



# Rich man, poor man

How Arnie Wexler and Sheila, his wife of 52 years, rode out his compulsive gambling and beat the house

By Diana Ballon

Arnie Wexler's gambling began innocently enough. At the age of seven or eight, he would shoot marbles, pitch pennies and flip baseball cards outside his Brooklyn home with his neighbourhood pals. The stakes then were low—a few pennies, maybe nickels or dimes given to him by his grandfather, who was living with them at the time. But then, at the age of 14, when he was making 50 cents an hour cleaning floors and making deliveries for a garment factory, he won \$54 at the racetracks. He dreamt he was going to be a millionaire by the time he was 30.



It was false belief about his ability to win at gambling that began the downward spiral toward compulsive gambling, toward an addiction that just about ruined him and his relationship and caused him to lose everything he owned. It would cause him to abandon his young wife at the hospital while she was miscarrying to plot his next bet. It would bring him into debt for three times his annual salary. It would leave him emotionally depleted, and his wife depressed and agoraphobic, alone with the first of his two children, whom he rarely saw because of his addiction.

Little did he know, he would also manage to quit gambling after 23 years—with a gambling addiction for more than half of this time—and become a leading advocate for the rights of people with gambling problems. He would start up the first hotline for compulsive gamblers in the United States. He would volunteer tens of thousands of hours to talking to other compulsive gamblers to try and lead them toward recovery. He would help start the National Council on Compulsive Gambling in 1972, and later help start and run the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey for eight years. He would then develop a business with his wife to train more than 40,000 casino workers and executives at casinos across North America. They would also train addiction counsellors and educate legislators and policy makers in 42 states and seven countries.

### For better or (much, much) worse

After Arnie won \$54 at the age of 14, his interest in gambling became an obsession. He finished high school while doing any odd job he could get to make the money he needed to keep gambling. From the age of 17, he was going to the race track several nights a week, and betting daily on sports events and horses with a bookmaker—stealing from his family and even the local candy store to support his habit. He was aggressive in his betting, but also strangely naïve. As he writes on his website, “I had never seen a hockey game, but bet on it anyway. It wasn’t until months later when I did see my first hockey game that I realized that hockey was played on ice.”

The odd jobs morphed into a full-time job at a garment centre, first in a shipping department, then in the showroom. The gambling and stealing continued: amidst it all, he met his future wife, Sheila, whom he courted mainly with dates to the racetrack, card games and sporting events he was betting on. When their first child was born, his immediate concern was to find out the birth weight, which was seven pounds, one ounce. He bet 71 in the daily double horse races, won, and became more committed than ever to being a winner.

Hardly surprising, Sheila was terribly unhappy in the relationship. She was only 18 and a half when they married, having moved straight from her parents’ home in with Arnie. But married life was not what she’d expected. Bills weren’t getting paid. They would get letters from the bank. He was borrowing from relatives, and lying about everything. “He’d [even] lie about what he had for lunch, for no reason,” she says.

“I maybe never had self-confidence,” admits Sheila. “I just kept losing what little self-confidence I had,” she says, with that sense of vulnerability still hovering in her memory.

“You felt trapped. Emotionally it wore me down. I kept trying to figure out what was wrong with me that he wouldn’t stay at home at night. Why did he prefer the gambling to me?”

“I became withdrawn. I stopped seeking out friends. It was impossible to make excuses as to why he wasn’t around, why we were

not succeeding financially.” Sheila developed agoraphobia, which prevented her from leaving the house, even to go to the pediatrician. “I was afraid when the phone rang. The stress became intolerable.”

Arnie is equally candid about his negligence in the relationship. “Once, when we were having sex, my wife said, ‘I hear a radio. Do you hear a radio?’ It was under the pillow. I was listening to a ballgame I had bet on.” And yet Sheila didn’t leave, she couldn’t. “In those days, women didn’t go no place,” says Arnie. “What was she going to do—go back and live with her mother and father? ... Thirty years ago, a woman couldn’t [even] buy a car without the husband’s name on it.”

The worst time she remembers was the miscarriage. Arnie drove her to the hospital in the middle of the night, got his mother to babysit their two kids, and left his wife to go off to the racetracks. There was no bed for Sheila, so she was left to wait in the hallway of the hospital.

“I was alone and frightened. I hemorrhaged very badly. They thought I had gone into shock,” she recalls. It wasn’t until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. that Arnie showed up, not having checked to see how she was doing in the meantime. He had spent the day at the racetrack.

“It was the end of any hope that I was going to have a marriage. It looked like it was going to be my life with someone who didn’t care about me,” she responds bluntly.

Through this time, perhaps ironically, Arnie’s career continued to advance. At the age of 23, he became plant manager for a Fortune 500 company in New Jersey. Although the job involved supervising 300 people, he had good people to run the place, so he could carry on a crap game and a card game in the office, and not get caught. (He paid the girl at the switchboard \$25 a week to tell him when the boss was coming to town, so he could hide all evidence of his games during the boss’s visit. Then as soon as he left, Arnie would go back to playing cards and craps.)

With Arnie betting big sums—\$1,000 to \$2,000 a race—on a salary of \$125 a week, his boss was becoming suspicious. And for good reason: Arnie was taking racks of dresses from the plant and selling them for money, placing up to 40 bets a day with the bookmaker and swindling the stock market (he had \$10 in his bank account when he bought \$4,400 worth of stock with a cheque the broker told him a few days later was no good).

