

eyes on the prize

According to those who enter contests as a hobby, winning is everything—even if first place is a booster seat or barbecue they don't need

BY STEVE BURGESS

Luck. It comes in two flavours, and William “Buck” Buchanan has been served both. He’s in Toronto for the first Annual National Contestors Convention—for people who like to enter contests. The gathering at the Sheraton Centre is an offshoot of similar contest-players’ events held across the States, bringing together small but feverishly dedicated groups for whom winning is a hobby.

Buchanan likes to win. And last year, the Memphis native scored big in a beer-company sweepstakes: a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. He was riding that bike in April 2007—on his way to the post office to mail a bundle of contest entries—when a white Oldsmobile made a sudden and very unfortunate left turn. “The guy got out of the car and walked over to where I was lying on the pavement,” Buchanan recalls.

"He said, 'You'll be all right, sir.' Then he drove away."

Now, Buchanan has some shiny new hardware—a brightly painted artificial leg. "No," he says, "I didn't win that."

LUCK is a dodgy and capricious little cat. But the 100-odd attendees at the convention think they know how to tame it. "Luck is a four-letter word," says Dan Bonneteau of Surrey. "*W-o-r-k.*"

Bonneteau starts his days early. "I like to get up at five, when everything is quiet. I sit down with my coffee and go to work." He enters about 100 contests a day. Like many other players, he does most of this online, visiting websites where contests are listed. But the radio also provides contest opportunities: "At 6:18, it's CKNW for Brain Teasers; 7:10, I switch to CKWX for the Insider of the Day contest; 7:15, back to 'NW for the Trip to Mexico; 7:20, it's the Artist of the Day contest." At 7:30, he drives to his job at an auto-parts department, but "before I go in at 8:30, it's QM/FM's Beat the Bank."

Bonneteau's recent scores? His biggest is a \$2,000 Ernst Benz watch from a beer company; he also won free gas for a year and a \$500 Palm smart phone. "Oh, and a booster seat from Canadian Tire," he adds. Any toddlers? "No," he says.

Bonneteau's wife, Andrea, and cousin Karen are with him at the convention, where women make up the

majority of the solidly middle-age crowd. Andrea lists her latest wins: a trip to Hawaii, a luxury-hotel stay at Harrison Hot Springs in British Columbia and, in a "Moolah the Cash Cow" contest held by a Vancouver radio station, \$1,200. Karen Bonneteau won a trip for four to Las Vegas, and a barbecue. "It's still in the box," she admits.

A win is a win.

CAROLYN WILMAN looks around the noisy hotel meeting room and smiles. Wilman, a.k.a. Canada's Contest Queen, is co-organizer of the convention and author of *You Can't Win If You Don't Enter*, a bible for many here. Her winnings over the past seven years are valued at over \$100,000.

Wilman's book presents tips and encouragement for serious players. Tip No. 1: Always read the rules. If Wilman had followed her own advice, she'd have avoided humiliating combat in an inflatable sumo suit. "I won a silver pass to an Indy race from the *Toronto Sun* and The Fight Network," she recalls. "But I didn't read the fine print. In order to go on to win lunch with the wrestler Bret 'The Hitman' Hart—my husband would have been upset if I'd said no—I had to put on a giant sumo suit and wrestle this other contestant in a big ring at the fairgrounds. I got squashed. My helmet got stuck in the ropes. It was a disaster."

But worse than losing the bout was the ribbing afterwards: "'You should have read the rules,' my husband said. 'I read that in a book somewhere.'"

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THE FIRST Annual National Contestors Convention offers a strange mix of hard-edged practicality and eccentric mysticism. Speakers' topics include online safety, the marketing logic behind contests, and lawyer Eric Swetsky's tutorial on contest legalities. Another seminar deals with harnessing feng shui energy to attract luck.

Next door to the main meeting room, a table displays "magic luck" ointments made of gemstones and essential oils. A giant affirmation board is set up for attendees to tack pictures that exemplify their fondest hopes—the better to attract Heaven's favour. The resulting collage reflects what contestors call "the four c's"—cash, cars, cruises and computers.

