

Dusty Schmidt & Jared Tendler

dragthebar.com's latest signing goes head to head with poker's top mind coach.



In a game where being a psychological Jedi can be the difference between winning and losing, it pays to be fully equipped with the Force when you take to the tables. Almost every major athlete in the world has used a sports psychologist in the past and with poker arguably tougher than ever, we're now seeing more players look within themselves to gain that extra edge.

Dusty "Leatherass" Schmidt is one of the toughest grinders on the internet and after a heart attack at 23 ended his chances of becoming a professional golfer he jumped at the chance to become competitive at poker. Despite not having a losing month since he started playing that hasn't stopped periods of doubt affecting his game. In a bid to iron out any mental creases, Schmidt enlisted the help of sports psychologist turned poker mental

game coach, Jared Tendler. We hooked up with the dynamic duo at the recent PartyPoker Big Game in London, England, to delve inside the labyrinth of cells and synapses to discover what it takes to think like a pro.

Dusty, your ability to grind multiple tables for hours on and still play your A-game is legendary. What kind of mindset does it take to do this?

I think there are a number of factors to it. In the beginning I had to play because it was either that or be on the streets. I started out playing 400 hours of poker in the first month and now I only play a third of that so it feels like I'm taking a vacation for the rest of my career. A lot of my ability to play well for long periods comes from the fact that I'm not one of these guys who's always had money come easily, I've had to work for it. Basically

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I'm too cheap to not play well; when I'm playing \$1k pots I'm not going to let myself play badly [laughs.] That's where a lot of my drive and ability comes from. I think when I first started it was an unpolished ability and after working with Jared we did a lot of work to polish it up and that's been a pretty big milestone for me over my career.

Why did you first approach Jared and what things were you looking to improve to take you game to the next level?

A lot of it came from when I played and watched other sports like golf or football. Those guys had all the best equipment, the best trainers and a lot of them had sports psychologists. I looked at poker and thought it was the beginning stages of a new sport and I didn't want to wait for things to become accepted norms, I wanted to be creating the curve, so to speak. I applied a lot of the things people use in other sports to poker and dedicated myself to a lot of the things an athlete would do to play well. With poker you're working more with your mind than your body so I went straight to Jared as he was a mental coach and to my knowledge I'm the only person in poker to do it.

From your experience, Jared, what are the common mental game issues that poker players suffer from?

Tilt is a big one. Following on from that there are a lot of confidence issues and players are generally reluctant to think of tilt in those terms. However, if you're overestimating your ability which, for a lot of players happens, then you are

overestimating your edge and that, in my mind, is an issue of confidence. Having an exaggerated view of your game causes some players to play in games they aren't necessarily profitable in and when they have higher variance they think they are running bad and these things become compounded because you've exaggerated your abilities. Conversely there are a lot of players that don't have enough confidence in their game and start questioning themselves too much, especially when on a bad run. Focus and motivation issues are also big things for online players. Players generally have big goals and think they're going to achieve them very easily, but in poker it doesn't necessarily work that way. Some players start off and make a bit of money and it can become very easy to let the competitive edge slide and not work as hard. This leads to them not winning as much and all of a sudden a three-month break-even stretch turns into a six-month losing streak. These are just some of the issues that can be fixed quite easily if you know how to approach them.

Dusty, how have you maintained that competitive edge now you've become a successful player?

A lot of it is down to insecurities that will maybe slip away at some point and for some reason I'll not be as profitable in the future. I'm definitely excited about the financial position I'm in but I don't have enough money to live on for the rest of my life. It's really important for me to keep building on my success as much as I can and put myself in a good position where the worst-case scenario would still be pretty good. ➔



» Jared, is that something you see a lot, players enjoy some success and then lose their drive?

Yeah, certainly. A lot of times it comes down to having very clear goals. You set a target and you reach that target then you don't create a new target. Dusty's a very driven person, he likes having things to achieve, so he's able to stay motivated and stay passionate about creating a great life that has many different trajectories to it. Being able to create different opportunities, like his philanthropic work, is great for him and not letting those opportunities slip away is something that maintains his motivation. Those types of goals, not just for him but any poker player, are important and you have to have that sort of vision keep the necessary motivation and drive to succeed in the game.

Jared, your new book is set to explore some of these ideas in more depth. Can you tell us a little more about some concepts in the book?

The goal of the book is to present a comprehensive approach to poker psychology and help improve a lot of the major mental game issues that a player might have. It also contains a piece

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about maximizing your performance and how you can learn more efficiently. Players looking to create a well rounded poker game need to have these three components in place. Indeed, some players might not have many glaring

weaknesses like tilt and anxiety, but they might not be getting the most out of their game because they have issues with the way they learn about the game, because they don't structure their approach to the game in the most efficient manner. There

care much about it, I just enjoyed playing and I had my own expectations at the table. Everyday I could measure myself against those expectations and I liked the fact that it was consistent month after month. In live poker I think I've got to take a couple of years before I can really look back and think about where I stand. That's kind of kept me away from events like the wsop, but now I'm in a good place financially so I feel like I want to branch out and play some more tournaments and have a shot at winning a bracelet.

Finally, Jared, you were also a successful amateur golfer before becoming a poker mental game coach. Are there any crossover traits between golfers and poker players?

Absolutely. The interesting thing for me in coming over to poker was that poker players struggle with every single issue that athletes struggle with; they are people first and poker players second. Issues such as tilt, anxiety, confidence, motivation, the quality of your thought processes and your work ethic are common problems; it's just the specific details that differ. I think the most interesting crossover trait I've found is variance and how people react to it. Poker players are professionals at understanding variance and if they aren't they need to be. Golfers I don't think are. Comparatively, if you look at basketball,

football and other similar sports, the variance is pretty minimal but of all of the major sports golf has the most variance. If you take one golfer and got them to hit 100 golf balls they wouldn't hit every one in the same spot every time and this is down to a lot of factors such as slight variations in their golf swing. So if you're looking to evaluate yourself and the decisions you make it pays to understand these facts in both golf and poker. There are a lot of marginal professionals who think they are worse because they've gotten some bad breaks, yet there are players who are worse than those guys that have gotten some lucky breaks who think that they are better than they are. Being able to distinguish between variance and your skill is critical, especially in the short terms because "shit happens." Working with poker players has certainly forced me to step-up my game and look more closely at certain mental game issues. Poker players operate in a bubble because they are always dealing with short term variance and unreliable results. This makes it difficult to accurately judge your skill level in the short term. In any sport all the mental game stuff is mapped out short term. You have to be a master at confidence and controlling tilt to be able to accurately determine what's going on in that bubble before you start to use your results as a measure of your ability. **WPT**

are already books out there that have laid the groundwork and I'm hoping to bring a perspective on poker psychology that is going to be really well received. I've worked with over 125 poker players from around the world and that experience has enabled me to create some generalized approaches that will have a lot of value to people.

Dusty, you've said you're going to the WSOP this year. Is winning bracelets and leaving some sort of legacy important?

It's becoming a lot more important to me. When I first started playing I didn't really