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3

Bracing for ACES

Blackjack is Your Vehicle

ACES is blackjack. Repeat it. Blackjack. It doesn't roll off the tongue. It leaps off. Two short syllables that say everything there is to say about our culture. Though the Spanish, French, and Italians all claim to have invented the game of "21," the nickname "blackjack" originated right here in the U.S., in the turn-of-the-century gambling dens of Indiana, America's heartland. In a variation of 21 played at a racetrack in Evansville, a player was paid an extra five bucks if he was dealt an ace and either the jack of spades or the jack of clubs. Hence, blackjack.

It's the only table game that's guaranteed to win you comps time after time.

How about the other table games? Let's take craps. Pardon my French, but it sounds like shit to me. Speaking of French, there's also roulette. Roulette? I've lived out West for more than 35 years and any game that ends in "ette," forget it. Keno? Bingo? Lotto? Those games only keep about 25¢-50¢ out of every dollar you bet on 'em. Why don't they just call them all dumbo? And what about all those new games like Caribbean Stud and pai gow poker and super pan 9, Let It Ride, casino war, three-card poker, and chuck-a-luck. Chuck my lunch! They're all a bunch of trumped-up high-house-edge games played by suckers who haven't got the sense to get in the cellar with a tornado on the way.

Nope, it's blackjack and only blackjack. Why are you even

thinking about playing some sissy game like baccarat? Hell, you can't even pronounce it the way they do in casinos without sounding like William F. Buckley or worse. If they said it right, like maybe if it rhymed with "pack-a-rat," I might take a look at it. But no, to say it the "right way," you've gotta raise one eyebrow, make your lips all pouty, drop your voice way down, and say "Bach-o-rah," like you're doing some kind of prissy cheer for an 18th century German Baroque composer or something. Besides, the percentages for baccarat are about eight times worse than a good blackjack game. And you have to sit next to all these snooty suckers who drink espresso with their pinkies stuck out like they're trying to impress the owner of the joint (who's probably laughing his head off while he guzzles his Maxwell House with both hands and wipes the drool on his sleeve).

Gamblers everywhere else in the world are suckers. It's *Americans* who figured out how to play blackjack to win. Who do you think were the forefathers of basic strategy? That's right. And who was the first card-counting revolutionary? Ditto. And the strategist who came up with card-counting teams? Yep. And the foot-controlled blackjack computer? Uh huh. And comp counting? Yours truly—a God-fearin' Texan.

"So," you ask, "why do Americans love blackjack so much?" *Because it can be beaten.* Period. Probably not by 99.9% of the people who play it, but by a few, and that's enough to keep the hope alive.

The Play of the Public

In 1987, Peter Griffin handicapped the play of the public in a conference paper entitled *Mathematical Expectation for the Public's Play in Casino Blackjack*. Griffin concluded that the public misplays "about one hand in six or seven," and plays at a losing rate that's about 1.4% higher than that of a perfect basic-strategy player. This means that the average player loses at a rate just under 2%, assuming a starting casino edge of 0.5%. (According to Griffin's study, Las Vegas gamblers play at a rate that is about 0.25% worse than the overall average, fixing their expected losses at more than 2% and providing an even greater level of subsidization for comp counters.)

Comp wizards love blackjack too, but for another reason. Blackjack is the only mainstream casino game for which the house advantage versus a particular player can not be readily determined. That's because the magnitude of the casino's advantage depends on the skill of the player, and players' skills vary widely. Still, the house assigns the same expected loss to every player, usually somewhere around 2%, because that's what the casino wins on average. Bottom line? Once you become a good blackjack player, your (comp) gains will be subsidized by the losses of the bad players.

If you want to win the comp game, it's essential that you hone your blackjack skills. Dedicated students of the game can become very good. So good, in fact, that they actually have an advantage over the casinos. You've all heard about card counting. It really works. But it's also relatively difficult and time-consuming to master. Don't worry; you won't have to become a card counter to make blackjack work for you. You do, however, have to be able to play *basic strategy*. Basic strategy is the set of guidelines that delineates the best way to play any hand versus each of the 13 possible dealer up cards. The action specified by basic strategy (hit, split, stand, double, surrender) is always optimal, and once you've mastered it, there'll be no guessing, no vacillating, and no hunch-playing involved in your decisions.

It's important to understand that learning basic strategy will not make you a winning blackjack player. You will still lose money over time. But you'll lose at a rate that's so minimal, the comps you receive will make you a big net winner. Let's take a look.

Here's a breakdown of what a basic-strategy player faces playing blackjack in a typical game that employs Las Vegas Strip rules. (This is the long-term expected result. For a look at what can happen in the short run, see "Play to Your Bankroll").

Average Bet	\$100
House Percentage	<u>0.2%</u>
House win per hand	20¢
Hands an hour	<u>60</u>
House win per hour	\$ 12

The bottom line, \$12, is the amount you expect to lose betting

\$100 a hand for an hour. Now I'll show you how much the house will give you back in comps. Remember, casino marketing makes no provision for your ability to play basic strategy and this is what they *think* they'll win from you.

Average Bet	\$100
House Expected Win	<u>2.0%</u>
House win per hand	\$ 2
Hands an hour	<u>60</u>
House Expected win per hour	\$120
% House Returns in comps	<u>40%</u>
Comps Earned	\$ 48

That's not too bad—\$48 worth of stuff for only \$12. Sound hard to do? It would be if you were on your own. But you're not. You're riding with the Maxster now. Saddle 'em up.

Learning Basic Strategy

Learning the complete basic strategy will take a little work. If you make a diligent effort, you should be able to memorize the entire strategy (see "Complete Basic Strategy" in the Appendix) with four to eight hours of study.

If you just can't bring yourself to learn the complete basic strategy, you won't have as high a profit margin as is portrayed throughout this book. However, every little degree of improvement helps. Simply playing blackjack according to the six rules in the abbreviated basic

Abbreviated Basic Strategy

- 1) Always split eights and aces.
- 2) Double 10 & 11 against dealer's 2-9.
- 3) You hold 12-16; dealer shows 2-6 — stand.
- 4) You hold 12-16; dealer shows 7,8,9,T,A — hit.
- 5) Stand on 17-21, except always hit on soft 17.
- 6) Never take insurance.

strategy chart below will chop the casino edge down to about 1%. Rules #3 and #4 are the most important to learn. A soft 17 is a total containing an ace, i.e., (A,6) or (A,2,4).

Computer Learning

You can study the charts if you like, but a much easier way to learn basic strategy is to use a computer program. You practice by playing blackjack against computer-generated hands displayed on your monitor. When you make a strategy error, the program alerts you. Since it's more like playing a game than doing a chore, you learn faster and more completely. There are several good programs; I like Stickysoft's *Blackjack 6•7•8*.

The Rules Affect the Edge

After you've improved your playing skills, your next concern is choosing the best blackjack games. All blackjack games are not created equal, and the casino advantage versus basic strategy players can vary from zero up to more than 2% on some double-exposure games (both dealer cards dealt face up) and a few of the newfangled blackjack variations that are surfacing. If you don't mess with these high-edge mutants, you can keep the casino advantage confined to a range from 0% (single deck, dealer stands on soft 17) to about 0.8% (six decks, dealer hits soft 17).

How important is it to play the better games? Very important in the long run. Here's a look at the difference in expected losses (for a \$25 average bet) in a blackjack game with a casino edge of 0.2% versus a game with a casino edge of 0.7%.

\$25 bet for	Expected loss	Expected loss
1 hour	at -0.2% (\$3)	at -0.7% (\$11)
10 hours	(\$30)	(\$105)
50 hours	(\$150)	(\$525)
100 hours	(\$300)	(\$1,050)
1,000 hours	(\$3,000)	(\$10,500)

Variables for Determining Player Edge

Number of Decks (edge in %)

1	deck	0.00
2	decks	-0.30
4, 6	decks	-0.50
8	decks	-0.60

(The base percentages assume: dealer stands on soft 17; split and resplit any pair except aces, which may be split only once; double down on any two cards but not after splitting; no surrender.)

Effect of Options (in %)

	Single Deck	Multiple Decks
dealer hits soft 17	-0.19	-0.21
double 10, 11 only	-0.26	-0.17
double after split	+0.14	+0.14
late surrender	+0.03	+0.08
resplit aces	+0.03	+0.07

There are two ways to determine a casino's advantage on its blackjack game. The easiest is to let an expert do the work for you. Stanford Wong's newsletter, *Current Blackjack News*, updates the casino advantage for all blackjack games in Nevada (and other parts of the country) on a monthly basis. If you subscribe to the newsletter, you'll have the up-to-date casino advantages at your fingertips.

If you don't want to pay for *CBJN* (currently \$49 online or \$99 hard copy), you can figure out the edge on your own. You need to know the number of decks being dealt and whether or not certain options are allowed. Look at the chart on the next page. Start with the base percentage that corresponds to the number of decks being used, then add or subtract the value of any of the five "options" listed here that the casino employs on its game. (There are many other possible options, but these are the most common.)

Here's an example. Let's say you're playing a double-deck game,

with the following departures from the two-deck base percentage game: dealer hits soft 17, and double after split is allowed. The calculation goes like this:

2 decks	-.30
dealer hits soft 17	-.21
double after split	<u>.14</u>
Total	-.37 (round to -.4%)

Why Casinos Don't Know If You Play Basic Strategy

Caesars Palace, among others near and far, has three spots on its blackjack rating slips (mini bac and Pai Gow poker too, how mondo strangeo!) that read Basic, General, and Soft. What that means is the floorman is supposed to watch the players and denote how well they play the game. Does it work? Is the Pope Jewish?

The result? Rating slips at Caesars almost never indicate that a player uses basic strategy.

Why not? How would you feel if you called your boss over and had him watch a game and you were wrong? There is no upside in the casino business for making a mistake. An employee is much better off not swinging than batting .500. It's one of the quirks of the industry. It doesn't matter if you're right. Just don't be wrong. Mistakes are cumulative in casinos. They stay with you for life. Errors of omission go unnoticed. To stick your neck out in a casino is to flirt with the executioner who, even in this age of "enlightened management," still swings a mean axe.

In this fashion, casinos are like governments. It is death for a junior executive to show any initiative. You do your eight hours and go home. If you do a good job and you're lucky enough to pal around with a few big shots, you *might* have a nice spot someday. If you're stupid, rude, and lazy but your wife's uncle runs the joint, you *will* have a nice spot someday. If you pester your boss and make him watch every player you suspect of knowing basic strategy, you'll *never* have a nice spot. Human nature. It's what makes casinos bog down and comp wizardry work.

