

# BLACKJACK SECRETS



Stanford Wong

# **BLACKJACK SECRETS**

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**STANFORD WONG**  
**Pi Yee Press**

# **BLACKJACK SECRETS**

by  
**Stanford Wong**  
**Pi Yee Press**

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# PREFACE

It is definitely possible to win at blackjack — that has been proven beyond any doubt.

This book explains how to win at blackjack by counting cards. It contains a simple explanation of a powerful winning system, the high-low.

More importantly, this book explains how to win in a casino — how to win without getting kicked out. This material has been thoroughly tested in casinos throughout the world.

Part of the content of this book originally appeared in *Professional Blackjack*. The remainder of this book is mostly rewrites of articles that first appeared in one or another of the newsletters: *Stanford Wong's Blackjack Newsletter*, *Current Blackjack News*, *Blackjack World*, *Nevada Blackjack*, and *Winning Gamer*. (Of those, only *Current Blackjack News* is still published.) The format for much of that material is letters from readers and responses to those letters. Thanks to all the readers who sent letters to Pi Yee Press; without them, this book would not exist.

Here is an example. A reader asks:

What do you tell people that you do? I mean, suppose you are at a party and someone asks you what you do. Do you tell them that you play blackjack?

I have a variety of answers to that question. Sometimes I tell people that I am in investments. When they follow up with "What kind of investments?" I say "short-term." I am telling the truth — my average investment lasts less than a minute. If I want to discourage further questions when someone asks me what I do, I say that I am in insurance. Again I am not telling a lie, because I do buy insurance when the count per deck is high enough.

All the decision numbers in this book have been derived on a computer. The software you can use to verify them, and to derive related results, is *Blackjack Count Analyzer*.

Many people have contributed to the success of this book. In contrast to literary tradition, most of them shall remain nameless in order that they may continue to play casino blackjack unencumbered by recognition. I am particularly grateful to the contributions made by, in alphabetical order: Daniel Forbes, Marvin French (also known as Marvin L. Master), Peter Giles, and Donald Schlesinger. All four of these people are highly-skilled, successful blackjack players; their words are expert opinions. These are not the only highly skilled, successful blackjack players in the world of course; they are merely the ones who wrote the most wonderful letters that found their way into my newsletters. All who read this book are benefiting from their contributions.

Anthony Curtis deserves special thanks. He is a good friend and my best source of news about great casino giveaways. Most of the top money-making opportunities of chapter 7 I learned about courtesy of Curtis.

Curtis, Donald Schlesinger, John Speer, and Michael Dalton also deserve thanks for reading a draft copy of this manuscript and suggesting changes. Schlesinger is Mr. Eagle Eye on errors. Speer contributed many clarifications and clever phrases, such as "pacify the eye in the sky" on page 71. Any remaining errors are of course my responsibility. If you find an error, please tell me about it. I will correct it in the next printing.

This book started out as a revision of *Professional Blackjack*, my first book on card counting. I realized quickly that I had so much material to add that the project would be more manageable if broken into two or more books. My plan is to incorporate the rest of *Professional Blackjack* into a book on advanced card counting.

A related book, completed in 1992, is *Basic Blackjack*; it covers basic strategy for the multitude of rules that have been used at blackjack over the years.

This book can be improved. If you find passages that you think are wrong, or if you have questions that are unanswered, please put your comments in writing and send them to Pi Yee Press, 7910 Ivanhoe #34, La Jolla, California 92037-4511. I reserve the right to publish your letters and my responses.

Stanford Wong

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

Gamblers around the world win and lose millions at blackjack in casinos and private clubs and homes. A handful of professionals support themselves by playing blackjack, and they call themselves investors rather than gamblers. Investing means expecting money to grow, and sometimes involves placing it in a risky situation. Gambling means placing money in a risky situation and hoping that it will grow but knowing that it will more likely shrink. The investor buys stocks and bonds and real estate, while the gambler plays craps and keno and slot machines. For most people, playing blackjack is gambling; but, for a few, it is investing.

Casino owners establish the rules of blackjack and the card counter always stays within these rules. You break no law when you win money by using a card-counting system. Blackjack is a sporting proposition.

The casinos have issued the challenge; the card counter accepts on the casinos' terms and generally wins. It is always satisfying to beat someone at that person's own game.

Casino gambling is a multi-billion-dollar industry. One of the most important games, in money won by the casinos, is blackjack. Card counters win a few million dollars per year, which, from the casinos' point of view, is probably a reasonable price to pay for advertising.

For every proficient player there are hundreds of gamblers who know enough about blackjack to bet big with confidence, but do not really know enough to have an advantage over the dealer. Then there are those players who know what they must do to win, but prefer to rely on their intuition; such players deviate from the correct plays so frequently as to be losers. Strangely but truly, the casino owners have been helped on balance by the publishing of blackjack systems.

An aside: Be happy that bad players exist. They are the reason casinos can afford to offer blackjack games that can be beaten. Smile if the person sitting next to you makes a bonehead play. Never give advice to other players at the table. A casino can offer blackjack only if it makes money on the game, though it does not have to beat every single customer. A casino can afford to deal to winning blackjack players only if it has a sufficient volume of losing blackjack players. If you play well enough to win, you should be thankful for those players who stand on soft seventeen and make other gross misplays. If you help other people at the table play correctly you are cutting down on the casino's ability to afford you.

Ed Thorp (*Beat the Dealer*) and the late Lawrence Revere (*Playing Blackjack as a Business*) wrote excellent

books on blackjack. Nevada casino people knew that Ed Thorp and Lawrence Revere won more than they lost at blackjack and no casino owner would knowingly deal to them. As was to be expected, casino owners caught on to them and took countermeasures to prevent their continuing to win large amounts of money. Thorp and Revere published their books after their playing days were virtually over.

Then came (alphabetically) Ian Andersen, Bryce Carlson, Carlson Chambliss, Carl Cooper, Michael Dalton, Steve Forte, Peter Griffin, Lance Humble, Tom Roginski, Arnold Snyder, Ken Uston, Bill Zender, and others with good books on blackjack.

What does this book add to the material already published by others? The major item is an explanation of how to get away with winning in a casino.

This book explains how to turn blackjack into an investment. It describes a powerful, yet simple, system that has been proven to work, and it does so in a straightforward manner so that a person who has never been to a casino can learn how to win. No magic is required — just skillful work. You too can learn to play blackjack for profit as well as fun.

Besides introducing blackjack to people who know no other winning system, this book tells how to play without being spotted as a user of a winning system. After all, what good does it do to know how to win if winning will get you kicked out?

Two other books with good coverage of this point are Ian Andersen's *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas* and Bryce Carlson's *Blackjack for Blood*. Both are recommended reading for anyone who wants to take big money from casinos at blackjack.

In spite of impressive winnings, you can be treated as a preferred customer at those casinos that encourage heavy bettors. Besides accepting lodging in complimentary hotel suites, enjoying complimentary gourmet dinners, and happily taking in complimentary floor shows at the most luxurious gambling palaces in the world, you can win at the gaming tables of your hosts and hostesses most of the time.

If you wish to become a card counter, you must have certain abilities. You must handle simple arithmetic well. You must be able to remember a simple number, such as three, be able to subtract one from that number or add one to that number, and be able to do it quickly. You must be able to divide and multiply approximately. You must be able to memorize tables of numbers. If you have ever memorized a multiplication table, you can memorize these tables. I used to think you had to have good eyesight, but a reader says:

I would like to take issue with one thing. While I am sure good eyesight is a definite advantage, I do not believe it to be essential. I am legally blind and am still able to keep an accurate count and play a winning game.

You should be in good physical condition because blackjack is as much a physical sport as it is a mental game. The better your physical condition, the more hours per day you will be able to play.

Most people can learn to play winning blackjack, but most of the readers of this book will never make any significant amount of money at the game. It takes time to learn to play well, and most people are unwilling to devote the time necessary to develop the skills. This time requirement is fortunate. Because of it, most casino personnel do not learn how to win at blackjack and

cannot accurately spot winning system players. In addition, so many customers play poorly that casino owners need not change the game.

Yet for those who do learn to count cards quickly and accurately and who do memorize the strategy tables, other obstacles loom up — like money, and boredom, and just time itself. To win money playing blackjack you must put in time playing blackjack. The longer you play the more you can expect to make, but playing blackjack means spending less time on other things. It might be that switching a block of time to blackjack could end up giving you more free time than you now have to pursue your dreams.

Playing professional blackjack demands a good deal more than a simple expenditure of time. It also involves quite a lot of financial risk. Having an advantage over the dealer does not mean that you will win steadily. The gambler usually loses but occasionally gets lucky and wins; the card counter usually wins but occasionally gets unlucky and loses. Your bankroll will not inch upward like a tram, but zoom up and down like a roller coaster.

If you cannot afford to lose big, do not bet big; and if you cannot afford to lose, do not play. You can only expect to win big by betting big, and if you bet big you are going to lose big — regularly. If you can only afford a small loss, you must bet small, and you may not even win enough to cover your expenses.

Of course, you can bet small at first and increase your bet size as you build up a stake of winnings, but then you run into another problem: boredom. If you are a card counter, you must be a machine. You are programmed to make decisions almost without thinking. Playing blackjack is exciting for the first weekend, but on succeeding weekends the excitement usually lasts no more than an

hour. If the time required to learn the game does not discourage you, and if you are willing to accept enough risk to have a chance to make some real money, then the boredom will get to you for sure. The few who will really profit from this book are those who can afford the risk financially and emotionally and who do not mind getting bored as long as they are compensated adequately.

Investing in blackjack resembles investing in the stock market. Just as a diversified portfolio of stocks can be counted on to become more valuable if enough time passes, a stake invested in blackjack can be counted on to become more valuable if enough hands are played. The stock market chronically slumps, and some of the slumps last for years. The blackjack investor's portfolio also chronically slumps, and some of the slumps last for hundreds of hours of playing time. Blackjack is superior to stocks in that it offers more expected return in reward for taking risk.

The strategies in this book will outperform intuition. Playing hunches will cost you more than it will gain. Any time that you have a decision and one choice is superior to all others, you should take the superior choice. The tables in this book tell you which choice is superior. If you lose three consecutive double downs and another situation arises in which the tables say to double down, push more money out. Your chances of winning this hand are not affected by past successes or failures. The tables in this book are accurate.

If you do not believe that a decision recommended by this book is correct, test it at home or in your hotel room by dealing hands to yourself. For example, if you think that standing on sixteen against 7 wins more often in spite of advice in this book, deal 100 hands in which you stand on sixteen and another 100 in which you hit; then

subtract the number of losses from the number of wins for each alternative. You will find that hitting sixteen against 7 is less costly than standing. You will gain confidence in the recommendations of this book.

The organization of the rest of this book is as follows. The rest of this chapter explains the rules of blackjack, and is copied from *Basic Blackjack*. Chapter 2 covers basic strategy, and also comes from *Basic Blackjack*. Chapter 3 is a description of a simple yet powerful counting system, the high-low. Chapter 4 explains how to play winning blackjack without getting kicked out of a casino. Mastery of chapters 3 and 4 will turn you into a money-making machine. Chapter 5 contains hints on how to win faster. Chapter 6 discusses "tokes," or gifts to the dealer, which can be a card counter's biggest expense. Chapter 7 lists some of the best money-making opportunities that have appeared in casinos in recent years. Chapter 8 is devoted to getting freebies. Chapter 9 is for people who are thinking of becoming professional blackjack players. Chapter 10 discusses cheating. Chapter 11 explains how to play double-exposure blackjack. Also included: a glossary, a bibliography, and an index.

## Playing the Game

Dealing blackjack is more boring than playing blackjack. The dealer's actions are cut and dried. A set of rules fixed by the casino decides whether the dealer takes an additional card. The dealer does not try to beat you; rather the dealer must play the hand according to the established and publicly proclaimed rules. It makes no difference to the honest dealer whether your cards are face up or face down. The honest dealer has no influence over the outcome of your hand. The greedy dealer roots

for you in expectation of a toke if you win and in hope of a toke even if you lose.

You make choices all the time. Casino rules limit your options, but at least you can make decisions that affect the outcome of your hand. Sometimes two players firmly disagree on how to play a particular hand. Most of the time when you have a choice, one alternative is superior to all others. Sometimes the correct choice is obvious, but at other times the choice that you know to be correct looks stupid to anyone watching you.

The typical blackjack game goes something like this. You approach the table and notice five to seven little circles or other symbols that look like place markers. Actually they are locations for sacrificial offerings. You put a bet on the nearest little symbol and say a prayer or some such. The dealer shuffles the cards with lightning speed and an annoyed expression and sets the pack in front of you. You cut the cards and pray again. The dealer picks up the cards and places them in a box called a shoe. Or, if one or two decks are used: With a quick motion called burning a card, the dealer removes the top card and places it face up on the bottom of the pack or face down in the discard tray. The dealer gives one card face down to each player, one card face up to the dealer, a second card face down to each player, and a second card face down to the dealer. Variations exist; for example, some casinos deal all the players' cards face up.

Aces count either one or eleven. Face cards count ten. All other cards count their face amounts. A two-card combination of an ace and a 10 (meaning 10 or face card) is known as a "natural" or a "blackjack." If you have a natural you turn both cards face up and smile. The dealer with an ace or 10 up may check the hole card to see if the hand is a natural. With any other upcard, the honest

dealer has no reason to look at the hole card. A dealer with a natural turns both cards face up. If the dealer has a natural and you do not, you lose. If you have a natural and the dealer does not, you happily win one and a half times your bet. If both you and the dealer have naturals, no money changes hands.

### **Insurance**

Most casinos offer “insurance,” a side bet that you may make when the dealer shows an ace. A dealer showing any other card does not offer insurance. Some casinos never offer insurance, ace or no ace. The insurance bet is almost always limited to half the original bet.

If you wish to take insurance, place a new bet in front of your original bet. The dealer with a natural (i.e. a 10 in the hole) pays two to one on the insurance bet. If the dealer does not have a natural, you lose your insurance bet. If both you and the dealer have naturals, the insurance bet still wins two to one. If the dealer has a natural while you do not, the win on the insurance bet equals the loss on the original hand and no money changes hands; hence the “insurance” tag.

Most of the time you will not have a natural and the dealer will not have a natural. Then you must select one of several options. The order in which you will consider them is: surrender, split a pair, double down, hit or stand. Not all options are available in all casinos. In any casino, however, you may have to make several consecutive decisions.

### **Surrender**

A few casinos offer “surrender,” and generally only on your first two cards—seldom after hitting or splitting a pair. Early surrender is surrender that is allowed before the dealer checks for a natural. Late surrender is

when you must wait to surrender until after the dealer checks for a natural. If the dealer does not check the hole card, and acknowledges your desire to surrender by putting a tiddly-wink or some such on your cards, and picks up your whole bet in the event of a natural, you are playing against late surrender. Late surrender is more common, but early surrender is more profitable for the player.

You surrender by saying "Surrender" or "Take them; I do not want them!" or some such expression of hopelessness. The dealer then picks up your cards and half of your bet. You keep the other half of your bet, and sit back to watch while the other players and the dealer finish their hands.

### **Splitting a Pair**

You can split any pair. A pair is two cards with the same point value, such as ace-ace, 2-2, etc. Generally any 10-10 is a pair and may be split; e.g., you may split a jack and a king at most casinos. "Splitting a pair" is accomplished by turning both cards face up and placing an additional bet equal to the first bet by the two turned-up cards. You then have two hands with a bet on each.

If you split ace-ace, each will receive one — and only one — additional card on each ace. In other words, at most casinos you cannot get more than two additional cards after splitting aces. There are exceptions; the occasional casino allows resplit of aces or multiple hits to split aces.

If you split any other pair — that is, any pair except aces — you ask for additional cards on the first hand until satisfied with it, then move on to the second hand and ask for additional cards for that one until satisfied. If the first additional card to either of the split pair is a third of the kind, it may be resplit to

make a third hand in most casinos. Resplitting to make four hands is generally allowed, but not resplitting to make five or more hands.

### **Doubling Down**

“Doubling down” means turning the cards face up and placing by your original bet an additional bet of the same amount or smaller. The dealer then gives the hand one more card — never any more than that, and never any less.

At most casinos you can double down on your first two cards. Rarely will you find a casino that will allow doubling down on three or more cards. At many casinos you can double down on a two-card total after a pair split. When the text of this book says “double down on any first two cards,” then you cannot double down after splitting. At most casinos you can double down on any first two cards, but some casinos restrict doubling down to certain totals, such as ten and eleven only.

### **Hit**

To “hit” a hand means to receive another card. You signal for a hit by scratching the table with your cards. Then the dealer inserts another card face up in front of you. Additional scratching brings additional cards. If your first two cards are face up, you ask for a hit by scratching the table with a finger or tapping the table in the vicinity of the hand that needs the hit. If a hit brings your total to twenty-two or more with all aces counting one, your hand is “busted.” You have lost, and the dealer picks up your busted hand and your bet.

### **Stand**

To “stand” is to be satisfied with the hand, i.e. to want no more cards from the dealer. If the cards have been dealt face down, you indicate your desire to stand by

placing your cards face down under your bet. Manners demand that this be done without handling the bet. To touch your bet after you have received cards is to invite suspicion of cheating. If the cards are face up, you indicate your decision to stand by shooing an imaginary fly away from your cards.

### The Dealer's Hand

After all the players finish their hands, the dealer turns up the hole card and plays out the hand according to preset rules. If the hand totals sixteen or less, the dealer takes a hit and continues hitting until the hand totals seventeen or more. The dealer cannot split pairs, double down, or surrender. Most casinos specify that their dealers stand on soft seventeen, but at some places house policy is dealers hit soft seventeen. The dealer has no choice; the casino rules either specify a hit or specify a stand, and all dealers in the casino act in accordance with these rules.

After reaching seventeen or more, the dealer turns your cards face up. If your cards add up closer to twenty-one than the dealer's or if the dealer's total exceeds twenty-one, the dealer pays you even money. If the dealer's total is closer to twenty-one without going over, you lose. In a tie, which is called a "push," no money changes hands. The dealer picks up the used cards and places them on the bottom of the pack or in the used-card tray.

Time for the next round. Put another offering on the sacrificial spot and pray again. This time the dealer does not shuffle, does not offer the deck for a cut, and does not burn a card. Rather, the next round is dealt from the unused cards.

This procedure has many minor variations. The dealer may not check the hole card to see if the hand is

a natural. One deck may be used, or two or more decks may be shuffled together. The cards may be held by the dealer or placed in a box called a "shoe." Used cards may be placed on the bottom of the pack or stacked on the table or placed in the chip rack. One or more players may battle against one dealer at the same table; each player tries to beat the dealer. A player may play more than one hand. Players' naturals may be paid off immediately or after the dealer's hand is finished. The dealer may shuffle after every other round or halfway through the pack or not until most of the cards have been used. You will encounter other minor variations from casino to casino.

The dealer will deal several rounds between shuffles but generally will not start a new round with fewer than 26 cards (single-deck games) or 52 cards (multiple-deck games). With one deck and four or more spots bet, you can plan on two rounds per shuffle; with one deck and three spots bet, you generally will get three rounds per shuffle. Only with fewer than three spots bet, or with multiple decks, will you get more than three rounds per shuffle.

Blackjack is the only casino game in which dealer procedures and player options vary so much from casino to casino. *Basic Blackjack* presents basic strategy for most past, present, and proposed rules for blackjack.

To keep up with what rules and playing conditions currently are offered in American casinos, you might consider *Current Blackjack News*, published monthly plus special issues since 1979.

## Expected Win

This book assumes that decisions are made on the basis of expected value, also called expected win. Whether an action turns out to have been correct or incorrect on

one isolated hand does not matter. What does matter is what the average outcome would be over thousands and thousands of such decisions. A positive expected win rate means that you are expected to win in the long run, and a negative expected win rate means that you will lose in the long run. For example, when your expected win rate is -0.5%, you are expected to lose at the rate of 0.5%.

Here is a question from a reader. I like it because the answer to it is a good example of what this book is all about.

Why should I not split 10-10 when the dealer shows 5? I like the idea of starting two new hands with a single good card. I am likely to draw totals much better than the dealer will get when he starts with the worst of cards.

This reader is correct in that starting with a 10 is likely to lead to a good hand. You will make money if you split 10-10 against the dealer's 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, or 9. You will make money splitting 10-10 against 10 or ace if you lose only one bet to a natural. You will also make money if you do not split 10-10. You should split or not split depending on which alternative makes more money. With 10-10 against 5 you make about 25% per hand by splitting but you can make 67% by not splitting. Making 67% is more attractive than twice making 25%. Therefore, basic strategy says do not split 10-10 against 5.

## How to Read the Tables

Each column of the tables in chapters 2, 3 and 11 represents a different upcard. The rows cover your possible hands. To read what a table says to do for a particular combination of your hand and the upcard, find

the row corresponding to your hand and the column corresponding to the upcard.

If you have a pair and have the option of splitting, look first for a row corresponding to your pair. If you are not going to split, then look for a row corresponding to the total in your hand.

The arrangement of hands follows that used by Edward O. Thorp in *Beat the Dealer*. Other authors have chosen to turn the tables upside down. Rewrite the tables if you wish — copying them may be an aid in understanding them.

## Soft and Hard Hands

The smallest soft hand is twelve. A hand such as ace-8 is called soft nineteen; it is not called nine though it can have the value of nine. Therefore the only hands that are called eleven or less are aceless hands, and the word "hard" is not needed to describe them.

## Learning How to Win

Learning how to win at blackjack involves three steps:

1. Learn basic strategy.
2. Build speed at counting cards.
3. Learn strategy index numbers.

### Learning Basic Strategy

The best way to learn basic strategy is by using a computer program. I recommend *Blackjack Count Analyzer* or *Blackjack Analyzer*, but any program that gives you feedback when you deviate from basic strategy will do. You have got to practice until you know immediately

what is the correct play as soon as you see your hand and the dealer's upcard.

You can of course also learn basic strategy by sitting down and memorizing a table, and by dealing hands and trying to recall how to play them. But doing this with a computer program is much more efficient — you will learn faster and build up speed faster.

A reasonable goal is to be able to play 300 hands an hour. Generally in a casino you will play 200 or fewer hands an hour, but that is with the dealer controlling the speed of the game. You have got to be able to handle 300 hands an hour when you are controlling the speed in order to be able to handle 200 when the dealer controls the tempo. (With practice, you can play considerably faster than 300 hands an hour.)

### **Building Speed at Counting Cards.**

You have got to be able to count cards quickly, and you have got to be able to do it without moving your lips or doing anything else that gives away the fact that you are counting. You must be able to go through a deck of cards in less than 30 seconds, and it is possible to do it much faster. Hold the deck face up and, beginning your count at zero, flip through the cards, keeping the running count: +1, +2, +1, +1, and so on. At the end of the deck your running count should be zero if you have a full deck and have made no errors. Also practice counting two cards at a time, because in a casino you often will see two cards at a time.

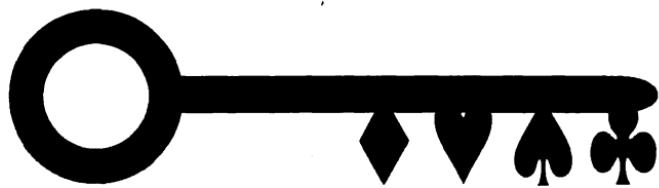
You do not really need to practice with a deck of cards; that just is the traditional way of doing it. Using a software program is a more enjoyable and more efficient way to build speed.

## Learning Strategy Index Numbers.

Different people learn different ways. I prefer to sit down with a pencil and blank piece of paper and recreate the table of strategy numbers I am trying to memorize. It is easier for me to memorize a matrix than individual numbers. Some people find it easier to memorize individual numbers, and they prefer to learn index numbers with flash cards. Make a set of cards, each of which has a decision on one side and the appropriate index number on the other side. As you learn particular decisions, you can put those flash cards aside and continue to practice with the others.

To test yourself to be sure you know the index numbers and can use them quickly, play blackjack with a software program that gives you feedback on how well you play. Again I recommend *Blackjack Count Analyzer*.

Learning to win at blackjack is possible and enjoyable. Depending on how much time you devote to practicing, it will take a month or two to build your skill level to the point where you can handle the casino game.



# CHAPTER 2

## GENERIC BASIC STRATEGY

This chapter presents basic strategy for single exposure, which is blackjack in which the dealer has one card face up for you to see as you are playing your hand. Basic strategy is what plays you should make if you are not counting cards and you do not have any information about the dealer's hole card. You are presumed to know the total in your own hand and the dealer's upcard, but no other cards.

Chapter 11 contains basic strategy for double exposure, which is blackjack in which the dealer has two cards face up.

Another book, *Basic Blackjack*, presents basic strategy for all the various rules that have been offered for blackjack, such as dealers take ties on

seventeen, six-card hand pays double, surrender after doubling down, etc.

This chapter contains generic basic strategy, and is a copy of chapter 2 of *Basic Blackjack*.

Basic strategy is the best way to play a blackjack hand on the first round after a shuffle. For a person who does not count cards, basic strategy is the best way to play every hand.

## Calculating Basic Strategy

Basic strategy can be either total-dependent or composition-dependent. Total-dependent means the decision rules require only the dealer's card and the total points in your hand. Composition-dependent means the decision rules require knowledge of the dealer's card and the precise cards that make up your hand. For example, total-dependent strategy says stand on twelve against 4. Composition-dependent strategy for twelve against 4 requires you to specify how you get to twelve: Do you have 7-5, 8-4, 3-2-2-5, or what? If you got to twelve by 10-2 or 2-10 (where 10 means any 10-count card), and only one deck is being used, you should hit. If you got to twelve by any other route, or multiple decks are being used, you should stand.

There are few differences between composition-dependent and total-dependent strategies for single deck, and none that are important for multiple decks. (The more decks shuffled together, the less difference one card makes.) This book uses total-dependent strategy.

The details of basic strategy depend on the particulars of the rules. However, you must start some-

place. This chapter presents a version of basic strategy that is approximately correct for the most common sets of rules — a generic basic strategy. For modifications of this generic basic strategy that are appropriate for different sets of rules, see *Basic Blackjack*.

Blackjack is most commonly played with the dealer's hand showing one card face up. If you are playing blackjack in a game where you get to see two cards face up in front of the dealer before you play your hand, go to chapter 11 for playing-strategy advice.

## Table of Generic Basic Strategy

Table 1 presents generic basic strategy. It contains advice for every decision the blackjack player commonly makes. Each column is a different dealer up-card. (10, J, Q, and K are lumped together as 10.) Each row is a different player hand.

Technically, table 1 is basic strategy for multiple decks and dealer stands on soft seventeen.

## Pairs

The order of decisions presented in table 1 is the order in which you evaluate your hand. First you check to see if you have a pair. At most casinos, any two 10-count cards, e.g. J-K, are a pair and may be split. If you have a pair, the first part of the table tells you how to play your hand. Use this part of the table to decide whether to split your pair. To split means to make another bet equal in size to your first bet, and play each card as the start of a separate hand.

**Table 1**  
**Generic Basic Strategy**

## Table 1 Continued

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>										
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A	
<i>double allowed after split</i>											
A-A	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
10-10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9-9	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	-	spl	spl	-	-	-
8-8	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
7-7	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h
6-6	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h	h
5-5	db	db	db	db	db	db	db	db	h	h	h
4-4	h	h	h	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h	h
3-3	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h
2-2	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h

**KEY:**

-: Stand.

db: Double down; if you cannot double, then hit.

dbs: Double down; if you cannot double, then stand.

h: Hit.

spl: Split.

sr: Surrender; if you cannot surrender, then hit.

If you split a pair and catch another card of the same value, resplit if you can. If it is correct to split a pair, it is correct to resplit.

You may or may not be allowed to double down after splitting a pair. For example, if you split 8-8 and catch a 3 for eleven, you may or may not be allowed to double down on that eleven. If doubling down after splitting is allowed, then splitting is more attractive and you should split more often. The first part of table 1 assumes you are not allowed to double down after splitting. If you are allowed to double down after splitting, then use the last part of table 1 — the part on the facing page. The decisions that are hits in the first part of table 1 and splits on the facing page are: 6-6 against 2, 4-4 against 5 or 6, 3-3 against 2 or 3, and 2-2 against 2 or 3.

## Soft Hands

If you do not have a pair, then see if you have an ace. Aces count your choice of one or eleven. A hand in which an ace counts eleven is called a soft hand, and the total points in it is called a soft total. The second part of table 1 explains how to play soft hands.

The double-down advice is broken down into db and dbs. The reason is you need to know what to do with a particular total if you cannot double down. For example, suppose you have soft eighteen and the dealer shows 3. Your best play is to double down, so that is what you do if you can. But if your soft eighteen is a three-card hand, say ace-2-5, then you probably will not be allowed to double down. The table lists "dbs" for that hand, which means if you are not allowed to double down then you should stand.

Note that sometimes it is correct to hit eighteen. If you have soft eighteen and the dealer shows 9, 10, or ace, then hitting your soft eighteen is better than standing on it.

One decision that is very close is soft thirteen against 5. It does not matter whether you hit or double down.

## **Hard Hands**

The lower two parts of table 1 explain how to play the rest of your hands. Hands labeled “hard” might contain aces, but all such aces are counted as one. Hands from 5 to 11 do not contain an ace; if a hand totaling eleven or less has an ace it is a soft hand and is played according to the “soft” part of the table.

## **Surrender**

Surrender means losing half a bet for the privilege of not playing out the hand. Generic basic strategy presents strategy for late surrender, which means you cannot surrender if the dealer has a natural. Most of the value of surrender comes from surrendering sixteen against 10. Late surrender is worth 0.1%.

