

The Card Counting Myth

{I am not a mathematician of any note, so I could be wrong... but I doubt it.}

Card counting is a myth. My guess is that the myth is actively promoted by the casinos themselves, but in the end the important thing to remember is that it is a myth.

First of all, counting cards requires a tremendous amount of concentration, more than you or I have, or at least more than I have. It requires sitting at a table and adding 1's and -1's together for long periods of time (say for a half hour or more), while actually playing a game that requires a fair bit of math in and of itself (i.e. adding together the point value of the cards in your hands), while sitting in an environment that is specifically designed to be as hyper-sensory stimulating as possible (what with all those bells, whistles, mirrors, and flashing lights, not to mention all those scantily clad cocktail waitresses walking about...), but all of that is just the least of it. The real factor inhibiting concentration is the long periods of time involved. Counting cards requires being at a Blackjack table for a long, long time, while the actual window of opportunity in which the counting occurs is relatively brief--when the dealer flips over the cards, and bets are paid. Let your attention fade for these crucial, all important moments and you can kiss all your efforts up to that point goodbye. I should also mention that all of your work also goes down the tubes anytime the cards are shuffled, but that's a slightly different matter.

But whatever, let's assume you've counted the cards for a half hour and everything is in your favor, you now have a 2-3-4-5% edge against the house, to which I say, Dream on! but what the heck? Let's assume you've got a 5% edge on the house. This will last for maybe 5 hands, and it took you what? 25 hands to get there, during which time your edge was at -1% (i.e. the house had a 1% advantage over you), and this is if we are generous and assume that you can play perfectly. You know, that you know how to play

a 6-6 split against a dealer's 4 with the count at +3. Trust me, you'll never remember this crap, so you'll really never have a 5% edge, but this is fantasy, so let's give you that 5% edge, and let's assume the casino is stupid, doesn't know what they are doing, and just lives to give money away, so you'll keep that edge for 5 hands. And while we're making ridiculous assumptions, let's also assume that you'll achieve the mythical level of advantage every tenth time the cards are shuffled (rather than the far more realistic every hundredth time). I mean, believe it or not, most of the time that a person counts cards, all that is determined is that the odds are pretty much what they were at the start of the shuffle, or worse, they've drifted in the wrong direction, but realistically, most of the time the odds don't change. Anyhow, we're being generous and we'll assume that you got your 5% edge for 5 hands so then what? You double, triple, or quadruple your bet. Heck, let's go with a 10x increase in the bet, and just for the sake of argument let's assume that the pit boss won't instruct the dealer to shuffle the cards based on this sudden change in behavior. We're just going to assume that you'll get your 5% for 5 hands at a 10x bet. That gives you a net yield of $.05 \times 5 \times 10$ or about 2.5 profit. If you're betting a dollar a hand, congratulations, you've just made \$2.50 (statistically speaking), and if you're betting \$100/hand you've just made \$250.

But let's be fair, to get that 5% edge, which is ridiculously high and totally unrealistic--I mean, most folks figure 1%--but still, I'm willing to give you 5%, because to get that 5% you have to sit at that table and play through 10 odd shuffles at 30 hands a shuffle (25 hands while you count and 5 while you're in the money (or not) equals 30 hands). That's 300 hands you have to play, and if you play perfectly--something neither you, me, nor anybody else who isn't able to figure out the odds of this on their own is going to be able to do, but once again, I'm willing to make that assumption--and let's assume that you can play perfectly, and when a person plays perfectly--and I mean perfectly--the house edge against you is something like -1%--and the variables on this are so

large that they would take an entire book to go into, but basically, one misplay every hundred hands brings the casino's rake to -2% or higher, but we need not go into that. You're perfect. You never make a mathematical error, add wrong, or do silly things with numbers. You never get tired, say the wrong word or suffer from fuzzy thinking, so when you play Blackjack or 21 the odds against you are only -1%. So what does sitting at the table for 300 hands cost us? A -1% house edge for 300 hands at a 1x bet reduces to $.01 \times 300 \times 1 = 3$. Guess what. Sitting at that table counting cards has cost you \$3 (statistically). You lost \$3 to make \$2.50. Good job. Or if you're betting \$100 chips, it cost you \$300 to make \$250. And in case that was obvious enough you're down 50 cents or \$50 depending upon your level of betting.

