



“We feel like we know each other really well, so it’s like another level when we play against each other”

Pro on pro

# Barney & Ross Boatman

They were the first brothers to make a WSOP final table together and have been playing poker for more than 20 years. Here they reveal how they caught the poker bug, and tell gun stories...

**T**aking part in Channel 4’s *Late Night Poker* back in 1999, Barney and Ross were two pioneers of UK televised poker and they have each made more than \$1.25 million in career tournament earnings. They are currently sponsored by Full Tilt.

Big brother Barney has enjoyed a long and varied career, including working as a bartender, builder, journalist and legal advisor before he caught the poker bug and turned professional. He is also the first player to reach three consecutive WSOP final tables.

Younger brother Ross hones his poker skills as a professionally trained actor. Currently starring in *The Bill*, he is more famous for his part as Kevin in *London’s Burning*, and has twice starred in the Patrick Marber play *Dealer’s Choice*.

In an echo of their 2002 joint final table performance, this month both of the Boatmans will be playing in the same televised semi-final of the Ladbrokes Poker Million, where they will more likely than not play harder against each other than anyone else at the table...

**Barney:** If it was possible to play any harder against each other, we would. We’ve played each other so much...

**Ross:** When we first really got the bug for poker, we’d tear up to Barney’s flat as

soon as we got back from work, and sit there all night playing heads-up poker in a very competitive way – because that’s the only way to play.

**Barney:** We feel like we know each other really well, so it’s like another level when we play each other. Because he knows that I know that he knows... it’s one of those.

**Ross:** If it’s at all possible to play harder, we do.

**Barney:** But at the same time, we’re not competitive in the sense that we begrudge each other any success. I’m always really happy for Ross if he does well and vice versa. I think...

[Laughter]

**Ross:** Yeah, of course.

**Barney:** But you know, we’ve knocked each other out at key stages in big tournaments, and there’s no hard feelings... for long.

[Laughter]

**Ross:** We’ve played heads-up more than once. We’ve finished first and second, first and second again and then first and third, haven’t we?

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**Barney:** Yeah, we have, we had one at the Vic in a £50 No Limit freezeout, which was a big thing at the time, where we finished up heads-up.

**Ross:** I managed to win that one.

**Barney:** Did you?

**Ross:** Yeah!

**Barney:** I thought that I won it?

**Ross:** No, no – I won that one...

**Barney:** Oh! OK then...

**Ross:** You won the ‘real’ one in Las Vegas.

**Barney:** Yeah we had the Omaha in Las Vegas. I won that. And then there was the one in, erm...

**Ross:** Luton.

**Barney:** Luton, yeah, where I came first and Ross came third. That was the real case in point, because we had the most chips when we were three-handed, and it was like the other guy wasn't there. We were just bashing away at each other – this guy was just sitting in the middle wondering what the hell was going on and why we weren't trying to get him – but I just wanted Ross out of the way!

[Laughter]

**Ross:** Yeah, we both wanted to go heads-up with the other guy because he was a real easy mark. How he got there I

haven't got a clue, but he managed to squeeze in there somehow, and we both wanted the other one out the way so we could finish him off.

**Barney:** It took me about three hours to beat him...

**Ross:** Only because he passed every pot.

**Barney:** Well, that's true.

**Ross:** He never put a chip in.

**Barney:** So yeah, we've got a lot of history.

*Do you find that you play quite hard against the other boys in the Hendon Mob as well?*

**Barney:** Oh, even more so. I mean, Ram [Vaswani] has knocked me out of more tournaments – and always from behind – than any other player.

In fact it all started in the Masters Classics [Amsterdam], where we were three-handed. He didn't actually knock me out in this pot, because I was chip-leader before the hand, but we got it all-in when I was a decent favourite against him. He had a flush draw and hit it. Then he went on to win, and since then he's been my doctor everywhere we go.

**Ross:** There's no love lost.

**Barney:** No, absolutely not. And we can't even say that we're as uncomplicatedly delighted about the others' success.

If Joe's knocked me out of a tournament I can't just sit there cheering for him quite

as much as I'd be cheering for Ross. It's a little bit more painful...

[Wry laughter]

**Barney:** But obviously we're all good mates as well, and we're delighted for each other.

**Ross:** And we all share 5% of each other, so it always cushions the blow a little bit when one of us knocks the others out.

*If you were honest, who would you say was the better player?*

They each point at the other and simultaneously answer.

**Both:** He is...

[Laughter]

**Barney:** If we were honest, you say? Well, we're not...

[Laughter]

**Ross:** I think that everybody would agree that I am... Nah! We've both got our own strengths, and weaknesses too, and we play two very different styles of poker. But the record speaks for itself, and when you look at what we've cashed in tournaments since we started, there's probably about fifty pence between us.

