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Part One

The Ins and Outs of Video Poker

How Much in This Book is True?

Most of it, actually, but not all. Most of my professional-level colleagues would be horror-stricken at the thought of being identified in a book. So whenever I felt the need to speak about them, I changed their names and some of their characteristics. But the gist of who they are and what happened is factual.

The numbers I cite as to how much I won or lost at a particular time are reasonably accurate. But some of these events took place seven years ago and I just don't remember completely.

The names of the following people are real (or in many cases are the pseudonyms these people use). They're all described fairly, if at times flatteringly: Jeffrey Compton, Anthony Curtis, Liam W. and Katherine Daily, Tom and Margaret Elardi, Adam Fine, Glenn Fine, Lenny Frome, Paul Henderson, Skip Hughes, Dan Paymar, Lawrence Revere, Jean Scott, Shirley and her family, Arnold Snyder, TomSki, Stanford Wong, Dean and Sara Zamzow.

All other names in the book are fictitious and are used to represent people I've known.

Of necessity, a lot of what happened to me over the past seven years has been omitted. Some of it is repetitious, some has little to do with video poker, and some secrets are better left untold. The central story of the book, however—that I started with a \$6,000 bankroll in 1994 and my wife Shirley and I together netted more than \$1 million by playing video poker between September 1, 2000, and March 15, 2001—is absolutely true.

Part Two

From Backgammon to Big Vegas

What I Learned from Playing Blackjack

In the mid-1970s, my gambling interest was backgammon. I bought every backgammon book I could find—and most of them were very bad. (Not so today. Some very bright and competent players are writing about that game.) Winning at gambling was the goal. So I wanted to learn everything about the game that I could. The same stores that sold books on backgammon also sold books on blackjack. And many of my backgammon buddies also played blackjack and talked of their successful forays to Vegas, so I got the book *Playing Blackjack as a Business* by Lawrence Revere.

Revere's book promised that I could be a winner if I did things his way. I heard stories of guys with little success with women at home (i.e., me) who would learn to play blackjack and have these romantic all-expenses-paid-by-the-casino trips to Vegas with a different gorgeous lady each time. Sign me up!

After I learned basic strategy reasonably well, I came across a magazine ad for a place called Vegas World. It promised free room and board if I would bring in \$2,500 and play \$25 a hand for so many hours. This casino, run by Bob Stupak and located on a small part of the site of the current Stratosphere, didn't have very good blackjack rules. But I really didn't know how to get good deals at any casinos that did.

So I took on Stupak Thanksgiving weekend 1978. It was my first trip ever to Las Vegas. I played the whole weekend and won \$2,000. (Actually I won \$1,500 and received the extra money

from a casino mistake. More on that later.) I was hooked. On that particular trip, most of the time when I drew a card to a 15 or 16, I ended up pulling a 4 or 5. Not bad! Other players would stand on these “stiff” hands and I’d win while they’d lose. I felt quite superior. I knew how to play and was on my way!

Since that Vegas trip had ended up positive and the books all said that I could win, everything seemed natural. I figured that most of my trips would turn out that way. They didn’t. Years later, I came to realize that the game at Vegas World had almost a 1% house edge and that for 400 hands or so on a weekend, luck is more predominant than rules or even skill. My return trips to Vegas World were negative. Each weekend at a time, I chalked it up to bad luck. But I now know that with Bob Stupak’s rules and Bob Dancer’s skills, I had no chance.

Before I chronicle the rest of what I learned from blackjack, let me tell you a fascinating story from my first trip. I ended up being mentioned in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that weekend as a “high-roller gambler.” I saved the article for years, but lost it somewhere along the way.

Unbeknownst to me, a sting was about to go down at Vegas World. A group of cheating players had approached a dealer and told him he would earn a great deal of money if he’d let them substitute a fake shoe (called a “cooler”) with the cards stacked in a particular way. Once the shoe was in place, the team would play out the stacked shoe and take the casino for big bucks. After the shoe had been played, the cards would be shuffled and the evidence destroyed—everyone would be home free. The dealer told the gang it sounded like a good idea, then went straight to his bosses with the story. The plan was to send the dealer to the table with the best cameras located near it (including one feeding to Stupak’s second-floor suite), and cram the place with undercover Metros (the Vegas police), who would be playing at nearby blackjack tables.

At the appointed time, everything was in place and would have gone down as planned, except for one thing. At just that

moment, I walked up to the blackjack table that was being staked out, asked for a \$500 marker, and started to play. And play. And since I was winning, I kept playing! The place was filled with very nervous team players waiting for me to leave, and Metro officers playing blackjack and losing far more than they had budgeted because they thought they would be playing for only a few minutes for cover purposes.

The dealer mentioned several times how nice the gourmet room was and that if I wanted to go, the service was best before 7 p.m. Different pit people, all in a friendly manner, told me that the key to winning in the long run was to quit while I was ahead. “It would be a shame to give that all back.”

Stupak must have been fuming! When a sting is about to go down, everyone’s adrenaline is flowing because there’s no telling what’s about to happen. If the bad guys made the cops and decided that the dealer had double-crossed them, things could get ugly fast. The police all had guns. Did the players? Who knew? If they did, would they be arrested quietly or would this be the “Shoot-out at Vegas World”? I played blithely on. I was totally unaware that anything was going on other than the fact that this was my first trip to Vegas and I was winning. Just like I was supposed to.

Finally, I decided to go. I announced that I wanted to buy back my marker (like the book said to do) and the pit crew was obviously more than happy to get rid of me. I couldn’t figure that out. I’d won maybe \$1,500, but that was nowhere near enough for a casino to worry about. Meanwhile, the people in the pit were trying not to appear nervous about what was going to happen next. I suspect they were frightened at the thought of so many guns being in their vicinity, but they were so flustered that they returned the marker and let me keep the \$500 in chips too!

From talking to a dealer the next day, I found out that five minutes after I left, the table emptied. The team came, the shoes were switched, everyone on the team bet \$500 or more off the top of the shoe, and the Metro officers moved in. It was over in a minute, and the cheaters went off to jail quietly. Most of the patrons

there that night probably had no idea what had just happened.

Two days later I saw Stupak in the coffee shop and I asked him about it. He said he'd wanted me to leave the game, "anyhow and any way." He said he'd kept hoping that I would win more or vary my bets big or something so he could justify kicking me out of the place without raising the suspicions of the bad guys. But I kept flat-betting green chips (consistently betting \$25 per hand) and winning modestly. What could he do?

I ended up with an extra \$500 due to the pit mistake. Other players might have responded differently, but I kept my mouth shut and hung onto the extra money. Back then, I didn't have a fixed philosophy about what to do if the casino gave me excess money, as I do now. If a casino error in my favor is traceable to a particular person who will have to make up the money, I give it back. I reason that anyone working for wages in a casino probably needs money more than I do. But if it's going to go to casino overhead, I keep it. I figure I need the money more than the casino stockholders do. It may not be your philosophy, but it's mine.

