

First, let me get this out of the way very clearly - **I do NOT think either Kristen or Alex *intentionally* did anything unethical.** I do not think they intended to cheat or collude. I do however think some ethical lines were crossed in very egregious ways.

Cliffs on what happened: Kristen Bicknell and Alex Foxen have been dating for some time. They made the same final table recently and finished 1st and 2nd. They have been accused by some of soft playing each other and a few specific hands have been pointed to as examples. Unsurprisingly, the Twitter debates involve a wide range of opinions and tact.

New information: Kristen and Alex had a small auto swap at the beginning of the tournament. At one point at the final table they both had similar stacks and **increased the swap to 30%.**

Regardless of the hands, opinions, and intentions, **this is absolutely not ok.** My primary goal in writing this is to make sure people understand why this is not ok and hopefully to make sure it never ever happens again.

The Full Replay: <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/274447585>

PokerNews Article:

<https://www.pokernews.com/news/2018/06/the-muck-alex-foxen-kristen-bicknell-take-it-easy-on-each-ot-31174.htm>

Mike Watson's blog: <https://twitter.com/SirWatts/status/1013145281016152064>

My tl;dr opinion on everything: I don't think they intended to cheat. I do think they find it difficult to play hardball against each other and don't realize how problematic that is. Regardless of everything else, the 30% swap is egregious.

Explanation on theory, ICM, under bluffing, and softplaying: I've seen the opinion on Twitter from non-high-stakes players that they just bluff each other a bit less and from there stuff makes sense - QED, no big deal, not cheating. I need to clarify why this view is problematic.

ICM -> when someone busts out, everyone else profits (pay jumps). This is especially true with final table payjumps. If 3 (or more) people are playing at a FT, and A+ B are less likely to bust each other for any reason, ethical or otherwise, player C suffers financially.

The most basic game theory in poker is bluffing frequency. If someone rarely bluffs, you call them less. If they bluff a ton, you call them more. Simple. If two players cut out a large percent of their bluffs against each other, that means a lot less money should go in on every street. The pots will be smaller and less confrontational, and they will bust each other a lot less. If they do this at an FT, all the other players become less likely to hit pay jumps and suffer as a result. It is not ok to avoid bluffing someone at a FT because you like them.

A new hand I would like to submit: Time stamp 4:26:00 in the above Twitch video. It's very simple. Kristen raises KQo in the CO, Alex calls 22 on the button, and they check it down on T687T (2 flush draws on the turn). From the flop being dealt to the final river check, less than 30 seconds pass. While they quickly check it down, they are literally giggling at each other. In my opinion this is the smoking gun.

- 1) It indicates to me that they are probably not intentionally cheating - who would giggle and be so blatant while knowingly cheating?
- 2) It shows they are not trying their hardest against each other. This is strategically a very interesting hand. Deciding not to bet on any street is not an easy decision. I'm sure some people will respond saying they always play relatively quickly, but the giggling seals it.

This hand basically sums up all the reasons why I think they don't realize that what they did was wrong.

The AA vs JJ hand: Timestamp 8:15:00 This has been discussed ad nauseum, but here is my quick opinion. The only way this hand makes sense is if we proceed through the lens that they both know they will be drastically under bluffing each other. Some of these analyses I've seen on the hand include absurdly narrow ranges. Why can't he have KTs for value here? Why can't he have ATs as a bluff? Yes, I understand ICM is a thing, but ICM does not mean "don't bluff".

This hand is proof of my above point - that when 2 players have an unspoken understanding that they will bluff each other less, the third player in the hand gets screwed. Even if this wasn't intentional by Kristen and Alex, they are still taking EV away from Kahle, and that is very unfair.

The Chop Offer: I think Kristen realized it was a weird situation and she offered the chop because she wasn't actively trying to seek out any shenanigans. I respect her for offering it. While if I was in Kahle's shoes I would have either accepted the chop or at least pressed for more information about the swap situation, I don't think it's ok to fault him for refusing the chop. He should have the right to play out the tournament. While I do respect Kristen for offering the chop, it does not excuse the situation that existed in the first place.

The 30% Swap: For me, this is by far the most upsetting of anything that went on. I talked to Kristen about it privately because I wanted to give her a chance to clarify what went down before I speculated on anything. She told me herself that they swapped 30% during the final table when they got close in chips. I don't know what other swaps / selling they had for the tournament, but let's give them the benefit of the doubt and say they only swapped out 10%. This leaves them with at best a 2:1 ratio of each other's action to their own. This creates really bad incentives. Doing this at the start of the tournament when they're somewhat unlikely to be at the final table would be within the realm of possibly justifiable (but still wrong in a 178 player event IMHO), but doing it midway through a final table when the weird situations are 99.9% to come up is indefensible.

Inevitably, some people will argue, "but if they play their hardest, then it's not wrong". I disagree. Poker is not a cut and dry game. Thousands of factors influence your decisions including subconscious thoughts. Kristen has even said herself that the relationship creates a weird dynamic in their play. Being willing to complicate that even further with a 30% last minute swap in shorthanded FT play is completely out of line. It shows they were not thinking through the implications of their actions. Kristen even said as much to me - it's just something she didn't even consider when making the swap.

Consensus: I'm in multiple large poker group chats and among them there is a very large consensus that Kahle got the raw end of the deal here. Many of the opinions (but not all) are that nothing was premeditated or malicious by Kristen or Alex. There is basically unanimous agreement that we need to make sure this doesn't happen again since they do play small field high rollers with each other on a regular basis.

I point this out because many of these people will not speak out publicly for fear of backlash. Mike Watson got a lot of hate for coming down hard against them, and most people just don't want to get involved. While I don't agree with every word of his post, please keep in mind that his is not a minority opinion. Many of the regulars in these tournaments including some of the best players in the world and some of the most ethical poker players I know agree with him.

I do believe Kahle suffered financially due to no fault of his own. If Kristen and Alex want to make things right, I think throwing some money his way is the right thing to do.

What do we do now? I think this is a situation where we need to come together as a community and discuss what acceptable practices are.

My personal opinion is that we should agree to something like a 3:1 rule. Always have at least 3x as much of yourself as anyone else in a tournament. Even stricter rules should be in place for very small field tournaments, and if people want to occasionally be loose in fields with thousands of players, then I think that's fine (e.g. buying 50% of someone in the WSoP 7,000 player main event). Swapping extra when at the same table with someone should be especially frowned upon for obvious reasons.

I would like to ask other high roller players for feedback on this. Is this a reasonable expectation? Is 3:1 too loose? Maybe 4:1 or 5:1 is better? Would you be willing to agree to adhere to something along these lines?

P.S. - Inevitably I will get backlash because of mistakes I made as a teenager. Honestly, this is kind of reasonable. People who have flawed paths should be looked at more stringently. I get it. However, I think for the past ~12 years I have held myself to very admirable ethical standards in poker and in life. I believe that the people who I deal with on a regular basis all trust and respect me on every ethical level and I believe I have earned that trust and respect.