

KINGOf The..... CHEATS!

In 1999, Richard Marcus was the most wanted man in Vegas after terrorising casinos for two decades with his brilliant chip-switching moves. Now, after six years of lying low, *FHM* flies him back...

WORDS: PIERS HERNU PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES STENSON

"FIFTEEN MILLION dollars, give or take a million." It's the answer to a question we've been itching to ask all day, but really weren't sure he'd tell us.

The man sitting opposite *FHM*, playing with a pile of casino chips, is Richard Marcus, a young-looking 50-year-old New Yorker who speaks like he's straight out of *GoodFellas*. And that 15 mill he's owned up to is the net takings of his "career" - as he calls it - making money by cheating casinos. Playing blackjack, roulette, baccarat and craps, he and his team toured the world, living like kings as they did so. Tonight, *FHM* is in the presence of



FHM plays a hand with the world's greatest casino cheat

greatness - Richard is the finest casino cheat of all time.

It's 2am and we're in his room on the 22nd floor of the MGM Grand, the biggest hotel in Vegas - and the whole goddamn world. Throughout the Nineties, this was one of the hotel casinos that Richard and the other two

members of his team ripped off for thousands of dollars on an almost nightly basis. As the lights of the Strip twinkle in the distance, Richard shows us some of his chip "moves" on the bedroom table: clever sleight-of-hand manoeuvres that helped him bag fortune after fortune with staggering regularity.

It's jaw-dropping stuff.

"Now," he says with

a smile, "I'm gonna show you how to do the Savannah." He rolls up his sleeves and positions a stack of casino chips. "I came up with this move back in 1992, and it's the greatest cheating move of all time."

Sweet Jesus. It is...>





THE DOWN AND OUT

Earlier in the day, we met Richard in the lobby of the MGM Grand and took a walk down Las Vegas' famous Strip, a vast, six-lane highway dominated by enormous themed hotels on each side. This is the first time Richard has been back in Vegas since he retired from casino cheating on New Year's Eve 1999 to write his memoirs, the result of which is *The Great Casino Heist*, which we speed-read, mesmerised, on the flight over here. "I've always loved Vegas," sighs Richard, drinking in the familiar sights and sounds. "How could I not? It's been so good to me."

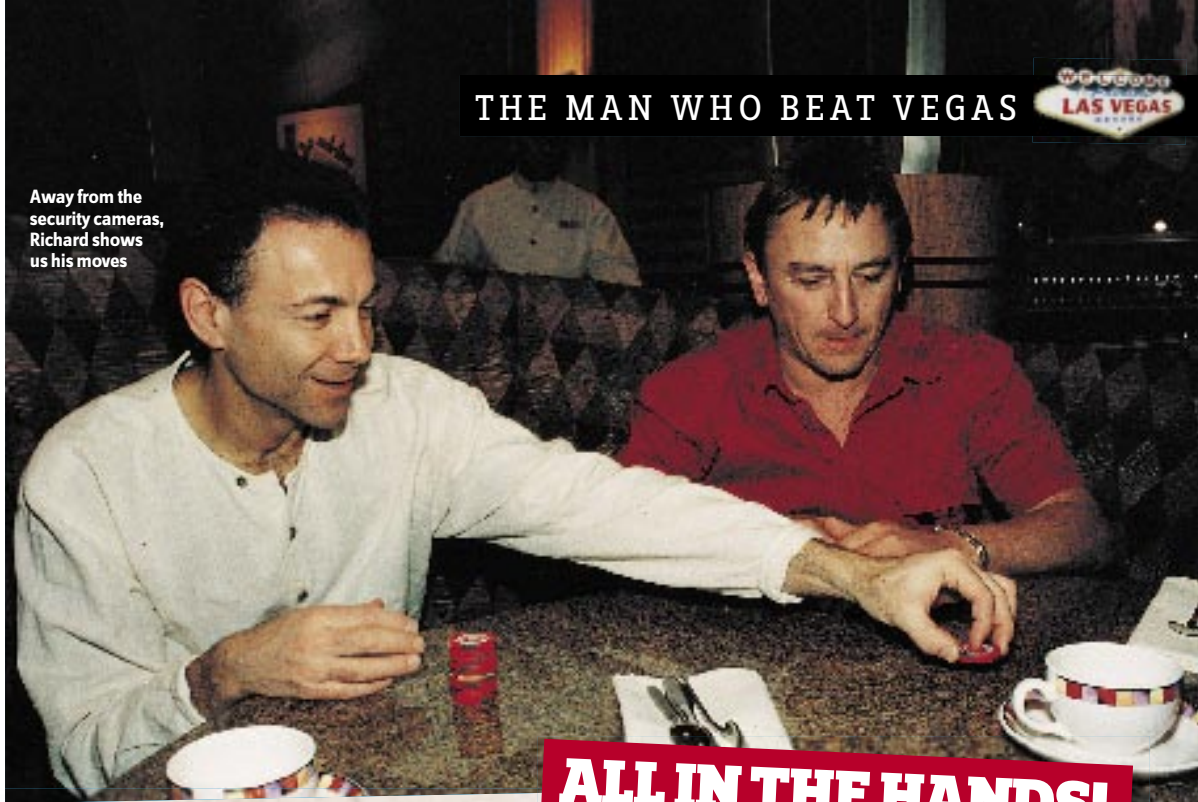
But that wasn't always the case. As we head towards New York, New York - a hotel built to resemble Manhattan's skyline - Richard points out a flyover in front of us. "See that bridge? That's the one I had to sleep under when I first came out here."

