

Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Zones.....	3

The Silver Zone

1 How I Got Started	9
2 The House Advantage	15
3 How the Game is Played	17
Rules of the Game.....	18
4 Basic Strategy	23
Sequence for Learning Basic Strategy.....	27

The Red Zone

5 Selecting a System	37
Three Factors in Determining the Power of Systems	38
Different Types of Systems	40
6 Learning to Count Cards with the PLS	43
Learn the Point Values of Each Card	44
Learning to Maintain a Running Count	45
Maintain Running Count as Cards are Dealt	48
Apply a Betting Strategy to the Running Count.....	49

7	True-Count Conversion.....	57
8	Learning Play Variations.....	63
	Plus Counts.....	63
	Minus Counts	64
9	Advanced Counts.....	75
	Zen Count	75
	Unbalanced Zen II Count	77
	Converting to True Count Using Half-Deck Segments	78
	Side Count of Aces	85
10	Putting It All Together.....	91
11	First Casino-Play Experience	95
	Developing a Game Plan.....	95
	Ready to Play?	98

The Green Zone

12	Money Management	105
13	Interaction with Casino Personnel.....	109
	Tipping	115
14	Heat, Casino Countermeasures, and Camouflage.....	119
	How Much is too Much?	119
	Who is this Person?	121
	Use of Different Names	122
	Obtaining a Casino Players Card	122
	Moving Your Bets.....	123
	Playing Your Hands.....	124
	When You Start Winning	124
	You Wanna Be in Movies?.....	126
	Barring from Play	127
	Surveillance Techniques	129
	Countermeasures.....	135
	The Typical Card Counter Profile	137
	Camouflage	139
	Disguising Wins and Hiding Chips.....	141
	Cashing Out.....	143

15	Casinos and Personal Privacy.....	145
	Your Driver's License, Please.....	146
	Identity Theft and Casinos	147
	Profiling Through the Players Club	148
	Casino Credit.....	149
	Cash Transaction Report (CTR).....	150
	Suspicious Activity Report (SAR)	153
	Be Informed	155

The Black Zone

16	Cheating.....	159
	The Preferential Shuffle	163
17	Advantage Play: Some Gray and Not-So-Gray Areas.....	167
18	Tactics for Double-Deck Play	173
	Summary.....	177
19	Backcounting.....	179
20	Blackjack and the Internet.....	183
	Security Tips for Participating in	185
	Blackjack-Related Web Sites.....	185
21	Blackjack Tournaments.....	189
22	The Comp Game and Travel Strategies	197
	The Allure	197
	Airfare	198
	Saving Money on Hotel Rooms	202
	Complimentaries	202
	Loss-Rebate Programs.....	208
	Other Comps	214
	Some Final Tips on Scoring Comps	214
23	Airline Travel Security.....	217
24	Blackjack Outside the U.S.	221
	Foreign Currency Exchange ("FX") 101	224
25	Basics of Zone Tracking.....	227
	Identifying Segment Sizes	229

Learning Cut-Off Tracking	231
Learning Segment Location	233
Learning Multi-Segment Location	240
Summary	243
26 Location Play	245
Introductory Exercise	245
The Learning Process	248
How to Bet	258
Fine Points	259
Summary	263

The Purple Zone

27 Introduction to Team Play	267
Comparisons of Solo vs. Team Play	267
My First Team	270
28 Notes from a Team Diary	281
29 Getting to Know You	295
30 Team Leadership	301
Management	301
31 Methods of Player Compensation	305
Method A	305
Method B	306
Method C	307
Method D	308
Method E	309
Method F	311
Player Bonuses	311
Method G	313
Penalties	313
32 Living with Losses	315
Some Reasons for Red Ink	315
33 Outline for a Team Manual	327
1. Confidential Nature of Contents	327
2. Establishment and Implementation of Team Policies	327
3. Manager's Role	328

4. Membership.....	328
5. Testing.....	328
6. Procedures for Actual Team Play.....	332
7. Various Tactics That May Be Applied	333
8. Expenses.....	335
9. Safety And Security	336
10. Distribution of Winnings.....	337
11. Quality Control.....	337
34 Down Memory Lane	339

The End Zone

35 Assuming the Role of a High-Stakes Player.....	345
Attitude	345
Preparation, Homework, and Knowledge.....	347
Eye Contact.....	348
Attire.....	350
Appearance.....	351
Purpose.....	352
Summary.....	352
36 Playing Blackjack as a Part-Time Professional.....	353
Summary.....	360
37 Resources and Final Notes.....	361
Recommended Books.....	361
Periodicals.....	364
Software	365
Final Note.....	366
Glossary	367
Index.....	375
About the Author	381

Introduction

Okay, here's another book on blackjack. After reading most of the books published on the game, playing for many years, and providing group and private instruction, I finally decided to put some ideas of my own together. People in the blackjack world tend to evaluate, compare, and critique card-counting systems, software programs, books, and theories as they encounter them. That's good, but it's essential to always keep an open mind. If you read a book, watch a training video, or take a lesson, you can glean at least one solid principle out of the presentation. We never stop being students of the game. Accordingly, there's something within these pages that can benefit players of all levels.

This book doesn't contain any "new breakthroughs" in card-counting systems. With several excellent systems already on the market (some of the good ones are included in this book), there are too many tough acts to follow. Rather, the differences in systems are discussed, enabling aspiring counters to select one that's suitable for them. But just knowing how to count cards isn't enough, and beginning and experienced players alike will gain valuable insight from the discussions of several important concepts and techniques that must be mas-

tered to be a successful blackjack player.

Before attempting to apply card-counting skills in live play, it's necessary to have a solid understanding of the fundamentals of the game. Toward that end, this book covers such issues as:

- bankroll
- money management
- discipline
- game selection
- attitude
- interaction with casino personnel

One of the highlights of this book is the introduction of the Progressive Learning System (PLS), a technique that allows you to learn any card-counting system on the market in the most efficient and simplified manner.

If new to the game, after reading *Blackjack Blueprint* you will know what it takes to become a successful blackjack player and should be able to determine if playing in the manner that's outlined herein is for you. You'll be able to:

- Determine if card counting is something you have the ability and desire to do successfully.
- Select a card-counting system that works well for you.
- Master the PLS approach so you can learn the mechanics of almost any card-counting system.
- Take the skills acquired from this book and strategically apply them to live casino play.

As an existing player, *Blackjack Blueprint* will provide you with a means to:

- Learn other advanced techniques in a progressive manner.
- Evaluate the pros and cons of team play.

- Gain or enhance knowledge about tactical approaches to playing a winning game.

Here are a couple of quick pointers to facilitate the learning process while reading the book:

- If you see a term and you're unsure of its meaning, refer to the Glossary in the back of the book. Cards with rank ten, jack, queen, or king are referred to in the book as "10s."
- Don't be afraid of running into complicated mathematics. The goal is to present the material in a simple and clear manner. Many of the tactics discussed in this book come from personal experience in actual casino play.

The first question you need to ask yourself is: "Am I a gambler or a disciplined player?" A gambler is an "action player" who relies on luck and thrives on the excitement of casino play. Gamblers usually aren't winning players. A disciplined player is a calculating individual who has the patience and ability to evaluate a game and play only if the conditions appear favorable. Disciplined players can walk through a casino, evaluate the games at hand, and walk out without placing a bet if the conditions aren't favorable. When they bet, it's in good situations and this translates into winning over time. If you evaluate your own personality and determine that you've got what it takes to be a disciplined player, you'll benefit greatly from this book. The goal of *Blackjack Blueprint* is to educate you about the overall game, as well as the "games within the game." I hope you'll find this presentation helpful and profitable.

The Zones

The book is broken down into six "zones." As you progress through each, you'll enhance your knowledge of blackjack play.

The Silver Zone

After familiarizing yourself with the rules of the game of blackjack, along with the house advantage, you'll learn how playing according to the proper basic strategy can minimize the casino's edge.

Covered in the Silver Zone are:

- the casino advantage at various games
- how blackjack is played
- basic strategy

The Red Zone

Applying the outlined Progressive Learning System (PLS), you'll develop a foundation of the basic skills needed to identify opportunities and play blackjack at an advantage.

