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THE BLACKJACK INSIDERS



How Two Pit Bosses Beat the
Casinos at Their Own Game

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Prologue

Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas

“Sir! Sir! You need to get your ass out of bed now!”

I was ripped from a deep sleep after a long night of counting cards at Sunset Station, a locals casino in Las Vegas. Three high-beam flashlights tore through the blackness of the Las Vegas hotel room. One of them pierced my eyeballs, blinding me, while the other two crisscrossed the room.

“Excuse me?” I had no idea what the hell was happening.

Lights started coming on all over the room, revealing two security guards flipping the switches, while a third stood by the doorway, keeping his gaze fixed on me. Still reeling, I pulled a blanket over myself and tried to make sense of the situation.

It was my first trip to Las Vegas as a card counter. I hadn’t even been in town for 24 hours and security was busting into my room like this? I’d seen stories in books and movies about this type of treatment at the hands of

casinos, but I always thought they were exaggerations. This was really happening!

“Sir, you need to get up and go down to the front desk, right now. You have a bill that’s not settled. If you don’t settle it, you have to leave. Immediately.”

Finally in possession of my senses, I realized security had busted into my room and was treating me like some sort of criminal. I propped myself up on an elbow and shot back, “Do you just barge into any guest room you feel like? I’m asleep, in my underwear, and this is the way you handle a bill that’s not even due until tomorrow? All three of you need to leave this room. Immediately.”

A flash of realization that he might not be within his rights crossed the guard’s face, then he motioned to the others that they were leaving. “Get out of bed now and take care of this or you’ll be forced to leave,” he said loudly, before slamming the door closed.

I popped out of bed, infuriated, and dialed Mark, my blackjack business partner. The room was under Mark’s name and prearranged to be an all-inclusive comp. Mark had to leave town the previous day and left the room to me, while I indulged in an all-night all-out blackjack bender.

He answered quickly. “How’s it going? You should have slept longer.”

“Well, I would have, if security didn’t just give me the wake-up call from hell.”

“Wait, what?”

I quickly recounted the details of the invasion.

“You’re kidding! They really did that? Wow.” He sounded almost as surprised as I was. “Did they think you were me?”

I hadn't thought of that. The room was under his name, so it was possible.

We strategized that I'd go down, get to the bottom of the bill situation, and use the incident with security as a violation of privacy to pressure them into following through on the comp.

In the casino, the host refused to see me, claiming he was busy. I had a hell of a time getting ahold of anyone with authority, but finally spoke with a table-games manager. The comp was based on play at the tables, so I knew from my own work that it was his job to take care of his players.

Though I was a floorman, this particular situation was above my pay grade. I took a stab at what I thought was the best way to handle it, based on what I did know: the truth. Of course, I'd have to omit the part about the advantage play.

I explained what had transpired. When I told him whose name the room was under, he stopped me and said, "We know Mark Stevens. But what's your name? Let me see your ID and I'll work on it for you."

Again, I'd never been involved in anything like this, so like a total rookie card counter, believing that this boss was trying to help resolve the situation, just as I would in his position, I gave it to him, handing over my name and all of my information to the opposition. He walked me back to the front desk and told me to wait there, while he looked into it.

After nearly an hour of back and forth with front-desk personnel and the pit manager, another suit showed up to inform me that the balance needed to be settled, giving no further explanation. This added to my suspicion that

I was on the shit end of an epic practical joke—and not between friends, but between bitter enemies. My first day in Vegas was already showing me what I already knew, at least intellectually, though I'd never before experienced it quite so directly and viscerally—it was us against them.

My years behind the tables taught me a lot. I knew the game of blackjack inside and out. None of what I'd learned thus far had prepared me for this conversation.

"What *can* you take care of then?" I asked, assuming that they'd still comp some portion of my stay. I did know that was how this game worked. "Something needs to be done here. Your security damn near violated me!"

"Let me see what I can do, sir." The suit, either the table-games manager's supervisor or underling, disappeared into a back office.

He returned wearing a grin that was a bit too smug for this situation, adding to the fishy feeling. "I'm sorry, sir, but we're unable to comp any of your visit."

