

Suspicious Minds

HIGH-TECH CASINO SURVEILLANCE OPERATIONS FIGHT—AND USUALLY WIN—THE CONSTANT BATTLE AGAINST CHEATING GAMBLERS AND CROOKED EMPLOYEES.

BY CHARMAINE COOPER

The temptation is there. Crisp, fresh greenbacks make a resonant snap as they are counted out onto the table. Chips, their worth symbolized by bright colors, lay stacked like a child's pretend skyscraper city. More money than you've ever seen in one place. Would the casino really miss just one hundred-dollar chip, one bill?

Sure, the wealth is yours for the taking, if you play your cards right, hit the jackpot, or ride a lucky streak. But if you're banking on skulduggery to make your fortune, don't bet that you'll get away with it. In all probability, this is one game in which you'll be a guaranteed loser.

Nonetheless, cheating is a fact of life in all casinos—and it's not just the patrons who are under surveillance. "At any given time in just about any casino, 25 percent of your employees are looking for a way to steal," contends Brent Farnsworth, director of surveillance and internal audit for Casino Magic.

With those kinds of odds, it's no wonder that casinos have adopted extreme measures to thwart thievery. Almost every move a dealer makes, every accessory on his or her uniform, every prop on a table game, serves an additional function beyond its obvious practicality: it prevents the dealer, the player, or both, from cheating.

A Time For Every Purpose

Ever notice a dealer clapping her hands before shaking yours after a game? Don't flatter yourself into thinking she's applauding your performance. Clapping or "dusting" the hands prevents dealers from "palming" (concealing chips or money in one's palm), or from passing chips to players in a handshake. The actual procedure is to clap and open one's hands face up towards the surveillance cameras.

Dan Rajnic, director of security at Biloxi Belle, and Robert E. King, surveillance director at the Isle of Capri Biloxi, say there are two standard situations which require a clap: any time hands leave the gaming surface or the dealer touches money. That includes such innocuous actions as tucking in shirts, adjusting ties and moving aprons. Even covering your nose for a sneeze cannot be done without clapping first, no matter how immediate the need.

This rule also extends to casino cashiers, and is even voluntarily adopted by some executives. It can and does become second nature, clapping while being introduced to people at parties or paying for groceries. "You can always tell a dealer in the grocery store," laughs King. "First they won't hand the people the money, they'll put the money down. Before they touch the money, they'll clear their hands." In addition to precluding palming, placing money directly onto the gaming table allows the cameras to verify that no chips are concealed within the bills.

A Fair Deal

The elaborate ritual of setting up and dealing cards also entails dos and don'ts which prevent card manipulations, card marking and palming, says Rajnic. After a dealer has fanned the cards out face up (to be counted), they are turned over—not because it looks cool but because the dealer must examine the card backings for defects. Observant players who spot defects first are able to skew the game in their favor.

The dealer must deal with two hands, and, except for certain "pitch" blackjack games that are dealt from the hand, is not allowed to hold the cards in the infamous "mechanic's grip." The mechanic's grip allows dealers skilled in sleight of hand to second deal (deal the second card while saving the first for herself), bottom deal, (deal from the bottom from the deck), or peek at certain cards. Also forbidden is the "dead thumb," a method of keeping the thumb still on the top card and second dealing with the other fingers. In a proper deal, the thumb is the operative finger to fling the cards out to the players. At the Biloxi Belle, dealers must toss the cards with the thumb and forefinger.

And forget thinking a certain camaraderie with the dealer will give you an edge. Dealers are on their honor to send friends and relatives to other tables.

The Clothes Break the Man

The 1890's Mississippi riverboat theme so common in area casinos extends, of course, to employee uniforms. But it's more than a coincidence that the 1890's style of dress also frustrates attempts to conceal chips somewhere on the body, within the clothes, or in special pockets called subs.

Narrow, string, or bow ties are standard dealer attire: wide ties have unacceptably high chip concealing potential.

