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Choosing Your Count—

The “KISS” Principle

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Card counting is really nothing more than assigning a numerical value to each card and adding or subtracting those values as cards are played. In the count systems I use, the number assigned to each card is either 0, +1, or -1. Starting at zero, each time I see a card I either add one, subtract one, or do neither. I add one when I see a 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6; subtract one when I see a 10, J, Q, K, or A; and do nothing when I see a 7, 8, or 9. It's as simple as that. Almost.

This number, which changes depending on which cards I see, is called the “running count” (RC). Most effective playing decisions, and more important, betting decisions, are based on what's called the “true count” (TC). You convert the running count to the true count by dividing the running count by the number of decks of cards that have not yet been played. For example, if I'm playing against a 6-deck shoe and have a running count of +8 with 4 decks remaining to be played, I divide +8 by 4 and derive a true count of +2.

The higher the true count, the higher the player advantage. The more negative the count becomes, the greater the casino's advantage and the worse it is for the player. Thus, ideally you would like to play only when there's a plus true count—that is, when you're playing with an advantage.

Each hand is an independent event, so any calculation of the count reflects only the winning (or losing) probabilities for the upcoming hand. Since the composition of the remaining cards changes from hand to hand, the chances of winning do too. Overall, the casino is going to win more hands than the player, regardless of whether he's counting cards or not. However, since you control the size of your bets, you can bet more when the odds are in your favor and less when the odds favor the house. You can also alter the way you play a given hand against a dealer's upcard, further tilting the scales in your favor.

Changing your bet size and the way you play hands in certain situations more than overcomes the fact that you lose more hands than you win, because you win more money than you lose. The bottom line is your total profit, so you're happy to make this tradeoff — all you want is the money!

The blackjack literature is replete with discussions about which count system is best. Computer simulations of billions of hands have been done to compare one system against another. I've tried a number of them. I'm convinced that for new players just learning the game, and even for seasoned professionals who wish to change counts, the KISS principle applies: Keep It Simple, Stupid. Just use a simple, accurate, one-level count.

Now, I know there are players out there who claim they can use a three-level count system, where cards have values from plus or minus 1 to 3, and keep perfect track of the cards while carrying on a conversation in their third language, Romanian. But for us mere mortals, it's better to stick with KISS. There are too many things a successful player has to be aware of to worry about maintaining a complicated count, which doesn't gain you very much anyway and is exhausting to play perfectly. However, if you've already learned a particular count system and are comfortable, competent, and successful in its use under casino conditions, I suggest you stick with it.

For the past 15 years or so, I've used Stanford Wong's Hi-Lo system exclusively for all multi-deck (shoe) games. This count has a betting efficiency (compared against computer-perfect play) of about 97%. When playing shoe games, it's considerably more important to make accurate betting decisions than playing decisions. Make your big bets at the right times and you'll eventually get the money. Since an ace and a ten have the same value in Wong's Hi-Lo system, you'll make some playing errors as compared with a computer, like on insurance, doubling down on 11 against an ace, and so on. But from a practical standpoint, this doesn't matter much. The simplicity of the system and its high degree of betting accuracy make it ideal for casino conditions. I can easily carry on constant conversations with both dealer and pit boss and pull off all kinds of antics without any risk of losing the count.

I'm going to discuss some of the rudimentary aspects of card counting, using Wong's Hi-Lo to illustrate. Before doing so, however, I want to make the point that mastering a card-counting system requires study and practice. While not exceedingly difficult, card counting is fairly complex; entire books have been devoted to conveying the nuances of the discipline. I strongly urge you to study a book devoted exclusively to card counting before attempting to apply it in the casinos. I favor the Hi-Lo count, which is outlined in Wong's excellent book, *Professional Blackjack*. I also like the new K-O count described in *Knock-Out Blackjack* by Olaf Vancura and Ken Fuchs. Several other recommendations are made in this chapter and throughout this book.

The Hi-Lo is a one-level count that values cards as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 &= +1 \\ 10, J, Q, K, A &= -1 \\ 7, 8, 9 &= 0 \end{aligned}$$

This count has a set of playing-decision tables published in Wong's book. The tables printed here appear courtesy of Stanford Wong. For new players, I think it's necessary to memorize only a short list of the most commonly occurring situations (remember, please, that these are numbers for true counts, not running counts, except as noted).

1. Insurance—Take insurance if the TC is +3 or greater.
2. 12 vs. 2—Stand if the TC is +3 or more.
3. 12 vs. 3—Stand if the TC is +2 or more.
4. 12 vs. 4—Stand if the TC is 0 or more (hit on any negative running count).
5. 12 vs. 5—Hit if the TC is -2 or less.
6. 12 vs. 6—Hit if the TC is -1 or less.
7. 16 vs. ten—Stand on any positive running count.
8. 15 vs. ten—Stand if the TC is +4 or more.
9. 13 vs. 2—Hit if the TC is -1 or less.
10. 13 vs. 3—Hit if the TC is -2 or less.

Also, I suggest making these double-down modifications:

11. 9 vs. 2—Double if the TC is +1 or more.
12. 11 vs. ace—Double if the TC is +1 or more.
13. 10 vs. ace—Double if the TC is +4 or more.
14. 10 vs. ten—Double if the TC is +4 or more.
15. 9 vs. 7—Double if the TC is +3 or more.

These 15 strategy deviations, plus standing on 16 vs. 9 at TC +5, splitting tens vs. 5 at +5, and splitting tens vs. 6 at a TC of +4, are called "the Illustrious 18" by Don Schlesinger in his excellent book, *Blackjack Attack*.

These 15 plays are the only variations from basic strategy against shoe games that, in my opinion, card counters need concern themselves with. Other plays either come up so infrequently or are so unusual for players to make that they

will draw attention to you — the kind of attention you don't want. One such play is splitting tens against a dealer's upcard of 5 or 6. While there are times when this is the correct play to make (at a TC of +5 and +4, respectively), making this play will generally put your longevity as a player in extreme peril. Although some players, even some skilled players, may tell you this is a good play to make because it looks stupid, don't listen to them. You'll occasionally encounter novice players who routinely split tens against a dealer's 5 or 6. But the operative word here is routinely. They do it every time. If you split tens, the casino will realize that you are either a counter or a fool, and it won't take them long to determine which.

Now put yourself in the position of a seasoned casino security person watching from the eye in the sky. He's not sure about you. You seem to be a competent basic strategy player and you vary your bets a lot, but you don't do everything perfectly and your betting pattern looks like a parlay system. He's scrutinizing your play intensely. Then the count gets really good. You win a few bets and parlay up. The count continues to improve and your bet continues to creep up. You're betting 10 times as much as you were a few minutes ago. Now you've really got security's attention. Then you get two tens against the dealer's 6. You've got a \$1,000 bet out and the count is a true +6. What an opportunity. No one's even looking. You split your tens, knowing it's the mathematically correct play, and *voilà*, you draw an ace and a ten giving you 21 and 20. The dealer turns an 8 and draws a ten, dutifully breaking. How sweet it is! What a game!

Five minutes later you've been tossed out into the hot desert sun, wondering where you went wrong.

Let's analyze this play from the viewpoint of the eye. I urge you to do this to figure out what decision you would make should similar circumstances arise. Security already knows that you're at least half-smart, but you've thrown the surveillance man a little off-balance with a few moves that don't fit his stereotype. Now you split tens when it's obvious

that the deck composition strongly favors the player. In the 45 minutes he's been watching you, you haven't split tens once — and rightly so. Why now? Either you've gone bonkers with \$2,000 in action or you're an undesirable threat to the casino. What would *you* think if you observed such a play?

I strongly recommend you never split tens unless you adopt a playing strategy that differs in *many* ways from basic strategy. If you still want to do it, then I suggest you set up this play by splitting tens at least twice against 5s or 6s in neutral or unfavorable decks while making minimum bets. Mind you, doing this has a cost and the opportunity to split tens favorably might not arise during the watch of the security observer who witnessed your prior actions. If a new man has replaced him, you're back in the soup, because he hasn't seen how dumb you can be, only how smart you are. It's best for most players just to skip this play altogether.

The count I use against single- and double-deck games is called Hi-Opt I, developed by Lance Humble. I learned it years ago and it has served me well. Like the Hi-Lo, this is a one-level count. It's similar to the Hi-Lo count, except for the way aces and deuces are handled. Hi-Opt I values 3, 4, 5, and 6 as +1 and all ten-value cards as -1. The 2, 7, 8, 9, and ace are all valued at 0.

In shoe games, the TC fluctuates between +2 and -2 most of the time (83%). In single- and double-deck games, the variation is larger. This increase in the volatility of the count makes playing decisions more important. And when it comes to playing decisions, the Hi-Opt I is more accurate than the Hi-Lo.

This increased accuracy comes from how the Hi-Opt I accounts for aces. Although aces are extremely important for betting purposes because of their blackjack potential and, to a lesser extent, their soft-doubling potential, they're not nearly as valuable for playing purposes. In fact, for playing purposes, an ace performs more like a small card than a big card. After all, no dealer ever busts when catching an ace.

They're also deadly on double downs when you hold 11. Of course, they help a lot if you're doubling down with a 10.

It's frequently helpful to know if the deck is ace-rich (has a greater proportion of aces than normal) or ace-poor (has a lesser proportion of aces than normal). For example, in a single-deck game with half the deck gone, the normal composition would have two aces remaining to be played. If there are three left, the deck is ace-rich; if only one is left, it's ace-poor. To make the proper adjustments, you must keep a separate count of aces. This is easier to do than you might think. Just count aces with your feet:

one ace — toes together
 two aces — heels together
 three aces — both feet together
 four aces — both feet apart

For double-deck play I repeat the sequence. Then, for betting purposes only, I adjust my count for aces, adding one to the running count for each ace the deck is rich, subtracting one for each ace the deck is poor. For playing purposes I ignore this adjustment. For complete playing-strategy tables for the Hi-Opt, I refer you to *The World's Greatest Blackjack Book* by Lance Humble and Carl Cooper.

If all this sounds too complicated, just stick with using the Hi-Lo for all games. You won't be giving up that much, and you can focus your attention on improving your playing conditions and preserving your longevity as a player.

New players, or players who want to convert to an easier count, might consider the Knock-Out, or K-O, count, described fully in the book *Knock-Out Blackjack*. Because the K-O count doesn't require converting from the running count to the true count, it's easy to learn and easy to use. This is a significant advantage, especially for new players. Another advantage to this count is that it differs in a few ways from the Hi-Lo count. Since most casino personnel who observe sus-

pected counters primarily use the Hi-Lo, on some occasions your play will not be the same as what they expect. These differences might buy you a few more playing hours.

For further reading, see “Appendix II.”

Your P&L Statement— Penetration and Longevity

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In business P&L stands for profit and loss; in blackjack it stands for penetration and longevity. After all, profits and losses in blackjack are inexorably tied to these two considerations. Penetration describes how far down in the deck or shoe a dealer will go without shuffling. Longevity means how long you'll be allowed to play without getting backed off or barred. An optimal blackjack strategy must have provisions for promoting both excellent penetration and extended longevity.

While this may seem obvious, many counters take the short-term view. They see a good situation and try to maximize instead of optimize it. Then they wonder why they got barred. Many of these players are grossly undercapitalized, so they're really just taking a shot at winning some money quickly. If they win and get thrown out, who cares? There are other places to play. This is a myopic view, regardless of bankroll considerations. It would be far better for this category of player to reduce his bet-unit size and play more optimally, preserving his longevity. Getting your photo in the Griffin book of cheaters, undesirables, and counters is not the hallmark of a professional player.

As I've been saying, patterning your demeanor, your

casino act, after that of a high roller is extremely helpful in preserving longevity. This requires that you be automatic at counting cards so you can carry on a running dialogue and still keep a perfect count. Sound difficult? I assure you it isn't as hard as you think. I'd guess that most readers of this book have the ability to do it, provided they're sufficiently motivated. It takes practice. Lots of it. But you needn't lose a lot of money practicing under casino conditions. Computer software is available that enables you to practice counting at home (I like *Casino Vérité* by Norman Wattenberger). This approach is far less expensive than cutting your teeth in the casino.

Once your counting becomes automatic, you can begin to develop your act. Players who bet big money can't easily slip in and out of casinos unnoticed. The reality that modern casinos are policed predominantly from the eye, and that all games are videotaped, means that casino personnel can scrutinize your play at any time and in as much detail as they desire. If you're betting big money, you simply must assume that you're being watched. Even now, many counters play like automatons. In *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas*, I detailed some of the elements that make up a good act and ensure your longevity as a player. I summarize them here.

