

# The Gambler

**Attorney Michael N. Schonbuch likes to take big risks in court in order to come out a big winner, calling himself 'a dice roller.'**

BY ERON BEN-YEHUDA

**L**ike his clients who own strip clubs, music venues and bars, Southern California attorney Michael N. Schonbuch is comfortable skirting the edge.

"I classify myself as a dice roller," Schonbuch says. "I like taking risks."

The 36-year-old admits he crapped out the first time he tried the case in which a celebrity photographer claimed a club's security guards helped destroy a snapshot allegedly showing rock music legend Mick Jagger snooching movie actress Uma Thurman.

The jury hit his client, hip hot-spot The Viper Room, for \$600,000, in part because Schonbuch decided not to call his own damages expert to counter the one who testified on behalf of the plaintiff. So when the jurors found Schonbuch's client liable, they essentially gave the photographer the money he asked for, Schonbuch says.

"[My strategy]backfired," he says.

After making some solid arguments during his motion for new trial, Schonbuch won the chance to set things right.

But he still didn't bring a damages expert for the second trial. That only weakens a defense, by implicitly conceding the potential for liability, he says.

"My way, I'm going in bare," Schonbuch, of Los Angeles' Daniels, Fine, Israel & Schonbuch says

### SNAPSHOT

#### Michael N. Schonbuch

**Law school:** Boston University School of Law, 1990

**Case types:** Premises liability defense with a subspecialty representing bars and clubs

**Career highlights:**

Partner, Los Angeles' Daniels, Fine, Israel & Schonbuch, 1999-present; partner, Los Angeles' Daniels, Baratta & Fine, 1990-99

An all-or-nothing approach suits him fine.

"I remove the chance of coming in at \$50,000," he says. "I remove the middle."

No one can argue with the result in the second trial, a defense victory. *Einhorn v. Viper Room*, SC044441 (L.A. Super. Ct., verdict Oct. 1, 2001).

Other defense attorneys practice law more conservatively, but Schonbuch cultivates a rebel image that he says helps him bond with his unconventional clients.

"You can't sit there with a banker's outfit on," he says. "People always tell



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me I look like Al Pacino. My hair is slicked back, and I've got a little attitude to me."

That attitude sometimes riles opposing counsel.

Attorney Edward Steinbrecher of Encino's Steinbrecher & Associates considers Schonbuch skillful and aggressive but also arrogant.

About two years ago, Steinbrecher represented a police officer on horseback who injured himself as he fell over a short wall and onto property owned by Schonbuch's client. After rejecting Schonbuch's offer of \$25,000, Steinbrecher says he won a \$1 million verdict against the property owner.

That experience didn't warm him to Schonbuch.

"He's completely full of himself," Steinbrecher says.

Douglas E. Kottler also has tried cases against Schonbuch.

"[He was] a tad on the rude side,"

Kottler says of their first encounter.

A few years ago, Kottler of Los Angeles' Kottler & Kottler represented two tenants living in an apartment building where a gas explosion caused damage. Back then, Kottler didn't appreciate the way Schonbuch referred to him only by his last name, without the courtesy of using "Mister" or the more friendly tact of calling him by his first name.

"I remember we bumped heads a little bit," Kottler says.

But the more he worked with Schonbuch, the more comfortable he felt with the man's style.

"He gets to the point without a lot of fluff," Kottler says.

North Hollywood attorney Steven "Bernie" Bernheim also has experienced the Schonbuch treatment.

"[Schonbuch avoids] b.s. discovery disputes," Bernheim says. "Some defense lawyers try to beat a file to death."

While he considers Schonbuch "a little bit of a renegade," Bernheim doesn't take offense.

"He's certainly not pompous," Bernheim says. "He's very real. He's very genuine."