



SWINGS AND ARROWS

Vladimir Geshkenbein is no more than a lucky fish, destined for bustoville. That's what his detractors will tell you. Yet already in his short career, the 22-year-old Russian has amassed three major titles and more than \$1 million in live earnings. And according to **Dan Grant**, he's just getting started...

PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL CONDRON / LEA SALOMONE MAKE UP LARA CRUDGINGTON

Vladimir 'Beyne' Geshkenbein is Team PKR Pro's rock star. A young man with the swagger of Muhammad Ali, the flair of Brian Lara and the self-destructive hedonism of George Best. His voracious appetite for action and adventure has taken him across the globe, from his home in Malta to Las Vegas, the Bahamas, Macau and Australia. Rich playboys are ten-a-penny in poker circles, but it's *Beyne's* dazzling natural ability that sets him apart. Like most great poker players, Geshkenbein is a gambler. His fearlessness and longing for action could, on their own, spell serious peril. But allied to a shrewd intellect and a fierce competitive streak, they form a deadly combination.

The only child of a physicist and a biologist, Geshkenbein was born in Russia and moved to Switzerland at the age of five. In 2007, at the age of 18, he was introduced to poker by friends at

high school, swerving lessons in favour of sit-and-gos. He then discovered online poker, and within two weeks was beating the micro-stakes. Within 12 months he had moved up from \$0.05/\$0.10 to \$1/\$2 no-limit, and by early 2008 he was causing devastation at PKR's tables against anyone who would play him, including future EPT champion Kevin '1Kevboy' Stani and his arch-nemesis Teodor 'Goldeneyehd' Caraba. Caraba's battles with Geshkenbein, enlivened by the pair's rivalry and Geshkenbein's vivid table chat, drew packed rails and further established Geshkenbein as one of the site's most exciting prospects.

Going AWOL

Specialising in heads-up cash games, a world where bumhunting was de rigueur, Geshkenbein shirked no challenge. Phil Ivey once commented that he had respect only for those online players who would play anyone, for any amount. During 2008 and 2009, only *Beyne*, *1Kevboy*, and perhaps one or two others took on all comers on PKR.

Part donk, part lunatic, part genius, Geshkenbein confounded, bemused and horrified his opponents with inexplicable and seemingly unprofitable plays. With the promise of taking his now substantial winnings away from him, his opponents would put their bankrolls on the line, convinced they'd prevail if only luck would even out.



► While he left many opponents busto in his wake, the outcome was not always assured. Running well, he was nearly unstoppable. Running badly, he was a disaster zone, dropping buy-in after buy-in as word of his meltdown spread and the waiting lists grew.

Despite these violent fluctuations, *Beyne's* confidence, reputation and bankroll grew, along with his desire to be recognised. Although he was now, to his great irritation, trapped in his year of compulsory Swiss military service, the 18-year-old risked prison by travelling to London in April 2009 for PKR Live II. Fielding an irate call from his commanding officer demanding his return, he grinned, sipped his beer and shrugged at the prospect of a night in jail on his return.

At PKR Live, he asked PKR Community Manager *PKR_Jabba*, 'How do I become a Team PKR Pro?' The reply, half in jest, was: 'Go and win a major tournament.' Fast forward to Macau, late 2009, the scene of *zlatan35's* famous APT Macau

victory. *Beyne* had suffered his customary heavy losses at the cash tables after elimination from the tournament, keeping his head above water with easy money from the blackjack table. But after another high-stakes car crash at the hands of 'the world's biggest cash game fish', he was down to his last few bills and considering a flight home.

From busto to robusto

With a hotel bill to settle, he sat for one final blackjack session, spinning his remaining money up to \$15,000, which he sensibly chose to invest in that day's \$11,000 APPT High Roller event. He had equally wise plans for the remaining \$4,000, reserving the most expensive hotel suite in Macau for the duration of the tournament. Funds exhausted on his new plan of attack, he called Team PKR Pro Kai '*kingkai84*' Paulsen to borrow enough for dinner.