If you are playing blackjack at a casino that does not offer surrender, or if you are not allowed to surrender due to having more than two cards, then hit those hands for which table 1 advises surrender.

## **Insurance**

Table 1 does not show insurance. Basic strategy says never take insurance. Even if you have a natural, you are better off not insuring it: You are better off

winning 3:2 most of the time than winning even money for sure.

If you have a natural yourself, insurance gives you a sure winner (and thus is sometimes called "even money") but you still should not buy it; you are ahead in the long run taking a chance on a push or winning 150% of your bet. You should take chances when the odds favor you. Maybe 150% and maybe 0% is better than a certain 100% when the 150% occurs more than two-thirds of the time. If you remove your 10-ace and the dealer's ace from one deck, 49 cards are left, each of which is equally likely to be the hole card. Fifteen of the 49 cards will give the dealer a natural, and the other 34 will give the dealer a lesser hand. Not insuring your natural results in your winning 150% of your bet 34 times and pushing 15 times, out of 49 total. This averages out to winning 104% of your bet by not insuring. Would you rather win 104% of your bet on average or 100% for certain? The professional black-jack player would go for the 104% because it makes more money in the long run. Multiple-deck calculations are similar and yield the same advice: Do not buy insurance.

An exception is if you are using a coupon. If an insurance bet protects the coupon as well as the bet, as generally is the case, then always insure a coupon.

# CHAPTER 3

# THE HIGH-LOW

# SYSTEM

Winning at blackjack requires two things: You must bet more when you have the advantage and less when the dealer has the advantage; and you must make correct decisions on insurance, surrender, splitting pairs, doubling down, and hitting or standing. This chapter discusses single-exposure blackjack; chapter 11 discusses double exposure.

You need a counting system to tell whether you have the advantage and to aid in making decisions. Aces and 10s favor you because naturals are worth half again more to you than they are to the dealer. Small cards favor the dealer by decreasing the dealer's chance of busting.

The high-low system, first introduced in 1963 by Harvey Dubner, is both simple and powerful. Thorp, in the revised edition of *Beat the Dealer*, Revere, and Julian Braun, in *How to Play Winning Blackjack*, discuss it. This chapter contains my independent calculations for it, produced by *Blackjack Count Analyzer*.

Counting cards in the high-low system is relatively simple. Start with a count of zero after the cards are shuffled. Add one for every small card (2, 3, 4, 5, 6) that you see. Subtract one for every ace or 10-count card that you see. Do not change your count for 7, 8, or 9. This is shown in table 2.

Keep a running count. Accumulate the total since the last shuffle. The running count will hop up and down around zero, but will generally stay between -6 and +6. A full deck contains the same number of +1 cards as -1 cards. Therefore, at the end of the deck the running count should come back to zero. This is called a "balanced count."

Practice counting with a deck of cards. Shuffle the cards and turn them up one at a time, while keeping a running count. In addition to counting one card at a time, you should practice with two-card combinations since you often see two cards at a time in casino play. You should practice until you are very fast and never make a mistake. Practicing at a casino costs money. It

## Table 2 High-Low Count

<i>Card</i>	<i>Count</i>
2,3,4,5,6	+1
7,8,9	0
10,J,Q,K,Ace	-1

is less expensive to become perfect — or thereabouts — before going to a casino.

Keeping an accurate count is essential. The easiest way to maintain confidence in your accuracy is to count every card as it is turned face up on the table. Do not count other players' cards that you see but that are turned face down. If you count every card you see, when the dealer turns each hand face up in turn you may not recall whether or not you have already counted some cards. You cannot afford such confusion. If you can remember which cards you have counted, then count what you can see. If you do not trust your memory, then count only the cards that stay face up.

## Count Per Deck

The high-low count tells you when the best cards, the 10s and aces, outnumber the small cards. The richer the pack, that is, the more 10s and aces relative to small cards, the better for you. You need to know how rich the pack is in order to make appropriate bets and decisions in play.

Richness of the pack depends on the proportion of excess 10s and aces. For decision purposes, you must relate the running count to the number of decks you have not seen. For example, twelve 10s and aces remaining to be used when the dealer is halfway through a single deck is two 10s and aces more than average; that is as favorable to the player as if there were four excess 10s and aces in 52 cards, and is described as a count per deck of +4.

For betting and playing decisions, a running count of +2 with one deck remaining is equivalent to a running count of +1 with half a deck remaining, to a

running count of +4 with two decks remaining, and to a running count of +8 with four decks remaining. Therefore, you must convert the running count into count per deck for making decisions. Simply divide the running count by the number of decks (or fraction of a deck) that you have not seen. If less than one deck remains, your count per deck will be greater than your running count. If more than one deck remains, your count per deck will be less than your running count.

For example, suppose you approach a blackjack table with a single-deck game in progress and see the following cards.

<i>First Player</i>	<i>Second Player</i>	<i>Dealer</i>
2-3-2-4-7	10-10	3-8-9

You glance at the cards and see that the running count is +3. Since what you have not seen is almost one deck, the count per deck is slightly above +3. The dealer picks up the cards, and you place a bet. You receive 2-10, the dealer's upcard is 2, the first other player has a natural, and you do not see the second other player's cards. You must decide whether to hit or to stand. The running count is now +2. Since about 2/3 of the deck remains unseen, you divide by 2/3. This is the same as multiplying by 3/2. It gives a count per deck of +3.

You need to only approximate the count per deck. You do not need an exact count of the number of cards remaining. If you had seen roughly half a deck in a single-deck game, a running count of +2 would translate to a count per deck of about +4. If you had seen about half a deck (26 cards) in a double-deck game, a running count of +2 would translate to a count per

deck slightly greater than +1 (2 divided by 1.5 gives 4/3). A rough estimate of the count per deck suffices for decisions because you need to know only whether it exceeds an integer in a table.

## Estimating Your Edge

Your advantage or disadvantage if you play basic strategy varies with the rules and number of decks used. *Current Blackjack News* is a good source for keeping up to date with the rules at various casinos and your advantage or disadvantage. Commonly you are at a disadvantage of about 0.5% with basic strategy.

For each point increase in the count per deck, your advantage goes up by slightly more than 0.5%. So generally when you have a count per deck of +1 you are playing even with the casino — no advantage or disadvantage. At a count per deck of +3 you have an advantage of about 1%.

The 0.5% per count per deck works both ways: The dealer's advantage over you increases with negative counts. At a count per deck of -1 you are at a disadvantage of about 1% — if you play perfectly. If the count per deck is -4, you can expect to lose about 2% faster than if the dealer were to shuffle.

Winning with card counting requires betting more money when you have an edge than when you are at a disadvantage, and playing your hands correctly.

## Jumping into a Game in Progress

When the best available table is a game in progress and you want to jump in without waiting for a shuffle, just start counting from zero and play according to

your count. Treat the unseen discards the same as cards yet to be dealt. An unseen card is an unseen card whether it has already been used or remains to be dealt. Example: You jump into a four-deck shoe after about one deck has been used. You play and count as another deck is used. If your running count is +6, what is your count per deck? Two of the four decks have been used, but you have counted the cards in only one deck. Since about three decks remain unseen by you, divide your running count by three to get a count per deck of +2.

## Effect of Rules on Strategy

Some dealers use one deck, some use six, and some use other multiples. Decision numbers vary only slightly with the number of decks used. The tables in this chapter are based on four decks, but are approximately correct for any number of decks. One-deck decision numbers are slightly different from multiple-deck decision numbers, but four-deck decision numbers are almost exactly the same as decision numbers based on other multiples such as two, six, etc. Some decisions are very close, and different methods of calculation can yield slightly different results. The decision numbers in this book have been found by a calculation method more precise and more time-consuming than the method used by *Blackjack Count Analyzer*. However, *Blackjack Count Analyzer* finds decision numbers quickly and for any number of decks and any set of rules.

You should truncate, and not round, when using these tables. Examples: If the count per deck required to double down is +4, then double down only if you have a count per deck of +4 or more, and do not double

down if your count per deck is say 3.8. If a count per deck of -1 is required to stand, then stand if your count per deck, truncated, is -1 or higher. (Zero is higher than -1, and a count per deck of -1.8 is truncated to -1.)

At some casinos dealers stand on soft seventeen, whereas at other casinos dealers hit it. The discussion of this chapter initially assumes that the dealer stands on soft seventeen, and then also covers what to do when the dealer hits soft seventeen.

Extremely high or low counts per deck are encountered infrequently in actual casino play, so memorizing extremely high or low decision numbers probably is a waste of time. If you follow my advice (coming later in this book) of leaving a table on a negative count, you will seldom encounter counts per deck of less than -1. Therefore, the tables in this book include decision numbers only from -1 to +6. For a wider range of decision numbers, use *Blackjack Count Analyzer*.

The decisions are discussed in the order in which you make them at a casino: insurance, surrender, pair splits, double down, and hit or stand. The decision numbers in this book are derived for multiple decks with the dealer standing on soft seventeen, and are also very close for one deck or with the dealer hitting soft seventeen. You must memorize them; when you are playing blackjack in a casino, you can refer to these decision numbers only in your head.

## Insurance

Advice of well-meaning but ill-informed gamblers that you should insure only a natural is worth its cost — nothing; you should buy insurance if more than one-third of the unseen cards are 10s. As soon as you see the dealer's ace, begin considering whether you should buy insurance. Table 3 gives the minimum counts per deck for which insurance is a good buy, as a function of number of decks shuffled together. For example, if one deck is used, insurance is likely to be profitable if the count per deck, after counting the dealer's ace and as many other cards as you can see, exceeds +1.4. My suggestion is to use +3 as the decision number for more than two decks. Note that the number you use from table 3 is based on the total number of decks used, rather than on the number of decks yet unseen.

**Table 3**  
**When to Take Insurance**

*Decks      Count Per Deck*

1	1.4
2	2.4
3	2.7
4	2.9
5	3.0
6	3.0
7	3.1
8	3.1
9	3.1
10	3.1
infinite	3.3

## Early Surrender

At some casinos, you have the option of early surrender; that is, you may surrender before the dealer checks the hole card. The higher the count per deck, the more likely you should be to surrender. Table 4 summarizes early-surrender decisions.

### Examples:

A) You get 9-4 for thirteen against ace; table 4 says always surrender.

B) You get 8-8 against 9; table 4 says do not surrender.

C) You get 10-4 for fourteen against 9; surrender if the count per deck is greater than or equal to +6, and do not surrender if the count per deck is less than +6.

**Table 4**  
**Early Surrender**

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>			
	8	9	10	A
hard 17			5	esr
10-6, 9-7	4	0	esr	esr
8-8			esr	esr
hard 15		2	esr	esr
hard 14		6	0	esr
hard 13			3	esr
hard 12				esr
7				esr
6				-1
5				0
4				2

### KEY:

blank: Do not surrender.

esr: Surrender.

number: Surrender if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; do not surrender if the count per deck is less than the number.

## Late Surrender

At a few casinos you have the option of late surrender. The higher the count per deck, the more likely you should be to surrender. Table 5 summarizes late-surrender decisions.

Examples:

- A) You get 9-7 for sixteen against 10; table 5 says always surrender.
- B) You get 8-8 against ace; table 5 says do not surrender.
- C) You get 10-4 for fourteen against 9; surrender if the count per deck is greater than or equal to +6, and do not surrender if the count per deck is less than +6.

**Table 5**  
**Late Surrender**

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>			
	8	9	10	A
10-6, 9-7	4	0	lsr	-1
8-8			0	
hard 15		2	0	2
hard 14		6	3	6

**KEY:**

blank: Do not surrender.

lsr: Surrender.

number: Surrender if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; do not surrender if the count per deck is less than the number.

## Pairs

Table 6 covers pair splits, assuming that you cannot double down after splitting. If you can double down after splitting, then use table 7 instead.

Count per deck also determines whether you should split pairs. The higher the count per deck, the more pairs you should split. The exception is 8-8 against 10, which you should split when the count per deck is less than +6 and not split when the count per deck is +6 or more.

**Table 6**  
**Pair Split, No Double After**

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
ace-ace	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
10-10			6	5	4					
9-9	0	spl	spl	spl	spl	6	spl	spl		3
8-8	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	6*	spl
7-7	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl				
6-6	2	0	spl	spl	spl					
5-5										
4-4										
3-3		3	0	spl	spl	spl				
2-2		3	0	spl	spl	spl				

**KEY:**

blank: Do not split.

spl: Split.

number: Split if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; do not split if the count per deck is less than the number.

\* : split 8-8 against 10 only if the count per deck is less than 6.

If you do not split, then play your hand according to the strategy number for the total.

Examples:

A) You get 3-3 against 3. The number from table 6 is +3. If the count per deck equals or exceeds +3, you should split the pair. If the count per deck is less than +3, you should hit.

B) You get 3-3 against 9. That spot in table 6 is blank, so do not split, no matter what the count per deck.

C) You get 8-8 against 9; table 6 says to split no matter what the count per deck.

## Table 7

### Pair Split, Double Allowed After

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
ace-ace	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
10-10			6	5	4					
9-9	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	3	spl	spl		3
8-8	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
7-7	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	5			
6-6	-1	spl	spl	spl	spl					
5-5										
4-4		6	1	-1	spl					
3-3	0	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	4			
2-2	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	5			

**KEY:**

blank: Do not split.

spl: Split.

number: Split if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; do not split if the count per deck is less than the number.

If you want to win at a casino that does not allow doubling down after splitting a pair, you should memorize table 6. It summarizes 100 decisions, but only 13 of these are numbers and the other 87 are either "split" or "do not split." Table 6 appears complicated, but it is not impossible; and it is the most complicated table that you need.

You should split more pairs at a casino that allows doubling down after splitting. Use table 7 instead of table 6 if the casino allows doubling down after pair splitting. As a first approach, decide which casino you wish to attack and memorize either table 6 or table 7. After you have hit your target casino and wish to play at a casino with the other rule, memorize the other table.

## Doubling Down

Doubling down also depends on count per deck. You should be more likely to double down if the count per deck is higher. If you decide to double down, always put up additional money equal to the full amount of your original bet.

The soft-doubling parts of all double-down tables in this book assume that the ace in your hand can be valued at either 1 or 11 after you split. If the ace cannot swing, then do not double down on soft hands of nineteen or less.

### Examples:

- A) You get 6-5 against 4. Your hand totals eleven, and table 8 says to double down no matter what the count per deck.

B) You get 4-5 against 9. Your hand totals nine and table 8 says do not double down, so you take a hit.

C) You get ace-8 against 6. You may call your total nine and double down if you wish, and table 8 advises doing so if the count per deck equals or exceeds +1. If the count per deck is less than +1, or if doubling and catching a 2 would give you eleven instead of twenty-one, call your total nineteen and stand.

## Table 8 Double Down

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
11	db	db	db	db	db	db	db	db	db	1
10	db	db	db	db	db	db	db	-1	4	4
9	1	0	db	db	db	3				
8**			5	3	1					
ace-9			6	5	4					
ace-8		5	3	1	1					
ace-7	0	-1	db	db	db					
ace-6	1	db	db	db	db					
ace-5		4	db	db	db					
ace-4			0	db	db					
ace-3			1	-1	db					
ace-2			3	0	-1					

### KEY:

blank: Do not double down.

db: Double down.

number: Double down if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; do not double down if the count per deck is less than the number.

\*\* : Double down on 4-4 rather than split only if doubling down is not permitted after pair splitting.

## Soft Standing

Table 9 summarizes soft standing decisions. Soft doubling as in table 8 takes precedence, so use table 9 only if you are not doubling down.

If you do not double down you should hit a soft total of seventeen or less and stand with a soft total of nineteen or more. With soft eighteen if you do not double down you should stand against 2 through 8, and hit against 9 or 10. Against ace you should hit soft eighteen when the count per deck is less than +1, but stand when the count per deck is greater than or equal to +1.

**Table 9**  
**Soft Standing**

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
soft 19										
soft 18								h	h	1
soft 17	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	h

**KEY:**

blank: Stand.

h: Hit.

number: Stand if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; hit if the count per deck is less than the number.

## Hard Standing

Table 10 covers hard standing. With a total of eleven or less, never stand. With a hard total of twelve or more, you should be more likely to stand when the count per deck is higher.

Examples:

A) You have 9-8 for a total of seventeen against 2; table 10 says to stand.

B) You have 10-4 for fourteen against 8; table 10 says to hit.

C) You have 2-6 for a total of eight against 10; you ask for a hit. Suppose you receive a 7 to bring your total to fifteen. If the count per deck is less than +4, you should ask for another hit; if the count per deck equals or exceeds +4, you should stand.

**Table 10**  
**Hard Standing**

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
hard 16						h	h	5	0	h
hard 15						h	h	h	4	h
hard 14						h	h	h	h	h
hard 13	0	-1				h	h	h	h	h
hard 12	3	2	0	-1	0	h	h	h	h	h

KEY:

blank: Stand.

h: Hit.

number: Stand if the count per deck equals or exceeds the number; hit if the count per deck is less than the number.

## If the Dealer Hits Soft Seventeen

Tables 4-10 assume that the dealer stands on soft seventeen. If you are playing blackjack at a casino where the dealer hits soft seventeen, you should play slightly differently, primarily against an ace. The differences against an ace are: You will be more likely to hit soft eighteen, more likely to stand on hard sixteen or hard fifteen, more likely to double down on eleven, and more likely to split 9-9. Hitting soft seventeen has these effects on strategy because the dealer is less likely to finish the hand with exactly seventeen and is more likely to bust.

The major changes to make to tables 4-10 if the dealer hits soft seventeen are as follows:

**Table 4:** Always early surrender 5 against ace.

Always early surrender 4 against ace.

**Table 5:** With hard 15 against ace, late surrender if count per deck is greater than or equal to 0.

With hard 14 against ace, late surrender if the count per deck is greater than or equal to 4.

**Table 9:** Always hit soft 18 against ace.

**Table 10:** With hard 16 against ace, stand if the count per deck is greater than or equal to 4.

With hard 15 against ace, stand if the count per deck is greater than or equal to 5.

## Summary Strategy Tables

Tables 11 and 12 summarize strategy decision numbers for the high-low count. Table 11 applies if the dealer stands on soft seventeen, and table 12 applies if the dealer hits soft seventeen. Table 12 includes the

## **Table 11**

### **Decision Numbers**

### **Dealer Stands on Soft 17**

## Table 11 Continued

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
<i>double allowed after split</i>										
A-A	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
10-10	-	-	6	5	4	-	-	-	-	-
9-9	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	3	spl	spl	-	3
8-8	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
7-7	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	5	h	h	h
6-6	-1	spl	spl	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h
5-5	<i>never split — play as total of ten</i>									
4-4**	h	6	1	-4	spl	h	h	h	h	h
3-3	0	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	4	h	h	h
2-2	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	5	h	h	h

**KEY:**

- : Stand.
- db: Double down; if you cannot double, then hit.
- dbs: Double down; if you cannot double, then stand.
- h: Hit.
- spl: Split.
- number: See earlier tables in this chapter. (Note that the 1 for ace-7 against ace is hit/stand, and does not say to double down.)
- \* : split 8-8 against 10 only if the count per deck is less than 6 and doubling down is not permitted after pair splitting.
- \*\* : Double down on 4-4 rather than split only if doubling down is not permitted after pair splitting.

## **Table 12**

### **Decision Numbers**

### **Dealer Hits Soft 17**

## Table 12 Continued

<i>Player's Hand</i>	<i>Dealer's Upcard</i>									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
<i>double allowed after split</i>										
A-A	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl
10-10	-	-	6	5	4	-	-	-	-	-
9-9	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	3	spl	spl	-	1
8-8	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	-1	
7-7	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	5	h	h	h
6-6	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	h	h	h	h	h
5-5	<i>never split — play as total of ten</i>									
4-4**	h	6	1	-1	spl	h	h	h	h	h
3-3	0	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	4	h	h	h
2-2	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	spl	5	h	h	h

**KEY:**

- : Stand.
- db: Double down; if you cannot double, then hit.
- dbs: Double down; if you cannot double, then stand.
- h: Hit.
- spl: Split.
- number: See earlier tables in this chapter.
- \* : split 8-8 against 10 only if the count per deck is less than 6 and doubling down is not permitted after pair splitting.
- \*\* : Double down on 4-4 rather than split only if doubling down is not permitted after pair splitting.

major changes listed above plus minor changes as recommended by *Blackjack Count Analyzer*. Tables 11 and 12 ignore surrender; if you can surrender you will have to add table 4 or 5.

## Importance of the Strategy Tables

You should memorize one of the high-low strategy tables. You should know each number exactly and be able to recall any number in a few seconds. Memorization is the important part. You have plenty of time to think at the casinos; polite dealers will not rush you. You should know the decision numbers precisely. If you only have a hazy idea of when to surrender or split or double down or hit, you are probably a gambler rather than an investor. You cannot win consistently — if at all — on intuition alone. If you know what to do but refuse to do it, you are a gambler for certain. Before each foray into casino country, you should sit down with a blank paper and a pen and recreate the appropriate strategy table. If you make any errors or are uncertain of any decisions, study the table for a while and then put it aside and try again to duplicate it from memory. You are not fully armed for battle until you can reproduce it accurately, swiftly, and confidently.

After you have learned to count, have memorized the playing strategy, and have practiced until you can make correct decisions quickly, you are ready to wage war on the casinos.

This chapter has presented multiple-deck playing strategy, but at some casinos blackjack is dealt with one deck. Multiple-deck decision numbers are only slightly different from single-deck decision numbers. You will win almost as much by using multiple-deck

decision numbers with one deck as you will win by using one-deck decision numbers with one deck. With freshly shuffled cards, the casino has a larger advantage as the number of decks increases.

## Which Count?

A reader says:

On surrendering and using a plus-minus count strategy I am confused in situations such as the following: I am sitting at third base. The dealer has a 10 up and received his hole card when the count was -3. I have sixteen. At the time I have to make a decision whether to surrender, hit, or stand, the count is +2. I feel I should stand since the dealer probably has a small card in the hole (since he received his hole card when the count was -3). Is this the correct decision?

For every decision you make, use your most up-to-date count. In your example, make your decision based on the +2 count. Ignore the fact that it used to be -3.

## Estimating the Count

You can occasionally make inferences about cards you have not seen.

When approaching a table at which the dealer has already finished some hands, look first at the spots with no cards. If a stack of chips looks like the payoff for a natural, count it the same as if you had seen the natural.

Sometimes, as you are meandering in search of a favorable situation, you see a table with many small cards but the dealer scoops them up before you have had time to come near — much less to count them. As your running count you may use your best estimate of what you think you saw, but be conservative. Two

biases are acting to make a group of cards look more favorable than they really are. Aces tend to look like small cards, but they do not have the same effect on the count as other cards that show lots of white. If, for example, you caught a quick glimpse of what looked like four small cards, chances are that one of those cards was an ace and thus you might choose +2 as being a reasonable estimate of the value of that group of cards. The other bias is that 10s resemble 8s and 9s rather than face cards. Just because you see a table without face cards does not mean that no 10s were there.

You can practice estimation with a deck of cards. Randomly select a group of six to ten cards and glance at them briefly. Write down what you think the count is. Then count those cards exactly and see how close you were on your estimate. If you fail to estimate accurately in practice, do not rely on your estimates in casino play. If you estimate accurately in practice, then start your running count with your estimate in casino play. You should never use estimation when an exact count is possible.

## Temporary Correction

You can make a temporary correction to the running count if you need a count per deck for a playing-strategy decision. For example, suppose the running count is +3 and you catch a quick glimpse of a 10 in another player's hand. Remember +3 (perhaps with the aid of the joints of your fingers), but make strategy decisions as if the running count were +2. Other players' cards which you observe, but which are turned face down, may be treated as part of the temporary correction. At the end of the round when the dealer turns the

cards face up, you can count them with confidence that you are not counting the same cards twice.

Cards you have not seen but about which you can make some inference also become part of the temporary correction. For instance, bad players tend to insure 10-10; so, when the dealer shows an ace, any bad player who pushes the cards under the bet and immediately buys insurance can be presumed to have 10-10. A pat hand against 7, 8, 9, 10, or ace can be counted as -1 as part of the temporary correction. A hand hit against 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 can be counted as +1. Do not adjust your running count in this manner, as you could be wrong. These are simply temporary corrections for decision-making purposes during play of a hand.

Suppose you are playing the last hand at the table, the dealer shows 10, you have 10-6, the running count is +2 after counting your cards and the dealer's upcard, and half a deck remains. If there are three other players and they all stand on their original two cards, you should take a hit because three pat hands against a 10 are likely to contain enough high cards to reduce the running count to -1.

## Counting System

Any counting system based on small cards versus big cards will get the money. If you are using a 10-count you should switch counting systems; but if you are already using something similar to the high-low, then stick with it. You should know the appropriate decision numbers for the exact rules you face, such as whether or not you can double down after splitting.

When you play next to another counter in a casino, the two of you almost always agree on which play is correct. If the proper play is to double down, most

counting systems will say to double down. You can not tell what counting system the other person is using by just watching the play of the hands. Therefore, it does not matter much what counting system you are using; you would be making the same plays with a different system.

Of course there are minor differences from counting system to counting system. But these differences are dwarfed by other factors. For example, you are better off playing a simple system perfectly than playing a complicated system with which you make an occasional counting or other error. The cost of the errors probably is greater than the gain from making slightly better decisions.

If you try using a more complicated counting system, you may find that you tire sooner, meaning you cannot play as many quality hours per day.

Another advantage to using a simple counting system is it leaves most of your thinking capacity for other things, such as carrying on a conversation and observing the people who are observing you.

## Learning to Count Cards

The most efficient way to learn how to count cards and practice using the decision numbers is with a computer program that will deal to you and give you feedback on the correctness of your play. There are many software programs that will do the job. I recommend *Blackjack Count Analyzer*. In a computer program you have a dealer who never gets tired, never complains, and never makes mistakes. You can build speed on a computer, so that by the time you face a live dealer in a casino you can play fast enough to keep up. With practice you will be able to count cards and play your hands correctly faster than the fastest human dealer can deal.

# **CHAPTER 4**

# **HOW TO WIN**

# **WITHOUT GETTING**

# **KICKED OUT**

You must count cards to get an edge at blackjack. But counting is not enough. A card counter has to be able to get away with it in a casino. That is what this chapter is all about.

You probably are trying to win as much money at blackjack as possible. You want to win as much per hour as possible, and you want to keep open the option of playing more hours.

One thing that is important is to develop your own style. Be a one of a kind. This forces casino bosses to figure

out what you are doing by watching you in action, which gives you more playing time than if they know what you are doing before you win your first bet.

Every casino has employees who know that blackjack can be beaten, but very few casino people actually know how to beat the game. Playing blackjack is a war in which the casino employees are the enemy, while you are a spy behind enemy lines who must hide your true identity at all times. Some of the enemy are on the lookout for card counters. They think that they know what a card counter looks like: The garden-variety card counter wins and does so with varying bet sizes. A person who exhibits this behavior is observed intently. When casino personnel are positive that they have spotted a card counter, they will take an action to your disadvantage, such as ordering the dealer to shuffle after every round.

Of course you must hide your ability. Do not look like you are counting cards. Do not look like you are trying to recall a number from a table. Do not carry any written tables with you. In some jurisdictions, most notably Nevada, you may be barred from play if you are identified as a proficient card counter. Elsewhere you might find the shuffle point moved up on you. Bet size makes little difference. A dollar bettor who is recognized as a card counter will be subjected to countermeasures, while the careful \$100 bettor can continue to play indefinitely.

Keep the dealers and pit bosses ignorant of your ability and they will be happy. Never, never let on that you are playing any sort of a winning system. You will be asked in a conversational way if you count cards or have read any books on blackjack. Do not admit to anyone that you are counting cards. (You might pretend that you think counting means adding the indexes to find the

hand total.) Do not admit to having understood any book on blackjack. You can act stupid, lucky, unlucky, drunk, sleepy, or whatever, but do not act like you know that you are playing a winning system or you will find the welcome mat withdrawn.

Casino personnel notice small bettors who are big winners and big bettors whether they win or lose. This exposure is unavoidable but relatively harmless because many gamblers bet big and many gamblers have winning streaks. Casino owners who are inhospitable to all winners and big bettors lose more by turning away gamblers than they gain by turning away professional blackjack players.

Except for winning more often than losing, you must look like a gambler if you want to preserve your potential for income from playing blackjack. A gambler who plays blackjack daily for week after week eventually runs out of money. If you play daily in the same casino for week after week, you will eventually lose your credibility in that casino. If you want to play fifteen hours per month in one casino, it will look more natural to cram all of those hours into a two-day period than to play thirty minutes every day for thirty consecutive days. Try to spread your playing among all three shifts — dealers put in eight hours a day just like other working people.

## Good Plays to Avoid

In general, do not deviate from the playing strategy recommended in chapter 3 in an effort to hide your card-counting ability. Strange as it seems, most casino personnel do not even know basic strategy and do not recognize an expert play when they see it. If chapter 3 says to hit ace-7, then hit it. If the dealer thinks you are stupid, fine.

Let the dealer, the pit boss, and the other players think that you do not know what you are doing, that you throw your money away too rapidly. Sometimes a pit boss who is watching you intently will walk away when you split 10-10 or double down on ace-9. You will be a preferred customer if you bet heavily and appear to play stupidly. One word of caution — when splitting 10-10 is a wrong decision, it is a very costly wrong decision. Do not split 10-10 just to give the impression of playing poorly. Do not deviate from the correct strategy for the pit boss's benefit. The pit boss likely cannot distinguish a good play from a bad play.