"Then check me out. I'm leaving. I'm not paying for another night of being treated like this."

I handed over \$500 cash to settle the bill for the four nights Mark and I had spent there, plus the food and other charges made to the room. The casino had lured us in to play with the promise of comps. Now none of the stay would be covered and I was out of a room for my last night.

I stormed back up to the room and got my things together. When I relayed the message to Mark, he couldn't believe it. He did offer an explanation that I agreed with. "They're messing with us." In other words, when the Sunset Station bosses realized he was counting cards during the previous few days, they canceled his comps, forcing

him to pay. I just got caught up in the middle when he went home early and I stayed on.

Still, Mark and I were in the casino business. We knew that the sequence of events that night was improbable under any circumstance. Improbable or not, though—what a way to start my career as a counter!

I threw my bag into the car and drove off into the sunrise with one night left on my first big counting trip and nowhere to stay.

Welcome to fabulous Las Vegas.

Chapter 1

The Big Idea

I sat on the floor of my living room. Most freshly single 25-year-old guys would be out at a bar or club on a Friday night. But my three-year-old son B.J. was asleep in his room and I was sitting on the floor of a silent house, flipping over playing cards. I was getting better and faster at keeping the count, completely unconcerned with whatever hell my friends might be raising. Instead, I was feverishly running through deck after deck, keeping the count and thinking of my future.

It was just a few months after my divorce, so money was tight and emotions were in overdrive. I married too young, so one result wasn't surprising. The other result, however, was the amazing kid asleep in the next room. The little guy and I were in a bad place, both hurting in our own ways. But now, I'd been shown a way out of the hole I found myself in.

My fresh start began in the unlikeliest of places—on the job. I'd been working at the CasaBlanca Resort since

shortly after my promotion from dealer to supervisor. The CasaBlanca was one of two properties owned by the same gaming company in the small town of Mesquite, Nevada, with a population of roughly 18,000. I'd been transferred from the older and dingier Virgin River Hotel & Casino by new senior management.

I liked it at CasaBlanca. The crowd was younger than at the western-themed Virgin River, which attracted the local retirees. It was newer and more upscale, aimed at affluent tourists. I had a much better chance to flourish at the CasaBlanca, I'd been told, and it would give me the opportunity to learn from a great shift manager, who'd also been transferred there recently. The new bosses intended the move to be beneficial for everyone involved. Little did they know what they'd be facilitating in the long run.

A few weeks before my transfer, the bosses had given all the casino supervisors a blackjack basic strategy test. Basic strategy delineates the proper way to play a hand against any of the dealer's possible 13 up cards. The test consisted of a chart in which the dealer's up card was indicated on the top row, with the player's two cards depicted along the left column. We were to fill in all the other boxes with the correct play — hit, stand, double, etc.

Many of the other supervisors had years of experience with the game, but by the looks on everyone's faces, the test wasn't going too well. As for me, I filled it out confidently. As a dealer and a newly promoted supervisor, I'd done my homework on the game. I'd gotten the promotion about a month after my divorce. It was the first of many doors that opened for me, with a hint that this was just the beginning.

The new shift manager, Mark Stevens, gave us the test. Mark looked every bit like the position he held. He was about my height, but stockier, and kept a tight buzz haircut, almost like a drill sergeant. Unlike a drill sergeant, however, he was mild-mannered, approachable, and understanding. He genuinely cared about the casino business, which was unusual in this town full of casino workers who had too many years under their belt to give a damn anymore. At least, that's the vibe they gave off.

Having finished my test, I sat in the break room, mulling over basic strategy and eating bad food. Most casino break rooms are like small cafeterias. The one at dumpy Virgin River had a few televisions in the corners, several rows of long tables, a table with cold cereal and oatmeal, a fountain drink machine, and a steam table with what seemed to be leftover food from the buffet.

Over rubber chicken and cauliflower crumbs, I tried to guess what was tripping up the other supervisors. I'd been in the business only three years and was, by far, the youngest floorman. I respected the others, who taught me about my job and encouraged my growth, but I'd started to realize that my potential surpassed the limitations of what could be taught by most of the people in this small-town casino. Admittedly, I was cocky, but there's a fine line between confidence and cockiness and at that point in my life, I was still finding out where that line was.

