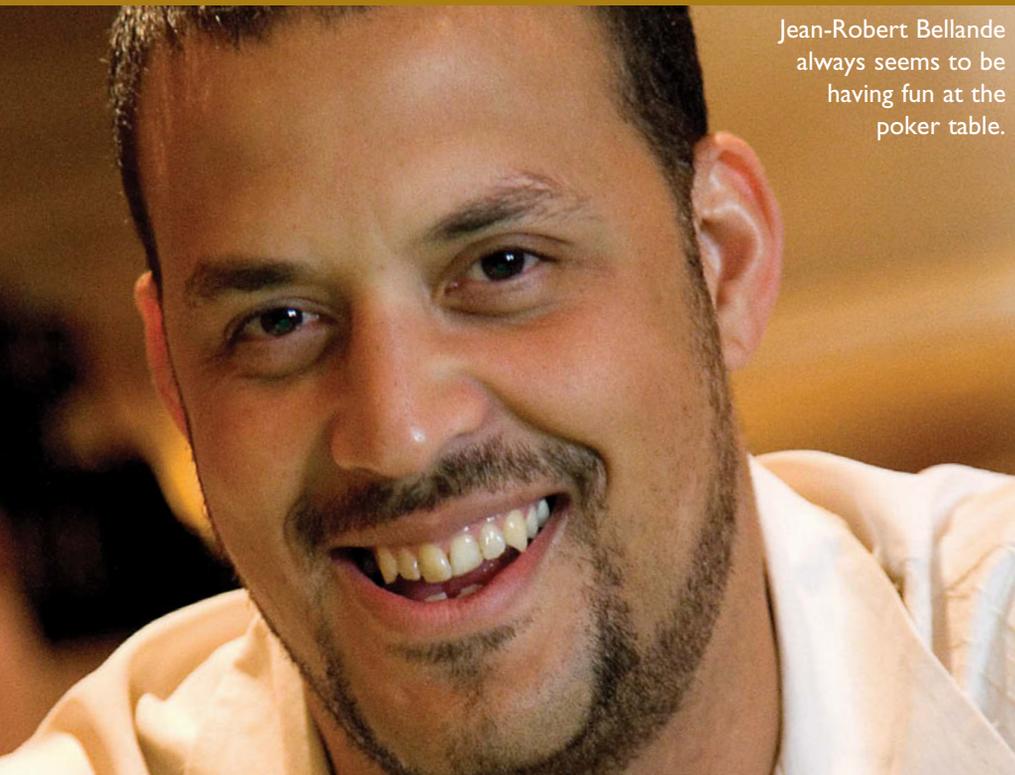


Bob Bellande Gives a Lesson In Psychology



Jean-Robert Bellande always seems to be having fun at the poker table.

Pavlov Would Be Proud Of This Tilt-Inducer

By Aaron B. Rochlen, Ph.D.

LAST TIME I CHECKED, my lifetime poker winnings still lag considerably behind my newspaper delivery earnings. That's not good news for my poker bottom line. I "retired" from that job at age 12 and

made 10 cents a toss.

As I mentioned in my first column, I have yet to win any *major* poker tournaments. Not yet, anyway. So I get it. **Poker Pro** magazine has no interest in my advice on heads-up strategies or how to three-bet under the gun.

But they *do* want me to write about



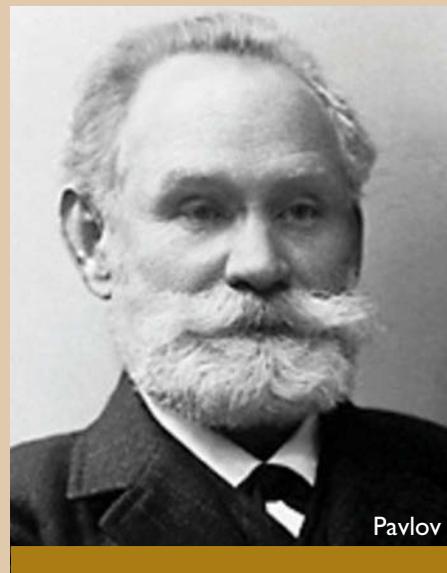
Pavlov's dog

how people can learn about themselves through the game, poker stories, and scenarios. They like the angle, see the need. Arguably, my self-deprecating writing style and ease in discussing poker missteps may add to the intrigue. But realistically, my readers will tune in for the poker life/parallels and the psychology. I'm good with that plan. And I have plenty of ammunition.

