

A Rave For Rad

“*Radical Blackjack* is perhaps the culmination of the writing career of one of blackjack’s most prolific and highly respected authors. In this final work, Arnold Snyder has decided not to hold back and to publish information that has heretofore never been made public.

The book begins where traditional card counting leaves off and displays, from his personal experience at the highest level of play, Snyder’s intimate knowledge of every blackjack advantage-play technique. Whether shuffle tracking, hole carding, sequencing, front loading, edge sorting, or how to best take advantage of casino loss rebates—the crown-jewel chapter of this prodigious work—Snyder is at his story-telling best.

Always an engaging writer, the escapades come to life as we participate vicariously in his myriad adventures at the tables, often with his wife at his side, as they extract, quite literally, millions from the casinos using all of the above sophisticated techniques. And while most of us will never play six simultaneous hands of \$10,000, we can enjoy the narrative of this icon who has been there, done that, and is now willing to “tell all” and share the journey with his thousands of fans.

Chock full of these tales plus brief bios of some of the game’s most revered figures, *Radical Blackjack* is a fitting climax to the impressive literary body of work of this legend of the game.”

—Don Schlesinger, author of *Blackjack Attack: Playing the Pros’ Way* and member of the Blackjack Hall of Fame.

Acknowledgments

I must begin by thanking my publisher, Anthony Curtis, who's been a friend and confidant for close to 40 years. I knew him when he started his gambling career, hustling coupons and lucky bucks to make ends meet. Now he's the biggest publisher of gambling books in the world and one of very few in this business whose primary concern is that the books he publishes are honest, accurate, and of real value to players.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Huntington Press' longtime editor, also a longtime friend of mine, Deke Castleman. Deke knows how to arrange my paragraphs, delete my redundancies, and make my awkward sentences flow smoothly.

James Grosjean was corralled into lending his eyes to this project, primarily to assure Anthony Curtis that I got the math right—which I almost did, but not quite. Thanks to James, all of my bad numbers have been corrected and I come off much smarter than I actually am.

I'm also grateful to Don Schlesinger, a meticulous author whose writings on blackjack I had the honor of publishing decades ago. Don was enlisted by Anthony to do a proofread of the manuscript for this book, because Don understands

the technical aspects of gambling on a level beyond most mortals.

I must also thank the many blackjack authors, computer analysts, and professional players who have taught me so much of what I know about this game: (alphabetically) Ian Andersen, Julian Braun, D.V. Cellini, Steve Forte, Al Francesco, Peter Griffin, Bill Haywood, Tommy Hyland, John Imming, Mathboy, Richard Munchkin, R.C., Rob Reitzen, Lawrence Revere, Max Rubin, Keith Taft, Ed Thorp, Ken Uston, Norm Wattenberger, Allan Wilson, Stanford Wong, and Bill Zender.

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Author's Note

Contained in these pages is mostly material I've never published. This isn't a how-to book, though sharp players may gain insights into techniques or approaches to game situations they hadn't considered before. This book is more personal. These are my own stories and experiences in which I describe how I made valuable gambling discoveries or learned costly lessons.

You'll notice that a number of the same characters keep popping up in this book. Many have since been inducted into the world's most exclusive assemblage of professional gamblers, the Blackjack Hall of Fame. At first, I planned to use initials or fake names to disguise them all, figuring it was the story that was important, the technique that mattered, the discoveries that readers wanted to hear about. And I wasn't sure these guys would want me to expose them. Professional gamblers are a secretive bunch.

The fact is I love all these guys. They've enriched my life and in so many ways have made my brief time here on this planet an adventure story. They're the recent legends of the gambling world and the world should know about them. They differ from one another in myriad ways, but they're all rule-breakers, nonconformists, and iconoclasts with no

inclination to accept the nine-to-five drudgery today's world offers to humans in the civilized world.

But although I want to tell the world about these rebels that have made my life a roller coaster ride, I'm not sure I should be writing this book at all. Should a professional gambler ever tell his secrets?

Australian Blackjack Hall of Famer, Zeljko Ranogajec, used to call me at my office in Oakland to try and convince me to stop publishing *Blackjack Forum*. This was 30 years or so ago. "And why would you publish that Over/Under Report?" he said on one call. "You can't keep telling everybody everything you figure out, mate."

