

# play "The Operators' Choice" METER

Cover Story (May 2007)

## "Operator of the Year"

**Jason Rubin**  
**A.J. Video Amusements**  
**Rockville, Md.**

When you ask someone how long they've been in the coin-op industry and they tell you they had to find rides to place machines because they were too young to drive yet, you know it's going to be an interesting story. And, that's the case with Jason Rubin of A.J. Video Amusements.

Operator  
of the  
Year:  
**Jason  
Rubin**

Play  
Meter  
Game  
Awards

ASI 2007  
Wrap-Up

5/1/07  
THE COIN-OP  
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His father Jeff Rubin found his career in the entertainment business. He managed bands for all kinds of functions: bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs, weddings, corporate functions, balls, etc. Jason wasn't necessarily itching to follow in those footsteps. But then Jeff and a partner opened three arcades in the early '80s. Definitely a young boy's dream.

The plaque naming Jason Rubin  
Play Meter's "Operator of the Year."

The award was named in honor of  
Play Meter founder Ralph C. Lally,  
who died in 1984.



As a kid, Jason recalls visiting the arcades and playing the latest games. Did Jason's mother object to him spending time in the arcades? No, because she grew up in the industry and yes, because she grew up in the industry! Jason said his mom did chores around the office like rolling nickels. Her father, Jason's grandfather, Herb Fingerhut, was in the vending business as a routeman and then branch manager for Ogden Vending. Herb serviced all the movie theaters in the area supplying nickel candy and popcorn.

Jason said, "They didn't pop the popcorn in the theaters like they do now. My grandfather would deliver huge bags of popcorn to the theaters in the Washington D.C. area. When I was little he used to take me to the warehouse and the highlight of my day was riding with him on the forklift!"

After Herb retired from Ogden, which is still around but not in vending, he went to work for his son-in-law Jeff at one of the arcades. When Jason turned 14 he, too, got a summer job at one of the arcades. Jeff picks up the story: "I remember we were buying equipment from Chuck Weiner at General Vending. When Chuck left to start his own company, Weiner Distributing, we had developed such a strong relationship that we began buying games from him."

It wasn't long before Jason called Chuck and asked him if he could buy a few games. Once he got the games he started lining up locations. "I found a Chinese restaurant and a pizza place for the games, but my biggest problem was getting the games moved because I did not have a drivers' license. I'd beg and borrow rides to the locations where I remember I had a Pac-Man and some other games."

When Jason was a junior in high school he heard that the school was trying to find a way to raise money for lights on the football field so they could hold night games. Jason sensed an opportunity and approached the principal. Jason explained, "I suggested that I could put several games in the cafeteria, split the revenue, and use the games as a fundraiser for the lights. But my real motive was to get a parking permit at school. After the principal ran the idea by the PTA association and I made my own presentation, I was given the OK. The best part: I got my parking permit."

Jason placed four games in the cafeteria; Punch-Out and Pac-Man are the two he remembers. The games stayed the whole school year and the machines, as Jason predicted, raised the money to install the lights. However, after that the school decided that maybe it wasn't the best thing for kids; the PTA was convinced that students were spending their lunch money on games instead of food. Jason isn't so sure, as he described, "I had to fight about this. I asked the cafeteria and was told that their sales weren't down while the games were there. But it didn't make any difference and I couldn't prove it so the games were removed."

After graduation Jason applied to Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pa., and was accepted. The co-op school was set up for students after their first year to go to school for six months and work for six months. "Since I was working toward my accounting degree, I was given a choice of places to work. I wanted to go back home since I had games there and I began working for the Federal Deposit Insurance Company (FDIC) as a bank auditor. If you remember in the late '80s there were quite a few banking scandals and I was right there."

Jason continued, "Although I got to travel I learned early on that I did not want to be an accountant. I worked two cycles with FDIC and finished the five-year accounting degree in just over four years and then got a marketing and business degree."

