

CASINO SECURITY

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JESSIE BEAUDOIN, SURVEILLANCE PROPERTY MANAGER FOR AMERICAN CASINO & ENTERTAINMENT PROPERTIES



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Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Edward Thorp, author of "Beat the Dealer," speaks Tuesday at the World Game Protection Conference at Paris Las Vegas. The book, published in 1962, featured a proven system for card counting.

Counting a legend

Author of seminal book on blackjack math draws big crowd

By ARNOLD M. KNIGHTLY

REVIEW JOURNAL

Card counting for Edward Thorp was about proving a mathematical formula, not making money.

When he authored "Beat the Dealer" in 1962, the first widely published book with a proven system for card counting, Thorp was a mathematician at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology trying to improve a theory.

"I never did imagine I would make money at this," said Thorp, who was the keynote speaker at last week's World Game Protection Conference, a two-day gathering of casino surveillance professionals from the United States and 10 countries. "I thought it was a great mathematical problem."

A standing-room-only crowd of approximately 380 people packed a ballroom at Paris Las Vegas to hear the

75-year-old mathematics professor discuss the events surrounding his book.

"This is like going back in time and seeing Babe Ruth to me," said Bill Zender, a casino security consultant for Last Resort Consulting. "Here's the man who started it all."

While the conference included such dry-sounding topics as "Information Integration" and "Broadening Your Surveillance Intelligence," Thorp's speech created buzz.

Jessie Beaudoin, a surveillance property manager for American Casino & Entertainment Properties, said Thorp's book still fundamentally influences the way casino surveillance watches and monitors blackjack.

"Edward Thorp is completely instrumental to the gaming industry, period," Beaudoin said. "You're looking at 50 years later and people are just now using it the way you would of thought 30 years ago."

"Beat the Dealer" has sold nearly 600,000 copies,

► AUTHOR: Publishing of 'Beat the Dealer' caused a sensation in 1962

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Thorp calculates, and has never been out of print.

Following his talk, many surveillance professionals approached Thorp to ask him to sign well-sworn copies of his book. One even extracted his copy from its protective bubble wrap.

Tudley's wide acceptance of the book and Thorp is a far cry from the book's original reception among casinos nearly 46 years ago.

Zander, a former Nevada gaming control agent and former Aladdin casino manager, said the book upset

"The reason is because if you use the strategies (the casinos) had a game that was totally beatable," he said.

The book, however, helped increase the popularity of blackjack among players who believed they could come to Las Vegas and beat the casino using their brains.

The book's history began in 1958 when Thorp was teaching mathematics at the University of California, Los Angeles and the run across an academic paper in a statistics journal written by four male college graduates enlisted in the Army.

Their paper provided a strategy for playing blackjack

that didn't beat the game, but provided a probability outline for when players should stand or take a hit.

Thorp, intrigued by the mathematics in the paper, headed to Nevada to try the strategy for himself.

Holding the formula on a note card in one hand — Thorp drew attention to himself when he hit a seven-card 21.

Playing with small amounts, Thorp realized that the casinos "didn't understand this game very well."

Thorp then contacted the journal article's authors and asked them to send him their

supporting work.

After Thorp moved to MIT in 1959, he began working on various systems before honing in on a single system that would have wide public appeal.

The mathematician presented his basic strategy findings in 1961 at an abstract mathematics conference in Washington, D.C.

After presenting his talk to the "most diverse crowd I've seen at a mathematics presentation," Thorp said he tossed a stack of five-page handouts toward the surging crowd and headed for the back door.

Soon, MIT received 20,000

letters and Thorp got offers from financial backers willing to take him to Nevada to make money.

The publishing of "Beat the Dealer" in November 1962 caused a sensation among players and heightened concern among gaming regulators. It led to publicity that included an article in Sports Illustrated.

In early 1964, casino owners and operators met to discuss strategies to counter the book. The meeting led to changes including the adoption of multiple-deck blackjack and the elimination of many betting options.

Despite his book, Thorp

said the most he ever made playing blackjack was \$11,000 in 20 hours of play at a Lake Tahoe casino during spring break from MIT.

Thorp soon moved on to other pursuits, applying his mathematical knowledge to the stock market. But he still receives offers to speak at gatherings similar to Tuesday's a couple of times a year.

"The thing I didn't know at the time was how long this would last, five years or 50 years," Thorp said. "Obviously, it's 50 years."

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