

COVER FEATURE

THE OLD SKOOL

BACK TO THE

Old Skool

We like a bit of continuity here at *Flush*, and so, after a few issues with the young hotshots taking centre stage, we went right to the other end of the spectrum and gathered some of the legends of the home-grown game. No shooters allowed.

Words: Jon Young Photography: Eddie Macdonald
Shoot location: The Walrus Social, London

There's an old adage in the acting profession: 'Never work with animals or children.' For poker, one should add, 'Never work with old poker players'. We haven't even got cracking yet at our shoot venue, the wonderful Walrus Social in Waterloo, London, before Willie Tann has done a bunk. Tired of waiting for Dave 'Devilfish' Ulliott to arrive, he's buggered off down the

road to the nearest bookies. It's a full 20 minutes before 'The Dice Man' can be located. Meanwhile upstairs, Devilfish has arrived and is assaulting the gathered *Flush* hoards with a joke involving jam and marmalade (don't ask) and Irish rover Padraig Parkinson is pointing out the various virtues of WSOPE champ Annette Obrestad (again, don't ask), and recounting the time he first met Ulliott.

"The first time I ever met the Devilfish was at the Irish Open," says Padraig. "Remember the old Jackpot in Dublin? Dave and Alan Betson had been hanging out a bit together in England and Alan's there sitting in this cash game. He's taking beat after beat and the next thing is Devilfish comes in who we've never seen before and he's stood behind Alan rattling off two or three bad beat stories at him. Alan just turns around at Dave and says, 'Excuse me mate, have you mistaken me for some guy who gives a f**k?'"

"Padraig, you've got to tell a f**king story that I remember," replies the 'Fish. "I'm not saying it didn't happen but it's got to be something that I remember. About me and you maybe..."

"What, like the time that you put me up against that wall in Vegas?"

"I was going to throw you down the stairs. No - a f**king good one. The funniest thing I remember about Padraig was when we were at the Merrion Club in Dublin. I remember you walked in about three o' clock in the morning and you look like you'd just climbed out of a skip. He was absolutely as pissed as I've ever seen him in my life."

Er, hang on, what was this about Devilfish up against a wall?

Padraig continues: "I think it was the last year that the World Series was at Binion's. My World Series was over and I'm on the f**king beer so I've gone upstairs to the poker room and Dave's still in. There are maybe three or four tables of the World Series left and I'm standing up there on the railing. I shout out, 'Goddamn, it's the Devilfish, just like on the TV!' and someone goes 'Yeah, that's him.' The 'Fish goes up by about four inches and I said, 'F**king ugly bastard isn't he?!' Half an hour later the Devilfish has got me up against the wall and he says, 'Do you want to sort this out in the car park, Padraig?' I said to him, 'Nah, I'd rather sort it out right here now. Sorry Dave, I was only taking the piss' and off he goes."

And so it continues, with more unprintable jokes and a slightly uneasy banter between guys who've known each other for a long time, taken money off each for a long time and respected each other for a long time. Over the years, they've played everywhere - from the final tables of World Series to the grimmest backroom cash sesh - games Guy Ritchie can only get moist about in his dirtiest wet dreams.

Just as Devilfish is launching into a tale about turning up at an illegal Midlands game moments before the police raided it, Willie turns up, his first-weekend football bets down.

"I used to play games up and down the motorway with a driver called Gary Whitaker," says Devilfish. "I used to have a gun in my pocket in those days; I think that's why I got left alone. Why pick on the guy with the gun when there are other guys out there, right? I remember someone at the time who'd won a tournament; I think it was in Bradford. After he'd left the game all his car windows got smashed in with baseball bats as he stopped at the traffic lights. You used to get all sorts of stuff going on. I just missed out on getting robbed at Stevie Young's game in Birmingham - the guy who gave me the nickname Devilfish - so you know, it was tough times and you had to look after yourself."