Zeljko was raking in big bucks from his blackjack teams when I was still spreading \$2 to \$20 at Circus Circus in Reno.

"C'mon, Zeljko, I'm a players' advocate."

"It's not right, mate. You're educating some of the wrong people."

But as the years passed, I thought more and more about Zeljko's complaint, especially as I saw game conditions deteriorating. For example, at the time I published my strategy for beating the over/under side bet, Stanford Wong had already pronounced the side bet as worthless. He'd calculated the house edge, which was in the neighborhood of 10%, and advised players in his monthly newsletter not to waste their money on it. I reported Wong's analysis in my *Blackjack Forum* quarterly, but got a call from one of my Canadian subscribers, Jake Smallwood, suggesting that I ignore Wong's analysis and calculate the effects of removal for the bet. Jake was a really smart guy. I quickly discovered that the edge on the bet was enormously volatile and that a simple counting system would find advantageous betting opportunities far more frequently than on a standard blackjack game. How long might the over/under bet have lasted

if I'd never opened my big mouth about it? Did Ed Thorp make a mistake when he published *Beat the Dealer* in 1962? Zeljko stopped trying to convince me to quit publishing, but started teasing me with intriguingly incomplete information. He called from parts unknown to brag about the great games he was finding. "I'm on an island, mate. You should see this game – early surrender, single-deck, dealt to the bottom. They don't even know what a card counter is here."

"Where are you, man? What's the casino?"

"No, no, you can't get that out of me."

"Well, what island are you on?"

"Ha! I can't even tell you that, mate! You'll go and publish it!"

One time he told me he'd found a great game at a casino in South Africa. He asked me if I could hop on a plane and come down there.

"To South Africa?" I asked. "How long would the flight take?"

"From California? Maybe twenty hours."

"Are you serious?"

"Hey, I gotta run, mate. Look into it."

I did look into it, but not seriously. There was no way I could take off for South Africa to play blackjack. My kids were older, but I was running a business and still working at the post office. I was sleeping only three or four hours each night. It was hard to get away just for a weekend.

Should I shitcan this whole book right now?

Anyway, after talking it over with Anthony Curtis, my publisher, I went over the manuscript and in almost every instance where I'd used a fake name, I put in the real one. (I did leave a few fake names to protect people who deserved protection – like surveillance agents providing me with

inside info, names you wouldn't know anyway.) And as I replaced fake names with real names, I started adding other information about who these characters were to me personally. If I'm going to tell this story, I should tell the whole damn story. I learned a lot from these guys, almost everything I know about how to squeeze money out of a card game.

Curtis told me he would run any sensitive information by the players/authors/experts I mentioned, just in case they had any problems with being outed. Some did. So, a few of the fake names in this book may be famous players/authors/experts whose names you would know. They agreed to allow me to tell their story, but they asked to have their identities disguised.

Some of the stories in this book discuss my early playing experiences when I had no money to speak of; after the publication of my first book in 1980, I worked full time for the post office for 13 years. I also discuss playing on team bankrolls or being bankrolled by investors. To have a monster cache of ammo is ideal for an advantage player. That's because the casinos don't see a gambler with a lot of money as an opponent with a lot of ammo. They view a gambler's money as a prize that's just waiting to be captured by them. This puts you in a position to ask for favors. Some players ask for shopping trips or expensive gewgaws they see in the casino's retail stores, or tickets to a heavyweight championship fight that's been sold out for weeks, when scalpers are charging an arm and a leg for a seat.

I rarely asked for that kind of stuff. I usually asked for favors that increased my supply of ammo, which is to say, better table conditions. I asked for a game where the dealer would stand on soft 17 (S17) instead of hitting (H17). And I got it, even though every other table in the house was an

H17 game. I asked for the dealer to hand-shuffle 6 decks instead of using the automatic shuffler the casino was using on all of its shoe games. I got that too. I asked for a \$3,000 table maximum in a casino where the high-limit max was \$2,000. And I got it. And I asked for loss rebates. Lots of loss rebates. I requested rebates on my losses from casinos that had never given loss rebates to players before. I literally had to explain to the casino managers how loss rebates worked. And I got them.