Shirts with French or ruffled cuffs won't pass muster, nor will rolling up one's sleeves. Garters worn on the sleeves prevent dealers from sliding chips up through their arm and down into their shirts. Aprons serve a dual purpose, preventing wear on pants from constant friction against the table and making it more difficult for dealers to access their pockets. Some casinos require that all trouser pockets be sewn closed. To keep chips from disappearing underneath watch faces, dealers at Casino Magic and other casinos in Vegas are not permitted to wear oversized watches. Similarly, "flagrant" jewelry is also not allowed.

Beyond the frenetic activity of the casino floor, the hard-count (for coins) and soft-count (for currency) staff at Casino Magic wear jumpsuits.

It's All in the Cards

The table games area is carefully laid out to prevent shenanigans. The tables are placed in "pits," back-to-back and in rows, so that players cannot get behind a dealer or the table, and so that the floorperson (a games and dealer supervisor) can easily keep an eye on the action.

Card tampering is deterred by a myriad of handling and replacement procedures. Cards in most Gulf Coast casinos are replaced after every shift, or at least daily. During this rather short life span, they are counted incessantly—upon receipt from the manufacturer, by the dealer when setting up a game and again at the conclusion of the shift. Cards are removed in sealed audit bags,



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signed off on, and taken to a card cancellation room. There, they are counted again before being edged (cut) on the sides or corners, drilled through the center, or otherwise irreparably marked. After a final count for good measure, they are either sold in the gift shop or donated to charities. The Biloxi Belle, with just 50 table games, goes through more than 200 decks of cards each day.

Tricks of the Trade

Blackjack tables are the scene of some of the more sophisticated anti-cheating precautions. In all but pitch blackjack games, cards are dealt from a shoe, a box which holds the cards and prevents card manipulations. Many casinos incorporate a prism-type mirror into the table, allowing the dealer to see her hole card without lifting it from the table surface. All discarded cards at both Grand Casinos are held in what is known as a "red reader," which detects the use of "luminous reader" cards, red-backed cards distinguished with faint green marks that are visible only under a red filter.

Over at the craps tables, dice are transparent to prevent "loading," injecting a weight into the dice which throws off the physical properties of a perfect cube. The dots which mark dice numbers are stickers anchored to the surface and not scooped into the dice; this hinders loading a heavily weighted element such as gold beneath a dot. Like cards, dice are replaced regularly at the end of every shift, or at the floorperson's discretion. They are then drilled through the center and recycled into key chains for the gift shop.

Mirrored panels lining the inside of craps tables enable boxpersons (craps game supervisors) to see the side of the dice facing away from them. If the facing-side and the side reflected in the mirror do not add up to seven, the dice shooter has introduced a pair of "tops and bottoms," dice with some numbers omitted.

In roulette, a plastic guard protects the outer half of the wheel from player interference. Players are not allowed to touch the ball, even if it flies off the wheel and lands on the floor. The balls are checked for tampering by a compass-like device which measures weight and balance, or by a magnetic device which detects implanted loads. There are usually two or three roulette balls on the table, says Biloxi Belle's Rajnic, so that they can be switched if one is suspected to be "off."

At the big six wheel, the dealer stands to the side during play, allowing for a view of both the betting table and the wheel. A small six-by-six inch mirror is placed on the table to reflect the denomination which comes up after the spin. That way, the dealer's eyes do not have to leave the table to check the wheel. This prevents a common method of cheating known as "past posting," or placing your bet after the outcome of the spin.

Playing by the Rules

There are also rules to be followed by the player, lest a floorperson come a-tapping on your shoulder with a stern warning, or worse. In all games dealt face-up from a shoe, players are not allowed to touch the cards. Touching the cards opens up an opportunity to palm cards and replace them with others that a player has picked up in earlier rounds, or to mark cards by bending, crimping, or bridging (curling).

In craps, the shooter must throw the dice so that they bounce against the dimpled far wall, preventing any "whip," "drop," or "slide" rolls, or rolls in which the outcome would be other than random. In some casinos you may not be allowed to make bets for or even sit at a table game with a playing companion, presumably to preclude some sort of suspicious complicity.