### Finds his calling

While in college Jason stayed friends with Chuck Weiner although his father had long ago closed his

arcades. Jason was still buying equipment, but Chuck told him about something else that would literally change his life. Jason recounted, "Chuck was talking about jukeboxes. He was selling Pioneer CD jukeboxes so I bought one and put it in the college student center. It lasted there about a year?? but there were a lot of break-ins. However, it got me thinking that there was a market for CD jukeboxes. A lot of operators really weren't moving over to CDs from 45s yet. I began setting them up in locations such as Chi Chi's. The location was so happy that the district manager recommended me to another and soon I had six Chi Chi's restaurants with jukeboxes. People were lining up for them."

Jason went on, "Now I'm really trying to figure out whether to make coin-op a full-time career. I decided that since I was living at home with few expenses and basically no overhead I would give it a shot. I had been running a route part time since the early '90s and I was ready to get into it full-time. I've never looked back on that decision."

Even as a kid Jason was often invited to Weiner Distributing to play games and Chuck would ask him which ones he liked. About three months after Jason started working his route full-time, he got a call from Chuck, who had a proposition for him. Jason picks up the story: "I asked my dad to come along for the meeting. Chuck explained that his business was growing and he needed someone for sales and thought I'd be perfect. He told me that I could continue my route."

"At first I thought it sounded a little crazy. But then I started thinking seriously about it. The coin-op business is all about relationships with everyone networking. I was just out of college and I didn't know anyone. I agreed to do it and soon I was meeting manufacturers and all kinds of operators."

As Jason noted, part of the deal was that he could run his business out of the Weiner Distributing facility and that's what he is still doing today. "We never merged although some people think we are one company; we just have our offices in the same building," Jason affirmed.

What's in a name?

We're always a little curious about how company names are chosen so we asked. Here's Jason's reply: "First of all I wanted to be first in the phone book! Seriously, I had a friend when I was about 14 and his name was Ari. We talked about starting a company together where I would sell games and he was interested in fixing them. Since we had planned to work together one day, we called the company A.J. Video Amusements taking the first letter of our first names."

Jason continued, "It never happened but I used the name from the very beginning. I had one employee while I was in college to take care of my locations on a part-time basis. My younger brother Robert partnered with me after he got out of college. I was working about 90 percent at Weiner and about 10 percent developing the route."

"I would make sales calls at single locations and realized that I could focus the same energy on chain accounts and get more locations. I thought it was more beneficial to go after chain accounts and that was the idea behind my plan. Because we had a smaller overhead we could invest our profits into new games. We were young but our philosophy was already about promotion and service. One chain had

three stores when we started and now it has 17; another had three and now has 16."

A.J. Video Amusements had a growth spurt in 1999 when TouchTunes and Golden Tee golf opened many new locations for the company. "I had a good relationship with Dan McAllister and when he joined TouchTunes he told me about the product. He guaranteed us we'd like them. I took him at his word and after that I was spending 99 percent of my time on the route, which was now big enough to consume most of my time. At Weiner I still had some loyal customers who only wanted to buy equipment from me so I continue to sell them."

Jason said earlier that his brother Robert joined as a partner in the company after college, when he was in the same predicament Jason had been in when he got out of college. The coin machine business is not like any other typical 9 to 5 career, as Jason related, "Nothing is ever the same. It's always about the newest game or the latest tournament. This is a relationship business and we work overtime to make those relationships flourish"

One of A.J. Video's customers owned a nightclub featuring country line dancing. Her name was Maria Ruth and since we had games in the club we got to know her. She had retired from the phone company but was getting frustrated with the nightclub. People paid a cover charge but then they didn't buy drinks. Three years after opening the nightclub, she closed, but Jason and Maria had become close friends.

One day Jason mentioned to her that they were about to invest in the Silent Partner software and Maria replied that she had quite a bit of experience with computers she got while at the phone company. Jason asked her if she would consider a part time job at A.J. Video to help them get the software set up.

Jason added, "It was perfect timing. We were about to explode with TouchTunes. Maria's part-time job quickly turned into a full-time position and she's still here. Maria has spoken about all our tournaments and contests at many of the Incredible Technologies' summits.

"Around this time, Dave Kelly of Incredible Technologies (IT) would come to see us and he got Maria interested in Golden Tee promotions. When we decided to participate in the Golden Tee promotions, he held our hand and told us what to do. I remember our first one in 2001. We gave away a shopping spree; we had a huge turn out for the first player party. I remember something like 35 players in the finals."

