

sports

■ Part three of a three-part series: Sports' dirty secret: The games, the gamblers and the mob

Gambling?

What gambling?



National Football League executives pat themselves on the back, noting they haven't had a major gambling scandal in close to 50 years. National Hockey League vice-president Bill Daly calls gambling on NHL games by players or club officials a "hypothetical" issue.



Bill Lankhof

Mostly, professional sports league administrators speak about how they have the twin-headed monster that is gambling and associated crime covered.

"Bull," says Arnie Wexler, the former executive director of the New Jersey Council on Compulsive Gambling, a renowned speaker and a self-described "recovering compulsive gambler" who has counselled numerous professional and college athletes.

"This is a huge problem not only with players but some executives," Wexler says. "It's a hidden secret. They don't want the information to get out to the public. So they try to hide it. They're afraid the media will write about it."

"This is the big dirty secret. This is a bigger, dirtier secret than steroids for pro sports and it will be the next explosion."

It doesn't help the optics when, three weeks ago, publishers suddenly cancelled the release of *Blowing The Whistle*, a book by referee Tim Donaghy, who was booted from the NBA for his gambling activities. It prompted whispers of an NBA cover-up.

Pat Berdan, a senior consultant at Executive Prison Consultants and Donaghy's prison liaison to the publisher, told ESPN.com that the decision not to publish the book was the result of a threat of legal action by the NBA. The NBA has denied any involvement.

But there is no denying gambling is a sensitive issue within pro sports. The Raptors directed Sun Media inquiries to the league. The NBA wasn't much more forthcoming, offering after several weeks to provide a head-office lawyer.

The NHL Players' Association declined requests for an interview. Daly, at least, was willing to address the issue.

"Our players, owners and (team officials) betting on games, which is forbidden by the league, doesn't happen," he tells Sun Media. "If it was established to happen it would be a huge issue ... worse than doping and certainly worse than using any recreational drug because I don't think (those vices) strike at the heart of the competition in the same way."

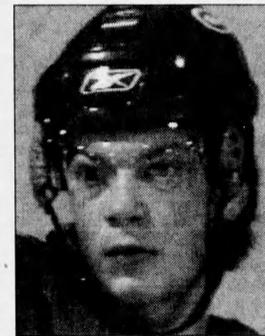
"We sell to the public every night the integrity of the competition that they pay to see. If that competition is compromised by gambling that is huge. It has just never been a realistic concern because I don't think it happens ... it's hypothetical."

Wexler isn't the only person who thinks that might be wishful thinking.

There's also Michael Franzese. A former organized crime figure now working with the FBI to fight gambling, Franzese believes it is an ostrich-in-the-sand approach.

"He (Daly) has his head in the sand," Franzese says. "I have friends; NHL players. Bruce McNall and I became good friends so I hung out with some big players. Some of the Russian players had family in Russia and they told me straight out that No. 1, they were being extorted and two, that they were involved with Russian organized crime guys that had approached them to throw games."

Daly's assurances come after a difficult time for the league during which its biggest star, Wayne Gretzky, and his wife, Janet, were linked to a betting ring for which then Phoenix assistant coach Rick Tocchet was charged with taking bets. Investigators said at the time an NHL team owner had placed bets with the gambling ring, as did others connected to NHL teams.



Andrei Kostitsyn was linked to organized crime.

Last February, the Montreal Canadiens' Kostitsyn brothers Andrei and Sergei were linked to organized crime figure Pasquale Mangiola. While the Kostitsyn brothers have been suspected of no criminal activity, the connection was embarrassing for the league. Daly would not confirm an NHL investigation or its findings.

"I'm not going to confirm our characterization of what the NHL did. Having said that, it is fair to assume that there was nothing we found that concerned us enough to assess discipline," Daly said in an e-mail.

That kind of response irks Wexler. He wants the leagues to admit there is a problem, deal with cases openly and help any players or team officials overcome their problems.

"Pro sports is afraid of this thing. They don't want you guys to talk about this," Wexler says. "I remember I did a four-day seminar for the NFL in the mid-90s. The first day in Denver, ESPN was in the hotel lobby and wanted to interview me. (The NFL) told me I couldn't talk to the media. The next day, they made everybody in the audience get up and identify who they were because they were afraid some media people were in the audience."

All the major pro leagues boast of gambling prevention and help programs. Not good enough, says Wexler, because the programs

aren't independently run.

"Would you go to your boss and tell him you've got gambling problem?"

