

POKER: THE TV SPORT TO WATCH NO BLUFF!

By HILARY KRAMER

Some of the nation's biggest companies have become addicted to gambling, the televised kind.

Anheuser-Busch, for example, pays to have its World Select brand named the official beer of the World Poker Tour, the show that ushered in cable television's hottest new sport.

An estimated 50 million Americans play poker, but now it's become one of the country's fastest growing spectator sports. In fact, it's become so lucrative that the World Poker Tour is considering an initial public offering of its shares. No Limit Texas Hold 'Em is the game of choice, and the cable networks seem to be the venue of choice — beginning with the Travel Channel's "World Poker Tour" and followed soon after by ESPN's "World Series of Poker" and Fox Sports Net's "Showdown at the Sands."

The Bravo channel has its own take: "Celebrity Poker," with guests including Ben Affleck, "Friends" star David Schwimmer and the "West Wing" cast. Even the local MSG network's in on the game, with its "Late Night Poker" show.

"The rating boons on Travel and Bravo have inspired the other channels to jump in," says Melissa Grego, TV industry specialist and news editor at the trade publication, Television Week. "Poker is a growing genre and excellent niche. We will only see it grow."

Grego said the TV industry has grown terribly



BEN AFFLECK
Poker face.

concerned that it is losing the young male demographic.

Poker fills that void. And, with advertisers migrating to cable from the major networks — a 15.6 percent rise in ad spending from 2002 to 2003 — the rush is on to find appealing programming in order to grab those extra dollars.

Cable poker shows typically don't pay any broadcast-rights fees like those paid by networks to traditional sports leagues.

So aside from producers boosting the pot, this is the only sports league where the players put up their own prize money.

Production costs are further defrayed by casino sponsorships, including those by the prestigious Bellagio and the nearby Fox Woods casino.

The World Poker Tour is even starting to license itself in categories such as poker accessories, interactive games, collectibles and apparel.