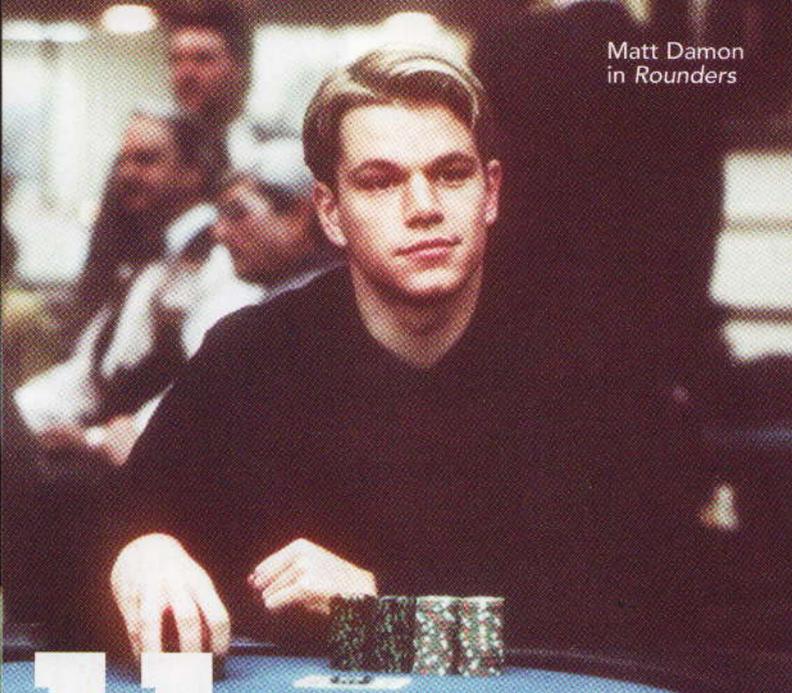


Ben Affleck

Matt Damon
in *Rounders*

Tobey Maguire



HOLLYWOOD SHAUFFLE

IT'S NOT JUST YOUR FATHER'S FRIDAY-NIGHT-OUT GAME ANYMORE. THESE DAYS, POKER IS TURNING A- TO Z-LIST STARS INTO **FIVE-CARD STUDS.**


if

BY STACIE HOUGLAND

How you bet is your business.

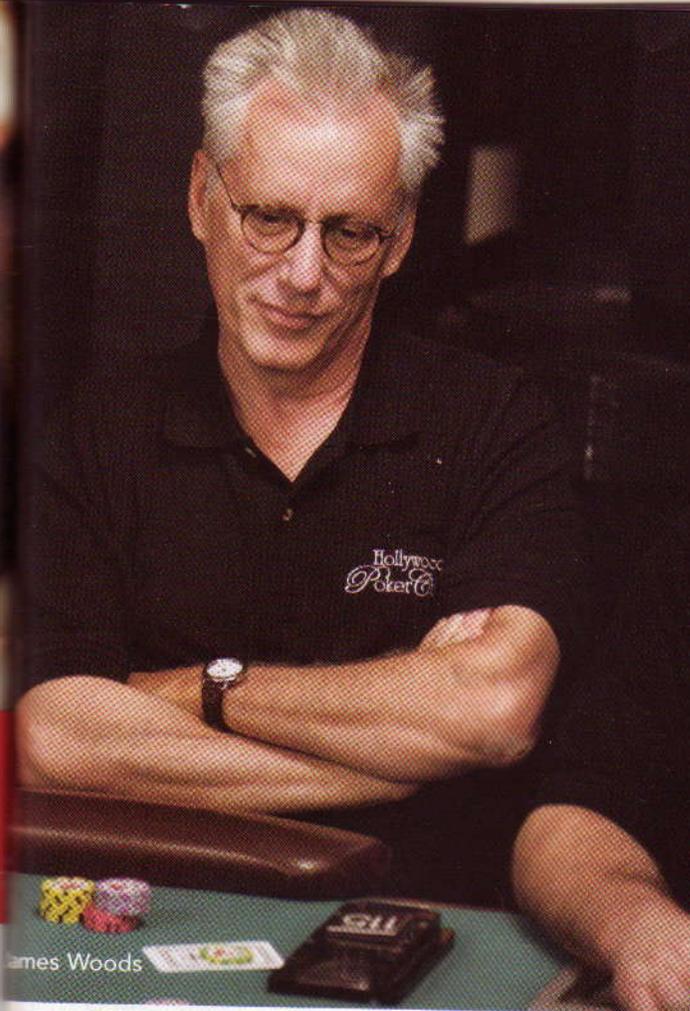
You wanna make him think about it for a reason.

