

'I'll Bet You a Million to One': Shooting the Bull With 'Amarillo Slim' Preston

By Kenneth L. Adams

There is nothing in the world like the *World Series of Poker*. I don't care how many *Super Bowl* games you attend, or *Wimbledon* or *Masters* tournaments if tennis or golf is your thing — you are not going to have a chance to shoot the breeze with a *Super Bowl* quarterback about how he reads defenses, or with Pete Sampras or Tiger Woods about the one that got away. At the *World Series of Poker*, on the other hand, all it takes to spend some quality time with the legends of poker is an interest in the game and a sympathetic ear.

At the 2000 *World Series of Poker*, I was fortunate enough to have a conversation with "Amarillo Slim" Preston and Noel Furlong. Slim, whose reputation as a proposition better is legendary, was testing out various propositions on other players. "What do you think the over-under line should be on the age of this year's *World Series* champion?" Slim said that Mike Sexton had proposed 42 as the number. Most of us thought there would be far more money bet on the over than the under. Only Furlong predicted that the younger players would be odds-on favorites. Slim then tried out 45, and various other numbers, and then moved on to other propositions: "What are the odds the championship will be won by a European player? How many Europeans will make it to the final table?" Like many professional gamblers, Slim sees the world in terms of odds — everything in the world that has not yet occurred offers the chance of estimating the likelihood that it will happen, and when. In Slim's case, each proposition offers an opportunity to book a wager and gamble on the outcome.

After several minutes of engaging banter along these lines, Slim posed the following proposition: "I'll lay you a million to one that you can't go broke on the first hand in four tournaments out of five, even if you push all your chips in without looking at your cards." He went on to explain that he was the laughingstock of the satellite room, having gone broke on the first hand in four of five satellite tournaments in a row.

In his trademark drawl, the lanky Texan went on to describe each situation. "The first one was pot-limit Omaha. On the first hand, I was dealt 4-5-6-7. The flop came 3-4-5. We got it all in on the flop. The turn came a jack, and the river paired the three. The very first hand, and I was walking."

Slim then played a satellite for the no-limit hold'em event. On the first hand, he was dealt pocket kings in late position. By the time it came around to him, everyone had limped in. He raised the pot and everyone folded except the player to his immediate right, who reraised all in. Slim called. The flop came K-6-3 with one heart. His opponent showed A♥ 10♥. When running hearts fell on the turn and river, Slim was walking again!

He described these hands without the usual self-pity that accompanies bad-beat stories. Instead, his laconic style gives the impression of a man who has seen it all, and who has come to accept the absurdity of expecting the world to deliver on its promises in any predictable sort of way. But the next satellite tested even Slim's existential patience.

"So now I'm playing in another pot-limit Omaha satellite. On the first hand, I look down and find Q-Q-10-10, double-suited in spades and diamonds. Three of us get 90 percent of our chips into the pot before the flop. The flop comes Q-J-3, with two clubs. The rest of the money goes in. You guessed it. A 9 comes on the turn, making straights for two people, and a club on the river makes a flush. I'm walkin' again!"

By now, according to Slim, he was the butt of every joker in the satellite room. When he sat down to play a satellite for the limit Omaha eight-or-better tournament, his friends teased him mercilessly. "Better throw away the first hand without even looking at it, Slim, or you'll bust out again." Paying them no heed, Slim looked at his hand and was pleased to find A-J-5-2, double-suited in clubs and spades. The flop came K-Q-10 offsuit. Six players put in five bets each before the turn, which brought a 7. Another king fell on the river, making four kings for the winning hand, and Slim was walking again after the first hand!

"You don't believe me, do you?" Slim smiled. "Ask anyone, the whole room was laughing about it. I sit down, they deal the cards, and I'm up walking, just like that. What's the odds of that happening four times out of five? You couldn't do it if you tried. I'll bet it's a million to one. If you just put all of your chips into the pot without even looking at your hand, you couldn't bust out on the first hand four times out of five. It just can't happen — but it happened to me. I'm afraid to walk out that door onto the street. The way things are going, I'm liable to get hit by a bus."

I must confess, I was so charmed by Slim's affable, self-deprecating yarn that I was sorely tempted to take him up on his proposition and bet him \$100 against \$100 million. But then I remembered the lesson that Sky Masterson learned from his father, as recounted in the classic musical *Guys and Dolls* — "Someday a guy is going to offer to bet you that he can make the jack of spades jump out of a brand-new deck and squirt cider in your ear. Son, you do not accept this bet — because as sure as you stand there, you are going to end up with an ear full of cider." So, I gave Slim a sympathetic smile and wished him luck in the championship event. "Sounds like you already used up all your bad luck for this month," I offered. Slim just smiled like a wise old-timer who knows better. "Just because it's a million to one doesn't mean it can't happen again." ♦