

RAY ROMANO:

MY GAMBLING ADDICTION

EVERY bookie loved Ray Romano.

The star of the CBS sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* admits he once had a serious gambling problem – and sources say he may not be 100 percent cured, either.

"It was a full-on compulsion," Romano, 43, confesses. "Bookies and Atlantic City – I hit rock bottom. I could pick up a phone and make a bet on any game. That's where you really lose money.

"In a casino, you gotta give them the money up front. But when you make a call to a bookmaker, you say, 'Put a thousand dollars on this,' even when you don't have the money on you."

The TV superstar insists he quit gambling 11 years ago after blowing a good portion of the modest \$30,000-a-year salary he earned performing standup comedy.

These days, the happily married dad of four, who plays a sportswriter on his hit show, still makes friendly wagers. Only now he can afford to cover them – including one for a whopping \$10,000 with his TV wife, Patricia Heaton.

Romano said he'd cough up the cash during last year's Emmy awards if she used a fake British accent when she gave her acceptance speech for best actress in a comedy.

The funnyman breathed a sigh of relief when Heaton didn't go through with it – and his wife of 13 years, Anna, probably did too! Sources say she may know he still loses money at the gaming tables.

"I've watched him play blackjack at the Riviera Hotel and Casino," an insider reveals. "He's a complete maniac when it comes to gambling.

"Ray loses thousands of dollars at a time and thinks nothing of it except to say, 'Don't tell my wife.'

"I think Anna knows he has a problem, but he hides the extent of it from her. He says she tries to set limits. When he goes to Vegas, she tells him: 'Don't bet the house.'"

Romano is so into betting, he even makes "mental" bets with himself when he plays golf.

"If I don't shoot a certain score," he says, "then I can't watch TV that night."

He also indulges his co-workers on *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Twice a week, he doles out over \$1,000 in lottery tickets to everyone on the set.

And that's not a good sign, according to addiction experts.

"Buying lottery tickets or hanging out in Las Vegas casinos is not a good indication that Mr. Romano is 'clean,'" Jack Tilman, a counselor for Gamblers Anonymous, tells *STAR*.

"Rather, it's a sign of a deep-rooted compulsion. Of course, the most tragic example of how gambling still has a hold on him is making a \$10,000 bet with his co-star, no matter how silly the subject or the odds.

"He needs to meet with one of our counselors – the sooner the better.

"I think Mr. Romano is kidding himself, and his family, if he thinks he's beaten his gambling addiction just because he says so."

—ROBIN MIZRAHI ★



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