—Rusty Ryan (*Brad Pitt*) coaching young poker players in *Ocean's Eleven*

acting is all about expression, Hollywood cardsharp wannabes are learning an all-new skill—the poker face. From Ben Affleck to Tobey Maguire, James Woods to Mimi Rogers, David Schwimmer to—you get the gist—the list of stars who can count the 52 ways they love playing poker is endless. At *E!*'s recent party to launch its celebrity poker show *Hollywood Hold 'Em*, Jennifer Tilly played next to beau Phil Laak (aka “The Unabomber” on the pro circuit) and down the table from Macaulay Culkin. Sara Rue hosted a tournament-style event at exclusive Guy's in West Hollywood, where Jimmy Kimmel, comedienne Sarah Silverman and Chris Masterson sat in. And on any given night around town, someone famous is holding a home game.

So, really, what's the deal?

Brad Pitt's famously funny scene teaching the newbies cards in 2001's *Ocean's Eleven* may have heralded poker's rise, but it wasn't until about two years ago the game really started to sweep Hollywood—and the nation—with the advent of TV shows like *Celebrity Poker Showdown* and the *World Poker Tour's Hollywood Home Game* that pair stars with top pros. (There's really something singular about watching Affleck finally take a gamble on-screen that pays off, doing something you yourself can do with friends at home.) And



James Woods



Actor/poker guru/
Poker Tour commen
Vince Van Patten

Photo by Scott Nathan

“It’s a game about deception and reverse psychology. Actors are born for that.”

—Vince Van Patten

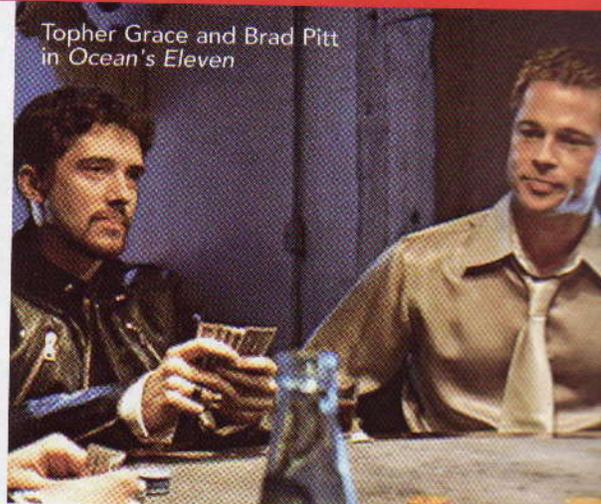


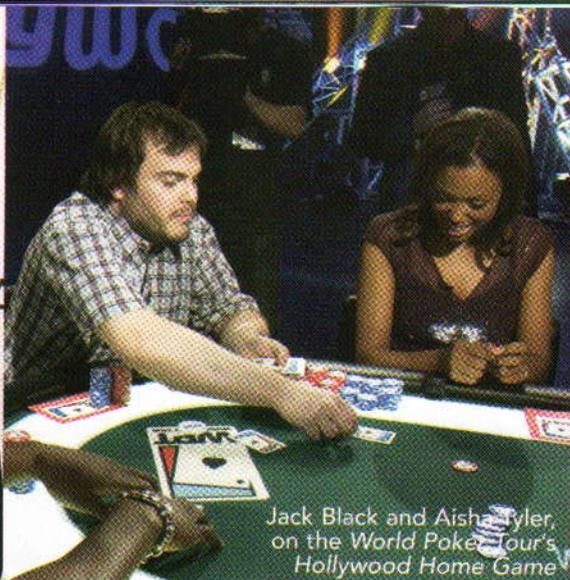
poker, it would seem, is the perfect Hollywood pastime for people who basically bluff for a living, love risk (if an acting career isn't risky, what is?) and would jump at the opportunity to ham it up on any of the ubiquitous poker TV shows. Says Rue, who hosts a bimonthly home game and got into it at 18 when she moved in with male roommates who included her in "guy's night," "I have always loved the thrill of gambling. I don't want to jump out of a plane or snowboard. The fear of breaking a bone never did it for me," she says. "However, the terror of losing \$20, or even better, the thrill of winning who knows how much, always gets me going." She finds the psychology behind people's betting to be the most fascinating aspect of the game. "I'm always trying to figure people out. What makes them tick?"

