

The Evolution of Casino Players Club Cards

The history...and future...of players club cards as a casino collectible

by Robert Pardue

Introduction

Interest in players club cards has mushroomed in recent years among casino memorabilia collectors. While chips and tokens remain the predominant casino collectibles, it seems that players club cards may have equalled or surpassed most other casino-related items (dice, ashtrays, swizzle sticks, playing cards, etc.) in popularity. As a free – or inexpensive – “go-with” collectible, players club cards can be a colorful and fun item to add to your casino collections. With the addition of two collector guides on slot cards in the past year, watch for this casino collectible to grow rapidly.

Players Club cards (often simply called “slot cards”) evolved from VIP cards and other non-electronic methods for identifying regular players in the casino. When table-games were the primary focus on casino floors just 10 to 15 years ago, it was the responsibility of pit bosses and casino executives to know their repeat guests by sight and name. A regular table player was – and still is – greeted with a friendly “Hello, Mr. X”. Comps for table game players were calculated manually, but comps for slot players were non-existent. As profitability for slot machines increased and the mix on casino floors changed to mostly slots rather than tables, casino executives looked for a better way to identify and reward

their newly favored customers – the repeat-visit slot player. Slot players proved difficult to track precisely as they moved from machine to machine, and their interaction was more frequently with the change person than the casino manager.

Slot clubs were created about the same time that slots were wired for multi-machine jackpots (for a whole carousel of machines or for multi-site games such as IGT’s Megabucks). As slot machines were wired to report into a central location on their performance and accounting, the next logical step was to gather information on *who* was playing each machine and the *total value* of their play on the machine.

VIP Clubs and direct rebate tickets – forerunners of today’s slot clubs

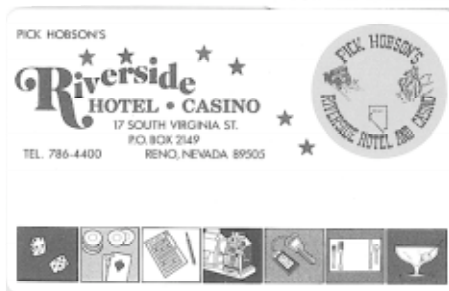
Even before slot machines were networked to collect player information, some casinos issued VIP cards to

their better players (or to all players who asked). As examples: Dunes “Special Guest Card”; Pick Hobson’s Riverside Casino – Reno identification card; and Sahara Hotel Casino – Las Vegas: “VIP Gold Card”, a non-automated card issued to players during a prior ownership. (This VIP card was not inserted into the machine, but instead, used to identify the player when buying tokens. The change person recorded the amount of buy-in, and enough buy-ins translated into comps.)

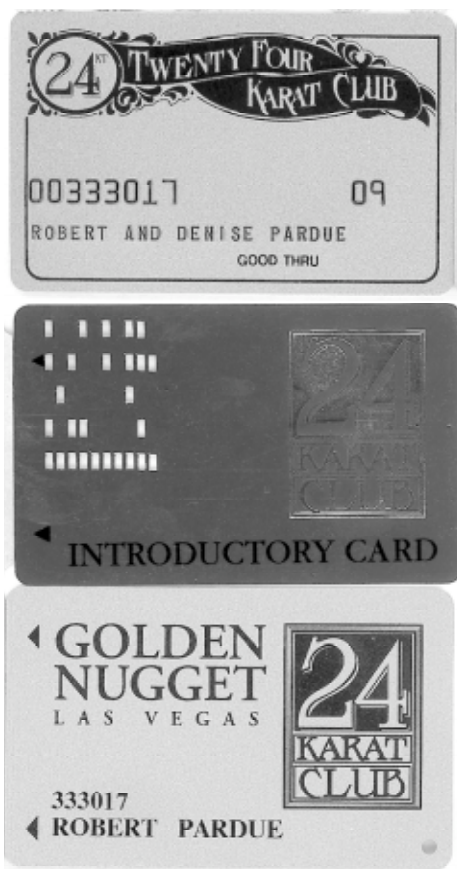
One of the early casino slot club programs was at the Golden Nugget-Atlantic City slot club (1982) and the Golden Nugget-Las Vegas program (1983). Initially, the \$1 slot machines



in the Las Vegas program dispensed a ticket for every \$75 played in the machine. The ticket, which resembles a “skee-ball” amusement ticket, was good for 50c cash back at the slot player booth. Players redeeming large numbers of tickets would become familiar to slot hosts and be invited to receive casino comps and invitations to slot events. This first generation slot rebate



program did not include individual player tracking. Later, the Golden Nugget added full-fledged player tracking with the introductory and permanent player cards used today.



