



TALES OF A CARD COUNTER

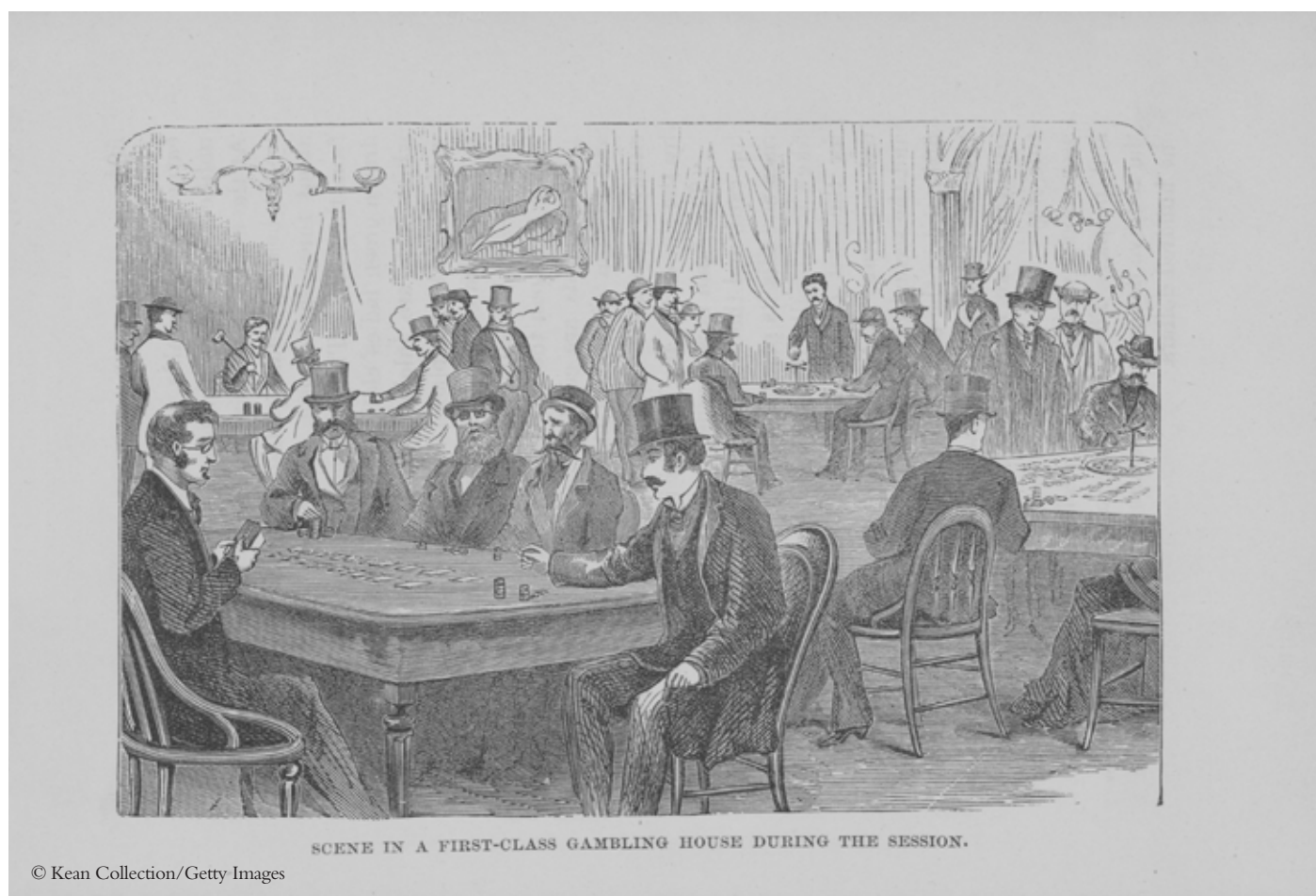
Words Ollie Gordon

Photography Sophie Wright

The art of card counting was developed in the 1950s and has won public recognition and cult cultural status thanks to its representation in films such as Rain Man and more recently 21. The game operates on the fringes of the law: it's technically legal, but you won't be in a casino long if you're suspected of it. And it's that opaqueness that has attached a level of intrigue and mystery to card counters eluding other professional gamblers. The art's secretive practitioners are assumed to be introverted, hyper-numerate phenomena. But Ollie Gordon discovers that it takes all kinds.



