

Funny money

They laughed when Mark Breslin opened his first Yuk Yuk's. Now he runs a chain of comedy cabarets, and Breslin's laughing all the way to the bank

BY DICK BROWN

Yuk Yuk's began 10 years ago as a once-a-week, mostly amateur comedy show in a community hall in downtown Toronto. Today, there are two permanent Yuk Yuk's cabarets in Toronto, and there are Yuk Yuk's in Buffalo, Rochester, Ottawa, Edmonton, and Hamilton and plans to open additional Yuk Yuk's in Vancouver, Victoria, Winnipeg, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and London, England. Yuk Yuk's, in short, is the world's largest comedy chain, and Mark Breslin, the young comedian behind it, expects revenues this year to top \$6 million. Breslin himself is friendly, funny, and candid, and he'll be happy to tell you about his success — about how his strange operation evolved and how it works.

He is sitting in a chair in his sleek bachelor pad in the trendy Yorkville section of Toronto. It is 8 p.m. — your evening, his afternoon — and he wears a designer shirt, jeans, and no shoes or socks, and he is snacking from a bag of Oreos.

In a nutshell, the Yuk Yuk's are a series of nightclubs where stand-up comedians perform. Breslin coaches them, brings them along and books them. Many get their start on the one night a week that is amateur night in each Yuk Yuk's when admission drops sharply. Ordinarily, it is \$5 on weeknights, \$8 on Fridays and Saturdays. On amateur nights it runs around \$1. Drinks are fairly expensive (in Toronto, a beer is \$2.25 and a scotch is \$3.75), but Yuk Yuk's makes most of its money on charging people to hear the comics, some very funny, a few terrible (more about the show in a moment). The point we want to deal with first is the impressive success of the Yuk Yuk's. They — and Mark Breslin — are making pots of money and doing it on a relatively small investment.

"It's a lot like a franchise," Breslin says, finishing off an Oreo, "except that in a franchise the franchisee puts up the

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Mark Breslin not only owns an international chain of Yuk Yuk's, he also owns Funny Business, a company that manages a string of about 40 comedians.

money. Here, I put up the money."

Usually, the start-up investment is in the neighborhood of \$20,000, and a "co-venturer" runs the new club. And they split the profit, 50-50. If the co-venturer also manages the club himself, he gets a salary as well as a share of the profit, and the profit generally runs around \$100,000 a year.

It's an interesting system — so how do the nuts and bolts work? It's easy for the mind to get around the opening of, say, yet another McDonald's, but how does one go about expanding a comedy chain? Breslin grabs an Oreo and begins explaining the process, step by step: Suppose he

wanted to open a new Yuk Yuk's and you were the "co-venturer"....

First of all, you would become a co-venturer only if he knew you. "I wouldn't take a flyer on someone I didn't know. I've been booking acts for umpteen years [if this makes him sound elderly, you should know he's just turned 34], and the co-venturer might have been involved in the booking or in the publicity. I'd know that you were interested and that you were trustworthy and that you were hot to trot on the idea. Without your enthusiasm, there would be no point even looking at a deal.

"Then," he goes on to say, "I would