



## MONTANA CASINO OPERATIONS: A NEW GROWTH AREA FOR TABLE GAMES

by Vic Taucer

### A TABLE GAME RESURGENCE IN INDIAN COUNTRY. CLASS II GAMING MAKES THESE GAMES WORK!

In past articles I have written about the great effort in Indian gaming concerning the growth and expansion of table games operations. In the past few years, casinos in Indian Country have expanded their table games operations, opened table games casinos where there had been none, and in general acted as a great starting point for new innovations in table games operations. This continues currently with the advent of table games operations in a state where this form of casino entertainment was non-existent prior to this year.

On Sept. 29, a great new casino opened in Browning Mont. The Glacier Peaks Casino, owned and operated by the Blackfeet Nation, is a full-service casino that will offer over 400 slot machines, 12 table games, Bingo, Las Vegas-style showgirls and entertainment, and all the amenities you would expect from a casino resort. The casino will employ over 200 people and will have a restaurant and full-service bar. Casino gaming has come to Montana in a big way!

All games and casino products will be in the Class II format, non-house banked games with a players' pool. In table games, the pit will have 12

games, including traditional card games like Blackjack, Poker and Baccarat. As an added attractor, the casino's table games department will also offer Craps and Roulette in a Class II format (using Bingo balls to determine the outcome of the gaming event).

Resurgence in the interest of table games has appeared nationwide, and its effect, especially in Indian Country, is a real growth trend in the live gaming portion of our industry. This new casino addition in Montana is indicative of a national trend, especially in Indian Country. Casinos are adding table games, both in growing existing table games departments by adding new games and in starting table games departments where once there were none. This is great news for table games personnel nationwide.

The resurgence has resulted in the younger demographic, the age group of 21-45, playing table games as opposed to slots, even though they grew up playing video games! These younger groups, as exemplified by the players at casinos who cater to this group, are playing table games instead of slots because table games offer more of what they are

looking for in the gaming experience.

What is the cause of this resurgence? Many reasons abound. Table games are being perceived as "cool," the "in thing," once again. People want to play table games as they are once again bringing people together in a social environment. The resurgence of Poker as a major casino force is a big reason here. Poker on television, in live form and in tournament style has resulted in a great interest and has spread over into other table games, bringing in a new generation. Table games are a hot topic... finally after years of being the "red-haired stepchild of the casino industry" we are growing in force.

Some casinos are hiring veteran staff personnel to initially get these games up and running. This is a tough way to go, but mandatory in some venues. Bringing in the hired guns is a great way to start, but should be just that... a start.

To be successful in table games in new areas, casinos must train their own staff. This table games staff must be home grown, locals to the area who live, work and play in the area where the casinos will be. This is the whole idea behind the spread of gam-

ing: employment for local people in the new industry. The initial set up of the operation and getting started correctly mandates bringing in the right managers.

Gary Green is the general manager of this exciting new property in Montana. A veteran gaming operator with extensive experience in Indian casinos, Green knows how to bring the Class II format into a new casino area and use this non-banking format to make a casino successful. He brings an excitement into an area, over and above the excitement caused by the games themselves. "Our marketing programs, the level of quality our casino will offer and the newness of the casino product in Montana, are keys to making us an instant hit," Green stated. He has also brought in experienced casino staff from other gaming areas, David Cook as director of operations, and Carrie Wilson as director of table games.

To ensure that their casino — especially in table games — utilizes the native population, the management team at Glacier Peaks Casino is going the right way training-wise, to staff their casino. Each dealer is being cross trained in all the table games products that will be offered at this casino in Class II form. Not only will this casino have an excit-

ing table games pit — the only one in Montana — they will also have a professional table games operational staff.

For the tribes in Montana (and in other states) thinking about going into table games, I would explore you enough to train your own staff in your local area. Do not put too much weight on bringing in operational staff for more than just start up. In training your staff, don't go it alone. Do not bring in an ex-dealer or ex-pit boss to do the training. Bring in a professional, a training company that specializes in training table games staff.

**Follow these rules:**

Training your table games staff

1. Use a professional trainer with table games training experience to train this group.
2. Use a set and industry accepted curriculum with textbooks.
3. Set up, follow and adhere to a good set of operational procedures.
4. Train for technical skill and customer interaction.
5. Train dealers and supervisors not with fear but with excitement!

Do not train or try to train dealers by utilizing

other dealers to do the training. Blackjack and other table games are strict, procedurally based games where the right basic training is mandatory. Do not try the requisite use of an ex-dealer with the old "Watch-me-and-learn method."

Table games dealing is a skill and should be taught as such. Most dealers — the good ones — all have attended a professional school to teach this skill. A mandatory timeframe as far as attendance, a detailed curriculum and lesson plan, and a teaching platform that can be used not just to train your initial staff but all others in the future is mandatory. **NAC**

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Poker on television, in live form and in tournament style has resulted in a great interest and has spread over into other table games, bringing in a new generation.



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# Change at the table



*As table game play explodes in casinos across America, tribal facilities add new game types and better technology to capture a larger piece of the action*

BY JAMES J. HODL

**T**he power of television has had a real effect on the gaming floors of Native American casinos nationwide. "Broadcasts of Texas Hold 'Em tournaments have created a new generation of card game enthusiasts. And tribal casinos are eagerly seizing the opportunity," said Gary Green, co-owner of gaming industry consulting firm Southern Dutch Gaming in Las Vegas.

That tribal casinos didn't rush to add table games years ago was strictly a matter of economics, said Victor Rocha, editor of Pechanga.net.

"Nothing brings in more revenue per square foot on a casino floor than slots," said Rocha. "The tribes realized this, so in the 1990s, it was not uncommon for Indian gaming operations to pare tables in favor of adding more slots.

"But this trend has reversed during the past one-and-a-half-years since the poker craze hit, and players—especially younger players—began demanding more opportunities to play card games, at times creating long waiting lines at poker rooms. The excess crowd spilled over to bet-

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## Table Games

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against-the-house table games like blackjack, Three-Card Poker, Caribbean Stud and Let It Ride. Seeing the demand, tribal casinos are responding by expanding their table games sections, often at the expense of slots."