Even housekeeping gets involved in preventive measures. Drink spills warrant serious, immediate attention because chips or cards, when wet, become sticky, and can be palmed or stuck onto anything from a sleeve to the bottom of a cocktail waitresses' tray.

All of these regulations are designed so that no cheating can occur without an accompanying break in procedure. And who's watching to ensure that procedures are followed? The often mysterious and secretive surveillance departments.

Behind the Black Bubble

The mantra echoed by every surveillance department that agreed to be interviewed was that their mission is to "protect the assets of the company" through whatever means necessary. Way back when, that meant plain old human eyes spying through a two-way mirror that ran the length of the ceiling, called a "catwalk." Catwalks are still used in a handful of casinos, but only as a supplement to high-tech television cameras. Concealed within those gleaming black bubbles on the ceiling are cameras with pan, tilt, and zoom capabilities so advanced that surveillance officials can see the total on a credit card receipt. What the cameras see is visible on black-and-white and color television monitors, which are stacked in a small, dark and heavily air-conditioned room (to keep the equipment cool) somewhere in the casino. One or two surveillance personnel sit before the monitors 24 hours a day...and watch. In addition to the pictures that appear on the monitors, many more angles can be called up by pressing a series of buttons on a keyboard.

All of the available angles, visible on the monitor or not, are automatically recorded by a VCR (The Isle of Capri Biloxi has 56 VCRs). If the recorded activity is unremarkable, the tapes are kept between 10 and 30 days before reuse. Tapes which contain suspicious activities may be kept indefinitely.

According to surveillance personnel, boredom is not a factor while watching the monitors. "If you're bored, you're not doing your job," says Kim Blakeney, surveillance supervisor for the Isle of Capri Biloxi. "If you don't have a (table) game going on, then you're watching the slot department—or employees, or patrons in the lounge, or bartenders."

A special surveillance monitor is linked to a computer, which is connected to the lock, or door, of every slot machine in the casino. Any time a slot machine is opened, the computer alerts surveillance, which checks to make sure that the machine is legitimately emptied of its coins or repaired by personnel—and not tampered with. Casino Magic has an additional computer in its surveillance room that allows for further analysis of a suspicious move. It can even be downloaded via modem for study by an outside expert.

Staying a Step Ahead

Surveillance departments must keep up with both the latest in electronic surveillance and the latest cheating scams. Personnel are required to know the rules of all games, dealer procedures, and even how a player should "look" while playing, says Blakeney. The price of all this paranoia? Between \$250,000

and \$1,000,000, according to the *Encyclopedia of Gambling*. Farnsworth says that Casino Magic's surveillance system cost about \$400,000.

Surveillance departments also send out plainclothes observers, who inconspicuously patrol the aisles. These observers may be sent to the floor at the request of the floorperson or the pit boss, who may sense that something is going on and want to get a trained

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eye down to take a look, to "mingle" with the suspects. Likewise, if something unexplainable is spotted on a monitor, surveillance personnel may often call down to the pit and ask the floorperson or dealer to be on the lookout.

Likewise, surveillance departments at competing casinos look out for each other. Farnsworth explains the benefits of networking: "It's not like the normal business competitive environment. We're all working together because if someone's going to steal from our casino, they're going to head down the street and steal from theirs. So we freely exchange information, and some of the best arrests that we've caught are when someone will come in and hit you and you'll realize as they walk out the door, 'Oops, I just figured out what happened there and they got us.' And we get on the phone, call down to all the other surveillance departments, who are then ready and watching with a description for these people."

Corporate policy regarding surveillance department operations varies from casino to casino. Some are upfront about their tactics, others are secretive. Whether to publicize or protect their presence depends on management's philosophy. Some believe that divulging details of their operations or of recent cheating scams benefits the bad guys. Indeed, many area casinos declined to participate in this story. Others believe that knowledge is the best weapon for defense and were willing to discuss the scams they've heard of or discovered.

