

Pinball Wizard vs. Evel Knievel — tilt!



The Sun-Times and the Better Government Assn. ran a Near North Side bar, the Mirage, to investigate corruption and fraud in the tavern business. This is the 18th article of a continuing series.

By Pamela Zekman and Zay N. Smith

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Pinball Wizard was having another bad night on the Evel Knievel machine.

"You scurvy dog! You whore! I don't let no machine do this to me!"

Bernie Delaney worked, by day, in a camera store near the Mirage. At night he was Pinball Wizard. He could not resist the machines. It had been that way since he was 14.

"I guess you could say I'm an addict," he said. "Look at all the money I pour into these machines."

Chicago lifted its ban on pinball machines only a year ago. Now almost every neighborhood tavern has an Evel Knievel, a Night Rider, a Grand Prix. You drink beer. You play pinball. It is the city's newest addiction.

But Pinball Wizard went further. He would not rest until he had beaten the high score on each new machine he saw. He would keep after a machine until he "owned" it.

And he would almost meet his match in the Mirage's Evel Knievel.

The trick is that every pinball machine is slightly different from the next. It depends on the mood of the repairman. He can adjust the speed, the scoring, the tilt. He can make things easy. He can make things tough.

Wizard walked into the Mirage one August night and noticed the new Knievel in the corner. It was flashing a previous high score of 242,050.

This would be easy. Wizard bought a beer and went to work.

But funny thing: Wizard didn't come near that night. Or the second night. Or the third. And he was beginning to wonder.

"It's never taken me more than three days to beat a machine!" he said.

Wizard waited another week to confirm his worst fears. The Mirage's Evel Knievel was the toughest he had ever seen.

"The only reason I keep coming back here is this damn machine," he said. "There's another Knievel that gives me trouble at a place called the Little King. But this machine! It's raping me!"

Wizard did not like being raped by any machine. He would tell by the way he began pounding it and shouting at it and calling it a whore.

At one point, after the machine had been especially cute with him, he inquired how much it would cost if he maybe smashed the glass.

"It should only cost \$7.50," he said. "But sometimes they'll stick you for \$75."

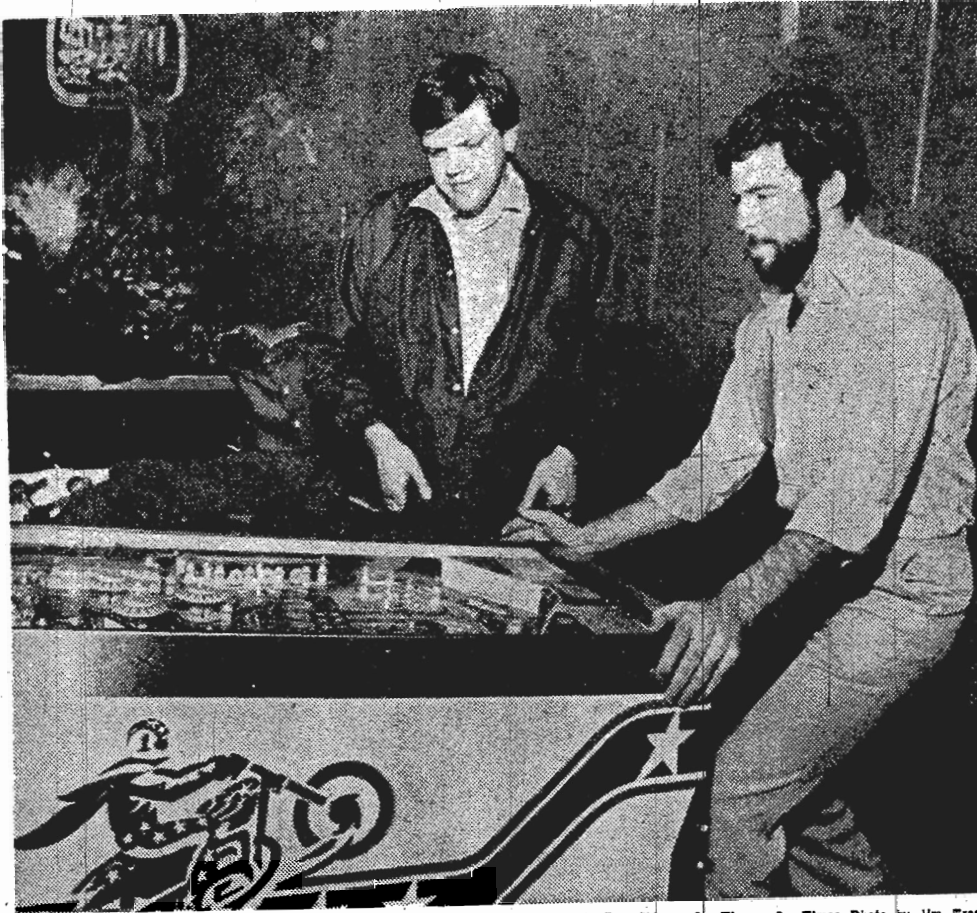
The Mirage conveyed the question to its vending-machine operator. "Tell him it'll cost an arm," the operator said.

