

CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
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Part I Starting With Home Study

1	Stepping Out On the Right Foot	2
2	Choosing a Basic Practice Game	14
3	Gaining Strategy Skill.....	22
4	Building Your Frugal VP Tool Kit	36

Part II Building On The Basics In The Casino

5	Exploring Casinos.....	45
6	Choosing a Primary Game.....	57
7	Studying Game Charts	62
8	Evaluating Slot Clubs	73

Part III Putting It All Together

9	Settling On a Core Play	81
10	Estimating Session Bankroll	89
11	Session Bankroll Charts	102

by Viktor and Michael Shackleford, The Wizards of Odds

Part IV**Finding Added Value For Your VP Game**

12	Maximizing Players Club and Comp Benefits	110
13	Utilizing Promotions.....	121
14	Playing In a VP Tournament.....	137

Part V**Broadening Your Game Choices**

15	Playing Multi-Line Games.....	146
16	Playing Oddball Games	154
17	Playing Multi-Strike Poker.....	169
18	Playing VP Progressives	181

Part VI**Improving Your VP Play Results**

19	Becoming a Good Casino Scout	194
20	Fine-Tuning Your Strategy Accuracy.....	203

Viktor's Frugal VP Computer Lessons

Lesson 1—Practicing Jacks or Better.....	216
Lesson 2—Evaluating Your Progress	227
Lesson 3—Figuring Slot Club Benefits	236
Lesson 4—Changing a Paytable	
The Basics	243
Lesson 5—Changing a Paytable	
Quads And Other Bonuses	252
Postscript	263
Epilogue	265
Glossary	270
Video Poker Resources	275
Index	284
About the Authors.....	288

STEPPING OUT ON THE RIGHT FOOT

"The majority of casino players leave too much to chance when they gamble in a casino. To put it bluntly, most don't have a clue about the odds, the strategies, and in some cases, even the rules."

—Henry Tamburin

Why Choose Video Poker?

Video poker is an enjoyable gaming experience for many casino visitors. They like the independence of the game. There are no pit bosses scowling at you, no dealers copping an attitude, no complicated casino procedures and rules you must follow, and usually no fellow players trying to make you feel inferior by criticizing your play. The only other person who regularly interacts with you during a gaming session is the waitress serving complimentary drinks—or perhaps a friend or spouse playing by your side. You're mostly on your own.

Most video poker and slot players alike cite the above reasons for eschewing the table games.

Viva Las Difference!

Although all machine players are sometimes lumped together by the casino or in gambling literature, I always distinguish between a slot player and VP player—they are in two separate categories in my mind and in my writings.

However, there are many additional reasons a knowledgeable machine player chooses video poker over a slot machine.

First, VP requires that you make decisions, a stimulating activity for many players who consider slots boring.

Second, VP players, generally speaking, lose less money per hour than slot players. Why is this? To begin with, most players have had some card-playing experience. Of course, the strategies for video poker and live poker are very different. But even just applying good card sense, VP players usually earn a higher payback percentage than anyone playing slots of the same denomination at the same casino. Although paybacks differ greatly if you compare slot machines in casinos all over the country, in any one casino VP is “looser” than slots, meaning that the *average* return (to all players over a long period of time, not just to you in any particular session) is higher. Add the higher payback to the time it takes to make decisions, thereby slowing down your play, and your gambling bankroll more often lasts longer, giving you more entertainment value.

And third, VP is a game where skill can be used to improve your results. With slot machines, you’re almost always at the mercy of luck (unless you have the rare skill to find and analyze the rare bonusing or progressive slot machine). With instruction, almost anyone can learn how to look at a VP machine and determine the casino edge.

Better yet, you'll know in a glance, on a very few machines, if you can get the edge on your side. You cannot do this with slot machines.

Why not?

Standard VP machines in most state-regulated jurisdictions in the United States are totally random, meaning that each of the 52 cards (or more if there are jokers) has the same chance to come out in every hand as in a physical deck of cards. This book assumes you're playing such a machine. Therefore, the payoff schedule, also known as the paytable, that you find on every VP machine can be mathematically analyzed to reveal the overall payback. Later in this book you'll learn how to find out the long-term payback of almost any schedule you might come across on any truly random VP machine. (See box on pages 5-6 for a warning about non-random VP machines.)

Slot machine paytables, on the other hand, give you no clue what the casino edge is—and believe me, the casino almost always has the edge on slot machines and in most cases a fast pocket-emptying one at that. The casino orders from the manufacturer a particular computer chip that governs the overall payback of the machine to give the casino the profit margin it desires.

A friend offers the following example he uses to explain this concept. If you're dealt 4 cards to a royal on a non-wild-card machine, you have a 1 in 47 shot at hitting that royal if it's truly a math-based random machine. On the other hand, say you're playing a 3-reel slot machine and each reel has 10 stops (to keep the math easy, although modern virtual reels have hundreds of stops). When you get JACKPOT, JACKPOT, -----, the odds of that last reel hitting the third JACKPOT symbol are not 1 in 10. What you get on that 3rd reel is random, meaning that the machine's computer has not been programmed

to give a jackpot exactly every so many pulls. However, there is no regulation that says that the jackpot has to appear with a certain mathematical long-term frequency that you can know by reading the paytables. The odds on getting the third JACKPOT symbol could be one in 100. It could be one in 1,000. It could even be one in a 1,000,000. You have no way of knowing.

If a casino wants to change the overall return of a slot machine, it simply orders and installs a new computer chip and it's impossible for players to tell that this has been done. The glass on the front of the machine looks the same and there are no changes in the paytable. Chip changes don't work this way in totally random VP machines. If the casino wants to change the return, it has to change the paytable to match the new chip change—and this new paytable is visible, so any player can see the change. Many slot machines in many casinos, and even in the same casino, can look exactly alike on the outside, with the same paytable, but have different chips inside them. Therefore, a slot player is not able to look at slot machines and decide which one might be the best to play. Video poker paytables are reliable guides to the game paybacks.

SLOTS THAT COULD LOOK LIKE VIDEO POKER

I need to warn you that some VP machines aren't totally random and you can't use the information in this book to play them with skill. They're merely slot machines with a video poker face. You must be especially wary if you see a machine in a private club in the U.S. (usually an illegal venue) or manufactured by a foreign company and/or located outside the United States, including on cruise ships. Not all areas of the world have the same strict casino regulations as in the U.S., and often there's little or no regulation at all. Just because the machines may be those of a reliable U.S. manufacturer and look the

same as the ones in your local regulated U.S. casino, be aware that it *is* possible to change chips in a formerly random machine to make it non-random.

In the case of Native American casinos in the U.S., the whole topic of VP randomness is one of complete confusion. Two separate categories of machines have evolved, Class II and Class III, but there's no across-the-board acceptance of the specifications of each. Because each state makes its own compacts with the tribes, there's no one guide a player can use when looking at a VP machine to know for sure whether it's a skill-based game. Some do offer the same random games that you find in heavily regulated states like Nevada. These are usually called Class III machines.

However, many Indian casinos have signed a pact with the state that allows only Class II machines, and each state has its own interpretation of how these can work. They're often based on a bingo simulation, or on lottery and pull-tab models, but are perfectly legal even though they're not random in the same way as, for instance, Nevada video poker has to be. The reason that the payable is irrelevant on Class II VP machines is that they deal out a *non-random* hand that has a *predetermined* win, often from a centralized computer. And now comes the interesting part: If you select a hold contrary to the intended final hand, there must be some way the machine can still give you the intended payoff. Some manufacturers use a bonus "match" feature to do this; others use a magic "genie" to change your hold.

Indian casino gambling in most states is very unstable, due to continual legislative turmoil and delays in determining the legality of different types of machines. Change will probably be the name of the game for many years.

What Are Your Goals?

Once you decide to learn how to play VP, the next step is to think about your main goal in visiting a casino. Most people will immediately claim, "I want to win some money." However, if you talk with them a little longer,

you learn that they don't win every time; in fact, they lose more often than they win. So you ask the logical next question: Why do they keep going back? And I've found that almost everyone then talks about their real motivation, the entertainment factor: Casinos are exciting and fun places in which to spend some leisure time.

