

Blackjack: trying to catch up to the house edge

Whenever the subject of playing cards comes up there is bound to be a story of glorious days at the casino where someone won a load of cash. Never does everyone ever mention the day they lost another load of cash in the same casino.

Now is there math or logic or science that either swings things in your favour when playing? Yes and No is the short answer. It is not something that can simply be answered in a single sentence or a paragraph or two.

Casinos make their money from having a house edge. It is a fact. Ever wonder how they manage to set up the type of buildings they do? Those palaces of glamour, where no expense is spared to showcase luxury? All paid for by the house edge.

But what about blackjack? Yes. They have the edge.

And craps? Yes. There they have it to.

And roulette? Yes. Of course.

They wouldn't have a game at the casinos if they didn't hold a house edge. The edge they hold is often not huge and the pay-outs on bets placed is usually varies somewhere between 90% - 95% for most table games. That means for every dollar bet, you will get a return of 95cents.

I know that paints a grim picture, but there have been some interesting situations over the years where players have been able to become professional gamblers and most often this is as blackjack players.

As with poker it is easier when you are playing against others in tournaments as there are no house edges that come into play. It is you against the opponent with the odds of the game thrown into the mix.

What I am talking about however is the situation of playing at a regular casino or online casino and being able to win while playing blackjack. There are a couple of things you can do which might turn the tide in your favour, but it requires practice and skill to pull off successfully.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am not promising endless riches or success. What I would like to tell you about are things that have been around for decades and used by some quite successfully. After reading through this article and having a look at what I have to say, you are welcome to judge for yourself.

But let's start right at the beginning of what would be the best way to approach this...

Avoiding the silly pitfalls

When people go to casinos they go there to have a good time and that is a big reason why casinos are in business: to provide entertainment... with the possibility of getting lucky.

If you go to the casino with the idea in mind that you want to have a go at the tables seriously, you should however check your ego at the door and listen to what I have to say. What I am about to share is not anything spectacular, but it is often the biggest problems that people have.

1. Don't drink and play. It might sound stupid to say this, but the number of drunk people I have seen at tables is amazing. They start out with just a drink or two and before you know it they are all over the place. They don't concentrate on the game, make stupid plays and start bleeding chips.
2. If you are there to play seriously, don't get distracted. Focus on what is happening and the cards coming out so that you can make informed decisions about what you should do next.
3. Don't play too long without a break. Mental fatigue is one of your biggest enemies. If you play for 30 minutes or an hour, then take a break. Leave the table, clear your head and return to that table or another one.
4. Don't tip the dealer. He or she is getting paid to do their job. It might sound like you are being a jerk, but if you have been working hard to get a few extra chips, why give them away? If you tip them they aren't going to start dealing you favourable cards or anything like that. It will be one of the quickest career ending moves for them.
5. There are no hot or cold dealers, tables or seats. They are all the same
6. If you are planning on trying to count cards, then automatic shufflers will make it impossible. Don't even try.
7. Progressive betting is not a blackjack strategy. It is stupidity. It doesn't offer any useful odds and the risks outweigh the small rewards in a big way.
8. If you have a bad run or get a hand that was lucky for you at another time, don't play it just or refrain from playing based on previous results. Play smartly (I will get to that later)
9. It is very rarely a good idea to take the insurance bet that is on offer from the casinos. More often than not it is just a very easy way for the casinos to make money at the blackjack tables.
10. If you want to have ANY hope of challenging the house edge, don't even go and sit down at a table without having memorized the [blackjack basic strategy](#). As far as cutting down the house edge goes with accurate play, there is none that comes close to it. Mathematically it is the best possible way to cut the house edge to the bone. From there you can explore a few other options in an attempt to get an edge over the house (more about that later).

The blackjack basic strategy

What makes it so impressive is its simplicity. I am not saying that it is simple to learn, it is just that it is built on no frills logic. Over the years it has been proven to be the most mathematically sound way of cutting down the edge the casino holds down to a minimum.

Putting together a strategy that can compete against the house edge involves two parts. The one is playing in a strategically sound way and the other is knowing when and how to vary your bet sizes to get the best out of good situations in limit damage in the worst situations.