TILT-INDUCING PLAYER

But every now and then, a well-known poker player makes my job easy. He does the work, I do the writing. Such is the case during the most recent World Series Main Event. Enter the often-broke Jean-Robert Bellande of Vegas High-Stakes cash-game fame.

I guess the jury is still out on Bellande. Like many strong personalities, you could put him in the "love him or hate



Pavlov

him” category. Some find his play mediocre, his table antics painful. Others see him as a solid player, with a particular gift at setting others on tilt. Unquestionably, he has made some impressive runs in some big tournaments.

“Survivor” appearance aside, I have no problem with the guy. For sure, I’d love to play against him. Better yet, I’d love to hit the Vegas bar scene with him as my tour guide! I also like that he genuinely seems to be having fun while playing. I like his random across-the-table fist bumps. So many players seem to be having a miserable time while they play, but not Bob.

Finally, I’m giving him an A+ in psychology. And JRB has never been in my class or visited during office hours.

Why? In the midst of a deep run in the 2011 Main Event, JRB gave an impressive and timely psychology lesson. He tried to teach his opponents the basics of a set of psych experiments led by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov. The problem was nobody knew what the hell he was talking about.

These experiments, known as the “Pavlov’s Dog Studies,” are infamous in psychology. Clearly, there were no psych majors at Bellande’s table. But anyone (myself included) who digs psychology and poker was loving his chatter.

THE SCENE

The scenario? Bob had just reraised someone off a hand with a bluff or semi-bluff. I’m not sure which, but I AM sure of this: He didn’t have much, was praying for a fold, and got one. Immediately after his opponent’s muck, he let out a convincing: “*Good laydown. Smart fold.*”

After some of the players noted how often he seemed to say this, the psych lesson emerged. He asked if anyone knew about the “Pavlov’s dog” research. It was obvious they didn’t, so he gave the Cliff notes. And I can tell you with confidence that he was right on target.

Briefly, in these experiments, dogs were fed a tasty meal after the ringing of a bell. After a while they would start salivating every time they heard the bell, whether there was any food around or not. They were trained to salivate on cue.

The key point? You can easily condition dogs or people to do what you want

– as long as the right reinforcement is applied. Of course, the situation differs with dogs looking to chow down and people angling for your money, but the approach is similar: Connect the stimuli (“ring ring” or “good fold”) with your hoped for outcome (salivation or a mucked hand). If you can associate the desired outcome to a reward (food or praise), you just might benefit.

Also, in general, praise isn’t a bad way to reward people – in poker or life. It works. And whether the praise is authentic or unwarranted is often irrelevant. In

“bad guy” – the player they can’t wait to knock out. Second, on your next big bluff, they may think back on the last time you made a similar bet. They may feel good about the correct read they made last time, and follow suit.

Of course, this doesn’t ALWAYS work. No strategy in poker is bulletproof. And in the Pavlov experiments, if the dogs didn’t occasionally get fed, they stopped salivating to the bell.

But it’s not a horrible approach to have in your poker bag of tricks. JRB knows that – with or without the psy-



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poker, making others at the table think they are reading you effectively (whether true or not) might help your game.

Bellande’s Poker Pavlov lesson was clear. If you occasionally show your opponents a big hand followed by a reinforcing “*good laydown, well played*” you are sending several messages and results. The first message is, “*You play me really well.*” The second message is, “*Don’t call my next big bet.*”

The potential outcomes may protect or help build your stack. Your opponents may feel good about their play and reads. This could keep you away from being the

chology degree. Now, so do you.

And if it doesn’t work, try delivering newspapers.

Just look out for the salivating dogs.♠

Aaron Rochlen, Ph.D., is a Licensed Psychologist and Associate Professor in Counseling Psychology at the University of Texas. When not at work, in Vegas, or discovering new poker/life parallels, he spends time with his wife and two young children.