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It's a cold, winter afternoon and I'm sitting at a corner table in the Artful Dodger on Royal Mint Street. I'm gazing blankly out the window at the enduring grey, half pondering whether Liverpool will beat Bolton in the late kick-off. Sebastian Ross, or Seb as he asks me to call him, puts two pints of Stella down in front of us and sits. I consider his appearance for as long as social convention permits. He's difficult to label: medium-height, slender, good-looking in a swarthy way, and in his twenties. He's wearing a smart, beige three-quarter length coat that says City boy; but has a scruffy beard and shoulder-length, curly dark hair that point towards an affinity with hemp-based clothing. He reminds me of a seventeenth-century French musketeer; if D'Artagnan was into shrooms and afrobeat. I'm looking for signs of Seb's profession. You see, Seb is a professional card counter; a casino's worst nightmare, a blackjack hustler.

For those unfamiliar with the concept, card counting is a gambling strategy based on memorising cards to give the player a statistical advantage over the house. It's founded on probability but, if done properly over a defined period of time, offers the wielder untold riches at the expense of casinos. I took on the interview wanting to find out just what

	My hand	UpCard 2-6	UpCard 7-A	
HARD	4-8	HIT		
	9	DOUBLE except 2	HIT	
	10-11	DOUBLE if more points than dealer		
	12-16	STAND hit 12 vs 2,3	HIT surr 15 vs 9, vs 9-A	
	17+	STAND		
	SOFT	13-14	HIT, but double vs 5,6	
15-17		HIT, but double vs 5,6,6		
18		STAND VS 2,7,8	DOUBLE VS 3-6	HIT VS 9-A
19+		STAND		
SPLITS	2,3,7	SPLIT vs 2-7		
	4	SPLIT vs 5-6		
	6	SPLIT vs 2-6		
	8, A	SPLIT always		
	9	SPLIT vs 2-6 and 8-9		

type of person becomes a card counter. To me, the moniker brings to mind insanely numerate autistics, MIT maths graduates and debonair comen. So far, Seb isn't fitting any of my pre-conceived models, but there is definitely an intriguing look in his eye: a mixture of excitement, insatiable curiosity and a tangible lust for adventure.

If Seb's appearance threw my expectations, his backstory was just as confusing. He was born in London to the unlikely combination of a vicar father and a contemporary dancer mother. "She was the source of all my creative leanings and encouraged me to do things a bit differently," Seb says. He had a transient childhood as his father moved from vicarage to vicarage, and until the age of eighteen he was a well-behaved Christian boy. "I was pretty evangelical. I would go to God festivals and tell my schoolmates not to have sex before marriage." But Seb insists his father was never pushy with religion: "He never pressured me into believing, he just served as a great example of how to live an altruistic life."

At the age of sixteen, Seb won an army scholarship which furnished him with a bursary to attend an exclusive Dorset public school, and university after that. In exchange, he signed a contract committing him to the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst after his studies and service in the army for a period of three years. At the time, Seb was delighted with the scholarship, having always dreamed of the adventure of an army life.

However, in his eighteenth year, Seb underwent a delayed adolescent rebellion, and subsequent existential awakening that changed him forever. Perhaps typically, it struck in his gap year. After deciding he needed to see more of the world, Seb spent the next nine months travelling by himself around India, Nepal and South America. The trip was an eye-opener, not least in completely undermining his religious beliefs. "I was meeting people who had never encountered my Christian God, and for that reason would not be saved. It made me realise that God's salvation is geographic and pre-determined, and that seemed the cruelest concept. It completely turned my life upside down." As his religious beliefs slowly ebbed away, they were replaced by the usual trappings of a hedonistic youth.

On his return, Seb started studying theology at Edinburgh but, unsurprisingly, it didn't take long before he changed course. After three years of intellectual and social experimentation, Seb graduated with a degree in philosophy. However, he now had a dilemma: he was still tied into his army contract, but a career in the Forces was the furthest thing from the 'new' Seb's life aspirations.