A reader says:

Are there good plays you sometimes avoid so as not to attract attention?

One comment related to this: Although dealers at some casinos alert their pit bosses to some good plays, such as surrendering, I still continue to use an obvious basic strategy play. But sometimes it is annoying to hear the dealer shout out, "Double on soft eighteen," or "Hitting soft eighteen against a 10!"

On playing strategy, with two exceptions, I stick precisely with the book. I even double down on eight; that play attracts zero attention nowadays.

One exception is at single-exposure I split 10-10 or double down on ace-9 only if I have established a "wild" image. If I have established an image as a player who probably knows basic strategy but occasionally plays hunches, I generally forgo splitting 10-10 and doubling down on ace-9. The problem with splitting 10s is the only people who split them are idiots and card counters. If the rest of my play looks solid to the people watching, I cannot pass for an idiot. Therefore, splitting 10s makes me look like an expert.

Other hands I play correctly. Insuring a stiff has never brought me any heat. When I am playing in a casino that allows surrender, I do surrender whenever it is the correct decision. This has never caused a problem for me. My experience is that surrendering does not make me look like an expert. On insurance and surrender and other plays that I think could attract attention, I pause as if I am thinking before I make the play. I also pause frequently before making an obvious play (such as before hitting fifteen against 7), to give the impression that I am seriously considering an alternative.

The only place where doubling down on softhands or hitting soft eighteen has brought me any attention is Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. I too have had a dealer say, "Doubling down on soft eighteen," and, when I did it again, "Doubling down on soft eighteen like he knows what he is doing." I attribute this to my not toking the dealer. Dealers at Caesars Palace are accustomed to generous tokes.

The only other way I sometimes deviate from proper play of the hands is something I have found valuable for camouflage: buying insurance on the first round after a shuffle if I have a small bet out. Pit bosses seem to relax when I buy insurance, if they are certain I have made a bad play. The reason this ploy is effective only on the first round is that, unless the boss is counting cards or checks the discards, the first round after a shuffle is the only time s/he can be certain insurance is a bad play. (At single deck right after a shuffle, if you can see the cards in two or more hands and you see no 10s, insurance is a good bet.)

More than once a pit boss has seen me buy insurance (or accept even money on a natural, which is the same

thing), glanced down at the discards, seen it is the first round after a shuffle, and walked away smiling.

Donald Schlesinger adds:

I think that both you and your readers may be missing a rather important point regarding dealers who call out "surrender," "doubling down on soft eighteen," "hitting soft eighteen," and the like. I do not at all agree that their primary purpose in doing this is to finger good players, or counters. I am friendly with several dealers. I know a great deal about dealing procedures and regulations. I have been told that dealers are told to call out "unusual" plays primarily so that there can be no argument later if a player claims he never intended to make the play. If a person wishes to hit an ace-7, the attitude is, "If he is stupid enough to do it, let him; but call it to our attention so that there will be no mistake about what he is doing." As for surrender, you have to understand that to the camera up above, there had better be a good reason why, with no hand signal whatsoever from the player, the dealer suddenly reaches over and scoops up half his bet. They must call out "surrender" to authorize the touching of the money. My god, with the way idiots surrender in this game, does anyone really think the dealers call out "surrender" to finger the good players?! NEVER! It is strange, but perhaps just as all the above has never occurred to you as the reason for calling out these plays, I assure you that when they have happened to me, I have never for a moment felt the least bit threatened. The casinos' motives, believe it or not, may be purer than one might imagine.

I agree, except when a dealer calls out, "Doubling down on soft eighteen like he knows what he is doing." The important thing, when a dealer calls out your play, is to just sit there calmly. If you flinch when the dealer

calls out "Doubling on soft eighteen" or "Surrender," you are calling attention to yourself.

I often wonder why American casinos do not adopt a hand signal for surrender to pacify the eye in the sky. There is a hand signal for surrender in Asian casinos: One draws an imaginary line behind the hand, as if to cut it off. The motion resembles the gesture used to indicate suicide by "slitting one's throat."

## Bet Size Variation

Casino personnel know that variation in bet size is part of most winning systems. If you could get away with it, you should bet more whenever you have a larger advantage over the dealer. Your expected win is how much you bet times your advantage, summed over all the hands you play.

Any mathematician can demonstrate that an optimal betting scheme involves betting an amount that varies directly with your advantage. The higher the count per deck, the higher your advantage, and thus the more you should bet. Thorp, being a mathematician, recommends bet size variation; when he started playing his big bet was ten times his small bet. Revere recommends less drastic bet size variation. Both Thorp and Revere recommend making a small "waiting bet" when the pack is neutral or the dealer has the advantage, and making larger bets when you have the advantage. Casino personnel look for this sort of bet-size management, and can spot it because it differs from a typical gambler's variation in bet sizes.

If you wish to bet more when your advantage increases or less when it decreases, be certain that your bet size variation looks like that of a gambler. A gambler

often will try to capitalize on winning streaks. After winning a few consecutive hands, the gambler feels lucky and increases the bet size. Of course winning streaks cannot be extrapolated.

In a similar vein, losing one hand does not make losing the next more or less likely. A few diehard gamblers double up after a loss again and again on the theory that the next win will be big enough to wipe out a string of losses. There is no mathematical justification for this behavior either; the gambler who doubles the bet after a loss and reverts to a small bet after a win will be wiped out for certain, though ruin may take a few days.

Actually, you need not appear to vary bet sizes at all. You can win handsomely with an identical bet on every hand that you play. If bet size variation identifies you as a system player, then bet size variation is something you can do without.

## Wonging

“Wonging” is a word made up by Atlantic City card counters in the late 1970s. It means hopping from table to table, playing only when you have an advantage. When I wrote *Professional Blackjack* in the early 1970s, I was making trip after trip to Nevada in which I made flat bets the whole trip, playing only positive counts. Then it worked great, but then there were very few people doing it.

Wonging still works. Rather than sitting at one table for long periods, walk around and look at the cards in play at other tables. When you see a pack become profitable, sit down and play at that table. When the pack turns unprofitable, leave the table. If you do not play against unprofitable packs, you have no need for small

waiting bets. Your waiting bet is as small as it can get—zero. Casino personnel do not equate leaving the table with making a small bet. A small bet tends to look bad, while leaving the table usually passes unnoticed. You must, however, make your standard bet against freshly-shuffled cards once in a while lest casino personnel catch on to you.

The only justification for playing in unprofitable situations is "advertising." If you think that leaving the table will look suspicious, then stay and play another round. Only play in an unprofitable situation if doing so will buy you more playing time. Otherwise, play only when you have the advantage or when the pack is neutral. Have patience. Do not play just to be playing. If you do sit down at a game in progress because you see small cards, and then aces and 10s pop up to make the count negative, get up and go without playing a single hand. If you are already playing and the count goes negative, you should leave the game.

You are not trying to get in the most hands possible; rather you want to play as many favorable hands and as few unfavorable hands as possible. Not playing at all costs less than playing against a negative count. Hopping from table to table with a uniform bet is more profitable than sitting at one table and varying your bet size, because when you stay at one table you have the advantage only a fraction of the time. The rest of your time can be better spent looking for profitable situations than betting small because the dealer has the advantage.

Jumping in with small bets is easy against multiple decks; you find a dealer who has just shuffled and watch a few rounds without playing. If the pack becomes profitable, you jump in and play; if it becomes unprofit-

able, you leave; and if it stays neutral, you can stay and watch another round.

Against a single deck, or with big bets, subtlety is required, and watching the cards without playing is an art. If you watch a single deck being shuffled, watch a couple of rounds being dealt and played, and then, when the count is good, jump in with a big bet, you will find that you are being eyed suspiciously. Perhaps your action will even cause the dealer to shuffle away a profitable situation. When looking for a profitable single deck, keep walking as you are looking at the cards at various tables. Never take root and stare. You may stop and watch, if a round is in progress, because you must wait until the round is finished before you make a bet. When the dealer is ready to deal the next round you have only two valid options—bet or walk away. Do not watch a second round at that same table, because your watching may be watched. You do not want anyone to question the chastity of your blackjack playing.

You may wonder whether betting exactly the same amount each hand hour after hour and day after day might be interpreted by casino personnel as unusual behavior. It has never attracted any attention to me.

You may vary your bet size if you wish, but be sure to do it in a manner that is not suspect. Do not appear to bet bigger because the pack has turned more favorable. You want to be mistaken for a gambler. A lot of gamblers bet small when they first sit down at a table and bet bigger after they have been at the table for a while. You may do this too if you wish. For example, bet half your standard bet on the first hand you play at a table, then go to your full standard bet on the next round if you stay.

You can usually switch back and forth between one hand and two hands without attracting attention. For

example: When the pack is profitable, bet two hands; when it is neutral, bet one hand; and when it is lousy, walk away.

If casino personnel watch you closely in an effort to discover why you hop from table to table, you could give them a reason for what you do. For example, you could leave a table only when the count is negative and you have just lost a hand, and never leave a table after a win. Your expected win rate will be reduced slightly if you play occasionally when the cards are unfavorable, but the offsetting benefit is that the pit bosses will attribute your table-hopping to your losing a hand.

A similar disguise might be used for altering the number of hands you play. For example, if you play one hand and lose, continue to play only one hand whether or not the pack is favorable. If you play one hand and win, then play two hands on the following round — if the count is favorable.

You can increase your bet size against a fresh shuffle without attracting adverse attention. You might consider doing so if you have been playing two hands and winning. Suppose you have been winning with two hands of \$200 each. If you think that cutting back to one hand of \$200 when the dealer shuffles will look bad, you might switch to one hand of \$300. You now have only \$300 on the table instead of \$400, but the dealer and pit boss may think that you are increasing your bet size.

To get more money on the table, you can double up after a loss, or let a winning bet ride. If you really want to look unlike a card counter, play two hands of unequal bet size.

If the pit bosses think that they know why you do what you do, and if they think that what you are doing does not involve getting an edge over the casino, then you

can play indefinitely. Read Ian Andersen's *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas* for an excellent discussion of playing without getting barred.

A reader who wants to be called J. S. says:

While walking through a casino, I paused at a \$25 single-deck table where a player had a large stack of greens in front of him. The dealer was shuffling. I stood and watched and after the third round had been completed, I had a true count of +6. I placed two greens in the box for the next hand. I was dealt a hard nineteen against the dealer's upcard of a 5. The dealer turned over a 10 and hit it with another 10. At this point the count had dropped to -1, so I picked up my winnings and started to walk. The dealer looked at me with a big question on his face. I responded to his unspoken question: "I am really a \$5 player. Why press my luck?" He laughed, as did the pit boss who was standing nearby, and I laughed. Of course, I was not laughing at the same thing that they were!

Another reader says:

I have found that pure Wonging it just does not work for me for several reasons. First I am too much of a degenerate gambler and simply enjoy playing too much to exercise the discipline of getting up and leaving the table whenever the count gets bad. Also, pure Wonging does not seem practical for use on a junket. However, I use a modification that has been suggested by other authors, which seems useful. Specifically, I do not sit down for my usual hour of play until the shoe hits a true count of close to +1. I jump in, get my marker, and play two hands of \$75-\$100 each. I stay put for about an hour, betting \$50 to \$300. I manage to have one "call of nature" when the count goes strongly negative during that hour. I also end my play on a shoe that has turned negative. This approach thus far appears to attract no heat.

A reader asks:

Is it better to Wong in at any plus count or to wait until the count indicates at least a 1% advantage?

If the count indicates a zero advantage and you play anyway, you will be adding to your risk but not to your expected win. But you might find that playing only when your advantage is large attracts unwelcome attention. For cover you probably will want to play some hands at less than a 1% advantage. In shoe games I play whenever I have any kind of advantage at all, and sometimes when I have a disadvantage but the count is zero or positive. In single deck I even tolerate negative counts if the game is fast and the dealer is giving good penetration.

A reader asks:

Does the terrible disadvantage of the bad rules at multiple decks in downtown Las Vegas and Reno affect the Wonging flat bettor?

You probably should avoid all games where your disadvantage right after a shuffle is more than 0.5%, unless you have something else going for you, such as fabulous penetration.

A reader says:

Following your advice means a lot of standing and watching, which gets me a cut I cannot live with. When the count per deck gets to -1, I always leave; but I have found that to keep from being identified as a counter I must make some bets at neutral or slightly minus situations. Otherwise I must jump about like a grasshopper, and a 260-pound grasshopper attracts attention. Thus I often place bets at tables with counts per deck less than +1, or even negative. What I need is a bet ratio that will allow me to gain an edge while playing and waiting for a high count.

**On negative counts:** If you cannot bet zero, then bet the minimum you can get away with.

Today's casinos have seen many card counters Wonging from table to table playing only positive counts. Casino pit bosses are aware that it is a winning technique. They are watching for it, and when you come in and use it yourself they might catch on quickly to what you are doing. So you may not want to use pure Wonging.

Of course you want to use techniques that give you an edge. But it is better to use a technique that nobody else is using. Then the people who are watching you do not know in advance what you are up to. They may see you win and suspect you are up to something that gives you an edge, but make them watch you for a long time to figure it out. You should try to play only positive counts as much as possible. For sure the first hand you play in any casino should be on a positive count. Whenever you leave the table the count should be negative.

### **Jumping into a Game in Progress**

A reader says:

I have been using optimal proportional betting and "Wonging it." I find this method superior to changing bets with the count for two reasons. First, I attract little or no heat, except if I spend too much time at one pit. Second, I have never liked losing big bets and then having to try to catch up with small bets because the count has dropped; making big bets every time suits me better.

I have a question. You talk about "jumping into a game in progress." Is this a dangerous way to play? Can you suggest some guidelines for this type of play? Specifically, when I am playing six-deck shoes, when should I consider not playing the method — when one, two, or three decks have already been dealt before I arrive? Should I lower my bet because of the additional

risk or is there, in fact, no additional risk? What are the dangers?

There is no additional risk and there is no danger. The only problem with jumping into a game in which cards have already been discarded and you do not have a count of them is that the shuffle comes too soon. Suppose for example six decks have been shuffled, two have been cut off, and three have been used before you start to count. You are only going to be able to see the cards from one deck before the dealer shuffles. You will be dividing your running count by five or six to get your count per deck. You never get to play against a big count per deck if you get to see only one deck out of six before the cards are shuffled.

The procedure I use is to check the discard tray before I check the cards on the table. If the discard tray has more than half a deck already, I do not bother to scan the cards on the table. I do not want to waste time on situations where I have a small advantage for a few hands and then the dealer shuffles; I would rather keep looking for a situation where there are enough cards remaining to be dealt so that there is a chance I can get a big advantage for a few hands.

You might wonder why you find count per deck by dividing by the number of decks unseen rather than the number of decks remaining in the shoe. For example, if you jump into a table after one deck has been played but you do not have a count of that deck, you should mentally add one to the number of decks left in the shoe every time you calculate count per deck. The reason is if you see a bunch of small cards on the table, that means the cards already used are likely to contain a slight excess of big cards. Dividing by total number of decks unseen rather than decks left in the shoe adjusts for it. If you have a

running count of +10, there are four decks left in the shoe, and you did not see the first deck, then on average the deck you did not see contains two excess 10s and aces. The four decks remaining in the shoe on average contain the other eight excess 10s and aces.

A reader says:

You write of watching for freshly-shuffled decks before Wonging in. Later, in another context, you mention the precautions to be taken when entering a game after unseen hands have been played. The implication seems to be that either method is OK. But I always worry that I am playing a negative deck, even though I have just counted a plus hand. Should I ever Wong in after unseen hands have been played?

If you have a plus count after watching a hand, that plus count is your best estimate of the running count. The cards already used but unseen are NOT more likely to contain a higher proportion of excess 10s and aces than the cards yet to be dealt. So yes, it is OK to Wong in after unseen hands have been played. The disadvantage to jumping in after unseen cards have been played is the shuffle comes with too many unseen cards — those left in the shoe plus those in the hands you did not see. If you watch from the first round, then the shuffle comes with unseen cards limited to those left in the shoe.

### **Wonging Full Tables**

If you happen to be walking by a table on the first round after a shuffle, glance at the cards even if there currently are no open spots at the table. This hint was first published by Arnold Snyder in his *Blackjack Forum*. If the count is very high, stand and watch more rounds. If a spot becomes available, which usually happens, sit down and play. Sometimes you will be frustrated; you will count down a whole shoe and have a high count the

whole time, but no spot ever opens. But often a spot will open, and you can jump right in to a very high count. (Do not waste your time Wonging full tables if casino rules prevent mid-shoe entry.)

While keeping track of the count at a full table, if a dealer on either side should happen to shuffle you can count that table down too. Yes, with practice it is possible to count down two tables simultaneously. Try to stand where you can see all the cards at both tables without moving, but usually you will have to move around a bit because players' heads get in your lines of sight. I have tried keeping the count at three different tables simultaneously, but I do not do it any more because I cannot look casual while doing the amount of moving around that is required.

### Sitting Out a Hand

Here is a variation of Wonging that works. Every once in a while, sit out a hand or hands and join in again when you feel like it. Of course the hands you sit out should have negative counts. Nobody seems to care if you sit out a few hands. If you sit out too many, the dealer or a boss might ask you to give up your seat to someone else who wants to play. Sitting out an occasional hand with a negative count is a winning technique. You might say something like "Maybe I will sit out a hand to change the order of the cards." I have never tried sitting out 100% of the negative counts.

And of course if the count goes too negative too early but you want to stay at that table because of good penetration or whatever, you will probably feel the need to go to the rest-room. Come back to the table just as the dealer is shuffling.

## Penetration

Penetration, or how far down into the pack the dealer goes before shuffling, is extremely important. I always knew it was important, but I learned from the mass of simulations I have done that penetration is more important than I had previously realized.

The reason penetration is so important is that the rare occasions when your advantage gets very high — say 5% or more — are always toward the end of the pack. If penetration is lousy, or if a deck or two has already been used before you start counting, you are not going to get a situation of very high advantage. And situations of very high advantage are what you should be looking for.

### Two-deck Example

Here is an example of the importance of penetration. You can get similar numbers yourself with *Blackjack Count Analyzer*. Your advantage is 4.8% or more at counts per deck of +8 or more. For one player at the table in a two-deck game, that count per deck occurs 0.7% of the time with 52-card penetration, 3% of the time with 76-card penetration, and 4% of the time with 82-card penetration.

### Wonging Shoe Games

As mentioned earlier, the effect on your win rate is the same as if cards already dealt but not counted were behind the cut card and would not be used. For example, sitting down to play in a six-deck game with one deck cut off and one deck already played but uncounted is the same as sitting down at a six-deck game with two decks cut off. Six decks shuffled and one cut off is playable, but six shuffled and two cut off is a waste of time unless the rules are so good that you have an edge with basic strategy alone.

## Single and Double Deck

On single or double deck, penetration is so important that if you are in a casino where there are big differences from dealer to dealer on penetration, you ought to make sacrifices to play against a dealer who gives the best penetration. For example, in double deck you should rather play at a table with a couple of other players and cards dealt almost all the way out than head-on with a shuffle after only half the cards are used. If a dealer who has been giving excellent penetration gets switched to another table, and the relief does not give as good penetration, you too switch to that other table.

At single deck you should seldom play with three other players, and you should never play with more than three other players. The reason is at single deck, a full table gets two rounds per shuffle at most. If the first round contains a large excess of small cards, the dealer might shuffle after only one round; the dealer thinks there are not enough cards to deal another round, and you feel like shouting that all hands will get so many face cards that there will not be much need for hit cards.

Be willing to start a game at a table where the dealer is standing alone. But if the dealer shuffles earlier than you expect, do not wait around for a second shuffle. Stay only if the penetration is good enough.

## Casinos to Avoid

In many casinos, every dealer gives bad penetration. Do not even bother to play blackjack at those casinos. If you happen to see a big excess of small cards on the first round after a shuffle at such a casino, jump in and play until the count goes negative. But keep telling yourself you are wasting your time because the shuffle will come too early, robbing you of the rounds with the most profit potential.

## The Flesh Is Weak

Playing blackjack is more of a physical than a mental contest. Your eyes and legs race to see which go bad first. Casinos are full of glare and smoke. If 6s and 7s start looking alike or if you cannot clearly see the cards at the other end of the table, it is time to quit. When your legs get tired you will feel like sitting down for a while. Do it, but not at a blackjack game. You will lose if you play when the count is negative. Periodic breaks are necessary. A walk outdoors is therapeutic. Murine works. An hour of stretching out on a bed with eyes closed will revive you. You want as much playing time as possible, but it must be effective playing time.

## Errors

Card-counting errors cost you money. If you bet less or more than what you should and could have, or if you make a strategy error based on your bad count, then you have taken an action that has a lower expected win than if you had not made the counting error.

## Watch Your Cash and Chips

Remember that blackjack dealers are not the only ones after your money. Occasionally casino customers lose more than they can afford, and your fat wallet may be attractive to such desperate people. A money belt (the kind you wear under your clothing) can provide security for some of your stake. At most hotels free safe deposit boxes are available. If you wear pants and carry your wallet in your pants, keep it in a front pocket. Back pockets are for pickpockets. You want to take money from

the casino and keep it for your own spending. It is bad policy to donate it to a thief.

## Drinking

Watch out for alcohol. You might think that you will be watched less closely if you appear slightly inebriated, and what better way to appear tipsy than to have a few drinks?

A buxom cocktail waitress asks if you want a complimentary drink. You name your favorite brand of Scotch. After two minutes, she brings you a liberal potion. As you polish off the drink, you notice that the dealer is picking up the cards faster and dealing faster. You should not really care, because you can count the cards faster than any dealer can deal, but you are slightly annoyed at being singled out for special treatment. The cocktail waitress sees your empty glass and asks if you want another of the same. Well, you say, why not? The second drink is just as powerful and just as good. As you finish it, the dealer again speeds up — amazing. This time you are annoyed enough to leave the table and walk out of the casino. At the next casino, a different dealer pulls the same trick. Just as you have relieved your thirst with another Scotch, the dealer picks up the tempo! Remarkable! Just your luck to run into to two ornery dealers on the same day. You move to a third casino and notice that it seems to have hired the world's fastest dealers. You find a friendly dealer, take a seat, make a bet and order another Scotch. After a couple of quick rounds, the drink comes, and you enjoy it. By now that nice, friendly dealer is moving the cards so fast that you are no longer confident of your count. You quit playing blackjack and wander back to your hotel room to think. By George, you

cry to your swimming brain cells, get organized! They make a muddled effort. The coincidence of three dealers speeding up on you is troubling, and so was the last dealer being too fast for you to count accurately. Finally, it dawns on you that the dealers may not be speeding up, but you may be slowing down! Alas alack, alcohol does not fit in with winning at blackjack.

Each drink makes the dealer seem to go faster. The dealer does not really speed up of course, but your reactions slow down with each drink. Your advantage at blackjack is slim at best. You cannot afford to give up any part of that advantage. The best rule on alcohol is: Do not drink at all while you are working.

You may not even want to order nonalcoholic beverages at a blackjack table, since ordering a drink ties you to the table until the drink comes.

## Playing Conditions

Playing conditions vary from hour to hour, day to day, and casino to casino. The best playing conditions are when the casinos are crowded enough so that you can get lost in the crowd but not so crowded that you cannot move. It would be ideal if each blackjack table had one player. If the tables are too crowded, you cannot get in very many profitable hands per hour. If customers are too few, you are scrutinized carefully because the pit bosses have nothing else to do. If you want to limit your playing hours because of boredom or excessive exposure, then try to play when conditions are best.

If you are playing blackjack full-time, try to hit all shifts. If you are going to play only occasionally, then try to arrange your sleeping, eating, and loving in such a manner as to hit the tables when the playing conditions

are best. The hard part is forcing yourself to get out of bed. Once you are inside the casino, 3 AM looks just like 3 PM.

## Stashing Chips

A reader says:

One question has bothered me. Would you counsel in favor or against “rat-holing” chips during casino play? Las Vegas casinos so closely monitor my quantities of chips that I usually attempt, on a \$500 marker, to squirrel away \$100-\$200 in chips during an hour of play, in order to exaggerate losses and minimize wins. In your opinion, does the risk outweigh the benefit, particularly with “the eye in the sky”?

I do not like to have a large pile of chips on the table in front of me. It attracts too much attention from other customers. I buy in for only \$100 to \$300 at a time. If chips start to pile up in front of me, I stick some in my pocket. But I am not sneaky about it. Sometimes I will ask the dealer to exchange some of mine for chips of a higher denomination, and I explain that I want to put them in my pocket.

Gamblers often remove chips from the table and stash them in pockets or purses. Therefore, doing so will not mark you as a counter. However, casino people are suspicious of customers who establish credit, take out markers to buy chips, and then exchange chips for cash. If such customers never pay off their markers, they are stealing from the casino. It happens. If you are playing to front money instead of credit, you should not be suspect. If anyone asks you why you are putting chips aside, you can make up a believable reason. For example, “My wife/husband gets the bonus every time I get a natural.” Or,

"I found a system that works. Every time I win three hands in a row, I put a bet in my pocket."

A reader says:

After a very modest win, I was flabbergasted when the cashier picked up the phone and told the pit how much I cashed in. I was equally floored when the cashier at another casino picked up the phone, looked me straight in the eye, and announced to the pit "eleven green." I had played conservatively at both places, did not up my bets, and thought I blended well. Quite obviously, I was wrong.

Your experiences were not unusual. The cashiers were not using anti-counter tactics. In some casinos only chips of \$100 and larger denominations are called to the pit; at small casinos the attention starts with \$5 chips. The cashier calls the pit to give casino executives a chance to react if something is wrong. It is protection against counterfeit chips, and it is protection against customers who use credit to buy chips and then attempt to convert them to cash instead of paying off their casino debts.

## How Big to Bet

You may find that jumping into the middle of a shoe with a big bet draws attention, even if you flat bet. If that is so, try to find the point at which attention starts. For example, the attention may start at \$100 and become more intense with higher bets. The attention of non-counting bosses might be a plus of course, since it can result in comps. However, if you want to jump into a positive count and bet big, but with as little attention as possible, you might be better off starting with a bet that will not attract attention, for example, a bet under \$100.

You might find that jumping into a shoe with a bet sequence of \$50-\$100-\$150 draws less heat than with \$100-\$100-\$100. Even if the dealer calls out "checks play," the pit boss may not come to the table if the checks belong to a person who is already playing at that table.

If you can play but do not want to make big bets yourself, you can hire an assistant and use a technique that has come to be called "play calling." You bet small and count the cards, and on good counts you call in your assistant to make big bets. Your assistant should be someone unknown to the casino, but the assistant need not be a card counter. However, to simplify the information-transfer procedure, your assistant should know basic strategy. Then you need signals for only three messages:

1. The count is high, so bet your money.
2. The count went down, so leave the table.
3. Deviate from basic strategy on this play.

## Shuffle Tracking

Here is something you can do to get a little extra edge. It is not too difficult. If you see a large clump of high cards—or a large clump of low cards—remember where the clump is in the discards and follow its progress through the shuffle. If the shuffle is incomplete, and if the high cards are cut to the top or low cards are cut to the bottom, you can bet big on the first round of the shoe. Conversely, if the low cards are cut to the top or the high cards are cut to the bottom, it is time to change tables.

## Mirrors

One more hint: Check out the ceiling. Are there mirrors? If yes, you might be able to count cards at a table 60 feet away. Do not be obvious about it of course; raise your eyes without tilting your head.

## Casual or Hunch Deck

A reader says:

In the Reno/Lake Tahoe area, there is no way to avoid constant attention, if not heat, with black-check action. I have found a gambling style of betting at single decks that is good for keeping the welcome mat out. Depending on what I think of the bottom card (viewed as I cut, by a hopefully undetectable motion of arm and wrist), I play either a "casual" or "hunch" deck. If I see a 3, 4, 5, or 6, I play a hunch deck; with any other card on the bottom, I play a casual deck.

A hunch deck starts with three hands, each bet at the maximum. Sometimes the bets are graduated, \$300 on the first hand, \$400 on the second hand, and \$500 on the third. My attention is rapt. I sustain this betting level for three rounds if I maintain an advantage, however slight. If I lose the advantage, I immediately cut back to one hand of \$100 or so.

A casual deck begins with one hand of \$100, and I try to appear to be only slightly interested, chatting to anyone who will listen. If the count warrants it, I might progress to higher bets.

I thus get a sort of 1-15 spread, although with high variance. I have found the fluctuations frightening, but the win rate has been large. I always get the seal of approval from the bosses for this style of play. Even if nervously, they comp me to the hilt.

This is an explanation of the “hopefully undetectable motion of arm and wrist” I mention in my first paragraph. The deck is best situated at an angle of 45 degrees to a line drawn between the dealer and me, with the tilt going NW-SE for a right-handed cut, or NE-SW for a lefty. I lift the cards off towards the dealer, maintaining the 45 degree angle of the deck as it sits on the table. I lift the cards several inches. At the top of the parabolic motion of cards from deck to table, a slight rolling motion of my wrist enables me to catch sight of the top right corner of the bottom-card-to-be. I perform the whole gesture quickly and with panache, so the peek should be undetectable.

Another tip: When Wonging, I try to approach a table just as the deck is being cut. I often glimpse either the bottom card or the burned card, and so pick up a little extra knowledge.

## Heat

Donald Schlesinger says:

During a long New Year's weekend, the main pit at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas was all \$100 minimum or higher tables, you could not ask for a marker of less than \$1000, and white (\$500) chips were as common as silver dollars. One Oriental lady played yellow \$1000 chips each night at a reserved table and began each session by asking for a rack of chips, which, in this case, was \$100,000. At another table, one of the highest rollers in Caesars's history was back in town after a three-year absence. He had lost millions at Caesars and the pit was buzzing in anticipation of his play. Throughout the casino the floormen watched all the play with their customary detached, vacant stares as if they did not know which \$1000-a-hand player to observe first.

