

# Part One: Legendary Blackjack Teams

## Chapter 1 - The Long Shot

There have been thousands of amazing stories in the colorful history of blackjack. Some of the most successful players seemed destined to become card counters, while others took a longer and bumpier road to the top. However, one narrative stands out from all the rest—the incredible tale of how a small group of Eastern Europeans redefined the word “improbable.” Even today, if you mention the Czech blackjack team, many old-time pit bosses still break out in a cold sweat. The remarkable exploits of the Czechs truly place them among the legends of blackjack.

They first became famous during the great early surrender experiment of the late 1970s when they pounded the Resorts International Casino in Atlantic City. In a rare victory for card counters, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that blackjack players couldn't be barred because of their skill. One newspaper reported that the Czech team took advantage of this unusual opportunity by winning over five million dollars in Atlantic City (a number that was greatly exaggerated). But it wasn't just American clubs that feared the Czechs. The team crushed casinos around the globe, traveling from Beirut to Bulgaria and from Korea to Kenya in search of the best blackjack games.



### Early Surrender

*Early surrender is one of the most advantageous rules for players. This rule allows players to forfeit (i.e., surrender) their hand and receive half of the initial wager before the dealer checks for a blackjack. Early surrender was offered when casino gambling was first legalized in Atlantic City. Because of the early surrender rule, basic strategy players enjoyed a slight edge over the house. Early surrender also benefits card counters because they can surrender hands in high counts (when they have larger bets) when the dealer is showing a strong upcard (e.g., a 10) thus minimizing the fluctuation in their bankroll. Note that there is a specific basic playing strategy for early surrender.*

The inspiration behind this dynamic team was George Hascik, an unpretentious man who rose from the most unlikely circumstances to lead the assault of the Czech blackjack team. George was a master at exploiting edges, such as the time he found a casino near Monte Carlo that never shuffled the cards. His hourly edge on that game was so huge, he could have won enough within a few weeks to retire on the Riviera—if they had allowed him to continue playing.

There are many things in life you have absolutely no control over. An obvious example is the old adage that you can pick your friends, but you can't pick your relatives. A corollary is that you also can't choose where you are born. Some enter this

world under a lucky star with a silver spoon in their mouth. A millionaire's son has many advantages over a similar child born at the exact same moment, but in a poverty stricken region of Africa.

Considering that he would later become one of the world's most successful gamblers, George Hascik's journey on this planet started off with a bad run of luck. His lot in life was to grow up in a Communist country. Living under an oppressive regime wasn't pleasant for anyone, but it especially felt confining for George. He always had an adventuresome nature and wanted to see the world. The rigid structure of Czechoslovakia gave little hope to independent spirits like George. The economic future of the entire Eastern European Soviet Bloc looked bleak, and severe travel restrictions allowed little freedom of movement. The joke was that you could be a free thinker in a Communist country, just as long as you kept your thoughts to yourself.

So when George reached legal age, he tried to get a visa to Germany in order to covertly leave the country along with a couple of close friends. However, Communist officials were aware that this was a ruse frequently attempted by many young people who had no intention of leaving the country to take a vacation, but were planning to escape Czechoslovakia and start a new life in a free land.

That was certainly George's objective. He desperately wanted out and was crushed when a suspicious official refused to grant him a visa. He could have patiently waited a few years for the political winds to change. But George didn't want to wait. He had just turned eighteen and felt now was the time to seize his moment.

He figured his best chance to flee Czechoslovakia involved a solo effort rather than a complicated plan involving several friends. So he began scouting for the best escape route. The long border between Czechoslovakia and Austria didn't have a physical wall like the one that separated East and West Berlin, but it did have an imposing electric fence. This daunting obstacle consisted of two rows of wire four meters tall with five meters of open area between the rows. Additionally, towers manned by armed guards rose every 500 meters. This deadly combination made the odds of comrades escaping into the west very difficult to overcome. Few even tried. The government made it clear that anyone attempting to flee would either be shot or thrown in jail.

Yet George was a driven man. He sensed his destiny lay on the other side of that fence. Rather than do something impulsive or foolish, he analyzed his options in much the same way he would later evaluate the casino game of blackjack. He looked for ways to reduce the difficult odds facing him and to somehow increase his chances for success. He spent weeks studying a small section of the border along Southern Moravia by riding in a public bus during tourist season. He finally found a promising area in a quiet wooded region just outside a small town.