Adding the values in this way yields a good approximation of the casino advantage. Remember, if you wind up with a “-” sign preceding the number, the casino has the edge. On the rare occasion that you get a “+” sign (single deck, dealer stands on soft 17, double after split), the player has the edge.

One more thing. You won’t benefit from the good rules on a blackjack game (double after split, late surrender, and resplit aces) if you don’t know how to take advantage of them (see the Appendix for “Basic Strategy for Favorable Blackjack Options”).

More Help

The most complete and accurate basic strategy for any number of decks and combination of rules is contained in *The Theory of Blackjack* by Peter Griffin. The most comprehensive overall treatment of basic strategy is contained in the book *Basic Blackjack* by Stanford Wong. The easiest card-counting system to learn and use, by far, is *Knock-Out Blackjack*, by Olaf Vancura and Ken Fuchs (see “Resources” for information on obtaining these and other recommended books and software on blackjack).

Bankroll is Your Fuel

The size of your bankroll will determine several things: how much you should bet; how long you can play; and most importantly, what level of comps you can expect.

By now you probably want to know where you fit into the comp hierarchy and how you can formulate a strategy that’s optimal for your level of play. In short, what kind of comps are you entitled to if you’re a \$5 bettor, or a \$50 bettor, or a \$500 bettor?

Anyone with a few nickels to slip into a slot machine can easily score the comp classics—souvenirs, funbooks, and free parking, as well as alcohol in the states that serve it free. These are not unimportant freebies. But if you want to survive the natural swings of wins and losses long enough to qualify for some kind of meal or room comp, you’ll need the gumption to bet at least \$5-\$20 a hand, with

a bankroll of at least \$100 to \$1,000. At this level, you'll still be more concerned with protecting your limited bankroll than scoring a major comp. Look at it this way. A free meal in a casino where you can get a decent meal for \$4.99 is hardly worth the agony that going broke can cause you. You're far better off taking advantage of the great deals in food and rooms that are synonymous with American casinos and practicing a more judicious brand of comp counting. Also, at this level of wizardry, where you play is just as important as how much you bet and how long you play.

Serious comp counting, in the major jurisdictions, begins with bankrolls of about \$2,500. At \$5,000, you'll have the ammunition necessary to go for RFB at some of the lower-level casinos. Many more ACES moves are available to high rollers than to medium and low rollers. Larger bankrolls are necessary for advanced techniques; the larger the bankroll, the higher the octane for cruising. I consider the lower boundary of true high-roller status to be a bankroll of \$10,000. Obviously, this is a somewhat sparsely inhabited universe; people who are able (and want) to deposit ten grand in a casino cage and make hundreds of \$50 to \$250 wagers are few and far between in the real world.

The proper assessment and handling of your bankroll is important. Refer to "Play to Your Bankroll" to determine where your bankroll puts you on the comp map. Once you know how big your playing stash will be, you can use the unique "Bankroll Index" in the back of the book to guide you to the comps within your means.

The Casino is the Avenue—Scouting the Joints

When you're ready to enter the realm of advanced comp counting, you'll need to know how to interact not only with hosts, but also with room-reservation agents and casino bosses. For most of you, this initial foray into the bowels of casino marketing will be your first real-life incursion into the comp system. If you're nervous about calling strangers and asking the wrong questions or making a mistake, phone a couple of joints you're not interested in and prac-

tice a time or two. You'll find the best time to call is between 8 and 11 a.m. during the week, when it's not too busy.

Here's how it works. Refer to the scouting checklist (see the Appendix) and have a copy of it by your side before you call the casinos. A listing of every casino in the country can be found in an excellent book, *American Casino Guide*, by Steve Bourie, now in its eighth or ninth edition and updated yearly, or use the phone listings in the Appendix. Have the PBX operator connect you with Room Reservations (some riverboats and Native American casinos don't have rooms; see "Day Trippers"). Ask the reservations agent what the weekend rate is for a room. She'll ask, "Which weekend?" Name one, but don't be surprised if you have to offer a couple of alternative weekends before you find one that isn't sold out. When you finally get a price, jot it down. Then ask her how much for the cheapest suite. She may go back into her "For when?" routine. When she quotes you a price, enter it on the "Weekend Suite Rate" slot on your checklist and ask her to transfer you back to the PBX operator. Sometimes they can't make the transfer, so you'll have to call back.

When you connect with the operator again, ask to speak to a VIP or table-games host. When the host comes on, tell him that you're a blackjack player, you visited his casino on your last trip, and you'd like to stay there your next trip out. Be prepared to make a little small talk, then ask him what it takes to get a room comp. He'll usually quote you a number right away, something like "\$50 a hand for four hours a day." Make sure that it's the requirement for room only, then ask him how much for RFB. It will usually be two to five times what a room-only comp is. Then ask him how much more for airfare. Be polite, but be direct. He won't be offended (you wouldn't believe some of the calls he gets from professional grinders). By using the checklist, even if it's your first call, you'll sound like you know what you're talking about.

Important. The host will often ask when you were there and what time you played. He's fishing to find out if you were rated, because if you were, he can extend you privileges right away. Tell him it was late at night and you didn't bother getting rated, because you were staying somewhere else. He'll understand.

Once the questions get around to airfare, a lot of hosts will tell

you they don't pay airfare or that you'll have to establish credit or deposit front money (and don't be surprised if it's a lot). The rule of thumb is still pretty much 10% of your losses or 5% of your credit line, with a few little kinks, depending on the joint. For really really short losses (just a few minutes) they'll try to cheese you out of your plane ride altogether. And if you have a super long play (20 hours or more), they'll often cough up as much as 15% of your actual loss. The real trick to getting airfare is to not run up a bunch of bills for stuff that you don't really want and make sure to leave enough on the table for them to give you the hard cash money.

If the host offers to book a room for you, politely decline. (You'll want to compare the information you get from the hosts at other casinos before committing.) If he presses you, tell him you'll call him back after you've decided when you can make the time to come out.

When you decide where you want to stay, call the host back. If it's 30 days or more in advance, you've got a real good chance of getting a room in the hotel you want, particularly if you agree to apply for credit or put money up front. If you're the spur-of-the-moment type, you may have to shop around at a couple of joints to get what you're looking for.

If you've posted all of the information you've accumulated from the room agent and the host, you'll know exactly how much and how long you have to play to get the comps you want. Now you need to know what kind of blackjack game they deal to see if they offer real comp value.

If you don't already know the casino's blackjack rules, have the host transfer you back to the hotel operator. Ask for a blackjack pit. No matter who answers, ask to speak to a floorman. They come in all shapes and sizes, so don't be surprised if the floorman sounds like a snot-nosed kid or a Teamster bill collector or your spinster second-grade teacher. Whoever it is will (sometimes grudgingly) tell you the house blackjack rules. Write them down. If the floorman is friendly or at least talkative, you can ask him about the guidelines for comps for buffets, coffee shops, and shows. The reason you want to ask the floorman (and not the host) about these comps is that floormen can issue "limited" comps, but they have to adhere to strict guidelines. So he'll give you the exact requirements, while a host might tell

you, a la Harrah's, "Go ahead and gamble and we'll evaluate you at the end of the play" for the lower-end comps, to get you out of his hair. Even if the floormen can't write the comps, they speak to the hosts often enough to know exactly what's expected to get a comp request approved.

Once you know the casino's blackjack rules and low-level comp requirements, you can refer back to the "Variables for Determining Player Edge" to figure out what the casino's advantage is. And now, at long last, you have everything you need to determine exactly what your expected costs will be and if the casino is ripe for a plucking.

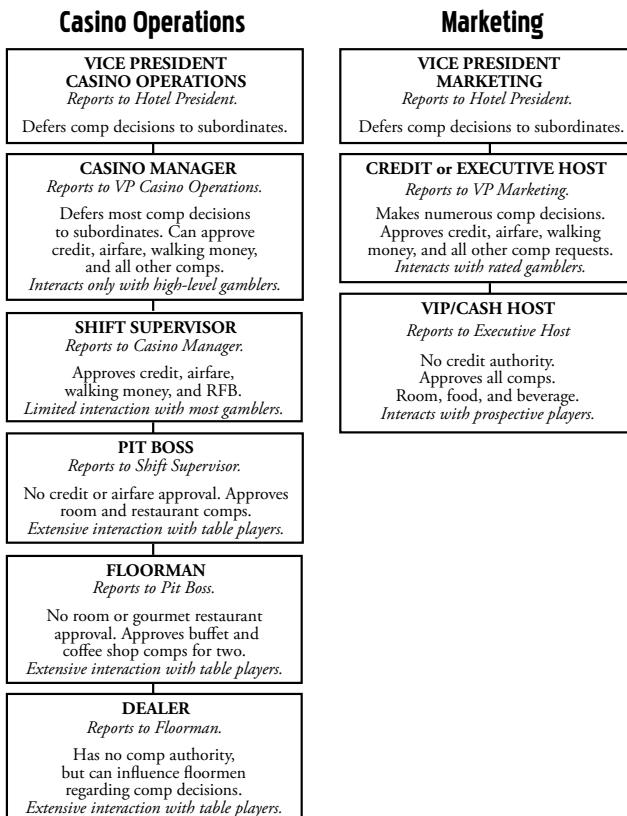
Know Your Floorman

Now that you know how to handle the guy who approves all of your comps, your next big step is to become intimately familiar with the world of floormen and pit bosses—a world full of dealers and supervisors, computers and clerks, front money and markers, counts and fills, rating slips and relief bosses, and endless paperwork. By the time you finish this book, all these terms and procedures will be second nature to you and you'll know your floormen almost as well as they know themselves.

Always remember that floormen are both your friends and your antagonists. They're the ones who assess your play and relay the information to the hosts and casino marketing. Based on the floorman's information, marketing makes a decision on your potential worth to the casino and how much in comps the casino is willing to give you to keep you on board. So your job as a comp wizard is to get into the good graces of your floormen on the one hand, and pull their strings on the other as if they were your personal marionettes.

Contrary to popular belief, most floormen earn less than hotel bartenders, cocktail waitresses, valet parking attendants, bellmen, *and* the dealers who work for them. On top of that, they have sizable wardrobe and dry-cleaning expenses and are paid by check, while most of the other people you meet working in the hotel take home a tip envelope every day.

