



Just a few of Newport Grand's many video lottery terminals, each offering you a chance to hit paydirt, or frustration.

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# A GRAND DAY OUT

**MATTHEW KEEFER** goes on a fact-finding mission, meets a nice old lady and learns when to walk away.

I've done a lot of things. Hung out with local bands. Nearly drowned at Second Beach. Made an Everclear torch. Got kicked out of a comedy club.

But being 24, one of the few things I hadn't done was so glaring, so abominable, I was almost ashamed to admit it to the older woman in a salmon pantsuit sitting next to me at the Winner's Circle in Newport Grand watching for the next simulcast horse race.

"I've never gambled before."

"Well, dear, I only started when I was 30."

She points to a screen. "And here's the New York race, and this one's the Florida race," she adds.

"That one up there is pretty tough."

And she hands me a sheet. Or I should say packet. She goes over the statistics, some of them, anyway: trainers, jockeys, records, names. A whole slew of information to make the uninformed feel more, well, informed.

"We come up here every Saturday." She points to the older gentleman beside her. "It's our day out."

I suppose it's a day out for me, too. The Grand has always been one of those places I'd passed by since I was young — back when it was Newport Jai Alai, named after the sport once played there and the popular crossword puzzle answer — and it's always had some famous mystique to it, more so than drinking and smoking. But this Saturday afternoon I was looking for a story, and this was a place of stories: a place where a man could lose it all, could come home wealthy; a place for an aspiring writer to sit down next to a woman three times his age and chat about horses.

"It's a sport," the salmon lady says of horse betting. "The slots pay for the hotel renovations."

She's right. There is something crummy about the more than 1,000 video slot machines that line the rooms. The Tomb Raider, the Muck Raker, the Hex Breaker. And I can see the people, most twice my age, cranking away at those machines. I leave the salmon lady and go to the concessions stand.

"I'm new here; is there like a map or anything?" I ask the guy with a scruffy beard behind the counter.

He points out a few things. I feel like a tourist. I walk around and try to find inspiration. Finding a story takes luck, sometimes; but here in the Grand,

luck is a four-letter word. Everything is a skill: horse betting is a skill. It takes a lot of skill to play the slots; there are lines, selections to make. Even though most people just press the button.

I keep walking and find an older gentleman at one of the slots. Suddenly he wins \$20 — 2,000 credits actually as state law prohibits the machines from dispensing actual cash, only a human being can do that — and he's excited. I'm standing watching next to him, near another woman.

"That woman there," she points out, "just hit the jackpot. Six thousand dollars."

"Wow."

And the older man is sitting there, putting the money up again. The woman tells him to cash out, but pretty soon they're both pressing the button, placing more bets.

I sit at one of the quarter machines. It's every bit as confusing as the horse sheets, considering I nearly earned my degree in advanced calculus. A dollar in and I press the button, flashing lights and a spin. Nothing. I do it again, nothing. The exercise has cost me 50 cents and that's rich enough for my blood. I get my 50 cent credit slip to cash out and walk away confused and frustrated.

The atmosphere starts to get to me. I go down to the dining area to order a plate of fries. While I'm waiting, I'm wondering how to pitch the expenses to my editor.

I sit at the bar and look around. I smell second-hand smoke, hear the machines flashing sirens and the occasional hoots and calls from the lucky, I mean skilled. But most of the people seem to be droning at the machines, not particularly vested in the outcome of the game. I realize there isn't anything glamorous or wonderful about this place. There are no big winners, no tragic losers. It's just another place, one that makes me feel somewhat uncomfortable, a place with people sitting by and passing the time. People at the horse races, people cashing their winnings in again. I finish my fries and go get my 50 cents back.

It would be a lie for me to say I really enjoyed myself in the hour and a half I spent there. But there is something more human and intricate about the Grand, something more interesting than those wild, almost childish stories we tell ourselves about casinos. No Robert De Niro, no Sharon Stone. I guess this is just a quiet story with an older lady in a salmon colored suit enjoying a day out.

*Matt Keefers is determined to win his 50 cents back. But first he'd like a refresher tutorial with the salmon lady before he's ready to try for a superfecta.*