Meanwhile, in jurisdictions such as California, limits on the number of on-premises slot machines is leading the state's tribal casinos to expand their table game operations as a means to increase gaming revenues, said Mike Meczka, owner of Meczka Marketing in Los Angeles. This has resulted in an insatiable demand for new and interesting games, making California tribal casinos a first stop for all game marketers, he noted.

### Table growth

Whatever the reason, no gaming facility has been immune to table game fever, and all are racing to meet increased demand with new product, better facilities, improved customer service and improved technology.

"Business for all types of card games was very good in 2005," said Frank Spurduto, director of table games at the Turning Stone Resort & Casino near Oneida, N.Y. "While blackjack remains Turning Stone's most available card game, Three-Card Poker was our hottest specialty game last year, attracting more players and generating more revenue than the year before. Mini-Baccarat and Let It Ride also were popular."

"In response to this growth, Turning Stone is looking at giving its customers more opportunities to play," Spurduto



Frank Spurduto

said. "We now have 22 tables in the poker room and 102 table game stations, and additional tables will be added during 2006."

Pechanga Resort & Casino in Temecula, Calif., also had a growth year in table games, said Larry Miranda,



Tribal casinos, such as Ledyard, Conn.-based Foxwoods, pictured here, are improving table pit areas to capture a larger slice of the table play pie.

vice president of table game operations. Of Pechanga's 158 table game stations (up from 90 in 2003), 111 are devoted to blackjack. The number devoted to Mini-Baccarat rose to 16, which Miranda credits to increased play due to

the introduction of a "squeeze" game where customers get to hold their baccarat cards. Pechanga's hottest specialty game is its in-house creation, Pechanga Craps, in which cards substitute for dice while following the rules of the popular

## Tailor made

Special tribal table game needs are no problem for most manufacturers

In tribal gaming markets, not all table games are equal. Indeed, thanks to widely divergent state gaming regulations, a table game that is perfectly designed for a Las Vegas casino may not be so in North Carolina tribal gaming facility.

Fortunately for the Indian gaming market, manufacturers can adapt to the widely divergent table game rules and regulations.

In Oklahoma, for instance, table games in which patrons play against the house are illegal. So many tribal casinos there have adapted blackjack and other games so that bets go into a player pool, which goes to the person (or persons) with hands that beat the dealer's, explained Gary Green of Southern Dutch Gaming. As Oklahoma allows casinos to take 10 percent of each bet, a player who bets \$5 on a hand must, at the time of the bet, place an additional 50 cents in a separate pool for the house.

Game marketers have adapted their games and playing surfaces to meet Oklahoma rules. Table tops at Oklahoma tribal casinos will have an area marked off for the house's percentage, Green noted.

In some other jurisdictions, table games are limited to those played with cards. Several game marketers have thus developed games that play like roulette and craps, but with cards substituting for the roulette wheel and dice. Some of these games are designed to play as fast as actual roulette and craps, with special side bets added to boost the excitement of play, Green said.

—James J. Hodl

dice game. Pechanga will soon triple the tables offering this game, Miranda noted.

A steady increase in table game business has prompted the Barona Valley Resort and Casino near San Diego to increase its table game stations a few tables a year, going from 52 in 2000 to 68 in 2005, said Michael Patterson, director of table games. The casino also now has a 15-table poker room.

High stakes card games are cited by many industry consultants as the big draw at Barona, with bets of up to \$10,000 accepted at some blackjack tables. High stakes can even be found at the specialty game tables.

Randall Drodody, vice president of table games at the Grand Coughatta Casino in Kidder, La., has likewise felt the public's growing demand for more table game action.

"We added 12 tables in late July, for a total of 73," Drodody said. "To take advantage of the poker craze, Grand Coughatta also created a Party Pit of 16 tables offering our most popular games, manned by our most high-energy dealers, and backed by music and a party theme that is changed every two weeks."

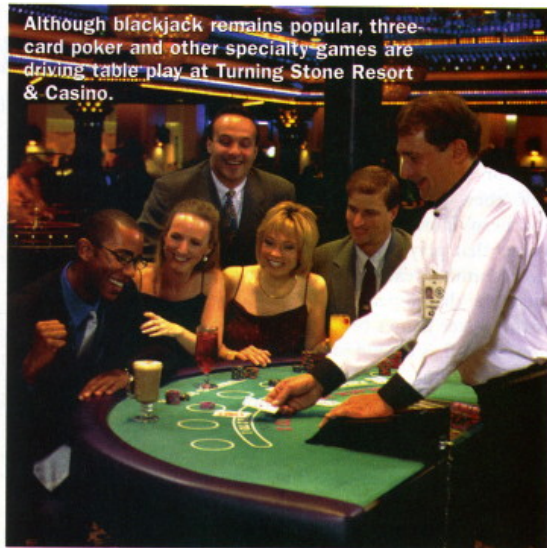
With 302 game tables already in operation, the Mohegan Sun Resort &

Casino in Uncasville, Conn., isn't planning to expand its table game floor. But finding new games that excite players is an ongoing strategy, said Rocco Santoro, vice president of table games. In the past year, Santoro has seen a shift in player patronage from blackjack to poker-based and Pai Gow-based specialty games.

#### Finding the right games

As tribal casinos look for new table games to add to the mix, they appear most attentive to trying out the many new table versions of the popular Texas Hold 'Em poker game. Getting the most looks are Shuffle Master's Ultimate Texas Hold 'Em and Lakes Entertainment's All-In Hold 'Em, which play like the regular game, with players getting two cards each and creating winning hands with community cards, but with bonus

Although blackjack remains popular, three-card poker and other specialty games are driving table play at Turning Stone Resort & Casino.



bets that offer up to 500-1 odds on getting a flush.

Others getting more than a cursory glance include several card games based on Pai Gow—Shuffle Master's 6 Card Poker (in which players can risk up to 10 times the ante to build up winnings), and Masque Publishing's Spanish 21 (a blackjack game played with a 10s-free

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## Table Games

(Continued from Page 13)

48-card deck).

"The common criteria at tribal casinos for selecting new table games is that they play fast and clean," said Southern Dutch's Green. "They want games that play quickly enough to create communal excitement among all at the table; that appear to be as fast-paced as the poker games broadcast on television, as well as enable more games to be dealt per hour. And they want games that play clean; that lack complicated betting rules that can intimidate novices."

