



The Old False-Shuffle

Richard Marcus is considered one of the world's greatest casino cheats, and now consults for casinos around the world to help prevent them becoming the victims of scams. He details one of the biggest casino scams in history, and asks—“should it have been detected earlier?”

On May 26, I received an email from Robyn Doolittle, a reporter at the *Toronto Star* newspaper, who sought my insight on the “huge international baccarat scam” that had been busted two days previously.

It was close to noon on a Saturday, and my desire to head out to the beach made me disinclined to respond to her interview request. Besides, what huge international baccarat scam was she talking about? I figured she was exaggerating. But, as I once had a weakness that compelled me to pull off the world's greatest gambling scams, I now feel compelled to hear about those that potentially rival mine. So I figured the beach could wait, and gave her a call.

On the phone, Robyn told me it was a major baccarat scam involving 18 casinos, and nearly three-dozen people had been arrested. I immediately asked her two questions: First, “Was it an inside scam?” She replied yes. Before I asked the second, “Did it involve mostly Asians?” I already knew that it had to. When she affirmed that it was headed by the Tran Organization and stated that she wasn't really sure what the scam was, I told her I would explain it to her. Clearly puzzled, she asked: “How could you know what the scam was?” I answered: “Because I invented it.”

My first scam

Whether or not I actually did, I'm not sure. However, I am sure I was the first (and probably only) non-Asian to perform it. If you think I'm full of hot air, go read my book “American Roulette.” The old “false-shuffle” is actually the first scam I ever pulled on a casino. It was 1977, and I was a dealer at the Four Queens Casino in Downtown Las Vegas. I was the swing-shift mini-baccarat dealer, and one night, while dealing a legitimate game, my mentor-to-be sat down at my table and started shooting the breeze. Before long, he told me he was a professional casino cheat and dared me to come up with a good inside scam to rip off the casino.

A week later on a busy Saturday night, I found myself protecting a “slug” of cards as I washed, shuffled and laced through eight decks before putting them into the dealing shoe. The fifty cards in the slug had been charted by my cohorts on baccarat scorecards provided by the Four Queens, when I'd dealt them from the prior shoe. By protecting that slug, the cards would come out of the new shoe in the same order I'd placed them into the discard rack that previous deal. While I performed the move, which really should be called the “non-shuffle” because that's what it is, I was a novice dealer with less than a year behind the table. Did I worry about getting caught? Would a floorman or pit boss catch me? Would the cameras catch me?

Not on your life! Even then, on the eve of launching my now infamous cheating career, I realized how easy it was to put it over on the casinos when they were your bosses. True, at the time not all casinos had 24/7 coverage on all their tables. But did that really matter? In fact, it did, but not for the reason you're thinking. The truth is that



unless your surveillance operators are clued into the move before it goes down, the cameras aren't worth a damn in preventing this kind of scam. They only come in handy when you already know what's happening and then you start setting up the crooked dealers and their agents on the table taking off the money. What I'm saying is that the more advanced and omnipresent your technology is, the harder it is to catch this, or any other casino scam, in its early stages—i.e., before the big money starts walking out your doors.

It comes down to communication

I bet you're scoffing at me now, but don't forget who's writing this article. I know a thing or two about cheating casinos. Now I will tell you why this is so. In a nutshell:

Casino people on the floor are too dependent on the cameras, and there is insufficient communication between the floor and surveillance.

Floormen and pit bosses too often take the attitude that since the entire casino is filmed 24/7, any major casino scam will sooner than later be detected and busted. They think to themselves, “Why should I be constantly on the lookout for this scam or that one?” This attitude is what made me so successful cheating casinos for so long. Today, wherever I train casino staff, I always stress: “Remember, a camera is no different than a computer. For a computer to give you output, you have to give it input. For a camera to give you video evidence of a

scam, you have to ask for it. The camera will not tap a pit boss on the shoulder and say, “Hey, Charlie, there's a big false-shuffle scam going down on the mini-bac game.” The point is, employees on the floor must be able to spot suspicious activity and scams on their own feet, and then call surveillance to get verification, or in some cases be told that nothing but a hot streak went down. They must not depend on surveillance operators to spot these scams as they're happening. It's rarely going to happen that way. In my 25-year cheating career, not once, not one time, did a surveillance operator call down to the floor and prevent me from making a successful cheating move, or catch me after it was done.

“What about today's ultramodern tracking systems?” you might ask. Sure, they may tell you that a group of players is winning inordinately at the baccarat table, but they cannot tell you if or what kind of scam may be taking place. That has to be put together by staff, and the caper would more likely than not be over with its perpetrators long gone before that happened.