Covered in the Red Zone are:

- selecting a card-counting system
- learning the fundamentals of card counting
- preparation for initial live casino play
- live casino play
- post-game evaluation

The Green Zone

Here, you'll fine-tune your skills and develop more tactical approaches to playing a winning game.

Covered in the Green Zone are:

- tactics necessary for betting at higher levels
- interaction with casino personnel
- money management
- avoiding detection

The Black Zone

Entering the Black Zone, you'll prepare to play high-stakes blackjack and add more to your arsenal, which is needed at this level of play.

Covered in the Black Zone are:

- the Internet as a source of blackjack information
- casino comps and travel strategies
- blackjack tournaments
- awareness of cheating
- zone tracking
- location play
- other advantage-play techniques

The Purple Zone

In the Purple Zone, you're taken through the team-play experience.

Covered in the Purple Zone are:

- recruiting players
- management
- training
- testing
- quality control
- security
- creating a team manual

The End Zone

Having reached the End Zone, you're given some final pointers to complete your blackjack education.

Covered in the End Zone are:

- high-roller strategies
- playing part-time
- recommended books and systems

13

Interaction with Casino Personnel

While playing, you interact with casino personnel. This chapter gives you a basic idea of the “who’s who” in the business.

Most casino employees work a basic eight-hour shift. Since most casinos are open 24 hours, there are three shifts. Day shift is noon–8 p.m., swing shift is 8 p.m.–4 a.m., and graveyard shift is 4 a.m.–noon. Note: These times vary from casino to casino.

Here’s the basic chain of command within the casino staff:

Dealers

Obviously, you’ll have the most interaction with these folks. Most have completed a course or training program, provided by a school specializing in instruction of dealing casino games or an in-house casino training program. Dealers are usually trained in more than one casino game. It’s not uncommon to see the same dealer who dealt you a blackjack game one day working the roulette wheel the next day.

During the dealer’s shift and depending on the casino’s procedures and policies, the dealers may rotate the tables

where they deal, as well as take specified breaks after dealing for a certain period of time. Relief dealers fill in at the tables while the regular dealer is on break. It's common to see a dealer working your table for up to one hour, then taking a 20-minute break. There are several reasons for this.

One of the most important is that dealing, standing on one's feet and performing the duties involved in the job, is tedious and mentally tiring. Considering the accuracy required for all the payoffs of winning wagers, along with the totaling of the numerous hands dealt, it's wise to give dealers regular breaks to minimize the chance of their making errors. Some casinos also fear that if a dealer stays too long at the same table, he or she may get too friendly with some of the players. Since most casinos encourage dealers to practice good customer relations and be friendly at all times, some are concerned that a dealer may get too friendly with a player, and be tempted to provide "help" for a player. Such "help" is not only against casino rules, but a crime punishable by a prison term (more in Chapter 16).

Dealers are just regular folks trying to make a living, as in any other job. Some are there just for the paycheck, while others aspire to work their way up the ranks. One thing to realize is that dealers have a sometimes difficult chore, as they're the front line interacting with the public. Dealers have to put up with players who lose, then blame them. They deal with boors and drunks. The best approach in interacting with dealers is to be friendly and courteous. Say "please" and "thank you," make eye contact, and smile. When you're losing, don't blame them.

You'll find that interacting with dealers is similar to interacting with front-line employees in many other businesses. Bank tellers or restaurant servers are good examples. Some are friendly and talkative, while others are quiet and seem as if they just want to finish their shift, get their paycheck and go home. It's best to treat them all with courtesy.

If a dealer makes an error (in favor of the casino), the way

you point it out can have an effect on your future relationship with this dealer. Many players are blunt, abrupt, and harsh in pointing out a dealer's mistake. A recommended approach is to smile and say, "Excuse me, but would you mind taking a second look at [whatever the situation may be]. I may be missing something, but it looks like [say whatever may be incorrect]. I'd appreciate it." Say, "Thank you" if you're correct or "I'm sorry; thanks for checking" if you're wrong. This may sound like a lesson in etiquette, but it helps to maintain this attitude. If a dealer should make an error in your favor, use your own judgment.

Remember that being nice can pay off!

Floorpersons

Next up the ladder, floorpersons are assigned to oversee a few tables within the pit. They're responsible for watching the dealers at those tables, ensuring that house procedures are followed. The floorperson, in all probability, has previously worked as a dealer and was promoted to this position. They often interact with players at the tables.

When you first enter a game, it's common for a floorperson to approach you and ask whether you have a player's VIP card or if you'd like to be rated (meaning have the pit record your play to qualify for casino comps). When this occurs, ideally, you should already have a player's card. If you don't, it's a good idea to sign up for one. When you get rated, you become eligible for comps, most commonly meals; this helps cut down on expenses. Also, it looks suspicious if you're playing decent money and refuse to get rated. An informed floorperson knows that card counters like to avoid contact with the pit staff, and refusing to be rated is typical of a card counter's actions. And there are methods you can use to get rated without using your true name. If you take this approach, in the unfortunate event you get backed-off from the game (more on this in Chapter 14), they don't have much information on you.

Other functions of a floorman are: Write out markers for credit players; fill out rating slips for rated players; check the chip trays on the tables to keep track of how much the table may be winning or losing; arrange for “fills” to the chip trays; perform lots of paperwork accompanying all the above; and watch for any dealer and/or player cheating or stealing.

The floorman may come over to chat with you periodically. When this occurs, you should make every effort to look that person straight in the eye, smile, and carry on the conversation. Ask some questions; say something about yourself (whatever you want to make up); talk about sports, shows, and restaurants. These are the usual things discussed by regular players, which is what you’re trying to appear to be. While this is happening, you can still maintain the count. If, like many others, you find it difficult to talk and maintain the count at the same time, just flat bet and play basic strategy until the floorman leaves. If he doesn’t leave, ask for a meal comp. That way the person has to step away to fill out a comp form for you! The floorman usually has limited authority in issuing comps. In most casinos, the floorman can issue a buffet or coffee shop comp without requiring a higher level of approval.

In many casinos, if a floorman suspects a player of being a card counter, this suspicion will first be reported to the pit boss.

Pit Bosses

Pit bosses are responsible for all activities related to the tables within their assigned pit. They keep records of all fills, markers, and drops (cash going into the drop boxes); authorize any comps for rooms, gourmet meals, or shows; schedule breaks for floorpersons; complete endless paperwork; and have some interaction with players. In some of the larger casinos, the pit bosses’ performance evaluation may include the ability to cultivate new business for the casino.

When a high roller is playing, pit bosses usually make a

point of introducing themselves, handing over their business card and saying, "Let me know if you need anything." How the high roller reacts after that determines whether the pit boss will hang around to chat or step away. This is based on the marketing strategies taught to the casino pit staff.

Generally, high rollers come in two basic types. Some want to feel important and be catered to. They want to impress everyone around that they're high rollers. They want the pit boss to pay attention to them. Others don't have such ego demands, are more subdued and low-key, and might even appear to be shy. In this case, the pit boss desires to demonstrate that he's part of a classy operation that caters to plenty of high rollers and doesn't need to dote on the players. Bosses will leave this high roller alone, checking up only when called upon.

If a floorperson reports that a player might be a card counter, the pit boss either observes the player personally or notifies surveillance to observe the player, or both.

Shift Manager

All pit bosses on a shift report to the shift manager. Requests for higher-level comps, such as airfare reimbursements or full room, food, and beverage ("RFB") comps require, in many cases, the shift manager's approval. Shift managers normally don't have a great deal of interaction with the players. They do pay attention to high rollers who bet at or above a specific level.

Casino Manager

The shift managers for all three shifts report directly to the casino manager, who runs the entire gaming operation. The casino manager normally interacts with only the highest of high rollers playing in the casino. In this case, the casino manager ensures that the player is extended the highest level of comps the casino has to offer.

Casino Hosts

The above chain of command – dealers, floorpersons, and bosses – is representative of the gaming operations area. In the marketing area, you may have contact with hosts.