The blackjack basic strategy is the one side of the coin: playing smartly. What the basic strategy helps you with is in judging what to do when the cards are dealt at the start of a game. It will start with you getting two cards face up and the dealer getting dealt two cards with one face up and the other face down.



If you apply the blackjack basic strategy correctly you will cut down the house edge to the smallest edge mathematically possible. Making the right decisions is quite easy if you know what to play when. That is where the blackjack strategy chart comes into play.

The blackjack strategy chart looks at the cards the dealer have showing and the cards that you were dealt. Based on this combination it offers you the best playing option based on the cards showing.

This is what the chart looks like:

Player	Dealer									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
8	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
9	H	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
10	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
11	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H
12	H	H	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
13	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
14	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
15	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	SuH	H
16	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	SuH	SuH	SuH
17	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
A and 2	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A and 3	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A and 4	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A and 5	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A and 6	H	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A and 7	S	D/S	D/S	D/S	D/S	S	S	H	H	H
A and 8	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
2 and 2	H/Sp	H/Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	H	H	H	H
3 and 3	H/Sp	H/Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	H	H	H	H
4 and 4	H	H	H	H/Sp	H/Sp	H	H	H	H	H
5 and 5	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
6 and 6	H/Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	H	H	H	H	H
7 and 7	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	H	H	H	H
8 and 8	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp
9 and 9	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	S	Sp	Sp	S	S
10 and 10	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
A and A	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp	Sp

Using it is quite simple in fact. You will see that there are different letters in different positions.

Based on them you should act as follows:

H = Hit

S = Stand

D = Double if allowed, otherwise hit

D/S = Double if allowed, otherwise stand

Sp = Split

H/Sp = Split if allowed to double after a split, otherwise hit

Su/H = Surrender if allowed, otherwise hit

There isn't much more to say about it other than this is the very basic thing you need to learn if you want to increase your odds of winning.

Now let's move on a bit to the more juicy stuff...

Turning the tables a bit

Movies have romanticised blackjack players as mad geniuses who can remember every single card dealt. People with super human abilities which allows only a select few in the world to play the game successfully.

I must admit that is the way I looked at it myself. I thought however that it might just be worthwhile learning a bit more about the strategies out there and what it entails. By not rushing myself and letting things sink in, it became a lot clearer to me. I realized that it would be something I could do... and that was without any super powers at all.

What I needed to do was to concentrate and follow the game closely.

There are basically two things you need to be able to do in order for you to gain an edge over the house. The first is to learn the blackjack basic strategy by heart so that you play the cards you are dealt as efficiently as possible. The second is to learn how to count cards. When I first started reading about counting cards I was very sceptical and scared of looking like an idiot.

My impression of [counting cards](#) was that you needed to know every single card in the deck and know exactly when each card is dealt. That would be amazing and REALLY useful, but that is not what it is all about.

The idea behind card counting is identify when it is favourable conditions to bet more and when it is better to bet less. As you count cards you will get either a positive count (favourable to you) or a negative count (in favour of the house). If the count is positive you will increase your bet sizes to maximize your possible wins. If the count goes in the wrong direction however, you should bet the least amount possible to ensure you don't lose too much.

Sounds simple enough, hey? Let me tell you a little bit more about card counting

The different ways of counting cards

There are loads of different card counting strategies out there. Some are easier to learn and use than others. The ones that are easy to learn however often don't give you much of an edge, whereas the ones that are more intricate are also more accurate and give you a better edge.

The different strategies are given different levels. The Level 1 strategies are the easier ones to learn (but often not the most effective) and it goes up to Level 4 strategies that are really effective, but quite difficult to use.

If you are relatively new to blackjack or have not counted cards before it will be best to start off with a level 1 strategy and then later work it up to a level 2 or 3 strategy. If you are a natural at it and you find it easy to keep the count, then there is no reason why you can't try your hand at one of the level 4 strategies in time.

