



# Mastering The Comp Game

by Mike Aponte

*Mike Aponte is one of the main characters in the best-selling book, "Bringing Down the House: The Inside Story of Six MIT Students Who Took Vegas for Millions." As one of the MIT blackjack team's most successful big players, Mike lived the lavish, Vegas lifestyle of a high stakes gambler. Mike experienced the red carpet treatment and enjoyed the amazing comps afforded to high rollers by casinos. Mike is co-founder of the Blackjack Institute ([www.BlackjackInstitute.com](http://www.BlackjackInstitute.com)), which offers an array of products and services that teach players how to win at blackjack.*

Aside from the prospect of winning big, comps are the most appealing lure for gamblers. Comps are enticing "gifts" from casinos like free valet parking, RFB (room, food and beverage) and show tickets. For high rollers practically anything under the sun is possible. As a big player for the MIT blackjack team, not only did I stay in luxurious penthouse suites and dine in fine restaurants, but I also enjoyed extraordinary perks, such as an all-expense paid ski trip to Aspen and ringside seats at championship fights. Of course casinos didn't grant me these incredible comps out of the goodness of their hearts. Competition in the casino industry has grown increasingly fierce, especially in Las Vegas, and comps are a smart and necessary business practice to attract gamblers and encourage return visits. Comps aren't actually free for 99% of players. Most gamblers pay a pretty penny for their supposed freebies. If you understand how the comp system works however, blackjack can provide tremendous bang

for your gambling buck, as well as the opportunity to make your comps truly complimentary.

Comps are based on how much a casino expects to win from you. Casinos are willing to give back a percentage of a player's expected loss in the form of comps. Comp returns range from 20% to 40%, depending on the casino, with 30% being the average. Think of comps as a rebate on your expected loss. The formula for the expected loss of a blackjack player has four simple components:

Expected loss =

Average bet x hours played x hands/hour x house advantage

A player's average bet and hours played, as well as hands/hour, make up what casinos call "action." Action is equal to average bet times hours played times hands/hour. This is the total amount of money a gambler puts into play. In the expected loss formula, for hands per hour and house advantage, casinos assume blackjack players play 60 hands/hour and that the house has

an edge of 2%. Given these numbers, it's easy to determine expected loss from a player's action. A player's action is tracked by casino floorpeople and entered by computer into the player rating system. To illustrate how the comp formula works, imagine a gambler named Joe. Skill-wise Joe is a mediocre blackjack player, and his average bet is \$100 a hand. For one hour of play, this is Joe's expected loss:

Expected loss = \$100/hand x 1 hour  
x 60 hands/hour x 2% = \$120

Casinos expect to win \$120 an hour from Joe, and based on a 30% comp return, he will receive \$36 in comps (30% x \$120) for every hour of play. From a value perspective, Joe's getting the short end of the stick. A \$36 comp rebate for a \$120 expected loss is far from an even exchange.

So how is it possible to turn the comp system in your favor? Let's first look at the component of house advantage. When calculating expected loss for blackjack players, casinos assume a 2% advantage because this is what they expect to win on average. The key word is "average." The house advantage in blackjack is dependent upon the skill level of a player. It's impossible for casinos to determine their precise advantage over every blackjack player since skill level varies considerably among gamblers. In other table games,

like roulette, the house advantage is the same for each player because skill isn't a factor.

Blackjack players' decisions actually determine their odds of winning. The easiest and most powerful way to improve your odds of winning is to learn basic strategy. Basic strategy is the correct way to play your hand versus the dealer's up-card, and its importance cannot be overstated. Basic strat-

egy maximizes both your expected win and the value of your comps.

What does basic strategy do for you in terms of dollars? Basic strategy chops the house advantage from 2% down to 0.5%, which reduces your expected loss by a whopping 75%. Remember Joe? He has an expected loss of \$120 an hour. What happens if he learns basic strategy? Joe's hourly expected loss plummets to \$30 (\$100/hand x 1 hour x 60 hands/hr x 0.5%). Learning basic strategy saves Joe \$90 an hour, and over \$1,000 for every 12 hours of play, a dramatic difference. Joe continues to earn comps based on the the average house advantage of 2% and the casino's assumption that he's losing \$120/hr, but he's actually losing only \$30/hr. Joe now has the upper hand in the comp game. His comp rebate of \$36/hr is greater than his expected loss of \$30/hr.