New games must also have staying power; that players will come back to play again and again and make the game profitable for the casino, said Pechanga's Miranda.

"We let the market decide which table games we offer," Miranda emphasized. "Each new game we decide has possibility gets a three-month trial at



Tribal casinos looking for an operations edge are turning to specialized systems, such as Bally's MP 21 (MindPlay).



## Exotic growth

Specialty table game tournaments are on the rise at tribal casinos

To better market their table game offerings, many tribal casinos are turning to tournaments, even for unique specialty games such as Pai Gow Poker and Caribbean Poker.

Turning Stone Resort & Casino near Oneida, N.Y., has been running specialty game tournaments for several years, director of table games Frank Sperento said. He reports such tournaments to be popular, attracting crowds of good players who like nothing better than to fit their skills against other good players, especially when a larger than normal top prize is at stake.

Meanwhile, table game producer Shuffle Master has expanded the tournament offerings for its proprietary three-card poker games. Last year, the firm staged a national tournament for the game, with qualifying events at casinos nationwide, and the finalists battling it out at the Rio All-Suite Resort-Casino in Las Vegas over the Thanksgiving weekend for a \$1 million top prize. Shuffle Master senior vice president Brooke Dunn said this tournament was so successful that it will be repeated in 2006, and that tournaments for the firm's other specialty games were in the planning stages.

—James J. Hodl

Pechanga. If, at the end the period, it is gaining customers, we keep it. If not, out it goes!"

Turning Stone also sees a growing market for craps, and is planning to add more tables for this dice-based game.

"We are promoting craps to young people," Sperduto said. "While some may see craps as a World War II-era game played by our grandfathers, the game is fast moving and offers many betting options that makes it exciting to play—just what today's younger customers demand. So Turning Stone is offering two classes a day to teach players the rules and betting strategies of craps, so they won't be puzzled or feel intimidated when they encounter a craps table on the gaming floor."

Southern Dutch's Green, however, warned that the poker craze won't last

forever. To keep seats filled at table games, tribal casinos will have to market the games they offer, just as they now do for their various slot machines, he emphasized.

### Attracting, keeping players

Many tribal casinos are aware of the need to market their operations better and are acting on it.

"Let's face it. We all offer pretty much the same table games. To separate us from the other gaming venues, Pechanga is putting greater emphasis on providing superior customer service. Our new slogan is 'Service Guaranteed!'" said Miranda.

As part of this effort, Pechanga is training all its employees—from dealers to managers—on how to meet all customer needs. Emphasis is placed on how to properly talk to guests, and in exhibiting a friendly attitude. And systems are being put in place to measure how well employees are doing in providing customer service up to the new standards.

Turning Stone's Sperduto is in agreement, noting that "we've long emphasized customer service as the way build regular patronage. When people can easily fly to Nevada or New Jersey, they'll still opt to travel to upstate New York if it means getting excellent customer service."

At several tribal casinos, managers are looking at table game management systems as the ultimate marketing tool. These systems can track play and identify the best customers. In turn, casinos can target these valuable customers for

comps, creating a major incentive for their continued patronage at the casino.

The two table game management systems receiving the most tribal attention are the Intelligent Table System (jointly offered by IGT, Shuffle Master and Progressive Gaming International) and the MP21 (MindPlay) system by Bally Gaming & Systems.

The advantage of such a system is that by automatically collecting player data, it frees pit crews from having to record play data by hand, allowing them to perform other vital customer service tasks, said Rich Soltys, Bally Systems' senior vice president. As MP21 automatically analyzes the collected data, tribal casinos can identify who their most valuable customers are such as the fellow who plays quietly but steadily, rather than the flamboyant gent who may play short sessions. The quiet guy will appreciate being singled out for special comps, Soltys added.

The MP21 collects table game data through Bally's VisionCore optical-imaging system that spots minute differences in identifiers on MONEYpiece Intelligent Chips. The Intelligent Table System collects data through the movement of gaming chips fitted with RFID microchips. ■

## Roll of the dice

*Olympia Dice develops a craps game for the younger set*

**S**o you say craps is a game of interest only to older players from the same era as Nathan Detroit and Abbott and Costello? No problem!

Olympia Dice of Terrell, Texas, has developed what it claims is an even faster, more sociable version of craps that increases the game's appeal to younger players.

"Lonestar Craps eliminates the Big 8 and Big 6 bets that most players don't like while creating 5-to-1 odds on 12 High and 2 Low bets," said Olympia owner Clay Cacas. "The result is a faster game (more plays per hour) with more action that pleases both novices and old timers, while anchoring the game's odds at only 5.5 percent in favor of the house."

"The lure of winning serious money faster makes the games more exciting to all players," he added.

—James J. Hodl

**Pechanga is training all its employees—from dealers to managers—on how to meet all customer needs. Emphasis is placed on how to properly talk to guests, and in exhibiting a friendly attitude. And systems are being put in place to measure how well employees are doing in providing customer service up to the new standards.**



*"Chief Boyd and I have been creating things for a long time."*

*- Barry Thalden*

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## Games of Chance

It's official: In Oklahoma, casino gambling has arrived. Indian gaming, once the domain of low-stakes bingo halls, has come online with big wins, big buildings, and big bucks. Resort casinos are now hot tourist destinations, with golf courses, restaurants, live entertainment, fitness clubs, and conference facilities all part of the package. Join us as an *Oklahoma Today* contributing editor explains how it all got started while letting us vicariously tag along on his casino adventure.

By Chad Love

Photography by Tom Luker

**H**UMANS ARE BORN GAMBLERS. AS a species we seem to be genetically hard-wired to tempt fate, to eschew a sure thing in favor of the tantalizing possibility of a bigger payoff. We've been doing it since some enterprising Cro-Magnon, tired of digging up gophers and roots, gazed longingly at all those delicious-looking yet large and ill-tempered woolly mammoths lumbering about the plains like so many super buffets. Carefully weighing the risk versus the reward, our prominently

browed high roller would then set out to hit the Paleolithic equivalent of the jackpot.

