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# BLACKJACK AUTUMN

A True Tale of Life, Death, and Splitting Tens in Winnemucca

BARRY MEADOW



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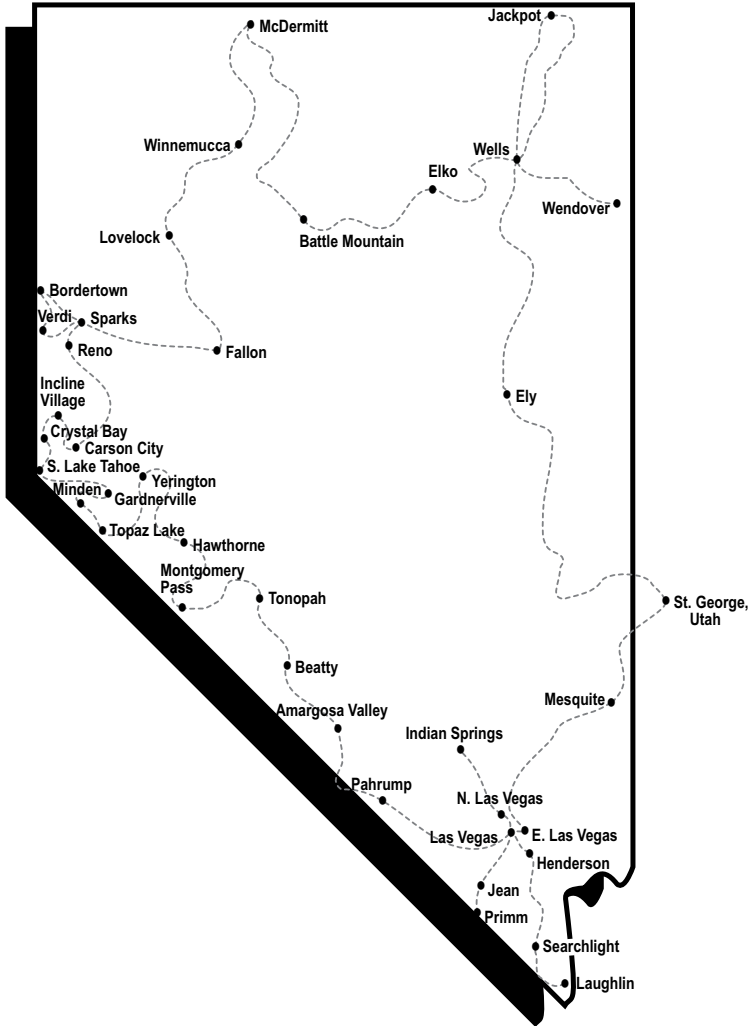
**A True Tale of Life, Death, and  
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**Barry Meadow**

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## **It's All About the Benjamins, Baby**

In Beatty, the game halts because if I win the next hand, there are not enough chips in the tray to pay me.

In less than 15 minutes at the Stratosphere in Las Vegas, I lose \$1,800.

I am trapped in Tonopah, the blackjack game so good that I dare not leave.

In Sparks, I lose in every casino but one—and in that one, I'm told never to return.

Playing blackjack in every Nevada casino that offered a live game took me two months and 4,000 miles and led me to towns where a tourist is as rare as a Hawaiian snowstorm. I went to places I thought I'd never see, and to places I hope never to see again. It was a long, lonely road, meandering through nearly 200 casinos, and I'm here to tell the tale.

Everywhere I went I carried a tiny tape recorder. Sometimes I mumbled into it while walking through a bank of slot machines; I must have looked like a Secret Service agent on full assassin watch. Or I'd find some stairwell or lobby far from the action, feeling like Norm Macdonald dictating a "memo to self." I made more recordings in garages than a Seattle grunge band.

Sometimes I was king of the casino, the biggest winner

in the whole damn joint. And sometimes I was a blackjack piñata, pummeled by dealers having their own private party.

Each night back in my room, I'd boot up my laptop computer and get to work. By the time the trip ended, the computer was in worse shape than Andy Sipowicz. And so was I.

I learned many things, but most of all I learned that no matter what anybody tells you, in Nevada there's only one word that matters.

Cash.

In Nevada, it's all about the Benjamins, baby.

There are red carpets and brown deserts and blue skies and neon glamour in a whole electronic palette. But only one color really matters here — green.

In some places, money doesn't matter much. Maybe what's important is that your uncle is the king, or you're the deputy assistant secretary, or you have tenure. Or maybe that you have character, that you shelter the homeless and feed the starving.

None of that matters in Nevada. Have cash in abundance and you're a desirable commodity. Lack it and you're just one more sucker, and don't let the door hit you on the way back to your turnaround charter bus from Cucamonga.

Cash gets it all done here. At the bottom, adult clubs give \$10 spiffs to taxi drivers who steer customers to their place instead of to the naughty joints across the street. At the top, your seven-digit credit line and willingness to risk some of it at baccarat gives you access to jacuzzi penthouses with your own private butler and chef, and if you'd like some company whisked up your private elevator, that would be no problem, sir.

In a state where churches gladly accept chips in the

collection plate, your bankroll determines everything. While the hoi polloi shovel their money into slot machines and stand on hour-long lines to see Wayne Newton, the mostly Asian whales who can afford to lose \$1 million in a single night have no lines to fret over, and here's a \$20,000 fur coat for your wife, Mr. Kim, as a token of our esteem – though when Mr. Kim's business fails, there will be no more food, drink, suites, or fur.

It doesn't matter, exactly, how you obtained your money. In fact, it was quite a source of consternation in Nevada when a few years ago the federal government began requiring casinos to record the names of players whose cash transactions totaled \$10,000 a day or higher – not just because the paperwork was an expense and an annoyance, but because the requirements figured to drive away some players whose money was earned by something other than fixing faucets or selling sofas. Luckily for the casinos, it turns out that these currency transaction reports are easily dodgeable by anybody who hasn't landed directly from Mars, wink wink.

Discrimination in Nevada is not by race or religion or ethnicity, but by dollar. Have the dollars and you go to the special no-wait check-in area, avoid the restaurant lines, and slide right into that sixth-row-center booth for the show. Lack the dollars and your place in the touristic hierarchy is somewhere south of nowhere. You're a sucker no matter what, but some suckers are more important than others.

Gambling has been a staple of Nevada life forever, except possibly for that period half a billion years past when the entire state was underwater. Two thousand years ago, the local Indians would bet on which member of a team was concealing a small stick. In 1869, five years after Nevada attained statehood, gambling was legalized. Soon

every riverboat wise guy arrived seeking new fish, bringing cards that were marked, sanded, daubed, trimmed, or waxed. Name any gambling scam and probably someone in Nevada was doing it, a glorious tradition that continues to this day. Gambling remained legal until 1909, when a reform movement succeeded in outlawing it.

