

Opinion: Professional casino cheat set the bar high

By John L. Smith, Las Vegas Review-Journal

John Vaccaro was sure he had something big working.

But in the world of the professional casino cheat, good help can be hard to find. It's not all "Ocean's 11" reruns, baby. Putting together a competent crew isn't easy.

Eventually, Vaccaro's criminal associates in the takeoff of the President Casino in Biloxi, Miss., in 1993 focused on their work long enough to relieve the gambling hall's blackjack tables of \$500,000 before the scheme unraveled and resulted in a federal criminal indictment. Some took a plea, others took flight. Nothing if not dedicated to his trade, Vaccaro took another fall.

John Joseph Vaccaro Jr., a military veteran, roofing contractor and longtime member of Nevada's casino "Black Book," died Nov. 16 after a brief illness. He was 75.

Although his criminal record stretched back to 1971, he landed high on the government's radar in 1983 as the leader of what was then the biggest slot machine-rigging caper in Nevada history. In all, eight people manipulated more than 100 slot jackpots at casinos throughout Nevada and racked up more than \$8 million before being caught. One jackpot at Harrah's Lake Tahoe alone paid \$1.7 million. The first MGM Grand in Reno lost more than \$1 million. The crew also scored at the Castaways, Barbary Coast, Bingo Palace (now Palace Station) and Holiday Casino in Las Vegas.

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