



**ADVANCED TACTICS
IN CASINO ADVANTAGE PLAY**

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by Abram Alexander

The Turn

One of the most closely-guarded secrets in the upper echelons of casino advantage play is the practice of card sorting, known as “the turn,” and everything I have learned has been through observing the play of others, reverse-engineering their approach, and trying to implement it on my own. The turn incorporates elements of both hole carding and next carding in the form of a game where partial information on both is available to the skilled player. The turn has been briefly touched upon in *Casino Game Protection* and *Blackjack Ace Prediction*, which both give a general idea of how the method works. The technique is predicated on the imperfections in the manufacturing process for casino playing cards. The backs of the cards, which generally contain some sort of repeating diamond or geometrical pattern, are often asymmetrical. If examined closely, it will be revealed that the top and bottom or right and left edges of the cards are not identical. Players need only look through a few packs of used casino cards to find these asymmetries; anyone who has collected a few packs of such cards will undoubtedly have one or more that show recognizable asymmetries.

The name of the technique tells exactly how it is implemented. Suppose the cards in play have a repeating diamond pattern on their backs, and suppose further that the asymmetry in the pattern consists of larger portions of the diamond closest to the edge present on one edge than on the opposite. In this case, suppose the player can either orient the big diamonds toward the top or bottom. This orientation will give the player a clue as to the card’s value, because she will orient all cards of certain values with big diamonds toward the top, and the rest of the cards toward the bottom. So, hypothetically, a pack could be oriented such that all ten-valued cards are oriented with the big diamonds toward the top and the little diamonds toward the bottom. A player in this scenario who looks at the top card of the pack will be able to predict if it is a ten or not a ten. The turn is most frequently used in hand-dealt blackjack games where players are able to handle their own cards, but it can also be implemented (with varying degrees of difficulty and value) at other games.

This technique relies further on the consistency of procedure that is common among casino blackjack games (and other games). In a game dealt at a casino, procedure is very rigid, so the cards are always handled in exactly the same way every hand by a competent dealer. This uniformity of procedure means that the player can be assured that her handiwork of orienting the cards to her liking will be preserved throughout the deal. Dealers always gather and place mucked hands into the discard the same way; dealers always deliver hit cards the same way; dealers always expose player hands at the end of the deal, gather them, and place them in the discards the same way, and so on. Occasionally, a dealer will add some flare to a move, such as placing his own hit card after exposing his hole card or delivering a player’s hit card. That will be out of the ordinary but, generally speaking, the procedures are predictable. Certain dealer actions (depending on the game in question and the procedures in place at a given casino) will cause a card to end up oriented the opposite way in the next shuffle, but these can be fairly well predicted and accounted for.

The exact geometry of how to turn the cards is something that will have to be determined on a per-casino, and sometimes per-game basis. Often, the player will need to orient the cards a certain way on one shuffle and then switch to orienting them the opposite way on the next shuffle. This typically depends on how the dealer handles the cutoff. If he rotates it before placing it in the discards, the resulting orientation of the cards relative to the discards will be different than if he places it directly in. Sometimes, the dealer takes the discards out from the discard tray and places them with the remaining cards on the table. Again, this could involve a rotation or no rotation. The important thing for the player is that the dealer is consistent in this process. A dealer who is haphazard about merging the cutoff and the discards can be unplayable. Differences in this procedure can also

affect game quality. In some cases, the cutoff and discards are merged such that hit cards the dealer delivers end up being oriented opposite from the rest of the cards. In games such as this, an approach in which players are parsimonious in their hitting, perhaps forgoing marginal gains from splits, soft doubles, or even hits is better so as to preserve the rotation of a higher percentage of the deck. Players will typically orient their cards to be in alignment with the cutoff, rather than the hit cards. In any event, it is rare to have a situation where all of the cards are perfectly oriented.

The turn is obviously a complicated method of advantage play. My own experience is limited, having only played on my own, and only in three casinos (The Palms, The Orleans, and the Barbary Coast (now known as Bill's)). Playing this technique solo is an arduous process, and the presence of square players is a perpetual annoyance. This technique is best practiced with a team that can lock up the entire table and, in fact, I have on more than a few occasions come into a casino to see a veritable who's who of advantage players working in concert to make it happen. Every square player at the table diminishes the edge of the advantage play team, because the squares randomly orient their cards.

The person sitting at third base will be doing all of the heavy lifting in a team play. It is her job to spot the card on the top of the deck and guide the others in the play of their hands. Her primary goal is to see to it that the dealer busts and that the players on her team do not bust. If a big player is being used who is betting significantly more than the other players, a secondary goal is to help the big player make good hands. These ends can be achieved through sacrificial play on the part of the small players: eating bad cards that would go to the big player, making non-standard decisions to stand on weak hands so as to send the dealer a likely bust card, and so on. Exact strategies for how to play the turn exist, and a player with a network of high level advantage players should be able to acquire it, but the play is so powerful that a skilled player with a well-developed intuition about blackjack and other games can garner a big edge on that alone.