Way back in the long, hot summer of 1976, a 20-year-old lad from New York who loved gambling pulled into Vegas' Riviera Hotel in a Mustang Convertible and booked into an \$800-a-night suite. Burning a hole in the boot of his car was \$20,000 he'd won in a lucky bet at the Saratoga racetrack in New York. That afternoon, he wasted no time in taking it straight to the baccarat tables where his luck continued. "I was on a roll - I turned that 20 into 50, then 80, then \$100,000. The casino paid for my suite and filled up my champagne glass at its best parties." Richard's champagne bubble, however, was about to burst.

On the night of his 21st birthday, in one nightmarish baccarat session, he lost the whole \$100,000. The next day he sold the Mustang and blew that cash, too. Thrown out of his suite, he went from the lap of luxury to sleeping alongside tramps under the very bridge we're now gazing at. "I had to use my duffel bag as a pillow," he winces.

Later that evening we take a taxi to downtown Vegas where the neon burns just as bright as the Strip, but the

Away from the security cameras, Richard shows us his moves



ALL IN THE HANDS!



For 20 years, Richard ripped off Vegas' biggest casinos

LAS VEGAS CAN DESTROY THE GREEDY AND UNLUCKY

LUCKY JOE

"Wow," Richard says, with a nostalgic glint in his eye. "This is the very table I used to deal at. It was right here, late one night in June 1977, that I dealt to a guy called Joe Classon."

As Richard talks, we wander across the street to the most famous casino in the world - Binion's Horseshoe - the only casino to accept any bet, whatever the size. We have a drink at the bar where, after his shift, Richard met up with Classon, a well-dressed man in his 40s who introduced himself as a casino cheat and made him an offer he couldn't refuse: "Come up with a scam to rip off the Four Queens and you can join my team and live the life of Reilly."

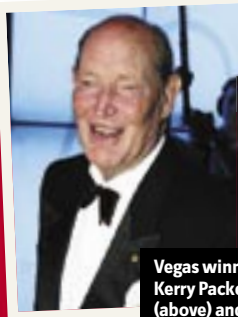
After racking his brain for a week, Richard came up with a scam that involved shuffling the cards at the end of his shift in such a way that anyone playing against the dealer who took over from him would win the next five hands in a row. It worked like a dream, netting Joe, his two partners and the new boy \$21,000 between them. Richard immediately jacked in his job and joined the team full time.