For years I continued to fly in to Las Vegas on three-day weekends to play blackjack. Overall, I am a loser at this game. The profits I made in the year or so I played after I moved to Las Vegas in 1993 came nowhere close to offsetting the losses sustained during my learning-curve period.

People who know of my successes at video poker may be a bit surprised to learn that I'm a net loser at blackjack. After all, anyone smart enough to win consistently at video poker is probably smart enough to learn to count cards at blackjack. (And vice versa. Successful blackjack players often become successful video poker players.) And if I was a net loser lifetime-to-date, why would I move to Vegas? Did I have a bankruptcy wish?

What changed me from being marginally successful to being very successful was the use of a personal computer. I programmed mainframe computers for many years in the early '70s and all through the '80s. But I never got into PCs. The early models had so many problems, I just avoided them. Also, I heard that

technology was moving so fast that by the time you got a new computer hooked up, it was almost obsolete. Since I was always trying to save money (so I could get a gambling bankroll, among other things), I didn't own a computer until 1994.

I learned to count cards manually. I got pretty good at it, but never great. How did I know if I had the right count at a particular time? I didn't, really. Unless there was an outside source counting the deck right along with me, who's to say whether I was right or wrong?

Blackjack computer programs today, of course, correct the player every step of the way. The player can input the strategy he wants to use, along with the rules and number of decks, then let the computer deal cards until diamonds grow on trees. Every time the player makes a mistake, the computer speaks up. These programs were becoming available before I quit the game, but I didn't have a computer and wasn't convinced of their value. I now believe that if I'd realized the value of practicing on a PC, my blackjack days would have been much more profitable. I can still go back, learn to count on a computer, and play blackjack, of course. But with the counter-catching tools available to casinos today and the fact that my face is already well known to people in the business, I believe that my days playing profitable high-stakes blackjack would be limited. So I don't even try.

So, then, why did I move to Vegas even though my lifetime results playing blackjack were negative? Two reasons. First, the three years prior to my moving to Vegas yielded positive results. And this made sense. My counting skills were improving and I was learning about the better places to play, so of course my results improved. By the time I made the move, I was definitely a small favorite at the game. Plus I knew of several blackjack promotions that made me a rather large favorite.

The second reason I moved to Vegas even though I was just a small favorite at my game of choice was to take advantage of coupons and casino promotions. I discuss some of these promotions in depth in subsequent chapters. For now, suffice it to say

they were a big part of my early Vegas profits, but I never did capitalize enough to make up for the losses in my earlier years.

In the year and a half that my partner, Ginnie, and I played blackjack in Vegas, we made something like \$12,000 from blackjack (including promotions directly related to blackjack) and \$21,000 from coupons and other promotions. This \$33,000 was for two people for a year and a half. It was subsistence success. But when most of the blackjack promotions disappeared, we had to make a switch to quarter video poker. Ginnie's commitment to Vegas (and me) switched as well, and she decided to move back to Southern California where she could get a guaranteed \$25,000-a-year job. Things would have had to get a lot worse for me to give up and get a regular job again. And they haven't yet.

Fact is, the lessons I learned at blackjack served me well later when I played video poker. These lessons include the following:

- Play only when you have the advantage. If the house has the edge, it will beat you in the long run.
- If you don't continue to practice your skills, they deteriorate. The matrix numbers in a blackjack counting system are pretty complicated. If you don't review them regularly, they get fuzzy. Today, six years after I last played serious blackjack, I still remember about 90% of the strategy matrix. But that last 10% is gone, which probably reduces my skill by .05% or so. That's a serious amount, given the minuscule edge blackjack players must exploit.
- You'll have good days and bad days and they'll often have little to do with how well you're playing. Some days you draw to 16s and get 5s more often than you're supposed to. Those days you'll win, whether it was correct to be drawing to that 16 or not. Other days every 12 you draw to will bust. That day you'll lose—whether hitting the 12 was correct or not.

This was a tough lesson. Accepting randomness in scores is not an easy concept. It's easy to buy into the idea that if you play well, you'll win and if you play poorly, you'll lose. That concept is correct if you look at the game as being a year, or 10 years, long. I played long enough that I believe it's fair to say that the main

reason I wasn't more successful at blackjack was that my skills weren't sufficient. But for individual days or weeks, I had good sessions and bad and luck was a major factor in the short run.

- It's easier to understand what casinos are doing if you consider them as business enterprises attempting to make money. I've heard fellow pros rail about casinos, "Those lousy bastards. They used to stand on all seventeens and now they're hitting the soft ones. What are they trying to do? Ruin the game for everyone?" Or later in video poker, I would read Internet e-mails berating a casino because "it used to have twelve full-pay Deuces Wild machines and now it has only four. And those machines are so busy that I can't find two side by side to play!" There will always be changes. But good players will find ways to prosper. In the professional gambling world, if you're doing things the same way you did two years ago, you're probably not doing very well!

- Playing a 100% game is no bargain. It costs money to live—cars, insurance, food, housing, clothes, etc. No matter where you live, these expenses are very real. If gambling is your source of income, you need a game that returns significantly higher than 100% to end up ahead. To those who argue that the rooms and meals provided by casinos have real value for out-of-towners, I agree, but they're not worth nearly as much as their face value or even what the casino would like you to believe. If I didn't have a free room at a casino, I'd stay home where my rent is paid by the month whether I'm there full time or not. Yes, you can eat wonderful meals in a casino "for free." But the tip alone is more than I usually pay for meals at home.

- The advice you get from other gamblers is often faulty. In blackjack, people will tell you that "you should always insure a blackjack," or that "the actions of the guy at third base are more important than anybody else's," or that "a bad player at the table can ruin the deck for everyone." I'd wager that no winning player believes any of that, but that many wannabe winning players do. You even find some of these theories in print.

In video poker it's much the same, except now the advice is, "In 10/7 Double Bonus, if you're dealt two pair with aces and eights, hold just the aces." This is also wrong, although not by much. Or how about, "If the machine has just hit a royal flush, you had better not play it because it's rare that a machine hits for two royals in the same day." That's total nonsense, but you hear it all the time. "Quit while you're ahead," and "If you're losing, quit," are both examples of nonsensical advice. The two statements offer opposite advice, so it's impossible for both to be true. But it is possible that both are false. I'll have a lot to say on this later in the book.

Here's another: "Having fun is more important than whether you win or lose." This, likewise, is a bunch of crap. If you want to tell yourself this so you don't feel so bad when you lose, go ahead. But winning players didn't get to be winners by going out to have fun, then being content to take the wins if they came along. Winning players got to be winners by working hard.

