



# Card Cheats and Crossroads Converge on Arizona Social Gambling



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## Phast Phun in Phoenix — A Card Cheats' and Crossroads' Paradise

By Arnold Snyder

(From *Blackjack Forum* Vol. II #3, December 1988)

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The way I hear it, the cheating was all a big mistake. Except for the squeaky-clean state lottery and your occasional church bingo night, there wasn't much gambling in Arizona.

But what the hay, this is the Wild West, and cowboys will be cowboys. There were always a few bars and strip joints running backroom poker and blackjack games, your occasional crap table off in the corner. There were never any laws in the state prohibiting social gambling. Casinos were illegal, but Friday night poker games were just considered good clean fun.

The problem, as perceived by the lawmakers, was that some of these two-bit bars with backroom gambling were making decent money in the back room, and, naturally, paying no taxes on these ill-got gains.

It didn't seem necessary, or even possible, to get rid of these friendly games. Social gambling had been going on as long as anyone could remember. No one was getting hurt. Organized crime wasn't involved. There weren't even any crossroads or cheating (that anyone knew of). It was small potatoes.

You couldn't expect the police to start busting the bar owners or patrons of these games. These weren't criminals. They were fine upstanding citizens having a little innocent fun on payday.

Everyone played a little blackjack some time. And what with the booming casino industry of Laughlin, Nevada, plastering their billboards all over the state of Arizona -- just a few hours' drive from Phoenix, well it just didn't make sense to make an issue of it if Arizonans wanted to keep their entertainment dollars right in

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their own hometown.

But it was the principal of the thing. Bar owners were just not paying their fare share of the taxes. Not that there was any great tax potential from these nickel and dime games. Just the principle.

The last thing the legislators wanted to do was make it legal for the bars to run these gambling games. They didn't want casinos in Arizona. They just wanted to clarify the law. If people wanted a little friendly social gambling, fine. But no casinos. Bars shouldn't be banking these games, raking the pot in poker, dealing the blackjack and taking the house edge. It just wasn't fair. And if there's one thing that Arizona's lawmakers pride themselves on, it's their sense of fair play.

The solution seemed so simple. There wasn't much argument in the legislature. They'd simply define "social gambling." You want to play a little poker, a little blackjack, shoot some craps, fine. Any establishment could allow games like these right out in the open.

But the bars couldn't bank the games. No one could bank the games. These would be friendly games between the players, and only between the players. Who deals? The players. Who sets the rules and the stakes? The players. Who rakes the pot? No one. In fact, it would be against the law for any establishment offering such games to charge their customers any cover charge to play, or to benefit in any way from these games.

If the players wanted to drink while they played, they could order drinks. But no bar was going to hustle drinks or pressure players to spend money. These were friendly games, played by mutual agreement of the players. Fair games. No house edge. No problems.

## A Law Designed for Card Cheats

On August 18, 1987, Arizona Revised State 13-3301 was signed into law. "Social Gambling" was defined as "gambling which is not conducted as a business and involves players who compete on equal terms with each other in a gamble if all of the following apply:

- "a) No player receives, or becomes entitled to receive, any benefit, directly or indirectly, other than his winnings from the gamble.
- "b) No other person receives, or becomes entitled to receive,

any benefit, directly or indirectly, from the gamble.

- "c) None of the players are below the age of majority (21 years)."

That seemed pretty clear. No casinos. No house edge. No banking the games. The law was straightforward. Friendly. Fair.

Jolee's Lounge in Glendale, a suburb on the west side of Phoenix, was one of the first establishments to take advantage of the new law. Jolee's owner, Joann Ashley, heard about the new law and figured the novelty of a couple poker tables might pump up her business. She thought her regular customers might enjoy playing poker and the tables would probably draw in some new customers as well.

She was right about the latter. Within several weeks it was hard to get in the door. There were crowds around her two tables waiting to jump at an open seat. Her regular customers weren't so regular anymore. It just wasn't the same atmosphere.

Heavy gamblers were controlling the tables, but there wasn't much Joann could do about it. The law prohibited her from having much say about the games, lest she be accused of acting as "the house" for her own benefit. More disturbing to her were offers she was getting from professional card sharks. They wanted to give her a cut of their action in exchange for the use of her tables with their own dealers.

