

Hooked On Recovery

March 4, 2005

A Fool and His Money

“A fool and his money are soon parted.” --Thomas Tusser

I parted with money at a very early age. I was pretty foolish for a pretty long time. My Grandma used to say, “Phillip, money burns a dern hole in yer pocket.” I remember my first currency was baseball cards. We’d flip them and play knockdown and closies. I realize now I was gambling with them. If I had just bought them and stored them, I could probably have a house on the Cape today. Then I played setback in school for quarters. Went to Jai-Alai at age fifteen. I realize now how the “rush” from early gambling experiences was only a foreshadow of what was to come.

March 1982: North Carolina 63, Georgetown 62. It was a great game. Dean Smith’s North Carolina with Sam Perkins and freshman guard Michael Jordan matched against John Thompson’s Georgetown with Sleepy Floyd and Patrick Ewing. A great game but I just sat and stared at the television. Jordan had put Carolina ahead with 16 seconds. With 15 seconds left, Georgetown’s Fred Brown brought the ball, across midcourt and passed to James Worthy. The only problem was that James Worthy played for Carolina. Worthy dribbled into the corner to run out the clock and preserve the Tarheels win. He was fouled and had two shots with five seconds left. The game for all practical purposes was over. But not for those who had wagered on it. The spread was one and a half points. I had bet \$500 bucks on Carolina, all Worthy had to do was make one of two free throws and I had a winner on the largest bet I had ever made. Worthy, who had already scored a game high 28 points, missed the first one. OK. OK. One more chance. He missed that too. Sleepy took a desperation shot at the buzzer and missed. Carolina won. I lost. By half a point. And I didn’t have \$500. Some mean looking dude named Tiny would probably be coming into the restaurant looking for tall skinny kneecaps to break. I sat and stared at the television, cried and rubbed my kneecaps. I thank God that the owner of the restaurant paid that bill for me.

I haven’t made a bet with a sports book since that game 23 years ago. I’d like to say that was the end of my gambling. But it wasn’t. Near the end of my active addiction, I wagered too much on golf and played cards for way too much money. Money I usually didn’t have. I ended up one time in Atlantic City supposedly to play in a golf tournament. I can vaguely remember; blackjack in the Playboy Club, a beautiful waitress named Tarzania (I kid you not), many many vodkas and grapefruit, splitting kings for some obscene amount of money and losing to a dealer 21. I returned home from that trip with a lot less money than I went down with. There were several other episodes as well.

Recently, with the explosion of Texas Hold ‘Em, the World Series of Poker and all the other spin-offs, I’ve become introspective into my recovery as it relates to gambling. I like to watch poker on TV, love The Professor Howard Lederer and his sister Annie Duke. I like Danny Negreanu and Chris MoneyMaker too. Can’t stand Phil Helmuth. I’ve played a little bit online with play money. I’ve won enough and lost enough play money to know I don’t want to do it with the real thing. For me, I have some kind of line I can’t afford to cross when it comes to gambling. It’s spiritual in nature. It could actually be the finger of God protecting me. I had the most powerful experience happen while at Foxwoods.

I've been to Foxwoods three times and have never been to Mohegan Sun. One time was for a Yanni concert (OK, so that's a whole 'nother story). Another time was for a fishing show. And the time that stopped me cold in my tracks was while accompanying my wife on a company outing. I had a few chips and we were wandering through the casino. I stopped at a \$5 blackjack table with chips in hand. I was about to sit down, but I started to step forward and it was like I hit an invisible force field. I couldn't move forward. I couldn't sit down. I know it sounds silly, but there was something stopping me. It rattled my cage. I gave my chips to Sandy. I didn't play. I didn't gamble with my money. Or my recovery.

Looking back, I know now that I would have crossed the proverbial line in the sand. I now firmly believe gambling will eventually lead to my relapse with alcohol and/or drugs. Who knows if I have another recovery in me? I don't want to find out.

March 8 -14, 2005 is *National Problem Gambling Awareness Week*. For more information contact the National Council on Problem Gambling, 208 G Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002 (800) 330-8739, (202) 547-9204, (202) 547-9206 Fax, www.ncpgambling.org

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, now a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.