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Fomer MIT blackjack team member talks about breaking the bank

By Bob Tremblay, GateHouse News Service

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When he was growing up in Chicago, Jon Hirschtick performed magic tricks as a budding magician. And he made a few bucks.

While he was a student at MIT, Hirschtick performed a different kind of magic as a blackjack player. And he made nearly \$1 million. The cash was parlayed into the creation of SolidWorks Corp., a Concord software company he helped found in 1993.

Hirschtick was a member of the famous team of MIT students who incorporated a card-counting system to win huge sums of money playing blackjack in Las Vegas. Their exploits were chronicled in the best-selling book "Bringing Down the House" and are now the subject of the movie, "21," which opens Friday.

"No characters in the book or movie correspond to me," says Hirschtick, who graduated from MIT in 1986 and was a member of the team from 1984 to 1994. "The movie characters are largely blurred ... but they're well-cast and they're believable as counters. The emotions they go through are portrayed very accurately. All the free things they receive. The weird adjustment. At school, you're asked, 'What did you do this weekend?' Where do you start? 'I went to the Super Bowl on a private jet.' It's hard to explain that to your friends."

In addition to the money, Hirschtick and team members received such perks as free stays in top hotels, free airfare, free food and free drinks.

"The first time I got on an airplane was to go to MIT," says the former Waltham resident. "I wasn't exactly worldly. This was an opportunity to go to exciting places and get all these free things. I never had room service in my life until I played on the blackjack team. I didn't know what it was."

Hirschtick praises the book and the movie.

"Generally, they're both very well done, if you don't look at them too closely," he says. "They tell our story, and I'm grateful for them telling our story in a very professional way. As for '21,' I think it's a really good movie in terms of the quality of the production and the quality of acting."

Hirschtick is more critical of omissions and inaccuracies. For example, in the movie, basic blackjack strategy receives short shrift.

"(The filmmakers) wanted to create tension so they invented some things," he continues. "I understand they wanted to add dramatic fiction; fine ... but characters doing weird things like playing slots, shopping and sleeping with strippers? It's hard for me to say that never, ever happened, but I don't know of it happening. Then there's drinking and playing - that's a no-no - and the way they lose control and bet without counting - no. It's definitely out of character. And people getting beat up (by casino staff), I'm not going to say it never happened, but it never happened to us.

"A great scene from real life which they should have put in the movie but didn't is when you get back-roomed. Not to get beaten up. What happens is they bring you into a security room with cameras and bars like you're a convict or something. They then read you a Miranda-sounding statement. 'Under Nevada statute such-and-so, the owners of (this casino) are hereby informing you that you are barred from the premises and should you enter the premises you will be arrested for trespassing.'"

Hirschtick says he was back-roomed twice.

"You get a little nervous, but it's like being pulled over by the police," he says.

While he's barred from about a dozen casinos in Las Vegas, he can still play at newer casinos elsewhere.

"What I don't do is give my real name or bet a lot of money," he says. "That would raise a red flag."

While card-counting isn't illegal, casinos frown on its practice as it tilts the odds in the player's favor. Card-counters keep track of all the "good" and "bad" cards that have been played. For example, an ace is a "good" card. After awhile, more good or more bad cards get played and you bet accordingly based on the tally.

"You do have to have a certain amount of mental agility (for card-counting), but the brain part is overestimated," says Hirschtick. "It's really more about persistence, and what I did have was persistence."

"I liken card-counting much more to the skill of typing than to the skill of math. It's an activity like typing where you have to do something very precisely at 100 words per minute."

Hirschtick became aware of the MIT blackjack team after seeing a flier on a wall at the student center in January 1984. "It said, 'Earn \$2,000 to \$6,000 over the next six months playing blackjack with a professional team. Meeting is Thursday night in room such-and-so.' That's how it started for me."

"Maybe 60 people showed up the first night and (the organizers) weeded out people based on their interest in pursuing it. It was up to you each week to learn more. They gave us a basic strategy chart to memorize and I went home and memorized it. I came back the next week and went from there."

The team Hirschtick joined made millions of dollars over the years with membership changing frequently.

"It was almost like a sports team," he says. "You'd play a season or two and some people would go on to real life. When the team lost some people, they'd recruit new ones."

The team was founded in the late 1970s by an MIT student and a Harvard University student with membership totaling about 50 over the years, according to Hirschtick.

"Eventually, everyone I knew left blackjack and went on to real life except one player - the character Kevin Spacey plays. He lives in Las Vegas and he's still playing. I saw him last week at the world premiere cast party in Vegas."

"In counting, people retire primarily because of a combination of wanting to establish a real life and getting burned out."

Hirschtick established his real life by starting SolidWorks, where he is now a group executive. He also married the girlfriend he took on trips to Las Vegas, the former Melissa Hatch of Dover, who was a student at Wheelock College at the time. "Like most people, at first hearing about

(the team), she was skeptical, but then when she went on the trips, she had fun," says Hirschtick. The couple now resides in Lexington, Mass., and has four children: William, 12; Emily, 11; Sam, 7; and Nathaniel, 6.

"The (blackjack) experience was great," says Hirschtick. "I really enjoyed it, and that's why I did it. Sure, you made money, but it was fun and exciting. As the movie brings out, if you've grown up a nerd, you're in some ways the least likely person to be flying to Vegas, getting a free suite, riding a limo, having a casino host call you 'Mr. H' and having attractive women come up to you and say, 'How you doing?' because of your money.

"If you're the last person in the world who seems to be able to do that stuff and all of sudden you're doing it, it's kind of interesting."

Card-counting also adds a new wrinkle to gambling, according to Hirschtick.

"I think gambling is an activity that's inherently fun, but we all don't do it as much as we might because we feel in the back of our mind that it's somehow not a positive thing to be doing," he says. "It's like eating fast food. It's fun to do, but you probably think in the back of your head, 'Gee, I really shouldn't do this too much.'

"So gambling would be inherently attractive, but you know you're not going to win because the casino has the advantage. But once you're card-counting, all of a sudden this fun activity of gambling becomes profitable and justified. It's like finding out that fast food is loaded with vitamins and healthy for you. 'OK, I'll eat a pizza because it's good for me.' You suddenly can do this activity guilt-free and that's kind of fun because you're going to win in the long run."

The blackjack experience also taught Hirschtick valuable lessons he's applied to business.

"I learned you can win even when conventional wisdom says you can't," he says. "When I started on the blackjack team, all my friends were like, 'You can't win at blackjack.' 'The casinos will kick you out.' 'There's no system for doing that.' It's sometimes hard to fight a head wind of negativism like that, but I did.

"You can't always listen to what the consensus view of your friends is - what other people say about things, especially if they have no particular experience in it."

Hirschtick, now 45, still plays blackjack, but only once or twice a year for fun. "I love talking about blackjack, and blackjack was a good bet," he says, "but I have to tell you, SolidWorks was a better one. It's meant much more to me than blackjack. I love the business."

Today, SolidWorks is a \$350 million company employing more than 500 people.

As for the MIT blackjack team, Hirschtick isn't sure if it continues to play, though former members still do. Small consolation for the casinos.