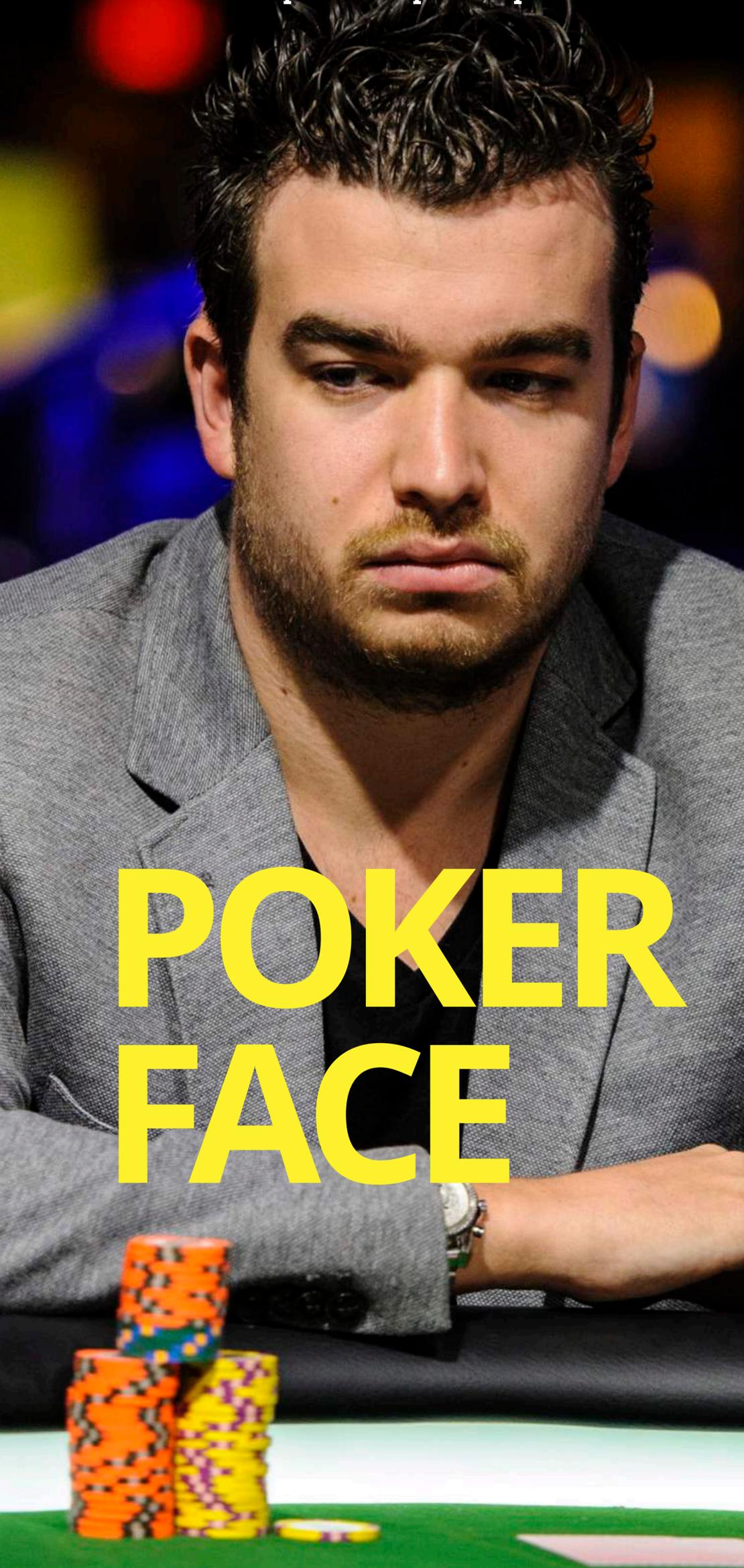


**Chris Moorman has achieved enormous success at the poker table, but what are the secrets to his game? Dr Stephen Simpson reports**



# POKER FACE

If variety is truly the spice of life then I must be one of the luckiest people alive. As an elite performance coach I never know what each day will bring. I have almost given up trying to organise a diary. My clients come from every walk of life, but one quality that they share is that they know what they want, and they want it now. They want to be the best they can be. During one single day I could be working with the CEO of a bank, a tour golfer, an actor, or a proud father dreading the speech that he will shortly deliver at his daughter's wedding. I could be in my office, but more likely travelling to a sports event, a film set or to a client's home. Or I could be working with poker legend Chris Moorman on the World Poker Tour.