The opportunities are certainly there. A 2007 issue of *Canadian Con-*

tests Newsletter, for example, featured an astounding array of sweeps, including one from Gillette offering a chance at suborbital space flight. However, there may be provisos, such as the one for cash prizes offered at one migraine-survey website: "Must suffer from condition indicated." I ask convention co-organizer M.J. Mendes if she would fake a migraine just to enter. "No," she muses, "but Mike Smith might."

Smith, a convention-seminar speaker from Toronto, has won three cars—two within 21 days. His total take exceeds \$250,000 in value. He admits to filling out forms while waiting at red lights and in bank queues.

And one woman from British Columbia, who wishes to remain anonymous, has won over a million dollars' worth of prizes in her decades of contesting.

Brian Makse, president of a marketing business specializing in contest

management, says it's all about companies building their marketing databases. "They want you to use their products," he says. "Why? To sell goods and services."

Still, Makse says, companies do have their doubts about filling the treasure chests of serious contest players: "But I tell them it's better to have these people playing than *not* to have them. They're all consumers."

"POPLE laugh at us," says Bonnie Staring of Etobicoke. "They say, 'Why do you bother?'" Like the five other women at her table, Staring is clad in bright red, identifying her as a member of the club T.O. Wanna Winners.

Her groupmates agree that contesting quickly becomes something you can't really talk about with outsiders. "Your kids walk away from you in stores as you're writing down UPC codes," says Donna Dorschu. Universal Product Codes are often required for contest entries. (No purchase necessary, indeed!) Everyone emphasizes the hard work.

And if an hourly wage was calculated based on the resulting rewards? "That," Staring says, "would be really depressing."

THE CONVENTION organizers are offering plenty of giveaways, including

"show bags" containing items such as soybean milk, hats and stuffed Dora the Explorer dolls donated by sponsors. These modest awards are hardly the stuff of dreams, but when the winning names are shouted from the podium, whoops, screams and shrieks mark the thrill of victory. Staring responds to a win by taking the mike to sing a song to the tune of Madonna's "Like a Virgin." She calls it "Like a Contest." "And that was just for a \$50 gift certificate," notes emcee Richard Adams.

To call these people optimists is to state the obvious. Still, their attitude is striking. In a world where companies and salespeople generally are mistrusted, where even advertising tries to affect a cynical tone towards marketing, and where consumers are deeply suspicious of any attempts to profile them or otherwise gain information, contest players dive in: They participate happily in the marketing schemes of major corporations. They are opportunists, but not the cynical kind. Modern prospectors, they pan the contest channels like riverbed gravel to scoop the gold—or, in a slow month, the booster seat—that is there for the taking. They thrive on luck.

Buck Buchanan certainly feels lucky. "I'm alive," he says. "And during my six weeks in hospital, I received hundreds of packages and cards from people I met at conventions. 'Don't give up,' they told me. 'Keep sweeping.'"

Why not upset the apple cart? If you don't, the apples will rot anyway.

FRANK A. CLARK

THE final exam in electrical engineering worried my son, Don. On the last day of class, the professor wished the students luck as he wrote a phone number on the blackboard. "If anyone has difficulty understanding the review material, call this number," he said as he dismissed the class.

On Saturday afternoon, stumped by one of the review problems, Don reached for the phone and heard a recorded message from Dial-A-Prayer.

D. MOORE

My husband and another professor were chatting after a conference when a dazzling, bright-red convertible roared to a stop at the curb. My husband's cohort recognized the driver, a fellow faculty member in his mid-to-late 40s, and complimented him on his car. "Thanks," the man responded. "My wife calls it my mid-life Chrysler."

GAYLA FARRAR

RALPH HAGEN

Through these hallowed halls walks our future.

"Talk about putting pressure on a guy!"

WHEN our daughter, Carolyn, was in university, my husband called her frequently to make sure she was all right. He liked to phone on Saturday night because it was "date night."

One Saturday, at about

10:45 p.m., he called her room and was relieved when she picked up the phone. "Oh, honey," he said, "I'm so glad you're back in your dorm."

"Dad," replied Carolyn, "I'm just getting ready to go out!"

PATTI KUHN

IN A business class, we had to interview a variety of local farmers and write a report. I thought the assignment was a waste of time until I spoke with one 78-year-old farmer. "How much education do you have?" I asked.

"Six years of schoolin'," he replied, "and 72 years of learnin'!"

S. G. H.