

# Probing Toronto's poker underground

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Filmmaker Matt Gallagher (centre) is shown in a scene from the documentary *Grinders*, at the Hot Docs festival.

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Poker is such an easy game, until it becomes the only way to put food on the table.

From that point on, paying the bills on the turn of a card is the most stressful and torturous of occupations, nothing like the lives of high-rolling TV poker players or this week's million-dollar tournament champ.

It's a world that filmmaker Matt Gallagher dabbled in when he was out of work, and later parlayed into *Grinders*, a documentary screening tonight at the Hot Docs festival.

The cards ran well for Gallagher after he started playing poker a few years ago, enough that he thought he could earn a living at it, at least until his fortunes in the film business improved.

He eventually recognized the false promise of poker when the cards turned on him. Instead of being devoured by the game, he made a film about it.

Gallagher takes his audience inside Toronto's underground poker clubs and introduces them to three "grinders" who earn their living from cards, two as players and one as the operator of a club.

Both players are convinced their poker skills are so formidable that it is the only way to make a living, without realizing they are prisoners of their obsession.

One tries to escape the numbing grind of never-ending poker by talking his way onto a reality TV poker show, while Gallagher follows the other to Las Vegas, where he hovers on the fringes of major tournaments.

For most people, poker is either a game played with friends at a kitchen table or by professionals on television. They know nothing of the vast landscape in between, where the grinders eke out a living.

For every guy in sunglasses and a hoodie who takes down a \$40,000 pot on *Poker After Dark*, there are a thousand people praying that the chump who called their \$300 all-in bet doesn't draw out on them.

Their workplace is the underground club or casino card room, which gets its cut of the action through the "rake," an amount taken from each pot before it is pushed to the winner.

Players who spend the most time in clubs also pay the most rake, making the game that much harder to beat. Some clubs operating higher-stakes games will rake anywhere from \$15 to \$50 from a good-sized pot.

A full-time player who averages 40 hours a week has to beat the game for upwards of \$40,000 over a year, including tips to card dealers, just to break even.

It's not all gravy for a club operator, as demonstrated by the guy Gallagher follows. He invested \$40,000 to set up his club, called Cincinnati Kid, only to have his landlord lock him out and demand an extra \$6,000 in rent.

One of the two players in the film is in his 20s and still lives at home with doting parents who smile and shrug about it, saying he'd make a good comedian if he wasn't so handy with the cards.

The other lives in a nice house and supports his family by endlessly playing poker on the internet and in live games; his comfortable digs and good car furthering the illusion that poker is legitimate employment.

They are the exception to the rule. The total net worth of a lot of grinders can be found in one of their front pockets, and is in play any time they sit down in a game.

If they drive at all, it is often a beat-up car they'd rather not be seen in, parked behind a rundown apartment building where they are months behind on the rent.

For anyone trying to grind a living out of smaller-stakes poker, the toughest opponent is lady luck. When the cards run hard, even the most skilled and patient players are run down like a dog in the street until they're broke.

It's why so many everyday players suddenly disappear from the poker scene. Mean cards and too much rake have a way of swallowing people.

You won't see that on TV, or in the *Grinders* documentary.

*Jack Lakey writes The Fixer column for The Star and has spent many years playing poker with grinders.*