- The learning process is easier if you have study partners. I swapped notes regularly with several budding blackjack counters. This was important. If blackjack was still an important game to me, I would regularly check out bulletin boards run by Stanford Wong and Arnold Snyder. You can learn a lot from them. Unfortunately, many casino table-game executives lurk on these bulletin boards, just to see what the players are thinking.

- Finally, if learning to gamble well helps you get laid, I never learned nearly well enough! Ginnie was lovely, and so is Shirley (whom I'll marry in a few chapters!). But both of them met me on the dance floor and the fact that I could dance was more important to them than whether I knew how negative the count had to be before I hit a hard 14 against a dealer 5. There was more than a year between these two ladies and during that time, no supermodels were standing in line to meet me. So if you're looking for a profession that teems with romantic encounters, try becoming a dance teacher!

My First Play for Dollars

Note: An honest accounting of “how I got from there to here” must include a few shenanigans in which I indulged early on. This story happened pretty much as presented at a real casino in Las Vegas, but the name “Firestone” is obviously made up.

I’d been playing at the Sahara on Thursdays and Vacation Village on Sundays and Mondays for almost a year when I discovered a good dollar play at the Firestone. I don’t remember how I came to find it in the first place, but it wound up being a turning point in my career.

The game at the Firestone was dollar 10/7 Double Bonus with a .39% cash slot club. This was a 100.56% return, and since dollars allowed me to put about \$2,500-\$3,000 through the machines an hour, I figured that this was worth about \$15 per hour. That was about the same hourly return as the quarter games at the other casinos, so there was no incentive for me to move up in denomination, especially because now I would have W-2Gs to worry about. The casino is required to issue an IRS reporting document called a W-2G on all jackpots of \$1,200 or higher—which on this game was triggered by the \$4,000 payoff for the royal flush.

However, there was a promotion at the Firestone that caught my eye. Every time you got a 4-of-a-kind or a straight flush, the change girls would stamp a card that had 25 squares. It looked like a bingo card. There were six free squares and a completed card was worth almost \$200. That meant each quad or straight flush earned an extra bonus worth a little more than \$10 ($\$200/19 = \10.53), and since I would get about 1.5 of these an hour, the promotion was worth an additional \$16 an hour.

Now it all added up to \$31 per hour. Plus, I could play any hour of any day of the week for the three months the promotion was scheduled to run. I knew Double Bonus cold (from my play at Vacation Village) and by then I’d built my bankroll up to about \$20,000. I still didn’t know a lot about how much bankroll I

Do You Know What it Takes to Win?

I've posed the following riddle to hundreds of people—both one-on-one and in the "Secrets of a Video Poker Winner" classes that I teach. Of the 20 or so winning gamblers I've queried, *every one* got the answer correct and thought the riddle was trivial and easy. Of the non-winners I've queried, more than half have missed it. Why? Simply because what it takes to win and what people *think* it takes to win are two different things. Here's the riddle.

Stan and Pearl are imaginary friends of mine. Every night they go to a casino and play dollar 9/6 Jacks or Better, a game that returns slightly over 99.5% when played perfectly—which they are able to do. (There is no slot club in this part of my imagination.)

Stan and Pearl are more disciplined than any players you've ever seen. Stan plays exactly 10 hands every night, then stops whether he's ahead or behind. Pearl also plays 10 hands, but if she's ahead by at least the value of a flush, she plays five more hands. If she hits a flush or higher during those five hands, she parlays those winnings by playing five more hands. And she keeps playing her sets of five hands until she finally hits a five-hand dry spell, at which time she too will stop for the night.

Stan stops and Pearl parlays. Here's the question for you: If Stan and Pearl gamble in this manner every night for a year, whose net result is more likely to be better at the end of the year? Go ahead and figure it out before you turn the page. I'll wait.

The people who like Pearl's chances often tell me that she's playing with the house's money and that's good. Or they'll tell me that the secret to winning is to catch a machine on a hot streak, then ride it to wealth. Players who know how to win, however, know that Pearl's approach is the wrong one.

Winning players know that the key to this puzzle is that 9/6 Jacks or Better returns only 99.5% without a slot club, which means this game is a loser for the player. So the one who plays the least loses the least. Since Stan plays less than Pearl, Stan figures to lose less than Pearl during the year.

If we alter the riddle slightly so that the casino has a slot club that pays 1% cashback, everything changes. The game is now worth 100.5%. So since Pearl is the one playing more hands, Pearl is the one who will usually have the better results.

You've probably heard that you should bet more when you're ahead. You've also heard that you should quit when you're ahead. This is another example of two widely quoted rules that recommend opposite actions. It's not possible for them both to be correct, but it is possible for both to be wrong. And they are.

The secret to winning at any gambling game is to bet only when you have the advantage. If you're the favorite and you can afford the swings, go for it. If you're not, don't. Period! That's the secret to winning.

needed to survive the swings on this game—I hoped my \$20K would be enough.

All of my play up until that time had been for quarters and I'd been largely ignored in casinos. Change people never hung around; quarter players require hand-pay jackpots only on royal flushes, which don't show up very often. But as a dollar player,

Adding Up the Advantage

Here's the step-by-step process for calculating an edge in situations such as that encountered at the Firestone.

Step 1: Determine the advantage

Base game	100.17%
Less: factor for mistakes (I knew this game well.)	.00%
Real return	100.17%
Plus slot club cashback	.39%
Total return	100.56%

Step 2: Determine amount of action

550 hands x \$5 per hand = \$2,750

The low 550 hands per hour was due to the slower-than-normal play due to frequent "coin spills" (see page 63).

Step 3: Multiply the advantage times the action

.56% x \$2,750 = \$15.40—which I round downward to \$15.

The 550 hands per hour is just an approximation anyway.

Step 4: Add the value of the promotion

This is an approximation. Each bingo square was worth \$200/19 = \$10.52. I figured I'd get about 1.5 of these per hour, so I gave the promotion a value of \$16 per hour.

Adding everything up yields the play's value of \$31 per hour. There's always some amount of guesswork and approximation involved. But the objective is not to peg precisely what you will make per hour. It's to determine whether playing is worth the time to begin with and whether it's better than playing someplace else.

jackpots get magnified. Every time I called an attendant over to mark my bingo card, the jackpot was at least \$250. Several times a day it was \$400, \$800, or occasionally \$4,000. To a change person, these are big jackpots. They were big to me, too, and I began toking a dollar every time I got a \$250 or \$400 jackpot, \$2 for an \$800 hand of four aces, and \$10 for a royal flush. Not major amounts to be sure, but more than I had ever tipped before.

This also made me a bigger-than-average tipper for the Firestone, and the change people began paying a lot of attention to me. How was I doing? Could they call for cocktails? Did I need anything? Everything I said was treated as though I was a wit and raconteur. I responded to the attention and enjoyed being considered a sport, at least as long as it was only costing me a buck a quad!