"It's a game about deception and reverse psychology," says actor/poker guru/*World Poker Tour* commentator Vince Van Patten. "Actors are born for that. They can be sneaky and can act and pretend and talk well at the table, which is a tremendous edge. These guys get it, and that's why they're so good."

Dubbed "King of the Hollywood Home Games," the youngest child of *Eight Is*

Topher Grace and Brad Pitt
in *Ocean's Eleven*





Jack Black and Aisha Tyler, on the World Poker Tour's Hollywood Home Game

Chips Ahoy! The Basics of Texas Hold 'Em

The version of poker called Texas Hold 'Em is the most popular poker game around. Here's how it's done: The player directly left of the dealer puts in ("posts") the "small blind" (half of the minimum bet). The player two to the dealer's left posts the "big blind" (the full minimum bet). Each player is dealt two cards (called "pocket" cards) face down, followed by a betting round where players can call, raise or fold. The dealer discards ("burns") the top card of the deck to ensure that no one saw it. Then the dealer lays three cards face up on the table in what is known as "the flop." After another round of betting, the dealer burns another card, then lays down another card, "the turn," face up. More betting, and the dealer burns one more before laying the fifth and last card, "the river," face up. Each player uses any combination of the seven cards—his two hole cards, plus the five community cards—to create the best five-card poker hand and bet and bluff accordingly. In the words of former World Poker Tour champ Amarillo Slim, "If you don't see a sucker at the table, you're it."

his early games, Van Patten remembers, "If he pulled off a big bluff, Don Adams [of *Get Smart*] would be very proud and would show his cards, then look at everybody and in his Maxwell Smart voice would say, 'Sorry about that, Chief.'"

Mowadays star poker players can find games to drop their dough on almost every night. Producer Jon Landau's known to have a Monday night game at his home in Sherman Oaks that draws David Schwimmer. Jack Black's *Tenacious D* partner Kyle Gass is said to host a home game on Tuesday. On Wednesdays you might catch Sharon Stone, Dennis

Hopper, Nicollette Sheridan and Jason Alexander at retired agent Norby Walters' Hollywood home game, which has been going on for nearly 15 years and whose invitees are pulled from a rotating list of 100-plus actors. Another well-known game on Wednesday is director Paul Mazursky's that's taken place for some 35 years with Leonard Nimoy, Richard Dreyfuss and Elliott Gould dropping by.

West Wing star and *Celebrity Poker Showdown* co-creator Josh Malina told *Card Player* magazine he once got kicked out of Hank Azaria's Sunday night game (he was asked back), which Matthew Perry has frequented. *That '70s Show*'s Laura Prepon is said to hold a game practically every night of the week.

Quite possibly the most exclusive—and funniest—game in town is the one held by the Gourmet Poker Club, so called because they always eat a gourmet meal. Its members are an elite seven: Steve Martin, Neil Simon, Carl Reiner, Chevy Chase, Barry Diller and producers Dan Melnick and David Chasman.

But stars don't just visit one another's mansions and Hollywood Hills estates for a good round. Maguire, Affleck, Leonardo DiCaprio and Lou Diamond Phillips often hit the felt at the world's largest poker casino, Commerce (in the City of Commerce, east of L.A.), which hosts a number of different tournaments like the California Poker State Championship that Affleck won last

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THE HANDS: From lowest to the highest (ace is always high)—a pair, two pair, three of a kind, straight (five of any sequence in any suit), flush (five cards of the same suit), full house (a pair with three of a kind), four of a kind, straight flush (a five-card sequence in the same suit) and finally the rarely-seen royal flush (ten, jack, queen, king and ace all in the same suit.)

BET: Each of the players must match the amount of chips bet on the table, or fold.

CHECK: By checking, you place no bet and pass the betting option to the next player, but if another player raises you must match the bet to stay in the game.

RAISE: To increase the amount of a bet.

CALL: When you place a bet equal to the previous player's bet. For example, he raises two chips and you call by also betting two chips.

FOLD: If you think you have no chance of winning, you throw in your hole cards face down, drop out of the round and lose your bet.

BLUFF: Pretending to have a strong hand by betting aggressively. So you're dealt a seven and two off suit (considered the worst hand you can get)? Put on that mask of deception, convince yourself you're holding aces and bet as if you are, and you might just fool the rest to fold. (Then again, you could lose your shirt.)