Longevity

Don't Look Like a Counter

I act relaxed and enthusiastic. When I win a big hand, an expression of joy or relief is in order. When I lose an important decision, I naturally express my dismay. I sympathize with other players at my table. If they win a double down, I cheer; if they lose, I commiserate; if their first card is an ace (in exposed card games), I root for them to get a blackjack. I constantly talk to the other players, the dealer, and the pit boss.

Every hand with a large bet has the potential for high drama. I love it when a big crowd gathers at my game. I play to the crowd and get the spectators involved, especially if I'm playing alone. I show them my cards and ask them what to do (I don't have to take their advice). If I win a big double down, especially if it's hard-fought or unlikely — like when catching an ace on an 11 against a dealer ten, then luckily winning when the dealer breaks — I might explode with an "All right!" Then I might run over to the crowd with both hands held high and yell, "Touchdown!"

When adversity strikes — say, when a dealer pulls a six-card 21 to crack two pat 20s — I might fall off the chair. I mean literally just collapse in a heap on the floor. I recall one dealer who was really pounding on me. I have never seen so many odd combinations that added up to 21. It was amazing! Then a hand came up with a true count of +5. I had two maximum bets out. The dealer showed a deuce, a dangerous card given that the deck happened to be rich in 7s and 9s. My first hand was 7,7 — which was a relief (two more 7s now accounted for). I split and caught a 4 on each, doubled down, and caught 9s on both. Things were really looking up now — two 9s also snarfed up. On the second hand I had two aces. I split them and *voilà* — two more 9s. I now had \$12,000 spread on the layout. Feeling rather sanguine about my chances — having taken off four 9s and two 7s, the count still at +5, and the deck now replete with face cards — I turned to the dealer, gently shaking my finger and admonishing her, "Now, no miracles."

The lovely Vietnamese dealer gave me a sheepish grin and turned over another deuce, giving her a total of 4, then another deuce, then a 5. She now had 11 and a ten had not shown in ages. My apprehensions grew rapidly. "No!" I yelled. "Remember, no miracles!" An ace hit the felt, giving her 12.

"Bigger!" I shrieked.

She dealt herself another ace. She now had a six-card 13 —

another troublesome number because there were still plenty of 7s left. You could cut the tension with a dull knife.

“No seven!” I screamed.

Another ace. Then another. I kid you not. She now had four aces in her hand, not to mention the two I had. More

Longevity Boosters

Your longevity is in the hands of the pit boss, pit manager, shift boss, and casino manager. Establishing strong and enduring relationships with each of these employees is a primary objective.

Pit Boss—Heat usually shows up soon after the pit boss gets suspicious. Establishing a good rapport with the boss goes a long way toward reducing this risk.

Pit Manager—This executive supervises the pit bosses in a given area. He’s usually involved in evaluating suspicious characters. I reach out to pit managers soon after I start playing at a new venue. They quickly come to the conclusion that I’m a happy-go-lucky high roller, not a threat. When asked for an opinion about me from higher-ups (as is inevitable as my profits mount) they’ll provide favorable comments, at least temporarily allaying front-office fears.

Shift Boss—The shift boss is in charge of all casino games during an eight-hour shift. His is the onerous task of determining whether a customer is desirable or a threat. Being on the right side of this decision is critical for the pro. I make contact with each shift boss as early as possible at each joint where I’m playing, then go out of my way to ingratiate myself to these important judges.

Casino Manager—The casino manager spends a lot of time in his office perusing the computer printouts of player activity. Most players rarely see the casino manager; I try to meet him. VIP parties or special events often present the perfect setting for such a meeting. Some of these guys are very sophisticated and talented. My approach to them is usually tempered: I try to present a convincing profile of a highly successful businessman, someone capable of losing lots of money. A green light from the casino manager is worth tens of thousands in additional profits at each casino.

important, she now had 15. Now even a seven would break her.

"Biggest!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. A huge crowd had gathered, drawn over because of my histrionics. I was a monster favorite.

Her long slender fingers gracefully reached for the next card. With a fluid motion it took its place as the ninth in her hand. It was a 6. Disaster! She had made 21—a nine-card 21—to crack my four 20s. I flew from the table, leaving my chips unattended, and ran across the casino hollering, "That's a miracle!"

It must have been a full minute before I returned.

"That was really a miracle," I said in a more relaxed voice. "How did you do that?"

"I don't know," she stammered. "I can't remember ever being this lucky."

I doubt that truer words were ever spoken; I know I'd never seen anything like it. I reassured the dealer that it was not her fault and that I knew she was on my side (which indeed she was), then we played the next hand. Antics like this, though you may view them as extreme, have worked for me for the past 25 years. They're so far removed from the behavior of the typical counter that they tend to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of even the most suspicious casino observers.

You don't have to be a borderline maniac to put on a convincing act. It's best to adopt a style that fits your personality. If you're introverted, you might carry on a pleasant conversation with the dealer, the pit boss, or another player, while seeming not to be paying much attention to the cards as they come out. Or you might pretend to be practically falling asleep at the table, holding your head in your hands and watching the game through your fingers. Or if a TV screen is in sight, you might pretend to be absorbed in a sporting event, absent-mindedly placing your bets as if distracted. If you put your mind to it, you can easily find a way to look as though you're doing anything but counting cards. After all,

if hundreds of people start running around casinos copying my act, it won't work anymore. So develop an act that fits your own unique style.

Handle Your Chips Clumsily

Stack them in irregular piles and appear to be clumsy when placing your bets. If you handle chips like a skilled player, there's a good chance you'll raise suspicions. At a minimum, the pit will know you've played a lot of cards. Why give the casino a reason to worry?

Always Respect Dealers and Pit Personnel

Remember that getting angry with a dealer is counter-productive. You'll have to endure bad beats frequently; they come with the territory. I just laugh them off. I often congratulate the dealer on her prowess: "Wow, can you deal. If I had a casino, you'd be the first dealer I'd hire. Then imagine all the money I'd make."

You must stay on the good side of dealers and floor personnel. You need these people. They can help you. More important, they can also hurt you.

Several years ago I watched a counter abusing a dealer. "Well, I thought I'd been fucked every way possible in my life," the player sneered. "I've been horse-fucked, cow-fucked, and goat-fucked, but you, sweetheart," he said to the male dealer, "find a new way to fuck me on every hand. There you go again! Now I can say I've been snake-fucked too! And now again! What do you call that, an alligator fuck?" On and on he went.

The dealer just stared ahead impassively, taking the insults. I knew this dealer well, having played with him many times. I also knew that his uncle was the head of casino security. Finally, he went on a break. When he returned 20 minutes later, the player looked up at him and said, "Well, look who's back, my favorite dealer." A smile turned up the corners of the dealer's mouth as two burly security guards

came up on either side of the player and escorted him from the premises. I never found out whether he was 86'd for counting or for abusive behavior. Probably both. In any event, his language was totally out of line. In my estimation, verbal abuse is nearly as bad as physical abuse.

If treated properly, dealers can help you win money and pit bosses can help increase your longevity. Besides, you never know what connections they may have.

Never Admit to Anything

There are times, no matter how good my act, when some casino person gets suspicious of my play. Some of these guys think they're Sherlock Holmes. One might try to smoke me out by coming up to the table from out of nowhere and asking, "What count are you using?" while scrutinizing my facial expression.

"Count?" I look up bewildered. "Did I add up the last hand incorrectly? Didn't I have eighteen?"

"Don't play dumb with me," he might respond sternly. "You know what I'm talking about."

"Not really," I'd say, "but I gather it has nothing to do with the last hand."

Not getting the reaction he's looking for, he will either ask me to leave right then or, perhaps, decide to observe me further. If he leaves, I'll play another five minutes, making sure I don't vary my bets at all, then look at my watch and make up some excuse to leave. I never press it in a situation like this. I've just had a very close call. When my longevity seems threatened, I know it's time to go, and I'll avoid that shift at that casino for about a year.

I never admit to a player that I count cards, either. There's no reason for other players to know what I'm doing, and the best I can do by giving out this information is break even. Worst-case scenario: Someone might tell someone, who tells someone else and, ultimately, someone at the casino hears about it.

The same holds true for my business associates. I don't tell my banker, my lawyer, or my accountant about my blackjack prowess. If a professional acquaintance from an unrelated business catches me in the act, I play it down: "I'm just out having a good time," or "I've got to spend my money somewhere." Bottom line—the fewer people who know my true abilities at the blackjack table, the better. (More on this in the next chapter.)

Freely Solicit Help From Floor Personnel

This is one of my favorite gambits, and it has worked with remarkable success through the years. I often seek help from pit bosses on how to play a hand or how much to bet. While it's true that some pit bosses are about as warm as icebergs, most are reasonably cordial. Almost all of them are bored. I try to add some levity and interest-value to their day. I actively solicit their advice and they give it freely. Then, if they're later asked about my play, what can they say? After all, they taught me everything I know.

The Casino is Not Your Enemy

Many gambling books, blackjack texts in particular, use war metaphors—playing for blood, attacking the casinos, you against the house. I think there's a better way of talking about my relationship with the casino than referring to it as hand-to-hand combat. I view it much more as a cooperative venture. Casinos are inanimate, but their employees are real people with real feelings. By ingratiating myself to casino personnel at all levels, I try to make it beneficial for each of the employees I encounter to have me as a customer. This is a crucial point. It's not the casino employee's money I'm winning. Sure, he has a job to do and he wants to do it well, but my winning or losing doesn't affect his paycheck. I do everything possible to make my presence an asset rather than a detriment to every casino employee I encounter, from dealer to casino manager. In the course of my playing career,

I've had lots of help from people at all levels of the casino hierarchy.

If Asked, Leave Quietly and Graciously

As I've said, if you play long enough, you will occasionally be asked to stop playing blackjack, or worse yet, to leave, regardless of how good your camouflage tactics are. When this happens to me, I look astonished. "You want me to play only craps because you think I play blackjack too well? Wow! That's quite a compliment. It's also a first. Wait until I tell my wife!" Then I'll amble over to the crap table, shaking my head and smiling as if I'm really pleased.

If asked to leave, it's important to leave quietly and quickly to avoid being photographed. So far, even though I've been backed off at several casinos, I've managed to avoid having my photo wind up in the Griffin Agency's book. I've also never been pulled up at a second casino because someone from a place where I'd just gotten heat had called around about me. At one casino where I was backed off, the casino manager suggested several other casinos where he thought I would do well and wished me good luck. I try never to burn

Griffin and the Black Book

Many casinos in Las Vegas use a surveillance service called the Griffin Agency to spot cheaters and counters (there is often no distinction between them in the minds of casino executives). Once a Griffin agent has clocked your play and decided that you're a threat to the casinos, unknown to you, your photo is taken using the high-tech equipment mounted in those bubbles you see everywhere on the casino ceiling. Your mug is then published in Griffin's infamous compendium of casino undesirables known as the "Black Book" and circulated to all the casinos that subscribe to the Griffin service. The next time you waltz into a casino, even one where you've never set foot before, you'll be greeted at the table by a team of security guards within minutes—nailed from your photo in the Black Book.

my bridges and I keep friendships active. For example, I send Christmas cards to my friends who work at casinos. This is another practice that has paid off handsomely.

I never cease to be amazed by the twists and turns of this business. One of my biggest surprises came one day when I got a letter inviting me to play at a major Nevada casino where I had never played before. The letter was signed by a man who had personally backed me off at another casino. Bizarre! I sat on the invitation for a couple of days, wondering what was up. Finally I decided the only way to find out was to call, which I did. The casino executive addressed me warmly, telling me that he had just moved over to a new joint that “wasn’t afraid of big action” like his last casino had been. He was giving me the green light to come and play. Wonders never cease. To this day I’m welcome at that casino.

Aiding and A-betting

By now it should be clear that how you play your hands, how you act, and how you interact all have a direct bearing on your longevity as a player at each casino. How you bet your money is also an important longevity consideration. See “The Ultimate Gambit” (next chapter) for the full treatment on how I play certain hands incorrectly at minimal loss, both to preserve my longevity and to increase my bet spread.

