

THE PHOENIX

Winner takes all

Inside the prize-filled trophy home of a seemingly obsessive-compulsive contest enterer

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Tom Wethern's house brims with more prizes than the free-toy wing at the Cracker Jack factory. Two slanted-ceilinged trophy rooms on the third floor of the 100-year-old Lower Allston home more than live up to the billing. The right room — with space for only one person to enter at a time — is overflowing with cardboard boxes, all filled with years' worth of spoils. The left room feels as though prizes are practically oozing from its walls: there's a Schecter guitar signed by members of the Cure, an elaborate Super Soaker water gun called a Hydroblade, a radio-controlled car begging to be freed from its box, and T-shirts and hats strewn about like confetti.

A second-floor closet is awash with won cosmetic items: shampoos, face washes, and lotions — *lots* of lotions. "This is one thing they give away all the time," notes Wethern, patting the skin above his long Brillo-ish beard. "Which is good — once you hit 40, your skin starts to go."

Downstairs, a manila folder bursting with congratulatory prize notices — the scrapbooked remnants of a lifetime of contesting — sits on a coffee table. Outside, a large front porch houses one of his biggest spoils, a shiny, nail-polish-red Vespa.

The house is a shrine to Wethern's winnings, a product of the obsession with contesting that he's had for the past 30 years. When he was 12 years old, living off the coast of Georgia on the remote Saint Simons Island, Wethern — who sometimes refers to himself in the third person as Weth — began entering contests. He found them in magazines or comic books, the few connections he had to the outside world. The contests propitiously offered free gifts and trips; all he needed to snag them was a card with his name and address on it, a stamp, and a little luck. It was like gambling via the United States Postal Service.

So Weth cast his contest rod, and eventually reeled in something: a briefcase and a calculator from Apple Computer Inc. They weren't exactly the envy of the other kids in junior high, but they possessed catalytic powers. Soon, contesting was his ongoing hobby.

And it wasn't just mail-ins. After moving to Boston to attend MIT, he mastered the art of winning radio phone-in contests — a process that's two parts mathematics and one part kismet. Weth kept tabs on radio giveaways. He knew former WFNX *Boston Rocks* host Juanita always gave away five tickets to upcoming concerts; sometimes he even knew how many phone lines the station had, and which caller would be the winner. So he worked out a formula.

"If I knew they had three lines for calls, and I wanted to be the 11th caller," Weth explains on a recent Saturday evening at the Middle East restaurant, "I'd try to be caller number three or five first, so that I could keep calling back until I was 11th." (I don't follow this logic at all, but then again I didn't go to MIT.)

With the growth of the Internet also came a surge of Web-based contests. That's when the amount of time Weth spent contesting "exploded," his husband, Steve Gisselbrecht, says a week later, as we sit in their sun-filled living room. The pair have just opened a new batch of prizes, including a hockey puck from the Versus cable network and a T-shirt that reads "I feel a connection."

"A decade ago, I was entering about 50 contests a month by mail," recalls Weth. "Now it's seven or eight a month by mail, and about 50 a day online." Weth spends one or two hours a day, on his lunch break or after his audio-engineering job, perusing a set of bookmarked sites, including online-sweepstakes.com.

"Weth might otherwise be a compulsive gambler," Weth explained in a recent e-mail. (See what I mean about that third-person thing?) "Entering contests gives the same sort of adrenaline rush that gambling does," but without the risk of financial loss, he says. "Now that most all contests can be entered online, Weth doesn't even spend that much on postage anymore."

The Internet ignited his contesting career, and he continued to win: a hairy-armpit keychain, a freezer with 242 pounds of Dreyer's ice cream, a trip to the *Soul Train* music awards in Los Angeles. Eventually, Weth had amassed more than the two-bedroom Mission Hill apartment he shared with Gisselbrecht could handle. "For every awesome prize I won [like the recently awarded \$400 toward concert tickets of his choosing]," Weth recalls, "I also got hundreds of T-shirts and hats." His increasingly enormous collection of winnings soon became a subject of domestic arguments.

"We fought constantly about stuff," says Gisselbrecht. "I'd say, 'I don't want 47 baseball caps when neither of us has ever worn one!' " Still, he understood Weth's compulsion. "This is stuff he feels a connection with," he says. "So, we had to buy a ridiculously big house so we didn't have to break up."

When Weth wins, we all win

Weth wins often, but collecting prizes is not his goal. He's a prize philanthropist of sorts, and he's constantly giving things away — books and DVDs to his friends, kids' stuff to Toys for Tots. He couldn't even let me leave his house without a bag of assembled goodies.

Several years ago, when he won a trip to Nashville and Gisselbrecht was unable to accompany him, Weth was forced to

choose a lucky friend to be his traveling companion — and thus the joys of contesting turned meta. He had a friend set up a Web site, winwithweth.com, where he now re-prizes things he's won. He asks friends to submit haikus or limericks, based on self-appointed themes, and awards prizes accordingly.

Weth also spreads the word about his contests and winnings on the Boston-based message board Lemmingtrail, where his postings — including details about a year's worth of free shows at Great Scott — have themselves won a sort of cult following. "[T]his is probably my favorite thread ever!", Lemmingtrail user danshea noted. "KUDOS! to you and your mission!"

"Last year Weth had a Summer Haiku Contest [Weth's Summer Haiku Madness Contest Series]," says Roger Lussier, another Lemmingtrail user, "which was based on the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Virtues. To win, you had to submit a haiku (in standard 5/7/5 format) that related to the prize," a .51-carat un-mounted diamond. Lussier's entry — "OMG I WANT/GIMME GIMME GIMME PLEASE/MINE ALL MINE ALL MINE" — successfully and hilariously tackled the concept.

On a page titled "Weth Wins in 2007!", Weth posted all his winnings for that year in a set format, with a knowing cheekiness, even specifying whether or not he'd be giving the prize away on his Web site. Example, from early this past year:

PRIZE 13 Coupon for a free 1.75 ounce Butterfinger

SPONSOR Nestlé USA

CONTEST Nestlé Butterfinger Online Instant Win Game

ENTRY METHOD Online

PRIZE DELIVERED BY US mail

SPONSOR'S VALUE Up to \$0.79

VALUE TO WETH \$0.50

DISPOSITION OF PRIZE You have to know that Weth is totally going to chow down on that Butterfinger.

SPONSOR'S CUMULATIVE 2007 DECLARED PRIZE VALUE \$170.55

WETH'S CUMULATIVE [TO DATE] 2007 PRIZE VALUE \$55.65

The list was long, and ventured beyond candy bars — Prize 94 was four Green Monster tickets, with a chance to watch the first inning from behind the Fenway Park scoreboard, and 97 was \$31,000 in cash. On another page, called "Weth wants to give you Ice Cream," he organized group meetings at Cold Stone Creamery so he could chip away at a \$1000 gift certificate.

This year, in lieu of posting his winnings, Weth is providing links to interesting contests so that others may enter. Up for grabs are four trips to Hawaii, 1000 Blockbuster rental memberships and 350,000 packs of popcorn, a chance to record a song for Epic Records and perform it live in Times Square, and 8000 one-day lift tickets for Stratton, Vermont. The prizes are alluring, but Weth's not worried about increasing his competition. "Weth can't win every prize," he says. "Weth has already snagged seven bags of Blockbuster popcorn, but there's plenty to go around."