

# STACKING THE DECK

**FORENSICS**

GAMBLING IS A MUG'S GAME. YOU CAN NEVER  
WIN AGAINST THE HOUSE. OR CAN YOU?

BY DANIEL WEISS

The house almost always wins – but not when former card counter Josh Axelrad is on the other side of the blackjack table.

PHOTO: REDUX

# SOONER OR LATER, ALL SUCCESSFUL COUNTERS DRAW NOTICE

**T**he Aladdin casino, Las Vegas, Nevada, the United States (US). It's a few days before New Year 2001, and gambler Josh Axelrad is already down over US\$20,000 at the blackjack tables. All the same, he places two orange chips on the felt: US\$5,000 each for a pair of spots in the next round. The dealer flips him two elevens against the house's jack. As if on impulse, Axelrad tosses a strap filled with US\$10,000 in cash onto the table, instantly doubling his bets. Onlookers gasp as the dealer counts out the bills.

The dealer draws a four, then an eight, busting with a total of 22. Axelrad wins both hands and pockets a cool US\$20,000. Over the next few hours he continues to bet - and win big. He staggers from table to table, looking confused, even drugged, with drool flying from his mouth. His heart pounds with excitement, his emotions so high he can't even sit down. By the time casino staff have had enough and bar him from further play, he's up over US\$78,000.

## SHARP CARDS

To the casual onlooker, Axelrad seemed to win by dumb luck. In reality, he was using a carefully calibrated technique

known as "card counting" to gain a mathematical advantage over the house. Every hand was played according to a preset strategy. Each time he stumbled over to a new table, he was responding to a teammate's secret signal that the mix of remaining cards was particularly promising. He played standing up not merely out of excitement, but to ensure he could see the signals. "It was very intense," he recalls. "It was the realisation of everything I had been dreaming of since I'd first heard of card counting years before."

That session at The Aladdin, the most successful in Axelrad's gambling career, is detailed in his new book, *Repeat Until Rich: A Professional Card Counter's Chronicle of the Blackjack Wars*. There were plenty of losing sessions too,

but over five years, he netted around US\$700,000 on behalf of his team.

In his best years, he took home over US\$100,000 after expenses, enough to pay for a Ford Mustang convertible and an apartment in Las Vegas in addition to his home in New York City. "I was living very decadently for a while," he recalls. "I would disappear for weeks at a time and come back with bottles of Johnny Walker Blue for my friends."

Axelrad's team, which he refers to as Mossad in his book (not its real name), spent much of its time in Las Vegas, but also hit other casinos across the US. Wherever they played, the routine was generally the same. A number of low-level players called spotters would settle in at tables where a fresh shoe, or set of decks, was being dealt. While

playing for low stakes, they would keep a running count of all cards played: plus one for every two, three, four, five or six, minus one for every 10, jack, queen, king or ace.

The spotters were on the lookout for a high count, meaning there were many high cards - which are favourable to the player - left to play, and fewer low cards, which are favourable to the dealer. When the count got sufficiently high and the dealer's edge tipped to the player, the spotter would signal a teammate called the Big Player, or BP. The BP would then join the game and play for very high stakes, making the most of the temporary advantage.

There are a number of reasons why a high count favours the player. First, it increases the player's chance of getting

blackjack, which pays out at a higher rate than a normal winning hand. Second, it increases the dealer's chance of busting, or going over 21. The dealer plays a fixed strategy that requires hitting on any hand totalling 16 or less, while the player can change strategy to protect against busting. And third, the player can make other strategic moves such as taking insurance, which is a bet that the dealer will get blackjack.