How I bet my money, naturally, also parallels the typical high roller. The two most common methods of increasing bet size are parlaying and chipping up. “Parlaying” means doubling the size of your bet after winning a hand by adding all of the chips you’ve just won. It’s also called “letting your bet ride.” Chipping up is a more cautious method of advancing your bet. With this technique, a single additional chip is added to your bet after each hand won. For example, if you had four units bet and won the hand, you could chip up to a

five-unit bet on the next hand. Both parlaying and chipping up are extremely common among high rollers, especially Asians. So I use these systems as well, the difference being that I parlay, or chip up, only when the composition of the remaining decks is favorable.

Here is one way I do this. For shoe games, my initial bet is two units. If I have more than two units bet at the shuffle point at the end of the shoe, then I'll make the same bet at the start of a new shoe. Sometimes this will be a large bet, much greater than two units.

If I win the first hand and the running count is +2 or more, I chip up to three units. If I lose this hand and the running count is +2 or more, I again bet two units. If I win the hand and the running count is less than +2, I still make the same bet. In fact, I make it even if the count is substantially negative. That's right. I make the same bet if I've won the first hand, no matter how many tens and aces may have come out. I never reduce the size of my bet if I've won the preceding hand. It looks too atypical. I almost never see a big player win a hand, especially his first hand, and bet less on the next hand. The times I have seen this, the players turned out to be counters. So I make it a hard and fast rule never to reduce the size of my bet if I've won the preceding hand.

If I lose the first hand and the running count is less than +2, I bet one unit on the next hand. I continue to bet one unit if the running count is less than +2 and I've lost the preceding hand. I also continue to bet one unit if I've won the preceding one-unit bet and the running count is less than +2, unless I've won three consecutive hands. Then I either parlay up to two units or spread to one unit on each of two hands. Ninety percent of the time I take the latter approach, because it has the added benefit of using up cards when the deck is bad. Spreading to two hands also provides cover for the times when I play two hands with big bets. I don't think it looks right to spread to two hands only when making big bets in strongly positive shoes. It seems more "natural" to

me to let the casino observers see two hands being played at various bet levels. If I've just won a two-unit bet and the deck is providing a positive expectation, I often spread to two hands of two units each rather than parlay up to four units on one hand. If I win and the deck remains good, I will chip up on both hands—a two-unit increase in my overall bet.

This approach of spreading to two hands, beginning in even or marginally profitable situations, has worked for me for years, allowing me to get more chips in play faster and with less scrutiny than sticking to one hand. It also eliminates situations where parlaying would create a huge tower of chips on one hand, which has the potential to arouse suspicion.

On many occasions, I win the first hand and lose the second. When this happens, if the deck is still good, I always make the same bets on the next round by simply sliding the payoff over to the adjacent box. I do this no matter how good the deck has become. If the deck turns bad, however, I usually play the one hand with the same bet by dragging down the payoff and leaving the original bet out there. Sometimes I lose the first hand and win the second with either a blackjack or a double down. When this happens, and if the deck is still rich, I use the added chips on the table to increase the two bets. This looks natural. I'm adding winnings to my bet. Any time I have the opportunity to add to my bet by using winnings, I do so. I usually parlay until I get to six units on each of two hands, then keep chipping up so long as I keep winning and the deck stays good.

I don't stop at six units on both hands, like many professionals do, for the very reason that many counters bet this way. If I keep winning both hands, and the count continues to warrant it, I keep chipping up until I get to nine units on each hand, even more.

However, should I then lose both hands, I cut back by one unit on each hand, no matter how good the count. If I lose both hands again, I cut back again by one unit on each; for the next loss on both hands, I again reduce each bet by one

unit. I won't go below six units on each hand so long as the count is decent, and I immediately start chipping or parlaying up with any net winnings from the two hands. I think this looks more natural than having a six-unit top bet on two hands. It gives me greater than a 1-to-12 spread overall, and by moving my bet up when I win and down when I lose, my play parallels that of other high rollers.

A word of caution. Should the count go from positive to negative and you lose two big bets of, say, eight units each, I don't recommend immediately dropping back to a minimum bet. As a rule of thumb, I cut my bet back by half and still play two hands. If I lose both hands again, I cut back by half again if the decks are still lean, then finally back to one hand with a minimum bet. Of course, as discussed already, should I win one or both bets, I make the same bet on the next hand. I never jump my bets either up or down. This is critical for maintaining longevity. You've got to look like everyone else if you are to be a welcome returning guest.

At this point, astute readers are probably thinking, "Yeah, great. I'm camouflaging my bets, but this must have a cost." It does have a significant cost. According to Schlesinger, this type of betting reduces your win rate by about 30%, from .64% to .46% against a 6-deck shoe with a 1-to-12 bet spread and 75% of the cards dealt out. Thirty percent is a lot to give up. It's very tempting to say, "Screw that. I'll just bend the rules, not have so much camouflage, and cut the cost in half to a more respectable fifteen percent." Although you might get away with this and more for lower-stakes play, I emphatically recommend against this approach for black-chip play and higher. Strip yourself of your betting camouflage and you expose your unprotected underbelly to the harpoons of casino scrutiny.

You will have to play longer to win the same amount of money, in fact, 43% longer. However, if you can't play at all anymore, your win rate is zero. You're out of business. My personal win rate actually compares favorably with the

predicted win rates for the games I play and spreads I use, without adjusting for the inefficiencies in my betting strategy. In fact, it's 80% better than predicted. Here's why.

Again, my bet spread doesn't stop at two bets of six units each. I keep chipping up if I win until I get to two bets of nine or more units each. Although I chip down every time I lose both bets, my average big bet is undoubtedly higher than players who use the standard 1-to-12 spread. My overall spread is probably 1-to-14 or so. This extra two units in bet spread, again according to Schlesinger, amounts to a gain of .22% for a 6-deck game with 75% of the cards dealt, more than compensating for the .18% I lose for my betting inefficiency. So by changing my bet-spread tactics, I make up for the inefficiency of my betting camouflage. This is essentially a break-even tradeoff and provides a lot of cover. So far we are back only to where we started. But how do we gain another 80%? The answer is penetration.

Penetration

Penetration is the single most important factor to the counter — more important than bet spread, more important than rules variations, more important than playing strategy, more important than anything. No, I'm not talking about some arcane measure of sexual prowess. Penetration in this context refers to how deep into the shoe the dealer deals. The more cards dealt out, the better it is for the player.

The effects are staggering. For example, the difference in my advantage between a 6-deck game using a 1-to-12 spread with 4½ decks dealt and the same game dealing out 5½ decks is an unbelievable figure: almost 300% (see Schlesinger's *Blackjack Attack*). The most important thing a player can do to increase win rate is increase his penetration.

If penetration can be increased from 75% to 83% (from

4½ to 5 decks), it will compensate for the costs of making all sorts of stupid-looking plays, like standing on A,7 vs. 9 or ten, insuring all blackjacks, always standing on 16 vs. ten, and never doubling down with A,2, A,3, A,4, or A,5. Get the dealer to run out 5 decks or more, and you can look like a dunce and collect like a bandit. You get the point. So how can a player in today's modern casino environment consistently get better penetration?

One thing you can do is simply cruise around the casino looking for dealers who routinely cut off fewer cards than they're supposed to. Most casinos with 6-deck shoes instruct their dealers to cut off 1½ decks, or about 25% of the pack, but not all dealers are perfect. Some, no doubt, are lazy and don't like shuffling frequently. Others may not really know how many cards comprise 1½ decks. Whatever the reason, you will find dealers who consistently cut off less than 1½ decks. Obviously, playing with these dealers is extremely lucrative. Often, however, their games are busy. (I wonder why!) As you'll read later in this book, I won't play at a full table. And I'm not much interested in hanging around for hours waiting for a good dealer's table to go dead. A real dilemma. What to do?

The answer is to *create* better penetration. This is one of two subjects in *Burning the Tables* about which I thought long and hard before deciding to divulge information about the techniques I use. I'm not going to tell you exactly what I do. After all, we can't all run around trying to foist the same ploys on the same casinos. Besides, referring to my own trick would identify me instantly to bosses throughout the world. I'm still out there, just like you, trying to make a living. But I will give you a big hint about my technique.

You might be surprised. You might be incredulous. But the simple truth is: I ask for it. I don't say, "Ms. Dealer, you seem like a nice person, so would you mind terribly cutting off only one deck so that my chances of winning are greatly improved?" No, I resort to my old friend superstition.

Again, I'm not going to describe precisely how I do it, but suffice it to say that I use a harmless ruse to get dealers to cut off fewer cards from the bottom of the deck. The superstition at issue is, of course, utter nonsense. Obviously, there is no relationship whatsoever between what I ask the dealer to do and the reason I give her for asking. It's pure Cheshire-cat absurdity.

So why would a dealer, even one prohibited from taking tips, do this? The answer is that most people, dealers included, want to please. They're so used to people with far-out superstitions that I doubt they even bother to figure out what I'm saying. Since I'm such a nice guy, if it makes me happy, why not try to satisfy me?

My technique creates a challenge that breaks up the monotony a bit. The dealer is required to perform a function exactly as I've asked her to, strictly from memory. No small task. If she's successful, she gets a verbal reward (always), a big grateful smile (always), and a pecuniary reward where it's allowed.

I suggest you use your ingenuity and come up with your own superstitions. Maybe it's your 52nd birthday today. Maybe a friend of yours is a numerologist who's told you that today your lucky number is 50. Perhaps you (or your father) flew a B-52 bomber in World War II, and if you don't keep the squadron in order you may lose too many planes. Maybe you're an engineer, a draftsman, or a plastic surgeon whose work (and superstitions) depend on precision. Perhaps your dog, Toto, was born on the fifth day of the second month and you won't get back to Kansas unless the dealer helps you out. If you put your mind to it, I'm sure you can create multiple diverse superstitions to encourage the dealer to cut off fewer cards. If you're considerate, cordial, and supportive of dealers, and they like you, they'll do everything possible to help. Where they put the cut card just doesn't seem like a big deal to many of them.

By the way, you can work the play from either side of

the pack. Suppose you catch a glimpse of the bottom card and it's a ten or an ace. In some cases casinos don't bother covering the bottom card. If it's a ten or an ace, I slice the cut card one deck (or slightly less) from it, bringing the ten or ace to the top. If I've cut off exactly 52 cards, the bottom card that I've seen will be the 52nd card played. By tracking

Penetration Boosters

In a 6-deck game, the difference between dealing 4.5 and 5 decks is a whopping 75% increase in expected return. To put this into perspective, a half-deck of deeper penetration is more valuable than dealer standing on soft 17, doubling after splits, resplitting aces, unlimited pair splitting, and late surrender combined. Players would come from all over to take advantage of such juicy rules. But they'd be far better off forgoing them all if they could consistently get that extra half-deck dealt out. Two casino employees in particular, the dealer and the pit boss, can help you achieve this goal, and therefore qualify as the prime penetration boosters.

The 21 dealer is the most important employee for optimizing the day-in day-out extraction of funds from casino coffers. By dealing more cards before shuffling, the dealer can increase your win rate significantly. Pit bosses have the immediate responsibility of game supervision, which includes making sure that the dealers follow established house procedures. Therefore, a pit boss who is less than diligent in enforcing cut-card-placement rules can also be extremely valuable. (Pit bosses also fill out the rating slips that indicate your average bet, time played, and the amount won or lost. They can help you here by shading these ratings in a way that will qualify you for more comps.)

I spend lots of time making sure that dealers and pit bosses are favorably disposed to my presence and style of play. I work the dealers slowly, gradually persuading them to cut off fewer and fewer cards. Each time they do, I reward them by making small bets for them and heaping superstitious-sounding praise on them. I try to make pit bosses my friends—using humor (sharing jokes), kindness, and consideration until I establish a true relationship. The benefits of having these pit personnel as allies are innumerable.

how many cards have been played, I know within a card when it's coming. By spreading to two hands and making a larger-than-normal bet, even when the count doesn't warrant it, I can snag that ten or ace on one of the two hands. Against a single deck, starting a hand with a ten gives you about a 14.3% advantage; starting with an ace gives you a 52% edge. Although the advantage is smaller against six decks, it's still substantial, especially if the card is an ace. If the bottom card is small, I cut the deck near the top, probably at around the 48-card mark. These 48 cards go to the bottom, then the dealer puts in the cut card. If she puts it in at 48 cards or less (because she is very proficient at following my instructions), I make a mental note that a "baby" lurks 48 cards from the bottom and may be put in play on the last hand. This can be very useful information at the end of the shoe. In the meantime, since this card is effectively out of play until the last hand, I start my running count at +1.