The best time to ask for favors like these, if you ever want to try it, is when you suffer a big loss. Before you check out of the hotel, find the casino manager and ask him to look up your play result. Then say, “I never win on games where the dealer hits soft seventeen. I don’t get it. I always do better at XYZ Casino. I really love your rooms and restaurants and shows, but I just don’t think I can play here anymore.” Let him take it from there. So I guess that’s the first secret I never published before. If you’re playing big money, you don’t have to play their game. You can get them to play your game.

At the urging of Radar, my partner in crime and wife of 20 years, I’ve organized most of the stories in this book loosely by topic, rather than sticking with chronological order. And be warned: There’s a lot of off-topic rambling in these tales. Also, some of the material that really didn’t fit anywhere, I pasted onto the end. Those are some of the best stories in the book, so don’t skip that stuff.

Introduction

Drawn to Crazy People

If you tell non-blackjack pros (“civilians” in the vernacular) that you play blackjack for a living, they’ll look at you like you’re putting them on.

“I mean, really, what do you do for a living? You know, for survival? What’s your job?”

A small percentage of people don’t respond this way. They act like it’s perfectly normal for someone to pay the bills by playing blackjack and ask questions about where you play and how you learned to do that and if you ever have any problems with the casinos.

If you ask one of these people what they do, you’ll often find they’re paying their bills through some unusual entrepreneurial gig—selling *Star Trek* memorabilia online or conducting hang-gliding classes.

All my life, it’s been the weirdos on the edges of society that have interested me and ultimately, that’s how I got into blackjack.

My first wife, El, was schizophrenic, or so I’ve since surmised. I don’t know that she’d ever been officially diagnosed as schizophrenic, but I knew that she’d been diagnosed with

something and I'm guessing it was schizophrenia.

Three nights after we met, she called me at my dorm in the middle of the night, waking me up, because she was seeing green men outside her window. I talked to her for a couple of hours until the green men had disappeared. Then I went back to bed, but couldn't sleep. This was in 1966, at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. We were both 18, though I was an incoming freshman and she was a returning sophomore.

I was immediately attracted to her. She had a unique style of dress—colorful, gypsy-like—with heavy bangs almost covering eyes that were always done up in mascara and turquoise eye-shadow; she had long, straight, black hair, wore lots of inexpensive but amusing jewelry, and was definitely not into blending in with the conservative college crowd at WMU. Her style was similar to the early Cher—the slouchy beatnik Cher, not the later bedazzling Cher. I sat down across from her one morning in the student union cafeteria and I guess she'd seen me eyeing her for a couple of days, because she told me right off she was crazy and I shouldn't get involved with her. From that point on, we were inseparable.

She had little "x" scars on her wrists that she told me she'd made herself to mark her arteries, just in case she ever needed to commit suicide quickly. She went into a long discussion on the proper way to slash your wrists to ensure that a suicide attempt would work. She also had a number of scars on her forearms from cigarette burns that she said had been made by her former boyfriend. She told me she'd spent much of the previous summer in a "nuthouse" after attempting to commit suicide with prescription pills.

But the most disturbing thing El told me, and on numerous occasions, was that she was God. She was always very

gentle when she was in this state, so I didn't fear she'd do anything rash. It wasn't like when she was hallucinating, which often scared me, especially when the hallucinations she saw were scaring her. But when she went into her God rap, I argued with her, insisting that she was insulting me by claiming to be my creator, making me nothing more than some idea she'd had. My arguments just made her laugh. If I asked her what was so funny, she'd say something about how it didn't make sense for her to be fighting with her dreams.

A lot of guys would have gotten away from her long before they'd learned all this. El wasn't a girl you wanted to bring home to Mom. But when she wasn't telling me horror stories about her self-destructive tendencies or claiming to be God, she was the funniest, most entertaining, most perceptive person I'd ever met. She often had me laughing out loud at her observations on other students, fraternities, sororities, professors on the make, politics, current films, and books. We chain-smoked and drank coffee night and day, slept little, and missed classes. I had no desire to be anywhere but with her. I was afraid for her and that surely played into my decision not to abandon her. I didn't know how she could survive in the world.

