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M A G A Z I N E

## GAMBLING ON FUN

For high-stakes event excitement, casino games are a planner's best bet

BY NATASHA GARBER

**B**OOSTED BY THE recent popularity of celebrity poker tournaments and tribal gaming, along with the timeless allure of Las Vegas, casino events are hot, game vendors say. Adding to the excitement are new gaming options and fresh takes on a tried-and-true theme.

**LONE STAR** Glamorized by stars such as Ben Affleck, whose \$350,000-plus win in a single California tournament made media headlines early this year, Texas Hold 'Em is one of today's hottest casino game tickets.

David Peters, whose Vegas Casinos & Entertainment serves a broad range of "Fortune-500-type clients," says the popularity of tournament poker has prompted him to add several eight-person oval, padded, drink-rail-equipped tables to his Orlando, Fla., and Las Vegas inventories.

While blackjack remains the most popular game among event clients of Lucky Lady Interactive Events of Kent, Wash., "the rising popularity of Texas Hold 'Em has generated phenomenal interest," says manager Geri Windecker. To meet demand, she has introduced a number of new Texas



**Sure bets: D&E delivers casino staples including craps and poker tables. Guests go wild with games from Lucky Lady's.**

Hold 'Em tables, which join an inventory that also includes craps tables, poker chip sets, cards and gaming instruction books.

Meanwhile, at Las Vegas-based event game supplier Plan-It Interactive, where blackjack, roulette and craps top event rentals, Texas Hold 'Em setups are also gaining ground. "Made popular by poker tournaments aired on network TV, these tables are in demand," says account executive Alfredo Jaro.

**ALL INCLUSIVE** As for event planners who worry that poker and other strategy-heavy games might prove daunting to event guests, vendors offer reassurance.

"We stress to the client that our dealers (who accompany casino equipment) love to teach and will actively encourage the timid player to step right up and get involved in the action," Windecker says. Also, unlike the real thing, "Our dealers are always willing to offer playing tips as different situations arise during a hand."

Peters says his staffers "often create a table or two for new players where we slow the game down and explain strategies for plays and

bets.” At the same time, he reminds clients to budget for plenty of chips so that experienced players can enjoy the thrill of playing the high-roller role. “These are parties. This is fantasy!” he says. “That’s important to remember.”

**GAME REFRAME** Still concerned that “casino night” might be a tad, well, tired? Fear not, say vendors, who are putting innovative spins on the casino concept.

Peters’ operation, for instance, has introduced such offerings as the macho, upscale “Triple Crown Club.” Ideal as a VIP section or a stand-alone event, the “club” typically includes digital audiovisual horse races, oil paintings of famous horses, a cigar lounge and “loads of masculine furniture and fabrics,” he says. “It’s a great choice for an upper-level-management event, or an event where the concept is time for people to talk without loud noise or a band.”

Ronnie Sheridan of San Bruno, Calif.-based Golden Gate Casino suggests beefing up a “James Bond” theme with her company’s baccarat tables. Or, for a more comprehensive “New Orleans Riverboat” theme, she might provide her popular roulette and blackjack equipment along with a full-service package including “setup, dealing, end-of-party tally and helpful fund-raising information.”

**RISK MANAGEMENT** No matter which casino games planners choose, they should not gamble on logistics.

Give games their space, advises Ellie Bingham of Lakewood, Calif.-based D&E Casino Services. “Our craps table is 11 feet by 4 feet, our blackjack table is 5 1/2 feet by 3 1/2 feet, and our roulette table is 7 feet by 4 feet,” she notes. Setup, however, shouldn’t pose a problem: “Our games are already assembled when we deliver them to the event, and we do not require any power supply unless the event is outside in the evening, where additional lighting may be needed.”

Windecker agrees. “Casino equipment is very space hungry. We will make up a room diagram for the client and venue that easily illustrates how a room can fill up,” she says. Also, she reminds planners, “Casino parties are fairly labor intensive. We use a scale of approximately one setup person for every eight tables in the package ... and at least one person at each gaming table,” plus a casino manager and, possibly, relief dealers.

But the payoff, she says, is well worth it, especially at events where an equalizing factor is essential: “Everybody starts with the same amount of play money and everybody has the same chance to win or lose,” she explains. “We often find the CEO playing at the same table and exchanging jibes with the mailroom guy.” ■

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