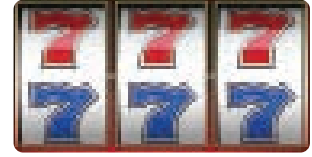


JACKPOT!



Spinning Wheels, from Tokyo to Pennsauken



Sherry and Richard Mashbitz of R&S Wholesale

RICHARD MASHBITZ'S JOB as a bus driver for the Pennsauken School District is to take no risks and get the kids there safely. But when the bus is parked for the day, Mashbitz's entrepreneurial wheels start spinning like the reels of an over-worked casino slot machine.

This is a man who got into selling bison burgers only to have a popular radio talk jockey declare on air that it was one of the worst things he ever tasted. (*Whoever cooked it botched the burger, but when I cooked it for him the radio star's verdict was fine, Mashbitz said.*)

About 18 years ago, Mashbitz turned a corner at a merchandise exhibit and ran into a array of flashing machines that stopped him in his tracks.

Used slot machines! Wow. People LOVE slot machines and their bells, lights and whistles. Selling used machines seemed a delicious idea and Richard Mashbitz bit hard. He and his

wife, Sherry, have been selling used casino slot machines ever since and loving the taste of success.

"I was with him at that show and I thought it would be a nice gig," said Sherry. "I used to run payroll for a large corporation and we also ran my dad's meat business from Philadelphia for a while, but we both always wanted our own business."

Don't get the idea that Richard backs up his truck at Atlantic City casinos and hauls used machines to the R&S Wholesale business the couple run on Route 73 north, close by the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge. It's illegal to purchase modern-era slot machines from those gambling halls; only antiques can be sold legally, Mashbitz said.

"These machines here are from Japan, where you can find them in the pachinko parlors that are everywhere there," said Mashbitz. "Gambling is illegal in Japan so these machines use tokens that players redeem for gifts. At one time, the machines that were used and unwanted were thrown into landfills, believe it or not."

He and Sherry stood close to 40 brightly lit machines that occupy half of the store, which also sells billiard tables and supplies, games of all sorts and other game room must-haves. ("For some reason Mah Jong sells big to people in Medford.") The machines, which range in price from \$300 to \$1000, are all three-reel devices and vary in sophistication. They are manufactured by international companies serving the gaming industry.

"In Japan, they're getting more into digital technology," Sherry said. "The *Lord of the Rings* machine here has animation and scenes from the movie. This *Bon Jovi* machine has video from his concerts and the Bon Jovi fans go nuts over them.

"The more expensive machines are collectibles, like *Marvel*, which has scenes with the comic book characters. *Popeye* is big and *Rocky* has video of his fights and the scene when he runs through the Italian Market."

Mashbitz brings the machines to this country by the container-full, 500 at a time, but he does have growing concerns because "it's getting tighter now and they are talking over there about recycling these things in the future."

The Pennsauken location has been open for about a year; prior to that his outlet was near the now-closed North Catholic High School in lower Northeast Philadelphia. "The Catholics complained at first but found we were good neighbors. The DA's office came in constantly but there was never an issue,

over there or here; check with the Better Business Bureau, no complaints.”

The signs offering slot machines outside his storefront catch a lot of eyes, and business has been good, he said.

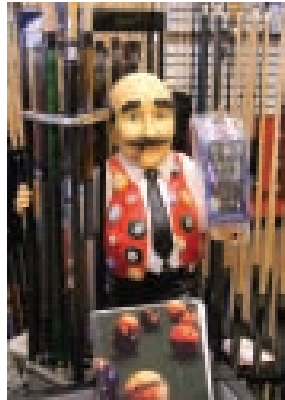
“Some people buy two or three at a time for their homes, their man caves, but it is a mixed business with both men and women. We do a lot with senior citizen facilities. A University of Pennsylvania senior day care facility put five of them in a room where the seniors go in to play and get prizes. It keeps them active and they enjoy it.”

The slots account for about half of the store’s business, with billiard accessories and games selling well.

“Chess is really big right now,” he said. “Chess clubs come in, one from Willingboro, and we have portable sets, oversized sets you can play at the beach or pool area. The shuffleboard table there is 12 feet long; most homes don’t want a 24-footer.

“And because there are fewer billiard parlors, more people have tables at home. We can install a new table cloth for \$200 in a day.”

One other thing about the slot machines – buyers can



adjust the payout percentage anywhere from 65 percent to 105 percent, he said.

“You can set the odds manually, the way they used to do in Atlantic City,” he said. “Now they do it through mainframes that set the slot payouts through the computer system.”

But there is no telling when the jackpot gets hit, right?

“Well, they say results are random, but they can control the percentage. You see one billboard going into Atlantic City that says they pay out 90 percent on selected machines. But tell me how random that is, they pay 90% on

selected machines but what are the others set at? Is it that you have 3000 machines but only five are paying out 90 percent?”

Whatever his customers decide to pay out (in tokens he provides), his company will service the machines.

Business is brisk and life seems to be good for the Mashbitzes. As some passing cars slow down to read his large signs, Mashbitz is asked rhetorically: Could there be a better location? He doesn’t take it rhetorically.

“Well, maybe one,” he said. “I have another location in mind. It’s further down on 73. I keep eyeballing it.”

Inside or out, those wheels keep turning. ■ L.A.

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