There is no casino in the world that I know of that is more tolerant of card counters than Caesars Palace.

During Christmas week I played with the kind of counter I personally dislike. He would bet \$25 or \$50 on bad counts and then suddenly, and without any attempt at camouflage whatsoever, spread to two hands of \$300 or \$400 on high plus counts. He never spoke, never smiled, never tipped, never lifted his eyes from the table, and played for nothing but cash. He played with absolute impunity for the entire week, back-counting tables in the main pit to his heart's content and never once received so much as a single word of admonition from the pit. I have never yet seen anyone receive heat at Caesars.

Heat is when the floorman turns his back on the game and talks surreptitiously to the dealer. Heat is when the shoe is suddenly cut in half and/or shuffled before the stop card is reached. Heat is three bosses converging on your table, where one watches from first base, one from third, and one leaves the pit to stand behind you! Heat is when you get up and move across the aisle to another pit and that floorman is already on the phone talking to the one you just left before you sit down at the new table.

My definition of heat is different from Schlesinger's. I try to be sensitive to the times when the bosses are saying to each other, "He is winning, so he must be doing something to get an edge. Let us figure out what he is doing." So to me, heat is any attention I receive that is excessive considering my bet size. I may keep playing rather than leave when that happens, but that is still is what I would call the onset of heat.

## Giving Your Name to Casinos

A reader says:

I would like to know why they always want my name in casinos. I know that I do not have to give it. Is it smart

to give my right name? Do they give information about me to other casinos? What should I do?

I am a small bettor. I went to the Trop on the day shift and was followed by a counter catcher who is short and has a mustache and a light build. He picked up on me when I doubled down on ace-8 against 5. Do you think it would be better to forgo some of these plays?

Big bettors are asked for names as part of the casinos' promotional efforts. Since you are not a big bettor, the casino people probably want your name because they have identified you as a card counter. What you do is up to you: You can refuse to give a name, you can give your own name, or you can give them a false name. I doubt that they would share your name with another casino.

If doubling down on ace-8 draws unwelcome attention to you, then that is a play you should avoid. I personally do not double down on ace-8 or ace-9 if I think my play is being watched.

## Head-On Play

### Hands Per Hour

You would rather be the only player at the table. One reason is more hands per hour; you easily get in as many hands in one hour of head-on play as in three hours of play at a busy table, and if you play fast the ratio can be higher.

### Win Rate Per Hand

Another reason to prefer head-on play is the win rate is higher. The more players, the higher percentage of your hands are right after the shuffle. And the more players, the lower percentage of your hands that are started with a small number of cards left.

Playing head-on at single deck, with average or better penetration, you will get an additional round even after the dealer has already used half the cards. At a full table you never get another round out of a single deck after the dealer has used half of it.

For multiple decks also, your win rate per hand is higher with fewer players at the table, though the effect is not as great as with single deck.

### **Changing Bet Sizes**

In some European casinos you can increase your bet by a multiple of 50 and nobody cares. In Nevada if you alter your bet size you should do so only gradually. When you are the only player at the table, the count changes gradually and so you can change your bet size gradually and still be betting about the right amount. When the table is full the count sometimes changes drastically, and you may not feel comfortable jacking your bet up or down as much as the count warrants. So you are more likely to end up betting too much or too little at a full table than when you are alone with the dealer.

### **Other Comments on Head-On Play**

If you have a head-on game and the dealer is giving you good penetration, stay and play through negative counts. But if the table fills up, leave on the next negative count.

Though head-on games are best, you will generally play with one to three other players at the table because you will not find enough head-on games. But those other players have to play quickly. Do not stay in a game with slow players—on the next negative count you should be gone.

You might prefer a high-limit table. Those tables offer better opportunities for getting head-on games. And

the other players, if there are any, generally play faster at high-limit games.

## Entering a Casino

What should you do when you walk into a casino and do not see any games that are attractive? Answer: You walk out. Do not play even a single hand unless sufficient profit potential exists. If you do not play any blackjack then the people who work there do not pay any attention to you, and next time you come in you will be a stranger to them.

Heaven is when you can find good playing conditions at a casino you have never played or have not played for years. You can go in and put on a good act and play blackjack for as long as you wish.

### Shoe Games

When you first enter a casino with shoe games, check out the count at any table where the dealer has just shuffled. Try to make your first bet in a situation where you have an edge. If you can not find a good count at a table where the dealer has just shuffled, start a game at a table with a dealer but no customers and pray that the empty seats do not fill up quickly.

### Single and Double Deck

When you first enter a casino with single or double deck, first check out the penetration at the games in progress. At single deck this means checking out only the tables with one or two player hands in action. Note which dealers seem to be giving good penetration. If play at one of those games is fast enough, join in. If all the games with good penetration seem to be too slow, start a game at a table with a dealer and no customers.

## An Alternative To Wonging

In *Beat the Dealer*, Ed Thorp says he started out with 1:10 bet variation. When that attracted too much attention, he cut back so that his big bet was a smaller multiple of his small bet. Most authors since Thorp have written as though 1:4 was large enough. I took small bet variation to the extreme in *Professional Blackjack*, recommending flat bets and Wonging.

It is also possible to get away with the other extreme — to use bet variation, and lots of it. You might be able to get away with one hand of \$25 on the worst situations and have two hands of \$200 or more on the best. In casinos where bets over \$100 attract too much attention, you might be able to get away with \$5 to \$100.

Bet variation is tolerated better now than it was in the 1970s. Perhaps this is due to the increased number of Asian customers in casinos now. In Macao and other countries in the Orient, huge bet variation is the norm; if the table limit is 10 to 2000 in local currency, most customers seem willing to bet 10 for a starter and progress to 2000 if they hit a winning streak. If casino employees see enough poor players use huge bet variation, then a card counter using big bet variation can blend right in.

The trick to getting away with big bet variation is to do it in other than a mechanical, by-the-numbers way. For example, you might occasionally pop out a big bet on the first round after a shuffle. If you are going \$25 to two hands of \$200, for example, you might sometimes bet one hand of \$100 or more on the first round. If you bet \$100 on the first round, then you might go up to \$200 or drop to \$25 on the second round, depending on the count. Thus you get a \$25 to \$200 spread on the second round. Cutting

back from \$100 to \$25 does not seem to attract attention. If you had bet only \$25 on the first round you certainly would attract attention betting \$200 on the second round!

Try to avoid any sort of a pattern. For example, if you realize that for the last ten minutes you have been betting only one or two green chips each hand because the count has not gone very high, you might pop out five greens on the first round after the shuffle. Your expected win is negative on that one bet, but it buys you the ability to bet five or more green chips on the next good count.

Do not use bet variation in a mechanical manner. If the count calls for a big bet, just grab a handful of chips and place them in the circle. If you want to bet \$200 and you are betting quarters, for example, you may actually have \$200 out there, but if you did not grab exactly the correct number of chips you might bet \$175 or \$225. People do not seem to pay as much attention to how much you bet as how you bet it. You would probably get more attention carefully counting out \$150 than by quickly grabbing a handful of chips that happens to total \$225.

A side benefit from betting odd amounts is more dealer errors. For example, once I bet \$55 in \$5 chips and was allowed to insure the whole bet for just \$25. The dealer thought I had bet an even \$50.

Bet what you can get away with rather than trying to bet an optimal amount that depends on the count. If the count is negative, try to bet the least you can get away with. If you have an edge, try to bet as close to the optimal amount as possible with the constraint that you want your bet size to look natural to whoever is watching.

## Streaks

Try to be somewhat consistent with what casino people expect you to bet. For example, if you have been betting \$100 per hand for several hands and losing hand after hand, you probably should stick with \$100 on the next hand even if the count justifies a higher bet. But if you can give the impression you are "steaming," then you might jump to \$300. If you do increase your bet after a series of losses, give the impression that you are emotional and the bet is impulsive.

You will have losing streaks and winning streaks. Do not get overconfident after a big win, and do not get discouraged after a big loss. You will continue to have big wins and big losses, and you cannot predict which will be next. If you play long enough, you will be rich. The long-run odds are with you, even though you will occasionally lose in the short run. This book can turn you into a big winner if you play long enough.

There will be times when everything turns out wrong. You may get so discouraged that you feel like doing the opposite of what the system recommends. The times will also come when the dealer or other players will try to dissuade you from doing something that they think is foolish. Chin up. Have confidence. The system works. Let others think that you are playing foolishly and throwing your money away. You know better.

I should mention that there is no support for the notion that streaks tend to perpetuate themselves. Just because you have won a couple of hands in a row does not make you any more likely to win the next hand, and losing a couple of hands does not make you any more likely to lose the next one. But there is a lot of superstition connected with gambling, and the casino employees who

are watching are among the most superstitious. If you can use their superstitions to justify an action you would like to take anyway, do it. And if you do something that is contrary to their superstitions, you must realize that you will arouse suspicions.

For example, suppose you have been losing hand after hand. This happens, and all too frequently. The people who are watching, including the dealer, are probably expecting you to cut back on your bet size or perhaps even leave the table. All of a sudden the count goes high, and you want to make a big bet. Go ahead and increase your bet size, but with the realization that your big bet looks irrational to superstitious people watching you. If the count stays high and you continue to bet big and you continue to lose, you should leave the casino as soon as the positive count disappears. The reason is you will have aroused suspicions by betting high while losing; casino employees think that is unusual behavior. There is nothing you can do to get your credibility back. But suspicions not confirmed seem to be forgotten. You can come back the next day and everyone will act as if nothing unusual has happened.

The best situation to be in is to be winning hand after hand and have a high count. When you are winning hand after hand, everyone who is watching is expecting you to bet bigger. To them, no bet seems too large after you win five in a row. One thing you should try to avoid doing is cutting your bet by a small amount after winning several hands in a row. For example, if you have been betting \$150 and winning and the count justifies only a \$100 bet, do not cut back to \$100 because that would look unusual to anyone watching. If you still have an edge, you probably should stick with \$150. If the count went negative, you probably should drop all the way to \$25.

When you are winning, dropping from \$150 to \$25 looks more natural than dropping from \$150 to \$100. When you are on a winning streak and cut your bet way down, act as if you think your luck is about to change and now it is the dealer's turn to win. Of course the real reason you cut back is the count now is negative.

## Best Game

Simulation results indicate that there are vital differences in what your time is worth for different playing conditions. Penetration is important. The rules are important. How many hands you play per hour is important. How much you can bet without attracting undue attention is important. How much bet variation you can get away with is important.

Though some books recommend playing half an hour or 40 minutes and then leaving the casino, you probably are better off finding a casino with good conditions and then playing there for several hours. Play only the very best games, meaning the games where you think your time is worth the most per hour.

If all the casinos you can reach easily have lousy blackjack conditions, then save your money for a trip to Las Vegas. That fabulous city has more than 60 casinos competing with one another for your business, and bargains always abound.

## Double Exposure

Do not ignore double-exposure blackjack, which is explained in chapter 11. You may not play double exposure often enough to be able to keep the strategy numbers in your head, and much of the strategy is non-

obvious. Take this book with you if you travel to casinos because you will want to be able to play correctly should you stumble upon a good game.

Here is an example. I was wandering through High Sierra at Stateline, Nevada, at 9 PM and came upon a double-exposure game that had not been there earlier in the day. I stopped, checked it out, discovered that naturals paid 3:2, and decided it was worth playing. So I ran back to my motel room, got out my book with double-exposure strategy, and spent half an hour memorizing basic strategy and the most important decision numbers. Then I returned to the High Sierra to play double exposure.

Occasionally you can find a double exposure game where you have an edge right after the shuffle. Every time this has happened in the past, the reason for your edge was naturals paid 3:2. This probably is a general rule: If naturals pay 3:2 at double exposure, the game is worth playing; and if naturals pay even money, the game is not worth the effort of relearning double exposure strategy. The difference between 3:2 and even money on naturals is at least 2.3%, so you can see why this rule can make the difference between worthwhile and not worthwhile.

If you find a good double-exposure game, it might be so good that you can justify staying and playing through conditions that would cause you to abandon a normal blackjack game. When High Sierra introduced its liberal double exposure, I changed my plane reservation to stay an extra day. That night I played blackjack until 4 AM, which is way past my normal bed time. (I am a morning person.) I was getting very sleepy, and finally left when a new player came in and slowed the game way down.

## Big Bet at the Shuffle

A reader named Fritz says:

Generally I pay little attention to other players at the table, but now and then something attracts my attention and I watch more closely. I often detect a fellow card counter. What catches my attention? Pull-back of large bets at the shuffle! Here are my suggestions for various ways to handle this situation without attracting unwanted attention.

1. Let the bet ride and suffer the consequences.
2. Occasionally pull back a large bet and replace it with a smaller one, not necessarily your minimum.
3. Replace a big bet with a small one, and then add another chip after the cut. This can give the impression you think it is a good cut and this will be your lucky hand.
4. Replace your bet with a stack as tall or taller, but of smaller chips and thus of less total value.
5. Pull back your bet and use the pause in action to restack all of your chips as if counting your money.
6. Take your bet back at every shuffle, and make a new bet only after the cards are cut and ready to be dealt.
7. Leave the table.

Another reader says:

I tried Fritz's ideas about what to do with a big bet at the shuffle. I drew back my bet as the dealer started to shuffle, and when he was about through I bet one chip. If he gave me the cards to cut, I advanced one more chip with an audible click. In one case, with a full table, I was given the cards to cut shuffle after shuffle by an entranced dealer.

John Speer adds:

Perhaps this conspicuous action could also be avoided if one made a habit of pulling back the entire bet after every win before placing the next bet.

## Supervision

Do not worry if a pit boss camps at your table. In many casinos this is the customary procedure at any table with big bets. The only problem with having a pit boss assigned to your table is almost all dealer errors will be caught.

When a new pit boss comes to relieve the old one, the exiting pit boss generally tells the new one how much each player has bought in for. If you think they are talking about you, you are right, but fear not. The bosses keep track of how much you buy in for and how many chips you walk away with, but I have never seen the information put to any use except to decide whether to offer you a free meal.

Sometimes a boss will grab a handful of discards and examine them. Sometimes the backs will be examined, sometimes the fronts, and sometimes the sides. Generally the boss is looking for marks. Maybe s/he is checking to see if the cards have been used enough and should be replaced. It is rare that a pit boss will examine the discards to find the count.

One caution: If a pit boss examines the discards at your table, watch those cards! If the boss turns around and removes the cards from your sight, get up and go at the shuffle! The reason is that while the cards were out of your sight they might have been replaced by a like number of small cards, and thus aces and 10s will be scarce after the next shuffle. This is cheating and it is rare, but it can happen. No pit boss should ever remove

cards from your sight. Even if a card is torn and must be replaced, everything should be done openly.

What do you do when a boss recognizes you from a previous trip and calls you by name? Smile, and act happy to be recognized. Act like the boss is your friend. Act like you want him to pay for your dinner. Come to think of it, that might be a good way to act toward pit bosses even if they do not recognize you.

## Cover

The best attitude to exhibit is that you are a gambler out to have a good time. Act like you are trying to win, but act as if winning is less important than enjoying yourself.

Suppose you are playing blackjack in a casino that cannot bar you. Can you then be open about being a card counter? Usually, no. Even if you cannot be barred, there might be countermeasures taken against you. For example, if you are identified as a card counter you might find the cut card moved up at every table you play. So it pays to hide your ability at blackjack.

### Talking at the Table

Try to interact with the other players at the table. This is particularly true when you are playing for long hours at the same table. When you are engaged in conversation with other players, the bosses seem to ignore you as if you could not possibly be playing a winning game.

One time a player asked me to stop talking so he could think. And he was not even a card counter. He just had to add his fifteen points and decide whether to hit or stand. I wonder if he would have believed me if I told him that while I was talking with him I was counting cards and playing my own hand according to the count.

I do not talk to a pit boss unless I am spoken to first. I do not want to make myself any more memorable than I need to. But then, I seldom seek comps.

### **Masking Your Intelligence**

Chances are, you are way above average in intelligence. Most card counters are. So work on looking smart enough to have made the money you bring to the table, but not smart enough to know how to make money at blackjack. An example is eye contact. Though you can see things at a glance, when you play blackjack you may want to look at everything twice as long as you need to. You want to give the impression you are thinking half as fast as you are. And though you may know in an instant how you want to play a particular hand, pause as if you are thinking about every decision. Also, you might consider masking your intenseness and your competitive nature.

### **Masking Your Experience**

One problem with having played thousands of hours of blackjack is you become adept at handling cards and chips. Picking up your cards quickly helps speed up the game, but it also marks you as a person who has spent a good deal of time with cards in your hand. So try to fumble a bit when picking up your cards. Same with chips. Keep them in stacks, but not neat stacks.

I am trying to break myself of the habit of nonchalantly playing with small stacks of chips. If my fingers playfully interweave two stacks of six chips each to make one stack of twelve chips, anyone who is watching me knows I have had chips in my hands a lot. To that, Donald Schlesinger says:

You cannot always look as if you are playing for the first time. Some experienced junket players have played,

handled cards and chips for 30 years, and still do not have a clue about the game itself. If bosses would not suspect a chip-interweaving crapshooter, why should they be more suspicious of his counterpart at the blackjack table?

### Using an Alias

I used to use my own real name in casinos. One negative thing I personally have noticed about using my real name in casinos is: When I wanted to write a book about blackjack, I had to select a pen name. If I could do it over again I would have used a false name in casinos so I could use my real name on my books.

One problem you might have in using an alias is forgetting who you said you were. And even when you remember who you are supposed to be, you sometimes might be slow in responding to someone calling you by name. A person ought to know his or her name well enough to be able to recognize it immediately if someone uses it.

A solution is to use only names of relatives and good friends. You can use the same few names over and over. Generally I use the name of my grandfather on my mother's side, a brother-in-law, or a neighbor. Now I never forget who I am supposed to be.

There is not much communication between casinos. You can use a different name in each casino if you want. If you do, you should keep track of which name you have given to whom, so you can be consistent. The only problem you might run into is there is some movement of pit bosses from casino to casino. It might be awkward if two pit bosses in your pit each know you by a different name.

Sometimes I am two different people in the same casino. I use different names for day shift and swing

shift. During the time of shift change when both sets of pit bosses are present together, I will not be there. I will be eating a meal and changing clothes. If I wear out my welcome on one shift it will not automatically carry over to the other shift.

### **Clothing**

Some books on blackjack advise you to dress differently in different Las Vegas casinos. They advise wearing fancier clothes on the Strip than in downtown casinos. Well, I dress for comfort. I wear the same clothes downtown as on the Strip, and have never had a problem with it.

On a few occasions I have had casino pit bosses look down at my shoes. I suspect that the reason for the shoe inspection is not fetishes, but hidden computers. The hidden computers I have seen and heard about require the user to input information by moving his toes up and down to activate switches in his shoes. So I suspect the bosses look at my shoes to see if I could be using a hidden computer to aid my blackjack play. My shoes have always passed their inspection. If your shoes seem to attract special attention, then you might change shoes. Or wear shorts, because the hidden computers I know about have wires leading from the shoes to the power source and output device elsewhere on the body.

By the way, do not use a hidden computer to play blackjack. In some jurisdictions, notably Nevada, use of such a device at a casino game is a felony, as illegal as cheating.

### **Disguise**

I never disguise myself when I play blackjack. The only time I wear a disguise is when appearing in public as Stanford Wong. However, I have been in casinos at the

same time as friends who were in disguise, and I have never recognized a one. The next day I would hear, "I saw you in Caesars. I was in disguise. I walked right in front of you. Didn't you recognize me?" No, I did not recognize the person. So I know that disguises do work.

### Keno

Some pros report that a short play at a game other than blackjack provides good cover. Some like to carry a keno ticket to a blackjack table. They hope the pit bosses think that anyone foolish enough to play keno cannot possibly play blackjack well enough to have an edge. You do not need to play keno yourself to sport a keno ticket in your pocket; you can recycle someone else's losing ticket.

### Fitting In

These are the words of the Smiling Spy, writing about Atlantic City:

I have been playing full-time for nine months and have tried many playing styles to remain one jump ahead of the casino people. Clean-shaven, I have an image as a friendly "dumb" player throwing his money away. With a beard, I find I am suspected before I sit down solely on appearance, even though I dress well and try to look rich.

I get the least heat playing the \$100-minimum tables where, remarkably, there are some of the worst players. Playing a black check (\$100) at a low-limit table brings immediate attention. The dealer calls out "black in action" and the floorman rushes over to stare at me. At a high-limit table, purple-check (\$500) action does not raise an eyebrow; the attitude toward big action there is blasé. Winning \$1000 at a low-limit table will create an anxious atmosphere, but winning \$3000 at a high-limit table passes unnoticed.

Peter Giles says:

I have been playing \$25 to \$100. I am afraid if I up my bets I will have to play more conservatively. This is common, and I usually opt for a smaller bet and a greater advantage.

Marvin French says:

I wear a "player number" button from one casino when I visit another. They think I am a junket customer.

A reader asks:

Do you usually go to the cashier to cash in chips after winning a substantial sum or do you go back later?

I always go to the cashier and cash in my chips right after I finish playing. My logic is that most gamblers who have lucky wins would rather brag than sneak out as if ashamed. I want to appear to be a lucky gambler.

Another reader says:

I have been trying hard to camouflage my counting and betting variations at the casinos, but I have by no means perfected it. I think several things give me away or attract attention. I am young, white, and bearded; my eyes follow the turned over cards; I am quiet; I concentrate intensely. My question does not center around the corrections to these problems as much as what many dealers do when they suspect me of counting.

The dealers in various casinos repeatedly have me cut the cards, whether I am winning or losing, no matter how many others are at the table. Is this some kind of "inside" signal to the floorman or the "eye in the sky" that I am suspected of counting and should be watched more closely?

Having you cut the cards is not a signal to have you watched.

This is what Arnold Snyder says in an article that originally appeared in *Card Player*:

Card counters live in fear of discovery. That is what makes it fun. The cops-and-robbers aspect of professional blackjack lends an air of play-acting, with a secret hint of danger, to the mundane recreation of gambling. You just cannot get the James Bond rush at a crap table or a bank of slot machines. Adults in our society, other than real cops and robbers, do not often get a chance to pretend they are not what they appear to be.

Unfortunately, most camouflage comes with a price tag. When you make "dumb" plays for the purpose of confusing the bloodhounds on your trail, it costs you. Holding down your betting spread, insuring your naturals, not taking advantage of surrender or soft doubling opportunities, and so on, are all excellent methods of hiding your counting abilities because, in fact, you are relinquishing varying amounts of your potential gain from counting. If you make too many of these types of camouflage plays, you no longer will have an advantage over the house. What is the value of eliminating the possibility of discovery if there is nothing worth discovering? If you do not utilize the information you gather, then gathering the information in the first place was a waste of time.

Some camouflage, however, is cost-free; and ironically, this cost-free camouflage is often the easiest type of camouflage to pull off. Misplays, as a form of disguise, require a knowledge of, and attention to, how much these plays cost, so that you do not kill your edge. Cost-free camouflage, on the other hand, is not based on misplaying hands, so it is a no-brainer exercise.

What is cost-free camouflage? Rather than misplaying your hands, you allay suspicions by the image you project, the way you look, exploiting general prejudices

and preconceived notions that exist within the common pit boss/casino security mentality.

Let us dissect these biases.

**1. Age: young.** If a young man and an old man are playing at a blackjack table, all other factors being equal, the young man will be suspected of card counting sooner than the old man.

**2. Sex: male.** If a man and a woman are playing at the same table, all other factors being equal, the man will be suspected sooner than the woman.

**3. Race: Caucasian.** A white player spreading his bets will be suspected sooner than a black or an Asian player. This racial prejudice, as a matter of fact, even extends to casinos in other countries. Asian card counters often find the casinos of Korea, Macao, and other Asian countries to be profitable, heat-free venues for their action. Their betting spreads and strategy variations are virtually ignored. White players, on the other hand, and especially Americans, are immediately suspect if they play for big money, and they often find themselves *persona non grata* if they spread their bets even moderately, or win any substantial amount of money.

**4. Nationality: American.** This is tied into the previous factor. All the notable books on card counting have been published in the United States, and few are obtainable in bookstores outside of this country. This fact does not escape the notice of casino managements in foreign countries; nor is it ignored in this country. In fact, there have been some sophisticated and well-bankrolled European counting teams that have attacked the casinos of the world, including those in the United States. In many cases, these teams have gotten away with incredible betting spreads for lengthy periods of time before anyone in the pit took notice.

**5. Demeanor: introverted.** You put a quiet, thoughtful player at the same table with a gregarious,

talkative player, and the quiet player will be suspected of counting before the talkative one.

**6. Dress code: stylish-casual.** A player who is nicely but casually dressed will be suspected of card counting before any other fashion type. Card counters do not wear three-piece suits; nor do they dress like outlaw bikers. They do not look like hippies or punks. They are not decked out in Western gear. And they are usually not shabby, not if they are playing for serious money.

**7. Body type: ectomorph.** You put a fat man and a thin man at the same table, and the lanky guy will draw the heat first.

Now I am aware of the fact that there are many exceptions to all of these prejudices. I know that fat counters, female counters, non-white counters, and so on, have all been discovered and barred at one time or another. And I am sure there are some pit bosses and security personnel who will state emphatically that they watch only for playing styles to determine which players pose a real threat to their tables. But all of these prejudices do exist in the general casino security mentality. I have heard so many stories from so many players who have found that one or more of these seven factors have contributed to their longevity (or lack of) at the tables, that I believe these biases to be real. Most of them (but not all), as a matter of fact, are based on truths.

Looking at these seven bias factors, we now can draw a picture of the player most likely to be suspected of card counting, as well as the player least likely to fall under such suspicion.

**Most likely card counter:** a young, white, American male, who is thin, stylishly dressed, and playing quietly by himself.

**Least likely card counter:** a heavy-set, gray-haired, non-white woman, who speaks with a foreign

accent, is loud and talkative with friends or other players at the table, and is dressed in some unusual cultural outfit, or simply cheap, unstylish clothes.

The more a player looks like the "most likely card counter," the more s/he will have to employ costly "misdisplay" camouflage. The more a player fits the image of the "least likely card counter," the more freedom s/he will have to play accurately and with a wide betting spread according to the count.

All this is wonderful news for you card counters who have been struggling for years for picayune win rates with constant heat. You can forget those costly camouflage plays that have been eating away at your long-run expectation these many years. Just walk in looking like a 70-year-old grandmother; wear a sari and a babushka; rant loudly in some language other than English, and you can really take those casinos for a ride! Happy days are here again! Winning was never so easy!

(Arnold Snyder publishes a quarterly newsletter for blackjack players: *Blackjack Forum*. For information about it, write to RGE Publishing, 414 Santa Clara Ave, Oakland, CA 94610.)

## Summary

First, patronize casinos that give the best penetration.

Second, use as much bet variation as you can get away with. Your edge comes from bet variation, but you do not want to be identified as a card counter.

Third, be aggressive about leaving tables on bad counts. Try to arrive at a new table after a shuffle, just as the first round is being dealt; you want to be too late to make a bet but early enough to see all the cards that are used. On the next round you may have to make a bet

before the count justifies your playing to assure yourself of a spot at the table in case the count goes high.

Fourth, develop your own style. You can win more money more pleasantly if you are the only person using your particular playing style. So use this book only as a source of ideas that work. Use your imagination and experiment. If something that gives you an edge works for you, then use it!

The people who are watching you do not have to know the real reason for your actions, but they need to think they do.

# CHAPTER 5

# WINNING FASTER

## Unusual Circumstances

Your bet is not lost until the dealer picks it up. If the dealer errs in your favor, keep the money. Never cheat, but never give money to the dealer. Of course, if the dealer makes an error in the casino's favor, speak up and get it corrected.

Look for gifts. The dealer is not supposed to show you either the card on the bottom of the pack or the burned card (i.e. the card turned under). Enough dealers are careless, however, to make it worthwhile to look at the pack after it is cut. Seldom will you see both the bottom card and the burned card, but you will occasionally see one or the other. Whatever you see, you count.

In some casinos, a dealer showing a 10 must check the hole card to see whether it is an ace. If the dealer has

to look twice or extra long at the hole card, it may be because the hole card is not easily distinguished from an ace. When this happens, a dealer is likely to have a small card such as a 2 through 6 in the hole, which would make the dealer's total twelve through sixteen. If you know for certain that the dealer has a total of twelve through sixteen, get as much money on the table as possible and do not take a chance of busting; i.e. split all pairs except 5-5 and 10-10, double down with eight, nine, ten, eleven, and any soft total, and stand on hard twelve or more. If you are not positive but merely think that the dealer is likely to have a small card in the hole to go with the 10 showing, you should be more likely to stand with hard fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, or soft eighteen, and more likely to double down with ten or eleven. What you do in a particular instance depends on your judgment as to how much information the dealer has unwittingly given you. See Steve Forte's *Read the Dealer*, Ian Andersen's *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas*, and my *Basic Blackjack* for more discussion of "tells."

When the dealer's upcard is an ace, whether or not the dealer is slow in checking the hole card is of no aid in deciding how to play your hand.

When you are playing more than one hand and the dealer shows any card except an ace, you must finish playing your first hand before looking at your second hand. When the dealer shows an ace you may look at all of your hands before deciding whether or not to buy insurance. By all means, look at and count all of the cards allowed.