Up close, Devilfish cuts quite an imposing figure. Decker out in a jet-black suit, youthful-looking black hair (evidently those winnings have been spent somewhere), and tall (he must be well over 6'3"). The trademark knuckledusters (one reads 'Devil', the other 'Fish') keep catching the sunlight and his charismatic wink is now a firm part of his make-up, like a nervous twitch. But the 'Fish oozes charm; this is a man who was born to be a poker celebrity. ▶



The former life of Dave Ulliott is well-documented. A figure in the Hull underworld, he was part of a safe-cracking team that targeted shops and post offices in the town. He served two spells in prison, but either side of his time inside, Devilfish was becoming known around the illegal card games in the area. He was organising poker games in the back of his shop (Rottweilers and shotguns purely precautionary measures) and dominating the home games of others to the extent that people stopped telling him where they were being held. Local legends like Marty Wilson, Lucy Rokach and Dave Colclough all beat the felt at some of these sessions.

In the late '80s he befriended a café manager, Gary Whitaker, and the pair travelled to poker games most nights of the week. After Devilfish was banned from all of William Hill's bookies for winning heavily on the horses, he employed Whitaker to put bets on for him. He still manages to get the bets on though.

"The fact that I've been banned from all bookies in the last ten years proves that things are all good. My last port of call was Betfred. I won £25,000 off of them two weeks ago and they said, 'That's enough, no more each-way bets.'"

Now a firm fixture in the poker community (even yer Gran knows who he is), Devilfish is involved with his own poker site, Devilfish Poker, which naturally he's keen to promote.

"Everything's new. We've got new software; we've got a great new team on board. Everything's going great and it's all new. We've got 24-hour customer service, some great ideas and some great tournaments. You can take me on in bounty tourneys too."

Now settled, Willie Tann looks quite the elder statesman in his dark suit. He's been there, done that, got the t-shirt AND the bracelet. He's won events at the Irish Open, French Open and was European no.1 not so long ago, in 2005. In that year he took down the \$1000 NLHE event at the WSOP in Vegas, his only World Series bracelet to date. Undoubtedly he's one of the legends of British poker. "You had to put me on the front cover. I'm the Doyle Brunson of British poker!" Quite.

Born in China, Willie came to London in 1960 via Singapore to train as a lawyer. But, hit by a gambling bug that still remains to this day, any dreams of taking to the courts were dashed once he started frequenting the casinos and gambling dens of London. Nicknamed 'The Dice Man' for his predilection for the craps tables (a love that has seen him go broke countless times), his poker winnings have still ensured that he saw his son through prestigious public schools. Out of the three, he probably has the longest poker experience in the UK.

"During those days it wasn't fashionable to be a poker player," says Willie. "If you told your family you were playing poker they would frown upon it; I guess things are the same now in some ways. But in the '70s if you were into poker you were into gambling as well. Nowadays if we say you're a poker player it's quite cool. Everybody wants to be a poker player now."

"We used to play seven card stud with a stripped deck all around London - Abbey Road, St John's Wood, south London, games were all over the place. We started playing late at about 11pm and wouldn't stop until the early hours of the morning. You'd see the same people all the time."

"In the games I used to play in, the police would come in and raid them."

They'd come with between ten and twenty policeman and when they got to the door, everybody would freeze and stay still with their hands over their money. They would take down your names and addresses, but sometimes they would let you off. They might confiscate your money or return it to you in a couple of weeks. It wasn't so serious back then."

So was this the way it was back then? Were all the poker players gambling on everything else?

"Oh yeah. It was very unlikely that you'd find a poker player who wasn't an all-round gambler," says Padraig. "Now you've got all these kids in the hoodies and the shades and they're professional. But back in those days we didn't know any better; nobody had taught us about money management."

Dubliner Padraig Parkinson completes our old school trio. Now a firm fixture on the European circuit, he first came to the attention of the novice poker community in the UK by winning Series 5 of Late Night Poker in 2002. In 1999, the 'Year of the Irish', he finished 3rd at the main event of the WSOP. Fellow countryman Noel Furlong went on to win.

So, finally, the class is settled and we can begin.

FLUSH: Guys, is there a certain nostalgia now about the whole poker scene? It's good that there's all this choice, you have the Internet it's great for new players coming into the game, but is poker really all that different now?