Sun-Times reporter Zay N. Smith — Norty the bartender — decided to join Wizard in a game or two. Wizard took one look at Norty's game and decided it was time to open a pinball clinic.

Norty, to start with, was a "double-flipper man." That meant he usually pushed both flipper buttons at once, which is no good at all. Anybody who wants to play good pinball must learn to use the flippers independently. This opens the way to all kinds of subtle maneuvering.

There were other tricks. It came down, mostly, to style and psychology. You have to know how to stand, how to move — even how to smoke a cigarette.

"Most people who smoke just let the cigarette



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dangle out of the corner of their mouth," Wizard said. "But you should make your cigarette work for you. You know, put it in the middle of your mouth, hanging out just so."

Style becomes especially important, he said, when there is betting involved.

"It's all manipulation when you play for money," he said. "You have to psyche them. You have to distract them."

"Maybe you run up a good score on the first ball. Then you deliberately make a bad play and complain about what the machine

'Just look at the time. I was just going to spend 15 minutes here and I've been here for hours. Jesus. That machine.'

did to you. You talk about how the goddamn machine is raping you and screwing you. That way you make your opponent wonder about the machine. You make him think too much and tense up."

Wizard, in fact, was missing out on a money game even then.

"You know, this is Wednesday night," he said. "On Wednesday nights I'm usually over at the Candlelite playing with my friends for money. But here I am with this machine instead. That shows you how bad I want this machine."

Why no money games at the Mirage?

"You wouldn't want us doing that here," he said. "Sometimes we play for \$20 a game, maybe more. It sort of degrades a nice family place like this when you have hard-core pinball players."

Norty, for his part, was on his way to becoming hard core. A couple of lucky games was all it took. Norty was dumping coins in the Evel Knievel right along with Wizard. And he practiced when Wizard wasn't there.

The addiction took final hold one night when Norty joined two other Mirage regulars in a pinball game. Norty still didn't know what he was doing — but he could do no wrong that night. Every nudge of the flipper sent the ball into a bonus runway.

"Hey, man," said one of his opponents. "He's kickin' our ass!"

Norty just smiled.

Pinball Wizard, meantime, kept coming back. "I hate this machine," he shouted one night. "God, what a machine!"

Wizard turned to Norty.

"You know what I'll bet?" he said. "I'll bet nobody ever got that score. The pinball guy probably took the glass off and kept catching the ball before it went down the chute. He probably ran up the score that way."

But Wizard wouldn't get out of it that easily. The score was genuine. There was another Mirage customer who had been lucky.

Yet Wizard was in a mood to criticize. He said he didn't like these new computerized machines, anyway. The Evel Knievel was solid state and very snazzy, but it just didn't have the good solid feel of the old mechanical pinball machines.

"For one thing, these machines are too damned light," he said. "See how I can lift it right off the floor? All the computerized machines are this way."