## Break-In Dealers

Peter Giles says:

Break-in dealers often reveal the burn card or the bottom card. It is not unusual to find one who will reveal both. Occasionally one will reveal the hole card to first base when checking for a natural. Sometimes you can see the top card before it is dealt. If you can consistently see the hole card or the next card to be dealt to you, it is hard to lose. If I could do this every day I would not bother to count.

The psychology of most break-ins is not hard to understand once you have known a few. Many of them get canned on their first job and have to start over. Almost all of them are apprehensive at first. The schools usually send them out before they are ready to deal. They go to the table nervous and tense, and the pit boss usually aggravates this condition by jumping on them for making mistakes. There are a few floormen who are understanding and patient, but this is not the general rule. The basic psychology is this: The average break-in has two goals. First of all, he wants to deal properly without mistakes; he is on stage, and he knows it. During the first week or two he gets more heat than a card counter. Second, he wants to win; almost all of them feel that winning will get them approval and thus job security. Oddly enough, this is sometimes true. Many dealers have been fired for being unlucky. There is always another reason on the termination slip, of course; but the truth is that many pit bosses are superstitious.

Outside of sometimes catching hole cards and top cards, the third big gain from playing against break-ins is that they usually make the best tells. (Of course this helps you only if you are playing in a casino where the dealers check hole cards under 10s.) I once found a dealer who looked like he would vomit when he was

stiff. I have seen several female dealers break down and cry in the back room when they lost. Spotting these symptoms is often an art. Most break-ins try hard to look cool and indifferent or tough. It is mostly show. Beneath the facade, the emotions are seething. Sometimes there is no facade — just raw human feelings.

The fourth gain from playing break-ins is due to the fact that they know a little but not enough. This is quite often true of more experienced dealers also. They know that card counters exist and that the game can actually be beaten. Most of them have the crude knowledge that counters win by varying their bets or jumping in when the deck is hot. They rarely know anything about beating the game. (I know a few experienced dealers who are up on the game, and they are usually playing blackjack when they are not dealing.) Dealers are generally taught to shuffle when players up their bets or jump in in the middle of the deck. Thorp was the first to develop a ploy for dealing with this kind of dealer — see the next section.

There are other advantages of playing break-ins, but these are probably the most important — in general. They also make more incorrect payoffs. In general, they make better targets for warp players, front loaders, and spooks. They are the prime targets of those who cheat. It takes a while for dealing to become natural, and during this period they are not very alert to players' tricks in general.

The best way to find break-ins is to get a line on them through one of the dealing schools. A second good way is to know which casinos hire them and to be on the lookout. Many casinos hire break-ins because they like to teach their dealers themselves. Most of them break in on the graveyard shift. You will rarely find one at a major Las Vegas Strip casino. Occasionally someone's nephew or the pit boss's girl friend will get "juiced" in, but in general a year's experience is required, often

more. Novice dealers can usually be found at a new casino. This is not always the case, though, particularly at major new casinos on the Las Vegas Strip. These are coveted jobs due to status and better tokes. When a promising casino opens on the Strip, half the dealers downtown have their applications in.

The time of year often makes a big difference. As the tourists come in and more tables are opened, you are likely to find break-ins anywhere.

You are likely to find break-ins at any casino that does not do much business. The reason for this is tokes are not good at such a place, and the casino cannot be choosy. The more business the better the tokes, and experienced dealers gravitate toward places with bigger tokes.

## Forcing a Shuffle

Peter Giles says:

I have found, after almost two years of playing blackjack, that Thorp's section on "punishing fakes" (page 127 of *Beat the Dealer*, 1966 edition), is one of the best techniques around to win at blackjack. You simply raise your bet when the deck is bad and let the dealer shuffle up and start over. As an experienced player who knows most of the ways to get an added advantage, I can say for sure that this is the only thing you can do every day. Break-ins are best, but many experienced "fakes" will do the same thing. When you want the dealer to shuffle you raise your bet, and then you pull it back when s/he does shuffle.

There is an elderly male dealer working days at a large Las Vegas casino who thinks he is really tough. He will actually shuffle after the first hand on a two-deck game if you raise your bet. If you keep it the same he will deal the cards all the way out. This is only if you are suspect, of course. He obligingly appears at my table

every time I play there. Apparently the house thinks he is tops. I enjoy table-hopping without changing tables.

## Team Play

Team play was popularized by Ken Uston in *The Big Player*. Bryce Carlson, author of *Blackjack for Blood*, says:

I was in Las Vegas over the New Year holiday with a team of three attractive young girl counters. We played six decks exclusively. In 25 hours of play we won \$15,000. I was very impressed with the naturalness of team play with six decks. There is none of the frenetic running around typical of four-deck team play.

Marvin French says:

A black-chip bettor playing with a \$2-betting companion at a \$2 table will win faster if the \$2 bettor does an awful lot of hitting and splitting when the deck is negative.

A corollary is that the \$2 bettor must get out of the way when the count is high — perhaps run over to the crap table every five minutes or so. There is an act for you — a two-game-playing \$2-betting drunk running between the 21 table and the crap table, while his blackjack-playing partner flat bets \$100!

Craps at a crap table has a negative expectation. For zero-expectation craps, how about a \$2 bettor with diarrhea on positive counts?

A reader says:

Here is an example of something that happened three times. After a sizeable win, my wife and I divided our chips equally before cashing them in. When I cashed in \$400, the cashier got on the phone and gave a general description of me. My wife cashed in \$400 and

no phone call was made. I think I should have my wife cash in all the chips.

## Seeing Faster

Peter Giles says:

I enrolled in dealer's school to see what I could learn to aid my game. I found that many break-ins are very nervous and overanxious. I discovered a new trick for this kind of dealer. If you move your cards forward as though you were getting ready to scratch for a hit, they will often start sliding the top card forward in anticipation. As most schools teach their students to tilt the deck back (so card-markers cannot see the marks), it is often easy to get a peek at the top card. A little training with a tachistoscope and nothing can slip by you — burn cards, bottom cards, hole cards, top cards — if it is flashed before your eyes, no matter how quickly, you can pick it up.

As a tachistoscope is primarily an educational tool, it can be obtained at educational supply houses. It is a fairly simple instrument — basically a slide projector with a timing device, accompanied by a screen.

When I started using a tachistoscope, I knew little more about blackjack than that it existed. This was somewhere in the mid-sixties. I was on a mission of conquest, as usual, and the enemy was myopia. I had heard that Aldous Huxley had become nearly blind — he could read the large E on the standard eye chart at three feet — and had acquired 20-20 vision by the use of some very simple drills designed to relax and make proper use of the involuntary muscles in the eyes. Somewhere in the twenties a man by the name of William Bates decided that modern optics was on the wrong track. He came to the conclusion that almost all visual problems were psychological in nature, and he spent most of his life proving it. Huxley contacted his

chief disciple, a woman by the name of Margaret D. Corbett. With her help, he corrected his vision.

My vision was not that bad, but I was very interested in the prospect of throwing away my glasses. I read Huxley's book on the subject, *The Art of Seeing*, and came to understand why I was near-sighted. The book is an excellent work on the relationship of vision to psychology, and anyone who wants to correct his vision should read it. Unfortunately, the book does not really tell you how to do it. So I picked up Corbett's *Help Yourself to Better Sight*. With this book and my tachistoscope as aids, I managed to function quite well without glasses in about three months. However, more time was necessary to make the changes permanent. As the drills were very tedious and time-consuming, I relaxed my discipline and in a few months had to resort to wearing glasses again. If you want the effects to be permanent, you must continue with the exercises that brought them about for about another year or two. I got bored.

Getting back to blackjack, a player with glasses can see just as well as a player with normal vision. Their mutual apparatus is about equal. But there was a side benefit to using the tachistoscope. Even though I settled for glasses, I found that I could still pick up an image with enormous speed. I manage to see my share of hole cards.

The distinction to be made is between accuracy and quickness. A tachistoscope will not help you to see better; it will help you to see faster. It does not matter whether or not you wear glasses. As the cost should not be high, the only question is whether or not it is worth the time. For a professional who plays a lot, wants to round out his game, and take advantage of every opportunity, I highly recommend its use.

Many counters use flash cards to help learn strategy variations. It would be possible to make up a set of

tachistoscope cards to flash on the screen. However, the present material, which usually consists of words and phrases, suffices. If you can improve your speed in picking up a word or phrase, you will find that you can pick up other things faster too. You are developing a technique that is general to use in specific circumstances. It does not really matter what you flash on the screen. If you can pick up words in 1/250th of a second that you could see before in 1/10 of a second, you will find that this ability carries over to any object you happen to be viewing during the course of everyday life. All you have to do is keep moving the timing device a little each day (or week). When you conquer one speed, move on to the next.

All you have to do is look at the screen. Do not try to get faster. Rely on time. If you try, it will slow you down. You are trying to make an improvement in an involuntary mechanism, and at best, any voluntary action on your part will get you nowhere. Keep your timer set at a speed just above your capacity at the moment, always forcing the involuntary mechanisms to perform just a little bit better. Do not try to make rapid jumps overnight. Be patient. In a week or two you will see some improvement. In a month or two you will be patting yourself on the back. Sooner or later you will start seeing subliminal flashes at the movies telling you how much you love popcorn. You will be able to watch the cocktail waitress and still pick up the burn card in your periphery. When you are satisfied with yourself, keep watching the screen for a little each day. The longer you watch it, the less you will lose when you stop watching it.

**An eye doctor says:**

I have some information on what Peter Giles is talking about. I am an eye doctor and I specialize in visual therapy, which includes reducing nearsighted-

ness and improving people's perceptual skills and abilities. Two other doctors and I did a visual scan on the Atlanta Braves baseball team, checking all of their skills. We also work with some professional football teams. We use tachistoscopic exposure in training them to see quickly and accurately and take in a whole picture all at once. So I am quite familiar with tachistoscopes. I have designed some visual therapy instruments.

Here is a technique for learning to catch glimpses of cards using a deck of cards instead of a tachistoscope. Take one card and without looking at it, turn it over and place it in the middle of the deck. Hold the deck design side up. Riffle through looking at the upper left hand corners. You can either slow down or speed up the riffling of the cards to suit your own particular skills. You can get where you can expose that one face-up card for just a fraction of a second and catch it. Sometimes you can even get it subliminally. For example, if you riffle through and you think you may or may not have seen the card, just make a note of the first card that comes into your mind. Then riffle through again but slower and see if the card you noted is not the card that is face up. You only saw it fleetingly and it registered on the subconscious rather than on the conscious mind.

Peter Griffin, author of *The Theory of Blackjack* and *Extra Stuff*, uses a substitute for a tachistoscope. He practices counting with half-size cards smudged with dirt. He says:

I use a miniature deck left at my mother's house by my sea-faring brother years ago. I used to scrape the dirt off periodically; it comes off most easily in the dry summer months. But the dirt just reaccumulated so I do not clean them anymore. I like them to practice with for two reasons. First they are smaller than normal cards, less than half the area. Second, the filth obscures

the denominations if I go through the deck rapidly. I liken it to preparing to hit a 16 inch softball by practicing against grey golf balls hurled at 100 mph at dusk.

Donald Schlesinger adds:

There are dozens of software products, including Stanford Wong's, that deal cards at variable speeds for practicing counting.

## Tricks from Daniel Forbes

Daniel Forbes says:

I spent a great deal of time at a new Atlantic City casino. The personnel were virtually all new. Dealer errors were rampant. Betting black checks virtually guaranteed careful perusal of payoffs, but betting green was heaven. The dealers were instructed not to make any conversions between different denominations of chips, but the faster ones often tried and failed, much to our liking. All the usual tricks worked — betting odd amounts, chatting during payoffs, placing new bets in circles after busting and waiting for the dealer to bust to pay the whole table, etc.

Here is a new trick. When the cut card came flying toward me, I fielded it cleanly and slid it under my stacks of chips. After the hand, another counter at the table failed to put up a bet. As the dealer waited for him, he uttered something about the cut card. I intoned, "Shut up and bet up." He quickly placed two more bets and we played on. After three rounds, I allowed the cut card to reappear. The other player was hysterical and ran to tell his friends what he had just seen.

## Early Surrender

This one comes from Peter Giles:

I had not been to Henderson in over a year, so I drove out to investigate a new casino. When a new casino opens I am usually there to greet them. They usually have to pull dealers out of school before they have finished the course, and there are usually some defective slots. I did not expect much from this casino, it being so small.

It was dealing two-deck blackjack. During the course of play I asked if I could surrender a hand. The owner was all for it, but said that if the dealer had an ace up, I had to surrender before he checked for a natural. The owner obviously did not know much about the game and thought that was to his advantage. He did not say what the situation was when the dealer had a ten up, but I had no trouble throwing in a hand before the dealer looked at his hole card.

The limit was \$25, but if the owner was there he would sometimes let you play \$40 or \$50 if you were ahead and he was anxious to get his money back. He watched the game with grave concern if there was any substantial betting. He could count a little but was slow and unsure of himself. I liked to talk to him, keep him distracted, act a little goofy, and not vary my bets too radically.

When I left that club, I walked across the street to another casino that had surrender. Greedy for advantage, I asked the dealer if I had to surrender before she checked for a natural. She did not know and called over a floorman. He gave me the same answer that I had received across the street. I smiled and settled in for the afternoon.

## Delayed Raise

This one comes from Bob Fisher:

I have come up with a betting camouflage technique that I have not seen in any book. I use it for any

multiple-deck game. When the count turns good, I do not increase my bet immediately, but continue to bet the same amount for one more hand. On the next hand I jump the bet if the count is still favorable.

Logic: I suspect that many pit bosses are lazy when they look for counters. Specifically they do not remember the count from round to round, but rather count the cards on the current round only, getting the change in running count. Such a lazy pit boss will not catch me.

## Cutting for Advantage

A reader says:

I like to play blackjack at a casino that does not do a thorough shuffle, making it possible for one to note the count at the shuffle point, and watch how the dealer shuffles, following the stack of previously unused cards. If the count was, say, -10 at the shuffle point and you then cut the cards, you can cut the same unused cards to the back of the stack. Conversely, if the count had been +10, you could cut such that the unused cards (and hopefully more aces and 10s) are the first dealt and you can increase your first few bets accordingly. The person sitting in third base gets the cut card more frequently, since if the dealer deals the cut card to himself he passes it to third base to cut.

On my second trip my husband went with me. He is not a counter, but plays basic strategy while I use the high-low. We sat together at a \$2 table, he at third base, me next to him where I could see the cards a bit more easily. Between us we received the cut card about half the time. Whenever my husband got the cut card, he asked me to cut "for luck" and I did so according to the count. Once, when the deck was neutral at the shuffle point, I told him to go ahead and cut.

We had a relatively new dealer who was making an abnormally large number of mistakes, such as not

paying off blackjacks correctly, misadding cards, etc. Once he counted twenty-one on his five-card hand, beating the table, only to be informed by one of the players (fortunately) that he really had a twenty-two. We had to watch him extremely carefully, as most of the mistakes were in the house's favor. Some mistakes were in our favor. One time he paid off my husband's natural, and my husband left his standard \$2 bet. After the dealer busted he paid off the entire table, giving my husband another \$2.

Another reader says:

My last trip to Tahoe suggested a blackjack problem that may have some application as well as being of theoretical interest. In a casino where one cuts the cards by inserting a colored card, I encountered a dealer who held the deck in such a way so I could always see the bottom card of the deck before I cut. The question is: As a function of the card seen and the number of players at the table, where should one cut the deck and how should one use the knowledge of this one card? Of course one can cut so that small cards go to the bottom and are not used, leading to a slightly favorable deck, and large cards are cut close to the top, but I think that one can do better by incorporating the knowledge about the location of one card into one's playing strategy (i.e., either by strongly suspecting that the "known card" is the dealer's hole card, or maybe the next card to be dealt.) I would be curious to hear any comments you might have.

Some professionals have perfected the ability to cut exactly the number of cards they want. For example, with seven player hands in action, they do a seventeen-card cut; the cut card is inserted exactly seventeen cards from the bottom. After the cut, the known card is seventeenth from the top. One card is burned, fourteen cards

go to the players, and one card is the dealer's upcard. The known seventeenth card is the dealer's hole card.

Peter Giles says:

Sometimes I try to cut the cards so that my first card will be an ace or 10. Griffin's *Theory of Blackjack* says if I can cut myself a 10 I have an advantage on that hand of 13%. With an ace my advantage is 52%. Averaging these numbers, with four 10s to one ace, means my average advantage if I can cut myself a 10 or ace is around 21%. If I stay in practice, I can cut, glance at the bottom card, and about 80% of the time drop it plus one more card to be burned. Of course I sit at first base. My favorite game is using this technique with a dealer who shuffles every time I raise my bet. Then I can not only get rid of unprofitable situations, but I get to cut more often.

## After You, Dealer

Marvin French says:

Three times I got to play my hand after the dealer's hole card was exposed. First a dealer peeked under a 10 and flipped over a 4! We all have experienced the "double dip" look at a 4 in the hole under a 10, but this is the first time I have seen the 4 turned over. I was playing two hands. The first, with a toke, totaled nine. I could not double down, so I hit and caught an ace. The second hand was fourteen, so I stood. Instead of me breaking, the dealer broke and I won.

The second time was at the MGM. A super-fast dealer did not wait for me to double after splitting 7-7 against her 6, when I caught an ace on the second 7. She flipped up her hole card, a 10, before I could even blink. I screamed for the pit boss, who let me double down. When the dealer broke I won.

The third time was at Sundowner. I wanted to double down on ten against an ace because of a high count. I stupidly laid my hand face down as I reached for my wallet. The dealer thought I was standing and turned over her hole card, a 4. The pit boss was understanding and said I could stand, hit, or double. I doubled, and this dealer also broke.

## Cover Plays

If you are playing blackjack in a casino in which the dealers check hole cards under 10s, tells are a possibility; that is, you may be able to learn about the hole card under the 10 by watching the dealer closely after s/he checks under the 10. For this reason, most casinos no longer have their dealers check hole cards under 10s. But in case you encounter such a situation, here is a story from Peter Giles:

I had 4-4 once when the pit boss was watching the game. The dealer had 10 up and I read her for 9 or 10 in the hole. I laid my two cards side by side on the table for a split. I got about halfway out with my chips and then stopped. "Wait a minute," I said, "I think I'll double down." Then I stopped again and finally threw in my cards. "I surrender," I said. The pit boss laughed — as well as the other players and the dealer. Someone said, "Go get 'em, Tiger!" I acted embarrassed. But I smiled when the dealer showed twenty.

Later, when the pit boss was watching again, I had a four-card soft twenty-one. I looked at the cards as though I were trying to add them up. I finally threw them in for a bust. The dealer dutifully placed them under my chips for me.

## Dealer Errors

A reader says:

For my last 150 hours of play in Atlantic City, playing two spots per round, I received a grand total of two gifts. Both times, against different dealers, I surrendered \$75 bets, handing the dealer \$12.50 in chips. The dealers were so grateful for my help that they left my \$75 untouched.

## Bosses on Commission?

A reader asks:

Do pit bosses or any pit personnel receive a commission or bonus based on the profit of their particular pit? They all seem to be very concerned over anyone with even the slightest win!

Pit bosses get salaries, and the dealers get salaries plus tips. Many pit bosses are afraid of getting chewed out if their pits lose. Many dealers are afraid of getting chewed out if their tables lose. Casino employees have no job security.

Some casino managements are more enlightened. They strive for a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Their pit bosses are happy if you win and sympathetic if you lose. These casinos get more customers and make more money.

## Biorhythm

A reader asks:

Have you checked your "biorhythm" against winning and losing days? If yes, what were the results?

I checked and found that my winning and losing days do not run in regular cycles. If the biorhythm theory is valid you cannot prove it by my wins and losses.

Predicting wins and losses is just like predicting stock market ups and downs — you know they are going to happen but you never know which is going to happen next. You can look back and see cycles, but you cannot project these cycles into the future.

## Grossman Wins

Howard Grossman wrote this in 1981:

On the blackjack scene I can offer two interesting items. The first is the fact that my play coupled with Peter Griffin's single-deck double-exposure strategies has stunned the Las Vegas "21" machine society. The play against the slot machines netted my friend and me about \$10,000 between the \$1 and 25-cent slots in about two months. The "Wide Open" machines have since been changed or removed. Now the player can double only on ten or eleven and no splitting allowed of mixed 10s. I have been barred at two places from playing these machines.

The second item is even more exciting. I am playing a \$40,000 challenge match against the Nevada Palace. It started Wednesday, 5-13-81, and will continue until I win \$40,000 or lose \$40,000 or more and wish to give up. The rules of the match are a one-deck game, dealer hits soft seventeen, with all the other standard options. I can bet anywhere from \$100 on one hand to two hands of \$400 each. The dealer deals three rounds and then must shuffle. As of Friday, 5-15-81, I am up \$18,500. There will be some local media coverage of the match and I hope the Nevada Palace will get some good publicity.

(later)

The Nevada Palace match lasted four days and I won almost \$25,000. As my win steadily rose the owner became very tense and realized he had made a losing deal. The end result was that he hired me as a consultant and host at a nice salary.

## Hitting Busted Hands

Marvin French says:

A counter friend of mine will sometimes keep hitting a busted hand when the count is minus. He just keeps going until the dealer wakes up to the fact that the hit cards alone exceed 21. Such "stupidity" usually amuses dealers, who shake their heads as my friend apologizes. We are going to have a contest to see who can achieve (1) the highest total of hit cards and (2) the highest overall hand total.

## Halloween Treats

One Halloween I was in Reno. Halloween was on a Sunday, and over the whole weekend I saw casino customers in full costume, including masks. So if there is a casino you would love to play but you do not want to make an appearance with your face showing, Halloween is your opportunity! Invest in a costume and a mask. Who would suspect a fluffy white rabbit with chips in his Easter basket to be a feared card counter?

## Cut-Rate Insurance

A reader says:

A card-counting friend of mine playing at a six-deck \$3 table at Atlantic City takes insurance every time the dealer shows an ace as it only costs \$1. I wait for a count

per deck of +3 before insuring, and believe I am correct but cannot justify my belief mathematically. Could you help?

The answer depends on whether \$1 of insurance protects the whole \$3 bet or just \$2 of it. When your friend has a bet of \$3 and a winning insurance bet of \$1, does the dealer take a dollar or does your friend keep his \$3 bet as well as his \$1 insurance?

If \$1 of insurance protects only \$2 of the bet, then you are correct in waiting for a count per deck of +3 before buying insurance. The mathematics, to a non-counter, shows an average of 96 wins of \$2 each for every 215 losses of \$1 each, for a net loss of \$23 in 311 insurance bets.

However, if the \$1 of insurance saves all \$3 of the bet, then the correct decision is to insure virtually all of your \$3 bets. Those 96 wins become \$3 each, yielding a profit of \$73 per 311 insurance bets. Insurance would be worthwhile at a count per deck as low as -7.

The reader responds:

### Table 13

### How \$3 and \$3.50 Bets

### Get an Edge

	<i>Bet Size &amp; Number of Decks</i>			
	\$3.00&6	\$3.00&8	\$3.50&6	\$3.50&8
basic strategy edge	-0.45%	-0.48%	-0.45%	-0.48%
gain from \$1 insurance	0.60%	0.60%	0.86%	0.85%
gain on naturals			0.34%	0.33%
overall player edge	0.15%	0.12%	0.75%	0.70%
expected win per 100 hands	\$0.45	\$0.36	\$2.63	\$2.45

Thank you for the mathematics on insuring a \$3 hand. \$1 of insurance saves all \$3 of the original bet. So insurance is a winner. \$1 of insurance will also save all of a \$3.50 bet.

That means a \$3 or \$3.50 bettor should virtually always take insurance. Furthermore, the gain from the cheap insurance more than makes up for the casino edge off the top, so a \$3 or \$3.50 basic strategy player has an overall edge over the casino! The amount of the edge varies with the number of decks as is shown in table 13.

The gain on naturals in table 13 occurs because a \$3.50 natural wins \$5.50 instead of \$5.25. This extra \$0.25 on every untied natural is a gain of about a third of a percent.

\$3.50 appears to be an attractive bet. You will not get rich betting \$3.50 per hand and insuring at every opportunity, but you do have an edge of 0.70% to 0.75%, which means an expected win per hour of a couple of dollars for basic strategy alone. If in addition you count cards and bet more when the count justifies it, you might be able to get your expected win per hour up to a respectable number.

## \$2.50 Chips Hard to Get

Samuel Rothschild says:

\$2.50 also is an attractive bet. \$1 will insure all of it, and a natural pays \$4.00. These bonuses are available only in Atlantic City; elsewhere, rounding is done in favor of the casino. In Nevada, a natural on a \$2.50 bet wins \$3.50 if there are no 25-cent pieces to pay \$3.75.

At least one Atlantic City casino has 25-cent pieces on its games, and in these games \$2.50 is not an advantageous bet because naturals pay \$3.75.

\$2.50 chips are difficult to get. The dealers have been instructed to use those chips only for payoffs on naturals; they will not sell \$2.50 chips to bet. I tried to buy ten pink (\$2.50) chips for a green (\$25) chip; the dealer called over a floor person, who refused to sell me the chips.

Also, \$2.50 chips are difficult to keep. When you bet \$3.50 (a \$2.50 chip and a \$1.00 chip) and win, the dealer always will pick up the \$2.50 chip, leaving you with a \$5 chip and two \$1 chips.

Betting \$3.50 hand after hand obviously is not possible if the casino will not sell you the necessary chips. But if the table does not have 25-cent pieces, any bet containing an odd \$2.50 has an expectation of an extra penny due to the 25-cent bonus paid on naturals. You can pick up a penny here and a penny there by trying to get \$2.50 chips and then betting them singly. If you always bet an odd number of dollars, then every time you get a natural you will get a \$2.50 chip. Every time you bet that chip, your expectation is to win an extra penny. This will raise your win rate by \$0.05 or \$0.10 an hour.

## Who Barred You?

What can you do if you want to play at a table (perhaps after seeing a big excess of small cards), but every spot is taken? One pro checks out the players at the table to see if any of them appear to be proficient. If he sees someone he thinks is also a counter, he quietly tells the counter that his action is no longer welcome! After the counter vacates his seat, the pro sits down and plays!

I certainly am not advocating that you bar counters to get their seats. But if you are barred yourself, you ought to be aware of the possibility that the person

asking you to leave might be other than a casino employee!

## Other Opportunities

Keep your eyes open for other opportunities. For example, a few years ago at Bingo Palace in Las Vegas a pit boss occasionally showed the dealer's hole card! It happened to me. The dealer's upcard was 3. The pit boss flipped the dealer's two cards over, and then the upcard was 4 (and the 3 was the hole card). Since I knew that I was playing against a total of seven, I hit my hard fifteen. I asked the dealer about this strange action of the pit boss. The answer was that Bingo Palace pit bosses did this frequently as a form of advertising.

Peter Giles says:

I found a dealer who simply could not add to 21. I busted several times and put my cards under my chips. She paid me every time. Everyone was laughing and she was looking around blankly, perhaps wondering what the joke was.

## Sorting Edges of Bee Cards

On page 44 of *Casino Management*, Bill Friedman suggests a novel way of getting an edge at blackjack. It amounts to sorting edges of Bee cards.

Examine the two ends of the back of a Bee card. Are they identical? In some decks they are, but in others every card in the deck has a leading edge that is easily distinguishable from the trailing edge. Likewise the left edge is different from the right edge. Friedman suggests that as you play at a game with such cards, you align each card so that the backs of the cards have meaning to you.

Though Friedman did not use his system himself, I know a pro who has used it in a casino with good results.

Of course you must be able to get a good look at either the next card to be dealt or the dealer's hole card to use the information in the sorted edges. In hand-held games, most dealers show you neither the back of the pack nor the hole card long enough for you to read the edge. With some dealing-shoes, a person with good eyesight can see the edge of the next card to be dealt.

There are problems. You have to work out a method of turning a card end for end without being obvious about what you are doing. The dealer will maintain your alignment of the cards, except that some dealers rotate part of the deck during the shuffle, the countermeasure suggested by Friedman. However, pitching a card to a customer often rotates it. This means the aligning process must be continuous, so you will either have to play head-on or with friends who align the cards the same way you do.

Assuming it works, how should you sort the cards and how much can you gain using Friedman's system? If you can see the edge of every card in the shoe before it is dealt, the strongest play probably is to sort 10s and aces versus other cards, and have first base make a big bet when the first card to be dealt is an ace or 10. The win rate would be enormous.

# CHAPTER 6

# TOKES

Some players occasionally “toke” a dealer, i.e. give a tip to the dealer. Dealers at a casino generally pool their tokes and share them equally. No dealer has ever been known to toke a player. Exceptionally greedy dealers let you know in unmistakable terms that they expect tokes, particularly from winners. Even if you play only one hand, win, and walk away without toking you sometimes get a sarcastic “Thank you.”

## Most Tokes Are Shared

Generally a toke you give to a dealer does not go directly to the pocket of that dealer, but rather is put into a pool to be shared with other dealers.

If you like to toke, you probably have a greater chance of getting value for your toke if you patronize casinos where the dealers keep their own tokes, as they

do in a few northern Nevada casinos. For a current list of casinos where dealers keep their own tokes, see *Current Blackjack News*.

## My Advice on Tokes

The problem with tokes, at least in my experience, is they are not cost effective. When you take you give up value but you do not receive any value in return. The honest dealer dispenses no favors in return for a toke. Toking will not stop a dealer from shuffling on you if you have been identified as a card counter. Toking will not cause the dealer to deal down closer to the end of the pack. Toking will not cause the dealer to make an incorrect payoff. A toke may make a dealer smile, but will not change the expected value of the next hand. Usually a toke does not even make the dealer smile. You derive no benefit from a toke—it only reduces the size of your win. Tokes are an unnecessary cost of doing business.