Worst of all, the big crowds did not spell financial success. Ms. Ashley learned, to her dismay, that gamblers drink a lot of coffee and not much else. She had always provided coffee to her customers for free. Within a couple months, her Friday night business had dropped from \$1200 to \$300.

By December of 1987, four months after Arizona's "social gambling" law was defined, Jolee's Lounge became its first casualty. Joann had taken out the poker tables. She didn't have gambling anymore. But she'd lost her regular customers as well. She was forced to sell what was left of the business.

No one knows how many bars and night clubs in Arizona tried "social gambling" within the first year of the new law. But the Phoenix police department had a list of 22 full-time gambling establishments just in their county. The police didn't know quite what to make of this new phenomenon. Unlike Nevada or New Jersey, Arizona law didn't specify any game rules or regulations.

There were no cheating statutes. No training or licensing of dealers or pit personnel. No pit bosses. No agency existed to oversee the games or to enforce laws designed to protect the public. There just wasn't much of a law to enforce.

The new law had been in effect more than a year, in fact, before anyone had been indicted for a gambling violation. On September 15, 1988, Tommy Caselli, owner of Tommy's Full House Casino on Camelback Road in Phoenix, was charged with a misdemeanor violation of the law. Tommy's mistake, according to the assistant D.A. who was prosecuting the case, was that Tommy had advertised the gambling in his establishment. To the D.A., this indicated that Tommy would be "benefiting" from the games. Tommy stopped running his newspaper ads, and within a month, these charges were dropped.

Since then, other bars have been busted for running the games in their establishments with house dealers. Whether or not these charges will stick has yet to be seen. How long this wide open gambling will exist in Arizona is anybody's guess. Most informed sources feel the state lawmakers will either outlaw social gambling, or more strictly define this recreation in order to rid the state of the current problems as soon as possible.

I spent three days in Phoenix in September with *Blackjack Forum's* esteemed correspondent and Laughlin reporter, Pigbait, as my guide. Here are some of the technical data I collected on Tommy's Full House Casino.

## **A Report from the Arizona Card Cheat Scene**

On Thursday night, there were 11 blackjack tables in operation, as well as 5 poker tables and a crap table. On Friday night, there were 13 blackjack tables, and on Saturday, these increased to 15. Most of the tables were regulation 7 spotters with a "Harvey's" logo on the felt. Some were card tables with a felt layout thrown over it. A few were card tables with no layout at all.

The game rules varied according to the dealer's choice. I saw one 4-deck shoe game on two of the nights. All of the other games were 1- and 2-deck handheld. Players bring their own cards. Any player who is dealt a blackjack may take the deal. If you don't have your own cards you can only exercise this option if some other player at the table will lend you his deck. Most players do

not want the deal because of the risk.

The dealer sets the betting limits. I saw games with limits of \$2 to \$5, \$2 to \$10, \$2 to \$20, \$5 to \$20, \$5 to \$50, and \$5 to \$100. Most games have a \$20 upper limit. The problem with taking the deal in such a game is that if you lower the limit (which is the dealer's option), many players will leave the table. A few consecutive dealer busts at a full table with a \$20 limit could wipe out a moderate bankroll.

Rules and procedures also vary widely. Many games are dealt to the bottom card, with all but the bottom and burn cards being played.

Many dealers show the burn card, and some won't burn an ace. Most games are dealt face-up to the players so that players never touch the cards.

Sound like a card counter's dream? One deck dealt to the bottom, all players' cards face up? Someone pinch me.

Both soft 17 rules are used, and both Vegas and Reno doubling rules are also employed. Dealer's choice. Most dealers do not offer insurance. Some do. Blackjacks pay 3 to 2, but most dealers do not use 50¢ pieces. If you get a blackjack with a \$5 bet, you will be paid either \$7 or \$8. Again, dealer's choice, but most dealers will alternate the underpay and overpay if you remind them.