And as long as he was on the subject, he didn't think much of how the Mirage had placed its Evel Knievel. The Mirage thought you just put a machine out in a corner somewhere. But a proper pinball addict knew better.

"This machine shouldn't be out by the front window," he said. "It should be in the dark. Pinballs should always be in the dark part of a tavern."

"I also like them so they face toward a wall. A lot of us like it that way. Then you can lean back on the wall as you play. And you can use the wall to brace your foot so you can push off. You should see some of those walls. They have scuff marks that go up 5 feet high."

But Wizard tolerated the bad playing conditions. Anything to beat the machine. He would spend whole evenings at the Mirage trying to beat the machine.

"Just look at the time," he said one night at about 10 o'clock. "I was just going to spend 15 minutes here, and I've been here for hours. Jesus. That machine."

Double flip a no-no for Wizard

Anybody who wants to play good pinball must learn to use the flippers independently, Bernie Delaney — the Mirage's Pinball Wizard — advised Sun-Times reporter Zay N. Smith, a double-flipping pinball rookie. Style and psychology are also important, the Wizard said, especially when money is on the line. But there was no money on the line when the Wizard encountered the Evel Knievel game at the Mirage. It was simply Man vs. Machine, and the machine offered Wizard his greatest challenge.

Wizard would try every approach. He would barely nudge the Evel Knievel. He would bang the machine until it tilted. He would play cold sober. He would play with a few beers in him.

Nothing worked. Wizard would edge toward 242,050 and then — kachink! — the ball would go careering down a chute.

"I hate this machine!" he shouted.

It was on Sept. 16 — after nearly a month and a hundred or so games — that Pinball Wizard made his move.

Wizard announced, at first, that it would be a quick visit. It was Friday night and he was due early Saturday for a weekend with the Naval Reserve. He was carrying a small suitcase with his flight suit and papers.

But the machine was treating him especially rough that night. It was, in fact, humiliating him. And no pinball addict leaves a machine on a bad game. It just isn't done.

"I know how this is going to work," Wizard said. "I've already missed the 6:40 train. Now I'll look up and see I've missed the 7:40. Then I'll look up again. That'll be the 8:40."

Finally, at about 8:40 p.m., Wizard looked at Norty and announced: "Hell. Can the Reserve. I'm going after that machine."

Besides, he said, Saturday would mark his 22d birthday. And who wants to spend his birthday in a flight suit? Good point, Norty said, urging him on.

The showdown came shortly after midnight — just as Wizard, indeed, was turning 22. Norty was microwaving a bratwurst behind the bar when he looked up and saw that Pinball Wizard had something going. He had pushed over 200,000 and still had a free play left on the game.

"Get up, damn you; get down, stay there; come on, you scurvy dog," he shouted.

The ball went down the chute a few seconds later. Wizard had one play left to put him over 242,050. He patted the machine. Then he performed what had become a Mirage ritual. He reached out to the machine's back glass. There was a drawing of a voluptuous maiden there — an Evel Knievel groupie. He touched

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Public reaction to Mirage affair

Now it's the public's turn to evaluate the issues raised by our continuing series on the Mirage.

MetroPoll



...your views

The Sunday Sun-Times.

In running the Mirage, a Near North Side tavern, investigators for The Sun-Times and the Better Government Assn. encountered payoff-seeking public employees and were told by some government workers and private businessmen that payoffs are one of the costs of doing business in Chicago.

MetroPoll respondents, selected at random, were asked to assess the seriousness of such problems and to tell if they've ever had personal knowledge of a payoff situation.

The results of the MetroPoll survey — plus another installment in the Mirage series — will appear in The Sunday Sun-Times.

MetroPoll, a public opinion survey conducted for The Sun-Times by Mid-America Research, is checking the reaction of Chicagoans to disclosures made during the last three weeks.

Results of the survey will appear in

Bilandic office fails to back claim of earlier payoff action

By Michael Flannery and Pamela Zekman

Mayor Bilandic claimed two weeks ago Thursday that his administration had routinely rooted out payoff-taking employees and had given law-enforcement officials evidence of the misconduct.