The one we will look at as a level 1 strategy is called [the Canfield Expert Strategy](#). It is one of the systems that has been around for quite some time and is relatively easy to learn. When using the strategy you will be using a chart which links up the values of the cards to the count. Using this strategy you will add 1, subtract 1 or not count the card.

The chart is fairly simple and it looks like this:

Card Values	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	J	Q	K	A
Count	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	-1	-1	-1	-1	-1	0

What the counts mean

- 0 : you don't add or subtract from the count*
- 1 : you increase the count by 1*
- 1 : you decrease the count by 1*

You will count the values of all of the cards dealt at the table including the dealer's and the cards of any other players at the table. So if you see a 3 dealt, you will add 1 to the count. If a 7 comes, you will add another 1 to the count and so on.

When you reach a positive count that starts to exceed +3, it means that your edge is starting to increase. This is a good time to then bet slightly more to take advantage of the favourable conditions. Let me just point out again, that you should use it in conjunction with the basic strategy discussed above.

The Canfield Expert Strategy is what is called a balanced strategy. This means that you will start the count of the cards at a 0. If you start counting and all the cards are dealt one after the other face up you will end on 0 again at the end of the count. This is also the easiest way you can possibly learn to keep the count for this blackjack strategy. You can practice whenever you have a few minutes and a deck of cards and you can just deal them face up one by one while counting.

In short that is what the Canfield Expert Strategy is all about. It is not complicated and it is easy to understand. If you use it for a while and really start to understand the count as well as how to play the cards based on the blackjack basic strategy, you will improve immensely and you will see the results.

If you get better at it, you might however consider making the step up to a bit more advanced strategy like the [Uston Advanced Point Count](#). It is exceptionally powerful and one of the best strategies in the world. Learning how to use it effectively is however a whole other story. Let's have a quick look at it nonetheless.

There are parts that aren't too difficult to get the hang of, while others are a lot trickier. You start off with a running count, meaning that you use the values on the strategy chart below and count according to it. You will be placing bets at a higher level as you get a stronger positive count and decrease your bets if things go south of the 0.

If you have a look at the strategy chart you will however see that it is no longer the simple addition or subtraction of a 1. The range is much wider.

Card Values	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	J	Q	K	A
Count	1	2	2	3	2	2	1	-1	-3	-3	-3	-3	0

What the counts mean

- 0 : you don't add or subtract from the count*
- 1 : you increase the count by 1*
- 1 : you decrease the count by 1*
- 2 : you increase the count by 2*
- 2 : you decrease the count by 2*
- 3 : you increase the count by 3*
- 3 : you decrease the count by 3*

What makes it a bit easier to learn is that you can use the same tip mentioned above for the Canfield Expert strategy, to learn the count by heart as it is also a balanced strategy. Not all of them are however, so you are in luck.

Things get a little trickier with this one however in two areas specifically:

- Keeping a true count
- Taking the number of Aces left in the deck(s) into consideration

A true count is based on the running count (the normal way of just adding the values according to the strategy chart). What you do however to establish the true count is to divide the running count by the number of decks left to play. What this does is give you a far more accurate count on which you can base your betting decisions. If you run into a stronger positive count based on the true count, you can definitely bet more with confidence.

When you use only the running count, you are bound to run into some short term positive fluctuations, which might lead you into a false sense of security, which in turn can result in you placing some bad bets.

The last thing to take into consideration is keeping a side count of the Aces left in the deck. For any card counting strategy it is good to know how many Aces you can still expect to see. The value that the Aces offer are huge and they offer you an exceptional edge (you will see this with time and by using the basic strategy accurately).

So is it worth all the effort?

That is something I would not be able to answer for you. You need to make your mind up about [what type of blackjack strategy](#) you want to employ, if any when playing blackjack.

With all honesty I can confidently say that I don't know everything about blackjack. What I do know however is stats and how they relate to probability. When you take emotions out of the equation

and you start focusing on what you are doing, you can get some amazing results employing a combination of counting cards and the blackjack basic strategy.

I would like to advise however that you start slowly and put in a lot of practice. There is some wonderful free material available online discussing a wide array of blackjack strategies.

So what are you going to do about it?