

Jay-Z, Fanatics CEO Michael Rubin open sportsbook at Ocean Casino Resort

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1. Jay-Z, from left, and Fanatics CEO Michael Rubin stand alongside Justin Thomas as the golfer holds up his betting slip at the Fanatics Sportsbook at Ocean Casino Resort on Sunday. Photo by John Russo.

By: John Russo

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ATLANTIC CITY, NJ (September 15, 2024) — Michael Rubin’s love for Atlantic City goes back to when he was about 12 years old.

“The gambling age was 18 when I was a kid,” the once-small kid from Philadelphia recalled.

“I remember when I was 12 years old, I went to an Atlantic City casino, to Caesars. It was 40 years ago. I won \$2,500. I called my mom from a pay phone and said, ‘Mom, I got great news! I just won \$2,500!’ She asked how, and I said, ‘I’m in a casino in Atlantic City,’ and she goes, ‘You’re grounded, get home.’ That’s my favorite story.”

Rubin, now 52, has gambled on himself his entire life. Now, his company, Fanatics, is on top of the global sports world, from sports apparel to collectibles.

Recently, the Fanatics experience has included sports betting, and now it has arrived in Atlantic City.

In a ceremonial ribbon-cutting that featured legendary rapper and the sportsbook's co-founder Jay-Z, Fanatics Sportsbook announced its grand opening Sunday in a private ceremony at Ocean Casino Resort ahead of a celebrity blackjack tournament and NFL viewing party that also was closed to the public.

Rubin, along with CEO of Fanatics Betting and Gaming Matt King, partnered with Ocean to bring Fanatics' first sportsbook in New Jersey. The Fanatics Sportsbook is also the company's first sportsbook experience in the country complete with food, bar, television and gaming. The brand has 21 small pop-up kiosks around the country.

"There are very few places in the United States like Ocean, so this is a great spot to be," King said. "I think Atlantic City is an amazing place where a lot of people go for entertainment, a lot of people go for gambling. And in our industry, New Jersey has been an incredible innovator for online gaming spaces, which is awesome."

Pro golfer Justin Thomas was awarded the honor of placing the ceremonial first bet — with Rubin and Jay-Z watching, he wagered \$100 on Alabama to win the college football national championship.

"It's awesome. It takes two really good brands that aligned very well, and it connects them," Ocean general manager Bill Callahan said of the partnership with Fanatics. "My relationship with Michael has been a long time running. We both want to be very successful in what we do. And we think the journey for the customers is the most important thing, and I think we can both accomplish it without stepping on each other's toes. It's a perfect marriage at this point."

Fanatics Sportsbook at Ocean opened Sept. 5. Featured prominently in the casino's Gallery, it offers a 100-foot elevated bar and lounge area with seating for 60 surrounded by slot machines, tables and 140 feet of LED walls for games, betting information and more. Fans can place wagers at betting windows or self-service terminals throughout the venue.

Callahan said his favorite aspects of this sportsbook are the screens and the sight lines.

"Whether you're sitting at the bar or you're gambling, there's so many things you can do in this space," he said. "People are gambling in one moment, or they're sitting at the bar or upstairs chilling in the lounge. They're all doing the same thing. They're watching games and just experiencing it differently."

Callahan said the idea of a sportsbook came out of a random Sunday afternoon phone conversation with Rubin.

"It had nothing to do with the numbers. It had more to do with, 'Hey, would this make sense from a customer perspective for your clientele and our clientele to mesh?' Over that 30-minute phone call, it started as 'we probably should do this' to 'you know what, what do we do next?' It was a great journey."

Last year, Rubin and Jay-Z partnered to bring a \$250,000 blackjack tournament to Ocean to benefit Reform Alliance, a nonprofit organization dedicated to probation, parole, and sentencing reform in the United States through legislation and lobbying. Earlier that day, Rubin was flanked by seven-time Super Bowl champion quarterback Tom Brady, comedian Kevin Hart and rapper Travis Scott as they visited Linwood collectible store Wax, Packs and Throwbacks as part of an event for Topps, which Fanatics also owns.

Sunday afternoon's blackjack tournament was held in celebration of the sportsbook.

In August, Rubin created the first Fanatics Fest. Held in New York City, it featured many celebrities and athletes. So this market has always been pretty important to the company, from a personal standpoint for Rubin, who is from this area, and from a moneymaking standpoint. California and Texas are also major sports markets, he added, but neither has legal sports betting.

Rubin said Sunday that New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania "are three of the most important markets in the entire online gaming space."

"It's natural. It would almost be wrong not to start it (in Atlantic City)," he said.

Rubin sees these partnerships as a way to help Atlantic City.

"I don't think Atlantic City has seen more stars in the history of Atlantic City (than) last September when we brought the Reform event for charity," Rubin said. "I think this is a very special building, a special place run by a special individual (in Callahan), and I think he's going to outperform everybody here."