TELL: Any number of giveaways (eye twitching, finger tapping, breathing heavily, jumping out of your chair and cheering...) that you're about to take it all—or lose your shirt.

ALL IN: If you're really confident you can win the pot (or down to just a few chips and will go out anyway), you bet everything you've got, and other players must match it or fold.



Van Patten (center) coaches the cast of *Hustle & Flow*: (from left) Paula Jai Parker, DJ Qualls, Elise Neal, producer John Singleton, Taraji P. Henson

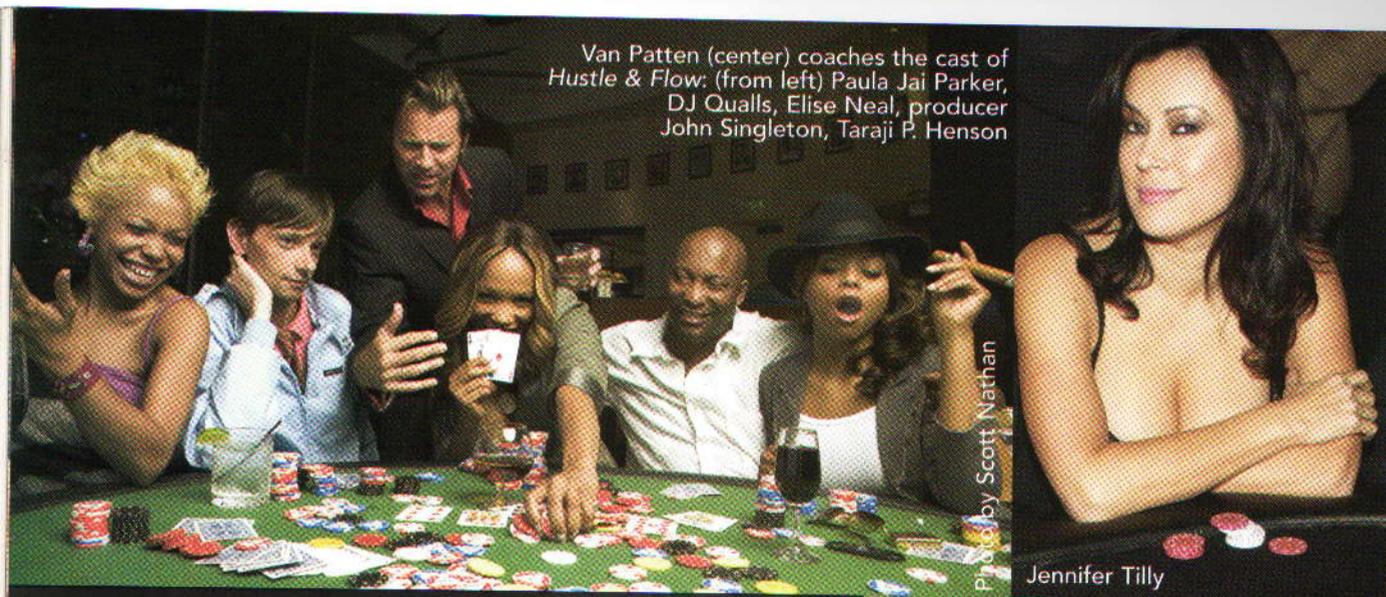


Photo by Scott Nathan

Jennifer Tilly



Danny and Chris Me and Laura Prepon



Ante Up for Your Own Home Game (not that we advocate any illegal activity...)

SO YOU WANNA JOIN IN A FEW ROUNDS OF TEXAS HOLD 'EM, BUT TOBEY AND BEN DIDN'T GIVE YOU A RING? LEO WAS UNAVAIL? HAVE YOUR FRIENDS OVER FOR AN EVENING OF CARD SHARKING—THE POKER FACES MAY NOT BE AS FAMOUS, BUT IT'S FUN ANYWAY.

MAKE THE CALL

A single table should seat six to nine players. You will probably want to invite people who know a little about the game—you don't (necessarily) want to bluff your novice pals into the poorhouse.

