

# Making It To

In the world of blackjack, Michael Aponte is a rock star. He's stayed in some of Las Vegas' most luxurious high roller suites for free, been wined and dined like royalty, rubbed elbows with Hollywood celebrities and sports superstars and won millions of dollars in some of the world's most posh casinos. And now, Michael Aponte has something even a rock star would envy — his very own TOPPS trading card. Aponte, a/k/a MIT Mike, has been immortalized by TOPPS in their 2007 Allen & Ginter trading card set, which includes 20 world champions from various fields of sports, such as boxer Joe Frazier and martial arts master Bruce Lee, along with 300 baseball greats and 25 historic figures. Aponte concedes it was a pleasant surprise. "I'm a huge sports fan, having grown up playing sports year round, so having a trading card is a tremendous honor and thrill for me." If there was ever any question as to Michael Aponte's place in the world of blackjack, or of blackjack's place in the realm of sports, this should put it to rest once and for all.

The journey from book-smart, football playing MIT student to cultural icon took a crucial turn in 1992 when Aponte was recruited to become a member of the newly formed MIT Blackjack Club. The club's goal was to make some serious money by incorporating a team approach to card counting; an approach that had not been attempted before on such a large scale. Potential team members were evaluated in terms of their ability to blend into the casino environment, their street smarts and their aptitude for math. In Aponte, they found the perfect fit for the job.

## **The Road to the MIT Blackjack Club**

Thanks to his father's career with the U.S. Army, Aponte and his family moved frequently while he was growing up. By Aponte's count, he attended 11 different schools throughout the U.S and overseas. Adjusting to new schools and making new friends probably contributed to Aponte's ability to adapt to new and different environments, a quality he put to good use during his professional blackjack career. At an early age, he displayed an affinity for math and was athletically inclined. An excellent student, in 1988 he graduated valedictorian of Ewing High School in New Jersey. Acceptance into the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of

Technology (MIT) followed, where he studied economics and was a wide receiver on the football team.

During Aponte's senior year at MIT, he was enticed by a friend to join a team of fellow students who were embarking on an innovative blackjack venture. Figuring it might be fun, but blithely unaware of how lucrative it would ultimately be, Aponte decided to give it a shot. Relatively unfamiliar with the game, Aponte was immediately hooked after attending his first team meeting. The basic concept was a team approach to blackjack employing a card counting system, which relied on at least two players working in tandem. Essentially, one player would serve as the "Spotter" and would count the cards while either watching from behind the blackjack table or while making inconspicuous minimum bets. When the card count became favorable for the players at the table, the Spotter would signal the Big Player, or "BP," who would join the game and receive the card count via code words from the Spotter. It was important that the two players appear not to know one another, which necessitated the use of code words. The BP would proceed to make large bets during the "hot shoe" and, if all worked as planned, rake in the money.

To ensure the plan worked, however, the MIT team spent hours training, practicing and planning. Choosing team members was an art unto itself; the recruits needed to be



# The TOPPS

by Cynthia Earhart



mathematically agile, have nerves of steel while betting huge sums of money, and be able to blend into a casino crowd. Aponte was the perfect choice - a math whiz who honed his competitive nature on the football field, and he possessed a chameleon-like quality that enabled him to meld into his surroundings without calling attention to himself. Aponte quickly became one of the team's most successful big players.

Getting the job done involved intense training for team members. For a recruit to become an official team member, he or she had to pass a series of comprehensive training sessions capped by a series of skill tests called "checkouts." The checkouts were so rigorous, no one passed on their first attempt. Practice was the key. Aponte recalls running calculations through his head while walking to class and waiting at the bus stop.

In fact, Aponte proved to be so adept as a team member, he was soon promoted to team manager. The managers were

responsible for strategic planning, money management and, most important, recruiting and training new team members. The stress of this high-stakes lifestyle wasn't for everyone. Weekdays were spent wedging practice and training sessions between classes; weekends were spent in Las Vegas or Atlantic City or any other venue that offered advantageous blackjack action. This fast-paced lifestyle left little time for a

personal life. Recruiting team members who could adapt to this high-pressure schedule while remaining completely trustworthy was a challenge. "There were several qualities I looked for when recruiting new members," Aponte recalls. "One was mathematical aptitude. Two was street smarts and awareness. Three was unequivocal trustworthiness. Having the moxie to operate naturally in the casino and the trust factor were actually more important than mathematical ability."

