

Card Player

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Katja Thater

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KATJA THATER

THE FACE OF GERMAN POKER

by Rolf "Ace" Slotboom

It was in 1999 when Katja Thater was seated behind her husband, who was playing in a big seven-card stud game. When he left for a quick bathroom break, he said: "Katja, you play." Despite the fact that she had never touched cards before, let alone in a casino atmosphere, she wound up winning the first hand that she had ever played — and instantly caught the poker bug.

Eight years later, this same Katja Thater is the new face of German poker, and living proof of the fact that poker in Germany is booming. She is one of the most popular players in her country, where she has become a TV celebrity, and she had her international breakthrough two years ago when she signed with prestigious Team PokerStars. All of that was reason enough to find out the story behind one of poker's rising stars. (After this interview was conducted, Katja won a \$1,500 razz event at the World Series of Poker, making her the first woman to win an open-field event since Annie Duke in 2004. The event was Katja's second final table of the series; she finished in fifth place in the ladies event.)

Katja's story is not a standard one, by any means, and it especially differs from the majority of the sponsored female players. Many female players who are part of a team have relatively little playing experience, and almost without exception, they are very young. Katja, on the other hand, is what many people consider to be "middle-aged," and, most importantly, she first built a serious and successful cash-game career before switching to tournament poker. In other words, it was only *after* proving herself as one of the better cash-game players in Germany that she started focusing on tournament play — a decision that would ultimately lead to her joining Team PokerStars.

Also, in contrast to many "new" players, Katja plays a wide variety of poker games. She plays seven-card stud, is an avid Omaha player, and actually prefers pot-limit as a betting structure over no-limit (hold'em), which has become the standard in today's poker world. And it's not as if her tournament career started with a bang, either. In 2005, she got very far in many *World Poker Open* events in Tunica, Mississippi. And while this *seemed* like a good start, she received the dubious nickname "Bubble Girl" for busting out just short of the money in no less than five events. From there, she improved to the point where she had two small cashes at the 2006 *World Series of Poker*, and then had her real international breakthrough at the 2007 *European Poker Tour* event in Warsaw, where she finished fifth.

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Biggest Result So Far

About the event in Poland, she said, "Well, I guess I didn't play any better or worse than in any other tourneys; the only difference was that maybe I just didn't run into much bad luck. I liked Warsaw. It being the only EPT event that was not televised, things weren't as hectic as usual, and unlike other events, I didn't have any people from magazines standing behind me or following me. I played the second flight of day one. When I entered the room, I noticed one seat in the back of the room, situated in the far right corner, that seemed so nice and quiet. I thought, "Gee, I wish I could draw that seat," and as fate would have it, that is exactly what happened. It was a 200-to-1 shot, and probably not all that important, but it still helped me feel good. And, indeed, I started out well, quickly working my way up from 10,000 to 15,000. I then had a few tough hands, but I had enough chips that these pots didn't cripple me too much.

"I started the second day with about 11,000, clearly below the average of 30,000, but I didn't push any panic buttons. I have the ability to wait for very long even when my stack is fairly

short. I quickly doubled through, and then took quite a few chips off big-stack Andreas Hoivold; for example, one time he gave me an awful lot of action with just a pair of deuces. Another time, I got very lucky. I made a move from the button, raising big with just a K-Q. That was not so bad in itself, but I hadn't noticed that one limper was already in the pot — someone who had his cards somewhat hidden behind his chips. I then made the mistake of opening my cards prematurely, and as it turned out, I was facing someone with aces! Fortunately for me, the flop came with two queens and this doubled me up, meaning that I was in good shape now — even with the 10-minute penalty that I got for my mistake. Not much later, the final table started, and I could profit from the fact that some players with a lot more chips than me were playing a bit too overaggressively. In fact, a few actually blew themselves up. This led to me finishing fifth, for about €65,000 — and I consider that to be a more-than-decent result."

