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# Ciaran O'Leary & Marty Smyth

We caught up with two of Ireland's biggest poker stars at the Irish Winter Festival, where they discussed how the Irish have gambling in their blood and why that makes the Emerald Isle the best place in the world to play poker

**M**arty and Ciaran are two of Ireland's five WSOP bracelet winners, with victories in the 2008 \$10,000 Pot Limit Omaha event and the 2007 \$1,500 NLHE event respectively.

Marty is from Belfast, and in addition to his WSOP bracelet he has also beaten the largest field ever assembled for a European poker tournament, taking down the 2007 Irish Poker Open. Currently sponsored by BoylePoker, he has over \$2.6 million in career tournament earnings and is lying second in the Ireland all-time money list behind Andy Black.

The son of a greyhound trainer, Ciaran 'Big C' O'Leary (the moniker stems from the Americans' inability to pronounce his name) has had gambling in his blood from an early age and is originally from Carrigaline, County Cork. Now living in Seattle, Washington, the PaddyPower sponsored professional has more than \$778,000 in career tournament earnings and is ranked 15th in the Ireland all-time money list.

No stranger to flying the flag, both players represented Ireland in the 2008 Poker Nations Cup in Cardiff, alongside fellow professionals Liam Flood, Pdraig Parkinson and Donnacha O'Dea, where they overcame a poor start to finish a close second to the eventual winners, Great Britain.

Ben Wilson caught up with them over a pint (or several) of the black stuff...

**Marty:** The first time I met Ciaran was after he won the [WSOP] bracelet last year. Obviously, because he's lived in America for so long, I didn't actually realise he was Irish until he got to the final table. Then it was like: 'Jesus! He's from Cork!'

It was the first time I'd heard of you, because you hadn't played that much over here, and I don't really play very much in the States.

**Ciaran:** I typically try and keep up to date with the Irish players and see how everybody is doing and stuff. It's very important, at least from my point of view, to see how we're doing and how we're holding our own against some of the other countries in the world. And rest assured, like in 1998 when it was my first World Series of Poker, which was also the year that Donnacha [O'Dea] won his first bracelet and you know... I was there. I was there and I was very, very proud to be Irish and to see that he could win a bracelet for us.

He was the first to win one, he was our first one you know? Then there was Noel [Furlong], and Marty and myself and Alan Smurfit as well. Alan's like me - he's been away a while, but I know we're back on it three or four times a year. But I suppose I should answer your question

- I'd heard of Marty, I'd read some stuff about him and knew that he was an up-and-coming player about four years ago - people were talking about him and stuff like that. Any Irish lads I'd meet, I'd say 'who's the next up-and-coming?' and it was always 'there's this lad Marty Smyth, he's very successful and he's gonna break through pretty soon'. I have a lot of respect for his game, and we've become reasonably good friends over the last year or so.

**Marty:** When I heard Ciaran was on the final table [at the 2007 \$1,500 NLHE WSOP event]... word spread around that there was an Irish guy at the final table and I said "Is he a proper Irish guy, or is he one of those 'Irish' guys" - one of these Americans who has Irish grandparents' you know? Then I heard the accent and it was, like: 'Oh! He really is Irish'.

[Laughter]

**Marty:** We bump into each other a few times a year. He comes over here and we catch up, and then I'm over in Vegas every year for five weeks or so as well. Then there was the Poker Nations...

**Ciaran:** The Poker Nations was storming, and you made me go on to that, so we were on the same team for the Poker Nations Cup as well. We spent ▶

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► fucking seven days together eating, sleeping and drinking pretty much you know?

**Marty:** Well, there wasn't that much sleeping.

**Ciaran:** Close quarters. Well I say that because half the time we were literally asleep sitting in the chair in the Green Room looking up at the screen because it does get a bit monotonous after a while. I mean you learn a lot about a man in six or seven days and I also got to commentate with Vicky Coren on his heat as well, so...

**Marty:** In fairness you went easy on me and made some pretty good excuses for me, so it wasn't too bad.

[Laughter]

*The barman turns up with a round of Guinness for the table.*

**Ciaran:** Here you go, man. No? They never take tips. They always run from me.

**Marty:** They must be scared of you.

[Laughter]

*So how did it feel to finish second in the Poker Nations Cup?*

**Marty:** I think that at the start, and your always going to be disappointed if you don't win, but if someone offered you second place at the start you'd snap it up.