Four days later, he arrived by helicopter at the door of Team PKR Pro James '*James666*' Sudworth's Hong Kong hotel with a torn plastic bag in his hand. 'Put this in the safe', he said, motioning to the bag. 'I just beat Johnny fucking Chan to win the APPT High Roller. He's a fish.' The bag contained just over HK\$2 million (\$266,705) in freshly wrapped bricks. Having stared bustoville in the face, Geshkenbein was back in business.

From his High Roller payout, *Beyne* invested a six-figure sum, so the story goes, in one of the world's most stable

His real talent may lie in concealing the predator that lurks beneath the untamed, irreverent exterior

Geshkenbein The REAL deal

What is *Beyne* really like on and off the tables? **Michael Kaplan** met up with the young star at his place in Malta

STACKED▲: How did you first get into playing poker?

BEYNE: I played \$5 sit-and-gos with friends. After winning more than I lost, I figured maybe I had something. I signed with a site and got a \$50 signing bonus. A few \$50 deposits followed - but it sounds better if you say I started winning right away. Truthfully, I eventually won because I worked

hard. I put in effort and studied. My mathematical education helped and so did my natural gift as a provocateur. I know how to make people angry. I suck out and laugh at my opponents.

STACKED▲: You've become known for needing at the table - are you okay with that?

BEYNE: I do not go out of my way to be mean at the poker table. But, I must admit, sometimes it happens. I do enjoy making fun of people. I would never call someone fat or a fish - at least not in front of them. I'm more into irony. If someone plays a hand really badly, I'm apt to say, 'Well played, sir.' Then I start clapping my hands. It gets people to thinking.



economies, a chain of adult stores in Moscow. But no Team PKR Pro contract materialised, with the key players at PKR still unsure what to make of the unpredictable youngster. Several weeks later, he was urged to participate in the \$10,000 buy-in PKR Heads Up Grand Slam. If ever a tournament was tailor-made for Geshkenbein, this was it. A small field, just 32 runners, with some of the poker world's biggest names would convene in London to contest a new title. Tom Dwan, Annette Obrestad, J.C. Tran and the infamous Luke Schwartz were among the field.

Beyne cruised through his first two matches, babbling happily in front of the camera, beer in hand. His next opponent, APT High Roller champion David Steicke, declined to get involved in the banter and as a result was battered more fiercely than previous victims, drawing dismissive remarks from Geshkenbein as he swept his reserved opponent aside.

That led to a grandstand semi-final with friend and Team PKR Pro James Sudworth, a bizarre match remembered more for their continual verbals than the poker. After Sudworth was a meeting in the final with Finnish pro Juha Helppi, a man so far removed from *Beyne* on the personality spectrum they may as well have been born in different galaxies. Although he undoubtedly received better hands, Geshkenbein was unstoppable, smothering Helppi in trash talk and reraises until he succumbed, silently,

leaving Geshkenbein, arms aloft, to claim his next title and \$120,000 in prize money.

The following day, *Beyne* became a Team PKR Pro, achieving what he had set out to do six months before, and bringing to a close an extraordinary year.

Fear and loathing

As befits every human life, after the peak came the trough. In 2010, the prospect of a first visit to Las Vegas and the World Series of Poker became the new object of desire for Geshkenbein. For many poker pros, Vegas can be a utopia of endless possibility. For *Beyne*, it was a catastrophe that sent his hard-won bankroll tumbling earthward in a haze of decadence, blackjack and under-rolled cash games.

For someone who had never been to Las Vegas before, the decision to spend eight weeks there was characteristically inadvisable. With a \$50,000 bankroll set aside for the trip, he arrived at the WSOP full of determination to continue 2009's meteoric rise. Forty-eight hours later, only \$1,000 remained and *Beyne*'s first World Series looked bleak.

Sudworth recounts, 'He rang me at 1am with the news that he was busto. I'd already told him I would have no sympathy and that he should show restraint, so I hung up and went back to sleep. I expected to find his room empty next morning. Either he'd have returned home or be out in the desert somewhere with a gun in his mouth. Instead he



STACKED♠: How are you away from the table?