His fortunes were to change one evening in 2012. In a chance meeting at a Bob Dylan concert, Seb encountered an octogenarian named Jack (a pseudonym, on Seb's insistence) and over the following weeks learned his compelling life story.

Hailing from Canada, Jack had spent his youth hanging out with the likes of Leonard Cohen in the Montreal jazz scene. In the 60s, he had moved to London to set up his own underground card game in Soho and, being a "polymath with an insane head for numbers" (as Seb describes him), subsequently taught himself the new art of card counting. He would spend the next thirty years travelling the world making money hand-over-fist with his particular skill. However, in the early 90s, Jack pushed it too far and, after rampaging through Vegas, plundering its casinos for 16 million dollars, he found his details shared with every major casino in the Western world. Since the spree, Jack has been banned from entering most gaming halls in the US and Europe and has had to get creative to ply his trade, working in card counting syndicates and hustling small, obscure joints in developing countries.

One fine day Jack introduced Seb to his business partner Tom (another pseudonym), a hedge fund manager whom Jack had met in Cyprus in the 90s and who now invests in his gambling. After the financial crisis in 2008, Tom took a lot of his money out of the stock market and ploughed it into Jack. "He says the returns are more reliable," explains Seb. Jack and Tom told Seb they could solve his career crisis, offering to pay off his army contract if he would join their gambling syndicate. "It didn't take me too long to accept," says Seb. So over the next few weeks Jack taught our man to card count.

In layman's terms, card counting is a system to determine whether the next hand is likely to give a probable advantage to the player or to the dealer. Card counters look to reduce the inherent 'house edge' of the casino by keeping a running tally of all high and low-valued cards that emerge in a game, allowing them to bet more with less risk when the count gives an advantage, as well as reduce losses during an unfavourable count. They can also alter their playing decisions based on the composition of the remaining cards. "In short, you're predicting what cards are going to come up, and playing with statistics and probability," says Seb. "It's never going to be 100 per cent accurate all the time, but the statistics tell me that over, say, a 1000-hour period, I will be up. It's about having enough of a bankroll to see you through the bad times."