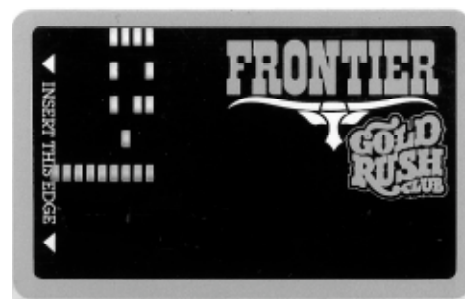
Slot Clubs: How they evolved & How they operate

Casinos use slot clubs for two primary purposes. (1) Identify slot players by name, in order to attract and retain good players with offers of comps and invitations to slot tournaments. (2) Offer cash and/or comp rebates on volume of slot play, in order to create an incentive for players to choose their casino over other properties.

Initially, slot clubs were introduced selectively at some of the larger properties in Atlantic City and Nevada. At the same time, other casinos proudly advertised their *lack* of a slot club. Originally, casinos such

as Palace Station and the Horseshoe-Las Vegas marketed *against* slot clubs, with the notion that the overhead costs of operating a slot club were detrimental to player returns. Today, however, nearly all casinos – large and small, tourist or locals oriented, old or brand-new – offer a slot club. The exceptions are usually tiny or marginal clubs or some smaller slots-only clubs, and a few others.

Even the tiny “Treasury” casino in Sparks operated a slot club. And several small locals casinos and bars in Las Vegas have jumped on the slot club bandwagon with hand-scan cards.



The Frontier Hotel Casino-Las Vegas initiated one of the first (maybe *the* first?) computer-tracked slot card programs in the 1970’s with their “Gold Rush Club” card. The New Frontier continues to run a player tracking system today, though it has evolved considerably from its original roots.

In 1985, Harrah’s Marina (Atlantic City) claims the distinction of being the first on-line slot player tracking system, developed with their vendor, Electronic Data Technologies. This “Captain’s Circle” program was the first modern slot club, according to Harrah’s. The Harrah’s slot programs evolved, with separate programs and cards at each location over many years. Harrah’s finally became the first nationally-branded casino to introduce a multi-site card, the Harrah’s Gold Card, which could be used at every Harrah’s property. The formula for earning points differs among Harrah’s locations, but it allows players to earn points in one (or many) locations, then redeem points for cash or comps at other properties. The fully-networked card system allows a card issued from one property to be recognized in another property’s card reader in just seven seconds. Most recently, Harrah’s has transformed its player card program into 3 tiers or rewards — gold, platinum and diamond — with their Total Rewards program. Harrah’s Rio and Showboat brands have adopted this program too.



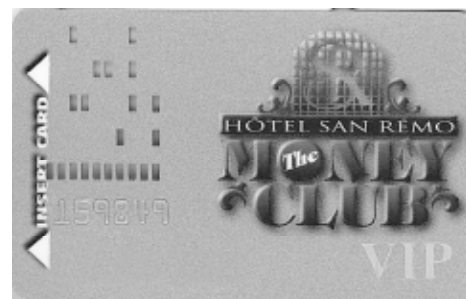
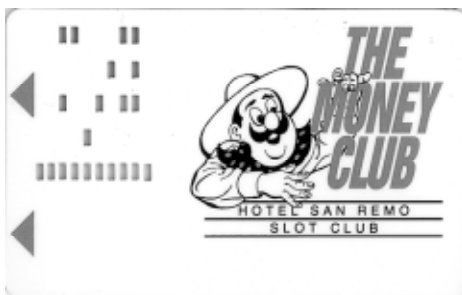
Describing Slot Cards in your collection — some terminology

Slot cards are challenging to describe completely, unless accompanied by a photo of both sides of the card. This is because a number of slight variations can exist for similar-looking cards. If you are attempting to describe, in writing, the characteristics of your slot cards, you will probably need to track at least 8 data elements, preferably with a computerized database or spreadsheet file.

- Casino name & location
- Name of Player/Slot card program
- Type of card — regular, permanent, introductory,
- Senior/Over 55, etc.
- Size/shape and Material — plastic, paper
- Holes & embossing/printing
- Punchboard reader or mag-stripe
- Card face — Various colors, logos, writings
- Card reverse — manufacturer (if any), writings, mag stripe, signature block

Some of these details are hard to describe, so a scan or photo (preferably in color) is very helpful, unless you have a great memory and aptitude for detail.

Can you spot the differences in the San Remo “Money Club” photo? (And these distinctions are easy when compared with some cards!)



