

Scotty still beaming...

Scotty Nguyen

The 'Prince of Poker' is a legend of the game, but as Ben Wilson discovered, his behaviour during the WSOP 50K HORSE event may have tarnished his crown

The flop comes Nine-Nine-Eight. A white-track-suited Scotty Nguyen eyes the flop from behind his trademark blue-black tinted sunglasses and checks. Kevin McBride comes out firing for 100,000. Scotty counts out a stack of chips methodically before speaking. "How much you got left man?" he asks McBride brusquely. McBride looks down and counts his chips. "About 350,000 maybe?" he answers after a pause.

Scotty looks back at his cards, toying with his chips and stroking his chin pensively before calling and then check-calling another 100,000 McBride bet on the turn when a second Eight hits.

"Oh my god, what is going on here?" Phil Helmuth wonders aloud from the commentary box, 'could Scotty be slow-playing a Nine?'

After the third Eight hits the river, Scotty instantly announces all-in before standing up and uttering the immortal line that would win him the 1998 WSOP main event. "You call, it's gonna be all over baby!" he states, coolly exhaling smoke and taking a swig from his bottle of Michelob. A disbelieving McBride calls, announcing that he is playing the board, only to see Scotty flip over a Nine for the higher full house.

And with that one line, Scotty Nguyen cemented his place in poker history and

announced to the world that the Prince of Poker had arrived.

"The 1998 WSOP is something you can never forget, because when you win the main event at the WSOP, 100 years from now people will know that in 1998, Scotty Nguyen was doing this, and after that what did he do? He's going on and winning a lot of major tournaments, not just getting lucky in 1998 and being forgotten until now. A lot of WSOP champions, they win and then they get forgotten. No one even come close to what I do." confirms the lively and garrulous World Champion.

Currently the only player to win both the main event the \$50,000 HORSE event and a World Poker Tour title, Scotty is also one of only five players to win a WSOP main event and a WPT title. With more than \$10 million in career

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tournament earnings, and ranked seventh in the poker's all-time money list, he has come a long way from his humble origins to establish himself as one of the most successful and colourful characters in the game.

Vegas, baby

Born Thuan Nguyen on 28 October, 1962, in Vietnam, the eldest of 13 children, a young Nguyen arrived in the States having fled the war in his homeland when he was just 13.

As in the old adage 'all roads lead to Rome', in the world of poker all roads lead to Las Vegas and in 1982 a young Nguyen found himself employed as a busboy in Harrah's. It was here that he picked up his moniker 'Scotty' – because, as the manager curtly informed him, no one would be able to pronounce the name Thuan – and the start of the legend began to take shape. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Well, not quite. As with all roads, the ride can sometimes be a little bumpy. After a rocky start where Scotty began dealing poker at Harrah's, he also began playing. By the age of 23, Scotty was starting to make a name for himself in the poker world. However, after a disastrous stint at the gaming tables and a cold streak in sports betting, Nguyen found himself between tournaments and with little money.

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▼ Scotty has two pet monkeys called Lucky and Jackpot



▲ Scotty talking with Johnny Chan

Enter Mike Matusow stage left. The big-hearted pro bought Scotty into a \$500 World Series satellite for a share of his action, and after four days of gruelling tournament play Nguyen found himself heads-up with Floridian Kevin McBride.

Fast-forward a decade, four WSOP bracelets, a WPT title, seven WPT final tables and several million dollars in tournament winnings later. A mildly inebriated and belligerent Scotty puts young poker pro Michael DeMichele to the test during a hand of Omaha High-Low. “Did you fuck that up baby?” questions Scotty as he exposes his hole cards to the crowd.

“That is inappropriate,” acknowledges commentator Norman Chad. “Scotty’s really crossing the line,” confirms Lon McEachren.

Despite him winning his fifth WSOP bracelet and the coveted Chip Reese Memorial Trophy, the fallout from Scotty’s HORSE victory was catastrophic

“You have to win in a clean way, in the pretty way, because a lot of young kids are looking up at me

and the knives were out. Journalists, poker aficionados and the fans alike were outraged and unforgiving. He may have won poker’s most prestigious title, but many were disgusted by the way he behaved. Scotty’s reputation took a hit.

“You know the 50k HORSE means so much to me. It’s like my dream. You got to have a dream, a goal you know? It was my goal to win that HORSE event the last couple of years,” Scotty draws

laconically. “But I don’t like the result. I mean winning sometimes is not everything... You wanna win in a pretty way, and you want to win in a way the fan remembers and enjoys, not the way... you know it’s like the player tries to get under the skin of all the other players, you know what I mean?”

