

The Zengrifter Interview

- By Barfarkel

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The interviewer, known as 'Barfarkel', is a serious recreational player who started with basic strategy in 1996 and learned the Silver Fox count by the end of 1998. He has been counting since early 1999. Barfarkel's trip-report diary, [You've Got Heat](#) contains the details of his playing trips to Las Vegas over a 4-year period. This interview was conducted in March 2003.

One of blackjack's most controversial and irreverent practitioners, known as 'The Grifter' or 'Zengrifter,' has granted a no-holds-barred interview in the hopes of providing us with a glimpse into 'the education of a card-counter,' and to set the record straight on some of the controversy that has arisen about him in business and blackjack circles.

A self-professed inveterate card-counter since graduating high school in Las Vegas in 1971, he pioneered the probabilistic-based speculative strategies that culminated in over \$600 million in randomly awarded cellular telephone licenses by FCC lottery, in the mid-1980s, and made a few million dollars for himself in the process. In the mid-90s he and his wife developed an advanced 'game-theoretic' approach to winning PCS licenses in FCC airwave auctions that resulted in her company being among only 18 PCS license winners in the biggest cash auction in world history (\$8 billion) and culminated in their meeting President Clinton and Vice-President Gore. In the late '90s his victories would sour amidst federal allegations of fraud and racketeering, involving the sale of more than \$270 million in so-called "unregistered securities," leading to a RICO-conspiracy plea and conviction. Forbes magazine wrote two separate and uncomplimentary articles about him, dubbing him "The Grifter" in the process, and he humorously adopted the handle.

Zengrifter is currently completing a 14-month 'stretch' at Federal Prison Camp Miami, having transferred from his original prison camp at Nellis Air Force Base, north of Las Vegas. He'll do a total of 14 months at camp, followed by a month or two at a downtown Las Vegas halfway-house, and then three months of home confinement.

Our interview begins with my trip to Las Vegas last spring, where I visited my friend and mentor at Federal Prison Camp Nellis. FPC Nellis is an inconspicuous cluster of dormitories, barracks and athletic facilities. To a casual observer, its architectural style is indistinguishable from that of the adjoining air force base.

Pulling in to the visitors' parking lot, I noted the lack of fences and walls. The grassy outdoor visitors' area was nicely appointed with umbrella clad patio tables and benches. There was a kids section with swings, merry-go-round, and a jungle gym. Families clustered here and there smiling and taking photos.

"Grif", as I often call him, arrived in dress khakis looking noticeably slimmed and tanned. We embraced fondly like the old blackjack warrior-comrades we are. Settling in at a table at the opposite end from where the children's voices and laughter filled the air, I noted that he seemed relaxed and familiar with many of the other inmates who were hosting their guests that weekend.

As we were starting, The Grifter motioned to a fellow inmate who approached and introduced himself as Jay Cohen – the same Jay Cohen that Gambling and the Law attorney/author Nelson Rose has written about several times. Jay is serving 24 months for violating the antiquated Interstate Wire Act by allowing Americans to wager on his Antigua based World Sports web book. He returned to the US to face the charges in what he had hoped would be an exonerating test case, but lost. He told Grif that he had “a blackjack question” for later.

Grif also introduced me to pro sports bettor Jerry Crouch who is “down for 18 months for gambling in Las Vegas,” Crouch chuckles. Actually he was a successful and renown sports bettor who refused to rat out his friends when the U.S. Justice Dept. pressured him to do so. As a result they maliciously prosecuted him on a trumped up money laundering charge for hiring beards to get down his sports bets in violation of Nevada’s new Messenger Betting Law.

Another inmate swooped by our table and chimed in, “Hey Dr. Evil, can I bum a Marlboro from your friend?” He took the cigarette I proffered and retreated. “What’s his case?” I inquired. “Tax fraud”, replied Grif. “He’s a big Newport Beach sports doctor and the ex-wife turned him in.” “Hell hath no fury,” I quoted whimsically. Apparently ‘Dr. Evil’ is a new nickname Zengrifter has acquired since he shaved his head and began honing an Austin Powers shtick. I was pleased to see my old friend relaxed and adapting so well to his current albeit temporary environment.

What caused you to first become interested in card counting?

What year was that and how old were you?

As a kid, I became enamored of the romantic riverboat and secret-agent gambler images portrayed on TV's Maverick, James Bond, and The Man From Uncle, and began playing poker with family members at gatherings and in junior high-school, age 13 or so. During this period I read and reread Scarne On Gambling and Scarne on Cards. I knew Scarne's basic strategy for 21 in the eighth grade and regularly played poker with my pals, for money, though I was neither particularly successful nor was I 'on the hustle.' I just enjoyed playing and reading. Scarne was the guru then, and I also read Herbert Yardley's Education of a Poker Player, Frank Wallace's Poker Guaranteed Income, and then I chanced onto Ed Thorp's Beat the Dealer, hardcover first edition - the most exciting literary gambling adventure ever! Of course I did not even attempt to learn Thorp's 10-Count, but the theory-understanding was simple to grasp.

By age 16, circa 1969, my family had moved to Las Vegas and that summer I discovered Lawrence Revere's Playing Blackjack as a Business and took my first stab at counting. Donning sunglasses and haunting the Mint and Horseshoe I counted 5s and bet \$1-\$10 on several successive evenings. But, my new passion was cut short when I switched to the poker table and went all in, nearly \$200 with kings-full, and was beaten by four deuces - the kick-in-the-stomach pain of that loss was enough to keep me from setting foot in a casino again for another few years.

I did continue to play poker through high school, but not until I had graduated in the early '70s did I take another stab at counting. The first, last and only salaried job in my life was lifeguard and pool boy at Caesars. It was a 'juice job' as locals called the many jobs that required one to know someone on the inside. In my case, I went to high school with the sons and daughters of many high-ranking casino people including the then Caesars president. The tips I made became a replenishable bankroll that enabled me to lead a lifestyle that required little financial security.

After a few notable losses I re-immersed myself into Revere's book, this time tackling the basic strategy and Revere Point Count sections until I had both down cold.

My mother had influence at the Hilton and MGM and by then it wasn't looking like I would go on to college to be a doctor or lawyer, my mother's dream, so she urged me to "learn 21" so she could juice me in to one of the premier spots. She hoped I'd someday be a casino executive, but by the time I turned 22 I had been backed-off from many of the better clubs in Vegas including the Hilton where Mom worked, and she was promptly informed upon her arrival of my barring that same evening. It broke her heart that I was already exhibiting signs of being an outcast and at odds with the industry that had supported most of our family at that time.

Did you win a lot of money in those early days?

Yes, and I lost a lot as well. In the beginning I thought, "Man, this is going to be my highway to riches!" But by the time I was 23, I had been barred from many, if not most, of the best casinos in Nevada, due to inadequate cover, and had lost my bankroll three times over, due to over-betting. After that, I went into sales and entrepreneurial pursuits and blackjack was relegated to 'avocation' status. From the late '70s through the '90s, I played mostly mid-level stakes with multi-hand top-bets typically maxing at \$300 apiece.

In chronological order, what are the major count systems you've used through your playing career? How would you rate them, and why did you change from one to another?

I was personally taught by Lawrence Revere and at his recommendation, in 1975, I switched from the Revere Point Count to the Revere Advanced Plus/Minus, an ace-neutral level one (2-6 vs. 9-10 with 125 indices). When I switched to HiOpt-2 in 1976, Revere stopped speaking to me. He ultimately refused further mentoring and dealings with me after I informed him that I was opting for the HiOpt-2 in lieu of his Advanced Point Count. By then, Julian Braun's first ever simulation-comparison of several '70s systems had been published - I got a copy in late 1975 at the Gamblers' Book Club - It clearly showed that the simpler HiOpt-2 out-performed Revere's latest advanced 'level-4' system. For several years I played HiOpt-2 with 'multi-parameter' adjustments for aces and sevens. At least 100 indices were considered critical in the '70s, however I went a bit overboard, using 160 or more back then. Since the mid-80s, upon the first publication of Arnold Snyder's Blackbelt in Blackjack, I've played Zen with 90 indices. And, if I knew in the '70s what I know now, I'd likely never have switched away from the RPC, as published in Revere's then-popular book.

After playing blackjack using Revere's methods, what were your results?

How did you feel about the effectiveness of his teachings?

What was Lawrence Revere like?

Revere was a paradox: undoubtedly a pioneer, he had the ethics of the rogue that he was. I am convinced that Revere understood more about the Kelly/risk-management side of the game than he revealed in his own published "money-management" advice. In effect, he purposely had us all over-betting. Often our win rate would approximate the 8-10 units per hour that we were led to expect, only to inevitably hit an "inexplicable losing streak" that would all but collapse our insufficient bankrolls.

Of course we were grossly over-betting, but when we'd limp back to Revere's place on Rexford Drive, the money management issue never entered the analysis... instead he would "check" our play by dealing cards. Getting down to the last few cards, our count would always be wrong - which invariably led to the purchase of more lessons at \$100 per hour, and up to several system upgrades: the complete RPC with 160 indices, the Advanced Plus Minus with ace side count, four different versions of his Advanced Point Count at \$200 each.

As you may have guessed, our count was always off during the "checking" sessions because Revere was dealing to us from a shorted deck.

To his credit, he was the true inventor of the 'Big Player' team approach that was borrowed and improved upon by Al Francesco, popularized by Ken Uston, and further perfected by the MIT Team, and others. Barred universally in Nevada, he would make frequent casino trips abroad with his all-girl team of apparent "nieces" and "daughters."

One gal that I knew in passing worked for 6 months as his business assistant during the mid- 70s and noted that he averaged about \$3000 weekly in mail-order and lessons sales alone. To this day his daughter-in-law, Mary, continues to sell systems - and dispense wholly inadequate advice - from the very same residential location that I used to meet her father at.

You've often stated that precise index numbers are not important. Can you explain why you feel that way?

While other experts emphasize the top 20 or so index plays, I advocate the use of 60+ indices, and personally utilize 80+ with my Zen count. The endlessly debated point I've been making is that so-called precision index numbers are a "myth" and offer no significant added gain over extreme-rounded numbers! Whether one uses an index "granularity-scale" of 0-1-2-3-4-5-6 or 0-2-4-6 or even 0-3-6 it will make absolutely no difference in actual casino play spanning three million hands, which is ten years of full time play. Time is money and 'extreme-rounded' index numbers can be deployed faster in real casino conditions. You gain much more in ease and resultant speed than you lose in lost precision. This has been pointed out previously by Snyder in his Hi-Lo Lite and True Edge Zen, in Ken Fuchs' Hi-Lo Express, in George C's Extreme Rounded Zen, and by John Imming, who developed the Universal Blackjack Engine and simulated billions of hands to prove this very point.

It seems you have broken away from the card counter "orthodoxy" over this and the related use of intuition?