Besides the complication of generally needing a team to play the turn most effectively, there are the added complications involved in finding a playable game. First, the cards have to be flawed enough to give an edge to a player. This is not as hard to find as an aspiring player may think. A visit to a casino with many tables will frequently reveal one or more candidate games.

Secondly, the dealer must be playable. To be playable, he must hold the deck in such a way that the top card is clearly visible to the player on third base. Typically, a player will have to stand up at third base to be able to see (unless she happens to be unusually tall), and the dealer will have to hold the deck low and steady enough when preparing to deliver hit cards. Occasionally, a dealer holds the deck low enough so that a person of normal height who is sitting can see the top card, and these can be great games, but this should not be expected to be the norm. Beyond this, the dealer must be consistent in her procedures. Even in good games, the unfortunate fact is that the person on third base will have to focus intently on the deck, and will have to keep craning her neck and moving her head around to get the best view.

In a good game, the player will have knowledge of the dealer's next card and the hole card. In hand-dealt games, the cards get warped after being handled by the dealer for a while, and dealers often do not square their up card with their hole card perfectly. These two features conspire to allow enough of the top of the hole card to leak out and be visible. In some cases, the hole card is delivered first (I suspect as a countermeasure against hole carding), in which case it is very easy to see. Right away, the player has some idea of what is in the hole. The next card is given by watching the top of the deck during the play of the hand. When the dealer is looking to the players for their actions, the top is frequently angled toward the person at third base, making the orientation

clearly visible.

The players at the table other than the captain at third base have a few simple tasks. First, they must have mastery of the signals, and they must be able to manipulate the play of the hand such that the player at third base can get the best view. This may involve repositioning oneself in a seat, or moving to a different seat, until an optimal configuration is reached. It may also involve a certain pacing in making playing decisions, either faster or slower, which induces the dealer to hold the deck lower and steadier.

Besides this there is, of course, actually turning the cards. Several techniques have been proposed for how to best accomplish this. The most common and easiest is for a player to look at her cards one at a time, either as they are dealt or as they are picked up, in the event of a player playing multiple spots, and to turn them into position one at a time. With practice, this can be accomplished with some subtlety. A more difficult approach is to pick up both cards together in a perpendicular orientation, or “plus sign,” making a note of the orientation of the backs of the cards as they are picked up. The player then moves them into position, rotating the back card either clockwise or counterclockwise, as appropriate, in a quick and subtle motion. I believe that most people use the former method, because it is just easier to do. Whatever the case, picking up and turning the cards is something that an advantage player should practice at length, making it almost second nature. There are a lot of other things to think about and be aware of when playing in a live casino setting, so mental effort cannot afford to be expended on this task.

Certain casino procedures can make the turn unviable. One, in particular, effectively kills any potential turn game. It is appropriately referred to as “a kill.” This ridiculously simple countermeasure requires only that the dealer rotate half of the deck when shuffling. The dealer merges the cutoff and the discards into one stack. He riffles them once. He then separates them into two stacks and, prior to a second riffle, he rotates one of the packs 180 degrees on the table. Any advantage player who sees this procedure in place in a casino should have lowered expectations for successfully putting a turn play on at that venue (though dealers who do not shuffle correctly can be found in any establishment). This susceptibility to a simple countermeasure is precisely why the turn has been kept under wraps for so long, and the continued existence of the turn as a viable advantage play technique is strong evidence that casino game protection has a long way to go before it is entirely effective. Similarly, in a carnival game where the cards are washed after every few deals, the turn becomes unplayable.

Other countermeasures are available to casinos, some arguably even simpler than a kill. Dealing all games face up and disallowing players to handle the cards is one, and it has the added benefit of eliminating many forms of player cheating. Another is simply making use of cards that are not subject to asymmetries on their backs. The myriad simple countermeasures available to foil this technique make my rational mind think this that this tactic cannot be viable for long, but these countermeasures have always been available to casinos. Yet, this method of advantage play has persisted for decades.

On the whole, the turn is a sophisticated play that requires a lot of practice and teamwork. I do not recommend it as a means of generating income for an advantage player on her own, unless she happens to possess an unusual amount of advantage play skill. Generally, it is best done as a team, and it is best for that team to have some experience working together; an aspiring player who can hook up with an existing team would be wise to give it a shot. The other major issues with the turn, besides the difficulty, are the game’s susceptibility to being killed (as has already been discussed) and the amount of exposure it generates. Several players will have to keep coming in and playing together. A large team can mitigate this by allowing for multiple combinations of players at the table, but this can eventually cause problems in a given establishment. To add to this, the player at

third base will get additional scrutiny because she will be unable to simply sit still and play in most cases. An alert pit boss will know immediately that she is up to something just by the way she is behaving.