Almost on cue, Mark walked into the break room and sat across from me.

"I want to show you something," he said, placing my test on the table.

I looked and saw eight little red marks with corrections. It wasn't as good as I thought or hoped it would be.

It was humbling, even a little embarrassing.

"So, what do you think of your results?"

"Well, I'm a little surprised, and disappointed in myself. I thought I'd done better."

"I shouldn't show you this, but I want you to understand something."

He opened a folder and laid out four of the other supervisors' tests in front of me. Every one of them had far more red ink than mine. A couple of them had three or four times as much.

"The fact that you're disappointed in your results is a good thing. You should want to know the game perfectly, without question. But I wanted you to see how far ahead you are. This isn't a bad result. After you learn a few moves, it'll be perfect."

I went back on the floor carrying the completed and corrected basic strategy chart that Mark had left with me, along with the results of my test and instruction to study more.

I memorized completely the basic strategy chart and, while I studied, I watched as scores of patrons played not just incorrectly, but badly. Seeing this with fresh eyes gave me a whole new perspective on the game I thought I knew so well.

Several years earlier, before I was even in the casino business, I'd done some brief research online about counting cards. It was one of those late-night whims, when boredom sets in and random Internet browsing takes control of you for a while. I realized quickly that it was harder than I imagined and, given that I hadn't thought much about counting since then, my interest in it seemed like a late-night distraction.

A few days later, I walked into the dealer's break room and found Mark sitting at a table. We chatted again about basic strategy, and card counting came up. Because of my one-time interest and research, I asked my shift manager if he knew how to count.

"Well, yeah, I do."

"Why don't you play then?"

"I never said I didn't play."

Everyone knew that Mark was a man a few words and we accepted that. But this was too much! I sensed that he actually wanted to tell me more, so I just said, "Really?" and waited.

"Actually, I'm heading down to Vegas next week. I have a few extra days off, so I'm going to make some money."

Intrigued, I asked, "Do you do that often?"

"I wouldn't say often, but if I have the time and need some extra dough, I'll play for a few days."

"Just like that? If you need money, you go play blackjack and win?"

"Well, not always, but ideally, yeah."

That made my head spin. For a moment, I was completely hung up on two words: extra money.

My divorce, though not yet final, had already cost thousands of dollars. Replacing most of the furniture hadn't been cheap either. I'd gotten to keep the house, but that was both a positive and negative. I'd done a lot of the work on it myself, so it had ample sentimental value. The actual monetary value, however, was non-existent. We purchased the house in 2007, about the worst time to buy, and we owed more than it was worth. But I had no intention of moving away from Mesquite anytime soon, so my

ex-wife, who resettled in Las Vegas, and I agreed that I'd keep the house. It had a reasonable monthly payment. Expenses, of course, were more difficult than before, with just one income. Combined with legal fees and life in general, my less-than-modest small-town income was running thin.

In the break room, seated across from me at a square table, Mark smiled knowingly and, in just a few words, said something that would kick-start my life. "I can work with you."

So there I was, sitting on my floor on a Friday night, dealing cards to myself. I was following Mark's first instructions about how to count down a deck of cards according to the Hi-Lo system (2s, 3s, 4s, 5s, and 6s have a value of plus 1, 10s, face cards, and aces are minus 1, and 7s, 8s, and 9s are neutral and have no value). I'd spent hours working different drills, giving myself a serious tension headache. It's difficult to describe the feeling of being humbled by a deck of cards, while sitting on the floor alone.

I was starting to see cards floating, even with my eyes closed, when my phone chimed with a text from Mark. *I'm going to Vegas tomorrow and starting my extra days off. Want to come down during the day? See what it's all about?*

I had to go to Vegas the next day anyway to drop B.J. back off at his mother's. So, I took the leap.

I texted back. *I'm there.*

Chapter 2

The Spark That Lit the Fire

The next morning, B.J. and I got in the car and started heading to Sin City, 80 miles southwest straight down Interstate 15.

I was excited. It was rare to experience minimal traffic coming into the city, which I thought had to be a sign.