Slot card collections may be sorted in any way you choose, but a common sort is by location (state, then an optional sort by city), then listed alphabetically by casino name. Note that in many cases, the slot club name is different from the casino name, and the casino may have used several different names for its slot club over the years. A cross-reference between casino name and slot card name(s) is helpful.

The recent publication of two books on slot card collecting can be a big help in organizing your collection, especially if you have many cards. (These books, by Carolyn Donley and by Lamb & Wells are available through their authors.)

Segmenting the slot players market — more slot cards

As casino marketing departments learned to mine their database of players, they discovered differences in play — casual vs. frequent players; quarter players vs. dollar or higher players; “Seniors” (often starting at age 55); and sometimes slot vs. table games, or combination players. The volume of play determines eligibility for discounts or comps for food,

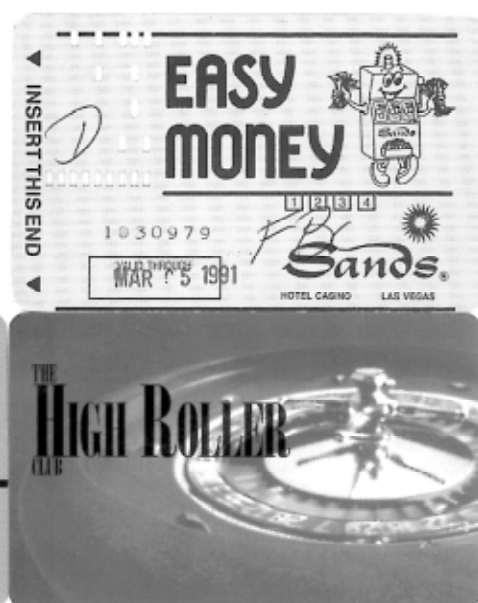
rooms and special slot party invitations. Comps may affect accrued point totals, or may be offered independently; cashback is usually a straight formula on points accrued, although points can be awarded faster on higher-denomination machines and/or lower payback machines.

For the slot card collector, this means more cards to collect. Introductory or Qualifier cards, Seniors cards, tiered-award cards, special event cards. The list is endless. Some clubs even issue multiple cards with different images, just to keep their program fresh.

Looking for more card categories to collect? How about paper cards, like the early Club Rio and Sands temporary card. Or manufacturers sample cards, like the PPC and High Roller cards pictured to the right.

Key cards, reminder cards, bungee cords and “go-withs”

If you’re not overwhelmed yet, you can always branch out into door key (key card) collecting, as there are some very colorful plastic keys being issued. A more limited collectible is the plastic “reminder card” which a few casinos issued with their slot



cards. (The idea was to attach the reminder card to the slot card, allow it to dangle outside the card slot, so you wouldn’t forget your slot card when finished playing.) Four key cards and 3 reminder cards are shown on the next page.

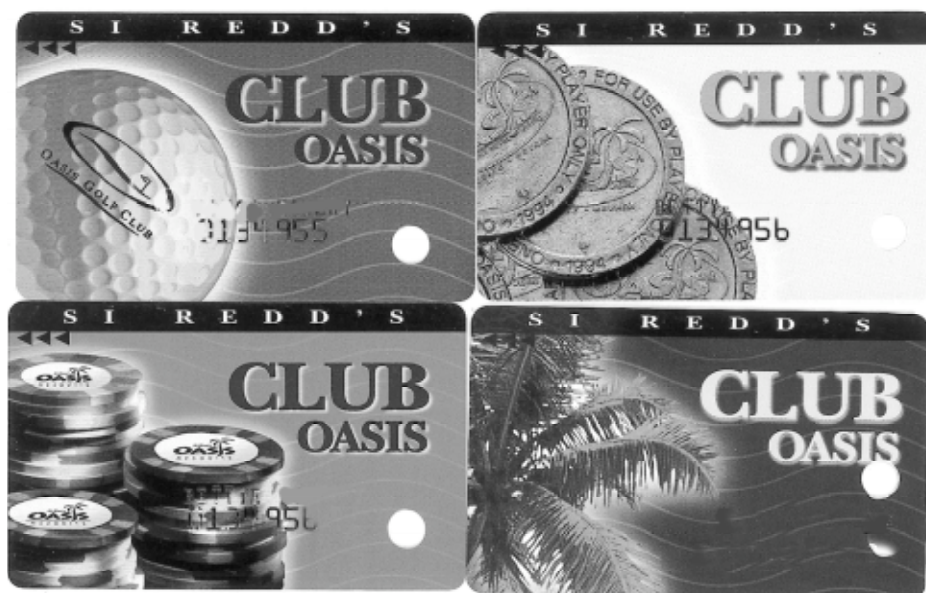
While I haven’t seen much evidence of bungee cord collecting and trading, you never know if it will become popular in the future. Interesting “go-withs”, such as the Mr. O’ Lucky key chain from Fitzgerald’s may have some collectible value in the future.



