

Flaton Wins Inaugural United States Poker Championship Crown

BY KENNETH L. ADAMS

In a dramatic come-from-behind victory, veteran poker professional Ken "Skyhawk" Flaton bested a field of 100 contestants, including four former world champions, to capture the \$500,000 top prize and the winner's 14-karat gold Geneve wristwatch in the \$7,500 no-limit hold'em event at the *United States Poker Championship*. Flaton, 56, is a New Jersey native who lives in Henderson, Nevada.

Second-place honors went to Surinder Sunar, a 37-year-old tournament pro from Wolverhampton, England. Former *World Series of Poker* winner Phil Hellmuth had to settle for third after leading the field during much of the three-day event.

Among the female contestants, Cindy Violette was the top finisher in 13th place, while *Baywatch* co-star Yasmine Bleeth dazzled onlookers with a remarkable 27th-place finish in her first effort at tournament poker. Violette, a New Jersey

resident and hometown favorite, was poised to double her stack when Hellmuth called her all-in bet with A-K — an underdog to Violette's pocket kings. But the flop brought an ace, eliminating the last woman from contention.

It was a disappointing finish for Hellmuth, considered by some to be the best tournament player in the world, who was in third place at the end of the first day of play, led the field at the end of the second day, and held a commanding chip lead at the final table until the tournament entered its final hour.

The final table of six players resumed play on day No. 3 with Hellmuth having 25 percent of the chips. He was by far the most aggressive, constantly attacking the antes and blinds. At the end of two hours of play, Hellmuth was still the chip leader, though he had lost all but one of the contested pots that he had played. His style contrasted sharply with Sunar's, who played cautiously and defensively much of the time, risking his chips only when he had a clear advantage.

After two and a half hours of play, the first final-table contestant to be eliminated was Jerry Cusack of Hauppauge, New York. After Hellmuth called the blinds from last position, Cusack raised all in with an offsuit 5-4. On nearly a dozen previous occasions

when Hellmuth had called or raised the blinds, he had laid down his hand when one of the blinds had moved all in. This time, Hellmuth called with pocket nines and picked off Cusack's bluff. The turn card helped neither player, and the four on the river was too little too late for

Cusack, who finished sixth in his first major tournament effort.

A few hands later, Sunar emerged from his defensive shell and doubled through Jamie Ligator of Costa Rica and Miami, Florida. Ligator raised \$60,000 with a suited A-9 in the small blind, and Sunar, in the big blind, called all in for \$40,000 holding pocket jacks. The flop came K-6-5 offsuit. A seven fell on fourth street, giving Ligator an open-end straight draw, but fifth street brought a harmless 10 and Sunar gained new life.

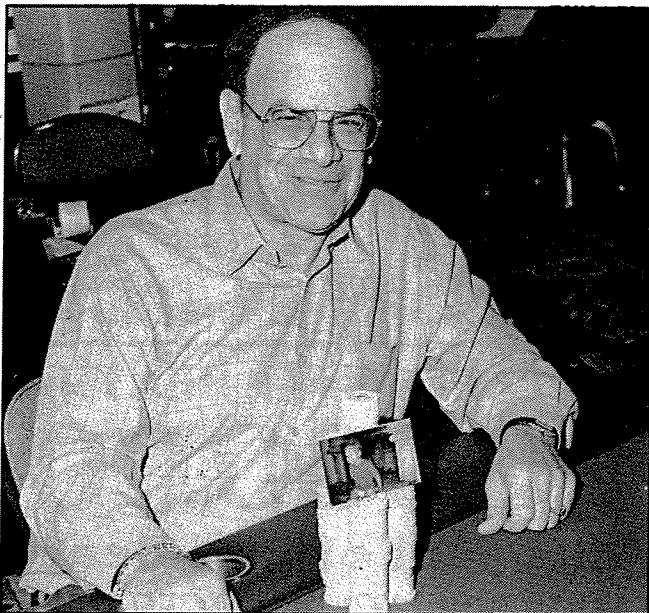
The blinds and antes were eating at the stacks of 72-year-old Paul McKinney, who opted to move Sunar all in while holding A-10. Sunar called with A-K. The flop came K-K-2. Sunar doubled

through McKinney, who was hopelessly short-stacked from that point on. Two hands later, McKinney shoved in his last \$34,000 holding a suited Q-7. Hellmuth called with 10-7, and it looked like McKinney might live to fight another battle. However, the flop came 10-6-2, and another 10 on the turn eliminated McKinney in fifth place.

At that point, Hellmuth was the chip leader with \$420,000, Flaton had \$140,000, Sunar had \$110,000, and Ligator trailed the pack with \$80,000. Shortly before the break, Sunar escaped near disaster and took a chunk out of Flaton's second-place stack. Sunar smooth-called before the flop with pocket aces. Flaton, holding 10-5 in the big blind, flopped two pair and bet \$25,000. Fortunately for Sunar, a third ace also appeared on the flop. Sunar smooth-called Flaton's bet. When the 3♣ came on the turn, Flaton checked and Sunar moved all in. Flaton mucked his hand and Sunar moved ahead of him into second place behind Hellmuth.

