

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO

BLACKJACK

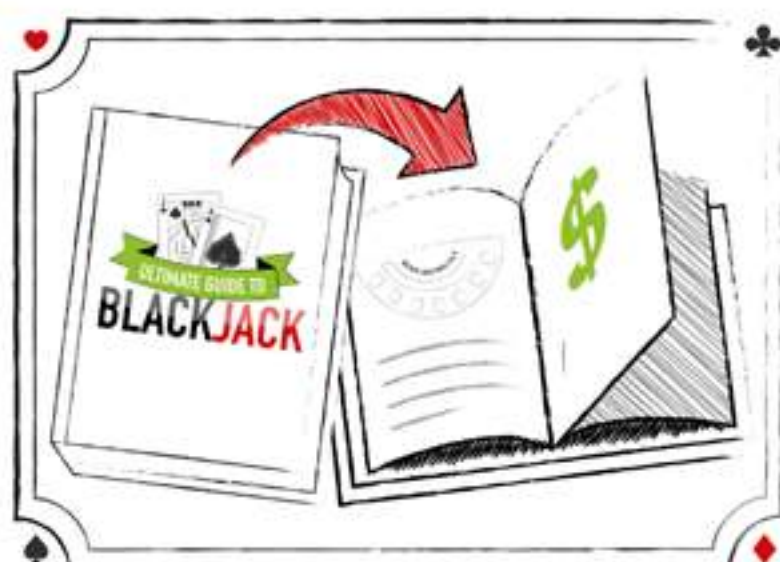
by Henry Tamburin, Ph.D

CHAPTER 1:

Greetings!

You are reading this guide because you either want to learn how to play blackjack or you want to learn how to win at blackjack (or both).

You've arrived at the right place because this guide is 50 years in the making, which is how long I have been playing, studying, writing, and teaching blackjack. In collaboration with 888casino, everything I've learned about this fascinating game, I will share with you in this guide that is posted on their site.



ARE YOU READY? GOOD, THEN LET'S GET STARTED.



GETTING STARTED WITH BLACKJACK

In this opening chapter, you'll learn about:

The history of blackjack, specifically its origins, how "21" became "blackjack," and who the pioneers were that developed the first basic playing strategy for blackjack; why blackjack is "different" from other casino games and how we can exploit this difference; and how the casino enjoys a built-in advantage over players and what we can do about it.

1.1 THE LONG AND COLORFUL HISTORY OF BLACKJACK

For several reasons, blackjack is the most popular casinocard game in the world:



- **It's an easy game to play**

(just beat the dealer's hand)

- **There's an element of skill involved and**

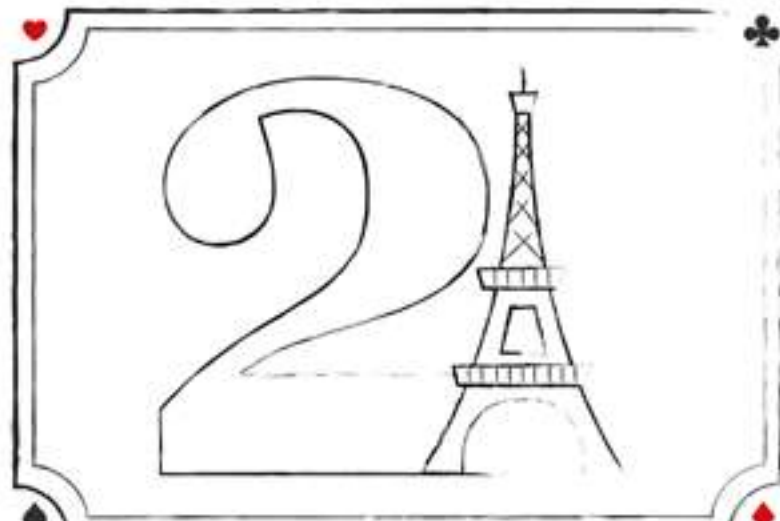
- **The mystique that surrounds card counting, which makes it possible to beat the game, keeps it in the public eye.**

You may think that blackjack is the same today as it was 70 years ago, but that's not so. There have been many subtle - and some major - changes to the game throughout its long and provocative history.

FRENCH PLAY VINGT-ET-UN

The origins of blackjack are not entirely clear. It is widely thought that its precursor "vingt-et-un" (pronounced van-tay-uhn, meaning 20 and one, or, simply, 21).

