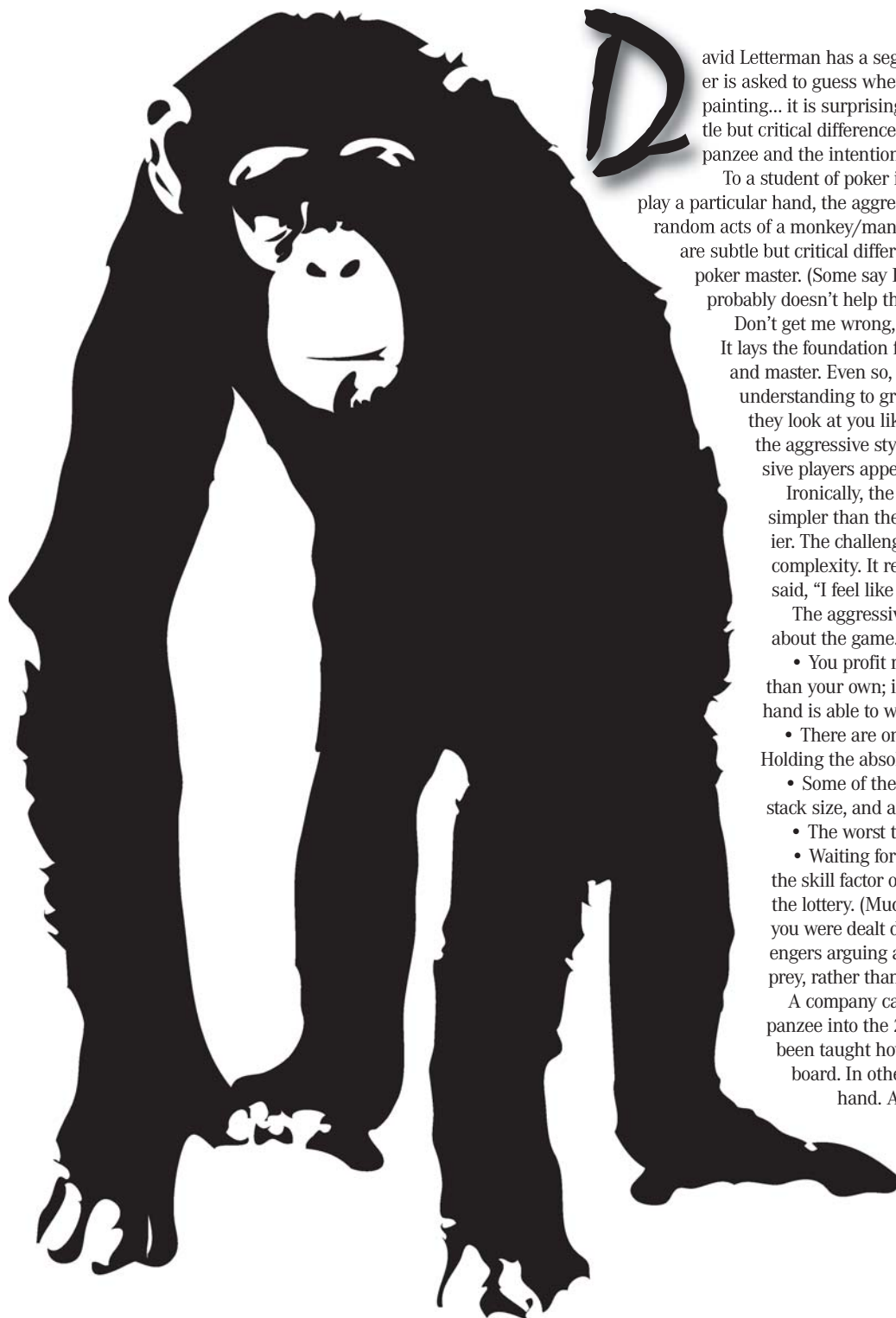


The Amateur's Mind

Monkey or Artist?

BY MICHAEL ROME



D avid Letterman has a segment called “Monkey or Artist?” The viewer is asked to guess whether a monkey or artist created an abstract painting... it is surprisingly difficult. The joke is based on the subtle but critical difference between the random strokes of a chimpanzee and the intentional bending of rules by an artist.

To a student of poker involved in online debates about how to play a particular hand, the aggressive style of some pros may seem like the random acts of a monkey/maniac. This is only appearance. In fact, there are subtle but critical differences between the poker maniac and the poker master. (Some say I lean towards the monkey/maniac ... it probably doesn't help that my screen name is ChimpLeader.)

Don't get me wrong, the analytical level of poker is important. It lays the foundation for the later distinction between maniac and master. Even so, it is difficult for those at one level of understanding to grasp the next evolutionary leap. If you try, they look at you like a dog watching a card trick. Critics of the aggressive style don't seem to notice how often aggressive players appear at the final table.

Ironically, the highest form of NL tournament play is simpler than the analytical level, but for many it is not easier. The challenge has more to do with psychology than complexity. It reminds me of the East Indian avatar who said, “I feel like I am selling water next to the river.”

The aggressive approach recognizes some basic facts about the game.

- You profit more from playing your opponent's cards than your own; i.e., determining how often your opponent's hand is able to withstand a large raise.
- There are only two guaranteed ways to win a hand: Holding the absolute nuts or getting your opponent to fold.
- Some of the most powerful tools are position, chip stack size, and a read on your opponent.
- The worst thing you can become is predictable.
- Waiting for the right cards at the right time minimizes the skill factor of the game. You might as well be playing the lottery. (Much of the extended analysis presupposes you were dealt decent cards to start with. It's like scavengers arguing about the best way to happen upon dead prey, rather than about going out and hunting it.)

A company called Pokershare tried to enter a chimpanzee into the 2006 WSOP championship event. He had been taught how to recognize his cards and those on the board. In other words, he relied only on playing his own hand. Although it was a step above randomness, somehow it was appropriate as the skill of the monkey.

Michael Rome is co-founder of the Amateur Poker Tour, and can be found at www.amateurpoker-tour.info ■