While you're playing, probably trying to keep track of the running count, a well-dressed man or woman with a huge smile may approach you, extend a hand, and say "Hi, my name is _____ and I'm a casino host here." The host will give you a business card, ask you some questions about yourself, and just make some generally brief (you hope) small-talk. When this occurs, you can stop playing (if the count is negative), look the host straight in the eye, and talk. Ask questions about the casino, about a line of credit, about the restaurants. Keep talking until the shuffle (if you can). Since the host wants you to put money in action, if it becomes evident that you're distracted, he'll leave.

If this visit occurs during a positive count, stand up to shake hands with the host and position yourself so you can easily shift your attention back and forth from the table to the host without too much head-turning. Take your time when trying to keep the count, play your hand, and talk to the host. It may appear to be a difficult task to juggle all this, but it can be accomplished with some practice. To learn more about the inner workings of casino marketing, I recommend reading Deke Castleman's *Whale Hunt in the Desert*.

Casino Surveillance

Throughout the casino are many cameras and two-way mirrors from above the casino floor, manned by individuals monitoring the activities of all the customers, as well as monitoring casino personnel working the floor. This form of surveillance, known as the "eye in the sky," is responsible for detecting anyone stealing or cheating, any dealers deviating from proper procedures, and players counting cards or utilizing any advantage techniques. Some casinos hire former

cheats, who know just about every trick in the book, to work in their surveillance departments.

The surveillance staff watches a video monitor of any given table. They can monitor, film, and photograph any player(s) and table(s) as instructed by any pit personnel for further review. Most casinos film every table. Films are normally reviewed only when deemed necessary.

Cashier

You'll visit the cashier "cage" to exchange your chips for cash. Pay attention to ensure accuracy when the cashier is counting both your chips and cash.

Cocktail Servers

Drink runners visit the tables every so often, and you can order a cocktail, beer, wine, soda, coffee, or whatever your pleasure. Note: Avoid drinking bottled water, as the word in the pit and surveillance is that this is the preferred drink of card counters. Remember to tip!

Tipping

Let's discuss how and when to tip the dealer.

Dealers make a portion of their income from tips, which are referred to in the casino industry as "tokes" (short for "token"). The pit staff commonly believes that card counters don't tip. When winning, you may place an occasional modest toke for the dealer. This is done in three ways.

You outright lay a chip on the table and tell the dealer it is a tip. Place a chip in front of your bet, indicating that win or lose, it's a bet for the dealer on that hand. Though this method is most common, it's far from best for two reasons. First, if you win the hand, the dealer is required by the house to take the winnings and deposit them into the toke box. He doesn't have

the option to “let it ride” and benefit if you have a hot streak. Second, if the hand turns out where you need to double down or split, you end up putting out more money for the dealer’s original bet, as well as your own. You’re not required to match the tip portion on a double down. Often you feel obliged to, but it isn’t obligatory. On the other hand, it’s good to tip in this manner if a boss is watching and you want to demonstrate that you’re tipping.

Here’s a good method for toking the dealer. Place a chip on top of your bet, then lean over and tell the dealer, “You’ve got something riding on this hand.” If you win the hand, give the dealer the one winning chip and leave the original chip for the next hand. You may even ask the dealer, “How about we let it ride?” In this method, you control the tip, rather than the dealer having to follow house procedures. Actually, you don’t need to say anything to the dealer when placing the chip on top. If you need to double or split, then win, you don’t have to feel obligated to give up more winning chips. Remember that our edge is small and overtipping can eat into profits.

If you’re in a losing session, don’t tip at all. You’re not winning, therefore you have no money to tip and shouldn’t. Period.

The majority of casinos require dealers to pool all the tips. Why? For reporting purposes, there’s consistency in the dollar amounts of tips evenly distributed amongst the dealers. Dealers are naturally hesitant to underestimate the amount of tips earned for tax purposes, knowing it’s on record what *all* dealers earned from the tip pool during any designated shift. In addition, a dealer working a \$100-minimum table generally earns more tips than a dealer at a \$5-minimum table. Pooling of tips creates a fair distribution based on hours worked. Finally, there’s less incentive for a dealer to be in cahoots with a generous tipper, since the dealer doesn’t get to keep all of the tokes personally.

Some casinos still allow dealers to keep their own tips. If

you are playing in such a casino, tipping can become a more strategic part of your game.

Here are a few finer points on tipping.

Wait for a positive count before placing a chip for the dealer.

A lot of people, as a rule, tip the dealer when receiving a natural. Don't do this too often, because you don't want the dealer to get in the habit of expecting a tip every time you receive a natural.

When playing 1-deck or 2-deck games where a cut card isn't usually used to indicate the shuffle point, a good time to place a chip for the dealer is deep in the deck(s) during a positive count, where the dealer may normally shuffle. Upon placing the chip, say to the dealer, "This is for you; I feel a blackjack coming out right now."

When a floorman is watching the game, it may be beneficial to place a chip on top of yours, and if you win the hand, toss the winning chip to the dealer. If asked why you don't place the bet on the side for the dealer, say, "If I did that, the dealers would never get any money from me with my luck here today."

When initially buying in, if you're playing at a \$25-minimum table, ask the dealer to break down one \$25 chip into five \$5 chips. This might lead the dealer to think that the \$5 chips are for tipping. At a \$5 table, break down a \$5 chip into dollars. Sometimes, by creating this perception, you have a dealer on your side before you even place your first bet!

When talking to a dealer, find out when the next scheduled break is. A good time to tip can be right before the break, especially if the relief dealer sees you placing a tip up. Dealers also are known to say "Thanks for the bets" upon leaving the table for break. This can be an indication to the relief dealer that you're a tipper.

Remember that your edge is small and overtipping can wipe it out. Time your tips accordingly and place those extra chips out there modestly.

Casinos and Personal Privacy

Players smart enough to win must also be sharp enough not to fall prey to the manipulative methods of the casinos. This is especially true in the case of card counters. Whether you're a professional player with a winning system or a recreational player just looking to have some uncomplicated fun, you must avoid the pitfalls and protect your personal privacy.

As time marches on, it's increasingly difficult to preserve personal privacy. Aside from proving age to purchase alcohol or cigarettes, or to enter a casino, the rule today is that an individual present some form of "government-issued photo identification" for entrance to buildings, opening a bank account, checking into a hotel room, obtaining telephone service, and many other necessary day-to-day activities. Our society has made it a *requirement*, not a law, to provide such documentation in order to function in a normal manner.

First and foremost, simply by *applying* for "official" identification of any sort, you are, in essence, providing the issuer (government agency) with your life story. You are now *in the database*. The three most common forms of official identification are driver's license, passport, and military ID. Every

time you comply with a request to present such identification, you're at risk of revealing your personal information to at least one stranger.

It's understandable that businesses have such requirements as a measure of protection against fraud and the like. However, in the majority of instances where identification requirements exist, they've been instituted with the specific purpose of gathering as much information about as many individuals as possible. Translation: The businesses want your information for marketing. We're being manipulated by what society now dictates as a necessity. This can be dangerous, as your most critical information ends up in the database, accessible to any number of interested parties.

One of the most notorious perpetrators of this practice is the casino industry.

Your Driver's License, Please

Both individual and team players are becoming more and more concerned about privacy protection. The average citizen has been brainwashed into automatically turning over a driver's license whenever asked for a "photo ID." Even worse, persons requesting a form of photo ID now ask for a driver's license just out of habit.

Do you automatically give your driver's license to anyone who requests it? Congratulations. You've just joined the ranks of the majority of Americans who are routinely providing unknown persons with a license to steal. Go ahead and call it paranoid, but open your wallet and take a look at all the wonderful information on that harmless little card. Your driver's license has your name, home address, and date of birth. Some states even include your Social Security number on the face of the license. This one little card gives away all the data necessary to steal your identity. All it takes is one individual with larcenous intent.

Identity Theft and Casinos

The following concerns are not limited to casinos—they apply to any business that interfaces with the general public. Still, few other businesses toss money around so openly and freely. This in itself attracts a certain type of thinking, one that involves theft.

You're at the casino cashier window and a clerk asks for your driver's license. Did you notice the stranger standing nearby, clicking a photo of your license with his cell-phone camera? What do you know about the clerk to whom you've just given the keys to your privacy, or any other casino employee with access to the casino database?