He swiftly learned that the key to Joe and his team's success lay in the art of "pastposting", the subtle skill of replacing a pile of small denomination chips in roulette, blackjack, craps or baccarat

casinos and people are several shades shabbier. It's here where gamblers who have lost everything - even the money to get home - stay, often for the rest of their lives, in a haze of booze and squandered social security cheques.

This is the dark underbelly of what, for the last three decades, has been the fastest growing city in the States, a town that can mercilessly dazzle and destroy the unwary, greedy or plain unlucky.

"Right here is where I got a job and pulled myself out of the shit," explains Richard as we walk through the doors of The Four Queens casino. Having shoplifted some clothes and blagged his way into a dealing school, it was here that he became a baccarat dealer and met the man who would change his life.



Vegas winner Kerry Packer (above) and loser Jay Sarno (right).



his winnings to the MGM's employees as tips.

CHIEF LOSES BIG Jay Sarno, who founded the Circus Circus and Caesars Palace, was one of Vegas's biggest high

rollers throughout the Sixties and Seventies. He lost between 50 and 60 million dollars in his gambling career.

EASY COME, EASY GO

Vegas: the stuff of legends. And idiots...

TRAMP OVERDOES IT

In the spring of 1996 at Treasure Island Casino, a homeless man cashed his social security cheque of \$400 and started playing \$5 blackjack. His strategy was so erratic that experts were called in as he kept on winning, and a week later was up over \$2.5m. Two days later he

was back down to \$50,000. He blew the rest downtown and soon died of a heart attack.

OZ GETS LUCKY

The biggest single win for one stay at a casino is attributed to Aussie billionaire Kerry Packer, who won \$22 million at the MGM Grand. Packer gave back about a third of

Roulette offers a whole galaxy of cheating moves



NO BET TOO BIG!



Outside Binion's Horseshoe, the only casino that never refuses a bet

with a different set of larger value chips. They would only make the switch after the result of the spin or hand was known and they could see they'd won. If the bet was a losing one, the original stack was left untouched and they'd wave goodbye to a few bucks. But if they won - and could slide in the bigger chips without being caught - they were quids in. Using a combination of meticulous planning, discreet communication, timing and sheer balls, Joe's four-man team would manipulate the dealers and their pit bosses both physically and psychologically to ensure big pay-offs every night.

"After the first time I made a claim, I told Joe I couldn't think of anything I'd rather be doing with my life," explains Richard upstairs in Binion's Steakhouse. "I felt great. It wasn't just the money - it was the camaraderie as well."

Eyes alight with memories, Richard goes on to explain how, during that fateful September, the team launched an all-out assault on Vegas. But it wasn't all plain sailing. "The payoff rate was about 85%, and we had a few close calls." When things didn't go smoothly, careful retreats were

'THE DEALERS ALMOST NEVER SEE YOU SWITCHING CHIPS'

necessary and soon, as word of their exploits spread throughout Vegas, it was time to get the hell out. "That's when we went on our world tour," he grins, "and it lasted for 22 years."

THE BLACKJACK MOVE

Later, Richard gives us a tour of the legendary Caesars Palace. "This is where I want to be buried," he says. "They just paid and paid us here." From there, it's on to Peppermills restaurant, the team's emergency meeting place whenever they had to do a runner.

When all this talk of past glories has Richard's fingers itching again, and he's soon keen to show us his moves - but away from the eye-in-the-sky security. We disappear to his room at the MGM.

"Okay," he says, spreading some chips on the table. "This is the Blackjack Move - the real bread and butter move of pastposting. It's the only one you can do on your own." We grin nervously, knowing that we're probably going to give it a go once Richard heads back to New York.

