

THE GAMING ISSUE

Las Vegas has always been the gold standard for gambling life. Take away a glittering strip, warm weather and legalized prostitution, and we have a nice smaller scale of Sin City right here in West Michigan. With an abundance of area casinos, West Michiganders have options on where to go to meet their gambling, enormous buffet and Vegas-style entertainment needs.

BY JAYSON BUSSA

POKER TIPS FROM A PRO

BERNARD LEE HAS racked up \$1.35 million in winnings from the game of poker, but he also logs plenty of hours as a swami of the game, educating many aspiring players.

Lee, who was the 13th overall finisher at the 2005 World Series of Poker Main Event, co-hosts the ESPN television show *Inside Deal* and pens a poker column in the *Boston Herald*, which has led to two book releases.

Lee is also a teacher at the World Series of Poker Academy and has rolled through Michigan to compete in a past Heartland Poker Tour event at Soaring Eagle Casino. With that extensive experience in tow, Lee was able to peg down some tangible answers to the open-ended



Bernard Lee

question "What can little old me do to improve my poker skills?"

"One, don't play as many hands as you play," Lee said. "People play

just too many hands. They decide to get involved with very marginal holdings and they play."

Another strategy Lee suggested is to utilize play position. Players can have more liberties when they are playing in late positions because it forces players in earlier positions to make the first moves.

"The comparison can be made to Black Jack," said Lee, who totes a master's degree in biology from Harvard. "What's the advantage to the dealer? Well, you have to act first. If you bust, the dealer doesn't have to do anything ... Similar to poker, the person who is in early positions will have to act first. If that person checks, you might be able to take down the hand even if you don't have anything."

Lee, who regularly rubs elbows with the sport's elite, welcomes the debate on which player is best, as no exact criteria exists to gauge a player's

ability. All things considered, Lee pegged pro Phil Ivey as the top player in the world.

Such is a conversation you can tell John Faarup – a Grand Valley State University graduate – has had often. The 25-year-old, who ditched his journalism gig to play poker online, said it's a never-ending argument.

"It is fun to debate, I suppose, but it is like asking "Who is the best

TOP U.S. POKER PLAYERS

Name-career earnings

1. Phil Ivey - \$12,799,787
2. Daniel Negreanu - \$12,483,065
3. Jamie Gold - \$12,187,854
4. Peter Eastgate - \$11,132,939
5. Joe Hachem - \$10,670,474

*Source: *PokerPages.com*

football player of all time? Johnny Unitas, Peyton Manning, Barry Sanders, Jim Brown, Joe Namath, Watler Payton," Faarup said. "It's just way too subjective."

Faarup recently competed in his first live tournament, a sit-and-go in Las Vegas, where he emerged as champion.

"Don't use any slow play or trickery of any kind," suggested Faarup, who is also an instructor on cardunners.com and stoxpoker.com. "Just try to get paid off with your strong holdings. Position is of utmost importance because being able to act last after the flop is the biggest advantage you can have."

If you're lucky enough to get as far into a big tournament as John Kurfman, a Heartland Poker Champion in 2009, do what he considers being the simplest but most underestimated strategy: Just relax.



Blackjack lessons at Four Winds Casino

GRADUATE FROM THE SLOTS

BLACKJACK CLASSES

Firekeepers Casino, Battle Creek
Tuesdays, 11 a.m.; Thursdays, 5 p.m.

CRAPS CLASSES

Firekeepers Casino
Mondays, 11 a.m.; Wednesdays, 5 p.m.
firekeeperscasino.com, (269) 660-5722

YOU SIT AT A SLOT machine, gazing longingly at the smooth table players while you mechanically push the button that starts up another round of mismatched numbers or sea animals.

Lance Allen, the director of table games at Firekeepers Casino in Battle Creek, has a remedy for that.

Among all area casinos, Firekeepers is the only one that offers classes where patrons can learn the ins and outs of a couple table games before hitting the gaming floor.