Breakfast With World Champions

It needs to be said that when Katja

was introduced as a member of Team PokerStars, quite a few eyebrows were raised. Critics said that she hadn't gotten that position because of her abilities at the poker table, but simply because she's a charming and good-looking woman. Katja countered, "Well, most of these critics of mine are simply jealous. After all, who *wouldn't* like to be in the position that I am in? I am in the spotlights, a fantastic site pays me to play in prestigious tournaments, I travel to all kinds of beautiful places, and I can have breakfast with all of the world champions who are part of our team. Tell me, who *wouldn't* like to lead a life like that? Of course, I fully understand that the sole fact that I'm a woman has helped me. And I also recognize that the fact that I'm rather big in Germany, one of the booming markets in Europe, may have had a lot of influence. After all, both of these things have made me very marketable for the sponsor, and in return I can represent PokerStars, especially for the German market. So, I fully understand that my poker abilities have not been the *only* reason for PokerStars to sign me — but that doesn't mean I can't play."

Getting Married

While her partner, Jan von Halle, has always been referred to as her "husband," the fact is that they have not yet tied the knot. Well, at the time of the interview, they hadn't. Because they had planned their marriage to take place in Vegas during *World Series* time — this means that as you are reading this, Miss Slick may indeed have just turned into Mrs. Slick.

Assuming that everything has occurred just as planned, this is Katja's second marriage. She was married before to someone she really loved, and someone she would never leave; at least that's what she thought. Then she met Jan, someone who — just like her — had been married for about 10 years. It was a Sunday night in the winter when Katja was riding around on one of her

Photo courtesy of iTPDI

Katja Thater: Facts, Figures, and Quotes

Full name	Katja Thater
Date of birth	July 14, 1966
Place of birth	Hamburg, Germany
Current residence	Hamburg, Germany
Marital status	Just married (assuming that, indeed, things have gone as planned)
Education	Studied arts in Barcelona, Spain
Languages	German, English, Spanish
Turned pro	2005
Regularly plays	Live: €10-€20 pot-limit hold'em or Omaha. Online: Fixed-limit \$30-\$60 and higher, only on PokerStars
Favorite game	Seven-card stud ("I like all stud games, including high-low and even razz.")
Least-favorite game	Draw poker
Online/Live	Live
Tournaments/Cash games	Cash games
Strengths	Patience and aggression; "Call me a cobra. I lie asleep for hours, but when I wake up, I'm going to tear you apart. (Laughing) Or, just call it the woman's way."
Weaknesses	"Sometimes I'm afraid of certain players. At the EPT Grand Final, I had Josh Arieh to my immediate left. And as much as I hate to admit it, he simply scared me, and made me play differently than I usually do — weaker than I usually play."
Biggest win ever	"Being a German player, I don't like to talk much about money, simply because not all aspects of today's poker world are entirely legal in Germany. Of course, the tournament results are out in the open, but especially the good cash-game results, I just like to keep to myself."
Biggest loss ever	"In a cash-game session, around €5,000 or so."
Major accomplishments in poker	"Being a member of Team PokerStars — both the fact that they picked me up and that they are still happy with me."
Major accomplishments in life	"I guess that I have a very good feeling, and that I can trust my feel and my gut instinct when it comes to making decisions. I can look into a horse's eyes and know what it is thinking, and I'm very proud of that. Seated on a horse, you have to know exactly what it feels or is planning to do, and in return you need to find the proper ways to make it do what you want it to do. So, just like in poker, you have to be very patient; you cannot be too pushy, and, perhaps most importantly, you have to know when to give up."
Most influence on career	No one ("I did it all myself.")
Poker friends	Andy Black, the Boatman brothers, Jan Sörensen, Michael Keiner
Most respected players	No one in particular
Favorite casino/tournament	"Casino Austria in Baden is my favorite room, I guess. As for games, I guess the Esplanade in Hamburg — also because it's just around the corner for me."
Favorite poker book/writer	"I don't have much time to read, but I really like the Harrington books. I try to read some Omaha material, and as it happens, right now I am reading your pot-limit Omaha book, Rolf. (Laughing) In fact, I am sleeping with your book under my pillow!"
Online nickname	MissSlick, KatjaThater
Sponsor	PokerStars

horses. (That's not uncommon for her, as she is a professional horse breeder.) When Jan and Katja accidentally met that night, they went to a café together — and liked each other so much that they decided not to waste any time. Within two weeks, they were living together, and within six months, both were divorced and ready to continue their lives together.