The hit-stand-double index for basic strategy departure is a wide-border "coin-toss" zone of perhaps two digits, plus or minus. Therefore, I encourage the use of one's intuition when the decision is close. If decision by coin-toss will not reduce our effectiveness for these ever-frequent wide-border decisions, does it not stand to reason that we can learn to increasingly utilize the 'meta-awareness' faculties of our brain and "go with the force," so to speak, to potentially obtain a subjective improvement over raw statistical expectation?

Consider for example, that while our conscious mind may not be aware of that extra 4 or 5 still remaining in the deck, and not evident by our true count of +1 when we face 16 vs. 10, modern science tells us that our brain did notice the hit-not-stand situation, despite a true count indication to the contrary.

I once debated this issue with Don Schlesinger, who labeled my approach “sloppy, with no inherent advantage over precise.” I countered that if he was to replace “sloppy” with “fuzzy,” as in what computer science calls ‘fuzzy-logic,’ I would opt for the latter.

To summarize, one should strive for 60+ indices, but use a coarser granularity scale of two to four digits wide, individually tailored for ‘pattern-recognition’ ease. For example, if your index for 12 vs. 2 and 12 vs. 3 is +4 and +2 respectively, you can re-label both at +3 so they’re easier to remember and faster to utilize. Or by the same token, all indices of -1, 0, and +1 can be rounded to 0, and so forth. So, re-label 60+ indices and learn accordingly.

Further, strive to play faster and longer. If 40+ extra indices can increase one’s relative expectation by 20%, and if we can increase our playing speed by, say 20%, and then add to that a 20% longer average playing day, then we have potentially increased our per-day EV by perhaps 70%. And that’s not even counting the intuition potentiality.

***60+ index departures? Isn’t that a lot of numbers to learn?
Is it feasible for novices?***

Today’s emphasis on the so-called ‘Illustrious-18’ indexes has conditioned newer counters to not attempt learning more - but learning 60 or so is actually fast and easy.

How should a beginner go about it?

Use ‘flash-cards’ - just like when we learned our multiplication tables. Start by ordering the cards in sequence, then after awhile when that is mastered, randomize the cards. Most novices will be pleasantly surprised to find the additional 40+ numbers mastered within a few hours of practice.

Which indices should comprise the “Grifter-60+”?

Well, let’s see, off the top of my head:
12 vs. 2-6; 13 vs. 2-6; 14 vs. 2-6&9-10; 15 vs. 2&9-A; 16 vs. 9-A; 8 vs. 4-6; 9 vs. 2-4&7; 10 vs. 8-A;
11 vs. 8-A; A8 vs. 4-6; A9 vs. 4-6; 88 vs. 10-A; 99 vs. A; 10s vs. 4-6.

That should do it... oh, and learn separate numbers for dealer 6 and Ace, depending on whether the rules are hit-or-stand on soft-17, and assuming that one plays both versions.

So you really think that it’s worth the extra effort?

Yes, if you play more than a few times per year. 60+ indices also aid your camouflage slightly, since most surveillance and pit staffs only know, at best, the ‘I-18.’

Can you give us some pointers about using intuition at the tables?

You may consciously play your hunch in the wide-border zone by taking a ‘prompt’ from your ‘adaptive-unconscious’ - that area of the brain-mind that processes and sorts an ocean of sensory-data entirely without conscious awareness. One way that we can learn to take an ‘intuitive-prompt’ is via physical ‘cues’ – skin or other bodily sensations in particular have been proven to relay intuitive resolution.

George Soros, the billionaire currency trader, uses pain sensations in his back to signal when to buy or sell, beyond what all of the technical and computer analysis at his disposal might otherwise indicate.

Additionally I believe that a counter's intuition power, for use at the frequent wide-border decision zones, can be increased dramatically through regular meditation. In fact, meditation offers substantial physical-mental-spiritual benefits. One method that I have used for years, and wholeheartedly endorse, is 'Transcendental Meditation' or 'TM.' The TM method requires just 20 minutes application morning and evening. Results are typically enjoyed within 1-4 weeks, and increase with continued regular use.

You've used some outrageous ploys to disguise your blackjack skills. What are some of them?

One I use frequently is flipping a coin at the table for decision making. I'll use the coin repeatedly for the wide-border-zone decisions when I feel the need to ham up my cover. If the flips are working it then becomes "the magic coin" and I may flip it for others at the table as well. With a noticeably large bet out, I can call the pit-critter over and have him flip the coin even, or for occasional bet-sizing where there's a close call – heads we let it ride, etc. If the results of the coin-tossing isn't working, I can announce that the coin is now "a perfect reverse barometer" and do the opposite of what the coin says, thus confusing everybody, including myself it would appear.

Another ploy I've used on occasion is to bring a gift shop basic strategy card to the blackjack table and ponder it for various decisions...brow furled in thought as I try to grasp the logic of say, splitting 9s against a 9 or doubling 11 vs. a dealer's 10. I'll get excited when a key BS play works, but then moments later become suspicious to the point of paranoia when I follow the chart and lose a hand. "Ah ha! I should have known better than to trust a system sold at the hotel's gift shop!" Then I'll 'purposely' go against the chart and if my 'hunch' works I'll assume an air of smug superiority with my own 'innate strategy.'

I've seen you use those before. What are some of the stunts you've used in the past, long before I met you?

Two classic stunts come to mind. One is my "Blind Card Counter" ploy that received honorable mention in Arnold Snyder's *Blackjack Wisdom* on page 77: I wear dark glasses, a stylish suit, and wield a blind man's cane. I'm led to the table by a female companion who asks the dealer if she will verbally tell me my cards and her up-card on each hand. Meanwhile I'm fumbling for cash, smiling sun-glassed face turned upwards like Ray Charles.

When the dealer calls over her superior, the pit-critter arrives just in time to see the big wad of cash being laid on the table by a blind man's shaky hands. My companion kisses my cheek and tells me she'll be nearby and return soon. I'll lay in the act with some bonehead plays for the first 15-20 minutes, combined with some non-count related progressions and a quick well-timed removal of the dark glasses to wipe my brow – eyes rolled way back so as to appear clearly dysfunctional. After asking for a security escort to the men's room, I return to the table and start blasting away without cover, other than a blind man's fumbling, of course.

Another cute ruse, I used a few times in the '80s, is posing as a wheelchair-ridden muscular-dystrophy victim during the week of the Jerry Lewis telethon. I'd roll up to the table, eyes level with the felt. Using spasmodic movements and twisted posture I announce in a strained voice that I was the 1964 Jerry Lewis Muscular Dystrophy "poster boy."

Of course the primary reason for the act was to have my eyes level with the felt to be able to see the dealer's hole card flashing with each round.

How about the time you played with a Groucho Marx disguise?

Actually it was one of those cheap gimmick 'Groucho glasses' with the big nose and plastic moustache. I had been barred at the Imperial Palace just two days before. On a fluke, I was with some out-of-town buddies, one of whom had just purchased the Groucho glasses at a magic kiosk. First I ran the play down to them, strictly for laughs, next door at the old Holiday casino where Harrah's now stands. Although my three friends didn't count, I had them sit at different tables on the same shift that I had been barred from, while I made the rounds with a cigar, back hunched over and loping like Groucho from table to table, wonging the two-deckers while cracking Marx-witticisms: "A blackjack, I was once dealt a blackjack in my pajamas. How the cards got in my pajamas, I'll never know." When a pit-critter asked if I had a player's card, I'd quip, "I'd never belong to any club that would have me as a member."

At one point, one of my buddies let it slip to the pit that I was a "world famous astrologer," who only played blackjack "when the planets were in proper alignment." The best part is that I played for over an hour, wonging aggressively on the same shift that had barred me only forty-eight hours before, and the pit-critters loved it. As we departed, I proclaimed that I would return again "when the planets re-aligned."

Didn't you invent a cover ploy where you pretended to be one of the new owners of a casino that was for sale? Tell us the circumstances.

Back in 1999 when the newspapers announced the acquisition of the bankrupt Las Vegas Maxim by Premier Interval, a timeshare developer, I hit upon the idea of capitalizing on my knowledge of the principals of that California-based timeshare company.

One night, shortly after the shift change to graveyard, I blew in there with my 'snide-inebriated' act and settled in betting \$10 - \$40 at their single-deck game, though not always with the count. Within 15 minutes I had introduced myself as the "CFO" of the new company. "In fact," I informed the shift boss, "I'm the guy that put the deal together to buy this turkey from the BK trustee!"

As I answered questions about the upcoming 'changing of the guard,' the off work private dancer playing at my table called her dancer friend over and introduced me as "the new owner!" After an hour or so, I had passed muster with the pit. Dan the shift boss was happy to change the music selection and adjust the volume level to my liking. By now my betting was becoming quite aggressive - sometimes as low as \$5 or as high as 2 hands of \$250.

I returned twice more on that shift, posing as 'the new owner' and played outrageous spreads while guaranteeing a floorman's wife a job in sales, agreeing to let the dance-girls open a billiard club, informally promoting another pitcritter to shift boss as soon as the transfers were complete, and promoting two dealers to the floor.

All totaled I played nearly 10 hours with outrageous spreads at both one and two deck and won about \$1500. I should have won more. And this joint was the resort headquarters of Griffin.

So the next time you need a good cover ploy in a small-independent joint that's changing hands, just walk in and announce with confidence that you are "the new owner."

You've claimed to be possibly the first player to have found a way to beat continuous shuffling machines. When did this come about? Can you reveal the details of your discovery?

The year was mid-1987 and two first generation 'CSM' prototypes were installed at the Las Vegas Golden Nugget. When I first saw the units, I thought to myself "the end is near!" I wouldn't think of playing against the infernal things, but I noted that they were quite popular - players who liked them did so for the same reason that the casino liked them - no wasted time shuffling. It was clear to me that the machines were unbeatable.

On subsequent visits to the Nugget, I had several opportunities to look inside the machines - they were often open because they would jam frequently, requiring floor personnel to prod inside with a pencil or pen. Even after peering inside several times, I did not readily perceive any weakness or vulnerability.

Early one morning several weeks later, as I collapsed into bed at my rented high-rise condo at the prestigious Marie Antoinette after an extreme negative-flux that previous evening, I thought of the CSMs as I fell asleep. In that almost sleeping alpha-wave state the answer hit me like a brick and jolted me awake - in an instant I knew that those machines were the most beatable blackjack games in town!

The 'gestalt' or full perspective of the CSM's inner workings, in light of my blackjack knowledge, was dramatic and immediate: what I realized was that the machines contained only three decks - and the only shuffle process involved about one-third of a deck at a time, a total of nine segments that, in turn, were not being further mixed together - nine distinct segments that maintained distinct count characteristics, changing only slightly and gradually, as the CSM cycled them around perpetually.

My first stop was the Nugget's health spa, still the best in town for my money, and by the time I got out of the steam bath, excited, alert and confident, I had the whole process clearly mapped in my cerebrum. It was a simple matter of identifying the two or three high-plus segments and locating them as the three decks cycled round and round like a merry-go-round...simply a matter of counting the number of hands between high count segments.

