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## first person

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### First person account

*[This article prints out to about seven pages. —ed.]*

## Arnie Wexler's story:

### I am a recovering compulsive gambler who placed my last bet April 10, 1968.

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I started gambling as a kid in Brooklyn, N.Y., at about age seven or eight. It started with flipping baseball cards, pitching pennies, shooting marbles and playing pinball machines. That kind of gambling continued until about age 14 when I started to bet on sporting events with a bookmaker, and then I got into the stock market.

As a young kid growing up, I always felt that everyone was better than me. The only time I felt okay about myself was after I had a win, whether it was marbles or baseball cards or pennies. Then, at 14, I went to the racetrack for the first time; it was Memorial Day 1951, Roosevelt Raceway. At the time, I made 50 cents an hour after school, working 15 to 20 hours a week. That night at Roosevelt Raceway I had my first big win and walked out of the track with \$54. Looking back today, I think it was that night that changed my life. Even though I had only won \$54, it was about five weeks' salary to me. After that night, I believed I could be a winner from gambling, and eventually, become a millionaire. I can still recall that high feeling walking out of the racetrack that night.

By 17, I was already stealing to support my gambling. It started with stealing

comic books from the local candy store to play cards.. Before long it was stealing money from my family to gamble. By then, I was taking the bus to the racetrack a few nights a week on a regular basis. In New York in those days they closed the track in the winter months, so on weekends, I took the bus or the train to Maryland to gamble. I was betting sporting events and horses with a bookmaker on a daily basis. Back then, each sport had its own season. I remember calling the bookmaker one day and the only thing that was available to gamble on was hockey. I had never seen a hockey game, but I bet on it anyway. Only months later, when I saw my first hockey game, I realized it was played on ice.

Sometime between ages 17 and 20 I went to the racetrack one night and won \$6,000. Wow! Another big win, the equivalent of two years' salary. This reinforced my belief that I could be a winner at gambling.

By my early 20s I was betting big amounts on lots of games that I didn't really know much about and probably couldn't name more than a handful of players who played them. In some of the college games I bet on, I couldn't name one player or even tell you where the college was located, but I needed to be in action. By then I was a regular at the old Madison Square Garden, every week. I watched and bet on college and professional basketball on a regular basis. I was working full-time in a shipping department in the garment center and every Tuesday when we got paid there was a regular crap game out in the hallway. Almost every week I lost my pay in that game. I began stealing supplies and merchandise on a daily basis to pay for my gambling. I already had a bank loan and a finance company loan, and I borrowed from coworkers.

At 21, I met my future wife. Our first date was to the movies, and most of the rest of our dating was at the racetrack. We had a joint checking account to save for our wedding: she put money in —and I didn't. I needed my money for gambling. I was still looking for another big win. I thought the perfect place for our honeymoon would be Las Vegas or Puerto Rico since I knew both places had casinos. My wife-to-be didn't think that was a good idea; I guess she understood enough about my gambling already. When I was 23, we got married. I wanted to stop gambling at that point and I thought I could. But within a short time I was back at it. Even though I wanted to stop, I realize now that I couldn't.; I needed to gamble like any drug addict needs to stick that needle in their arm or an alcoholic needs to have that drink.

Four weeks after we got married I went away to the Army Reserves at Fort Dix, New Jersey, for six months. The whole time, I gambled every day, fast and furious, from placing bets by phone with the bookmaker to shooting craps and playing cards —every waking minute. When I came home in December of 1961, I owed \$4,000 and didn't even have a job.

I eventually got work in the garment center. In the showroom I worked in there were a few compulsive gamblers who I quickly got friendly with. They became my buddies. We played cards during the day and went to the racetrack at night, and on weekends, we did both. My wife thought I was at business meetings some nights. All of us lied for each other.

In 1963, my first daughter was born. While my wife was in labor for 37 hours, I went twice to the racetrack. When the doctor finally came out and told me that we had a baby, the only question I really cared about was "How much did she weigh?" You would think that my concern should have been "How is my wife?" or "How is the baby?" He answered 7 lbs., 1 oz., so my first call was to the bookmaker to bet 71 in the daily double. The next day, I saw in the newspaper that I had won, which convinced me that God had sent me a message: now I was going to be a winner.

One year later, my boss gave me an option to buy 500 shares of stock in the company for \$7,500. Within a year that stock was worth \$38,000. In those days, you could buy a car for \$2,000 and a house for about \$10,000. Within three years, all of that money was gone due to my gambling. I was now a plant supervisor for a Fortune 500 company. My gambling was already so out of control that I was stealing everything I could just to stay in action. I set up a room in the factory for playing cards, all day long. I was starting to do illegal acts, manipulating stocks in the stock market; still, at that point, I had borrowed money only from legitimate sources.

