

# The StarPhoenix

## Sports leagues walk fine line when associated with gambling

By Bruce Constantineau  
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VANCOUVER -- Taking bets on sporting events must surely be one of the world's oldest professions.

There had to be bookies in ancient Greece who laid odds on the results of chariot races. Maybe they even sold daily form charts with past performances.

So it's a natural progression for modern-day sports teams to enter into marketing and sponsorship arrangements with gambling companies. Both businesses appeal to a similar audience.

But leagues walk a razor-thin line between maintaining a symbiotic business relationship with gambling interests and upholding the integrity of their games. Public relations horror stories ensue when league players or officials get caught up in gambling scandals.

Just think of the fallout after it was revealed disgraced superstar Pete Rose bet on baseball games when he managed the Cincinnati Reds in 1987 or when former NBA referee Tim Donaghy was sentenced this year to 15 months in prison for betting on basketball games.

The NHL reinstated former Phoenix Coyotes assistant coach Rick Tocchet earlier this year after he dealt with charges related to his involvement in a New Jersey-based gambling ring. None of the charges involved betting on hockey.

"You can't have any perception among fans that anything about your game can be subject to any outside influence," NHL spokesperson John Dellapina said in an interview. "That's why the basic ban on betting on hockey exists for anybody involved with the league."

While NHL players can't bet on hockey, referees and linesmen can't even go to a casino or racetrack or poker hall or Jai-Alai facility. The game officials' collective bargaining agreement with the league forbids them from associating with gamblers or other "notorious undesirable characters."

The NBA won't let its referees visit casinos during the season, but will permit it in the off-season if the officials notify the league in advance. The CFL allows its game officials to go to casinos, but reminds them they carry higher expectations, based on the nature of their business and the integrity of the game.

But with all those anti-gambling rules in place, NHL teams can still make business deals with casinos and provincial and state lottery corporations.

The Vancouver Canucks recently signed a multi-year partnership with Great Canadian Casinos that includes changing the name of the GM Place club section to "The River Rock Club" -- a reference to Great Canadian's flagship Richmond, B.C., casino.

A news release said the "official casino of the Vancouver Canucks and General Motors Place" will host two VIP road trips and VIP hosting nights as part of their promotions this season.

Great Canadian vice-president Howard Blank said the casino operator has business relationships with the CFL's B.C. Lions and its Hastings Racecourse property has a marketing relationship with the Western Hockey League's Vancouver Giants. The company's Boulevard Casino in Coquitlam, B.C., features a Lions Den bar dedicated to the football club.

"The teams obviously look for integrity issues and want to make sure we don't try to market to minors," he said. "But we see ourselves as having the exact same demographic -- adult entertainment."

The NHL, however, refuses to allow any association with contests that pay money if you correctly predict the outcomes of hockey games. So you might see casino or Lotto 6/49 ads in NHL rinks, but you won't see Sports Action or Pro-Line advertising.

The NHL, NBA and CFL allow their teams to enter into relationships with free "tutorial" gambling websites like PokerStars.net, but deals with commercial sites like PokerStars.com or PartyPoker.com are forbidden.

Coveted free-agent centre Mats Sundin recently signed a deal with PokerStars to become an "international celebrity ambassador" and can probably continue that relationship if, as expected, he soon signs with an NHL team.

NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly said he'll have to look at the specifics of the arrangement before making a definitive judgment.

"But based on what I think the relationship is and what PokerStars.net does, I don't think it would violate anything we have," he said in an interview.

The NBA has clearly relaxed its rules on certain gambling associations over the years. In the mid-1990s, it demanded NBA games be taken off the Sports Action menu in B.C. before it would approve the Grizzlies franchise in Vancouver.

But NBA representative Tim Frank said that demand probably wouldn't be repeated today.

"We had a heightened concern of inclusion in those types of lottery games, but over time, other major sports leagues did not share our concern and allowed it," he said.

The NBA so far refuses to award franchises to cities that allow betting on NBA games, but league governors have thought about having a Las Vegas team some day. The league's 2007 all-star game was held in Sin City.

"Las Vegas is a terrific market with great potential, but at this point, our rules remain unchanged," Frank said.

CFL senior vice-president of marketing Rob Assimakopoulos said the league has no problem with most gambling company marketing relationships as long as the companies are legal, like free **online gambling** sites but not commercial pay-to-play sites.

"We are very emphatic about things being legal and on the level," he said. "We run (an online) fantasy game ourselves, but it's a free game that allows casual fans and families to engage in a fun and free way with our game."