

Monika: Today it is my pleasure and honour to interview Michelle Nastasis, the first known Transgender professional poker player from Florida, USA, and author of 'QdQh: Queen of Diamonds, Queen of Hearts: The Life and Journey of Michelle Nastasis, the First Known Transgender Professional Poker Player!' (2020). Hello Michelle!

Michelle: Hello Monika!

Monika: Could you say a few words about yourself?

Michelle: First, I really am a professional poker player. I've played in almost 5000 tournaments over the last 12+ years as a pro. My unofficial career earnings are just shy of \$2M USD.

Second, I am very much a fashionista at the table. I have over 400 dresses and over 1100 pairs of high heels.

Third, I am married to a wonder woman named Sue Rudisill-Nastasis. Sue has a daughter who requires a lot of support (autism).

Monika: Your book was published just a couple of months ago. What inspired you to write it?

Michelle: I felt as a visible and very out transgender woman, it was the appropriate time to put pen to paper and finish the story I started over 3 years ago.

Monika: Paul Newman used to say that money won is twice as sweet as money earned. Is it true?

Michelle: Absolutely. When you play in a poker tournament, the average person is going to make money in a tournament about 20% of the time. The average PROFESSIONAL will make money between 30 and 35% of the time. My cash rate in over 13 years and 3500+ tournaments is 32.67%. I have cashed 1257 times in 3512 tournaments as a pro) My unofficial tournament earnings are just \$13 shy of \$2M USD.

Terminology - cashing in a tournament means making money above your buying fee. Typically, the top 15-17% of the field makes money.

Monika: I have read somewhere that the most important part of poker is the ability to count cards. Do you agree?

Michelle: Not exactly. Yes, you "count cards" but not in the sense like blackjack (21). Knowing which cards will help your hand improve is vital. Two of the most important skills to have in poker are math skills and being able to determine the pot odds; stack-to-pot ratio; your "equity" or odds of winning.

The second most important skill is called range setting. This skill does involve "counting cards". It involves: your opponent's tendencies of starting hand selection, their betting patterns, and the community (or common cards facing up).

With these factors in mind, you can determine - mentally- what range of cards your opponent has. So, yes, you do count cards but in a different context.

Monika: How did you start playing poker?

Michelle: Around age 7 or so. My dad introduced me to the game. His platoon sergeants would come to our house on base every Friday night. My dad was the Senior Drill Instructor at Parris Island Marine Training Base in South Carolina. I first learned 7 card studs from him. I learned Texas Holdem from Phil Hellmuth's bok - "How to Play Poker like the pros" and from watching hundreds of hours of video from The World Poker Tour

In 2014, I got the break of a lifetime. A poker pro named Terry Ring had seen me play. He said I had a ton of talent but had no clue how to use it. He offered to be my teacher/coach. He was my coach until his unexpected passing in March 2016. I am now coached by one of the top teachers in the game, Alec Torelli.

Monika: We all pay the highest price for the fulfillment of our dreams to be ourselves. As a result, we lose our families, friends, jobs, and social positions. Did you pay such a high price as well? What was the hardest thing about your coming out?

Michelle: Yes. My mom, dad and younger brother all effectively disowned me. I got extremely lucky in the fact that my 1st wife was a nurse and totally understood my diagnosis of gender dysphoria. She told my sons, who were 13 and 15 at the time in a language they could understand what was going to happen.

My mom, dad and brother have not spoken to me in over 17 years.

Professionally, I still face the bigotry associated with President Trump. I have heard comments like: "the clown show has arrived." "Tranny faggot." "Oh look, it's a guy in a dress."

I use those comments as motivation. My response is to be quiet. My personality is summed up by my nickname - The Ice Princess. It comes from the way I play. Ice cold. Zero emotions and the cold heart of an absolute assassin.

Monika: Are you satisfied with the effects of the hormone treatment?

Michelle: Absolutely yes. Hormones, supplements and Mother Nature conspired to give me a great gift - A 48F chest.

I use that gift at the poker table. I call it The Weapons of Male Distraction.

They are: being tall (5'11" in flats and over 6'3" in heels), being voluptuous (48F), being blonde (waist length), and long legs wearing a short dress and high heels.

Monika: We are said to be prisoners of passing or non-passing syndrome. Although cosmetic surgeries help to overcome it, we will always be judged accordingly. How can we cope with this?

Michelle: This is where having a great support system around you is absolutely critical.

Monika: Are there any transgender role models that you follow or followed?

Michelle: Yes. Two in particular: Jazz Jennings and Laverne Cox.

Monika: Do you remember the first time when you saw a transgender woman on TV or met anyone transgender in person?

Michelle: Absolutely. It was on TV. It was the tennis match between Bobby Riggs and Dr. Renee Richards.

Monika: What do you think about the present situation of transgender women in your country?

Michelle: The last 4 years have been a giant step backwards under outgoing President Trump. On January 20, President Biden will restore a ton of those rights.

Monika: Do you like fashion? What kind of outfits do you usually wear? Any special fashion designs, colours or trends?

Michelle: Oh yes! I am known as a fashionista at the table. I have over 400 dresses in my collection as well as over 1200 pairs of high heels. My favorite colors: purple, red, black, white, Royal blue, gray.

Monika: What do you think about transgender beauty pageants?

Michelle: I love them!! In fact, I am a pageant winner myself. In 2013, I was crowned the First Miss Transz Fresno.

Monika: Could you tell me about the importance of love in your life?

Michelle: My wife, Suzanne Rudisill-Nastasis, is my biggest fan. She is also responsible for helping me with the maintenance of my health and wellness programs. Sue is my best friend as well.

Monika: What is your next step in the present time and where do you see yourself within the next 5-7 years?

Michelle: In about 6 weeks, I'm going to have breast augmentation.

Over the next 5 years, I plan on playing about 150-200 tournaments per year as well as developing my reputation as a teacher. As well as furthering my relationship with sponsors and brands I endorse.

Monika: What would you recommend to all transgender women that are afraid of transition?

Michelle: Don't be afraid of change. Transitioning is not easy. You have to remember that transitioning is the act of aligning your body and mind. Remember, society as a whole (especially in the US under The Trump Administration) is not real receptive to the Transgender community - yet. Hold your head up. Be proud. Celebrate your emergence. You're a beautiful butterfly.

Monika: My pen friend Gina Grahame wrote to me once that we should not limit our potential because of how we were born or by what we see other transsexuals and transgender people doing. Our dreams should not end on an operating table; that's where they begin. Do you agree with this?

Michelle: Absolutely! She hit it perfectly!!

Monika: Michelle, it was a pleasure to interview you. Thanks a lot!

Michelle: Thanks Monika! It was my pleasure.