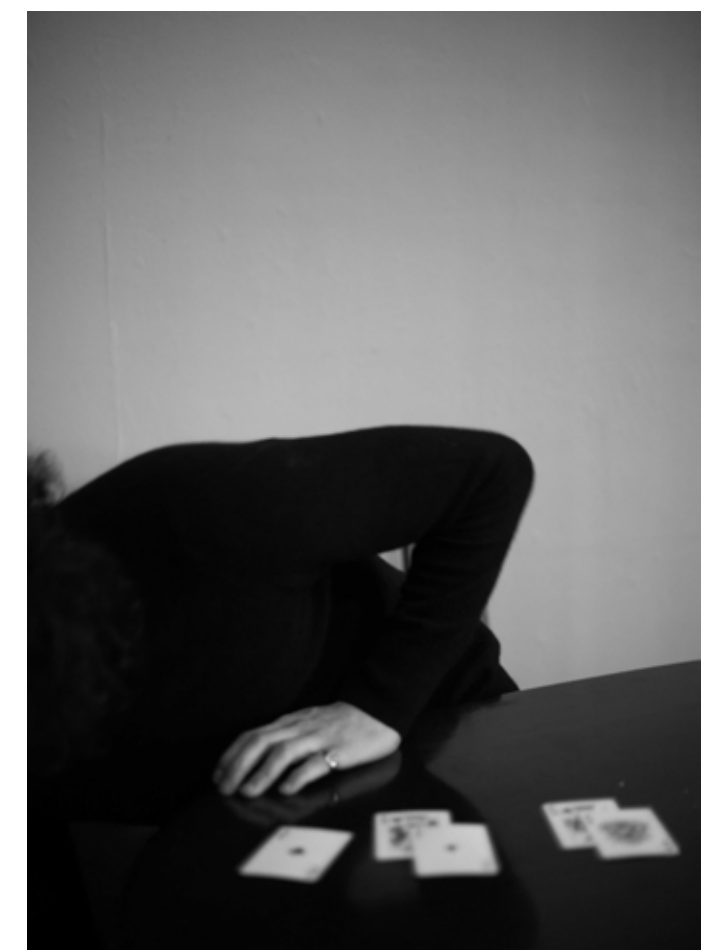
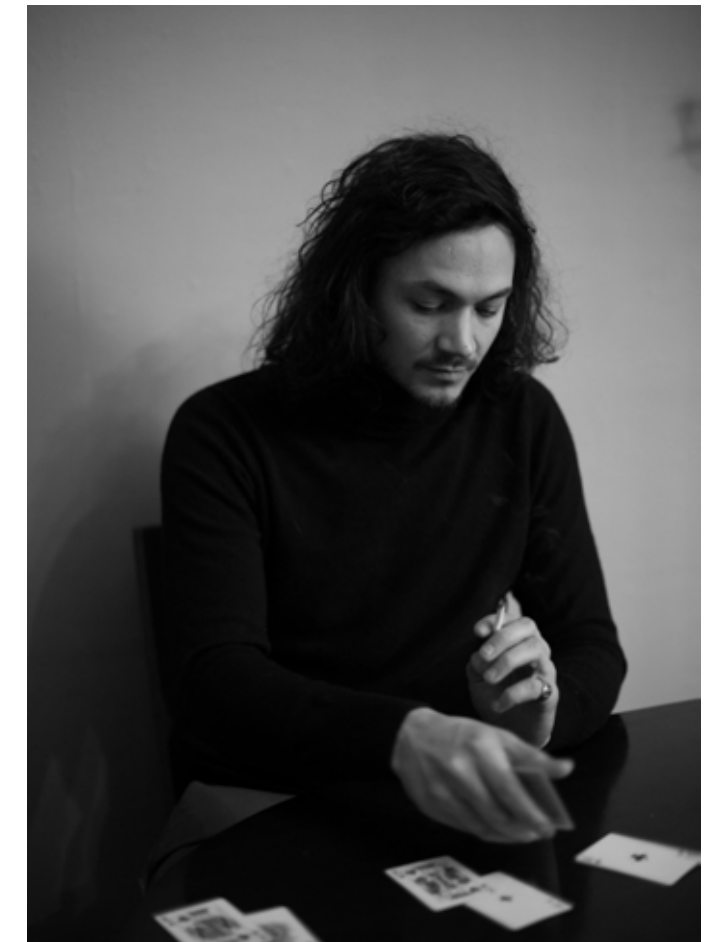
That is the technique in its simplest form but, unsurprisingly, there's a lot more to it. As Seb goes into greater depth, I feel my head start to swim. "So, you have to be a bit of a maths genius then?" I ask. "No, not really," Seb replies. "You've got to have a head for numbers but I'm no Rain Man. You've also got to be good under pressure, because you're always being watched in a casino and the pit bosses and cameras know what they're looking for. We've had some real Mensa-types in our team who are great on paper but melt when they get under the lights."

After Jack imparted his wisdom, Seb locked himself away for three weeks to hone his game. He emerged, joined Jack's five-man syndicate and started hustling his first casinos. Not long after, Jack announced the two of them would be undertaking a six-month tour of Eastern Europe to plunder the region's not-so-finest gambling joints. "Weren't you worried about the danger?" I interrupt, recalling the Hollywood horror stories of card counters having their hands pulped by hammer-wielding Vegas mobsters and perhaps unfairly judging the regulatory oversight of the average Eastern European casino. "Nah, it's not like that anymore," says Seb. "Casinos will just ask you to leave. In fact, a mafia-run casino is a gold mine if you can find one. They're really badly run and they never pick up what you're doing. Plus, they don't really care, they're just using the casino for money laundering, so the more that flows through it – even out – the more legit it looks."

"It's the gamblers you have to worry about. Jack got robbed in Bulgaria once: they beat him to a pulp, took him to his room and stole 10,000 pounds. He had to have a security guard for a long time after that. You really have to be on your guard whenever you're leaving a casino."

Jack and Seb embarked on their gambling eurotrip at the end of 2012. Their first stop was Serbia, but they made little headway, encountering what Seb terms "burnt out games" (casinos with highly-preventive measures for card counting). They then moved on to Macedonia, a country known for its abundance of glitzy casinos catering to moneyed Greek mobsters, but ran into the same problems. "In the end, we were kicked out of every casino in the country in less than two weeks," says Seb, grinning widely. So they skipped over the border into Bulgaria, and found what they were looking for. They hit the jackpot in the southern city of Plovdiv, spending the next four weeks raiding every joint in town. But the grand tour had to be cut short after Jack had a bad fall and shattered a femur.

