

## How Twenty-One Became Blackjack

According to Richard Epstein (*Theory of Gambling and Statistical Logic*, Academic Press, 1977), blackjack became popular during World War I, and was called "black-jack" from the practice of paying a bonus to a player who held an ace of spades with a jack of spades or clubs. John Scarne, (*New Complete Guide to Gambling*, 1961, Simon & Schuster), puts the year when this curious rule first appeared at 1912, when [twenty-one](#) tables appeared in horse-betting parlors in Evanston, Illinois. According to Scarne, by 1919a Chicago gambling equipment distributor was selling felt table layouts emblazoned with the announcement: "Blackjack Pays Odds of 3 to 2." I believe Epstein's information is taken from Scarne, and Scarne states that he discovered the origins of blackjack in America as a result of his private discussions with old-time gamblers, not from any published texts that can be looked up today.

I am skeptical of much of what Scarne has written about blackjack, so I'll quote from Mickey MacDougall's *MacDougall on Dice and Cards* (Coward-McCann, 1944, NY), which was published prior to any of Scarne's books: "Many professionals dress up the game by giving prizes for certain hands. A favorite stunt is to offer ten times the size of the wager to anyone holding a natural twenty-one with a black jack. This adds interest to the game, but it also tempts a player to increase his stakes."

In an honestly dealt single-deck game, this gimmick bonus would give the player a substantial edge over the house, assuming the player knew basic strategy (an unlikely assumption). I would also assume that a gambling house that offered this bonus would be using any number of illegitimate methods to assure the house a healthy edge.

That curious bonus payout that gave blackjack its name, however, has long since disappeared. There may be some casino somewhere that pays a small bonus if a player is dealt a natural 21 which includes a jack of spades or clubs, but that is no longer a normal rule of the game. Today, a blackjack is simply any initial two cards that consist of an ace and any ten-valued card.

That's when Ed Thorp dropped another bombshell. Under the auspices of their Vintage Paperback division, Random House published a revised and expanded edition of *Beat the Dealer*. And the most important addition was Harvey Dubner's Hi-Lo counting system, which Thorp called the Complete Point Count, with a computer-optimized strategy devised by Julian Braun. To the casinos' frustration, this was a system that could more easily be applied to multiple-deck games.

Thorp was keeping the casinos on the run.

Still, the casinos' fears were mostly unfounded. The Complete Point Count was easier to use than the ten-count, but it was not a lot easier. It required players to keep two separate counts. In addition to the running count of the cards' point total, the player had to keep a count of the exact number of cards remaining to be played. And in order to play his hand, he had to memorize a chart of 158 different strategy changes to be made according to the count.

Thorp also included a Simple Point Count in this new edition of his book, but at the time that strategy seemed way too simple to most players to gain much of an edge, or to be taken seriously by players who wanted to beat the game. Later, the power of Thorp's simpler method of adjusting the running count, without keeping a separate count of the exact number of cards played, would be shown.

## About the Author

The article is written and posted by Christopher J Skinner, a mature and experienced poker gambler.

To read more about [blackjack](#) please visit my site [Blackjack Encyclopedia](#).