But then whenever you get down to the last two, of course you want to win. Even if you've done well and come in second you're going to be really gutted at the time.

We were pretty happy with second place, though, because we got off to such a bad start. I mean we were nearly written off halfway through the heats, and then firstly Ciaran scored a few points for us in one of the later heats, and we got to the final very much as underdogs. I think ourselves and the American team were way down the bottom of the table in terms of chip stacks. So we did pretty well to come back from that, and we were just a whisker away from winning it.

**Ciaran:** Yeah, I'd echo everything Marty said there really. When you're playing in those, especially that type of structure and it being the Poker Nations Cup, it's not about the money you know?

You're actually putting up your own money to play in it, but it's the pride in the jersey, so to speak, and the fact that you're playing for the Irish and are trying to bring it home. And the Irish are very proud of stuff like that, any time that there's a team event, and I suppose it's

only fitting that we got to go up against Great Britain at the end with our best player, which was Donnacha O'Dea, and he was the one that we wanted to rest everything on.

As Marty said, we hadn't broke too good, through no fault of our own. It's a completely different animal those six-handed TV tourneys. It's arguably a different game to your standard game because everybody is a very accomplished player – they all know the set-up and what's at stake. So you have to be prepared to do what your opponent maybe wouldn't do, but at the same time you don't want to make a mistake because you don't want to let your teammates down.

You could be looking at a hand that you believe to be the best hand. However, if I'm wrong here... if it was my own event, then I'd walk out and have a pint and it's not the end of the world, but I'm gonna let these other five guys down.

And that's what's so wonderful, and what I think is so great about those type of events.

**Marty:** I didn't actually enjoy it that much. I enjoyed the whole week, but I didn't actually enjoy playing first because I just felt really under pressure in those things. Much more pressure than you'd get from playing heads-up, even.

**Ciaran:** Oh yeah! You could be playing for over \$100,000 and you wouldn't feel that much pressure, because if it's on your own shoulders. Like Marty says, it's a different animal when you've got to go back out and face your five lads and be like [shrugs shoulders] you know?

**Marty:** No one is ever gonna say anything and no one's ever going to be

## “Cards are such a big part of the Irish heritage. I believe it's in every strand of the Irish people's DNA

upset with you, but you feel bad yourself when you get something wrong.

**Ciaran:** I'd get back out and everybody would be in the fucking bus...

[Laughter]

**Ciaran:** I'm thinking: This is great! This is really nice... Where's the 'Wahay Ciaran! You got us back?' and [Liam] Flood was the only one there, all the other fucking four boys are out in the bus – they couldn't wait to get back to the bar.

[Laughter]

**Marty:** Brutal! We didn't want to have to wait around while you talked the interviewer to death... we waited around for half an hour.

**Ciaran:** I should have just said: "Leave two rolls of tape there and someone to change it and come back in two hours."

[Laughter]

*How does it feel to be two of Ireland's five WSOP bracelet winners?*

**Marty:** I'm very, very proud to be part of that group of players. Until very recently it was just Donnacha and Noel and nobody won a bracelet for quite a while.

**Ciaran:** Padraig finished third in 1999.

**Marty:** That was the year Noel won it. Then I think it was five or six years before Ciaran and Alan Smurfit won theirs as well. So it's been a good couple of years. It feels nice to be putting Irish poker on the map.

Just a few months ago I was down in Donegal just for a weekend break, it was in a one-street town, but like everywhere you go in Ireland there was five or six pubs, and this was just a tiny village, but



▲ Staying true to their roots, both Ciaran and Marty are sponsored by Irish poker rooms

even all the pubs there had notices up for the weekly Texas Hold 'Em tournament.

You can't go anywhere now without pubs running poker tournaments, and there's different tourneys springing up everywhere. Irish poker's just getting bigger and bigger all the time. I can't believe how big poker has got over the last few years.