I've talked about the subject of goals in my two previous books, *The Frugal Gambler* and *More Frugal Gambling* (for brevity, I sometimes refer to them as *Frugal 1* and *Frugal 2*). In the first book, I had a "pyramid" of gamblers, based on knowledge and skill levels. Clueless gamblers occupy the broad base; going up, the number of gamblers decreases until reaching the tiny number of professional gamblers at the tip. But I got some criticism from readers who insisted that this seemed too judgmental. They argued that there is no "bad bottom" or "good top" category of gamblers. Instead, it's all just a matter of different personalities and personal goals.

Therefore, in *Frugal 2* I shifted away from the pyramid model. With VP, as in all gambling, it's better to refer to a long path of shifting priorities. Although everyone wants to have fun in a casino, VP can take you from a starting point where that's your only goal to a desirable point where you can lose less during that entertainment time. Then, once you've mastered the basics and gained experience, you may begin not only to lose less, but also to win more. At that point, you may see and embrace the ultimate opportunity of becoming an expert player who, over the long term, might be able to "beat the casino," pulling out an overall profit from your play.

I only mention that ultimate goal here to make you aware that this possibility does exist. In the latter part of the book, I talk about it in more detail and provide many avenues of study to try to reach it. But remember, you

learned to crawl before you could walk and to walk before you could run. So we'll start with baby steps—and right now the best goal is to learn enough about VP that you'll *lose less* while you're in a casino. Stretching your entertainment time is a great goal for many gamblers. When you lose less, or lose more slowly, your money lasts longer. If your bankroll doesn't run out so quickly, you'll be able to spend more time having fun in a casino and have a longer period to try to hit a big jackpot.

Where Are You Coming From?

Casino players have different goals and expectations for their gambling and they walk through the casino doors with an infinite variety of skills and experiences.

Amount of math knowledge? If you have an extensive education in mathematics, you'll enjoy the numbers aspect of VP study, even to the extent of choosing to analyze all the math yourself to see if you agree with the experts. The rest of us, however, are grateful to the VP experts who have figured out the math for us and given us the tools to facilitate our study. I've tried to keep the math in the text to an absolute minimum. However, some players, especially those who want to go far up the VP path, will want to delve into the math more deeply. The "Resources" section in the back of the book includes plenty of help for them. In this book, I'm addressing the desire of most players to have simple instructions and to keep the text as uncluttered with math as possible.

Luck and Math

Hank, a VP-playing friend of mine, once wrote to me on this subject of luck and math: “I was trying to explain this to a friend recently after she declared that ‘gambling is all just luck!’ Every casino game that I know of is a *math* game. If gamblers want to think otherwise, they are simply deluding themselves. Arm wrestling is a strength game. NASCAR is a speed game. Chess is a strategy game. But gambling is a *math* game. If you can fool yourself into thinking otherwise, you’re part of the statistics the casino depends on to win *their* game—the math of averages over large numbers.”

Amount of computer skill? The emphasis in this book is on learning to play VP skillfully in a casino by first practicing on your computer at home, where it doesn’t cost you any money when you make mistakes. In fact, this book was written as a “help manual” to use closely with the software program *Frugal VP* although the information is valuable whatever software you use. Again, I identify with everyone who’s not a computer geek. I was already an “old lady” when I was finally persuaded—OK, pushed—to jump onto the information highway in cyberspace. I’m still amazed when I can do anything more than turn on the monster—that’s what I fondly call my computer!

But wait! Don’t pitch this book into the trash if you don’t have a computer. My husband Brad and I learned VP and played *very* successfully financially for more than seven years before I got my first computer. It *can* be done. I’ve made sure that much of the text helps both those who can use a computer and those who cannot. And I’ve sprinkled boxes throughout with helpful advice for those in the latter group. Look for this graphic—.

However, I must warn you that it’s not an easy task if you don’t have computer help—and it’s much harder to

do than when we first started playing VP in the late '80s. Good VP games are not as plentiful as they were then, and so many more different VP paytables are showing up in casinos today that finding the best one is a time-consuming scouting job. In addition, with the constantly changing world of casinos, the VP player has it *much easier* if he can use the Internet to help him find good playing opportunities, over and above the software for practicing and learning good strategy.

Amount of gambling experience? Some of you may be brand new casino visitors looking for basic help in learning about the best games to play. Others have been casino-goers for many years. Maybe you're a skilled blackjack player, but have heard that VP can also be played profitably by using skill. Or perhaps you're a casual VP player, one even who's played a long time, but has never taken the time to study ways to improve your results. Maybe you're a slot machine player and have never touched a VP machine, perhaps because you think they're too complicated to learn to play.

Valuable Benefits for Everyone

Whatever your background, this book is for anyone, computer user or not, who wants to learn to play VP or wants to become a better player. I've arranged the chapters so that a beginner can take them one by one from the start and build his skills gradually with study and practice. However, those who have some VP knowledge and actual playing experience might choose to start with some of the later chapters to build on the experience they already have. But before you dismiss the early chapters

as too basic, you might want to at least scan them. Some VP players have done only a hit-and-miss study of the game—and they might be surprised by how useful a review of the basics might be to fill in some important gaps in their knowledge.

What Resources Do You Need?

I recommend two basic books for the beginning casino gambler, *The Frugal Gambler* and *More Frugal Gambling*. Yes, they're both my books, but I wrote them for no other reason than to give ordinary casino visitors basic information so they lose less and make their money last longer.

One of the key purposes of these books was to lay a firm foundation for learning to play VP more skillfully. However, VP is not an isolated island in the middle of the gambling ocean, but just one country in the big casino world. Therefore, successful players need to have close relationships with all the countries along the borders: the slot club, comp programs, and promotions. Although I talk about some of these related casino subjects throughout this book and show how they can add value to your VP play, many more helpful details on these complex subjects are covered in those first two *Frugal* books.

Next you need tools to help you put the information you read into practice. Of course, you could go straight to a casino and start practicing. However, the casino won't teach you to play VP without charging a "fee," especially if you choose a low-paying game. Even if you choose a good game, there's a financial penalty for every mistake in strategy you make—holding or discarding the wrong cards.

But Is There an Option?

I'm glad you asked this question, because I have a money-saving answer for you: video poker software! With this, you can practice to your heart's content and not lose a red cent. Your feelings might be bruised when the computer scolds you when you make a mistake, but there will be no pain in your pocketbook.

Several good VP programs have been published over the last ten years or so and I've used them all. Most were tutors that let you practice VP and signal your errors. One generated strategy charts that you could print out. However, *Frugal VP (FVP)* was the first one that both tutored and created strategy charts too, and provided the capability for many other helpful new functions. Although you may have another program that can be used along with the information in this book, the specific computer-practice lessons Viktor provides are designed to be used with *Frugal VP*, and some functions are not possible with any other VP software product on the market.

Another valuable resource a computer provides to the VP student is access to the Internet. All through the book Viktor and I mention websites with supplemental helpful information.



Everything I've said so far about the importance of resources goes double for software. Without a computer, you can't generate your own strategy charts, analyze paytables, or get current information about casino inventory from Internet sites. So you'll have to rely heavily on the commercial products and periodicals found in the "Resources" section in the back of the book. But don't worry—this book gives you enough information to put you far up the path to skilled VP play. However, periodically I'll point you to some other resources for some extra support. Look for the logo.

Okay, enough “teacher talk.” I hope you’re as excited to start on the VP trail as Viktor and I are to be your guides. What isn’t there to be excited about? You’ll be learning how to stretch your money so you can have more fun when you go to a casino. The next chapter starts you on the basics.

EXPLORING CASINOS

"If you ain't just a little scared when you enter a casino, you're either very rich or you haven't been studying the games enough."

—VP Pappy

Hurrah! You're finally entering a casino, clutching your Frugal VP Tool Kit. You're excited, but your head feels so full of VP information that you're in a daze. What should you do first?