He continued, "As our contests and promotions grew so did our location base. One of our customers was a large Putt-Putt Golf. We had all the games in the game room. When we heard it was going to close, we hired the manager Tony Demma, who had been there 14 years, since he was a teenager. Robert and I had a great relationship with Tony, we knew he would be a real asset he was like family."

All this time Jason had been delivering all the equipment, making sales calls, servicing locations, and repairing the machines. He had no formal training to repair games but he admitted he learned a lot from the service techs at Weiner and from trial by error. Shortly after starting as a TouchTunes operator it became apparent the company would need a superstar jukebox technician. In Baltimore there was such a star named Bryan Ziokowoski. He grew up in the business; his father was the service manager for a Baltimore operator. Bryan really knew jukeboxes inside and out from his many years at Weiner

Distributing. He had even engineered an amusement ride. Bryan was working for a chain of FECs when Jason approached him about coming back to his roots: jukeboxes. Jason said, "Six years later Bryan is now our service manager. He can't sleep at night because he is always thinking about the next jukebox installation challenge."

When asked what type of business he was in Jason had a quick answer, "I'm in crisis management. Crisis is a good motivator!" Jason quipped. "I remember recently telling this to good friend Dale Lazar and laughing but really it is true every day in coin-op is different. One day it's sales calls and another might be an installation. I deal with accounting, marketing, sales calls, human resources, and whatever it takes to get through the day. I still do a little of everything."

According to Jason, Robert's best skill is developing loyal relationships with customers. He explained, "We never advertise or send out mailers. We were always a grass roots business. We'd tell our customers that if they were happy with us to recommend us. To this day, when we attend local shows we see our customer base. We pride ourselves on our service. We place the best games and we answer service calls within four hours. Because of our relationship with Weiner, when the new games come out, we can sell the older ones."

Jason is adamant that you have to invest in new equipment to be successful. "When operators say that games don't make money, it's because they aren't putting new games in front of the players. Operators say they can't buy new equipment because it's not making money. It's a vicious cycle that they can't step out of unless they invest in their business."

Jason cites cranes as his favorite piece of equipment. "I was just on the phone ordering Shrek merchandise. We are going to ride along with all the money DreamWorks is spending on the new "Shrek 3" movie. We have close to 300 cranes and I'll admit that they take more attention than any other type of equipment," Jason said.

He added, "Some say I'm crazy, but I visit some of my locations five times a week! We have 100 stackers and visit those locations a lot. Back in the day, Joe Bates of Plush for Play had a motto: The more you visit the crane machine the more it's going to earn. So we did that. You can't operate a crane in a location that's so far away that you can't visit it at least every couple of days. And, you know what, Joe was right!"

## Club Lucky

Making decisions about what merchandise to buy for the cranes was the catalyst for a new venture called Club Lucky. Jason described how time consuming it is to choose just the right merchandise and he should know since he does all the buying for the company. "I would visit stores and now the Internet to see what's hot. I used to buy from just one or two suppliers but now I talk to as many plush companies as I can.

Jason picks up with the Club Lucky story: "IT holds operator summits and we would always go. We went to get ideas and we'd meet operators there who were successful. We made a lot of friends and met

some really smart people at the IT summits.

"I started a group in Baltimore called Golden Tee contest.com and I invited friendly competitors to join in. I figured we could work together to promote our Golden Tee contests and we'd be able to offer bigger prizes. It worked well for a cooperative effort. We awarded some amazing prizes; a Harley-Davidson, a Mazda 6, and we had lots of fun doing it. Our challenge was that the player base wanted an even bigger challenge. They wanted to compete against players from other markets. So we began to meet like-minded operators in other markets that had similar aspirations."

Jason continued, "We started working with a franchisee here in Maryland for Buffalo Wild Wings (BWW) and met Matt Vedula from Full Spectrum, who operates tons of franchise stores for the BWW chain, he was IT's Operator of the Year one year prior to us."

Matt Pascal was working with Ed Tuhkanen, TouchTunes Director of National Accounts; Jason was also working with Ed. Ed got the two together and they became friends. In fact, IT wanted to shoot a commercial for Golden Tee Live and flew both Matt and Jason out to be in it. After shooting that commercial all day, Matt and Jason went to dinner and started brainstorming. They realized that they were doing similar things just in different markets.