**Barney:** Yeah, I've got fifty pence and he's got nothing.

[Laughter]



## “They were all standing there with baseball bats, just waiting for these guys to come back

**Barney:** Although we're very close, get on very well and make each other laugh, we're actually constitutionally very different. I'm very full of nervous energy, can't sit still, and sleep about an hour a night. Ross is very relaxed, solid and chilled and could sleep for England, or at least he could before he had kids. I think that difference comes out in our poker games in some ways.

*So how did you both get into poker? Which one of you got hooked first, and which one hooked in the other?*

**Ross:** Barney's slightly older than I am, so he learnt how to play first and he taught me the rules – though I wouldn't say that he taught me how to play, because...

**Barney:** ...I didn't know how! Really, we got into the game in a serious way together. We had a game that started off with Ross and his college mates, then we gradually got more serious about the game together. We went to the Vic and started playing tournaments, so although I was playing games in a general way – and poker specifically – before Ross, we have really been doing it the same amount of time. When we first got the Vegas bug is probably the best story.

I'd just broken up with my girlfriend and was looking for an adventure. I phoned up Ross and said “fancy coming to New Orleans for Mardi Gras?”

**Ross:** I'd just finished filming my first series of *London's Burning*, so I had a few quid and thought: Fuck it! Yeah!

**Barney:** I didn't ask him because he had a few quid! It's coz he's my brother and I love him...

[Laughter]

**Barney:** We got a name of a friend of a friend. It was this guy who was a bass



▲ “I didn't ask him because he had a few quid! It's coz he's my brother and I love him...”

player in a band and he lived a big squat in New Orleans, and we phoned him up and he said: “Yeah, you can come and kip on our floor.” So we turned up...

**Ross:** And all that was left of the place was the floor...

[Laughter]

**Barney:** Exactly. The day before we got there, they'd been attacked by a bunch of rednecks and the house had been burnt down. The whole back of the house was missing, there was no lights, no water, and they were all standing there with baseball bats waiting for these guys to come back. We kipped one night on the floor and then we found the only room available in New Orleans...

**Ross:** At a doss house, basically. It was full of hookers and Vietnam vets and junkies. Best place I ever stayed...

**Barney:** So we're staying on a stained mattress with no blankets in a little wooden box. It was \$5 a night for the two of us because all the \$500 per night hotels are full, and we made really good friends with the guy in the next little box.

**Ross:** He was a dead ringer for Chuck Berry – he only had one tooth left – and he had done time for stabbing his wife 56 times or something. And they were still best of friends...

**Barney:** We spent the day of the Mardi Gras actually sitting on their porch in the black area of New Orleans with their extended family. We didn't see another white person all day. And we got drunk, got up and started dancing, and somebody went...

**Ross:** [In a deep-south US accent] “Wooheeee! Look at dem white boys dancing!”

[Laughter]

**Barney:** We'd come to see the Mardi Gras and we ended up watching it...

**Ross:** On that tiny little black and white telly...

**Barney:** Drinking these beers that this guy's dad was selling to us. After that it was like – what do we do now? So we said ‘why don't we hire a car and drive to Vegas and have a little look.’ ▶



We'd always wanted to go and liked poker. As we were driving into Vegas we turned the radio on and heard an advert for \$9.99 a night for a hotel room somewhere...

**Ross:** And a free cocktail...

**Barney:** So we didn't have a clue. At first, we thought we had a system for roulette, didn't we? We thought we were geniuses.

**Ross:** Yeah – double your bets. We'll start with \$100. And \$3,200 in, we're like "Jesus! Hold on! This ain't working! We're down 3,000-odd trying to nick a hundred..."

**Barney:** So then we went into... what's that place downtown? It's down the end of the road.

**Ross:** Oh, Union Plaza.

**Barney:** Yeah! And we were playing Omaha high-low sitting at the same table.

**Ross:** Two dollar/four dollar.

**Barney:** Then, like now, we never played together. We're very competitive. But

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because it's high-low, you can get into a situation where one of you has got the high and one of you has got the low, and you're each playing your own hand.

There was an incident where that was the case, where we had the nuts one way each, and there was this one guy caught in the middle. And when the pot was finished and we turned our hands over, he leapt up and looked like he was trying to pull a gun.

He accused us of trying to put him in a sandwich, and said: "I'm gonna introduce you to Mr S & W!" and went for his pocket. Two guys just grabbed him from either side and dragged him out...

We thought that we were the business. We had this room at the Frontier, and we

never even slept in it. We just played in this game...

**Ross:** We went back once for a shower, I think. We played for about three days solid. We managed to iron out our whole holiday tank playing \$2/\$4 high-low split for about 36 hours...

**Barney:** Not that it was all that much money, but we had been planning to go to Mexico as well. And then we worked out that we'd have to do on average about 120 miles per hour to get back to LA in time to get our flight.

**Ross:** By now we were so broke that we couldn't pay our way out of the car park. Security were called....

**Barney:** ...and this guy's on the phone going [Barney puts on fake American accent]: "We've got these two English guys here that say they haven't got... what? Not worth the hassle? OK."