He returned to this spot a few days later at night, but didn't get very far. He was afraid to risk using a flashlight, and the dark forest prevented him from crawling more than a hundred yards. He quickly gave up and decided a daring daylight dash at high noon would be his only choice. George came back the next day and methodically worked his way through the woods, stopping for long stretches to observe his surroundings.

When he got close enough to view the fence, he studied the guard tower for two to three hours. He became convinced there was either nobody in the lookout tower closest to him or the sentry was asleep.

However, there was a small dirt road running between the two wire fences, and a soldier rode by on a motorcycle every thirty minutes. After observing this pattern, George estimated he had a good twenty minutes to cross the border—if he was right about the guard tower's being empty. Moving with a cool collectedness that belied his tender years, he carefully avoided the trip wire hidden ten meters from the fence. Then, he used his pliers to cut a hole in the barrier and made his way to freedom. Fortunately, he was right about the nearest guard tower's being empty, as no one noticed him during his breakout.

Once he got through the second set of wires, he broke into a dead run. Using a compass, he made his way through Austria and eventually was placed in a refugee camp. The CIA agent who interrogated him was astounded at George's audacity. At first he suspected George was telling a lie and was really an agent the Soviets were trying to plant in the West. Previously, only three out of 5,000 people succeeded in escaping that section of the border. Once they verified the fence had been cut, the American agent concluded George was either very good or very lucky. In reality, it was probably a little of both.

Though George knew absolutely no one in the United States, he considered America the land with the greatest opportunity. While at the refugee camp, he met two other Czechs named Jan Vogel and Walter Spengler, and the three of them immediately struck up a friendship. In the summer of 1974 they all landed in New York City together. George worked a few odd jobs before heading down to Florida and then out west to California. He didn't know anyone on either coast, but he still had the wanderlust of youth and wanted to explore all corners of his new homeland.

After he arrived in the Golden State, George took a job as a busboy, and it was in a restaurant that he first heard about card counting. One of the waiters bragged about his former life as a blackjack player. He explained the basics of how it worked, but admitted he never had the nerves to really succeed at such a demanding task.



## Card Counting

*Blackjack is one of the few casino games where past cards played during a round affect future hands directly. This fact prompted some early blackjack pioneers to keep track of cards that had been played to help predict future cards to be dealt. Ed Thorp, who is mentioned frequently in this book, is considered to be the “Father of Card Counting.” Thorp’s original Ten Count system was extremely complicated. Several different card counting systems have since been developed, many of them rather simple and easy to learn. Most systems attempt to track relative differences between number of high cards (tens, picture cards, and aces) and low cards (twos through sixes) remaining in the deck. In general, decks with more high than low cards remaining unplayed are favorable for players. For a description of several card counting systems, consult the book “Play Blackjack Like the Pros,” by one of this book’s authors, Kevin Blackwood.*

What had been only a passing fancy for the waiter sounded like the ideal dream job to George Hascik. He knew firsthand that he had the guts to take risks—his life had certainly proven that—and he immediately set out to learn the game of blackjack. After moving to Las Vegas, he got hired as a dealer at the old Money Tree Casino, a dive located just off Sahara Ave. He used a fake passport to land this position since he wasn’t legally old enough to work or gamble in a casino. But this job didn’t last long as his real intention was to better understand the game of blackjack, rather than draw a salary from the casinos.

After reading a few books on card counting, he put his meager life savings on the line at the tables. However, his dreams of becoming a professional gambler got off to a rocky start. Following the advice of the early blackjack author Lawrence Revere, who erroneously wrote that you needed only twenty-five top bets, George aggressively pushed out \$20 of his \$500 bankroll on the positive counts. This combination of overbetting and an initial run of bad luck resulted in George’s losing all his savings. He was forced to go back to work again in order to replenish his bankroll before resuming his budding blackjack career. Ironically, it was a holiday promotion rather than a high plus count that ultimately propelled George on the road to success.