Stopping at the Players Club

Always head for the players club booth first when you enter a new casino. Join the club—it's always free—and get your players card, a piece of plastic that looks like a credit card, but is more valuable than any credit card you've ever had in your billfold. You have to pay your

credit card bill, don't you? The casino gives you a players card because it wants to pay *you*.

Be sure to pick up all brochures or information sheets at the desk and check to see if any promotions are going on that you might be able to take advantage of. And don't forget the assignment I gave you in Chapter 4: Try to find out the answers to the two questions I had you write in your notebook:

1. How many dollars of play does it take to earn one point?
2. And how many points does it take to earn \$1 in cash or comps?

When you have the answers, jot those figures down; you'll need them for future lessons.

Viktor on Players Club Cards

The first thing most slot clubs ask you to do when you sign up for a card is to select a PIN, similar to one you have for your ATM card. It's very important that you *don't* use the same PIN(s) you use for your ATM, credit, or other financial cards. When entering your code into card readers to receive free play or into kiosks for automated comps, people are often seated next to you or in line behind you; they can easily watch you enter your PIN. With this information, thieves will steal your purse or wallet and try using that code with whatever financial cards you carry. Some Las Vegas casino ATMs allow larger daily withdrawals than in other locales—and the thieves know which ones.

In addition, it's more important than ever to protect your slot club card, not carelessly forgetting to remove it

when you finish playing. Your card has two kinds of value: the financial value of the points on the card toward cash-back and/or comps, and as identification for obtaining comps or VIP services (such as line passes or preferential seating).

Once another person has your card and your PIN, whether he's a conniving thief or just a casual opportunist, he can rob you in many ways: download your free play, use your points to pay for restaurant meals, and go on a shopping spree at the gift shop with your points. Free play and some comp systems are completely automated with no human asking for identification. And even when there's interaction with a casino employee, many are lax about checking ID if the person shows the players card.

If you lose your card in the casino, go straight to the slot club and change your PIN. Ask them to make a notation in your account that your card was misplaced or stolen. This way, if someone successfully misuses your card, you have a much better case for recovering the stolen points.

Scouting the Casino

Not all players find a 9/6 JoB game in the casino where they've first chosen to put their VP skills into action. What if you find out that this casino doesn't offer it, or it's only available in the higher denominations, like dollar and up, which are beyond your bankroll? Remember, I warned you earlier that you wouldn't find this particular game in every casino.

So what's your next step, you ask?

I know it's hard to be in such an exciting atmosphere

and not be in action. So I won't judge you if you decide to go back this time to the slot machines or to the roulette table, whatever you might have played in the past.

On the other hand, you might want to sit down at any VP machine, even though it doesn't have the paytable you practiced, and play a little with money you've earmarked for entertainment and are prepared to lose. (Be sure to choose the lowest denomination you can find so your money lasts longer, and pick a single-line game—leave the newer multi-line games alone until you've studied more and have more experience.) If you've never played VP in a casino before, this at least gives you some experience in how the machines work. You won't know the exact strategy, of course, but you can use any card sense you have to try to pick the logical holds. There's always the chance you'll get lucky and hit some big hands. If you hit a big enough jackpot to go home a winner—well, that's icing on the cake!

However, there's one other very important thing you can do during this first visit, whether you find the paytable you're looking for or not. This is the ideal time to start developing your *scouting expertise, one of the most important skills a video poker player can have*. Remember, no matter how much you practice VP on your computer, it's all in vain if you can't find a good game on which to use this skill!

When you were preparing at home for this visit, perhaps you jotted down some good game paytables for this particular casino that you found mentioned on the Internet sites I suggested in Chapter 4. Hopefully, you also have the *Frugal Video Poker Scouting Guide* with you. Using these resources, you can scout around the casino and see what games are offered. Write down in your notebook any paytables that you want to analyze when you get home and

any questions for which you want to look up the answers.

An hour or more of scouting can be a very good learning experience and can give you a nice push up the path to skilled video poker play.

Coping with Psychological Traps

Casinos are definitely “fun factories,” but you need to be alert at all times to the mental and physical influences you face there. It’s far too easy to get side-tracked from clear thinking in a casino by the relentless assault on your senses: the neon and glitter, the bells and whistles, the gambling myths and superstitions, and the constant emotional roller coaster of winning and losing.

“The beautiful lights, the around-the-clock-activity, the festivity, and the fast-paced action in a casino can sometimes make idiots of otherwise well-oriented clear-minded individuals.”

—Len Miller

Too many people leave their good sense outside the door when they enter a casino. In their day-to-day lives, they learn new skills to get better jobs. They shop sales and cut coupons. They budget their money carefully. And they research any investments they make. But they go into a casino with no plan for managing their bankrolls and no knowledge about the games they’ll play—all they have is the hope that they’ll get lucky.

If you have conscientiously studied all the chapters in this book so far, you’re already showing you have good

sense: You're studying the game you plan to play in the casino. However, you need to know about some of the financial aspects of playing video poker. You didn't think we would never have to discuss the money part, did you?

Figuring Bankroll

The big bankroll question you need to answer before you enter the casino is: How much money should you take to the casino as you start on the path to smarter VP play?

Viktor discusses this subject in depth in Chapters 10 and 11, with computer calculations and math charts for the particular VP game you're playing. However, for now I'm assuming you're a typical recreational player with a limited amount of money that you've set aside for entertainment. Although you hope to win—and sometimes you will—your main goal is to slow down your losses so that your bankroll lasts longer and gives you more playing time.

No one can ever tell you *exactly* how big your gambling bankroll should be; it depends on your financial resources and personal goals. However, there are really two different bankroll considerations. The first one I call the “moolah factor”: How much discretionary income can you lose in the casino without negatively impacting your individual or family budget? That means you'll still be able to pay all your bills, maintain—or raise, if that's your goal—your standard of living, and have money to spend on the various other entertainment choices you might have.

The second consideration is the “head factor.” The first amount may be the actual amount of money you can

financially “afford” to lose. However, it would make you mentally depressed, or even physically sick, if you lost that much. I’ve found that the psychological bankroll—the one in the player’s head—is often much lower than the financial bankroll—the one in his pocket or bank accounts!

It helps to think about the money you take to the casino as your “admission fee” to this entertainment venue. Sometimes you’ll come home with more money than you took. Great—you got by without paying an admission fee that time. But often your pockets will be lighter when you leave; the casino collected an entrance charge, a small one if you’re lucky, a larger one if Lady Luck deserted you. *A good rule is to limit your gambling bankroll to what you can afford to pay for this entertainment and to the amount that you would consider a good value for the pleasure you received.* That’s your personal answer to how much money to take to the casino!

Enduring Volatility

Volatility is the facet of playing VP that’s the hardest for me to teach and the hardest for even the most earnest students to learn. Although you should feel better prepared to put your learning to work on real VP machines that take real money (and you’re better prepared if you’ve studied and practiced conscientiously), you must understand the volatility of gambling so that you won’t be falsely confident. Even if you’ve chosen a good game and you know the accurate strategy down cold, you can’t win every time you play. No gamblers do, not even the most skilled.

“On some days, a machine will devour \$20 bills like Homer Simpson at an all-you-can-eat taco bar.”

—John Kelly

All gambling predictions, whether you win or lose, are based on the *long term*, which is an *infinite* number of hands. Anything can happen in one short-term gambling session or even in any series of sessions. If you choose games with better pay schedules, learn proper strategy for the game you’re playing, and play long enough, you’ll eventually *average* losing less money than you would by playing a lower-paying game, and far up the VP path, you might even reach the goal of winning more. But for any one playing period, whether an hour, an all-day session, or even a stretch of sessions, your results can—and will—vary tremendously. Most VP sessions will be losers unless you hit a big jackpot or a series of smaller ones. This is what we’re talking about when we use the term “*volatility*,” that roller coaster ride of losing lows and winning highs on the way to the long term.

All gamblers run the gamut of outcomes. In any given casino session, they can win or lose a little, break about even, go home a big winner, or suffer a big loss. That sentence describes my gambling today, even with my advanced VP skills and 22 years of gambling study and experience. *There is no magic bullet that will make you a winner every time you gamble!* Gambling is *always* a roller coaster ride, because the element of luck is always present, and it’s especially strong in the short term.

