

TALES FROM THE **PIT**

CASINO TABLE GAMES MANAGERS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

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Introduction

Dealing in a casino presents challenges and rewards not seen in many workplaces. With hundreds of thousands of dollars at stake every minute, casinos are high-stress workplaces. Managing a casino workforce brings stresses of its own.

In 2015, the Center for Gaming Research received a grant from the UNLV University Libraries Advisory Board that enabled it to undertake an oral history project intended to capture the stories of table games managers, including both those currently working in the field and those who have retired. There were several reasons for undertaking this project. First, the table games manager occupies an important vantage point in the casino. As someone with a long tenure in the business and employment at a number of properties and sometimes jurisdictions, he or she is privy to insights into the nature of the casino industry that might elude line employees or executives who have not spent significant time in operations.

Second, table games managers—floor people, boxmen, pit bosses, shift managers, and casino managers—have, thanks to their long tenure in the industry, seen many changes in the casino business. The city in which many of them started their careers in the 1970s (and, in one case, as early as the 1950s) has changed tremendously since then. Listening to table games managers describe their early careers in their own words provides a window into a Las Vegas that is now gone. There are, unfortunately, few documentary sources that describe the everyday operations of casinos and the work conditions in them as these interviewees do.

Finally, the nature of table games management is currently in transition. The traditional career path described by most interviewees—a low-paid break-in stint in a Downtown casino, followed by progressive moves “upward” to dealing on the Las Vegas Strip, ultimately in the highest-end casinos like the Desert Inn, MGM Grand, and Caesars Palace—is no longer the form. Dealers today break in even at casinos that, a generation ago, might have demanded a decade or more of dealing experience even to audition. Casinos have eliminated several management positions, from box to pit manager. Generally, interviewees felt that dealing, while still a viable career choice, has become less prestigious and less remunerative.

For all these reasons, the Center undertook the oral history project. This is a necessarily Las Vegas-centric look at table game management, given the Center’s location in Las Vegas, but interviewees described their work in Las Vegas, Reno, Atlantic City, numerous tribal and state jurisdictions, cruise ships, and as far away as Australia. The crisscrossing career trajectories that some interviewees describe provide a ground-level look at how the proliferation of casino gaming created opportunities for both dealers and managers.

It is hoped that the interviews captured via the project will provide a source for future historians to consider in their writing about gambling in Las Vegas in the late 20th and early 21st century, and will be of interest to those who, right now, are curious about what goes on in gaming pits, and how that action has changed over the past several decades. The complete transcripts of the interviews can be found in UNLV Special Collections; this book presents excerpts from the interviews grouped by topic. Before launching into the topics, a brief introduction to table games management—and some terminology—is in order.

MANAGING THE TABLES

Table game management, as it is practiced in casinos today, is a relatively young discipline. Modern American casinos emerged in Reno and Las Vegas in the middle of the 20th century. Around this time, a basic hierarchy of table games management emerged, determined by the nature of the games that made up the casino.

The chief games offered by casinos at this time were craps, blackjack, roulette, and “the wheel,” a game known alternately as Big Six and the

Wheel of Fortune. Craps was, until the ascendancy of blackjack in the 1960s, the chief moneymaker for casinos, and, with its complex set of wagers and payouts, was considered the most difficult game to deal. Baccarat joined these other games more or less permanently in the 1960s in Las Vegas. Most of the managers interviewed began their careers as dice dealers.

As described by Bill Friedman in 1974's *Casino Management*, the first book devoted to the study of gaming management, the DEALER was at the base of the management hierarchy. This employee was responsible for dealing the cards at blackjack, spinning the roulette wheel, selling chips, and sweeping in losing bets. Craps featured an additional role, the STICKMAN, who controlled the dice and announced the results of each roll.¹

“Dealing,” Friedman notes, “is a highly skilled profession...it takes several years of serious dedication for a person to become a proficient crap dealer.”² Further, dealers were required to not only run a quick, precise game, but to protect the house's money by guarding for cheating by players.³ These essential responsibilities gave dealers in the era in which Friedman wrote two major perks: a schedule that allowed for twenty minutes off each hour, and a combined tip/salary income that surpassed that of most casino managers.⁴