The Horseshoe Casino traditionally celebrated the birth of Jesus by paying 2 to 1 on all blackjacks for one week every Christmas. However, the killer advantage this promotion offered was greatly diluted since the bonus applied only on bets up to \$5. But for a struggling player on a shoestring budget, this game was a lifeline. George played close to one hundred hours that week and finally fattened his bankroll to a more respectable amount. And perhaps even more important was the fact that he met three other card counters (Vladimir Reznek, Wayne Mooney, and John Russell) during the promotion, leading to the formation of his first blackjack team.

Like George, Vladimir Reznek had made the long journey from Czechoslovakia to America. Vladimir and Wayne Mooney also had started out as dealers in Las Vegas

before venturing into card counting. This gave them a common bond and they immediately discussed playing together on a joint bankroll.

The other player George met at the Horseshoe promotion was John Russell. He wasn't a dealer, but Russell knew more about blackjack than the other members of the team combined. He served as a mentor to the younger players and helped educate them on the fine points of card counting. John also brought in Bill Kaplan, who would later help start the famous MIT team. All five players contributed \$2,000 of their own money to create a team bank of \$10,000. This enabled each player to bet to a much higher level than he could on his own and greatly boosted their profit potential.

The team concept yielded far stronger results than five single players attacking the mighty casino fortresses on their own. John recommended they have 80 top bets (\$125 max bet with their \$10,000 bankroll), but George soon realized that wasn't enough. So they switched to 100, then 125, and finally ended up settling in at 150 top bets.



### Team Play

*As the term "team" suggests, blackjack teams involve two or more people playing blackjack often in the same casino at the same time, sharing information and a common bankroll. Teams have different strategies, bankroll sizes, and numbers of players. Some use different systems simultaneously to help make better betting decisions. Others use card counters who bet small amounts of money and let a partner, who can read subtle signals from seated players, enter games and bet large amounts when the edge is in their favor (known as the Big Players). The primary advantage of teams is their ability to pool resources and start with a larger bankroll than most individual players could provide. The team "amortizes" losses across a number of players, and uses some big wins by a few players to overcome losses by others in the team. By playing with a common large bankroll, team players also have the potential to earn more money than playing solo with a smaller bankroll.*

The team was successful, but there were some snafus, especially as the small group increased in size. Some players padded their hours (this later reached a laughable peak when two Filipino players hired for a promotion each claimed to be working twenty-five hours a day). Also, the new players John recruited were either weak card counters or skimmed from the team, which drastically diluted the winnings. So George formed his own team to keep better control over his money. He sensed that Bill and John had a different vision for the future of the team than he did. Most card counters view blackjack more as a sideline occupation than as a real job. But George felt the best approach was all or nothing. And he wanted to take control of his own destiny the same way he had by escaping from Czechoslovakia.

George already recognized that the game had begun to change him within just a few months. There was something artificial and draining about making your living in the casinos and spending long hours at the tables. Las Vegas is the only city in the world

that gets brighter when the sun goes down. So even early in his career, George Hascik began to envision his life—after blackjack. He determined that the smartest course of action would be to make his money, then move on to something else. To do that he needed a smaller team that would be willing to travel anywhere and do anything necessary to make it big in blackjack. George didn't want to just nickel and dime his way up the ladder—he wanted to hit the casinos so hard they would never forget him. He proposed a bold take-no-prisoners approach that would make so much money that he would be free to move on to other pursuits in life.

He didn't have to look very far for new recruits.

Like George, Walter Spengler had moved to Las Vegas to become a blackjack dealer for the casinos. But he remained skeptical about switching over to the other side of the table and giving up the security of a paycheck. Instead, he preferred to wait and see how George fared in his new vocation before testing the waters himself. When he realized that George and Vladimir were on to something big, he quit his job and joined. He also brought along Jan Vogel and the small group could now officially be called the Czech blackjack team (Wayne Mooney still remained as the lone American).

George taught Walter and Jan the tricks of the trade. The new group quickly developed into a highly efficient team and built their bankroll up to \$50,000 before venturing out of the familiar confines of Nevada. Walter's talents closely mirrored those of George. They were both hard workers and willing to put in whatever effort was necessary to reach the top. Later, as a protégé of Chip Reese, those same qualities propelled Walter to become one of the best poker players in the world.