You can modify your patter to make some kind of superstitious case for where you insert the cut card. However, if you can't see the bottom card, it's probably best to try for 1 deck, especially in Nevada where the player must insert the cut card at least 1 deck from the top or bottom of a 6-deck pack. Internationally, you'll be able to get away with more. High rollers can generally get away with a lot more than low rollers; casinos know that high rollers tend to be "quirky."

If you're a red-chip or green-chip bettor playing at a table with other people and this kind of move doesn't work immediately, I wouldn't try it a second time — it'll make you stand out and look suspicious. If you're a lower-limit player, I'd restrict the use of this caper to when you're playing heads-up with the dealer. Even for the high-limit player, it's far less conspicuous to try this when playing alone.

As I've said, dealers generally acquiesce to my cut-card ploy. Pit bosses however, are another story. I've had times when pit bosses, who clearly didn't suspect me of counting, have admonished dealers about cutting off too few cards. If

the pit boss is hovering close by, it's not a good time to get superstitious.

As luck would have it, though, pit bosses aren't usually interested in watching a dealer shuffle the cards and prepare a shoe; they're much more likely to pay attention once the cards are in the air. So you should have ample opportunity to discuss your innermost superstitions with the dealer.

I recall a specific instance when the pit boss asked the dealer why the cut card was so far back (in this particular case, half of a deck). The dealer innocently responded, "What difference does it make? I'm not going to run out of cards." The pit boss told him to move it back next shoe to 1½ decks. When the next shoe was shuffled I cut off exactly 52 cards and said, "There, that looks like about a deck and a half. See if you can match that." He did. Perhaps he really didn't know what 1½ decks looks like; it's more likely that he was again trying to please within the limits of his job parameters. However, when the pit boss came by and looked, he seemed satisfied with the cut. On this occasion I think cutting off only half a deck was a little too strong — pushing the envelope.

In general, it's better to be conservative and get 5 out of 6 decks dealt, which is still a great game, than to push it too far and risk bringing heat to either the dealer or yourself. I can honestly say that, to the best of my knowledge, this caper has never aroused suspicion. Some dealers won't go for it, some pit bosses will correct it, but no one has ever said a word to me about it, nor have I been backed off from any casino where I have used this technique. That's a stone-cold fact.

To Review

Your P&L (profit and loss) is directly dependent on your P/L (penetration/longevity). Higher and fully camouflaged bet spreads and better penetration allow for a myriad of

intentional playing deviations that are sure to throw the casino off track. The more your play mimics the average high roller's, the more beneficial it is to longevity. If you can increase either your bet spread or your penetration ever so slightly, you'll more than make up for the misplays. It's hard to imagine getting 86'd when making so many of these bad plays (which can be made at such little cost) that distinguish you from both the counter and the basic strategy player.

In the next chapter, "The Ultimate Gambit," I divulge which set of misplays I've adopted. I want to re-emphasize, however, that these cover plays are necessary only for bigger players. Red-chip and low-level green-chip players should play the hands perfectly, especially in the classier hotels where your bets are likely to be viewed as insignificant. Since you have little risk of being backed off, there's no reason to give up anything. You should also be able to take more liberties with your bet spread. High rollers, on the other hand, will find this advice invaluable.

The Dirty Dozen

Here is a summary of 12 things to avoid when playing.

Rudeness

Rudeness will alienate dealers and pit bosses alike. And once alienated, they can and will make your life miserable. Rudeness is not only indicative of a lack of social grace, it also costs you in terms of expected return. Being rude is like throwing money out the window.

Poor Game Selection

Many recreational players and semi-pros have limited time when on a Las Vegas playing vacation. They are often lured into playing under poor conditions, such as at crowded

tables with poor penetration, then wonder why they can't win. If you're going to Vegas to win money at blackjack, you should select tables with no more than one other player at single-deck games, two other players at double-decks, and three other players at shoes. As for me, my tolerance is one other player at any game. For high-limit play, I advise applying this more stringent criterion.

Drinking While Playing

I know. I, too, saw Paul Newman (Fast Eddie) and Jackie Gleason (Minnesota Fats) each polish off a fifth of bourbon in *The Hustler* and play near-perfect pool. And there might be a few people around with enormous livers who can metabolize alcohol as fast as they can drink it. But alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. And the last thing you need as a counter is a sedated brain. Leave the drinking and drugs for after playing hours. Better yet, if making money is your objective, stow the whole lot until you get home.

Overplaying Your Bankroll

A number of books will tell you that a 400-unit bankroll is sufficient. I disagree. I think you need at least 1,000 units. This means that if you're playing \$100 units you need a \$100,000 bankroll. In fact, 2,000 units is even better—1,000 active units and 1,000 inactive units that can be accessed at any time. In my long career I have never sustained a 2,000-unit downdraft (although I've come close). Had my bankroll been limited to 400-500 units, I would have gone broke more than a half-dozen times over my playing career.

Playing to Get Even

Most counters, even some of the top professionals, will play long sessions when they're losing. This creates needless exposure and eliminates a major contributor to longevity: allowing casinos to book wins. Limit plays to an hour or less, win or lose.

Seriousness and Concentration

Lighten up; you must act the part of the easy-come, easy-go high roller if you are going to be allowed to play. Act like you're enjoying yourself. Seriousness is a disease. It promotes suspicion, scrutiny, and surveillance. Besides, it's no fun.

Overtipping

Tipping should be viewed as part of an overall strategy to improve game conditions and must be geared to the rewards it brings. No rewards, no tipping.

Loss of Discipline and Control

To be successful, you must maintain discipline and control. This governs all playing activities in blackjack and other casino games. It also encompasses execution of all parameters of your strategy according to plan. Significant deviations from your game plan are usually costly.

Winning Too Much at a Single Session

For longevity considerations, a 50-unit win limit is a good policy. The larger the win, the more attention it will get. Long-term pecking is better tolerated than devouring.

Poor Penetration

Good penetration is more important than favorable rules. If you cannot create good penetration or play with dealers who routinely provide it, it is best not to play at all.

Playing at a Game With Other Counters

Bet increases that are synchronized with those of another competent player look suspect. Synchronization is best left for swimming. If another counter joins your game, leave as soon as possible.

Dressing Inappropriately to Betting Level

Your dress contributes to the overall impression casino

YOUR P & L STATEMENT

personnel will have of you. If you're betting hundreds of dollars a hand but are dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball hat, you'll probably arouse suspicions. You must look and act like you can afford to gamble (and lose) big money. This is especially true for counters younger than 40 years old.

Blackjack players run across many situations in the course of play that can be handled in different ways. Most players have strong views as to which approach works best. For me, it makes sense to vary my tactics as conditions dictate, although I usually have my preferences. A number of issues are endlessly debated among high-stakes professionals. In the following, I attempt to analyze the most common of these debates and tell you the approach I take to each issue.

Playing Alone Versus Playing With Others

As mentioned, I have a strong preference for playing alone with the dealer. Not only do I get in more hands per hour this way, but I can also lay down my act without the risk of offending anyone. I can play as fast or as slow as I want, interacting with both the dealer and pit bosses at will. Should a crowd gather, as often happens, I can interact with the crowd and create a dramatic high-tension environment. I'm in my element, with no one else to consider.

When playing with one other player (or two or three, God forbid), I often get comments on plays I make. "If you'd

stood on that sixteen when the dealer had a seven up, she would have caught the eight you got and busted.” I don’t like disappointing people. It’s one of *my* weaknesses. But it’s impossible to play in such a way that I always make the right decision (for everyone) as judged in hindsight. Therefore, so I don’t disappoint anyone (not to mention preserving my higher hourly earnings expectation), I prefer to play solo and control the game.

The flip side is that more players means more cover. This is also better for comps, because the way the ratings are set up, the heads-up player does not get proper credit for the number of hands he plays.

As to the first point, I disagree. My act affords me a bigger umbrella than any cover a couple of other players might provide by distracting surveillance. The second point, however, has merit. It’s true that casino rating systems do not adequately distinguish the number of hands a solo player gets in from those of a customer playing at a full game. At best, they may differentiate between a “slow game” (60 hands per hour) and a “fast game” (100 hands per hour), but they never fully credit the 150 to 200-plus hands per hour you can play heads-up. So if you’re playing primarily for comps, it’s probably best to put in your time at a full table and find ways to slow down the game and keep the meter going, while you sit out hands for one reason or another.

But if you’re playing to win money, earning power and camouflage are the name of the game, and these objectives are better accomplished playing alone. Sure, the comps are important and they’re worth money; I regard them as an attractive benefit. The bigger reward, however, for a high-stakes player is in the play, and I’ll take mine straight up, thank you.

Playing Two Hands or One

This is another one of those issues often bandied about by players. When you increase your bets, is it better to do so on one hand, say, with 12 units, or to spread to two hands with six units on each? The argument for playing one hand stems primarily from the fact that it uses up fewer cards, providing more opportunities for the player during rich shoes. Some players also believe spreading to two hands draws heat.

The argument for two hands is that it looks a lot better having six units on each of two hands than having 12 units on one, which is a pretty serious-looking stack of chips. Also, playing two hands reduces standard deviation a bit, thus reducing fluctuations by about 15% to 20%. Two hands provide additional flexibility, allowing the player to vary his bets: sometimes betting one unit on each of two hands, like with a true count of zero to +1, then going to two units on each hand, should either hand win and the count improve. If the player gets a blackjack or wins a double down or split, he can smoothly get even more chips in action, count permitting. Obviously, the chance of such an outcome is twice as great with two hands.

Whether to play one or two hands really boils down to a matter of personal preference and style. It's a close call in terms of value. My preference is to play two hands, but not only during monster plus counts. I often play two hands for one-unit bets each in neutral to slightly positive shoes.

Say I bet one unit on the first hand out of a new shoe and win. The count is still zero. I may very well spread to two hands of one unit each right then and there, particularly if an ace hasn't shown on the first hand; I'm establishing the fact that I often play two hands. Then I'll go back and forth between one hand and two without any discernible pattern. If I've played two hands and one has won and one has lost, and the count is neutral to marginally positive, I may parlay up to two units on the winning hand, while staying at one

unit on the losing box. If the “lucky box” wins again, I might chip up to three units on that hand, while remaining at one unit on the second “unlucky” hand. This provides deception to my betting pattern at little to no cost.

Now, when the count gets good and I start parlaying up on both hands, it looks natural. Playing one hand all along, then suddenly spreading to two hands of six units each seems likely to provoke suspicion. Even if it’s done only after having won a six-unit bet on one hand and using my winnings to play the second hand, I think it raises eyebrows to spread to two hands for the first time with a big bet out. If the pit personnel have become accustomed to you playing two hands early in the shoe, they’re less likely to become alarmed when your big bets hit the felt.

Team Play Versus Solo Play

Some blackjack players pool their bankrolls and playing time in a team effort. Sometimes they use a non-playing investor to help capitalize their effort.

There are many variations of team play. For example, one team member bets the \$5 table minimum on each hand. When the count gets good, he signals a teammate to come over, also signaling him the count. The teammate sits down in mid-shoe and starts making big bets. The small bettor leaves a hand or two later to preserve cards for the “big player” and to find another advantageous situation.

A variation on this theme is for one team member to stand behind a game and count it down. When it gets good, he signals his teammate and moves on. This way no connection can be made between any player in the game and the big player. I like this method if the “spotter,” as the roving counter is called, is paid an hourly wage. By paying a spotter a salary rather than a percentage of the win, my earning

potential is increased and the spotter receives a fair wage whether I win or lose.

One sophisticated refinement is to use a female spotter. Acting as if they're a couple (whether it's true or not), the male player walks over and greets his female partner, who gives him the count. After greeting her, he suddenly decides to "play a few hands." She watches for a short while, then moves on to identify another advantageous situation. Since women are far less suspect than men, it's unlikely that this ploy will be discovered, especially if play is limited to about an hour per shift at each casino. This can be repeated as often as bimonthly.

For a complete discussion of team play, I recommend *The Big Player* and *Million Dollar Blackjack*, by Ken Uston. Kenny, now long deceased, was one of the founders of team play. Today, there are a number of well-capitalized teams still using this approach to tackle the game. Some do quite well. Others get busted.

I've preferred to play alone. Team play is just a little too cumbersome for me. Wins have to get divided up multiple ways, and there's always the risk of a team member cheating.

Organizing and controlling a group is obviously far more complex than organizing and controlling myself. But for some people, especially those who are thinly capitalized, the team approach may be the best way to go. If you're well-financed, however, I think you can win more money with less aggravation playing "on your belly" (alone).

