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Counters Culture The Simple Rule of Blackjack is That the House Reigns-To Win Consistently Takes Skill, Luck and the Art of the Con

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Saturday night, about an hour short of midnight, and Bryce Carlson is on the prowl.

The dense palm jungle inside the Mirage, Steve Wynn's South Seas fantasy on the Las Vegas Strip, vibrates to the rhythm of a live pop band. Under faux-bamboo canopies, 80 blackjack tables hum like hives. A young Asian player with a $500 bet stares first at his nine and seven and then at the dealer's up card, a queen. He motions for a hit and draws an eight, busting his hand with 24. As the dealer sweeps away his stack of black chips, a gallery of onlookers murmurs sympathetically.

Carlson detaches himself from the crowd and casually moves on, checking out the other tables, looking for one where the action suits him and his methods. He finds one, takes a seat and drops five $100 bills on the table.

"Changing five!" the dealer sings out. Her pit boss glances over, marks the big action and nods. All he sees is another fish on the line.

Big mistake. Bryce Carlson is a card-counter, and during the next hour he will beat the Mirage for $2,600.

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CASINOS ALL OVER NEVADA WOULD PROBABLY PAY MONEY FOR CARLSON'S DESCRIPTION, OR EVEN FOR A CLUE TO HIS real name. Not long ago, Bill Zender, manager of the Aladdin Casino in Las Vegas and a former counter, publicly hinted he had picked out Carlson from an old surveillance videotape and was fixing to throw him off his property the next time he tried to play. Not everyone believes this, but much of the blackjack world is awaiting the showdown.

For now, let's just say this much: Carlson is tall, but not too tall. Mid-40s. This evening he's dressed to look prosperous but not ostentatious. Brown leather jacket, cashmere scarf. Nice gold watch but no other jewelry to attract attention. His guiding principle is to look as if he belongs and, in fact, he fits into the clientele of high rollers and Southern California weekend revelers like a Mercedes-Benz in a Brentwood driveway.

As a skilled player, Carlson is a soldier in one of Las Vegas' oldest battles. By keeping a mathematical picture of the deck's composition in his head, he is able to raise and lower his bets as the cards shift in and out of his favor. The process is called card-counting but it is much more than that. It's psychology, for the counter must play in a way that draws no attention from a suspicious pit boss; it's acting, because when Carlson wants to sit out a hand in a freezing cold deck, the dealer must believe he is momentarily distracted by counting the bills in his wallet, and it's war. Not by coincidence did Carlson entitle his book about his powerful counting system "Blackjack for Blood."

The idea of matching wits with the casinos has attracted thousands of combatants. The typical counter, as the casinos see him, is young, male, serious and introverted. But the ranks of card-counters with winning records also include plenty of retirees, women and party animals. What they have in common is an aptitude for numbers-although the math is not necessarily complicated-and the discipline to excise superstition and emotion from their play and bet exactly as the count dictates.

"You don't need a photographic memory," Carlson says. "A person of average intelligence could do it, although every counter I've met is probably a couple of standard deviations" smarter than that.

Unlike such stunts as marking cards, card-counting is not considered cheating, a felony in Nevada. Years of court cases have established that it is merely a highly sophisticated way of using information available to everyone at the table: what cards have been dealt. Yet the casinos regard it as such a threat that they can, by state regulation, eject-or "back off"-anyone they suspect of the practice.

"I'm not running a candy store here," Zender says. "If I opened up the place and said everyone could beat the hell out of me, I wouldn't have the candy store for long."

Counters know that the Nevada casinos are determined to protect their blackjack games. If casinos could not bar skilled players, they would find ways to make the games unbeatable. When the late player Ken Uston won a court order forcing Atlantic City casinos to deal to all comers, owners responded by dealing eight decks together and reshuffling after four. But the stupefying slowness in shuffling eight decks frustrates casino owners as much as it does the players; a slow game costs the house money.