Skill can overcome luck only in the long term. At first you must have faith in the math principles you’re learning in these lessons, and then you must have enough patience to keep on the right path. Everyone wants to win every

session—I know I do! But the sooner you learn that this is a pipe dream, the easier it'll be to accept the fact that your casino entertainment is slowly but surely costing you less in the long term, that you're getting more bang for your casino buck.

Am I scaring you? Well, risking your money in the real video poker world *is* a lot different from practicing on your computer and it can be scary for all players, novice or experienced. However, I've always believed that a small dose of fear is good when you're in a casino. It might keep you from being tempted to forget the lessons you've learned and wander off the path of good-sense gambling. Always remember to risk only the money you can afford to lose.

The Mechanics of Playing a VP Machine

by Viktor

When it comes to the sheer number of buttons and flashing doodads, VP machines can be the most complicated gamble in the casino. Machines vary slightly by manufacturer, but this primer should you give a good idea of what to expect.

Buttons

- *Bet One* (Credit)—Adds one credit to your total bet for the next hand. After pushing this button five times, the cards are dealt automatically (unless, in rare cases, the max bet is more than 5 coins).

- *Draw* (Deal/Draw)—The Draw button (sometimes

labeled Deal/Draw) deals out the cards after you've selected how many credits to play, and draws new cards after you've selected which cards to hold.

- *Hold* (Hold/Cancel)—After the cards are dealt, you use these buttons to select which cards to hold. The word "Held" and/or a colored border appears over the cards you've selected. Press this button again to de-select a card.

The buttons are usually placed directly under the on-screen cards they're associated with, and sometimes have the card numbers (1-5) printed on them. On many newer machines, you can also touch the cards on the screen itself, but over time you might find the buttons quicker, more accurate, and more ergonomic.

- *Bet Max*—Also sometimes labeled "Max Bet," this button automatically selects 5 credits (or more; keep reading), then automatically deals out the cards.

Important Warning: Depending on your machine and your betting intentions, the Max Bet button can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Traditionally, a max bet on a VP machine is 5 credits (or 5 credits per line on 3-, 5-, 10-, 50-, or 100-line machines). However, some new machines—especially at the penny denomination—have max bets of 10, 50, 100, or even more credits.

Now, if you're playing a machine where you intend always to bet max, here's a practice I religiously use myself. Always press Bet Max to start a new hand, instead of the Deal/Draw button. Why? Waitresses, chitchat, and other distractions can sometimes cause you to forget you're in the middle of a hand, so hitting Bet Max instead of Deal/Draw ensures you never accidentally throw away a good dealt hand without holding any cards.

Beware, however, if you're playing one of those new-fangled machines that lets you bet umpteen coins when

you only want to bet, say, 5. Hitting the Max Bet button can put you into a world of hurt. A hundred credits on a quarter machine is \$25. And hitting the Max Bet on a 100-credit dollar machine sucks up the whole \$100 bill that you'd planned to cover you for more than one hand! Always check your paytables and know what the maximum bet is for your machine.

Jean's Note: I've heard of players hitting the Max button by mistake and asking a casino supervisor to void the bet. One friend of mine had success at this once—but he and the supervisor agreed that even if a royal came up, it would be a no-pay hand. Another friend got an attendant to begrudgingly void his \$100 bet. But he told my friend that this was his one and only time and recorded his players club number just to make the point. My friend gave this advice: "I think the only way to do this is to look as pitiful as you can!" Still, I wouldn't count on finding an accommodating supervisor, no matter how good your act.

- *Cash Out*—My favorite button. Time to take all the money we made and go home.

Getting Started

First, insert your players card and make sure it's activated. This is often indicated by a green light or a welcome message with your name. Now, insert your hard-earned cash into the bill acceptor.

The machine gives you an appropriate number of credits, usually shown in the lower-right corner of the screen. Some machines show you the actual dollar amount ("\$5.00" vs. "20 credits" on a quarter machine) and on some machines you can touch that section to go back and forth between credit and dollar amounts.

Now, per the warning above, check the paytable for the maximum bet. Then press “Bet Max,” or if you prefer to play fewer credits, press “Bet One Credit” repeatedly until you reach your preferred number of credits, then press “Deal.”

Next comes the strategy part, which is what differentiates video poker from the slot machines you might be used to. In video poker you have a choice: You get to choose which cards to hold and which to discard. Use the Hold buttons to select the cards you want to *hold*; any cards you don’t select will be discarded and replaced with new cards. (If you change your mind, you can cancel each card you don’t want to hold by hitting its Hold button a second time.) Hit the “Draw” button to replace your unselected cards, then look at the onscreen paytable to see your prize!

To play the next hand, hit “Bet Max” if you’re playing max coin or “Deal/Draw” if you’re not. This deals a new hand, with the same credits bet as the last hand. Again, select which cards to hold, then hit “Draw.” Keep doing that—that’s all there is to it.

SETTLING ON A CORE PLAY

“When you go to a casino, always carry a concealed weapon—your brain.”

—VP Pappy

If you’ve studied the last three chapters carefully, you now understand how to choose good plays by looking for good video poker games and adding good slot club benefits. You may even have done this for several different games at several casinos to compare your various options. Sometimes there’s a clear-cut best choice. On the other hand, you still may not have firmly decided what your first core game should be. So in this chapter, I discuss some other factors you can consider in making your final decision.

Personal Makeup

The first factors to think about are the personal ones. What are your goals when you go to a casino? What is

your personality type? Do you want to choose a lower-EV game that's the most fun for you, even though you know your bankroll won't last as long? Or would you rather choose one that isn't quite as exciting, but you know in the long run you'll lose less? Would you rather play a lower-EV game that has a simpler strategy or take the time to learn a more difficult one so you can play at a higher EV? Only you can make these kinds of choices—and no one else has the right to judge your decision.

Casino Location

Another factor you might want to consider is location. Some people choose one high-EV core game and never play VP unless they can play that game, even if it means avoiding their local casinos and as often as possible visiting faraway ones that have their chosen game. Others choose a lower-EV game because they want to play often and it's the best play in their area. In Chapter 4, I gave you three Internet sites that can give you extremely valuable assistance here and save you many many hours of scouting time. In fact, these sites contain such a wealth of information about casinos all over the country, their slot club benefits, and their video poker inventory that it would take one person not hours or days, but months of heavy travel and scouting to match it. And the beauty of Internet information is that it can be updated quickly as the VP options in casinos change, which they do *very* often.

There can be very good reasons to choose a lower-EV game in a casino near you. Many casinos send generous weekly cash or free-play coupons to locals. Some hold nu-

merous drawings and offer promotions that players who can visit the casino frequently will be able to take advantage of. I discuss this in detail later in the book and show you how you can figure out the value of these kinds of benefits. Many times they will compensate for lower pay schedules.

However, you have to face reality here. Many casinos offer *only* very low-paying VP paytables. No amount of extra benefits would put the games into a position where the long-term losses are acceptable to players who want to play heavily and often. These games are an option only for the very light recreational player who's willing—once in a while—to take a shot at a gamble with odds no better than a slot machine.

Cash vs. Comps

In Chapter 8 you learned that some casinos give cash for points, while others only offer comps. In either case, if your points are worth a stated dollar amount, whether in cashback or comps, you can figure out the percentage that this casino benefit adds to your game.

If the points in the casino where you're considering playing can be redeemed for cashback, there's no decision—a dollar is a dollar is a dollar. However, if the points can only be used for comps, you must decide if you really want and will actually use them; in other words, are they worth the same amount to you as if they were given in cash? Chapter 12 contains more detailed help on evaluating comps, but this is a personal decision. One man's pleasure is another one's yawn.

Real-Life Examples

Here are some examples of people I've known—although I haven't used their real names—and how they made their decision about what game to play and where to play it. Hopefully, their experiences will be helpful in making your own decision.