One time I was going through a dry spell. One of the change girls came over and asked me why I hadn't turned my light on recently for her to stamp my card. I told her I was down \$1,200 in the past two hours. To my surprise she said I deserved to have a couple of squares marked to make up for my bad luck. So she proceeded give me credit for two "virtual" quads. I thanked her and gave her two \$1 token.

Whenever I got a quad, a change girl raced up to mark my card. They wanted the dollar tip. After one attendant marked it, another would come over a few minutes later and ask if I had received credit for the quad yet. I would honestly respond, "Yes, but only once so far." Then that second attendant would take the card and mark it once or twice more. I'd thank her and toke her appropriately. It became common practice to be credited at least twice, often more, for each quad.

This was unbelievable. Every square marked on the card was worth more than \$10, and the change girls were willing to sell the marks for a dollar apiece. It wasn't just a few of employees. At least ten change girls, two hosts, and four floorpeople participated in this scam. Employee morale at the Firestone was, to say the least, quite low at the time. The employees felt betrayed by

the casino (which was up for sale) and were willing to stick it to management every chance they got.

By the end of the bingo promotion, I was showing up to play with plenty of \$5 bills on me. When I hit a quad, I'd present the card to one of my "friends," with one of the fivers folded inside. The card was returned with a lot of spaces stamped. In a typical eight-hour playing session, I should have received 12 marks (worth \$125). However, I would end up with an average of two cards filled (worth \$400). It probably cost me \$25 a night in expenses to harvest this bonanza.

The promotion ended and I went on to different things. I figured I'd never see the likes of that promotion again. Wrong! The next year it returned, except that this time the completed bingo cards received only \$100 instead of \$200. Still, the squares were worth more than \$5 apiece and the same change people were willing to sell them for \$1 again. In addition, now we all knew how to work this game. And since no one had been caught the year before, they were willing to stamp three or four times for every quad hit.

This went on for awhile. Eventually, other knowledgeable players discovered the promotion and began playing it, too. They saw my tipping, figured out what it was buying me, and began doing the same thing. It's hard to keep a good thing quiet.

As it happened, the 10/7 machines lost money for two months in a row and the slot director figured he needed to do something about it. He decided to kick out everyone who had hit royal flushes during those two months. I was never accused of buying bingo squares.

If I were to discover such a situation today, I would walk away. Quickly. At this point in my career, I'm unwilling to risk being caught in a scandal. Remember, a lot of people knew about this and just one person having an attack of conscience could have brought the whole thing down. In this case everyone had an incentive to keep quiet about it, and it turns out everyone did, but

you can never know for sure what will happen in such a situation.

At the time I was struggling. Survival itself wasn't at issue, but I'd experienced days where I'd lost as much as \$3,000. Having several of these days in a row didn't seem out of the question. My bankroll kept increasing (albeit with large swings), but I wanted as

Coin Spills and Ticket-Out

I've played a lot of dollar Double Bonus machines that "spill" coins, instead of registering them on the credit meter, when the count is above 400. On these machines, all quads that pay 400 coins (2s, 3s, or 4s) spill into the tray, unless you have exactly zero credits when you hit them. Other quads and straight flushes that pay 250 coins create spillage if there are more than 150 credits registered when they hit. And when you get right up close to 400 credits, any 3-of-a-kind or higher drops coins into the tray.

When coins spill, you have to either feed them back into the machine one by one or transport them to the change booth. Since I'll often load a machine with hundreds and play through a spill, I've had to transport \$800 or more to the change booth on dozens of occasions. Sometimes I'm ahead of the game when I do this and sometimes I'm down a thousand or two. Regardless, people see me hauling the coins and come out with comments like, "Boy! I wish I was as lucky as you," or "Where were you playing? You found a good machine!"

Since most players bring a lot less than \$800 to a casino, they figure that if someone has \$800 all at once it must mean they're ahead. I don't usually want to explain to strangers that I actually started with \$2,000 in my pocket and am down a bundle. Or worse, that the \$800 they see is nothing (and they should see the \$4,000 in my pocket). So I usually smile and say something like, "I guess it was my turn." This seems to satisfy most people.

Today, many casinos are switching to a ticket-in ticket-out procedure. With these systems, credits accumulate until you're ready to leave. When you press the cashout button, you get a receipt, which is redeemable at the cashier or a change booth. Cashing a receipt for \$2,000 doesn't require much more effort than cashing one for \$20. And it's a lot faster than cashing coin. Best of all, it circumvents the annoyance of being congratulated when you've lost a bundle. I love this new system.

big of a cushion as I could get. By then I'd developed an obsessive loathing of ever working an 8-to-5 office job again.

Today I'm not struggling in the same sense as I was then and the actions described in this adventure now seem money-grubbing and unworthy. I hope I'm never so desperate that I have to do such things again.

Most serious gamblers who have been around long enough have faced similar temptations. A few have run away quickly, though probably more have succumbed somewhere along the way. If gambling is a life you contemplate for yourself, you might want to stop and think about how you would have reacted in this situation. And then, when it actually does happen somewhere down the road, see how your actual response jibes with what you think you would have done.

Big Time at Bally's

In mid-to-late 1996, Bally's Las Vegas had full-pay Deuces Wild for very high denominations. By very high, I mean three-coin \$25 machines and three-coin \$100 machines. With the slot club (around .15% cashback at the time, plus another .075% that had to be cashed in December), it put this game's return just fractionally below 101%.

Arnie and I considered teaming up to tackle the \$25 machine. We figured a taxable jackpot would happen only on wild royals and higher, which occurs slightly more than once every 500 hands. The machines would hold only 47 credits at a time, so they'd spill into the tray frequently—or so we hoped!

The 47-credits limit existed because 48 \$25 coins adds up to \$1,200, and it used to be that machines would never hold \$1,200 or more in credits at a time. Apparently, when they set this up, someone confused accumulated credit totals with the \$1,200-in-one-hand W-2G minimum. On this particular machine, full houses paid 9 coins (\$225), 4-of-a-kinds paid 15 coins (\$375), straight flushes paid 27 coins (\$675), and 5-of-a-kinds

The Benefits of Losing

Assume you have plenty of bankroll, video poker knowledge, and discipline to play only games where you have the advantage. You go to a new casino and can choose between two options:

Option 1: On Trip 1 you lose \$500. On Trip 2 you lose \$500. And on Trip 3 you win \$1,000.

Option 2: On Trip 1 you lose \$50,000. On Trip 2 you lose \$50,000. And on Trip 3 you win \$100,000.

Which is the more profitable option? At first blush, they seem equivalent. In both cases you break even.

Shirley greatly prefers Option 1. For her, the pain associated with losing \$50,000 twice is much greater than the joy of winning \$100,000. So even though she breaks even, the stress factor with Option 2 is too high for her “psychological bankroll.”