A better solution may be the Aladdin, where Zender offers what is perhaps the Strip's most counter-beatable game, but also its most counter-savvy staff; all but one of the shift managers formerly played for a living, and Zender's library of surveillance tapes spans years. The simple reality of casino gambling is that the house reigns. It manipulates the odds, dictates bet limits, controls the rules. To beat the house consistently demands not only skill and luck, but guile. Which is exactly why card-counters can't resist taking it on.

"That's what they're really in it for," says Arnold Snyder, publisher of the quarterly Blackjack Forum and a leading authority on the game. "It's James Bond, Spy vs. Spy. The world doesn't offer many legal ways you can feel you're a con artist, and this is one of them."

"The act is every bit as important as the system," says AnthonyCurtis, a onetime stockbroker who came to Las Vegas from Detroit as a card-counter and stayed to publish the "Las Vegas Advisor," a monthly visitors guide to casino promotions.

But there is almost as much distance between the glamorous image of the card-counter's lifestyle and the reality as there is between James Bond and, say, CIA mole Aldrich Ames. Professional counters almost always play under pseudonyms and forgo "comps" because a casino lavishing free food, drink and lodging on a player tends also to monitor his action.

Then there's the counter's razor-thin edge. Mastering the count means hundreds of hours poring over books and software, honing one's skills in solitude and then spending night after night in casinos trying to exploit a 1.5% 1.5% over the house. Thus a player laying out an average bet of $125 a hand, at 60 hands an hour, will put $7,500 on the table to earn an average of $112. One expert recently calculated that a full-time counter could earn $70,000 to $230,000 a year under perfect conditions: no casino countermeasures, no mental mistakes, eight hours a day, 50 weeks a year. Any departure from the ideal slices a chunk from that potential or forces the player to seek opportunities elsewhere, such as new casinos opening all over the country or in Europe or Asia, where management's unfamiliarity with counting may leave players with slightly better odds.

Nor are counters exempt from the grim laws of probability. En route to that 1.5%, anyone can suffer weeks, even months, of relentless losses. Playing at a professional level without $70,000 or more behind you is asking to be wiped out for good.

The battle takes its toll. Snyder believes that a counter playing well enough to make a living might have a career span of only five years or so before he becomes too well known. This is why many counters constantly look for ways to make earning money from blackjack more compatible with having a real life. Some, like Zender, go into casino management. Others turn to writing books and software for the thriving players' market.

"There's more money in playing blackjack than writing about it," says Stanford Wong, a renowned player and writer for whom blackjack has helped finance a spacious house in La Jolla, an unvexing lifestyle and college

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educations for his two children. "But to play, you have to go to the casinos, and that's inconsistent with spending time with the kids."

Expert estimates of the number of counters relying on blackjack as a full-time career range from a few dozen to several hundred. Players like Carlson, who runs his own computer business in Los Angeles and regards blackjack as a "lucrative sideline" (he makes more than $50,000 a year), sympathize with brethren who try to make a full-time living by counting.

For them, "it's a lonely life and a very stressful one," he says. "You don't hang out with people, you just play. You have to be secretive. It's not a good way to develop a well-rounded personality."

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"The perception that a skilled player can beat the dealer in 21 is the best thing that ever happened to the game." The speaker is Steve Forte, 38, widely regarded as blackjack's most skillful player ever.

Forte knows more ways to beat the game (some legal, some not) than any man alive. During his counting career, he ran six-player teams in which three played and three scouted the tables. Now he runs a consulting service from a pleasant home in Henderson, just outside of Las Vegas, where he takes calls from fretful casino executives all over the world.

"Steve, we've got a sick game," they'll complain. Sometimes he'll find that the problem is nothing more than a new traffic pattern that is steering players away from the tables. But often the problem is more subtle, like inadequate card-handling that allows attentive players to track clumps of valuable cards through the shuffle.

The concern is understandable: Blackjack accounts for nearly half of all table-game revenues, nearly $1 billion a year in Nevada alone. That's remarkable considering that 30 years ago blackjack was a gambling backwater, offered mostly for women to play while their husbands shot craps.

