



WOW FACTOR

"When you walk into the club we hope there's a 'wow factor'" says Simon. "Most cardrooms are oblong shaped. Even the Venetian, one of my favourite casinos, is still just a big square. Dusk Till Dawn is something different - it's a big theatre design across three levels. Down at the bottom we've got the TV table, and behind that we've got five tables. Stepping up to first level where there's another 15 tables, and then at the top tier there's 24 tables. If we have a festival, we start with the top tables and break our way down to the TV table."

SIMON 'ACES' TRUMPER

Rob Yong approached seasoned poker pro Simon 'Aces' Trumper at the 2005 World Series and said that he was thinking about opening a club. That December, he called him up with the news that a venue had been secured: was Simon still interested? He certainly was! Simon moved to Nottingham, and is now live poker director of Dusk Till Dawn.

MEMBERS-ONLY

"All players need to register online in advance" says Simon. "Membership is free, but if you want to play here you need to go to dtdpoker.com and join up. If you turn up and you're not a member you'll not get in. We're next to a big nightclub, and we're going to be open until 6am. What we don't want is people turving out of there at 2am and thinking that 20 guys can just pop over to the poker club. This is for poker players. To maintain the poker only environment we require that all our members have joined in advance."

I met with the Gaming Board inspector. The thought the premises were ideal

2005 - LOOKING FOR A VENUE

● **Sunday, 27 November:** I emailed Mike Wiseman, the local Gaming Commission inspector, to confirm a meeting for 13 December at the premises. I've met this guy once before, and at the moment he seems really positive about the club. I need to make sure he stays that way.

I've never really been too stressed out about getting the gaming licence, and I guess I'll find out shortly whether I've been a bit complacent in this area. You can't apply for a licence until you get the premises, so what the hell is a man supposed to do? Gamble!

● **29 November:** People have offered to invest their own money in the project, but I feel more comfortable risking my own cash in something volatile like this. Everyone in this venture needs to be passionate about poker, and be willing to put themselves out - to remain focused on getting the gaming licence while moving everything else in the right direction.

Not getting a gaming licence is simply not an option. I cannot allow this to happen or consider it not happening. We also need a name for the club. I quite like The Bubble.

● **30 November:** I need to pack for Vegas now, taking my camera to get plenty of photos for ideas for the club layout. We'll be offering an entirely different product from a normal casino, so we will not be a threat to local card rooms in the Midlands. We will not be catering for people who like to play blackjack and roulette, so I'm sure we can all exist together. (And none of the casinos will object to my gaming licence application, please!)

● **2 December:** I'm racking my brain for a name for the club. There have been plenty of suggestions but nothing except 'poker in the rear and liquor in the back' really bowls you over. [Surely 'liquor in the front and poker in the rear' - Ed]. It's annoying me now, and I keep sitting up all night writing down names.

● **10 December:** We finally received the sign-off for the premises yesterday. Hooray! At last! I always said that the toughest part was the right premises, and we have now achieved that.

These premises are absolutely perfect. It would be impossible for anyone to find us a better place in the future.

● **11 December:** Now we have the premises sorted, the next stage is to tackle the Gaming Board, who I am taking round the premises on Tuesday. I have sent the inspector an email before the meeting, so he is fully prepared for all of my questions.

● **12 December:** Things are moving on nicely now. I've had some positive feedback on the name 'From Dusk Till Dawn'. One person said he was concerned that it didn't flow off the tongue, and I explained that this was intentional. I wanted a name that would be different, and a bit quirky. It will catch on and stick in people's minds after a few months.

● **13 December:** I met with the Gaming Board inspector today. It was mostly good news, but not all great. He said he could see no reason why I will not get a licence. In fact, I asked him the odds, and he told me 100% for the Gaming Board consent, and although he could not speak for the Magistrates Court, he said he could see no reason why, and would be shocked if I got turned down.

He thought the premises were ideal for the purpose, and he thinks objections will be weak from other casinos. Because their main income is not derived from poker, they need to prove 'significant loss',

DUSK TILL DAWN



Nottingham's Dusk Till Dawn poker club is, at last, legit. Owner Rob Yong reviews the long battle with extracts from his diary, below, while Simon Trumper takes us on a tour of the venue

When businessman and poker player Rob Yong decided to open up his own cardroom, he decided to think big. Rather than operate on the fringes of the law in some small room above a bar, his cardroom would be the real deal - a 15,000 square foot venue on a prime Nottingham retail park, with 44 poker tables and - crucially - a bona-fide casino license.