But because gambling was already deeply ingrained in the local culture, enforcing the ban was haphazard at best, and over the years the legislature watered down the original law anyway. The state was already considered the nation's center for wickedness, what with the quickie divorces, illegal prize fights, lackadaisical enforcement of Prohibition, and sanctioned prostitution, so the gambling ban was never taken all that seriously. In fact, you could have looked far and wide trying to find a market or gas station that didn't have at least one slot machine somewhere on the premises. To the rest of the United States, Nevada was the rascally and frequently delinquent nephew, always getting into some scrape or other that you really didn't want the details of, but you loved him just the same.

Finally, in 1931, the legislature legalized gambling once again. Just 24 hours after the bill was signed into law, the previously illegal but always flourishing Bank Club in Reno was jammed to capacity, with nearby clubs overflowing as well. A new era in Nevada history was dawning. The quest for cash had been made official.

Entrepreneurs quickly moved to upgrade their existing underground casinos or build new ones, such as the luxurious Meadows Supper Club in Las Vegas. An inmate-run casino was even set up in the Carson City prison, where game bosses could legally rob their fellow felons. About the only beings in the state untouched by gambling were the cattle.

All America became the target for casino operators

when Raymond “Pappy” Smith plastered the highways with more than 2,300 billboards with the legend, “Harold’s Club or Bust,” directing travelers to the Reno gambling joint named for his son. And downstate, right after World War II, Las Vegas as we know it began to take shape, spear-headed by mobster Bugsy Siegel, who built the Flamingo. Not long after the hotel was opened, however, Bugsy was introduced to a bullet, and not voluntarily.

Legendary gamblers, big-name entertainers, vicious criminals, and assorted colorful characters formed the Nevada quilt over the next several decades. There was Nick the Greek, who would quote Shakespeare after winning yet another hand from some hapless poker victim. And Benny Binion, the Texas tough-guy gambler who arrived in town with a trunkful of \$100 bills and a book-anything mentality. And Howard Hughes, the reclusive billionaire who helped Las Vegas transform itself from Mafia fiefdom to corporate mint. And Liberace, Sinatra, Elvis, and all the rest.

But always, it was about cash. And it still is.

You get famous in this state not by curing a disease or inventing some useful product, but by making some obscene amount of money and then hurling it around with wild abandon. Like Archie Karas, who played bigger and longer than anyone else in the history of Nevada, even outdoing billionaire Kerry Packer, who plays his \$500,000 hands in short bursts during his infrequent Las Vegas excursions. Karas was a full-time player, a pool hustler and poker maven who beat several of the world’s best out of millions of dollars during his run, which began with \$10,000 he borrowed from a fellow gambler in early 1993. In between crushing poker champions, Karas enjoyed a little craps at Binion’s Horseshoe — \$100,000 on a roll was typical. He kept winning and winning, eventually run-

ning his stake up to somewhere between \$17 million and \$22 million, depending on whose story you believe. One time, a high roller wanted to play craps at the Horseshoe and needed \$5,000-denomination chips. The owner of the Horseshoe at that time, Jack Binion, had to call Karas and ask him to lend the chips – because Karas had every one of the Horseshoe’s \$5,000 chips, \$10 million worth, in his safe-deposit box. Was Karas the luckiest crap player in history or was there something darker involved? Who knows? It took three years for him to lose it all.

The signs are all around. Loosest slots. More winners. Best payoffs. Highest jackpots. Some places even have whirlwinds of cash, a lucky patron picked at random to grab as much flying money as she can in one minute’s worth of greed. It’s the promise that keeps on promising, the seduction that always seduces.

We have the cash. Now come and get it.

If you can.

Nevada is a state built on license. A man with a vice, no matter what it is, can probably indulge it somewhere in Nevada. And the more cash a man has, the greater the extent of the indulgence.

Just about everyone in the state is in on the game. Change girls recommend a machine and hope you hit something and toke them. Dealers quickly classify you as a George or a stiff. Maitre d’s give you one seat for no tip and a different one for a ten-spot. Pit bosses calculate how much you figure to lose, and how quickly. Prostitutes demand the most money for the least time, then tell their office you paid half. State gaming officials jump into careers in the casino industry, parlaying a little experience into six-figure salaries as lobbyists and executives for the very companies they were supposedly regulating.

It’s not just a few mobsters with doctored scales, fool-

ing the tax man into thinking that a bag of nickels weighed 20 pounds instead of 30.

It's everybody.

As David Spanier writes in *Welcome to the Pleasure-dome*, "It's one of those things that one senses even on a first visit, is irritated by, and then comes to take for granted. The doorman, the bell captain, the cocktail waitresses, the dealers — it's not that they have their hands out ... it's rather that it is expected."

This naturally leads one to feel the most common emotion you can find in Nevada — contempt. Everyone holds the player in contempt, for what person in his right mind would enter a game he knows he can't beat? The player is seen as a mark, quickly classified by the amount of money that can be extracted from him. But there's plenty of contempt to go around elsewhere as well — floorman vs. dealer, high roller vs. host, card counter vs. all other players who are depriving him of his rightful position as star of his own head-up game, and everyone else. You think casino owners look upon their guests as anything other than patsies? If so, a certain bridge in Brooklyn is available for your purchase.

Contempt is not a very pleasant sentiment, so the staff has to block it out of their consciousness. Especially when some drunken loudmouth of a big bettor spills his drink all over the cards or calls a dealer names that are usually heard only by Marine recruits. The casino security force, so quick to expel a misbehaving \$2 bettor, is usually nowhere to be seen when black chips are involved. You can be the world's biggest jerk, but if you're a rich jerk, hey, you're not so bad after all.

"The casinos are fantasyland," writes a well-known gambling author using the pseudonym King Scobe in a delightful little book called *The Morons of Blackjack and*

*Other Monsters.* “There’s nothing legitimate going on there, nothing real, except hypocrisy. Does anyone really think the casino personnel are his friends? That they really care about you? That they want you to win?”

Yes, it’s all a fantasy, with Las Vegas the most fantastic of all. The place is big on authentic reproductions – of King Tut’s tomb, of the streets of Greenwich Village, of a pirate battle – and lookalikes who impersonate real celebrities. You can find fakes everywhere, from the fake castle that fronts the Excalibur to the fake breasts of the showgirls.

The sincerity is fake, as well, the essential problem of the casino business. The casinos want desperately for you to lose, while appearing to want desperately for you to win. And the more money you have, the more they want you to lose. In fact, every last dollar would be just fine.