Another reason that I am lucky is that the methods that I use for all these varied clients are the same, albeit it with some creative customisation. This article is about Chris Moorman, and attempts to identify what makes him so special, because some of his outstanding qualities might just rub off on you too – even if you will never play poker.

I have been surprised by how many people talk to me about poker, how many people watch it on TV, and how many people dream of being a poker star too. Is it the attraction of the money, the exotic travel, or perhaps dreaming of being a rebel just once in their otherwise very sensible life?

Moorman is far from being a rebel, and his background is conventional enough. Although from the age of eleven there were hints of what was to come. It was then that he found bridge, and was good enough to captain England. He was pretty good at pool too, captained his university team, winning the National University Championship. At university he also discovered that playing poker was a whole lot more fun than studying economics, and much more profitable too.

Moorman turns 30 in July, and has already won millions at the tables and online. Indeed, he is the first player to have broken the \$12m barrier in online events. Moorman has also finished in the top three in tournaments over 700 times. 'With nearly \$4m banked in live tournament cashes, Moorman has evolved into one of the most accomplished and feared pros in the world,' reported Poker Player.

Shortly after we started working together Moorman notched his first live event career title at the 2014 WPT LA Poker Classic, and pocketed a mouth-watering \$1,015,000 in winnings. It is difficult to quantify how much I helped Chris, but he feels that our work significantly increased his confidence and focus, especially when things did not go his way at the table.

I love coaching poker players, and one of the reasons is because there is a lot in poker that is counter-intuitive. One example is that you have to learn how to lose before you can win. Only 15 per cent of players win at events, so I asked Moorman what strategies he uses to deal with frequent 'failure'?

"Obviously I am trying to win the tournament when I buy in but I am realistic and know that this is going to be incredibly tough," he says. "As long as I feel like I played close to my A game I try not to get too caught up in the actual results unless I am losing for an extended period of time. Getting too emotionally involved with losses is one of the biggest weaknesses of the average player."

There are endless debates about the relative importance of luck and skill in poker. Both are important, but how a player deals with them is far more important. Moorman is pragmatic on this subject too, and believes

the game is 75 per cent skill and 25 per cent chance. "I have often won tournaments whilst not playing my best and conversely could easily play my A game and not cash in anything," he adds. "I heard a great quote once about this, I believe it was Doyle that said it. Over the course of one hand in poker 100 per cent of the outcome can be luck. Over the course of a year, luck can be 50 per cent. But over the course of a lifetime playing poker, luck should play .01 per cent part in the game."

So what skills might be important to be a champion? Mathematics? I was surprised by Moorman's response. "A great player doesn't have to be strong in mathematics but will require a basic knowledge in order to work out the odds of making their hand for example when drawing to a flush," he explains.

"A lot of the best players in the world are very strong at maths although there are also top tier players who rely very little on the maths aspect of the game."

Then what about having a great memory and card-counting skills? Not quite so simple, explains Moorman. Remembering a hand played years ago is a lot more important than one played five minutes ago. "A great player will normally have a good memory because a lot of poker is down to meta game which means you need to remember hands in detail that you have played versus particular opponents months or even years ago in order to make the optimal decision in the hand you are playing with them now."

I dig deeper to find pay dirt, and start to feel that I am getting closer to the secret. I raise a subject close to my heart. What about the importance of intuition in poker? "It helps and is extremely important," Moorman says. "Having strong intuition and a lot of experience to aid your decision making can often give you that extra 10 per cent that you need at the very top level of the game."

It is hardly surprising that the more experience and success a player has achieved the more they listen to and trust their gut instincts. It is however far more difficult during a long losing run which robs even the best players of their confidence.

