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Foreword

by Semyon Dukach

Former MIT blackjack team player

Sometimes I try to imagine what my life would be like today if I hadn't been introduced to the game of blackjack in 1992. It seems like such a long time ago. I was a just a kid, really. I was navigating the campus at MIT, trying to make a Ph.D. thesis out of the idea that the Internet could be used for buying things. Then I met the guys running the MIT blackjack team, and my life has never been the same. As a result, I grew from a young graduate student into "The Darling of Las Vegas," a card-counting whiz kid featured in the book *Busting Vegas*, by Ben Mezrich.

Today, I am the chairman of a successful technology company, SMTP.com, and I'm actively involved in several other boardrooms around the globe. When I'm not looking for an edge in the corporate world, I'm staying busy with my wonderful wife and children. Suffice it to say, my life has very little down time.

On most days, blackjack is nothing more than a distant memory. That is to say, the glamour of stretch limousines, private jets, and high-roller suites are all images of the past. Two things I took away from blackjack, however, continue

to impact my life today. The first is the business sense that I acquired as a manager of the MIT blackjack team. After all, that is exactly what it was, a business. People invested in our organization, we applied our business process—playing blackjack with an advantage—and everyone involved profited.

The other thing of value that I gained from blackjack was the number of great people I've met over the years. Some of my best relationships were established during my playing days in the 1990s and newer friendships continue to grow as a result of my blackjack-teaching endeavors since I retired from the game over a decade ago.

I remember the first time I met Nathaniel Tilton. His soft-spoken nature led me to believe that he was nothing more than a fan of my story, which drew many gambling buffs to my seminars, but few who aspired to achieve something with the game. Most who attended weren't there to learn. They were there to catch an inside look at how my former teammates and I were able to take Vegas for millions. They wanted to hear the stories, not learn our techniques; they were under the impression that you had to be a math genius to beat the game. As a result, many of my seminars turned into question-and-answer sessions focused on the aforementioned glamour of the Vegas Strip or underground casinos in the shady section of Boston's Chinatown.

Not long after the seminar detailed in this book, I decided to terminate the seminar program and focus full-time on my burgeoning career outside of blackjack.

Several months later, I received an email from Nathaniel. He told me that he and another attendee had been making progress on learning how to count cards and they wanted to hone their skills. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that my seminar had inspired them to explore the game professionally and I stayed in touch.

I have always believed that players should look for new vulnerabilities in the game, develop strategies to exploit those vulnerabilities, and then share those ideas with other aspiring players. In *The Blackjack Life*, Nathaniel has done just that. He and D.A. were able to absorb the many different strategies that exist today and combine them in a highly efficient and effective way, while staying true to the mathematics of the game.

They proved that advantage players don't have to be on large teams, like I was; and they don't need to be stuck grinding through shoes by themselves, which can be difficult from a bankroll and advantage standpoint, but can also be a lonely life. In many ways, this story is much more relatable than previous ones that I've read. These were regular guys living regular lives, yet they figured out a way to master the art of card counting using small-team play. I'm a big believer that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

Over the years, I've gotten to know Nathaniel quite well and I am glad to call him a friend. In many ways I see a lot of myself in him. He approached blackjack like a business and sought greater understanding of the game, himself, and life. Like me, he's not one to be tied down to a 9-to-5. He has a passion to live his life on his own terms, and he does so with absolute enthusiasm. He even brought my website back to life, which includes the seminar program that he now teaches.

If you ever meet Nathaniel, you'll know that he is genuine and kind, but when it comes to his blackjack game, he has a take-no-prisoners mentality and his skills are exceptional. He has always been committed to improving his game and he has never been afraid of getting his money on the table when the count was in his favor.

Meeting the blackjack team at MIT changed my world nearly two decades ago and I'm happy to have had an influ-

ence in changing Nathaniel's world, as well. Not only is his story compelling, but I'm proud that he has taken blackjack to new places and is now passing those techniques along to you.

