

Stage set for a rematch as Polaris falls to poker professionals

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It came down to the eleventh hour, but the humans finally prevailed in the \$50,000, man-versus-machine poker playoff.

Late last night in Vancouver, British Columbia, poker professionals Phil 'The Unabomber' Laak and Ali Eslami defeated Polaris, the computer poker program built at the University of Alberta, in the final session of the world's first man-versus-machine poker challenge. The two pros won the two-day event with a record of 2-1-1.

The match was tied 1-1-1 after the first three sessions, leading to a tense, decisive final session last night.

Polaris, the reigning world champion computer-poker program, played two of the sharpest poker players in the world, Laak and Eslami. The two-day event was 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.

"This is a world first and, I hope, the beginning of something that will grow and become an annual event," said U of A researcher 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 competition featured four Texas Hold 'Em matches between Polaris and the two pros. In each match Laak and Eslami played simultaneously against Polaris in separate rooms. At the end of each match, Laak and Eslami combined their chip totals and compared them against Polaris' combined total. The professionals earned cash for each match they won.

In spite of the loss, Polaris creator Dr. Michael Bowling was upbeat about the result.

"This was absolutely a valuable event. I wish some parts of it went differently, but we saw some success and, overall, we were able to show that our program could compete with the best in the world," he said.

"Ultimately, Phil and Ali showed they were the better players. They were able to adapt to our program and find patterns in its behaviour and holes in its equilibrium. Now we need to improve our program by getting it to do what Phil and Ali did."

Laak and Eslami were gracious in victory.

"This was not a win for us," Eslami said. "We survived. I played the best heads-up poker I've ever played and we just narrowly won. I think this program is good enough to win against any of the best players in the world. The quality of this machine - this beast - is amazing"

"The most important element of this event for all of us is learning," added Dr. Darse Billings, a co-creator of Polaris. "Phil and Ali learned a lot, and I know we learned a ton about our program and how to improve it. We're really looking forward to working on it and then trying this again."

Source: University of Alberta

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