BEYNE: I am more of a nice guy. At the table, other players are my enemies. I need to get their money. I'll play the donk or the rich guy who doesn't care. I want them to play differently against me. I sit there with a beer and people assume I'm drunk. Usually I'm not. Usually I'm really focused.

STACKED♠: I hear you busted a lot of opponents on your way up. Do any guys stand out?

BEYNE: I remember playing \$25/\$50 no-limit on PKR and a \$5/\$10 regular thought I was a huge fish. People kept telling him he was the fish. But he wouldn't listen. I won \$60,000 off him,

busted his bankroll, and didn't see him for two months. Then he came back and played much lower.

STACKED♠: Your format of choice at the \$25/\$50 no-limit level is heads-up. How come?

BEYNE: I like to play a lot of hands and heads-up is best for that. The other thing is that it allows me to concentrate on my opponent and for him to concentrate on me. That creates opportunities for me to put across the fake image and tilt him more. I'll swear in the chat box or just type in random shit.

STACKED♠: How can somebody put you on tilt?

BEYNE: Play slowly. If a guy times out every decision, I get bored and play very badly.

STACKED♠: Considering the stakes you play for, you must encounter massive swings. How do you handle them?

BEYNE: Pretty badly. I used to tilt a lot, and that put me in a bad mood after the game ended. Sometimes, after I've had a few drinks, and play online when I shouldn't, I'll punch my laptop, throw it across the room, or slam it down. I've broken seven or eight computers. That usually happens after a fish sucks out on me ten times in a row.

STACKED♠: I hear you've got a weakness for blackjack, but that at a recent APPT event, in Macau, the game saved you...

BEYNE: Yeah. I flew to Macau for the APPT, but then I went bust in

the \$100/\$200 cash games before the tournament began. I had changed my flight and was packing up to leave - no money means no reason to stay. Then I opened the safe and noticed \$2,000 in there. I spun it up to \$15k playing blackjack, bought into the High Roller tournament for \$11,000 and spent the



remaining \$4k on a top suite at the MGM Grand.

STACKED: You ended up making the final table with Johnny Chan. What was your state of mind at that point?

BEYNE: Increasingly inebriated. I promised to drink a drink for every final-table player who busted. So that was nine drinks all told. By the time I got heads-up with Chan, I had drunk beer, vodka, champagne, whiskey, and more. I like to mix it up.

STACKED: It must have been pretty intimidating to play against Johnny Chan.

BEYNE: I don't get intimidated by poker players. I might get intimidated by the President of the United States. But a poker player? No. Maybe I called Johnny Chan a fish. He didn't play very well.

STACKED: That was a pretty nice score for you: \$266,000. But what happened at the 2010 World Series of Poker?

BEYNE: Las Vegas and me are not a good combination. I got too much into blackjack. I got drunk. I played cash games I shouldn't have played. In tournaments, I made very bad decisions. I was there for six weeks, staying at different hotels, wherever I could get comped for playing in the pit. Vegas is too crazy for me. It's not real, with free booze, shiny lights, wild nightclubs. Things just got out of control. That's it.

STACKED: By the time this story runs, the 2011 WSOP will be in full swing. Any plans?

BEYNE: I'm taking it more seriously. I'll lock down some of my bankroll at home. I don't want access to all of it.

STACKED: One last question. Earlier, you said you don't insult people to their faces, but didn't you call an opponent fat right after you won €390,000 at the EPT Snowfest?

BEYNE: I didn't call the guy fat in person. PKR asked me to do this Twitter thing and I wrote whatever popped into my head. I didn't know that people actually read the Twittering shit. Apparently my opponent did, and he took it quite well, referring to me as a Russian alcoholic after I called him a fat Belgian. Who cares? I only care about winning.

answered the door, naked but for his underwear, clutching \$50,000 in bricks, that familiar grin spread across his face.' He'd escaped again, winning back his WSOP stake and scoring a complimentary VIP suite in the Bellagio in the process.