"You have to approach the table in a way that doesn't draw attention to yourself," he says. "When the dealer is sweeping the cards from the last hand played, place your bet squarely in the circle and sit down at 'third base' - the first betting circle on the dealer's right. Do not fuck up her robotical function - once you do that then you become the fuck up!" And so begins lesson one of the Blackjack Move. Third base, he

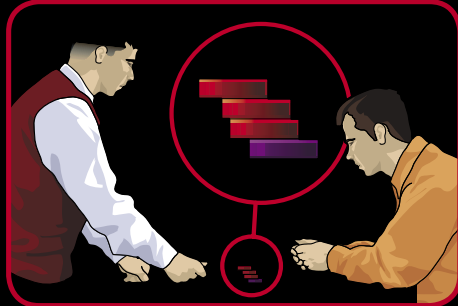
explains, is the last place to be dealt a hand and the first to be paid. Richard shows us how immediately after being paid for a winning hand, he swaps his original three \$5 chips for two \$10s under a five, pockets the original bet, taps the hand of the dealer and tells her she's paid him wrong - all in one fluid motion. "Never be afraid that the dealer is gonna see you switch the chips, it almost never happens," he says. "The beauty of it is that, when she pays you, your hands are supposed to be coming out there to get your money." Now it's our turn and he makes us repeat it time and time again. "That's good," he says after 20 attempts. "Three weeks after I taught my buddy Pat this move he went through Caesars doing \$5,000 a pop and we made \$112,000 in one weekend." Having revealed the basics of the Blackjack Move, Richard moves on to his masterpiece - the Savannah (see panel). "The beauty of this move is that there's minimal risk," he grins, "even when you get caught red-handed."

RETURN OF THE KING

The next morning we head back to downtown Vegas where, inside the Fremont casino, two people are playing roulette. "This is the table where we first tested the Savannah," Richard whispers, "and I'm gonna show you how. Now, if the dealer sees my black \$100 chip, because it's a large amount he has to say 'black action'. Go stand by the wheel."

With that, he pulls two chips out of his pocket, places the red \$5 chip on top of the black \$100 chip, making sure it juts out over the red by about the width of two matchsticks. From where I'm standing the black chip is invisible. From where the dealer's standing it obviously is too because, despite looking twice at the bet, he says nothing and spins the ball. Smiling, Richard removes his bet - quite legitimately, before the dealer says "no more bets" - and beckons me to follow him outside. "That's the move," >

THE SAVANNAH The greatest cheat move ever devised, revealed at last!



1 First, stack your small value chips (the red ones) on top of your big one (purple) in such a way that they hide the purple from the dealer.



2 If the hand wins, scream with delight and draw the dealer's attention to the unseen purple. He'll be in a daze - but he'll have to pay.



3 Losing bet? Just swipe up all your chips in anger. If the dealer catches you, replace them with a stack of reds. Remember: he never saw the purple.

Illustration: Peter Liddiard

he shrugs. "It's that fucking simple, but it made us millions. If the bet won we'd get \$210, and if it lost I'd rake it off the table. If I was caught, I'd just apologise and replace it with the two red chips that the dealer thought were there."

From there, we head to the Golden Gate where Richard sits at third base at one of the blackjack tables. He's retired now and isn't going to cheat for real, but he tells us to watch carefully...

He wins a hand, the dealer pays him and, as she moves to pay the next person, Richard switches his chips in one smooth movement. He doesn't claim - but the point is made. We exchange subtle nods and, after winning the next hand, he does it again. And again. "It doesn't matter what the dealer sees," he explains later over a beer. "She can look at your red chips ten times, but the shock of slapping her hand and claiming wipes the image in her brain and replaces it with what she sees in front of her."

As we wander past the banks of gurgling slot machines, Richard illustrates his point with the story of The Rainbow, a move done by Joe Classon on the night of his retirement from pastposting at Caesars back in 1989. "I watched that with amazement," he smiles. "He bet five reds and switched it for a red with a green, black, purple and yellow underneath it. \$1,630 in all, and it got paid without a moment of doubt - definitely in the top ten greatest moments of my life."

On the way back to the MGM, we mention that an old adversary of Richard's - a man who would once have put him away for many years - has agreed to meet FHM.

Richard's impressed. "George Joseph's seeing you? Wow. He's the number one authority on cheating, the guy casinos call when they've got a problem." Richard says he'd be happy to meet George Joseph, but doubts George would be happy to meet him.