The pit was relaxed and unconcerned about advantage play at the CSM tables; clearly they were of the mind-set that they could not be beaten by counters. I spread my bets wildly between segments sometimes only betting \$10 and other times betting two or three hands of \$300-\$500. After my first three hours I was up over \$6,000, and I graciously accepted a comp for three at the gourmet room that evening as well as my lunch buffet.

I played the CSMs four more times in the course of 14 days for a total of 15 hours and accumulated nearly \$12,000.

You were killing them! Did you finally catch heat?

On my next to last play I began to get some scrutiny and spotted a pit-critter observing me from behind a nearby pillar. Eventually he came forward and introduced himself. He was Asian and coincidentally his name was Wong, the 'Senior 21 Games Director' at the Golden Nugget. Mr. Wong was friendly and told me that my betting style was "unique."

I feigned flattery and introduced myself as a "*mechanical engineer*" from California. I told Wong that I had invented "*a new betting system*" that was based on "progressions and rhythms." I also told him that I had run the so-called basic strategy from "*that 'Harvard' professor 'Eric' Thorp*" on my computer at work, and that I found "*serious errors*" in it -hence, I had created "my own" correct strategy that I "could prove" afforded the house "less than a 1.5% advantage!"

I also explained that my unique progression/rhythm betting scheme would of course not win in the long run, but that it "will win in the short run." Further, I had elected to concentrate my play on the new shuffling shoes because they allowed me to "get into the short run faster and stay in the short run longer!" Wong liked my answer, and I schmoozed another gourmet room comp from him, this time for four.

After my fourth and final play, and another \$3,000 win, a curious thing happened - I headed south on Las Vegas Boulevard and was pulled over by a metro squad car. The solo sergeant checked my ID, while saying that I hadn't committed any traffic violations, and he did not cite me. The adolescent in me could not resist asking him if he knew former Las Vegas police detective Bob Griffin, the head of the industry's most pernicious detective agency. He acknowledged that Griffin was "a friend" and I told him to "say hello for me."

Years later I would learn that a sophisticated team held back for nearly 18 months, waiting for the machines to become more proliferate and management even more comfortable, and then hit the Nugget and Mirage hard in late 1989 for an "upper six figures" amount.

Needless to say, today's CSMs are nothing like those 1st generation models... or are they?

Well, I've recently hypothesized that the 'Random Ejection' model 'handheld-multideck' - so called 'Fak1' and 'Fak2' games - may very well be beatable on the theory that they ONLY shuffle one or two decks at a time - segments that maintain their proximate order - similar to the method that I used on the first generation CSMs.

Didn't you once work with a roulette computer crew?

Not a crew, actually, I did some post-prototype R&D with UNLV physics professor Harry Fechter. I met Harry on a fluke when he called me and introduced himself as "the guy who built the hidden blackjack computer" that Eddie Seremba had been wearing when he was pulled up at the Frontier and then hit the newspaper a few days previously. The year was 1977 and I had run a biz-opp ad in the Las Vegas Sun looking for backers. Harry remarked that "even with a computer the edge is so small at blackjack," and that he had something more powerful.

I was familiar with the theory of computer-aided roulette prediction from Thorp's revised *Beat The Dealer*, Allan Wilson's *Casino Gambling Guide*, and Richard Epstein's *Theory of Gambling and Statistical Logic*. Theory held that such a computer could achieve a 40% edge over American roulette! I guessed right and was invited to meet the good doctor.

I met Harry at his nearby home and he gave me a tour of his garage laboratory - among his inventions were a card deck-sized dead car battery starter, a solid-state no moving parts refrigeration chest, a couple of blackjack computers, and the object of my visit... a city phone book-sized second generation roulette computer!

I asked this local outstanding scientist why he would be dabbling with these cutting-edge commercial projects, what with his busy UNLV academic schedule and 'CTSA' (cosmic-top-secret-atomic) clearance consulting at the nearby Mercury nuclear test site. He lamented that after his son died a few years previously he realized what he really wanted in life, "to make a great deal of money."

So he had a yellow pages sized roulette computer? Was it viable?

He had done an outstanding job of R&Ding the prototype, considering that this was pre-micro electronics. The algorithm it was based on was obtained from Ed Thorp and Claude Shannon, using his own academic credentials.

Prior to roulette, Harry helped fellow UNLV professor Koko Ita develop the Ita 'Green Fountain' count (first generation SilverFox), and he had then built two of the first hidden blackjack computers to be employed successfully.

The roulette computer, as Harry had developed it, was intended for one person to deploy - slung with a strap over one shoulder under a coat, one hand in the coat's pocket on a control fob, and an ear-phone delivered Morse-code readout... obviously not practical for actual casino play!

Over a three week period he educated me about biased wheels - the computer exploited a bias that was found in 8 out of 10 wheels: most wheels are not perfectly level, and even being off one-half degree from level would cause the ball to fall from the track at the same spot most of the time. Harry reminded me several times that micro-electronics were just "around the corner" that could produce a third-generation model reduced to cigarette pack size - we envisioned the next-generation miniature with eyeglass mounted micro-switches tripped at the user's temples by jaw clenching!

My job was to re-think/work the application concept - retrofitting a Radio Shack FM transmitter to the audio-based readout - transmitting to a confederate wearing a small transistor radio. And I was to line up the BR.

Anyway, Harry was after all a college professor and he got cold feet. To my knowledge his roulette machine was never successfully put into play.

Splitting 10s is a risky yet lucrative play that most counters avoid - but I've watched you split tens many times.

How do you establish yourself as a 10-splitter without drawing heat?

I'm an enthusiastic 10-splitter, though I fancy that my top-bet 10s get split at a higher true count typically than the strict EV-based indices suggest, thus a bit more 'risk-averse'... and as the number of splits increases, my index rises higher into RA territory. I also establish myself early on as a 10-splitter by splitting and re-splitting tens incorrectly a couple of times with small bets out, even against a 3 or a 7 perhaps. Besides the obvious cover value, it's also an excellent way to clear the table of excess players - and if I'm lucky enough to cause the loss of others' bets due to the 'obnoxious' splits, I chuckle at the player's loss and announce that "it will work better next time!" If a ploppy invades my table I will often immediately ask them in mock surveyesque fashion "would you play at the same table as some crazy yahoo who splits 10s?"

More times than not they will passionately reply "NO!" Then I turn to the dealer and say, "Hurry up Sally - deal me some 10s!" The other players usually get the message. I'm also fond of getting another player at the table to split their tens – usually a wild redneck or one of 'the brothers' – I put up the other half, going "partners" - in which case the index need only be well below what even doubling on 10 would be.

Frequently you go partners with other players at your table.

How do you get them to agree to let you share their split or double down?

How do you know when that ploy is advantageous for you?

Going "partners" on double-downs and splits several times per night is a significant 'EV- booster.' The key to this move is to cultivate a 'table alliance' with ploppies at the table who will allow you to put up all or part of the additional double down or pair-split. For example, whenever I see a fellow player chunk out his last stack in frustration I immediately alert him that "If you get a good double down hand I'm putting up the other half!" "Partners on the double," is what I proclaim as I place the other half of the money out, reassuring the player that I'm going to "share the risk." Whenever I see someone place a large 'last shot' bet out I immediately announce that I'm "locked and loaded" with the other part of the money, and I demonstrate this by segregating the amount out. If I see a player hesitate on a double or place a sizeable bet and/or announce "double for less," I'm there for the balance. The key is to observe other players for these situational opportunities.

If the amount is somewhat larger than my regular top bet, that's ok, the edge on half-doubles is very high. Partner-doubling well below the index is advantageous, so I go for it. Partner-splitting is another story - I haven't analyzed it entirely, but I would go split partners on 9s against 2-7, 10s against 2-9, etc... perhaps most 'aggressive splits' but certainly no 'defensive splits,' like 8s vs. 10) - if a macho or boozed up redneck or black brother ploppy gets 10s against 2-9, I challenge, "if you got the balls to split those I'll put up half the dough!"

How do you handle it if they turn you down?

Usually I'll say, in mock-concern, something like, "Ok, but I must warn you that it's very unlucky to turn me down on a partnership offer." If we win a partner-double I reinforce for the next time with a high-five, "Yeah! Pleasure doing business with you". Or if we lose, I reinforce with "see it's good to share the risk... but you owe me another chance, good buddy!" If the dealer intervenes to pre-empt the move, I act oblivious and reassuringly instruct the 'partner' to "here take my chips."

One time I went partners with a \$500 matching bet and we lost. In the next instant the player turned to me casually and asked, "Ok, now how much do I owe you?" I was tempted to tell him \$250... but instead I kindly told him "another one."

Inebriated females are the best/easiest to cultivate on this ploy, but watch out - the cute ones, no matter how drunk, will insist that you in turn go partners with them on their 8-8 vs. Ace, a tricky situation.

Did you ever get into shuffle-tracking? Or ace-sequencing?

The multi-deck ace-sequencing stuff, using mnemonic devices like David Morse reveals in *Blackjack Reality*, no. However, catching aces at one and two-deck games by simply noting the 'key' card which precedes it is fairly straight forward. Now a days I almost always sit at 1st base when I play 1-2D games so I can bet big after I see the key-card.

As for shuffle-tracking, I do use the simpler forms, mostly thanks to Mason Malmuth's *Blackjack Essays* which contains three chapters on the simplest form of shuffle-tracking, which is called 'cut-off tracking.'

Cut-off tracking in shoe games is relatively easy to do. The hard part is finding games with shuffle procedures that leave the cut-offs - the undealt cards left behind the shuffle card - in a relative 'cohesion-dilute' and exploitable as such. Such games are few and far between, but they are out there, once you know what to look for. Last year I noticed close to a dozen or so games between Southern California and Southern Nevada that were exploitable with variants of the relatively simple cut-off tracking method.

So, what's the gist of it?

Once you know how to recognize a shuffle that leaves the cut-offs in a proximate but diluted cohesiveness, all that is required is to secure the cut card, and proceed to cut those cards to either the top or the bottom of the post-shuffled stack - then you make a simple count conversion - the result being that an otherwise mediocre six or eight deck game with poor penetration is instantly transformed into a three or five deck game with 90% penetration and a starting plus count two-thirds of the time!

Two years ago, I was playing a tough 'dog' six-decker in Southern California. Playing for over an hour, I suddenly realized that the house shuffle, despite its apparent surface complexity, was ideal for cut-off tracking. In the course of four additional hours of play, I proceeded to break two of my 25 year records - I had my biggest win in a single round, and my biggest win in a single multi-hour session. Much of the time my bigger bets were placed at the start of the shoe. The play incurred no heat. In fact, at session's end, the shift manager thanked me for playing.

