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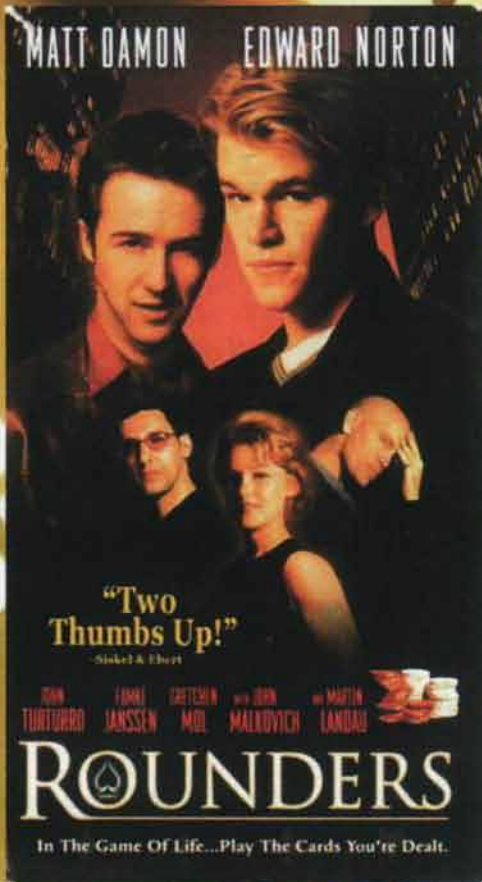


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'ROUNDERS' REVISITED: *Vaireeeeeee Agkgresseeeve!*

By Harvey Roy Greenberg

Psychiatrist Discusses The One Poker Movie That Got It Right



There are movie lines that stick in your head like Crazy Glue:

"I made him an offer he couldn't refuse."

"I coulda been a contender..."

"You can't HANDLE the truth!"

I'VE FOUND that many poker players love movies as much as I do, and are exceptionally well informed about films present and past. In virtually every game I've played in more than 40 years, someone is sure to come up with a great movie line like the ones above.

However, it's rare around the felt to hear a line from a "pure" poker movie like *The Cincinnati Kid*, or from a poker scene in another genre. Memorable poker quotes don't exist, with one notable exception. In *My Little Chickadee's* Old West saloon, Mae West asks W.C. Fields: "Is this a game of chance?"

"Not the way I play it..." replies Fields in his inimitable drawl.

There is, however, one quote that has cropped up regularly in table chatter over the last decade or so: "VEREEEEEE AGK-GRESSEEEVE!!!" This line is now up there with venerable chestnuts like:

"Think long, think wrong!"

"Read my book!" and

"Ah, YAH!!!"

It was first spoken by "Teddy KGB," a sinister Russian mobster cardroom owner, in the 1998 classic poker picture *Rounders*. Teddy (John Malkovich) is responding to a powerful raise from Mike McDermott, the movie's appealing young protagonist - played by Matt Damon - during their climactic \$30,000 heads-up NLH match.

Rounders took in 30 million dollars or so at the box office - chump change by Tinseltown standards - then quickly faded away (except in the minds of poker

