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Competing At Poker Makes Me A Better Lawyer

By **Alexis Gambale** (June 4, 2026, 2:02 PM EDT)

*In this **Expert Analysis series**, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.*

When I was younger, I was mesmerized by "The Big Game," a poker show where an amateur was staked $50,000 to sit in a no-limit Texas Hold 'em lineup against lively and mainstream poker professionals — and keep any winnings above the stake. The premise was irresistible: high stakes, imperfect information and real consequences.

Alexis Gambale

Years later, that same pull drew me into poker as a serious hobby. After dozens of tournaments, I've come to see that the skills the game rewards — discipline, risk calibration and composure under scrutiny — map surprisingly well into my restructuring practice. And in both fields, not only are the skills comparable, but also women are still too often underestimated.

Walk into most poker rooms and you will see a sea of men; across dozens of nine-handed tables, only a handful of women may be playing. Courtrooms can feel similar. That imbalance can fuel assumptions — sometimes subtle, sometimes blunt — that a woman is less experienced, less aggressive or less capable.

Poker taught me to treat those assumptions as information. If someone misreads you, they misplay against you. In law, the stakes are higher than a pot, but the lesson still rings true: Preparation, poise and well-timed pressure beat perception. Ultimately, it's about how you play the hand you're dealt, in either scenario.

Confidence to Compete

Playing poker consistently builds a particular kind of confidence: the earned certainty (in a land of uncertainty) that comes from making judgment calls under pressure, over and over again. It is sharpened in rooms where women are often underestimated, where composure is tested, decisions are public and mistakes are expensive. To compete — and to win — you must stay calm, read the room, assess the risk and act decisively while operating with incomplete information.

Lawyers face the same conditions in courtrooms and negotiations.

Playing poker tournaments and cash games, especially when my opponents seemed to underestimate me, taught me to treat skepticism as background noise rather than a deterrent. That skill carries directly into practicing law: Confidence grounded in preparation, not permission, allows you to advocate effectively even when you're not initially presumed to be the authority in the room.

Strategic Aggression

Alongside confidence, poker taught me a form of aggression that translates directly to legal practice. Not aggression in the physical sense, but the strategic kind: pressing advantages, holding a position when it is sound and advocating without apology.

In poker, passivity is expensive. If you never apply pressure or never respond when someone else does, you will get run over. In a tournament, you can be blinded out without ever truly playing.

The same dynamic exists in the restructuring industry. If you don't push for the best available outcome for your client by testing arguments, leveraging facts and insisting on fair terms, you risk doing them a profound disservice. And unlike poker, where the consequences are personal, in legal practice, clients rely on you to carry the weight with them.

Poker also taught me to pursue the win the way seasoned players pursue the pot — sometimes because they have the goods, and sometimes because they understand timing, leverage and narrative. My mindset when I walk into a courtroom, or when trading emails with opposing counsel, is to advocate zealously and deliberately.

It is the same mindset that drives Michael "The Grinder" Mizrachi to keep chasing another World Series of Poker bracelet: focus, stamina and the willingness to apply pressure when it matters. The goal is not bravado, it is results.

As a female poker player, I've mastered my comfort with asserting pressure in environments where forcefulness from women is sometimes unexpected. At the card table or in the courtroom, that sharpened skill is especially effective.

The similarity of the settings is clear to me. Opponents may assume you will not aggressively bet, raise or push back, but you do so without apology, and the same decisiveness applies to a lawyer's role in contested bankruptcy proceedings.

Cards and Cases Require Risk Assessment

Poker can turn on a single card. Position, table dynamics, board texture and bet sizing all shape what a "good" decision looks like in real time. The point is constant: You cannot freeze when the facts change, you adjust.

That flexibility maps neatly into my work as a bankruptcy attorney. Bankruptcy moves fast because the financial reality underneath it moves fast. A case that begins as a straightforward reorganization can pivot into a sale process and, ultimately, liquidation.

Strategies change, stakeholder priorities shift and liquidity constraints tighten. You cannot litigate the last hand, you have to play the one in front of you.

At the center of both poker and bankruptcy is risk assessment. In poker, risk evolves with every street and every bet. Sometimes you are responding to risk. Other times, especially when you are first to act, you are shaping it.

In bankruptcy, you start assessing risk before a petition is even filed, and those early judgments often set the trajectory of the case. Poker trained me to evaluate uncertain information quickly and to commit to a course of action with discipline. These skills directly translate to my field, as I use them daily to guide me through my practice.

Conclusion

The practice of bankruptcy law, like poker, rewards those who can stay composed while the ground shifts beneath them. Cases unfold in unexpected ways, with imperfect information, competing stakeholders, and real financial consequences for businesses, employees and communities.

Playing poker in male-dominated rooms taught me how to trust my judgment, apply pressure when it matters and adapt without losing strategic discipline — skills that are indispensable in restructuring and insolvency matters. In both areas, success is not about bravado or assumptions; it is about preparation, risk assessment and the ability to play the hand you are dealt while shaping the outcome through deliberate choices.

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