This is a clear example of a game that a savvy counter would typically avoid - I just happened to find myself in the area for twenty-four hours, to take care of some non-blackjack business, with no other games in the immediate vicinity. I routinely check out the house shuffle on mediocre shoe games with an eye towards using cut-off tracking. As for the more complex tracking methods, such as described in Snyder's *Blackbelt in Blackjack*, they are beyond me.

You've played on several "shared bankroll" teams. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that type of arrangement?

The advantages of joint or merged bankrolls are obvious and look great on paper. Simply conceived, four or five or even ten counters of reasonably verified skill, combine so as to increase each one's bet size and earning power four or five or ten-fold, with NO increased risk!

The main problem appears to arise primarily due to 'flux-induced' paranoia. During the occasional extreme negative swings, members may become suspicious and distrustful. The 'flux-paranoia' is further exacerbated by the multi-player acceleration-swing of results per day. In an extreme dip, several teammates may tank at the same time, resulting in half or more of the joint bankroll being depleted in a day or two. Notwithstanding, some teammate dishonesty does undoubtedly exist, but irrespective of the trust, paranoia, and flux issues, I personally feel that the reward outweighs the risk.

You've been accused of taking advantage of teammates whom you've met online, arranging to meet them for a "shared bankroll" team venture, during which you allegedly take advantage of their naive expectations. How did these rumors start?

The allegations first arose when my legal difficulties were made public. Initially the "accusers" were blackjack discussion-board denizens with whom I've never played. In fact I'd never even met any of them in person. It was sort of an "Ah ha! No wonder he advocates joint-bankrolling, he's ripping off the newbies!" Their pseudo-revelations continued: "He's a ruthless convicted fraudster so of course he's scamming!" The fact of the matter is that, with one notable exception, no teammates have ever alleged impropriety about my conduct. Several teammates have posted to my defense.

The Internet blackjack community gossip-mongers have for the most part been discussion board trouble-makers with whom I'd clashed online previously. As typical in life, those who squawk the loudest often are not coming from the purest of intentions. It's been my observation that the extended blackjack internet community, BJ21, AdvantagePlayer, Yahoo CardCounterCafe and the rest, have somewhat degenerated into little fiefdoms rife with censorship and political agenda.

Two years ago, there was a nasty accusation made against you by a well-known poster who at the time was managing a \$300k team bankroll. Can you describe the controversy and your side of it?

The genesis of that particular episode, actually a short series of episodes, provides a micro-cosmic glimpse into the sort of confusion and misunderstandings that can quickly undermine the otherwise goodwill intent of a team-partner arrangement.

I was recruited by a well-known counter, a west coast real estate speculator by profession, who was already an investor in a small \$20k trip-bankroll, to which I was playing. The speculator was packing \$100k or so in cash...he never did reveal the exact amount. But we decided that I segregate the cash I was playing to, and instead play higher stakes on his dime, in return for 20% of my individual win. During a four-week run, we played Vegas, Tahoe and Reno. I enjoyed it a lot, except for when I would lose - his intense disappointment was most unnerving. I began to minimize my losses and corresponding wins in order to spare him and myself the momentary grief that would ensue every time I had a regular downward swing.

By the end of our four-week jaunt, I had lost a perfectly acceptable 140 units. By then \$9k of his and \$5k of mine had become intermingled, but he then was unable or unwilling to reimburse my \$5k loss.

However, by then our intrepid speculator had become partners with a stylish and lanky bespeckled Northeasterner, whose team I was invited to join. Another comedy chapter ensued. First there was the polygraph – the speculator said the bespeckled partner required it, while the bespeckled one said the speculator required it. Upon my arrival in Las Vegas, they sprung it on me, and in the next breath, made it my responsibility to locate a polygrapher out of the phone book, on a Friday afternoon heading into New Year's Weekend.

I found the polygraph man - boy, what a racket these guys perpetuate. The partners laid down \$500 and in I went. It was a terrible first experience that brought me almost to tears. I was faced with a computer print-out that labeled me "94.2% likelihood of deception" - a 'false-positive,' to coin the vernacular of the profession. So there I was, faced with this damning print-out and a deadpan system operator quoting "reliability curves" derived from "Stanford University algorithms."

Angered and hurt, I skulked back to my Laguna Beach abode on a late-night flight. Denied my playing opportunity that weekend, I instead researched polygraphs. I discovered what most of us have heard informally – that so-called 'lie-detectors' are "wholly unreliable" and that 'false-positives' constitute a whopping 35% of all results. In particular, I found a wealth of data at www.antipolygraph.com.

So this particular team involvement didn't end for you on that night?

No, actually, the bespeckled partner was kind enough to offer me a second crack "on the box," as professional polygraphers call their infernal devices. The next session would be on my own dime, he emphasized.

Prior to my second stab at the lie-detector, I had become quite a polygraph expert. I had learned that one should simply never submit to a polygraph for the purpose of verifying honesty - the odds of a false-positive being far too great. Further, if one must submit, there are simple "counter-measures" that can insure a passing (honest) grade.

So, I returned to the same polygrapher's office a month later, bespeckled partner in tow. I asked the operator, this being our second attempt and all, if I could get a discount off the \$500 price. But no, it seems there are "no discounts" for testing of so serious a nature, he dead panned. The whole process takes barely 30 minutes in all.

I employed the counter-measures and they were as beautifully simple and effective as antipolygraph.com had foretold. "So easy that a ten-year-old child can learn it in 15 minutes," to quote an Army intelligence officer from the website.

The polygraph operator printed out a "97.9% likelihood of honesty," then turned off his machine and pulled his chair close. He asked me in a serious tone if I had used 'counter-measures.' Antipolygraph.com had prepared me for this question as well. "Counter-measures?," I dead panned back, "You mean like the casinos use against counters?" "Look," he poker-faced back, "You paid for this test and you passed...97.9% truthful. But, tell me in confidence. Did you use counter-measures?"

I looked him straight in the eye and told him I didn't know what he was talking about, but if he was inferring that I was not truthful he could strap me back in and run another test, this time on his dime. Of course he declined.

Anyway, I passed. What a joke polygraphs are. First I told the truth and got a false-positive, then I lied and got a false-negative. The bespeckled team manager was momentarily happy and handed me \$10k and asked how much of my own funds I had brought. I told him \$5k. He asked if I'd mind making a short-term loan to the team effort, as capital was spread thin between several players in different cities. Oh, brother, I thought. I'm out over \$6,000 in bankroll, travel and polygraph expenses, and here we go again!

So now you're playing to a \$300k team bankroll?

Yes, and it lasted all of 25 play-hours, spread out over two additional trips to Vegas, flying in and out on my own dime. My bet spread was roughly \$50 to two hands of \$1,000. After my first ten hours, my net result was a minus \$2,200. Returning home, I get a call from the real estate speculator who now requests that I "pay him back" the \$9k that I lost previously during our last partnership, from monies that I'll earn from the present team. Without humor, he offered that I could "pay myself back" what I was out as well!

By the middle of the next 15 hours of play, which commenced a few weeks later, I had begun to reflect upon the amateurish unsigned pseudo-agreement that the bespeckled team manager had provided me - the payout was way too heavily weighted towards results – positive individual short-term swings – than towards hours expended.

You're saying that now you are on the big-money team... and the personal reward is tied to short-term luck?

That's exactly right. As I recall the base pay was \$20 per hour if the team had a winning month. This team was down \$60K for the month, I learned. In a winning month, the biggest winner, irrespective of hours played, got the biggest paycheck. So it occurs to me that after all of my efforts to not be a gambler per'se, now I'm playing the blackjack 'flux lottery.'

Meanwhile, due to the increased bet size and spread my frequency of backoffs have increased dramatically - Caesars, Bally's, Flamingo, Harrah's, etc., they were falling like dominoes!

By the end of this second big-team trip, and 25 hours under my belt, my result was a lackluster minus \$7,500 or thereabouts. Shortly after my return home, I received an email from the bespeckled one. I will now need to 'verify' my \$5,000 loss at the Mirage. Great, I inform him that I was hit-and-run at this Mirage session, with neither a player's card nor rating, as allowed by the team's written rules and my initial orientation discussion with him. "Do what you have to do, and get it verified for my investors," he reiterates. Investors? Now I'm answering to unseen investors? I asked him if, immediately upon verification of the Mirage loss, I would be able to play, as my next Vegas trip is already planned in less than a week. He side-stepped a direct answer and told me, "First I'll need the loss verified, and then we'll determine whether you can play."

Fortunately, I had a backup group of lower stakes counters to meet in Vegas for this new trip. As I marched through Vegas and Reno with the alternate group, for over three weeks, I left numerous messages on bespeckled's cell phone to please call me back at the IP, at the Silver Legacy, at the Peppermill, etc, but no return call or email came. Not until weeks later.

Along the way, I managed to get the attendant pit-critter at the Mirage-loss to agree to personally verify the loss in question, and for the speculator-partner to meet the Mirage man one evening. But the speculator flaked on the meeting.

So how was this matter ultimately resolved?

It wasn't. By now I had reports that certain team members had quit over similar misunderstandings. Others had been accused of "improper borrowings" and "mis-entries," and still others were stuck \$60k and \$80k. It was, at least at that point in time, a real mess. And then I came to learn that I was being accused, in absentia, of "cheating" the bespeckled one. Though he denied the slandering, he did offer to give the BJ community a "clean bill of health" on me, if I would kindly pay him a paltry \$2k "settlement."

I strongly considered the offer. But then, upon further review, I was already out close to \$10k, including the lie-detector test, the previous deal with the speculator, travel expenses, etc. Now for an additional 2000 bucks I can get a "clean bill of health" from Mr. Bespeckled? Foggetaboutit! I'm The Grifter! What the hell does The Grifter need with a "clean bill of health?"

CLEAN BILL THIS! (Zengrifter grabs his crotch, bellowing like Tony Soprano). Enough is enough! Next question puhlease.

***You've pioneered an unusual betting scheme called the "Grifter's Gambit."
Can you describe this method?***

Actually I didn't pioneer the method, I revived it. It was first revealed as "Consolidation Betting" in Mason Malmuth's Blackjack Essays, in 1985, with little fanfare. Malmuth advocated it as a form of apparent flat-betting for good single deck games. In 1998, George C. took a look at it after I requested he run a simulation. Initially he said it looked like "a stupid idea." Then he simmered and refined it for quality 2-deck games and discovered it to be a powerful ploy, unknown to pit staffs and surveillance people.

Malmuth deserves the credit but George C refined it and respectfully dubbed it "Grifter's Gambit," presumably because I rescued it from obscurity and had him run the sims.

How does it work? Can you give an example?

Ok, let's say I'm playing a quality two-deck game, heads-up: In minus and neutral counts I bet three hands of one unit each. This eats cards fast in order to speed things along and get to the plus-deck situations quicker. At modest plus-counts I bet three units on one spot. I increase to five units on one spot in moderate plus-counts. In higher counts I bet one spot of seven units. Playing one spot in plus-counts helps preserve the rich portions longer. Per 100 rounds - not hands - the sim showed a gain of four units - with an apparent spread of three to seven units - just barely more than a 1-2 spread!