Since then, his office has refused to back up the claim with facts and figures.

"We can get that information for you," Bilandic told reporters who pressed him for details of the 400 cases in which he said city workers were disciplined or fired in 1977.

But, in response to almost daily inquiries from Sun-Times reporters, press secretary Celesta Jurkovich has been able to cite only one case in which the city moved to fire a man for taking a payoff.

The employee, an investigator for the Revenue Department, is still at work, because his alleged victim, decided at the last minute not to testify. The city dropped the case, which charged the investigator took a \$150 payoff from a gasoline station owner who wanted to

convert part of his property into a parking lot. Beyond that, Miss Jurkovich estimates that "30 per cent of the 400 disciplinary actions were taken for conduct unbecoming a city employee."

She refused to say how many were corruption-related because "in order for us to get the specifics you want there would have to be a massive research job."

For the same reason, she said, the mayor cannot tell how many corruption cases were referred to prosecutors nor which specific law-enforcement agencies might have received such data.

After failing to return phone calls at one stretch for seven days, Miss Jurkovich finally said the city would not perform the research needed to answer the questions.

At a City Hall press conference Jan. 12 during which he announced potentially far-reaching anticorruption reforms, Bilandic said:

"We have quietly and effectively been carrying on our own inspections and reviews. We took care of either severing or disciplining 400 individuals during the last year. And we have protected the public to that extent. Now in reviewing our procedures, we find we can improve even more."

What spurred Bilandic to act was The Sun-Times' series on the Mirage, a tavern it operated secretly for four months with the Better Government Assn. The tavern, at 731 N. Wells, has since been sold.

Seven city inspectors have been suspended as a result of wrongdoing uncovered at the Mirage. They include four from the Building Department, two from the Board of Health and one from the Fire Department. Three inspectors for the Illinois Liquor Control Commission have also been suspended, two of them pending a discharge hearing.

Miss Jurkovich said there were several ways that a disciplinary or firing action was initiated in 1977. The 400 cases referred to by Bilandic were handled by the mayor's Budgetary Division, which sought primarily to promote "efficiency and productivity." Hence, 30 per cent of the actions it took were for "extended lunch," 20 per cent for "quitting early or tardiness" and the final 20 per cent for "extended coffee breaks," she said.

The now-defunct Investigation Department (it was merged into the Budgetary Division

of Jan. 1) found evidence leading to the disciplining or firing of another, 49 city workers.

Those actions included 27 for dual employment, 2 for insubordination, 2 for drug-related misconduct, 11 for having been arrested, 1 for assault and battery, 5 for disregard of departmental rules, and 1 for impersonating a police officer, Miss Jurkovich said.

The final method of initiating discipline, she said, is for department heads to take action on their own. She had no idea how many such cases there were in 1977 nor for what offenses.

In whatever manner the action begins, if the accused is a career service employee he may demand a hearing before the Personnel Board.

Personnel Director Charles A. Pournian said more than 900 city employees were suspended by the Personnel Board in 1977. The board has jurisdiction over some 30,000 city workers. The approximately 14,000 members of the Police Department are under the jurisdiction of the Police Board.

Only 10 persons were fired by the board last year, Pournian said. Seven were discharged for living outside the city, two for excessive absenteeism and one for using a city truck without authorization.

The revenue investigator accused of taking the \$150 payoff was scheduled for a hearing before the board. When the charge was dropped, the Revenue Department found "another personal problem" affecting the man and as a result of that assigned him to what Director Thomas J. Davies describes as "limited, clerical duties." Davies would not identify the personal problem nor would he give the man's name.

Miss Jurkovich argued that many corruption-related dismissals appear in the official record as resignations or as discharges for another reason.

"A department head will get an anonymous tip, check it out and then call in the person to lay out the information he has gathered," she said.

"Suppose the employee quits on the spot. That is not listed as a termination for taking a bribe. If you look at private industry, you will find a very similar situation. You want to get rid of the person who is hurting your business," she said.

