

gambling is big business — but at what cost?



LUCK OF THE IRISH: The thrill of a win can provide an addictive, short-term, mood-enhancing release for punters

Poker is all about skill for Cork champ

CORK poker champion Eoin Tobin started playing the game during a year out from college.

The 21-year-old student said he spent a lot of time watching poker on TV last year when taking time out to change courses at University College Cork.

Eoin, from Ballinlough, began playing poker "non-stop" around December 2005 and has had three major wins since then, including the €50,000 top prize at the Irish Classic Poker Festival in Cork last summer.

Eoin said he considered making a professional career out of poker but returned to college to complete his degree last September.

He said success at poker is "definitely a combination of luck and skill" but added that "the better players will always win".

Eoin said he is addicted to the game "to a certain degree" and has seen some players lose large quantities of money and become quite depressed.

"I don't really consider it as gambling because I would only play a game in which I have the edge to



WINNER: Eoin Tobin considered making a professional career out of poker.

win," he said. "I wouldn't be interested in playing casino games like roulette and blackjack because the house always has an edge over the player. If you want to win at these games, you have to hope that you get the cards you need.

But, with poker, you don't always need the cards — success can come down to skill," added Eoin.

He said it is estimated that only 5-10% of poker players consistently win.

"The majority of players are either breaking even or losing. I've seen a lot of

players who can't afford to play. They're coming in and betting their wages. I don't know how they pay.

"Poker can definitely affect a person's emotional stability. I've seen people quite depressed after they lose. I try not to play stakes that are too high for what I can afford. So, if I have a losing day it won't affect me too much.

"It's basic bank-roll management," he added.

"If I had a friend who was losing regularly I'd definitely tell them to take a break. But it's hard to talk to these guys because the game can be very consuming and can affect people's mind-sets.

"I know a good few people who play poker in casinos all night and all day online. It's too much," said Eoin.

"I suppose I would be addicted to a certain degree but I limit myself to the amount I spend and the amount of money and time I spend playing.

And I can separate poker from my regular life. It certainly doesn't affect my social life but it can be hard to find the right balance," he said.

You can even bet on Father Ted fun

THE launch of the National Lottery brought gambling, in its most innocent form, into almost every Irish home in 2000, and all in the name of a good cause.

But remote gambling, via the internet, has made placing a bet faster and easier than ever before. And the expansion of bookies' services has made it possible to bet on almost anything at all!

Paddy Power bookmakers currently offer odds on everything from sports to novelty bets, like who the winners of the next general election will be and how many cups of tea will be drunk at the upcoming Father Ted Festival on Inis Mor.

A visit to the website, paddy.com, offers punters the chance to bet on where in Ireland Michael Jackson is most likely to buy a home; who might succeed Pat Kenny as the presenter of the *Late Late Show*; and who the winners of the BAFTAs, Oscars and Meteors will be.

There are a raft of gambling opportunities on the Father Ted Festival next month, such as: which episode will be named the best *Father Ted* episode ever; what age will the winner of the festival's *Lovely Girls* competition be; and will nuns or priests win the festival's five-a-side football league.

Celebrity bets also rank high with odds on which celeb is most likely to check themselves in for rehab next. Pete Doherty and Britney Spears top the list with joint odds of 4-1 while Kate Moss and Kerry Katona rank close behind.

It's not hard to see how gamblers are easily be drawn in by fun and seemingly harmless bets like these. But caution is advised. One bet can lead to another and the loss of a small fortune...



ROBERT O'SHEA

WHEN the Mallow sugar beet plant closed last year it was mooted that the best way to utilise the factory if the land wasn't going to be sold off to the highest bidder, was for it to diversify into the biofuel industry.

A study commissioned by the county council said the idea, with government investment, was technically feasible, but that the only way for the former Green-core factory to be financially viable was if an ethanol fuel tax relief was introduced.

Recent reports suggest that ethanol production at the plant is now unlikely, which environmentally speaking, is a shame.

Ethanol has all sorts of benefits if Irish drivers were to start using it in big numbers. When it's blended with petrol it reduces greenhouse-gas emissions. Unlike fossil fuels, it doesn't get depleted over time, since it's made from biomass. Biomass, off the top of my head, and without consulting Wikipedia, is biological material taken from plant (such as sugar beet) or animal matter, which can be used as fuel.

Alternatives to petrol are something this country needs to be thinking about because crude oil is running out, it pollutes our environment and its price is unstable.

Oil, as we all know, comes from the dinosaurs: led by the Tyrannosaurus Rex, unled by the leaf-eating brontosaurus, and diesel from the terrifying pterodactyls.

Millions of years ago God, or some other benign entity, turned their rotting carcasses into a slicky black liquid that turned out to be fierce handy for human beings but dreadful news for badgers.

The unfortunate thing for governments in the Western world, is that most of the dinosaurs, when they died, seem to have been loitering in areas now controlled by autocratic states in the Middle East.

In the 1970s, Brazil embarked on a programme to substitute sugar ethanol for oil. Today, every gallon of petrol in Brazil is blended with at least 20 per cent of ethanol, and many cars run on ethanol alone, at half the price of petrol.

Will we be driving cars powered by ethanol in the near future here? Hybrid cars for sale are not exactly filling the showrooms at the moment and remain fairly expensive and

the only place with an ethanol pump in the city is the Maxol garage on the Lower Glanmire Road.

Yet, Cork is leading the way with ethanol initiatives in this country.

A Carrigaline entrepreneur, Roger O'Connor, has begun importing a bio-ethanol conversion kit that costs €580 and can be installed by a mechanic into any ordinary car. And at the recent Young Scientist of the year awards, Blarney student Anthony O'Brien took first prize for a kit that needs no modifications to engines and that allows you to change from ethanol to petrol use with the flick of a switch on the dashboard.

There seems to be no downside to this ethanol business, does there?

I, being a trained journalist, with special antenna to spot flies in the ointment, can see one.

Ethanol is pure alcohol.

Alcohol at 64c a litre at your nearest forecourt might prove far too tempting for people tired of the high price of booze in the pubs, and sick of being anti-social with their bottle of wine at home.

We might soon see drivers, when filling their cars, turning the pump on themselves in a "one for you, one for me" practice that could send the anti-drink-driving lobby back 20 years.

When pulled over, those over the limit will rip the pine-tree freshener off the rearview mirror and stuff it in the glove compartment.

Garda: Have you been drinking, sir.

Driver: Not a drop.

Garda: I seem to smell booze...

Driver:... off the exhaust, officer.

Garda: I'll have to ask you to deflate one of those tyres into this bag please, sir.

Should we not also be concerned about the effects of our vehicles getting tanked on alcohol and going about four wheels to the wind?

Cars that are constantly locked. Members of the AA being sent out in the middle of the night to vehicles that have half-cut out. Bums patrolling the streets with siphoning gear. The city alive with the sound of slurred honks.

You should draw the line and accept your car has a problem if you find them hungover and refusing to start on frosty mornings unless you stick two aspirin into the kettle of boiling water you pour over the windscreen.