



Local poker player will try his luck at national tournament in Las Vegas

The cards are the same, the chips represent identical amounts and the Texas Hold 'Em rules won't change a bit.

The venue, though, could wind up being far beyond Joe Shifflett's imagination.

He has never been to Las Vegas, let alone played poker in a giant, multi-million dollar hotel and casino like the Mirage.

He is used to the homey atmosphere of Walker's Steakhouse & Lounge, not the bright lights and thousands of people in Vegas.

"It will be interesting, I'm sure," Shifflett said.

At 48 years old, the railroad engineer from Maxwell hadn't played cards much at all, except a few games of Spades when he was in the U.S. Army.

"Honestly, I didn't even know the suits," he said.

A little over a year ago, a co-worker invited Shifflett to play and he's been traveling to Gothenburg every Thursday night since.

All in

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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“Within a couple of weeks, I had it figured out,” he said.

On Dec. 10, Shifflett will play in the Free Poker Network’s national Texas Hold ’Em tournament among more than 300 players from across the country.

Stephanie Walker is the host for the Free Poker Network league at Walker’s Steakhouse & Lounge on Thursday evenings.

Players in the league don’t ante up any money. They play for points earned through attendance and weekly finish.

There are 12 regular players at Walker’s and Shifflett tends to place toward the top much of the time.

He said he’s not much of a risk taker. If he has the chip lead, he might make a big gamble but otherwise he said he plays fairly conservative.

“It takes a combination of a little skill and a little luck,” he said.

Shifflett’s skill comes from research he’s done, learning to calculate probabilities quickly before making a play.

His tactics have taken him to three state tournaments, conducted at the end of each six-month league session.

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In the most recent state tournament, Shifflett said he was sitting third in the chip stack and in 14th place overall when he “went all in with a pair of queens.”

An opponent beat him with a pair of kings, knocking him out of play.

There are multiple ways to qualify for the national tournament.

State tournament champions, points leaders, game card winners and scratch card drawings can get a player to nationals. Since Shifflett was defeated in the state tournament and didn't have enough points to qualify, he relied solely on Lady Luck.



On a scratch card he earned by winning at poker at Walker's, Shifflett revealed a pair of jacks and a pair of nines.

“That's a pretty decent hand,” he said.

The card was sent into the national office and completely by chance, Shifflett's entry was drawn for the national tournament.

“I guess I am a little lucky,” he said.

On Dec. 10, Shifflett will represent Walker's Steakhouse & Lounge at the Free Poker Network's national tournament.

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He said he and his wife, Rebecca, will make a little vacation of it, staying five days to see the sights.

Walker had intended to go along but other commitments will prevent it.

Shifflett hopes he has saved his biggest hand for Las Vegas.

“My only goal is to not be the first one out,” he said. “Sure it would be nice to take first but that would take more luck than I think I have.”