Willie: Oh yeah, there's so much money in the game now and it's a lot easier to find a game. The games are getting bigger and bigger and more competitive. Ten, fifteen years ago a £100 game was big, but now £100 is a small game; even £250 or £500. There's so much money in the game that if you win a big tournament it's life changing. I mean last year we had the World Series of Poker Europe where the girl won £1 million and only a year ago the GUKPT winner took £100,000.

£100,000 prize money is a big thing in many sports events, but you can win it every month now in a poker event anywhere in England.

FLUSH: Do you wish you were a young up-and-coming player experiencing the current boom?

Willie: Well, I've been playing poker a long, long time. One of the most important things for young people when they start playing poker now is to learn money management...

Padraig: ...Money management and Willie Tann? Those two things shouldn't be mentioned in the same f**king sentence!

"You had to put me on the front cover. I'm the Doyle Brunson of British poker!"

Willie "The Dice man" Tann

FLUSH: Maybe a problem for these kids is that they're living at home with their parents. Once they get out of their parents' home and have to spend money on themselves they'll actually start giving a shit about money management.

Padraig: Well it's a good point. When all goes out of things... somewhere around the 26th of each month!

Willie: Poker clubs are all over colleges and universities and there are so many students playing; I don't know whether it's a good thing or not. It's huge, but what they're there for is studying. They should be thinking of that before playing poker.

Padraig: I spent five years playing poker in college. They had to give me a f**king degree to get me out of there.

Willie: It was all a misspent youth for us.

Devilfish: Nowadays it's just a completely different world. You can sit at home with your mum and dad and play online in your bedroom and never leave the house. I played with some kids in the Bellagio recently who were big online winners, but you couldn't imagine them walking into the places that I used to walk into - they'd have them bent over with their pants down.

FLUSH: I always ask the internet kids about the older guys and vice-versa. What we found out from American youngsters like Justin Bonomo is that there isn't much respect between the two camps. Is there more respect shown in the UK and Ireland?

Padraig: Well, there's kind of an intelligentsia in America who have ingratiated themselves with ESPN and Fox Sports and all of that so it's in their interests to look down on the young kids and say, 'Oh well, it'll be ten years before we know if he's a player or not, so don't put him on the telly.' I mean some of the young players coming through - I've been hugely impressed by them. They're way better than I was at that age and they're probably better than a lot of the top guys in the world were at their age.

FLUSH: Is it simply down to them having played more hands?

Padraig: Obviously they've played more hands, so the learning curve is maybe cut by five, six or seven years, but at the same time you're getting much brighter people playing the game. When I started playing poker, poker was a backroom game. Now there are kids playing with three university degrees and four PhDs by

the time they're 17 and they've turned into professional poker players. You know, some of the brightest young guys in the world are taking up poker because it's sexy and it's now socially acceptable; it's all changed.

FLUSH: Is it harder for you or do you just adapt?

Padraig: I like it. If you're not adapting in this game then what's going on? You can complain about these kids getting it really easy, but the other side of it is that the internet has been good for everyone. The games are getting better and there are a lot of bad players coming through off the internet. Plus, for guys like me the internet is great because I get some free entries and a bit of sponsorship from internet sites that ten years ago you never dreamt of.

FLUSH: Let's talk about the World Series; obviously you've all been out there again. Are there too many events? You've got these guys overlapping events and they're not concentrating on their games because they're rushing from table to table...

Padraig: Well, the organisers are making cu*ts of themselves and they're bringing the game into disrepute. I mean you've got the responsible players, the guys who have a piece on the side, but playing two tournaments simultaneously is a very sad cry for attention. There are way too many events. The bracelet used to mean something but now it's got to the stage where only championship bracelets are going to mean anything. There should be a championship event in each discipline and maybe an overall one and that should be it. But Harrah's don't care.