By wisely targeting blackjack games with the best rules, it's possible to even further reduce the house advantage. A basic strategy player can pare the house advantage down to 0.25% in a six-deck shoe game with the following rules: dealer stands on soft 17, re-split aces, double after split, and late surrender. If Joe plays this game, his hourly expected loss drops to \$15 (\$100/hand x 1 hour x 60 hands/hr x 0.25%). Joe's \$36/hr comp rebate now costs him only \$15/hr. He receives more than \$2 in comps for every \$1 in expected loss. All else being equal, single- and double-deck are more favorable than multi-deck games, but most single- and double-deck games offer unfavorable rules. Many single-deck games pay a dreadful 6/5 on blackjack. The house has up to 8x's the advantage on 6/5 single-deck blackjack compared to the most favorable six-deck games. Never play a game that pays less than the standard 3/2 payout on blackjack.

Basic strategy combined with savvy game selection substantially decreases the house advantage, but it's important to recognize that casinos will still have a slight edge. The fewer hands you play, the less money you

will lose. You can boost your comps and minimize your risk by getting credit for more hands than you actually play. In the formula for expected loss, casinos use 60 as the average number of hands played per hour. The key word again is "average." The number of hands played per hour can vary significantly depending on a number of factors, such as dealer speed, the number of players at the table, and cut card placement. Crowded tables are ideal because fewer rounds are dealt per hour. A shallow cut card is preferable (two decks or more in a six-deck shoe) because fewer cards are dealt before the dealer shuffles. The more often the dealer shuffles, the more playing time you earn for just sitting at the table. Here's a bad scenario for maximizing comps – head-to-head play with a lightning fast dealer and a deep cut card (1.5 decks or less in a six-deck shoe). Under these conditions you could easily top 100 hands an hour.

To minimize your risk, try to slow down play and sit out as many hands as possible. If you're smooth, observant and quick on your feet, you can pick your spots. For example, you can pull your chips back when you ask the floorperson for a meal comp, or you can sit out a few hands when the cocktail waitress arrives with your drink. Chatting it up and discussing your hands with the dealer and other players, especially a friend, is an excellent way to slow the pace of the game. This is another reason to seek crowded tables; they are more conducive to socializing. Stepping away from the table to talk on your cell phone and well-timed bathroom breaks are additional ways of accumulating playing time without risking anything. If you keep an eye out for opportunities to sit out, and play at a full table with a slow dealer, a shallow cut card, and a talkative group of players, your hands per hour rate can dip well below 60 hands/hour.

In addition to earning comp points for more hands than you actually play, you can inflate your action by reducing your bet at opportune times. Whenever

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you sit down at a blackjack table, always present your player card to have your play rated. Whenever the floorperson leaves the area or is distracted, decrease the size of your bet. Playing at crowded tables during peak hours when it's busy makes it more likely your smaller bets will go unnoticed, not to mention that it's easier to sit out a hand or two when the opportunity presents itself. When the floorperson stops by to check up on everyone's play, raise your bet back to normal to maintain a higher player rating.

You should never be embarrassed to ask for a comp, but always ask politely. A little courtesy and social engineering can go a long way. If dealers, floorpeople and pit bosses like you, you're more likely to get the benefit of the doubt when it comes to your player rating. Since comp policies and guidelines can vary from casino to casino you should find out exactly how much action is required for specific comps. You can call casino marketing and even

better, establish a good relationship with a casino host. Casino hosts have some discretion when it comes to granting comps, especially after a player has lost. Make sure you get on the casino marketing mailing list in order to take advantage of promotional offers such as coupons, complimentary/discounted rooms and free entry into blackjack tournaments. Comps are there for the taking, but you have to be resourceful and proactive because casinos aren't going to hand them to you. (*Comp City*, written by Max Rubin, is an invaluable guide to the art and science of the comp game.)

The key to maximizing your comps is having casinos believe you're playing worse, playing longer and betting

*The key to maximizing your comps is having casinos believe you're playing worse, playing longer and betting more than you actually are.*

more than you actually are. By understanding the system and adopting a strategic approach, you can enjoy comps that exceed your expected loss. The most important aspect of the comp game is improving

your blackjack skills. The most critical step to becoming a better blackjack player is learning basic strategy, which draws you almost even with the house.

Card counting can put you over the top and take your game to a whole new level. If you gain the advantage, your comps would truly be on the house, and the casinos would, in effect, pay you to play blackjack. Whether your goal is to win money over the long run or maximize the value of your comps, blackjack is your best bet. □



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