

Sunday Register

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Arm wrestling in bars pays profit for Iowan

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It was 2 a.m., but the patrons at the International 2 bar in Wichita, Kan., were not ready to leave.

It wasn't that they wanted another drink, or that they were too drunk to drive home. It was just that they were having so much fun with their new toy — the World Class Arm Wrestling Machine.

Mel Hill, who bought the Kansas franchise rights from the machine's inventor, Jack Barringer of Ames, is having a difficult time satisfying his customers' seemingly insatiable demand for it.

"This is fantastic," Hill said of the machine. "I bring it into these bars and the people just go nuts with it."

The people at the International 2 were ready to risk arrest for a chance to arm wrestle just a little longer.

"We took the tournament right up until 2 o'clock," Hill said. "That's the time the bars close around here. But they wanted . . . to lock the doors and let 'em go another hour. But, of course, you can't do that. The police would have been there to break things up."

Barringer knew his machine would bring such a reaction. That is why he spent more than three years and \$300,000 developing it. He invented "The Monster" arm wrestling machine in 1978, but wanted something better.

"It started about 3 1/2 years ago," Barringer said, "when I thought, 'If I could make arm wrestling perfect, what would I come up with?'"

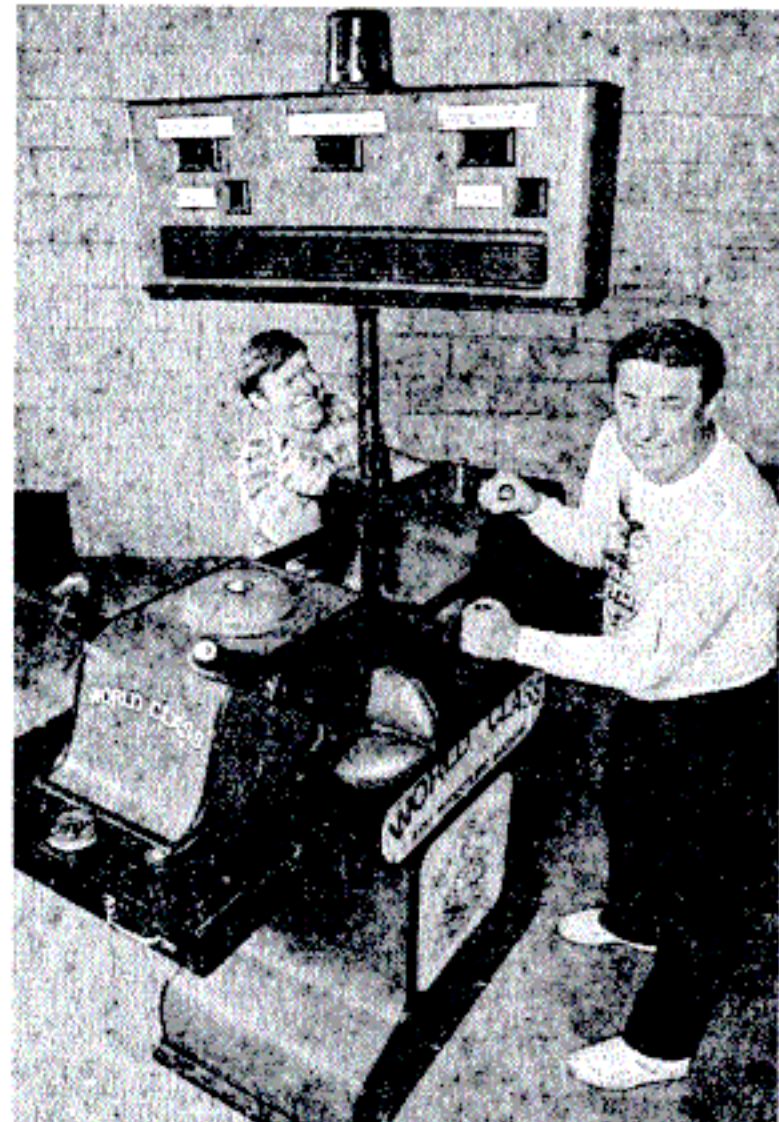
What he came up with was a machine that takes all the technique — and controversy — out of arm wrestling and establishes strength as the sole criterion for victory. The competitors simply stand on either side of the machine, grab hold of its levers, and wrestle. The levers are connected by a steel bar through the middle of the machine, so the competitors are still wrestling each other and not the machine.