This apparent pay inequity discouraged many proficient dealers from moving up in the management hierarchy. Several interviewees cited the Internal Revenue Service's increasingly tight policing of tip income—including several years' worth of audits—as factors in agreeing to the first step above dealing, the position of FLOORPERSON (originally FLOORMAN or simply FLOOR). The floor was in charge of between two (craps) to six (blackjack or roulette) tables, supervising the game play, monitoring the chip counts, and watching for cheating or other malfeasance, and was the first line of appeal for customers upset by a dealer's call.⁵

Crap games had an intermediate level of supervision: the BOXPERSON (BOXMAN, BOX), who sat in the center of table. From this perch, the box monitored the table's chip supply and issued rulings on gameplay. Box also had responsibility for the integrity of the table's dice and watched for cheating and theft by dealers and players alike. Friedman describes the Desert Inn as having inaugurated a policy of employing two boxmen on each game to deter theft. Most Las Vegas casinos, however, maintained one boxman. Northern Nevada

casinos, with lesser, lower stakes action, sometimes eliminated the box and even the stick positions, giving the two remaining dealers on the game additional responsibilities. This economy, Friedman noted, reduced expenses but also slowed down the game.⁶

Above the floor, the PIT BOSS supervised a grouping of roughly between six and a dozen games in a pit. Within the pit, the pit boss oversaw operations, settled disputes about play, interacted with patrons (including the power to award them complimentaries, or comps. Removed from the immediate supervision of the tables, the pit boss held a position of considerable authority; he or she was responsible for the human resources function of keeping the games staffed by happy (or at least responsive) dealers, ensuring the players felt they were getting a fair deal, and watching for theft, cheating, and collusion by employees, subordinate managers, and players.

The pit boss reported to the SHIFT MANAGER, who was responsible for all table game operations during one of three shifts, day, swing, or grave. Theoretically, the shift manager was in charge of the entire casino, but, as Friedman notes, he only became involved with keno or slot operations in extreme cases. In some casinos, shift managers doubled as assistants to the casino manager.⁷ Over the time period described by the interviewees, many casinos began reclassifying their shift managers as casino managers, giving them more perceived authority to act as final arbiter on play disputes and other patron-facing incidents.

The CASINO MANAGER was responsible for setting all aspects of casino operational policy and for hiring, promoting, and firing dealers and managers. Friedman, writing at a time of transition, explains that “traditionally, most of the Strip hotels...made the casino manager the most powerful executive in the establishment.”⁸ While this was an “effective” management structure when casinos were relatively small, the growing size of resorts, and the growing prominence of non-gaming elements (even in the early 1970s) was dictating a shift towards a more balanced power structure, in which a property president presided over all gaming and non-gaming department heads so as to “coordinate and integrate the policies of all the departments and produce a unified and efficient business venture.”⁹

This was the management structure which most of the interviewees in this book came into the casino industry under from the 1970s to the 1990s. It had a distinction rare in American industry; those seeking

promotions actually accepted pay cuts to rise in the ranks. Judging from the interviews, most future managers did not enter the industry with a plan for advancing; for the most part, they were attracted to dealing by the potential for high incomes, and later chose to pursue careers in management for a variety of reasons.

In the time that many interviewees have worked in the industry, table games management has changed. Writing in 2003, Taucer and Easley state that, in earlier years, “casino managers were generally placed in their positions of authority because of nepotism, seniority, or even their gold handicap. In the sixties and seventies, a formal education was not a job requirement for a casino manager.”¹⁰ In the ensuing generation, however, there had been much change: “Today,” they write, “it is rare to find a table games manager who does not hold at least one college degree.”¹¹

In addition, the responsibilities of the casino manager both expanded and contracted. At the time that Friedman wrote, the manager was the ultimate authority over all casino employees, and the primary decider for a host of operational and player decisions. Since then, the advent of other departments, from human resources to casino credit, has lessened the burden on managers somewhat, although they now have the additional responsibility of coordinating between the larger management structure, other departments, and their dealers.

