

C H E A T S

PHOTO: YUSAKU TAKEDA

HAS THE AUTOMATIC CARD SHUFFLER PUT CROOKED DEALERS IN THEIR GRAVES?

WALKING THROUGH THE LOBBY of any cardroom, seeing half the people on their cellphones, have you ever asked yourself, “How did the human race ever survive without cellphones?” And when you arrive to the tables and see all the dealers removing freshly made decks from automatic card shufflers, do you ever ask yourself, “How did poker rooms ever survive without these beastly black machines?”

Well, whether or not you have, and whether or not you like or dislike their now ubiquitous standing in brick-and-mortar poker rooms (where they always seem to be breaking down), there is certainly one group of people affiliated with them who dread their existence as much as people trying to sleep on trains hate cellphones. I’m talking about a certain small minority of poker dealers: those who cheat.

There probably is not one reader of **Poker Pro** who hasn’t heard the term “mechanic” used to refer to cheating

by Richard Marcus

poker dealers. From the old Wild West days to modern poker rooms, mechanics have made their mark on big-action games, including those in Las Vegas’ and Atlantic City’s marquee poker rooms. At the top of their list of talents has always been the ability to perform false shuffles and cuts of the cards.

Working with partners playing in their games, they performed such tricks resulting in their pushing big piles of chips to their partners after showdown. Before my retirement as a casino cheater, I once partnered up with an Atlantic City poker dealer intent on taking off his game. It happened in a major poker room and there were no automatic shufflers on the tables.

SIGNALS WERE EASY

Leaning against the boardwalk railing overlooking the ocean, “Bobby” said, “Take a seat in my game as soon as one’s

available.” He didn’t bother telling me what he would do. He said he’d be giving me one of four signals: fold, call, bet and raise. All I had to do is follow them every hand and we’d “make out like bandits.”

The signals were easy and well concealed. Each was given by the slightest movement of his thumb as he held the deck. When he wanted me to fold, Bobby’s thumb would hang by half its width off the front of the deck. When he wanted me to call, his thumb would slide back onto the top of the deck and a little to the left. A raise he indicated by moving his thumb slightly farther down but still to the left. When the pot was either checked to me or I was first to act, and Bobby wanted me to bet, he would flash me the same signal he used to indicate a call. To give his signaling camouflage he constantly varied the position of his thumb on top of the deck. He would do that even when I was out of the hand.

At his full \$30-\$60 stud game, I nestled comfortably into Seat 3, posted my ante and got right into the flow of the game. The first four hands Bobby flashed me the fold signal, his thumb slightly off the pack of cards. On the fifth hand he had me call. My door card was the 10♠. I had A♠-K♠ in the hole. I did not think it was a coincidence that Bobby had me call with three royal flush connectors. Somehow he knew what my hole cards were.

On fourth street the player in Seat 1 paired up with eights. He checked to player 2, who checked to me. I had received the J♣, giving me four cards to an ace-high straight and still three to a royal flush. Bobby's thumb was now squarely on the pack and to the left, telling me to bet. I bet \$30. Player 4 on my left raised. Player 7 called, as did Players 1 and 2 and me.

MONSTER

On fifth street I received a monster card: the J♠. This gave me a pair of jacks and now four cards to a royal flush. Plus I still had the ace-high-straight draw. Bobby again gave me the signal to bet, so I cut out \$60 in chips. Player 4, the previous raiser, now folded. Player 7 called, Player 1 called, then Player 2 threw his cards in the muck. Sixth street brought me the 6♠ and the flush. Player 1, still high on board with his pair of eights, continued checking.

I received the bet signal and obliged, sixty bucks more to the pot. Players 7 and 1 called, then the dealer heaped everyone's chips into the pot. Seventh street did not improve my hand, but I still had an ace-king-jack flush.

About the only way I was losing that hand was if someone bought a full house. Certainly didn't appear that way after the pair of eights checked again. The guy in Seat 7 did have a matching pair of sevens on board, but they'd been there since fourth street. I didn't put him on a big hand either.

I had my hands on my stack ready to bet out, but suddenly I noticed that

I HAD AN ACE-HIGH FLUSH, BUT THE DEALER SIGNALLED ME TO FOLD

Bobby's thumb had dipped off the cards. This meant he wanted me to check. I couldn't imagine why, although I was fairly certain Bobby had not mixed up his signals and that I had read him correctly. My instincts would prove correct when I received the next signal. Player 7 bet out after I checked, Player 1 discarded his hand and now Bobby was clearly giving me the signal to fold mine, his thumb still edged off the deck. He was telling me to junk my ace-high flush.

I noticed that Player 7 had three clubs on board to go with his pair of sevens, but any flush he may have had could not have beaten mine. So the only possibility was that he had a full boat. And he did! He was also one of those players who felt obliged to show it to the whole table. He cockily flopped over three big nines. He had nines in the hole from the start and bought the third on the river.

SHARING THE LOOT

I played at Bobby's table until 5 in the morning and won \$2,500. The scam had worked like a charm. Bobby guided me through all the hands and even had me call a few losers to keep the cover. I won just about every significant pot I was in at showdown. I'd figured Bobby's angle but couldn't figure how he was doing it. He knew everyone's hole cards in the hands he had me play. That was his gig, and it was huge.

When we met up again on the boardwalk, we cut up the profits and then

Bobby told me how he'd done it.

"All I do is gather the face-up cards the way I'm supposed to, and when I need more cards I just peek at a few of the face-down ones. Then when I shuffle up, I make sure not to disturb the clump containing those cards at the top of the deck. I'm pretty good at fake shuffles and fake cuts. So you see, by remembering the order of the cards I picked up and how many hands I'm dealing the next round, I can keep track of everyone's hole cards. Then I just play your hand with that knowledge. As long as you don't blow the signals, we get the money. There's nothing more to it."

Maybe so, but this was one of the simplest yet most devastatingly effective methods of dealer-collusion cheating I'd ever seen. But can scams such as this happen with today's shuffle machines? Certainly not, unless, of course, a crooked dealer is tampering with the machine and rendering it useless. Believe it or not, I saw that happen once, but it was on a blackjack game.

So, are there other scams that crooked dealers can do when using the shuffle machines properly? Yes, but none of them are good enough to warrant them coming out of their graves. ♠

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