After the break, the blinds increased to \$5,000 and \$10,000. Ligator moved all in with pocket jacks, but ran into Sunar, who again held pocket aces. Neither player's hand improved and Ligator was eliminated in fourth place. Hellmuth still led with \$400,000,

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and Sunar was close behind with \$300,000. Flaton seemed to be all but doomed, with only \$50,000 left and the blinds and antes chewing up \$21,000 per round. After a few rounds, Flaton moved all in with his last \$16,000 holding 10-8 on the button. Hellmuth called with A-5. Neither player improved on the flop or the turn, but Flaton caught an eight on the river to stay alive. Two hands later, Flaton moved all in again, this time holding K-10 in the small blind. Sunar called in the big blind, holding A-Q. For the second time, Flaton outdrew the stronger starting hand, as two tens landed on the flop. Flaton and Sunar now were tied for second place behind Hellmuth, who seemed invincible with his \$400,000 stack. But the tide was about to turn.

A few rounds later, Hellmuth raised on the button with A-Q. Flaton moved all in with pocket threes and Hellmuth called. The first card off was an ace, followed by a nine and a three.

Not long after, Hellmuth raised \$20,000 before the flop with pocket fours. With \$51,000 in the pot, of which \$12,000 was his, Sunar called the raise holding 7-6 offsuit. The flop came 7-7-3. Sunar checked and Hellmuth moved Sunar all in. Sunar called. No four came on the turn or the river, and Sunar took the lead away from Hellmuth for the first time.

Hellmuth emerged from the break and resumed his earlier style of controlled aggression. He attacked the blinds successfully twice, and

lured Sunar into reraising before the flop when Hellmuth held pocket aces. But when Hellmuth reraised all in, Sunar mucked his hand and escaped disaster. Then, two hands later, Hellmuth called the blinds with K-10. When the flop came A-J-6, he led out with a \$15,000 bet. Flaton raised \$35,000 and Hellmuth reraised. Flaton called all in and showed A-6 for two pair. Neither hand improved and Flaton dragged a \$226,000 pot. Less than an hour after he had moved all in with his last \$16,000, Flaton was now the chip leader.

Five hands later, Flaton raised \$35,000 before the flop with Q-J on the button. Hellmuth called with a suited J-9. The flop came J-8-5, giving each player top pair. Hellmuth checked, Flaton bet \$55,000, and Hellmuth raised all in. Flaton called. Neither hand improved on fourth or fifth street, and Hellmuth had to settle for a third-place finish.

During a short break in the action, security guards wheeled out a briefcase filled with \$500,000 in \$100 bills and set it on the table between Flaton and Sunar, alongside the gold wristwatch that would go to the winner. When play resumed, Flaton had \$580,000 in chips to Sunar's \$170,000.

Heads-up play did not last long. Seven hands later, Flaton raised \$20,000 before the flop and Sunar called holding 8-6 suited in spades. The flop came 8-4-3 offsuit. Flaton, holding A-8, bet \$50,000. Sunar moved all in and Flaton quickly called. Two blanks fell on fourth and fifth street, and Flaton emerged as the winner of the first *United States Poker Championship*.

Flaton, who also finished first in the \$500 buy-in seven-card stud high-low split event, and fourth in the \$1,000 buy-in pot-limit Omaha event, seemed thrilled about what he called the biggest win of his poker career. "It's not just the money, it's the chance to beat out all of these top players that's something you dream about."

\$7,500 no-limit hold'em championship Entrants: 100 • Prize pool: \$850,000

1. Ken Flaton, Henderson, NV \$500,000
2. Surinder Sunar, Wolverhampton, Eng. 122,500
3. Phil Hellmuth Jr., Palo Alto, CA 63,000
4. Jamie Ligator, Miami, FL 35,000
5. Paul McKinney, Kingsport, TN 24,500
6. Jerry Cusack, Hauppauge, NY 17,500
7. Mike Shag, Philadelphia, PA 14,000
8. Mike Sexton, Las Vegas, NV 10,500
9. Donnacha O'Dea, London, Eng. 8,400
10. Kassem Deeb, Long Beach, CA 7,000
11. Bill Frymer, Williamston, PA 7,000
12. Tom McEvoy, Las Vegas, NV 7,000
13. Cyndy Violette, Absecon, NJ 6,950
14. Noli Francisco, W. New York, NJ 5,950
15. Ted Forrest, Las Vegas, NV 5,950
16. Thomas Chung, Federal Way, WA 5,250
17. Frank Henderson, Houston, TX 5,250
18. Yosh Nakano, Downey, CA 5,250



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THE CALIFORNIA CARD CLUB ASSOCIATION