Chapter 1

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

April 2009

“First, it must be stated that the act of counting cards has to be legal. It can’t be illegal to look at the cards dealt, and it can’t be illegal to use one’s brain to decide how to play the hand. Further, it would be both ridiculous and impossible to try to enforce a law that prohibits thinking. Therefore, the next question is, what can the casinos do about the card counters?”

I. Nelson Rose and Robert A. Loeb,
Blackjack and the Law

Eight \$2,400 stacks of multi-colored casino chips sat in hand around the betting circles in front of me. Their fate rested entirely on the next card the dealer was preparing to turn over. The true count was 9—not the highest we’d ever seen, but enough to increase our heart rates. Our team’s playing system had become so difficult to detect that it afforded us the luxury of removing any ceiling on the maxi-

mum number of units we could bet. In the past, we would max out at two hands of six units each, including a slight reduction in our bet size on each hand to account for the covariance that comes from playing multiple spots. Our betting unit was \$300, so the normal wager would've been \$1,800. But now without a cap, our betting ramp could climb to whatever the true count dictated.

Initially, I'd bet two hands of \$2,400 without slightly reducing each hand, as I probably should have, accepting the somewhat increased risk. At the beginning of my career that would have been a lot of money to wager on one round of blackjack. It was enough to pay my mortgage back in Boston, but over the years a few thousand dollars on the felt in front of me had become well within my comfort zone. More important, we had better than a 4% advantage—huge by casino standards.

I appeared to be steaming, as if firing bets to dig out of a hole. I'd lost a couple of earlier hands while the count was rising. As I'd done many times before, I began planting a seed of deception that any losses were making me increasingly frustrated. In reality I wasn't angry at all. The count was rising and, along with it, my profit potential. The steam was camouflage. It allowed me to bet more without drawing attention as quickly. My hope was that the casino thought I was losing control and over-betting. I'd learned to read each situation carefully to determine whether camouflage was necessary and, if so, in what form. Our advantage was becoming increasingly greater and I wanted to be fully invested, so I decided to steam. It worked perfectly as several rare splitting opportunities began to arise.

Soon the two initial bets turned into eight, and I had more money at stake in front of me than I'd ever experienced as an advantage player. The \$19,200 on the table was more than what I made in a month working as a financial advisor at that time. The potential returns, however, were

greater than any I could offer my clients at my real job—and that was the only job that my family and most of my friends knew I had. I shared my underground life as a professional blackjack player (or “card counter”) with a select few. Now, this moment was about to mark the conclusion of a supplemental career that spanned five years. For many, the longevity of a card counter is comparable to that of a professional athlete. While a few seemingly play forever, the average tenure is usually a couple of years. While I’d had a great run, my voluntary retirement from blackjack was just a few minutes away. The question was whether I would go out with a memorable win or shuffle back into life with blackjack as a distant bittersweet memory.

The answer was dependent upon Laura, the high-limit room blackjack dealer at the Mirage. I knew that she’d endured a grueling childhood, the youngest of three daughters of a southwestern farmer. Like her sisters before her, Laura left home when she was 18 for the bright lights of Las Vegas, only to wind up dealing cards to drunken businessmen for the next 23 years. As she aged, she tried desperately to maintain the glow she once had, despite the wrinkles, the bleached-blonde hair, and the heavy makeup.

One of the regulars told me the cautionary tale of Laura’s life. I felt sorry for her. She spent hours in the gym every day after the graveyard shift trying to maintain her figure. So while my flirtatious and gregarious behavior helped me blend in as a vacationing gambler at the table, it was quite possible that the “eye in the sky” had its doubts about my motives.

The sizeable piles of chips in front of me were enough to draw a small crowd around my back. The high-limit room wasn’t exactly in seclusion. It was adjacent to the main blackjack pits and close to the Cirque du Soleil entrance. A buzz was swirling at what had happened. In front of me, Laura had grown increasingly nervous at the multiple splits

I made, as I drew jacks after kings, after queens, after tens. Four splits on each of my two hands. The floorperson was Ming, a 30-something baby-faced man, but he was inadequately trained to sniff out people like me. Ming had gone to the phone after I'd split my first pair of tens—a king and a jack.