- Riverboat Sam is a 65-year-old retired railroader who lives in the Midwest with a riverboat casino just five miles from his house and two more about an hour's drive away. Before his wife died, she converted him from craps to video poker and taught him about using accurate strategy. They usually visited the two casinos that were farther away, because both had 9/6 JoB and they had that strategy down pat. They occasionally visited the casino close by and had learned the strategy changes for its best game, 9/5 JoB. Now he only plays at the nearby casino, even though he knows that the EV of 9/5 JoB is 1.09% lower than the 9/6 version. He sticks with the nickel machines, but realizes this still costs him about \$1.36 more per hour than 9/6 (\$.25 per bet, based on 500 hands per hour). It's worth it to him not to have to drive so far, especially at night, since his eyes aren't as good as they used to be. Besides, all his railroad cronies go to this nearby casino and he enjoys the company of old friends. They all flirt with the young change girls who know them by name and they eat long lunches together in the casino buffet most weekdays.

He strictly budgets what he takes to the casino. If his daily-session VP bankroll doesn't last as long as he'd like to stay in the casino, he sits in the race book and watches horse races and chats with his friends. He always plays more on the two-a-week senior double-point days than on days when he gets single points. He keeps track of his

wins and losses, as well as the slot club benefits and comps, and says that this entertainment has cost him about \$100 a month since his wife passed away three years ago. He says that's a small price for the fun that has helped alleviate his loneliness—and it has saved him from the high price of gasoline and his own cooking.

- Curt and Cindy are highly paid executives with stressful high-tech jobs in California's Silicon Valley. They fly to Reno or Vegas for a weekend every month or so to relax at high-denomination VP machines. They play at such a high level that the casino floods them with luxurious comps and extra benefits. They're smart and understand the concept of game EV, but they choose to play Double Double Bonus, although higher EV games are available. They tell me that they work at monotonous tasks 60 hours a week—they get away to a casino for excitement and love the thrill of a kicker game. They have a large gambling bankroll, so they don't worry about the dry stretches and just play on, anticipating those jackpots. They've practiced DDB on the computer, so they know the strategy quite well. I've talked to them about the financial advantage of switching to JoB, which is available in the casinos where they play, and they tried to switch. But they got bored too quickly and went back to their beloved DDB.

Still, they may have made a better choice than it seems on the surface. Casinos can become suspicious of players who play only the best VP games—and in some cases, may take countermeasures, such as cutting off their goodie mailings or becoming stingy with comps. Curt and Cindy will never have to worry about this happening to them—they'll always be welcome at the casinos with outstretched hands full of freebies.

- Jim and Joyce, a young couple with two school-age

children, live in the Midwest, close to the Canadian border, where there are only a few scattered small Indian casinos. Because they have no nearby competition, they all offer very poor VP. The best schedule pays back only 96.15%. Jim and Joyce used to drive a half-hour to one of these casinos two or three times a month, dropping the kids off at volunteer grandparent babysitters along the way. They studied VP and fell in love with Deuces Wild, but the best Deuce schedule they could find had an EV of only 94.34%. So they played slowly on the machine with the best payable available, 7/5 JoB with the big casino edge of 3.85%.

Jim and Joyce both had good jobs and this was their major entertainment choice, so they could afford the average loss, which was about \$19 per hour for each quarter machine. (A slow-rate 400 hands an hour is \$500 coin-in for each machine. Multiply that by the casino's 3.85% edge, and you get a \$38-an-hour loss for the two of them.) Playing two hours in one evening, their expected average loss was \$76, perhaps reduced by a comped meal once in a while. Of course, they were thrilled with an occasional big jackpot—but most of the time they lost, and sometimes they lost big time.

After a few months, they sat down and added up the monthly cost of this pastime, realizing that even if they had average luck, they were putting out \$150-\$200 a month. So they decided to stay home and rent a movie, or eat out, or find some other low-cost entertainment for those nights they used to spend in the casino. They started socking away most of the money they used to spend there and surfed the Internet regularly, looking for cheap airfares to Las Vegas, where they can now fly every few months or so and play all day long on their game of choice, quarter full-pay Deuces Wild. They say that they

don't feel deprived, but enjoy immensely these frequent vacations for no more than they used to spend at their home casino. In fact, they report, they're doing so well on this high-EV game and getting so many free room offers in the mail from their play in Vegas casinos that they're well on their way to having all these vacations cost just a fraction of their saved bankroll.

- The next example is a composite of scores of retired couples we've met—and given suggestions to—who've moved to Las Vegas because VP is their favorite entertainment choice. Most don't aspire to make money gambling, since they have adequate pensions and investments for a secure financial future, but they enjoy the comp side benefits, especially free meals and shows, that VP play brings. Most soon realize that these comps "cost" too much if they're losing more on the games than the comps are worth. So, if they haven't studied how to choose a good VP game and use accurate strategy, they soon decide to either cut out the gambling and pay for their own meals and shows or start learning how to reduce their losses. Many of these retirees, because they have the time and motivation, read, practice, and learn the ropes of the slot club/comp systems until they become extremely skilled VP players, "accidentally" making it a financially profitable hobby as Brad and I have done.

Ready to Practice Your New Core Game

I hope you now have enough information to choose the best play for your particular needs and interests. If you're lucky enough to find your chosen game with the

exact schedule already pre-loaded in your software, you're ready to start practicing, in just the same way you did early in your study with 9/6 JoB.

However, there's another skill you might need if your newly chosen game is not one of the pre-loaded ones in your software. You'll have to know how to change a paytable. Any good VP tutorial allows you to take one of the pre-loaded games and change any part or parts of it to correspond with the paytable of the game you want to learn. It should then help you quickly find the EV of the new game. And if it's a full-feature program, like *Frugal VP*, it should also generate an accurate strategy chart for this new game, one you can use during your computer practice, then print out and take to the casino for reference.

If you have the *FVP* program, you can do all of these things and Viktor will guide you step by step in Lessons 4 and 5 in the back of the book.

MAXIMIZING PLAYERS CLUB AND COMP BENEFITS

“Part of me wants to lose weight, and part of me wants to gorge on comps. ... So far the gorge part is winning out.”
—Barry Meadow

Back in Chapter 8, I discussed how players club benefits and comps can really pump up the value of a VP game, often turning a bad play into a good one. I showed you how to find the percentage value of slot club points so you could add that to the EV of the game.

However, in many casinos you have choices as to how you can use your points, and more benefits to belonging to the players club than what you get with the basic points you earn are often available. It pays to learn the intricacies of the slot clubs in all the casinos where you play, so you get all the advantages to which you’re entitled. And believe me, this isn’t an easy task—each casino has a unique slot club system, and casinos are notorious for changing policies often, especially when you’re talking about comps. Jeff Compton, the foremost authority on slot clubs, figures there are over 350 clubs in the U.S.

and Canada—and every year about 20% of them undergo some major change.

So where do you find up-to-date information about slot clubs and comps? Unfortunately, no one resource gives you all the information you need. Sometimes you find helpful articles in gaming magazines or local and regional newspapers. In earlier chapters I gave you two good Internet sources: the databases at VPinsider.com and vp-FREE. Many casinos have their own websites these days, but only a few give you any details about their slot clubs and comps; and even when they do, it's usually only very basic information. A very few do provide the handy capability for you to check your personal slot club account. Obviously, you can look for brochures and informational literature at the slot club desk in the casino where you play. But again, this is usually basic stuff.

When I want to get information beyond the basics, I talk to slot club employees and hosts. Not always, but usually I find out about some benefits that aren't written down anywhere. However, the best way to get information about extra or little-known slot club and comp benefits is by talking to other knowledgeable players, both in person and on Internet bulletin boards. I can inquire about any North American casino's slot club and/or comp benefits on the Internet sites mentioned above, and within 24 hours or so I have replies from several gamblers who play in that casino. The valuable details they provide will allow me to enter that casino armed with good information on how to maximize the extra benefits.

The last resource is personal networking. Some casino benefits are so valuable that those who know about them *never* talk about them, except perhaps to a small circle of friends who have agreed to exchange information. They're never discussed on the Internet and the general public is

usually not aware of them. If these benefits became general knowledge, they would disappear faster than an ice cube on an August Vegas sidewalk. If you're lucky—and a persistent searcher—you might just come across one of these juicy benefits on your own!