So look for trends or play a hunch or find a hot table or tune into the vibrations or clutch your lucky pencil and come on down, take a chance, somebody wins so why not you? Here’s a free lesson on how to play craps, have a drink on us, and how many will that be for the show, sir? Anything we can get you, do for you today? So glad to have you with us.

As I begin my journey deep into the Nevada gambling world, my balance sheet is shamefully weak. I carry a mere \$8,000 into battle, an amount that Archie Karas on a good day might have given out in tokens.

Just a few short years ago, such a sum would have seemed a trifle. But that was before I discovered the world’s largest casino, the stock market. In the greatest bull run in history, I managed to lose more money than some people earn in a lifetime.

I lost on big stocks, little stocks, momentum stocks, value stocks, Internet stocks, new stocks, old stocks, on all exchanges and in all industries. Month after month, year

after year, my stock-picking was so spectacularly dreadful that on CNBC, I was listed as a key technical indicator — if Meadow bought, the stock was headed for a nosedive; if Meadow sold, however, a sensational rally loomed.

I'd earned much of my cash from gambling on horses, which made me perhaps the only man in recent history to make a fortune at the track and squander it in the stock market, although the stock losses far exceeded the race-track gains.

Was I happier when I was rich? Damn right I was. Maybe money can't buy happiness, but it sure can forestall misery.

But maybe misery is my natural lot. Few of us are really happy in this life, which might be why so many people look forward to an afterlife. I'll be content when I get that promotion, when the apartment is painted, when the kids finish school, when I lose the weight, when I can clean that closet, when my sister gets out of the hospital. It's always out of reach. Something always comes up.

But I do have some cash, the \$8,000 mark reached after I collect \$13 for recycling a large bag of soda cans. And I have credit, too. If I get off to a rocky start, I can use my casino credit lines to stay in action. I like having a well-dressed pit boss call me Mister Meadow as he hands over piles of black chips on my signature. But maybe I'll lose the \$8,000 in my pocket and another \$20,000 or so in markers as well.

Now I could, of course, borrow money against some credit cards or maybe take out a home-equity loan. Then I could bet higher stakes and win huge sums — unless, of course, I lose huge sums, which is also possible even if I'm the Babe Ruth of blackjack. In this game, bankrolls gyrate wilder than anyone in a Janet Jackson video. And if I borrow a lot of money, and lose it, and borrow a lot

more, and lose that ... well, the ending of the story will be uglier than a porno movie starring Roseanne.

I played in my first blackjack game 20 years ago, not long after moving to California from New York. I bought several books, learned the game, and played occasionally over the next few years. Later I began to go on up-and-backs, then on short junkets, and eventually on longer trips to places like Antigua and the Bahamas with my then-wife. I always saw the game as something I could use for a break from my regular routine, maybe as a way to get a free or low-cost vacation.

In the back of my mind, I always wondered if I could make a go of it just playing, and whether I would even want to. I understood the pressure of having to win money by gambling, having spent several years in which betting harness races was my main source of income. But this trip would be something different – not only would I have to win, but I'd have to win while traveling far from home, alone, for weeks and weeks, with the additional financial and emotional pressures that such a project would entail.

Making money playing blackjack in your spare time is one thing. Trying to do it using all your time is something else entirely, as I would learn.

A few years ago, a man who used the name Stuart Perry wrote a book called *Las Vegas Blackjack Diary*, in which he described a two-month full-time playing stint. His goal: to use his skills as a card counter to hammer the casinos. But the story ended disappointingly, with Perry having been kicked out and abused all over town and winding up with less of a profit for his seven-day work weeks than he could have made as an assistant bun boy at McDonald's.

I wonder if the same will happen to me. Or something worse. I'm concerned about hauling thousands of dollars in my pocket and making \$100 bets in some small town

on a Tuesday, then relying on the nonexistent security in some dirt-cheap motel where everyone who's ever stayed in Room 118 still has his key.

Maybe I'll wind up in some two-bit town broke and frightened, in debt to half a dozen casinos.

Anybody can go gamble for three or four days, and even that short a time is enough for most people. So what will that sixth, that seventh, that eighth week on the road be like? In that old country song, Dave Dudley couldn't wait to get home after six days on the road; I'll be gone sixty. And what road will it be, anyway? Will my fiancée abandon me, my teenaged son turn to drugs, my business fall apart?

And what about me?

Most of us like routines and habits — the same dinner with Mom every Friday, the same golf game every Saturday, the same church service every Sunday. You could set your watch by some people's lives.

I've never been much for routines and habits. At least Stuart Perry had an apartment. I'll have only a suitcase and some mighty long highways. No one will comfort me if I'm ill or ask how my day went. There'll be no more jacuzzi nights, unless you count being crammed into a hot tub with half a dozen tourists from Toronto. No more romantic dinners, the day's culinary highlight a long buffet line for cut-rate fried chicken.

No one will even know me.

I'll just write it as it happens. With no guarantees of anything but a long time away, a long way from home.

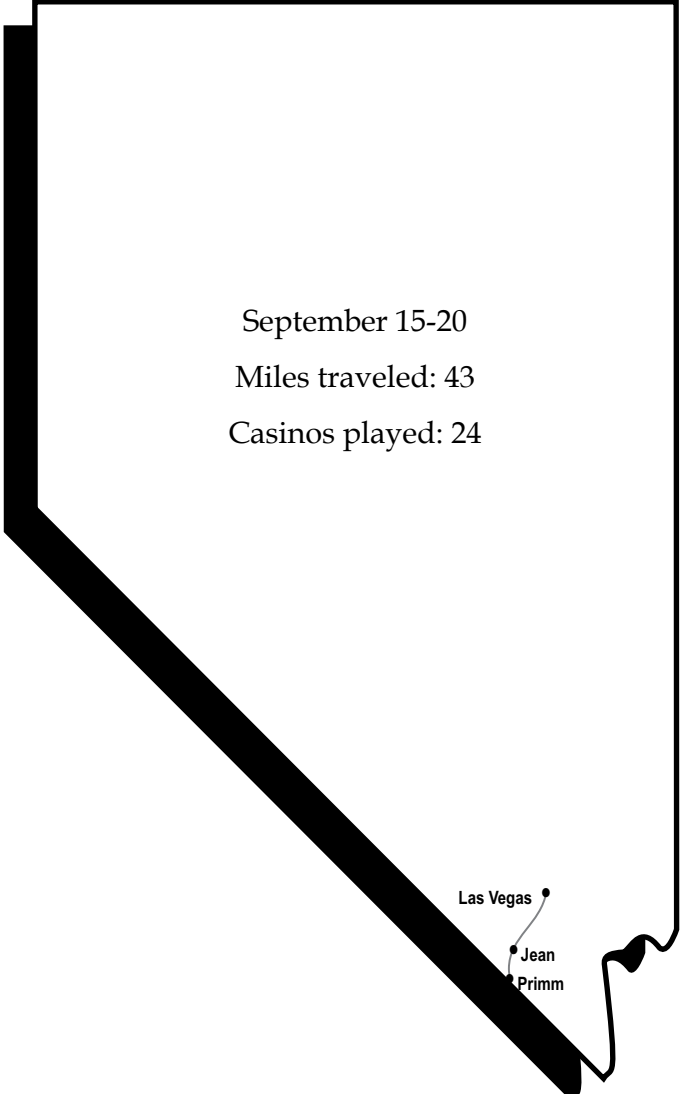
I publish a monthly horse-racing newsletter, and issue ratings each day for California thoroughbreds. I can't suspend my business while I'm gone, so I've prepared two months of newsletters in advance, hired a man to do my daily ratings, and trained my son to handle the paperwork

