

TWOPLUS TWO MAGAZINE

Interview with Don Ding

by Ben Saxton

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Don Ding's poker career got off to a blazing start. A math major with a penchant for puzzles, Don grew up in Arkansas in a family of academics. In 2011, at twenty-three years old, he left his job as a bioinformatics specialist for the FDA to play poker. He had no previous online or live experience. But he did have a background in competitive gaming and a conviction that, if anyone could succeed, he could. Within months Don was beating 2/5. Within a year he was beating mid and high-stakes games everywhere: in Florida, Los Angeles, Tunica, Las Vegas—even in Macau, where he won over \$40,000 in a week. Don chronicled these adventures in Two Plus Two's Poker Goals & Challenges forum, where his thread, "Just quit my 6 figure job to play live poker," has garnered 650,000 views.

When we met for dinner last December at the Karl Strauss Brewing Company, a dim, lively restaurant in San Diego, Don was still adjusting to life on the West Coast. He had recently bought a condo, earned a real estate license, and joined the training site CrushLivePoker as an instructor. He had also been losing—a lot—in the 5/5 no-limit and pot-limit games along the coast. We discussed downswinging, strategies for managing variance, playing poker professionally, video games, and limping suited aces under the gun.

Ben Saxton: "You ran really hot out of the gate. Then, after a few years as a live pro, you wrote this: „Nothing I can say here will adequately explain how badly I have been running in poker in 2014. One can only lose money for so many hours before one loses his mind. Throughout the year I have lost my confidence and questioned myself countless times. Even during the times when I did trust my abilities, I doubted whether I could ever flip a coin and have it land on heads again, or whether it would just cost me another thousand to find out that I wasn't sure." How have you handled these swings? Has it changed your perspective on the game?"

Don Ding: "The variance is just crazy. I think my favorite post that I've ever read on Two Plus Two was written by "fees," [poker pro Ryan Fee] who said, „Think about the worst you that could possibly run—the absolute worst you can imagine—and I guarantee you that, if you stick with poker, you'll run even worse than that." And I think that's true."

Ben: "That post is your favorite because it's true? Because it's borne out by your experience?"

Don: "Yeah. It also helped to put things in perspective. Last year I had a ridiculous upswing, and this year I had an unbelievable downswing. It started in Florida, where I lost 20K in two hundred hours. I thought that was bad, and now it seems trivial in retrospect. Lifetime in poker I'm way under EV, I believe, despite having that initial upswing. But it's fine, because poker EV is only one percent of life EV."

Ben: "Do you find it helpful to take that kind of macro perspective?"

Don: "I do it mainly for my own sanity. I say to myself, „Hey, I lost five thousand dollars today, but at least I didn't get hit by a drunk driver and die." I think any professional poker player needs some way to rationalize downswings. I also take breaks. I've taken two three-month breaks from poker."

Ben: "What do you do?"

Don: "I play a lot of video games. I hang out with friends and have fun. Most people would be like, „You're wasting your life away." I actually have the opposite opinion: you're wasting your life away if you spend all of your time working."

Ben: "What was it about your job that made you want to leave? Because you were clearly successful at it."

Don: "Despite having a pretty good job, I dreaded waking up in the morning. I was really looking forward to the weekends. Then I found out about poker and was like, „Playing a card game that I play in my free time sounds awesome." And then I did that, and it was awesome."

Ben: "Your 2+2 thread has been held up as validation for players who leave a lucrative job to pursue their dream. Recently you posted about why you shouldn't quit your job to play poker.³ Where are you on that subject? What would you tell a twenty-year-old who's thinking about going pro?"

Don: "It's different for every person. The problem is that a lot of people say that they know they'll succeed but they can't. I taught one of my friends about poker because I knew that he could do it and that poker would be good for him. But the vast majority of my friends who say, „Yo, poker sounds fun, teach me how to play," I'm like, „No. you don't want to do that." Out of people who think that they want to play poker and they'll do well, only one of a hundred of them actually does."