Then they thought about getting an e-mail list of other like-minded operators and have an idea exchange for anything business related. As it developed, Matt and Jason tried to figure out what else they could do.

What they decided to do was get together during last year's Amusement Showcase International (ASI). Chuck Weiner's girlfriend suggested a restaurant called Club Lucky. During that dinner they came up with a framework of doing a contest. While trying to think of a proper name for the group, Jason threw out the name of the restaurant and Club Lucky was born.

While it started out with contests, first one and then another, they realized they were all buying tons of stuffed animals and asked themselves why they couldn't get a better deal. That's when Club Lucky became a promotion and buying group. It started with eight charter members.

Many of the eight charter members were doing business with the same chain restaurants; one chain was CiCi's Pizza. Jeff and Kama Reed, Matt Vedula, and Jason were all operating in CiCi's Pizza franchises owned by the Marwin Group. Michael Winton was overseeing game room operations for the company and saw a need for a supplier of quality toys and merchandise for all the CiCi's operators.

Michael and Jason really hit it off and instantly saw an opportunity for Club Lucky and Michael's toy company. One Stop Shop Vending and Redemption would become the Preferred Supplier for Club Lucky. Jason had a friend in the plush business named Shawn Sullivan and put him in touch with Michael's company. Shawn was what Michael needed to propel his business into the Plush arena.

Jason said, "Moving forward, Club Lucky is looking to build the brand in every thing we do: quality prizes, quality promotions, and that's just the beginning."

Advisory boards

Jason credits the manufacturers for setting up operator advisory boards. Jason explained, "I always harped on the manufacturers to get input from operators. They needed to establish operator advisory boards. Many have and I think it's changing the industry. They aren't trying to eliminate distributors but their goal is to get the awareness level up. I'm an operator and I know what operators need. However, I also know that it's not cheap to make a game but not all operators are aware of that. There must be communication and education back and forth.

"There are operators buying cranes from Asia and they just not the same quality. You can visit a company like ICE and see the quality and what goes into its products, but you'll never be able to do that with a company from Asia. It's impressive to see that factory. When you see an ad about a product you have no idea what's behind it. At ICE there are hundreds of people behind those products. The fact that I can pick up the phone and call any one of the companies like Sega, IT, TouchTunes, ICE, and Merit and know they are going to take my comments seriously is refreshing. We've come up with some ideas about cranes and ICE has designed cranes around what we wanted to do."

Jason had other examples of how the operator input has helped get better equipment out on the street, "Dan McAllister and John Parachon of TouchTunes were very interested in getting operators' opinions on their product. We gave them an earful and out popped the Allegro. It looks like a jukebox instead of an ATM."

Merit has been good about listening to operators, according to Jason. "Operators just hated it when Merit came out with its software updates because they were never right the first time. It would come out and then Merit would have to send out updates. You can understand that it wanted to get it out but it was very frustrating to operators but they just decided not to put up with it."

He continued, "Merit sent us samples of the latest software and said it isn't going to ship it until the operator advisory committee is convinced it is perfect. I was with Merit last week. It's ready to ship the Aurora and wanted advisory board to see it. I liked it. Operator input made it operator-friendly for service and for getting the monitor, computer, and bill acceptor out of the machine. In a dark bar it's difficult and no one at Merit seemed to understand that. Merit for years could do what it wanted to do because it was the only true player. Then JVL gave them a run for the money and Merit knew it better do something. Competition is healthy and it really benefits the operator."

## Game education

Just as Jason saw a need for communication, he also knows that equipment is not always easy to understand. For instance, he said, "I look at Stacker and know that most operators didn't get taught the ins and outs by their distributors. So it doesn't make money for them and they don't come back for more. Then as a result the company might struggle even though it has a great product. I remember that Chuck used to spend a lot of time making suggestions and making sure operators understood a game's potential."

However, noted Jason, even the best promotion won't work if you don't know the ins and outs of the

game. It's like shooting arrow without a target. He said, "In our Club Lucky group we have guys who know the games. If you always award the prize for the highest score you will only have a small number of people who will always win. We go a step further: We give prizes for birdies or other goals that players can strive to achieve."