and phones each day after school. Surely it would be better if I had a bigger bankroll or I still had full-time help at the office. I can't really afford to take this time away – not from my fiancée, nor from my son, nor from my business.

Truth is, there's never really a good time for a trip such as this. There's always work to attend to, people to see, phones to answer, bills to pay, stuff to do. The only way to clear a calendar is simply to clear it.

I know that if I don't go now – *right now* – I'll probably never go. And if I never go, I'll always wonder what it would have been like. So now it's time to stop wondering, and play some cards.

This, then, will be my blackjack autumn.



September 15-20  
Miles traveled: 43  
Casinos played: 24

Las Vegas  
Jean  
Primm

## **Cash, Brainiac, and Cloud Man**

*Day 1 (Tuesday, 9/15/98, Primm)*

My first stop is the Primm Valley Resort in Primm, a town consisting solely of three casinos and a few four-to-a-trailer employee quarters. The nearest actual town is a 40-minute commute away.

The hotel is one of a trio of properties, all owned by Primadonna Resorts, that grab California visitors en route to Las Vegas, 43 miles east. Located just across the state line, the hotel and its sisters, Whiskey Pete's and Buffalo Bill's, have become a destination unto themselves. The main attractions seem to be price (often, rooms go for less than \$20), proximity (tour-bus groups save an hour and a half round trip by going to Primm instead of to Las Vegas), and things to keep children busy (a world-renowned roller coaster and other thrill rides, along with arcades, bowling, billiards, and a movie theater).

Which is why Leroy Iverson was a frequent visitor to Primm. On Memorial Day weekend in 1997, Iverson left late as usual to avoid traffic, taking with him his two children, 14-year-old Harold and Harold's half-sister, seven-year-old Sherrice. He pulled into the Primm Valley parking lot around midnight. He dropped his children at

the arcade, giving them \$5 each, and headed for the slot machines.

A 58-year-old retired bus driver who was living on disability, Leroy Iverson suffered from emphysema and diabetes. He had an on-again, off-again relationship with Sherrice's mother, who was 30 years his junior. At the time of the visit to Primm, the relationship was off. Though he had little extra cash, Leroy Iverson enjoyed gambling. He'd taken the children many times to Primm. After all, the brightly lit casinos had 24-hour security, which was more than you could say for his shabby apartment in south-central Los Angeles. And surely Harold was old enough to keep an eye on Sherrice.

But this night, things were not going well. The children had wandered over to Buffalo Bill's, where an alarmed security guard escorted them back to their father, who was still fixated on the slots. Later, guards at Primm Valley did the same, pleading with Iverson to leave the casino and control his children. But Leroy Iverson was here to make some cash, not to baby-sit. Didn't he take care of those kids all week, driving Sherrice to and from school every day? This was his time, and he'd be damned if he would let some tired brats ruin it.

In retrospect, someone at the casino should have made sure Iverson left the machines to take care of his children. Insisted on it. Escorted them all out of there. But Leroy Iverson was a customer, and he wasn't drunk or abusive. It was a judgment call. Could have gone either way.

Iverson stayed.

It was past 3 a.m. when 18-year-old Jeremy Strohmeyer met Sherrice Iverson. She was throwing wads of paper at a little boy, who was firing back his own paper missiles. Strohmeyer, a bright but troubled youth who harbored a collection of child pornography, picked up a

paper wad and joined the game. Sherrice Iverson darted into a restroom. Jeremy Strohmeyer followed her. A few minutes later, Sherrice Iverson was dead.

The restroom is still there, but the arcade has been moved into an area that's heavily trafficked. The original arcade — located in a remote downstairs corner so that the noises of children wouldn't intrude on the gamblers upstairs — has been replaced by a billiards parlor that closes promptly at midnight. A new law prevents any unsupervised child from being in a casino area after that time.

It's all too late for Sherrice Iverson. Her last chance came when a friend of Strohmeyer, wondering why Jeremy hadn't come out of the women's restroom, strolled in and came upon Strohmeyer and the girl. She was still alive. The friend, figuring something bad was happening but not wanting to find out what, turned around and walked out.

The friend's name was David Cash.

My own search for cash begins at 8:10 p.m., where I commence the trip's festivities just a few yards from the crime scene.

I am here to play blackjack. And I am here to win.

I play blackjack at a skill level high enough so that I, not the casino, am the favorite.

I count cards, meaning I track the ever-changing deck and vary my bets and plays based on the remaining cards. Without boring you with all the details, which you can find in any decent blackjack book, in general a surplus of high cards left to be dealt favors the player, while a surplus of low cards remaining hurts the player. By comparing the undealt ratio of high cards to low cards, you can determine whether the deck is positive (favorable) or negative (unfavorable). You'll then bet more on positive decks and less on negative decks, and alter your playing strategy accordingly.

For instance, the correct basic-strategy play with a 15 against the dealer's 10 is to hit. However, with a moderately positive deck, you're better off standing and hoping the dealer has a weak card underneath. Conversely, while you normally stand on 14 against a 4, in a highly negative deck the correct play would be to hit.

It was 1962 when Edward Thorp's *Beat the Dealer* revealed the first strategies that could defeat the house at blackjack. The game immediately soared in popularity, far surpassing what had once been the premier table game, craps.

After Thorp's book appeared, the casinos restricted doubling to 11 only and forbade the splitting of aces. Players quickly decided the new game wasn't much fun, and after only three weeks the casinos reinstated the old rules. Other than minor changes, mostly involving the addition of more and more decks, the game basically remains as it was in those early days of successful count strategies.

Thorp's ideas have since been refined by many others—dozens of blackjack books and software programs are on the market these days—but the principles are the same. The question of what to do with every hand under every set of conditions has been definitively answered by computer programs that can play billions of hands of, say, A-4 vs. 4 or 13 vs. 6, then tally the results. The math has been solved, the wheel already invented.

