

On July 7th this year, a police raid broke up a sophisticated high-stakes poker cheating scam at the Borgata, Atlantic City.

Richard Marcus, a reformed casino cheat and author, has an inside scoop.

Eight mega-high rollers arrived in style at the ritzy Borgata Casino the first week of June. They were all packing, loaded to the gills with cartridges of cash, ready to attack the high-stakes hold'em games spread across the floor of the Borgata's giant poker room. Their plan was to fatten up their bankrolls and then invade the tables at Atlantic City's richest poker tournament, the Borgata Summer Open, which was to begin in two weeks. The championship event boasted a \$5,000 entry fee and a cool half-million to the winner. And there would be more lucrative side games running parallel to the tournament.

But the most lucrative game of all was high above the Borgata's poker room, its existence made known by two classy grifters who carefully selected these eight high rollers to be their victims. One by one they told them of a super high-stakes cash game taking place in a penthouse suite. The game was open to those select players who had both the requisite bankroll, at least \$500,000 cash, and the

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good sense to keep their mouths shut; after all, high-stakes poker is legal on the floor of the casino but not in the accommodating hotel rooms above it.

The eight high rollers could not resist. There was nothing better than an organized high-stakes private game. First, there was no rake to pay the casino. Then there was the availability for each high roller to do whatever

he liked between hands without the scrutiny of casino regulations. For some, that may have meant a quick indulgence, a boost of narcotic energy or even the visit of a high-priced call girl to relieve the tension. The suite was certainly large enough to satisfy each of their whims. But the greatest allure of the private game was privacy itself. No onlookers. No curious eyes. No eyes that were *more* than curious – those set into faces of lurking criminals looking to remove the high rollers from their cash, or IRS agents looking to do the same in the name of the US government. The looming threat to high-stakes cash players was the federal currency law that required the reporting of any cash transaction of \$10,000 or more to the IRS. There was also its sister law that required the same report for the same amount of cash carried into or out of the United States. Players in the public eye were prone to this detection, but if they won millions in cash in a private game, both the IRS and potential thieves would be kept safely in the dark.

THRILLS BLUFF INVESTIGATION

Although the eight players were quite familiar with luxury hotel suites, they had to notice that this one at the Borgata was bathed in opulence. Extremely large, it was the plushiest of the plush, used only for super high rollers. Baroque double-doors opened into a marbled foyer underneath a garish chandelier. Magnificent leather and teak furnishings regally graced the beige velvet carpeting. The walls sported artworks encased in gold frames. The living room beyond boasted a regulation pool table, a Steinway piano and a movie-screen TV with a built-in state-of-the-art sound system.

And a very ordinary green-baized poker table with eleven chairs.

Naturally the eight players invited to the game had some curiosities that had to be satisfied before venturing into play: Who had set all this up? Who was paying for the suite? They were told that the casino had supplied everything on the house because the suite had been given to friends who were high rollers in the main casino with million-dollar credit lines. Nothing was more believable in the big-time casino world. The game itself had been going on and off for weeks, the eight were told, but several of its players had busted out and gone broke. A new influx of cash was needed. The newcomers were glad to oblige.

Everything ran according to plan. But as with any international spy operation, not everyone was privy to the plan. In this case, it was the eight high rollers who were left out in the cold, ignorant to what the other two players in the game were well aware of. Embedded into the room's four walls, camouflaged by artworks and strategic lighting, were tiny cameras whose lenses zoomed in on the players' hands as they picked up their hole cards. More than not, the unsuspecting victims exposed them. They felt comfortable as there were no "peeping toms" watching

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the action the way they did downstairs in the poker room. Even though the three rotating dealers hired for the game were legit, the cards they dealt were not. The tens, jacks, queens, kings and aces were marked. The two crooked players wore special contact lenses that allowed them to see the markings. Even if the eight intended victims suspected any of this in their wildest dreams, they would have had trouble imagining what was going on next-door.

Next door was not a fancy suite. It was a regular hotel room, but large enough to house the equipment needed by the other two cohorts, both high-tech geeks, to pull off the biggest poker scam of all-time. They huddled like cops working a stakeout in a van, surrounded by their high-tech arsenal. They had five laptop computers. On four of their screens appeared images of the players' hole cards, each screen taking the feed from a camera shifting between two hands at the

poker table next door. The fifth computer ran automated simulation programs adapted to poker probability.

As if peeking at their opponents' hole cards wasn't enough!

The techies' fingers scrambled over their keyboards, processing information, then they transmitted it back to their two cohorts at the poker table, who wore tiny, undetectable earpieces through which they received the information. They could increase their advantage by reading marked cards when the techies could not furnish all their opponents' hole cards. They also used key "team-up" playing strategies when they had to, careful not to overdo it as they already had a huge advantage going in.

