Entrepreneurs of the Card Table

What Poker and Blackjack Teach About Luck, Life, and Business

by John Crawford

Cardplayers have much time to think. Sitting at tables for hours at a stretch, watching a dealer dish out bad breaks and losing streaks, they can turn into philosophers pondering the lessons that games of chance teach.

Yuchun Lee, MBA ’96, and Bernard Lee, MBA ’99, (they’re not related) are two such thinkers. They have been successful as gamblers, as well as entrepreneurs, and they have contemplated the role of skill and luck and the importance of taking the long view, whether in the casino, one’s career, or one’s life.

Yuchun Lee is now chairman, CEO, and cofounder of Unica Corp., a global provider of marketing software based in Waltham, Mass., but in the 1990s, he was a member of the MIT blackjack team that inspired the movie 21.

Those were heady times. The team often won big, and the casinos showered Lee with complimentary gifts: expensive bottles of wine, helicopter rides, huge hotel rooms. But Lee made sure to stay levelheaded. In blackjack, one must be objective at all times, when winning or, especially, losing. “In downtimes, people make foolish decisions,” he says, an observation that seems all too relevant, not just to cards, but to economic downturns.

Bernard Lee of Wayland, Mass., is a professional poker player and media personality. As a child, he sat at the top of the stairs and listened to the banter of his father and uncles as they played cards. It was a grown-up world, and it made an impression. “You thought that was being a man,” he says.

His father taught Lee how to play poker. He also told Lee how to tough out bad luck and losing hands. “The harder you work,” his dad said, “good things will come.”

That’s good advice for all things, not just the game of poker.

The Poker Professional

With cards, luck always comes into account, even for the professionals.

Bernard Lee has earned more than $1.3 million at poker tournaments and has become a media personality offering advice on the game. He hosts “The Bernard Lee Poker Show” on 1510 AM, a Quincy, Mass., radio station, and is a poker columnist for ESPN.com and Boston Herald. His columns from the Herald have been collected into two books, The Final Table, Volume I and Volume II.

While Lee believes that skill plays a big role in poker, more than luck, the whims of chance still can’t be discounted. The game is a fickle one. Lee has had dry spells when he didn’t win for months. He has had heartbreaking tournament defeats where he just missed winning money. “This isn’t as easy as it looks,” Lee says. “On average, 80 to 90 percent of the time you fail.”

When the cards don’t come his way, Lee thinks of his family. He keeps a picture of his children, 6-year-old Noah and 4-year-old Maya, in front of him while he plays. The picture helps to center Lee and put things in perspective, reminding him that, win or lose, his children are waiting for him at home.

Another part of Lee’s poker routine is his sunglasses, which hide his eyes, allowing him to observe other players.
“They don’t know they’re being watched,” says Lee, who will turn his head, acting as if he’s looking at a player to his side, but behind the sunglasses, his eyes stare at the player in front of him.

Lee is watching for clues, known as tells, to what cards players are holding. One opponent’s tell, for instance, revealed if he planned to bet. Whenever the player moved his cards to his left hand, Lee knew that the man was staying in the game and preparing to bet with his right hand. “There are a lot of tells people have,” Lee says.

Being a professional cardplayer wasn’t Lee’s first career choice. Originally, he wanted to be a doctor but ultimately decided on marketing. He went to work at medical device manufacturer Boston Scientific and earned a Babson MBA with a marketing concentration.

His career progressed. There were promotions, and Boston Scientific once named him marketing manager of the year. “I couldn’t ask for a better job,” Lee says. “I really believed that was what I was meant to do.”

Then everything changed. Poker always appealed to Lee, ever since listening to his father and uncles’ card games long ago, but around 2004 or so, his interest turned much more serious. He read books on the game, took extensive notes, and essentially became a poker scholar. An analytical person, he enjoyed the math and odds surrounding the game. He also liked the art of it. “To bluff someone off a hand is an art,” he says.

In 2005, Lee qualified for the World Series of Poker, though his participation in the prestigious tournament, which ultimately would change Lee’s life, almost didn’t happen. A week before he was set to leave for Las Vegas, his wife Katie had unexpected surgery to remove a benign ovarian tumor.