Complimentary Chain of Command



The average floorman lives hand-to-mouth. He rarely gets to eat out at a nice restaurant or do much of anything else, especially if he's raising a family. Since most of these guys are struggling, the salient point for budding comp wizards to remember is that floormen can be bought cheap—if you know how to make the play.

A tie, a small gift certificate, a dozen golf balls, something your company sells, an off-premises comp, almost any little token you can think of will be paid back in spades on your rating—as long as you find the right bosses. This isn't to say that you're trying to bribe them. You're simply befriending fellow struggling human beings who happen to make subjective ratings on your play. All right, all right,

so you *are* trying to bribe them. What are they gonna do, shoot you for being nice?

Say you have a boss who especially appreciates you (after you've dished off a gift, of course). Which of your bets do you think he's going to remember when he's completing your rating slip? The little bets that'll force you to pay a \$300 hotel bill when you check out? Or the big ones that'll ensure everything's comped and motivate you to come back as soon as possible?

Sometimes you'll observe a boss for a while and won't be able to get a handle on his or her personality. All you have to do is make an offhand comment to the dealer about the boss, such as, "Does she ever smile?" Within ten seconds you'll know all you need to about your floorman. Trust what a dealer says; they're usually pretty honest about the bosses working behind them.

In order to nurture at least a couple of bosses on every comp-counting trip, you'll need to recognize the different *types* that work the casinos. Some of them can be spotted in seconds. Some you won't be able to get a handle on until you check out, unless you prod them for your ratings while you're playing.

The Good Bosses

The good bosses are the guys you can use. It really doesn't matter if they're smart or dumb, hard working or lazy, stable or goofy. What matters to you is that you can trick or bribe them to get more stuff. Generally speaking, if they're congenial, busy with other affairs, or too damn self-absorbed to pay any attention to you except when they have to, you'll get more comps by playing in their sections.

Carey Casinova

He's the original casino love god. Married four times, his current wife is a dealer in the same joint, but he's still got all the moves. You can spot him in seconds. If he's not hitting on the cocktail waitresses, he's leaning over the tables, trying to get a gander of some sweet thing's layout, while ignoring three \$100 tables with rammin' jammin' action going on all around him.

Usually a handsome guy, he's a flashy dresser with perfectly coifed

hair and in constant need of attention. He'll flirt with every woman from 21-year-old racehorses to 90-year-old wheelchair-bound blind women. He's glib, knows all the casino jokes, and talks the talk with the best of them. A generous sort, he won't have a clue what you did on the game until it's time for you to leave.

He's easy to stroke. If you're male, all you have to do is brag about how slick he is to the ladies on your table when he's within earshot and he'll double your rating immediately. If you're female, he'll do whatever he can for you, as long as you laugh at his jokes. Don't ever let him think he has a chance with you, though, because if you turn him down, your rating will suffer accordingly. If you do go for his lines and wind up in an amorous relationship, you'll hit the grand slam of comps. Until he gets tired of you (usually about two days).

Gary Greedhead

He's got his hand out to everyone. Ostensibly to shake it, he's also trying to subtly shake you down. Often a real estate broker on the side, he wants to know where you're from, what you do, and how often you come to Las Vegas. A walking chamber of commerce billboard, he wants to talk business with you. The conversation invariably ends up with a discussion about how little floormen make and how nice the hotel's gift shop is.

He's best played with a three-way squeeze: Buy him off with an inexpensive gift, bet small the 90% of the time he's hustling other customers, and tell him you're interested in investing in Las Vegas real estate, if he happens to hear of any good deals. He will.

Benny Buttkisser

He's so busy sucking up to the shift bosses, trying to make his fellow bosses look bad, and generally stirring up shit, he has little time to actually watch the games. Although he appears to be very efficient at rating his players, he has no desire to socialize with them and if you leave him alone, he'll leave you alone.

If you can read his dealers' body language when he talks to them, you'll know right away that he's the kind of guy who'd rat out his own mother if he thought he'd get a promotion. He's especially

susceptible to compliments you give his boss about him, if you make sure he overhears you.

If you can bring yourself to write a glowing letter to management about him, he'll automatically triple your ratings on your next trip.

The Gift That Keeps On Giving

Although I've told you to lay something on the bosses if they're especially nice or you need a favor, you really shouldn't give them anything unless you're reasonably sure to get something in return. Once you find a boss or two willing to go in the tank, use these handy hints when forking over the graft.

- Never ever offer a boss cash. Virtually all casinos will terminate a boss for taking currency from a player and you could put someone in a bind if he thinks no one is watching.
- Give them something cheap. It's the thought, etc.
- Almost every male floorman in the country has to wear a suit five days a week. They all need ties. Make it conservative, or the other bosses will hooray him when he wears it to work.
- Women like flowers. Too bad. They're too conspicuous.
- A \$10 three-team parlay bet is a favorite among bosses. It makes them think of you for the whole weekend and it gives you both a common enemy—the house.
- Even big bosses get golf balls. No one seems to care if a player lays a dozen or two around the pit. Even if your favorite boss doesn't play the game, he'll probably give them to his boss, so no one gets hurt when you hand them out.
- Off-premises coffee shop or restaurant comps are a major motivator for bosses to nudge rating slips. If you can, get the comp with an open date so the boss can go on his day off. Warning. An off-premises comp will put the boss on notice that you're a comp wizard. Only offer them if you *know* he'll do something special for you in return.
- Be discreet. If only a couple of bosses are scoring all the loot, the other bosses get jealous.
- Never mail a boss a gift. His boss gets his mail first and hand-delivers it to him. If your buddy gets too much booty in the mail, he'll fry.

Honey Happycheeks

Dressed like a \$1,000 call girl, she's new to the trade (of working for a check, that is). Formerly one of top management's concubines, she's a little long in the tooth for them now (pushing 25) and they've insisted that the casino manager break her in as a dealer.

After extensive seasoning of, oh, about five weeks and following a lengthy visit "upstairs" on one of her breaks, she miraculously gets the first promotion that comes along, bypassing the 34-year-old mother of three who's just finished her masters in Business Administration. She's usually extra friendly, has great interpersonal skills and, if you're lucky, comes with all her vaccinations.

Known to date even 80-year-old trolls if they have enough chips, she's an easy pick-up if your bankroll can stand the bludgeoning. Although she still has trouble adding to 21, she knows the *exact* average bet and line of credit of every male in the casino who can draw markers for more than \$50,000.

Warning! She's to be avoided by male comp wizards betting more than \$250 a hand (unless you're looking to get lucky), because she'll gun every bet you make and be on you like a chicken on a June bug. She'll ignore you if you keep your ACES play within the \$25-\$100 range.

Strangely enough, if you're an average-looking female betting gobs of money, Miss Happycheeks will often give you a higher average bet than she should, because even though you may have an excellent education, great career, wonderful family, and more money in blue-chip investments than she can conceive, she feels sorry for you. But if you're a knockout, look out. She'll give you a rating all right, and it ain't gonna be a 10.

Mary Mary Kay

Very personable, she's a recovering drug addict trying to get out of the business by hustling all of her dealers to join her pyramid play while she pretends to watch her games. Often a born-again Christian, she never has a clue about what's going on in the pit. Although oblivious, she's a nice gal who's been splattered a few times herself and would never do anything to hurt you, hence your ratings stay high.

Danger! If she tries to bring you under her sales spell, under no

circumstances should you ever suggest that what she's doing is a pyramid scheme, because it's really "network marketing." To even hint that you believe otherwise will probably find your rating slip in the garbage. However, you can appear to be fascinated by her big-buck networking ploy. And you are—as long as it nets you big-buck comps.

Sammy Serious

A college-grad tweezers-but with visions of being the CEO in twenty years, he wears Brooks Brothers suits, wing tips, power ties, needlepoint button-down-collar shirts, and a smug look at all times.

A guy who's read all the books, he counts down every blackjack player winning more than \$500, but doesn't know a thing about how comps work (they didn't teach comps at Cornell). He's never made a laydown in his life and has about as much street sense as, well, a street.

These guys are great to comp-wizard on (now it's a verb), because they might as well be blind for all they can see through their tortoiseshell glasses.

Shelly Saywhat

Shelly went to dealer school a year ago. She had pretty good hands. She's all right in the looks department, as well. Problem is, with all these new joints opening up, management had to hire some new bosses from within the ranks, and to meet their government quotas, they had to promote a few extra women. The smart dealers didn't want the job. Shelly wasn't smart.

She's so out of her depth that she might as well be underwater. Frequently sighted with a thousand-yard stare and permanent loopy grin, Shelly can pretty much be ignored. Just don't let her ignore you when you're making your big bets.

Warning. Shelly sometimes has trouble figuring out that two hands at \$100 equals a \$200 average bet. If she's exceptionally slow on the uptake, play one hand.

Willie Wiseguy

He can be anywhere from 30 to 70, but he's seen it all and done it all. Usually not too worried about his appearance, he's constantly on the lookout for crossroaders (casino thieves). A former casino

bandit himself, he doesn't believe card counting works, let alone comp wizardry.

He's a guy who'll plant himself on the big game in his area and hawk it with a vengeance, making sure to keep the dealers and other players as uncomfortable as possible. He'll pick the cards up out of the discard rack and inspect the backs and sides any time someone makes a non-book play that wins, and he'll ignore your piddly \$25-\$100 play all night. As far as a comp wizard is concerned, he might as well not even be there, except when you're making your first and last bets.

Mr. Whiskey

He's a hail fellow, well met, parties with the customers, and usually has a pretty good handle on what's going on around his area. The only thing is, he doesn't give a damn. Look for a big gut, nose blossoms, a big smile, and an ill-fitting suit.

He's especially vulnerable to golf balls, fight tickets, and food comps from somewhere else. If you're even close on the rating you need, tell him, and he'll do everything he can for you, *if* you make his shift fun. If you're a boozer coming with a buddy or two and want to raise some hell in the casino, this is your man.

The Mechanics of ACES

Living With the Losses

Now that you're a professional gambler (playing for comps, of course), you have to understand the ebb and flow of the business. There will be good times. There will bad times. During the bad times your character will be tested. You won't believe it possible to lose so many hands in a row, but it is. Viscerally, you won't understand the negative fluctuations, and you'll think that you're being cheated. You're not. If you know an engineer, ask him for a print-out from a random number generator. The numbers will appear to be anything but random—you can find evidence of any pattern you want to, if you look hard enough. The ups and downs are inevitable and you'll simply have to learn to live with them.