Then came Ed Thorp's book, "Beat the Dealer."

In 1956, Edward O. Thorp was a UCLA mathematics professor planning a stop in Las Vegas. Before he left, he read an article describing an optimum playing strategy for blackjack. Having committed the strategy to a palm-sized card, he hit the tables, where he lost $8.50 of his $10 bankroll.

But Thorp was snagged. "The atmosphere of ignorance and superstition that pervaded my little experience," he would write later, "securely planted in my mind the suggestion that even `good' players did not know the fundamentals of this game. There might be a way to beat it."

During the next two years, he spent every spare hour dissecting blackjack's mathematics via the computers at MIT, to which he had moved in the interim. But Thorp was not much of a gambler (no bankroll) and he used his system mostly as grist for academic papers. One of these came to the attention of a reporter, who wrote it up. Within days Thorp was deluged with offers to finance a working demonstration.

He accepted the proposal of an East Coast millionaire named Emanuel Kimmel, a gangster; his mob nursed a grievance against the mobs that owned the Reno-Lake Tahoe casinos. So a few weeks later Thorp, Kimmel and two bodyguards flew to Nevada. In short order, the system turned Kimmel's $10,000 seed money into $21,000.

"Beat the Dealer," which first appeared in 1962, explained that the deck favors the player when it contains a disproportionate number of high cards (10s and aces) than low (2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Assigning the high cards a value of -1 and the low cards +1, Thorp instructed the reader to keep a running count as each card appears and is removed from play and to bet higher whenever the count goes plus-that is, when an excess of high cards remains in the deck. That improves the player's odds of getting a blackjack, among other things.

The book also codified blackjack's Basic Strategy, a set of rules dictating the optimal play of every possible hand based on the dealer's up card-when to hit, stand, split pairs and double down. In most casinos, even a non-counter playing flawless Basic will face only a 0.6% disadvantage. That means someone betting an average of $10 a hand at 60 hands an hour will lose an average of $3.60 an hour.

With sales of close to a million copies, "Beat the Dealer" must be one of the most successful gambling treatises ever published. Ask almost any counter how he got started, and sooner or later the answer will come around to ". . . and then I read Thorp."

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Thorp, now 62, lives in Newport Beach and runs a successful money-management firm specializing in securities. "I haven't been back to Las Vegas in several years," he says. "Blackjack's too much of a grind-you've got to sit there hour after hour after hour. I can make far more money just sitting here and thinking about things than taking myself off to the casino."

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The subculture that bloomed in the wake of "Beat the Dealer" boasts a cast of characters almost as rich as baseball's. There's Frank Schipani (pseudonym: "Al Francesco"), a former contractor from Indiana who invented many classic team strategies. And there's Ken Uston, a senior vice president at the Pacific Stock Exchange when Schipani put him on his team. Brash and publicity-hungry, Uston brought a "60 Minutes" camera crew into the Flamingo Hilton in Las Vegas and managed to get "backed off" in front of Harry Reasoner.

Among the game's real stars are the men who gave blackjack its theoretical foundation. At the top today is a disparate triumvirate whom publisher Anthony Curtis calls "The Big 3: Griffin, Wong and Snyder."

Peter Griffin played blackjack in 1970 to get some experience for a Cal State Sacramento course he was preparing on the mathematics of gambling. "After totaling up the losses of my brief novitiation," he later wrote jocularly, "I vowed revenge on the casinos."

The result was "The Theory of Blackjack," a 254-page tome that subjects the game to the kind of mathematical analysis usually found only in quantum physics, tempered by a sharp wit that makes Griffin a popular figure in the game.

He is also a brilliant mathematician with transcendent counting skills-but with no taste for high-stakes playing.

"A lot of mathematicians don't have the gambling instinct," says Curtis, whose Las Vegas-based Huntington Press publishes Griffin's book. "Peter enjoys the hunt and the mental challenge, but he's happy to play for $5 a hand."