And while we no longer have to gamble with our lives in order to procure our basic sustenance (at least in this country), our innate urge to beat the odds is as strong today as it ever was. Whether you consider it a harmless recreational activity, an addiction, or a corrosive social disease, gambling is as old as we are, and judging by the staggering amount of money the gaming industry generates each year, there are an awful lot of us getting in touch with our inner caveperson.



Cha-ching! Oklahoma's Indian tribes have hit the jackpot with the addition of destination casinos like the Cherokee Casino Resort in Catoosa. The 95,000-square-foot facility attracts approximately 5,000 people a day with its 1,482 electronic games, 39 blackjack tables, 36 poker tables, and other amenities.

## Hit the Road

Oklahoma is no exception. In fact, with, at last count, some eighty-seven casinos and gaming centers statewide and several more either under construction or planned, we are fast becoming a gambling destination for homegrown high rollers and out-of-state players alike.

Much like a box of instant mashed potatoes, all we had to do was add the right ingredients to the mix, stir, and—voilà!—instant industry, one that some say will spur not millions, but perhaps billions of dollars in development over the next few years.

Are we the next Vegas? We haven't yet been assaulted by Tom Jones impersonators, so it remains to be seen just how pervasive the gaming industry will become. Those on the inside, however, are confident this is just the beginning.

"I think we're going to see development of bigger, more destination-type resort properties in Oklahoma, and I think that'll happen within the next couple of years," predicts Brian Foster, general manager of Lucky Star Casino in Concho and the current chairman of the Oklahoma Indian Gaming Association. "We're going to see a big expansion in all the

## 'It was just a single metal building. No resort, no casino.'

—Gina Olaya, on the precursor to Cherokee Casino Resort

tribes' casino properties and all the amenities that come along with that."

David Stewart, CEO of Cherokee Nation Enterprises, concurs.

"There will probably be over a billion dollars pumped into the economy over the next couple of years," says Stewart. "All this activity has a multiplier effect on the economy, and it's going to be noticeable."

Stewart says the Cherokee tribe alone will be reinvesting more than \$150 million into capital projects to build new casinos and expand existing ones.

In fact, of Oklahoma's thirty-nine federally recognized tribes, twenty-seven either have gaming facilities or are planning them. Oklahoma now has more tribal gaming centers than any other state in the union.

Walk into any Oklahoma casino on a weekend night, and you'll be rubbing shoulders, literally, with a mass of like-minded humanity. Oklahomans have always been gamblers: Our genesis, our continued history, and most of our traditional industries are predicated on risks, hunches, and a not-insignificant share of wild guesses.

With that kind of background, the question isn't will Oklahomans embrace casinos, for they clearly have, but how quickly they will become a defining part of our state culture. Visit a few, and you'll realize that question is being answered in real time.

**I**N 1993, WHAT WOULD EVENTUALLY become perhaps the most popular casino destination in Oklahoma was just another non-descript tribal bingo hall perched on U.S. 412 east of Tulsa.

"It was just a single metal building," says Gina Olaya, director of corporate communications and government relations for Cherokee Nation Enterprises. "No resort, no casino. We offered paper bingo, and that was about it."

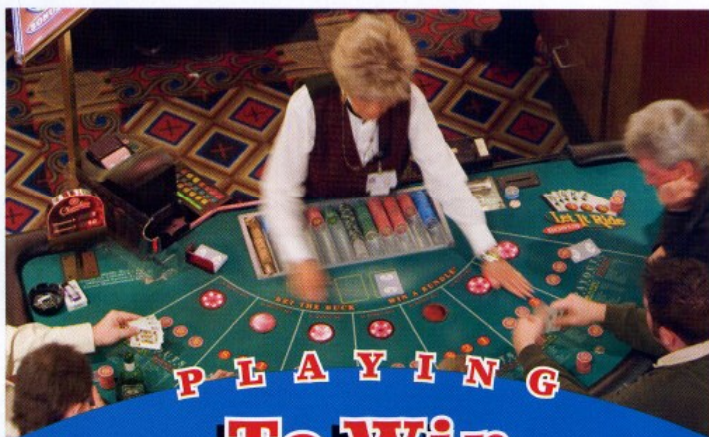
Like many of Oklahoma's tribes, the Cherokees' sole gaming industry consisted of small-stakes bingo, which they inaugurated in 1992. Other tribes had been offering it for years.

The history of Indian gaming can trace its roots to 1979, when the Seminole Tribe of Florida first started offering high-stakes bingo jackpots much larger than those then allowed by state law. The Seminoles won the ensuing state-level court battle, and in 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the legality of Indian gaming with a decision in favor of the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, a tiny tribe sued by the state of California.

The result was the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, which clarified and codified the legality of Indian gaming. The act allowed tribes the exclusive right to offer and regulate gaming on Indian lands, provided it isn't expressly prohibited by federal law and is conducted in a state that does not prohibit gaming activity.

In Oklahoma, that meant tribal bingo. Given the federal green light, those state tribes that had already been offering small-stakes bingo prior to passage of the IGRA could now up the stakes considerably.

"When the Cabazon decision upheld the earlier Florida ruling, thus creating the IGRA," says Bill Thompson, a public administration