Katja explained: "The reason for all of this was simple. Both of us knew from the very start that this was not just an affair. It was something much more worthwhile than that, and we both acknowledged it as such. Nowadays, we lead a great life, traveling around together and making a great living out of the game that we both love — poker. Both Jan and I

love playing the game, and in addition, I enjoy a lot of success because of my TV activities in Germany. And then when I think it is time to lay low for a while, I simply go back to my horses, and enjoy the serenity and peace of living in the country. All in all, I lead a great life — and right now, I just don't think I could be any happier." ♠



Race for the Bracelet



Event No. 28: Shankar Pillai Wins \$3,000 No-Limit Hold'em Title

Beth Shak Finishes Second

By Erik Fast

Final tables are always full of people on a mission, but the \$3,000 no-limit hold'em final table played host to two special quests for glory. Only a week after winning bracelet No. 11, Phil Hellmuth was at another final table, going for No. 12. Beth Shak was also in the running for some glory; with Katja Thater winning the razz event earlier in the day, Shak had a shot at another historic honor: If she won, it would be the first time that two women captured a bracelet on the same day.

Neither Hellmuth nor Shak had it easy, with a tough table that included Perry Friedman, Brett Richey, and each other to get through. Hellmuth put on quite a show along the way. On a few of his hands, he bought insurance from Phil Ivey, which earned Ivey more than \$100,000 on the night. Eventually, Hellmuth was eliminated in sixth place, and although he didn't capture the bracelet, he did tie T.J. Cloutier for most final tables made.

Shak got closer to her goal when she got heads up with Shankar Pillai. On the eighth hand, Pillai raised to \$180,000 and Shak reraised \$550,000 more. Pillai called and the flop came 10♣ 8♥ 3♥. Shak pushed and Pillai eventually called with the A♦ 8♦, which had Shak's K♦ 8♠ outkicked. After the turn and river brought blanks, Pillai was awarded the bracelet and \$527,829. Though she barely missed the historic achievement, Shak still outlasted 825 players to finish second and earn \$328,683. ♠

Katja Thater Wins \$1,500 Razz Championship — Event No. 29

First Woman to Win an Open-Field Event Since Annie Duke

By Julio Rodriguez

Just because of the ladies event alone, a woman is guaranteed to win a bracelet every year. But not since Annie Duke's win in the 2004 \$2,000 Omaha eight-or-better event has a woman won an open-field *World Series of Poker* tournament. Now, Katja Thater can add her name to a very short list of women.

Thater took out Larry St. Jean to win event No. 29, \$1,500 razz. On the final hand, Thater's hand read (8♥ 2♠) 9♦ 3♦ 5♣ 3♥ (4♥), and St. Jean's, (5♦ 2♦) 10♣ 5♠ 7♣ 8♣ (4♠). Thater's 8-5-4-3-2 low beat St. Jean's 8-7-5-4-2 for the bracelet.

This was Thater's second final table of the *Series*. She finished fifth in the ladies championship event.

Players were up until 4 a.m. on day one and 3 a.m. on day two, in one of the longest tournaments of the *Series*. The final eight players voted to come back on day three to finish the tournament, which originally was scheduled as only a two-day event.

The final-table results were as follows: Katja Thater, \$132,653; Larry St. Jean, \$73,311; O'Neil Longson, \$46,547; Paul "Eskimo" Clark, \$31,186; Denny Axel, \$24,204; Mark Vos, \$18,386; Men "The Master" Nguyen, \$14,197; and Thomas Daubert, \$10,473. ♠

