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CREDIT-FREE PROGRAM

Author Teaches Craps Course At Manchester Community College

By JESSE LEAVENWORTH

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The game of craps is mayhem to the novice, like watching frenzied brokers at the stock exchange.

"People are winning on '7,' losing on '7,' chips are flying, people are yelling and screaming," Nino Nistri says.

Nistri, 68, a recreational gambler since age 11, knows the tumbling dice as well as anyone can. The Glastonbury man wrote a book about the game — titled simply "Craps" — and he teaches a non-credit course on the subject at Manchester Community College.

The book is the basis for the course, but the problem in writing the book, Nistri said, was where to start?

A craps player wins the game's basic wager by rolling a 7 or 11 on the opening, or "come-out," roll. A 2, 3 or 12 come-out roll loses, or "craps out." Any other number establishes a "point," and the player wins by rolling that point number again before rolling a 7.

But players also can win by betting "wrong" and lose by betting "right." There are "world" bets, "sleeper" bets, "hop," "horn" and "hard way" bets. Each section of the table and each casino worker at the table has a name and a purpose. Each roll carries a slew of slang names. A 2, for example, may be called "craps," "aces," "snake eyes," "two bad boys from Illinois," "bird balls" and "eyeballs."

Since 2000, Nistri has taught the language, rules and odds of this fast-moving game that emerged from alleys and back rooms into casinos around the country, including the two in Connecticut. Mohegan Sun, for example, has 18 craps tables and craps is one of the Uncasville casino's five most popular table games, spokeswoman Cathy Soper wrote in an e-mail. Manchester Community College offers the course because some people want to learn the rules so they can play with confidence and enjoy themselves, Ann Bonney, director of credit-free programs, said.

Nistri has an official craps layout for the course, which consists of four two-hour sessions. Each student receives a pair of regulation dice, a laminated odds sheet and Nistri's book (he also teaches a blackjack course at the college and has written a book on that game of chance). The fee for the craps course — titled "Oh Craps!" — is \$50 and the book costs \$29, which Nistri, an animated man who widens his eyes when he wants to make a point, says is "dirt, dirt, dirt cheap" for what he offers.

Born in New York City, Nistri's family moved to Connecticut when he was 11. Caddying at a Norwalk country club, he earned \$4 to \$5 for each bag he toted through 18 holes. With the money, Nistri said, he gambled with the other caddies.

"That was the slippery slope down," he says, laughing.

But Nistri hasn't earned his living at the tables. He's a U.S. Air Force veteran who entered the insurance business in the early 1980s and now works from home as an insurance and investment broker.

Nistri says he likes to gamble, but he has seen some sad stories unfold around the gaming tables and he tells students in both his blackjack and craps courses that their focus should be on fun, not raking windfalls on their first bets.

And for sheer excitement, Nistri said, craps is the game.

"When things are going, you can feel the electricity," he says, popping his eyes. "It's the best game in the house, in my opinion."

The next "Oh Craps!" course is scheduled to begin on May 13 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Manchester Community College. For more information, call 860-512-2800.

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