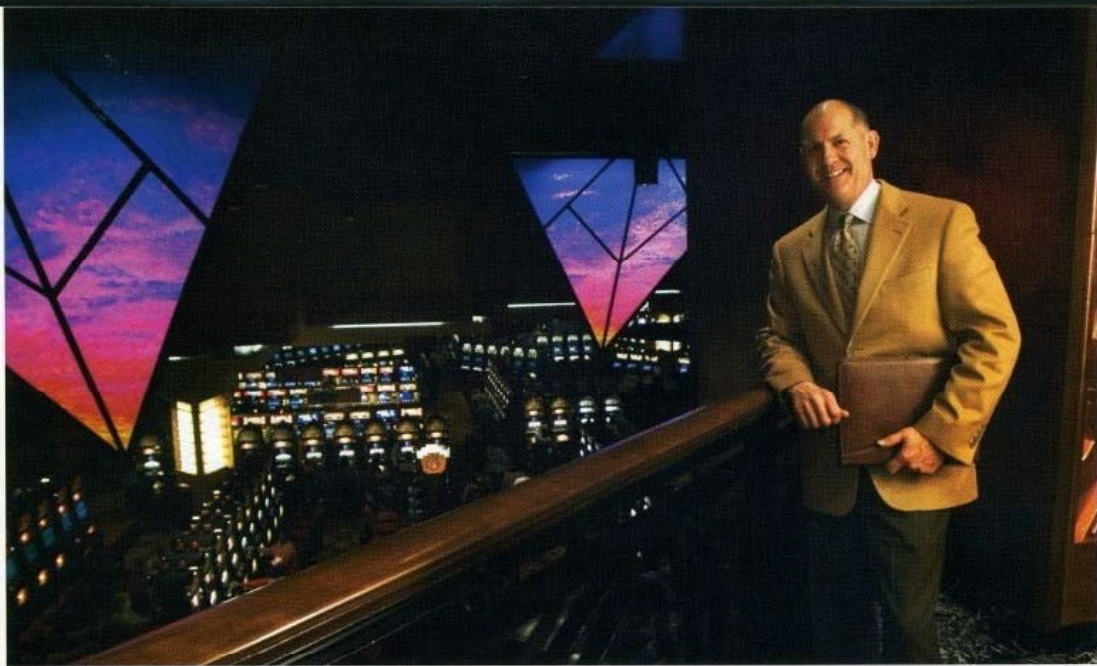


## PLAYING To Win

**If you don't find a spot in the winner's circle, free stuff helps.** Last October, a gambler won really, really big at the Cherokee Casino Tahlequah, racking up \$192,000 in a progressive jackpot that marked the most sizable Oklahoma haul in Cherokee Casino history. For most of us, however, a nearly two hundred grand

payoff seems remote. With profits in the millions annually, there's no doubt the house is the biggest winner. To make all of that loss a little more palatable, many casinos offer reward programs that include discounts on room rates, food, and other casino amenities.

—Steffie Coreoran



**Cherokee Nation Enterprises CEO David Stewart has a lot to smile about. In the last year, he has overseen a \$29 million payroll increase.**

professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas and nationally known expert on the casino industry, "that's really when Indian gaming started spreading across the nation."

The advent of more sophisticated and Vegas-like electronic bingo machines in the mid-nineties signaled the end of the prefab metal bingo-building era for the state's tribes.

"We really started getting kicked off in 1997, when we were able to work with game designers to offer faster and more fun bingo and pull-tab games," says Foster. "For us, '97 was the beginning of the change from the old bingo hall to the casino-type atmosphere."

The transition was complete with the passage of State Question 712 in November 2004, which created the State-Tribal Gaming Act, commonly known as "the compact." In a nutshell, the compact allowed the tribes to introduce newer machines and card games (specifically blackjack and poker), and in return, the state gets a percentage (usually 4 to 6 percent for machines, 10 percent for card games) of the take from the new "compact" games. The act also allowed the state's racetracks to install a fixed number of gaming machines on-site, resulting in what has become known as the "racino."

It wouldn't be hyperbole to claim that 712's passage set off an unprecedented and appropriately karmic land rush among the state's tribes.

Many are now playing catch-up to places like Cherokee Casino Resort. Construction started in 2002, and the facility has been open since December 2004.

Any doubts a would-be gambler may have about the newfound primacy of tribal gaming vanishes upon approaching Cherokee Casino Resort. The art deco-themed structure resembles a mother ship amid a flotilla of smaller ancillary businesses that have popped up around it to take advantage of the huge crowds that flock there. A massive color display under the roadside marquee plays an endless loop of happy-looking people presumably winning large amounts of money and having lots of fun. It's obvious the tribe wants to convey the sense this is a destination resort.

"It's not all about the gaming," says David Stewart. "We try to make it an entire experience for you when you come. We prefer to call it entertainment."

And people are responding. "We've been open a year, and we've seen a pretty steady increase in attendance over that year," says Stewart. "Because we're a resort destination, the percentage of out-of-state traffic is starting to grow steadily."

Stewart says the casino's out-of-state percentage started at 15 and has risen to close to 30 percent. "We've built something people like," he says.

The heart and soul of the place is the gaming floor, some 80,000 square feet of space that contains 75 card tables, nearly 1,500 gaming machines, five restaurants, four bars,

and venues for live music. The attached 150-room hotel is very nice in its own right, but without the casino, it's just another pleasant place to spend the night.

**I** ARRIVE ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON, and the casino's Rhode Island-sized parking lot is virtually full. I am pretty sure they aren't all there for the pool.

After the hike from my truck, I check in, dump my bag in the room, and saunter downstairs to check out the casino. I have no idea what to expect. I've never been in a casino before and want to experience it fresh, with no guides, no handler, and no clue.

The Cherokee's gaming floor is situated on a lower level than the hotel lobby, and as I stand poised to descend into its cavernous darkness, I make my first, and perhaps most important, observation about casinos: Depending on the vagaries of individual taste, they can be either a feast for the senses or an assault on them. They are crowded, they are loud, and they are smoky. It's no Walden Pond, but of course it's not meant to be.

I step down to the casino floor, greeted by a cacophony of light and sound. I am immediately struck by the gulf-sized dichotomy of experience observable in a casino, diametrically opposed story lines often playing out literally shoulder to shoulder as people sit bathed in the soft, multicolored moon glow of row after row of gaming machines.



There are hundreds of people here, representing every shape, size, color, and walk of life, a whirling dervish of dreams and disappointment. The screen flashes, the shoulders slump, and another dollar disappears silently into the machine, while one row over, someone else hits a jackpot and gives an animated whoop.

I walk by the poker and blackjack tables. Every one is full. I lean against a nearby wall and watch the action, not understanding a single bit of it. Whatever stratagem, the individual styles are as diverse as the players.

Some casually hover over their cards as if the three or four hundred bucks worth of chips they just threw in are, like, no big deal, dude. Others sit up ramrod straight and as tightly wound as watch springs. Eyes narrowed, lips drawn tightly, they play in a serious, clipped style that doesn't invite conversation. Some wear hats drawn low over eyes shaded by dark sunglasses, just like the professionals on television poker tournaments. (Indeed, Cherokee Casino Resort recently entered into a marketing agreement with Scotty Nguyen, a professional poker player apparently famous for winning large sums of money and ending every other sentence with the word *baby*.)