The casinos can only be relieved by that. Once in a 5,000-hand test of his playing efficiency-that is, how close he came to the maximum win attainable from perfect knowledge of the deck's composition after each hand-Griffin scored a towering 82%.

"Probably there are people who could do better," he says from his Cal State Sacramento office. "Maybe even as high as 90%. But that would have to be someone with nothing else on his mind-I mean like an idiot savant. But I've long since disabused myself of the notion that I could win a fortune at the game."

Although Griffin, 57, never played professionally, his impact on the game-and vice versa-is perhaps greater than if he had. "As a second career, it's led me to a lot of interesting people and places." He laughs. "Without it, who knows what kind of embittered old professor of algebra I'd be?"

Where Griffin plays the math genius out on a lark, Stanford Wong (born John Ferguson in Oregon about 51 years ago) has the persona of the stern, even severe, professor subjecting the game to unforgiving scrutiny. And he is the only counter to have a playing maneuver named after him: "Wonging" means counting down a deck without playing and stepping in the moment it turns positive (and leaving the moment it turns negative again). It's so effective that some casinos don't allow players to enter a game until it breaks for a shuffle.

Wong first visited Las Vegas in 1965 at the age of 21, having read Thorp between classes at the Oregon State University. He and a friend worked as dealers for the summer and spent all their free hours at the tables. He later earned a doctorate in finance from Stanford, taught at several institutions but decided that blackjack was the best way to satisfy his lifelong fascination with puzzles.

Today his books "Professional Blackjack" and "Blackjack Secrets" are standard works and his "Current Blackjack News" is an industry nemesis, analyzing gambling opportunities across the country. Any casino offering a promotional deal that involves manipulating the game's delicate math-paying on totals of 22, instead of the usual 21, for example-will find its offer communicated to Wong's subscribers. Just last December, the Alton Belle, an Illinois riverboat, decided to pay a generous 2 to 1 (instead of the normal 3 to 2) on player blackjacks every Tuesday that month. Wong flashed the promotion on Dec. 1 and flights into Alton jammed up. The house lost more than $300,000.

Wong is unrepentant. "You walk around these casinos and they're so fancy from all the money they've made from the little people," he says. "I'm helping a few of them get their money back."

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The third member of Curtis' pantheon is Arnold Snyder, known as the "Bishop of Blackjack" ever since he donned a chasuble and bowler hat to deliver a mock sermon in 1981 at the University of Nevada's fifth national conference on gambling. Snyder is a high-school graduate and former postal worker who began counting in 1977. He also recognized that in haunting the $1 and $2 tables in Reno and Tahoe and playing from a bankroll of less than $100, he was guaranteed winnings of about $1.59 an hour. "I made more than that at the post office," he says.

The answer was to publish. He offered 10 photocopies of his own counting system for sale through gaming newsletters for $50 each and was stunned when a publisher sent him a $1,000 check and an order for 20 more. "The Blackjack Formula" was "totally hack mathematics, but it worked," Snyder says.

Later, he started Blackjack Forum, the game's top technical journal today. A recent issue discussed the newest maneuver that is giving casinos fits: shuffle tracking, a nearly undetectable method of following clumps, or "slugs," of high-value cards through a casino shuffle.

Snyder, a guest lecturer at Cornell University, also monitors new products to weed out the "crap and phony systems" from the information inundating players. A card player can choose from dozens of software programs that can train a counting eye or analyze a system's betting efficiency. "There's an incredible amount of information available that 10 or 20 years ago players would have died for," Snyder says. "In the old days, the average person had to take it on faith. Now he can get the software and test almost anything."

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But no system protects the counter from the swings of fortune.

Having exited the Mirage ("You don't want to spend too much time in one place"), Bryce Carlson heads toward Vegas' east side and a casino catering to local players.

Here his $100 bills draw closer scrutiny. "Are you staying with us, sir?" the pit boss asks as Carlson unfurls three fresh ones onto the green felt.

