

Poker program goes full-tilt this weekend

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Poker professionals Phil "The Unabomber" Laak and Ali Eslami might have some trouble honing in on a tell from their latest opponent - Polaris.

A poker-playing computer program developed at the University of Alberta [will battle against the pair of poker kings](#) in a \$50,000 contest on Monday.

Polaris, the reigning world champion computer-poker program, will challenge two of the sharpest poker players in the world, Laak and Eslami. The two-day event is being staged in conjunction with the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence's annual conference, July 23 - 24 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Vancouver, B.C.

"This is a world first and, I hope, the beginning of something that will grow and become an annual event," said Jonathan Schaeffer, a team leader of the Polaris program.

Schaeffer, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Artificial Intelligence, believes the event is a natural evolution of the 1994 match between IBM's "Deep Blue" chess program and Gary Kasparov, the then-world chess champion.

"The difference is that chess is a game of perfect knowledge, meaning there is nothing hidden from the players. In poker you can't see your opponent's hand, and you don't know what cards will be dealt. This makes poker a much harder challenge for computer scientists from an

artificial intelligence perspective," Schaeffer said.

The competition will feature four Texas Hold 'Em matches between Polaris and the two poker professionals. The tournament is designed to eliminate luck and focus on pure skill. In each match, Laak and Eslami will play simultaneously against Polaris in separate rooms. At the end of each match, Laak and Eslami will combine their chip totals and compare them against Polaris' combined total. The professionals will earn cash for each match they win.

Laak, a former World Series of Poker champion and host of the Mojo TV program I Bet You, is taking the challenge seriously. He intends to put in up to 40 hours of practice play during the week leading up to the match. Laak says he's familiar with the artificial intelligence poker programs by Schaeffer and Darse Billings, who earned his PhD here last November.

"There is a part of me, deep down inside, that is a nerd," Laak said. "When I come home at the end of the day I don't turn on the TV and watch sports, I read. And what do I read? I read about science and technology stuff."

Each match will consist of 500 hands, with the cards dealt in duplicate, meaning that the Polaris program will receive the same cards in one room that the professional will receive in the other room and vice versa. The duplicate system will be employed in order to balance out the luck of the cards and emphasize the capabilities of the participants.

Source: University of Alberta

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