Arnie thought daily about suicide. He thought the only other way out would be if Sheila would die: then he wouldn’t have to tell her how bad things were.

And that was when things changed.

“I went to a 12-step program because someone said they would pay off my money debts.” Instead, they gave him what he refers to as a “pressure relief meeting”: they ask you to write down everything you owe and everything that’s coming in in two separate columns, he recalls. “I thought they were going to bail me out,” he says, as if still a bit incredulous. “I didn’t have any intention of stopping.” Instead, they recommended that he take on two more jobs. So in addition to working as a plant manager from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., he began loading trucks in the evening, and working for a photography company on the weekend.

Eight weeks later, he gambled one more time. It was April 10, 1968, opening day of the baseball season. They won the first game, then lost the second at the bottom of the 9th inning. Then he stopped for good—because he had no more money, and was afraid to steal, and he had the support to keep going on without gambling. It’s been 45 years.



## Recovery rules

Arnie is a passionate guy. When he e-mails, he uses all capital letters and sometimes boldface to emphasize his points. He speaks rapidly, and responds to calls and requests for help quickly.

"I've been doing this for 45 years. No one else has been doing it longer," he says.

Indeed, Arnie has an international reputation for his commitment to advocating for the rights of problem gamblers and their families. He's been on *60 Minutes*. He's been interviewed by Howard Cosell, and Connie Chung on the *Today Show*.

"I'm not God, but nobody recovers from an addiction unless he sticks out his hand and helps another. The highest high in my life used to be gambling. You think back to the best sex you ever had in your life, and that one time when it was unbelievable sex and you'd like to be back there. That's what a gambler feels like about the first time he has that big win.

"You need to get something to replace that. I get a high from new people calling, from doing what I'm doing with you, and seeing people get better—from people coming in totally devastated, and then six months later, they're vivacious.

"I needed to gamble like an addict needs to stick a needle in his arm," says Arnie. While he sees the similarities between a substance use and gambling addiction, he also sees gambling problems as a more invisible, more insidious illness. "You give a drug addict a \$1,000. The drug addict will [get more drugs, take them and then] be passed out. The gambler will just borrow more money, sell his watch and everything else [he can get his hands on], blow through thousands. There will be no track marks, no diluted pupils."

Arnie is quick to label compulsive gambling as an impulse disorder, a disease about control and ego and lying. "Compulsive gamblers have broken brains. They see only the positive things; they don't see the negative. In the end, their brains don't work right until they are in recovery for some time...."

"I think there's a defective gene for addicted people," he says, reflecting on addictions in his own family. "We all have bumps in the road." He attributes his own gambling problems to a combination of low self-esteem, a big ego and a childhood trauma. Arnie discovered at the age of 14 that the man he thought was his real father was actually his stepfather. He found this out when he broke a lady's window with his baseball and she yelled out, "If your father was alive, you wouldn't be behaving like that," he says. "All of a sudden, you get to thinking, like gee, they [my half siblings] are getting treated better than me."

Despite the belief that he could be a winner, he found out the hard way that this was a kind of magical thinking. Not until years into his recovery did he discover that if you constantly gamble, you can't win. "The system [the casinos, the racetracks, the lotteries] is set up for the house to win. They want you to gamble because the longer you do, the more you will lose."

According to Wexler, the difference between you and a gambler is, "If you and I both win \$100, you will buy shoes or dinner [or whatever]. Or if you lose that amount, you walk away. A gambler is different. He has to get the money back. He must chase wins or losses."

## When treatment works

Arnie is a firm believer in 12-step programs as the route to helping the problem gambler. "When you're in group, one gambler can't bullshit another, at least not usually. If you don't have someone available at 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 in the morning, the person can go down the tubes." Although he concurs that some professionals can help, he says they have to understand gambling. "Many so-called professionals won't know a compulsive gambler from a cockroach on the wall."

While Arnie is the first to admit how difficult it is to stop gambling, and what a small percentage can actually recover, he knows that he can and has made a big difference. He still responds himself, as a volunteer service, to all callers on his hotline, 1 888-LAST-BET. He and his wife also continue to fight for responsible gaming policies to be introduced into all gambling-related business. They apply pressure on gaming facilities to legislate a credit limit. They lobby to have a hotline help number included in gambling ads. And they push for compulsive gambling to be covered by insurance companies, and to have businesses offer employees treatment for their gambling problems. Sheila herself became a certified alcohol and drug counselor in 1978, and a gambling counsellor just over a decade later. She also managed to develop and implement what is and continues to be the only compulsive gambling inpatient treatment program at a New Jersey addiction centre.

Now 75 years old, Arnie says he won't stop working "until they put me in a box." He continues to go to 12-step meetings—nine last week alone, including three in one day. Although it's been close to a decade since he's had the urge to gamble, Arnie still relies on meetings to keep him from making impulsive decisions and from succumbing to "crazy thinking."

He's been 45 years clean, and 52 years married to a woman who understands and has stuck by him. Sheila says she no longer has trust issues with her husband. "He's now a compulsive helper, but not a risk taker," she says. "It's an illness. This is a good man that did terrible things. In recovery, he has become a good man." ☐



Arnie Wexler and his wife of 52 years, Sheila.

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