

## MIT blackjack millionaires share their table manners

### Former students run Blackjack Institute

By HOWARD STUTZ, REVIEW-JOURNAL

Two former Massachusetts Institute of Technology students who teamed with classmates and took Las Vegas casinos for millions in the late 1990s by counting cards at blackjack tables said the practice is still going on across North America.

But Mike Aponte and Dave Irvine were quick to tell an audience Wednesday at the Global Gaming Expo they are no longer active participants. Instead, the pair formed the Blackjack Institute, which teaches blackjack techniques to gamblers. They also help casino executives understand ways to protect their games.

"We don't play anymore. We moved on," Irvine said.

The gambling exploits of Aponte, Irvine and other MIT students were told in "Bringing Down the House," a 2002 New York Times' best-seller by Ben Mezrich. A movie based on the book and starring Kevin Spacey was shot in Las Vegas this year and is expected to be released in 2008. Irvine said he and Aponte are the only members of the MIT card counting team who used blackjack to move into the mainstream business community. Other members of the team, he said, are "doing normal jobs."

Irvine said the book was an accurate account of how different groups of MIT students, using a card counting technique developed by an MIT professor in the 1960s, turned betting on blackjack into a business. Teams of students routinely came home from weekend gambling sprees with a \$100,000 profit. The biggest Las Vegas weekend was a profit of \$500,000.

"The movie is a fictionalized version of a book that took a lot of liberties," Irvine said. "All the names are made up and the characters are basically caricatures. The general story in the book is 100 percent correct with a little bit of editorializing."

Card counting, where players hope to gain an advantage over the house by determining how many face cards and aces are still in a game, is not illegal. Aponte, who was the basis for the Jason Fisher character in "Bringing Down the House," said the practice common in casinos with counters using the same methods as the MIT team.

Another member of the G2E panel, former casino investigator Andy Anderson, who spent 30 years protecting casino operations, said gaming executives are more concerned with catching cheaters than stopping card counters. Cheaters, he said, adversely impact the operations of a game. Card counters can be stopped but not eliminated.

"Card counters are like a pimple," Anderson said. "You pop one and another one pops up."

Aponte said the MIT team was successful because casinos didn't exchange information. He and another team member might be caught and ejected from one casino, but could easily move to another Strip resort.

**Eventually, Aponte said, casinos began using technology-based systems in the surveillance rooms to thwart advantage gamblers. By 2000, the casinos had caught on to the MIT team, and the players were banned from gambling halls.**

**Aponte said he recently was stopped from playing blackjack in a Caribbean casino after he was spotted by high-tech facial recognition methods.**

Irvine said the MIT method has been improved upon.

"We made 99.9 percent of our money counting cards the old-fashioned way," Irvine said. "I have a way of beating the casinos with a different twist and that's what the casinos need to stay up on. I'm not going to tell you what it is."

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