For a good single deck game there can be a virtual flat-bet: in minus counts bet three spots of one unit, and in plus counts bet one spot of three or four units - this will yield a similar gain to a traditional 1-4 spread BUT with higher variance. However, because the minimum bet is 3 x 1 unit, the comps are much better. One other thing: you must be playing alone at the table if it's single deck or with no more than one other at a double decker.

***Have you tested this betting scheme? What were your findings?
Did you encounter any heat or scrutiny while using it?***

I have applied variations of the technique on and off in quality single and double-deck games with absolutely no heat. Irrespective of my act, I think that the technique is pretty much off the counter-alert radar screen. I even allude to "my new system" while dealers and pit critters grimace in disdain as I chronically "wreck the flow of cards" after a favorable streak by 'compulsively' changing the number of hands being played.

A while back I utilized it for hours on-end and for several consecutive days at a prominent Strip resort, spreading from three hands of \$50 to one hand of \$350, while listening to pit and dealer accounts of an on-going "counter-purge."

I've played this gambit with a green spread for many hours at the single deck tables of a downtown Vegas casino - one of the sweatiest and most suspicious casinos in Nevada, known for rapid and aggressive barrings of novice red chip counters. They loved my action. They'd instantly make my table \$25 minimum when I requested it. Ultimately my cumulative play did me in.

All totaled, I put in over 25 hours there, spanning a few months. I was finally barred, but it wasn't because they had any reservations about my betting. I simply over-played that joint.

At double-deck games I hesitate to include an estimate of just how many negative decks I might abandon in an hour - the sim assumed no exiting. I often appear to be "closing a big deal" and must run to the house phone or step back from the table frequently after an imaginary page or a pager or cell phone chirp. I complain excessively about the attorneys and associates needing me to hold their hand through every detail!

You mentioned higher variance. What kind of bankroll do you need to play a Grifter's Gambit with an acceptable risk-of-ruin?

The double-deck sim showed a 22% risk-of-ruin with 500 units of bank. With 700 units it drops to 11%. At 1000 units it's 5%, and you can reduce it to 1% with a 1500 unit bankroll. For a typical 20 hour trip there is a 17% chance of losing 250 units. Like I said, a higher risk-variance, but conversely better comps. George C.'s sim was run on Karel Janacek's marvelous Statistical Blackjack Analyzer.

You pulled off a Grifter Gambit play at the Lakeside in Tahoe. That play is especially revealing as to the camouflage afforded by consolidation betting.

Yes. The small Lakeside Lodge had the best rules in Lake Tahoe in 2000 – a one deck game with double after split. The challenge was that being the best game in Tahoe, and a small joint to boot, The Lakeside gives tremendous scrutiny to large and/or unusual players.

I sat down at a \$3 table - the only table open - with three other nickel players and bet 1-5 quarters in a non-count related progression for about 10 minutes, and then I asked the dealer if he thought the house would give me a quarter game. He called the pit manager, 'Augie,' over who warmly invited me to wait 10 minutes and they'd give me a game.

On my first hand at my \$25 table I spread to three hands of \$25, and the dealer informed me that "three hands require five times the minimum" - \$125 each. I looked at Augie and he shrugged and said "three times \$75 each - for him," at which I mock hesitated then increased to three hands of \$75 and proceeded to lose all three hands and including a double-down. The count being slightly negative, I frowned at Augie and put out three bets of \$75 and won all three. The count tanked further south and I increased my bets to three bets of \$100, and I won again.

Now I was 'in like Flynn' - when the count was negative I would bet three times \$75-\$100, when the count was positive I would bet one hand of \$300-\$500, which was the house limit. About 15 minutes into the play a female approached and bet a single quarter - I frowned at the manager and reduced my bet to two hands of \$50. She played a couple more hands and wandered off as Augie put a 'reserved' sign at my table and glowingly invited me to "... place any size bet per three hands, you now have a private game!"

Now my bets ranged from a low of three times \$25 to a max of one hand of \$500 or two bets of \$375 or three times \$300. In 45 minutes I was ahead \$6000, at which point Augie came behind me and said, "I have bad news," and I'm thinking he's going to bar me. But instead he informs me that "upstairs has decided that you gotta bet \$125 each at three hands." Oh well "sucking me in" I replied wistfully, he says "sorry."

So now I shift my betting to three times \$125 in negative counts and one hand of \$500 in positive counts – winning three rounds of three times \$125 in amazing succession. I happily call out to Augie, "its working, thanks!"

Exactly 60 minutes into the play I'm up \$10k when Augie taps my shoulder and informs me that "we decline your further play." Smiling I wave half of my winnings in the form of ten \$500 chips and taunt, "don't you guys wanna to try to win half of it back?" "No!" The romance was over.

I managed to get a comped lunch from Augie before cashing out, the two remaining tables had a total 5 nickel players as I departed.

What are some of the ploys you use to induce the dealers to give you better penetration?

Inducing better penetration is a subtle art and should be attempted only if you're really confident that you can get away with it without alienating the dealer or having her rat you out to the pit. Such techniques are useless in those casinos that use a notch on the shoe or discard rack to standardize the cut, but many blackjack games still leave room for dealer-discretionary penetration.

One trick I use is borrowed from Ian Anderson's Burning the Tables in Las Vegas: In double deck games I tell the dealer that "today is my brother's 29th birthday, so please place the shuffle card 29 cards from the bottom". In shoe games, "my brother" is 46, so I ask that the card be placed 46 cards from the bottom, "for luck," I add. I place a token bet out as I insert the cut card and demonstrate the penetration I desire, and proclaim, "Let's make some money." If the dealer balks, I add conspiratorially, "Just get as close as you can."

Often times all it takes is to ask in an innocent, unabashed way. Occasionally a dealer is only too happy to place the cut card deeper. "Mums the word," I quip with a wink.

What are some of the other techniques you use to deflect heat, both before and after detecting scrutiny?

First of all, I remain relaxed and give no indication that I'm aware of any scrutiny. When the pit is watching and the 'Eye' may be in play is neither the time to leave nor start suspiciously flat betting. Typically such scrutiny only lasts ten minutes or so, during which time I may revert to a modest negative-positive alternating pseudo-progression scheme. Another thing I'll do is throw a few low-cost 'bonehead' plays out. Standing on A-6 is always good for a laugh, as is "doubling for less" on 16 vs. 7. I may split 10s against a stiff in minus counts or insure a good hand in a neutral or even minus count. Standing on A-7 vs. 9, 10 or Ace, or standing on 12 vs. 2 or 3, or standing on 16 vs. 10

in a minus count, is also helpful low cost cover. Or even standing on 9-9 against stiff. Most importantly, I rarely reduce my bet after the shuffle, and I may occasionally place a minimum bet in a rich count. Not too much, mind you, just enough to allay suspicion.

Sometimes I'll order "Malibu rocks" which looks like a potent drink but contains only a small amount of liquor. I'll pound down a couple of those, slur my speech and perhaps even fall off my chair.

I also use my 'New Age' leanings to accentuate the perception that I'm a superstitious fool. Besides flipping the 'magic coin.' I'll rearrange the table clutter, moving glasses and ashtrays, and straightening out the chairs - to properly harness the 'Feng Shui' energy flow. Sometimes this includes meticulously aligning my chips' side stripes, because "if the chips are in order, the cards will appear in order." "It's Feng Shui," I'll announce confidently. I may utilize my "Buddhist good luck mantra," chanting "Nam-Myo-Ho-Renge-Kyo" as I briskly stroke the felt with my palms.

If the magic coin and Feng Shui appear to fail me, I might ask the pit critter to withdraw the drop box paddle, turn it 180 degrees counter-clockwise, and reinsert. "This will re-tune the table's morphogenic field", I'll explain with a straight face.

Cellini's new book, Surveillance For Counters, is a must read, by the way.

You've become quite a 'couponero' lately, what little known coupon advantage techniques have you to share?

Not so much a technique per'se, but a philosophy: Smaller bankrolled counters, as I have found myself of late, should obtain and use as many coupons as possible. Coupon promotions come and go and should best be exploited on a volume basis.

In 2002 I was quite enthusiastic about the Las Vegas Advisor and Casino Perks coupon books and I advocated their use as a means to "turbo charge" a small bankroll. Like little "nitrous injectors" I likened the coupons, and some of us went to great lengths to obtain several booklets for each trip. I myself ripped through 20 or so of the Las Vegas Advisor coupon books - over 140 3-1 and 2-1 BJ payoffs - over the course of a few weeks last year simply by having friends and family obtain them for my subsequent use. That constituted over 45 hours of high-gain play.

Now the LVA and CP coupons are less valuable and thus this variety of 'couponomy' is less profitable for small bankroll counters than was previously the case.

Still it pays for an advantage player to be aware of ‘coupon power’ because from time to time some casinos still offer valuable coupon plays.

Not long ago a Henderson casino mass-mailed out coupons to thousands of local residents that offered 2-1 payoffs on blackjacks up to a \$25 bet. An enterprising local counter went around to nearby apartment complexes and gathered up hundreds of the mailings that had been junked right at each complex’s mailbox.

Additional extensive blackjack ‘couponomics’ is covered by Clark Cant in his free online book, *Blackjack Therapy*, and by LV Bear’s *Matchplay Coupon Treatise*, also online.

Okay, a new counter has studied and practiced. When is he ready for live casino play?

Simply quantified, he’s ready when he knows basic strategy, plus twenty or so count departures, and he can count down a single deck in 25 seconds or less using a level-1 count.

How fast can you count down the deck with your level-2 Zen?

In about 12-14 seconds. And aside from speed and accuracy, it is most crucial for new counters to understand proper bet-sizing, game selection criteria, and risk-of-ruin assessment. Incomplete schooling in these three factors underlies the reason that many, if not most, new counters are unsuccessful.

You often use aliases in casinos. What’s your advice for smaller red and green chip counters who want to use aliases and still get ratings and room comps, without having to risk carrying phony ID’s?

Simple, actually: Have friends and relatives obtain the player’s cards and give them to you. Then book the reservation in the player-card name, and add your real name as a second occupant.

Then check in using your real name and ID, and leave a cash deposit in lieu of a credit card. After check-in, see the host or pit boss, using your player-card moniker, and make sure your comp is properly credited. By the way, when you check in, don’t forget to specify, “two beds,” if you get my drift. That is unless your ‘persona’ is ‘flaming.’

You’ve emphasized the use of ‘personas,’ not disguises. Can you elaborate?

Essentially, the best disguises are not the elaborate Dana Carvey and Mike Myers get-ups. Any average counter can likely muster a ‘persona-makeover.’ That is to say, a different name, different home-story cover, different style of attire, different speech and outward behavior mannerisms, etc. Being that I myself am balding, I don’t rule out the use of good quality hairpieces – but then I also don’t rule out the shaved-head look which is currently in vogue.