Devilfish: I don't agree with two tournaments a day; it's too much. You get people jumping in and out of tournaments desperate for a bracelet. All the top pros didn't care what tournament it was, they were just jumping in one event, chucking their chips in and then going and jumping in the next one at five o' clock. The only per- ▶



son that didn't really do that was Hellmuth. He played and then left Las Vegas for a bit and came back. But lots of the other pros were playing a lot of tournaments.

FLUSH: How would you decide who plays in the main event? Maybe you have to qualify through a set of satellites and only then you can play in the main event.

Padraig: You're probably right. The main event now is the greatest bag of bollocks of all time. The real world championship is the \$25,000 event in the Bellagio; now that's an event. I don't know how many runners there were this year, maybe 500, but there were certainly 200-300 of the best players in the world and good players who'd gotten in through satellites, so every table you played at you were liable to be playing against top class players. The guy that won that event could say that he'd played the best players in the world and beat them. I hate to have to say this, because I'm always on the side of the underdog and the little guy, but the main event has become a joke. And it's not sour grapes but when I first played the World Series in 1999 there were like 396 runners so your average table then was made up of maybe three world-class pros, three good pros and three desperados like myself. I was lucky enough to get to the final table that year, but in the middle of the thing, I don't know how many top class players I played against, but I played against the best players in the world; guys that were recognised as being the best players in the world for hours on end. I played the 'Fish, I played Seidel, Huck Seed and Annie Duke. But now it's mathematically possible with all these numbers that you could be just an average player with a decent draw and get to the final table of the world series without meeting anybody that was any better than you. That can't be right. Jerry Yang is probably a very nice fella, but to call him the world champion is a f**king joke. I don't know who he beat along the way, but people don't respect the world champion any more because he hasn't beaten the best in the world. I think it would be more prestigious to win at the Bellagio and the WSOPE because there's zero dead money in that – that's probably the toughest tournament in the world.

"You couldn't imagine these kids walking into the places that I used to walk into – they'd have them bent over with their pants down"

Dave "Devilfish" Ulliott

FLUSH: Does that mean you value the WSOPE main event higher than the one in Vegas?

Padraig: Yeah, I think so. I'm definitely coming to London.

Devilfish: I'm gonna play for definite. I'm gonna play as many events as I can and really get my act together for this one. I did badly in America despite winning in the cash games, but I did bad in the tournaments. When you're running bad, sometimes it makes you play bad as well you know, your confidence goes and you just think, 'Ah well, whatever...' I've had the worst Vegas I've ever had, in so much as I never actually reached the second day of any tournament. And it never really looked any good. I didn't bother playing the H.O.R.S.E. event because I was catching no cards and you can't win a H.O.R.S.E. event if you're not catching any cards – simple as that. I'll play much better in London.

FLUSH: Was it just one of those years then?

Devilfish: Yeah, but fortunately for me, at the end of the six weeks they decided to have a big cash game in Bobby's room [Bobby Baldwin's high rollers' cash room at the Bellagio], half no limit Hold'em and half Omaha. At one point I was losing about a million dollars and I came out up about \$140,000. So I climbed Everest in roller skates as they say, so it was pretty good.

FLUSH: Do you think there's a future for the World Series in London and Europe?

Devilfish: Oh yeah. It's a good tournament, everyone wants bracelets and everyone wants the honour that goes with it. It's going to get bigger and bigger each year; it's possible that you could end up with more players playing in some of the events here than in Vegas.

FLUSH: So where's your bread and butter now? Is it still live or are you playing online more?

Padraig: It's wherever it comes from! I'm certainly going back to playing live. I've played a lot in America in the last few years, but I was only playing the huge tournaments, which was probably a mistake. You've got to be playing a lot more, so I'm gonna go back and play a lot more smaller events. Also, I find playing on the internet a pain in the arse; I can't play without watching TV or talking on the phone to somebody.

FLUSH: Where would you say the game is headed in the UK?