"No, I'm over at Caesars, and they take pretty good care of me there." This tells the boss a couple of things: Carlson's a high roller, and he's already passed muster at a major club. For the next few hours the boss watches Carlson's play from a respectable distance.

What he sees is an average player, chatty, friendly with the dealers. Carlson joins in the table's discussions of blackjack strategy, agreeing wholeheartedly with someone's dead-wrong justification of a bonehead play. When he has a close hand, he'll show it to the player at his left. "Do you have my nine?" he asks companionably; his neighbor obligingly shows his hand and Carlson is able to incorporate those cards into his count and decide how to play.

"If you have a good act, like I do, the bosses can't distinguish me from an amateur, losing counter," he says later.

Except this time the losing's no act. The dealers score blackjack after blackjack and repeatedly sweep the table clean. Three hours after taking his seat, Carlson is down more than $3,000, wiping out his Mirage win.

"This is the yang as opposed to the yin," he says later. "I had a nice run of cards at the Mirage, and I gave it back here. At the level I play, the short-run fluctuations are in the range of a few thousand dollars."

In fact, the ability to withstand the fluctuations is what distinguishes the pro from the counter wanna-be. The casinos make money from blackjack because most players are destined to lose. They make rudimentary mistakes, let emotion color their play, overbet to make up losses and then wonder why card-counting isn't the magical path to riches the books promise.

"Out of 100 people who buy a book on blackjack, probably 80 don't even bother to learn Basic Strategy," Zender says. "Card-counting takes quite a bit of practice, 200 hours of practice at least, and that's a lot of time."

But the lure remains. As Carlson says, "Blackjack is essentially a solved game." He finishes his weekend with a win streak at Circus Circus that put him firmly in the black. "If you play an accurate strategy and always bet the money appropriate to your advantage, you will win," he says. "Period."

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Beating the Odds

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The object of blackjack is to get closer to a total of 21 than the dealer without going over ("busting"). Tens, jacks, queens and kings are valued at 10; aces at one or 11 (a hand in which the ace is valued at 11 is "soft," a hand with no ace, or an ace valued at 1 is "hard"), and all other cards at their face value.

After placing a bet, each player receives two cards, either face up or face down, depending on house rules. The dealer gets one up and one down. A player dealt an ace and 10-card has a natural blackjack, and is paid 3 to 2 on their bets (unless the dealer has a natural, in which case the hand is a tie.)

After the two cards have been dealt, a player can double his bet and draw only one additional card. If a player is dealt a pair, he can make a second bet equal to the first and split them into two separate hands. The dealer cannot split a pair and must draw up to a total of 16 and stand on 17 or over.

Many casinos also offer insurance when the dealer's up card is an ace. The player makes an additional bet of up to half his original wager; if the dealer has a blackjack, the player gets 2 to 1 on his insurance bet. If there is no blackjack, the insurance bet is lost.

A player using Basic Strategy, the optimal play of a hand based on the composition of a complete deck, will reduce his disadvantage against the house in a multiple-deck game to about 0.6%-by far the best odds anywhere on the casino floor. Complete Basic Strategy charts are available in bookstores but these seven rules cover the majority of plays.

1. Against the dealer's 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6, stand on all "stiff" hands (hard 12 through 16).

2. Against the dealer's 7, 8, 9, 10 or ace, hit to a total of hard 17 or higher.

3. Hit all soft hands of 17 (A-6) or less and stand on soft 18 or higher.

4. Always double down on 10 and 11 against a dealer's 2 through 9.

5. Always split aces and 8s; never split 4s, 5s or 10s.

6. Split all other pairs against a dealer's 4, 5 or 6.

7. Never take insurance.

PHOTO: COLOR, Former -counter .; PHOTO: COLOR, (man at table); PHOTO: COLOR, (table and hand) / Al Seib / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: (men around table) / Howard Schwartz, Gamblers Book Club

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