

# Gasser Chair Odds-On Favorite in Vegas

*Family business manufactures seating for the gaming industry.*

BY DAN O'BRIEN

The chances of you hitting big at the slots in Las Vegas are slim, but it's a good bet that the chair you sit in as you tackle the one-armed bandits was manufactured right here in the Mahoning Valley.

Gasser Chair Co., based in Liberty Township, has emerged as a high roller in this industry, carving out a specialty market that, since the 1960s, has grown with the rising demand for gambling and entertainment venues across the country.

"We've done business with almost all of the major casinos at one time or another," says Mark Gasser, president of the company. And, his company looks to expand its reach to projects such as new casinos under development in Cleveland and Cincinnati. "We haven't got the orders just yet," he says, "but we're working hard."

Gasser Chair manufactures custom chairs for the entertainment and hospitality industries, but half of its business is with companies that operate hotels and casinos across the United States. "The entertainment business to us is largely the casino industry," he says.

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David Ghizzoni applies upholstery to a chair back. Gasser Chair developed the vinyl trim exclusively for its products.

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## Gasser Chair: Odds-On Favorite in Las Vegas

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As with any market, there are booms and busts, Gasser adds. The Great Recession delivered a direct hit on the gambling and casino business and some of the company's major customers "went two years without buying a stick of furniture," he recalls.

That market is starting to return, and Gasser reports his company is ready.

The downturn afforded more opportunity for Gasser Chair to retool and improve its operations, the president says. Among these upgrades was a \$500,000 powder-coating paint shop. "Before having this, we shipped out metal components one or two hours away to be finished," he says. "We look at each operation and determine whether it makes sense to manufacture it in-house or use an outside contractor. Now, almost nothing leaves the building."

Twelve years ago, Gasser Chair purchased a long-vacant manufacturing building just off Logan Avenue in Youngstown that once was part of the former General Fireproofing Co. complex. The company added lighting, installed a new roof, upgraded the interior and added new equipment to improve its production capabilities. Today, the bulk of Gasser's 125 employees work in this building.

The company houses its main offices a mile to the north on Logan Way Avenue in Liberty Township, operates a foam, vinyl and wood assembly operation in Holmes County, and owns a warehouse in Hubbard.

"It all starts with a design," Gasser says. Often, the company can engineer a schematic of its own, or work closely with its customer to perfect or improve an idea, some as rudimentary as a sketch on a napkin. "A customer will often ask us to 'Gasserize' it," he says, "that is, make it durable and able to stack."

Once a design is agreed on, specific tools, dies, patterns or profiles are used to fabricate and manufacture the product, Gasser explains. "All of our chairs are custom-made. We don't build anything unless it's sold."

The company takes orders that range from quantities of 20 to 5,000. On this occasion, workers are preparing an order of 2,000 chairs for the Silver Legacy casino and hotel in Reno, Nev.

Gasser Chair buys its material – mostly aluminum extrusions – from local companies such as Aerolite or Astro-Shapes, Gasser says. These extrusions are custom-cut to the client's specifications. The tubular aluminum – essentially the metal skeleton of the chair – is bent and fabricated to a customer's specifications, while vertical automated machining centers are used to cut precision slots in the metal. For smaller orders that don't require new tooling, the company uses a computerized cutting process that involves high-pressure water jet to form a part.

"It's good for small custom orders," Gasser says. "You can't afford to make hard tooling for these, so this machine comes in handy."

Once the aluminum components are prepared, they are sent to the new powder-coating line, where they hang from a conveyor and cleaned, dried and then sprayed with a colored powder that settles like talc on each metal frame. The parts then move into a heat-treating process that bakes the color on the part.

"There are thousands of colors we can paint," he says. "But about 20% of our colors are about 80% of our volume."

Simultaneously, workers are forming other parts



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of the chair. A automated router perfects the shape and contour of the seats and backs of the chairs while the upholstery department prepares the proper coverings for each order.

The router, Gasser says, can cut several parts out of a single wooden board; what isn't used is either sent to the company's operations in Holmes County or shredded at the Youngstown plant and sold to a landscaping company, which dyes it and markets it for mulch.

"We get the most out of every board," he says. "There's virtually no waste from this product."

Once the wooden seats and backs are formed, workers add foam cushions manufactured in the Holmes County plant, staple the upholstery, and secure a vinyl trim the company developed exclusively for its products, Gasser says. "We developed the vinyl trim during the 1970s as a protective covering – much like a car bumper," to resist wear and tear.

The chairs are then assembled and either boxed or wrapped in a blanket, then shipped to customers throughout the world.

"We take pride that 95% of our chairs are fabricated in Youngstown," Gasser says. Aside from selling to casinos in the United States, Gasser Chair products can be found in China, England, Russia, and the French Riviera. "We're working on a project in Switzerland right now," he remarks.

And, some restaurants and country clubs in the Mahoning Valley have been good customers. "The hardest thing for us is determining who appreciates what we do," he relates. "You can always buy something for less money."

Recently, the Gasser company was awarded the contract to manufacture the barstool seating for Quaker Steak & Lube restaurants across the country.

Because the low-priced foreign competitors are mainly geared toward more mass-produced furniture, they rarely infiltrate the custom-order segment, notes Mark's brother Gary, who serves as CEO and chairman of the board.

"We do have some competition," Gary Gasser says. "But I don't know of too many operations as extensive as ours, with an engineering department and testing facilities."

Gary Gasser explains this expertise was developed over the life of the company, dating to when his father and two uncles founded the company in 1946. "We were founded as a service company that focused on working with what was then a new metal, aluminum," he remarks.

At first, the company developed a good business in welding aluminum beer kegs, laughs Gasser, but soon diversified its product line into kitchen tables and chairs. "Then, my father saw a market on the commercial side," he adds, and took the company's wares to a restaurant show in Chicago.

Soon after, his father struck up a relationship with Bill Harrah, founder of Harrah's Entertainment and today a giant in the casino industry. "He convinced him that slot machines should have a stool in front of them so players can play longer and be comfortable," Gasser says.

In doing so, the company opened up an entirely new market that would help guide its business over the next five decades.

"We don't get all the business," Gasser says. "But of what we would call the four- or five-star properties, we probably get the lion's share."

Gasser has done business with just about every name in the business, and has furnished seating for Donald Trump, the U.S. Senate dining hall and the Hay-Adams Hotel in Washington, D.C.

And, the recession helped develop another product line that, in its early stages, looks promising.

Gasser says that Rumpus Sports is a tailor-made product designed to appeal to universities that furnish executive suites and loges in stadiums. Thus far, the company has obtained licenses to apply Ohio State, Michigan State, Iowa and Youngstown State logos on its custom seating.

"So far, it looks promising," he says. "I think there are always opportunities to increase market share and develop related markets."

"We're not trying to be the largest chair manufacturer by sheer volume in product or dollars," Gasser adds. "We're just very proud of our name being on a product or installation."