Firekeepers offers hour-long blackjack classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays and tutorials for the more complicated game of craps on Mondays and Wednesdays. Classes are always held at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. on each respective day.

"We have guests that come in who have said they are a little intimidated in sitting down at a table game," Allen said. "We want to be able to alleviate that intimidation so when a guest walks in, we are willing to provide a full-service facility for them so they can feel comfortable sitting down at a blackjack or craps table and feel comfortable with the basic skill set they have."

Allen stressed that the classes create an intimidation-free zone for beginners, and newbies shouldn't feel constrained from hitting the live tables right away.

"One of the easier ways is just to come in at a less-crowded time during the week and, this way, you can have the one-on-one time to speak with the dealer and ask your questions," Allen said. "At any point and time you can ask a question of a dealer or a supervisor. That's part of what we do. We don't expect every guest that walks in the door to know everything about everything we have on the floor."

Part of the reason why many casinos haven't found the need for classes or practice tables is the prevalence of both table game information on the Internet and online casinos. Matt Harkness, general manager of Four Winds Casino Resort in New Buffalo, said the only thing a player

should walk in with is the very basic knowledge of the game.

"If you have even a rudimentary knowledge of card games, I don't think it's that complicated for a novice player, with a helping hand from the staff, to get started," he said.

Harkness, who started his career as a dealer, hammered home that dealers are service providers, not the competition.

"It's not the place of the dealers to tell you what to with your own money," Harkness said. "But, it's certainly the place of the dealers to help people to get an idea what the best type of approach to play is."

But, for those that just can't get along with others, Harkness has yet another solution.

"A lot of casinos, including ours here, offer electronic games that mimic the actual table games," he said. "It's not on all types of table games. ... We're soon going to have blackjack. There is less of, I think, an intimidation because you're playing on a machine and it's more similar to a slot machine."

MARCH FIGHTS THE LAW WITH NCAA POOLS

ALITTLE ILLEGAL activity never hurt anyone – at least during March.

If you have the gambling itch as the NCAA men's basketball tournament rolls around this month, well, it's just too bad. Like most of the country, gambling on sports is illegal in Michigan, even at area casinos.

"There was a law that put in effect, voted on by congress in the 1980s, that any state that didn't already have a legalized sports book wasn't allowed to have it," Four Winds Casino General Manager Matt Harkness said. "There is only, I believe, maybe three states that have sports books approved. One place that does is obviously Las Vegas."

So for those of us who are hundreds of miles away from Sin City, this leaves tournament prediction pools, which quite frankly makes March Madness what it is, in the hands of offices, homes and circles of friends.

Law enforcement generally seems to cast a blind eye to the prevalence of this misdeed. However, there is still enough paranoia wafting around that Mark, an employee at a local accounting firm, chose to withhold his last name and place of business when describing his hopes of cashing in some green while watching roughly 48 hours of college hoops.

"It would still be a great tourney and fun to watch, but the pools give everyone, including the casual fan that knows nothing about sports, something to root for in every single game," he said.

Participating in a March Madness pool doesn't necessarily equate you with the hardened sports gambler whose running the risk of having their knee caps busted by an angry bookie.

"I'd say it's a different motivation for different people," Mark said. "I do it just as much for the bragging right as for the money. Others might be in it more for the money."

THIS ISN'T YOUR GRANNY'S BINGO

IF ANYONE KNOWS the trends of bingo, it's George McNees.

The Grand Rapids native has managed the local hall at AMVETS 126 for 20 years now, and he wasn't afraid to admit that some of the stereotypes are true. This includes the motley crew of gray-haired, chain-smoking rabble-rousers that swarm to one of Michigan's 97 registered halls on a nightly basis.

"We get a few of the younger crowd," said McNees, whose hall offers bingo seven days a week. "I think the younger ones start off with their mothers and stuff like that. The ones that start playing really get hooked on it quick. Right now, bingo isn't really a big drawing card for them."