I thought that the whole internet boom, I was kinda expecting it to fizzle out. I thought that it'd just be a good few years and then that's your lot. But it just keeps on getting bigger and bigger all the time, and poker in Ireland is just getting more popular all the time as well.

**Ciaran:** Keep in mind, too, you're talking about a country that's got a betting office in every village and every town, do you know what I mean? So basically there's no escaping the noose for the Irish – in some way it's either gonna be the horses, the greyhounds, obviously you've got the football and the rugby and everything, but I think that cards are such a big part of the Irish heritage. I believe it's in every strand of the Irish people's DNA. It's a game that we love.

**Marty:** Every family plays cards, whenever you end up spending time with your family you play a few games of cards – probably because it's always raining over here, so every family holiday you probably end up having a few games of cards.

**Ciaran:** And you're always going to have that competitive nature as well, trying to get the better of your mates and stuff like that. And money aside, when we started



playing the game there was nowhere near the amount of money around that there is in the game now, and there was always a form of No Limit, because basically you always played for the amount of money that you had in your pocket. When we were playing poker down in the pub at the bar I'd see people lose – sad to say, but businesses, houses, everything, they'd be fellas with their watches...

It sounds extreme, but that comes with it. Anything that you love and enjoy that much, unfortunately there's going to be a bit of a downside that comes with it as well. But the Irish are among the best players in the world... really!

I tell you one thing, anyway, they keep you honest. It's hard to make a move. You'd better have something – you know what I mean? They might just have second pair and go 'OK I'm gonna call.' So if you're trying to represent something that you don't have... I might be able to get Marty off a hand a lot easier than a ►



▲ Ciaran (left) moved to the United States with just 1,000 dollars in his pocket





▲ Despite preferring cash games, Marty has had a great deal of success in tourneys

fella that maybe plays in the pub once a week, some folks are like ‘alright there’s an Ace on the board but this King *has* to be good!’ And he might only have a Seven with the King, so you’d figure if you have a King you surely have him beat anyway.

You’ve got to behave yourself you know? And pick your spots.

**Marty:** I’m not just saying this, but I really do enjoy playing in Ireland far more than any other country – although the Amsterdam Masters Classics last year was really good. It had a similar vibe to tournaments over here [Ireland]. I just think that here people just don’t take it as seriously. That’s not to say that people don’t try – I mean everybody wants to win it – but nobody seems that bothered whenever they’re busted, you know? It’s probably because there’s so much going on around the tournament.

I like Vegas as well; I’ve got some good memories from Vegas for this year, obviously.

**Ciaran:** Oh yeah! He’s getting a plaque made for his front door.

[Laughter]

**Marty:** I just think that the atmosphere is a bit more serious in Vegas. I suppose it’s the money involved as well. I just like the atmosphere over here [Ireland]. It’s a bit more light-hearted and stuff – a bit more banter at the tables.

**Ciaran:** That’s definitely the case. I mean people who come here – I had a couple of beers here with Doyle when he was here

## “It’s just not the end of the world for the Irish lads when they get knocked out of the tournament

at the Irish Open, like, and Todd Brunson, and they were just floored by the attitude. It’s just not the end of the world for the Irish lads when they get themselves knocked out of a tournament. They go to the bar and they have a pint and it’s, like, ‘there’ll be another tournament,’ whereas some fellas are distraught.

It’s everything else that comes with it. It’s a social gathering that brings people together – like fellas you might not have seen since last night at the poker table at four in the morning [chuckles].

But yeah it is, it’s like Marty says, when you go to all these different places, like in Holland, or Austria, or Australia, it’s a big deal to these people who are hosting the event – like Canada at the WPT Niagara Falls.

They put so much effort and time into it, and you have to respect that. For them, it’s their biggest tournament of the year and it’s just a testament to how much people really like and really enjoy the game.

But again, if you asked me where is the place I’d rather play, then for me it’s the World Series. There’s nothing that comes

close outside that, then there’s the Irish Open, which is ahead of everything else.

*Would you rather win the Irish Open or another WSOP bracelet given the choice?*

[Ciaran points to Marty.]