One of the ways that Moorman uses his intuition skills is in reading another player's 'tells'. Players make great efforts to conceal their emotions, so as not to give the other players any clue as to how good their hand is, or not. The bluff in poker is one of the key strategies to master. Despite their best efforts every player has a 'tell'. It could be a nervous tic, or even the pupils of their eyes dilating slightly. Spot a 'tell' and you are in the driving seat.

"I try to focus on my opponents' mannerisms when they are involved in big pots and guess in my head whether I think they are strong or weak," he explains.

'Guess in my head'? This is intuition. It is a feeling. For Moorman it is in his head. For others it could be in their guts, their heart, the hairs on the back of their neck or goosebumps. The best players tend to peak in their late twenties, although this could change in the future. Younger players have won early in their career, but are the exception. As in any job, there are no short cuts to success. Just hours and hours of deep practice and analysis. Long periods of intense concentration and focus require immense mental and physical strength. Moorman estimates that he plays poker about 11 hours each day, so how does he cope with these pressures?

"When playing online it can be quite hectic because you only get a five minute break every hour, which makes it hard to prepare food or do much else," says Moorman. "For me I try to be prepared with food that's handy and easy to make on break. Before I start my day grinding I like to try to get some exercise and fresh air as I know it will be a long day sitting down inside in front of a computer screen. At the end of a session I like to wind down by watching TV and having a nice meal."

There are two things that really upset me as a coach working in the field of elite performance. The first is when players take performance-enhancing drugs. If we cannot trust a new world record then much of the joy of sport is destroyed. The second thing that upsets me is when I discover that computers can beat the best players or athletes in the world. So I was greatly reassured when Moorman guaranteed to me that while a computer can beat the best in the world in a poker cash game with limits, this would never happen in no limit tournaments. There are too many variables for a computer to process, and the most important of them are human factors.

Scientists have barely discovered the mechanisms of even the most simple thought processes that control our emotions and decision-making. Even less is known about intuition in poker, and when scientists start talking about quantum and string theory most players look nervously for the nearest exit.

So it is abundantly clear that life as a professional poker player is a tough one. Long unsocial hours, long losing runs and lots of stress. So what is the attraction? Fame and fortune are obvious motivations, as is the exotic travel on tour with fun-loving friends. What else drives the players to this sport to

the exclusion of most other activities? Could it be that they are obsessed by playing poker, or even addicted to it? Moorman knows this to be true, and offers some extremely valuable cautionary words.

"Yes, poker can be very addictive," he says, "but you have to realise that it is just a game and not let it take over your life. If you are playing online you can set weekly or daily deposit limits and it is wise to practise good bankroll management so that you don't end up losing money you can't afford."

If this does not put you off then you would also be wise to study the best book on poker you can find before visiting the tables. Guess what? The current best-seller is Moorman's Book of Poker: Improve Your Poker Game with Moorman, the most successful online poker player in history.

I ask Moorman what motivated him to write his book? "To give something back to the community and to challenge myself to do something outside of my normal comfort zone. It is a hand history review of a semi pro player and is aimed at up-and-coming players."

Was he worried about giving away too many of his secrets? Clearly not. "Not really, as poker is very situational and a lot of what I do is based on my individual reads on opponents." So we are back to the tantalising subjects of reads, tells and intuition again. Perhaps you should also consider finding a good book on how to develop your mind skills too.

If you are serious about making it to the top in one of the most challenging arenas in the world you might also like to join the ever-increasing number of players who sign up for mind coaching as well as technical coaching. You will need a lot of luck to get to the top in poker, and those who learn to uncap the awesome hidden potential of their mind find ways to make their own luck. Even a little can go a long way, and not just in poker either. So in whatever you do, and wherever you do it, I wish you good luck!

**Dr Stephen Simpson is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, and Elite Performance and Confidence Expert. He regularly appears on TV and radio, and his clients include leading names from the diverse worlds of sport, business, and the entertainment industries, including professional poker. Visit [drstephensimpson.com](http://drstephensimpson.com)**