

For some, casino vs. player competition expands into war

Written by Administrator

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Skilled advantage players can lose more often than they win, say lawyers for Phil Ivey, arguing that the world-famous gambler should not have to return the \$9.6 million he won playing baccarat at the Atlantic City Borgata in 2012.

Even if Ivey's use of the disputed technique known as edge-sorting let him know the value of the first card to be dealt in each game, the subsequent three to five cards — whose values could not be known in advance — determined whether he won or lost, says a defense brief filed Nov. 29 in New Jersey federal court.

The latest chapter in Ivey-Borgata saga gives new life to a decades-old debate: Do casinos spend more time and money worrying about advantage players than they lose to the handful of people capable of overcoming the house edge?

Another question follows: Do high-profile actions against big winners underscore the idea that only losers are welcome at casinos? For example:

- Ivey won millions from Borgata and from Crockfords casino in London in 2012, and both sued him over edge-sorting, in which a player uses minute discrepancies in the designs on card backs to help identify the value of a card about to be dealt. Each casino agreed to several Ivey requests, including the brand of cards to be used and that, during play, “good” cards were rotated and “bad” cards were not. Still, Ivey's overall record at Borgata was 864 wins, 822 losses and 164 ties, according to court documents. Ivey and Borgata officials both acknowledge that edge-sorting does not guarantee a win.

- In 2012, the Golden Nugget in Atlantic City sued mini-baccarat players who won \$1.5 million after noticing a pattern in the cards being dealt. Typically, casinos provide pads or electronic displays for mini-bac players to track the results of hands, because in the long run it doesn't matter. In this case, an eight-deck pack of cards that was supposed to have been pre-shuffled was not. The players noticed it, but the casino staff did not.

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- At least twice in the past two years, a slot machine display congratulated the player on winning a \$40 million-plus jackpot, but the payouts were voided because of a machine malfunction. One player was offered a steak dinner in return.

- In 2014, Hard Rock Casino in Las Vegas banned actor Ben Affleck from playing blackjack, saying he won by card-counting.

- Stung by a slower economy and increased competition, many casinos have tightened their comp and free-play policies.

“When casinos start doing things like it's a war, then the players are going to look at it (the same way),” says Jean Scott, professional video poker player and author of the “Frugal Gambler” series of advice books. “There used to be a little better relationship between the players and the casino.”

Bob Dancer, a video poker expert and author who is one of the few high-stakes advantage players to publicize his techniques, says casinos enjoy many advantages: they set the rules, within limits; they serve alcohol to players; and, in most jurisdictions, they may bar players they believe are too strong.

“When players think they have a chance to win, they're willing to gamble more,” says Dancer, who co-hosts a weekly podcast at GamblingWithAnEdge.com. “The (casinos) who allow me to play have come to the conclusion that I bring in more customers from my writing than I cost them as a player.”

Colin Jones, former leader of the “Church Team” of blackjack card counters, says the overall casino win dwarfs the loss to advantage players. Nevada casinos won more than \$4.1 billion at table games for the 12 months ending in October, according to the state Gaming Control Board. If advantage players won \$40 million during that time, it would be 1 percent of the casino's total.

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Gambling mathematician and game consultant Eliot Jacobson says any medium to large casino often experiences losses of \$50,000 to \$200,000, but those don't hurt for long. However, some advantage-play teams can make a half-million dollars in a weekend, so casino management must be on the lookout.

"The truth is that a few very good players beat a few poorly run casinos out of a lot of money," Jacobson says. "Your typical casino is probably not going to get wasted by one of these guys."

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Avoid blackjack on Vegas Strip, guru advises

Visitors to Las Vegas should not play blackjack on the Strip because of appalling number of games with "lousy, unfair" rules, according to blackjack guru Henry Tamburin.

Tamburin's rant, available at casinocenter.com also serves as a reminder that Pennsylvania's blackjack rules are among the best in the country.

Tamburin tells Vegas visitors to avoid blackjack at more than two dozen Strip properties that deal primarily 6-to-5 blackjack, even in games using six or eight decks. In a 6-to-5 game, a player's natural (Ace-10 on the first two cards) pays \$12 on a \$10 bet instead of the traditional 3-to-2 payoff of \$15 on a \$10 bet. Tamburin, a prolific author about blackjack, is editor of the Blackjack Insider newsletter (bjinsider.com), and host ofsmartgaming.com . (Disclosure: I'm a contributor to Blackjack Insider). The Strip has more tables paying 6-to-5 than 3-to-2, Tamburin says.

Pennsylvania gaming regulations stipulate that every blackjack game at every casino must pay 3-to-2 on naturals. Other player friendly Pennsylvania rules: Dealer stands on Soft 17 (Ace-6); players may double on any two cards and after splitting; and surrender is allowed. Bottom line: Pennsylvania blackjack is a good deal for players.

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