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GAMING Everybody wins Playing for charity Bingo, poker are top picks when it comes to donating your skills for a good cause

Everyone knows that the holidays are a time for giving, a time to donate money and other items to those less fortunate than you. In the world of gaming, there's no better way to do this than through a charity game or tournament.

These contests work just like ordinary gaming competitions. You go. You play. You win (or lose). You leave. Behind the scenes, however, instead of a "house" pocketing a percentage of the profits (as is the law here in California), a set amount of the rake goes to charity.

Essentially, these games are fundraising vehicles -- fun and interactive ways for nonprofits and other charities to make some cash. In some cases, according to [Annie Van Bebber, founder of Fundraisers.com](#), an Internet resource for charity fundraisers that's based in Los Angeles County, the contests can garner \$5,000 or more.

In the Bay Area, the most common type of charity gambling event is bingo. These events, usually held at local churches, raise money for a variety of causes. At St. Paul's Church (1600 Church St.; (415) 648-7538, San Francisco), Friday night bingo games benefit the parish and its outreach programs.

Ruth Tortorelli, administrative assistant, says the bingo games at St. Paul's date to the 1950s. Back then, the grand prize was no more than a couple of bucks. Today, big winners at the weekly 7 p.m. game can take home as much as \$250 a card. The church pockets a percentage of the rest.

"It just helps finance different things that come up," Tortorelli said. "It's not a huge chunk of our fundraising, but every little bit helps, and this helps a lot."

Another popular bingo game is the one held daily at Army St. Bingo (1740 Cesar Chavez; (415) 550-8597). Proceeds from those games benefit nine nonprofit organizations that fund local youth, legal outreach, media and foster care programs.

Despite the popularity of poker in the Bay Area, charity poker tournaments are a little harder to find. In local cardrooms such as Casino San Pablo, you might find a charity tournament or two. But for years, the state has regulated these contests outside of formal gaming establishments (craps, roulette and blackjack are forbidden).

The thinking behind the old laws was that allowing anyone to host poker tournaments was an invitation for fraud. A new law will take effect next month to amend the older rule, enabling charities and nonprofits without gambling licenses to host one charity poker game a year at their sites and keep 90 percent of the profits.

The law, AB839, stipulates that in these charity tournaments, gamblers can play only for prizes, not cash, and that no prize can be worth more than \$500. It also mandates that the total value of prizes at a tournament cannot exceed \$5,000, and that 10 percent of all money goes back to the state.

"There are 60 million people playing poker today, so clearly poker is a good venue for donation," Van Bebber said. "It is their way of doing something they love to do and giving back at the same time."

For a list of charity gaming tournaments in the Bay Area, visit www.fundraisers.com.

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