

Table games debut this week with sneak preview today

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By Mark Belko / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

With table games arriving in Western Pennsylvania this week, Roger Gros has some advice for those who will be playing: Stick to blackjack or craps. And try to avoid becoming a "fish."

Blackjack and craps typically give players the best chance of beating the house, assuming they know the strategy, said Mr. Gros, publisher of Global Gaming Business, a leading industry trade publication.

"Blackjack is by far the most popular game in any case. It offers the best odds if you play it correctly. Craps is second, but by a long shot," he said.

Barring last-minute hitches, novices to seasoned gamblers will get a chance to test their luck -- and skill -- at those games and others such as poker, roulette and mini-baccarat starting Thursday at the Rivers Casino on the North Shore, The Meadows Racetrack and Casino in Washington County, and Presque Isle Downs and Casino in Erie. The Rivers and Meadows will open play at 6 a.m.; Presque Isle at 10 a.m.

Those three casinos will be the first in the state to introduce table games, followed by three in the middle of the state next Tuesday, and the last three at the eastern end July 18.

Some people will get a sneak preview today when the three Western Pennsylvania casinos hold invitation-only test days required by the state Gaming Control Board.

Locally, guests will be able to wager at Rivers Casino and The Meadows from 2 to 10 p.m. All gambling losses will be donated to charity, with the Mario Lemieux Foundation the recipient at the Rivers and the United Way of Washington County at The Meadows.

If all goes according to plan, the gaming board will give the go-ahead to officially begin play on Thursday, ushering in the first major expansion of the state's 4-year-old gambling industry.

Table games are arriving sooner than many expected. The recession, which left the state with a multibillion-dollar budget deficit, forced the hand of legislators, who legalized table games to help plug the gap.

Unlike slots revenue, most of which goes for property tax relief, the cash from table games will go directly into the state's general fund. The state already has received \$165 million in table games licensing fees from 10 casinos, including SugarHouse in Philadelphia, which hasn't opened yet.

The state is counting on another \$91.4 million this fiscal year. The Innovation Group, a consultant that did projections for a group of casino operators, estimated that by 2012 table games would generate \$865 million a year overall and \$103 million a year in tax revenue for the state.

Pennsylvania keeps 14 percent of table games revenue. Host counties and municipalities each get 1 percent.

The Innovation Group also calculated that table games would produce another \$111 million a year in slots revenue from "companion" play -- by spouses or others who come to a casino with a table games gambler and play slots.

Paul Girvan, managing director of The Innovation Group, said Pennsylvania casinos could see a 3 percent to 4 percent bump in slots play with the advent of table games. The Meadows is expecting as much as a 10 percent boost in slots play.

"There's no question there's something to be said for companion play," general manager Sean Sullivan said. "I think even some slots players want a full-service casino even if they don't play tables. They just don't think it's a real casino until you have table games."

Pennsylvania's gain may be West Virginia's loss. Both The Meadows and Rivers expect to attract customers who previously had been going to either West Virginia or Atlantic City, N.J., or even Las Vegas to play table games.

Mr. Sullivan said he had talked to hundreds of people from as far away as Cleveland who now go to West Virginia or other places to play blackjack, poker or other games but who "can't wait" to play at The Meadows.

"Everywhere I go people tell me they're going to change their behavior," he said. "It's not a mystery. It's not a myth. It's real."

Greg Carlin, the Rivers CEO, said table games would make his casino more competitive with those in West Virginia, Atlantic City and Ohio once that state's gambling parlors are up and running.

Mr. Carlin sees table games as "transformative" for the Rivers, a casino that hasn't come close to hitting its slots revenue projections in the year it has been open, prompting credit downgrades by New York rating agencies. A group of existing investors recently put another \$108 million into the casino to firm up its financial footing and to help fund table games fees and capital improvements.

He said table games would help boost slots revenue, attract younger customers and give the Rivers a full complement of amenities to offer to guests, making the casino "more of a destination."

"This really revolutionizes the property," general manager Todd Moyer added. "It takes us to a whole new level."

With 86 table games, the Rivers will be adding 458 employees, bringing its total number to more than 1,400. The Meadows, with 68 games, is creating about 550 jobs, bringing total employment to nearly 1,700.

"To me, this is one more step toward a world-class entertainment destination," Mr. Sullivan said of table games.

What about the players? With so many options, what are the best choices to win money? Blackjack? Roulette? Pai Gow Poker? That's where Mr. Gros comes in.

A former dealer, Mr. Gros said beginners probably should start with blackjack because it's easy to understand and a player can be successful by learning basic strategy.

Experienced players can cut the house edge to as little as 1 percent, he said. Craps also is a good bet for better players, with a house edge as low as 2 percent.

However, craps can be daunting -- and expensive -- gambling for the inexperienced. One rule of thumb: "The bigger the print on the table, the worse the bet," Mr. Gros said.

He urged those just learning to stick to "pass" or "don't pass" bets. They have a low house edge and "are very good bets," he said.

Some other tips from Mr. Gros: Stay away from roulette, which has a high house edge; three-card poker is easy to learn and "can be a decent game for players if you learn the rules and play it correctly;" and "avoid the Big Six wheel at all costs."

"The house edge is just too much. It's well over 6 percent," he said, explaining it can go as high as 11 percent in some cases.

"Table games make the casino," he added. "You're making the decisions that affect whether you win or lose. It's a decision you have to think about."

As for poker, it's generally a game for more skilled players, he said. Gamblers do not play against the house but against other players.

Mr. Gros said inexperienced players can be "easy pickings" for those who tour the country playing poker in casinos. He suspects a lot of those players will be "salivating" at the chance to come to Pennsylvania to play.

"There are going to be a lot of beginners there who don't know what they're doing. They call them fish," he noted.

Fish?

"Like shooting fish in the barrel," he explained.

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