I, however, greatly prefer Option 2. Why? Because when you lose large amounts, casinos rush in to nurture you. Casinos *like* players who can lose \$50,000, pay off their debts, and come back and gamble more. So to ease the pain, they’ll often rebate 10% of a large loss if you ask for it. They figure it’s well worth \$5,000 today to have you come back and lose \$50,000 again tomorrow.

At the end of Trip 2, they’ll usually give you another \$5,000 or so if you ask for it. You are, after all, an extremely valuable customer. And they’re still \$90,000 ahead, so they like their position.

Though I’ve been using the \$5,000-rebate figure like it’s a fixed amount, it’s not. They might offer you \$2,000 first. Maybe you’ll squeeze \$8,000 out of them. Some casinos won’t give you anything. But 10% of your losses is approximately correct at most places.

At the end of Trip 3, you get to keep all \$100,000 you’ve won. You don’t have to return the two \$5,000 rebates. So with Option 2, you end up \$10,000 ahead, which is far superior to breaking even.

Now let’s consider a new Option 3: Trip 1, you win \$100,000. Trip 2, you lose \$50,000. And trip 3, you lose \$50,000 again. (“I’ll take that one,” Shirley says, “except I’ll quit after Trip 1.” Not a choice.)

When you lose \$50,000 on Trip 2, you’re unlikely to get a rebate. The casino will look at it as if you’re still playing with its money. It’s worth a shot, so go ahead and ask. But don’t be too surprised when you get turned down. Your odds improve on Trip 3 (now you’ve had two \$50,000 losses in a row), but it’s still iffy.

The best strategy for getting this rebate is to be in the red lifetime-to-date. If you’re skilled at the strategies and are playing the right games, this won’t be the case at too many casinos. But it will be at a few (personally, I’m probably behind at 20 or so casinos throughout the country). At those where you’re losing, if you’re behind a bunch, ask away. You’re a favorite to get lucky.

paid 45 coins (\$1,125). If I had 30 credits accumulated and hit a straight flush for 27 more, the total would add up to 57 coins. Since the machine held only 47, the 27 coins would spill into the tray and the meter would retain the remaining 30 coins. On the next hand, I'd bet three coins so the meter would decrease to 27 coins. If I collected on a straight or less on this hand, the credits would rack up. If I hit a straight flush or 5-of-a-kind, 27 or 45 coins would spill, respectively. These coin spills took a lot of time—partly because when you hit several of them in a row, the machine hopper would empty out and there'd have to be a fill. The better your less-than-wild-royal results were, the more time was wasted with the spillage. Other time-consuming factors included the necessity of a hand-pay for a wild royal or higher and the need to constantly feed the machine with either coins or hundred-dollar bills.

If I could get \$30,000 (400 hands) or more through the machine per hour, which we figured would be manageable because three of the machines were side by side and I could switch off while waiting for a hand-pay, this was a \$300-per-hour opportunity—plenty of money to share if we could work out the details of the partnership. I couldn't take this play on myself. My bankroll was somewhere between \$50,000 and \$70,000 at the time—a nice chunk of change, to be sure, but nowhere near enough to play this game. Or so I thought. I knew from a lot of experience at quarter Deuces that when you don't hit four deuces (paying \$15,000 in this game!), you're in for a long expensive day. I wasn't nearly brave enough (perhaps foolhardy would be more accurate) to want to tackle this solo. But by the time Arnie and I had worked out the details for our joint venture, the games were gone. Another player had beaten up the casino pretty badly, I suspect. It wasn't me, but I knew that someday I'd have the bankroll and the nerve to try such machines.

Shortly after New Year's 1997, I heard that the games were back—sort of. Same denomination, but now the machines were 10/7 Double Bonus in the Bally GameMaker version. Double

Bonus is the same game I'd played for so many hours at Vacation Village, "Firestone," and the Rio. I knew it cold. But I'd been playing the IGT version, which paid only 50 per coin on the straight flush. The Bally version paid 80 per coin. This enhancement added more than a third of a percent, so the game was worth 100.52%. With the same .225% slot club, it totaled almost 100.75%, which was about three-quarters as good as the earlier play. Still not bad—more than \$200 an hour.

Overall, my life was going very well about then. My bankroll had grown since the time of the first play, Anthony Curtis was about to publish my book, and Shirley and I had spent a spectacular New Year's holiday after visiting with her family over Christmas. I decided that this was as good a time as any for me to take a shot at these machines.

I decided to put \$8,000 at risk. This was not a scientifically determined amount. It was simply the amount of cash I had on hand at the time without going into my checking account or mutual funds. If I could hit enough good hands early on, this \$8,000 might blossom into something big. On the other hand, if I had two bad hours in a row at the start, my \$8,000 bankroll would be wiped out. And I'd decided that if the \$8,000 went, I wouldn't chase it. At least I hoped wouldn't. I usually kept promises to myself, but not always. I was more than a little nervous. The biggest game I'd played previously was for \$5 units, which took \$25 per hand. Loading up a three-coin \$25 machine takes \$75, so I'd be risking three times as much as I ever had before.

I first had to learn the game. When the straight flush pays more, there are several differences in strategy. To find out what they were, I tried to check the hands systematically, investigating those with straight flush potential. I first looked at 4-card straight flushes compared to 5-card straights—hands such as 4♥5♥6♥7♥8♣. It turns out that it's still slightly better to keep the straight, as long as all cards are ten or below. However, if there are one or more high cards in the straight flush, as in 8♠9♠T♣J♣Q♥, it's better to try for the straight flush. The presence of the three

jacks remaining to be drawn (and return even money) is enough to make the difference in the play.

I then checked the 3-card royal flushes compared to high pairs, as well as 3-card royal flushes compared to 4-card flushes. There were a lot of these and they weren't easy to figure out. For example, from K♣Q♣J♣5♣4♦, you hold KQJ in the 10/7/80 version of this game rather than the KQJ5 in the 10/7/50 version, but from K♣Q♣J♣5♣J♦ or K♣Q♣J♣5♣9♦, you hold KQJ5 in both games.

I knew that double inside straight flushes with no high cards were close in value to either a J or an A, depending on straight interference. So I checked those. And I checked many other hands too. I spent at least 10 hours finding and memorizing these differences. As I look back on the notes I took then, I see now that I missed quite a few of the strategy changes. I know a lot more about various kinds of interference than I did then and the available tools (for analysis) are better now. Still, I went forward at the time with the best tools I had.

At about 8 o'clock one evening, I took my eight grand and went off to Bally's to seek my fortune. Their high-limit room, called Champagne Slots, was essentially empty. A host was idly chatting with a cashier when I walked up and asked to buy \$5,000 in \$25 tokens. This got their attention. Before I could sit down I had the host's card in my hand with a promise that he'd be available 24/7, forever and ever, to get me anything my little heart desired. Well, maybe he didn't promise quite that much, but it sounded like it. I tried to be cool, as though I did this all the time. "I'll get back to you. Right now I'm more interested in getting four aces than I am in eating."