We shall see...



CLASH OF THE TITANS!

Casino cheater Richard comes face to face with his nemesis, George Joseph



FHM puts in some practice before attempting Richard's "pastposting" move

to kill before our flight back to Britain, we waste no time catching a taxi downtown - to put Richard's teachings into practice.

SHOWTIME!

I'm seated at third base at a full blackjack table in the Golden Gate; my plan is to put a green \$25 chip under a red \$5 and switch it for my bet of two reds. My mouth is dry, my heart is thumping, cold sweat beads my forehead. The first hand I play,

I win. The dealer pays me and I begin to make the move... but freeze up at the crucial moment. Twenty minutes later, having downed a quick beer to steady my nerves, I sit down at another table. George

Joseph's answer to a question I asked him earlier echoes in my head: "The current penalty for switching a bet in Vegas, regardless of the amount of money, is a \$10,000 fine and six years in the state penitentiary."

On my second hand I win again with a Jack and a nine. The dealer pays me... but once again my hands won't do what my brain is telling them to. It happens yet again and, as I leave the table in disgust, the simple truth hits me - the real genius of Richard Marcus and his fellow pastposters is not their planning, nor even their moves: it's their guts. It takes balls of iron to take on the might of the casino's sophisticated surveillance systems and highly trained staff - and normal blokes simply don't have them.

Just before Richard left for the airport I asked him whether it had all been worth it - being a pastposter and risking jail on an almost daily basis. He patted his wallet and flashed me a big smile: "You bet!" **FHM**

Richard Marcus' book *The Great Casino Heist* is out now, published by Robinson in paperback, priced £8.99.

THE PENALTY FOR SWITCHING A BET IS A \$10,000 FINE

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

"I came to Vegas in the Fifties with some people who were involved in one of the hotels in the old days, if you know what I'm saying," says George Joseph, sitting at a bar in the MGM. "They wanted me to look for cheaters, so I set up surveillance rooms and systems, and since then my job has been catching cheaters and pastposters." He talks about his friendship with Frank Sinatra and how the Mob ownership of casinos gradually gave way to big corporations. Slowly, FHM steers the conversation round to Richard Marcus. "That man has all the guts in the world," George says, a note of respect in his voice. "You get a lot of cheaters who talk a lot of bullshit, but his stuff was for real."

We mention the Savannah. "There's no question, it is brilliant," George nods, "but what makes it so brilliant is its simplicity. I give lectures on it to new dealers all the time."

With nothing to lose, we tell George that Richard is in town and ask if he'd like to meet the Savannah's inventor.

For a moment he looks taken aback. Then, "Sure, why not?" he shrugs. "Richard's retired now, right? But if he's doing business again I don't want to know about it."

Fifteen minutes later on the bridge between the MGM Grand and New York, New York, a historic meeting takes place - the greatest Vegas cheat shakes hands with its greatest cheat catcher... and they get on from the off.

For a full 20 minutes they swap stories and reminisce about the good old days. Sworn enemies during their active careers, they both seem genuinely delighted to meet each other on friendly terms and the mutual respect is obvious. At the end of it, George even insists on taking Richard to his car so he can give him a signed copy of his book about Vegas. "Ain't he a wild card?" grins George as he starts up his car. "You gotta like Richard. He's a loveable character - and that's part of what makes a good hustler."

Half an hour later it's time to say goodbye to Richard as well as he takes a taxi to the airport. But with 24 hours

THE CHEATER'S PHRASEBOOK

Know the lingo, make some cash...

PASTPOSTING: The art of swapping a small bet for a larger one once you know it's a winner.

RAILING: The lowest of the low - nicking another player's chips from the stash in front of him.

SLEEPERS: Winning bets picked up by cheats when the person who made the bet is too slow/stupid to realise they've won.

RAT: Fellow punter who sees a pastposting move and tells casino staff. Traditionally, Oriental punters "rat" the least.

CHOCOLATE: The daddy - the elusive \$5,000 brown-coloured casino chip.