So, how good is the false-shuffle baccarat scam? The answer is that it's good enough to have warranted a chapter in my latest book “The World's Greatest Gambling Scams.” The version of it I wrote has the chapter title “The Kowloon Baccarat Scam.” It covers the identical scam that was launched in Kowloon [in Hong Kong] and carried out in neighboring Macau in the late 1990s. Same thing: Instead of the Vietnamese gangs you had the Chinese Triads who bribed dealers to maintain slugs of cards that had been played during the previous shoe and recorded by the Triad's players. Then, when the dealers arrived at the slug during the next shoe, the signals to bet big were given and the casinos were quickly beat for millions.

Macau follows Vegas

The same scam happened in Las Vegas a few years before it hit Macau, in the mid '90s. A group of Chinese nationals recruited several Chinese baccarat dealers at the Desert Inn, Hilton and MGM. This scam was only busted because one of the dealers involved cracked under pressure while being interrogated by the Nevada Gaming Control Board Enforcement agents. The dealers performing the false shuffles in those casinos were so well trained that surveillance video of them actually doing it provided no evidence that would have held up in court without that dealer's confession.

There are also several documented cases of the scam having taken place in Atlantic City, the last major one at the Borgata in 2003. So as we see, this is a very popular scam, and the reason for its popularity is that it is both easy to pull off and very profitable, and no technology is needed to aid the scammers. Some of the news accounts of this latest US/Canada bust claim that cell phones and other electronic gizmos were used by the cheaters to communicate information amongst each other. This does not appear to have been the case, and technological equipment surely is never needed to carry out this type of scam.

Watch out for addictions

So how can casinos stop it? And, believe me, it will be tried many times in the future. I would guess that for every false-shuffle scam busted more than a hundred have been successfully realized without detection. The answer resides in “good old-fashioned surveillance work,” both on the floor and in the eye in the sky. Firstly, all casino dealers should be monitored for both dealing procedure and erratic behavior, which might suggest that particular dealers have problems outside the casino that could make them vulnerable to participating in scams against their employers. Any evidence of drug use or com-

pulsive gambling amongst floor staff should be addressed, as addictions account for the vast majority of dealers who go bad. I saw many cases of this during my short tenure as a dealer. Remember, the dealer is in the best position to cheat the casino, more so than anyone else inside the casino or looking to cheat it from the outside.

Next, casinos need to monitor their baccarat players. Of course, it will be difficult to weed out the potential cheaters from legitimate high-rolling players before a scam takes place, but there are certain tell-tale signs. The most blatant one of the scam actually in progress is seeing a certain point in the shoe where baccarat players who have been varying their bets suddenly team up and take the same side. By varying bets I do not mean switching from “player” to “banker.” I mean that there is a repetitive somewhat-equal distribution of bets on the layout. Cheaters in this type of scam will usually bet an equal total amount on both sides, even though their individual bets will vary greatly. The key is that the total amount wagered on the mini-bac table will be evenly distributed between player and banker before the slug in the shoe is reached. This is known as an “offset” procedure where the cheaters do not lose any significant money while waiting for the arrival of the slug. Then if they all jump to the same side and win several hands in a row at the maximum bet, you might be witnessing the scam. Especially if they revert back to an offset formation after the slug is over. Observing all this is harder than it sounds, but the one thing you can almost always count on is that when the scam is going down, everyone playing at the table is involved in it, in order to maximize the total amount of money they take from the casino.

Surveillance measures

Assuming that all casinos are not going to run to the exclusive use of automatic shufflers and that future false-shuffle scams are not going to be nabbed before they happen, there are some measures surveillance can take to recognize them as quickly as possible. Most false washes and shuffles can be detected by using the low-angle view on distant PTZ cameras, even if the dealer's hands are partially concealing the slug. Also, if the dealer tempts fate and tries a second false shuffle, watch for variations in his dealing procedure. There has to be one in order to maintain the slug.

If you're suspicious of just having been hit with the scam, call surveillance to review video of the hands during the winning streak. Have the operator record the sequence of cards that were played during the streak. Then have him review all the cards dealt from the previous shoe. If the cards that appeared during the streak match the same order they came out of the prior shoe (or are in perfect reverse), you have incontrovertible evidence of the scam.

Remember, it's all about humans before technology. The truth of the matter is, the Tran Organization was not busted because of efficient casino security and surveillance. They were busted because they got too greedy and involved too many people. Hopefully, we will see these scams broken up much sooner, and not require a four-year FBI investigation. ♠

Richard Marcus, a former baccarat dealer and recognized authority on numerous aspects of Asian gambling and cheating, now offers detailed training and seminars to casino staff, including dealers, floor personnel and surveillance. His engaging and authoritative insights have been featured at The World Game Protection Conference, the Asian Casino Executives Summit, the Peru Gaming Show as well as many international TV segments about casino surveillance and the armies of cheaters who battle against it. <http://www.richardmarcusbooks.com/protection.htm>