I’ve been the shaved-head dot-com MP3 record promoter, a USAF Major, the bespeckled nephew of a famous psychedelics guru, the CFO of a resort development company, an urban cowboy, and more. The fact is that since most of my play has been mid-level stakes, the radical disguise route has not been necessary.

Notwithstanding, I've been counting and occasionally barred - more times than I can remember - since the mid-70s, and I still am able to play virtually all of the clubs that have backed me off or 86'd me. Some casinos have barred me several times in the course of a few years and I can still play them for 90+ minute sessions, albeit using different names and player's cards....and I'm a memorable guy!

The point is, a different name, a different story, a different way of dressing and accessorizing, and any previously unwelcome green to black level counter can be back in business. A little persona adjustment is all that it takes.

Give us an example of a 'persona' shift that was successful.

The El Cortez is a real dive of a joint, but features very good penetration single deck action. It is commonly believed by the hordes of red chip counters that get the boot there that the Cortez is near impossible for successful counting.

Actually the El 'Commode' can and does tolerate bigger play with max bets up to \$200+ with a decent act and some esoteric-camo - my own tipsy/snide inebriated act and combo of betting gambits has worked there many times, on all 3 shifts tolerating wins and losses of \$1000+.

One of my protégés, with a youngish nerdy counter appearance, went all out one day to dress like a street bum - a drugged-out speed-freak street bum, at my direction! His BR consisted of individually crumbled 100s and 50s stuck into different pockets, and he practiced wild-eyed movements in the mirror the night before. He also rehearsed bizarre low-toned self talk like "damn damn I knew they would do this to me!" - eyes rolling upward when losing a big bet. And "Ya ya this is it - payback time, yaaa" - eyes wide with demonic smile when winning a small bet. He sounded like a Beavis or Butthead character.

He spread wildly from \$10-150 with no heat on day shift and won \$700 in 2.5 hours, proclaiming the 'El Commode' to be a "candy store" he said that the pit-critters wouldn't go near him - I warned him not to get rolled on the street when he left - his big problem upon leaving was that no cabs would stop for his dangerous looking character.

He says that he is going to add another persona to his repertoire - a sluttishly flirtatious transvestite, winking at the pit bosses and cooing "come talk to me baby!"

Forbes magazine wrote an unflattering five-page article about you in 1995, entitled "The Grifter." What's your take on it?

Coincidentally, the publication release date was September 11, 1995, an inauspicious date in retrospect. The article made me out to be an unrepentant fraudster. They claimed that I once obtained a national list of Alzheimer victims and turned a sales force loose upon them with the simple pitch: "Where's that money you were supposed to send?"

"Ouch! Bad Grifter...No No!" (I playfully admonish him as we laugh together)

Forbes knew the story wasn't true but they went to great lengths to establish that image for me while obfuscating the \$600 million or so in investor profits that my airwave acquisition strategies produced and the tremendous lobbying effort that we carried on for nearly a decade on behalf of the independent wireless operators and licensees.

It all started in 1984, when one of my business associates brought to my attention a little-known lottery that had been announced by the Federal Communications Commission. The lottery would award cellular telephone construction licenses. At that time I was already part of an informal national network of financial product and ‘tax shelter’ developers and distributors.

Owing to my background in card counting and advantage gambling, I was able to immediately recognize a ‘positive-expectation-gambling’ opportunity. After a series of meetings in Washington DC, with various technical and legal experts, I had mapped out the first of several statistical-based strategies for beating the FCC’s license awarding process. And simultaneously, by networking the independent investment sellers from coast to coast, we kicked off one of the most remarkable ‘land rushes’ ever. Within a few months we would come to level the playing field of America’s biggest telecoms, at least temporarily.

Initially, there wasn’t even an entry fee collected by the government - but each entry required a sophisticated application document of up to several hundred pages demonstrating the technical, business and financial qualifications of the applicant. A dozen of the largest US telecoms applied for the first 60 markets, each spending on average \$300,000 per application. The dozen major applicants never saw a lottery on those first 60 markets because they all agreed to share, making the FCC happy not to hold the drawing - this was our inspiration.

We aligned with a high-caliber Washington DC-based technical and legal team that gave us a price of \$50-100,000 per application, in volume. With immediate pre-construction values of \$10-\$30 million per license, the FCC had essentially created a positive expectation game.

We figured out how to ‘spread the risk’ by boiler-plate - duplicating and individualizing - each of our ‘master’ applications 100+ times and reselling and filing them for our investors at \$5,000 to \$10,000 apiece. TV advertisements, featuring Philadelphia talk show host Mike Douglas, advised potential investors that “Ordinary citizens can now stand on equal footing with the nation’s biggest telecoms to vie for a piece of the multi-billion-dollar spectrum pie!”

Each applicant signed an ‘alliance’ agreement to share each license no matter who won. Amidst allegations by the big companies and various government agencies of “fraud” by the “app-promoters” (us) and “insincere speculators” (our investors) some of our clients made as much as \$20 million, while the average client realized a 400% return on investment. Our sales battle cry was, “The last great land rush is in the air!”

Certainly the big telecom companies didn’t appreciate what you had done, but what about the FCC?

No, the FCC didn’t appreciate us either, partially because we had increased their application-processing workload dramatically, from a few hundred cellular license filings total, to several thousand applications per month and climbing. We blitzkrieged them!

They enacted ‘countermeasures’ - rule changes intended to discourage the mass of unexpected small applicants. Most notably, they eventually outlawed the use of ‘intra-market’ alliances – risk-sharing agreements among competing applicants. Santa Barbara, for example, in which 220 out of 330 applicants for that territory belonged to such an alliance and enjoyed a 67% likelihood of success.

As it turned out, our clients did win Santa Barbara and dozens like it, using that particular strategy, while at the same moment the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) was attempting to shut us down, saying on the US Circuit Court record that “There may be NO demand for cellular in small areas like Santa Barbara.” Ultimately, the Santa Barbara license alone fetched \$30 million for our clients.

When the FCC outlawed the risk-sharing agreements they utilized no game-theoretic or statistical-logic expertise. They smugly announced that the new rule revisions would “stem the rising tide” of applications by rendering the opportunity a pure multi-hundred to one crapshoot. Before the ink was dry on their announcement we had begun offering shares in partnerships, each partnership to file in several hundred different license lotteries, thus obtaining the same statistical expectation without risk-sharing between competing applicants.

As I’ve said, these strategies generated over \$600 million in profits for the thousands of small cellular investor-speculators who partook of our offering.

And in the process, turned the big telecoms and regulators against you?

Certainly did. This airwave land rush, or “spectrum-grab” was not unlike those of previous eras, replete with similar cast: “greedy land barons,” “earnest homesteaders,” and “gun-toting federal marshals” who were often in collusion with the “land barons.”

Along the way, my wife, and Adrian Cronauer of Good Morning Vietnam fame, and I would come to lead a group of trade organizations in Washington DC that would not only become the biggest lobby of small wireless operators and licensees on the planet, but also file more FOIAs and challenges against the FCC than any group before or since, including the single largest US Court joint appeal in the history of the airwaves.

By the early ‘90s, we were going after FM radio station licenses, the specialized mobile radio frequencies which were eventually consolidated to become Nextel, and “wireless-cable” TV permits as well.

And the FCC was playing increasingly dirty pool - eventually the Forbes article would result as a backlash to our exposure of corruption, between the FCC chairman and Hughes Electronics, that scuttled hundreds of our rural wireless-cable TV markets with a combined value in the billions.

So you were playing the big game in Washington DC, and were poised to become a wealthy wireless operator?

Yes, via wireless cable TV, a nascent industry that had the technological capability to take on the established coaxial cable business. Cheaper to build than conventional cable TV, wireless-cable uses license-allocated spectrum to transmit it’s cable programming via microwave from regional radio towers. We mapped out hundreds of rural markets, that had poor or no cable TV service, and began mass-filing license speculators using the tools and strategies we had perfected in cellular - engineering the signal coverages, buildout schematics, and business plans as we rolled across the nation’s countryside markets planting the wireless-cable flag. Our ultimate plan was to capture the construction and operating contracts for the majority of 300 mostly rural areas where we targeted the licensing - worth an aggregate \$4+ billion.

Did you actually build any operating systems?

Yes, contrary to Forbes, quite a few including Palm Springs, Key West, Omaha, Atlantic City, and American and Western Samoa. We also precipitated substantial investment equities in operating systems in New Orleans; York, Pennsylvania; Madison, Wisconsin; Mobile, Alabama; Stowe, Vermont; and Nashville, Tennessee, where we bought the licenses and equipment from Al Gore's brother-in-law, to name a few.

It seems like you were well on your way. How did you blow it?

In a nutshell, I was overbetting. I had used statistical-logic to crack the FCC lotteries, as well as game theory to both affect the regulatory process and to set bidding strategy in FCC auctions that ultimately superceded the lotteries. But I failed to take an adequate risk-of-ruin assessment as the stakes continued to rise. I was effectively betting millions while failing to appreciate the rising variance, which in part was due to 'hidden' opponents who were guarding their "sacred turf" surreptitiously.

Eventually, hundreds of our prime rural wireless-cable target areas would be thrown out by the FCC on bullshit technicalities - representing over 10,000 license filings and \$100 million in application sales - all the while, the FCC publicly denigrating the quality of the application work product, insinuating that "boiler-room scammers" did the filings wrong, were "ripping off the gullible public," etc.

But in actuality this was high quality technical work?

Oh, the highest quality. By then we were employing a dozen of the best technical and legal firms in America. In addition, we were spending millions on lobbying and rulemaking efforts, increasingly not knowing exactly who the enemy was.

So, in the final analysis, the game changed from a purely statistical exploitation to a more complex, multi-layered political and game-theoretic one. During this transition, more and more, I was overbetting while not cognizant of the identity and power of our hidden opponents... and the lengths to which they would go to stop us, as we progressively stormed the gates of the trillion-dollar electromagnetic spectrum hegemony.

Did you ever identify your hidden opponents?

We managed to identify at least one big one: Hughes Electronics, a CIA 'spook' company, according to Roger Denton and Sally Harris in their definitive Las Vegas expose *The Money and the Power*, and parent of satellite-delivered 'DirecTV.'

Hughes conspired through a major DC law firm, along with the soon-to-be chairman of the FCC, to effectively scuttle our rural wireless-cable plans. They had a multi-billion dollar investment in the launch of its DirecTV unit that would use rural America as its initial 'launch-ramp.' Had Hughes not kyboshed our ascent through corruption of the licensing process, DirecTV would have been forced to compete in its infancy with hundreds of new microwave cable systems.

Ultimately the FCC denied the lower priced microwave-cable TV to most of rural America, and DirecTV became a resounding success.

