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Cashing in when the chips are down: Charities, nonprofits ride the wave of poker popularity to raise money

By Carolyn Kessel Stewart / Daily News Staff

When parents of young football players and cheerleaders in Marlborough realized they desperately needed cash for equipment this fall, they bypassed bake sales and turned to the latest craze in fundraising: Texas Hold'em poker.

None of organizers of the Marlborough American Youth Football league is a poker aficionado, however, so the group looked to a new breed of businesses that have sprung up to serve this exploding market: charity poker experts.

They found Dan Brown's Bay State Poker business while flipping through the pages of a newspaper.

Brown, a Wakefield poker fanatic and event planner, opened his business 16 months ago and makes his living running more than 20 tournaments a month, all for charitable organizations.

The nationwide Texas Hold'em phenomenon hit in 2004 when ESPN turned poker into one of the best-watched games on TV. Now poker is a fund-raiser of choice, from giants such as the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation to the Baypath Humane Society of Hopkinton.

"We heard it generates good revenue for a minimal investment," said MAYF volunteer Kathryn White. Like many charitable ventures, MAYF is what she called a "bare-bones organization."

"We have nothing, absolutely nothing. It's been us doing everything we can for the kids."

For its March 10 Texas Hold'em tournament at the Marlborough Moose Lodge on Fitchburg Street, MAYF is asking for a \$125 donation and promising a \$2,500 first prize.

It sounds like easy money. But, Brown said, running a poker tournament is not for the weak-hearted. Poker players want a decent game run the right way and the state puts strict rules on tournaments, requiring permits, tax filings and more.

"It's not a slam dunk. You have to be motivated and dedicated and you have to do your homework," Brown said.

A decent poker tournament needs 100 players, so charities have to get the word out. That's where the hired help comes in. All of Brown's poker tournaments are posted on his Web site, he said, and his regulars often check out that calendar for local games.

"We have the pool of people," he said.

The only legal poker in Massachusetts is technically a lottery. The state allows only charitable organizations to host poker tournaments and bars them from allowing cash bets. In addition, only the charity's volunteers can deal; Brown and others like him are supposed to leave the building during the tournament.

Players can "lose" only their entry fee, considered a charitable contribution. The attorney general's 10-page advisory on charity poker, released last summer, also bans players from repurchasing chips and requires purses to be advertised in advance.

The AG's office does not keep statistics on charity poker games, but has fielded fewer complaints since the advisory went out, said spokeswoman Sarah Nathan.

Most enforcement is left up to local police departments. Complaints to the AG's office are usually about questionable ads for tournaments, Nathan said.

"You do need to file a permit and you need to go to the (state) Treasury Department," Nathan said.

This year, at least three permits for Texas Hold'em games have been filed with the Marlborough city clerk. One has been filed at the Framingham Town clerk's office, although more events are advertised in town.

Vin DiNunno, the entrepreneur behind Charity First Poker in Raynham, said the regulations have cooled his once-hot year-and-a-half old business.

Clients sour on the idea once they hear all the rules, said DiNunno, who was hired to run Baypath's tournament in Framingham last Friday.

Serious poker players stay away from the games, he said, because they know the real money is in casino games.

But professional poker player Doug Frisoli of Boston says the game is exploding. He keeps busy by renting out his poker tables and chips and providing training to the volunteers at charities all over Massachusetts and New Hampshire. His computer software program runs throughout the tournament and

cues novice dealers throughout the game, such as telling them when blinds should go up.

Frisoli, who placed 12th in a recent World Series of Poker event, is a diabetic on an insulin pump who said he wants to help charities for diabetes and other causes.

"This doesn't pay the rent," said Frisoli, who charges per table. "The most important thing is that the charity collects the money."

Annie Van Bebber of www.fundraisers.com, who advises charities large and small, said Texas Hold'em is the hottest thing she has seen in 35 years of fundraising -- and it shows no signs of stopping.

"It's like on fire with the fund-raisers," she said. All of a sudden, event planners need to learn everything from what's a good hand to what the laws are in their state.

Brown also predicts longevity for poker. "Everyone can enjoy it," he said. Unlike golf, the perennial fund-raiser, poker is completely unaffected by the weather or the physical abilities of the player. "We have people on oxygen tanks" who play, he said. And the need to raise money is not disappearing.

"They're all in the same boat with the budget cuts everywhere."

For Jim, a Boston leader of Gamblers Anonymous, however, more promotion of gambling is never a good thing.

"If you gamble, every time you win a few bucks, you think you can win a few more and then you lose it all," which can drive some to desperate measures, he said.

"They don't advertise cigarettes on TV, but they advertise gambling. One is just as deadly as the other."

Internet poker seems to be more of a problem than charity poker for gamblers calling the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling hotline, said a spokeswoman.

Van Bebber sees the charity poker trend as a boon for the needy.

"I hope people realize this is a blessing and not a demon." Charities "need all the help they can get."