Casinos love to dangle the carrot in front of players. They offer freebies for all who sign up for a players card. Most commonly, you're given an application to fill out. In addition to the standard name, address, and phone number, among other things, they may ask for your date of birth, Social Security number, anniversary date, and maybe even your favorite sports. Here again, in order to obtain a players card, you must also present a photo ID. This requirement varies from casino to casino, so let's break down the term "photo ID" into three common categories:

Category #1: Any respectable-looking ID card with a name and photo that resembles you (company ID card; photo credit card; medical-alert card; any self-manufactured photo identification, the possession or use of which does not break any laws).

Category #2: A government-issued photo ID (passport, military ID; government employee ID; state-issued firearms permit).

Category #3: Your driver's license.

From this point forward, do yourself a favor and never give your driver's license to anyone other than a police officer. Category #1 gives you the most flexibility, but as an advantage player with a desire to stay anonymous, you may find the need

to go to Category #2 (giving up only some minor details). You should do this *only* in the event that the place is offering something good enough to persuade you to make the exception. One trick that's always worth a try is to have whatever application is necessary already filled out, then present it along with a Category #1 ID *before they ask you for their choice of ID*.

Government-issued photo ID comprises a broad category that gives you more safety than a driver's license. A passport, for example, does not provide your home address or Social Security number. Given a choice, providing a passport is preferable to a driver's license any day.

Profiling Through the Players Club

Casinos invest an obscene amount of energy and money in customer profiling. Look at all the weapons a casino has at its disposal: players clubs, casino credit, hotel rooms, valet parking, cameras everywhere. Now add facial recognition.

The most powerful weapon is the players club card. Most casinos encourage regular use of players cards by patrons, in order to reward them with free stuff. However, every time you present or insert this card, that event is recorded in the casino's monstrous database. Even if you don't present your card when you eat, purchase show tickets, play golf, or buy something in a retail shop, if the purchase is made using a credit card, that information is captured.

The main reason for gathering this information is to enable the casino to market to you, so you'll come back, gamble, and lose more money. When a player has points on a players card, he feels obligated not to "let the points go to waste." Send a customer an offer for a free room and there's a good chance he'll be a return visitor. Throw in a free meal or two? The odds of the return visit have just increased.

Am I saying you shouldn't use a players card? No. The perks offered by casinos are a part of the gaming experience

for casual players and even calculated into the gains of many advantage players. With this in mind, using a players card is beneficial, if not mandatory, to get the highest return.

However, be aware that it comes at the price of privacy. If you care about your privacy and use a players card, I recommend that you take measures to limit the information casinos can obtain about you, which is to say, give them the bare minimum you need to to get what you want. Keep in mind that many casinos have a policy whereby all players at a specified bet level must present valid identification or they will not permit play. Yes, they do have that power!

Casino Credit

In three words: Don't do it!

Take a look at a typical application for a casino credit line. After providing the casino with all that information about yourself, it goes into a database ... and we all know how secure databases are! Imagine an employee who manages to get a copy of a casino's database of premium players: names, addresses, bank account numbers – an identity thief's dream!

Central Credit has provided services for the casino industry since the late 1950s. Global Cash Access acquired it in 1998 and increased the number of services offered, as well as its ability to invade an individual's personal privacy. While Global Cash Access provides identity verification of casino patrons to protect all parties from identity theft, the player's personal information is in its database, which is accessible by any number of casino employees worldwide.

Casino Credit Services can provide casinos with a dossier of all a subject's recorded casino activities. At some casinos, your name is checked against that database when you check in. I'll bet you didn't know how invasive the simple process of getting a hotel room could be.

Cash Transaction Report (CTR)

Federal law requires casinos to report all currency transactions in excess of \$10,000 (or its equivalent in other currencies). The stated purpose of this requirement is to thwart laundering of money used to finance terrorist activities, drug trafficking, and other crimes. Casinos have historically been targets for these practices.

A casino is required to file a Currency Transaction Report (CTR) with the IRS, identifying any customer who conducts a cash transaction or series of cash transactions totaling more than \$10,000 in a gaming day. The CTR details the customer's name, address, date of birth, and Social Security number. If the customer is a regular player, he probably has a players card with an account number and the casino should already have the information in its system. If not, a casino employee will ask for a form of government identification. If the customer refuses to provide this, he will no longer be permitted to engage in cash transactions of any type.

Notice the phrase "totaling more than \$10,000 in a gaming day." If you go to a table game and buy \$5,000 in chips, then later in the day go to a different table and buy another \$6,000 in chips, your total buy-ins are \$11,000 and the casino is required to identify you. Officially, buy-ins have to *exceed* the \$10,000 mark. The casino staff tracks cash buy-ins and attempts to identify anyone who looks like a threat to exceed the threshold early on. In fact, some casinos have specific thresholds at which they won't allow further buy-ins for an *unidentified player*, i.e., one who won't surrender ID when first asked. It could be \$5,000, \$7,000, or any such amount.

Here is an important point. It *is* federal law to report a cash transaction exceeding \$10,000. If you attempt to cash in \$10,001 in chips, the casino cannot legally give you the cash unless it has information (obtained from a government ID) on file. The same goes for buying in for chips with cash at a table. However, any requirement to obtain ID prior to the \$10,000 point is solely dictated by internal casino procedures and *not* by fed-

eral law. That means you don't have to produce ID prior to \$10,000 in cash transactions. But keep in mind that if a casino asks for ID and you refuse to provide it, you will be watched very closely from that point on, or possibly even backed off.

A simple way to view this is as follows.

An ID request resulting from cash transactions *exceeding* \$10,000 = federal law.

An ID request resulting from cash transactions *below* \$10,000 = internal casino policy.

Privacy problems can arise out of the blue as a result of CTR issues. For example, it's not uncommon to buy in for something like \$9,000, get on a bad run, and ask to buy in for another \$3,000, at which point you'll be asked for ID. If you refuse, the casino is within its legal rights to refuse to allow the additional buy-in.

The regulations as outlined under the Bank Secrecy Act clearly define a currency transaction as the physical exchange of currency between two parties. When you go to a casino gaming table and place \$5,000 cash down in exchange for chips, that is a physical exchange of currency. After that initial \$5,000 buy-in, you're using casino chips to play. Now, say you win \$12,000 and leave the table with a total of \$17,000 in chips. That is not an additional physical exchange of currency. It only becomes defined as an exchange when you go to the cashier and exchange those chips for cash. So playing with chips you've won shouldn't trigger a CTR, but once you cash them, that transaction will likely accrue toward your total, including any other cash transactions you've made that day.

Casino policy may impose additional actions or requirements of identification when cashing out chips. They include the following:

- The cashier may require identification any time chips higher than a designated denomination are presented. While this varies by casino, it's most common with \$5,000-denomination chips or higher. Since casinos are known to track these chips very closely, many players

never accept them at the table, but rather work only with \$1,000 or lower denominations.

- The cashier may phone the pit where you recently played to verify the amount of chips you walked away with. For convenience, it makes sense to keep an ample amount of chips available if you plan to play more at a casino, which means it's rarely necessary to cash out large amounts at any one time. Keep in mind that if it's determined that you're "structuring," you'll have bigger problems to deal with, as explained below. Be careful and obey the law.
- Some casinos use Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, with tracers implanted in high-denomination chips. Caution must be exercised if this type of chip is in use. In such cases, only you should attempt to cash it or break it down at a table for future play.

The term "gaming day" also needs to be considered, as its definition differs among casinos. A gaming day (or designated 24-hour period) might run from midnight until 11:59 p.m. in one casino, while it's 7 a.m. until 6:59 a.m. in another. Most customers won't know what constitutes the casino's gaming day. And while it might be good to know, you have to be careful about what you do with that knowledge. Cashing out different amounts at different times can be perfectly legitimate. However, making multiple cashouts in a deliberate attempt to avoid a CTR is called "structuring," a crime for which you can be arrested. If you're with a spouse, relative, or friend, you legally cannot break down your chips and have them cashed out for you to avoid a CTR. That could also be considered a form of structuring.

To summarize, if your usual level of play causes you to exceed \$10,000 in cash transactions, then dealing with CTRs will be something you have to get used to. If you keep your cash activity under \$10,000, you're not legally required to provide

the casino with your personal information, but understand that your refusal might prompt other actions, as you'll see below.

