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SELF-HELP

Ask Dr. BlackJack
Sam Barrington
Author House
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Sam Barrington wins at blackjack so often he is barred at forty-six casinos. Why? Not for cheating or card counting (which he says "is a total waste of time,") but because, as one dealer described him to a pit boss: "He's a weird one. He quits when he's ahead."

"Dr. Blackjack," as Barrington calls himself, is more businessman than gambler. He approaches the game as a business; mathematically and seriously but also with an eye to having fun. Blackjack, after all, is not his profession—it is his hobby, and one in which he is fortunate enough to make money. Barrington spends a lot of time and effort getting to that level, recording and analyzing 10,000 games and "training" at this indoor sport for about four hours per night and often twice that long on weekends. That training is the most amusing of his thirty-two very short chapters (some of which barely fill one page and none more than eight).

In his very light, conversational style, Barrington happily shares what he has learned in thirty years at the blackjack table. His hints and teachings, however, come with many caveats and outright warnings. Some are obvious and folksy, like, "Don't ever drink while playing cards or driving a bulldozer. Both are very dangerous." Others are more practical and businesslike, and deal mostly with knowing when it is time to walk away from the table, especially when winning.

Barrington spends the first half of his book on what to expect—and to look out for—while in a casino. He outlines the traps and trip-ups, offers advice on how to act and on what to do and not do, giving a brief overview of the rather formidable foe against which all gamblers, especially the casual ones, are pitted. That enemy is the house, which is so confident of coming out ahead that it "doesn't have to cheat."

There are cautionary tales of casino hookers and the "high-roller room," which he describes as "a disaster waiting to happen," as well as such sober advice as to take only as much money to gamble as "you are willing to throw out of the car window on your way to the casino." He tells readers right up front, "If you bought this book to learn how to break the casinos, then

send this book back to me and I'll refund your money."

If half of the book is like sitting on a barstool, having a casual conversation with an old-time gambler, the other half is like sitting in a classroom with a statistician. The latter part is the meat and potatoes of Barrington's system, complete with what he calls a "flashcard" and two smaller charts that advise when to hold, split or double-down on a hand. He breaks down key plays and decisions by the percentages of win, loss and "push" (a tie with the dealer, which means the player's bet is returned to him). This part of the book includes answers, as the chapter names indicate, to such questions as, "When Do I Hit the Dreaded '12'" and "Do I Always Split A, A?"

The writing is deceptively folksy and, at times, light-hearted. *Ask Dr. Blackjack*, like the game itself, should not be judged by its short length or seemingly simple components. There is much wisdom here, and not only about how to play and win the game, but also on how to survive winning—or losing—at this furious foray into the world of gambling.

Mark McLaughlin