Padraig: Poker has followed snooker very, very closely in its removal from the back room to having all the grannies watching it on TV and if they're not very careful it will follow snooker the whole way. There's a reason all these snooker players are playing poker now and that's because all the money has gone out of the game. I mean, I started watching *Pot Black* in black and white with Terry ►





Griffiths and John Spencer. But snooker went from getting that break on TV into being huge and it was huge because you had the good against the bad. Guys like Steve Davis came along and got really good at it and you'd have Davis against Higgins and Davis against Jimmy White and then Stephen Hendry came along, who was squeaky clean, but the likes of Bill Werbeniuk and Kirk Stevens were still there, doing a bit of charlie – it was always the good against the bad. But then these young kids came along in snooker and they realised that doing 4 grams of coke a day and not practicing wasn't really the way to do it any more. You know that fourteen hours of dedicated practice a day was what was required and that changed snooker completely. I know a lot of the top snooker players and I'm on very good terms with them, but at the same time they killed the game because these guys got so good that all the characters got squeezed out because they couldn't live the lifestyles they were living and stay at the top. Then the whole thing collapsed and everybody was wondering what happened. The sponsors started pulling out, the TV ratings started going down; it was because the characters left the game. No sorry, maybe the characters didn't leave the game, but they just couldn't f**king qualify any more! If poker isn't very careful, that's what's going to happen. You'll get all these guys in who are really good but have no personality.

FLUSH: There are still a lot of interesting characters in poker though.

Padraig: Yeah, of course there are, but they still have to be careful. I mean it's started already - the figures are going down, internet companies are cutting back on sponsorship on the TV. If they don't look at what's happened to snooker, that's what's going to happen to poker. There was probably saturation, the TV people weren't really interested in the quality of what was going on, just the quantity. All of a sudden you can go to seven different channels on the TV and watch a bunch of boring farts pass the f**king blinds around. If some f**king guy thinks he can sit on the TV and win a million dollars without saying anything but call, pass or raise and that somebody is going to want to turn on the TV to see him to it they can forget about it. I very rarely watch poker on TV any more, I'll only watch it if the 'Fish or Tony G or Matusow or Hellmuth - somebody who people might think is an asshole - is playing. These people are great for the game.

FLUSH: So will Late Night Poker turn into University Challenge?

Padraig: Ha. Thing is, I find it absolutely extraordinary that the average IQ around a poker table at the top level has probably increased by about 20% but these guys still haven't figured it out. They sit there like pieces of fucking wood; they don't say anything. They're going to change the game but they don't understand that they're in the entertainment business and that people will only want to watch it on TV because it's interesting or because they want to love or hate a guy. If these guys f**king sit there with their dodgy f**king hairstyles and say nothing, well nobody wants to f**king watch that. I'd rather watch bowls!

Devilfish: I was watching poker the other night - it was the Party Poker World Open - and they had the most boring players on that I've ever seen. For me, if you have really boring players and you have too many tournaments where there are just amateurs on or people who don't know what they're doing, that can kill the game.

FLUSH: Let's talk about Late Night Poker. Guys like you came to wider public attention with this show. When it first got suggested, were you part of the community who thought, 'This is going to be great for poker in England'?

Willie: Oh yes. I mean it was definitely advertising poker; it was the first televised poker tournament in the UK. We all had to pay our buy-ins though because I can't remember people having sponsors back then. You had to be invited too, you know? You were there because you'd been invited and it was a good game.

Devilfish: Rob Garner was the producer at Presentable - we can give him a nice mention can't we? - and I was fortunate enough to play in the first televised tournament that they did. I was the only guy there in a black suit and a World Series bracelet and I managed to win the first series. I actually won three TV shows on the trot and consequently the viewing figures went up dramatically because people thought, 'Whoa, this is all skill' and 'Who the hell is this guy?' I actually think that I did my little bit in putting poker on the map because we had everyone watching it. People in America saw the viewing figures and then the WPT came along not long after. Really, poker players out there, all the young poker players out there, we all owe it to Rob because he came up with this idea and tragically he died at the early age of 36 leaving a wife and kids. He was an absolute gentleman, but you know, it's always said that the good ones die young, so I should be here for about another fifty years!