I once played on a team — not blackjack, but roulette. We used computers to predict where the roulette ball was likely to fall off the rim and at what position on the wheel the ball was likely to hit. In those days, the early 1980s, there was no anti-device statute on the books in Nevada. (This didn't happen until July 1, 1985, shortly after Thomas Bass wrote a book on using computers to beat roulette, called *The Eu-daemonic Pie*.)

Our roulette team spent hundreds of hours evaluating wheels all over Las Vegas. It turned out that the best results were obtained from wheels that were slightly out of balance and used heavy balls. The old ivory balls worked particularly well. An unlevel wheel had a “high point.” The ball tended to fall off the wheel at this high point. Heavy balls didn’t bounce much, coming to rest in reasonable proximity to the point where they hit the wheel, while light balls might bounce half a wheel or more. These restrictions certainly limited the universe of playable wheels. We did manage to find a few, however.

At one Strip hotel we were up about \$27,000. Conditions were perfect. I was doing the betting; the guys with the computers were signaling me which section of the wheel the ball was likely to land on. We were hitting about two out of five spins and the money was rolling in nicely. The pit boss on the game was an old-timer. As we continued to win, he became more and more agitated. Then I hit three numbers in succession — bang, bang, bang! I was betting \$100 straight up on each number, the house limit, and each payoff was \$3,500. After accounting for the chips I had bet, I had won nearly \$8,000 on these three spins alone. This was too much for the old duffer. On the next spin, just as the ball was falling from the rim onto the wheel, he reached in and hit the ball with his hand.

I shrieked, “Hey! You can’t do that!” Pandemonium ensued. The dealer tried to collect my losing bets, but obviously I couldn’t allow that to happen. I demanded that the game be stopped without touching any of the bets, and asked to see the casino manager. Needless to say, by the time the casino manager arrived, my computer-packing friends were long gone.

The casino manager asked what happened. I explained that the pit boss had hit the roulette ball with his hand. Incredulous, the casino manager turned to the pit boss and asked if this was true.

"Damn right it's true!" the pit boss spluttered, his face reddening. "This guy is fuckin' us. I don't know how he's fuckin' us, but I know when I'm bein' fucked!"

"Calm down, Max," the casino manager soothed. "I'll handle this." Pushing my losing bets back to me, he said, "From now on you must place all your bets before the dealer spins the ball. And Max, keep your hands off the wheel or we'll have this place swarming with Gaming Control Board enforcement people."

Well, that was the end for us at this friendly wheel.

A couple of days later we located another favorable wheel, but it was in an unfavorable location — the Horseshoe. In those days the Horseshoe had a reputation of treating unkindly anyone caught taking advantage of the house. It was with great trepidation that we ventured in and started playing this slightly unbalanced wheel. We started winning immediately and within half an hour were up \$18,000. The pit seemed reasonably relaxed. Just as I started to believe that my fears were unfounded, from out of nowhere a veritable army of suits and security guards materialized. One of the guards carried an enormous level with him. At the sight of the level, the computer guys split, leaving me to face the gathering storm.

I remained as cool as possible as they placed the level on the wheel, noticing that it was slightly out of balance. To my enormous relief, they escorted me over to the cashier's cage, politely telling me that the wheel I had been playing was now "closed for repairs." I was delighted to find myself in one piece and with the win in my pocket. So ended my career with the roulette team.

There is one aspect of team play that I find intriguing. For many years I've fantasized about organizing a team of women. Even today, in an age when women are commonly seen on the floor protecting the games, I believe female players have a substantial advantage over male players. They are just not as suspect. In my opinion a well-organized well-fi-

nanced team of women has limitless potential. Imagine what Asian women could do!

Playing Single Deck, Double Deck, or Shoes

This is another subject that blackjack aficionados could debate all night. Single- and double-deck games are dealt from the dealer's hand (hand-held games). Multiple-deck games (4 to 8 decks) are dealt from a plastic shoe (shoe games). Single- and double-deck games have a greater expectation for the player than shoe games, which is why they're more closely scrutinized by the casinos. It's also easier for casino surveillance to count hand-held games and to monitor suspected counters. Hand-held decks are constantly being reshuffled, and advantages or disadvantages become clear after the first hand or two. Shoe games are more difficult to monitor. Counting a shoe takes more skill. Non-counters will often start a shoe with small bets, then progressively increase them as the shoe gets dealt out, especially if they're winning. Counters who mimic this betting behavior (in positive-expectation shoes, of course) can often escape detection.

Some casinos have more favorable rules at their shoe games than at their hand-held tables. At the time of this writing, the Mirage in Las Vegas offers late surrender and resplitting of aces on its 6-deck games, but not at their double-deck tables. These rules are worth a total of about .3% to the player, narrowing the difference in expectation between hand-held and shoe games.

I like to play double-deck and shoe games. For big money, single-deck play is, unfortunately, difficult to pull off, even when using a lot of cover. There's usually a clever employee somewhere who thinks he smells a rat, albeit one that looks like a Siamese cat. Before they'll let you win serious money, they're likely to back you off.

Your insurance decisions are probably the biggest tip-off in single-deck play, and the easiest for the casinos to catch. If you decide to try single-deck games, I suggest you use some playing cover, especially on insurance bets: Always insure a natural and occasionally take insurance, or partial insurance, on a small bet when the count doesn't justify it. This will buy you more playing time.

Double decks are a different story. Employing the Ultimate Gambit against double decks reduces the overall win rate by only about 5% and provides ample protection against discovery. Making these bonehead plays seems overly aggressive and amateurish. I combine this with full betting cover and never reduce my bets at the shuffle point; I often have large bets riding after the shuffle. This combination goes a long way toward convincing even the most cynical observers that I'm not a threat. Also, double deck can be played with a smaller bet spread than shoe games and yield the same win rate with smaller fluctuations. I recommend this approach if you don't think you can get away with a larger bet spread.

Shoe games, on the other hand, provide a lot more flexibility, especially when played heads-up with the dealer. Bets can be run up and down seemingly at random. Opportunities are ample to increase bet spreads on a series of winning hands without having to be concerned about an imminent shuffle. Since far more shoe games are typically available, it's generally easier to change tables without receiving much notice from the staff.

So which is preferable? Tough call here. Both are acceptable options. If forced to pick, I go with shoes. Take away the cover provided by the Ultimate Gambit and it's not even close. Without the bonehead act, I'll take the shoe game every time. You're bound to get nailed at single- or double-deck relatively quickly if you bet big and play each hand perfectly. It's simply too transparent.

Credit Versus Front Money

In *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas*, I stressed the importance of using credit. If you have a fat bank account, credit is readily extended to you by the casino. For players, this is the simplest way to have funds readily available for play. More important, it's the most common way that high rollers play.

Once you've established credit at a casino, it's there to use anytime. You don't have to carry cash, arrange for telegraphic transfers, or waste time waiting for bank checks. In addition, there's a nice float to be played. When you win, you get paid in cash; when you lose, you generally have 30 days to pay. On big money, interest alone adds up to a significant amount over the course of a year.

Another advantage of credit play is that you can often negotiate a discount in paying off your markers. Once in a while, you can claim an unexpected "surprise" that temporarily sets you back, like a stock market crash (October 1987 and October 1997), sudden slack time in your core business, or a messy divorce. You can always drum up some reason why things are unexpectedly tight at this perspiring moment.

"Of course I'll be able to pay off my markers; I just need a little extra time. Sure, I could always borrow the money from the bank, but that has costs... What's that? You can offer me a ten percent discount to help cover my costs? I'll get right on it!" Next trip, when things have come right for you again, the casino will be only too happy to offer you the same credit line. If it doesn't, it knows you can get more favorable terms somewhere else. Competition for whales (big-bucks players) is intense. If you fit into this category, your negotiating position for settling losses is strong. It's not uncommon for whales to get discounts of 25% and more for losses that run into the millions. When they win, of course, they keep 100%. Run that through your blackjack computer when you're trying to figure out your expected return. Huge!

Using credit does, however, have some drawbacks. You have to supply your real name, unless you have established another identity, along with your address, date of birth, Social Security number, bank account number, and a bank contact person. This presents a potential hazard. The information is passed to the Central Credit Agency, a repository for information about players. Often when you get barred and are read the Trespass Act (though usually not when you're politely backed off), the casino notifies Central Credit of your banned status. Then whammo! When you go into the next casino, even if you have established credit and have no known problems there, it nails you before you even make your first bet. It happens! They cross-reference name, address, date of birth, and SS number. This way they don't mistakenly confuse one Robert Smith with another. "Oh, you're the Robert Smith from Dallas, not the one from Chicago."

A number of options are available to the player to defeat this cross-referencing system. Ideally, it's best to isolate one casino from another. One way of doing this is to create another identity, complete with driver's license (or state ID card), credit card, and bank account. In the chapter "On Guises and Disguises," I discuss how to legally change your name and how to use mail drops to preserve privacy.

As for date of birth, in Europe and much of the rest of the world, the day comes first, rather than the month. Thus June 3, 1952, is written 3-6-52. If you're ever confronted with this juxtaposition error, you might respond, "What's that? Yes, it's true I'm a U.S. citizen, but that time I spent in London in my formative years has left a few bad habits that are difficult to break. Sorry, old chum."

A Social Security number is also requested, as is a bank account number. I resist providing my Social Security number, claiming that I don't remember it and don't carry the card with me (does anyone?). I provide it only if there's a tangible need. When one casino decided to withhold a \$9,000-plus video poker jackpot until I provided my Social Security

number, my otherwise faulty memory was sufficiently jogged into recalling the requested sequence. When I must give my number, I always supply the correct one, regardless of the name I've used.

A very close friend of mine, however, suffers from dyslexia when it comes to his SS number. It seems that, no matter how hard he tries to get it right, he inadvertently juxtaposes two numbers—some foul-up in his left- and right-brain coordination, he reckons. If it's ever pointed out to him that he's gotten the number wrong, he summons up the mental capacity to recognize this error, stemming from his crossed neuro-circuits, and while apologizing profusely, proceeds to rectify it.

Your bank account number is the most important one. If the money is there when the casino checks, and your banker tells them what an honor it is having you for a customer, the casino may have little interest in pursuing your SS number until the need arises.

Front money is money deposited in advance of your visit, or upon arrival, with the casino's cashier; markers are drawn against it. It can either be sent to the casino in the form of a telegraphic transfer ("T/T") from your bank or deposited in person in the form of a bank draft or cashier's check.

If you're bringing a check with you, it's generally a good idea to secure it a few days before traveling, then fax a copy of it to the head cashier to verify in advance. This way you'll be cleared to play when you arrive. If you don't plan ahead and you arrive when the bank is closed, you won't be allowed to play until the casino verifies your check. It's no fun sitting around half the weekend because you can't access your playing funds. Even during banking hours, the verification process can take half a day or more.

The name of the maker of the bank check (you) does not appear on the check itself. Obviously, this gives you more flexibility. Sometimes, however, the casino will call your

banker to verify the check, using the name you've given. To protect against this, I tell the banker that I use a different name for gambling for reasons of confidentiality; I also give the banker the name that the casino may use in verifying the check. I've never had a banker question this. I then tell the casino who to contact at the bank for verification, and the loop is closed, preserving my identity.

Although front money doesn't have the financial perks that credit play has — no interest for 30 days and opportunities like settling at a discount — it makes it easier to maintain anonymity and provides plenty of flexibility. Since the money on deposit is in the form of cash rather than credit, the casinos tend to be much more lax about things like markers, withdrawing cash (to play in other places), and so forth. And rightly so. Until and unless you lose it, that money is yours to use as you see fit.

Not so with credit. The casino keeps much closer tabs on credit to prevent you from turning it into cash. Some players have been known to pocket chips while playing. Then they have a friend cash in these chips a few at a time — \$1,000 at this cashier's window, \$1,500 at another, and so on — and leave with a lot of the casino's money in their pockets, not having lost it gambling. Of course, they still have to repay the money, but they play the float (essentially a 30-day no-interest loan), pocketing the interest. Casinos try within the limits of their abilities to prevent this practice, but their vigilance can curtail it only a bit. There's always someone who finds a way to slip between the cracks. Hmmm ...

So which is better? This is a tough one. I use both. If I'm playing under an ID that has no bank accounts, I obviously prefer front money. If the ID has established bank accounts, either way will do. If I have to pick only one way, I prefer front money.