On the other hand, Jan Vogel provided a good example of the old adage "opposites attract." He walked through life with a smile on his face and fun on his mind. Jan clearly lacked the inherent discipline of the other Czechs and had almost no money-management skills. The strict team rules were the only thing that kept him alive, as there were so many leaks in his game he would have had zero chance of success attempting to attack the tables on his own.

The money that Jan did win on the team often disappeared fast, and he developed a reputation as the playboy of the team. However, his charismatic demeanor did provide many benefits to the group, as several times it was his ability to charm the socks off people that helped the Czech team escape serious trouble and dangerous situations.

Preparation and opportunity soon came together in a fortuitous way for the Czech team. In May 1978, Resorts International Casino in Atlantic City opened its doors to thousands of eager customers. Previously, Nevada held a monopoly on gambling in the United States and the pent-up demand for casinos along the East Coast was staggering, as hordes of people packed Resorts every day.

Since Resorts was literally the only game in town, this steady stream of business turned the flourishing casino into a money machine. However, prosperity did come with a potential downside. Every casino in Atlantic City had to answer to the state of New Jersey. While Nevada clubs had a similar Gaming Commission watching over them, the restrictions in New Jersey were much greater. For example, Caesars Palace in Las Vegas could change the rules of blackjack any way they pleased, any time they wanted.

They could put in single-deck games or switch to all shoes, depending on what combination offered the greatest house edge while still appealing to players.

However, Resorts could not alter any of its rules without permission. Every aspect of their table games was highly regulated. One of these restrictions created an incredibly advantageous rule called “early surrender.” This resulted because the N.J. Casino Control Commission decided to not let dealers check under their tens or aces for blackjacks. Evidently the commission had serious concerns about corruption creeping into the games at Atlantic City and didn’t want to give the dealer any chance to cheat. However, they drastically misunderstood the implications of that option combined with surrender. Now players could surrender (or give up half their bet) even when the dealer had blackjack, which yielded a great edge for players.

The consequence of this new rule was that hordes of card counters flocked to Resorts. Finally, an uneasy truce was worked out, which became known as the first blackjack experiment in Atlantic City.

When George heard about the great conditions in Atlantic City, the Czechs took their game to New Jersey, hoping to cash in on the advantageous early surrender rule. Initially everyone was allowed to play—and the whole affair soon became a botched experiment—at least for the casinos. Every table was packed with pros, and the casino took a huge financial hit from the expert players. Resorts panicked and started kicking everyone out.

At first, the Czech team survived this purge. George believed the reason for their longevity was Jan Vogel. He had become a public relations machine and made many influential friends in high places. Nearly every night he dined or had drinks with several key members of the local Mafia. This connection made the casino executives tread very lightly around the Czechs, and the team was able to remain at the feast long after most other card counters had been shown the door.

After their success in Atlantic City, the team decided to head across the pond and check out the games in Europe. It was in the early stages of this trip that the group hit their first major milestone when the bankroll broke through the \$100,000 barrier in England. George had come a long way from his modest \$2,000 starting stake, but the best was yet to come. Though the team won money in London, the British casinos had lousy rules and generally mediocre games. However, once the team crossed the English Channel, a whole new world opened up for them.

France has only a handful of small casinos scattered across its countryside. The French citizens would understandably prefer to be known for their fine wines and topless beaches rather than the seedy business of gambling. It was in this Gallic nation that George made the transition from successful card counter to legend.

One of the ingredients that set apart the few players who really make it big in blackjack is persistence. To beat the game, a person has to have a solid grasp of math and discipline. But to break through the barrier and become a millionaire at the tables, an additional set of skills is required. And George possessed those qualities in spades. Most players never took the time to visit Europe, and the few who did normally gravitated to just the largest casinos, like Monte Carlo. Not George. He literally went to



every casino in France. Big or small. It didn't matter. He still checked them out. And his patient footwork paid huge dividends.

One casino he found was a modest joint tucked off the beaten path between Nice and Monte Carlo. When George entered, no one was playing blackjack—they didn't even have a blackjack table open. Rather than give up, George sat down at one of the dead tables. A snobbish-looking casino manager eventually made his way over to see what George wanted. In his best French, George inquired when the blackjack tables would be open. The manager responded with "right now." He clapped his hands and summoned a surly-looking lady to leave her empty roulette table and deal cards to George.