Our careers had come full circle. When we began our blackjack lives as amateurs, like most players we adhered to the rule that one should never split tens. Then our training told us that there were certain times when splitting tens was the right play to make. Eventually our experiences told us that no matter how correct it might be to split, a casino's theory is that a player who splits tens is either an idiot or a card counter. So by this time in our careers, we rarely did it unless we had very good reason to believe that it wouldn't trigger a call to surveillance, or if it was toward the end of a playing session at a casino we would never visit again. This time was a little different. We were saying *bon voyage* to the game itself and we had little regard for surveillance. But first, I had another problem to contend with.

"I'm sorry sir," Laura had said softly, with a slight southern drawl. "You can't split those cards."

I'd been in this situation before, specifically in Detroit and upstate New York. In smaller casinos like those, it was common to encounter pit personnel, especially dealers, who lacked a fundamental understanding of the rules of the game. Most didn't even know basic strategy. But this was a carpet joint in Vegas, and I hadn't anticipated that Laura, a seasoned dealer, didn't know that because the ten-valued cards (tens, jacks, queens, and kings) were all of equal point value, they could be split in most casinos.

"Are you sure? I thought I could split tens, and you know that's why I'm here, Laura, to gamble. Can you double-check with Ming?"

I didn't want the conflict, but I knew what I had to do.

Hearing his name, the portly floorperson in an inexpensive black suit peeked his head over the corner of the table and smiled. "What's up, Turney ... Laura still won't give you her number?" Of course, my real name wasn't Turney. That was my alias, for now. I'd felt a growing insecurity about using my real name in light of recent wins at other MGM properties on the Strip. My true identity had run its course on the other side of the country, but in Vegas, Turney Jones was relatively new to town.

"No, sir," Laura interjected. "He's requesting to split his king/jack, but I told him he can't because they're not the same tens."

Ming's smile slowly faded when he realized the amount of chips in each betting circle, as well as the other stacks piled high next to my near-empty Corona bottle. Reluctantly, he instructed her to honor the split and then made a beeline to the phone in the center of the blackjack pit, presumably to call surveillance or locate the pit boss—probably both. By the time I'd split and re-split a few more times, the pit boss had arrived to witness the action. I'd seen this amount of heat before, but I'd learned to block it out—or run. I could see D.A. out of the corner of my eye. Although he had a calm exterior, I knew his heart was racing as fast as mine. My 6-foot-8 inch, 240-pound teammate sat three seats over from me with a mere \$200 bet in front of him. The two small black chips meant nothing to us right now. His blood pressure was high for the same reason mine was: We had nearly \$20,000 in play. D.A. lost the previous several hands, while I'd continued to win. So his \$200 bet remained constant hand after hand, awaiting a win before chipping up, and I'd been chipping up in accordance with the count.

Our system had afforded us an extensive shelf life in the cat-and-mouse game of card counting, but this was the make or break moment of our careers. Soon we'd go back to our regular lives. But now, all we could think about was the

dealer's upcard, a 6, and what the hidden hole card beneath it might be.

Laura turned up her hole card—a 9. She had a total of fifteen, so she had to draw another card.

Hard to believe that less than four years before, the only thing I knew about blackjack was that it was a fun game to play over a bachelor-party weekend. But as life so often does, it took me down a path I'd never imagined. Eventually I was introduced to the professional side of the game and once my interest was piqued, it led me on a journey that brought me to this moment.

I wasn't exactly a whale, but the size and quantity of my bets were enough to make Ming sweat. I knew that the yellow cut card would be coming within the next few rounds of dealing so this was it. Any anxiety I felt was easily trumped by the palpable tension among the gallery of people around me, as well as Laura, Ming, and (I surmised) casino surveillance.

Laura reached again to pull a card from under the coarse hairs of the front of the blackjack shoe ...