Our home life was deteriorating. Gambling was more important than anything else that went on at home. I lied about almost everything and I would come home and pick a fight so I could go out and gamble. Nothing else in my life was more important than gambling —not my family, not my job —gambling came first.

My gambling got progressively worse. As a plant manager in New Jersey, I was supervising 300 to 400 people and my boss was in New York. Most of the time he didn't know what I was doing. Besides stealing and borrowing money from coworkers, I now had loans with three banks, three finance companies, and I owed a loan shark an amount of money equal to one year's salary. I was involved with three bookmakers, both working for them and betting with them. I directed a lot of people in my company who gambled to my bookmaker and so I got a piece of the action. I even got involved in a numbers operation. Between these activities and stealing, I supported my gambling.

There were times I bet on 40 or 50 games in a weekend and believed I could win them all. One weekend, just before I hit my bottom, I called a bookmaker

and took a shot by betting a round robin equal to about two years' salary. If I had lost that bet there was no way I could have paid it at that time. Things were getting so bad, I remember calling a bookmaker one day and he said that if I didn't bring him the money I owed him, he would not take my bet for that night, so I went home and sold our car to a neighbor.

I wasn't going home to pick fights with my wife anymore; I was doing it over the phone so I wouldn't waste the trip. Most of the time I was out gambling, but when I was home we fought constantly. We rarely had sex. When I won I was so high I didn't need it and if I lost I didn't want it. There were times when we did have sex, though, and my wife would say, "Do you hear a radio?" Of course, I told her she was crazy, but I had a radio on under the pillow so I could listen to a game.

We tried to have another child, but couldn't. My wife came to me with the idea of adoption. I didn't like it, especially because it would cost money, money I needed for gambling. After three months of her bothering me, I finally went along with her, thinking that she would be so busy with the two kids she would leave me alone. I borrowed the money we needed from my boss and relatives. The day we brought our new son home on a plane was the seventh game of the 1967 World Series. My wife was busy looking at this beautiful new baby but I had no interest in him. I had a large bet on the game, and although the pilot announced the score every 15 minutes or so, I was so upset that we were on this plane. I wished and prayed the plane would land so I wouldn't miss another minute of that game.

In the next few months, the bottom fell out of my world even though I still had my job and I still looked like things were okay; that is, there were no track marks on my arm and I didn't smell. No one could really tell what was going on. I would come home from gambling and see my wife crying all the time, depressed and sick. Our daughter was four years old and I don't remember her walking or talking. Either I wasn't home, or when I was, my head was consumed with gambling. I owed 32 people the equivalent of three years' salary; I had a life insurance policy and constantly thought about killing myself and leaving my wife and two kids that money.

I would do anything to keep gambling. I still thought the big win was just around the corner as long as I could get money to stay in action. I tried to find out where I could get drugs to sell, I scouted gas stations to rob, I asked people about making counterfeit money—I was running out of options. My boss came to me one day and told me a detective who was following me had a report on my gambling. He knew I bet more than I earned and was sure that I stole from the company. If he found out, he said, he would have me arrested. Only three hours later I was stealing from the company again: I needed to go

to the racetrack that night.

On February 2, 1968, my wife had a miscarriage. I took her to the hospital, wishing and praying all the way that she would die. I thought it would solve all my problems not to have to tell her how bad things were. That morning, I called my mother to watch my kids and called my boss to say I couldn't come to work because my wife was in the hospital. That afternoon I went to the racetrack. After the track, I went to see my wife. When I got to the hospital the doctor told me that my wife was in shock, she had almost died. I was so deep into my addiction that I didn't care —about her, the two kids or myself. The only important thing was making a bet.

I thought I was the only one living that way and doing what I did. But I found out that I wasn't alone and that I could stop gambling with the help of the other people. I had hope for the first time.

It has been almost 34 years since I last gambled. Today, I have everything I dreamed I would get from gambling and then some. I have a wonderful family that is still intact and I have even been blessed with four grandchildren who I love very much. In the last 20 years, I have been able to devote my working life to helping others who have this problem and educating people on the disease of compulsive gambling. This has been a dream come true.

*Submitted: February 18, 2002*

*This First person account was not peer-reviewed.*

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*Arnie is an expert on the subject of compulsive gambling and has been involved in helping compulsive gamblers for over 34 years. He has appeared on many of America's top television shows, including Oprah, Nightline and 48 Hours. He has been quoted and profiled in hundreds of magazines and newspapers.*

*Arnie has presented workshops and training seminars nationally and internationally. He has spoken to gaming industry executives, Fortune 500 corporations and legislative bodies, and on college campuses. He has carried out training for the National Football League.*

**Issue 7 —December 2002**



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