Arriving at my ex-in-laws' house, I got through the usual unpleasantries as quickly and painlessly as possible. It was always tough to say goodbye to B.J. for the week; on the other hand, it was time to do something new and exciting.

I dialed Mark's phone and he answered. "Hey, how's it going? I'm not sure where you're at, but I'm at Green Valley Ranch. Want to meet me here?"

"Green Valley. That's right around the corner from my in-laws' place. I'll be there in ten minutes!" I couldn't stop myself from seeing the convenience of the location as another sign.

I arrived less than ten minutes later, parked in the garage, and hurried into the casino to search for my boss. Feeling my cell phone vibrate in my pocket, I looked to see a text message from Mark. *Two rules. Don't say my name, and don't mention what we do for a living.*

This idea added excitement, like we were doing something we weren't supposed to. Which, of course, was true. However, I'd only intended to hang out and watch. Now, I felt like an accomplice.

I found Mark at one of the double-deck tables and sidled up to the chair next to him.

He looked at me and said, "Hey, glad you're here. I'm getting killed. Maybe you're my good-luck charm."

"What do you mean by getting killed?"

"I'm down eight hundred."

My heart sank. I thought this was supposed to be easy. Not to mention, \$800 was a lot of money! The most I'd ever lost at a table was \$400, one time during my separation, when boredom and anger took away my self-control.

So hearing him say with relative nonchalance that he was down twice that amount freaked me out. But I tried not to show it. Plus, in the back of my head, I was calculating how much money he must have, and how much he must be able to win, to cover losses like that.

We exchanged small talk about the drive and the weather. It didn't take long to notice that the dealer was a spaz. He seemed like a nice guy, but he sure had a strange way of dealing his games—trying to show off and look cool, though failing miserably. Mark and I exchanged subtle knowing glances, as if to say, what's up with this guy? It was the first of countless times the two of us, without a word, together sized up what was going on in the

pit. The simple mechanics the dealer was trying to flare up were likely to cause more problems than just doing it the right way — maybe even cause problems that could work to our advantage.

Our insider view, unfortunately, didn't ease the killing Mark was enduring as we sat across from this awkward dealer. After a while longer, Mark slid his dwindling chip pile forward and stated, "I've had enough. Color me up."

After stopping at the cashier, he took a minute to address an important point. "Does it sound crazy that sometimes it's good to lose?"

"Yeah, a little."

"Okay, Andy, but consider it. As a floorman, what would you think of a blackjack player who won all the time?"

"I'd be pretty suspicious."

"Of course. So losing shows up on your rating and throws the supervisors and surveillance off the scent. Right? If they see that you seem to win all the time, it's a reason for them to watch more closely next time."

I knew all about how people *thought* they could manipulate ratings: buying in for large amounts or ratholing chips into their pockets. By the way, neither of those has much effect on your actual rating. What Mark was saying, though, was on the money — although you don't want to lose, losing is actually good for your rating. "Let's head down the road to Sunset Station. I'll drive."

It was only around noon, so I had plenty of time before I needed to get back for work at eight.

We cruised over to Sunset Station, a decent-looking casino where I hadn't been before. We took a pretty direct route to the tables, passing the colorful and oddly shaped

Gaudi bar, and found a blackjack table with several seats available.

Mark pulled two \$100 bills out of his pocket, handed me one of them, and told me to give it a shot. I figured that, with his money and him sitting right next to me, I had no reason not to. The dealer exchanged the Benjamins for chips. I also handed my driver's license to the supervisor, requesting a player's card. I figured I'd start building up a few points, since I was there.

We played through a few shuffles, just about breaking even. Mark was taking it easy, flat betting \$10 with the occasional \$25 bet. After a \$25 hand, he perked up a bit, pushed out \$75, and motioned for to me to do the same. We both won. On the next hand, he put out \$100 and again motioned me to bump up my bet from \$5 to \$25. He was muttering about how he had a feeling, much like we saw people do every night while we were working. Then, he winked at me. Subterfuge—nice. I don't remember the outcome of my hand; I was excited that he'd just won another hundred bucks.

Then it happened: the exact moment I decided I wanted to be a card counter.