The Anonymous Approach Versus Establishing Close Relationships

One of the classic blackjack debates is whether it's preferable to build solid long-term relationships with casino personnel or to hit and run anonymously. Both styles can work. Blackjack experts Bryce Carlson and Don Schlesinger, among others, prefer the anonymous approach. Many others, such as George C. and myself, rely on the relationships approach. Although I've touched on this important subject elsewhere in the book, I thought it might be helpful to examine more rigorously the advantages and disadvantages of these two approaches.

Advantages of the Anonymous Approach

Play Without Getting Noticed—The goal here is to slip into a casino, play for a short time, and (it is hoped) win an amount that won't attract a lot of attention, like up to 30 units or so. The player won't return to the same shift at the same casino for several months.

Anonymity—Since the player isn't looking to get rated, he has no casino rating card. If playing for significant stakes, he'll surely be asked for his name and where he's staying. A low-greens player might get by with "Jim, and I'm staying with friends." With black-chip players, pit personnel will be more persistent, although you can give them any name you like. They're likely to press you for a last name so they can make a record of your play. They'll also ask where you're from and where you're staying. You need to have answers ready for these questions.

Some players try to stick with first names. When asked, "Jim what?" they respond, "Everyone just calls me Jim. I've got a long Polish last name that no one can pronounce. Call me Jim W. if you want." This leaves the pit boss at a dead end. It's difficult for him to press you further without appearing to be rude.

Not giving a last name allows you to say you're staying at any of the Strip hotels. If you give a false last name and a hotel where you say you're staying, they may call to check if they're suspicious. When they find out that no one by that name is registered, they'll go on red alert. Avoid this trap.

Obscuring Your Cumulative Win—Staying anonymous makes it difficult for the casino to track your cumulative win. Since you can give another name to another pit boss on a different shift at the same casino, say "James B.," the records the casino keeps, if any, will not be complete.

Focus On Play— It takes a lot of effort to curry relationships. Anonymity is less demanding and allows you to focus on your game.

Disadvantages of the Anonymous Approach

No Comps—Comps have real value. Eliminating comps reduces overall income.

Reduced Information Flow— You have no "friends at court." You have no access to information regarding what others at the casino think about you and your play. If you're under suspicion, you're not likely to hear about it. This makes it more difficult to avoid getting backed off or barred.

Lack Of Support From Casino Personnel— If you're chummy with a shift boss or casino manager, floor personnel will notice the obvious cordial relationship and tend to leave you alone—no sense in stepping on the toes of one of their superiors. When you're anonymous, you're not likely to have powerful friends to support your case and influence others.

Advantages of Close Relationships

Reduced Suspensions— For black-chip play and beyond, it's difficult to maintain "local" anonymity. Freely giving up your name, city of origin, and hotel is the natural expected course of events. Not doing so might be cause for suspicion. At this level you're entitled to substantial comps. Openly refusing

fantastic freebies is unusual, to say the least.

Full Comp Privileges — Airfare reimbursements are cash rebates. Free hotel rooms and food are also money in your pocket. Unless you live in an area with close casino access, these are significant considerations. At the end of the day, expenses you save are the same as money you earn.

Information Flow — This is one of the biggest benefits of establishing close relationships. You'd be amazed at the things I hear: who's getting promoted and who's leaving; pending changes in policy; surveillance techniques under consideration or about to be implemented; who will be filling key open job positions (enabling me to avoid traps on occasion); planned rule changes; promotions and special events; and a wealth of useful personal information about key employees (likes, dislikes, anniversaries, birthdays, weddings, etc.).

Over time, this information can be used to help cement deeper relationships. It also enables me to react much better to changing circumstances. I'm rarely caught off-guard. If someone is suspicious about my play, I'm usually able to determine who he is, which shift he works, and how strong his convictions are. Then I decide how to defuse the situation before it gets worse. I might choose to avoid the person. I might try to find a way to ingratiate myself to the suspicious party in an attempt to convert him from foe to friend. It all depends on the circumstances. The more information I have, the clearer the decisions become.

Prolonged Longevity — Establishing excellent relationships, especially with people at the decision-making level, preserves longevity. Key people in this regard are shift bosses and the casino manager. Adding a casino executive of high stature to your list of friends is helpful. When your name comes up for discussion because of the size of your cumulative wins, you're likely to have some influential people taking your side of the argument. I believe this accounts for why I haven't been barred since I was a kid, have never been read the Trespass Act, and have never had my photo in the Griffin book. I'm

usually tipped off that the casino is considering backing me off, and I leave on my own accord before this happens. I've done this a number of times, only to return to the same casino a year or two later.

Improved Playing Conditions—Close relationships with dealers and floorpeople mean better playing conditions. The dealer can cut 1 deck instead of 1½ decks out of a 6-deck shoe, or deal an extra hand or two at double deck if she chooses. Having a special relationship with her dramatically increases the likelihood of this occurring. Don't get me wrong—by "special" I don't mean a sexual relationship. Just a close rapport, which includes respect for her and enjoyment of the time spent playing at her table. If she sincerely likes your company, and you've been able to subtly communicate the little things that make you happy (like dealing deeper), you're far more likely to have your needs met compared with the anonymous hit-and-run player. The pit boss is also likely not to notice any preferential treatment if he likes you, too.

Disadvantages of Close Relationships

Effort—It takes a great deal of time and effort to establish these relationships. You cannot focus solely on your playing and betting strategies. Some people find it too distracting and tiresome.

They Know Who You Are—When a casino finally gives up and can't fade your action any longer, managers know who you are (or at least they're familiar with one of your identities). This can cause problems, especially if you use multiple identities. Casino people move around and many of them have long memories. If someone who knows you as Bob Walker starts working at a new joint and spots you playing, you may have difficulty explaining why you are going by the name of Charlie West.

Of course, things like this can always be explained away. For example, in this instance you could say that your wife has discovered your gambling problem and you now have

to use a different name to hide your gambling from her. Hell, you've even had to go so far as to set up a bank account in your new name to hide your gambling losses from her. She's told you that if she catches you gambling again, she's leaving. Under these circumstances, a man can't be too careful, now, can he?

Feeling Betrayed – This is a particularly sensitive issue that you must be aware of at all times. People don't like to be made to feel foolish, especially by their friends. For this reason I always try to find a knowledgeable person in a high position who, as part of our friendship, tries to help me improve my "otherwise losing" blackjack game. Then, even if I'm eventually backed off, he believes it's because of what he has taught me. He feels pride at having taught me so well, but also guilt, since I can no longer play there because of what he taught me. He does not, however, feel betrayed.

It's all about establishing trust, getting people to like you, and accruing benefits. It might seem like a lot of effort, but when the count is high, the dealer pitches out one last hand, and you win a double down for a bit of money, you'll be glad you went to the trouble.

And So ...

... The debate continues, and it's a tough choice. As I assume you've discerned, I prefer forging relationships, which I then use to my advantage. Which approach you decide to use depends on your personality style, your comfort in the casino environment, and your interpersonal competence. Both methods have merit. You might even decide to vary your approach as called for by the specific occasion. When you start thinking like this, you've become a pro.

On Maintaining Physical and Mental Fitness

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Playing blackjack regularly, especially for high stakes, is a stressful activity. For me to play consistently at peak form, I must take steps that help preserve my physical and mental acuity and well-being, while keeping stress to a minimum. In many ways playing blackjack (or poker) at the highest level is analogous to playing a professional sport. The better conditioned the athlete, both physically and mentally, the better his performance will be. Diet, exercise, supplements, and the use of stress-reduction techniques, such as deep breathing and meditation, are most helpful in this regard.

The subject of preventative healthcare has interested me for more than 30 years. I've read extensively about and experimented with many of the regimens and disciplines I describe in this chapter. By trial and error, I've found what works best for me. You'll need to make your own assessment as to which of these regimens, if any, you choose to incorporate into your daily playing and living—many of these concepts are applicable to pursuits other than professional gambling.

Diet

I'm not about to give you a lecture on how to eat. For one thing, I wouldn't know where to begin. Each of us is different in terms of physique, metabolism, and culture. The single best piece of dietary advice I can give you is to eat sparingly, especially when playing. I like to play on an empty stomach. I find that by so doing I am more alert, aware, and animated. I feel light and energetic. On days that I'm playing, I eat lightly — small servings only. Here is a typical daily routine:

1. Wake up at 4 a.m.
2. Drink a teapot of hot water with the juice of a whole fresh lemon and one teaspoon of honey.
3. Shower.
4. Play 4:30-5:30 a.m.
5. Take a long walk 6-7 a.m.
6. Shower and relax.
7. Play 8:30-9:30 a.m. (This time may vary depending on shift changes. I don't like to play during shift changes — too much information exchange and exposure.)
8. Eat a bowl of fresh fruit with flax.
9. Read, relax, and shower.
10. Play 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
11. Eat a good-sized salad.
12. Relax, read, watch TV.
13. Shower.
14. Play 2:45-3:45 p.m. (also variable depending on time of shift change).
15. Swim for 30-40 minutes.
16. Relax and shower.
17. Play 6:30-7:30 p.m.
18. Eat a full normal dinner.
19. Read or watch TV.
20. Go to sleep 9:30-10:00 p.m.

Notice that I eat only one big meal a day when I'm playing

and only after the last session of the day. This is the eating schedule that provides me with the highest level of energy and awareness. Eating sparingly while playing is the key. What you eat is far less important than how much, but here are a few tips that I've found useful.

Try to reduce your intake of fats. Fatty foods tend to make you sluggish. They're also unhealthy. Although your cardiovascular system would be grateful if you reduced your fat intake to 10% of your total calories, eating would probably be less enjoyable. To preserve the pleasure of eating without overly taxing your body, 20%-30% of calories from fats is sufficient. This will probably mean cutting back on high-fat foods: most fast food (especially fried), meats, nuts, ice cream, mayonnaise, avocados, whole-milk products, and rich desserts.

Use monounsaturated oils. Olive oil and canola oil are the best-known monounsaturated oils. Stick with olive or canola for salads and cooking, and you can't go wrong. I use extra virgin olive oil (first press) to avoid the negative effects of chemical or heat extraction. To avoid pesticide residues, I use cold-pressed organic canola oil. Meats, on the other hand, are rich in artery-clogging saturated fats, so avoid cooking with lard. Palm oil and coconut oil also are full of saturated fats. Polyunsaturated fats, when heated, change form, turning to saturated fats. For this reason it's best not to use polyunsaturated oils, such as safflower, corn, and cottonseed oil. Monounsaturated oils do not change form when heated.

Eat fortified flax. If I had to pick a single food to eat, it would probably be flax. Flax, or linseed as it's also called, is a grain. It's the richest vegetable source of omega-3 fatty acids. It tastes good, it's satisfying, and the omega-3 fatty acids are heart- and artery-friendly. They reduce platelet aggregation, reducing the tendency for your blood to clot and decreasing the risk of heart attacks and strokes; they also have anti-inflammatory effects. (Animal sources of the omega-3 fatty acids include deep-water fish, such as salmon,

sardines, mackerel, and anchovies.) Flax is available as whole organically grown seeds that can be ground in a small coffee grinder, pre-ground seed in powder form, or oil. The oil must be used quickly or it can become rancid. I like the pre-ground seeds sold by Omega-Life Products available in many health-food stores. This product is fortified with several vitamins and minerals that can be processed *in vivo* by eating flax.

Avoid protein overload. Proteins are complex molecules that are hard to digest. Four ounces of protein a day are sufficient for proper nutrition. Large amounts of protein can lead to sleepiness or sluggishness, taking the edge off your play. In my regimen I leave the protein for the last meal, after I've finished my last blackjack session for the day.

The bulk of my diet comes from carbohydrates. I eat mostly fruits, vegetables, grains, and pasta (for my big evening meal). These foods "burn clean" and seem to leave me at top efficiency for playing. They're also rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber. They help to build a strong immune system. Research has shown that many fruits and vegetables contain potent anti-cancer compounds. As to the style of food, suit yourself. Whether your preferences are for Japanese, Chinese, Lebanese, Thai, Italian, French, or whatever, it makes little difference, provided you follow healthful principles.

I must reiterate that the most helpful dietary habit you can develop to improve your play is to eat sparingly. I often fast the day before coming to Las Vegas. All I have is large amounts of distilled water — that's it — for 24 hours prior to my trip. This makes an enormous difference in the way I feel. My body feels light and energetic. My mind seems incredibly clear, sharp, and insightful. I'm ready for action. For me, a one-day fast is the best possible tune-up for playing.

By continuing to eat sparingly during my trip, I remain sharp. After a couple of days of eating lightly, I lose my appetite. Other players report similar positive effects from fasting, but since not all people react in the same way to a one-day fast, I suggest you try it at home to see how it affects

you before using it on a casino visit.