Common oddities: No chips are used. All bets are cash on the table. A bill folded in half means "bet half" (i.e, a \$20 bill folded in half in your betting circle means you are betting \$10). Most dealers do not make change until after the hands are completed. A bill placed between two betting spots means you are playing two hands, betting half the bill's value on each (i.e, a \$20 bill placed between two spots means you are playing two hands, betting \$10 on each). A \$20 bill folded in half between two spots means you are betting a total of \$10, or \$5 on each of two hands.

## **If You Build It, Card Cheats and Crossroaders Will Come: Seconds Dealing, Marked Cards, Stacked Decks and More in Arizona**

Most dealers peek under tens and aces to see if they have a blackjack prior to completing the players' hands. Some dealers

peek under all of their upcards before completing the players' hands. This may strike you as stupid — or it may strike you as a potential cheating move. Since there is no legitimate reason for the dealer to know his hole card in advance unless he has a ten or ace up, he could be seeking this information for any of a variety of scams.

This, of course, is the biggest problem you face if you gamble in Arizona. Avoiding the scam artists. One reliable source informs me that every card mucker and crossroader in Nevada has relocated to Phoenix in the past year, and that a large proportion of the games being dealt are crooked.

Marked cards are common, what with dealers supplying their own decks. You will not be able to detect the markings, which may often be nothing more than lightly sanded edges that allow the dealer to identify tens and aces. Be especially wary of any dealer who varies his upcard and hole card. The trick is for the dealer to always show a ten or an ace up, so that the players will always be hitting their stiff and rarely doubling down or splitting. A move like this requires no other legerdemain, and is very strong.

Also, watch out for dealers who deal face down games, then don't turn up all of the players' cards after a player busts. This is a classic move for a dealer working with a third base confederate when he wants the confederate to draw off a card or cards that he doesn't want to deal to himself. Such a dealer may be using a marked deck, waiting for the top card to be the one he needs to make his hand. (Most games -- even though 1- and 2-deck -- are dealt face up.)

Dealers who peek under all up cards -- not just tens and aces -- may be signaling their hands to confederates, or may want to know their hands in advance for many other possible cheating moves. Dealing styles are so amateur that it is not uncommon at all for dealers to peek under non-tens/aces. Most of these dealers probably do it because they've seen others do it, or it was always how they played in home games and they just want to know their hands.

Many cheats have been run out of games by players or bar owners who have caught them. This is a fairly regular occurrence in Phoenix games — especially dealers getting caught with "short" decks or marked cards. Sometimes, guns are drawn, though no instances of actual shootings have occurred yet to my knowledge. It is legal to pack a pistol on your hip in Arizona, and it is not

uncommon to see gun-toting citizens. Remember, this is the Wild West.

Unlike Nevada or New Jersey, Arizona law does not spell out what constitutes cheating, therefore, no arrests have been made in these cheating incidents. Although these games are legal, don't forget that these are back-alley games, with back-alley rules. If you're accused or even suspected of cheating, you may have to deal with back-alley justice.

For this reason, I would strongly advise against "spooking" as a strategy — that is, positioning yourself behind a dealer so that you can signal a confederate at the table as to the dealer's hole card. This is so easy to do in Tommy's Full House Casino that you may be tempted to try and pull it off. There are no pit bosses. Just a few "security" employees of the bar whose main job seems to be asking customers to remove their hats because of the "dress code." (No t-shirts! Stricter than Caesars Palace!)

You can stand directly behind most of the dealers and look over their shoulders. Nobody will stop you. But if somebody suspects you're passing signals to your buddy at the table, your arguments that the "law" doesn't cover this, or even that it's an untested legal area in Nevada, may not wash very well with the bikers escorting you out the back door.

Also, watch out for inaccurate payments on winning hands. With all of the folded bills and bills between spots, etc., "errors" -- which may or may not be intentional -- are not uncommon. Some errors will work to the players' advantage. The worst mistake I saw was a dealer who, after busting, did not collect the bets from the players who had also busted, but considered these hands pushes!

If it appeals to you to take advantage of amateurs and drunks, you'll love Arizona.