Jason also talked about the prizes, "I'm big on perceived value. Anyone can go to Wal-Mart and buy a plasma TV so the players will know what you spent on the prize. But when you start stacking prizes together like signed sports or music memorabilia items, it's a perceived value for a player to know that if he shoots the most eagles, he'll win an Eagles guitar!

"Another thing I do is buy things like Coach purses. Put one in a Stacker, for instance, and you're going to attract different players. We spend lots of time shopping for the perfect prizes, even waiting all night to get Xbox or Nintendo Wii. We are doing all kinds of crazy things that are turning out to be not so crazy. For our next bowling tournament we are awarding a trip to Europe. We give away laptops every week. We're even planning on giving away a motorcycle.

"I am huge on promoting bars. We can't give away liquor but we can give away a tailgate party. The winner of the contest can invite 20 or 25 of his closest friends to come to the bar an hour before some sporting event and we pick up the food tab. The bars love this because you draw people who might not ordinarily visit the bar. We've also done that with CiCi's Pizza. Customers can win a coupon in our Stacker games that allows the customer to bring 25 people to the buffet. We pay the bill and that's the prize they won."

Jason said he's so attuned to prizes that one of the manufacturer's representative (not to mention any names!) would pick his brain and got to be so good at suggestions that he was dubbed the "prize expert." Jason added, "The reason I feel so confident about appropriate prizes is because I know my locations. I call them, e-mail them, and visit them at night. I spent quite a bit of time hanging out on location!"

Enter Illana

That made us wonder when he ever found time to find a wife. No problem, his mother helped. "I was literally working over 90 hours a week. My mom saw a need, as most good Jewish mothers do, and set me up with Illana, the girl who would become my wife. I think Illana was a little skeptical about why I had to spend so much time in bars. Don't ask her how many of our dates turned out to be service calls! When I began taking her with me it wasn't long before she realized that it wasn't exciting and that I wasn't kidding when I said we'd be in there working.

"Illana and I got married in 2002 and now have two kids so it's hard to be out in bars at night. I still read magazines and do quite a bit of research to see what's coming out. I can't wait until Ian and Alexis are old enough to tell me what games they like and what merchandise is popular!" Ian already goes out on the route with dad; he is a fan of candy cranes and air hockey.

You can tell that Illana, who was a project manager for a health care company, knows that Jason needs balance between the route and their family. He said, "The business is very consuming, and she is a most

supportive wife."

A.J. Video is looking to the future and Jason said that he is very excited to be in the coin-op business. "The industry is consolidating, which provides many new opportunities for us, Jason observed. "Social interaction, challenges of quality contests, and high-perceived value drive our business. The future? We are excited about the possibilities."



Jason Rubin's grandfather Herb Fingerhut, back in the day running the Name of the Game arcade. He was a big influence on Jason.

Here is Robert Rubin (c), partner in A.J. Video with customers Paul Martin and Ken Lizzato.

Paul Martin won a Mazda 6 Sports Sedan in previous contests sponsored by A.J. Video. Here they look over Incredible Technologies' newest game Bags.



Route Manager Jim Bordonaro at a Maryland Bar/Restaurant show where A.J. Video showed the Super Trivia Game by ICE. There were two representatives from Hooters restaurant (one of A.J.'s accounts) present in the booth to run a trivia tournament and award prizes.



One of A.J. Video's great people,  
Tony Demma with his fiance Valerie.  
They are getting married this month.  
Tony has been with A.J. Video since 1999.  
He came from Putt Putt Golf Center when it closed.



Here's Maria  
Ruth, A.J.'s Promotion and Marketing Guru,  
awarding player Mathew Leader a prize on one of  
the  
many Golden Tee Promo nights she organizes.



The A.J. Video Amusements' booth  
at the Maryland Restaurant/Bar show  
promoting tournaments.



Jason and Illana  
Rubin  
at the AVON Breast  
Cancer  
benefit in March.



Jason Rubin will tell you that tournaments, including those on Golden Tee Live, are an asset to operators.



Here is a great picture of Rubin's son Ian at age 2, taken last Easter Season; he was helping his dad fill the crane at CiCi's Pizza on the route.



Jason's son Ian and Daughter Alexis.



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