

# Jocks sure thing in Vegas

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

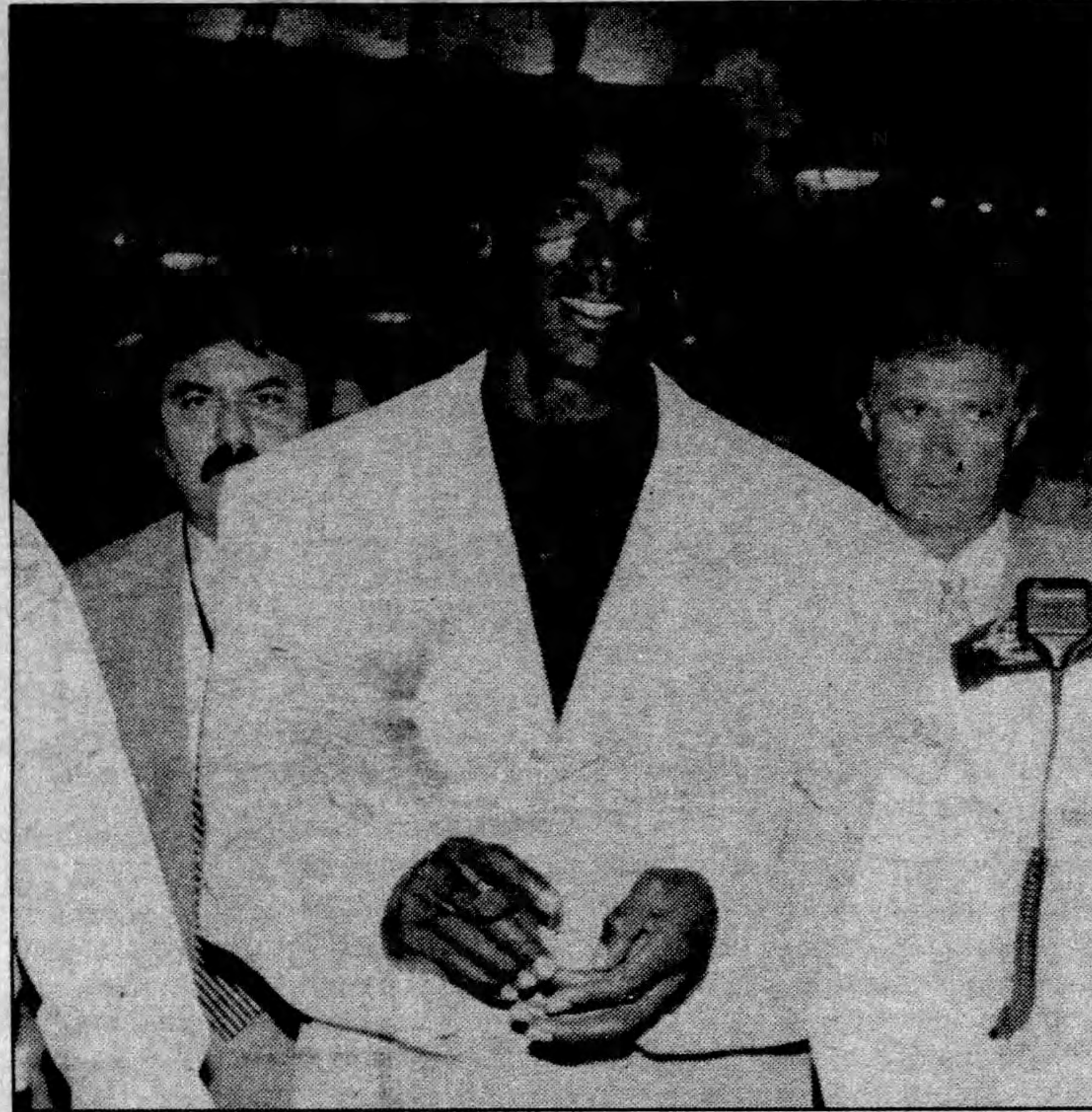
Some athletes can't get enough of the fun and the glamour. A former bookie knew several ballplayers who loved playing in Southern California because they could hop on a plane after a day game, spend the night in Vegas and return for the following night game. "I've seen some unbelievable nights," says the bookie, who now lectures Major League Baseball players about gambling at pre-season seminars. "Guys leaving \$200,000 down, guys winning \$100,000. What's \$50,000 when you're making \$12 million?"

Casinos in Las Vegas, Atlantic City and elsewhere want a cut of those big contracts, and they keep track of which players sign big deals, then tempt them with outrageously lavish gifts.

"The casinos want a shot at their money," says one host who caters to big-name athletes with credit lines between \$50,000 and \$7 million. "We provide \$10,000 worth of chips just to come in the door. The casinos know these guys will spend the \$10,000, and then spend a lot more than that."

Comps are based on a complicated formula known as the theoretical: the average bet an athlete makes times the number of hours he plays times the house advantage. The house has a substantially better advantage at the roulette wheel, for example, than at the craps table.

"They don't want the guy to go away angry. They want to keep the customer happy," the



**HIGH ROLLER** Michael Jordan is center of attention at Caesars Palace. He reportedly bets up to \$15,000 a hand at blackjack tables.

host says.

## WAGER WAR

Many of the taboos surrounding gambling and sports are as outdated as tight shorts in an NBA game, some critics insist.