Yet each year, Nevada casinos earn approximately \$1 billion from blackjack. That's Billion with a B.

Why is this? Do you have to be Einstein to count cards? No, although an early book on the subject actually was written by a guy who used the name Einstein. There are many different counting systems, though the most popular one requires nothing more advanced mathematically than the

ability to add and subtract 1. So what's the problem here?

As near as I can figure out, most people think it's too much work to learn and too much of a headache to use in a casino. Hey, they want to enjoy themselves. When they hear the stories of how some counters use flashcards and charts to learn index numbers, and practice with a stopwatch to improve their speed, and ask friends to deal deck after deck to them to simulate the action in the casino, they usually lose interest.

They left work to get here. And card counting is work. Not difficult work, you understand—it's so simple that even a reasonably bright first-grader could grasp the basics. But tedious work.

Memorize a complete strategy for every possible hand. Count all the cards. Adjust the running count to a different number based on how many decks remain undealt. Vary your strategy depending on the count. Get more money on the table during positive decks. Have enough of a bankroll to withstand the wild swings of the game. Remain calm and focused even as you lose hand after hand.

I'm getting tired just thinking about it.

Raise your hand if you want to spend a gambling vacation highlighted by the wearisome monotony of hour after hour filled with thoughts of plus 1 and minus 2.

Class? Class? Is anyone still awake?

But the tedious nature of card counting is only a part of the picture. Fact is, casinos in Nevada don't have to deal to you if they don't want to. And if they find out you're a card counter, your welcome mat will quickly turn into a get-lost mat. If the truth becomes known, you will be as popular as Jerry Falwell at a Gay Pride parade. No more blackjack for you, sir, and the exit is that way.

Thus, if he's playing for any kind of actual money, the counter not only has to make all the proper plays, but

he also has to pretend he's really not very good at this blackjack thing.

Camouflage your play so that nobody knows you're a counter. Talk normally with assorted players, dealers, and floormen. Don't glance around furtively. Don't stare at the cards. Don't play obsessively with your chips. And don't forget what name you're using when you ask the pit boss for a comp.

You're on stage, baby. Robert DeNiro and Anthony Hopkins are your heroes now, not Ken Uston or Don Schlesinger.

You're not you, with all your hopes and dreams and weaknesses and insecurities. You are Counterman. He may look like you and talk like you. But he isn't you.

You're trying to act natural, although that phrase is a problem right there. If you act, you're not natural. And if you're natural, you're not acting. You don't need Edward Thorp right now. Where the hell is Stella Adler?

"Just got in from Covina." Plus 2, minus 1. "Lotta traffic on I-15." Minus 1, plus 4, two decks left. "That John Elway was really something yesterday." Let's see, 9 vs. a 3, close to a double, what's that index number? "I'm over at the Tropicana." We're at plus 5, I've just won the double, let's leave it all out there to make it look like a parlay.

Except maybe for pool hustling, it's hard to think of too many jobs in which the idea is to pretend you're really not very good. Do you think an accountant has to miscount some numbers, or Mark McGwire has to purposely strike out, or a surgeon has to kill a few patients from time to time? Nope, but that's the way it is in blackjack — the better you are, the more you have to pretend you're not so good.

You're a loser, not a winner.

And the truth is, you really do have a very big chance to lose. In the same way that some days the worst poker

player at the table gets all the cards and all the money, sometimes at the blackjack table a poor player who's lucky wins, while a terrific counter who's unlucky loses.

There's certainly plenty of luck involved. Nobody can guarantee that he's going to win for any particular shoe, or session, or day, or week, or month. There's even a minute chance that through an incredibly horrendous run of luck, a counter playing 100 hands an hour for 10,000 hours could wind up behind. It's not likely, but it could happen.

Still, in the long run the money is supposed to flow to the counter, although not all at once. Depending on a number of factors, a good counter might enjoy somewhere around a 1% edge — sometimes more, sometimes less.

The ideal situation for a counter includes four elements — a deep-into-the-deck deal (the further the deck penetration, the more hands a counter can play under positive counts), a head-up game (to get more hands per hour while seeing every card), no heat for wild bet spreads (the greater the spread, the more the counter can vary from low bets on bad decks to high bets on good decks), and good rules (since better rules yield higher profits to players who know how to use them). Many casinos offer none of these elements — crowding players into cramped tables to cut labor costs, cutting off three decks from a six-deck shoe, scrutinizing the games and having the dealers shout "Checks!" whenever a player makes a big bet, and offering bad rules and limited player options.

My plan is to play somewhere between \$25 and \$200 a hand, generally starting with \$50 or \$75 bets off the top and seeing how the deck goes. I've played for higher stakes in the past, but my present bankroll is dicey even at this level.

A formula known as gamblers ruin — and isn't that an unhappy moniker — tells me that with an \$8,000 bankroll, a 1% edge on every bet, and a \$75 average wager, I probably

have a better than 10% chance of losing the entire stake. If I were to take out further credit and play it to the max, betting say between \$100 to \$700, I might on an unlucky run lose \$100,000, which is serious money for just about everybody not named Oprah.

I buy in at the Primm Valley Resort for \$200, bet \$65 on the first hand, double down, and lose, to go minus \$130 before the first minute of gambling has been completed. I make a small comeback, but the tide turns for bad after I double an 11 against the dealer's 10 on a \$50 bet. I watch in horror as the player to my right comes up with the bright idea of hitting his hard 17. Brainiac is dealt a 10 – my 10 – and I draw a small card. The dealer turns over a 10 for a \$200 swing as I lose \$100 instead of winning \$100.

I switch to the lone one-deck game. Though only two other players are in the game, the dealer delivers just two rounds, only 20 cards of the 52-card deck. I'd like to see more cards. Then again, maybe not. Because I've just seen that the dealer has dealt herself three consecutive 21s.

I leave after little more than an hour, down \$760.

Simply having a small advantage does not mean you're guaranteed to win. A few years ago, an Indian casino in Fresno offered a 48-hour promotion in which it paid 2-to-1 for blackjacks, instead of the usual 3-to-2. Even after deducting the collection fee on every hand that's assessed in California Indian casinos, I figured my edge was 0.6%. I flew to Fresno with \$11,000 and managed to lose every last dollar of it.

Blackjack is a game of fluctuations. Let's say that you're able to get away with a juicy 1-to-12 bet spread. A shoe turns rich and instead of your usual \$25 bet, you push out \$300. You get an 11, double it, and lose. On the next hand, still playing \$300, you get a pair of 9s vs. 4, split them for a pair of 19s, then watch the dealer pull out a 20. In two

minutes you've lost \$1,200. You'd have to win 48 consecutive minimum bets just to break even — an example of how you can win a lot of bets, but if you lose the big ones you could wind up destitute.