LIKE A CLASSIC

HOMERIC EPIC,

'ROUNDERS' DROPS

US INTO THE MIDDLE

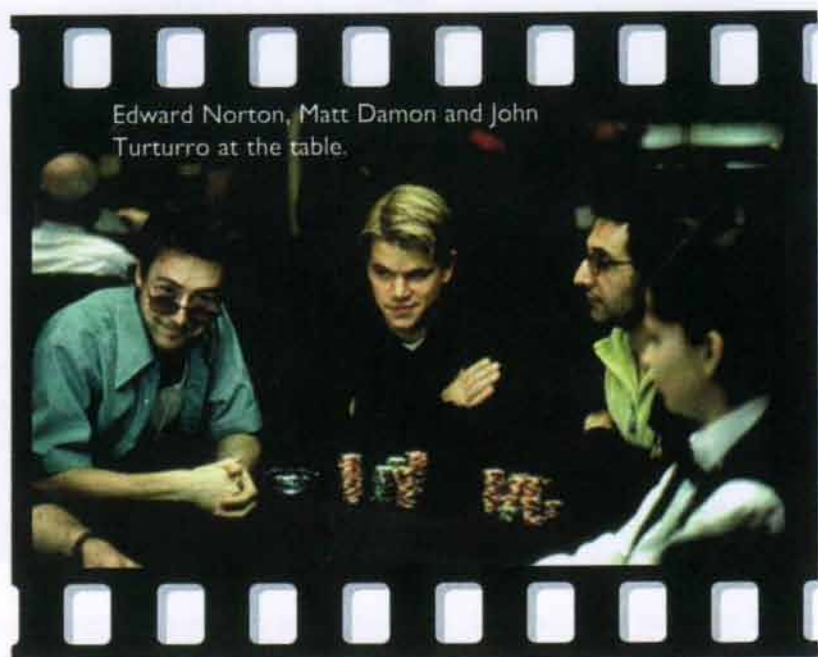
OF THE ACTION,

WITH NO IDEA OF

HOW WE OR THE

CHARACTERS HAVE

GOTTEN THERE



Edward Norton, Matt Damon and John Turturro at the table.

cognoscenti). Nevertheless, it remains my top poker movie, and a wonderful picture in its own right. *Rounders* pushes many personal buttons as a psychoanalyst, film critic, and a player with deeply affectionate memories of the New York poker scene of the 1970s to '90s. (Unfortunately, thanks to dubious clean-ups and the rise of Internet play, the current Manhattan poker landscape seems a bloodless shadow of its seedy glory days.)

It's been stated that all sorts of tales – myths, Homeric epics, fairy and folklore, novels, plays, movies – essentially boil down to “road stories.” Since antiquity, audiences have usually preferred their road warriors male (well, not always) and bigger than life (even though the hero may begin small). A good road story always poses the same questions: How are Ulysses, Don Quixote or Luke Skywalker going to get from here to there – wherever “there” may be. What is the hero searching for down the road? Who does he meet along the way? What does he learn about life and himself? Will he ever find his throne, or Holy Grail, or home (that's all E.T. wanted)? If he survives the journey and wins the prize, what then?

Compared to Ulysses or Conan the Barbarian, a would-be poker luminary

would seem too small-time scruffy to be rated a valiant road warrior. But on his own terms, in his unique world, Mike McDermott's search to find his true destiny is as vital and thrilling as Jason's search for the Golden Fleece.

Like a classic Homeric epic, *Rounders* drops us into the middle of the action, in Teddy KGB's high-rolling, low-class joint, with no idea of how we or the characters have gotten there. Mike slow-plays Teddy with a nines full of aces boat, only to be crushed by Teddy's aces full of nines. The stake Mike put together with years of careful play is gone in an instant, leaving his self-worth utterly savaged.

POKER IMMEDIACY

Unlike the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, *Rounders* doesn't go on to say much more about its characters. It's a cunning narrative ploy, keeping you even more involved with the hectic here-and-now of the poker world, and Mike's struggle to rejoin it.

What little we learn is that Mike comes from a working class background. He's gone through college and law school on scholarships and card skills. He has a law-student lover who stuck with him when he was in poker hospital before. After his devastating defeat, she makes their future hinge on his quitting the game forever. Several months later, Mike

is hitting the books, getting by on a “hump” delivery job, well and truly saluting the flag – until his oldest, best, and soon to be worst friend, Worm, is let out of jail.

Rounders' real villain is not Teddy KGB, but Worm. Their fathers' low-level jobs at a rich-kid prep school granted them free admission. They scammed their way through shameless collusion cheating and point-shaving until Worm got caught in their senior year. He refused to rat out Mike, and was expelled. Mike went on to scholastic triumphs. Worm went down the toilet, and has lived on the soiled margins of the wild side ever since, through petty crime and crooked poker.

Experts distinguish between compulsive and anti-social gamblers. A true compulsive gambler is fiercely honorable about his debts, and only descends into cheating and low-level criminal activity at the “end-stage” of the disease, when he's busted out, totally demoralized and de-moralized. But the antisocial gambler is grossly dishonorable across the board and does anything disreputable to win, from cheating to holding up the same game where he just lost a bundle.

Teddy KGB is a dangerous psychopath. He'll cap your kneecaps, or put you in the ground if you don't pay him off. Yet, intriguingly, what we see of his play is not only artful, but honest. Worm manages the neat trick of combining the sleazoid behavior of the chronic antisocial gambler (he's a perpetual scammer and cheater who doesn't pay his debts) with many symptoms of non-criminal compulsive gambling – an addiction to “action” for its own sake, the huge amount of time spent gambling or moving money and the erosion of healthy relationships outside of gambling. (One senses that Worm never had any reputable relationship except his camaraderie with Mike. As for love, he declares that “in the poker game of life, women are the rake.”)