I almost never take. I gain more in dealer errors than what I give up in tokes.

I like the joke that Peter Griffin, author of *The Theory of Blackjack*, heard from a dealer in Las Vegas:

What is the difference between a card counter and a canoe?

The answer: A canoe sometimes tips.

## Smile

I find that being friendly is enough to get me a good game. I use a smile and small talk in lieu of tokes. Most blackjack players seem to ignore the dealers as if they were not human beings. A simple "Hello" is generally effective in brightening up a dealer. I try to be such a nice

person that the dealer does not mind if I do not take. Smiles I can afford.

I always act happy in a casino. Nobody likes a grouch. I try to be such a nice person that nobody cares if I win. It sounds corny, but it works.

Here is an example. I was playing blackjack at Harrah's and losing hand after hand. A supervisor was camped at my table and acting sympathetic. Then a little old lady walked up and I finally won a hand. She innocently asked me how I was doing. I looked at her and smiled and said, "Since you got here I have won every hand." The supervisor practically fell over laughing.

If I am too tired to keep a smile on my face, I quit playing blackjack until I am properly rested.

## Benefits of Tokes

Some blackjack players disagree with me; they think they get value for their tokes. See, for example, Ian Andersen's *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas*.

Here is a Daniel Forbes contribution:

My plane back was scheduled to depart late morning and I debated further play as I arose. After washing up and shaving, I returned to the Sahara to play once again at what was by then early Friday morning.

I settled in at one of the single-deck games (\$25 minimum) and spread from \$25 to whatever I could get away with. An attractive young woman was playing at third base; she was the only other player. It occurred to me she might have been a counter, but a deck or two later confirmed she was not. I slowly drilled the casino as she lost. Not long after, a clean-faced young man sat down and placed two \$50 bets. After a few hands, it was obvious he was counting. I began to show him my cards immediately, and he shortly thereafter reciprocated.

Because I was more than able and all too willing to bet 2 x \$150 or more at positive counts, we began sharing any and all information available to us. Then it happened.

While most counters refuse to take (I love Griffin's counter/canoe joke), I am of the Andersen school. The dealers changed; our new dealer was a young man. After a few hands, he began blind-discardng (when the dealer busted, players' hands were scooped up without being turned face up first). I was not sure whether this practice was aimed at me or not, but the other counter walked immediately. A few hands later, I put up a take for the dealer, and the blind discarding practice stopped. I went on to a \$700 win.

Lest we debate endlessly the toking question, I will confess to over-toking. I do spend a great deal of time on junkets, sucking up what freebies are available. I guess the toking habit comes from trying to show the money means little to me. And the results have paid off, I think. I will admit it is useless if the dealer does not check hole cards under 10s except for cover (except I do think I have purchased a few deeper cuts from knowing dealers), but as the counter/canoe joke indicates it is probably great for cover.

## **Cost of Not Toking**

Hustling for tokes is something many dealers do routinely. Whether it works for them or not on a particular customer they forget quickly. I do not think a dealer has ever remembered whether I toked last time I played.

Sometimes after I have played a few hands without toking, the dealer will give me a gentle hint about sharing my good fortune by donating "something for the boys." I just keep smiling and act as if I do not hear or do not understand the hint. Usually the dealer stops hus-

tling me and accepts the fact that I am one customer who has better uses for my money than giving it to a dealer.

Sometimes the hustle is not too subtle. In Germany, I am told, a dealer will shake the toke box in front of a winner to demand a toke. The most gross I personally have witnessed was at the Flamingo in Las Vegas, long before it became a Hilton property. While making a circular motion with his palm on his shirt pocket, the dealer opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue as if he were begging for food.

The worst reaction I have ever gotten from not toking was the incident at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas that I mentioned in chapter 4. Dealers at Caesars Palace are accustomed to generous tokes. After ignoring a blatant toke hustle, I got ace-7 and doubled down. The dealer called out "Doubling down on soft eighteen" as if I were making an unusual play. The very next hand, when I again got soft eighteen and again doubled down, the dealer sang out in a louder voice, "Doubling down on soft eighteen like he knows what he is doing." I finished the shoe because the count was good, and at the shuffle took my chips to another table.

Except for sarcastic comments, I have never had any adverse reaction from not toking. When I get a sarcastic comment I never reply in kind. When I leave a table with a big pile of chips and the dealer says "Thank you, sir!" in a loud voice, I just smile and say "Thank you" to the dealer.

## How Much Do Dealers Receive?

The only published figure I have seen is for dealers at the Las Vegas Hilton in 1977. Inflation since then has certainly boosted the dollar amount. In 1983 *Las Vegas*

*Today had a short item with facts from a trial of a dealer accused of filing a false income tax return for 1977. The dealer, James Hawthorne, declared \$300 in tip income for the entire year. Victor Petty, a Las Vegas Hilton floorman who was a blackjack dealer in 1977, testified that tips averaged \$88 per day that year. He was testifying under a grant of immunity because he himself had declared only \$44 a day.*

## **Dealers' Tips Are Taxable Income**

A letter from a reader says:

The IRS is forcing dealers at the Plaza to report their tip pool and be taxed accordingly. They are having to pay back taxes now. Is the IRS pressuring other casinos and do you think this could lead to dealers demanding to keep their own tips so as to avoid tax reporting?

I am in favor of voluntary compliance with the tax laws. However, it appears that dealers as a group have been reluctant to comply voluntarily. I am surprised that the IRS has been treating them so gently — offering to forgive them for past tax evasion if they will promise to obey the law in the future. In previous cases of tax evasion the IRS has seemed to prefer sending people to prison.

IRS people are probably pressuring casinos to handle tips in a manner such that the total can be reported to the IRS. Given the reluctance of dealers to voluntarily comply with tax laws in the past, I doubt that the IRS would allow dealers to keep their own tips and thereby more easily evade taxes.

## Some Readers Disagree

The above exchange prompted a few letters from other readers. Axel Freed, a highly-skilled, successful blackjack player, says:

I generally will not take during play, but if I have had a profitable and pleasant session I will leave something when I cash in. Some dealers, however, expect tokes whenever a player is betting big and winning. One young male dealer was particularly upset that I was not toking, and showed it in the way he slammed down the cards. The session was profitable but unpleasant, so I did not take when I left.

Another reader says:

From personal experience I disagree with your position on tokes and support Ian Andersen's toking policy. There are many occasions I can remember where a dealer dealt further into a deck when I was toking. I am confident that the dealers knew the rudiments of counting, for they would let tokes ride at the appropriate moments. Furthermore, these same dealers shuffled earlier when the count was negative.

Secondly, I table-hop, making it difficult for the floor people to keep track of my wins and losses. Many times floor people ask dealers how I did, and people playing with me have said that dealers are sometimes questioned about whether I was counting or not. From what I can tell from my fellow players, and from the dealers themselves, the information dealers give to floor people is always favorable to me. I do not think this would be so if I was a 'non-toker.'

In conclusion, I do not believe it is financially unwise to make a bet for a dealer, particularly in a highly favorable situation. You can let a relatively small tip ride on your bet until it reaches an amount that is truly appreciated.

My advice to that reader is go ahead and take if you want to. Keep a pencil and paper handy, and write down the amount of each take as soon as you give it. Total up your takes at the end of each day and at the end of the trip. You have to know how much you are taking in order to make an intelligent decision as to whether you are getting value for your money.

You also need to know how good a game you can get without taking. Therefore, you should make at least one trip without giving a single take.

At one time I too thought that takes were necessary. But I tried not taking and found to my surprise that I could get as good a game. So I stopped taking entirely, and still do not take.

## Dealer Takes and Waitress Tips

Donald Schlesinger says:

I would like to raise a side to the taking controversy that no one has yet mentioned. Would you normally eat in a restaurant and not tip a satisfactory waitress? Would you normally take a cab ride and not tip a satisfactory driver? If the answers are "No," then the reason has to be one of social acceptability and custom. Cab drivers and waitresses could not work at those professions without counting as expected revenue the tips that go with the job. And saying that they provide a service is not the answer. The gas station attendant provides a service when he washes your windshield. In the United States it is not customary to tip him; in France it is. The theater usher who takes you to your seat never gets tipped here; in France he always does. The point I am making is simple. Dealers' salaries are, as you know, inadequate for survival. Tips at the fashionable Strip hotels provide roughly 65%-75% of a

dealer's income. It is a platitude to state that dealers could not exist without tips. Since tipping in a shoe game cannot buy the player any advantage whatsoever, I am fully aware that when I do tip I do it solely because I believe the dealers work hard, have no union, no job security, and work for tips.

Schlesinger is entitled to his opinion of course. I have seen published comments on the subject by dealers themselves, and they deny that the tokes they receive are akin to the tips earned by waitresses and cab drivers. Dealers insist that their tokes are gifts and not customary payments for services. This has been their major point in their argument with the IRS over taxes on tokes. Since I want to walk out of a casino with as much money as possible, it is in my best interest to agree with dealers that tokes are gifts and thus optional rather than customary.

I am generous with waiters and waitresses, and I do tip cab drivers. However, I rarely take dealers. I hope that taking does not become customary because it effectively raises the house percentage on games. This is easiest to see in casino poker games. A sign specifies the rake, and the dealer takes that amount out of every pot. However, the winner of every pot tips the dealer another \$1. I asked some poker players what happens if you do not tip, and was told the dealer might get revenge. For example, you might find yourself dealt out of the next pot. The mandatory \$1 tip effectively increases the rake by \$1.

Donald Schlesinger replies:

I am very close to several dealers in Las Vegas. They argue that tokes are "gifts" because that is the argument that is necessary for them to present to the IRS. It is totally irrelevant to the player.

Daniel Forbes agrees with Schlesinger:

You played a semantic game in recounting the dealers' clever attempt to avoid taxation of tokes. Gifts and tips are not the same to the IRS. But, come on, tokes are tips. I agree with Schlesinger: When you come in contact with people who provide you with a service, and the service is proficient, you tip. Especially people who help you make your living. I look at tokes as a cost of doing business.

I do not agree with the logic that says casino customers should ignore anything dealers say to the IRS. Dealers have publicly claimed that dealing is not a service for which tipping is customary, and casino customers are entitled to consider those statements when making their decisions regarding how much to take.

Schlesinger says:

What is altogether a certainty is that dealers must have tokes to live. They accept jobs as dealers with the expectation of the major portion of their earnings coming from tokes.

Dealers are overpaid. There are more people willing to be and capable of being dealers than there are jobs for dealers. Overpayment is the reason that "juice" (having a friend in a position to influence a casino executive's decision) is required to get a job dealing at a major Strip casino. The pay (salary plus tokes) for dealing is so high that every time there is an opening for a dealer, the casino can select from among a large number of fully-qualified hopefuls. If dealers were not overpaid, juice would not be required. Though some readers claim that dealers are underpaid, they have offered no evidence to support that claim.

## Tokes When the Dealer Checks the Hole Card

At most casinos, the dealers do not check hole cards under 10s. This practice was started by Howard Grossman at Nevada Palace in East Las Vegas in May of 1981, but did not really catch on until started at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas in November of 1982. Before, dealers at all casinos in Nevada checked hole cards under 10s as well as under aces. Here is a reader's letter from 1980:

I would like to compare experiences with other players on the value of toking. I find that with the right dealer it is extremely useful to toke, perhaps especially on the big bets for oneself. When there is a 10 up it is very common for there to be an involuntary gesture concerning the strength of the hand. The eyes sparkle happily for an instant, the jaw tightens almost imperceptibly (oh-oh, better hit that 16), etc. If the benefits concerned only the toked hand, I guess it would not be profitable business, but they tend to flow over onto all the hands, at least in some cases.

This is a letter from Daniel Forbes from back when dealers checked hole cards under 10s:

I keep a book on dealers and their helpful hints. The coldest, cruellest dealer can change with a toke or two, if the toking is done properly.

Many dealers can spot a counter almost as fast as we counters can spot each other, and it is human to want a piece of the action. If a dealer continuously hollers "checks in play," "green action," "black in play," "doubling (or hitting) soft eighteen," etc., your active life span as a player is diminished. On the other hand, a dealer who quickly bypasses your humble sixteen to expose a hidden 4 under his 10 is giving you a big edge over the house.

An example. I located a dealer who gave unfailingly accurate hole-card information, even when floor people were watching and I was betting the table maximum. It was easy money. When the relief dealer came on, she knew I was a toker and was very friendly. In the midst of a high count, I was playing two hands at the table limit and she showed a 10. I had two stiffs. She exhorted me to "go for it!" and I did, busting both hands. When she turned over a 3, I was devastated! I quickly cut my bet size and bet small until the first dealer returned. Later, I told the first dealer what had happened. She must have talked with the second dealer because the second dealer is now a little smarter, the shift makes more tokes, and I am slaughtering the place. Give me dealer help and I will give up counting and still do very well, thank you.

Now you understand why casinos have had their dealers stop checking hole cards under 10s.

Marvin French says:

A friend impressed a lady Strip casino dealer so much that she was peeking at all the down cards in order to help him. Her toke was a dinner at a nice restaurant.

Dealers who voluntarily disclose the values of their hole cards in exchange for tokes are cheating. They risk being fired and they risk being arrested. Whether the customer is risking arrest in such a situation I do not know. I have never bought a dealer's help, will never do so, and would not advise any of my readers to do so.

## What One Dealer Did For a Toke

The scene was Westworld, a three-table casino in Henderson, shortly after midnight one July evening in 1979. I was watching, checking out the game for my

newsletter. One blackjack table was open. It had four customers, each betting \$2 or \$3, and each betting \$1 for the dealer. The pit boss was counting the chips at another table that had just been closed.

The dealer showed 10 and checked the hole card. All of the players had totals of twelve to fourteen, and all appeared to want hits. The dealer drew one card out of the shoe, saw that it was an ace, and gave it to first base. She drew another card out of the shoe, saw that it was a 10, turned over her hole card, and gave the 10 to herself to bust her hand. The players did not complain about not getting the hits they had wanted. The dealer paid off the bets, taking \$1 and leaving \$1 on each toke.

On the next round, the customers kept their same bets and the \$1 tokes were still riding. The dealer's upcard was a 5. First base had hard fourteen and motioned that the hand was good. The dealer took a card out of the shoe, saw that it was a 7, and gave it to first base. First base's frown turned into a smile when she realized that the dealer had given her twenty-one. The dealer continued in this manner, hitting or not hitting the players' hands depending on whether the next card out of the shoe would bust a hand. This continued until the pit boss came over to supervise, at which time the players had to play their own hands.

## **Insuring a Toke**

Here is a play I observed in August 1979 at the Sundowner in Reno, a place where the dealers were keeping their own tokes. The woman next to me bet \$2 for herself and \$1 for the dealer. The dealer's upcard was an ace. The woman bought \$1 of insurance. The dealer had a natural but did not pick up any of the woman's money.

The woman told the dealer that \$1 of insurance should protect only \$2 of the bet and apologized for losing the \$1 toke. The dealer hushed her with "We don't do it that way here," and let the toke ride for the next hand. The customer looked confused, picked up the toke, and put it with her other chips. The dealer told her to bet it again, so she did. The dealer wanted that toke.

## Tokes for Bosses

According to an article in the 7 October 1985 issue of the *Las Vegas Sun*, floormen, pit bosses, and the casino manager at the Riverside in Laughlin all get a share of the tips earned by the dealers. Owner Don Laughlin says this system eliminates rudeness toward customers.

Dave Douglas, formerly a dealer at a Strip casino, agrees that bosses who get a share of tokes are friendlier to customers. Douglas once worked at a casino where the dealers agreed to cut the bosses in for a share of tokes. He says tokes increased dramatically and stayed high because the bosses were hustling customers to "show their appreciation" to the dealers. Douglas got a smaller share of the pie when it was sliced to include the bosses, but it was a bigger pie so Douglas made more money when the bosses got tokes. It stopped when the owner found out what was happening and fired most of the bosses. The owner did not like his employees competing with him for the customers' money. The owner also was concerned about the possibility of being cheated; when a big winner is a big toker, bosses sharing tokes have less incentive to inquire into whether the win was due to luck.

# CHAPTER 7

# TOP

# MONEY-MAKING

# OPPORTUNITIES

Over the years casino customers have had many great money-making opportunities. This chapter describes a few of the best ones that have popped up recently. Something similar may be going on someplace as you read this, and similar opportunities are sure to appear in the months and years ahead.

If you want to find out about money-making opportunities like these as they occur, the best source is the newsletter in which most of these items first appeared: *Current Blackjack News*. It is published by Pi Yee Press, 7910 Ivanhoe #34, La Jolla, CA 92037-4511.

## May 1978

Resorts International opened its doors as Atlantic City's first casino. Its rules for blackjack included early surrender, giving the player an edge of 0.2% right after a shuffle. Huge bets were common. Big bet variation was tolerated. A skillful card counter had a huge income potential. The good rules lasted until June of 1981, when early surrender bit the dust.

## February 1979

The best-ever long-lasting blackjack rules in the world might have been those at the Olympos in Inchon, South Korea. February of 1979 is when I discovered them, but they had been in existence for some time.

You had a considerable number of options, and best of all is if you got five cards without busting, you could turn in your hand for a half win. Four decks were used, the dealer stood on soft seventeen, double down was allowed on any two cards including after splitting, you could late surrender on any number of cards except you could not surrender against an ace, 6-7-8 suited and 7-7-7 paid triple, aces could be resplit, penetration was good, and the maximum bet was high. Basic strategy gave you an edge of 0.4% at the Olympos. I first published these rules and the strategy index numbers for playing them in 1979 as part of *Blackjack in Asia*. This wonderful game lasted for many more years.

## July 1979

Nevada Casino in Las Vegas paid 2:1 on naturals. It also paid 2:1 for 6-7-8 of the same suit and on 7-7-7, and it offered late surrender. In the single-deck games, basic

strategy yielded an edge of 2.2% right after a shuffle. In the double-deck games, your edge was 1.8% right after a shuffle.

These rules attracted a lot of good players. Even the best counter of all, Peter Griffin, flew in from Sacramento for the occasion. Howard Grossman, as well-known as his face is, was allowed to bring in his team to play for a while.

Unfortunately for the owners of the casino, the liberal rules did not attract enough losing players to counterbalance all the good players. So the rules were tightened somewhat. Late surrender was discarded, and doubling was restricted to two-card totals of ten and eleven. The good players continued to play and the 2:1 payment on naturals continued to take its toll. Two weeks after it began, the 2:1 payment was stopped.

## August 1979

The Sundowner in Reno ran a newspaper ad that said:

The Sundowner Hotel and Casino will help your (Canadian) dollars go further! Simply purchase in-house chips at 100% par! These chips are good only at the Sundowner, and only for 21, dice, roulette, poker, and keno. Winners will be paid in regular Sundowner chips, redeemable in U.S. currency. Then, simply return your in-house chips for good old Canadian currency! We've also reduced the exchange reduction for slot change from 15% to 10%! So don't throw your money away, stay and play at the Sundowner Hotel and Casino!

You did not have to be Canadian to take advantage of this offer. You could buy a thousand dollars of Cana-

dian currency for less than \$900, and use it to buy \$1000 of chips at the Sundowner. You simply carried these chips over to a blackjack table, and bet them. Every time you won a hand, the dealer paid you in chips redeemable in good old American currency. Every time you lost, you lost Canadian.

## January 1980

The Treasury in Las Vegas had an advertising giveaway called "Catch 22." You got a special card from the casino cage, hotel desk, or a floorman, and this card gave you a push on 22. The limit was one per day. If you doubled down on twelve and busted, the Catch 22 card saved your entire bet. You kept the card until you needed it; i.e. you did not turn it in until you wanted to save your bet on a twenty-two. This card was worth 100% of a bet, slightly more if you doubled down on twelve against 2 through 6. The maximum bet was \$200.

## February 1980

Early surrender came to Reno — at the Bonanza on Virginia north of the university. The dealer paused before checking the hole card and asked if you wanted to surrender. Another plus at the Bonanza — it used 50 of the 52 cards. This great game lasted until May.

## July 1980

Double exposure came to three casinos in Reno, and at two of them the rules were liberal. The best rules were at Gold Dust — two tables, four decks, naturals pay 3:2 unless the dealer also had a natural, in which case you lost. Other pushes lost. You could double down on ten or

eleven. You could resplit up to four times (to make five hands). The dealer hits soft seventeen. The max was \$500. Your advantage with basic strategy was 0.4%.

## November 1980

Three Nevada casinos introduced particularly liberal double exposure. The three were Orbit Inn in Las Vegas, King's Inn in Reno, and King of Clubs in Sparks.

King's Inn paid 3:2 on naturals at its double-exposure game, giving you an edge of 1.7% with basic strategy if you could split unlike 10-count cards (such as jack-king), and 1.5% if you could not split unlike 10s. Some dealers allowed splitting of unlike 10s and some did not allow it. The rest of the details were: five decks, the dealer hit soft seventeen, natural against natural was a push, you could double down on any first two cards, no resplits, and you got paid 2:1 for 6-7-8 suited and 7-7-7. The maximum bet was \$100.

King of Clubs dealt double exposure with two decks. Naturals paid 3:2 but lost if tied by the dealer's natural, resplits were allowed to make up to four hands, and double down was restricted to ten or eleven. The dealer hit soft seventeen. Your edge with basic strategy was 0.4%. The maximum bet allowed was \$200.

Orbit Inn offered a table of particularly liberal double exposure on day shift Saturdays — no other shift and no other day of the week. Naturals won 3:2 and won even if tied, and no resplits. The dealer hit soft seventeen. Six decks were used. The maximum was only \$50, but basic strategy gave you an edge of 2.1%.

## June 1982

Landmark in Las Vegas offered a liberal game on one table only, and from 11 AM to 7 PM only. The maximum bet for this special table was \$25. On this one table, Landmark inserted three jokers into the five-deck shoe. The joker had no effect on the dealer's hand, but if you got a joker and happened to win the hand, you won double the normal amount. The joker did not add points to your hand. For example, a three-card hand of joker-ace-10 paid 3:1 instead of the normal one and a half. This rule was worth about 1.3%, giving you an edge of about 0.8% right after a shuffle.

Originally it was five jokers per five-deck shoe, and originally it lasted until 3 AM.

## November 1983

Marina in Las Vegas offered an attractive promotion. However, there were no signs or other advertisements announcing it; one simply had to know that it existed and go to the cashier to sign up. The first person to tell me about it was Marvin French. The promotion is the casino paid you to make \$5 minimum bets. The rate of pay was \$75 for four hours or \$100 for six hours, or \$125 for eight hours. Obviously the best rate was the \$75 for four hours. You had to be from out of state — you were asked for ID.

## March 1984

The *Las Vegas Advisor* revealed a fabulous promotion at the Riviera in Las Vegas. On selected tables for limited hours, the casino paid 2:1 on naturals on bets of \$1 to \$500! Your edge with basic strategy was 1.8%! The

promotion applied to two six-deck tables only, and only from midnight to 7:00 AM Monday through Thursday. You did not know in advance which tables would be blessed. At 2:00 AM two more tables sometimes were converted over to the special rules. Seats at the promotion tables filled up quickly, and there were customers waiting should a vacancy occur. Sometimes seats were sold by one player to another.

## **January 1985**

Onslow in Reno paid 2:1 on naturals for ten minutes out of the hour on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 5 PM to 9 PM. Bonus time was when a red light flashed. Normal house limits applied during this promotion; most tables were \$200 maximum, and one was \$500. Your edge with basic strategy during bonus time was 1.9%.

## **June 1985**

For this whole month, Jerry's Nugget in North Las Vegas paid 3:1 on naturals in hearts! At single deck this is worth 0.44%; at four decks it is worth slightly less. The dealers stood on soft seventeen and you could double down on any two cards, so at single deck you were even with the house before the bonus. You have got to love a single-deck game where you have an edge of almost half a percent right after a shuffle!

## **September 1985**

The best news this month was from Las Vegas; it was Westward Ho's coupon book "for invited guests only." At the time, this was the most valuable coupon book I had

ever seen. I attended the "Ho-waiian Luau," and was told that the "Grubstake Jamboree" and two other annual events had the same coupon book.

One coupon in the book entitled you to buy 25 dollar coins for \$20, a \$5 value.

A roulette coupon paid 40 to 1 when you hit 0 or 00. You kept the coupon until your number hit. Your expectation was to make 38 bets to use your coupon. If you bet the maximum \$5 per roll, your expectation was to invest \$190 to win \$200, making this coupon worth \$10.

That is \$15 of expected value so far, and we have not even gotten to the really valuable coupons. By the time we are done with them, you probably will have forgotten about these first two.

**Craps.** Two of the coupons were for craps. One allowed you to push with a roll of 6-6 with a pass-line bet; pass-line bets normally lose to 6-6 on the come-out roll. You kept the coupon until 6-6 was rolled. On average it takes 36 come-out rolls to roll 6-6 once, and the casino's normal edge over 36 come-out rolls is approximately half a bet. Another way of saying the same thing is instead of the casino having 1.4% edge over you, you had 1.4% edge over the casino for an expected 36 bets. Thus this coupon had an expected value of half a bet. If you bet the maximum \$100 per come-out roll, your expected win was \$50.

The other crap coupon allowed you to push with a field bet when a five is rolled. You kept this coupon until you needed it. On average it takes nine field bets to roll a five, and your edge while you have such a coupon is 5.6% per roll. Thus the expected value of this coupon was half a bet. If you bet the maximum \$100 per field roll, your expected win was \$50.

**Blackjack.** One of the blackjack coupons you saved until you had a natural; then you gave it to the dealer to receive 2:1 instead of 3:2. This coupon was worth half a bet. You did not have to use the coupon on your first natural; you could save it until you got a natural on your biggest bet. The maximum bet allowed at blackjack was \$200, making this coupon worth at most \$100.

Another blackjack coupon you used to turn a twenty-two into a push. This coupon was worth one bet. As was the case with the other coupons, you did not have to use it on your first twenty-two; you could save it until you reached that number with a big bet. This coupon was worth at most \$200.

Possibly even more valuable was a coupon for winning on a six-card hand. Not only did you save the coupon until you got six cards without busting, but you waited until the dealer's hand was completed! This coupon turned a loser into a winner, and thus was worth two bets. Six-card hands are rare, so you ought to have used this coupon at first opportunity instead of waiting for a big bet. The maximum value of this coupon was \$400.

One coupon entitled you to receive 2:1 money on a 6-7-8 of the same suit. That hand is so rare that you probably would not have been able to use this coupon.

**Total expected value.** The total value of the coupon package to you depended on the amounts you bet and whether you got to use all your coupons. The coupons you would have used almost for sure were the two crap coupons, the 2:1 natural, and the push on twenty-two. The total expected value of those four coupons was one crap bet (maximum \$100) plus one and a half big blackjack bets (maximum \$300).

Your chance of using the six-card coupon depended on the number of hours you devoted to blackjack and

whether you played single deck or the shoe. I got a six-card hand on a \$175 bet, and turning a loser into a winner made this coupon worth \$350 to me. I can only guess at the expected value of it and of the one for 6-7-8 suited. My best guess is the expected value of the two together was about one big bet.

This made the total expected value of the coupon book one crap bet and two and a half big blackjack bets plus \$15. (Did you forget about the \$15?) If you bet up to \$100 at both games, the coupon book was worth about \$365 to you. If you bet up to the casino's maximums, the coupon book was worth about \$615 to you. And you got a free room for three nights. And you got invited to a free feast at which fourteen \$50 bills were given out as door prizes. And if you brought a spouse you received another coupon book!

By now you probably wonder how I got invited to Westward Ho's coupon giveaway. I got on the casino's mail list while playing blackjack — a pit boss had me fill out the information questionnaire right at the table. You did not have to be a high roller to get on the mail list; the average invited guest seemed to bet a small stack of \$5 chips at table games or played 25-cent or \$1 slots.

## October 1985

Here is a spectacular game discovered by Anthony Curtis, publisher of *Las Vegas Advisor*.

Mint in Las Vegas had signs over a few of its blackjack tables. The signs over six-deck shoes promised 2:1 on ace-king of diamonds. This was worth .04% — not enough to make six decks attractive.

One single-deck table had signs over it, and they offered 3:2 payoff on five-card hands under twenty-one!

Most dealers paid the 3:2 for five-card twenty-ones also. You had a 1.9% edge over the casino with only the appropriate basic strategy!

The table had only five spots. The maximum bet was \$500. However, pit bosses on day shift got excited by bets of \$50 or more; they pressured the dealers to win, and sometimes ordered a shuffle after every round. Swing shift bosses were much more comfortable with big bets; if you showed them a good act, they would give you at least two rounds per shuffle and no heat. The game generally was closed on graveyard (2 AM to 10 AM); but if someone was betting big when 2 AM rolled around, the game would be kept open as long as that player stayed.

## January 1986

Hide-Away in Wendover, Nevada, had an interesting innovation: You could split any sixteen. Besides 8-8, you could split 10-6 and 9-7. Basic strategy is to split all sixteens. I simulated splitting 10-6 and 9-7 (no resplits on those hands, and no splitting ace-5), for a double-deck game with the dealer hitting soft seventeen. I found a player edge of 1.2% instead of the normal casino edge of 0.5%.

## May 1986

Lady Luck in Las Vegas had three video blackjack machines linked to a progressive jackpot for A-2-3-4-5 of the same suit. They were quarter machines, and you had to play eight quarters to be eligible for the giant jackpot. I told my newsletter readers about it when the jackpot reached \$33,000.