Ok, so MTV probably won't be launching a reality TV show anytime soon about a group of five strangers picked to live in a house and hit bingo halls every weekend for nights of unabashed low-stakes gambling.

That doesn't mean the youngins aren't playing.

Take that same game, mix approximately 10,000 blinking lights, loud music and some booze, and the classic game is catching the eyes of millennials.

"Bingo is accessible to younger people, but I think kids like to go to the casinos because there is more excitement than there is at a bingo hall," McNees said.

Thus is the trend for area Soaring Eagle and Firekeepers casinos, which both offer the game. Soaring Eagle's bingo facility, which is housed in a separate facility from the casino, ranks as the largest in Michigan, offering a number of promotions and twists to liven the games up.

Clint Hill, the director of bingo at Firekeepers in Battle Creek, said the younger crowd is becoming more involved because they get the most bang for their buck.

"It's starting to go with the younger players now because what it costs to play," said Lee, who has managed halls for 14 years. "They realize how it doesn't cost a lot to play but they're getting a lot of time for their money."

At Firekeepers, a player can spend as little as 26 bucks and win up to \$10,000 in a night's session. Lee said he brings in a good crowd on an average night and it spikes when the prize board increases.

Church charity and lodge bingo are regulated on how much money can be used for payouts, limiting how much

cold hard cash a player can pocket. Casinos don't face those constraints, Lee said, and the younger group is taking notice.

Add to that the fact that this is no longer your grandmother's bingo.

"It gets the younger crowd because the more stuff we offer at bingo," Lee said. "Now, we can have cocktails and play bingo at the same time. We have electronic bingo, just like playing bingo on a computer and you can use that and play cards at the same time. It's more of a looser atmosphere."

But through it all, bingo remains a classic game with painfully simple rules and an opportunity to shout loudly in a crowded room without being reprimanded.

"There are so many different ideas you can use from game to game to make it exciting," Lee said. "Plus, the money it offers, makes it exciting."



CASH IN YOUR CHIPS FOR LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

CASINOS AREN'T just for gambling. Sure, everyone likes to try to double their dough at the tables, but for the music-minded, casinos are a good evening hot spot with an eclectic lineup of touring acts and dance club spins.

Little River Casino Resort injects big-time star power in the coming months with tribute shows. Little River will welcome the Chicago Tribute Authority on March 6 and the Australian Bee Gees Show on March 13. The Manistee casino will cap

off the month's headlining entertainment on March 27 with Loverboy (the actual band), which boasts such hits as "Working for the Weekend" and "Turn Me Loose."

Firekeepers Casino (Battle Creek) and Four Winds Casino Resort (New Buffalo) don't reel in big-named acts, but make a point to keep the melodies flowing. Firekeepers offers live music Thursday through Saturday from 7 to 11 p.m. at its bar,

(Continued on page 32)

HOW DEEP IS YOUR LOVE? Bee Gees tribute: March 13, Little River Casino
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE AUSTRALIAN BEE GEES SHOW

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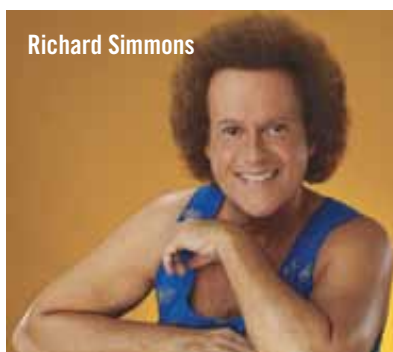
LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

(Continued from page 30)

Kabaret, while DJs take over from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. For a change of pace, Firekeepers brings in comedians on Wednesday nights. Four Winds offers live bands on Friday and Saturdays at Stage Bar.

For the concert-goers who want to lose the junk in their trunks, Soaring Eagle Casino and Resort welcomes the infamous afro of fitness guru Richard Simmons on March 5. International pop icon Engelbert Humperdinck has the unenviable task of following up the spandex-clad Simmons in his March 19 performance.