Cash or Stuff

Most slot clubs specify what you can get by redeeming your points and often provide a brochure at the slot club desk with a "menu" of choices. Some clubs give cashback—in the form of good old U.S. currency you can stick in your pocket—or "free play" (which you have to run through the machine once before it's yours). This may be money you collect the same day you earn it, but some casinos send you a coupon for the cashback amount and you must return within a specified time period to pick it up. This latter choice is definitely more restrictive; if you can't or don't wish to return to the casino, this benefit is worthless to you.

Cashback is King

"Cashback doesn't have bad streaks like VP does; it's always a positive number. You get the cashback amount on every hand, win or lose. Cashback lowers the swings in your play tremendously; the higher the cashback percentage for a given play, the less volatile your results will be."

—John Z

Many clubs don't give cashback for points; you can use them only for what I call "casino stuff." Sometimes your choice here is limited: food in the restaurants, comped

rooms in the hotel, or items in the gift shop. Some larger casinos with more amenities offer a larger choice of in-house comps, including ones you use in the hair salon, spa, childcare center, movie theater, or showroom. Recently I've seen a strong trend toward casinos giving you the opportunity to use your points for stuff outside their own properties—something I call “cash equivalents.” We've been able to earn gift cards/certificates at individual stores such as Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Best Buy, Rite Aid drugstores, and Von's grocery stores, as well as for large shopping centers where we have a plethora of store choices.

Your redemption options become a personal decision. You have to decide what stuff has good value for you. This should be a special concern if you have your choice of cash or comps, which some casino programs give you, with a different point-redemption value for each. At one time, one local Las Vegas casino gave you \$10 cashback for 4,000 points—but you could also redeem 4,000 points for \$12 in food comps. We'd usually take the cashback there, because we always have more food comps all over town than we can use anyway. But Brad loves the down-home cooking in their buffet, so occasionally we used our points to eat there. A gift certificate for a store where you'd never shop or where the merchandise is ridiculously overpriced wouldn't be a good value for you even if it was a 10% higher amount.

And remember, whether you choose cash or comps, if you have *Frugal VP*, you can use the handy Slot Club Calculator to figure out how much EV your choice adds to the value of your play. We'll use this figure later in the chapter to compare different plays.

Bouncing Back to the Casino

Bounce-back cash is the newest “in” benefit that many casinos are offering—and I must tell you it has become one of my favorites. When you get a cash coupon in the mail, this is an incentive for you to “bounce back” to the issuing casino—and hopefully give them some play on their machines or tables. This is not the cashback I referred to earlier—money you earned by putting a specified number of points on your players card and had to come back later to collect. I call that “delayed cashback,” although it has the same purpose as bounce-back cash: getting you back to the casino for an extra visit.

This new phenomenon, bounce-back cash, is a much more complex marketing tool than simple cashback you earn while racking up slot club points. The amount of your bounce-back cash depends, at least partially, on your coin-in, but you often don’t know how much play gets you what. To add to the mystery, many other factors about your play history might be thrown into the computer mixer: denomination and/or time played, type of game played, frequency of play, whether you have won or lost, your zip code, and many others. In many casinos, it’s impossible to figure out exactly how much VP you have to play each week or month in order to score a big bounce-back coupon. And if you do get lucky and find out the requirements for the various levels, chances are a new marketing director will come in or the old one will tinker with the formula, and it will change.

Bounce-back cash takes several forms. It can be a coupon or a voucher that you take to the casino and exchange for cold hard cash. You aren’t required to put it into a machine and play, although the casino hopes you give them a shot at getting it back. More frequently these days, the coupon is for free play, which requires that you download

credits and play them through the machine at least once before you can cash out the balance.

To calculate how much EV bounce-back adds to your play takes more detective work after the fact. First, you need to know how long the casino looks back at your play to decide how much to send you. This will often be the two months *prior* to the current month (i.e., your March mailer is based on January's play), but sometimes the cut-off date is in the middle of the month or the qualification period may go back three, or even six, months. The second thing you need to know is how much coin-in you had during the qualification period. One way to get this information is to take your mailer to the slot club booth and ask: "What dates does this mailer cover? And how much coin-in did I have during that time?"

If this is a casino with a simple bounce-back system based only on coin-in *and* if the slot club employees know what the qualifying periods are, you can get the necessary information. Then, using the formula I gave you in Chapter 8 or using *FVP's Slot Club Calculator*, you can figure the percentage that this bounce-back is adding to your play. We'll use this figure later in the chapter.

Unfortunately, not all marketing departments play nice and share information in the casino playground, so not all slot club employees, or even hosts, are privy to the factors that are used in sending out the various levels of bounce-back. It's a deep dark secret, and sometimes uses so many factors that even I—with 22 years of casino experience and a large network of savvy player friends—throw up my hands in resignation and decide just to be thankful for whatever a casino sends me!

Holiday Shopping Sprees—Santa's Helpers

Many casinos offer a players club program that lets you accumulate “holiday-shopping” points all year long, in a separate bank from your regular slot club points. You can use these special points to buy all kinds of merchandise during designated days in November and/or December. This is the time when planning ahead is essential, since you must almost always redeem these points only in person. Early in the year, ask about the holiday shopping dates and put them on your calendar. I’ve known players who’ve given up thousands of dollars they could have redeemed in valuable merchandise, just because they didn’t get back to the casinos during the specified time. My grandchildren think Santa lives in a casino—and these holiday shopping programs are a big reason for their belief!

The casino usually devotes a small percentage, often .1% or .2%, to your holiday account. To find out exactly, you can use the formula I gave you in Chapter 8 or Method 2 of *FVP’s Slot Club Calculator*, just as you did above with bounce-back, although you’ll want to estimate the real value of the merchandise that’s offered, since it usually sports a highly inflated retail price tag.

Comps

There are three basic ways to get comps at a casino: through the slot club system, through direct-mail offers that come from a marketing department, and through the casino player-development department, using hosts. We’ve already been discussing all the stuff you can get through the players club, and the other two systems are built on the foundation of the players club system, even if they’re in separate departments. Casino marketing looks

at play histories in the players club database as a starting point to decide who gets the discounted and free rooms and other offers they send out in the mail. Although the host may be able do more for you beyond what you can get by using your slot club points—often there's a separate “comp bank” from which you can draw comps—a host looks first at that same database to view your play history.

Regardless of how you get the comps, they're a splendid way to increase the value of your VP play, especially now that many multi-property companies let you transfer comps you've earned in any of their casinos to others across the country. Many players take several free vacations a year to casino areas, because they know how to work the comp system. The year before we bought our condo and moved to Las Vegas permanently, we stayed free for 191 days in various casino hotels all over the country—with no room or food charges whatsoever!

However, the higher the level of your play and the more luxurious the comps you earn, the more likely you are to enter a danger area. Remember, casinos give you comps based on the level of your play—and no comp is “free” if you stand to lose more at the games than the comp is worth. If you've budgeted to take money out of your pocket in the same amount for the rooms, food, shows, and other non-cash perks you get comped, it's quite correct to count them in your calculation of the total EV of the VP play. However, you must be very careful here. We didn't count comps in our total return for very long, because we were soon getting so many comps that we were increasing the number of our casino vacations and the luxury of our casino lifestyle to a level that we could never have afforded on our own budget.

We're always careful to value our comps conserva-

tively. Back when we were staying in casino hotels, we could get a nice room for less than \$50 most of the time. So when we got a comp for a more luxurious room that usually went for \$100, we still counted it as only \$50 in monetary value. (The higher psychological value was just a nice extra.) We've always eaten simply and have never been impressed by high-priced restaurants, so we've always valued our gourmet meals at a lower amount, no more than we would ordinarily spend when eating out. If gourmet is a real pleasure for you, you may want to value it at the actual price, especially if you're going to spend your money on it if you don't get it comped. Figuring the value of comps is a very personal matter and depends on what you consider important. However, sometimes you can't "afford" all those luxury freebies—it's that simple.