Ben: "Why do you think such big misconception exists about poker as a profession?"

Don: "Actually, I have a lot of insight on this from video games. In League of Legends, a five-on-five game that I play, players always blame their teammates when they lose. And I think poker's really similar. If you go to a nine-handed table and ask every person, „Are you the best person at the table?" half of them will say yes. So many of them think, „Man, I come here every day, I play better than all these idiots, and I still lose. I don't understand why." Obviously this could be variance, but the vast, vast majority of people who have that mentality are just losing players who don't understand why they're losing."

Ben: "Is there something about poker specifically that lends itself to that kind of self-deception?"

Don: "It has such high variance. In League of Legends, everyone remembers the games when they got twenty kills and died one time, but no one remembers the game when they got one kill and died twenty times. Poker's kind of the same. Everyone remembers when they hero called with Ace-high and won a huge pot, but they don't remember when they hero called and lost four times in the same session."

Ben: "Who do you look to for poker role models? Who do you see as someone who can legitimately claim poker greatness?"

Don: There's two sides to that. When I was starting out, I wanted to be the best. My first experience playing 5/10 was at the Horseshoe Cleveland, and all of the best players would sit in that game. My reasoning was that, if I wanted to get better, I should play against all of those guys, and I did. Then I went to LA and met Bart Hanson and [Abe] Limon, and their mentality is that you want to play the worst players. And that's the mentality I've adopted. Do you want to be a great poker player or do you want to make the most money? These days, I would be more than happy to play with people who have no idea what they're doing."

Ben: "Can I ask you one strategy question?"

Don: "Go for it."

Ben: "One of your students wrote that you helped him with pre-flop tendencies, especially that he should be raising ninety percent of pots that he enters and that he shouldn't be limping suited aces. Do you still think that's good advice?"

Don: "It's a good baseline. For newer players, always focus on the basics. In some lineups you can definitely limp ace-five suited under the gun. But I think that, for ninety percent of professional poker players, they should just fold it."

Ben: "As the game gets deeper, would playing ace-five become mandatory?"

Don: "No. A lot of players think that it is a mandatory call or raise, but I would fold ace-five suited under the gun at most tables. I'll give you another example. I was in the big blind with ace-six suited, a really nitty guy raised, three people called, and it's on me closing the action."

Ben: "I feel like 95% of people would call in that spot."

Don: "Yeah. And I think it's a trivial fold. It's not a very profitable spot."

Ben: "I know this is all situational, but what does your range look like under the gun?"

Don: "All pocket pairs. Ace-ten suited, Ace-ten offsuit."

Ben: "So Ace-ten offsuit is better than Ace-five suited?"

Don: "Definitely. In most lineups. In really nitty lineups, ace-five suited is better because you're not looking to get money in with top pair. But, in general, ace-ten will have top pair, top kicker way more often than ace-five. You beat people playing king-ten, queen-ten, jack-ten, ten-nine—all these are hands that every single recreational players plays one hundred percent of the time. If you play ace-five you're not going to be beating king-five, queen-five, jack-five."

Ben: "One of the things that I appreciated early on in your Two Plus Two thread was the lightness of

your posts. When you first started playing, your happiness and excitement is so palpable. Three years later, has anything changed? Are you as happy as you were?"

Don: "I think I got a little bit jaded somewhere down the line. I don't know why. I wish I could go back to the way it was before. I still look forward to playing poker. I look forward to going to the casino. But I'm still a bit jaded, I guess."

Ben: "What place do you see poker having in your life moving forward?"

Don: "I'll probably still play an absolute minimum of ten hours a week, no matter what I do."

Ben: "Would that be out of enjoyment or obligation?"

Don: "Mostly enjoyment. I remember in LA, some of the longer-time grinders like Bart and Limon told me that I was playing too much poker and that I should take a break. They had seen other guys burn out hundreds of times. But for me, if I take a day off, the next day I'm like, „Man, I really want to go play poker!“"

Ben: "So it's still there. That desire."

Don: "Yeah. It's still there."