The rules were naturals paid even money, you could double down only on ten or eleven, you could not split pairs, a six-card hand was an automatic winner, and the dealer stood on soft seventeen.

A six-card player hand was an automatic winner probably because a seventh card would not have fit on the screen. This rule normally is to the player's advantage, but could have been costly. Suppose your first six cards were A-2-3-4 of clubs and 2-3 of hearts; you would have had six cards for an automatic winner. But you would have had only fifteen points. You almost certainly would have preferred to draw another card to try for the 5 of clubs and the progressive jackpot. At least I assume you would rather draw one card to have one chance in 45 of winning \$33,000 than accept a certain \$2 winner.

So you had to hit your A-2-3-4-5 of the same suit within your first six cards. Your chance of winning the big jackpot was one in 190,000 plays.

Your disadvantage while playing video blackjack without hitting the giant jackpot was 2.9%. At 200 plays per hour you could expect to lose \$12 an hour—if you did not hit the big one. Your expectation was to invest almost 950 hours and \$11,000 to win the \$33,000. Thus you on average would have had to invest 950 hours to net \$22,000. Dividing \$22,000 by 950 hours gives an overall expected win rate of \$23 per hour.

One other disadvantage on these machines is you had to feed in coins for each pull of the handle. Each time you got a win or push, coins dropped. This meant you could not play as fast as if the machines would have accumulated your payouts and let you play the maximum coins with a single push of the button.

I wrote this up in a \$12-for-twelve-issues newsletter called *Winning Gamer*. That newsletter was earning me

about \$5 an hour for the time I spent writing and publishing it. I chuckled about how ironic it was that I was earning \$5 an hour telling people about an opportunity worth \$23 an hour. Then I realized that it was more than ironic; it was stupid. So I discontinued *Winning Gamer* with that issue, and started investing more hours playing video blackjack at Lady Luck.

The jackpot kept rising, at the rate of \$500 or \$600 per month. Each \$950 increase in the jackpot added another \$1 to the expected win per hour.

In late 1986 a strange thing happened: One of the three machines started paying 3:2 on naturals. On that machine the player was at a disadvantage of only 0.6%, ignoring the progressive jackpot, instead of 2.9%. People who patronized those machines regularly quickly discovered the anomaly, and preferred to play that machine. But Lady Luck management never did seem to catch on to the fact that one machine paid 3:2 on naturals.

One day in April of 1987 I bought \$20 in quarters and wandered over to play my favorite slot machine. However, a Lady Luck slot mechanic had the door open and was examining the innards. Perhaps management had finally realized that something was different about that one machine. So I settled in at the adjoining machine, and opened my first roll of quarters. I was just about to open the second roll when I was dealt A♥-2♥. I drew a card — 4♥. I drew another card — 3♥. I said to the mechanic working on my favorite machine: "Look. If I get the five of hearts I win the jackpot." Then, as he was watching, I hit the draw button. The card was the five of hearts! I had just won \$40,370! The mechanic shut the door of his machine as if finding the problem no longer mattered. He called in my jackpot on his cellular phone. I heard him say, "No, that's not the machine he hit."

## March 1989

A reader sent a clipping about Eddie's Fabulous 50's casino in Reno. In part the clipping said:

Beginning Dec. 26th, Eddie's started offering 5 times odds on craps and already on blackjack tables a player can double down on any first two cards and split aces up to four times. Eddie's also offers single deck 21, no peek, and "Early surrender". Bonuses available on selected blackjack tables include: two to one payoff for any 6-7-8 flush, three 7's ace and jack of spades; any six card 21 or less automatically wins and four 5's wins a \$25.00 bonus.

The grammar is the clipping's, and not mine. Your edge at single deck was 0.7% right after a shuffle.

## March 1989

In October of 1988 I mentioned in *Current Blackjack News* that Silver City in Las Vegas sometimes had special promotions that lasted the month only, and were not announced in advance. That newsletter mentioned early surrender as an example of a promotion that had been offered. Silver City did it again; it offered early surrender as a special promotion for March of 1989. They did not call it early surrender, but you could surrender against both 10 and ace before the dealer checked the hole card. Your edge right after a shuffle was about 0.5% at single deck and 0.3% at double deck.

In the past I had been ho-hum about news from Silver City because its management had seemed uncomfortable with bets larger than \$2. This time was different. Anthony Curtis reported that he and a friend got no heat though each played two hands of up to \$70, and they thought they could go higher. Of course they had good

acts; if people can easily identify you as a counter you probably would not have been able to bet quarters at Silver City.

## September 1989

Sands in Las Vegas played blackjack with three jokers per six-deck shoe. If the dealer got a joker, it was burned. A customer who got a joker in the first two cards had to specify the value of the joker before playing the hand. A customer who got a joker as a hit card had to specify its value before another card was dealt. The other rules and procedures remained unchanged from the no-joker game.

You had an edge of about 1.8% right after a shuffle, which is 2.1% higher than if no jokers were added. Thus one joker per six decks was worth about 0.7%.

## October 1989

Once again Anthony Curtis came through with a fabulous news item. The news this month was a coupon book at the Marina in Las Vegas. It was similar to the one offered at Westward Ho in 1985. Chuck Wenner was the man behind both coupon books.

The three best coupons in the book were numbers 11-13. Coupon #11 gave you a push on a 6-6 on a come-out roll at craps, for a bet of up to the table maximum, which was \$500. The total expected value of this coupon was half a bet. You had a 1.4% edge for an average of 36 come-out rolls. If you bet \$500 on the pass line until you used the coupon, on average it was worth \$250 to you.

Coupon #12 gave you a push on five on a field bet at craps for a bet of up to the table maximum. The total

expected value of this coupon was half a bet. You had a 5.56% edge for an average of 9 field bets. If you bet \$500 in the field until you used the coupon, on average it was worth \$250 to you.

Coupon #13 gave you a push on a total of twenty-two at blackjack for a bet of up to the table maximum. You could save it until you reached that number with a big bet. If you play basic strategy, you will bust with twenty-two an average of once per 22 hands, a curious coincidence. Allowing for the loss expected for basic strategy, this coupon was worth 84% of a bet at six decks or 88% of a bet at double deck. If you bet \$500 per hand until you used the coupon, on average it was worth \$440 at double deck or \$420 at six decks.

There were other coupons too. Among them were two \$3 for \$2, two \$7 for \$5, and one \$35 for \$25. The total expected value of these lesser coupons was \$7.70.

Coupon #14 turned a losing six-card unbusted blackjack hand into a winner, for a bet of up to \$100. This hand is so rare that it was not worth playing basic strategy just to use the coupon.

The total value of the coupons mentioned, ignoring #14, is \$7.70 plus one crap bet plus 88% of a blackjack bet. If you made \$500 bets, the coupon book was worth almost \$950. You could probably call it \$1000 because there was a chance you would get to use the six-card coupon.

You could get a coupon book if you stayed at the Marina. And you could get a coupon book through Anthony Curtis's *Las Vegas Advisor*. And you could get a coupon book by presenting an ad out of one or more of the free advertising magazines published in Las Vegas.

You were supposed to use only one coupon book per day, but I heard of people using one coupon book per shift.

## November 1989

Arnold Snyder, publisher of *Blackjack Forum*, reported that Comstock in Reno offered the over/underside bets at all of its blackjack tables, all of which were single or double deck. With over/under, you can bet that your first two cards will total under thirteen or over thirteen; aces count one and thirteen loses. "The Over/Under Report" by Arnold Snyder explains how to take advantage of it. There is considerably more profit potential in playing basic strategy and using a count to make correct over/under bets than in using a conventional counting system to play the hands correctly but just be approximately correct on making over/under bets.

Here is an example of how strong the "over" bet is. With a freshly-shuffled single deck, there are 1326 two-card combinations, of which 618 exceed thirteen and win while 708 lose for a casino edge of 6.8%. Removing two small cards leaves 50 cards from which can be dealt 1225 two-card combinations, of which 618 win and 607 lose for a player edge of 0.9%. Removing a third small card leaves 49 cards from which can be dealt 1176 two-card combinations, of which 618 win and 558 lose for a player edge of 5.1%.

Unfortunately, the Comstock was not a place where you could vary your bets with the count if you were playing for a long time or for more than nickels. Snyder's advice was to flat bet. My advice was to bet more after winning and less after losing so as to look like a gambler. The over/under option is so strong at single and double deck that you could do well with either method.

## December 1989

Anthony Curtis reported that Sahara in Las Vegas was dealing baccarat without a commission! This was a promotion for December only, and ran Monday through Thursday from 7 PM to 2 AM. The minimum bet was \$20 and the maximum was \$100. Your edge betting on the bank was 1.36%. Your expectation was to win \$1000 per evening. No skill was required — in baccarat the cards play themselves. The problem in this game was getting a seat; enough of the locals knew about it to fill up the table.

## April 1990

Dunes in Las Vegas had two tables of pai gow poker, both of which had signs saying "Surrender allowed; keep half your wager and fold your hand." With proper strategy, surrender at pai gow poker gives you an edge over the casino of 1.2% (after paying the 5% commission). The maximum bet was \$1000. Proper strategy for surrender at pai gow poker is contained in *Optimal Strategy for Pai Gow Poker*.

## December 1990

The big news this month was KENO. Anthony Curtis read in the 10 December issue of *The Keno Newsletter* that Continental in Las Vegas had a six-spot with payoffs that totaled 120% of the ticket price, so he drove over to check it out. The ticket cost \$3. Six out of six paid \$5500 and occurs 0.0129% of the time, or once per 7752 plays. Five out of six paid \$800 and occurs 0.310% of the time, which is once per 323 plays. Four out of six paid \$15 and occurs 2.85% of the time, or once per 35

plays. Multiplying the payoffs times their probabilities and adding them up yields \$3.617, so your edge was actually slightly over 20%.

## February 1991

Edgewater in Laughlin gave a package of coupons to its hotel guests. This report came from Bryce Carlson, author of *Blackjack for Blood*:

One of these coupons can be a big money maker. It works as follows: On any blackjack of the player's choice, s/he may present the coupon and be paid 2:1, instead of the usual time-and-a-half. They have no rule about one coupon per customer. Although the coupon states (in mouse type) that only the first \$50 will be doubled, most dealers are unaware of this limit and will pay 2:1 on any blackjack no matter how big.

I did not stay at the Edgewater, but had no trouble camping out at the \$2 games and buying up as many of these coupons as I wanted, at \$5 each. I saved these coupons for \$100 blackjacks, and generally profited each time to the tune of \$45 (\$50 minus the cost of the coupon). On only three occasions did the dealer pay 2:1 on only the first \$50 (giving me a net profit of \$20 for each of those blackjacks).

Edgewater pit personnel are about as easy-going and gracious as you will find anywhere, and they did not seem to mind that I was making a major pig out of myself with these coupons.

## July 1991

Great single-deck news from Las Vegas this month. Frontier allowed double on any two cards, including after splitting. With the bonus of A-J suited paying 2:1 even if the dealer has a natural, basic strategy yielded

0.3%. Initially I was fooled by signs on the tables that said "double down on any first two cards." Peter Griffin and Anthony Curtis informed me that the rules were better than the signs indicated.

## August 1991

This issue was early to share great news. Maxim in Las Vegas had two tables of single deck with unbelievable penetration. Most dealers burned one card and dealt out the other 51! This news was reported by a reader, and I personally verified it. It has been decades since I have routinely watched the dealer shuffle to complete the hand.

In addition, Maxim offered a bonus: Your first \$100 buy-in and each natural earned coupons worth \$1 each for non-gaming purposes inside the Maxim. You used them like money for food, room, etc.

## January 1992

I was about to leave for Las Vegas to look for news items when Anthony Curtis called to say that Lady Luck in that city was giving out coupon books containing a coupon that could be used as an insurance bet. There was no maximum on the coupon. You needed out-of-state ID and ad from a magazine to get the coupon book. The required magazine was given away right outside the casino. Curtis said a person could get more than one per day. To a basic-strategy player, the value of the insurance coupon was 31% of a bet less the expected loss on the average of 13 hands needed for the dealer to show an ace. Basic strategy put you at a disadvantage of about 0.3% on the double deck and double exposure games, and 0.6%

at the other shoe games. This made the insurance coupon worth 27% or 23% of a bet. For every \$100 you bet, the coupon was worth \$27 or \$23 if you simply played basic strategy and used the coupon at first opportunity.

## September 1992

This item came from both Anthony Curtis and another reader. Continental in Las Vegas was paying a \$100 bonus for two consecutive naturals. Wish I had found out about this one earlier, because originally the bonus was larger: \$500, and then \$250.

The bonus was offered from 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM Monday through Friday.

Two consecutive naturals occur once per 461.5 hands at two decks, and once per 496.5 hands at six decks. So the \$100 bonus was worth \$21.67 per 100 hands at double deck, or \$20.14 per 100 hands at six decks. (These numbers are from page 49 of *Basic Blackjack*.)

## October 1992

Dave Douglas heard that the Continental in Las Vegas was offering a new card game called "Yin Yang Yo 22" so he drove over to check it out. A written explanation was provided and the rules were posted, but they were complicated and some details were ambiguous. Douglas had questions for which he needed answers, so he sat down and played for minimum bets to get all the details.

In brief, the game involved dealing cards to two hands, named Yin and Yang, until one of them went over 22. Customers could bet that Yin would win, that Yang would win, or that they would tie (Yo). Each of those bets

paid 2:1. Most customers bet on Yin or Yang; there was little action on the Yo.

It looked like a game that could be beaten with card counting, so Douglas went home and wrote a computer program to analyze the game. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that he had an edge of 4% on the Yo bet right after a shuffle! He did not have to count cards to get an edge!

Of course he checked his work every which way to make sure he was right. It is rare that a casino offers a bet that gives the customer an edge with no thinking required on the part of the customer. And a 4% edge is ridiculous; card counters at blackjack generally have less than a 1% edge. Douglas checked his work again and again, and kept coming up with a 4% player edge.

So Douglas decided that Yin Yang Yo 22 was a game he would be willing to play for high stakes. He considered playing the game himself, but decided that he did not want to attack the Yo with \$100 bets after being seen playing for small stakes and asking questions. So he let a couple of his friends in on his secret. They each contributed to a joint \$5000 bankroll, and they agreed on how to share the amount they would win (or lose). Douglas explained the game to his two friends, they played as a "high-roller couple," and Douglas did not accompany them to the casino.

They played Yin Yang Yo 22 for two days, winning \$5600 before the casino closed the game down.

## December 1992

This good news came from Anthony Curtis. Nevada Hotel in Las Vegas had more than just clean, comfortable rooms for \$19.94 plus tax. With the room came a valuable

coupon book. The highlight was a coupon that could be used as an ace for your first card at blackjack, for any amount up to the table limit, which was \$200. If you got a natural with this coupon, it paid even money, costing you about 2/13. In spite of that, the coupon was worth about 35% of a bet. I played my coupon with \$200, and got no heat. I received an ace, split, and lost \$400, so I did not kill the coupon promotion all by myself. Also in the coupon book were match-play coupons for \$10, \$5, \$2, and \$1. There also were coupons for a free breakfast and a free hot dog. The total value of the coupon book was at least \$80. If you took a spouse or a friend, you could afford separate rooms!

Anthony Curtis, who has supplied me with so many great news items, publishes a monthly newsletter of his own: *Las Vegas Advisor*. It covers getting value for your money in Las Vegas on food, rooms, entertainment, and transportation. The address is Huntington Press, 5280 S. Valley View Boulevard Suite B, Las Vegas, NV 89118. The telephone number is 702-597-1884.

## January 1993

Santa Fe in Las Vegas offered the royal match side bet on a six-deck game. Two cards of the same suit paid 3:1, except for king-queen suited, which paid 10:1. The player has an edge of 1.1% on this side bet at six decks. (At single deck, the casino has an edge of 3.8% on royal match bets.) The negatives: There was a \$25 max bet on the royal match bet, and the bet was offered at only one table. The positives, besides the fact you had an edge: You could bet more on the royal match than on your blackjack hand if you wished, and you could play multiple hands.

## February 1993

This tip came from Anthony Curtis. Sahara Race Book in Las Vegas had what it called "Round-Up Time." According to a Sahara news release:

Bet any thoroughbred race with a win payoff of under \$6 and the Sahara will "round up" your winning payoff to the next full dollar amount...For example, if your winning horse pays \$5.20, your payoff will be "rounded up" to \$6.

Payoffs of exact dollar amounts were not adjusted.

You could not be sure that your horse would go off at an odds number such that the Sahara would augment the track payoff if the horse won. And of course you can never be certain before the race whether a given horse will win. But on the average horse that won at odds of less than 2:1, this Sahara promotion added about 8% or 9% to the payoff. The percentage bonus was higher the lower the odds of the horse.

Signs said \$20 max, but the race book took bets larger than \$20. How big they would go I do not know. For a newspaper article the racebook manager used an example of a \$200 bet paying \$600 instead of \$520.

## April 1993

On 7 April the Las Vegas Hilton introduced one table of six-deck blackjack with a side bet that was scheduled to last for 30 days, and on 8 April I mailed the analysis to subscribers of *Current Blackjack News*. The bet was called 50/50. When you had twelve through sixteen on your first two cards, you could make another bet equal to your original bet and get another hand. You had to stand on your original hand. The first hand otherwise played

like a regular blackjack hand, as did the second hand except that on the second hand naturals paid even money.

Basic strategy is to make the 50/50 side bet with stiffs against 2-6, and with fifteen or sixteen against 7. Do not make the side bet with any soft hand or with any pair.

The side bet on the average stiff against 2-6 is worth 15.3% (according page 70 of Revere's *Playing Blackjack as a Business*), and you make it 14.1% of the time. The side bet with fifteen or sixteen against 7 is worth 3.5% on average, and you make it 1.0% of the time.

Overall the side bet is worth 2.2%. Without the side bet you had a disadvantage of 0.3% at the Hilton, meaning with the side bet your edge playing basic strategy was 1.9% of your original bet.

There were seven spots on the table, the cut was slightly over a deck, the limits were \$10 to \$1000, and big bets were accepted graciously.

Hilton pulled the plug on this great game on 11 April.

## April 1993

For Sunday through Thursday for the whole month of April, Saddle West in Pahrump (an hour west of Las Vegas) added a joker to each four-deck shoe.

If the dealer got the joker, it was burned and the player was no worse off. If the player got the joker, the player won double. Examples: A \$50 5-joker won \$100. A \$50 eleven on which you doubled down (and thus had \$100 riding) won \$200 if the double-down hit was the joker.

The value of one joker per card for four decks was 2/209, or 1%. Your average hand uses 2.6 cards. With the extra pay on doubles, a joker per four decks was worth

2.8% to you. Since basic strategy otherwise lost at the rate of 0.7%, your edge right after a shuffle was 2.1%. The max bet was \$200.

As cards were used without the joker appearing, your edge went up inversely with the number of cards yet unseen. For example, if the joker was still undealt when two decks were left, the value of the joker was 5.6%, making your edge with basic strategy 4.9%.

# CHAPTER 8

## COMPS

RFB means room, food and beverage. Many casinos extend RFB comps (for complimentary, or free) to their best customers. An RFB comp does not include reimbursement for airfare.

A reader says:

For years now I have fantasized my being comped RFB — and possibly even airfare — either as part of a junket or on an individual trip. Like any good American, I want something for nothing. The only time I have ever been comped was on my very first outing with Revere's Point Count. I played late at night in a small Reno casino, betting \$2 to \$10 for two hours, winning a little over \$40. When I innocently asked my wife if she was ready to go get something to eat, the dealer graciously called over the pit boss for a couple of meal tickets. I had just read Ian Andersen's *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas* and spent the two hours

acting quite unlike myself — laughing, making jokes, talking a lot. The dealer thoroughly enjoyed me and obviously did not suspect my exciting secret.

You have an excellent chance of getting an all-expenses-paid trip to Las Vegas. Watch your newspaper for ads in the sports section and in the personal classified. The yellow pages of your telephone directory may provide some leads.

According to Anthony Curtis, junkets (with junket masters paid by the casino to bring in and host casino customers) are going out of style. More and more, individuals are making their own arrangements with casino hosts. This way the casino does not have the expense of a junket master. Also common these days are "spree" programs, in which customers typically put up front money and then receive cash rebates after playing a specified number of hours with specified minimum bets. There may be an up-front charge for airfare and other expenses, but if you put in enough hours at the tables and bet enough money, your rebates should recover most or all of the cost of the spree. Sprees typically are arranged by travel agents that specialize in spree business. Your newspaper should provide leads here, also.

The definitive book on comps is *Comp City* by comp wizard Max Rubin.

## Which Way to Go?

A reader says:

After having tried two RFB (room, food, and beverage) trips, I question whether the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. I do enjoy the VIP treatment and the free RFB. However, requirements such as playing so many hours at the host casino infringe on

freedom to move around when I choose. Also, if I ask for a comp I feel like a moocher. In Las Vegas it is easy to find a low-priced room, and easy to find inexpensive meals. I think I prefer paying my own way.

## From a Woman

**Alison Green says:**

I usually go to Nevada alone for one to three days, with a bankroll of \$100 or \$200. I often get meal comps in spite of my \$2 bets. All it takes is a move over yet another stiff hand against a high upcard, then a wry smile and a shrug at the watching boss when the hit busts my hand. Some male pit personnel will begin to chat given the least encouragement. Once acquainted this way, I refresh his memory with a wave or "Hi" when I pass by or return to play later in the shift and during the next day or two. Around mealtime I ask, "How is the food in the restaurant here?" By this time he would like to get my name, so he produces pen and comp slip. I return afterward to say how much I enjoyed my free meal.

## Comp Withdrawn

**Marvin French says:**

I had a comp withdrawn at the Riviera in Las Vegas. They would not give me an explanation of why I had to pay my bill. I thought I fulfilled the requirements for my comp — I deposited \$5000, wrote \$6000 of markers, and maintained a minimum \$25 bet. I played an average of 45 minutes per \$500 marker. In addition, I lost \$1500. My big bets were \$50, split \$25-\$25. I was not going to use the surrender option, but when I fell \$1500 down I began surrendering fifteen and sixteen against 10 and ace at high counts. Was this a mistake,

do you suppose? I am guessing that my \$25-\$25 counted only as a \$25 maximum bet instead of \$50, thereby ruining my rating.

**Donald Schlesinger responds:**

Nobody cares if you surrender. So, no, Mr. French, it was not a mistake for you to surrender at the Riviera. It was, of course, a mistake to try to fulfill the requirements of a comp that called for minimum bets of \$25 by never on a single hand placing a bet that exceeded \$25. The casino host expected more "range" in your betting.

**Axel Freed says**

There is little question in my mind that Mr. French was so concerned about not being detected as a counter that he overlooked the need to look like a "good" player. It appears that although he took \$6000 in markers, his total action was only in the neighborhood of \$25,000-30,000. Therefore, his expected loss from the house viewpoint could not adequately cover his RFB expenses, even if he were playing craps or baccarat instead of blackjack. Casinos do not like players who appear to be deliberately attempting to fulfill minimum playing requirements; they want players who "come to gamble." Therefore, it is probably a good idea for a comped player to parlay his bets from time to time, perhaps on plus counts.

## Casino Creates a Counter

**A reader says:**

I would like to thank a shift manager at Caesars Tahoe for causing my interest in card counting. I was invited out as a comped guest. I was very lucky and won about \$2000 in one hour betting green chips. The shift manager barred me and revoked my comp. I was confused and did not understand what was happening,

so he explained that he thought that I was a counter. I decided that if he thought counters were that effective, I had better learn how to count cards. So I bought a copy of *Professional Blackjack* and am now a counter.

## Comped and Barred

A reader says:

Tonight I played at a casino in Atlantic City from which I had been barred on day shift yesterday. I was receiving no heat from the pit despite winning several thousand dollars. In fact, a pit boss liked my play so much he asked me if I needed anything, and I suggested he give me a room for the next night. He told me it should be no problem and went to check on it. I continued to play at the same table, waiting for a natural opportunity to "Wong away," but also waiting for the friendly pit boss to return. Suddenly a "compliance officer" appeared at my shoulder and read me the standard barring statement. I left the table and went to cash in my chips. As the cashier stacked my chips, a casino official appeared at my side, called me by name (an alias), and offered the information that my room comp had been approved! I had been barred and comped simultaneously! I pointed this out to the casino manager, who resolved the inconsistency by revoking the comp.

## Using an Alias

Steve Lottier, one of the big players in Ken Uston's *The Big Player*, likes to establish credit at a casino to get comps easier and to have an alternative to carrying large amounts of cash. He also likes to change his name from time to time. At first glance, changing one's name and establishing credit seem to be incompatible. So I asked

Lottier how he established credit under an alias. Here is his answer in his words:

About a year ago I got an AKA (Also Known As) attached to my regular bank account. I got personal checks in my new name with my real home address. I practiced my new signature prior to using my new account. My banker knows everything about me; I do not deceive him in any way. I have a \$15,000 signature loan approved at my bank. When I ask for \$10,000 credit at a casino, someone from the casino calls my bank and my banker verifies that I am good for \$15,000.

A problem sometimes arises in identification. Some hotels ask for a major credit card when I check in. The casino cage has also asked for a driver's license. Thus far I have just told them I do not have it with me. I also have to be prepared to give my date of birth when signing markers at a table.

## Going Too Far

A European pro who travels the world playing blackjack gave me this information. The pro and his friends live in Las Vegas from time to time. They like to live in free hotel rooms and eat free food. They also like to get reimbursed from the casinos for their round-trip air fares from Miami. Only they never go to Miami. They buy airline tickets, present them to their hosts for refunds, and then sell the unused tickets back to the airlines.

His advice if you want to try his scheme: You must bet black (\$100) chips. Play the minimum hours and do not spread above 1 to 2 (one deck) or 1 to 3 (multiple decks) because your profit is the freebies, not what you win at the tables.

# CHAPTER 9

# TURNING PRO

## Full-Time Blackjack?

Some letters I get follow a pattern. The writer starts by asking whether blackjack really still can be beaten, and whether it will stay that way or whether beatable games will disappear. Then s/he asks if it is possible to make enough money playing the game to support oneself. The writer finishes by saying that s/he is considering playing blackjack full time and wonders what I think of that idea. One such letter comes from a lawyer who is earning \$40,000 a year. He is thinking of quitting law for a year, to play blackjack.

My answers to those letters also follow a pattern. I say yes, blackjack really can be beaten. I cannot predict the future myself. Prophets knowledgeable about the casino business have been predicting the demise of

beatable blackjack since publication of Ed Thorp's *Beat the Dealer* in 1962, and what has happened instead is that blackjack has been one of the fastest-growing casino games. Sure some casinos that were easy to beat have toughened up their blackjack, but the opposite seems to happen just as frequently — other casinos liberalize their games and become easy places to win at blackjack.

And yes, you can make enough money at blackjack to support yourself, though it is not easy. You will have to patronize many different casinos because you will wear out your welcome if you stay too long at one. There are so many casinos that you will not run out of places to play. Of course your time is worth considerably more per hour at some casinos than at others.

However, I think you are foolish to play blackjack full time, even for a year. You are probably aware of the problems of financial risk and boredom. A major problem you may not have considered is that as a full-time professional blackjack player you tend to cut yourself off from the world. You need social contacts to enjoy yourself, and you need business contacts to make money at something else besides blackjack. You do not make enough of either of those contacts while playing blackjack.

The big advantage to playing part time instead of full time is you can get by with playing only the very best games, the games that give you the highest expected win per hour.

So this is my advice to the lawyer and to anyone else who asks the same questions. Make no more than one blackjack trip a month, and play only the best games. Keep your job, keep up your social contacts, and otherwise lead a normal life away from blackjack. You will be

happier and wealthier than if you were a full-time professional blackjack player.

Another reader says:

I am thinking of quitting my job and taking up playing blackjack as a profession. What advice do you have for me?

Do not quit your job. Everybody knows that to win money at blackjack you just count cards and use proper playing strategy; and that you must have an adequate bankroll. These things, however, are not the only requirements.

The most important requirement is that you must be very stable emotionally to be able to handle the monetary swings and the inevitable barrings. Do you ever feel any emotions? That is, do you ever feel anger or fear or love? My encyclopedia says, "A normal, healthy individual shows reasonable emotional responses to the situations of everyday life." If you are this sort of normal, healthy individual, you will never make it as a professional blackjack player. If you feel emotional responses to the situations of everyday life, you are too emotional to be a professional blackjack player. If it takes an extreme situation to provoke an emotional response in you, then you might be stable enough emotionally to survive as a professional blackjack player.

A professional blackjack player experiences big wins and big losses. Though you have an edge, your bankroll seems to go down fast and build up only slowly. Some losing streaks last for months. You must be able to cope with the losses that inevitably will occur. If you get upset when you lose, if losing makes you suspect that you were cheated, or if losing leads you to suspect that authors of blackjack books have explained playing strategy back-

wards, then you had better find another way to keep rice on your dining table.

Peter Giles says:

I particularly enjoyed your advice to the fellow who wanted to quit his job and make a living playing blackjack. I had to laugh—more at myself than him—because that is more or less what I did. I did not have a job to quit because I have always been stubbornly independent, but I did put all my eggs in one basket, which amounts to the same thing. Two years ago I was a normal, healthy, emotional individual; today I am an abnormal, unhealthy, cold-blooded winner.

