

SECOND OPINION: CONDUCTING A WINNING PLAYER EVALUATION

By Bill Zender

Have you ever experienced an uncomfortable feeling when watching a table game player winning a large amount of money? Day after day, the player kept winning. Your floor staff and table games manager watched for different possible forms of advantage play or cheating and were unable to find anything wrong with the customer's table game activity. Your surveillance personnel have reviewed the play and found nothing wrong either.

Upper management started to question the legitimacy of the customer's activities. How could someone win so much for so many sessions in a row? In most situations, upper management has limited table games experience and, to top it off, has a very low tolerance for negative result fluctuation. When it gets to this point, upper management starts to question table game management and surveillance's ability to protect the organization's bankroll.

Everybody in table games management has experienced this situation at one point or another. When a situation of this nature occurs, have you considered getting a second opinion from an outside expert? Hire a second set of eyes to look over documents and video segments of an extremely lucky customer's play and render a report as to the expert's findings? In the last several years, I have served in this exact purpose several dozen times. I've been employed by casinos to act as that second set of eyes and provide table game management with a second opinion as to the legitimacy of a table game customer's "uncomfortable" sequence of winning play.

It has been my experience that 90 percent of all reviews confirmed that the person was a standard customer playing by the rules. However, it's the other 10 percent that keeps us awake at night. For some reason, request for video reviews have become popular over the past number of years. I have conducted a number of reviews of players in blackjack, baccarat and craps. Most reviews are requested for two reasons: (1) a known high-limit player wins a good deal of money over a period of time and management needs a second opinion, or (2) an unknown player wins consistently and management needs an outside source to determine if the player is using a technique that is new or unfamiliar to their staff.

How I Conduct Winning Player Video/Tracking Reviews

I conduct reviews on casino customers who are winning to a point that makes management "uncomfortable." The obvious games for this type of review are blackjack and baccarat, but I also have reviewed occasional craps play and have received requests to review alternative games as well. In many cases, casino management and surveillance have conducted their own analyses of the play and have found nothing unfair or illegal. Nevertheless, when the amount of the win or the length of the winning period becomes a serious concern, it is prudent for

management to get a second opinion from an outside source. What follows is a list of points I look at when regarding winning customer play reviews.

- I need to review several shoes/decks of the customer's play before I can make an accurate decision. In blackjack I need no less than four shoes or eight decks (double/single) of play to look through. Since card counting is a primary concern for my clients, I especially look for situations where a shoe/deck runs very "plus," and also very "minus." Many of my clients automatically default to "card counting" mode, and look at it as the major possible problem. The combination of shoes that are "plus" and "minus" allows me to look for contrast in play when analyzing for card counting. Looking at a number of decks or shoes where the true count stays fairly neutral will result in poor decisions (false positives). In addition, by looking at a number of shoes/decks, I can identify any changes in procedures, dealer's exposing cards unnecessarily or attempts by the suspect player at manipulating the deck cut.

- Regarding the game of baccarat, I require no less than the video (or hand tracking sheets) from four shoes. Other than card counting, I look for the same problems in baccarat as I do in blackjack, i.e., exposed cards, not following procedures, etc. Watching at least four shoes gives me a sample of the customer's betting strategy. Does he follow the winning hands of the shoe? Is he following the scoreboard prediction screens, or is his wagering pattern conducive to sequence knowledge?

- Note on baccarat and card counting: Although baccarat is considered a "card depletion" game the same as blackjack, the properties of the basic game prevent it from being counted profitably. Unfortunately, this does not apply to certain side bets like the Dragon 7, Panda 8, Pair Bet, etc. In standard evaluation procedure, analyze these side-betting alternatives during a baccarat game review.

- I can conduct video reviews on all digital formats as long as surveillance attaches the video player to the DVD disc containing the sample video. Because a number of digital formats are being used, it's important that I have the correct system for reviewing the digital segment. In the past, reviews have been held up due to the casino's failure to provide a useable player along with the video segment. Believe it or not, I have the ability to review VHS tape. If a casino is still using tape, it is more convenient if it has converted over to digital. It is much easier to ship video samples in memory stick format, especially when the shipment is made through overnight mail.

- In some instances, local regulatory agencies will not permit the surveillance department to send video samples to anyone outside the casino organization. If this is the case, I can still conduct an analysis from the surveillance tracking sheets. The tracking sheets need to include the appearance of all cards in the hand, who received those cards (even non-suspect players at the table), amount of wagers and in any hand strategy decisions made by the player. The more detail the better. Again, I would

require the same number of shoes/decks if possible. I may also need to contact a member of surveillance (or floor supervisor) who can answer questions about the exact play, either over the phone or by email. In these situations, the contact employee acts as my “eyes” and lets me know the different procedures or actions occurring that cannot be accurately depicted on a written report.