Another common denominator among the members was a background in team sports. It's probably no coincidence that a good number of team members had an athletic background. "I think the competitive and teamwork aspects of sports also applied to our blackjack team," Aponte notes, "with trust being the essential ingredient."

## ***Life on the MIT Blackjack Team***

All this attention to detail and insistence on perfection paid off when the blackjack team took to the road to put its skills to the test. The team approach proved to be wildly successful, culminating in its biggest winning weekend - Super Bowl XXIX in 1995 - when team members left Las Vegas with over \$500,000 in their pockets. Not every weekend was quite so lucrative. Aponte recalls their worst loss totaled just over \$100,000 in one weekend — the winning weekends far surpassed the losing ones — and the team was well on its way to winning millions.

Since they often bet table maximum, Aponte and his colleagues were given the high-roller treatment by the casinos - lavish suites, limos, anything they could possibly want or need. Service at this level led to brushes with the kinds of people for whom the high-life is standard issue - the rich and the famous. The team made it a point to hit Las Vegas during the high action weekends, such as three-day-weekend holidays or when special sporting events were on tap. One of the biggest draws in Las Vegas was, and continues to be, big name boxing events. Aponte was actually staying at the MGM Grand during the infamous Mike Tyson - Evander Holyfield fight, and was a witness to the melee that ensued afterward when casino patrons believed they heard a gunshot. It was this particular weekend, while standing in the VIP check-in line at the MGM Grand, that Aponte noticed a



*Mike wins the first ever World Series of Blackjack in 2004*

gentleman standing in front of him who looked familiar. It was football Hall of Famer Walter Payton. Aponte spoke to Payton who, to his surprise, was happy to chat even though he had no idea who Aponte was. He engaged Payton in conversation far longer than he imagined would be possible, given Payton's fame, and was impressed that someone at such an elevated level of celebrity could be such a nice guy. As a former football player himself, Aponte cherishes the memory of meeting one of his idols.

Despite the glitz and glamour all around them, the Vegas party scene held little interest for the Blackjack Team members. They often played long hours, well after midnight, as long as casino conditions were ideal. Their single-minded determination was admirable, and surprising, given their young ages and the temptations of Sin City all around them. But they were there to play winning blackjack and making mistakes wasn't an option. As Aponte remembers, "When we were in Vegas, our primary focus was business. Given the limited number of big weekends in Vegas, we focused on

cashing in on those trips. That was a big reason we were so successful. Partying was not our priority."

This was a business with some unique facets. For instance, the logistics of keeping massive amounts of cash at the ready presented a challenge. Because the team was based in Boston, travel to and from Las Vegas was via air, and transporting cash through airport security, even in the 1990s, could be perilous. It was felt that cash was safer carried on a person's body rather than stashed in a bag, which left team members employing new and unusual methods of transporting cash including taping bills to their legs and stuffing it under baseball caps.

And the cash stashing challenges didn't end upon arrival in Las Vegas. Hotel room safes were often too small to contain the amounts of cash carried by the team, leading to some close calls with housekeeping. On one occasion, one of Aponte's teammates was in the shower and could not hear the housekeeper knock on his door. The housekeeper, assuming the suite was unoccupied, walked in to see about

\$100,000 in cash and chips strewn across the bed. The perplexed housekeeper contacted security who had a lot of questions. Fortunately, the incident was resolved without anyone being tossed out of the hotel — that time.

While card counting is perfectly legal, casinos aren't favorably disposed to it. The barring of a player caught counting cards was one of the most serious challenges the MIT Blackjack Club was up against. In an attempt to thwart the efforts of casino security to recognize them once they'd been "made" as card counters, team members often tried to come up with new and unique ways to change their appearance. Aponte recalls an excursion he and a team member made to Los Angeles to purchase a variety of disguises for the team. Aponte himself tried the baseball hat and sunglasses combo, a fake mustache and beard and even went so far as to don a fat suit. Ultimately, many of the disguises were not as effective as the team had hoped.

In the end, all the fake mustaches in the world couldn't keep sharp-eyed casino security from recognizing members of the team, and Aponte was asked to leave casinos numerous times, including his favorite, The Mirage. After finding it increasingly more difficult to play in the casinos due to his card counting infamy, and becoming frustrated by the new recruits who weren't as dedicated as the original group, MIT Mike unofficially retired from the MIT

Blackjack Club in spring of 2000.

