

The Quiet American John Juanda

Regarded as the pro's pro by his peers, John Juanda is the epitome of class at the tables. Here he shares the secrets of his success with **Ben Wilson**.

Calm and collected at the tables, softly spoken John Juanda is a stark contrast to some of the louder, more outspoken players who litter the world of professional poker. You won't see the man they call 'the pro's pro' berate or deride his opponents at the tables. There are no Hellmuth or Matusow-style blow-ups – solid play and impeccable table manners are the cornerstone of John Juanda's game, as is a fearsome and calculating poker intellect that has seen him make over \$9 million in tournament earnings and win four WSOP bracelets over his 12-year career.

Marathon man

His most recent triumph is taking down the WSOPE main event for his largest career cash of \$1.5 million, beating Russian Stanislav Alekhin after a seven-and-a-half-hour heads-up battle at London's Empire casino.

The Full Tilt-sponsored professional was a successful long-distance runner in high school, so he is no stranger to going that extra mile. Since then he has graduated to running marathons at the felt – the gruelling 19-hour final table is the longest in WSOP history, proving he is as comfortable going the distance at the tables as he is the track.

"Well I've always been interested in games of chance, like poker or even sports betting. I guess anything where I'm able to compete in one way or another – any type of competition at all. When I was in high school I enjoyed competing

on the track; I was a runner. Then, after I came to the States I didn't run any more and some friends introduced me to poker and I thought 'Hey! This is a good venue to channel my competitive spirit'."

It was John's competitive nature that initially attracted him to the game, as well as the element of skill involved, and he first began playing seriously while studying finance at the University of Seattle.

"I am a very competitive person, so I would go to the casino and play games like blackjack, and then I found poker. So I decided to take \$100 out of my pocket and give it a try, and luckily I won first time. And then after that I just decided to play more poker because I could see it required more skill – or should I say the skilful players get more handsomely rewarded in poker."

It is this quiet confidence combined with razor-sharp focus, dedication and a deep understanding of the game that has seen him win so consistently.

“I like to be able to look at the other players. I like to stare them down when they move all-in

"Poker is just like everything else in life," confirms John. "There's no shortcut or secret formula for success. You have to work hard on your game. Like anything in life, you have to be dedicated, you have to work hard and try hard to improve. If you try harder than anybody else, chances are you're going to end up being better than most people."

Poker's Blofeld

But what about the man behind the mask, just what is it that makes him tick? "I think that the thing that gets me to keep playing and going to all of these tournaments is my competitive spirit. I just love to play and be able to prove, not to other people but to myself, that when I set my mind to it I can still do this. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that."

With his menacing stare, immaculately attired table presence and cool and calculating demeanour, Juanda exudes an almost Bond villain menace. He dislikes wearing sunglasses, because he prefers to stare down his opponents when they make big plays at him.

"When I play, I like to be able to look at the other players. I like to be able to stare them down when they move all-in or when they make big bets at me."

John explains that he is also a master of subterfuge as his cunning use of the iPod demonstrates. "I go to poker tournaments wearing my headphones, but most of the time I don't even have the music on [*chuckles*]. I'm just doing that so people don't try to get me engaged in conversation too much, because I find

► © Jesse Wild



“I just love to play poker and prove to myself that, when I set my mind to it, I can still do this



▼ John currently sits in ninth place in the tournament players' all-time money list

► it hard to talk and concentrate on the game at the same time – so I just use it as a distraction.”

This, however, is just his table persona. The respect he receives from his fellow pros is perhaps best explained by his consummate, controlled professionalism and the classy way he handles himself.

“I don’t want to mention any names, but you get some of the pros out there who are crazy and loud and rude, and often get out of line – you know?”

Despite the recognition of his peers, John flies under the radar of many players. With ninja-like stealth, he has been quietly dominating and crushing final tables before his opponents have even realised his fiendish master plan.

“Poker is such a complex game. If you are going to do well, then there are so many things and so many variables that you have to consider.”

“For example; how do you play differently against each player at your table? You have to plan on what you’re going to do if certain cards fall on the flop, turn or river.”

Goldfingers

So what advice would he offer to any budding poker pro lucky (or unlucky) enough to be at the final table with him? “Just fold when I raise,” chuckles John dryly. “But first you need to remember that everybody gets two cards in



▲ John is a member of team Full Tilt

Hold ‘Em, whether you sit down at the same table as me or other professionals. It’s not like the great players get more big pairs than everybody else. Everybody is on a level playing field.”

Do pay attention 007...

“Mostly you just need to pay attention and put a lot of thought into the game, then try to think of a way to take advantage of the situation. You couldn’t drop a pin at the table without players like Daniel Negreanu and myself noticing it, you know [laughs]? Basically, that’s what poker comes down to – how well you are able to take advantage of the situation.”

Another thing that works to John’s advantage is the close group of poker buddies that he has can talk strategy and tactics and discuss hands with.

“You get some pros out there who are crazy, loud and rude and often get out of line – you know?”

“I started playing poker around the same time as Phil Ivey, Daniel Negreanu and Allen Cunningham and we’ve been good friends almost since day one. And then Erik Seidel is also one of my best friends in poker. Playing at the same tables as them, they just push me to try harder and take my game to the next level, because they are such great players.

“I can’t just play a social game there; I have to bring my ‘A’ game along to do well against these guys.”

“I was just looking the other day, and between the five of us we have 26 World Series of Poker bracelets and almost \$50 million in career tournament earnings – and each one of us is in the top ten all-time money list. I’m very proud to be part of such an exclusive group of players, and to be able to call these people my good friends.”

Record breaker

Far from just getting by with a little help from his friends, John is enjoying a great deal of success; breaking two records at the WSOPE for longest heads-up and longest final table on route to taking down the main event title, as well as earning himself a cool \$2 million with a second-place finish at the EPT High Rollers Event, barely a week after his WSOPE win. However, the one thing that has eluded him so far is a WPT title.

“Another title that I really want to win is a World Poker Tour event. I’ve made quite a few final tables [chuckles]. I think I’ve finished everywhere from second to sixth place, but just haven’t been able to finish first. So in the near future, hopefully I’ll have the opportunity to win one. That would be great.”

With his re-discovered motivation and focus, this should only be a matter of time. While it’s true that there are a lot of good young players out there right now, the cream will always rise to the top, and as John has proved time and again, he is certainly worthy of his place within the highest levels of poker.