So what if you lose? As the sage Ernest P. Worrel is fond of saying, "Them's the grits." It happens. Live with it. Don't despair. The longer you play, the more likely you are to profit. A casino owner worth his salt never sweats the money as long as he knows he's got the best of it. If he books a loser, he knows he'll be a winner the next time, or the next time, or the next. It's not easy, but it's the only way he survives. Emotionally, the same principles apply for an ACES player.

Now that you're this far into the system, you're actually thinking about trying to live like a high roller, but you're still afraid of losing money. Why? Because like most of us in the reasonable world, you've been led to think that you can't win. After all, you never really won anything significant, right? Pardon me, but that happens to be crap! You're already such a big winner it almost defies belief. How? I'll tell you.

The average man expends about four hundred million sperm with each act of love. Let's assume your parents married at 25. Let's also give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they had sex 50 times a year for 20 years. That gives us 20 years times 50 acts of love times four hundred million sperm each time. That comes to four hundred billion little spermies and yours won! That's four hundred billion to one!

Now that I've put to rest that you are a winner, let's talk about how to handle yourself when the inevitable losses happen.

You just lost money. A lot of money. You feel like an idiot, a jerk, a loser. Now you're without a dime and you've got another whole day to stew. What do you do? Get stewed for free to drown your misery (see "Free Whiskey")? Maybe. But no matter how miserable you are for having lost so much money, you can still hold your head high, because you had the best of it going in and you've got the best of it now.

If you have access to more discretionary dollars, go get them and get back on the merry-go-round. It's the only way you'll learn how to ride the rough terrain. If you're out of jack because you bet way more than you should have, you'd better go home and reassess what you're doing. You may not have the discipline to be an ACES player or you may be playing for more sinister reasons than getting a free vacation. If you are, you're on your own, in more ways than one.

Everyone can be a hero when he's on top. An honest measure of someone's character is what he does when he's down. Do you really think it does you any good to curse the dealers and snarl at the bosses? Hell no, it doesn't. On top of that, if you behave like a lady or gentleman, you still get one hell of a vacation for the money you blew and you might be invited back next time RFB and won't even have to gamble, so you'll have the best of it by far even if you've lost your stash.

I'm sorry if this sounds like sermonizing, since I'm about as far away from fire and brimstone as a man can be. On the other hand, I'm not bragging when I say that behaving with grace under pressure is one of the few admirable traits I managed to develop in my formative comp-hustling years, and it has served me well.

In the casino business, as well as in life, nobody likes a sniveler and nobody likes a snitch. If you show some class, they'll give you

a pass. If you whine, you won't get a dime more in comps, and you might get a lot less. If you point fingers at other people and blame them for your losses, you'll definitely get a lot less and you might not get invited back at all, let alone for a full-comp RFB no-risk romp the next time you get the urge.

Living With the Wins

Strangely enough, you see much more erratic behavior in casinos from the winners than you do from the losers. Sure, the losers get goofy and bang their heads on tables and abuse the staff, but the winners? They go completely off the deep end. Why? Lots of reasons.

First of all, guys who have always thought of themselves as losers are suddenly self-anointed heroes and their egos aren't even remotely prepared to handle it. Secondly, a lot of guys who've just won a thousand or two for the first time have never in their lives had a thousand or two to blow on something frivolous. So what do they do? They run to the casino men's clothing shop and buy a \$500 jogging suit (retail value \$79). They order two bottles of \$150 champagne up to the room. They might even call up a couple of \$300 hookers. Then they go downstairs and regale anyone who will listen with tales of their exploits (as if they invented debauchery that very evening).

The third and underlying reason that most folks lose control when they have newfound wealth is that they simply aren't wired to handle instant, albeit unearned, success. It happens in all walks of life to those who suddenly achieve fame and fortune. How many times have you seen a struggling businessman, actor, or athlete suddenly get wealthy overnight and then immediately start to believe his press releases? It happens every day in Casino Country.

What does this have to do with me, you ask? A lot. First of all, remember, you're supposed to look like a loser. Giving the old "Yeehaw," along with tossing \$25 chips to cocktail waitresses, doesn't do a lot to enhance that image, amigo. Nor does suddenly betting \$500 a hand as soon as you're up a thousand or two. It looks good for your average bet, but it puts a whole lot of unwanted attention on your game.

So much for image. What should you do if you stumble onto a monster win? Put the money in a safe place (that you can't reach if the adrenaline and booze start taking control) and continue to play as if you were on the same budget you started with. Remember, the next time you play, you could lose an equal amount and then you won't have enough to continue your comp-wizard career in the fashion to which you've now become accustomed.

Here's what happens to most gamblers. They come to town and lose, say, \$1,000. On their next trip they win about \$1,500, but they spend the hell out of it. The third time they blow around \$500, and then maybe lose another \$300 the fourth time out. Now they've made four trips and their bankroll's down \$1,800 when it should stand at about a mere \$300 loser. Do you see what's happening here? If you don't salt away the winnings, over time you won't have anything to play with. Take it home and put it in the safe. It's the only way you'll survive the swings.

Warning. If you win real real big your first time, don't let it go to your head. When I was a pit boss on the Las Vegas Strip in the late '70s, I watched a Texan who owned a chain of lumberyards win more than \$100,000 on a \$1,000-limit dice game on his first trip to Las Vegas. He was back the next week and lost \$40,000. No problem, he had a system. He came back two weeks later. Before long he was a fixture at the tables, not only losing about \$10,000 a day, but neglecting his business. He took his eye off the ball and failed to see the oil glut that was destroying his state and it took him about six months to lose everything he had, because he "knew" he could make up his business losses by shooting dice. In less than eight months from the moment his plane touched down at McCarran for the first time, he was a break-in blackjack dealer at Binion's Horseshoe. I haven't heard what happened to him since then, but I'd be willing to wager a bundle that whatever he's doing, it's not quite as good as owning a chain of lumberyards in Dallas.

The moral of the story is, it doesn't mean a thing if you win today—the joints always have the edge. Unless you're playing for comps, that is.

Superstitions and Admonitions

The Great Myths

The great myths of all cultures and their interwoven sub-cultures are usually a society's attempt to understand the unexplainable.

They sprout from seeds of truth and are founded on a remarkable incident or sequence of incidents that have been repeated, altered, and embellished over time.

The gambling culture is no exception. It has its own rich lore, laden with universal myths, which almost all gamblers believe. The ones I've listed below are just a few examples of the useless drivel you'll be bombarded with while you ply your comp-wizard trade. You'll hear them near and far and they will befuddle you, exasperate you, and maybe even make you question the wisdom of *Comp City*. The upside is that once you understand that they are all wrong, they can work to your advantage.

Myth #1— Money-Management Systems Work

The concept of money management has been wafting through gambling dens since Hatasu, a queen of Egypt circa 1600 B.C., shot ivory dice at Thebes. The advice comes in all varieties, but “Bet the house’s money!” is the bedrock mantra that’s been passed down by thousands of veteran know-it-alls to eager novices hot for the score. And now, at the turn of the century, “Bet the house’s money!” is still the intellectual linchpin for the dream of getting rich just for showing up.

Almost every serious gambler I know (the limits don't matter—if you're betting enough to make you tingle, it's serious) still believes in the theory of betting small when you're losing and betting big when you're winning. Nice theory. I like it, too. Only problem is, you don't know where you're winning.

"Yes I do, Max," you say. "When I'm on a winning streak, I can feel it in my bones."

No you can't. Want proof? You still work for a living? That's proof enough.

Here's a fill-in-the-blank multiple-choice question for you. Which type of gambler does not belong in the following sentence?

Joe, a professional _____, has consistently made a good (and legal) living practicing his craft in the casino over the past five years.

- A. card counter
- B. money manager
- C. horse handicapper
- D. sports bettor
- E. video poker player
- F. poker player
- G. tournament player

I get around a little bit and I know at least a couple of people in every category except one who have figured out how to make a real living off the casinos. Which one doesn't belong in this band of professional scufflers? I'll give you a hint. It has to do with managing money.

Even the lowliest gamblers don't want to succumb to the joints without a little fight. But instead of picking a beatable game, studying, practicing, and getting their experience through the school of hard knocks, they take the easiest road they can find. They buy a book or tape that touts the wonders of money management.

Plenty of sham products out there try to convince you that you're sharp because you now know the magic credo: "Only bet big when you're on a winning streak." The problem is, none of the

high-stakes casino raiders I tend to run with have ever been able to figure out just when that streak is happening. If *they* can't figure it out—and trust me, when the casino bosses are sleeping, these guys are perfecting another blockbuster casino-busting idea—then some poor shnook who happens to pick up a book in the casino gift shop full of illogical notions is meat on the table.

Yes, streaks happen, but you won't know when they're occurring because *all streaks are historical*. You simply can't know *when* you're on a streak or in a streak; you'll only know when you've *been* in or on a streak.

Unless you know something that has escaped Thorp, Griffin, Wilson, Wong, and the other great mathematical and blackjack theoriticians, "streak theories" are nothing but quackery. Peddled by charlatans and frauds.

A final proof. Ask yourself: At what point in a game of chance does the *size* of my bet affect the odds against me? It never does.

As a comp counter, you should vary your bet only to get the goodies you want.

Myth #2—Players Jumping In and Out of a Blackjack Game Upset the Sequence of the Cards

Let's dispel this myth in no uncertain terms. It makes absolutely no difference to your chances of winning or losing if another player comes into or out of a blackjack game. Sure, the future order of the cards is changed, but so what? You didn't know what it was in the first place. It's a stone cold fact: Predisposed sequences of cards get "thrown off" equally good and bad when another player sits down on a game.

However, by appearing to believe this myth, you can save a lot of money. Just sit out hands when these "card busters" come and go (remember "Play Slow"?). You can also skip a hand or two when your partner shows up and sits down.

Once in a while you'll encounter a player who will go so far as to ask you to wait until he loses a hand or the dealer shuffles before you make a bet. He'll explain that he's won a few hands in a row with the previous mix of players on the game and doesn't want the cards

to change. If you come into a game and someone asks you to wait, tell him, “No problem,” while you watch. If he wins, tell him you’re glad you waited. It’s a little better than even money that he’ll lose. When that happens, smile and say, “I guess I should have sat down after all.” He’ll agree. Now you’ll have a friend with whom you can compare hands and slow the game down for the rest of the session.

