

Cops bust up high-tech poker scam at casino hotel room

Atlantic City, New Jersey – It was a high-tech variation on one of the oldest tricks in the book, dating back to the Wild West saloon days _ cheating unsuspecting poker players by rigging the game.

But the tools in a scam broken up by New Jersey State Police were decidedly 21st century, including tiny video cameras and earpiece radio receivers designed to be undetectable, and laptop computers.

One of the four men arrested is a well-known consultant who charges people for advice on how to detect and thwart casino cheaters.

In arrests carried out June 7, but made public Wednesday, police charged Steve Forte, 51, of Las Vegas, with using a computer and cheating devices to commit theft, attempted theft by deception and conspiracy.

His Web site describes the services and products offered by his company, International Gaming Specialists, including a four-part video series „designed to help protect all those that play in private games from card and dice cheaters.“

Forte did not immediately respond to phone and e-mail messages left at his Las Vegas office on Wednesday.

The site also says Forte produced his own half-hour television show titled „Gambling’s Invisible Thieves.“

Yet that’s just what New Jersey authorities allege Forte and his co-defendants were. Joseph T. Ingargiola, 50, of Playa del Rey, Calif., Stephen Phillips, 52, of Las Vegas, and James C. Harrison, 41, of Duluth, Minn., are facing the same charges.

All are free on bail.

Peter Aseltine, a spokesman for the state Attorney General's Office, said the men rigged hidden cameras in a hotel room at the Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa so that they could peer at players' cards, and relay information on what each player had to players who were in on the scam.

„They were also using computer programs to further enhance their odds of winning, entering what they had and helping them decide what to do next,“ he said.

One concession to old-school card cheating was allegedly used: a marked deck with certain cards identified from the back.

Although the games took place at the same time the Borgata was holding a poker tournament, authorities and casino officials were quick to point out that the alleged scam took place in a private hotel room, away from the casino floor.

„None of the casino-generated games or tournaments was targeted or compromised,“ Aseltine said.

It was not immediately clear how many people were victimized and how much money was involved. But Aseltine described the games as „high-stakes.“

„They were big players,“ he said.

The investigation is ongoing, and has spread to several other jurisdictions where gambling is permitted, including Las Vegas, Aseltine said.