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When a pastime turns problem

By **Tan Vinh**
Seattle Times staff reporter

He pulled all-nighters during freshman year at his dorm — hosting poker parties.

He lost thousands of dollars at casinos, even draining a savings account he'd established for his now-2-year-old son.

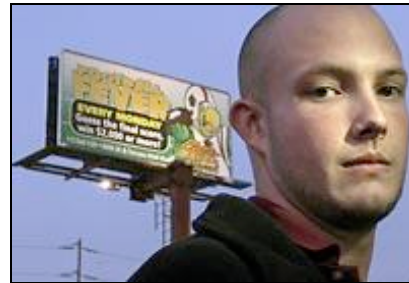
And despite going to Gamblers Anonymous meetings and promising his father he'd never gamble again, 20-year-old Dustin Waggoner of Puyallup drove to Chips Casino in Lakewood, Pierce County, one night last month and blew the entire \$1,500 in his checking account.

"When I see the casino billboards, I think I can make a month's paycheck in one night," said Waggoner, who started gambling heavily two years ago. "And the only way I leave a casino is when I can't get any more money out of the ATM, or the casino closes."

Waggoner says he has stopped gambling again — for good this time, he hopes — though he still sees the lure of gambling all around him: online, on casino billboards and in televised poker tournaments with winnings of up to \$1 million.

Gambling officials, researchers and treatment providers say that, for the vast majority of people who go to casinos and cardrooms or engage in other forms of gaming, gambling is but another form of entertainment. But as the state's legalized gambling industry has grown — with net receipts more than tripling in the past 10 years to nearly \$1.7 billion — so, too, have concerns about problem gambling.

The state has identified three groups as being particularly vulnerable — older people; Asians and members of other ethnic groups for whom gambling has deep cultural roots; and young people, who tend to be impulsive.



enlarge BETTY UDESEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Dustin Waggoner, who started gambling in high school, says his problem gaming is now behind him. Billboards near his workplace on South Tacoma Way are a constant reminder of the nearby casinos, including Chips Casino, where he was a regular.

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In high schools around the area, counselors and intervention specialists more accustomed to seeing teens who drink too much, use drugs or suffer from anorexia say they're hearing more this year about problem gamblers — from friends and parents concerned that a student is playing too much poker with friends or on the Internet.

"Teen gambling is huge, huge. At the high schools it's unbelievable," said Bellevue therapist Margaret Ferris, an expert on teen gambling.

"I see it more on the Eastside because they have access to money. A lot of these kids have their own credit cards. It's not until they spend thousands of dollars that parents wonder, 'What is going on?'"

Many school counselors say the phenomenon is driven in part by the increasing visibility of gambling — especially the poker game Texas Hold 'Em. Toys R Us and KB Toys stores sell poker sets and other casino-related games. Many colleges host casino night as a social event for freshmen, and some poker tournaments offer college scholarships.

As a result, more young adults are gambling, and their addiction rate is higher than that of other age groups, several nationwide studies concluded. In September, the University of Pennsylvania found that nearly 13 percent of boys and young men between the ages of 14 and 22 gamble at cards at least once a week.

The nonprofit Washington State Council on Problem Gambling found that 8.4 percent of teens 13 to 18 have a gambling problem. The rate is likely much higher, many school counselors and therapists say, because the survey was completed in 1999, long before the Texas Hold 'Em craze.

An expert on youth gambling, Dan Romer of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center, warns that this fad is more dangerous than others because teens are more prone than adults to addiction. "They are more compulsive risk-takers," said Romer. "It's sensation-seeking, looking for thrills and kicks without thinking about the consequences."

Friday night bets

Christine Sogn, an intervention specialist who works with teens in the Lake Washington and Bellevue school districts, meets regularly with a 17-year-old high school senior who also sees a private therapist for his gambling addiction.

The teen has told Sogn that in the past two years, he has played poker with about 50 to 100 friends from several high schools, with pots that can reach up to \$700. He now plays a couple of nights a week with friends or online with a credit card, sometimes gambling until his first class starts, drawn in by an adrenaline rush he says he doesn't get from sports.

This past summer, after discovering that some casinos don't check IDs, he also started betting at casinos. He estimates that he has lost at least \$2,000 in allowance money and what he earned from odd jobs.

that a student's gambling has gone from pastime to problem.

Lying: Has the student lied about the extent of his gambling or gambling losses?

Significant losses: Are the gambling losses significant?

Falling grades: Is the student missing classes or falling behind at school because of gambling?

Obsession: Does the student spend all or most of his free time gambling?

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"Everyone in high school knows how to play Texas Hold 'Em, or they know someone who plays," said the student, who added that most kids aren't addicted to gambling like he is.

In a survey of more than 2,500 University of Washington undergraduates, about 62 percent said they bet on cards for money, according to a study co-authored by Clayton Neighbors, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. "I think we have yet to see the impact of this Texas Hold 'Em craze," said Neighbors.

Especially now that football season is over, Sogn said, poker is big on Friday nights. "I hear it all the time in the halls: 'We're going to play poker. Want to join us?' Kids play in the basement or the family rec room. Parents approve because the kids are in a safe environment. They are not out doing drugs or drinking."

Winning came easy

Waggoner said he started playing poker with classmates during his junior year at Tacoma Baptist Schools.

At 18, he enrolled at York College, a private liberal-arts school in Nebraska where, in his dorm, everyone seemed to be into Texas Hold 'Em. He organized some games, winning up to \$300 per night.

In the spring of 2004, after his girlfriend became pregnant, he quit college and returned home, moving in with his parents and delivering furniture to help support his infant son. One day he gambled \$50 on blackjack at Chips Casino in Lakewood and won \$1,900, the most cash he has ever held in his hands. It was easy, and it made him feel rich.

The next day, he called in sick to work and headed back to the casino, winning another \$700. On the third night he hit it big again, he said, winning \$2,000. "I was making a whole month's paycheck in a day."

After a shopping spree, he lost the remaining \$3,000 at blackjack. Unfazed, he figured he could turn \$50 into thousands another night. That's when he became a regular at the casino, rushing there on paydays and typically betting \$200 a hand.

When his cash ran out, he bet the money for his car payments. One night, he even withdrew the \$1,000 from an account he'd set up for his son and lost it all. Ashamed and distraught, "I thought about suicide. I was hurt. I knew I had lost everything that night."

Waggoner joined Gamblers Anonymous. But with a full-time job delivering furniture, a part-time job bagging groceries and a full load at Tacoma Community College, he said, he only had time for a few meetings. But he assured his parents his gambling days were over. Last month, though, he sat down at the blackjack table again — and proceeded to blow his entire bank account.

Fed up, his parents kicked him out of their house in Puyallup, and he moved in with a friend. He vowed he has learned his lesson. Still, he said, the temptations are all around him. "Even when I'm not looking for it, I see it."

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