"There isn't a player who is going to call a league office or the NCAA office and say I've got a gambling problem and I need help. In the NFL, I've had two players call me for help. That's the problem when you run an in-house program. I had a baseball player making \$800,000 and the same year he owed \$25,000 to the Trump organization in Atlantic City. I arranged for him to pay it off and wipe out the debt and his quote to me at the time was:

"I'm afraid Major League Baseball will find out and I'll get blackballed."

Each year, more than 100 million Americans wager an estimated \$96 billion on sports games, according to a survey by the Wall Street Journal. And, much of that action surrounds the NFL.

"Gambling isn't going away," admits Deana Garner, the NFL's director of player services. "People like sports. People like placing bets. Sports and gambling are going to continue to coexist because society allows them to do so."

Garner, in her second year heading up NFL security, says that's why the league is "proactive" in prevention programs.

"Players understand. When we ask them what one policy violation will get you put out of the league they'll tell you: 'Gambling.' They're very aware."

A book by former all-America quarterback Art Schlichter released last month details how he ended up in prison through gambling and associating with criminals, but he was already in trouble before he got to the NFL and he was never a star. The last major scandal involved Paul Hornung, the Packers' star running back, and Alex Karras, an All-Pro defensive tackle for the Lions, who were forced to sit out the 1963 season for betting on NFL games and associating with gamblers.

Garner admits there are some in the NFL who think that just couldn't happen again.

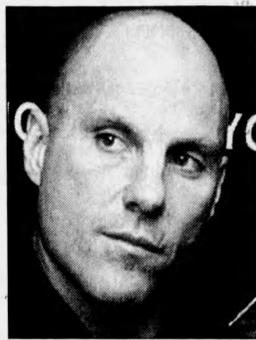
"I tell them, you guys think because you haven't lived through a scandal that it can't happen to you. But it can. It happened in college. It happened in (Toledo) Ohio ... at Northwestern ... they are our teaching moments."

And Garner, unlike her NHL counterparts, does admit that professional gamblers do try to infiltrate the game, that players and club officials are approached for information.

"I can't quantify how often (it happens)," she says, "(but) gambling is always an issue. Our sport is not immune. Organized crime likes to participate in gambling on sports. That's always a threat."

Every few weeks another example pops up. Donaghy was just released from prison and Nikolay Davydenko was a central figure in a tennis match-fixing investigation. Last week, former Celtics star Antoine Walker was arrested in Las Vegas for writing bad cheques for casino markers totalling \$1 million. Former major league pitcher Shawn Chacon is facing arrest for failure to pay Caesars Palace \$150,000 in gambling debts.

"It's a huge (problem). I dealt with hockey players, basketball players, baseball and football players," Wexler says. "In 1999, I was hired on a handshake deal by the NBA to deal with a gam-



Rick Tocchet was charged with taking bets.

blem with the players. They were going to let me talk to all the players because the security people at the NBA said we have a major problem.

"Then two weeks later, when I called to ask what was going on they told me (the commissioner's office) didn't want to do it, that (they) were afraid the media would find out. That was it. I sent (USA Today) the story two years ago when the Tim Donaghy stuff broke. The (NBA) refused to deny or admit that they had meetings with me about that."

Similarly, Daly says there really wasn't much to learn from the Tocchet incident.

Were there any lessons learned from Tocchet? "I can't tell you there really were," Daly says of Tocchet, who has returned to coaching in Tampa Bay. "There was no indication that there was at any level, by any person (wagering) on NHL hockey games. It was a bookie type situation which exists quite frequently south of the border, that one of our coaching personnel was using. Bad judgment. It constituted a crime for which he was punished. I don't think there was anything the NHL could've or would've done differently."

"It did cause us to conduct a pretty thorough internal investigation," says Daly. "I think we were ultimately satisfied there wasn't anything broader (that would've affected the outcome of games)."

Nice and tidy. But Franzese, like Wexler, isn't convinced that is a complete picture. While the NHL may not have found itself compromised by organized gambling, Franzese notes that doesn't mean the issue doesn't exist.

"(Daly) could say maybe that it hasn't surfaced as a problem in his sport," says Franzese. "Yet ..."

He does know that when it comes to wagering, most NHL players are out of his league.

"I started playing golf with NHL players back in 2000. I have never been around a group of guys who gamble more. That's the absolute truth."

Ultimately, no athlete can ever be too careful. And so it was Karras, who returned in 1964, when asked to call the pre-game coin toss refused, saying:

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm not permitted to gamble."

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On the net

Watch the video:

www.canoe.ca/gambling

Bill Lankhof discusses "Sports' dirty secret" with Gareth Wheeler

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The Mob's Mr. Fix-It

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— NHL vice-president Bill Daly, on gambling within the league