Myth #3— It’s Harder To Win at Blackjack With A Lousy Player at The Table

The way another person plays has absolutely no affect on whether you win or lose. It *will* alter how many hands you play. A blatantly bad blackjack player (who splits faces, doubles twelves, etc.) can empty a game faster than a red-wine-and-chili-dog fart, and if players leave the table you’ll play more hands, which is bad. Most poor players aren’t bad enough to run off the other players, though, and having a bad player on the game can actually be a plus.

If you encounter a paragon of ineptness, keep him on the game, making sure to take time to offer a few pointers. A “helpful” ACES player can slow the game down three rounds an hour just by conveying a little friendly advice and up to five rounds an hour with a slow learner. My experience has been that men usually don’t take advice too kindly, even if they don’t have a clue about what they’re doing. So you should be a little careful when trying to talk to them. Women novices, on the other hand, are usually open to all advice.

You can even bring your own bad player to the party. It’s great sport to work with someone who has the rookie act perfected (females are best). If you’re playing with a female partner, the less blackjack knowledge she appears to possess, the better it is for you. Here’s how it works.

After you’ve played a couple of hands, your covert partner sidles into a spot on the game. The first time she gets two face cards, she splits them. Before she gets her second bet out the other players will howl like they’ve just been prodded with hot pokers. Now she gets to ask why she shouldn’t split tens. The whole table will be chock full of advice. After they’ve been so kind as to tell her how to play her own money, have her pull the money back and stand pat. It won’t

be long until all of the other “experts” on the game will be giving her constant advice, and she’ll be able to slow the game down to reverse.

Whether you know the bad player or not, be sure to get maximum value from the situation. When you’ve finished your play, point to the player and make some comment to the boss such as, “Does this guy work for you?” as you shake your head and lament your extraordinary losses (trumped up, of course). He’ll know what you mean, even though he doesn’t understand that the poor guy’s bad plays had absolutely no negative effect on you.

A related myth concerns the skill level of the player at the last seat (“third base”). Because the person sitting at third base acts last, just before the dealer, most blackjack players think that having an expert gambler there enhances their chances of winning. Obviously, they also feel that a poor player at third base costs them money. Again, another player’s lack of skill has nothing to do with your own outcome. But to make sure that your partner’s “bad” play gets the attention that it deserves, try to lock up third base for her.

Myth #4—If You Change Tables, You Can Change Your Luck

Yeah, right. Table hopping goes directly back to the streak theory that most suckers like to lean on when they’re gambling. Not only does table hopping do nothing to change a streak of bad luck, it aggravates bosses who have to chase you around the pit and could, therefore, destroy your ratings.

On the subject of luck, a surprising number of casino bosses apply this myth to changing a player’s good luck to bad. Let me tell you about something that happened at Lake Tahoe in the ’80s that’ll show you just how far the really superstitious in the gambling business will go to change a gambler’s run of good fortune.

The shift manager, Bob the Bleeder, was the kind of boss who believes that there are only two kinds of blackjack players: losers and cheaters. A drunk gambler had already tattooed his shift for about ten large. He turned to Lenny, a floorman who’d been watching the action for the past two hours. “Did you change the cards?” the Bleeder barked.

Lenny nodded, “Yes.”

“Did you change dealers?” Bob hissed.

Lenny nodded, “Yes,” again.

“Change them again!” Bob roared. Lenny took a dealer off a dead game and put her in. The blackjack player won three straight \$500 bets. Bob turned to Lenny and glared. “Well?”

Lenny had just about had it with the Bleeder. “Well what?” he snapped.

“Do something!” Bob bellowed.

Lenny walked over to the table, pulled out the plastic paddle used to shove money into the drop box, turned it around, and stuck it back in its slot.

“There, that ought to do it,” he said, as he smiled at the Bleeder.

The gambler won another \$10,000 in the next five minutes. The Bleeder’s sense of humor matched his tableside demeanor and Lenny found himself looking for work. On the bright side, Lenny is now an assistant shift boss at a premium Las Vegas resort and Bob is dealing \$5 blackjack and freezing his ass off in Colorado.

The point is, and I can’t emphasize it enough (although you might be getting tired of hearing it), *nothing you do that’s non-mathematical will change the mathematics of the game*. Since you have an edge with ACES, you want as much playing time as possible credited toward your rating, so the less you hop around, the higher your ratings will be.

Now that you know you shouldn’t hop around indiscriminately, there are a few good reasons for changing tables more than once during any single playing session. If you’re unlucky enough to get a second rude dealer in a row, you’ll want to make one more move, and it should be to another boss’ area. Also, if you’re on a game where another player is knocking the casino stiff, when a boss or two start hovering around and sweating the action, take a break or move to another game. It’s a good bet someone will be gunning the big player and everyone else on the game, trying to detect collusion of some sort among the players and the dealer. And you won’t want to be making ACES moves with that kind of heat.

If a dealer keeps making hands and beating everyone, the table will soon empty on its own. Since you don’t ever want to play alone, this is a prime time to move. And it looks like a natural reaction to the bosses. You’ll also want to leave a game, even if it’s full, if a speed

demon suddenly shows up to deal. These gunslingers are so fast that even if you weren't counting comps, you'd probably get dizzy trying to keep up and have to leave anyway.

Myth #5— You Need a Sophisticated Card-Tracking System to Consistently Win at Blackjack

Nonsense. ACES is the most powerful long-term, no-heat, please-come-back-and-let-us-give-you-something-you-don't-deserve gambling method known to man.

Where Women Stand

Play The Cards You've Been Dealt

Most of the things I'm about to say aren't (necessarily) my own opinions, only an honest rendition of how the overwhelmingly male-dominated gambling industry has come to view and treat women.

Up until 50 years ago, only men participated in the business on either side of the tables. It wasn't until the 1940s, during the man shortage of WW II, that Raymond "Pappy" Smith broke tradition by hiring women to deal and welcoming women to gamble at his Harold's Club casino in Reno. Even so, half a century later the profile of the table-game player most desired by the casino remains male. In the eyes of the casino bosses, men are the real *gamblers*, who live for the moment, compelled to take a ride on a crash course where financial disaster looms around every corner (often to the dismay of the women with them). Bosses love men who have a gambling death wish, because they know the guy's bound to eventually blow everything he has, and if it's on their watch, they might even get a little credit when he goes down in flames.

Although it happens all the time, most bosses can't picture a woman crashing and burning. Women, they assume, play for fun, not out of an irrational need to risk money. Thus, the male bosses don't have much respect for women gamblers. This lack of respect, though personally annoying, presents a powerful opportunity for comp wizardry. Blackjack bosses rarely feel there's a reason to fear

or suspect women; it's up to you to reinforce, and take advantage of, that notion.

Getting comped is an art, a nurturing art. Women are into nurturing. Ergo, women get more comps, especially from men. The power of the pen is a little-understood perk in the casino business. There's something downright sensual about being able to lavish meals and rooms upon those *you* deem deserving. Comps don't cost man-bosses a thing and giving them away to the ladies makes them feel like big shots. That feeling of control and power, particularly for the guys who grew up hard, is addicting. As a woman, knowing this about man-bosses can take you a long way.

Egos and More Egos

The following are time-tested moves to an old old game. By now, your womanly instincts and better judgment should automatically signal you *when* to play this game, and your comfort zone will let you know *if* you can pull it off with impunity. It might be a sad commentary on the human condition, but it should come as no surprise: By stroking a man-boss' ego, you'll have a definite advantage.

Playing it smart involves using some of the mechanics of ACES—with a feminine edge. For example, you can slow the game way down by calling a man-boss over any time you'd like some “expert advice” on how to play a hand. Of course, when you call him over, you'll have your biggest bet of the day out, and he'll remember that when he completes your rating.

Here's a shocker: Men like women to notice them. When you sit down and ask a boss how long you need to play to get a comp for the coffee shop, be attentive. Let the conversation flow. That doesn't mean you need him to think you're on the make. Just let him know, in your own subtle way, that you think he's important. You'll be putting yourself in no real danger. Even if he has the time, freedom, and inclination to hit on you while he's working, he has to leave the property at the end of his shift. No casino in the country lets a boss linger around the pit after he gets off work—for any reason. When he's finished, he's gone, and that's that. Then you can try it again on the next guy.

Of course, if you're playing cards with a man-partner, let him know what you're up to before you flirt with the man-boss, or you might draw a little fire yourself. If he's in on the deal, it can be fun for both of you as you watch the man-boss fawn. It's not too tough on your partner's ego, either.

Laugh at the boss' jokes. Even if you've heard them a hundred times before, laugh again. It's always ego-deflating for a man to tell a joke to a lady and have her say, "I heard that one." He's supposed to be the guy in the know. Let him think that. It doesn't cost you anything, and he'll be pleased when you chuckle, even though you're laughing for reasons he'll never be aware of.

Note. There's rarely any justification for you to play in a section with an unknown female boss. In addition to losing the advantages described above, women bosses are better at ferreting out the schemers and scammers. It's a fact. Women bosses are more conscientious, more suspicious, more territorial, and hawk their games instead of the cocktail waitresses.

Chauvinism

Twenty to thirty years ago, any attractive woman playing alone in Las Vegas was unjustly assumed by most everyone to be a hooker. If a single woman sat down to play a little blackjack and was friendly to a male customer, it was his prerogative to discreetly inquire if she was "workin'." Chauvinism still runs rampant, but the worst thing you're likely to encounter from the bosses (other than the ordinary stuff, like being leered at and occasionally being hit on) is that they'll refer to you as a "girl."

It's a fact of life in a casino; no matter how old you are, most of the men, players and bosses alike, will still call you a "girl." I'm just letting you know up front, so you don't have a stroke when you sit down to play in one of the older clubs and hear some guy, who appears otherwise to be a gentleman, utter such gems as, "Jesus Christ, the cocktail girls are slow tonight."

You'll also, of course, have to be aware of the men you play with on the games. Many of them will be politely indifferent to you, intent on their cards and chips. Some will be friendly, and again you'll have

to rely on your instincts to determine your response, but getting cozy can really slow down a game, especially if you can involve the dealer. The potential is there, however, for the odd man out to get nasty.

If another player is insulting you, it won't last long. Casinos are scared to death of harassment lawsuits. They don't put up with harassment from a customer, and they certainly aren't going to stand for it from a boss. If you do encounter any overt acts of harassment from a man-boss and you've got the nerve for it, tell him you feel that he's harassing you and you need to get away from the game, and you probably need some dinner to cool down, and you'd hate to say anything to his boss, so maybe he could make it a comp for four and you'll just forget the whole thing. Soooeee! You'll get the comp all right, no matter how many rules he has to break. All it takes is one sexual-harassment incident in his employee file and he is virtually finished in the industry.