"Okay, fine. But don't forget, I'm right here."

It took all of 20 minutes for the machine to swallow the \$5,000. *Slurp slurp* and it was all gone. Feelings of dread began to spread over me. I started feeding hundred dollar bills into the machine, each one worth only slightly more than a single bet. The cashier came over and asked me if I wanted to buy more

tokens. I told her that I'd try the bills for awhile. "Maybe it'll change my luck."

Two minutes later, I was dealt four 3s for a \$6,000 payoff and I was even again. Phew! I now knew that \$8,000 was a *piti-fully* small bankroll with which to attack this machine, but I kept going anyway. I moved over to the adjacent machine and before I'd been paid for the 3s, I hit four kings for \$3,750. I started to breathe normally again. This might turn out to be an okay experience after all.

I now had a small cushion. Very small. In 15 minutes I was back to my original \$8,000. Then I hit another quad. In the next hour, I hit for three more 4-of-a-kinds, one of which was "special" (paying \$6,000 rather than the \$3,750 for the "non-special"), so I was up ten grand. Life was beautiful!

Over the next few hours I gave most of that back. Shortly after midnight, I hit four aces: \$12,000 all at once. Yes! Since this jackpot was more than \$10,000, it had to be verified by a "suit"—i.e., a slot supervisor or a shift boss. No problem. There were two vacant machines just sitting there and I had cash and tokens.

Cash or Coin?

When the Bally's floorman came over to handle the \$6,000 payment for the four 3s on the \$25 machine, he asked me if I wanted cash or coin. Since these machines were balky in terms of accepting coins, I asked for bills. When the two floorpeople brought over the \$6,000 (there's always a witness for transactions of this size), they had \$5,000 with a paper strap around it and ten \$100 bills.

They asked if I wanted the \$5,000 counted in front of me. I was amazed by the question. Even when I'd hit a \$20,000 royal at the Frontier earlier, everything was counted out. I was told that at Bally's, a lot of the customers didn't want to waste time with counting. And besides, two people had counted it already. I told them the "strap" was fine with me, although as soon as they left I counted the money anyway.

A side note: I've since received several hundred \$5,000 or \$10,000 straps from high limit-cashiers in several different Las Vegas casinos. I believe that I've never been shortchanged.

While waiting to be paid on my aces, I was dealt aces on the adjacent machine. Another \$12,000. I whooped. I'd never won this much money at one time and I was excited. A minute or so later I'd calmed down enough to move over to the third machine, where it took me five minutes to line up a straight flush for another \$6,000. Amazingly, all three machines were now out of commission with jackpots requiring hand-pays. *My* jackpots. I couldn't play, so I just sat there, alone, at one in the morning, basking in the glow of \$30,000 that I'd amassed in less than 15 minutes. Plus, I still had coins in my tray and a strap in my pocket. I was ecstatic.

At this point, I considered getting a room at Bally's for the night. Although I lived less than 10 miles away, at that moment I wasn't sure I could drive safely. But by the time I got paid, I was fine.

This was when I learned the rules for leaving money in the cage. I didn't want to take possession of 30 grand in public, but I was required to fill out a line-of-credit application before I could put the money on deposit. I filled out the form. They kept the money and gave me a receipt.

(Once you have one line of credit in Las Vegas and a history of paying it off on time, getting more lines is easy. You don't need to fill out all the forms. The casino at which you're applying just calls Central Credit, the credit-overseeing organization that most Las Vegas casinos use, and they set you up fast.)

I played several more hours and finished at 5 in the morning. My net for the day was +\$22,000, and I had a big stack of W-2Gs. I'd had one session this big before—at the Frontier—but this was still special. I had to call Shirley. Today, I've hit enough of these jackpots that I just let her sleep, but not back then. Besides, she was a new girlfriend—people do things differently under those circumstances. Shirley was surprised when her cell phone rang at 5 a.m. in a motel room in Fresno. Initially, she was frightened, thinking it must be something bad for anyone to wake her up like that. But when I told her the story, she forgave me for calling.

I had trouble going to sleep. When I finally did, my dreams were filled with straps of hundred dollar bills. It was exhilarating! When I woke up, however, I faced a big decision. I'd taken a potshot and gotten away with it. I was willing to lose \$8,000 the night before, but this was a new day. Twenty grand was a good-sized addition to my bankroll, but I still had less than half of what I needed to play that game safely. (Based on the 3- to 5-royal rule of thumb and a \$60,000 royal, I figured I needed between \$180,000 and \$300,000 to play the game forever.) I'd lost half a royal in one day several times while playing for lower stakes. Half a royal on this machine was \$30,000. One average bad day could wipe out the results from the best day in my life so far. What to do?

I decided to continue to go for it, but at the same time, I'd also lock up some of my profit. I put away \$13,000, putting me \$5,000 ahead of where I'd started. That left me \$17,000 for another potshot.

I'd been around gambling for 25 years. I knew that locking up profits had very little, if any, mathematical basis. Nothing was sacred about where I was when I took the first potshot, so neither was my new bankroll of \$5,000 more. At the same time, I knew I was gambling for bigger stakes than I could afford. I was out on the skinny limbs of my bankroll and my nerves; thus, stopping points made a lot of sense—even if their only value was psychological.

So I went back the next night, and lo and behold, I won again—though this time it was “only” \$13,000. And I won again the next night. In the first two weeks I played those \$25 three-coiners, I was up more than \$60,000. I had losing sessions, but not many, and they were much smaller than the winning sessions. I was in heaven. Finally, gambling for real was as good as it had been in my dreams.

After another three weeks, I'd added another \$40,000. It was only mid-February and I was up more than \$100,000 for the year. Quite a heady experience. By March 1, I was up \$120,000. But then my gambling world turned upside down. In the next two

weeks I lost \$80,000. Two months previous, my entire bankroll was about \$80,000, and now I watched that much go away almost instantly.

I'd expected this losing streak. It had always shown up before, and I had every reason to believe that it always would in the future. But so much. And so fast. Damn! It was devastating.

Those early-morning calls to Shirley weren't so jubilant anymore. It's a lot more fun explaining how you just won \$20,000 than how you just lost \$20,000. What can you say? "The machines plain died. For awhile there, even three-of-a-kind seemed like a big hand. A flush? A straight? I don't remember what they look like."

I set my stop-loss at a net profit of \$30,000. How I came up with that number, I don't know. Shirley told me that if I had set my stop loss at \$120,000, I'd still be up that amount. But I explained to her that ups and downs are just part of the game.

Still, Shirley was very nervous about these numbers. She was accustomed to making \$20,000 after taxes for a year of hard work, and I'd win or lose that amount in a few hours. Although we hadn't discussed the M-word at this point, she'd thought about it and was trying to figure out if she could cope with these swings.

