



Dan Hurney, left, and Scott Redell compete in a game of Uncle Tug, a high-tech tug-of-war machine with sirens and flashing lights being promoted by inventor

Jack Barringer, rear. The machine's national marketing director, Keith N... ay, is shown holding a flag symbolizing his patriotic marketing sc...

Big egos, big arms bring big bucks

By KENNETH PINS

Of The Register's Ames Bureau

AMES, IA. — Jack Barringer considers himself the Thomas Edison of barroom sports.

While the rest of the world slept, the Iowa-born inventor created the Monster. Now he's coming out with Uncle Tug. And he's working on at least three more "concepts," he says.

While the Iowa Development Commission hasn't yet touted it, this state is virtually the Monster capital of the world.

Monster is a table-top apparatus on which combatants plant their elbows in adjustable pads and grab one end of a handlebar, and commence grunting. The machine eliminates the leverage edge enjoyed by long-armed contestants in *passee* hand-to-hand arm wrestling, and lends an official air to tavern tournaments that now include referees, the national anthem and a set of rules — wrestlers' bottoms may never lose contact with their chairs. Add adrenaline, unrestrained crowds and 6-foot-tall trophies, and you have an athletic spectacle.

Cecil Moon, a burly Tama screen-printer who unleashes a Godzilla-sized roar after each victory, is the best in the business — winning both left and right-handed Monster national championships.

And Lee Ann Krough, 36, a mother of four from Van Horne who once said Monster "is about as much fun as you can have with your clothes on," is a four-time national champ in the women's open division — 161 pounds and up. The irrepressible Krough, who says she's smitten by "Monster fever," has been beaten only once in five years, that time by "a little-bitty 135-pound gal" at the Kansas State Fair, after she threw her arm out 15 seconds into the match.

This is a tale about a simple axiom of economics: Ego

times muscle equals money. Lots of it. Jane Fonda, and every other celebrity with leotards and a record contract understands it. So do the legions of health club operators. And so does Jack Barringer, 42, of Ames.

"I don't see any limits on the new products I can come out with," he boasts.

Monster is a concept that came to him in a Hastings, Neb., bar. From it he has formed the World Monster Association, a league of barroom gladiators who flex their muscles amid the smell of the crowd and roar of the cash register in officious tavern tournaments. They have brought Barringer untold wealth.

There are now more than 300 dealers in 41 states who paid up to \$15,000 each for a Monster machine and rights to set up tournaments in bars within their protected territories. Barringer collects a \$50 sanction fee from the \$275 to \$350 tavern keepers gladly pay dealers to sponsor Monster tournaments in their establishments and pack in standing-room-only crowds.

Monster is also flexing its muscle in seven foreign countries, and Barringer is "working on a deal" — his favorite phrase — with Malaysia and "your Scandinavian countries."

The arithmetic is staggering. How much money does Monster raise in a year?

Barringer, who displays a "Poverty Sucks" poster on his office wall and a mother lode of gold and precious stones on his fingers, pauses, and finally dodges. "Let's say it went way beyond its wildest expectations, and just leave it at

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Iowa sends its troubled kids out of state

By MELINDA VOSS

Register Staff Writer

Iowa is sending increasing numbers of its troubled youth and hard-core delinquents out of the state for treatment.

The number of such placements tripled since 1983. Before then the number was so small few people paid any attention. But now about 200 children — 13 percent of the boys and girls in group foster care, excluding the developmentally disabled — being treated elsewhere. The cost to Iowa taxpayers came to about \$1 million the first 10 months of the current fiscal year.

Although those numbers may seem insignificant, they're enough to sound an alarm that something may be seriously wrong with Iowa's system for handling delinquents and other troubled youth, say private providers.

"People assume the reason private agencies are concerned is self-interest. That's not the case. There's too many kids in this state who are not getting served," says James Wacker, president of the Coalition of Family

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that," he said. "You never know, the IRS might read this article."

The early years were unpromising, with Barringer personally peddling the crowd-gathering attributes of his invention to skeptical saloon keepers around Iowa. The first two doubtfully named national championships were held in Ames.

About that time, Barringer feels he had a revelation. "I realized I hadn't invented just a machine, I had invented a sport," he says. "That's truly what I have done is invented a sport."

With six men's and four women's categories, the sport grew. The third national championships were held in Des Moines. Last year they moved to the rarified atmosphere of the Charlie Club, a health club and bar in suburban Chicago, which attracted a huge crowd and the Wall Street Journal.

Barringer said he is talking with Caesar's World about staging this year's November classic in Atlantic City, N.J. And he's talking television deals and international competition. He fully expects his World Monster Association to supplant the World Wristwrestling Championships in Petaluma, Calif., as the premiere attraction of the genre.

"Each year, we keep moving up into the big time," he said. The world may never tire of the Monster.

"Now here's the whole thing," Barringer says, paternally. "The secret to my success is — with most game machines, they just oversaturate them — I come out, and I have a system."

Local Monster tournaments keep moving from place to place, with local winners advancing up the ladder to district, state and — for real mastodons — the nationals.

"Pac Man, Space Invaders, mechanical bulls — they're a flashpan," Barringer malapproped. "Here today, gone tomorrow. I'll be in business 10 years from now because I'm organized, and treated like a sport."

And before the competition can catch its breath, Barringer is coming out with more concepts. The most promising is Uncle Tug, a high-tech tug-of-war machine with sirens and flashing lights to announce the winners. Barringer has teamed with promoters Bill Schwartz and Max Shapiro — "he's a multimillionaire," Barringer says respectfully — to form U.S. Sports Events, which will promote and market Uncle Tug through franchises along the lines of the World Monster Association.

About two months ago, Uncle Tug made its national debut at Manhattan's Studio 54. "That's where all your big rock stars go," Barringer said.

Shapiro, who organizes baseball fantasy camps at which those who wish they had been stars get to play with those who used to be, and Schwartz have brought a public relations blitz to pull for Uncle Tug. Barringer, in characteristic hyperbole, says his latest invention "is the greatest thing since man's application." And

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But success for this Atlantic native, who has sold everything from milk to real estate to waterbeds, began when he was living in Nebraska in 1977.

Barringer ran into a friend named Jerry Ewing — who by all rights should be able to claim some credit — in a Hastings watering hole.

Ewing was idly twisting a brass bar rail in its loose-fitting bracket when it began to get on Barringer's nerves. "I grabbed ahold of that thing, and held on to it real tight. And then we started going back and forth," he said. "Finally, I reached in my pocket and took out a quarter and laid it on that rail." They began twisting to make the quarter fall in their direction.

What happened next is similar to the way Tom Sawyer got his Aunt Polly's picket fence whitewashed. "People started watching, and finally, a couple of guys wandered around and said, 'Hey, do you mind if we play?'" Barringer recounted. "So we stood back, and for 2½ hours that night, these people were walking up and putting their quarters on the rail."

Barringer sketched out on a napkin what he thought it might take to turn idle diversion into a machine, and after he moved to Ames, he worked on 20-some prototypes before the Monster was patented.

The rest is one variation of the American dream. Krough, the aforementioned women's champion, is now a member of Barringer's Monster dealer network. Moon has a living room full of 6-foot-tall Monster trophies.

Barringer sees no end in sight. "As long as there are young men with big egos, there will be arm wrestling," he said.

And Ewing? He's still in Hastings, Barringer said, although he called when he read about Monster's success to congratulate the inventor. And maybe he's still twisting that brass rail and wondering how Barringer turned it into his brass ring.