

# Gambler's Book Club

by Murphy James

John Luckman (his real name, honest) is the man to see when you're ready to make a bet. Luckman owns the Gambler's Book Club in Las Vegas, which consists of a catalog-sales division, a publishing house, and a retail store. Among his 1,500 titles you'll probably find what you're looking for. "Everything is here. There is not another bookstore like this anywhere on earth," says Len Miller, editor of *Gambling Times Magazine*.

In 1955 Luckman moved to Las Vegas, working first as a blackjack dealer and later as a pit boss. As a hobby, he collected gambling books. After he'd collected about 300 titles, Luckman donated the lot to the library at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Using Luckman's books as a nucleus, the University went on to establish what is now the world's largest collection of books on gaming.

When a friend stored a broken printing press in his garage in 1957, Luckman repaired it and reprinted his favorite book, a 1908 classic, *Racing Maxims and Methods*, by "Pittsburgh Phil." In 1964 he put together a catalog on his kitchen table and distributed it while still working as a pit boss at the Tropicana Casino. In 1971 he went full time with the business. It is now a \$600,000-a-year enterprise.

Over the years, more than two million books have been sold. Luckman himself is the author of his best-selling books, a series of "little books" on blackjack, craps, roulette, keno, baccarat, and slot machines. Luckman used the pen name Walter I. Nolan for this series of "fact" books. He wryly points out that it is not coincidence that Mr. Nolan's initials spell the magic word, WIN. His fact books are sold in more than 100 locations in the Las Vegas area. One full-time employee does nothing more than keep the stock of these books replenished. While welcome in most hotel/casino gift shops, his



Mr. John Luckman

books are barred in one. The reason: One casino official was aghast to see that Walter I. Nolan recommended gambling "in moderation" and ordered the books removed from the shelves.

Luckman operates out of two buildings across the street from one another just minutes from Las Vegas' famed "Strip" and "Glitter Gulch." Facilities include the retail store, offices, a bindery, and modern platemaking and typesetting operations. His publishing unit has printed over 100 original titles. Luckman is actively seeking manuscripts on the obscure card games of kotch, skin, and tonk, and on greyhound racing and sports betting. His authors include a college president, an astronomer, a chemist, an engineer, and a university statistics professor.

He also publishes two sports journals, each with a circulation of about 800: *Casino and Sports* deals with casino games and sports betting while *Systems and Methods* deals with horse racing and other forms of pari-mutuel betting, including jai alai.

About 85 percent of Luckman's business comes from retail and wholesale catalog sales. The remainder comes from his retail store. In any given day, Luckman says, "We'll have 30 to 40 people walk in. Ninety

percent of them will be tourists." He further explains this irony: "Dealers, pit bosses, and casino managers are basically nonreaders. To go out and buy a book would be an admission that there is something going on that they don't know about. But to my way of thinking, to know where something is going, you need to know where it's been."

Luckman prints 35,000 catalogs annually in newspaper format. The catalog is updated six times a year by a newsletter called *Overlay* and lists 800 new titles and another 700 out-of-print titles. One hundred sixty different publishing houses are represented.

His inventory ranges from a paperback called *How to Play Marbles* to a \$125 text used in the University of Nevada's highly respected hotel-management program: Bill Friedman's *Casino Management*. There are sophisticated books on all aspects of casino games, of course—with heavy emphasis on mathematics and statistics—as well as offerings on the sociology and psychology of gambling.

The average buyer is someone who finds that reading about his or her favorite game adds to the enjoyment of playing it. Two diverse groups of buyers include the FBI and prison inmates. The FBI is interested in Luckman's inventory of books and videotapes on cheating; they stop in periodically to catch up on new offerings. The favorite topic among prisoners is poker (cheating is a close second). State prisons allow inmates to buy books on gambling. Federal prisons do not.

Luckman employs 15 people, 10 full time. Among these is Howard Schwartz, a former journalism instructor who serves as editor of the Club's books and sports journals. Neither Luckman nor Schwartz is a big bettor. Luckman says, "I haven't placed a bet in four years." Schwartz calls himself a "scared bettor" who

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