[Laughter]

**Ross:** So we were turfed out of the car park.

**Barney:** We weren't worth the hassle. That was the ultimate insult...

**Ross:** But the games at Archway – that's where we really started to play. That's where the bug really got hold of us. I made a friend called Christian Coleson at the Vic, he introduced me to Patrick Marber, the writer and playwright, and they both started coming to our game in Archway. The play *Dealer's Choice* is actually based on and came from the game at Archway.

*So how closely based on that game is it?*

**Ross:** Well, I don't know. It was all pretty original, but the feeling of it – and the way he brought out the competitive side of men and the banter and stuff like that – it's definitely from his experiences in those games.

**Barney:** The kind of thing that's very real is a character in it who's always a loser, and on the one day that he seems to be winning, all of a sudden his personality really changes and he really starts to give it to the player that he's beating.

It's like a kid who's been bullied all his life and he gets a chance to bully someone else. It's not a pretty sight, but it catches

a lot of what blokes are about – but specifically through the prism of poker.

You can tell that the experience is real. You can tell that he's writing poker from a real place. You know, you see a lot of movies with poker in, like the ridiculous *Casino Royale*, where it's just an absolute joke. You know they offered Ross a job?

**Ross:** Yeah, they offered me the job of being the poker advisor and they said that there was a possibility that I might get a small part in the film if I did. I went for a meeting with the producer, and he wrote the scenario.

He's a bit of a poker player, and he understood the game a bit, but it was a delicate situation because I didn't want to say 'listen mate, any poker player worth his salt would just blow this straight out of the water. It's rubbish. It's just so fucking obvious...'

It was just crazy – but of course I wanted the job, so I didn't want to tell him that it was complete shit, and I tried to pussyfoot around. Anyway, I ended up spending a day with some of them and teaching them how to handle chips and that kind of stuff.

They didn't offer me a part, but they did ask if I would look after Daniel Craig and teach him how to play poker and I said 'How much?' They said £50 a day so I said 'Well, I'm a bit busy right now...'

**Barney:** And they asked me to be his body double but they only wanted to give me £5 per day, so...

[Laughter]

*Which character out of Dealer's Choice would you most closely associate yourself with, and why?*

**Ross:** There's a character in the play called Frankie and there's definitely some of me there – and that's deliberate, I think, on Patrick's part, although he's never said that to me. But he [Frankie] is the young gun, the flash player who really fancies himself to be able to go off to Vegas and become a pro, but who's actually not nearly as good as he thinks that he is, which was probably true of me at the time.

**Barney:** It's not true any more, because now Ross realises that he's no good...

**Ross:** Yeah exactly...

[Laughter]

**Ross:** But if there was a wide boy cheeky chappie in the game, I think it was probably me. And Frankie was definitely that way. He really thought that he was going to take off to Vegas and beat the pros, but of course a professional comes into the game and cleans him out, and he's really not as nearly as good as he thinks.

But when I did the play recently in the West End, I played Sweeny, who I've got much more empathy with at this stage of my life. He's got a daughter that he's separated from, as have I. He's wasted many years of his life staying up late and gambling, and not doing the things that he's supposed to do.

I like to think that's not the case with me any more. I'm now a very responsible father and have three children who I spend a lot of time with, but I think that I probably have more in common with him now – except that he is a rubbish poker player, and I'm a much better one... [Chuckles] I hope...

**Barney:** It would have to be Mugsey for me, because, just personality-wise, he's the only one in the play who isn't a complete bastard. He's a bit of a dreamer, Mugsey...

**Ross:** He's a man of vision...

**Barney:** He looked at a toilet and saw a restaurant. I looked at Ram Vaswani, Joe Beevers and Ross Boatman and saw the Hendon Mob – you know?

[Laughter]



▲ Barney practises his "I'm gonna introduce you to Mr S&W" pose

**Ross:** That game back then was much more fun than any that I can possibly imagine could ever be again. It'll never be like that, partly because of the characters that were in the game and partly because it was fresh to us. It was new, exciting and funny, and we were playing for amounts where it wasn't really too painful if you lost. I mean, it did get a bit painful now and again, but it was fun.

It was a social event, something to look forward to. It wasn't going out to grind and to try and make a living.

We'd spend night after night just falling around laughing – crying with laughter. I can't remember why, now, or what it was we'd laugh about, but Patrick was a big part of that. We all were.

**Barney:** Yeah, those were great days. It's something that you can't recapture, although we go to home games every now and again. I go to Vicky Coren's game, and in some ways that's got a bit of that about it. But then everyone who plays in that game can play. Although it's fun, small stakes and silly games, it's not like it was then. We were just off our heads, it didn't have to be poker – it could have been anything.

**Ross:** I suppose the risk of the money heightened the emotion.

**Barney:** Yeah, there was a buzz for sure.

*You can find the HendonMob online at TheHendonMob.com and can play with them every Tuesday night in the Hendon Mob league on Full Tilt Poker.*