And you do lose a lot of bets in blackjack. Most of them, in fact. On average, even with a positive count, out of every 100 bets you win 43, lose 48, and tie 9. So on most hands, you're going to be unhappy. You'll need blackjacks and successful splits and double downs to win. And maybe you won't get them.

I get my first meal comp, the pit happily granting me a slip that covers the Mongolian chicken with the assorted appetizer platter. Though each meal might be worth only \$10 or \$15, on a long trip they can really add up and keep the expenses down.

I've estimated that with decent luck on this foray, I might be able to get in four useful hours of play a day and average \$40 per hour for a gross profit of \$160. With comped meals and cheap rooms, I hope to keep my expenses down to \$60 a day. That would net \$6,000 for the two months, which will just about cover my extra business expenses for the time that I'm away. It's hardly the kind of reward that would cause a corporate executive to give up the good life in Stamford or Grosse Pointe for a trek through the Beattys and the Battle Mountains of Nevada.

After dinner, I play for 15 minutes, winning \$50. But with the shuffle points so early, this game is wasting more of my time than a "Munsters" marathon.

Dead tired — I'd gotten maybe four hours of sleep the previous night and yawned all the way on the long drive to Primm — I decide to relax by playing the Megabucks slot machine. The jackpot is up to \$21.9 million now, though I suppose if I actually win it the direction of this book would change in a hurry. But I care about my readers, and thus

does the jackpot escape me.

Perhaps the thought of all that cash rejuvenates me, because I wind up spending four hours in front of that machine. Yes, I know it's completely sick and I should be in a treatment program, but I win \$304, so don't begrudge me. Of course, I'm never close to winning the big money. The Megabucks symbol, a smirking eagle, shows up on the correct payout line about as often as you find a herd of giraffes thundering down a windswept highway in North Dakota.

All jobs have occupational hazards, even gambling jobs. The fact that these seductive little slot machines are located a bit too close to the blackjack tables might just turn out to be a problem for me — even though I, a certified Math Boy, know that playing the slots for any length of time is about as futile as tossing quarters into a wishing well while mumbling, "I wish I had money ... I wish I had money."

At the end of each day, I'll mark the trip totals, exclusive of any wins or losses other than blackjack, and not including expenses. I'll round everything off to the nearest dollar. For the first day:

*Daily total: (-\$710) Trip total: (-\$710)*



## **Day 2 (Wednesday, 9/16/98, Jean)**

I sleep in, and by the time I take the monorail to Buffalo Bill's it's nearly 1 p.m. This is one of those themed casinos, the theme apparently the Old West in the good old days before players learned to count. The casino is lousy with large lighted pretend trees. Overhead runs an ersatz train

track, complete with prospectors and sidecars.

Opened in 1994 at a cost of \$90 million, Buffalo Bill's and its 1,200 rooms are enveloped by a huge roller coaster called Desperado, a name that also refers to many of the players inside. When it was built, Desperado was the world's tallest and fastest roller coaster. Nevada is big on this Biggest, Loudest, Highest theme. While Desperado remains fairly tall and fairly fast, it now slinks around as no longer the planet's standard bearer.

Besides the roller coaster, kids can also get themselves sick on a flume log ride and on a contraption called Turbo Drop, which lifts riders 200 feet above the desert before plunging them to earth at 45 miles per hour. Why this is an attraction is hard to fathom.

My favorite kiddie fare is something called the Ghost Town Motion Theater, a motion simulator. The sign outside says, "You will experience sudden jarring, shaking, and other movement while seated." Which perfectly describes my blackjack experience.

The game is a two-decker. I buy in for \$200, bet \$65 on the first hand, split a pair of 7s against the dealer's 7, get two 17s, and lose both as the dealer turns over an ace. So now on two consecutive days, I am down \$130 after my first hand. Eerie.

Soon the \$200 is gone and I buy in for \$200 more. I make a slight comeback. Then, just as the dealer is about to commence another round, a player rushes in from out of the clouds to bet \$5. Our card sequence now altered, the dealer promptly deals himself a blackjack. Two hands later, Cloud Man hits his 16 against the dealer's 3. I've seen enough and depart, a small winner.

A word here about bad players. In the long run, they don't affect your results in the slightest. Maybe they hurt you on one hand and help you on another. Maybe they ruin

you on one hand, but their bonehead move changes the order of the cards and you win every hand the rest of the shoe. Still, for some reason, most blackjack veterans always seem to remember when one of their feebleminded moves hurts us. As King Scobe jokingly writes, "Scobe's First Law is that whenever the count gets really high and you have your biggest bets out, some moron will sit down and win. This moron will get all the good hands. You will lose."

Psychologically, this cannot be a plus. When a bad player does something dim-witted, I become as tense as a burglar who's just been cornered by a team of police dogs. My blood pressure soars and occasionally I'll even make a sarcastic remark to the offender, which is not very smart if he has formerly played for the Chicago Bears. I'm at my best when I just worry about my own cards. I need to keep telling myself that because of bad players like Cloud Man, the game flourishes. I should thank him.

For some reason, though, I don't react in the slightest when someone directs a disparaging comment about my own fine game. Let's say I split 10s, a move that normally qualifies one to play the roles of both Dumb and Dumber, but that's occasionally correct on a high count. No matter whether I win or lose (but especially if I lose), players feel compelled to comment on my supposed ineptness. I blithely tell one and all that I just felt lucky, so there you have it.

Originally I had planned to play long enough for the floorman to notice my bet sizes and offer me a lunch comp. But with the dealer dealing out only a few rounds, bad players jumping in and out, and the whole thing smacking of marginalia, I'm feeling crankier than Albert Belle after a bases-loaded strikeout. Two days out of California, the train has left the station, and All Are Bored. I'll buy my own \$4.95 buffet.

Next stop is the third member of the Primadonna triumvirate, a depressing place called Whiskey Pete's. This is a popular last-chance stop for Californians en route home, as the freeway exit goes directly to the casino's parking lot. Whiskey Pete's trumpets its two-car gangster-vehicle collection—one owned by Al Capone, the other the bullet-riddled auto of Bonnie and Clyde. I'm not sure what emotions are stirred by such a display, but it doesn't matter: Due to some construction, neither car is available for viewing. I hope that no one has driven all the way from Tennessee just to see them.

The blackjack game mirrors the mediocrity of the sister properties, so I spend just 10 minutes playing and leave with a \$95 gain before wasting an hour on Megabucks, blowing back most of the day's tiny profits. Unlike the machine at Primm Valley, the one at Whiskey Pete's offers slot-club points, so I insert my card and earn enough credits to get both nights' rooms comped. I had reckoned I'd be earning freebies due to my high-stakes blackjack play, yet my room is free because I have become a prized slot player. Go figure.

