



WHO'S COUNTING? — Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise go for broke in "Rain Man."

Figuring odds just hobby for author

LAS VEGAS — Blackjack accounts for nearly half of all table-game revenues, nearly \$1 billion a year in Nevada alone. That's remarkable considering that 30 years ago blackjack was a gambling backwater, offered mostly for women to play while their husbands shot craps.

Then came Ed Thorp's book, "Beat the Dealer."

In 1956, Edward O. Thorp was a University of California, Los Angeles, mathematics professor planning a vacation stop in Las Vegas. Before he left, he read an article describing an optimum playing strategy for blackjack.

Having committed the strategy to a palm-sized card, he hit the tables, where he lost \$8.50 of his \$10 bankroll.

But Thorp was snagged. "The atmosphere of ignorance and superstition that pervaded my little experience," he would write later, "securely planted in my mind the suggestion that even 'good' players did not know the fundamentals of this game. There might be a way to beat it."

During the next two years, he spent every spare hour dissecting blackjack's mathematics via the computers at MIT.

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to which he had moved in the interim. But Thorp was not much of a gambler (no bankroll) and he used his system mostly as grist for academic papers. One of these came to the attention of a reporter, who wrote it up. Within days Thorp was deluged with offers to finance a working demonstration.

the player when it contains a disproportionate number of high cards (10s and aces) over low (2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Assigning the high cards a value of -1 and the low cards +1, Thorp instructed the reader to keep a running count as each card appears and is removed from play and to bet higher whenever the count goes plus — that is, when an

er" must be one of the most successful gambling treatises ever published. Ask almost any counter how he got started, and sooner or later the answer will come around to "... and then I read Thorp."

Thorp, now 62, lives in Newport Beach, Calif., and runs a successful money-management company specializing in securities. "I haven't been