Another expansion came with the rise of “secondary” objectives for managers (their primary objective, of course, being to maintain and increase profits). Taucer and Easley describe casino managers as being additionally charged with “social responsibilities” such as preventing underage gambling, assisting compulsive gamblers, working with organizations like the United Way, and guaranteeing employee satisfaction.¹²

Many of the interviewees not only describe the shift in table games management, but explain how these changes have impacted both the daily operations of casinos and the morale of both employees and managers. As dealers under the old system and managers under the new one, they are in a unique position to comment on this historic shift.

DEALING AS A JOB AND CAREER

The interviews were conducted with no set goal in mind or thesis to support. Interviewees were given an open microphone and a series of open-ended questions, with minimal prompting from the interviewer. As a result, the interviews provide a cross section of how the job of dealing—and managing dealers—has changed in the past 40 years.

Dealing casino games is not an easy job. In addition to the difficulties associated with mastering the physical and mental demands of dealing cards/dice and calculating and delivering the correct payoffs, dealers are charged with both protecting the game from player cheating and ensuring those same players remain happy. There is a more fundamental tension here: if the players are winning, they are satisfied and likely to tip more generously. But if the players constantly win, management, which safeguards the bottom line, will be displeased. So, on a daily basis, the average dealer can expect to make someone unhappy. The trick to dealing seems to be managing that unhappiness.

Despite that seemingly no-win situation, the managers interviewed for this project for the most part seemed happy about their decision to become dealers. Some of this may be self-selecting—those who regret the decision do not stay in the field for years (or decades) and rise up the ranks. But in their recollections of their days as dealers, one thing that emerges from many of the interviews is a sense of fun. The job may have been stressful, but it was rarely boring. In addition, the shared antagonists (management on the one hand, and players on the other) assisted in building a sense of camaraderie with fellow dealers.

Table games management in Las Vegas—and even internationally—was and still is a relatively small community. One of the most interesting things about conducting the interviews was what a small world the table games management field is. As can be expected, those with decades of experience in an occupation where frequent moves are the norm and not the exception run across many of the same people in their careers. Unlike other careers, where employees typically pick an employer with the expectation that they will remain for several years, dealing in Las Vegas involved a great deal more job-hopping. Most interviewees who were well established boasted at

least a half-dozen different casino employers. Perhaps the most well-traveled worked for 17 different casinos in nine different markets. The peripatetic nature of both dealing and management assisted in dealers developing stronger attachments to their craft—the profession of dealing itself—and particular managers and colleagues as opposed to casinos.

Another thing that is clear from the interviews is that successful dealers—both new and established—were motivated by a pride in their professional execution of their duties. This included both the technical and mechanical aspects of dealing and the maintenance of a stoic façade no matter what players, fellow dealers, and managers threw at them.

Particularly in the time before the IRS began ratcheting up its pressure to collect taxes on previously unreported tip income (the late 1980s) and when human resources departments began to assume many of the personnel responsibilities (hiring, discipline, and firing) previously held by the casino manager, interviewees spoke of their pride in achieving their positions as dealers. At the time, most dealers “broke in,” or started working as dealers, in Downtown Las Vegas. Some were recent graduates of independent dealers’ schools; some attended schools run by the casinos themselves; some were already employees in other departments.

Before the hiring responsibility shifted to human resources departments, most casino managers hired dealers under a strict protocol: they had to work their way up to more prestigious—and better paying—dealing opportunities. To get a start in the profession, dealers had to start at break-in houses, usually Downtown Las Vegas casinos whose low table limits attracted low-betting patrons—and generated relatively low tip income. From break-in houses, ambitious dealers would, after at least one year, progress to more prestigious Downtown casinos, whose higher levels of play allowed for more tips. With more time—anywhere between one and five years—dealers could then make the jump to lower-tier Strip casinos. After more time—typically several years—at those houses, particularly dedicated dealers could then progress to the elite Strip casinos—for many years, the Desert Inn, Bally’s, Las Vegas Hilton, and Caesars Palace.

Another change captured in the interviews is the shift from tips being divided between craps crews on individual tables to those tips being divvied up among all dealers on a shift or across three shifts.