But even with grand ambitions like these, Rob never guessed the project would run into stiff opposition from his rivals, whose delaying tactics would help to consume £3 million of Rob's money before a single hand had even been dealt.

Rob's two-year struggle to get Dusk Till Dawn off the ground was chronicled in an astonishingly frank diary that he kept for poker community BlondePoker.com. As Dusk Till Dawn prepares to open its doors for the first time, we present an edited extract that reveals what it took to get Europe's largest cardroom off the ground...

Rob Scott



BUILDING A DREAM

Simon reveals Rob's original idea was to open a cardroom with just seven or eight tables. "But we decided to think big, and ended up with this. A £1 million projected spend has turned into £3 million. I've played all over the world, and let me tell you there's nothing like this - anywhere."

alternative to what currently exists in the UK casinos. Also somewhere where I want to spend my time – there are selfish reasons for doing this as well, of course.

● **22 December:** We now have a full floor plan for the club. Nick emailed it to me this morning and it looks great, and utilises the floor space very well. I just need to send a copy to the owners of the building to get it officially authorised, but they have already told me that will be a formality. It's nice to work on something that you are genuinely enthusiastic about.

2006 - PIECING IT TOGETHER

● **12 January:** When I explained my plans to the bank manager, he was nodding at me politely, but I could tell he was thinking: "This isn't going to work. Poker is just a fad on TV."

His first comment after my detailed, enthusiastic rendition was: "So your worst case is losing the £1m on the refurb, and having a £250k per annum lease around your neck for 15 years. Okay, I'll set the bank accounts up, but don't expect any overdraft or loans for this project". Charming! No VIP membership for you, methinks.

● **13 January:** There are quite a few other things that I conveniently forgot to give proper consideration to before committing myself to the £3m, 15-year lease, such as not costing in the price of the poker

chips (50p each chip, and we need a load of them) or providing for any flooring in the gaming area. Never mind, my accountancy is bit rusty.

● **28 January:** I managed to get kicked out of the Broadway Casino this afternoon. I was having a meeting, and I think the manager overheard me talking about casino licences and a poker club, and he asked us to leave. I'm not sure if this means that I cannot play in their festival in two weeks time. Guess I'll find out if I try to get in!

I'm shelling out a lot of cash on wages and set-up costs, such as professional fees. By my reckoning, I've spent just over £125,000 up to this point.

● **15 February:** I showed Paul Zimmler round the premises. He was one of the first people to set up a card room in Spain, so it was definitely worth getting his opinion. Problem was, I forget my torch.

Basically, when you enter the premises you have 30 seconds to deactivate the alarm before security is called out. It's pitch black, so you need a torch to find the alarm console located at the other end of the building. I only had a lighter, so I had to wander round in the dark with the alarm going off. I've got a massive blister on my thumb from burning myself with the lighter.

It's a surreal feeling, standing in the middle of a 15,000 square foot building in total darkness with an alarm blaring and a voice announcing: "You have been detected as an intruder. Security are on the way. Please leave the premises".

● **18 February:** I sent the first payment for the gaming licence today. It's £8,500 just to get your application read by the powers that be – and, of course, it's non-refundable if you are unsuccessful. If you are granted the Certificate of Consent you then have to cough up £35,000 more to the local magistrates court to get their blessing. Double or triple that with legal fees, it's no wonder all the card clubs in the UK are unlicensed.

● **8 May:** Loads of people were buzzing about DTD in Blackpool. They talk about it like it's already open – although when the same plonker asked me "When is the club open?" that asked me four weeks ago in Luton, I had to grit my teeth and say: "It's a big job, you know".

It's nice that so many people are looking forward to it. But imagine if Nottingham Magistrates turn us down for the licence. How will I ever be able to show my face at any poker event, anywhere?

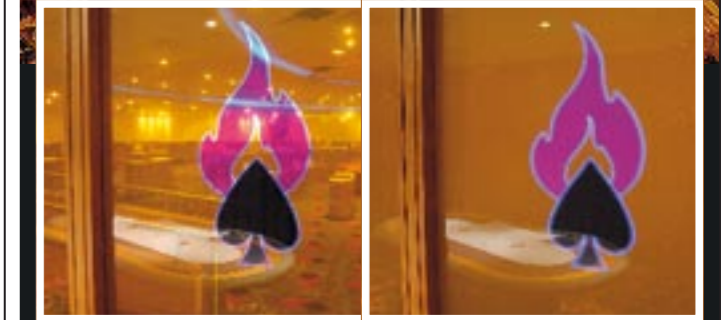
● **5 July:** We have finally been granted a 24-hour alcohol licence for the club. Even that was two weeks late coming, but it's another job I can cross off the admin list. I think we may be the only place in Nottingham with a 24-hour alcohol licence, though I'm not sure if this is a good or bad thing.

