

Beating Loaded Dice

By KAREN FELD

Darwin Ortiz, who paid his college bills with gambling winnings, now advises police, casino operators, and you on how to spot cardsharps and other crooked gamblers and gaming devices.

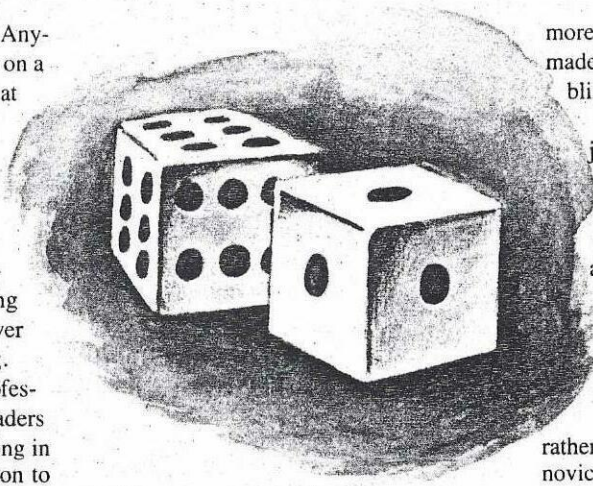
Ever been bilked at a gaming table? Anybody who plays cards for money on a regular basis is going to be cheated at some point, according to Darwin Ortiz, 34, a master at double-dealing, card palming, switching, and cutting.

Ortiz makes his living not as a gambling-table cheat but as a professional gambling consultant, advising casino operators and police undercover agents how to detect illegal gambling.

"There are 2, 3, or 400 full-time professional cheats — professional crossroaders — who make their entire living cheating in legal casinos," says Ortiz. "In addition to that, there are a couple thousand hustlers who've learned to cheat somewhere, and when they're desperate for money, will go try and take on the casino."

Cheats are young and old, well educated and poorly educated. And they're chameleonlike, according to Ortiz. "A full-time professional cheat can attend an ironworkers convention this week and be indistinguishable from the other ironworkers. Next week he can attend a convention of chemical engineers and fit right in, playing cards in a hospitality suite with the other chemical engineers. No one would question what he does for a living."

A slight, soft-spoken Puerto Rican with a well-manicured mustache, Ortiz, the son of a New York City taxicab driver, grew up in the South Bronx. He acquired his first deck of cards at age 7, hung around gamblers, and became obsessed with learning how to do sleight of hand and fancy cuts, the basic



cheating moves. He's gained the confidence of the most sophisticated cheats in the country. He admires their skill "but not their ethics," and views their techniques as an art.

Winnings from poker, gin rummy, and blackjack paid for his college expenses at City College of New York and at law school, where he dropped out in his final year to pursue a less-conventional career.

Ortiz now lives in a basement apartment in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. He practices sleight of hand moves for hours each day in front of a mirror propped up in his kitchen. Using a combination of acquired skills, his high IQ (he's a member of Mensa), and his sensitive hands, Ortiz manipulates a deck of cards with great ease.

He keeps his skills honed for entertaining, lecturing, and seminars. Ortiz-trained undercover police often infiltrate illegal gambling houses. If the agents can prove that the house was cheating customers, the

more serious charge of fraud usually can be made in addition to a charge of illegal gambling-house operation.

Ortiz gave up playing casino blackjack after repeatedly being thrown out of major casinos for card counting, which is merely keeping track of cards that have been played and adjusting bets accordingly as remaining cards are dealt. That, he says, is "strategy," not cheating.

"The key to longevity in blackjack is to study how losers act, and act that way," says Ortiz. "Look like a klutz rather than like a computer — as do so many novice card counters." One way to accomplish this is to fill out a keno ticket while sitting at the blackjack table. "Nobody who is a smart gambler wants to be seen filling out a keno ticket, because that's the biggest sucker game in the casino. But to create a good act and buy two more hours of playing time, invest 5 dollars in a keno ticket," says Ortiz. (Such camouflaging will be unnecessary if a current court challenge to the right of casinos to ban counters is successful.)