"I think major league sports are a little too high and mighty," says Logan, who points out that legal bookmakers alerted authorities to the 1993 Arizona State point-

shaving scandal. "Gaming is now a very legitimate business. You have to be squeaky clean. I think Las Vegas does way more good for the country than it gets credit for."

Gamblers could buy the 1919 White Sox because 80 years ago ballplayers didn't earn much more than their fans. "The salaries provide a check and balance they didn't have back then,"

Bartkowski says.

But experts believe that because athletes have been trained to take risks and keep competing even in the face of mounting losses, they are vulnerable to compulsive gambling problems.

"Athletes need competition to prove their self-worth," says Ed Looney, executive director of the New Jersey Council on Compulsive Gambling. "Gambling is a way to keep score off the field."

The NFL, NBA, NHL and Major League Baseball forbid their players and coaches from betting on their own sports. In pre-season seminars, league officials tell their players unequivocally that gambling can only damage their careers.

"They understand what our preference is, but we do not mandate they avoid Las Vegas," NFL spokesman Greg Aiello says.

Neither does the NBA.

Baseball, meanwhile, is so worried that gambling could compromise the national pastime that it posts an agent experienced in organized crime issues in Las Vegas, says MLB security chief Kevin Hallinan.

All those freebies the casinos offer high rollers will be used in later sales pitches, Hallinan says. "If you value your privacy, why would you allow them to build a file on you?" he tells ballplayers. "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Athletes who blow their money in casinos, Hallinan adds, risk their reputations, endorsement contracts, even their careers.

When Jaromir Jagr slumped at the start of the 2000-01 season, critics blamed his taste for gambling. Jagr was a frequent guest in the late '90s at the Vegas MGM Grand and Bally's casinos, and reportedly had a \$500,000 line of credit and private baccarat table at Caesars in Atlantic City.

Jagr, perhaps the best hockey player in the world, grew estranged from his teammates and coaches in Pittsburgh, prompting a trade last year to Washington.

Gamblers who can't pay their debts face embarrassing lawsuits, their personal lives suddenly public fodder. Former Philadelphia Eagles owner Leonard Rose lost everything when the Sands in Atlantic City sued him in 1991 to recover \$1.23 million in gambling debts.

Barkley had an embarrassing encounter after his \$787,000 Super Bowl win on the Patriots when Mandalay Bay fired its sports book director for taking the bet even though Barkley did not have a sufficient line of credit.

Athletes who bet with illegal bookies face even more trouble: They are blackmailed for confidential locker room information or asked to shave points. "I knew if they didn't pay me, I just had to make a call," a former bookie says. "Their careers would be over."

Even in Vegas, the champagne often goes flat and the bill comes due. "After a while, it's like quicksand," says Dowd, baseball's former investigator. "You're stuck and you can't get out."

## Former mob capo says athletes easy targets

By **MICHAEL O'KEEFE**  
DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

A former Mafia capo says he is still amazed at how easy it was for his crew to obtain confidential locker room information from athletes.

Michael Franzese, a former Colombo crime family captain turned motivational speaker for Major League Baseball, the NBA and the NCAA, says New York-area pro athletes who couldn't pay off gambling debts even tried to shave points for the mob.

"They were incredibly easy marks," says Franzese, who was known as the "Yuppie Don" in the 1980s. "They like the women, they like the nightlife. It wasn't hard to use that to get them involved in gambling. They didn't know they were getting involved with organized crime until it was too late."

The pro leagues say there is no evidence that pro ballplayers fed information to Franzese or tried to influence the outcome of games for gamblers. The teams say they don't know what he's talking about. Law enforcement has never investigated his charges, either.

But his claims are a central part of the message he delivers to athletes on the dangers of gambling. "Getting Michael Franzese was like capturing an enemy general," says MLB senior vice president of security Kevin Hallinan of getting Franzese to speak to players.

According to a 1985 indictment, Franzese owned or operated 18 companies used as fronts to collect and



**KNOWS THE SCORE** Michael Franzese now stumps on dangers of gambling for MLB, NBA and NCAA.

embezzle money. From 1975 until 1983, Franzese says his crew also ran a gambling operation that preyed on athletes.

When the owner of a local auto dealership couldn't pay his gambling debts, Franzese says the crew took over his business. He says the dealer provided free cars to pro and college athletes and encouraged them to place bets with Franzese's group.

"We wanted inside information," says Franzese. "Who

was hurt? How much confidence did the manager have in the team he was putting on the field that day?"

Franzese says his gambling operation had seven or 10 New York athletes who offered to shave points. "Athletes would get into trouble and I'd say, 'Somehow, you've got to pay the bill.' Most of the time they would pay the money and move on to another bookmaker, or they'd ask them to provide information about their team."

Franzese provided muscle and money for Walters and Lloyd Bloom, two agents who rocked college football by signing 44 players to representation contracts before their NCAA eligibility had expired.

Franzese says his crew hoped to get the players indebted to the mob so that bookmakers could later use them to influence the outcome of games. He says players were offered \$2,500 to \$5,000 up front, then \$250 a month, plus clothes and cars.

Franzese testified for the government after the FBI shut down Walters and Bloom in 1989, and did three years in a federal prison on racketeering charges. He is now a real-estate developer and coaches Little League in Southern California.

But not everyone in baseball has gotten the message that Franzese has switched teams. Franzese was in Florida a few years ago for spring training when he walked by a coach he had done business with.

"He had left town owing us about \$50,000," Franzese says. "I had to explain I wasn't there to hurt him."