● **15 July:** Bob Meek and Fay Callaghan, the Gaming Board inspectors, arrived at my offices for an interview. For the first hour Bob gave me a very hard time. He is an ex-policeman, and he was firing questions left right and centre and making me feel like a naughty boy. I knew my answers were not good, and found myself getting annoyed – probably more with myself than them.

Bob asked me some questions on recent changes to the Gaming Act, which I did not answer very well. He also told me that the Gaming Board had decided that they were going to make no allowances for DTD, even though we're just a poker club. We would have to operate with all of the regulations of a normal casino, and there was going to be no compromise.

I could now feel myself getting very close to breaking point, and finally lost my self-control when he told me that the Gaming Board would even want a 'reserve' (casinos have to leave an amount of cash with the Gaming Board based on their maximum payouts on their gaming table).

Before I realised what I was doing, I closed my notepad dramatically and went on a disjointed rant. I raised my voice and told Bob what I thought of his interrogation tactics, how I didn't like his



ROB'S ROOM

"Here's Rob's room. Actually, not Rob's room - don't call it that! On the plans it was called that. We're going to have two types of membership - normal and VIP membership. This will be open to selective players. This was based on Bobby's Room in Bellagio where you have the high stakes games. We're hoping players like Hellmuth will come here, and we want to have corporate hospitality, if you like. But at the same time we want all players to have the opportunity to use it. It's not going to be elitist. One cool feature is that players can flick a switch and the glass frosts over so nobody can see in. It cost £15,000 for this technology. It's an amazing feature. But don't ask me how it works!"

NO TABLE GAMES!

"We have a full casino license. So we could, if we wanted to, put in roulette, blackjack, craps. But we chose not to. We want this to be a dedicated poker only venue. We're hoping that players will support us. There was £2 million spent creating this, and I think it's going to be an amazing place to play. It'll take a long time to be profitable. But Rob didn't build it for that reason."

CASH GAMES

"Not everybody plays tournaments. Some people just want to come and play cash games. Traditionally in casinos, if you want to play a cash game you've got to wait three hours. If there's a tournament on they're not going to provide a tournament until later on. Here, if we open a 6 and there's cash players that come here, I want to be able to offer a cash game straight away."

100% DEALER DEALT

"All our dealers are going to deal the same way. All our rulings will be exactly the same. All our floor managers will rule the same way. I've been to festivals and you can have the dealers dealing six or seven different ways. It's quite common. The way they deal the flop, the way they handle the chips, the way they control the table, the way they shuffle. There's so many variations. There will be no self-dealing at Dusk Till Dawn. It's protection for the players. If you have a self-deal tournament there are so many mistakes made, and it just slows the game down horribly because the dealers aren't professional."

TV FRIENDLY

"We've had two production companies come and look at this venue, and they've both said it's the most TV friendly venue in the country" says Simon. "Traditionally these companies use casinos, which are just not accessible. Can you imagine what the Vic's like? You've got to go up to the top floor and run all your cables down outside. We've had a permanent lighting grid installed costing £6,000, and an access point for outside broadcast. All the TV crew has to do is pull up in a truck outside."

→ which they cannot. The courts are unlikely to be sympathetic to any objections.

The not-so-good news is that I need to employ a 'compliance officer' to ensure all regulations are being carried out in the club, at extra cost. And he thinks there is a good chance that I will not be able to play poker in my own club, but he is open to discuss this further, as poker is not a 'house' game. And gaming hours are strict. If a comp does not finish by 6am, we cannot continue.

Overall, though, a good meeting. Another small step further in the bigger plan.

● **19 December:** I went to play the £50 re-buy in Nottingham tonight. The interest in the club is growing. I can't get to the bar at Gala without three or four people asking me how things are going with the club, and my inbox is constantly busy. It's nice that so many people are interested.

● **20 December:** I keep looking at the vote on the club name. Looks like nearly everyone thinks 'tilt' should be 'till' or 'til' and the 'from' should be dropped.

● **21 December:** Putting this amount of money and effort in is a bit daunting, but exciting. I know that the Nottingham (or East Midlands) market will not support the club alone, so the task will be to attract players from all over Europe and the UK, corporate customers, and extra business through the restaurant (such as players bringing their partners for a meal).