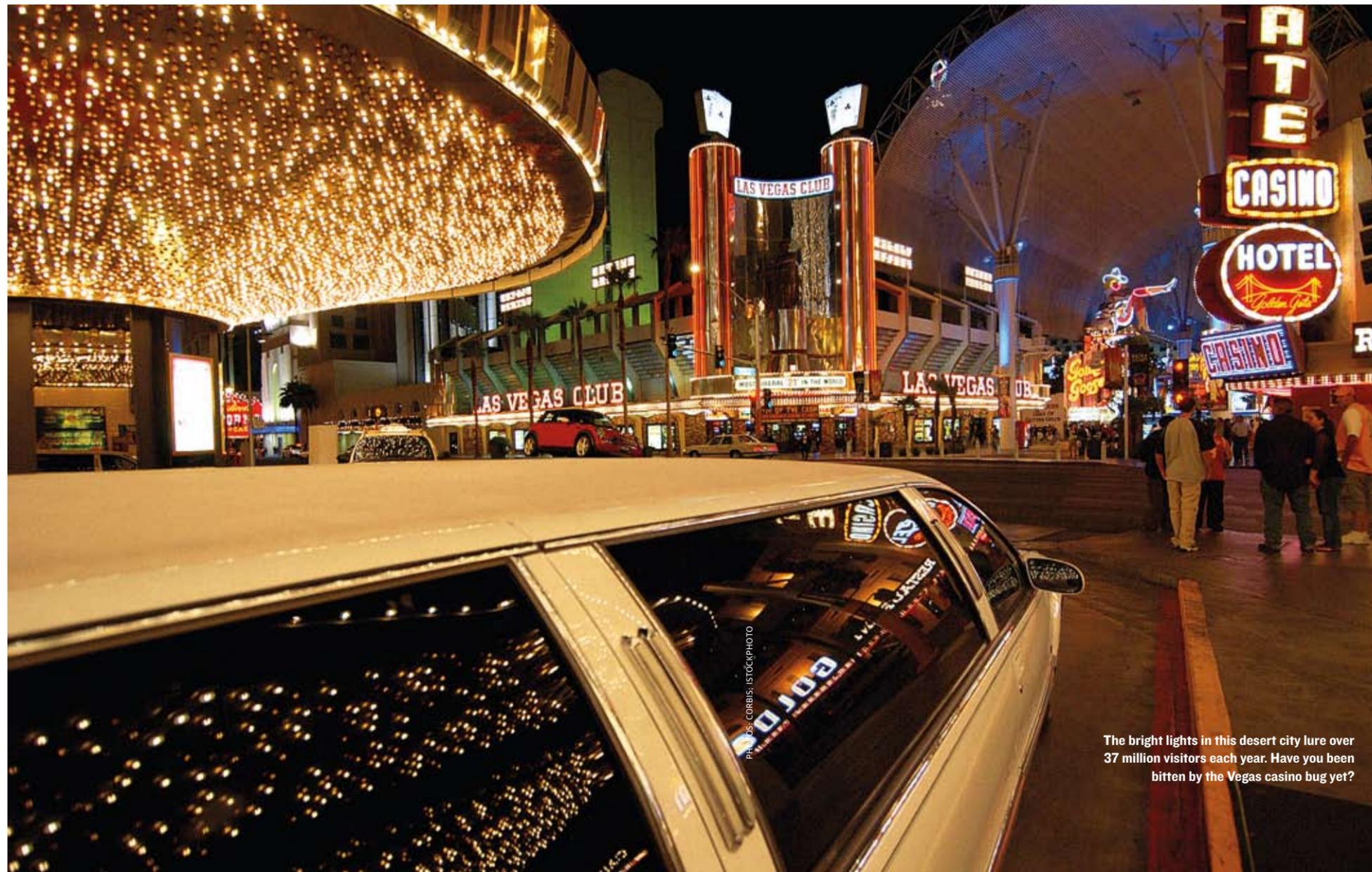
On a typical trip, Axelrad and his team started with a bankroll of several hundred thousand dollars and played for a predetermined amount of time, usually 200 player hours over a week or two. At the end, winnings were divvied up according to hours played and amount of money invested in the starting bankroll.



## HOW TO COUNT CARDS

**So, you want to be a card counter? The first thing you need to learn is basic strategy to allow you to play any blackjack hand to maximum advantage. If you execute perfect basic strategy without counting, the house will still win - but you'll keep its edge to about 0.5 percent. That means you'll lose on average US\$5 for every US\$1,000 wagered. At the same time, you have to keep track of the basic count: plus one for every two, three, four, five and six played, minus one for every 10, jack, queen, king and ace. Then, convert to the true count by dividing the basic count by the number of decks still to be played. For each step up in the true count, you gain about 0.5 percent advantage over the house. By the time the true count reaches plus two, you should start ramping up your bets.**

**Be careful, though, successful counting is harder than it seems. A casino ensures plenty of distractions to break your concentration, and making even a few small errors can wipe out your advantage. Because counting is so difficult to pull off, casinos actually welcome most would-be counters; since they believe they'll win in the long run, counters often lose far more money than the average gambler. In fact, before the first books detailing counting strategies were published in the early 1960s, casinos made less from blackjack than craps or roulette. Today, it is one of their most profitable table games.**



The bright lights in this desert city lure over 37 million visitors each year. Have you been bitten by the Vegas casino bug yet?



