

Baccarat Play: Is it Costing your Casino Money?

By Bill Zender

Situation: You are the Director of Surveillance.

Your swing shift supervisor has left you a note. He's letting you know that there has been some unusual play in baccarat over the past several nights. It appears that up to three different baccarat players have been making large wagers towards the end of the shoe on several occasions, and are winning an aggregate total of \$60,000. He wants you to review the play. The swing supervisor can't see anything wrong with play other than the fact that the suspected customers are winning, wager only late in the shoe, and play in a consistent, almost scripted manner.

You review the video segments of their wins. What you see is three Asian baccarat players buying for several thousand dollars late in the shoe on several occasions. In each segment they play approximately a half dozen hands to run out the shoe. Their betting pattern starts with smaller wagers with the suspected players wagering in no coordinated pattern. After a couple of hands the trio wagers table maximum on either the "player" or "banker" hand. On all but a couple occasions, the three suspects win the wagers. After their table maximum wager, win or lose, they drop back to small, offsetting bets.

You review the shuffle, player cut, and ribbon spread cut card insertion procedure without detecting anything amiss. Your casino uses the "mini" baccarat format so the players don't handle the cards, and you use a cover over the discard holder to protect the discards from being marked. You utilize an MD-2 shuffling machine that has never caused you or any other casino problems. You've run out of possibilities, so you conduct a background check on the individuals.

Your Surveillance Network reveals that one of the suspects was back off at baccarat by another casino. The Network information indicates that the customer was a suspected "advantage player". You know the director at that casino and give her a call. When questioned, she tells you that floor operations backed the player off of their baccarat game for "counting cards". She didn't agree with the call that the floor made because she knows that baccarat can't be counted successfully. Although, she did confirm the playing and wagering patterns seen at her casino were the same you have observed at your casino.

You are no closer to an answer now than when your first read your shift supervisors note. You go back again and look over the video segments in hope of finding a clue. Remembering that you've only looked at the overhead shots, you go back and look at several of the area shots. After several reviews you have come to the end without coming up with any new evidence of foul play. You watch several segments of the machine shuffle, the deck transfer, the cut, the ribbon spread, and the cards being placed into the shoe by the dealer. It then when you notice something on the video that gets your adrenalin pumping. It's a woman.

You've seen the same woman standing up next to the last position on the baccarat game during the cut and ribbon spread process in two separate segments. You look at another segment, and then another segment and you see the same woman each time. She's never playing, just standing and watching the start of the shoe. You go to a more distant area shoot, and you watch her some more. She walks up to the game as the dealer swaps the old deck for the new deck in the machine. Then she walks away from the table when the first card is exposed and burnt. Is this the only similarity?

You look at the video again and concentrate on the customers on the table. You experience a second “aha” moment. During each deck transfer and cut, there is a man sitting in on the table to the dealer’s right. Just like the woman, he also appears in all the video segments of the baccarat play. You notice that he peers very intensely at the cards spread across the table during the shuffle point card insertion. Your casino uses the traditional ribbon spread procedure for inserting the shuffle point card exactly 14 cards from the back of the shoe. You review the procedure in the baccarat manual binder. It says;

“The dealer will remove approximately 20 to 25 cards from the front of the eight decks following the cut. The dealer will spread the card face down on the layout, and starting from the dealer’s left count each card. Once the dealer locates the 14th card, he/she places the plastic cut card between the 14th and 15th card. The entire spread of card are picked up in order and placed behind the eight decks”

At this point you’re not sure exactly how the suspects are using this information to beat the game, but armed with the information that one of the suspects could be an advantage player, you’re drive to look further. Then it hits you; it doesn’t take two people to view the ribbon spread, what is the second person actually doing? You review the video segments one more time. You notice that the woman isn’t looking at the ribbon spread; she’s trying to get a peek at the exposed card that is positioned at the back of the eight decks. Now it’s starting to make sense. If she see the value of the last card of the shoe, and he counts the total number of cards used in the ribbon spread, then the advantage players know the exact location of that one exposed cards.

With 416 cards used in an eight deck shoe, and let’s say, 26 cards used in the ribbon spread, the “exposed” card will be exactly 390 cards from the front of the eight deck shoe. Once the cards are in the shoe, and the dealer turns over a card and burns that number of cards, they subtract that total as well. Then, as the hands are drawn, the advantage players subtract either 4, 5, or 6 cards from that “running” card total. The advantage players keep subtracting the total cards used in each hand, counting backwards, until they can determine that the “exposed” card will appear in a specific hand, either the Player’s or the Banker’s. You know that 7s, 8s, and 9s are strong cards because those are the cards the cheaters like to “mark” to get first card value. If the “exposed” card is a 7 trough 9, then the hand it would fall to would be subject to a significant mathematical edge.

Your next stop is to look through your book library. The book library is something you have assembled, and is available to the surveillance staff. You select the copy of Steve Forte’s book on Game protection. After reviewing the section on baccarat game protection, you find a section describing location play in baccarat. The section is almost a “blow-by-blow” description of what you’ve witnessed on the video segments. What is really interesting is Forte’s chart on “known card” values. The chart indicates that the average gain from spying a card is in the neighborhood of 10%. You also discovered that the chart included card values and strategies for playing the “exposed” card if it fell into the 5th card or 6th card position. For example; if the “exposed” card was a “4”, and you knew it would fall into the 5th card of the hand and placed a wager on the Player hand, you could expect an advantage of 18% on that hand. No wonder these players were winning \$60,000.

You pick up the phone on surveillance counter, and punched in the number for the Director of Table Games. “Bob, I want you to come up to surveillance and look at something. I think we have a problem in baccarat”.

Over the last several months I have received at least a dozen emails or phone calls from Surveillance Directors or Operations Managers regarding this same advantage play in baccarat. Even though I have mentioned this same technique in several of my articles (one being here in the Catwalk February 2011), and demonstrated it in my Baccarat Game Protection Seminars, the problem still exists. The scary part of this story is that this same technique has been used for over 20 years. I believe the reason for its longevity stems from the unusual application of the technique. The information and tracking process starts at the beginning of the shoe, and approximately 80 hands later, or about 90 minutes, the advantage players make their “play” on the information.

Many of my gaming peers have a difficult time digesting the fact it’s a one-time play during an 80 hand shoe game. They don’t see the value in wagering on one hand. However, the gain from playing that one hand is “through the roof” when considering it’s an undesirable, but legal advantage play. The average gain, regardless of the “exposed” card, is approximately 10%. If the advantage players have the ability to “shop” the exposed back-card, and only attack when the “exposed” card is a picture card, ten, four, seven, eight, or nine, they can play with an average gain of 15%.

In the previous scenario, the Director of Surveillance was contacting the Director of Table Games regarding his discovery. As a casino executive or surveillance professional, what would you do to correct this situation, and any future situation from occurring? Your comments on this blog are welcomed.