

'Contest crack'

The thrill of chasing prizes spawns addicts' clubs in Toronto -- one member won a trip to Sweden to see a band she doesn't like

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There are people who believe in luck, and people who believe in perseverance -- and then there are people who spend at least an hour a day entering contests. Those people believe in both.

Leagues of contest junkies inhabit Toronto and its outskirts. They troll the aisles of the LCBO glassy-eyed, looking for entry slips, waiting for the next big win. They sit in front of their computer at home or work, reloading Web pages over and over to increase their chances. And now and again, they visit one of the three clubs in the Toronto area where they can exchange tips and tales of woe with fellow contestants.

CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post

For Carolyn Wilman, the light bulb went on after she wrestled a fellow winner.

Though individuals have been entering contests since before the dawn of the ping-pong-ball cage, it is only recently that they have organized formally around the cause of scoring as much free stuff as possible. In the GTA, much of the legitimacy that accrues to contesting is due to Carolyn Wilman, the self-dubbed "contest queen," a former marketing professional who has "contested" daily since she was laid off from her job five years ago. She runs the online resource contestqueen.com. In March, she self-published the how-to book *You Can't Win If You Don't Enter*.

Wilman, an Ajax wife and mother of one, had not considered extending her hobby into a real world social setting until August, when she entered a contest through *The Toronto Sun* to win lunch with wrestler Bret "The Hitman" Hart. Runners-up won passes to the Molson Grand Prix and were required to wrestle each other; Wilman wrestled a fellow contest junkie and, while being handily defeated, had an epiphany: Toronto was ready for contest clubs.

Wilman, who wins five to 10 contests a month, says the clubs attract exactly who you'd imagine: people addicted to the thrill of getting something for nothing. "People like me want that feeling all the time. I guess that's why some people drink and some people smoke. Me, I enter. I call it 'contest crack.' To me, contests are a free form of gambling. I'm too cheap to go to a casino, but I still win stuff, and it doesn't cost me anything."

In the past month, Wilman has won an Almay makeup basket from Town Shoes, five sets of movie passes from various newspapers, 25 photo prints from Mc Donald's, a UNO prize pack from YTV, two mascara wands and \$12 at her bowling alley. Her largest win ever was an \$11,000 trip for four people to New York. Alas, she entered her niece in the contest and the niece didn't invite her along.

Bonnie Staring, an Etobicoke writer, is a member of the T.O. Wanna (pronounced

Tijuana)Winners club, which features food, camaraderie and the occasional presentation on how to enhance your contesting skills. What's the attraction? "You can't really talk to your husband too often about contests, or your friends and family. They start rolling their eyes and looking at the door," she explains. "People only want to know about the win."

Kim Patrick, who recently won a three-day trip to Sweden to see Iron Maiden (though she's not a fan), recently gave a presentation to the group on Robo Form, auto formfilling software that can speed up online entering.

Products like Robo Form are contentious in the contesting community, where many think they slant the playing field. "Some people talk about same-sex marriage as being a crucial political subject. For us, it's the whole form-filling software thing," she observes. "There are some organizations that are set up to enter contests on your behalf, but why would you do that? That's like paying somebody to go on your holiday for you."

Companies that sponsor contests have mixed feelings about the hardcore enterers whose livelihoods thrive on their promotions. "There are some people who are not fond of professional contestors, because they believe they taint the whole industry," says John Findlay of Launchfire, an interactive promotions company that helps companies hold contests as marketing tools. "I believe if your contest platform is well designed, you can still get value out of professional contesters. The professional contestor still buys products; they're still a consumer; they still have an income."

Many companies see contests as an excellent way to get consumers to do their data entry for them, tracking the success of a particular promotion through customer response.

The Canadian contesting trend has even spawned a new word. Contest addicts in America call themselves "sweepers," derived from "sweepstakes." Wilman coined the spelling "contestors" and it is now entered in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (though she didn't get a free copy of the dictionary for her efforts).

What makes a good contestor? Positive thinking, of course. But even more important is dedication. Staring and her husband once ate 39 packages of hot dogs over three months in an effort to win a Volkswagen Beetle. Many enter regularly to win things they don't even want. "I'm an ex-ballot-box-junkie," confesses Staring. "If I saw a ballot box, I'd fill out my name and just jam it in there. Until I won fishing lures. And it struck me that maybe I should actually read what the contest is for."

Though Wilman has also won items she has no use for (two tubs of deck sealant for a deck she does not have) she prefers to regift or share her winnings, unlike others who sell prizes on e Bay.

Patrick, the Robo Form demonstrator who flew to Sweden for an Iron Maiden concert in a plane piloted by lead singer Bruce Dickinson, has mixed feelings about her win. "I definitely did feel a little bad that, had somebody that was a huge fan won, it would have meant a lot more to them, because it was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But for me, it's also a once-in-a-lifetime experience to get a free trip to Europe."

She considered ditching the concert and just enjoying her brief stay in Scandinavia but the record company sent along a representative, and Patrick felt obliged to attend. Still, there are stories of winners who haven't played along, like the U.S. woman who won a Super Bowl trip and skipped the game. "I think most people, out of guilt, would go," says Staring. "I don't think Canadians would do something like that."

SLAM THE SHAM: HOW TO SAY SCRAM TO SPAM AND SCAMS

Contesting sound like something you'd like to be addicted to? Toronto contestors offer some simple tips.

LOOK OUT FOR SCAMS The "free week at a Collingwood resort" or prize you have to pay \$50 to claim are typical of contests that aren't contests. Do some research if you're not

sure the contest you're entering is legit.

CONSIDER USING ONLINE TOOLS Most contestors who use automatic formfilling tools do so not just for efficiency but to avoid typos that would cheat them out of a win.

PROTECT YOUR INBOX FROM SPAM Companies run contests to harvest information about you so they can better market to you. Guard yourself from unwanted e- mails.

READ THE RULES Some Contests allow you to enter daily, others only once. Following the guidelines will increase your chances of winning.

TELL AN ACQUAINTANCE IF YOU'VE ENTERED HER NAME IN A CONTEST

The last thing either of you wants to hear is that she hung up on a call telling her she won big because she assumed it was a scam. And if you enter your best friend to win a trip to Jamaica, don't be sure she won't take her boyfriend instead of you. Set up an agreement in advance or set aside your feelings.

Ran with fact box "Slam The Sham: How To Say Scram To SpamAnd Scams"which has been appended to the story.

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