

TABLE GAME MYTHS PERSIST AMONG PLAYERS AND DEALERS

By Bill Zender

Table game myths have been the basis of discussions and arguments for decades. In this installment, we examine five myths that persist in the industry today. The first three myths listed cover card counting, lucky/unlucky dealers and roulette dealers who boast of the ability to drop the roulette ball on whatever number they choose. The last two myths have come about due to advances in technology and through mystifying the public with a plausible, but unproven, system to beat the casinos. Are these table game myths fact or fiction? You decide.

Card counters always win

I've found that both sides of the gaming table, casino employees and players, view the technique of card counting as a sure-fire method for beating casinos out of thousands of dollars. I've worked for many old-time executives over the past 30-plus years who believe a card counter, wagering up to \$500 a hand when the deck is rich in 10-value cards and aces, is guaranteed to win several thousand dollars when allowed to play several decks or shoes. This erroneous belief has been perpetuated for decades by the casino industry as a whole and is due to the lack of education regarding the mechanics of the technique of counting cards.

Many casino executives believe card counting provides the player with a serious advantage when in fact it only provides a slight edge (approximately 1 percent of the average wager). This edge is gained only if the counter has mastered keeping track of the "running count" while playing at the table, and another dozen skills that he or she needs to learn before being able to eke out that small edge. Realistically, only 1 in 1,000 persons who have studied blackjack and the technique of card counting has produced a positive return from this venture; very few develop the skill to a point where they can live off the proceeds. In support of my assumption of general pit "card counting" paranoia, one only has to go as far as the standard industry belief that blackjack must never be dealt deeper than 75 percent of the deck or shoe. Deck penetration rarely exceeds 75 percent when in fact this "shallow" shuffle point cost the casino's thousands, if not millions of dollars per year in lost revenue potential. Card counting might be costing the casino industry millions each year, but it's not the player sitting at the table who is causing it.

Casino customers aren't much different from their casino industry

counterparts in their perception of the advantages of card count. Books depicting the exploits of card counter and movies such as *21* that examine the adventures of a bunch of MIT kids that took on the mega casinos in Las Vegas and Atlantic City send the wrong perception of the advantage in counting cards. The general public believes that a person can buy a book on card counting, practice for a moderate period of time and then possess the ability needed to beat the casinos in the long-term. From my experience, anyone can learn the skills required to gain a mathematical edge through this technique; however, very few people have the discipline and the willpower to make the commitment required to master professional-level card counting.

To support this assumption that people perceive counting to be the gold at the end of the rainbow, I refer to a lecture I presented at Denver University several years ago. A professor, Dr. Bob Hannum, invited me to speak before approximately 100 Denver University students from the university's Hospitality College. This event took place the spring in which the movie *21* was released. Hannum informed me that the movie was the "talk" of the campus, with some of the students promoted the idea of card counting to a "cult" status. His concerns lay with the student's perception that card counting was an alternative to finishing school and earning a degree. Why stay in school when the average college student can learn how to count cards, hang out in Vegas and earn a king's ransom? I felt the lecture I presented on the mechanics of card counting went well from my perspective, but it was not well-received by the students looking for a career alternative; the brighter ones realized that they were destined to "tough out" one more year of school.

Bottom line: Only a true card counting professional, with access to a fairly large bankroll, will develop the skill necessary to eke out that 1 percent mathematical advantage. In most cases, a professional-level counter does not earn thousands of dollars an hour, but realistically earns a couple of hundred dollars per playing session. Given the choice, I would rather work at a 7-Eleven or McDonald's.

Some dealers are luckier (or unluckier) than others

The more people know about gambling and probabilities, the less and less they rely on superstition to explain unusual outcomes. Unfortunately, a good number of casino executives are still

superstitious. When I “broke in” to the gaming business as a blackjack dealer in the ‘70s, I worked in a casino that was extremely superstitious. From my first day dealing at this casino, I was subject to a variety of superstitious procedures used by the floor supervisors to “change” the flow of the cards. While dealing a game, if I started losing I was told to shuffle after every hand, or told to deal the deck all the way to the last card. If that didn’t work, I was told (secretly of course) to purposely break the corner of a playing card and request a new deck. If that didn’t work, another dealer was summoned to replace me with the hope that the new dealer could change the flow of the cards and reverse the table’s losing trend. Once I asked the casino shift manager if in fact the casino could do something to change the outcomes on the table, wouldn’t that be illegal? For this comment I was given a harsh talking-to, and advised to never say anything like that again if I wish to stay employed. I would imagine most casino industry individuals who dealt cards or dice during the ‘70s and ‘80s have similar stories to tell.