A hundred dollars was a lot of money to me at that point in my life, almost as much as I got paid for a day's work as a floorman in a small casino in Mesquite.

The dealer was showing a 7, not a bad card to play against. I peeked at the cards in front of my \$25 bet, but barely took notice of what I had. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Mark—who supposedly knew everything

about blackjack — had turned his cards over and placed an additional \$100 on the table, doubling down on his ace, 7. My mind started spinning. A soft 18, against a 7!

Perhaps sensing my panic, Mark looked over at me confidently and said, “It’s all right, man. We got this.”

Got this, my ass, I thought. Like most other people who have ever played blackjack, I had the misconception that going against what “the book” says about blackjack basic strategy, which mandates standing on that hand, not hitting, let alone doubling, would somehow awaken a magical voodoo force that made everyone lose.

The dealer gave Mark his double-down card; I noticed he did so reluctantly, because he shared my trepidation. After what seemed like an eternity of heart-pumping pressure as I sat on the edge of my seat, the dealer flipped over his own face card, for a total of 17.

Now I was *really* worried.

Finally, the dealer came to settle Mark’s hand. The double-down card was face down, so we didn’t know if he’d won or lost until, again reluctantly, the dealer flipped it over. It was another face card, for a total of 18!

Mark looked at me and nodded confidently as he collected \$200 in green \$25 chips. The shuffle ended.

We colored up our chips and retreated to the food court to grab a bite to eat. Mark explained to me what had just happened.

“The count was so off-the-charts high that I expected tens galore.” He dug into his burger. “It’s not just about knowing basic strategy and keeping the running count, Andy. It’s about following the count and betting more in positive situations and knowing your index numbers so you can make the proper deviations from basic strategy.”

I'll never forget that soft-18 double. Yes, Mark quickly earned \$500, including what I'd won. But he'd made a move that almost all dealers, bosses, and basic strategy players would consider insane, because he knew he had the advantage in doing so. And when he explained it all to me in the food court, I knew I wanted to be part of it.



After lunch, we went back to the tables. Judging by Mark's consistently small bets, the count must have stayed low. I played perfect basic strategy, unless Mark told me otherwise, for reasons I didn't understand yet. Sometimes, I hit 12s, 13s, and even 14s against the dealer's bust card, prompting more questions I'd ask later.

Not much happened at that table – unless you include the two stunningly gorgeous women we met there, who seemed to be showing some interest in us. The girls, Alexa and Tatiana as they introduced themselves, were from Russia. They'd just landed in the U.S. the day before and were staying in Vegas for their first week. Their accents were thick, and very attractive I might add, but their English was fluent.

I hit it off with Alexa instantly. Her smile was radiant and it was difficult to look away from her captivating blue eyes. She was blonde, thin, and well-proportioned, apart from a bust that was slightly larger than would be expected of her thin frame. For my taste, that was absolute perfection. When they left to keep their spa appointment, they gave us their numbers and expressed interest in going sightseeing with us after the sun went down.

Problem was, I had to head back to Mesquite to make it to work in time.

“Would you rather head back to work or take Alexa and Tatiana out to see the city?”

I knew Mark was teasing me, because in my three years at the casino, I’d never called in sick, not once. “Call in to go out with two random girls we just met? That’s not like me at all.”

He pulled out his phone and showed me a picture he’d taken of Alexa and me. “I’d call in for that.”

Then he showed the picture to the dealer and asked him if he’d call in sick for that. After reminding him that cell phones weren’t allowed at the table, the dealer chuckled, as if the answer was obvious, and added, “I would definitely call in for that.”

Then Mark said, “Besides, who are they going to tell? Me?”

I had to laugh. Even if someone found out that I wasn’t really sick, I was in Vegas playing blackjack and chasing women with Mark – the boss!

I looked at him, giving him the opportunity to return to reality, and asked bluntly, “For real?”

He regained his usual stoic expression. “Ordinarily, I wouldn’t get caught up in something like this, but I think you need to have some fun. You’ve been dealt a bad hand these last few months. Let’s celebrate the end of all that and the beginning of something else entirely. Let’s take these beautiful women out for their first big night in America. We’ll have a great time. I can tell that you want to learn about this game, so I’ll work with you and show you everything I know. Next time we come to Vegas

together, we'll stay serious. But as far as tonight goes, yeah, man, for real."

