

Somebody's Got A B I N G O!

A typical night at the bingo hall looks like an odd cross between a church social, a country fair and a Las Vegas casino. Although the big game hasn't started yet, more than 100 people have sat down at rows of long tables and arranged colored cards before them.

While waiting for the game to start, the players exchange gossip and smiles and consume hot dogs and cigarettes. The caller, sitting on a raised platform like a preacher on his or her pulpit, gives an introduction into the microphone, and the roar of the small talk quickly dies down.

Eyes fall to the cards as soon as the numbers are called out: "B-12," "N-44," "I-30," the caller announces without comment.

Soon a player raises one of her cards high in the air and exclaims, "Bingo!"

The daily mass ritual of the bingo game has begun at the Association for Retarded Citizens' bingo hall, just one of several places around Eugene where bingo players congregate in droves.

They come for all kinds of reasons. Of course, there's the money to be won, but bingo attracts for many other reasons.

"The appeal of bingo is that it's a fun, relaxing afternoon away from the house," says June Barth, who is a regular at the Tuesday afternoon games at the ARC hall. "I think it's just plain fun."

Barth knows most of the other ARC regulars by name. Bingo is a social sport. Everyone participates together and has an equal chance.

"I come mostly to meet my friends, not to win money," says Margerite, another one of Barth's friends.

Although acknowledging the other reasons, Marilyn Paxton, who manages the operation, thinks the cash winnings are the major draw. "The majority play in hopes of winning" the cash prizes that range from \$5 to \$1,500, she says.

A few are serious gamblers. Although a person can play for \$3 a night, some spend up to \$60 and attend every night. These hardcore bingo buffs keep up on which progressive game in town has the biggest pot, attending the one that does.

When the game starts up though, one could swear everyone in the room is a high-stakes gambler. Hundreds of intent eyes scan across the cards as the numbers are called out.

At times bingo can be quite dramatic. When several people are "on" — one away from bingo or blackout — during a high pay-off game, the seemingly care-free game becomes an anxious wait to see who will get the lucky number.

Many find this intensity an absorbing diversion. "All the stresses of the day go by the wayside," Paxton says of these people.

Ironically though, it's the pressure of the game that makes Paxton dislike playing bingo. "I don't relax. Bingo's not fun and relaxing for me," she says.

Paxton became involved in bingo through the ARC, where she works to raise money. The Eugene operation earned more than \$800,000 for the association last year.

Oregon laws allow any non-profit fraternal, charitable or religious organization to run bingo games, but the money from them must go directly to the charity and can't be used to pay salaries of those running the games.

Besides the ARC, several other charities operate games in the area, including Marist High School, First Family Life Christian Church and St. Paul's Catholic Church.

Paxton believes bingo has become more popular since the ARC took over the hall five years ago. Despite heavy competition, the ARC hall averages about 170 players a night.

The players are as diverse as they are numerous. "There just isn't an 'average' bingo player," Paxton says. "People range from 18 to the 80s, spend from \$3 to \$60 a night, and come from all walks of life."

However, she admits there are many housewives and retired people and more women than men.

Bingo is such a simple game that anyone can understand it, although one must be 18 to play. Players mark off number/letter combinations on their cards as each is called out. Each card has a random combination of numbers from "B-1" to "O-75." The first person to mark off a certain pattern on one of their cards is the winner.

Surprisingly, there is a great deal of variety within this simple game. The ARC bingo runs several "regular" games nightly, where six different combinations can win as well as blackout games where all the spaces must be filled.

Both variations are played on "hard" cards — permanent cards with built-in covers for each number. How much a player wins depends on what color cards are purchased. Each of the five color cards costs a different amount, and the more paid for the card, the more you can win.

"Special" games are played on paper cards between regular games. In each special, players try for a specific design and stamp out called numbers with an official ink marker.

Most agree that winning is a matter of chance. "As far as I'm concerned, it's all luck," Paxton says.

Still, players constantly try to beat the odds. Some increase their chances by simply buying more cards. Others slave over bins of cards in order to find a combination of cards that includes as many numbers as possible.

The more superstitious look for cards with certain lucky numbers, such as B-13 in the corner. A bingo newsletter, "The Bingo Bugle," even has a horoscope column that advises on the best number to pick and what color stamp to use on special games.

To further aid their fortune, players also may rely on magic charms like rabbit's foots, lucky jewelry or stuffed dolls.

As with all gambling, even the most lucky don't always win. Patrons still attend regularly, even when they spend much more than they win.

No doubt, bingo fans will keep coming as long as there is fun and friends and that one chance of winning.



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(From left to right) Catherine Jones, a 27-year-old homemaker, says she comes to the ARC bingo parlor once a month. Eileen Given concentrates on the game at hand while Lona Snider checks the monitors for newly called numbers. Volunteer caller John King holds the players in suspense while randomly picking the numbers for the game.

