



Poker-table maker takes a bit of a gamble

Entrepreneur optimistic that patent-pending, six-month-old venture will pay off in spades

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For a non-card player, Joe Elko sure has a lot of poker tables.

The 56-year-old manufactures them along with his son and wife in a Petersburg warehouse.

"I play once every six months. But one of my friends bought a portable poker table 10 years ago, and it was nice-looking but of poor quality," said Elko. "I thought about that for 10 years and thought what I would do differently to make a better table."

Elko previously owned a furniture supply company and still manages a sewing company that contracts with the federal government and the military.

But the poker table, called the Maxus, is his newest venture. He's in the process of patenting it. The name sounds like the Roman gladiator Maximus, said Elko's wife, Betty.

The base model costs \$600 and seats up to 10 players, with Vegas-style metal drink holders.

Matching chairs are available but not included in the base price. The table can be broken down easily and transported in a carrying case to wherever the best game may be found.

The playing surface comes in green or red or can be customized with logos from colleges, such as the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech, for an extra \$200.

Elko is advertising in alumni magazines, but so far he has had no takers in Virginia for the college logo.

Elko said he has always been involved in some sort of carpentry businesses, and his uncles were in the craft. Poker tables made sense, he said, because, "I wanted a product to sell on the Internet that I could FedEx to the customer."

He preferred not to share sales figures, but he said the endeavor is a bit of a gamble, though sales have increased since the product was first available six months ago.

"We're still marketing and still finding our niche," he said.

The couple's son, Jake, 23, does most of the woodworking onsite in Petersburg. Pre-cut legs, sheets of plywood and bolts of felt-like fabric arrive from suppliers in four cardboard boxes. The stained, sanded parts are shipped to customers complete with a screwdriver for assembly.

Joe and Jake build the tables 10 or so at a time, but if one were to be assembled from scratch, Joe Elko guessed it would take around 12 hours.

So far, the West Coast and Northeast account for most of the sales.

The table was featured on the CBS drama "Shark."

"A director called after finding the Web site," Betty said. "It had to be high end and portable. The actor James Woods has high-end stuff, and the director was worried if we could get it [there on time]. We did."

"It was great for us."

The tables are also appreciated by those outside Los Angeles.

"I love it. I have the Ohio State Buckeyes print, and I like the armrests on it," said customer Shane Skinner, who lives in Ohio. "I play poker with friends, and if I ever need to take it over to somebody else's house, it's easy."

Parker Johnson bought one because the table doesn't have dividers that limit the number of players who can sit comfortably.

"I like the versatility, and it can handle more than the standard number of players. We play on it hard, eating, drinking, and not being aware that much. It doesn't show one bit of wear."

THE RESUME

Name: Joe Elko

Born: Oct. 14, 1950

Product name:
Maxus Portable
Poker Tables

Education: Colonial
Heights High School

Family: wife Betty;
son Jacob, 23, son
J.B., 27

Resides: Matoaca,
Chesterfield County

Web site:
www.maxuspt.com