Using more words than I'd ever heard him say at one time, he convinced me that the change I desperately needed and wanted was already occurring. Seeing my expression morph from anxiety to excitement, Mark extended his hand and asked, "How's that sound? Deal?"

"Sold!" I reached out and shook his hand firmly with a smile. And with that, I walked outside and called in sick to work for the first time ever. After ending the call with the day-shift manager, I felt no remorse as I'd thought I would. I felt only relief, like somehow a great weight had been taken off my shoulders.

I walked back inside and found Mark on his way to the cashier. "Well, that table was no longer an option for us," he smirked.

I exclaimed, "I was gone five minutes! What happened?"

He held out his hands and they were full of black \$100 chips. "Sunset Station just paid for our celebration."

"How generous!"

We got in touch with Alexa and Tatiana and arranged to meet in the lobby in two hours. Then we realized that neither of us was prepared. I was only supposed to be in Vegas for the afternoon and Mark had nothing nice to wear. We hurried over to Nordstrom Rack, right across the street, and bought a couple of night-out shirts—also on Sunset Station's blackjack tab.

While we were out, Mark elaborated on some plays from earlier in the day, like why he sometimes told me to hit against a bust card. He assured me that I'd become an expert in all the situations in which I should deviate from

basic strategy, but I had a few more things to learn first. Mark was adamant about taking it in steps and not too many at a time. Making sure one step was second nature before moving on would develop me into a more able player.

Then he elaborated on what had transpired while I was outside calling in sick. "The count skyrocketed. I had my max bet out for the last four hands. I lost one of them, but the last hand was big again. I split aces three times and hit them all."

"They allowed you to split aces like that?"

"Yes. Station Casinos allows it on their double-deck game." He paused, then said, "Made four hundred on just that one hand."

This stuff was blowing my mind.



Meeting the girls was like a scene from a movie. A five-star film director couldn't have timed it better. We walked into the lobby just as they were coming around the corner from the hotel corridor, and they were ravishing. They'd accomplished a rare thing in Las Vegas—the perfect balance between modesty and, well, a lack thereof. Combined with an exoticness in their look and overall attitude, the entire package was almost jaw-dropping.

My eyes were riveted to Alexa. Her flowing blonde hair draped down below her shoulders, meeting her sleeveless top, which was just low-cut enough to inspire any man's imagination. She wore a tight pair of jeans that enhanced her curves perfectly. It was a simple but stunning ensemble. I'd be the envy of Sin City tonight. Glanc-

ing over at Mark, I saw that he seemed quite pleased with Tatiana.

We squeezed into Mark's Nissan. It wasn't a compact car, but with four adults inside, it was a bit snug. Sitting in the back with Alexa, the snugness didn't bother me a bit.

We started out downtown, drinking at one of the outdoor bars that lined Fremont Street approximately every 30 feet, so we could take in all the insanity on display, along with the light show on the overhead screen. Then we drove down to the Strip, parked at a hotel, and walked, drank, and laughed the night away. Alexa and I held hands and kissed; the more inebriated we became, the deeper the kisses got.

Like all good nights, however, this one came to its end. We arrived back at Sunset Station, said good night, and arranged to see one another in the morning, before the girls were off to L.A. and I went back to Mesquite.

When we got back to our room, I plopped down on the bed by the window, my head spinning with vodka-induced images of cards, chips, and Russian beauty queens. "Man, that was some fucking night."

"Yeah, that was pretty great."

"I can't wait to come back to Vegas."

"Well, remember, they're leaving in the morning."

"It's not that. I had a great time, but I couldn't do that every weekend. It's more that I want to be able to *afford* that. I want to come down and have my room comped and pockets full of black chips."

"Unbelievable. You just had the night of your life, with possibly the hottest woman in Vegas, you're drunk, and you're still talking about blackjack."

"I guess I am. Call me crazy."

“You’re not crazy.” He looked me dead in the eye.
“You’re ready. We’ll start this week.”

The deal was sealed, not with a handshake between a boss and employee, but with a fist bump between friends.