[In 1999, Devilfish was one of 40 players to appear in the first series of Late Night

Poker, the first poker show to use hole-cam technology. He won his qualifying heat against a field that included Hendon Mobster Ross Boatman to advance to the Grand Final. Devilfish dominated the final from the first hand (where his flush beat Surinder Sunar's straight). The 'Fish went on to win the heads-up confrontation against Peter Evans, and the £40,000 first prize. Ulliott's win was watched by over 1.5 million people and his character at the table was part of the reason for the renewal of the series.]

"I used to have a gun in my pocket in those days; I think that's why I got left alone"

Dave "Devilfish" Ulliott

FLUSH: We interviewed Joe Beevers a few months ago and he was saying that some of the pros didn't want to go on this at all. They were all thinking, 'What's this? I don't want people to see my cards!'

Devilfish: For me, I just saw the chance to get poker on TV and if you don't get TV

involved in any sport there's no money in it, right? That's why I was eager to get involved. It's the same in any sport: darts, snooker, you name it. When I first got there I didn't like the fact that you could see the cards in the glass, so I had to get that sorted out; we had to get some tape and square it off so you couldn't see the reflection.

Willie: The series I played in was funny. There was Padraig, myself, Kevin O'Connell, Phil Hellmuth and another guy. We all made Padraig favourite. I remember Phil Hellmuth saying, "What?! I'm a world champion and I'm not favourite?!" He went ballistic. And of course, he was the first one out in the heats.

Padraig: I knocked him out! I was drunk as a monk and the bookies made me 2-1 favourite and Hellmuth was 9-4. So the bookies knocked Hellmuth out of the heats! Hellmuth went absolutely nuts that the boys had made me favourite, but also because all of the people hanging around the green room were going to bet on me for a laugh. Hellmuth stood up at the table just before we started and said "What the f**k's going on?! I've got six bracelets!"

FLUSH: So he was an arrogant idiot even back then?

Padraig: I like Phil. I get on very well with Phil.

FLUSH: Devilfish, I heard you on Radio Five the other week talking with John McCririck about whether poker was a sport. The arguments for and against weren't put across too well...

Devilfish: The truth is, we were trying to argue over something that we know isn't really true. We know it isn't really a sport. I mean it's not a sport that you could play at the Olympic Games is it? You've got to use your mind, you've got to use your memory, you've got to have plenty of stamina to play in these tournaments. What we never mentioned is the fact that most of the guys who make the final tables at the big events are the young guys because they've got the most stamina. I can talk about overweight players doing this and old guys doing that, but not many of them make it to the crucial end of a big tournament because they get worn out.

FLUSH: I was talking to a chess player who was saying that the game was nearly re-classed as a sport. In the end it was rejected because of the threat of drug tests. Of course, most chess players are on caffeine and I guess most poker players must be too, having to keep concentration for 13 or 14 hours.

Devilfish: Well, you just have to be fit, that's all. I'm at the age now that I've done it for so many years that I can just do it. But it's not so much my stamina, it's my attention span that goes a bit funny. Sometimes I have to go for a walk or go to

talk to somebody on the next table. I can't sit there with a hat and glasses like Hellmuth does just like a statue; I can't play it like that. I mean I'm quite prepared to miss a few hands and go for a walk during a big game.

FLUSH: So guys like you will be around for some time to come?

Devilfish: People keep saying,

"When are you going to quit?" but if I quit what am I going to do? Will I just sit around all day and sit on beaches go on cruises, coz you know, that's what I'm doing now and I get paid for it! Now, I go where I want, I do what I want. I've got no sponsorship deal with anybody that says that you've got to do this, you've got to do that. I've got my own site and I can basically do what I want.

Padraig: As long as the old heart can stand it.

FLUSH: So are your goals in poker now just to keep on enjoying the game?

Devilfish: Yeah, if you don't enjoy it why do it? I like to drive nice cars, live in a nice house, I've got a nice young girlfriend on my arm. That's all you want isn't it? I look after my kids, buy 'em all cars and stuff... I try my best.

FLUSH: And definitely no police raids and shooters?

Devilfish: Look - I just want to make it clear in case any Mums are reading this, all that crime and guns and nonsense is all in the past. 