

OPINION | BUSINESS WORLD

Gambling Will Take Over TV Sports

Can it unpop the sports bubble and hold together the \$100-a-month cable bundle?



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Sports-gambling receipts in Dover, Del., June 5, 2018. PHOTO: PATRICK SEMANSKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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When
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me Court last year struck down a federal law banning sports betting, they knew it was good news for the beleaguered cable bundle, the glue of which is live sports. But why wait for gambling to find its way to sports fans and sports fans to find their way to the TV? Why not give them a push?

Now underway are experiments to do just that, which will likely change televised sports forever. NESN, the cable network that carries the Boston Red Sox, has launched a new five-day-a-week gambling show, never mind that the Massachusetts legislature is still working on a bill to authorize sports betting. ESPN has two wagering shows nationwide, one on its main network, one for its online streaming service. And Comcast has been experimenting with a special telecast of 76ers games for gamblers.

To the surprise of few, talent from the existing world of sports broadcasting and sports-talk radio turns out to be quite conversant in the language of betting. No training needed. Unfortunately, one who won't be available is Craig Carton, longtime star of New York's sports-talk flagship WFAN. He was sentenced this month to three-plus years in jail for a ticket fraud related to his need to pay off millions in gambling debts.

Can gambling unpop the sports bubble and hold together the \$100-a-month cable bundle? Maybe. What does it mean for the sports culture that recently gave us the uplifting spectacle of Tiger Woods's resurrection? Probably nothing good.

So far, the leagues have not prevailed in their gaudiest ask, failing to convince any state to guarantee them a share of the gambling gross, supposedly for their role in ensuring "game integrity." But sports leaders have other ideas for making money. Jeff Wilpon, of the family that owns the New York Mets, has spoken of bringing betting windows to Citi Field. Ted Leonsis, the AOL billionaire who owns the Washington Capitals and

Wizards, acquired the lease of a thriving sports bar on the grounds of Capital One Arena and is expected to turn it into a gambling mecca.

You may be recalling the 1919 Black Sox Scandal. For years the leagues turned a leery eye toward professional gambling. Not anymore. Today's players, they assure us, are paid too much to risk throwing games. Public cynicism may not be so easily allayed. Last year, when so many early-season passes went through the hands of New York Giants' receivers, fans rolled their eyes. Next season they may wonder who got paid for his butterfingers.

Plus, the alleged immunity doesn't apply to college players. It doesn't apply to referees and umpires. The National Basketball Association is still trying to live down the scandal involving referee Tim Donaghy, who wagered on games he was officiating. Major League Baseball is worried enough that it now requires teams to clear their starting lineups with the league 15 minutes before releasing them publicly to "reduce the risk of confidential information being 'tipped.'"

Still, the future can't come fast enough for the fading cable-TV powers. After last year's Disney-Fox deal, 22 regional sports networks were put on the market and the bidding has not been brisk. So far only YES, the New York Yankees network, has found a buyer in a consortium that includes the team and online retail giant Amazon.

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has become a featured presence at gambling industry confabs for a reason. The drive to overturn the federal ban started not with fans or leagues, but with tax-hungry states. Now a politicized scramble is underway whose name is cronyism.

The shining city on a hill for teams and their TV partners, of course, is online gambling. Even the most boring or blowout contest might still be riveting to viewers if allowed to place bets by smartphone on every pitch, putt or free throw.

Such proposals, however, must run a gantlet of established gambling interests—Indian tribes, state lotteries and Las Vegas casino companies. They favor online wagering only if they control it. If not, they want it restricted to the brick-and-mortar premises they already operate under friendly deals with state politicians.

Enter the hand of Trump supporter and casino owner Sheldon Adelson, believed to be the secret influencer behind a surprise Justice Department interpretation in January that held that most forms of online betting remain illegal under the 1961 Interstate Wire Act. The Trump administration hardly has a stellar record in court. How long this novel DOJ interpretation or the law itself may stand between them and nirvana is one more thing for gambling addicts to bet on.

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