The Employee Threat

Employees have been known to go to extreme lengths to smuggle chips or cash out of the casino. According to the *Encyclopedia of Gambling*, "dealers have been caught with chips in their pockets, mouths, under their belts, in their shoes, up their sleeves and in their underwear." There's the story of one

dealer who was getting chips into his mouth by bringing his hand up to cough; supposedly he resembled a chipmunk when surveillance finally approached him, and he spit several chips out right into the agent's hand. Some dealers have been known to sew aprons—or underwear—together to create covert compartments.

Left-handed dealers looking to cheat are at a distinct disadvantage, according to Richard Turner, a card-cheating-technique performer. It is much more difficult, he says, for left-handers to execute false shuffles; second, bottom, and even middle dealing; stacking the deck; and pecks.

Probably the most effective cheating occurs when the player and dealer are in cahoots. One cheating prop called a "chip cup" is a legitimate \$5 dollar chip glued to the top of a hollow open-ended tower which resembles a stack of chips. When the empty stack is collected in a loss from the player, the dealer can slyly place the cup over a stack of \$25 chips. The player then throws a \$25 chip at the dealer, asking for five \$5 chips in change, and the dealer passes the cup back, now filled with \$25 chips that look like \$5 chips. This can be done repeatedly, with honest bets and plays in between.

To cover their tracks, dealers often make up for what they've stolen by shortchanging the players, or ignoring the occasional win.

The Player Scams

Peeking at the dealer's hole card in blackjack is big business in the cheating world, and without a prism mirror, dealers are susceptible to any number of attempts to see what they've got. This furtive method of peeking is called "front loading" or "hole card plays," and players will go so far as to slouch down in their seats or roll up to the table in wheelchairs. Some go so far as to seek out taller dealers because they are more likely to expose more of the card while peeking. Sometimes it's done by the player at the table; in other cases a player at another table sneaks a peek and signals to the first player accordingly ("spooking").

In March of 1993, the Isle of Capri Casino was victimized by a gang of spooks using ultra-sophisticated equipment. When they realized what had happened—the pair had taken them for about \$46,000, according to Casino Magic officials—they put the word out. Soon after, surveillance at Casino Magic became suspicious of a blackjack player who matched the Isle's description. When they noticed a woman matching the description of his suspected accomplice take a seat at an opposing table, they got even more curious. But it wasn't until they spotted the infrared light of the camera hidden in her purse—visible only on a black-and-white monitor—that they knew they'd caught the group who had cheated the Isle.

Inside her ordinary-looking black purse was a zoom-lens camera with the ability to see the dealer's hole card as

he lifted it to peek. The camera's monitor was holed up in a van in the parking lot. Via an ear piece, the woman could receive instructions from the person in the van as to the best angles to place her purse, and then tell the man how to play based on the hole card. After he had been detained, surveillance cameras captured the man detaching hair-thin wires from underneath his hair. According to Hank Beard, surveillance manager at Casino Magic Bay St. Louis, the transmitter for the man's ear piece was no bigger than an eye-shadow applicator.

A legal way to get an edge in blackjack is by counting cards (a method of determining the value of the remaining cards in the deck). But just because it's legal—as the Isle's King says, "You can't arrest someone for thinking!"—doesn't mean you'll get away with it. Casino floorman who suspect a player of counting cards will not hesitate to give him the "brush-off" or "back-off," politely informing them that their action is no longer welcome in blackjack.

While mental calculations are legal, artificial devices, such as computers or calculators, are not. Such devices have been spotted on players' shoes, in their pockets, and in one incident at Casino Magic, strapped to a player's leg, discovered after officers pulled down his pants.

Often these players tip off surveillance by repeatedly touching their shoe or leg, or putting their hand in their pocket only when the cards are being dealt (a "tell"). "A person who's not dishonest will handle cards indiscriminately," says Rajnic. "A person who has something to hide or who's performing an illegal task will attempt to do it the same way."

Surveillance departments are even trained to be wary of Band-Aids. Bandages on a player or dealer's hand in poker games have been used to conceal a thumbtack, with just the pinpoint exposed, allowing the cheat to prick the cards he wants marked. Dishonest poker players have also been known to "daub,"—smear oil, grease and even Vaseline on the cards to mark them. Such markings would not be easily detectable by surveillance, but the "tells" would.