“I don’t need to do that. I don’t need to talk like that at the end, you know? That’s the only thing I regret, because a million of my fans, you know, I let them down and let my loved ones down too. My loved ones could not believe how I acted... The only thing I want to let you know, the fans mean so much... so you have to win in a clean way, in the pretty way, because a lot of young kids are looking up at me, and I can’t do something like that.

“I promise you... I promise the fans that it won’t ever, ever happen again,” a remorseful and sombre Scotty confirms outside London’s Empire casino when we ask him about about his final table antics.

“You play a game with the best in the world for four to five straight days and it comes to one point and you just forget about the fans, and I forgot about my wife sitting behind me. All I want to do is focus and enjoy my win for the bracelet and the trophy you know. It means so much to me. All I wanted to do is win.

“After it aired, that’s when I see things I’m not supposed to do and things I’m not supposed to say. You know baby, like I say the bottom line, winning sometimes

is not every thing. It’s just how you win for the fans, because without them you never have Scotty Nguyen. So I want to apologise for that you know.”

I’m sorry, baby

Genuine remorse lines his face as he considers this last statement before he continues: “I like it when a player play nice, in the clean way you know. What I dislike is, some people they take a cheap shot, or old school, they act like they gonna throw their hand away when they sit there with the nuts.

“You know, baby, you don’t need to do that. When you have the nuts, try to figure it out and win the pot and stack them up. Enjoy it! You don’t need to needle the player when they lost. It’s bad enough when you lost a big pot. You don’t need to say anything about how bad they play or anything. You know baby, you don’t need that, just be professional. Don’t play dirty.

“That’s what I dislike about some players, you know. That’s old school, baby. That’s messed up. Just win and enjoy it, just make it clean. Even the HORSE event you see; I won the game straight up baby, I didn’t make no deals. I didn’t buy the trophy. There were some things that were said but bottom line, Scotty Nguyen clean. He win it all. It’s not like we cut a deal and people throw their game away and let me win the trophy, the bracelet. If we make a deal, something important like that...

“I would never ever make a deal, if you look at it, you go home, bring the trophy

“It’s bad enough when you lost a pot, you don’t need to say anything about how bad they play

home, you look at it and you tell your loved ones, the reason I win that is cos we made a deal and the player has not played their best game no more.

“That’s why I enjoy the trophy now when I look at it, because I win it, straight up, I won it playing poker you know, I prove to the world that I’m the best at this, Scotty Nguyen is still the best there is baby!” Scotty throws back his head and gives his trademark chuckle.

That’s the truth, baby

There is a disarming honesty to Scotty – a genuine feeling that what you see is what you get. And there you have it, in a nutshell, the reason why Scotty is such a favourite with the fans. As if to prove my point a mildly inebriated Scotsman wanders up. Oblivious to the fact that Scotty is speaking into a Dictaphone, he only has eyes for his hero.

“Scotty! Pleased to meet you buddy! I watched you on TV last night, and the night before!” he gushes, “I saw your temper tantrums at the Omaha but you

▼ Scotty won nearly \$1 million in Tunica



did well in Hold ’Em. Doesn’t matter, though,” he states confidently, “I been watching you man. You’re my inspiration buddy! I’m playing in the WSOPE tomorrow for the first time! Can I get a photograph? Me and you baby?” he asks confidently.

“You got it baby!” confirms Scotty. “Good luck tomorrow!” he wishes as the clearly happy Celt wanders off into the crowds of Leicester Square.

Rewind five years, I wander the busy corridors of the Rio towards the Amazon Room, just another open mouthed fan in awe of the gaggle of big name poker professionals walking past. It is telling that only one stops to speak to me. His name? Need you ask?

Nobody is perfect, everybody makes mistakes, and when you are in the limelight consistently you are not always going to come across too well. Am I making excuses for his behaviour? Far from it, but I think that everyone is entitled to learn from their mistakes and strive to improve themselves. But as some poker pros demonstrate by their behaviour on a regular basis, they don’t always have time for the people who put them on the pedestal. One man does.

In his own words: “I’m a good husband, a good father, and I’m the best poker player that ever lived baby. Nobody make the game fun like Scotty Nguyen do, cos when I play I give it all, not just for myself or my loved ones but for all the fans.” And he’s right, he does.

Is it all over baby? I certainly hope not, it would be a shame if people were to write off one of the game’s more loquacious and charismatic characters for just one lapse of judgement. The rest, as they say, is up to you.



▲ At the Borgata in Atlantic City

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