It was immediately apparent that this woman had been trained only for the roulette wheel. She didn't seem to have a clue how the game of blackjack worked. The game was agonizingly slow, but that didn't bother George—he was happier than a hippie who'd scored back stage passes at a Grateful Dead concert. The reason for his glee was that the dealer was dealing *all* the cards. Normally, any shuffle with less than 20 percent of the cards remaining would be a strong game and potentially profitable for a card counter. But this shoe didn't even have a cut card. It dealt out 100 percent!



### Cut Card

*The cut card is a colored plastic card that is inserted into a pack of shuffled cards to divide it into two parts. Usually, the dealer places the pack of shuffled cards in front of one of the players, hands the cut card to the player, and the player places it somewhere inside the pack. The dealer then takes the bottom section of the pack and places it on top of the other half. The dealer then will place the cut card near the back of the pack. When the cut card appears during the process of dealing the cards, this signals the dealer to complete the round and then shuffle the cards. The percentage of cards that are played is known as the penetration, and the deeper the penetration (i.e., the further back the dealer places the cut card into the pack of cards), the more profitable the game becomes for card counters.*

The last few hands provided some of the biggest edges George had ever seen as a card counter. And when the shoe ended, an even more incredible thing happened. The dealer simply put all the cards back in the shoe and started dealing again. *She never shuffled the cards!* George could hardly believe his eyes.

It took him several hands to regain his composure and realize how he could best exploit this unique opportunity. He noticed some paper and pencils at the roulette tables. These were provided for superstitious players to keep track of what numbers and colors had previously hit on the wheel. Such knowledge of the past had no way of helping in the future, but many roulette players don't understand that concept.

But blackjack was different. George knew if he could somehow remember where the key cards were in the shoe, he could gain a tremendous edge on future hands. So



with a pencil in hand, he began writing down the location of each ace. The casino manager just smiled at this practice, thinking he had another sucker on his hands.



### Tracking Key Cards

*An ace is a key card in blackjack because players get a bonus payout when they get an untied blackjack. Some players will observe where a just-played ace is placed in the discard tray, and by knowing the shuffling routine used by the dealer, can predict with a fair amount of accuracy the approximate location of the ace in the shuffled pack of cards. These players (or their confederate tablemates) will position the cut card such that the key card will be near the top of the pack of cards. These players will then bet big on the initial rounds of the next shoe with a high expectation of receiving the ace (and potentially a blackjack).*

Over the next few shoes, George bet the table max every time an ace was due. Starting a hand off with an ace gave him a phenomenal 50 percent edge over the house. And he absolutely crushed the club. Mounds of chips piled higher and higher in front of him. At first the manager acted like a typical French aristocrat and hardly seemed concerned over the foreigner's success. But after two hours and \$20,000 in house losses, he finally came unglued. When he realized the dealer's error, he quickly replaced her with someone trained to deal twenty-one.

A similar situation happened later in France on the same trip. Here the dealer at least shuffled the cards, but did so in the most rudimentary fashion possible. George recognized that once again he might be able to keep track of the aces. Using the same paper and pencil technique that he had earlier employed on the Riviera, he followed the aces and approximated when they would appear in subsequent shoes.

George gained more longevity at this casino—partly because the manager was an eighty-year-old veteran of World War I, who was far more interested in conversation than anything else. George, and his wife, Karen, played at this club every day for a month, logging over two hundred hours. The only way they could get a seat every night was to tip the dealers—heavily. Otherwise, all seats always went to locals, even if George had reserved one earlier.

The party finally ended after a month of steady winning. They had a tremendous run and suffered through only one losing day. George left the club \$100,000 richer, a huge score at that point in his career. It is unlikely they would have won so much without their heavy tipping greasing the wheels. But the irony of that is that the Czechs were notorious for their frugality and general lack of tipping. Later they would implement what was commonly called the “Reznek Rule” as a guideline for team members getting comped meals. They were never to tip more than \$1 for breakfast, \$2 for lunch, and \$3 for dinner. This was regardless of the cost of the meal. Needless to say this policy proved very unpopular with waiters and busboys through the years.

