

Q&A

Matt Gallagher: filmmaker

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Matt Gallagher

Filmmaker

Age: 42

Born in Windsor, Ont., Matt Gallagher graduated from the University of Windsor and then spent the next few years working in television in Halifax, directing episodes of the teen-themed newsmagazine show *Street Cents*. In 2000, Gallagher made his first documentary, *Cass*, about his uncle's life in the Cass Corridor, a downtrodden area of Detroit. Since then he's worked as a "director for hire" on documentaries covering a wide range of subjects, from a First World War documentary to an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?* This summer, he'll be filming a Second World War documentary in Ireland.

Grinders screens as part of the Hot Docs film festival Saturday, May 7, at 9:30 pm at TIFF Bell Lightbox and Sunday, May 8, at 6:30 p.m .at the Fox Theatre.

How many underground poker clubs are there in Toronto?

It is staggering. And these games move around constantly. I've never done texting before I started playing poker, and now I get five or six texts a night telling me where the new game is. There's probably four games happening within five blocks of here [Bloor and Lansdowne]. There are hundreds of games in Toronto every night.

How do you discover them?

Once you get invited to one, it's like this private society where they see a new guy at the table and everybody wants you to come to their game, because it's lucrative for the people who run games. A friend of mine invited me to my first game. He had met somebody down at one of the casinos who ran an underground game. But once you get your foot in the door, you'd be surprised at how easy it is to go to a game. There are games 24/7 here.

Who are the people playing?

They're aged 15 to 90. They're from of all cultures. Some games in Greektown will have a different makeup than games in Chinatown. Games that are out on the 400 will be different than the games in Scarborough. They come from all different walks. Some are guys who have day jobs but most are not – they're doing it for a living.

A lot of people might imagine underground poker clubs as seedy little dens, but many of the clubs in your film seem surprisingly high end, with cushy leather chairs, wait staff in formal attire and big screen TVs.

Most of the illegal clubs I play at, there's no smoking, there's no drinking. They don't want people there who are drunk and causing fights. They want people drinking coffee, playing poker all night and the next day. It's a buyer's market as far as poker clubs go. Most of the time you go to these places and they feed you dinner; some will offer you gas money if it's way out in Scarborough. They really want you to go to their clubs.

Was it hard to convince these clubs and players to let you film them?

The first game I went to before I even had the idea of making a documentary, they asked me if I was a cop. I didn't want to do a documentary that was a hidden-camera exposé of this group of people. I wanted to do a documentary that was more about the character portrait, of who these people are and why they do it. But getting permission to get the camera into the club was very difficult.

How long did you gamble for?

Two years. For two years I was going three, four, five nights a week.

How did you do?

I think I did okay. I still own my house and paid all the bills. At the end of two years, it just became tedious. It was really monotonous. I used to work on the assembly line at Chrysler where you do the same job over and over again, and it began to have that flavour to it.

When did you realize that a documentary could be made on the life of grinders [semi-professional poker players] in Toronto?

From the point I started playing poker and began realizing I could make a living at this, there was this point where I looked around me and I was looking at this really interesting sub-culture of people out there who were like me, who for one reason or another had decided that the workday world wasn't for them or were forced to play poker for a living. At about the two- or three-month mark of playing cards underground, I had this idea of doing a documentary on it.

Did you ever get a sense of how much underground poker clubs in Toronto are on the police's radar?

I think, for the most part, the cops turn a blind eye. Maybe they have more important things to do. I know it's dangerous. Three of the clubs I've played at have been robbed by men with guns and masks. Fortunately I wasn't there when it happened. I think that the cops care when somebody gets hurt or something like that, but if it's a quiet game I don't think anyone cares too much.

Your movie delves in to some very personal matters that you and your wife were going through in trying to have another child. Did the two of you struggle over whether or not to include that?

The doctors that we were talking to were always talking to us in terms of odds and probability, and my ears perked up. When doctors would tell us that our chances are 50/50, I'm thinking that's like having ace-king against a pair of sevens. We thought that we should put this in the story. It's the idea of risk and what we're all willing to risk and how much chance we take in life.

Are you ever tempted to drop in on a game?

I drop in on games that I consider to be lucrative. I'm very choosy about which games I play now. Lately I've been playing at Fallsview Casino on weekends because there's a lot of tourists and it's a really easy game for me. When you play at the grinder clubs, the players are really, really solid. They're not drinking and they're not there to have fun. They're there to make a living.