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From the Baltimore Sun

Casinos, NCAA ante up together

Hardly two of kind, both want to save integrity of games

Sports gambling: Bill Ordine

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As March Madness and the inevitable gambling it inspires approaches, the NCAA is looking for help from an unlikely, if entirely logical, ally - Las Vegas casino bookmakers.

A longtime foe of college sports wagering, the NCAA is sending an observer to Las Vegas over the next two weekends, not to spy, but to work with sports gambling operators toward what the two sides see as a common goal. Both want honest games.

"It does seem like a strange partnership," said Rachael Newman-Baker, NCAA director for agents, gambling and amateurism activities, "and certainly we have different jobs and we work in different fields, but when it comes to protecting integrity of the games, we're fighting the same fight."

The NCAA's interest in keeping sports free of corruption is obvious. And without public confidence that the games are on the level, bettors would turn away and hurt the casinos' profits.

The weekend visits are meant to help the NCAA learn more about the sports wagering business and establish communication lines between the two disparate sides.

"Any type of relationship we can build there, we're behind 100 percent," said Jay Kornegay, who runs the race and sports book for the Las Vegas Hilton.

"It's a step in the right direction. ... We want true games, and we want [the NCAA] to have an understanding of our business, how we run our race and sport books and all the rules and regulations."

That would be a change in attitude for the NCAA from just a few years ago, when the group teamed up with Arizona Sen. John McCain in an unsuccessful try to ban betting on college athletics at Las Vegas casinos.

For years, legal gambling interests have argued they are often the first to know if something fishy is going on in a sports event, because when the fix is in, unusual betting patterns emerge.

That's exactly what happened in 1994, when Arizona State star Stevin Smith admittedly engaged in point shaving in four games. In the first three, Arizona State failed to cover the spread and those involved made money. The fourth game, however, was when the big bucks rolled in. Jimmy Vaccaro, the Mirage Casino's sports book director, said he alerted his company's lawyers, who in turn contacted Nevada gaming regulators.

Vaccaro said he even went so far as to give the gamblers who were in on the fix free rooms so that enforcement authorities could track their movements. In the fourth game, the Sun Devils rallied in the second half to cover the point spread and win in

a blowout that busted the cheating ring in more ways than one.

But while Las Vegas bookmakers were credited for the policing effort, Vaccaro said the warm glow was short-lived.

Indeed, it was several years after the Arizona State scandal that the NCAA was pushing Congress for the sports betting ban. And some in Vegas feel that the bookmakers' well-intentioned efforts in the ASU case were used against the casinos.

"We're the messenger. ... We didn't have anything to do with the fixing element," said Robert Walker, director of race and sports book for MGM Mirage, a company whose casino holdings include the Mirage, Bellagio, MGM Grand and many others.

Walker said he is hoping the up-close association with the NCAA will also be an eye-opener.

"They're going to see how passionate the people are who bet these games," Walker said. "From Thursday through Sunday, we're mobbed with people who come here specifically for this, to bet maybe \$20 a game. And they'll see that this is all about entertainment and it's hard not to get swept up by it."

As far as casinos' acting as a listening post for game fixing, Walker's enthusiasm is measured.

"It is embarrassing to everyone when there's a fixed game or a scandal with shaving points," Walker said. And bookmakers can serve as an "indirect watchdog," he said.

But the two sides, the NCAA and the bookmakers, still need to achieve a certain comfort level, he said.

"How will we feel if, going forward, we come up with something unscrupulous and they come after us rather than [the cheaters]?" Walker said.

In addition to the NCAA sending a staff member to Las Vegas, Newman-Baker said the group is stepping up efforts to prevent illegal gambling activities through education. This year, the traditional cautionary presentation by an FBI agent to the Final Four men's and women's teams will be expanded to include the Sweet 16 in both tournaments.

"We want the athletes to understand the realities of what's involved and that what can happen doesn't just affect their eligibility; it's a legal issue," she said.

The NCAA's initiatives come just as a research paper prepared by a University of Pennsylvania assistant professor suggests that as many as 500 men's college basketball games out of 44,000 studied over the past 16 years have been influenced by point shaving.

Justin Wolfers, a Wharton School business and public policy professor, discovered anomalies in the statistical probabilities involving games in which one team was favored by 12 points or more. What he found was that big favorites just barely failed to cover the spread more often than they just barely managed to successfully cover it. The occurrence of blowout margins beyond the spread stayed true to statistical expectancies.

Favorites covered the spread in 50.01 percent of the games, and strong favorites (12 points or more) did so 48.37 percent of the time.

Wolfers concluded that games in which one team is a big favorite allow the relatively attractive temptation for an athlete to shave points without losing the game. "That's the junction where what the players want and what the gamblers want is the same," Wolfers said.

In Las Vegas, where it's critical that the public believes the games are honest, Wolfers' conclusions are viewed skeptically.

"Look at any sport and you can find statistics like that," said Kornegay of the Las Vegas Hilton. "And how you want to read it depends on the point you want to make."

The NCAA's Newman-Baker was more neutral.

"We know it's happening," she said about crooked play, "but we're not in a crisis."

bill.ordine@baltsun.com

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