

*VAIREEEEEEE AGKGRESSEEEVE!!*  
**ROUNDERS REVISITED**  
Reviewed by *Harvey Roy Greenberg*

There are movie lines which stick in your head like crazy glue:

“I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

“I coulda been a contender !“

“You can’t **HANDLE** the truth!!!”

I’ve found that many poker plays love movies as much as I do, and are extremely knowledgeable about films present and past. In virtually every game I’ve played in over forty years, someone is sure to come up with some cherished line like those above.

However, it’s rare around the felt to hear a quote from a ‘pure’ poker movie like *THE CINCINNATI KID*, or from a poker scene in another genre. Memorable poker quotes simply don’t exist, with one notable exception. In *MY LITTLE CHICKADEE*’s Old West saloon, Mae West asks W.C. Fields -- “Poker -- is this a game of chance?” “Not the way *I* play it...” replies Fields in his inimitable drawl.

There is, however, one quote which regularly crops up regularly in table chatter over the last decade. “*VAIREEEEEEE AGKGRESSEEEVE!!!*” is now up there there with venerable chestnuts like “Check in the bank!”; “Think long, think wrong!”; “Read my book!” and “Ah, **YAH!!!**” It was first spoken by Teddy KGB, a sinister Russian mobster cardroom owner, 1998’ classic poker picture *ROUNDERS*. Teddy is responding to a powerful raise from Mike McDermott, the movie’s appealing young would be pokermeister, during their nerveracking final \$30,000 heads-up NLHE match.

*ROUNDERS*’ took in about thirty million dollars at the box office -- chump change by Tinseltown standards -- and then quickly faded away. Nevertheless, it remains my top poker movie, and a terrific film in its own right. *ROUNDERS* pushes many personal buttons for me -- as a psychoanalyst, film critic, and a player with deeply affectionate memories of the New York poker scene of the Seventies to Nineties. Thanks to dubious clean-ups and the rise of internet play, the current Manhattan poker landscape seems a bloodless shadow of its seedy glory days.

It’s been stated that that tales of every type -- myths, Homeric epics, fairy and folklore, novels, plays, movies -- essentially boil down to ‘road stories’. Since antiquity, audiences have usually preferred their road-warriors male (well, not always), and bigger than life (even though the hero may start small). A good road story always poses the same questions. How are Ulysses, Don Quixote, or Luke Skywalker going to get from here to there -- wherever there may be? What is the hero’s mission? Who does he meet along the way? What does he learn about life and himself? Will he ever find his throne, or holy grail, or home -- that’s only what E.T. wanted, after all. ? If he and wins the prize, what then? (Everyone loves road-story sequels, the *Indiana Jones* franchise a blockbuster case in point.)

Compared to Ulysses or Conan the Barbarian, a would be poker luminary would seem small-time small-change rate as a valiant road warrior. But on his own terms, in his

unique world, *ROUNDER*'s Mike McDermott's search to win the WSOP is as thrilling and crucial to his quest as Jason's search for the Golden Fleece.

Like a classic Homeric epic, *ROUNDERS* drops us squarely into the middle of the action, in Teddy-KGB's high-rolling, low-class joint, with no idea of how we or the characters have gotten there. Mike slow plays Teddy with a nines/aces full house, to be crushed by Teddy's aces/nines boat. Mike's stake, carefully put together over years of careful play, is demolished in a flash, leaving behind only the ruin of his dreams.

Unlike the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, *ROUNDERS* doesn't go on to say much more about its characters. This is a cunning narrative ploy, keeping you even more involved with the hectic here-and-now of the poker world, and Mike's struggle to rejoin it.

What little we learn is that Mike comes from a working class background. He's dazzled his way through college and law school on scholarships and card skills. He has a law-student lover who stuck with him when he was in poker hospital before. After his devastating defeat, she makes their future hinge on him quitting the game forever. Several months later Mike is hitting the books, getting by on a 'hump' delivery job, well and truly saluting the flag -- until his childhood, best, and soon to be worst friend, Worm, is let out of jail.

*ROUNDER*'s real villain is *not* Teddy-KGB, but Worm. Mike and Worm's fathers' low-level jobs at a rich-kid prep school gave them free admission. They scammed their way to senior years with shameless collusion cheating and bookmaking, until Worm got caught in a point-shaving scheme. He refused to rat out Mike and was expelled. Mike went on to scholastic triumph. Worm went down the toilet; has been living on the soiled margins of the wild side ever since via petty crime and crooked poker.