We identified the culprits as Hughes and the by-then new chairman of the FCC, and we proceeded to prosecute the biggest joint appeal in airwave history - which brought about the backlash of the Forbes article, the purpose and effect of which was to undermine my rising credibility and to turn me into a 'trophy-target' for federal law enforcement - Forbes was a client of the same DC law firm that represented Hughes.

So you never sued Forbes for defamation and slander?

No. A lawsuit was prepared and slated to coincide with Steve Forbes' 1998 presidential primary bid, but it was pre-empted when the feds approached me and threatened to bring a twenty count indictment alleging fraud and racketeering. I might have beat them on nineteen of the twenty counts, and still have wound up spending 8+ years at 'Camp.'

My attorneys said that my case was strong, "a very strong trial defense," but I also had to think of my loved ones - the feds threatened indictments against my father and others as well. So I made a deal to plead to one count, "RICO-conspiracy." While my operations were not "100% snow-white," my "crimes" would have been considered mere civil infractions, had we not been so in-their-face activist.

Some of the news clippings reveal that you cooperated with the Feds in an 'undercover' capacity. What did that entail?

As part of a very creative plea-agreement, I created one of the most successful white-collar fraud 'stings' in law enforcement history. It was a fraudulent currency trading fund called the "UNEX-2000." I crisscrossed the country, visiting crooked telemarketing rooms, using my 'notoriety' as the "Forbes Grifter" to gain entry. These were expressly not rooms that previously sold my airwave investments.

Ultimately many crooked operations would be stung selling the psuedo fraudulent UNEX-2000 package, which was written and designed by me and printed at FBI headquarters in DC. Some of the operations that we stung were controlled by organized crime factions.

My pitch to the boiler-room operators was: "We can make a lot of money by Christmas. When 'Operation Busy Signal,' as it came to be named, was finally over my nickname at the Department of Justice had become "The Grifter who stole Christmas."

Operation Busy Signal netted boiler-room operators and brokers, attorneys, accountants, and even a now-former US Attorney. In all, the feds credited me with preempting nearly a billion dollars in future investment fraud directed primarily at retirement accounts.

The newspapers and Forbes follow-up article weren't that descriptive, were they?

Well, that's the media for you, but it's all documented in a massive 'Downward Departure Motion' that the Justice Department submitted at my sentencing, and why I'll actually only be incarcerated for 14 months, and at the proverbial 'Club Fed.'

What are some of the big differences in playing blackjack today as opposed to the casinos of yesteryear when you were starting out?

The main difference is that in the 1970s there was only Vegas, Reno and Tahoe and the games were few but great. That is of course assuming that you weren't being cold-decked or dealt seconds, and that possibility was much greater then, as Thorp, Humble and others frequently pointed out.

Today's solo red to green player can find a significantly greater number of playable games, and better comps, from Nevada to New Jersey and many states in between.

In Las Vegas alone, it's still entirely feasible to find good handheld games for \$5, \$10 and \$25 minimums and play them without interference for months without leaving town, as long as you keep your spreads polite and your sessions short. Even without factoring in comps, the EV is still quite acceptable for a well-practiced counter.

The biggest difference I can see is the trade off between less advantageous multi-deck games coupled with reduced penetration in all games, and the vast proliferation of the number of casinos, thus giving small and medium stakes counters a huge increase in the number of blackjack tables while conversely suffering a distinct erosion in the quality of those many new games.

Currently poker is all the rage, but I have to agree with the legendary Tommy Hyland, that even today blackjack, rather than poker, offers a greater opportunity for the novice-to-intermediate low-to-moderate stakes advantage-player.

Besides Revere, who are some of the more famous advantage players and celebrities you've known and/or played with?

One in particular who I am proud of is 'Daryl P,' who is mentioned in some of Kenny Uston's writings, and was the subject of a recent interview in Blackjack Forum. Daryl was a raw novice when he and I met in a Las Vegas boiler-room, circa 1976. Daryl went on to play extensively with Kenny and later became a world-class musician, and a founder of the mythical 'Team Hammer' featured in Esquire some years back. Daryl once remarked, "Wow, [Grifter] was the first one to really show me about the game!" Way to go, Daryl. If you're out there, drop me a line.

During a stay at Harrah's Reno in '87, my companion introduced me to Harry Anderson after our comped dinner show. Harrah's had barred me that very day but still showed enough class to comp us to Harry's show, Dom Perignon and all. Backstage, over cocktails, I explained the basics of card counting to Harry. Of course he was a quick study. Two hours later we convened across the street at the short-lived 'Eddie's,' a '50s-retro casino. Harry was dressed in his '50s-retro attire while I signaled the plays and bets from first base. Meanwhile onlookers and casino workers gawked and copped autographs, providing perfect cover. And no, the needle through the arm is not an illusion.

One of Daryl P's former partners, the dashing 'Mr. Lucky,' from the Aloha state and winner of the competition at Max Rubin's 2003 Blackjack Ball, is another that comes to mind, though we've met only twice briefly. We met when he showed up at my table at Binion's in '99 to partake of their short-lived "Five-Card-Charlie" promotion. He had just flown in from Hawaii, dashed to the table, thrown down his \$3K buy-in, and was reaching for his chips when he was instantly barred without playing a hand.

The Griffin Agency's main man was standing in the pit, a few feet away, going through a mug book while half the Tommy Hyland team, already barred, was lining up to cash out at the cage. Mr. Lucky's charm and demeanor is reminiscent of actor John Corbett's character on the F/X show Lucky. Immediately upon getting barred, he moved into the pit, directly behind the Griffin agent and reviewed the mug book over his shoulder for several moments before being discovered: "WHAT DA FUUUH...!" Gotta love the guy!

I first met 'Turtle' during an annual Green Chip gathering in Las Vegas. We went on to play jointly for a couple hundred hours or so. The man has incredible endurance and heart, and he proved to me that he is one of the most experienced blackjack players in the world. Turtle is also a seasoned and successful commodities trader, and I am presently learning his 'Turtle-Trend' trading system.

Another, known as 'Stalker,' is one of the few full-time pros that I have met. He's primarily a 'hole-card-player.' He and his associates keep tabs on sloppy dealers throughout the country who chronically flash their hole cards in blackjack and the newer Caribbean Stud-type games, giving them a 3% to 15% advantage. Stalker has forgotten more than most published experts will ever know about advantage gambling.

During my days in Washington DC I met EchoStar's Charlie Ergen, the controversial billionaire founder of the DISH Network satellite TV service. However, I wouldn't learn until later that Charlie was a frustrated card counter first, and a satellite TV pioneer second.

Here at FPC Nellis, my 'homeboy' Jay Cohen has become the most famous Internet casino developer in the world, due to the vagaries of his case which was recently denied appeal by the US Supreme Court. In 1995 Jay, and his partner Steve, were professional stock traders who hit upon the Internet's 'killer app': gambling. Their company, World Sports of Antigua, has become one of the top five Web casinos and sports books and continues to pioneer new market-like wager products. Jay had read Revere's book, and tells me that Steve actually counted cards. Jay was a market protégée of the legendary Blair Hull, card-counting's most successful alumni member, it turns out.

Another Nellis 'homie,' Jerry Crouch, was one of America's most successful sports bettors for years. He first ran afoul of the FBI years ago when he refused to co-operate against some of the illegal books that he would bet with. Years later, his success in Vegas would require laying bets off through intermediaries standing by at numerous sports books, a technical infraction, you might say, until the state passed a law against "messenger betting."

The casinos complained to the FBI who said, "Hey, we remember this uncooperative SOB," and voila – a successful advantage gambler is charged with 'money laundering,' i.e. passing moolah through straw bettors. Of late, Jerry, Jay and I have been confabbing auto race betting, partly inspired, I suppose, by our close proximity to Craig Speedway, which can be seen and heard only two miles away.

Any other 'celebrity-insider' stuff?

Well, the late Dr. Timothy Leary, the infamous 'Harvard LSD guru.' I knew him, and it is not widely known that he was a novice card counter who played quite a bit of blackjack, mostly in Reno. He was incorrigible – often wearing a button that read "Just Say Know!"

The last time I saw Tim Leary alive, he was 70 years old. In front of several people, I chided him, “How long has it been since you last took LSD, and how often do you still take it?” He didn’t miss a beat. Twinkle in his eye, he snapped back with, “Well, it’s like sex - too long ago and not often enough!”

Like with Charlie Ergen, I never actually discussed blackjack with Leary. Instead I would learn about his card counting forays from dealers in the Reno area. For a time, I had taken to using the moniker ‘Timothy Leary’ as one of my blackjack aliases, claiming to be the actual nephew of the famous mind-altering scientist. As a result, I was informed several times of my “late uncle’s” exploits by several dealers. Apparently ‘Uncle Tim’ didn’t try to hide the fact that he was counting.

Another is actor Wilford Brimley of Cocoon and Quaker Oats fame. Wilford is a novice counter who likes to play early morning sessions at the Horseshoe while in Vegas. I’ve enjoyed his company at the single deckers on several occasions. Wilford fancies himself a Hi-Lo player though he appears to frequently lose the count. He also snatches his bigger bets back upon the shuffle, despite my nagging admonishments to the contrary. His play generates much attention and Binion’s benevolently tolerates his action undoubtedly due to his celebrity.

You’ll turn 50 soon. What are your future plans in business?

We built the first cable TV systems in the South Seas, in American and Western Samoa, along with landing the first PCS frequencies there, and now the family owns the regional newspaper there as well.

In recent years we’ve been consulting on capital formation, start-up, and marketing concepts. My now-ex wife directs a company that organizes strategic alliances and brokers capital and resources to entrepreneurial ventures. In the last twenty-four months we’ve taken a growing interest and involvement in computer and Internet facilitated business-barter and trade-exchange ‘alternative currency’ systems.

I also have an interest in starting a Las Vegas online and print newspaper.

So you think barter is the coming thing?

Yes, indeed. Barter commerce is fueled by weakening economies. Despite the massive media cover-up and White House propaganda to the contrary, our economy, and the world’s, is slipping from bad to worse. The worse it gets, the more businesses, small and large, will increasingly trade their goods and services to augment their cash business.

Anything else, business wise?

A pet project I’ve been developing here is a TV sitcom pilot called Camp! I think America is ready. Unprecedented millions of Americans are behind bars, due in large part to our despicable, ill-conceived “Drug War.” Camp life represents quite a cross-section of characters: Wall Street insider-traders, CPA embezzlers, tax-cheating doctors with embittered ex-wives, drug-busted pro athletes, and drug-dealer informants. A real slice of life!

Give us a preview of what “Camp!” might look like.