**“I WAS A LITTLE CRAZY IN THE RIGHT WAY. I WAS ABLE TO PUT ON A SHOW”**



**BETTING ON THE LAW**

Counting cards is legal in the US, although casinos in most areas have the right to bar anyone suspected of it. Casino staff closely monitor big bettors - particularly those who enter mid-shoe or dramatically raise and lower their wagers. Eventually, all successful counters draw attention.

“The idea is to bet with a meaningful edge, understanding that you will be barred and deal with heat as it comes up,” says Axelrad. “It becomes just another part of life as a card counter.” In his career, Axelrad was thrown out of over 100 casinos.

So how did he manage to win all that money before he was rumbled? “I was a little crazy in the right way,” he says. “I was able to put on a show in the casino that allowed me to play.” He disguised himself with outlandish wigs and leather outfits. He once played a session wearing a plastic Viking helmet with a string of beads hanging from one of the horns. To distract attention from his high bets and impulsive moves from table to table, he would act drunk or drugged, the way he did during the monster session at The Aladdin. Sometimes he embellished this act with blue contact lenses and told people he was a music producer.

One of Axelrad’s most successful acts was to pretend that he was severely mentally challenged and barely understood the game he was playing. “It’s a perfect act, if they buy it,” he says. “It answers almost every question that gets raised when you are betting like a card counter.” If staff wondered why he moved his bets around, why he shifted from one table to another, there was a rational explanation. “For me, acting like a simpleton did that job. They thought, well, this guy bets eccentrically because he’s a freak.”

Other members of Mossad who looked the part blended in as more typical high rollers. Axelrad fondly recalls a scene created by Jon Roth (not his real name), the team’s founder, when a high count dropped and strategy called for dramatically reduced bets. Although he had only played a few hands, Roth started shouting that he wouldn’t bet any more unless the casino gave him

a bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne. “He screamed ‘I refuse to wager!’ over and over again,” remembers Axelrad. “Card counters usually try not to draw attention to fluctuations in their bet size, but he did the opposite. He started shouting that he had stopped betting and by drawing attention to it, he made it seem like something he couldn’t possibly be hiding.”

This game of cat and mouse was, in a way, the ultimate appeal of card counting. “Any of us could have had a normal job and earned a living in a responsible way,” says Axelrad. “But we didn’t want that, we wanted a crazier, more exotic and dangerous life.”

Driving across the desert towards yet another casino with the top of his convertible down, his pockets stuffed with tens of thousands of dollars, he felt like he was living on the edge. His girlfriend once described him as the “last living cowboy”.

**FEELING THE JUSTICE**

Living like a cowboy can earn you enemies though, and Axelrad found himself in sticky situations from time to time. In February 2003, when a pair of Louisiana policemen pulled him and four teammates over for speeding, they discovered that the five were carrying over US\$100,000 in cash. After a tense hour spent explaining what they did for a living (with confirmation from some local casinos), the gamblers were allowed to continue on their way.

But when they arrived at their destination - a casino in Baton Rouge - they were greeted at gunpoint and handcuffed by the same policemen who had let them go. Axelrad was put in the back of a police car, where he spotted an advisory on the scanner describing their vehicle and stating the occupants were wanted for fraud. The cops eventually determined they had no grounds to hold the team and let them go. Axelrad is convinced that a manager at the casino had directed the cops to arrest him and his teammates.

That was all part of the game to Axelrad. “That didn’t drive me out at all. It made me angry and inclined to get revenge,” he says, breaking out in laughter. Indeed, during his years as a

**LIVING LIKE A COWBOY CAN EARN YOU ENEMIES THOUGH, AND AXELRAD FOUND HIMSELF IN STICKY SITUATIONS**

# HE SAW CASINOS AS EXPLOITERS OF HUMAN WEAKNESS

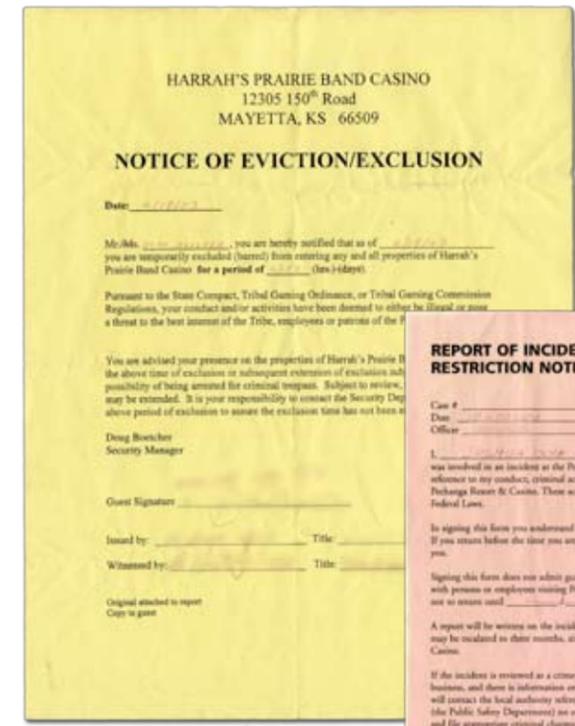
To say Axelrad and others of his ilk are unwelcome in casinos is an understatement of epic proportions. He's probably been evicted from more gambling establishments than most people have been to.