"It's not man against machine," Barringer said. "It's still man against

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REGISTER PHOTO BY CHARLES SCHLOSSER



Jack Barringer (foreground) demonstrates his arm-wrestling machine with his friend and "opponent," Harold Greving of Ames.

Iowan hopes to sell machine in other nations

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man. The machine is just an equalizer."

Sells Franchises

The World Class Arm Wrestling Machine also brings two new variations to the sport of arm wrestling. The machine is equipped with a special transmission that allows left-handers to wrestle right-handers, and it has four levers so teams of two can compete against each other.

As soon as production of the machine was complete, Barringer set out to collect on his investment, selling franchise rights. A franchise entitles the owner to exclusive promotion of the machine in an area approximately equal to a population of 500,000.

He started selling franchises for \$20,000 each, but has raised the price to \$25,000. In the first 90 days, he has sold 27 franchises.

The franchise includes a machine and a three-day promotion seminar in Chicago, where owners learn how to book and promote events and how to work with sponsors. Barringer agrees it would be much easier to sell the machines outright to bars and arcades, but he is trying to avoid the saturation that killed the popularity of the

mechanical bull and many types of video games.

"We want to treat this as a sport, not as a game," Barringer said. "Game machines will burn out. If you treat it as a game machine it will be here today and gone tomorrow."

Popular Machine

Hill agrees. He has held 16 events at 16 locations in two months. He started by buying one franchise, but soon bought the whole state of Kansas — five franchises.

"I started in Wichita," Hill said, "which is a town of about 350,000, and I had a good response. But after I bought the rest of the state I took it out into the rural area, and I'll tell you these cowboys and farmers are just packing the places."

He took the machine to the Silver Spur, a private club in Hutchinson, Kan., on a Wednesday night. "The owner said she usually has about 10 people in there on a Wednesday night," Hill said. "That Wednesday we had 200 people jammed in there."

The local television station was at the Silver Spur to do a spot for its late news, something that Hill is arranging at many of the places he stops at.

Hill said the most exciting part of World Class Arm Wrestling Machine tournaments is the team competition. One reason is that women are more eager to get involved.

"Now the girls don't have to sit on the sidelines and watch their boyfriend or husband," Hill said. "Now they say, 'Hey honey, it's our turn.'"

Interest has grown so much in Kansas that Hill is already booking events into September. He is also considering a request from the warden of the State Reformatory at Hutchinson to hold a tournament there.

Promoting the machine has become a full-time job for Hill, who is in the process of selling his electronics firm, Sound Investments, so he can concentrate on promoting the machine.

Profitable Venture

Hill estimates he is making \$8,000 a month, per machine. He hopes to have three machines on tour soon. All of these promotions are leading up to a state tournament in January, where he will combine the machine with a number of other forms of adult entertainment for what he hopes will be a very profitable weekend.

"I think I can make \$400,000 easily this year," Hill said. "But then, I'm a hustler. I push myself. I'm gearing everything for my state tournament."

"I wish I had the funds to buy another state," he added. "Give me a couple months. If I have enough I'm going to buy another state."

The World Class Arm Wrestling Machine will be a permanent fixture

in the on-set living room of The New Monkees, when the series premieres on cable television this fall, Barringer said. "Whenever the Monkees have an argument, they will wrestle on the World Class Arm Wrestling Machine to settle it," he said.

Barringer has already sold the franchise rights to the entire United Kingdom thanks to his, and the machine's, appearance on BBC's Tomorrow's World television show. He has promotion trips planned to New Zealand, Australia and Japan and has received inquiries from Canada, France and Italy because of his appearance on the show.

"There's no doubt about it," Barringer said. "We will be the largest arm-wrestling organization in the world in six months."

Tournament Planned

A World Class Arm Wrestling national tournament is being planned for the Showboat Hotel in Las Vegas, Nev., next spring.

Barringer, who wants to keep Iowa's franchise rights for himself, has yet to promote the machine to a wide audience in the state. He has held a couple of tournaments at The Cave bar in Ames, but has been too busy to do much else.

But soon, he said, he will bring the machine to the masses in Iowa. And around 2 a.m., many still won't be ready to leave.