Bored with the action at the tables, I wander over to the complimentary coffee, fill my cup, and make for the gaming machines. It is time to win some money, baby.

But first, I need some coins, right? These are slot machines, right? Just like in Vegas, right? I walk up to a cashier's booth and ask if the machines take quarters or nickels.

"You've never done this before, have you?" the cashier asks rhetorically.

"The machines only take bills or player's club cards," she says, smiling. I exchange a five for five ones and wander back into the maelstrom. I walk the psychedelic rows of machines until I find myself standing in front of one emblazoned with an airbrushed likeness of Kenny Rogers in his prime, say circa-1979.

"It's time for counting when the playing

is done," Kenny suddenly intones in a tinny, metallic voice that sounds like it was recorded on a fast-food drive-through intercom. I slide a dollar into the machine. "All right, I feel refreshed," replies Electro-Kenny.

I look at the screen and am instantly confused. This is a slot machine? There's an electronic bingo hopper on one side of the touch screen, several horizontal rows of symbols in the center, and the instructions, while written in English, are of a language I am utterly unfamiliar with. What is all this bingo stuff, anyway?

## RISK TAKERS

### A New School for an Old Business

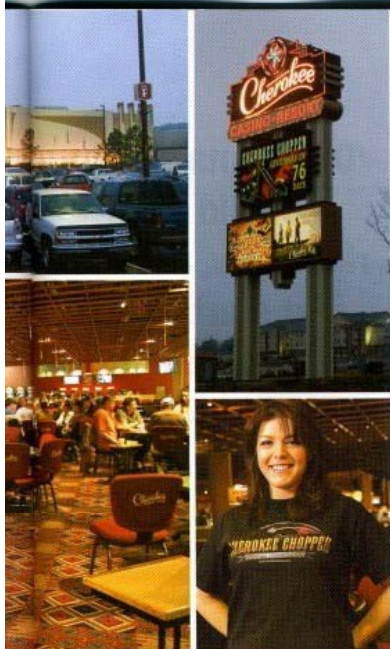
At ACES777 in Oklahoma City, card sharks are taking their hobby one step further by turning it into a career. This 7,000-square-foot training facility offered its first classes in August 2005 and has since graduated dozens of dealers on to the Oklahoma gaming scene. "If you're eighteen years of age, and as long as you didn't flunk math, we can teach you. And if you did flunk math, we can still teach you to deal poker," says school owner and Muskogee native Skip Davis. (405) 603-8888 or [aces777.com](http://aces777.com).

**T**HIS IS THE POINT IN the story where the average, nongambling reader falls down the bottomless rabbit hole of the finer points of gaming definition and regulation.

Remember the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988? It set up three "classes" of Indian gaming. Class I is traditional tribal gaming that doesn't have a bearing outside the tribe. The Class II designation was written basically to include bingo and all electronic facsimiles of bingo, while Class III is everything else, including slot machines and full-blown Las Vegas-style gaming.

The rub is that "electronic facsimile" part. At the time the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was written in 1988, the only electronic form of bingo was a hand-held electronic bingo dauber that essentially allowed you to play multiple games at once.

"But in the nineties, along came the



Food, folks, and fun. The Cherokee Casino Resort in Catoosa boasts many winners, including Lisa Hurt of Coweta and Diana Cantero of Tulsa, far left. Cherokee Nation Enterprises employs 2,800 people, including cocktail server Chelcy White, bottom right.

**'I like to say that in Oklahoma, you have Class two-and-a-half gaming. The slots in Vegas or Tunica are still not the same as the compacted games in Oklahoma.'**

—Gary Green

technology boom spurred by the Internet bubble, and some brilliant technologists came up with a different facsimile of bingo," says gambling industry consultant Gary Green, a resident of Delray Beach, Florida, whose business is based in Las Vegas. "The result was a completely electronic game that looks and plays remarkably like a slot machine but is classified as bingo."

That, according to Green, is what Class II gaming has become in Oklahoma. "I like to say that in Oklahoma, you have Class two-and-a-half. Those are the machines you'll find mostly in the casinos in Oklahoma. In November 2004, when State Question 712

passed, it approved what in other states would be Class III gaming, but the way the law was written, it's not true Class III gaming. The slots in Vegas or Tunica are still not the same as the compacted games in Oklahoma."

Currently there are around 3,200 compacted machines out of a statewide total of around 30,000, but that may be changing soon, thanks in part to the Terminator.

When Arnold Schwarzenegger won the California governorship of California, one of the issues his administration pursued was the question of Class II gaming.

"He came up with this scheme to tax the tribes a lot more than they were being taxed under the existing contracts with the state," says Green. "The tribes responded by saying, 'We'll just put in more Class II games.' California has a huge number of casinos, and it became a major political issue."

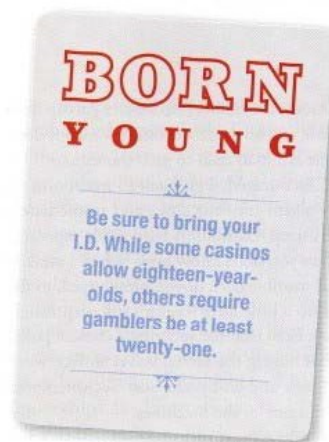
The state of California argued to members of Congress that these games were not representations of bingo, but de facto slot machines that play a phony virtual bingo.

"Whether this is true or not is obviously a matter of debate, but that's the issue," says Green. "As a result, the National Indian Gaming Commission is taking a hard look at these Class II machines, and there are standards being proposed that would virtually eliminate current Class II machines and redefine it to be mostly paper bingo."

If the guidelines are approved, most of the popular Class II machines in Oklahoma would be illegal, including Electro-Kenny, who is patiently waiting for me to punch the flashing button.

I still can't decipher the instructions, so I shrug my shoulders, hit the button, and hope. Ten seconds and three rolls later, the game is over, Electro-Kenny is counting my money, and I still have no idea what just transpired, except that I lost a dollar. That's when I realize my second and equally important observation about casinos: Walking into one completely ignorant of even the most rudimentary concepts of how the games are played is not a strategy for success.