In many casinos, the comp system is huge and complex. Sometimes this is connected to the players club system, sometimes it's a little kingdom of its own. It took 84 pages for me to cover the ins and outs of casino comps in *More Frugal Gambling*, and that was in addition to the 43 pages I'd already used up talking about the slot club system. Obviously, I'm giving only the highlights in this chapter, but I'd suggest further study about players club benefits and comps to boost your video poker game EV higher than you can imagine, as it has for us over 14 years.

Down to the Play Decision

Using all the considerations above, you can now compute a more complete total value of your play or compare two plays to one another.

Here's an example of two plays that might be available to you and how to figure which one is best.

Casino A: Game—9/6 JoB 99.50%	
Slot Club cashback	.25%
Bounce-back cash	.25
Usable comps	.50
Holiday Shopping	.20
<u>Total EV</u>	<u>100.70%</u>
Casino B: Game—Full-pay Double Bonus	
	100.17%
Slot Club Cashback	.20%
Bounce-back Mailed Cash	.10%
<u>Total EV</u>	<u>100.47%</u>

Is Casino A your best play? Yes, if you’re talking about the play that the math says—in the long term—will more likely allow you to come out further ahead financially. This is an example where, considering extra benefits, the best *game* is not the best *play*. However, in the next chapters I talk about other factors besides long-term expectation that might influence your choice: your bankroll, your ability to cope with volatility, the amount of time you play, your knowledge of accurate strategy for each game, and your personal goals.

The above example shows a choice between two positive-expectation plays (over 100% total theoretical payback), which in many casino areas is quite rare if not downright unknown. *However, even when you’re making a choice between two negative-expectation plays, the higher total EV play is usually a better choice.* Leaving out special factors, if you can play at a total EV of 99.5%, you’ll lose less money over the long term than if you choose a play with a total EV of 99%. As I’ve repeated for years, for most players losing less is as important as winning more. When you lose less, you get to play longer and, therefore, make your

fun last longer in a casino, and you can end up with more money in your pocket when you go home.

Before you despair of finding any good plays in your favorite casinos, jump to the next chapter, which tells you how to take advantage of a casino fringe benefit that can add tons of value to a VP play—promotions.

FINE-TUNING YOUR STRATEGY ACCURACY

“The video poker machine, although a computer, is not programmed to think of mischievous ways of emptying your wallet. Poor play will accomplish that.”

—Mark Pilarski

Early in this book, I introduced you to the idea that correct strategy is an important factor in losing less and winning more when you play video poker. I gave you only the basics at that time, because I knew they were complex enough to keep you busy while you were just beginning your study.

However, strategy accuracy should be a continuous concern as long as you play. You might think that experience alone makes you more accurate—and it does, in one way: The more you play one particular game schedule, the more that strategy is set in your mind and you can remember it without checking a chart frequently to refresh your memory. You’ll also be able to see specific hold patterns more quickly, because you’ve seen a lot of them.

On the other hand, there are danger areas that both the veteran player and the novice need to work to avoid.

Basic Errors to Work on at Home

Obviously, if you've never studied a strategy for a game you're playing, you'll make many errors. A video poker machine isn't a good place to use seat-of-the-pants strategy, even if you've played live poker. Good card sense won't get you close to accurate strategy; VP just isn't intuitive.

However, even players who've studied a game often make strategy mistakes in the casino. Some of these can be erased by extra home study. The more you practice with a VP tutoring program and study the errors you make, the more accurate you become. But there's other study you can do. Be sure you fully understand any strategy chart you use, including the terminology and the abbreviations. Most strategy charts come with a separate instruction sheet, sometimes with examples of various hands. This sheet can be a comprehensive and useful study resource in itself. The same holds true for the Help files of your software.

Another good way to improve your strategy accuracy is to study particular kinds of hands. Do you know the parameters of all straights? You can waste a lot of time trying to decide if you have a possible straight if you don't know the tops and bottoms of each, i.e., A-5, 2-6, 3-7. This is not as important in JoB, where you hold few inside straights, but very important in Double Bonus and Deuces games. Straight flushes are perhaps the most common overlooked hands, so going back to Chapter 3 and studying the SF explanations and examples there could be a helpful exercise.

Mechanical Errors

Once you start playing in a casino, the first problem area is the VP machine itself. Mechanical mistakes aren't the result of not knowing the proper strategy. They happen because you're dealing with a machine. One of the most common of these is caused by sticky Hold buttons. I know it's inconvenient to move once you settle into one spot, but I've kicked myself more than once that I didn't do so. I'll say to myself that I'll just be careful—but an hour later, I'm crying when I realize that the Hold button for one of the cards in the dealt flush I thought I held didn't do its job. If you want this particular machine for some reason, or it's the only one open, then it's almost always worth the wait to have a technician summoned to fix any faulty button.

Some errors can be a combination of mechanical and human factors, such as hitting the Deal button by mistake with your elbow or brushing by a touch screen and accidentally holding or canceling the wrong card. It pays to be careful and deliberate with your hand movements. I'll never forget the time I accidentally hit the Yes button to double up on a \$1,000 jackpot. Although I got lucky and won the Double, my heart still skips a beat when I think about the risk this error made.

Another mistake that's becoming more common since multi-denomination multi-game machines have been introduced is unknowingly playing a game or denomination that you didn't intend to. Many of these machines go to a default game when they haven't been played for a short time, sometimes including when you stop to insert more bills. Or they remain at the game and denomination of the last player. Brad and I, like most frequent players, have occasionally had the good fortune to come out of this kind of mistake smelling like a rose, such as hitting

quad aces on the wrong game, but one that paid a much higher premium for them than the game we intended to play. However, in most cases, we'd be making costly mistakes, because we'd be playing the wrong strategy. Playing the right game at the wrong denomination may not be so serious, unless you intended to play nickels but accidentally played dollars and your small bankroll evaporated before you knew it. And if you want a psychological kick in the stomach, how about hitting a nickel royal when you thought you were playing quarters!

Other mistakes happen when you accidentally hit the wrong button (perhaps because the buttons aren't positioned directly under the corresponding cards) or fail to hold it firmly enough. Sometimes (but not always) I've had success in talking to a supervisor when I've done this and getting paid the proper amount, since they can go back into the machine's memory to see what was dealt in the last five hands. I remember one instance when for some reason, I didn't hold the third card of a trip (or the button didn't hold), and the fourth card came up on the draw. Because I was a known customer at this casino (and it probably helped that Brad was a good tipper), they paid me the difference between trips and a quad, a hefty amount on a dollar machine. I wouldn't count on this in most casinos, however!

A common and frustrating mechanical problem involves the players club system. Perhaps your slot card inexplicably times out but you don't notice it, or you find out later that you didn't get the advertised bonus points for that day. Although you can't be watching the card reader every minute, it pays to check for a few hands at the beginning of each session, then periodically, that the slot club points are racking up correctly. And if you stop playing to talk or take a break, remember that many casi-

nos' slot cards will time out with just a short period of no play. Check to see if you need to reinsert your card before you start playing again. And finally, if you find *any* mistake in your players club account, it's important to speak to a host or the slot club supervisor ASAP, certainly the same day. It's very difficult, sometimes impossible, to get errors corrected at a later time.

The ergonomics of video poker machines can be sub-optimal at best. The playing cards can be too large and we seniors, with failing peripheral vision, don't have arms long enough to let us lean back, take in a whole 5-card hand, and reach the buttons. Hard and unmovable chairs keep the tall and the short and the thin and the portly uncomfortable—just who is average in every part of his body? The best advice I can give you is to choose the machine that's the most comfortable one you can find. Play slowly the first few minutes until you get used to the feel of the machine and can adjust your touch to the position of the buttons.

Auto Hold

Q: Some VP games have an Auto Hold button that lets the machine choose the dealt cards to hold. Is this a good thing to use?

*A: Although the machine holds *generally* follow a simplified basic strategy, they're not always correct. I like Auto Hold, because it speeds up my play, making the right holds most of the time. However, when I see it deviate from accurate strategy, I can quickly override it and make the correct hold. I think it helps one avoid the oversight errors, such as missing a small pair.*

Distraction Errors

A casino is one of the most distracting places on Earth: flashing lights to produce migraines, heavy smoke to swell sinuses, a roaring background so you can't hear yourself think. Then, to top it all off, half-naked beauties continually tempt you with mind-altering liquids.