It began showing up in French casinos around 1700. The rules for vingt-et-un differ from blackjack as we know it. The game's objective was to reach a "natural" with cards that total 21; however, players wagered after (not before) they received their first card. The dealer had the option to double everyone's bet after looking at his initial card. Moreover, if the dealer got a natural, players would pay him triple. Nevertheless, there are some striking similarities with modern blackjack; namely, the hand-ranking system and the goal of trying to achieve 21.



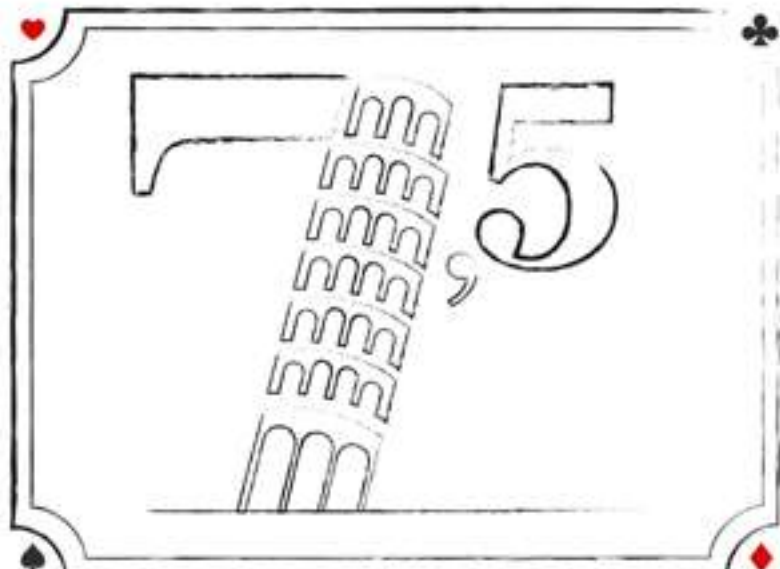
ITALIANS PLAY SEVEN-AND-A-HALF

The Italians, meanwhile, were playing a game called "Seven-and-a-Half."

THIS GAME:

- **Used only face cards (counted as half a point)**
- **The 8s, 9s, and 10s (counted as one point)**
- **The king of diamonds was a wild card.**

The goal was to reach a hand totaling 7.5 points. A player automatically lost when his hand exceeded 7.5 points. It is widely believed that the blackjack term busted was derived from this game.



SPANIARDS PLAY ONE-AND-THIRTY

Another card game with similarities to blackjack was the Spanish game called "One-and-Thirty." Played in Spain and Ireland in the 15th to 17th centuries, players received three cards. The objective was to get closest to 31 with three cards in the same suit.



CHANGE FROM "21" TO "BLACKJACK"

Vingt-et-un's popularity spread throughout the world; however, the name of the game soon became corrupted: in England it became "Van John," and in Australia, it was "ponton."

It is generally believed that the game made its way to America in the 1800s, but, initially, it was not popular in gambling houses. To encourage more players to try it, the casinos changed the rules and began paying a 10-to-1 bonus payout when a player's initial two cards were either a jack of clubs or jack of spades, together with an ace of spades. As a result of this change, Americans called the game "blackjack."



ORIGINS OF BLACKJACK IN NEVADA

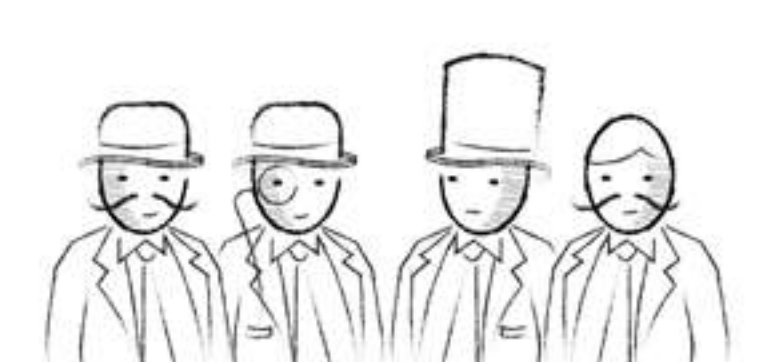
Nevada legalized gambling in 1931, and, gradually, blackjack made its way into legalized casinos in Las Vegas. Casino owners didn't know much about the math of the game, but what they did know was that they were making a lot of money dealing blackjack.