However, the priority will be a great place to play poker, and I believe we can create a better (but inevitably more expensive)

I closed my notepad and went on a disjointed rant. I felt sure I had blown it



BAR AREA AND RESTAURANT

"The bar and restaurant has seating for 220. There's also a chill area with sofas, far away from the cardroom where people can have coffee and relax completely. It's a nice touch to have somewhere if you just want to come and read a book."

OPENING HOURS

"Rob wants us to start on a four day week, with a restricted staff. When so much has been spent on this, it would be silly to open with a full team of half-trained dealers. We're not going to rush into it. I'd like to get to seven days. Rob's given me a target of a year. I'd like to do it in six months."

questions and how I am sick of jumping through hoops.

I then stood up and said: "I need a break from all this," and went outside for a cigarette to try and compose myself. I felt sure I had blown it. To my surprise, Bob joined me outside and tried to calm me down. He seemed genuinely concerned that I would withdraw my application. It suddenly dawned on me that the Gaming Board might need me almost as much as I needed them. The last thing they wanted was another Gutshot situation.

We returned to the meeting room, and the whole mood had changed. It was nice, friendly and constructive. Bob told me that my application was the most favourable that he was handling, that I had "gone too far to go back now", and he would support me as much he could. He even said he would be recommending to the powers that be that DTD be granted the licence.

So, ironically, it's looking very positive now on the gaming licence, despite my unprofessional tantrum. If someone who I employed had conducted an important meeting like I just have, I would be very unhappy with them.

● **18 July:** Good news: I got a phone call from the Gaming Board tonight. They are have finalised their report on Dusk Till Dawn, and are recommending that we are granted the gaming licence.

As a new applicant, I still have to attend one more interview at their head offices, but they told me that, subject to me not 'totally blowing' the interview, we would receive our gaming licence in mid-August. Bob Meek has never had a single one of his recommendations overturned in 20 years of service at the Gaming Board.

Following that, we also have to apply to the local council to attend a magistrates hearing in Nottingham – but again, they told me that this should also be a formality, based on the strength of our application.

● **8 October:** Hurray! We have now finally started building works on Dusk Till Dawn. It's seven months later than planned, but better late than never. I feel most of the planning for DTD is over – it is now about implementing what we have agreed.

● **22 November:** Following some tip-offs from legal and poker people, I am now pretty sure that the casinos are going to lobby

against DTD. I'm really disappointed that they may choose to do this. We're not doing casino games, so what will they lose? I genuinely wanted to work with the other casino groups to make sure we don't clash DTD events with theirs, but I guess I have not been living in the real world.

2007 - FIGHTING FOR A LICENSE

● **28 March:** The Magistrates Court hearing for Dusk Till Dawn is scheduled for 26 April, and unfortunately both Gala and Stanleys have lodged official objections. Even though we have the Certificate of Consent from the Gaming Board, these two casino companies have still elected to try and impede our attempts to open the club at the last minute.

● **19 April:** I am told by very reliable sources that [the casinos have] a bottomless pit of resources to prevent Dusk Till Dawn opening, and that will be used as necessary. Together with the significant costs of delays that we have already incurred, plus the additional delay costs caused the expected adjournment, these casinos must believe that they can smoke us out – i.e. we run out of money so can't afford to open. I am sure this is their tactic, as I just cannot believe that any rational person (or lawyer) would think that they could actually win this case.

● **26 April:** Because there are three objectors, the case could not be heard today and must be adjourned to a date in the future. Gala said they could not make another hearing till March 2008, and Stanley said that would suit them too. My legal council, Andrew Woods, objected to these dates, stressing that DTD was effectively financed by an individual rather than a large corporate, and in the end, the court and the legal reprehensive negotiated a date of the 24-27 September 2007.

To be honest, it's just one disaster after another. Realistically, let's say I get the local licence on 27 September and apply for the dealer licences in October, I cannot open this club legally till January 2008, a

The magistrates will see straight through them and all this will be history

total of 18 months delay, and at running costs of £75,000 per month on wages and premises. Clearly I am facing a serious problem. Where to now? The answer is I do not know.

To be legal DTD cannot open for 8/9 months (a further loss of £600,000), and to open illegally would mean that my Certificate of Consent would be revoked and I would be in the same boat as the Gutshot.

● **27 April:** My solicitor tells me that, after the hearing, he asked Gala if there was any chance of withdrawing their objection, as they are clearly co-ordinating things. I was a bit shocked that he said their brief actually told him: "Fuck off". Maybe that was meant with a bit of humour, who knows? But under the circumstances, I did not find it funny.

