Playing Poker With Hum Diddy

Vincent J. Abramo

It was in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn, New York the summer of 1956. Vincent and a small group of 13-year-olds hung out in the local public park on 53 St. and Ft. Hamilton Parkway. The park was essentially a small playground on about 3 acres of asphalt.

It had swings, a hand ball court, a basketball court, a “kiddie” pool, and “monkey bars”. It was on the monkey bars where all sorts of gymnastic feats were performed by young dare devils oblivious to the dangers of showing off.

There was hardly enough room left for the five or so long park benches that were the daily meeting place for several Orthodox Jews who came to talk about who knows what?

The kids were a mix of gentile and Jew and never spoke to the older Jewish men unless spoken to. The only thing the kids knew about these men with beards and yarmulkas on their heads was that two or three of them had numbers tattooed on the inside of their forearms.

Frank Valenti, the “parky”, as he was known, unlocked the 10’ gate at 8:00 each morning. Right away several kids laid claim to playing the first singles on each of the two handball courts. The chess games and basketballs were checked out from the park house, through Frank, courtesy of the New York City Parks Department, while other kids just raced to the swings or monkey bars.

After about an hour Hum Diddy showed up and moved toward the farthest corner of an area around the basketball court. He sat on the ground against the park’s perimeter chain link fence and crossed his legs. He rolled down the sleeve of his T shirt and caught a soft pack of Marlboro’s that had been held in place by the turned-up sleeve.

Hum Diddy pulled a butt from the pack and rolled it back on to the sleeve as it was before. He lit the cigarette with the flick of his Zippo, pulled out a deck of cards from the back pocket of his Levi’s, and calmly began to shuffle the deck.

Hum Diddy was older than most of the kids. He was about 16 and fat for his age. He had jet black hair, a sleepy looking sort of face and broad shoulders that were draped in his oversize white T shirt.

He had the look of a sitting Buda, only this Buda smoked, held a deck of cards in his hand and was, as we were soon to find out that summer, a methodical thief, and bully.

Two or three kids sat down around him in a circle. They were excited about playing poker with an optimism of winning cash money. Vincent had never played in Hum Diddy’s game, but on this day, he thought why not. He had earned $5 in small change the day before delivering groceries for Mr. Lund the owner of the local Norwegian market. Maybe, he thought, if he won money, the extra could buy him a ticket for a days’ worth of rides at Steeple Chase Park in Coney Island.

Hum Diddy barked “ok who’s in”? Vincent by this time had already sat down on the tarmac and was part of the poker game. He threw his 10 cents into the pot to start the deal. The game 5 card draw poker gave each player the option to draw 1- 4 cards in exchange for the 5 originally dealt. Hum Diddy dealt. He let it be known that at his game he was the only dealer. Nobody else was allowed to touch the deck.

At 13 Vincent was hardly a poker player, but he played enough at home with his brother Charlie that he knew the basics of the game, not well, but barely enough to lose his hard earned $5 bucks.

Over the next couple of hours kids lost their money quickly and dropped out. Vincent was still in the game. He won a few pots and after a couple of hours was ahead $12. Three of a kind, a full house, a flush and winning several hands with a pair of kings or queens mostly at a time when Hum Diddy had ace high only. The pots were getting fatter with sometimes $4-$5 in it for the winning hand.

Whatever was happening, by 11:00 Vincent was ahead by about $20 in singles and Hum Diddy was now down to change. As Vincent was pulling together winning hands the cash on the ground was shifting into his direction as Hum Diddy was becoming very nervous and agitated.

It was Hum Diddy’s game. He was the dealer, always the dealer, and yet this 13-year-old was getting the best of him. He was dealing himself bad hands and the kid was winning. Only two were playing at this point because as the other kids lost and dropped out nobody else joined. It was down to the two of them by noon.

 At just after 12:00 Vincent knew that while he was ahead it would be smart to pick up his winnings and head home for lunch. His mother had told him to be back by 12:30 the latest.

As he began to pick up his winnings Hum Diddy, with a jerk of his head, said to the young card sharp “where you going”? “I got to get home before noon” Vincent told him.

“Waddaya mean go home? Hey! I’m losing and I want a chance to get my money back. You aren’t going to leave until I say so.” The look was menacing, and Vincent knew if he attempted to leave with the money Hum Diddy would get even sometime, maybe not just then in the park but somewhere. Maybe “jump him” on his way home some night when the rest of the kids weren’t around. One way or another Vincent knew that Hum Diddy was not going to leave him alone until he got, not just his money back, but the money the other kids lost, money that was now part of Vincent’s windfall.

Vincent stopped picking up the half dollars quarters and dimes, looked at Hum Diddy and saw evil ...pure and simple. Without a word or a look of anger on his face Vincent kept his cool, left the dough where it lay and said to Hum Diddy “ok deal”.

Well as the story goes, over the next hour in his poker duel with the Buda, Vincent “lost” consistently. He would throw his cards in after each hand when Hum Diddy had raised the pot to see his cards after each draw. By throwing in Hum Diddy never saw the hand Vincent was holding. All the Buda knew was that he was getting his money back while the rest of the kids looked on not saying a word. By 1:00 Vincent had lost everything to the big guy. Getting away from that big fat piece of garbage he thought was worth the $20 he was previously holding as winnings. He was free to go. He got up didn’t look back and walked home. He never brought Hum Diddy up in conversation around the neighborhood and he never got into another poker game for the rest of the time he lived in Brooklyn.