It’s funny, but I still hear of incidents in which certain dealers are banished to low-limit games due to an incredible run of bad luck. I knew one dealer years ago who was promoted from dealer to floor supervisor for a simple reason; management felt he was naturally unlucky and would do “less damage” if he were off the tables. Superstition also rolls over into the table gaming device world as well. I know of several casinos that removed electronic shuffling machines because they weren’t providing the returns management had anticipated. Were the machines running unlucky? Maybe management should have made a more knowledgeable decision based on a longer trial or by investigating other possibilities. One casino deemed their hole-card readers unlucky. The month after the hole-card readers were installed on the tables, the blackjack games experienced a lower-than-average hold percentage. Management deemed the readers the culprit and quit using them. Today the hole-card readers still occupy a place on the table, still unused after several years.

I read a magazine article recently that discussed how players should select dealers when gambling in the casino. The article strongly suggested that blackjack and alternative game players should stay away from younger male and all Asian dealers. The author of the article wrote that he personally had never been “lucky” on a table game when a young man or Asian dealer was dealing the cards. The author’s advice was based on his 20-plus years of gambling. I guess he felt that statistical probabilities are akin to voodoo and fortune telling. I know of one older gentleman that refused to play against any dealer with a mustache. The reason: if the dealer wears a mustache he must be a crook. How he developed this theory, I have no idea. Maybe he knew someone who cheated at cards who also happened to be adorned with a mustache.

The lucky-unlucky superstition also can extend into the world of knowledgeable gambling. One of the sharpest advantage players I know wouldn’t play in a certain casino. Why? Not because he thought the floor staff or surveillance team would spot him for what he was. No way. The reason he wouldn’t play in that casino is that he believed it to be unlucky for him. I found out he wouldn’t play at the Fremont Hotel and Casino in downtown Las Vegas. During that time period, the Fremont offered an excellent double-deck game with great deck penetration; a great game for a card counter. Regardless of what the game offered, my friend the advantage player wouldn’t walk through the door. His comment, “I never win there. The place is haunted.”

An experienced roulette dealer can hit numbers of his or her choosing

I can’t tell you how many roulette dealers I have known who claim they can spin the ball and place it in any section of the roulette wheel head. Some even claim they can hit specific colors and drop the ball within a few pockets. Amazing! The problem with these statements of superior control and gifted ability is that none of these individual can back up their claims. If a small percentage of experienced dealers were talented enough to drop the spinning ball into specific sections or a number on the rotating wheel head, there would be a number of old millionaire roulette dealers retired and living on the French Riviera. Also, the game of roulette would no longer be dealt by a human being. In the past, I’ve offered any number of roulette dealers the chance to prove their accuracy. I’ve challenged them to spin the ball no less than 1,000 times, using a statistical method known as Chi Square Goodness of Fit test to measure the result. No one has taken me up on my challenge.

Mathematically, even moderate control over the flight of the ball would be profitable for the “skilled” dealer. If he or she could guarantee that they could place the ball every spin into 30 out of 38 numbers, and enlisted an outside individual to wager numbers in that 30 number section (any of those numbers would be fine), the dealer and his or her accomplice would be subject to a 20 percent advantage on every dollar wagered. That’s a huge advantage if the dealer could consistently “bar” eight numbers. Why hasn’t anyone heard of this happening?

A couple of years ago I represented roulette dealer in court as his expert witness. He was arrested for cheating at roulette. Normally I don’t represent people accused of cheating, but this guy’s case was different. The gaming control board regulating gaming in that state arrested him for “pacing” the roulette wheel. It was its belief that he was timing the release of the ball so he could place the ball into numbers that either held a dealer courtesy bet or a wager of a customer who tipped. What they were accusing him of was similar to

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throwing a key into a lock, and after looking at the video of the alleged incidents, the dealer wasn't even throwing near the lock. The case went all the way to a jury trial, and, after two days of trial, it took the jury 30 minutes to return a not guilty verdict.

Shuffling machines and intelligent dealing shoes are easy to rig

I really hate the movie *Ocean's 13*. Not that it was a bad movie. Actually it was quite entertaining. The reason I hate it is due to the scene in the movie in which the cheat mastermind Danny Ocean hires a computer genius to rig a shuffling machine—the machine being a continual shuffling machine. In the movie, the computer guru is able to develop an electronic method to get the machine to shuffle the cards so he wins every hand. In the first several weeks of the movie's release, I received a number of emails from executives in the gaming industry concerned that their continual shuffling machines could be attacked in a similar manner. Bottom line: It's impossible to rig any advanced shuffling machine in that manner. Unless the machine was totally re-engineered, it can't happen. I still get emails about that machine.