Suspicious Activity Report (SAR)

Financial institutions are required by federal regulations to file a Suspicious Activity Report (SAR) when they *suspect* that a violation of federal criminal law or regulations is being committed or attempted and involves the money being transacted. Guess what? Casinos are considered financial institutions and are required to comply with this regulation as well. Given the vagueness of the requirements, anyone can be subject to such reporting. The actual dollar amount that warrants an SAR filing is also vague. It's generally understood that banks use a \$5,000 benchmark, whereas casinos are more likely to use \$3,000. Remember how a cash transaction in excess of \$10,000 requires a CTR filing? The \$10,000 number can score you both a CTR and an SAR if someone finds you suspicious!

You're in the blind with regard to when such filings are made. The Bank Secrecy Act prohibits the institution filing the SAR from informing the filing's subject. However, there are two areas in which a patron is protected by this same Bank Secrecy Act.

The filing institution is prohibited from disclosing to other institutions that an SAR has been filed on a patron. In the casino business, patrons frequently move from casino to casino. A player may even bring chips from one casino to cash in another. It's not uncommon for one casino to call another and inquire about a suspicious patron. If this occurs and a casino reveals that an SAR was filed, that casino is in violation of the Bank Secrecy Act. Quite serious! Additionally, the filing institution is not permitted to inform law-enforcement authorities that an SAR was filed. Suppose you're detained by casino security and local police get involved. If a casino employee informs the police that they filed an SAR on the player, the casino is in violation of the Bank Secrecy Act.

Financial institutions have a “better safe than sorry” mentality on this issue. They fall under the protection of the Safe Harbor Provision, where they’re granted immunity for any consequences that stem from illegal transactions, provided they filed an SAR. Casinos are especially sensitive to this.

In fairness to casinos, they encounter many players who engage in multiple cash exchanges throughout a 24-hour period and it’s difficult to keep track. To aid in tracking, most maintain Multiple Transaction Logs, in which they either have the patron’s player card number or, in the absence of that, a physical description of the patron. They may be logging your transactions, but at this point it’s not a legal requirement to obtain official identification, and any attempt by a casino to do so is merely an anticipatory effort based on internal policy. The tricky part is that if you wish not to comply with the request, the casino may not allow you to make any further currency exchanges. Even though you may not have even approached the \$10,000 mark, the casino can implement this as internal policy to protect itself. This is risky territory due to its vagueness, making decisions subject to opinion rather than verifiable facts.

Other than determining whether you’re old enough to engage in casino play, the only legal reason a casino has to identify you is if you engage in cash transactions in excess of \$10,000 during the course of a day. This will trigger a CTR. Additionally, an SAR can be filed below the \$10,000 threshold if the casino deems you to be *suspicious*.

Here are some of the major differences between the CTR and SAR reports:

- Federal law has an established threshold of \$10,000 for CTR reporting, but none for SAR reporting, which is subject to the *judgment* of the casino.
- The patron’s Social Security number is necessary for a CTR, but not required for an SAR.
- If a patron does not provide identification when a CTR is required, the casino is prohibited by law from com-

pleting the transaction. With an SAR, the casino is under no such prohibition by law. However, a refusal to complete a transaction could be a result of internal casino policy and not federal law.

Be Informed

From my experiences and those of others I've spoken with, the pit staffs in most casinos aren't knowledgeable about the whys of these requests for identification. Their actions give every indication that they were lightly trained and simply proceed in a robotic manner when they ask for IDs. Players (including me) have encountered situations where pit staff asks for ID at specific points below the \$10K mark, stating, "The government requires it."

You're now armed with some knowledge that will help protect your privacy. As you implement the necessary measures outlined here, all perfectly legal and within your rights, to protect yourself, you may come up with new tricks of your own. Don't forget to pass them on, so others can better protect their own privacy. The best way to battle devious practices is to educate others. This is not limited to card counters playing blackjack, but applies to many other areas of life.

27

Introduction to Team Play

Based on several factors, once you enter the Purple Zone, playing solo limits your opportunities. You may find it more profitable and desirable to join forces with one or more skilled players, forming a team.

Comparisons of Solo vs. Team Play

Exposure

Players involved in high-stakes blackjack have a limited number of places that will accept their level of action, which can lead to overplaying and raising the odds of getting barred. A team can minimize exposure by rotating schedules.

Limited Bankroll and Bet Range

Suppose a solo player has a bankroll of \$10,000. On a team, you can have 10 players each contributing \$10,000, creating a bankroll of \$100,000. Thus, if you're setting your maximum bet as a percentage of your bankroll, each of you can bet 10 times higher than you would if playing solo. Of course, winnings are

divided 10 ways, but the fluctuations inherent in the game are greatly attenuated and you're still winning 10 times as much as you would playing solo.

Fluctuations and Negative Swings

A solo player can run into a negative swing that can completely wipe out an entire bankroll. Many players who attempt to count cards playing solo don't last a year before throwing in the towel. Playing with a team, one member can have a bad session, while three others may have winning sessions. The swings are more manageable in team play.

Limited Number of Playing Hours

The solo player has the ability to put in only a limited number of hours each day. Let's say a solo player puts in eight hours each day. A team with 10 players each putting in the same eight-hour day is getting a total of 80 hours of play each day. Here's a set of sample numbers:

	Solo Player	Team of 10 Players
Bank:	\$10,000	\$100,000
Maximum Bet:	\$100	\$1,000
Average Bet (Estimate):	\$20	\$200
Hands Dealt Per Hour:	70	70
Total Action ¹ :	\$1,400	\$14,000
		(for 1 player per hour)
Win Rate Per Hour ² :	\$14	\$140 (for one player)
Hours of Play Daily:	8	80 (for the team)
Total Daily Win per player:	\$112	\$1,120
Total Expected Daily Win:	\$112	\$11,200 (for the team)

¹Average Bet x Hands Dealt Per Hour

²Total Action x 1%

Like Minds Wanted

There's also the intangible benefit of the motivational support you get from playing with others versus playing solo. It's a fact that life as a card counter can be very lonely. Chances are that the people with whom you are close (family, friends, coworkers) cannot begin to relate to what you're doing. When you're elated about a big win and want to relate all the intricate details to someone, you can't. After running into a really bad session, no one can understand and sympathize with you. There's no one with whom you can talk things through to see what may have gone wrong (if anything), no one to motivate you to get back out there and play on. Joining up with others who are involved in card counting provides you with the sounding board you really need at times.

You've been counting cards at blackjack for a while and may have been successful. You've read many of the books, including those written by Ken Uston, and now have an interest in team play. You want to waltz into a casino and start slamming down table-limit bets, win tons of money, and stroke your ego to boot. This is common among younger players just starting out or having played for only a short while. You can spot these guys a mile away.

I too read Ken Uston's *Million Dollar Blackjack* in the early 1980s, and at the time caught a small dose of that fever. I was working full-time at a good-paying job and could only take weekend trips to Atlantic City or a couple of week-long trips to Las Vegas or other destinations during the course of the year. After mastering the Uston APC, I started playing solo and winning at a respectable rate.

Then I hit my first extended losing streak. It was back to the books for a refresher course. I realized that the negative swing I'd just experienced was quite common. I needed to get used to it and respect it. The main problem I was experiencing was that I had nobody to talk to about the game! I hoped to have the opportunity to hook up with a team at some point, where I could bet higher and reduce the variance one experi-

ences as a solo player. I was fortunate when I was recruited onto a high-stakes team in 1985.

My First Team

I'd been card counting for almost three years. On a trip to Las Vegas, I was playing in a casino for moderate stakes with no difficulty. There was another fellow at the table, a European I'll call Andrew, and we got to talking about skiing in the Swiss Alps and other places in Europe. He was playing higher stakes than I was. The conversation was interesting, and since I had the ability to talk while maintaining the count, I was doing so. Andrew got a comp for lunch and invited me to join him. Since I was about ready to break, myself, I accepted his offer.

Over lunch we continued discussing European ski areas when out of the clear blue he asked me, "What count are you using?" Completely caught off guard, I sat silent for several seconds. Then sensing my resistance, Andrew volunteered: "I use the Revere Count."