Men, this move will not work with female floormen, so forget it.

Comp Counters Who Count Cards

Do you know how to count cards and win? If the answer is yes, then you, my friend, have the absolute nuts from this day forward. Think about it. If the bosses ignore you all night long, you can combine comp counting with card counting and win the equivalent of two bets an hour (one in money, one in stuff). If there's heat, cut your bet spread down to a level that's breakeven, and you'll still earn great comps.

If you want deep cover, how's this? You can pound booze and never look at anyone else's cards all night long and still be an overall favorite because of the comps. Meanwhile, no one on that shift will ever suspect you're a counter and you'll be welcome forever. This book was written to show basic strategy-level blackjack players how to crush casinos by earning comps valued at ten times their gambling losses. Every tactic portrayed in *Comp City* can also be used by an accomplished card counter, and you won't even have to fade the losses.

Although I've played my share of winning blackjack, I don't pretend to be a world-class blackjack player on a level with the legendary counters who earn hundreds of thousands a year. But based on my

extensive experience on both sides of the table, I believe I have some insight worth discussing here. Some of these tips you'll be familiar with and some may be new to you. A few of them threw me off when I was working the floor. If they're not already in your repertoire, incorporating them might gain you years of card-counting longevity.

Laying Cover

You know all about cover, while most bosses don't even know what it means. But that's not to imply that you should underestimate the enemy. A few bosses in every casino have read the books and a handful of them can actually play a winning game. Although their numbers are few, you should assume that at least one sharp boss lurks in every joint.

This is paramount. Don't take your money back when the dealer shuffles. You're giving up a little, but pulling the money back confirms all of the boss' worst suspicions, especially if the shuffle was prompted by your big bet.

Watching the Boss

If a boss catches you looking at him, smile and call him over. Ask him for something—a comp, directions, a recommendation for a show, anything—but don't ever let him see you divert your eyes away from his. It's a dead giveaway that you're up to something.

Tipping

Tip! You should budget at least 5% of your expected win for the dealers. If you're a big player with a high hourly return, it's almost imperative that you give the dealers at least 10% of your expectation. So what if your profit is reduced by a little blood money? I've had hundreds of conversations in pits about counters and 90% of the bosses believe that counters don't tip. Tipping will buy you years of playing time.

By the same token, if you're betting more than \$100 a hand, tip the cocktail waitress \$5, no matter what. The bosses will think that

you're a sport and they know that counters are anything but. If you don't tip, you might get barred, and when you're barred, that game is gone forever.

Cover Bets

If a boss is watching, you want to look like a sucker. When you win a hand and he's watching, bet it up no matter what. If you lose, you can go up or down. (If the count's good, bet it up. If it's bad, bet it down.) A boss only has to see you do this two or three times in a session to be convinced that you're a negative-progression or money-management player, not a counter. It will reduce your expected win by a few bucks. But I see it as a valid expense of doing business. Unless you're the type who plays till you're barred, it's the only way to go. There are people in this country who play solo, live in penthouse casino suites, and make a half-million dollars a year because they're not afraid to tip and lay cover. Some of these guys lay \$500 in cover during a \$1,000 session. Guess what the net result is here? Five hundred big ones an hour—after hour, after hour, after hour, year after year.

Sucker Plays That Work

If you want to get a boss thinking you're a stone sucker, slam that first shot of whiskey and bet a quarter for yourself and a quarter for the dealer on the first hand.

Take insurance when you have a natural. You might even insure your twenties when the boss is watching. Do it with conviction and without hesitation (you know you have to protect those good hands). It'll come up infrequently, so it won't cost too much overall, but it leaves a lasting impression with the bosses. A move with similar value is not hitting a soft 18 against a nine, ten, or ace. The word is out on this play; hitting the 18 identifies you as a player in the know. So does standing on 16 with any positive count.

There are a lot of other cover plays that can work for you. Pick up a copy of Ian Andersen's excellent book, *Burning the Tables in*

Las Vegas, for a treasure trove of ideas. Don Schlesinger's book, *Blackjack Attack*, and the *Blackjack 6•7•8* software program will help you discover those that cost you only a few dollars in expectation for hundreds of dollars worth of cover. If you're a comp counter first and only use card counting to defray your over-the-table losses, these moves are inexpensive, indeed.

Appearance

I never trusted a guy who looked like he woke up just to play blackjack. Don't come in on graveyard shift between 4 and 7 a.m. rubbing the sleep out of your eyes. No true degenerate gambler (which is what you want them to think you are) ever had to set an alarm clock to tell him when it was time to play. Most graveyard bosses are on the lookout for the ghouls nesting upstairs who descend on the tables before sunrise. If you're playing the graveyard shift, stay up all night or make your plays later in the morning when you can wake up naturally.

Don't drink mineral water (unless you're in a joint in Washington, Oregon, etc. that doesn't serve booze). Don't ask me why, but an inordinate number of counters drink mineral water. Get juice, coffee, tea, Dr. Pepper, but stay away from the bottled waters. As far as the bosses are concerned, anyone sitting in a casino drinking anything that smacks of health is not to be trusted.

Conduct

Introduce yourself to the boss and give him your VIP card. Talk to him. A lot. If you want to enlist a co-conspirator for the weekend, buy your favorite floorman a \$25 three-teamer for Sunday's games (Monday if you're staying that long). The boss will be your buddy for the next couple of days. If you win big, yuck it up. Until you've established a pattern of winning (five or more sessions), if your cover is good enough, there's no way they'll throw you out of the casino for counting. When they like you, some bosses will even warn you if the heat is on upstairs.

Hiding Chips

As a pro, you know you're doing well if you win an average of one big bet an hour. All you have to do is *hide* one big bet an hour and you'll be doing great in terms of preserving your welcome. Unless you're playing head up, where the boss can determine exactly how many chips are missing from the rack, you can swing with up to two bets an hour and you'll look like a loser forever. Most places are reluctant to bar "losers," unless they're blatant scufflers.

Buying In

If you're a cash player, don't ever buy in for more currency than makes sense. For example, it's just not natural to buy in for \$500 and make \$15 bets. Gamblers don't do it that way. If your eventual big bets will be \$100, buy in for \$100 and start by playing quarters. Win or lose, you'll be able to move your bets into your normal spread within a few minutes. If you're losing, it looks natural for you to come out of your pocket, especially when you want to bet big. If you're winning, it looks like you're making a parlay play—also very natural. If you bet \$5 for the dealer and \$25 for yourself early on, you'll look real easy! When you come out of pocket, let the money play.

Drinking

Buy an O'Douls or a Sharps at the bar. Pour it in a glass. Take it to the table with you. When the waitress comes by, ask for a shot of whiskey, making sure the boss hears you. Slug it down when the boss is watching. Then chug the O'Douls. The next time the waitress comes by, order a real beer and sip it slowly. Time for a break. Take the beer and get rid of it. Buy another fake beer, pour it into a glass, mosey back to the table, and chug it while you're talking to the boss. Order another real beer. Then you sip again. When it's a quarter gone (half an hour or so), order another cold one. By now you'll have to go to the bathroom again and, yep, go get some more fake stuff. In a two-hour session you'll consume the equivalent of a drink and a half and look like you're getting smashed. It works.

Wonging

Start your play with the best of it. Wong into a rich shoe and make those important big bets when you have a big edge. If you're good, you can back count the game next to you (make sure you're in a position to watch the other layout) and pop into that one when it gets juicy. Just let the boss know you're moving.

Getting Rid of Bosses

If a boss is hawking your game and you want to get rid of him, get in his face. Be nice, but bombard him with requests. Ask him for reservations for the show. He'll have to do it, even if he doesn't want to. If he comes back to your game, ask him for reservations for dinner. If he comes back again, ask him for a comp for the coffee shop. Keep this up long enough and he'll stay as far away from your game as he can get. The problem is, he'll also get mad, which will probably have an adverse effect on your rating. The moral? If you're playing primarily for the comps, you'll have to tolerate a boss' scrutiny.

Get Your Comps While You're Losing

This way, you not only get the comps you want, but the casino has also done the very thing that comps were designed to do: get you to play more. And you will. The only difference is that you're playing with an edge on the blackjack as well as the comp games. Then, when you're tossed (and you will be, someday), you'll be ahead of both the money and the complimentaries.

Safety Tips

This section is directed toward those souls who, just like me, seem to have no trouble finding trouble. One of life's irrefutable truths is that it's a whole lot easier and cheaper to get *into* trouble than it is to get out of it, especially in casino venues, where acting like a fool

is taken to new heights every night of the year. Armed with these timeless tips about common traps that have snared more than their share in gambling destinations, you can save yourself a little money and a lot of grief.

Note: Some of these tips apply to Nevada, but most are applicable anywhere there are casinos.

Wedding Chapels

Do you know why divorces cost so much? Because they're worth it. More than 220,000 people fell in love and got married in Las Vegas last year. Love? Well, maybe not, not when you consider the ease of getting married here (no blood test, no waiting period) and of losing control. To some people, Las Vegas' magic spell looks a lot like love.

Getting married in Las Vegas is as cheap as it is easy and informal. You can get married here in a jogging suit, bikini, or a \$5,000 gown, and believe it or not, without getting out of the car.

So what's the safety tip? I'll sum it up in one word. Don't! Don't ever decide to get married *after* you get to the Wedding Capital of the World. Unless you *both* decide to get married while you're still sane and sober back home and *then* hop in a plane, bound for Nevada to ratify your life together in one of the state's famous temples of love, you'll be one sorry sucker come morning.

Sure, you thought he was some kind of hero after he smacked the blackjack tables for \$8,500 and got the honeymoon suite, but how good do you think he's going to look tomorrow after you both wake up hungover and he tells you he's lost back most of the score? (He's probably lying—check his wallet when he's in the shower.)

All right, so you're going to ignore my expert advice and do it anyway. The Marriage License Bureau, downtown in the Clark and Washoe county courthouses, are open long hours. Fork over 35 bucks and you're ready to tie the Gordian knot. Now it's on to a chapel to pop for another \$50-\$1,000 (the sky's the limit if you want flowers, videotape, cake, limos, etc.), with a standard \$35 toke for the ministers who make the Jimmies (Swaggert and Baker) seem downright sincere.