MOVIE PSYCHOANALYSIS

Adolescents mature psychologically by identifying with people they idealize – relatives, friends, teachers, celebrities,

Teddy moves all his chips to the middle in the climactic game.



etc. During their journey into adulthood, they leave behind many inner psychological identifications and real-time relationships that no longer make sense, "internalizing" the best qualities of the people they admire, old and new.

Along these lines, Mike was drawn to Worm (Edward Norton) because he liked and shared many of the same assets and liabilities: major smarts, the outsider's cynical defiance of authority and conformity, ironic gallows humor and rogue behavior.

But Mike always owned a fundamental decency Worm lacked. One senses Mike was distancing himself from Worm even before Worm was jailed yet again. It's Mike's very decency and loyalty that makes him meet Worm at the prison gates, then help him pay down his previous debts back in town. In return, Worm quickly seduces him back to the rounder lifestyle. True to her promise, his lady leaves him.

Ever the scorpion, Worm has lied to Mike about how much he owes, and to whom – Teddy KGB. He runs up even more on Mike's ticket, and ruins every chance of escape from the deadly corner he's painted himself into. Mike finally is able to cut him loose, at the cost of assuming Worm's entire debt. He puts everything on the line, his life included, in the film's last contest with Teddy.

Mike is staked by an unlikely mentor, Professor Petrovsky, the eminent dean of his law school. For Petrovsky (Martin

Landau), Mike embodies his own identity crisis as a young rabbinical student. A descendent of renowned scholars, Petrovsky was already accounted a major talent when law, rather than God, called out to him. He commenced his legal studies, at the price of his family abandoning him. He gained the summit of his profession, but never saw them again. Recognizing the legitimacy of Mike's desire to become a poker titan due to his own painful experience, he tells him that law is as unfulfilling a fate for Mike as rabbinical scholarship was for him: "You don't chose your destiny, Michael," declares Petrovsky. "Your destiny chooses you."

ONE MOVIE THAT GOT IT RIGHT

I won't reveal the dramatic end of this great film for those who haven't seen it. Suffice it to say that Teddy and Mike's last battle is fine poker in its own right, and breathtakingly cinematic. Here and elsewhere, the camera becomes another character, fluidly taking us from an agonizing fall of cards at table level, to the poker locales in New York I knew intimately 20 years ago (or heard of), artfully re-created: the long defunct Mayfair and Diamond Clubs; the Taj's vast Atlantic City cardroom, where Manhattan sharks lay in wait for weekend rubes; a mobbed-up suburban game straight out of *The Sopranos*; a Hungarian social hall without Hungarians.

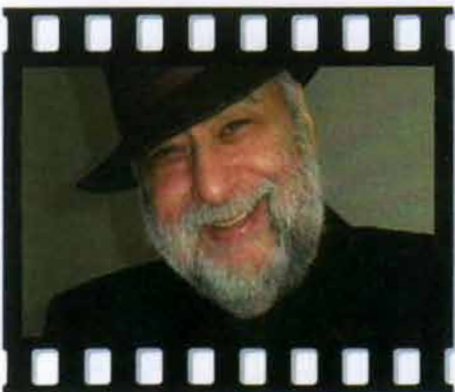
Rounders' cast of major and minor

poker people is unerringly skillful. With compelling artistry, they reincarnate the personalities – some long gone, some languishing in poker hospital – from my old days as psychoanalyst/writer by day, and poker zealot by night: Matt Damon's engaging Mike, Ed Norton's repulsive Worm, John Turturro's Joey Knish, Famke Janssen's bewitching cardroom hostess.

Some have found John Malkovich's Teddy KGB over the top, but I treasure his borscht-speak ("chick, chick, chick!!! Kidz gott alligator bludt...disz isz mye f... ..ink klobb, endt aeye veel splesh die podt venneffver aeye f.....ink vandt!").

And of course, "VAIRREEEEEEE AGK-GRESEEEVE!!!"

I especially respect *Rounders'* completely non-judgmental take on a world that non-players often find inexplicable and even corrupt. Director John Sahl communicates the profound integrity of Mike's passion, the absolute validity of his quest to become a master of the game – not merely for money, but for the affirmation of his core being. For these qualities alone, *Rounders* stands head and shoulders above every poker movie ever made. ♠



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