

Taj Mahal Postpones United States Poker Championship as Casino Commission Decides Future of Atlantic City Poker

BY KENNETH L. ADAMS

Atlantic City poker is in jeopardy. The Taj Mahal has had to postpone this year's *United States Poker Championship* tournament. The culprit behind all of the uncertainty and turmoil is the New Jersey Casino Control Commission. During a recent visit to Atlantic City, I played at both the Taj and the Tropicana, and here is what I learned about the complicated situation that is jeopardizing Atlantic City poker.

Unlike cardrooms and casinos in Las Vegas and elsewhere, Atlantic City casinos are not allowed to let poker dealers keep their own tips. Instead, all player tips must go into the toke box, to be pooled with all tips from the entire casino. The total amount is then divided among all dealers — poker, blackjack, craps, roulette, baccarat, and so on — based on hours worked.

The system is awful for poker players, as dealers have no financial incentive to give good service. Players cannot reward a good dealer, nor punish a bad one, when all tips go into a common pool to be divided without regard to a dealer's skill and courtesy.

The pit dealers, who outnumber poker

dealers by 4-to-1 at the Taj Mahal and by an even higher ratio at the Tropicana, don't like the system any more than the poker players do, as their tip pool subsidizes the poker dealers to the tune of more than \$100 a week (per person), due to the higher level of tipping at the high-limit table games. But to change the system would require a change in the law.

Enter state Sen. William Gormley. He sponsored legislation to allow casinos to separate the poker tip pool from the table games tip pool if they wished. The legislation was enacted, and the Casino Control Commission is on the verge of issuing regulations to implement the new law, but will limit it to poker rooms with 25 tables or more.

A vote was taken recently among dealers at the Taj Mahal to decide whether the option to separate the tip pools should be exercised by management. As expected, the results were lopsided in favor of separation — 804 in favor, 226 against — reflecting the ratio of pit dealers to poker dealers.

If separation of the toke pools goes into effect as expected, it will be very difficult for the Taj Mahal and the Tropicana to keep good poker dealers. Their effective pay will drop by an estimated \$4 an hour. An offsetting pay increase is not likely, as that would create labor issues at a time when management is fighting what some consider to be a losing battle to keep the Teamsters Union from successfully organizing Atlantic City's casino employees. The prospect of running a world-class tournament (the *U.S. Poker Championship*) without the ability to recruit experienced, skillful poker dealers was one of the factors that led the Taj Mahal to postpone the tournament.

I believe the solution is to allow poker dealers to keep their own tips.

The good dealers would more than make up the loss that is expected to result from separating the poker and casino pit tip pools. It is unclear, however, whether the Casino Control Commission would support or oppose passage of a bill to allow poker dealers to keep their own toke. The Commission has shown repeatedly that it has little understanding of the different needs of poker players vs. pit players. If East Coast poker players do not make their voices heard at the Commission to allow poker dealers to keep their own toke, it is possible that they may lose two of the best poker venues east of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon Line. ♦

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