'I hate this machine!'

Continued from preceding page

her breasts and smiled at her.

Wizard shot the last ball into play. "Come on! Damn you! Stay alive!"

A few tipplers looked on in respectful silence. They watched Wizard thump the machine, nudge it, bang it, slap it. They watched him twirl around completely when he hit a bonus.

Then the onlookers watched Wizard suddenly ease up. There was a tight little smile on his face. He knew he had the machine beaten. An addict can sense these things.

The ball finally slipped off a flipper and went down the chute. Wizard stood very still while the last few points were totaled up. He was savoring this.

The final score was 250,689.

"I did it!" he shouted. "I beat it! Oh, how I love that machine!"

An onlooker pointed out that Wizard had also won some bonus free games. But Wizard, who was jumping and clapping and shouting,



'It's all manipulation when you play for money. You have to psyche them.'

didn't care about free games. He fell across the machine and embraced it.

"Who gives a ——— about free games? He doesn't understand! I beat the goddamn machine! It's mine! I love this machine!"

Norty gave Pinball Wizard a free pitcher of beer. It was the least he could do on a night like that.

SUNDAY:
Mirage gets to know a neighbor — the warehouse

Payoff offer to quit race charged by gay candidate

By Karen Koshner

Gary Nepon, a candidate for the state Legislature, has accused State Rep. Daniel P. O'Brien (D-Chicago) of offering to pay him more than \$10,000 and to give him patronage jobs if Nepon withdrew from the race.

Nepon, 23, the city's first openly gay candidate, is one of three opponents of O'Brien, who is running for renomination from the North Side 13th District in the March 21 primary election.

Nepon said Wednesday in an interview that O'Brien, 43d Ward Democratic committeeman, also offered him political support if he decided to run for 43d Ward alderman in 1979 although Nepon does not live in the ward. O'Brien said he met with Nepon several times, but he denied that he ever offered Nepon anything more than good luck.

Assistant State's Atty. Richard Means said the state's attorney's office would look into the matter. "It's an unusual case and it doesn't look right, but we have to do more



GARY NEPON

REP. DANIEL P. O'BRIEN

legal research to determine if it's a crime."

Nepon said in the interview that O'Brien called him shortly after the Jan. 3 lottery drawing for ballot position. O'Brien ended up last in the four-way race for two Democratic nominations for the House. Being last would

put O'Brien's name on the B line of voting machines, a spot that is easy for voters to overlook.

The other two candidates for the Democratic nomination are Rep. James M. Houlihan (D-Chicago) and former Rep. Jesse White.

A meeting was arranged for Jan. 8, around 2 p.m., at the Seminary Restaurant, 2402 N. Lincoln, just down the street from O'Brien's ward office, 2641 N. Lincoln, according to Nepon.

Nepon said he took along a friend, David Barrett, because "people advised me not to meet with him (O'Brien) alone."

Nepon said he and O'Brien talked about their problems in the tight race and that O'Brien was depressed about his ballot position.

O'Brien said it would cost him \$50,000 to overcome his bad ballot position, which is more than double what he would have to spend if his name was on the A (top) line, according to Nepon.

Then O'Brien, according to Nepon, told him it would be in his best political interests to drop out of the 13th District race in exchange for O'Brien's support in the aldermanic race in the 43d Ward next year. Nepon said O'Brien made it clear that the offer was more than just an endorsement.

Nepon said he told O'Brien that the offer was ridiculous because he lives just across the 43d Ward boundary, in the 44th Ward.

Nepon said that O'Brien told him that he would check on the residency requirements and "he didn't think it would get in the way."

When Nepon said he was not interested, O'Brien said he would pay all of Nepon's campaign expenses incurred so far — about \$2,500, Nepon said. When he still didn't agree, Nepon said, O'Brien then offered to sign an affidavit guaranteeing to give Nepon \$5,000 to back up his promise of support in the aldermanic race.

Nepon said "no" and O'Brien upped his offer.

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