Well, for example, after my first week here, I obtained my issue of free generic laundry soap and headed for the washing machines with my dirty clothes. My ‘homies’ in Dormitory ‘A’ I would describe as an eclectic assortment of characters. I’ll use actual actor’s names to relate each one’s type. The Latino marijuana smuggler: Paul Rodriguez; The tax-fraud plastic surgeon: David Schwimmer; The country-boy meth cook: Woody Harrelson; the hip-hop counterfeiter: Chris Rock; and the loony camp officer: Christopher Lloyd. All of them are concerned with my intention to use the free generic soap, and express their dismay:

“Hey, man, don’t use that free shit,” exclaims Paul Rodriguez.

“Ya, dude, get you some Tide at the commissary, homeboy,” expresses Woody Harrelson, as the others nod in sober agreement.

“Why in the hell do I want to pay good money for laundry soap when they give it out free here?” I protest in exasperation.

“Well, my good man, Tide gets your whites whiter,” deadpans David Schwimmer, holding up the box.

“Your khakis brighter!” the whole chorus shouts gleefully.

“Get Tide!” chimes Chris Rock and Christopher Lloyd in unison.

Another scene occurred in the GED English class that I tutor:

A visiting professor from UNLV was explaining a nuance: “In English, as in most of the world’s languages, the use of a ‘double-negative’ is generally improper, but may nonetheless imply a positive.” He continued, “An exception may be found in the Russian language where a ‘double-negative’ may indeed infer a negative.” “However,” the professor hastily added with smug authority, “in no language anywhere on the planet shall a ‘double-positive’ ever imply a negative.”

After a moment of silence, there’s a loud reply from the back of the class as our hip-hop counterfeiter Chris Rock sarcastically responds, “Yeah, right!”

So that’s Camp!

Funny stuff! What else can you relate to us about camp life?

Life at camp isn’t too bad, really. We work at our respective jobs for 15-20 hours per week. We read a lot of books. We go to the camp movie theater to watch the latest DVD releases. There’s softball, racquetball, basketball and soccer. Some of us jog the track or hit the weights. We can enroll in a variety of classes. We also play a lot of cards. I play mostly gin and Texas-hold-em tournaments.

Camp is the easiest ‘time’ to do and the lowest security, without high walls or barbed-wire fences. Inmates can and do occasionally walk away, usually to be picked up within a few months and have a couple of years added to their sentence.

Camp living is military barracks style, and the camaraderie is not unlike enlisted military. It's nothing like the 'hard time' you see on HBO's Oz or the Discovery Channel's Supermax.

Believe it or not, many of us have found the incarceration experience to be a blessing.

So with this phase of your life nearly behind you, what are your future gambling plans?

Well, we've touched upon the auto-race betting. I've never cared much for traditional spectator sports, baseball and football and the like, but I have always enjoyed racing. In fact, one of my passions, since my teens, is 1/24th scale commercial track slot car racing. To this day, I occasionally race at a few different tracks in Southern California and Nevada. So auto race betting has captured my interest.

We may be able to get ahead of the curve there with a solid data collection base and keen bet-programming, although, as in any sports betting, the real edge would need to be derived from 'inside' or 'breaking' news, as Stanford Wong points out in his marvelous primer Sharp Sports Betting.

I expect to play blackjack in Mississippi and Louisiana for the first time, which I am looking forward to in the near future. Until now, my blackjack play has been limited to Nevada and Southern California, plus a few visits to Atlantic City.

Here at camp, for the first time since high school, I'm playing a lot of poker – mostly hold-em tournaments. I doubt my limited poker prowess is leading anywhere, though I do fancy I might enter the World Series of Poker on a \$10,000 flyer, just for kicks. Notwithstanding, gambling games other than blackjack are not my passion – business development and speculation is my real 'gambling juice.' Other than that, I'll probably continue counting until blackjack is finished, which may be another decade or two.

But aren't the blackjack games clearly deteriorating, in general, and during these last three years?

Yes, undoubtedly, but still beatable albeit with a bigger spread and bankroll against increased variance, with regards to maintaining an acceptable EV. But still beatable, nonetheless. And anomalies against the trend continue. Just last month, amidst generally worsening conditions, no less than several Vegas casinos featured markedly improved conditions, as well as beatable new side bets like 'Royal 20s' and 'Lucky Ladies.'

What's your final advice for novice and neophyte counters?

First and foremost, if it's not fun for you, find something else.

Secondly, overbetting your bankroll is the killer.

Third, the several Internet discussion boards, despite the politics, can be invaluable for accelerating your knowledge and contemporaneous experience absorption.

Beyond that, obtain some good drilling software and drill hard between trips.

Oh, and a final thought: if you play a lot, don't stay too long as a red chipper. Move to green action quickly where the games are less congested. By the same token, don't get over-exposed as a green chipper or you'll be haunted in your move to black.

A good practice is to limit your exposure, a la Revere and Schlesinger, by limiting session lengths to sixty minutes and/or winning or losing forty units or so.

Sixty minute sessions? Not exceeding forty units won or lost? I've watched you exceed those parameters many times!

Yes well, that's an example for novices of "do as I say and not as I do."

What has been your greatest winning gamble?

Won and lost, perhaps, and that would be my now-ex wife. In 1990 I was blessed to meet her when she was consulting for one of my California-based syndicators. Soon afterwards, we entered into a business alliance, and within ninety days she had formed our DC-based lobbying consortium and relegated me to 'junior-partner' status in the firm! It was she who later charmed Adrian Cronauer onto our team in 1991.

The 'big gamble' was on my birthday in 1992 which fell auspiciously on Good Friday! As fate would have it, she is related to the notorious 'Jesse James Gang,' whereas my great uncles are the infamous 'Dalton Brothers Gang.' We wrote our wedding vows to supplant "honor and obey" with "aid and abet." Years later, while driving cross-country, she and I would stop in Coffeerville, Kansas to visit the Dalton Gang Museum. Upon explaining to the museum curator our Dalton and James family ties, he matter-of-factly informed us that "the James and the Daltons were cousins!"

But you two are divorced now?

Yes, due partially to the stress and upheaval of my criminal case, and other factors both strategic and emotional, but we are still friends and we still occasionally work together on business projects.

Many times you've told me about your 'New Age' philosophy. Are there any ways in which these beliefs have helped you at the blackjack tables?

Well, I once went through a phase where I only played blackjack at pre-determined times throughout the day that had been calculated by a nationally ranked astrologer, but my results were inconclusive.

Seriously though my beliefs, which I occasionally use as cover, it never impairs the accuracy of my counting or bet sizing. I do, however, embrace a Buddhist-like paradigm of 'universal mind' by recognizing that all manifestation is consciousness. I prefer to call it 'higher consciousness' or 'quantum reality' and my leanings toward a more Eastern philosophical awareness stem from over 300 LSD trips, and from studies I've undertaken for over 30 years including Zen, Taoism and the teachings of the Ruchira Avatar Adi Da Samraj, Alan Watts, J. Krishnamurti and Sri Poonjaji, among others.

Beyond the intuition factor discussed earlier, we get into some heady stuff that re-acquaints us with the gamblers' penchant for the so-called 'superstitious.'

Some readers who have studied quantum-physics will recall the hypothesis of “Dr. Schrödinger’s Cat.” Schrödinger posited that a cat placed into an electrically wired black box which, in turn, was randomly electrified - only sometimes with enough juice to kill the cat, with the random charges unknown to the observing experimenter - would result in neither a dead nor a living cat until the box is opened and the animal’s state observed.

Along similar lines, the next card dealt from the shoe is not pre-determined, at least not in ‘quantum-reality.’ Thus a gambler’s beliefs may very well indeed affect his results.

I once employed my friend and best-selling ‘higher-consciousness’ author Marilyn Ferguson (The Aquarian Conspiracy, Brain-Mind Bulletin) to channel the late Kenny Uston.

Marilyn channels many “gone-yonders,” as she refers to them, including Joseph Kennedy, John Rockefeller, Buckminster Fuller, Timothy Leary, and even ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ whom she endearingly calls “the J of N.” Her son is a semi-pro poker player, so at his urgings she has even channeled the late poker legend Johnny Moss.

During the channeling session, Kenny stated that since the time of his “last incarnation,” he has become “increasingly convinced” of the “connection between state and luck.” Such connection between ‘state’ and ‘luck’ has been suggested by many mystical and scientific types, alike. This suggests that a gambler may actually be able to ‘invoke’ a ‘lucky-state’ through meditation, prayer, self-hypnosis or even neuro-linguistic-programming, perhaps. I don’t know, but I’ll ask my friend Tony Robbins the next time I see him.

Do you have any concrete results that would justify these concepts?

My results are totally inconclusive, statistically speaking, although chanting Buddhist good-luck mantras at the blackjack table is certainly good for cover! One of my biggest wins was at the old Reserve in Henderson while loudly chanting ‘Nam-Myo-Ho-Renge-Kyo.’ Afterwards, a teammate stepped within earshot of the pit-critters who had been in attendance and overheard them discussing, “What do you think he was chanting?” to which the other replied, “He was probably putting a curse on us.”

Does this ‘quantum-reality’ stuff bother your teammates?

A few years ago I was playing in Reno, and there were five of us having a team meeting and I suggested that perhaps we should all try playing sessions timed according to our daily bio-rhythms and/or astrological charts. They all got angry and told me to “stop scaring” them! After a bathroom break I returned to the meeting and challenged them: “Is there anyone here that is totally without superstition?” In the next moment, one pulled out his rabbit-foot key chain, another produced his lucky coin, a third had just splashed on his lucky aftershave. A fourth teammate showed his rosary beads.

As it turned out, I was the only one in the group who wasn’t carrying a ‘talisman’ into play that night.

Do you really believe in this ‘cosmic consciousness’ stuff?

Oh yes! Fundamentally, the seemingly ‘separate’ and ‘external’ universe is a holographic illusion, not truly composed of inanimate rocks and matter, but is rather a ‘paradigmatic-realm’ of unbounded mind and consciousness wherein all things and events are interconnected in infinite possibility through the eternal here-and-now via the engine of third-dimensional creation: one’s own cerebral cortex!

By the way, I’ve considered using an expert with a dousing rod to walk the aisles of the BJ pit to select my table - a potentially great cover ploy... and it just might work!

You are one strange dude, Zengrifter!

Yes, I know, everyone tells me that.

Thank you for sharing some of your insights, tactics and experiences today.

Thank you for visiting.

Winding up our interview, we said our good byes, I slipped Grif some contraband that he had requested, and then as we walked to the departure area, The Grifter stopped and playfully asked two of the officers if they knew “How many cops did it take to throw a suspect down a flight of stairs?” They chuckled, anticipating a punch line from one of the principal jesters on campus, and then bit...”ok, how many?” To which Grif cracked, “None, he slipped!”

The four of us laughed and then one of the officers said, “Hey Dr. Evil, my in-laws are coming to town this weekend. Don’t forget to stop by the officers’ bubble with that basic strategy and coupon book info, huh?”

The Grifter turns to me, his little finger raised to the corner of a quirky-demonic smile. Damn, he does look rather like a dashing Dr. Evil!

... THE END?