When asked if it would be possible today for a similar team effort to be as astronomically successful as the MIT Blackjack Club was in the 1990s, Aponte surmises that a small group of players might be able to make a go of it. But a team as large as the one he played on was probably an anomaly and it would be difficult to duplicate today the same level of high stakes team play. The MIT Blackjack Club formed a completely unique business entity, structuring an environment where trust was key, and organization and discipline was mandatory. Aponte also suspects it would be difficult to recruit the type of dedicated and trustworthy players today that his team had a decade ago. The easy access to huge sums of cash can lead to temptation, which some people are unable to resist. Other challenges to a successful blackjack team operation in this day and age include increased airport security, and the constantly evolving technology in casino security.

#### **Life After the MIT Blackjack Club**

Mike Aponte's life as a part of the MIT Blackjack Club was so extraordinary it sounds more like fiction than fact, making it perfect fodder for a book. *Bringing Down the House*, written in 2002 by Ben Mezrich, is the saga of the MIT Blackjack Club from 1994 through 2000. And, of



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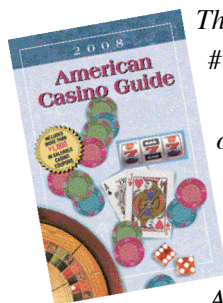
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course, books that recount compelling stories are magnets for Hollywood. So it's not surprising that the story of Aponte and his colleagues will soon become a major motion picture. The movie version of Bringing Down the House, entitled 21, was optioned by actor-producer Kevin Spacey, who is also starring in the film; the premier of the film is currently slated for March 21, 2008. While Aponte is looking forward to seeing his life played out on the big screen, he has plenty of his own projects in the works as well.

Aponte rarely plays blackjack in casinos these days although he has discovered the lure of tournament play. In 2004, Aponte won the first ever World Series of Blackjack. In 2006, he joined the Ultimate Blackjack Tour's Legends of Blackjack, placing third in a field of seasoned pros. While he has no immediate plans to play in another tournament, he looks forward to some future tournament action when his schedule permits.

Hollywood via the small screen has come calling as well. In pre-production is a television drama series based on the exploits of Aponte and his business partner and former MIT teammate, David Irvine. The duo also has a blackjack-related reality series in development.

To facilitate these new business opportunities in the entertainment industry, Aponte and his wife recently relocated to Los Angeles from Washington, D.C. Aponte is enjoying his adjustment to life on the west coast.

His primary focus, however, is the business Aponte and Irvine started together - The Blackjack Institute. Providing instructional seminars as well as one-on-one private instruction, The Blackjack Institute teaches students the card counting methods employed by the MIT Blackjack Team in its heyday. Also available through the Blackjack Institute are an instructional DVD, a training manual, as well

as a home training course to help players hone their blackjack skills, utilize sound money management and improve their betting strategies. Aponte explains the Institute's approach, "What makes our instruction so different and effective is that it breaks down card counting into simple, easy to understand steps. Our instructional products and services are based on the same training system that made the MIT Blackjack Team so successful." Additional information about these products and future training seminars can be found on the Institute's website at: [www.BlackjackInstitute.com](http://www.BlackjackInstitute.com).

All of these endeavors still leave Aponte with time to pursue a labor of love - tutoring school students through Project Discovery, a government-funded organization that provides guidance and scholastic assistance to minority and low-income students who want to achieve higher education. An award in 2002 from the Points of Light Foundation honored Aponte for his work with young people. Focusing on preparing students for the SATs, Aponte tutors in math, reading and writing. While Aponte admits he doesn't tutor the students in blackjack strategy, after all, they're not yet 21, he concedes that when students have seen him on TV and have asked about his blackjack background, he has shared his story with them as well as the importance of basic math skills in card counting. A man who won millions playing blackjack may not be a traditional role model for students to look up to, but how many tutors have their very own TOPPS trading card? □

*— Cynthia Earhart is a freelance travel and gaming writer. An advantage video poker player and frequent visitor to Las Vegas, she has written extensively about the city. When not traveling, she resides in Columbus, Ohio, where she operates a freelance litigation paralegal practice.*