It isn't only the casino executives who are concerned, so are players who have been subject to unusual losses when playing against a shuffling machine. The concern is that the machine reads the cards as they are placed into the machine by the dealer. The players are afraid the machine identifies the value of the cards and then stacks the deck against the players. Their worries are unfounded. The shuffler is actually equipped with two separate computers; one computer that reads the value of the cards and determines if any are missing, and a second computer that uses a random number generator to slot, or mix the cards once they are placed into the machine. Because these two computing units are not linked for communication, the reading unit can't pass information to the random shuffling unit. Even after that explanation, a number of players still are not convinced. Why? Because they claim I work for the industry and that's why I won't tell them the truth.

I'm getting word that there is also blow-back from both sides of the gaming table over the new intelligent dealing shoes. In the past month I have received a number of emails or phone calls from gaming executives about whether or not the "i-Shoes" can be "hacked" so the players know the value of the cards coming out of the front of the shoe. I explain that the optical device in the different i-Shoe only reads the cards as they are being drawn from the dealing shoe, and it is impossible for the i-Shoe to see cards that have not been drawn.

There is nothing to worry about. And, then comes along the dealing shoes that were discovered in a casino in Korea. Several baccarat dealing shoes were found to contain a miniature camera hidden behind the faceplate of the shoe. The cameras would film the index corner of the top card of the shoe and transmit this information to a player at the table. The dealer was involved in the scam because he or she had to activate the camera and position the card at the very edge of the faceplate. Although the altered Korean shoes were not electronic intelligent, it still sent a shock wave through the gaming industry and has cast undue mistrust back onto the i-Shoe.

People who practice rhythm rolling can beat the game of craps

About a decade ago, a group of dice players started publishing articles and books about a dice rolling technique known as "rhythm rolling." The technique is accomplished by the dice shooter who must set the dice, side-by-side, on a specific number pattern,

incorporate a special finger grip when picking up the set dice and use a practiced arm swing to launch the cubes. If done correctly, the dice will rotate as a single entity while traveling in the air, land on the table at the same time while "glancing" off the wall of the table and pinwheel away from the wall without rotating sideways. If the shooter sets the dice side-by-side on the table with the one and the six facing outward, in theory when the dice are tossed and glance off the wall as a single unit on the same axis, it will reduce the number of sevens rolled. Of course this throwing system would not be used in this manner on a "come out" roll, but would be employed after a point was established. These dice "experts" swear by this technique, referring to it as "the card counting of the new millennium." A number of instructional classes are available throughout the country, and hundreds of "rhythm rolling" enthusiasts have been trained and turned out to inflict their skills on the casinos.

The casino industry is having a difficult time taking this technique seriously, and it is correct in its skepticism. A number of these dice control experts have been challenged by legitimate gaming and mathematics experts, and the challenges have resulted in nothing but excuses from the controllers. When asked to demonstrate this rare technique, the dice controllers can't seem to have the ability to come through with a genuine performance. The main excuse is that the technique involves the arm and muscle, and because the arm would tire after 100-plus throws, there is no way the dice controllers can produce an accurate sample of 1,000 trials. One thousand tosses would be the minimum need to run a worthwhile statistical analysis. In addition, no large craps winners have surfaced who used this technique. You would think if the technique provided the shoot with a 1 percent or 2 percent advantage, someone would be grinding a major casino out of thousands of dollars!

The consulting firm Sunzeri Consulting analyzed the physical mechanics behind the throw, and the physical properties of the average crap table have thrown further cold water on the concept. Its finding indicates that the dice, over a number of throws, will not react to the action as described by the rhythm rolling experts. The consulting firm claims that the actions the dice are suggested to take are physically impossible. This analysis was conducted before even considering the hardness of the surface of the table or the effect of the diamond padding that lines the crap table's walls (see my article on, "Rhythm Rolling: A Dice Control Technique," in *Casino Enterprise Management's* October 2005 edition).

The bottom line on this technique; keep your table surfaces hard and your diamond padding new and let the players throw the dice any way management sees fit. If the technique works, it will only work for a handful of people who constantly practice the throw and only on certain tables where the conditions allow for their actions to have a chance of succeeding..



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