Amid the largely unprintable chaos of the next few weeks, he played several WSOP events, posting only one minor cash. When the PKR crew arrived for their week-long WSOP Experience, he played event 54 alongside the 35-strong team of qualifiers, reaching day two with a sizeable stack. Still oblivious to the value of an early night, he appeared briefly at PKR's WSOP party, before a disagreement with a roulette croupier in the casino precipitated an evening as a guest of the Nevada County Sheriff.

Apparently, law enforcement officers have little appreciation of the pressure of rising blinds. Day two began and there was no sign of the Russian as his stack dwindled to just a few blinds. In the nick, if you'll excuse the pun, of time, he appeared and set about turning a handful of blinds into a mountain of chips, contesting a pot for the chip lead but eventually cashing for \$7,000.

By the end of the Series, his \$22,000 in tournament earnings was insufficient to claw back an unimaginable sum invested at every bar, casino and strip club in Sin City, and he left vowing never to return. But his first encounter with Las Vegas had one positive effect. He returned to

Malta and his comfort zone, online heads-up cash games. By late 2010 he had recovered from his WSOP exertions, becoming the first PKR player to cash out \$1 million, although as he is quick to point out, 'It wasn't all profit.'

Top gun

In January this year he travelled to EPT Deauville in search of a third title, sustaining another dent to his bankroll courtesy of the softest cash games he had ever encountered. He returned to France weeks later for those same cash games, recovering his losses and then some, reducing one opponent to tears after catching a two-outer for a five-figure pot.

After an appearance on the *German High Roller* televised cash game, where he both won and lost back a record number of euros, he travelled to Austria in April for EPT Snowfest, grabbing the headlines as the chip leader after Day 1. With the usual blend of spasmodic stack progress, self-amused chatter and good fortune, he ploughed his way to the final table and to victory, claiming the biggest cash of his poker career – €360,000 – and his first EPT title.

On such a prestigious stage, this was the poker world's first real taste of the Russian, and the poker media rather enjoyed it. Described as 'wildly unpredictable, fantastically cheeky and maddeningly smug', and likened to Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*, Geshkenbein has now

Luck? What luck!

Beyne is often called a luckbox - this 'lifetime' graph would suggest otherwise



Part donk, part lunatic, part genius, he bemused and horrified his opponents with inexplicable and seemingly unprofitable plays

attracted the kind of attention his unique character and undeniable talent deserve.

In just three and a half years, he has earned more than \$980k from live MTTs and a greater sum in cash games. In this new age of poker, where aggression is the byword, he still stands out as a wild and fearless player. But to describe him simply as hyper-aggressive would be to do him a disservice. It is his unorthodoxy, both at and away from the table, that has brought *Beyne* success, and his real talent may be in concealing the predator that lurks beneath the untamed, irreverent exterior.

White-knuckle ride

So what's next for *Beyne*? In many respects he remains a mystery, and it is not yet clear what truly drives him. Certainly the notorious disregard for his own bankroll implies that financial gain isn't his *raison d'être*. Yet he's also dismissive of the poker world's idolatry of tournament champions, reminding us he has 'only won a few donkaments'.

During the first years of his spectacular rise, haters and onlookers awaited the inevitable and explosive crash, yet with continued spectacular results, wise investments and a maturing character, *Beyne* has confounded critics with his career's upward trajectory. Having won – and lost – millions of dollars, brought poker legends to their knees and done it all with effortless delight, this poker pro's adventure is far from over. And I for one can't wait to see what lies in store. ■

► *Beyne*'s raw stats are the envy of most poker players. Since his first foray at \$0.02/\$0.04 NLHE in April 2007, he has played more than 330,000 cash game hands. After 12 months he reached \$2/\$4 NLHE and put the pedal to the metal. Since September 2008 and after 309,000 hands, he has banked more than \$550k in profit. But the route to this mind-boggling amount was not for the faint of heart. After 140,000+ hands and \$300k profit he suffered a sickening downswing, losing half his entire profit in just 5,000 hands. Not to be deterred, he recovered, and reached \$400k after 205,000 hands and \$500k after 283,000 hands.

