

## **‘I had nothing. In one night, I gambled and lost \$120,000 at the casino’: Richard Marcus, 64, Las Vegas**



There's nobody better than a cheat to point out where casinos are going wrong': Richard Marcus.  
Photograph: The Observer

Today I train casinos all over the world - both floor and surveillance staff - to spot cheats and other threats to their business. I help them understand what a suspicious person looks like - after all, for a long time, I was one myself. To my mind there's no contradiction in these two parts of my life: the house or the gambler? Everyone will have their own opinion as to who the real cheats and crooks are.

From the age of eight I was a gambler. When I should have been in class at high school in New York City, I was playing cards in the cafeteria instead. By my late teens I'd started betting at racetracks. One night, aged 19, I started with a few hundred dollars. I cashed in seven grand. Over the following weeks I found myself on a winning streak - I wanted to take advantage of my affair with Lady Luck. With 20-something thousand dollars in my pocket I drove to Las Vegas.

It was 1976 when I arrived in Nevada. I was underage, but I knew the right names. I checked into the Riviera Hotel and they gifted me a suite. In exchange, I had to gamble. On my first night I won maybe \$15,000; five days later I had \$100,000 to my name. My plan was to stick around until I racked up a few million, and then I'd be set for life.

Just one week later, I had nothing. In one night, I lost \$120,000. Then I sold the car I'd arrived in for a fraction of its value - I lost every cent in a single bet. With no money, the hotel caught on to me pretty quickly. For three weeks, an underpass was the only place I could find to sleep. Calling friends in New York to ask for help was fruitless, and I knew my family couldn't afford to take the hit. So I went in search of a croupier job.

My plan was to make enough money to get myself back to New York, but after paying for a bed and food I barely had enough to survive. Ten months later I was no closer to a ticket home. One night a man asked to speak with me. He was a professional casino cheat. He reckoned I was trustworthy and had seen how nimbly my hands moved. After two hours, he'd recruited me to his team.

Two weeks later I quit my job and joined the hustle full-time. I worked with him for 12 years. I led the team for another 13 after his retirement. For 25 years we cheated casinos the world over: from the French Riviera to the Bahamas; London, Monaco and the Caribbean. The problem is, almost all cheats get greedy - they want too much.

In the mid-90s I started getting cocky. The casinos opened investigations; undercover detectives followed me around. Nobody could work out what I was doing, but the heat was on. By this point I was in my 40s, and life on the road felt a little less enticing. I had enough money, so on New Year's Eve 1999, after one last night, I called it a day.

**When it comes to beating the cheats, I've got to be better than the best**

In the United States we have a statute of limitations, the cut-off point for facing any potential prosecution passed many years ago, so I'm free to talk at will. I wrote a book, *Dirty Poker*, and four years later it was published. Once I started doing a few TV appearances, calls began coming in from the casino industry - they wanted my help. I started off speaking at conferences in 2007, and soon was training their staff. I see a casino differently to its owner. I look at a table and visualise how I might cheat the game.

There's nobody better than a cheat to point out where they're going wrong. After all, I know the moves pretty well myself. And while casinos train their croupiers in the mechanics of cheating, they rarely touch on the psychology. The key of any good con is convincing everyone you're legit. The way someone acts at a table is as much of a giveaway as some shifty sleight of hand - that's what I can help them spot.

If I don't want to retire in Florida, what else could I do? I've no education, no other experience. If I don't cheat them, working for casinos is all I'm qualified to do. I also just love the work. It keeps me on my toes. When it comes to beating the cheats, I've got to be better than the best.

I don't feel guilty about what I did - I don't feel bad about trying to catch today's cheats either. Those years were the best of my life, and part of the fun was knowing there was someone on my back. It's all part of the game.