If you're on a budget and can't afford a chapel, but are still looking to sanctify your "love," walk across the street from the License

Bureau to the Commissioner of Civil Marriages, where a deputy bureaucrat will, without sermon or fanfare, pronounce you man and wife for \$35. (If you ask me, it ought to cost about \$50,000 to get married and divorces should be free. You don't suppose the attorneys have anything to do with putting this deal together, do you?)

"Okay, Max," you say. "Enough of the sermonizing. We're getting married anyway. What's the *best* way to do it?"

The best way is to get it comped. A lot of the casinos have wedding chapels and if you're RFB, you can get the whole sucker handed to you on a flowered platter. Unless you're a big *big* player (at least \$500 a hand), they won't pay for incidentals, such as photographs (\$50 and up), flowers (\$50 and up), tips, and limos, but they will give you the room and it's convenient to exchange vows right in your hotel, especially if some friends have joined the celebration.

If you go to a chapel, they'll rip you apart with the live organ music, videotapes of the wedding, renting tuxedos and gowns, buying rings, cakes, garters, and all the trimmings. If you show any speed at all it'll cost you at least \$500-\$700 to get married away from the casino. Take a comp and keep the money—you're going to need it.

Most Las Vegas wedding chapels require at least a one-hour lead time. If she's in labor and you want to make it legal on the way to the delivery room, you can save a lot of money and time at the Little White Chapel, Las Vegas' own drive-through wedding window. Push a button and a minister sticks his head out the driveway window and starts preaching while the wedding march blares over outdoor speakers. Make sure you turn down your radio or you might miss it. I don't think a Happy Meal comes with the ceremony, but for the money it probably should, though the burgers and fries might make the experience a taste too formal.

Jewelry

Just for grins, check out the prices in the casino's jewelry shop after you check in, when you're sober and still semi-rational. You'll see that a Seiko watch, for example, costs about twice as much in the friendly hotel shops as it does at the Zales back home—which isn't exactly Discount Sam's. How do these gift shops get away with

selling the stuff for twice retail? By relying on two time-tested human traits: guilt and vanity.

If you've been real bad, sneaking away to the Gulf Coast or Tahoe, leaving your lover behind, and having the best time ever since reaching the age of consent, and if you've got any kind of heart at all, you'll probably feel a tad remorseful about going AWOL. And if you happen to have a pocketful of chips and a snoot full of booze while you're waiting for the limo to take you home, you'll be tempted to pay double for something she probably doesn't want anyway. Don't go in there. You're supposed to be a percentage player by now. If you want to make a heads-up play, take her a slug of hundred dollar bills. That's *always* appropriate.

So much for the guilt trip. What if you've just snagged some sweetie on a game? She happens to drag you by the shopping arcade on the way up to the room and stops in front of the jewelry stand, just to "window shop." Don't let your ego get the best of you during this trying time by showing off and tossing your hard-earned green on the counter. The only thing to do to get out of that one (*and* continue up to the room after) is *lie*. Tell her you'll bring her back to shop in the morning. Don't worry. It's a long time till morning, and by then the bloom might be long off the rose.

Escort Services

I doubt that it's true, but there's a rumor floating around that an escort actually escorted a guy somewhere years ago. If she did, she probably got hoorayed out of town, so I won't include her in my long-distance evaluation of the trade.

You can find "escorts" or "entertainers" or "exotic dancers" in any gambling destination's Yellow Pages. It's none of my business what you do to get yourself through the night, but there are obvious, and subtle, dangers inherent with the escort trade. Be advised.

- The legal brothels 60 miles from Las Vegas and 10 miles from Reno conduct weekly checks for the wide array of sexually transmitted diseases now available to the unprotected. Because they require all clients to use protection, there has (reportedly) never been a case of a

licensed working prostitute having AIDS at one of the legal establishments (although occasionally applicants have been rejected for employment after being screened and found to be HIV positive). However, since the “entertainers” are unregulated, no such protection exists. Bad odds here, folks. If you’re determined to do something dirty on your trip to southern Nevada, travel about 60 miles to Nye County; in Reno drive east on I-80 to the Mustang exit. It could save your life.

- If you’d still like companionship in your room, it works like this. You call up the girl’s number from the Yellow Pages or a sex rag, found in newspaper vending machines on the streets of many gambling towns. You give your name, room number, and preference of entertainer. Then Bambi or Cherry or Sugar gives you a call to discuss price. The going rate is about \$150 for a “dance.” Totally nude. If you want something more (and you wouldn’t have called if you didn’t, because you can watch totally nude dancers at 10% of the price in the local dives), you’ll have to negotiate the “tip” face to face. Sort of. The going rate for “extras” is about \$100-\$1,000, depending on how drunk, stupid, or desperate you are.

- When your little love muffin shows up, don’t tell her how much money you have, because pretty soon that’s how much money she’ll have.

- Don’t ever go to sleep while she’s still there. If you do, when you wake up you’ll be lucky to find your shoes and underwear.

Hookers

The rules for entertainers apply to hookers, with some notable exceptions.

- The blatant hookers are usually more honest.
- If the hooker is working the bar, she may have a pass from someone in management (never the owners), which means she probably won’t rob you once she gets to the room.
- You can negotiate with a hooker before you go upstairs, then leave the rest of your money in the casino’s safe deposit box.
- If you pick her up on the street, you’re putting yourself in immediate danger of being mugged, dosed, VD’d, or worse.

- It's a felony for an AIDS-infected hooker to solicit or engage in prostitution. So she's committing a felony. Big deal. She's got a terminal disease and she's afraid of cops? You're still vulnerable to the virus and although one little tryst might or might not do the trick, that's one lottery you really don't want to play.

Trick Rollers

You'll at least have a vague idea of what you're getting yourself into when you hire a hooker or entertainer to come to your room. But there's a much more dangerous breed of female predator out there, known as trick rollers. Often posing as a school teacher, accountant, or lonely girl on a weekend's runner, a trick roller is usually pleasantly attractive (but never dressed like a hooker) and somewhat aloof when you first meet. Then, after an hour or so of hearing your witty rejoinders and banter with dealers and bartenders, she'll slowly become attracted to you. After another half-hour (and a couple more drinks), she'll wait for you to suggest that you go up to your room. When you do, she'll slip you a mickey (an elephant tranquilizer) that'll knock you cold. Then she'll rifle through your belongings and take everything you have. You get to wake up 12 hours later (if you haven't been fed an overdose) with the worst hangover in the history of revelry. Then you'll have to call your wife and make up some lie about getting mugged in the hallway. And finally, you'll have to decide if you want to go through the legal circus. Gulp.

The tough thing about trick rollers is that they're hard to spot. Luckily, there's one sure warning sign that can keep you on your toes and away from these vile creatures of the night. If she's cute and she thinks you're slick, then something's wrong. I mean, c'mon! What nice girl in her right mind would want to go up to the room with (choose one) a bald-headed, overweight, drunk, married man; a young egomaniac with the morals of a goat; or an old geezer who's probably good for at least three minutes before the pacemaker goes off. You can't win. Go watch a dirty movie in your room and save yourself a lot of heartbreak.

Las Vegas and Reno Police

When you're walking off your 5,000-calorie free meals, you'll probably see guys wearing yellow shirts and black helmets riding around together on bicycles. Although it may be 3 am and they look like choir boys, they aren't. They're cops. There's no question that they're the most liberal cops in America when it comes to letting you walk around with open bottles and glasses of booze, and they truly are masters at dealing with drunks on foot. But don't ever let their friendly demeanor fool you into thinking that they won't hurt you. At any given time, thousands of tourists are strolling the Strip and downtown Las Vegas and Reno, most of them carrying cash. I've spent hundreds of hours walking between the casinos and I've never seen anyone get mugged. Why? Simple. You just don't mess with cops in gambling towns and the professional bad guys know it.

If you challenge one of Las Vegas' finest to fisticuffs or even "dis" one in front of his fellow bike soldiers, he'll stomp the crap out of you, hog tie you, and toss you in jail before you can squeal "Miranda." And if you're in Reno, you won't be the first to wind up in intensive care while you sort out your legal troubles.

Unreasonable force? Maybe, but I like being able to walk the streets at midnight with a couple of thousand in my pocket. If you screw up and they're on your case, be humble and show them the respect they demand and they'll do anything within reason to sort out the problem before running you in. If you take one step over that imaginary line and challenge them, you're in deep trouble.

Security Guards

A much more dangerous breed of gun-toting cowboys is the wannabe cops, casino security guards. Former football players, fighters, military men, and NRA extremists who couldn't get past police department psycho screenings, the only way they can justify their pay is by finding someone doing something wrong. It could be you, so be careful, especially when you're drunk. While the new-age joints train their guards in advanced customer-handling techniques,

some of the older places still take great pleasure in sending human hamburger to the emergency rooms.

You can raise hell in casinos, you can spill drinks, you can puke on the table, but don't ever get on the muscle. Not with the dealers, not with the customers, not with the bosses, and *especially* not with the guards. If they ask you to leave, say, "Yes sir," and hit it. Immediately. For more than 50 years, casinos have prided themselves on dispensing swift western justice, so don't push your luck. If you want to fight, go to the gym.

Cheating

Entire books have been written on how to cheat casinos and how to catch the cheaters when they do. The good cheats use moves that aren't written in any books. This is advice for you, an amateur gambler and professional comp counter. Don't even think about cheating.

What, me cheat, you say? Let's suppose you have a \$25 bet out, you're sitting in the last spot, and you're dealt a blackjack. Some lout on the other end of the table is giving the dealer a hard time and she's not paying any attention to you. So, with a couple of beers to cloud your mind, you put another chip on your bet. What's the worst thing that could happen?

The worst thing that could happen is that the dealer, a boss, the eye in the sky, or another player sees you. If any one of them notifies the casino manager about it, the bosses will run back the videotape of the game. If they verify that you "capped" the bet, they'll haul you into the back room. There, you'll wait for Gaming Control Board cops to show up and arrest you for cheating at gambling, a felony. If you don't have a record, you'll get off with a fine and probation, but you'll have a crime of moral turpitude against you the rest of your life. Try to get any kind of professional license with that hanging on you, pal.

But won't they give you a break if they know that you're a good guy with too many beers in you? No, they won't give you a break. They don't have a choice. If they even suspect anyone has cheated, for any amount, and don't tell the Gaming Control agents, they can lose their gaming license, which means they're out of business. In

early 1993, a 22-year-old kid about ready to graduate from college in Arizona capped a bet for \$25 in a major resort on the Strip and was arrested. The case has since been cleared up, but his name hasn't. Is it worth an extra \$25? Not even close. It's something you should only try if you want to compare the difference between early-morning room-service steak-and-eggs to a county-jail bologna-and-white-bread breakfast.