Personally, I would not play in any game in Arizona that I was not dealing. I just don't trust dealers who bring their own cards. I would also not deal a game unless I had arrived with friends who would be accompanying me out at night's end. Dealers carry a lot of cash. I would also deal a face-up game so that players did not touch their cards. And I would be hyper-aware of spooking and front-loading possibilities as I dealt. I would also make change for folded bills and bills between spots prior to dealing the hands.

If you like craps, you'll find an interesting back-alley style game at

Tommy's. Again, it's players vs. players. No house. They've got a regulation size casino crap table with no layout on the felt. Players make up their own proposition bets by mutual agreement, set their own odds, etc. The don't pass bet is popular since no numbers are barred; don't bettors have a 1.4% advantage.

The poker games look very loose — lots of cash on the tables. Big pots. High-low split games were popular when I was there.

Personally, I wouldn't go near the poker or crap games with my money. These games offer far more cheating possibilities than blackjack (assuming you're dealing).

In any case, there's a good chance the Phoenix lawmakers will do away with the whole gambling scene soon. I'll keep you posted in these pages on developments as they occur. If you're real sharp, and you've got a good sized bankroll, and a few big friends to escort you around town, you might want to check out Phoenix. It's unlike anything you've ever seen in Nevada or New Jersey.

If you're a casual player, stay home. This is no place for amateurs. If you've just got to see it to believe it, then check it out, but keep your wallet in your pocket. You'll see some of the sharpest hustlers in the country cleaning the clocks of Phoenix locals night after night.

If you insist on playing, spend a few hours watching Steve Forte's [\*Gambling Protection Series \(DVD 3 Set\)\*](#) on how to detect cheating moves before you hit the tables. You may not be able to see the moves, but it should add to your enjoyment of the games to know why you're losing so consistently.

In the last week of October, Pigbait did a mini-survey of the action available in the Phoenix area. There are dozens of bars with one or two tables that he did not survey. Note that although there are no house rules, the smaller bars tend to develop an unwritten set of rules and procedures that the regular patrons agree on. If you try to deal a different game, you may have no one to deal to. ♠

- Angelo's (E. Mesa): 1 table, 4-deck shoe dealt down to last 8-10 cards; double on any two cards; no insurance.
- Annie's (Mill Ave., Tempe): 1-3 tables, 2- and 4-deck games; dealt face down: both double-down rules (dealer's choice); dealer's choice on insurance; limits 2-5, 2-20.
- Dancing Sunshines (32nd & McDowell, Phoenix): Open 24 hours; 2-3 tables; 2-decks; face up; no hand held deal

(decks on table); no insurance; double 10-11 only; dealers almost always peek under any up card; limits 1-3, 1-5, 2-10, 2-20; any player may ask for the cards to be counted face up onto the table at any time to insure against short decks.

- J.J. McLinqu (University Ave., Tempe): 2 tables; 1 deck; hand held; dealer's choice doubling; no insurance; limits 1, 1-2, 1-3, 1-5,-10.
- Lester's (Bell Rd., Phoenix): 3-4 tables; 1- or 2-deck; hand held; face down; both doubling rules; no insurance; limits 2-5, 2-10, 5-10, 5-20.
- Pool & Brew (32nd & Thomas, Phoenix): Open 24 hours; 2-3 tables; 2-decks; face up; no hand held dealing (decks on table, dealt with one hand); double 10-11; no insurance; dealer usually peeks under every up card; limits 2-5, 2-10, 5-50.
- Tommy's Full House (Camelback Rd., Phoenix): 12 tables; 1-, 2-, and 4-deck; dealer's choice on doubling rules and insurance; limits 2-5, 2-10, 2-20, 5-20, 2-50, 5-100.

## Recommended Books on Card Cheats and Casino Cheating

\*Note from Arnold Snyder: Again, whenever you have reason to be concerned about cheating at cards, I recommend viewing Steve Forte's [Gambling Protection Series \(DVD 3 Set\)](#). Also of value if Bill Zender's [How to Detect Casino Cheating at Blackjack](#), which helped me to avoid getting cheated at a Palm Springs casino recently.

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### Crossroaders and Card Cheats Move in on "Social Gambling" in Arizona

Arnold Snyder reports on the social gambling experiment in bars and social clubs in Phoenix, and how the games got quickly overrun by professional card cheats and crossroaders.

