

GAMING GAMBIT

by Phil Hevener



People who are big on images and mystique call him Texas Johnny. The big man says simply, "My name is John Moss. That's all." For 53 years he has played poker anywhere he could find a game and has won and lost millions of dollars.

Every word, he swears, is true. "What I've done I've done where people could see me. I ain't never cared for people who say one thing and do something else. Yes sir, I've made a lot of money and I've lost some and mostly, it's all been because of poker."

Officially, Moss, a resident of Odessa, Texas, has won the annual World Series of Poker at the Horseshoe Hotel and Casino three times, in 1970, 1971 and 1974. But he points out he also won the tournament in 1968 and 1969 when it was played at Reno before it was moved to Las Vegas where it has become an annual classic. Oh yes, he finished second in 1972 and 1973.

"I guess," he concedes, "I win a little something here every year, even when I don't take home the big prize there at the end. I'll probably win something this time. I may even win it all. That's the way it's been all these years for me and some of the good poker players here. We make money off the major league poker players. We beat the players who beat the suckers."

He Flashes Impatience

During those relatively slow moments of his life when there was not a poker game going somewhere, Moss has been in oil and he has been in the building business. But he exhibits an impatience typical of many self-made westerners with the government's tendency to taketh away and giveth back damn little.

When the veteran big league poker players hunker down around their campfires at night to talk about the greats they've known, Moss is never far from the minds of many. But the balding, mild-mannered, pot-bellied veteran of countless green felt skirmishes almost manages to appear miffed he hasn't developed the sort of popular following of some lesser players. Maybe next year, he says, he'll take care of that and write a book.

He mentions Doyle "Texas Dolly" Brunson, a two-time winner of the tournament and "Amarillo Slim" Preston — both are previous winners of the local tournament. "Why they wore out three cars following me across Texas so they could learn how to play. That's what Doyle says about me in that \$100 book he wrote. But that's about all he says."

'Who Cares?'

The second time he won the tournament, Moss believes he was in a position to benefit from a publicity standpoint. "The third time I could have done anything." But he shrugs, perhaps a little unsure. "Who the hell cares about a poker player?"

Moss only knows he cares. He has been playing since he was about 14 and living in Dallas. It long ago ceased to be something he did for fun, if that ever was the case. After all, a man who wins loses millions in a lifetime of playing a card game isn't there just to pass the time.

That's something he'll cover in that maybe someday book of his. There will be all those accounts of the big wins — the things, he stresses, people saw him do. There was the marathon session in 1951 when he won \$870,000 at the Flamingo. And there were those games when he walked away with \$700,000 and \$500,000.

"Then I guess I'll have to tell about how I lost it all playing craps." His lips part in a hint of a smile. "I had maybe \$7 million or \$8 million and it took me four years to lose most of it." Moss, the poker player with the instincts of a hunter and the mind of a computer, confesses, "I just didn't have no sense. So I left Las Vegas in 1954 and didn't come back until 1970."

He Played Anywhere

He became again what he had always been: a road gambler. "I played anywhere they had a game. I played it all. What game did I like best? I liked whatever they were playing. Good gambling ain't luck . . . you gotta know how to keep playing. I was the best lookout gambler on the road," he declares, explaining patiently that a lookout gambler is one with a particular skill for spotting cheats.

Like the fastest gun in the west, Moss is regularly challenged by those packing a strong bankroll but faulty instincts. "They all come around me hustling me. Play, play, play, they say. I was getting beat at seven card high. After all, it's difficult for us old folks to learn new things. I'm 71 but my eyes feel like they're 90, I use them so much.

"So I kept playing this seven card high and I began to get a little better, a little at a time." Moss beams. "Now in the last couple years I bet I ain't lost twice playing it. This is business with me. It isn't anything but business."

He holds up the blue-veined back of his hand for a listener to examine. "You see that?" He answers his own question. "Looks like blood don't it? It ain't. That's ice water. When I sit down to play, I'm there to win and when I break a man I love it." John The Shark leans back and his eyelids lower as though he is measuring the impact of own words.

Moss is slouched on a red plastic-covered Horseshoe restaurant chair, an empty beer bottle before him. He has told his story and now he begins to fidget, peering through the plate glass restaurant window at the crowds beyond. There are games to play and he will be part of them.