Experts distinguish between compulsive and anti-social gamblers. A true compulsive gambler is fiercely honorable about his debts; only descends into cheating and low-level criminality in the end-stages of the disease, when totally broke, demoralized and de-moralized. The antisocial gambler is grossly dishonorable from the start, across the board; will do anything disreputable to win, even holding up the same game where he just lost a bundle,

Teddy KGB is a dangerous psychopath. He'll cap your kneecaps or put you in the ground if you don't pay him off. Yet, intriguingly, what we see of his play is ruthless but honest. Worm manages the neat trick of combining the sleazoid behavior of the chronic antisocial gambler -- he's a perpetual conniver and welsher -- with many symptoms of non-criminal compulsive gambling -- the addiction to 'action' for its own sake; the huge amount of time spent gambling or moving money, and the erosion of healthy relationships outside of gambling. (One guesses that Worm never had *any* reputable relationship except his camaraderie with Mike. As for love, "in the poker game of life, women are the rake." is his contemptuous motto.)

Adolescents mature psychologically by identifying with people they idealize -- relatives, friends, teachers, celebrities, et cetera. During their journey into adulthood, they leave behind many inner psychological identifications and real-time relationships which no longer make sense; 'internalizing' the best qualities of the people they admire, old and new.

Along these lines, Mike was drawn to Worm because they shared many of the same qualities -- wiseguy smarts; an outsider's cynical defiance of authority and

conformity; ironic gallows humor; and scalawag behavior.

But Mike always owned a fundamental decency Worm lacked. Mike was distancing himself from Worm even before Worm was jailed again. Mike's very decency and loyalty compels him to meet his old buddy at the prison gates, and help him pay down his debts in town. In return, Worm quickly lures him back to the rounder lifestyle (admittedly that doesn't take much luring). True to her promise, Mike's lady exits.

Ever the scorpion, Worm has lied to Mike about how much he really owes, and to who -- Teddy- KGB. He runs up even more on Mike's ticket, ruins every chance of escape from the deadly corner he's painted himself into. Mike finally realizes he must cut Worm loose, at the cost of assuming all his debt. He puts everything on the line, his life included, in *ROUNDER*'s last contest with Teddy.

Mike is staked by an unlikely mentor, Professor Petrovosky, eminent Dean of his law school (the ever impressive Martin Landau). Mike embodies Petrovsky's identity crisis as a young rabbinical student. A descendent of renowned Hebrew scholars, Petrovsky was already accounted a major Talmudic talent when law, rather than God, called to him. He left the synagogue for his legal studies, at the price of his family abandoning him. He gained the summit of his profession, but never saw them again. Recognizing the legitimacy of Mike's desire to become a poker pro from his own painful experience, he tells him that a law career will be as unfulfilling for Mike as rabbinical study was for him: "You don't chose your destiny, Michael" reflects Petrovsky, "**Your destiny choses you.**"

I won't reveal the end of *ROUNDERS*. Suffice to say that Teddy and Mike's terminal battle comprises fine poker in its own right, and is breathtakingly cinematic. Here and elsewhere, the camera becomes another character, fluidly taking us from the agonizing fall of cards at table level, to the poker locales in New York I knew intimately or heard of twenty years ago, artfully recreated in somber or light drenched color: the long defunct Mayfair and Diamond Clubs; Atlantic City Taj's vast card room, where Manhattan sharks lay in wait for weekend rubes; a mobbed up suburban game straight out of *THE SOPRANOS*; a Hungarian social hall without Hungarians.

*ROUNDER*'s cast of major and minor poker people is powerful. With uncanny acuteness, they incarnate the personalities -- some long gone, some languishing in poker hospital -- from my old days as apsychoanalyst/writer by day, and a roving poker zealot by night. Matt Damon's endearing Mike; Ed Norton's repulsive Worm; John Turturro's Joey Knish -- the demolished rounder's guardian angel (Norton and Turturro's character range continues to amaze); Famke Janssen's bewitching cardroom hostess. Some have found John Malkovich's Teddy-KGB over the top, but I treasure every bit of borscht-speak ("*chick, chick, chick!!! Kidz gott alligator bludt...disz isz mye fockkingink klobb, andt aeye villl splesh die podt venneffver aeye fokkink vandt!!*"). And of course, "**VAIRREEEEE AGGRESEEEVE!!!**"

I profoundly respect *ROUNDERS*' cool, completely non-judgemental take on a world that non-players often find inexplicable, and even corrupt. Director John Dahl communicates the integrity of Mike's passion, the total validity of his quest to become a master of the game not merely for money, but towards affirming the core of his being. For these qualities alone, *ROUNDERS* stands head and shoulders above every poker movie ever made.

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ROUNDERS is widely available on DVD. I especially recommend the deluxe version, containing cast and crew interviews, Sahl's commentary on the film, and other fascinating material.

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Harvey Roy Greenberg, MD is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Albert Einstein School of Medicine at Yeshiva University in New York, where he teaches adolescent psychiatry and medical humanities. He has written five books and several hundred articles on psychiatry, film, media, and popular culture. A contributor to POKER PRO, his most recent work on compulsive gambling is an exhaustive study of the disorder -- as well as non-pathological gambling -- for the prestigious COMPREHENSIVE TEXTBOOK OF PSYCHIATRY.

Email: [HRGSMES@AOL.COM](mailto:HRGSMES@AOL.COM);

Website: <http://www.doctorgreenberg.net>