- I have also found that any reports compiled by either surveillance and/or floor operations to be very valuable. Sometimes these reports give me insight into the customer’s history and certain playing characteristics not obvious through review of the video. It is very helpful to have these reports included in the submitted package.

- When conducting a review in blackjack, I look for various problems, not just card counting. In blackjack I analyze for possibilities of shuffle tracking, sequential tracking and location, general location play, dealer collusion and various forms of cheating, including marked cards and past posting. When I conduct a review in baccarat, I look for various avenues of attack, including weaknesses in the shuffle and cut, cut card placement, the possible use of miniature video cameras to record card sequence, hand mucking (squeeze games), card sort manipulation, marked cards and other forms of intrusions to obtain card sequence information.

- Note on detecting marked cards: In an initial analysis I don’t need to look at the actual cards used to see if they are marked. First, I watch the betting patterns and the play decisions. In every case of marked cards, the unique betting/playing patterns are always detectable even though the markings on the cards are all but impossible to read without the right lens or lighting. Once marked cards are suspected, a sample of these cards can be examined more intensely. Currently, I have access to Galaxy Gaming’s Spectrum Vision (SV-1) marked card detection unit, and I have yet to find a daub or paint it cannot detect.

- Once an analysis is completed, I compile a detailed report of my findings. The general purpose of the report is to provide surveillance and management with written verification of the customer’s playing qualifications and characteristics. This report provides the casino organization with a second opinion as to the value (or the threat) of the analyzed customer. It’s also written with the understanding that the report might be used as verification for members of upper management who may not possess an understanding of table game terminology and/or procedures. I try to make the reports easy to read and use bullet points whenever possible. I’m also prepared to conduct presentations to executive committees and/or Board of Directors if necessary.

- Most table game reviews, including reports, take about three to four hours to complete. Anytime a review appears to extend past the four-hour period, I contact the individual requesting the analysis with a new time estimate. The longest time taken so far to complete an evaluation and complete a report on a single high limit play (with no problems with his card play noted) has been eight hours.

Why a Second Opinion?

In all honesty, it’s very rare for me to find evidence of advantage play or cheating during a second opinion review. In situations in which I detect

advantage play or cheating, time is of the essence. I contact the individual requesting the report. From there we can determine how much additional time needs to be spent analyzing the video/tracking information on my end. At this point, I can help the casino strategize as to the next step they wish to take in the matter. Based on my past experience with the Nevada Gaming Control Board, I can also provide advice on how to move toward an arrest for gaming violations. In cases where a person is arrested, I’m more than prepared to offer my services as an expert witness in court, as I have a number of hours serving in that capacity over the past 30 years.

One of the primary reasons you should employ an outside gaming expert to review suspected winning table games players is that your staff doesn’t know every aspect of advantage play and cheating, especially the newest methods being used to beat the games. As a gaming consultant, I travel all over North America and sometimes overseas to deal with various requests clients have. By working for these different organizations throughout the world, I’m exposed to different scams and cheating methods that are not realized (yet) in your gaming region or area.

For example, recently I identified a known high-limit blackjack player as being an advanced card counter. The player gained “invisibility” due to his play strategy of always surrendering busting hands against the dealer’s up-card of eight or better. After reviewing a chapter in Ian Andersen’s book *Burning the Tables in Las Vegas: 2nd Edition* (2003), I was able to confirm this surrender strategy as a legitimate card counting strategy. Because of this player’s wide bet spread employed in plus count situations, the cost of making the aggressive surrender play in neutral and minus situation was overshadowed by the gains achieved in plus situations with the customers wagering 50 times his base bet.

When a good casino customer is winning an abnormal amount of money, or has been experiencing a winning streak for an unusual number of trips, it might be time to consider getting a second opinion regardless the experience of your floor and surveillance staff. Usually, a second opinion from an expert source outside the casino organization is given more credibility than the analysis of the in-house staff. A second opinion can be used to help satisfy upper management concerns and get you past these “heart wrenching,” but normal, periods of negative statistical fluctuations.



▲ BILL ZENDER



Bill Zender is a former Nevada Gaming Control agent, casino operator, professional card counter and present gaming consultant. He has been involved in various areas of gaming and hospitality since 1976. He can be reached at wzender@billzender.com.

**Satisfied With Your Live Games’ Performance?
Need to Supercharge Your Table Game Results?**

Contact Me I Can Help

Bill Zender and Associates
www.billzender.com

702.423.5734