Soaring Eagle also offers live music in its restaurant, Water Lily Lounge, on Fridays and Saturdays while DJs spin all night Thursday through Sunday at the Talon Sports Bar and Night Club, located in the center of the gaming floor.



Richard Simmons

FIREKEEPERS CASINO
Chicago Tribute Authority
March 6, 8 p.m., \$10-\$20

Australian Bee Gees Show
March 13, 8 p.m., \$10-\$20

Loverboy
March 27, 8 p.m., \$20-\$30

SOARING EAGLE CASINO AND RESORT
Richard Simmons
March 5, 8 p.m., \$10-\$25

Engelbert Humperdinck
March 19, 8 p.m., \$20-\$40

ISLAND RESORT & CASINO
George Jones
March 12-13, 8 p.m., \$27

Rick Springfield
March 26-27, 8 p.m., \$32



A poker tournament at Soaring Eagle Casino

PHOTO: COURTESY OF HEARTLAND POKER TOUR

HEARTLAND POKER TOURNAMENTS

HEARTLAND POKER tournaments are geared toward the everyman who doesn't have the reinforcement of a hefty bank roll, according to President and Co-founder Todd Anderson.

If you don't believe him, meet John Kurfman. He is the quintessential everyman. Kurfman is a 24-year-old farmer from Illinois. He admits that he hates, and is no good with, media interviews. He enjoys playing poker, but never considered himself a pro by any stretch of the imagination.

Last year, Kurfman's weekend of work on the farm was washed out by rain. To kill time, he made his way to the Meskwaki Bingo Casino Hotel in nearby Tama, Iowa to compete in one of HPT's stops. A few days later, Kurfman emerged \$84,000 richer after a win in just his second live tournament.

"It didn't really set in what had just happened," Kurfman recounted. "It took like two days before it finally all set in."

Stories like Kurfman's are not uncommon to HPT, which for six years, has built a reputation of being affordable enough for newcomers and amateurs while boasting

payouts big enough to catch the attention of poker pros.

The tour paraded its "Real People - Unreal Money" mantra through Mount Pleasant's Soaring Eagle Casino last August and November and will return in May for a tournament, and again in November for the Champion's Open.

"It's really a beautiful property for one thing, so it's always a good experience there," Anderson said of HPT's Mid-Michigan stop. "They have great hotel rooms, excellent restaurants. It's one of the nicer places we go, which is the big draw. Also, the fact it's in the middle of Michigan, it pulls in people from Detroit, Chicago, Northern Michigan. It's a nice location."

Buy-in amounts vary for Heartland tournaments. A buy-in straight to the main event generally runs just over \$1,500. However, Anderson stressed that players can enter satellite tournaments with buy-ins as low

as \$50. Winners of those tournaments are fed into the main event.

"We do more of a tour for the average poker enthusiast," Anderson said. "The whole concept was how we can we create an opportunity for people to participate on a televised poker stage without having to come up with a \$5,000 or \$10,000 buy-in?"

Main event coverage for Heartland events are broadcast internationally, reaching 100 million homes in the United States. Coverage also reaches Europe and the Caribbean. All this might be intimidating to a newbie, but Anderson assures his events are an excellent starting point.

Soaring Eagle's tournament director and table games shift manager Donald Morrow said the casino brought aboard the tournament after its poker rooms experience great popularity. The previous three installments of HPT events have been welcomed with great success, especially last November's Champion's Open.

"It's definitely big for us," Morrow said. "It really relies on the area.

We're not Las Vegas, we don't pretend to be. We offer that style of gaming just on a lower scale. We know times are tough everywhere and it gives the average person a shot to do what they see on TV."

HEARTLAND POKER TOUR

Soaring Eagle Casino and Resort, Mount Pleasant
May 14-23
Must be 18 or older to play
soaringeaglecasino.com,
(989) 775-7777

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CASINO DIRECTORY

If you're looking to fulfill that gambler's itch, look no further. Michigan is home to multiple casinos and resorts. Whether you're looking for a night out, or a Vegas-style weekend, you can find the best fit here.