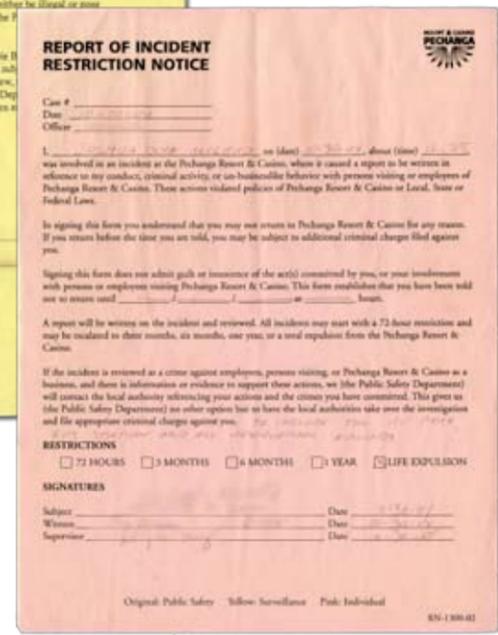
PHOTOS: REDUX; ISTOCKPHOTO

card counter, he came to see casinos not just as opponents, but as exploiters of human weakness. "People inside the casino industry claim they're about recreation and entertainment - but that's false," he says. "Casinos create gambling addicts and then they destroy them. The people who are the backbone of the industry are suckers." This distaste made beating casinos at their own game and making them the suckers all the more pleasurable to him and his teammates. Over time, though, the casinos' defensive measures ultimately did drive Axelrad out of the game. They instituted rules and practices that made card counting less profitable, such as severely limiting bets to players who entered a game mid-shoe and shuffling shoes before they were finished, so high counts didn't last as long. Mossad's members became increasingly well known to casinos and more likely to be spotted and ejected. Being constantly on the road and routinely hassled by casino personnel began to seem more chore than adventure. By the end of 2004, Axelrad was barely playing at all. At this point, some of his team moved on to online poker. Axelrad did too, but his success

at blackjack didn't translate. He lost over US\$50,000 in a single year. Now he gambles extremely rarely and says a return to card counting is unlikely. "Right now, I don't have a bankroll, so I'm not in a position to run anything myself," he says. "But my resume is pretty bizarre, so I don't have a huge number of professional options." He pauses, then adds, "I guess I could see it as a possibility." All he would need is a few hundred thousand dollars and a skilled team bent on beating the house ... ■



Do eviction notices and bans like these (left, below) mean you've won the battle against the establishment - or lost? Either way, don't forget to change your chips (bottom) back to cash on your way out.



## MAKING OF A CARD COUNTER

As a child growing up in Los Angeles, California, Josh Axelrad accompanied his father on a few trips to Las Vegas. He was awestruck by the fantastical architecture, the neon lights and a certain sense of possibility in the air. Later, when he returned to try his hand at gambling and lost, he found the experience "worthless, a pure disappointment". Axelrad moved to New York City to attend Columbia University, where he earned a philosophy degree. Then he got a job as a business analyst at a Wall Street bank - and found himself bored to tears. When he overheard a man at a party talking about card counting, he was immediately captivated. "I envisioned a card counter as a guy in the Wild West who would walk into a saloon in a cowboy hat and play poker, memorising every card that was played and knowing exactly what was left in the deck," Axelrad says. "None of that was correct, but the truth of it was even more fascinating. It didn't require you to be a genius. It was a skill set that you could learn and use to generate an edge against a casino." It took Axelrad about eight months of practice before he was at all comfortable keeping basic count while playing perfect basic strategy. That enabled him to pass Mossad's spotter test and join the team. It would be another eight months or so before he mastered the true count and became a controller. "I was really slow at basic computation," he says. "It's not something I have a gift for." Soon enough, though, his counting skills were bringing the promise of Las Vegas to life.