I then told him, "I use the Uston Advanced Point Count." I asked him: "How did you know I was counting? Was I that obvious?"

He responded, "No, you were covering your skills very well. It's just that being a counter, I am very aware of other counters at the table, and I know what to look for." He went on to tell me that he'd been playing for 10 years worldwide. He then asked, "Are you playing with anyone else?" I responded, "If you're asking whether I'm playing with a team, no, I'm not. Just myself. How about you?"

That's when Andrew told me about the team he was playing with.

He was a member of a team consisting of roughly 20 players, active worldwide. Its method of operation was a bit different than those I'd read about up to that point. I envisioned a counter seated at a table, flat betting the table minimum, signaling in a "big player" or BP (who took signals and placed

large bets) when the count got high, and continuing to signal the big player how much to bet according to the count and how to play the hands. The BP avoided any suspicion, as he didn't have to pay attention to the cards and could drink alcohol at the game. The big-player concept was originally devised by Al Francesco (pseudonym) and first made public in Ken Uston's book titled *The Big Player*.

The method applied by Andrew's team was similar, except the counters weren't seated at the table. Rather, they stood behind it, while maintaining the count. The big players were signaled in on positive counts, then signaled to leave during negative counts. Since the team was large enough and had counters stationed behind several tables, the big players would usually be able to get a signal and bounce from table to table, playing only positive counts. I found this method interesting, as the team was wagering only in situations when the player had the advantage, and never playing at a disadvantage.

Andrew said, "I just arrived in town today and am getting a little time in on my own, but some of our team will be arriving this evening." He then offered, "We're always looking for good counters and if you'd like I could introduce you to the team manager."

I replied, "Sure, I'd be interested, but I have a full-time job and don't know how much time I'd have available. How much money would I have to kick in?"

"That can all be worked out, as we have a few players who also play only part-time, and you can contribute as much as you want to the bank, or contribute nothing. We do like everyone to put in a little something, though."

We then talked a bit more and Andrew told me that he'd mention me to the team manager. If he were interested in meeting me, it would be set up, provided I was interested. I arranged to meet Andrew for a drink later that evening. I was intrigued, as I'd read about how teams are able to lay down huge bets and make all kinds of money, but I never expected to have the opportunity to play on one.

Then I started to wonder if maybe Andrew was trying to con me. My head was spinning.

Later that evening, I met up with Andrew and he informed me that the team manager, "Reggie," was interested in meeting me. He said, "We could go up to his room right now if you like."

Even though I was a bit cautious, I said, "Let's go." We went over to the hotel where Reggie was staying and entered his room. Reggie looked to be in his early 40s and was also European.

He didn't waste any time. As soon as we were introduced, he immediately sat me down, tossed a deck of cards on the table, pulled out one card, and said, "Andrew tells me you use the Uston APC. Using your count, I want you to count down this deck and tell me the value of the card that I pulled. Ready? Go."

I counted down in a bit over 30 seconds, but got the value of the card correct.

Reggie said, "Try again, I know you can do better than that."

I counted down again. This time I finished in less than 25 seconds. Reggie had me count down a few more times, until he seemed convinced that I was quick and accurate enough. Then, he dealt me some hands, which he had me play using basic strategy. He dealt very fast and wanted me making my decisions just as fast.

Next, he tossed some chips on the table and said, "Now play the hands using basic strategy and make your bets according to the count."

We did this for about 15 minutes, until he tested me on my accuracy in converting running count to true and maintaining a side count of aces. I felt confident with the results.

Reggie then asked, "Do you know all the play variations for the Uston APC?"

I said, "Yeah."

"Do you happen to have your flash cards or chart with you?"

"No, but I do have them in my hotel room."

"How much longer do you plan on being in town?"

I told him I'd be around for three more days.

"What are your plans for the next three days?"

I told him, "Put in as many hours of play as I can."

Reggie then offered, "Why don't you go back to your hotel, get your flash cards, and bring them back here? If you know your indices as well as you say you do, perhaps we can make the next three days a bit more interesting for you."

I agreed. "Okay, I'll be right back." When I left, I was excited, but extremely nervous. It looked like I'd receive an offer to play on their team. But could these guys be trusted? I didn't know what to think. Then I thought again that Andrew had mentioned I wouldn't be required to lay out any money.

When I got back to the hotel room, Reggie drilled me on the play-variation flash cards and I guess I passed the audition, as Reggie then said, "Okay, time to get you working." He explained the method his team used, which corresponded to what Andrew had outlined earlier in the day. "We're a winning team," he told me confidently. "This trip we'll be in town for two weeks, playing to a two hundred thousand dollar bank. If and when we double the bank, we distribute the winnings and start a new bank. I'll train you as a 'backcounter,' passing signals, and you'll be paid on an hourly basis." Reggie showed me the formula for how the "hourly counter's rate" was determined: 25% of the total win was distributed to counters in proportion to their hours of play. For example, if the team doubled the bank (won \$200,000) in 400 counter hours:

$$\frac{\$50,000}{400} = \$125 \text{ per hour}$$

If I could put in 24 hours of play over the next three days, I stood to make \$3,000! At that point I'd never made that much money for three days of anything. If the bank doubled in less time, I'd make even more. I figured that the only thing I'd have

to lose is time. So I said to Reggie, "Count me in. What's next?"

Reggie said, "I've got to leave for a couple of hours. Andrew will run you through our signals, which are easy to follow. When I return, we'll run through them again. Then get some rest and we'll meet back here sometime in the morning. At that time we'll go over the signals some more and by then the rest of the team should be here." Reggie left and Andrew and I went over the signals for the next couple of hours.

When Reggie returned, he put me through some drills with the signals and told me I was doing well. That made me feel good, because up until then, Reggie had made no comment on my ability.

The next morning, I returned to the hotel room. I was introduced to five other team members. Sitting in a circle, we went through an ongoing series of drills. We passed around decks of cards, counting them down. We passed around flash cards to quiz one another on play variations and dealt out hands where we would quickly need to place our bets in accordance with the count. We paired off and worked on passing signals. By the time we ordered in for lunch, the complete group was present, 14 players in total.

After lunch, Reggie held a meeting and passed out the assignments for the evening's sessions. The previous evening, when Reggie left Andrew and me to practice, he'd gone off to scout a few casinos and noted in the assignments specific dealers to look for and to avoid. I wasn't assigned any playing duties for the evening, as I'd been instructed simply to observe the operation. The setup had nine players stationed at various tables throughout a large casino during the evening. We left to take a break and relax a bit, with instructions to meet for dinner and some quick run-throughs before the 9 p.m. session.

The members of the team didn't all use the same count systems. One additional advantage in having all members of a team use the same system is that a counter can signal in another member and signal what the exact count is, avoiding the

need to further signal how much to bet and how to play the hands.

After dinner, some last-minute practice, and a brief meeting, we left for the target casino in five-minute intervals. My instructions were to sit by the bar, which overlooked the gaming pit, and watch the signals being passed. I was also instructed to watch the actions of the pit, specifically looking for any signs that a pit person might have caught on to the team.

I was the first to enter the casino. There was a nice enough crowd, but the tables weren't all full. I found a seat at the bar that enabled me to get a clear view of the entire pit. I watched our first backcounter, Michelle, enter and station herself behind a table; then the nine other backcounters arrived at staggered times, each at a different table. I didn't notice any of our five big players there yet, until I saw a backcounter flash the signal for a big player to enter a game. Then, from behind a bank of slot machines, one of our big players slid over to the table. Already in possession of chips, he placed a bet of several black \$100 chips. The dealer looked over to the floorman, who nodded and walked over to watch the game. While this was going on, I saw another backcounter flash a signal, whereupon another of our BPs jumped in on the game. After about 20 minutes our entire team was working the floor. Some of the points I noticed were:

A couple of the backcounters occasionally leaned over to chat with a total stranger seated and playing at the table. I figured this move was to blend in a bit more and not appear too obvious standing behind a table.

Backcounters traded off tables periodically, so as not to look obvious standing in one place for too long.

Backcounters positioned themselves opposite an empty seat at the table, to enable the big player to have a clear view of the signals passed.