Before I reached the \$30,000 stopping point and had my rainbow disappear, I found the pot of gold. I hit a royal for \$60,000. Yahoo! My biggest jackpot yet. I was now up almost a hundred grand at Bally's and life was beautiful again. Shirley didn't mind that phone call one bit.

A few weeks after I started playing at Bally's, Arnie encouraged me to take a room and order booze. "You must have fifty large worth of comp credit there. Start ordering expensive wine by the case and see what happens. I'll buy it from you at forty percent of retail."

"Fifty percent."

"Okay."

So I did. I already had a room there much of the time, but now I was ordering \$2,000 or \$3,000 worth of alcohol a week. To be sure, the liquor prices were significantly marked up, so it

was probably \$500-\$600 retail, but it was still substantial when I did it on a regular basis. Every day I arrived with towels from the last trip in an otherwise-empty suitcase-on-wheels and left with it full of wrapped bottles. I was ordering more alcohol than anyone in the place, but I was also betting more money than anyone. And since I don't drink, every time they saw me in the casino I was cold sober. But the total amount of comps I cashed was still less than what my play generated, so no one said a word.

Right after I hit the \$60,000 royal, another losing streak began. From being up \$100,000 on the play, I went down to about \$60,000. To add insult to injury, my host told me that all of my comps were being cut off and he wasn't authorized to say any more. When I complained, my calls were shuttled upstairs to a vice president, who informed me, firmly but politely, that they believed I was a strong player who had an edge over them. They weren't going to 86 me from playing, but damned if they were going to let me waltz that much alcohol out of the place, too. I could continue to play if I wanted, but I had to pay retail for rooms, meals, and everything else. (As if I would pay retail for a casino room 10 miles from my home.)

Darn! Can't say I didn't have it coming, but I'd enjoyed those extras. By then I'd increased my stop-loss figure from \$30,000 to \$50,000. Even though I hadn't dropped quite that far yet, I decided that this was a good time to leave. The machines lasted for another month or so after I left, but eventually they were pulled.

The experience at Bally's changed my life. My bankroll got a big boost and I was never afraid to hammer away at \$5 machines again. I got used to staying in nice hotel rooms and decided that if all it took to get one was to play a few more hours at a game where I had the advantage, then why not?

I used to think that all hotel rooms are alike. They're just a place to sleep; it doesn't matter what they look like. No more. I cared about the walls being soundproof. I cared about security. I learned to tell and appreciate the difference between ceramic tile and marble in a bathroom. And having two bathrooms and a

Jacuzzi tub is a sweet touch. I miss these amenities when I don't have them. This isn't to say that I'd willingly pay for such things with real money, but in the casino, where you can get them with comps, they're worth a few hours extra of play to obtain.

During this adventure, I had bigger swings than ever before. I'm frequently asked how I deal with such swings. Part of dealing with them is confidence in my methods. When I played at Bally's, I'd been winning at gambling for eight years straight. My score went up and down, but I hit lifetime high-water marks again and again. This gave me confidence that I was doing the right things.

Part of it is just plain willingness to accept risk. Some people are more daredevil than others.

And part of dealing with the swings at Bally's was that I won first. There's a tendency to think of recent winnings as not quite being yours yet, so giving back recent winnings is not as big a deal as losing money you've had for a long time.

After this experience I also vowed never to abuse comps again. I did what I did at Bally's partly just to see what I could get away with. It wasn't fraud by any means or anything bad enough to go to jail over. I can make all kinds of rationalizations about why I did it at the time, but the fact remains that I'm sorry I did, and won't do it again. Lesson learned.

Shirley Doesn't Always See it My Way

Shirley and I were heading to Arizona Charlie's East for "Triple-Point Tuesday" when the following riddle came over the radio: What's blue and smells like red paint? No answer came to Shirley. I got it right away: blue paint. Paint smells like paint, no matter what the color is. I thought it was clever; Shirley thought it was stupid.

We were on our way to Charlie's to play a Ten Play dollar 10/7 Double Bonus machine—a formidable game that takes \$50 to fully load. We were playing it to take advantage of the triple points.

As soon as we arrived, Sherry, the assistant shift boss, came

over and said hello. I asked her, “What’s blue and smells like red paint?” Shirley cringed with embarrassment. Sherry shrugged. When she heard the answer, it was clear she agreed with Shirley that it was a stupid riddle.

I promptly hit a royal flush for \$4,000. Royals are always nice, but they’re a lot more common on Ten Play than on single-play machines, and they pay just 80 for 1 (based on the coins needed to play all 10 lines) rather than the 800 for 1 you normally receive.

When the shift boss came to pay me, I asked, “What’s blue and smells like red paint?” Shirley cringed again. But this time the \$4,000 soothed her embarrassment.

After humoring me, the shift boss went away and a few minutes later I hit another royal. Shirley started to develop a “theory.” She argued that even though it was the dumbest riddle she’d ever heard, telling it to people seemed to bring on royals.

I replied, “That’s a classic logic fallacy known as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. The riddle preceding the royals has absolutely nothing to do with the royals being made. It’s pure coincidence.”

“How can you know that for sure? Maybe the video poker god has a sense of humor tonight,” she insisted. Whenever someone came by, Shirley sweetly said, “Glad you’re here. My husband has something he wants to ask you about paint.” Now I was the one cringing, but I went along and posed the riddle.

About an hour later I hit a third royal, which, of course, supported Shirley’s theory, at least in her mind. And before our session ended, I hit a fourth royal. I’d played almost 5,000 hands; on Ten Play Double Bonus, that’s about one royal-flush cycle. Hitting four or more royals in one cycle happens about 2% of the time. Rare, but not exceptionally so.

Shirley didn’t see it that way. “Have you ever hit four royals in eight hours before?”

“No. But I really haven’t played that much Ten Play. Some day I’ll be dealt a royal on one of these machines, and that will be ten of them.”

Shirley still wasn’t buying. “If you’ve never done this well

before, I say it's because of the riddle. You've never told that riddle before either."

This, of course, was absolutely ridiculous. Proving something by double negative is another fallacy of logic. The fact is, superstitions come in all shapes and sizes, often when you least expect them. But riddles, clever or otherwise, are not the secret to hitting royals.

Another time, flying into Reno, we saw signs at the airport indicating that WIBC members got a 10% bonus on jackpots. What was this? We didn't know what the WIBC was, but figured it was worth our time to find out. The WIBC, we learned, is a woman's bowling organization that was hosting a tournament in Reno while we were there. A 10% bonus might not be much for a casual player, but for Shirley and me, who aren't afraid to play \$25 machines, this could be enormous.

"Shirley," I said, "you're about to join a bowling league."

"Oh no!" she cried. "I'm the world's worst bowler! I was forced once to join a company team and my co-workers ended up taking a collection so I could go to dinner and a movie on league nights so I wouldn't show up at the bowling alley! No way am I going through that humiliation again!"