It's so hot outside that when I hear the radio announcer say, "It's four twenty-nine," I don't know whether he's telling me the time or the temperature. Lizards are dropping from heat exhaustion. "It's a dry heat," say natives, although so is the inside of your oven and I don't think you'd want to spend an hour there. When the weather is this hot, there is only one sane thing to do.

Go bowling.

There are eight lanes at the Primm Valley bowling alley, presided over by a genial young man named Renaldo. I should point out that his name is not actually Renaldo. While everything in this little volume did in fact happen as stated and there are no composite characters, I've changed

the names and some identifying details along the way. No one requested to be in this book and there's no point embarrassing them for any slip-ups.

Renaldo is not slipping up, but lounging around, sprawled across the seats in front of Lane 8, reading a newspaper. He tells me that he's not much called upon to do that special magic known only to bowling attendants, because only an idiot would want to bowl in the heat of the day. Proud to be called one, I rent shoes, pick out a ball, and proceed to roll a strike in my very first inning, or whatever they call it. It's been years since I've bowled, and I had forgotten that the game is about as exciting as listening to Al Gore lecture on the state of the Portuguese economy. Perhaps bowling was invented after a spirited contest in which the great minds of mankind were challenged to come up with the dumbest way possible in which to spend an hour.

Refreshed after shattering the always-difficult-to-surpass 100 barrier, I plan the night's festivities. Off I go to the town of Jean, which consists of two casinos and a prison. And when things are going badly, it seems like three prisons.

Jean is en route from Primm to Las Vegas, so it grabs a few of the folks who failed to be ensnared in Primm's enticing little traps. It's home to the Gold Strike and Nevada Landing. These large hotel-casinos are easy to find, their flashing message marquees visible as far away as Boston. Neither would be suitable for visiting royalty, although if you're a fatigued trucker heading from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City you're not likely to find many places that are cheaper. The slot clubs here are so liberal that if you put just \$200 through a machine in one day, you get a free buffet. A midweek room usually runs around \$18.

I start off at the Gold Strike by losing hand after

hand, until suddenly the count climbs higher than Robert Downey Jr. on a cocaine bender. I take a shot with two hands of \$200. I win both, one on a double, and the \$600 I collect puts me into the black.

I'm playing at a two-deck game with just one other player, an elderly woman from San Bernardino who's betting \$5 per hand. Sitting next to her is her husband, who appears to have arisen from the grave. He tells me he had open-heart surgery three weeks ago and proudly rips open his shirt to show me the scar. After this treat, I turn back to the game until he interrupts me with more news. Rolling up his pants, he shows me a large collection of scars from where the doctors ... well, you don't want to know.

I continue to gain ground, then a super deck appears. It's so super that I lose every hand, going in less than five minutes from +\$400 to -\$300. I console myself that it could have been worse — twice I save losses by insuring against a dealer's ace, and both times he has blackjack.

Insurance is not a good bet unless you've calculated that the remaining-deck ratio of non-tens to tens is less than 2-to-1. Because you need to put up half your bet, you have to win this bet one-third of the time to break even on it. So if you could deduce that there remained 37 non-tens and 20 tens, you would take insurance; if there were 41 non-tens compared with 20 tens, you wouldn't. Thorp's original system was perfect for this problem, but modern count systems assign various points to each card so all you get is a sense of the situation, not the exact ratio.

Ignorant players will tell you that you should always insure a blackjack, because you'll be guaranteed a win, but you give up more than you gain by this play. In fact, this is probably the worst time to take insurance because, of the two cards in your hand, one is a 10, which negatively impacts the ratio.

After a few more losses, I'm hungry enough to ask for a food comp. No doubt pleased to see this former winner turn into a loser, the sympathetic pit boss obliges.

When I return to the two-deck game, I find another world's tallest – the world's tallest dealer, a 7-foot 1-inch behemoth named John. I plan to be on my best behavior, because John looks as if he could dislodge my head with one backhand swipe if he so chooses. This knowledge makes me a bit uncomfortable, as does the fact that John wins the first three hands.

I switch to the single-deck game, which had been crowded earlier but now has just two players. I go down another \$600 before something wondrous happens. For four consecutive decks, betting mostly the minimum since they're all negative, I win every hand. A perfect 12-for-12, including three blackjacks.

Buoyed by this streak, I drive across the freeway to Nevada Landing, where I face something I haven't seen in at least a decade. I sit down at the one-deck game where I'm the only player against Lara, a dealer from Hawaii. I bust on the first hand – and note with astonishment that Lara then slides her bottom card into the discard tray without turning it over for me to see. Two hands later, I bust again and she does the same thing.

I wonder if this is pit policy to prevent counters from seeing all the cards. I ask the floorman about this, not mentioning that thing about counters, explaining that the game is more fun when you can see whether or not you should have hit. He assures me that it isn't a house policy, although I sense he's crossing his fingers when he tells me this.

Despite that billion-dollar gross win, casinos are paranoid about counters. To them, counters are heavily armed guerrillas who are siphoning millions of dollars, though

nobody knows whether this is true. I'm still waiting to hear the following conversation:

*Player:* "Didn't you guys used to have another tower?"

*Dealer:* "Counters won so much we had to tear it down."

Casino-management books confidently explain that the hard-way hop bet in craps offers a 13.89% house advantage, or that a balanced baseball line of -150/+130 yields a house edge of 3.3613%, or that a bank of slot machines can be programmed to hold exactly 6.47%. Yet not one person in the entire industry can say with much certainty how much money card counters might be winning.

But fearing the worst, casinos go to great lengths to frustrate counters. While in the old days all the games were single-deck, most are now six-decks, an additional edge to the casino. Some places forbid doubling except on 10 or 11, or limit other player options. In a hand-held game, a dealer might shuffle early (before the deck has a chance to go positive) or engage in preferential shuffling (dealing deep into negative decks, but shuffling positive ones). Or the floorman will stand right next to the suspected counter, hawking his every move like a proprietor of a candy store when half a dozen teenagers enter the premises. As a last resort, the counter might be asked to leave.

All this activity takes place with so much subtlety that the other players at the table have no idea it's even happening. It would look bad if three burly enforcers yanked a winning player from a table in full view of the other customers, so the dance is conducted mostly in secret.

But there's no question that a casino-vs.-counter war rages. "Each side enters the fray in deadly seriousness,

because the outcome determines who is in charge, who wins, who keeps the cash,” writes Timothy O’Brien in *Bad Bet*. “It is a battle waged between those who have the money and those who haven’t, between companies that have mastered the art of separating gamblers from their dollars and individuals bent on outwitting large, seemingly invulnerable institutions on their own turf.” As if to emphasize the war metaphor, popular books for counters include such titles as *Blackjack Attack*, *Blackjack for Blood*, *Blackbelt in Blackjack*, and *Knock-Out Blackjack*.

