

Garrett Adelstein



BENEATH THE CARDS

A High-Stakes, High-Anxiety Poker Journey

EXCLUSIVE PRE-RELEASE EXCERPT

EXCERPT FROM

BENEATH THE CARDS

by Garrett Adelstein

The transition back to work after my wedding was difficult. There was a striking dichotomy between the prior blissful week and the dog-eat-dog world of poker. I then went on a \$500K downswing over the next few months. Poker is never much fun when you get kicked in the nuts every time you show up. The frustration began to mount.

In December 2021, I was scheduled to film three days playing on High Stakes Poker (HSP), a top TV franchise that has maintained its staying power since 2011. Feeling burnt out, I really didn't want to go. But I hopped on the plane to Sin City to honor my commitment anyway.

I tried to open a new container—to hit the mental reset button as I went through my pregame ritual. I ate a healthy breakfast, had a great workout, and then meditated in my hotel room until showtime. I was grateful to have the opportunity to battle against some of the biggest names in poker, guys I grew up idolizing: Phil Ivey, Daniel Negreanu, Doyle Brunson, Tom Dwan, and Patrik Antonius.

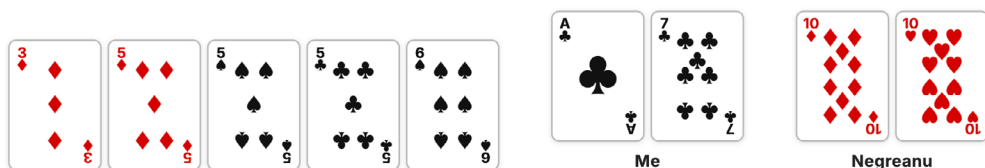
Early on day one in the \$500/\$1,000 game, I ran a giant bluff against Daniel Negreanu with ace-seven of clubs (A7cc). The hand began when I raised two seats before the button to \$3K. Negreanu, next to act, 3-bet me to \$10K. It was an

aggressive play, portraying hole cards that meant business. I elected to 4-bet to \$40K out of position, a borderline reckless bluff given how strong I suspected my opponent's reraising range was. Negreanu called.

We both checked the flop and turn on a three, five, five, five (3555) board—an unwise move on my part if I wanted to represent a hand like pocket aces (AA), which would usually want to bet the flop and turn for value. Instead, my intention was to cut my losses, check the lousy hand down, and not compound my error further.

When a six fell on the river, I was still reasonably confident Negreanu had a strong hand and wouldn't fold it. The play remained the same: wave the white flag. And yet, the next thing I knew, I'd inexplicably gone all-in anyway, wagering a massive \$179K overbet bluff into an \$82K pot. It was an out-of-body experience that I still can't really explain.

Negreanu didn't take long before calling with his pocket tens. I was toast.



The \$440,000 pot was a trainwreck, maybe the worst hand I've ever played. My performance wasn't any better over the next two days as I struggled to let the disastrous hand go.

Once day three wrapped, I was fortunate to have only lost about \$400,000 given the massive stakes we were playing. What bothered me most wasn't the evaporated cash, though. It was my lack of execution on the biggest stage in poker. It felt like a rebroadcast of my Survivor debacle.

All these viewers think I'm the best, I thought to myself. Yet here I am, giving my chips away when the bright lights are on. I'm such a fraud.

Throughout my livestream career, so much of my identity had been derived from projecting an image of being a top no-limit player. If I was no good at the one thing I'd spent most of my life obsessing over, then who was I? What did I even offer to the audience—or the world?

I'd been running from imposter syndrome my whole life, attempting to overcome my incessant self-doubt through sheer will. But poker doesn't work that way. No matter how hard you prepare, you're not always going to play your best. Sometimes you're going to bring your C game. And sometimes you're going to lose even when you bring your A game.

When a seat opened, host Brent Hanks offered to get me in for the final day of filming. It was a game worth around \$50K in expected value assuming I was in the right headspace. But with my confidence shattered and my brain in disrepair, I declined. Instead, I got plastered over dinner and wine with

Tom Dwan and another friend, flew home hungover the next morning, and fell into a deep depression. I quickly gained fifteen pounds lying in bed and eating everything in sight for the next two weeks—doing the same destructive shit I thought I'd overcome.

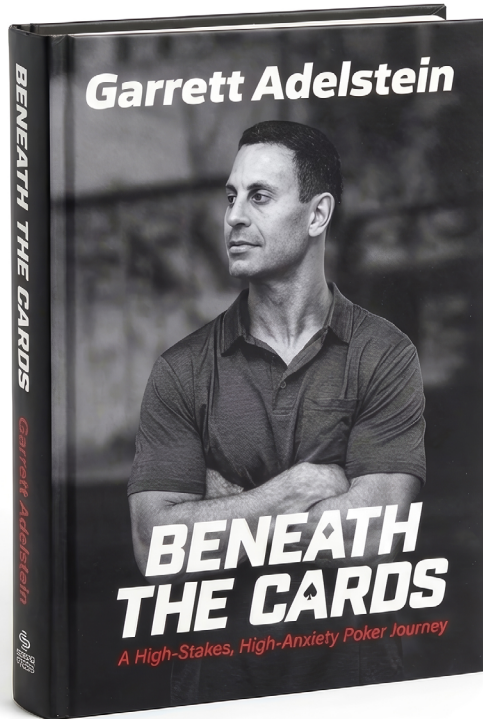
After five years of successfully managing my emotions on and off the table, the relapse was scary. I eventually recovered by exercising, spending time with friends, and deconstructing the irrational thoughts with my wife. Still, I refused to go on a livestream for two months, unwilling to be on camera until I dropped the weight.

I was still trying to play the role of the perfect guy, even if only subconsciously. I had no issues talking about my former weight fluctuations because I was in great shape nowadays. I was content discussing how I used to be a complete tilt-monkey because I was emotionally stable now. I felt safe mentioning my past mental health struggles because they were just that, in the past. In reality, after bombing on HSP, my psychological well-being went from robust to anemic in an instant.

It was all just vulnerability theater. Just like I projected an image to get paid off in big poker hands, I was lying to the world—and myself—by pretending my problems were behind me. Depression wasn't in the rearview. I didn't have it all figured out.

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Beneath the Cards is an unflinching memoir about the cost of competing at the highest levels, what happens when your system breaks under pressure, and what it takes to rebuild in the aftermath.



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