"Don't worry. You don't have to bowl. All we need to do is get you the WIBC card so you can qualify for the 10% bonus. If we play the \$25 machines, we get an extra \$125 for every full house, up to \$2,000 for quads, and \$10,000 for a royal. And this is on top of a game that already returns over 100%. It's video poker heaven!"

"But we didn't bring enough cash for a \$25 game. And we don't know the rules for the 10% bonus. Surely they're not going to pay us more than \$1,000 an hour in bonuses hour after hour. We should check it out first."

Shirley was right. Seeing a vague ad is one thing; reading the fine print at the slot club booth is another.

We learned from someone in the hotel elevator that Shirley could sign up for the WIBC for \$11 a year. Not bad; even if we

used the 10% coupon only once on a 4-of-a-kind, it was worth at least \$625 to us—certainly worth the minor inconvenience of joining.

Shirley signed up and got the coupon. Turns out it applied only to the top award (i.e., the royal flush) and was limited to \$1,000. Sigh. A royal comes along only 80 hours or so on a single-line machine. Possible, but not likely in our two-day trip. Of course, we still made sure Shirley played on a card with her name on it, so if she did get a royal, she could collect the bonus worth an extra \$450 on the machines we were playing.

Ultimately, she didn't connect. *C'est la vie.* But Shirley was annoyed. "I now belong to an organization that wouldn't want me if they knew how badly I played and we got absolutely nothing for it. What could be more stupid?"

I disagreed completely. Collecting on lucrative video poker promotions means having to go through things like this. You have to keep your eyes open. It takes time and energy to ascertain the exact rules for a potentially promising promotion. Occasionally you cash in big time, but usually you don't.

I regularly get e-mail from readers I've never met saying something like, "I'll be in Las Vegas for four days next month. Tell me the absolute best place to play so I don't have to waste my time searching." No can do. Even if I were motivated to give out this information, I have no idea what the best situation will be two days from now, let alone next month.

The great situations are rare. And they're only great for the first few people who find them. After the first day or two, the casinos wise up and change the rules. And just who are the "lucky" people who get to take advantage? The ones who go looking and are alert to the possibilities. Many of your searches will end up futile (like this one). But always being alert means that some of the time you'll be in position to succeed. The harder you work at this, the luckier you'll be.

Playing Up a Superstition

Abner, a fine player, was hammering away at a \$100 9/6 Jacks machine at a major Strip resort and was stuck \$80,000. Not an unusually large amount for a \$100 machine, but irritating nonetheless. He asked to have the machine locked up while he took a short nap. The casino had a policy that it would lock up the machine for up to four hours at the request of anyone who'd been playing for awhile.

Abner went to his room, set the alarm, and went to bed. After three hours and 45 minutes, he returned to the machine and found it unlocked. One of the change people told him that Randy, another regular player, had tipped \$100 to have the machine unlocked and promptly hit a royal flush for \$400,000.

Abner knew that Randy's jackpot had nothing to do with him. Everything is random and the fact that the machine had paid out big recently was totally irrelevant to what would happen in the future. But Abner also knew that many players are superstitious, believing that a royal flush hit on a machine "poisons" it until the machine has time to catch up. He decided to play it up as though he was really mad.

Abner demanded to see the slot boss. He ranted about how the casino had agreed to lock up the machine and how the casino employee had violated that promise and, in the process, his trust. A lot of casinos would appreciate a player who was willing to lose 80 grand, he told them. He should probably take his business elsewhere, maybe even see a lawyer.

It was all gamesmanship, of course. Abner just wanted to see where it would get him.

He was offered \$10,000 to make up for the mistake. He refused. He was then offered \$25,000. He refused again. "What's twenty-five grand compared to four hundred thou?" he fumed. "That should have been my jackpot!" Abner hoped that the VPs weren't savvy enough to know that he was spouting nonsense and that they'd concentrate on the \$80,000 he lost in their attempts to do whatever it took to make him happy.

He eventually settled for \$42,000 and the promise that 10% of his markers would be forgiven. Not a bad payday for a half-hour of acting—an Academy Award-winning performance, in my opinion.

Abner knew that his ranting would result, at a minimum, in someone being fired. The floorman who'd accepted the tip to open up a locked machine had to go. This didn't bother Abner in the least. The floorman was well aware of the rules and had knowingly accepted a sizable tip to break them. Players have to be able to trust casino employees.

Part Four

My Million-Dollar Six Months

Note: “Michael” and “Richard” are names I use to represent a number of different MGM executives. Sometimes I intentionally switch the names. I’m not trying to blame or embarrass any specific executive with regard to the events described here.

The Dancers at the MGM Grand

From September 1, 2000, through March 15, 2001, the video poker gods smiled down on Shirley and me. We cleared \$1 million in cash winnings (including cashback), mostly from the MGM Grand, but the Venetian and a few other casinos chipped in nicely, thank you very much. We also collected more than one automobile, two computers, a home entertainment center, and in excess of four million American Airlines frequent-flyer miles. We lived for four weeks-plus in the MGM Mansion, truly heaven on Earth, and another month at the MGM Penthouse—also a form of heaven and the nicest place we’ve ever stayed in our lives, with the exception of the Mansion.

The story that follows has two parts. The first is the happy part (for us), which describes how we rode a fantastic wave of favorable circumstances and good fortune to achieve a goal that was painstakingly pursued over the period of time portrayed in the earlier sections of this book. The second part is more matter-of-fact and not so happy. It’s the story of the fallout that ensued as a result of our win. I’ve included it because it was every bit a

part of the experience as the winning. Gambling for a living is difficult for many reasons that I've already told you about. But because of the nature of gambling, a winner must create a loser (or losers), and there's always a price to pay.

Cash-wise, we were stuck for the year 2000 going into September, even though I'd been dealt a \$100,000 royal on a \$25 machine in February and dealt a \$60,000 royal on a \$5 Triple Play machine in August. Both of these jackpots were hit at the MGM, but we were still behind there.

But something special was going on at the MGM. In addition to some decent games and a good cashback rate, several juicy promotions were running concurrently. What's more, premium players, those who played enough to earn 100,000 points monthly (i.e., \$500,000 coin-in for slots or \$800,000 coin-in for video poker), received an extra 40% on cashback. Add in comps and special events, and it made for an extremely strong game. And there was one more thing. For several months, the cashback on the \$5 Triple Play machines (and a few others) was extra-generous. These video poker machines were awarding slot points at the slot-player rate (.625%) rather than the video poker-player rate (.39%). With the high-roller accelerator, these particular high-limit machines were paying an incredible .875% cashback. It was amazing. Adding everything together and multiplying by the high dollar amounts it was possible to run through the machines created the largest relatively long-lasting advantage I've ever heard about, let alone experienced.