The session lasted for almost 90 minutes, as I watched each backcounter routinely giving the "end-of-session" signal. Then it was off to a second casino, where I was instructed to station

myself in the keno parlor, which gave me a clear view of the action. The operation ran in the same fashion as before, except it was a bit shorter, lasting a little more than one hour. I noticed some more attention from the pit in this session.

After the second session, we all met back at the hotel. Everyone was present, except for Reggie. The five big players were completing their win/loss session sheets. One of the members, Jill, was responsible for keeping the master records. While all the tallying was going on, we were discussing the sessions, comparing notes about the pit, certain dealers, and general observations.

Shortly thereafter, Reggie returned and immediately asked Jill where we stood. Jill announced that we were up \$11,000. Reggie seemed pleased. He said he'd work on the assignments for the next day and distribute them during our 4 p.m. meeting tomorrow. We'd do four one-hour sessions scheduled in large crowded casinos with multiple pits and lots of tables.

Reggie asked me, "What do you think of the operation so far?"

I answered, "It's amazing. You guys have it down to a science."

He asked, "So you think you're ready to give it a try?"

I agreed. Reggie then told me, "Good, you're on the schedule for tomorrow."

We filtered out of the hotel room and I went to my room to get some sleep. The next day, we met again for our afternoon meeting, ordering in an early dinner. The setup was a little different from the day before. We were 15 players, myself included, and Reggie thought we could increase our win rate by getting more money on the tables. He proposed to do this by having eight backcounters and seven big players. Reggie further said that he would backcount, but if his table were cold, he'd put chips into play periodically at another table as a big player. This started to sound a bit confusing, but then it clicked and sounded like it could work.

At 6:15 it was time for me to head out. I had my assign-

ment sheet, which listed some preferred dealers. I arrived at the casino, which had mostly 6-deck games, along with a half dozen 4-deckers. I found one of the dealers on the list working a 6-deck table with a \$100 minimum and a \$5,000 maximum and three empty seats. I stationed myself right there, watching the pit. I noticed they all seemed busy, as the place was getting crowded.

Soon enough, all eight of our backcounters, Reggie included, were in the casino, stationed at various tables. It was almost 7 p.m., time for our big players to start arriving, and the dealer at my table was about to shuffle. But before he did, a relief dealer replaced him. I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there, watching this relief dealer shuffle, hoping the cut card would be placed somewhere to indicate favorable penetration. It was placed one deck from the back, which was actually better than the previous dealer. I was relieved.

After two shoes were dealt out, I didn't get a favorable enough count to signal anyone over. On the third shoe, I finally caught a high count and gave the signal for a big player to enter the game. Kevin jumped in with four purple \$500 chips and drew a total of 9 against a dealer's upcard of 6. He placed four more purple chips for a double down, and drew a ten for a total of 19. My heart was pounding, as the dealer turned over a hole card of a ten, then drew an ace for a 17. Kevin had \$8,000 on the table, collected \$6,000, and left the \$2,000 bet, as I signaled him to do so. He was next dealt a hand of 20 against a dealer's ten. The hand ended as a push. In that process the count dropped, so I signaled Kevin to leave the table. He grabbed his chips and left without a word. That shoe ended, and as the dealer went through the shuffle routine, I thought it worked out well. I signaled Kevin in for two more hands and we won \$4,000 more.

It was getting near the time we were scheduled to end the session and there was probably time for one more shoe. Midway through the shoe, the count was again favorable and I went for the signal. No one came into the game. I looked around

and didn't see any of our team members around. I looked at my watch and saw it was 8 p.m. and everyone had probably filtered out, so I headed to the next casino on the list. Things went smoothly and I was subtle in my passing of signals. What stood out most were the times I had to wait patiently until a favorable count came around. We weren't playing as many hands per hour, but we weren't playing *any* hands in negative or neutral counts, where the house has an advantage.

When we gathered back in Reggie's hotel room, we calculated our win for the night at \$19,000. Adding that to the previous day's win, we were up a total of \$30,000. Reggie told me that I did well, as did a few of the big players who responded to my signals. I played the next day, then had to get back home. A week later, I was informed that the team had doubled the bank and I was sent my counter's wage. I continued to play with this team for a bit less than a year. We played in Las Vegas, northern Nevada, Atlantic City, and the Caribbean. Then they went on to play around the world, which required a full-time commitment. I wasn't in a position to leave my regular job and career at that time, so we parted company.

Over the years, I've played on various teams of different sizes and bankrolls. The one key factor in whether a team is right for you or you are right for that team is identifying the objectives of everyone involved. Different players have different goals. Some teams have a revolving door of players. These teams play to maximum expectation and they take no prisoners. As a result, players become subject to overexposure and are likely to end up getting barred on sight. When this happens, a player has a lot of difficulty being able to play for any length of time and quits. This is fine for someone looking to make a few quick dollars without the desire of making a career of playing blackjack. It works well with some teams that make a practice of recruiting such players. On the other hand, players looking to maintain longevity need to be certain that the method of play the team requires permits certain forms of camouflage to minimize detection.

Team play works. When approached in the proper manner, it's strong, which is why casinos are afraid of teams. The team, with several players, can put more hours of more money in action, which adds up to faster and higher earnings than a solo player can achieve. Up until recently, every team bank that I've been part of has been profitable.

I could sit here and start bragging about the successes and how great things have been, but I think it's more important to insert a healthy dose of reality and illustrate the worst I've experienced. The last team I personally organized was a losing financial effort. As the Boy Scout Motto goes, "Be Prepared."

There hasn't been a book that actually details the play of a blackjack team in the form of a diary. Stuart Perry authored the *Las Vegas Blackjack Diary* in 1994 (self-published in 1995 and last revised by ConJelCo in 1997), in which he detailed two months of solo play. Barry Meadow has also written a book, *Blackjack Autumn* (Huntington Press, 2000), about his adventures playing blackjack in every casino in Nevada.

Many lessons were learned from Stuart and Barry's books. My initial idea was to record the progress of my most recent team in diary form. For those having any interest in team play, this would have shown the ups and downs, highlighting some of the mistakes we made. However, I decided against the project in such a format out of respect for my teammates. There really wasn't an accurate way to document activities for an entire book without giving up personal details. That's a no-no. I eventually decided on a different approach. The goal of the Purple Zone is to provide a guideline for anyone interested in forming or participating in a professional blackjack team. Also included is an outline for putting together a team manual.

Let's start off with some choice sections from a recent personal team diary, noting that many details have been changed to omit personal information about the team members.

Assuming the Role of a High-Stakes Player

When playing for high stakes, it's of the utmost importance that you look and act the role of a player who can afford to gamble with the sums of money that you'll be putting out. Don't think you have to completely change your existing image; from experience, doing so comes across as forcing an act or look, so it appears unnatural. What we want to do is identify the qualities of your existing look, attire, and personality that can be made prominent to present the image of a high roller. Once these factors are identified, we accessorize them accordingly to create a sellable product: *you as a high roller*. Below is an outline detailing the components of what it takes to sell yourself as a high-stakes player.

Attitude

Keeping in mind that the typical card counter is in constant fear of being "made," it's imperative that you get this "fear factor" out of your head. Stay alert and aware of your surroundings, but approach the game with the attitude that *you are in control. You are the customer*. As you enter a game, the casino staff views you as a "premium client." Therefore, it's crucial

that your persona exude the fact that you are. Players in this category are entitled to a certain level of service, and *you must subtly convey that you're aware of this*.

In this role, you're someone who has money. Money equals confidence. Every move you make, every statement you utter, every recommendation you offer must be made with confidence. If your appearance is refined, when you ask for something, do so firmly, politely, but with confidence that your request will be honored. Structure your requests in a manner that demonstrates that you know what you're entitled to and are not asking for anything too out of line. If you're presenting yourself as a celebrity type, a shady character, or an obnoxious foreigner, you may be able to get away with a highly aggressive attitude.

Example—Don't ask, “Could I get a dinner comp at ...?”

Do ask (refined), “Could you arrange dinner for 7 p.m. at ..., if available?”

Do ask (aggressive): “We're ready for dinner. I'd appreciate it if you would call (name of maitre d') up at ... and take care of it for us.”

See the difference? Rather than asking for something in a manner where you're indicating you're unaware that it will be comped, you're confidently “helping” the employee provide you with what you want.