● **15 June:** Well, I have not had much joy persuading the three casinos to withdraw their objections. "It's just business," is the feedback I am getting, so I guess it's just a case of rolling up our sleeves and preparing for a fight. I keep getting whispers that the casinos believe they can get another adjournment, but my legal team are sure that this will not happen, as the courts have allocated a full four days for the hearing.

● **2 July:** Time is flying by. We are only 12 weeks away from the magistrates' hearing, and have collected most of our evidence, which we must submit 50 days before 24 September.

● **17 July:** The word on the street from the casinos (and one in particular) is that they have 'a million and one ways of delaying the DTD case'. I just can't see how this could be done, but this information is from a pretty reliable source.

I find it a little bit strange that one casino company is blatantly telling its customers that they will do anything they can to delay DTD "long enough that Rob Yong won't be able to afford to open it". Fair enough, say it to each other, but do they really think this sort of thing impresses their customers?

I keep going over everything in my head. Have I missed anything? What can they do to delay us further? Why are they so confident?

● **21 September:** Many Gala, Stanleys and LCI employees have told me that I have no chance, but in my opinion, all I am up against is a few hired hands in suits. The magistrates (who are just normal people like me and you) will see straight through them and their underhand tactics, and then this will all be ancient history. Dusk Till Dawn will open, and people will be saying "do you remember those donkey casinos who tried to stop us opening? What a bunch of jockeys they really were".

I mean, how annoying is it that, when the recently opened Stanleys Casino applied for their casino licence in Nottingham, they received no objections, yet I have all three groups against me? How can I or



TOILETS

"All our basins are done in cherrywood veneer. A lot of expensive finishings have been done in this place. Nothing's been done on the cheap."

I am told the casinos have a bottomless pit of resources to prevent us opening

anyone else have any respect for the way these casinos do their business?

● **23 September:** Well, it's finally arrived: D-Day. Almost. The Dusk Till Dawn case begins at 10am tomorrow, and the Magistrates Court has allowed four full days to reach a result. I predict that the result is announced either way by end of play Tuesday – or Wednesday at the very latest. This is based on the fact that I have decided to use only three witnesses (myself, Simon Trumper and Mike Wiseman) and the fact that the three objectors collectively submitted next to zero documentary evidence.

There was always a faint hope that one or all of the objectors would pull out at the last minute, but I never personally expected that. This case has become more than just a routine casino application versus objectors. Somehow it has developed into a bigger fight than that – for both sides. It's been a long journey. I'd like to say "full of highs and lows", but there have not been that many highs, except maybe looking at the building now that it is finished.

Looking back, I would never have got involved in DTD if I had known about the licensing problems and everything else that comes with this industry. I never launched DTD to make millions, it was just an idea that sort of ran away with itself, but I stubbornly refused to be pushed around by the casinos, so we are where we are.

Outside of poker, I run successful professional businesses, but my important decisions are always based on gut feel, not financial rewards. I liken a business to a community – there are good and bad in both, but if you are good, you will have respect, which makes you feared, unpredictable and dangerous to your adversaries.

I believe that, in the poker community, I am respected, and that the casinos are a necessary evil at the moment. I also believe that this will be demonstrated in court, and DTD will win resoundingly.

If we do get the green light this week, I will take a break to rejuvenate, as I am very tired, to be honest. The background work that I have been doing to get us to this position has taken its toll on me; most people don't see what has needed to be done. I will need time to get my enthusiasm back, as there are many things that have really disappointed me to do with this project, not only licensing-related.

Despite being pretty fed up with the whole DTD project, the last thing that I will do is roll over and let the casinos win this week. In fact, in a perverse way, I am looking forward to finally locking horns, because I am so sure that the magistrates will see what is really before them. I also look forward to silencing a few of the so-called experts who have been predicting my downfall behind my back.

● **26 September:** The three magistrates visited Dusk Till Dawn today, and were given a tour by Simon Trumper. They also visited London Clubs International's card room. All evidence from DTD, Gala and Stanley has been given now. Gala and Stanleys put one director from each of their companies on the stand today. Tomorrow at 10am, each of the three barristers will give their closing statements to the court, then the court will break for lunch, and by 2pm we will have a decision.

● **26 September:** Yes! We have won! And no chance of any change or appeal! We are in my pub having a beer now, and it feels a bit surreal. Everyone is pretty quiet. I think the task that everyone has achieved here is just sinking in slowly, and people are in shock. The DTD team have taken on the legal casino monopoly and beaten them. I thank everyone in the poker community for their support.