Most frightening to her was the prospect of finding herself back in the nuthouse. Every person in a position of even the slightest authority unnerved her—not just a teacher or cop, but even a supermarket clerk. She was constantly terrified that someone would figure out that she was mentally ill and have her put away again. Her descriptions of the facility where she'd spent that summer, where she'd felt the doctors and nurses were sadists, were so horrifying that I decided to take on the role of white knight and protect her. Plus, there was the sex. She was the first woman I'd

ever fallen in love with and the first woman I'd ever had sex with. I was a goner. She loved sex as much as I did, so I did what I had to do.

I convinced her to marry me.

We were both 19. Within six months, she was pregnant and the two of us were on a Greyhound bus from Detroit to San Francisco. The race riots had just torn up our downtown Detroit neighborhood and it was scary as hell, like being in a war zone—the constant smell of smoke, the sporadic gunfire, the never-ending sirens—while San Francisco was in the midst of the Summer of Love.

I worked a series of shitty jobs. Dishwasher. Shipping clerk. Baggage handler. El absolutely hated that I had to go to work. She begged me almost daily to stay home. And she sweetened the pot by reminding me that I still had a bunch of pink wedges, so I could take the day off, drop acid, and she'd do all the cooking. I could just hang around the house and take showers and listen to the stereo and let her take me back to bed all day.

I liked acid from the first time I tried it. I was fascinated by the complexity I saw in everything. I always took it alone. El didn't want it. One of the reasons she liked it when I took it was that we connected so well when I was tripping.

On one of my trips, we were in our basement studio apartment and my mind started racing. I was just coming on and what was running through my head was El's argument that she was God. We were both standing, dancing more or less, just swaying, looking at each other, a Frank Zappa LP on the turntable. I was about to say something about her claim of being God, when it occurred to me that *I was God*. And *I'd created her* (and everything else in the universe). As soon as I had this thought—and it struck me as the absolute truth, which I should have always known since it seemed so

obvious—my face must have been expressing it somehow (shock? horror? terror? amusement?). El suddenly went from just looking at me to looking at me like she'd heard my thoughts. She started laughing and pointing at me and saying, "*I knew you'd see it! I knew you'd see it!*"

We talked about it for hours in that way people have conversations when they're tripping, where you say as much with your hands and your eyes as with words. And we made a pact that, although I knew for a fact that I was God, and she knew for a fact that she was God, we wouldn't argue about it, because regardless of which of us was right, it's futile to fight with your dreams.

A few months after that trip, my son was born. Fifteen months after his birth, my daughter was born. I was God, but I was only 21, with two children in diapers and a schizophrenic wife who couldn't handle the babies and had no education or job prospects. I'd gotten a job as a clerk at the post office where they would take anyone who could read addresses. It was night-shift work sorting letters. Tedious, but easy. I hated it. And when I got home from work after mandatory overtime, I found the bathtub filled with dirty diapers.

We couldn't afford a diaper service and if Pampers existed, we didn't know about them and couldn't possibly have afforded them. If the kids hadn't been fed yet, my first job was to feed them. Then I went into the bathroom to deal with the dirty diapers, which were crawling with cockroaches. El usually spent the night collaging the living-room walls.

I knew I had to find a way to make more money for my family. I needed help with the kids. And because of my experiences with LSD, though I no longer felt at all Godlike, I still had a deep feeling that I could make my own life, be whatever I wanted to be. And I didn't want to

be a postal clerk.

I tried poetry readings, standup comedy. At a punk-rock club in San Francisco, I did bizarro impersonations of Johnny Rotten and his country brother, Johnny Roadapple, opening for the local bands — the Dead Kennedys and the Nuns and Pearl Harbor and the Explosions. “NOOOO FUUTURE! Yippie Ki Yi Yay, Yippie Yo. NOOOO FUUTURE! Yippie Yi Yippie Yay Yippie Yo.” I took a community-college course in video production, wrote pulp fiction for 2¢ a word, and worked on a lot of novels that never found a publisher.

By happenstance, I found blackjack. I was still working at the post office, no longer a clerk, but a letter carrier, when I came down with something. The doctors at Kaiser couldn’t figure out what it was, but I had a fever and no energy. No way could I lug a mail satchel up and down stairs all day. One doctor thought it might be cancer and wanted to take a bone-marrow sample. I refused. I had plenty of sick leave saved up, so I wanted to see what rest could do.

