

Bill Rea ? Worried about problem gambling

Toronto City council has come out in favour of increasing the gambling services available at Woodbine, with the idea of creating what amounts to a full-fledged casino.

The logic is it will create jobs in the area, and that is seldom bad news.

One the other hand, I have a bit of a problem with organized gambling. To put the matter briefly, I believe they take advantage of excessively hopeful people who think they might get rich.

Lotteries are a lot like that too. Many of us, myself included, regularly buy lottery tickets. I spend the same amount (probably more than I should) every week. Granted, I play in the hopes that my numbers might come up one of these days, making me financially secure for life. But I also like to think I'm a realist, meaning lotteries are not likely to finance my retirement.

But there are people who get lucky. I frequently get media releases from the Ontario Lottery Gaming Commission (OLG), telling about some local resident who won a potful of money in some lottery or another

I have been to casinos a couple of times, including the one at Woodbine. An annual trip to Woodbine was part of the vacation routine for my wife and I. But times change and we haven't done it in years.

But I do know there are a lot of people who spend a lot of their time at such establishments, and a lot of money too. I worry about people like that, often wondering what they would otherwise do with the money they part with gambling.

Look around the next time you're in a casino. You'll see a lot of casual gamblers like me, but there will also be a lot of people with dead serious expressions on their faces, pumping coin after coin into the slot machines, oblivious to every thing around them and beyond.

How many of these so-deeply-absorbed gamblers can really afford what they're doing? I'm willing to bet the number who fall into that category amount to much, much more than those who actually win.

Some of you might have seen the 1972 made-for-TV movie called The Night Stalker. It dealt with a vampire who was killing young women in Las Vegas.

I once read an amusing story that the producer of the film was taken aback by how the players in the Vegas casinos seemed oblivious to everything going on around them except their gambling. So he asked the actor playing the vampire, Barry Atwater, to walk around one of the casinos in full costume and makeup. According to the story (I read it on Internet Movie Data Base), Atwater wandered among the gamblers for more than 40 minutes, and no one gave him a second glance.

But it is a fact that winning does happen sometimes.

During one of our vacation trips to the casino years ago, I put 50 cents into a slot machine and did a thousand-to-one pull. The machine immediately froze and started making a lot of loud and scary noises. Beth wandered up, attracted by the noise, and asked me what was going on.

?I think I just won 500 bucks,? I said in a tone so casual it surprised me.

Eventually, a member of the casino staff dashed up, silenced the machine, and bid me to follow him into a small room, where he handed me an envelope with \$500 in cash (20s and 50s, if memory serves), as well as appropriate congratulations, and sent me on my way.

I stuffed the envelope deep into a pocket and returned to gambling, using only the money I had brought in for that purpose.

Another man might have used up that money in a hurry, then dug into the \$500 windfall, probably eventually leaving the premises broke. I walked out with \$500 for which I hadn't budgeted.

?Know your limit. Play within it? is the slogan we hear a lot from OLG, and there is a lot of merit in it. I followed it that day I got so lucky, and indeed I always have any time I've gone into a gambling establishment.

But at the risk of sounding excessively uppity, I know there are a lot of people who don't think that way. And that's what worries me at the thought of Woodbine's operation expanding.

There are so many who don't know their limits, or don't care.

But there are other ways to know when the gambling has gone far enough. I was introduced to one such way 30 years ago last month.

I spent a couple of weeks driving a car as I toured the land of my ancestors; Ireland.

I pulled into Galway late one afternoon, checked in to a modest hotel in the heart of the city, then walked along the main drag, looking for someplace to eat. I passed what was evidently the Irish equivalent of a video game establishment. Out of curiosity, I poked my head in and was surprised to see there were slot machines, and there were people who seemed to be winning.

The machines took 10-pence coins, which (in those days at least) were roughly the size of a toonie, but half again as thick (more

about that later).

Since I wasn't in any particular hurry, I change three pounds to 10-pence coins and decided to try my luck. I inserted the coins, pulled the handle and frequently heard the sound of heavy coins clattering into the plastic bin below, meaning I was winning a bit. It sounded almost like a jackhammer.

After running the 30 coins through the machine, I found myself scooping about six pounds from the bin. Realizing I was on a hot streak, I went about putting those winnings into the machine to see what developed. What developed was a lot more winnings. At the rate things were going, I might have kept it up all night, but several people helped me call it quits.

The noise of winning attracted a lot of attention, and I soon found myself surrounded by a group of admiring fans. The problem is they were all big, mean-looking guys, and I suddenly found myself fearing for my safety, wondering if I was about to be mugged for my winnings.

Realizing I had reached the time for a fast exit, I tried to gather up my winnings, but my hands were not up to handling all those 10-pence coins. One of my ?fans? produced a large bowl (I have no idea where it came from), in which I lugged all the coins to the cashier, and she converted the money into paper ? much easier to carry.

I left the premises, amid the well wishes of my audience. I walked rapidly down the street, throwing worried glances over my shoulders, ready to run for my life at the first sign of pursuit.

None materialized.

I got back to my room, counted the money, and realized I had won enough to pay for the hotel room, with enough left over to stand myself to a pretty decent dinner.

Not every gambler has the benefit of scary-looking guys telling him enough.

My luck was maybe better than I had realized