Note. If you want to take your comp hustling to new levels and learn how to count cards, don't be afraid of what casinos will do to you. Case law has determined that card counting is not cheating, only taking advantage of the casino's policies and procedures. Go ahead and count, but be warned. Card counting is a grueling hard-fought grind that's best left to those with little opportunity to make money at a legitimate job.

Chip Switch

It's an old move, but if you're new to casinos, it'll be new to you. You'll see someone standing outside a casino. He'll act drunk. He'll hold out a handful of chips and tell you he was thrown out and can't go back in to cash out. He'll hand you a few hundred dollars worth of chips and offer to discount them if you'll buy them off of him. Don't do it. They could be counterfeit. If they're not, you missed a bargain. If they are and you try to cash them, you're in for one of the most interesting experiences of your life, because you'll get to test the validity of everything I've already told you about the horrors of cops, security guards, Gaming Control Board agents, and the wonders of Wonder Bread.

There aren't as many chip switchers as there used to be when casinos that changed hands would sell the old chips for souvenirs for about 25¢ each. The best sucker play I ever heard of happened with a group of college guys from UNLV. The Thunderbird Hotel had just changed hands. One kid, who's now the director of marketing for a big-time casino, had a father who was a big boss at the old Thunderbird. His dad kept a couple of boxes of the old green and black chips in his closet as souvenirs. The kid found them. He knew they weren't any good at the T-Bird anymore, but he had an idea.

He rented a room at the Desert Inn. Then he walked down the Strip to the Thunderbird where he met up with three of his chums. They all got in a taxi and told the driver to take them back to the DI. The kid went on to tell the driver that they'd just won over \$7,000 and showed him the chips. The driver was impressed. When he got to the DI he handed the driver a legitimate \$25 chip from the new Thunderbird and told him he wanted some girls up to the room. Now, in the old days, every cab driver on the Strip knew a bell captain with a stable of working girls. The driver parked his cab and went right up to the DI's bell captain, an old running mate. The standard deal then was 40% for the bell captain and 60% for the girls. The driver and bell captain agreed to split his share and the calls were made.

In about 30 minutes four call girls came to the renegade's door. The boys showed the nice girls the chips and offered them \$1,000 apiece for a deluxe tag-team four-on-four love-fest. Of course, the ladies agreed and the love-o-rama was on. According to the stories, and I've heard them from three of the guys involved, it was two hours of non-stop we're-gonna-go-to-hell-for-doing-this debauchery. When they were finished, they gave each of the ladies a \$500 tip and told them they'd like to see them the next night, too.

Talk about happy hookers! They went downstairs and jumped in the friendly driver's taxi and raced to the Thunderbird, only to find that the chips were bogus. I've heard that the scene at the cage that night was probably more entertaining than the romp the girls had engaged in earlier (but I doubt it).

Needless to say, the collegians who rented the room dashed out the back door as soon as the hookers went downstairs and lived to tell the tale. On a grimmer note, the hookers blamed the bell captain and never worked for him again. He thought it was the taxi driver's fault and they haven't spoken for the past 25 years.

Chip Hustlers

Let's say you're playing black chips and you go on a big-time lucky streak. You'll get real popular real fast when your stash starts growing. Crafty women will somehow discover you. How they find you, I'll never know. But they will.

The most common move a chip hustler uses on you is to make a couple of bets for herself and somehow go broke after she's ordered a drink. She'll wink and blink and laugh and scratch and ogle your chips. If you're as easy as most guys, you'll make a little bet or two for her while she waits for her cocktail. When she wins, she'll thank you and maybe give you a little arm rub. Then she'll bet again. As soon as you look away or concentrate on your cards, she'll plop a chip or two into her purse. I've seen the real pros do this for hours, always appearing to be out of their own chips, while their purses bulge with yours. Before the night is done, you'll be out of jack and she'll be at the cage cashing out a couple thousand in greens.

If you've made buddies with the bosses, they'll usually stop the hustlers from moving in on you. On the other hand, if they don't like you, they might even give a chip hustler a call and let her know you're there.

Lobster Traps

These are the BIG-lobster places, in Las Vegas and elsewhere. When you walk in the door, a waiter greets you with an ear-to-ear grin. Why the ear-to-ear? He's about to bankrupt you on your meal! All the menu says (in bold) is "market price" for the tasty-looking morsels. A closer inspection of the six-point type reveals that they cost anywhere from \$18 to \$22 *a pound*. And the smallest they have is a three-pounder. I just read an article that claimed a party of 80 racked up a \$23,000 bill in one of them.

The smiling waiter puts timeshare salesmen to shame. He'll power-close your party of four on a 15-pound beauty, and if you don't go for it, he'll make you feel like a tightwad. Tightwad? Gee, that's only \$330, plus wine (which isn't cheap), for a steroidal crustacean. And tasty? If you think bulked-up NFL linemen are tough, try nibbling on this mutant that has a bigger tail than your date.

Bottom line? If you want lobster, get a good one—and get it comped.

Pawn Shops

Gambling cities have more pawnbrokers per square foot than any other towns in America. While they do admittedly provide a way for the wayward to get instant money, they're best avoided. They make the casino cash machines look like good deals. Pawnbrokers give you about a third of what something's worth, then tack on a \$5 service charge and 6% interest a *month* (that's 72% a year) to get your own stuff back.

When you walk into one of these instant-loan joints, it goes like this. You show them a family heirloom or the watch your father gave you for graduation. They ask how much you want to borrow. You ask how much they'll give you. They never crack, so you finally tell them how much you'll take. They tell you if they'll give it to you. When the deal is done, you've settled for half of what you wanted.

They hope you never come back, because in four months they can sell your keepsake to another mark for up to 75% of its original value. In order to dissuade you from coming back with your pawn ticket, they print it on pink tissue paper that'll dissolve in a light rain or a heavy sweat. You don't suppose they know their borrowers are going gambling, do you? Nice guys, huh?

Years ago the pawnshops weren't regulated as tightly as now and they'd charge up to 10% a month on what they'd loaned you. But now they're limited to the 6% monthly charge. Plus the service fee of five bucks, even if the loan is for a paltry \$10.

If you happen to fall on hard times and have to resort to using a pawnshop to replenish your gambling stake, but then get lucky enough to make a little money back, be sure to pick up your pawned stuff right away. You might think that you're coming back to town in a month or two, but things happen. If you don't get back within 120 days, some slob with a pocketful of twenties who always wanted a watch like yours is certain to buy it, even if your name is engraved on the back.

Hotel Long-Distance Charges

It's said that more half of the megaresorts around the country now make more money from room, food, and retail than their casinos.

And now there's one more tiny little item that you might want to pay attention to if you're staying in one.

Let's say the casino has 3,000 rooms and someone makes a long-distance call, on average once a day, from each room. Now let's say the phone call lasts only five minutes. Now let's say that long-distance phone calls cost between *eight and ten dollars a minute!* We'll average it to nine dollars a minute, so each call racks up \$45. Quick, how much did they skin the public for?

Nothing serious. Only *49 million dollars*.

It's happening all across the country. Getting the long-distance phone charges at the end of your stay has become one of the biggest bummers of the gambling experience. And do casinos comp long distance? Don't be silly—of course they don't (unless you're a whale). So what do you do?

First, ask about the charges when you check in (most hotels conveniently forget to tell you that a one-hour call to mom will cost you more than your rental car). If it turns out that they're phone gougers, you can make one of two plays. Either use your cell phone or buy a phone card and dial an 800 number from your room (these usually max out at \$1 a call, but be sure to ask about that too).

If you happen to get trapped with some horrendous phony phone charges, don't even try to whimper your way out when you're settling up at the end of your stay. Just put it on your credit card, then write a letter to your credit-card company disputing the bill. Be sure to say that you were never warned about the casino's price-gouging strategies in the first place and that no one in his right mind would ever make phone calls that cost more per minute than the casinos pay their dealers every hour.

One of these days the gruesome phone charges are bound to reach up and bite the casinos right where they need to get bit. But until then, you're at their mercy if you call on their dime.

Avoiding Criminals

With gambling comes crime. Most casino towns have more than their fair share. Most of the violent crimes happen in the grimy older

sections and it's extremely rare for someone to get mugged or raped near the casinos, but the edges of downtown are a different matter. While you're in and around the casinos, you're pretty safe as long as you don't walk around with money sticking out of your ears. Wander two blocks away, and you run into the sleazy flophouses and week-to-week hotels where the dregs lurk, waiting for a prize like you to come along. I'm not saying don't go down there, but if you do you might meet some ugly people with bad intentions.

Cover Your Tracks

More than a few men have brought their wives to big casino, then wound up with a hooker in the room while the wife's downstairs enjoying a show or playing the slots. Talk about a high-risk move! Let me tell you what can happen.

Elmore and Shirley check in about 5 p.m. They go down to dinner, then gamble a while. Now, Shirley, a 55-year-old brunette, wants to see Liza, but Elmore hates Liza (or so she thinks). Elmore slips Shirley a couple hundred, escorts her to the showroom, and tells her he's going to gamble. And gamble he does. He dashes to the bar, discovers an extra-friendly 26-year-old six-foot redhead, and hustles her up to the room. He slips *her* a couple hundred, pulls back the covers, and she earns her keep in about ten minutes. He quickly remakes the bed and they dash out of the room and everything's jake.

Until Elmore and Shirley come back to the room a few hours later. She pulls back the bedspread and spots these little curly red hairs all over the sheets. She levels a fish-eye on Elmore. He gives it the old "yabba dabba doo!" while he's trying to figure a way to get out of the grease.

Never anybody's slouch at fingering someone else, he gets on the horn and calls the front desk, demanding another room and berating the maids. If he's lucky Shirley doesn't snap to what he's been up to and his heart holds out during the twenty minutes they wait for housekeeping to show up and explain that the bed *was* made up with fresh linen before they got there. His only hope now is to leave the hotel in a huff and go somewhere where the sheets are "clean."

At best he's put a damper on the weekend and at worst Shirley will wind up with his computer business and the house.

The moral? I told you before I'm not a moralizer and I'm not about to tell you how to conduct your life, but I will let you in on one of life's great practical hints: Don't leave enemy short hairs in your bed, boys.