Note: Avoid direct use of the word “comp” when dealing with casino employees. It comes across as bush-league.

Example—Don't ask, “Can I get a comp for ...?”

Do ask: “Can you arrange ... for me.”

You want to give the impression that the level of service extended by a given casino is of more importance to you than their actual comp program.

Homework: Names of employees, chain-of-command,

restaurant employee names, restaurant names, menu items, wines, sport games currently being played, betting lines.

Preparation, Homework, and Knowledge

The casinos try to find out as much about you as possible. It's your goal to take control of this situation in a twofold manner.

If you're presenting yourself as a refined gentleman or lady, anticipate potential questions and offer information about yourself that you've prepared in advance. You need to live the role that you're assuming and present yourself in a believable manner. Develop your own profile and have it memorized to the finest detail. While most casino employees in the know will not come across as too intrusive, they'll still be curious and will try to gather information about you. Make it easy for them *on your own terms*. During your interactions, determine what the individual may be fishing for and give it up *on your own terms*. Throw them a bone!

Develop a complete knowledge of the names of the key employees with whom you'll be dealing, as well as the top executives in the casino. Do your homework and learn as much about these folks as possible. If you learn of a particular interest of a top person, figure a way you can use this to your advantage.

Example—The casino manager collects baseball memorabilia.

Well, you know what to do from there!

The goal here is to endear yourself to people at the highest level, so it's established on the casino floor and elsewhere that you are in with the big boys. It's also a good idea to learn the names of restaurant managers, maitre d's, and other restaurant employees. This is also true for employees of other hotel/casino services of which you might avail yourself (limo drivers, concierge, health club, etc.).

Advance knowledge of the casino's procedure on obtain-

ing identification for a player's card is extremely valuable. Since chances are you'll be playing for stakes that will prompt CTR reporting to the U.S. Department of Treasury, you'll need to use a legal name, along with valid government form of identification. Have all this in order before you start playing. If a pit clerk gets your identification for this purpose, you run the risk of having a photocopy being made, along with all your personal data and photograph. You may try to have this information arranged by a clerk at the player's club desk, who might not make such a photocopy. If you do this on a trip before you actually play, call a host prior to your next trip to ensure that all the required information is in their database. The bottom line is the casino requires certain information, and you know what that information is. Give them what they need and nothing more. Do it in advance and ensure they have everything they need before you play. *You take control of the information provided under your terms.*

Eye Contact

Contrary to popular belief, this eye-contact phenomenon is overrated. I'm not saying that it doesn't work, but it's not something you can rely on. Hence, a clever individual can use such eye contact to generate false reads. There are dozens of reads on what so-called experts determine certain glances mean, but they're not always accurate. Your goal is to limit the types of eye contact you project, creating minimal variations and confusing those who rely on eye contact to attempt to read you. Practice your eye-contact techniques in a mirror, on video, and with friends. Evaluate yourself and fine-tune things to achieve the desired results. Here are some methods of eye contact that minimize the ability for others to read you.

Hard or Piercing Eye Contact

When you're having a conversation with someone impor-

tant, yet you want to create an impression of “power,” look hard and directly into the other person’s eyes without looking elsewhere. Wait for the other person to shift eye contact first, but pause for a second or two before making your own shift. Your only shift should be a total exit from the conversation. When you’re playing and such a person starts a conversation with you, you can stop your play and maintain the conversation. If this is a casino employee (most likely), he or she should realize that it’s not good for the casino’s bottom line to keep you away from wagering and will gracefully say, “Excuse me” and leave.

Soft Direct Eye Contact

When you’re having a conversation with someone important or whom you want to make feel important, look directly into his or her eyes with a gentle ever-so-subtle movement of your eyes. Use slight head nods, coupled with smiles, when the person states something deemed to be of significance. By using this technique, you’re yielding power to the other person without stepping down from your own. You’re acknowledging, while putting the person at ease with you. Here, too, wait for the other to shift eye contact first, but create the exit as a mutual decision. You also want to stop your play and focus when the person starts a conversation with you.

No Eye Contact

This can be considered rude, dismissive, aloof, or arrogant, among other things. The purpose here is not to even acknowledge the other person’s existence. You’re too busy to be bothered. When you’re playing for high stakes, other players may try to get friendly with you (for a variety of reasons), but you truly don’t want to have anything to do with them, because they’re taking you away from your focus. When someone approaches your table, don’t even look up. If a player makes a

comment or asks a question not specifically directed to you, act as though you didn't hear it. If you're asked a direct question, pause for a few seconds (this is annoying to people), then give a direct, short, to-the-point answer or an aloof response in a subtly dismissive manner, without making any eye contact. The trick here is to do this without appearing rude.

Sunglasses

Unless you have the rock-star or gangster thing going, wearing sunglasses indoors is tricky to pull off. These eye-contact "experts" read sunglasses as hiding something. Knowing that, you can actually use them to your advantage. If you appear at a table sporting shades, you're giving off a suspicious appearance. When someone appears to speak to you, dramatically remove the shades and shift into hard or piercing eye contact method #1 or #2 (#1 works best for this purpose). What you accomplish here is initially baiting people into thinking one thing, then completely throwing them off scent, where they're now questioning their ability to read you.

Attire

When betting large sums of money, you must dress in a manner that's representative of someone who can afford to: designer shirts, slacks, and belt for starters. Expensive shoes are essential, as is an expensive watch. Your jewelry should complement the image you're trying to create. If you want the flashy look, pile on the gold chains and rings. If you're after a quiet elegant look, a thinner watch (expensive, but not a huge Rolex) would be appropriate.

Be familiar with the big designer names. When dealing with style, there are different plateaus. First, you have the trends that mainstream society gets sucked into. You can jump on the bandwagon, purchase all the popular designer names that everyone else is wearing, and you'll certainly fit right in. You can

also set your sights on a higher plateau by avoiding the trendy names and seeking out brands that are a notch above, which the mainstream has not yet caught up to. These brands don't advertise heavily, but you'll find celebrities wearing them. For example, where the mainstream embraces Armani, Gucci, and Prada, you look at other European labels or go the custom-tailored route. You can get away without paying retail. Check out sample sales and outlet centers for some great bargains.

In respect to watches, while the mainstream views Rolex as *the* watch, you may want to look for some other brands and join the major leagues. Here, you don't have to pay top dollar. Shop around for a pre-owned watch from a reputable dealer or check out some auctions. Also keep in mind that the typical Rolex is thick and bulky. If you have a small wrist, it won't look good on you.

Apearance

Your overall appearance should say "money." You're someone who has it and doesn't worry about spending it. Here are some additional points to add to the total package:

Your fingernails should be clean and presentable. A manicure just prior to a trip is essential and quite inexpensive.

A suntan delivers the message that you're fun-loving. You can always take in a few sessions at a tanning salon a week or two prior to a trip.

Pay attention to your posture. Stand erect when you're walking. Avoid slumping over at the tables.

When walking in the casino, never look as though you're rushing to get somewhere. Walk in a slow, deliberate, or care-free manner, depending on the message you're trying to convey.

Don't always appear to be alone. Have people with you. You want to create the appearance that you're with family or friends to have a good time.

Purpose

Why are you here? You have to create an impression as to your reason for being here. Are you on business? If so, what business brings you here? Be prepared to discuss it with knowledge and enthusiasm if you're questioned. You also may want to take a proactive approach and volunteer some information about your business that may confuse or bore the average layperson. Doing so discourages someone to discuss it with you further. You also want to convey the message that you're here to have fun. You enjoy gambling and other things, such as shows, golf, shopping, etc.

Summary

Some blackjack books discuss the "act" element of the play. Over the years, many players have attempted to put on such acts. Most of these players eventual fail in their acting abilities. In order to be successful, you need to actually live your act and believe it yourself. If you're used to eating at home or at coffee shops, take an evening out at a fine gourmet restaurant. Get accustomed to the atmosphere. Take a walk in some of the finer clothing and jewelry stores (you don't need to actually make a purchase) to get a feel for the style of people who frequent such places. Remember, if you look back on some of the best film performances, you'll see that the acting appears to be believable. This is precisely what you're looking to accomplish. Live your act!