Not all stops on their European excursion went according to the textbook. In Spain, they encountered two problems. First, when the Czechs played at a laid-back casino along the Spanish coast, an amorous Portuguese pit boss not only wanted Jan

Vogel to win, she wanted Jan or Vladimir or Walter or George. It really didn't matter to this lonely lady. She desperately wanted to find a romantic companion and she thought the Czechs were filthy rich because of their huge bets. She spent every day chasing them around on the beach and all over the small resort town. Normally, this wouldn't seem like a horrible situation to be in, especially for a playboy like Jan, but since she was short, overweight, and unattractive, no one on the team was willing to date her.

The second problem occurred when they left the country with their winnings. They had heard you could get a much better exchange rate in France, so they decided to take their money with them over the border. There were some petty laws regarding transporting Spanish currency out of the country, but the Czechs figured it was not that big a deal, and there was little chance of getting caught. Unfortunately, they took a wrong turn just before the border and ended up having to turn around right in front of the guards. This raised the soldiers' suspicions and the guards checked their cars. When they found several garbage bags stuffed with money under the seats, the whole area went crazy and special customs agents were brought in. They laid out all the bags and started counting the cash but eventually gave up (the total was a staggering eight million pesetas).

Naturally, they assumed these dangerous men were bank robbers trying to flee the country. For four grueling hours, the customs agents attempted to contact the manager of the casino to confirm the Czechs' story of a huge win at the tables. Jan Vogel used every trick in his arsenal and all one hundred Spanish words he knew to try to defuse the tense situation. But when they could not locate the casino manager, it looked like the Czechs were headed to the local jail despite their fervent pleas of innocence.

Then in a moment of desperate brilliance, Jan remembered the card from the Portuguese pit boss in his pocket. It had her home phone number written on it. He pleaded with the officials to call her to confirm their story. They did and the love-struck pit boss vouched for them, with the stipulation that they had to return in person to the casino to exchange their money. The guards reluctantly decided to let the Czechs go, and the incident was resolved without any jail time.

Now the team refuses to say how they repaid the plump pit boss for her help, although there have been rumors that Jan Vogel was the brave soul who stepped up to the plate and took one for the team.

An even worse fiasco occurred in Italy. One casino there never showed the new cards when they were brought out at the start of each day and also refused to display the used cards in a rack on the table, but instead mysteriously hid them. George wisely chose not to play there. But in another casino in Northern Italy, he was less fortunate.

In the small town of Campione on picturesque Lake Como, three different blackjack teams all discovered the same candy store. The rules were great, there was no heat, and it looked like a game where you could practically write your own check. So the three teams grabbed all seven spots at the one-high limit table and fired away, day after day.

But somehow the cards failed to follow the script and all three teams lost, day after day. Within a week, the card counters were down over \$100,000, and all three

teams were growing increasingly suspicious about the integrity of the game. Usually there was never much fear of getting cheated at shoes. Single-deck games were typically the place where a skilled mechanic could manipulate the cards and outcome of the game. Yet one dealer named Marco consistently beat them like a drum. George couldn't detect exactly what was going on, but the odds of losing so many hands defied the laws of mathematics. Finally, he noticed that an older Italian player always left the table whenever Marco showed up. So George struck up a conversation with him. The gentleman acted surprised that George had never heard about the dealer, since Marco was a fairly well known TV personality in Italy and a magician. The revelation hit George like a ton of bricks. They immediately quit playing against Marco the Master, having learned a very expensive lesson along the way.

But it was back in Atlantic City that the Czechs experienced their greatest success when all card counters were allowed to play for one month in 1979. Surprisingly, few teams were successful during this great opportunity. However, the Czechs couldn't lose. Every member of their team finished in positive territory, and the team won a staggering \$265,000 from Resorts International Casino before the experiment finally ended.

George also wasn't afraid to push the envelope. One day he noticed that the seldom-used \$2.50 chips were almost identical in color to the \$500 chips. So occasionally, he would slip one of these smaller denomination chips between two \$500 chips. The intent of this unusual "sandwich" was to trick an unobservant dealer into paying off every winning hand with three \$500 chips. So, if he lost the bet, he was out only \$1,002.50, but a winner returned \$1,500. This was a powerful ploy, but one he could use only sparingly.

After the great run at Resorts came to an end, George and the team headed back to their home base in Las Vegas. Here the team once again reconfigured before moving on to their next phase of glory.