Extending players card programs into Air Miles and Visa Cards

For some time, the use of slot cards has been expanding beyond the slot box attached to your favorite machine. The card may be used for a discount in the casino’s gift shop or logo shop. It can be used to enter the express line at some casino restaurants and buffets. And with an integrated database, some casinos are using the card to track play at table games as well as slot play.

MGM Grand added a unique benefit for their players. You now earn American Airlines AAdvantage miles as you rack up points on your Director’s Club card.





Multi-property “master” cards means fewer collecting opportunities

Even as the big properties add “tiers” to their player card programs, some multi-casino owners are combining their programs into one card. Harrah’s is the undisputed leader in the one-card approach, but Station Casinos recently combined its Boarding Pass program into one card for most of its properties. MGM Grand is planning on consolidating to one card for its Las Vegas properties, and Mandalay Bay intends to consolidate some of its properties into one card program. These moves make sense for the big gaming corporations, and for players too. However, it will mean fewer cards available to collectors.

Building your slot card collection — trading and buying

The easiest way to build your collection is to sign up for all the slot clubs during visits to your favorite gaming destinations. Round-robin trading and one-on-one trading is popular for obtaining cards from distant geographic areas. If you live near some casinos, especially outside Nevada, you may be able to trade your local cards with other collectors in other parts of the country. A few casinos will send cards in the mail, without visiting the casino, though it’s not common. Some even allow enrollment through their internet website.

One of the appeals to slot card collecting is that it is inexpensive, but sometimes it may be necessary to purchase a card you are seeking. Most cards are still in the “few dollars” range, but genuinely rare cards have sold for \$100-\$300. These price levels are definitely the exception though., for now. As with chips, the older cards are usually harder to find and will cost more, other things being equal.



At least two casinos have/had an affiliate credit card program in which dollars spent on a special Visa or Mastercard will earn points or other benefits in the casino’s slot card program. These two casinos are Harrah’s (Visa card) and Caesars (Mastercard). The Caesars program is being discontinued, however. In addition, an independent Visa card company issued an interesting “Visa Las Vegas” credit card which had connections to the affiliated property.

While these credit cards are interesting additions to a slot card and room key collection, you will need to obtain your own cards. I doubt that many collectors would want to trade “live” credit cards. (The numbers are blocked in the attached scan, for obvious reasons!)

At the moment, California slot cards are in demand, because the American Indian casinos in California have just installed “real” slots and slot card programs.

Published information on slot clubs and slot cards

As mentioned previously, there are 2 slot card guides, published by their respective authors — Carolyn Donley and Pat Lamb & Steve Wells. Both are useful reference guides for the avid slot card collector. Janice O’Neal publishes an inexpensive list of slot cards too.

The Las Vegas Advisor Guide to Slot Clubs, by Jeffrey Compton, is a 1995 book which explains how slot clubs work, how to evaluate their added-value. Useful, but dated. Compton also writes a monthly “Slot Club Spotlight” column for Casino Player magazine. Reviews and compares a few slot clubs each month from various jurisdictions.

Don’t forget to check out the slot card brochures and materials which explain how the program works. If you are playing their machines, it’s important to know what to expect in

the way of cashback and comps. Slot card brochures may also include useful information on tiers or variety of cards available.

A few final thoughts

In my observation, the essence of slot card collecting, for most collectors, is to have fun without spending a lot of money. Slot cards and room keys may be the central focus for some casino collectors, but I suspect it is an add-on collectible for most collectors whose main collectible is chips or tokens... or occasionally dice, ashtrays or even swizzle sticks. The pursuit of new cards is challenging enough to keep it interesting without the dead-ends and frustration of reaching budgetary limits, especially as compared to the “rare” chip market.

It can be fun to trade, card-for-card, for only the postage involved in the trade. While the increased interest in slot cards, and the availability of price guides, will probably change the nature of some trading, and buying & selling, slot card collecting can be a refreshing change of pace in the world of casino collectibles.

There’s more to cover about slot cards — harvesting techniques, trading etiquette, storing your collection and more — but for now, I’ll close with a scan of some of my favorite cards, just because I like the graphics. Some cards are common, cheap, even free if you’re in Las Vegas. But I like them anyway, just ‘cause they look pretty.