At first, she was recovering nicely, but two days before his flight, Katie suffered increased abdominal pain, and Lee decided he wasn’t going to Las Vegas. Poker could wait. Family was more important.

Fortunately, an examination showed everything was OK, and Katie assured her husband. “Go,” she said. “Live your dream.” Lee proceeded to have “the week of my life in poker” at the World Series, finishing 13th and winning $400,000. “It was unbelievable,” he says.

Suddenly, Lee was thrust into the world of professional poker. He liked it, but quitting a good job and making gambling a career seemed reckless. He had a family, after all, and Lee could not assume that every tournament would end with big wins.

That was when he and his wife made a deal: If
Lee could make as much at poker-related activities as he did at his current job, he would quit. So Lee put on his entrepreneurial hat and began lining up work in the media, building his own personal brand as a poker expert. He also began teaching poker, and all the while, kept winning money at tournaments.

By 2007, Lee was ready. He quit his job at Boston Scientific. He was all-in.

The Blackjack Veteran

Yuchun Lee isn’t afraid to take calculated risks in business, but he dreads uncertainty. For that reason, he actually doesn’t enjoy gambling. He and the MIT blackjack group practiced a disciplined card-counting method, but without that edge, he wouldn’t have bothered playing. “It bores me to gamble,” he says. “Some people like the volatility. I don’t take the risk for the sake of risks.”

The MIT group spent many a weekend in Las Vegas. Lee still remembers the regular flights he took, the 8:30 p.m. out of Boston on Fridays and the 11:38 p.m. red-eye back on Sundays. At the casinos, team members sat at various tables and counted cards, and once they sensed the odds tipping in their favor, they used hand signals to call in the group’s designated high roller to bet big.

It was an effective system, and the team dealt with large sums of money. The most Lee ever bet at one time was $80,000. For the 1996 opening of Mohegan Sun casino, the team trekked to Connecticut and raked in the cash. After the weekend, the team met up, and on the table was a pile of chips totaling more than $500,000.

Lee once went to Las Vegas with his wife Agustina Lee, MBA ’96, and when they hit the gaming floor, they acted out roles. She played a rich woman, and he was her chauffeur. As she gambled, he stood behind her, counting cards.

At first, the rest of the cigar-smoking cardplayers snickered at her. She didn’t seem to know what she was doing. But when Lee noticed the odds turning in his wife’s favor, he signaled her, and she started placing bets that were 100 times bigger than the other wagers at the table. The snickering stopped. “Everyone got quiet,” Lee says.

All in all, those were exciting days, though not quite as wild as the 2008 movie *21* made them out to be. “The movie was not true to life,” Lee says. “We didn’t party, as that was team policy.”

There also wasn’t as much danger, though the edge gained by counting cards, while not illegal, is something casinos don’t like. Ultimately, Lee’s blackjack career pattered out around 2000 as the casinos learned who he was. Casino managers began asking him, in a nice way, to play something besides blackjack, and eventually, not so nicely, a manager and two security guards escorted Lee out of a casino. He was banned or “86’ed.” “Once they do that, you can’t go back,” Lee says.

Of course, stopping his gambling career wasn’t a problem for Lee. He was a successful businessman with an entrepreneurial heart who had been starting businesses his entire life, beginning in kindergarten, when he sold stickers. In fifth grade, he sold silkworms. In high school, he started a software company, and as an undergrad, he sold computers, importing the parts and assembling them in his dorm room.

He cofounded Unica in 1992, when he was attending Babson as an Evening MBA student. Today, the company has about 500 employees and more than 800 customers worldwide, including some of the very casinos where, ironically enough, Lee once gambled. With marketing dollars continuing to shift online, Unica realized $121 million in revenue in fiscal year 2008.

Even though his blackjack days are over, Lee still thinks like a cardplayer, contemplating luck’s influence in business and life. “The luck component in life is so much greater than people think,” he says.

Life is so short, he says, that people can become mired in a bad patch and never come out of it. People also can stumble onto lucky streaks. If his company hits its quarterly goals, Lee will wonder how much of a role luck played. “Sometimes you are good because you are lucky,” he says.