The four grifters had everything going their way. It was the perfect scam. The dealer dealt another round. While their opponents at the table carefully peeked at their hole cards, the two cheats at the table paid close attention to the soft voice in their ears. They listened to the methodical report of the eight players' hole cards, even the ones that had been tossed in the muck as that knowledge was still valuable information. It came across like the recital of stock quotes: "Position-One, ace-king; Position-Two, pocket threes; Position-Three..." They processed it quickly, added the marked cards that flashed in their eyes, then made their decisions. They played loosely, as they could afford to. They knew that the more hands they played, the quicker they'd get their suckers' money.

Within hours the two cheats were ahead fifty grand. The stakes had started at \$300/\$600, after an hour gone to \$500/\$1,000. After two, \$1,000/\$2,000. The thieves had the money to cover it; but more importantly, so did their marks. All eight were packing large. Each had a hundred grand cash on his person, and hundreds of thousands more in safe deposit boxes in

THRILLS

their hotel rooms or at the casino cage. A few had already made round-trips to fetch more cash. The grifters had told their marks that they had the suite at their disposal for the entire summer, which would have been true if they needed it. But it was expensive; they were secretly paying three grand a night to set up their marks in its lavish confines.

They did not have the whole summer to burn on these unlucky pigeons. The victims would run out of money and leave Atlantic City without ever seeing the tournament. But what did the grifters care? There would be plenty more well-heeled suckers to take their places. If enough of them continued hitting the beachside gambling town, they would stay there all summer, maybe even into the fall. Who knew? All they *did* know was that this was their big score, the one that made hustling their entire lifetimes worth it. For the alleged mastermind of the scam it was the ultimate risk, for he was the most well-known and respected anti-cheating consultant to the entire casino industry! Casinos worldwide had been paying him tens of thousands to teach them how to thwart cheaters. This guy wrote the books. He even authored a chapter on how people could protect themselves in high-stakes private games. Talk about the ultimate betrayal!

So it had to be worth it. They would all get rich and then retire to a velvety white beach somewhere. Maybe Rio. Maybe Tahiti. Wherever, it would all be over, no regrets. Just bags of cash under the sun. And if ever they got too lavish and spent too much of their booty, there was always another palatial suite waiting for them in a hotel staging a major poker tournament. There was always the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas, always more big action and suckers.

But something unforeseen was about to happen. The scam would come to a sudden and jarring halt. However, no sign of the end

was yet evident at the poker table inside the posh suite. In fact, at the very moment the scam was about to meet its demise, one of the scammers was in the process of raking in a huge pot. Sweeping piles of gold-flecked \$500 chips and \$5,000 packets of cash, the winner gave his cohort a surreptitious glance with a barely perceptible smile.

In the room next door, the second pair of scammers smiled deliciously as they watched their cohort on the screen stack the regal chips and packets of cash into a towering fortress on the table in front of him. But suddenly their smiles disappeared. There was the click of the keycard opening the lock to their room from the corridor. It took them a second or two to comprehend, and in the next second they realized with desperate relief that they had bolted the security lock shut. No way could anyone come crashing through the door.

But that's exactly what happened. The security lock collapsed under the prying of a special tool. In poured a dozen New Jersey State police officers and Borgata security men, some with guns drawn. Before the first wave entered the room and got a gander at all the electronic equipment in the midst of filming and transmitting, the security lock on the next-door suite's double-doors gave way, and into the living room crashed a dozen more cops and guards waving their guns. The high-tech cheating quartet was busted. They hadn't realized that one of their marks was not really a mark at all. Yes, he was a poker player and had plans to enter the Borgata's Summer Open tournament, but he also had recognized the alleged mastermind beforehand and knew that he'd been busted in that same casino town two decades earlier. His crime that time had been switching in a "cooler" on a blackjack game, which meant switching in a shoe filled with pre-arranged cards to take off the casino. The

dealer had been in on that scam and testified. The alleged mastermind ended up doing a two-month stint in the slam, then managed to turn his misfortune into a successful career as the world's *numero-uno* casino anti-cheating consultant. He'd even managed to have that long-ago conviction wiped from his record. He told me so himself at the 2006 World Game Protection Conference in Las Vegas, where he was the featured speaker to an audience of casino surveillance executives eager for his teachings how to protect their casinos from cheaters and thieves.

The alleged mastermind's name is Steve Forte and I know him quite well. I was certainly shocked to learn that he had been at the helm of this ultra-tech poker scam. It made headlines all over the world, and its ingredients were described with flashy accolades worthy of James Bond and Ocean's Eleven.

Only difference is that Bond and Ocean got away with it. ■

Richard Marcus is widely considered the best professional casino/poker cheater in the history of legalized gaming. He is also the author of four books: The Great Casino Heist (American Roulette in the US), his memoir of a 25-year career cheating the world's casinos, Dirty Poker, The World's Greatest Gambling Scams, and Identity Theft, Inc. He now serves as a game protection consultant to casinos.