Actually, they were making too much money because of this simple fact of the game: Players acted before the dealer, and if a player's hand exceeded 21, the player's bet automatically lost, regardless of what the dealer subsequently did. Casino managers smartly realized this was too big an edge for them, so they implemented some player-favorable rules. These included paying 3-to-2 on a blackjack, and allowing players to double down and split pairs. The dealer, on the other hand, had no options: she was required to hit on 16 or less, and stand on 17 through 21. These rule changes increased the popularity of blackjack, even though the math of the game remained a mystery, because many casino owners believed the game was simply too complicated to be mathematically analyzed. But that notion changed in 1956.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN TO THE RESCUE

Roger Baldwin, Wilbert Cantey, Herbert Maisel, and James McDermott, often referred to in the literature as the "Four Horsemen of Aberdeen," developed the first reasonably accurate basic playing strategy for blackjack.

What was impressive about their accomplishment was that it was done using only hand calculators (or, "adding machines"). These pioneers proved that blackjack offered the best odds of winning if players would follow a specific set of playing rules. Their work was published in 1956 in the Journal of the American Statistical Society, and then, a year later, in the book *Playing Blackjack to Win*. Although the Four Horsemen were not widely known by the general public, their peers recognized their accomplishments in 2008 by inducting them into the Blackjack Hall of Fame.



BLACKJACK IN THE 1940s-1960s



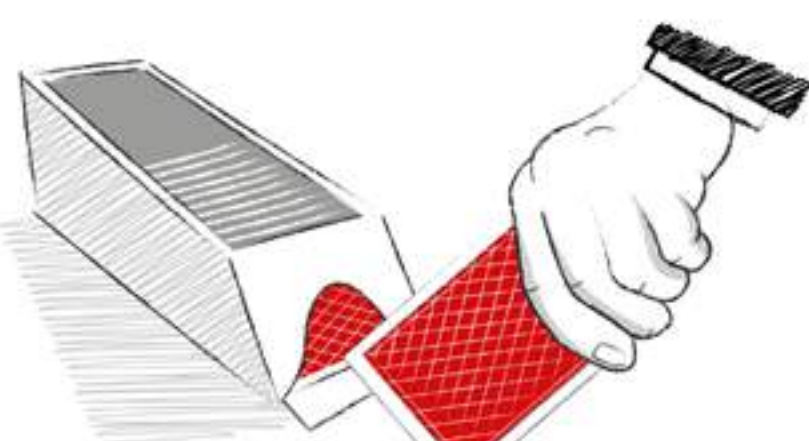
In the '40s and '50s, there were a few players who independently developed rudimentary counting systems to beat blackjack. The most notable was Jess Marcum, a nuclear physicist for the Rand Corporation, who quit his job to play professionally. However, it was Dr. Edward O. Thorp, in 1962, who developed and published the first powerful, winning card-counting system (the "Ten Count"). When Thorp's book made the *New York Times* list of best-selling books, hysteria took hold in Las Vegas casinos, and, on April Fool's Day 1964 - as if to perpetrate a cruel hoax on the public - casinos drastically changed the rules of blackjack:



- **Players were restricted to only doubling down on two cards that totaled 11 and**



- **A pair of aces could no longer be split.**



Players balked at these changes and stopped playing. The casinos had no choice but to revert back to the standard with one major, but important, change: instead of dealing a hand-held, single-deck game, many switched to a four-deck game that was dealt from a dealing shoe. The public accepted this change, and, for the first time, multiple-deck blackjack games became more or less the norm in casinos. Millions of players purchased Thorp's book, thinking it contained an easy method to get rich. But, even though his Ten Count worked, the public found it too complicated, and many reverted to their old ways of playing. Thorp's book led to an increase in the popularity of blackjack, which ironically led to soaring profits for casino owners.

When blackjack was first introduced in casinos, it was dealt with a single deck of cards. The dealer manually shuffled the cards, and they were pitched to players face down. Players would pick up their cards to look at them, and then either tucked their cards under their chips, or scraped them on the felt towards themselves to indicate to the dealer if they wanted to stand or hit. Untied player blackjack hands received a 3-to-2 payoff. In the very early days, the dealers would always stand on soft 17, and players could double down on any two cards and after pair splitting. For many years, this game was often referred to as the "standard Las Vegas Strip blackjack game." But times change, and so did the game of blackjack. In the subsequent chapters, I'll explore some of these changes, not only to the way the game is played, but also to the techniques that have been developed that allow skilled players to beat the game.