GET PREPPED

Have several decks of brand-new cards on hand, a full set of chips, and a table that allows for easy interaction (round, or if rectangular, approx. 40"-42" x 84"-110"). Plastic chips are less expensive than clay (Bicycle makes travel sets from \$15-\$32, available at Target, Kmart and Wal-Mart). Clay chips can be \$50-\$150 or more. "I believe poker should be played in nice conditions. Get lots of good cushions for your chairs, make the lighting proper, turn the stereo off, have enough decks of cards for when people start ripping them up and throwing them," Van Patten jokes. Felt tables are nice, but expensive. Hammacher-Schlemmer carries one for about \$300 and has a weighted chip poker set available too. www.hammacher.com

THE MENU

Nuts, pretzels, candy and the like are good to set out. Order a pizza, start the barbecue or go high-end and call in dinner. Van Patten's weekly game takes a 20-minute dinner break for meals ordered from players' favorite restaurants, like Mastro's Steakhouse, Mr. Chow and Dan Tana's. "Poker players feel like eating a lot of beef, rich foods," he says. "So we get the best steaks in town or the best Italian or the best Chinese." You'll be good to go with beer, wine, sodas and coffee on hand. "Keep the wine flowing and the people laughing," Van Patten says.

GAME ON!

Make sure all guests know the rules. If some are beginners, play a few rounds to practice. Do the buy-in, set the timer, announce the house rules, and get shuffling.

* Tips: Use two decks per table, as while one is in play the other could be shuffled to keep the game moving. For a shorter game, increase blinds (bets) faster, for a longer game increase them slower. Twenty-minute increments are good for an average game without a big buy-in.



Enough star Dick Van Patten started playing in his dad's home games as a teenager alongside *Welcome Back, Kotter*'s Gabe Kaplan, John Huston ("He'd fill up these huge shots of tequila"), Walter Matthau and Richard Dreyfuss. "I loved poker so much I actually had a fake beard and mustache made, and I used to go down to Gardena [a half-hour south of L.A.] where there was legalized poker for 21 and over. I looked like a little freak," Van Patten says, laughing. While evolving into a tennis pro (by age 20 he was one of the world's top 25 players) he continued to play poker through the years professionally in the world-class circuit and privately with Kaplan and producer Bob Evans. Now he hosts a weekly game with Affleck, Maguire, James Woods (his partner on a website called HollywoodPoker.com) and others. In 2002 he was hired as the *WPT*'s commentator, and the rest is history.

Though the pokeratti have helped bring the game from 3 a.m. ESPN broadcasts to every cable channel on DirectTV, Hollywood's love affair with poker is nothing new, going back to when it was relegated to seedy, smoke-filled back barrooms and ultra-private home games. Back in the day, industry bigwigs like Darryl Zanuck, Lew Wasserman, Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick and *Hollywood Reporter* founder W.R. "Billy" Wilkerson played weekly games during which Wasserman reportedly lost his home twice, but eventually won it back. On the East Coast, Harpo Marx, George S. Kaufman and Irving Berlin were part of a group dubbed "The Thanatopsis Pleasure and Inside Straight Club" that held court at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. Legend has it John Wayne won the dog who was the first Lassie from its handler, but ended up giving it back.

For years, Ira and Lee Gershwin held a weekly game at their home on North Roxbury Drive in Beverly Hills that included actor Edward G. Robinson (who starred opposite Steve McQueen in the poker-themed *The Cincinnati Kid*) and Angie Dickinson (who starred in the original *Ocean's Eleven*), later a player at Barbara Sinatra's Beverly Hills home with the wives of Jack Lemmon and Gregory Peck. Of

Novak's return to film in 1991 for writer-director Mike Figgis' noirish *Liebesträume* was an intensely unsatisfying experience. "I know he thinks I'm a total bitch," she says of Figgis, whose talent she regards highly. "That role was fabulous, full of depth, and when I interpreted it the way I thought was evident in the incredible script, he said, 'We're not making a Kim Novak movie, just say the lines.' Usually, I would have just said the words, played it and moved on, but in this case I felt so strongly about the script, I persisted and thought, 'How many more movies and opportunities will there be?' He said, 'If you continue to play the role this way, I'm just going to cut you out of the movie,' and he pretty much did. In this case, I take total responsibility for being unprofessional. He was not only the author, but the director. But he never listened to my point of view. It wiped me out."