**Ciaran:** Well, he’s already got both. I should take off my shoes around this man. Hail to the king!

[Laughter]

**Marty:** I think I’d rather win another Irish Open, to be honest. Although I’d like to win the main event [in the WSOP]. I think the tournament in Vegas was the biggest one that I’d ever won, but for me that was kind of number two behind the main event because I’m never going to play in the \$50,000 HORSE, so I think that the only way to go bigger in Vegas is to win the main event.

But then there’s lots of guys that have won two bracelets, or have won three bracelets – I mean Hellmuth’s won God knows how many – but there’s not too many people that have won two Irish Opens.

Noel Furlong won three, but that was in the old days where you were getting fields of 50 to 100 runners. So I think to win two Irish Opens when they’re getting fields of between 600 to over 700 runners, that would be even bigger than winning a second bracelet – unless it was the main event, like I say.

**Ciaran:** Boy that’s a great question, it really is. For me now it’s to win the Irish Open. It really brings it home when you see how the Irish people start to take notice. You’ll be walking down the street and they’ll give you the thumbs up. It’s like anything that’s got Irish Open in front of it, whether it’s the golf or the snooker, you know that it’s carrying and is packing a punch there.

This fella here [points at Marty] there’s no ifs ands and buts about it, he’s one of Ireland’s best players and is about as humble as you get. To do what he’s done is fucking absolutely amazing. It’s some achievement, and he’s done really well and at that final table... winning the Irish Open.

I mean Roland de Wolfe is a good mate of mine as well, a very strong player and he has to be one of the most difficult players to play against, and Marty was able to overcome that and take it down. So it’s a testament to his game, so



▲ Marty is second only to Andy Black in the Ireland all-time money list

well done. Marty is, and you can go on the record with this, I don’t give a fuck – Andy Black, anybody, you know? This is the best player in Ireland at the moment – his record speaks for itself.

I mean, look: he’s smiling, he’s as good as gold...

**Marty:** I’ve been running like God for a year-and-a-half. I mean I haven’t lost a 50/50 [chuckles].

**Ciaran:** Jon Kalmar, who’s another mate of ours, at the Poker Million six weeks ago, Marty and I were both fortunate – well me fortunate, him skilful – enough to win our heats and make it through, which I’m sure we’ll get to in a minute.

But you’ve got five Irish lads there out of 16 which is unbelievable out of a world class field, but erm... fuck it I’ve lost my train of thought, where was I going with that?

**Marty:** Jon Kalmar...

**Ciaran:** Oh yeah, Jon. He was laughing, so Skalie was there, Jon, and he was saying ‘It’s time for somebody else’s go on the swing now, Marty. Come on now,’ like there’s a bunch of kids waiting and there’s only two swings there and three or four kids want to have a go.

[Laughter]

**Ciaran:** Jon is a very accomplished player himself, who finished fifth in the main event in 2007 when Jerry Yang won it, so again it’s just another compliment to how good Marty’s game is. It’s amazing how good he’s really been playing over the last couple of years, it’s some fucking going.

And this is it now, because otherwise he won’t fit out the door. There are women I have tried to chat up I don’t give this many compliments to.

**Marty:** Make sure you jot all of that down, it’ll be really embarrassing [chuckles].

**Ciaran:** No, but Marty, Mad Marty Wilson. It’s like the poker world is a small world isn’t it? I mean there’s a lot of big names that you think would be unapproachable, but they’re all salt of the earth. It’s like a family, it really is. Just don’t ask anyone for money!

[Laughter]

**Ciaran:** But Marty [Smyth] came back and beat Neil Channing, who is definitely on the same level as Marty, considering how they’ve been playing in the last couple of years.

**Marty:** He was the most in-form player ever, I think, when we were playing so I didn’t think I’d have any chance. He was just winning everything in sight.

**Ciaran:** He’s [points at Marty] comeback to beat him, and Marty [Wilson] went on to write about his heat in Cardplayer Europe for that month saying that it might be one of the greatest performances that he’s ever seen.

They’re not words that you throw around loosely when you’re watching people like Devilfish, Tony G, Marcel Luske and Julian Gardener on a regular basis so... That’s it now – you’re buying the next round!

[Prolonged laughter...]



▲ Ciaran writes a blog on PaddyPowerPoker.com



▲ Marty began playing Hold ‘Em at the age of 22