

# Bill Zender's *Casino-ology*

**“O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!”  
1808 - Walter Scott, Scottish novelist and poet.**

**July 2009**

Last month, I meet with a good friend of mine, named Gary, who is an agent with the Nevada Gaming Control Board's Enforcement Division. For everyone who doesn't know, the Enforcement Division is the law enforcement arm of the Gaming Board. While having dinner together, Gary brought up an incident he experienced during a recent investigation of alleged cheating. He wanted me to know about a certain advantage play technique that was being used quite regularly in the Northern Nevada area. He also mentioned that there was a little twist to it that needed to be passed along to the casinos, especially to the surveillance departments. I thought Gary's information was extremely interesting as well.

In this month's Casino-ology, I will outline an interesting situation regarding legal advantage play, and let every read know how this play could end up costing their casino thousands of dollars if they are not careful. So grab a cup of Joe, sit back, relax, and please enjoy this month's edition of Casino-ology.

## **Understanding Playing Card “Sort” Patterns**

Over the past several months, several casinos in Northern Nevada have been subject to an advantage play attack of their blackjack games known as “sort” play. In order to take advantage of “sorts”, the advantage player must first find a casino that offers a hand dealt blackjack game where the players handle the dealt playing cards. Second, the advantage players need a casino that also uses playing cards that have a pattern back that covers the entire playing card. The playing card Gary mentioned that had been attacked was the US Playing Card company's “Aristocrat” brand. I would also like to point out that any of the other manufactured brands with a full back pattern could be subject to sorts as well.

Sorts are created when a card is not symmetrically cut during the deck's printing process. All casino quality playing card decks are printed on 60 card sheets, and are cut from the sheet using a two-step process. This process, although done with an automatic cutting machine, is not perfectly symmetrical. The cut may result in all cards of that deck having a very slight pattern difference on the sides or ends. Since the cards are printed with a full back design of diamonds, gems, or intersecting lines, sometimes cut pattern differences can be noticed by the trained eye. Although this is not common, it can happen. If the difference is too great, and the cut patterns

can be read when sitting within several inches of the dealer held deck, the casino is open for sort attack.

Sort play occurs when a group of players take over the entire table. After the cards are dealt, the team of players will position or turn their cards in a particular manner so one of the miss-cut pattern sides faces in the same direction when the slip their hand under the wagered chips. For example; the sort players may opt to position the ten value cards with all elongated diamonds on the back pattern facing to the right when the cards are positioned under the wagered chips. In this case, all non-ten value cards will be rotated 180 degrees in the opposite direction. The sort players will continue to keep turning the cards in the same manner throughout the dealing of the deck. Once the dealer shuffles the cards and begins to deal the next deck, the player will resume turning the cards until they have a majority of the playing cards positioned so they can be read to indicate the top card of the deck is either a ten or non-ten value card. In essence, the advantage player uses the miss-cut sort patterns to gain information just like a cheater uses marked cards. As you will see, the effect is quite similar, and in this next case, too similar.

### **Gary's Message**

Over dinner, Gary explained that he had recently responded to an alleged marked card situation at a Reno casino. Once he arrived at the casino, Gary was informed by management that they believed a team of players on one of their hand held games was marking the cards and using the information to bust out the dealer's hand. When Gary reviewed the video, he noticed that every player on the table was turning and positioning the cards in their hand in a similar fashion that Gary recognized as sort play. One player was observed standing up, wagering table minimum on the first table position. Apparently, his job was to read the sort patterns and try and steer either ten's or non-ten cards into the next player's hand. The next player, seated at the third table position was playing table limit, and was acting as the team's "big player". A third player was standing at the last position, and wagering table minimum. His job was to read the cards on the top of the deck and try and steer cards into the dealer's hand in an attempt to bust the dealer. After watching the team members turn cards and play sorts for about a half hour, the team terminated play and left the casino.

Out of curiosity, Gary followed them to another casino just down the street. Once inside the casino, the players set up on another hand held blackjack game, but after a short period quit. Why? Because the dealer on the game was utilizing an old technique that severely deterred sort play known as "the turn". When the dealer noticed the group of players on his table sorting and arranging cards, during the next shuffle he simply broke the deck in half and turned one half of the deck 180 degrees before starting the first riffle shuffle. Once team saw the dealer employ a turn in the shuffle, they ended play and left the casino. This confirmed Gary's assumption that the team was using "sort" information, and although they gained an advantage over the casino playing in this manner, it was totally legal and of no concern to the Nevada Gaming Control Board.

One thing bothered Gary, though. During the review of the video at the first casino, Gary noticed all the players of the sort team touching the cards in a manner that resembled a marked card play known as “daubing”. This was quite perplexing. Why would advantage players, using a legal technique to beat the casino, simulate the motions of cheating card marker? Usually players utilizing a legitimate technique to gain an advantage would purposely stand clear of any hand action that might mimic a cheating move. First, they don’t want to draw undue attention to their play, and second, they wouldn’t want the casino to grab them up for allegedly committing an act of cheating. Why were these players acting in a manner that might make someone think they were cheating? In Gary’s words, “It appeared as if they were planting the idea that they were cheating, since they were so obvious and kept running their finger across the top of the cards, over and over again.” What would be their motive to attract all this attention?

### **Zender’s Comment**

One thing I understood that Gary didn’t is that there is more than one way to beat the casinos out of money. The first is over the gaming tables. An advantage team, sorting miss-cut card patterns, can gain an advantage that will result in wins of several thousand dollars. Second, a group of players who are arrested by the casino for cheating when all they are doing is using an unacceptable, but legal technique, stand a chance to make a hundred thousand dollars in a civil law suit! From Gary’s rendition of the play in Reno, it appears the team was playing sort information to gain an advantage, and trying to simulate a cheating technique to, shall we say, “Hedge their bets”.

The following are some suggestions that you may wish to consider if presented with this type of situation:

- Always take time to analyze any suspicious play; don’t jump to conclusions.
- Watch for players who continually turn and position cards held in their hand. This is the primary indicator of “sort” play.
- Be sure the player’s are not using a legal technique before accusing them of cheating. Sorts emulate marked card play.
- Allow any gaming investigator responding to the case to make his or her decision on whether there is evidence of cheating. Show them the facts, but don’t give them a narrative of the event filled with accusations.
- The best methods for preventing sort play is; (a) place a 180 degree turn of half the deck immediately prior to a riffle shuffle into your shuffle procedure, or (b) consider using only faded edge cards on your hand dealt blackjack games.
- Remember, losing money across the tables is not the only way to lose money.

[Please direct all comments and questions to [wzender@lastresortconsulting.com](mailto:wzender@lastresortconsulting.com). Your comments and questions may be used in Bill’s monthly Casino-logy column.]