Back in London, Seb started to treat gambling as his quotidian existence. Aside from the odd foray to other UK





cities, Jack and Seb would stay in London, switching casinos regularly, but mostly targeting 'hot games' in Chinatown, Mayfair and South Kensington. That is to say, casinos that have few safeguards in place to stop card counting. Such measures could include: cut cards randomly placed in the deck which, when reached, result in a reshuffle; multiple decks – sometimes up to eight – making it harder to count; card scanners and electronically tagged gambling chips, used to identify card counting betting patterns in players; facial recognition technology, to identify known counters as they enter the casino; and continuous shuffling machines, which completely negate the ability to count.

After six months or so, Seb had perfected his game and was living the high life. He was working two to three hours a day, making considerable amounts. He is extremely cagey when it comes to his earnings, but concedes he and Jack once made 20,000 pounds in a month. "I thought it would be my profession forever, I didn't think the good run would ever end," he says wistfully. "I was making good money and not even working that hard, it was just great. I was also spending like no one's business. It was pretty fucking mad."

"So just how much money can you make?" I ask. "Well, you should be earning an average of 100 pounds an hour, but it can be a lot less or a lot higher depending on your run," he replies. "A counter I know called Broken Wing has been making around 2 million pounds a year. But you've got to be careful how much you take from one casino to avoid suspicion – if I made over three grand in a day in one place, I wouldn't go back for a while."

By the beginning of 2014, Seb had become so profitable that Jack and Tom were allowing him to take their funds and gamble on his lonesome. In exchange, the pair would take 50 per cent of his winnings. Seb also started getting into the recruitment and management side of the syndicate.

The money he re-invested in the syndicate was squandered when a series of bad recruits made substantial losses. To make matters worse, Seb underwent a sustained losing streak himself. Months went on with no end in sight, and he began to encounter the darker side of gambling for a living.

"When there's no definite payday and you know it's coming but it takes months and months, it rips your nerves to shreds. You start to portray the more negative traits you see in gamblers: the anger, the frustration. When you get a win it never feels like one, because statistically that is what's supposed to happen, but the loss is absolutely crushing." Yet as Seb looked to his fellow counters for answers to his malaise, he began to observe some unsavoury home truths about the profession. He realised that most of his counterparts were not contented folk, generally introverted single men, and Seb recognised that to be a good counter you need shed yourself of all feeling. "You have to be completely in control of your emotions to win. In the long run that means changing your personality, becoming a bit of a robot, which doesn't do much good for your personal life," he says.

As Seb looked up from the table, he also started to despair at what he saw around him. "Gambling in the day, you see all the same faces. These are people who would sell their grandmothers for a bet. Gambling is the worst addiction. I've seen people sign away their houses, cripples bet away their benefits. And the casinos don't give a fuck. They deal in human weakness, it's a grubby business."

But everything changed for Seb in June last year when he met his current girlfriend, burgeoning dressmaker to the stars Coco Fennell, one evening at circus class (having only known Seb for two hours, the peculiar location somehow doesn't surprise me). "Coco's made me realise that I'm not happy in what I do now and, more importantly, given me the inspiration to go and start my own business. She's done it herself from scratch and although I had ideas before she came along, without her I wouldn't have had the balls to act on them."

So eight months on, Seb now finds himself on the verge of launching a new company that aims to connect local businesses with newly moved tenants. Typically atypical, he is living in the bell tower of an old church near Tower Bridge, a decaying relic of his father's parish. He still gambles to supplement his income, but only on a needs-must basis.

It's at this point Seb calls an end to the interview. He needs to go play an away game for the pub's pool team. "My team's made up of me, an ex-con, a tramp and a seventy-year-old granny", he informs me, his eyes positively lighting up. I realise I've failed in my mission. If a card-counter *type* does exist, Seb's not it. He's an interloper in the best sense of the word: a joyrider of life, an experience junkie. And at the fresh age of twenty-five, his card counting career won't be his last escapade.