A friend brought me a batch of used books to read while I was stuck in bed. One of them was Ed Thorp’s *Beat the Dealer*. I was fascinated by it. I’d never been in a casino in my life, but I thought, “I could do this.” I had friends who drove up to Reno regularly, just a few hours’ drive. So I started learning Thorp’s Complete Point Count system and reading every other book on blackjack I could find in Berkeley’s used bookstores. I switched from Thorp’s system to Revere’s level-two count as soon as I found Revere’s book. It was simpler and stronger.

I made a trip to Las Vegas and found the Gambler’s Book Club. They were full of advice on the best books on card counting. They sold me a stapled copy of a paper Julian Braun had written, “The Development and Analysis of Winning Strategies for the Casino Game of Blackjack.” Braun had run computer simulations comparing a half-dozen different

card-counting systems in both single- and 4-deck games. What immediately caught my eye was the increase in the player's advantage in the 4-deck games when he increased the shuffle point from 75% to 80% dealt.

They also sold me a paper by Peter Griffin that discussed analyzing blackjack systems according to their playing efficiency and betting correlation. Neither Braun nor Griffin had books in print yet, but I realized very quickly that based on the formulas in Griffin's paper and the simulation results in Braun's paper, I could develop a formula that would estimate a player's advantage in any blackjack game based on the counting system used, the rules of the game, the deck penetration, and the player's bet spread. After finding that my formula's results compared favorably with all the results in Braun's computer simulations, I started changing the parameters, using different bet spreads and different percentages of deck penetration. I was astonished at how big a factor deck penetration was. For a card counter, penetration was the name of the game. None of the dozen or so reputable books on card counting at that time even mentioned this.

So I wrote a short booklet, *The Blackjack Formula*, that I printed myself at the local Berkeley CopyMat, explaining my formula and describing how anyone with a pocket calculator could use it to analyze the profit potential of card counting in any blackjack game. This was before the days when commercial simulation software was available, so it was the first time the average player could actually figure out his advantage on a game. Moreover, I emphasized for the first time in the blackjack literature the importance to card counters of deck penetration.

I sent review copies of the book to all of the experts who were publishing blackjack newsletters – Stanford Wong, Ken Uston, Lance Humble, plus other gambling magazines and

publications. Walter Tyminski, the editor/publisher of *Rouge et Noir News*, called me and asked what kind of a discount I could give him if he bought my book in quantity for resale. The next thing I knew, I'd gotten a check for \$1,000 for 20 copies of my booklet and a new blackjack expert named Arnold Snyder had arrived on the scene.

I had just one year of college and had never taken a college-level math course. I was good at math in high school, but it bored me. I still find it boring, unless I'm using it to figure out some new way of making money. Yet Ed Thorp had praised my book, as had Julian Braun. Stanford Wong called it "an excellent synthesis of your expected win percentage. Never before have all of these variables been considered together."

Professional gamblers around the world were now paying \$100 apiece for my little xeroxed manuscript. I suddenly had a blackjack bankroll, so I could actually play (at least at low stakes). Within months, I launched the first issue of *Blackjack Forum*, a quarterly journal aimed at professional gamblers.

Where did I get the nerve to send my xeroxed booklets to the gambling world's greatest mathematical minds? It all goes back to my schizophrenic wife and her encouraging me for years to take acid because it helped us understand each other.

Acid had made me brave.

The Cyber Links

If I were to publish this book with everything I wanted in it, it would be well over 1,000 pages. It would likely be published in multiple volumes, like Proust's *Remembrance*

of *Things Past*. But much of what I'd include as reference material is information you can get free online. So in the digital version of this book, I include live links that take you directly to the material I reference. In the print version, I provide the URLs. Whenever you see a superscript number in the text, you'll find the URL for that link at the end of that chapter.

Many of the links take you to articles from *Blackjack Forum* that are now posted on my blackjack website. A number go to interviews with pro gamblers that are posted on the "Gambling With an Edge" podcasts. My advice: Take the time to check out the articles and interviews I link to if you want to expand your knowledge on the subject at hand.

Also, books I refer to in the text are listed at the end of each chapter with links to where they can be obtained online.