Methods of cheating slot machines are going decidedly high-tech. Antiquated tactics such as spooning (opening the chute that traps the coins in), stringing (attaching a coin to a

string, placing it in the slot to trip the machine and then removing it), and the rhythm method (manipulating the wheels by using special handle-pulling methods) have all been thwarted by technological countermeasures.

But these efforts have not made slots tamper-proof. At Casino Magic Bay St.

Louis, surveillance busted a group of slot players and their "blockers," people who stand between the cameras and the player so that the dishonest action is not spotted. The group was using what's known as a "kickstand," a magnetic device placed in the chute of a slot machine to interrupt the light sensor that counts the coins as they pass through. With a kickstand in place, the slot machine would pay out all of its coins after any winning combination.

Over the Edge

Other ways of cheating are less subtle, i.e. robbery. The Queen of New Orleans was recently the target of an unsuccessful extortion and kidnapping attempt. One Gulf Coast casino was

robbed by a member of its own security force, who had called in sick. At another casino, a recently fired employee knew the procedure for bringing money from the cashier's cage to the count rooms, and robbed the cashier on her way there.

Casino Magic's security director Mike Leahy believes another kind of robbery will descend soon upon the Gulf Coast. "We don't have nearly as many snatch-and-grab attempts yet," he says. "But it's just a matter of time."

Farnsworth agrees: "The casinos provide a target-rich environment for distraction."

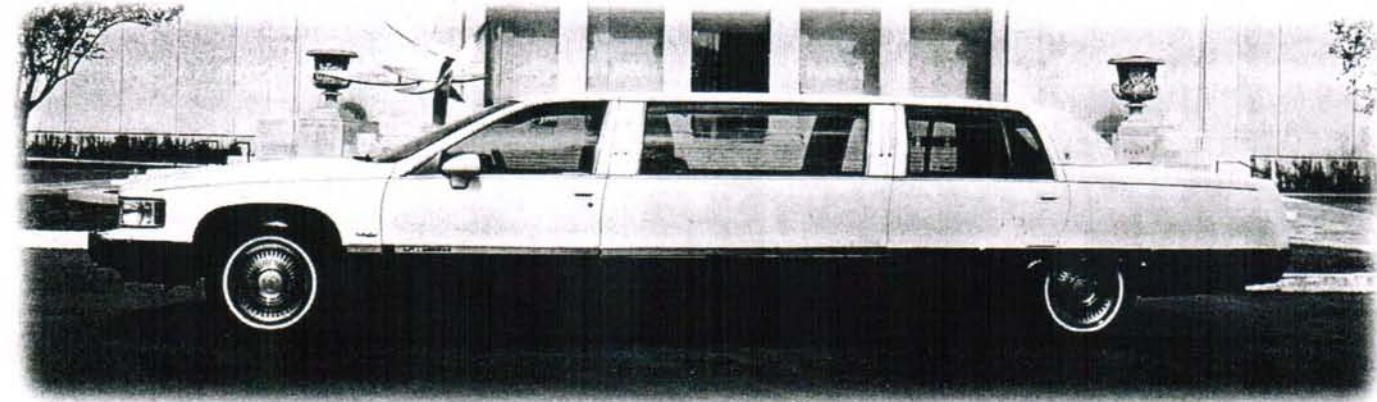
Once an illegal act is discovered, it's the security department's job to go in and make the arrest. Suspects are detained in a holding area or office while the police or other law enforcement agencies are called.

Cheating in Mississippi is a felony, carrying a penalty of one to 10 years with a fine beginning at \$10,000. Given that the cheater's action has probably been recorded by a surveillance camera and personally witnessed by either casino employees or players, there's little chance for a successful defense. While all of these precautions may seem a bit much, the casinos don't look at it that way. "No matter how many safeguards you come up with," says the Isle's King, "there will always be a criminal element. It's what keeps us working."

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