Loving Mentalism

IAN ROWLAND

Pascal's Swindle

This month's guest contributor is Michel W. Potts from Thailand. Michel is a former journalist and Hollywood screenwriter. In fact, he is the only person to have written five Hollywood movies that were made within a span of six years! That's quite a feat. These days, although he still works as a writer, Michel holds the rare distinction of being the only *Farang* (foreigner) magician performing in the bars of Bangkok.

At first glance, the effect that Michel has submitted might strike some of you as rather simplistic, given that it starts off with the "think of a number and double it" ploy from countless trite calculation stunts. You might well feel that any routine devised along these lines would be unfit to grace these hallowed pages of all that is subtle and excellent in the art of mentalism. If you wish, by all means offer a snort of contempt before turning the page in search of more edifying material. However, I would respectfully suggest that this item has plenty of potential for anyone who likes engaging and entertaining mentalism. Let me take a moment to explain why.

First of all, this is an effect in which someone merely thinks of a card and then you tell that person what it is. No actual cards are involved, there's nothing written down, and the effect is surefire. As you will see in just a minute, there's quite a bit more to it than that, and the details are, as always, less exciting than the headline. However, all experienced performers know that the effects we perform become greatly simplified and distorted in the retelling. The intermediate steps are forgotten and only the basic story is retold. In this case, many people will only remember that they thought of a card, you had a bit of fun, and then you read their mind.

Secondly, I like the strategy that Michel has chosen. If an effect relies on some sort of cunning calculation, the first instinct of most mentalists would be to conceal this fact as much as possible, and to disguise the calculation inside other bits of business. Michel has adopted the opposite strategy. He has decided to make the calculation as explicit as possible. In fact, you apparently *show* the spectators the very calculation you are using! I find this a refreshing change from various linguistic contortions intended to hide the sound of number crunching. It also introduces what I think is an intriguing premise: a mathematical formula for reading minds.

Given that there is no attempt to hide the calculation involved, you might wonder where the mystery lies. This brings me to the third reason why I like this particular effect. There is *no link whatsoever* between the number that the spectator eventually arrives at and the information you seem to deduce from it — that is, the identity of a playing card. This fact ought to be immediately obvious even to the least analytical of spectators, thereby creating a lingering sense of mystery and wonder.

Here's the effect.

You start by inviting a spectator to just *think* of any card.

After studying your spectator's forehead for a few seconds and gathering the psychic vibrations, say *"It's not a King or an Ace, is it?"*

If the spectator replies yes, say, *"I thought so. Statistically, those are the most popular cards. Think of a different card this time, one that's not so easy to guess."*

If the spectator replies no, say, *"I thought so. Statistically, those are the most popular cards. You're more sophisticated than most, so I'd expect you to be thinking of something less obvious."*

You continue, *"Are you familiar with Blaise Pascal? He was a 17th-century statistician who created modern probability theory. In the mid-1600s, he actually came up with a mathematical formula for reading minds. Let me show you."*

You take out a piece of paper with an equation written on it (see illustration). You pretend to refer to this during the following set of instructions.

Have the spectator access the calculator function of his cellphone and hold it so that you can't see the screen.

"Concentrate on just the value of your card. If you thought of a Jack or a Queen, remember that Jacks are worth 11, and Queens have a value of 12. Enter the value of your card on the calculator. Every card in the deck has a mate of the same color — its doppelganger, so to speak — so multiply the value of your card by 2. Then hit the 'equals' key.

"Now, you also have a suit in mind, but we can't exclude the other three suits, so add 3, and again hit the equals sign.

"Now multiply the result by 5, which is inclusive of value, suit, color, and probability variance, which I'll explain later.

"The next step of the formula goes like this. If you're thinking of a Club, add 1. If you're thinking of a Heart, add 2; if you're thinking of a Spade, add 3; and if you're thinking of a Diamond, add 4. Hit the equals sign again.

"Take the square root of the result and divide it by 4, the number of suits in the deck." See the later note about this step, in case the participant's calculator does not have a square root function.

"Finally, multiply by 52, the number of cards in the deck.

"Please concentrate on the final result. If I am right, according to Pascal's statistical analysis, your final result should contain a 1, 3, 5, or 7, which is an incongruent anomaly. Do you have one of those?"