This in a nutshell is why card counting is a myth. First, you, me, and nearly every other mortal on this here planet isn't capable of playing any card counting system or method without making numerous errors in judgment, attention, and what not along the way, and then, at the actual moment of truth, at that mythical point in time when the stars align and the cards indicate that you've got a 5% edge against the house coming your way... Well, you'd have to put so much money on the line that: A) you wouldn't be able to think straight, and B) they'd shuffle the deck on you, because that's what they do in Vegas when a chump goes from a 1x bet to 500x bet. They shuffle the cards. It's what they do. And then where are you? Betting \$500+ at -1% odds, which if you are anything like me is way more money than you can afford to lose.

Trust me. The whole card counting thing is a hoax and the biggest purveyors of this particular lie are the casinos themselves. Reason it out this way. What is the one thing that eliminates the benefit of counting cards? Don't think too hard on it, I'm going to tell you. It's shuffling the deck. All the casino has to do is shuffle that deck after every hand and card counting is worthless, totally and completely worthless. OK. Sure. Maybe shuffling the cards after every hand would get tiresome, slow up the game, or something, so instead of shuffling every hand, maybe the casinos

would only have to shuffle every ____ hands. Now I don't know what the missing number is, but if you owned a casino, wouldn't you hire some math wizard to figure out that missing number for you? And then wouldn't you just sort of make sure your dealers shuffled the cards every 10? 20? Or, 30 hands? You know, or whatever the magical number was to make sure card counting was a mute point?

Yep. Bottom line, if you owned a casino and you believed in card counting you'd shuffle those cards whenever you needed to. I mean, wouldn't you? So what makes you think the casinos don't? Goodwill? Kindness? Pity? Or maybe they don't worry about circumventing that whole card counting thing, because it's just not that effective of a strategy in the first place.

You know, now that I'm done, I'm thinking it would be a disservice if I did not include one more concept. Pretty much everybody understands the concept of the House Edge. The house wins more than it loses (statistically over time this is always true), and the amount of this statistical edge can be quantified as a percentage of the amount bet. A 5% edge (or -5% from the players point of view), means the house, will on average, keep 5% of each and every bet.

Another concept not as widely known (and certainly not as widely circulated), but which actually helps to explain much more vividly why you, me, and most everyone else leaves Las Vegas with less money than we had when we arrived is a concept call The Drop. The Drop is also a percentage, but this percentage indicates how much money a person brings to the table (puts on the table, cashes into table chips, etc.) versus how much they take away from the table. Most table games have a drop of well over 80%. This means that on average for every \$100 various players put on the table, as a group they only walk away with \$20. Another way to look at it is for every winner who doubles their money from \$100 to \$200 and then quits for the night, there are nine other players who lose \$100 each. (Nine who lose, plus one who wins each

betting \$100, means \$1,000 arrives at the table, and only the \$200 winner walks away with any money, equals an 80% drop in the amount of money the players have, or how much the casino drops down into that slot.) The Drop is really why the casino's rake in so much cash. Folks tend to play till they loose or they hit a big winning streak, and as they get bored, or the night wears on, they tend to increase their bets. Trust me. The Drop is typically in excess of 80%, and with a drop that high, it doesn't really matter what the house edge is, but even having said that, if you think they're ever giving way positive odds bets in Vegas, you're sorely mistaken. It's just isn't the way they play the game.

{I still believe that card counting is a myth, but the article is a bit long winded compared to my current writing style. I'd rather just make my points quickly and get on with my life, so in that vein and upon rereading:

Card Counting is a Myth:

A) If it was true, the casinos would circumvent it

B) And if it was true, the edge is so small, that the cost to achieve the edge doesn't pay for itself.

Yeah, that's a lot quicker. And now, having said what I wished to say, I can go on with my life.}

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