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Bar owner dealt lucky hand with weekly fantasy poker

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Drink specials didn't work.

Neither did Monday Night Football specials.

As the owner of The Sports Denn, Steve Denn tried almost everything to draw customers in on Monday nights.

"I have spent thousands of dollars to advertise Monday nights in the last 12 years but couldn't get it," Denn said. He figured slow Mondays were just part of the business.

Then The Fantasy Poker League approached him about the possibility of hosting fantasy poker tournaments at his establishment.

The idea seemed intriguing to Denn and, after some careful consideration, he decided it was a winning plan.

The Sports Denn began hosting the form of Texas Hold 'Em Poker tournaments with no buy-in, no cover charge and no money changing hands every Monday about two months ago.

"It's going over very well," Denn said. "When we first started out, we were getting right around 50 or 60 (players)."

In recent weeks, the poker tournaments at the Norfolk sports bar have been drawing around 90 players.

"We have doctors. We have attorneys. We have city people -- local business owners -- who have a great

time," Denn said, adding that the women who come out to play often do better than some of the men.

And poker hasn't drawn just players, it's brought in spectators as well.

"We have a lot of people who come and eat dinner on Monday night just to watch," Denn said.

Two sessions -- one at 6:45 p.m. and one at 9:30 p.m. -- are held every Monday. The sessions have five tables of eight people in The Sports Denn for nonsmoking players and five tables of eight people in Godfather's for smokers.

"Godfather's is a nonsmoking restaurant, but on Monday nights, there is smoking," Denn explained.

Because he was apprehensive about the legal aspects, Denn said he wouldn't have considered hosting the poker tournaments if he hadn't been approached by The Fantasy Poker League.

"This is 100 percent legal because money doesn't change hands," Denn said.

Players are given \$4,000 worth of fantasy chips -- with no actual monetary value -- at the beginning of the night. When players run out of chips, they're out of the session.

Denn, who has participated in a couple of the sessions, said he's found himself willing to bet more than \$8,000 in fantasy chips to stay in the game when he would not dream of doing something like that in real life.

"It's fun because it's just playing for fantasy," he said.

The league has two "pit bosses" present who make sure the rules of the game are being followed.

"They . . . also make sure that nobody's betting on the side," Denn said. "If any gambling takes place on the premises, they're banned from the league and kicked out of the bar. Period.

"We are playing for fun," Denn said. "I was excited that they (The Fantasy Poker League) came to us and picked us to do it."

The Fantasy Poker League has provided a small incentive for players to participate -- a chance to play in the 2005 World Series of Poker in Las Vegas.

Denn said at the end of the three twomonth sessions, 60 top players will be invited back for The Sports Denn Bar Tournament. The eight players who reach the finals will be sent to the state tournament in Lincoln to compete with other top players from Nebraska.

"The grand champion (of the state tournament) gets their \$10,000 seat paid for the 2005 World Series of Poker," Denn said. "They get a chance to play -- not just watch."

Denn added that Lanny's Bar in Hadar and Riley's in Wayne have begun hosting the fantasy poker tournaments as well.

"This is one of those things that just became really hot," Denn said. "Kids are playing it at home, people are playing it online. It's exciting. It's fun to play, and it doesn't take a lot of skill."

One local business manager, Todd Uhlir, has missed only two nights of fantasy poker since he learned that The Sports Denn was hosting it.

"It's just as exciting as when you're playing with money," he said.

Uhlir said he likes playing Texas Hold 'Em because it's an easy game to learn, and he's met a lot of new people during the tournaments.

"I had a brand new guy at my table last Monday," he said. "By the end of the night, he had it down like a pro."

Denn said he would be happy to host fantasy poker as long as his customers want to play it.

"What a great way for having crime-free entertainment," he said.