Turtle Creek Casino & Hotel
7741 M-72 E
Williamsburg
(800) 922-2946
turtlecreekcasino.com

Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort
6800 Soaring Eagle Boulevard
Mount Pleasant
(888) 732-4537
soaringeaglecasino.com

Saganing Eagles Landing Casino
2690 Worth Road
Standish
(888) 732-4537
saganing-eagleslanding.com

Ojibwa Casino Resort - Baraga
16449 Michigan Avenue Hwy.
Baraga
(906) 353-6333
ojibwacasino.com

Ojibwa Casino Resort - Marquette
105 Acre Trail
Marquette
(906) 249-4200
ojibwacasino.com

Odawa Casino Resort
1760 Lears Road
Petoskey
(877) 442-6464
odawacasino.com

MotorCity Casino Hotel
2901 Grand River Avenue
Detroit
(866) 752-9622
motorcitycasino.com

MGM Grand - Detroit
1777 Third Street
Detroit
(877) 888-2121
mgmgranddetroit.com

Little River Casino Resort
U.S. 31 and M-22
Manistee
(231) 723-1535
littlerivercasinos.com

Leelanau Sands Casino & Lodge
2521 NW Bay Shore Dr.
Peshawbestown
(231) 534-8100
casino2win.com

Lac Vieux Desert Resort Casino & Golf Course
N 5384 Highway US 45
Watersmeet

(906) 358-4226
lvdcasino.com

Kings Club Casino
12140 W. Lakeshore Drive
Brimley
(888) 422-9645
4baymills.com/html/kingsclub/

Kewadin Shores Casino - St. Ignace
3015 Mackinac Trail
Saint Ignace
(906) 643-7071
kewadin.com

Kewadin Casino Hotel - Sault Sainte Marie
2186 Shunk Road
Sault Sainte Marie
(906) 632-0530
kewadin.com

Kewadin Casino - Manistique
US 2 East Route 1
Manistique
(906) 341-5510
kewadin.com

Kewadin Casino - Hessel
3 Mile Road
Hessel
(906) 484-2903
kewadin.com



Firekeepers Casino, Battle Creek

Kewadin Casino - Christmas
N7761 Candy Cane Lane
Christmas
(906) 387-5475
kewadin.com

Greektown Casino - Hotel
555 E. Lafayette Blvd.
Detroit
(888) 771-4386
greektowncasino.com

Four Winds Casino Resort
11111 Wilson Road

New Buffalo
(866) 494-6371
newbuffalo.com/casino

Firekeepers Casino
11177 East Michigan Avenue
Battle Creek
(877) 352-8777
firekeeperscasino.com

Island Resort & Casino
W 399 Hwy 2 & 41
Harris
(906) 466-2941
chipincasino.com

Bay Mills Resort & Casino
11386 W. Lakeshore Drive
Brimley
(888) 422-9645
4baymills.com

Gun Lake Casino
1123 129th Avenue
Bradley
(616) 681-0498
gunlakecasino.com

GAMBLING PLAYLIST

If you're not feeling lucky, push play on any of these songs to give that roll of the dice some extra confidence.

"Have a Lucky Day" – Morphine
"Luck Be a Lady" – Frank Sinatra
"The Gambler" – Kenny Rogers
"Blackjack" – Ray Charles
"Casino Queen" – Wilco
"Ace of Spades" – Motörhead
"The Card Cheat" – The Clash
"The Joker" – Steve Miller Band

"Kentucky Gambler" – Merle Haggard
"House of the Rising Sun" – The Animals
"Tumbling Dice" – Rolling Stones
"The Winner Takes It All" – ABBA
"Poker" – Electric Light Orchestra
"Poker Face" – Lady GaGa

"Money (That's What I Want)" – Barrett Strong
"Gambler" – Madonna
"The Jack" – AC/DC
"Viva Las Vegas" – Elvis
"Still the Same" – Bob Seger
"The Loser" – Grateful Dead

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TOURNAMENT

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