Not exactly flush with triumph, I decide to cut my losses and walk around the floor. Al-



though the card games are popular, it's obvious the machines are what draw the most people. There are a dizzying variety of them. There are games that take the standard slot machine motif with names like Liberty 7s, Royal Reels, Press-It-Up-Poker, Mount Cashmore, Jacks or Better, and Mr. Money Bags, and then there are the games with themes so seemingly incongruous with gambling, it frankly makes you wonder what kind of creative block their designers were grappling with.

I sit down at one such game based on—I'm not kidding—the movie *Alien*. Now I love H.R. Giger's big-headed palooka as much as the next guy, but intergalactic terror is not exactly an image that makes me want to part with my money. Give me a dancing leprechaun or something. There must be some deep industrial psychology at work, however, because I slip in a dollar anyway. And lose it.

I walk on and suddenly find myself along a row of machines that anyone over thirty who ever picked up a comic book would recognize, sea monkeys. Yes, someone actually designed a slot machine based on the cruelest hoax ever foisted upon the youth of America.

This is a game I can understand the logic behind. The sea monkey ad seduced us, promised us amazing and wondrous things. I bought into it. Didn't we all? When the prize finally arrived, we rushed to our room, tore open the package, and discovered we'd just paid \$3.95 plus shipping and handling for a cheap plastic aquarium and a packet of brine shrimp eggs.

Sea monkeys were, for many of us, the first game of chance we ever played—and lost. And now some brilliant designer has gone and made a game out of it. This more than makes up for the alien. I can't wait to play.

Two hours later, I still can't wait to play. The sea monkeys are easily the most popular

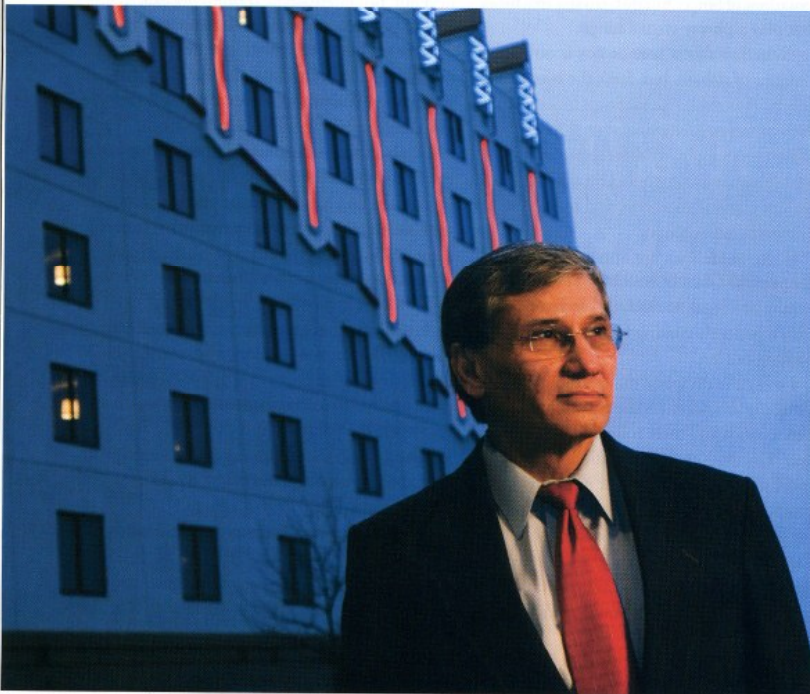
## Hit the Road

games in the casino. No one ever gets up from them, and on the rare occasion someone does, there is a mad rush to grab the seat.

Discouraged, I go back to my room, set my alarm for four a.m., and immediately fall asleep. Gambling's hard work, especially when you don't know how. When I awaken and stumble back down, bleary-eyed, to the casino a little after four, it's still surprisingly busy. I can hear the soft plastic clink of poker chips hitting the tables, velvet surface worn smooth and shiny, the soft Technicolored symphony of the machines.

I make my way back to the sea monkeys, but there's a body in front of every machine, and none of them act like they're going anywhere anytime soon. Whatever the motivation—nostalgia, revenge, or optimism—it's obvious these people are here to stay. Too groggy to wait it out, I give up for good this time. I shuffle back to my room and fall asleep dreaming of cheerful underwater kingdoms.

**'For our language and culture to thrive, we have to have strong local communities,' says Cherokee Nation principal chief Chad Smith. 'For the communities to be strong, our people have to have economic opportunity. Gaming helps create that economic opportunity.'**



**F**OR GENERATIONS, AMERICAN INDIANS HAVE struggled to get their slice of the American dream. Can casinos help with that?

The tribes say yes.

"Eventually, all the profits go back into the tribe in one form or another," says David Stewart of Cherokee Nation Enterprises, "education, health care, and normal governmental services. In the past three years, we've added about two thousand jobs with full benefits and career paths, good training. Indian gaming has had a significant impact not only on the local community but the region."

The tribes don't have to report their income or the percentages they pay out, but it's been reported that Lucky Star Casinos, with twenty-four card tables and more than a thousand machines, earned the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes around \$10 million in 2003.

"Employment was the immediate gain," says Brian Foster of Lucky Star. "A lot of tribes in Oklahoma are in small communities where there just aren't any jobs. The casinos have created thousands of jobs, and the profits fund programs that assist tribal members. It's an important economic development tool."

Bill Thompson agrees, to a point.

**'Oklahoma's truly the Wild West right now, and it's just starting to get settled a bit.'**

—Gary Green

"American Indians are the poorest ethnic group in the nation. They always have been, and they still are, so casinos aren't really changing the overall situation," says Thompson. "Nonetheless, casinos can make sure members of a tribe have health care, housing, and education. Tribes also pump their money into economic development projects to lure more jobs to the tribe. Some of them are doing some very progressive things. There's no question the money has helped in many, many cases. On the other hand, gambling is a very selfish, individualistic business and activity, and tribes have historically been very communal in their thinking, so it tends to cross tribal values. Indian gaming is not an unparalleled good, nor is it necessarily bad."

It is, however, rich in ironies, such as the one I was struck by while walking around Thunderbird Casino east of Norman. Owned by the Absentee Shawnee Tribe, Thunderbird is an enthusiastic disciple of the Deadwood school of design. The exterior is all clapboard and false front cow town. Inside, mannequins dressed as showgirls and steely-eyed bad men gaze down from fake staircases.

