



A PASSIONATE MAN

As someone
once grandly
put it:
“We get all of
humanity.”

—
Mr M. Baum

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There's a low hum of conversation drifting on the air in The Ritz Club. Two young businessmen laugh over Waterford Crystal snifters of brandy at the bar; waiters serve plates of delectable cuisine to groups of chattering compatriots in the restaurant; and an intense game of Baccarat is in full swing in the gaming room. It's 9pm and the night is just beginning.

For Martin Baum, director of casino operations at The Ritz Club, it's another day in the office. Dressed impeccably in suit and tie, greeting guests with a smile and a firm handshake as he traverses the room, Baum glides across the floor with confidence. He's an inexorable part of this place, despite his relatively short tenure with the Club. He took on this particular role only 18 months ago, but Baum's a Mayfair fixture who's been on the scene for 32 years. It's hard to believe that his entry into the casino industry — and he rates Mayfair as the pinnacle of gaming — came about purely by chance.

"Thirty years ago it was very different. Back in those days all of the companies used to have training schools. That's how I started," explains the affable Baum. By chance his now mother-in-law saw an advertisement in the Evening News for a company inviting applicants to try out for a casino role. She suggested Baum apply. "When I turned up to the interview in Queensway there was a good two-and-a-half thousand people, literally queued up outside the door to get in," Baum relates. From that two-and-a-half thousand, 60 hopefuls were offered one week of training. From 60 it went down to 20 and of that 20, 15 passed. Baum was one of those lucky few.

He has often wondered what got him through, but whatever the reason, this was the flame that ignited a 30-year career with Crockfords, as he worked his way through the ranks, starting as a dealer in the casino. "As with most people in the industry, I thought I'd just try it for a little while, see how I liked it, and maybe stay a couple of years. Thirty-two years later, I'm still doing it. If you like the hours, it's a very good job," he says.

When Baum signed up, the gaming industry in the UK was significantly different. The clubs opened at two in the afternoon and closed at four in the morning. No club stayed open 24 hours. Now, in recognition of an international clientele working across time zones, continual operations are par for the course.



“When my children were born, the industry was different and the hours were much easier,” Baum admits. At that time, long weekends compensated for the late hours and a 4am finish meant a quick drive home on traffic-free streets. The first change was an extension of the operating hours to 6am. “The difference of finishing at six instead of four, really messed up the body clock and driving home in the rush hour was and still is a nightmare. It’s noisy, it’s light, everyone is getting up and everything’s happening,” says Baum. While he believes you never fully adapt to the hours, it’s something you learn to work around. “I tend to wake up — well, my body wakes up — at about 10 o’clock in the morning. Unfortunately my head wakes up at 8 o’clock, regardless of what time I go to bed. Last night I got to bed at five and still woke up at eight. It’s like jet lag. But you do get used to it,” he says.

Baum’s equable manner is no doubt part of his success. This is a man who gets on with things. He’s composed, yet genial, used to dealing with a discerning clientele. Our conversation is punctuated by pauses as he shares a few words with the regulars who drift in to the Club. They clearly hold him in high esteem.

His move to The Ritz Club has naturally taken some adjustment. “There are a lot of different aspects to the job and it’s predominantly an office-based role, whereas my previous role was totally operational. My typing is ...” here Baum hesitates, shaking his head, “... well it’s improving. I’m using two-and-a-half fingers now instead of just two,” he laughs.

Baum saw the move as an opportunity to have more input into decision making. In this role he has control over the biggest department within the Club, with over 80 staff reports. “It’s just short of half of the workforce, which is quite a responsibility. Apart from the staff, there are the customers as well. It’s quite demanding,” he says, although this is a challenge he relishes. “While it’s primarily a gaming role, it encompasses the whole Club. I have control over the largest department so that also spills into other departments. The one place I try and keep out of the way of is the kitchen, because I can’t cook. That is all a bit of a mystery to me,” he confesses.

Baum starts his working day in the office, although as soon as he wakes he checks in to see what’s happened the night before. His administrative tasks occupy his first few office hours, although he jokes that if his typing improved this would be down to ten minutes. Then he’s on the floor, talking to staff and customers, paving the way for a pleasurable guest experience.

“A lot of it is just being a presence. It can be as simple as that. Most people who come in are regulars, so you get to know them. They like to see people they know. It helps them feel at home,” he says. As if on cue, his phone rings. It’s an Iraq-based customer planning a visit later in the month. “We are constantly communicating with our customers — if they need anything at all, they know that they can call and talk to us,” he says with a smile.

It’s hard to imagine Baum working anywhere else. He’s in his element here, surveying the Club with evident affection. It wasn’t what he expected as a

youngster, though. When he first left school he wanted to be a silversmith, perhaps in deference to his father’s work as a silver polisher. “I didn’t really know what I wanted and for some reason I picked up being a silversmith. It was never going to happen because I’m not artistic,” says the practical Baum. His first job wasn’t far off — he spent two years as a jeweller, before trying his hand at lacquer-spraying and then working for his father as a silver polisher. “I’d been there for just short of two years — the pay was abysmal,” he jokes, “... and then my mother-in-law saw the advert. I’d never even entertained the thought of working in a casino.”

Despite his many years in gaming, Baum rarely gambles himself, indulging only on certain occasions such as when he is on holiday. “I love roulette, but I’m no good at it. I tend to choose blackjack but I haven’t got the patience for that. I do exactly what I see customers do who end up losing. I try to break the bank and I can’t do it,” he says. Instead, his passion is football.

While Baum denies a connection between his support of Arsenal Football Club and accepting the role at The Ritz Club, which has long had a connection with the team, it’s been a happy coincidence. “We have a box at Emirates Stadium, and being able to entertain our guests and customers so close to the action is an amazing experience,” he says. There may be an odd sense of déjà vu for Baum at the Emirates Stadium, as this was once the site of the jewellers where his working career began.

Baum springs from a long line of Arsenal supporters. “I can never remember choosing a particular football team. It was just what it was,” he says. “In the old days we used to have a gramophone which also housed a radio. I remember listening with my dad one evening when I was about seven or eight. It was a midweek game between Tottenham and Arsenal, and Arsenal won 1–0. It’s my earliest sporting memory, listening to Arsenal on the radio.” A few years later, Arsenal won the FA Cup and League Cup double. Baum went to Islington Town Hall and hung on the railings outside, along with the other 200,000 or so supporters, waiting for the open-top parade to come past. This is a moment he remembers fondly.

Baum shares the Arsenal mantle with his family, in particular his son. “My father-in-law is a Manchester United supporter and he wanted to buy him a Manchester United kit when he was a little boy. I wouldn’t let him. Much to his disappointment I flatly refused to let him bring it into the house, my son simply had to be an Arsenal fan,” he says. Baum may be keen, but he’s not dogged, admitting that Arsenal’s seemingly injury-prone key players are not boding well for the team’s chances this season.

This may give Baum the impetus he needs to return to the golf course. Once an avid golfer, he confesses that he’s not been on the course much lately. “I wasn’t playing much and I just got really bad, so I stopped playing and then it got longer and longer between games. Hopefully I’ll pick it up again soon,” he laughs.

It would seem that this passionate man still has a few more games left to play!

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