Despite that experience, Novak's status continues to approach that of a living legend nonetheless. The right project could tempt her back to the screen even now. "Hollywood's big mistake," she says, "is that they always put emphasis first on the stars, second the directors and, lastly, the writer. The script is the main thing. If you're going to say something worthwhile, the script is where it will be found. And for me, that's still the goal—to touch people and have an impact." ■

JOE QUEENAN

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Haunting), Richard Gere (*The Mothman Prophecies*), Michael Keaton (*White Noise*), Dennis Quaid (*Cold Creek Manor*), Kevin Costner (*Dragonfly*) and Geoffrey Rush (*House on Haunted Hill*), and instead concentrate on teens. One of the reasons the *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* series were so popular is because the films centered on teenagers being slashed to ribbons; not even teenagers seem to mind watching other teenagers get cut to pieces. If I were making the calls in Hollywood, I'd recommend a lot fewer creepy kids in the attic and a lot more creepy teens in the basement. And please, no more horror movies starring Robert De Niro. For horror movies to work, the stars have to feign interest and avoid conveying the impression that they are merely cashing yet another check. Besides, De Niro now saves his scariest work for movies like *Meet the Fockers*.

On the other hand, a film about innocent children trapped in a deserted house with Barbra Streisand just might work... ■

Hollywood SHUFFLE

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summer. The actor, who has trained with pro poker superstar Annie Duke, beat 90 other players, among them Maguire, to take first place and \$356,400 in the \$10,000 buy-in tournament. "He's totally world class, picked up the game just a couple years ago and he's playing extremely high-level," Van Patten says.

It's just this sort of thing that makes great TV, and nothing has fueled the fascination with poker more than televised games—unless it's televised games with celebrities at the table. In days past, watching poker on TV was akin to watching a plant grow. The action was slow, the commentary dull. Plus, there was no way to know what each player had. And if you wanted to see poker on TV you had better keep the coffeepot boiling—expect to be up in the wee hours.

Van Patten's *World Poker Tour* changed everything.

In 2003, producer Steven Lipscomb revolutionized the concept of poker on TV, turning its hustling, low-class rep into a top-rated, well-respected spectator sport with the invention of the "hole cam"—cameras that show the viewer each player's "hole cards," or face-down cards—and lively commentators to amp up and explain the action and rules of the game. That year *WPT* became the highest rated show on the Travel Channel (A-listers among its fans), and held its first celebrity invitational tournament. Bravo's attempt to cash in on the explosion was produced by actor Joshua Malina, *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, to which the *WPT* responded with *Hollywood Home Game*, a series featuring Affleck, Mimi Rogers, Aisha Tyler and others. Now add to that E!'s *Hollywood Hold 'Em*, ESPN's *World Series of Poker*, the syndicated *Hip Hop Hold 'Em* airing in September, GSN's *Poker Royale: Celebrities vs. Poker Pros* and any number of televised tournaments, and you've got enough poker to watch that you won't have time to hit the table yourself. Unless, that is, you're online at the same time, competing on one of thousands of poker websites (PartyPoker.com, Bodog.com and PokerStars.com are a few of the more popular).

That's not all. A national monthly magazine called *All In* launched last year with Affleck on the cover. Pro player Phil Hellmuth will star in a poker reality show in the vein of *The Apprentice*, and Jenna Elfman has been mentioned to star in a Lisa Kudrow-produced sitcom based on Duke's life. Director Curtis Hanson is working on a drama to be released in December called *Lucky You*, about a professional poker player who runs into his estranged father at the World Series of Poker, that stars Eric Bana, Drew Barrymore, Debra Messing and Robert Duvall. Zak Penn is directing a poker mockumentary starring Affleck, Schwimmer and William H. Macy. Nicolas Cage will reportedly play poker legend Amarillo Slim in a biopic directed by Milos Forman. Phillips is shooting and starring in his own poker movie, *Dead Money*, this summer.

With the poker trend sailing toward full tilt, are the odds on the masses eventually throwing their cards at the TV in revolt? Or will variations on poker shows continue to spawn like so many reality show rabbits—a Whoopi Goldberg-hosted tourney on some South Pacific island, a couples game where the winners get married, a card-sharking *Fear Factor*? ESPN's original poker drama *Tilt* was canceled after its first season. One New Jersey assemblywoman wants cable networks that air poker shows to donate money to compulsive gambling programs. A recent *Vanity Fair* article suggested poker could be likened to cocaine, as addicted as some well-known Hollywood types seem to be. It may not be long before the public tires of watching Lance Bass and Tracy Bingham trade witticisms over a pile of chips and a pair of jacks.

Be that as it may, right now poker's the hottest diversion in town since Paris Hilton's sex tape, and like said actress, doesn't appear to be going anywhere soon. Says Van Patten, "You may not see it as much on TV in the future, but I think it will continue to grow, especially because the youth in poker is continuing to grow—and everyone loves to play poker." ■