I dislike airline food, so I usually start fasting before my flight and don't eat anything on the airplane. I drink plenty of mineral water to stay well-hydrated. Arriving in Las Vegas mid-afternoon or early evening, I continue to fast while relaxing and acclimating myself to the time change. At 4 the next morning I start my routine, beginning with hot water, lemon juice, and a teaspoon of honey. At 4:30 I'm razor sharp and ready to play.

There's a long-term benefit to caloric restriction. In studies done with a variety of laboratory animals, Roy L. Walford, M.D., of the UCLA School of Medicine, among others, has found that calorie restriction significantly increases life span. In one experiment, a strain of mice that has a naturally long life was divided into two groups. One group was fed a normal diet, the other a calorie-restricted diet with adequate vitamins, minerals, etc. The maximum life span of the mice on the normal diet was 41 months. This is roughly equivalent to 110 years for a human, generally accepted as the maximum age for our species. (There are rare exceptions to the 110-year limit. A French woman, Jeanne Calmet, died in 1997 at the amazing age of 121!) The group of calorie-restricted mice had a maximum life span of 56 months, an astounding 36% longer, or the equivalent of 150 human years.

Similar experiments have been performed on a variety of laboratory animals by researchers all over the world, and they all reach the same conclusion: Calorie restriction in laboratory animals, and almost certainly in humans as well, increases life span. Reducing your caloric intake by 10% to 50% is likely to prolong your life.

Also, according to Dr. Walford, there's an attractive side benefit to calorie restriction—a dramatic decrease in disease in laboratory animals (no wonder they live longer). Lung cancer is reduced by 50%, vascular disease by 73%, breast cancer by 95%, and liver cancer is virtually eliminated. The only rigorous human experiment in calorie restriction to

date was the Arizona Biosphere 2 project conducted from 1990-1994. Dr. Walford, chief of medical operations for this project, recorded sharply lower serum cholesterol levels of as much as 35%, reductions of blood glucose (sugar) of 15%-20%, and drops in blood pressure of 20% or more in those on a calorie-restricted diet.

The moral to this story — eat less, feel better, play better blackjack, and live longer.

Drink Plenty of Bottled Water

Spending time in smoky air-conditioned casinos can be dehydrating. It makes sense, therefore, to consume a lot of bottled water. Since I never order bottled water while playing, I drink a small bottle before and after each session. Staying well-hydrated helps maintain efficiency.

Exercise

Some form of aerobic exercise helps keep me sharp when I'm playing. Aerobic exercise stimulates the release of neuropeptides from the brain. One of these peptide groups, endorphins, produces a feeling of euphoria. The so-called "runner's high" is attributable to the release of endorphins. My preference is for walking in the morning and swimming in the afternoon. I used to jog, but it's hard on my knees. I've found that fast walking has a lot of the beneficial effects of jogging without the wear and tear on my body.

Swimming is another great exercise. It combines stretching and aerobics. Other than goggles (to keep the chlorine out of the eyes), swimming requires no special equipment. Almost all Las Vegas hotels have a heated swimming pool. When I stay in hotels that don't have pools, I walk twice a day. Since walking and swimming are both outside activities, I get out of the casino and can breathe some fresh air at least

a couple of times a day.

Yoga is another good exercise alternative. Although it doesn't provide the aerobics of swimming, stretching the body is highly salubrious, as it maintains flexibility and strength. Like the other two exercises, you can take yoga with you wherever you go. In foul weather I do some yoga before meditating as a substitute for swimming or walking.

Other indoor exercise alternatives include the treadmill, rowing machine, stationary bicycle, Stairmaster, and aerobics. Suit yourself. It takes some discipline to get into a routine.

Once you've got your routine down and notice the marked improvement in concentration and mood, I don't think you'll have to be convinced to continue.

Supplements and Herbs

Although you'll never hear about them from the drug companies (because they can't be patented and exploited), food supplements and herbs can be important adjuncts to health. One of the most important groups of supplements is antioxidants. Saturated and polyunsaturated fats tend to oxidize as they degenerate in the body, forming dangerous charged particles called "free radicals." These particles can damage DNA, leading to cellular mutations. Some experts theorize that this may be one of the causes of many types of cancer. Free radicals are also known to suppress the immune system.

Antioxidants are free-radical scavengers. They help the body rid itself of these harmful chemicals. By taking antioxidants regularly, you can "cleanse" your body of existing free radicals and inhibit the formation of new ones.

Antioxidants are available in various forms. Some of the more common ones include Vitamin C, Vitamin E, beta-carotene, zinc, and selenium. Some of the more exotic ones

include lycopenes, citrus bioflavonoids, hesperidin, bilberry extract (anthocyanin), grape skin and seed extract, and milk-thistle extract (silymarin). Some vegetables are naturally rich in antioxidants. Those with the highest concentrations are broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, carrots, and tomatoes.

Although I eat copious amounts of vegetables, I still take an antioxidant-rich supplement daily. There are a number of good products on the market; I take Life Extension Mix. It's internationally available by mail order. The company's website is <http://www.lef.org>, where you can find many interesting excerpts from the medical literature on supplements.

As far as herbs are concerned, I've found a few to be very beneficial. Some are foods and can be eaten as part of a regular diet. Others are flowers, roots, tubers, or leaves, usually of Chinese origin. Many herbal formulas come from ancient China, dating back 5,000 years. Ancient Chinese doctors were most interested in the effects on the body of various parts of plants. Unlike modern researchers who do extensive animal testing before any human prescription, the Chinese tested their formulations on people. The emperor's physicians fed plant material to human subjects and recorded the results. Some people died, and those herbs were discarded! Chinese physicians used a lot of people over a long period of time. After hundreds of years of experimentation, the Chinese pharmacopoeia was established.

Some herbs are used for specific problems. Others, called tonic herbs, are used to keep the body in balance and harmony. This latter class of herbs interests me most. They are all essentially foods and, as such, are non-toxic. Here are the herbs I use.

Garlic

Raw garlic and cooked garlic have different properties. When eaten regularly, cooked garlic can help lower serum cholesterol and blood pressure. Raw garlic can assist in

protecting you from a variety of fungal, bacterial, and viral infections. I've found it to be very effective, when combined with other herbs, in stopping colds before the symptoms become bothersome. To stop a cold, it's important to notice the first signs of onset. These signs may include a slightly sore throat, sneezing, tearing, or a runny nose. As soon as I notice any of these symptoms, I do the following.

Chop up 3-4 cloves of raw garlic, mix it into a dressing with olive oil and fresh lemon juice, pour it over a salad, and eat it immediately. You can also just eat the garlic cloves. The taste is too strong for me, so I prefer to go with the salad. For those of you who eschew garlic for social reasons, garlic capsules can be substituted. In my opinion, though, they're not quite as effective as raw garlic.

Take five tablets of Yin Chiao. Yin Chiao is a preparation of 10 Chinese herbs specifically formulated to combat colds and flus. It's manufactured in China by the Tianjin Drug Manufactory and is available at most Chinese pharmacies. If you have a Chinatown anywhere near your home, you'll be able to find Yin Chiao.

Six to eight hours later I eat another fresh garlic salad and take another five Yin Chiao. The next day, I take five Yin Chiao in the morning and five in the evening. I eat two more garlic salads.

I continue to take the Yin Chiao twice daily for 48 hours after the cold symptoms disappear. This is important if you don't want the cold to come back again. I reduce the garlic salads to one a day.

The cold symptoms are usually gone within 24-48 hours from the time I start this remedy. Cold viruses just can't seem to get a foothold in me when I follow this regimen. It's been more than five years since I've had a full-blown cold. I still get the initial symptoms a couple of times a year (usually with a change in season), but I easily knock it out before it gets established. Besides feeling better, keeping colds at bay is worth money to me. I haven't had any off-days due to ill-

ness and I don't have to play while trying to deal with the distracting nuisance of a stuffy head. I cannot recommend this regimen highly enough. I've introduced it to numerous friends, who now swear by it.

Ginger

Ginger is another food-type herb; like garlic, it's one of the Chinese "master herbs." It tones the cardiovascular system and reduces platelet aggregation. My wife uses ginger to combat motion sickness. She gets carsick quite easily, so before we leave on a long car trip, she makes a thermos of tea from fresh ginger root and honey. She sips it throughout the day when we travel. She says it works better for her than over-the-counter preparations available for motion sickness. Capsules of powdered ginger are also available.

Turmeric (Curcumin)

Turmeric is a root that closely resembles ginger. Curcumin is the active ingredient that is extracted from turmeric. It's a potent antioxidant, decreases cholesterol, is more effective than green tea in suppressing viruses, and is similar to aspirin as an anti-inflammatory. Curcumin is available in capsule form from health-food stores and by mail order from Life Extension Products.

Astragalus

Astragalus, or huang-chi as the Chinese call it, is a tonic herb from the root of the plant *Astragalus membranaceus*. Studies in China, and more recently in Western countries, have demonstrated that Astragalus boosts the immune system. It's available from Chinese pharmacies and health-food stores in ampules or capsules, as an alcohol extract, or as raw sliced roots. This is one of the most potent herbs for stimulating the immune system.

Ginseng

Panax ginseng is a white root, similar in appearance to a carrot. It's described in the Chinese literature as the "master" male herb. Although it seems to have little to no effect in younger men, aging men often report increased stamina and sexual vigor when taking ginseng. The dried root is available in Chinese pharmacies (expensive) and there are many different grades available. A tea can be made by combining the root (yang) with licorice, red dates, or poria (all yin tonics) to make a well-balanced tea.

Ginseng is also available in soft gelatin capsules, called Ginsana, and is distributed internationally by Pharmaton Ltd., a Swiss company. Each capsule contains 100 mg of *Panax ginseng* root extract. This is the form I use. Although not as dramatic as DHEA, I like the long-term effects of ginseng and recommend it for men over 40. Ginsana is readily available at pharmacies and health-food stores.

Some men find that ginseng causes slight irritability. If you fall into this group, you might want to try American ginseng (also called white ginseng). Many Asians prefer American ginseng to their native product. It has effects similar to the Chinese variety, with fewer side effects.

Human Growth Hormone

A third product that has merit for those of us over 40 is human growth hormone (HGH). HGH may be a panacea for older people that effectively reverses the aging process. In a 1990 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the premier magazine of mainstream medicine, Dr. Daniel Rudman et al. at the Medical College of Wisconsin reported an amazing discovery. They conducted a double-blind study and found that six months of HGH therapy reversed many of the effects of 10 to 20 years of aging. Weak flabby men in the study lost fat without dieting, gained muscle mass and strength without exercising, and felt more energetic. In some, gray hair started turning black again; in others, wrinkles

disappeared from their faces. Dr. Rudman concluded, "The overall deterioration of the body that comes with growing old is not inevitable. We now realize that some aspects of it can be prevented or reversed." The Food and Drug Administration has approved HGH for use in adults. Doctors can prescribe it for anyone with low blood levels of HGH. This includes most people over 40.

Many studies have now been done on HGH. Numerous physical and mental benefits have been reported. These include, in addition to those above, renewed sexual vigor, hair regrowth, improved immune functioning, lower blood pressure, and improved sleep. Three effects got my attention as a professional game player: sharper vision, increased memory retention, and mood elevation.

According to Dr. Ronald Klatz in his excellent book *Grow Young with HGH*, reduced levels of growth hormone are clearly related to cognitive dysfunction. This can lead, among other things, to the impairment of iconic memory, the ability to recognize and remember patterns – very important to blackjack and poker players. This impairment may be a large part of the reason why superb poker players seem to lose ability as they age. Reduced growth-hormone levels can also reduce both short- and long-term memory. Studies indicate that HGH replacement therapy improves the ability to think and reason. According to Dr. Klatz, "Patients on growth hormone recount being more alert, less forgetful, and better able to concentrate." It has also been shown to improve reaction time.

When I first read about HGH nearly five years ago, I wanted to get some right away. I found out, much to my chagrin, that it had not yet been approved by the FDA and was unavailable to the general public. I heard rumors that it was available in pharmacies in Mexico, but I decided not to take this route. It seemed to me that any experimenting with HGH should have medical monitoring, and no law-abiding doctor would monitor me on an unapproved drug.

The other negative was that to reduce side effects, HGH had to be injected twice daily, six days a week, for at least six months. More than 300 injections for a needle-averse person like myself was a daunting prospect.

