

time well spent

Counting cards without looking like a joker? No small feat

By Dan Monk

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He stares at the cards like he's trying to see through them. This is how a camera would work if it were human, born in Brooklyn, had a shaved head, bushy mustache and slightly bulbous nose.

Sal Piacente is doing the "Rain Man stunt." He has cut the deck and handed you half of them. It'll take him no more than 20 seconds to memorize the roughly two dozen cards in his hand. Then, he'll tell you everything in yours. Everything.

"I can memorize eight decks, sequentially," said Piacente, a 38-year-old Florence resident who is one of the world's best card counters.

For years, Piacente was the scourge of Las Vegas casinos, a rare player who could neutralize the house advantage at blackjack. These days, he works for the Hyatt hotel chain, teaching memory tricks to casino hosts.

Piacente doesn't like to talk about his casino days. He's a family man now who volunteers at area schools, teaching kids how to use word association to remember test materials. When he was a player, he wouldn't have talked at all. Casinos keep files on people like Piacente.

While card counting is legal, it is definitely discouraged. Sometimes, players are banned. Sometimes, casinos adopt countermeasures: putting limits on bets, shuffling the deck more often to keep counters guessing.

"It's a tough way to make a living," Piacente said.

But did he ever lose while counting cards?

"Not much," he said.

"It takes work. It takes study, and it takes dedi-

cation. Most people can't follow through," said Anthony Curtis, a former card counter who runs a publishing company, Las Vegas Advisor. He estimated there are no more than a few hundred players who count well enough to make a living.

Bob Bedinghaus is not among them. The former Hamilton County commissioner has read about counting cards but never tried it.

"It's too much work," said Bedinghaus, now a public relations consultant. "I'm there for entertainment. I don't gamble for a living. That was my old job (politics)."

Cincinnati-based Broadway producer Rick Steiner has won several thousand counting cards.

"It worked so well in Tahoe one night that for the first and only time I got banned from a casino," said Steiner, who often competes in the annual World Series of Poker and won an event in 1992.

There are myriad counting systems, most developed by mathematicians trying to squeeze out an extra percentage point of advantage, in a game where non-counters who play error-free can expect to win about 48 percent of the time. Recreational players should stick to the basics, wrote Arnold Snyder, publisher of the *Blackjack Forum*.

"Casual players who can recognize which games are more exploitable can do quite well ... if they can accurately apply a simple count strategy," he wrote.

The first step is to learn basic strategy. Statistics dictate when you should stay or hit, which means taking another card from the dealer. The rules of blackjack allow players to "double down," or double their bets when their first two cards add up to

11. The rules let you "split" your hand when your first two cards are a matching pair. Splitting aces always makes sense, but eights? The answer depends on the dealer's hand. With several hours' practice, said Curtis, most players can learn basic strategy. He recommends a computer program, *Blackjack 6-7-8*, as a teaching tool.

With the strategy mastered, you're ready for counting. The basic system involves keeping a running tab on the cards in play by assigning point values to high and low cards. High cards — 10s through aces — are the cards you covet. It takes only two of them to get you close to your goal of 21. Card counters assign a point value of minus one to high cards. Low cards — two through six — are the cards you don't want to see. They count for plus one. The numbers six through nine are neutral. They count for zero.

Flip through an entire deck of 52 cards. Starting at zero, subtract one point for every high card and add one for every low card. When all cards are played, you'll be back to zero. But, let's say you're halfway through the deck and a string of low cards comes up. Your running tab might be a plus five or 10. That tells you there are an abundance of high cards left in the deck. The odds have shifted in your favor. It's time to increase your bet.

One more wrinkle: The deeper in the deck you go, the more the odds favor a plus count. So, most counters divide their plus count by the number of cards they estimate are left in the deck. Since many casinos play with eight decks at a time, and most blackjack games are social affairs, with lots of distractions, this can be extremely difficult.

Hit me

Blackjack: A hand whose first two cards equal 21.

Hit: Take another card.

Stand: Stay with your cards.

Surrender: Option to turn in original hand for half initial bet.

Split: When first two cards are same rank, "split" them to form separate hands.

Source: Grizzled gambling veteran