Regardless of what answer the spectator gives you, mime opening a large, heavy book or ledger.

"At this point, Pascal would make the final calculation. When is your birthday?"

The spectator tells you his birthday.

"Pascal would cross-reference your birthday with the total you arrived at and then, with devilish delight, he would say to you, 'I'll bet your card is in fact...'" And here, you correctly name the thought-of card.

That's essentially all there is to it.

As you may have already guessed, the presentation is pure smoke. All you need to do is glimpse the number that the spectator arrives at after the fourth step, just before you refer to the square root. Whatever number is on the screen at that time, you mentally subtract 15 and the result tells you the card: the first digit indicates the value, and the second digit indicates the suit. In the case of a Jack or Queen, the first *two* digits indicate the value — 11 or 12, respectively.

Here's a worked example. Let's say that the spectator thought of the Four of Spades. 4 doubled is 8, add 3 is 11, multiplied by 5 is 55, plus 3 is 58. All you have to do is subtract 15 from 58, which is 43. The first digit tells you the value, the second digit tells you the suit.

So, how do you glimpse the total reached after the fourth step? You simply pretend to help the spectator operate the calculator. Having mentioned *"square root,"* you lean over, point and say *"Do you know how to do that? It's that button there."* In leaning over to help the spectator, you glimpse the number on the screen. You then lean back, making it clear that you don't see any of the remaining calculations. You have all the time in the world to mentally subtract 15 from the number you glimpsed.

It may be the case that the spectator does not have a square root feature on his calculator, or doesn't understand this step, or is unsure how to perform this particular operation. In each of these cases, you have a perfect excuse to lean over and either suggest the correct way to perform this step on his phone (if you happen to know) or, if it looks like this calculation might be difficult, suggest a different calculation, such as multiplying by 3.142. You can make up any pretext you like for this, such as: *"This value is compensatory to the cyclical nature of cards in a new deck order."* All that matters is that you suggest a step that the spectator will find momentarily puzzling or difficult to execute, and you get the glimpse that you need.

$$\sum n/4(52f\ R\sim B)$$
$$P=\sqrt{}\ v(2a+3)\ V+\{[1c],\ [2h],\ [3s],\ [4d]\}$$

- Blaise Pascal, 1623-1662

You might wonder why Michel suggests spiking the possibilities of either a King or an Ace being chosen, even though the method works perfectly well with those cards. Michel feels that these are the two values most commonly thought of, and he doesn't want to have the climax of the effect weakened by the spectator saying something like "I'll bet everyone thinks of an Ace." You can skip this opening stage if you want, or you can eliminate other values that you think are commonly chosen. That's up to you.

Once you have glimpsed the information you need, you can of course include any further calculations you want, because they make no difference. If you don't mind injecting a little levity into your presentations, you can have fun by asking the spectator to include all sorts of evidently irrelevant numbers in the calculation, such as the age of his dog or the next-to-last digit of his work phone number. You might take the view that this strengthens the effect (in the sense of making it clear that the calculation could not possibly lead you to the identity of the card) or you might think that it weakens it (by undermining the premise). As with so much that is worthy of discussion in mentalism, this is entirely a matter of opinion.

Although Michel presents this as a close-up effect, it could easily be adapted to fill a larger space. These days, you may well find yourself at the sort of cabaret or corporate event where the calculation can be relayed to a large screen, visible to all. You can face away from the screen for almost the entire process, only turning around for a split second to glimpse the needed information.

If you don't like the reference to Blaise Pascal, you can introduce the mathematical formula on any pretext you'd like. Say it is part of the formula Google uses to anticipate what you're thinking when you use certain search terms, or say it's something Stephen Hawking invented. I find that any reference to *"a mathematical formula for reading minds"* gets people interested, even if they (rightly) suspect that the idea is absurd.

CREDITS: The original effect was called Mathematical Discovery, and it appeared in Blackstone's *Modern Magic*. It was reprinted with Blackstone's permission in *50 Card Tricks*, complied by W.F. (Rufus) Steele, whose original manuscript, published most likely in the late 1940s or early 1950s, was reprinted in 2012 by Trickshop.com. M

Ian Rowland is based in London but flies around the world a lot. He very seldom eats dates these days, as he is trying to cut down on diary products.