

STYLE MAKERS

WINNING ODDS

Poker pro **Antonio Esfandiari** creates his own kind of magic in ***The Real Deal!***

The average Las Vegas poker player takes his place at the card table with little apprehension. Maybe he'll lose a few hands, a couple hundred dollars—nothing to write home about. That is, until he discovers that he's sitting across from expert poker player and magician Antonio Esfandiari. In The Venetian Las Vegas' new poker extravaganza *The Real Deal!*, Esfandiari and a team of the world's best professional poker players face off against an audience of amateurs in an interactive spectator-driven show. Esfandiari, for his part, describes his job at The Venetian as ideal. "I show up and play poker. I get to interact with new people, have fun and hang out with people who actually want to play." Antonio's life, however, wasn't always this easy.

As a nine-year-old, Antonio (formerly Amir) and his family fled from war-torn Iran to California. Within two years this young entrepreneur had learned English, changed his name to Anthony and started his own telemarketing company, selling copies of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

This need to be financially self-sufficient led to a hobby and, eventually, a career for Esfandiari. At 16, he was shown a barroom card trick where a spectator was asked to name his or her favorite card, and the card would be the only one to appear face up in a closed deck. "I was instantly hooked," he recalls. "Every day I practiced, all the time, books, videos. Some moves take days to learn."

His total live tournament earnings amount to about \$2.5 million.

True to form, Anthony became Antonio, a name more fitting for a magician. Esfandiari continued to work as a waiter and a magician until, in 2000, a friend gave him the book *Winning Low-Limit Hold'em* by Lee Jones (Conjelco, 2000). "I started implementing what the book said, and I started winning. It's what I've been doing ever since," he says. And win he did. Since that time, Esfandiari has played in consecutive years of the World Series of Poker and was the youngest entrant to win over \$1,000,000 at the World Poker Tour in Los Angeles. He also won the Poker Superstars Invitational Tournament Season 3, Match 1, which led to a winning of \$95,000. His total live tournament earnings over the years amount to about \$2.5 million. Under the stage name The Magician, Antonio continues to wow crowds at The Venetian. "It is still challenging," he says with a laugh. "At *The Real Deal!*, it's different because you and another pro play against the audience. There's no money at risk, but I always want to beat the other pro." And besides, says Esfandiari, "I can't complain, it's a great way to make a living." —Lindsay Shapiro



"I started implementing what the book said, and I started winning," says poker sensation Antonio Esfandiari, on *The Real Deal!* stage at The Venetian.

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