Playing accurate VP strategy in such an atmosphere is a real challenge. It takes extreme and continuous concentration. Drop it for a minute when a friend stops by to say hi, or your neighbor makes a friendly comment, or your gambling partner asks you a question, or the cocktail waitress brings you your drink—and you enter the Danger Zone of Errors.

The most common one of these is dealing a hand, turning away to get your drink or chat with a friend, and then going back to the game and hitting the Deal/Draw without holding any cards. Try to make it a habit never to stop your play in the middle of a hand. I remember stressing this concept to my daughter Angela, the Frugal Princess, when I was teaching her how to play Deuces Wild. I told her always to hold all deuces in the hand *immediately* after the deal, even if she needed to think a little bit about what else to hold. That way, if you're interrupted in the middle of a hand—by the cocktail waitress or a friend's arrival—and push the deal button prematurely, at least you've kept those all-important wild cards.

Everyone has his own way to cope with distractions. Some players keep their focus and drown out the incessant noise by wearing earphones. Others just ignore talkative neighbors. Brad and I love to talk with the many friends and fans who come up to speak with us in a casino and we consider it a nice break rather than an interruption. However, we've agreed that we *must* stop playing

when we're talking. We found that we could not do both and remain accurate in our play.

Distraction errors aren't a problem only for newbie VP students. Actually, they may stay focused more easily, because they're concentrating so hard to play each hand correctly. Many experienced players have agreed that there's the danger of "zoning out" when you're on a game that you've played for years and you know the strategy backward and forward. I call them mindless errors, when you obviously know the right hold, but your mind is on vacation.

Danger in the TITO Age

A timely warning, since this disaster seems to be more common with ticket machines than it was with coins, comes from an article in *Strictly Slots* by Paul Player, Sr.: "The granddaddy of non-playing video poker mistakes is leaving a machine that still has credits on it. This is most likely to happen when you get a hand-pay just prior to a dinner engagement and you're running late. In your haste to get to dinner, you completely forget that you still have money in the machine to cash out."

Human Errors

Guess what? Everyone makes an error sometimes, even the expert and experienced player. Why? Because we're all human beings and not computers.

But there are measures we can take to decrease the number of errors we make because of our human body and mind limitations.

- Don't play when tired. Tired eyes and tired bodies equal more mistakes. Take frequent breaks.
- Don't play when you're extremely hungry. Low

blood sugar causes a decrease in your mental alertness. Balancing your VP play with exercise and healthy meals reduces your strategy mistakes.

- Don't drink alcohol to excess. Your thinking processes and, thus, your accuracy, will suffer, whether you realize it or not. Also, many prescription or over-the-counter drugs will have the same effect.
- Don't play when you're upset. If you have a fight with your significant other, go take a walk and get some fresh air; don't use VP as a way to get your mind off your troubles. Accurate VP demands concentration without distracting thoughts.

"Keeping healthy often costs a lot, but that can be minimized with the right insurance. For video poker, that insurance is practice."

—Dipy911

Playing Hints to Improve Accuracy

• *Slow down—speed kills!* More mistakes can be blamed on speed than any other factor. Always strive for accuracy first. Speed will come naturally as you become more experienced.

• Get in the habit of pausing and double-checking the hand before you hit the draw button. I have this singsong mantra: Deal—Hold—Pause—Draw. I go through these four steps, albeit quickly, on *every* hand, even after 14 years of playing VP; it's as routine to me as breathing. If you hold your cards and draw immediately without thinking briefly in between, there's no chance to see a mistake and correct your hold.

• Pay attention when the machine identifies a dealt winning hand. That doesn't mean that this is always

the hold you'll make, of course, but it sometimes shows a combination you didn't see right away. When I first started playing VP, I would study and study a hand before finally seeing a straight, for example, but then I'd feel pretty dumb when I noticed the machine had long since told me what I was dealt. Like many players, I see a flush pretty quickly, but a straight, especially if the cards are mixed up, doesn't make as immediate an impression.

- Be careful when you revise an incorrect hold. It's easy to get mixed up and end up holding a group of cards that couldn't turn into *any* paying hand

- Train yourself to look for more than one possible hold in a hand. The most common reason that beginners make errors is that they didn't notice a play within the hand. A common example in JoB is a hand like this one: 4♥, Q♣, 5♥, J♣, 3♥. Those 2 royal cards will usually catch your attention right away—after all, we're always looking for a way to get to that beautiful royal flush—so you might easily overlook the lowly straight flush, which is the better play. Study each hand long enough to see all possible holds, and then you can choose the best one. You can't hold what you can't see!

- Make a special effort to watch for small pairs. There's a strong tendency to automatically see high cards first and overlook small pairs, especially if the two cards aren't adjacent.

- When you're trying to learn a new game, it's good to concentrate on studying, practicing, and playing that game alone for long enough that you feel you're playing fairly accurately. Only then should you attempt switching back and forth between games.

- If you're trying to learn a new game with a strategy that's difficult, such as Double Bonus, you might want to learn a more simplified version first. Then choose one ad-

vanced rule or complex situation at a time to work on, adding it to your expertise. Wait until you have that one mastered before you begin to study another one. Eventually, you'll find that you might have advanced from a beginner's strategy to a professional one!

- Switch around among different games as little as possible. Unless you're extremely experienced, you can't jump from one strategy to another frequently and maintain a good accuracy level. If Brad and I are going to play a game that we don't play often, we try to put in some practice on the *FVP* software before we leave home. If that isn't possible, when we get to the casino, we'll play together on one machine for about a half-hour to help each other switch our mindsets to the new strategy. And, of course, we always have a strategy chart close at hand to refer to, no matter what game we're playing.

- Personalize your own strategy aids. One helpful trick I've used through the years is to make a small reminder card for each of the various games we've learned, with only the rules and hands we've found by experience we tend to forget, rather than the complete strategy chart. You might find it useful to copy a strategy chart from a computer program such as *FVP* and simplify it, using abbreviations you understand and marking specific troublesome hands for you. It's also helpful to have a card that lists only the differences between two games you play—for example, between two somewhat similar deuces paytables.

***FVP* Tricks to Improve Accuracy**

The first is from Jim Wolf.

"When I first practiced VP with DOS software, I used to put a Post-it note over the payoff table so that

it wouldn't tip me off to a dealt winning play. While this is an important clue to your play in a casino, you should learn to see these plays without any clues. By covering up the payoff table during my practice sessions, I was able to strengthen my hand-identification skills.

"I thought that I could save fellow VP players a few thousand Post-its and maybe a couple of trees by incorporating this feature directly into *FVP*. Select "Don't Highlight Dealt Winners" under the game options and you won't be tipped off on a dealt paying hand."

Now I'll give you my favorite practice technique.

Choose a game in *FVP* on which you want to improve your accuracy. Go to "Tutor Options" and mark "Don't Signal Errors During Play" and "Don't Show Best Hand on Deal." Go to "View Options" and be sure you have marked "Don't Highlight Dealt Winners" and "Active Marquee." While you're there, change the background color and card colors that you're used to using when you're practicing. Go to "Audio" and select "Disable all Sound Effects" and "Enable Music," choosing the selection you hate the most and turning the volume up high. You're trying to duplicate the crazy noisy distractions of real VP play in a casino, so it would help to have two friendly cats that like to jump up on your desk and look at the screen or two dogs that bark all the time. If possible, work on this lesson while you're babysitting two toddlers who constantly pull at your sleeve for attention. And have a loving friend or spouse offer you a drink every 15 minutes. Play as fast as you can for about 30 minutes, without looking at strategy cards and without thinking too long about each hand.

Then go to "Session Errors" and see what types of mistakes you made. These are the things that you need to watch for as you play.

Now go back and set all the software choices to the

ones you use when practicing. Be sure to go to “Replay Errors” under “Options” and enable this valuable teaching feature.

I’ve found that this is one of the best ways to identify weaknesses in my strategy skills. Do I often miss small pairs? Straight flush draws? Now I know where and how I need to be more careful in my play.