In my reading on the subject, I found that it might be possible to increase my growth-hormone production by ingesting two amino acids: argenine and ornithine. This was great; I could take a few tablespoons of powder at bedtime and raise my growth-hormone levels. Unfortunately, I found, as have many others who tried using these substances, that they caused me to become nauseous.

Incidentally, one of the best ways to increase growth-hormone levels is by fasting. Fasting for a couple of days catapults blood levels of growth hormone. One of the main reasons calorie restriction leads to longer high-quality life may be because it increases growth-hormone levels.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland, located deep in the brain. Melatonin helps regulate our body clocks, establishing our cycles of sleep and wakefulness. It's also a powerful antioxidant. Melatonin production decreases with age. By 60 years old, we produce about half as much as we did in our youth.

Supplemental melatonin is available over the counter at health-food stores. It has become popular as a natural sleeping pill. It's non-addictive and induces a restful sleep for most people.

When I travel, especially internationally, I use melatonin to combat jet lag. It's so effective that I never step into an airport without it. I take a capsule at my normal bedtime hour at my new destination and it puts me right to sleep. Should I awaken at an odd hour, I take another capsule and sleep restfully until morning. I continue to take melatonin for the first three or four nights at my new destination, until I've fully adjusted to the time change. I also find it useful to take

melatonin the night before a big poker tournament, when sleep can be elusive.

Melatonin comes in one-, three-, and five-mg capsules. When I take a three- or five-mg capsule, I feel “logy” the next day. I’ve found that the one-mg capsules suit me best. Others like the higher doses, especially for combating jet lag. I suggest you experiment at home to find out what dosage works best for you. Start with the three-mg capsules. If it’s too strong, try dividing one in half. If this 1.5-mg dose seems about right to you, next time buy the one-mg capsules. If the three-mg capsule isn’t potent enough to be effective, try taking two capsules (a total of six mg). If this works best for you, next time buy five-mg capsules. There are no significant side effects.

Melatonin is reported to enhance immune function, lower blood pressure and cholesterol, improve sexual vigor, and benefit a whole host of other things, but I use it primarily for jet lag and a good night’s sleep. It’s an indispensable part of my travel kit.

Green Tea

Green tea is my drink of choice, everywhere except at the blackjack table where I pretend to drink alcohol. I prefer it even to bottled water. Green tea contains theophylline, a mild stimulant. Green tea has recently received substantial publicity because it contains catechins, substances that seem to protect against cancer, heart disease, stroke, and atherosclerosis. Catechins also increase HDL levels (good cholesterol) and reduce LDL levels (bad cholesterol).

Green tea does not keep me awake at night like coffee does. I can drink it with my evening meal and still sleep well. Studies have shown that it also reduces halitosis—a welcome side effect.

My favorite is Gunpowder Green Tea. It’s not as bitter as some of the other products on the market, even when

strongly brewed. I also like *genmai cha* (*cha* is both the Japanese and Chinese word for tea), a combination of green tea and toasted rice kernels. It has a softer more rounded flavor than straight green tea.

Ginkgo Biloba

Ginkgo biloba is an extract from the leaves of the ginkgo biloba tree, native to China. It's now available as a standardized extract in most U.S. health-food stores. Ginkgo increases blood flow, especially to the brain. Better brain oxygenation leads to better brain function. European studies have shown that ginkgo improves hearing, memory, and mental facility. I believe that any non-toxic supplement shown to improve mental functioning is worth a try. I take 120 mg of ginkgo once a day. I'm not sure whether it's having a positive effect or not, because I take a number of cognition-enhancing products like DHEA, AminoTropin-6, and phosphatidylserine (see below), but I feel very sharp and alert, so I continue to take ginkgo. There's so much anecdotal evidence, along with testimonials by others who attest to the efficacy of ginkgo, that I see no sense in changing a winning formula.

Phosphatidylserine and Choline

Medical studies have shown that phosphatidylserine (PS) slows the aging of brain cells in animals, especially older animals. In some human studies, PS has been shown to significantly improve cognitive function in people with mild dementia. PS seems to enhance brain-cell metabolism. Phosphatidylserine is combined with choline, a precursor of acetylcholine, in a Life Extension product called Cognitex. Acetylcholine is a chemical that transmits messages between neurons. In a double-blind study conducted at MIT, three grams of choline a day significantly improved the ability of students to memorize lists of words. Logic dictates that it should also improve a person's ability to count cards.

For Players Older Than 40

Two supplements I strongly recommend (and personally use) for people over 40 are dehydroepiandrosterone, commonly called DHEA, and Panax ginseng (recommended only for men). DHEA is my favorite supplement, bar none. It's a hormone produced by the adrenal glands. Its production decreases with age. By age 40 most people have only half the DHEA they had in their youth.

I believe the supplements and herbs I take keep my body toned and healthy. Generally, their effects are preventative. I did not "feel different" immediately after I started taking vitamins and herbs, though I did stay healthier. DHEA was different. Within 10 days I noticed distinct positive effects. I felt more energetic and robust, more clear-minded and alert (the alertness was different from the effect of coffee, which leaves me jumpy and irritable). I felt calm, yet clear, a desirable combination. I no longer felt the need to nap in the afternoon. I was much more productive, could concentrate better, and experienced a marvelous sense of well-being. I find it especially useful when long periods of intense awareness are required—like blackjack or poker sessions. This is great stuff! I wouldn't be without it.

DHEA also improves immune function and decreases body-fat content. In one study done at the University of California School of Medicine, the researchers found that 67% of men and 84% of women experienced a remarkable increase in perceived physical and psychological well-being. DHEA is metabolized by the body in eight hours. Men should take it three times a day, women twice daily. The pharmaceutical form is available in health-food stores or by mail order from Life Extension Products. I take one 25-mg capsule with each meal, a total of three capsules a day.

DHEA should not be taken by men with prostate cancer or women with cancer of the reproductive system. I strongly urge men over 40 to have a PSA blood test before taking DHEA. This is an early-screening test for prostate cancer.

In fact, it's an excellent idea for all men over 40 to have this blood test annually. It could save your life.

Breathing

The simple act of breathing, if done properly, can have a tremendous effect on the way you feel. It can relax or stimulate you. Like swimming and walking, breathing requires no equipment. You can take it with you anywhere. It can be a powerful friend when you're on the road for long periods or find yourself in stressful situations.

Here are two simple yet powerful breathing exercises.

For Relaxation

This yoga breathing exercise is a slightly modified version of one presented by Andrew Weil, M.D., in *Natural Health, Natural Healing*.

1. Sit on the floor with your back against a wall and your legs crossed Indian style. Sitting this way straightens your spine, freeing your chest and abdomen.
2. Exhale deeply, pushing out as much air as possible. Exhale forcibly through your mouth.
3. Now inhale quietly through your nose, slowly counting to four, making sure the breath fills your abdomen. Relax your abdomen so that it moves freely.
4. Hold your breath for a slow count of seven.
5. Exhale forcefully but continuously through your mouth for a slow count of eight. Make a whooshing sound when you exhale.
6. Repeat the process for four cycles.

This exercise takes only a couple of minutes, but it's very pacifying. I use it after bad poker beats and between shoes

in blackjack. I also find it helpful in re-establishing a sense of equanimity when playing.

For Alertness

This exercise, also from yoga, has a stimulating effect that produces alertness. I do this in my hotel room before going down to play blackjack. It's also useful for rejuvenation during long poker sessions.

First, stand with your legs slightly spread apart. Using your abdomen as a bellows, breathe in and out rapidly and forcefully through your nostrils. If done properly, you should hear a distinct sound upon both inhalation and exhalation. Allow your nostrils to flare when exhaling, like a bull that's breathing hard. Counting each breath pair (inhalation and exhalation) as one, count to 12, then hold your breath, exhaling completely when it feels appropriate. Then repeat the cycle. Four cycles is plenty the first time you try this. You may feel a little light-headed. As your body adjusts to this exercise, you'll be able to do more cycles. Five minutes is sufficient as a top-end target. Take your time in developing tolerance. Use this exercise whenever your alertness starts to flag.

Meditation

Playing blackjack or poker for high stakes requires a lot of thinking on your feet. To counteract the stress of it, it's helpful to turn off your mind. This kind of "mind fasting" can be accomplished by meditation. There are many forms of meditation. Some, like the popular transcendental meditation (TM), use a mantra. A mantra is a sound, like "OM," which the practitioner silently repeats over and over. Soon, if practiced regularly, this sound replaces thoughts, resting the mind. In Zen meditation and others, the practitioner focuses on his breathing, following each inhalation to its

natural conclusion, then attending to each exhalation. The mind eventually quiets.

Although I've experimented with both of these disciplines, I personally prefer high-tech meditation using brain-entrainment techniques. Meditation audiotapes are now available that obviate the need for years of training. By using sound frequencies, the tapes entrain your brain first into an alpha pattern that creates a state of relaxation, then a theta pattern, which has been documented in states of deep meditation. Using these meditation tapes, I've been able to reach deep levels easily. I carry them with me as part of my travel kit and use them frequently during my rest periods. When I make my next play, I'm calm, relaxed, and refreshed.

Walking Meditation

This is a handy form of meditation that I often use after a playing session. I like to do it outdoors, but it's effective in any environment. A place like the palm gardens at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas is ideal.

Imagine a cable attached to you about two inches below your navel. Walking slowly, focus your attention on this point and pretend that you're being pulled forward by the cable. This straightens your back and lifts your chin. Concentrate on this single point, from which you're being pulled. With practice, your mind will begin to quiet.

As you gain familiarity with this exercise, try simultaneously focusing your attention on the point just below your navel, on the feel of your clothes against your body, and on the rise and fall of each foot as you walk. If you keep practicing, eventually you'll be able to totally "fast" your mind — no discursive thinking whatsoever. This mind fasting has a most salubrious effect. I find it to be both relaxing and rejuvenating. After 10 minutes, I'm ready to play again. This is also effective during breaks in prolonged poker sessions.

Massage

Massage is an integral part of maintaining optimal fitness. It's particularly useful for blackjack and poker players who are exposed to long hours of tension-packed activity. Massage relaxes the muscles and stimulates the body's systems. This allows the free flow of what the Chinese call *chi* — the vibratory life energy that runs along the pathways that connect acupuncture points. In my opinion, the best two massages for the restoration and amplification of *chi* are shiatsu and Polarity Therapy.

Originated in Japan, shiatsu means "finger pressure." The technique involves the manipulation of specific acupuncture points that, when stimulated, remove blockages. This form of massage eases aches and pains and relieves tension and fatigue.

Polarity Therapy is used traditionally in India. Like shiatsu, Polarity focuses on acupuncture points. By stimulating two of these points simultaneously, currents are linked and amplified. A loop is also established between the practitioner and the recipient, further enhancing the currents. Polarity stimulates and tones the body's organs. The net effect is that you're relaxed and refreshed, yet alert and responsive. Unfortunately, it's difficult to find skilled Polarity therapists.

Shower Before Playing

I usually shower before each playing session. If I play five times a day, I take five showers. Why? Because showering leaves me relaxed and alert. Showers provide a flood of negative ions. This ion cascade seems to hone my senses. After a shower I feel as though I'm at peak efficiency and ready to rock. I believe showering gives me an extra edge.

Even if I'm not the best blackjack player in the room, I'm certainly the cleanest!

Don't Worry, Be Healthy

Well, there you have it, my complete physical and mental regimen for optimal playing results. Although I'm constantly on the lookout for new tools, this is what I'm using currently. I feel healthy, happy, and ready to play. I sleep well at night. I adjust well to jet lag. And I can rejuvenate myself should my attention level deteriorate. Despite constant changes in environment and the trauma of extended airplane travel with its recycled air, I'm almost never sick. I sincerely believe that a number of ideas presented in this chapter will be helpful to you. Why not give some of them a try? I know they work for me. (See "Appendix III.")

The Ian Andersen Gambler's Travel Kit

Here's what I have in my travel kit to optimize physical and mental well-being. This is a 30-day supply:

1. One bottle of Life Extension Mix tablets
2. Two bottles of DHEA 25-mg capsules
3. One bottle of Yin Chiao
4. One box of Ginsana-60 soft gel capsules
5. Two bottles of Cognitex
6. Thirty capsules of ginkgo biloba
7. One bottle of one-mg melatonin capsules
8. One box of Gunpowder Green Tea
9. One bottle of huang-chi (Astragalus) capsules
10. Thirty baby aspirins
11. Two meditation tapes
12. Swimming goggles
13. One Walkman with headphones