

DOUBLE OR NOTHING

How Crown tilts the odds in its favour



A SLICE of Las Vegas came to Melbourne last year when Crown casino chiefs introduced a US-style blackjack game in its swish high-roller Teak Room.

For local card sharks, it was seen as a chance to test their wares against a form of blackjack they only ever saw in the movies.

But within weeks, after Crown had stacked the deck, the game was gone. "It was a farce from the start," Crown high roller Ron Parsons tells the *Herald Sun*.

"They sold it as Vegas-style blackjack — the only problem was, they modified it to their advantage and changed the splits, doubles and surrenders. People eventually woke up and realised they'd been suckered."

The casino had altered the rules, depriving punters of betting options offered under traditional Las Vegas blackjack.

Critics of the Southbank gambling complex, which last year sucked a record \$1.06 billion from the pockets of its customers, say this is the way business is always done — Crown style.

The latest change, as revealed in today's *Herald Sun*, is the introduction of card-shuffling machines in the VIP Mahogany Room, a move some gamblers believe will boost the casino's winning edge.

It follows a decision to add an extra house number to the \$2.50 roulette wheels on the public gaming floor.

A double 00 has been added to the wheels, which also retain the single 0, effectively doubling the casino's profit margin from 2.7 per cent to 5.26 per cent.

Crown chiefs say all of their rules have been approved by the Victorian Commission for Gambling Regulation.

"We adhere to and abide by all of the rules and regulations laid down by the VCGR and the State Government," spokesman Gary O'Neill says.

As for the shuffle machines: "Many players are used to them on the main gaming floor and like them. No doubt a small number of customers prefer the older style dealer shuffling and there are many tables where they can play using this style."

A *Herald Sun* investigation this week uncovered several other changes designed to tip the odds in the casino's favour.

MICHAEL WARNER



One rule, quietly approved by the state's gaming watchdog, requires blackjack dealers to "hit" on "soft 17".

This means the house gets a final chance to win your money instead of paying out players holding cards valued at 18-21.

The change was likened by one punter to a sudden doubling in the cost of fuel from \$1.50 to \$3 a litre.

"But the advantage the casino has over the oil companies is that the cost of its product is not required to be advertised and that cost is difficult to calculate, so it is nicely hidden," the punter says. "Only the most knowledgeable players understand what is going on."

A decision has also been made at Crown to limit the size of a local patrons' complimentary rewards to \$400 a day.

Previously, Victorian-based gamblers at Crown could earn an unlimited amount of freebies, including meals, parking and accommodation, depending on the amount of time spent playing at the tables or pokies.

Others point out that the spread between the sizes of the minimum and maximum bets permitted at Crown are far less generous than those offered at casinos like Aspinalls in London, Bellagio in Las Vegas and myriad other houses in places like Macau and Atlantic City.

For example, gamblers playing on Crown's \$30 blackjack tables are restricted from outlaying bets bigger than \$1200. In Las Vegas, bets of up to \$10,000 can be made on a \$30 table, exposing the casino to far bigger losses.

"Everything they do in Melbourne makes it harder for us to win — and harder for them to lose," Parsons says.

And he would know. As a member of Crown's elite top 200 Premium Club, he turns over \$10 million a year.

Last week he defied the casino by launching *Casinobusters.com* — a website that teaches gamblers to win at both blackjack and roulette. Parsons' systems are based on

Stacking the odds

How Crown Casino compares

ROULETTE

Adding 00 to wheel

BLACKJACK

Dealer hits on 'soft' 17

Double 9, 10, 11 only

Limited bet spreads

Using 8 decks of cards

Splitting restrictions

Machine shufflers in high-roller room

	CROWN	BELLAGIO	ASPINALLS
ROULETTE			
Adding 00 to wheel	✓	✓	✗
BLACKJACK			
Dealer hits on 'soft' 17	✓	✗	✗
Double 9, 10, 11 only	✓	✗	✓
Limited bet spreads	✓	✗	✗
Using 8 decks of cards	✓	✗	✗
Splitting restrictions	✓	✗	✓
Machine shufflers in high-roller room	✓	✗	✗

capital preservation, coaching gamblers to gradually increase bets on winning runs and minimise bets on inevitable losing streaks.

He says the casino can be beaten, as long as players stick to the correct strategies.

During a recent demonstration at Crown, he won \$7100 playing roulette in just two hours.

But not everyone is welcome to test his theory.

Melbourne card shark Andrew Scott is among dozens of skilled blackjack players slapped with a lifetime ban by the casino.

Like all card counters, he's doing nothing illegal — but because he can win, Crown simply doesn't want him.

Scott, who has since joined the World Poker Tour, says Crown has made an art form of changing its rules to fill its coffers. "Yes, there

has been inflation in Australia since the casino first opened in 1994, but not of the kind we've seen at Crown," he says.

"In the early years, \$5 minimum Blackjack tables were commonplace and, during the day-time hours, \$2 minimum tables were made available. These days \$10 is the smallest minimum, and even they are hard to find and use those awful continuous shuffling machines."

But the VCGR says all of Crown's actions have been legal.

"I can understand that players like to play games in a particular way," VCGR chief Peter Cohen says. "Our job is to make sure it is fair and has integrity — and we are satisfied that the way blackjack (and roulette) are offered by Crown, including the use of shuffling machines, is fair."

However, long-time critic the Rev Tim Costello says there's never been anything fair about Crown casino. "From its inception, the casino has been in the state witness protection program. There always seem to be a special set of rules for Crown," he says.

Crown bosses also know that unlike their competitors in Las Vegas, London or Macau, a disgruntled gambler in Melbourne simply doesn't have the option of walking up the road to try his luck somewhere else.

"The standard blackjack game on the Las Vegas strip is a -25 point game, and there are better if you search around," Scott says. Crown's trashy -72 point game is almost three times as bad," he says. "Why? One word, competition. Oh, and one other thing, state government taxes."