According to Ortiz there are three card-cheating categories: cheating during the deal; cheating during the shuffle, which includes stacking the deck; and switching cards. (The deck switch in the railroad-car game in *The Sting* illustrates the third method.) There are a variety of ways of accomplishing each. For example, a dealer could deal the second card, the bottom card, the second card from the bottom, or a card from the center of the deck.

Most card cheats stack the deck during



the shuffle. Says Ortiz, "If you see the cards coming off one at a time rather than in groups, it's virtually certain that he's stacking the deck."

Ortiz estimates that there are probably 50 illegal gambling houses in New York City. Most dealer cheating goes on in illegal houses, he says. Although cheating sometimes occurs in licensed casinos, he adds, they are the safest places to play.

In seminars for casino executives, Ortiz concentrates on methods of cheating in blackjack. "The most common way . . . is to second deal, to deal the second card instead of the first," he says. The best defense for a casino against a dealer-accomplice scam is to have a detailed set of instructions as to how the dealer must cut, shuffle, and deal.

Casino operators worry more about the dealer who goes into business for himself

'If you see the cards coming off one at a time rather than in groups, he's probably stacking the deck.'

than the professional crossroader at the table. Ortiz explains:

"The dealer who has some sleight-of-hand skill and wants some extra money calls up a customer and says, 'Come in tonight. Come over to my blackjack table; bet as much as you want because I'm going to make sure you walk out a winner, and tomorrow night we'll split the winnings.' . . . A dealer who cheats to give one player a winning hand also cheats to give the other players losing hands so that the casino profit remains unchanged." In that way, Ortiz concludes, honest players can be cheated.

"It takes an expert to detect an expert," says Ortiz. "But . . . for every guy who can really handle a deck of cards and do a second deal which is perfect, you have a lot of ham-handed amateurs who use coarse methods of cheating but who get away with it." For this reason, Ortiz concentrates in his seminars on the cruder rather than the more refined methods of cheating.

The universal method of cheating at dice is to replace honest dice with crooked dice — Ts (or tops), flats, loads (or weights), or edge-work dice (dice whose edges have been beveled so they tend to roll off certain corners). "It's very difficult to detect the actual switch unless you know the difference between what honest dice look like and what crooked dice look like," says Ortiz.

Flats, dice that have been flattened, have a step on one side and therefore tend to roll

to a flat side. When surreptitiously substituted they cause rollers to fail to make their points more often than normal. Ortiz advises checking dice by lining them up "to see if they they're perfectly flush."

Ts have only ones, threes, and fives, or only twos, fours, and sixes. The dice are switched after an initial roll with normal dice so that there is one of each variety. "Most players don't see the forest through the trees," says Ortiz. In craps the goal is to repeat your point: If you roll a four with legitimate dice, you try to repeat the four before you roll a seven. If you roll a six, you have to repeat the six. But if the dice are switched, you can roll the rest of your life with Ts but they have no combination that will add up to four or to six while having several adding up to seven; you have to lose. "The key thing to remember is the two opposite sides of [normal] dice should add up to seven," says Ortiz.

"Any kind of wheel, whether it's a roulette wheel or an upright carnival wheel, can be easily gimmicked," says Ortiz. "The player doesn't have any chance of detecting it without taking it off the axle and inspecting it."

Every casino game has a house edge. Blackjack is the only game where the player can alter the edge through skill. That's why most serious gamblers prefer to play blackjack over other games.

There's no way to eliminate all cheating, according to Ortiz. "My friends who are card cheats and dice cheats think that trying to educate people about cheating is trying to empty out the ocean with a thimble." He adds:

"It takes a lifetime to learn to spot a second deal, but you can spot some of the gross, crude methods being used. Only a small percentage of the hustlers in this country succeed because they have superlative skill; most of them succeed because most people are so naïve at the gambling tables they can get by with very little skill."

Ortiz offers the following advice for casino gamblers:

- Never gamble when tired, depressed, or ill.
- Never drink while gambling.
- Always decide in advance how much you are willing to lose and when you reach that limit, quit.
- Never risk money that you can't afford to lose.

In gambling, it's what you don't know that can hurt you, so learn as much as you can about the game. ♣

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