Casino executives attend seminars on how to identify and toss counters, whom they regard as parasites to be exterminated as thoroughly as possible. Counters like to think of themselves as the little guys bucking the system, but there are enough of them to support such publications as Stanford Wong’s *Current Blackjack News*, Arnold Snyder’s *Blackjack Forum*, and Eddie Olsen’s *Blackjack Confidential*. A computer-savvy counter can even join Web sites where other counters discuss life in the blackjack world— anonymously, of course.

These magazines and Web sites are filled with everything from arcane discussions on which count system gets you an extra .08 advantage in a four-deck shoe with 70% penetration to what kind of heat you can expect in some obscure casino in Romania. Of course, nobody knows how many of the subscribers are actually proficient counters and how many are simply hobbyists who love to read about the casino-vs.-counter battles.

There’s one thing that both sides agree on: As soon as the casinos figure out that they’re unlikely to get your money, they have no use for you.

Over the years, each side has fired its guns, but the stalemate continues. Casinos added more decks, so counters devised methods to count down the shoes. Counters

came up with the “big player” concept, in which spotters bet the minimum at a table, then signal a roving high roller to plunk down a few hundred when the shoe turns good, so the casinos instituted the “no mid-shoe entry” rule. Casinos took pictures of suspected counters, so counters took to wearing disguises. Counters developed concealed computers that could play perfectly, so Nevada outlawed them.

Since casinos are aware that some players have figured out how to beat the game, many of them take what are known as countermeasures. Some hire full-time counter catchers, who are regarded by counters with the warm affection that George Washington held for Benedict Arnold. Others install equipment such as SafeJack or BJ Tracker or SmartShoe21, computer programs that enable an employee in a far-off room to monitor someone’s play. Others pay fees to detective agencies such as Griffin Investigations, which tracks not just card cheats but counters as well.

Nobody knows exactly how much casinos spend on these countermeasures, but complicating the whole issue is the fact that most anti-counter strategies serve mainly to annoy the vast majority of the other players and actually cost the casino money. For instance, let’s say there’s a game with four guys betting \$100 – one counter who wins 1% and three average players who lose 2%. The casino detests counters and instructs its dealers to shuffle after every hand. So instead of 80 hands per hour, the extra shuffles cause the number of hands dealt per hour to drop to 60. The counter would have won \$80 and now wins nothing – but the other three players would have lost an extra \$40 per hour apiece. So to save \$80, the casino costs itself \$120.

Even barring a player altogether can be problematic. Often some non-counter who hits a lucky streak finds

himself evicted, which can cost the casino plenty – not only from the player himself (who probably would have wound up losing), but also from his friends who are unlikely to patronize that casino again.

The most ironic part of all this is that the supposed threat from counters may be more myth than reality. And the myth is a powerful attraction for players who are not counters, but somehow have heard that the game is beatable and want to try to do so. According to Stanford Wong, “Anybody that’s good enough to do this is probably making far more money doing something else.”

Probably the leading authority on the subject is Bill Zender, author of *Card Counting for the Casino Executive* and *How to Detect Casino Cheating at Blackjack*. Zender has done just about everything in the industry. He’s been an undercover agent for the Nevada Gaming Control Board. He’s played on a blackjack team. He’s held seminars for casino employees on the best ways to identify counters. And he’s held a variety of high-ranking casino jobs.

In his last major position, he was responsible for setting up what many counters feel was the fairest game anywhere – the blackjack game at the old Aladdin Hotel.

“I gave up things, and I added things,” he says. “I took away the single-decks and added the dealer hit on soft 17, but we gave the players 75% penetration on the double-decks and 92% penetration on the six-deck shoes, along with double after split and surrender. We also generally didn’t back off counters if they bet \$50 or less, so if a guy was spreading \$5 to \$50, we didn’t bother him.”

When Zender first announced his plan, it was big news in publications such as *Blackjack Forum*. Great penetration, decent rules, no barrings for low-stakes players. Many speculated that the game couldn’t last; too many counters would pound it. But something strange and wonderful

happened. Despite the good game, the Aladdin's hold percentage — the amount of money kept from buy-ins — actually went up, exceeding the state's average. Because the Aladdin was dealing deep into the decks, it was getting in more hands per hour and thus winning more money from non-counters, which is exactly what Zender had thought would happen.

"Too many people in this industry sweat the games, and that makes the players uncomfortable," Zender says. "These corporations get scared if one month your hold is a couple of points lower than it usually is, and they start panicking. But usually, it's just the fluctuations of the game. I'm still a card counter at heart. I think that people should be able to get out there and have fun with it. But if you run the game right, you'll actually make more money than if you're wasting all this energy on trying to stop counters."

How many really good counters are there? No one knows. How much money do they really win? No one knows. All I know is that during a typical Nevada weekend of play, I usually see a grand total of zero individuals who even play perfect basic strategy. But even the rare player who's memorized perfect basic strategy will wind up as just another loser unless he learns to count cards. I see a really skillful counter about as often as I glimpse a Susan B. Anthony dollar.

Even though thousands of casinos around the world offer blackjack, the places where a top counter can ply his trade are limited. You need to average betting at least \$50 a hand to perhaps grind out \$40 an hour, and you can play only a few hours a day. While no one might pay you the slightest attention at the Bellagio, walk into most casinos and start betting this kind of money in a head-up game and you'll soon have new friends — the entire pit crew will

be watching you. Your chances of getting away with much of a bet spread are slim.

And maybe you don't get the cards. Let's say a counter normally spreads from \$10 to \$60 and has a run of bad luck to lose \$800. Angry and frustrated, he now figures that if he just spreads from \$50 to \$300, he'll get that money back quickly. Perhaps he gets wild and starts playing big bucks on marginal counts. And instead of escaping with an \$800 loss, maybe he loses \$8000 and quits the game forever.

Did I say \$8,000? Oops.

I've had enough of Lara and take a glance at the adjacent six-deck game, where a bunch of little cards are currently making their appearance on the layout, always an occasion for rejoicing since each little card represents an increase in the count. Some clever players try to participate only on such shoes, loitering until they find a table covered by small cards; they then jump in and play the rest of the shoe, or at least as long as it stays positive. Using this technique, which is known as back-counting or wonging, they ensure that most of the time they'll be playing on plus counts. The casinos, of course, are wise to this, and occasionally a back-counter will find himself escorted to the back door and told not to come back.

I face no such traumas today. I win six of the next seven hands.

I have recovered most of yesterday's losses, despite not finding a single decent game as yet.

*Daily total: +\$510 Trip total: (-\$200)*

