



DEALER'S CHOICE

TRAINEES 'ENJOY THE MOMENT' AT TABLE GAMES SCHOOL



Elijah McBride deals a hand of blackjack during his shift at Live Casino Pittsburgh.

(Photos: Shane Dunlap | TribLive)



Daylon Johnson, from Lake Wales, Fla., smiles while practicing blackjack with fellow table games dealer student Elijah McBride (right) during the dealer class at Live Casino Pittsburgh.



Class instructor Adam Ruck (background, left) watches students Khem Timsina of Rostraver (center) and Elijah McBride of Greensburg (right) while fellow student Ryan Thomas of Los Angeles deals a hand of blackjack during dealer class in Westmoreland Mall.

BY **QUINCEY CATULLO**

Elijah McBride's hands dashed across a half-moon shaped table at the entrance to Live Casino Pittsburgh's gambling floor, stacking yellow, red, white and black chips atop the maroon felt fabric.

McBride, 21, of Greensburg, one of the Hempfield casino's newest table games dealers, donned a gray, collared shirt accented by a bright red placket and cuffs of the same vibrant color.

He swiftly distributed shuffled cards from a card shoe to four eager blackjack players, the faint scent of cigarette smoke, the chime of nearby slot machines and the fluorescent glow of televisions filling the air around them.

The casino floor was quieter on this Monday night than McBride has grown accustomed to in his two months of working part time as a dealer assigned to the swing shift—8p.m.to4a.m.Friday through Monday. A handful of customers sat around the gambling tables, while dozens of others weaved about the slot machines, Italian restaurant, Fan Duel kiosks and sports bar on the casino's first floor.

"On the weekend, like Fridays and Saturdays, they're very busy, especially if there's a sporting event going on," McBride said. "There's probably over 100 people, hundreds of people, that are in the casino, upstairs and downstairs."

"It gets pretty packed sometimes. You'll have a full table plus people standing around at that table. You just have to focus and continue to deal—don't get distracted, enjoy the moment."

McBride said the casino's table games dealer school prepared him for the job

that employs thousands statewide — training him to handle the chaos of simultaneously paying out bets, dealing cards and interacting with customers.

The state employs about 15,800 people across its 17 casinos, about 90% of whom are Pennsylvania residents, according to the state Gaming Control Board's 2024-25 annual report.

Rivers Casino in Downtown Pittsburgh and Casino at Nemacolin in Fayette County offer similar schools to aspiring table games dealers, according to the board's website.

"They try to throw you off—keep you on your feet, keep you on your toes — in terms of drunk people yelling at you, smacking the table, getting mad at you, making a lot of noise,"McBride said of Live Casino's instructors. "They try to get you prepared for that"

How the school works

The six-week-long school—offered once every few months free of charge — trains aspiring table games dealers in the basics of blackjack. Upon a successful audition at the end of the course, students can apply for a permit to deal table games at one of the state's 17 casinos.

Students filter into the dealer school, housed in a first-floor space across from Old Navy in Westmoreland Mall, Monday through Friday. Classes are offered at five four-hour time slots — 6 to 10 a.m., 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., 2 to 6 p.m., 6 to 10 p.m., or 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

The first week starts off with the bare bones of table games dealing instruction. Students practice cutting down chips, riffing cards and learning

the hand shuffling procedure. Students learn the basics of blackjack in the second week, and rinse and repeat for the remaining four weeks.

ByWeek3of the school's February class, Greensburg Salem graduate McBride and his 11 classmates had covered the majority of the game, said instructor Adam Ruck, a table games supervisor and manager at the casino.

"They don't know everything because it is a learning process," Ruck said, "but at this point, they've covered about 99% of the game. We're pretty much just repetition until they do their audition."

If it weren't for the sign hanging at the school's entrance,mall shoppers might not be able to distinguish class instruction from a group of acquaintances playing black jack for leisure.

"I just get to play blackjack for school, What more could you ask for?"

~ Elijah McBride
Casino Dealer

On an unseasonably warm day in late February, students practiced blackjack at two of nine tables arranged in the front half of the classroom space. Vacant roulette and craps tables, pushed up against the left and right walls, framed the room.

Chairs, tables and boxes of unopened decks of cards were stacked in the back of the room, separated from the instruction area by a makeshift wall of black curtains hanging from metal poles.

As McBride took his turn dealing,

he exchanged banter with classmates sitting at his table. The group issued a collective "ugh" when someone's play didn't go according to plan.

"I just get to play blackjack for school," he said. "What more could you ask for?"

Dealer: 'I just take it step by step'

The casino employs 116 table games dealers — 75 full time and 41 part time, said spokesperson Doug Haniford.

In addition to McBride's swing shift, dealers can be assigned to the day shift—10 a.m. to 6 p.m. or noon to8p.m.—or the4a.m. to noon grave shift, he said.

Dealer compensation, including base pay and tips, averages between \$22 and \$25 per hour, but dealers can raise their hourly base rate by learning games beyond blackjack—such as craps, roulette, midi-baccarat and pai-gow.

About 80% of the pay comes from tips, Haniford said.

More than 80,500 gambling dealers were employed nationwide as of 2023, according to a report by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The average national pay for gambling dealers, the report said, is \$19.25 per hour and \$40,000 annually.

McBride was drawn to the job by positive work reviews from two of his friends and the good pay. He hopes the part-time work will support his long-term goal of becoming a commercial pilot, an aspiration he has held since going on an introductory flight lesson in 2023.

On his days off from dealing table games, McBride works toward his pilot credentials at the Laurel Highlands

Aeronautical Academy out of Arnold Palmer Regional Airport in Unity.

Until then, McBride is content mastering the fast-paced world of table games dealing.

"I just take it step by step," he said. "You have to make sure you're doing everything in the correct order. If there's a lot of people, it's really just you and one player at a time. You just take it as it is."

Instructor: 'You do have to entertain people'

Typically, fewer than 10 students per class complete the school, Ruck said.

Ruck was among the casino's first team of table games dealers, joining the staff upon the facility's opening in November 2020. He can still recall the excitement that reverberated throughout the room when the casino's first class of aspiring table games dealers gathered for the inaugural school.

Nearly six years later, Ruck has no plans to change career paths.

"Every day, you have to come to work and not really put on a show, but you do have to entertain people essentially. I like that aspect of it," he said. "That can be the hardest part. That's where the variables come in."

"The dealing of games is black and white. There's procedures you have to follow. You have to pay the bets correctly. But everything else is up to you personality-wise. You need to learn how to navigate different types of people that are going to come play."

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