I always set aside enough money to live on for three months. If I get behind, I play harder and longer each day to pull out. I find it very hard NOT to double my money in a three-month period. I have never lost in that amount of time. More often than not, I can double a given sum in less than one month. It would be difficult to give a long-term hourly win rate. But an average day is around four to six hours, and some of that is spent looking for advantageous situations. When I get behind I become a marathon player. I usually do nothing but eat, sleep, and play blackjack until I get back what I have lost. When I am behind, I also play only in very good situations. I look for head-up, one-deck games sometimes, and sometimes I table-hop, playing only high counts.

Playing weekend blackjack is one thing; making a living at it is another. I came to Las Vegas with \$3000 and ate a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to hang on to my bankroll. The dips always seemed to come when rent was due. I have slept in the back seat of my car. I have eaten at Mr. Sy's (a former Las Vegas casino that served a free scrambled-eggs breakfast to anyone). It is not easy to live on your winnings when you are not winning. It is not uncommon to lose half your

money in two days. Of course, if you keep playing, you will eventually get it back — providing you play a winning game. It helps a lot if you can circumvent living expenses.

My personal recommendation for those who want to quit working and play blackjack is this: Keep working and playing blackjack in your spare time until you have \$10,000 plus enough to live on for three months. If after three months, your bankroll is less than \$10,000, you should quit playing blackjack. If you have won enough to set aside enough for the next three months, you have a handle on the game and should keep playing and making improvements in your game. Also, you should have a few months' experience before you attempt even this. Do not come running to Las Vegas with a few hundred dollars and a head full of dreams. You will have to call Mother to wire you the money to get home. You cannot cut it playing red (\$5) chips, unless you are very lucky. If you are a good player, you can make a living playing green (\$25) chips if you are willing to work for it. When you make it to black (\$100) chips, life is easy.

I have never been officially barred. Despite their faults, most pit bosses are tactful. They generally let you know in their own polite way that you are getting there. The heaviest hint is to be comped when you are winning. If the pit boss smiles and says something like, "You look hungry," you are a fool to keep playing. That is why I keep a "cool it" list. When the whole of Las Vegas is on my "cool it" list, I will have a choice: Either move on to new territories or play until everyone says no. I think, at that point, I will move on.

#### A former pro adds:

I enjoyed reading Peter Giles's article. I too went to Vegas to become a professional blackjack player and did manage to support myself for close to a year by playing nickels (\$5 chips). I finally did reach a point where I

thought I had it made; enough money to support myself for more than three months, and a playing bankroll sufficient in size to allow me to play two hands at \$25 at a 3% advantage. I found that thinking you have it made and actually having it made are a long ways apart as far as playing blackjack goes. I suffered a very severe losing streak and ended up going back to a regular and less risky form of employment to support myself.

I did learn many things from my first attempt as a professional blackjack player (yes, I plan on future attempts), the foremost being that too much playing can be hazardous to your mind. Playing for over nine hours straight one day at the Circus convinced me that there are other ways of "blowing your mind" aside from drugs and alcohol!

Peter Giles may be interested in an article written about Ken Uston that appeared in the April 16, 1979 issue of *Sports Illustrated*. One million hands of blackjack were played on a computer and the results showed that it is possible to have a six-month losing streak while playing 30 hours a week! I feel any person who could withstand a streak like that and still keep all his marbles in place should be nominated for sainthood!

Personally, I do not recommend anyone quitting his or her job to become a professional blackjack player. I think it makes much more sense to keep blackjack as an occasional activity. I prefer the attitude expressed by another reader:

Vegas still is worth a trip if they do not know your face. I use the method of hit and run, come back much later. I made a year's salary in two and a half weeks there.

An Army professional asked my advice on becoming a full-time professional blackjack player. I advised him to stay with his profession and play blackjack just

part time. He tried full-time blackjack anyway. A year later I received this letter from him:

Let me tell you how my experiment at full-time blackjack worked out. I left the Army on 1-1-85 and have stayed in the Army Reserves. To date, I have grossed \$24,200 playing blackjack this year. I have made eight trips to Las Vegas, three to northern Nevada, three to Atlantic City, and other trips to the Bahamas, Aruba, Curacao, Bonaire, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, England, Holland, Korea, and Philippines. Trip expenses have consumed about \$10,500. I have been able to hold trip expenses down by taking advantage of free space-available flights on USAF aircraft and getting rooms at military bases.

However, I have gone back to full-time work as of 8 July. Since then I have been playing blackjack part-time. My job is made for blackjack because I am allowed to work "credit hours," and easily can work enough extra hours to have a four-day weekend. That and the judicious use of annual leave give me a full week off every other month, and a four-day weekend the intervening months. I project 12 blackjack trips during 1986, with about 360 hours of blackjack play.

Without doubt, I now agree with your view that part-time play is preferable to full-time. Playing full-time, you simply wear out your welcome at too many places. During 1985 I was barred from El Cortez (again), the Las Vegas Tropicana, Mizpah in Tonopah, Cactus Jack's in Carson City, Comstock in Reno, Curacao Concorde, the Aruba Palm Beach, three illegal casinos in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and the Paradise Beach in Pusan, Korea. It seemed to me that, had I continued playing full-time, I would be blacklisted worldwide in a matter of months. Playing part-time, I think my longevity will be much, much greater—perhaps even life-long.

Ah well, I had enormous fun playing blackjack full-time. If I did not think my full-time play meant my playing days were numbered, I would still be at it.

## Another Reader Considers Becoming a Pro

A reader says:

I am seriously considering becoming a professional blackjack player. My present job pays well and is secure; however, the time required for it creates conflicts with things I want to do, and blackjack could be the answer either by giving me more time each day or by leading to a possible earlier retirement.

My main concern is the following. Will casinos become either completely effective in stopping counters or make a very significant reduction in the counter's income?

There are a few dozen people who support themselves entirely by playing blackjack. So it is possible.

A big drawback to the professional blackjack business is that there is a limit to the amount that professional players in aggregate can win from the casinos. In most businesses considerable expansion is possible; advertise more or open a new store and more sales dollars flow in. In blackjack, however, more players playing with more skill can win more money for only a limited time. When the amounts won by skillful players become too heavy a burden to casinos, something must happen to reduce aggregate card-counter wins to an affordable amount. This "something" might be a rules change or a spate of barrings or cheating.

The existence of professional blackjack players is great advertising for casinos. The casinos make more

money when professional players exist than they would if blackjack were completely unbeatable. Therefore, it will probably always be possible for a very skillful person to support himself or herself by playing blackjack. However, due to the limit on the amount that professional players in aggregate can win, many professional blackjack players could probably make more money by switching occupations.

Playing blackjack full time probably involves a complete change in your life-style. Most blackjack pros move frequently. Your expenses for travel could be high. You would develop a new circle of friends.

It is true that casino people have finally caught on to the winning techniques developed several years ago. But it is also true that the people on our side of the table keep coming up with new ways to win, and these methods are generally successful for years before casino people catch on to them.

## Getting Barred

If you try to play blackjack frequently, and put in long hours, you run the chance of wearing out your welcome. Here is one reader's letter:

After a one-hour session at a \$5 table without any heat from the pit, varying my bets from \$5 to \$75, I cashed out with a \$400 loss and was barred by the shift manager. The surveillance must have been totally from the eye in the sky. It was carelessness on my part that must have initially alerted them. I usually buy chips at a crap table, make one or two small line bets, and then drift over to the blackjack tables. This time I bought in for \$1000 cash at a blackjack table and made \$5 bets until the shoe heated up. Stupid! Now I have one less money tree.

If you are going to start out with \$5 bets, I suggest buying in for \$20 to \$50, but certainly no more than \$100. You can always buy more chips when the shoe "heats up."

When you bought in for \$1000 and then bet \$5, you brought attention to yourself in two ways. Bigger bets draw more attention, and by buying in with \$1000 you were indicating that you were willing to bet big. Second, when you bet only \$5, you were doing something out of the ordinary. Most blackjack gamblers who buy in with \$1000 start with bets of \$50 or \$100 and often after a few hands are betting multiple hundreds. Anyone who was watching you must have thought that your first bet was disproportionately small. The eye in the sky was probably thinking, "I know he is going to bet big. I wonder if it will happen when the count justifies it."

Donald Schlesinger says:

Showing the pit boss that much money makes no sense. When I play from \$50 to \$600, I buy in for \$200! If I have to go into my pocket for more money, I take out the \$100s one at a time to give the impression that I am losing steadily and have to keep going into my wallet repeatedly. Buying in for large amounts of cash at the start of a session is unnecessary and counterproductive.

Here is a letter from another reader:

I am a good counter, but suffered a psychic shock last year from which I have not yet recovered.

About a year ago, while at a downtown Las Vegas casino — El Cortez — I was barred. I was playing at a \$2 minimum table and had a \$6 bet out. One of the pit bosses walked up to me and sarcastically told me to take my action elsewhere. I was stunned! To be sure, I was not unaware of the fact that he had been watching me carefully, and I was keeping a close watch on the cards,

but I never expected to be barred. Since then, my play has not been the same. Since I do not know anyone who plays blackjack I am curious about what happened to me. How common a practice is it — i.e., of barring the small-betting counter? Is the practice more prevalent in Las Vegas than elsewhere? I feel that I am now ready for \$25 minimum bets. If I am suspected of being a counter, can I reasonably expect to be barred while playing at the \$25 tables on the Las Vegas Strip? Elsewhere?

Being kicked out of a casino can be a traumatic experience. It can bruise your ego — the pit boss puts you down and you cannot fight back. Do not let it get to you. Being kicked out occasionally is a fact of life in this business, and not just in Las Vegas. It happens to the best of us. It means that you have one less place to play blackjack. It also might mean that either a casino employee was sharp enough to know what you were doing or you were somehow giving yourself away.

Now look on the bright side. If the pit boss does not know your name, you can still play during the other two shifts in that casino. Since you were betting only \$6, after a few months you can go back on the shift where you were kicked out and no one will remember you.

Who gets barred while playing blackjack is a complicated topic. At some casinos you can get barred just by betting big money, whether or not you are a skillful player. This happens because casino employees tend to get heat from above for losing but no rewards for winning big. A casino full of \$2 bettors will show a win for the casino. But one \$100 bettor in their midst who happens to get lucky could turn the shift into a loser. Thus that one big bettor is a good candidate to be kicked out whether or not s/he is counting cards.

To be a pro, you must have a good act. You must not appear to be a counter to the people who are watching you. It can be done. In Las Vegas, in the days when Circus Circus and Sahara had reputations as being tough on counters, I saw pros with good acts get away with black-chip action and reasonable bet variation at both places.

The best compliment I have received on my own act came in December of 1979 during the "counter convention" at Atlantic City. For a couple of weeks the casinos were not allowed to bar customers for displaying excessive skill at blackjack. Early surrender was offered, making the game very attractive to card counters. Many counters showed up to try to get their share. So the casinos lowered their max bets to \$500. When I was playing \$500 a hand at the Boardwalk Regency, a pit boss watching me told me I could bet higher than \$500 if I wanted. He explained that the \$500 limit was imposed because of the number of card counters in town, and since he was sure I was not a counter he was willing to let me go higher. I thanked him and told him that since I was very tired I did not feel like betting higher than \$500. My real reason for turning down his offer is I did not want him to go around to the other pit bosses saying "See that guy over there? I told him he could bet higher than \$500 if he wants." One of those other bosses might have seen me in action in the past and might have formed a different opinion of my skill at blackjack.

A reader says:

I think a major reason why some players lose at blackjack is because of fear of being barred. They make incorrect plays to throw pit bosses off. They have a small bet spread and they tip the dealer. Your advantage at blackjack is slim at best, and these players might have

negative expectations. I think it is much better to take a chance on being barred than to play a losing game.

## Ceiling on Win

The Yin Yang Yo game discussed in the chapter on top money-making opportunities illustrates some important points about being a pro. One is that to win big money from a casino, it is better if few people are doing what you are doing. No other players were betting the Yo for big money hour after hour; it was easy for pit bosses to attribute the mounting stacks of chips in front of Dave Douglas's friends to luck. If you are going to count cards at blackjack, you should have your own unique act; you do not want people to quickly recognize you as a card counter because of having seen other people who act just like you.

Another lesson is that there is only so much money that can be extracted from a given situation. In the case of the Yo bets, the money Douglas's friends won represented the casino's entire winnings on the game for the two weeks it had been open. The casino manager shut down the game when he no longer was a winner at it. (If you ever run into the game of Yin Yang Yo 22 in the future, it almost certainly will be with the Yo bet modified to give the casino an edge.)

It is possible that Douglas and his friends could have extracted more money had they waited longer before making their play. The problem with waiting is that somebody else would probably have figured out to bet the Yo, and then Douglas and his friends would have had competition and would have gotten only part of the maximum number of dollars the casino was willing to risk.

Daniel Forbes says the same thing about blackjack:

While it is true that the Nevada blackjack game can be beaten by skillful card counters, the Nevada law allows casinos to bar counters. If they could not, all hell would break loose. You are trying to strike a balance between the "right" of players to be able to count and the right of businesses to make money. However, if the rules are liberal enough to give the average player a decent shot, the counters will combine into well-financed teams and kill the casinos. This consideration has forced me to the conclusion that casinos should have the right to bar suspected counters. While it makes the game more complicated ("game" in the sense of counters versus casinos), it strikes an interesting balance between the casinos' need to make money and the counters' desires to get in on the goodies. If counters could play as a matter of law, the game would go completely to hell. I would rather have my surrender back and put up with an occasional barring.

## Win Every Day?

Can you hope to improve your skill at blackjack to the point where you can walk up to a blackjack table and always walk away a winner? No. Absolutely not. You cannot win every day. You cannot hope to win regularly or steadily. You cannot hope to win consistently.

Suppose you play 400 hands of blackjack every day for six days. Suppose you bet \$100 on one hand every round and have an average advantage of 0.75%. (This would be a good game!) Your expectation is to win \$300 per day (0.75% times \$100 times 400 hands), or \$1800 in six days, but you cannot hope to win \$300 every day. Your six-day total might be considerably over or under \$1800 — you could very easily end up a big loser.

Now suppose that your six-day win just happened to exactly equal your expected win of \$1800. What day-to-day results would you typically experience getting to this total? You can get the answer from a table of areas under the normal curve. Your standard deviation on one hand is about 1.1 bets. Therefore, your standard deviation on one day's play is about \$2200 (1.1 times \$100 times the square root of 400). Your individual-day results would likely have been about as follows:

	-\$2700
	-1200
	-200
	+800
	+1800
	+3300
Total	+\$1800

Your average daily win of \$300 is dwarfed by the individual daily swings. You have a 50-50 chance of losing more than \$2700 on your worst day of a typical six-day session, even though you are betting only \$100 per hand.

Doubling your advantage to 1.5% will double your expected daily win to \$600, but will not change your standard deviation very much. Adding \$300 to each of the daily results does not eliminate the possibility of a really bad day—on your typical worst day out of six you will lose \$2400. There is no legal way to win every day that you play. There is no legal way for a blackjack player to always walk away a winner.

## Beyond Card Counting

A reader says,

I had dinner with a pit boss who knows I am playing blackjack for a living and he gave me some helpful hints. He explained to me why he and other bosses dislike counters, and you might want to pass it on sometime to your readers. He said that card counters become dissatisfied with what they are capable of earning and in time invariably turn to other ways of making even bigger money — like making deals with the dealers. According to the pit boss, he has seen it happen many times, where a counter has been allowed to play for a period of days or weeks, only to abuse the "privilege" by ending up as a greedy cheat. He told me that one way to avoid getting kicked out would be to keep conversations with the dealers to a minimum, so as not to arouse suspicions of enticing them.

Proficient blackjack players do not invariably turn to cheating. However, if pit bosses really believe what this one does, the last sentence of the letter is good advice.

Peter Giles adds:

I had a terrible experience downtown a few nights ago. Some bastard was marking the cards and I was winning like crazy at the same table. Guess who they thought was marking the cards! By the skin of my teeth, I avoided the clunker. But I was detained for several hours, harassed, and forcibly ejected with threats concerning what my fate would be should I ever decide to return. Disregarding my cool-it list, I have now been officially barred six times. Woe is me!

Incidentally, I met Peter Griffin last week. Unfortunately, it was not the kind of introduction I would have hoped for. I was caught unshaven in my worst rags. It was an accidental meeting; I had stopped by Gambler's Book Club in Las Vegas to look at a book, and Griffin

was there on business. I was with a friend, and as I was perusing the book she called me over to the counter. As I was walking up, she asked me loudly what I thought of Griffin's *The Theory of Blackjack*. I immediately knew that this was a loaded question because we had spent many hours together reading and talking about the book, and she knew exactly what I thought about it. Then I understood the situation. The clerk, delighted to be a part of the in-crowd, had not been able to resist telling her she was standing next to Peter Griffin. I forgot what I answered because I was trying to keep my pants from falling down. She introduced me to Griffin and said that my name was Peter also. We shook hands, and he inquired about my last name. I was aware of half a dozen people in the immediate vicinity, and worse, the clerk, was obviously waiting in anticipation for some new morsel to chew on. Paranoia got the best of me. In my mind's eye, I envisioned the clerk reaching for a hidden microphone to announce publicly who I was to all the people in the store, who would just happen to work in my favorite casinos. In short, I clammed up.

## Income Tax

You must pay federal and state income taxes on your blackjack winnings. Your obligation to pay income taxes is just as strong whether you are a doctor, a lawyer, the president of a company, or a professional blackjack player.

I can tell you how to make money, and your lawyer or accountant can tell you how best to keep as much of it as possible. I am not qualified to give tax advice.

Counting cards is legal. Winning money from casinos is legal. Tax evasion is illegal and people go to prison for it. You can make enough money at blackjack to be able to afford to pay income taxes.

A reader says:

On income taxes, my personal feeling is that volunteering any information concerning gambling income will identify you to the IRS as a likely member of the "underground economy" and thereby open a Pandora's box of tax audit problems. If possible one should maintain a livable income from more conventional employment and be very careful to keep the funds of the gambling bankroll separate. Keeping a substantial bankroll in cash is ruinous due to inflation, making it desirable to keep the bankroll earning a little interest when it is not in action. However, bank deposits or withdrawals of cash over \$10,000 per transaction are routinely reported to the U. S. government. Please offer any imaginative ideas to solve a growing problem.

I have always advocated obeying the tax laws. I have declared blackjack winnings as income for many years. There were several years that I even listed my occupation as "blackjack player" on my 1040.

Here are some of the advantages I have noticed from being honest with the IRS. Most important is self respect. Tax evasion is a felony, and I could not respect myself if I committed a felony every 15 April. Related to that is the fact that I do not leave myself open to coercion. If anyone ever threatens me by saying, "I am going to tell the IRS all about you," my answer would be, "Go ahead. You cannot tell them anything they do not already know."

Another benefit of paying taxes is that I can spend money openly. I do not have money that I am trying to hide from the IRS. Every time I want a new car I go buy one — and I always write a check to cover the whole amount. There is no way I could have bought the house I live in (homes in La Jolla are not cheap) if I had been hiding my winnings instead of declaring them as income.

This brings up another benefit—I was able to qualify for a mortgage on my house based on my expected blackjack winnings, but only because I had a history of blackjack winnings on my past tax forms to show to prospective lenders.

I agree that the IRS treatment of gambling wins is not fair. I do not like the IRS sharing in my wins if I win for the year, but not sharing in my losses if I lose for the year. I would like to be able to carry gambling losses over to other years. However, my attitude is that I can live with the law. I have accepted the fact that I have a partner—the IRS—who takes a large part of what I earn. I treat as mine to spend only the part that the IRS does not take. I pay a lot of taxes, but I still manage to live comfortably.

## Final Word From a Pro

Daniel Forbes says:

Someday the cards will humble me. Maybe it will happen when I am 70 and can afford it. Some old pit boss will smile knowingly, thinking to himself, “It’s about time that sly old bastard got his. He always seemed to beat us. Heluva nice guy, though.”



# CHAPTER 10

# CHEATING BY THE

# DEALER

Cheating is currently only a small problem in legal casinos in the United States, but stay alert. You should be aware of ways that dealers can cheat and know what to look for. If you are cheated, you will lose very quickly. It will take you a week of playing against honest dealers to earn back what you can be cheated out of in an hour.

From the reports I get I am sure cheating still exists. But I have not knowingly been cheated in a long time. I am still always alert to the possibility of being cheated. No matter how friendly the dealer or how long I have been playing in that same casino, I always watch for cheating. I have not seen any in many years. The only times I have been cheated in recent years were in

Indonesia and Korea. All Indonesian casinos have since been closed. Cheating is not a problem at Walker Hill in Seoul and the other major casinos, but in Korea avoid small hidden casinos (that might be illegal) and casinos way out in the country that get almost no customers.

I never cheat. I have had instances where a dealer gives me a sly or knowing look and flashes the next card to be dealt or the hole card. I always get up and walk away. I want to win, but I want to win honestly. I do not mind profiting from dealer errors or dealer sloppiness, but I refuse to be a partner with any dealer in a scheme to steal from a casino.

## Atlantic City

Cheating has never been a problem in Atlantic City casinos.

## Nevada

Cheating has not been a problem in Nevada casinos for a long time. There will always be accusations of cheating whether or not cheating actually exists. Whenever anything unusual happens and you lose, you are likely to claim that you were cheated. You will occasionally lose ten hands in a row just by chance alone; losing ten hands in a row is not *prima facie* evidence of cheating. Some card counters incorrectly think that winning is due to skill and losing is due to being cheated. The truth is that winning and losing are both chance events.

Casino regulators are supposed to impose stiff penalties against cheaters. If gaming commission sleuths spot cheating at a casino, they can close that casino. Cheating managers are not supposed to be allowed to

manage casinos any more. Cheating owners are not supposed to be allowed to own casinos any more. All of this makes it unlikely that you will encounter a legal casino where cheating is house policy.

### Which Card is Upcard?

Axel Freed says:

On day shift at a large Las Vegas casino, I encountered a dealer who twice turned up his second card (instead of the first card) after considerable fumbling. The first time he had 10 up and a 4 in the hole. The second time the upcard was again a 10, so I stood with fifteen. This time the hole card was 5, and I won the hand.

In a situation such as Freed describes, what the dealer did is against the rules and dishonest. However, it may yield information on which you can capitalize. For example, suppose the dealer looks at the first card before turning it over. If the first card is 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 the dealer looks at the second card. If the second card is ace or 10, the dealer turns up the second card instead of the first card. Suppose the dealer is otherwise honest.

In the situation of the above paragraph, the dealer is giving you additional information. If the dealer turns up the second card, it will be 10 or ace and the hole card will be 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. If the dealer turns up the first card and it is 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6, you know that the hole card is other than 10 or ace. If the dealer turns up the first card and it is 7, 8, 9, 10, or ace, you have no new information about the hole card.

This information is valuable to you. If you know how to use it, you are better off than if the dealer did not try to cheat. Since I do not want to encourage you to play against cheating dealers, I am not going to work out the appropriate strategy or expected value of this scenario.

I should mention that if you ignore the dealer's actions and just play your normal game with decisions based on the dealer's upcard, you will be worse off due to the cheating. The cheating dealer shows aces and 10s too often, and the players bust much too often.

### **Peeking**

A reader says:

At a major Las Vegas casino a young dealer named Paul was blatantly peeking at the next card to be dealt, ostensibly for the benefit of a pretty female player who was toking heavily. Paul had the audacity to call for insurance before taking a hole card, peek at the top card, and then deal himself a natural after his female friend put up an insurance bet! I did not catch him dealing seconds, but the peek was obvious. It seemed like just "good-natured" cheating, but it is kind of scary to think that a dealer can be so blatant and not worry about being caught. When the girl hit a hard seventeen with a \$5 toke riding on the hand and caught a 10 to bust her hand, Paul looked at her hand, said "You can't hit a seventeen," and put the 10 in the discard rack, handing her back her seventeen.

### **Unusual Action**

A reader says:

I definitely believe there is some cheating at blackjack by some casinos some of the time. This is what happened to me at a single-deck game in a large northern Nevada casino. I began playing with green chips, varying my bets 1-4. There was no other big action in the casino, so three floor men watched my game. A new dealer came in, a short chubby-fingered man of about 50. The count went up and I threw out a \$100 bet. The dealer made a very suspicious motion with the deck. He held it high and with his other hand apparently flipped the top of the deck, making a snap-

ping sound. He might have been checking the number of cards to see if it was enough for another round, but there was no reason for him to do that because the discards were in a rack on the table. Then he dealt himself an ace, and I got garbage.

After the hand was over he shuffled the deck. I watched as he preserved a clump of about fifteen cards — in a single deck that is a lot! I said to the pit boss, "My nine-year-old daughter can shuffle better than that." The boss claimed the dealer shuffled well. I told him, "You should not have a poor shuffler at a quarter table — either he is purposely clumping the cards with a poor shuffle or he is a fat-fingered klutz." The pit boss became angry. Then I said, "And how about that ace he got last hand?"

To make a long story short, I was escorted out the door by five large security guards.

I say again — the shuffle was so obviously bad that a nine-year-old could shuffle better. Either it was purposely done, or the dealer was too tired, or he did not care, or he is all thumbs. As a \$100 bettor, I deserve a better shuffle!

This incident may have been cheating or it may have been harassment. I am including it because of my confidence in the writer's ability to detect actions that differ from normal casino procedures. The writer is an experienced pro who has played blackjack around the world.

Keep your eyes on the pack at all times. Occasionally watching the pack will make a dealer nervous, but you will not lose to a particular cheater more than once. Play only in big casinos. Do not play in single-table holes in the wall. Big casinos have more to lose than to gain by cheating and consequently should not tolerate it. If you see a cheating dealer, quietly inform the pit boss. The pit

boss will not believe you, but will watch the dealer closely. An honest casino owner will immediately fire a dealer caught cheating.

If you play enough and keep your eyes open, you will spot dealers with suspicious motions, and you will notice dealers using Bee cards with the unbroken pattern of dazzling diamonds. If you stick to big casinos, you will only rarely see a dealer whom you can positively identify as a cheat. This was not always true. During the 1960s several Nevada casinos, including some large ones, were closed because of cheating.

### The Golden

The Golden, now defunct, was once well known to knowledgeable Reno locals as a casino in which cheating was common. One weekend in early 1968, I went to Reno with six friends. I told the six what to look for and took the group into the Golden to find a cheating dealer. A woman of about 40 with drugstore-red hair was peeking and dealing seconds whenever she wished. The five customers at her table were bemoaning their bad luck, oblivious to being cheated. My friends and I stood, full of awe, in a semicircle behind the victims. Five of my friends saw everything that the wicked witch was doing, but one friend could only see her peeking without being able to tell when she was dealing seconds. I tried unobtrusively to demonstrate the different arm motion Big Red used for seconds. Meanwhile the pit boss had wandered over to see why so many people had gathered around one table. His sharp eye caught my arm motion, and he immediately whispered something in Big Red's ear. It must not have been sweet nothings because thereafter every card came off the top of the pack, and the gallery was treated to cordial smiles by the demure dealer. The fun was over, so our group left.

## Diddle the Discards

This technique comes from Mr. A., a professional blackjack player. He claims to have seen it used in Las Vegas. You may have noticed a pit boss pick up a handful of discards and examine them—the fronts, the sides, or the backs. But the boss never takes the cards out of sight, at least in my experience.

However, Mr. A. reports that one pit boss turned around with a handful of the discards, temporarily removing the cards from the view of the players! Thereafter, the count rose to the roof shuffle after shuffle. Mr. A. thinks the cards the pit boss put back on the table were not the same cards that he removed. In a game in which six decks are shuffled and less than five are dealt out, a player has difficulty knowing whether the pack has the correct proportion of each denomination. You could be playing against too many small cards and too few aces and 10s and not realize it.

Mr. A. claims a player called the Gaming Control Board and asked that it immediately seize the cards at that table. The person he talked to said it would be done, but no Gaming Control Board agent ever showed up to do it.

Dave Douglas sent a *Las Vegas Sun* clipping that states that State Gaming Control Board agents arrested a floorman at the Silver Saddle in Las Vegas; they saw him remove six face cards from two decks and then put the short decks in play.

## Peek and Burn

This technique also comes from Mr. A., who claims to have seen it used in Las Vegas. After finishing hitting his own hand, the dealer peeks at the top card. Various ways of peeking are explained in the many books and videocassettes on cheating. If the top card is an ace or 10, the

dealer sloughs it off when picking up the used cards. If the top card is a not an ace or 10, the dealer does not discard it, but deals it out in the normal manner.

Mr. A. says the peek and burn was used against a high-stakes blackjack player who was playing alone at a table. The effect is he got considerably less than his fair share of good hands since many of the aces and 10s he should have gotten instead ended up with the discards. First base at a busy table would suffer the same fate. The other players at a busy table would be hurt to the extent that they would be playing with a deck poor in aces and 10s, but they would not be hurt as badly as the first player to receive cards.

You undoubtedly have heard of dealing seconds, and you might be wondering why a dealer who wants to cheat would bother with the peek and burn because peeking and dealing seconds gets the money faster. The answer is that dealing undetectable seconds is a difficult skill to master. Sloughing off a card is easier. So a dealer who wants to cheat but who does not want to devote the time to master seconds might attempt the peek and burn.

### **Dealer Can Cheat By Hitting Busted Hands**

Dave Douglas shares a method of cheating that he may have encountered in a Strip casino. The incident was over so quickly that he is not certain whether what he thinks he saw is what really happened.

Douglas thinks the dealer looked at the next card out of the shoe as he was getting ready to pick up a hand that had already busted. The dealer saw that the card was a 10, put it on that hand, and quickly scooped the busted hand into the discard tray. Douglas was doubling down on eleven; a 10 that possibly should have gone to his hand may have been slapped on a hand that had already busted.