The poetic justice of an American Indian-owned modern casino made up to resemble the archetypal Hollywood old west town in an effort to lure mainly white suburban gamblers whose ancestors dispossessed the tribe to begin with is one the Taoists among us could have a field day with.

But that's just the unique nature of Oklahoma gaming, says Gary Green. Green, sometimes called the "Donald Trump of Indian Casinos," was Thunderbird's general manager in 2004. Involved in the gambling industry in one form or another since the 1970s, Green is currently consulting with the Ottawa Tribe as it opens its first casino in Miami.

"Oklahoma is a great state for gaming," he says. "But it's a very young state for gaming.

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It's truly, in the best of senses, the Wild West right now, and it's just starting to get settled a little bit."

Despite that, says Green, Oklahomans are far from rank amateurs when it comes to beating the house.

"Oklahoma gamblers are far more sophisticated than the typical gambler who goes to Vegas or Atlantic City," he says. "In Atlantic City, the day-trippers who come up on the bus are the primary market. In Vegas, the typical gambler is a tourist, a recreational gambler. But Oklahoma has a history of being a gambling state, much more so than Nevada. The entire heritage of the state is about taking chances, about risk, about gambling."

Green, a fairly ardent gambler himself, recalls an exchange he had with another contestant in last year's World Series of Poker in Las Vegas.

"The people at my first table were rank amateurs compared to the typical Oklahoma poker player," Green says. "I snickered to a person beside me, 'Let's fill this table full of Okies and see who's standing at the end of the day.'"

So what does the future hold? Everyone agrees there are changes afoot. Brian Foster believes the future is in expansion.

"The sky's the limit on where we can go with this," says Foster. "Will we ever be Las Vegas? I don't think anyone will, but I think Oklahoma will have some properties that come pretty close."

Green is optimistic but less sanguine.

"Very clearly, regardless of lobbying effort, the National Indian Gaming Commission and the Justice Department are going to change the definition of Class II games," says Green. "If the NIGC doesn't do it by regulation, Congress will amend the Johnson Act, which is the federal antislott machine law. Either way, the existing Class II games will probably cease to exist by the end of the year. As these changes take place, the way you play the games will be more Vegas-like. They'll be more like the games in the rest of the world."

**R**EGARDLESS OF WHERE THIS INDUSTRY takes us as a state, or how readily our culture adapts to it, it's safe to say our basic state character will survive intact. Two incidents in my casino adventure stand out in testament to that.

## A Hand for a Cause

### Make a Poker Run for a "Charity With Attitude."

Taking a chance on cancer? In the case of Cherokee Casino Resort, that can be a good thing. On Saturday, May 13, **CANCER SUCKS** is hosting its third annual Handlebars and Hot Rods Poker Run at the Cherokee Casino Resort in Catoosa. Registration begins at 9 a.m. Players can also register online. \$20 per hand. [cancersucks.com](http://cancersucks.com).

Standing inside the Goldsby Gaming Center in Norman, I am screwing up my courage to sit down and play a hand of blackjack. Up to this point, I haven't played any card games. There's a reason for that: The machines are safe and anonymous. You don't have to talk to anyone, interact with anyone, strategize. Basically, the only decision you make is how much to bet, how many lines to bet on, and how hard to push the button. The rest is up to software algorithms and fate. But the table games are intimidating. They involve skill, strategy, and a modicum of knowledge, none of which I possess in any degree whatsoever.

Both the floor boss and the dealer at the two-dollar table, however, are kind souls of everlasting tolerance, answering every stupid question I have. The fellow players patiently wait as the rules of the game are explained, then explained again after the blank, uncomprehending look on my face says I didn't quite get it the first time.

None of them realizes, of course, that they are mere pawns in what turns out to be perhaps the most horribly mangled piece of participatory journalism in the history of the genre. When the cards are dealt, I instantly lose the ability to perform simple arithmetic. I mumble, I fidget, I sweat. I cut such a pathetic figure, both the dealer and the

other players gently give me advice: Stay, take another card. I completely disrupt the flow of the game, but not a cross word is spoken, not a single complaint lodged. Despite their best efforts, I lose every hand, and there is genuine sympathy. On my last hand, one of the players looks at my card and says, "You should double down."

"What," I say, "is that?"

The game is stopped again as they all patiently try to explain the concept of doubling your bet. The only problem is, I have no more chips. I've lost every hand.

"Here," he says as he shoves me a chip. "Take it." I protest. "No, take it. It's a good bet."

I place the bet, the dealer turns over his cards, and I win my first and only hand of blackjack. I try to give the chip back, but he refuses. "Might bring you luck," he says with a smile.

Somehow, I don't think a genuine act of Oklahoma-flavored kindness like this would happen in Vegas.

A little later I'm in the Newcastle Gaming Center sitting at a machine, and losing, when I notice the lady playing next to me. I'll call her Teresa. Teresa's won about \$350 in the past few minutes, so I ask her what her secret is.

"Well, I've been playing out here for quite a while," she says, "and I've seen things you wouldn't believe. So here's my secret: Know when to play, but more importantly, know when to quit."

That's when I realize the third of my observations about casinos: They are what you make of them, nothing more, nothing less. Teresa's pragmatic philosophy is pure Okie common sense.

"Do you know when to quit?" I ask.

Teresa stands up, picks up her purse and cigarettes, and grabs the cash ticket from the machine. "You bet I do," she says. "Sometimes you're lucky, and sometimes you're just chasing bad money. You have to know the difference between the two."

**Oh, baby!** Oklahoma has more than eighty Indian casinos and gaming centers in operation and more on the way. For a sampling across the state, visit the following websites: [cherokeecasino.com](http://cherokeecasino.com), [chickasaw.net](http://chickasaw.net), [winstarcasinos.com](http://winstarcasinos.com), [choctawcasinos.com](http://choctawcasinos.com), [comanchenationcasino.com](http://comanchenationcasino.com), [comanchedrivercasino.com](http://comanchedrivercasino.com), [potawatomi.org](http://potawatomi.org), [luckystarcasino.org](http://luckystarcasino.org), [milliondollarelm.com](http://milliondollarelm.com), [seminolenation.com](http://seminolenation.com), and [astribe.com](http://astribe.com).